Saigyō, A Border Poet: Nature and Border-Crossing Words[1)]

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1. Introduction

The 12th-century poet Saigyō (1118-1190) is a figure who has left a long-lasting influence on both Japanese literature and culture as a whole, not only with his poetry but also with the extensive pilgrimages throughout his life. Many apocryphal anecdotes surrounding the figure of this eminent poet have emerged in later times, and there has been much research on the life and works of Saigyō. In this talk, I would like to focus on the notion of "border," which is the theme of this panel[2)], to explore the issue of border-crossing into other worlds in Saigyō's poetry.

My main argument is that Saigyō was able to set foot into "other worlds," such as the world of nature, or the world of the dead, by entering into the life of those in these "other worlds".

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1) This paper is based on the manuscript for a panel titled: "Border-Crossing Through Word and Image: Gods, Poetry, and Topography"for EAJS 2017 (15th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies in Lisbon, August 30 - September 2, 2017). The convenor was Haruo Shirane (Columbia University), and the panelists were Tae Hirano (Seikei University), Rie Kaneoka (Chiba University), and Tomomi Yoshino (Chuo University).

2) The summary of the panel is as follows: In premodern Japan the human world coexisted with other worlds, of the dead, of gods, of nature. How did one cross the borders between these worlds? The panel shows the significance of border-crossing and the language and tropes associated with border-crossing in poetry, prose, and performance.

One may argue to the contrary that it is fairly common in literature to immerse oneself or fictional characters in an "other world." While that is true, I would maintain that the act of crossing over to "other worlds" in Saigyō's poetry is fundamentally different. By constructing other worlds as an extension of this world and composing poems on his own actions and emotions, Saigyō creates the sense that there exists no border between this world and those other worlds, and proceeds to cross the border.

2. Saigyō's Use of Personification and Border-Crossing: Taking the "Pine Tree" and "Bush Warbler" Poems as Examples

First of all, I would like to focus on examples of poems where Saigyō crosses over the border to the world of nature, of the non-human.

In the *Sankashū* (hereafter abbreviated as SKS), Saigyō's personal poetry collection, there are two poems composed upon looking at the pine tree standing in front of the hut in which he was dwelling during his ascetic seclusion in Sanuki Province (present-day Kagawa Prefecture in Shikoku). The first one is:

> 久(ひさ)に経(へ)てわが後(のち)の世を問へよ松跡偲(しの)ぶべき人もなき身ぞ
>
> (SKS 1358)
>
> (Live through the long years, pine, and pray for me in my next existence, I who'll have no one to visit the places I once was.)[3)]

The second one is:

3) Translated by Watson, Burton, *Poems of a Mountain Home*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

ここをまたわれ住み憂(う)くてうかれなば松はひとりにならんとすらん (SKS 1359)

(If it became too hard for me to live in this hut and I ended up drifting away from here, would this pine tree be left all on its own?)

In these two poems, Saigyō personifies the pine tree standing by his hut and speaks to it. It is true that the pine tree has often been personified in poetry, being regarded as a "friend." It is also often portrayed as a figure that remains firm in all circumstances, alone in its solitude. However, Saigyō's poems do not simply employ personification. Rather, Saigyō recognizes the personality of that pine tree, speaks to it, acknowledging the pine tree as someone worthy of praying for him after he has passed away, but also worrying that the pine tree will remain all alone in this world once Saigyō has departed. It is because the pine tree standing in solitude near the hut in which he has been dwelling for a long time has become nothing short of a real friend to Saigyō—someone he could open his heart to—that Saigyō composed these poems. Here, the pine tree is no longer seen as something non-human.

The *Sankashū* also features a group of four poems on the bush warbler, one of which is as follows:

古巣(ふるす)うとく谷の鶯なりはてば我や代はりてなかんとすらん (SKS 27)

(If the bush warbler in the valleys were to leave the village and abandon its old nest, would I cry—in sorrow—in its stead?)

In this poem, the word "*naku*" is employed as a pivot word (*kakekotoba*), playing on its double meaning: 鳴く in the sense of birds singing, and 泣く in the sense of human crying. There is

an almost comical effect to the poem, where Saigyō claims he would cry in the place of the bush warbler singing, but what I would like to focus on is the idea of letting oneself take the place of the bush warbler. One could say that this is no longer merely a case of border-crossing, but rather, there exists no boundary line between the self and the bush warbler. The poem is somewhat reminiscent of the famous "The Butterfly Dream" passage in the *Zhuangzi*, but in Saigyō's poem, the fact that the conception takes place in reality rather than the world of dream most certainly contributes to the uniqueness of the poem.

Let us take a look at the next poems in the group:

> 鶯(うぐひす)は谷の古巣を出(い)でぬともわが行方(ゆくへ)をば忘れざらなん
>
> (SKS 28)
>
> (Even when the bush warbler has left its old nest in the valleys, I hope it won't forget my whereabouts.)

> 鶯は我を巣守(すもり)に頼みてや谷の岡へは出でて鳴くらむ (SKS 29)
>
> (Is it because the bush warbler trust me to guard its nest, for it's leaving the valleys to sing out among the hills?)

> 春のほどはわが住む庵(いほ)の友に成(なり)て古巣な出でそ谷の鶯
>
> (SKS 30)
>
> (O bush warbler of the valleys, pray don't leave your old nest, if only for the duration of spring, and become my friend while I dwell in this hut.)

We can see that Saigyō conceives of himself in an equal relationship with the bush warbler nesting near his hut in the valleys. He wishes for the bird to stay by his side as a friend, speaks to the bird, beseeching it not to forget his whereabouts, and conjectures that the bird trusts him to look after its nest.

However, it should also be noted that it is a common literary

device to personify familiar animals such as the bush warbler and cuckoo (時鳥(ほととぎす)). For example, in poem no. 158 by Ki no Akimine in the *Kokinwakashū* (夏山に恋しき人や入(い)りにけむ声ふりたてて鳴く時鳥 Might someone you love have departed to sojourn in summer mountains—O cuckoo, raising your voice in clamorous melody?[4]), the poetic persona speaks to the cuckoo as if to another human being, making a guess about the reason for its action. But I would argue that this poem is not similar to Saigyō's bush warbler poems. Akimine's poem simply personifies the cuckoo, drawing it closer to the human world by means of analogy. The cuckoo still remains a cuckoo throughout the poem. On the other hand, Saigyō's poems are composed from the perspective of someone who befriends a bush warbler that resides on the very boundary between the worlds of humans and nature.

Normally, personification is a rhetorical device that takes a non-human thing from the world of nature and brings it into the world of humans. However, in Saigyō's case, personification is not simply a rhetorical device, but rather, it comes from the kind of conception in which Saigyō views himself in an equal relationship with the nature around him.

3. Saigyō, Connecting with the Dead

Saigyō has seven poems composed on various occasions of visiting grave sites. Graves, the resting place of the dead, are the boundary between "this world" and the "other world." By composing poems on these sites and empathizing with the dead residing in the other world, Saigyō is able to set foot into that "other world." Among Saigyō's lament poems (哀傷歌), there are two in particular where the poet visits a gravesite, directly speaks to the dead, and echoes their behaviors and sentiments. It

4) Translated by McCullough, Helen Craig with modification. *Kokinwakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry: with Tosa nikki and Shinsen waka*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1985.

should be noted that in all the poems lamenting the dead in the first eight *chokusenshū*, there is no other poem where the poetic persona attempts to establish direct communication with the dead—the lament poems normally console the bereaved instead.

First of all, let us look at the poem Saigyō composed on the occasion of visiting the grave of Nijō-in at the end of the 49th day memorial service of the late emperor, when the moon was shining brightly, creating a highly evocative mood:

> こよひ君死出(しで)の山路(やまぢ)の月をみて雲の上をやおもひいづらん
>
> (SKS 792)
>
> (Tonight, when the ceremony is over, would His Late Highness look at the moon illuminating the mountainous path of Mount Shide and remember the time when he once resided in the palace?)

In this poem, Saigyō speculates on the actions and sentiments of Nijō-in (1143-1165), as if becoming one with the late sovereign, even when the latter was already buried in his grave. The first line in the poem ("*koyoi kimi*") may be taken as Saigyō calling out to the spirit of the Retired Emperor. With the moon acting as a medium connecting this world and the "other world"—that of the dead, where there is Shide Mountain, Saigyō tunes into the actions and feelings of the dead. Furthermore, according to folk belief, the dead is believed to cross over Shide Mountain on their way to the other world. In the poem, Saigyō employs the image of the moon—the representation of ultimate truth in Buddhism—shining brilliantly over the mountainous path, thus guaranteeing the late emperor's peace in his afterlife[5)], even when Saigyō himself still belongs to this world.

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5) See Hirata Hideo, *Wakateki sōzōryoku to hyōgen no shatei: Saigyō no sakka katsudō* (Shintensha, 2013), chapter2, part 2.

Among Saigyō's poems lamenting the dead, the next one may be even more well-known:

よしや君むかしの玉の床(ゆか)とてもかからん後(のち)は何にかはせん
(SKS 1355)
(Let it be, my lord. Surely this is nothing like the jewel-floored palaces of your past, but can we do anything alter after what's occurred?)

This poem was composed during Saigyō's trip to Sanuki, when he visited Sutoku-in (1119-1164)'s grave at Shiromine, as a rite of pacification for the dead. After being defeated in the Hōgen Rebellion in 1156, Sutoku-in was exiled to Sanuki and eventually passed away there. In this poem, Saigyō sympathized with the late sovereign, who was resting in his grave, directly called out to him, and used the phrase: "can we do anything alter after what's occurred?"（何にかはせん） to indicate the sovereign's regretful death, implying an intimate, mutual understanding between the two. The tone of the poem makes it look as if Saigyō is talking to the late emperor, crossing over the border between the world of the living and the dead to soothe the spirit of the late sovereign.

This rather peculiar structure where the poetic persona directly speaks to and pacifies the dead later gave birth to a legend in which Sutoku-in composes a poem in reply from under the grave. In the Kamakura-period *setsuwa* collection *Shasekishū*, Saigyō happens to come across Sutoku-in's grave while visiting Sanuki, and feeling much sympathy for the late sovereign, even when knowing that everything in life is but transient, he composed the above poem, whereupon Sutoku-in replies with a faint voice from under the grave with the following poem:

浜千鳥(はまちどり)跡は都に通(かよ)へども身は松山に音(ね)をのみぞなく

(My handwriting, like traces of a plover on the shore, shall travel to the capital as letters, but I am only waiting and crying at Matsuyama, watching the plover sing.)

The Kamakura-period war tale *Hōgen monogatari*, which recounts the circumstances of the Hōgen Rebellion, also contains a section that depicts Sutoku-in passing away at Sanuki after leaving a curse upon the world. As Saigyō later visited a very desolate Shiromine, he grievingly recalled Sutoku-in, wondering how the late sovereign must have longed for the capital, only to pass away while still holding onto a deep grudge. Later, while hovering between this world and that of dreams, Saigyō heard the following poem being recited:

松山の波に流れて来(こ)し舟のやがて空(むな)しくなりにけるかな
(The ship that drifted on Matsuyama's waves remained here, then faded into nothingness.)

"The ship that drifted on Matsuyama's waves" is a metaphor for Sutoku-in. This is in fact a poem composed by Saigyō himself[6], but in the *Hōgen monogatari*, it was composed by Sutoku-in in the grave and recited by the late sovereign. In the story, Saigyō replied with the "よしや君" poem mentioned earlier, whereupon the late sovereign's grave rumbled three times in response.

While the *Shasekishū* and *Hōgen monogatari* differ in terms of whether the "よしや君" poem triggers a response poem from the spirit of the late emperor or causes the miracle of the grave rumbling in response, the two stories both portray the Saigyo poem as being able to elicit a response from the dead. In other words, it is clear that Saigyo's poem is considered by later gener-

6) SKS 1353.

ations to be one that can directly connect this world with the "other world."

4. Conclusion

In this talk, I have discussed a couple of examples of border-crossing to "other worlds" in Saigyō's poetry. As I have mentioned several times, Saigyō's act of border-crossing is not achieved solely via the imagination or by rhetorical devices. By constructing other worlds as an extension of this world and composing poems based on his actions and emotions, Saigyō creates the sense of passing back and forth between this world and these other worlds.

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