

BASHŌ'S HOKKU

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Traditional Japanese poetry--waka, renga, and kanshi--continued to be written in the Tokugawa period, but a new genre developed that became the preeminent poetic form of the period: haiku. Not only does it remain a principal verse form in Japan, it is now an established literary form in North America as well.

Actually what we call haiku is a modern term. The genre developed out of *haikai no renga*, a "comic" form of renga that became especially popular in the 17th century. The first verse in a renga, called *hokku*, took on increasing importance to renga poets, and with Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) *hokku* began to assume a nearly independent status as a self-sufficient poem rather than the first link in a chain of verses. During the last 100 years fully independent *hokku* have been called haiku. Bashō not only helped to emphasize the *hokku*, he took the playful and irreverent *haikai* spirit and merged it with the poetic depth found in medieval Japanese and classical Chinese poetry and the spiritual profundity of Buddhism and Taoism, elevating *haikai* to the level of high art.

Bashō's *hokku* have had a great appeal among Westerners, but they also can be quite baffling to the student of Japanese religion and literature. Consider, for instance, his most famous verse:

<i>furu ike ya</i>	old pond--
<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>	a frog jumps in
<i>mizu no oto</i>	water's sound

It is common, and understandable, for someone new to Japanese literature to ask: how can this be considered a great poem? So a frog jumps into a pond--how could there be significant meaning in such a simple poem? It is important to take such puzzlement seriously, for it is based on common assumptions about the nature of imagery, the role of the reader, and the meaning and value of poetry, assumptions that could block or distort understanding if not explicitly dealt with.

Many Western students of literature are used to *analyzing* poetry, "figuring out" its meaning. One common aspect of such analysis is the explication of symbols, the assumption being that a symbol (e.g. dove) stands for something else (e.g. peace), and the reader needs to determine that reference, which is what the symbol means. (Consider, for instance, the rich tapestry of symbols in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland.") A second assumption is that poems have a theoretical content that we need to explain. In light of these assumptions, the commonplace nature of Bashō's imagery and the sheer brevity of the "old pond" poem make this verse an unlikely candidate for profundity and complexity.

The significance of the poem begins to appear, however, when we shift to a different notion of imagery. Usually (though not always), images in Bashō's *hokku* are not symbols standing for something else; they old pond "stands for" an old pond. This conception of language is related to what has been called the Buddhist critique of symbols, in which the dualism between the image and its symbolic meaning collapses.¹ An American Buddhist poet Kenneth Rexroth suggests this idea strikingly in his poem "Aix en Provence--Spring." (Note that Rexroth uses the term "image" here with the meaning of "symbol.")

There are no images here
In the solitude, only
The night and its stars which are
Relationships rather than
Images. Shifting darkness,
Strains of feeling, lines of force,
Webs of thoughts, no images,
Only night and time aging
The night in its darkness, just

¹ See William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), chapter 1.

Motion in space in the dark....
...It isn't an image of
Something. It isn't a symbol of
Something else. It is just an
Almond tree, in the night, by
the house, in the woods, by
A vineyard, under the setting
Half moon, in Provence, in the
Beginning of another Spring.²

If images do not stand for something else but instead indicate sensuous phenomena, what does reading consist of? As William LaFleur has said, "this aesthetic mode lives off the way it *redirects* our focused attention to phenomena for their own sake," in order to cultivate the "simple recognition of phenomena."³ But the simplicity involved in reading Bashō's *hokku* is not simplistic for it involves entering deeply into the scene presented. The poem, then, is not a bearer of symbolic meaning, it is a catalyst for experience.

While the images are not symbols, they do have associations that are important for a full experience of the poem.⁴ Consider the following verse:

ara umi ya
Sado ni yokotau
ama no gawa

Stormy sea--
stretching out over Sado Island
heaven's river

The poem begins with an image of a rough sea, its cold waves visible to the horizon. From the expansive image of the sea our vision is narrowed to Sado Island, which sits small and unmoving as the sea buffets its shore. It is important to know that Sado was famous as a place of exile: the solitary island is inhabited by isolated people. The coldness of their condition matches that of the waves, their powerlessness paralleling that of the island before the sea. In the middle of the second line, our vision shifts to "heaven's river" (the East Asian term for the Milky Way) which lies over the island. The change is dramatic: from the biting cold of the sea to the quiet coldness of the stars, from the turbulent waves of the Sea of Japan to the still stream of heaven's river, from the momentary life of the waves and the relatively momentary lives of the people on island to the eternity of the heavens. The waves are not quieted, the cold remains, and the island still stands alone, but all of this seems covered by (or perhaps drawn up into, as in the 20th century Japanese novel, *Snow Country*) the silent tranquillity of the river of heaven. The poem generates an experience that is acutely sensitive to both the stormy uncertainty and essential solitude of life as well as the cold beauty and entrancing stillness that encircles existence. There is an intense but subtle loneliness, not the disturbing emotion of being in want of a companion but an utterly tranquil feeling of solitude in a vast universe. This particular kind of loneliness was called *sabi*, and Bashō made it his central ideal.

In our discussion of renga we took a textual approach, focusing on the religious significance of the structure and dynamics of the text. With *hokku* it seems appropriate to take a reader orientation,⁵ which fits well with what has been called reception theory or audience response methodology in literary criticism. There are various, even conflicting kinds of reception theory. Our discussion necessarily is limited to some basic aspects of this general orientation.⁶

2 *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 323-324. Rexroth spent most of his life embracing both Buddhism and Catholicism, and was also influenced by Quakerism.

3 Karma of Words, p. 23.

4 Images in *hokku* sometimes do have metaphoric value, but usually the metaphoric meaning is supplemental to or grounded in the sensuous, which remains primary. In interpreting a *hokku* it is best to begin with a sensuous interpretation, then be open to additional metaphoric meaning.

5 One can do the same with renga, considering the structure and dynamics as it is apprehended by the reader rather than as a matter of text.

6 The following discussion is particularly indebted to, though not limited to, the theories of Wolfgang Iser. See especially his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

In reception theory, a work (verbal or non-verbal) is not a self-subsistent object. The "text," i.e., the marks on the pages bound within a particular book may be a singular thing, but the "work" as meaning-bearing phenomenon comes about only when the text is read. The work involves both directives which guide the reader and gaps which allow the reader to actively enter the generation of meaning.

The notion of meaningful gaps in the work is a particularly significant idea for Bashō's *hokku*. They often have a contrast which the reader must somehow embrace in the reading experience (rather than explain or intellectually resolve): the stormy sea and heaven's river; dawn twilight and the whiteness of a fish; chrysanthemum's scent and a worn sandal; the cry of a bird and a tall iris; an old pond and the splash of a frog. In addition to such contrasts, Bashō was a master of synesthesia, which necessitates the reader embracing a sensual paradox in his or her experience.

<i>umi kurete</i>	the sea dark,
<i>kamo no koe</i>	the call of a duck
<i>honokani shiroshi</i>	faintly white

Such contrasts involve a kind of experiential space, an opening for meaning. In Japan, *ma* or open space has been an important notion not only in painting, gardening, and architecture but also in literature.⁷ Bashō criticized some of his disciples poems for "saying too much." "A haiku should not leave nothing to say," he once said, and asked a disciple, "What is the point of giving a full description?"⁸ A *hokku* should have an open ambiguity that draws the reader into actively fulfilling the scene's details and the poem's meaning in imaginative experience. The significance of *yohaku* or blank space in Bashō's *hokku* may, in fact, have metaphysical significance, suggesting a kind of Nonbeing from which phenomena emerge and to which they return in the impermanence of life.⁹ Such a metaphysics has an affinity with Bashō's notion of creative nature, discussed in the section on Tokugawa aesthetics. In both cases, the view has a significant Taoist flavor.

Thus the realization of the meaning of Bashō's *hokku* depends on the readers. And it is important to recognize the diversity of factors that affect reading: the readers' literary sensitivity; their knowledge of conventions and associations in Japanese literature; their readings of the rest of the poet's works; their knowledge of the socio-historical context of the time and the religious traditions involved; the breadth and depth of their personal experience (someone who has not seen the Milky Way stretching out across the heavens in the silence and clarity of nature will be limited in their experience of the "stormy sea" poem); etc.

The meaning of a poem such as "old pond" or "stormy sea" is thus reader-dependent and plural. This multiplicity of meaning comes in part from the fact that different readers have different levels of expertise in the factors mentioned in the previous paragraph. But meaning also will be plural simply because meaning--the experience of the poem by the reader--is unique not only to each reader but also to each particular reading by the reader.

It is not surprising then that the interpretations of the religious character of Bashō's *hokku* has varied considerably. Let us consider here two very different kinds of interpretation of the "old pond" poem. Bashō's *hokku*, in particular this poem, has been read as an indication of *satori*, the Zen enlightenment experience. Recently an American Zen Master and literary critic, Robert Aitken, has presented an extended interpretation "from the fundamental standpoint of Zen." For Aitken, the image of the old pond suggests that "Bashō is lost in the samadhi of [Buddhist absorption into] an old pond, ...just as the Buddha was deep in the samadhi of the great ocean."¹⁰ This absorption, however, is not the final step. It is with the frog's leap that Bashō broke through samadhi into enlightenment, just as the morning star catalyzed the Buddha's

7 For a discussion of *ma* see Richard Pilgrim, "Intervals [ma] in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-aesthetic Paradigm in Japan," *History of Religions* 25.3 (1986):255-277.

8 See Kyoraishō, collection made by his disciple Kyorai. For a partial translation, see "The Essays of Kyorai," by H. H. Honda, *Reeds* 8 (1962):5-69, especially p. 25.

9 For a discussion of *yohaku* (blank space) in Bashō's poetics and its metaphysical implications, see Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), especially 63 and 73-74.

10 *A Zen Wave: Bashō's Haiku and Zen* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), 19, 27.

awakening. Indeed, he says, all the *hokku* Bashō wrote from that point on are indications of the same enlightenment experienced by the Buddha and all Zen masters. (Note that Aitken locates the meaning of the poem principally in the mind of the poet.)

Another approach to this poem has eschewed such an identification of the poem and Buddhist enlightenment and focused on what we could call the psycho-sensuous experience of the scene itself and an implied metaphysics. If we let ourselves be absorbed in the poem's setting, we can begin to feel an elemental stillness. "Old" gives rise to the feeling not simply of great age but of the suspension of time, an eternity not of unending duration but of utter timelessness. Suddenly (we cannot say how long there has been no movement) a frog leaps. Just as suddenly, in the third line, the frog has disappeared. There has been a change in senses as well, from visual to aural--the sound of the water. The sound too disappears in a split second, and we are left with the ringing silence that follows an abrupt intrusion of sound: the old pond is once again silent, while our listening remains acute. For a time, however, something of the frog and the sound remains--the ripples on the pond--a kind of visual echo which we imagine without any words to that effect. Soon these too will disappear and the pond will return to utter stillness.

This poem, like "stormy sea," embraces opposites: silence and sound, movement and stillness, sound and sight. The tranquillity of the scene is not broken by but rather contains the frog's leap and the water's sound, the stillness accentuated by their sudden appearance and passing away. The momentary existence of the frog and sound within the encompassing stillness gives rise to the subtle loneliness of *sabi*, though less intense here than in the "stormy sea" poem.

In this reading, the poem has religious meaning in at least two ways. First, there is a significant metaphysics here, shared by the "stormy sea" poem as well as others. The reader experiences a sophisticated type of "eternity," not a transcendental realm but a subtle but pervasive aspect of the phenomenal world. There is an essential dimension of timelessness, stillness, and a impersonal solitude that is part of the very fabric of reality, a dimension that (to borrow a phrase from a very different thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas) does not destroy the fleeting, uncertain, and at times painful aspect of our lives but presupposes and perfects them in a cosmic beauty. Second, the psychology involved includes an absorption into reality (see the discussion on unity with phenomena in the section on Bashō's poetics) and a mood of *sabi* that combines sorrow and calm in a melancholy tranquility that opens us to the vast and timeless dimension of reality.

The openness, ambiguity, and complexity of Bashō's *hokku* allow both of these kinds of readings. One could, following some reader-response critics, claim that the two readings arise from two different "interpretive communities," one Zen, the other attempting to clarify the experience and metaphysics without identifying them any sectarian tradition. To a certain extent we can leave Bashō's *hokku* open, allowing both approaches. Aitken's reading does have a limitation, however, in being such a complete and simple identification with Zen enlightenment. Such a move seems to close the door to receptiveness to the complexity and uniqueness of his writings, particularly when his literary prose is considered (see the section on Bashō's journals and *haibun*). A more helpful approach would be to inquire in what ways the second reading accords with traditional Zen descriptions of enlightenment (e.g., the metaphysics of an ultimate dimension of timelessness and stillness within the phenomenal realm, and the psychology of equanimity), and in what ways it differs from them (e.g. the special place of loneliness, and themes in his prose that seem to run counter to traditional Zen or more closely parallel Taoism or Confucianism).

However, we do not want to present a definitive and exclusive interpretation of Bashō's *hokku*. Instead we offer some starting points and directions into the recognition of the subtlety and complexity of these poems. In particular a reception oriented approach seems particularly helpful in realizing the meaning of his poetic works. It helps to show that a verse about a frog jumping into an old pond can indeed have religious significance.