Japanese Aesthetics and the ‘Pathetic Fallacy’

Carl M. Johnson

Contents:

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
II. Ruskin and the pathetic fallacy ........................................................................ 3
III. Roots of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility ..................................................... 5
   A. Makoto and hon’i .......................................................................................... 5
   B. Daoist influence on Japanese aesthetics ..................................................... 9
IV. NISHITANI Keiji and emptiness ...................................................................... 11
V. Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 17
VI. Works cited ...................................................................................................... 18

I. Introduction

Oku no Hosomichi 奥の細道 or The Narrow Road to Oku is the most famous work of Japan’s most famous poet, Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–1694). It is an embellished travel diary written in 1689 that records his literary impressions as he traveled from Edo into the deep interior of Japan. One of its best-known haiku was written at the start of his journey:

行春や 鳥啼魚の 目は泪

Yuku haru ya / tori naki uo no / me wa namida
Spring is passing by! / Birds are weeping and the eyes / Of fish fill with tears

This poem is emblematic of Bashō’s style in its expression of the resonance between the poet and the natural world, but from a Western aesthetic point of view, one may question whether its beauty is marred by an indulgence in the pathetic fallacy. That is, Bashō appears to be projecting his own feelings onto nature instead of respecting its otherness. Formally speaking, the poem consists of two parts divided by the cutting word ya. In the first, the poet invokes the passing spring. Earlier Japanese poets had created an association between grief over the changing of the seasons and the crying of birds (Kawamoto 84–5), and in the second part of the poem, we are given a concrete image of spring’s passing that relies on this association. We form a mental picture of Bashō as he leaves the bustling city where birds circle overhead as fresh fish lie in the market stall covered in

1. Translation from Keene 23.
drops of water. However, some critics might suggest that the concreteness of this image is undercut by strong emotional coloring of the image. In Japanese, both the singing of birds and the mourning of humans are called naki (crying), and Bashō has played up this ambiguity by writing naki with the character 啸, which can have either meaning, rather than using 泣, which specifically means mourning, or 嘀, which specifically means siniging. Furthermore, the drops of water which shimmer on the scales of the fish have been transformed into tears in their eyes. As a result, a critical western observer might accuse Bashō of injecting his own emotions into the scene and thereby compromising the integrity of the poem. A better poet, the critic might claim, would have contrasted his own sorrow to the indifference of the birds and fish rather than imposing his own sorrow on them.

This poem is not an isolated example from Bashō’s oeuvre. Neither is he alone in the Japanese canons of taste. The more one examines Japanese literature and art, the more examples one can find of similar intertwining of the emotional and imagistic. In this paper, I will use this poem as a prototypical example of a way of thinking about art common in the Japanese tradition and defend it against the accusation that it is in thrall to the inappropriate projection of emotions onto the material world. In order to better explain what the charge against the Japanese aesthetic sensibility is throughout the paper I will refer to the writing of John Ruskin, who coined the term “pathetic fallacy” in 1856. To answer the charge, I will examine the roots of Bashō’s poetry by looking at the literary conventions he inherited from earlier poets and the philosophical assumptions he inherited from early Daoism. Finally, I will use the writing of twentieth century philosopher NISHITANI Keiji to show that this tendency in Japanese thought is not the inappropriate form of projecting that Ruskin labels a fallacy but an appropriate expression of the play of imagination enabled by the emptiness of all things.
II. Ruskin and the pathetic fallacy

For John Ruskin, the highest objective for all art is truth. As such, poets have an obligation to express truth in their work. However, in his time, the Romantic poets were being drawn into an increasingly emotional identification with nature, a trend which Ruskin decried. In “On the Pathetic Fallacy,” he explains this tendency as a result of a weakness in the characters of the Romantic poets. In his view, there is nothing wrong with writing something like ‘the primrose made me happy’ or even ‘the primrose seemed happy to me,’ but when one writes ‘the happy primrose blooms’ or its like, one has crossed the line away from truth and into misrepresentation of the world. Such misrepresentations are a sign of a serious character defect and an insufficient appreciation for the reality of things. He acknowledges that such figures of speech are popular and at times even felicitous, but he insists that their popularity ultimately depends on an inappropriate appeal to the emotional investments of the author and audience. He explains that we should call such overuse of metaphor the “pathetic fallacy,” since on the one hand, it has an emotional appeal to reader (the pathetic element) but on the other hand, it involves a fundamental misdescription of the world (the fallacious element). One who approaches art from an appropriately disinterested position, on the other hand, will see the world as it really is, and reject the use of such language. When one recognizes the primacy of truth as the goal of all expression, including art, then one is obliged to reject the use of the pathetic fallacy, since

the pathetic fallacy is powerful only so far as it is pathetic, feeble so far as it is fallacious, and, therefore, […] the dominion of Truth is entire, over this, as over every other natural and just state of the human mind. (§16)

On the other hand, this does not mean that Ruskin is advocating the view that all descriptions of the world should be flat and emotionless. Rather, he insists that when we include emotions in our description of the world, it should be properly categorized as a property of the perceiver rather than as a property of the thing perceived. In fact, in many cases,
the truth can only be adequately captured if we include our own emotional responses as a part of our description of the world as it appears to us. Thus, truth in art is best served by a clear eyed view that captures both the world and our feelings about it, while at the same time preserving the strict separation between the two. Accordingly, as critics of art, we can divide people into three categories:

the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy’s shield, or a forsaken maiden. And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself—a little flower, apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be, that crowd around it. And, in general, these three classes may be rated in comparative order, as the men who are not poets at all, and the poets of the second order, and the poets of the first[...]. (§8)

With these guidelines in mind, Ruskin praises the poetry of Dante and condemns Coleridge:

Thus, when Dante describes the spirits falling from the bank of Acheron ‘as dead leaves flutter from a bough’, he gives the most perfect image possible of their utter lightness, feebleness, passiveness, and scattering agony of despair, without, however, for an instant losing his own clear perception that these are souls, and those are leaves; he makes no confusion of one with the other. But when Coleridge speaks of

The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,

he has a morbid, that is to say, a so far false, idea about the leaf: he fancies a life in it, and will, which there are not; confuses its powerlessness with choice, its fading death with merriment, and the wind that shakes it with music. (§6)

Applying the critical theory of Ruskin to Bashō raises three questions. First, does Bashō “perceive wrongly, because he feels”? Second, even if he did perceive wrongly, would it be any criticism of his work as a poet or his character as a human being that he should record his perceptions in verse? Third, what are the cultural conditions that might cause Bashō or other Japanese to have the perceptions that they have? We will look for the answers to these questions in reverse order, beginning with an explanation of the cultural roots which gave rise to Bashō’s aesthetic sensibility.
III. Roots of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility

A. *Makoto* and *hon’i*

Given Ruskin’s insistence on the importance of “truth” as the criteria of art and its central role in his opposition to the pathetic fallacy, it may be somewhat surprising to find that Bashō also expressed his poetical ideals in terms of the “truth of poetry” or *fūga no makoto* 風雅の誠. According to Peipei Qiu in *Bashō and the Dao*, for Bashō, this truth was realized in “the integration of his poetic ideals with his way of life” (48). In other words, for Bashō, truth or *makoto* (“truth,” “sincerity,” etymologically a “pure word or thing”) was not a matter of simply reporting what one sees accurately, but an entire mode of conduct encompassing a wide variety of ideals, mostly centered around the figure of the recluse sage-poet. (Interestingly, Ruskin also emphasizes the importance of ethics to aesthetics.)

One of Bashō’s contemporaries, Ueshima Onitsura (1661–1738), was also convinced of the centrality of *makoto* to the form of poetry they both practiced, *haikai* 俳諧. He wrote in his treatise on *haikai* called *Hitogoto*,

> in 1685 I arrived at this great insight: *There is no haikai without makoto*. Accordingly, I rid my verse of every single decorative language, poetic device, and clever trick. As far as I was concerned, all such things were so many falsehoods. (Crowley 28)

As we can see, like Ruskin, he believes that a commitment to the truth requires the poet to strip away decorations and falsehoods from his verse. However, in this same treatise Onitsura also makes remarks like,

> Spring rain has a heavy kind of loneliness.  
> Summer rain has a clear coolness.  
> Monsoon rains [samidare 五月雨] have a gloomy desolation.  
> Autumn rain has a loneliness that springs from the depths of the heart.  
> Winter rain has a piercing loneliness. (30)

From Ruskin’s perspective, such comments are an unacceptable betrayal of the truth, because the truth is that rain is H₂O and can be neither lonely nor desolate. Yet in the poetic tradition of Bashō and Onitsura, such comments are well supported. One of the central considerations for a poet in that period of Japanese history was a poem’s *hon’i* 本
KAWAMOTO Kōji explains in *The Poetics of Japanese Verse* that certain poetic images had, in the course of Japanese literary history, developed certain fixed associations. For example, the autumn dusk is forlorn. Kawamoto explains,

_Hon'i_ is usually explained as the essential qualities inherent in an object and the emotional response deemed appropriate. However, [...] the actual qualities of the phenomenon itself were second to the conceptual qualities acquired through literary precedent. To give a twist to Oscar Wilde’s famous remark [...], there may have been autumn dusks for centuries in Japan, but no one saw them until the age of the _Shinkokinshū_ (ca. 1210), when the theme of autumn evening began to attract markedly strong interest. (61)²

Kawamoto notes that _hon'i_ run into difficulty in traditional Western schemes of classification since they are neither clearly subjective nor clearly objective (2–4). Ruskin himself had qualms with the terms “subjective” and “objective” preferring the phrases “it seems so to me” and “it is so,”³ but he nevertheless accepted their associated categories as differentiating between the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us; and the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy; false appearances, I say, as being entirely unconnected with any real power or character in the object, and only imputed to it by us. (§4)

As we shall see, the separation of the objective and subjective, or true appearances and false appearances, plays an important role in the process by which Ruskin musters his disdain for the pathetic fallacy.

_Hon'i_ seem on the surface to be in between these two categories since they are imputed by “us,” not individually but collective and not based on a particular impressions but on a normative cultural construct—_hon'i_ are what one _should_ feel in a given

---

² Oscar Wilde’s famous remark is “There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them” (Kawamoto 10). Here we see an interesting convergence, in that it was Turner who brought fog to London, but it was Ruskin who defended the artistry of Turner against those who saw him as making overly abstract paintings.

³ Our current usage of “subjective” and “objective” dates to Kant, and at the time of Ruskin, the contemporary usage was still establishing itself against the previous meanings of “connected with subject of consideration” and “connected with an object of thought.” See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, Zone Books, 2007.
situation. Indeed, the Japanese poets would insist that a fact about the autumn sunset was revealed when it came to be associated with a sense of forlornness and a fact about the passing spring was revealed when they came to associate it with the calling birds. These associations are just as normative as the Humean associations that force us to think of the second billiard ball rolling away when see the first about to impact it. It is just that the object of association is emotional rather than physical. Nevertheless, in spite of this emotionality, these associations are not merely subjective or idiosyncratic.

Ruskin, for his part, was not completely immune to this kind of understanding, and even he admits that

however great a man may be, there are always some subjects which ought to throw him off his balance; some, by which his poor human capacity of thought should be conquered, and brought into the inaccurate and vague state of perception, so that the language of the highest inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor, resembling that of the weaker man, overborne by weaker things. (§8)

In spite of this, he emphasizes that such persons and topics are rare. This fourth kind of person is under the influence of a kind of “prophetic inspiration” in which,

the men who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them. (§9)

Ruskin’s primary examples for this category are from the Old Testament prophetic books. It is unthinkable that Ruskin would allow that such an ordinary activity as leaving on a journey should be an occasion for prophetic inspiration unless the journey itself was symbolic of some larger, cosmic process, as was the exodus of the Israelites. He writes,

by how much this feeling is noble when it is justified by the strength of its cause, by so much it is ignoble when there is not cause enough for it[…]. (§15)

Experiences of the transcendent are for Ruskin beyond the ordinary, and so not subject to any slow cultural accumulation as hon’i are. They come in a flash of divine inspiration or not at all. Furthermore, there is no expectation that prophets will set normative standards

---

4. All emphasis original.
for how later poets ought to see the world. The prophet is required to say “the fir-trees rejoice at thee” by the magnitude of circumstances, but ordinary person is nevertheless still required to understand that fir-trees cannot rejoice.

Kawamoto, on the other hand, explains that,

Bashō is saying that poetic truth can only be found achieved through a sympathetic and selfless faith in the traditions of the past. As the boundary between the one who sees and the object seen grows weak, the two are fused, and the division into subject and object becomes meaningless. (65)

Such experiences of the fusing of subject and object are, in one sense, religious or prophetic experiences in that they are the goal of Buddhist practice. In spite of this, such experiences are not to be thought of as limited in scope to a few fortunate and divinely inspired prophets. Rather, it is a condition of truthful sincerity that all poets should aspire to. Accordingly, the associations that constitute the hon’i of an image accumulate slowly within a culture, rather than being revealed at once by a poet/prophet.

When we interpreting Bashō’s poem from the perspective of the hon’i it refers to, we see that it is not the case that that he is projecting his own sorrow onto the birds and fish. To the contrary, because of his immersion in his native poetic tradition he is able to see the resonance between his individual grief and the larger grief which arises out of the situation itself. It was his own grief at leaving that provided a gateway for Bashō to step through and feel correctly the pathos that the situation properly contains in itself. Just as one can only see the beauty of the sunrise if some stimuli wakes one up early in the morning, in order to understand the passing of the spring, Bashō had to find himself in a context in which his grief acted as a stimuli that awoke him to the deeper grief of the passing of spring. His own grief is what awoke him, but what he saw once awake was something outside of himself.

This interpretation absolves Bashō of one kind of poetic overindulgence (seeing his own feelings simply reflected in nature after projecting them there) but brings to light a
new, more difficult problem: How can it be that the situation itself contains sorrow for
the passing of the seasons?

B. Daoist influence on Japanese aesthetics
To see why the Japanese were willing to accept such internal associations, it is valuable to
look at earlier influences on the Japanese tradition. Daoism in particular was influential
both directly through its texts and indirectly through its contributions to Zen. Bashō was
familiar with early Daoist works like the Zhuangzi and for a time even used the pen name
Kukusai 杏々斎, meaning “flitting and fluttering study,” in appreciation for Zhuangzi’s
famous butterfly dream (Qiu 42–3). What the episode of Zhuangzi’s dream illustrated for
the Japanese is the “transformation of things” and the ways in which seemingly distinct
entities like Zhuangzi and a butterfly can nevertheless be connected. When Zhuangzi
dreams of being a butterfly, this shows that the difference between a human being and
butterfly is not as great as it may appear. The seemingly insurmountable gap between
subject and object is, as we shall see, bridgeable.

Similarly, the pen name “Bashō” itself is connected to the Zhuangzi. Bashō took his
pen name after writing a passage about the wind blowing “upon the withered leaves of
the Plantain [bashō 芭蕉] Tree Hollow,” which is a reference to a passage in the Zhuangzi
in which Ziqi remarks that “the piping of Heaven” acts by “Blowing on the ten thou-
sand things in a different way, so that each can be itself” (Qiu 129–30). For Bashō and
other Japanese poets, the aim of poetry is a kind of naturalness that arises when things
are able to express themselves as they are—including emotionally. Dohō, one of Bashō’s
students, writes in Sanzōshi,

“Learn of the pine from the pine; learn of the bamboo from the bamboo.” These words of our
Master mean to distance oneself from private implications (私意 shii).5

In other words, when Bashō writes emotionally charged poems about the world, he takes it that these poems are not drawing from any private or subjective emotional associations with things in the world (shii), but from a proper understanding of the emotionality embedded in the world (hon’i).

From the perspective of a Western author like Ruskin, this is nonsense, since things in nature are affectless. To reveal things as they are means merely to reveal their hidden physical and causal powers. For example, Ruskin remarks that

the word ‘Blue’ does not mean the sensation caused by a gentian [flower] on the human eye; but it means the power of producing that sensation; and this power is always there, in the thing, whether we are there to experience it or not, and would remain there though there were not left a man on the face of the earth. Precisely in the same way gunpowder has a power of exploding. It will not explode if you put no match to it. But it has always the power of so exploding, and is therefore called an explosive compound, which it very positively and assuredly is, whatever philosophy may say to the contrary.

In like manner, a gentian does not produce the sensation of blueness if you don’t look at it. But it has always the power of doing so; its particles being everlastingly so arranged by its Maker. And, therefore, the gentian and the sky are always verily blue, whatever philosophy may say to the contrary; and if you do not see them blue when you look at them, it is not their fault but yours. (§3)

A proper investigation into the objective nature of reality then will reveal certain powers inherent in objects. Like the author of the Zhuangzi, Ruskin agrees that it is important to let things be themselves as they are blown on by the winds of heaven. The important difference for Ruskin is that emotional responses, unlike sensory responses, are not to be attributed to any power of the object, but ultimately belong to the free power of the subject to react as he or she chooses.

To see why the tradition that Bashō inherited would reject Ruskin’s analysis of the proper role of the subject and object, it is helpful to look at another episode in the Zhuangzi, chapter 17 Autumn Floods (秋水 Qiu Shui), which illustrates the response of Daoist tradition to the concerns of those who strenuously resist anthropomorphizing:6

6. Translation from Ziporyn 76.
Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the edge of the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, “The minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. Such is the happiness of fish.”

At this point, a Ruskin must object to this gross anthropomorphizing of the fish, and one does:

Huizi said, “You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of fish?”

The response of Zhuangzi to Huizi’s criticism is useful for showing why a Ruskin-like response closes off the possibility of truthfulness rather than securing it.

Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, so whence do you know I don’t know the happiness of fish?”

In other words, if we insist on extreme epistemological purity, we end up with a kind of paralysis. If we are not open to any emotional projection, then we will be unable to understand either our fellow human beings or the natural world. The apotheosis of this kind of thinking is Descartes’ claim in the Discourse on Method that we cannot tell a person walking down the street from an automaton and that with animals there is no difference to tell (54–60). Such thinking was alien to the pre-modern Japanese in part because they inherited from the Zhuangzi and other texts a tradition of attempting to capture nature in its full aspect, including emotionally.

After the opening of Japan to the West, modern Japanese scholars found themselves directly confronted by Western proponents of Huizi’s view that affective knowledge is forever trapped within the boundaries of the atomic individual. To oppose this view, it was necessary for them to take their tradition and translate it into the language of Western philosophy.

IV. NISHITANI Keiji and emptiness

In his essay “Emptiness and Sameness,” NISHITANI Keiji explains the metaphysical underpinnings of the identification of self with other in Japanese aesthetics by examining a number of poems, including this one by Bashō:
やがて死ぬ 景色は見えず 蝉の声
Yagate shinu / keshiki wa miezu / semi no koe
Without in sight the view / That soon she will die: / The cicada’s voice. (194)

In this poem, Bashō has not anthropomorphized the cicada, but he does feel for its plight: after years underground, the cicada will sing for a few weeks in the summer before passing away. The poem would perhaps earn a pass from Ruskin as sufficiently realistic, but it is important to see that this does not mean the poem is therefore absent of any of the emotional transference that Ruskin’s view of reality precludes. Bashō has feelings for the cicada that are partly predicated on his identification with it—since he knows he will suffer a similar fate. The poem makes us feel at once sorrow for the ignorance of the cicada, and joy for the way its ignorance of death allows its song to reach an otherwise unattainable purity.

What Nishitani draws our attention to is the way in which poetic experience captures the suchness of the seamlessness of reality without distinguishing between its physical and mental aspects:

Reality “is given” experientially to ourselves as one body and mind. When we say that a cicada is singing, for example, or that we hear the cicada’s voice, what is originally given is not the link between the representation of a general “voice” and the representation of a general “cicada”; it is the voice of the cicada that is actually given to our sense of hearing. (192)

Hearing a specific cicada is an absolutely ordinary experience, but there is something theoretically puzzling about it. If what we experience is really atomic and concrete, how are we able to generalize or abstract from it? We connect this cicada to other, different cicadas, but the self-sameness of a thing ought to rule out any possibility of equivalence between one thing and other, since it is a plain fact that this cicada is not that cicada, and this cicada certainly is not a class, not even the class cicada. As a result of the process of discrimination, we are left with a mere haecceity with no quiddity—a this but no what. Nishitani writes,

In the connections that we call the “world,” there are partitions, divisions, and limits everywhere. Pine trees are pine trees and they are not cedar trees; this pine tree is this pine tree and not that
pine tree. In the various dimensions of “being,” being always includes a sense of self-sameness that is itself and is not the same as any other thing. (198)

It is the process of differentiation that makes the class cicada different from the class locust, but this same process separates the individual cicada from the class cicada by an unbridgeable chasm. Things in the world are differentiated and boundaries exist between them that make them different things. This condition makes even Ruskin’s example of the color blue becomes suspect. He claims that to say a flower is blue means that the flower as an object has the power to present itself to us as blue, and this power is completely unrelated to our actually experiencing any blueness while seeing the flower. However, if this is the case, then it is wholly mysterious how it is that we can claim to know anything about the objective blueness (blueness as a power of objects), since all we ever experience is subjective blueness (blueness as an experience of the observer). Never having observed the power, we have no way to say anything about whether an object is blue or not, no matter how blue it may appear to us. The boundary between subjective and objective blue is so impenetrable that both classifications become useless, since without any objective blue to talk about with other human beings, we would have no basis on which to give a name to our internal, subjective feeling of blue.

However, just as Wittgenstein found that to fix a limit we must be able to think both sides of it, Nishitani emphasizes, “a ‘boundary’ implies a division that is also a joining” (197). In other words, to posit something as isolated is nevertheless to relate it to something outside of itself which it is not. Thus, we find that there is more to experience than sheer this-ness:

Because this means that the self can never venture out of itself, all other things become obstacles to the self. [...] Yet a diametrically opposed situation also appears with regard to the connections of the world—that is, nondiscrimination and equality, or oneness and unhinderedness, on all sides. (199)

When things are unhindered then a connection becomes possible between things that are, considered in themselves as limitations, different things. The process of limitation
is a process of negation by which we rule out what is not a member of the class, but by the same token, we can negate the limitation itself and regain the primordial unity of different parts of experience as unhinderedness. For example, what we find in experience is that we can experience the same thing through multiple senses, such as hearing and sight:

The person who has heard the crying voice of a cicada comes near the tree, for example, and acknowledges the form of the cicada. The sense of hearing hears the cicada’s voice but, while the voice opens as nothing but the cicada’s voice, its shape can only be included as an image. On the opposite side, the sense of sight can distinguish a cicada by seeing its shape and the flapping of its wings, but the voice can only be imagined in that visible shape. But in this case, since both are given at the same time, “the crying form” of the cicada is experienced sensorially thanks to the complementary union of hearing and sight. (212)

Hence our simple aesthetic experience of the world is already compounded and interconnected, just between different sense modalities if nothing else. For Nishitani, the ground of such a unity of different senses and sensations into images is possible only within a field or place that allows for the arising of the unity. The “place” of the thing, in turn, explains how it is possible for a sight to be connected to a sound or vice versa. Because place itself is already a relational field, any sight that we have must have something inside of it which relates to what is outside of it. In other words, one of its intrinsic properties is its relation within the extrinsic field of possible objects in its class.

Returning to the example of blueness then, we might say that what makes an object blue is not its dependence on an unknowable power to produce the unclassifiable experience of subjective blueness, but the existence of blue within a field of possible colors. When we think of this field of colors, we understand the blue as what is not red, not green, and so forth. Thus, grasping the more primal unity of the field establishes a place in which different properties can be asserted.

If we return to the aforementioned incident in the Zhuangzi where Zhuangzi and Huizi debate the happiness of the fish, we find a precursor to Nishitani’s more explicitly developed theory. Huizi presses on Zhuangzi in an attempt to establish the epistemic
boundedness of human reason but Zhuangzi deflects him by pointing to the place of knowing:

Huizi said, “I am not you, to be sure, so I don’t know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of a fish stands intact.”

Zhuangzi said, “Let’s go back to the starting point. You said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Since your question was premised on your knowing that I know it, I must have known it from up here, up above the Hao River.”

While Zhuangzi’s answer is in part a cheeky play of words (“whence”), it also contains a deeper truth. Our knowledge is always perspectival and situated. This does not have to be a cause for us to despair that we cannot achieve the true viewpoint of a view from nowhere. Truth or objectivity does not come from the removal of the subject from knowledge. It comes about instead when the subject becomes aware of the primal unity of the subject and object and experiences that unity as it presents itself in its suchness at a particular location with its limitations and occultations.

The opening provided by the relationality of things through negation is the crack that allows what would otherwise be atomic and isolated concrete experiences to be turned inside out and connect to one another. What allows for the relationality of things within the field of place is their emptiness. Nishitani writes, “The opening of the world is equal to ‘emptiness,’ and it is non-adherent. In this sense, it is totally ‘unhindered’” (202). Emptiness is a vital component both of the self-sameness or suchness of things and of the relationality of things. Because of emptiness, it is possible for us to speak of the perspectival reality of a thing. For example, seen from far away, a mountain looks small or as experienced by the nose, a rose smells sweet. For the early modernist philosophers, these properties of things were merely secondary qualities that arose from our perceptual faculties, and not true properties of objects themselves. However, such thinking makes things in themselves utterly mysterious and unknowable, and we can have no basis for positing anything we experience of an object as primary quality of that object.
(though they often proposed extendedness or mass). Nishitani finds a way of getting beyond this sort of thinking by following Kant in positing the reality of the image itself as a presentation:

Between the space of the “being” of stubborn reality and its “place” there is a fundamental dislocation along with an innate sameness. This is the development of an inner view that is concealed within being. This view is the ground for looking at reality “from within.” This dislocation is essentially a transference from the actual “reality” to its image. Within “reality,” the image that has become one with reality appears as the distinctive form of the image itself. (203)

Thus, the mysterious reality reveals itself in its image without thereby being limited to its image. The thing lends reality to the image and thereby makes the image real. However, unlike Plato’s mimetic theory, which describes images as always derivative and therefore less real, Nishitani’s images are fused with reality in such a way that we cannot speak of them as mere copies. Rather, the images participate in the reality of the original in such a way that they make up a part of what is real about the original. There is no “rose” as a division in the world without the smell. Secondary qualities are as much a primary aspect of reality as the things they come from.

To relate this to the aesthetic question under consideration, Ruskin and similar critics suppose that a truthful understanding of the universe will be one that is for the most part disinterested and passionless. We can discover only powers hidden in objects and feelings hidden in ourselves. The Japanese tradition proposes instead that things are empty in themselves and real only insofar as they are able to become images of experience. Truthfulness consists not in properly describing things (a mimesis of the original), but in meeting the original as it is in itself through compassion for its uniqueness. A truthful understanding of the universe is a compassionate view that emerges when we remove the artificial distinction between subject and object. This is why so many of the hon’i proposed by the haikai poets have to do with a feeling of loss at the passage of time. According to Nishitani, “through training in the realm of linguistic ‘connections’ and by transferring (reflecting) into their will and passions” the spiritual insights of their
philosophical tradition, poets like Bashō “lifted image and its place” to new heights of understanding and discovered a ground of “emptiness within the sensorial world” that “becomes the place of the deep mobility of the imagination in poetry” (217). They were able to imaginatively identify with nature itself because

The peculiar realm of the imagination is an intermediate zone where the senses and the intellect are blended—a mediatory realm where each draws mutually apart from the other and, by drawing apart, they get tied to each other. (213)

V. Conclusion

Earlier, three questions were raised. First, does Bashō “perceive wrongly, because he feels”? We have seen that for the Japanese tradition the answer to this question is, ‘No.’ Bashō does not perceive wrongly. He perceives with a compassion for the birds and fish around him, and sees his own personal grief as a reflection of their own, yet he also draws a great sense of joy or aesthetic satisfaction from his resonance with them. This is not a matter of projection due to moral weakness but of feeling due to moral strength. Moreover, even if Bashō were to perceive something wrongly, it would have to be in spite of and not because of his feeling. Since the truthful response to the universe is one of compassion, it is necessary to feel in order to perceive truly.

Second, is it any criticism of Bashō’s work as a poet or his character as a human being that he should record his perceptions in verse? Again, we find the answer is no. From the perspective of Japanese philosophy, to attempt to isolate oneself from one’s relationships to things in the field of the universe is a character flaw. To acknowledge one’s perceptions and list them non-dualistically along with other traditional objects as more conditions to be met with in the universe is no flaw. One must understand that one’s perceptions arise out of the confluences of the context in which they are felt. This context is the broader reality in which certain feelings become appropriate as the essential implications of the situation.
Third, what are the cultural conditions that might cause Bashō or other Japanese artists to have the perceptions that they have? As we have seen, Bashō inherited a strong tradition both from earlier poets and from earlier thinkers, like Zhuangzi. This tradition has carried on beyond the time of Bashō and in this era can be seen the writings of Japanese philosophers like Nishitani. In “Mask and Shadow in Japanese Culture,” SAKABE Megumi describes the Japanese tradition this way:

I believe that the meaning of the famous sentence at the end of Goethe’s Faust, “Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis” (which I would translate, or rather interpret, as “Everything that goes by in this earthly world is nothing but metaphor”), is since time immemorial a very familiar feeling for us Japanese. (251)

Far from the pathetic fallacy, it is the passionate truth.

VI. Works cited


