

2016

## Discovering the Lotus on This Shore: A Reading of Kenji Miyazawa's "Okhotsk Elegy"

Jon P. Holt

*Portland State University*, [joholt@pdx.edu](mailto:joholt@pdx.edu)

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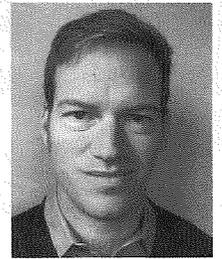
### Citation Details

Holt, Jon. "Discovering the Lotus on This Shore: A Reading of Kenji Miyazawa's 'Okhotsk Elegy'." *Dharma World* Vol. 43 (Tokyo: 2016). 25-29.

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# Discovering the Lotus on This Shore: A Reading of Kenji Miyazawa's "Okhotsk Elegy"

by Jon Holt



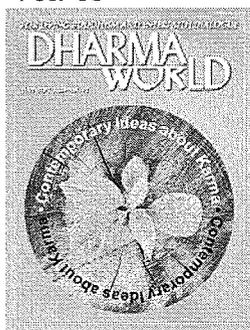
*Miyazawa wrote stories and poems in order to help others understand, venerate, and propagate the Lotus. In doing so, he created works that are both very Japanese and very worldly.*

Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933), perhaps Japan's most popular Buddhist writer in the modern period, was also one of Japan's greatest modern proponents of the Lotus Sutra, a special text that has remained highly vital to Japanese since antiquity. Although Miyazawa was by profession a scientist and by avocation a writer of children's stories and free verse, he reminds Japanese of the bonds between their society today

and its past. Dedicated to writing Lotus literature (*Hokke bungaku*), Miyazawa wrote stories and poems to help others understand, venerate, and propagate the Lotus. In doing so, he created works that are both very Japanese and very worldly. This welcome contradiction is immediately apparent in his poem "Okhotsk Elegy" (*Ohōtsuku banka*), in which the poet records his thoughts, as he stands on the shore of a Japanese

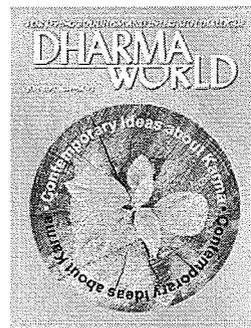
Jon Holt is an Assistant Professor of Japanese in the Department of World Languages and Literatures at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. His research interests include modern Japanese poetry, Japanese Buddhism, and manga. Recent publications include "In a Senchimentaru Mood: Japanese Sentimentalism in Modern Poetry and Art" (*Japanese Language and Literature* [2014]); and "Ticket to Salvation: Nichiren Buddhism in Miyazawa Kenji's 'Ginga tetsudō no yoru'" (*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* [2014]). His translations of Amari Hayashi's tanka recently appeared on *asymptotejournal.com*.

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*Kenji Miyazawa walks in a field near Hanamaki Agricultural School in the early spring of 1926.*

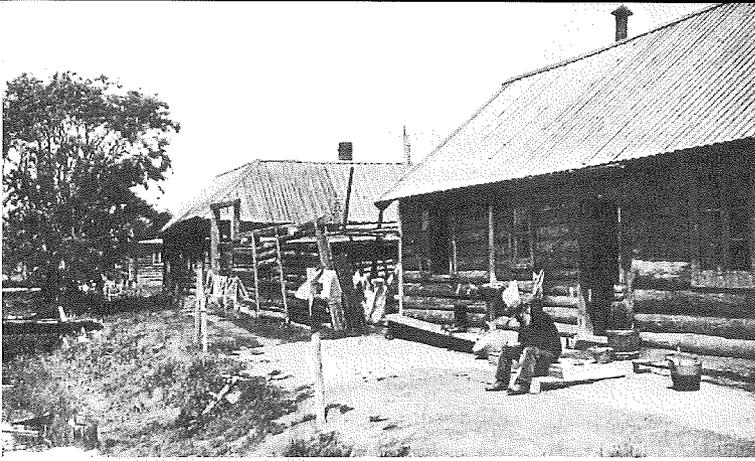
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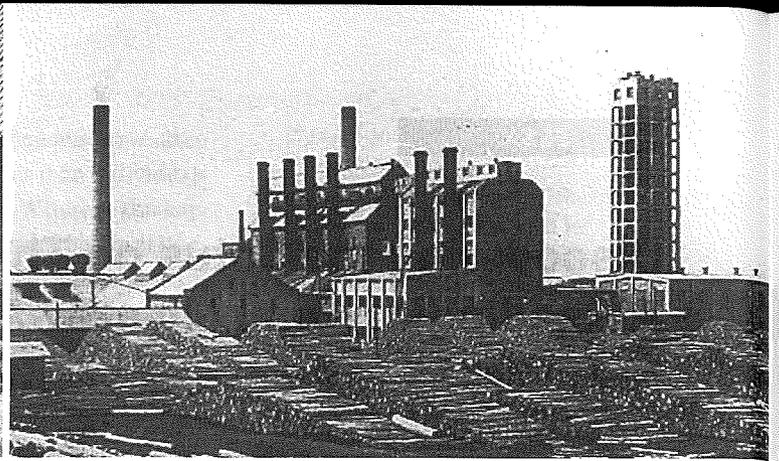
*Toshiko Miyazawa (1898–1922) when she was a student at Japan Women's College (now Japan Women's University) in Tokyo.*

colony formerly held by Russia, as well as his emotional changes that come from reconnecting with the Lotus Sutra after a dark period when he doubted his faith, following the death of his younger sister, Toshiko, in 1922.

"Okhotsk Elegy" takes places in Karafuto, not Japan proper. Karafuto is the Japanese name for Sakhalin Island. Its southern portion below the fiftieth parallel north became a colony of Japan in 1905. Officially, Miyazawa went there in August 1923 in order to help procure employment for one of his students through a former colleague. Miyazawa wrote a total of five poems in this series, documenting his progress and return, but "Okhotsk Elegy" was the main poem and serves as the section title within his 1924 poetry collection *Spring and Asura* (*Haru to shura*). The poem is at



A Russian village on Sakhalin Island. Ca. 1930. (Reproduced from the book *Nihon chiri taikai [A comprehensive outline of the geography of Japan]*, vol. 10, published in 1930 by Kaizosha and posted online by Wikimedia Commons.)



Kenji Miyazawa visits Toyohara plant, a large pulp plant built by Oji Paper Company, in Karafuto, to help procure employment for one of his students. (Reproduced from the book *Me de miru Karafuto jidai [The Karafuto period in photographs]*, published in 1986 by Kokushokankokai and posted online by Wikimedia Commons.)

once both Japanese and very other as it opens, describing a near-alien landscape (the translation of the poem is mine):

The surface of the sea has completely gone to rust from the morning's carbonization because you also have that green-blue color, there must also be azure present.

Far off where the waves disappear, there's much liquid lazuli.

Because we are reading an elegy (*banka*), we know this is a song memorializing a dead person's spirit. *Banka* is one of the oldest forms of Japanese poetry. Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (ca. 660–720), the great poet of *Manyōshū* (The collection of ten thousand leaves), composed a large number of elegies for private and public purposes. Miyazawa's elegy, however, begins with a tone that is entirely too rational. He is trying to make sense of this new, foreign landscape with his mind, not with his heart. Trained in the sciences of the soil, plants, and agriculture, he tempers his poetic spirit with the logic of a geologist and a taxonomist as the poem continues:

the spikes of *timothy* grass have become so short like this and they are blown by the wind, over and over and over (What they are are the keys of a blue

piano being pounded upon by the wind again and again and again) or perhaps it's just a shorter variety of *timothy*?

Morning dew droplets and *asagao* blooms there is the glory that we call morning glories

Despite the large number of names or terms in this poem that are English, Dutch, and even Sanskrit, strangely there are no Russian words to be found in this poetic topos of the Karafuto landscape, one so close to fellow resident Russian speakers. The landscape has a fantastic allure for Miyazawa, refreshing his senses in the "glorious" seaside of Sakaehama (Glory Beach), wherein he will rediscover the power of the Lotus Sutra. Miyazawa uses his cold, rational faculties to make sense of a fantastic place. His heart, aching for warmth, soon finds succor:

Here comes a dray meant for open-country work, the one I just saw the draft horse hangs its white, wizened head and here's that goodness of the pack-horse man that I felt earlier when I asked him on the vacant street corner "Where is the most lively part of the

beach?" and he answered, "Probably that part, but I don't know because I've never been over there." Now he gives me a kind, sidelong look (Yes, in his small spectacles are reflected the white clouds of Karafuto)

When we are lost in a foreign land, we ask directions. Miyazawa asked the Japanese colonist about this place and got an answer that was both helpful and not helpful, but at least he made contact with another person. Reaching out to him kindled the spark of faith in other people, which Miyazawa had been missing. As Miyazawa often does in his "mental-image sketches" (*shinshō suketchi*), he breaks off from his internal conversations to speak with others, although he always returns to his own thoughts, often in the form of parenthetical asides. Now he reconsiders his botanical assumptions, perhaps to reaffirm confidence in his rational powers. Miyazawa is still very far away from the spirit of the person he came to remember.

They look more like *paeonia* than *asagao* They are big beach roses They are Japanese *hamanasu* roses of the darkest red morning Ah, the deep fragrance of flowers

like these!  
 Somehow it must be the trick of  
 fairies!  
 They bring to them countless indigo-  
 colored butterflies,  
 and those small spear tips of golden  
 grass,  
 greenish bamboo blinds, nephrite  
 vases, and on and on

The landscape is a dizzy array of col-  
 ors, shapes, smells, and light that over-  
 whelm Miyazawa's scientific mind so  
 much that he cannot find predicates for  
 all of his subjects. Magic, through these  
 fairies (*yōsei*), defeats rational science  
 and Japanese syntax. Miyazawa tries to  
 reassert his rational mind by using the  
 provisional form (*ba*) of predicates to  
 clarify the cause and effect of nature on  
 human senses. When Miyazawa uses  
 logical sentence constructions in his  
 poetry, it usually shows a sense of des-  
 peration. Miyazawa here is desperate  
 not to become sucked too deeply into  
 his poetic reveries, because he would  
 risk succumbing to his grief.

Plus, with the clouds shining so  
 much like this  
 for me it's all a mad, dizzying rush  
 and oh so fun!

The tracks of the horse, side by side  
 remain on the brown sand, quiet  
 and wet  
 of course it's not that just the horse  
 has passed through  
 but the wide ruts of its dray  
 are so faint; are lines of cursive  
 writing

Miyazawa's exhilaration of the scene  
 is tempered by its solemnity. He came  
 to communicate with the dead. Instead,  
 fairies and sunlight have distracted him,  
 exciting him about the beauty of life. He  
 looks to the landscape and sobers him-  
 self. He reconnects with the cart man,  
 with whom he had brief communica-  
 tion. Instead of memories of speech,  
 Miyazawa begins to see messages in  
 the sand, a line of cursive text, which is  
 more alienating than the cart man's warm  
 words or kind eye contact. Miyazawa  
 has a mission to communicate with the  
 dead. The landscape reminds him of his  
 mission, of his message.

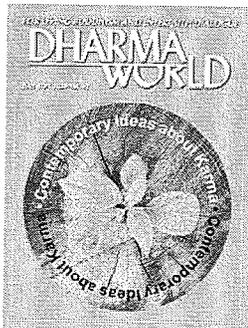
In the fine white lines formed after  
 the waves come  
 three small mosquitoes hover over  
 me  
 and then are blown away  
 What lovely shells! White fragments!

The stalks of blue day lilies are half  
 buried in the sand  
 waves coming in; waves churning  
 sand  
 I fall down into the fine gravel of  
 white schist and  
 I put into my mouth a piece of a shell  
 that was cleanly polished by the  
 waves  
 and try to doze off for a while

If the landscape will not speak  
 directly to Miyazawa, he will take the  
 landscape into his mouth. Although he  
 does not digest the shell, he has mouth-  
 to-mouth contact with it; in turn, he  
 falls into the landscape, allowing the  
 beach to absorb him in its colorful and  
 soft embrace:

Why sleep here? Well, on such a  
 high-quality *carpet* like these pale  
 white lingonberries  
 and newly ripened black berries  
 down under these mysterious  
*bluebells*,  
 my transparent energy  
 that I gave to the Sakhalin morning  
 fairies before  
 I must now recover from the light  
 of the clouds  
 and the sound of the waves and

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the damp-smelling wind  
 moreover, most importantly, my  
 mental image  
 has gone totally pale from exhaustion  
 and that's why, that's why it's even  
 glowing blindingly green-gold in  
 color  
 I can even hear from the light rays  
 and the dark, layered sky  
 unnerving bucket-drum sounds

Now the poet, rather than being  
 the one that absorbs and refashions  
 nature, is dominated by nature. He is  
 in danger of losing his special humanity,  
 his *shinshō*, mental image. Miyazawa,  
 with his pad and pencil taking notes out  
 on this poetic journey, now becomes  
 like illuminated text—glowing green-  
 gold in color, much like Buddhist sutras  
 illustrated and written with gold, which  
 was once an extreme act of devotion  
 by an aristocrat to demonstrate one's  
 dedication to the Buddha's teachings.  
 Are these unnerving drum sounds not  
 unlike the distant sounds of someone  
 beating the *mokushō*, the percussion  
 instrument used by Lotus practitioners  
 to chant the *daimoku*? Hail to the Sutra  
 of the Mysterious Flower and Wonderful  
 Law! *Namu myōhō renge-kyō!* Miyazawa  
 is becoming attuned now to his true  
 mission on Glory Beach, here at the  
 Sea of Okhotsk:

The humble grass heads, the haze  
 of light  
 The greenish-blue color stretches  
 gloriously to the sea horizon  
 from the seams of the clouds' lay-  
 ered construction  
 a bit of blue heaven peeps out  
 my chest is ever so strongly pierced  
 the two colors of blue over there  
 both are qualities my Toshiko had  
 When I walk alone, nod off from  
 exhaustion  
 on this deserted Karafuto shore  
 Toshiko is there on the edge of that  
 blue place  
 what she's doing there, I don't know.

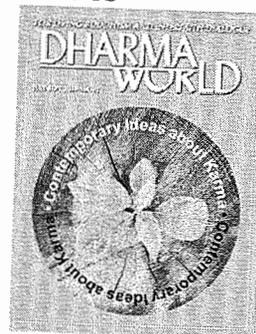
Finally, the seeker has found what  
 he seeks. However, when Miyazawa  
 observes Toshiko's spirit slowly emerg-  
 ing from her "two blue colors" of the  
 sea and sky, he cannot understand what  
 she is doing. If she has not come forth  
 to communicate with him, why is she  
 there? Miyazawa is confused.

The wild trunks and branches of the  
*ezo* and *todo* pines  
 over there have been wildly scattered,  
 the waves curl and curl  
 and the sand bursts forth because  
 of their rolling  
 the salt water becomes muddy and  
 lonely  
 (The time is 11:15. The flat plate dial  
 shines with its pale blue light)

Like Wordsworth's pathetic fallacy,  
 the landscape of Miyazawa's mental  
 sketch mirrors his confusion. Miyazawa,  
 the scientist, reemerges to counter this  
 mental chaos by taking note (parenthet-  
 ically) of the data he has: the time of day  
 and the position of the sun. When he  
 returns to his observations of the beach,  
 another Miyazawa emerges: this time it  
 is Miyazawa the elder brother.

Birds fly high and low through the  
 clouds here  
 the morning boats now go sliding  
 past  
 carved into the sand, the rut from  
 the bottom of a fishing boat  
 and the hollowed-out space from a  
 big wooden beam  
 together form a single wavy crucifix.  
 Taking a number of *ki-pen*, as she  
 called small pencils,  
 Toshi once spelled HELL and  
 changed them to LOVE  
 then showed me them arranged into  
 the Cross  
 it was a trick anyone could do, so  
 I mocked her with a cold smile  
 (one piece of shell gets buried in the  
 sand its white edge only sticks out.)  
 Fine sand that had dried out at last

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A commemorative photo of Kenji (aged five)  
 and Toshiko (aged three) taken in 1901 by  
 Jisaburo Miyazawa, their uncle.

flows down into this carved-out cross  
 now it steadily pours down and down

Kenji and Toshiko were the two  
 eldest Miyazawa children. When Kenji,  
 the eldest, converted from Pure Land  
 Buddhism to Nichiren Buddhism, only  
 Toshiko joined him, turning away from  
 Amida to focus on the Lotus Sutra. In  
 their youth, they learned about other  
 cultures and religions. Toshiko, like  
 Kenji, studied English; they also learned  
 about Christianity and had experiences  
 learning English through Christian mis-  
 sionaries. The two eldest Miyazawa chil-  
 dren turned to the Lotus to channel  
 their faith into positive energy. When  
 Toshiko died in 1922, it was a terri-  
 ble shock to Kenji. He never married;  
 the one true female friend he had was  
 his sister, Toshiko, who was his liter-  
 ary confidante and perhaps even his  
 soul mate. As recorded in his famous  
 poem "Pine Needles" (*Matsu no hari*),  
 he repeatedly asks her on her death-  
 bed, "Are you really leaving me alone?"  
 Even in August 1923, a year after the  
 tragedy of her death, Miyazawa contin-  
 ued to pursue Toshiko, hoping to get

an answer to his question. “Okhotsk Elegy” concludes with the poet confronting both the realm of death and the world of nature.

Although the sea is so green like this  
when I still think about Toshiko  
the expression of the distant folk  
say to me, “Why do you  
mourn only for this one person, your  
younger sister?”

I hear a voice within me say  
(Casual observer! Superficial traveler!)  
Once the sky shines so bright, quite  
unexpectedly, the darkness spreads  
out

and three fierce birds go flying now  
and they start chirping so sadly like  
that!

Do they bring me some kind of news?  
One side of my head hurts  
The roofs of Sakaehama village, now  
distant, glitter  
a bird, just one, blows her glass  
whistle  
and she goes drifting up to chalce-  
dony clouds

The glittering quality of the town  
and the wharf,  
the pink color of the smooth hillock  
there, smooth and high,  
is from its full swath of willow-orchids  
fresh apple-green grassland!

and rows of blackish-green pines!  
(*Namo Saddaruma Pundarika Sutra!*)  
When the sea waves come rolling in  
five little sandpipers  
run away with tottering steps

(*Namo Saddaruma Pundarika Sutra!*)  
When the waves pull out  
they follow them running with tot-  
tering steps

over the flat mirror surface of the  
sand.

Although Miyazawa’s “Voiceless Lamentation” poems about Toshiko’s death on November 27, 1922, are well known and loved by many Japanese, these poems from the “Okhotsk Elegy” lamentation poems are equally moving.



A stretch of South Sakhalin Railway, run by Japan’s Karafuto Prefecture. Ca. 1920.  
(Reproduced from the book *Me de miru Karafuto jidai [The Karafuto period in photographs]*, published in 1986 by Kokushokankokai and posted online by Wikimedia Commons.)

In the first lamentation poems, Miyazawa vividly described the passing of his sister in terms that were very realistic but also very much part of Miyazawa’s inner world. Those poems are very sad because Miyazawa lost both his sister and his faith. In this “Okhotsk Elegy” poem, Miyazawa slowly regains his faith as he comes to terms with the death of Toshiko. The Lotus helps him find his strength again. Urged by the other-world spirits not to just mourn and pray for Toshiko, Miyazawa awakens from a long, dark dream on an otherwise sunny beach. On Glory Beach, Miyazawa hears the *daimoku* chant of the Lotus Sutra sung in the original Sanskrit (“*Namo Saddharuma Pundarika Sutra!*”). Looking out at the Sea of Okhotsk, sitting in a colony on a Russian-Japanese island, Miyazawa connects with the world of his faith, once lost but now found. Somewhere out there, perhaps in between reincarnations, Toshiko exists (“what she’s doing there, I don’t know”). She is not caught in limbo between HELL and LOVE (that is, the Christian heaven). The tides of the cosmos or Buddhist karma flow again. Nature’s cycle of birth and death, like the waves of the sea, comes and goes.

Looking out “over the flat mirror surface of the sand,” Miyazawa sees himself in those sandpipers who delicately trace the comings and goings both of the sea and of life. Here is a perfect example of the kind of Lotus literature that Miyazawa wanted to write. Not only does it contain the *daimoku*, but it also contains the core message of how the Lotus Sutra can bring salvation to oneself and to fellow human beings. □

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