

JAPAN AND THE WEST: SHIKI AND MODERNISM

Alone
In the editorial department:
Summer rain falling.

Shiki ¹

In the years between Issa's death and Shiki's birth, enormous change had wracked Japan politically, socially and culturally. At mid-19th century, after more than 200 years of isolation, Japan was torn by economic problems and beleaguered from without by foreigners seeking to open Japan to trade with the West. Her farmers and samurai were financially depleted, her merchants could not function without access to markets. Dissolute factions within the country jockeyed for dominance over the crumbling Tokugawa Shogunate to the extent that some Japanese called for restoration of the Emperor. The appearance of the Black Ships of Russia, England and America heightened the anxiety of an already troubled nation. Change was inevitable and necessary for the survival of Japan. With the arrival of Commodore Perry in Edo Bay in 1853, Japan was eventually forced into the modern world.

It did not take long for the Japanese to recognize their defenselessness in the face of the military and technological superiority of the West. With dispatch, they sent emissaries abroad to obtain firsthand knowledge of their enemy, the "barbarians." The result: the Japanese people were awash in a flood of ideas that conflicted with their ancient traditions.

On September 17, 1867 in this time of ferment and cross-cultural exchange, Masaoka Tsunenori was born in Matusuyama on the island of Shikoku. (Later in his life, as was customary among Japanese poets, he adopted the name Shiki.) His father, Masaoka Hayata, was a samurai of lower rank who died of alcoholism. The boy and his younger sister, Ritsu, were raised by their mother, Yae, and Shiki's maternal grandfather, Ohara Kanzan who lived next door. This grandfather was a scholar of Chinese classics. He was adamantly opposed to the changes wrought during the Meiji Era. Under his tutelage, the young Shiki became known as a prodigy in the neighborhood.

Against the backdrop of political unrest in Japan and with recollections of his samurai heritage instilled by Ohara Kanzan, Shiki and a few of his friends were enthralled by novels from the library which told of war and valor. By 1880, now teenagers, they formed their own writing club and spent much of their time studying haiku, tanka and Chinese poetry. They wrote essays and travel accounts and put out their own magazine. They enjoyed a time of complete freedom of thought during these impressionable years. Though the youngest of the group, Shiki was the leader of their Poetry Lovers Society. Next came a period when politics and debating absorbed Shiki. Enthusiasm led him to take extreme positions. Shiki, deemed a radical, was severely reprimanded by his middle school authorities for his anti-conservative opinions. Ultimately, he was forbidden to speak at all! Of their life at that time, Shiki's cousin Ryo stated: "We reached adolescence just after the dissolution of the feudal system. All had been sown afresh. But while the old order had fallen, nothing new had yet been created in its place." ²

Nearly sixteen, Shiki looked to Tokyo as the answer to his dreams and ambitions for furthering his studies. Though he liked writing best, he thought he ought to pursue a career in the law or politics. This was a reflection of his early Confucian upbringing which placed great value on these professions. But as for literary pursuits, the Confucian conviction was that it was supposed to be didactic--its sole purpose was to "encourage virtue, reprove vice." ³ Beyond that, it was disdained as mere entertainment. Despite these attitudes, Shiki stood a chance at winning a scholarship offered to boys of samurai descent. His uncle in Tokyo urged him to come. On June 18, 1883, the teenage Shiki accepted his uncle's suggestion and left Matsuyama .

The city presented a whole new world to the teenager. Shiki behaved like one at a banquet, tasting this and that, sampling one dish, then switching to another. Politics became philosophy became poetry became aesthetics became literature in the broadest sense—a concept that was liberating to Shiki whose youthful acceptance of this hodgepodge of disciplines led him to false assumptions regarding the *actual* roles of each. His inclination at this time was *not* to study anything in depth and to sail through his exams, surprised when

occasionally he passed them! With youthful bluntness he declared: “I decided that passing examinations was as easy as farting.”⁴

From 1886 to 1888 Shiki shared a dormitory with a group of university students who also wrote and put out pamphlets containing their essays, Chinese poems, popular songs and haiku. In the summer of 1888 Shiki—always of delicate health—began coughing blood. He was twenty-one. It was at this time he assumed the pen-name “Shiki” which means “cuckoo.” According to Japanese belief, the cuckoo spits up blood when it cries. . . .

His determination to becoming a man of letters continued unabated. Fortuitously for Shiki, the mid-80s was the time when an enormous change occurred in Japanese thinking on the subject of literature. The new idea that ran counter to Confucian notions limiting it to the didactic approach was enticing: “Literature was a method of expressing truth that needed no justification beyond itself.”⁵ The very idea that literature could express *real* feelings of *real* people, that it could “collectively denote any kind of, poem, novel, short story, essay, drama, etc.”⁶ was a revelation for Shiki. It was key to all he needed to know. It expanded his natural inclination toward literary pursuits and gave the ambitious man the answer he sought. One drawback, however: these liberating pronouncements of Tsubouchi Shoyo [1859-1935], the originator of this new direction, left the haiku and tanka *outside* of literature as he saw it. He felt they were “too short to express the complex feelings of modern human being.”⁷ Here is where Shiki took over and laid the groundwork for their inclusion. Nevertheless, his limited reading in philosophy—Herbert Spencer’s *Philosophy of Style*—served him well. [Often the slightest phrase can inspire entirely new concepts, directions for the creative mind.] He found in it a statement by Shoyo who said that “the shortest sentence is the best.”⁸ In his own way, in an essay written in 1889 called “The Origin and Development of Poetry,” Shiki interpreted Tsubouchi’s statement to mean brevity *could* contain deep meaning. Thus he propelled it into a validation for the writing of compelling short poetry and for honoring it as literature. In this way he attempted to counter the detractors of haiku and tanka poetry. Shiki was moving away from the standardized Confucian and class-based constraints that had hobbled Japanese thought. To demonstrate the stultifying attitudes regarding haiku and tanka of the late Tokugawa period, Beichman explains:

“The haiku was associated with the merchant class while the tanka retained an association with the nobility. the distinctions which grew up between these genres of the basis of such seemingly superficial differences as their class associations, the subjects and diction suitable to them, and their rules of composition, tended to obscure their underlying common nature as poetry . . . A tanka poet would identify him or herself not as a poet, but as a tanka-person (kajin), while a haiku poet would refer to him or herself as a haiku-person (haijin). The two would feel their genres to be

mutually exclusive; a haiku poet would not dream of seriously composing tanka, nor would a tanka poet trespass within the bounds of haiku except in play. The aesthetic standards, the terms of analysis, the aims of each were felt to be totally different.”⁹

Sad to say, in certain quarters, elements of these antiquated beliefs linger.

So it was that at only twenty-two years of age, his role as a true iconoclast was forged. He benefits all of us who write *not only the haiku* but who, equally adventuresome, have expanded our range of expression to include the senryu, tanka, haibun and haiga. “Poet” is the adequate and honorific designation to describe the best practitioners in these genres. My gratitude is unending for the *truly* modern face Shiki brought to short poems--despite all the impediments that prevented the growth of *meaningful* new directions.

At this same time, Shiki’s tuberculosis was giving ominous indicators that his life would be a short one. For the second time in a year, he coughed blood. Yet a year later, Shiki entered the Imperial University [now Tokyo University]. His continued involvement with haiku and literature superseded his academic endeavors. He failed his final exams of 1892 and quit school, forfeiting his eight-year scholarship. He moved out of the dormitory and rented a house where he was able to spend most of his time on writing. Poor though this decision left him, his samurai origins sustained him in the conviction that one should be ready to throw one’s life away on a good cause. For Shiki, this meant the pursuit of literature. At this juncture, he did not regard his objective as becoming a poet. He wanted to become a novelist. When Shiki presented an example of his first story to one of the leading Meiji authors and was discouraged from pursuing novel writing, shortly thereafter he announced to his friend, Takahama Kyoshi [1874-1959]* that he had decided to become a poet.

That being determined, Shiki began publishing a long series of articles, “Talks on Haiku from the Otter’s Den.” In these he mapped out his objections to the old-fashioned haiku masters whom he held responsible for haiku’s decline. As Shiki had already been at work for some time on *Classified Collection of Haiku*, “an historical overview of the haiku through its primary sources, the poems themselves,”¹⁰ he was well-prepared to confront the subject of reform in haiku. Analysis before synthesis. These innovative articles ran in the newspaper *Nippon* beginning in June 1892 and going through October 2. By November, he was making enough money to send for his mother and sister and have them live in Tokyo. In December he became the haiku editor of *Nippon*. Over the next ten years, this paper published the majority of Shiki’s output of poetry and articles.

* When Shiki was twenty-four, he and Kyoshi met through haiku poet and disciple Hekigoto. Kyoshi was asked by Shiki to carry on in his name after his death. Though Kyoshi refused, they remained friend until Shiki’s death. Kyoshi edited Shiki’s work posthumously.

Despite the fact that Shiki's critical articles "Indiscriminate Attacks on the Literary World" and "Some Remarks on Basho" sound scandalously impertinent, his on-going studies over many years yielded him a surprisingly accurate assessment of the situation of his day. He was able to highlight the hypocrisy, the superficiality and frivolity of judgments, the lack of originality. He called to task writers who appropriated ancient works as their own, he denigrated haiku masters for their lack of standards. "Since becoming the sport of amateurs and ignoramuses, haiku have become more and more numerous, more and more banal." ¹¹ [Ah! *Plus ça change . . .*] His famous attack on Basho in which he claimed nine-tenths of Basho's poems were doggerel and in which he decried the fact that Basho was being elevated to the level of a god by the Japanese. Though shocking, this judgment did not represent the totality of Shiki's perceptive evaluation: Shiki believed that "Basho had been the first realistic poet in the haiku . . . and many of his poems had possessed 'sublimity and grandeur' . . . The sublime tone was, according to Shiki, unique to Basho." ¹²

Shiki led his life as though he were not ill. During a shift in his job situation when *Nippon* was forced to close down, he edited the replacement paper. Then, as governmental incidents alter and the *Nippon* resumed publication, he resumed his position there as haiku editor. In 1894 Japan declared war on China. Shiki's excitement was boundless at the prospect of covering the story as a reporter. He repeatedly urged the paper to send him. And he waited almost a year:

Alone
In the editorial department;
summer rain falling

He was as happy when he sailed for Shantung in April 1895 as he had been when he left Matsuyama for Tokyo years ago. His samurai zeal surged: "What point is there in having been born a man unless I can accompany the army?" ¹³ He was ready to face death, ready to throw his life away fearlessly. In a burst of nationalism he wrote:

A great wind
Suddenly arose
The banner! ¹⁴



Mizuo Toshikata "Hurrah! Hurrah! For the Great Japanese Empire!" [wikimedia Commons](#)

During the recent changeover at *Nippon*, Nakamura Fusetsu [1866-1943], an artist of the Western-style school of painting, befriended Shiki. He joined Shiki on the one-month tour of Darien, Luangtao and Port Arthur. Fusetsu's influence on Shiki's taste and opinions was to be a turning point.

The lights are lit
On the islands far and near:
The spring sea. ¹⁵

Fusetsu's artwork literally showed Shiki the path toward the type of writing Shiki would embrace in the coming years: *shasei* or the "sketch from life." A realism depicting *things as they are*. It would replace the stylized concepts and limitations imposed on haiku in the past. By the simple method of drawing a face in profile in the manner of the Japanese artists [quite two-dimensionally] and drawing another profile realistically [three-dimensionally as was taught Fusetsu in Paris], Fusetsu was able to show Shiki the completely difference in approach to subject matter. Shiki was astonished to realize how indoctrinated he had been to *expect* only the profile of the human eye as represented in the manner of the ancient Egyptians. But in Western European art, the eye is depicted *as it appears in life*, e.g. varying in shape according to the angle at which the head is turned. Thereafter, Shiki, with the dedication of a convert, would repeat this drawing exercise to convince others that they had been locked into an incorrect presentation.

Shiki's 1895 spring adventure was a calamity. Not only did he not experience the Sino-Japanese War which had ended on his way over, but he found himself being treated like an ordinary soldier. Shiki was shocked that he was allowed no special privileges which, as a

reporter, he expected. Privation exacerbated his illness. Before he had been away more than a month, he was taken back to Kobe hemorrhaging. Debarking the ship, he was rushed directly to the hospital. They did not expect him to survive.

Eventually, with his mother and one of his disciples, Kawahigashi Hekigoto [1873-1937] to tend him, he recuperated sufficiently to be moved once more. This time to Suma Sanatorium, where he composed one of several famous poems:

Nobody there;
A wicker chair in the shade;
Fallen pine-needles.¹⁶

Effacement rings from this elegant haiku. The somber tone of internal landscape comes through the utterance of the poet. The sense of the inevitable pervades Shiki's portrayal of "ordinary" things—hovering just below their cool and detached-sounding surfaces.

By a deft shift of focus, the next poem about the sanatorium displays Shiki's consciousness of the ever-present interplay between his own life and imminent death. With purely objective description, he expresses the deep-seated question: How long do I have?

Ranged along
The hand-rail around the corridor,
The mountains of spring.¹⁷

In August he was able to return to Matsuyama where he moved in with his old friend from university days, Natsume Soseki [1867-1916] who now took over his care. (Years later, Soseki was to become one of Japan's outstanding novelists.) A group of young poets known as the Wind in the Pines Society came to Shiki's bedside for regular meetings. With them, Shiki shared the ideas he had been developing concerning the new directions for haiku. Making use of these conversations, Shiki turned them into a series of articles for *Nippon*. They were called "The Elements of Haiku." At the end of October 1895, Shiki returned to Tokyo. Though further debilitated by spinal complication which kept him bedridden, he continued to write articles for the paper. Haiku meetings were held in his home monthly. Shiki was not isolated from the stimulation and companionship of fellow haiku poets.

*

On the world scene, the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War was to win international acclaim for Japan. Her transformation in four decades amazed the West and served to encourage in the extreme rightist Japanese, a sense of mission bordering on chauvinism. One result of Japanese victory oddly cropped up in their literature: the Japanese now disdained the use of their old-style language as "inappropriate" because it derived from Chinese! Shiki

supported this view. In the new poetry he advocated use of the modern Japanese language style.

Shiki's reformation of haiku was sweeping. He declared that *haikai no renga* [linked verse written by several people] was not literature since it was written collaboratively and therefore he considered it merely a social activity. He touted isolating renga's starting verse, the hokku, making it stand alone as a poem. It was Shiki who originated the name "haiku" to describe this henceforth *independent* work. Quite a natural development for a venturesome young convert like Shiki who had now shifted his thinking away from the feudal "we" to the "I".

The new style haiku Shiki advocated ought to base its material on direct observation of nature rather than on old haiku. He reminded beginners that among the old authors, one would find both good and bad poems—a particularly valuable caution to those with a tendency to revere uncritically everything a famous poet produced. It took time before he realized the importance of selectivity of one's material as the governing factor. As to this, he admitted he was mistaken in his earlier thinking that *any* real scene could be made into a poem. [I dare say this is the perpetual challenge, rarely met, to all writers!] Harking back to that influential statement he adopted early on: 'the shortest sentence is the best' he advised against putting anything into a poem that was extraneous. His emphasis on visual realism deriving from his exposure to art with Fusetsu, included a reminder to "Remember perspective. Large things are large, but small things are also large if seen close up."¹⁸

The implication of this fresh and flexible approach to utilizing one's environment can be seen here:

The coolness;
Through the pine needles,
Sailing-ships.¹⁹

A samisen hung up
In the tea-shop on the moor:
Spring.²⁰

Again, by manipulation of perspective, Shiki focuses on small things close up, then expands his vision outward to encompass the grand. The following poem illustrates another aspect of Shiki's involvement with the visual in his poetry:

Two petals fall
And the shape of the peonies
is wholly changed.*²¹

*one of 14 peony haiku from "*The Verse Record of My Peonies: A Diary Of An Illness*," 1902.

The next poem, too, displays Shiki's originality. Flowers had customarily been portrayed "happily"—a caprice, a *most* pathetic fallacy Shiki abhorred. In this example he portrays them with straightforward realism:

Chrysanthemums withering;
Socks drying on the fence;
A fine day. ²²

Emphasis on reform led to easing restrictions on the 17-onji [symbol-sound] count for the Japanese haiku. Hekigoto was especially inclined to push the envelope with his renowned 20-onji haiku:

Recently, the greengrocer's wife being dead,
Father and daughter load the greens,
Load the onions.

Hekigoto ²³

Following his lead, another 20-onji haiku

Here also,
Just a little sunshine,--
And some socks drying.

Ichirinsō ²⁴
[20th century]

and, conversely, this haiku by the beggar-poet Santoka, contains fewer than 17 onji:

Into the iron bowl* also
Hailstones.

Santoka
[1882-1940] ²⁵

Another dictum: *Every haiku must contain a codified seasonal reference* came under scrutiny. Poems such as the following were called *mu-ki* [no-season] haiku:

A small, country
Newspaper;
It was soon read.

Hosai ²⁶
[1885-1926]

The nails
In the nail-box
Every blessed one bent!

Hosai ²⁷

*begging bowl

Contemporary subject matter was seen as fit material for poetry. Industrialization had come to Japan bringing with it innovations affecting all areas of Japanese life. Shiki urged responding to these changes, but in a way that removed what he considered the “vulgarity” from such material. Some of Shiki’s poems which illustrate just how he maintained that sense of elegance while marrying the old with the new subjects:

Low over the rail-road,
Wild geese flying;
A moon-lit night. ²⁸

A lonely
Railway station;
Lotus-flowers blooming. ²⁹

A great ship
Towing a small boat behind it
Into the haze. ³⁰

In actual practice, we see in these poems the grounding Shiki’s rich classical education provides for his avant-garde practices. They become an elegant fusion of the best qualities of the ancients with the incorporation of fresh material and realistic approach of the contemporary scene. Shiki says

“My own idea is not to say it in exactly the same way as the ancients did, nor to attempt to follow the established practice. *My fundamental principle is to express as clearly as I can the poetic quality that I myself feel to be beautiful.* [Italics Shiki’s] Consequently, if I feel that common language would most appropriately express my esthetic feeling, I should discard elegant diction and use common language. Although I sometimes treat a subject in accordance with the traditional, established practice, when I do so it is not that I have followed the established practice simply because it is there. I have employed it because such a treatment is most appropriate to the expression of beauty.” ³¹

Obviously, in the next poem Shiki felt common language perfectly suitable:

a stray cat
taking a shit...
the winter garden ³²

*

Too little emphasis has been placed, I believe, on the effect terminal illness had on the literary achievements of Shiki. Until the middle of the 20th century and the discovery of streptomycin and INH treatment, world-wide tuberculosis was incurable. The subject has been avoided assiduously, as though to admit its role, to *explore* its pervasive effect on his life and work, would be to engage in morbidity. But it is the single most all-encompassing fact of the life of this poet who suffered a degenerative disease from the age of twenty-one until his death at thirty-five. Not to reckon with this leads even such an influential aficionado of haiku as R. H. Blyth to make the following misleading assessment: "As with Buson, whom he [Shiki] admired so much, he gives us pure poetry, which never fails to satisfy us, and though it may not gain in depth with re-reading, we do not tire of him." ³³ it is difficult to accept such negation of the depth to be gained through re-reading Shiki in light of the fact of his wretched illness. Blyth mentions it in his works but ignores it as a determining factor in understanding just *why* it is that he finds such pleasure, such enduring quality in the man's poems. Shiki's illness provides the missing link to deriving *full impact* from his work. What is transmitted on a first reading of his poetry is only the tip of the iceberg. Marvelous enough. But what comes with knowledge of the actual circumstances under which he wrote brings readers to Emily Dickinson's "...a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone."

Other haiku poets treated the subject of coolness, mainly as an external sensation.

The cool breeze;
Crooked and meandering
It comes to me.

Issa ³⁴

Coolness
Painted into a picture;
Bamboos of Saga.

Basho ³⁵

The cool breeze
Fills the empty vault of heaven
With the voice of the pine-trees.

Onitsura ³⁶

The shrine
In a sacred grove:
A cool wind blows.

Chora ³⁷

But no one brings to his poems the extraordinary sensitivity Shiki brings in regard to sensations of coolness. It is my firm belief that this is due directly to the condition of feverishness that attends the consumptive. The next poem, when read with an awareness that a tubercular patient frequently experiences drenching night-sweats, makes one acutely conscious of the components of the poem and enables the reader to realize *why* they would have special significance for Shiki. Yet, as a prefatory note to several of the “coolness” poems, Blyth states: “Shiki seems to have been *peculiarly* [emphasis mine] susceptible to heat and cold.”³⁸

Fields and mountains
Drenched with rain,—
A cool day-break. ³⁹

What surplus meaning [*yojo* is what Basho called that] is added to this haiku—the correlative drawn—once you learn the particulars about Shiki’s condition!

Coming out of the bath,
The wind blows on the nipples;
Cooling on the verandah. ⁴⁰

With acute sensitivity to sensory stimuli, in the next three poems Shiki makes use of synesthesia to achieve the sensation of touch (coolness) via aural or visual sensations—or both.

The night-light goes out;
The sound of the water:
The coolness. ⁴¹

The coolness;
Through the window of the stone lantern
The sea. ⁴²

The coolness;
A crab climbing up a pine-tree
In the rain.⁴³

Note how in “the sea” and the “climbing crab” Shiki excels at this palpable caressing of his subject with the eyes—albeit a sublimation of unshared passion. . . He wrote no love poems.

The next two poems are usually paired to illustrate the typical Japanese technique of emulating a well-known poem but altering it slightly. Early on in my acquaintance with the haiku, I was under the false impression this was blatant plagiarism. But I came to learn that, in reality, it was the customary way Japanese paid homage to their master poets. (Treacherous practice nowadays for the international horde of haiku poets to resurrect! In addition, such an undertaking places little obligation for creativity upon the one who chooses this ancient route—unless, *on rare occasions*, it can be skillfully turned into parody resulting in a fine senryu.) Now to the pair of famous haiku which work knowingly off one another. The first is by Buson and the second by Shiki who changes only two words. But to tremendous effect! Observe that the feeling conveyed by each poet is entirely different.

On the temple bell
has settled, and is fast asleep,
a butterfly.
Buson⁴⁴

On the temple bell
has settled, and is glittering,
a firefly.
Shiki⁴⁵

The Buson haiku is really a lovely, delicate moment of coincidence in which the contrasts of noise and silence, agitation and repose; largeness and smallness weave their own quiet magic. But if we recognize in Shiki’s haiku, the firefly as metaphor (a common technique poets use to disguise yet convey more of their feelings)—as a self-portrait, it is *devastatingly* different from Buson’s. The dominant thrust of this haiku is not in contrasts but in its contained burning, “glittering” feverishness! All the suppressed anger, frustration, drive and despair of the consumptive poet, the agnostic, the iconoclast, burst from this superficially innocuous variation on Buson’s haiku. The true flavor of what is happening in Shiki’s version comes from this passage in Thomas Mann’s 1924 novel of a sanatorium, *The Magic Mountain*:

“ And now his body has come into the foreground in another sense and made itself important and independent of the rest of him—namely, through illness. He is all ‘lit up’ within and can’t get rid of the infection and become healthy . . . be a soldier. . . But the disease

makes him ailing within and fevered without;
disease makes men more physical
it leaves them nothing but body. . . “⁴⁶

Poem after poem portrays varied aspects of acute solitariness, a circumstance forced upon the poet by his illness. How different this is from the solitariness of Basho who sought it, who found solace in it!

The seeds of the nettle-tree are falling;
recently, the child next door
Doesn't come.⁴⁷

A grasshopper chirping
In the back
Of the clog-cupboard.⁴⁸

All the sick-nurses
Fast asleep,--
Ah, the cold.⁴⁹

Again and again, a feeling of isolation. But never in these does Shiki employ one iota of sentimentality in order to achieve the poignancy inherent in his choice of subject matter. Even so, his illness and attendant solitude provide the key to understanding the underlying subjective dimension of Shiki's poetry of "realistic description."

In the following poems, it is the absence of things which strike the deep psychological knell:

There is no trace
Of him who entered
The summer grove.⁵⁰

On the sandy beach,
Footprints:
Long is the spring day.⁵¹

When I looked back,
The man who passed
Was lost in the mist.⁵²

Loneliness;
After the fireworks,
A falling star.⁵³

Of crimson foliage
There is none here,
Deep in the mountains.⁵⁴

We see in these haiku the functional application and proof of Shiki's theory on the ability of brevity and objectivity to evoke intense emotional response. And in the following:

I met a coffin,
At midnight,
In the New Year.⁵⁵

Yes, this is handled with what Blyth chose to call Shiki's "excessive objectivity." But what a small leap of imagination is required to recognize what that occurrence portended for Shiki. He cannot *afford* to be sentimental lest he collapse inward upon his awful future! His very control and sense of irony allow him to function—*for what time he has*.

*

Meanwhile, Shiki's foremost disciples, the experimental modernist Hekigoto and the conservative Kyoshi, were blossoming into laudable poets of this *Nippon*-spawned group as the year 1896 wore on. At this time, Shiki made his first acquaintance with the work of Yosa Buson [1716-1784] in his book *New Flower Picking*. From this, Shiki absorbed the idea for sequences of haiku on a single topic and the haibun [journals combining haiku-like prose with haiku poems interspersed]. In his usual fashion, upon finding a new idol, Shiki immersed himself in the writing of Buson. For a while he was taken by what he attributed to "imagination" in Buson's work—this at a time when the constraints of his growing infirmity pressed in upon him. Shiki wrote: "While the author's hand rests upon an old desk in a four and a half mat room, his imagination ranges beyond his country's borders throughout the universe and he seeks beauty in perfect freedom. Though wingless, he can soar to the sky; though finless, he can hide in the oceans. When there is silence, he hears sounds; when there are no colors, he sees them. In haiku there is only one poet like this: Buson."⁵⁶ As Shiki himself declared, even among the greatest poets one will find good work and what—in this hyperbolic flight of fancy—I find to be way off the mark in describing Buson. He was a widely-traveled, urbane artist of the Nanga aka Bunjinga School of Painting, and a prolific poet who married and lived a long life. Shiki's comment strikes me as psychological projection by a terribly ill individual. To switch the final name in his commentary to "Shiki" I think would be the accurate attribution. With sadness, I readily overlook this blunder.)

This notion about “imagination” prevailed for a couple of years until Shiki’s world had shrunken to his actual surroundings: only his sickbed, the little garden plot by the doorway he could barely crawl to, and himself. . . At this point, he realized that central to “imagination” were the limitations of the human mind, whereas the ever-changing world available in sketching from life was limitless. So his writing turned to the sketch-from-life mode. (“Life” such as it was!) Therefore, it was with increased frequency he incorporated first-person expression in sequences of haiku. This was novel. He did this in his tanka too --as was sanctioned for *that* genre, and in his prose. By 1898, his first essay in the new style, “Record of the Little Garden,” was published. As this prose-venture developed, it ultimately diverged from the haibun in that it eliminated the use of poems and literary allusions. Instead, Shiki conceived it as having the structure of a mountain: “It should gradually ascend and reach a peak, and from there gradually descend.”⁵⁷ Once more, as in his new poetry, Shiki stressed the necessity for careful selection of one’s material. How uniformly faithful he was to his own precepts is not as important as the far-reaching ideas he presented to writers. In his last years, the prose style begun in 1898 reached its apex in his poetic diaries: *A Drop of Ink* [1901], *A Sixfoot Sickbed* [1901], *Stray Notes While Lying on My Back* [1902]. (*Stray Notes* became *1902: Morphine Diary*.)

As always, Shiki was a path-finder. There are those among Japanese writers who felt that “ modern prose begins with Shiki.”⁵⁸ The school of haiku developed by Shiki’s efforts dominated the Tokyo scene. *Hototoguisu* [*The Cuckoo*], the magazine created by Shiki’s friend and disciple, Kyoshi, was transferred from Matsuyama to Tokyo. This publication provided the most modern forum for Shiki’s ideas. His work appeared on its pages and the content of the dynamic magazine expanded to include tanka, literary and art criticism as well as prose essays and the new-style haiku.

After excoriating the tanka writers of his day in a series called “Letters to a Tanka Poet,” Shiki began writing his own. The following tanka is the most famous one of a sequence of ten on wisteria.

wisteria
in the vase
so short
it doesn’t touch
the floor⁵⁹

It appears within his journal as the first of the series written that same evening as he lay in bed after dinner. Traditionally, the wisteria’s graceful *length* is lauded in tanka. The poem’s tone of profundity comes when we realize as Shiki points out: *this one is too short*. Focusing on that reality echoes the inner anguish Shiki suffers recognizing *his* life, too, is “so short.”

As his interest in the clearly subjective tanka intensifies, an increasing number of his haiku take on autobiographical coloring--even though historically, the haiku poet has tended to remain quite *outside* the poem, e.g. In haiku, the poet may be implied as the observer of the action, or, if in the poem at all, his role is subordinate. But Shiki, by now a wholly dependent, bedridden victim with suppurating ulcers and spinal tuberculosis, was himself the dominant feature of the shrinking landscape of his final time on earth. Several of the following poems are examples of these plaintive so-called "I-poems":

Everyday
Not eating the grapes,--
Drinking medicine. ⁶⁰

My life,--
How much of it remains?
The night is brief. ⁶¹

The persimmons I love so much
Can't be eaten:
I'm ill. ⁶²

How many, many times
I asked about it,
The deepness of the snow! ⁶³

Thinking back to how I first reacted to the most familiar poems by Shiki-- before I read his biography, his final works, his tanka-- I was completely awed by his ability to capture majestic distances in these tiny haiku,

Skylarks are soaring,
Treading the clouds,
Breathing the haze. ⁶⁴

The billowing clouds,
Piled low along
The far line of the sea. ⁶⁵

by the exquisite point of focus in

The coolness;
Through the window of the stone lantern
The sea. ⁶⁶

or the exactness of the elements selected that fit together to describe the ancient Japanese fishing practice: torchlit night-fishing--*with underlings*. Again, Shiki extends an “ordinary “ scene with a parallel unmistakable subjective interpretation. It is one of my favorite works.

Morning twilight;
In their basket, the cormorants
Asleep, exhausted. ⁶⁷

I believe he already achieved greatness as a haiku poet and innovator long before the highly autobiographical work of his last years. I often think what a great death-poem this earlier haiku of his would have made:

There is no trace
Of him who entered
The summer grove.

On September 19, 1902, written on the very day of his death, these were his last utterances:

the gourd flowers bloom,
but look—here lies
a phlegm-stuffed Buddha! ⁶⁸

a quart of phlegm—
even gourd water
couldn't mop it up ⁶⁹

they didn't gather
gourd water
day before yesterday either ⁷⁰

With every bit of his energy, he drove himself to transcend his rotting body and complete a body of work that would assure him a place in the literary firmament. By prodigious effort, he altered writers' thinking and advanced these small works to the stature of Literature. Shiki, born on the cusp of two worlds, the ancient and the modern, was the perfect vessel for delivering the modern haiku.

NOTES

1. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 Summer-Autumn, (Hokuseido, Japan, 1952). p 63.
2. Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki* , (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1982). p.8.
3. Beichman, *Ibid.* p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
5. *Ibid.* p. 12
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.* pp. 12-13.
10. *Ibid.* p. 18.
11. *Ibid.* p. 38.
12. *Ibid.* p. 39.
13. *Ibid.* p. 20.
14. Blyth, *Haiku*, v. 3 op. cit. p. 102 .
15. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 2 Spring (Hokuseido, Japan, 1950). p 135.
16. R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku* v. 2 (Hokuseido, Japan, 1964). p. 87.
17. Blyth, *Haiku* v.2 op. cit. p.132 .
18. Harold G .Henderson' *Introduction to Haiku* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1958), p. 161.
19. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 p.14.
20. Blyth, *Haiku* v.2 p.39.
21. Earl Roy Miner, *Japanese. Poetic Diaries* (Berkeley, Univ. of Ca. Press, 1969), p.49.
22. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 4 Autumn-Winter, (Hokuseido, Japan, 1952), p.318.
23. Blyth, *History* op. cit. p. 190.
24. *Ibid.* p.281
25. *Ibid.* p 176.
26. *Ibid.* p. 159.
27. *Ibid.* p.160.
28. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 4 op. cit. p.62.
29. Blyth, *Haiku* v.3 op. cit. p.312.
30. Blyth, *Haiku* v.2 op. cit. p. 87.
31. Robert H. Brower, "Masaoka Shiki and Tanka Reform" in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*. ed. by Donald H. Shively (Princeton , N.J., Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 395.
32. William J. Higginson, trans., *thistle brilliant morning* (Paterson, N.J., From Here Press, 1975).
33. Blyth, *History*, op. cit. p.77.
34. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 op. cit. p. 25.
35. *Ibid.* p. 20.
36. *Ibid.* p. 19.
37. *Ibid.* p. 12.
38. *Ibid.* p. 13.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.* p.128.

41. Ibid. p. 16.
42. Ibid. p. 15.
43. Ibid. p. 14.
44. Henderson, *Intro* op. cit. p.163.
45. Ibid. p. 163.
46. (Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p.178.
47. Blyth, *History* op. cit. p. 97.
48. Ibid. p. 89.
49. Ibid p. 87.
50. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 op. cit. p.266.
51. Blyth, *Haiku* v.2 op. cit. p. 48.
52. Ibid. p. 85.
53. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 4 op. cit. p.24.
54. Ibid. p. 100
55. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 2 op. cit. p.18.
56. Beichman op. cit. p. 59.
57. Ibid. p. 109.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid. p. 117.
60. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 4 op. cit. p.131.
61. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 op. cit. p. 33.
62. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 4 op. cit. p. 132.
63. Blyth *History* op. cit. p. 96.
64. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 2 op. cit. p. 203.
65. Blyth, *Haiku* v. 3 op. cit. p. 36.
66. Ibid. p.15.
67. Ibid. p. 146.
68. Beichman. op. cit. p. 102.
69. Ibid. p. 103.
70. Ibid.