

## The poet vanishes: haiku by Chiyo, Bashō, and Buson

One of the difficulties of translating Japanese poetry is that personal pronouns are few and far between, and often completely absent, in the original language. On one level, it is a matter of the translator's discretion, or taste: adding pronouns or determiners may make the meaning clearer in English but, conversely, do we *lose* something by eliminating the imprecisions and ambiguities of the Japanese? On another level, we might see the lack of first-person pronouns, in particular, as a sort of metaphor for a larger ambiguity: where is the poet in relation to the poem — present, absent, or somehow both present and absent at the same time? The modest ambition of this essay is to offer a few observations on such questions. Needless to say, they are my personal opinions and you are welcome to disagree. Except where otherwise noted, the translations are my own.

Kaga no Chiyo, who died in 1775, is believed to have studied with Shikō, one of Bashō's most important disciples. She is probably best known for the following haiku:

朝顔に釣瓶とられてもらひ水

*asagao ni*  
*tsurube torarete*  
*morai-mizu*

the well bucket  
taken by morning glories,  
I go to my neighbour for water

Or if you prefer a more elliptical ending:

the well bucket  
taken by morning glories,  
to my neighbour for water

Translated literally, *morai-mizu* would be 'water received as a gift or favour', not the most poetic of phrases and obscure without further elaboration. The obvious and uncontroversial remedy here is to spell out that it is Chiyo herself (or another self she has imagined) who asks her neighbour for water because overnight her own well has been entwined in curling tendrils and trumpet-like flowers. The haiku is contrived, yes, and implausible (do we believe that even such a fast-growing vine

would be capable of doing what Chiyo suggests?). Suspend our disbelief, however, and we are rewarded with the image of a gentle-hearted poet who declines to impose her will on nature by reclaiming the bucket, and instead quietly defers to the morning glories. So much, I say, for Blyth's jaw-droppingly patronising assertion (*A History of Haiku*, Vol. I, p. 219) that 'women poets have a tendency to be moralistic and even philosophical'.

The next haiku, which appears in Bashō's *Oi no kobumi* ('Travel-pannier notebook', the record of his journey to western Japan in 1687-88), presents the translator with more — and subtly differing — choices. In Makoto Ueda's version (*Bashō and His Interpreters*, p. 170) it goes like this:

冬の日や馬上に氷る影法師

*fuyu no hi ya*  
*bajō ni kōru*  
*kagebōshi*

the winter sun —  
on the horse's back  
my frozen shadow

Read in the context of *Oi no kobumi*, it is natural to take the frozen shadow to be that of the poet himself: after all, the prose narrative has just explained that Bashō, en route to Cape Irago, is riding along a narrow path between paddy fields exposed to a bitterly cold wind off the sea. My only quibble with the Ueda translation is that I think the determiner 'my' works better with the horse than with the shadow, partly because it avoids the displeasing repetition of 'the ... the', mostly because it heightens the sense that Bashō is perceiving himself *from the outside*. See what you think:

the winter sun —  
on my horse's back  
a frozen shadow

But what if we free the haiku from its original context and treat it as a stand-alone poem. Not only that, what if we omit 'my' altogether and leave the identity of the rider to the reader's imagination. Mysteriously, doesn't it make the scene before us even *colder*? So cold, in fact, that the rider may no longer be

Bashō — just the shadow of someone numbed out of their body,  
and perhaps numbed out of existence:

winter sun —  
on the horse's back  
a frozen shadow

And so to the first of two haiku by Buson. It was among the poems collected, as we now know, by Buson himself and published in 1784, the year after his death:

水深く利鎌鳴らす真菰刈

*mizu fukaku*  
*tokikama narasu*  
*makomo-kari*

deep water —  
the swish of a sharp sickle  
slicing through reeds

Does the alliteration of *fukaku tokikama ... makomo-kari* suggest cutting sounds? If so, how to replicate the effect in translation? Well, I think one way is to focus on the *su* of *narasu*, which cries out for lots of sibilants in English: hence my 'swish ... sharp sickle ... slicing ... reeds'. As I read the haiku, its subject (protagonist, almost) is not, as we might expect, the reed-cutter wielding the sickle but *the sickle itself*. The man is there somewhere, yet what we are immediately aware of is the sound of the blade as it slices the reeds. And just as the reed-cutter is missing from the scene, so too is the poet who is supposedly observing or imagining the scene. While we infer the presence of reed-cutter and poet, can we really say that either is 'in' the poem?

The second of Buson's haiku, composed in the 1760s, again comes from the collection he made himself. Of all the examples I have chosen, maybe it is closest to what Bashō meant by 'object and self as one' (*butsuga ichinyo*): a state, and a poetic ideal, in which there is no distinction between seer and seen, here and there, 'I', 'it' or any other pronoun. I am surprised — though of course I shouldn't be — to discover that the more successfully a haiku like this achieves 'object and self as one', the less there is

to say about it. I end, then, with Buson in his own words,  
followed by my attempt to do justice to them in English:

白露や茨の刺にひとつづゝ

*shira-tsuyu ya  
ibara no hari ni  
hitotsu zutsu*

glistening dew —  
on the briar's thorns  
each a single drop

*Geoffrey Wilkinson*