

The Religio-Aesthetic of Matsuo Bashō

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MATSUO BASHŌ (1644–94) has been a continuing and fruitful source for both academic and nonacademic interest in Japanese culture—a culture which he so ideally represents in many important ways. As such, he and his art have received much attention in both Japanese and non-Japanese scholarship. In awareness and appreciation of this, the following does not so much pretend to uncover new data on Bashō as to probe for a deeper and clearer understanding of that which has already been pointed to as the core of his thinking and art. The thesis to be shown here is that the “core” of Bashō is best understood as both religious and aesthetic; that is, as “religio-aesthetic.”

While the category “religio-aesthetic” might be held—at the most general level—to refer to any artistic/aesthetic phenomenon which has or carries religious meaning, the intention here is to use it in a much more specific and careful sense as that point where the aesthetic and religious become synonymous, and the distinction of religion and art is transcended. It is especially in this latter sense that “religio-aesthetic” becomes a crucial way for understanding not only Bashō, but some important aspects of Japanese culture and religion generally.

For purposes of this paper, then, let us understand “religious” and “aesthetic” in the following ways: Something is *religious* which evokes, expresses, or makes reference to a particular kind of sensibility, awareness, apprehension, or mode of perception which is marked by a sense of Reality, sacrality, power, true being, ultimacy, unrestricted value, depth and profundity, meaningfulness and truth, transcendence, numinosity,

and awe. Something is *aesthetic* which evokes, expresses, or makes reference to a particular kind of sensibility, awareness, apprehension, or mode of perception marked especially by a sense of beauty,¹ unity (wholeness, completion, satisfaction), meaningfulness, value, integration (order, harmony), profundity, intuitive immediacy and involvement, new/renewed insight, numinosity, and a certain awe (wonder).

Delimited in this manner, there exists a certain overlap between the religious and the aesthetic, yet no necessary synonymy. However, where the aesthetic takes on the marks of the religious as well, or the religious the aesthetic, there is synonymy made. Of course, the particular character of the "beauty" or the "Real" may diverge widely according to the particular case; however, this does not affect the possibility of synonymy. For example, the divergence might be as wide as between a Picasso and a Sesshū, yet one might make the case for synonymy in both instances.

Examples of an articulation of this synonymy, especially in the Far East but certainly not exclusively there, are manifold. To multiply these examples would serve little purpose here. However, one might point to such Western thinkers as Whitehead, Heidegger, Wheelwright, or Tillich as concerned to open up our understanding of the fundamentally religio-aesthetic character of certain kinds of experience and phenomena.² Or, in the Indian context, one might suggest the importance of *rasa* or/and *santarasa* as an important religio-aesthetic matter in the culture.³ For the Far East generally, F.S.C. Northrop has suggested the primarily religious (or spiritual) character of aesthetic apprehension in his ambitious

¹ Beauty is here understood as the experience of something as "a presence to be apprehended in loving joy (and) as radiant form." See Eliot Deutsch, *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), p. 34.

² See, e.g., Stanley Hopper, "Whitehead: Redevious or Absconditus" in *America and the Future of Theology*, ed. by W. Beardslee (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967); Heidegger as discussed in Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. xvii-xxv; Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 156-72; and Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

³ See Deutsch, pp. 17f.—notwithstanding his apparent wish to finally draw a line between aesthetic and "pure spiritual" experience.

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work.⁴ Again for the Far East, several have pointed to the relation of Taoism and Zen Buddhism to aesthetic modes of apprehension—not to mention, of course, much of the art works of China and Japan.⁵ Finally, Japan itself has often been suggested as manifesting this synonymy in unique degree.⁶

In all this, Bashō stands out as a paradigmatic model of the religio-aesthetic synonymy, with particular reference to the character of that synonymy in traditional Japan. In the following, we shall pay special attention to the terms *fūrabō*, *fūga* (and *fūryū*), *hosomi*, *sabi*, and *karumi* as crucial categories through which a religio-aesthetic interpretation of Bashō might appear.

1 *Fūrabō and Fūga (Fūryū): A Religio-Aesthetic Self-Understanding*

While there are possible qualifications, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bashō's central image of himself as a human being and a poet revolve around religious and aesthetic ideals. This could be shown, of course, through certain biographical data reflecting his concerns for artistic truth and depth, or his connections with institutional forms of religion such as Zen Buddhism. However, more convincing are the recurring images of himself and his art that he himself expresses. Central to these is the image and ideal of the detached poetic ascetic for whom life and poetry is a spiritual journey—a "path with heart" which may hopefully lead somewhere both spiritually and artistically, but which is itself the "goal." Bashō's expression of this comes in a variety of places and forms. It is certainly implicit, for example, in the title of his most famous travel diary, "Oku no hosomichi" (1689), where the "narrow

⁴ F. S. C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1946), especially Chapter ix.

⁵ See Chang, e.g., in n. 2; and Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, "Zen: Its Meaning for Modern Civilization" in *The Eastern Buddhist* 1, 1, pp. 45f.

⁶ See, e.g., comments by Kishimoto and others in C. A. Moore, ed., *The Japanese Mind* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), pp. 117f, 296 (cf. n. 28, p. 310). See also my work, "The Artistic Way and the Religio-Aesthetic Tradition in Japan," to be published in *Philosophy East and West*, Summer 1977.

road(s) of/to (the district of) Oku” can be understood not only literally, but as a metaphor for a life journey into the very “depths” or “innermost essence” (*oku* . . .) of things—a journey fraught with difficulties no doubt, but one which is its own reward in spiritual and aesthetic fulfillment.

The most explicit and helpful comment, however, is made by Bashō in his “*Oi no kobumi*” (“Record of a Travel-worn Satchel,” 1688), and this comment focuses on the word *furabō* (perhaps: “wind-blown hermit”):

There is something in this body composed of one hundred members and nine orifices, which is called provisionally a *furabō*. Does it refer to a thin robe in tatters, flapping in the wind? This fellow [Bashō as *furabō*] has for a long while been an ardent composer of *kyōku* [*haiku*], for he thought that this was his life mission. Sometimes, however, becoming tired of it, he wants to throw it overboard; sometimes, cherishing the positive ambition to excel others in it, his mind is distracted very much with worldly concerns, and for this reason he feels uneasy. Indeed, he often aspires to a worldly position, but (his liking for *haiku*) suppresses the thought.⁷

The image here of a “wind-blown hermit” is amplified and repeated elsewhere in Bashō—both in particular and related images such as *fūga* (lit.: “wind elegance”), *fūryū* (lit.: “wind style”) and *fūsō* (lit.: “wind-refined person”), and in more general references to himself as a wandering homeless pilgrim. Some instances of these references are as follows:

We celebrated our start [of the journey] by scribbling on our hats, “Nowhere in this wide universe have we a fixed abode—a party of two wanderers.”⁸

My body, now close to fifty years of age, . . . drifts with the winds and clouds that know no destination. Morning and night

⁷ As trans. in D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 258.

⁸ From “*Oi no kobumi*” as trans. in Nobuyuki Yuasa, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 81.

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I have eaten traveler's fare, and have held out for alms a pilgrim's wallet.⁹

Admirable is a person who has nothing that hampers his mind. Laudable is a man devoid of worldly talent and knowledge. The same can be said of a homeless wanderer, too. Yet, leading such a totally liberated life requires an iron will . . . At one time, as if caught by a sudden whirlwind, I dashed out on a journey to the north and roamed about with a tattered hat on my head.¹⁰

Of course, none of this is meant to suggest that Bashō simply saw himself as unambiguously leading a "purely" religious life. He is neither officially, nor in his own self-understanding, a Zen monk or a Taoist hermit. He makes this quite clear in a number of places, and shows thereby a certain sense of being caught in a kind of middle road between the "purely" spiritual and "purely" secular worlds. For example:

I, too, was clad in a black robe, but neither a priest nor an ordinary man of this world was I, for I wandered ceaselessly like a bat that passes for a bird at one time and a mouse at another.¹¹

But I should not have it thought from what I have said that I am devoted to solitude and seek only to hide my traces in the wilderness. Rather, I am like a sick man weary of people, or someone who is tired of the world. . . . I have not led a clerical [monastic] life, nor have I served in normal pursuits. Ever since I was very young, I have been fond of my eccentric ways, and once I had come to make them the source of a livelihood, temporarily I thought, I discovered myself bound for life to the one line of my art.¹²

⁹ From "Genjuan no fu" ("Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling," 1690) as trans. in Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 374.

¹⁰ As trans. in Makoto Ueda, *Matsumoto Bashō* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 118.

¹¹ From his "Kashima kikō" ("A Visit to Kashima Shrine," 1687), as trans. by Yuasa, p. 63.

¹² From "Genjuan no fu" as trans. in Keene, p. 376.

I wear no sword at my side, but carry an alms wallet around my neck and a rosary of eighteen beads in my hand. I resemble a priest, but the dust of the world is on me. I look like one of the laity, but my head is shaven.¹³

While such feelings as these might suggest to some that Bashō felt caught in a kind of existential bind,¹⁴ it is probably closer to the truth to suggest that, like the banana plant (*bashō*) with which he felt an affinity, he was flexible, sensitive, delicate, somehow lonesome (*sabi*), a bit impractical, and yet fully there fluttering in the breezes and bending with the wind. However "in between" the sacred and the secular vocations this may have left him, it was an identity he carried easily and securely, and it had its own validity and meaning—especially considered religiously and artistically. It could hardly be otherwise for one who saw himself and his art as standing squarely in the religio-aesthetic tradition of recluse monk-poets, or of the ideals of art as a Way (*dō*) of ultimate or religious significance. Without trying to show Bashō as having some clearly non-artistic Buddhist "salvation" in mind for his life, one can simply suggest that he was informed by, and in some degree modeled his life on, a tradition in which spiritual and aesthetic endeavor went hand in hand.

The models for this that seem most compelling and fruitful for an understanding of Bashō's own self image as *fūrabō* would seem to be the Taoist sage (or eccentric hermit *à la* Chuang Tzu), and Saigyō, the priest-poet of the late Heian period. Allusions to these people and ideals, and others like them, are manifold in Bashō's work. Thus, for example, when he describes himself as a "wind-blown hermit," he may well have in mind the following kinds of things from Chuang Tzu:

The hundred joints, the nine openings, the six organs, all come together and exist here (as my body) . . . It would seem as

¹³ From his "Kamhi ginkō" ("Journey of 1684")—sometimes titled "Nozarashi Kikō" ("Records of a Weather-exposed Skeleton")—as trans. by Donald Keene in "Bashō's Journey of 1684" in the Arthur Waley Anniversary Volume, *Asia Major* vol. vii (1959), p. 196.

¹⁴ See T. Izutsu, "Far Eastern Existentialism: Haiku and the Man of Wabi," *Philosophical Forum* vol. iv, no. 1 (1973), pp. 43f.

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though there must be some True Lord among them. But whether I succeed in discovering his identity or not, it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth.

All things that have consciousness depend upon breath. But if they do not get their fill of breath, it is not the fault of Heaven (Tao). Heaven opens up the passages and supplies them day and night without stop. But man on the contrary, blocks up the holes. The cavity of the body is a many-storied vault; the mind has its Heavenly wanderings. But if the chambers are not large and roomy, then the wives and sisters will fall to quarreling. If the mind does not have its Heavenly wanderings, then the six apertures of sensation will defeat each other.

The Great Clod [Tao] belches out breath and its name is wind.

Follow your mind and make it your teacher.

Men do not mirror themselves in running water; they mirror themselves in still water. Only what is still can still the stillness of other things.¹⁵

The force of this—much of which echoes Bashō's comment on *fūrahō* above—is to suggest that the true essence of the self is the mind at one with Tao, and that breath and wind are primary symbols for it. It is through the workings of this mind—the still mind—that true spiritual creativity comes and puts all in harmony. Therefore, continuing with Chuang Tzu, the Taoist sage, or true man, is one who:

1. Wanders spiritual realms, abiding nowhere, transcending self/world:

The sage . . . wanders beyond dust and grime . . . leans on the sun and moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, leaves confusion and muddle as it is, and looks on slaves as exalted.

¹⁵ As trans. in Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 93, 138, 91, 34, and 65 respectively.

Sages . . . join with the Creator as men to wander in the single breath of heaven and earth . . . They forget liver and gall, cast aside ears and eyes, turning and revolving, ending and beginning again, unaware of where they start or finish. Idly they roam beyond dust and dirt; they wander free and easy in the service of inaction.¹⁶

2. Faces the difficulties of life courageously:

To understand that hardship is a matter of fate, that success is a matter of the times, and to face great difficulty without fear—this is the courage of the sage.¹⁷

3. Rides the wind as a bird:

There is a Holy Man living in faraway Ku-she Mountain, with skin like ice and snow, and gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn't eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on clouds and mist, rides the flying dragon, and wanders the four seas.

The giant bird P'eng (Wisdom), . . . with a back like Mount T'ai and wings like clouds filling the sky, . . . beats the whirlwind, leaps into the air and rises up ninety thousand *li*, cutting through clouds and mist, shouldering the blue sky, and then he turns his eyes south and prepares to journey.¹⁸

These quotes have been given at some length to both give a slightly fuller picture of Chuang Tzu, and to show the quantity of parallel images and ideas to those found in Bashō. For example, Bashō too has a strong sense of one who “faces great difficulty without fear” and takes “hardship as a matter of fate,” or of himself as a “gentle and shy” person who thrives on wind, dew, clouds and mist, and wanders “the four seas.” Even the bird is a recurring self-image in Bashō, and one associated by him

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 25.

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with spiritual existence. For example, as quoted above: "neither a priest nor an ordinary man of this world was I, for I wavered ceaselessly like a bat that passes for a bird [the priest] at one time and a mouse [man of this world] at another." Similarly, in several of his poems which refer to himself, he is some kind of winged creature. For example, the poem upon leaving his family home:

*Kumo to hedatsu
tomo kaya kari no
iki wakare*

Parting from his friends
A wild goose goes its way
Soon to be beyond the clouds.¹⁹

It is the contention here that these parallels are not merely coincidental, and that Bashō's central understanding of himself as *fūrabō* evokes these kinds of images and meanings; that is, of one who sees his existence and life as a kind of spiritual journey in which he seeks to plumb the depths of reality, identify himself with the "larger life" of things which, especially for Bashō, is manifested in nature, and cleanse the dust of ego and other attachments that tie one to this impermanent world. Much as Chuang Tzu's sage, Bashō "roams beyond dust and dirt" and "wanders free and easy in the service of inaction [non-attachment]."

All this is even more compelling when one realizes Bashō's relation to the poetic/recluse tradition in Japan (and China), and especially to one of its exemplary models, Saigyō (1118-1190). Little need be said of Bashō's appreciation for either the recluse/hermitage (*yamazato*) existence, or for Saigyō, for both are manifest throughout his writings. In particular here, however, Saigyō is the model of the wandering poet who finds in nature, and the religio-aesthetic sensitivity to it, a spiritual fulfillment and the basis for true artistic creativity.²⁰ In suggesting his own identification with this kind of tradition, and with Saigyō as a model, Bashō says:

Since ancient times, those with a feeling for poetry did not mind
carrying satchels on their backs, or putting straw sandals on their

¹⁹ Trans. in *Haikai and Haiku* (Tokyo: Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, 1958), p. 142. Cf. two poems of pp. 10f where Bashō again refers to himself in this kind of way.

²⁰ For the religio-aesthetic of Saigyō, see William LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature," in *History of Religions* vol. 13, nos. 1 & 2 (1973).

feet, or wearing humble hats that barely protected them from the elements. They took delight in disciplining their minds through such hardship and thereby attaining a knowledge of the true nature of things.²¹

Specifically with Saigyō in mind as he retraces Saigyō's pilgrimage and visits his hut during the journey of 1684, Bashō says:

Many of the men who from ancient times have come to these mountains to forget the world have obtained a refuge in the poetry of China and Japan. [Then, in a poem inspired by Saigyō's hut, and the spring nearby:]

<i>Tsuyu toku toku</i>	The dew falls drip-drop:
<i>Kokoromi ni ukiyo</i>	Would I could dip myself here
<i>Susugabaya</i>	And wash away (the dust of the world). ²²

As Ienaga Saburō suggests, Bashō is the true heir and culmination of a recluse tradition in poetry—a tradition inspired in great degree by the religio-aesthetic vision of Saigyō as the wandering poet who found in the tranquil solitariness (*sabishisa*) of nature his true being.²³

To mention Saigyō as poet, and the *sabishisa* that he and Bashō hold so dear, is, however, to begin to move beyond *fūrabō* as a wind-blown hermit and toward *fuga* (*fūryū*) as the more precisely aesthetic side of Bashō's fundamentally religio-aesthetic self-understanding. While *fūrabō* emphasizes the clearly religious character of Bashō's self image, *fuga* suggests the aesthetic and poetic appropriation of this as the ground for true creativity. Bashō's comment on *fūrabō*, with which we began this discussion, thus continues as follows:

After all this, he [himself as *fūrabō* and poet] is now an ignoramus with no accomplishments whatever except that he holds steadily

²¹ As trans. in Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō*, p. 116.

²² Keene, "Bashō's Journey of 1684," p. 138.

²³ See Robert Bellah, "Ienaga Saburō and the Search for Meaning in Modern Japan" in M. B. Jansen, ed., *Changing Japan: Attitudes Toward Modernization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 393.

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to the pursuit of one line only, which is in truth the line uniformly followed by Saigyō in his *waka*, by Sōgi in his *renga*, by Sesshū in his paintings, and by Rikyū in his art of tea. One spirit activates all their works. It is the spirit of *fūga*; he who cherishes it accepts Nature and becomes a friend of the four seasons. Whatever objects he sees are referred to the flowers; whatever thoughts he conceives are related to the moon. . . . Therefore, . . . accept Nature, return to Nature.²⁴

This at once indicates the tradition with which Bashō identifies, and something of the essential religio-aesthetic content of that tradition. *Fūga*, related as it is to *fūrabō* by the recurring wind (*fū*) imagery and by appearing directly after his discussion of himself as *fūrabō*, becomes the key to the particularly aesthetic character of Bashō's religio-aesthetic understanding. It is the ascetic (*fūrabō*) as aesthetic (*fūga*), and is Bashō's particular appropriation and expression of what it means to live poetically as *fūrabō* in this world. It is the religio-aesthetic ground of true artistic creativity, and the "one line" out of which all good things come, and back to which they refer. It is what Bashō refers to, I think, when he says: "Follow the narrow thread of the Way of Poetry. Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; seek what they sought."²⁵

Taking Bashō's comment on *fūga* quoted above, however, it would seem that it involves two key notions: one is the acceptance of, identity with, and return to nature; and the other is the aesthetic "transformation" of the world through the religio-aesthetic sensitivity gained thereby. In fact, one might suggest that the *fū* ties *fūga* not only to *fūrabō* but to nature itself (as "wind"), while the *ga* ("elegance" etc.) ties it to aesthetic refinement.

Pursuing the former aspect first, *fūga* suggests a recurring theme in the Japanese tradition; that is, the importance of direct communion with nature as a means of directly experiencing Nature, or the "larger life" at the "essence of all things." An earlier artistic expression of this can be

²⁴ In Suzuki, pp. 258f.

²⁵ As trans. in Wm. T. De Bary, ed., *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 450.

found in the great Nō master Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443). As he puts it:

The universe is a vessel producing the various things, each in its own season: the flowers and leaves, the snow and the moon, the mountains and seas. . . . By making these things the essence of your artistic vision, by becoming one with the universal vessel, and by securing your vessel in the great *ma* style of the Way of Emptiness (*kūdo*), you will attain the ineffable flowers of this art.²⁶

While couched in a much more self-consciously Buddhist language than Bashō, the statement is typical of the Japanese religio-aesthetic artistic tradition in which one attains a kind of spiritual identity with the “greater life” of the universe, particularly via an aesthetic sensitivity to nature, and—with that as the basis—creates the “flowers” which are true art. Going back to Saigyō, and even Chuang Tzu, it is a kind of tranquil-mind-in-nature which has religio-aesthetic significance. In what seems almost a paraphrase of Zeami, it is as Bashō says, to “make the universe your companion, always bearing in mind the true nature of all creation—mountains and rivers, trees and grasses, and humanity—and enjoy the falling blossoms and scattering leaves.”²⁷ More specifically, for Bashō, it is “submerging” oneself with nature:

The Master once said: “Learn about pines from pines, and about bamboos from bamboos.” What he meant was that the poet must detach himself from his will . . . [and] submerge oneself within the object, to perceive its delicate life and feel its feeling, out of which a poem forms itself. . . . [Otherwise] the poem will be a work of artifice made by the poet’s will.²⁸

In short, one’s sense of separate selfhood disappears into the immediacy of the direct experience of nature/Nature, and poetry is formed.

²⁶ My trans. of a section from his “Yūgaku shūdō kempushō” in Nose Asaji, ed., *Zeami jūrokubushū hyōshaku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 575ff.

²⁷ In *Haikai and Haika*, p. xvii.

²⁸ Trans. in Makoto Ueda, *Zeami, Bashō, Yūzō, Poems* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), p. 38.

Fūga as aesthetic transformation, on the other hand, is resident in the idea that “out of this experience, poetry is born,” or, out of the “return to nature” one transforms “all objects into flowers and all thoughts into the moon.” True art is not artifice created by the self-conscious and object-conscious mind (or “will”), but is *born* out of the “return” or submerging of self into object. It is associated stylistically with what Bashō calls the “permanent style” for, while the permanent and impermanent are both necessary (in life and in art), and both have *fūga* as their essence, “the permanent style is the one which is firmly based on the true poetic spirit (*fūga*), irrespective of the writer’s time or of the contemporary fashion.”²⁹ This is indeed what Bashō means by not merely “following in the footsteps of the masters of old” (i.e. changing styles and fashions), but “seeking what they sought.”

Thus is *fūga* that religio-aesthetic sensibility *par excellence* which is the experiential/existential basis for artistic creativity generally. It is religious in its intent to probe, evoke, and express the very ground of Reality, and aesthetic in its intent to suggest that that Reality is best (or even necessarily) probed, evoked, and expressed via aesthetic sensitivities and artistic expression. Together with *fūrabō*, it forms the core of Bashō’s religio-aesthetic self-understanding, although the other categories to which we now and more briefly turn expand and develop this self-understanding a bit more.

II *Hasomi*: The “Slender Mind” of Poetic Creativity

While often understood as a particular aesthetic poetic style, *hasomi* is probably better and more appropriately understood as a term closely related to *fūga* as the religio-aesthetic ground of true creativity. Literally meaning “slender” or “narrow,” it seems to refer to that particular moment and mode of consciousness out of which true poetry is born. As such, it is related to moments of heightened *fūga* as “tranquil-mind-in-Nature,” and/or to what the Zen-influenced artistic tradition refers to as *mushin* (“no-mind,” “*mu*-mind”). While the evidence for this in Bashō is not conclusive, there seem to be various significant passages with images

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

suggestive of it—most of which point to the narrow, thin, sharp-edged mind as related to moments of deep insight in which subject/object distinctions are transcended and poetry becomes a spontaneous creation. For example:

When you are composing a verse, . . . let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write. Quickly say what is in your mind; never hesitate at that moment.³⁰

"Composition of a poem must be done in an instant, like a woodcutter felling a huge tree or a swordsman leaping at a dangerous enemy. It is also like cutting a ripe watermelon with a sharp knife, or like taking a large bite at a pear" . . . [Then Bashō's disciple says:] All these words show the Master's attempt to remove personal will from the artist's work.

"Learn" means to submerge oneself within an object, to perceive its delicate life and feel its feeling, out of which a poem forms itself.

One should set his poetic feeling into form instantly after he gets into the realm [where subject and object meet], before the feeling cools off. In composing *haiku* there are two ways: "becoming" and "making." When a poet who has always been assiduous in pursuit of his aim applies himself to an external object, the color of his mind naturally becomes a poem. In the case of a poet who has not done so, nothing in him will become a poem; he, consequently, has to make a poem through the act of his personal will.³¹

Again, the thrust of such comments is the association of images of thin, sharp, narrow, or delicate with that moment of intuitive insight out of which poetry is born. Probably not unlike Chuang Tzu's model cook/

³⁰ *Trans.* in Makoto Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1967), p. 159.

³¹ In Ueda, *Zenmi, Bashō, Yeats, Pound*; pp. 52f, 38, and 39 respectively.

³² See Watson, p. 47.

butcher who cuts up oxen with a knife whose blade has no thickness,³² the mind of Tao (or the mind of *Mu*) is so slender that it enters anything with plenty of room to spare. Perhaps as in the title "Oku no hosomichi" the "narrow road" into the depths (*oku*) is really or finally the narrow mind which opens one to the depths of reality. Perhaps it is also the *isasaka kokoro* ("slight" mind/heart) that Bashō uses to describe someone having true *fūryū* (*fūga*),³³ or *fūga* as the "narrow thread of the Way of Poetry" mentioned above. Or perhaps, finally, it is Bashō's "entering the realm of no-mind (*mushin*) under the moon after midnight,"³⁴ for it seems that this kind of experience is that out of which true poetry comes—as suggested by the story connected to Bashō's most famous *haiku*: "Our master [Bashō] was deeply immersed in meditation, but finally he came out with the second half of the poem . . . 'A frog jumped into water/A deep resonance.'"³⁵

If we follow this line of interpretation, *hosomi* would then become a further specification of *fūga* as the religio-aesthetic ground of creativity, and would apply to a particular mode of consciousness which ideally gives birth to particular poetic expressions. It would be, as one definition of *hosomi* suggests, "indicative of the inner profundity of a verse coming from the beauty felt by the poet in an elevated spiritual state of poetic consciousness."³⁶

III *Sabi and Karumi: Two Modes of Religio-Aesthetic Style and Expression*

In light of the above, it is entirely logical for Bashō to say to his disciples at the end of his life: "Attain a high degree of enlightenment and return to the world of common men."³⁷ Whether "enlightenment" is here understood in some strictly Buddhist sense or not, it is clear that

³² See Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu, *Back Roads to Far Towns* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), p. 67.

³⁴ From his "Kashū ginkō" as trans. by Donald Keene in *Landscapes and Portraits* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971), p. 96.

³⁵ In Yuasa, p. 32.

³⁶ From the *Shin Kōjien*, as quoted in Izutsu, p. 68, n. 18.

³⁷ In Ueda, *Zaami, Bashō, etc.*, pp. 69f.

Bashō saw his life essentially as a process of religious or spiritual fulfillment in and through aesthetic/poetic modes. While, like other artists in the religio-aesthetic tradition of Japan (for example, Zeami) he finally may have had doubts about his spiritual achievements (as judged from some more strictly Buddhist standpoint), by no means does this detract from the fundamentally religio-aesthetic character of his ideals. As we have seen, these ideals are particularly bound up in the terms *fūga*, *fūrabō*, and *hosomi*—all of which represent Taoist/Buddhist influences, and influences from the larger Chinese and Japanese religio-aesthetic traditions, but are finally Bashō's own unique appropriation and expression of these things.

Of more particular concern at this point, however, is the possible significance of "returning to the world of common men." While in some ways more appropriate to *karumi* ("lightness") than to *sabi* ("loneliness" or "solitariness"), in general it does suggest the idea that Bashō and poetry are, after all, a part of *this* world and not some other. Perhaps with more than just a nod, Bashō is pointing to the bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism. As expressed so clearly and graphically in most versions of the so-called ox-herding pictures of the Chinese and Japanese Zen tradition, the bodhisattva is precisely one who "attains a high degree of enlightenment and returns to the realm of the common man"—for the sake of helping to save others. Understood here simply as an analogue, the bodhisattva model suggests for Bashō the importance of returning—of bringing one's spiritual insight to bear in the various modes of being which make up human existence.

While setting aside the "common man" element as more appropriate to *karumi*, one particular poetic/aesthetic concretization of spiritual insight is represented by *sabi*.³⁸ For Bashō, and especially for his middle years as a mature poet when "returning to nature" was more important than "returning to the common man," *sabi* is perhaps *the* most essential and/or characteristic style/experience that poet and poetry sought to attain, evoke, and express. It is that particular impersonal atmosphere or

³⁸ For a fuller discussion of *sabi* as an important religio-aesthetic category both in Bashō and in Japan generally, see my work referred to in n. 6.

"feeling" which seems, almost necessarily, to accompany that "tranquil-mind-in-Nature" referred to in connection with *fuga* above. The kinds of images that evoke *sabi* (i.e. the *sabi* "style") are those suggestive of impersonal, detached aloneness—a kind of deep wakefulness or awareness beyond personalized emotion or I-it consciousness. Although examples abound in Bashō's poetry and prose, one most compelling and explicit one appears in his "Oku no hosomichi." Here, the prose and poetry are equally important in expressing or evoking *sabi*:

Sixteenth, sky clearing, decided to gather small shells, sailed along Iro beach. Altogether seven *li*. One Tenya so-and-so, with carefully-packed *warigo* and *sasae*, etc., taking servants along for the ride, enjoying tailwinds arrived in good time. Only a few fisherman's huts along beach and bedraggled Hokke temple nearby. Here drank tea, hot *sake*, much moved by the pervading sense of isolatedness (*sabishisa*) at night fall.

isolation (*sabishisa*)
more overwhelming than Suma
beach's fall.¹⁹

The images here and elsewhere, dominated as they are by things suggestive of detachment, quietness, slight melancholy, and tranquility, bring *sabi* as experience and style very close to a kind of aesthetic/poetic atmosphere one might expect upon "returning" from *farabō*, *fuga*, and *hasomi*; or poetizing out of the *yamazato* and "return to nature" ideal. As such, *sabi* is one particular and specific instance of aesthetic experience and poetic style which is religio-aesthetic in its fundamental character.

Sabi, however, is not the only mode of being to which Bashō "returns." There are, of course, many poetic styles and aesthetic criteria represented in the whole of Bashō's work—some of which might well not be characterized as religio-aesthetic. However, in his later life Bashō seems to turn from *sabi* to *karumi* as a key poetic style and religio-aesthetic stance in the world, and it is *karumi* which suggests more precisely a return to the world of "common men."

¹⁹ In Corman and Kamaike, p. 147.

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As many commentators have pointed out, the poetic style of *karumi* is represented by the light, plain, simple, down-to-earth, homely, mundane, etc.—as suggested in one of the few poems Bashō explicitly designates as containing *karumi*:

Ki no moto ni
Shiru mo namasu mo
Sakura kana

Under the trees,
A flurry of cherry-petals
On soup and fish-salad!⁴⁰

Here, the juxtaposition of the noble and sacred cherry blossom with the mundane picnic food gives the poem that sense of “lightness”—perhaps even a kind of iconoclasm which purposely breaks with the expected images and atmosphere.

More to the religio-aesthetic point, however, Bashō's return to the common man in *karumi* is by no means an abdication of the religious for the sake of the mundane or secular. While internal evidence for saying this is by no means strong, it is entirely consistent with Bashō's progress and ideals that *karumi* might be a distinct (from *sabi*) yet equally religio-aesthetic category. Its religio-aesthetic character lies in its close relationship to Bashō's generally Buddhist notion of non-attached involvement in the world—a non-attachment which, by his later years, Bashō apparently felt could extend to an acceptance of mankind and civilization (as well as nature). If the bodhisattva analogue has any power or meaning for Bashō, such a move would almost be necessary; for, while the “return” as a return to nature (*sabi*) is valorized in the ninth ox-herding picture, the tenth and final picture represents the bodhisattva amidst human-kind with “bliss-bestowing hands.” Or, to put it another way, true detachment or true enlightenment can function anywhere in the world, to the point of a kind of detached but radical affirmation of the “everyday world”—something Mahayana Buddhism (and especially Zen) refers to as nirvana is samsara and samsara nirvana; Emptiness (*ku*) is form and form Emptiness. Again, while we may not want to tie Bashō too closely to the bodhisattva model, as an analogue it might be suggestive for him. This sort of thing certainly seems resident in some definitions given *karumi*,

⁴⁰ In *Haikai and Haiku*, p. 5.

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to wit: "A spiritual attitude to actualize the light flexibility of the mind so that it might go on responding to the ever-changing reality without remaining attached to any particular aspect of it,"⁴¹ or, "*karumi* implies an attitude towards life in which the world is not taken too solemnly and sentimentally, but looked at dispassionately and with detachment."⁴²

Thus *sabi* and *karumi*, while distinct in both aesthetic style and experience, are religio-aesthetic in their essential character and tied very closely to Bashō's underlying religio-aesthetic understanding of himself and his art. Together, the categories explicated in this paper suggest a rather consistent and profound view of himself and his art as fundamentally a living identity of the "religious" and the "aesthetic."

⁴¹ From the *Shin Kōjien* as quoted in Izutsu, p. 68, n. 33.

⁴² In *Haikai and Haiku*, p. xxi.