

task for tormenting defenseless dwarf trees, and there is “Mr. Robert” (236–42) by Viki Radden, which recounts the gala reception given to the newly-arrived English-language teacher in a small Japanese town, and the comic confusion that ensues when the young man turns out ‘not’ to be an obese Mexican, as the townsfolk had somehow come to expect.

The Broken Bridge owes much to the aforementioned Donald Richie, who was instrumental in the volume’s production. I should mention that the book begins with his fine introductory essay (9–16) and ends with his “Six Encounters” (342–53), a mini-anthology of vignettes that in effect recapitulates the entire volume.

In conclusion, one imagines any number of interesting applications of *The Broken Bridge*, either in whole or in part, in courses concerning Japan, cross-cultural relations, comparative literature, and the like. It is a decidedly “good read” and surely merits an audience larger than the circle of Asianist academe. ▯

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Bashō’s Narrow Road

Two Works by Matsuo Bashō

TRANSLATED WITH ANNOTATIONS
BY HIROAKI SATO
BERKELEY: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 1996

Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) is, of course, history’s most famous master of haiku: the poetical form that so epitomizes the profound simplicity of Japanese aesthetics. Haiku provides something of a cultural link between the contemporary West, where it has become a popular poetic form, and traditional Japan. Hiroaki Sato’s book vastly augments the educational potential of our familiarity with haiku by supplying a wealth of context along with his unaffected and engaging translation of two important related works.

Narrow Road to the Interior (Oku no Hosomichi) is written in a genre called *haibun*, which was a new style of prose mixed with poetry. Sato explains and illustrates the various forms that underpin the haiku: most significantly, the *renga* or “linked verse,” to which several participants contributed short stanzas according to set rules, under the guidance and judgment of teaching masters such as Bashō. Leaving aside the precise definitions for the moment, one can think of the *Narrow Road* roughly as narrative prose peppered with haiku. The work possesses an intriguing dimension that a conventional anthology would lack, however, for the occasion of individual pieces of verse is revealed further in the prose account. We witness the genesis of each individual haiku embedded in the more extended fabric composed of the history, art, culture and geography that inform Bashō’s experience of pilgrimage into the interior of Japan.

At its most straightforward level, the work is Bashō’s travel diary of a five-month circuitous journey in 1689 from the capital Edo to Kisakata in the north, along the coast of the Sea of Japan through Niigata and Tsuruga, and back inland to Ōgaki. Sato includes a double-page map of the route showing the major stopping places—a handy device to keep us attuned to the progress of the narrative and its grounding in real terrain. In order to take in some *uta-makura*—“poetic pillows” or places charged with literary significance due to repeated reference throughout history—he and his companion Sora forsake the high road for one “seldom used by people but frequented by pheasants, rabbits, and woodcutters” (83). They take a wrong turn but are treated to a panoramic view of Mount Kinka across the sea from Ishinomaki port. Shortly after, they chance their way afloat down the Mogami River, with its “terrifyingly dangerous spots” with rocks and rapids, toward Sakata on the western coast (95).

Thus the country reveals itself through the travel narrative of the poet. And as we readers journey through the poetic tale, the manifold historical, religious and aesthetic dimensions of Japan are reconstituted before our eyes. Roland Barthes’s expression, “empire of signs,” seems apt, since each experience along the way reverberates with significance. At Ōta Shrine, near Kanazawa, Bashō meditates on the helmet of the warrior Minamoto no Sanemori (1111–83), the subject of Zeami’s (1364?–1443) Nō play *Sanemori*. The story is that Sanemori’s final mortal foe Yoshinaka (1154–84) donated the helmet as a mark of pity; he dispatched it to the temple with the dead soldier’s friend, Jirō, as messenger. Confronted with Sanemori’s head carried back from battle, Jirō had exclaimed, “Oh, how cruel!” Bashō reiterates the expression in his haiku, which echoes with a shriller cry: “Cruel: under the helmet a cricket” (117). Bashō’s exquisite ironies are often informed from historical depths; furthermore, subtle allusions to Chinese art and literature abound as the poet casts his experience into a contiguous aesthetic form.

The renga A Farewell Gift to Sora complements the main part of the work, providing a perfect instance of the communal production that was one of the *raisons d’être* of the poet master, along with rare technical insights into the way he worked. *The Gift* connects with the *Narrow Road*, marking Sora’s departure from the journey on account of illness. Sato’s translation conveys the *renga* session of Bashō, Sora and Hokushi in all its brilliance, and he provides extended explanatory notes on content and the rules of *renga*.

From the incomparable Bashō, through Sato’s thoroughly accessible translation and illuminating annotation, capped with illustrations by Bashō’s great admirer, Yosa Buson (1716–83), this is a stunning piece of work. Sato’s ingenious layout faces each page of the *Narrow Road* with a page of notes, which refer in turn to comprehensive endnotes. We are free to flow with the narration or deviate from it to join in Sato’s reconstruction of the background tapestry. *Bashō’s Narrow Road* has everything to recommend it to the classroom with an interest in Japan. ▯

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