

Matsuo Bashō and the Art of Haiku

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Of all the forms of traditional Japanese literature that have gained sustained appreciation in the West, the shortest of the various traditional Japanese verse forms, the haiku, written in seventeen syllables (broken down into patterns of 5-7-5), has become the most widely appreciated. American school children study and write them in their literature classes. The famous "frog poem" of Matsuo Bashō has been quoted again and again as a superior example of how much a short poem can suggest.

Furu ike ya

The ancient pond-

kawazu tobikomū

A frog leaps in.

mizu no oto

The sound of the water.

(Translation by Donald Keene)

Bashō (he usually goes by his "artistic name," rather than by his family name, Matsuo) was born in 1644 and died in 1694. He took the haiku form, which as yet showed little in the way of high literary accomplishment when he was a young man, and turned it into a surprising vehicle for a touching, often profound means of high artistic expression. For most readers and writers of haiku in Japan, he remains the greatest, and most daring, poet of all.

Writing haiku in English has by now become a tradition in itself, with its own rules and possibilities, many of them based on the possibilities of our language. In the traditional Japanese form, however, there were established a number of set regulations that were almost always followed by haiku practitioners. Here, by way of example, is a simple example of the rules that Bashō himself adopted and which are, on the whole, still followed today in Japan. Each poem is to include four elements, chosen for their congruence with the larger subject of the poem.

1. season
2. location (in a general sense)

3. time of day
4. the "atmosphere" which the poem is to suggest or elucidate.

Take this striking poem from the beginning of one of Bashō's celebrated travel diaries, *The Record of a Weather-exposed Skeleton (Nozarashi kikō)*, composed sometime after his trip of 1684-5.

Nozarashi o

Determined to fall

kokoro ni kaze no

A weather-exposed skeleton

Shimu mi ka na

I cannot help the sore wind

Blowing through my heart.

(Translation by Yuasa Nobuyuki)

The four elements are, of course, concealed and need to be teased out of the poem itself. With a little careful reading, an observant reader can intuit that (1) the season is the autumn, (2) the location is outside, an exterior scene, (3) the time of day is doubtless dusk, and (4) the general "atmosphere" is sad. Actually, in the context of the diary, which mixes prose and poetry, Bashō explains that he is in ill-health and is setting out on a journey from which he may not return. In this case, the prose helps explain the poetry.

When Bashō began writing his poetry, he had inherited a form which was basically comic in artistic intent. These short poems were often strung together in long sequences, called *renga*, or linked verse, a communal form of expression involving a number of poets working together. Usually it was the most accomplished poet or teacher who wrote the opening verse, or *hokku*, which set the tone for the whole sequence. The assembled group of friends would add on to this verse, as best they could, following a series of complex and ingenious rules. Bashō himself was a professional teacher of haiku poetry, which is how he made his living, and he wrote *hokku* for his students, who learned from their teacher how to develop their own individual skills. Many, if not most, of Bashō's students were amateurs, from a variety of walks of life. This art was considered a very democratic one, that could be practiced by men and women of all social classes. Reading his philosophical and moving travel

diaries, one forgets that Bashō often made these trips as a means of supporting himself, locating and teaching students all over Japan. Thus what we now refer to as haiku most often began, in Bashō's case, as hokku, relatively complex poems that were written to show more ingenuity, and often more profundity, than the poems of his disciples that would follow in the sequence. These hokku of Bashō came to stand alone, and the term haiku which we now employ eventually came to be used to describe them. The art of renga has more or less died out in the past hundred years or so, but the art of writing contemporary haiku still goes on.

Despite the fact that Bashō was a famous man during his own day, it seems surprising that so little is known about the details of his life. Incidentally, his artistic name "Bashō" refers to a kind of tree, with brittle leaves, an altogether appropriate image to characterize the subtle sense of transiency that characterizes his poetry. He came, apparently, from a minor samurai family, and he showed so much literary talent as a youngster that he was made an attendant for the son of the Lord of Iga province, an area now in Mie prefecture. Bashō thus received superior training in such traditional aristocratic pursuits as Japanese and Chinese classical literature, as well as calligraphy. While a teenager, the Lord's son suddenly died, and Bashō was given the task of taking his friend's memorial plaque to the great Buddhist monastery at Mt. Kōya, located in the mountains not far from Osaka, and still one of the great religious sites in Japan today. He never returned to his home province. Although details are sparse concerning this period in his life, Bashō apparently fled to Edo (the traditional name for modern Tokyo), may have married, and eventually settled down there as a teacher. His early poems which have been preserved were composed very much in the comic styles popular at the time, but eventually his poetry began to take on an added depth and luster which attracted a number of gifted students and practitioners.

How did Bashō come to change the tradition? In my view, it was through his introduction of some significant elements of Japan's great literary past into a more mundane and popular present. In one famous passage, he describes his art and the figures from the past who inspire him.

Saigyō in traditional poetry, Sōgi in linked verse, Sesshō in painting, Rikyō in the tea ceremony, and indeed all those who have achieved real excellence in any art, possess one thing in common, that is a mind to obey nature, to be one with nature, throughout all the seasons of the year. Whatever such a mind sees is a flower, and whatever such a mind dreams of is the moon. It is only a barbarous mind that sees other than the flower, merely an animal mind that dreams of other than the moon. The first lesson for the artist is, therefore, to learn how to overcome such barbarism and animality, to follow nature, to be one with nature.

(Translation by Yuasa Nobuyuki)

These comments about the need to put oneself in tune with nature help explain much about the art of haiku, but Bashō's cultural heroes are basically from the earlier medieval period, and they are among the greatest figures in the entire Japanese cultural tradition. They all show a strong attachment to a Buddhist sense of the transience of the world and to the transcendental nature of truth. Saigyō (1118-1190), a courtier turned Buddhist monk at the end of the Heian period, is one of Japan's great religious poets, who wrote in the 31-syllable classic waka form. Sōgi was the master of the medieval renga form, mentioned above. Sesshō (1420-1506) was the most renowned of the medieval ink painters, and Rikyō (1522-1591) perfected the Japanese tea ceremony.

All of these masters had an interest in the arts of classical China as well, and indeed Sesshō actually traveled in China, where his paintings were apparently much appreciated. Through such examples, Bashō also came to appropriate some of the values of classical Chinese art and literature as well; indeed, the poems of the great Chinese Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770) were to remain a particular inspiration for Bashō during the length of his mature period. To choose such high and classical art as a model was a daring move, but Bashō so loved the creations, and the ideals of these men, and he absorbed them so well, that through the example of his own writing he was able to infuse what had been until his time a popular art with a powerful and suggestive level of deeper spiritual truth.

Yet, the artistic challenge for Bashō was great. How can a brief poem of 17 syllables convey such depth or profundity? Careful readers of Bashō's poetry over the generations find three different strategies that he, and the best of his successors, were able to develop. The first of these is what might be termed an "impersonal" quality. Brevity means that there is no space to include the kinds of common and descriptive words used in English or American poetry. Personal pronouns, or an expression of direct states of emotion "I feel happy, she feels angry" have to be ruthlessly omitted. Personal involvement can only be suggested through indirect means. As Bashō underscores in the passage cited above, the poet must become one with nature, so that, by revealing the truth of the object, as the poet perceives it, one reveals the truth about oneself.

Here is another famous passage, taken down by a student of Bashō, who reported that the master spoke as follows.

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on your subject and do not learn. Your poetry issues of one accord when you and the object have become one-when you have

plunged in deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well-phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural-if the object and yourself are separate-then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit.

(Translation by Yuasa Nobuyuki)

In brief, what you choose to feel and express shows in your poetry who you are. A second strategy for giving depth to such brief poems is to take advantage of the nature of the Japanese language itself. Many words used in Japanese poetry have multiple meanings and poetic resonances developed in a thousand-odd years of use. The poet who can take advantage of these characteristics can pack in a great deal of meaning in a short space.

Thirdly, haiku depends on the creative power of the reader, who must learn to bridge the gap between the images and the deeper meaning that lies behind them. A good haiku often juxtaposes two statements or images. The creative reader can learn to put them together. Remarkably, each image is often defined in terms of the other. Here, for example, is a famous poem of Bashō included in what is probably his most famous work, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*Oku no hosomichi*).

Shizukasa ya

Such stillness-

iwa ni shimi-iru

The cries of the cicadas

semi no koe

Sink into the rocks.

(Translation by Donald Keene)

The reader is presented with two parts to the poem. The first is the word for "silence," or "stillness." The second is a sound: the cry of the cicadas. A sharp noise thus creates a sense of its opposite, absolute quietness. To make such a poem succeed, however, it is the reader who must connect the two. In that sense, reading haiku requires a highly developed level of intuition on the part of the reader. This kind of skill is quite different from the kind of intellectual knowledge need to read, say, the poetry of Wordsworth or T. S. Eliot. The feelings, that sense of unarticulated potential, are what give haiku its special vibrancy and life.

For many lovers of haiku, Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is his most moving and accomplished achievement. Never published during his lifetime, this travel journal has become one of the true classics of Japanese literature, and, through a number of translations, is widely known and appreciated around the world. This poetic journal, which purports to be an account of Bashō's travels in the northern parts of Japan, was based on notes taken by the poet during his trip which he undertook in 1689, but they were heavily reworked over a number of years, so as to move the journey from a literal account of the facts to a whole new level of spiritual insight.

During the trip, Bashō was accompanied by one of his most gifted disciples, Kawai Sora (1649-1710). When Sora's own diary of the trip was discovered in 1943, the differences were immediately apparent. Sora carefully recounted the events of each day and explained one of Bashō's actual purposes in making the trip, that of spreading the art of haiku into the hinterlands, and, of course, finding a way to support himself by serving as a teacher and an occasional judge for local poetry contests. Bashō's text, however, while not neglecting these aspects of his trip altogether, makes the trip a journey into the self, taking the opportunity to remove himself from his ordinary life in order to meditate on the higher realities of things, and even to attempt to reach a state of enlightenment by putting his art at the service of the Buddhist-influenced spiritual traditions of which he felt himself a part.

The diary is written in what is called *haibun*, or "haiku-prose," and the results are elliptical, elegant, and suggestive. Translating a work of this kind into a language such as modern English, so different from Tokugawa literary Japanese, is a complex, perhaps thankless task, but there are now a number of translations of this diary which, when read together, can give at provide at least some measure of the extraordinary beauty, wit, elegance, and profundity of the original.

When dealing with haiku, the matter of translation is a crucial one, for capturing the elusive originals in English (or even in modern colloquial Japanese) is difficult. Here, for example, are a selection of translations of the famous frog poem cited above, both serious and satirical.

From Earl Miner, a distinguished scholar of Japanese literature:

The still old pond
and as a frog leaps in it
the sound of a splash

From Allen Ginsberg, the famous "beat" poet:

*The old pond
A frog jumped in
Kerplunk!*

From James Kirkup, well-known American poet and translator:

*Age-old pond stillness,
Jump of a frog disturbs it
With a little plop.

pond

frog

plop!*

(all from Satō, One Hundred Frogs)

If the high art of haiku can be said to have begun with Bashō, it certainly did not end there. He had many disciples, and many admirers since his own lifetime, and those who enjoy this form will enjoy reading of many of their poems. There are excellent translations of the writings of Yosa Buson (1716-1783), of Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), and in the modern period, of Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Taneda Santōka (1882-1940), and many others, right down to the present day.

The art of haiku is still very much alive. The very surface simplicity of the form allows persons of even modest poetic experience to try to write poems, and the more relaxed rules adopted by various reform movements in the twentieth-century have made new, sometimes daring experiments possible. In the end, however, whether or not they make direct use of Bashō's poetics, modern and contemporary haiku poets are happy to acknowledge Bashō as the father of the form; they either accept him, as a good son or daughter might be expected to do, or rebel against him. But they cannot forget Bashō.

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Suggested Reading

Translations of Bashō:

Matsuo Bashō. *The Narrow Road to Oku*. Translated by Donald Keene. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1997.

Yuasa, Nobuyuki. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*. New York: Penguin Books, 1966.

Corman, Cid and Kamaike Susumu(trans.). *Back Roads to Far Towns: Bashō's Oku no Hosomichi*. New York: Mushinsha-Grossman, 1968.

Background reading:

Shirane, Haruo. *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Ueda, Makoto. *Bashō and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Later poets:

Yosa Buson:

Ueda, Makoto. *The Path of Flowering Thorn: The Life and Poetry of Yosa Buson*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Kobayashi Issa:

Yuasa, Nobuyuki. *The Year of My Life*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1972.

Ueda, Makoto. *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966.

Anthologies, including haiku originally written in English:

Heuvel, Cor Van den. *The Haiku Anthology* New York: W. W. Norton 1999.

Satō, Hiroaki *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku in English*. New York: Weatherhill, 1983.