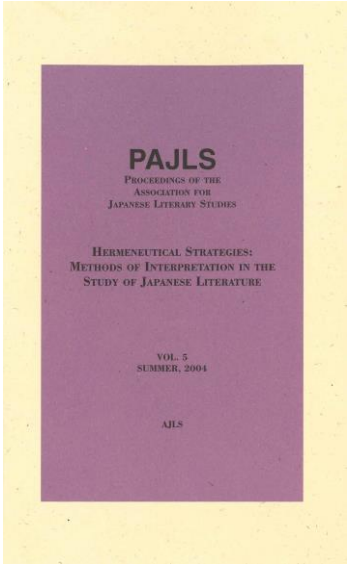
“Miyazawa Kenji and the Ethics of Scientific Realism”

Gregory Golley

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (2004): 166–174.



PAJLS 5:
Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature.
Ed. Michael F. Marra.

MIYAZAWA KENJI AND THE ETHICS OF SCIENTIFIC REALISM

Gregory Golley

What can we learn about modernism by reading the works of Miyazawa Kenji? This poet and writer of children's tales who died in 1933 at the age of 37 almost completely unknown, now enjoys an extraordinarily broad readership in Japan. Celebrated by his native city of Hanamaki as a local genius, promoted by Iwate Prefecture's regional tourist industry as the embodiment of the gentle folk-wisdom of Japan's rural northeast, Kenji has acquired an image often far removed from the social conflict, ideological crisis and artistic experimentation that defined the age in which he lived and wrote. As with all canonized writers, Kenji's vision survives through the mechanisms of literary scholarship and the commercial press. He has been immortalized in the pages of illustrated volumes, several recently updated paperback editions and an extraordinarily detailed annotated "complete collection" (*zenshū*) of his work that appeared in 1995.[1] But the words and images of Kenji's literary world have also proliferated and circulated throughout the pastel terrain of greeting card illustrations, calendars, and novelty kitchen utensils: the universal language of the gift shop.[2] Against the neutralizing effects of this ever-broadening field of profit and consumption, however, it is crucial to recognize Kenji's fiction and poetry as rooted in the consciousness of revolution—in the uniquely radical epistemological and political valences of the early decades of the twentieth century. When understood in the context of Japan's modernist moment of the late Taishō and early Shōwa years, the poems and stories of Miyazawa Kenji yield unexpected insights into the historical amplitude of this artistic and literary movement. Kenji's work teaches us that aesthetic modernism – the legacy of the machine and the metropolis, of movie houses and capitalist exchange – shares a deep

[1] Chikuma Shobō's *Shinkōhon Miyazawa Kenji Zenshū* (1995), a revised edition of that publisher's extraordinary 1974 *zenshū*, was preceded by a paperback (*bunko*) collection, *Miyazawa Kenji Zenshū*, in 1986. Six other volumes of collected stories, poetry and plays by Kenji have also been published as part of a popular paperback series by Shinchōsha, and ten others by Kadogawa Shoten. There have also been several illustrated children's editions of Kenji's work.

[2] The 1996 "Kenji boom," occasioned by the centennial of his birth, spurred newly invigorated promotions of Kenji-related museums, gift shops and theme parks in and around the city of Hanamaki.

connection with another less predictable facet of industrial capitalism: the science and ethics of *ecology*.

The link between modernist art and the early beginnings of environmental thinking can be traced to their common foundation in a *new form of scientific realism*. The strangely abstract tone of this new realism displayed itself most memorably in those revolutionary theories in the physical sciences that achieved popular acclaim in the early decades of the twentieth century. More than anything, it was the Neo-Copernican audacity of twentieth-century physics coupled with its unequaled descriptive authority that fascinated the leading figures of Japan's literary avant-garde. Yokomitsu Riichi's (1898-1947) invocation of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, for example, in the context of what came to be called the Debate on Formalist Literature (*keishikishugi bungaku ronsō*), allowed this beleaguered modernist and former spokesperson for the New Sensation School (*shinkankakuha*) to lay claim to a higher form of "materialism" (*yuibutsuron*) than that espoused by his Marxists opponents.[3] By removing the dialectical inflection of materialism and employing the term in a purely "scientific" sense, Yokomitsu deflected the issue of political content altogether and focused instead on the question of *descriptive accuracy*. Although the effect here was clearly reactionary, it is important to recognize the critical potential underlying any aesthetic that takes *accuracy* as its central claim. The logic of revolution necessarily informs an artistic vision that aspires (even if only in theory) to a closer, more adequate depiction of the social, material or natural world. If Ezra Pound's formula that defined "bad art" simply as "inaccurate art"[4] can be applied to Japan's own modernist literature, then referentiality must be understood as one of the central functions of this aesthetic movement.

Of course, modernism, with its reflexive instincts and its denaturalized language, represents (among other things) a departure from the conventions of *literary* realism. But it is a mistake to conclude from this, as Dorothy Ross and many others have, that this aesthetic moment represents a "turn away from objective reality" and toward a "fractured

---

[3] For complete versions of the essays Yokomitsu wrote in the context of this debate, see Yokomitsu Riichi, "Bungei jihyō" 1, 2, 3, and 4 in *Teihon: Yokomitsu Riichi zenshū*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1981), pp. 143-170. Contributions to this debate from various Marxist writers can be found in *Gendai Nihon bungaku ronsōshi*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1956).

[4] Cited by Michael Reynolds, *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 30.

subjectivity."[5] It is also misleading to present modernism (in Japan or in the West) as an embryonic stage of *post*modernism, a sort of missing link in the evolutionary progress from a benighted belief in transparent *representation* to today's overriding concern with *signification*. In his summary of European modernism, Michael Bell conceals his owns version of this evolutionary approach behind an alimentary metaphor: "... the change from Modernism to postmodernism," he tells us, "is not a difference in metaphysic so much as a different stage in the digestion of the same metaphysic."[6] Literary historians in Japan have typically shared this view, often defining prominent Japanese modernist texts by their non-referential, proto-typically "semiotic" concerns.[7] In important ways, however, writers and poets in Japan associated with modernism's brief efflorescence of experimental creativity seem to have been interested not in a "turn away from objective reality" toward the mere surfaces of language, but rather in a *higher form of objectivity*, a higher accuracy. Avant-garde authors aspired, it seems, to create a language precise enough to reveal to readers more than they could ever see with their eyes. In many cases, the modernist rejection of literary realism in Japan amounted to the embrace of *scientific* realism in the literary realm: an expanded realism driven by the hope of a more comprehensive, more profound, more accurate account of objective and social reality.

The language of Japanese modernism, then, can be most usefully compared to the controversial atomic models associated with the newly emergent discipline of energy physics: not stylistically realist, to be sure, but certainly referential. Like the diagrammatic grammar of a cubist painting, the language of the most important experimental texts of the second and third decades of Japan's twentieth century can be characterized by this impulse toward a transmogrified realism: what I call the language of *non-mimetic referentiality*.

In this respect, modernism shared with the newest trends in theoretical physics—famously represented by Albert Einstein's special and general theories of relativity—a position of revolt from the sensory

---

[5] Dorothy Ross, "Modernism Reconsidered," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences 1870-1930*, ed. Dorothy Ross (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 6.

[6] Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 9.

[7] Both Shinoda Kōichirō and Komori Yōichi, for example, argue that Yokomitsu Riichi's essays from the late twenties on poetics anticipate French semiotic theory. See Shinoda, *Shōsetsu wa ikani kakareta ka* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1982), 100. See also Komori, *Kōzō to shite no katari* (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1988), p. 470.

literalism associated with Meiji-era Positivism in physics, and Naturalism in literature. If there is a consistency to modernism's political ambivalence in Japan—its tentative flirtations with both socialist revolution and emergent fascism—it can be traced, I think, to this aspiration toward an integrative ideal, this *higher* objectivity. Behind the exuberance of Yokomitsu's stylistic and thematic experiments in his novel *Shanghai* (1928-1932), for example, operates a drive not merely to depict fragmentation and alienation, but to push beyond it—to provide a language adequate to the otherwise invisible boundaries of a newly elusive geo-political totality.

And this holds true for Miyazawa Kenji as well. Only for Kenji, this totality was the natural universe itself. At the same time that the "truth" of daily experience in modern Japan had become bound up with a global imperial system whose structure exceeded the local limits of direct experience, subatomic theory and energy physics were presenting a model of a *natural* universe that existed largely beyond the sphere of direct, organic perception.

An experienced researcher and teacher, Kenji maintained a broad and imaginative, but rigorously detailed interest in the discoveries of the natural sciences throughout his life. In 1918, as a twenty-three year old research student at the Morioka School of Agriculture and Forestry (*Morioka kōtō nōrin gakkō*)—today's Iwate University School of Agriculture—Kenji published a geological survey and topographical map of his native Hienuki County.[8] Covering the fields and mountains of his home on foot and charting the contours of their hidden histories proved to be an experience of both practical and poetic significance. Kenji, trained in agricultural chemistry, taught himself to navigate the surface and depths of the land, attending not only to its material character but also to the "social" tension between that materiality and the human community inhabiting it.

---

[8] During Kenji's life, Hienuki county covered territory just southwest of the center of Iwate Prefecture and included Hanamaki township (*chō*), which served as its administrative center. In 1929, Hanamaki-chō absorbed its neighboring township of Kawaguchi, and finally, in 1954, became Hanamaki City, reducing the size of Hienuki County territory substantially. See "Hienuki," in *Miyazawa Kenji goi jiten*, ed. Hara Shirō (Tokyo: Kodaka Minyū, 1989), pp. 581-582. Also see map in ibid., p. 875. Kenji undertook this project after graduating from the Morioka School of Agriculture and Forestry where he studied agricultural chemistry. He completed the survey under the supervision of Professor Seki Toyotarō. The published results were included as supplements in the county geological and topographical report. See Miyazawa Seiroku, "Kaisetsu," in *Chūmon no ōi ryōriten* (Tokyo: Kadogawa Shoten, 1996), p. 180. See also *Miyazawa Kenji goi jiten*, p. 456.

Later teaching chemistry, soil science and crop production at the Hienuki County School of Agriculture (*Gunritsu Hienuki nōgakkō*) [9], Kenji continued to develop and refine a practical understanding of the relationship between molecular phenomena, geological history and human culture, an understanding that would serve as the core of his literary vision.

Although educated in chemistry, Kenji evinced a particularly avid—if non-specialist—dedication to the latest developments in physics and astronomy. In a published outline for a series of lectures delivered at the Hanamaki School of Agriculture on the subject of "The Art of the Farmer" (*nōmin geijutsu*), when the author urged his audience of cultivators to join him to "make from our fields and our lives a great fourth-dimensional work of art," Kenji was reiterating what can be seen throughout his poetry and fiction as a persistent dedication to the geometrical formulations of Hermann Minkowski, the mathematician credited with providing the non-Euclidean means of representing Einstein's concept of space-time. [10] Deeply influenced by his reading of Charles Steinmetz's 1923 *Four Lectures on Relativity and Space*, [11] Kenji seems, at times, to write from the belief that all the great problems of history and philosophy are reducible to the four-dimensional idiom of Einsteinian relativity: the abstract poetics of time and space. As with Einstein's theory, Kenji's work seems driven by the impulse to *reveal* the local limits of knowledge and *transcend* them at the same time. "To live justly and strongly," the author proclaimed, "means to be aware within ourselves of the Milky Way Galaxy, and to respond to that awareness."[12] Like many of his modernist contemporaries, Kenji proposed a world beyond the purview of any single frame of reference, conceivable not as a stable totality but rather—to

---

[9] Later, this school would become the Iwate Prefectural School of Agriculture at Hanamaki (*Iwate-kenritsu Hanamaki Nōgakkō*). Today, it survives as the Hanamaki Agricultural High School (*Hanamaki Nōgyō Kōtōgakkō*). Among other things, Kenji also taught algebra, English, and meteorology. See Horio Seishi, "Miyazawa Kenji nempu" in *Bungei dokuhon: Miyazawa Kenji* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1977), pp. 281-282.

[10] Miyazawa Kenji, "Nōmin geijutsu gairon kōyō" in *Bungei dokuhon: Miyazawa Kenji*, p. 278. Hermann Minkowski used the mathematical formalism of Henri Poincaré as the basis for his geometrical formulations to represent Einstein's theory in four-dimensional space.

[11] For a discussion of the importance of Steinmetz's book to Kenji, see Saito Bun' ichi, *Gingakei to Miyazawa Kenji* (Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 1996), pp. 99-115. See also Okura Toyofumi, "Kenji no yonda hon," in *Miyazawa Kenji: dowa no uchū*, ed. Kurihara Atsushi (Tokyo: Yūseidō , 1990), p. 202.

[12] Miyazawa, "Nōmin geijutsu gairon kōyō," p. 275.

borrow physicist Lee Smolin's description of Einstein's essential vision—as an "evolving network of relationships."[13]

For Kenji, then, as for the most advanced thinkers in physics at the time, the limits of human perception in no way defined the limits of reality. Like the surprisingly difficult imagery of his greatest children's stories, the abstract language of Kenji's "The Art of the Farmer" finally asks its listeners to hold an image of *unity* and an image of *incommensurability* in balance. "We are, to begin with, all shining atoms scattered throughout space," the outline states toward its conclusion. "We each, moreover, live separately within our own sensations, within our own separate worlds." But against this fact of disunity, Kenji offers the following laconic observation, not as a resolution but rather as a kind of sacred mystery: "This place is here, a field in the land of Rikuchū, in Japan, in the solar system, in the Milky Way Galaxy..."[14] Shedding the naïve impracticalities of its more abstract demands, "The Art of the Farmer" finally offers this concrete antidote to the infinitely fragmented vastness of the universe itself: the simple exhortation to *know where you are.*

It is precisely within the contours of this moral imperative that Kenji's cosmic vision intermingles with what today we might call his "ecological" consciousness. The opening passage of Kenji's story "The Hills of Oino, Zaru, and Nusuto," (*Oinomori to Zarumori, Nusutomori*) collected in the 1924 collection: *The Restaurant of Many Orders*: (*Chūmon no ōi ryōriten*), makes clear the ethical consequences of this vision. The story begins with an enumeration of place-names, marking the boundaries of a geography, a setting:

> North of Koiwai Farm, there are four mountains (*mori*) covered with black pine. The southernmost of these is Oinomori, next is Zarumori, then Kurosakamori and, on the northern edge, Nusutomori.[15]

But it soon becomes clear that the "setting" of the story – the land and its features – is also its protagonist, one of its leading characters and, in fact, the primary agent of narration:

> One day a great rock deep in Kurosakamori boasted to me: "I am the only one who knows how these mountains came into

[13] Lee Smolin, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 19-20.

[14] Miyazawa Kenji, "Nōmin geijutsu gairon kōyō," p. 278.

[15] Miyazawa Kenji, "Oinomori to zarumori, nusutomori," in *Kōhon: Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1974), Vol. 11, p. 19. Translation is mine.

being in the very beginning and how they got their strange names." It was this rock who told me the following story.

A very long time ago, Iwate-san erupted over and over again. The whole area was buried in ash. Of course, even the black rock telling me the story had been thrown up from that volcano, landing where it stands today.

When the eruption finally calmed, the hills and plains, beginning toward the south, gradually began to grow grasses – some with ears of grain-seed and some without – which eventually covered the area. Then oaks and pines sprang up until at last the four wooded mountains that stand there today were formed. But the mountains as yet had no names; each one thought of itself simply as "I." It happened one year in autumn on a day when the wind, as cold and clear as water, rustled the dry oak leaves and a cloud cast a sharp black shadow upon the silver peak of Iwate-san.

Four men – peasants wearing straw rain-gear – crossed over the rugged obsidian peaks to the east and arrived at a little field girdled by these mountains. They had hatchets and hoes and all the required "weaponry" for mountain and meadow strapped to their backs. If you looked carefully, you could see that they all were also brandishing large swords.[16]

The power of this opening passage grows directly out of its realist foundations: the belief in an objective reality that exists independently of human experience. This tale identifies itself from its opening lines as a geographical autobiography, the story of a place *as told by the land itself.* The matter-of-fact idiom of the fairy tale allows its narrator—with the help of his native informant (the rock)—to move seamlessly across the sweeping vistas of geological time, from the area's volcanic genesis to the appearance of ancient flora and finally the arrival of the first cultivators: the first encounter between the wilderness and agriculture.

The story is told, in fact, for the benefit of human ears—for the unnamed recipient of this an all the other tales in this collection (the "I" that appears throughout these stories)—and so it also must be understood as an oddly objective kind of *human* history as well, told through a permeating geological perception. These opening lines follow the mythical notion that the beginning of an entire age can be traced unambiguously to a single day. And there is something both sad and ominous captured in the taciturn image of the last bright autumn afternoon when leaves rustled in the wind

[16] Ibid.

with no human ears to hear them. The image holds the power of an idea: of a reality undiminished by the absence of human witnesses. To imagine and to cherish *as real* a world that may live and die "unseen" by humans reveals itself here as one of the single most powerful ethical dispositions of the modern age. This is what Kenji's fiction seems bound to teach us as it paints a picture of the land unencumbered by the burden of names, when each mountain "thought of itself simply as 'I'" (*ore wa ore da to omotteiru dake deshita*).

But the reader soon recognizes that the darkness cast upon the snowy peak of Iwate-san serves as an ominous shadow-line, marking the epochal instant of transition from the hour of the wilderness to the hour of the cultivator: the moment of human settlement. The metal tools carried by the settlers suggest dire consequences for the forest itself. They foretell not only the direct pressure of agriculture activity, but the depredation of hardwood forests that the manufacture of charcoal—required in the forging of metal tools—eventually brings to this area. After a series of potentially disastrous "misunderstandings" between the wilderness and the humans, this story ends with the establishment of a diplomatic balance between the farmers and the forest, expressed through yearly offerings acknowledging the interdependence of the human and the non-human community. Humans in this story (as in many other of Kenji's tales) are placed firmly in a web of relations, in the enormous structure of the food chain: what Gary Snyder calls the "scary, beautiful condition of the biosphere."[17]

Though it is Kenji's experimental poetry that has been noted for its openly "scientific" vocabulary and perceptual disposition, it is his children's stories—with their thematic exploration of the tension between the wild and the cultivated – that reveal the true consequences of his scientific perspective. However fantastic, these narratives are electrified by the critical power of realism in its most fundamental form, freighted with the ethical weight that accompanies the simple notion that organisms, entities and processes can and do exist independently of human knowledge and perception.

In the "Preface" (*jo*) to the collection cited above, the author famously describes the tales he is introducing neither as inventions nor as true depictions, but rather as "received" objects. "I received every one of these stories," he tells his readers, "in the forests and fields and on the railroad tracks, from rainbows and moonlight."[18] The author asks his

[17] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), p. 184.

[18] Miyazawa Kenji, *Kōhon: Miyazawa Kenji Zenshū*, Vol. 11, p. 7.

readers to accept the stories of this collection not as fiction, strictly speaking, but rather as faithful recordings of discoveries made under specific conditions of time and place: when walking "through a green oak forest in the evening" or standing "shivering in the November mountain wind." To appreciate the critical scope of Kenji's work, it is essential to take these sentences in some sense as literal, if playful, testimony to the consequences of realism. These tales ask us to consider what it means to occupy a world that has experienced (and continues to experience) its own history beyond reference to human subjectivity, but which is nonetheless profoundly connected to humanity. Kenji's fiction is built around an exploration of what science philosopher Roy Bhaskar calls the "intransitive objects of knowledge."[19]

For Bhaskar, intransitive objects are precisely those entities and mechanisms that are not reducible to social constructs, not mere products of human cognitive history. "We can easily imagine a world similar to ours," Bhaskar observes almost mystically in his classic book *A Realist Theory of Science*, "containing the same intransitive objects of scientific knowledge, but without any science to produce knowledge of them. In such a world, which has occurred and may come again, reality would be unspoken for and yet things would not cease to act and interact in all kinds of ways... the tides would still turn and metals conduct electricity in the way that they do, without a Newton or a Drude to produce our knowledge of them."[20] Kenji's fiction, like Bhaskar's philosophy of "transcendental realism," places all of its critical and ethical emphasis on this notion of a reality that is neither *constructed* by humans, nor even necessarily directly *perceived* by them, but which nonetheless exists somehow to be *discovered.*

From this perspective, it is the role of the poet and the author to let speak a world as yet "unspoken for." A narrative that places human culture in conversation with a non-human—even non-living—world both *reveals* and *transcends* the peculiar boundaries of the human frame of reference. By allowing the intransitive world to speak, Kenji's fiction defines the local limits of human experience precisely by offering a glimpse at a larger reality. This realist insight animates the literary world of Miyazawa Kenji at every level, uniting his poems and stories by a common impulse to locate humanity's relative position in a dark and elusive universe.

---

[19] Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (New York: Verso, 1975), p. 21.
[20] Ibid., p. 22.