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**Sparks from the Clouds: a modern Buddhist poem**

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**Abstract:** Although published only two years after Eliot’s famous modernist poem “The Waste Land” (1922), Miyazawa Kenji’s 52-line “Haru to Shura” (1924) is already very nearly as modern. The two poems, examined here using my expanded version of Riffaterre’s semiotic theory, have analogous propositional structure. One proposition concerns the faithless majority of mankind; the other involves a heavenly personage of potentially rehabilitating power. In Miyazawa’s case, the former is represented by Japanese peasants; the latter is the “Shura” – normally an unruly member of the lowest rank of Buddhist demigods. Miyazawa’s modernist message reverses the roles of these two personae: the Shura only wants to be recognized by the peasant he spies below his abode in the clouds. The peasant comes off as the lesser of the two beings because of his obdurate fixation on the soil. Miyazawa enhances the contrast of roles by painting the spring landscape – normally a season of burgeoning nature – in somber colors. This is a spring (haru) in which no birds sing, and the ranks of cypress trees are black. Commentaries by Japanese critics, plus one by one of my students, are examined: none can distance themselves from common sociolectic concepts of the seasons and the peasant population. Miyazawa, a devout Buddhist, is thus expressing a novel view of the people’s attitude to religion which they themselves are culpably unaware of. Their attitude is thus very close to that of the various personages in Eliot’s poem.

**Keywords:** Haru to Shura; Miyazawa; modernism; semiotic structure; The Waste Land

1 **Introduction: Miyazawa Kenji and modernism**

It seems remarkable that Eliot’s famous modernist poem “The Waste Land” (1922) should have a virtually contemporary counterpart in Japan: Miyazawa Kenji’s 52-line “Haru to Shura” (1924).

From a thematic standpoint, the two poems have analogous structure. This means that both poems demonstrate the operation of the semiotic organization of modern poetry along the lines of two overarching propositions, one concerning the

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faithless majority of mankind, the other involving a heavenly personage of potentially rehabilitating power (see Section 4 below).

Miyazawa’s rather difficult poem is clearly modernist in structure and operation. As we shall see, “Haru to Shura” has long bedeviled critics in its country of origin. In order to demonstrate this kind of structure and its operation, I will use a considerably expanded version of Michael Riffaterre’s semiotic theory of the structure of poetry, which deals in fact with modern and proto-modern poetry – although Riffaterre is not specific about this. The expanded theory is detailed below.

2 Riffaterrian theory expanded; signification extending beyond the text

2.1 Matrix and interpretant

Notably in Semiotics of poetry (1978), Riffaterre develops a theory in which the process of interpreting a poem entails a search for the underlying theme that generates the whole text. This “matricial” structure never appears on the textual surface. It generates a set of images, the “ungrammaticality” of whose surface structure signals that they are generated by a common underlying “matrix.” Individual images may seem to refer to disparate sociolectic phenomena, but in fact refer to each other, the second image being the object-sign of the first (subject-sign), and so on, as members of a set. The interpretant of these images is their matrix.

The lexical form of the matrix is modeled on that of a “hypogram,” i.e. a phrase – often a cliché or “descriptive system” – already existing in the sociolect which has no necessary relation with the matrix on the level of propositional structure (Riffaterre consistently uses the term “structure” in the latter sense). The fact that its set of matrix-based images is thus controlled, on both the level of structure and that of lexical form, confers on the text its “monumentality” – the faculty of resistance to deformation by the reader. According to Riffaterre, the interpretant of the text (as subject-sign) and intertext (as object-sign) may sometimes be a third text. But in the same book he also adopts the classic Peircean definition: “[Interpretants] mediate, since by their very form they represent the equivalence of two signifying systems” (e.g. primary text and intertext) (R.1978: 81). In line with Peircean theory it would be a propositional structure put together by the reader, sharing syntactic and semantic features of subject and object-sign (Riffaterre in fact details this classic definition of the interpretant in an article entitled “Sémiotique intertextuelle: l’interprétant” [1979: 133]).

The reader’s contribution to the interpretive process begins with the considerable effort involved in reconstituting their common underlying propositional structure
from a comparison of the images of the textual surface. Riffaterre terms this “retro-
reading,” since only after all the ungrammatical figures of the text have been taken
into account – regardless of their linear order – can their underlying structure be
formulated.

2.2 The role of the intertext as structural model

In seeking to reconstruct the matrix, the reader may appeal to the authority of an
“intertext,” a structural model that may be found in other – usually pre-existing –
texts or works of art (this is intertextuality on the level of the text as a whole, not the
kind of partial intertextuality of Kristeva, Barthes, et al.). Riffaterre gives the example
of two variants of a common matrix, the first involving a camel “crossing the
trackless sands of the desert,” and the second involving a ship “furrowing the briny
deep”: both variants are built on the matricial proposition that a trusty conveyance
bears human beings across a large and dangerous expanse (Riffaterre 1984: 142).

The role of the intertext as model is important since, to some extent, it over-
determines the semiotic structure of the primary text. The originality of the latter
consists in its having a unique vocabulary set into a propositional framework that is
generally homologous with that of an intertextual model. The Riffaterrian reader, then,
requires a certain amount of intertextual background knowledge, in addition to an
alertness to the existence of hypogrammatic structures, that will in
fluence his choice of vocabulary as he seeks to formulate a matrix. One might say that a Riffaterrian “literary
competence” (cf. Culler 1975: Ch. 6) involves both a grasp of the “syntactic” rules of
poetic structure according to the theory, and a knowledge of the “lexicon” of inter-
textual and hypogrammatic material.

2.3 Binarism

The above rules become more complex in my expanded theory, in that every modern
text has not one but two paradigmatic sets of images generated by two matricial
phrases or propositions, linked together by a syntagmatic relation, which may be of
several types: negation, difference of scale, etc. For example, positive matricial
phrase no. 1 may be negated by matricial phrase no. 2, the syntagmatic action of
negation constituting the intermatricial relation (IMR).

Jonathan Culler makes a suggestion that is very relevant to my argument in favor
of this type of binarism, in the chapter of The pursuit of signs (Culler 1981) devoted to
Riffaterre (1978). Noting that the Riffaterrian principle of poetic unity requires that
all the images of a poem be “variants of the same structural matrix” (Riffaterre 1978:
82), Culler doubts that the semiotic structure of a poetic text is necessarily as simple as that (Culler 1981: 92–93). He suggests that “in many cases readings unify a poem with the aid of some elementary binary opposition,” citing as an example Rimbaud’s *Fêtes de la faim* (Culler 1981: 93). This “binary opposition” is evidently suggested to Culler by the analysis which Riffaterre himself initially proposes of Rimbaud’s text into two sections or expansions, each generated, I would say, by a different matrix: “eating the inedible, eating the edible” (Riffaterre 1978: 78).

It proves to be the case that bimatriciality, far from being the exception, is apparently a very powerful rule. The two matricial phrases will be called “MPI” and “MP2,” the latter being the more innovative, and more difficult to identify – according to my convention in Hopkins (1994). I will approach Miyazawa’s text from the same “bimatricial” perspective. This means that the intertext, whether literary or cinematic, etc., is also of bimatricial structure.

### 2.4 Interpretant and perceptual change

Far from laying itself open to modification by the reader, the modernist text – though Riffaterre does not make this point – sets out to *change the reader’s preconceptions regarding reality*. Its very monumentality would seem to be essential in giving the text this power. Umberto Eco is very explicit about the power of “aesthetic texts [to] modify our concrete approach to states of the world” (Eco 1976: 275).

The Russian semiotician Juri Lotman also takes the interpretive process beyond the text. In the chapter of *La structure du texte artistique* entitled “Le texte et les structures artistiques extra-textuelles,” he points out that, once the text has been decoded according to the rules of the literary idiolect, the reader’s previous worldview (“le vieux modèle du monde”) is swept away by the “nouveau modèle plus complet du réel,” (the “new, more complete, model of the real”) offered by the text (Lotman 1973 [1970]: 390–406). Lotman calls this process “modélisation,” which I translate as the “remodeling” power of the literary work.

The interpretant abduced by the reader from a comparison of primary text and intertext will contain enough of the matricial structure of the primary text (TMS) to present to the reader a novel view of the world. Subsequently, the reader projects this new worldview “not only onto the structure of his artistic experience, but also onto the structure of his experience of life,” i.e., onto his sociolectic preconceptions (Lotman 1973 [1970]: 392, 396). The result will be a change in those preconceptions. The worldview brought to the text by the reader I term the “sociolectic context (SC)” of the interpretant of text and intertext.
2.5 Sociolectic context

Even given the notion that an intertext may constitute a sort of “literary context,” it is an important part of my theory that a text also possesses a sociolectic context (SC), i.e. a proposition outside the text and homologous with the matricial structure of the text on the lexical level, but different in propositional structure. In making this proposal, I am assuming that poetry communicates not only in relation to other texts, but also in relation to that sociolectic background which the reader brings to it. For example, if the primary text compares the power of human intelligence unfavorably to the power of Nature, the SC of this message includes these same lexical elements, which, however, are not related in the same way as in the primary text.

Thus, we have similarity on the lexical level and contrast on the level of propositional structure: this contrast is the *sine qua non* of innovation effected by the poem as a whole. The uniqueness of the proposition made by the interpretant brings about a *change* in the reader’s preconceptions.

2.6 The work of the reader

The investigative work demanded of the reader by the modern poetic text may be divided into four stages as follows: (i) that of comparing the images belonging to a single set in order to uncover their underlying common features as poetic signs – in the expanded theory, this stage involves two sets of matrix-generated images; (ii) that of searching for an intertextual model for the global structure of the primary text – a model which can influence the semiotic structure of the text, particularly on the syntagmatic level of the relation between the propositional structures generating each set of images; (iii) that of abducting an interpretant from a comparison of primary text and intertext; and (iv) that of the search for an SC, where necessary via an appeal to a continuing series of interpretive triads, the interpretant of the textual triad becoming the subject-sign of a subsequent triad, and so on.

Whereas, according to the deconstructionists, the text may be changed by the reader, according to the poetics of Eco (and of Lotman et al.), it is rather the reader’s thinking which is changed by the text. Let me add a quotation from the modernist poet Francis Ponge who – perhaps more than any other poet – is quite explicit on this subject: in his 1947 essay-poem on Braque, about works of “art moderne” in general he says: “il leur faut avant tout me CHANGER” (Gavronsky 1979: 144, emphasis in original) (of course, this leaves aside the whole question of the appropriateness of deconstruction to postmodern literature).

Apart from Lotman, Eco is the most explicit among literary semioticians concerning how the relations between text and sociolect might be accounted for
without doing violence (as Barthes and Derrida do, for example) to the notion of the text as an impermeable – or “monumental” – semiotic structure. Eco does not deny the importance of establishing rules governing the operation of the internal signifying system of the literary text. In his terminology, one would speak of an intensional semantics, which, he insists, should be considered a prerequisite for any extensional semantics, i.e., one that would deal with the relations between text and sociolect, that “[…] controls the correspondence between a sign-function and a given state of the world” (Eco 1979: 179).

So the reader has to contend with the three intensional stages of analysis, by which the reader assembles the underlying bimatricial structure of the primary text, searches for an intertextual model, abducts an interpretant of primary text and intertext, and then proceeds – at the extensional stage – to look outside the text for an SC in contrast to which the primary text makes innovative linked propositions.

3 Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933): “Haru to Shura” / Spring and the Shura

3.1 Preface and text

“Haru to Shura” is the ninth poem of nineteen with the same general title in the second volume of the Collected Works (Zen-Shû) first published in 1923–1924, and unquestionably Miyazawa’s most published poetic work since. In this section, I hope to demonstrate the mechanism which makes this poem thoroughly modernist in the innovative nature of its propositions, and in the surface opacity (or “ungrammaticality”) of its images. The word shura in the title needs some explanation. First, Miyazawa was a devout Buddhist. According to the traditional Buddhist theory of reincarnation, all living things are bound to be reborn into one of six realms of existence; the ashura represent the realm of contentiousness, selfish desires. For this reason, in its normal Japanese sociolectic usage the word shura – without the “a” – means ‘fighting,’ or ‘struggle,’ etc. These sociolectic meanings of ashura and shura notwithstanding, Miyazawa’s Shura is, rather, an observer of the human scene from on high whose disappointment at the lack of response from humankind causes him to disintegrate at the poem’s end.

The translated text is the version in Miyazawa (1988: 20–22). The original Japanese text is given in the Appendix, at the end of the article. The bracketed subtitle is in English in the original. Line beginnings have been offset as necessary in order to represent the wave-like format of the original between lines 13–37; certain other lines are offset one space for the same reason.
Spring and the Shura (1922)
(mental sketch modified)

1 From the mental image’s grey steel¹
2 Tendrils of the akebi-vine wind to the clouds
3 Clumps of bramble and rotting swamplands:
4 A wide prospect, a flat prospect, of nothing but sanctimoniousness²
5 (It is the time when, denser than the flute music of noon,
6 Flecks of amber fall from the sky)
7 The bitterness – and the blue – of anger!
8 Through the bottom layer of light of the April atmosphere
9 Spitting to himself, grinding his teeth, he comes and goes
10 “I am a lone Shura”³
11 (The scenery wobbles through his tears)
12 Setting a limit to the visibility of the shattered clouds
13 In the sparkling sea of the heavens
14 The sacred crystal breeze blows to and fro
15 The ZYPRESSEN – Spring in a single row:
16 Though they drink in the ether blackly
17 And from their dark ranks
18 Even the shining snowy ridges of Tian Shan can be seen⁴
19 (In waves of mirages and white polarized light)
20 The True Word has been lost
21 The clouds disperse and fly through the sky
22 “Aa! thus through the bottom of the shining bowl of April
23 Passionately grinding my teeth I come and go
24 I am a solitary shura”
25 (The pearly clouds flow by
26 Where, in this Spring, does a bird sing?)
27 When the sun’s orb shimmers bluely
28 The Shura blends with the trees

¹ Miyazawa’s term is a compound, literally ‘heart-forms’ or ‘mental images,’ ‘fantasies.’ The subtitle of the whole “Haru to Shura” collection is “Shinshô Sketches”: ‘sketches of mental images.’
² tengoku: also translatable as ‘hypocrisy.’
³ I have used a capital S for “Shura” throughout in all cases where it assists in distinguishing the hero of our poem from the concept of ‘shura,’ or ‘shura’ – nature in general. Quotation marks have been added for all cases of the Shura’s speech.
⁴ Lit. the ‘heavenly mountains,’ a mountain range west of China across which the famous Tang priest San-zô (in the Japanese reading) journeyed in order to bring back the Buddhist scriptures deemed essential to the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, and subsequently Japan.
From heaven’s dazzlingly collapsing bowl
The throng of black trees stretches away
Their branches sadly proliferating
From this landscape in which everything is double
From the treetops of this forest in mourning
Ravens flutter into flight
(When the atmosphere finally clears
And the cypresses stand silent against the sky)
A figure makes its way through the golden grasses
Unmistakably a human form
“Wrapped in his straw cloak, the peasant looks at me
But can he really see me
In the depths of this blinding atmospheric sea?”
(The colour of sadness is deep, deep blue)
The ZYPRESSEN sway quietly
Birds again cut through the blue sky
(The True Word is not to be found here
The Shura’s tears fall to earth)
Returning to the skies to catch his breath
His lungs contract palely
(“May this body be scattered into fragments of the sky”)
The small branches of the ginkgo glow once more
The ZYPRESSEN finally blacken
Sparks of cloud rain down

3.2 Critical opinions on the status of Miyazawa’s Shura

3.2.1 Some critiques

One reference-point will be a recent analysis of the poem by a graduate student, which echoes comments made about the whole “Haru to Shura” series by Prof. Umehara (1983). This analysis illustrates the dangers of reliance on the sociolectic versions of concepts in a poem (Riffaterre’s “referential fallacy”). This student, like Umehara ignoring the poet’s omission of the initial “a,” goes straight to the dictionary and finds that, as noted above, in Buddhist lore an a-shura represents those beings

5 ‘mourning’: sō-shin generally has this meaning, but there is a possible paronomasia here: this might also be ‘the [Shura’s] dejected spirit.’
who are too bound up in selfish desires to achieve enlightenment. The title of the relevant chapter of Umehara’s (1983) book, *Shura no Sekai o Koete* (Going beyond the Shura’s world) implies that this world is an unfortunate state from which the Shura-poet is trying to escape. Other commentators, too, lean heavily on this negative, sociolectic, version of the shura. Mita Muneshuke is an exception in that he points out that the ashura was originally a benign Persian deity, demoted to an evil opponent of their god Indra by the Brahmans, partly reinstated by early Indian Buddhism to one of the eight kings who guard the scriptures, and then finally demoted to his more recent position because of his contentiousness. He concludes that Miyazawa was simply aware of both positive and negative tendencies in the ashura’s background, and thus used the god as a figure for his own contradictory self. Even Mita persists in this kind of autobiographical approach: the Shura is supposed to represent the poet’s psychological state – and this throughout the whole “*Haru to Shura*” collection, although Mita, like so many commentators, does not present a detailed reading of a single complete poem (Mita 1984: 110 ff.).

Umehara’s notes (1983) are among the most recent specific treatments of at least parts of this poem; his approach to Miyazawa’s poetry in general evinces a refreshing disenchantment with most past readings – quite justifiably, I believe, in the light of the autobiographical kind of approach outlined in this section (Umehara 1983: 207). He insists that “No-one has yet known how to read correctly these poems of Miyazawa’s” (Umehara 1983: 207).

Some of Umehara’s observations tend to support a bimatricial interpretation. First of all, his idea that all of humanity finds itself in the state represented by the conventional ashura – in the same way, according to the Buddhist example, as those animals which live by killing others, being killed themselves in turn (Umehara 1983: 223).

This interpretation agrees with the negative opinion of Man adopted by the Shura of our poem. But Umehara must then face the problem of distinguishing between this ashura state of all living beings, and the Shura of this text. He refers us to a Buddhist parable according to which a falcon is revolted by the fact that it must live by killing others. Umehara seems to mean that, like our Shura, the falcon is the only one to be conscious of the dog-eat-dog side of social life. However, he tends to identify the falcon rather with Miyazawa himself. That is to say that, having decided that all the beings in the poem are ashuras, he has recourse to an extra-textual authority to distinguish between the Shura and Man; one wonders why he had not thought to do so in light of the conditions of the text. Further, regarding the textual meaning of Haru (Spring), Umehara treats only the Haru of the title of the collection, suggesting that it represents “the eternally renewed brilliance of Nature” – an image far from the negative Spring painted in such somber colors by this poem (Umehara 1983: 217). He does not perceive that the Haru of the poem is a figure designed to convey the negative state of Man himself. This proposition of Umehara’s provides an example of the Shintoist bias (for
Shintoism venerates spirit-infused Nature) of this critic, which distorts Buddhist concepts throughout his notes. At this point, Umehara parts company with our text and returns to the themes that he imagines run through the collection in general.

### 3.3 Polarity in the text

In his own analysis, our student proposes that the text be divided in two, along the lines of two key-concepts: the world of the Shura and that of the peasant who appears in lines 37–41. From a bimatriccial point of view, this proposition seems more relevant to the semiotic structure of the text than those of the abovementioned critics. Unfortunately, when it comes to the content of these two divisions, he loses touch with the text and refers rather to sociolectic stereotypes. For example, he transforms the peasant into an archetype of the “good old farmer,” whose beneficent power “cures” the Shura of his wickedness. As a result, the student is obliged to suppose that the somber countryside of the poem changes at the end into a scene illuminated by this “cure.” Perhaps he is distracted by the branches of the ginkgo which gleam furtively in line 50? But all this takes us too far from the text.

If Miyazawa has omitted the initial “a” from the word ashura, that does not mean that he uses shura in the ordinary sense of “struggle,” etc. His Shura (with a capital S) is a living being – who addresses us as readers, in line 10, for example; he is an idiolectic entity completely different from all those sociolectic concepts having the same name. The English subtitle, “Mental sketch modified” indicates that this is a structure of ideas formulated by the poet, and not of sociolectic concepts.

If, as Umehara suggests, all of Miyazawa’s poetic work is only a means of explaining Buddhist philosophy, the status of Man in this poem also will necessarily be negative (Umehara 1983: 204). This approach would help to explain the conceptual polarization of this poem: if Man as represented by the peasant is negative, the Shura – who in the poem belongs clearly to another category of being – is evidently less negative, and becomes even positive. Most of the criticisms reverse, or neglect, this polarity, which reflects the existence of two matrices linked – as we shall see – by the idea that the Shura hopes to enter into contact with Mankind.

### 3.4 Two matrices

#### 3.4.1 Overview

The text in fact alternates neatly between groups of images generated by each matrix. Matrix no. 1 (MP1, involving the human – or relatively negative – world)
underlies lines 1–4, 15–20, 25–26, 29–31, 35–38, 43–46, and 50–52. Matrix no. 2 (MP2, the Shura’s – or a relatively positive – world) underlies lines 7–11, 21–24, 27–28, 39–42, and 47–49. There are certain groups of lines which may seem to contain elements of both positive and negative matrices; they are thus microcosms of the text’s total matricial structure, and some of them sound rather like authorial comment. The negative part of each is a product of matrix no. 1, and the positive, of matrix no. 2. For instance, the dark/light imagery of lines 12–14 and perhaps also the light/dark imagery of lines 50–51, and the specific statement about the duality of existence in lines 32–34, have to do with two related ideas: (a) the duality of the shura-nature itself: the Shura’s consciousness of the warring of good and evil within himself (cf. Tanikawa in Kusano 1958: 46); and (b) the larger duality of the worlds of the divine and that of man.

Lines 12–14 are especially revealing in this second regard, the word for ‘sacred’ – an explicit reference to the world of the divine – being reinforced by the use of an archaic word for ‘glass’ or ‘crystal’ (hari), which originally derives from Sanskrit Buddhist terminology. Likewise, just before the Shura’s self-destruction, the way in which the ginkgo tree glows again in line 50 in contrast to the cypresses’ blackness is not contradictory: rather, in its role as another of these “bimatrial” images, this image asserts the primacy of the duality of good and evil in Nature itself. One other image-group that might be treated in the same way is in lines 25–26: the pearly clouds represent the positive matrix and the following rhetorical question (“where, in this Spring, can one find a bird that sings?”) represents the negative one, since it expects a negative answer. More specifically, metonymies enable the clouds to represent the Shura, whose abode they are (cf. 3.4.2), and the lack of birdsong to represent the “dark” Spring of Man’s world.

A reading of the text from beginning to end does not necessarily mean that images must be read in linear progression. From the outset, the poem’s Shura is a being who inhabits an extra-human world; he is benign, in a reversal of the antisocial connotations mentioned in 3.1, and looks down from the clouds on a Spring landscape, the dark-toned side of which symbolizes the negative attitude of humanity throughout the poem. The Shura seems to have at least some hope that all of the world below may not be dark, and this is reflected in the images which point to the existence of a world of brightness. He spies a peasant below, who for a moment appears to be looking up; however, the peasant cannot see into the world of the Shura, whose hopes are therefore outweighed by the images of darkness: forests of spear-like cypresses, never usually associated with Spring in Japanese literature, figure three times in the text. Miyazawa uses the German word Zypressen, which sounds suspiciously like the English “depressing”; such a paronomasia would provide an explanation for the overdetermination of the choice of this word. The lack of response from humanity totally destroys the Shura, who chooses to lose his existence as an individual being and be absorbed back into the totality of Nature, where
at least there is the possibility of a brighter side of things (symbolized by the occasional flashes of light in the abovementioned images).

The above images expressing a portrait of the Shura in the text should be viewed as “mapping onto” each other, rather than as parts of some linear progression. Thus, the Shura’s various features and faculties are part of his nature from the outset, for example, his tears foreshadow his ultimate disintegration (this would not exclude the possibility of representing the poem as a fabula. The situations in “Haru to Shura” and “The Waste Land” will be compared below, Section 4).

3.4.2 MP1

Lines 1–4 obviously deal with the human world, to which we will assign our first matrix. The *akebi*-vine is specific to the Japanese and other far Eastern countrysides, to which the swamplands or wetlands add a negative touch, also a clue that this is a rice-growing landscape. It is important to point this out, if only to emphasize that the “sanctimoniousness” or “hypocrisy” (*tengoku*) of l. 4 is that of human society, and not an attribute of the Shura. As Ono Ryûshô notes, some commentators have suggested that, because *tengoku* is explicitly linked with the shura-nature in Nichiren’s teachings, this must also be the case in the poem. Ono rightly objects to this, and yet not for reasons based on the text; he is more concerned to pin down a “Miyazawa version” of the shura-concept, which is supposed to apply throughout the poet’s work (Ono 1979: 138–139).

There is, moreover, a clever pun on the word for ‘heaven’: the pronunciation of the four characters *tengoku-moyô*, divorced from their logographic form, could also imply a ‘heavenly prospect.’ But what the Shura sees in the human world below – ironically, in view of this pronunciation – is far from being a “heavenly prospect”; the phonetic form of the word itself is virtually an example of hypocrisy. Lines 8–9 tell us that the Shura is definitely the viewer of this prospect, who is located above the scene of lines 1–4 – somewhere up in the “atmosphere.” From on high, he can see that anything that looks like religious activity in human society is really only pretense.

In sum, we know already by line 8 that this first matricial concept (MP1) is concerned with the human world’s lack of a genuine response to the divine. This is of course the Japanese society of the early twentieth century; against the background of the age-old animistic beliefs and superstitions of a still half-agrarian society, it was hard to find – outside the priesthood – people interested in anything as intellectually sophisticated as Buddhism. In the light of line 4, then, the “grey steel” of the “heart/mental image” in line 1 is a figure for the darkness and hardness of human hearts and has nothing to do with the Shura, as one commentator would have it.

In lines 15–20, the darkness and sadness of the Spring scene – both before and after the peasant’s appearance – are quite explicit, for example in lines 16–17, (cf. also
ll. 31 and 42); the sky may be blue elsewhere in the poem (e.g. l. 27), but it’s a sad blue. The repeated comment that “there is no truth in the world below” (ll. 20 and 45) I have put with matrix no. 1, as this seems to be made by the narrator rather than the Shura, and in any case refers to the world of Man.6

Turning to lines 25–26, as noted above, line 25 really characterizes the positive side of the Shura; however, it is part of the same sentence as line 26, which – in negatively characterizing the world of Mankind – plainly sets the scene for the Shura’s final disappointment.

In lines 29–31, the word “dazzling” is of course part of the general scheme of “enlightenment” imagery; but here this is juxtaposed (in a disturbing piece of ungrammaticality) with “collapsing,” which gives a sense of something drastic about to happen. In fact, the latter image seems to prefigure the demise not only of the Shura himself, but even that of a whole heavenly order.

Lines 30–34 provide the poem’s clearest indication that the darkened features of this Spring are figures for the negative world of mankind.

The section most obviously related to the world of Mankind is that covered by lines 35–38: the simple description of the peasant’s approach. Yet, even here, we have a positive element in the “gold” of the grasses (the original uses the meliorative term ôgon – lit. ‘yellow-gold’). It’s as though we have a reminder that, although mankind may be oblivious to higher things, the natural environment is full of signals of their existence. By contrast, the silent cypresses of line 36 add a somber note (cf. l. 31).

In lines 43–45, the cypresses stand as dark witnesses to the final statement of the absence of the ‘True Word’ among mankind; the “birds” – which reappear here – are evidently the negative birds of line 34.

Although already mentioned in 3.4.1, lines 50–51 may also stand on their own as an image directly characterizing mankind’s world: the ginkgos’ “glow” is like a final glimmer of positive light before the ultimate darkness expressed by the cypresses in the next line.

3.4.3 MP2

Our second matrix (MP2) has to do with the quest of the Shura. It may be formulated thus: A quasi-divine being wishes to make contact with the human world. This notion of the will to contact mankind coming from the divine side is a commonplace of religious theory, but this poem’s version of it is quite innovative: in this search the seeker is defeated. There is no hint of a conversion of Mankind.

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6 The original expression makoto no kotoba – lit. ‘words of truth’ – I have translated as “True Word”; this is not necessarily, as Satô and Watson (1981: 493, n. 4) allege, a reference to the Shingon (lit. ‘true word’) sect of Buddhism.
In lines 7–11, the Shura is already depressed or disappointed; in retrospect (cf. ll. 39–42) the human attitude of sanctimoniousness (l. 4) is the cause. The flecks of amber (ll. 5–6) falling from the sky are also less puzzling in a retrospective light; they belong to MP2 as images that use vocabulary containing the same ‘shining’ to represent the divine world and its possibilities (cf. ll. 50–51). On the way, the landscape “wobbles” (yusureru) through the Shura’s tears (l. 11), which T. Amazawa has called the “key” to the whole text (though nowhere in his book does he actually give a close reading of the whole text). Amazawa even suggests that the up-down movement (in Japanese script) of lines 12–36 is meant to represent this wobbling movement; but if so, (a) why does it not start from line 11, and (b) – more important – why does it not extend throughout the text? (Amazawa 1976: 209). This movement may have more to do with the “blowing to and fro” of the “sacred crystal breeze” (l. 14), the depiction of which begins precisely at line 12; the way in which this movement stops at line 36 could then be explained by the appearance of the peasant in line 37, putting an end to the positive possibilities symbolized by the crystal breeze. A possible alternative view of this graphic movement may be that it is an attempt to represent the movement of cypresses in the wind – but then objection (b) above would still apply.

Lines 21–24 repeat the Shura’s self-identification. The clouds’ ungrammatically sudden dispersal reflects the Shura’s agitated movement in reaction to the immediately preceding statement about the loss of the True Word. The “shining bowl of April” (l. 29) is another in the abovementioned set of expressions representing the divine world: note that it is the abode of the Shura, suspended above the world of Man.

In lines 27–28, we learn that the Shura comes down into Man’s world. The “blue” (besides indicating the time of day) raises echoes of the use of the same color in lines 7 and 42 to characterize the Shura’s mood of sadness or anger: it’s as though, even in seeking to contact Man, he holds out little hope of success.

Lines 39–42 confirm that the Shura is indeed interested in contacting the human world. Lines 39–40 state: “he looks at me, but can he really see me?” And then we have the repetition of the statement that the “True Word” is not to be found in the world of man, followed by the Shura’s tears (definitely generated by matrix no. 2).

Lines 46–49 and line 52 represent the resolution of MP2. The final six lines come after a one-line break on the page (which exists in two different editions of Miyazawa’s works). But just before this, in line 46, the Shura’s tears show his profound disappointment with Man, and prefigure the “sparks” of the final line. The Shura returns to his abode in the clouds, but even there his body no longer functions properly. Then we have his dramatic death-wish – that his body be scattered into fragments.

Line 52 confirms that this has been realized: he self-destructs because of his defeat in the attempt at contact with the human world. The sparks of cloud falling down are plainly enough fragments of the disintegrating Shura, who is repeatedly
represented by cloud, or associated with cloud (cf. l. 21, where the clouds’ sudden dispersal expresses the Shura’s agitated movement; also the pearly clouds of l. 25, which are a neat figure for the optimistic, spiritually enlightened side of the Shura). The “sparks” represent his positive, divine side which now can no longer hold together in the face of Man’s lack of interest; yet their fall to earth may still represent a final gift by the Shura of this bright world to Man. These highly ungrammatical sparks are able to have this function because of their place – within the semiotic system of matrix no. 2 – as part of the ‘light/shining’ motif which represents the immanence of the divine throughout the text. This light is no longer the sparkling sea of line 13, the shining snow and white polarized light of Tian Shan (lit.: ‘celestial mountains’: ll. 18–19), or the dazzling heaven of line 29: it has finally been broken into fragments. Thus, these changes in the ‘light’ motif through the text reflect the growing disappointment of the Shura’s hopes of Man. These sparks may also echo the tears of line 46, which now seem in retrospect to have been prefigured by the flecks of amber which fall from the sky in line 6.

3.4.4 Textual matricial structure (TMS)

The poem’s TMS may be summarized as The Shura’s (= spiritual world’s) sacrifice is caused by humankind (= the earthbound world). In more detail, in matrix no. 1 Man is characterized as unheeding of the “True Word”; in matrix no. 2 the Shura – who belongs to a realm less earthbound than mankind’s – is made to suffer from this deficiency of man’s, the resulting relation between the two matrices (IMR) being that Man’s attitude causes the Shura’s demise.

The fact that Miyazawa chooses a being whose connotations are negative contributes to establishing the ironical character of the central proposition of the poem: the comparison of Man with the Shura implies that a Spring without contact between the human world and the divine is much more negative than the purgatory which is normally associated with the Buddhist ashura. If the Shura of the poem recognizes the existence of this “True Word” – in contrast to Man – at the same time, he resembles the sociolectic ashura from the viewpoint of his disquiet, of his contradictory nature. Whereas a bodhisattva would be expected to show only compassion toward Man, the human beings of the poem make our Shura angry and distressed. As a result of the ironical reversal of roles of Man and Shura, Man’s lack of interest in any world other than his own makes him all the more culpable.

3.4.5 The intertext

Our Shura’s fruitless quest for the True Word among men and his own final destruction – indirectly because of the incomprehension of Man – inevitably recalls the mission of
Jesus and the incomprehension of his compatriots. It is worth noting that Miyazawa was strongly influenced by a Christian friend, Saitô Shûjirô (Janome 2006). Although Miyazawa himself may not have had access to Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” any reader coming across “Haru to Shura” over the decades since the 1930s certainly will, and thus will be able to choose it as an intertextual model.

In “Haru to Shura,” there is a religious figure from another dimension – the Shura – who longs to get in contact with Man, in the form of an uncaring collection of peasants who keep their eyes fixed on the soil. Likewise, in “The Waste Land” there is the rehabilitating Christ figure (the “road to Emmaus” section, lines 359–365) in relation to the great world-focused majority. In that section of the poem, Christ is a shadowy figure who is “seen but not seen.”

We may assume that this thematic analogy occurred independently of Eliot. But it remains as an example of the international nature of semiotic structure in modernist poetry. Both poets held long-lasting religious convictions – Eliot in Anglo-Catholic Christianity and Miyazawa in Mâhâyana Buddhism – which strongly influenced the propositional content of their poems. “Haru to Shura” came out just two years after first publication of “The Waste Land” (in English), seeming to make any question of direct influence unlikely (Japanese translation by Ueda Tamotsu, 1938). Yet, in a broad thematic sense, Eliot’s poem could be an intertextual model of Miyazawa’s.

From such a standpoint, Miyazawa’s poem is a virtual miniature of “The Waste Land.” The countryside on which the Shura looks down is a wasteland of the spirit, being populated by earthy peasants with no interest in spiritual things. If the Shura’s action seems more positive than Christ’s in Eliot’s poem, we must remember that the shadowy figure encountered by the disciples on the road to Emmaus is after all the resurrected Christ, who has already willingly “self-destructed” by death on the Cross.

The essential structure of any intertext must serve as a model for the TMS of our text: Man (in general) refuses the message of the being who could save him, obstinately clinging to his own mindset – thus causing his would-be savior suffering. The poem’s propositional structure implies that, if only mankind would take the trouble to acknowledge the Shura’s existence, it would gain access to that higher world consistently symbolized in the text by “light” imagery (cf. my note on lines 35–38 in 3.4.2 above.) It’s as though we have a reminder that, although mankind may be oblivious of higher things, the natural environment is full of signals of their existence. Eliot does something quite similar from time to time in his poem, for example, the “inexplicable splendour” of “the walls of Magnus Martyr” (ll. 263–265).
That mankind is in need of being enlightened is abundantly clear from the text (cf. especially l. 4). It is perhaps not explicit in our text that the Shura desires man’s salvation, but he certainly is very concerned about man’s spiritual attitude.  

3.5 Interpretant and sociolectic context

3.5.1 The interpretant

In both Miyazawa’s and Eliot’s poems, rather than the compassion of the divine being, what counts is Man’s will to “hear”– to take seriously – the “True Word,” in the most generalized meaning of that term. It does not necessarily refer to any particular scripture, but in the background lie the Lotus Sutra of Buddhism and the Christian gospels. The interpretant, then, consists of (MP1), the difficulty that Man finds in recognizing the divine, and of (MP2), the sacrifice, because of this human blindness, of a being who exists beyond the human world. Let us note that the intermatricial relation (IMR) remains constant: the idea that the unreceptive attitude of Man provokes the sacrifice of the divine being.

3.5.2 Sociolectic context and change

To return to the title, in retrospect, this is an encapsulated version of the text’s matricial structure: the Shura is seen to represent something like a hope for human interest in higher things; this particular Haru is then the negative Spring of unheeding humanity – a complete reversal of the Japanese sociolect’s image of that season.  

The SC, on the other hand, is precisely the sociolectic reading of the title – taken out of the poem’s context – which unfortunately is what our student tended to do, abetted by not a few published commentaries. According to this reading, of course, Spring can only be good, and our Shura has the conventional negative meaning of ashura. It is important to note that, according to convention, “Spring” is read as a figure for the world of mankind (MPI), and the Shura as a figure for a higher form of existence: thus the SC retains its character as a kind of “hypogram” of the interpretant, containing lexically very similar expressions which are, however, related in a very different way. The conventional view of the components of the SC are that Spring/Man’s world is

7 In a previous treatment of Miyazawa’s poem – in French – I suggested an intertext from Mahayana Buddhism, with which our poet was deeply involved (Hopkins 1998). This illustrates how an intertext having the same essential structure may be found across various cultures and eras.

8 Cf. the depressing Spring of other poems in the series, e.g. the short poem Shunkô Juso/Spring Curse (lit. ‘Curse of the Spring Light’): “Spring is disgusted with its grasses and ears/Beauty disappears” (Miyazawa 1988: 23, ll. 6 and 7).
morally superior to an ashura-like existence; this is radically reversed by the matricial structure of the poem.

3.6 Note on the published commentaries

The various published commentaries on this text provide examples of the way in which literary critics react to a “difficult” poem by having recourse either to sociolectic commonplaces (e.g. the dictionary meaning of ashura) or to biographical information (the supposed identity of the Shura with Miyazawa himself).

The idea of the Shura’s defeat by mankind – the only notion strong enough to account for his disintegration at the poem’s end – is absent from any existing interpretation I have found. Throughout the text, it’s as though the Shura has by now just about given Mankind up for lost (cf. my comment on lines 27–28 in 3.4.2). The poem, in fact, might be subtitled The Shura’s Last Stand. When this attempt at contacting Mankind fails, there is no recourse but death – but because he is, with all his faults, a being who already inhabits a realm above Man’s in the spiritual order, his destruction has the effect of showering down on Man fragments of that light which he could not find on earth.

4 “Haru to Shura” and “The Waste Land”

4.1 The “mapping-on” of variant images, and the fabula approach

Our two poems are of course very different in length. Yet despite the quite extreme length of “The Waste Land” (433 lines), Eliot’s poem has even less of the aspect of fabula – or story set out in linear order – than Miyazawa’s, i.e., each episode generated by either matrix is “mapped onto” the matrix’s other variants, so that all variants are presented virtually simultaneously (see Section 3.3.1 above).

Eliot himself notes that “Just as […] the one-eyed merchant seller of currants melts into the Phoenician sailor, [and] the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples”; and regarding the feminine characters, “all the women are one woman” (Eliot’s note to l. 218). Thus, the mimetic identities of the Marie in Part I, “staying at the arch-duke’s” as a child, that of Tiresias in Part III, or Phlebas the Phoenician in Part IV are immaterial to the underlying signification of the text as a whole (cf. Hopkins 2016).

There is perhaps more linear progression in the images concerning the Shura in Miyazawa’s text. Or, could we view the Shura’s various features and faculties as parts of his nature from the outset? That is to say, do his tears somehow foreshadow his ultimate disintegration, so that the two images make up an integrated whole? But
there is also the appearance of the peasant in lines 37–41. So it seems possible to represent the poem as a *fabula* more readily than “The Waste Land.” That would arguably make “*Haru to Shura*” somewhat less modern.

In this analysis, I have chosen to let each image of either matrix be mapped onto the others, restricting any linear order theoretically to the syntagmatic relation between the text’s two matrices. Whether or not the text in either case may be represented as a fabula is perhaps best set aside as a separate exercise from viewing each text as based on matricial structure. Considering the length of “The Waste Land,” the latter approach – as underscored by Eliot himself – is definitely more striking.

**Appendix**

Original Japanese text of Miyazawa’s “*Haru to Shura*” (formatted horizontally)

春と修羅
(mental sketch modified)
心象のはいいろはがねから
あけびのつるはくもにからまり
のばらのやぶや腐植の湿地
いちめんのいちめんの讃曲模様
(正午の管楽よりもしげく
琥珀のかけらがそそぐとき)
いかりのにがさまた青き
四月の気層のひかりの底を
唾しはぎしりゆききする
おれはひとりの修羅なのだ
(風景はなみだにゆすれ)
砕ける雲の眼路をかぎり
れいろうの天の海には
聖玻璃の風が行き交ひ
*ZYPRESSEN* 春のいちれつ
くろぐろと光素を吸ひ
その暗い脚並からは
天山の雪の稜さへひかるのに
(かげらふの波と白い偏光)
まことのことばはうしなはれ
雲はちぎれてそらをとぶ
ああかがやきの四月の底を
はぎしり燃えてゆききする
おれはひとりの修羅なのだ
(玉髓の雲ながれて
どこで鳴くその春の鳥)
日輪青くかげろえば
修羅は樹林に交響し
降りくらむ天の檐から
黒い木の群落が延び
その枝はかなしくしげり
すべて二重の風景を
喪神の森の梢から
ひらめいてとびたつからす
(気層よいよみわたり
ひにもしんと天にたつころ)
草地の黄金をすぎてくるもの
ことなくひとのかたちのもの
けらをまとひおれを見るその農夫
ほんとうにおれが見えるのか
まばゆい気圏の海のそこに
(かなしみは青々ぶかく)
ZYPRESSEN しずかにゆすれ鳥はまた青ざらを截る
(まことのことばはここになく
修羅のなみだはつちにふる)

あたらしくそらに息つけば
ほの白く肺はちじまり
(このからだそらのみじんにちらばれ)
いてうのこずえまたひかり
ZYPRESSEN いよいよ黒く
雲の火ばなは降りそそぐ

References


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