

HAIKU MASTER BUSON

Translations from the Writings of Yosa Buson—Poet and Artist—with Related Materials

YUKI SAWA AND EDITH MARCOMBE SHIFFERT,
TRANSLATORS AND EDITORS
BUFFALO, NEW YORK: WHITE PINE PRESS, 2007
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Reviewed by Fay Beauchamp

American fascination with haiku is primarily a post World War II phenomenon. In the 1950s, Beat poets, specifically Jack Kerouac, were drawn to haiku as an easy way to connect to a type of Zen Buddhism made popular through the writings of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. While “on the road,” Kerouac would have liked *Haiku Master Buson*, first edited and translated by Yuki Sawa and Edith Marcombe Shiffert in 1978. Now part of *White Pine Press’s Companion for the Journey Series*, its present form is compact, light, and attractive. The cover shows Buson on a horse stepping through a stream; the invitation is to unfettered wandering. Haiku can be the source of portable enlightenment: seated in a craggy nook, readers can ponder the suggestive short lines, observe their surroundings, and write.

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There are dozens of editions of haiku. Current competitors include *Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets* (including examples of Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Kerouac) and Sam Hamill’s even smaller *The Sound of Water*, with the same Japanese poets, but without the Western counterparts. Why, either as a teacher assigning a text, or as an individual heading out the door for a ramble, would you choose *Haiku Master Buson*?

For students, whether undergraduates or in grades six through twelve, this book gives a full sense of an individual Japanese poet with a specificity of time and place that corrects the cliché of a timeless, static East. The book allows the reader to learn about Yosa Buson (1717–1783) from Buson’s own autobiographical essays, longer poems, and letters; from a biographical essay by his disciple Kito; and from Western perspectives in the introduction and section notes. While a focus on literary genre or Buddhism might make a teacher choose to teach haiku isolated from chronological context, it is important to have these varied cultural perspectives when the goal is to teach about Japan or Asia.

Buson’s own prose emphasizes his relationship to Bashō (1644–1694), and to a lesser extent, the Chinese sources for Japanese poetic tradition. Buson seeks “for the elegant simplicity and sensitivity of old master Bashō and to restore Haikai (Haiku) back to what it was in the ancient days,” but he also intends to go by his “own will and enjoy the differences” between Bashō’s time and his own century. From Kito, the reader hears about Buson’s wife and daughter, and his frequent social interactions with his many disciples who admired his poetry. The comfortable domestic details belie the stereotype of the isolated poet, poor and adrift. The peace imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate allowed some mobility between countryside, Tokyo, and Kyoto; Buson could come from humble origins, educate himself, and eventually lead a comfortable life of poetry and painting.

Shiffert highlights Buson’s parallel career in painting. I recommend that teachers use an interdisciplinary approach and juxtapose Buson’s poetry with the many available copies of Hiroshige’s woodblock prints, very popular in Japan in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Hiroshige, Buson has an eye for telling moments of ordinary human traces in natural surroundings: a fishing line blown in the autumn wind, a tea stall deserted under a full moon, a Buddhist image mistaken for a badger in autumn dusk.

What of the poetry itself? The arrangement in divisions of spring, summer, fall, and winter follows a Japanese convention rather than American whim. The divisions also tell a coherent life story, from the first spring poem that gives Buson a whiff of pride to the last poems of withered winter grasses and Buson’s approaching death. Each haiku is

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followed by the Japanese in *romanji*, and even someone studying Japanese can see how the translator interprets phrases. Often three haiku are presented on a page beginning or ending with the same *kigo* (seasonal word or phrase). Shiffert and Sawa translate these in deliberately different ways; for example, *kogarashi* becomes either “nipping wind” or a “tree withering wind.” The *romanji* also allow the reader to hear the original language; the charming *ochi-kochi* (far and near) repeats (63, 98) and cold enters all the corners (*sumi-zumi*) of a room (62).

On the other hand, an attempt to follow the word order of the original often leads to some awkward wordiness. It’s fine not to translate with a strict 5-7-5 count, because English syllables work differently from Japanese sounds. But, in either Japanese or English, a concise phrase leads to the simplicity and suggestiveness valued by Zen Buddhism. One fairly famous haiku here reads, “It goes into me—/ the comb of my long gone wife / to step on it in the bedroom” (115). A poignant moment becomes bathos as one imagines the poet hopping with a comb literally stuck into his foot! With alternate translations available online, students can choose among the variant possibilities to form their own combinations. This book invites the reader to be as observant to detail as Buson. By noticing the unusual in daily surroundings, one appreciates the originality and creativity in this art form.

In one way, the introductory material is sadly wrong; Shiffert writes, “naturally, the more a reader is familiar with each haiku’s scene, the more pleasure it will give him [because of the many ways Japan of two hundred years ago] is still the Japan of today” (15). One place Buson describes the most is Bashō’s “hut,” which Buson recreated in the outskirts of Kyoto; Buson’s own grave marker stands nearby. Within the circumference of bamboo and wire fences, one can still peer into an old well, an embanked stream, or view a family of four ants embark across swept sand. But down the steps from the gate, the paved street connects miles of concrete houses, jigsawed into every available space, with no trees, grasses, or open land, and water channeled in sewers under grates. The view of Kyoto reveals only buildings expanding toward the tops of the surrounding hills. The concrete sprawl is pervasive from Kyoto to Osaka, or to Nara, or to what even ten years ago were the temple islands, such as Horyuji, set within seas of countryside. Buson’s poetry brings comfort because of the contrast of fragile humanity and cyclical nature. A contemporary Thoreau, Kerouac, or Hiroshige would have to travel elsewhere for the scenes that both tourists and poets used to love. ■

OTHER BOOKS MENTIONED

Sam Hamill, *The Sound of Water: Haiku by Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Other Poets* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

Peter Washington, ed. *Haiku* (New York: Knopf, 2003). This Everyman’s edition uses translations from 1952 by R. H. Blyth, who was also very influential in making haiku popular in the United States, although Washington includes—as one of the first “modern haiku”—Ezra Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro,” originally published in 1913. A starting point for exploring how Suzuki at Columbia University and Watts in San Francisco popularized haiku can be found at <http://www.fyreflyjar.net/jkhaiku.html>. Sites helpful with translation are too numerous to mention.

FAY BEAUCHAMP, Professor of English and Director, Center for International Understanding, Community College of Philadelphia, has recently written about Japanese, Chinese, and Korean “contemporary” literature for *Understanding Contemporary Asia Pacific*, edited by Katherine Kaup (Lynne Rienner, 2007).



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