

Extending the Notion of Home Through the Language of Poetry

David Farrah¹
Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Abstract

This essay will offer a personalised, critical consideration of how the notion of “home”, while remaining central to my vision as a poet, has evolved from the provincial to the international to the universal through the medium of landscape. It will accordingly ask the following question: how do we find a way to express ourselves through the features of a landscape we might not initially consider to be “home”, in the language of poetry? In answer to that question, the Japanese concept of “shakkei” or “borrowed landscape” will be explored as it relates to both literary history and the more contemporary concern for the expression and cultivation of the individual self. In particular, the technique of “ikedori”, or the “capturing alive” of a landscape will be examined. And finally, this essay will suggest that “shakkei” and poetry are much more than just metaphors for each other. Rather, they are organically and artistically linked mediums through which creative wonder is formalised, personalised and expressed.

Keywords

Landscape, gardening, poetry, *shakkei*, Japanese, expatriate, home

But our native country is less an expanse of territory than a substance; it's a rock or a soil or an aridity or a water or a light. It's the place where our dreams materialize; it's through that place that our dreams take on their proper form.... Dreaming beside the river, I gave my imagination to the water....

Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (qtd. in Schama 244)

Whether by giving our imaginations to the waters of our familial foregrounds, or to the trees and mountains in the distance, or even the lands in between,

¹ David Farrah received his Ph.D. from Ohio University, Athens, USA and is Professor of English at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. His poems and essays have appeared in various journals, including *Denver Quarterly*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The Ohio Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. His books, *Small Sounds in the Brush* (poetry and short tales), *The Poems of Nunobiki Falls* (translations), and *Parity's Ground* (poetry), have all been published by Shinbisha of Tokyo.

most of us have at least once in our lives been “wedded” (qtd. in Hongo 215), to use Yeats’ word, to a landscape in such a way that it – the substance of it – remains with us always. And it is indeed that substance, the elemental nature of it, that forever seeds our imaginations and the ground upon which we live, no matter where that might be.

For the expatriate, the traveller, or anyone else who lives *elsewhere*, that can be a comforting notion. It can also be a disturbingly poignant one. Over the years, the “proper form” my own dreams have taken has been the form to be found in poetry, and within the framework of the individual poem, the substance of landscape has been a recurring theme. While I grew up in the mostly landlocked interior of the American Midwest, I have spent – I recently realised to my astonishment – almost as many years residing outside Ohio than within. Nevertheless, some of the substance of my native landscape remains embedded in my core. Catching an unexpected glimpse somewhere in the world of a sunset that contains a hint of the shell-pink sky I knew as a boy can instantly bring a smile to my face. Conversely, running my hand over the rough green husk of an ear of corn while standing somewhere deep in the fields of Asia can briefly break my heart. When we are far from what we have once called home, such poignant moments help to remind us not only of the experience of the place itself, but also of the substantive connections we hold deep within us to the elemental earth.

As a child, I spent much of my time in the cornfields and forests that surrounded the home where my family lived, where both child and imagination were free to roam. A direct product of that time and place is the poem titled “The Ride Home”:

I. In the woods
 behind my house

 a deer lives

 like the consummate houseguest
 the invisible presence

 my mother – she makes my bed –
 has taught me to be

 regardful of our cousin
 the horse’s mouth

 why peel an apple when you can eat it whole

 circumference is everything

II. Around the table there
are more faces than I have
loved.

This is family. *Family*. The extended food
chain of events that explains
my curly hair but not

its loss. When I was three months old
my grandfather died, leaving
my mother fatherless.

When no one is looking
she sleeps at his table.

She raised us smart
enough to know you
can't wake the dead by giving
thanks.

III. Except for the bed, I have taken
what I have been
given, the knowledge
that life can be
no other way.

You make your bed.

You clean your plate.

From the kitchen to the bedroom
is twenty steps.

In the basement
there are ghosts with room enough
to play.

IV. If I could believe

like a deer in my place of rest,
I would run home to
bed and

let the sheets fall
away like the past, freely
and untempered,
faceless.

If I could live by the mouth, which is
endless.

But the ride
home, easier by day,
is as inevitable as the movement

of furniture.

(Farrah 29-32)

The inevitability to be found at the conclusion of “The Ride Home” is arrived at through the personal, earthly and organic connections that exist between the variety of life forms contained by the poem. While the past is being peeled away in four parts, the forest and its inhabitants, the house and its inhabitants (both living and ancestral), all begin occupying the same dreamlike landscape of the imagination, which in turn accommodates their integration. Ultimately, the speaker gains in perspective, and a new, more mature understanding of his own place within his familial past is realised, as it is expressed within the framework of the poem.

Such framing of the world may be necessary to our understanding of it. In his book titled *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama draws upon Magritte to make the point:

“This is how we see the world,” René Magritte argued in a 1938 lecture explaining his version of *La Condition humaine* in which a painting has been superimposed over the view it depicts so that the two are continuous and indistinguishable. “We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside.” What lies beyond the windowpane of our apprehension, says Magritte, needs a design before we can properly discern its form, let alone derive pleasure from its perception. And it is culture, convention, and cognition that makes that design.... (12)

If in that same year (or even six hundred years earlier), Magritte had been standing on the other side of the world, say in Kyoto rather than Paris, arguing for the principles of artistic design as they applied to the understanding of the landscape of the human condition, he might have been gesturing toward his garden, rather than his canvas. And if, as he suggested, “culture, convention,

and cognition” are precepts of such design, and therefore the subsequent form it takes, then the Japanese gardening concept of *shakkei*, or “borrowed scenery” or “borrowed landscape” would have been equally effective in demonstrating his point.

In his book *Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden*, Teiji Itoh defines *shakkei*² as “distant views incorporated into garden settings as part of the design” (15). He then goes on to clarify the concept:

In its original sense, however, *shakkei* means neither a borrowed landscape nor a landscape that has been bought. It means a landscape captured alive. The distinction here is peculiarly Japanese, and it reflects the psychology of the garden designers. Its implications run more or less like this: when something is borrowed, it does not matter whether it is living or not, but when something is captured alive, it must invariably remain alive, just as it was before it was captured.... From their [the gardeners’] point of view, every element of the design was a living thing: water, distant mountains, trees, and stones.... Understanding of the term *shakkei* does not mean true understanding of the concept unless there is an actual sensation of what it signifies. (15)

Similarly, understanding the words of a poem on the canvas of a page does not necessarily lead to the “actual sensation of what it signifies.” For those of us who believe in the organic nature of art, i.e. words are living things, too, the distinction is an important one. Mere observation is not enough. Instead, the engagement that takes place between the landscape of the poem and the imagination of the poet (or the imagination of the reader) implies a fecund middle-ground where the two can expressively meet. In terms of the *shakkei* garden, this middle-ground is considered to be “the fourth essential”³ of *shakkei* design. It is where the distant scenery is “captured alive” by being brought

² Itoh also explains the term’s provenance: “And it was only at the beginning of the seventeenth century in China and in the nineteenth century in Japan that the term *shakkei* (in Chinese, *chieh-ching*) actually began to be used.... There was published in Ming-dynasty China a book on landscape gardening by Li Chi-cheng (582-?) called *Yuan-yeh* (in Japanese, *En’ya*).... In the last chapter of the *Yuan-yeh* the expression *chieh-ching*, or *shakkei*, appears for the first time.... To tell the truth, it was not this book that introduced the techniques of *shakkei* into Japan. It merely happened that the Japanese borrowed the term *shakkei* from the book during the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-26) eras, when Japanese gardening techniques were being systematized in scholarly fashion, and it is therefore no wonder that the gardeners, who had no connection with academic learning, remained ignorant of the term, even though they had long been constructing gardens in *shakkei* style” (15-16).

³ According to Itoh, the first, second and third essentials are, respectively: 1) “that the garden be within the premises of a building or a complex of buildings,” 2) “the borrowed scenery itself: the object to be captured alive,” and 3) “*mikiri*, or trimming: the device by which the garden designer limits the borrowed landscape to the features he wishes to show” (29-31).

together with “the forefront of the garden in one integrated vista” (Itoh 32). In other words, it is the space in which the elements of earth coalesce through design into collective meaning, where the emerging form of a landscape is made manifest through the active engagement of those elements with the human imagination. Importantly, such comprehensive engagement also requires a willingness on the part of the poet (or painter or gardener) to openly extend himself into that middle-ground where his thoughts can be organised and expressed through a design and form that subsequently reveal themselves through his perceptions, as Magritte suggested (Schama 12).

Much of what is perceived and engaged often lies just beyond the framework of our very own windowpanes at home:

Outside my window
in the February sun
the oranges are bright
and big and fat. How easy
to forget the world is round.
(Farrah)⁴

The above *tanka* is a product of the middle-ground. It borrows the fruit to be found in the foreground and places it within the context of light from the distant, circular sun. Such illumination then facilitates the “apprehension” of the design of the form that reveals itself in the connection that exists between those shapely elements and their relationship to each other, as well as to the world in which we, the viewers, also exist. Our lives, too, hang in the balance as we attempt to articulate and understand them in the context of the landscape that appears before us.

Likewise, the following *tanka* by the Japanese poet Masaoka Shiki formulates an understanding of the landscape of the human condition as it is expressed through the framework of his window and the form of the poem:

fuyugomoru huddled up for winter
yamai no toko no upon a bed of pain
garasudo no I wipe the window
kumori nugeba clear of frost and see
tabi⁵ hoseru miyu tabi, hung out for drying
(tr. Beichman 94)

⁴ Unpublished poem.

⁵ *Tabi* are traditional, two-toed Japanese socks.

Shiki, himself, had also been hung out to dry. Suffering from both tuberculosis and a bad back, he recognised that his life would be a short one, and in fact, he died in 1902 at the age of thirty-five. During most of his later life he was bedridden, and as a result, had an extremely limited view of the outside world as it was seen only through his bedroom window. More than most, he would have understood that all landscapes – including our very own bodies – are borrowed. We are, after all, mortal. Our own forms fade. Gazing out his window at the *tabi* so similarly limp of life, Shiki would have perhaps found an underlying transcendental irony in Magritte’s words, that what we see as “being outside ourselves... is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside.” Nevertheless, through the framework of his poetry, Shiki gave his understanding of the human condition its more lasting form.

Engaging the world at ground level or through the window are, of course, our most commonly held points of view. We are, after all, bipeds. However, variations in aspect do exist. In fact, when considering *shakkei*, there are four different techniques that can be utilised in the borrowing of a landscape: “borrowing from a great distance, borrowing from nearby, borrowing from a high level, and borrowing from a low level” (Li Chi-cheng quoted in Itoh 16). While these possibilities present themselves in direct reference to the location of a landscape, implicit in them is a recognition of the fundamental importance of the viewer’s positioning, as well as the resulting changes in perspective and point of view. Presented with such an array of options, the gardener (or poet) might be forgiven for allowing his mind to wander to even loftier heights:

Java Kingfishers

We gaze down upon the formal earth
river and field, ricefields and grasses,

and reflect on them, the abundant
thinking of the replicative acts of god.

Just listen to the birds call out.
How else might we distinguish ourselves

in such a landscape, follow our lives
to the source of a place where the mind

patterns itself after a song. Bodily
pleasures? Yes. And here in this house

we have made of earth, we are delivered
to the world on great blue wings, and

wonder, repeatedly, at its foundations.
(Farrah)

The metaphor, it seems, is complete. Only through extending and pairing his point of view with that of the airborne kingfisher's can the poet-reader-gardener-viewer transcend his own physical limitations and gaze down upon his earthly home, thereby allowing him to discern its forms and his significance in relation to them. From this new, heightened perspective, he can pose the question "How else might we distinguish ourselves in such a landscape?" and perceive an answer in the patterns of design that reveal and repeat themselves in a rich variety of substances and forms: in the ricefields and grasslands and gardens that we create, in the houses that we build, in the songs and poems that we sing. In life itself. And it is through all these things that the mind itself is ordered and revealed and left to wonder about.

Landscape gardening, like poetry, is a form of expression that accommodates wonder. In this sense, *shakkei* becomes more than just a metaphor for articulating the process of creative engagement. It becomes the medium itself, through which that wonder is formalised, personalised, and expressed. It is a melding and manifestation of both the physical and imaginative worlds, which in turn facilitates the creative interplay of both. Additionally, it is transitional, even liminal. By providing a sense of security associated with our attachment to "home," it fortifies us, and in doing so instills in us the confidence to extend ourselves from the safe and familiar ground of our immediate surroundings into the lesser known elements of a distant landscape, possibly even into the unknown. It allows our imaginations a place to play, and our aesthetic to develop. In a very real and active way, it embodies our dreams just as we inhabit its spaces. And like us, it is very much alive.

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