

On Reading the Script of the New Noh Play *Blyth-Sensei*  
—Men Who Would Not Fight: R.H. Blyth and Henry Thoreau—  
by MUNAKATA Kuniyoshi

宗片邦義創作能『不来子先生—たたかわざる者：ブライスとソーロ—』  
台本を読んで

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宗片邦義会長の創作能『不来子先生』を読み作者のブライス先生に対する深い敬愛の念、宇宙、自然、人生に関する思想が能独特のリズムで表現されているのに深く感動して感想を英語で書いてみました。 (2020年12月10日)

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The National Noh Theatre in Tokyo presented the new Noh play, *Blyth Sensei*, written by MUNAKATA Kuniyoshi on November 18, 2020. I didn't get to see the Noh play acted on the stage, but I can vividly visualize the Noh stage when I read its script. Blyth's former student and Walter Harding, an American university professor, enter the main stage. And the Chorus sings a haiku by Basho:

**Along the road**

**Goes no one,**

**This autumn eve.** (Basho. Blyth's translation)

Walter Harding came from New York to Japan to give a series of lectures on Henry Thoreau and wished to meet Blyth and he asks Blyth's former student to take him to Blyth. Then he is told by the student that Blyth passed away last month. The student tells Harding about Blyth's homage to Thoreau and how he lived in Tokyo, teaching at various universities and institutions. He also tells him that Blyth was a private tutor to the Crown Prince of that time for many years. The student tells Harding that Blyth said "Even if Germany is Britain's enemy, Germans are not my enemies. I can't kill a man." So, Blyth was confined to a prison as a conscientious objector. The student tells Harding that Blyth said, "Killing a man is a sin, and killing thousands of men makes you a hero?"

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

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

think it was something extraordinary that a Japanese publisher published a book by a man from an enemy country. The Japanese publisher was a brave, conscientious man, indeed. The book has introduced Zen to the entire world ever since.

Later the student and Harding come to the front gate of Toukeiji Temple in Kita Kamakura. The student mentions, “The spiritual culture of this country” and the Chorus continues, “developed through the ages of Nara, Kyoto and Kamakura, various religious, ethical teachings, and customs.” And Harding says, “Many Japanese are generally eclectic and made up a great Harmony of cultures.”

Harding and the student talk about Blyth’s name after death: 不來子古道照心居士.

Then Blyth’s ghost appears, speaking:

**“A wild sea!**

**And stretching across to the Island of Sado**

**The Galaxy. (Basho)**

Now I am coming.”

Harding, Blyth and the Chorus mention about “Influence of Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*,” and the words of Lincoln and Thoreau.

Later Harding asks Blyth’s ghost what the object of Zen is. Blyth’s ghost says: “To transcend life and death, and really to live.” The Chorus repeats what Blyth’s ghost has just said: “To transcend life and death, and really to live.” I notice that an important line or a message is repeated by the Chorus in Noh plays. Here what Blyth’s ghost has said is repeated by the Chorus, which is very effective in emphasizing the message. Then, Blyth’s ghost says, “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.” I think we all can agree that the object of life is to understand one another. We should try to understand one another. What Blyth has learned through Zen meditation is vitally important to human beings. Then the Chorus sings: “In particular, for men to understand women and for women to understand men; in general, for one nation, if such illusion has any real existence, to understand another.” And what the Chorus sings is particularly interesting: “In particular, for men to understand women and for women to understand men.” If men and women could understand each other better, the world would be a much happier place.

The student says to Blyth’s ghost, “In your seminar on Shakespeare you said: “Without humour we can’t live in this world.” And the Chorus sings: “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.” This new Noh play by Munakata, like all other Noh plays by him, is based on his deep love of and profound knowledge in Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s creative spirit is alive and producing new Noh plays in this Far Eastern country four centuries later.

Let’s listen to what Harding and Blyth’s ghost say and what the Chorus sings:

**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 that the heavens are above us. Human beings are in the Universe, in the great Nature.

Then, Blyth's ghost and the Chorus exchanges their ideas:

**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.]

Coming to the end of this new Noh play, *Blyth Sensei*, I find myself keep reading aloud the final four lines above over and over again, deeply feeling its beauty with all my heart.

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