

MIYAZAWA KENJI

Selections



Edited and with an Introduction by **Hiroaki Sato**

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HIROAKI SATO



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FOREWORD *A Modernist in the Mountains*

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN

The Japanese poet Miyazawa Kenji, who died in 1933 at the age of thirty-seven, became a culture hero on the strength of a single brief poem written toward the end of his obscure and voluntarily impoverished life. "November 3rd" — an unpublished notebook entry probably intended more as a prayer than a poem — sketches a portrait of an idealized ascetic:

neither yielding to rain
nor yielding to wind
.....
without greed
never getting angry
always smiling quietly
eating one and a half pints of brown rice
and bean paste and a bit of
vegetables a day
in everything
not taking oneself
into account

and concludes:

someone
like that
is what I want
to be

Revered as a religious utterance, exploited in the 1940s as a wartime morale booster promoting self-sacrifice, and memorized by every subsequent generation of schoolchildren, “November 3rd” remains universally familiar in a way that no poem has in the West since Rudyard Kipling’s “If” or Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees.” The world it evokes, a world of thatched huts and drought-stricken fields, sickly children and rice farmers with bent backs, might appear anachronistic when set against the Japan of computer graphics and advanced robot technology — unless you were to take a bus into the mountains and see landscapes and faces lifted intact from a Miyazawa poem.

In his own way Miyazawa came quite close to realizing the saintly ideal set forth in “November 3rd.” The son of a pawnbroker in northern Japan’s Iwate Prefecture (a backward region afflicted with chronic crop failures), he converted in adolescence to the Nichiren sect of Buddhism. Taking as his guide the Lotus Sutra, which teaches the availability of Buddhahood to all sentient beings, he dedicated himself to the welfare of the local farmers, becoming a sort of one-man cultural and agricultural missionary, teaching crop rotation and soil improvement and exploring methods of flood and drought prevention. In the meantime, he strictly observed vegetarianism, often subsisting on a poorer diet even than the local people were used to, and as a result he ruined his health.

Such a career clearly lends itself to hagiography, and it is somewhat ironic that Miyazawa has been claimed in turn by militarists, Buddhists, modernist aesthetes, and most recently (so Gary Snyder tells us) the Japanese Greens. All these claims occurred after the poet was safely

dead: for Miyazawa was not the sort of person ever to become a leader or a spokesman. He was a strange mix of humility and irascibility, whimsy and anguish, and the self-imposed deprivations of his life contrast mysteriously with the exuberant profusion of his writing. His poems — he wrote several thousand, in both traditional and modern forms — range from epigrams to an eight-hundred-line free-verse notation of a journey on foot, from comic monologues to metaphysical reveries, from scientifically precise landscapes to fervent devotional outpourings, while his children's stories express sometimes surprisingly violent and tragic themes through a cast of animals, stars, and gods.

One of the most distinct poetic voices of this century, Miyazawa was one of the most private as well. A single self-published collection in 1924 was his only gesture toward making his poetry public, his life was lived apart from literary circles, and — notwithstanding the vigorous modernity of his style — he thought of his writing more in religious than aesthetic terms. He wrote at a time when Japanese poetry, after confining itself for a millennium or so to effusions of no more than thirty-three syllables, was branching out with gusto into the wide-open spaces of *vers libre*. But much of this work had a borrowed tone, heavy with Parnassian and Symbolist echoes and imbued with a certain lugubrious self-pity. Miyazawa — for whom self-pity was never a mild emotion but something closer to self-torture — nevertheless cultivated a bright, sharply defined, often comic diction, hurling incongruous elements together and letting them find their own unexpected unity.

Miyazawa used the title *Spring & Asura* for three separate collections of his poetry in modern forms. An asura is a demon, inhabiting one of the six Buddhist realms of existence, and the opposition of restless demon and vegetative landscape makes a fitting ideograph for Miyazawa's poetry, where consciousness erupts into its surroundings

and mind does not merely contemplate the world but actively constructs it. Yet mind is also a construct:

The phenomenon called “I”
is a blue illumination
of the hypothesized, organic alternating current lamp
(a compound of all transparent ghosts)
a blue illumination
of the karmic alternating current lamp
which flickers busily, busily
with landscapes, with everyone
yet remains lit with such assuredness
(the light persists, the lamp lost)

Self, the organizing principle of consciousness, is fragmentary. The “I” of Miyazawa’s diaristic voice charts its own disintegration into its compound elements: lava slopes, mineral deposits, parched reeds, foreign scientific terms, Sanskrit mantras, imaginary vistas of China or Italy or Russia, apparitions of Buddhist saints and demons, abstract patterns of line and color. (The expertise with which Miyazawa breaks down the world in his poems ties in curiously with his employment, in the last years of his life, as an engineer for a local rock-crushing company.) The wonder is that this disintegration of self leads not into a void but into an ecstatic fullness:

Out of the gray steel of imagination
akebi vines entwine the clouds,
wildrose bush, humus marsh

begins the title poem “Spring & Asura,” one of Miyazawa’s most energetic flights:

At the bottom of the light in April’s atmospheric strata,
spitting, gnashing, pacing back and forth,

I am Asura incarnate
 (the landscape sways in my tears)
 Shattered clouds to the limit of visibility
 in heaven's sea of splendor
 sacred crystalline winds sweep
 spring's row of *Zypressen*
 absorbs ether, black,
 at its dark feet
 the snow ridge of Tien Shan glitters
 (waves of heat haze and white polarization)
 yet the True Words are lost
 the clouds, torn, fly through the sky.

He is devotional but never didactic. Despite the orthodoxy of his religious beliefs, one never gets the feeling that Miyazawa is limiting himself to what he ought to say. On the contrary, there is a nakedness and spontaneity leading to constant surprise. In the poems concerning the death of his sister Toshiko in November 1922 — including three written on the day itself — the grief is palpable and unpredictable in its manifestations. The death scene continues to well up in poems written the following year, along with visions of Toshiko assuming other forms:

Two large white birds fly
 calling to each other sharply, sorrowfully
 in the moist morning sunlight.
 They are my sister,
 my dead sister.

Elsewhere, as the wheels of a train squeak noisily and a moth crawls under a ceiling lamp, he writes:

My feelings are warped with sorrow
 and I can't help thinking of her, hidden somewhere.

In the wake of her death, Miyazawa's poetry seems to toughen, mournful subjectivity hardening into mineral edge — "The sea is rusted by the morning's carbon acid" — and the poet taking a critical tone toward his own spiritual aspirations:

Why do you try to grasp firmly in the human
what you can get only in religion?
.....
Come now, wipe your tears, collect yourself.
You must not love in so religious a mode.

Feeling, however intense, is not privileged over other levels of experience; it is a vehicle, not an end in itself. Many of Miyazawa's poems begin at a level of keyed-up emotion where someone else's would end and extend a mood of turmoil in almost leisurely fashion, as if the poet were sufficiently at home in his own anxieties to feel out the space around them and take notes on the view. His images suggest not so much the contents of his self as what remains after self has been exhausted. The world articulates itself in hard, jabbing lines: "The flock of crows is zinc scrap in dilute sulfuric acid." "Pale-blue sap oozes from the severed root." "The gray light avalanched in the distance." In the later poems the world enters more and more, bringing with it a varied population of animals (pigs, snakes, horses, insects) and humans whose doings are chronicled with almost novelistic density. A disheveled landlord, having loaned back the rice he's received as rent, goes off hunting to feed himself:

But when he manages to haul back a bear,
they say, "He killed the mountain god
so this year's crop is poor."

A young doctor begins to integrate himself into village life, and Miyazawa suddenly sees him as he will be in a few years:

By the time this doctor finally comes to feel
just as the villagers do
.....
he'll have fallen behind in new techniques
and at the lecture of the county doctors' society
he'll curl up small, a perpetual listener.

The hallucinatory center of his poetry is framed by a broad, even humorous, picture of the surrounding community. He is not apart from the world but consciously alone in the midst of it, with all his senses operating.

The humor is chiefly evident in the monologues spoken by a series of bureaucratic or academic personae: "The Landscape Inspector," "Mr. Pamirs the Scholar Takes a Walk," "The Prefectural Engineer's Statement Regarding Clouds." Even in translation — or at least in translation as deft as Hiroaki Sato's — it is possible to gauge the juxtaposition of formulaic, ritually self-deprecating official language and the rugged, unresponsive landscape in whose midst it is spoken. Not surprisingly, the comedy has a bitter aftertaste, most memorably in "An Opinion Concerning a Proposed National Park Site," where the poet suggests turning his volcanic surroundings into a theme park embodying the Buddhist underworld:

And yes, here in particular, set up a Hell.
Make it charming the Oriental fashion.
A spear-shaped red fence.
Touch it up with dead trees starkly
.....
from Yama's Courthouse to the Womb-Trip —
.....
As a finale, blast off real shots electrically
from two field cannons
hidden this side of the mountain.

The moment they think, *Bingo!*
they're right there in the Three-Way River, you see.

In fact where he is — “this prefecture where there’s nothing to eat” — is a lot tougher than Hell: “Over there on the frozen riverbed/ a naked baby was found abandoned.” The flights of fantastic invention always return to their source. What separates Miyazawa’s poetry most strikingly from that of most of his modernist contemporaries in Europe and America is its immersion in actual hunger and actual labor. The imminence of drought or flood and the murderous difficulty of procuring sustenance can be felt in every line.

In the later poems, physical work is the abiding and obsessive theme, not work on behalf of some idealized nation-state or political program but for bare survival. The anguish is no longer metaphysical but practical: “I’m filled with anxieties about the manure/I threw from the horse cart and left on the slope yesterday” (from “Work,” in *Spring & Asura*). He monitors weather and growth as if vigilantly surveying the movements of a potential enemy:

I calculate again and again
the number of days before the delayed rice takes root,
the number of days before bifurcation, and the time when the ears will
come out.

The real threat of starvation makes for the force of “The Breeze Comes Filling the Valley,” a cry of triumph that, in the face of an anticipated crop failure and despite a violent flood of rain,

because of the slight differences in seedling preparation
and in the use of superphosphate,
all the stalks are up today.

The triumph is only temporary, tentative — there will always be another season to worry about — but for the moment Miyazawa allows himself a moment of pure elation:

I went home late at night.
But in the end I did not sleep.
And, look,
this morning the east, the golden rose, opens,
the clouds, the beacons, rise one after another,
the high-voltage wires roar,
the stagnant fog runs in the distance.
The rice stalks have risen at last.
They are living things,
precision machines.
All stand erect.
At their tips, which waited patiently in the rain,
tiny white flowers glisten
and above the quiet amber puddles reflecting the sun
red dragonflies glide.

Yet this plenitude — literal, not metaphoric — is after all only another moment of reality, no more privileged than the others that Miyazawa recorded. On the day of his death six years later, this tanka was the last poem he wrote:

Because of an illness, crumbling
 this life —
if I could give it for the dharma
 how glad I would be.

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