

An Interview with David Landis Barnhill

by Robert D. Wilson

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RDW: Thank you, Professor Barnhill, for allowing me to interview you. Your essay in Matsuo Basho's Poetic Spaces is insightful and lays to rest some of the myths prevalent in today's Blyth influenced Western English-language haiku community. You address the term *zoka*, which some scholars translate as nature, and tell us that translating *zoka* as nature can be misleading and, as such, doesn't address the term's true meaning, that the notion of nature is a cultural construction. What exactly is *zoka*? How is it different from the Western definition of nature?

DLB: In the West we normally think of nature as a collection of things: trees, toads, rocks, etc. Or we may think of it as a place, such as a wilderness area. *Zōka*, which I translate as “the Creative,” does not refer to either of those. It is the vitality and creativity of nature, its tendency and ability to undergo beautiful and marvelous transformations. It is not a place or collection of things, nor is it something outside nature that is directing it or bringing things into being—thus the translation of “the Creator” is misleading. *Zōka* is the ongoing, continuous self-transforming creativity of the natural world.

RDW: Basho's words regarding *zoka* are stern and unrelenting, warning poets not to ignore the *zoka* in their poetry, and to avoid poets who do not include the *zoka* in their artistic expressions. In essence, he calls this ignorance, the antithesis of refinement and beauty.

"Saigyō's waka, Sōgi's renga, Sesshū's painting, Rikyū's tea ceremony---one thread runs through the artistic Ways. And this artistic spirit is to follow zoka, to be a companion to the turning of the four seasons. Nothing one sees is not a flower, nothing one imagines is not the moon. If what is seen is not a flower, one is like a barbarian; if what is imagined is not a flower, one is like a beast. Depart from the barbarian, break away from the beast, follow zoka, return to zoka."

If this were Basho's day, and he was alive now, would he approve of kigoless haiku?

DLB: I like the way you put this, stern and unrelenting. He is being extremely dualistic here: you are either working with (or within) *zōka*, or not. And the notion of beauty is crucial, and here he is being non-dualistic. Rather than the crude notion of pretty (flowers and moon), everything is beautiful, because everything is the transformation of *zōka*, so we should see everything as beautiful (flowers and moon).

I think Bashō would argue for the inclusion of season words, certainly for the seasonality of haiku poetry in general. A moment in nature is always a moment in a particular season. To really see nature is to see it in a particular season. Of course American haiku is free to evolve according to its own insights, but we should realize how important seasonality is in Japanese poetry and why it is important. Then if we want to move away from it, OK.

RDW: As a follow up question, Professor, what does the above teaching tell us regarding the current day picture many in the Western world have of Basho? He speaks, in this passage, like a seasoned university professor giving a lecture, with confidence and authority.

DLB: I think in this instance he speaks like a Zen master admonishing a disciple. His sharp language is intended to emphasize what is at stake. Pretty ain't good enough. What is at stake is whether you have made the transformation so you can be fully part of the workings of reality—the reality of this world, which is ultimate reality. Whether it is religion or the arts in East Asia,

the goal is to really, truly see how reality works and to harmonize with it – to participate in it. This is true of Confucianism and Daoism and Shinto, as well as Buddhism. You have to really see it, though, and then you really have to change. Being truly “natural” – acting according to our true nature and the true nature of reality that we are a part of – is what is most difficult.

RDW: How complex was Basho's world? You state in your essay *The Creative in Basho's View of Nature and Art* that "meaning is not simply textual (confined to the text at hand)" but cultural and intertextual," that "we must consider those texts that shed light on the meaning of Basho's writing." R. H. Blyth and Kenneth Yasuda maintained in their writings that Haiku is a Zen poetic genre, yet as current day research has revealed, Basho's world view wasn't confined to Zen Buddhism, and included in the broader Chinese religio-aesthetic tradition, which includes Daoism and Confucianism, as well as aesthetic ideas and ideals in the Chinese poetry and painting. You also point out in your footnote that Basho also was influenced by Shinto and Ainu shamanic animism.

DLB: When you see religion as a Way, a path to follow, you look around for anything that helps in pursuing that Way. The West is such an either-or culture. Think of someone who says she is Jewish and Christian and Muslim – those traditions tend to be (but don't have to be) highly exclusivist. They are dealing with one God and one Truth. But for most in East Asia, religions are paths through life, which involve insight into reality and certain spiritual qualities and states of mind. So it is natural to incorporate more than one religion. But then each religion is itself a mixture. Zen Buddhism, of course, is highly influenced by Daoism. Neo-Confucianism brings together classical Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Shinto and Buddhism co-existed and intermingled for most of the last thousand years. I have argued in an article that we should see religions as cultural ecosystems, each one made of different cultural elements. Culture itself is an ecosystem, made of interrelated cultural elements, everything interpenetrating to one degree or another. Put differently, religions are “empty” in the Buddhist sense of the term, empty of own-being, of discrete autonomy. Religions interexist.

Besides, life is infinitely complex. Why should we think one religion has it all?

RDW: Since the *zoka* is ever-shifting and never static, and Basho tells us that to ignore the *zoka* in our poetry is a barbaric act, what does this tell us about the art of haiku composition?

DLB: Lose yourself. If you are writing poetry out of will and desire and reason and emotional attachments, you will write barbarically. If you throw away “all the junk that goes with being human” (from a Gary Snyder poem), then you can write out of your true nature as it responds to the true nature of the ever-shifting reality we are a part of. Important here is that “barbaric” refers to what in the West we might consider civilized, particularly the rational will. We tend to associate barbaric with being natural, as opposed to being cultured and civilized. For Bashō and East Asia (Daoism and Neo-Confucianism also), to be the most cultured is to be the most natural. This points to more issues and deeper complexities, because to be natural doesn't mean you drop culture but ingrain yourself with it. The natural/highly cultured poet knows the tradition and knows the old poems and the rules, because they (supposedly) reflect and direct the way to see reality and nature deeply. But you also have to lose yourself. The Jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker said, “you've got to learn your music, you got to learn your sax, and then you have to forget it all and just blow.”

RDW: You state that Basho and the Chinese thinkers before him saw a parallel between art and the creativity of nature. In footnote 54, of your essay, you posit: "Basho's valorization of spontaneity can be seen in his distinction between a poem that naturally "grows" and a poem artificially "made" by the will of the poet." You go on to state that following the *zoka* in the composition of poetry transcends human design. Would you elucidate further?

DLB: Again, Bashō is being quite dualistic. You can try to make a poem, using your reason and will and ego. The result may be highly complex and polished, but it's a poem YOU made. The alternative is to enter into a state of intense concentration of both energy and consciousness, totally focus on the moment at hand, be fully open, and ... don't do anything. Let the poem come. One of the terms used is "wait." Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) talked about that long long ago, and that idea was picked up by poets in China, and Bashō. Waiting means don't act willfully, let your true nature and *zōka* working through you to bring the poem into being. That's a grown poem. I don't make my tomato plants grow, but I try to create the conditions in which they will grow.

Western writers also talk about this. Sharon Butala, the author of the book *The Perfection of the Morning*, has described her writing process this way. "When I was ready, I sat down at my desk and typed [the words] *The Perfection of the Morning*, then waited in that state of suspension of writers like me, of held breath, obliviousness to one's surroundings, the moment fraught with tension and with prayer, a kind of intense concentration not on some particular but on emptying oneself so that the right words might have room to form. And then, as so far has always happened, ideas began to flow, to shape themselves into words, sentences, paragraphs, as I typed."

The best statement about this that I am aware of is by the poet Denise Levertov, in her "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse" (in the book *The Poet in the World*). Discussing what was wrong with a poem she was struggling with, she states, "...the words themselves were straining; instead of waiting in that intense passivity, that passive intensity, that passionate patience which Keats named Negative Capability and which I believe to be a vital condition for the emergence of a true poem, I was straining to find words; the word had not found me." Here's Bashō's distinction between a made poem and a grown poem. The key is to enter into the state of being totally focused and open.

But she makes an even more complex statement. She claims that in the case of a poem that has undergone revision over a period of time (those with a "known history"), the same kind of spontaneity is at play as poems that come to you without any need of revision ("inspired poems"). Revision can and should be spontaneous as well. "Poems come into being in two ways," she says. "There are those which are--or used to be--spoken of as inspired; poems which seem to appear out of nowhere, complete or very nearly so; which are quickly written without conscious premeditation, taking the writer by surprise... There is nothing one can say directly concerning the coming into being of "given" or "inspired" poems, because there is no conscious process to be described. However, in considering what happens in writing poems which have a known history [with revisions], I have come to feel convinced that they are not of a radically different order; it is simply that in the "given" poem the same kind of work has gone on below, or I would prefer to say beyond, the threshold of consciousness. The labor we call conscious is... not a matter of a use of the intellect divorced from other factors but of the intuitive interplay of various mental and physical factors, just as in unconscious precreative activity; it is conscious in that we are aware of it, but not in the sense of being deliberate and controlled by the rational will..."

RDW: R. H. Blyth and Kenneth Yasuda, in their writings, call haiku a Zen Buddhist poetic genre. I see infused in Bashō's poetry a conglomerate of belief systems that include, besides Zen Buddhism, other sects of Buddhism (Pure Land, etc.), Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and shamanic animism practiced by the Ainu. What gives? Blyth and Yasuda refused to budge in their beliefs regarding this area. How widespread was the influence of these beliefs systems on the poets of Bashō's day?

DLB: It is simpler and sexier to say Bashō is a Zen poet. To talk about Pure Land Buddhism in his writings, or Shinto or shamanism, probably seems to some to dilute his Zenness, especially since our Western culture has a far lower view of Pure Land's pietism, or the earthiness of Shinto or shamanism, than of mystical Zen and its high philosophy. Yet all of these beliefs—more importantly their values, states of mind, personal qualities, and practices—were part of the cultural ecosystem of Bashō's day. But really, the same is true of the West. Our modern consciousness has a mixture of views from the Bible, Greek and Roman philosophy, Catholic theology, Protestant theology, and Freud (I could go on). It doesn't all cohere. We also have ruthless capitalist notions of individual autonomy and belief that in our system wealth goes to the worthy, and also communitarian views and care for others. All in the tasty soup of our mind!

RDW: One final question, Professor. Many English-language haiku poets are declaring that the need for a kigo in their haiku is not necessary. They also denounce the use of some Japanese aesthetic tools in the composition of their haiku which are more object-biased than activity-biased. Professor Haruo Shirane says that many modern English-language haiku are haiku-like poems written in the Imagist tradition. Your feelings, please.

DLB: Professor Shirane is right (and always worth reading). Americans are familiar with about 200 or so of Bashō's haiku – mostly those in the Imagist tradition. Or we might say the tradition of the modern haiku poet Shiki. Spend a long time with a wider variety of Bashō's poems, and you start getting a more complex picture. And spend more time with the seasonality and season words of his poems. In my translation of around 750 of Bashō's haiku (*Bashō's Haiku: Selected Poems of Matsuo Bashō*), I emphasized the season they were written in and listed the season word(s) in the notes. My original format for the translation was seasonal in the traditional Japanese sense: all his spring poems, then all his summer poems, and so on. A manuscript reviewer of that version rejected that format because we wouldn't be able to see how his poetry developed. Yes, that's true, but it shows how we focus on the person rather than seasons (which is nature combined with time). If the translation would have been arranged seasonally instead of chronologically, it is the moment of the poem that would stand out, rather than the poet. So I regret the format of my translation became biographical, though there are good reasons for that, too. But at the least I would like to see any substantial translation of his poetry identify the season words. I think the more familiar you are with this part of Bashō's writing and of the haiku tradition, the less likely you are to dismiss it.

Another aspect of the diminishing of haiku is the rejection of titles or introductory notes. Those also are normally erased in translation, but they are part of the poetry that Bashō created. Without them we get less of the poetry Bashō gave us. But titles and introductions are not part of the Shiki-Imagist tradition. And so you virtually never find them in American haiku. I think that diminishes the genre. But we do have a growing respect for haibun, which can function like an extended introduction to a haiku. Haibun can be a particularly rich way to write haiku.

David Barnhill is Director of Environmental Studies and Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. His translation of Bashō's haiku, *Bashō's Haiku: Selected Poetry of Matsuo Bashō* (SUNY, 2004) includes over 700 haiku with a brief commentary on each. His book *Bashō's Journey: Selected Literary Prose by Matsuo Bashō* (SUNY, 2005) is the most complete English translation of Bashō's prose, including all five travel journals, his one diary, and many of his haibun. David has also published several articles on Bashō's spirituality and he teaches a course called "Japanese Nature Writing."