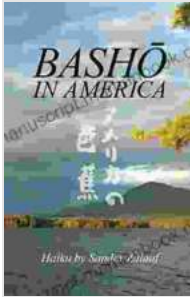


# Basho in America: Haiku, William Shakespeare, and the Transatlantic Poetics of Displacement



## Basho in America: Haiku by William Shakespeare

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The encounter between Japanese haiku master Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and American poets in the early 20th century marked a significant moment in the transatlantic poetics of displacement. Bashō's minimalist, nature-infused aesthetic, characterized by its brevity, simplicity, and evocative imagery, resonated deeply with American poets seeking new modes of expression in the wake of modernism's fragmentation and alienation.

Among the most prominent figures in this cross-cultural exchange were Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). Both poets were drawn to Bashō's haiku as a means of capturing the fleeting beauty of the natural world and the profound solitude of the human

experience. However, their appropriations of Bashō's work were distinct, reflecting their own unique poetic sensibilities and the cultural contexts in which they wrote.

## **Ezra Pound: The Imagist Appropriation of Bashō**

Ezra Pound, a leading figure in the Imagist movement, was one of the first American poets to introduce Bashō's haiku to the Western world. Pound's Imagism emphasized the use of clear, precise images and a focus on the concrete details of the natural world. In his essay "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," Pound famously declared that "an 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."

Pound saw in Bashō's haiku a perfect embodiment of his Imagist principles. He translated and adapted numerous haiku, capturing their brevity, simplicity, and evocative imagery. In his own haiku-inspired poems, Pound sought to distill the essence of a moment, often using juxtaposed images to create a sense of tension and surprise.

For example, in his poem "In a Station of the Metro," Pound evokes the fleeting encounter between a crowd of people on a subway platform:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough

Pound's haiku-like poem captures the momentary beauty and anonymity of the urban experience, using vivid imagery to create a lasting impression. By appropriating Bashō's aesthetic principles, Pound expanded the possibilities of Imagist poetry, bringing a new level of conciseness and emotional depth to his work.

## **William Carlos Williams: The American Idiom of Haiku**

William Carlos Williams, another influential figure in American modernism, also found inspiration in Bashō's haiku. However, unlike Pound's Imagist appropriation, Williams sought to create an American idiom of haiku that reflected the rhythms and cadences of everyday speech. He believed that poetry should be accessible to everyone, regardless of their social or cultural background.

Williams' haiku often dealt with ordinary, everyday subjects, such as domestic scenes, industrial landscapes, and the lives of ordinary people. In his poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," he captures the beauty and simplicity of a common object:

so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside th

Williams' haiku-like poem uses the concrete details of a wheelbarrow to evoke a sense of place and time. The poem's simplicity and directness reflect Williams' belief that poetry should be rooted in the everyday experiences of human life.

While Williams appropriated Bashō's minimalist aesthetic, he also experimented with form and meter. His haiku-like poems often depart from the traditional 5-7-5 syllable count, instead using a more flexible, open structure. This experimentation allowed Williams to create a uniquely American form of haiku that captured the rhythms and cadences of his native tongue.

## **The Transatlantic Dialogue: Shakespeare, Bashō, and American Poetry**

The encounter between Bashō and American poets was not only a one-way appropriation of Japanese aesthetics. It also sparked a transatlantic dialogue that extended beyond haiku. American poets also found inspiration in Bashō's life and work, including his travels, his spiritual journey, and his relationship with nature.

For example, Ezra Pound's epic poem "The Cantos" incorporates elements of Bashō's travelogue "Oku no Hosomichi" (Narrow Road to the Deep North). Pound's poem, like Bashō's travelogue, is a journey through time and space, exploring the intersection of history, culture, and personal experience.

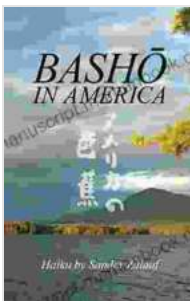
Similarly, William Carlos Williams' long poem "Paterson" draws on Bashō's haiku to capture the rhythms and textures of the American industrial landscape. Williams' poem, like Bashō's haiku, uses concrete details to evoke a sense of place and time, while also exploring the larger themes of human existence.

The transatlantic dialogue between Bashō and American poets was not limited to haiku. It also extended to the broader realm of poetic expression. American poets found in Bashō's work a model for a poetry that was both minimalist and deeply resonant, capturing the beauty and transience of the human experience. Through their appropriations and transformations of Bashō's aesthetic principles, American poets created a new kind of poetry that was both distinctly American and deeply rooted in global traditions.

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deeply with American poets seeking new modes of expression in the wake of modernism's fragmentation and alienation. Through their appropriations and transformations of Bashō's work, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams expanded the possibilities of American poetry, creating new forms and techniques that captured the beauty and complexity of the human experience.

The transatlantic dialogue between Bashō and American poets extended beyond haiku, encompassing a broader exploration of themes such as travel, spirituality, and the relationship between nature and human existence. This dialogue enriched both American and Japanese poetry, creating a cross-cultural exchange that continues to inspire poets to this day.



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