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Sound and Silence in Basho

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It is one of my greatest pleasures to meditate upon the haiku poems of Basho Matsuo, the seventeenth-century master of Japanese haiku. When translated, these poems often seem rather fragmentary and incomplete to English readers. But, to the Japanese mind, the very sound of the words with their accents and rhythm in itself is most delightful. On the surface these fragmentary poems consist of simple descriptions of the phenomena of nature; but inwardly all of them contain an undercurrent of Zen Buddhist philosophy with its sentiment of transitoriness, which appeals to the aesthetic sense of the Japanese. In this paper, however, I am less concerned with interpreting the meaning of the poems in terms of any philosophical implications they may contain, than with understanding and appreciating the poems by concentrating all my attention upon my emotional attachment to them.

The poem “Sizukasa ya. . .” is one of my favorites. Whenever I take a walk through the tall trees on a deep mountain path, and especially when I hear the sudden penetrating song of a cicada there, I recall the poem as an expression of my own emotional experience at such a place at such a moment:

Sizukasa ya	What a quiet place!
Iwa ni simiiru	Penetrating into the rocks,
Semi no koe	The cicada's song.

That's it! I admire the brief but exact description of momentary beauty and truth captured by the poet.

Someone has said that haiku is simply a description of what is happening at a certain place at a certain moment. To some extent such a statement is valid, but I can say with confidence that haiku is much more than that. Obviously

such seventeen syllable poems are one emission of soul. The division into three lines gives us the feeling of an ascent, attainment, and resolution of experience. In the 5-7-5 syllable form, the haiku poet creates his whole world at this place and at this moment. It is clear that what the poet aims at and practices is the evocation of mood or psychological intensity, not just the realistic description of nature. How do you feel when you hear a cicada's penetrating song on a lonely mountain path? The cicada's song may not mean anything to some people. But, to some people's minds, it may resound like this:

Waste, waste, waste,
This short life of mine will be gone soon!

What song the cicada should have will completely depend on the listener. The same thing is true of the haiku poem of Basho Matsuo. For it will be nothing but a fragmentary and meaningless seventeen syllables to unsympathetic readers.

When the cicada's penetrating song started, what voice did Basho hear? What beauty did he find in it? Let me describe the place where he must have been walking one summer day at dusk three centuries ago when he heard the cicada's song. I like to imagine that Basho was climbing a mountain in Yamagata Prefecture where the temple Rishshaku-ji stood. Rishshaku-ji was a secluded and quiet place, surrounded by tall pine and cedar trees; the mountain path to Rishshaku-ji was rather dark even in the day-time, and the stepping stones and the rocks on either side of the path were covered with moist moss. It was nearly dusk, Basho tells us in *Oku-no-Hosomichi*, when he started climbing to the temple. "Sizukasa ya. . ." must have been the voiceless voice bursting out of Basho's deep heart like a sigh. Probably everything around him was quiet — "the rock" here symbolizes quietude, and at the same time eternity. Suddenly a cicada started breaking into a boisterous song as if it had sung the joys of its short life. I like to imagine that the cicada had just emerged from silent Mother Earth, putting off its old clothes, and started singing its first song

towards the clear blue sky. Basho was walking on the lonely mountain path, perhaps contemplating this and that in the past and future while looking at the rocks on either side of the path, when suddenly he was awakened into reality by the cicada's penetrating song and drawn into a world of beauty through this mysterious mixture of sound and silence. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," he must have felt. In the harmonious mixture of sound and silence he must have found some truth in life which he had searched for in his journey. In spite of Basho's description, which seems to give only the momentary phenomenon of the specific situation, our imagination enjoys expanding beyond this and recognizing the grandeur of the music of nature—at first unconscious silence, then beautifully harmonized music of sound and silence, and finally eternal silence again. The temporary sound of the cicada is sucked into the eternal quietude of the rocks. Here is an idea of life and death, an idea of mutability and eternity. The cicada's short life is strikingly contrasted with the ancient and eternal rocks.

The same theme is found in another of Basho's famous haiku poems, "Furu-ike ya. . ."—the statement first of the unchanging, then the momentarily moving thing, and finally the splash, the point of intersection of the two:

Furu-ike ya	The old pond;
Kawazu tobikomu	A frog jumps in —
Mizu no oto	The sound of the water.

We can imagine the frog emerging from the withered grass, passing through the newly grown young grass, and jumping into the pond where he had spent the previous year before winter came. Again, through the eyes and ears of the poet, our imagination creates the whole experience at that place and at that moment. We can draw a picture of the poet standing by the pond, listening to the sound of the water, and looking at the stirred waves which would gradually die away, and meditating upon the quiet pond as it had been. I like to imagine that Basho was awakened into enlightenment when he heard the voice bursting out of

voicelessness, and that the conception that life and death were mere changes of condition was deepened into faith.

Of course, there are critics who would assert something to the effect that “a simple, true, and vivid bit of Nature — that is enough for us, in such a poem. We seek in it nothing more, and strongly prefer to find nothing more.” Siki Masaoka, who was a famous haiku critic as well as a haiku poet himself in the late nineteenth-century, declares in his critical essay on “Furu-ike ya. . .” that “the poem means only that Basho heard the sound of a frog jumping into an old pond—nothing should be added to that. If you add anything to it, it is not the real nature of the verse. Clearly and simply, not hiding, not covering; no thinking, no technique of words, that is the characteristic of the verse. Nothing else.”

But it is very clear that Basho put into it far more than that, and the Oriental mind is pleased to find it there. For the Zen Buddhist in particular, this poem may be symbolic of sudden illumination such as may come to the soul of man in a period of utmost stillness, of long and tense contemplation, and may mark a definite stage of spiritual progress. Historically in fact, it records such a moment of new illumination and of spiritual advance in the life of Basho himself. In my opinion, Basho probably used the frog as an imagery as well as a real living thing, similar to Thoreau’s use of the torpid half-thawed snake as a symbol of rebirth. Here I remember a phrase: “He is the richest who has the most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life.”

The real value of the Japanese haiku poems may be measured by what mood or vision they inspire in the reader’s mind. With its simplicity and brevity of the seventeen syllable form, haiku naturally depends on suggestiveness. The cooperation of the poet and the appreciative reader makes the haiku poem complete. Let us look at one more:

Kare-eda ni	On a leafless bough
Karasu no tomarikeri	A rook roosts:
Aki no kure	Autumn dusk.

This is a typical picture of autumnal desolation on a lonely mountain path. Basho's concentration upon a single image emphasizes the mood of desolation, the gathering consciousness of death. "A leafless bough," "a rook," and "autumn dusk"—all of these suggest something desolate. Like Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, the three visual images intermingle into one clear-cut image—the near-death, but here without any concluding couplet. Again, we come to notice Basho's preoccupation with the theme of mutability and eternity. The rook's slight movement is strongly contrasted with the other death-like things around it; the rook itself seems to evoke the spirits from the other world.

Of help in understanding Basho's poems more deeply is a remark of the poet to one of his disciples: "The changing seasons are the seed of haiku. Quietude is the pose of eternity, and motion is the proof of mutability. Unless one stops the process of mutability at a crucial moment, it will be lost forever. Only a momentary sight and sound crystallizes eternity in a moment." In "The Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats evokes the death-like urn to life through the penetrating power of imagination, while Basho eternalizes the momentary life of a mutable thing in his harmonious style. A lonely wanderer, Basho is said to have loved life and nature in all its aspects. "Follow nature and return to nature," is his doctrine towards life and poetry. He still lives in his poems and in his readers' appreciative mind.