

Living on the Edge of a Volcano: Reflections on Nietzsche's Philosophy and Albert Saijo's Zensational Rhapsody

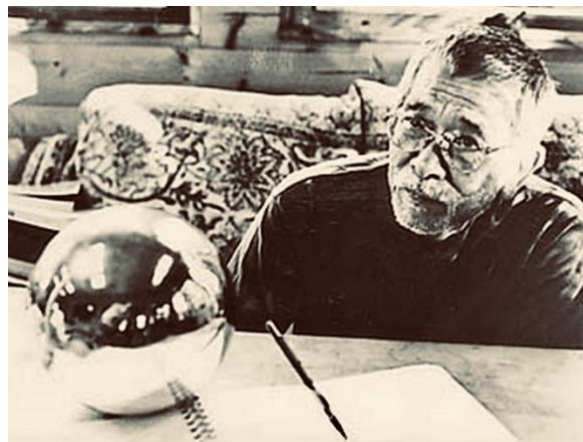
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This article focuses on the poetry of Albert Saijo, one of the lesser-known figures in the Beat literary movement. I suggest here that Saijo's work should be better-known, and in drawing out some resonances between Saijo's poetry and Nietzsche's philosophy, I make a case that Saijo should be taken seriously as a poet and philosopher. Saijo has been described as "a post-apocalyptic wisecracking prophet, speaking the language of the human future," and here I provide some justification for this statement. One could say that the Beat literary movement developed around the intersection of Existentialism and Zen, and this article explores that juncture in examining the play between language and silence in the writings of Saijo and Nietzsche. In addition to taking Saijo seriously, this article perhaps also opens another perspective on Nietzsche. I draw attention to the rhapsodic nature of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and suggest that the thought of eternal recurrence might be something like a Zen koan, or even a joke by another post-apocalyptic wisecracking prophet. The thought of eternal recurrence is compared with the bodhisattva vows, and Saijo's poem on those vows is highlighted as a great example of his "Zensational" rhapsody.

Key words: Albert Saijo; Nietzsche; Eternal Recurrence; Bodhisattva Vows; Zensational Rhapsody

BY AN ODD LEGERDEMAIN OF FATE WE ARE TRANSPORTED TO A SMALL CLEARING IN AN UPLAND 'ŌHI'A LEHUA HĀPU'U FOREST AT 4000' EDGING AN ACTIVE VOLCANO— ANOTHER EDGE—LIKE THEY SAY IF YER NOT LIVIN ON THE EDGE YER TAKIN UP TOO MUCH SPACE (Saijo 1997: 199)¹



Albert Saijo at home in Volcano, photo by Boone Morrison

In these closing lines to Albert Saijo's first solo collection of poems, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY*, the poet recounts how he and his wife ended up living in an almost pristine native

Hawaiian forest on the edge of the active volcano Kīlauea on the Big Island of Hawai'i. One of the Beat poets, Saijo is probably most known for the legendary trip he took with Jack Kerouac and Lew Welch from San Francisco to New York in 1959. The three composed *haiku* along the way, with the

poems later published in the Beat classic: *Trip Trap: Haiku on the Road*.² In this article I suggest that Saijo should be taken seriously, not only as a poet, but also as a philosopher. In drawing some resonances between Nietzsche's philosophy and Saijo's poetry, I explore the relationships between philosophy and poetry, language and silence, Existentialism and Zen, and contend that both of these "post-apocalyptic wisecracking prophets" have something important to say to us in this time of climate change and ecological catastrophe.

The quote Saijo closes *OUTSPEAKS* with, has been attributed to various sources, but the basic idea expresses something similar to the famous line from Nietzsche: "the secret to harvesting the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from existence is to *live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!" (Nietzsche 2018: 182).³ I can certainly attest to the dangerousness of living on the slopes of an active volcano. It turns out, by an odd twist of fate, I now live in the house built by Saijo on the edge of the volcano. For someone who has spent many years thinking about Nietzsche, living in this house has naturally led to considerable reflection on some connections between Nietzsche's philosophy and Saijo's poetry.⁴ Now I don't have any textual evidence that Saijo ever read Nietzsche; but the Beat literary movement was certainly influenced by Existentialism, perhaps even drawing its name from the existentialist quest for meaning.⁵ Saijo, of course, was deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism, and this led to an affinity with other Beat writers who were also into Zen, like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Kerouac.⁶ Thinking about Nietzsche and Saijo thus leads inevitably to that intersection of Existentialism and Zen, and thus thinking about the resonances between Nietzsche's thought and Zen, a topic which has drawn considerable attention in recent years.⁷ But here I digress, as this reflection comes from a particular place, the house Albert Saijo built on the edge of a volcano.

Albert did not use any power tools when he built the house starting at age 70. Every board was cut by hand and deftly hammered into place. One can still see his pencil marks here and there on the walls, probably from the same pencil he scribbled out some of his poems. The modest wooden cottage is quite unassuming from the outside, but from within it is quite the poetic space with plenty skylights flooding the space with sunlight, and hand-made windows all around opening up vistas into that beautiful 'ōhi'a lehua hāpu'u forest. Often the only sound is from the wind in the trees and the songs of the scarlet *apapane*, one of the native birds which are endangered, but abundant in this forest canopy. Sometimes I think the songs of the *apapane* must be the sound of paradise; and it turns out this place, the neighborhood where I live, is quite aptly named as it is called *Kalani Honua*—the earthly heaven. And yet this place of tranquil beauty sits only a couple miles from the edge of the volcano. During the eruption of 2018, the greatest in a couple hundred years, the summit region was rocked by constant earthquakes as the summit caldera collapsed due to the massive volume of lava that poured out far down below destroying hundreds of homes and dramatically transforming the landscape. For the last couple of years, a lava lake has been steadily rising again in the caldera, and if one walks out to the edge at night one can often see spectacular glowing fountains and rivers of lava. Living here one is constantly aware of living dangerously as we know there is always the possibility of another great earthquake and eruption of the volcano.

And yet it seems like we are all living quite precariously these days. The famed navigator of the Hōkūle'a, Nainoa Thompson once summed up the problem with our civilization: "The sail plan we are on is not sustainable" (Herman 2014).⁸ As Doug Herman, a geographer and specialist in cultural knowledge of Hawai'i and the Pacific Islands explains: "There is a Hawaiian proverb, '*He wa'a he moku; He moku he wa'a.*' It translates into, 'The canoe is an island, the island is a canoe.' It means that the

lessons of surviving on a voyaging canoe across the deep ocean are the same lessons for surviving on small, isolated islands. Now with globalization and global environmental crises, the Earth is the island, and the Earth is the canoe. We are literally all in the same boat” (Herman 2014). We are indeed all in the same boat; but unfortunately, the deepening ecological crisis suggests that it is not the Hōkūle‘a but the Titanic. While global conflict reminds us that we are still living under that “nuclear sword of Damocles,” the latest climate science suggests that everyone should also contemplate the day when the planet may be rendered uninhabitable by climate change and other deleterious effects of the global economy on the environment.⁹ It is becoming increasingly clear, as least to a few, that our whole civilization must somehow change course. As Saijo puts it in a poem written on a day of Kona winds and earthquakes: “HUMANS GOTTA CHANGE THE WAY THEY ARE IN NATURE” (Saijo 1997: 143).¹⁰

One could say this is the reason Nietzsche recommended living dangerously on the slopes of a volcano. The recommendation comes in the context of a passage in which Nietzsche is reflecting on the need for humanity to overcome the values of the past.¹¹ This task of overcoming would be the central focus of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s narrative in which the protagonist comes down from his mountain solitude to teach new teachings—about the need for humanity to further evolve, to overcome the values of the past, and become capable of remaining loyal to the earth. Nietzsche thought that the values underlying our civilization have been expressions of the longing for another world. In his diagnosis of the problem, the longing to free the soul from the prison of the body and earthly existence led to a profound misunderstanding in which human beings did not understand themselves, the natural world, or their relationship to the rest of nature. The human soul was taken to be completely separate from the body, and the earth and all other living creatures were reduced to soulless machines, with human beings understood to be the only beings that mattered, while all the rest of nature merely serves human interests. From the early to the late writings, Nietzsche was sharply critical of this anthropocentrism, emphasizing in one of the last texts: “Man is absolutely not the crown of creation: every creature stands beside him at the same stage of perfection” (Nietzsche 1990: 36).¹² With this longing for another world, the earth itself is devalued: it becomes not our home, but the disposable earth, something to be used up and left behind—a wasteland. Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* thus challenges humanity to live dangerously and overcome the life denying values of the past and become capable of remaining loyal or faithful to the earth and this life.

In an influential paper for environmental philosophy, the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. echoed Nietzsche’s critique and generated considerable controversy when he asserted that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for the ecological crisis (White 1967: 1206).¹³ White emphasized that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,” and he traced the roots of the ecological crisis to the dualism of man and nature and the teleological view that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White 1967: 1205). White went on to praise the ‘beatniks,’ whom he calls “the basic revolutionaries of our time,” because of “their affinity for Zen Buddhism, which conceives the man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view” (White 1967: 1206). Saijo had as much to do with this affinity for Zen among the Beats as anyone. Recalling the *Trip Trap* trip in his novel *Big Sur*, Kerouac describes the character George Baso, based on Saijo, as “the little Japanese Zen master hepcat sitting crosslegged on the back mattress of Dave’s [Lew’s] Jeepster” (Kerouac 2019: 39).¹⁴

1 Albert Saijo's Zensational Rhapsody

Saijo recalls in *OUTSPEAKS* that it was a chance encounter that introduced him to the Beat writers after moving to San Francisco in the late 1950s (Saijo 1997: 195). He first met Welch, and then through him, Snyder, Ginsberg, Philip Whalen and others. He would eventually live with some of these Beat writers in a place known as Hyphen-House in Japantown. When Snyder went to Japan to further his Zen practice, he asked Saijo and Welch to lead the informal *zazen* sessions at his place in Marin. Saijo's background in Zen and familiarity with *haiku* poetry easily resonated with Welch, Snyder, and the others, including Kerouac who arrived at Hyphen-House just after his appearance on the Steve Allen show in Los Angeles. Saijo's life as a writer, along with his familiarity with Buddhism and haiku, came from his mother, Asano Miyata Saijo, a writer noted for her haiku and for her "progressive, feminist perspective" in regularly appearing columns in Japanese newspapers in Los Angeles.¹⁵ Saijo recalls for us one of his earliest memories of his mother, scribbling away at her desk in the predawn hours (Saijo 1997: 192). He goes on to explain that his interest in Zen developed after a chance meeting with Zen monk Nyogen Senzaki in the 1940s. The Rinzai monk was one of the leading teachers of Zen on the West Coast at the time, and his commentaries on the *Gateless Gate* collection of *kōans*, along with other unpublished teachings and letters, are collected in a book titled *Eloquent Silence*.¹⁶ Saijo expresses his deep gratitude to Senzaki: "FOR OPENING THE QUESTION OF THE GREAT MATTER TO ME" (Saijo 1997: 194).

Another influence would be Walt Whitman. Of course, the 'father of US-American poetry' would influence just about all the poets down the line, but Whitman's free verse style, attention to the natural world, and joyous exaltation in the commonest things, would be especially influential on the poetry of the beats a hundred years after the original publication of *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁷ One might say that Whitman had already come to that view which White describes as the mirror image of the Christian view found in Zen concerning the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests so much when he cites the famous line in *Leaves of Grass*: "I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars," suggesting that it might be called a meditation on "interbeing endlessly interwoven," his phrase for the central Buddhist teaching that all phenomena are interdependent (Nhat Hanh 1996: 164).¹⁸ There has been considerable discussion about the structure of the long famous opening poem of *Leaves of Grass*, later titled "Song of Myself," but it has been suggested that the structure is a musical progression—a rhapsody.¹⁹

Saijo's *OUTSPEAKS* opens with a brief invocation, calling upon the muse, that "HEART TO HEART TRANSMITTER" as he puts it, to tell him the universe (Saijo 1997: 13). In the next poem, "FIELD PREACHER," as in the opening verse of Whitman's "Song of Myself," the poet introduces himself.

I WANT TO BE A WITNESS—I WANT TO TELL WHAT I FEEL WHEN I SEE WHATS
HAPPENING BEFORE MY EYES—I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE WHAT I SEE
HAPPENING BEFORE MY EYES (Saijo 1997: 17)

Saijo goes on to say he wants to be a field preacher like John Muir's father.

I WANT TO STAND UNDER AN OPEN SKY IN A FIELD & I WANT TO EXHORT & LAMENT ORACULATE ENTHUSE INVEIGH SCOLD RAIL STORM & RAGE RAGE ON WAIL & BEWAIL ELEGIZE & LYRICIZE (Saijo 1997: 17)²⁰

He continues on for a while and then exclaims: I WANT TO RHAPSODIZE (Saijo 1997: 17).

In the next poem, “ANIMAL RHAPSODE,” Saijo investigates the meaning of “rhapsody” finding the OED definition fitting his style perfectly.

AN EXULTED OR EXAGGERATEDLY ENTHUSIASTIC EXPRESSION OF SENTIMENT & FEELING—AN EFFUSION MARKED BY EXTRAVAGANCE OF IDEAS & EXPRESSION BUT WITHOUT CONNECTED THOUGHT²¹ OR SOUND ARGUMENT” (Saijo 1997: 18)

Other definitions he finds fitting as well.

THE STRINGING TOGETHER OF POEMS—A MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTION—A CONFUSED MASS OF THINGS—A STRING OF WORDS SENTENCES TALES ETC—A LITERARY WORK CONSISTING OF MISCELLANEOUS OR DISCONNECTED PIECES—A WRITTEN COMPOSITION HAVING NO FIXED FORM OR PLAN (Saijo 1997: 18)

He notes the etymology of “rhapsode” is a compound of the words “to stitch” & “song.” He explains the rhapsodes of ancient Greece were indigent persons who went around reciting Homeric poetry; and he notes that he is also indigent, but his text is not Homer’s, but rather, the world he lives in. He then comes to this conclusion.

I WANT TO RHAPSODIZE—BUT I WOULD NOT BE PUT INTO ANY LITERARY CATEGORY—I CAN HONESTLY SAY I HAVE NO LITERARY CONCERN—I AM AN ANIMAL IN A CAGE & I AM BARKING TO BE LET OUT—AS IT HAPPENS MY BARK IS RHAPSODIC (Saijo 1997: 19)

Saijo, of course, experienced what it is like to be an animal in a cage when he and his family, like so many Japanese Americans, were imprisoned in an internment camp after Pearl Harbor.²²

In declaring himself a rhapsode, Saijo declares his allegiance in the quarrel, already ancient according to Plato, between philosophy and poetry. As we know, in the *Ion*, Socrates criticized the rhapsodes for speaking from inspiration rather than knowledge. The poets, Socrates says, “are inspired and possessed” and “not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains” (Plato 1892a: 502).²³ Nietzsche, too, one could say, sided with the poets in the ancient quarrel; though, to be sure, it is a long, complicated story, as Nietzsche’s thought involves more than a reversal of the opposition between poetry and philosophy, art and truth. But the decisive turn in his thought is the allegiance to the poets and to art in the ancient quarrel. In *The Birth of Tragedy* and other early writings, the high point of Greek culture is not the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, but rather Greek tragedy, especially the tragic poets, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Much of Nietzsche’s later writings, various collections of aphorisms loosely stitched together in books, would fit the description of rhapsody as a “work consisting of miscellaneous or disconnected pieces.” In his own critique of *The Birth of Tragedy*,

Nietzsche explains that his first work was “an impossible book” and that was because he had set out to answer the Socratic question regarding tragedy, attempting to tell the truth about art, when the story turned on the opposition of art and truth. In this critique, Nietzsche explains that he should have shaken off the scholar’s hood and sung rather than spoken (Nietzsche 1967: 20).²⁴ Of course, *Zarathustra* is a narrative telling of the hero’s journeys and his speeches. Most of the sections end with “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” except notably several crucial passages which end “Thus sang Zarathustra.” “The Night-Song,” for example, expresses the anguish of love through the imagery of the sun in its solitude longing for the night and the company of shining stars. In his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche explains that “*Zarathustra* as a whole may perhaps be counted as music—certainly a rebirth of the art of *listening* was a prerequisite for it” (Nietzsche 2007: 65).²⁵ Perhaps there is a sense in which *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* may also be counted as a rhapsody.

In Saijo’s rhapsodic bark, in the poem “I MUST BE AN APOSTATE FROM HUMAN”, the poet rails against the madness of our modern civilization.

I BELIEVE THE HUMAN RACE INDIVIDUALLY & IN AGGREGATE IS A RACE GONE TOTALLY PSYCHOTIC AND I BELIEVE THE LEADING SYMPTOM OF THIS ABERRANT CONDITION IS WHAT WE CALL CIVILIZATION—THIS MASSIVE HEDGE AGAINST THE TAO OF THE UNIVERSE— [...] I MUST BE AN APOSTATE FROM HUMAN BECAUSE I BELIEVE WE HUMANS ARE ON A TRIP SO FAR OUT THAT DID WE NOT HAVE A NAME FOR IT LIKE NORMAL WE WOULD ALL IMMEDIATELY GO INTO THE STARK RAVING MODE OF IT—I MUST BE AN APOSTATE FROM HUMAN BECAUSE IT LOOKS TO ME LIKE CIVILIZATION CONSISTENTLY FAILS TO DELIVER COMMON GOOD EQUALLY—AND NOW SCIENTIFIC CIVILIZATION BRINGS OUT ALL THE WORST IN CIVILIZATION—IT EXAGGERATES OUR PSYCHOTIC PRESENCE OVER THE EARTH LIKE A SPECTER OF BROCKEN (Saijo 1997: 122)

In the poem “NATUREMART” Saijo pretty much puts his finger on the problem, calling attention to the “MONSTROUS INSTANCE OF PATHETIC FALLACY” of anthropomorphizing earth, treating everything as a mere resource.

HOW VERY PRESUMPTUOUS OF US TO RESIGN UNILATERALLY FROM THE REST OF NATURE & MAKE EARTH SUN STARS ATMOSPHERE NEAR & DEEP SPACE INTO ONE BIG NATURAL RESOURCE CALLING FOR EARLY DEVELOPMENT IN HOMO SAPIENS’ BEHALF SOLEY (Saijo 1997: 44)

The obvious mistake in this fallacy is missing how all things are “interbeing endlessly interwoven,” that central teaching of Buddhism, repeated at the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism in *The Heart Sūtra*, and again in the origins of Zen in Hui Neng’s famous line from *The Platform Sutra* which Saijo recalls here for us: “SINCE ALL IS VOID WHERE CAN THE DUST ALIGHT” (Saijo 1997: 44).

In a long poem on the Gulf War, the first one, Saijo rages against the destruction raining down on Mesopotamia. The poet takes us back and forth between the atrocity taking place on the other side of the world and the day as it unfolds in Hawai’i. He comes to a brutally harsh conclusion: “WE ARE A DESERVEDLY ENDANGERED SPECIES BOUND FOR EXTINCTION” (Saijo 1997: 80). The poem continues in a poem titled “WAR & PEACE” bearing the subtitle “A GITA UPDATE IN

RHAPSODIC STYLE” in which he calls attention, not only to the consequences for Iraqi civilians, but also on the environment.

NATURE GETS NO RESPECT FROM HOMO SAPIENS WHEN IT COMES TO ALL OUT WAR—ARMIES DON’T HAVE TO WRITE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENTS BEFORE THEIR WARS—IF THEY DID THERE WOULD NOT BE WARS—NATURE COMES BACK BUT WE TORE UP IRAQ SOMETHING SPECIAL US AND SADDAM—HERE LET US GIVE A SHORT WAIL FOR THE GONE BIOME OF MESOPOTAMIA & FOR THE GONE WATERS OF THE PERSIAN GULF (Saijo 1997: 86)

A little farther down he recalls the horrors of Hiroshima. Most US-Americans are not quite able to even consider whether the atomic bombings were really necessary and justified as their education never prepared them for asking such questions. Some consider it naive to even think about the problem of justice in war; but it sure sets a bad example for others to follow if the most powerful nation on earth ignores this question of justice. For his part Saijo holds nothing back in speaking out against the insanity of nuclear war, recalling in the poem “SCIENCE” the famous photo from Alamogordo of Oppenheimer and General Groves.

STANDING ON THE PARCHED & CRACKED EARTH AT GROUND ZERO —[...] HERE IS THE FORMAL WEDDING OF SCIENCE & THE MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX—THE DEADLIEST FORCE ON EARTH TODAY—LETS PULL THE PLUG ON THESE MOTHERFUCKERS (Saijo 1997: 51)

The poet also leaves us a kōan: “WHAT IS A DEAD RAT’S ASS WORTH” (Saijo 1997: 51).

In the poem “ANALGESIA LAND OF PAIN FREE” Saijo describes our civilization as an expression of pain, a monument to pain. Here is Saijo’s expression of the first noble truth.

IS THERE LIFE BEYOND PAIN—ARE WE READY FOR PAIN FREE—WE WILL CHANGE—WE ARE SO ATTACHED TO BEING PAINFULLY SICK & SAD—WE ARE SO CAREFUL TO BE SAFE FROM PAIN EVEN AS WE PAIN—WE FEAR PAIN & BUILD FORTRESSES AGAINST IT BUT PAIN ALWAYS MANAGES TO BREAK THROUGH EVERY DEFENSE & MAKE US HURT—WE GET NO RESPECT FROM NATURE PAINWISE—PAIN HAS BEEN OUR CONSTANT COMPANION SINCE BIRTH—I HURT THEREFORE I AM (Saijo 1997: 26)

At the outset of the poem, Saijo proposes a “CRASH PROGRAM TO RELIEVE HUMAN SOCIETY FROM ALL PAIN BY THE YEAR 2000”. Well, it sure hasn’t happened yet, not in the 2500 years or so since the Buddha first proposed such a program. But in another poem Saijo gets right to the core of the problem, elucidating both the cause and the cure, the second and third noble truths.

I LOOK AROUND & SEE THE MACHINE EATING UP EVERYTHING—I SEE IT HAS MADE EARTH INTO AN INDUSTRIAL SITE & WASTE DUMP—MACHINE IS DEFINITELY ON A LONG ROLL WORLDWIDE—BUT MACHINE HAS A FLAW—HARD AS IT IS IT IS BUILT ON SOMETHING NONMECHANICAL & SOFT FROM

THE INVISIBLE REALM—DESIRE—TURN OFF DESIRE & MACHINE COLLAPSES
(Saijo 1997: 63-4)

The machine of our industrial civilization is surely turning earth into a wasteland, and we also now know that it is the primary cause of climate change. In a poem titled “LIFE DIES IN A GREENHOUSE” from an unpublished collection, Saijo laments the coming catastrophe of climate change, and the resulting mass extinction that renders earth a near lifeless place.

UNDER CAP OF FOSSIL FUEL CARBON DIOXIDE EARTH GETS HOT—OCEANS WARM & EXPAND—ICE MELTS—STORMS GROW MORE FIERCE & ACID [...] LIFE GETS SICK WORLDWIDE—FAR INLAND HEAT WAVES & DROUGHT—SALT LAKES GET SALTIER—DESERTS GROW—NO RELIEF—CLIMATE SHUDDERS—LIFE CHOKES IN OZONE SINK WITH ONLY ANAEROBIC MICROBES SURVIVING—EARTH BACK TO THEM AND ROCK WATER AIR WIND FIRE ICE (Saijo 2005)²⁶

Many still think that advances in technology will save the day, but despite all that has been said and done so far, carbon emissions keep climbing year by year. It seems a more profound change in our civilization is necessary and Saijo make this point in drawing a lesson from a far flying kōlea bird. Just as he is writing about missing this “MARVELOUS BIRD OF PASSAGE” an earthquake happens.

A KONA DAY LIKE THIS JUST THE KINDA DAY EARTHQUAKES LIKE TO HAPPEN—KONA DAYS ARE FULL OF PORTENT MAKING YOU FEEL LESS SELF-WILLED & MORE FATED—YOU UNDERSTAND HAWAIIAN FEELING THAT SOUTH WIND IS AN ILL WIND—A DAY FOR THINGS TO CATCH UP WITH YOU AND NO ESCAPE—UNLESS YOU’RE KŌLEA AND FLY OFF TO W. ALASKA OR SIBERIA (Saijo 1997: 143)

Saijo then draws this lesson from the kōlea.

SOME KIND OF ANIMAL CIVILITY HERE—SOME KIND OF POLITIC FOR BEING TOGETHER AND ALONE—HUMANS GOTTA CHANGE THE WAY THEY ARE IN NATURE [...] (Saijo 1997: 143)

That’s the bottom line, of course, we do have to change the way we are in nature, but what is it about our civilization, our way of being in nature, that must change? Saijo calls attention to that monstrous pathetic fallacy of treating the earth and every other living thing as a mere resource for our consumption, and he exhorts us to turn off the desire that is fueling the machine of our industrial civilization and turning the earth into a wasteland. But, of course, all living things have desire and use the earth as a resource for life. What is it about humans that is different from the rest of nature? What is this animal civility Saijo refers to that we might learn from the kōlea? Of course, one might say that the most obvious difference about the human way of being in nature is the tremendous success human ingenuity and technology has achieved in rendering nature a resource to satisfy the most exorbitant desire. This success may be our downfall, however, as the need for resources to satisfy this desire leads to global conflict and ecological catastrophe. How can we even begin to change the way we are in nature when wealth is still considered the measure of success and ‘freedom’ means nothing more than the license to get as rich as possible?

This point gets to the issue of how language frames our way of being in nature, and Saijo explores this problem in the poem “IS LANGUAGE NECESSARY TO HUMAN EXISTENCE”. He explains that “LANGUAGE IS A BODY OF SUFFERING & WHEN YOU TAKE UP LANGUAGE YOU TAKE UP THE SUFFERING TOO” (Saijo 1997: 70).

Saijo continues on marveling about this power of language to shape our reality.

LANGUAGE MAKES US INTO EVERY MEANING IT EXPRESSES SO WE ARE EVERYTHING WE CAN SAY & THIS IS HEAVY—THAT SOMETHING SO OBVIOUSLY ABSTRACT SERIAL & RELATIVE CAN BE SO POWERFUL MAKES YOU WONDER—BUT THE CONSTANT PRESSURE OF WORDS ON PURE MENTALITY ESPECIALLY MEASURED WORDS FINALLY DRIVES EACH OF US MAD IN OUR OWN WAY” (Saijo 1997: 70)

A little further on, Saijo makes a reference to the *Daodejing*: “LIKE LAO TZE SEZ THEM WHO KNOW DON’T SPEAK” (Saijo 1997: 71). The famous opening line of the text, “Way making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making,” raises the question of just how one can say or write anything at all about *dao* if *dao* cannot be captured in words.²⁷ Saijo calls attention to this paradox of language.

WE CAN’T TAKE THE TENSION OF UPHOLDING THIS PARADOX SO WE GO FOR THE FALSE CERTAINTIES OF SYLLOGISM & THIS IS KILLING US OFF AS AN ANIMAL—EVEN AS WE SEE IT AINT GOOD FOR US WE USE IT—WE SEE PLAINLY IT POLLUTES MENTALITY STILL WE’RE ENAMORED OF IT—WE KNOW ABSTRACTIVE LANGUAGE TO BE THE BASIC CAUSE OF OUR MISREADING NATURE—HOW WE LOST TOUCH—YET THE WAY WE CONTINUE TO THINK ABOUT IT IS WHAT ELSE IS THERE—PLENTY—PLENTY WHAT—PLENTY MUTE ABSOLUTE (Saijo 1997: 71-2)

Is there another form of discourse between the false certainties of syllogism, the typical discourse of philosophical argument, and absolute silence? It is this concern with the problem of language that leads Saijo to write the way that he does. In what might be his most well-known poem, “EARTH SLANGUAGE WITH ENGLISH ON IT,” Albert gives perhaps the best explanation for his distinctive hand-written style of writing, writing in capitals and reducing punctuation to a dash.

I WANT TO WRECK ENGLISH ONCE—ESPECIALLY STOMP ON TEUTONIC ROMANCE JUDEO ROMAN BULLSHIT—LOOSE XTIAN GRIP ON TONGUE—DUMP GREEK AFTER PRESOCRATICS—PULL ENGLISH BACK TOWARD ROOT LANGUAGE OF HOMINID BEFORE CIVILIZATION—I WANT TO CREOLIZE IT—VANDALIZE IT—BEND IT TOWARD CHINESE—A VITAL COMPACT WAY OF SPEAKING & WRITING [...] CUT PUNCTUATION TO A DASH—YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEAN—THAT’S ALL THAT MATTERS—A LINGO ABLE TO EXPRESS MEANING SPARE OR RICHLY TEXTURED—&WHILE WE’RE AT IT LET’S MAKE THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE OF THIS COMING UNIVERSAL PIDGIN MORE PICTOGRAPHIC MORE REBUS-LIKE—MORE HIEROGLYPHIC—SO EVERYONE CAN READ THE FUNNY PAPERS & UNDERSTAND EM—AN EARTH

SLANGUAGE UNDERSTOOD BY EVERY HUMAN ON EARTH AS THEIR BIRTHRIGHT TONGUE—SO EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT EVERYONE MEANS & NO MISTAKE—A SLANGUAGE FOR HUMAN POSTCIVILIZATION INSTAR” (SAIJO 1997: 73-4)²⁸

The problem of the relationship between language and silence runs through Zen literature and has also recently arisen in a discussion of Saijo’s legacy by historian Michael Masatsugu.²⁹ When one reads Kerouac’s and Welch’s account of the famous cross-country trip, it sounds like Saijo was sitting in the back of the jeep silently meditating most of the way. In Welch’s uncompleted, posthumously published novel, the character based on Saijo is described as “sitting very quietly in the back looking at everything going by” (Masatsugu 2013: 75). In a letter to Snyder, Kerouac recalls that Saijo was sitting silently in the back of the jeep because he “wanted to see if it was possible to meditate away from the tranquility of a zendo, see that’s why he took the trip. He sat there silently for hundreds of miles, under blanketed cross legs, as Lew and I hashed over all the good news of America” (Masatsugu 2013: 75). Masatsugu describes Kerouac’s depiction of Saijo as the silent “little Japanese Zen master hep cat” as “a racialized figure that Saijo was invested in at one time, yet later sought to challenge in shaping his legacy as a counter cultural figure” (Masatsugu 2013: 60). In Saijo’s later reshaping of his legacy, Masatsugu emphasizes “Saijo’s own recounting of his participation in the 1950s as one involving a collective endeavor of traveling and writing haiku, involving shared speech and silence” (Masatsugu 2013: 62).

In his introduction to *Trip Trap: Haiku on the Road*, Saijo gives this recollection of the trip:

There was diverse and sundry talk about politics and politicians, intricate crimes, talk of wars and panics, food, drink, clothes, beds, flowers, talk of women, relatives, hometowns, travel, foreign cities, talk about movies and movie stars, about sports and champions of sport, gossip of the literary life, ghost stories, fables, riddles, jokes, talk of grammar, of origins, about what’s real and what isn’t, and plain swap talk. Often a subject would develop from small beginnings and gradually be carried to lengths that outraged every normal expectation. Jack was good at doing this. Lew was good at spinning long tales. Then both Jack and Lew were into popular songs from the 40s. They both had fine singing voices and good repertoires. Jack knew many Sinatra tunes and could sing just like him. Lew was a great singer of scat. So there were hundreds of miles of talk and song. There were also long stretches of silence when we would each be deep into our innermost privacies[. . .]. (Saijo 1998: 7)³⁰

Although I suspect this account of shared speech and silence is probably accurate, I also suspect that the accounts given by Welch and Kerouac have some ring of truth as Saijo probably was more silent than his friends along the way. In an interview recorded in 2002, probably in this house where I write, Masatsugu reports Saijo’s recollection about conversations and silences on the trip: “Talk about a talker, man, when [Lew] was around no one else could get a word in sideways, especially when he started drinking and they drank a lot on that trip and Jack Kerouac is no slouch as a talker too, especially when he gets drunk, so between the two of those guys, huh. [Saijo laughs.]” (Masatsugu 2013: 76). Albert probably sat there silently for hundreds of miles because he couldn’t get a word in sideways with those two yakkers going on, and also perhaps, compared to them he had taken Zen practice more seriously. The depiction of Saijo as a silent monk-like figure by the beats was perhaps not so much a case of demeaning Orientalism, but rather a measure of the respect they had for Saijo’s Zen. But Masatsugu’s point in concluding is well-taken: “In recalling the trip, then, Saijo attempted to

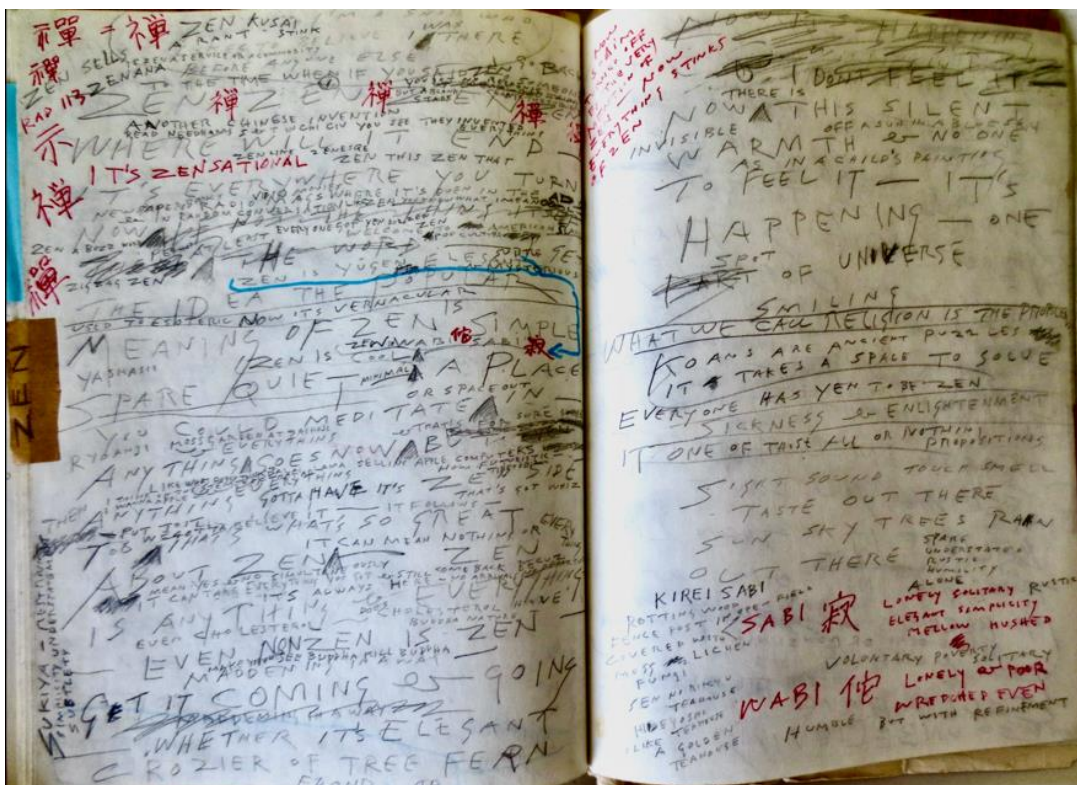
redistribute the economy of speech and silence in a way that transcended his racialized depiction by others, as he imbued silence with agency” (Masatsugu 2013: 78).

Saijo’s poetry is infused with Zen. In a poem on *The Heart Sūtra* he ponders on the paradox expressed in the famous line of the text.

IF FORM IS EMPTY AND EMPTY FORM—IF THEY ARE ONE & THE SAME—WHY DOES IT TAKE 2 WORDS IN A PARADOXIC STATEMENT TO EXPRESS IT—2 WORDS THAT IN PLAIN LANGUAGE ARE CONTRADICTORY (Saijo 1997: 157)

He goes on to suggest two reasons for the paradoxical line of the sutra: because life is a paradox and full of irony, and because: “THERE IS NO OTHER WAY TO SAY IT THAT EXPRESSES THE DEEP PATHOS OF SPIRIT CARNATE” (Saijo 1997: 157-58).

I have been fortunate to be able to peruse some of Albert’s notebooks, which are like a palimpsest, with layers upon layers of pencil scribbling.³¹ I found a remarkable couple of pages with some interesting ruminations on Zen. One could spend a lot of time studying this palimpsest, trying to make out the poet’s thoughts. One thought, in particular, stood out and draws my attention: “KOANS ARE ANCIENT PUZZLES IT TAKES A SPACE TO SOLVE”. On the top level of the palimpsest in red ink we find characters for zen, and wabi sabi, and also a little playful pun on the part of the poet. One imagines him smiling as he writes in bold red ink: “IT’S ZENSATIONAL”!



2 Nietzsche's Kōan of Eternal Recurrence and Albert Saijo's "Bodhisattva Vows"

There is perhaps a connection between a rhapsody and a kōan. Socrates criticizes the rhapsode Ion for not having knowledge of what he recites as he cannot explain, give an account of what he speaks. With a kōan even if one did provide a sound argument to explain it, that wouldn't be enough to pass the test. Take the first kōan, Joshu's "Mu" for example:

A monk once asked Master Joshu, "Has a dog the Buddha nature or not?"
Joshu said, "Mu!" (Shibayama 1974: 19)³²

Even if one could explain that explain that *mu* (無) not only serves as a negation, but also can mean 'emptiness,'—which, of course, is the wisdom of *The Heart Sūtra*, the teaching that everything is empty of inherent or separate existence and is thus the perfect response to the question whether a dog has Buddha Nature or not—it wouldn't be enough to pass the test. As the thirteenth century Chinese Zen Master Wumen (Japanese *Mumon*) had put it: "for the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind" (Shibayama 1974: 19). For the point of the kōan is not intellectual understanding, but rather the experience of *satori*, that sudden enlightenment, profound transformation in the deepest depths below the surface consciousness of the discriminating mind. It is not enough to understand "Mu," as Mumon explained, "one must *be* 'Mu.'" It is not enough just to think about it, as Mumon had put it: "one must concentrate with your 360 bones and your 84,000 pores, making your whole body one great inquiry" (Shibayama 1974: 19). One wouldn't pass the test until the kōan has done its trick in becoming a catalyst for transformation.

If one takes that famous line from *The Heart Sūtra* as a kōan, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," it would not be enough to explain that "form" is just the translation for Sanskrit *rūpa*, the "body," the first of the five aggregates, and thus be able to explain how the line is not such a paradox at all as the body is the branch of the self in the Buddhist analysis most obviously empty of inherent existence.³³ One would really have to get it—this wisdom of *śūnyatā*—all the way down in the deepest depths. But what about Saijo's kōan, what is a dead rat's ass worth anyway? I think this is probably a more difficult kōan, much more difficult for most of us. The simple merely intellectual explanation is the same for Joshu's "Mu." It is the same wisdom of *The Heart Sūtra*: the bodhisattva Padmapani, avatar of Avalokiteśvara, as depicted in the famous painting from the Ajanta caves, holds the lotus, symbol of enlightenment, out to all beings, including, of course, the rat. The wisdom of *śūnyatā* is supposed to lead to compassion for all sentient beings, but this is hard to really put into practice when it comes to rats. Perhaps it would take a space to solve this kōan, being in the space of a rat.



Bodhisattva Padmapani, Ajanta Caves, India, 5th century. Public domain.

We know that music was a problem for Plato. It would be too dangerous for the guardians in the *Republic*. As Socrates explains to Glaucon, it "is a more potent instrument than any other," and this is,

as Socrates further explains “because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward place of the soul” (Plato 1892b: 88).³⁴ The rhapsodes are especially dangerous, Socrates explains to Ion, because they are not in their right minds when they sing their beautiful poems, but rather are “like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus” (Plato 1892a: 502). Perhaps the most important clue Nietzsche gives about *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is when he attaches the subtitle “*Incipit Tragoedia*” (the tragedy begins) to the opening lines of *Zarathustra* in the closing lines of Book IV of the *Joyous Science* (Nietzsche 2018: 221). Here he suggests that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a tragedy. It may not have the form of a tragedy, but its aim was what he thought was the highest aim of art, what he saw in Greek tragedy, in the Dionysian power of transfiguration—in the capacity of art to change us. The book would then not only be about the transfiguration, or overcoming of humanity, it would aim to bring this about and the thought of eternal recurrence would be the catalyst for this transformation.

In this respect perhaps the thought of eternal recurrence is best considered, not as a metaphysical truth about the way time works or what really happens after death, but as a kōan.

The kōan of eternal recurrence, if you will, would be what Nietzsche calls *the greatest weight*: “What if one day or night a demon came to you in your most solitary solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live again, and innumerable times again’” (Nietzsche 2018: 220-21). Nothing would seem to be worse than the fate of having to live this same life over and over throughout eternity. Surely most of us would want things to be different, to change at least those loneliest moments. It is easy to see why the thought of eternal recurrence is so closely connected with the thought of *amor fati*, the love of fate, which Nietzsche expresses as a new year’s resolution, just a few short months after the thought of eternal recurrence came to him like a bolt of lightning by the famous pyramidal rock Nietzsche encountered while walking around Lake Silvaplana: “I want to come to regard everything necessary as beautiful—so that I will become one of those who makes everything beautiful. *Amor fati*: from now on, let that be my love! I do not want to wage war against the ugly. I do not want to accuse anyone, I do not even want to accuse the accusers. May *averting my eyes* be my only negation! All in all, and on the whole, some day I hope to be an affirmer” (Nietzsche 2018: 177).

Nietzsche’s resolution to accept everything necessary as beautiful echoes the acceptance of fate in the Stoics, and resonates with something similar in Zen, which may be traced back to Daoism, especially to the *Zhuangzi*. In that text, Zhuangzi tells stories about characters with unusually powerful charismatic power (*de* 德) as a result of the way they have handled what has happened to them, their circumstance or fate (*ming* 命). My favorite is the humorous story of the ugliest man. He was ugly enough to astound the world, and yet everyone was drawn to him in an extraordinary way. He didn’t have power to protect them, nor wealth to fill their bellies, but he had such powerful charisma because he didn’t let the oscillations of fate upset the harmony of his spirit (*qi* 氣). This ability to “harmonize and delight” in the oscillations of fate and “never be at a loss for joy” enabled him to “make it be spring with everything” (Watson 1964: 70).³⁵ Nietzsche’s new year’s resolution was to become just such a character.

Despite the seriousness of the thought that Nietzsche calls the greatest weight, there is also a sneaking suspicion that the thought of eternal recurrence might be considered something of a joke. One might recall that Plato would ban, not only music and poetry, but also laughter, at least for the guardians, and thus, for the philosophers.³⁶ Persons of worth and especially the gods are not to be represented as overcome by laughter. Nietzsche’s response, stated toward the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, is his

proposal of “an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter” (Nietzsche 1966: 232).³⁷ Then there is that last mad letter, perhaps the last thing Nietzsche ever wrote, just a couple of days after he collapsed on the streets of Turin, where he explains that he is “condemned to while away the next eternity with bad jokes” (Hayman 1982: 335).³⁸ The importance of laughter is one of the interesting resonances between Nietzsche’s thought and Zen.³⁹

There is also, surprisingly, despite all the speeches and the songs, quite a bit of silence in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. As one would expect with Nietzsche, there are many kinds of silence in *Zarathustra*, all depending on the state of the soul, or psychology of the silent one; though generally, Nietzsche’s basic question is whether the silence is the result of discontent, suffering, *ressentiment*, or abundance, affirmation, joy. The main drama of the tragedy involves the protagonist’s own development and overcoming of suffering. For that he must overcome the “menacing silence” of the soothsayer and his nihilistic teachings (Nietzsche 2005: 117). In the remainder of the story Zarathustra will eventually become exultant in experiencing an “unclouded silence” and a “blissful silence” (Nietzsche 2005: 210, 259). In affirming *amor fati* and the thought of eternal recurrence, Zarathustra overcomes the hidden “vengeful silence” he encounters in the section titled “On the Tarantulas.” I think perhaps the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy might be summed up right there when Zarathustra explains: “For that humanity may be redeemed from revenge: that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long storms” (Nietzsche 2005: 86).

I think this is perhaps where one may find the most interesting resonance between Nietzsche’s thought and Zen, between Zarathustra’s rhapsodic songs and Albert Saijo’s Zensational rhapsody. In a recorded reading of the poem “BODHISATVA VOWS” Saijo begins with a few edifying remarks:

Now when you take up the study of Buddhism, or maybe it’s just Zen Buddhism, you take these four vows. They’re all impossible vows, like one is ‘Beings are numberless, and I vow to save each and every one of them.’ That’s going to take an awful long time. The others are just as impossible.

The audience erupts in laughter as Albert explains the absurdity of the bodhisattva vows. It would take an awful long time to save each of the numberless beings. The bodhisattva vow to save each and every one of the numberless beings is just as absurd as Zarathustra’s thought of eternal recurrence. Neither view logically makes any sense. Yet just as the thought of eternal recurrence is a catalyst for change, for overcoming the longing for another world that turns the earth into a wasteland, the bodhisattva vow to save each of the numberless beings is perhaps a revolution in Indian philosophy, a catalyst for change in overcoming the longing for liberation from this world of birth and death.

As I sit here in the house built by Albert Saijo, at a place called *Kalani Honua* on the edge of a volcano, I can hear the song of the apapane resounding from the forest. They often come down to joyfully bathe in the waters of the bodhisattva bird bath I set up in the garden. It is really the perfect setting for contemplating the absurdity of the human condition. Here we are living on perhaps the best planet in the whole universe for all we know, certainly the best our species will ever be able to inhabit, and yet we are on the verge of rendering it uninhabitable. What is wrong with human beings? One might begin with the simple fact that for too many human beings, especially those most responsible for our global crisis, the earth is not our home. Nuclear war and anthropogenic climate extinction would simply be inconceivable if the earth were really recognized as our home. One of the striking affinities

between Existentialism and Zen is the stern refusal to look beyond this world for the source of meaning and value. Instead of longing for liberation from this world of birth and death, there is a resolute acceptance of mortality, a determined focus on the present moment, and an affirmation of this life.⁴⁰ One should perhaps also consider how much the desire for exorbitant wealth drives both global conflict and climate change.⁴¹

The wisdom of *The Heart Sūtra*, seeing how everything is “interbeing endlessly interwoven,” leads to the bodhisattva vow. The Mahāyāna elevation of the bodhisattva must surely have been shocking when *The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* first arose on the Indian subcontinent. Instead of longing for liberation from the round of rebirth, the bodhisattva vows to be reborn again and again in order to help all beings—the numberless beings including, of course, even the rats. If Nietzsche had been aware of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the bodhisattva ideal, I suspect he would have approved. If beings are numberless, then the bodhisattva’s return is an eternal return. Nietzsche thought affirming eternal recurrence could be a catalyst for a new kind of human being, overcoming the spirit of revenge, and becoming capable of a love that is a gift rather than an investment.⁴² If such a transformation were possible, it would lead to a different way of being in nature—the whole psychosis of our modern civilization driven by the madness of the wealth-producing machine would simply fall away like leaves from a tree in autumn.

Ah, but of course, it might already be too late, and the ship is just too big to turn fast enough. The prospects of getting off the Titanic and on board the Hōkūle‘a don’t seem very bright. But that is our fate to live in such a time. Nietzsche recommends *amor fati* and Dōgen reportedly once said: “I now while away my time accepting whatever may come.”⁴³ But let’s leave the last words here to Albert Saijo. Instead of “expressing both disdain and a degree of resignation with the Bodhisattva role” as Masatsugu suggests (Masatsugu 2013: 59), I think Albert’s poem expresses a cheerful embrace of the bodhisattva vows. Perhaps it is helpful to know that in Saijo’s handwritten draft the poem bears the title “TO BODHISATTVAS WORLDWIDE.” Some of his poems do express that beat down weariness that led Kerouac to name the Beat movement, but Saijo is not just barking here. In this message to all who would take on the bodhisattva vows one can hear his encouragement and his laughter. I recommend listening to his voice in reading the poem.⁴⁴ What we have here is a great example of Albert Saijo’s Zensational rhapsody.

BODHISATTVA VOWS

BODHISATTVA VOWS TO BE THE LAST ONE OFF THE SINKING SHIP— YOU SIGN UP & FIND OUT IT’S FOREVER—PASSENGER LIST ENDLESS —SHIP NEVER EMPTIES—SHIP KEEPS SINKING BUT DOESN’T GO QUITE UNDER— ON BOARD ANGST PANIC & DESPERATION HOLD SWAY—TURNS OUT BODHISATTVAHOOD IS A FUCKING JOB LIKE ANY OTHER BUT DIFFERENT IN THAT THERE’S NO WEEKENDS HOLIDAYS VACATIONS NO GOLDEN YEARS OF RETIREMENT—YOU’RE SPENDING ALL YOUR TIME & ENERGY GETTING OTHER PEOPLE OFF THE SINKING SHIP INTO LIFEBOATS BOUND GAILY FOR NIRVANA WHILE THERE YOU ARE SINKING—& OF COURSE YOU HAD TO GO & GIVE YOUR LIFEJACKET AWAY—SO NOW LET US BE CHEERFUL AS WE SINK—OUR SPIRIT EVER BUOYANT AS WE SINK (Saijo 1997: 127)

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- 1 Albert Saijo, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY* (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1997).
 - 2 Jack Kerouac, Albert Saijo & Lew Welch, *Trip Trap: Haiku on the Road* (San Francisco: City Lights/Grey Fox Press, 1973). The title of the book recalls both Gary Snyder’s book *Riprap* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Saijo lived many years in northern California, in Marin and Mendocino, writing daily, filling notebooks with his distinctive handwritten poems, and developing his talent in architectural design and carpentry. In a brief biographical article, Patricia Wakida describes Saijo as “equally skilled as a designer, woodworker, as he was as a philosopher and poet.” Wakida goes on to quote Saijo’s long-time literary colleague Hisaye Yamamoto Desoto’s words after *OUTSPEAKS*, his first solo collection of poems, is finally published: “At long last, Albert Fairchild Saijo has let loose his poems upon the world. Whether you read them in amazement, read them in an attitude of reverence, or read ‘em and weep, they are not to ignore.” Patricia Wakida, “THROUGH THE FIRE: Albert Saijo, Karmic Heart,” *The Rafu Shimpō*, 25 January 2013. (URL: <https://rafu.com/2013/01/through-the-fire-albert-saijo-karmic-heart/>; last accessed on April 7, 2023). In his introduction to a posthumously published collection of poems, the poet Jerry Martien describes Saijo as “a post-apocalyptic wisecracking prophet, speaking the language of the human future.” Jerry Martien, “POET INSTAR: WITH ALBERT SAIJO IN THE COUNTRY OF WORDS,” in Albert Saijo, *WOODRAT FLAT* (Kāne‘ohe, HI: Tinfish Press, 2015).
 - 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2018).
 - 4 My serious reflection on Nietzsche began in a graduate seminar on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* taught by Graham Parkes in the fall of 1985. What began then culminated in a dissertation chaired by Parkes: Timothy J. Freeman, “Written and Painted Thoughts: Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Turn,” The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, 1995. See also: Timothy J. Freeman, “The Shimmering Shining: The Promise of Art in Heidegger and Nietzsche,” *Comparative & Continental Philosophy* 5, no 1 (2013): 49–66.
 - 5 Saijo’s widow Laura, who served as his editor, assures me that Albert read Nietzsche. Ann Charters tells the story of the origin of the Beat moniker when John Clellon Holmes, in his apartment in Manhattan in the autumn of 1948, asked his friend Jack Kerouac to “come up with a term describing the ‘questing’ quality of their group in the fervent years after the end of World War II.” Kerouac responded: “It’s a kind of furtiveness. Like we were a generation of furtives [. . .] a kind of beatness. [. . .] a weariness with all forms, all the conventions of the world. [. . .] So I guess you might say we’re a *beat* generation.” Charters adds that if Kerouac had shared Holmes’s passion for philosophy, he might have said “we’re an *existentialist* generation.” She goes on to explain: “Yet for what would become the loosely associated group of postwar US-American writers known as the Beats, the existentialist quest to redefine the meaning of existence would be at the heart of their poetry and fiction.” Ann Charters, “John Clellon Holmes and Existentialism,” *The Philosophy of the Beats*, ed. Sharin N. Elkholy (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 133–4.
 - 6 Like many in my generation, my interest in Zen began with reading Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, still one of my favorite books. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Signet, 1958).
 - 7 Graham Parkes has suggested resonances between Nietzsche’s thought and both Daoism and Zen, emphasizing Nietzsche’s importance as an ecological thinker in numerous papers. See, for example, Graham Parkes, “Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as Ecological Thinker,” *Nietzsche’s Futures*, ed.

- John Lippit (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 167–88; “Nietzsche and East Asian Thought: Influences, Impacts, and Resonances,” *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 356–83. See also Jason M. Wirth, *Nietzsche and Other Buddhas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); André van der Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen: Self Overcoming Without a Self* (Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania: Lexington Books, 2013); Manu Bazzano, *Buddha is Dead: Nietzsche and the Dawn of European Zen* (Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2006). I respond to Parkes’s work in the following: Timothy J. Freeman, “Staying True to the Earth in Zarathustra, Zhuangzi, and Zen,” *The Wandering Dance in the Philosophy of Graham Parkes: Comparative Perspective on Art and Nature*, ed. David Jones (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).
- ⁸ Doug Herman, “For Four Years, This Polynesian Canoe Will Sail Around the World Raising Awareness of Global Climate Change,” *Smithsonian*, 23 June 2014. (URL: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/for-four-years-this-polynesian-canoe-sail-around-world-raising-awareness-global-climate-change-180951786/>; last accessed on April 5, 2023). Information about the *The Malama Honua Worldwide Voyage of the Hōkūle‘a* can be found on the *Polynesian Voyaging Society* website: <https://www.hokulea.com/worldwide-voyage/>; last accessed on April 5, 2023.
- ⁹ As President Kennedy put it in the famous speech: “Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness.” John F Kennedy, “Address before the General Assembly of the United Nations,” 25 September 1961. For the latest on climate change see the recent IPCC report: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Lösschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA. (URL: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>; last accessed on April 7, 2023).
- ¹⁰ One may wonder why Saijo writes in ALL CAPS. In his introduction to *WOODRAT FLAT*, Jerry Martien tells the story when he had asked Saijo to submit a poem for “a little bioregional mag” he was editing: “The writing he gave me was brilliant, sardonic, and funny, and there was a lot of it. Hand-written, all in capital letters, page after page of prose poem and journal in no order that I could easily discern. [...] The manuscript was also visually challenging. Artist’s sketchbook pages filled with wild lettering in pencil and colored ink, all caps, no punctuation but dashes, with words crossed out or marked for insertion. It was a mess. It was a visual manifesto, beautiful in the way of someone trying to get a job done. A calligraphy for a language stripped down to essentials. But how could I reproduce it in a low budget black-and-white mag” (Martien 2015: 11). The only recourse would be to typeset in ALL CAPS; but this, of course, would already be something of a translation, missing much of the visual manifesto. But why ALL CAPS? Is it that he is shouting, raising his voice like a field preacher, barking like a dog in a cage? Wakida, who interviewed Saijo in his Volcano cottage, interprets Saijo’s ALL CAPS voice as “a prophet incanting at a feverish pitch, upon a burning volcano.” She also quotes Gary Snyder’s explanation: “All caps and dashes, Albert Saijo’s poem is a great life’s strong song” (Wakida 2013). Martien provides further clues in thinking about how to reproduce Saijo’s poems in the magazine: “In big blocky letters, maybe, like a telegram. Or like a radio script or press release, which were traditionally in capital letters for clarity and ease of reading aloud. Nowadays in an age of instant transmission, caps are perceived as shouting. Use your lower-case voice for writing, says a culture whose literacy is in bits of information and tiny clicks of eye and fingertip. In reading Albert’s capital letters it helps to remember the fat pencil you printed with before you learned cursive or typing. [...] Or think of the caps in the speech bubble of comics” (Martien 2015: 11). When leafing through Albert’s hand-written poems one can see there is something childlike about the script, as well as the obviously intentional misspellings like “THOT” or “NUTHING” that show up here and there in his wizened reflections.

- 11 In response to a great crisis facing humanity Nietzsche sees a need for preparatory human beings, those
12 “with the ability to remain silent, solitary, resolute, contended with and persistent in invisible activity,”
13 human beings, he continues, “who have an inner inclination to seek in all things that which is to be
14 *overcome* in them” (Nietzsche 2018: 181).
- 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).
- 16 Lynn White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, no. 155, (1967): 1202–07.
- 17 Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963). The name “George Baso” obviously points
18 to the 17th century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō who is regarded as the greatest master of haiku.
- 19 Patricia Wakida, “THROUGH THE FIRE: Language and Silence—The Poetry of Asano Miyata
20 Saijo,” *The Rafu Shimpō*, 27 December 2012. (URL: <https://rafu.com/2012/12/through-the-fire-asano-miyata-saijo-1891-1966/>; last accessed on April 7, 2023).
- 21 Nyogen Senzaki, *Eloquent Silence* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008).
- 22 Wakida informs us that Albert had “a treasured memento from his father’s early education in the
23 U.S.”—a copy of *Leaves of Grass* inscribed in his father’s strong hand “Satoru Saijo November 1908,
24 Chicago Illinois,” (Wakida 2013).
- 25 Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Sun My Heart,” in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler, (Berkeley,
California: Parallax Press, 1996), 162–70.
- Malcom Cowley, “Introduction,” in *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, The First (1885) Edition* (New York:
The Viking Press, 1959), xvi.
- John Muir was born in Scotland, and his father had immigrated from there because he found the
Church of Scotland not quite strict enough. From all accounts, the father imposed the strictest
discipline on the son. By age eleven the young Muir had learned to recite “by heart and by sore flesh”
the whole of the *New Testament* and most of the *Old Testament*. See Stephen R. Fox, *The American
Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). It may
have been in part this strict discipline, and the need to escape his father’s hand, that the young Muir
took to frequently wandering the Scottish countryside, and then his later legendary sojourns, hiking
great distances in the mountains of the US-American West. It was at least in part this love of hiking in
the wilderness that led to Saijo’s affinity with Muir. In the early 1970s Saijo wrote a brief guide to hiking
in the wild. In the introduction, Saijo expresses admiration for the “light, simple, and elegant”
backpacking style of the 11th-century Tibetan yogi Milarepa, who reportedly hiked though the Himalaya
mountains with nothing more than “a few religious objects and a bowl.” Closer to home, Saijo draws
attention to Muir’s example: “He had a beautifully austere backcountry style that contrasted perfectly
with his exuberant nature.” Albert Saijo, *The Backpacker* (San Francisco: 101 Productions. 1972), 5–6.
Martien explains that it was Saijo’s essay “Me, Muir, and the Sierra Nevada,” which had convinced him
“to finally take Muir’s writing seriously” (Martien 2015: 11). See Albert Saijo, “Me, Muir, and the Sierra
Nevada,” in *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California*, ed. Peter Berg
(San Francisco: Planet Drum Foundation, 1978), 52–9. Muir, of course, frequently drew inspiration
from Emerson, and this perhaps draws a connection between Saijo and Nietzsche, as the latter also
expressed his enthusiasm for Emerson’s writings and is known for his solitary sojourns hiking in the
Engadine Alps.
- See note 10.
- For a recent documentary on internment of Japanese Americans, see [‘80 Years Later’](#) (IMDb, 2022).
- Plato, “The Ion,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol. 1, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1892a), 497–511.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

- 26 Albert Saijo, “LIFE DIES IN A GREENHOUSE: A FAST FORWARD VIEW OF CATASTROPHE” *PLENTY TIME FOR HAPPY NOW* (Unpublished manuscript, 2005, typescript).
- 27 Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 77.
- 28 Martien explains Saijo’s word INSTAR: “Some of the rockiest terrain was Albert’s vocabulary, especially the biological Latin. Sometimes I just walked around these outcroppings of Albert’s learning, but then I’d see it again from another ridge and go back to look it up. INSTAR was one of these. I thought it was coined from the verb in-stár, to cover with stars or become like a star. That was the connotation it carried, and one of the definitions I found. But it’s also a biological term, conveying another, emblematic meaning: an arthropod or hard-shell invertebrate between molting. A being in its temporary or provisional form” (Martien 2015: 13).
- 29 Michael Masatsugu, “Haiku on the Road: Albert Saijo’s Contested Historical Legacy,” *Amerasia Journal* 39, no. 3, (2013): 57–82.
- 30 Albert Saijo, “A Recollection,” *Trip Trap: Haiku on the Road* (San Francisco: City Lights/Grey Fox, 1989).
- 31 It turns out that I not only have some responsibility in caring for Albert’s Volcano cottage, which I rent from his widow, I also have taken on custody of his literary papers. After his death they were entrusted to a friend, who has subsequently entrusted them to me, figuring that they belonged in Albert’s house.
- 32 Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), 19.
- 33 Donald Lopez Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 57.
- 34 Plato, “The Republic,” *The Dialogues of Plato*. Vol. 3. trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892b): 1–338.
- 35 Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 70.
- 36 As Socrates explains to Glaucon: “Neither ought our guardians to be given to laughter. For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction” (Plato 1892b: 71).
- 37 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 232.
- 38 Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 335.
- 39 The importance of laughter in Zen is part of the Daoist influence on Zen. In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, The Kyoto school philosopher Keiji Nishitani calls attention to this laughter: “The most remarkable feature of Nietzsche’s ‘religion’ may be the sound of laughter that echoes through it.” He compares Nietzsche’s thought with Zen Buddhism, “the history of which,” he notes, “also reverberates with laughter of various kinds.” Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 180, here 66. Graham Parkes has also emphasized the importance of laughter in Nietzsche, Daoism, and Zen. In an essay drawing out some of the resonances between Nietzsche’s thought and Daoism, he points out that both *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the *Zhuangzi* “are deeply humorous—each constituting perhaps the most amusing philosophy of its tradition—emphasizing laughter as an often necessary concomitant of insight into the way things are.” Graham Parkes, “The Wandering Dance: Chuang Tzu and Zarathustra,” *Philosophy East and West* (1983): 235–50, here 236.

- 40 It is worth noting that when Lynn White praises the “beatniks” for their affinity for Zen, he also remarks that he doesn’t think Zen will ever be influential enough to make much of a difference. He closes his essay by suggesting a transformation of Christianity by going back to the radical views of Saint Francis of Assisi. He suggests that the prime miracle of his life was that he was not burned at the stake for his views in which he “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (White 1967: 1206). To his credit, the current pope, who took his papal name from this saint, published an important Encyclical Letter on the problem of climate change, subtitled the document “On Care for Our Common Home.” Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter LAUDATO SI’ (24 May 2015).
- 41 As the foreboding dark clouds in the gathering storm of war with Russia loom larger on the horizon, I think it would be wise for everyone to listen to President Kennedy’s words in the “Peace Speech” given a few months before his assassination. They seem as relevant today as they were then. John F Kennedy, “Commencement Address at American University, Washington D.C.,” 10 June 1963. (URL: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610> last accessed on April 5, 2023). I also highly recommend the film: Cory Taylor, *JFK: A President Betrayed* (Passion River Films, 2014).
- 42 Graham Parkes suggests a resonance between Zarathustra’s “bestowing love” and the “abundant generosity” of the bodhisattva. Graham Parkes, “Nature and the Human ‘Redivivized’: Mahāyāna Buddhist Themes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Nietzsche and the Divine*, ed. John Lippit and Jim Urpeth (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 181–99, here 183. Parkes also suggests that this generosity of the bodhisattva and Zarathustra opens up “the possibility of a radically new way of being for the human” which is “profoundly relevant for ecological thinking.” See: Graham Parkes, “Nietzsche’s Environmental Philosophy: A Trans-European Perspective,” *Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 1, (2005): 77–91, here 81.
- 43 Nishitani draws attention to Dōgen’s remark in suggesting a resonance with Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence: “We seem to be breathing the same pure mountain air that we felt in approaching the standpoint of Dōgen” (Nishitani 1990: 180).
- 44 *Jan Ken Po: Live in Honolulu, Poetry of Gary Snyder, Albert Saijo, and Nanao Sakaki* (Elepaio Press, Hawai’i Dub Machine & Limakokua Productions, 2003). (URL: <https://soundcloud.com/kevin-diminyatz/33-saijo-bodhisattva-vows?in=kevin-diminyatz/sets/albert-saijo-reading>; last accessed on April 5, 2023).