A COOL ASSESSMENT

by Anita Virgil

Too little emphasis has been placed, I believe, on the effect terminal illness* had on the literary achievements of Shiki. The subject has been avoided assiduously, as though to admit its role, to explore its pervasive effect on his life and work, would be to engage in morbidity. But it is the single most all-encompassing fact of the life of this poet who suffered a degenerative disease from the age of twenty-one until his death at thirty-five. Not to reckon with this leads even such an influential aficionado of haiku as R. H. Blyth to make the following misleading assessment: "As with Buson, whom he (Shiki) admired so much, he gives us pure poetry, which never fails to satisfy us, and though it may not gain in depth with rereading, we do not tire of him."[1] It is difficult to accept such a negation of the depth to be gained through re-reading Shiki in light of the fact of his long illness. Blyth mentions it in his works but illogically ignores it as a factor in understanding just why it is that he finds such pleasure, such enduring quality in the man's poems. Shiki's illness provides the missing link to deriving full impact from his work. What we get from the first reading of his poems is only the crystalline tip of the iceberg.

Other haiku poets treat the subject of coolness, in the main, as an external sensation.

The cool breeze;
Crooked and meandering
It comes to me.
--Issa[2]

Coolness
Painted into a picture;
Bamboos of Saga.
--Basho[3]

The cool breeze
Fills the empty vault of heaven
With the voice of the pine-tree.
--Onitsura[4]

The shrine
In a sacred grove:
A cool wind blows.
--Chora[5]

But no one brings to his poems the extraordinary sensitivity Shiki brings in regard to sensations of coolness. It is my firm belief that this is due directly to the condition of constant feverishness experienced by the tubercular. The next poem, when read with an awareness that a tubercular patient frequently experiences drenching "night sweats", makes one acutely conscious of the components of the poem and enables the reader to realize why they would have significance for Shiki. Yet, as a prefatory note to several of these "coolness" poems, Blyth with inexplicable denseness says "Shiki seems to have been *peculiarly* (my emphasis) susceptible to heat and cold."[6]

Fields and mountains
Drenched with rain,--
A cool day-break.[7]

Now let us compare Shiki's handling with the more superficial pleasantries of the other poets:

Corning out of the bath,
The wind blows on the nipples;
Cooling on the verandah.[8]

In the next three poems, Shiki makes use of synesthesia to achieve the sensation of touch (coolness) via aural or visual sensations or both.

The night-light goes out;
The sound of the water:
The coolness.[9]

The coolness;
Through the window of the stone lantern
The sea.[10]

The coolness:
A crab climbing up a pine-tree
In the rain.[11]

Note how in "the sea" and the "climbing crab," Shiki excels at this palpable caressing of his subject with the eyes--albeit a sublimation of unshared passion. (He wrote no "love" poems.)

In the following two poems, the first by Buson, the second by Shiki, we must observe that the feeling conveyed by each is entirely different -- but in what way?**

On the temple bell
has settled, and is fast asleep,
a butterfly.
--Buson[12]

On the temple bell
has settled, and is glittering,
a firefly.
--Shiki[13]

The Buson haiku is really a lovely, delicate moment of coincidence in which the contrasts of noise and silence, agitation and repose, largeness and smallness weave their own quiet magic. But if we recognize in Shiki's haiku the firefly as metaphor (a common technique poets use to convey their feelings) -- as a self-portrait, it is devastating. The dominant thrust of this haiku is not in contrasts but in its contained burning, "glittering" *feverishness*. All the suppressed anger, frustration, drive and despair of the consumptive poet, the agnostic, the iconoclast, burst from this superficially innocuous variation on Buson's poem. The true flavor of what is happening comes from this passage in Thomas Mann's novel of a sanatorium, *The Magic Mountain*:

"And now his body has come into the foreground in another sense and made itself important and independent of the rest of him -- namely, through illness. He is all 'lit up' within and can't get rid of the infection and become healthy,...no matter how much he wants to get down to the valley and be a soldier... But the disease makes him ailing within and fevered without; disease makes men more physical, it leaves them nothing but body..."[14]

Poem after poem portrays varied aspects of acute solitariness, a circumstance forced upon the poet by his illness. (How different this is from the solitariness of Basho who sought it, who found solace in it!)

The seeds of the nettle-tree are falling;
Recently, the child next door
Doesn't come.[15]

A grasshopper chirping
In the back
Of the clog cupboard.[16]

All the sick-nurses
Fast asleep,--
Ah, the cold.[17]

Again and again, a feeling of separateness. But never in these does Shiki employ one iota of sentimentality in order to achieve the poignancy inherent in his choice of subject matter. Even so, his illness and attendant solitude provide the key to understanding the underlying subjective dimension of Shiki's poetry of "realistic description."

In the following poems it is the absence of things which strikes the deep psychological knell:

There is no trace
Of him who entered
The summer grove.[18]

On the sandy beach,
Footprints:
Long is the spring day.[19]

When I looked back,
The man who passed
Was lost in the mist.[20]

Loneliness:
After the fireworks,
A falling star?[21]

Of crimson foliage
There is none here,
Deep in mountains[22]

We see in these haiku the functional application of his theory on the ability of objectivity to evoke emotional response. And in the following:

I met a coffin,
At midnight,
In the New Year.[23]

Yet, this is handled with what Blyth chose to call Shiki's "excessive objectivity," but what a small leap of imagination is required to recognize what the occurrence portended for Shiki. Shiki cannot afford to be sentimental lest he collapse inward upon the awfulness of his future. His very control and sense of irony allow him to function—for what time he has.

*Tuberculosis was incurable until the middle of the 20th century
**These two poems are usually paired to illustrate the typical Japanese technique of emulating a well-known poem but altering it slightly. Donald Keene has done so; Harold G. Henderson has done so in *Japanese Literature: An Introduction for Western Readers* and in *An Introduction to Haiku*, respectively.

References

1. R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, Vol. II (Japan, Hokuseido, 1964), p. 77.
2. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, Vol III Summer-Autumn (Japan, Hokuseido, 1952), p. 25.
3. *Ibid*., p. 20.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. *Ibid*., p. 12.
6. *Ibid*., p. 13.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid*., p. 128.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
10 *Ibid.*,. p. 15.
11. *Ibid* , p. 14.
12. Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1958), p. 163.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 178.
15. Blyth, *History of Haiku*, op. cit., p. 97.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
18. Blyth, Vol. III, op. cit., p. 266.
19. Blyth, *Haiku*, Vol. II (Japan, Hokuseido, 1950), p. 48.
20. Ibid., p. 85.
21. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, Vol. IV (Japan, Hokuseido, 1952), p. 24.
22. *Ibid*., p. 100.
23. Blyth, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 18.

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