REPRINT: Buson's Two Candles by Anita Virgil

Too often, I have read that Buson's poetry derives from imagination. Usually, this is mentioned by critics who are comparing his work with that of Basho. The underlying derogatory implication -- for I take it that "fabrication" is meant when the word "imagination" is used -- has always annoyed me because it ignores the quantity of consistently fine poems produced by Buson containing strikingly subtle and exact images. Could it be that the sheer diversity of Buson's work has given rise to such a notion? Reality is the springboard for all artistic creation, no less for Basho than for Buson. But the idea of "imagined" poems does not truly reckon with the fact of Buson's urbanity nor with the vital time period in which he wrote -- a time when inroads had been made that liberalized the subject matter for literature. The arts of Ukiyo and the developing art of senryu were in place. And one must also consider Buson's enormous talent as a professional artist. Had I not been privileged to see the exhibition of Buson's art in the early 1970's in New York City's Asia House, I would probably never have realized the degree to which his poetry stems from his vision as an artist. It strikes me that criticism of Buson may have its foundations in the inability of the non-artist to recognize evidence of the very thing which sets the visual artist apart from others: his ability to see more than most people. Combine this with the gift of writing and you have Buson, a man whose poems are composed of the most acutely observed realities reflecting a broad life-experience.

Lighting one candle
With another candle;
An evening of spring. [1]

From the first, this was one of my favorite Japanese haiku. Its fragility, elegance and equipoise are such that I have never felt a need to dissect it. But after experiencing Buson's paintings firsthand, it suddenly opened to me. It is a poem in which one beautiful thing literally fires another to a resultant sheer beauty. Surely, in the case of Buson, one must recognize how his artist's eye charges his writing dynamically, constantly.

The slow day;
A pheasant
Settles on the bridge. [2]

In the stillness
Between the arrival of guests
The peonies. [3]

Tilling the field:
The cloud that never moved
Is gone. [4]

The spring sea:
all day long
undulating, undulating. [5]

Several influences must have produced such a talent as Buson. There is ample evidence that Basho was a major one. Not only did Buson study under a teacher who was a pupil of Basho's disciples, Kikaku and Ransetsu, but he continually, in his art, paid tribute to the Master. He painted portraits of Basho, illustrated *Oku no Hosomichi*, and Buson's crow paintings engender the very loneliness and isolation of autumn and winter echoing Basho's famous crow poem.

The delicacy and elegance of Onitsura's work also finds its way into Buson's poems. Buson was well acquainted with Onitsura's work—in fact, wrote an *envoi* to selections from Onitsura's poems in 1769.

How hot the cobwebs look
Hanging on summer trees! [6]

Onitsura (1660-1738)

Spiders' webs
Are hot things
In the summer grove. [7]

Buson (1716-1783)

The *senryu*, in addition to ridiculing the overly sentimental, poor caliber haiku written post-Basho, opened the way for use of highly sensual subject matter which, Harold G. Henderson says, a considerable number of Buson's haiku contain. Concurrent with Buson's flourishing is the bourgeois art of Ukiyo-e, "The Floating World." It incorporated all aspects of city life for its subject matter. Life in the Yoshiwara, the licensed quarter of prostitution in Edo, gave rise to the world-famous Japanese woodblock prints which were to influence the French Impressionist painters over 100 years later. When Buson was 48 years of age, Harunobu was producing intimate glimpses in his woodblock prints of lovely and sensuous women, and Utamaro, too, was working his magical print art during Buson's mature years. The new freedom of expression in all the arts had the effect of making this era an aesthetically fertile one. Two examples by Buson of this cross-fertilization:

Early morning frost --
From the brothels of Muro,
The scent of hot soup. [8]

Over the gold screen
Whose silk gauze dress?
The autumn wind. [9]

The following poem uses the same subject matter as Basho's poem from *Oku no Hosomichi*: courtesans. But how different the handling and attitudes!

Courtesans
Buying sashes in their room,
Plum blossoms blooming. [10]

Buson

Under the same roof
Courtesans, too, are asleep --
Bush clover and the moon. [11]

Basho (1689)

Buson's courtesans were elegant ladies whose work obliged them to purchase lavish clothing. In his poem, Buson uses a close-up view of these indentured women of the Yoshiwara who were kept in quasi-isolation from the world outside their windows where, in contrast, other "beauties" (the blossoming plum trees) are rooted in freedom, open to sun and air and moonlight. The courtesans, adorning themselves with gorgeous silks and brocades, create another kind of "blooming." It is this parallelism that lends surplus meaning and poetic overtones to the poem. Basho's principle of internal comparison is evident throughout Buson's poem.

Basho's poem shows us rural courtesans who may have stayed at the inn Basho and his traveling companion, Sora, visited. But Basho's poem has a different perspective. Like a long-shot in a film where the cameraman pulls back to give a panoramic view, it provides a broad view. There is total acceptance of life observed in his poem, a total equality among the elements which suffuse this poem with serenity. This world, as represented by the women and the clover, and the extraterrestrial world, the moon and space, are one. Hence, Basho's religious attitude in the broadest sense comes through

to the reader. Buson's poem, however, brings us directly inside, and one shares this intimate moment with his courtesans. One does not observe them from afar. Without the least sentimentality, Buson still can pull from us the immense poignancy of this moment. These two poems illustrate clearly the different personalities of each great poet. One who, though participating in the world about him, maintains a certain distance; the other, who participates in the world and is not disturbed by contact with all aspects of it: Buson functions fully within the framework of his existence. Though there are critics who value the Buson poem less, I see both poems as great works -- different works. Buson makes this very point:

The two plum-trees:
I love their blooming,
One early, one later. [12]

Another point repeated in literature on Buson is that he does not go into any discussion of linking man and nature as Basho does. Buson, who found in Basho a vital source of inspiration, could not help but be influenced by the Master's words on this subject. It is an obvious theme stressed in Basho's work. It is my feeling that Buson's poetry and his paintings repeatedly make it clear that he accepts this integration fully. Therefore there was no need for him to formulate it into a philosophy -- his medium is his message. Yet, in *An Introduction to Haiku*, Harold G. Henderson says: "Actually very little is known of Buson's philosophy, and outside of his poetry and painting he apparently never did formulate one. We do know that he must have enormously enjoyed the ever-changing aspects of the passing world, though more as an observer than by in any way identifying himself with them." [13] I find this statement incomprehensible and highly contradictory. Weighted as it is on the side of theorizing about art instead of recognizing that the kind of art one produces conveys one's philosophy, this comment was clearly made by an individual not directly involved in the creative process, literary or visual, by one who himself was more an observer than a consummate participant in the creative act. As a poet and an artist, I can say that one's creations stand as the most vivid and open exposure of one's attitudes and beliefs.

With his innate sense of elegance and a brilliant facility for extracting the essence of a style of writing or of painting, Buson is multifaceted as a jewel. He can discern and emulate the many styles of Basho's work, yet his poetry is not at all like Basho's in overall tone and conception. Where we find an underlying serenity and immense depth to Basho's work, in Buson we find the range and sparkle of a virtuoso. It is as though one compared an introvert to an extrovert, a pearl with a diamond, antique velvet with silk brocade. There is a cosmic loneliness and grandeur to the man Basho. And Buson? I think Calvin L. French says it best in the art catalogue for the Asia House Gallery show:

> *"Buson was, of all Bunjin, * the foremost exemplar of the poetic vision. He excelled all others in the creation of mood and lyric expression. A lover of nature feels instant empathy with the artist when viewing his landscapes of trees and bamboo stalks shimmering with innumerable tones of finely textured leaf strokes so glowingly alive that one is convinced of the artist's thorough study and understanding of natural forms . . .*
>
> *Whether the painting be a rich, brocade-like landscape or a scattering of rocks across a plain surface, a depiction of reveling scholars or a single figure fused with a haiku poem, all communicate an intimate, honest response to the world. In Buson's painting one finds visual expression of the joy that living should be all about." [14]*

And in his poetry.

Literature and art occasionally coalesce in one individual. It is an extraordinary advantage heightening the sensory perceptions of the one fortunate enough to be so endowed. Yosa Buson was such a man.

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* Literati artists in the Chinese manner were called "Bunjin" in Japan.

1. R. H. Blyth, Haiku Vol. II, "Spring," (Japan, Hokuseido, 1950), p. 55.
2. ibid, p. 47.

3. Blyth, Haiku, Vol. III, p. 287.
4. Blyth, op. cit. , Vol. II, p. 167.
5. Harold G. Henderson, An Introduction to Haiku (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1958), p.97.
6. Asataro Miyamori, An Anthology of Haiku Ancient and Modern, p. 244 .
7. Blyth, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 260.
8. Calvin L. French, The Poet-Painters: Buson and His Followers (Univ. of Michigan, Museum of Art, 1974) p. 71.
9. Blyth, Haiku, Vol. I, p. 340.
10. ibid, p. 291.
11. Makoto Ueda, Basho (New York, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), p. 57.
12. Blyth, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 301.
13. Henderson, op. cit., p. 96.
14. French, op. cit., p. 26.

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