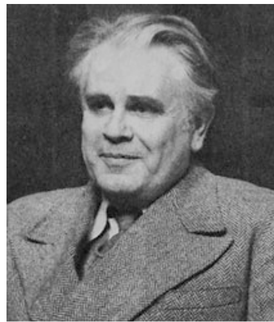
Reginald H. Blyth *Haiku* (1949–52)

Koichi Sembokuya



Reginald Horace Blyth. (Source: Reginald Horace Blyth, *Haiku*, Volume 1: Eastern Culture, The Hokuseido Press, 1949, p. 3)

Reginald Horace Blyth was born in Ilford, Essex, England in 1898 to a father who worked for the Great Eastern Railway. Reginald grew up as the only son of a middle-class family. During World War I, he evaded military service and, as a result, spent two years in prison in the City of London, where he became a vegetarian. He was taught by the eminent scholar William Paton Ker at the University of London and graduated with distinction. In the autumn of 1924, he taught English and English literature at the then recently founded Keijō Imperial University in Seoul. Soon after his arrival, he became devoted to D. T. Suzuki and eventually became a Zen practitioner himself. During that time, he experienced marital trouble and divorced

Koichi Sembokuya passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

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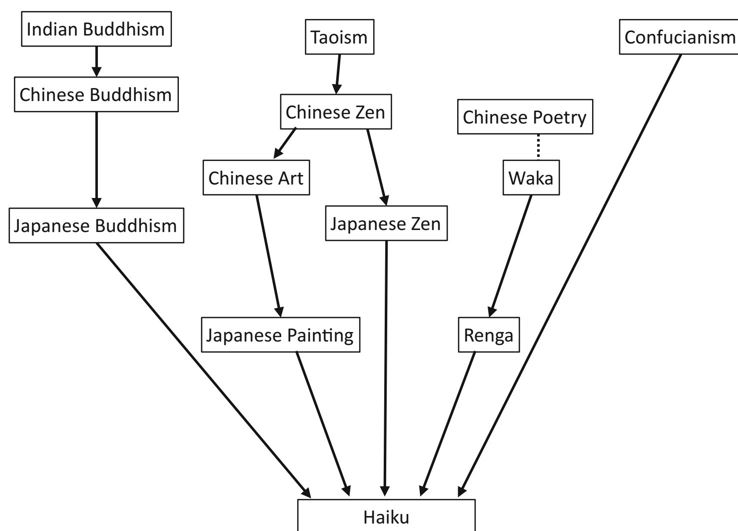
S. Saeki, T. Haga (eds.), *Masterpieces on Japan by Foreign Authors*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9853-9_29

his first wife, Anna, and married Kijima Tomiko in 1937. In 1940, he moved to the mainland Japan and taught at a number of universities, including the Fourth Higher School (under the old education system), Gakushūhin University, the University of Tokyo, and Nihon University. During the Second World War, he was interned in Kanazawa and Kobe, and some of the manuscripts of *Haiku* were written during his internment. Blyth and fellow haiku scholar, Harold G. Henderson, played a key role in Emperor Hirohito's "Declaration of Humanity" issued at the beginning of 1946. Blyth served as private tutor, until his death in Tokyo in 1964, to His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince Akihito (now His Majesty the Emperor Emeritus). In addition to *Haiku* and *A History of Haiku*, Blyth's major works include *Senryu: Japanese Satirical Verses*; *Japanese Humour*; *Oriental Humour, Japanese Life and Character in Senryu*; *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*; *Zen and Zen Classics*; *A Chronological Anthology of Nature in English Literature*; *A Short History of English Literature* and many other excellent and unique textbooks on wide-ranging subjects from English conversation to poetry and literature by the Wordsworth siblings, Thoreau, and many others.

It is said that when Asō Isoji, renowned for his research on Saikaku and Bashō, was the Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Tokyo, Blyth suddenly appeared at the door, almost standing still, and said, "I don't like Japanese literary scholars. They make a fuss about details and think that's the only way to learn. With an attitude like that, you can't really understand the merits of Japanese literature." As soon as he finished, he walked away. I thought this was very Blyth-like. All of his writings show that what Blyth said at that time was not just big talk, and the four volumes of *Haiku* are the most remarkable proof of this.

The first feature of this book is the magnanimity of his approach to haiku. The following is a transcription of a diagram that Blyth himself provided on the third page of the first volume.



Source: Reginald H. Blyth, *Haiku, Volume 1: Eastern Culture*, The Hokuseido Press, 1949, p.3.

As is clear from the above, for Blyth, haiku is a cultural phenomenon of the Far East, if not the entirety of Asia. This vast macroscopic perspective seems to follow the tradition of the England-born giants of Japanese studies, such as Basil Hall Chamberlain, George B. Sansom, and Arthur Waley. In the diagram above, the bond with haiku is particularly emphasized in Zen. For Blyth, Zen and haiku were almost synonymous. This makes sense, considering that D. T. Suzuki's English-language writings, especially *Zen and Haiku* gave an inputs to Blyth's *Haiku* and his earlier work, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*. That Suzuki writes "His thoughts were closely connected with Zen, though not always in the orthodox tradition," but of course this is not a condemnation. Blyth, a man of self-reliance all his life, did not want Zen to become old-fashioned and rigid, either. The following statements seem to be so natural when they're from Blyth's mouth: "When we say that haiku is a form of Zen, we must not assert that haiku belongs to Zen. It is Zen that belongs to Haiku. In other words, our notions of Zen must be changed to fit haiku, not vice versa. [. . .] if there is ever imagined to be any conflict between Zen and haiku, the Zen should be abandoned; the poetry of haiku is the ultimate standard." (*Haiku,* vol. 1, preface, pp. 6–7).

Many people seek happiness in life, but Blyth sought what can only be described as "blessedness." With this in mind, Blyth read and pored over many books from both the East and West, until one day he came across Buddhism, and then Zen. His eyes were opened by a phrase from the Vajra Prajnaparamita Sutra (the Diamond Sutra), which is said to have inspired Huineng (Enō), the Sixth Patriarch, to attain complete enlightenment: "応無所住而生其心." Blyth translates it as "Awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere" and refers to this as the "most profound, the most religious utterance in the world" (*Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, p. 27).

Zen shattered Blyth's tendency to escape reality, which was not absent in him, and brought him back into the midst of reality. Blyth never doubted that seeing blessedness in reality itself was both the spirit of Zen and of haiku. Blyth's writing has the effect of a magician who freely conjures up objects before the eyes of his audience. Laozi (Lao-tzu) (老子), Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) (荘子), Tao Yuanming (陶淵明), and Po Chü-i (Bai Letian or Bai Juyi) (白楽天) sit side by side with Shakespeare and Goethe. However strange it may seem, they are all part of Blyth's 'flesh and blood,' and he is far from being pedantic. Even if there are self-indulgent assumptions or complacent interpretations, there is no excessive sense of otherness. Therefore, the book certainly being Blyth's dissertation (directed by Asō Isoji, sub-reviewed by Hisamatsu Sen'ichi and Nakajima Fumio), *Haiku* is not a typical academic book. It is also a religious book or a "book of seeking." This is the other remarkable feature of this book.

As long as we stand on a purely academic footing, there is no way to connect English literature with Zen. Blyth, however, finds Zen throughout the works of English literature, including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dickens, and Stevenson, as well as Arnold, Keats, Shelley, Lawrence, Thoreau, Emerson, Goethe, Dante, Cervantes, and other major Western literary figures. His aim is, of course, not so much contrast as analogy. It is easy to criticize his attempt to bridge these high peaks

of East and West as hasty and reckless. In fact, this book has received such criticism, and even today, some of it persists both in Japan and in the United States. However, what compelled Blyth to break out of the norm was his poetic intuition, or rather, his thirst for poetry; and the spark of poetic spirit hidden within such audacity ignited the young people of the Beat Generation, including Ginsberg and Kerouac, in the late 1950s, and this in turn, I believe, led to the current abundance of haiku in the North America. By situating haiku at the intersection of Eastern and Western thought and culture, Blyth's work has once again revived the unique spirituality in the haiku that influenced the Imagist poets, especially Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, in the 1910s. Blyth's work has had a significant impact as a source of inspiration for the creative minds, so to speak, of the rapidly growing number of amateur haiku poets and many (but not all) poets, writers, and thinkers who studied Japanese literature in the United States in recent years—likely to a greater extent than Henderson's *The Bamboo Broom* or its revised and expanded edition, *An Introduction to Haiku*.

The haiku poets covered in this book include Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, "the four great haiku poets," as well as other haiku poets all from the Edo period (with the exception of Shiki). Of these four, Blyth focuses mostly on Bashō, followed surprisingly by Issa. His assessment that "Buson follows Bashō, Shiki follows Buson, but Bashō and Issa imitate no one; their life is their own." (*Haiku*, vol. 1I, p. 302) is very Blyth-like. Blyth called Bashō, who had deep ties to Zen, "the poet of life," and Issa "the poet of destiny." Blyth states that "Issa is like Heine, he has the power of saying lightly and humorously what others have only been able to say in the grand manner" (*Haiku*, vol. 1, p. 306). This seems to me to be a valid argument. (According to Blyth [Haiku, vol. 3, p. 232], Issa was also an embodiment of Zen.) For Blyth, the "artist" Buson seemed to lack the depth of Bashō, as his entry into nature remained in the realm of the senses and emotions. The clearer the image of the verse, the more the lack of depth stands out, making it less convincing. Even Blyth is not entirely closed-minded about the spring melancholy and malaise that is expressed in verses such as "As spring departs, How heavy This biwa feels! (ゆく春やおもたき琵琶の抱ごゝろ Yuku haru ya omotaki biwa no dakigokoro)," "Indifferent and languid, I burned some incense: An evening of spring. (等閑に香たく春の夕かなNaozari ni ko taku haru no yūbe kana)." However, in appreciating some verses about the passing of spring such as "Departing spring Hesitates In the late cherry-blossoms (ゆく春や逡巡として遅ざくら Yuku haru ya shunjun to shite osozakura)," "Today only Walking in the spring, And no more. (けふのみの春をあるいて仕舞けり Kyō nomi no haru wo aruite shimaikeri)," Blyth places more emphasis on the inevitability of the season moving into summer than on the regretful desire to hold on to the season, and in "Lighting one candle With another candle; An evening of spring (燭の火を燭に移すや春の夕 Shoku no hi wo shoku ni utsusu ya haru no yū)," Blyth delves into the mystery of life that is built into the season by alluding to "the light of life that is passed on from parent to child." There I feel that the Zen = haiku formula is strongly evidenced. The modernity of Buson's haiku, which is being unearthed in recent years, can be said to be the very opposite of Blyth's interpretation. It is obvious that modern haiku, with its diverse characteristics, cannot be fully explained by this formula. I am tempted by this thought when I

encounter interpretations of Buson's haiku, in which Zen sometimes seems to be a fetter.

When haiku was exported abroad, there was a tendency to neglect the seasonal themes and terms. This book, however, is arranged in the style of a *Saijiki* (an almanac of seasonal words for haiku), with each of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, except for the New Year, divided into seven categories: The Season; Sky and Elements; Fields and Mountains; Gods and Buddhas; Human Affairs; Birds and Beasts; and Trees and Flowers; with each category further subdivided into detailed sections. This is, of course, in keeping with the style of many haiku books, but it is also an insightful one. Neither Miyamori Asatarō's *One Thousand Haiku Ancient and Modern* nor Harold G. Henderson's *The Bamboo Broom* was written in the *Saijiki* style. This is because, although *Saijiki* is very popular today, at the time of this book's publication—around 1950—it was not.

Finally, I would like to present one haiku each from Bashō and Buson, each generally well-known verses in which Blyth's view of haiku works effectively, and his detailed appreciation matches the original. (Unfortunately, due to space limitations, I cannot cite the full text of Blyth's appreciation.)

"The silence; The voice of the cicadas Penetrate the rocks. (閑さや岩にしみ入る蟬の声 Shizukasa ya iwa ni shimiiru semi no koe)" (*Haiku*, vol. 3, pp. 816–8). On the point of this verse, Blyth states, "The silence is not only intensified in retrospect, it is not different from the sound of the cicada." To explain this "silence in sound, sound in silence," Blyth draws on *Caigentan* (菜根譚: Vegetable Root Discourse), Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and even a passage from Chuang-tzu (荘子) to point out the weakness of Thoreau's explanation. Blyth notes that Bashō's state of mind, "The beautiful scene was silent and still; my heart was at rest. I was conscious only of this. (佳景寂寞として心すみ行くのみおぼゆ)" is similar to Wordsworth's poem "we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul" *(Tintern Abbey*). Blyth concludes his appreciation of Bashō with Shelley's verse, "How calm it was!—the silence there By such a chain was bound, That even the busy woodpecker Made stiller with her sound The inviolable quietness." (*The Recollection*) and Shōhaku's verse, "The quietness; A chestnut leaf sinks Through the clear water. (静かさは栗の葉沈む清水かな Shizukasa wa kuri no ha shizumu shimizu kana)." In the Penguin Classics edition of *Oku no Hosomichi*, this verse is translated as "In the utter silence Of a temple, A cicada's voice alone Penetrates the rocks." The presence or the absence of a preposition at the beginning would concern the life of this verse. It is not a Zen verse, but it does have a Zen opportunity, and Blyth has it right. However, I daresay that Shelley's verse is too "wordy" (Blyth disliked this word along with "sentimental"), and the dignity of the verse is so different from that of Shōhaku. The phrase "Penetrates the rocks" is outstanding. This was one of the reasons for Bashō's painstaking elaboration.

"The spring sea, Gently rising and falling, The whole day long. (春の海ひねもすのたりのたりかな Haru no umi hinemosu notari notari kana)" (I, pp. 322–3). Although the verse may have a visual effect due to the *kana* writing, Blyth's appreciation relies solely on the auditory sense. After commenting the "sound of the sea striking the ear with its seventeen notes is more true than the sound of waves

actually heard on the seashore," Blyth goes on to describe the effects of sound in great detail. "The sounds of *hinemosu* almost reverse the sounds of *haru no umi*. The repetition of *notari, notari,* the *kana* which echoes the *a* sounds of *haru* and *notari*—all this represents, for some unknown reason, not so much the sound of waves, but rather the meaning of the long spring day by the shore. What *is* the meaning of this?" asks Blyth, and then brings up the verse again. I feel as if I had been evaded, but this is the Blyth way of Zen. It is said that the name of Blyth's elder daughter, Harumi (春海) derives from this verse (*Haru* means spring and *umi* means sea), and it must have been his favorite. In addition to appreciating it as verse, I feel that it reflects Blyth as a person, who played the flute and many other instruments, built organs, and loved Bach's music. It is almost impossible to discuss *Haiku* and his other writings without taking Blyth's personality into account.

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