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Miyazawa Kenji's Prophetic Green Vision: Japan's Great Writer/Poet on the 80th Anniversary of His Death 予言・者宮沢賢治が託した緑の展望　偉大な物書き・詩人の没後80周年

Roger Pulvers

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When Miyazawa Kenji was writing his stories and poems nearly a century ago, Japan was a country with a two-pronged mission: to become the first non-white, non-Christian nation to create a modern prosperous state — and to be the leader of an Asian revival.

The Japanese people were obsessed with their cultural identity and their place, as an imperial power, among the first rank of nations in the world. It was an obsession that would lead them to prosecute an aggressive and brutal war in Asia and the Pacific.

But in the case of Kenji (referred to here by his given name in accordance with Japanese literary custom), his obsessions were directed elsewhere. There is almost no mention of Japan or the Japanese in his works. Many of his stories are set in a land of his own imagining he called Ihatovo — a self-styled Esperanto rendering of his native Iwate, a prefecture in the Tohoku region of northeastern Honshu. And some of his characters bear foreign names, the best known being Giovanni and Campanella in his novel "Night on the Milky Way Train," which wasn't published until 1934, a year after he died.

Kenji's mind was obsessively focused on matters that barely occurred to his compatriots. He was on a different mission, a mission naturally not understood in his own era. In fact, as we now know, he was nearly a century ahead of his time.

We can give a contemporary name to his mission and its messages: Green Social Design.

Why "green"?

"Until all people are happy, there is no individual happiness."

In his works, Kenji goes far beyond a mere appreciation and love of nature. For one thing, he was a dedicated scientist — a professional agronomist and a keen amateur biologist, geologist and astronomer. He recognized earlier than anyone in his day in Japan that humans would have to live in peaceful coexistence with nature in order to survive the future.

In his short story "Indra's Net" he perceives our world as being composed of threads that are all interlinked. These threads connect not only person to person, but all things, organic and inorganic, in a net of interdependence. If one thread breaks, then all others are affected. Drops of dew on the net form a mirror in which we can see ourselves. This reflection is in turn reflected countless times in the drops of dew behind, to the sides, in front, above and below us. We cannot even begin to see ourselves without seeing all else that is around us in space and time.

Kenji was passionately interested in fossils, having discovered footprints of the extinct Akebono elephant in the bed of the Kitakami River that courses through his hometown of Hanamaki. He knew well that we humans could follow in the footsteps of that elephant to extinction if we didn't recognize how fragile are the threads that link us to all other natural phenomena. It is not only other animals and trees and plants whose welfare we must consider in our every action, but also the state of the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, lakes and seas, and the wind, the air and the light that we live amid every day of our lives.

This is why his messages have been taken to heart so profoundly since the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, and the tsunami and ongoing radioactive contamination that followed, primarily affecting his native Tohoku.

In the nearly three years since the earthquake, Japan has experienced something of a Miyazawa Kenji boom. In particular, his poem "Strong in the Rain," with its expression of profound compassion for all those who suffer, has given strength to the people of those northeastern areas struck by the calamity.

If there is a single message in Kenji's works, it is this: If we do not listen to the voices of all natural phenomena, then we have no one to blame but ourselves for our inevitable fall.

As for social design, in this too his notion of our proper role in society goes beyond what anyone in the Japan of his day would have been contemplating.

Kenji communed with other people through natural phenomena. His words to others passed from himself through air and light, carried on the wind, flowed over water and rock, brushed by the leaves of trees until they reached other ears, including, over time, our own.

Kenji cast an enormous net of charity and benevolence over the people of Japan. The nature of his social design was never passive. As we see in "Strong in the Rain," the person that he wants to be goes and cares for children and mothers and people who are living in discord. The empathy that drives his model for society is fervent and proactive. Without self-sacrifice there is no compassionate action. His stories are full of heroes who put the priorities of their own happiness well below the priorities of others. One of his best-known mottoes is: "Until all people are happy, there is no individual happiness."

His outlook on what humans need and desire has a long horizon. When he describes a location in the present in his stories and poems, he often includes in his "landscapes of the heart" what existed at that place in the past and what would be there in the future. Most poets are content to describe what they see and sense before their eyes. Kenji believed that you could not faithfully express an instant of reality without considering it through time and space.

Lines in "Strong in the Rain" tell us that a person's understanding of the universe should come from "observation and experience."

If his empathy for all people, animals and plants is proactive, though, it is never based solely on sentiment. We need first to understand and appreciate the scientific basis of things before we rush headlong into good deeds and any "development" involving them. This is another reason why Kenji's message to us has stark relevance today. The radioactive contamination from the stricken Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, of the Tohoku countryside and the sea off its coast, proves to us that development which ignores our interconnectedness with nature will come at a very high and, in all likelihood, irredeemable cost.

Another feature of Kenji's model of social design is the importance of art in our lives. He was dedicated to the nurturing of folk art and performance in his native Iwate Prefecture and wrote plays to enlighten students and farmers as to the dangers of living in disharmony with nature.

His play "Night at Taneyama-ga-Hara," structured like a traditional noh play with a prescient dream sequence in the middle, is about the crass commercialization of forest management leading people to favor unfettered greed over sensible husbandry.

This is where his green proclivity and his models of social design come together. The society of the future will thrive only if it is based on scientific principles grounded in harmony with nature and enriched by the bounty of art. Both science and the arts must be nurtured by society and government. It is not a case of one or the other.

He was a one-man non-profit organization, traveling around Iwate and offering his time and money to help subsistence farmers. He was also the granddaddy of the local products movement. Though he was a genuinely cosmopolitan thinker on a global scale, his primary commitment was to the farmers of his region. He used his knowledge and skills as an agronomist to modernize the farming methods there that were lagging behind much of the rest of Japan.

It is not only in his worldview that Kenji is an outsider in Japan. In some senses, he took the Japanese language itself out of its national context. This may be, when all is said and done, his greatest achievement.

At first glance, Kenji appears to be a provincial writer in both senses of this word "provincial", ie from the provinces and unsophisticated. In fact, this is the way he was looked upon by most literary critics and scholars when I first arrived in Japan in 1967. They were blinded by his "rustic" image. In reality, Kenji was a true cosmopolitan, though he never travelled outside Japan and did not display the usual worldly personality traits of the sophisticated. Yet, he was a man of the world.

The model of social design that pervades all of his work is universal. He sees far over the heads of all other Japanese people of his era. He is not concerned with the identity of the Japanese people.

Two things propel Kenji's language: wind and light. To most of us, these are media of nature, and we don't think of them in terms of language. But to Kenji, it is the wind that gives sound to our words and the light that transports our character to the world.

The sound of the wind arriving in "Kaze no Matasaburo" tells us that we exist fundamentally not as citizens of a nation state but as humans who are part of all creation…

どっどど　どどうど　どどうど　どどう

青いくるみも吹きとばせ

すっぱいかりんも吹きとばせ

どっどど　どどうど　どどうど　どどう

Bellow and road, bellow and roar

The blue walnuts are blown away by the wind

The sour quinces are blown away too

Bellow, roar … bellow roar

The wind sets all things into motion, including animals. It creates that music to which we do our dance of life. Again, Kenji's language imagery is not simply descriptive of Japanese nature, as the language of Japanese poets has been for centuries. Kenji's words lift reality into a new dimension. It is from that dimension that we are able to see what our place is on Earth and in the universe.

In a passage from his story "How the Deer Dance Got Started" all the deer begin to go around in circles in a frantic flute-accompanied dance. Then …

A chilling wind whooshes in from the north and the alder trees truly shine like mirrors made of pulverized steel, their leaves seemingly clinking as they brush against each other, and it looked like the fronds of pampas grass were mingling with the deer as they circled round and round.

In this passage, everything visible is dancing around thanks to the wind, creating a ballet of sound. The deer may as well be humans.

To Kenji, all sound is produced by nature. That is why his use of onomatopoeia is so amazing. This use of onomatopoeia is the most striking symbol of his universal approach to language. Of course he is using the Japanese language. But he is using it out of the context of the Japanese nationality. The stock images of cherry blossoms and other kigo (coded words or phrases that denote a season) are not there in their traditional forms. To Kenji language is a medium for communing with nature and people wherever

they are in location and time. That makes him the most unique creator of the Japanese language. To Kenji, the language is not an ethnic code.

As for light, no Japanese author has created more beautiful descriptions of its power, as in this passage from "Night on the Milky Way Train" that occurs when Giovanni has just found himself on the celestial railway …

Out of the blue he was sure he heard a strange voice calling … "Milky Way Station! Milky Way Station!" And before his eyes there was a flash flood of intensely bright light, as if billions and billions of phosphorescent cuttle fish had fossilized at their most radiant instant and been plunged into the sky, or as if someone had discovered a hidden cache of precious jewels that the Diamond Company had been hoarding to bolt the price skyhigh, turning the whole treasure topsy-turvy and lavishing them throughout the heavens. Giovanni found himself rubbing his eyes over and over, blinded by the sudden dazzle.

The two main characters in this novel have foreign names, Giovanni and Campanella. But it not only on this level that Kenji is a universalist.

It comes back to his social model, the kind of ideal society that he envisaged for the human race. Japanese, his native language, is of course his medium. But he is not using it as a medium to express the aspirations or confine the identity of a nationality. Its boundaries are not even earthly: They are cosmic.

This social model can be seen clearly in "Strong in the Rain." The poem depicts a person who is faced with the powerful challenges of nature. The rain beats down. The wind strikes him. There is drought in the land. But despite all this he goes out to help people. His ability to overcome his own fears by taking on the fears and hopes of others allows him to extricate himself from his ego and makes him a universal being.

In this sense, Kenji is creating not only the Japanese language but also a universal language, one that can be understood by people all over the world. This is one of the reasons why he is often so hard to read in Japanese but so easy to understand in other languages. Many Japanese people have told me that they really came to understand Kenji when they read him in English. This makes sense. When we hear Japanese, we naturally absorb the words instantly in the context of Japanese society in our era. This is what people all over the world do in their own language. But because the context of Kenji's language is not rooted in Japan, particularly in the Japan of his era, it is hard to grasp quickly. If you have, however, a truly cosmopolitan and universal sensibility yourself, which more and more Japanese people have in the 21st century, then you will find Kenji's language absolutely natural. This is why Kenji is more popular now than he has ever been, nearly a century after he was writing. It is because many Japanese people have come to share Kenji's spirit, rooted as it is in an understanding of the importance to us of living in harmony with nature and in demonstrating empathy with others in our thoughts and actions.

Kenji takes the Japanese language beyond the confines of national character by being the first Japanese author to use it as a universal medium of communication. Kenji is the poet of light, but not only because he creates beautiful descriptions of it. He uses light to manipulate objects, animate and inanimate, so that we may see them in a true and universal light.

Miyazawa Kenji was born on Aug. 27, 1896 and died on Sept. 21, 1933. Those two years resonate tragically with people from Tohoku. On June 15, 1896, about two months before his birth, the region was struck by a massive earthquake that triggered tsunamis eventually causing more than 22,000 deaths — exceeding the toll in the disaster of 2011. Then on March 3, 1933, some six months before his death, the region was hit by another colossal quake. This time the death toll stopped at around 3,000.

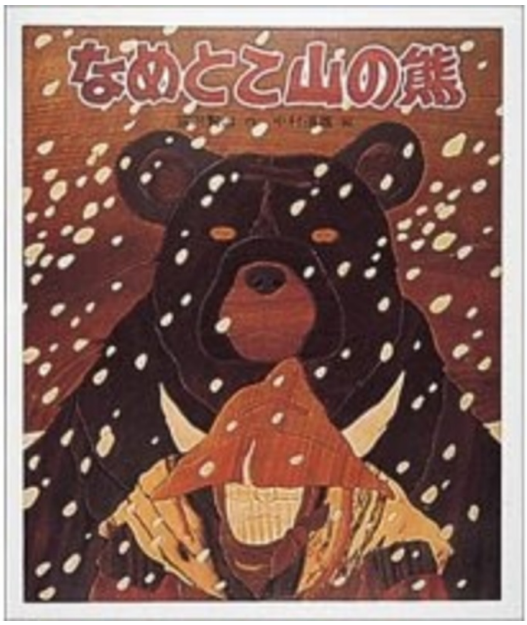
And yet, despite these coincidences, never once in any of his stories or poems does Kenji refer to those disasters in a region he so totally identified with. That this man, whose every cell was imbued with the conscience of his country and whose every waking hour was dedicated to the revitalization of his native prefecture, made no mention of these immense tragedies on his very doorstep may seem an anomaly. But it is not.

To Kenji, it made little sense to strive to deal with tragedy on such a mass scale. A great many of his stories take up tragedy and grief, but the scale is always personal and individual.

Giovanni in "Night on the Milky Way Train" experiences the death of his closest friend, first as a dreamlike metaphor among the stars and then as a real drowning in the local river. (The water in the river and the stars in "the river of the sky" — the Milky Way — become one in the end.)

A reader of "The Bears of Mount Nametoko" watches as Kojuro the bear hunter kills his prey, only to have the tables turned on him in the end, with the bears forming a circle around him in a gesture of reverence. And a boy in "The Barefeet of Light" must witness the near-death of his brother in the snow. All these are one-on-one personal tragedies.

One of Kenji's major themes is that overcoming profound grief is possible if we focus our thoughts, sentiments and actions on the plight of others. This is another reason why his literature has made an overwhelming impact on the Japanese people since March 2011. Their resilience is, at best, rooted in selflessness; their charity and grace, in empathy — all core Kenji preoccupations.



Kenji was born into a well-to-do family. In fact, the Miyazawas were, in their day, among the wealthiest people in Iwate Prefecture. His father, Masajiro, who owned and ran a highly successful pawn dealership (later to become a hardware store) in Hanamaki, was a pillar of the commercial and religious community.

As a boy, Kenji stood by as the destitute farmers of the district brought in their personal effects, such as clothing, to pawn in exchange for cash.

Though this gave him searing pangs of conscience, as the eldest son he was expected to stand himself one day on the controlling side of the counter of barter. His refusal to do so and his pursuit of what were seen as fanciful literary goals far out of step with anything that society at the time considered meaningful gave rise to a wounding rift between father and son that did not heal in Kenji's lifetime.

It was only after Kenji's death that his father, Masajiro, who outlived him by 24 years, came to realize the significance of the life of his eldest son.

Kenji's curiosity about the world never diminished. He was in this sense a man who never lost the vision of a child. Most of his stories are written from the viewpoint of the child — not as an affectation of innocence but because he was unable to see the world in any other way. He never married, nor did he have a single romantic experience in his life.

His specialty may have been the sciences, but Kenji also threw himself into the study of music. He took cello lessons while on trips to Tokyo and had what was said to be the largest collection of records in Iwate Prefecture at the time. He composed songs, both music and lyrics, and insisted that farmers and pupils alike listen to classical music at the educational association he founded near his home, the Rasu Chijin Kyokai, where *rasu* comes from the Polish word *las*, meaning "forest"; *chijin* means "men of the soil," since *chi* is another reading of *tsuchi* (soil) and *jin* is "people"; while *kyōkai* means "association." He went on countless hikes and excursions in the countryside, often alone and at night, to study nature in its wildest states … and all this with a comprehensive ardor and passion.

Kenji drew and painted, and also put on rustic morality plays using the local farmers as actors. He studied English, German and Esperanto, particularly Esperanto, in which he wrote poetry. He was an ardent student of religion and a devout follower of the Nichiren Sect of Buddhism. (This was another cause of clashes with his father, who was one of the founding members of the Hanamaki Buddhist Association, a local society dedicated primarily to the propagation of the Jodo Shinshu Sect.)

Kenji was even eager to experience military service, feeling that it would give him a different and valuable perspective on human behavior. His father, however, objected. In the pre-war years, the eldest son was exempt from compulsory conscription, and Kenji did not, in the end, enlist. (In any case, his health was poor enough to make him exempt, at least in those early days of Japanese militarism.) This did not stop him from rushing to visit his younger brother, Seiroku, in the Aomori Prefecture town of Hirosaki when the latter was undergoing basic training there.

Kenji's conscience burned fiercely within him, so much so that the local police, in that era of ever-tightening social control, deemed him a stirrer and a person of general interest to them. In the end, they dismissed him as an ineffectual and eccentric misfit. Eccentric, yes; a misfit, without a doubt. But an ineffectual counter to a Japanese establishment whose entire thrust was the pursuit of corporate profit at the expense of individual welfare? Perhaps for the time being.

Even the ever-suspicious police failed to recognize just how radical his views of our future social model were. He had a healthy disdain for politicians, whom he saw as self-aggrandizing manipulators out to feather their own little nests.

In his entire being, Kenji sensed a great battle looming — a battle that was going to be waged by every single human on this Earth. It was only decades after World War II ended in 1945 that some people began to share the vision he had had long before.

Some people began to warn of the consequences of human pollution of the air, land and water. Laws were enacted to protect these natural elements. Much later, legislators started to become aware of the cost to our humanity of cruelty toward farm animals. For the last 12 years of his life, Kenji was a vegetarian. In his short story "The Frandon Agricultural School Pig," he presents one of the earliest and most poignant arguments for animal welfare anywhere in the world.

There is a small stone monument in the precincts of Toyagasaki Shrine in Hanamaki. On this monument is engraved Kenji's second-last poem, which refers to Hienuki, a district in Hanamaki. (Hanamaki Agricultural School was originally named Hienuki Agricultural School.)

A festival to celebrate the harvest was held at the shrine annually between September 17 and 19, but Kenji was too weak to attend the celebrations in 1933. He sat in a chair outside his home and watched the crowds streaming by on their way to the shrine. Though that night was apparently unseasonably chilly, he remained seated in front of his home for a long time, oblivious to his pain.

Kenji must have known, as he'd written, a few years before he died, in his poem "Speaking with the Eyes," that "it won't be long now … " Nonetheless, his pain and coughing from tuberculosis were inconsequential to him compared with the joys of all the revelers. Though he was not long for this world, he found happiness in the thought that others would go on to plant rice, invent new inventions, sing songs, live and show kindness toward each other.

Here is my translation of the poem he wrote two days before he died, age 37, on Sept. 21, 1933:

Is it only in Hienuki and its region that the ears of rice ripen for the three-day festival? The sky is clear … and ever radiant

His concerns are unmistakably our concerns, and hopefully his obsessions — with the plight of others and our interdependence with all forms of creation — will be taken up as ours as well.

Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theater director and translator. He has published 40 books in Japanese and English including The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn. In 2008, he was awarded the Kenji Miyazawa Prize and in 2013 the Noma Award for the Translation of Japanese Literature for his book on Miyazawa Kenji, "Strong in the Rain": Selected Poems (Bloodaxe Books, 2008). A Japan Focus associate, his website is accessible here.

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