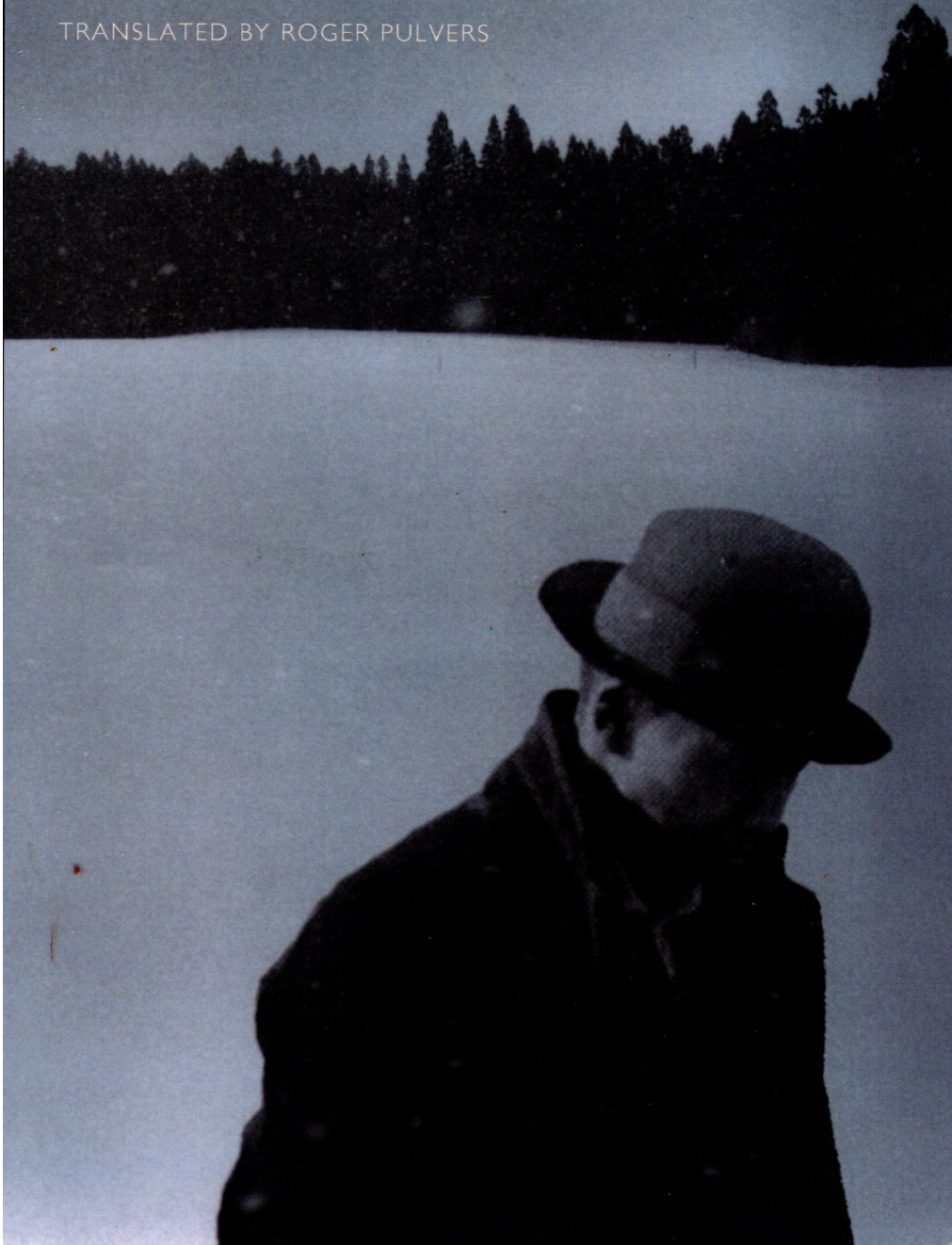


KENJI MIYAZAWA 宮沢賢治

STRONG IN THE RAIN

SELECTED POEMS

TRANSLATED BY ROGER PULVERS



INTRODUCTION

Kenji Miyazawa drew on nature in a way that no other modern Japanese author had before him. He observed, absorbed and re-created it, without resorting to fashioned counterworking or the traditional artifice of lament.

In the introduction to his collection of short stories, *The Restaurant of Many Orders*, he clearly sees himself as a medium for the reprocessing of nature: that is, natural phenomena of light, wind and rain are processed through him before they are recreated on the page.

‘These stories of mine,’ he wrote, ‘all came to me from moonlight and rainbows, in places like railroad tracks and fields and forests.’

As a writer and poet of the *plein air* variety, he trekked from the rolling farmland and the marshes to the mountains of his native Iwate, making what he termed ‘mental sketches modified’.

Then he went one step further and pictured himself, in ‘Preface to *Spring and Ashura*’, in terms of light.

The phenomenon called I
Is a single blue illumination
Of a presupposed organic alternating current lamp
(a composite body of each and every transparent spectre)

The single illumination
Of karma’s alternating current lamp
Remains alight without fail
Flickering unceasingly, restlessly
Together with the sights of the land and all else
(the light is preserved...the lamp itself is lost)

Not content to sit on the sidelines squinting and sighing with resignation, Kenji threw himself into nature. He could not separate himself from what he observed, and he believed that it was his duty to teach others to take robust action out of religious conviction.

(In this book I refer to the poet by his given name, Kenji. It is the custom in Japan to call famous writers and poets by their first name, though this is not always the case. Yukio Mishima is never referred to as ‘Yukio’, nor is Yasunari Kawabata called ‘Yasunari’. Poets Takuboku and Kenji, and novelists Soseki and Ogai – all of these are given names – are referred to in this way.)

This active engagement with nature, and his seeing himself as its faithful chronicler and recorder, was sufficient to set him apart from virtually all other Japanese poets, who tended to use nature

as a springboard for their own musings and lamentations. Because of this characteristic, if no other, he suffered the fate of being the most misunderstood Japanese literary figure of the 20th century.

In the mid-1990s, however, as if to redress the balance, the work of Kenji Miyazawa received unprecedented attention in the Japanese media. Hardly a day went by at that time when he was not featured in a national newspaper or magazine, or discussed on radio or television. (Japan had fallen into its worst recession of the postwar period, and young people were beginning to question the goal of economic expansion for its own sake. In this context, the alternative system of values underlying Kenji's work – being close to nature and acting on the basis of compassion and empathy – was attractive to many.)

In the first half of 1996 alone, three lengthy television docu-dramas were made about his life and writing, and two feature films went into production.

No author, living or dead, had ever received such concentrated attention. Kenji Miyazawa himself, more than sixty years after his death, had miraculously come up in the world, seen himself hauled up rank by rank in the literary states of existence from somewhere in semi-honorary literary limbo to heights of esteem bordering on adulation.

What was behind this turnabout? Was Kenji Miyazawa being made into a saint, a 'holy man from Hanamaki'? Was this boom genuine – a true interest held by the reading public and reflected properly in the media?

A Rare Exception

During Kenji's lifetime (1896–1933), the people of Iwate Prefecture in Tohoku (the northern prefectures on the main island of Honshu) struggled to subsist. The development of Japan has always been radically uneven. In the Japan of the Meiji Era (1868–1912), wealth gravitated to the major port cities that emerged from feudalistic practices, both civic and economic. The country was settling, not without considerable social upheaval, into the customs of modernisation. People in the large port cities realised that it was often necessary to replace traditional feudalistic relationships in the workplace and elsewhere with Western mores and ways of thinking.

The farmers in many rural areas, however, found themselves pushed behind. Their traditional social organisations did not always prepare them well for scientific farming; and, as in the case of Iwate, their lack of easy access to international ports such as Yokohama

and Kobe, from which the Kanto and Kansai regions drew their bounty, prevented them from acquiring either the means or the information necessary to keep apace.

Destitution sent men from the Tohoku area primarily to Tokyo, whose gateway for them was Ueno. Young girls, too, were sent away to spinning mills, if they were lucky. It is said that the wooden *kokeshi* dolls, popular in the northern prefectures of Honshu, were effigies of affection kept by parents and grandparents to remind them of their lost little girls.

Kenji Miyazawa was a rare exception. Born in Hanamaki as the eldest of five children into a well-off family – his father was the town pawnbroker – Kenji was obliged to watch at close hand while the miserable tenant farmers of the district traded their meagre personal goods for a pittance. (Pawnbrokering, particularly in rural Japan, where banking facilities were not as sophisticated as in the major cities like Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, or Kobe, was not a disrespectful vocation. Kenji's father, Masajiro, was a pillar of the Hanamaki community, and pawnbrokers like him were seen as providing necessary services to farmers in need of cash to tide them over during years of poor harvest or drought.)

By rights the eldest son should have continued in his father's footsteps. Even in a Japan bent on militarising, eldest sons were exempt from conscription. Following dutifully in the family line was considered that important. Refusing to do so was a dramatic act of rebellion.

I cannot help but think that Kenji must have suffered more than a few pangs of conscience, viewing poor farmers shuffling in and out of his father's pawnshop. He would have to find a way to do something on these people's behalf, to prove to them that he cared personally about their lot.

When Kenji turned into an extremely devout – some would say 'fanatical' – follower of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism, he tried in vain to convert his father, who was a dedicated follower of the Jodo Shinshu sect and had in fact been instrumental in founding the Hanamaki Buddhist Society. As a result, the relationship between father and son deteriorated badly (though Kenji seemed reluctant to reject his father's money, which enabled him to travel, study and proselytise). Yet it seems to me that the core of the lifelong feud was not based on doctrinal conviction, but rather on a fundamental personality clash of the most ordinary type between father and son. Neither would accept each other for what they were: the father, a narrow-minded patriarch who lent money to the poor in

exchange for their property or pledges; the son, an equally narrow-minded rebel with a cause, positively determined to sacrifice himself for the happiness of others.

And the two men were bound by more than such typical antipathy. It seemed that illness united them as well. Kenji underwent an operation on his nose at the Iwate Hospital in Morioka while in middle school. On a visit to see Kenji in the hospital, his father caught the infection that Kenji had apparently developed post-operatively.

In more superstitious times one might assume that Kenji was willing his father to take notice of the human state of the wretched, ill and unfortunate. Of course there was a medical explanation for it, but nonetheless it must have occurred to both men that their fates were intertwined in more ways than one.

An Act of Ego

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 sent waves of patriotic sentiment across the country. Japan was well into the process of colonising Korea, which it would annex by force in 1910. Most clever young men with a social conscience – and Kenji's social conscience burned incessantly inside him – would turn primarily to either commerce or the military as the outlet for their gifts.

As he went through school, however, Kenji took an increasing interest in plants and minerals. Had he been born and raised in Tokyo or Kyoto, for instance, he might have gone on to graduate school and a career in the natural sciences, either biology or geology. As it was, he opted for agronomy, keeping biology, geology, and later, astronomy as intellectual pastimes.

In fact, he dabbled in many disciplines: he studied English, German and Esperanto, and had an abiding love of classical music, which he played at great length on his cello or his gramophone to what must have been a somewhat bewildered audience of visitors and pupils.

Picture him teaching young people at the Las Chijin Association, which he established in his house by the side of a field in Hanamaki, pacing in front of his students and bashing their ears about the genius of Ludwig Zamenhof, the Polish-Jewish oculist who founded Esperanto; or rehearsing them in one of his morality plays; or preaching to them about the joys of vegetarianism at a time when some of them would have been thrilled to see the occasional fillet of a dried sardine on their plate. (The word 'las' in the Las Chijin Association is Polish, and means 'forest'; 'Chijin' means 'people of the earth'.)

The stories that are told of Kenji refusing food given to him by his parents, of even throwing it ostentatiously down a well, and of sitting down with a friend and virtually forcefeeding him a pile of tomatoes, are probably quite true. To Kenji, even eating came to be seen as an act of ego. Like the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, his purpose in life and the primary inspiration behind his writing came to be his religious fanaticism; and like Gogol, Kenji may be said to have starved himself to death, or at least to have exacerbated his tubercular condition.

There were two main themes, then, in his life, both related to guilt: that acquired at his father's pawnshop, and that born of the inner need to instruct and convince others. Taken together, they formed an ideology of self-sacrifice that eventually destroyed his body, while creating a spiritual legacy that took more than half a century to come to light. There is no doubt that the major personal event in Kenji Miyazawa's life was the death of his little sister, Toshi (or Toshiko).

Kenji, it must be remembered, was a man who displayed no particular interest in romantic love or sex. He is, I think, the only major Japanese author, certainly in the modern era, whose works make no reference whatsoever to sex and only scant mention of love of the heart between two adults.

He never married, but he certainly could have, coming from such a well-to-do family and having a respected career as a teacher. Offers of arranged marriage were, indeed, made to him at least twice. But he saw himself as too frail and sickly to take on the responsibility of a wife and family. It was a distraction he could ill afford. He lived most of his adult life alone.

Kenji and his sister were very close, as was attested to me in private conversations with their brother, Seiroku. After Toshi died of tuberculosis at 24 (Kenji was two years older), he composed three of his most famous poems, subsequently dating them to the very day of her death. One of them, 'The Morning of Last Farewell' (see page 79), begins...

O my little sister
Who will travel far on this day
It is sleeting outside and strangely light

How could he come to terms with it, if not by accepting it as a mere passing from one state to another, as not an ending but instead a single small step through the Buddhist realms of existence.

The sleet sloshes down, sinking
Out of sombre clouds the colour of bismuth

O Toshiko!
You asked me for a bowl
Of this refreshing snow
When you were on the point of death
To brighten my life forever
Thank you my brave little sister
I too will not waver from my path

The next year he took a ship to the southern part of Sakhalin, the large island directly north of Hokkaido, at the time a Japanese possession. I am convinced that in his mind the purpose of his trip was not to forget Toshi, but to go in search of her. The poems he wrote about this trip are essentially about Toshi and a way to communicate with her spirit through the natural phenomena that he saw on the trip while travelling.

If Kenji thought he might come to understand the real and natural state of the dead spirit on the cold waters of the Sea of Okhotsk, he imagined that state in fiction a few years later when he wrote his classic novel, *Night on the Milky Way Train*.

Part of the River Itself

The lovely story running through this novel is a parable. It describes the dream of a boy, Giovanni, as he takes a ride in a railway car throughout the heavens in the company of his best friend, Campanella. Kenji gave Italian names, the latter more a family name than a first, to his two heroes. There are characters in the story with Japanese names as well, but it is clear from the line of the narration that this is a tale of universal setting in more ways than one.

The two boys, meeting up with eccentric and fascinating people who inhabit or are passing through the sky on their way to their individual destinations, travel throughout the galaxy, from one constellation to another.

Giovanni is never quite sure where the train is heading, and is surprised, when asked by the conductor for his ticket, to find a small folded piece of paper in his pocket. The two boys gaze at the ticket in amazement, feeling that 'if they continued to stare at it they would certainly be swallowed up into it'.

'Good heavens,' says the birdcatcher, a crusty character who catches herons in the Milky Way and presses them into cakes that are as good as goose. 'That ticket is really tops. It will take you higher than the sky. With this ticket you've got safe conduct to anywhere your heart desires to go. With this ticket you can go wherever you wish on the imperfect Four-Dimensional-Milky-Way-Dream Train.'

'Giovanni's Ticket' is the last and longest chapter of *Night on the Milky Way Train*. For Kenji, the little piece of folded green paper which miraculously appeared out of Giovanni's pocket is a pass to another world, and back.

In a flash Campanella is gone from the train. Giovanni feels abandoned: after all, weren't the two friends going to continue on and on to the ends of the earth and beyond? Giovanni wakes up in the grass on the hill overlooking his town, where a festival is in progress. He makes his way down to the river. He is told that a boy has fallen in and has not been found. It is, of course, Campanella. Campanella actually jumped into the water to save another boy, who was, earlier in the story, not very nice to him.

The startling thing about the ending is, to me, Campanella's father's attitude in the face of his son's death. After only 45 minutes he decides to accept the fact. While gripping his watch tightly in his fist, he politely asks after Giovanni's father, who is due to return home after a stint up north at the government's pleasure. He invites Giovanni to his home the next day, when the other children will be paying a visit for what will probably be a wake.

With those words Campanella's father gazed far downstream, where the galaxy was part of the river itself.

Kenji is calming himself over the death of his sister, telling himself that it is precisely at times of profound sadness that people should think not of the dead or of themselves, but rather of the welfare of others.

By the end, Giovanni has resigned himself to his friend's fate.

Downstream, the Milky Way was reflected from one edge of the river to the other as if there were no water there at all but only sky.

Giovanni felt that by now Campanella could be nowhere but on the very farthest edge of that river of the sky.

Solitary Boy

Kenji's position in modern Japanese literature is unique. There have been many writers who have emulated the style of Ogai Mori (Yukio Mishima being the most notable), Soseki Natsume, Ichiyo Higuchi, Takuboku Ishikawa, Akiko Yosano and other great novelists and poets, but no one is able to reproduce, in style or spirit, the Japanese of Kenji Miyazawa. Where does his immense imagination, in terms of both content and style, come from? The answer to this question lies, no doubt, in his childhood.

Kenji wrote many of his stories not only about children, but as seen from the standpoint, and with the perspective, of children.

Many of the heroes of his stories are lonely little boys. Judging from Kenji's own life as a misunderstood and lonely person, I believe that it is correct to see these boys as recreations of his own life.

When I think of Kenji as a little boy, his story 'The Fourth Day of Narcissus' comes to mind. (In this title, the flower, the narcissus, is being used as if it were the name of a month. Kenji named a month after this flower without saying what month he imagined the story taking place; but it is likely February, as the narcissus is the harbinger of spring.)

A solitary boy wrapped in a red blanket cape was bustling along the foot of a snow hill in the shape of a huge elephant's head, and as he hurried home all he could think about was hot caramel.

This solitary boy encounters a Snow Child, who is, perhaps, his double. The child sings two little ditties to the stars in a loud voice. The child implores Cassiopeia to spin her glass waterwheel with a squeaky noise. He asks Andromeda to burn its alcohol lamp until it hisses.

When he was a boy, Kenji's hobby was collecting rocks. But he was also fascinated by the stars. And like the little boy in 'The Fourth Day of Narcissus' and the children in other stories of his, he could see animals and plants that others, especially adults, could not see.

Later, when he became a writer, he retained this outlook and insight, and he interpreted the world of people, nature and all things around him in terms of them. That is to say, his imagination was his real world, and whatever he observed and studied was interpreted in terms of it. Kenji Miyazawa is not a writer of fantasies. Many critics and readers alike have categorised his work as fantasy, or children's, literature. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these categories. They simply do not apply to Kenji. What he saw was totally real to him – be it a Snow Wolf that is whipped up by the wind or a constellation of stars that makes music. He did not conjure up these images to entertain or delight readers. He described what he saw in order to teach people the truth of the nature of the world.

As a little boy, Kenji sought escape. But there was not much entertainment in Hanamaki at the time. (The first cinema in the district, the Kinenkan, was opened in 1916 in nearby Morioka. As an adult, Kenji spent more than a year in Tokyo, spreading the religious message and striving to get converts for Kokuchukai. In his free time, he loved to visit the entertainment areas of Asakusa, especially the cinema there.) He certainly considered himself different

from the people around him, but he was close to his mother and his little sister Toshi. He was an extremely energetic child who, like a lot of the boys in his stories, could not stay still, and who always wanted to study something new, be involved in any adventure, even if it was just to walk the mountains, particularly Mount Iwate. In adulthood, due to this craving for activity, he dipped into all sorts of pursuits and hobbies: music appreciation, Esperanto, philosophy and geology, among many others. Writing stories and poetry was one of those creative pursuits, though I do believe that he considered himself a writer above all else and, like other authors, was very ambitious. He wanted his work to be published and widely read, though in his case the primary motivation was to convert readers to the faith of Nichiren Buddhism.

As was mentioned, his relationship with his father was strained, to say the least. Masajiro did not approve of most of the life decisions that Kenji made for himself, and he tried to prevent his son from going into a few professions, including the handcrafted jewellery business that might actually have suited Kenji quite well.

It wasn't until 1920, when he was already 24, that Kenji converted to the Nichiren sect and joined the ultranationalist Kokuchukai society (meaning, literally, 'National Pillar Society'). This group was founded in the 1880s by the charismatic preacher and scholar Chigaku Tanaka. Kenji was attracted to the group's robust, aggressive proselytising philosophy. (He was naïve about political matters. He died in 1933, just as Japanese incursions on the Asian continent were beginning. Had he lived, he might well have supported the Japanese war effort.) Masajiro, who opposed Kenji's religious views outright and saw them as dogmatic, was not pleased about his son's conversion.

By 1922, when he was 26, Kenji was teaching at the Hanamaki Agricultural School. He had become a fully fledged teacher of science and a person who believed in the strictest methodologies of observing and recording natural phenomena. But all the while he was writing poems and stories that he published using his own money. (Self-publishing was very common at the time in Japan and the West, and was not considered shameful. James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Anaïs Nin are all examples of writers who sometimes published their own works.)

Toshi died on 27 November 1922. Ultimately the psychological crisis that this plunged him into was assuaged by his absolute conviction that death was not final, that life itself was only the briefest state, an instant in the life of a spark, and that his beloved sister

had gone on to a better place. But the sadness that her death caused in him and his need personally to overcome it gave rise to a great tension inside him. I believe that his best poems and stories were written in the years following Toshi's death.

In 1926, Kenji left teaching. He had certainly thrown himself fully into that work, taking his students on excursions and field trips and sharing his wide knowledge of agronomy, particularly relating to the use of fertilisers. But teaching, curiously, had taken him away from the soil. It is generally thought that he desired to become a farmer himself and have a farmer's relationship with the land. But I do not believe this to be the whole story. His desire to farm may have been a rationalisation of his circumstances at the time.

Having lost his sister, and still largely estranged from his hard-headed father, Kenji felt more and more isolated in Hanamaki. In an era like ours today he might have gone to Europe or America to live. Instead he chose to retreat into farming and surround himself with his many intellectual and artistic interests. Why didn't he go back to Tokyo, though, where he had proselytised for the Kokuchukai? The answer to that, I think, lies in his personality. Kenji made few friends in Tokyo. Who could take a writer like him seriously in a Tokyo that had a myriad of sophisticated literary schools and polemical factions and magazines that served small coteries of avant-garde writers? The cultural elite of Tokyo was not concerned with fertilising rural Japan, as Kenji was, but with empire, industrialisation, modernisation and militarising. Japan was looking outward, towards Manchuria, the rest of China and, eventually, all of Asia, which many Japanese wanted to see as part of Japan's great new empire. Where was the place in Tokyo for a fertiliser expert from Hanamaki who was living out the illusions of his imagination?

Despite what a few of his surviving students have said decades later, I do not believe that Kenji was a particularly popular teacher. He had a very difficult personality. Out of conviction and enthusiasm, he wanted desperately for others to follow his example. He tried to convert people to his faith and to vegetarianism, a practice that has very few adherents even in today's Japan.

Kenji was too old – and too proud – by then to live in his parents' home. Now 30 and living alone, he took refuge in the companionship of the characters in his stories.

By the end of 1928 he fell ill again, with pneumonia. His lungs had been weakened by an earlier case of pleurisy. He had been gravely ill a number of times during his lifetime, and he had always had access to good medical care. But this time it certainly looked

like the end, as we see in several poems, such as 'Speaking with the Eyes' (see page 46):

It's blue and still out there
It looks like death...and very soon at that

The Sanctity of Life

Kenji's poetry and fiction were rediscovered by the Japanese long after his death. I believe that readers in the rest of the world will likewise discover his work in our century. My belief in this stems from one of Kenji's own themes: the relationship between humans and animals.

There is perhaps no more vivid example of this than his story 'Snow Crossing'. But even so, 'Snow Crossing' is by no means unique among his works. Other stories that depict the interrelatedness of humans and animals are 'The Acorns and the Wildcat', 'Gauche the Cellist', 'The Bears of Mount Nametoko' and 'The Restaurant of Many Orders', though in this last example it is the hunters themselves who nearly end up in the 'hunters' stew'.

Kenji's stories are parables about the sanctity of life. In this he is not especially different from other writers. But he parts company with Western writers who depict animals among humans. To most Jews and Christians, humans are the highest form of life. Animals do not have souls. Buddhism, at least as an ideal, reveres all life on one plane. The soul of a human being can return in the body of an animal. A deep reverence for all life is an essential element of Buddhist theory.

There is interaction, of course, between humans and animals in traditional and modern Western tales, but this is rarely interaction on an equal level. Animals are, by and large, there to scare humans or serve them. In the stories popularised by Disney, the animals are often anthropomorphic. This means that they are really humans in animal skins, made to look cute or cruel to serve what is actually a story about human relations.

For Kenji, animals are either on the same level as humans, or higher. They may have been the victims of human caprice or design, and suffer because of it. They may just want to be friends. Bears talk among themselves; hawks chatter, as do wildcats, mice, cats and others. But this is not the cutesy conversation of Disney characters. If anything, Kenji's animals exhibit wisdom and resignation and sadness, conveying these to humans in order to enlighten them.

Kenji's message, as we see in his poetry too, is that all humans and animals are part of creation, and we must all live in harmony

with each other or we will perish together. Kenji believes that children understand this better than adults, and that is why he has such strong affinities, at least on paper, with children.

At the end of 'Snow Crossing', after the foxes' magic lantern show, Konzaburo the fox says:

There is something that you all must truly take to heart tonight. And that is the fact that two children of human beings, both clever and not in the least drunk, have been kind enough to eat food made by foxes. I believe that in the future you, as adults, will neither tell lies nor be envious of others...

These messages remain relevant for our century. We must realise the danger of viewing humans as the conquering heroes of nature. We must see ourselves as only one part of nature, a part that should not excessively manipulate and destroy nature for our own temporary gains. Kenji is constantly telling us that we must have the humility to understand that animals, too, have souls like us, and that it is perilous for us to close our eyes to this.

True Happiness

Kenji wrote in his best-known poem, 'Strong in the Rain' – the last poem in this collection – that the 'kind of person he wanted to be' was one called 'a blockhead' and never taken to heart. There are many lonely characters of this sort in his stories, but perhaps none who so closely resembles the author himself as Kenju in 'Kenju Park Woods'. While the written character used for 'Ken' in Kenju is different from the 'Ken' in Kenji, the fact that they are homonymic makes the identification fairly certain.

In this beautiful story about humans and nature, Kenju is exactly the kind of overlooked blockhead that Kenji wanted to be. Kenju is overjoyed by glimpses of nature:

His eyes blinked and blinked in glee at the sight of the blue-green groves in the rain, he jumped for joy when he caught sight of a hawk flying up and up into the blue sky, and clapped his hands when he told everyone about it.

He was unable, though, to make the same connections with other children that he enjoyed with nature:

But the other children jeered at Kenju so much that Kenju gradually pretended not to laugh.

Kenji, like Kenju in the story, derived most of the joy in his life not from his bonds with other people, but from his companionship with nature. If Kenji had a friend and a lover in life, it was nature.

But Japan, since the Meiji Era, had set headlong in the direction of industrialisation: a nation striving to accomplish in a generation or two what had taken Europe well over a century. The result was that the traditional Japanese love of and respect for nature was largely abandoned in practice but retained as a national myth. Most of Kenji's contemporaries would have believed – as Japanese still tend to believe today – that the Japanese love nature virtually more than do the people of any other nation. This belief is held despite the fact that preservation of nature is a very low priority for those people in Japan who hold the future of the country in their hands. Nature itself has become nothing more than a figment of nostalgia to most Japanese people.

Kenji, at his hometown so remote from the centre of power in the new Japan, was, I believe, as keenly aware as anyone of the cost that Japan was paying and would pay in the future for its new industrial might. Yet he was not a "back-to-nature" kind of romanticist. Kenji Miyazawa did not share the view of Japan that the country was better off in a state of blissful nature worship. Kenji was a scientist, not a mystic. His spiritual beliefs may have been dogmatic, but his view of the modern village was concrete and forward-looking.

Kenji believed that the Japanese people would die in spirit if they did not continue to recognise beauty and true happiness in nature. Humans, birds, insects and all other creatures pass on; it is the trees and the light and the wind that retain and carry their messages to future generations.

In 'Kenju Park Woods' there is an unscrupulous man named Heiji. This Heiji 'did do a little farming, but his real job was something else, something that people found offensive'.

Kenju planted a cryptomeria wood and Heiji wanted him to cut the trees down.

'Cut 'em down, I say, cut 'em down, will ya!'

Kenju stands his ground.

'No, I won't!' he says.

And Heiji proceeds to beat the hell out of Kenju.

Later that year Heiji dies of typhus, and ten days later Kenju dies of the same disease. We may all share the same fate – even the same illness – whatever our beliefs and actions may be. In Kenji's Buddhist world, victim and victimiser are linked, like two mountain climbers connected by a rope on a high cliff in the snow. Being good does not save us. After all, Campanella was the one who died in the river.

The people in Kenju's village gradually began to accept their woods, however, giving names to its rows of trees: Tokyo Road, Russia Road, Road of the Occident. Even in the provincial outpost of Hanamaki, Kenji Miyazawa had a cosmopolitan view of the world. There is frequent mention of countries around the world in his poetry and prose, and only rarely does he mention Japan. You don't need to travel the world and be a connoisseur of wines to be a cosmopolitan. You don't have to mention your country over and over again to love what it stands for.

In the story, Kenju's wisdom is acknowledged years later. But it is the continued presence of the trees, the very spirit of Kenju himself, that stands as a source of true happiness for the people.

Kenji believed deeply in the Ten Powers of a Buddha and wished to acquire these powers himself. (After all, the 'ju' in Kenju is ten.) Of these Ten Powers, perhaps the one that he most wanted all of us to gain is the first: the power of knowing what is true and what is not.

Someone who sees the truth in one era may be branded a fool by his contemporaries. But that same fool may prove, in the future, to be a prophet. For Kenji, the future is contained in the past and the present. There is no need to "foresee". There is only a need to know, recognise, and accept.

Kenji believed that true happiness comes to humans from nature. This faith helped him to overcome his fears of illness and death.

On days like that, when the rain just flowed down from a soft pure-white sky, Kenju would stand outside the woods all alone, getting soaked to the bone.

The portrait of Kenju is a self-portrait of Kenji similar to the one in 'Whatever Anyone Says' (see page 50). He is now a tree, dripping with dew.

'Such Is the Power of My Wisdom'

The element in Kenji Miyazawa's life and work that is perhaps most difficult for us to understand today is his religious fervour. Japanese today are generally not religious in the same way that he was. The vast majority of Japanese people, when surveyed, describe themselves as areligious. Among those who actively identify themselves as adhering to the Buddhist faith, most, again, are not keen on proselytising. (The Nichiren sect, to which Kenji pledged his loyalty, is an exception.)

There are quite a few poems written on an openly religious theme, such as 'An Icy Joke' (see page 85). But when it comes to

his stories, religious themes permeate virtually all of them. The very first Kenji story that I read, back in 1968, was 'The Story of the Zashiki Bokko', a prose poem included in this collection (see page 55). Here it is obvious that some strange things are occurring in the household when a little boy appears (and yet at the same time is not there) and eerie sounds are heard in empty rooms. These phenomena are often brought on by the wind – a force that Kenji personified in his famous story, 'Matasaburo of the Wind'. His stories often feature a sick child, or a child who is about to die.

One of Kenji's most deeply religious stories is 'Bare Feet of Light'. It treats the subject of faith so nakedly that Kenji himself, in a note written on the manuscript in red ink, labelled it 'sentimental'. In a sense, 'Bare Feet of Light' is a continuation of the journey of the Milky Way Train. Ichiro in 'Bare Feet of Light' accompanies his little brother, Narao, to the other world, but is sent back to this one to finish his life as a human, thanks to his good deed of trying to protect Narao from the harsh cold of the snow.

'Bare Feet of Light' is about sacrifice and death, goodness and evil, and the eventual salvation of the soul.

Kenji may be at his best as a stylist when he describes light, wind, and snow. Some of the passages in 'Bare Feet of Light' are among his most lyrical and exquisite. In the beginning, the two brothers are visiting their father in the mountains. Their father is making charcoal to sell during the winter. The hut that they are staying in is filled with smoke and blue light (in Kenji's work, blue light is often a portent of death.) Narao begins to think of something else, something hazy and beyond him. This is Kenji's way of telling us that Narao is envisioning death: his own. (Using similar language, Giovanni also foresees Campanella's death in *Night on the Milky Way Train*, though he is not able to pinpoint the reason for his sadness.)

It is important, when translating literature, to understand the meaning behind ambiguous expressions, have a clear image of the range of what they could mean, decide on the correct interpretation of the ambiguity, and then find a similarly ambiguous or vague phrase in one's own language to use for the translation. This is particularly difficult when translating Kenji Miyazawa, because he uses a good deal of strangely ambiguous and sometimes downright bizarre Japanese. This style must not be made to sound bland and ordinary in English.

Let's take a look at a beautiful passage from 'Bare Feet of Light'.

The sky was slippery, as if polished by blue light and the boys' eyes tingled, smarting from the light. One look at the sun, and it appeared like a gigantic gemstone in the sky, scattering green and bitter orange and droplets of brightness, and when they shut their eyes because of the intense glare, the gem just looked bluer than blue in the blue-black dark, and when they opened them again, countless shadows of the sun were swimming and trembling before them, golden and dark-violet against the same blue sky.

This is a story about light, because it is the light of the World-Honoured One that turns hell into paradise and evil into good. The World-Honoured One tells the boys:

There is nothing to be frightened of. Compared to the great virtue that envelops the world, your sins are what a little drop of dew on the point of a thistle's thorn is to the light of the sun.

For Kenji, however dark human suffering may be, it is only a speck in a vast universe of healing and light.

That place where Kenji sends his characters who pass away is like a museum. It is a museum where all reality is stored. Everything we do – good, bad, or indifferent – is recorded there. When we die, we will be held accountable for these actions, and for everything done by our ancestors. This is the key to Kenji's morality. He is convinced that this is what is awaiting all of us, and he wants so desperately for us to be convinced as well.

Kenji first read the Lotus Sutra when he was a teenager. Later, in 'Bare Feet of Light', he referred to Book 16 of this sutra. Towards the end of Book 16, the World-Honoured One states, in the form of verse...

Such is the power of my wisdom
That its sagacious beams shine without bound

And at the very end, the World-Honoured One proclaims:

How can I cause living beings
To gain entry into the Unsurpassed Way
And quickly acquire the body of Buddha?

This is exactly how Kenji viewed his own personal mission. He wanted to help others become enlightened. By doing this, through self-sacrifice, he would gain his own entry into paradise.

The Chosen Few

Of all Japanese writers of the 20th century (the century in which the world "discovered" Japanese literature) Kenji Miyazawa should have been translated, read, and recognised in the West. Alas, it did not happen.

Why was Kenji neglected? The reasons can be attributed to both Japan and the West.

Japan was slow to recognise this poet and storyteller of genius. For one thing, Kenji was classified by critics as a "fantasy writer for children". Certainly many of Kenji's stories are about children. It can also be said that some of his stories are written in a child-like style. (His poems, however, are hardly for children. They are hard enough for adults to read!)

But as was mentioned, I have always believed that Kenji Miyazawa's work is not "fantasy". The events and descriptions in his stories are not illusions; they are faithful descriptions of what he saw and felt at the time, and they appear in his narratives for specific purposes, chiefly of religious allegory. The bulk of Kenji's fiction is parable.

Another reason for the lack of recognition in Japan for Kenji's literature stems from the fact that he was very much a local writer, whose dialect and stylistic rhythms were considerably different from what critics and literary editors had come to think of as "modern". There have been, needless to say, other major writers from Tohoku, including the haiku poet Takuboku Ishikawa, whose work directly inspired Kenji; the novelist Osamu Dazai, known as a "decadent" writer in the immediate postwar years; the satirical essayist and fiction writer Ango Sakaguchi (who was actually from nearby Niigata, technically in Hokuriku, not Tohoku), and even, in our day, Shuji Terayama, a playwright, poet, and essayist who has been influencing young people since the 1960s. But all of these writers adapted their style to suit Tokyo's – the nation's – taste, and there is scant use of dialect in their works. Publishers and editors were often simply unable to fathom Kenji's literary language, with its dialect, religious message, and esoteric scientific references.

Finally, I believe that Kenji Miyazawa's deeply religious themes have been an obstacle to his gaining acceptance among the general Japanese reading public as an author who is representative of Japan. There are other authors who have been greatly inspired by Buddhism, from Kyoka Izumi and Yukio Mishima to Jakucho Setouchi, just to name a few. But Buddhism for them is a philosophical backdrop – even for Setouchi, who became a Buddhist nun. For Kenji it is central – both medium and message, core and essence. Kenji's convictions are not part of the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism. Buddhism in Japan today has been largely relegated to the role of just one of many influences on behaviour, together with Confucianism, Shinto, and others.

Japan is a country where great writers are often given ample recognition and fame in their lifetime. If anything, they are lionised and obliged by editors and publishers to write too much, to spread themselves too thinly.

The reasons behind the Kenji boom of the 1990s were less literary than social. The recession caused Japanese people to reflect on the various ills of Japanese society, including those that were primarily economic in origin, such as exorbitant prices for land and rampant consumerism; those that were political, like corruption and neglect of people's real needs; and social ills like child abuse, poverty and homelessness. Kenji Miyazawa was one writer who cared deeply and personally about individual welfare and happiness. He preached – and preached is the proper word for it – that every individual should make sacrifices as a matter of individual conscience. This seemed to be a positive and helpful message for a Japan that was slipping into a lost decade. The bubble economy had collapsed by 1993. Japanese companies that had promised lifetime employment were now sacking workers. Issues of domestic violence, child abuse, and bullying were dominating the media. In January 1995, large sections of the city of Kobe and the surrounding districts were destroyed by a massive earthquake, killing more than six thousand people. This was followed by the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways, perpetrated by a fanatical religious sect called Aum Shinrikyo. Japan's confidence as a safe, ever-prosperous country was shattered. Many young people could no longer believe in the Japanese way of life as it was presented to them by the older generations. Kenji's philosophy of active, personal sacrifice for others – helping each individual one by one – seemed to be an answer to what was lacking in Japan.

There are several reasons for Kenji Miyazawa not being discovered in the West.

The neglect in Japan is one of them. Until the 1980s, the influence of the Japanese literary establishment, or *bundan*, on which authors were considered worthy of introduction to the West was considerable. The literature of Junichiro Tanizaki, Yasunari Kawabata, and Yukio Mishima, to name three, was chosen as being expressive of the "Japanese sensibility". The West has long entertained a rarefied notion of Japaneseness, and sought in Japan the sensitive, the sensual, and the serene.

Since the end of the 20th century, however, there has been a marked decline in interest in the West in the kinds of Japanese novels that are seen to be "typically Japanese". (I put this in quotation-

marks because I don't believe the work of any author to be typically Japanese. An author only represents one small segment of a world that he or she imagines.) There appeared a genuine interest all around the world in works by such contemporary authors as Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto. These writers are not seen in the West as being particularly Japanese in style or content. It is the absence of "Japanese" elements, combined with the universal alienation of the characters in the novels and stories of these authors, that has primarily appealed to non-Japanese readers around the world.

Kenji Miyazawa was not one of the chosen few destined to be "representative" either of the older school of Japaneseness or the contemporary one of universal alienation.

Supernova

In order to understand why Kenji Miyazawa's popularity suddenly grew, as if he were the light from a supernova that exploded years before the light reached the earth, one must view him in terms of his times and location.

He was fiercely committed to bringing rural Hanamaki up to the level of the more developed regions of Japan. His letters to friends contain detailed scientific information on the use of fertilisers. Several of the last hours of his life, during which he was in considerable pain, were apparently spent in lively discussion with a local farmer about how the man's crop could be improved. As an agronomist, when he believed that his own advice had been insufficient, he had gone around giving parcels of money to those farmers he had failed to help.

His faith was placed squarely in the consciousness of each and every individual. In 'Outline of an Introduction to Agrarian Art', written in verse form, he tells his wards:

In order to live properly and vigorously
Each and every person shall follow the dictates
Of his own individual consciousness of our galaxy

In other words, it is not enough for people to learn the lovely words and go through the motions of the rituals of faith. You must visualise the universe yourself and find the truth, personally, in it. Then you will come to realise that you cannot be happy until all other people in the world are happy. And if it will benefit humankind, you should, like Antares, the red giant in the constellation of the scorpion, allow your body to burn over and over again.

This is the key to Kenji Miyazawa's message to people: that you must climb the slopes of the volcano, oblivious of your own suffer-

ing, and use yourself in a scientific and social experiment; you must make your way to the sun, if necessary, to bring back its “black thorns”, thereby harnessing its energy for the good of others.

Characters in his stories do just that, though clearly he was using them as vehicles for his will, just as his beloved Lotus Sutra was using – and disposing of – him in its design.

Kenji Miyazawa had the courage of his convictions, even if those convictions were occasionally exclusivist and extreme. He put his mind and body on the line, and that is something which has direct appeal to the thinking people of Japan today. In that sense, the Kenji boom itself may have heralded a new era in the reformation of individual consciousness in Japan.

But if that were Kenji Miyazawa’s only legacy, then the sound of his boom would diminish over a span of distance. He provides more than just personal and concrete commitment, a means for Japanese now to feel they can make up for lost time.

He is a master stylist and a creator of the most beautiful metaphors in 20th-century Japanese poetry and prose. That, more than the example of his life, is the vehicle for his message. To paraphrase one of Kenji’s poems, the lamp itself [or the body] is lost, while the light from it is preserved. The ‘body’ here can be read as the body of his work.

Kenji died on 21 September 1933 at his parents’ home.

One of his greatest stories is ‘Polano Square’. It ends with a song/prayer that ties together the various elements of Kenji’s being – the poet, the believer, the teacher, and the scientist.

This story closes with the lines:

Were I to be granted my one desire
We would all be beyond the Milky Way laughing
We would burn all of our cares on a bonfire
And create a glorious new world

These lines sum up, to my mind, Kenji’s ultimate desires. He wanted, more than anything, to bring light and hope to the world. The metaphor of the bonfire in the sky, burning away all our cares, is a fitting one for him and his work.

ROGER PULVERS

Tokyo

Strong in the Rain

Strong in the rain
Strong in the wind
Strong against the summer heat and snow
He is healthy and robust
Free from desire
He never loses his temper
Nor the quiet smile on his lips
He eats four *go* of unpolished rice
Miso and a few vegetables a day
He does not consider himself
In whatever occurs...his understanding
Comes from observation and experience
And he never loses sight of things
He lives in a little thatched-roof hut
In a field in the shadows of a pine tree grove
If there is a sick child in the east
He goes there to nurse the child
If there’s a tired mother in the west
He goes to her and carries her sheaves
If someone is near death in the south
He goes and says, ‘Don’t be afraid’
If there are strife and lawsuits in the north
He demands that the people put an end to their pettiness
He weeps at the time of drought
He plods about at a loss during the cold summer
Everyone calls him Blockhead
No one sings his praises
Or takes him to heart...

That is the kind of person
I want to be

