Chamberlain’s “Bashō and the Japanese Poetical Epigram.”

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Introduction

Despite the current popularity of haiku, and the status it enjoys within world literature, the early translators of Japanese literature did not see it as a pre-eminent literary form or as quintessentially representative of the indigenous culture. Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935), who was one of the foremost of the early British Japanologists, was typical in this respect. Chamberlain had established his academic reputation with translations of the Japanese classics. His translation of the *Kojiki* was published by the Asiatic Society of Japan (ASJ) in 1878 and this was followed in 1880 by *Classical Poetry of the Japanese*, published by Truebner as part of their series of Oriental literature. However, this anthology of classical literature did not include any mention of haiku. Instead, it included only selections from the *Manyōshū* and *Kokinshū*, as well as four *Noh* plays, which Chamberlain referred to as Lyric Dramas. The omission of haiku (then most commonly referred to as hokku or haikai) can be put down to two factors: one was that haiku was generally seen by the Japanese themselves as having a lower literary status than *tanka* or *kanbun* (Yamashita 124); the other was its extreme brevity, consisting of only 17 syllables. George Aston (1840-1920) another eminent British Japanologist and member of the ASJ put the matter in a nutshell as early as 1877 in his *A Grammar of the Japanese Written Language*. In this work Aston offered a brief description of *haikai uta* (haiku) together with three examples of verse, but he was highly skeptical of the genre’s literary worth. As he writes,

The admirers of *Haikai uta* claim for it a quasi-classical character, but it is objected with much reason that nothing which deserves the name of poetry can well be contained in the narrow compass of a verse of seventeen syllables. (203)

Clearly then for Aston, and for other scholars of the ASJ, the extreme brevity of haiku made them doubt whether it could be viewed as serious literature, and during the last two decades of the 19th century we find descriptions of it were not only limited, but also condescending in tone. Thus, in his highly influential *A History of Japanese Literature* (1899), Aston, while giving a slightly longer description of haikai, describes it as a less austere alternative to the *tanka*, a popular literature whose brevity and simplicity endears it to a wide public. Although he grudgingly accords the work of Bashō and his school some small merit, his general opinion is that, “It would be absurd to put forward any serious claim on
behalf of Haikai to an important position in literature” (294).

Chamberlain had also given short descriptions of haiku (which he called hokku) in Things Japanese, his mini-encyclopedia of Japanese society and culture. These too, as with Aston, focused on the brevity and conciseness of this genre of verse. In the second (1891) edition, for example, he refers to hokku as “an ultra-Lilliputian kind of poem” (347). And in the third (1898) edition, while still retaining the exotic epithet of “ultra Lilliputian”, he adds, on a positive note, that the popularity of hokku means that “millions of these tiny dashes of colour have been considered worthy of preservation” (330).

These descriptions of haiku were, however, like those of Aston, limited in scope, and it is thus only with Chamberlain’s 1902 work, “Bashō and the Japanese Poetical Epigram”, that we have the first major treatment of haiku in English, or indeed any European language. This work, a paper presented to the ASJ, consisted of a long introductory essay, more than sixty pages in length, describing the historical origins and characteristics of haiku, which was followed by a further fifty pages of translations of a selection of haiku poets from the 16th to 18th centuries. In all, Chamberlain translates more than 200 verses of haiku within the work.

In this essay I shall consider firstly Chamberlain’s views on haiku, as revealed in the 1902 essay, before considering, as far as space will permit, the influence of his work during the interwar period on perceptions of haiku. In this regard however, it should be noted that, while the 1902 essay can be viewed as the best explication of Chamberlain’s ideas on haiku, his prolific output as author meant his views appeared in more than one published form. Thus, he was to attach the 1902 essay onto the body of his earlier work on classical Japanese poetry which, together with a new introduction, became the fourth section of a new work entitled Japanese Poetry (John Murray 1910). In addition, Chamberlain also revised the sections on poetry in Things Japanese so that, from the fourth (1902) edition on, they talked about haiku in greater length and presented a summary of the arguments given in the 1902 essay, with the same summary then being restated in the fifth (1905) and sixth (1939) editions of the same work. Hence, it may be said that Chamberlain’s influence on conceptions of haiku in the interwar years came from not one, but from three published works. He was, after all, an author who wrote for both an academic and an educated, non-specialist audience.

Bashō and the Japanese Poetical Epigram

Chamberlain divides the explanatory part of his essay into five sections. The first gives an overview of the genre. The second deals with the evolution of hokku and haikai from the classical tanka, and presents the early poets. The third deals with the emergence of Bashō and his school and describes their revolutionary impact on the genre. The fourth deals with the poets who followed the Bashō School. And the fifth gives Chamberlain’s critical estimate of the “value” of haiku verse when compared with the work of European poets. We shall consider each of these in turn.

In the first section Chamberlain seeks to give a general idea of the kind of poetry he is describing, and
the first problem he sees is in giving it a name. Noting that within Japan this verse form may be referred to by different names (usually hokku, but also haikai or haiku), he decides, “in default of a better equivalent” to coin the term “poetical epigram.” Chamberlain explains that he is not using "epigram" in its modern sense, but rather with a much earlier meaning, namely, to denote "any little piece of verse that expresses a delicate or ingenious thought" (“Bashō” 243). He seems to have in mind here the Greek epigram which Mackail in the introduction to his famous (1906) Selection from the Greek Anthology described as "a very short poem" which expresses "as though in a memorial inscription what is desired to make permanently memorable in a single action or situation" (4).

The use of “poetical epigram” or “Japanese epigram” as a valid epithet or translation for what we now call haiku was certainly not accepted by all in the following decades, but it should be remembered that at the time Chamberlain was writing the educated classes were much more familiar than today with the culture of ancient Greece, and with the Greek epigram in particular.

Chamberlain then states that the Japanese epigram is quite different from what Western people would normally think of as a poem, because it is such a compressed form, comprising only 17 syllables in a 5,7,5 rhythm. He gives an example with the syllable count included. In this case, as with all others in the essay, his method is to give a Romanised version of the original Japanese (without kanji) in tercet form, before providing a two-lined unrhymed verse as translation, here given in bold.

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Naga-naga to           5 
Kawa hito-suji ya     7
Yuki no hara           5

A single river, stretching far
Across the moorland [swathed] in snow  (243)
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Chamberlain argues that the brevity of the form means that there is no "assertion ... for the logical intellect" in this poem, and that it rather "a natural scene outlined in three strokes of the brush for the imagination or the memory" (244). Clearly the analogy he is using then, as can be seen from the phrase "three strokes of the brush", is to painting. The epigram, he is saying, is a kind of word-picture that appeals to the memory or imagination, rather than the intellect. And Chamberlain reinforces this idea of haiku of being an evocative word-picture rather than a realistic representation when, after giving more examples, he describes the epigram as "the tiniest of vignettes, a sketch in barest outline, the suggestion rather than the description, of a scene or circumstance" (245-46).

Following this, and with a view to further demonstrating the genre’s ability to evoke a panoramic scene despite its terseness and brevity, Chamberlain gives an example from the work of Bashō, who is, he says, "the greatest of all Japanese epigrammatists."

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Magusa ou / Hito wo shiori no  /Natsu-no kana

Over the summer moor, - our guide
One shouldering fodder for his horse.  (246)
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Once again, Chamberlain sees this verse as evoking a vivid mental image such that those familiar with Japanese scenery will see "mirrored the lush-green landscape, the sloping moor with its giant grass man-high, that obliterates all trace of the narrow winter pathway, while the bundle on some peasant's shoulder alone emerges far off on the skyline, and shows the wayfarers in which direction to turn their steps" (246).

And he then curiously, and perhaps significantly, argues that this verse from feudal Japan may be said to have affinities with the modern European sensibility as regards its view of nature. The "spirit of the seventeenth Japanese poet", he says, call to us across time and space, because it is "identical with [the spirit] which informs the work of the Western water-colourist of today." And he concludes, "It [the haiku poet's sensibility] is intensely modern, or at least imbued to the full with that love and knowledge of nature which we ... consider characteristic of modern times" (246-47).

Chamberlain then completes the opening section of the essay with a description of the great variety of subject matter that the epigrammatists would turn their hand to; these included, he notes, themes, topics and personages not commonly viewed as "poetical", but rather as "homely" or pertaining to the common life. He also notes that some verses are epigrams in the etymological sense, being used as inscriptions on fans, pictures and suchlike (249).

In the second section of his essay, Chamberlain seeks to place the epigram in its historical context.

Essentially, he sees it as a form that evolved from the _tanka_ (a short poem of 31 syllables with lines of 5,7,5,7,7) via the intervening stages of _renga_ (linked verse) and _haikai no renga_ (comic linked verse).

The _tanka_ was, says Chamberlain, the dominant form within classical poetry, the latter being the preserve of the aristocratic elite at the Japanese court. One of the pastimes at the Court was the practice of _renga_ (linked verse) which was a game in which the first hemistich of the verse (the _hokku_) was matched with an appropriate second hemistich. This led to the _hokku_ (the opening verse of 5,7,5) becoming independent and assuming more importance than succeeding verses. After this, linked verse, which had originally consisted of only two components, was extended to fifty or even a hundred verses, and came to be governed by a set of complex and arcane rules. As Chamberlain sees it, this rigidity and "fossilization" of form led to the emergence of a less restrictive form of poetry which allowed both a lighter (and even comic) subject matter and the use of colloquial language, or words of Chinese origin. The resultant _haikai no renga_ (comic linked verse) attracted a much wider audience, appealing to the merchant classes in the towns.

So much for the historical development of haikai verse. But the key points to note here for the purposes of our argument are that, firstly, Chamberlain views the evolution of the more popular and liberal epigram as being strongly affected by social factors (such as the rigid mindset of the aristocratic elite) and, secondly, he views this historical development as meaning that the epigram became an inherently fragmentary form. He offers a further definition of the epigram at this point in which, summarizing its history, he emphasizes its “essentially fragmentary” nature:

This epigram [haiku] may be defined as a half-stanza originally of a comic, or at least a colloquial
cast, which in time came to be composed in all moods,—grave as well as jocular, esthetic as well as trivial, classical as well as colloquial. Its permanently distinctive characteristics are two in number:—firstly, it is quite free in its choice whether of subject or of diction; secondly, it is essentially fragmentary, the fact is that it is part only of a complete stanza, and that it is consequently not expected to do more than adumbrate the thought in the writer's mind, having never been lost sight of. (261)

The "essentially fragmentary" nature of haiku verse then may be seen as connected to Chamberlain's view of it as an evocative and non-logical mode of expression. But he takes his argument one stage further here by stating that since a haiku can do no more than "adumbrate the thought in the writer's mind", this means that "a second stave is "always there in posse if not in esse." There is, as Chamberlain sees it, a complementary verse lurking unsaid in the background, and as a result the translator must always choose a version which will give "the impression of fragmentariness." Chamberlain also see this as explaining why the grammar of this type of verse tends to be "elliptical to the verge of obscurity", or even beyond that verge so that "many verses are unintelligible as they stand" (261).

Continuing the historical narrative, Chamberlain sees the early generation of haiku poets, as represented by the Yedo-based Danrin School, as typified by "frivolity", and he compares their work with the literature of the fin de siècle. Saikaku was, he says, "a Japanese Zola." Similarly, the literary conceits, puns and "verbal juggling" of the Danrin school, "hit the public taste, just as "smart" writing has done in our own day among Anglo-Saxons. The only question was as to who should express the most far-fetched ideas in the most unexpected words" (270-73).

In section three Chamberlain describes the emergence of the Bashō School, which he sees as rescuing the epigram from its initial frivolity and decadence. In particular, Chamberlain sees Bashō himself as the driving force behind this renaissance. He portrays him as a heroic figure, a sage-poet who lived a humble and frugal life which exemplified the moral principles of his verses. For this reason, no doubt, Chamberlain devotes a significant portion of the essay to describing Bashō’s life, and thereby present him to the reader as a flesh and blood historical figure.

Chamberlain begins the description on a note of romanticism. Bashō, he says, although from a family of "ancient Samurai lineage" chooses to renounce his family and social duties when, as a youth, he is overwhelmed by grief on the death of his young feudal lord and companion (274). As a result, he flees the world and enters a Buddhist monastery, "carrying with him a lock of his young dead lord's hair." After a period of inner turmoil, Bashō, within Chamberlain’s account, decides to reject his family and social world and to immerse himself in Zen mysticism and poetry. Chamberlain gives the following verse as a composition reflecting the inner struggle and “meditation” of those early years:

Tsuyu toku-toku / Kokoromi ni uki-yo / Sosogaba ya

Where the dews drop, there would I fain

Essay to wash this frivolous world (276)
This is a reasonable translation, if one accepts "frivolous world" as an adequate rendering for "ukiyo" (浮世) (literally meaning "floating world", but with the sense of "sad, transient world"). But the point to note is that Chamberlain's explanatory paraphrase (namely, "I would wash away from me all taint of the world by a plunge into pure nature") shows that he views this verse as reflecting the poet's inner experience (276). And he is at pains to contrast the profundity of the spiritual experience with the verbal puns and word-plays of previous epigrammatists.

Chamberlain then describes Bashō's development as a haiku poet. He travels to Edo where he studies the classics of China and Japan and, when not engaged in his travels, gathers a group of disciples and students around him such that he becomes "the acknowledged leader of those who wrote verse" (277). Chamberlain seems to see Bashō in this instance as something of a counter-cultural figure, noting with approval the social variety of those who became his pupils.

Every rank of society contributed its quota. The majority perhaps were priests, at least priest in name; but we find also doctors, tradesmen, Samurai, even Daimyos, and not grown men only, but boy students, and ladies too of various degrees enrolled in this truly democratic literary circle, which so strangely maintained its private liberty in the midst of the rigidly fettered social organism that enveloped it on every side. (277-278)

The picture Chamberlain paints therefore is of Bashō's school, and indeed the world of the haikai poet in general, as offering an oasis of liberty in the midst of a rigidly constrained feudal society. As Chamberlain puts it, it was a remarkable instance of a "truly democratic literary circle" surrounded by a "rigidly fettered social organism." Irrespective of whether this is an accurate description, it was surely a portrait likely to appeal to Western readers.

Chamberlain tells us that Bashō subsequently experienced a deepening of his belief in Zen Buddhism in the early 1680s ("a second conversion"), which meant that Zen had a greater influence on his verse from that time on. And he sees Bashō's most famous poem as dating from that period.

Furu-ike ya / Kawazu tobu-komu / Mizu no oto

The old pond, aye! and the sound of a frog leaping into water. (279)

Chamberlain adds an interpretation of the poem in which he explains some of the cultural background. The Japanese, he says, have traditionally used the frog within poetry because its croak was seen as "a sort of song", but the frog's appearance here, he suggests, has a different, more philosophical purpose. To wit,

The picture here outlined of some mouldering temple enclosure with its ancient piece of water, stagnant, silent but for the occasional splash of a frog, suggests to [the Japanese] the meditative and pathetic side of life. To them it appears natural that the 'attainment of enlightenment', as the Buddhists call it, or conversion, as we say in Christian parlance, should express itself in some such guise. (279)

Thus, Chamberlain sees the poem's inner meaning as concerning "the meditative and pathetic side of life," and implicitly what Buddhists call the "attainment of enlightenment", which he explains to his
western audience as being comparable to the Christian notion of conversion. He then takes this argument a step further by saying that he has come to accept the view of many Japanese commentators that Zen Buddhism should be seen as exerting a strong influence on the "inner meanings" of the works of Bashō and other writers. This concession to native scholarship is itself significant perhaps, but what is even more surprising here, given the allegation by some that Chamberlain’s views are colored by "Victorian" values, is his evident admiration for Zen Buddhism. Indeed, the latter part of the third section of the essay is largely devoted to Chamberlain’s description of those aspects of Basho's supposedly Zen-inspired philosophy of life which particularly appealed to him, and found expression, as he saw it, in his verse. Firstly, Chamberlain clearly admired Bashō’s mild manners and charitable treatment of others, no matter what their station in society. Chamberlain sees Bashō’s verse about spending the night under the same roof as courtesans, whom he had happened to meet on his travels, as indicative of his tolerance.

Hitotsu-ya ni / Yujo mo netari / Hagi to tsuki

Courtesans [and I] slept in the same house,- the lespedeza and the moon (286)

Chamberlain also admires Basho’s compassion for animals and all sentient beings, which he sees as inspired by Buddhism. Basho, he says, had a "vivid realisation of the Buddhistic doctrine of the essential unity of all sentient existence ... to which many of his best known stanzas bear witness" (283-4). Chamberlain gives several examples of such stanzas, one of which is:

Hana ni asobu / Abu na kui so / Tomo-suzume

Sparrow, my friend, oh! do not eat

The bees that hover o'er the flowers! (284)

Chamberlain also praises Basho's "ardent love" for inanimate nature, and particularly for flowers, which he sees as a state of mind that cultivated the habit of minute observation and detailed description from life which was to become such a distinctive feature of subsequent haiku poetry.

But it is Zen Buddhism’s pragmatism and lack of dogma that Chamberlain most admires. The modern form of this religion, he tells us, is “essentially tolerant and cheery” (292). It is not guilty of the pessimism that he sees as blighting other forms of Buddhism and Eastern religion in general. Thus, “the pessimism of original Buddhism is softened by wise concessions to common sense” (291). This pragmatic attitude means that while Chamberlain sees Zen as inculcating a healthy “detachment” to worldly pursuits, recognizing them as vain and futile, social intercourse is still carried on with artistic pursuits that “appeal to the cultivated mind” given an honoured place (291). Chamberlain sees Zen therefore as embodying a wonderfully tolerant and modern religion which promotes both disdain for the common life and esteem for the “higher spheres of thought and conduct” (292).

In a comparatively brief fourth section Chamberlain continues the historical narrative, describing the haiku poets that followed Bashō. First, he deals with eminent members of the Bashō School, the so-called “Ten Sages”, and argues that many of them composed verses that “seem often to realise absolute perfection in this particular style, conveying through a mere pin-point of expression a whole picture to
the mind (296).”

After the Bashō School Chamberlain sees haiku as suffering a brief decline, becoming a vulgar word-game, before flourishing once again in the second half of the 18th century in a silver age of haiku in which Buson was the master poet. Chamberlain praises Buson’s technical mastery of the form: his ability to “paint with words”:

The greatest epigrammatist of the silver age (circa 1770-80) was Buson … It may be said of him, as of Bashō’s two greatest pupils, that he carried the art as art up to perfection point. His technique is unsurpassed:—he literally paints with words and how few words!” (298)

But it is not only the polished technique of poets from what he calls the epigram’s silver age that Chamberlain admires, one also detects, in contrast to the spirituality and morality of Bashō, an approval of the humanistic character of their poems. Thus, many of Buson’s verses, he says, offer the reader “a perfect little cameo, sometimes of beauty, sometimes of humour.” Kobayashi Issa, another major poet of the era, is admired for his “eccentricity and childlike simplicity.” Similarly, the female poet, Kaga-no-Chiyo, receives praise not only for her technical prowess (“her pre-eminent superiority”) but also for her “depth of thought and feeling” (299).

Clearly Chamberlain found much to admire in what he dubbed the silver age of the Japanese epigram. But it was an admiration that was overwhelmed by his long-held conviction, evident in his early work on Japanese poetry, that the forms of Japanese poetry were inferior to those of Europe and, moreover, that they belonged to the past.

In the fifth section Chamberlain first completes his overview of haiku’s historical development before moving on to give his verdict on the genre’s value as poetry: his views on where it should rank within the pantheon of world literature. His contention regarding the first point was that the epigram (i.e. haiku) had reached a historical dead-end. After the poets of the silver age had passed away, he says, the practice of haiku verse declined into mannerism or vulgarity (the senryu) such that it became a “fossilized” form. He thinks that it is too early to judge the modern shinpa school of haiku, but he is skeptical, given what he has seen of this verse in contemporary newspapers, that it will produce work of critical value. As Chamberlain sees it, this ultra-brief form of verse has exhausted most of its expressive potential; within the narrow limits set by “such Lilliputian versicles”, he says, all that can be said “has been said long ago” (302).

To support his contention that haiku, irrespective of the ability of the poet, cannot be considered as great world literature, Chamberlain returns again to the notion of it being a genre of verse that is not only ultra-brief, but also fragmentary and elliptical. This means that the genre, if skilfully handled, can show moments of insight, or flashes of pathos or beauty. As he puts it, “The Japanese epigram at its best is a loop-hole opened for an instant on some little natural fact, some incident of daily life. It is a momentary flash, a smile half-formed, a sigh suppressed almost before it becomes audible” (305). At the same time however, the verse form, as he sees it, does not allow these “moments” to be developed into “a complex
organic whole” (Things Japanese 4th Ed. 374): a failing which he appears to see as reflecting the “mental soil” of Japan from which the haiku and tanka have sprung. As he says,

Practically, the classical or semi-classical poets of Japan, for over a thousand years past, have confined themselves to pieces of 31 syllables or of 17, whereas even our sonnet, which we look on as a trifle, has 140, and our system of stanzas strung together enables us to continue indefinitely till the whole of a complex train of thought has been brought before the mind (“Bashō” 306).

The key phrase here is “complex train of thought.” Chamberlain appears to see “great poetry” as involving a degree of complexity and intellectual ingenuity. And he further develops this argument by claiming that the better sort of haiku verses are in fact comparable to memorable “half stanzas” of a poet such as Tennyson with the crucial difference being, as he sees it, that Tennyson places such half-stanzas within a complex structure of verses, whereas the haiku poet does not.

The difference between the two cases—[Tennyson and the haiku poets] …— lies in this, that the Japanese production is isolated, fragmentary, whereas the European forms part of a grand organic whole. On the one side, “In Memoriam” and whole “Palaces of Art”;” on the other, a litter of single bricks, half-bricks in fact. (307)

Chamberlain argues then that the “half-bricks” of Japanese haiku, which he also calls “tiny beads (307), lack the architectural design which he sees as the hallmark of great art. They are “isolated and fragmentary” and leave no grand palaces of verse on the literary landscape, only a “litter of bricks.”

Such a view is, of course, highly contentious for various reasons. Firstly, it ignores the fact that many haiku are either set within a text (such as a travelogue) or linked to other verses through common seasonal references or allusion. Secondly, it equates complexity with poetic effect, but it can be argued that they are by no means the same.

Chamberlain concludes the main body of his essay on a note of pessimism. After stating that the epigram (haiku) is the most popular and therefore representative form of Japanese poetry, he then whimsically suggests that, like a dragon-fly in one of Bashō’s verses, it may indeed be unable to find a “stable foothold” in the modern world, and be forced to vanish from our sight.

Tombo ya / Tori-tsuki-kanashi / kusa no ue

A stem of grass, whereon in vain

A dragon-fly essayed to light (309)

Reception of 1902 Essay in Interwar Years

Despite Chamberlain’s view of haiku as a dated, literary form, it did not, as he predicted, disappear from view. In Japan it enjoyed continuing popularity, and in Europe too, the early decades of the 20th century witnessed an upsurge in interest for Japanese literature and for haiku in particular. The vogue for artistic experimentation in Europe at that time can be seen as one factor in this interest, while Japan’s astonishing
victory over Russia in the 1904-5 war was another. It was thus not mere coincidence that three major anthologies of Japanese literature (Aston in English in 1899, Florenz in German in 1905, and Revon in French in 1910) all appeared within a decade of each other.

If we now turn to the reception of Chamberlain’s 1902 essay, we find the clearest evidence for it being an important source text in the fact that a number of writers chose to follow Chamberlain’s usage and employ the term ‘epigram’ to refer to haiku. Thus, Karl Florenz referred to haiku as “the Japanese epigram” in his influential German-language anthology of 1905 (439-466); Couchard similarly entitled his influential 1906 work on haiku as *Lyrical Epigrams of Japan*, retaining the same nomenclature for later works; Porter, a British Japanologist, entitled his 1910 collection of translated haiku as *A Year of Epigrams*. And Michel Revon in his influential 1910 French-language anthology similarly followed suit. However, Revon makes it clear in this work that he is only using the term as a compromise, because he does not find any of the native terms (*hokku*, *haikai* and haiku) to be entirely satisfactory. As the following excerpt shows, Revon solution was to employ the native term *haikai*, as being a commonly used term that denoted a historical development, together with “epigram” as the French equivalent:

> In fact, they [hokku, haikai, haiku] are not very happy labels. ... Let us, nonetheless, adopt the word haikai, which appears most used, and which has at least the advantage of recalling a historical development; and in French we retain for these tiny poems the name of epigrams which Mr. Chamberlain has given them, very justly, in remembrance of their pleasant Greek sisters. (Revon 382)

But not everyone thought that such “tiny poems” could be justly compared with their ancient Greek counterparts. Miyamori, for example, writing in 1932 in his momentous anthology of haiku, criticizes the western use of the term “Japanese epigram” to refer to haiku. This was because, he says, haiku are shorter than epigrams and differ in style and content: thus, whereas haiku are nature poems, he says, the “epigrams, for the most part, treat of human affairs and aim chiefly at humour, cynicism and satire” (14). Miyamori’s objection therefore seems to be that he views ‘epigram’ as a derogatory term, one implying a “vulgar” content which he sees as characteristic of senryu rather than haiku.

Henderson, who was to become an influential critic and translator in the post-WW2 period, had a similar criticism. In his 1934 work, *The Bamboo Broom*, he suggests that Western commentators have not recognized the true poetic nature of haiku, (which is that it is “intended to express and evoke emotion.”) because, he says, “it has been the custom in the past to translate ‘haiku’ into ‘epigram,’ and this is quite misleading” (2).

It could be argued that these criticisms are themselves misleading as Chamberlain is at pains to state that he is using epigram in the ancient rather than modern sense, and his recognition of the poetic nature of haiku is readily evident in his coining of the term “poetical epigram”, but be that as it may. In fact, the contentious nature of the term ‘epigram’ for haiku at the time shows just how fluid and unstable the western perception of the form was. Indeed, in one review of Henderson’s book the critic begins his
review by debating whether ‘epigram’ or ‘haiku’ is the better term to use for describing this kind of verse, evidently favoring the former (Parlett 416). As regards the question of whether Chamberlain’s writings on haiku and Japanese literature exerted any influence on the views of writers who admired haiku, and sought to imitate or adapt it, that remains a murky question with much speculation and less definite evidence. If we consider modernist poets, for example, both Carr and Nadel see Chamberlain as a likely source for Pound and others. As Carr notes, Chamberlain’s description of haiku’s “fragmentary, elliptical nature, [and] its intense condensation of meaning” was one which chimed with the agenda of modernist poetry (192). Nadel similarly argues that Pound in all likelihood read Chamberlain’s work and that he was thus “a likely source” for Pound’s knowledge of hokku, as well as “a source on the Noh acknowledged by both Pound and Yeats” (12). But these attributions remain to a greater or lesser degree speculative in nature.

However, in considering Chamberlain’s influence on French haiku and the French haikai movement of the early decades of the 20th century, we are on firmer ground. Chamberlain’s 1902 essay was commented on at length in the first edition of the Bulletin del’Ecole Francais d’Extreme-Orient by Orientalist Eugene Maître in 1903. In 1905 Aubert quoted several of Chamberlain’s haiku translations in “Sur le paysage Japonais” (Agostini 2-3). In 1906 Paul-Louis Couchoud’s published his influential essay on haiku, the previously mentioned “Les epigrammes lyriques du Japon,” which was heavily indebted to Chamberlain’s 1902 work. Couchoud later reprinted the essay as part of an enlarged work, Sages et Poetes d’Asie (1916), which had an introduction by Anatole France. This work garnered sufficient interest for it to be translated into English in 1921 under the title of Japanese Impressions.

In addition to introducing haiku to a French audience, Couchoud was also important as the driving force behind the development of French haiku, and as a poet who himself sought to transplant the haiku form to a European setting. Thus in 1905 he produced, in collaboration with two other poets, Au fil de l’eau (Along the Waterway), a collection of French haiku-style verse with the narrative setting of a journey on a canal-boat. He also encouraged other poets to write haiku-style verse. One of these was Julien Vocance, whose Cent Visions de Guerre (A Hundred Visions of War), 1916, presented the poet’s experience of trench warfare though a hundred haiku-style verses. Moreover, Shibata persuasively argues that Rainer Maria Rilke’s later poetry was strongly influenced by Couchoud’s account of haiku (335-345).

As Couchoud did not read Japanese when he wrote his 1906 essay, it is no surprise that he relied heavily on Chamberlain’s work, borrowing from it key concepts and utilizing some of the English translations as a basis for his own. I shall examine these correspondences utilizing the text of “The Lyric Epigrams of Japan”, an English translation of Couchoud’s 1906 work which became chapter 3 of Japanese Impressions.

Citing the 1902 essay, Couchoud notes that Chamberlain calls haikai “the lyric epigrams of Japan”, adding that the title “defines two of their [haiku’s] essential qualities—brevity and the power of suggestion.” (36) Couchoud follows Chamberlain’s historical narrative of the emergence of haikai, and
indeed its later evolution as far as Buson’s appearance in the late 18th century (66), similarly seeing the history of haiku as oscillating between periods of superficial word-play and serious poetry. He also follows Chamberlain’s description of Bashō’s life almost verbatim (mentioning, like Chamberlain, Basho’s “democratic” literary circle in Edo, and his two “conversions” to Buddhism), and similarly sees him as haiku’s dominant figure: “It was he [Bashō] who gave the haikai its soul” (60).

However, there are also some vital differences. Couchoud sees haiku as having a dynamic intensity. For the reader, he says, haiku verse entails a “brief astonishment” or a “delicate shock” (40). In this context, it may be said that rather than disputing what Chamberlain has said, he is giving the same points a different, more positive, interpretation. Thus, Chamberlain’s analogy of haiku to “a loop-hole opened for an instant on some little natural fact … a momentary flash, a smile half-formed, a sigh suppressed almost before it becomes audible”, is quoted in full by Couchoud (68), but he uses this quote in a positive sense to show the unique character of Japanese poetry. Similarly, he accepts Chamberlain’s point about the non-intellectuality of haiku verse, but he sees the haiku poet as having spontaneity and a privileged, if atavistic, view of the world: “The mind of the Japanese poet has an almost childish ingeniousness which puts him on a par with the direct action of the animal world” (40).

In another chapter of the book, entitled “The Japanese Quality”, Couchoud praises Chamberlain as someone whom, like Lafcadio Hearn and Okakura Kakuzo, has “united Asiatic and Occidental culture” within their thought such that they have “the consciousness of a unique humanity” (11). But it is doubtful if Chamberlain would have taken this as a compliment. There were crucial ideological differences between them. Couchoud believed that modern Japan could be the crucible for a new synthesized culture of East and West, and that similarly, by virtue of its industrial and military power, Japan had become not only the repository of Eastern culture, but the powerhouse that would transmit that culture to the west (17-18). Couchoud was not alone in seeing a spiritual connection between Japanese militarism and Japanese art:

Here is evidenced the miracle of Japan: an artistic sensibility which is so highly refined united to an immutable military discipline; an island of poets which is the most unified nation of today. (32)

For Chamberlain, such ideas were anathema. He did not view modern Japan as the repository of Eastern culture, nor as a happy synthesis of West and East. In fact, in the 6th edition of Things Japanese, he referred to Japan as the direct opposite of this: as the “Europeanised, vulgarized Japan of today” (296). He had long railed against what he saw as the chauvinism and militarism of modern Japan, particularly objecting to what he saw as the attempts of the political and bureaucratic elites to control intellectual life, and perceptions of classical literature. Indeed, it is no surprise that what Chamberlain so admired about Bashō and the haikai poets was that there were relatively free from the controls of feudal society, and did not suffer the same restraints as composers of traditional verse.
Concluding remarks
Chamberlain may be said to have left, as one researcher notes, “a strong mark” on how haiku verse has been perceived (Takei-Thunman 152). And yet there is also an ambivalence that runs through his analysis of the genre which is surely puzzling. His presentation of haiku seems at times an unstable mixture of admiration and condescension. Haiku verse offers us rare moments of truth and wisdom, he says, but is ultimately nothing more than “a litter of bricks.” It is likewise a “fossilized” genre that reached its apogee in the 18th century under Basho, and at the same time one which can reveal the “intensely modern” spirit of the poet. It is difficult to see any simple, clear-cut explanation for this ambivalence. And yet part of the answer, I would suggest, is that we can see two divergent intellectual currents operating in his analysis of Japanese literature. Firstly, we note in the 1902 essay, and particularly in its final concluding section, the evolutionism which was more apparent in his earlier 1880 work. Thus his criticism of the haiku poets for lacking intellectual ingenuity in failing to develop their tiny verses into a “complex organic whole” is essentially a re-working of his earlier assertion in the introduction to The Classical Poetry of the Japanese that there is an evolutionary development of poetic form, with more complex forms supplanting the more rudimentary native forms as cultures come into contact. This evolutionary argument, whereby culture and art were also seen, along with other societal forms, as evolving naturally toward more complex structures was one accepted, consciously or unconsciously, by many scholars and intellectuals during the latter part of the 19th century and indeed beyond that. Part of that evolutionary argument was the idea that Europeans were more “profound” and intellectually complex than other ethnic groups and therefore occupied the top of a racial and cultural hierarchy (Stocking 81;Bolt 27). Chamberlain with his contention, repeated throughout the various editions of Things Japanese that “what Japanese literature most lacks is genius”, because it is “too timorous, too narrow to compass great things” (Things Japanese 2nd Ed. 276), may be seen as following this argument. And indeed, as specifically regards his verdict on haiku as lacking intellectuality and being an unstructured “pile of bricks”, here too we may see the effect of evolutionary theory.

At the same time, however, we may see another current operating in Chamberlain’s work, which is that of a thorough-going rationalism, and the view that culture is at least partly a social construct rather than racially determined. I have previously argued that the correspondence between Chamberlain and Lafcadio Hearn from the 1890s shows that a fierce argument broke out between the two interpreters of Japan as to the degree to which culture and mentality were racially determined. (Leonard 190-193) Hearn, although generally seen as pro-Japanese, argued that intellectual characteristics were the product of race and heredity; Chamberlain, while not denying hereditary influence, argued for the effect of social conditioning. Clearly then, Chamberlain was skeptical as regards the idea that intellectual abilities, and such psychological constructs as “artistic sensibility” could be passed on biologically. Moreover, as I point out earlier in this essay, Chamberlain’s theory of the emergence of the haikai movement in 15th century Japan is that it was the product of social factors such the rigidity of court society and the rise of a
merchant class. This being so, it is possible to see Chamberlain as conflicted with regard to the question of whether Japanese literary forms are to be ascribed primarily to nature (to an inbred native taste) or to nurture, with literary forms being a product of social organization. Let us note also, in this context, that Chamberlain’s anger at political developments in Japan from the mid-1890s on, with his view of “Mikado-worship” being that it was a religion that had been cynically constructed by the ruling classes, necessarily propelled him further along a path of rationalistic enquiry.

Finally, we may note that, despite his volte face in the final section of the essay, the preceding sections of the 1902 essay are full of compliments for the skillful technique and profound humanity of the haiku poets and their verses. This is particularly so in his descriptions of Bashō and his disciples as well as later poets such as Buson, Issa and Kaga-no-Chiyo. Chamberlain’s 1902 essay certainly had a strong influence on Couchoud and through him on a variety of writers. Moreover, it can also be argued that this seminal essay, which was reprinted in book form, and summarized in his mini-encyclopedia of Japan, had a more general influence on the Western perception of haiku in the interwar years, and that several of his concepts, such as that of haiku being an evocative word-picture, and a form of poetry strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism, still remain with us today.

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