

Establishing a Sense of Place: A Comparative Study of Two Eco-poets, Miyazawa Kenji and Gary Snyder

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses works of Kenji Miyazawa and Gary Snyder, two poets focusing on humanity's relationship with the environment.

The poets attempt to establish a sense of place mainly by combining science and Buddhism. I discuss Miyazawa as an inhabitory Japanese poet and Snyder as a reinhabitory American poet, both of them addressing and deepening the concept of sense of place by making a serious commitment to the places in which they chose to live. By living rooted in a place and by establishing a deep sense of place, both Miyazawa and Snyder suggest new images of humanity and the earth.

Miyazawa is a pioneer eco-poet in the context of twentieth-century world literature in his attempt to represent humanity as an intricate part of the food chain. Snyder shares this vital idea with Miyazawa, and thus both poets present a new vision of humanity and our planetary future.

KEY WORDS

Kenji Miyazawa
ecopoet
inhabitory
postcolonial

Gary Snyder
sense of place
reinhabitory
environment



I.

Gary Snyder translated into English eighteen poems by the Japanese poet Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933) and included them in *The Back Country* (hereafter cited as BC) in a section entitled "Miyazawa Kenji." Since then, several Japanese and American critics have compared and contrasted these two poets. Substantial analyses of the affinities or differences of these poets, however, have been done mainly by Japanese critics such as Hisao Kanaseki, Masao Shimura, and Hidetoshi Tomiyama. Patrick D. Murphy comments passingly on Miyazawa in his recent book on Snyder (87-88). Although Kanaseki and Shimura offer penetrating insights into these poets, their analyses remain unsatisfactory to those who want to see both Miyazawa and Snyder as attempting to establish a sense of place in the regions that they chose to live as inhabitory or "reinhabitory" poets. Kanaseki points out in his essay, "Gary Snyder, Buddhism, Miyazawa Kenji," that Miyazawa's Buddhism coexists with his strong interest in science (210). Shimura, who sees Snyder as an American mystic, emphasizes the influence of Miyazawa on Snyder's poetics (169). He does not, however, see Snyder as an ecopoet or as a reinhabitory poet. Tomiyama focuses on poetics and compares Snyder's translation with Miyazawa's original poems.

In this paper, I would like to read Miyazawa as an inhabitory poet who attempted to establish a sense of place by combining Buddhism with sciences such as geology, biology, ecology, and soil science. Gary Snyder, on the other hand, is a reinhabitory poet who seeks to establish a sense of place by fusing ecology, Buddhism, and elements of North America's natural and human history, both ancient

and recent. I use the terms “inhabitory” and “reinhabitory” in the following sense: an inhabitory person is settled in a place and usually has inherited by birth the old ways of the place; a reinhabitory person, on the other hand, usually makes a long-term commitment to a new place in which she or he chooses to live.

II.

Before discussing their poetry in detail, I would like to explain how Gary Snyder came to know Miyazawa. Snyder first heard of the Japanese poet in Berkeley in the early 1950s from Jane Imamura, wife of the head priest of the Berkeley Buddhist Church. He was studying Chinese and Japanese at UC Berkeley at that time. She showed him a translation of “Unbeaten by Rain,” probably Miyazawa’s most widely known poem. Almost any Japanese can recite the first lines of the poem: “Unbeaten by rain/Unbeaten by wind/Having a strong body unbeaten by snow or summer heat . . .” (my translation). Snyder thought it remarkable and very different from the other more European-inspired modern Japanese poetry he had seen. When he arrived in Kyoto, in the mid-1950s, he picked up a volume of stories by Miyazawa that had been translated into English. He came to realize that Miyazawa had written a lot more than just “Unbeaten by Rain.”

According to Snyder, in the early 1960s, he was offered (probably by UNESCO) a small grant to translate from a foreign language into English. He asked Burton Watson, an American scholar of Chinese history living in Japan to recommend a Japanese poet to translate. Burton, whom Snyder had met after his arrival in Japan in 1956, recommended that he translate Miyazawa. Snyder was already familiar with Miyazawa, and this seemed a very natural idea to him. In 1962, he worked with a Japanese man named Hirotosugu Inoue, who was a graduate of Kyoto University. They worked together for several months, and Snyder revised and polished the work into translations as we now see them in *The Back Country*. Later, when he received the grant, Snyder gave Inoue half the money (Gary Snyder, e-mail to the author, 23 July 2002; “Miyazawa Kenji: Work Sheets,” UC Davis

Special Collections).¹

Most of Miyazawa's poems are placed in Iwate Prefecture, formerly called the "Tibet of Japan," as Snyder explains in his introduction to Miyazawa's poems. Sometimes the dialect of this region creeps into the poems. How Snyder worked to translate Miyazawa's poems is recorded in a notebook entitled "Miyazawa Kenji: Work Sheets," now housed at the Special Collections, Shields Library at the University of California, Davis. It is a very interesting document showing both the meticulous process of translating poems written in a foreign language and the careful attention that Snyder pays to each word and its nuances and associations. I will return to this topic shortly.

III.

If Miyazawa is difficult to read even for Japanese readers, one of the reasons for the difficulty is his use of scientific terms in his poetry. Also, readers may find his use of Buddhist terms sometimes bewildering, as seen in "Spring and the Ashura":

I am an Ashura!
 (the scene gets blurred by tears)
 smashed bits of cloud cross my vision,
 a holy crystal wind sweeps
 the translucent sea of the sky.
Zypressen—one line of spring
 blackly draws in ether,
 —through those dark footsteps
 the edge of the mountain heaven shines. (BC 132)

These lines contain both scientific terms—"Zypressen" (a German word meaning "cypress") and "ether"—and religious terms, such as "Ashura" and "a holy crystal wind." Snyder does not translate "Zypressen" into English, probably because this German word also remains untranslated into Japanese in Miyazawa's poem. An

untranslated foreign word spelled out in capital letters highlights itself in such a context and draws the reader's attention to its peculiar function. (Snyder, in translating the poem, changed the capital letters, except the first one, into lower-case letters). Embedded in the Japanese text in an isolated form, the German word transforms the landscape of the old Iwate by bringing a refreshingly new sound and shape into it. For Miyazawa, the German word is a scientific term capable of transforming a familiar landscape into something unfamiliar. That is, a remote, poverty-stricken area in Northern Japan—"the Tibet of Japan"—can be seen in a new, scientific (European) light and explained in a refreshing way by using that term instead of a traditional Japanese word associated with an old, disparaging image of his region. Science, or a foreign botanical term, thus transforms the landscape and adds a new dimension to the image of this place. In other words, the old landscape comes to be seen as a bioregion analyzable in scientific terms instead of a mere farming village full of trees and plants.

In his note attached at the end of the poem, Snyder explains what "Ashura" means: "Ashura is a Sanskrit Buddhist term for beings inhabiting one of the six realms of existence. They are malevolent giants in constant strife, often represented in art as human warriors, samurai, killing each other. The Ashura realm is the warring, contentious, hostile area of the mind . . ." (BC 133). What is implied in the picture of Ashura in "Spring and Ashura" is the poet's depression and struggle for liberation from the old landscape. The Ashura, with a bitter anger, wanders "at the depths in the brilliance of this April air" (BC 132). It is the ZYPRESSEN that stands still and powerfully dominates and transforms the landscape. The Ashura sees that the ZYPRESSEN disrupts the old horizontal picture.

Another religious term that Miyazawa uses in the original poem—"hari"—is translated as "crystal." Miyazawa uses this term in combination with other words in the phrase "*seihari no kaze*," which Snyder translates as "a holy crystal wind." For many Japanese readers, *seihari* is a difficult term. It is a combination of *sei* and *hari*. *Sei* means "holy" and *hari*, which comes from Sanskrit, means "crystal"

or “glass.” *Hari* is also one of the seven treasures of Buddhism. So this is one example of the Buddhist allusions that Snyder mentions in his introduction to the Miyazawa section, and in his translation Snyder attempts to retain the religious overtone that the original line implies. Thus, Miyazawa’s poems come out of a matrix that fuses science and religion, and in his thinking, science and religion do not reject each other. They complement each other and enable the poet to see the landscape differently. Miyazawa constructs a landscape in which “a holy crystal wind sweeps” and ZYPRESSEN stands straight in it. It is a peculiar landscape, modern and scientific (European), but at the same time religious and traditional (Japanese/Asian).

In his poems, Miyazawa exhibits his deep knowledge of the place where he lived. Take, for example, the poem entitled “A Break”:

Up in that gaudy space’s
 upper section a buttercup is blooming
 (high-class buttercup it is but
 rather than butter, from sulphur and honey)
 below that, wild parsley and clover
 and a dragonfly of worked tinsplate.
 rain crackles,
 oriole cries in the
 silverberry tree . . . (BC 136)

These lines remind the reader of some poems by Snyder in their precise use of plant names. A sense of place in a bioregion is based on such knowledge, and this is what Snyder repeatedly highlights in his poems in *Turtle Island* and his books published after it.

In the 1920s and the 1930s when Miyazawa was writing his poems, he was seen as a “farmer poet.” Even Hisao Kanaseki, who was a leading critic of American poetry in Japan, calls Miyazawa in an essay written in 1975 “this great farming-village poet of Japan” (216). I do not think Kanaseki intends to be disparaging, but his confining Miyazawa to a remote farming village in Northern Japan and a narrow literary category is not unrelated to an unconscious

prejudice that critics living in urban areas used to reveal when commenting on this poet. Such a label seems to have disappeared only after an ecological awareness (accompanied by an increasing recognition of the importance of decentralization) permeated Japanese society. Miyazawa was the first modern poet in Japan that could liberate himself toward imagining a community of humans and nonhumans by establishing a sense of place based on his deep ecological grasp of the region. Kanaseki points out that Miyazawa's vocabulary does not include the term "ecology" (213).² Even so, he is a great ecopoet, and when we take his major works of prose into consideration, he should certainly be regarded as one of Japan's greatest nature writers.

As Hideo Isogai and Takeshi Umehara suggest, Miyazawa was already representing humanity as an intricate part of the food chain, ordered by animals to take off their clothes and put butter and salt on their bodies, thus being readied in order to be eaten by animals, as typically seen in the prose work "Chumon no oi ryoriten"[A Restaurant with Too Many Orders] (Isogai 193; Umehara 191). In the context of world literature, Miyazawa and Snyder clearly should be seen as pioneers in this field. Miyazawa's early vision of humans as animals to be eaten by other animals is especially outstanding in its boldness. It may well be one of the earliest examples of environmental literature in the twentieth century, in which ecological vision throws a new light on what humanity is.

It is not difficult to see affinities between Miyazawa and Gary Snyder after we have seen major characteristics of the Japanese poet. Snyder, too, attempted to fuse science and religion from an early stage of his career. He realized in the early 1950s that Buddhism and ecology "cross-fertilize" each other well. His journals in *Earth House Hold* manifest such insights into Buddhism and ecology. For Snyder, Buddhism and ecology share a vision of the world in terms of the interrelatedness of all beings. The central image of this worldview is "Indra's net" in which every being is seen as interdependent on each other (*Earth House Hold* 38). Interestingly, Miyazawa has written a story with the same title, "Indra's Net." For Snyder, "Indra's net" is a

picture of a world caught in the Asian religious vision, while ecology is a model of the natural world presented by the rational thinking of Western science.

After returning to the United States from Japan in 1968, Snyder chose to live in the woods, at Kitkitdizze, immediately beginning to establish a sense of place:

Don't ever eat Boletus
 If the tube-mouths they are red
 Stay away from the Amanitas
 Or brother you are dead
 (*Turtle Island* 46; hereafter cited as TI)

These instructions are not directed only to his sons but also to the poet himself, and thus, mushrooming is a way of knowing the place. The knowledge of botany, just as Miyazawa exhibits his in his poems—"A Break," for example—reflects a sense of place that the speaker of the poem acquired or is attempting to establish.

I would like to cite a few more of Miyazawa's poems in order to see affinities between the two poets. In "Some Views Concerning the Proposed Site of a National Park," Miyazawa satirizes a character who proposes to develop a natural area so that "tourists will flock from all over" (BC 138). A wild environment chosen as a possible site for a national park is now in danger of being transformed into a commodity "with a real oriental charm to it." The place is covered by lava flow which is "not very scenic" from a commercial point of view, but when this volcanic area is constructed as a picture of "Hell," the developer thinks he will be able to sell the tourists "certificates for Heaven" (BC 139). Snyder also satirizes commodification and rape of a natural environment in such poems as "Front Lines" and "The Call of the Wild" (TI 18, 21–22).

Another poem that invites a comparison is "The Politicians." In this poem, Miyazawa not only satirizes the folly of humanity but also implies the resilient energy of the wild that resists human dominance and destruction. The poem begins with a satirical depiction of

politicians:

Running around here & there
 stirring up trouble and bothering people
 a bunch of luses—
 Fern leaves and cloud:
 the world was so chilly and dark—

But this sort of folly does not last for a long time. The rain will wash humans away and “only green fern” will remain. “The Politicians” ends thus:

And when humanity is laid out like coal
 somewhere some earnest geologist
 will note them in his notebook. (BC 145)

The lurking wild, ever ready to return, reminds the reader of Snyder’s idea of the wild expounded particularly in his essay “The Etiquette of Freedom” in *Practice of the Wild* or poems like “Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin” in *Mountains and Rivers without End*. In these works, he celebrates the resilient power of the wild such as the “L.A. River,” ready at any time to return to the surface.

I do not wish to dwell on the affinities of Miyazawa and Snyder any longer, but I would like to point out quickly that they share another dimension: they are both activists in their bioregions. Living in a farming region known for poverty, cold, and heavy winter snows, Miyazawa devoted his whole life to working for farmers, guiding them as an agricultural scientist and sharpening his social consciousness witnessing their lives. Snyder, as is manifested in such works as “Front Lines” (TI 18) and other essays collected in *The Practice of the Wild* and *A Place in Space*, has also been actively involved in community work to redefine what it means to be human and to imagine the world anew, criticizing sharply the destructive power of modern industrial civilization.

IV.

What, then, are the differences between these two poets? Of course, differences between the two are numerous, but foremost, I would like to see Miyazawa Kenji as an inhabitory poet and Gary Snyder as a reinhabitory one. Spending almost all his life in the farming area in Iwate Prefecture, Miyazawa knew the natural environment deeply, and he was also aware that it was a remote area to which the metropolis and its literary establishment paid little attention. His introducing into his poems a great, sometimes onerous, number of scientific terms reveals his yearning for seeing the familiar landscape as a bioregion in a new light of modern science, but at the same time it manifests his revolt against the metropolitan, European-influenced literary standards that confined themselves, to use Snyder's words, to "the moral quandaries, heroics, affairs of heart, and soul searching of highly gifted and often powerful people, usually male" ("Unnatural Writing," *A Place in Space* 164). Snyder is talking about Occidental writing, but it was also largely true of modern Japanese literature in the 1920s when Miyazawa was meditating as an isolated poet and writer on what it meant to live in a place transcending standards of the dominant culture. For the literary establishment, however, literature that focused on a remote obscure place and attempted to go radically beyond an anthropocentric concept of literature based on ecology and Buddhism was irrelevant and inconsequential. Miyazawa as an inhibitory poet, however, stayed put in his place and tried to know who he was and how to be by defining the world in his own terms. In other words, it is now possible to see him as attempting to create a culture of place and aesthetic practices radically disruptive of the prevailing urban assumptions. It took almost a half-century for Japanese readers to recognize exactly what Miyazawa was doing in the distant northern city of Hanamaki in Iwate.

As a reinhabitory person, Snyder's major tools for knowing where he is and who he is are ecology and Buddhism. His books after

his return from Japan in 1968, such as *Turtle Island*, *Axe Handles*, and *Mountains and Rivers without End*, all manifest a fervent search for a way of living inextricably entwined with his vision of a new relationship between humans and the natural environment. Snyder came to reinhabit the Sierra foothills to meditate on a new relationship between humans and nonhumans and to envision the planetary future. Miyazawa explored his terrain as an inhabitory person to create new images for humans and the earth.

Comparing and contrasting the two poets as they explore their places and establish a sense of place, we notice that Gary Snyder exhibits in his works a peculiarly American consciousness, which we might call a postcolonial sense of place. As he writes in "What Happened Here Before," he is deeply aware of the historical background of the terrain. As a newcomer, his exploration of the place goes back 30 million years. Describing what happened in the place "40,000 years ago," he writes:

And human people came with basket hats and nets
 Winter-houses underground
 Yew bows painted green,
 Feasts and dances for the boys and girls
 Songs and stories in the smoky dark.

Snyder then depicts what happened "125 years ago":

Then came the white man: tossed up trees and
 boulders with big hoses,
 going after that old gravel and the gold
 horses, apple-orchards, card-games,
 pistol-shooting, churches, county jail.

Thus, a sense of place for Snyder involves an understanding of the history of place, and in the United States a reinhabitory person cannot escape an awareness of the dialectic of placing and displacing, loss of culture and building of culture, or invasion of an ecosystem

and its destruction and subsequent recovery.

For Snyder, reinhabitation ultimately means exploring the relationship between self and place in a historical and environmental context and then seeing how to be on this planet. “What Happened Here Before” ends as a “Bluejay screeches from a pine”:

WE SHALL SEE
WHO KNOWS
HOW TO BE (TI 79–81)

Such a postcolonial sense of place manifests itself in several passages in Snyder’s works. In *Mountains and Rivers without End*, for example, we have these lines: “Ah. Here I am arrived in Bishop,/Owens Valley, called Payahu Nadu not so long ago” (MRWE 140). This is the song of a traveler who is visiting “the White Mountain” to see the oldest living things on earth. But a reinhabitory poet is not free from postcolonial history, and thus an historically aware American place-based culture breeds a postcolonial sense of place. In addition, establishing a sense of place also implies uncovering acts of remapping that took place in ecosystems.

V.

For a reinhabitory person, establishing a sense of place also means living a process of becoming placed or re-placed in a bioregion. Having lived this process carefully for more than three decades, Snyder is able to state that “Our place is part of what we are” (*Practice of the Wild* 27). From this sense of humanity, he is able to expand his vision to encompass the earth itself as one watershed in which every being is interdependent, as we see in *Mountains and Rivers without End*.

Miyazawa as an inhabitory person did not have to go through this process, although he fervently sought ways to see the natural environment surrounding him from a new, scientific angle and saw himself as “a blue light/busily flashing/simultaneously with every one

and the landscape” (“Introduction,” *Spring and Ashura*: translation mine). “Spring and the Ashura ” suggests that the ashura in the poem is a psychological reflection of the poet himself—a dark, saddened figure fervently seeking something in a landscape enwrapped in a curiously brilliant spring light. Miyazawa thus rejects facile optimism in his poetry, and as Kanaseki points out, Miyazawa’s writings reveal a sort of “Japanese” melancholy, which is absent from Snyder’s writings (209). Ultimately, however, Miyazawa does not sink into despair and envisions the function of poetry and poet as follows:

Oh, New Poet,
 Absorbing transparent energy
 From Clouds, Light, and Storms,
 Suggest to humans and the earth a new shape
 To take.
 (“To Students,” Tanigawa, 269–70; translation mine)

Snyder does not include this long poem in *The Back Country*, and the “Miyazawa Kenji: Work Sheets” does not show that he read or attempted to translate it. It is included, however, in *Poems of Miyazawa Kenji*, which Snyder used to translate Miyazawa. Whether Snyder read it or not, he certainly shares this vision, as is shown, for example, in this statement:

The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension. We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental—and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple: gratitude to it all, taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh). (*A Place in Space* 188)

Both poets suggest that a vision of new humanity and a new planetary future come from direct contact with natural elements, the sources of energy that permeate this world.

By living rooted in a place, by establishing a deep sense of place, both Miyazawa and Snyder suggest new images of humanity and the earth. Literary and cultural movements in the twentieth century have been shaped by interacting ideas that transcend national boundaries. Imagism inspired by Haiku is one such example. In the case of these two poets, ecology and Buddhism—science and religion that bridge Asian and American cultures—have been central in creating their worldviews and poetry. Perhaps this is one major reason that their poetry and prose continue to stimulate readers on both sides of the Pacific toward imagining “a new shape” for the earth and humanity.

NOTES

¹ The text they used was *Miyazawa Kenji Shishu* [Poems of Miyazawa Kenji]. Ed. Tetsuzo Tanigawa. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1952.

² According to Shiroh Hara, Miyazawa read Ernst Heinrich Haeckel’s books (636). As is well known, *The Oxford English Dictionary* credits Haeckel for coining the word *ecology*. In his poem “Aomori Elegy,” Miyazawa refers to “Dr. Haeckel,” and Hara thinks that “Dr. Haeckel” refers to Ernst Heinrich Haeckel. It is an interesting reference that suggests that Miyazawa may well have been one of the pioneering nature writers in twentieth-century world literature.

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