

## In Defense of Craft

by Paul Miller

I am suspicious of any haiku poet who claims to write solely and purely from direct experience. This is not to say that all haiku poems are fictitious, but I believe a large percentage (over 60%) are.<sup>1</sup> Further I would add that some of the strongest work done by the haiku community is found in that percentage. When I say fictitious, I am referring to haiku that are inspired by memories, remembered phrases, the poet's imagination, lines of other poems, etc., or that are a construct of half truth and half fiction. Yet whenever I hear someone explain the origins of a poem, there is always a genesis story involving an actual, epiphanous experience that was jotted down suddenly in that particular moment. One rarely hears of any creative activity on the part of the poet. This is due to a bias against the use of imagination in haiku, known more commonly by the derogatory term "desk haiku."

This bias is understandable. James Hackett, one of the founding figures of the global haiku community, offered in his advice to writing haiku: "Write about nature just as it is...be true to life!"<sup>2</sup> Masaoka Shiki advised that haiku "must be grounded in reality."<sup>3</sup> His successor, Takahama Kyoshi, advocated *kyakkan shasei* (objective sketch)<sup>4</sup> as an extension on Shiki's own *shasei* (sketch from life).<sup>5</sup> But in most cases, Shiki's especially, these tips have been taken out of the context of a larger poetic theory.

That imagination has been so oft ignored as a subject is surprising considering its strong history in haiku. All of the Masters played loosely with the facts at times. Kobayashi Issa's poem:

a lord  
forced off his horse  
cherry blossoms<sup>6</sup>

written with the prescript 'Ueno' was actually "composed in Shinano Province during a snowy second month in 1810."<sup>7</sup> Matsuo Basho's poem:

how piteous  
under the helmet  
a cricket<sup>8</sup>

was written upon seeing the displayed helmet of Saito Sanemori. Even Masaoka Shiki included ‘selective realism’—the creative selection or rearrangement of elements—as the second stage of his three stages of haiku development.<sup>9</sup>

However, whether poets take liberties with the truth is not my concern here. I am more concerned with the propagation of this bias considering how much is known about the history of imagination in haiku. First off, a distinction needs to be made between poems that are obviously fantastical, or that were written in play as part of a linked verse, and those that might be perceived as having a realistic genesis.

Princess Saho  
with the coming of spring  
stands pissing

Sokan<sup>10</sup>

by the road  
a rose mallow. . . it has been  
eaten by my horse!

Basho<sup>11</sup>

The first poem, an obvious fantasy, contains a reference to a mythical goddess of spring. These types of poems are often less emotive to the reader because of the inherent distance between the poem and the reader. This is because either the subject is fantastical and thus emotionally inaccessible, or because it is part of a renku and thus carries all the intellectual baggage linked verses carry. Since these poems are typically composed around a table, no one expects truth from the poet. Any discussion of the poem’s realistic origins is moot. For similar reasons derivatives such as SciFaiku fail—because they are solely accessible by the reader in an intellectual way.

The second haiku, which can be perceived as having a realistic genesis, is the kind people split hairs over. These haiku are meant to be realistic with minimal distance

between the poet and the reader. Some, myself included, will argue that strong sensual memories can easily stand in for direct, recent experience. Of course, an experienced moment is a moment with the potential to be better realized in poetry, but I have stood on a beach on a windy eve enough times to write about it in its absence. We are talking about an art form here; this is where craft comes into play. Others would argue that there are acceptable degrees of using memory and imagination. The rest would accept only moments perceived in the now, written down quickly and precisely, and left unedited for content as true haiku. To the reader, this hair-splitting is academic.

Ogiwara Seisensui is reported to have described haiku as a circle: one half to be completed by the poet, the other half by the reader. I prefer to think of haiku poets as tailors whose job it is to make a custom suit for a special occasion. The tailor wants the suit to be comfortable enough for the customer to stretch out and enjoy themselves in, but not so large that the suit ceases to serve a particular purpose. This is a suit that can't be worn to any other occasion; it must fit that particular occasion's specifications. But in the end, it is the customer who has to actually wear the suit. If the material came from Argentina instead of Scotland, the customer won't know unless they are told of the fact, and realistically won't care. All they care about is the finished product and how it fits.

In haiku, the reader determines the authenticity of a poem, and they do so not by validating the poet's actual experience, but by how emotionally accessible and realistic the poem is to them. It is this fact that makes the origin, or at least the genesis story, of a poem pointless. An imagined poetical moment, well crafted, can convey the deepest of emotions. Likewise, a poet could write the truest thing there is, but if the reader cannot comfortably and believably access it, it means nothing.

A good example is Yosa Buson in his poem:

    this piercing cold—  
    in the bedroom, I have stepped  
    on my dead wife's comb<sup>12</sup>

This is an eerie poem that immediately brings to my mind the colloquialism, "step on a crack, break your mother's back." While it is improbable that Buson knew of this phrase, there is a naturally strong parallel between a comb and our skeletal bodies. We can easily

imagine the sharp, cracking sound as the teeth break—a visceral image we feel right down our spine. Yet, as Makoto Ueda tells us in his book *The Path of the Flowering Thorn*, Buson's wife Tomo was very much alive and would in fact outlive him by more than thirty years. But is this fact important when experiencing the poem?

I have spoken to exceptional poets who have written a poem, realized it would be much more effective if tweaked somehow, who then changed the season, the kind of bird, the time of day, etc... While we don't know the details of how Buson came to compose his poem, I wonder if he didn't simply tread on his wife's comb one day, make the connection with the human body, and think to add 'dead' for dramatic effect.

I bite into a persimmon  
and a bell resounds—  
Horyuji

Shiki<sup>13</sup>

Shiki's poem is an example of his 'selective realism' stage, and is easily accessible to the reader as an emotionally penetrating scene. The lingering sound of a bell is well matched to the lingering taste of the fruit. That the bell he heard was actually that of the Todaiji Temple is unimportant. Horyuji, with its famous persimmon trees, is a stronger setting. Does this creative change subtract from the power of the poem? To the contrary, it increases it.

As we have seen, while some of the poems of the Master's are technically lies, that fact is irrelevant to the reader's interpretation and acceptance of a poem. A reader can either access a poem or they can't. The poem must stand on its own. The reader knows they cannot count on the author or a biographer for missing background information. They have to determine the authenticity of the poem by their comfort with it—from how well the suit fits them.

If the origin of a poem is irrelevant to the reader's interpretation, what purpose could a bias against imaginative haiku serve? I think it a fair argument that nearly all haiku poets are not masters so such examples as shown above might be inappropriate. Furthermore, a poem rendered from a remembered scene may not have the same effective tactile impressions one would have gotten from standing in the middle of it. However, these are

details of experience and craft, not origination. And therein lies the answer. The bias against imagined or desk haiku is not really related to the originating facts, but instead related to the craftsman—the poet.

That we would disguise this fact, whether consciously or not, is understandable. Haiku are very personal poems because they are about ourselves and our daily interactions with the world. They are a record of our experiences, viewpoints, and intimate beliefs. Ogiwara Seisensui “felt that haiku should be an impression of one’s inner experiences...”<sup>14</sup> There is a large part of the poet in each poem.

But how can a reader critique a haiku without offending something that is so innately tied to the poet? Rather than make a negative judgment about a poet’s creation, and by implication their invested emotions (not to mention their poetic skills), the reader takes it out on the raw material: the scene—something the writer has no control of, something they can’t feel hurt over. It’s a polite way of telling the poet, I didn’t get anything from the poem, but it’s not your fault. Imagine if you didn’t like Buson’s poem yet his wife had actually died. Could you ever approach him to tell him that it was a poor poem and perhaps a bit heavy handed? And by the way, sorry about your wife. Of course not. But because she was alive, you could easily suggest that it felt false and overly dramatic because it was false.

While this is a small kindness, it is not particularly helpful to the poet because in the majority of cases this isn’t unfinished work that they are presenting, but poems that they feel are fully realized. But without honest feedback, the poet won’t see their failures. This kind of empty critique gives both the critic and the poet an unhealthy, automatic out. Nor is it especially good for the community. One of the reasons the mainstream poetic community doesn’t take the haiku community seriously is that we are too kind in our criticism of ourselves.

As a final thought: blaming the scene for any of our failures implies that we were simply trying to recreate the scene, nothing more. While that is the first step of Shiki’s three stages of haiku development, if the reader doesn’t believe the scene, then the poet (not the scene) has still failed. We should be accountable for our work and take our lumps when it fails.

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot substantiate this percentage. It is a personal belief based on numerous conversations with editors and poets.

<sup>2</sup> James Hackett, *The Way of Haiku*, Japan Publications Inc, Tokyo, 1969, pp. 251

<sup>3</sup> Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works*, Cheng & Tsui, Boston, 2002, pp. 31

<sup>4</sup> Susumu Takiguchi, *Kyoshi: A Haiku Master*, Ami-Net International Press, Oxfordshire, 1997, pp. 30

<sup>5</sup> Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works*, Cheng & Tsui, Boston, 2002, pp. 54

<sup>6</sup> David Lanoue, *Haiku of Kobayashi Issa Website*, <http://webusers.xula.edu/dlanoue/issa/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Makoto Ueda, *Basho and his Interpreters*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, pp. 265

<sup>9</sup> Lee Gurga, *Toward an Aesthetic for English-Language Haiku*, *Modern Haiku* XXXI, No. 3, 2000, pp62.

<sup>10</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dream*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, pp. 53

<sup>11</sup> Makoto Ueda, *Basho and his Interpreters*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, pp. 105

<sup>12</sup> Makoto Ueda, *The Path of the Flowering Thorn*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, pp. 117

<sup>13</sup> Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works*, Cheng & Tsui, Boston, 2002, pp. 53

<sup>14</sup> John Stevens, *Mountain Tasting*, Weatherhill, New York, 1991, pp. 11

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