

**HAIKU MASTER
ONITSURA**

ONITSURA UEJIMA

**TRANSLATED BY
EARL TROTTER**

Peach Blossom Press



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Cover: Portrait of Onitsura by Yosa Buson (1716–1784)
In the Kakimori Bunko, Itami City, Hyogo Prefecture.

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INTRODUCTION

History of Haiku

Before beginning the discussion, note that the use of “syllable” here is a little different from the usage for English. It could be rendered as “unit of sound”. The difference is that, in Japanese, long vowels and double consonants count as 2 syllables and the “n” after a vowel, one. So in romaji “*nan*” is two syllables as is “*shii*” while “*kakko*” is three syllables. Note that the long “e” and long “o” are usually rendered “ei” and “ou” (there are exceptions). The long syllables can also be written with a macron, e.g. “*shī*”. As well, “lines” are not lines as in English verse but represent the five or seven (or other) syllabic unit. Japanese verse was traditionally written vertically with no breaks.

The roots of haiku go back to the beginning of Japanese poetry. All the ancient forms consist of five or seven syllables. There were four main types. First there is the *kauta*, in a question and answer format consisting of three lines with the syllabic pattern, 5-7-7. Related is the *sedouka*, basically a double *kauta*. The *chouka* are built of alternating lines of five and seven syllables to an indeterminate length, concluding with a seven-syllable line. Within the *chouka*, there might be a break in the pattern with consecutive five or seven syllable lines. These forms eventually fell out of use although the *chouka* was a prominent form in the Manyōshū (compiled after 759).

Of greater importance are waka (or tanka). It consists of five lines with a syllabic pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. Initially this tended to consist of two couplets and a last line refrain. Later new breakdowns emerged in a 5-7-5 7-7 split where the first three lines modified the last two or where the two parts were related but

independent grammatically. Overtime there was also a growing use of a pause after the first line. This gives the first three lines a haiku flavour. By the time of the Kokinshu, compiled in 905, waka was the predominant form. A final point to notice was that the imperial anthologies of waka, over hundreds of years, divided the poems in sections and the four seasons were given prominence.

Beginning in early Heian, there appeared some waka where one person would compose the first three lines and another person, the last two. Such are called renga, or linked verse. This was mainly an exercise in wit. However the practice continued and slowly developed. Verses began to become linked – one writer composing a 5-7-5 opening then another adding 7-7, then 5-7-5 and so on. Eventually one hundred links became the standard. The first five lines would have a certain meaning, but lines four to eight would change the core idea, then lines six to ten likewise. By 1200 renga was a distinct genre. A group of poets would meet and then compose spontaneously to the preceding verse. Renga developed very complex rules for linking and also developed season words, or *kigo*, to be followed. The opening three lines were deemed very important and called *hokku*. *Hokku* were sometimes published separately and this gave them their own identity.

From renga, a humorous form developed, *haikai no renga*, which we will hereafter refer simply as *haikai*. The opening verse, as in renga, is called *hokku*. In addition to humour and wit, it also employed more colloquial language. Renga had followed the diction of traditional waka poets. The change here can also be traced to a shift where the merchant class became more involved in poetry. In Heian times it was limited to aristocrats. The first school of haikai was the Teimon School founded by Teitoku (1570-1653). Basically their principles were identical to renga, with most of its complex rules intact, with the exception of the use of colloquial language.

A reaction set in against the complexities of the Teimon School and Soin (1604-1682) founded the Danrin School. This school sought freedom and almost any diction and subject matter, including vulgar language and obscenities, were used. There was a heated competition between the two schools. Through all this development was the increasing focus on the independent *hokku*.

Although a later appellation (see below), we will refer to the independent *hokku* as haiku henceforth given its ubiquitous use.

The course of haiku was changed forever with the appearance of Matsuo Basho (1644–1694). He promoted the use of ordinary language as a means of sincere expression. As well, subject matter was broadened from the Teimon School, along with humour, but not to the excesses of the Danrin School. Basho promoted a series of various approaches to *haiku* – in fact, not staying put in one theory was part of his aesthetic. He talked of sincerity (*makoto*) and later lightness (*karumi*) and his poems often exhibited *sabi* and *wabi* – feelings of transience, imperfection, poverty and simplicity. Basho had many disciples, the major being Takarai Kikaku who wrote a moving account of Basho's last days and was influential until the time of Buson.

Basho was based in Edo. In the Kansai region (Kyoto, Osaka), Uejima Onitsura (1661–1738) wrote a poetics of haiku based on sincerity (*makoto*). His and Basho's ideas are likely connected in some manner, if only through Onitsura's contacts with Basho's disciples. Onitsura will be dealt with in some detail below.

The two major haiku poets after Basho were Yosa Buson (1716–1784) and Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828). Buson was a poet known for his sensibility and lyricism. He sought to be natural, not encumbered by too many rules. In his lifetime he was more renowned for his paintings and he is considered a master of *haiga*, a form of painting incorporating haiku aesthetics tending to a simple (though not simplistic) style. Issa, who was not well known in his lifetime is the foremost poet of humanity imbued with an atmosphere of pathos. There is also much down-to-earth humour in many of his haiku. Tan Taigi (1709–1771), a contemporary of Buson is another notable poet. The finest woman haiku poet is considered to be Chiyo-ni (Kaga no Chiyo) (1703–1775).

The bridge to the modern era came with Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902). Considered one of the four great haiku poets, along with Basho, Buson and Issa, Shiki was the one to designate what had been known as *hokku*, as haiku. He favoured haiku based on a realistic observation of nature. Shiki revived the haiku form. It has not only been exceedingly popular in Japan since his death but enjoys a popularity worldwide.

Characteristics of Haiku

Haiku can be succinctly summarized as a Japanese poetic form consisting of seventeen syllables in a 7-5-7 format, which will include a season word (*kigo*) and a “cutting word” (*kireji*). As mentioned previously, the syllable is a “sound unit” and the 7-5-7 format, rendered in lines, in English, is not done so in Japanese. Haiku usually cover some aspect of nature, even if talking about a social event, not the least, because of the season word. Haiku will usually be in two parts, either the first line versus the last two, or first two lines versus the last. The cutting word often serves to build this structure (end of line one, two, or three) and as well frequently highlights the preceding phrase (like an exclamation mark).

Since Basho and Onitsura, haiku has been seen as representing the true feelings and/or experience of the poet. However, this should not be seen as being solely a spontaneous insight into life or nature, immediately rendered down as haiku (the Zen moment). Haiku, even of masters such as Basho, are constantly revised in composition and certain events are, in fact, imaginary (viz. certain episodes in Basho’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). However, the best haiku will certainly be insightful and represent the poet’s true feelings, an aesthetic that goes back to the earliest writings of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics (see the Mao Commentary to the *Book of Songs* and the *Preface* to the *Kokinshu*).

Uejima Onitsura (上島鬼貫)

Onitsura was born in 1660 in Itami (now in Hyogo Prefecture). His family, of samurai descent, was involved in the *sake* brewing business. He was interested in haiku from an early age and wrote his first haiku at age seven (Western style age). At twelve, he studied with Matsue Shigeyori (1602–1680), a haiku writer and editor originally from Kyoto, who later moved to the Osaka area.

Shigeyori had affiliations at various times with both the Teimon and Danrin schools. Later, at age sixteen, Onitsura joined the Danrin school and met its master, Soin in 1680.

At twenty-five he withdrew from the haiku circles, seeking a deeper meaning in haiku. This self-searching lasted five years, after which he reached his initial realization of *makoto*. Also at age twenty-five he went to Osaka to study medicine. He then served at various locations as a doctor along with other duties. He met disciples of Basho and through them became familiar with Basho's writing. There are conflicting views on his exact relationship to Basho. Onitsura's eldest son (he had two others) died at age six in 1700. A few of his haiku reflect his son's passing. He wrote his famous treatise on haiku, *Hitorigoto* (Soliloquy), in 1718. Onitsura died, in what is now Osaka, in 1738.

Onitsura is more famous today for his theory of *makoto* (sincerity) than for his haiku. He felt that *makoto* had to be developed by rigorous training and that its expression from the heart rather than through clever words was essential. A poem with *makoto* will transcend time and the changing styles of poetry. Basho also employed *makoto* in his aesthetics and his conception is not incompatible with Onitsura's. The following are some of Onitsura's teachings from *Hitorigoto* (based on the Crowley translation – see Further Reading):

- The Way of *haikai* appears to be shallow, but is deep; it appears to be simple, but is difficult.
- If *haikai* is to accomplish its role as a means to achieve *makoto*, you must concentrate and practice diligently.
- ... treat everyone in the world as your brother or sister. Compare *haikai* to actions in daily life, and think of *haikai* as something in harmony with everyday things. Each verse will then emerge naturally.
- How can there be any *makoto* if there is no feeling of great joy in aspects of nature in your poetry?
- ... compose poetry thinking passionately and deeply, and employ whatever naturally comes to mind [paraphrased slightly. Ed.].
- The path of training is endless ...

- ... concentrate on neither avoiding falsehood nor including *makoto* – the result is that there is no falsehood in any verse and *makoto* emerges naturally. This is because there is no deception in the normal human heart, and people are naturally endowed with profound understanding of the pathos of things (aware 哀れ).
- By practicing *haikai* a person is able to realize *makoto*, and even insensitive people will come to know true feeling.
- ... the verses of a poet who has earnestly practiced the Way of *makoto* will not seem outdated, no matter how many years have passed since they were written.
- Good poems are those in which the language and spirit are in harmony.
- There is no *haikai* without *makoto*.

Onitsura's mature haiku then, sought to achieve the principles of *makoto*. He often uses simple diction and events from everyday life. There is a similarity in his approach and that of the Chinese poets (e.g. Mei Yaochen (1002–1060)) espousing “blandness” as a poetic virtue. His haiku tend to be regular with seventeen syllables and a season word although there are exceptions. There is also a fine touch of humour in many of his haiku.

The Translation

The translation of the haiku is fairly literal. I have tried to follow the original images sequentially but with Japanese this is not always feasible. The important point is to make the key image clearly stand out. The form is reflected in the three-line structure but no attempt has been made for a consistent number of syllables or accents per line. The Japanese text is from various sources on the internet including university archives but a few were transcribed from Blyth. Haiku from different sources matched, other than the use of kanji versus hiragana in some instances. Some 428 haiku are translated from the approximately 800 that have been preserved. The haiku are arranged by, but not within, season.

The romaji is for general guidance only. I have replaced the sound of the older forms, は(*ha*), へ(*he*), ひ(*hi*), and ふ(*fu*), where applicable, as they are now, in many instances, わ(*wa*), え(*e*), い(*i*), and う(*u*). The archaic ゐ(*wi*) is *i* in modern Japanese. Note that ふ(*fu*) was often used as a verb ending where う(*u*) is now employed. There are also the following older stand-alone forms that are retained in modern Japanese but have a different sound: は(*ha*), へ(*he*) and を(*wo*) as *wa* (topic marker), *e* (to) and *o* (object marker) respectively. As well, the pre-modern rendering of “today” as けふ(*kefu*) has been replaced by *kyou* in the romaji.

Further Reading

There is not a lot of material on Onitsura in English. The six Blyth volumes have many haiku by Onitsura scattered throughout their pages. There is a chapter in *A History of Haiku*, Vol. 1 (pp. 97-104) that deals specifically with Onitsura and is highly recommended (as are all of Blyth's works on haiku). Crowley's piece is a translation and commentary on Onitsura's prime prose work *Soliloquy* and is essential reading for understanding *makoto*. A final article on Onitsura is by Qiu, discussing Daoist influences. The Japanese entry is a selection of Onitsura's work including 357 haiku as well as prose pieces.

The other entries for further reading relate to haiku in general and to the four most noted poets, Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki. Yasuda's volume was of great help in doing the Introduction. As well, Lanoue's website of Issa translations was useful in resolving certain ambiguities in the text where the same term was used by both Onitsura and Issa. Of course, this list is just a fraction of the works available.

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New Year

ほんのりとほのや元日なりにけり
honnori to ho no ya ganjitsu nari ni keri

Creeping up,
almost unnoticed –
it's New Year's Day!

搗杵に血を見る餅のつよさかな
kachigine ni chi o miru mochi no tsuyosa kana

Pounding with the mallet
I spot some blood
– that *mochi*'s¹ tough!

我宿の春は来にけり具足餅
waga yado no haru wa ki ni keri gusokumochi

At my house
spring² has arrived
– *gusoku mochi*³!

¹ Rice cakes, eaten all year but associated especially with New Year's.

² In fact spring means New Year's here.

³ Onitsura was of samurai descent and *gusoku mochi* (rice cake) was presented to the suit of armour in one's home and that may be what is reflected here.

Spring

状見れば江戸も降りけり春の雨
jou mireba edo mo furi keru haru no ame

I see in the letter
it is also falling in Edo¹⁶ –
spring rain.

骸骨の上を粧て花見かな
gaikotsu no ue o yosobi de hanami kana

Skeletons
all dressed up in their finest
for cherry blossom viewing!

庭前に白く咲いたる椿かな
niwa mae ni shiroku saitaru tsubaki kana

At the front of the garden
those white blossoms
– the camellias!

¹⁶ Old name for Tokyo.

Summer

こいこいと言へど螢が飛んゆく
koi koi to iedo hotaru ga tonde yuku

Come here! Come here!
I cry out –
the fireflies fly away⁵⁰.

戀のない身にも嬉しや衣がえ
koi no nai mi ni mo ureshi ya koromogae

I have no lover
but I'm still glad –
it's Change of Clothes day⁵¹.

藪垣や卒都婆の間をとぶ螢
yabugaki ya sotoba no ai o tobu hotaru

Between the hedge
and the wooden grave tablets –
fireflies flitting.

⁵⁰ Onitsura's first haiku written at age seven.

⁵¹ The 1st day of the fourth lunar month for changing to summer clothes.

Autumn

秋風の吹きわたりけり人の顔
aki kaze no fuki watari keru hito no kao

The autumn wind
blowing crosswise –
the looks on people's faces⁸⁰!

行水の捨所なき虫の声
gyouzui no sutedokoro naki mushi no koe

Where I usually throw
the bath water –
the chirping of insects!

ながき夜を疝気ひねりて旅寝かな
nagakii yo o senki hinerite tabine kana

A long night –
tossing and turning with abdominal pain
at the inn!

⁸⁰ While walking along a path through the fields.

Winter

ひゅうひゅうと風は空ゆく冬牡丹
hyuhyu to kaze wa sora yuku fuyu botan

The wind is whistling
across the sky –
winter peonies!

しろ金や霰ふる夜の年忘れ
shirokin ya arare furu yo no toshiwasure

White gold!
Sleet falling on the evening
of the New Year's Eve party¹²⁹.

茫々と取乱したるすすきかな
boubou to torimida shitaru susuki kana

Over the wide plain,
drooping everywhere,
pampas grass!

¹²⁹ *Toshiwasure*, a traditional year-end drinking party.