

Haiku and “What Thought is Like”

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This is a follow-up essay to *Haiku and the Perception of the Unique*

<http://research.gendaihaiku.com/field-notes/perception-of-the-unique.htm>

I'd like to hear more about the “cult of the unique” mentioned by Tom D'Evelyn (“the cult of the unique has ideological roots that deserve close attention”), though don't see a strong relation to “[the perception of the unique](#)”¹ as a locus or *raison* of aesthetic arrest – would the young Pound serve as a case in point? I find nothing ideologically cultish here:

. . . and [I] saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion (Pound, [explaining the genesis](#) for “In A Station of the Metro,”1916).

The need to value the haiku genre, that is, raise its valuation, estimation, has been a central concern of recent criticism, seen in major anthology presentations such as *Haiku in English* (2013) and *Haiku 21* (2011). Reading Blyth, one sees how potent and even primary critical commentary can be for the genre. It may be useful to approach the critical structure of ‘poem + commentary’ again, grouping significant numbers of haiku into thematic sections. Aside from his idiosyncratic (and highly arguable) perspective, Blyth's influence was bolstered by his comprehensive-encyclopedic approach. Much of the aesthetic savor in Blyth arrives from his commentary -- especially noticeable when it's stripped out -- the bare translations are usually pretty dull. This begs the question of what, concerning Blyth, actually captivated the Beats, and thus caused “haiku” to become popular.

It's interesting to consider aesthetic arrest, contemplate its power -- just as a phenomenon -- also as formative of taste, or impetus of it. Aesthetic arrest involves force and radiance: magnetism, numinousity, velocity. We use words of kinesthetic force to describe this experience: I'm pulled in, it grabs me, I'm absorbed, enter the poem, am moved -- captivated (captive), captured, taken (away, somewhere), thrown (into, out of); magnetized.

Pound's marvelous storytelling explanation of his “Metro” poem (*cf.*

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/metro.htm) includes zingers like: "Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language." Hugh Kenner, quoting Pound, indicates the rapid evolution of Pound's search for new language, in order to depict the aesthetic:

"An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time": and that is the elusive Doctrine of the Image. And, just 20 months later, "The image . . . is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing." And: "An image . . . is real because we know it directly." (Kenner, *cf.* "Metro" *url*, above)

One may connote this experience as a form of violence – Paz, quoting Mallarmé: "The poet does violence to language in order to purify the words of the tribe." The wresting of words, language, out of normative, habitual associations is a violence akin to natural force: volcanos, earthquakes. This is not the violence of aggression, yet the term speaks to instrumental destruction (and deconstruction) in creation: a rending of skin, or in contemporary terminology, chaos breakdown in stable systems.

Violence in this context is depersonalizing, as is the idea of natural force. Yet this idea of violence is likewise as intimate as consciousness. It's no wonder people feel strongly about certain works of art. Given this context, it may be that all forms of aesthetic arrest, for art, involve a wresting of consciousness, and in this, loss. (Loss of habit remains a loss.) Unlike the sudden "wresting" of romantic love (*cf.* Helen Fisher, 'http://www.ted.com/speakers/helen_fisher.html'), the "other" of the poem is non-human. A work is a thing forged, become autonomous, self-existent, existing separate from its creator, even if emblematic. Thinking back to Pound, Paz, and other philosopher-poets of modernism, I'm struck by their concerns regarding consciousness and poetry; the notion of the poem is intimately bound into a questioning of the aesthetic.

Reading Pound at the Modernist dawn (or at least morning) -- his adventurous drive to formulate new modes of poetic arrest makes for exciting reading. What he presents to the world as signal discovery seems relevant to haiku, in terms of the wresting, rending, potency of superposition as fusional (emotional-intellectual) complex, vortex, etc. This does all sound rather macho -- both the rending and perhaps the ranting -- so it's worth revisiting just a few paragraphs prior, to: "a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me" -- which may be both Pound's best and gentlest attempt at description -- his longing and *need* to articulate -- his own Ginsbergian *Howl*, if you will.

It seems that the violence and (therefore) creative power of aesthetic arrest was central to Pound's conception of social relevance, at the time. Paz developed these ideas and enriched them greatly in his masterpiece (nearly forgotten by the critical mainstream), *The Bow and the Lyre*. In thinking of the perception of the unique as it relates to aesthetic arrest, there is on the one hand generic archetypal phenomenology. On the other, a specific exploratory drive towards new discoveries of the aesthetic, throughout the arc of modernism -- though which we see advance and agonistic overthrow (of previous concepts, schools, forms). Today we can leisurely appreciate these various "schools" of art which enrich our "emotional-intellectual" landscape. Yet, what of our own time?

When I read

the galactic aquarium shatters
our arms ending in starfish

a case of bird skulls
my ears torn by such
little scissors

and

sunlight through
the thin white blouse she
holds up folds and puts away

(Peter Yovu, *Sunrise*, (RMP 2010) qtd. in *New Zealand Poetry Society / Te Hunga Tito Ruri o Aotearoa*, [book review by Sandra Simpson](#); link to [Peter Yovu reading](#) from *Sunrise* (THF Readings, 2012)

I'm reminded of Perloff's insistence that the original project of modernism remains incomplete, and is commandingly relevant to our new century. We advance and return, holding mirrors up to our world in its shattering brilliance. These as-if galactic oceans -- as arms at the limit; as "starfish" born; is it this moment fiction becomes reality: these oceans we now fish in according to sailors and whales it's one vast ocean, girdling our planet, currently being "torn by such little scissors" as "a case of bird skulls" -- seems arch enough, according to what I hear. "There is scarce truth enough alive to make societies secure, but security enough to make fellowships accursed."²

When I find people ridiculing the new arts, or making fun of the clumsy odd terms that we use in trying to talk of them amongst ourselves; when they laugh at our talking about the "ice-block quality" in Picasso, I think it is only because *they do not know what thought is like*, and they are familiar only with argument and gibe and opinion. That is to say, they can only enjoy what they have been brought up to consider enjoyable, or what some essayist has talked about in mellifluous phrases. They think only "the shells of thought" . . . (Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 1916 [my emphasis]).

sunlight through
the thin white blouse she
holds up and puts away

is for our time a relevant response to what thought is like, in haiku. If the search to articulate the aesthetic is a mountain climb, aesthetic arrest allows for the story.

1. D'Evelyn was commenting on my earlier essay, "Haiku and the perception of the unique," *Field Notes, The Haiku Foundation*, (February 14, 2014: <http://research.gendaihaiku.com/field-notes/perception-of-the-unique.htm>).

2. Shakespeare, "Measure for Measure" (3:2, 102).