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

Jon P. Holt
Portland State University, joholt@pdx.edu

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Discovering the Lotus on This Shore: A Reading of Kenji Miyazawa’s “Okhotsk Elegy”
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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” (Ohotsuku banka), in which the poet records his thoughts, as he stands on the shore of a Japanese 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 taikei [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 azurite present.

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

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 packhorse 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" (shinsō sukechi), 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 reconsider 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 peonia than asagao
They are big beach roses
They are Japanese hamanasu roses of the darkest red morning
Ah, the deep fragrance of flowers

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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 colors, shapes, smells, and light that overwhelm 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 desperation. 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 sober his mind. He reconnects with the cart man, with whom he had brief communication. 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!

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
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’ layered 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 emerging
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 (parenthetically) 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
flows down into this carved-out cross
now it steadily pours down and down

Kenji and Toshiko were the two
oldest 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 con-
tinued 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 chalice-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! (Nama Saddaruma Pandarika Sutra!)

When the sea waves come rolling in five little sandpipers run away with tottering steps (Nama Saddaruma Pandarika Sutra!)

When the waves pull out they follow them running with tottering 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.

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 Pandarika 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.

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