

Introduction

Bashō is the single greatest figure in the history of Japanese literature, and one of the major figures of world literature. In the selections and versions of his work so far available in English, Bashō has appeared mainly as a philosopher of nature, as a Zen mystic in search of Buddhist enlightenment, and as the refiner and definer of Japanese sensibility, articulated through the brevity of haiku. When we read his haiku in their entirety, however, Bashō emerges as what he most truly was, a poet: the great poet of weather, of the withering and the cooling wind, of the freshening and the lashing rain, of drizzle and hail and sleet, of snow that transforms but can also blind, of the heat-heavy day, of ice cracking water jars in the night. He emerges as the poet of fauna as well as flora, of sex and the erotic, of male love, of friendship and grief, of tetchiness as well as tenderness, of city scenes as well as country, of the indoors and the outdoors, of travel but also of staying put, of lonesomeness as well as the desire to be alone. The dynamic interiority out of which many of these poems emerged has much to say to us in the time of coronavirus; Bashō may, indeed, be *the* poet of a world in lockdown.

Bashō is associated with brevity, restraint, Zen austerity, not with linguistic brio or even fine excess. Yet the range and subtlety of Bashō's language is extraordinary: coming out of the world of *haikai* poetry and its conventions, he mingles high and low diction, elevated literary idioms with a keen ear for the demotic, but he is unique within the *haikai* tradition in the way his work develops in service to a goal of invigorated attention to the extraordinary ordinary of the everyday

world. Bashō is not so much a seer as a *see-er*, one of the great lookers and noticers of poetry. There is also Bashō the sociable, involved in the serious fun of the *haikai no renga* social world, at gatherings with friends and followers, with the elite, but also with the rising mercantile class of Edo-period Japan, with doctors, with priests; and through his poems we also catch a glimpse of the Edo demimonde, and the less fortunate: poor farmers, abandoned children, the disregarded and discarded old. Bashō, from the margins of Japanese society himself, a countryman in the city, looks intently, compassionately, at times humorously at the range of Japanese social experience. And in these poems, we see also the famed Bashō of the road, of long journeys into deep country, into nature and the high lonesomeness of the self.

Bashō was born Matsuo Kinsaku in 1644, at or near Ueno, in the province of Iga. Apart from its most famous son, the town, in the west of modern Mie Prefecture, is known chiefly for its connections to the ninja. Visitors to Iga City, as it is now officially called, can see ninja figures, in different shades of their distinctive fighting costume, hanging off lampposts, perched on rooftops, and at various “strategic” commercial points throughout the town. The poet is celebrated by a statue at the bus station plaza in the center of town, and by a memorial hall, built to celebrate his three hundredth anniversary. The Bashō Memorial Museum contains reproductions of objects he may have used and clothes he may have worn on his travels, as well as a modest collection of books, letters, writing materials, drawings, portraits, and scrolls. On an undistinguished street in the town center, you can see a reconstructed version of the small house where he is reputed to have been born. The house is not open to the public, but in another part of town visitors can enter the *Minomushi-an* (“Bagworm Retreat”), the cottage of his disciple Dohō, the only “hermitage” connected to the poet still in existence (see 317). The town’s imposing castle, Iga Ueno Castle, with the highest *honmaru* (inner citadel) walls of any castle in Japan, testifies to the turbulence of the province’s history.

Though only thirty miles southeast of Kyoto, and even closer to Nara and Ise, the cultural, political, and spiritual centers of the Japanese world, the Province of Iga, surrounded by mountains, was isolated and inaccessible for much of its past. Isolation led to the development of a distinct Iga identity, and eventually a political formation,

independent of feudal overlords, known as the *Iga Sōkoku koku Ikki*. During the Sengoku (“Warring States”) period, the province was invaded twice, in the Tenshō Iga War: first, unsuccessfully, by Oda Nobukatsu in 1579, and then, devastatingly, by his father Oda Nobunaga in 1581, an event known as *Iga Heitei* (“The Pacification of Iga”). During the early years of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), Iga became part of the Tsu Domain under the control of the Tōdō clan, members of which were to play a great role in the early life of the poet.

Bashō’s father, Matsuo Yozaemon, seems to have been a *musokunin*, a class of landed farmer with some samurai privileges, such as having a family name (Matsuo) and a sword. The family’s tenuous samurai status may have been a result of the depredations of the wars of Bashō’s great-grandfather’s generation. Little is known of Bashō’s mother, apart from her parents’ having migrated to Iga from Iyo Province (in present-day Ehime, on the island of Shikoku). When Bashō was born, there was already a son and daughter, and there would be three more daughters after him. As the second son, Bashō would not have been in line to inherit his father’s property, and his humble origins portended a precarious future, a situation made even more so by the death of his father in 1656, when Bashō was in his thirteenth year.

We have scant information about his childhood and education, but at some point in his late teens, he appears to have entered the service of Tōdō Yoshiakiyo, a relative of the *daimyō* (feudal lord), eventually as attendant to his son, Yoshitada, who was two years older than Bashō. By this time, Bashō had assumed the name Munefusa, the custom being to change names at certain stages of life (other names of his childhood and youth include Hanshichi, Tōshichirō, Tadaemon, and Jinshichirō). Like many another socially marginal figure, talent, personal skills, ambition, and the grace and favor of those with influence were necessary for Bashō to get on. He may have come to the attention of Yoshitada, a keen poet known by the *haigō* (poetic pen name) Sengen, because of precocious verbal talent and skill in *haikai no renga*, the composing of “playful” linked verse in groups, a pastime popular among the literate and the socially and culturally ambitious.

During this period Bashō assumed the pen name Sōbō, an alternative reading of the two kanji characters in the name Munefusa. His earliest extant poem, composed when he was nineteen, comes from his time in service to Sengen (see 1). His duties may have included

traveling to Kyoto to carry messages to Sengin's mentor, the scholar-poet Kitamura Kigin (see 121), a poet of the Teimon school of haikai, the most influential of the time. Bashō's earliest poems adhere to the Teimon style, with its emphasis on wit, lexical play, and classical parody through the use of vernacular words, and one of the first documented references to him occurs at a renga gathering in late 1665 to mark the death date of Matsunaga Teitoku (1571–1653; see 970), the founder of the Teimon school, presided over by Sengin and to which Kitamura Kigin sent a verse. The following year, the course of Bashō's life changed dramatically. Sengin, barely twenty-five, suddenly and unexpectedly died.

Accounts differ as to what happened next. Some believe that Bashō, heartbroken, resigned and went to Kyoto, then the capital, to study Zen, or to be closer to Kitamura Kigin and the center of Teimon haikai. That he left Iga, at least for a time, is clear: poems surviving from this period identify him as "Sōbō of Ueno in Iga Province." There are rumors of an affair with a woman who later became a nun called Jutei (see 893) and who many years later showed up at his residence in Edo, with children. Yet Bashō's own words (recalling his youth he once wrote: "There was a time when I was fascinated with the ways of *nanshoku* [male love]"), and poems written throughout his life (see 40, 920) indicate more sexual interest in men than in women. The world within which Bashō moved was predominately male. Arashiyama Kōzaburō in *Akutō Bashō* ("Bashō the Rogue," 2006) suggests that Bashō's relationships with some of his disciples included a sexual element. As Paul Gordon Schalow reminds us, this was not unusual, though *nanshoku*, also known as *wakashudō* ("the way of youth"), "was always supposed to involve an age-based hierarchy between an adult man and an adolescent youth" (p. 3). Neither did it entail social censure: "In seventeenth-century Japan male love was not stigmatized and had been integrated into the literary canon" (p. 2). Indeed in 1676, Kigin himself edited an anthology of male homoerotic poetry and prose titled *Iwatsutsuji* (published in 1713).

Though little is known about the details of this period in Bashō's life, what is certain is that, with the death of his master and the succession of Yoshitada's younger brother as head of the family, Bashō's future had once again become precarious. What is also certain is that he turned aside from a settled life of service, and poetry and the mak-

ing of poems became the central fact of his existence. Between 1667 and 1671, publication in various haikai anthologies marked Bashō's passage from poetry as avocation to vocation, and then, in 1672, he published his first book under his own name, *Kai Ōi* ("The Seashell Game"), so called after a children's game of comparing seashells. Though only two of his own poems appear in that book (see 39, 40), it contains his comments on the verses of thirty-six poets, participants in a hokku contest of thirty rounds, the matches adjudicated by Bashō. His remarks reveal his wit and imaginative flair, and growing authority within local haikai circles. The book, dedicated to the Tenman-gū shrine in Iga, also marked a kind of farewell to his home province, and worked perhaps as a calling card for the next stage of his life: in the spring of 1672, going on twenty-eight years old, he moved two hundred miles east, to Edo, as Tokyo was then known, not yet the capital of the country, but as the seat of the Tokugawa government, a rapidly expanding commercial and mercantile center.

Why Edo rather than Kyoto or Osaka? The move to Edo indicates not only Bashō's desire to further himself within the haikai world and become a *sōshō*, a haikai master, but also a certain shrewdness. Kyoto and Osaka represented a crowded and well-furrowed field; fast-growing Edo offered a wider range of opportunity. The Tokugawa government's *sankin-kōtai* ("alternate residence") policy stipulated that all daimyō keep a residential estate (*yashiki*) in Edo and spend every other year there, his wife and his heir remaining hostage in Edo when the lord returned to his *han* (domain). The Tōdō clan, therefore, had retainers in Edo, and almost certainly Bashō had acquaintances and contacts in the city before leaving Iga. In his early years in Edo, Bashō relied on Iga connections and on disciples of Kigin who had also moved there. Indeed, throughout his life he maintained connections with the clan, and with Iga friends and acquaintances who had moved to Edo, or made efforts to meet them when they made visits to the city or when on his own travels. The names of Iga connections, whether in Edo or in Osaka and elsewhere, recur throughout his life: as sponsors, as hosts or participants in renga gatherings, and as a support network for Bashō and, most likely, for each other.

Once the preserve of the aristocratic elite, in the sixteenth century haikai no renga had become so popular that *haikaishi*, a class of haikai specialists and teachers, had arisen, one of the many forms of *machi*

shishō (town teacher) responding to the demand for instruction in the arts by a monied class of urban commoners (*chōnin*). A haikaishi could earn a living from fees as a *tenja* (marker) of poems, from refereeing at poetry contests, and as master at renga gatherings, and at the level of *sōshō* could gain students and patrons, and eventually *deshi* (disciples), attracted by professional reputation. These students and patrons came mostly from sections of society which had gained increased access to education as a result of Tokugawa reforms. The han school system, established originally for the education of the children and retainers of the daimyō, and the *terakoya* (temple schools) for commoners, meant that by Bashō's time most samurai, and the better-off among the artisan, farmer, and merchant classes, were able to read, a social change that, along with advances in the printing and availability of books, "transformed haikai, which had been practiced in the medieval period among a limited range of social groups, into a vastly popular form" (Shirane, *Traces*, p. 3).

Bashō's first years in Edo, however, are obscure. He seems to have found work as a scribe and eventually, in 1677, a clerical position in the Edo waterworks department. Despite the necessity for such salaried employment, his first fidelity was to poetry, and by the mid-1670s, having assumed a new pen name, Tōsei ("green peach"), and with his reputation growing, his work began appearing in notable haikai anthologies. Bashō's poems had moved toward the Danrin school, a style of haikai poetry popular in the 1670s and 1680s. Originally founded in Osaka by Nishiyama Sōin (1605–82), with whom, in 1675, Bashō participated in a renga gathering to celebrate his visit to Edo, Danrin differed from the Teimon style in its bolder playfulness with a more limited range of classical antecedents (see Shirane, *Traces*, pp. 59–60). In 1676, Bashō took part in two Danrin-style *hyakuin* (hundred-verse) sequences with Yamaguchi Sōdō, later published as *Edo Ryōgin Shū* ("Collection of Two Edo Poets"). Danrin's conventionalized techniques also fostered competitions called *yakazu haikai* ("counting arrows haikai"), in which contestants composed as many solo sequences as possible within a fixed amount of time. Bashō felt little affinity for this aspect of the life of the professional poet, the master of which was his exact contemporary, Ihara Saikaku (1642–93), like Sōin from Osaka, and in later years better-known as a novelist, who in 1677 composed sixteen hundred sequences in twenty-four hours. In 1680, he beat this

by composing four thousand, published the following year as *Saikaku Ōyakazu* (“A Great Number of Arrows by Saikaku”).

In the summer and autumn of 1676, Bashō made his first return visit to Iga. Something of his feeling for both Iga and Edo can be seen in the poems of this trip:

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Gazing on something
so seldom seen from Edo
The moon-topped mountains

nagamuru ya / Edo ni wa marena / yama no tsuki

By 1676, Edo was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population rapidly approaching one million. The pun on the word Edo (*e-do* can also mean “unclean earth,” in the Buddhist sense of a place filled with suffering derived from worldly desires) brings out the contrast with his hometown. This, of course, was early on in his time in Edo, but eventually he would settle into the life of the city, so much so that setting out on a visit to Iga in the autumn of 1684, he could write of it as “home” (see 191). He returned to Edo with his sixteen-year-old nephew, Tōin, in his care, an act and a relationship that reveal much about Bashō’s human qualities. Tōin, as well as the family he would go on to raise, would play a large role in Bashō’s later life.

Bashō’s poems in the mid-1670s typify aspects of the Danrin style (see 71) and yet, as with his earlier Teimon-influenced poems, his work is distinctive even within conventional haikai modes. Steven D. Carter reads Bashō’s Danrin period as deriving not from artistic motivations but as “a necessary move for a young poet to achieve professional recognition” (Carter, “On a Bare Branch,” p. 62). Professional recognition was forthcoming, and around New Year 1679 Bashō could finally hang out his shingle as a *sōshō* (see 103). He had also by now gathered around him some of the most significant figures in the group of disciples and supporters known later as the *Shōmon*, the Bashō school: Kikaku (1661–1707), Ransetsu (1654–1707), Sanpū (1647–1732), and Ranran (1647–93).

It then seems odd that, having established his professional credentials, Bashō should, in the winter of 1680, choose to turn aside from the

main drag of the city's literary life. But this is what he did, and in two major ways. First, and most visibly, he moved from the Nihonbashi area, at the heart of things in Edo, out to the eastern edge of the city, to unfashionable Fukagawa, on the far side of the Sumida River. Second, his poems turned aside from the commercially popular Danrin mode, finding new sources of inspiration in Chinese poetry, in particular in Li Bai and Du Fu, and in poets of the Japanese past, Saigyō and Sōgi. In the headnote to poem 123, written shortly after his move, he makes explicit the connection with a tradition of internal, artistic exile:

After nine springs and autumns living a lonely, austere life in the city, I have come to the banks of the Fukagawa. "From olden times, Chang-an has been a place of fame and fortune and hard for a wayfarer poor and empty-handed," so someone once said. I am impoverished, probably why I know something of how he felt

He also appears around this time to have taken up the study of Zen with the priest Butchō (see 314, 495), shaved his head, and adopted the attire of a lay monk; he also studied Daoism, and at times called himself Kkusai, from a word found in Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu). It would not be entirely accurate, however, to read Bashō's turning aside from such worldly concerns as earning a living and making a name for himself as a rejection of his previous life derived from a sense of spiritual deficit religious in origin or remediable within a religious framework. It is true he was now thirty-seven, no longer a young man, and with fifty years the life expectancy in Edo-period Japan, conscious of entering the definitive period of his life. The stakes involved in Bashō's turning aside, however, were poetic as much as spiritual, spiritual as much as poetic, or perhaps it is better to say that Bashō's devotion to poetry as a mode of the spirit had become such that the distinction is meaningless. When Bashō later alluded to this decision, in *Genjū-an no Ki* ("An Account of the Hut of Illusory Dwelling"), it is not correct to say that he made, as Katō Shūichi writes, "no mention of Buddhism, only of retreat from the world" (p. 96). Bashō, in fact, places the decision, just as he places his ideal of a life devoted to poetry, within the larger framework of the "true Buddhist path" (see Shirane, *Traces*, p. 158). Yet there is some truth in what Katō says when he continues: "Indeed it is difficult to find any strong Buddhist influence in his writing. His attitude is rather one that advocated literature as a means of escaping

from the turmoil and coarseness of daily life; it was, in a sense, art for art's sake" (p. 96). How central Buddhism was to Bashō's poetic practice is a matter of some debate. Writers such as Katō and Satō Hiroaki (who writes in English as Hiroaki Sato) see little if any influence, while others argue that Bashō's work was entirely informed by Buddhist tenets. Steven D. Carter offers a judicious view: "It can be fairly claimed that Bashō's worldview was Buddhist in its fundamental assumptions about life, death and everything in between, and that those assumptions informed his spiritual life and partially informed his poetics" (*Travel*, p. 181).

Bashō's subjects, to an extent even before this turning point, were unorthodox within the haikai world. Though the teeming, material life of the city, prevalent in the work of Saikaku and others, is, to an extent, present in Bashō, he was more drawn to the mundane and ordinary, to fishermen and farmers going about their work, to a woman tearing salted cod at a roadside shop, and, like W.B. Yeats, to such "liminal figures" as "the beggar, the old man, the outcast, the traveler" (Shirane, *Traces*, p. 11). Even in his personal life, he seems to have been drawn to the socially maladroit and the misfit, figures such as Shadō (see 771) and Tokoku (see 330). The natural world of the poems, too, tends toward the usually disdained: *shigure* (winter drizzle), plumes of misanthus, skulls, old bones in a field, the gums of a salted sea bream, the *karasu* (crow):

121

On a leafless bough
 the perching and pausing of a crow
 The end of autumn

kareeda ni / karasu no tomarikeri / aki no kure

This, one of his most celebrated poems, can be read as an emblem of Bashō's resolve to place poetry at the spiritual center of his existence. Bashō's precarious social origins may have played a role in his poetic predilections, and also, perhaps, in the fearlessness with which he now embraced the uncertainties and material deprivations of this new life.

The romantic excesses of this view need to be tempered, however, by a knowledge of the tradition to which Bashō, with a kind of

restrained demonstrativeness, was now pledging allegiance. In withdrawing from the commercial haikai world, and in a markedly public way, Bashō was aligning himself with a tradition of poetry exemplified by Sōgi and Saigyō: the poet as recluse, weary and wary of the human world, with nature a source of bracing spiritual replenishment, and in so doing, making an artistic claim for himself. As Steven D. Carter has brilliantly put it, for Bashō and for his students, disciples, and patrons, leaving Nihonbashi would have been considered “a step up and not a step out” (Carter, “On a Bare Branch,” p. 64): a step up in artistic ambition and seriousness, with a claim on the highest realms of artistic practice, and therefore prestige, among a discerning, if limited, public.

He had left behind, it also has to be said, some of the more onerous, if lucrative, aspects of the haikaishi life, practices that he had been reluctant to follow even in Nihonbashi. In a well-known letter to his disciple Kyokusui, written in 1692, we see Bashō’s disdain for the contemporary haikai scene, of the life of the marker, and of poetry as a contest. He divides haikai practitioners into three “grades”: the first grade, those completely taken up in the commercial world of the marker, running from poetry session to session, earning a living, feeding their family, and thus, he says, “probably” better than common criminals; the second, a wealthier, dilettantish type, for whom haikai is little more than a diversion, a game of scoring points, winning and losing, but who can also “probably,” he says, be included within the ranks of the haikai profession. The third type, and they are few, have an “unswerving devotion to poetry”:

These poets seek the distant bones of Fujiwara Teika, follow the sinews of Saigyō, cleanse the intestines of Po Chū-i [Bai Juyi], and leap into the breast of Tu Fu [Du Fu]. In all the cities and provinces, the number of such individuals is fewer than the fingers of my hands. (qtd. in Shirane, *Traces*, p. 158)

The move to Fukagawa signals that Bashō had achieved a level of recognition and reputation that could both allow for such a move and allow his poetry and life as a poet to continue. Fukagawa, as Carter says, was not up the side of a distant mountain, and he had the support, material and otherwise, of students and patrons close by. An underappreciated aspect of his work, both before his move from its center and even in the years after, is, indeed, how much the life of Edo