PENGUIN CLASSICS

BASHO

On Love and Barley – Haiku of Basho

PENGUIN CLASSICS

ON LOVE AND BARLEY

BASHO, the Japanese poet and diarist, was born in Iga-ueno near Kyoto in 1644. He spent his youth as companion to the son of the local lord, and with him he studied the writing of seventeen-syllable verse. In 1667 he moved to Edo (now Tokyo) where he continued to write verse. He eventually became a recluse, living on the outskirts of Edo in a hut. When he travelled he relied entirely on the hospitality of temples and fellow-poets. In his writings he was strongly influenced by the Zen sect of Buddhism.

LUCIEN STRYK's most recent collections of poetry are *Where We Are: Selected Poems and Zen Translations* (1997) and *And Still Birds Sing: New and Collected Poems* (1998). He has brought out two spoken albums of his poems on Folkways Records, a book of essays, *The Awakened Self: Encounters with Zen*, and, among other translations, *The Dumpling Field: Haiku of Issa* and *Cage of Fireflies: Modern Japanese Haiku*. *Zen, Poetry, the Art of Lucien Stryk* (edited by Susan Porterfield) appeared in 1993. He is editor of *World of the Buddha: An Introduction to Buddhist Literature* and the anthologies *Heartland: Poets of the Midwest* (I and II). With the late Takashi Ikemoto he translated *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry*, *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill* and *Triumph of the Sparrow: Zen Poems of Shinkichi Takahashi*. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Translation Center, and the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. He has held a Fulbright travel/research grant and two visiting lectureships in Japan.

Introduction

It is night: imagine, if you will, a path leading to a hut lost in a wildly growing arbour, shaded by the *basho*, a wide-leafed banana tree rare to Japan. A sliding door opens: an eager-eyed man in monk's robe steps out, surveys his shadowy thicket and the purple outline of a distant mountain, bends his head to catch the rush of river just beyond; then, looking up at the sky, pauses a while, and claps his hands. Three hundred years pass – the voice remains fresh and exciting as that moment.

Summer moon –
clapping hands,
I herald dawn.

So it was with Matsuo Kinsaku (1644–94), the first great haiku poet, who would later change his name to Basho in honour of the tree given him by a disciple.

Basho appeared on the scene soon after the so-called Dark Age of Japanese literature (1425–1625), a time of the popularization of purely indigenous verse forms, and the brilliant beginning of the Tokugawa era (1603–1867). The haiku was already well established, with its own distinct rules, but in the hands of rule-smiths (as in the sonnet of Western verse) it was expiring of artificiality. Almost alone, Basho reinvigorated the form. How he did so is, fortunately, well known, for among his many admirers were a few far-seeing enough to record his comments, literally to catch him on the run, for he was always a compulsive traveller, wandering all over Japan in search of new sights and experiences.

He wrote at least one thousand haiku, as well as a number of

travel sketches, which contain some of his finest poems. One of the sketches, *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel*, begins with a most revealing account of what poetry meant to him:

> In this poor body, composed of one hundred bones and nine openings, is something called spirit, a flimsy curtain swept this way and that by the slightest breeze. It is spirit, such as it is, which led me to poetry, at first little more than a pastime, then the full business of my life. There have been times when my spirit, so dejected, almost gave up the quest, other times when it was proud, triumphant. So it has been from the very start, never finding peace with itself, always doubting the worth of what it makes . . . All who achieve greatness in art – Saigyo in traditional poetry, Sogi in linked verse, Sesshu in painting, Rikyu in tea ceremony – possess one thing in common: they are one with nature.

Towards the end of his life Basho cautioned fellow haiku poets to rid their minds of superficiality by means of what he called *karumi* (lightness). This quality, so important to all arts linked to Zen (Basho had become a monk), is the artistic expression of non-attachment, the result of calm realization of profoundly felt truths. Here, from a preface to one of his works, is how the poet pictures *karumi*: 'In my view a good poem is one in which the form of the verse, and the joining of its two parts, seem light as a shallow river flowing over its sandy bed.'

Basho's mature haiku style, *Shofu*, is known not only for *karumi*, but also for two other Zen-inspired aesthetic ideals: *sabi* and *wabi*. *Sabi* implies contented solitariness, and in Zen is associated with early monastic experience, when a high degree of detachment is cultivated. *Wabi* can be described as the spirit of poverty, an appreciation of the commonplace, and is perhaps most fully achieved in the tea ceremony, which, from the simple utensils used in the preparation of the tea to the very structure of the tea hut, honours the humble.

Basho perceived, early in his career, that the first haiku writers, among them Sokan (1458–1546) and Moritake (1472–1549),

while historically of much importance, had little to offer poets of his day. These early writers had created the haiku form by establishing the autonomy of the parts of *haikai renga*, sequences of seventeen-syllable verses composed by poets working together. Though their poems possessed the desired terseness, they did not adequately evoke nature and, for the most part, lacked *karumi*. Basho wove his poems so closely around this feeling of lightness that at times he dared ignore time-honoured elements of the form, including the syllabic limitation. The following piece, among his greatest, consists in the original of eighteen syllables:

Kareeda ni
Karasu no tomarikeri
Aki no kure

On the dead limb
squats a crow –
autumn night.

So rare in the history of haiku was such licence that three hundred years on, a new haiku school, the Soun, or free-verse, school, justified its abandonment of syllabic orthodoxy on the grounds that Japan's greatest poet had not been constrained by such rules. In most respects, however, Basho was a traditionalist, his poems following very closely the expected structural development: two elements divided by a break (*kireji*, or 'cutting word', best rendered in English by emphatic punctuation), the first element being the condition or situation – 'Spring air', in the first of the following examples – the other the sudden perception, preceded by *kireji* (in these pieces a dash).

Spring air –
woven moon
and plum scent.

Early autumn –
rice field, ocean,
one green.

Unknown spring –
plum blossom
behind the mirror.

So the poet presents an observation of a natural, often commonplace event, in plainest diction, without verbal trickery. The effect is one of spareness, yet the reader is aware of a microcosm related to transcendent unity. A moment, crystallized, distilled, snatched from time's flow, and that is enough. All suggestion and implication, the haiku event is held precious because, in part, it demands the reader's participation: without a sensitive audience it would appear unimpressive. Haiku's great popularity is only partly due to its avoidance of the forbidding obscurities found in other kinds of verse: more important, it is likely to give the reader a glimpse of hitherto unrecognized depths in the self.

As we have seen, the sobriquet Basho, amusing even to his fellow countrymen, was taken by the poet from a tree planted by the hut in which he lived and met disciples, perhaps because it suggested the lightness he sought in life and art. He loved the name, making many references to it in writing. In Japan, too cold for the tree to bear fruit, the *basho* was thought exotic, and though its trunk had no practical use its big soft leaves offered fine shade in summer. Each of the three huts the poet was to own throughout his life was called the Basho hut, the tree transplanted wherever he settled. Even on his journeys he seemed never to be away from his hut, as the following poem suggests:

Banana leaves hanging
round my hut –
must be moon-viewing.

Little is known of the poet's early life. It is believed he was born in or near Ueno in Iga Province, around thirty miles south-east of Kyoto. He had an elder brother and four sisters. His father, Matsuo Yozaemon, possibly a low-ranking samurai, farmed in times of peace, making a modest yet respectable living. Of the poet's mother all we know is that it is unlikely that she was a native of Ueno. About the time of his father's death in 1656, Basho entered the service of the samurai Todo Yoshitada, a young relative of the local feudal lord. He was very well treated, and it was in these years that he began writing verse (his earliest known work is dated 1662). When Yoshitada died, prematurely, in 1666, the poet resigned his position and moved, it is thought, to Kyoto. A few of Basho's biographers mention a mistress (who was to become a nun named Jutei), even a child or two – but all concerning that part of his life is sheerest speculation.

It is known for certain that by 1672 Basho was in Edo (modern Tokyo), hoping for a literary career. He wrote, among other things, a pair of hundred-verse *renku* with another poet, critical commentaries for *Haiku Contests in Eighteen Rounds*, produced an anthology of his own and his best pupils' work, *Best Poems of Tosei's Twenty Disciples* (he was then called Tosei), and, like all haiku teachers then and since, judged one contest after another, including 'The Rustic Haiku Contest' and 'The Evergreen Haiku Contest'. Soon he settled in his first Basho hut, built for him in 1680 by an admirer, Sampu, in Fukagawa, in an isolated spot near the Sumida river, and it was here that he began to attract, not pupils, but disciples. From the start of his career as an established master he drew the most promising young Edo haiku poets, who came seeking advice and, on occasion, to engage with him in composition of linked verse. Later, there were periods when he found visitors no longer bearable, so he would keep his gate locked:

Morning-glory trailing –
all day the gate-
bolt's fastened.

Basho loved and needed solitude: 'I am like a sick man weary of society,' he wrote. 'There was a time I wanted an official post, land of my own, another time I would have liked to live in a monastery. Yet I wandered on, a cloud in the wind, wanting only to capture the beauty of flowers and birds.' But from the start of his residence near Edo he engaged with disciples in profound discussion of the art of haiku, and was soon known as the foremost living theorist. Here, one of his disciples, Doho, writes of a conversation with the poet:

> The master said, 'Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo stalk from a bamboo stalk.' What he meant was that the poet should detach his mind from self . . . and enter into the object, sharing its delicate life and its feelings. Whereupon a poem forms itself. Description of the object is not enough: unless a poem contains feelings which have come from the object, the object and the poet's self will be separate things.

To give an indication of the influence of such comments on subsequent practice of the art, a contemporary haiku school, Tenro, possesses a creed, *Shasei* (on-the-spot composition, with the subject 'traced to its origin'), virtually based on the theoretical statements and practice of Basho. Tenro has some two thousand members all over Japan, and it is customary for groups to meet at a designated spot, perhaps a Zen temple in a place famous for its pines or bamboo, and there write as many as one hundred haiku in a day, attempting to enter the object, 'share its delicate life and feelings'. As might be expected, there is much imitation of the master. Yet Basho was severe with disciples who did little more than imitate him:

Rhyming imitators –
musk melons
whacked to halves.

Basho's prose was as distinctive as his poetry, often taking the form of *haibun* (prose followed by haiku), characteristically concrete and imagistic. Writers of *haibun* used many Chinese characters (ideograms), which in contrast to phonetic Japanese have a strong visual effect. Thus the prose was consonant with the verse it accompanied. Perhaps Basho's finest prose, and most impressive haiku, can be found in the remarkable travel sketches he composed throughout his restless life, including *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* (1684–5), *A Visit to Kashima Shrine* (1687), *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel* (1688) and, most ambitious of all, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, begun in 1689. In the best of these sketches, and always in the late ones, prose and verse work organically together, and though, following him, many have produced similar works in various forms and languages, his stand alone for their absolute naturalness.

It is especially in the travel sketches that the poet's profound debt to Zen is apparent. Like other haiku poets of his time Basho considered himself a Zennist, indeed was thought to be a Zen monk. It is known that he practised the discipline under the master Buccho, with whom, according to D. T. Suzuki in *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism* (1963), he had the following exchange:

> Buccho: How are you getting along these days?
> Basho: After a recent rain the moss has grown greener than ever.
> Buccho: What Buddhism is there prior to the greenness of moss?
> Basho: A frog jumps into the water, hear the sound!

It has been claimed that this exchange, inspiration for one of the poet's best-known poems, began an epoch in the history of haiku.

All his life a wanderer, Basho took full advantage of the safe-conduct – important to the traveller of his day – and mobility Zen priesthood offered. He gave up virtually all possessions, his only concern spiritual and artistic discovery.

First winter rain –
I plod on,
Traveller, my name.

Basho's discussion of poetry was always tinged by Zen thought, and what in his maturity he advocated above all was the realization of *muga*, so close an identification with the things one writes of that self is forgotten. As Zen's Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (637–712), put it, one should not look at, but *as*, the object. It is of course one thing to voice ideals, another to attain them. Basho's late poems demonstrate that, in spite of periods of acute self-doubt, he was able to achieve a unity of life and art, the great hope of Zen creators. 'What is important,' he wrote, 'is to keep mind high in the world of true understanding, then, returning to daily experience, seek therein the true and the beautiful. No matter what the activity of the moment, we must never forget it has a bearing on everlasting self, our poetry.' As D. T. Suzuki explains, haiku has always been one with Zen:

> When a feeling reaches its highest pitch, we remain silent, even 17 syllables may be too many. Japanese artists . . . influenced by the way of Zen tend to use the fewest words or strokes of brush to express their feelings. When they are too fully expressed no room for suggestion is possible, and suggestibility is the secret of the Japanese arts.

Though inspired by Zen, Basho's haiku avoided the didactic tone of much classical Zen poetry, even the greatest:

WAKA ON THE DIAMOND SUTRA

Coming, going, the waterfowl
Leaves not a trace,
Nor does it need a guide.

Firm on the seven Buddhas' cushion,
Centre, centre. Here's the arm-rest

My master handed down. Now, to it!
Head up, eyes straight, ears in line with shoulders.

WAKA ON ZEN SITTING

Scarecrow in the hillock
Paddy-field –
How unaware! How useful!

Written by Dogen (1200–1253), who in the Kamakura period introduced Soto Zen to Japan, such poems were meant to encourage disciples. Dogen did not think himself a poet: he was, like all Zen masters, a guide, whose mission was to point minds to enlightenment, and the poems he wrote were meant only to serve that end. Basho, on the other hand, was conscious of being an artist, and saw the conceptual, whatever its application, as the enemy of art.

Basho strove to place his reader within an experience whose unfolding might lead to revelation, the eternal wrested from the phenomenal world. As a mystic, he knew the unconditioned was attainable only within the conditioned, *nirvana* within *samsara* – that the illumination sought was to be found in the here and now of daily life. Throughout Zen's history, wherever practised, Zennists have perceived a process in all such matters, some relating it to doctrines such as the *Avatamsaka*, a Mahayana Buddhist *sutra* of great importance to the formation of Zen. Here, for example, is how the contemporary master Taigan Takayama interprets a poem by Japan's greatest living Zen poet, Shinkichi Takahashi. First, the poem:

THE PEACH

A little girl under a peach tree,
Whose blossoms fall into the entrails
Of the earth.

There you stand, but a mountain may be there
Instead; it is not unlikely that the earth
May be yourself.

You step against a plate of iron and half
Your face is turned to iron. I will smash
Flesh and bone

And suck the cracked peach. She went up the mountain
To hide her breasts in the snowy ravine.
Women's legs

Are more or less alike. The leaves of the peach tree
Stretch across the sea to the end of
The continent.

The sea was at the little girl's beck and call.
I will cross the sea like a hairy
Caterpillar

And catch the odour of your body.

Now, Taigan Takayama's comment:

Most interesting, from both the Zen and literary points of view. Let's begin with the former: an Avatamsaka doctrine holds that the universe can be observed from the four angles of (1) phenomena, (2) noumenon, (3) the identity of noumenon and phenomena, and (4) the mutual identity of phenomena. Now, whether he was aware of it or not, the poet depicted a world in which noumenon and phenomena are identical. Considering the poem with Zen in mind, the lesson to be drawn, I suppose, is that one should not loiter on the way but proceed straight to one's destination – the viewpoint of the mutual identity of phenomena. But from a literary point of view, the significance, and the charm, of the poem lies in its metaphorical presentation of a world in which noumenon and phenomena are identified with each other [*Zen: Poems, Prayers, Sermons, Anecdotes, Interviews*].

It is unlikely that Basho would have disagreed with Taigan

Takayama, yet there is little doubt he would also have claimed that haiku, at its best, depicts a world in which 'noumenon and phenomena are identical'. Indeed he might have insisted, with justice, that it exists to demonstrate such identity. Occasionally, to be sure, Basho wrote poems as explicit in their Zen intention as any master's:

Skylark on moor –
sweet song
of non-attachment.

Monks, morning-glories –
how many under
the pine-tree Law?

Four temple gates –
under one moon,
four sects.

Yet surely the chief reason for the poet's universal appeal is that he never leaves nature, which – East, West – is one, through all processes and manifestations the sole unchanging thing we know. Throughout his life as a wanderer Basho sought to celebrate: whether his eyes turned to mountain or gorge, whether his ears heard thunder or bird-song, whether his foot brushed flower or mud, he was intensely alive to the preciousness of all that shared the world with him. Even his final poem, written for disciples shortly before his death, reaches for the unknown:

Sick on a journey –
over parched fields
dreams wander on.

163

May rain – the thing
revealed, bridge
over Seta Bay.

164

Moor: point
my horse
where birds sing.

165

Autumn wind,
blasting the stones
of Mount Asama.

166

Orchid – breathing
incense into
butterfly's wings.

167

Dusk – though last
bell's faded,
air's cherry-rich.

168

Loneliness –
caged cricket dangling
from the wall.

169

High wind – tea
leaves whip against
the brushwood gate.

170

Rhyming imitators –
musk melons
whacked to halves.

171

By the azalea
crock, she strips
dried codfish.

172

Dawn-scaling –
a whitefish, with an
inch of whiteness.

173

Perfect moon –
this bole of tree
I've axed.

174

Month's end – no
moon, storm stripping
thousand-year cedars.

199

How I long to see
among dawn flowers,
the face of God.

200

Squid-seller,
harping cuckoo –
one voice.

201

Summer grove –
pasania tree and I
find shelter.

202

A weathered
skeleton –
how cold the wind.

203

Winter retreat –
how old the pine traced
on the golden screen.

204

While moon sets
atop the trees,
leaves cling to rain.

205

Sixteen-foot Buddha –
from your stone base,
rising heat-waves.

206

Travelling Kiso road,
through the heart
of pasania blooms.

207

Banana leaves hanging
round my hut –
must be moon-viewing.

208

Chestnuts of Kiso –
mementoes for
the floating world.

209

Coldest days –
dried salmon,
gaunt pilgrim.

210

Summer rain –
on the hut-wall traces
of poem-cards.

'Orchid — breathing
incense into
butterfly's wings'

Basho, one of the greatest of Japanese poets and the master of haiku, was also a Buddhist monk and a lifelong traveller. His poems combine 'karumi', or lightness of touch, with the Zen ideal of oneness with creation. Each poem evokes the natural world – the cherry blossom, the leaping frog, the summer moon or the winter snow – suggesting the smallness of human life in comparison to the vastness and drama of nature. Basho himself enjoyed solitude and a life free from possessions, and his haiku are the work of an observant eye and a meditative mind, uncluttered by materialism and alive to the beauty of the world around him.

These translations by Lucien Stryk capture the refined artistry of the originals. This edition contains notes and an introduction that discusses how the life and beliefs of Basho influenced his work.

Translated by LUCIEN STRYK

PENGUIN CLASSICS

www.penguinclassics.com

Cover: Detail of poppies from an Edo period screen (c 1643) in the Burstein Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (photo: © Burstein Collection/Corbis)

9 780140 444599 51200 **
ISBN: 9780140444599
US $12.00 / CAN $14.00