

METAPHOR IN BASHO'S HAIKU

by Jane Reichhold

How many times, in your years of studying haiku, have you been told "never use metaphor or simile in haiku"? How many times have you written a pretty good haiku but have been afraid to send it to an editor for fear it would be rejected because it "kinda has a metaphor" in it?

Yet, if you have studied and written longer poems, you KNOW the use of metaphor is one of the essential aspects, one of the most time-tested techniques, of poetry. Our greatest English language poets were the best masters of discovering and using metaphor.

Now in haiku, the experts say we must cast aside this trusty tool. But wait a minute. Basho was Japan's most famous poet. Did he use metaphor?

Let us dare to rewrite his most famous "on a bare branch / a crow settles / autumn dusk" into:

the heavy way a crow settles on a bare branch is just like the way dusk comes in late autumn.

Given this, the reader's mind says yes, both are dark, autumn dusk is similar to heavy feathers that suddenly descend through the empty tree filling it with darkness. Yes, the black crow is the harbinger of death, the time of rest in nature and in life. If you've ever been near where a crow suddenly lands you've felt this fear folded under its wings, the surprise it is so black, so large, so threatening, so cold -- just as late autumn is.

What makes the haiku fascinating to us is that all above, and surely much more, can be contained by juxtaposing bare branch, a crow settling and autumn dusk. For me, the elements that securely tie the crow in place as metaphor for an autumn evening are: one, the verb "settling" (because we say dusk settles -- but not lands or perches), a technique Basho so often employs one automatically checks his verb for this two-sidedness when one appears in a poem and two, the image of a bare branch which can accept naturally both the arrival of a bird image and autumn dusk.

A bit more far-fetched, but therefore deeper and more interesting, is Basho's metaphor / simile in his "old pond / a frog jumps in / the sound of water."

To begin, let us take the Japanese literally in the last line so it reads "water of sound." Let that roll around a few minutes in your imagination. The water of sound. Sound as water. Sound moving as water does. Sound rippling outward as water does when disturbed.

Heretofore, all poetical Japanese frogs made sounds -- croaking, songs, calls.

What if water was used as a metaphor for the invisible sound? Instead of making a sound with its voice, what if the frog leaps into the water of sound?

We can never know if Basho was having thoughts like these before he wrote (or spoke) the lines "a frog jumps in / the water of sound" but we do know he was aware enough of the gift of his inspiration that he didn't allow Kikaku to tack on a

beginning phrase of yellow roses but stayed with his metaphor of water as sound / sound as water to say "old pond" to emphasize that sound is the oldest pond.

It could be, as it has been reported, that Basho simply heard a frog plunging into water (a rather probable occurrence as he lived in a marsh where two rivers joined) just at the moment a Zen master asked him a question on his progress in his meditations. Yet he didn't begin his poem with his reality of "in the marsh" or "by the river" but used "old pond" because in a quiet pond a disturbance most closely resembles the way sound moves and is most accurate. Again the third image is the tie for his metaphor of water for sound. Bodies (get that one?) of water have sometimes stood as metaphors for ears because of the way water reflects and distorts sound.

So you see, Basho's oft-quoted advice, "to know the pine, go to the pine" is also a clue to understanding the metaphors in his work. For instance, in his "summer grass / the dreams /of warriors" became clear to me one summer day while sitting before a hillside of long, dried grass. As the afternoon wind blew up the slopes, the heavy-headed (sleepy-like) grasses bent and waved. The sheen on the polished stalks flashed and darkened in patterns as if the ghostly people were dashing toward the top -- as if waves of attacking warriors were flowing -- flanking --following some unseen desire. That Basho surely saw this very same effect while visiting a famous battlefield gives added credence to the metaphor of warriors' dreams, their passions and ambitions, being as worthless as dried grass which moved so it looked as if the soldiers were still, in their spirit husks, charging up the hill.

My premise is that metaphor IS one of the valuable components of haiku writing. What is different though, is the way the metaphor is written into the haiku. In haiku the two portions of the metaphor / simile are usually not connected with "like" or "as" (although in several of Basho's haiku he does use these expressions) but the elements of the metaphor are simply set down in their clearest, most elementary expression, usually in juxtaposition tied together by a verb or third image.

Also, in haiku, the range of the metaphor is limited somewhat by reality. Towering storm waves crashing on a beach do call to mind lions raging toward the shore. Yet it is very rare to see lions cavorting in the surf. However to see the white spindrift blow aloft where a gull flies gives the more haiku-like "lifting white from the waves / a gull."

When encouraging writers to resume the use of metaphor, I am not suggesting the metaphor be selected and used in the conventional English literature tradition. Part of the delight and popularity of haiku is the learning of new, and for Western writers, unusual methods of stating the metaphors that come with our inspiration. Aside from the observation that most of the "flat" haiku are simple observations lacking in hidden metaphor and so many of the haiku that "grab one" are those offering a metaphor to chew on is the idea that we need metaphor to bring into concrete reality the poetic vision.

The poet's job is to experience this earth, this life, and report it to fellow inhabitants in a manner that allows the reader / hearer to experience the insight

for him/herself. The poet is the journalist for the spirit world. Yet our vocabulary for this illusive realm is as vague and undefined as the average person's ventures into it are. Therefore, in order to talk of feelings, sensations, vision, hunches, parallel world experiences, we must employ the concrete images by metaphor and simile.

Recently I've been studying William Everson's concept of "the earth as metaphor" in which he view all the physical elements of our universe as substances standing in for greater deeper, finer truths. The Bach Flower Remedies are a practical application of this belief. Distillations of the essence of flowers are sipped, not for any medicinal qualities of the plants, but for the emotions of the other world which manifest in them.

I believe it is this method of thinking that made Basho the great poet he was. When historians say "haiku degenerated" after Basho's death I suspect this decline was because haiku was denied its right to be a vehicle for poetry and poetical vision. I admit to finding most interesting the writing of persons, either Japanese or non-Japanese, who allow themselves to write as poets drawing on the devices of poetry and who are able to transfer ALL the previous poetic techniques into new forms inspired by the visions of poets of many cultures.