

Haikai, the poetics of intensity and perception

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Abstract: This short article has the purpose of presenting the Japanese poetry known as *haikai*. Its most prevalent representative was Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694) and he was responsible for providing a new status to the *haikai*, creating a school called *Shômon* where he made many disciples.

Keywords: Matsuo Bashô; Japanese poetry; *haikai*.

Resumo: Este breve artigo tem o propósito de apresentar a poesia japonesa conhecida como *haikai*. Seu principal mestre foi Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694), responsável por dar um novo estatuto ao *haikai* ao criar uma escola chamada *Shômon*, em que formou muitos discípulos.

Palavras-chave: Matsuo Bashô; poesia japonesa; *haikai*.

Haikai is simply what is happening here, now.

Matsuo Bashô¹

1. HAIKAI: THE LITTLE JAPANESE POETIC COMPOSITION

To understand the poetic form of the *haikai*, we need to know its antecedents. Present in a central position in Japanese poetry of classical tradition, the *tanka* is a kind of short poem whose metric composition follows the 5-7-5-7-7 scheme, alternating its verses sometimes with five syllables, sometimes with seven syllables. Over time, a division between the first three verses (the 5-7-5 triplet) and the last two verses (the 7-7 couplet) – respectively, the upper stanza (*kami-no-ku*) and the lower stanza (*shimo-no-ku*) – was increasingly adopted in the *tanka*.

This triplet with 17 syllables, the upper part of the *tanka*², originated the *haikai*. One of the main critics and translators of *haikai* in Brazil, Paulo Franchetti, comments on how the form of the *tanka* begins to constitute the tradition called *renga*:

In the *tanka*, the relation between the stanzas rarely presents a clear logical nexus. Poems in which this occurs are usually considered as being of second level. The most recurrent and valued procedures are either the direct juxtaposition of images that are somehow complementary or the use of the *shimo-no-ku* (lower stanza) to present a sort of commentary or exemplification of the general climate established in the *kami-no-ku* (upper stanza) [...].

The development according to the topic/comment scheme enabled and even encouraged that, given the palatial ambience of all classical Japanese literature, the same *tanka* was composed by two persons: one responsible for the 5-7-5 triplet, also called *hokku* (initial verse or stanza), and another person responsible for the 7-7 couplet, also called *wakiku* (lateral stanza).

The dialogued composition of a same *tanka* accentuates the independence of the two sections of the text and the masters of the new genre – called *renga* (interconnected song) – will emphasize that the beauty of this type of poetry lies mainly in the chaining of the parts of the poem, in the relation that is established between them³.

Made by more than one poet, the *renga*, as a chained poetic form, becomes a significant cultural practice of aristocrats in their halls and palaces. Of an eminently dialogical and collective nature, the composition of the first stanza (the *hokku*) by a poet triggered stanzas – in the form of couplet (7-7 syllables) – that could be really numerous, and there were even, in some cases, poems with hundreds or even thousands of collaborations of stanzas after the *hokku*.

According to Franchetti, considering the prevalent practice of the long *renga* in the aristocratic world from the 14th century onwards, a series of rules and norms for the composition are conceived, especially for the first stanza, the *hokku*⁴:

1. Bashô, in response to his zen master Bucchô, *apud* FRANCHETTI, Paulo. Introdução. In: FRANCHETTI, Paulo; DOI, Elza Taeko (org.). **Haikai**: antologia e história. 4. ed. Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2012, p. 28.

2. In the traditional criticism of Japanese poetry, this upper stanza was conventionally denominated *hokku*. In the craft of the *haijin* (as the *haikai* poet is called) and in the tradition of the *tanka-renga*, the *hokku* was gradually valued as the most significant part of the poem. As we will see below, Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) used the term *haiku* for the first time as a replacement for *hokku*. In this article, we preferred to use – depending on the circumstances – the terms *haikai* and *hokku*, which are the most widespread among Brazilian disseminators and critics. Concerning the terms, their uses, and their historiographical aspects, see: PORTELLA, Jean Cristtus. Semiótica do Haikai. In: FERREIRA, Fernando Aparecido; MOMESSO, Maria Regina; SCHWARTZMANN, Matheus Nogueira; ABRIATA, Vera Lucia Rodella (org.). **Discurso e linguagens**: objetos de análise e perspectivas teóricas. Franca: Editora Unifran, 2011. p. 165-192; FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 11.

3. FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 12-13.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 14.

Basically, it should be a long stanza, that is, 17 syllables; it should always contain a reference to the season and to the place where the session was held; and it should be syntactically complete, independent of the next stanza. The other stanzas also receive rigid prescriptions, but the main rules of the stanzas after the *hokku* are those that concern the appearance and succession of traditional motifs: the moon appears in a certain stanza; the spring is dedicated no less than three consecutive stanzas; certain words should not be repeated except after a certain interval; others are not mentioned more than once, etc.

Without the same restrictions of the rules and postulations that triumphed in the aristocratic halls, which gradually made the practice of the *renga* less accessible, there is the rise – in parallel, outside the palace environment – of a new practice that was called *haikai-renga*. Much more entertaining, comic and without the formalities imposed on the classic version, the *haikai-renga* soon spread over a vast territory among the Japanese.

It is, however, with Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694) that the *haikai* will be able to take a significant step to dissociate itself from the classic *renga*. Thus, the *haikai* emerges from the process of autonomization of the *hokku*; From the *hokku*, it maintains the structure of short poem with 17 syllables (5-7-5). Characterized by being the poet's own form of perception of a type of event, always natural, the *haikai*, according to Donald Keene, is constituted from the tension between what would be the element of permanence, its general condition, and the element of transformation, this one connected to the perception of the moment and to the unexpected⁵.

In the history of the *haikai* itself, the specificities of its production conditions should be considered. It was only in the nineteenth century, when the tradition had already reached almost 300 years, that the term *haiku* was coined by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) to designate the *hokku* and, therefore, this would be an autonomous form in relation to the *renga*. This means saying that in the mind of masters such as Bashô, Yona Buson (1716-1783), and Kobayashi Issa (1783-1827) there was no isolated understanding that the work of the *haikai-renga*, and more precisely of the *hokku*, was an authorial activity of individual development. Some implications of this understanding are explored by Franchetti:

It follows that the meaning of the rules and of their own development is completely different: developed for a collective art, the rules of the *haikai-renga* aimed to develop the spirit of collaboration, modesty, delicacy; for a solitary art, they gain in gratuitous conventionalism and artificiality what they lose in life and social necessity. Thus, for example, Bashô recommended that those who would compose before the person to whom they wanted to pay homage made a “shineless” stanza, so that of the honored person could shine more clearly, or, for the same purpose, that they made a stanza about flowers, then giving the honored person the opportunity to chain with “spring”; in the same spirit, all the attention given to the composition of the *hokku* was because, if it were not of good quality and high inspiration, the whole session would be doomed to failure; and the goal of achieving harmony among the participants led to the master's recommendations to abstain from mentioning illnesses, physical defects, or terms that could hurt the feelings of any of those present in the *haikai-renga*⁶.

5. KEENE, Donald. *Japanese literature*. New York: Grove Press, 1955.

6. FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 34-35.

This same critic will draw our attention to three other aspects of the organization of the *hokku*: “the spatial distribution, the identification of the segments, and the use of the ‘word of the season’.” It is known that the *hokku* were written in one or even four vertical lines and were placed, in some cases, in illustrative frames, the *haiga*, which expanded their possibilities of visuality and graphism (Figure 1).



Source: Crowley⁸.

Figure 1: *Haiga* by Yosa Buson, 18th century

Franchetti also explains that in the tradition of the *haikai* there was a systematization of the so-called words of cut (*kiregi*), whose functions, through particles, vary: they can have a role of interjection, of interrogation, of pause, among others⁹. Such words of cut are responsible for the segmentation of the verses (5-7-5). One of the most characteristic aspects of the *hokku* is that which is called the “words or terms of the season” (*kigo*), and it is through them that the poem refers to the transitory phenomena of the seasons of the year. They must necessarily be in the *hokku*. Here are some examples, from different authors, related to each of the seasons¹⁰, in verses translated by Elza Taeko Doi and Paulo Franchetti¹¹:

Primavera:

A neve está derretendo -
A aldeia
Está cheia de crianças!
Issa

Verão:

Com a luz do relâmpago
Barulho de pingos -
Orvalho nos bambus.
Buson¹²

Outono:

Um corvo pousado
Num ramo seco -
Entardecer de outono.
Bashô¹³

7. Ibidem, p. 36.

8. CROWLEY, Cheryl A. **Haikai poet Yosa Buson and the Bashō revival**. Leiden: Brill, 2007. p. 221.

9. FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 37.

10. For each of the poems, we decided to underline the terms of the season: the *kigo*. In the translational solutions of Elza Taeko Doi and Paulo Franchetti we chose to present only the translation made in verse by the authors. The authors of the poem are always found below the stanza, in italics.

11. FRANCHETTI, Paulo; DOI, Elza Taeko (org.). **Haikai: antologia e história**. 4. ed. Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2012, p. 69, my highlights. All translations of *haikai* are extracted from this anthology.

12. Ibidem, p. 100.

13. Ibidem, p. 128.

Inverno:

Primeiras neves -
Meu maior tesouro,
Este velho penico.

*Issa*¹⁴

The use of the *kigo*, with its aspect of transitoriness, shows the relation between the forms of the *hokku* and the Buddhist precepts. The *kigo* would be responsible for the very poetic force of the *hokku*:

they are the fundamental point of the theorization of all the masters and Bashô, consistently, also attributed to them the greatest importance, even declaring that, if someone discovered a single *kigo* throughout life, that would already be a precious inheritance to be bequeathed to posterity¹⁵.

2. MASTER MATSUO BASHÔ (1644-1694), PRACTITIONER OF HAIKAI-RENGA

The youth of Matsuo Bashô is a time to learn the samurai doctrine. The death of his master Yoshitada, in 1667, leads Bashô to follow new paths. He then takes refuge in a monastery and becomes a disciple of Bucchô, a Zen monk. Paulo Leminski, in a rather irreverent manner – as was characteristic of him –, says that Bashô was “warrior by birth and raising, monk by choice, poet by fatality¹⁶.”

Bashô would soon participated in the two main *haikai* schools established until then. In the Teimon school, based on the teachings of Teitoku (1571-1613), he obtained the teachings of master Kigin (1624-1704). In the Danrin school, of master Sôin (1604-1682), considered by Bashô as a renewer of classical Japanese poetics, he could develop the practice of a more colloquial poetry, less conservative, and with a powerful humor for his time.

With full mastery of the *haikai*, Bashô commenced his own manner of teaching and producing, resulting in a new school of thought, the well-known Shômon. Octavio Paz, in an important study on the Japanese poet, emphasizes the importance of the master for the Japanese poetic art:

Bashô does not break with tradition, but follows it in an unexpected way; or, as he himself says: “I do not follow the path of the old ones: I seek what they have sought.” Bashô aspires to express, with new means, the same concentrated feeling of the grand classical poetry. Thus he transforms the popular forms of his time (the *haiku no renga*) into vehicles of the highest poetry. [...] Japanese poetry, especially thanks to Matsuo Bashô, achieves a freedom and freshness thitherto unknown. And, accordingly, it is converted into a replica of the mundane turmoil. Before this vertiginous and colorful world, Bashô’s *haiku* is a circle of silence and introversion: wellspring, well of dark and secret water¹⁷.

In addition to this absolute mastery of the technique of poetic composition of the *haikai*, of which he is one of the great names in Japanese literature, in

14. Ibidem, p. 162.

15. FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 38.

16. LEMINSKI, Paulo. **Vida:** Cruz e Sousa, Bashô, Jesus e Trótski. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013, p. 95.

17. PAZ, Octavio. **Signos em rotação.** Tradução de Sebastião Uchôa Leite. 2. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1990, p. 156-164.

favor of the master there was also the great attraction and influence he had over disciples, which may be explained by the way he approached the poetic practice between the valuation of tradition and the paths of innovation. It was not only an artistic practice, but the practice of a philosophical principle that, in a certain way, followed him.

In his vision, the *haikai* would occupy a key position of his teachings. Motivated by the Zen understanding, Bashô would have in the *haikai* a way of seeing the world through its transitory and permanent aspects; momentary and long-lasting. More than that, it would be a way for poetry to really capture an intense relationship between the inner world of the poet and his outer world: “In the thought through images of the Japanese poet, the *haikai* functions as a kind of portable lens, able to capture the surrounding reality and the inner world, and to convert them into visible matter¹⁸.” According to Bashô, the poet, mediated by his own perception, should be attentive to the deepest meaning of life, in that which he understood as the most intimate relationship between man and nature: “Bashô’s poetics recommended the maximum observation and integration with the poetized object. He believed that when someone composed a verse, they should not allow that even a hair strayed their minds from that about which they wrote¹⁹.”

Some poems by Bashô²⁰ should be brought into this discussion (Figures 2, 3, and 4):

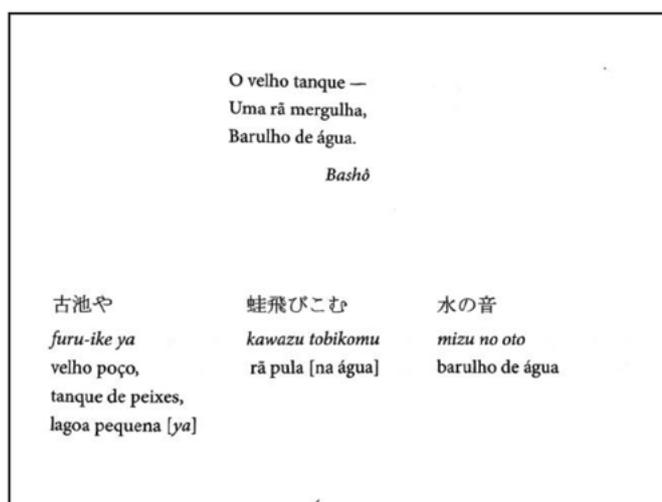


Figure 2: Poem by Bashô

Source: Franchetti and Doi²¹.

18. CAMPOS, Haroldo de. **A arte no horizonte do provável e outros ensaios**. 4. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1977, p. 65.

19. PORTELA, op. cit., p. 169.

20. Based on the translations of Paulo Franchetti and Elza Taeko Doi, we decided, in most quotations, to follow the form presented by the organizers and translators of the anthology. The translators presented “two translations of each poem: one translation, as literal as possible, mirroring the Japanese text, almost word by word; another translation more attentive to the full effect of the poem, more interpretive. They were thought to work together” (FRANCHETTI; DOI, op. cit., p. 53).

21. Ibidem, p. 81.

O grito do faisão —
Que saudade imensa
De meu pai e minha mãe.
Bashô

父母の	しきりに恋し	雉子の声
<i>chichi haha no</i>	<i>shikiri ni koishi</i>	<i>kiji no koe</i>
de pai e mãe	saudade imensa	voz do faisão

Source: Franchetti and Doi²².

Figure 3: Poem by Bashô

As flores
Da beira da estrada —
O cavalo comeu.
Bashô

道のべの	木槿は	馬に喰われけり
<i>michinobe no</i>	<i>mukuge wa</i>	<i>uma ni kuwarekeri</i>
da beira da estrada	o mukuge	foi comido pelo cavalo [<i>keri</i>]

Source: Franchetti and Doi²³.

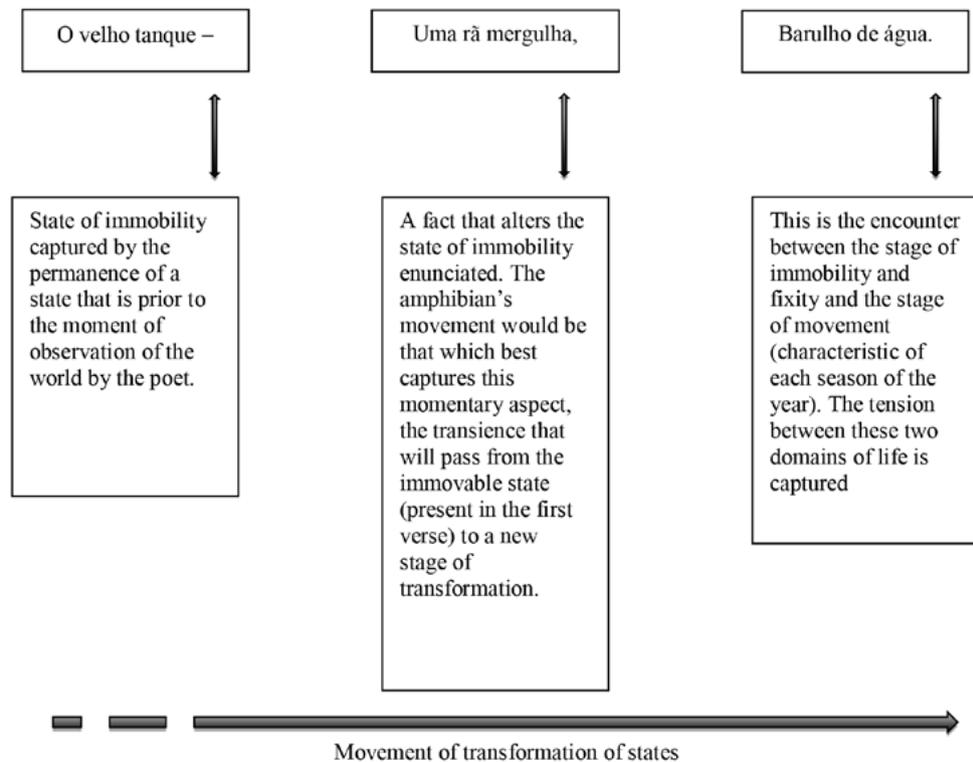
Figure 4: Poem by Bashô

The poem in Figure 2 may be one of the most famous by the poet, and has been disseminated by numerous translations in several languages²⁴. The segmentation of the poem shows – based on the objectivized observation of the environment – the alteration from a state of things towards another state of things, which could be represented as shown in Figure 5.

22. Ibidem, p. 80.

23. Ibidem, p. 141.

24. Among the translations that are most known and widespread among the Brazilian public there are: that by Paulo Franchetti and Elza Taeko Doi; that by Haroldo de Campos; that by Décio Pignatari; the intersemiotic translation by Júlio Plaza; that by Paulo Leminski; and the freer translation by Wenceslau de Moraes.



Source: Prepared by the author.

Figure 5: Transformation of states in poem by Bashô

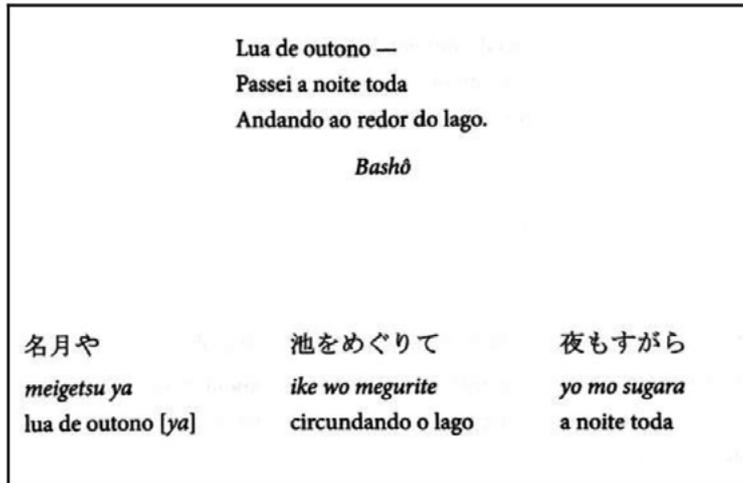
It is necessary, above all, to understand the poetic practice adopted by Bashô from a perspective that is not that of the West and of Aristotelian tradition. According to this Japanese poet, the perception of the natural world at the present moment of observation by the poet becomes central, so words and things can be mistaken, as a unique truth. Let us take the second example presented here (Figure 3). Two dimensions are interconnected: the natural world, in the voice and presence of the bird, and the memory of the past to which the poet is directed by the perception of the outer reality. It results in a memory in state of purity of the poet, for it all must be nourished by an ascetical view of and in the world. This lesson, disseminated by Bashô and his school of thought, to a certain extent both follows a path of spontaneity of the poet and reinforces – through a long and exhausting continuous exercise – the *haikai* practitioner's responsibility as to pursuing the disengagement from their own view as a way to find a freer path.

Learning such lesson is only possible by direct observation, which in no way simply means "objective" observation. An entire training is necessary to eliminate what the *Shômon* calls "own view" (*shi-i*). Imitation of the master, study of the old ones, meditation and immediate perception of sensations and feelings - "The *haikai* must be composed without reflection, through an impulse of the spirit" - constitute the path recommended so the disciple can escape the "personal view" (*shi-i*), the projection of the ego on the subjects of his *haikai*. In this context, one of the main hazards for those who want to accomplish a good *haikai* is precisely wanting to accomplish a good *haikai*²⁵.

25. FRANCHETTI, op. cit., p. 25.

As already pointed out, the zen teachings are intimately associated with the poetry practiced by Bashô. As Franchetti points out, it is necessary to understand the environment in which this poetry was cultivated: “Bashô’s *haikai* is the product of a syncretic religious thought, in which Shintoist animism coexists with the Buddhist doctrine of the world as illusion and suffering²⁶.” The aspect of ephemerality that characterizes the life of all beings is a significant trait of the Zen thought, being, in this doctrine, a source of constant learning. The depiction presented in the third poem (Figure 4) may be considered a model of this understanding. The singular moment of that season, when there is a kind of flowering on the roadside and the transitory state of things and nature is revealed, is undone by a poetic function expressed by the animal itself and its relationship with the other beings, suggesting a singular imagery about the ephemerality and the mysteries that surround life.

Finally, it is a meditative way of observing the natural world, which can also be found in other poems by Bashô, such as those in Figures 6 and 7:



Source: Franchetti and Doi²⁷.

Figure 6: Poem by Bashô

26. Ibidem, p. 20.

27. FRANCHETTI; DOI, op. cit., p. 131.

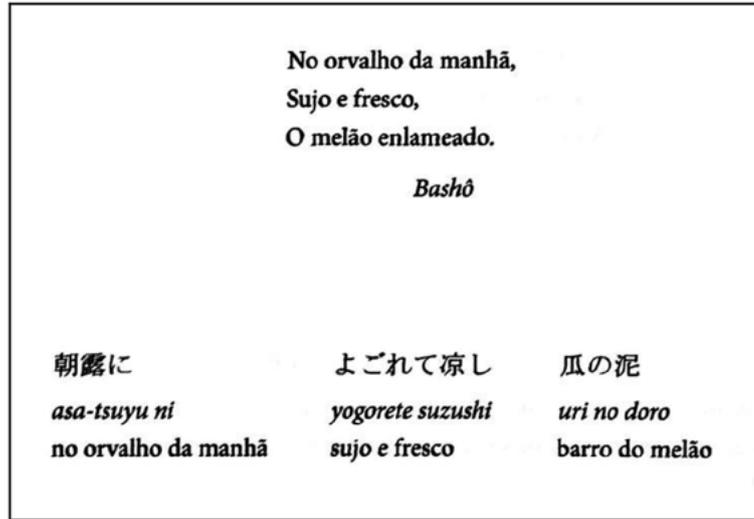


Figure 7: Poem by Bashô

3. THE HEIRS OF MATSUO BASHÔ

In the tradition of the *haikai*, it may be very difficult to separate who would be and who would not be the heirs of Bashô. Considering his pioneering character and the impact of his teachings in the Shômon school, in general, all practitioners of this Japanese poetic form would be his heirs ever since. The traditional criticism of the *haikai* proposes three other names as the main heirs of Bashô, who deserve to be highlighted here: Yona Buson (1716-1783), Kobayashi Issa (1783-1827), and Massaoka Shiki (1867-1902). The first two would represent, despite their differences in style, a project of continuity of Bashô's work and would be nourished by the same cultural environment of stability of the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867), while the last one would have been subject to new dynamics arising from a world in profound transformation, under the molds of modernity, and his role, in these circumstances, would be to defend and maintain the *haikai* tradition.

Therefore, we shall present some poems by these three heirs (Figures 8, 9, and 10):

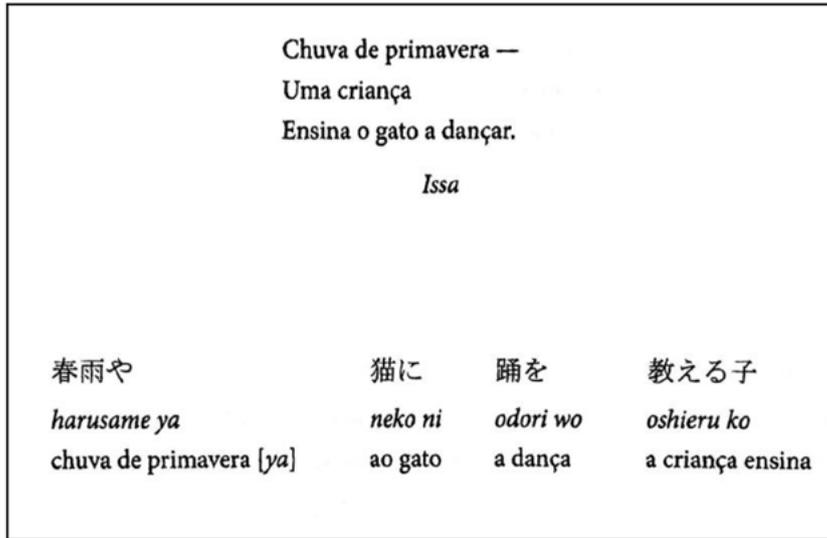


Figure 8: Poem by Issa

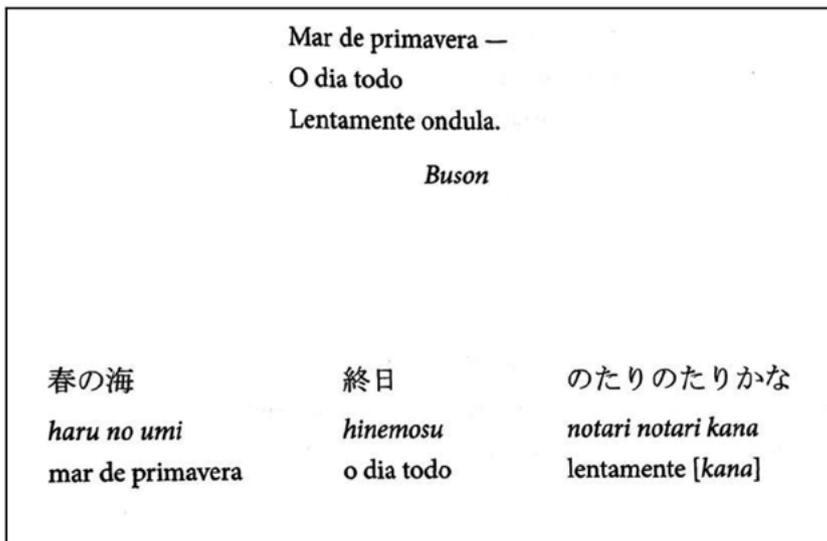


Figure 9: Poem by Buson

29. Ibidem, p. 76.

30. Ibidem, p. 77.

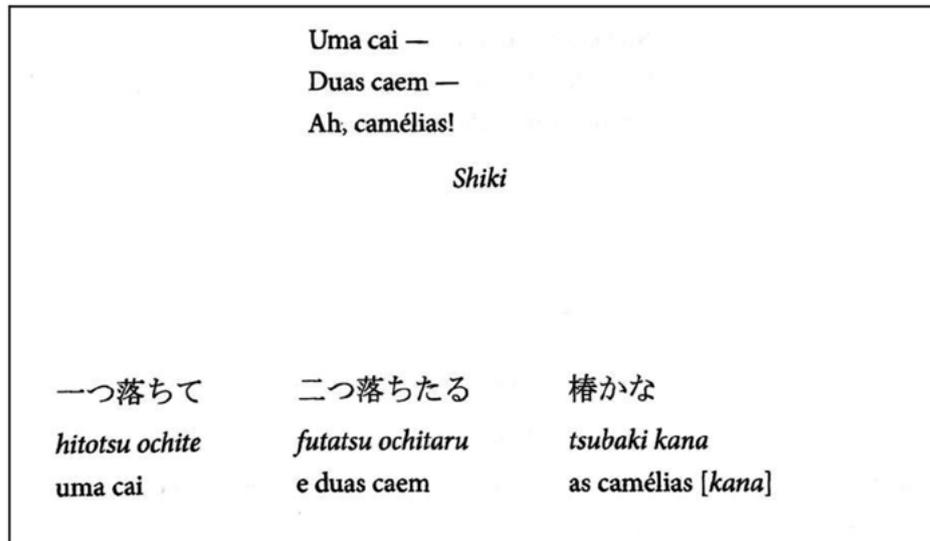


Figure 10: Poem by Shiki

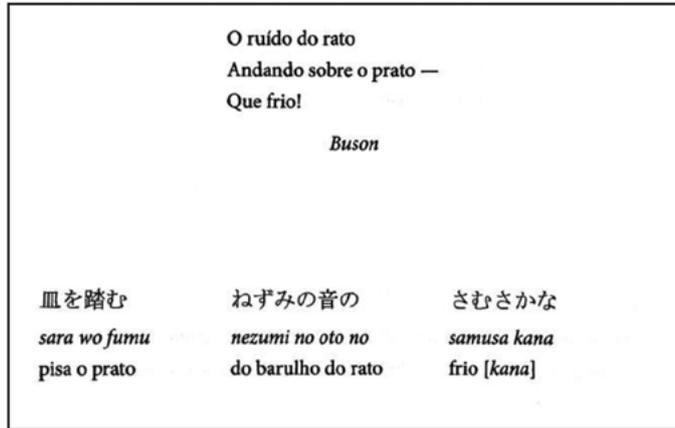
These three poems are situated within the state of mind of the same season: the spring. With topics in common, the “spring rain,” it is clear the difference between the approaches of Buson and Issa. If the poem of the first results in a plasticity that is characteristic of objectivity, almost of surgical precision of the poet, without any remnants of a subjectivizing view, Issa’s poem focuses on a more – let’s say – sentimental aspect: under the spring rain, the poet created a precise imagery of interaction between a child, possibly, and their pet. Already experiencing another time, if we take into account a new political-historical period that begins in Japan, Shiki preserves the aspect of greatest value in Buson, that is, what there is of most objective in the poetic imagery that are captured there, a kind of maximum economy that the poet can do: providing the reader with nothing more, nothing less, just enough.

The decadent subjectivity of some late imitators of Bashô did not please Shiki, who had Yosa Buson as example of objectivity and efficiency in language. Shiki craved a *haikai* made in objective language that dealt with everyday facts, accessible to experience, not about affected mystical imaginations³².

Let us return to the style differentiations between Buson and Issa. The winter poems, presented in Figures 11 and 12, show how this is found in the literary language itself. In Issa, it should be noted the way the poet’s presence expresses a unique perspective about the very presence of the human being in the world. While in Buson, who is recognized for his keen view of painter of the things of the world, the poem deals, once again, with the objectified world, with minimal human interference, in the last degree. Let us see:

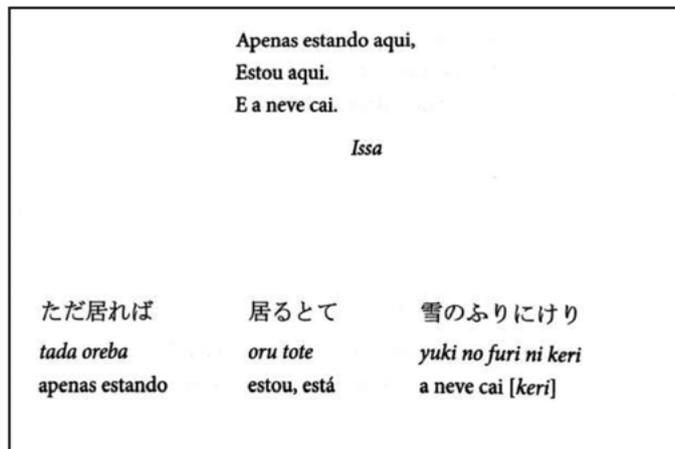
31. Ibidem, p. 85.

32. PORTELA, op. cit., p. 171.



Source: Franchetti and Doi³³.

Figure 11: Poem by Buson



Source: Franchetti and Doi³⁴.

Figure 12: Poem by Issa

Despite the differences between these poets, they all seem to share the same spirit that, predominantly, has Bashô as their great master. They are his undisputed heirs. There is no doubt that, without the presence of Bashô and his teachings, it would not have been possible to capture this sublime moment registered in the beautiful and ingenious poem by Issa³⁵:

Nos olhos da libélula
Refletem-se
Montanhas distantes.

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33. FRANCHETTI; DOI, op. cit., p. 156.

34. Ibidem, p. 168.

35. Ibidem, p. 140.

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