The painter-poet's eye, and ear: nine haiku by Buson

Yosa Buson (1716-83) is now acknowledged as one of Japan's great haiku poets. Yet for a long time he was celebrated more as a painter, known particularly for the delightful illustrations he added to the text of Bashō's travel sketch *Oku no hosomichi.*[1] Buson's reputation as a painter has a great deal to do with how he and his poetry have been, and still are, perceived — Buson the exponent of *shasei* ('sketching from life'), as the nineteenth-century poet and critic Masaoka Shiki would say, or Buson the 'objective' poet as opposed to the supposedly 'subjective' Bashō. It is true that many of Buson's haiku are intensely visual, almost photographic in their precise detail. But I would like to caution that if we always focus on Buson's visual qualities, we risk overlooking some of his other qualities — especially, as I hope to demonstrate, his sensitivity to sound.

The translations that follow are all my own. Where I think there is a meaningful comparison or contrast to be made, I refer to the translations by R.H. Blyth in *A History of Haiku* (Volume I) and Robert Hass in *The Essential Haiku.*[2] While most of my commentary is concise, in two places it is more discursive and explores links or parallels with works from earlier Japanese literature. My observation that one of Buson's autumn haiku echoes Saigyō's 'rising snipe' waka is uncontroversial, probably commonplace. I begin, however, with spring and a haiku of Buson's that may (very speculative, this) benefit from being read alongside a seemingly unrelated passage of prose from *Oku no hosomichi.*

Spring

大門のおもき扉や春のくれ
ōmon no
omoki tobira ya
haru no kure

The great gate's
heavy doors —
dusk in spring

[1] The illustrations are reproduced in the Penguin Classics translation by Nobuyuki Yuasa, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*.

[2] Blyth in the Hokuseidō edition published in Tokyo in 1969; Hass in the UK edition published by Bloodaxe Books in 2013 (page numbering may differ in other editions).

A rare instance of a haiku that can be translated word for word, and even in the same order as the Japanese, its very spareness allows multiple interpretations. One is that the 'great gate' is the entrance to the Shimabara red-light district in Kyoto, which would explain the connection with spring (spring, *haru*, being a conventional euphemism for sex).[3] Another interpretation is that it is the gate to a temple. Blyth suggests the unseen presence of the gatekeeper who has just heaved the doors shut, and also a contrast between the loud groaning of the hinges as he did so and the silence that now prevails (*History of Haiku* p. 268). Gatekeeper or no, Blyth is surely right about the silence, and I wonder whether there might be a parallel here with Bashō's description, in the 'Ryūshakuji' episode in *Oku no hosomichi*, of the mountain temple in Yamagata. After arranging lodgings for the night, and in the fading light, Bashō and Sora climb to the shrines near the summit:

> 岩に巌を重て山とし、松柏年旧、土石老て苔滑に、岩上の院々扉を閉て、物の音きこえず。
> *iwa ni iwao wo kasanete yama to shi, shōhaku toshifuri, doseki oite koke nameraka ni, ganshō no in'in tobira wo tojite, mono no oto kikoezu.*
>
> The mountain is made of massive rocks piled one on top of another, covered with ancient pines and oaks. Earth and stone are time-worn and smooth with moss. The shrines perched on the rocks all have their doors shut. Not a sound.

Is it my imagination, or is there some significance in the detail that the doors to the shrines are all closed? You may object that Bashō is describing a summer scene (true: this passage leads into his 'cicada' haiku, and the cicada is a season word for summer). Whatever the season, though, isn't there something very atmospheric — and slightly melancholy — in the image of old wooden doors, solid, weathered, and barred shut?[4] I feel it enhances, rather than detracts from, the appeal of Buson's haiku that we do not really know why he associates the image with spring.

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[3] In the selection of Buson's haiku, *Buson kushū*, edited by Tsukasa Tamaki (Tokyo: Kadokawa Bunko, 2019), pp. 430-31.

[4] I have a theory that unconsciously the image also evokes the aromatic smell of timber structures in Japan (not quite the same, but think of the resinous smell of a conifer forest).

山もとに米踏ム音や藤のはな
yama-moto ni
kome fumu oto ya
fuji no hana

Gentle thud of a mallet
at the foot of the mountain —
sprays of purple wisteria

In pre-industrial Japan, rice was polished using a heavy mallet attached to a seesaw-like rocking beam, which was operated by foot or by water. In some regions the device was given the name *Sakontarō* ('Trusty Sakon', 'Good Old Sakon'). To a non-Japanese reader, and perhaps to some modern Japanese readers, it takes an intuitive leap to sense any link between wisteria flowers and the rhythmic pounding of a *Sakontarō*. Blyth suggests a 'secret connection' between them: 'Both belong to the sleepiness of spring.' (p. 245). However we characterize the connection, the auditory element here is plainly just as important as the visual: the interplay of the two makes for a form of synaesthesia, sound and sight merging into a single sensory impression.

Summer

牡丹散て打かさなりぬ二三片
botan chirite
uchi-kasanarinu
nisanpen

A peony sheds its petals,
two, three
settling on each other

Buson's attention to detail captures the just-as-it-isness of the scene, both its sharpness — the falling petals crimson in colour, say, or magenta, or moon-white — and its poignancy, for the peony has finished blooming and, conventionally speaking, is past its best.

涼しさや鐘をはなるゝかねの声
suzushisa ya
kane wo hanaruru
kane no koe

Coolness —
the bong-ng-ng of a bell

leaving the bell

Hass's rendering, 'Coolness — / the sound of the bell / as it leaves the bell.', can't be faulted for its simplicity and faithfulness to the Japanese (*Essential Haiku* p. 93). You may say, then, that I have just wrecked it with an unwarranted exercise of translator's licence. What I am trying to bring out is akin to another synaesthetic effect: the complex reverberations — the overtones — of a temple bell that ring in the ears, ring through the whole body, suspend time and, yes, as it seems, suspend the fierce heat of a Japanese summer. By all means restore the literal translation of '*kane no koe*', 'the sound of a bell', but feel it as well as hear it.

Autumn

あちらむきに鴫も立たり秋のくれ

achira-muki ni
shigi mo tachitari
aki no kure

The snipe just stands there,
facing the other way —
autumn dusk

In spirit this haiku immediately recalls one of the most exquisite waka (or, less correctly, tanka) by the twelfth-century priest-poet Saigyō:

心なき身にもあはれは知られけり鴫立つ沢の秋の夕暮

kokoro naki
mi ni mo aware wa
shirarekeri
shigi tatsu sawa no
aki no yūgure

Even one who renounces this world
cannot but know
the pity of things:
a snipe rises from the marsh
in the autumn dusk[5]

Although the two poems are very similar in tone, look what Buson does through a sort of play on words: his '*tachitari*' means

[5] Poem 362 in Book 4 of the *Shinkokinshū*. The phrase '*kokoro naki mi ni mo*' translates literally as 'Even one who has no heart', but it is clear that what Saigyō means is one who has renounced the world, that is, a priest. My translation of Saigyō's poem originally appeared in 'Dream-bridges: three tanka from classical Japanese' in *Ribbons* Vol. 14:2 (Spring/Summer 2018).

‘stood still’ (*tatte iru* in modern Japanese), but *tachi-* comes from the verb *tatsu*, which on its own, as in Saigyō’s poem, means ‘to stand (or rise) up’. And not only is Buson’s snipe standing still rather than flying up, it has its head turned away from the poet, a brilliant metaphor for the indifference of the bird — and of nature itself — to any human presence or, indeed, human existence. Within the even smaller compass of a haiku, Buson has conjured up a landscape as lonely as that of Saigyō’s waka.

三度啼て聞えずなりぬ鹿の声
mitabi nakite
kikoezu narinu
shika no koe

Three times breaks the silence,
then no sound at all —
the cry of a stag

Buson here describes or imagines the harsh braying-bellowing call of a stag in the rutting season. Blyth has worked from an earlier version of the haiku, almost identical except that it ends ‘*ame no shika*’ (literally, ‘rain-deer’) instead of ‘*shika no koe*’ (‘deer-cry’), (pp. 269-70). This variant does not appear in most collections of Buson, which is a pity because, as captured in Blyth’s translation, it is all the more atmospheric: ‘Three times it cried, / And then was heard no more, / The deer in the rain.’

Winter

繋ぎ馬雪一双の鐙かな
tsunagi-uma
yuki issō no [6]
abumi kana

A tethered horse —
snow
in both the stirrups

Once again it is hard to better the Hass translation, ‘A tethered horse, / snow / in both stirrups.’, although I think adding ‘the’ before ‘stirrups’ somehow has the effect of reinforcing ‘both’ (p. 126). The fact that both stirrups are full of snow suggests that a considerable period of time has elapsed. But who and where is

[6] If you are puzzled by the syllable count, it helps to know that in Japanese *issō* counts as four syllables (*i-tsu-so-u*), making seven in all when combined with *yuki* and *no* (*yu-ki-i-tsu-so-u-no*). Three of the haiku above, ‘*botan chirite*’, ‘*achira-muki ni*’, and ‘*mitabi nakite*’, do have an irregular (6-7-5) syllable count.

the rider? It is a visually striking and mysterious image, and a striking and mysterious haiku altogether.

雪折れも聞えて暗き夜なる哉
yukiore mo
kikoete kuraki
yo naru kana

Sharp crack
of a snow-broken branch —
black night

While 'snow-broken' (or 'snow-split'?) is an improvement on Blyth's 'Snow-break' (p. 249), it still fails to do full justice to the word *yukiore*, which conveys more precisely that it is not the snow itself but the weight of the snow that has caused the branch to break. In other words, the translation lacks the complementary visual image — snow piled up on the branch before it gives way — that *yukiore* summons for a Japanese reader. Buson composed at least four other haiku on the theme of *yukiore*, including the following:

雪折れも遠く聞えて夜ぞふけぬ
yukiore mo
tōku kikoete
yo zo fukenu

Distant thump
of snow-felled branches —
the night far gone

I have assumed that the *yukiore* Buson now describes has brought down something more substantial, perhaps several large branches all at once. In any case, he makes it a sound that is far-off, muffled, impinging more subtly on the consciousness of poet and reader alike. This version is yet more evidence, if more were needed, that Buson's perceptions of the heard are every bit as acute as his perceptions of the seen.

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