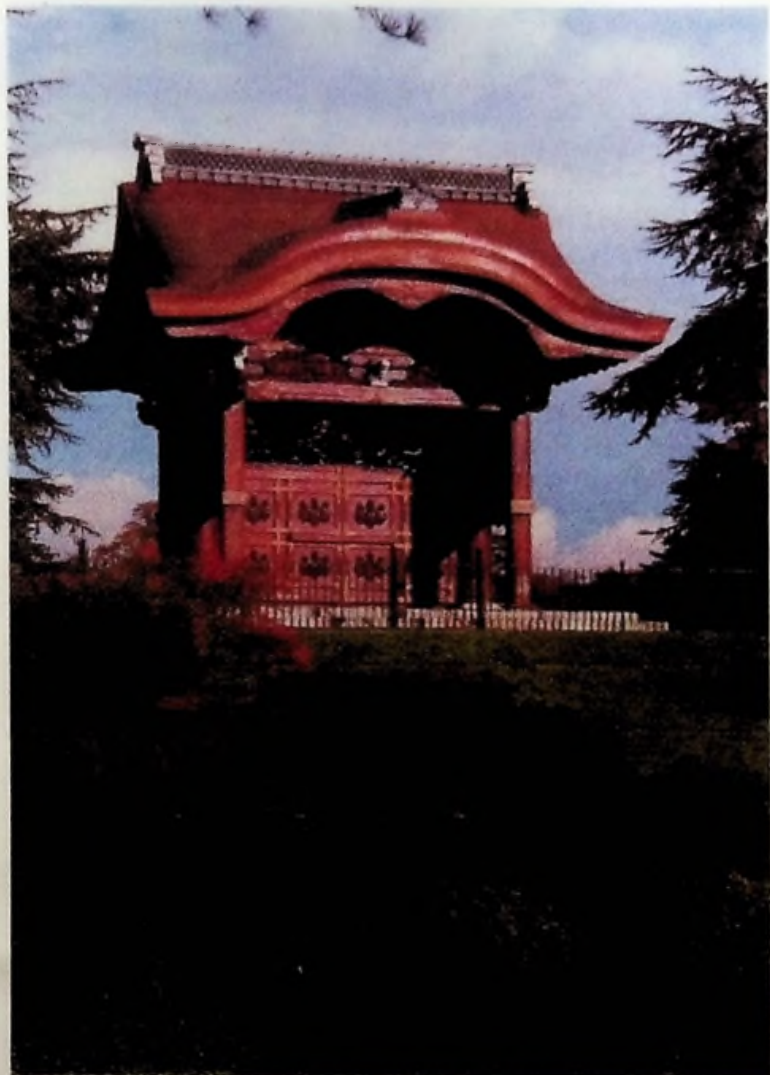


THOUGHTS, WORDS, WRITING ...



A HAIBUN BY BAMBOO SHOOT



... writing ...

... Edition
... Papers Number 12
1981



thoughts, words, writing ...

Bamboo Shoot

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PREFACE

It seems in order to say a few words about this small piece of writing in the light of recent editorial criticism. But this is not to peevishly defend some imagined piece of literary brilliance. Simply, the writing is different from the current norm of British haibun; and I can easily recognise that its reading might pose problems for those used to only reading the simple descriptive, or not used to 'close reading' beyond the text. The criticisms are in *Italics*.

You are trying to do something very ambitious.

Indeed, I was not aware of trying to do anything except present a purely spontaneous piece of writing to the best of my ability. Coming to 'creative writing' rather late in a largely un-literate life, I have found that, whether I like it or not, once my pen moves, the resultant writing almost invariably becomes littered with puns, metaphors, and symbolism that I am little aware of until I later read what I've written. Literary theory (e.g. Jakobson on aphasias) tells me that there are possibly hard-wired neurolinguistic reasons for much of this – something to do with metonymic and metaphoric axes of language. Whatever, it's my brain and I'm stuck with it.

The piece of writing in question was the more or less immediate response to one afternoon's experience; its content and form were largely completed (in the Refreshment Pavilion) before I had even left The Gardens. Since then, I have read it through several times, made adjustments, and attempted to improve the English.

*

As we understand it, a haibun is a body of haiku-like prose, breaking out into haiku where appropriate, and directly reflecting the writer's experience in the moment.....

Haiku-like prose – What is that? Is it the terse, fragmentary notebook style of the Bashō and Buson translations given in *Haiku Handbook*? Or is it the more supple, yet uncomplicated, English of Nobuyuki Yuasa in his Penguin translation of Bashō's '*The Narrow Road ...*'? Most English writers that I've read seem to find an inconsistent in-between; and I suggest that 'directives' such as the above can only risk encouraging the contrivance of monotonous uniformity. Thing is, why should we want, or need, to write like anybody but ourselves? We need

an authentic English haibun equivalent – not some misconceived Japanese-look-alike. With some technical excuse, we abandon the English language in our haiku; but there is no need to do so in our haibun prose. Read, say, Seamus Heaney's prose poems (*Stations*, 1975), to see the possibilities, and take it from there.

What is of paramount importance – because, as I understand it, it is vital to the 'idea' of haibun (East and West) – is that the haiku should integrate with the text, not merely illustrate it. It is not enough that one walks along a leafy lane and hangs a picture of twittering bird here, a picture of a crashing sea there. Each haiku should, at least, enlarge its immediately adjacent prose; and at best (I speculate) it should be as if the whole text is charged by visions of the moment that touch the raw edges of a prevailing mood. I hope to show that all the haiku in this piece of writing deeply penetrate the entire text – despite its 'deviant' appearance.

Haibun remind me very much (in essence) of Van Gogh's letters – when you can't write, paint; when you can't paint, write. The best writing for us, I feel, will simply be interesting poetic prose in clean, unmutilated English.

.....*The first two haiku, and the first paragraph of prose attractively satisfy such a definition. However, after the asterisk ('Built in 1910') the prose generally gives way to a descriptive guide book style. It happily resumes working as a haibun after the second asterisk ('Beneath a canopy...') ...If the middle were excised ...we would have a very pleasing haibun.*

What should the content of a haibun be? My view is that it might be the description of anything that one can experience or relate to in a haiku way. It might even be the paraphrasing of other texts; and such is partly the case here.

The criticism overlooks the fact that when one approaches a 'public presentation' such as Chokushi Mon, one may well bring to that experience memories of previous visits and all their dusty memorabilia; and that once 'on site', one is likely to be further faced by up-dated explanatory notice-boards. The complained of section is simply a re-emergence of such memories and texts, now coloured by the workings of the writer's mind.

The origins of the 'middle' section I had hoped would be obvious; but I dare to think that the style of writing is hardly that of the average guide-book. I had hoped that a sense of *sabi* and transience permeated the first paragraph; that the receptive reader would notice some metaphoric reference to haiku in the second; and that the last three short paragraphs would at least seem intended to be poetic, with their fitting reference to Housman. However, I do admit to experiencing some difficulty in restructuring the English of this section into acceptable form.

How then is this section to be read? Simply, 'the writing is the experience'. The middle section is in three parts: in the first, the author approaches Chokushi Mon and notices change; next, he reads a notice-board or pamphlet; and finally he strolls around the garden to take in what he has learned. What play the active role in this section are the related haiku: all but one were written much earlier and used retrospectively; responding to immediate experience, they reflect regret, self-distaste (at the memory of attending tea ceremony in the wrong spirit), and existential cynicism.

*

As to the footnotes, only the second is relevant to the haibun proper and I suggest it would be more effectively incorporated into your text, instead of leaving the reader wondering what the translation is.

Originally there were two footnotes, one of which referred to a less 'ingratiatingly' toned translation of Kyoshi's haiku. In fact, after reading the criticism, I realised that it was this footnote that was superfluous. Literature and Life being stuffed full of versions and interpretations, quotes and misquotes – some academics make a living out it – it scarcely needed adding. The footnote that remains, however, is certainly relevant to text. It cites a fact that was already (fortuitously) known to me, and its subconscious emergence here might well be read as metaphor for the western emergence of haiku. The metaphor is obviously flawed (haiku has never vanished from Japan – though modern changes might be seen as the result of reflected western influence), but it does suggest, perhaps, that the new clone should be uniquely English? As to the positioning of the footnote, I had indeed originally written it into the relevant section of text. Later, I replaced it so as not to interfere with immediately adjacent content. It now seems, to me, not too out of place with the overall tone of the haibun. Later still, I changed its mode of

presentation.

*

The two concluding haiku seem to dangle detached from the haibun and I suggest they were better used in some other context.

However odd the end-structure of this piece of writing may seem, the concluding haiku are – however tenuously – attached to the whole by significant meaning; (actually, I thought enigmatic final haiku were par for the party line anyway?). These haiku had deeply planted themselves in my mind almost without notice, and were the last to be scribbled down before I turned my back on Chokushi Mon and retired to the Pavilion. It took a further scribbling out of drafts – and several cups of tea and pieces of fruitcake – to fully realise their subconscious connections and contribution to the whole.

Take the first ‘concluding’ haiku: cranes and turtles have mythological associations with longevity in Japanese and Chinese culture; and angular and rounded islands are common traditional features of Japanese gardens. At Kew, two such islands are linked by a narrow bridge that annually receives the

buffets of falling pine-cones. In Japanese culture, pine trees normally hold some sense of good luck or the permanence of human relationships; but perhaps here, I was simply thinking of the ultimate destruction of all things, given time – even the homes of the immortals.

The ‘final’ haiku is partly allusive. It refers to T.S.Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’: The Dry Salvages, section III, ls.1-5; but even without such ‘erudite knowledge’, this haiku obviously refers back to the first – ‘another year/ yet still green ...’ – (in my end is my beginning etc.). Thus the whole piece of writing is circular, and feels its way through the transient nature of both real and recorded existence. This last haiku, in its relation to a pessimism stated in the opening paragraph, also threatens to open up an Epimenidean paradox (now broken by actual publication); it comments on the stillborn fate of some writing.

To analyse my own work seems to deny its alleged (you only have my word for it) spontaneity. Read it for yourself and find your own meanings – if you find it worth reading at all.

*

Frankly, at my age, I can’t take myself too seriously.

I write – in the absence of other activities – simply to kill the time twixt old age and death; and even then, rarely submit for publication. On the other hand, I doubt that I shall ever lose my compulsion to engage in reasoned debate where I feel there is something to be said on whatever subject happens to be at hand. I do feel that if we – the British haiku community – want to attract a wider public to our haikai writings, then the haibun genre could prove a potent magnet; but we need to widen our imaginations and improve our scholarship. Which is **not** to say, ‘write this way’. The sole intention of my Preface is to suggest the following: that if *the English haibun is to be re-invented* (as I believe it should be); if it is truly the wish to publish *literary creations that have something to say – creations having textual densities enriched by metaphor, symbolism, and allusion – creations that constantly search for ‘new’ topics*; then the responsibility for all this rests as much with the reader as with the writer. In some sense, it might be said that Literature is only ever as good as the views of the prevailing ‘Establishment’ allow it to be. How fortunate for Bashō that his varied styles and haiku could ‘go’ without explanation.

thoughts, words, writing ...

... another year
yet still green
 – the ginkgo leaves
fall from my notebook ...

*

24.10.97: Kew. A morning of coffee spoons and conversation, a brief Italian extravagance for lunch, and now – the brilliance of a late October afternoon as time ambles itself away into non-existence around The Gardens. The mind floats somewhere between mislaid memory and bright enthusiasm for yet another collection that would be my first; and already, a small notebook is fat with coloured leaves, sketches, and some thirty poems that like as not will never see the light of print. Colours and smells of autumn swirl about me as I retrace old steps towards the Pagoda and Chokushi Mon ...

flagpole,
there in my youth –
I can hardly look up at you

*

Built in 1910 – a near life-size replica of a sixteenth century Buddhist temple gateway in Kyoto, Kew's Gateway of the Imperial Messenger has changed since I saw it last. Time and the English climate have done neither of us favours, but Chokushi Mon has recently been rejuvenated by a team of Japanese master-craftsmen – themselves a dwindling breed. Copper tiles have replaced old lead and cedar shingle, finely carved panels have been repaired or reworked; and set now, jewel-like, in a newly constructed landscape – amongst flowering cherry, bamboo, acer, kurume azalea and other Japanese cultivars – something like a former magnificence has been restored. Sunlight once again returns enhanced from the lacquers and warm-toned timbers of Chokushi Mon ...

rain comes through my thatch,
and summer sun stings my head –
telling me something

Japanese gardens are, in general, more formal than their English counterparts; though not in any regimental sense – no merely mechanical juxtapositioning of plants and artefacts. The aim is always an aesthetic mix of tradition and balance, symbolism and simple beauty; and in designing the Japanese garden at Kew, a prime concern has been to

both complement Chokushi Mon and blend in with western botanical surroundings. Old established pines have been allowed to fittingly share the stage with Hinoki – the Shinto-sacred conifer of whose wood Chokushi Mon is constructed; while in future years, the Japanese custom of severe clipping and pruning will be restrained, thus allowing most plants to grow towards their natural shape. Yet overall, a strong spiritual sense of Orient is aroused symbolically by the way in which the landscape is constructed: Chokushi Mon contains, and is encircled by, a fusion of principles that might seem to embody the nature of all experience.

There is a Garden of Peace that echoes the *roji* of a traditional tea garden – where one can follow stone lanterns, pebbled path, and stepping stones to reach a barely audible *tsukubai* – a tranquil walk to rinse away the weariness of the world ...

some samurai!

... aching ankles

forgot my *thank you* ...

the taste of tea

... whilst elsewhere, a Garden of Activity evokes austere mountain sceneries with clastic rock-flows that

tumble incessantly towards a gravel sea – a sea forever
raked by unchanging waves and the flotsam from
overhanging pines ...

Chokushi Mon.

Please keep off the gravel.

... 'footprints' all over ...

... and linking together tranquillity and action, the
constant with the ephemeral, is a Garden of Harmony
– an area of general and symbolic planting intended to
reflect the natural beauty of the Japanese countryside.
As yet this section is some ten years immature; but few
will notice when, each spring, the senses are besieged
by flowering of the loveliest of trees ...

and after winter
what? The white cherry blossom
blowing in my face?...

*

Beneath a canopy of low-branched flowering cherry,
I find the haiku stone of bluish granite. The haiku is
by Takahama Kyoshi – written following a visit to
Kew made in 1936; the stone itself donated by family
in 1979 – some twenty years after Kyoshi's death.

There is a nearby transcript:-

Even sparrows
Freed from all fear of man
England in Spring

So expressed, I do not care for these sentiments – they have an air of ingratiating formality that I do not attribute to Kyoshi; after all, Japanese haiku are not necessarily treated faithfully by their translations. But then perhaps – for whatever reason – not all haiku may be wholly faithful to their motivating emotions; and indeed, there is something else that bothers me. For some time I stand brooding over Kyoshi's stone, thinking about Art, Nature, what Kyoshi really felt he meant in his own language, and whether he too until I am joined by two young Japanese whom I had noticed earlier. At distance, they had had the chattering full-of-lifeness of bright birds; now – in alien presence – they fall into unfathomable silence. And for a moment, I am incautious of my thoughts – I point ...

- *Not good haiku?*
- *Yeaah! Not good.*
- *It's by Kyoshi!*
- *Hey, yeaah – He's dead famous.*
- *... but maybe not even true? ...*

...and I point again – this time to where, not far from
the *tsukubai*, the stripped body of a small bird lies
cooling in its last rays of sunlight ...

near Kyoshi's stone
the crow pays close attention
to a crimsoned corpse

*

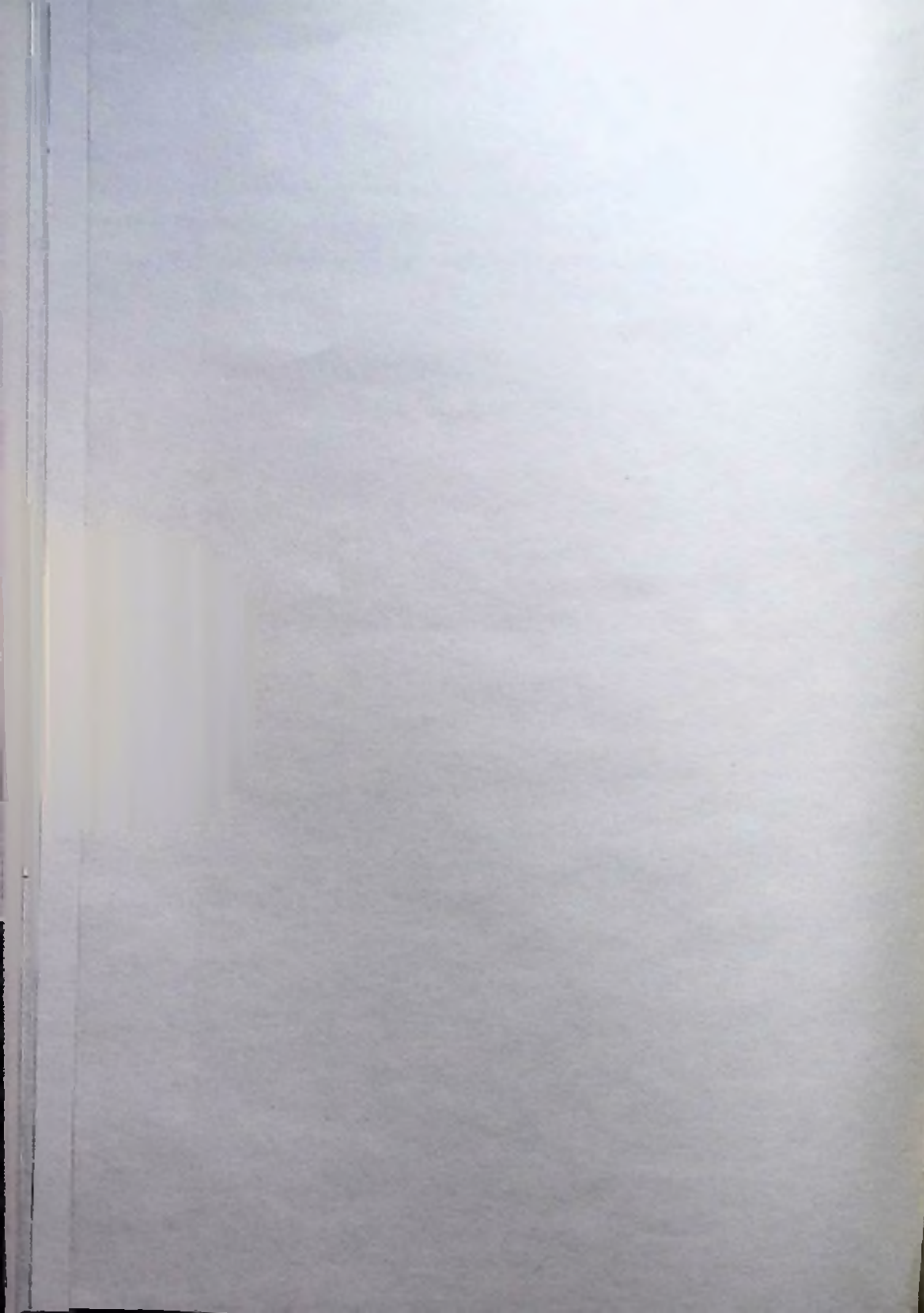
B. S. Birmingham October 98

... old established pines ...
needles and cones fall to the bridge
twixt crane and turtle ...

There is a specimen of *Tai Haku*
— the Great White Cherry — much
valued in Japan. Between the 18th
& 20th centuries it is said to
have disappeared from Japanese
culture, only to be restored from
a 'new' clone found in an English garden.

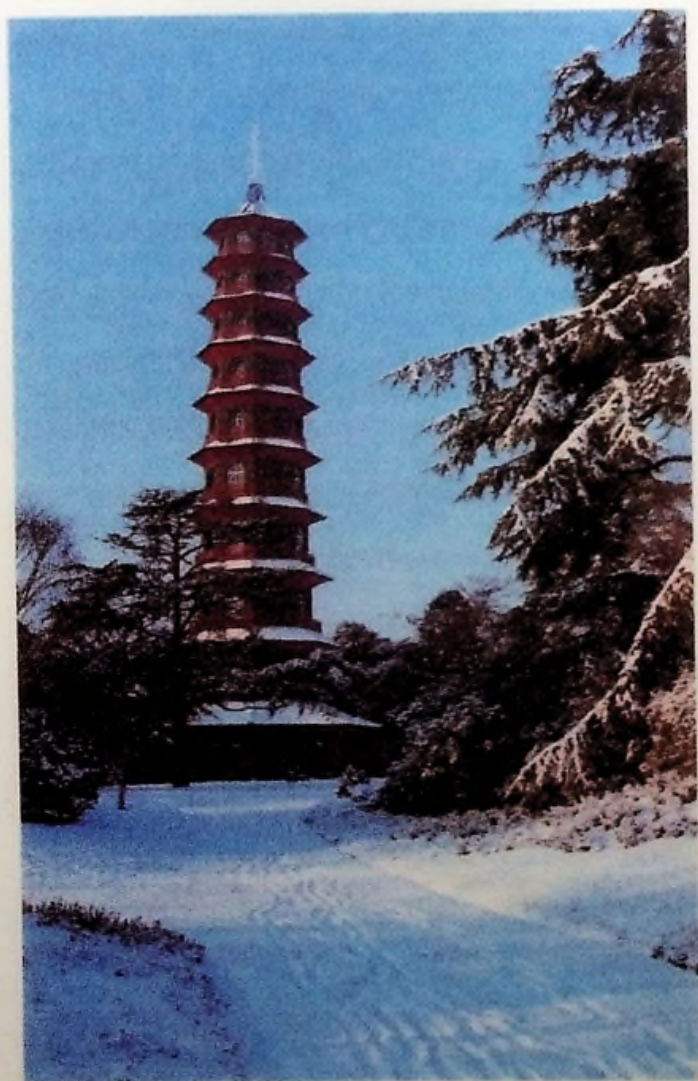
... the flowers fade,
pressed between yellowing pages
of an unopened book ...







Hand-made
in a Workshop
in Wingland close by
Belloc's
Walk round the Wash



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