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Matsuo Basho's Creative Haibun: State of the Art

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Abstract

Basho was the key figure who elevated haikai from an entertaining pastime to a respected poetic form. He had developed a set of related poetic ideals widely utilised by his disciples, fellow poets, and successive followers since the mid-1680s. It looked to the past for inspiration and authority and yet rejected it. It parodied the classical (and Chinese) tradition even as they sought to become part of it. It paid homage to the 'ancients' and yet stressed newness. The haikai Basho created was marked by its freshness though it was not delinked from the Japanese and Chinese past.

Keywords- *Classical, Cultural, Literariness, World Peace, Environment*

In an article titled, "Make Haibun New through the Chinese Poetic Past: Basho's Transformation of Haikai Prose" Chen ou Liu suggested, "In my view, maybe it is time for anyone who is interested in writing haibun to re-think Basho's poetic ideal of 'the unchanging and the ever-changing' situated in one's own socio-historic-cultural contexts, and to make haibun anew through the poetic past of one's own literary legacy and shared ones from the rest of the world."¹

Here is a point to ponder over. Though short verses were available aplenty in many literary societies the creative genre called haibun was perhaps rare; it was a Japanese speciality, a gift from Matsuo Basho (1644-94). Even haiku is known world over as a Japanese genre of short verse. Poets writing haiku and related poems usually relate to the original creations adapted to their respective tongues adhering to the Japanese style and content, to the extent possible. It may not be based on one's own literary tradition. Regarding the use of past in poems Haruo Shirane wrote,

Basho believed that the poet had to work along both axes. To work only in the present would result in poetry that was fleeting. To work just in the past, on the other hand, would be to fall out of touch with the fundamental nature of haikai, which was rooted in the everyday world. Haikai was, by definition, anti- traditional, anti-classical, anti-establishment, but that did not mean that it

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rejected the past. Rather, it depended upon the past and on earlier texts and associations for its richness.²

So past and present both are to be utilised which includes culture of countries but in such creations the Japanese creative force has to be utilised even in the modern context.

It was after his return from a journey to Oku that Basho became more focused on developing a different style of prose which was infused with a haikai spirit. Around 1690, in a letter to Kyorai, he named this new haikai prose haibun which was characterized by the "prominent inclusion of haikai words (haigon), particularly a combination of vernacular Japanese (zokugo) and Chinese words (kango)." ³

Though Basho re-established and refined a mixed genre of verse and prose called haibun (haikai prose), leaning on the Chinese past, as exemplified in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, it has been opined that haibun had been developed before Basho and written in the form of short essays, such as Kigin's *Mountain Well* (1648). But its prose style resembled that of classical prose. So though akin to it, it was not considered as haibun proper. After the publication of the first anthology of the new haibun, entitled *Prose Collection of Japan*, Basho was recognized as the first creator of such a model.

Basho's haibun are allusive, figurative and are infused with parallel phrases and contrastive words; all of them are used to enhance literary effects and add aesthetic-historical depth to the poems. To have direct experience of his haibun and haiku two quotes are given below from Matsuo Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* in English translation: ⁴

"The months and days are the wayfarers of the centuries and as yet another year comes round, it, too, turns traveler. Sailors whose lives float away as they labor on boats, horsemen who encounter old age as they draw the horse around once more by the bit, they also spend their days in travel and make their home in wayfaring . . . As the sky of the new year filled with the haze of spring, I thought of going beyond the Shirakawa Barrier, and so possessed was I by some peripatetic urge that I thought I had an invitation from the god of travelers himself and so became unable to settle down to anything. I mended my underpants, re-corded my rain hat, and took three bits of moxa cautery. I could not put from my mind how lovely the moon must be at Matsushima. I disposed of my property and moved to Sampu's villa.

My old grasshut
Lived in now by another generation
Is decked out with dolls

(Translated by Earl Miner from "The Narrow Road Through the Provinces", in *Japanese Poetic Diaries*, 1969)

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“The passing days and months are eternal travellers in time. The years that come and go are travellers too. Life itself is a journey; and as for those who spend their days upon the waters in ships and those who grow old leading horses, their very home is the open road. . . .

I sold my home and moved into Sampû’s guest house, but before I left my cottage I composed a verse and inscribed it on a poem strip which I hung upon a pillar:

This rude hermit cell
Will be different now, knowing Dolls’
Festival as well.

(Translated by Dorothy Britton (A Haiku Journey *Bashô’s Narrow Road to a Far Province*, 1980) Example from another travel book by Basho is here:

“In his introduction to *Narrow Road* (18), Hiroaki Sato translates a passage from Basho’s *Knapsack Notebook*, the *Oi no Kobumi*:

Heels torn, I am the same as Saigyo, and I think of him at the Tenryu ferry.
Renting a horse, I conjure up in my mind the sage who became furious. In the beautiful spectacles of the mountains, field, ocean and coast, I see the achievement of the creation. Or I follow the trails left by those who, completely unattached, pursued the Way, or I try to fathom the truth expressed by those with poetic sensibility.⁵

Basho understood his journeys through a genre he developed from old travel genres. He refurbished it through his understanding of haiku. In his study of Basho, Makoto Ueda noted the artistic quality of Basho’s prose and opined that Basho’s haibun could be called haiku prose, written in the spirit of haiku. David L Barnhill called them prose poems. But Jamie Edgecombe aptly thought that the complex structure of haiku should keep the poem from being dissolved in the haiku prose. ⁶ So it may be said that the haikuesque prose remains with the haiku making the whole a comprehensive poetry. Basho says, “Learn about pines from the pine, and about bamboo from the bamboo.”⁷

“The is-ness of a thing is not to be gained through attention to the thing alone. Indeed, is-ness is not the same as the ‘thingness’ of a ‘thing’”, opined Jamie Edgecombe in his “Basho’s Journey: A Ruminantion” as referred above.⁸

“In his essay, *Basho’s Poetic Spaces*, Barnhill quotes from the poet’s *Knapsack Notebook*:

Saigyo’s waka, Sogi’s renga, Sesshu’s painting, Rikyu’s tea ceremony – one thread runs through the artistic Ways. And this artistic spirit is to follow zoka, to be a companion to the turning of the four seasons. Nothing one sees is not a flower, nothing one imagines is not the moon. If what is seen is not a flower, one is like a barbarian; if what is imagined is not a flower, one is like a beast. Depart from the barbarian, break away from the beast, follow zoka, return to zoka.⁹

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Basho journeys or voyages run into the multiple fields of past and present, of persons bygone and existing. He follows their becoming as he exists; he physically journeys across time-space while simultaneously journeying into his existence and the nature of these journey-voyages become a creative process. He follows and returns to *zoka*, the creative heart of the real. He inhabits travel. Travel becomes a symbol of time and space. In the two haibun referred from *Oku no Hosomichi* we find that the selling of his hut and its impact is present in both the haiku referred. The works are repetitive and imaginative to some extent. He is concerned about the poetic sensibility and artistic quality, travel being at the height of things in his life. Basho pays little attention to the present, past occupying a greater portion but the past is not mere memory. It is nostalgic, it is mystic. Past contains the future in it as in “Doll’s Festival” or in the mere mention of the dolls. Learning about the pine and bamboo from pine and bamboo refers to the idea of becoming one with them by concentration. The idea of catching the is-ness, thing-ness and I-ness lie in the spiritual sphere to be found in ancient Chinese and Indian sources, specially in Taoism, Buddhism and Vedic ideas. Here I refer to one of The Mother’s (A spiritual personality; co-founder of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Pondicherry, India) diary entry to know the process of her identification with the plants and flowers; her spiritual journey into the thing-ness of the flowers. Let’s look at her diary entry of 7 April 1917:

A deep concentration seized on me, and I perceived that I was identifying myself with a single cherry-blossom, then through it with all cherry-blossoms, and as I descended deeper in the consciousness, following a stream of bluish force, I became suddenly the cherry tree itself, stretching towards the sky like so many arms its innumerable branches laden with their sacrifice of flowers.¹⁰

Basho the main architect of haiku expanded his poetic self into haibun as he was a real poet-philosopher, an explorer of consciousness; far above writing few lines of light bodied haiku with technical fitness.

In contrast to the above, if we refer to the submission guidelines of modern haiku and some haibun magazines or e-zines we shall have different notions about the poetic genres depending on the ideas of their editors and others governing them. As large numbers of haiku and even haibun have been written, they seem to search for the new and exotic varieties of poems to avoid boredom, to be tuned according to their choices which are often idiosyncratic. Asking for changes in others’ poems is never a norm usual with the mainstream poetry magazines. One may reject poems or take them but demanding changes regularly in poetic creations are beyond expectations, beyond the usual. In spite of all fastidiousness when the issue is published one may easily find similar kinds of works strewn throughout the pages of the magazines which often ends with a touch of personal memory or a piece of story at the end of the haibun. A tiny story linked with memory is the most popular example of such works. Short Stories have their own science. Mini stories following the Short Story pattern could be

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created as a genre but they already exist. Haiku, dangling at the end of the prose in a haibun as the end product, not related to the prose many times, are often noticed. Here I refer to some comments by critics which are very relevant.

We note that the vast majority of Western haibun end with the haiku – the contemporary desire for selflessness, for abandonment of the ego, has been structurally arrived at within a given context. The textual journey is over. But such an act of closure may deny haibun a sense of resonance and layers of depth. The “haiku prose” demanded by haibun is deeply metaxic and the only difference between it and the haiku itself is the architecture of the haiku, which formalizes the tension between the particular and the universal.¹¹

In his “Haibun: Some concerns” in the June 2015 issue of “Haibun Today” Ken Jones has made some in-depth study of the earlier issues of the journal, “It was exasperation on reading the March 2015 issue of Haibun Today that impelled this paper-

I refer to the current haibun norm of a long single paragraph or more, where a solitary haiku dangles insecurely from the end of the prose. And where the reader is required to do some hard thinking as to how it might connect with what has gone before, because of its obscurity or because it’s (sic) meaning is too far removed to jump the gap, or both. Often it feels as if the writer felt the requirement for an end-stop haiku and pulled out something vaguely relevant from her ditty box as an afterthought

A great wasteland of unremarkable prose with only an apology for a haiku dangling from the end makes the heart sink

A reference to the American journal *Modern Haiku* issue at time of writing showed all but one of the eleven haibun were end-stopped only. The comparable figures for the UK journal *Blithe Spirit* were half the twelve haibun end-stopped.¹²

Some examples from the issue referred to are cited below for a better understanding of the subject.¹³

1. “At the Marketplace” begins with a quotation of four lines from a poem by Patric Kavanagh which introduces a melancholic tune of April by a bird. Then it runs like this

“In early April, days before Easter and Passover, the local supermarket sets up displays of pansies for sale outside their doors, close to the parking lot. The flowers are a joy; in shades of lavender, Velvety purple, and soft yellow, they are an emblem of spring’s return, rebirth and the revival of our spirits after the long, harsh winter.

easing the egg
Into the dye . . .
The waxing of the moon

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“Sadly though, the pansies are wilting. On the tiered shelves under the store’s overhang, they are bone dry, dying. Someone forgot to tell someone else to water them. A busy store manager has already declared them a loss, ‘ready for the trash bins,’ not worth keeping and doomed.

Holy Week
another day
closer to Coventry”

Here the story moves round religious ritual and local culture about the Easter festival in April. Return of the spring from harsh winter is a good subject though well known but the whole thing happens at the community market place.

2. “Songbird”, another haibun begins with a haiku: “A wren announcing /the scheme of one small space /with his rollicking song.” And then the prose begins, “I’ve always thought it kind of funny how some unlooked for little thing like that can call up a memory, intact and vivid as the day it happened.”

Calling up memory and telling stories; most of the haibun and tanka prose here make up with stories of writer’s personal life. “The Sutra” is good because of its reminiscent story but it is the same technique. Story is the mainstay in “Kathy’s Mum”; here haiku has link with the very short prose but is not quite related to Nature. Nature is used to tell a small story. I don’t think that stories only make good haibun.

Among these haibun a tanka prose the one titled “Presence” keeps to the promise of a good haibun. The tanka and the prose are so natural with the surroundings, drenched in beautiful Nature, that it seems there could be nothing else. The prose is poetry fitting with the tanka; added with haiku it could be haibun, though there is some subtle difference, as the experts would claim.

Though change with time is always the norm for any type of literary work, such things have to be in tune with the basic ideas behind the creation of a genre. Here Basho and some of his distinguished contemporary poets remain the ideals, still now. High poetic and creative zeal is the requirement for creation of haibun. For both haibun and haiku the ideal background should be pastoral. Beauty of Nature is an additional qualification in them. No quizzical trick or idiosyncratic insistence is the ideal to be imitated. The poetry should be natural expression coming out of the being of the poet; original and evocative, following the traits of the genre.

A comparative study of the latest volume of such journals as mentioned, shows that through the changes incorporated into such poetic works the poets have shifted from the original base of such poems as Basho had initiated, followed by the poets close to his time and thereafter.

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