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This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document, This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Anthrozoös* on 6 October 2015, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2015.1064211> and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

Stibbe, Arran ORCID: 0000-0002-3854-9854 (2015) Issa and the Meaning of Animals: A Buddhist Poet's Perspective. *Anthrozoös*, 28 (3). pp. 517-518. doi:10.1080/08927936.2015.1064211

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2015.1064211>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2015.1064211>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5199>

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

David G. Lanoue. *Haikuguy.com*, 2006. 290 pages. ISBN: 978-0991284030

(paperback)

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鳴ながら虫の乗行浮木かな
naki nagara mushi no noriyuku ukigi kana

still singing the insect
is swept away...
floating branch (Issa's 1822 haiku, p. 145)

Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) was a prolific haiku writer, commonly regarded as one of the four great masters of the art. In more than 20,000 poems Issa recorded his intimate observations of animals, plants, nature, and people. David G. Lanoue, in this book, claims that Issa's work can cross time and space to be "instructive for those who struggle today with the ethical, scientific, religious, economic and political implications of how animals are treated, and mistreated, by human beings" (p. 8). In fact, he does more than just *claim* this, he *shows* it, through detailed analysis of more than 400 of Issa's haiku, in the context of history, biographical information, and Issa's own diary entries. The 400 haiku mentioned in the book are part of a larger collection that the author has made available as an extremely useful searchable archive of 10,000 of Issa's poems (<http://haikuguy.com/issa/>).

In an introduction and five long chapters, the book shows how Issa's agenda is "to seek to mend the rift between the human and animal worlds: to depict people and animals sharing common space and a common destiny" (p. 16), and it explains specifically how Issa achieves this through detailed explanations of the workings of

the poems. In chapter one the book describes how Issa mends the rift between human and animal worlds through talking directly to the animals who happen to be around him: “*ware to kite asobe ya oya no nai suzume*. Come and play / with me... / orphan sparrow” (Issa 1819, p. 29). The vocative implies the presence of the speaker as well as the hearer in the scene.

In chapter two, the book describes how what might at first be seen as anthropomorphism in Issa’s poems actually contains a heavy dose of realism. In “*neko no ko no kakurenbo suru hagi no hana*. The kitten plays / hide and seek... / in bush clover” (Issa 1814, p. 116), the kitten is playing a game which at first seems to belong to humans—hide and seek—but on closer examination is a game shared with many other species. Issa’s “haiku portraits of animals at play are as valid as a biologist’s field notes” (p. 117). In chapter three, Lanoue describes *where* animals are represented as belonging in Issa’s haiku, which turns out to be both in the nature outside as well as in the nature indoors: “*semaku to mo iza tobinarae io no nomi*. Though it’s cramped / practice your jumping! / hut’s fleas” (Issa 1814, p. 155). Throughout Issa’s poetry, “animals share human spaces and involve themselves in human activities” (p. 150).

In chapter four, the book picks up on a theme which is mentioned in other chapters: that in Issa’s poetry, animals are fellow travellers on the path to enlightenment. Issa is, as the title of the book makes clear, a Buddhist poet, and there are numerous religious references with his poetry, such as “*fuyugomori tori ryōri ni mo nebutsu kana*. Winter seclusion / cooking a chicken / praising Buddha” (Issa 1793, p. 190). The reason why Issa is eating the chicken and reciting the nembutsu prayer (rather than abstaining

from meat) is because of the particular branch of Buddhism he follows: Jōdoshinshū, the Pure Land sect. This makes for interesting discussion of how Issa resolves the tension between caring for and eating animals. The concluding chapter examines (among other things) how Issa represents animals as role models for humans, their ability to live in the present moment making them perhaps one step ahead on the path to enlightenment, for example, “*inazuma ya enokoro bakari muyoku kao*. Lightning flash / only the puppy’s face / is innocent” (Issa 1820, p. 258). This overcomes the traditional hierarchy of reincarnation where “human birth is considered a notch above animal birth” (p. 243) and animals can only become enlightened after being reincarnated in human form.

The book presents Issa’s discourse as an alternative to the narrow rationalism of utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer, describing it as a form of “head-*and*-heart understanding of human relations with animals” (p. 8) more in tune with a feminist ethic of care. However, at the same time, the book often uses empiricist science as a yardstick for measuring the realism of haiku, for example, “as valid as a biologist’s field notes” (p. 117). It stops short of discussing whether haiku can provide a form of validity and realism that the disinterested discourses of empiricism and rationalism lack, for example, through being able to represent the larger picture of an empathic and caring observer interacting with other beings who share certain similarities with the observer.

Overall the book could be considered to be an “appreciate enquiry,” in that it consistently and enthusiastically aligns itself with and praises the insights that Issa’s poetry offers, without artificially attempting to provide a balancing dose of negative

criticism. The arguments of other critics are mentioned and considered, but ultimately refuted: “Many readers and critics of the poet conclude that he [Issa] imposes human terminology and frames onto nonhuman animals for no more profound reason than to create humour ... Such readers and critics are wrong.” The appreciative approach is refreshing since it does not let unnecessary cynicism distract from the key point, which is that Issa’s poetry offers something of immense value to people struggling to rethink current human relationships with animals.

Lanoue sums up what is so valuable about Issa’s poetry by stating, “His haiku about animals can motivate readers to change their thinking so that they might connect, or in some cases, reconnect with fellow members of the extended family of earthly existence” (p. 16). In order for Issa’s haiku to cross time and space and offer new ways to view our relationship with animals, it is necessary for his haiku to be collected together, sympathetically translated, the subtleties discussed, and some of the larger patterns explored. In doing just this, the book provides an extremely valuable path from Edo-period Japan to a modern world where the connection between humans and animals is often broken.