

THE POETICS OF THE BASHŌ SCHOOL

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Bashō was not simply a great poet and diarist, he developed probably the most significant poetics of the Tokugawa period. He was not a systematic theorist: from his own hand we have only a few relevant passages from his journals, *haibun*, and letters to his disciples. In order to obtain a substantial portrayal of his aesthetic ideas, we have to turn to the writings of his disciples. The works that appear closest to Bashō's own ideas are *Kyoraishō* (Selections from Kyorai, 1702-04) by Mukai Kyorai (1651-1704) and *Sanzōshi* (Three Books, ca. 1702) by Hattori Tohō (or Dohō) (1657-1730).

The beginning of Tohō's "Red Book" is a particularly rich source for studying Bashō's ideas about the ideal state of mind and the creative process. Bashō continued the medieval attitude that poetry is not just an artistic practice, but fundamentally a spiritual discipline. Concentration of mind, rectification of spirit, and ceaseless striving are required. Central to this discipline is the loss of the "self" which results in *makoto* (genuineness), a term important in the Shinto, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions.

Tohō speaks of two ways of achieving the state of mind of *makoto*. The first is a unity with the mind of the master, Bashō. "If one does not understand the Master's mind, there simply is no path to follow toward genuineness. In order to understand his mind, one needs to follow the traces of his poetry, know them well, and thereby correct the course of one's mind. To endeavor to understand by submitting in this way can be called striving after *makoto*." Like certain great poets before him, Bashō became an object of cultic practice, ritually remembered and imitated by those who came after.¹ But Tohō's statements center not on ritual worship but on a meditative unity--the goal is the attainment of Bashō's own realization. One loses one's self by a complete absorption into the Master's poetry in order to take on his mind. "If they seek the Master's mind relentlessly, their own mind will become tinged with its hue and scent." Poetry becomes an avenue of meditative unity with a master's consciousness, recalling the mind-to-mind transmission advocated by Zen Buddhism.

Such a complete dedication to Bashō's poetic mind also involves adopting his poetic practice. Here we see a second form of unity, another mode of losing the self. Tohō states, "The Master said, 'Learn of the pine from the pine, learn of the bamboo from the bamboo.' In other words, one must become detached from the self." What this means is not immediately clear, and in several places Tohō expresses his concern about misunderstanding. "If one understands this idea of 'learning' in one's own way, the result will be no learning at all. 'To learn' means to enter into the object and to feel the subtlety that is revealed there.... For example, no matter how clearly one represents an object, if the poem lacks the feeling that arises naturally out of the object, the self and the object would form a duality and the feeling would not have attained genuineness. Instead, the poetic meaning would have come from the self." Such a mind, free of the artificial self, merges with the object without obstruction {2b}. "The color of the mind becomes the object," he says. One who has lost the artificial self and achieved unity with the object has *makoto*.

The goal here is not simply to achieve a consciousness in which there is a unity of subject and object. Nature has "feelings" and it is the poet's task to enter into the feelings of that which is around him, to merge with them, and to give them voice. In one of his *haibun*, Bashō states "A person who can identify with the feelings of the things in nature and express them in words, he is a master of poetry." {97}

¹ For a discussion of this cultic practice, see James Foard, "The Loneliness of Matsuo Bashō," in Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps, eds., *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, The Hague: Mouton, pp. 363-391.

Two different influences seem to be at work here. Taoism and Neo-Confucianism hold a dynamic, vitalistic view of nature in which things have not only principle (Chinese, *li*; Japanese, *ri*) but also a kind of spirit (Chinese, *ch'i*; Japanese, *ki*; or Chinese, *shen*; Japanese, *shin*). This idea of entering into the spirit of the object can be found in the writings of several Chinese poets.² A second influence is the indigenous tradition of animism and shamanism associated with Shinto and Japanese folk religion. Central to native Japanese belief is the presence of a sacred vitality in certain objects as well as the tradition of mediums giving voice to spirits. The term translated above as "master of poetry" is *hijiri*, the name of Japan's traditional shamanistic ascetics. Bashō's ideal of giving voice to the feelings of a bamboo plant can be seen as a merging of mysticism and shamanism.

A poet who can enter into an object's vitality and give voice to it "makes the moon and flower one's very heart." A mind thus freed of the artificial self moves with fluid responsiveness and manifests creative spirit (Jpn: *ki*; Chi: *qi* or *ch'i*) [Red Booklet]. It is within such a state that true haiku poetry comes with spontaneous immediacy. Tohō quotes his master frequently in this regard: "let there not be a hair's breadth between you and the writing desk" {5a} so that the verses comes "before the illumination of the object disappears." {7a} Words come "like felling a huge tree, slashing deep into the hilt, splitting a watermelon, or biting a pear." There is a suddenness, a "shaking out," of writing with no separation between vision and writing. This can occur because the poet is in a state of genuineness, with no artificial self, no willful ego, deciding and directing the creative process.

As a result, Bashō says, we can distinguish between two kinds of poems. Those that arise spontaneously within genuineness "grow" by themselves. In the state of unity with the object, "the color of the mind becomes a poem." But if the self is involved, then a poem is artificial, it is "made." In such a situation there is a duality between subject and object, which cuts the flow of the mind and kills the creative spirit.

The creative process is a natural arising of words in response to the perception of the object. The poet does not write the poem in the sense of deliberate, calculated, willful production. The poet, emptied of self and unified with the object, is the medium for creation to happen. For Bashō, this is how nature works, and the poet follows nature's own creativity. In his travel journal "Record of a Travel-Worn Satchel" (*Oi no kobumi*), he says what unifies the great artists is that they "follow nature, are a companion to the turning of the four seasons." The ideal, then is "to follow nature, return to nature." Bashō uses an unusual term for nature here, *zōka*, "creative nature." This word, which originated in Taoist literature,³ implies a sense of nature as creation. There is no implication of nature as the object created by a transcendent and definable deity. Instead it seems to suggest an ongoing, organically self-generating process, and idea which draws from the Taoist and Neo-Confucian traditions more than Buddhism. The poet is a companion to nature in part by being the vessel for spontaneous creativity.⁴ Thus, he says in the Red Booklet, the "transformations of nature are the seed of the poetic spirit." {7a}

Bashō's poetics, then, bring together elements from a wide variety of traditions. The result is a complex ideal for the poet's state of mind as well as a significant, though loosely defined, metaphysics.

² See several quotations from Chinese poets in James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, ... pp. 36-43.

³ See, e.g., chapter six of the *Chuang-tzu*. Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu* p. 85. {The term also appears in haibun 59}

⁴ The notion of nature as a vessel of creativity the artist can imitate can be found in Zeami. See Rimer, *The Art of the No*, pp. 118-119. There is in Bashō, however, a vague sense of a creator, primarily in the sense of a divine artist who brings about the manifold beauty of nature. [haibun 59, 67] This seems more a personification of the wondrous creativity of nature than a belief in a transcendent creator deity.