論　文

Thoreau and Ryokan: The Harp with One String

Michiko Ono

When telegraph wires were laid all over Concord in 1851, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was delighted with the sound made by the wind when it blew over them, and called it “the telegraph harp” (Harding 296; III: 219). Taking into consideration that he made an aeolian harp by himself and enjoyed its music when the wind vibrated the strings, it is not surprising that he was fascinated by the electric wire when it “suddenly and unexpectedly” rose “into melody as if a god had touched it” (III: 247). In his words, it was “a harp with one string,—the first strain from the American lyre” (VI: 121). It is significant that he wrote in his *Journal* that he received messages from heaven through the telegraph harp (IV: 459; II: 496-97). Coincidentally, more than half a century earlier, Ryokan (1758-1831), a Japanese Buddhist monk, wrote several poems on a traditional Japanese string instrument called the *koto*, and in one of the poems, the *koto* has only one string. However, in contrast to Thoreau’s telegraph harp, Ryokan’s *koto* is an imaginative instrument, and its sound soars into the heavens instead of coming from above. My purpose in this study is to make a comparative study of Thoreau and Ryokan in terms of their “harp with one string,” and try to shed light on its significance.

I. The Telegraph Harp

Thoreau wrote about “the telegraph harp” in several journal entries from 1851 to 1854. The following is a passage quoted from his *Journal* for

September 12, 1851:

> At the entrance to the Deep Cut, I heard the telegraph-wire vibrating like an aeolian harp. It reminded me suddenly,—reservedly, with a beautiful paucity of communication, even silently, such was its effect on my thoughts,—it reminded me, I say, with a certain pathetic moderation, of what finer and deeper strings I was susceptible, which grandly set all argument and dispute aside, a triumphant though transient exhibition of the truth. It told me by the faintest imaginable strain, it told me by the finest strain that a human ear can hear, yet conclusively and past all refutation, that there were higher, infinitely higher, planes of life which it behooved me never to forget. As I was entering the Deep Cut, the wind, which was conveying a message to me from heaven, dropped it on the wire of the telegraph which vibrated as it passed. I instantly sat down on a stone at the foot of the telegraph-pole, and attended the communication. It merely said: "Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now travelling on. Know that the goal is distant, and is upward, and is worthy all your life's efforts to attain to." And then it ceased, and though I sat some minutes longer I heard nothing more. (II: 496-97)

The most notable phrases in the above excerpt are "a triumphant though transient exhibition of the truth" and "a message to me from heaven." The wind drops a message from heaven on the telegraph wire which vibrates like an aeolian harp and conveys it to the writer. If the Transcendentalists maintained that most of what is called "values" lie "outside the limits of reason and belong rather to the realm of instinct or intuition" (Fuller and Kinnick 565), this passage shows Thoreau's transcendental aspect.

Again, in his *Journal* for January 9, 1853 we find a similar account:

> The telegraph harp again. Always the same unrememberable

> revelation it is to me. . . . It stings my ear with everlasting truth. It allies Concord to Athens, and both to Elysium. It always intoxicates me, makes me sane, reverses my views of things. . . . When the zephyr, or west wind, sweeps this wire, I rise to the height of my being. A period — a semicolon, at least — is put to my previous and habitual ways of viewing things. This wire is my redeemer. It always brings a special and a general message to me from the Highest. . . . To-day I hear this immortal melody, while the west wind is blowing balmily on my cheek, and methinks a roseate sunset is preparing. (IV: 458-59)

Although this excerpt shows no specific message from heaven, the west wind vibrates the "telegraph harp" and brings "everlasting truth" to the writer. The message "from the Highest" alters the writer's "views of things" and raises him "to the height" of his being. Also, in his *Journal* for January 3, 1852 Thoreau expresses his thought about the telegraph harp: "Why was it made that man should be thrilled to his inmost being by the vibrating of a wire? Are not inspiration and ecstasy a more rapid vibration of the nerves swept by the inrushing excited spirit, whether zephyral or boreal in its character (III: 175).

Incidentally, the idea that the wind conveys a message is also found in Wordsworth's poem, where the poet addresses the breeze as "messenger," and describes it as "the sweet breath of heaven" (Wordsworth 211-12). Frederick Garber interprets Wordsworth's "breeze" as "an emissary, a messenger, a wind with a mission" (39). Even though Thoreau and Wordsworth share the idea that the wind is a divine messenger, there lies a crucial difference between them: whereas in Wordsworth's poem the wind itself is the message bearer, in Thoreau's case the divine message is received through a telegraph wire, a modern device which is a product of industry.

II. The Koto with One String

Now turning to Ryokan, he wrote numerous poems in his life. According to Toshiro Tanikawa (1929-2014), the number of Ryokan's poems amounts to

2,139 in total. Among them are 682 Chinese-style poems, or “long poems,” which are generally much longer than the other forms of poems,[1] and some have nearly fifty lines. The poems on the *koto* are written in this style, and they are seven in number. They all exhibit “sublime imagination” (Tanikawa 500). Junzo Karaki comments on those poems: “Ryokan’s poems on the *koto* have the style of something like a drama. His imagination soars high in the sky along with the tone of the *koto*. This kind of magnificence is rarely seen in his other poems. I do not know for sure why this happens, but I believe that there must be something significant in this” (195, my trans.).

Indeed, Ryokan’s poems on the *koto* depict spectacular scenery brought about by the notes of the *koto*, and one poem in particular produces a magnificent universe. In this poem, the *koto*, which is an imaginary instrument, has only one string but creates sublimely beautiful notes. To borrow Thoreau’s words, this too could be called “a harp with one string.” My translation of the poem follows:

> I have a *koto* with one string. It is not made of phoenix wood or paulownia wood./ On a quiet night, in the drawing room of a mansion,/ The red string of the *koto* stirred the wind at will that was blowing through the pine trees,/ At the dawn of a spring day when the air was soft,/ The notes reached the Lord of heaven’s[2] sensitive ears./ Greatly amazed and wondering,/ he wished to know where the notes came from./ The year was at the spring, February or March,/ And the weather was moderately warm./ The wind god swept up the roads,/ The rain god made the groves look solemn./ Taking the lunar halo, the Lord of heaven made it his umbrella,/ And holding the rainbow, he made it his bow./ With the cloud as the colors and the mist as the decorative lace,/ The carriage was ready and the coachman controlled the horses./ Crossing ten islands in an instant,/ The carriage disappeared into the air./ The nearer to the tone the carriage went, the farther away it was heard./ Once the tone came from the west; in a moment it was heard in the east./ His soul exhausted/ and his heart deeply distressed,/ Wavering, the Lord of heaven looked

> back and said,/ "Let's go back to the kingdom where I live." (Tanikawa 95-96, my trans.)

If the Cartesian universe is constituted geometrically and methodically, we could say that Ryokan's universe in the above poem is constituted "musically and rhythmically" (Karaki 196). Indeed, the Lord of heaven and his retainers are described in a rhythmical way. The rhythm of their actions reminds us of Thoreau's words about the motions of a sail: "I watch the play of its pulse as if it were my own blood beating there" (I: 155), about which Matthiessen comments: "[Thoreau's] pulse was beating in unison with the pulse of nature and that he could therefore reproduce it in words" (91-92).

Concerning the meaning of the above poem, Tanikawa elucidates from the point of view of Buddhism: "Introducing a *koto* that has a mysterious power, the poet conveys that the truth of Buddhism cannot be grasped even if pursued with authority. In this poem Ryokan produces a picture where the Lord of heaven, who is the symbol of authority, runs around the whole universe, taking along meteorological phenomena as his retainers" (500, my trans.).

After the Lord of the heavenly world is finally gone back to heaven, the world on earth is the same as before—with the murmuring stream, the refreshing rain and the rustling wind. This imagined landscape may reflect Ryokan's state of mind when he wrote the poem. His creative moment was when he was in the state of *vimukti* in Sanskrit, or true freedom.[3] This state of mind goes beyond reasoning, inference, demonstration, and a dualism between subjectivity and objectivity (Karaki 197).

III. The Koto Without a String

Among Ryokan's works is a poem on the *koto* without a string. It is an eight-line poem. My translation follows:

> On a quiet night, in my hermitage/ I play alone the *koto* without a string/ Its notes rise into the wind and clouds/ The tone dissolves into the deep

> stream,/ Fills the valley in abundance,/ And carries clearly across the grove that goes on endlessly./ If not a hearing-impaired person,/ Who could hear the rare, exquisite tone? (Tanikawa 287-88, my trans.)

The following is Tanikawa's interpretation of the poem: "As this delicate sound can be discerned only by hearing-impaired people, so Buddha's holy teachings can be understood only by those who are above desires" (288, my trans.). He also explains that a "*koto* without a string" allegorizes the teachings of Buddha, which are "Buddhist revelation" and "extralingual transmission of the Zen dharma" that cannot be taught by words or letters (288n.).

From a slightly different angle, Karaki furnishes the following explanation: "The '*koto* without a string' implies that the instrument is hidden in the player's heart and does not take a physical form to be seen from outside. . . . The last two lines in the poem, which make a rhetorical question, mean that hearing-impaired people alone can hear the rare, exquisite tone in nature. Ryokan himself, of course, is included among them, for his ears are deaf to the hubbub of this earthly world, or noise or noisy dispute upon advantages and disadvantages" (192). We may say that the same is true of Thoreau. His ability to discern minute sounds in nature was conspicuous, and probably it was not merely because of his sensitivity to sound. Karaki continues: "It is, as it were, a universe of ensemble created by the *koto* in the poet's heart and the sound in nature. The poet and nature respond to each other in the serene world of the truth" (192).

Further, pointing out that Ryokan's works show more auditory spheres and fewer visual or spatial spheres, the critic concludes that Ryokan is not an eye person but an ear person (193). This seems to be an insightful and convincing observation, despite the fact that Ryokan affectionately describes not only plants and animals but also natural objects in his poems.[4] The same could be true of Thoreau. His detailed descriptions of flora and fauna as well as various natural phenomena may indicate that he is an eye person; nevertheless, Ethel Seybold asserts that Thoreau's sensitivity to music was “the strongest of his sense perceptions” (71). Seybold further observes that “if he failed to hear the sphere music, he heard and delighted in something which was an audible approximation of it—the sound of the wind in the telegraph wires, the music of the telegraph harp” (71). Indeed, with his strong auditory sense perception, Thoreau perceived divine messages in the music of the one-string telegraph harp. Perhaps we may deduce that both Ryokan and Thoreau were “ear” persons.

IV. The Telegraph Harp with No Sound

By a remarkable coincidence, Thoreau writes about the tone of a telegraph harp that makes no sound. Referring to the fact that the telegraph posts come from the forest, he enters in his *Journal* on September 22, 1851 as follows:

> I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music, labored with the strain, — as if every fibre was affected and being seasoned or timed, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law. Every swell and change or inflection of tone pervaded and seemed to proceed from the wood, the divine tree or wood, as if its very substance was transmuted. What a recipe for preserving wood, perchance, — to keep it from rotting, — to fill its pores with music! . . . When no music proceeds from the wire, on applying my ear I hear the hum within the entrails of the wood . . . .
>
> The resounding wood! . . . To have a harp on so great a scale, girdling the very earth, and played on by the winds of every latitude and longitude, and that harp were, as it were, the manifest blessing of heaven on a work of man’s! . . . (III: 11-12)

The telephone pole, which is made of wood from the forest, plays a vital role in this passage. When no music is heard from the telegraph wire, the writer puts his ear to one of the posts and hears “the hum within the entrails of the wood” (III: 11).

The scene described in this passage brings to mind that in Ryokan's poem on the *koto* without a string. Parenthetically, the body of a *koto* is also made of wood. In Ryokan's poem the tones that rise into the wind and clouds travel throughout the deep valley and the grove stretching endlessly, in a similar way as the "harp" in Thoreau's passage girdles "the very earth," and is "played on by the winds of every latitude and longitude." Both tones create a spectacular vision with inaudible sound and imaginary scenery.

V. Music Without Audible Sound

Thoreau and Ryokan's ways of expressing their views, opinions or feelings on various topics may be quite different. Thoreau expressed them sometimes in satirical, critical or outspoken ways, mainly in prose; Ryokan expressed them clearly in poems, though in human society his deep inner feelings were sometimes conveyed without words—for example, just a few teardrops from his eyes made a person turn over a new leaf. Yet they both loved music. While Thoreau played the flute, it is not known if Ryokan actually played any instrument. Nevertheless, they both had an inner ear to appreciate music even when there was no audible sound, and their world of imagination created by music is spectacular. Thoreau even regarded silence as music, as the following excerpt shows: "I hark the goddess Diana. The silence rings; it is musical and thrills me. A night in which the silence was audible. I hear the unspeakable" (IV: 472). Ryokan, on the other hand, wrote a poem on a *koto* without a string that exists only in his mind.

VI. Conclusion

To summarize, Thoreau enjoyed the sound made by "the telegraph harp," or "a harp with one string," and entered in his *Journal* how he received messages from heaven through it. The wind vibrated the telegraph wire and sent him divine messages. Coincidently, Ryokan wrote a poem on the *koto* with one string, which could also be called "a harp with one string," and depicted a grand universe in a dynamic way. In his case, contrariwise, it was the string of the *koto* that stirred the wind blowing through the pine trees to make the notes. Tanikawa's interpretation of the poem is that the Lord of the heavenly world with authority seeks the truth of Buddhism with his power but fails to grasp the essence of it and that the truth of Buddhism cannot be grasped by power but by a pure heart (97). Significantly, in a similar fashion, Thoreau expresses the message from heaven as "everlasting truth" or "a triumphant though transient exhibition of the truth" in the two journal entries cited earlier.

Concerning "truth," while Kant defines it in varied, logical ways in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (197-98, 216-18, 267, 276, 280, 384, 684-90), Thoreau writes in the second chapter of *Walden* as follows: "Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here (96-97). This excerpt is crucial in understanding Thoreau's idea of "truth." Thoreau also remarks in the same chapter of *Walden*: "In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident" (99). From these quotations we may infer that in Thoreau's view "truth" is something deeply connected with "eternity" and "immortality" as well as "now and here," and he sensed it in the music of the telegraph harp. In passing, Ryokan, who practiced Zen meditation often within a day, gained "enlightenment" while he was an ascetic. Similarly, Robert Epstein and Sherry Phillips refer to Thoreau's "enlightenment experience" in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*, where he sat in his "sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in reverie" (111), and they claim: "It is evident . . . that Thoreau practiced meditation, though in what form and with what regularity, no mention is made in *Walden* (Epstein and Phillips xiii-xiv).

Lastly, Thoreau entered in his *Journal* for May 30, 1853 as follows: "The morning wind forever blows; the poem of the world is uninterrupted, but few are the ears that hear it. Forever that strain of the harp which soothed the Cerberus and called me back to life is sounding. Olympus is outside of the earth everywhere"[5] (V: 200). He valued the truth more than anything, as we see in his words *in Walden*: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (330). For Thoreau the tone of the telegraph harp was the medium for receiving the truth from heaven intuitively, and for Ryokan that of the one-string *koto* was his way of expressing the truth of Buddhism. We may conclude that the common thread that links the telegraph harp and the *koto* with one string is "truth," and that Thoreau and Ryokan were both seekers after truth.

Notes

1 Ryokan wrote 107 haiku and 1,350 *tanka*.

2 The "Lord of heaven" should be distinguished from "God Almighty" in Christianity.

3 Tanikawa elucidates "*vimukti*," or "true freedom," as follows: "to attain a state of enlightenment by getting rid of all the desires concerning the body and the mind" (320n. my trans.)

4 The following poem is one example of Ryokan's description of nature: "Flowers ingenuously invite butterflies/ Butterflies ingenuously visit flowers/ When flowers open, butterflies come/ When butterflies come, flowers open/ I do not know others' feelings/ Others do not know my feelings/ Without knowing, we follow the laws of nature" (Tanikawa 426, my trans.).

5 We find quite a similar statement in *Walden* (85), where no mention of "the harp" is found. Actually, there are no references to the telegraph harp in *Walden*.

Works Cited

Epstein, Robert, and Sherry Phillips, compilers. *The Natural Man: Henry David Thoreau*. The Theosophical Publishing House, 1996.

Fuller, Edmund, and B. Jo Kinnick, editors. *Adventures in American Literature*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.

Garber, Frederick. "Thoreau and Anglo-European Romanticism."

Approaches to Teaching Thoreau's Walden *and Other Works*. Edited by Richard J. Schneider, The Modern Language Association of America, 1996, pp. 39-47.

Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography.* Dover Publications, 1962.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason.* Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge UP, 1998.

Karaki, Junzo. *Ryokan*. Chikuma-Shobo, 1975.

Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford UP, 1941.

Seybold, Ethel. *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics*. Yale UP, 1951.

Tanikawa, Toshiro, compiler. *Ryokan Zenshishu* [*Complete Poems of Ryokan*]. Shunjusha, 2014.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau: In Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two, Vols. I-VII.* Edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Dover Publications, 1962.

---. *Walden*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley, Princeton UP, 1971.

Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*. Edited by Nicholas Roe, The Folio Society, 2002.