Famous Japanese Haiku Narrators

by Randy Brooks

Introduction

All imaginative literature employs a narrator — the voice, perspective, and cultural role — who is telling the story. Whether implied or explicitly designated by the writer, the narrator is the imagined speaker whose words create focus and imply attitudes toward the situation being discussed. Even in autobiographical accounts and memoirs, the narrator is crafted by the writer as their writing identity. In this essay I want to explore the role of narrators evident in the work of some of the most famous Japanese haiku writers.

On the micro-level of reading one poem, the haiku narrator is usually implied or suggested through associations from images and connotations of language usage. As a concise expression, a single haiku rarely explicitly designates a narrator's perspective. However, the choice of words, suggested attitudes, grammatical tense, social context, location, perspective, or point-of-view, do provide hints that allow the reader to imagine the narrator. This is how imagined narrators are part of the reading process of each haiku

However, when reading a collection of haiku or a body of work by one author, this transactional process of imagining the narrator may extend beyond an individual haiku to the congregate of several haiku. Readers form a sense of the haiku writer's identity and come to expect certain content, themes, language and social perspectives from that author. Over time, readers and literary critics shape the haiku writer's ethos, reputation, and identity. Let's consider the ways well-known Japanese haiku writers employ narrators, or perhaps put more simply, a writer's point of view, in their work.

Matsuo Bashō's Persona

In Makoto Ueda's book, *Matsuo Bashō*, one of the key arguments for the significance of Bashō's work is the way in which his approach to writing changed and developed throughout his life. He describes these as five phases: 1) *Haiku as Pastime: 1662-72;* 2) *Technique of Surprising Comparison: 1673-80*; 3) *In Search of Identity: 1681-85*; 4) *Manifestations of Sabi: 1686-91*; and 5) *Last Phase: 1692-94*. Ueda describes Bashō's approach in each phase indicating a shift in identity and related aesthetic goals for writing haiku.

1 – *Haiku as Pastime*: Bashō as a Young Witty Haikai Poet

In the first phase, Bashō "was simply following the conventions prevalent in his day … the so-called Teimon school of haikai" (39) which sought amusement through playful language, puns, and allusions to well-known ancient waka and related literature. In his book *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, Haruo Shirane described Bashō's starting point as a haikai writer. "Bashō at first served as a domestic employee of the Tōdō house, presumably as a companion to Toshitada. … During this time, Bashō adapted the haikai name Munefusa, or Sōbō, and became a devotee of the Teimon style of haikai, the school led by Matsunaga Teitoku. In 1666, Sengin died prematurely, at the age of twenty-five, apparently forcing Bashō to leave the Tōdō house and severing his last connection with the samurai class. … In the spring of 1672, at the age of twenty-eight, Bashō moved to Edo to establish himself as a haikai master who could charge fees for his services." (178)

2 – *Technique of Surprising Comparison:* Bashō as an Edo Haikai Teacher

In the second phase, Bashō had moved to Edo and developed a following as a successful teacher of haikai poetry. Ueda writes: "The transition from refined wit to more earthy humor grew more apparent after Bashō came to Edo, and it was accelerated when the

Danrin school of haikai, which arose in opposition to the Teimon school, began dominating the local poetic scene in 1675. The new school markedly expanded the scope of haikai in both theme and diction, extending it deeply into the life of the common people. Elegant subjects cherished by classical court poets were often parodied and ridiculed; word play and allusions were not to show urbane wit but to provide a humorous contract to some mundane subject." (40)

3 – *In Search of Identity*: Bashō as an Impoverished Hermit

For the third phase, Ueda explains: "Apparently Bashō, weary of relying on wit and puns in the Japanese court tradition, had begun experimenting with the more somber and less artificial style of classical Chinese verse. The best product of these experiments is a famous poem about a crow, with which it is said Bashō came into his own:

On a bare branch
A crow is perched —
Autumn evening. (*Matsuo Bashō*, 44)

Again, the subject is very much like those of Chinese poetry and painting." (44) Ueda calls the third phase "*In Search of Identity*" because Bashō is no longer following another school of haikai. He is shaping his own approach and identity as a haikai writer. He writes: "The first Bashō Hut was built in 1680, and the poet settled down there that winter. From around this time until 1685 … he went through a transitional period during which he sought to shake off the prevailing poetic mode and to establish a style of his own." (45) The two primary new characteristics of this approach were the emulation of Chinese poets and the start of Bashō's travel journals while embracing the life of an impoverished hermit.

As Robert Aitken notes in *River of Heaven*, Bashō "moved to Edo and on, across the river to Fukugawa, for a reclusive life out of

the public eye. His disciples built him a rustic hut and planted a banana tree (bashō) in the yard, giving him a new pen name and his first permanent home." (5) Bashō is deliberately re-shaping his writer's identity as a recluse. In *Bashō and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*, Ueda explains that in 1681 "Bashō received a banana plant (bashō in Japanese) from a student named Rika as a gift for his new home. ... Neighbors began calling the house "the Bashō Hut" and its resident "Master Bashō." The poet liked the nickname and adopted it as his pseudonym." (67) [When citing Bashō's headnotes or prose about his own poems, I will present Bashō's words in italics.]

What I feel in my grass-thatched hut

banana plant in the autumn gale —
the sound of rain pattering
in the tub tonight (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 76)

One of Bashō's interpreters, Ogata, writes: "Living alone in his hut there and going through such harsh experiences, Bashō gained a new perspective on life. The hokku's first phrase, which describes banana leaves torn to pieces in the gale, can be taken as depicting a man as helpless as the leaves. In the violent environment of his new residence Bashō experienced such helplessness and, delving into the world of poetry and communicating with past poets, he elevated that helplessness into a new poetic ideal. This hokku marks the foundation of that ideal, wabi." (77)

Here is another haiku from *Bashō and His Interpreters* demonstrating Bashō's embrace of the impoverished hermit perspective. Bashō writes in a headnote to the haiku: *Rich people enjoy themselves by eating the finest meat, and aspiring youths sustain themselves by chewing vegetable roots. As for myself, I am a poor man.*

the morning of snow —
all alone, I chew
dried salmon meat (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 65)

And here are a couple of comments from Bashō's interpreters. Sokotsu writes: "The hokku vividly conveys the sense of Bashō's lonely life, the sense of his being satisfied with it, the sense of feeling excited on a snowy morning." Kōseki writes: "The poem presents the life of wabi as led by a haikai poet, which is distinctly different from that of a rich man or of an aspiring youth." And Imoto writes: "Like the crow poem, this hokku suggests the temperament of a recluse as seen through Chinese poetry. But that passion for the hermit's life has not yet become instinctive; rather, it still includes elements of dandyism." (65-66)

4 – *Manifestations of Sabi*: Bashō as a Wandering Poet

In *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, Shirane describes Bashō's approach at this time in this way: "During the next four years, he wrote in the so-called Chinese style, creating the persona of the recluse poet who was opposed to the materialism and social ambitions of the new urban culture. ... In the fall of 1684, Bashō began the first of a series of journeys that occupied much of the remaining ten years of his life." (179) Bashō is very forthright about embracing a Chinese model: *My hat had been worn out by the rains during the long journey, and my paper coat had crumpled up because of the storms I encountered. My appearance was so extremely shabby that even I thought of myself as a pathetic roamer. It suddenly occurred to me that many years ago a talented writer of kyoka had visited this province. Thereupon I wrote:*

comic verse

in the wintry gust
a wanderer . . . how like Chikusai
I have become! (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 120)

Ueda explains that "Chikusai is the name of a fictional quack doctor featured in a contemporary comic story, *Chikusai Monogatari* (*The Tale of Chikusai*). He has lost all of his patients due to his indulgence in comic poetry; impoverished but still scribbling kyōka, he manages to reach Nagoya on his way to Edo." (120) One of Bashō's interpreters, Yamamoto, writes: "It goes without saying that the words at the outset, 'comic verse,' are not part of the poem. But by placing these words at the beginning of the hokku, Bashō showed that, in setting out on a new poetic journey, he was making great plans that would be carried out with great resolution. He was resolved, in fact, to embrace every vicissitude in a spirit of freedom and equanimity. 'Comic verse' implies a humorous, plebian, unfettered type of haikai verse. It is not a self-deprecatory term used in deference to the more elegant kyōka. Rather, Bashō here declared, while standing at the very same place where the kyōka poet Chikusai stood, that he would write 'comic verse.'" (120)

Bashō wrote several hokku, often at the beginning of various travel diaries, declaring his persona as the wandering traveler. Ueda describes Bashō's fourth phase as "*Manifestations of Sabi*" which results in poetry celebrating the life of an impoverished hermit or that of a wandering poet. In *Traces of Dreams*, Shirane described the importance of Bashō's persona as a wandering poet. He notes that Bashō's new persona represents a change in aesthetic goals: "Both in origin and by definition, haikai was an oppositional poetics. In the mid-1860s Bashō reconceived that poetics in terms of a dramatic persona, the recluse or perpetual traveler. ... Here that oppositional stance, which Bashō infused with wabi aesthetics and the Taoist philosophy and humor of *Chuang Tzu*, is embodied in a poetic persona who stands outside society and its values or who madly pursues poetic and spiritual goals. The Bashō circle, which came to regard this attitude as an integral part of the haikai spirit, called such poets 'mad recluses' (kyōinja), 'masters of crazy verse' (kyōka no saishi), 'mad guests' (kyōkaku), 'mad people' (kyōsha),

and 'mad priests' (kyōsō). Whether Bashō actually led the life of a recluse is questionable. He was successful, however, at creating a distinctive serio-comic persona who embodied the haikai spirit in his actions and thoughts." (73)

Removing my straw sandals here, resting my cane there, I continued to spend days and nights on the road until the year came to a close.

another year is gone —
a traveler's hat on my head,
straw sandals on my feet (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 125)

"traveler"
shall be my name —
first winter shower (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 166)

Ueda notes that "Bashō wrote this hokku on November 15 [1687] at a farewell party held for him. He reused it for *Oi no kabumi*, adding the introductory remark: 'The weather was unsettled at the beginning of the tenth month, and I also felt as unsure of my future as a leaf in the wind.'" One of his interpreters, Yamamoto, explains: "The juxtaposition of 'traveler' and 'first winter rain' was borrowed from traditional poets, and one might think Bashō used too facile a device. Yet, in the opening passage of *Oi no kabumi*, Bashō had written: 'There is one thing that permeates Saigyō's waka, Sōgi's renga, Sesshū's painting, and Rikyū's tea ceremony.' He must have attached a special set of meanings and nuances to the word 'travelers.' Bashō used the word in the sense that those four predecessors were 'travelers.'" (166)

In *The Art of Haiku: Its History Through Poems and Paintings of the Japanese Masters*, Stephen Addiss also wrote about this poem: "Bashō was later to describe this 1687-88 journey in haibun form as *Oi no kabumi* (*Notes for My Knapsack*). Bashō begins with an introduction telling how he regards the spirit in his body as windblown. It had led him to poetry many years before, initially for pleasure but then

as a way of life; he knew that he could not satisfy this spirit either in court or as a scholar. All he could do was respond to nature, just like the tanka poet Saigyō ... He went on to say that whatever such a heart and mind sees is a flower and whatever it dreams about is the moon, so the initial task of any artist is to become one with nature. For Bashō, replenishing his spirit meant travel, as the first poem in this haibun makes clear." (100)

Addiss also makes the point that although Bashō never became a Zen Buddhist monk, he enjoyed writing haiku from a monk-like persona. Addiss writes: "Bashō traveled in monk's robes and shaved head, but he never became a monk as such. In effect, he was traveling through Japan beyond any of the official categories of society (in descending official order: samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, plus monastics and Confucian scholars). As they began their journey, Sora also shaved his head and put on Buddhist-style robes, writing this haiku himself." (106)

cutting off my hair
at Black Hair Mountain
and changing clothes (*The Art of Haiku*, 106)

Addiss goes on to explain the importance of taking on the appearance of a Zen monk and emulating the Chinese wandering poets was to "examine in what ways his own character and life choices advanced his poetry. In this regard, there are a number of factors that can be cited. First, Bashō maintained his freedom. By giving up his official position, by frequently moving, and especially by his journeys, he never grew stale or redundant, but could view fresh places, meet new people, and experience multiple aspects of nature. ... He studied Zen, shaved his head, and wore a monk's robe, but never became a monk. In short, Bashō didn't fit into a category or niche in a society that was very niche conscious. ... Second, he appreciated the past without being overwhelmed by it. Through his deep admiration of both classical Chinese poets and Japanese masters such as Saigyō and Sōgi, Bashō could use them as

exemplars of travel, nonattachment, and profound observation of the world around them." (124)

Ueda also notes Bashō's use of a monk's perspective.

for a while I sit
meditating by the falls —
start of a summer retreat (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 232)

Ueda explains that this was "Written on May 20 at Urami Falls, some four miles west of Nikkō. *Ge* refers to the ninety-day period of ascetic seclusion prescribed for Buddhist monks each summer. In 1689, the period started on June 3. This haiku shows Bashō meditating like a Buddhist monk, pretending to be one . . . or imagining their forthcoming time in a prescribed ninety-day retreat. He is not a monk and clearly does not participate in their ninety-day retreat instead choosing to continue on his poetry writing journey. He imagines or feels something of their seclusion "for a while." (232) Bashō does not have to become a monk to write from that imaginary perspective. He does not engage in a monk's ninety-day retreat, but for an afternoon he understands and writes a haiku from a meditating monk's perspective. As one of his interpreters, Ando, states: "According to Sora's journal, Bashō went to see the falls on the morning of May 20. It was still some time before the beginning of summer seclusion. That is a valuable clue to the reading of this hokku. The seasonal phrase 'start of summer' signifies that the period of seclusion has begun, not that the period is forthcoming. Bashō seems to have wanted to say he tasted something of the religious exercise unexpectedly." (232)

5 – *Last Phase*: Bashō as a Famous Elderly Poet

Ueda says Bashō's final phase could be called his embrace of *karumi*, a lightness of being alive. He writes: "In these later poems the belief that all things are mutually communicable, that a person can become at one with other creations of nature, seem to

underlie the humor. This attitude was to evolve into the concept of 'lightness.'" (59)

Under the trees
Soup, fish salad, and everywhere
Cherry blossoms. (*Matsuo Bashō*, 59)

Ueda writes: "The haiku of Bashō's last three years show him moving from the world of nature to the world of man. In actual life, he returned to Edo in the winter of 1691 and began to live gregariously. A famed poet, he now associated with many non-poets; he also had some relatives to look after. The leisurely life he had enjoyed at the Unreal Hut and the House of Fallen Persimmons was no longer possible." (60) Bashō was no longer playing the role of impoverished hermit nor emulating the Chinese wandering poets.

In this haiku written by Bashō when he "was a guest at a snow-viewing party hosted by a book dealer in Nagoya" he writes with a childlike voice:

now then, let's go out
to enjoy the snow . . . until
I slip and fall! (*Bashō and His Interpreters,* 177)

One of his interpreters, Tosai, writes that "The poet must have muttered his hokku while he was being helped on with his straw raincoat. It is superbly original, mixing humor with the misgiving of advancing age. In all likelihood it was the heartfelt sentiment of a poet who would risk death for the cause of *fūga*." (177)

It is interesting that Bashō's death verse was not actually written on one of his wandering journeys. However, he reprises the wandering poet haiku narrator to write this poem.

on a journey, ailing —
my dreams roam about
on a withered moor (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, 413)

One of his interpreters, Yamamoto, writes: "Even in dreams Bashō saw himself walking around in search of something, and he recognized in this the tenacity of his sinful attachment. He dreamed of himself as an obsessed man running around on a frenzied quest. His entire life flashed through his fevered mind like a panorama. Aware that death was near, he singled out from that vision the image of a traveler on a withered moor and made it symbolize his entire life. He presented the image through the hokku's last two phrases, using simple and powerful language." (413)

Chiyo-ni's Persona

In their book of translations, *Chiyo-ni Woman Haiku Master*, Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi discuss Chiyo-ni's various names and identities as a haikai poet. Their introduction starts with her most famous haiku:

morning glory —
the well-bucket entangled
I ask for water (*Chiyo-ni*, 25)

"Japan's most famous woman haiku poet, also known as Chiyo-jo, Kaga no Chiyo, and Matto no Chiyo (Chiyo of the Matto Area), exemplifies the best of the women poets of the Edo period (1603–1867). She is most widely known for her morning-glory haiku above, familiar to most Japanese. Her life is full of legend, yet two things are certain. She lived the Way of Haikai, appreciating each moment, creating art as part of everyday life because she was open to her world. And she achieved fame during her lifetime through her intense devotion to her art in an age when women's freedom

and creativity were restricted." (25) The translators explain that she had three official name changes: "Chiyo-ni's given birthname was not Chiyo-ni but 'Chiyo,' meaning 'a thousand years'; the feminine suffix 'jo' was added, so she was sometimes called 'Chiyo-jo' until she changed her name to 'Chiyo-ni,' when she added the suffix 'ni' (nun). However, like many poets in Japan, she used many pen names in her lifetime." (26)

Pure Land Buddhist Poet

Chiyo-ni was very well known as a beautiful talented haikai writer before she went through a religious-based makeover as a Pure Land Buddhist nun. "In 1754, at age fifty-two, Chiyo-ni became a Jōdo Shinshū (Pure Land) Buddhist nun and added the suffix *ni* (nun) to her name, thereafter, was known as Chiyo-ni (Chiyo the nun). Her ordination came rather late in life; other women poets who became nuns, such as Kikusha, did so around age thirty. By then Chiyo-ni was ready to move to a new stage of peace and nonattachment after many years of struggle." (40-41)

"For her ordination, Chiyo-ni took the Buddhist name Soen (Simple Garden), and sometimes signed her haiku and paintings thus. On the day she had her head shaved, she wrote the following preface and haiku:

I am not rejecting the world, but because of feeling a lonely sense of mujō [impermanence] I am rather seeking a way for my heart to take after pure water, which flows night and day.

putting up my hair
no more —
my hands in the *kotatsu* (*Chiyo-ni*, 43)

Some say this is one of Chiyo-ni's *satori* haiku. Here the *kotatsu* (a quilt-covered table with a charcoal brazier under it) reflects her calm state of mind. She continued to live an ordinary life, but her

heart was not ordinary: it was devoted to the spiritual path of haiku." (43)

Her new identity and related spiritual life provided her with several artistic advantages not available to most women haikai writers. As the translators explain: "Chiyo-ni did not live permanently in a temple, as conventional nuns did, but continued to live in her home, enjoying the freedom and respect that the status of a nun gave her, and the rare privilege, as a single woman, to travel and meet other poets, especially male poets, for it was usually forbidden for women to associate with male outsiders. As an artist and a nun, Chiyo-ni was outside the class system and therefore not restricted by the normal social codes imposed upon women, whose activities were usually confined to their homes and governed by male family members, according to the three obediences: when young obey your father, when married your husband, and when widowed and old, your son. In Chiyo-ni's case, her only obedience was to follow the path of Buddhism and haiku." (41)

Woman's Perspective

Both before and after becoming a nun, Chiyo-ni was known for expressing a woman's perspective. The translators note that "many of her poems do reflect a sensuality of feeling and imagery not usually found in male haiku. Others reflect an unusual sensitivity to the images of women of her period. Some embody an almost imperceptible delicacy of imagery which could be labeled as feminine. And all show a careful observation of the details of everyday life more often honored by women. Much of Chiyo-ni's imagery has a sensual, pearl-like quality — dew swollen on buds, rouged lips, a woman's naked skin, rouged fingertips on a white chrysanthemum, a change of kimono, moonflowers sleeping as lovers, the peach-white skin of children, the loneliness of sleeping alone, or catching a cool breeze in one's kimono sleeves. Here is one such haiku:

change of kimono:
showing only her back
to the blossom's fragrance (*Chiyo-ni*, 81)

This haiku has a subtle sensuality, and a reticence that is unusual because it's not simply about being shy to a lover, although that is implied, but being shy even to the fragrance of the blossoms wafting in the air.

moonflowers —
when a woman's skin
is revealed (*Chiyo-ni*, 81)

In this haiku, the white moonflower, which only blooms in the evening twilight, heightens the beauty of the contrast between the skin's whiteness and the dark." (80-81)

Yosa Buson's Artistic Personae

In Earl Miner's book, *Japanese Linked Poetry*, he characterizes Buson as a studio poet. "No group of artists better represents the new sophistication than those called 'bunjin.' These literati got their name from the literary emphasis shown by their paintings. For our purposes one might call them studio poets. ... He did not share Bashō's desire to live as a recluse. He did not feel the compulsion to set out in travel, not expecting to return. He did not have that tormented nature which Bashō sometimes shows, or that sense of death. In the enjoyment of good things Buson shows the fineness of a person born to art and the clarity of an acute mind." (99) Rather than living a life of the monk or wanderer, Buson imagined and created paintings and poetry in his studio as acts of imagination. For Buson, most of his haikai were works of the imagination, written with a variety of perspectives or haiku narrators. As Stephen Addiss summarizes in his book *The Art of Haiku*, Buson admired Bashō and was part of the Bashō revival, but his work was

in the studio. Addiss notes that in 1774: "In admiration for Bashō, Buson also wrote a haiku in which he borrowed the master's persona:

as I go out the gate
I too am a traveler —
autumn darkens (*The Art of Haiku*, 195)

Of course, Buson was not fundamentally a wanderer like Bashō, but rather a poet with a home and family." (195) Addiss continues that Buson "produced a great number [of haiku] during the 1770s, with a broader range of subjects than before. These can again be divided into groups based first on parallelism, second on which sense is primary, third by poems featuring colors or otherwise related to painting, and ending with a few that are more deeply personal." (196)

with a remaining tooth
I bite off the ice from
my brush at night (*The Art of Haiku*, 204)

Addiss cautions readers that although Buson's poems often seem to be very personal, "one must always be careful about assuming autobiographical intent in haiku. Like other poets, haiku masters could and did take on different personae, and yet some of these verses seem to carry more internal emotions than usual. ... One well-known Buson haiku subtitled 'In My Bedroom,' mentions his wife, who was very much alive at the time." (210)

it penetrates my being —
stepping on the comb
of my dead wife (*The Art of Haiku*, 209-210)

In *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, Shirane also notes that Buson was an accomplished artist whose works were acts of the imagination. "A *bunjin* (literatus) was someone who worked in several art forms

as an avocation instead of a livelihood." (538) He explains: "One of the ideals of Buson's poetry and painting was the notion of *rizoku*, or 'departure from the common,' which was closely related to his awareness of himself as a *bunjin*. ... Unlike Bashō, who advocated 'awakening to the high, returning to the low' (*kōga kizoku*) and sought 'lightness' (*karumi*), or the poetics of everyday life, Buson advocated 'departing from the common,' and exploration of other worlds through Chinese literature and painting as well as the Japanese classics, wandering freely in a world of elegance and imagination that he found far superior to the life immediately around him." (540)

Not interested in realism or writing about the everyday experiences of commoners, "Buson wrote in a variety of haikai styles. Some of the most striking are his realistic portraits of people, reflecting the influence of the Edo-za school; his fictional narratives; his ability to conjure up the atmosphere of a children's story or fairy tale; his playfulness and sense of humor; his painterly eye; his construction of imaginary, romantic worlds; and his heavy use of Chinese and Japanese classical sources as a means of drawing the reader into another world." (540) For Buson, each work of art can imply or suggest its own narrator or point of view. Like a chameleon, the professional artist and haikai writer can play with a large variety of personae.

Issa's Persona

In his book *Pure Land Haiku: The Art of Priest Issa*, David Lanoue makes a case that Issa's persona can be best understood as following the Way of Haiku as a Pure Land Buddhist priest. The dominant persona is a conception of life as a journey of religious pilgrimage. Lanoue starts with the point that "Issa refers to himself not only as a priest but as a 'Cloud-Water' wanderer (*unsui*), claiming his place in a long and revered tradition of itinerant artist-monks." (6) Throughout his life as a poet, Issa embraces the perspective of the

impoverished homeless orphan, the wandering poet, the beggar priest, and the compassionate Pure Land Buddhist priest.

Issa as Impoverished Homeless Orphan

Lanoue starts with Issa's childhood: "Issa's first journey into the world was one of exile: sent away by his father for the sake of domestic harmony to seek work in Edo … the theme of abandonment and the image of the orphan crop up so often in his writing throughout his life, he was no doubt deeply scarred by the emotional deprivation, if not outright abuse, of his early years. In his fifties, he composes this haiku about a motherless sparrow:

come and play
with me . . .
orphan sparrow (*Pure Land Haiku*, 10)

The haiku is one of Issa's most well-known. … [published] with the postscript, 'Age six, Yatarō' and a prescript that describes how he was lonely and sad as a child, taunted by village children for being motherless. … In a different text, he supplies even more details: 'A parentless sparrow made himself known by singing pitifully, alone. In a little shack in the backyard, I cared for it all day.' To call this bird a metaphor seems somehow to dilute the emotional power of the passage. On a deep and real level the sparrow is Issa." (10)

Lanoue cautions critics about viewing Issa's haiku as merely biographical. "Since biography colors so many of Issa's haiku, it is tempting to declare biological connections throughout his writing … Sadly, the biographical approach can mislead even when critics have their facts straight. There is no doubt that Issa poetically associates his own childhood abandonment with orphan sparrows. Nevertheless, to read such poems as *merely* about his life limits their meaning and ignores their more universal connotations." (35) The point is that Issa's perspective or narrator's voice comes from his spiritually based compassion and empathy.

evening —
how the orphan sparrow
cries! (*Pure Land Haiku*, 35)

Lanoue writes: “If we regard such sparrows as merely masks for Issa, the content of these haiku appears self-absorbed; the tone, self-pitying. However, beyond their biographical connection to the poet, the sparrows in such haiku are actual birds towards whom Issa feels tenderly, inviting the reader to do the same. Imbued with generous compassion — selfless *ninjō*, not selfish sorrow — such ‘motherless sparrow’ poems reveal something bigger than biography, something about the human condition: all of us, at one time or another, have found or will find ourselves alone and abandoned in the vast world.” (35)

Not only an orphan, Issa also experienced true impoverishment with few resources for success in Edo. Lanoue explains: “We infer from his poetry that Issa experienced another sort of rejection on his first journey away from home. A farm boy from the provinces, he entered the Shogun’s city at a time when government authority prefaced its edicts relative to farmers with phrases like, ‘since peasants are stupid people … Though he became a permanent resident, most migrant workers from farm country sought employment in Edo only for the winter months and were called derisively, *mukudori*, ‘gray starlings.’” (12)

“A starling from the sticks”
I’m called . . .
winter rain (*Pure Land Haiku*, 13)

“An unwanted stepchild in his native village, a country ‘starling’ in the capital, Issa depicts himself as an aimless, restless wanderer; a bird without a nest … homeless.” 13

homeless now
I view the blossoming
spring (*Pure Land Haiku*, 14)

Issa as Wandering Poet

Evidently, Issa did find success as a haikai poet in Edo. Robert Aitkin notes that when Issa's teacher, Chikua, died, "Yatarō inherited the mantle of his teacher's school. He accepted tonsure in his family faith of Jōdo Shinshū and took the name Issa (one [cup of] tea). He was expressing his vow to be as simple as his name. This would be in keeping with the Jōdo Shinshū tenet that the sacred and the secular are one. … later … Issa began a series of pilgrimages that were his passion to the end of his own life. Like Bashō, he took four major journeys. And like Bashō, his life on the road was his way of inspiration." (134) Here is Stephen Addiss's account in *The Art of Haiku*: "After Chikua died in 1790, Issa determined to become a wanderer, much like Bashō. Beginning in 1792, he spent the next decade traveling and visiting a number of poets in Edo and the Kyoto-Osaka area. That same year he took the name 'Issa' (a single tea), as a later haiku explains." (223) Apparently becoming the master of the haikai school and becoming a priest led to his poetic journeys.

spring returns —
Yotarō has become
the monk-poet Issa (*The Art of Haiku*, 223)

autumn evening —
a man on a journey
mending his clothes (*The Art of Haiku*, 223)

Lanoue claims that Issa had a spirit of wandering throughout his lifetime: "Interestingly, his rootlessness with its origins in the harsh facts of biography becomes something else, something more in his writing. From the earliest journals Issa self-consciously

embraces the persona of a traveling poet-priest, claiming his place in the time-honored tradition of the itinerant Buddhist artist. Specifically, he views himself as a follower of the great haiku poet Bashō, whose literary journeys were legendary. Travel is both a poetic theme and an actual, physically arduous reality for Issa. ... He traveled far and wide. Two years after his death, when his students gathered to publish his haiku in an anthology ... they singled out in their preface the following verse to epitomize their departed master's life and art." (15)

in pine-tree shade
sleeping, eating . . .
sixty provinces! (*Pure Land Haiku*, 15)

"Issa, in the eyes of his disciples, was above all else a traveler — one who slept and dined in the pine-tree shade of 'sixty provinces' ... a euphemism for the entire country of Japan." (15) Lanoue adds: "He embraced the actual lifestyle as well as the literary persona of the roving poet-priest, preferring the freedom of the mountains to the 'cage' of the capital." (16)

Lanoue also discusses how his haiku name is related to his identity as a wandering poet priest. "His haiku name, 'Priest Cup-of-Tea,' suggests the constant movement of his lifestyle. Restless Issa has time for just one cup, and then he rushes off. In another early journal, *Chichi no shūen nikki* (1801), he again describes his life using images of restless movement: 'Like a floating cloud, thinking to go east then wandering west, with time passing like a wheel rolling down from the top of a hill, twenty-five years went by. Until my own head became white as frost, I kept distant from my parent.' ... He writes that he had promised his father to settle in the family home, but that his stepmother and half-brother had raised objections and blocked this from happening. Issa adds, with resignation, that he supposes he will 'once again become a Cloud-Water wanderer, hiding in whatever rocky crag or tree-shaded gorge, hating the wind and enduring the rain.' ... life on the road

afforded little companionship, unless one counts, as Issa does in 1795, that of the non-human sort." (17)

also changing
into summer clothes . . .
my journey's lice (*Pure Land Haiku*, 21)

"Accompanied only by his lice, Priest Issa drifted through Japan solitary and detached, observing and writing." (22)

Issa as Comic Beggar Priest

Unlike Bashō who sometimes dressed and meditated like a Zen Buddhist priest, Issa was a Pure Land Buddhist priest with compassion for fellow pilgrims (human and otherwise) along the way. As Lanoue explains: "Despite his Pure Land Buddhist appreciation of humanity's essential, ego-driven corruption in the age of *mappō*; Issa was no misanthrope. Throughout his poetry and journals, he adopts the rhetorical stance of an outsider, creating for himself the comic persona of 'Shinano Province's Chief Beggar,' then using this distancing of himself from his more worldly comrades to poke gentle fun at them, not to condemn. ... This proletarian outlook has endeared Issa to readers who embrace him as a champion of the working man and woman. When a bill collector enters a farmer's house, it is easy to tell where Issa's sympathies lie." (48-49)

the bill collector
with shoes on steps inside . . .
to the hearth (*Pure Land Haiku*, 49)

Lanoue interprets this haiku: "Ignoring the Japanese custom of removing his footwear, the agent of class oppression stomps rudely into the house to warm himself at its hearth. The winter cold outside is not nearly as cold as the heart of this invader. The image is stark, and yet it emerges, oddly, from *ninjō*: 'Beggar Issa'

feels warm solidarity with the poor, oppressed farmer … and from this human feeling he writes his poem." (49)

Issa as Compassionate Pure Land Buddhist

As a Pure Land Buddhist priest, it is not surprising that Issa's haiku narrator speaks with compassion about the suffering of animals, impoverished commoners, or children. Issa views such suffering as recognizing karma rather than simply playing with anthropomorphism. Lanoue discusses this priest's persona stating, "We have already noted that Issa's treatment of nonhuman beings as peers and fellow travelers is a widely recognized hallmark of his style. … 'personification' (*gijinhō*), the 'human' depiction of animals." (7) He explains that "Reincarnation, especially in relation to the bodhisattva myth of enlightened beings returning to the world of suffering to enlighten others, was a favorite theme for the founder of Jōdo Shinshū and, consequently, for his followers. Issa writes, then rewrites, a haiku about himself and a butterfly under a shady tree." (100) Here's the original and second version of Issa's haiku:

in tree shade
relaxing with a butterfly . . .
friends in a previous life (*Pure Land Haiku*, 100)

in tree shade
dwelling with a butterfly . . .
friends in a previous life (*Pure Land Haiku*, 100)

"The word *tashō* in the third phrase of both versions denotes a previous life, while *en* signifies karma. The Buddhist concept of *tashō no en* ('previous life's karma') provides the poet with a mythic explanation for the connection he feels: How else to explain his deep sense of recognition and relationship? He and the butterfly must have been on good terms in a previous lifetime. … In both texts Issa includes prose postscripts. In *Issa hokku shū*, he writes, 'A little girl was serving as my guide on a mountain road, when

a capricious rain suddenly fell,' and in *Busei kuchō*, he reveals still more: 'Being guided on a mountain road by a young girl named Butterfly, a sudden rain came pattering down.' The 'butterfly' in the scene, then, is a little girl. As Issa crouches with her under a tree in the rain, he senses their karmic connection from an earlier life." (100-101)

Lanoue makes it clear that he objects to characterizations of Issa as a children's poet or cartoonish writer giving sentimental voices to the birds and bees. He writes: "When the writers of *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* refer condescendingly to Issa's 'sentimentality,' they might be well advised to take a closer look at these butterfly poems and others like it. Issa's tender feelings toward insects, children, birds, and flowers arise within a context of his Buddhist understanding of life and the essential connectedness of sentient beings. When he treats animals as peers, critics label this 'personification' and label him a 'child's poet.' Yet Issa's portrayal of non-human beings as conscious, aware colleagues seems not quite childish or sentimental when one sees this in terms of his belief in reincarnation and karma, core values of his Jōdo Shinshū faith." (101)

The compassionate Priest Issa writes with a haiku narrator who "regards animals as karmic cousins on the road to enlightenment, his habit of addressing them directly in haiku seems only natural." (105) Lanoue argues that Issa "is a practitioner of Buddhism for whom animals are colleagues to be loved, chided, or, when he rolls over in bed, given fair warning. In another haiku involving a katydid (a cousin to grasshoppers and crickets), he warns of an impending shower." (106)

I'm taking a leak
so look out!
katydid (*Pure Land Haiku*, 106)

Lanoue takes Issa's persona as Buddhist priest seriously, and he concludes that "Issa's haiku can be viewed — correctly, I think — as the records of myriad trusting and accepting encounters of self with universe in which the two disclose their essential unity. … To an enlightened perspective — a perspective that transcends either-or thinking and can therefore be talked about only in the language of poetic image and metaphor — there is just one traveler, one struggling point of consciousness, one 'I' on a journey to ultimate realization: a journey to a place that has been called, metaphorically, the Pure Land, made possible by a guiding and enabling power that has been called Amida." (130)

Conclusion

Most writers do not box themselves into just one purpose or approach, so generalizations about the writer's identity do not accurately portray the range of haiku narrators they use within various individual haiku. Readers may see that a haiku author writes from a variety of social roles or perspectives. Our identities shift over time and depending on various social situations, so it is only natural that haiku narrators — even from a single writer — may shift in language, voice, or cultural perspective. A person can write haiku from multiple perspectives including a child, a parent, an orphan, a woman, a hermit, a traveler, a priest, or even a fictional character in a work of art. Some would even say that all identities and narrators are acts of imagination.

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