



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
Research Online

---

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

---

2006

# The Art of Emptiness: Buddhist Nature in picture books of Miyazawa Kenji's *Donguri* to *Yamaneko* (Wildcat and the Acorns)

Helen Kilpatrick

*University of Wollongong*, [helenk@uow.edu.au](mailto:helenk@uow.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

Kilpatrick, H, The Art of Emptiness: Buddhist Nature in picture books of Miyazawa Kenji's *Donguri* to *Yamaneko* (Wildcat and the Acorns), *The Looking Glass: new perspectives in children's literature*, 10(2), 2006, p 1-17.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

## The Looking Glass : New Perspectives on Children's Literature, Vol 10, No 2 (2006)

[HOME](#)   [ABOUT](#)   [LOG](#)

[IN](#)   [REGISTER](#)   [SEARCH](#)   [CURRENT](#)   [ARCHIVES](#)   [ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)

---

[Home](#) > [Vol 10, No 2 \(2006\)](#) > [Kilpatrick](#)

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

# Alice's Academy

---

## "The Art of Emptiness"<sup>[1]</sup>: Buddhist Nature in Picture Books of Miyazawa Kenji's Donguri to Yamaneko (Wildcat and the Acorns)<sup>[2]</sup>

Helen Kilpatrick

---

*Helen Kilpatrick is a lecturer in the School of English Literatures, Philosophy and Languages at the University of Wollongong, Australia, where she teaches a number of courses in Japanese language, literature and civilisation. She also teaches at the English Department of Macquarie University in Sydney, at times lecturing in the picture book subject in the Master of Arts in Children's Literature and/or tutoring in the undergraduate children's literature subject.*

---

*Helen Kilpatrick's article introduces readers to one of the most well-known twentieth-century Japanese children's authors and stories. Her article also provides a seamless, detailed analysis of two sets of illustrations for this story. Picture book lovers as well as those interested in Japanese children's literature will enjoy Kilpatrick's discussion.*  
*(Elizabeth Pandolfo Briggs, editor, Alice's Academy)*

Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), the author of Donguri to Yamaneko <sup>[3]</sup>, is recognised as one of "the most imaginative spinner[s] of children's stories, of twentieth-century Japan" (Satō xvii). Moreover, Kenji, as he is commonly known, is probably Japan's most renowned Buddhist writer and his work is now taught in schools and universities. <sup>[4]</sup>He was writing at a time when Japan was undergoing rapid modernisation and much of his work, including Donguri, was created as a protest against the spiritual desolation associated with rampant industrialisation, commodification and consumerism. Donguri should be considered in this context as the story ultimately foregrounds a communion with Nature, although his tales can also be considered as pleas for ecological balance. <sup>[5]</sup> Despite the fact that he was writing in the 1920s, Kenji's work has found increasing receptivity across the world in recent years and he has become one of the most prolifically illustrated literary figures in Japan, particularly in picture book form.

Because Donguri is one of Kenji's most often re-presented works in picture book form, it provides a taste of the kind of signification that is being held up as important for children in (post-)modern Japan. Contrary to most picture book re-versions of classical tales, Kenji's original texts are held sacrosanct and are never modified in any publications. <sup>[6]</sup> It is precisely because his words remain unaltered, however, that these picture books offer an exceptional chance to explore the different meanings that images produce in response to a fixed source text; that is, how illustrations can shape story. Moreover, the two modes of narrative discourse (pictorial and verbal) offer a more powerful acculturating influence than do words alone, so the combination of word and image provides an opportunity to analyse how a Japanese audience is influenced to take certain viewpoints when reading such a text.

This article will contrast two contemporary illustrated versions of *Donguri*, by Satō Kunio and Lee Ufan, in the context of Kenji's Buddhist ideals. [7] It will demonstrate how the artists achieve the story's Buddhist views about the futility of human attachment to ego. Inherent in this significance is Kenji's ideal of the other world (ano yo 「あの世」): an 'empty' interdependent (non-dualistic) cosmos, a Utopia in which there are "no complications or rivalries, a world where the souls of people and all living creatures can fraternise freely" (Okada 32). The story satirises competition, pride and superiority by telling how a young boy, Ichirō, helps a Wildcat 'magistrate' settle a dispute among some acorns who are arguing senselessly about which of them is superior. The argument is settled at a 'trial' where Ichirō helps demonstrate, through recalling a Buddhist sermon, the futility of all attachment to human ego. The climactic realisation of this point thus signifies the transcendence of a rational, dualistic view of the ego or individual in this world (kono yo この世) to a Buddhist ideal of a non-essential self.

In Buddhism, all subject/object discrimination, all sense of everyday reality, is just an illusion and as Peter Harvey points out: "the commonsense world of self, people and things, and 'objects' of thought ... [are] all wrongly seen as having real permanent essences..." (110). In other words, all conventional, everyday phenomena are only what they are because of their relationships to everything else. This means that all forms of essentialism and substantialism, including self, lack any independent identity they appear to have. Such 'emptiness', however, involves an interdependence in which there is both fullness and emptiness, involving everything and nothing, with the self (and everything else) as a transient being subject to constant change (Solomon and Higgins 21, 61). The external is neither real, nor important, so true 'being' is about non-attachment to such illusions. All dualities, separation, division and individuation, therefore, are about false attachment to 'being' or ego in this (illusory) world. By invoking the idea of an 'empty' being, a sense of the nothingness of the 'self', all such dualisms can be transcended to achieve a fusion with Nature. The false or 'empty' ego as signified in *Donguri*'s sermon thus expresses the possibility of unity amongst all sentient beings, the Buddho-animist ideal that extends beyond the anthropocentric views of the individual against which Kenji was protesting in the rapidly modernising Japan of his day.

The story of *Donguri* satirises such egoism by juxtaposing the self-centred whims of the main protagonists at the trial against the sense of contentment of the organic beings whom Ichirō meets in the mountains on his way to Wildcat's 'court'. This contrast between locations establishes a distinction between Nature and Culture, where only young children such as Ichirō can access the 'truer' (egoless) vitality of Nature, and where competition and ego are linked with the less natural 'superficiality' of materialistic cultivations (Culture). Ichirō's 'truer' sense of being comes with his integration into Nature during this journey, and this is contrasted against the 'civilisation' or Culture with which he comes into contact at the symbolically barren clearing where the trial is held. At this hearing, the Wildcat, his coachman and the acorns all exhibit the 'false' traits of pride, superiority and competitiveness. In other words, it is human desire and pride that lead to superficial competition and rivalry, as revealed by the acorns and Wildcat, and such characteristics are specifically cultural morés. These traits are contrasted with Ichirō's communion with Nature and thus satirised in the starkness of the clearing to signify Kenji's ideal—an acceptance of an 'empty' self which ultimately opens up an ability to interconnect harmoniously with the wider cosmos.

The two discrete pictorial representations to be examined here focus on transcending the material attachment to ego through unification with Nature. While the two artists both exploit the Nature/Culture contrast, they do so in extremely distinct ways, creating different spaces from which to explore a Buddho-animistic sense of self and subjectivity. The following section will focus on how the artists encourage such exploration in the context of the themes of competition, conceit and ego. Whereas Satō's artwork reproduces the anthropomorphism in Kenji's story to underline the divisions between humanity and Nature, Lee's work completely rejects any such replicatory (or dualistic) representation of story or characters; his, instead, offers a dialogical response to the story's moral about interpenetrative 'being'. An analysis of how Satō satirises the materialism of Culture by accentuating Wildcat's pretensions will provide the context for the later contrast with how Lee's abstract art acts more dialogically to signify the 'empty', yet unifying sense of connection with the natural cosmos.

**Satō** [8]

Satō frames sections of the story to highlight the dichotomies between Ichirō's dialogue with the natural beings he encounters in the mountains and the human foibles of the 'cultured' Wildcat, thus emphasising the superficiality of human desire and pride. He also highlights Wildcat's anthropocentric narcissism and pomposity in an exaggerated and humorous manner through an extra-textual focus on his excesses of food and wine in a high-class French restaurant. By doing so, Satō offers a much more rationalistic critique of self and identity than Lee. However, Satō draws attention to his organic medium (wood-block prints) to strongly signify Nature and establish the basis for consideration of Culture/Nature dichotomies. His spontaneous manipulation of the texture of the wood foregrounds the simplicity of the more organic material. The prominence of the natural grain and subtle washes of colour show through large expanses of black, breathing life into the 'infinite' space throughout many of his tableaux. These bold energetic woodcuts also evoke the spontaneity of the distinctly Japanese folk art (*mingei*) style of Munakata Shikō, usually associated more with the sense of process rather than product. [9] Satō's forceful sharpness and strength of line therefore connotes the kind of psychological or spiritual communion from which Munakata's art evolves: the loss of self that is inspired by his Buddhist belief that spiritual energy proceeds from the subconscious (Newland and Uhlenbeck 208; and Addiss 112-115). Satō's impulsiveness of style also suggests fleeting temporality as signified in the breezes that usher the characters in and out of the story. His technique harks back to a simpler Japan, one that could be seen as less complicated and closer to Nature, and therefore closer to the ideal of a non-impeded Oneness. Together with such impulses evoked through this style, Ichirō's traditional Japanese attire is foregrounded throughout to represent the nostalgic ideal of a less cultivated era: his thonged geta clogs, and his summer yukata kimono which is reminiscent of organic indigo dye and print techniques. Such allusions to simpler traditions suggest a closer alignment with the concept of a non-essential self that can commune with the natural world. These urges contrast markedly with the confusion that reigns at the trial (and with the superiority associated with Wildcat's feudalistic regalia). Along with his organic medium, Satō establishes a context which shows Wildcat and the acorns as alienated from Nature. Here the artist's barer planes connote emotional barrenness.

Satō initially highlights humanity's alienation from nature in 'this world' of here-and-now (*kono yo*) by clearly distinguishing between Ichirō's reality (at home) and his dream (in Nature). This distinction begins on the cover, which depicts Ichirō reading Wildcat's postcard within a huge acorn (Plate 1), and situates the reader as an observer of Ichirō's vision. This *mise-en-abyme* draws attention to the narrative as a staged framework, thus distancing the viewer from the story and allowing objective perception of the dream/reality dichotomy. Such framing continues in another *mise-en-abyme* in the first opening, which again juxtaposes the real with the imaginary (Plate 2). Ichirō appears twice in this double spread, once realistically, reading the postcard in his 'real' house, and again, in magnified replication, more salient within a huge acorn 'balloon' which protrudes from the foregrounded branch of the oak tree. Another smaller acorn-balloon portrays the contents of the 'real' Ichirō's imagination where he visualises Wildcat at court, majestically attired in traditional regalia, arms folded. The sequencing of these acorn thought-balloons moves the eye from left to right, against the reading direction (right to left), disrupting the sense of the here-and-now of Ichirō's reality and emphasising the dichotomy between thought and dream. These opening pictures therefore enhance reader awareness of Ichirō's transition as he enters the mountains and goes in search of Wildcat, into another world (*ano yo*): the idealistic transcendental, ethereal sphere represented by Nature.



Plate 1



Plate 2

Satō contrasts the two sections of the story by juxtaposing the use of organic framing devices for the scenes of Ichirō's journey with a later lack of framing and less animation of plane. Such framing techniques foreground the distinctions between reality and dream, Culture and Nature, material and immaterial, and discontent and contentment. He continues to frame all the dream tableaux of Ichirō's initial journey within natural flora. For example, when Ichirō first asks the chestnut trees about Wildcat's whereabouts, the text and landscape are all enclosed within a huge tree-trunk to stress the harmonious, idyllic nature of Ichirō's dialogue with the organic beings (Plate 3). Although Satō anthropomorphises the characters along Ichirō's journey, his organic framing devices, along with the manipulation of the natural wood-grain which enlivens the black expanses, continue to emphasise Ichirō's journey as a disruption of the substantialist actuality of here-and-now (*kono yo*).



Plate 3

All such organic framing devices disappear with the scenes at the clearing, beginning with an enlarged replication of the Wildcat of Ichirō's dream to suggest the more material desolation of the restless characters in the trial scenes. Wildcat is represented here in his ceremonial regalia, puffing ostentatiously on a cigar (an extra-textual embellishment of "tobacco") to highlight his egoistic 'cultivations' (Plate 4). Satō also depicts the textual reference to Wildcat's jimbaori (陣羽織), a feudal military garment. This, with the transition in framing, exaggerates his superior status, foregrounding issues of class and elitism and the concomitant Buddhist precept about the falsity of pride. Wildcat is explicitly excluded from any framing flora to set him even further apart from Nature. In fact, his upper head and ears break through the more rigid (therefore 'unnatural') framing line which encloses the upper two-thirds of this double opening, as does the cloud of smoke from his cigar, the 'puff' of which forms the more overtly artificial (cultural) frame for the written text. This stagnant cloud of smoke also contrasts dramatically with the more natural breeze in the text. Such juxtapositioning of stasis and motion emphasises Wildcat's superficiality while also suggesting the instability of such false egoism.



Plate 4

Further, with Ichirō absent from the pictures for the first time here, the viewer is suddenly shifted into a first person pictorial point of view as Wildcat offers Ichirō (and the viewer) his cigar box (another extra-textual pictorial addition). This shift in viewpoint not only invites the reader's disapproval of Wildcat's affectations, but also aligns the viewer more with the coachman's feelings of misery as Wildcat ignores his tears of desire for the tobacco, and blows his cigar smoke towards him. The lines of Wildcat's cigar and whiskers extend (in the direction of reading) along the side of the smaller cloud, down his arm along the bottom of the large cloud to create a vector towards the pathetic coachman. Whereas in the text he waits patiently, here the coachman 'demands' the viewer's empathy through his teary, one-eyed gaze. [10] (The smoke-framing appears again later when it emanates from the coachman's cigar as Wildcat offers Ichirō his choice of reward after the trial has been settled. Besides bringing to mind Wildcat's insensitivity, it serves there as another reminder of the material nature of his covetous concerns.) Wildcat's salience in Satō's pictorial introduction (through the change in framing, point of view and character size and traits) focuses attention on Wildcat's insensitivity, the obduracy of his affected superiority (which relegates others to positions of inferiority and inequality) and the superficiality of his egoistic mannerisms, all of which dramatically confront Ichirō (and the viewer).

In another pictorial disruption of point of view, Satô emphatically punctuates the moment when Wildcat opens the hearing. With the introduction of the acorns "at Ichirô's feet" there is a significant flattening of the picture plane (Plate 5). Such a lack of referential background contours helps draw the viewer into the scene to emphasise the acorns' sense of confusion. The rather abstruse vertical axis appears suddenly lower here to align the viewer more with the acorns' line of sight towards the (cut-off) lower legs and feet of Wildcat, Ichirô and the coachman. Together with the acorns, the viewer encloses, yet is simultaneously enclosed within, a kind of semi-circle of elevated human culture, the (cut-off) clothed legs and feet at the top of the page. While the audience seems to look up with the acorns from behind, the acorns are also seen from above, so this viewpoint is suddenly much less fixed than in previous pictures and such multi-focal dissonance accords with, and thus emphasises, the reader's experience of the acorns' misunderstanding about their own sense of 'being'. While aligning with the confusion of the acorns, this picture, rather than inspiring any sense of awe for Wildcat for instance, also gently pokes fun at the pomposity of the figures of Culture from below. Significantly, this is the symbolic point in the text just before Wildcat, in another show of majesty (and ecological insensitivity), is about to toss aside his tobacco and give orders to the coachman "to ring the bell" and "cut the grass". Satô's flatter, barer plane here also underscores the point about the barrenness of his more substantialist cultivations. Furthermore, the anthropomorphised 'unnaturalness' of the acorns in their confused state contrasts with their later return to a natural, un-anthropomorphic, therefore 'truer' form, further emphasising the contrast between how 'to be' and how 'not to be'. (See, for example, the contrast between the acorns here in Plate 5 and those in Plate 8).



Plate 5

Satô elaborates this contrast further by augmenting the textual moment where, after the judgement at the trial, Wildcat asks Ichirô to choose between the salmon or golden acorns as his reward (Plate 6). In comparison with the acorns' (textual) epiphanistic realisation of the moral, this picture heightens Wildcat's lack of understanding of his own (or Ichirô's) judgement at the trial by portraying Wildcat as an insensitive, urbane character who is completely out of tune with Nature. Wildcat, on the one hand, is imagining himself at a refined French restaurant ordering the salted salmon heads in a Western dinner-suit (the French language in the thought balloon underscoring his narcissistic affectations) [11] which contrasts with his traditional Japanese attire. Ichirô, on the other, (as identified in the text of Ichirô's thought-balloon) is imagining using his gift of more ordinary-looking acorns as spinning tops (which, significantly, have now returned to their natural, un-anthropomorphised state). This dramatic extra-textual allusion juxtaposes the sophisticated, exotic desires of Wildcat against the simpler dreams of Ichirô. Such embellishment of the text at this crucial moment categorically indicts Wildcat's materialistic traits against a backdrop of simpler contentment associated with 'natural' objects and past-times.



Plate 6

After this explication of Wildcat's ostentation, Satō returns to a semblance of natural framing in the penultimate scene, where Ichirō is returning home in the coach (Plate 7). The softer curved lines of the mushroom-shaped coach and reassertion of the prominence of natural wood-grain here once again animate the natural landscape background to blend Culture and Nature and herald a calmer, more spontaneously immersive state.



Plate 7

In his closure in the following opening, Satō moves to another interestingly interactive and immersive first person perspective that works to push the significance beyond all such pretensions towards the moral about communion with the natural world (Plate 8). This evening scene (evident through the stars, for instance) contrasts markedly with Satō's introductory mise-en-abyme that distances the reader, as this scene now aligns the viewer with the sense of nostalgia indicated in Ichirō's final thoughts:

*Perhaps he ought to have let Wildcat write 'your presence is formally requested,' after all? [12]*

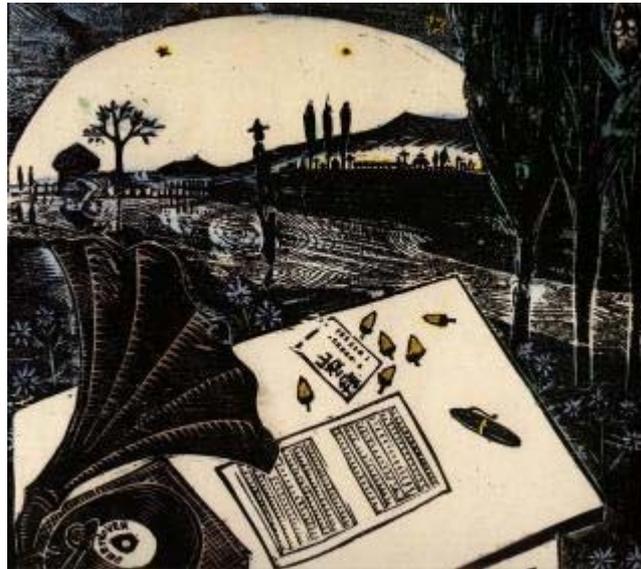


Plate 8

With Ichirō's absence, the viewer is looking out over a desk, which is unenclosed by walls and open to the elements, to wistfully anticipate the future postcard (with Ichirō). The corner of the desk protrudes into the black infinite, its colourless top counterbalancing the negative space, the upper edge of which shapes an arched window/moon across the top of the scene. Perspective is distorted through the flattened picture plane which also provides the illusion of a merging between all the represented phenomena; for example, the arch of the huge moon which rises over the landscape is simultaneously suggestive of the frame of a window within the house or a more distant bridge which leads forward towards the nature depicted in the distance. The vector of the right edge of the desk in the foreground advances the eye — toward the left with the direction of reading — into the natural world and the future. Yet the nostalgic objects on the desk are large and salient, taking up a major part of the foreground to simultaneously suggest a retreat into the past — to the right — back into the civilised world, to signify the vicissitudes of time and experience brought by Wildcat's postcard (which is lying on the desk, surrounded by the ordinary acorns as another reminder of the past experience). Satō's closure thus balances the possibilities of a merger between all time and space against Ichirō's nostalgia to provide a more open-ended, less determinate viewpoint. Further, such pensiveness provokes consideration of the egoism inherent in Ichirō's yearning for an opportunity to attend another trial.

This last scene also retreats further into the past by making a metafictional and intertextual reference to an adult perspective through the nostalgic objects on the desk — the fountain pen, postcard and old-fashioned gramophone with a record of Kenji's favourite Beethoven — all items which enabled Kenji himself to access his utopian 'other world'. This picture may therefore represent the author's own yearnings for the *ano yo* achieved in the story or, indeed, the adult Ichirō recalling his childhood experience or dream of long ago. [13] Such intertextuality helps to make the reader an even more active participant in reflecting upon the significances inherent in the story. On the one hand, the items on the desk (pen, postcard etc.) evoke the author's (and perhaps, the artist's) sense of nostalgia and a longing for a simpler past, favouring 'tradition' over modernity. On the other hand, the omnipresence of Nature at dusk, together with suggestive mergers of 'reality' with 'shadows' focussed through mandala-like circular knots of wood-grain, also signify Kenji's ideal of a more intertwined Nature or *ano yo* (other world). [14] Moreover, the reflections in the 'stream' that runs diagonally through the middle of the picture suggest a more immersive intersubjectivity which allows a blending of 'this world' with the 'other world'. Whereas this final picture determinedly merges home and landscape and creates an ambiguity among past, present and future to merge all temporality and spatiality and suggest hope for such a communion, the barrier of the (more 'cultural') desk, however, also reiterates the moral that 'civilised' egoistic influences must be conquered in order to find and accept the naturally 'true' self.

Lee Ufan [15]

While Satō's satirical playfulness with Kenji's textual signification highlights humanity's attachment to ego, Lee's abstract artwork, in contrast, creates a dialogue which captures the essence of the inter-connectivity between the human and the organic world inherent in the tale of Donguri. This particular representation of Donguri is part of a series of abstract picture books of Kenji's tales commissioned by the late Tanigawa Gan. [16] It should not be assumed, however, that such images are completely arbitrary or merely function as a decorative accompaniment to Kenji's verbal texts. Rather, it is precisely because they accompany these texts and were specifically inspired by each of the stories that they openly encourage an integrated reading of tale and image. Like all the other artistic representations of Kenji's tales in this series, Lee refuses to fix determinate meanings to Donguri's verbal text, so the viewer of his calligraphic brushwork is drawn into an intensely dialogic reading position. Because there is no immediately obvious connection to the narrative or participants in the tale, the reader has to work hard to make associations between word and image. Neither are there any Chinese characters, so the brushwork forces the reader to contemplate their possible meaning and to search for connections, thus opening the story up to more abstract psychological processes than that offered by Satō's overtly satirical representation of Wildcat. Lee's cover, for instance, with seemingly random, short brown brushstrokes set against the open space of the stark white background, bears no resemblance to either the subjects mentioned in the title, Wildcat or the acorns, or to place. [17] The open, centrifugal nature of the initial brush strokes here (and in the frontispiece) challenges the viewer to actively contemplate the psychological or emotional connection with the 'loss of self' necessary to achieve Kenji's ideal of communion with all life in a rather explosive manner.

The strokes that accompany Donguri appear as a set of arbitrary, yet deliberate and considered daubs spread over each blank white page in horizontal, circular or vertical directions, their interrelationships evoking the tension between voids and correspondences, dissimilarities and semblances, rivalry and cooperation. As Okada Kiyoshi points out, the life of each brushstroke, the dynamic interrelationships of rivalry and co-operation that are perceived through mental vision, are more important than the images or ideas, or the materialistic phenomena such as the canvas or paint, colour or shape (84). Yet Lee's pigment and canvas simultaneously penetrate and repel each other to produce such inter-related fissures: the frictions between the fixed sense of the individual ego, and a more organic, intricately intertwined universality. When considered in light of the tale, such tensions in turn evoke the contrasts between the notions of pride and humility, contentment and discontent explored in the story.

The centrifugal swirls on the cover and frontispiece, for example, connote the unseen torrents and unheard sounds of the wind, rain, sun and light: the natural chaos that is as anti-materialistic as the Buddhist precepts about attachment to this world and its desires exemplified in the satirical pomposity of Wildcat and the ludicrous pride of the acorns. The rhythm of Lee's brush and colour, broken lines and brushwork 'points' animate the blank white picture plane and induce what Minemura Toshiaki calls the ethereal 'cosmic chaos' of more basic Oriental traditions (12). [18] This involves a universalistic strength, a rhythmical 'accordance' or 'correspondence' (chōwa 調和) — of those phenomena which we can neither see nor hear — that accords with the spiritual profundity of Nature's life forces (Minemura 12-13). Such a sense of chaos mirrors the wind that blows throughout Donguri, encouraging an open, spontaneous 'accordance' with the natural world. The wind, as an element of Nature, connotes a 'truer' connection with the natural world which only comes through rejection of ego or suspension of all individualistic subjectivity.

Somewhat like Satō's impulsive woodcuts, the spontaneity of the physical connection of brush to the blank white surface creates an open dialogue which "intimates the infinite" with "minimum contact and maximum resonance" (Tani 10). This physical contact thus connects both the concrete and transcendental. Like each touch of the brush, all creation arises from a point, which then "extends into a line" (Saitama Museum of Modern Art 2), and each point and line hints at birth and death, or presence and absence, to evoke a strong sense of existence in space which "dynamically takes in its surrounding spaces as well as its viewers". [19] This is similar to what Hagiwara Masayoshi, for instance, interprets as Kenji's 'galactical consciousness', the infinitely small space that simultaneously moulds an infinite space: "If the origin of life becomes death in a second, and if we take it that the point of return to death revives life, life and death become the one continuous 'life'" (95). While the connection of paint to page represents, for instance, material attachment such as that of Wildcat or the acorns, the

points and lines of creation against the blank page open up the notion of infinity to represent the possibilities for spiritual suspension of such superficiality.

Lee's attention to process promotes an intuitive interconnectivity with the universe that is similar to the child Ichirō's natural instinct in the mountains. His impulsive 'splashed-ink' style breathes life into each brushstroke and connotes the suspension of all subject/object or mind/body distinctions. [20] The life-force of the brush and the fleetingness of brush to picture plane encourage a sense of spiritual oneness (Bryson 101). Such absorption through the brushwork suggests a sense of simply 'being in the moment' that is similar to that loss of consciousness suggested in the *mingei* (Buddhist folk-art) philosophy of Yanagi Sōetsu or the aforementioned Munakata Shikō and, of course, to Ichirō's communion with Nature before he reaches the clearing. The linear trail of broad black strokes or 'points' on the front and back end-pages, for instance, contrast with the looser strokes and spaces on the internal pages to suggest Ichirō's dream-like journey and, indeed all life, as the speed of an intuitive flash of imagination (Plate 9). The repetition of this same trail on the back end-page further indicates the cyclical flow of time that suggests what Inui Yoshiaki, in relation to other works by Lee, refers to as a "continual-recurrence pattern of life, death and rebirth of the points (or lines), ... in ... a non-continuously continuous tension" (1). The white of the background seeps through the essential black 'line-points' to further suggest the ephemeral and mercurial vitality in the ideal of communion signified in the tale. The repetition of colours from black to orange to brown to blue to black recurs twice to also signal this more intuitive, 'non-continuously continuous tension' in the cyclical temporality and spatiality of all life.

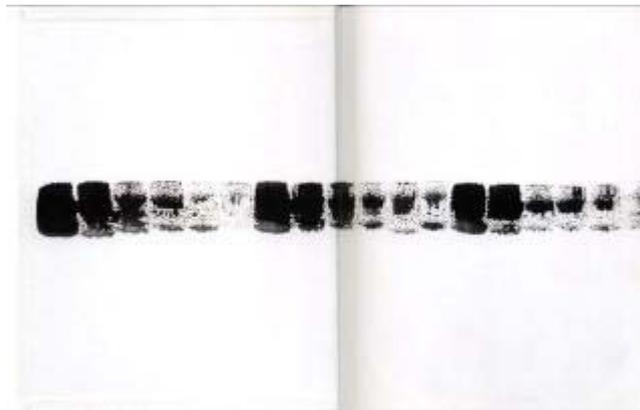


Plate 9

Further, Lee's brushstrokes — their colours, style, shape, the sweep or thrust of brush to page, the clustering and sequencing of strokes — all differ on each page to signal the common relationship between all disparate things. While the uniformity of the groupings of chosen colours within each discrete spread suggests the similarities between things such as the acorns, for example, the considered differences between each separate brushstroke and their groupings simultaneously accept the uniqueness of each individual being. Different brushstrokes also signal the temporal and spatial tensions and emotional variations between the notions of rivalry and cooperation, contentment and discontent, equality and inequality that complement the story.

According to Tani Arata, Lee uses the primary colour blue because it is "impregnated with life and death, [it is] the colour of nothingness" (10). Lee also purposely chooses primary colours and white and black to avoid reminiscences of 'superficial phenomena' and therefore evoke a more 'essential world' (Aoki 74). If in Lee's depiction of this tale, we equate the 'superficial' with pride or Culture, and the 'essential' with all of Nature, then his secondary orange and tertiary brown daubs suggest a similar dynamic, connecting in relative proportion with the more superficial or material. [21] Furthermore, the tensions between the colours and groupings, the styles of brushstroke — the closed (or limited) and the more open — and the touch of the brush to plane, all represent the fissures between an alienated human independence and the open integrity of a more communal Nature. The transition from the 'constraint' of the linear black trail to the looser orange tick-like flow of daubs in the frontispiece, for instance, implies the tension between the 'loss of way' in constrained civilised environments such as the trial and the freer, more instinctive spatiality and temporality Ichirō experiences during his foray into the

mountains. In contrast with the linear image, these orange daubs evoke the more centrifugal, generative force of natural law such as that suggested earlier — the whims of the natural breezes that blow Wildcat, Ichirō (and the reader) about.

As Ichirō embarks on his journey and begins to communicate with the chestnut trees and the flute waterfall, the tertiary brown strokes from the first image (on a single page with four vertical strokes) change to the blue of life and death (across a double spread) (Plate 10). These more numerous, lighter brushstrokes ooze light and bring the intervening voids to life, the space gushing forth from beneath to suggest a loss of centre that connects with Ichirō's more instinctive moments in Nature as more uniquely free, open and rhythmically harmonious in time and space. At the same time, the vertical strokes along the length of this wider spread also conjure the brighter life-force image of long fine fingers playing the flute of the waterfall. Significantly, a much more intense image punctuates the point when Ichirō enters the dark forest of yew trees and begins to climb upward towards the clearing and the 'un-natural' confusion of the acorns at the trial. Here, Lee's life-giving blue suddenly gives way to a double-spread of densely overlapping black 'points' which close off much of the light and thus challenge the previous sense of vitality. The 'closed' density of the black daubs demarcates the emotional loss of way which is inscribed in the chaos and confusion at the trial. This dramatic change in colour and style thus signals the symbolic transition between the open life force of Nature and the closed 'darkness' of such material Culture.



Plate 10

As if to confirm this transition, in his next image, when the squabbling acorns appear at the clearing, Lee sets a range of pear-shaped brown 'points' in horizontal formation to suggest the determined approach of the mass of their pointy heads (Plate 11). Together with the tertiary brown (representing the more superficial), the more uniform rows further evoke the constrained regimentation of material Culture. Their arranged uniformity not only signifies the rigidity of their obstinate squabbling but also their superficial 'desires' as a false attachment that is as materialistic and rigid as any 'real' material commodity. This arrangement is positioned to accompany the textual scene where the coachman, who is awaiting orders from Wildcat,

*seem[s] to be having such a hard time controlling his own desire for a cigarette that great big tears trickle[...] down his cheeks. [22]*



*Plate 11*

These forms, therefore, may also be seen as tear-shapes that forge a visual link with the coachman's tears, suggesting further images of false desire. The tear-shapes align the viewer with the coachman's position and, like Satô's positioning of the viewer to acknowledge the coachman's tears, thus highlight not only Wildcat's insensitivity but also the notions of inequality inherent in such exclusive behaviour. Further, the darker brown tear-drop shapes in the next picture, although looser in space, are heavier in shading (often applied over with a second layer), making them seem to drop to the bottom of the page, producing a downward effect that complements the hopelessness of the continuing acorn dispute .

The next double spread accompanies the climax of the story in which the trial is settled. Here, all such weight, uniformity or constraint are diffused into a mixture of lighter, looser and freer-flowing dynamic blue line-points across the breadth of a double spread (similar to those on the cover). Primary blue reappears to emphasise the Buddhist concept of essential nothingness, the less constrained, explosive world of Nature. Just as the effect of the sermon is being felt, then, this image reinscribes the story's significance about the superficiality and transience of human desire and materialism. This change in colour and style of brushstroke conveys the ephemerality of the resolution to the trial: the enlightenment implied in the silent realisation of the acorns at their own stupidity.

Lee's penultimate image returns to black line-daubs to coincide with Ichirô's break with fantasy and his return to reality. The strokes are now horizontal in direction and contrast with the earlier vertical strokes, signalling the transition back to the material world of his more 'permanent' home. Yet the break in the penultimate stroke, together with the gradual fading of ink-depth, simultaneously evokes the fragility of any such permanency. This sense of transience is also apparent in the last single orange daub in the centre of the final page which accompanies the disappearance of the carriage carrying Wildcat and the coachman, evoking the image of Ichirô left standing by himself, contemplating the wording of the postcard. It again represents the 'point' from which all creation begins (and ends), evoking ephemerality, while also implying a continuous hope for a more complete unity. The brighter secondary orange and bleeding of hue within the daub simultaneously suggest the fragility of such a hope.

All such shifts and subtleties suggest the oppositions between the staticity of egoistic materialism and transcendence into a sense of Buddhist transience and impermanence that allows a merger with the universe. Moreover, the aforementioned colour sequencing, which circles twice through and is framed by the black on the inside covers, further signifies the cyclical vitality and pulse of all life that comes with the surrender of ego or submergence of self into Nature. Lee's calligraphic medium achieves a dynamic opposition of rivalry and co-operation, with the moral that nothing is superior or inferior, just different and thus entitled to occupy a natural place in the world. His art thereby explores the tensions between the superficiality of the egoistic individual and a more essentially organic universality to present a Nature that is "alive in all its parts and constituting one great unity..." (Bester xii).

The comparison of these modern picture books of Donguri has shown how Satô's more representational mode utilises shifts in perspective at significant climactic moments to emphasise how 'not to be'. While Satô presents characters and scenes from a more distant third-person viewpoint, his simple, spontaneous woodcuts signify an impermanence that accords with the harmony of Nature and the whimsical breezes that blow Ichirô around. He humorously extends the Nature/Culture dichotomy through his extra-textual mockery of Wildcat's behaviour and his contrastive framing. Wildcat is presented as the object of ridicule and his materialistic cultivations are linked with the human world of desires (for example, food and wine in fancy restaurants), whereas the personified acorns gradually lose their human features in the last scenes to suggest their newfound understanding which returns them to their more natural, contented selves. Whereas Ichirô's fantasy journey is framed in flora, the more 'unnatural' barren scenes are unframed. The scenes at the clearing, for example, mostly have sparser backgrounds with less suggestion of the black infinite showing through the natural wood-grain to separate the ideal from superficial desires (Wildcat's pomposity). Satô's first-person perspective, especially at climactic moments, also encourages consideration of such dichotomies. Moreover, his final picture closes Ichirô's fantasy with this positioning to consider the story from an adult perspective which both observes and experiences the nostalgia and

yearning. Humanity's alienation from Nature is thus also foregrounded through consideration of conceit (as exemplified through Ichirō's final thoughts).

Lee's brushwork, on the other hand, while encouraging free association, also requires a mixture of thought and intuition to create meaning from the combination of the verbal text and his accompanying abstract calligraphy. Because there are no concrete references to scenes or characters in the artwork, the observer is left with few options but to infer emotional or rhythmic connections with the tale from the colours, shapes, and rhythmic qualities of the seemingly random daubs across pages. Through his oppositional tensions, Lee constructs an interactive dialogue between reader and text that connects the reader with the 'art of emptiness', thus signifying the essence of Buddhist inter-connectivity between the human and the organic world — Kenji's wider significance of cosmological integration.

## Notes

- [1.](#) This phrase is Lee Ufan's, one of the artists whose work is under discussion here. (See D'Souza.)
  - [2.](#) I would like to thank the two artists who have kindly given copyright permission to have their artwork included here: Satō Kunio and Lee Ufan. I would also like to thank Lyn Swierski who read an earlier draft of this essay and provided valuable editing advice. The University of Wollongong provided funding assistance to attend the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), held at the Australian National University in 2004, at which an initial version of this article was presented.
  - [3.](#) Henceforth, this story will be referred to as simply Donguri. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own. All names are given in the Japanese order; that is, the family name precedes the given name.
  - [4.](#) Ushiyama notes that Donguri was taught in Japanese literature as early as 1946 and that no other author in Japan is on the school curriculum as much as Kenji (12).
  - [5.](#) For further information on this aspect of Kenji's work, see Karen Colligan-Taylor, for instance, *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*, (New York & London: Garland, 1990).
  - [6.](#) The reason for this lack of 'tampering' is mostly due to the efforts of Kenji scholars such as Nishida Yoshiko (personal communication).
  - [7.](#) The book with Satō's artwork was originally published in 1989 and that by Lee, in 1983. Both books are still in print.
  - [8.](#) Reading direction for Satō Kunio is right to left. Satō is a well-known Hokkaidō artist who, after starting out as a carpenter, has devoted much of his later life to carving Kenji's works as wood-cut illustrations. He has his own web page at: <http://www.yamanekokoubou.com/>.
- Please note that, in the accompanying plates, the reproductions of the single page images are only larger than the double spreads because of scanning procedures.
- [9.](#) Munakata (1903-1975) is a renowned woodblock artist commonly associated with the Buddhist folk tradition of Japan and Yanagi Sōetsu's (1889-1961) folk art (mingei) movement of the early twentieth century. Munakata was familiar with Kenji's literature and illustrated some of his poems and stories.
  - [10.](#) For further discussion of visual gaze as demand, see Kress and Van Leeuwen (27).
  - [11.](#) This translates as 'Plate of salmon with sauce in the style of the wandering Wildcat'.
  - [12.](#) Bester's translation (79).

[13.](#) My gratitude for this observation goes to Dr. Tomoko Aoyama.

[14.](#) The essential feature of a mandala is a circle which, like the circle of the full moon in Buddhism, symbolises completeness or "perfect truth, the full knowledge of dharma, the Law" (Hall 104). Mandalas usually represent a visual metaphor for the complete "structure of the universe as it would be perceived in the act of meditation" (Hall 4).

[15.](#) Reading direction for Lee Ufan is left to right. Lee Ufan (b.1936) is an internationally renowned artist who, although born in Korea, went to live in Japan in 1956 at the age of twenty to further his education in philosophy, literature and art. He became active as a leader of the well-known Mono-ha group which arose in Japan in the 1960s. The aim of this movement was to embrace all existence and encourage the "fluid coexistence of numerous beings, concepts and experiences" (D'Souza). It investigated the relations between things by reconstituting industrial and natural materials to clarify the modes of existence of objects in general (Rodin Gallery). His work is not only exhibited in Japan, but throughout the world, in the USA, London, Europe, Australia and Korea.

[16.](#) This is the Monogatari Bunka no Kai (Story Culture Club) picture book and cassette series commissioned by the poet Tanigawa Gan to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of Kenji's death (in 1983). These books have both Japanese and English text. The English translation is by Tanigawa and C.W. Nicol.

Tanigawa provides an interesting example of the explicitly ideological process of canonisation of Kenji's work. In the 1980s, Tanigawa deliberately appropriated Kenji's tales for their nativism, regionalism and multivocality, to resist the revival of cultural nationalism and the self-exploitative project of modernisation (Sasaki-Uemura 152). Tanigawa was a poet and activist whose writings on marginalised people and places focussed on "how the margins could resist co-optation and or incorporation into the center" (Sasaki-Uemura 130). According to Sasaki-Uemura, his work "comprised of a kind of 'response' before the fact to the nihonjinron [theories of Japaneseness — usually suggesting homogeneity and uniqueness] that appeared several years later" (130). Tanigawa actively adopted Kenji as a "new vehicle of expression" for such resistance, as the vehicle to promote an alternative education for young children. To this end, he utilised Kenji's fables to develop self-expression, often through dramatic recitals, in middle and high school students during school holidays (Sasaki-Uemura 152). This picture book series arose out of these activities.

[17.](#) To view a picture of the cover, please go to:  
<http://www3.big.or.jp/~monobun/oshirase/phot/hanbai/donguri.jpg>

[18.](#) Lee's brushstrokes of points and lines are reminiscent of his 'From Point' (Ten Yori) and 'From Line' (Sen Yori) and 'From Winds' (Kaze Yori) series of exhibitions in the 1970s and 80s when, according to Minemura, Lee's work had culminated through thirty years of experience into this kind of cosmic 'accordance' (12). As mentioned in Endnote 7, Lee's representation of Donguri to Yamaneko was first published in this period, in 1983.

[19.](#) [http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodin\\_gallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en\\_sub.html](http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodin_gallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en_sub.html) — accessed 29th October, 2005.

[20.](#) Lee's early practise of ink-painting (sumi-e) not only taught him that all painting begins from a point and that all forms consist in points, but also the importance of breathing life into each touch of the brush. This, as a fundamental component of the painting, formed the basis of the subsequent step of producing unalterable interrelationships between individual brushstrokes (Okada 84).

[21.](#) Orange is a secondary colour that arises from two primary colours, red and yellow, and brown is a tertiary colour that is produced from the combination of the secondary orange and the primary blue.

22. This translation is by Nicol and Tanigawa (16).

## Works Cited

Addiss, Stephen. *How to Look at Japanese Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.

Aoki, Masahiro. "Towards the Presentation of a New World." *Ri Ufan Ten - Kansei to Ronri no Kiseki* (「李禹煥展—感性と論理の軌跡」—Lee Ufan Exhibition: Traces of Sensibility and Logic). Eds. M. Aoki, K. Okada and M. Sawamura. Gifu: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1988. 72-76.

Bester, John. *Once and Forever*. Tokyo, Kodansha, 1993.

Bryson, Norman. "The Gaze in the Expanded Field." *Vision and Visuality*. H. Foster. New York: The New Press, 1988. 87-113.

Colligan-Taylor, Karen. *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*. New York and London: Garland, 1990.

D'Souza, Michelle. *Lee Ufan — Correspondance*. (2004).  
<http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/exhibitionInfo/exhibition/14581>.  
Accessed 17th October, 2005.

Hagiwara, Masayoshi. 「イラストレーションが奏でる賢治の銀河」(*Irasutorêshon ga Kanaderu Kenji no Ginga — The Play of Illustrations in Kenji's Galaxy*). *Art Express* (4 — Autumn, 1994). 88-95.

Hall, James. *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art*. New York: Harper Collins. 1995.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1990.

Inui, Yoshiaki. *Ri Ufan no Kaiga* (「李禹煥の絵画」 — *The Paintings of Lee Ufan*). Tokyo: Tokyo Garô. 1980.

Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images*. Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1990.

Minemura, Toshiaki. "The Cosmos and the Meteoric." *Ri Ufan Ten — Kansei to Ronri no Kiseki* (「李禹煥展—感性と論理の軌跡」 — Lee Ufan Exhibition: Traces of Sensibility and Logic). Eds. M. Aoki, K. Okada and M. Sawamura. Gifu: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1988. 10-13.

Miyazawa, Kenji. 「どんぐりと山猫」(*Donguri to Yamaneko — Wildcat and the Acorns*). Illustrated by Lee, Ufan. Tokyo: Monogatari Têpu Shuppan, 1994 (2nd ed).

Miyazawa, Kenji. 「どんぐりと山猫」(*Donguri to Yamaneko — Wildcat and the Acorns*). Illustrated by Satô, Kunio. Tokyo: Benesse. 1996 (4th ed).

Newland, Amy, and Chris Uhlenbeck, eds. *Ukiyo-e to Shin hanga: The Art of Japanese Woodblock Prints*. London: Bison Group, 1990.

Niwano, Nikkyô. *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra*. Tokyo: Kôsei Publishing Co., 1990.

Okada, Kiyoshi. "The Artistic Path from Theory to Practice." *Ri Ufan Ten - Kansei to Ronri no Kiseki* (「李禹煥展—感性と論理の軌跡」 — Lee Ufan Exhibition: Traces of Sensibility and Logic). Eds. M. Aoki, K. Okada and M. Sawamura. Gifu: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1988. 82-85.

Okada, Jun. 「子供の本の魅力: 宮沢賢治から泡直子まで」 (Kodomo no Hon no Miryoku: Miyazawa Kenji kara Awa Naoko made — The Charm of Children's Books: From Miyazawa Kenji to Awa Naoko). Nagoya: KTC Shuppan. 1992.

Rodin Gallery. "Lee Ufan — The Search for Encounter."  
[http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodingallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en\\_sub.html](http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodingallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en_sub.html).  
Accessed 29th October 2005.

Saitama Kenritsu Kindai Bijutsukan. 「常設展示」 (Tôsetsu Tenji — Standing Exhibition Catalogue). Saitama: Saitama Kenritsu Kindai Bijutsukan. 2000.

Sasaki-Uemura, Wesley. "Tanigawa Gan's Politics of the Margins in Kyushu and Nagano." *Positons: east asia cultures critique* 7 (1 — Spring,1999): 129-163.

Satô, Hiroaki. *A Future of Ice: Poems and Stories of a Japanese Buddhist Miyazawa Kenji*. San Francisco: North Point Press. 1989.

Solomon, Robert C. and Kathleen M. Higgins. *A Passion for Wisdom*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Tani, Arata. *A Presence that Eclipses Subject: The Art of Lee Ufan*. Ed. Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo: Foundation Arc-En-Ciel, 1991. 6-10.

Ushiyama, Megumi. 「賢治教材の現在」 (Kenji Kyôzai no Genzai — Contemporary Teaching Materials by Kenji) in *Jugyô ni Ikiru Miyazawa Kenji (Kenji Alive in the Classroom)*. Tokyo: Toshô Bunka Sha, 1996. 12-21.

Helen Kilpatrick

---

Volume 10, Issue 2 The Looking Glass 2 April, 2006

Site design and content, except where noted, © [The Looking Glass](#) 2007.

"The Art of Emptiness": Buddhist Nature in Picture Books of Miyazawa Kenji's 'Donguri to Yamaneko' (Wildcat and the Acorns)"

© Helen Kilpatrick, 2006.

Send general correspondence regarding [The Looking Glass](#) c/o [The Editor](#).

*The Looking Glass: new perspectives  
on children's literature*

ISBN 1551-5680