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ESSAYS

FISHING FOR BASHŌS: INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES AND HAIKU IN ENGLISH¹

Stewart C. Baker

I. Deconstructing Haiku

In the Winter 2014 issue of *Modern Haiku*, haikuist and scholar Mike Spikes makes an excellent case for the use of deconstruction as an analytic technique for haiku. Spikes' conclusions are compelling—he uses deconstruction to show that haiku, despite their textual brevity, are “in a significant sense, long and involved” (57). Unfortunately, his arguments themselves are likely confusing to anyone without a grounding in the philosophical theories of Derrida, De Man, and other high-culture critics. Indeed, one of the recurring complaints against Derrida and other practitioners of deconstruction is that their prose is dense to the point of obfuscation.

The point of this essay, though, is not to discredit literary criticism. Quite the contrary: while my understanding of deconstruction differs slightly from what Spikes lays out, in general I agree with his methods and his conclusions. What I would like to do instead is to tease out one of the threads which prefaces his argument and follow it to a different critic, and a different destination. Early in his article, Spikes quotes Max Verhart in saying that “it is not the haiku moment preceding the haiku that matters, but only the haiku moment that is created in the poem” (42, qtd. in Spikes 50). Spikes uses the quote largely for context, to show that readings of haiku-as-texts are nothing new. However, it also makes a Derridean point: the text (the haiku) actually creates what we might consider its own origin (the haiku moment).²

This inversion may seem counter-intuitive and confusing. In the rest of this essay, I will attempt to make it clearer. First, I will summarize Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities; I will also briefly clarify what the word "text" means in a literary-critical context. After visiting Fish, we will return to the haikai world with a tour of Bashō's most famous haiku and most famous haibun, not only reinforcing Spikes' conclusion that literary analysis is indeed useful, but showing that apparently opposing methods are—contradictorily and complementarily—equally valid.

II. The Text According to Stanley Fish

Stanley Fish, like Derrida is one of those theorists whose conclusions are counter-intuitive, yet compelling. In this essay, I will focus mostly on his theory of interpretive communities, which argues that the meaning of a text is largely created by readers—not writers. To properly grasp the finer points of that argument, it is first necessary to explain what Fish means by "text." A common argument against post-structural theory is that it is nonsense: how can a text be created by its readers? The very idea seems impossible. This changes when we take the time to step back and define our terms before diving in. Text, as Fish uses the term, does not so much mean 'words on a page' as 'a discourse created by the act of experiencing words on a page.'³

In "Interpreting the Variorum," an essay on a collection of essays of Milton, Fish makes explicit three assumptions of traditional literary criticism which his work opposes: "that there is a sense [to a work of literature], that it is embedded or encoded in the text, and that it can be taken in at a single glance" ("Interpreting" 158). To Fish, reading does not lead to a singular, correct meaning (or 'sense') which is embedded in a work by its author. In fact, reading does not lead to anything: reading instead actively creates meaning through the reader's "making and revising of assumptions, ... rendering and regretting of judgments, ... coming to and abandoning of conclusions" as he or she reads, applying his or her own knowledge and experiences to a given piece of writing—in short, as Fish says, reading is an act of interpretation ("Interpreting" 167).

This might seem a call for anarchy, but in fact it simply shifts the focus of criticism from writing to reading. And it is not true that readers exist in a vacuum, after all. Each reader belongs to one or more groupings—what Fish calls interpretive communities—which share common understandings of terms, analytical methods, and overall aesthetics. It is the “interpretive strategies” consisting of these understandings, brought to bear on works by readers, which create the various meanings assigned to any given poem (“Interpreting” 168).

If we return briefly to Spikes’ article, we can see in the haikuists he cites two distinct communities: one—represented by Watts, Yasuda, and van den Heuvel—posits that the words in haiku make themselves transparent, so that the poem directly presents the object or experience it describes; the other—Verhart and Hotham—are more focused on the words as words. Spikes himself—with his deconstructive analysis—we might put in yet another interpretive community.

Then there are readers of haiku who only know what they were taught in elementary school; readers of haiku who are translators of old Japanese; readers of haiku who are astrophysicists; readers of haiku who are practitioners of Zen; readers of haiku who are professional photographers. The communities to which each of these readers belong will subtly but surely affect how they interpret a haiku or other work, because each shares a specific set of understandings about what haiku is for in the first place—an aesthetic, simply put. And we could surely come up with more example groups.

But enough of hypotheticals! Let’s move on to some analysis, and see how an awareness of reading-as-meaning-making can change our understanding of haiku.

III. Rain of Frogs

Before we go any further, I want to make explicit that any reading of Bashō which does not occur in Japanese is not a reading of Bashō: it is a reading of an interpretation of Bashō—an interpretation of an interpretation, if we accept for now Fish’s argument that reading itself is interpretation.⁴ Self-evident though it may seem to say that Bashō did not

write the English words “a frog jumps in” anywhere in his original poem, it is necessary to state exactly this to avoid unknowing misreadings—even if, like Fish, we accept that the original author’s intended meaning is beyond our grasp as readers, and that there is thus no “true” reading.

A common translation of the poem in question looks something like “old pond / a frog jumps in / the sound of water.” Simply looking at a transliteration of the poem, and the possible translations of each word, however, makes it clear that this is far from the only possible reading:

furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

The word *furui*, according to online dictionary WWWJDIC, can be translated as “old; aged; ancient; antiquated; stale; threadbare; outmoded; obsolete” (*furui*). While we can discard a few of these—“threadbare pond” doesn’t have quite the right ring—it’s easy to see how the job of a translator is less finding the supposed ‘meaning’ of a word than choosing a word or phrase in his or her own language which he or she believes will best carry the sense of the original as he or she understands it. Similarly, *kawazu*, meaning frog, might be singular or plural, as Japanese has no plural in most cases; we might also debate what kind of frog is pictured. Even the distinction between “old” and “ancient,” subtle though it may be, will shade how we read the translated poem.

Hiroaki Sato makes this point well in his *One Hundred Frogs*, where he presents many translations, adaptations, and variations on Bashō’s most famous poem. Of those, I wish to pick out just two translations:

A lonely pond in age-old stillness sleeps...
 Apart, unstirred by sound or motion ... till
 Suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps.

Curtis Hidden Page

The old pond,
 A frog jumps in:
 Plop!

Alan Watts

To those of us who write and read haiku today, Page’s rendition seems so far from the original text that it barely even qualifies as a translation. In the first line, which we might translate on a more word-for-word basis as

“old pond,” Page has added in a number of details not in the original: the pond is “lonely;” and it “sleeps” in “stillness.” The second line of Page’s poem does not exist at all in Bashō’s original: its further development of the pond’s tranquility seems entirely unnecessary to modern readers of haiku. The final line, corresponding to Bashō’s “a frog jumps in,” ends the poem before we even get to the “sound of water” which we expect to see, and which exists in Page’s version only implicitly, in the “till” of the line before.

As much as we may cringe at Page’s rendition of Bashō, to late nineteenth century American readers presumably unfamiliar with Japanese poetry, it must have been far more understandable as a poem than Watts’ sparser translation would have. Then, too, as we might remember from Spikes’ two types of haiku theorists, Watts is one of those who believes that the essence of haiku lies in its ability to “wordlessly” present a real, meaningful moment (48), breaking down the barriers inherent in an elaborate—almost purple—poem like Page’s. Indeed, if we take Watts’ history with Zen and other religious traditions into account, we can also put him into another interpretive community: that of the mystic who holds that haiku—much like Zen—can provide a “view of the ultimate reality,” albeit one presented as poetry (“Haiku”).⁵

As tempting as it is to say that Watts’ translation is much more faithful to the original than Page’s, neither is a ‘correct’ translation of Bashō’s original. This does not mean that either version is incorrect: it is simply the nature of translation. There is no such thing as a ‘correct’ translation, because translation—like any other form of reading—necessarily draws on the background of the translator—or reader. As Fish puts it, each interpretive community will consider their reading of a text the only “true” reading, while in fact “the truth will be that each perceives the text (or texts) its interpretive strategies ... call into being” (Fish 171).⁶ Both Watts’ and Page’s translations are ‘true’ readings for their interpretive communities, and it is only because we are much closer to Watts’ than Page’s that his translations seems more true to the original poem.

The disparities between interpretive communities are even more apparent in commentaries on the poem. Robert Aitken, a Zen teacher as well as a translator, argues that the real “significance” of the poem lies in

the fact that Bashō, in drawing to our attention the tiny splash of a frog in an old pond, brings together an immediate sound with a “timeless, ancient” setting of a mossy pond to create an “exquisite unity” of ancient and immediate which rests in all of Bashō’s mature haiku (4). Aitken is discussing the poem explicitly in the context of Buddhism, a context in which it makes perfect sense to say that Bashō presents his own mind as an ancient pond, and that the scene presents a “serene and potent ... condition familiar to mature Zen students” (4).

Kawamoto Kōji, a Japanese literary critic, is less concerned with spiritual matters: he points out that one contemporary explanation of Bashō’s famous haiku⁷ claims that the sound of the frog entering the water was intended primarily to “violate a firmly established waka principle,” which requires poems about frogs to mention the song of the frogs. The brilliance of the haiku for Kawamoto is that Bashō, by focusing on the sound of the frog’s entry into the water instead of its song, “disregards the traditional treatment,” thus making his poem fresh and effective to its contemporary readers (76).

Hasegawa Kai, a Japanese haikuist as well as literary critic, takes a similar approach to Kawamoto by placing the haiku in its historical context. He points out that Bashō’s disciple Kagami Shiko records the origin of this haiku at a gathering where Bashō and other poets occasionally heard the sounds of frogs leaping into water outside the poet’s hut (72).⁸ In an interview with Richard Gilbert, Hasegawa says that, despite its common surface treatment, the poem is excellent not because of its subject matter but largely because of its *kire*, or cutting. However, it is not the cutting words such as *ya* or *kana* which Hasegawa finds so interesting in the “old pond” poem. Instead, it is a non-textual “cutting before and after,” a kind of *kire* which uses the sound of the frog as a sort of *ma*, or gap, to open in the mind an awareness of the absence of sound, a sort of “inadvertent” noticing often suggested in haiku by the cutting word *keri* (80-81). The cut, that is, takes place outside of the poem, as its effects filter through our consciousness.

While all three of these critics agree that “old pond” is an excellent example of haiku, each hold very different, sincere beliefs as to the reason for that excellence, beliefs which stem from the interpretive strategies

used by their interpretive communities. For Aitken, a Zen teacher, the historical rules of waka and renga have less relevance than how Bashō's haiku might help practitioners of Zen today. For Kawamoto, primarily a literary scholar, it is more important to set Bashō and his work into historical context and draw conclusions on a more literary level. Hasegawa, a haikuist as well as a scholar, is interested in the historical context as well, but primarily as a way of understanding the effects the haiku can have on the mind of the poet and the mind of the reader.

IV. Narrow Road(s)

Hasegawa's "cutting before and after" can actually make for a useful way to think about how interpretive communities create a communal "text" when reading a poem or other work. If we examine treatments of Bashō's poetic diary, *Oku no Hosomichi* (commonly translated as "Narrow Road to the Deep North"), we will see that much of the interpretation of this longer work takes place before we even read its first word—even when the piece is simply named and not being actively presented at all. Just as with the "old pond" poem, this problem may seem at first to be purely one of translation: how do we change this Japanese title into a sensible English rendition which carries the right sense? Should the particle *no* mean "of," or is it more accurately "towards" in this context, or "through"? Is this a single narrow road, or is it a group of roads? What or where exactly is *oku*? And so on.

But, again just as with "old pond," much of how a translator renders the Japanese phrase depends on his or her interpretive community's shared tools for interpreting. Put simply, that is: it depends on why the translator believes Bashō made his journey, and in a broader sense why Bashō wrote poetry at all. The various titles translators choose make it clear that even a small difference in interpretation can have quite an effect.

Tim Chilcott, an academic and amateur translator, has put together a fascinating pseudo-translation of *Oku no Hosomichi* by comparing a number of other translations and compiling the results into a single coherent text. Chilcott points out that there are a number of ways to translate that one little word, *oku*. The word literally means "interior, inner

part, inside”, but in the context of Bashō’s usage it acts as somewhat of a pun, meaning not only the topographical term for the northern provinces of Japan, but also partially a sort of spiritual inner space (Chilcott v). Chilcott presents a number of title translations which illustrate his point of just how complicated the word is: *oku* is rendered variously as “a far province,” “far towns,” “the interior,” and “the deep north,” as well as left entirely alone—Donald Keene simply calls the work “The Narrow Road to Oku” (Chilcott v-vi). And many other possibilities exist: Robert Aitken, who placed such a Zen focus on the “old pond” haiku, calls the work “The Narrow Way Within” (21), a translation so radically different from most that it seems to discuss an entirely different work.

As with “old pond,” commentaries on the work bring the different interpretive communities into even sharper relief. Aitken, as we might expect, frames the journey as primarily a religious one—he calls it Bashō’s “best-known pilgrimage” (21)—and while he is certainly aware that Bashō’s account contains significant changes from his actual journey he is more concerned with how its sections can serve as “a good Zen story” (73). Donald Keene, on the other hand—like Kawamoto in his discussion of the “old pond” haiku—is more focused of the historical, literary context of Bashō’s work. Keene argues that Bashō, in making his trip, wished primarily to “renew his art by direct contact with places that had inspired the poets of the past”—in particular Saigyō, a twelfth century poet (379). Keene also points more strongly to Bashō’s revision habit, arguing that the structure of *Oku no Hosomichi* may have been modeled after the rules for traditional linked verse—in other words, it was created as a literary work foremost, and a representation of an actual journey as a secondary concern. While not denying these formations of a spiritual or literary grand project, David Barnhill makes the argument that Bashō also had a simpler travel goal in mind: he needed to “spread the word of his style and ... gain more disciples;” the journey was, “put crudely: ... good for business” (5). Even the Bashōs amongst us must eat.

It is worth reiterating that these differing interpretations are neither correct nor incorrect as such. When viewed in the context of their respective interpretive communities, each reading is the only “true” reading. Or, at least, one possible “true” reading—for there will always be minor

variations and disagreements between members of a given community. It should be noted as well that any given reader can belong to multiple communities, and that his or her reading of a single work can create multiple texts depending on which community he or she is currently among. That is: it is perfectly reasonable for the same person to say in one context “*Oku no Hosomichi* presents a timeless exploration of the eternal real” and in another “*Oku no Hosomichi* presents an idealized literary version of Bashō’s travels through Japan.” For (e.g.) a Zen teacher with an interest in Japanese literary history—or for a literary historian with an interest in Zen—both readings can co-exist, complementing each other even as they seem to contradict.

V. Conclusion: The Journey Itself Home

Some readers might be shaking in their boots at this juncture. And indeed, Fish points out that critics of his theories often fear that they point to “a world in which every utterance has an infinite plurality of meanings” (“Is There a Text” 307). But there is no need to fret about such things, as interpretation is never totally arbitrary: there is always some shared understanding, no matter how far apart interpretive communities may seem.

In fact, it is precisely the variety of interpretation which allows us to fully appreciate a text. By approaching a text from different angles, we bring to light multiple readings; these readings, while they may seem contradictory, co-exist. As Fish puts it, “there are disagreements and . . . they can be debated in a principled way ... because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities” (171). Although we can never arrive at a ‘correct’ meaning of a text, that same multiplicity of meanings—the text’s irreducible quality of being interpreted in different ways, or viewed through different lenses—is in fact what allows us to have debates about a text’s meaning in the first place, and to understand one another while we do.

Discussion of a poem allows us to reach a fuller understanding of it than if we were only to adhere to one single, unitary view. It also helps us learn about ourselves and how we experience our surroundings, to ques-

tion what we hold as unarguably true and right and to arrive at a more nuanced view of reality. And isn't this ultimately one reason for poetry's existence? Not only to show us a pretty scene or transport us to another place and time, but to help us learn about who we were, are, and could be. It is this questioning—this journey to the make-believe destination of “the answer”—which is essential to learning, and to life.

As Bashō himself writes at the beginning of *Oku no Hosomichi*:

Months and days are the wayfarers of a hundred generations, the years too, going and coming, are wanderers. For those who drift life away on a boat, for those who meet age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey, the journey itself home. (Bashō, 49).

NOTES

¹ This essay is based on a presentation, “Do All Roads Lead to Bashō?” given at the 2013 Haiku North America conference. The Prezi for that presentation can be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/W4dnlp>

² At the same time, it is impossible to deny that it first stems from that reality. The idea that a text is created from reality, in other words, is first overturned to show that the text itself creates reality, but that overturning must then itself made problematic. The point here is not that one thing happens before another, or that one is more important than another, but that the whole system of binary oppositions poses serious philosophical problems. Deconstruction, through displacing binaries, attempts first and foremost to show this. Derrida calls this “[marking] the interval between inversion ... and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept’” (39). A clearer way of thinking about it is by asking: is a door inside or outside the room it leads to? Neither answer makes much sense, and to a deconstructionist, the question of whether text or reality comes first is equally meaningless—or at least, it is the not the best question. It is more useful by far to ask: why do we insist that the door must be part of the room?

³ Roland Barthes, yet another theorist, may help to clarify things. He makes the following distinction: “the work can be held in the hand, the text ... is experienced only in an activity of production” (157). That is, the work is the physical or literal

thing-of-the-writing; the text is how we interpret it on any given reading. Hence, texts change from reading to reading while works stay the same.

⁴ This is not to claim that Japanese readers somehow have an “essential” grasp on haiku or on Bashō by dint of their Japanese-ness. As many interpretations of haiku exist in Japanese as in English and other languages, and just as many Japanese are totally baffled by the form as Americans, Australians, Brazillians, and so on. Nonetheless the specific Japanese words signify differently, and that signification has been changed by how the translator chose to interpret them. Some possible readings are lost by translations, and others which were not possible in the original are opened up.

⁵ Interestingly, as Michael Dylan Welch notes in his annotation of Watts’ essay, a similar idea has been put forward by Roland Barthes, the post-structuralist quoted in footnote iii above. Barthes argues that haiku is not a signifier, but simply is—that is, a haiku’s words do not exist as signposts to things, but are essentially the same as the things themselves (“Haiku Missionary”). The idea of haiku-as-reality is so prevalent, then, it is held by two apparently opposing camps: Zen Buddhist readers and literary theorists. Although, as Derrida reminds us in footnote ii, no opposition is ever stable.

⁶ As Barthes might put it, the reader creates the socially-held text through the act of reading the physical work. We can see one interesting example of this in Welch’s response to Watts’ essay: Welch admits he is “uncomfortable with the agenda” Watts’ assertion of haiku-as-ultimate-reality places on haiku. This agenda, for Welch, “pollut[es] haiku as literature,” (“Haiku Missionary”) however for Watts and other Zen practitioners, haiku was never ‘pure’ literature in the first place, but something like a koan: a “profoundly startling simplicity,” as Watts puts it, which can lead from the trappings of perceived reality to an “ultimate reality” which lies beyond (“Haiku”). Those in other interpretive communities, on the other hand, might posit a number of other, equally “true” essences of haiku, or might deny that one exists at all—in itself a kind of argument for a “true” reading.

⁷ In the context of a discussion on the history of Japanese poetic aesthetics, it seems pertinent to note that what we have been calling a haiku is more correctly a stand-alone ‘hokku,’ which could potentially serve as the opening verse to a communally written, longer poem.

⁸ It is interesting to note in passing that this proposed origin of the poem means there literally were multiple frogs—at least in the poem’s original inspiration.

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