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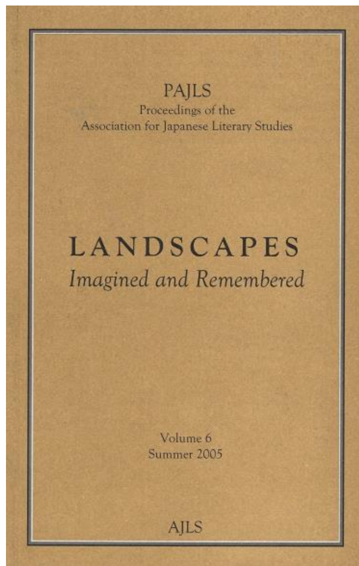

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Folktales and Spiritualism in the Landscapes of Miyazawa Kenji

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In 1921, Miyazawa Kenji left his hometown of Hanamaki, Iwate prefecture, in northeast Japan, to stay in Tokyo for eight months. After that, he returned to Hanamaki to work as a teacher and an agricultural advisor and practitioner. "Jūgatsu no sue" (The End of October) is a little-known story written by Miyazawa Kenji, presumably between 1921 and 1922. "Jūgatsu no sue" has been portrayed as a work that "serenely describes scenes from the life of a farming family."[1] But, when we take into account the author's provincial birth and his experiences as a young man in Tokyo, and we ask ourselves how he rediscovered the provinces upon his return home, we can begin to think about how the story reflects the fate of the provinces under the processes of national consolidation and centralization. We can also see how Kenji structured – within the space of the literary text – the social trends of his time.

The text itself describes a day in the life of a farming family in two scenes – morning and night. At first glance, the story appears to be an accumulation of the uneventful episodes of a single day but, in fact, each episode harbors significant kernels that call forth larger problematics. For example, the electric wire swaying in the wind during one episode is described as groaning the melody and lyrics of "Kimigayo," the Japanese national anthem. Also, in another episode, an older boy of the farming family reads aloud a few sentences about life in the countryside written in his elementary school textbook. The boy's grandfather, listening to the reading, objects to the book, saying that the description is ridiculous. The boy is reading a state-designated textbook, the only one approved by the government at that time. Naturally, the provinces (*chihō*) described in the textbook are organized according to the ideals of the nation-state, and thus the descriptions generally ignore the concrete realities of the people living there – their actual lives and feelings. The grandfather, being of an older generation, is able to recognize the textbook's deception. But his grandchild, facing the absolute authority of state education, does not notice the difference between the ideals of the textbook and the actual space he inhabits, nor is he familiar with the feeling of what it is to live there. The boy's generation can do little but accept the landscape of the farming village as it is depicted in the textbook. In other words, the landscape formed from the ideals of the state is (mis)recognized as what the landscape should be; the landscape that stretches before the

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[1] Tsuzukihashi Tatsuo, "Sondō-suketchi oboegaki," in *Yojigen* 128 (July 1961), 12-16.

grandchild's very eyes is then suppressed. Thus, we can say that the confrontation between the grandfather and the boy regarding the "landscape of the farming village" depicts how we can find the processes of state centralization hidden even in the small minutiae of daily life.

The text also includes episodes that belong to a different category from that which I have just mentioned; these are episodes related to *denshō* (oral traditions). The stories that the grandfather and grandmother tell about "the farting uncle in the mountains" and "the perverse goblin, Amanojoku"[2] fall into this category. "Jūgatsu no sue" describes these *denshō* as already having been rebuked by the generation following the grandparents' generation, that is, by the young boy's mother. It depicts a situation in which *denshō*, an oral form on which the history of the community is inscribed, degenerates and loses credibility with the combined effects of state centralization and changes in the local community.

Yet "Jūgatsu no sue" is not content merely to depict a community in decline or the processes of centralization that affect it. After layering and structuring these various episodes atop one another, it finally returns to *denshō*, but in a very different way. Just as the boy, confronting his grandfather, becomes enraged and vents his anger on his younger brother, loud noises – a thunderclap followed by a strong hail – rapidly shift the course of the narrative; the boy and his younger brother run out of the house and let out cries of admiration. Then, as lightning flashes and the mountains, illuminated by the moon, float up out of the darkness of the night, the young boy shouts, "Ah, Farting Uncle of the Mountains!" This little boy, unlike his brother, has yet to start school, so he has not yet internalized the landscape of the state textbook and reacts to the phenomena of the outside world with an exclamation rooted in bodily experience. Overwhelmed by a sense of nature's raw existence, he gives new power to an old *denshō*. Thus, in the final episode of the story, a *denshō* is transformed from mere fabrication to the testimony of actual feelings by someone living on the land. The younger boy's spontaneous response to nature's awesome power is a recitation of *denshō* – he essentially becomes a new, modern-day narrator of that "tradition."[3]

If we consider "Jūgatsu no sue" from a literary-historical perspective, we can safely say that the narration, which holds to the realistic mode, relies on a "Tokyo/provinces" and "culture/nature" structure evocative of Romanticism. But the structure is used differently from that seen in Romanticism's "discovery of landscape" as it is described by Karatani Kōjin. In *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* (Origins of Modern Japanese Literature), Karatani argues

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[2] All quotes from "Jūgatsu no sue" come from the version printed in *Shin kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995), 273-280. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are my own.

[3] I discuss this point in detail in *Miyazawa Kenji: "Chikara" no kōzō* (Tokyo: Chōbunsha, 1996), 85-107.

that "landscape" was something discovered conceptually and, upon discovery, its origins were forgotten and its existence was epistemologically reconfigured as "natural."[4] But "Jūgatsu no sue" clearly shows us a different use of "landscape." First, it calls into question the landscape as constructed by the ideals of the centralizing nation-state; second, it depicts the moment at which the people living in that place discover in their everyday lives the landscape in a new form. Both of these movements, though constructed through fiction, take a day in the life of a farming village and put that day in an historical context. It is certainly true that we can observe in this story part of the path of modern Japanese literature: the tendency of Taishō-period literature to capture the structure of the world in short fiction through realistic description, the binaries of Romanticism, and a diverse arrangement of narrative styles. Yet Miyazawa Kenji deviates from this tendency, and we perceive more clearly his deviation when we recognize his position as someone who moved between Hanamaki and Tokyo before making the provinces his base of activity.

Let us consider more carefully the *denshō* that has such a close connection to the landscape of Kenji's text. Yanagita Kunio gave a modern meaning to *denshō* rooted in the nature and lifestyle of a place. His *Tōno monogatari* (Tales of Tōno) is believed to have had a profound impact on the creative activities of Miyazawa Kenji. In the preface to *Tōno monogatari*, Yanagita writes, "All of the tales and stories recorded here were told to me by Mr. Sasaki Kyōseki."[5] That is to say, Yanagita recorded and reconstructed the oral legends he heard from Sasaki (also known as Sasaki Kizen). It is important to note that the historical context surrounding this process included a literary establishment with intense interest in *kaidan* (ghost stories), psychic research, and spiritualism. Before founding the study of folklore in Japan, Yanagita was a Romantic poet on close terms with naturalistic writers. He formed a "ghost story circle" with other ghost story enthusiasts in the *bundan* (literary establishment); through the personal connections formed there, he met Sasaki Kyōseki. The *denshō* that Sasaki narrated to Yanagita might be called *kai'i jitsuwa* (true stories of the mysterious).[6] These stories were passed down through word of mouth by residents of Tōno and, at the same time, were "facts" so closely tied to residents that the latter could identify the concrete dates and proper nouns in the stories. In *Tōno monogatari*, narratives of *kappa* (water sprites), mountain men, murder, and the dead essentially unfold in the present.[7]

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[4] Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Brett de Bary (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
[5] The quotes from *Tōno monogatari* are taken from *Teihon Yanagita Kunio zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1968).
[6] See Yokoyama Shigeo, "Kaidan no iso," in *Tōno monogatari no shūhen*, ed. Mizuno Yōshū (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 2001), 265-331.
[7] See Iwamoto Yuki, *Mō hitotsu no 'Tōno monogatari'* (Tokyo: Tōsui Shobō, 1983).

Tōno monogatari may not be an explicit collection of materials for psychic research, but it has been pointed out that, viewed from such a perspective, it can still be read as testimony and evidence of that research. A very distinctive feature of Yanagita was that he regarded ghost stories and "true stories of the mysterious" as materials for the new scholarship of folklore. In this regard, he can be compared to Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote *Kaidan* in 1904. Both Hearn and Yanagita sought the psychological core of the Japanese people in stories linked to the realm of the dead, stories that speak of encounters with the deceased. What is more, both Hearn and Yanagita asserted that these stories connect to the present-day world. At this time, then, we may say that the oral tradition of *kaidan* was a means by which to make clear that the landscapes of the present were an accumulation of temporal moments, a moving body of things both seen and unseen.[8]

I have already spoken of the historic context in which Miyazawa Kenji cited and retold *denshō*, including stories of the mysterious. In addition, he reconstructed as fictional text the site where stories were told and received. Here, I would like to connect this previous discussion with that of *kaidan* by presenting the example of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* (Night of the Milky Way Railroad, 1924-1932?). The content of this famous story fits perfectly the category of *kaidan*: the main characters, Giovanni and Campanella, on board a train traveling through the Milky Way, talk with passengers who are actually dead. Modern ghost stories, it should be noted, are often set on trains. Matsutani Miyoko, a writer of children's stories and a collector and researcher of folktales, wrote *Gendai minwa kō* (A Study of Contemporary Folktales) between 1985 and 1996.[9] She researched how the *denshō* of old – tales about *kappa*, *tengu*, and spirited-away people – were narrated in contemporary society, and she also collected examples of *denshō* that concerned new objects of the modern era: the army, school, photographs, radio, television, and trains. She considered *denshō* to be the historical testimony of the general public. These narratives include a number of ghost stories and "stories of the mysterious." *Denshō* related to trains are classified under the category of *nise kasha* (ghost trains), in which foxes or raccoons transform themselves into trains and run at full speed. Matsutani comments on this group of stories, quoting *Tōō ibun* (Strange Stories of the Eastern Interiors), a book written by Sasaki Kizen. She writes that, in the beginning, all the engine drivers in Japan were British, and were replaced by Japanese only in 1879. It was around this time that people started to tell "ghost train" stories. The introduction of new objects in Meiji Japan brought about not only expectation, but also perplexity and fear due to the rearrangement of bodily senses and lifestyles. And when the new objects became familiar, people summoned the past inscribed on their

[8] See Makino Yōko, "Yanagita Kunio to Haan," *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 49:11 (October 2004), 110-116.

[9] Matsutani Miyoko, *Gendai minwa kō*, 12 vols. (Tokyo: Rippū Shobō, 1985-1996).

bodies and called forth characters, like the fox and the raccoon, from the existing *denshō*. In the case of *nise kasha*, people tied those existing characters to the very symbol of modern civilization, the train. The space where trains ran at full speed could be called a new landscape of modern times, but it was also a place where people's minds connected the past and the present and brought forth various *denshō* to make that link.

Thus, it is not surprising that the railway was a place where *denshō* were born and narrated, since it was the very place where modern civilization and people's historical bodies met, as well as the place where passengers met with all the stories they carried with them. In order to think about the significance of the conversation between Giovanni, the only living person on the Milky Way railroad, and the dead passengers who ride along with him, I refer to a book titled *Shinshō oyobi sono jikken* (Psychic Phenomenon and Related Experiments, 1909). In it, the editor, Tamotsu Shibue, who was known for contributing to the flourishing of Spiritualism in the Meiji era with his many publications, tried to investigate psychic phenomena and cites many factual examples along the way. It should be noted that *shinshō* in the book's title means "psychic phenomena" and is thought to be related to the "*shinshō* sketch," which Kenji used as a method for his writing. Shibue's book is an interesting document in that it includes an advertisement for *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the sources for *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*. Although the relationship between *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* and Spiritualism has been pointed out before, it is difficult to say that any serious consideration has been given to discussing the link concretely.

I will finish my argument by beginning a discussion of this link and by focusing on what I believe to be an important point. *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* had not yet been published at the time of Kenji's death, though several repeatedly revised manuscripts of the work were left behind. The editors of Kenji's complete works have divided these revisions into four stages. Up until the third stage of revisions, Dr. Bulcanillo makes an appearance in the story as a character who collaborates with Giovanni on experiments related to the transmission of thoughts. So, Giovanni's experiences on the Milky Way Railroad, until the third stage of revision, are depicted as the results of the remote transmission of thoughts by Dr. Bulcanillo. Such experiments were taken up by Shibue, who referred to them as *densōjutsu* (the art of transmission) and gave actual examples of successful experiments. According to Shibue, human beings harbor great power and can perform marvelous acts, one of which is *shisō kōtsū* (transport of thoughts). Shibue's book lists examples of transmission not only between living people, but also between living people and the spirits of the dead. Shibue explains that "spirits" are far superior life forms that exist within the universe. The "noble consciousness" hiding in human beings can be awakened by the "transport of thoughts" with such spirits. *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* offers two depictions of the act of

"transporting thoughts": one occurs between living people, that is, between Dr. Bulcanillo and Giovanni, and one is between dead passengers of the Milky Way Railroad and the living Giovanni. Given the structure of the story, in which Giovanni – a boy suffering from solitude and the irrationality of life – converses with the spirits of a higher order and then strikes out in a new direction in the world, we can safely say that the narrative is related to the development of Spiritualism in modern times.[10] This development was, of course, something imported into Japan. Take, for example, the British writer Arthur Conan Doyle, who devoted himself to Spiritualism after witnessing the heavy casualties of World War I. Doyle came to regard death not as something empty, but rather as something that brings revelation and new hope to a world filled with suffering. Thus the popularity of Spiritualism in Japan involved not only an interest in the strange, but also a specific context of historical development.

It is interesting that the stories the dead passengers tell while riding the Milky Way Railroad include *denshō* from the distant past (for example, a tale of the death of a scorpion), and a true account of the deaths of children and their private tutor modeled after the tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic. The latter tale is, in other words, a *denshō* to be passed down as a modern folktale. The dead people on their way to a world different from our own relate their own stories of life and death, and the living Giovanni takes them back with him at the end. Through narration, new layers of landscape are excavated.

We can see that the landscapes of Miyazawa Kenji consist of historical layers stretching from the past to the present, and that these layers ultimately structure the "here and now." In describing the lives of everyday people, the invisible dynamics of political power, and the world of spirits as a source of new wisdom, Kenji makes transparent the multiple historical layers of landscape. This creation of transparency is the distinguishing characteristic of the world that he constructs in his fiction.

[10] I discuss this point in further detail in "*Ginga tetsudo no yoru* no kaisetsu," in *Kindai Nihon shinrei bungaku shi*, eds. Ichiyanagi Hirotaka, Andō Kyōko, and Okuyama Fumihiro (Tokyo: Tsuchinoko Shobō, 2004), 240-243.