

Japanese Texts: Lyric

THE POETRY OF
MATSUO BASHŌ

Haruo Shirane

The modern haiku derives from the seventeen-syllable *hokku* (opening verse) of a *haikai no renga*, or comic linked-verse sequence. These usually consisted of from thirty-six to one hundred links composed in alternate verses of seventeen (5/7/5) and fourteen (7/7) syllables by one or more poets. In the seventeenth century (or early Edo period [1600–1867]), when Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) began his career as a *haikai* poet, the *hokku* was regarded primarily as the beginning of a linked-verse (*renga*) sequence. Bashō considered himself to be, first and foremost, a comic linked-verse poet and was a *haikai* teacher by profession, but he often composed independent *hokku*—commonly referred to by modern readers as haiku—for which he is primarily known today and which lie at the heart of his prose narratives.

In a linked-verse session, the author of the *hokku* was required to include a *kigo* (seasonal word), which functioned as a greeting to the gathered poets and established a special line of communication between the poet and the audience—a connection that proved crucial to the independent *hokku*. In the course of poetic history, the seasonal words used in classical poetry (the thirty-one-syllable *waka* and later orthodox-linked verse, or *renga*) had come to embody particular emotions, moods, and images. Thus, “spring rain” (*harusame*), which always meant a soft, steady drizzle, brought sweet thoughts; the endless, oppressive “summer rain” (*samidare*) connoted depression; and the cold and sporadic “early winter showers” (*shigure*) were associated with the uncertainty and impermanence of life. The importance of seasonal words in the *hokku* is evident in the following poems from the beginning and end of Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

(*Oku no hosomichi*), which describes his journey of 1689:

yuku haru ya
tori naki uo no
me wa namida

The passing spring:
Birds cry, and in the eyes
Of fish are tears.

hamaguri no
futami ni wakare
yuku aki zo

A clam being parted
From its shell at Futami—
The passing autumn.¹

The two respective seasonal references, “the passing spring” (*yuku haru*) and “the passing autumn” (*yuku aki*), indicate more than the temporal dimensions of the poems; in the classical tradition they are strongly associated with the sorrow of separation, particularly that caused by a journey. In the opening poem, nature at large—here represented by birds and fish—connotations of the seasonal word, the poem also expresses Bashō’s sorrow at leaving behind his friends. In the final poem, the departure of autumn (and implicitly that of Bashō) becomes as difficult and as painful as prying apart the shell of a clam. On the surface, the two poems appear to depict only nature, but the seasonal words, coupled with the larger context, underscore a recurrent theme of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*: the sorrow of the eternal traveler.

Haikai, or comic linked verse, deliberately employs contemporary language and subject matter, which was forbidden in classical poetry. The sense of the comic that informs *haikai* usually derives from humorous subject matter, from verbal play, and from parody of traditional poetry and literature. Ichū, a *haikai* theorist of the Danrin school, once stated that “a poem that draws on the literary tradition and at the same time parodies it is *haikai*.” The same is true of much of Bashō’s poetry, though in a more subtle manner than in earlier *haikai*. A good example is Bashō’s famous frog poem, which marks the beginning of his mature poetry, in the so-called Bashō-style:

furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

An ancient pond—
A frog leaps in,
The sound of water.
(1686)

Kawazu (frog), a seasonal word for spring, was a popular poetic topic, appearing as early as the *Manyōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, 759), the first major anthology of Japanese poetry.

The following *waka* (vol. 10, no. 2165) appears in a section on frogs:

<i>kami tsu se ni</i>	On the upper rapids
<i>kawazu tsuma yobu</i>	A frog calls for his lover.
<i>yū sareba</i>	Is it because,
<i>koromode sasumimi</i>	His sleeves chilled by the evening,
<i>tsuma makamu toka</i>	He wants to share his pillow?

By the Heian period (late eighth to late twelfth c.), the *kawazu* was almost exclusively associated with the blossoms of the *yamabuki* (kerria), the bright yellow mountain rose, and with limpid mountain streams, as in the following anonymous spring poem from the *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Old and New Poems*, 908):

<i>kawazu naku</i>	At Ide, where the frogs cry,
<i>ide no yamabuki</i>	The yellow rose
<i>chirinikeri</i>	Has already scattered.
<i>hana no sakari ni</i>	If only I had come when
<i>awamashi mono o</i>	The flowers were in full bloom!

In the medieval period, the poet was often required to compose on the poetic essence (*hon'i*) of a given topic. By then, the *hon'i* of the *kawazu* had become its beautiful voice. In a fashion typical of *haikai*, Bashō's poem on the frog works against these traditional associations. In place of the plaintive voice of the frog singing in the rapids or calling out for his lover, Bashō gives us the plop of the frog jumping into the water. And instead of the elegant image of a frog in a fresh mountain stream beneath the bright yellow rose, the *hokku* presents a stagnant pond. One of Bashō's disciples suggested that the first line be "A yellow rose—" (*yamabuki ya*), an image that would have remained within the associative bounds of traditional poetry. Bashō's version, by contrast, provides a surprising and witty twist on the classical perception of frogs.

This is not to say that Bashō rejects the seasonal association of the frog with spring. The *kawazu* appears in spring, summer, and autumn, but in the seasonal handbooks used by both Bashō and his readers, the frog is listed in the category of mid-spring, along with insects and reptiles that emerge from underground hibernation during that season. As a seasonal word, the frog thus deepens the contrast or tension between the first half of the poem, the image of an old pond—the atmosphere of long

silence and rest—and the second part, a moment in spring, when life and vitality have suddenly (with a surprising plop) returned to the world.

In Bashō's time, the seasonal words in *haikai* formed a vast pyramid, capped at the top by the key seasonal topics (*kidai*) of the classical tradition—cherry blossoms (spring), the cuckoo (summer), the moon (autumn), and the snow (winter)—that remained the most popular subjects even for early Edo *haikai* poets. Spreading out from this narrow peak were the other seasonal topics derived from classical poetry. Occupying the bottom and the widest area were the *kigo*, which by Bashō's day literally numbered in the thousands. In contrast to the seasonal topics at the peak, which were highly conventional and conceptual, those that formed the base were drawn from and directly reflected contemporary life. Unlike the elegant diction of the words at the top of the pyramid, the new words at the ever-expanding base were earthy, sometimes vulgar, and drawn from a variety of "tongues," particularly those of popular Edo culture and society.

Bashō's place in *haikai* history can be defined by his attempt to tread the "narrow road" between the complex, rigidly defined, aesthetic order centered on traditional seasonal topics and a strongly antitraditional movement that sought to break out and explore new topics, new subject matter, and new poetic language. As the frog poem suggests, Bashō draws on the classical tradition, not in order to return to it, but to infuse it with new life. Indeed, for those aware of the cluster of associations that had accumulated around the seasonal words, the beauty of Bashō's poetry often lies, as it does in the frog poem, in the subtle and ironic tension between the traditional associations and the new presentation.

It has often been noted that the effect of the frog poem derives from the intersection of the momentary and the eternal, of movement and stillness. The two parts of the poem interpenetrate: the sound of the frog accentuating the stillness of the ancient pond and the quiet atmosphere highlighting the momentary. A similar effect can be found in the following poem, also from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

<i>shizukasa ya</i>	How still it is!
<i>iwa ni shimīru</i>	Penetrating the rocks,
<i>semi no koe</i>	The cicada's shrill.
	(1689)

In this summer poem, the cries of the cicada, which seem to sink into the surrounding rocks, intensify the profound feeling of silence. According to Ogata Tsutomu, a modern commentator, the spirit of the speaker becomes one with the voice of the cicada and penetrates the rock, arriving at a deep, inner silence.² In a number of *hokku* written by Bashō at this time, a small, vulnerable, or fragile creature—a cicada, a frog, a cricket, etc.—is cast against a temporally or spatially unbound setting, creating a feeling of loneliness (*sabishisa*). This poignant and tender mood is savored and appreciated for the inner peace and quiet communion with nature that it brings.

In early Edo *haikai*, the comic element derived almost entirely from parody of classical poetry (*waka* and orthodox linked verse), from the playful destruction of the aesthetic world created by classical tradition. Many of Bashō's earlier poems are in fact clever displays of wit that make light of the conventions of classical poetry. However, Matsuo Bashō's mature poetry, which begins from the period of the frog poem, transformed *haikai* into a serious form that embraced larger human and worldly concerns even as it retained its comic roots. The comic element in Bashō's mature poems usually derives from a sense of "newness" (*atarashimi*) or the unexpected, which brings a wry smile rather than the laughter typical of earlier *haikai*. In the frog poem, it is the unexpected, sudden plop of the frog that provides the comic overtone. The solemn opening line, "An ancient pond—" (*furuike ya*), however, tempers and internalizes this comic aspect, making it part of a highly meditative poem. This ironical movement or tension, which is both serious and light, profound and minor, is sometimes called *sabi*, a hallmark of Bashō's mature style.

Bashō and his disciples speak broadly of two fundamental kinds of *hokku*: the "single-topic" (*ichimotsu shitate*) *hokku* and the "combination" (*toriawase*) *hokku*. Examples of "single-topic" *hokku* by Bashō are:

*kegoromo ni
tsutsumite nukushi
kamo no ashi*

In fur robes,
They are warmly wrapped—
The feet of the wild duck.
(1693)

*bit to naku
shirigoe kanashi
yoru no shika*

Crying "Bee—,"
The sadness of the trailing voice—
A deer at night.
(1694)

Each poem describes a single topic, the feet of a wild duck and the voice of the deer, albeit in a surprising and fresh manner.

The "combination" (*toriawase*), by contrast, combines two or more different images in one *hokku*. Bashō's disciples further divide the "combination" into two types: those "outside the circumference," which bring together two (and sometimes more) images that traditionally are not found together, and those "inside the circumference," which combine images that are associated with each other in the classical tradition. Bashō once said that "combinations that emerge from within the circumference are rarely superior, and all of them are old-fashioned." As we have seen, in classical poetry the frog usually appeared in combination with fresh water and the yellow rose to form an elegant and bright image. Bashō's poem effectively goes outside that "circumference," but had Bashō used "A yellow rose—" (*yamabuki ya*) instead of "An ancient pond—," as one of his disciples suggested, he would have stayed within the "circumference."

Sometimes a "combination" of distant, "extra-circumference" images are held together by an intermediary image, as in the following poem by Bashō.

*aoyagi no
doro ni shidaruru
shiohi kana*

Branches of the willow
Drooping down into the mud—
The tide is out.
(Sumidawara, 1694)

The gap between the two elements of the "combination," the willow (*aoyagi*) and low tide (*shiohi*), two classical images never associated in the poetic tradition, is bridged by the earthy, non-classical image of mud (*doro*). The *haikai* element derives from the vernal, feminine image of the elegant willow, admired for its gracefully drooping branches, being unexpectedly soiled by the mud on the bay bottom.

Bashō's distant "combinations" are closely associated with the "links by scent" (*niot-zuke*) that he regarded as an aesthetic and literary ideal in *haikai* linked verse. The following example is from a thirty-six-link verse sequence in *Sarumino* (*The Monkey's Straw Raincoat*, 1691).

*sō yaya samuku
tera ni kaeru ka*

A priest returning to a
Temple as he grows cold?
(Bonchō)

<i>saruhiki no</i>	A monkey trainer,
<i>saru to yo o furu</i>	Passing through life with a monkey—
<i>aki no tsuki</i>	The moon of autumn.
	(Bashō)

In the first verse a priest has come back from a chilly day of begging for alms, and in the second verse a monkey trainer, fated to pass his days with a monkey, is juxtaposed with the autumn moon, an image of loneliness. The two scenes are linked by a common mood, by the solitary and humble sadness of two individuals who stand outside the warm embrace of society. The second verse (by Bashō) probes the chilly atmosphere and loneliness of the previous verse (by Bonchō) even as it stands apart. To use *haikai* terminology, the new verse “lets go” (*tsukihanasu*) of the previous verse even as it catches its “scent” (*nioti*).

The same kind of “link by scent” can be found within the confines of a single *hokku*, as in the following verse by Bashō,

<i>kiku no ka ya</i>	Chrysanthemums scent—
<i>Nara ni wa furuki</i>	In old Nara the ancient
<i>hotoketachi</i>	Statues of Buddha.
	(1694)

The chrysanthemum, which blooms amidst the bright colors and leaves of autumn, possesses an old-fashioned but refined fragrance. The dignified and elegant buddha statues that fill the temples in the old capital of Nara have no overt connection to the scent of chrysanthemums—the statues are not surrounded by flowers—and yet the two images share overtones: both evoke a quaint, elegant atmosphere.

The “distant combination” can take the form of a question and an answer, one of the formats from which Japanese linked verse first arose. The following poem was written shortly after Bashō fell ill on a journey:

<i>kono aki wa</i>	Why have I aged
<i>nande toshi yoru</i>	This autumn?
<i>kumo ni tori</i>	A bird in the clouds.
	(1694)

According to one of Bashō’s disciples, the speaker, hampered by the vicissitudes of old age, looks enviously at the bird in the floating clouds, symbolic of eternal travel. The bird in the clouds

also reflects the speaker’s loneliness. Whatever connection the readers finally draw, they must leap from one mode or state to another (in this instance, from a subjective, lyrical statement to an objective description).

The “combinations” found in Bashō’s *hokku* do not usually employ simile or metaphor proper, in which a direct transference is made between one image and another. Instead, Bashō relies on selective juxtaposition, in which the connections are only suggested. The *hokku* usually juxtaposes either two antithetical items or two similar elements. In either case, the combination is usually unexpected and “new”—that is to say, it works against traditional associations, shedding new light on both sides of the “combination” and often joining a classical topic with a nonclassical image or phrase.

The notion of “scent” (*nioti*) also applies to the relationship between Bashō’s prose and the embedded poetry. Like the two parts of the *hokku*, the poem and the surrounding prose often highlight each other even as they can be read and appreciated independently. The linking by “scent” also occurs between poetry and painting. Instead of the poem simply reflecting the content of the painting or sketch on which it appears, we often find the two juxtaposed, creating a montage effect, in which the poetry and the painting are joined only by shared overtones.

The *toriwase* (combination) is usually made possible by the *kireji* (cutting word), one of the formal requirements of the *hokku*, which severs the semantic, grammatical, or rhythmic flow of the poem. The cutting word frequently takes the form of the exclamatory particle *ya* at the end of the first or second line, or the exclamatory particle *kana* at the end of the poem. According to Bashō, any of the seventeen syllables of the *hokku* can function as a cutting word as long as it “severs” the poem. In the frog poem, the *ya* (translated by a dash) at the end of the first line splits the poem into two parts, causing the two halves to reverberate against each other. In typical Bashō fashion, the cutting word sets up an opposition or parallel between a visual image and an auditory sensation.

The cutting word, like the seasonal word, vastly increases the complexity and power of the seventeen-syllable *hokku*, commonly recognized as the shortest poetic form in world literature. It can only be effective, however, if the reader makes it so. In linked verse, the *hokku*, or opening verse, was followed by a second verse, which drew on or emerged out of the overtones of the first voice. In the independent *hokku*, or haiku, the reader must per-

form the same task in his or her imagination. To “cut” a verse is to entrust the final meaning to the reader, to allow the audience to participate actively—an aesthetic process similar to the *cadenza* in pre-Romantic music, in which the composer leaves part of the musical notation blank for completion by the performer. It is no accident that Matsuo Bashō once said, “those verses that reveal seventy or eighty percent of the subject are good. Those that reveal fifty to sixty percent, we never tire of.”

Many of the literary characteristics of Bashō's *hokku* are also to be found in his travel journals, where much of his best poetry appears. In addition to hundreds of *haibun* (poetic prose) vignettes and essays, Bashō wrote a series of more extended works (all available in English translation), *Nozarashi kikō* (*Record of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*), *Kashima mode* (*A Visit to Sarashina Village*), *Oku no hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*), and *Saga nikki* (*The Saga Diary*), all of which are based on journeys to various parts of Japan. Most of these journeys, particularly that which is described in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Bashō's masterpiece, involve a search for or visit to *utamakura*, famous places in Japanese poetry.

Like seasonal words, *utamakura* (poetic places) were aesthetic clusters, which, as a result of their appearance in famous poems, possessed rich overtones. When mentioned in a poem (or, as Bashō often did, in prose), the established associations radiated out from the *hokku*, providing depth to the seventeen-syllable verse. From as early as the classical period, *utamakura* became popular poetic topics, and like seasonal topics, they assumed fixed associations that the *waka* poet was required to employ. Relying on poetry handbooks, classical poets could easily write about places that they had never seen, just as they composed poems about aspects of nature that they had never encountered. Bashō broke from this tradition, and in a manner that deliberately recalled certain poet-priests of the classical and medieval past—Nōin, Saigyō, and Sōgi—he journeyed to numerous *utamakura*, where the present met, sometimes in ironic and violent disjunction, with the literary past. If, for most classical poets, the *utamakura* represented a beauty that transcended time and place, Bashō's travels brought him face to face with the impermanence of all things. This tension between the unchanging and the changing, between literary tradition and intense personal experience, between classical diction and contemporary language lies at the heart of both Bashō's prose and poetry.

The following is from *Record of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*.

akikaze ya
yabu mo hatake mo
Fuwa no seki

The autumn wind!
Nothing but thicket and fields
At Fuwa Barrier.

Fuwa Barrier (in present-day Gifu Prefecture), originally one of the three main checking stations in Japan, was abandoned in the late eighth century. However, it continued to exist in literature as an *utamakura*, immortalized by the following poem by Fujiwara no Yoshitsune in *Shinkokinshū* (*New Collection of Old and New Poems*, 1205):

hito sumaru
Fuwa no sekiya no
itabishashi
arentshi nochi wa
tada aki no kaze

The shingled eaves
Of the guard post at Fuwa
Where no one lives,
Have collapsed, leaving only
The winds of autumn.

Coming upon the guard post at Fuwa (which literally means “unbreakable”), the speaker in Bashō's poem finds that even the building has disappeared, leaving only thickets and open fields swept by autumn winds. The *hokku* follows the “poetic essence” (*hon'ri*) of Fuwa Barrier (the pathos of decay) as well as that of the “autumn wind” (loneliness). But these classical associations, which are embodied in Yoshitsune's *waka*, are presented anew in a striking manner, using nonclassical diction: “nothing but thickets and fields,” a phrase which subtly contrasts the present with the poetic past.

Bashō repeatedly told his disciples that they “should awaken to the high and return to the low” (*takaku kokoro o satorite, zoku ni kaerubeshi*). Matsunaga Teitoku, who established Edo *haikai*, defined *haikai* as linked verse with *haigon*, vocabulary that classical poetry had excluded as being vulgar and “low” (*zoku*). The use of *haigon* (literally “*haikai* words”) transformed the verse into a popular form that could be enjoyed by all classes. At the same time, however, *haikai*'s poetic “liberation”—particularly its free use of *haigon*—seriously threatened the literary nature of *haikai*, often making it more a form of amusement or vulgarity than a serious literary genre. Bashō was the first major poet to bring a heightened spiritual and literary awareness to *haikai*. He infused the “high” (*ga*) into the “low” (*zoku*) of *haikai*, or rather, sought the “high” in the “low,” a pursuit that ultimately transformed the *hokku* into a powerful poetic form. As the frog poem suggests, Bashō sought the new in the old, the profound in the trivial, the serious in the comic.

"Awakening to the high" also meant exploring and sharing in the spirit of the "ancients," the superior poets of the past. The long and difficult journeys to *utamakura* were a means of communing with the spirits of the great poets of the past, of sharing in their poetic experience. For Bashō, the great figures were Li Bai, Hanshan, Du Fu, and Bo Juyi in the Chinese tradition, and Saigyō, Sōgi, Rikyū, and Sesshū in the Japanese tradition—most of whom, significantly, had been recluse poets or artists. The work of these "ancients" was bound together, in Bashō's mind, by a common literary spirit, of which the best of *haikai* should partake. It was not enough, however, simply to imitate and borrow from the "ancients," whose "high" art—particularly Chinese poetry, *waka*, and *renga*—had become aristocratic, refined, and exclusive by Bashō's day. The poet must also—and here Bashō parts company with his medieval predecessors—return to the "low," to the everyday life, to immediate personal experience, and to the popular language and "tongues," all of which change from day to day. It was only by "returning to the low" that one could create poetry with "newness" and lightness, which were critical to the life of *haikai*. For Bashō, it was ultimately the harshness of travel on foot, which combined the associations of *utamakura* with the vicissitudes of everyday life, that became the quintessential means of "awakening to the high and returning to the low" and that led to much of his finest poetry.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the formal characteristics of haiku? What functions do the cutting word and the seasonal word have? What kind of techniques are commonly used in haiku? What is the difference between haiku and the thirty-one syllable *waka*, or classical lyric? What are the strengths of this particular form? Its weaknesses?

2. In what ways can Bashō be considered a nature poet? What kind of imagery does he use? What kind of relationship does his poetry and travel accounts have to the literary tradition (including Chinese poetry)? What role does the theme of impermanence play in Bashō's poetry and travel accounts?

3. What significance does the notion of a journey have in *Narrow Road to the Deep North*? In what ways is it a journey into the past? A religious journey? In what ways does *Narrow Road to the Deep North* resemble a Noh play? What is the relationship between travel and poetry? Between the prose and the poetry in *Narrow Road to the Deep North*?

NOTES

1. All translations are by Haruo Shirane.
2. Ogata Tsutomu, in Ogata Tsutomu, ed., *Haiku no kaishaku to kanshō jiten* (Tokyo: Ōbunsha, 1979), p. 82.

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- Bashō. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966. The style, particularly that of the poetry, is inferior to other translations, but it is available in low-cost paperback and includes a number of other key travel works by Bashō: *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, *A Visit to Kashima Shrine*, *The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel*, and *A Visit to Sarashina Village*.
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For more information on Matsuo Bashō or an introduction to traditional haiku in general, see:

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