

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
*Issa and the Meaning of Animals:
A Buddhist Poet's Perspective*

David G. Lanoue
HaikuGuy.com 2015
292 pp., paper

LISA KEMMERER
Montana State University, Billings

Volume 19, Issue 1

Aug 2016

© *Between the Species*, 2016
<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

LISA KEMMERER

In *Animals and World Religions* I note that Japanese Buddhists tend to find in nature an apt medium for the highest spiritual truths, and that Dogen, for example, found in nature the “essence of enlightenment” (92). Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) would also have provided apt examples, but David G. Lanoue’s book, *Issa and the Meaning of Animals: A Buddhist Poet’s Perspective*, was not yet published.

Issa wrote more than twenty-thousand haiku, many of which involve cats or dogs, fleas or butterflies, frogs or bats or mice, going about the business of life—or death. Lanoue introduces Issa, the time period, and haiku themselves, then weaves the narrative of his book around hundreds of Issa’s lovely lines. The material is extensive, but Lanoue transitions smoothly through Issa’s three-line poems, exploring connections and teasing out meanings with skill and care. Who that loves animals¹ or haiku would not love lines such as these?

waiting for spring
sparrows also make a home
in the bamboo (115)

caged bird –
watching the butterfly
with envy (32)

Issa and the Meaning of Animals highlights contemporary themes in animal studies, such as human-animal relations, the many ways animals are depicted under Issa’s pen, and the thoughts and perspectives Lanoue believes the poet to be sharing in his verse. Lanoue’s chapters focus on “Talking to Animals,” Anthropomorphism vs Realism, “Where Animals Belong,” “Shinto and Buddhist Animals,” and “Issa’s Butterfly Challenge,” a chapter that highlights Issa’s many butterfly

LISA KEMMERER

haiku. Lanoue ferrets out the value of various verses, providing comment from other scholars, noting what naysayers might conclude, and offering his own take on Issa's sometimes poignant, sometimes comical, always thought provoking verse.

Lanoue states clearly: "Though Issa offered no cogent, overt argument about the ethical treatment of animals, I intend to piece together such an argument." In the process of exploring and presenting Issa's haiku (21), Lanoue finds in Issa's haiku a sensitivity to the feelings, perspectives, and lives of animals. He asserts that Issa's haiku negate traditional barriers that humans tend to build between ourselves and other animals, that Issa's works "can be read as impassioned advocacy for the humane, respectful, and appreciative treatment of nonhuman animals" (20). While Lanoue notes that this was doubtless not Issa's intent, the "sameness" of animals and human beings is an "important and richly explored theme" in his poetry (21). Issa, in Lanoue's view, invites "readers to question what it means to be human and to re-think their relationship with other life on the planet" (21). Indeed, Lanoue faithfully demonstrates that Issa's haiku present animals as "peers who employ their own languages, express and appreciate beauty, raise families, work and play, co-habitat with people in shared spaces, benefit from blessings of Shinto, participate in the rituals of Buddhism, reincarnate and follow the law of karma, and, in some cases, are shown to be possibly superior, in a spiritual sense, to human beings" (22).

Lanoue includes a section titled "Killing Animals, Animals Killing" in his chapter on "Shinto and Buddhist Animals" (177). When a reader approaches a subject from a certain angle, such as Lanoue has done, there are likely to be blind spots.

LISA KEMMERER

On certain subjects *Issa and the Meaning of Animals* carries considerable tension. For example, Lanoue includes this haiku:

winter seclusion—
 cooking a chicken
 praising Buddha (190)

Lanoue's narrative notes how Issa's juxtaposes the chicken's cold, dead body against the smug human, reciting a *nembutsu* to secure his own rebirth and enlightenment *despite* his blood-thirsty ways. He notes the "cold-heartedness" portrayed in Issa's lines, evidence of a world that seems too often "violent and merciless" (190-191). Lanoue reminds of the murky morality of Pure Land, where devotion to Amida overrides the worst of sins (190). A few pages later Lanoue includes this haiku:

the clams' cremation smoke
 rises
 evening's winter rain (196)

Lanoue writes of this haiku:

The rising steam from the pot, Issa imagines, is the clams' . . . cremation smoke. . . . Describing their cooking in this religious fashion, he indicates his profound respect and sympathy for the clams. He even suggests kinship with them, recognizing them as members of the family of life whose cooking is a rite of cremation. The fact that he will possibly eat them does not negate the depth of his feeling. (196)

Actually, it does. Most arguments in the field of animal ethics entail a distinction between sentient life and non-sentient life, and choosing to eat beings who suffer and who conscious-

LISA KEMMERER

ly will to go on living—if one has other options—is clearly less morally desirable than granting others their will to live as we would wish others to do for us. If Issa chooses to eat the beings he purports to empathize with, when he could do otherwise, then he definitely negates any sincere “depth of his feeling” with regard to those beings. While it may be true that Issa genuinely feels a measure of sadness for those dying in his pot, Issa’s feelings are not deep enough to cause him to spare their suffering or their lives.

Along the same lines, Lanoue includes a poem about cooking snails:

evening moon –
pond snails singing
in the kettle (186)

Lanoue offers a couple of interpretations of what “singing” might mean, then again notes that Issa “clearly sympathizes with the snails” (187). While this may be in the case, it is scarcely worth noting. What is sympathy without mercy? One who sympathizes for those she willfully causes to suffer, one who cannot be bothered to change behavior in order to prevent suffering, lacks anything remotely like sincerity of sympathies. Lanoue, determined to find the good in Issa despite his flesh-eating ways, fails to recognize this basic truth. Lanoue writes of Issa: “He may have eaten the snails, but he never denied their intrinsic value—or their suffering” (16). Indeed, he did deny their intrinsic value. To willfully cause another individual extreme suffering and premature death would seem to exemplify the denial of their inherent value. Lanoue comments that this poem “evokes hellish torment” and “makes one’s mouth water”

LISA KEMMERER

(188). Causing tremendous suffering and premature death does not make *my* mouth water.

Lanoue is clear about his intent; approaching a book from a certain angle is likely to leave a few blind spots. Readers versed in ethics and speciesism may feel this tension, and a measure of frustration. But Lanoue's shortcomings seem to stem from his commitment to Issa and Issa's haiku. Lanoue demonstrates a strong grasp of poetry more generally, and of Issa's work in particular. *Issa and the Meaning of Animals* reveals an extensive and yet focused understanding of Japanese language and culture of the period, Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and practices, and of Issa's life and works. Moreover, it is clear that Lanoue is deeply engaged with Issa's haiku regarding anymals. *Issa and the Meaning of Animals* reads like a labor of love which is a great pleasure for readers interested in learning about Issa's anymal haiku.

Endnotes

¹ "Anymal" (a contraction of "any" and "animal," pronounced like "any" and "mal"), refers to all animals who do not happen to be the same species as the speaker/author. If a chimpanzee uses sign language to express "anymal," human beings will be included in this reference while the chimpanzee will not. Using the term "anymal" avoids

- using "animals" as if human beings were not also included in the term "animal";
- dualistic, alienating references such as "non" and "other";
- cumbersome terms such as nonhuman animals, other animals, and other-than-human animals.

I am a human being, so "anymal" in this writing refers to any animal who is not a human being. (see "Verbal Activism: 'Anymals'" in *Society and Animals* 14.1 (May 2006): 9-14. <<http://www.lisakemmerer.com/Articles.html>>