NEW PERSPECTIVES ON BASHO'S FAMOUS HAIKU POEM ABOUT THE FROG

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Abstract: The present paper wishes to draw attention to different translations and, with them, to different interpretations of the famous frog poem by Matsuo Basho, considered the first ever haiku author. This haiku poem has become a staple for this poetic genre for Western culture members. Haiku is defined as a Japanese poem, based on its structure of three lines, arranged in a 5-7-5 syllable pattern, which is about nature. Basho's poem has been given as an example of awareness of the present moment, as Western culture members were thinking about it as an illustration of Zen philosophy (Hitoshi, 2011). Indeed, translated versions of this poem support this mindset, in the English and French languages. In the meantime, haiku poems written by contemporary Romanian haiku authors such as Eduard Ţară and Valentin Nicoliţov support this interpretation. Yet, Mark Ravina, PhD, teaching at Emory University, completely challenges everything we had previously known or thought we had known, presenting this poem as making a comic reference to conventions of the time, where the frog was a symbol of love, and according to whose interpretation Basho's poems was a humouristic one, baffling the expectations of his contemporary readers who expected a love story, but all they got was an ordinary frog jumping into a pond.

Keywords: Zen Buddhism, Hokku, Renga, Playfulness, Translations, Intertextuality, Conventions.

A reference point for the haiku poem and an example that goes hand in hand with the definition of haiku as a three line poem, grouped according to the 5-7-5 syllable pattern, including elements of nature, together with or as part of "a seasonal reference" (McCarty, 2008: 3) is the poem about the frog jumping in the pond written by Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), considered one of the great haiku masters, along with, as included by Lowenstein (2007), Yosa Buson (1716-1784), Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) and Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). For the majority of Western culture members, Basho's frog haiku is almost considered a part of the haiku's definition, not only in the sense of its specific features such as the focus on the present moment (Hitoshi, 2011; Louis, 2017; Rosenthal, 1987; Welch, 1995), but also with respect to the way visual imagery is used (Welch, 1995). The awareness of the present moment, the focus on a realistic scene in nature, without any figures of speech present about it, at least in the way Western culture poetry uses them in a lyrical way, which leads us to be removed from reality, as we attribute to nature various human emotions and behaviours, and we distort it, as well as the presence of concrete and not abstract elements are part of the features a haiku poem has which challenge the way Western culture poets think and write. As put forth by Blasko & Merski (1998: 39), "poets are cautioned to avoid the use of figurative language such as metaphor, which may obscure the expression of a simple perceptual truth." The language of the haiku poem is simple, since it is colloquial, or language as used in everyday life, and not artistically crafted in a conscious way so as to create figures of speech as in Western cultures' poetry. Yet, simplicity does not mean that this type of poetry, haiku, is easy to write or that it is superficial. On the contrary, the haiku poem is a "combination of simplicity of form and profoundness of meaning" (Blasko & Merski 1998: 39).

While other rules, such as the fixed structure of the poem, have been challenged by the Japanese masters themselves, such as Shiki, who did not respect the 5-7-5 syllable pattern in the Japanese language (McCarty, 2008), the other features remain landmarks for Western culture members in order for them to write authentic haiku poems.

Why do we feel the need to write authentic haiku poems? This could come as a reaction to the way the Japanese culture members themselves see haiku as a cultural product that distinguishes them from the rest of the world with respect to wiritng poetry, and which leads Western culture members to consider the challenging features of haiku poems exposed previously: "Japanese haikuists regard it as an inimitable part of their literature, aesthetics, and culture" (Mc Carty, 2008: 1). The attribute "inimitable" refers, likely, to the uniqueness of the haiku poem as cultural product, since it originated in Japan and nowhere else, until it was a poetry form taken over by the rest of the world. The Japanese are very open to the way Western culture poets write haiku and they are also very proud that other cultures appreciate this poetry form which has begun as a specific poetry form in their culture. This attitude of the Japanese could come from the way that they understand the taking over of this practice by other cultures' members as a form of them being willing to express empathy for the way that they view the world by means of this type of poem. Haiku poems are means of expressing Zen Buddhist philosophy (Ross, 2007), which is the main mindset and religion for the Japanese culture members. According to Zen Buddhism, the focus on the present moment is due to the fact that this is all we actually have, and as a result we should be aware of what is going around us at present. Otherwise, the past and the future are simple scenarios we make, and we should not stop and focus on them. Instead, we should accept that everything in this world is ephemeral, and that we are going to lose everything, including the persons that we love. Everything in this world is, thus, ephemeral, an idea which is expressed by means of the present moment, as a symbol of "life's being fleeting" (Temizler, 2019: 44). Decay is also an aspect of life that should be accepted (O'Neill, 2007). The latter is, after all, present in Japanese culture and in haiku under the form of the aesthetics of wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi deals with the beauty of imperfection (Suzuki, 2021), since everything we own in this life becomes worn, yet it remains beautiful to us. We can associate this with these objects being meaningful to us. At the same time, nature itself can offer us examples of wabi-sabi aesthetics, since nature is often both imperfect and beautiful, a contrast which is maintained in Japanese culture due to the way in which nature is viewed in practices such as Zen Buddhist garden arrangements and *ikebana*, or specific Japanese flower arrangements, as being the result of man not intervening to much to the point of making nature look artificial. Nature is supposed to be accepted and appreciated for what it is, just as the Zen Buddhist meditation practice encourages us to leave aside all our preconceptions about what nature means and how to interpret it, how to assign meaning to it based on what we have been taught by our education within the context of our culture. Such preconceptions are especially visible in the case of Western culture members who, apparently, distort the perception of nature using figures of speech and metaphorical type of thinking, when, in fact, they should just see nature for what it is and see everything from a completely new and fresh perspective, the same way as children do, as they are situated in a stage where their culture and their education has not been yet having a visible influence on them, for they had not yet assimilated it.

For Western culture members, this mindset resonates with their view on art, such as the one theorized by Shklovsky (2007: 3) in his theory of defamiliarization, claiming that art should challenge our perspectives and our preconceived notions about objects and situations, by presenting them from a fresh and unexpected perspective. Shklovsky (2007: 1) also tells us that "Art is thinking in images," which can be directly related to the way that the haiku poem challenges our perception, as members of Western culture. We are also told by Shklovsky (2007: 1) that "Poetry is a special way of thinking," which, once again, brings the haiku poem

close to us. In spite of all the specific cultural differences, we can still find a means to sympathize with the view of reality and with the way of creating art in the case of haiku poems.

When we try to understand something new to us, we always build up on our previous background knowledge, and we make various connections based on similarities and differences. The theories set forth by Shklovsky, a Russian Formalist representative, show how we can create connections with familiar elements and ways of thinking in our own culture, at least placing it at large level, as Western culture, in this case, Russian culture, to which not all of us belong to. European cultures are not homogenous, each and every one of them having particular features and traditions, which influence their cultural products, while also having similar elements, which we can believe are universal, or, at least, based on a universal understanding of life.

The haiku poem by Basho with the frog clearly embodies all the specific Japanese haiku poem features which Western culture members need to adopt, and which prompt them to start thinking differently about the poem, by contrasting haiku poems with the usual, stereotypical, lyrical poem of the Western world. For one thing, the setting is a very realistic one, and nature is not distorted in any way. The poem described a scene that is realistic, yet we should mention that the details chosen are not left to chance. The scene, while being visual and realistic, is also meaningful.

One of the translations of Basho's poem is the following: "The old pond,/ A frog jumps in:/ Plop!" (Watts 1999). This translation shows the precise sound of water, in which the frog plunges. In this way, the poem shows an authentic experience. What is more, the present moment is shown exactly as it happens, under the form of the interjection. Another one is Jane Reichhold's translation (2003), which mentions the explanation of the interjection, namely "the sound of water": "old pond/ a frog jumps into/ the sound of water."

According to Nicoliţov (2022: 211), Basho's frog poem can be interpreted according to the following: the old pond is a symbol of eternity, since the place can remain unchanged, while the frong's jump can represent the ephemeral, the passing moment. Nicoliţov is the leader of one of the Romanian haiku writers' communities, namely the Romanian Haiku Society, which publishes a magazine two times a year, as well as various books related to the haiku activity in Romania and at international level. Haiku authors that are members of the Society are promoted and supported by president Nicoliţov to publish their author's volumes.

Nicoliţov (2022: 211) presents a variation on Basho's poem in the haiku written by Romanian haijin Eduard Ţară: "În urma broaştei/ un plescăit în noapte -/ şi luna ţăndări," which could be translated as follow: "Behind the frog/ a splash in the night -/ the shattered moon" (my translation). Why is this a reference to Basho's famous frog poem? It is, apparently, a different experience, since it shows how, in a pond, or other body of water, the moon is reflected and then the reflection is broken by the frog's jump. The poem written by Eduard Ţară, thus, looks as being more spectacular and based on an optical illusion, which is the one of the moon's reflection in the pond. The moon's reflection can be understood as showing an illusion of perception, which is shattered, and through this shattering, the frog, with its jump in the water, brings up the viewer towards the present moment, as if breaking away the viewer's daydreams as he/ she witnesses the scene. The awareness of the present moment is, however, stronger in Ţară's poem, since, perhaps, Western culture members may not perceive the subtleties of the specific Japanese culture perception and sense of observation required by haiku poems. By making his poem so spectacular, Ţară in a way translates the experiences expressed by Basho in a way that has impact for the Western culture members. Western culture members see, in Ţară's version, very clearly how the experience in the haiku poem can challenge their perception and make them see usual experiences from a completely unexpected perspective. The element of the spectacular draws their attention and they can feel the experience all the

way along. Otherwise, they may have felt the experience as too quiet to actually resonate with it, as it may have been too subtle for them.

The poem written by Eduard Ţară can be interpreted as both an intertextual reference to Basho's poem, as well as a translation, through the reinterpretation of Basho's poem. The translation reinterprets the poem to fit in with the emotional sensitivity of the Western culture members. Eduard Ţară's version sounds, however, more creative and more surprising, to the point where we could claim that we are dealing with an instance of defamiliarization. Art, under the form of poetry, manages to show us how reality can cross and blur the borders between reality and fantasy through the actual reflection of the moon in the pond, which is real beyond arguing, yet which, by using language, created a completely different link with the realistic elements. The moon is shattered behind the frog's plunge and splashing into the river, which is an image that sounds as if it belongs to the realm of fantasy more than to the realm of reality. While the reflection in the pond is real, like in a mirror, it still created a fantasy-like connection between the cosmic space and the earthly space, which is also a connection between the eternal, symbolized by the moon, and the ephemeral, symbolized by the single instance of the present right here and now of the frog's splash into the water, as we have seen in the analysis given by Nicoliţov (2022: 211).

Nicoliţov (2022: 211) also presents another variant of Basho's poem, this time his own, which in Romanian sounds as follows: "Pe mal o broască/ în ciocul unei berze./ Şi niciun sunet." In my translation, the poem could sound as follows into English: "On the shore a frog/ in the beak of a stork./ Not a sound." The author, Nicoliţov (2022: 211), explicitly mentions that, in his interpretation, there is absolutely no sound, the splash of the water being replaced by complete silence. Mention should be made that silence, in Japanese culture, is not considered awkward, even in a conversation, as it is considered in Western culture. In Japanese culture, silence is considered to be a natural part, and a means of showing, indirectly, through body-language allusions, what the interlocutor actually means when uttering a word but meaning, in fact, something else, such as in the example of saying "yes," but meaning "no." An interlocutor would say "yes" when meaning "no" in order to show that they value their interlocutor and wish to maintain their collaboration, as well as the harmonious relationship (Iwai, 1996), yet they do not agree with what the interlocutor proposes, but still believes that improvements can be made.

Both reinterpretations, through intertextual allusions, as well as through the translation for the Western culture public, sound as bringing a creative twist to the original frog oem by Basho. They show, through the moon's shattered reflection and through the silence after the frog's leap, as it is caught in a stork's beak, respectively, an unexpected twist and an element bringing about a fresh perspective over an old, already known by anyone, haiku poem. Both authors add details that can surprise knowledgeable readers of haiku poems and which show that a small detail in haiku poems can give about an entirely new perspective over the whole poem, and, for that matter, a completely different interpretation and experience. The element of the shock experience when being brought into the present moment is stronger in the versions by Ţară and Nicoliţov, stirring even the sensitivity of Western culture members. In Ţară's version, we witness the return back to reality from, perhaps, a moment of daydreaming, when the moon was being reflected in the lake, and seemed so close, yet the illusion is shattered once the frog breaks the mirroring experience. In Nicoliţov's version, we notice the fragility of the moment, as the frog is caught by a stork, and we will no longer see it. Nicoliţov (2022: 211) mentions that he meant, with his poem, to say that everything in this world grows still once the frog dies. We can feel as if we are dealing with loss, since Basho's frog seemed eternal to us, if we were familiar with his poem. We notice how fragile life is, from a Zen Buddhist perspective, and how, even a frog in such a poem, is not at all everlasting. It is a small being,

subject to the laws of nature, to the passing of time, and to various risks it may encounter in nature, such as being caught by a predator.

The element of breaking is present in certain translations of the poem, in both English and French, and they can be correlated to the new interpretation offered by Eduard Ţară in his version which seems directly inspired by Basho, as suggested by Nicoliţov (2022: 211).

We could mention, from this point of view, of the word "breaking," the following translation of Basho's poem into English, belonging to Nobuyuki Yuasa: "Breaking the silence/ Of an ancient pond,/ A frog jumped into water —/ A deep resonance" (Ayaz & Khan, 2018: 46). The breaking of the silent moment in this translation is transferred, in Ţară's poem, to the concrete realm of experience, from the figurative one. Silence is disturbed, in the translation by Nobuyuki Yuasa, while the surface of the pond where the moon is reflected is also suggested to be broken, by being disturbed by the frog's jump.

The following French version of Basho's poem (2002) also mentions braking, in this case the breaking of the water, or, as readers can imply, of the water surface, just as in the case of Ţară's poem: "Vieil etang -/ un plongeon d'un grenouille/ l'eau se brise." We see, here, a reference to illusions, or favouring illusions in reallife, nature settings, when the moon is reflected in the pond, like in a mirror. This illusion is easily broken away by a common element in nature, in this case a frog which jumps in the water.

While the significance of Basho's poem looks clear, especially since it is based, in Nicoliţov's interpretation (2022: 211), on other, previous ones, at international level, with respect to a Western culture perspective, there is another interpretation which can overturn everything. This interpretation belongs to Mark Ravina, PhD, teaching at Emory University, and whose perspective is presented via the Youtube video uploaded by Real History (2020). Ravina (2020) present us the beginnings of the haiku poem, which started from renga, a sequence of poems, which talked, in a comic way, about everyday topics. We may know Basho nowadays as a haiku author yet, during his time, he was known as a renga author. Renga poems involved collaboration among poets, which, while preserving attention to the 5-7-5 syllables at the beginning of renga, began to be left aside, and groups or circles of poets where no longer needed, as the poem having a 5-7-5 syllables format were considered independently. The very work "haiku" is composed of "hai," originating in"haikai," which meant "humorous," "comic," "relaxed," and which referred to a poem using everyday life language. The new short versions of renga wer called "haikai no renga," referring to a humorous and comic renga. The "ku" from "haiku" comes from "hokku," which designated the lines opening the renga. Ravina (2020) refers to the following translation of Basho's frog poem: "An old quiet pond/ A frog jumps in/ The sound of a splash." Yet, Ravina (2020) mentions that, what is absent in translations, is the joke made in the Japanese language in a subtle way by Basho, as the frog, in classical Japanese poetry, based on its conventions, is a love symbol, since frogs make such loud sounds when they go through their mating ritual. The readers of Basho's times expected, since the frog was mentioned in Basho's poem, a love poem, yet the frog in his poem is just an ordinary one. Basho's classic haiku is, from the point of view of this interpretation, a poem exemplifying playfulness, just as the following example which can reach contemporary audiences given by Ravina (2020): "On a moonlight stroll,/ A long stroll beneath the sky,/ Where are the car keys?"

Ravina (2020) opens up, thus, a new perspective on Basho's frog poem to us, which we may not have been aware of, judging by looking at other interpretations. We can go as far as to conclude that Basho's poem was referring to the conventions of other poems, in an intertextual manner, and that it may have been, in fact, a senryu, or what we call today a humorous version of haiku poems.

Ravina (2020), thus, challenges our perception of Basho's frog poem, by challenging all other interpretations of this poem which have been summed up by Nicoliţov (2022: 211).

We can notice how Western cultures members have interpreted Basho's frog poem as an example to highlight what they perceived as different in Japanese culture as far as haiku poems where concerned and as far as a different mindset was required to write them.

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