

COPYING BIRD CALLS

A Hundred Linked Haikai

by Nishiyama Sōin (1605-1682)

Introduced and Translated by

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INTRODUCTION

During his life, Sōin traveled an extraordinary expanse of geographical and social space. Born a samurai, he became a page of Katō Masakata, lord of Yatsushiro castle and deputy governor of the Higo domain in Kyushu. Sōin began to study waka as a boy and renga linked verse while attending his renga-loving lord. In 1621 Masakata sent Sōin to Kyoto to study for eight years with the conservative, influential Satomura renga masters on a stipend from the domain; there Sōin accompanied the Satomura

masters to renga meetings of the powerful and prestigious and received instruction in “secret” interpretations of court classics. In 1632, when Sōin was twenty-eight, the shogunate, suspicious of the Katō clan, removed it from the Higo domain and scattered its leaders. Sōin eventually followed Masakata to Kyoto, where he rejoined the Satomuras, composing sequences with daimyō lords, aristocrats, and Buddhist bishops. In 1647 he was made renga master of Temma Shinto shrine in Osaka, where he oversaw renga gatherings. He also led sequences at other shrines and visited castle lords around Japan to compose sequences, often keeping lively journals on his journeys.

Osaka’s commoner, economically-oriented culture contrasted with the neoclassical tastes of Kyoto, and soon Sōin was also, under the names Saiō and Baiō, overseeing meetings to compose haikai—worldly, often humorous linked verse that did not follow many of classical high renga’s canons and rules. Most haikai poets were merchants without extensive education in courtly and courtly-style culture, so Sōin’s ability to move between social classes and cultural worlds and the

lightness with which he wore his learning put him in great demand, and Sōin’s smooth yet pungent haikai were widely anthologized. During the late 1660s Sōin lost several members of his family, and in 1670 he became a lay Zen monk and turned over his duties at Temma shrine to his son. Sōin hoped to spend the rest of his life wandering and writing as he wished, but he soon found himself at the center of literary controversy. A younger generation of haikai poets who had never composed renga found in Sōin the breadth and good humor to act as the symbol of a new style of wild and earthy haikai which came to be called Danrin. Sōin had little interest in literary movements, but haikai, like renga, was a public, social art, and he enjoyed linking haikai with the iconoclastic, experimental younger generation, which included Saikaku and Ichū. By 1675 Sōin was so popular he was invited to Edo, where he linked verses with Zaishiki, Shōi, Bashō, and others. The Danrin movement asserted that linked verse could legitimately write about the ordinary, non-elegant world, use a wide variety of colloquial words, and link rapidly in looser and elliptical ways that sometimes approached

stream-of-consciousness associations, and some Danrin poets composed thousands of verses in a single day in pursuit of “light-mouthed” links. Sōin lent his prestige to the younger poets and supported them, calling haikai a common paper robe with a brocade collar and pointing out that the sixteenth-century poet Moritake had established a systematic precedent for leaping, sometimes surreal linking on a large scale with his thousand-verse haikai sequence of 1540. Soon, however, Sōin and his proteges were being attacked by “Teimon” followers of the conservative Kyoto poet and scholar Teitoku, who had sought to import high renga forms almost whole into haikai, which he regarded as a vulgarized form of renga. Ichū responded by quoting Zhuangzi and arguing that fiction, imaginary worlds, and allegory (*gūgen*) were the essence of haikai, an assertion that drew ridicule and condemnation. The acrimonious debate continued, and Sōin, who had hoped to spend the rest of his life floating among clouds and undulating within sequences, returned to renga and in 1681 retired to a mountain hermitage. “Good haikai is good, and bad is bad,” he

had written in *Orandamaru nibansen*, “whether it’s classic, Danrin, or from a few decades ago.”

But Sōin had helped make history, establishing haikai as an accessible and viable form for the majority of Japanese city poets, and Danrin linking groups and Edoza groups that sprang from them continued well into the eighteenth century. Sōin also showed with a series of solo hundred-verse sequences that the solo form was important in haikai. In the solo form, also practiced in traditional renga, the individual writer was assumed to be structurally just as much of a collectivity or *za* as the group was in group linking. Moreover, during a period of change and innovation, such as the late seventeenth-century, solo sequences often took more risks and were often the most successful. Bashō, who began as a Danrin poet, would later praise Sōin by saying he had pioneered connotative “heart links” that went beyond denotative Teimon “word links,” thus preparing the way for his own still more suggestive “scent” links. Sōin would no doubt have smiled at this teleological scheme. Danrin poets produced works of imagination, non-sexist sensuality, humor, and

social realism seldom equaled by later haikai poets, and some Danrin poets such as Saikaku or Zaishiki saw the comparatively elegant “Bashō style” as a retreat, an attempt to effectively transcend the floating world and reestablish a new semi-vernacular version of high renga, replete with genteel restraints and balances.

The solo sequence by Sōin translated here seems to have been composed between 1675 and 1677. It is placed toward the beginning of the *Sōin shichihyakuin*, a collection of seven Sōin sequences, the last of which dates from 1677. I have followed the text in Katō Sadahiko, ed., *Koten haikai 28, Sōin senku ta*, Benseisha, 1976, pp. 79-82. Where two or more interpretations of a verse seemed plausible, I have chosen for the translation that which seemed most likely in terms of contemporary usages, styles, and horizons of expectations.

Exact protocols for reading Danrin haikai have yet to be reestablished among modern Japanese poets, readers, and scholars, since Sōin and other Danrin poets have only in recent decades been intensively reread and enjoyed as Japan comes to reevaluate various aspects of

commoner culture in its pre-Meiji history. Danrin sequences came to be virtually excluded from the haikai canon due to historical developments such as the rise of the cult of Bashō, the increase in popularity of writing individual verses, including hokku and senryū, and the simultaneous breakdown of poets’ ability to link in long sequences, and the fondness for harmonious, high-literary haikai among literati in the later Edo period and among early twentieth-century readers. Sōin himself stated, according to *Haikai mōgyū*, that there is no single set of haikai rules and that the poet writing solo or leading a linking session should follow his or her good sense regarding diction, seriation, and image deployment. Sōin obviously had a good sense of how to proceed as well as deep knowledge of traditional linking, and his sequences draw equally on rules and imaginative flows of image association.

As in medieval renga linked verse sequences, each verse except the hokku is to be read twice, first alone and then together with the previous verse, the second time in order to appreciate the composite, dialogical image generated

between the verses; each verse is thus transformed in its relation with the next verse, and savoring these transformations is one of the major pleasures of reading the form. But unlike high renga, where meaning is contained within almost waka-like two-verse units, sequences by Sōin and other Danrin poets keep the two-verse link as the core unit for generating movement while sometimes developing particularly interesting images or situations by returning back two or more verses (*uchikoshi*) and continuing links for more than two verses. I have noted some of these overflow reticulations (*rinne*, literally 'transmigrations'), and readers can trace others. They create a delicate music indeed. Sōin's sinuous sequence is not simply a description of the floating world but a refloating of it.

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