

THE NEW POETICS OF THE IMPERSONAL IN ART AND THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE POEM FURU IKE YA IN MATSUO BASHŌ'S WRITINGS

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Abstract The present article analyses the poetics of the haiku and the aesthetic principles on which the new vision imposed by Matsuo Bashō on Japanese poetry in the last two decades of the 17th century is based. Known as the founder of a new poetic form, the haiku, Matsuo Bashō, through his poetry, creates not only a new poetic order, but also a true path on which his disciples later set off. Starting from the haiku known as “the old pond poem”, the present article identifies and analyses the poeticity features of Matsuo Bashō’s poetry.

Keywords Haiku, Matsuo Bashō, Japanese poetry.

Matsuo Bashō (松尾 芭蕉) was 41 years old when he wrote the poem *Furu-ike ya*, eight years before his death (1686). Although he was well known in the poetic circles of that time, the poems written prior to this moment, even though they respected the poetic canons, are, however, considered by the interpreters as *mediocre*¹, as R. H. Blyth also states in the volumes dedicated to the history of the haiku poem, considering that only after this poem did Bashō surpass the level of the popular poetry (*haikai no renga*) practiced as entertainment by the intellectual elite of that time. Therefore, there is a question that both history and literary criticism continue to ask: what is so special in this poem which, for Bashō’s disciples, represented a poetic model worth following and which made its author the creator of a new school?

Born in 1644, this son of a poor samurai, whose real name was Matsuo Munefusa, had not been given many career opportunities in his home province of Iga, where his family was in the service of a local lord (*daimyō*). The weapons profession in times of peace brought nothing certain, which is why the young man dedicated himself to studying and writing *haikai* type poems. After the death of the son of the master, Tōdō Yoshitada (who was also a *haikai*

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¹ R. H. Blyth, *A History of haiku. From the Beginnings up to Issa* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1984), 105.

author), Bashō leaves the samurai world (*bushi*) and sets on a path of wandering, heading towards the capital city, Edo. He dedicated his entire life to journeys and poetry and the travel motif is often present in his poems. Thus, following the traditional models, Bashō also wrote travel journals that can also be analysed as writing journals, since they contain the poems written during his journeys. His detachment from the world and his alienation represent, as Shūichi Katō notes, a new form of *aesthetic asceticism*² which gives birth to *The Way of Elegance* (*fūga no michi*), or what could be translated using the terminology of western poetics as “art for art’s sake”.

Despite the appearance of simplicity, given by the shortness of the 17 syllable poem, the haiku evolved as a stand-alone form from the opening stanza, *hokku*, of the *renga* collaborative poetry, after which it became a stand-alone poetic unit. Some literary historians identify the origins of this poetic form in the *haikaika*³, which dates back to the *Man'yōshū* period, a poetry whose characteristic was the humour with which the forms and themes of the elegant poetry established by the canon rhetoric were treated. Thus, the humorous spirit of the old *haikaika* can also be found in the Edo period, particularly in Bashō, who liked to reassess or reinterpret old themes in a new manner, sometimes playfully ironic. The opening *hokku* stanza from *renga*, the stanza that announces the theme of the poem was, during the poetry sessions, very important, and it was usually stated by the most important poet of the group. Apparently, the honour of the one who wrote the *hokku*⁴, although highly craved, put a lot of pressure on the chosen one, and this is why, given that the *renga* session was based on spontaneous creation, it is no surprise that some poets practiced creating such stanzas beforehand. Even if *renga* implies a group creation of a poem of approximately one hundred verses, as a spontaneous transcription of certain poetic moods felt by all participants, a beforehand preparation in verse writing was welcomed and even recommended, and it was expected that the writing rules be known and well assimilated, in order to successfully face a *renga* session. We know of several anthologies or personal collections of *hokku* to which, depending on the case, the *renga* poets resorted during the poetry sessions in which they took part.

As a poetic genre, *haikai* became extremely popular only after the Edo period. Before this period, since there were few poets who took themselves seriously enough to sign their own works, *haikai* was considered to be a minor genre, an improvisation with no great aesthetic goal. In spite of its popular, noncanonical nature, *haikai* maintains the traditional 5-7 syllabic alternance, which proves that, far from exhausting its resources, this poetic genre was preparing for an aesthetic resurrection that would establish it not only as a new form, but also

² Shūichi Katō, *Istoria literaturii japoneze. De la origini până în prezent* (Bucharest: Editura Nipponica, 1998), 440.

³ Haruo Shirane, “The rise of haikai: Matuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, and Kobayashi Issa,” in *Japanese literature*, eds. Haruo Shirane, Tomi Suzuki, David Lurie (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2016), 403.

⁴ Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese haiku. Its essential nature, history, and possibilities in english* (Rutland, Vermont, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1995), 133.

as a *multi-faceted genre with a great impact on other cultural forms*⁵. This resurrection did indeed occur and it was due to Matsuo Bashō and his frog poem:

古池蛙飛び込む水の音

Furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

(An old pond / a frog leaps in / the sound of the water)

After Matsuo Bashō, the poets rediscovered nature and seemed willing to know it directly; nature became the true master of poets, while knowing the classic traditional poetics, that, for medieval poetry, represented the true standard, became an opportunity for ironic inter-textual dialogue or critical reinterpretation. Thus, the renewal of certain poetic conventions, exhausted of significances to trivialisation or to the loss of meaning, was crucially necessary and it found a true promoter in Matsuo Bashō. It is true that the renewal made by Bashō and the resilient search for the essence of poetry in the sense of an *enlightenment* (*satori*), in a mystical sense, led many interpreters to the somewhat justified division of his work into two periods, between which the poem *Furu ike ya* is interposed. The idea of investing art with the power of provoking *satori* was not new; before Bashō, the tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) let himself be led by a similar idea in conceiving the tea ceremony as a way of *enlightenment*, *wabi-cha*, (わび茶). But it was undoubtedly the first time when a poet chose this way of poetic enlightenment, of seeking higher beauty as the primary purpose and principle of poetry. The idea of turning poetry into a way of seeking art, of eliminating from the poem all that is useless and hinders spiritual elevation, depersonalising it to the essence, makes Matsuo Bashō a universal poet, thus opening the haiku towards universality, which would later ensure the success of this poetic form in other languages. The traditional themes and models of the medieval Japanese poetry were exhausted in sterile, limited combinations; with the passing of time, they were no longer capable of conferring new possibilities of suggestion that would also correspond with an epoch that was increasingly more attached to the concrete, material values of existence. He was a contemporary of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) and of Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), together with whom Matsuo Bashō left his mark on the Genroku period; the latter preferred to set off on a path different from the first two and became not the representative of a world whose values he would represent in art, but the one who modified them and established the taste of the period in matters of lyricism.

This is why the journeys made by Bashō throughout his life are part of the poet's effort to search for the nature of beauty beyond the conventions and artifices and to depict it in a new, original form. The poet spends a lot of time in nature, regardless of the season; he observes it and learns the mystery of starting from a personal emotion in the impersonal depiction of beauty: "Such a dissolution of personal emotion into an impersonal atmosphere

⁵ Shirane, 403.

constitutes the core of Bashō's attitude toward life.⁶ Removing the artifice from art and liberating it from the impairment of the predecessors' style by pursuing simplicity and the natural represents the way Bashō had aspired to find and sought to follow. His encounter with nature caused a true revelation. The poet's trained eye missed nothing, it recorded every change throughout the day and observed the transition from one season to the next, discovering the subtle signs that he then inserted in his poems, transforming a static landscape into one that is full of life.

Beginning from a nature landscape – thus following the idea of the connection between poetry and nature, proclaimed by the medieval classics – the poet describes what he observes and, in the attempt to lock into words the likeness of an almost banal image, he depicts a similar image that is somehow surprisingly new. It all starts with a visual image but, from the speed with which the scene takes place in motion, the poet must capture a single snapshot through which he can render not only the space, as a subjective dimension, but also, through sensation, the objectivised perception of time: to make visible to everyone what is only visible to the one who observes and describes it. This is not possible in any other way than through a conscious effort to impersonalise emotion. Depicting in only 17 syllables, using a very precise language, without interpreting or analysing, conceptualising what is suggestive and timeless in an emotion felt at the sight of a landscape represents the true purpose of the *haiku*. It is always said that a *haiku* captures eternity within the passing moment, or at least its luminous shadow.

However, a haiku is not merely a visual image, but also a literary one. A unique image that lasts after everything that is not representative has been removed, sometimes even the poetic subject – the image reduced to its essence that is not even metaphorical, but rather banal, yet significant. Bashō is said to have made from the harmless event *a true poetic experience* and the entire haiku aesthetics and philosophy is contained by the frog's leap into the water⁷. The principles of this aesthetics were explained by Bashō's disciple, Kyorai Mukai, in the volume *Kyoraishō*, as representing the old Chinese principles of Daoism: *fueki (eternal)* and *ryūkō (ephemeral)*. What Kyorai notices in relation with his master is that he does not see the two principles as opposing ones but, in the spirit of Asian thought that unites the opposites, as complementary, representing for one another a basis and a manner of understanding⁸. The need to capture with the naked eye the moment in which the ephemeral *ryūkō* and the eternal *fueki* intersect and to give it an artistic representation was not new but, in Bashō's poems, this old concept, which can also be found in the Chinese culture in the form of the encounters between the *yin* and *yang* principles, reaches perfection. Thus, in the case of

⁶ Makoto Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 151.

⁷ *L'art du Haïku. Pour une philosophie de l'instant. Bashō, Issa, Shiki*, textes présentés par Vincent Brochard et Pascale Senk (Paris: Belfond, 2009), 89.

⁸ Peipei Qin, *Bashō and the Dao. The Zhuangzi and the Transformation of Haikai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 136.

the poem *Furu ike ya*, the interpreters saw the leaping frog in *ryūkō*, and the old lake in *fueki*. When the frog leaps into the lake, something of the eternity of the lake fractures, suggesting the impression that nothing is eternal but, at the same time, only what is ephemeral can measure what, through immobility, is considered to be eternal. This is actually a perfectly legitimate possible interpretation if we were to also add the impersonal value that the poet confers to this encounter between eternity and the moment, when the primary aesthetic stake of the poem must be sought in the subtlety characterising the suggestion of the interplay between the two planes. The Buddhist consciousness of the impermanence of all things (*mujō*) merely confers the poem a metaphysical aura which, generally, the classical tradition prefers to overlook or to only give it a vague note of oddity. In Bashō, the natural elements are beautiful through their essence, not because a deity, in the spirit of the Shinto belief, dwells within them, but because they are part of the ever-changing, surprising and ephemeral nature. Thus, for Bashō, when he reveals the presence of a tragic consciousness facing the impermanence of things, the metaphysical is in the spirit of the Buddhist system of thought with which the poet was very familiar. However, Bashō does not aim to imprint a religious character on his art, to confer religiosity to poetry, but, if possible, to elevate art to the level of a religion, namely to turn the art of poetry into a *way*, in a religious, spiritual sense.

Bashō's poetics encourages silence regarding the object, the event, in favour of the allusion – of the symbols of the pure poem, of conciseness and of a new form of expressivity. It inclines towards a poetics of description and representation of motion, towards using a minimal vocabulary; the actions are thus often limited to one, to a verb with a continuous appearance, but also to the complete absence of the verb. This apparently static style challenges the objects (*mono*) to express themselves through themselves and, through this effort of suggestion, it confers the poem an intrinsic, surprising force from which the life of the objects emerges in a new, unusual but lively form. As Bashō masters his technique more and more, his poems become less personal, less subjective, less lyrical in the common term, creating the transition from the particular to the general, the effect of which is a decrease in the importance of the circumstances under which the poem had been written, of the particular, of the individual, thus placing the general elements in the foreground. A type of poetic instinct is confirmed, a sublimation of matter in the search for the essence; Bashō sensed that, somewhere at the root of the subjective, there lie the impersonal and the universal. The poetry of nature thus transforms into the poetry of the absolute. The total loss of the consciousness to which the poet aspires, or of the complete knowledge, makes Bashō a visionary poet. Becoming a visionary of nature, putting the poetry of nature into words represents for him, the eternal traveller, the supreme option. This visionary character has nothing in common with reason; the poem is spontaneously born of the depths of the being, or it communicates something of the atmosphere or the memory of those experiences. Thus there appears a new concept of poetry that is no longer merely a means of elegantly expressing the beauty of things, but of acceding, through enlightenment (*satori*), to a purer state of things. The poet opens a path towards a world that is seemingly filmed in slow motion, but only to draw our attention to its fleeting nature, in relation with eternity.

According to specialists, there are three essential elements around which a *haiku* is built: *where? what? when?*⁹, and the poet's ability to suggest, through an image or through the synaesthesia of the senses, as well as through suggestive words, the compositional structure of the poem. In a well known poem, Bashō manages to use the three elements of temporal, spatial and circumstantial identification and to render a representative image without explicitly naming the season.

枯朶に烏のとまりけり秋の暮 Kareeda ni, karasu no tomarikeri, aki no kure
 On a withered branch / Where?
 a crow is perched / What?
 Autumn evening. / C&nd?

The word *kigo*, or the element that sets the season, be it through poetic allusions, is indispensable in *haiku* since, besides its normative character, it sometimes also bears inter-textual value, referencing other poems, particularly belonging to the classical poetic tradition. Thus, from the *kigo* examples available in the classic poetry, in order to exit convention and a redundant poetic language, the poet is completely free to also initiate a subtle inter-textual game, a dialogue with the previous poetry. This is what Bashō also does, and he manages not only to exit the frame of poetic conventionalism called out by some of the *renga* poets, but also to enrich the thematic field of *kigo*. *Kawazu*, or the frog, represents *kigo* for the beginning of spring and, until Bashō, it had never been used so. Usually, for the beginning of spring, the more serious poetry used completely different elements to suggest the revival of nature.

In order to understand what determined Bashō to consider the poem *Furu ike ya* an innovative one, so that, starting from it, he could rethink the world of the *haiku* in its spirit, we must begin from the middle verse, closely following the natural process of the creation of the poem. One of Bashō's disciples, Kikaku, later stated that the master's attention had been drawn by the frog's leap, creating the middle verse, *kawawu tobikomu*, in a heartbeat and only afterwards did he think of the first and last verse. By associating two terms, be they antithetical, which, however, belong to the same *auditory* register – the *noise* produced by the frog's leap and the eternal *silence* of the lake –, the solution found by Bashō is only seemingly effortless. Essentially, what dissociates the two planes is not the sound or its absence, but the relation between each element (object) and time, or, in other words, the relation between the frog and the lake and time.

If the old lake (*fuku ike*), in relation with time, surpasses temporality, identifying with eternity, by contract, the existence of the frog is strongly connected to the passing of time, since it is conditioned by its passing. One can assume that, before the writing, the frog had stayed motionless, silent and it was thus itself part of the eternity of the lake. A question thus arises: what exactly determined it to leap, when it would have been simpler to make its presence known by singing, as frogs do at the beginning of spring and as it had been natural in

⁹ Yasuda, 41.

the spirit of a haiku dedicated to the season? In accordance with the logics and the spirit of nature, the silence of the old lake should have been broken by the frog's song, not by the noise made by its leap into the water. Therefore, following the poet's instinct, starting from the middle verse and seeking in the image of the leaping frog another, corresponding reality, could we not understand its leap as *an intention* to challenge the silence to express itself, to come out of itself and to become sound, as is the case of the art that gives form and expression to what had not existed before? If the frog, instead of leaping, had sung, overlapping its song on the silence of the lake, there would not have been any interference between the two planes. We must also note that man is absent from this poem and we can only assume that he plays the role of a close or distant observer. Nothing gives away his presence, although the one who records the silence and the lake and, then, the sound of the water, is the poet. He does not see the frog, but he heard the echo of the noise produced by its leap. Thus, an imaginary triangle is outlined, made of the (absent) man, the lake and the frog. The frog may have leaped in the water after having been frightened by the man. But, at the same time, an equally legitimate assumption would be that, by preferring to remain absent, the poet means to suggest that he is outside the scene that he merely observes and impersonally, objectively describes. His mission is to not give himself away, to let nature manifest itself with no intervention but, through the senses (sight, hearing), to perceive each change in the immense scenery of nature without overlooking anything. Therefore, nature serves man by offering the soul the possibility of knowing itself, seeing itself and manifesting itself through it. However, man also serves nature by providing it with a voice. In this case, the voice is the sound produced by the water, the silence that expresses itself through the sound of the water. Thus, the *intention (intentionality)* belongs to the poet or, more precisely, to art.

As it has already been established, enlightenment in the Zen spirit (*satori*) can be achieved not only through meditation, but also through art. In this frog poem, the surprised reaction of the silence, through the frog's leap, challenged and torn from muteness, deeply reverberates in the poet's spirit, leading him towards the poetic enlightenment that would revive the art of the haiku. This is proved by the insinuations on this poem made by the later poets of Bashō's school. Yosa Buson (1716-1784), as well as Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) readdressed the frog theme in haikus, suggesting the importance of this poem to the haiku aesthetics and philosophy. See, for example, Kobayashi Issa's poem that pays tribute to his master and to the frog poem:

古池や先御先へたとぶ蛙
furu ike ya mazu o-saki e to tobu kawazu

In order to understand the poetic renewal effect made by Bashō, it has been observed that one of the methods of creating a "strangely harmonious"¹⁰ atmosphere is the *abrupt* juxtaposition of two disparaged *objects* that seemingly have nothing to do with each other.

¹⁰ Ueda, 162.

Through this technique, Bashō aims not to merely create a poetic synaesthesia (the way the French poets later do) but, in his *return to nature*, as R.H. Blyth also noted, to create *love*¹¹ and empathy for things, a love with the help of which he reaches the authentic spirit of poetry, the deeper core of things. In order to give this spirit a voice, the poet must transition from the perception of the object, naturally through emotion, to expressing it in an expressive, depersonalised form that is authentic and intuitively assumed.

It is equally important for the poem to concentrate into a single image and in a spontaneous form the awe or admiration for a scene in nature. However, nature is not described as an external object; from this viewpoint, Bashō is anti-discursive, anti-descriptive. Similarly to his frog, the poet's spirit must emerge in things, and, from there, it must capture the echo of the things that reverberate further. Therefore, pure art can only be conceived outside the world, and poetry gives a new form to the invisible, making it perceptible, visible. In this case, one can only achieve enlightenment from within, on the path that leads to the heart of the object, capable of capturing the invisible and of making it vibrate, similarly to a tight string that resonates between two poles, man's heart and the heart of the universe. To connect the two *hearts* (planes), Bashō seems to say, represents the way of pure art, of true poetry. Such an intention is metaphysical. And Bashō's poetics is, in fact, anti-poetics.

Ideally, a poem cannot lack the feeling that created it; therefore, from the preface of the anthology *Kokinshū* 古今集 (905), edited by Ki no Tsurayuki, Japanese poetry is based on sentiment and feeling. The medieval poetry imprinted on lyricism a Buddhist touch with strong ascetic qualities. The empathy for things and the desire to abstract from the world seem to be, in Bashō's time, in somewhat of a contradiction. Makoto Ueda demonstrates that Matsuo Bashō resolves this conflict through spiritual enlightenment and, given the achieved enlightenment, through the return to the common world. He makes this endeavour using a set of principles known by the art of that time: *sabi* and *shiori*¹². A certain inclination towards vagueness, asymmetry and imperfection is also present in Bashō's poetry, an inclination characteristic to the Japanese classical lyricism. Vagueness and asymmetry, ambiguity and imperfection represent the lines of force of Japanese medieval poetry and they are also present in other arts, in the art of tea, for instance, in the master of this art, Sen no Rikyū. Bashō uses the ambiguity of the Japanese language in his favour, transforming it through *shiori* into a poetic technique. It is thus unsurprising that there are several interpretation possibilities in the case of the poems. *Shiori*, which usually expressed a poem ambiguously enough to give way to various interpretations, in Bashō it does not play the role of a poetic riddle or of a Zen parable; quite the contrary, even if it produces that enlightenment effect, enticing the reader, its simplicity reveals itself into a new art form. If *sabi* and *shiori* are the heart of the poet, *kireji* and *kigo* represent his soul. *Kigo* represents the word for season and it is very important in the poetics of the haiku since, as Bashō himself believed, each poem must suggest the atmosphere of nature and must help the reader know during which period of the year the moment of

¹¹ Blyth, 110.

¹² Ueda, 149.

evocation had been captured. *Kigo* must not name the season, but suggest it. Bashō stood out through the variety of *kigo* words used, but especially through his choice of new and common words that were not part of the canonical poetic vocabulary. *Kawazu* is one of these words and it suggests the beginning of spring. It is not the most adequate for the season, all the more so as it creates ambiguity, since one cannot know whether there is one frog or more, but its ambiguity undoubtedly represents a clue for the reader regarding the lack of characteristics. *Kireji*, often suggested through a word like *ya*, represents the pause or the caesura, holding one's breath until uttering the final verse. Starting from the idea that *ya* is *the equivalent of an interjection like ah!*, Rodica Frențiu notes that, from a grammatical viewpoint, the scene with the frog's leap has an attributive determination¹³ that gives way to interpretation regarding the succession of the moments. *Kireji* also has a grammatical function but, in this context, it gains a new charge, a semantic *assignment*. Implicitly, through the role of separating the two plates, the timeless plane of the lake and the fleeting plane of the moment, *ya* – which, in spite of its apparently incidental position at the end of the first scene – plays an essential role since, in accordance with the idea of the poem, it moves the emphasis from the signified towards the signifier, drawing the attention to an implicit *poetic reality*. In the banal image of a leaping frog, counting on the element of surprise and effect, the poet describes a *poetic* experience, first triggered by the senses (on a sensory level), then culminating through a deep dive in the imaginary, as a significant threshold of the poetic consciousness and, through the effect of auditory reverberation suggested by the final verse, a repeating experience in relation with the act of reading.

Matsuo Bashō understood poetry as an authentic path and aimed to make it into a religious one as well. Makoto Ueda, analysing the final period of the poet's life, concluded that, in spite of its power of suggestion, the haiku is, however, *not a religion* and that Bashō's mistake was that "he sought to attain the passivity of religion by means of poetry."¹⁴ Nonetheless, in its short moments of grace, poetry can obtain *sabi* and *shiori* and even if, from a religious viewpoint, it does not become an ascension, it is still the most intimate way of achieving a state of mind and of superior knowledge of the world.

Translated from the Romanian by Anca Chiorean

¹³ See Rodica Frențiu, "The Intuition of the Real and the Aesthetics of Silence in Japanese Haiku," in *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in the Humanities*, XVIII (2013), No. 2, 454-465.

¹⁴ Makoto Ueda, 171.