

New Noh Play: *Blyth-Sensei*

Men Who Would Not Fight: Henry Thoreau and R.H. Blyth (Revised, 2020)

by MUNAKATA Kuniyoshi ©

Persons:

Shite: R.H. Blyth's spirit

Tsure: Blyth's former student

Waki: Walter Harding

Ji-utai (Chorus)

Hayashi (Noh musicians): *Nohkan* (Noh flute)

Ko-tsuzumi (small hand-drum)

Oh-tsuzumi (large hand-drum)

Shakuhachi (bamboo flute: *Myouan* school)

[Harding appears on the *hashigakari* walkway.]

Chorus: Along this road
Goes no one,
This autumn eve. (Basho. Blyth's translation)

[Harding enters the main stage.]

Harding: My name is Walter Harding. I have come to Japan from New York to give a series of lectures on Henry Thoreau. Availing myself of this opportunity, I wish to meet Professor R.H. Blyth, whose Zen and Haiku books I admire. I asked his former student to take me to him.

[Student appears and enters the main stage.]

Student: I am sorry to tell you, but Professor Blyth passed away last month.

Harding: What? Professor Blyth passed away? What a pity! I wonder whether I can visit his tomb. I hear he built his house all by himself.

Student: Yes, his house is in Oiso in the west of Tokyo. In the middle of one room a big pine tree is growing up.

Harding: I believe it shows Blyth's homage to Thoreau who built a house at Walden and lived there for two years and two months.

Student: He used to take a train to Tokyo. In Tokyo, he rode on his bicycle, teaching at eight or nine Universities and several other institutions.

Harding: I understand he had also been a private tutor to the Crown Prince.

Student: Yes, for almost twenty years.

Harding: Teaching English?

Student: I hear he claimed he was teaching how to live.

Chorus: Blyth was a conscientious objector as a boy of eighteen in London during World War I and was imprisoned.

Student: He said, "Even if Germany is Britain's enemy, Germans are not my enemies. I can't kill a man."

Harding: He obeyed the higher laws of the conscience, not the laws of his country.

Student: He once said in a class, "Killing a man is a sin, and killing thousands of men makes you a hero?"

Chorus: During the Pacific War, he would not return home, but was kept in an internment camp in Kobe.

Harding: His first fine book *Zen in English Literature* was published during the war.

Chorus: An English book on Japanese culture, written by a man of enemy nationality, making it through the strict censorship, surprised the Japanese intellectuals. The president of the Hokuseido Press later said, "We only kept our promise."

Harding: Blyth really loved Japanese culture and Japanese people.

Chorus: He writes in the book there is a lot of Zen in English Literature also: Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Stevenson, Dickens, but the greatest nature poet is Japanese Basho.

Student: He once wrote to me:

Chorus: "I am building a house, all by myself, and when I am too exhausted to lift even the lightest hammer, I am translating from *Zenmon Koan Taisei* or the Collection of Zen Koans."

Harding: He could still pick up a pen. That was his way of life, full of Zen spirit.

Student: One day in his graduate seminar;

Chorus: One day in his graduate seminar, we were reading from Thoreau's *Journals*.

The passage said:

Student: "Our most glorious experiences are a kind of regret. Our regret is so sublime that we mistake it for triumph. It is the painful, plaintively sad surprise of our Genius, remembering our past lives and contemplating what is possible."

Chorus: Alfred Tennyson's "divine despair," is a similar feeling. In there, there must be hope. Thoreau said in his last days, "My life has been the poem I would have writ, / But I could not both live and utter it." Then Blyth added that science may destroy the human race. The physical welfare is not real civilization; the human in its essence is a spiritual being.

Student: Here we are in front of the gate of Toukeiji Temple in Kita-Kamakura.

Harding: Where is Blyth's tomb?

Student: Dr. Suzuki suggested it to be just behind his grave.

Chorus: Toukeiji Zen Temple was built by Hojo Tokimune's wife, after his death in the 13th century. It was known as a nunnery or a shelter for battered women till the beginning of the 20th century.

Student: The spiritual culture of this country

Chorus: Developed through the ages of Nara, Kyoto and Kamakura, various religious, ethical teachings, and customs.

Harding: Many Japanese are generally eclectic and made up a great Harmony of cultures.

Chorus: Very similar to the ideas of Thoreau and Blyth. Blessed are those who are *rich* in spirit. Man shall not live by *spirit* alone.

Student: Now, this area on your left is the "Philosophers' Corner." Several modern Japanese philosophers sleep here: Dr. Nishida, Dr. Watsuji, and Dr. Suzuki's graves are here.

Chorus: Behind Suzuki's is Blyth's tombstone. His name-after-death is engraved in Chinese characters: 不来子古道照心居士 (Buraisu Kodoh shoushin koji).

Harding: What does it mean?

Student: "A man who does not come, studying the Way, and enlightened." Suzuki once called him 不来子 "Buraisu" in Chinese characters, implying a man who does not come.

Harding: Does not come.

Student: To this world.

Chorus: That name is engraved on the tombstone.

[*Shakuhachi* player appears on the stage and sits almost in the middle of the stage. Then he plays the ethereal *myouan* style of *shakuhachi* music. ----- Blyth's ghost appears on the *hashigakari*.]

Blyth's ghost: A wild sea!
And stretching across to the Island of Sado
The Galaxy. (Basho)

Now I am coming.

Harding: I wonder whether that is the spirit of Professor Blyth.

Blyth's ghost: Death makes no difference; it only accelerates a natural process.

I have come to tell you that I have regarded Henry Thoreau as the greatest man America produced.

Harding: I agree. I have been lecturing on the "Influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience."

Blyth's ghost: Influenced, but not realized yet in government. Has it ever been realized in the United States, though President Lincoln said, "It shall not perish from the earth"? When we read the words of Lincoln and Thoreau, we feel there is some humbug in the president.

Chorus: And this humbug has been perpetuated and rolls on like a snowball threatening to overwhelm the whole American nation. In the Gettysburg address, such phrases as "that these dead shall not have died in vain" are materialistic and vulgar in their note and import. They lack the transcendentalism which alone can make them practical in the best sense of the word.

Blyth's ghost: The truth must be able to be expressed in an ordinary voice, as Lincoln writes:

Chorus: "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's will is different from the purpose of either party."

Chorus: In order to save as many lives as possible, he could have admitted the North and the South as two countries. The government should be for the people. Their lives

were to be most respected.

[Big hand-drum.]

Harding: Can you tell me simply what Zen is?

Blyth's ghost: There are three stages in our apprehension of the world: first, a mountain is just a mountain. Then the mountain becomes a mystical, symbolic, divine, mysterious, poetical, magical things. There is a third stage: The mountain becomes a mountain, but quite different from the first. It strongly resembles the practical transcendentalism of Thoreau.

Harding: What is the object of Zen?

Blyth's ghost: To transcend life and death, and really to live.

Chorus: To transcend life and death, and really to live:

[Noh flute.]

Blyth's ghost: I loved walking in the forest while young. Until I met with D.T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, I had intended to be a poet. But Zen meditation taught me: The object of life is to understand one another.

Chorus: In particular, for men to understand women and for women to understand men; in general, for one nation, if such an illusion has any real existence, to understand another.

Student: And in your seminar on Shakespeare you said: Without humour we can't live in this world.

Chorus: Love without humour is not real love, healthy love.

As we see in *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and even *King Lear*, love should end in tragedy, as it actually does in drama.

[Small hand-drum.]

Harding: Will you explain the reason why you have evaluated Thoreau as the greatest American?

Blyth's ghost: The greatness of Thoreau lies above all others, not in his literary judgements, nor in his criticisms of society;

Chorus: But in his ever-present knowledge of that which is important and that which is not. Thoreau is always mindful that the earth is beneath us and the heavens are above us. Human beings are in the Universe, in the great Nature.

[Blyth's ghost dances.]

Blyth's ghost: Thoreau has the hypaethral quality when we are with him;

Chorus: The combination of the transcendental with the practical

Blyth's ghost: Gives us a sensation of open air,

Chorus: Of the sky that is so near and yet so far.

Blyth's ghost: Everything in him begins in Nature, or his absolute obedience to the Will of Nature.

Chorus: His death is memorable for three great sayings concerning it. The first is contained in a letter written three months before he died:

Blyth's ghost: I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing.

Chorus: When asked on his deathbed if he had made his peace with God, he replied:

Blyth's ghost: I have never quarreled with him.

Chorus: When someone wished him to speak about the next world,

Blyth's ghost: One world at a time!

Chorus: Blyth concluded: When the final account is made and God closes the books, it may be found that Thoreau was the one real man America produced. Thoreau is compared to the greatest Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho.

Blyth's ghost: In the beginning of his Journey, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Basho writes:

“Months and days are eternal travellers; the passing years are travellers too.”

Chorus: Months and days are eternal travellers; the passing years are travellers too.”

[*Shakuhachi* bamboo flute.

Blyth's ghost dances.]

Blyth's ghost: Ill on a journey;

My dreams wander

Over a withered moor. (Basho)

Blyth's ghost: My every seminar was for me the last seminar.

Student: The farewell words you left us were,

Blyth's ghost: “Human life has a meaning

Chorus: Human life has a meaning

Blyth's ghost: Only if the struggle is

Chorus: Only if the struggle is

Blyth's ghost: Hopeless.”

Chorus: Human life has a meaning only if the struggle is hopeless.

[*Shakuhachi* music.]

Blyth's ghost: The old pond:

A frog jumps in, ---

The sound of the water. (Basho)

What is the old pond?

Who is the frog?

[*Shakuhachi* continues.]

Blyth's ghost: Every word, every sentence that Thoreau wrote is suffused with
humour, his own humour.

Chorus: Every word, every sentence that Thoreau wrote is suffused with humour,
his own humour.

Blyth's ghost: His own humour.

Chorus: His own humour.

Blyth's ghost: My life has been

[*Blyth's ghost* moves to *hashigakari*
and exits.]

Chorus: My life has been the poem I would have writ,

My life has been the poem I would have writ,

But I could not both live and utter it,

But I could not both live and utter it.

[*Exeunt all.*]

Reginald Horace Blyth Ph.D. (1898-1964), known as the author of *Zen in English Literature*, *Haiku* (4 Vols.), *A History of Haiku* (2 Vols.), and *Senryu*, was a Professor of English in Japan and private tutor to Crown Prince, now Ex-Emperor Heisei, for almost twenty years. At his unexpected death in Tokyo in 1964, D.T. Suzuki, the prominent Zen Buddhist, wrote, “The world lost one of the most eminent exponents of Japanese culture of recent years. His studies on haiku and the Japanese sense of humor as well as Zen were unique contributions towards East-West understanding.”

MUNAKATA Kuniyoshi Ph.D. (1934-) is Professor Emeritus of Shizuoka National University and President of the International Society for Harmonization of Cultures and Civilizations (ISHCC). He has created numerous Shakespearean Noh plays, including *Noh Hamlet* in English, where he has often acted as *shite*. A life member of the Thoreau Society since 1973, he met with Walter Harding in Concord and in Tokyo. His books include *Noh Hamlet in English*, *Noh Adaptation of Shakespeare*, *Essentially Oriental: R.H. Blyth Selection* and *Thank You, Professor Blyth*. ISHCC: <https://ishcc.stars.ne.jp/>

Noh: Noh has been regarded in Japan as its most refined theater art, founded in the 14th and 15th centuries by Kan’ami and his son Zeami. It is a song and dance drama with chorus and musicians, and influenced by Zen, it respects simplicity and spirituality; it is not necessarily based on realism. There remain over 200 Noh plays. The texts are written in verse and prose. Noh plays written after the Meiji Restoration (1868) are called “new Noh plays.” Noh’s deep singing style and slow, stately movements appeal to the imagination of the audience.