



Traces of Bashô

Haruo Shirane talks with Udo Wenzel

Udo Wenzel: In the year 2004 the anniversary of Bashô's 360th birthday and his 310th death day was held. How important is Bashô for the modern Japanese Haiku?

Haruo Shirane: I think that Bashô is very important for Japanese haiku. It is not only that he is a model for poetry, he is a cultural model. That is to say, his lifestyle, his travels, his philosophy, his legend – there are all important and had a large impact on subsequent poets, including those today in Japan.

Udo Wenzel: Most biographies about Bashô mention that he was a lay monk of Zen. I noticed, however, that you did not mention it in your book *Traces of Dreams*. Do you think it is not important for his poetry? Did you like to show another Bashô, not associated with Zen and the Mythos of Zen?

Haruo Shirane: It is not clear if he was lay monk of Zen. It is clear that he had exposure to Zen Buddhism. He also had exposure to other forms of Buddhism as well as to Shintô. He was influenced by many sources, of which Zen is only one. Since too much stress had been placed on Bashô's relationship to Zen in the West, I thought it would better not to stress it. What is important is not Zen Buddhism so much as the stress in the Japanese tradition on closeness to nature (Shintô) and on the stress on non-self, which allows the poet to fuse with his or her subject matter. This is something that Bashô stressed though he never used Zen phrases. This connection between the poet and his subject matter allows the poet to write about his or her surroundings with letting his self or ego get in the way. If you read Bashô's travel diaries, you will see

that he believes in the local deities, sometimes Shintô and sometimes Buddhist. He feels a certain awe of nature or of the place as when he is at Ryuushaku Temple (the mountain temple) or at Hiraizumi in the Narrow Road to the Deep North (Oku no hosomichi). He writes about that awe and expresses it in his poetry. This is more important than the notion of Zen Buddhism. Almost all Japanese are polytheistic and the local gods or kami are very important.

Udo Wenzel: Your book about Bashô called *Traces of Dreams*. Is "dreaming" an important conception in Bashô's poetry? What does it mean?

Haruo Shirane: I took the title from the most famous poem in Oku no hosomichi (Narrow Road to the Deep North): natsukusa ya tsamonodomo no yume no ato: "Summer grasses – / traces of dreams / of ancient warriors." I find this haiku to be representative of the entire text and of much of Bashô's poetry in that it presents two landscapes at the same time: the present landscape, of the summer grasses before the eyes of the traveler, and the past landscape, of the battlefield where many warriors lost their lives in a futile struggle. The word "dream" is important since it suggests the fleeting nature of human life. At the same time, the dream is of the past, reliving the lives of historical individuals, thus transcending time and giving them recognition through poetry and memory. Poetry, particularly haiku, has this power to capture both the fleeting and the past, and in this case to overlap the two. The "dream" here also suggests the dream of the *waki*, or the traveler-monk in a noh play, who comes to a place and dreams of the past and of the spirit of the dead, who speak to him of their past suffering, aspirations, and attachments. The traveler-monk then offers a prayer, to console the spirit of the dead. The poem is a kind of prayer for the spirit(s) of the dead who lost their lives here in vain. To me these are very significant moments in Bashô's career and in his oeuvre of poetry.

Udo Wenzel: Thus, one could say, Bashô was not a pure nature poet, but a poet, who appreciated the closeness to nature, and simultaneously possessed an increased awareness of the cultural connotations of a landscape. Did`nt he had also a keen

sense for landscapes which were transformed into stereotypes? Meanwhile one of his travelings, he is standing in front of one of the sacred landscapes in Japan, the Fuji, and he composes: *kirishigure Fuji o minu hi zo omoshiroki* (misty rain / a day with Mt.Fuji unseen: / so enchanting¹)

Haruo Shirane: Yes, I agree that Bashô worked and played against poetic cliches and cultural stereotypes, as suggested by the poem that you cite. One of the major characteristics of haikai poetry, or what I call "haikai spirit," was the awareness of established associations in poetry and the need to relativize or critique them, often in a humorous way. This is one of the things that distinguishes haikai from renga (orthodox linked verse) and waka (classical poetry): the need to bring new visions or perspectives to established associations or poetic cliches. I believe that this is one of the important characteristics of modern haiku, that it allows us (or should allow us) to see the world in new ways, with fresh lens.

Udo Wenzel: You wrote in *Traces of Dreams*: "Travel meant a constant effort to explore new territory and new languages as well as the perpetual search for new perspectives on nature, on seasons, and the landscape, the carriers of poetic and cultural memory." Haiku-poets often distinguish between the style of Bashô, the style of Buson, the style of Issa. Did Bashô indeed emerge a unique and homogeneous style?

Haruo Shirane: Bashô did not have one poetic style. In that sense, it was not homogeneous, nor was it always unique. He moved from one style to another. For example, in the very early stages, he used a Chinese style with many Chinese characters, Chinese imagery, and with Chinese syntax. At the very end of his career, by contrast, he used a very light, colloquial style which tried to convey the sense of the everyday life of the commoner. I can not give examples in English since they tend not to translate well. On the other hand, in a very broad perspective, it is fairly easy to distinguish the style of Bashô from that of Buson and Issa. This mainly has to do with subject matter and attitude. Buson, for example, uses a large number of classical words and Chinese words, and is very much of a romantic in imagining worlds and

scenes that would never exist in reality. Many of his poems are about the ancient period or the medieval period, many centuries before he was born. Bashô does not do this; he writes about the present. He can write about the past but he always does so from the point of view of the present. Buson often starts in the past and stays there. Issa also focuses on the present. The difference with Issa is that he focuses on more mundane and comical matter, often small living things, like flies, frogs, small animals and birds, or on children. Bashô does not do this in general. Bashô and Issa both use a colloquial style, but for very different purposes. Bashô tends to be more spiritual while Issa tends to be more earthy or mundane. Shiki is a modern poet so his language tends to be more modern. These differences tend to get lost in translation. The important thing is that the content and attitude are different.

Udo Wenzel: Following your explanations, Bashô's haikai working on two key axes. One is the horizontal, the present, the contemporary axe; and the others is the vertical axe, leading back into the past, to history and other poems. But how can we imagine that? Doesn't a haiku emerge in the moment and spontaneously? Was the ancient Chinese and Japanese poetry in this way present for Bashô that it could come together at certain places with his own experiences, perceptions, and poetry? Or is his poetry a result of a long consideration, a kind of brain-work?

Haruo Shirane: You are right in that the haiku often emerges in the moment and spontaneously. It is also true, as you note, that Bashô's poem about the present will call up or allude to an earlier poem by a Chinese or Japanese poet. This happens often in Japanese poetry since it is so short and there is constant referral to earlier texts in order to deepen the content. But this is not necessarily done in an obvious way. If the reader catches it, fine; if not, that is also fine. One does not have to be a scholar to read a poem properly. Did Bashô wrack his brains about how to allude to another poem? No, I don't think so. The poets of the time shared a common body of knowledge. He usually wrote many versions of one poem, and then took the version that he liked the most. In a number of cases, the poem would echo another poem or text. In many cases, it referred to nothing but the present. Sometimes, the poem took one into the

past, sometimes it did not. This had much to do with linked verse, which, by nature, was an imaginary journey that often included the past.

Udo Wenzel: Is it possible to compose haiku as art (as “pure literature” that stands outside person experience) as opposed to composing haiku from personal experience?

Haruo Shirane: Yes, definitely. This composition of poetry, or haiku as art, is an important part of Japanese literature. Poetry in Japan tends to be composed at banquets or on social occasions where the participants have to compose on a given topic. By necessity, this is an imaginary situation. If the topic is *a woman abandoned by a man*, and a man writes this poem from the woman's point of view, it is fictional. Even if the poet is a woman, it would be fictional if she never had this experience. In Japanese poetry, *a woman abandoned by a man* is a popular topic on which thousands of poems have been composed.

Udo Wenzel: Does it make sense, as not-japanese writer, to follow Bashô's aesthetic ideals? Are these ideals specific japanese or universal?

Haruo Shirane: It makes sense only if you share some common experience. If, for example, you are a traveler and share some of Bashô's views of travel, then you can use him as a model or echoe his poetry on poetry. If you don't like to travel, but you want to imagine yourself as a traveler, you can still use him. If you don't want to have anything to do with travel but want to be a hermit and enjoy nature, Bashô may be for you.

Udo Wenzel: First you did research work about the *Tale of Genji* of the Heian periode. How did you learn about Bashô? Is there a connection between the *Tale of Genji* and Bashô's poetry?

Haruo Shirane: After I did my work on the *Tale of Genji*, I became interested in literary and poetic theory, that is to say, discussions about literature and poetry. What did authors say about fiction? About poetry?About drama? I found that many of the

literary treatises were about composing poetry. That is to say, this was not literary theory or critique, but practical means of learning how to compose poetry. This tells us a great deal about the nature of Japanese literature, that much of it was meant to be created and exchanged, not just consumed by a distant audience. This is certainly true of haiku. Of the many literary treatises that I read, those by Bashô and his disciples were the most interesting. They were both about practice and about the appreciation of poetry. That is the main reason that I started to do research on Bashô.

Udo Wenzel: Which books can you recommend for those who like to learn more about Bashô?

Haruo Shirane: Beside my own book *Traces of Dreams*, I recommend Makoto Ueda's book called *Bashô's Interpreters*, which looks at different interpretations of Bashô's poems, and his earlier book called *Matsuo Bashô*, which gives a good biographical overview.

Udo Wenzel: *Thank you very much for the interview*

Remark

1 Translation from David Landis Barnhill. *Bashô's Haiku. Selected Haiku by Matsuo Bashô*. State University of New York Press. 2004. S. 41