

Beyond the Haiku Moment:

Bashō, Buson, and Modern Haiku Myths

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ABSTRACT: Haiku has migrated from the country of its origin, and to languages and cultures that seemingly share nothing with Japan, yet the genre is thriving. The most energetic and thriving haiku culture resides in North America. Haruo Shirane, an authority on classical Japanese literature and a provocative writer on the legacy of haiku in the contemporary world, examines some of the changes which haiku has undergone in its travels, and evaluates them in relationship to the standard they might find in today's Japan. Among the issues he considers are the place of metaphor and other poetic tools in haiku; the necessity of season words and seasonality in contemporary practice; the awareness and inclusion of "self" in English-language haiku; and the need for a "vertical axis" of reference and allusion to create depth. He also considers the broadly different approaches to *senryū* to be found between cultures.

What does North American haiku look like when observed from Japan? What kind of advice might haiku masters such as Bashō and Buson give to English haiku poets? What would Bashō and Buson say if they were alive today and could read English and could read haiku written by North American poets?

I think that they would be delighted to find that haiku had managed to cross the Pacific and thrive so far from its place of origin. They would be impressed with the wide variety of haiku composed by North American haiku poets and find their work most innovative. At the same time, however, they would also be struck, as I have been, by the narrow definitions of haiku found in haiku handbooks, magazines, and anthologies. I was once told that Ezra Pound's famous metro poem first published in 1913, was not haiku.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
 Petals on a wet, black bough .

If I remember correctly, the reason for disqualification was that the metro poem was not about nature as we know it and that the poem was fictional or imaginary. Pound's poem may also have been ruled out since it uses an obvious metaphor: the petals are a metaphor for the apparition of the faces, or vice versa. This view of the metro poem was based on the three key definitions of haiku—haiku is about direct observation, haiku eschews metaphor, and haiku is about nature—which poets such as Bashō and Buson would have seriously disputed.

Haiku as Direct Personal Experience or Observation

One of the widespread beliefs in North America is that haiku should be based upon one's own direct experience, that it must derive from one's own observations, particularly of nature. But it is important to remember that this is basically a modern view of haiku, the result, in part, of nineteenth century European realism, which had an impact on modern Japanese haiku and then was re-imported to the West as something very Japanese. Bashō, who wrote in the seventeenth century, would have not made such a distinction between direct personal experience and the imaginary, nor would he have placed higher value on fact over fiction.

Bashō was first and foremost a master of *haikai*, or comic linked poetry. In *haikai* linked verse, the seventeen syllable *hokku*, or opening verse, is followed by a 14-syllable *wakiku*, or added verse, which in turn is followed by the 17-syllable third verse, and so forth. Except for the first verse, which stood alone, each additional verse was read together with the previous verse and pushed away from the penultimate verse, or the verse prior to the previous verse. Thus, the first and second verse, the second and third verse, third and fourth verse formed independent units, each of which pushed off from the previous unit.

The joy and pleasure of *haikai* was that it was imaginary literature, that the poets who participated in linked verse moved from one world to the next, across time, and across space. The basic idea of linked verse was to create a new and unexpected world out of the world of the previous verse. One could compose about one's daily life, about being an official in China, about being a warrior in the medieval period, or an aristocrat in the ancient period. The other participants in the *haikai* sequence joined you in that imaginary world or took you to places that you could reach on with your imagination.

One of the reasons that linked verse became so popular in the late medieval period, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it first blossomed as a genre, was because it was a form of escape from the terrible wars that ravaged the country at the time. For samurai in the era of constant war, linked verse was like the tea ceremony; it allowed one to escape, if only for a brief time, from the world at large, from all the bloodshed. The joy of it was that one could do that in the close company of friends and companions. When the verse sequence was over, one came back to Earth, to reality. The same occurred in the tea ceremony as developed by Sen no Rikyū. The tea hut took one away from the cares of this world, together with one's friends and companions.

In short, linked verse, both orthodox linked verse (*renga*) and its comic or casual version (*haikai*), was fundamentally imaginary. The *hokku*, or opening verse of the *haikai* sequence, which later became haiku, required a seasonal word, which marked the time and place of the gathering, but it too had no restrictions with regard to the question of fiction. Indeed, poets often composed on fixed topics (*dai*), which were established in advance. Buson, one of the great poets of haiku of the late eighteenth century, was in fact very much a studio or desk poet. He composed his poetry at home, in his study, and he often wrote about other worlds, particularly the tenth and eleventh century Heian aristocratic world and the subsequent medieval period. One of his most famous historical poems is *Tobadono e gorokki isogu mowaki kana*, probably composed in 1776. (All translations are my own.)

To Toba palace
5 or 6 horsemen hurry
autumn tempest

Toba palace, which immediately sets this in the Heian or early medieval period, was an imperial villa that the Cloistered Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129) constructed near Kyoto in the eleventh century and that subsequently became the location of a number of political and military conspiracies. The galloping horsemen are probably warriors on some emergency mission—a sense of turmoil and urgency embodied in the season word of autumn tempest (*nowaki*). An American equivalent might be something like the Confederate cavalry at Gettysburg during the Civil War or the militia at Lexington during the American revolution. The *hokku* creates a powerful atmosphere and a larger sense of narrative, like a scene from a medieval military epic or from a picture scroll.

Another noted historical poem by Buson is *Komabune no yorade sugiyuku kasumi kana*, composed in 1777.

the Korean ship
not stopping passes back
into the mist

Komabune were the large Korean ships that sailed to Japan during the ancient period, bringing cargo and precious goods from the continent, a practice that had long since been discontinued by Buson's time. The Korean ship, which is offshore, appears to be heading for port but then gradually disappears into the mist (*kasumi*), a seasonal word for spring and one associated with dream-like atmosphere. The Korean ship passing into the spring mist creates a sense of mystery, of a romantic other, making the viewer wonder if this scene is nothing but a dream.

Another example from Buson is *inazuma ya name moteyueru akitsushima*, composed in 1776.

lightning—
girdled by waves
islands of Japan

In this *hokku*, the light from the lightning (*inazuma*), a seasonal word for autumn associated in the ancient period with the rice harvest (*ina*), enables the viewer to see the waves surrounding all the

islands of Akitsushima (an ancient name for Japan that originally meant the islands where rice grows richly). This is not the result of direct experience. It is a spectacular aerial view—a kind of paean to the fertility and beauty of the country—that would only be possible from far above the Earth.

Even the personal poems can be imaginary.

piercingly cold
stepping on my dead wife's comb
in the bedroom

The opening phrase, *mini ni shimu* (literally, to penetrate the body), is an autumn phrase that suggests the chill and sense of loneliness that sinks into the body with the arrival of the autumn cold and that here also functions as a metaphor of the poet's feelings following the death of his wife. The poem generates a novelistic scene of the widower, some time after his wife's funeral, accidentally stepping on a comb in the autumn dark, as he is about to go to bed alone.

The standard interpretation is that the snapping of the comb in the bedroom brings back memories of their relationship and has erotic overtones. But this is not about direct or personal experience. The fact is that Buson (1706–83) composed this while his wife was alive. Indeed Buson's wife Tomo outlived him by 31 years.

Why then the constant emphasis by North American haiku poets on direct personal experience? The answer to this is historically complex, but it should be noted that the *haikai* that preceded Bashō was almost entirely imaginary or fictional *haikai*.

Much of it was so imaginary that it was absurd, and as a result it was criticized by some as “nonsense” *haikai*. A typical example is the following *hokku* found in *Indoshu* (*Teaching collection*, 1684), a Danrin school *haikai* handbook: *mine no hana no nami ni ashika kujira o oyogase*.

making sea lions and whales
swim in the cherry blossom waves
at the hill top

The *hokku* links cherry blossoms, which were closely associated with waves and hill tops in classical Japanese poetry, to sea lions and whales, two non-classical, vernacular words, thereby comically deconstructing the poetic cliché of “waves of cherry blossoms”. Bashō was one of the critics of this kind of “nonsense” *haikai*. He believed that *haikai* should describe the world “as it is.” He was in fact part of a larger movement that was a throwback to earlier orthodox linked verse or *renga*.

However, to describe the world as it is did not mean denying fiction. Fiction can be very realistic and even more real than life itself. For Bashō, it was necessary to experience everyday life, to travel, to expose oneself to the world as much as possible, so that the poet could reveal the world as it was. But it could also be fictional, something born of the imagination. In fact, you had to use your imagination to compose *haikai*, since it was very much about the ability to move from one world to another. Bashō himself often rewrote his poetry: he would change the gender, the place, the time, the situation. The

only thing that mattered was the effectiveness of the poetry, not whether it was faithful to the original experience.

One of the chief reasons for the emphasis in modern Japan on direct personal observations was Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the late nineteenth century pioneer of modern haiku, who stressed the sketch (*shasei*) based on direct observation of the subject as the key to the composition of the modern haiku. This led to the *ginkō*, the trips to places to compose haiku. Shiki denounced linked verse as an intellectual game and saw the haiku as an expression of the individual.

In this regard Shiki was deeply influenced by Western notions of literature and poetry; first, that literature should be realistic, and second, that literature should be an expression of the individual. By contrast, *haikai* as Bashō had known it had been largely imaginary, and had been a communal activity, the product of group composition or exchange. Shiki condemned traditional *haikai* on both counts. Even if Shiki had not existed, the effect would have been similar since Western influence on Japan from the late 19th century has been massive. Early American and British pioneers of English-language haiku—such as Basil Chamberlain, Harold Henderson, R. H. Blyth—had limited interest in modern Japanese haiku, but shared many of Shiki’s assumptions. The influence of Ezra Pound and the (Anglo-American) Modernist poetry movement was also significant in shaping modern notions of haiku. In short, what many North American haiku poets have thought to be uniquely Japanese had in fact its roots in Western literary thought.

We are often told, particularly by the pioneers of English language haiku (such as D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and the Beats) who mistakenly emphasized Zen Buddhism in Japanese haiku, that haiku should be about the “here and now.” This is an extension of the notion that haiku must derive from direct observation and personal experience. Haiku is extremely short, and therefore it can concentrate on only a few details.

It is thus suitable for focusing on the here and now. But there is no reason why these moments have to be only in the present, contemporary world or why haiku can’t deal with other kinds of time. This noted haiku appears in Bashō’s *Narrow Road*:

samidare no furinokoshite ya hikarido.

Have the summer rains
come and gone, sparing
the Hall of Light

The summer rains (*samidare*) refers both to the rains falling now and to past summer rains, which have spared the Hall of Light over the centuries.

Perhaps Bashō’s most famous poem in *Narrow Road* is *natsukusa ya tsuwamonodomo ga yume no ato* in which the “dreams” and the “summer grasses” are both those of the contemporary poet and of the warriors of the distant past.

Summer grasses —
traces of dreams
of ancient warriors

As we can see from these examples, haiku moments can occur in the distant past or in distant, imaginary places. In fact, one of Buson's great accomplishments was his ability to create other worlds. Bashō traveled to explore the present, the contemporary world, to meet new poets, and to compose linked verse with them. Equally important, travel was a means of entering into the past, of meeting the spirits of the dead, of experiencing what his poetic and spiritual predecessors had experienced. In other words, there were two key axes: one horizontal, the present, the contemporary world; and the other vertical, leading back into the past, to history, to other poems. As I have shown in my book *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*, Bashō believed that the poet had to work along both axes. To work only in the present would result in poetry that was fleeting. To work just in the past, on the other hand, would be to fall out of touch with the fundamental nature of *haikai*, which was rooted in the everyday world. *Haikai* was, by definition, anti-traditional, anti-classical, anti-establishment, but that did not mean that it rejected the past. Rather, it depended upon the past and on earlier texts and associations for its richness.

If Bashō and Buson were to look at North American haiku today, they would see the horizontal axis, the focus on the present, on the contemporary world, but they would probably feel that the vertical axis, the movement across time, was largely missing. There is no problem with the English-language haiku handbooks that stress personal experience. They should. This is a good way to practice, and it is an effective and simple way of getting many people involved in haiku. I believe, as Bashō did, that direct experience and direct observation is absolutely critical; it is the base from which we must work and which allows us to mature into interesting poets. However, as the examples of Bashō and Buson suggest, it should not dictate either the direction or value of haiku. It is the beginning, not the end. Those haiku that are fictional or imaginary are just as valid as those that are based on personal experience. I would in fact urge the composition of what might be called historical haiku or science fiction haiku.

Haiku as Non-metaphorical

Another rule of North American haiku that Bashō would probably find discomforting is the idea that haiku eschews metaphor and allegory. North American haiku handbooks and magazines stress that haiku should be concrete, that it should be about the thing itself. The poet does not use one object or idea to describe another, using A to understand B, as in simile or metaphor; instead the poet concentrates on the object itself. Allegory, in which a set of signs or symbols draw a parallel between one world and the next, is equally shunned. All three of these techniques—metaphor, simile, and allegory—are generally considered to be taboo in English-language haiku, and beginners are taught not to use them.

However, many of Bashō's haiku use metaphor and allegory, and in fact this is probably one of the most important aspects of his poetry. In Bashō's time, one of the most important functions of the *hokku*, or opening verse, which was customarily composed by the guest, was to greet the host of the session or party. The *hokku* had to include a seasonal word, to indicate the time, but it also had to compliment

the host. This was often done allegorically or symbolically, by describing some aspect of nature, which implicitly resembled the host. A good example is:

shiragiku no me ni tatete miru chiri mo nashi:

gazing intently
at the white chrysanthemums—
not a speck of dust

Here Bashō is complementing the host (Sonome), represented by the white chrysanthemums, by stressing the flower's and, by implication, Sonome's purity. Another example is *botan shibe fukaku wakeizuru hachi no nagori kana*, which appears in Bashō's travel diary *Skeleton in the Fields* (*Nozarashi kiko*).

Having stayed once more at the residence of Master Toyo, I was about to leave for the Eastern Provinces.

from deep within
the peony pistils—withdrawing
regretfully the bee

In this parting poem the bee represents Bashō and the peony pistils the host (Master Toyo). The bee leaves the flower only with the greatest reluctance, thus expressing the visitor's deep gratitude to the host. This form of symbolism or simple allegory was standard for poets at this time, as it was for the entire poetic tradition. In classical Japanese poetry, object of nature inevitably serve as symbols or signs for specific individuals or situations in the human world, and Japanese *haikai* is no exception. Furthermore, poets like Bashō and Buson repeatedly used the same images (such as the rose for Buson or the beggar for Bashō) to create complex metaphors and symbols.

It is no doubt a good idea for the beginner to avoid overt metaphor or allegory or symbolism, but this should not be the rule for more advanced poets. In fact, I think this rule prevents many good poets from becoming great poets. Without the use of metaphor, allegory and symbolism, haiku will have a hard time achieving the complexity and depth necessary to become the object of serious study and commentary.

The fundamental difference between the use of metaphor in haiku and that in other poetry is that in haiku it tends to be extremely subtle and indirect, to the point of not being readily apparent. The metaphor in good haiku is often buried deep within the poem. For example, the seasonal word in Japanese haiku tends often to be inherently metaphorical, since it bears very specific literary and cultural associations, but the first and foremost function of the seasonal word is descriptive, leaving the metaphorical dimension implied.

Allusion, Poetry about Poetry

The emphasis on the “haiku moment” in North American haiku has meant that most of the poetry does not have another major characteristic of Japanese *haikai* and haiku: its allusive character, the ability of the poem to speak to other literary or poetic texts.

I believe that it was Shelley who said that poetry is ultimately about poetry. Great poets are constantly in dialogue with each other. This was particularly true of *haikai*, which began as a parodic form, by twisting the associations and conventions of classical literature and poetry.

One of Bashō’s innovations was that he went beyond parody and used literary and historical allusions as a means of elevating *haikai*, which had hitherto been considered a low form of amusement. Many of Bashō and Buson’s *haikai* in fact depend for their depth on reference or allusion to earlier poetry, from either the Japanese tradition or the Chinese tradition. For example, one of Buson’s best known *hokku* (1742) is

yanagi chiri shimizu kare ishi tokoro dokoro

fallen willow leaves—
the clear stream gone dry,
stones here and there

The *hokku* is a description of a natural scene, of “here and now,” but it is simultaneously an allusion to and a *haikai* variation on a famous *waka*, or classical poem, by Saigyō (1118–1190), a 12th century poet:

michinobe ni shimizu nagaruru yanagi kage shibashi tote koso tachitomaritsure (*Shinkokinshū*, Summer, No. 262).

by the side of the road
alongside a stream of clear water
in the shade of a willow tree
I paused for what I thought
would be just a moment

Bashō (1644-94) had earlier written the following poem (*ta ichimai uete tachisaru yanagi kana*) in *Narrow Road to the Interior* (*Oku no hosomichi*), in which the traveler (Bashō), having come to the place where Saigyō had written this poem, relives those emotions: Bashō pauses beneath the same willow tree and before he knows it, a whole field of rice has been planted.

a whole field of
rice seedlings planted—I part
from the willow

In contrast to Bashō’s poem, which recaptures the past, Buson’s poem is about loss and the irrevocable passage of time, about the contrast between the situation now, in autumn, when the stream has dried

up and the willow leaves have fallen, and the past, in summer, when the clear stream beckoned to Saigyō and the willow tree gave him shelter from the hot summer sun. Like many of Bashō and Buson's poems, the poem is both about the present and the past, about the landscape and about other poems and poetic associations.

The point here is that much of Japanese poetry works off the vertical axis mentioned earlier. There are a few, rare examples of this in English haiku. I give one example, by Bernard Einbond, a New York City poet who recently passed away,¹ which alludes to Bashō's famous frog poem:

furuike ya kawaze tobikomu mozu no oto

(an old pond, a frog jumps in, the sound of water)

frog pond . . .
a leaf falls in
without a sound

This haiku deservedly won the Japan Airlines First Prize, in which there were something like 40,000 entries. This poem has a *haikai* quality that Bashō would have admired. In typical *haikai* fashion, it operates on two fundamental levels. On the scenic level, the horizontal axis, it is a description of a scene from nature, it captures the sense of quiet, eremitic loneliness that is characteristic of Bashō's poetry. On the vertical axis, it is an allusive variation, a *haikai* twist on Bashō's famous frog poem, wittily replacing the frog with the leaf and the sound of the frog jumping in with no sound. Einbond's haiku has a sense of immediacy, but at the same time it speaks to the past; it enters into dialogue with Bashō's poem. In other words, this haiku goes beyond "the haiku moment," beyond the here and now, to speak across time. To compose such haiku is difficult. But it is the kind of poetry that can break into the mainstream and can become part of a poetic heritage.

The vertical axis does not always have to be a connection to another poem. It can be what I call cultural memory, a larger body of associations that the larger community can identify with. It could be about a past crisis (such as the Vietnam War or the loss of a leader) that the poet of a community is trying to come to terms with. The key here is the larger frame, the larger body of associations that carries from one generation to the next and that goes beyond the here and now, beyond the so-called haiku moment. The key point is that for the horizontal (contemporary) axis to survive, to transcend time and place, it needs at some point to cross the vertical (historical) axis; the present moment has to engage with the past or with a broader sense of time and community (such as family, national or literary history).

Nature and Seasonal Words

One of the major differences between English-language haiku and Japanese haiku is the use of the seasonal word (*kigo*). There are two formal requirements of the *hokku*, now called haiku: the cutting word, which cuts the 17-syllable *hokku* in two, and the seasonal word.

1. Bernard Lionel Einbond (1937–1998).

English-language haiku poets do not use cutting words per se, but they use the equivalent, either in the punctuation (such as a dash), with nouns, or syntax. The effect is very similar to the cutting word, and there have been many good poems that depend on the cutting. However, there is no equivalent to the seasonal word. In fact, the use of a seasonal word is not a formal requirement in English-language haiku, as it is for most of Japanese haiku.

In Japan, the seasonal word triggers a series of cultural associations which have been developed, refined and carefully transmitted for over a thousand years and which are preserved, transformed and passed on from generation to generation through seasonal handbooks, which remain in wide use today.

In Bashō's day, seasonal words stood in the shape of a huge pyramid. At the top were the big five, which had been at the core of classical poetry (the 31-syllable *waka*): the cuckoo (*hototogisu*) for summer, the cherry blossoms for spring, the snow for winter, the bright autumn leaves and the moon for autumn. Spreading out from this narrow peak were the other topics from classical poetry — spring rain (*harusame*), orange blossoms (*hanatachibana*), bush warbler (*uguisu*), willow tree (*yanagi*), etc. Occupying the base and the widest area were the vernacular seasonal words that had been added recently by *haikai* poets. In contrast to the elegant images at the top of the pyramid, the seasonal words at the bottom were taken from everyday, contemporary, commoner life.

Examples from spring include dandelion (*tanpopo*), garlic (*ninniku*), horseradish (*wasabi*) and cat's love (*neko no koi*).

From as early as the 11th century, the poet of classical poetry was expected to compose on the poetic essence (*honi*) of a set topic. The poetic essence was the established associations at the core of the seasonal word. In the case of the warbler (*uguisu*), for example, the poet had to compose on the warbler in regard to the arrival and departure of spring, about the emergence of the warbler from the mountain glen, or about the relationship of the warbler to the plum blossoms. This poetic essence, the cluster of associations at the core of the seasonal topic, was thought to represent the culmination and experience of generations of poets over many years. By composing on the poetic essence, the poet could partake of this communal experience, inherit it, and carry it on. (This phenomenon is true of most of the traditional arts. The beginner must first learn the fundamental forms, or *kata*, which represent the accumulated experience of generations of previous masters.) Poets studied Japanese classics such as *The Tale of Genji* and the *Kokinshū*, the first imperial anthology of Japanese *waka* poetry, because these texts were thought to preserve the poetic essence of nature and the seasons, as well as of famous places.

Famous places (*meisho*) in Japanese poetry have a function similar to the seasonal word. Each famous place in Japanese poetry had a core of poetic associations on which the poet was obliged to compose. Tatsutagawa (Tatsuta River), for example, meant *momiji*, or bright autumn leaves. Poets such as Saigyō and Bashō traveled to famous poetic places — such as Tatsutagawa, Yoshino, Matsushima, Shirakawa — in order to partake of this communal experience, to be inspired by poetic places that had been the fountainhead of the great poems of the past.

These famous poetic places provided an opportunity to commune across time with earlier poets. Like seasonal words, famous places functioned as a direct pipeline to the communal poetic body. By contrast, there are very few, if any places, in North America that have a core of established poetic associations of the kind found in famous places in Japan. And accordingly there are relatively few English haiku on noted places.

The point here is that the seasonal word, like the famous place name in Japanese poetry, anchors the poem in not only some aspect of nature but in the vertical axis, in a larger communal body of poetic and cultural associations. The seasonal word allows something that is small to gain a life of its own. The seasonal word, like the famous place name, also links the poem to other poems. In fact, each haiku is in effect part of one gigantic seasonal poem.

People have often wondered about the brevity of the Japanese poem. The seventeen syllable haiku is the shortest form in world literature, and the thirtyone syllable *waka* or *tanka*, as it is called today, is probably the second shortest. How then is it possible for poetry to be so short and yet still be poetry? How can there be complexity or high value in such a simple, brief form? First, the brevity and the overt simplicity allow everyone to participate, making it a communal, social medium. Second, the poem can be short and still complex since it is actually part of a larger, more complex poetic body. When the poet takes up one of the topics at the top of the seasonal pyramid or visits a famous place, he or she enters into an imaginary world that he or she shares with the audience and that connects to the dead, the ancients. To compose on the poetic essence of a topic is, as we saw, to participate in the larger accumulated experience of past poets. It is for this reason that the audience takes pleasure in very subtle variations on familiar themes.

This communal body, the vertical axis, however, is in constant need of infusion, of new life. The *haikai* poet needs the horizontal axis to seek out the new experience, new language, new topics, new poetic partners. The seasonal pyramid can be seen as concentric circles of a tree trunk, with the classical topics at the center, followed by classical linked verse topics, the *haikai* topics, and finally modern haiku words on the periphery. The innermost circles bear the longest history and are essentially fictional worlds and the least likely to change. The outer circles, by contrast, are rooted in everyday life and in the contemporary, ever-changing world. Many of those on the circumference will come and go, never to be seen again. Without the constant addition of new rings, however, the tree will die or turn into a fossil.

One of the ideals that Bashō espoused toward the end of his life was that of the “unchanging and the everchanging” (*fueki ryuko*). The “unchanging” implied the need to seek the “truth of poetic art” (*fuga no makoto*), particularly in the poetic and spiritual tradition, to engage in the vertical axis, while the “ever changing” referred to the need for constant change and renewal, the source of which was ultimately to be found in everyday life, in the horizontal axis.

Significantly, the Haiku Society of America definition of haiku does not mention the seasonal word, which would be mandatory in Japan for most schools of haiku. Maybe half of existing English-language haiku have seasonal words or some sense of the season, and even when the haiku do have a seasonal word they usually do not server the function that they do in Japanese haiku. The reason for this is that the connotations of seasonal words differ greatly from region to region in North America, not to

mention other parts of the world, and generally are not tied to specific literary or cultural associations that would immediately be recognized by the reader. In Japan, by contrast, for hundreds of years, the seasonal words have served as a crucial bridge between the poem and the tradition. English-language haiku therefore has to depend on other dimensions of haiku for its life.

In short, while haiku in English is inspired by Japanese haiku, it can not and should not try to duplicate the rules of Japanese haiku because of significant differences in language, culture and history.

A definition of English-language haiku will thus, by nature, differ from that of Japanese haiku. If pressed to give a definition of English-language haiku that would encompass the points that I have made here, I would say, echoing the spirit of Bashō's own poetry, that haiku in English is a short poem, usually written in one to three lines, that seeks out new and revealing perspectives on the human and physical condition, focusing on the immediate physical world around us, particularly that of nature, and on the workings of the human imagination, memory, literature and history.

There are already a number of fine North American haiku poets working within this frame so this definition is intended both to encourage an existing trend and to affirm new space that goes beyond existing definitions of haiku.

Senryū and English-Language Haiku

Maybe close to half of English-language haiku, including many of the best ones, are in fact a form of *senryū*, 17-syllable poems that do not require a seasonal word and that focus on human condition and social circumstances, often in a humorous or satirical fashion. I think that this is fine. English-language haiku should not try to imitate Japanese haiku, since it is working under very different circumstances. It must have a life and evolution of its own.

Senryū, as it evolved in Japan in the latter half of the 18th century, when it blossomed into an independent form, was heavily satirical, poking fun at contemporary manners and human foibles. English-language haiku magazines have established a distinction between the two forms, of haiku and *senryū*, in which those poems associated with nature are placed in the haiku category and those with non-natural subjects in the *senryū* category. According to the Haiku Society of America, haiku is the "essence of a movement keenly perceived in which nature is linked to human nature." *Senryū*, by contrast, is "primarily concerned with human nature; often humorous or satiric." While this definition of English-language *senryū* is appropriate, that for English-language haiku, which tends, by nature, to overlap with *senryū*, seems too limited.

One consequence of a narrower definition of haiku is that English-language anthologies of haiku are overwhelmingly set in country or natural settings even though 90 percent of the haiku poets actually live in urban environments. To exaggerate the situation, North American haiku poets are given the alternative of either writing serious poetry on nature (defined as haiku) or of writing humorous poetry on non-nature topics (defined as *senryū*). This would seem to discourage haiku poets from writing serious poetry on the immediate urban environment or broader social issues. Topics such as subways, commuter driving, movie theaters, shopping malls, etc., while falling outside of the traditional notion

of nature, in fact provide some of the richest sources for modern haiku, as much recent English-language haiku has revealed, and should be considered part of nature in the broadest sense.

For this reason I am now editing a volume of New York or urban haiku,² which, according to the narrow definition of haiku, would often be discouraged or disqualified, but which, in my mind, represents the original spirit of Japanese haikai in focusing on the immediate physical environment. Projects such as Dee Evett's "Haiku on 42nd Street," in which he presented urban haiku on empty movie theatre marquees in Times Square, are, in this regard, both innovative and inspiring.

Conclusion: Some Characteristics of *Haikai*

The dilemma is this: on the one hand, the great attraction of haiku is its democracy, its ability to reach out, to be available to everyone. There is no poetry like haiku when it comes to this. Haiku has a special meaning and function for everyone. It can be a form of therapy. It can be a way to tap into one's psyche.

Haiku can do all these things. And it can do these things because it is short, because the rules are simple, because it can focus on the moment.

However, if haiku is to rise to the level of serious poetry, literature that is widely respected and admired, that is taught and studied, commented on, that can have impact on other non-haiku poets, then it must have a complexity that gives it depth and that allows it to both focus on and rise above the specific moment or time. Bashō, Buson and other masters achieved this through various forms of textual density, including metaphor, allegory, symbolism and allusion, as well as through the constant search for new topics. For North American poets, for whom the seasonal word cannot function in the fashion that it did for these Japanese masters, this becomes a more pressing issue, with the need to explore not only metaphorical and symbolic possibilities but new areas—such as history, urban life, social ills, death and war, cyberspace, Haiku need not and should not be confined to a narrow definition of nature poetry, particularly since the ground rules are completely different from those in Japan.

How then can haiku achieve that goal in the space of 17 syllables? The answer is that it does not necessarily have to. One of the assumptions that Bashō and others made about the *hokku* (haiku) was that it was unfinished. The *hokku* was only the beginning of a dialogue; it had to be answered by the reader or another poet or painter. *Haikai* in its most fundamental form, as linked verse, is about linking one verse to another, one person to another. *Haikai* is also about exchange, about sending and answering, greeting and bidding farewell, about celebrating and mourning.

Haikai was also about mutual composition, about completing or complementing the work of others, adding poetry and calligraphy to someone's printing, adding a prose passage to a friend's poem, etc.

One consequence is that *haikai* and the *hokku* in particular is often best appreciated and read as part of a sequence, as part of an essay, a poetry collection, a diary or travel narrative, all forms that reveal the process of exchange, linkage, and that give *haikai* and haiku a larger context. Bashō's best work was

2. A project that never came to fruition.

Narrow Road to the Interior (Oku no hosomichi), in which the haiku was embedded in a larger prose narrative and was part of a larger chain of texts.

In Bashō's day, *haikai* was two things: 1) performance and social act, and 2) literary text. As a social act, as an elegant form of conversation, *haikai* had to be easily accessible; it had to be spontaneous; it had to perform social and religious functions. Thus, half of Bashō's haiku were greetings, parting poems, poetic prayers. They served very specific functions and were anchored in a specific place and time, in a dialogic exchange with other individuals. For Bashō, however, *haikai* was also a literary text that had to transcend time and place, be understood by those who were not at the place of composition. To achieve this goal, Bashō repeatedly rewrote his poetry, made it fictional, gave it new settings, added layers of meaning, emphasized the vertical axis (linking it to history and other literary texts), so that the poem would have an impact beyond its original circumstances. One hopes that more North American haiku poets can take inspiration from such complex work.

