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## How a Medieval Monk-Poet (Saigyô) and Japan Became Identified with 'Nature'

Mike Sugimoto

### ABSTRACT

Japan and, more specifically, the celebrated early medieval monk-poet Saigyô have long been associated with properties of 'nature'. From Ruth Benedict's postwar work of anthropology *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, to earlier appropriations by nineteenth-century artists of *Japonisme*, to greenways lined with cherry trees, Japan as nature has been a powerful cultural cliché. This paper traces the misidentification of a key poet, Saigyô, with the qualities of nature, and argues that this rendering of Japanese culture is an ideologically invested part of Orientalism.

We have already drawn attention to the idea ... of nature as the 'aggregate of systems of the laws' governing what happens ... [T]here is another conception of nature, a *value concept* ...

Nature thereby acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by man, in contrast to the artificial structures of human civilisation. But, at the same time, it can be understood as that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more.<sup>1</sup>

In his essay on reification, Lukacs describes the contradictory notions of nature that have developed along with the rise of society under bourgeois capitalism.<sup>2</sup> On a descriptive level, nature signifies that which is objectively 'there', or 'what is', while in a prescriptive sense

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukacs, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1968), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> Although working within an 'ideas moving through history' methodology, Arthur O. Lovejoy enumerates some 45 different notions given to the term 'nature' within the last 150 years. *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), pp. 69–77.

nature as ‘the natural’ names an imperative of how things ought to be. In its objective sense nature is thus an object of contemplation for the perceiving subject as well as for the perceived object, and both are locked into a hypostatic relationship which, according to the argument, coincides with the development of bourgeois capitalism. Extending Marx’s concept of alienation, Lukacs presents the bourgeois worker and philosopher as hopelessly caught in a series of social and theoretical antinomies (subject/object, theory/practice, past/future, etc.), reifying ‘the real’ as object and the perceiver as contemplator.

However, in its prescriptive sense, nature signifies a quality of being, a quality that is imbued with nostalgic meaning, an ontological situation of the past that is projected as a model: ‘They [the forms of nature] are what we once were ... they are what we should once more become.’<sup>3</sup> Thus the past is re-read in a nostalgic gesture that draws from past ideals in order to overcome antinomies; the past becomes the dead-end, as it were, of the reified present. Most importantly, since it is not possible to actually restructure the particular historical conditions external to the subject, this gesture of overcoming is accomplished within the subject’s interior, thereby constituting an ‘inwardness’ and the role of memory. Being essentially an idealized or aestheticized process, the solution is only inwardly established and is historically disengaged from the larger social context.

The reasons for this introduction concerning Lukacs, in a paper discussing the poetry of poet-priest Saigyô (1118–90), are many and complicated. Firstly, because Saigyô is widely acknowledged to be the quintessential nature poet of the Japanese *waka* tradition, I want to problematize what his concept of nature or natural experience might have been. Rather than nature being presented as direct experience, it may be, in Lukacsian terms, ‘second nature’ – that is, mediated by social structures and language. Secondly, the works I have read by William R. LaFleur – *The Karma of Words*, and ‘Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature’<sup>4</sup> – tend to read Saigyô and his poetry from the perspective of the philosophic dilemmas surrounding German Idealism in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. At that time there was still a drive, in the wake of failed total philosophic systems, to construct a materialist philosophy that was also ontologically total – that is, non-theologically transcendent. It is this philosophic project, which frames LaFleur’s interpretation and is extended to some of the Japanese scholars he draws upon, that causes him to read Saigyô vis-à-vis his

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<sup>3</sup> Lukacs (quoting Schiller), op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) <https://doi.org/10.1086/462697>; ‘Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part I’, *History of Religions* 13.2 (1973), pp. 93–128; ‘Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part II’, *History of Religions* 13.3 (1974), pp. 227–48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/462703>

relationship to nature as a dialectical synthesis or resolution of conflicts and tensions that were formulated, basically, in the twentieth-century West. Lukacs's critique of the methodology within modern Western metaphysics is also instructive in helping us to understand what LaFleur considers to be the theoretical problems within Buddhist metaphysics. In short, LaFleur assumes antinomic categories, then interprets Saigyô as fulfilling those dichotomies internal and external to the development of Buddhist thought (mind/body, original enlightenment/enlightenment through experience, China/Japan, Buddhism/Shinto, etc.). For LaFleur, the antinomies are overcome in an 'enlarged', apotheosized notion of nature; one which authentically achieves the total identification of universals and particulars in the concrete, material realm.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I would like to first discuss LaFleur's presentation of Saigyô, utilizing aspects of Lukacs's critique of the antinomies of bourgeois thought in modern capitalist society. Then I would like to suggest that his poetry indeed contains images of nature, but that they are inextricably bound up within the classical tradition of Japanese poetics. Saigyô was a Buddhist priest (probably Shingon) and his poetry does convey the oft-mentioned qualities of *yûgen* (depth) and *aware* (pathos or melancholy). My contention is that Saigyô probably perceived enlightenment not exclusively in terms of harmony with external nature as a site of the real, but also in terms of mediation through language imbued and invested with memory of the past. The poetic language Saigyô employs, the 'new aesthetic' or 'neo-classicism' that Robert Brower and Earl Miner discuss in terms of Fujiwara Shunzei and Fujiwara Teika,<sup>6</sup> appropriates the tradition in a nostalgic gesture. Appropriation requires that the tradition be objectified; a subjectivity of nostalgia requires that the symbols be unambiguous. In order to properly channel memory, the objects of fixation must be clear (no 'static'), eventually leading to an almost automatic association of meanings between certain phrases and their respective poetic essences (*hon'i*). That is: in an allegory, the linguistic objects must necessarily be unproblematic in their diction, style, and so forth, in order to effectively trigger the overtones of depth within the memory of the poet/reader. Not exclusive communion with external nature, but communion linked to reflexive inwardness, best describes these well-known Japanese poetic ideals; melancholy is interiorized, and is layered by an exterior signified through language.

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<sup>5</sup> In the 'Reification' essay, Lukacs discusses the development of aesthetics and the 'principle of art', his dialectical solution ultimately depending upon the self-consciousness of the subject-object proletariat.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), pp. 231–71.

**William LaFleur and the Value of Nature**

In tracing the development of nature's soteriological value (its power to save) and the status of enlightenment for *sômoku* (grass and trees) in Buddhism, LaFleur, in his two-part article 'Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature', constructs a dialectical narrative that achieves its synthesis in the Buddhism of Japan's medieval period. Not merely concerned with the question of inclusive Buddhahood for plants (*sômoku jôbutsu*), he raises nature to a prescriptive value – that is, as the model for a perfect ontology. Arguably following an East Asian religious precedent, LaFleur sets up a series of dichotomies that are then resolved in a series of reversals, ultimately finding representation in the poetry of Saigyô. Important to this kind of progressive dialectic is its continual dialogue with an original past. In other words, what is natural represents a condition of obscurity, requiring recovery. In this sense, I understand Saigyô's poetics to contain a certain nostalgic gesture actualized through language, in order to resonate with overtones of depth and melancholy. All of this is generated through the further production of, and even the theorizing of (as in the case of contemporaries such as Shunzei), the poetic tradition. The natural is a category mediated through poetic language; culture is not effaced or unmasked in a mode of recovery. Instead, as I will go on to argue, Saigyô's images of nature attest the extent to which 'empirical' experience had become poetically grounded. Thus in his reading of Saigyô and the development of Mahayana Buddhist doctrine LaFleur is working out the loss and recovery of metaphysical plenitude via Buddhism, and this suggests that the terms of loss and of recovery are framed to a large degree by the Western idealist tradition – which ultimately implies that the recovery he achieves is not so much false, as unrelated to his supposed subject.

In a discussion concerning Tendai scholars Chan-jan (Chinese, 711–82) and Chûjin (Japanese, 1065–1138), LaFleur writes:

It should ... be noted that Chan-jan is not interested in the Buddha-nature of plants and trees alone ... We gain the impression from this that Chan-jan holds to the Buddha-nature of the natural world ... because the logic of Mahayana universalism is that to which he is especially sensitive ... Whereas the Chinese looked at above were superb logicians ... the Japanese after Kūkai seem to restrict their area of

concern to the natural world – in distinction to that which is civilization ...<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism in Japan ... was forced to accommodate itself to the long-standing and pre-Buddhist high attribution of religious value to the natural world ... [T]he discussions outlined ... were, in fact, either consciously or unconsciously responding to pressures exerted upon them by ancient and deeply ingrained experiences of the Japanese people – experiences especially of nature as a locus of soteriological value. To term this an accommodation of Buddhism to Shinto is an oversimplification, and yet there can be no doubt that the ancient and continuous recognition of the presence of *kami* throughout the natural world was a prime characteristic of the Japanese religious ethos ... Chūjin's theories ... made it possible ... to view natural phenomena as already enlightened; this meant that in some sense at least things within nature could be seen as Buddhas and, therefore, as approximate equivalents – although within another vocabulary – of *kami*.<sup>8</sup>

On the grandest scale, then, there is a general dichotomy between China (sophistry, logic, theory, civilization) and Japan (experience, nature), which is ultimately harmonized in a fulfilled *sômoku jôbutsu* doctrine. According to LaFleur, the doctrine had theoretical value among Chinese Tendai thinkers such as Chi-ts'ang and Chan-jan, but never really moved outside of theoretical discussion into actuality. Further, as 'motivation' the Chinese scholars tended towards presuppositional argumentation – that is, *sômoku jôbutsu* had value to them as an ultimate conclusion for minds bent on logic, not on reverence for nature. Even the debate concerning *sômoku jôbutsu* among Japanese Tendai scholars is played off against the teachings of Shingon founder Kôbô Daishi or Kûkai (774–835), in order to fit it into the overall dialectic that culminates in the emerging doctrine of the total identification of the phenomenal world and the Buddhist Absolute. Thus the section featuring the debate between Ryôgen (912–85) and Chûzan (935–76) over *sômoku jôbutsu* signifies the nascent synthesis between the native Japanese penchant towards natural soteriology, and Buddhist doctrine. Ryôgen's importance was in the preeminent authority

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<sup>7</sup> LaFleur, 'Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part I', p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

he ascribed to the *Lotus Sutra* among the various Buddhist teachings, thereby giving doctrinal justification for the Buddhahood of plants as described in the sutra. By drawing upon the life-cycle of plants as an analogue or model for human enlightenment, Ryôgen, in LaFleur's dialectic, parallels and recalls Kûkai in reducing the problem of enlightenment to that of epistemology – that is, to a human dilemma of subjectivity. Therefore, the Japanese Tendai debate is presented as an illustration of the Japanese pull towards nature, even in its influencing a hermeneutics that raises the status of the natural in Buddhist ontology.

### **Hongaku and Shikaku**

Integral to an argument that establishes dichotomies in order to resolve them is not only a future synthesis, but a projection of the organic, original past. In a sense, then, history only reveals what was already present. However, such originality always contains an irony: by definition the original already existed in the past, and yet in actuality it cannot exist, even in the past, until it is problematized as such in the present. Thus, in LaFleur's outline regarding the reception of *sômoku jôbutsu* from India, through China, and into Japan, there is a presentation of ironic twists and turns as the doctrine seeks to eventually make good on its original promise:

There is irony in the manner in which the problem historically came into existence. It was occasioned by the fact that, when Buddhism had been well established in China, what in the Indian sutras had been intended as a Mahayana extension of the umbrella of salvation, namely, the stress upon the eventual enlightenment and Buddhahood of 'all sentient beings,' was viewed as a limitation rather than as an expansion.<sup>9</sup>

The rising status of the *sômoku jôbutsu* doctrine, then, is the intelligible demonstration of doctrinal progress; epistemologically speaking, humanity catches up with plants. This is arguably anthropomorphic – reading the resolution of human anxieties onto a unity imagined in the world of plants – although there is a fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable chasm between humanity and nature. Whether plants receive their value because they model human cycles of enlightenment, or whether they are acceptable in and of themselves (as ontological models of a perfected Buddha-nature), the values are

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

essentially describing human aspirations. So although LaFleur argues for the position of plants in the *sômoku jôbutsu* teaching by stating that ‘the only real problem ... is epistemological’,<sup>10</sup> that has always been the issue from the beginning. Given that the conflict is a human conflict over points of doctrine and subsequent practice, the changing status of plants vis-à-vis Buddha-nature only really reflects a human resolution. This view may generally be a tenet and consistent feature of East Asian religious systems, but epistemology seems essentially modern in orientation; resolving epistemological tensions by projecting them onto a non-Western tradition is also thus a questionable move that imports considerable theoretical baggage.

The nostalgic return to the original moment – the recovery of epistemological innocence – is dialectically presented in the construct of *hongaku* (original enlightenment) versus *shikaku* (enlightenment that is experienced). This is where the influence of the philosophic issues surrounding German Idealism comes into play. Through a presentation of the understanding of *sômoku jôbutsu* of Saigyô’s contemporary the Tendai scholar Chûjin, LaFleur presents a *hongaku* that fulfils the epistemological dead-end of Western ontology – namely, the inability to establish a materialist basis for transcendence. *Hongaku* becomes the natural model that perfectly combines the concrete particular with the universal, not by external transcendence, but by conflation of various dichotomies (mind/body, subject/object, Being/Becoming, etc.). By relying upon and quoting the work of Bruno Petzold published in 1939,<sup>11</sup> LaFleur operates within the idealist dichotomy between Being and Becoming (‘Buddha Sein’ versus ‘Buddha Werden’) and tries to establish a notion of ontological totalization based upon material reality. Not merely substituting terminologies, Petzold, in a very Hegelian statement of teleology, interprets *hongaku* as a *Geist* (Spirit) which moves through Japanese history and literally ‘explodes’ or ‘springs forth’ in the Kamakura period. Besides the problematic adoption of Western metaphysical vocabulary and technique in order to reveal a reversal of order which only exists in grammar (‘sky-which-is-*sunya*’ or ‘*sunya*-which-is-sky’),<sup>12</sup> there is at work in LaFleur’s argument a more central assumption that he shares with the idealists and that causes him to posit such an

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Petzold, ‘Hon Gaku Mon und Shi Kaku Mon’, in *Studies in Buddhism in Japan*, ed. the International Buddhist Society (Tokyo, 1939), pp. 133–78; cited by LaFleur in ‘Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part I’, pp. 107–09.

<sup>12</sup> I am reminded of Theodor W. Adorno’s criticism of Heidegger for using a term that is ‘hallowed by its hyphen’. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 109.

unmediated notion of nature.<sup>13</sup> In order to construct a model of original wholeness – one that is not immediately in the present – it is necessary to remove from the discussion the messy, historical constraints to any methodology, which are ‘the historical scars on the creaturely body of language’.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, by means of the Hegelian *hongaku* that realizes itself in a progressive History, particular histories and our only access to them through language are downplayed in order to reveal an origin – in this case, of ontological Being.

Thus the nature presented in Saigyô’s poetry has to be stripped of its linguistic content in order to serve as a transparent microcosm of the perfect ontological order. LaFleur valorizes nature as understood in East Asian Buddhism because he assumes that it can be experienced in an unmediated way, and it is thus able to serve as a prescriptive model while also retaining objectivity. The terms of its originality are displaced and hidden; the truth that LaFleur locates as ‘nature’ would be unavailable to him otherwise. Although it might perhaps be argued that LaFleur is merely indicating a truth already present in Buddhism, I contend that that argument remains defined by modern epistemology. Rather than embracing a simple state of unity, it may be more accurate to present the East Asian religious ‘resolution’ as embracing paradox, and to admit that the portrayal of nature in literature involves epistemological tension.

When nature becomes landscape ... the artist’s unmediated experience of the landscape (which has of course only achieved this immediacy after undergoing a whole series of mediations) presupposes a distance ... between the observer and the landscape ... If he were to attempt to integrate himself and the nature immediately surrounding him ... within ‘nature-seen-as-landscape’, without modifying his aesthetic contemplative immediacy, it would then at once become apparent that landscape only *starts* to become landscape at a definite ... distance from the observer ...

... as soon as history is forced into the present ... this ‘pernicious chasm’ [i.e., the subject/object split] ... opens up.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> LaFleur stresses the role of actual plants, as in this interpretation of one of Saigyô’s poetic images: ‘it is a natural flower that is being presented’ (‘Saigyô and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part II’, p. 116).

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Lukacs, op. cit., pp. 157–58.

The theoretical assumptions that LaFleur makes, in positing his notion of an organic, total identification with the Buddhist Absolute, force a reading of Saigyô at the expense of his poetry and his understanding of enlightenment. On the other hand, LaFleur's interpretations are telling in what they reveal about the philosophical struggles that certain Western ontologists faced. Referring to the above quote from Lukacs, it is precisely *that* history that is sealed and closed off in order to harmonize away difference. The possibilities of exploring what enlightenment or *yûgen* may have meant for Saigyô have to be, to a certain degree, denied so that the integration of subject and object in a total concept of Being can be performed. LaFleur cites Ônishi Yoshinori's 'classic' 1940 study *Yûgen to Aware* in order to substantiate 'the collapse of the distance between object and subject' in an interpretation of a poem by Shunzei.<sup>16</sup> However, in a self-conscious attempt to harmonize *yûgen* with 'the sublime' and 'darkness' as taught by Hegel's pupil Friedrich T. Vischer (1807–87), Ônishi writes:

In my opinion, this 'darkness' is a kind of 'shadow' cast on the totality of aesthetic experience by the symbol of the Idea of Being itself as sensed through the nature-aesthetic impulse ... What I refer to is an occasion when the artist suppresses the creative function of his mind as much as he can and submerges it in the provisions of nature until he enters a state of pure contemplation. On such an occasion, nature and the human mind, or the object and the subject, merge into one and allow him a momentary glimpse of the Being in its totality ...<sup>17</sup>

There are, of course, intellectual connections to be made between Saigyô, his Buddhist beliefs, his particular aesthetic, and the surrounding doctrinal issues between the Tendai and Shingon sects, but my contention is that he understood his Buddhist experience as mediated through, among other things, the language and memory of the court. It was probably not a pure contemplation of external nature seen as the solution to a totalized notion of ontology.

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<sup>16</sup> LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, pp. 102–03.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Makoto Ueda, 'Yûgen and Erhabene: Ônishi Yoshinori's Attempt to Synthesize Japanese and Western Aesthetics', in *Culture and Identity: Japanese Intellectuals During the Inter-War Years*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 291.

In an explication of the following poem by Shunzei, in order to demonstrate the ‘nonhierarchical ... interdependence of all things’,<sup>18</sup> LaFleur comments:

harusame wa	Spring’s fine rain
konomo kanomo no	both in the distance and right here
kusa mo ki mo	both on grasses and trees
wakezu midori ni	is evenly dyeing everything
somuru nariken	everywhere in its new green. <sup>19</sup>

In the final analysis, Shunzei’s poem is not a literary utterance that uses the rain, grasses, and trees to refer to the sutra and, through the sutra, to the universal and abstract Buddhist dharma ... The orbit of its concern returns inevitably to concrete particulars; it affirms the existence and the beauty of the rain, the grasses, and the trees as they are.<sup>20</sup>

There are a variety of problems here concerning the assumptions being made about the transparency of language. At the most basic level, Shunzei’s poem is made up of words that are also grounded in an historical aesthetic, diction, and context of meaning that may remain inaccessible to contemporary dilemmas of knowing. Thus, even when taking the poem’s images as interpreted by LaFleur, radical egalitarianism seems untenable. The concrete particularity of the natural order only exists because it depends upon the domination of the rain’s ability to permeate, which is an attribute. Undifferentiating benevolence is a condition that the rest of the natural order only participates in to the degree that it receives definition through the qualities (colour, moisture) inherent in rain. LaFleur seems to confuse the relationship between the rain’s wetness and grass, trees, and so forth by listing them all as concrete particulars. Regardless of whether or not the poem describes them in those materially specific terms (I do not take colour to be ‘concrete’), in my reading the images are not involved in any conflation of universals and concrete particulars that reveals things ‘as they are’. In the event that total identification with the Absolute was ever achieved, it is doubtful that such radical egalitarianism could even be

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<sup>18</sup> LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

described. Since most of existence is bound up in contrastive, disjunctured, relational definitions (egalitarianism or nondualism only being discernible with the assumed notions of hierarchy or opposition), if such total identification ever did occur, we probably would not even recognize it. Again, this may be more productively explored as a foundational paradox for Buddhism.

Also, it seems ironic that it is the raised status of the *Lotus Sutra*, outlined by LaFleur, that enables the doctrine of *sômoku jôbutsu* to emerge in the first place. In other words, the Buddhahood of plants apparently became tenable as the *Lotus Sutra* became more prominent and authoritative in the reshuffling of the Buddhist canon; reconsiderations of the natural world were, then, fundamentally tied to shifts in hermeneutics and epistemology. It is especially curious that if LaFleur is correct, the Japanese reception of the *Lotus Sutra* was enthusiastic partly because of the sutra's fascinating images and parables. Perhaps, then, the *Lotus Sutra* was appealing less for its egalitarian *sômoku jôbutsu* content than for its wording – that is, its value as ‘literature’.<sup>21</sup>

Along these lines, Yamada Shôzen, in an article on the relationship between Buddhist sutras and medieval poetry, makes the point that Saigyô's poetry is unique for its synthesis of Shingon doctrine and the *Lotus Sutra*. Therefore, beyond mentioning certain Buddhist images or vocabulary as utilitarian messages or content, Saigyô's poetry, as poetry, attempted a philosophic integration of theological doctrine. Using the *waka* practice of basing poems on stated topics, in his *Monjoshû* collection Saigyô wrote poems based upon the 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*. Further, as Yamada shows, Saigyô's poems incorporated the theological content of commentaries such as the *Dainichi-kyô Sho* (a sutra commentary by Tang priest I-Ching), Kûkai's *Hoke-kyô Kaidai*, and the *Bodaishin Ron*. Significantly, his poetry operated within the context of Buddhist literature, performing a hermeneutic function as the *Lotus Sutra* was interpreted in conjunction with outside commentaries. Needless to say, the natural images are thoroughly embedded in theological discourse; if there is a spiritual world of plants and nature, the appropriate next question might be how humans can engage with it, or whether they are caught in a hermeneutical circle of sorts.<sup>22</sup>

### Saigyô and the Poetic Objects of Melancholy

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Yamada Shôzen, ‘Poetry and Meaning: Medieval Poets and the *Lotus Sutra*’, trans. Willa Jane Tanabe, in *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), pp. 105–09.

I would like to make use of some of LaFleur's presentation of Saigyô (particularly in *Saigyô – Mirror for the Moon*)<sup>23</sup> as recluse, a seeker of consolation in nature in the face of a deteriorating capital culture. However, I will present nature not as external, but as mediated through language. In this way, the poetry may not have to be suppressed in order to justify ontological imperatives, but may be understood in terms of a notion of enlightenment that incorporates court poetics. I will thus embrace the contradictory position of using symbols (the words of Saigyô's poetry) to prove that symbolism as such is illusory in a reality of interdependence. From my limited reading of Saigyô and the virtually non-existent knowledge of his theological beliefs, I understand his poetry to function in a nostalgic or melancholic gesture of remembrance. Along with Shunzei and Teika's appropriation and recontextualization of the classics (including the *Manyôshû*), Saigyô's imagistic poetry contains aesthetic objects that conjure memories of the past, in the midst of the increasing political and military turmoil surrounding the Fujiwara versus Minamoto conflict. Rather than seeing Saigyô as seeking refuge in hermitages, it may be more accurate to see him as seeking solace in the composition of poetry – seeking solace in the remaining artifacts of Heian civilization.

Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning ... can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man.<sup>24</sup>

Walter Benjamin's analysis of the function of allegorical objects in the German baroque theatre is instructive in describing the relationship between objects (in his case, theatre props) and melancholy. According to Benjamin, a period of social instability, such as occurred in Germany in the seventeenth century after the Thirty Years War, is signified in the isolation of particular objects in the baroque drama. Lacking an ordered social structure, these objects become the dead relics of a bygone era and serve mainly to channel feelings of melancholy within the observer. A static field of perception is constructed

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<sup>23</sup> William R. LaFleur, *Saigyô – Mirror for the Moon* (New York: New Directions Books, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 139.

between the subject and the object of contemplation. Thus, outside of empirical experience, these are the feelings that are 'bound to an *a priori* object'. I would suggest that the oft-mentioned but ambiguous notions of *yûgen* or *aware*, which are used to describe the dominant aesthetic quality of the Japanese medieval period, may be better understood as a result of this approach. This may help to elucidate the aesthetic and political dynamics involved in medieval Kamakura literature's appropriation of the Heian classics. The depth, resonance, and lyrical quality associated with the newly emerging *Shinkokinshû* poetics may depend upon the aestheticized classical tradition in order to generate that subjective experience. Consequently, the descriptive, objective, 'neo-classical' character of the *Shinkokinshû* may mean that the appropriation of past tradition also requires its objectification in order to effectively conjure feelings of nostalgia; memory needs the clarity of symbolic configuration in order to succinctly trigger emotional depth.

In the case of the German baroque, Benjamin argues that otherworldliness is a response to the decay of 'this world', and that it is achieved allegorically through the melancholic contemplation of isolated objects. With limitations, it may be possible to read Saigyô's poetry as representative of a similar turning-point in Japanese *waka* and Buddhism, whereby poetics become objectified and are then used to evoke deep feelings of the past that are aestheticized through increasingly fixed meanings of essence and place. Thus, for Saigyô, Buddhism overlaps with the evocation of poetic memory; renunciation of capital culture means involving himself in its poetic distillation. Rather than seeing Saigyô as personally involved in the binary dualisms of capital versus *yamazato* (mountain ideal), as though activating the latter meant denying the former, we see that participation in Heian court politics and aesthetics formed the categories by which he understood the terms of the rustic ideal. Appreciation of the natural and simple was undoubtedly something that only a person of sophistication could achieve.

Just as his poetry was interwoven with theological discourse, throughout his life Saigyô himself maintained, even sought after, his contacts with the Heian court. One of the few poets whose recognition was achieved in his own lifetime, Saigyô actively pursued his inclusion in imperial court anthologies and *utaawase* (poetry contests), and he continued to contact members of the court or the Fujiwara family throughout his numerous pilgrimages. While we might imagine him as someone who had high status prior to entering the priesthood (i.e., rejecting privilege and rank for religious life), he apparently was of the

'lower guardsmen' position, falling below sixth rank.<sup>25</sup> Saigyô's low social status would thus have prevented his public recognition. He was entrusted with overseeing the preliminary manuscripts of the *Kyûanhyakushû* imperial anthology, but he could not submit his own poems. His common status required that his entry in the *Shikawakashû* imperial anthology be anonymous. However, eventually, near the end of his life, Saigyô's apparent friendship with Fujiwara Shunzei, who once made him an *utaawase* judge, resulted in 18 of his poems being selected for the *Senzaishû*. That there are 94 of Saigyô's poems in the *Shinkokinshû* testifies to the closeness with which his poetic sensibility matched the ambitions of the innovative aesthetics of Shunzei and Teika. Thus, far from Saigyô's poems signifying the rejection of political involvement, they probably represent his constant struggle for recognition in the midst of the political battles accompanying each aesthetic (the conservative Rokujô schools versus various innovators). Saigyô's continued prominence suggests the outcome.<sup>26</sup>

As suggested above, experience of melancholy is achieved through the contemplation of objects – in this case, poetic images from the past. Not only are the images themselves objectified, but so is the way one perceives them; thus, phenomenologically speaking, both subject and object are reified in a formal relationship. This may explain the increased prominence given to the images of the *Manyôshû* within the poetics of Shunzei, Kintô, and Teika, as well as explaining the critical imperatives that were employed concerning how one should read and experience those early poems.<sup>27</sup> These poets and critics did not appropriate the past in an unmediated way, but were well aware of the gap in style and diction between the early poetry and their own time. The depth of melancholy could only be channelled within the reader by objectifying the tradition and its meanings through its linguistic artifacts; by nominalizing classical phrases and images into 'things' (i.e., nouns) that could be contemplated.<sup>28</sup> The construction of an epistemology based upon a neo-classical aesthetic was self-conscious, and certainly textual:

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<sup>25</sup> Apparently from a provincial clan with low status in the capital, Saigyô was officially of the 'low court' status, which is normally divided between fourth and fifth ranks. See Takigi Kiyoko, 'Saigyô – a Search for Religion', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 4.1 (1977), pp. 46, 48, and 54.

<sup>26</sup> Brower and Miner, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>27</sup> Probably fewer than 300 poems were actually able to be read at all (Kintô deals with 196 *Manyôshû* poems in his *Koraifûteishô*).

<sup>28</sup> There is an interesting discussion on the proliferation of nouns in the *Shinkokinshû*, in contrast to the earlier *Kokinshû* anthology, in Brower and Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry*. Though the connections are not fully made, Brower and Miner do tie noun usage to the *hon'i* (essence) and to the practice of writing poems on set topics. See Brower and Miner, op. cit., pp. 274–77.

... without Japanese poetry, no one would know the fragrance of the cherry blossoms in spring, nor would they know the color of the bright leaves in autumn. Without Japanese poetry, what would we do for an original heart?<sup>29</sup>

... as the cherry blossoms give way to bright autumn leaves, we are reminded of the words and images of poems and feel as if we can discern the quality of those poems. At the beginning of spring, the colors are various ... yet their fragrance is the same, penetrating the sleeve that breaks off a branch and clinging to oneself.<sup>30</sup>

As Shirane's translation shows, Shunzei's theory conflates external, physical nature with the textual representation of the same; various poetic phrases are strung together to form a series of citations. Further, the basis upon which feeling or depth can be registered not only requires the original images, but an 'original heart' which knows how to read and feel. I take the phrase *mi ni shimu* ('permeating the body'), well used by Saigyô, as being a metaphor of how poetic representations of nature are actually experienced. Thus, colour and smell are attributes associated with the past, that can permeate and become internalized in the body. This is the interiorizing of melancholy that Saigyô demonstrates in his poetry, and that forms the basis for his experience of 'the natural'.

The following sequence of poems from Saigyô's *Sankashû* anthology (##711-19) is permeated with nostalgic longing for the capital culture of the past:

#711

tanomashi na	Steadfast is the evening and dawn
yoi akatsuki no	sounding of the bell.
kane no oto	Will my lawless obsession, also,
mono omou tsumi mo	never cease?
tsuki zara me ya wa	

<sup>29</sup> *Karonshû* (ed. Hashimoto Fumio, Ariyoshi Tamotsu, and Fujihira Haruo), as cited and translated by Haruo Shirane, 'Lyricism and Intertextuality: an Approach to Shunzei's Poetics', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 50.1 (1990), p. 79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2719223>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

#712

tsukuzuku to                    Entirely preoccupied  
mono o omoi ni                with longings,  
uchisoete                        I hear the tolling of the bell  
ori aware naru                 which deepens my melancholy  
kane no oto kana               the moment it sounds.

#713

nasake ari shi                 I am yearning  
mukashi nomi nao             only for the past,  
shinobarete                    where I knew elegance.  
nagara e ma uki                How long are the days that  
yo ni mo aru kana             remain in this world.

#714

noki chikaki                    The smell of orange blossoms  
hana tachibana ni             by the eaves  
sode shimete                    permeates those sleeves.  
mukashi o shinobu             I will wrap the past with tears  
namida tsutsuman             of longing.

#715

nanigoto mo                    Hearing anything of the past,  
mukashi o kiku wa             its elegance,  
nasake arite                    stirs nostalgic longings  
yue aru sama ni                of grandeur.  
shinobaruru kana

#716

waga shuku wa                 Since I have a home  
yama no anata ni               in the paradise beyond,  
aru mono o                        why does my mind not understand  
nani ni ukiyo o                 this world as fleeting?  
shiranu kokoro zo

#717

kumori nau	If only I would perceive passion
kane no ue ni	the way the world sees
iru chiri o	a particle of dust
me ni tatete miru	on a cloudless mirror.
yo to omowaba ya	

#718

nagara e mu to	Not having the slightest desire
omou kokoro zo	to continue,
tsuyu mo naki	or to endure in renouncement –
itou ni da ni mo	this body of melancholy.
taenu uki mi wa	

#719

omoidazuru	I recall the behaviour
sugi ni shikata o	of my past,
hazukashimi	while yet alive.
aru ni mono uki	The melancholic shame
kono yo nari keri	of this world.

The *yûgen* or depth within Saigyô's poetry is analyzed by LaFleur as resulting from the recognition of the impermanence of all things, which means that the privileged identity of any particular thing (including oneself or one's melancholy) disappears – since it is indistinguishable from the Absolute – and there is no hierarchy between universal and particular. Awareness of melancholy over existence is ultimately resolved in 'mutual interdependence'. Again, nature is seen as the perfected model of this existential condition. I contend that Saigyô tries to resolve his melancholy, but that he achieves this by completely idealizing melancholy as an aesthetic category, not by renouncing longings for civilization. Curiously, therefore, the above poems reify the condition of longing (*shinobu*) while working through the dilemmas of attachment. Also, there is little mention of nature, while Saigyô is obsessed with elegance (*nasake*). Poem #711, the last in the sequence of love poems, actually conflates the sounding of a bell – a symbol for enlightenment – with the

amorous (i.e., the times of arrival and departure for lovers). The times most conducive for sensing *aware* alluded to in #712 (apparently, during the early morning hours of chores) are overlaid with the recalling of desire, specifically *eros*.<sup>31</sup> Thus the act of hearing, as in #715, is particularly attuned to longings associated with the secular past. Poem #714, while containing the clearest image of nature, is thoroughly engaged with classical poetics through the familiar literary metaphors of orange blossoms, eaves, sleeves, and tears. Not merely containing the images, the poem continues the almost generic, classical description of those poetic objects: the sleeves are wet with tears, permeated with floral scent, and located by the eaves. Gotô Shigeo suggests that this poem was a precursor of the neo-classicism later associated with the poetics of the *Shinkokinshû* period.<sup>32</sup>

Besides the poetic devices employed by Saigyô – such as *kakekotoba* (puns), *engo* (associated words), *honka* (foundation poems), and progressive sequential structure (similar to the *Shinkokinshû*) – there is, in one reading of poem #717, a borrowing of not only poetic technique, but also aristocratic outlook. The self-critical purging of passion is paralleled with the worldly scrutinization of dust on a mirror. Whether the intent is to simply recognize passion (the dust) as indeed passion or to consider it a problem, secular practice is being utilized in order to problematize and allegorize spiritual detachment. Similarly, poem #796 conflates the spiritual with the literary, referring to the continued practice of composing poems on set topics:

During my visit to the Tokiwa residence, Tamenari wrote on the topic of  
'Home Village Recollections'.

shigeki no o	Through this overgrown field,
iku hito mura ni	distinguishing the clumps of grass,
wake nashite	once again, it seems
sara ni mukashi o	my longing for the past
shinobikae sa mu	is being recalled.

The Buddhist reading of this poem casts Saigyô as having recently set out on the path towards enlightenment, and as momentarily looking back at his former life. Recognition of old paths and fields signifies a mind still tied to attachments. However, Tokiwa apparently

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<sup>31</sup> Watanabe Tamotsu, *Saigyô Sankashû Zenshûkai* (Tokyo: Fugenshobô, 1968), p. 403.

<sup>32</sup> Gotô Shigeo, *Sankashû* (Tokyo: Shinchô, 1979), p. 192.

being the location for many *utaawase* parties, the Buddhist meanings are generated from a poem that is entirely bound up within the conventions and social practice of composition by topics; attachment is categorized under the topic of ‘Home Village Recollections’. Given the fact that Saigyô was an *utaawase* judge for Shunzei, an early, unacknowledged consultant for imperial anthologies, and a writer of *renga* (linked verse) sequences,<sup>33</sup> it seems plausible that in his poetry, Buddhist concepts were also broken down into their associations and essentialized as poetic ideals. What may appear as ‘mutually interdependent’ may actually be a concrete image that has been invested with the meanings of an entire poetic category.

Not all of Saigyô’s poems necessarily achieve a realization of those Buddhist ideals (##711–19 indicate struggle), but the constant presence of melancholy, stemming from the contemplation of his predicament, primarily results in a valorization of *mukashi*, ‘the past’. It seems that rather than renouncing capital culture, Saigyô achieves resolution as he immerses himself further into poetry. In other words, instead of achieving a higher recognition of impermanence, thus nullifying even his melancholy, Saigyô’s *yûgen* results from a perfection of that melancholic contemplation as a poetic ideal; melancholy is no longer problematic once the objects of melancholy are perfected in verse. Thus rather than defining Saigyô’s struggle in binary terms (nature versus culture), the tension may be entirely engaged with poetics; the nature versus culture struggle is, from the outset, a product of culture. Saigyô was very much involved in the heated poetics concerning use of diction, style, allusions, and so forth in order to best convey *hon’i* (essences), and he probably treated melancholy as an ideal to be refined like any other. The ‘successful’ poems, the ones that are acknowledged to exemplify *yûgen*, undoubtedly mastered the literary modelling required, so that the poetic objects effectively executed the overtones of depth. In this way, rather than transcending melancholy, by levelling it under a radical non-dualism Saigyô’s poems fulfil it as an ideal. Melancholy only appears to be transcended because the objects (the materials of poetry) no longer draw attention to themselves as objects; they have achieved the perfected balance of Ki no Tsurayuki’s *kokoro/kotoba* (content and form), to which the nostalgic, neo-classical poetics of Shunzei, Kintô, and Teika hark back. These poetic objects become objects of contemplation that resonate with overtones full of *iro* (colour) and *nioi* (fragrance) within the poet’s interior.

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<sup>33</sup> Earl Miner, Robert Morrell, and Hiroko Odagiri, *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 233. Saigyô wrote two *jikaawase* (solo poetry contests), *Mimosusogawa Utaawase* (1187) and *Miyagawa Utaawagawa* (1189), during his stay at Ise.

Therefore, in the following poems that feature natural imagery, I would suggest that *yûgen* is achieved first through appropriation of the poetic technique, and then through internalization of the poetic atmosphere. In accordance with the *Koraifûteishô*'s description of Japanese poetry's ability to convey phenomenological truth, Saigyô's verse distils the essence of melancholy through the colour, sound, and smell of literary phenomena:

#342

mi ni shimete	More than the wind
aware shirasuru	reveals the pathos
kaze yori mo	permeating my body –
tsuki ni zo aki no	so does the colour of autumn
iro wa ari keru	in the moon.

#983

mi ni shimi shi	Though the sound of the ogi reed,
ogi no oto ni wa	permeating my body,
kaware domo	has changed,
shibuku kaze koso	the rough winds are truly
ge ni wa mono uki	the melancholy of things.

#1088

mi ni mo shimi	Permeating my body,
mono aware naru	a scene of desolate feelings,
keshiki sae	stirred –
aware o semuru	by the sound of the wind.
kaze no oto kana	

#1090

matsukaze wa	The wind in the pines
itsumo tokiwa ni	without change
mi ni shimedo	permeates my body,
wakite sabishiki	but is especially bleak
yugure no sora	under the evening sky.

#1038

kaze no oto ni	In deep reverie,
mono omou ware ka	I am imbued with the colour
iro somete	of the sound of the wind,
mi ni shimi wataru	and with the autumn evening
aki no yugure	that permeates my body.

Remaining within the classical tradition, melancholy is virtually a trope of the autumn category, along with the moon, the ogi reed, the wind in the pines and, in other poems, maple leaves. The poems bridge the internal world of the subject (the feelings stirred) and the external world of nature. The perceptions of autumn as a colour, or wind as desolation, are not merely descriptive, but are evaluations of experience vis-à-vis the category of melancholy. The use of *iro* in #342 and #1038 works not just as an empirical description (the redness of autumn; maple leaves scattering in the wind), but also as an aesthetic term that recalls the *Kokinshû*'s preface – *iro* meaning the form of poetry. Poem #1038 builds upon the *honka* (foundation poem) from the *Kokinrokujô* anthology, in which the autumn wind is felt as ‘something without colour’ (*iro naki mono*).<sup>34</sup> Besides poetic technique, the significant change is the total envelopment of the subject’s interiority within the experience of melancholy. Thus the phrase *mi ni shimu* (‘permeating the body’) emphasizes that which is coloured, blown through, by melancholy. It is the internalization of the poetic sensibility of the natural that creates *yûgen*; not the harmony between the body and external nature, but the deep permeation of the subject, creating a landscape of poetic inwardness.

The word *keshiki* (scenery), mentioned in #1088 and (see below) in #1042, thus fulfils the classical meaning of an external scene, but also refers to an internal landscape of the heart’s longing. *Yûgen* seems to be exemplified when the fusion between both realms is perfected, when the *hon’i* of melancholy, as it were, is flawlessly conceived:

#1042

On the eighth month, around the time of the moon, I went to Kitashirakawa. There was a distinguished-looking house and, as I heard the sound of an instrument, I stopped and listened. Befitting that moment of pathos, the piece was called ‘Autumn Wind’. Peering into the garden, it was a scene of melancholy: the moon was lodged in the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

dew on the asaji reeds. Recalling ‘the sound of the wind accompanying the ogi reeds seems to permeate my body’, I sent in these poems.

aki kaze no	‘Autumn Wind’
koto ni mi ni shimu	especially tonight
koyoi kana	permeates my body.
tsuki sae sumeru	Even the moon rings clear, here
niwa no keshiki ni	in this illuminated garden scene.

Both dimensions of landscape – external and internal – are realized in the above poem and headnote. The setting is classical, based upon a distinguished (even dilapidated) mansion in the capital and a selection of court music (*gagaku*). As in the poems discussed above, classical phrases and images pervade: autumn wind, the moon reflected in the dew, and the *honka* line of the ogi reeds. There are numerous puns – some of them seen before – such as *tsuki* (‘to strike’ and ‘moon’), *sumu* (‘to reside’ and ‘to purify’), and *koto ni* (‘especially’ and ‘lute’). More importantly, as the scene is rustic (the house appears run-down), the vividness of melancholy is enriched with historical decay. The objects of poetry and the music deepen the melancholic sensibility, as they assume a nostalgic air which is charged with illuminated brilliance. The capital may already largely be an historical ruin, but the apotheosis of that civilization appears unscathed and clear in nostalgic memory. The artifacts (the poetry, the house) now create an atmospheric landscape that permeates the body’s interior, filling it with music and light.

After examining even a small selection of poems from the *Sankashû* anthology (there are over 1500 in total) it seems clear that Saigyô remained within the classical world in terms of his composition as well as in terms of the ongoing connections he maintained with the court and high-ranking figures. Theological concerns are also prevalent, but their relationship to his poetry, or to any experience of the external world, is mediated and synthesized. Given the rising status of literature during the medieval period as a self-justifying vocation – part of ‘the Way’ or *michi* – it seems implausible that Saigyô (and his poetry) would have to be seen in a relationship of conflict with the capital culture; his Buddhist understanding is inseparable from the capital. Rather than necessarily seeing the secular as becoming sacralized, if we interpret literature according to that framework then perhaps under the episteme of medieval Buddhism the sacred could become secularized as well; Buddhist themes take on literary colours, as it were, and find expression in ‘secular’

symbols and phrases that begin to connote multiple meanings. From this perspective, *yûgen* or *aware* may actually be Buddhist concepts that rely upon the formation of a court literary tradition in order to be actualized as effectively as they were in the poetry of Saigyô. It is precisely the poems (the language and its signifying meanings), drawn from court aesthetics and idealized into *hon'i*, that served as melancholic objects of contemplation; the past was mourned and created simultaneously.

In my reading of Saigyô's poetry thus far, I only detect a medium for mourning, a working-through of nostalgic longings, not an act of modern philosophic redemption. Rather than suggesting that the intellectual value of 'nature' or 'art' in a pre-modern, non-Western context is soteriological, before mining that value as a solution or claim on the truth we should first recognize that the context is distant and foreign from our own intellectual framework; and we may thereby attempt to limit the scope of our own ideological bias. In the case of Saigyô, a study of the poetic language helps us not primarily to gain access to a salvific spirituality, but to appreciate the historic context and discover the limit of that salvation, as well as the limit of our own epistemology.