The Narrow Road to a Deeper Understanding of Haibun

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Abstract

In seventeenth century Japan, Matsuo Basho wrote *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* in an innovative style that is still admired in contemporary English language critical theory and emulated in various forms of practice. The immense difficulties in integrating sections of prose and poetry, (traditionally in haiku), in the same text continues to engage and intrigue. Rich Youmans describes "the special excitement of encountering Basho's one-two punch: his gracefully evocative prose shifting into the deeply entwined, limpid poetry of his haiku". He claims that this is not always achieved by contemporary North American writers of haibun as they attempt to interrelate expository prose with the lyrical haiku, while acknowledging traditional Japanese climatic, geographic and literary allusions. The evolution of the haibun form, from texts by John Ashbery, to Jack Kerouac, to Robert Wilson's *Vietnam Ruminations,* continues to prompt ongoing debate. Attempts have been made (for example, by the *Society of American Haibun*) to codify what the form should and should not contain. These efforts to harness this cross genre approach have failed to successfully define what should constitute any aesthetically coherent interdependence of prose and poetry in an English language context. This paper argues that western writers must revisit the way trodden by Basho as he came to grips with his own literary encounter between classical Chinese and Japanese prose writing and the new style he evolved for his integration of this prose with traditional haikai. What have we overlooked in his written observations of his own principles and practices and how should we reposition these in diverse English language literary contexts.

Late last year, I completed a collection of poems concerned with the traumatic situation of AIDS-effected orphans in rural sub-Saharan Africa. Its published title is *Flame in the Fire*. Back in Australia earlier this year, I realized I wanted to portray another traumatic situation – the year our family lived in a dying mining town in rural Victoria. This time, the narrative would include diverse content forms; oral witness account transcriptions, diaries, newspaper articles and official documents, among others. This representation of the life narrative of a town will be a bricolage of public statements and personal journeys, a collage of prose and poetry. Sections of autobiographic poetic prose are accompanied by snatches of poems. I realized this last form of writing has a name: haibun. Its origins are in seventeenth century Japan and its development largely attributed to Matsuo Basho.

The Japanese Path and Beyond

Basho's haibun has been described by one of his translators, Nobuyuki Yuasa, as autobiographical travel sketches in which prose and a series of haiku poems 'illuminate each other like two mirrors held up facing each other" (Nobuyuki Yuasa in his Introduction to *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Basho 1966, p. 39).Versions of haibun in English first appear in the 1950's and are attributed to the so-called Beat generation. Gary Snyder's *Earth House Hold* (Snyder 1957) is generally accepted as one of the earliest attempts to write a long single text consisting of haibun. The evolution of the haibun form, from short pieces by John Ashbery, to Jack Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* (Kerouac 1965), to Robert Wilson's *Vietnam Ruminations* (Wilson 2003), continues to prompt ongoing debate. Attempts have been made (for example, by The Haiku Society of America) to codify what the form should and should not contain for publication. These efforts to harness this cross genre approach have so far failed to successfully define what should, or should not, constitute any aesthetically coherent interdependence of prose and poetry in an English language context.

Over the past decade, editors of haibun and haiku journals/magazines, together with the growing body of English language haibun practitioners, have been attempting to reach some understanding of guidelines and parameters for its definition, characteristics, exemplars and future directions. (This has been complicated by the parallel evolution of contemporary Western haiku and the problematic situation of addressing the haiku embedded in the haibun).
There seems a reluctance of academics to include haibun as part of the tradition of defining and understanding poetic form. This lack of secondary sources has resulted in an over reliance in this paper on discourse in other areas, such as online journals and introductions to anthologies, (often more concerned with possible directions for contemporary Western haiku.) However, the opinions of practitioners and advocates of Western haibun make informed and relevant observations regarding a genre they passionately care about, albeit with open-eyed reservations. This group, to whom I refer throughout this paper, include Bruce Ross, Jim Kacian, Jeffrey Woodward, Rich Youmans, Ray Rasmussen from USA, David Cobb, Ken Jones and Graham High from UK, and Janice M Bostok, Beverley George, Patricia Prime and Owen Bullock from Australasia.

This paper examines the discourse relating to purpose, content and style of contemporary Western English language haibun form. I have limited discussion to the 'contemporary' timespan 2000 – 2010 and the term "Western' to only embrace

English language communities in the USA, the UK and Australasia. Within these narrowed confines there is still considerable debate, unfortunately generally limited to practitioners rather than academics. But this has not disheartened the haibun evolution. The immense difficulties involved in integrating sections of prose and poetry, (traditionally in haiku), in the same text, are acknowledged by Rich Youmans in his praise for Basho's haibun: "the special excitement of encountering Basho's one-two punch: his gracefully evocative prose shifting into the deeply entwined, limpid poetry of his haiku" (Youmans and Ramsey 2011 np). He freely admits that this is not always achieved by contemporary North American writers as they attempt to interrelate expository prose with lyrical elements in the haiku, while also encompassing traditional (Japanese) climatic, geographic and literary allusions in a Western context. I suggest a possible, seemingly simple, approach for dealing with such issues: a re-examination in the twenty-first century, by English language haibun theorists and practitioners, of the fundamental principles in Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*).

The contemporary Western Path

What is it about haibun that makes it a unique cross genre entity? The reluctance of English literary traditionalists to consider poetry and prose in the same context has limited such a discourse. "Poetry is poetry and prose is prose – how often have we heard that! Poetry has one mission and prose another."(Virginia Woolf in Bradshaw 2008, p.55). Early in the twentieth century Virginia Woolf identified the central attribute of prose as its "marvellous fact-recording power" (p.80), but that "prose has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry" (p.82). Poetry and prose continued as discrete genres, for the most part, for the rest of the twentieth century. Exceptions include James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, which continue to defy genre classification. Verse novels and prose poems occasionally appear in literary publications. In a 1991 interview, Harold Bloom declared: "Almost everything written and published and praised in the United States as verse isn't verse, let alone poetry. It's just typing, or word processing" (Bloom 1991, p.24). Definition of what constitutes contemporary poetry is difficult enough, without considering a cross genre form. Defining what happens when poetry and prose are employed in a single text is another matter altogether. Haibun observers think they may have a partial answer.

For American Bruce Ross, haibun epitomises "a narrative of an epiphany. Haiku, on the other hand, offers us an epiphany, a revelation" (Ross and Woodward 2008, np). There must be a "flow of sensibility" between the haiku and prose, what Ross alternately calls the "privileging the link" in this delicate balance. This is an opinion he confirmed a decade after its original appearance in his *Journey to the Interior: American Versions of Haibun (*Ross 1998). It is a view shared by Jim Kacian. In an interview with Patricia Prime he claims that while the haiku in the haibun may sometimes seem unrelated to the prose, "in the hands of the very best practitioners, the reader will discover not only the thread that connects the two parts, but that it is an essential thread, connecting in both directions, providing meaning to both elements" (Prime 2008, p.4). This linking is what makes haibun different to any other prosimetrum. But the problem of relative merit of the haiku within the haibun and the haibun prose itself is still unresolved. Haiku exponents claim superior status for the form, and many of them also write haibun.

For Welshman Ken Jones "…it's rarely worth attempting to write a haibun unless you have evidence that you can write a good haiku" (Jones 2011, np). For haiku writers the task of writing the prose within haibun provides challenges while the opposite is true for prose writers attempting haibun. Poets are not necessarily good prose writers nor even experts in haiku and alternately, prose writers often find poetry a challenge. Further issues relate to whether the haiku within haibun needs to conform to the guidelines tentatively established for contemporary Western haiku, or whether the haiku of haibun is identifiably different. Little insight has been shed here by academic theorists in either of the associated fields of poetry and prose. While this debate also lies outside the confines of this paper, it has obvious repercussions for any agreed development of contemporary Western haibun. While haiku remains the generally accepted style within haibun (for the present at least), theories as to what purpose it holds within, and for, the haibun have been articulated by practitioners.

For Ken Jones, this means the haiku "need to be strong in their own right" while at the same time "powering up the prose" (quoted in McClintock 2003, np). For "the grand Old Man of British haiku" David Cobb, the best haibun "tend to use pre-existing haiku, very likely haiku that have already appeared in print without any consideration of them later forming part of a haibun" (Cobb 2011, np). His concerns lay more with their number and placement within the haibun, so they coincide with "those few places where the prose shifts in a new direction … a change of mood" (np). For Graham High "some less successful haibun appear to have been constructed by taking a favourite haiku (or perhaps an otherwise unclear haiku) and writing a short contextualising back-story to it" (High 2006a, pp.3-4). In the same article he quotes David Cobb as having written of himself that "after devoting 20 years to freestanding haiku David Cobb feels he may be ready to extend his range into haibun", the inference perhaps being that the haiku written particularly for a specific haibun is a challenge he has yet to embrace and one equally complex as composing haiku only (pp.3-4).

Regardless of the individual literary merit(s) or otherwise of the haiku within a haibun, the question remains: what are the purposes for inclusion of these haiku, with prose, in this particular form? Is it possible to envisage poetic styles other than haiku within haibun? Where do the 'rules' governing Western haiku come from and how closely do they follow the model of haiku in haibun set by Basho in T*he Narrow Road to the Deep North*? Traditionally, its translations into English have three lines of haiku with seventeen syllables. Yet Nobuyuki Yuasa makes clear, in his Introduction to Basho's text that, as haiku is basically colloquial in tone, "in my opinion, the closest approximation of natural conversational rhythm can be achieved in English by a four-line stanza rather than the constrained three-line stanza" and that his translation "is not for purists who insist (without believing either in its validity or possibility, I presume) that *haiku* should be translated with the original seventeen syllable scheme or at least three lines" (in Basho 1966, pp.48-49). Similar observations can be made regarding the arbitrary distinctions drawn by English writers as to what constitutes haiku and senryu. Do these correspond with original Japanese forms and if they don't, does it matter?

For Ray Rasmussen too, haibun, with its possibilities for considerable literary merit, should no longer to be considered "the poor relative of haiku" (Woodward and

Rasmussen 2011, p.2). Rich Youmans concurs, contributing: "If a haiku can be eliminated or re-written as prose and the haibun suffers no discernible change in state, then it is not really a haibun: rather it is a prose poem masquerading as a haibun" (Youmans 2011, np). For Youmans the whole is always greater than the parts:

> A haibun *must* need its haiku. In fact, a haiku must be so organically one with the aesthetic whole that its excision would be deeply harmful – like losing an arm or leg. An arm (a haiku) and a torso (the prose) have very different functions, yet they are of one intact person".
> (Youmans and Ramsey 2011, np).

The above views are from UK and US haibun proponents and much of what they convey is shared by Australasians such as Patricia Price (NZ), the late Janice M Bostok (Queensland) and her authorised biographer Sharon Dean, as well as other Australian poets including John Tranter, Beverley George and Graham Nunn. In an interview with her biographer Bostok describes haibun "as a pure form of creative writing" and points out that haibun in Japanese means 'haiku prose' (Dean 2008, np). In this she agrees with Bruce Ross that haibun's uniqueness is that it reflects a haiku 'sensitivity' present in such texts as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North.*

A Back to the Future Path

Some in the contemporary Western haibun community have already broached a return to the basic principles and practices of Basho. As Bostok observed: "Anyone wanting to learn about haibun should look at its history and follow its development in Japan, but then move on from there' (Dean np). Youmans, Jamie Edgecombe, and their UK counterparts Cobb, Jones, Graham High and Lyn Lees, are all steeped in traditional Japanese haiku practices and well aware of connections with Basho's work. They are also knowledgeable regarding the publications by academics specialising in studies of Japanese literature, such as Haruo Shirane, Koji Kawamoto and Chen-ou Lui.

In his article 'A Few Timely Heresies about English Haibun' Cobb identifies what he considers to be significant observations by Japanese poets and critics in an attempt to establish some workable guidelines for contemporary Western haibun development (Cobb 2011, np). For example he contradicts the belief that Basho shunned abstract and conceptual words: "Basho does if fact make some use of abstractions and is occasionally judgemental, using expressions like 'the fatal sinfulness of these people's nature"' (np). He encourages contemporary Western haibun practitioners to return to the Japanese masters for guidance, rather than the self-appointed standards set by journal editors and society committees. His 'list' of recent 'rules' that can be broken, as they don't conform with the original Japanese model of Basho's haibun include the insistence on the present tense, a detached, objective viewpoint, natural non abstract observations, no direct speech and rigid adherence to the number and placement of haiku.

Koji Kawamoto, in an article predominantly concerned with haiku, nevertheless makes some interesting observations regarding the preconceptions of contemporary Western haiku and haibun proponents. He sees Basho as "an avant-garde classicist" (Kawamoto 1999, p.712) whose example should be followed in combining the past and present/ permanence and change in the doctrine of *fueki ryuku (fueki* the

unchanging *and ryuko* the ever-changing*)*. Haruo Shirane agrees, suggesting that when Basho visited "the poetic places of the ancients" it was to view what had "physically decayed and disappeared, becoming constant reminders" of what was ever-changing (Shirane 1998, p.266). Not just literal but figurative landscapes, such as that of classic Chinese and Japanese language and literature, were used by Basho to generate a new poetic landscape, to intermingle historic and mythical allusions in a travel diary/journal prose of a new literary genre. Kawamoto stresses the importance to English to exploit its own poetic tradition in order to avoid losing it, as the Japanese have themselves partially lost ties with their own classical tradition in recent times.

Haruo Shirane reinforces and embellishes these views, once again, in an article primarily concerned with haiku, but nonetheless with relevance to those interested in haibun. He identifies several key elements of contemporary Western haibun that have false premises in the Basho model they claim to follow. He takes issue with the haiku "as Direct Personal Experience or Observation" (Shirane 2000, np), that it be non-metaphysical and 'of the moment' and argues that it is impossible to establish a definition that straddles different cultures and languages: "In short, while haiku in English is inspired by Japanese haiku, it cannot and should not try to duplicate the rules of Japanese haiku because of significant differences in language, culture and history" (Shirane 2000, np). For example, the seasonal references in Japanese haiku contains cultural import that English haiku cannot equal, especially when a persimmon tree in North America drops its fruit at a different time of year to one in Australia, or even Canada. Although sharing a common language English, literature traditions vary as do cultural attachments to the features in the physical landscapes. For example, an American visitor would not fully appreciate the significance of the Blue Mountains, the crossing place of first white settlers into an unknown continent, Australia. Shirane contributes the following observation regarding the future form of contemporary Western haibun:

> haikai and the hokku in particular is often best appreciated and read as part of a sequence, as part of an essay, a poetry collection, a diary or travel narrative, all forms that reveal the process of exchange, linkage, and that give haikai and haiku a larger context. Bash's best work was *Narrow Road to the Interior*, in which the haiku was embedded in a larger prose narrative and was part of a larger chain of texts.
>
> (Shirane 2000, np).

For Toronto essayist Chen-ou Liu the focus is on haibun and his article provides a precise analysis of the contemporary Western haibun scene. He cites Koji Kawamoto and Haruo Shirane, among others, as providing insights into how non-Japanese haibun may evolve (Lui, 2012). He lists key principles established by Basho through his writing of *Narrow Road to the Interior* and which came to define the new literary form, haibun. He quotes Atsushi Mori's work in identifying Basho's preoccupation with "balance as antithesis" (np) and its interplay with Shirane's notion of Basho's vertical/horizontal axis synthesis of the past in the present and vice versa. Basho's genius in combining elements of Chinese and Japanese language, vernacular and poetic usages, together with traditional poetic, historic and mythical allusions achieved a form that began as an 'incidental' travel diary, supposedly spontaneously

written as a pseudo comic/humorous relief for the entertainment of fellow sufferers from bed lice and other related seventeenth century travel hazards.

Bitten by fleas and lice
I slept in a bed
A horse urinating all the time
Close to my pillow

(Basho 1966, p.120)

Like Koji and Shirane before him, Chen-ou Liu implores those who care about the evolution of contemporary Western haibun to "re-think Basho's principle of 'the unchanging and the ever-changing' within one's own socio-historic-cultural context, and to make haibun anew through the poetic past of one's own literary legacy and shared ones from the rest of the world" (Lui 2012, np).

So, have Westerners adopted the suggestions of Karamoto and Shirane to more closely follow Basho's narrow road? What innovative reinventions of the prose and verse components of haibun are being experimented with, across the diverse English language communities? Can haibun now be considered to consist of a sequence of short poems and haiku? Perhaps even a sequence of short poems and haiku and prose? Published haibun, since the beginning of a new decade, would seem to suggest the status quo. For my own creative practice, I am writing a long narrative with haibun embedded so they form a chain with other prose and free verse poetry pieces, along the lines suggested by Shirane. I am particularly interested in experimenting with the haibun prose, trying to find an appropriate diary style for a young, busy mother on her first day in a new home in the dying mining town. I also break the English 'rules' in regard to the haiku, but strive to keep the epiphany connection and allusions to the natural world, in this case the juxtaposition of an exotic garden in a doomed brown coal valley.

I creep to peep through the crack
between the blind & window frame. Heavy dew
on lawns & necklace of a spider web
in the lilac tree. I can't see the cooling towers from here

dark matter is dark energy
buried in the black hole
evaporating slowly

I hope to emulate Basho's delicacy in dealing with extremely personal and public tragic moments. The ability to convey grief and loss through references to a cultural and natural environment is one of the hallmarks of Basho's haibun. The sentiment is tightly controlled within the coded boundaries of haiku and the more lyric, yet similarly constrained, but beautifully wrought prose. It is left to the reader to experience the epiphany in discovering the connections between all these carefully arranged components. For example, before he began his pilgrimages around Japan, Basho lost his mother, his mentor, his house and his job. In *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, written during the 1684-5 journey, he revisits his family village: "I could not find a single trace of the herbs my mother used to grow in front

of her room. The herbs must have been completely bitten away by the frost" (Basho 1966, p.55) He is given an amulet bag by his brother containing her hair:

"Should I hold them in my hand
They will disappear
In the warmth of my tears
Icy strings of frost."

Conclusion

> It was Basho's genius that led him to recognise the importance of combining past and present … to invest the mundane and up-to-date with the deep meaning of serious poetry.
> (Kawamoto 1999, p.717).

In Japan, before Basho, haibun existed as prefaces, headnotes to hokku, short essays which were more in classical prose than Basho's haikai style, and employed vernacular Japanese and Chinese words. In contrast, by beginning to write haibun prose that incorporated both Japanese and Chinese vernacular, Basho managed to rework and condense his prose into a type of poetry with inbuilt, more natural rhythms. In fact, Basho's classic *Narrow Road to the Interior* contains a wide variety of prose styles – from largely Chinese formal to softer classical to more vernacular or a combination of all three simultaneously. The rigidity with which contemporary Western haibun has kept to terse, unemotional prose has tended to produce unimaginative texts that display little experimentation. There is a need to revisit Basho and see how to resolve this impasse.

Contemporary Western haibun possesses properties and creative diversities as yet undocumented in literary scholarship. There appears to be an acknowledged lack of academic theoretical discourse relating to this cross genre and this paper is a contribution that is timely, globally relevant, as well as adding another Australian voice to the haibun discussion. However, there remains the issue not touched upon here: the response of the reader/audience. What happens to traditional responses to the disparate forms of poetry and prose in the context of the English language literary tradition? Are they altered when readers are exposed to/in a different yet interrelationship between forms? The borders of the prose poem and prose, between haiku and the short poem, notions relating to the linking of poems in an extended narrative across a single long text to constitute a haibun, have yet to be pushed to their considerable limits. As these are all intricately interconnected to the concept of contemporary Western haibun, the narrow road keeps developing interesting twists and turns. Basho would be pleased; everything remains unchanged and ever-changing.

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