

IS ENGLISH HAIKU ESTABLISHED AS A GENRE IN ENGLISH POETRY?

by Atsuo Nakagawa

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

It has long been the writer's wish as a Japanese to do something about this flood of English *haiku* being written and printed, particularly, on the American Continent, for it started as translations and imitations of original Japanese *haiku* which has a history of more than 500 years.

Is English *haiku*, however, established as a *genre* in English poetry? The writer himself has never heard or seen such a question asked or printed. One may say that that is a stupid question because the fact that English *haiku* is already part of the English literature is evident enough if we only look around us. Nevertheless it is necessary as a first step to ask it of oneself if one is to scrutinize or develop any theories of English *haiku*.

Here the writer does try to briefly survey the historical and actual facts of English *haiku* and confirm if English *haiku* is established as a *genre* in English poetry, which will be his further subject on and from which he is going to explore and develop his own theories of poetry.

HISTORICAL FACTS:

Since Japanese *haiku* was first introduced to Western poets through China or some other countries or through some other means toward

the end of last century, *haiku* seems to have been introduced to France, England, the United States, Canada, Brazil and many other European and American countries. Harold Stewart says in his book⁽¹⁾:

Since Chamberlain's pioneer work on Japanese poetry appeared in the 1880's, containing a chapter on "Basho and the Japanese Epigram," which was probably the first attempt to render haiku into English, there have been a fair number of translations;.....

And he further mentions the names of the introducers:

William N. Porter (*A Year of Japanese Epigrams*, 1911), Curtis Hidden Page (*Japanese Poetry*, 1923), Yone Noguchi (*The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*, 1914), Asataro Miyamori [*An Anthology of Haiku, Ancient and Modern* (a revised edition of his *One Thousand Haiku, Ancient and Modern*, 1930), 1932 & 1956], Kenneth Yasuda (*The Japanese Haiku*, 1957; *A Pepper Rod*, 1947), Harold G. Henderson (*The Bamboo Broom*, 1934; *An Introduction to Haiku*, 1958; *Haiku in English*, 1965; *Japanese Haiku*, 1955), R. H. Blyth [*Haiku* (4 vols.), 1952; *Senryu*, 1949; *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, 1942 & 1956; *Four Seasons*, 1958] and others. (The surnames and their order only are his.)

However, according to Saburo Ohta's lecture entitled "Sadakichi Hartmann and Greenwich Village"⁽²⁾ Sadakichi issued an anthology, *Tanka and Haiku—Japanese Rhythms* in 1914 probably in New York, while Marcus Cunliffe's history book says that they (Imagists) knew Chinese and Japanese verse through the translations of Judith Gautier and from the work of the Boston Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908)⁽³⁾. Thus

(1) Harold Stewart, *A Net of Fireflies* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1969), p. 151.

(2) Tokyo Cultural Center (ed.), *Meiji Centennial Lectures* (Tokyo, 1967-1968), p. 33.

(3) Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (London: Pelican Books, 1954), p. 256.

Hisao Kanaseki is approximately right in guessing that it was probably when Ezra Pound (who once accepted to edit Fenollosa's posthumous works) wrote his essay "Vorticism" in 1914 that *haiku* or *hokku* began to be discussed sincerely among the Western poets for the first time. (The statement in the parentheses is not in the original.)⁽¹⁾

It is since after World War II, however, that *haiku* has been in fad all over the world except certain communist countries and developing nations. *Haiku* is being written not only in Japanese by a limited number of foreigners, but also in foreign languages such as English, German, French, etc. The well-known translator, R. H. Blyth says in his book:⁽²⁾

The latest development in the history of haiku is one which nobody foresaw,—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.....

Those which especially contributed to the fad seem to be Blyth's books (see the above list), Yasuda's, *Japanese Haiku* (Peter Pauper, 1955), Miyamori's, Henderson's, Lewis Mackenzie's *The Autumn Wind* (1956), *Cherry Blossoms* (Peter Pauper, 1960), and Stewart's. The books published before the war may have helped scholars to study the Japanese culture and people, in the United States, but it was after the occupation of Japan by allied forces that the Japanese *haiku* with the rest of the Japanese culture was well known to Western people. And of course those books I listed above helped them to get acquainted with and understand

(1) Hisao Kanaseki, "Haiku to Amerika Gendai-Shi (Haiku and American Contemporary Poetry)," *The Rising Generation*. CXIV (June 1968), 358.

(2) R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1969), II, 349.

haiku deeper accompanied with the study of Zen. It is however these past ten years or so that English *haiku* became so popular among the people on the American Continent. Henderson writes in his book:⁽¹⁾

Haiku—and attempts at haiku—are now (1965) being written in English by the hundred thousand. In the 1964 Japan Air Lines National Haiku Contest 41,000 were submitted. Other thousands are constantly being printed in newspapers, school and college publications, “little” magazines, etc. One publication devoted entirely to haiku (—*American Haiku*)⁽²⁾ is now in its third year and going strong, and volumes of haiku by individual poets are beginning to appear.

Only recently I found this statement of Henderson is endorsed by a letter from an American high school teacher.⁽³⁾

PRESENT DEVELOPMENT:

It goes without saying that of all the foreign *haiku* poets English speaking people hold the majority. English *haiku* is being written not only by children and students, but also by people in general, especially by women on the American Continent. There are at least two *haiku* magazines devoted to *haiku*⁽⁴⁾ only, one *haiku* society in New York and a *haiku* checklist is going to be published this year.⁽⁵⁾ *Haiku* contest has been held every year by *haiku* magazines. (Small-scale contests in limited societies or areas are not rare.) As for the newspapers, school and college

(1) Harold G. Henderson, *Haiku in English* (Tokyo : Charles E. Tuttle Co. 1968), p. 28.

(2) The statement in the parenthesis goes as follows in the original: *American Haiku*, P. O. Box 73, Platteville, Wisconsin.

(3) Eetty J. Hudson, Centennial High School, Pueblo.

(4) One is *Haiku Magazine* (Toronto), and the other : *Haiku West* (New York).

(5) Wm. J. Higginson (ed.), *Haiku Checklist* (Hamden, CT., U. S. A.).

publications, and other little magazines, and books of *haiku* by individual poets the trend Henderson mentions in his book (see the previous chapter) is continuing. In schools of the United States teaching *haiku* is not limited to the university institutes specializing in Asian culture. It is taught at elementary schools (from the first grade) as well as at junior and senior high schools by teachers who are interested in or have learned *haiku*. According to Yokichi Miyamoto, *haiku* appear in American high school textbooks.⁽¹⁾ *Haiku* is also taught and the students are given the chance to compose *haiku* in English in creative writing classes at colleges in general. "We need new air," says a professor.⁽²⁾

ACTUAL HAIKU: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

If we survey the English *haiku* being printed or collected for publication, we find that it ranges from the kind which faithfully follow in form and prosody the Japanese classic type to the one which could not be conceived by Japanese poets, which can only be written in other language than Japanese in a romantic world.

Until World War II most English *haiku* poets did not know exactly what *haiku* really is. They only knew that *haiku* was just a very short poem consisting of a few syllables.⁽³⁾ Thus it was only after the war that they got acquainted with every detail of *haiku* prosody—even *wabi* and *sabi* thanks to those studious translators and scholars, and excellent haiku

(1) *Meiji Centennial Lectures*, p. 118.

(2) Professor Harold P. Wright, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, U. S. A. in his letter to the writer (May 1969). Mabelle A. Lyon, "Afterword," *Melodies from a Jade Harp* (Lyon ed.; Charleston: Prairie Press Books, 1968). p. 45.

(3) Kanaseki, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

poets I listed above. And then once the method of composing English *haiku* had almost been established, other varieties than the typical one began to appear. Thus there are following varieties:

- F. 1. On a withered bough
a crow alone is perching;
Autumn evening now.
- F. 2. IN A TEMPLE GARDEN
The old green pond is silent; here the hop
Of a frog plumbs the eveng stillness: plop!
- F. 3. The old rooster crows—
out of the mist comes the
rocks and twisted pine.
- F. 4. Lily:
out of the water...
out of itself.
- F. 5. A moonless night
With tired breeze blowing...
Young butterflies escape
- F. 6. Snow—falling, tumbling,
Cascading from the wide skies,
Twirling, swirling down.
- F. 7. O weeping willow, crying
because your arms are breaking,
Don't—life is short enough
- F. 8. Rain drops, wet and wild
falling slowly from the sky—
will you ever die?

- F. 9. The tongue of hatred
 Will always produce a yield
 Of self-destruction.
- F. 10. A deep autumn path,
 with not a soul to be seen...
 ancient loneliness.
- F. 11. Long days of summer
 Give more time to watch God work
 Daily miracles.

It must be added that according to the *Haiku Magazine*⁽¹⁾ there are *haiku* set to music by Robert Fairfax Birch (F. 12), and that it also carries such short *haiku* as "Love in the summer sweet and warm" and "Sun/birds/cherry trees in bloom" in diagrammatical presentation each on one whole page (F. 13).

Form 1 is the translation of Basho's famous piece by Kenneth Yasuda⁽²⁾ in accordance with his own *haiku* theory. It is not only faithful to the Japanese *haiku* form and prosody, it also has rhyme. Form 2 is also Basho's famous work translated by Harold Stewart according to his own theory of English *haiku*. He discovered among existing English verse-forms a stanza which occupies a place corresponding to that of the *haiku* in Japanese versification, that is, the smallest stanza of similar length capable of standing alone in English—the single rhymed couplet with only eighteen to twenty syllables that can be comfortably spoken in a single

(1) Eric W. Amann (ed.), vol. III, No. 2. (1969).

(2) Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1968), p. 184.

breath and so is best suited to short lyrical exclamations.⁽¹⁾ The example⁽²⁾ however is a little too long in length. Form 3 is a prize winning piece in the *American Haiku* and Japan Air Lines Contest 1965. It is a typical nature poem in about 17 syllables.⁽³⁾ Form 4 is also a prize winning work (1963) written by N. Virgilio.⁽⁴⁾ It is very short with only eleven syllables—in this case the colon and the points of suspense are considered to make up the insufficiency of length. Form 5 is a college student's *haiku*.⁽⁵⁾ This is what they often call "picture" *haiku* favored by, and for, most beginners. Form 6 is the same type from a high school teacher's collection (—the following two examples also come from the same source).⁽⁶⁾ This is essentially English in that it uses internal rhyme and assonance which the Japanese counterpart can *not enjoy*. Here the great danger is that of making the poem too beautiful, so that the words get between us and "the thing."⁽⁷⁾ Form 7 is a sentimental rendering of the poet's emotional sympathy. It is not usually accepted as a good *haiku* because of its quality contrary to the essential traits of *haiku*.⁽⁸⁾ Form 8 is a subjective childish wonder (or surprise in other cases)⁽⁹⁾ rather than a simple, straightforward description of the circumstances which aroused the

(1) Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 160.

(3) Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

(4) *Loc. cit.*

(5) Submitted to Philip Williams, Linfield College, Oregon.

(6) By a student at Buena Vista College, Storm Lake, Iowa—from a collection of haiku by Larry Noyes, Corwin High School, Lakeview, Colo., U. S. A.

(7) Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

(8) By a Pleasant Valley High School student, Iowa.

(9) By Camilo Sena, Corwin High School.

emotion. Form 9⁽¹⁾ was accidentally, that is, unintentionally, invented, as it were, when the poet attempted to compose a *haiku* because he had traditionally had very short didactic (epigrammatic, proverbial, obituary, or gnomic, in other cases) poems, which they have been taught or read. Form 10 is from J. W. Hackett's book.⁽²⁾ It is very well written, only with a tinge of metaphysical-ness. In this sense it is a typical English *haiku*. It is a work by a poet who has enjoyed a long history of excellent metaphysical poems. Generally speaking, in those typical English *haiku* one often finds too much ostensive, i. e., overt thought.⁽³⁾ Form 11⁽⁴⁾ could be called a metaphysical poem in haiku-form. Form 12 is a very bold attempt characteristic of European people. They must have arisen from their misunderstanding of the essentials of *haiku*—simplicity and suggestion. In setting *haiku* to music, the composer deprived the listener of his liberty to develop suggestions within the context of himself.⁽⁵⁾ Form 13 was probably composed after their traditional rendering of their short poems, though the technique is not recognized as authentic yet. Perhaps this fancy worked.

As to the subject matter, the following quotation from Lyon's "Afterword" attached to her anthology will be enough:

.....we feel they (the haiku submitted for her collection) show a greater diversity of subject matter than was evident a year ago. American haiku writers seem to be more sure of themselves and are covering a larger range of experience. In a country that includes the Arctic and the Everglades, many mountain peaks of over

(1) Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

(2) J. W. Hackett, *Haiku Poetry* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc., 1968), p. 2.

(3) Blyth, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

(4) Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

(5) Rod Willmot, "Haiku and Music : A Review," *Haiku Magazine*, vol. III (1969), No. 2.

14,000 feet and below sea level blowing sands, two oceans and enormous lakes,
 this is as it should be.....⁽¹⁾

IS ENGLISH HAIKU ESTABLISHED AS A GENRE IN ENGLISH POETRY?

In the first place, if English *haiku* is part of English literature it must appear in the history of English literature or at least it must be included in school textbooks as literature. Furthermore if it is included in the courses of creative writing too it will confirm the fact more solidly.

As I stated in the third chapter, most English *haiku* poets before the war didn't know well about *haiku*. Yet the few haiku-like poems which Ezra Pound wrote could be called *English haiku* in the sense that they use images of "super-position" or stress on image, extreme simplicity or economy, and the direct or objective treatment of subjects or materials, in near 17 syllables. This is also true of the like short poems written by other poets such as Amy Lowell, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle and so on. According to Hisao Kanaseki, Earl Miner finds the reflection of Basho's haiku on first snow-fall in Amy Lowell's "Nuance." Thus since Pound's attempt more and more very short hokku-like poems have been written by many other poets.⁽²⁾

It was after the war, however, that many tens of thousands of people began to write *haiku* in English on the American Continent, and as a result, quite a few anthologies of, or including, English *haiku* were published. Moreover, to endorse the fact of English *haiku* being established

(1) *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

The statement in the parenthesis is not in the original.

(2) Kanaseki *op. cit.*, p. 358.

in English literature, there are haiku-attempts in creative writing classes in American schools and colleges. A professor at The Ohio State University says in his letter to the writer:⁽¹⁾

What you say also applies to *Waka*. I think both *have* become "unique forms of English poetry." The instructor of poetry writing here.....requires the students to write their first attempts in Haiku. The second assignment is *Waka*. Good things have come from both.....

What is the English *haiku* then? As you have seen them in the writer's brief analytical study on contemporary *haiku* in English, there is no fixed form, and therefore no general agreement about methods, or even about objectives. However it is generally taught that the form should be 17 English syllables divided into three lines of 5, 7, and 5. A few modify this by adding "about" or "approximately." Almost all specify that a *haiku* should be unrhymed.⁽²⁾ And mastery of objective *haiku* is the first step,⁽³⁾ while the basic objective of English-haiku poets is to let their readers experience for themselves the same living emotions that they have themselves experienced.⁽⁴⁾ And I can only add that the scholars are looking forward to the day when writers (and readers) of English *haiku* will develop traditions, standards, and presumably conventions of their own. Yet at the same time they think that these will necessarily be somewhat different from the Japanese. But they cannot be *too* different and the poems will be *haiku*.

As for the writer himself, he as a person from Japan which produced original *haiku*, hope that their own standards will show a way or at

(1) Wright, *op. cit.*

(2) Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 60.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 66.

least some hints how the present stagnation in haiku-writing in Japan to be resolved.

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OTHERS:

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- Collections of haiku by Philip Williams, Linfield College, Oregon, U. S. A.
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