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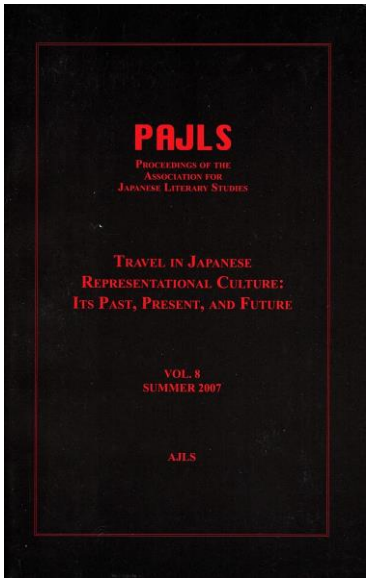

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ON NOT CROSSING OVER INTO THE PAST: BASHŌ AND BENJAMIN AT THE BARRIERS

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In the *waka* tradition, passing a Barrier (*seki o koeru*) was an occasion to write a poem that looked to the road ahead and the road behind, and also looked into the past, towards other such poems and their creators. But a voice from outside calls into question this last 'look':

> Just as a man lying sick with fever transforms all the words which he hears into the extravagant images of delirium, so it is that the spirit of the present age seizes on the manifestations of past or distant spiritual worlds, in order to take possession of them and unfeelingly incorporate them into its own self-absorbed fantasizing. (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 53)

Not only is this a warning (to all of us) against glib historicizing, it also incorporates an implicit demand that the past be confronted only on its own terms, as it comes to us. Hence my title, "On Not Crossing Over Into the Past."

Bashō, as we all know, wrote, "I do not seek to follow the men of old; I seek what they sought." This was not only a proud claim made on the past; it is also a reminder of impermanence, *mujō*: "Nothing was revealed." Yes, Bashō's thought is quite different from Walter Benjamin's: the poet shows us a past whose tasks must be taken up anew but which cannot be grasped at all, while the critical theorist asks us to confront a past whose quite real manifestations must not be appropriated into present-day fantasizing. But much of the difference is contextual: Benjamin challenging us to see the distant and bygone, Bashō defining a quest that must be carried out in the here and now.

My goal here will be to bring these personages closer to each other, under the rubric of travel—especially of the awareness of impermanence and separation (*kari yado*, borrowed lodging) that it brings. Through travel we make ourselves part of a world that seems to change around us. And while we are travelers, we are separated from, distant from, both our home and our goal. In particular, for both Benjamin and Bashō, travel meant departure, separation; it did not have to mean arrival. Benjamin died a traveler; Bashō bracketed the text of his most famous travel diary,

Oku no Hosomichi, with beginning and concluding *haiku* that thematized departure: *yuku haru* (departing spring), and *yuku aki* (departing fall).

And I have another, less immediate, purpose: to resist an easy sense of the pathos and passivity of time, one that would relegate Bashō to a mythic, cotton-wool 'long ago' and the 'modernist' Benjamin to a role as merely 'a thinker from the first part of the last century.'

1: BENJAMIN

Walter Benjamin traveled for pleasure in the spring of 1932, taking ship from Germany to the Spanish Mediterranean island of Ibiza. His causal writings from that period have finally become widely available. They include landscape descriptions, character sketches, and drafts of short stories, along with notes in which he developed his theories about aesthetics and history. Among the latter is the following passage. After reading it I began to plan this talk.

> A strange obsession has made travel writers become fixated on the idea of 'fulfillment'—the desire to preserve for each country the blue haze that distance surrounds it with, or for every station in life the glamour that the imagination of the idler endows it with. The leveling of the globe through industry and technology has made such great strides that, by rights, **each description should take place against a black backdrop of disillusionment, from which the truly strange incommensurability of the near at hand—of human beings in communication with one another and with the land—could then stand out more sharply**. ("Spain, 1932" 643; my boldface)

We must know two things about this "black backdrop of disillusionment" in order to understand what is going on here. First, during the time period of this text's composition—April–July '32—National Socialism was coming to power in Germany. Benjamin, as a Jewish intellectual with strong Marxist sympathies, realized that on his return he would no longer be able to make a life for himself in Germany; indeed, he thought passingly that he might commit suicide at the end of his Ibiza vacation (Broderson 194–7, 210). Hence, perhaps the "disillusionment." Hence also, perhaps, his restless experimentation with different genres. And hence, finally, this traveler's awareness of separation and impermanence.

Second, this passage shows Benjamin working out his theory of the "aura," which we find systematically developed in his more formal writings of the era: "Little History of Photography" (1931), "The Artist as Producer" (1932), and finally "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (published in 1936).

Benjamin had learned that aura is what a work of art possesses by way of its proper context. (An altarpiece in a cathedral had aura.) He then theorized that aura is stripped away when the work is taken out of that context. A photo of that altarpiece has no aura. Aura is most frequently understood nostalgically as a situation in which the manifold of the viewer, the work of art, the work's social context, and the tradition to which the work belongs are sensed as a seamless continuum. But Benjamin, while he gave the aura its due, valued its absence more than its presence. In 1931 he wrote admiringly in "Little History of Photography" that Atget's photographic images "suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship" (518). Indeed, one can say that for Benjamin, any fully awakened response to the art of the past necessarily strips away its aura. In other words, one should, in confronting the work of the distant past, choose the "black backdrop of disillusionment" over "self-absorbed fantasizing." Aura thus became, in Benjamin's theoretical framework, an impossible vista that purported to encompass viewer, art, and the depth of space and time. For the modern viewer, Benjamin claimed, that vista is, or should be, closed. We cannot, in Bashō's words, "follow the men of old"; Benjamin would say that this is because we cannot authentically cross over into the past even in imagination.

Benjamin saw the stripping away of the aura in both the high and the popular art of his day as an ideological weapon that the awakened might be able to deploy against Fascism, which for its part was appropriating for itself the mystifying common bond offered by the aura. Marxist theorists of the day, preeminently Theodor Adorno, thought Benjamin's hopes callow: too much hidden religiosity, too little dialectical materialism (Broderson 223; Benjamin and Adorno 127–34). Perhaps time has proven that view correct. But Benjamin's claim that all art, all signifying, and all scholarly analysis is crucially conditioned by its historical context, and may condition it in return, has stuck with us as an approach to aesthetics, critical theory, and the philosophy of history that challenges us to acknowledge that if the historical past is to be confronted, it will be as it comes at us, in the here-and-now.

Now, as we turn from Benjamin to Bashō, we will keep in mind that Benjamin's dialectic of the aura developed as the "thoughts of a traveler," and realize that, once we allow the aura of the world to drain

away, we all find ourselves travelers, displaced from one close-up sight to the next, and separated from a home in a past that yet confronts us as if across an impassible barrier.

Benjamin, as we know, died a refugee at a border crossing.

2: BASHŌ

Sometime on July 2, 1689 Bashō, rained in at a Barrier dwelling during his famous Oku-No-Hosomichi trip through the North of Japan, wrote:

nomi shirami / uma no shito (bari) suru / makura moto
fleas, lice
a horse peeing
by my pillow
(Here and below, Bashō translations are Barnhill's.)

We can see that the traveller's displacement, the changing landscape, is VERY close-up here, even, in some respects (the biting bugs), closer than the poet's own skin. Bashō wrote this verse on the occasion of crossing the Shitomae (the name suggests 'pee-out') Barrier, evidently in a "light of disillusionment" and, rather uncharacteristically for him, without much overt reference to the famous poetic travelers of the past such as Saigyō. The verse doesn't say much about history either. Even so, here we have a standpoint from which, just as Benjamin would wish, 'the truly strange incommensurability of the near at hand—of human beings in communication with one another and with the land— [can] stand out . . . sharply." At first glimpse, then, its view of the traveler's world is a sardonic one—and as such not the sole instance in *Oku-no Hosomichi*. ("'What struck you as you crossed the famous Shirakawa Barrier and visited the very willow under which Saigyō rested?' 'Just the song of the farmers who were planting rice there.'" And there's the poet closing the shutters on the sublime moon over Matsushima, to spend the night shut up with his homesickness, sorting through mementos from his friends.)

Taking a second look at this verse, though, we find its 'disillusionment' almost jovial. Bashō enjoys the horse's inadvertent *mitate* allusion to the barrier's name (*shitosuru*, to pee out) or, in another reading, the way the urination (*bari*) mirrors the stabbing bites of the little bugs (*hari*, needles) (*Matsuo Bashō Shū* 100–01*;* Kohl "Station 24-Dewa"). Then he gives us a sudden change of tone with the classical-sounding '*makura moto*.' And, *renga* master that he is, he has arranged

for this humble scene to follow directly after a journal entry incorporating his *hikaridō* (Hall of Light) verse (*Matsuo Bashō Shū* 99–100; Kohl "Station 23-Hiraizumi")—the humble rain-soaked dwelling juxtaposed to the gleaming temple that, having been restored and over-roofed, seems impervious to the summer rains:

samidare no / furinokoshite ya / hikaridō
all the summer rains:
have they left it untouched?
Hall of Light

So, like the openly evanescent (the rain), even the seemingly enduring (the temple hall that happens to have been preserved) is ultimately a manifestation of impermanence (*mujō*).

A few lines earlier in this same entry, Bashō is visiting the ruined site of Hiraizumi. Paraphrasing a few lines from the Chinese poet Tu Fu, he muses on the evanescence of fame and power:

> Yoshitsune's retainers took this castle as their fortress; their glory, in a moment, has turned to grass. "A country torn apart, the mountains and rivers remain; in spring, in the ruined castle, the grass is green." I laid out my bamboo hat, and I wept without sense of time (*toki no utsuru made*).
> *natsugusa ya / tsuwamonodomo ga / yume no ato*
> summer grass—
> all that remains
> of warriors' dreams.

This is more harping on impermanence, of course. But something strange has entered here in the form of the Tu Fu poem, which is not itself about evanescence, or a musing on ancient times. Rather it gives us the poet's unmediated, agonized reaction to the sight of a Capital devastated, only three months before, by a war of rebellion. This grass has grown in the desolation that follows a holocaust:

Spring Scene
State ruined mountains-rivers survive
City spring grass-trees thick
Moved-by times flowers sprinkle tears
Hating separation birds startle heart
Beacon-fires have-continued-for three months

Home-letter worth ten-thousand taels
White hair scratch even shorter
Quite will-be unequal-to hatpin
(Word-for-word version, Hawkes 47–48)

Nothing like that had happened in Bashō's country during his lifetime. And, even though the previous century's Sengoku era of constant wars had left the country with many a recently ruined castle, it would probably be wrong to see anything subversive in his momentary comparison of peaceful Genroku Japan to a country under the power of a usurper. Yet the text has allowed the past to come at us for a moment, drained of aura. Bashō has disposed his words so that, for this moment, the past is not a mere image that, like a restored temple, we nod to without entering into its illusion. Instead, as we read, the past comes at us, its once spring, now summer, grasses conveying something very like what W. G. Sebald's more recent impression: "In contrast to the effects of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature's ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire" (39–40).

"State ruined mountains-rivers survive / City spring grass-trees thick" indeed.

Woven into Bashō's pervasive exploration of the sense and sensation of time, then, is a refusal to enter into its vista and seem to go back. To look again at a passage I alluded to earlier: Bashō does not write about Saigyō's willow, except to gently doubt that, after so long, it could be the genuine article. He merely sits under it for a spell to see and hear the present-day rice-planting that might resemble what his medieval predecessor might have seen and heard. And at Hiraizumi he does not enter into the ancient warriors' dreams, but sees in the bleached summer grasses, literally, "*yume no ato*" the dream's fading trace that one still senses after waking. This standpoint does not let him cross over into or appropriate the past by animating it with (in Benjamin's words) "the glamour that the imagination of the idler endows it with." Instead, as we have seen, this restraint gives the past an opportunity to make its own mark, unmediated and bereft of aura, in the sudden way that fresh scenes arise before a traveler. In sum, like Benjamin, Bashō refuses to cross over into the past, and like Benjamin he uses this refusal as a means towards a more direct confrontation with that past. His Shitomae barrier opens no distant scenic vista, spatial or historic; instead it is wholly a matter of, as

Benjamin would say "the truly strange incommensurability of the near at hand—of human beings in communication with one another and with the land."

Benjamin, for his part, insists that we must separate ourselves from the past in order to see its truth. The past comes at us; we needn't, cannot, and shouldn't try to, cross over into it. In various places he compares it to a dream we must awake from before interpreting it (*One Way Street*), or to debris blown at our feet by the wind of time ("Angel of History"). Ultimately, perhaps, Benjamin might even agree with Bashō that we perceive it as '*yume no ato*': "Anyone who has climbed a mountain on his own and arrived at the top exhausted, and then turns to walk down again with steps that shatter his entire body—for such a person, time hangs loose, the partition walls inside him collapse, and he pushes on through the rubble of the moment as if in a dream ("Ibizan Sequence" 593).

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