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## Objects Coloured by Subjective Feeling: Hagiwara Sakutarō and Haiku

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## OBJECTS COLOURED BY SUBJECTIVE FEELING: HAGIWARA SAKUTARŌ AND HAIKU<sup>1</sup>

*Stewart C Baker*

Hagiwara Sakutarō was a poet and critic active from the 1910s through to his death in 1942. As a poet who veered away from tanka, haiku, and other traditional forms toward imagistic lines of no fixed length, he is notable for his free-form poetry and critical work—including the book-length publication in 1926 of *Principles of Poetry*, his attempt to define the fundamental essence of poetry.

In some ways, an examination of Hagiwara invites comparisons to Shiki.<sup>2</sup> Both saw themselves as modernizers active during a time of great change in Japan, interested in reinventing norms and in the fusion of Western and Japanese ideas. Shiki, for example, drew his ideas about shasei partially from European landscape painting.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Hagiwara was drawn to European history, philosophy, and literature; his prose was influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche,<sup>4</sup> and he lists Goethe, Wilde, and Tolstoy—along with Bashō—as quintessential artist-poets in *Principles of Poetry*.<sup>5</sup>

However, while Shiki was a haikuist first and foremost, Hagiwara's work of note on haiku was critical in nature rather than creative. His fame as a poet rests rather on books like *Howling at the Moon*, which featured poetry with no fixed line limits that moved strongly away from traditional Japanese ideas about poetry. While he wrote some haiku and tanka, they do not occupy an important place in his work.<sup>6</sup>

All the same, Hagiwara's critical work provides a unique lens through which to view haiku. *Principles of Poetry* in particular is insightful for the practicing haikuist — especially when held up against too-literal interpretations of shasei. In it, Hagiwara sets out to define the essence of all forms of poetry,<sup>7</sup> idiosyncratically winding through discussions of subjectivity, objectivity, ethics, fine arts, and literature to eventually arrive at the argument that poetry must express "the symbolization of emotion" using "rhythm, tone, and feeling."<sup>8</sup>

Generally speaking, Hagiwara discusses Western-style poetry in *Principles of Poetry*. However, he does devote some space to haiku, notably insisting that while the form is commonly referred to as an objective one, a successful haiku does not merely grasp "the reality of nature," but engages in "chanting subjective sentiments and feelings by way of describing natural objects." Likewise, Hagiwara is very dismissive of those who judge haiku entirely by their surface-level, objective-seeming description, saying that they "only read but never understand" haiku as poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Because a poem *must* contain emotion and subjectivity in Hagiwara's poetics, it is impossible for haiku to be completely objective. Instead, Hagiwara argues that traditional haiku's reputation for aloof, refined observation is due to "a certain meditative quality in the timbre and mood of its poetical sensibility," a sensibility he ascribes to *haimi* (非味) or "subdued taste." In cases where *haimi* is not present it "must be replaced by another poetic quality" for a haiku to work as a poem.<sup>10</sup>

To write haiku that are solely exercises in detached, intellectual observation, Hagiwara says, will produce poems that are "awkward" and "uninspired" and which contain "no strong poetic passion whatever," whereas haiku with a "true genuine poetic quality" appeal to the heart rather than the head; it is the "pleading, lamenting or desiring" within these poems, rather than their contemplative nature, that makes them effective and memorable.<sup>11</sup>

As evidence, Hagiwara quotes a poem by Buson and one by Bashō, reproduced below:

春の海 終日のたり のたりかな  
*haru no umi hinemosu notari notari kana*

the sea in spring  
 all the long day  
 rolling, rolling

*Buson*

草の葉を落つるより飛ぶ蛍かな  
*kusa no ha wo otsuru yori tobu hotaru kana*

falling from  
 the grass blade, then flying  
 firefly<sup>12</sup>

Bashō

These poems are successful, Hagiwara argues, because they present "objects colored by subjective feeling, but not objects as objects per se."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, he does not go into great detail about what exactly these subjective feelings are, apparently assuming that readers will take his word for it that Buson's poem "shows the author's subjective mood of leisure on a long spring day," and that Bashō's symbolizes "the author's sensibility toward a summer night."<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that no poem is *wholly* objective, as its author by necessity plays a role in the selection of words and their arrangement on the page. The act of describing something *is*, by definition, subjective.

A brief analysis of Buson's poem shows this well. Critics frequently point to the repetition of "notari notari" as mimicking the rolling waves, the ebb and flow of the tides. This repetition may be what Hagiwara is referring to when he talks about a "mood of leisure," suggesting that Buson selected these specific words to connect the slow, interminable rolling of the waves to the lengthening days of late spring. Likewise, the description of a firefly "falling, then flying" in Bashō's poem is an arresting, expertly curated image — even if it does not necessarily clarify what the author's sensibility *is*, as such.

Hagiwara does not discuss the haiku of Shiki or other contemporaries at any length, but the same principle can be applied to their work as well. It is not Shiki's detached observational attitude from his sickbed that make the many haiku he wrote there so moving; it is the unique subjective feeling with which he observed and wrote.<sup>15</sup> And of course, the many haikuists writing in English, Japanese, or other languages today also provide numerous proofs of Hagiwara's insight.

Hagiwara's rhetorical moves are often disorienting and idiosyncratic. This fact, along with the historical remove of the work—published in 1926—makes reading the *Principles of Poetry* an odd experience at times.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Hagiwara's argument that poetry is a literature that uses symbols to present emotions is as compelling today as it was when he first made it. If nothing else, he rarely fails to be interesting.

For me, there is a definite appeal to approaching haiku as a presentation of "objects colored by subjective feeling."<sup>17</sup> When I think of favourite haiku, I find those that have left a lasting impression are certainly those which present reality 'as it feels' instead of trying to capture something 'as it is.' Likewise, Hagiwara's conception of the poetic essence as "the insufferable loneliness that vibrate[s] through life's depths"<sup>18</sup> speaks to me on a deep level—even if I don't always express that feeling in my own haiku.

Of course, poets who find Hagiwara's ideas bizarre or otherwise out of step with how they compose or read haiku need not despair. Rather, they should remember what Hagiwara himself says at the beginning of his book: "All the answers to the question 'what is poetry' are either fallacies caused by narrow-minded provincial prejudices or personal dogmas."<sup>19</sup>

## SOME HAIKU BY HAGIWARA SAKUTARŌ<sup>20</sup>

Many thanks to Fay Aoyagi and Takamichi Okubo for reviewing and correcting the translations below and improving them immensely. Any remaining errors or awkwardness are my own.

### 1. Assorted Haiku<sup>21</sup>

五月幟立つ家家の向うは海  
*satsukinobori tatsu ieie no mukō wa umi*

Boys' Day streamers  
 standing at every house  
 opposite the sea

天城ごえ伊豆に入る日や遅櫻  
*amakigoe izu ni hairu hi ya osozakura*

entering Izu  
 at Amakigoe<sup>22</sup> —  
 late-blooming cherry trees

青梅に言葉すくなき別れ哉  
*aoume ni kotoba sukunaki wakare kana*

saying goodbye  
 in a few words...  
 green plums

ブラジルに珈琲植糸む秋の風  
*burajiru ni kōhii uwemu aki no kaze*

Coffee  
 grown in Brazil...  
 autumn wind

プラタヌの葉は散りはてぬ靴磨き  
*puratanu no ha wa chirihatenu kutsumigaki*

plane tree leaves  
 scattering...  
 a shoe-shiner

冬さるる畠に乾ける靴の泥  
*fuyu saruru hata ni kawakeru kutsu no doro*

winter departing...  
 mud from the field  
 dries on my shoes

人間に火星近づく暑さかな  
*ningen ni kasei chikazuku atsusakana*

mankind  
 as Mars draws near<sup>23</sup> ...  
 this heat

"Bochō's death"<sup>24</sup>

磯濱の煙わびしき年のくれ  
*isobama no kemuri wabishiki toshi no kure*

the rocky beach's  
 melancholy fog—  
 year's end

"Bush Warbler's Song"

笹鳴の日かげをくぐる庭の隅  
*sasanaki no hikage wo kuguru niwa no sumi*

passing beneath  
 the shadow of the bush warbler's song...  
 garden corner

笹鳴や日脚のおそき縁の先  
*sasanaki ya hiashi no osoki en no saki*

bush warbler's song —  
 the sun's slow movement  
 past my porch

## 2. Haiku from a Posthumous Manuscript<sup>25</sup>

"Somehow I'm already over fifty years old."

枯菊や日にさめゆく憤り  
*karegiku ya hibi ni sameyuku ikidōri*

withered chrysanthemum —  
 my indignation cooling  
 with every day

"All those youthful hopes and dreams were completely  
 in vain."

秋さびし皿みな割れて納屋の隅  
*aki sabishi sara mina warete naya no sumi*

lonely autumn ...  
 all the plates broken  
 in a corner of the shed



"Ah! Already wasting away, my heart weeps tears again."

冬日くれぬ思ひ起せや岩に牡蠣  
*fuyubi kurenu omoiokoseya iwa ni kaki*

remembering  
 endless winter days —  
 oysters on a rock

"I return to my hometown, walking alone along the bank  
 of the Tonegawa River."

磊落と河原を行けば草雲雀  
*rairaku to kawara wo ikeba kusahibari*

walking along the riverbank  
 with an open heart...  
 grass cricket

"My fantasy city is in the sky."

虹立つや人馬賑ふ空の上  
*niji tatsu ya jinba nigiwau sora no ue*

a rainbow's arch —  
 people and horses bustling  
 above the sky

"My passion for seclusion irresistible, I think painfully  
of Bashō."

藪蔭や蔦もからまぬ唐辛子

*yabukage ya tsuta mo karamanu tōgarashi*

in the thicket's shade —  
the red pepper left uncovered  
by the ivy

"On a late autumn day, the misery of a swimming beach  
in Shōnan."

コスモスや海少し見ゆる邸道

*cosumosu ya umi sukoshi miyuru yashikimichi*

cosmos —  
spotting a little of the sea  
on the mansion-lined street

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Fay Aoyagi and Takamichi Okubo for reviewing and correcting the translations included in the last part of this essay and improving them immensely. Any remaining errors or awkwardness are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Hagiwara seems ambivalent toward Shiki himself. In a footnote in *Principles of Poetry*, he describes a school of waka poets trying to follow Shiki's ideas as "unquestionably a wrong course led by misunderstanding the form of poetry" and "illiterate and disgusting riffs," (p. 131). On the other hand, he acknowledges Shiki's praise of Buson as noteworthy in a 1933 essay on Buson ("The Homesick Haikuist, Yosa Buson." [郷愁の詩人 与謝蕪村] Iwanami Shoten, 1988. <https://www.aozora>).

gr.jp/cards/000067/files/47566\_44414.html).

<sup>3</sup> Trumbull, Charles. "Masaoka Shiki and the Origins of Shasei," *Juxtapositions* 2.1, March 2016. <https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/juxta/juxta-2-1/masaoka-shiki-and-the-origins-of-shasei/>

<sup>4</sup> Sato, Hiroaki, translator. *Cat Town*. By Hagiwara Sakutarō. New York, New York Review, 2014, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Hagiwara, Sakutarō. *Principles of Poetry*. Trans. Chester C.I. Wang & Isamu P. Fukuchi. Ithaca, NY, Cornell East Asia Program, 1998, p. 33

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Hiroaki Sato describes Hagiwara's tanka as "undistinguished" (Sato 2014, p. 20) and his haiku as no more than "playful jottings" (Sato 2014, p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the idea of "literature" as a unified form comprising the various types of poetry and prose was not common in Japan, with each field of poetry and prose being viewed as a unique artform distinct from others. See Beichman, Janine. *Masaoki Shiki: His Life and Works*. Tokyo, Kodansha, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Hagiwara, 1998, p.56. Hagiwara is given to flights of fancy and hyperbole, and also suggests that poetry's "essential spirit [is] a yearning for the things we do not have" and that poetry itself is "the whole existence [of] the universe appreciated with a subjective attitude" (1998, p. 48).

<sup>9</sup> Hagiwara, 1998, pp. 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Translations of these haiku are my own. Hagiwara has "suberu" for "falling" in the Bashō haiku, but I could not find that variant elsewhere and have replaced it with the apparently standard "otsuru."

<sup>13</sup> Hagiwara, 1998, p. 130. This is similar to the line "no ideas but in things" from American imagist poet William Carlos Williams, which can be interpreted as meaning something like "make a concrete image with everyday language, rather than a vague, lengthy notion of it." See Wickliffe, Ed. "Historical View of W.C.Williams': "No Ideas but in Things," *Triggerfish Critical Review* 2, 2009. <https://triggerfishcriticalreview.com/historical-view-of-wcwilliams-no-ideas-but-in-things-by-ed-wickliffe/>

<sup>14</sup> Hagiwara, 1998, pp. 129-130.

<sup>15</sup> As Makoto Ueda points out, Shiki's conception of shasei was not simply a detached observation of reality but a form of *selective* realism, where the poet must make choices about what objects to present, as well as how and why (Trumbull).