

Bashō's frog, the great survivor

Geoffrey Wilkinson

古池や蛙飛こむ水の音

*furuike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto*

The old pond—
a frog jumps in,
the sound of water.

Let's just call it the "What's all the fuss about?" school of thought. That is, there are those who think Bashō's frog hokku has been the subject of too much oversubtle interpretation—mystification, in fact—and accorded an importance it does not deserve. The scholar Naitō Meisetsu, for example, writing in 1904, put it as follows:

There was an old pond, a frog jumped into it, and—plop!—the sound of water was heard. That is all the poem says. The interest of the poem lies in its being purely descriptive of the scene. It goes without saying that this hokku does not rank high among Bashō's poems. I am certain Bashō and his disciples did not expect future readers to value [it] so highly or to attach so many surprising meanings to it.¹

This is a minority view, of course, and the consensus now is that Bashō's frog fully deserves the importance attached to it because it marks a dividing point, a pre-amphibian/post-amphibian moment, not just in but in the broader haikai tradition as well. Ironically, the roots of the modern consensus largely go back to a series of articles, *Bashō zatsudan* (*Small Talk about Bashō*, published in 1893–94), in which the poet and critic Masaoka Shiki set out, in effect, to debunk Bashō and his school. The idolatry that had built up around Bashō had to be stripped away, said Shiki, so that there could be a more genuinely critical reappraisal and appreciation of his poetry. The frog hokku was a good candidate for reappraisal because, for Shiki, its spare descriptiveness—

¹ Translation by Makoto Ueda, in his *Bashō and His Interpreters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 141. Copyright 1992 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

Meisetsu's "That is all the poem says"—was not a limitation or weakness but something new and unique:

This poem is nothing more than a report of what the poet's auditory nerves sensed. Not only did it include none of his subjective ideas or visual, moving images, but what it recorded was nothing more than a moment of time. For that reason, this poem has no breadth in time or space. That is why no poem can be simpler than this; it is why this poem is impossible to imitate.²

In a later essay devoted specifically to the poem, Shiki was clear that it is not Bashō's best hokku (and equally clear that Bashō and his disciples did not think it his best, either). That was not the point. The significance of the hokku, said Shiki, is that it represents Bashō's realization that he had been mistaken in supposing only thoughts of dying alone on a gloomy journey, sorrow for an abandoned child, or other such "extreme things" could be the stuff of poetry, and that, on the contrary, "something ordinary can immediately become poetry." Here the something ordinary just happened to be a frog jumping into an old pond.³

In our own day, Haruo Shirane has added another dimension to our appreciation of Bashō's frog hokku by exploring its subversive quality of "working against" conventional poetic expectations. To explain what he means, Shirane invokes the account by Shikō, one of Bashō's disciples, of how the hokku was composed on a spring day in 1686.⁴ A gentle rain was falling, says Shikō, and every so often could be heard the sound of frogs hopping into the pond in Bashō's garden. After silent reflection, Bashō came out with the last twelve syllables:

蛙飛こむ水の音
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

a frog jumps in,
the sound of water.

2 Ueda translation, again from *Bashō and His Interpreters*, p. 141. All the remaining prose and poetry translations in this essay are my own.

3 Shiki's essay, published in 1898, is translated in full as "Shiki on *Furu-ike ya*" in R.H. Blyth's *A History of Haiku* (Tōkyō: Hokuseidō Press, 1969), Vol. II, pp. 46-76.

4 Shikō's account comes from his *Kuzu no matsubara*: first published in 1692, it is virtually contemporaneous with the events it describes.

Another disciple, Kikaku, suggested five syllables to begin the hokku:

山吹や
yamabuki ya

Golden kerria—

Bashō disregarded *yamabuki ya* and completed the hokku himself with the wording we know today:

古池や
furuike ya

The old pond—

The *yamabuki* (*Kerria japonica* to the botanist) with its bright yellow flowers was one of many associations with “frog,” itself a season word for spring, that haikai poets had inherited from classical poetry dating back to the Heian period and earlier. If Bashō had chosen *yamabuki ya* rather than *furuike ya*, Shirane argues, it “would have left [his] hokku within the circle of classical associations. Instead Bashō worked against what was considered the ‘poetic essence’ (*hon’i*), the established classical associations, of the frog. In place of the plaintive voice of the frog singing in the rapids or calling out for his lover, Bashō gave the sound of the frog jumping into the water.”⁵ Mind you, as Shirane himself points out, the same observation had been made not much more than eighty years after Bashō’s death, and more succinctly, in a hokku by Buson:

飛こんで古歌洗う蛙かな
tobikonde
furu-uta arau
kawazu kana

Jumping in,
washing an old poem clean—
a frog.

⁵ Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 15. Reprinted with his permission.

For Buson, we feel, it was not so much a question of “working against” as *breaking free from* the constrictions of stifling, codified convention.

Buson, Shiki, and now Shirane all help to explain why Bashō’s frog is generally held in such high esteem today. Along the way, though, and quite apart from the skepticism of people like Meisetsu, the hokku has had to put up with a variety of indignities, some mild, others more grievous. At the mild end of the scale is the ink drawing by Sengai (1750–1837, head priest of the Shōfukuji, a temple of the Rinzai Zen sect in Hakata, Kyōshō) that depicts Bashō’s frog crouching under a banana plant. The plant is a visual pun on Bashō’s pen name, *bashō* being the Japanese for *Musa basjoo*, a variety of non-fruiting banana. Obvious enough. But above the drawing, in an imaginative leap of its own, the frog gently parodies Bashō with this mock-hokku:

池あらば飛んで芭蕉に聞かせたい
ike araba
tonde Bashō ni
kikasetai

If there were a pond,
I’d jump right in and have
Bashō hear the sound.

An almost exact contemporary of Sengai was the poet and Zen priest Ryōkan (who was considered an eccentric recluse, and spent most of his life in what is now Niigata Prefecture in northern Japan). His response to Bashō’s frog was as follows:

新池や蛙飛こむ音のなし
araike ya
kawazu tobikomu
oto no nashi

The new pond—
not so much as the sound of
a frog jumping in.

At first sight this, too, looks like nothing more than an affectionate parody. Yet could there also be a Zen element in Ryōkan’s poem? Is it intimating that, at one and the same instant, an old pond, a

frog and the sound of water are there and not there? (More on Zen below.)

Moving towards the more serious end of the indignity scale takes us, I think, into the realms of translation. As I am only qualified to speak about translation into English, I will confine myself to that, although I appreciate that the frog hokku must have been translated into any number of other languages. While there are lots of perfectly good English translations, it has to be said that there are one or two excruciatingly bad ones. The prize for the most excruciating should probably go to the following, collected by R.H. Blyth and identified by him as “No. VII of a Monograph Committee, Los Angeles, 1964”.⁶

Old pond, ancient pool:
A frog jumping plunges in:
Waterish splash-splish.

(Albeit an extreme case, this strikes me as a perfect illustration of tail wagging dog: by insisting on trying to replicate the 5-7-5 syllable count of the Japanese, the translators have ended up with repetitive gibberish. Except in the fortuitous instances where it does work, the 5-7-5 scheme is an unnatural—and, in my view, unnecessary—constraint in English translation. I digress.) On balance, I suspect that Bashō would have preferred Alfred Marks’s limerick, which may be guilty of irreverent frivolity but not the crassness of the Monograph Committee translation:

There once was a curious frog
Who sat by a pond on a log
And, to see what resulted,
In the pond catapulted
With a water-noise heard round the bog.⁷

Arguably the greatest indignity suffered by Bashō’s frog—and whether you agree with this or not will depend on your own interpretation of the hokku—is its identification with, or some

⁶ *A History of Haiku*, Vol. II, p. 350.

⁷ From “*Haiku in Japanese and English*,” in *Chanoyu Quarterly* 9 (1972), p. 60. My thanks to the Uransenke Foundation, both for permission to reprint the limerick and for sharing their archive copy of the article. To be fair to the late Dr Marks, his intent was to illustrate how a particular poetic form or rhythm may work in one language but not in another.

might say its hijacking by, Zen Buddhism. On the face of it, this appears to be a phenomenon associated with the Western “discovery” of Bashō’s poetry and its popularization, in the English-speaking world, at least, by Blyth and others. Certainly we are familiar with Blyth’s conflation of haiku with Zen (and with aspects of Wordsworth), “Haiku is a kind of *satori*, or enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things,”⁸ but is that the full picture? Is there anything comparable in the critical literature written by *Japanese* scholars and commentators? The answer is not black and white. Yes, in Japan there is a history of interpreting the frog hokku in Zen terms, and it long predates the Western “discovery” of Bashō. Moreover, while some of these indigenous interpretations are cautious and nuanced in reading Zen content into the hokku, others do so very explicitly. To the best of my knowledge, however, no authoritative Japanese commentator has ever claimed, as Blyth does with characteristic extravagance, that “If we say... that haiku is a form of Zen, we must not assert that haiku belongs to Zen, but that Zen belongs to haiku.”⁹

In the Japanese literature, one of the most unambiguously Zen readings of Bashō’s frog appears in a commentary dated 1795. “[The hokku] should be taken in with one’s eyes closed, seated on a straw mat,” according to Shinten-ō Nobutane, who goes on:

In the Hōreki era [1751-1764] the Zen monk Hakuin often spoke about the sound of one hand [clapping]. Likewise, in this poem the sound of water is everything and nothing, nothing and everything.¹⁰

By contrast, the twentieth-century critic Yamamoto Kenkichi is more oblique in his reading. While he does not doubt that Zen played a significant role in the overall development of Bashō’s mature style, Yamamoto is circumspect about the frog hokku itself. The reason why it has been interpreted in Zen terms, he suggests, is to do with the nature of Bashō’s poetic imagination. In common with Shirane, Yamamoto alludes to Shikō’s account of how Bashō chose *furuike ya* over *yamabuki ya* for the opening

8 *Haiku* (Tōkyō: Hokuseidō Press, 1950), Vol. I Preface, p.vii.

9 *Haiku*, Vol. I Preface, p. v.

10 From Nobutane’s *Oi no soko* (*Bottom of the Knapsack*), an eight-volume critical commentary on Bashō’s hokku. Almost nothing is known about Nobutane himself.

phrase of the hokku. For Yamamoto, too, Bashō's choice is at the heart of the matter, and it is not, or not necessarily, a Zen matter. As he expresses it:

The phrase *furuike* is not a "combination" [*toriawase*] device like *yamabuki*. It is an essence, so to speak, distilled from the scene created by the next twelve syllables, and it reveals the core of Bashō's poetic understanding. Conversely, we might say that the poem is multi-layered: what is grasped immediately and intuitively in the first five syllables is grasped concretely, in more detail, and reflectively in the last twelve syllables. A "combination" device principally works by setting up a visual image that connects the elements of the poem at an outer level of consciousness, but here the elements resonate with each other at a deeper and more fundamental level of consciousness. Compared with a "combination" poem, Bashō's way of doing it works by evoking the auditory imagination and comes from his more profound experience of language.¹¹

Unlike Yamamoto, other twentieth-century Japanese commentators persisted with explicitly Zen interpretations. Among them was the philosopher Takeuchi Yoshinori, who, in an essay¹² that touches incidentally but tellingly on Bashō's hokku, speaks of its "dynamic character." By this Takeuchi partly means the "interaction and interrelation" between the stillness of the old pond and the motion of the leaping frog, which he accentuates by expanding and translating the hokku as follows (typography as in Takeuchi's English-language text):

The old pond—
a frog jumps in;
the water sounds—
The old pond!

Now this stillness—sound—stillness "dynamic," which suggests that, paradoxically, the serenity of the scene is all the greater for being interrupted momentarily, is also found in many

11 My translation is from Yamamoto's *Bashō: sono kanshō to hihyō* (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1959), Vol. I, pp. 126-127.

12 "The Philosophy of Nishida," which originally appeared in the journal *Japanese Religions* in 1963. Takeuchi's essay is reproduced in full in Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2004), pp. 183-208.

interpretations of Bashō's hokku that make no mention at all of Zen. But Takeuchi's context is quite specific: the purpose of his essay is to discuss, approvingly, "pure experience" and later developments in the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (which, very roughly speaking, seeks to express Zen insights through some of the concepts and language of Western philosophy), and it is clear that Takeuchi's own understanding of Bashō's "dynamic" is heavily influenced by Zen.

Perhaps the most striking Zen interpretation of Bashō's frog by a Japanese commentator (and surely one that would have made a great impression on Blyth) is offered by D.T. Suzuki in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture*, originally published in English in 1938.¹³ Suzuki begins with an alternative account of the composition of the hokku. While he agrees that it came into being back-to-front, with the first five syllables added after the rest, he suggests it was under very different circumstances. It is known that in the early 1680s Bashō practiced meditation under the guidance of a Zen master named Bucchō. One day, Suzuki says, Bucchō visited Bashō and asked, "How are you getting on these days?" to which Bashō replied, "After the recent rain the moss has grown greener than ever." Bucchō then asked, "What Buddhism is there even before the moss has grown greener?" And it was in response to this, according to Suzuki, that Bashō came out with the twelve syllables,

蛙飛こむ水の音
kawazu tobikomū
mizu no oto

a frog jumps in,
the sound of water.

The exchanges between Bucchō and Bashō are in the nature of *mondō* or *kōan*, paradoxical and seemingly meaningless utterances (including Hakuin's "What is the sound of one hand?," alluded to by Nobutane) that are typical of Zen. We are puzzled, and even more puzzled when Suzuki refers to St John's Gospel. *Bucchō's* second question, Suzuki continues, is equivalent in significance to "Before Abraham was, I am," Christ's rebuke to the Jews in the temple who accused him of insulting their patriarch.¹⁴ In

13 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 239-241.

14 John 8:58.

other words, implicitly both Bucchō and Christ are addressing the same question: what was there—or, as Suzuki is careful to say, what *is* there—before man, before nature, and before the world itself? Christ answers by identifying himself with God and asserting that *God* is and has always been, that is, by an appeal to Christian faith. But Bucchō's way of putting the question demands a more rigorous answer because Buddhism does not make a distinction between creation and creator, or split man and nature from some separate being above and beyond the world. Hence what Bucchō is asking is, "Where is God even before he uttered, 'Let there be light'?" which is to say, "What is there before the world, *and before any God to create the world?*" The Zen answer is that there is time without time, space without space, an undifferentiated nothingness that nonetheless contains the possibility of everything that is and might ever be. Which brings Suzuki back to Bashō's frog and the sound it makes as it leaps into the old pond.

It is a mistake, Suzuki says, to understand Zen as a "gospel of quietism," and it is a mistake to understand Bashō's hokku as an "appreciation of tranquillity." Bashō's insight, Suzuki insists, is not into the silence of still water in a shady garden, but into the sound of water as the silence is broken. The frog, the pond, the poet, the whole universe itself, are all dissolved in that one sound and united in the undifferentiated nothingness. "Bashō's old pond," Suzuki concludes, "lies on the other side of eternity, where timeless time is.... It is whence all things come, it is the source of this world of particulars, yet in itself it shows no particularization. We come to it when we go beyond the 'rainfall' and 'the moss growing greener'."

On one level, it is difficult to know what to make of Suzuki's interpretation. Although he does not identify it as such, his alternative account of the frog hokku's composition actually comes from *A True History of Master Bashō's 'Old Pond'*,¹⁵ published in 1868 by the poet Kitsuda Shunko, which Yamamoto describes as "nonsense" and others regard as a hoax. But maybe authenticity of source is not the issue here. Whether as an elaborate metaphor, imaginative license, or however else Suzuki might mean us to take the *True History* account itself, his own commentary on it represents one of the profoundest of the Zen interpretations of Bashō's hokku and, in my opinion, is the one that rings the truest.

15 *Bashō-ō furuike shinden*, purportedly transcribed from a rediscovered manuscript.

What is the moral of the story? How do we account for the fact that after more than three hundred years Bashō's frog hokku keeps drawing us back, and, chances are, will still be drawing readers back in another three hundred years? How come everything that could possibly be said about its seventeen syllables has not been said long ago, definitively, once and for all? Particularly as Shiki and Yamamoto have both picked up on the auditory element—the sound of water—in the hokku, an auditory, or even a musical, analogy seems apt.

In a rare interview in 1998, the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt was asked, indirectly, what he was trying to say in his music and what he thought his audiences expected when they came to hear it. Pärt's answer, equally indirect, was: "Perhaps together with the audience, we [composer, orchestra, choir and conductor] are at the same distance from something larger." For Pärt, a devout Russian Orthodox Christian, the "something larger" in music may well be God, but he does not assume that anyone else will perceive it in the same way. "There are as many different ways of perception as there are listeners," he adds, "and all of them are justified."¹⁶ Is the secret of the longevity of Bashō's hokku, then, precisely that it cannot be pinned down and interpreted definitively, once and for all? If there is something larger in it, and most of us feel that there is, it is something that no one can agree on. Whether we put our own interpretations on the poem, or accept it as an unadorned report of Bashō's faculty of hearing, a casting-off of tired convention, a moment of Zen insight, or, indeed, a case of "What's all the fuss about?," in Pärt's sense every one of our responses is justified.

¹⁶ Pärt's interview appeared in the Estonian-language newspaper *Postimees* on June 12, 1998. The translation is by Alan Teder, reproduced with his permission.