

Reality and Imagination: Sketches from Life

DAVID BURLEIGH

Poets and painters, like other people of intersecting interest, sometimes form groups to exchange ideas or discuss their work, and out of this a new movement may be born. Often the first gathering takes place in the city – the Impressionists in Paris, the Imagists in London – but there may also be some repair later to the countryside, where they can work out their ideas by spending time together. One thinks of Coleridge and Wordsworth at Nether Stowey, the dawn of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. One such short-lived meeting of minds was the subject of an exhibition in Tokyo last year.

“Van Gogh and Gauguin: Reality and Imagination” was a splendidly mounted show at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, running from early October till the week before Christmas. It centred on the time that Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived together in the Yellow House at Arles, and the walls of the third gallery were all yellow, like the borders of the posters and the flyers. It was so good, and so uncrowded, that I went a second time. But what came to me especially on the first visit, as I tried to puzzle out the short quotations from the painters’ letters displayed on the walls, was how the difference between them seemed to mirror or echo another familiar debate, this time in haiku. I tried explaining this to my companion on that occasion, without much success, so I will try instead to set it down here.

The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and the French artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), both of them legendary today, have been the subject of so many fictional and non-fictional studies and stories that the outlines of their lives scarcely need an introduction. They are known generally as post-Impressionist painters, and their work developed or transcended the initial break with a stultified academic tradition in French art enacted by Manet, then Monet and the other artists of the “impression”, in what came to be known as Impressionism. Van Gogh and Gauguin, having abandoned their former lives as missionary and stockbroker respectively, to become

painters instead, first encountered each other in Paris in late 1887, after Gauguin had returned from Martinique. Vincent, as he always signed his paintings, had been deeply impressed by Gauguin's work when he saw it, and they took to each other when they met. Gauguin then joined some other artists in Brittany for a time, while Vincent moved south to Provence in search of warmth and brighter colours.

In renting the Yellow House in Arles, subsidised by his brother Theo, Vincent hoped to entice other artists to join him there, forming an artists' colony, a Studio of the South. Gauguin was gradually persuaded to join him, and the two painters shared the two-storey house for nine weeks in the late autumn of 1888. Gauguin arrived there on 23 October, departing finally on Christmas Day, the artists' strained relations having reached a crisis when Vincent first threatened his friend, then severed part of his own ear. But in the interval they had accomplished a great deal.

The differences between the two artists became apparent as they worked together. During the previous summer they had exchanged letters, in which realisation of this had begun: "His correspondence with Vincent van Gogh in the summer of 1888 was crucial to Gauguin's consciousness and subsequent construction of himself as a Synthetist and Symbolist," explains one critic.¹ Vincent preferred *plein air* painting, or using models, while Gauguin worked just as much from memory and imagination. "Gauguin was happy to abstract away from what was in front of him; Vincent was more attached to what he saw," says Martin Gayford in a recent study of the artists' cohabitation.²

This "northern and Protestant" attachment to reality on Vincent's part probably owed something to his loss of religious faith, "the painful disappearance of supernatural belief".³ Gauguin had dallied earlier with pointillism, but turned away from it: "Pointillism seemed to Gauguin all too rational, scientific and external. He was searching

¹ Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), p. 65. The Tokyo exhibition included Gauguin's early painting, *La petite rêve* (1881), a study of his daughter Aline asleep, "a strange foretaste of his later preoccupations with the world of the unconscious," says the author, p. 25.

² Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles* (London: Penguin Books, 2007; first pubd. 2006). A later study by Martin Bailey, *Studio of the South: Van Gogh in Provence* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2016), covers much the same ground, and shares a title with the major exhibition on this subject at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2002, "Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South", still available in book form and online.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

for an art that dealt not with appearances but with dreams.”⁴ The contrast is emblematised in two famous paintings made by Vincent of the chairs they each habitually used, Vincent’s straight-backed, much plainer and simpler, “has on its seat his pipe and tobacco,” while on Gauguin’s more rounded and comfortable one “he placed two ‘novels’ and a candle, representing another kind of solace and inspiration – the kind that came from reading and imagination.”⁵ Vincent was certainly a prodigious reader, but of Naturalist writers like Flaubert and particularly Zola, whereas Gauguin had aligned himself in a self-portrait with Jean Valjean, the romantic hero of *Les Misérables*.⁶ Vincent painted sunflowers, while Gauguin painted Vincent painting the sunflowers, and then painted them again later himself, in 1901, not in a vase but in disarray on an armchair much like his own more comfortable one in Vincent’s picture. Gauguin greatly admired Vincent’s sunflower paintings, whose yellow brilliance has come to represent the whole enterprise of the Studio.

Vincent’s hope that the Yellow House would fill with other artists never came to pass, and he himself moved on to Auvers, and met his tragic end there, while Gauguin made plans to travel to Tahiti. They were never to meet again, though they continued to exchange letters until Vincent’s death. A strong red is characteristic of some of Gauguin’s more distinctive paintings, as well as other bright hues. When he returned to Paris from his travels in 1893 and took a studio in Montmartre, he “painted the walls chrome yellow” the better to display his paintings.⁷

Both Van Gogh and Gauguin have a place in the history of Japonisme, as is again well-known, especially in Vincent’s case, from their having come under the influence of the bold colour palette, flatter surfaces, and unusual points of view in Japanese woodblock prints, which had become available in Europe. In 1895, several years after the venture of the Yellow House, and on the other side of the world in Japan, two important literary figures had a strangely parallel experience, sharing a house together for almost the same length of time.

The novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) and the poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) first became friends as students in Tokyo, in which

⁴ Ibid, p. 125.

⁵ Ibid, p. 172. The divergence in their taste was epitomised by their conflicting responses to the works on display at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, which they visited together in December 1888. See Gayford, op. cit., pp. 264–272.

⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷ Thomson, op. cit., p. 182.

the former had grown up, and to which the latter had come from his hometown of Matsuyama in Shikoku. That they were of an age we cannot help noticing in the 150th anniversary year of their birth, though the first was a little older. In both cases the names by which we know them now, Sōseki and Shiki, were pen-names adopted later.⁸ While we remember them as novelist and poet, and editor and poet, respectively, they did not launch their literary careers at once. Sōseki studied Chinese classics, and then English literature, spending some time at a Zen temple in Kamakura before he took a job as an English teacher in Matsuyama.⁹ Shiki meanwhile took an interest in philosophy, as he once had in politics, and tried writing a novel, without much success.¹⁰ He too studied English, and was in fact the first person to translate Bashō's classic verse about the frog into English in 1892,¹¹ while later also coining the word "haiku" nowadays used to describe it.¹² However, his main occupation was writing for a newspaper, *Nippon*, in which he had a platform for his opinions, especially his rereading of traditional haiku and commentary on that, a task that proved seminal in the reform and modernisation of the genre.

In the spring of 1895, following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Shiki went to Manchuria to report on this. By this time he had already moved to the house in Negishi where he was to spend the last decade of his life.¹³ The trip to China was disastrous: even before he left his health was not good, and when he returned by ship to Kobe, he was seriously ill. For two months he convalesced in a hospital there, sometimes close to death.¹⁴ When he had recovered enough to be discharged, he first went to a nursing home, then returned to Matsuyama,

⁸ It is common practice for haiku poets especially to use pen-names. "Shiki" refers to the *hototogisu*, or little cuckoo, said to sing until its throat bleeds, and was chosen when the poet first coughed blood. See Donald Keene, *The Winter Sun Shines In: A Life of Masaoka Shiki* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 44–45. Sōseki's pen-name was of Chinese literary provenance, and he used it first in 1889, according to Beongcheon Yu, *Natsume Soseki* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 13.

⁹ Yu, *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ See Janine Beichman, *Masaoka Shiki* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986; first published 1982), Chronology and Chapter One, pp. 1–18.

¹¹ Keene, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 224, n. 5. Previously it would have been called either *hokku*, as the opening verse of a sequence, or *haikai*, referring to the genre.

¹³ The small wooden house, a faithful reconstruction of the original one that burnt down in World War Two, still exists and is open to visitors, while in Matsuyama there is a large museum devoted to Shiki's life and work.

¹⁴ For a detailed account, see "Cathay and the Way Thither", chapter five of Keene, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–90.

where he was invited to stay with Sōseki, his old friend from university days who had now become a teacher at the Matsuyama Middle School. They shared a house for about two months in the autumn, almost the same amount of time as the two painters had shared one in southern France. Sōseki was already writing haiku using the pen-name *Gudabutsu*, meaning “a fool and no Buddha”, and this self-mocking moniker was then applied by others to the house, known from their later recollections of it as the *Gudabutsu-an*, the poets’ hermitage.¹⁵

Unlike the shared residence of the two painters in Arles, the coming together of the two Japanese writers in Matsuyama was accidental and unplanned, though there was perhaps some familiarity involved in Sōseki’s having accepted a job in his old friend’s hometown, which he had visited before. Donald Keene has noted the difference in their personalities: “Sōseki was solitary, and sensed a chasm separating him from the world. Shiki was gregarious.”¹⁶ Yet in spite of this, Shiki drew his friend into his own circle of activity, as Janine Beichman describes:

During Shiki’s stay in Matsuyama, a group of young haiku devotees who had christened themselves the Wind in the Pines Society (*Shōfū Kai*) adopted him as their mentor and filled Sōseki’s house every day. Eventually, according to his own account, Sōseki was lured down from the second floor by their enthusiasm and became one of their number. Shiki introduced them all to the new haiku style he had been developing since 1892.¹⁷

Already Shiki was gathering people round him, as he would again in Tokyo, where his home became a meeting-place for literary debate. The sessions of haiku composition in Matsuyama which Sōseki took part in are richly documented, and illustrated too by sketches of all the participants, with their names added.¹⁸ The farewell verses that the two friends composed on parting, when Shiki returned to Tokyo, are

¹⁵ See *Shiki and Matsuyama* (Matsuyama: The Matsuyama Municipal Shiki-kinen Museum, 1986), pp. 70–71. The museum, known locally as “*Shiki-haku*” contains a reconstruction of the house.

¹⁶ Keene, op. cit., p. 55

¹⁷ Beichman, op. cit., p. 21. See also Imanishi Kanichi, et al., eds., *Botchan-jiten* (Tokyo: Bensei-shuppan, 2014), entries on “*Gudabutsuan*” pp. 141–142; “*Shōfū-kai*” pp. 152–153; “*Zenki-haiku*” pp. 157–159; and “*Masaoka Shiki*” pp. 195–197.

¹⁸ These records are mostly held in the museum in Matsuyama, but some are currently (2017) on display at the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature in Yokohama.

now inscribed on stone monuments in front of the school where Sōseki taught.

That it was a fruitful period no-one any longer doubts: almost a third of the haiku that Sōseki composed are thought to derive from this time, and afterwards he would continue to submit his and others' work to his friend's judgment. Likewise Shiki benefitted from the exchanges with someone as rigorous and well-informed as Sōseki in other fields, so that Shiki's own haiku "definitely improved".¹⁹ Shiki's important critical work, *Haikai taiyō* (The Elements of Haiku), "which gave an overall finish to his haiku reform movement" and "became a touchstone for modern haiku", was completed at this time, and sent off for publication in the newspaper.²⁰ His strong views, forceful example and radical critique have affected the whole history of haiku, right down to the present time. Back in Tokyo he continued his reappraisal, provocatively denigrating the work of the revered seventeenth-century master Matsuo Bashō, and lauding instead the eighteenth-century poet-painter Buson, whom he offered as a model. The key element in all of this came from Western painting.

Shiki's best haiku and mature style date from the period after he had shared a house with Sōseki, but cannot be wholly or simply attributed to that, for the experience of illness had also made him aware of his own mortality, and from then on his life became increasingly restricted. It is the struggle with pain and the approach of death that makes his later prose and poetry so moving and impressive.

Shiki, as one recent critic puts it, failed as a writer of fiction because he could not "lie".²¹ Instead, along with the bold declaration that haiku was a form of "literature", rather than a parlour game, Shiki stressed the importance of realistic observation, of haiku as a "sketch from life" (*shasei*). This idea had come to him through discussion with his friend the Western-style painter Nakamura Fusetsu, who had studied under Asai Chū, who in his turn had been taught by an Italian landscape painter, Antonio Fontanesi, originally invited to teach Western painting in Japan.²² The practice of *plein air* painting, the artist with his easel precisely depicting what is before him, albeit with some selection and rearrangement, is directly reflected in the whole new

¹⁹ Keene, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁰ *Shiki and Matsuyama*, op. cit., p. 61. See also Beichman, op. cit., pp. 22–23; also Keene, ibid., p. 93.

²¹ Hasegawa Kai, *Shiki no uchū* (Tokyo: Kadokawa-sensho, 2010), p. 94.

²² For more detailed accounts, see Beichman, op. cit., pp. 54–60; also "Sketches from Life", chapter six of Keene, op. cit., pp. 90–107.

movement that Shiki initiated at this time. The modern intention he promoted was not, then, to discover a spiritual dimension, or a Romantic overflow of feeling, but to show the world “as it is” (*ari no mama*).

Towards the end of his life, when he was confined to his sleeping-mat (*futon*), scarcely able to move and in constant pain, Shiki took more and more to making sketches, painting water-colours of flowers and fruit immediately to hand or in the garden that his room overlooked. There is something in the intensity of this that resembles the work of Vincent van Gogh, not only as in Vincent’s paintings, but also in his letters. “I had a flowering branch put beside my pillow. As I faithfully sketch it, I feel I am coming to understand the secret of creation,” recorded Shiki.²³ The absorption has an almost visionary quality, suggestive in its way of Vincent’s last pictures, as he descended into madness in Auvers. Shiki wrote of flowers, for example, in a short essay on “Red” (*Aka*) quoted by Donald Keene:

The most important element in their beauty is color. There are hundreds if not thousands of colors, but in general the colors of the world of nature are bright and beautiful, the colors of the world of human beings are dull and clouded. The blue of the sky, the green of leaves, the red, white, purple, and yellow of flowers are bright and cheerful... But even among the colors of nature, the essential one is red.²⁴

Here Vincent writes similarly of a painting in a letter to his brother Theo in 1890:

Daubigny’s garden, foreground of grass in green and pink. To the left a green and lilac bush and the stem of a plant with whitish leaves. In the middle a border of roses, to the right a wicket, a wall, and above the wall a hazel tree with violet foliage. Then a lilac hedge, a row of rounded yellow lime trees, the house itself in the background, pink, with a roof of bluish tiles. A bench and three chairs, a figure in black with a yellow hat and in the foreground a black cat. Sky pale green.²⁵

²³ Beichman, op. cit., p. 140.

²⁴ Keene, op. cit., p. 175.

²⁵ Bruce Bernard, ed., *Vincent by himself: A selection of his paintings and drawings together with a selection from his letters* (London: Time Warner Books, 2004; first pub. 1985), p. 167.

Both of them had wanted to influence others, Shiki succeeding in his lifetime, Vincent only after he had died, while neither lived as long as his companion in the art they practised.

It is not simply that one man died in his thirties, while the other fellow outlived him, though this is true. When Vincent died, Gauguin was still in Europe, not having yet departed for Tahiti, despite having announced in his last letter to Vincent, “The savage will return to the wilderness.”²⁶ By contrast, Sōseki was far away in London when Shiki passed away, and expressed his grief in a small set of haiku. It was he, not Shiki, who was rumoured to have gone mad, from loneliness and isolation, and there is a baffling aspect to these verses that requires some interpretation.²⁷ It is here that we encounter imagination, the distinguishing allusive quality of Sōseki, the one that separates him artistically from Shiki. Where Sōseki had come to haiku under the tutelage of his friend, who urged him to use the painterly approach, and write “objective sketches”, Sōseki found himself unable to do so, claiming that he could only write “subjective verses”.²⁸ The distinction is not absolute, but this is the core of the debate between them, and it was Sōseki that would become a successful writer of fiction later on. This is not to say that Shiki’s thought might not have developed in more diverse ways if his life had not been cut so short, for his subsequent work with tanka brought in a different dimension, one of lyrical beauty, and he experimented with other forms like *kanshi* (poetry in Chinese) and *shintashi* (new poetry imitating Western models).²⁹ It may well be true that Shiki loved the same novel by Victor Hugo that Gauguin identified with,³⁰ and that his disquisition on “Red” reminds us somewhat of the strong use of that hue in Gauguin’s painting, but for the French artist it held symbolic power. Even Shiki’s famous haiku on the “cockscombs” (*keitō*), and his later paintings of that flower, are more likely to suggest the sunflowers of van Gogh, even in their uncertain number, despite being in a planter rather than a pottery vase.³¹ Certainly in haiku the idea of the sketch

²⁶ Thomson, op. cit., p. 119.

²⁷ See Jon LaCure, “Sōseki’s Haiku on the Death of Masaoka Shiki” in *Haiku, Zen, and Traditional Japanese Verse* (USA: independently published, 2017), pp. 88–103.

²⁸ Quoted in an article by Sekimori Katsuo in the Japanese haiku journal *Kō* (耕) No. 348, Nagoya, February 2017, p. 60. Translation mine.

²⁹ Keene, op. cit., *passim*.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 33.

³¹ For comment on the poem, see Beichman, op.cit., pp. 64–68; also Keene, op. cit., pp. 115–116. For the painting, see illustrated books on Shiki, or museum postcards.

(*shasei*) has been highly influential.

When Shiki died there was some rivalry between his two main disciples, the modern and later free-form poet Kawahigashi Hekigotō (1874–1937), who initially took the lead, and the more conservative and traditional Takahama Kyoshi (1874–1959), who then came to dominate the mainstream of haiku until the 1950s, and whose influence is felt even today. Kyoshi restored the idea of the “objective sketch” (*kyakkan shasei*) that Shiki had developed, combining it with traditional references to the seasons.³² While all of this took some time to convey to the West, in a curious way the same debate that marked the differences between reality and imagination continues to be played out in haiku today, not only in Japan, among competing practitioners and schools, who have since diversified in many ways, but even in the West, to which the haiku has now also been transmitted and where it has become a popular poetic form. Partly under the influence of Imagism, but also that of Japanese poetry and prints, certain tendencies emerged in American poets like Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, moving determinedly away from the last traces of Romantic self-expression, to something more concrete and objective: “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself”, the title of a well-known poem by the former, and the motto “No ideas but in things” in a poem by the latter, are familiar dicta.³³ The spread of more detailed knowledge about the haiku had to wait until the postwar period, but picked up pace in the 1940s and 50s with the many volumes of translation by R. H. Blyth.

What was notable in the rules drawn up for haiku composition in English from the 1960s, especially in the United States, which led the field, was the emphasis given to the tangible and real: haiku was a poetry of “nouns” it was claimed, of the “here and now”, a “moment”, that should be expressed without recourse to literary devices like metaphors, similes, personification. These guidelines exerted a strong force on composition and practice, and can occasionally still be found to inform discussion of the adopted form, as careful reading of haiku

³² Donald Keene gives an account of this in *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era, Poetry, Drama, Criticism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987, first pub. 1984), pp. 92–118. Keene does not use the expression *kyakkan shasei*, but it appears in other accounts, for example “A Brief History of Modern Haiku” by Toshio Kimura, in *21-seiki haiku no jikū / The Haiku Universe for the 21st Century* (Tokyo: Nagata Shobō, 2008), pp. 8–11.

³³ For the influence of Japanese prints, see Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Westpoint, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1976; first pub. 1958), *passim*, but especially pp. 182–201.

journals will reveal. That language itself is metaphorical was not clearly understood. It is only more recently, as more modern haiku have been translated, that awareness has begun to dawn that none of these absolute proscriptions exist in Japanese, where it is not at all unusual for haiku poets to employ similes, for instance, while even personification, while rare, is not unknown. The revelation of all this came to me while working with a Japanese poet on translations of modern haiku for an anthology that was published twenty years ago.³⁴ The same was also perceptively noted in a review of the book in a British journal.³⁵ That poetry, by its very nature, is in some degree metaphorical is finally being grasped and understood by Western practitioners of haiku. This is the tail end of a long argument between reality and imagination that became manifest in the nineteenth century, following early exchanges between the West and Japan. The influence of the visual imagery in Japanese woodblock prints on Western painting happened quite quickly, while the translation of Japanese poetry, and above all the conveying of an understanding of it, took considerably longer, but we can now finally say that even haiku may evoke reality using the imagination.³⁶

~~~~~

David Burleigh retired from Ferris University in Yokohama in 2016, but continues to teach at Waseda University. He edited and introduced *Helen Waddell's Writings from Japan* (2005), and has been involved in haiku composition and translation for over thirty years. He was an invited speaker at the biennial Haiku North America gathering in Ottawa in 2009, an Assistant Editor for *Modern Haiku*, USA, 2006-2013, and co-translated the Japanese section of *A Vast Sky: An Anthology of World Haiku*, ed. Bruce Ross (2015).

~~~~~

³⁴ Kōko Katō, ed., *A Hidden Pond: Anthology of Modern Haiku*, trans. with commentary by Kōko Katō & David Burleigh (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1997).

³⁵ "Simile, Metaphor and Anthropomorphism in Modern Japanese Haiku" by Jackie Hardy, in *A Silver Tapestry: The Best 25 Years of Critical Writing from the British Haiku Society* (Kent, UK: British Haiku Society, 2015), pp. 44–46.

³⁶ The same point has informed critical writing by the contemporary poet Hasegawa Kai. See especially *Haiku no uchū* (Tokyo: Kashinsha, 1993) and *Furuike ni kaeru wa tobikonda ka* (Tokyo: Kashinsha, 2005).