

# THE JOURNALS OF MATSUO BASHŌ

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## *A Hermeneutical Approach to the Journals of a Wayfaring Poet*

The long tradition in Japan of diary literature reached perhaps its greatest peak with the journals of Matsuo Bashō. His five travel journals and one diary present a compelling portrait of one person's spiritual life and in the process display sophisticated religious thought. His *haibun*, short pieces of poetic prose, are also rich sources of religious meaning.

Because of the autobiographical character of Bashō's prose, we will focus here on the world view and way of life presented in the journals. With such a goal in mind, the methodology of phenomenological hermeneutics is particularly appropriate. This method sees the text principally as a projection of a particular mode of being in the world. Interpretation is the explication of that mode of being. Phenomenological hermeneutics focuses on experience, seeing it not as a subjective being experiencing an objective reality but rather a mutual implication of subject and object. That is, subject and object are not separate entities but part of a single field of experience, like poles of a continuum. What the author (for example Bashō) experienced was his particular being-in-the-world, not some objective reality. The text arises out of that experience and is itself a presentation of a mode of experience. But the text's projection of a being-in-the-world is "fictive" (no matter how autobiographical it seems), not exactly equivalent to that of the historical author's. Thus a reader engages the *text's* world of experience, not that of the person who actually wrote the text. Thus when we talk of "Bashō" in this section, we will be referring to the persona in the prose works, not the historical author.

The text was the creation of a different time and place and is therefore distant and different from the reader. But reading allows us to appropriate the text, to actualize it into our own world of experience. That appropriation can never be transparent, for the text remains distant and it is experienced within our particular mode of being. In a sense the reader "puts into play" the world of the text, and as such the reader is himself played by the text.<sup>1</sup>

Thus there are several relationships at work. The author and his world, the author and the text, the self-world relationship embodied in the text, and the reader's experience of that textual world. Interpretation *per se* concerns this last relationship. But we should note that phenomenological hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of another relationship, the reader's own being-in-the-world which is affected by his or her reading of the text. The ultimate goal of reading is self-understanding that arises from the reader's experience of and response to the text.

Given this hermeneutical method, we can approach the religious meaning of the being-in-the-world of Bashō's literary prose in a wide variety of ways. Here we will briefly make use of four: an examination of the religious traditions he participated; an analysis of specific themes in his writings; the application of cross-cultural theories of religion; a discussion of his relation to existing religions.

### *Bashō and His Traditions*

Bashō experiences himself as part of a tradition of religiously motivated travel. The opening passage of his first journal, *The Record of a Weather-exposed Skeleton* [*Nozarashi kikō*], Bashō announces his spiritual intention. "I set out on a journey of a thousand leagues, packing no provisions. I leaned on the staff of an ancient who, it is said, entered into nothingness under the midnight moon."

In particular Bashō sees himself as part of the tradition of ascetic practices (*gyō*). In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*Oku no hosomichi*), for instance, he climbs up to Urami ("back view") waterfall, which you can walk behind and look out from the back of the falls. Bashō offers this verse:

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of the reading aspect of phenomenological interpretation closely parallels that of reader-response theorists. See the section on Bashō's *hokku* for a discussion and application of that approach.

shibaraku wa  
taki ni komoru ya  
ge no hajime

For a while  
confined to a waterfall:  
onset of summer

*Ge no hajime* literally means "the beginning of summer," but it refers to a practice in which monks would go into seclusion in the mountains for ninety days of ascetic practices. Bashō is explicitly associating himself with the tradition of mountain asceticism, but he remains confined only "for a while." His own practice is not seclusion but wayfaring, the *yugyō hijiri* tradition we have discussed in earlier sections.

It is important to consider the *function* of his *hijiri*-like wandering. In part, traveling the countryside was a form of ascetic practice that sharpened both his poetic creativity and his religious vision. But it also served a specific religious purpose of "re-membling" those of the past, not simply recalling people and events of the past but establishing a spiritual bond (*kechien*) with special people. Early in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* he stops at a *shugendō* temple and worships at a statue of En-no-gyōja, the founder of the sect. Focusing on the elevated footwear made especially for rain, Bashō writes:

natsu yama ni  
ashida o ogamu  
kadode kana

In summer mountains  
praying to the clogs:  
departure

Bashō's journals are filled with moments of such communion with monks and poets, in particular Saigyō. 1690 was recognized as Saigyō's *gohaku saiki*, the ritual on the five hundredth anniversary his death. Bashō's journey was in part a rite of remembrance of Saigyō and participation in the earlier poet's religious life.

In addition to the *hijiri* tradition, Bashō also experiences himself in line with the religio-aesthetic tradition of Japan. This tradition includes not only Saigyō but also the painter Sesshu, the tea master Rikyu, and the renga poet Sōgi. In Bashō's words, this tradition is one of following creation and being a companion to the turning of the four seasons. We will discuss this tradition and Bashō's poetics in the next section.

Bashō, then, sees himself as part of two major traditions, the *yugyō hijiri* heritage of religiously motivated, ascetic wayfaring and the religio-aesthetic tradition of a vision that parallels nature's creative power. But Bashō was not simply another example of these traditions. His vision and way of life were unique developments of them. To see this we need to turn to certain themes in his writings that indicate patterns in his mode of being in the world.

## ***Two Themes in Bashō's Journals***

### **1. MUJŌ**

We have seen how *mujō* (impermanence) is one of the most important themes in Japanese literature. Perhaps no Japanese literary writer developed a more sophisticated notion of time than Bashō. Here we can but briefly touch on his vision of impermanence.

Bashō experienced the world as being characterized by what we have called "soft" transformations of the world, change that involves no radical or unexpected disruption. Unlike the Heian courtiers, however, his experience of nature's changes is at times marked by immense scale and a sense of awe: "mountains crumble, rivers change course, roadways are altered, stones are buried in the earth, trees grow old and are replaced by saplings. Time goes by and the world shifts, and the traces of the past are unstable." (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*) It is noteworthy that while these changes are slow and predictable, they are not reassuringly cyclical and the change created is of a scale far more monumental than depicted in Heian literature. In this he is more akin to Chōmei.

Bashō's world is also characterized by another type of *mujō*: the *shōja-hissui* ("those who rise must fall") that is seen especially in *The Tales of the Heike*. In a passage in his *Saga Diary*, Bashō comes upon the grave of Lady Kogo, a former court lady who had been acclaimed the most beautiful lady and finest koto player in the palace but who was banished from the palace at the age of 23.

She lived her daily life in brocades and silks; in the end she turned into dust amid  
the underbrush....

ukifushi ya

take no ko to naru

hito no hate

Wretched

the fate of a person:

bamboo shoots

While Bashō's sense of *shōja hissui* recalls *The Tales of the Heike*, it is far less genteel. He sees not only the bittersweet beauty of nobility overwhelmed, but also the crudeness and thoroughness of death: glory has not only died, it has decayed and putrefied.

The hard edge of Bashō's *mujō-kan* is found also in his sensitivity to the imminence and unpredictability of death. In *A Visit to Sarashina Village* he becomes frightened as he rides on a horse along a narrow cliff-edge path. He dismounts, and a servant promptly seizes the opportunity for a free ride.

Many times I thought he surely would fall; I was terrified as I looked up from behind. Gazing upon the sentient beings of this transitory world, the Lord Buddha must feel the same. When we reflect upon the unremitting swiftness of change, we can see why it is said: "The whirlpool of Awa is free of wind and waves."

The final quotation references to a popular Buddhist poem: "Compared to our journey through his world, the whirlpool of Awa is free of wind and waves."<sup>2</sup> Life is turbulent and we are all like the servant, riding precariously on the edge of death.

Bashō consciously patterned his life after the *yūgyō hijiri* ideal of *sutemi mujō* (abandoning oneself to impermanence), as seen in the first poem in his first journal.

nozarashi o

kokoro ni kaze no

shimu mi kana

Bleached bones

on my mind, the wind pierces

my body to the heart

The bones he imagines are both those who have died on the road before him and also his own.

For Bashō, however, *mujō* does not simply involve the inevitable or imminent passing away of things. It also involves continuity and regeneration. By visiting *utamakura* he is able to witness the traces (*ato*) of the past and to "see into the hearts of the ancients," as he says in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The past survives through centuries and is brought back to consciousness by his own travels and journals.

Bashō not only experiences continuity *through* impermanence but also the continuity *of* impermanence: the ceaseless flow of living, dying, and living. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* opens with this type of *mujō*.

Months and days are the wayfarers of a hundred generations, the years too, going and coming, are wanderers. For those who drift life away on a boat, for those who meet age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey, the journey itself home. Among ancients, too, many died on the

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by Donald Keene, *Appreciations of Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981), 117.

journey. And so I too--for how many years--drawn by a cloud wisp wind, have been unable to stop thoughts of rambling.

Here death is always followed by life, as life is followed by death. This is neither the cyclical change in which spring goes and then returns nor the karmic cycle of rebirth. The images of days, months, and years suggests that what passes will not return: a year once gone is gone forever. The ancients, too, have come and gone, dying on their life's journey, to be followed by other poets and religious practitioners. Now Bashō journeys, and the implication is that he too will die--and that others will follow him. The balance between the acute sense of death with strong sense of historical continuity gives this passage a pronounced tone of solemn celebration.

For Bashō, *mujō* is the central aspect of his religious worldview. Worldview has been defined as what a "religion affirms about the ultimate nature of reality" and it functions as a frame of perception, a symbolic screen through which experience is interpreted.<sup>3</sup> For Bashō, *mujō* shaped his vision of how life ultimately is and it lead to his view of how it ought to be, which he embodied in his wayfaring lifestyle.

## 2. THE JOURNEY ITSELF HOME

The opening passage of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* quoted above makes explicit Bashō's ideal of the wayfaring life. As presented in his journals, his travels are not temporary departures from his normal lifestyle, they are his basic mode of living and his primary religious practice.

It is a *religious* practice for a variety of reasons. He visits numerous sacred sites and expresses deep spiritual sentiment. We also have mentioned that he is part of the *yugyō hijiri* tradition and that he seeks a religious state of mind. But more importantly it is a religious practice because for him it embodies the fundamental nature of existence.

The anthropologist of religion Clifford Geertz has suggested that a primary function religion is to fuse one's worldview with one's values and way of life. The religious perspective is "the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the variety of occupations and lifestyles, Bashō sees all people as wayfarers. Whether or not the boatman and horseman realize it, their life is a journey that ends only in death. But it is not enough for Bashō just to recognize this fact, he feels compelled to embody it directly and concretely in the way he lives. By living as a wayfarer, he "real-izes" the inherent structure of reality. In doing so he "moves with the deepest grain of reality."<sup>5</sup>

Bashō's view that all people are wayfarers suggests another religious aspect of his mode of life. The anthropologist of religion Victor Turner has analyzed an important aspect of human society. We normally think of societies creating a social structure that people are part of. Turner showed us that there is also an "anti-structure," a position outside of the conventional structure. This is often seen in moments of transition, for instance from childhood to adulthood. In many tribal societies, there are rites of passage, in which the young person leaves the village and his childhood identity, and after a "liminal" period spent away, the person returns to the village and is welcomed as an adult. During that liminal period, the person in effect has no social identity. Rites of passage may involve hardships and privations.

There are similarities between this and military boot camps, when the people are no longer civilians but not yet accepted as soldiers. Another kind of liminal ritual is more social, a day or days in the calendar year in which the normal social roles and rules do not apply. Mardi gras is such a ritual.

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<sup>3</sup> See Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 125, and *Islam Observed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 98.

<sup>4</sup> *Islam Observed*, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> *Islam Observed*, p. 102.

Pilgrimages can function as a liminal ritual. People leave their society and join people of other societies temporarily as part of the pilgrimage. After journeying to the pilgrimage site, gaining religious benefits, they return to their home society. During the pilgrimage they have a different identity. Turner found that in pilgrimages, social divisions tend to disappear and people experience “*communitas*,” a feeling of social solidarity with others, even with those who normally inhabit different social classes.

In all of these cases, people step outside normal social structures. They are “betwixt and between” social roles. Bashō’s journals in various ways demonstrate such anti-structure. One key difference, however, between Turner’s notion of pilgrimage and Bashō’s wayfaring is that Bashō presents his wanderings as his basic mode of life, rather than a temporary ritual. The ideal presented in his journals is of a person who is always on the road; it is not a temporary condition but rather his fundamental way of experiencing the world.

We see *communitas* at various points in his journals. While other people divide people into religious sects, occupations, and classes, he sees a *communitas* among all people as wayfarers. In *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* he presents a scene in which structure “holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions.”<sup>6</sup>

I wear no sword on my hips but dangle an alms wallet from my neck and hold a rosary of eighteen beads in my hand. I resemble a priest, but the dust of the world is on me; I resemble a lay person, but my head is shaven. Although I am no priest, here those with shaven heads are considered Buddhist friars, and I was not allowed to go before the shrine.

Bashō’s religious stance is not that of a monk but of a *tonseisha* and ultimately a wayfarer. This gives him a “betwixt and between” status, or statusless status, that characterizes anti-structure. He gives a humorous picture of his liminality in the opening passage of *A Visit to Kashima Shrine*: “I am neither a monk nor a man of the world; I could be called a bat--in between a bird and a mouse.”

### ***Bashō and Religious Traditions***

Of course the fact that Bashō chose not to become an official member of a religious tradition does not mean that those traditions are irrelevant. While he is not, for instance, a Buddhist in the conventional sense of the term, his world view and way of life exhibit certain Buddhist qualities, only one of which can we mention here.

As we have seen, an important aspect of Buddhist thought is nonduality. Nonduality applied even to the distinction between the deluded state and enlightenment, as seen in Buddhist phrases such as “enlightenment is found in the world of passions” (*bonnō sunawachi bodai naru*) and “the deluded mind is itself Buddha” (*mōjin soku butsu*). The Zen master Dōgen is famous for insisting on the nonduality of means and end. For him, *zazen* is not a technique one engaged in for the purpose of achieving enlightenment, it was the enactment of enlightenment.

Bashō also experiences, in a unique way, the nonduality between imperfection and perfection and means and end. His travels are not like pilgrimages, which are temporary journeys directed toward a specific end. His wayfaring is endless: the journey itself is home. Early in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, he falls ill and his sufferings continue through the night and into the morning. But he recalls that the “goal” of his wandering is to resign oneself to death continue on the journey, to cross the next barrier.

My distant journey remained, I was anxious about my illness, and yet this was a pilgrimage to far places, a resignation to self-abandonment and impermanence (*sutemi mujō*). Death might come by the roadside but that is heaven’s will. With those thoughts my spirits recovered a bit, I began to step broadly on my way, and jauntily I crossed the Ōkido barrier at Date.

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<sup>6</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 274.

The nonduality of means and end extends to his attitude toward himself. Because his practice is never concluded, he sees himself as forever incomplete, like the *asunarô* tree, which appears to be the valuable cypress but is not.

"Tomorrow I will be a cypress!" an old tree in a valley once said.  
Yesterday has passed as a dream; tomorrow has not yet come. Instead of  
just enjoying a cask of wine in my life, I keep saying "tomorrow,  
tomorrow," securing the reproof of the sages.

sabishisa ya	Loneliness:
hana no atari	among the blossoms
asunarô	an <i>asunarô</i>

The name *asunarô* literally means "tomorrow I will become..." with the context implying "...a cypress." But the tree will never become a cypress, and Bashô will never complete his journey either. While in several passages Bashô exhibits self-denigration about his incompleteness, ultimately this is not condemnation but realization: reality fundamentally is an endless journey with no climax or completion. But there is, perhaps, something of a Pure Land Buddhist tone in his self-recrimination and sense of imperfection, and the possible affinities between Pure Land and Bashô are worth careful attention.

While Bashô's mode of being is Buddhist in some ways, they depart from traditional Buddhism in other ways. Buddhism began to lose its hold as the predominant religious tradition in the seventeenth century, and Bashô's departure from (and in some cases criticism of) Buddhism may be an example of this. The notion of *karma*, so important to medieval Buddhism, is absent in his works. In fact, early in *The Record of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* Bashô encounters a situation that seems to be presented in a way that the reader expects a reference to *karma*: an abandoned baby by the roadside. After tossing the child some food and composing a mournful poem, he continues his speculation on the cause of the situation. "Why did this happen? Were you hated by your father or neglected by your mother? Your father did not hate you, your mother did not neglect you. This simply is from heaven, and you can only grieve over your fate." Traditional Buddhism would call for an explanation based on past lives that would affirm the cosmic justice of deserved suffering. For Bashô there is no cosmic justice in the normal sense, only the ever-present imminence of death shared by all wayfarers.

This passage is patterned very closely on the writings of the Taoist Chuang-Tzu, and Bashô's notion of fate is far closer to classical Taoism than it is to traditional Buddhism. In fact, Chuang Tzu is alluded to in his writings more often than any other religious thinker. Bashô's self-portrait has several Taoist aspects. The *Chuang Tzu* contains numerous images of wayfaring and flying as the ideal, especially in the first chapter, "Free and Easy Wandering." *The Record of a Travel-Worn Satchel* begins with a description of Bashô as a *fûrabô*, and the image in the first sentence is taken directly from *The Chuang Tzu*.

Among these hundred bones and nine holes there is something. For now let's call it "gauze in the wind" (*fûrabô*). Surely we can say it's thin, torn easily by a breeze. It grew fond of mad poetry long ago; eventually, this became its life work.

This life's work, he relates elsewhere, is quite "useless," a major theme in Chuang Tzu's writings.

Bashô, then, experiences life as an inheritor and participant in the meditational Buddhist, classical Taoist, and shamanistic *yugyô hijiri* traditions. Indeed he most likely saw them as three complementary streams, all of them parts of one religious complex of ideas, attitudes, and practices. This particular mode of being-in-the-world presents to the reader a sophisticated world view and way of life that becomes for us an *ato*, a trace of his life that we can appropriate in our particular way as we travel our own endless journey.