

AN INQUIRY INTO
THE REASONS WHY HAIKU IS POPULAR ABROAD

by Atsuo Nakagawa

In his short monograph 'Is English Haiku Established as a Genre in English Poetry?' the writer has already stated briefly how popular haiku is abroad. And if the writer may add to it what he knows of the recent trend in the haiku world, the number of haiku magazines and books is increasing in spite of their financial difficulties⁽¹⁾, and the quality of English haiku is getting better.⁽²⁾

Since the number of haiku written is increasing (supposing the number of haiku magazines and books substantiates the writer's guess⁽³⁾), and inasmuch as refined types of haiku are being produced, it seems that this prevalence of haiku in the Western countries is not merely a transitory phenomenon, but has struck root in the mind of European and American people.

Then naturally comes the question why and how haiku was accepted and has succeeded in establishing itself as a *genre* in their literature. It would be a big question if we try to tackle it squarely, and needless to say, it is beyond the writer's knowledge and power to answer it. However there is a way, he believes, to treat the question within his own professional field. And this will also speak partly of the general cultural problems.

As to *how*, he has already stated briefly his views in the above-mentioned essay, too. And he would like to take a fresh look at the problem from some other angles in this one. But it would certainly help to kindly read the essay before reading this, as the writer proceeds on with the understanding that he has already written a bit about it.

(As regards the haiku written in the society of immigrant Japanese, the writer does not refer to them because they have been and are, as it were, a sort of closed society and it is quite natural that they took Japanese literature along with them and have been preserving their literary tradition in their new world,⁽⁵⁾ and also because the area they cover in the world is limited, while this monograph seeks for general reasons which can be applied to the West.)

According to Harold Stewart⁽⁶⁾ it was Basil Hall Chamberlain's pioneer work that first introduced Japanese haiku to the Western countries. The pioneer work on Japanese poetry was the chapter on 'Basho and the Japanese Epigram,' which appeared in the 1880's.⁽⁷⁾ And Ezra Pound, whose reference to haiku in the *Fortnightly Review* (September 1914) is well known, probably knew Moritake's haiku through Chamberlain's translation (according to Mr. Hiroshi Hayakawa⁽⁸⁾).

Pound's discovery of one of the specific qualities of haiku—'superposition'—contributed greatly to the cause of imagism although this haiku of Moritake's was not a suitable example of haiku from which to discover the important poetical technique.⁽⁹⁾ Then hokku or haiku began to be taken seriously among Western poets for the first time and more and more very short hokku-like poems were written.⁽¹⁰⁾

However it was mainly as epigrams that haiku was first introduced

as you see in the title of the chapter by Chamberlain, and also in the title of “Epigrammes Lyriques de Japon” by Paul Louis Couchoud.⁽¹⁾ The next book (by William N. Porter) Harold Stewart mentions in the list in his book also has the name: *A Year of Japanese Epigrams* (1911).⁽²⁾ This fact must be remembered. Indeed, when we look into the haiku produced by our famous poets, we find not a few epigrammatical haiku which, translated into English, would have appeared more appealing to the Western people as epigrams than as ‘haiku’, since in western Europe they have had a long and steady tradition of metaphysical wit.

Moritake’s haiku (see the footnote, No. 8), with which most foreign haiku critics would like to begin, was doubly misunderstood. According to Hiroshi Hayakawa again, Harold G. Henderson finds in the haiku its allusion to a line in a Sutra, “Can a fallen blossom return to its branch?”⁽³⁾ while Earl Miner sees a deep Buddhist view of nature in it—the rule of beauty reviving in the constant cyclic changes of four seasons.⁽⁴⁾

R. H. Blyth who asserts that “haiku is an aspect of Zen; that haiku is Zen, Zen directed to certain selected natural phenomena” has published four volumes of haiku (translated into English), besides two volumes of *History of Haiku*.⁽⁵⁾

Thus foreigners tend to base their interpretations of haiku on morality, religious dogmas, and philosophical views. They try to find too many allusions to the Buddhist catechism and the realization of Zen in haiku. This tendency seems to come naturally from their tradition of expressing or suggesting ideas in poetry—ideas often come first before composing poetry.

With Zen Buddhism being widely read and popular in the West, the

'related' literature—haiku—also became popular. The chief 'agitators' were, according to Hayakawa, Daisetsu Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938), its rewritten version, *Zen and Japanese Culture; Zen Intuition as Basis for Poetical Inspiration of Haiku* (1959), and the mis-(or rather fictitious) interpretation of the famous 'Furuike-ya.....' haiku by Basho.⁽¹⁶⁾

Thus it seems that most of the haiku written and highly thought of by foreigners contain those ingredients in them. R. H. Blyth says in his book, *A History of Haiku* that he finds too much ostensive, i. e., overt thought in the excellent contemporary English haiku collected and printed in it.⁽¹⁷⁾

So it is supposed that there were days when it was almost impossible to tell which it was, the fad of haiku-writing or the study of Zen, that was promoting the other. If the writer be allowed to give one example from among his own circle, an old American haiku-poet who has so far written a lot of haiku and is planning to have his books of haiku published, is now studying 'Zen-Yoga Theories' after having studied Zen. Here is a typical example of his works:

Reading haiku
and eating strips of bacon:
the taste of sorrow.

As a *genre* of lyrical poetry, probably haiku is the shortest. In western Europe, there have been short forms such as epigram, proverb, obituary, gnome, etc. Even though Harold Stewart finds "the smallest stanza of similar length capable of standing alone in English" in the single rhymed couplet⁽¹⁸⁾—often in isolation as a complete poem, notably in

the works of Robert Herrick (—he finds even a precedent in Herrick for its use as a nature poem, and also in Thomas Gray)—, they only accidentally appeared just as in Junzaburo Nishiwaki's long poem we find a lot of haiku-like short stanzas—⁽¹⁹⁾ chapters. And that haiku-like form was not recognized as a unique poetic form to sing their feeling and emotion and thought in. Thus the form was not able to make itself independent and had no (group of) poets to write the like steadily in the Western poetry world.

In the meanwhile, after Pound's article in the periodical, more and more experimental haiku were written, and as the study of Zen became more popular, studying and writing haiku increased along with it. And its literary value was beginning to be recognized.

However the decisive essay which clearly recognized haiku's unique role as a definite form for a sort of lyrical experience was Kenneth Yasuda's book, *The Japanese Haiku*. He feels that this pattern in English⁽²⁰⁾ is so fitting a vehicle for the kind of the experience which leads to the composition of a haiku that at this stage any other vehicle seems completely inadmissible.⁽²¹⁾

It is these less-than-ten years that haiku-in-English has been written abundantly, and even publications with *haiga*-like illustrations have been issued, some of them being reversely exported to Japan especially from the American Continent. The *raison d'être* of haiku has now been recognized, and its fitness for certain sensation, emotion and thought has really been enjoyed for the past several years.

Thus if there were some misunderstandings about Japanese haiku in the past and if there are any even at present, haiku-in-English as a *genre* in English poetry is now indispensable to some poets among the Euro-

pean and American people, and will continue to be composed and read and sung even in developing countries as Blyth expects,⁽²²⁾ just as in Japan haiku is indispensable to a large number of people as part of their literature and will not cease to be enjoyed in the future.⁽²³⁾

In this age of revolutions in technology, education, communication, etc., changes of things are so rapid, and contemporary men, especially young ones, get acquainted with them so easily and (seem to) comprehend them or make them their own so soon, that the people are apt to get weary of them at the same tempo and seek for more and more fresh new things.

In creative-writing classes too, students get tired of the heaps of literary books assigned to them for reading. They naturally want some changes in their program—something peculiar, simple and fresh. In this situation the introduction of haiku (and waka) is sure to play a very effective role in relieving the students of their crisis. It is not only in colleges that haiku is taught, it is taught even in the first grade of elementary schools.⁽²⁴⁾ And the results are very good, says Professor Harold Wright at the Ohio State University.⁽²⁵⁾

For example, some teach haiku as an introduction to poetry in general or to Japanese culture; others to increase interest in nature or awareness of the world around us; still others, of course, teach haiku for their own sake—if they do this, all else is added unto them, they say. The advantages, for beginners, of using a strict form are two-fold. First, it makes for simplicity. Second, it is excellent practice, not only for haiku, but for every kind of writing. Meanwhile if the mastery of objective haiku is made the first step for haiku-teaching, it teaches observation, the recog-

inition of what is (or is not) important in any experience, at least the beginnings of the art of expression, (and, above all, that a haiku is a record of some particular moment of experience or intuition.)

Though the exact number of the student haiku-writers is not known, it is supposed that their number is larger than that of the adult haiku-poets. And so far as the number of persons is concerned, this introduction of haiku to school will certainly lead to a further increase of haiku poets on the American Continent.

Haiku, the shortest poem in the world, is—though the scope it can cover is still considerably limited—not only a fittest form for the modern life which is too busy to read or write long poetry or prose, but also an alternative form for the modern literary world which seems to have lost suitable vehicles for expressing or delineating the complicated, multi-faced modern life satisfactorily. Haiku is one of the best and the most convenient means to grasp and describe bit by bit the aspects of the monstrous society of man.

Haiku is not only the shortest and the most convenient; it is also an all-round art, because a number of short haiku can be grouped into a fairly long poem to depict some life. It can also be used for artistic display of hand-writing, sometimes with *haiga*-drawings which decorate the printed pages or help understand the haiku. Furthermore the short poems of haiku can easily be made into posters, concrete poems, picture books, etc.

Thus those who have found the value of the shortest poem—its beauty, simplicity, depth, extent, varieties, convenience, handiness, and so on, can not get out of its enchanting world. This is proved by the

fact that there are a great many very old people, men and women, who never stop composing and writing haiku, drawing *haiga*, and so forth.

Whatever course haiku may have taken to be accepted in the foreign countries, and however long it may have taken to do so, what is really valuable is recognized sooner or later in this highly-communicated world. Almost everything unusual or strange has chances to be publicized and shown some interest to in this modern world, but most can only cause a fad at best if they are really valuable to the life at a certain place and time.

As stated above, haiku has made its own way abroad, and taken over half a century to be fully accepted (or adopted) there. What really make haiku sustained in the foreign lands, however, are its essential traits and characteristics—its unique form for a sort of experience, its usefulness for creative-writing class, its adaptability to the modern world as a *genre* of art. The writer can never think of the time in the future when haiku (or the like) will cease to be composed or read. It is a necessity to certain people forever.

(1) *Gifu Keizai-Daigaku Ronshu*, III, No. 1 (1969), 189—200.

(2) *Haiku Magazine*, IV, No. 1 (1970) edited and published by Eric W. Amann quarterly in Toronto, Canada, cites the following besides itself:

Haiku West. Leroy Kanterman, Ed. New York. Bi-annually.

Modern Haiku. K. T. Mormino, Ed. Los Angeles. Quarterly.

Haiku Highlights. Jean Calkins, Ed. Kanona, N. Y. Bi-monthly.

The number is twice as many as last year.

(3) Amann, reporting in his magazine, No. 4, Vol. III (1969), says:

“.....In general, form has become subservient to content, rather than to a predetermined rule. In content, too, there is more freshness and originality than ever before, a tendency to get away from the ‘pretty-flower school’

of haiku writing, a willingness to explore new fields, new areas of experience.....”(p. 35)

For details, see the page and the following one.

- (4) Amann also says in the same report, “The year 1969 saw the publication of a greater number of good English haiku books than the entire decade before it.”
- (5) According to Ryohei Shiota, haiku is part of their common culture to a certain extent in the society of immigrant Japanese on the Hawaiian Islands.—“Japanese-American’s Image of Japan—A Discussion,” *Meiji Centennial Lectures*, ed. Tokyo American Cultural Center (Tokyo, 1967—68), p. 127.
- (6) Harold Stewart, *A Net of Fireflies* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1969), p. 151.
- (7) *Japanese Poetry* (London: John Murray, 1880 & 1911).
- (8) “Eigo Haiku Ron Sandai (Three Arguments on Haiku in English),” *Bungaku Geijutsu*, No. 1 (1968), 1—2.
Pound’s proud haiku, “The apparition of these faces in a crowd;/Pedals on a wet, /black bough” is said to have been composed after Moritake’s “Fallen flower returning to the branch;/Behold it is a butterfly.” (Chamberlain’s translation).
- (9) *Loc. cit.*
- (10) Hisao Kanaseki, “Haiku to Amerika Gendai-Shi (Haiku and American Contemporary Poetry,” *The Rising Generation*, CXIV (1968), 358.
- (11) Hayakawa, *op. cit.*, p. 15. It is a chapter in *Les Lettres* (1906)
- (12) Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 151 & Bibliography.
- (13) Hayakawa, *op. cit.*, pp. 2—3.
- (14) *Loc. cit.*
- (15) Published by the Hokuseido Press, Tokyo. (1963—69)
- (16) Hayakawa, *op. cit.*, p. 6. The date of publication (of the latter) is not in the original.
- (17) p. 362, Volume II.
- (18) Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 163—4.
- (19) *Tabibito Kaerazu* (Tokyo: Tokyo Shuppan Sha, 1947).
- (20) —“English haiku can satisfactorily follow the same general pattern in English as in Japanese in regard to the number and length of lines, finding within this framework variations as multiple as the poet will need for his vision.” (p. xvi)
- (21) Published by Charles E. Tuttle Co. in 1968. See also pages xv—xvi.
- (22) “The latest development in the history of haiku is one which nobody fore-

saw,—the writing of haiku outside Japan, not in the Japanese language. We may now assert with some confidence that the day is coming when haiku will be written in Russia……, in the Celebes, in Sardinia……”

See also page 349, *A History of Haiku*, II.

- (23) *The Asahi Shinbun (Newspaper)* (March 22, 1970) reports that contributions of haiku have been increasing year after year.
- (24) Mabelle A. Lyon, “Afterword,” *Melodies from a Jade Harp*, ed. Lyon (Charleston: Prairie Press Books, 1968), p. 45.
- (25) In his letter to the writer (May 1969).
- (26) Harold G. Henderson, *Haiku in English* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1968), pp. 47 & 60.

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