

The Haiku Writing Landscape, Jean Antonini

Translation from French to English by Kent Neal

1. Writing Landscape?

If it seems possible to evoke the haiku writing landscape, this is because with its concision Bashō's *hokku* like today's haiku can be practiced not just sitting in front of a sheet of paper but also while walking down the street, standing in a bus, cooking, and anywhere the *haijin* or haiku poet happens to be. The haiku is the size of a living memory. Haiku writing is more related to the poet's physical space than any other poetic genre. This is why environment, nature, and landscape are important themes in haiku poetry.

We are indebted to Matsuo Bashō for this relationship between haiku and landscape. While looking for a new direction for poetry, Bashō worked to develop his freedom in writing at the Nishiyama Sōin School (*danrin-ha*) in Osaka⁽¹⁾, while maintaining a link with tradition². He found this tradition in poets who lived a life traveling, being in contact with nature, and tending to avoid society: Nōin (998-1050), Saigyō (1118-1190), Sōgi (1421-1502), and the

¹⁰ *mine no hana ho nami ni ashika kujira o oyogase*

making sea lions and whales

swim in the cherry blossom waves

on the hill top

² *Traces of Dreams- Landscape, Cultural Memory and the Poetry of Bashō*, Haruo Shirane, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998

Chinese poets Li Bai (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770). From Chinese poetry, he adopted the tradition of the poet living secluded in the mountains. “*I left the city life exactly ten years ago. [...] Trusting the shadow of the reed that held the grebe’s floating nest, I changed the hut’s thatched roof, repaired the fence, and at the beginning of the fourth month, I moved in temporarily, but soon realized that I never wanted to leave.*”³ His search for novelty (*atarashimi*) and lightness (*karumi*), led Bashō to take several trips. He wrote, “*If we are not able to capture the scattering of flowers flying in the wind or falling leaves by sight and sound while they are moving, once they stop, their very existence would disappear without a trace*”⁴. In order to write *hokkus*, he needed to be alone, free, and payed close attention to every movement in the surrounding environment and landscape.

Bashō's life of poetry was shared between writing meetings or discussions with the *shōmon ha* poets, which helped him clarify his conception of writing and apply it in his *rengas*, and his trips around Japan. He wrote the *hokkus* that intersperse his travel journals in relative solitude and with a large degree of freedom.

Not only did Bashō leave us texts written collectively and individually (*renga* and *haibun*), but also a **writing landscape**. This is made up of two fundamental areas:

1. the *renga* writing meetings and discussions with the *shōmon ha* group;
2. the isolation of travel where poetry was a solitary practice.

2. Japan

We cannot forget that all of this is from a French perspective on Japanese

³ « L'Ermitage de l'irréelle demeure », in *L'Art du haïku*, Vincent Brochard, Pascale Senk, Belfond, Paris, 2009 – p.132

⁴ « *Sanzōshi*, livre rouge », [7], in *Le haïkai selon Bashō*, traduction de René Sieffert, P.O.F., Paris, 1983

history. Out of the *haikai* poets whose poems we know today in France, let us look at the classic masters: Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masaoka Shiki. Their lives of poetry, like Bashō's, fluctuated between the two areas mentioned previously: socializing and isolation. Yosa Buson spent a good part of his life traveling and finally settled in Kyoto where he founded a poetry group. In France, he is almost better known as a painter than a haiku poet. Kobayashi Issa spent part of his life in Edo and belonged to a group of poets. But his poems in French translation were written when he lived in the village of his birth and led a more solitary life. On the contrary, Masaoka Shiki's poetic life was mainly developed during discussions with painter and poet friends in Tokyo. His poems have been less translated into French than Issa's. On *Amazon*, you can find one of Buson's books in French, four of Issa's, and one of Shiki's. Haiku translators and publishers in France seem to prefer poems written in isolation. As for other poets translated from Japanese, you can find two books of poetry by Fukuda Chiyo-ni, one by Katsuzo Seigetsu, one by Taneda Santoka, two by Ozaki Hōsai, and seven by Ryōkan Taigu. Obviously, Bashō outdoes all of the other poets with 17 books in French.

French translators and publishers seem to favor publishing Japanese poets who wrote alone, had a relationship with nature, and were more known as country dwellers than city dwellers. Issa was translated more than Buson and Shiki. Ryōkan seems to be the most translated poet, not only for his life of secluded poetry, but also because he practiced Zen Buddhism, resulting in many publications over several decades in France.

3. From One Country to Another

Paul-Louis Couchoud, a French man who studied philosophy, brought back his great enthusiasm for the *haikai* after a trip to Japan in 1904. He and three friends read *hokkus* in a small Parisian apartment while giving each other their impressions of them and drinking sake. They then found a place to have

meetings and created the first group of haiku poets in France. The only poet in the group was Julien Vocance. The others were a painter, sculptor, and philosopher. They were touched by this thing from abroad because of its difference, brevity, concision, and the relationship it helps develop with the world. But they do not know much about it and tried to turn it inside and out to understand its spirit and how it works. Paul Louis Couchoud wrote, “A *haikai* cannot be compared to a Greek or Latin distich or a French quatrain. It is not a ‘thought,’ a ‘word,’ a proverb, or an epigram in the modern sense or an epigram in the ancient sense, meaning an inscription, but a simple painting in three brushstrokes, a vignette, a sketch, sometimes a simple touch or an impression.”⁵

And what better way to adopt a poetic genre than by writing it? They too chose to isolate themselves to write haikus in French. They took a barge that was going to deliver its load of sugar in the center of France, by following the Seine River toward the south, then canals that overtake the Loire River. In this isolated area, a kind of island, they were able to start writing poems that did not belong to the literary history of their own country. Like a lot of Japanese haiku poets, they recreated an area of isolation in contact with nature and the environment. They identified with a poetic rupture with the French literary landscape.

Seventy-two *haikai* were published under the title *Au fil de l'eau (The Run of the River)*⁶, a collection of poems printed in 30 copies by the authors. The poems are interesting from a historical perspective and bear traces of the imitation of Japanese models, of course.

4. First Haikus in France

⁵ *Le haikai – Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon*, Paul-Louis Couchoud, La Table ronde, Paris, 1906, 2003 – p. 25

⁶ *Au fil de l'eau*, Paul Louis Couchoud, André Faure, Albert poncin, autoéité, Paris, 1905 ; Mille et une nuits, Paris, 2003

It was only at the end of World War I that haikus were written in French that could actually be called haikus by the poet in the above group: Julien Vocance. The poems in *Cent visions de guerre (One Hundred Views of War)* were written in the trenches on the English-French-German front, a total area of isolation. In this environment, Vocance most likely did not think of the huge distance separating Japan, France, and their two cultures. He used a poetic form that seemed rather bare to him in order to give accounts of the atrocious life of soldiers.

Large sections of pallid walls,

The men have the blues:

Lunar vision

These poems were published for the first time in the literary journal *La grande revue*⁷ in 1916, then later, in a collection of haikus called *Le livre des Hai-Kai (The Book of Haikai)*⁸, in 1937. They were republished in 2013 for the one-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the war⁹.

Vocance's writing practice shows the two areas that we saw before: socializing with his friends and isolation on the war front.

5. Reading There, Writing Here

Except for a publication in the *La Nouvelle Revue Française (The New French Review)* in 1920¹⁰, under the leadership of Jean Paulhan, and an anthology issue of the literary journal *Le Pample (The Vine Branch)* in 1923, under the

⁷ *La Grande Revue*, 20^e année, n°5, Paris, mai 1916

⁸ *Le livre des hai-kai*, Julien Vocance, Société française des éditions littéraires et techniques, Paris, 1937

⁹ *En pleine figure, haïkus de la guerre de 14-18*, Dominique Chipot, éditions Bruno Doucey, Paris, 2013

¹⁰ N.R.F., 7^e année, N°84, septembre 1920, p. 329-345

leadership of René Maublanc¹¹, haikus written in French were hardly present in the literary history of the country. The genre may have seemed too foreign. Its readership barely existed. Walls were put up to protect literature, which is at the center of France's national heritage. However, the Japanese haiku slowly crept into French literature¹². Several authors focused on it, the most well known being Paul Eluard¹³, Paul Claudel¹⁴, Yves Bonnefoy¹⁵, Philippe Jacottet¹⁶, and Roland Barthes¹⁷. At the end of the twentieth century, the haiku landscape in France was a landscape of reading, reviewing, and translating Japanese haikus. Around 1980, two anthologies^{18,19} of Japanese haiku made an impression and then helped relaunch haiku writing in French.

Patrick Blanche's first haikus were published in 1980 in the literary journal *Pour l'analyse du folklore (For the Analysis of Folklore)*²⁰, led by Maurice Coyaud, author of an anthology of Japanese haiku called *Fourmis sans ombre (Ants without Shadow)*. Patrick Blanche, an agricultural worker living in the Drôme, led a life of what could be called isolation. In Nyons, he founded an ephemeral group of French haiku poets called the "Toad School"²¹. To my knowledge, he is the only contemporary French haiku poet to have his work

¹¹ « Le haikai français, bibliographie et anthologie », par René Maublanc, in *Le Pampre* n°10/11, Reims, 1923

¹² *Le haïku en France – Poésie et musique*, sous la direction de Jérôme Thélot et Lionel Verdier, éditions KIMÉ, Paris, 2011 (compte rendu d'un colloque de l'université Lyon 3, mars 2010)

¹³ *Pour vivre ici, onze haïkaï*, Paul Eluard, NRF, Paris, 1920

¹⁴ *Cent phrases pour éventail*, Paul Claudel, éditions Koshiba, Tokyo, 1927 ; Gallimard, Paris, 1942, 1996

¹⁵ *Haïku*, avant-propos et texte français de Roger Munier, préface de Yves Bonnefoy, Fayard, Paris, 1978

¹⁶ *Haïku*, présentés et transcrits par Philippe Jacottet, Fata Morgana, Cognac, 1996

¹⁷ *La préparation du roman*, Cours au Collège de France, Roland Barthes, Seuil, Paris, 2003

¹⁸ voir note 15

¹⁹ *Fourmis sans ombre, Le livre du haïku-une anthologie promenade*, Maurice Coyaud, éditions Phébus, Paris, 1978

²⁰ *P.A.F., Pour l'analyse du folklore*, De loin-3, Paris, 1980, p. 47-55

²¹ *Un caillou dans l'herbe*, cinquante « haïku » de l'école du crapaud, éditions la Voix/e du Crapaud, Nyons, 1991

translated and published in book form in Japan²². Alain Kervern, a French translator of Japanese and poet, only translates haikus. As anyone who knows Japanese, he is more aware of the differences between the two languages and is bothered by the idea of writing haikus in French. His first poems written in the spirit of haiku were not published as them²³. He lives in Brest, the far western part of France and he asserts his Breton isolation. He conducts haiku writing workshops. In 1982, I published my first collection of haikus, with a preface written by Maurice Coyaud²⁴. I have devoted most of my writing to the haiku^{25,26}. Even though I am less geographically isolated than other haiku poets, I have been kept from the literary world because of my scientific education and work. I created a group of haiku poets called The Kukai of Lyon.

It is important to note in these three authors, the presence of the group and isolation in the writing landscape, not just physical isolation but also literary.

6. Popularity in the 2000s

From the year 2000 on, haiku associations and groups were founded in France. Many poets devote a large part of their activity to haikus, write and publish poems that no longer imitate Japanese haikus. The number of annual publications has increased year after year to reach several dozen. French haiku anthologies have been published^{27,28}. All of Bashō's *hokkus* have been

²² *Si léger le saule*, Patrick Blanche, traduction de Makoto Kemmoku, publisher Michitani co., Japon, 1997

²³ *Les portes du monde*, Alain Kervern, éditions Folle avoine, Bédée, 1992

²⁴ *Riens des villes et des champs*, Jean Antonini, éditions Aube, Lyon, 1982

²⁵ *Anthologie du haïku en France*, sous la direction de Jean Antonini, Aléas éditeur, Lyon, 2003

²⁶ *Chou hibou haïku, Guide de haïku à l'école et ailleurs*, sous la direction de Jean Antonini, Alter éditions, Lyon, 2011

²⁷ *Haïku sans frontières, une anthologie mondiale*, sous la direction d'André Duhaime, éditions David, Canada, 1998

²⁸ *Seulement l'écho*, anthologie de haïkus francophones, sous la direction de Dominique

translated²⁹. Contemporary Japanese haiku poets have been translated as well. French poets are in a similar situation to contemporary Japanese poets, except for their place within the literary community. The two areas that existed in Bashō's lifetime have been brought together again.

7. Conclusion

The haiku is a precious poetic object because of its ability to travel and cross cultures. Today, there are groups of haiku poets, not only in Japan, but also in a lot of other countries. The international practice of haiku has created a new landscape in poetry³⁰. The poets who are here today in Parma, Italy belong to and build this landscape. In this regard, it should be noted the important role played by the World Haiku Association in this construction.

A transcultural poetic practice is not that easy. It comes up against national borders and language barriers. This explains why in many non-Japanese countries, haiku poets' writing is not very recognized at the national level. In France, interest in Japanese haiku is more focused on poets with a rural, socially isolated, "natural" life. The solitary existential travels better from one country to another than the social existential. This shows that in some ways nature and environment make up a common landscape able to transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

To continue spreading the history of haiku around the world, we must no doubt favor nature and the environment, which form a kind of area without borders. This area is being mistreated and slowly destroyed by human activity and it needs haikus and haiku poets' resistance.

Chipot, éditions La Part commune, Rennes, 2010

²⁹ *Bashō Seigneur ermite, l'intégrale des haikus*, édition bilingue par Makoto Kemmoku et Dominique Chipot, éditions La Table ronde, Paris, 2012

³⁰ *World Haiku n° 1 à 12*, sous la direction de Ban'ya Natsuishi, W.H.A, Saitama, 2005 à 2016