

“A Kick at the Icebox Door”: Haiku and Beat Haikus

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In 1958, two remarkable books were published that together helped to establish the popularity of haiku in the United States. The first of these books is Harold Henderson’s *An Introduction to Haiku*, in which Henderson outlined the basic characteristics of haiku and presented his own translations of haiku by Japanese masters, among them Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki, along with the literal word-for-word gloss of each poem with the romaji. His book is well researched and also quite readable, scholarly but clear. It would be difficult to imagine a better ambassador into haiku country than Henderson. But there was another book with a very different flavor that may have had a more immediate impact, Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, in which Buddhist-influenced character Japhy Ryder spontaneously composes haiku during a mountain hike: “A real haiku’s gotta be as simple as porridge and yet make you see the real thing, like the greatest haiku of them all probably is the one that goes, ‘The sparrow hops along the veranda, with wet feet.’ By Shiki. You see the wet footprints like a vision in your mind and yet in those few words you also see all the rain that’s been falling that day and almost smell the wet pine needles.”

The haiku stretches far back into time, its traditions thoroughly woven into Japanese culture, and it endures as Japan’s shortest, and most profound, verse form. Can true haiku be written in English? Can they even be appreciated by non-Eastern, non-Japanese speakers?

During the Thanksgiving holidays in the United States, school children are often instructed to trace their hands on construction paper, cut out the tracing with scissors, and accessorize the cutout so that the result depicts a turkey. Likewise, school children are also

sometimes asked to compose haiku by writing a short poem, based on nature, comprising three lines of 5-7-5 syllables. The results can be charming, in some instances astonishing, but are about as likely to be haiku as their hand tracing projects are likely to be actual turkeys. True haiku represent hundreds of years of aesthetic and cultural development, and many rules attend their composition. A degree of skill and fortitude are required just to read haiku, let alone to write one. Sometimes I despair that I'll never really get it, that I'm excluded from the haiku world because I am not Japanese; you need more than a passport to get past customs, and some observers rush to assert that is actually the case. Roland Barthes states that a westerner's comprehension of Japanese happenings and events can be recovered only from a great distance and that we would in fact "have to make haiku out them, a language which is denied us" (79). The flavors, colors, sounds, weather, superstitions, manners, spirituality, and history of the Japanese people invest every aspect of the haiku. Or maybe it's vice versa. It is entirely possible that westerners can develop an appreciation of haiku and move toward what is called by some aficionados as the "haiku moment," described by Otsuji as "when . . . the relationship between the subject and object is forgotten, and one becomes one with nature" (Yasuda 12-13.)

From another perspective, Kenneth Yasuda ascribes to the haiku moment "the realization of what the object is . . . in and for itself . . . so that it becomes unique." Thus, concludes Jody Norton in a 1987 *Contemporary Literature* article, "at the haiku moment, just as in the experience of satori, we may see the many in the One, but we also see the One in the many" (53). The matter is debatable. Michael Dylan Welch, a writer and editor of haiku in English, points out that the haiku moment "is essentially a western concept, and not one that is actually important to the majority of haiku writers writing in Japan." He concludes that "Haiku writers in Japan typically aren't after a depiction of satori at all, but sensory perception." So maybe I found

myself barking up the wrong tree. When I first began reading haiku in the late 1970s, I had high expectations, having known haiku not by sight, but by reputation. After reading a dozen or so translations, I was underwhelmed by the experience and concluded that I'd gotten hold of a bum batch. Despite occasional further experiments, more than twenty years would pass before I began to understand that the haiku moment needs the participation, not the passive reception, of the reader. And this involvement, this contribution to the effect, comes after an understanding of what haiku poetry is. If you're Jack Kerouac, you might get it quickly, intuitively, and with natural connection. For some of the rest of us, it's a longer road.

What is haiku? To start with, in the Japanese language, the 5-7-5 structure itself is not really a syllable count, as we might understand it in English. It is more of a word-sound count. Here is one by Kyoroku, a student of Bashō:

Ichiban-ni | kagashi | wo | taosu | noaki | kana

Number-one at | scarecrow | [acc.] | make-fall | autumn-storm | *kana*

First of all,

It blows down a scarecrow –

Storm-wind of fall!¹

Let's just look at the syllables in Japanese. "Ichiban-ni" – can you count them? In English, there would be only four, but in Japanese, the "n" at the end of "Ichiban" counts, plus the preposition "ni," so that's five. Then there's "kagashi | wo | taosu": again, in English, there might be only six, not requisite seven, but you count it this way: KA GA SHI WO TA O SU. Finally, NO A KI KA NA. Almost all syllables in Japanese consist of a consonant and an open vowel. We don't have that situation in English, and so for this reason alone, the haiku form can be constructed more practically in Japanese.

There's another reason haiku are particularly Japanese, though. Japan is a relatively small island nation, and people there relate to the seasons with a fair amount of commonality. Haiku must correspond to a season, either subtly or overtly, by use of a *kigo*, or season word. In this sample haiku, the season is rendered in several ways: by the use of the falling scarecrow, and then the clearly stated "aki" which means autumn. There are literally thousands of *kigo* that Japanese haiku poets can draw from, and some of them are very, very specific. A typical Japanese reader would know from the *kigo*, sometimes a single syllable, not only the season, but the point of the season, such as early spring, very early spring, middle spring, and so on. Certain plants, such as the cherry trees in bloom, as well as specific animals, festivals, foods, cloudiness,

rain, rivers high or low, temperature, all of these have their own specific terms that clue in the reader, and seasoned haiku readers know them.

There's more. Haiku are structured on *kireji*, or cutting words. For example, *kana* in the sample haiku is a *kireji* that comes at the end of haiku, and while it doesn't have a specific translatable meaning, we could say that serves to end the haiku with an "Ah!" or "Oh!" It can be as soft as a sigh, and it usually follows a noun that the first half of the haiku describes, in this case, the autumn wind. Also, it counts here for two syllables, and we have nothing like it in English. We render it here with the exclamation mark. Typically, *kireji* come in the middle of the haiku, separating the first part from the second. Often, *kireji* are represented by appropriate punctuation. My personal favorite of the *kireji* is *ya* which again, has no readily definable meaning, yet can be approximated by "Lo!" And it is featured in the most famous haiku of all, composed by the great Bashō early in 1686:

Furu-ike | ya | kawazu | tobi-komu | mizu-no-oto

Old-pond | : | frog | jump-in | water-sound

This is a very literal translation. But it can be rendered in many ways. In fact, here's a translation by James Kirkup:

pond

frog

plop!

This “translation” comes from Hiroaki Sato’s *One Hundred Frogs* (Weatherhill, 1995), a collection of 100 versions of Bashō’s haiku.

Another important haiku characteristic is juxtaposition, the placing of two elements together without explanation:

Buson:

Sakura | chiru | nawa-shiro | mizu | ya | hoshi-zuki | yo

Cherries | scatter | rice-seedling | water | : | star-moon | night

Scattered petals lie

On rice-seedling waters:

bright is the starlit sky.

You can probably see the reflection of the stars in the rice paddy water. But there is also the ephemeral passing of the scattered blossoms cast against the apparent eternity of the night sky, yet maybe the assertion is that these stars too, in time, will scatter.

There are many more aspects of the haiku – use of present-tense verbs; specific action; simplicity; no rhyme; no figures of speech; use of association; spiritual atmosphere, such as *sabi*, *wabi*, aware, *yugen* – look, it goes on and on. And we haven't even mentioned the debatable topic of the importance of Zen Buddhism to haiku. Let it be said that Harold Henderson's An Introduction to Haiku introduced new readers and set a terrific standard for westerners to get a clue (a hai-clue, maybe). But then Kerouac's The Dharma Bums made haiku fun, living, breathing, hip. A party game of sorts, which is actually how haiku got started in the first place, centuries ago, as the opening verse in a linked-verse construction.

Kerouac seemed to have one speed for literary exploration, and that was all out. He filled his notebooks and letters with haiku (or, as he colloquially phrased the plural, “haikus”), and these have been gathered by Regina Weinreich in Book of Haikus, published by Penguin in 2003. Many of these short poems are quite fine, but could not be labeled haiku by any means; yet many of them are also fine and certainly could be haiku, morphed in U.S. English. Barbara Unger writes that “Kerouac shows . . . a fine understanding of and appreciation for the haiku. He seems to have been born with some of the mid-set of a haiku poet. . . . To him the most important tenet of Buddhism was, Life Is Suffering. . . we can see in his haiku an extreme sensitivity to the weak: a deep sympathy for children, animals, growing things, the unfortunate” (119). Yet his background sometimes betrayed him.

I called – Dipankara

instructed me

By saying nothing (Kerouac 93)

This short poem may have some impact, but it is decidedly not a haiku; there is no element of nature or season, it's not clear that there is a specific action, it is overly complicated, and it has about it, as some critics say of similarly designed work, "the stink of Zen." As Weinreich points out in her insightful introduction to Book of Haikus, Kerouac originally read the Japanese haiku artists in R.H. Blyth's translations: "Blyth's helpful commentary gave Kerouac a window into the gestalt and very culture of haiku, the thusness and suchness, the traditional tropes" (xxii).

Unfortunately, though, most modern critics find that Blyth overstates the case of Zen's impact on haiku, leading Kerouac and other mid-century US haiku writers astray. Weinreich concludes

Given that his mind-set, though akin to the Japanese artists' sensibilities, is yet miles and years part, and that his aesthetic, highly refined in its own sense, comes truly from another world, Kerouac does at times achieve a depth and richness approaching that of his models. (xxii)

Here's one that will stand the test of time:

In my medicine cabinet

the winter fly

Has died of old age (Kerouac 12)

We instantly recognize the scene as one we have witnessed ourselves; it is drawn simply, unselfconsciously, directly experienced, and suffused with an identification for the plight of the fly, trapped in a medicine cabinet, a casual enough occurrence, though a bit ironic, and still we feel the tug of our own mortality, without having to be hit on the head with it.

Another:

Missing a kick

at the icebox door

It closed anyway. (Kerouac 16)

This one may be more properly labeled a *senryu*, a haiku that tends to be humorous, often human-centered. Like the classic haiku, it lacks a clear subject, relying on the –ing verb form

here to convey intention without the agent of action. We can imagine someone (ourselves?) having just gotten beers from the fridge, and then, both hands full, sending a kick to close the door that hits nothing but air. But so what? The door closes anyway by . . . gravity? Its own accord? Uneven flooring? In any case, the scene is instantly familiar; we can relate to it.

One more:

Frozen

in the birdbath

A leaf (Kerouac 5)

Kerouac wrote the first half of *Desolation Angels* in a classic Japanese tradition of the *haibun*, that is, a work with haiku interspersed. The most famous of these is Bashō's Oku no Hosomichi, passages of which are memorized by Japanese school children to this day. Prose narrative and the haiku strike a balance, and Kerouac accomplishes this smoothly, creating a series of effects that move from sharpness and clarity to dreaminess and impressionism.

Kerouac is not the only of the Beat-associated writers to explore the haiku: Kenneth Rexroth, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Diane di Prima, and Joanne Kyger have all worked with the form. Lew Welch wrote one of the great phrases of haiku-like concision that I recall vividly from my childhood: "Raid kills bugs dead."

In a 1980 Contemporary Literature article, Paul Portuges describes Ginsberg's astonishment with Cezanne's use of juxtaposition in painting, "the juxtaposition of multi-colored spots that create atmosphere and light" (446). in "Art of Poetry" Paris Review Ginsberg described the juxtaposition achieved by haiku writers, saying that in haiku " you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a logical connection between them: the *mind* fills this space." (cited in Portuges 446).

Ginsberg haiku:

The master

emerges from the movies:

the silent street

I don't know the names

of the flowers – now

my garden is gone

Portuges: "In Howl Ginsberg was hoping to accomplish the effect of haiku in combination with his spontaneous method of composition and its use of unaltered mind.

Ginsberg; “I was trying to do similar things with juxtapositions like ‘hydrogen jukebox.’ Or ‘winter midnight smalltown streetlight rain.’” Concludes Portuges, “the result is the gap that stops mindflow, arrests normal consciousness, and creates a temporary void.” Portuges notes that Ginsberg has a hard time explaining what he meant to do, “but, as in haiku, one isn’t supposed to explain it, not rationally. One is supposed to experience it” (448).

Gary Snyder also developed his use of ellipses and juxtaposition from the haiku.

Effective use of these structures brings to the reader’s mind the same impression that inspired the creation of the poem to begin with. Henderson says that in a sense a haiku answers a question: what made you smile like that? What made you sad there? The haiku is that *what*. In such poems, the reader comprehends the poem only to the extent that he or she is able to “achieve a similar intuitive perception through the re-created experience of the poem,” according to Jody Norton (52). Norton clarifies the reader’s role in closing the gap between the two parts of the haiku: “In a typical haiku, an initial generalized image invokes the reader to flesh it out and expand its context; with this process in motion the poem itself is abruptly cut short by the thought-pause [via the cutting word], while the reader’s imagination continues to evolve the material with which it has already been presented. The second image, arriving abruptly, creates a comparison or contrast with the initial image and at the same time resolves the imaginative and rhythmic movement of the poem. Mind is thus led toward an intuitive recognition of Mind . . . into a powerful, aesthetically complete haiku moment” (53-54). Ezra Pound focused on this effect in his “Station of the Metro” – overlaying two distinct images: the apparition of these faces in a crowd; / petals on a wet black bough.

Buson

Tilling the field

The cloud that never moved

Is gone²

Snyder (“Hitch Haiku” from his 1967 Back Country)

A truck went by

three hours ago

Smoke Creek desert

Born in 1931 in New England, Cor van den Heuvel read about the San Francisco poetry renaissance in the Evergreen Review and decided to head west and explore the poetry scene

there, where he discovered haiku. He is one of the United States' premier writers of haiku. I offer some of his haiku here as a way of demonstrating success in the form in English:

In the toy pail

at low tide floats

the still Ferris wheel

the black model-T Ford

rounds the white curve

of the heron's wing

November evening

the wind from a passing truck

ripples a roadside puddle

One may discover that nearly all the Beats wrote haiku at some point, to varying degrees of success. It is worth noting that the form attracted them powerfully, perhaps owing to haiku's sense of fresh perception and origins in spontaneity. For Kerouac in particular, the haiku offered an area in which to work out his notions of the ways that language is a medium for exploring and conveying spirituality. Realizing that he was not creating traditional Japanese haiku per se, he dubbed his little poems "pops." He once said that his goal in writing haiku was "to compress into three short lines a great big story" (Berrigan 68). Gary Snyder helped Kerouac to understand haiku, and Kerouac, through The Dharma Bums, helped to spread the word.

* I wish to thank Michael Dylan Welch for his sympathetic reading of my paper and for his numerous suggestions. I greatly value his knowledge, insight, and helpfulness.

Notes

¹ Today, Henderson's translations are considered substandard. In order to supply translations that seemed to be more like crafted poems, Henderson created rhymes, inverted syntax, and so on. I use his translations here because they are contemporaneous with the publication of The Dharma Bums.

². Translated by R.H. Blyth

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