Moments, Seasons, and Mysticism: The Complexity of Time in Japanese Haiku

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In 1689, the 17th century Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Bashō was traveling through the "deep north" of Japan, a journey that would result in his masterpiece, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Well into that journey, he stops at Izumo Point on the Japan Sea and gazes out to Sado Island. He wrote a haibun – a short piece of haiku-like prose – about his experience. Bashō begins by reflecting on Sado Island, which was infamous as a place of exile. The haibun concludes with these lines.

> I push open my window, hoping to soothe for a time the sorrows of the road. Already the sun has sunk into the sea, the moon is dim, and the Silver River hangs across the heavens, stars glistening in cold clarity. As the sound of waves is carried in from out at sea, my spirit seems slashed, my bowels torn apart, leaving utter desolation. I can take no ease on my pillow, and my ink-black sleeves are wringing wet with tears.

stormy sea--
stretching out over Sado,
Heaven's River

araumi ya / sado ni yokotau / ama no gawa

The Silver River and the River of Heaven is what we call the Milky Way, and it suggests a vastness and tranquility that arches over the turmoil of life.

This is beautiful nature writing, but it is also just as importantly, "**time writing**." Much of traditional Japanese poetry, in fact, and virtually all of haiku literature concern experiences of nature and time complexly interwoven. We are used to speaking of cultivating "a sense of place." It is interesting that we rarely speak of cultivating "a sense of time." That sense of time is an essential part of the haiku experience and traditional Japanese poetry as a whole. This paper is a highly abbreviated outline of of "nature-in-time" and "a sense of time" in the writings of Bashō.

Impermanence

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of time is **seasonality**. Every haiku verse is supposed to have a season word, a word that designates the poem's temporal location in the annual cycle. Some of these season words are **obvious**, for example "summer's heat." Some are what those in the West might call **arbitrary**. For instance, unless otherwise indicated, the image of the moon is the full moon in autumn.

Some season words actually refer to **human events**. The season word of the stormy sea poem I just read is Heaven's River, which places the poem in early autumn. This is not, of course, because the Milky Way is an autumn phenomenon, but because the Japanese celebrate the **Tanabata** (the "Star Festival") on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, which is the first month of autumn. The festival is based on the legend that on this night, and only this night, the Oxherd Boy (the star Altair) is able to cross the River of Heaven to be with the Weaver Girl (the star Vega).

Two points about seasonality are worth mentioning here. The most general point is that **nature is always experienced temporally**. There is no "nature" that is not nature in spring, nature in summer, and so on. Seasonality is an essential aspect of *any* place, *any* moment, *any* experience. Such a sense of time actually means that a haiku has **two seasonal locations**. First, it is part of the ever wheeling **annual cycle of the seasons,** with each season itself having its own three-month movement from early to middle to late.

There is also a **second seasonal location**. Because seasonality is emphasized so much, poems of the same season are thought of together – even if they are by different poets from different centuries.

When Bashō wrote the stormy sea verse, culturally it became a part of all of the autumn poems ever written, in particular a part of all the poems about the Tanabata festival of early autumn. Here, seasonality is not an ongoing cycle, but rather one season stretching back through time.

In fact, the **traditional way to anthologize haiku poetry** is seasonal. Whether it is a collection of many poets or just one, the verses are arranged by their temporal location in the seasons. So a traditional collection of haiku begins with early spring poems – written by various poets from various centuries. Season trumps the poet's personal identity and biography.

A second point about seasonality. Season words are a kind of **"eco-cultural phenology."** Phenology is the study of *what* happens *when* in nature. Haiku is shaped by a phenology, but it is an *eco-cultural* one because the designations are rooted not only in the processes of the more-than-human-world but also in the peculiarities of Japanese culture. The Bush Warbler (*Cettia diphone*), for instance, is year-round resident in Japan, but in poetry it is the first bird of earliest spring. After that, Bush Warblers become virtually invisible in the literary tradition. So we can use the term "**Japanese literary seasonality**," which involves an overlapping of nature and culture.

There is also a **broader sense of temporality** in traditional Japanese nature writing. **Impermanence** is one of the major themes in Japanese literature, and certainly in Bashō's works. The moment of experience captured by a haiku poem is a moment in the world's ceaseless flux of life. In some cases, the focus of impermanence is the **past**, with a haiku or a prose passage suggesting the presence of **absence**. One of the most famous examples of this is in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in which Bashō encounters a famous battlefield that has become an unbroken field of grass. As he reflects on the scene, he weeps, he says, "without sense of time." Then he offers the haiku:

summer grass--
all that remains
of warriors' dreams

natsugusa ya / tsuwamonodomo ga / yume no ato (62)

At other times, impermanence is **more present and future oriented**. The things that are very much present in the here and now are experienced as transient. In the words of Kenneth Rexroth, who was strongly influenced by Buddhist thought and Japanese aesthetics, what we see before us is "the fugitive compounds of nature all doomed to waste away and go out" (CP xxx).

One example of this aspect of Bashō' sense of time is the following haiku:

soon to die,
yet no sign of it:
a cicada's cry

yagate shinu / keshiki wa miezu / semi no koe (496)

As John Elder has put it, "The sadness of Bashō's poetry comes from the way in which each new experience of meaning in the natural world feels like both a greeting and a good-bye" (*Pilgrimage 158).* Nature is always nature-that-is-passing-away, and each moment in nature has intensified value because it is felt to be a once in a lifetime encounter.

Despite the centrality of impermanence, Bashō also felt a strong **sense of continuity and connection.** Here the point, we might say, is not the presence of *absence* as much as the ***presence*** of absence. What has passed away often remains in some marginal way as traces that enable communion. We live among the remnants of the past, and even when the remnants are of what humans have built, with time they become intertwined with nonhuman nature, as if as time goes by, the built environment and the natural environment slowly merge.

> In the village of Awa in Iga Province there are the ancient remains of the temple of Shunjō Shōnin.[48]. . . The Main Hall is crumbled, the foundation alone remaining. The priests' quarters have vanished, having turned into fields. The sixteen foot Buddha is buried in green moss, with only the holy face visible. . . . With such reminders of that distant time, my tears flowed. . . . (34)

To quote John Elder once again, "Ruins, relics, vestiges of battle and defeat, all serve to represent both transience and endurance for Bashō" (*Pilgrimage* 156). This is seen in a passage that begins with a statement of monumental change and ends with a sense of continuity found in a still-standing stone monument from long ago.

> 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. Yet [here remains a] monument, which certainly has stood a thousand years, [and] I could see into the hearts of the ancients. Here is one virtue of the pilgrimage, one joy of being alive. I forgot the aches of the journey, and was left with only tears (59).

<u>Timeless</u>

While the types of impermanence discussed previously involve the inexorable movement of time, there is in Bashō's writing what we could call a "**sense of timelessness**." There are, in fact, several types of timelessness in Bashō's writings, and I'll mention two of them. The first is familiar to most students of haiku. It has been called the "**haiku moment,"** an intense focus on the moment at hand. The haiku poet enters into a total absorption in the present as a **boundless temporal space**, which Zen has termed the Absolute Now. Or, to borrow a line from that non-Buddhist Edward Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*, 12-13), "A suspension of time, a continuous present" – or as Bashō put it, he weeps without sense of time. This timelessness too is part of the "sense of time" in haiku.

How can this idea and ideal of timelessness be harmonized with all the talk of the flux of life and the seasonality discussed earlier? I believe that one can experience the moment as a moment in a seasonal cycle, one can experience all things as "fugitive compounds of nature," one can experience a moment as precious because all is precarious, and **still be wholly focused on the present**. Terms such as "haiku moment" and "Absolute Now," I suggest, are fundamentally code words for: a complete immersion in the present without concern or attachment toward the past or future, but also with a sense that everything is fleeting, that this moment will never come again, and thus that the present has unqualified value.

One other type of timelessness is best seen in that image of the **River of Heaven** in the "stormy sea" haiku I started with. The poem is often read as a poem of space—the vastness of ocean and of the star-threaded sky. But there is also a **temporal vastness**. The River of Heaven is in part an ironic image: it is a river that does not move or change. Yes it moves across the heavens as the night wears on, but it moves without any flow within the river itself. As a river it suggests the flow of time, yet as a stream of stars it suggests a kind of transcendent stillness. In addition, the spatial boundless ness of the night sky suggests a kind of temporal boundlessness, a type of "eternity," not in the sense of a separate eternal realm, but rather an eternity as a temporal dimension that overarches and embraces our normal sense of time if we raise our eyes to it. To experience the moment under the arc of Heaven's River is to experience this moment as a tiny part of a temporal dimension beyond knowing, whose tranquility graces the tumult below. This too is part of Bashō's "sense of time."

More could be said about traditional haiku literature as **nature writing that is time writing**. In addition, this aspect of Japanese literature could make a fruitful point of comparison with Western nature writing. So too more attention to the temporal dimension of nature writing could enrich Western ecocriticism. But given the inexorable impermanence of life, my time has come to an end and I need to stop.