

Saigyō: The Monk Who Travelled Between Two Worlds

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Saigyō 西行 (1118–1190) was not only a Buddhist monk but an admired poet of vernacular verse (*waka*) as well. It was through both his religious and literary activities that Saigyō succeeded in traversing a number of borders, such as that between life and death, the holy and the profane, the past and the future, this world of living men and the purgatory of condemned souls, man and nature, borders relating to social class, along with those supposed to exist between Buddhist divinities and nativistic deities. Saigyō was certainly no magician; it was not by means of any magical spells that he was able to actually traverse these borders. Above all else, Saigyō adopted vernacular poetry as the ideal vehicle for exploring imaginary realities, other worlds existing—if not in actuality, at least in fancy—beyond his immediate environs. How exactly did Saigyō accomplish these poetic journeys? What manner of literary devices did he employ? There are, it seems to me, two primary strategies repeatedly used by Saigyō. First, his practice of including certain telling phrases, the intoning of which was supposed to somehow assist the reader in bridging the gap between one world and another. Second, Saigyō is fond of using appeals or direct petitions to unseen beings, along with the related literary devices of analogy and personification.

Regarding the first strategy, that is, the use of certain phrases believed to assist the reader in travelling between two worlds, let us focus our attention here on the curious expression *na ga nochi no yo*, which may be rendered in English simply as “when I am gone,” or, more literally, “that world (or life) to which I shall go after death.” This expression occurs twice in *Sankashū* 山家集 (*Poems of a Mountain Home*, late 12th century), Saigyō’s personal collection of vernacular poems.¹ Significantly, this particular expression does not seem to have been used by any other poet before Saigyō. This was, for all we know, a unique invention of Saigyō’s

¹ For a full English translation of this collection, see Burton Watson, trans., *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.



Figure 1. Image accompanying the poem “If anyone should come to pay his respects to my soul [. . .] place as your offering a cherry blossom before the Buddhist statue atop my grave.” From *Saigyō monogatari* (NIJL, Ukai bunko 鶉飼文庫, item no. 96–616, image no. 65).

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poetic genius. It should be understood that, in the world of vernacular poetry where conformity to tradition, including traditional poetic diction, was strictly regulated, the introduction of a new expression such as this exerted a real influence over both contemporary and later poets. Now, let us look at those two poems in which Saigyō uses this new expression of his:

O, pine tree, I implore you, do pay your respects to the place I once was long after I have left this world for the next, for there is no one else in all the world who will ever remember me.

(*Sankashū*, poem no. 1358)

If anyone should come to pay his respects to my soul after I have gone to the next world, please, I beg, place as your offering a cherry blossom when someone would hold a service for my soul (see **Figure 1**).

(*Sankashū*, poem no. 78)

In the first poem, the phrase “after I have left this world for the next” corresponds to the original *wa ga nochi no yo* わが後の世, while in the second, this same expression has been translated as “gone to the next world.” As may be plainly seen from these poems, the use of this expression allows the poet, who is still living in



Figure 2. Saigyō and Mount Fuji. From *Saigyō monogatari* (NIJL, Ukai bunko, item no. 96–616, image no. 36).

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this mortal world, to imagine himself as though he were already in the land of the deceased. Again, this is something very unique to the poetry of Saigyō. Another poem of his, while not employing this particular expression, nevertheless reveals the same attitude of meditating intensely upon his own demise:

This soul of mine is like the smoke that issues forth from Mount Fuji only to drift away and dissipate somewhere in the sky: there is no telling where it will go after this (see **Figure 2**).

(*Shin kokin wakashū*, miscellaneous poems II, poem no. 1615)

Just how idiosyncratic, and indeed how essential, this manner of expression was to the inner life and work of Saigyō may be appreciated by the fact that only one other poet, namely, the monk Jien 慈円 (1155–1225), is known to have used this expression repeatedly in his own verses. It is for this very reason, I suspect, that Jien is seen as the spiritual successor of Saigyō.

Of course, *wa ga nochi no yo*—the world after this one—is not the only example of an expression meant to assist the reader in imaginatively projecting himself into another world. Saigyō was fond of including certain place names, dialectical words used only in limited areas, as well as curious expressions used only by, say, fishermen and lumberjacks, as a means of blurring the boundaries between the holy and the profane, between the elegant and the mundane.



Figure 3. Saigyō pays his respects to the tomb of Retired Emperor Sutoku. From *Saigyō monogatari* (NIJL, Ukai bunko, item no. 96–616, image no. 57). This image may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.20730/200020115>.

Turning now to the second strategy—Saigyō’s use of appeals, analogy, and personification—let us look at an example of a poem employing direct petition, in this case, to the soul of Emperor Sutoku 崇徳天皇 (1119–1164, r. 1123–1141):

If it must be so, then so be it. Dear sovereign, even supposing you were still seated upon your jeweled throne, what comfort could that possibly afford where you are now—now that you have left this world of men?

(*Sankashū*, poem no. 1355)

Direct appeals of this sort are encountered quite frequently in Saigyō’s poetry, where they serve as the most important vehicle by which other worlds are imaginatively reached. In the above poem, Saigyō, having visited the grave of Emperor Sutoku upon Mount Shiromine 白峰, in Sanuki 讃岐 (modern-day Kagawa)—the place, so far away from the capital, where Sutoku died in exile—proceeds to address the soul of the deceased sovereign (see **Figure 3**). By thus envisioning the spirit of Sutoku as though it stood before him, Saigyō is able to temporarily transcend the boundaries between the living and the dead and, through the medium of poetry, engage Sutoku as a fellow man. Nowhere in any of the eight imperial anthologies of vernacular poetry—from the early tenth century through to the beginning of the thirteenth century—do we find any examples of a poet directly addressing or con-

versing with the departed. This strategy, too, is wholly unique to the work of Saigyō.

The thought of addressing the soul of a deceased Emperor Sutoku at his gravesite captured the imagination of later writers. Some were inspired to imagine that Sutoku, moved by Saigyō's verses, either appeared in the form of a spirit before the monk, or made his presence known by means of a formless voice alone. A Kamakura-period collection of anecdotal tales known as *Shasekishū* 沙石集 (*Sand and Pebbles*, 1278–1283) contains one such tale.² Saigyō, we are told, while passing through Sanuki, recited his “If it must be so” poem over Sutoku's grave, “composing his verses there on the spot, just as they came, in accordance with his deep sense of sympathy” for the departed soul. Moved by this show of sincerity, Sutoku responded, albeit faintly from beneath the ground, with a poem of his own:

Plovers leave their tracks in the sandy shore, while the calligrapher's brush leaves its inky traces in a letter. Letters can be sent to the capital, whereas I, confined to this solitary mountain of pine trees, can but cry, like the birds that visit me here.

This episode may be compared to another, of similar content, found in the Kotohira MS of *Hōgen monogatari* 保元物語 (*The Tale of Hōgen*, c. 1320), a military tale which vividly depicts those circumstances surrounding the Hōgen Rebellion of 1156, in which Retired Emperor Sutoku, having failed in an attempt to wrest the throne from Emperor Go-Shirakawa 後白河天皇 (1127–1192, r. 1155–1158), is ignobly sent into exile in Sanuki. Sutoku is presented to us as having perished in Sanuki, bitter and full of rage, cursing the world for his ill fortune. Some time passes, and Saigyō is shown paying his respects to the deceased sovereign's sorely unkempt grave. Utterly overcome with sadness at the thought of poor Sutoku, imagining how much the man wished to return to his beloved capital, and with what rage he must have perished, Saigyō falls down at the lonely graveside and indulges in tears. In the midst of his weeping, the monk fancies he hears a voice speaking to him in verse:

Compare me to a little boat, which, having drifting haplessly upon the waves, was thrown upon the shore of this lonely mountain of pines. Here the boat yet remains, dry, brittle, and broken—of no more use to anyone.

Saigyō, in turn, responds to this with his famous “If it must be so” poem. As a final sign of appreciation, the buried sovereign replies with a series of three brief tremors that shake the earth about his grave. Whether inspiring a dead sovereign to reply, or causing his gravesite to miraculously quake, Saigyō's poem served as a means of communicating with souls of the deceased. The real power behind these verses lies in Saigyō's effective use of the direct appeal. It is this device that allows the poet to transcend the border between life and death, between his own immediate surroundings and some other imagined world. Herein we are certain discover the lasting charm of Saigyō's poetic legacy.

² The tale in question is preserved in fascicle 5, part II, tale no. 6. For a full English translation of this collection, see Robert Morrell, trans., *Sand and Pebbles: The Tales of Muju Ichinen, a Voice for Pluralism in Kamakura Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.