

Haiku and *Haiku*

By Martin Lucas

What Is Haiku?

Haiku is not *haiku*. Our 'haiku' are not *haiku*. *Haiku* - here identified by italics - is a very short form of Japanese verse. It would not be quite true to say that it can be written only *by* a Japanese, but it can be written only *in* Japanese, and it would require the same level of fluency in Japanese culture, history and literary tradition as in language. If you want to get to know *haiku*, you need to get to know Japan; the country, the people, the language. That's a huge project, a lifetime's project, but there's no point in minimising the scale of it and pretending that you can somehow get to know *haiku* without it.

So What, Then, Is Our 'Haiku'?

It is a very short form of verse in English *inspired* by what we have seen of Japanese *haiku*. In 99 cases out of 100, this means inspired by *translations* of Japanese *haiku*. (Only a handful of English-language writers have any fluency in Japanese.)

We need to be clear that a translation is not the poem, it is only a version of the poem. It can be a very close approximation, or a very distant approximation, but even in cases where the meaning is conveyed almost precisely, the fact of the language difference means that the poetic experience is bound to differ. Sometimes a very closely approximate translation sounds like a very poor effort in English; and sometimes a very distant approximation can achieve striking success as a 'haiku' in English. Either way, we are still dealing with approximations.

All the concepts with which we handle *haiku* are approximations. We might define *haiku*, roughly but reasonably, as: 'A short poem in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables respectively, usually including a season-word and a cutting-word.' If we understand this as a rough-and-ready definition, there is no problem. But it is only possible to be more precise by offering numerous qualifying footnotes, and this is because every single aspect of this 'definition' involves an approximation:

- 'Lines' is a concept applicable to English and other related Western languages. We might naively imagine the poetry of all languages to be structured in lines, but it isn't so: the concept of 'lines' has limited validity in describing the structure of a *haiku*.
- 'Syllables', in English, are a variable measure of the spoken language. The sound-symbols in which Japanese *haiku* are written are a fixed measure of the written language, only loosely corresponding to our notion of 'syllables'.

- And 'cutting-word' is a slightly desperate attempt to find some English equivalent for the *kireji*, a 'meaningless' word that is used as punctuation, either within or at the end of the *haiku*. It is entirely reasonable to think of the 'cut' in *haiku* as corresponding to a dash, semi-colon or exclamation mark, for instance, but this only gives a vague idea of the significance of the *kireji*. If we read translations in which these punctuation marks replace *ya* or *kana*, we miss something integral to the original.

Changing a language also means changing concepts. For example, it is naive to assume that *haru*, *natsu*, *aki* and *fuyu* are spring, summer, autumn and winter. As William J. Higginson points out¹, the *haiku* seasons begin about a month earlier than in the usual northern hemisphere Western interpretation of the calendar (in February, May, August and November respectively). That's not so much a meteorological difference as a cultural and linguistic difference, a difference in the concept of 'season'. More attention is paid to the signs of the season, the incipient conditions, than to the temperature graph. But because of meteorological differences, the connotations differ, too.

Consider the season-word, *kareno*. You can translate this, in a sense, as 'withered field(s)', but without the phenomenon you can't meaningfully translate the concept into, for example, British English as it describes a desiccated condition that residents of the British Isles rarely see - where fields in winter become muddy, soggy and boggy.

Such conflicts of connotation bedevil all translation projects from beginning to end, and it's not saying anything new to point it out. But it is remarkable how much discussion of haiku-in-English proceeds from a position that overlooks both the fact and the consequences of the fact that our knowledge of Japanese *haiku* is based very largely on poetry in translation. I'm not saying that *haiku* can't be translated, I'm saying that translation is an imperfect art.

And this isn't a counsel of despair, it's a counsel of humility and respect for limitations. Our own haiku have added a new and valuable creative possibility to the range of poetry in English. But let's not be too quick to claim that our own approach is in some way authorised by Japanese practice, unless we can back up the claim with an evident ability in and familiarity with Japanese. This is not something to worry about, it is something to be aware of - our statements about *haiku* had better be tentative rather than categorical.

Un-useful Advice

Something left out of this article so far is any word of advice on How To Write Haiku. This advice is absent because I don't think it's possible to approach the question directly in any useful way.

To begin writing haiku, and to make progress to any significant extent, requires two gifts:

- The ability to be alert to the subtleties of sensory or psychological experience (i.e., to notice things)

- A sensitivity to the subtleties of language (i.e., to be able to express things).

However, it isn't necessary to *know* that you possess these gifts *before* beginning to write: the gifts are very often revealed - and developed - in the writing. In the process, you may enter something which we might call 'haiku mind'. This isn't any special or exceptional state, and there are no magic words of access; there are as many haiku minds as there are readers and writers of haiku.

But what 'haiku mind' points to is a certain way of seeing the world, and relating to it, which is an unfolding process of discovery. Once you've started on this path, it can take many twists and turns, but there is no real reason to turn back: if you're seeing the world through your haiku mind, why would you ever choose to unsee it?

In this light, there is no real value in giving technical advice. It's possible to provide technical comment on a particular work-in-progress, but technical advice in general is restrictive and haiku need to emerge without restrictions. Haiku has a centre of gravity - your own immediate experience - but it has no boundaries. Go with your haiku mind, wherever it goes.

Read and Share

How then, in practical terms, are we to make progress in haiku? There are two main possibilities. Firstly, we need to read. Secondly, we need to share.

In reading, the best plan is to study the Japanese poets as thoroughly as possible. I'd continue to recommend R.H. Blyth's four-volume *Haiku* (published by Hokuseido of Tokyo) as the best possible introduction, but for those who don't get on with Blyth's idiosyncratic approach, or find it dated, there are many other good works on Japanese haiku available.

This reading shouldn't be taken to include only the works of the masters of the pre-20th century past: much can be learned by reading the works of contemporary poets as well. But I do find it useful to practice a certain deference towards the Japanese tradition. *Haiku* evolved in, was designed for, and has been shaped by, the Japanese culture and language and the *haiku* way-of-seeing comes much more naturally to Japanese than it does to most Westerners. I do believe our own haiku has much to offer - or I wouldn't have written *Stepping Stones* - but it shouldn't be seen as a substitute for Japanese *haiku*; and it needs Japanese *haiku* to set it in context.

I'd also recommend, when reading haiku, a conscious attempt to isolate 'favourite poems'. For one thing, there is a bewilderingly large number of haiku out there, and we are each limited in what we can absorb. But also, when we read, although the trigger of pleasure given by any particular poem is an instantaneous experience, having that experience is often a sign that this poem has more to give, if we can live with it for a few days or weeks. We might want to ask, quite consciously, how it works - or we might just settle for repeating it from time to time, allowing ourselves to hear it and see it more clearly. At any rate, a real enjoyment of a dozen haiku is much better than a passing acquaintance with a

hundred.

As well as reading haiku, it is also a great benefit if we can take opportunities to share our reading and writing with others. This is not necessarily easy to arrange. My own haiku group in the Yorkshire/Lancashire area meets monthly and our usual events are workshops, though we also enjoy ginko (walks) and renku composition, from time to time.

In our workshops, we typically ask participants to bring two haiku - one of their own, and one by somebody else. The poems are written up anonymously and displayed for comment and discussion. The discussions are often quite rambling and generally appreciative, from time to time homing in on technical comments on the works in question. But what they achieve is bringing 10 or 12 minds to bear on a poem from a wide variety of angles - and this 'group reading' is generally much richer and more diverse than our initial reading as individuals. This 'airing' of work breathes new life into it, and into our own reading experience, and this sense of an audience adds depth to our writing experience - we are no longer alone with our notebooks.

Selected Commentaries²

heading home I return the stone to the river

- Stuart Quine

For Bashō, the most celebrated of all the Japanese *haiku* poets, there was a sense in which every poem he wrote was his death poem. Very many *haiku* have been written as death poems, either to express a sense of resolution, or to attempt to catch whatever remains unresolved. This 'heading home' isn't a death poem, as such, but it does express, with almost perfect concision and self-assurance, the feeling of the end of a journey. To pick a stone from a river, very likely on a whim, hardly constitutes even desecration as minor as picking a wild flower. But, even so, the writer has a sense that the stone's belonging is in the river and not in any garden or nature-table hoard of his own. It goes back, and the poet goes back; and the music, both beat and melody, of the single line, moves us on. For me, this has the potential to speak to our contemporary condition, as we face whatever ecological crises confront us. It isn't about being precious; it is about giving to the river what is due to the river; and to the sea; and to the land. They aren't dumping grounds for whatever we discard; they have their own spirit, and we nourish our spirit when we nourish theirs.

swirling round
the mirrored alder tree -
the alder's leaves

- David Cobb

Haiku has sometimes been represented as nothing more than a photographic art, with the theory that since the natural and social worlds abound in incident, all the poet needs to do is to record these small dramas as faithfully as possible. By 'faithfully' in this theory is meant 'objectively', impersonally, without the intrusion of poetic devices or intellectual interference of any kind. This is bad enough if it is felt as an aesthetic demand; but it is frequently presented almost as a moral injunction. The haiku poet must be without ego, it is said; and the traditional weaponry of the Western poet, whether metaphorical or musical, is all the work of that little devil, the ego. This is an appealingly Luddite manifesto, at first; but it all too easily degenerates into something close to nihilism, as if all that is necessary to emulate the artlessness of the ancient masters is to apply as little art as possible.

It would seem to be more productive to turn the theory on its head and argue that it is precisely the interaction between self and material that transforms a mere prose record, a nature note, into something that has rhythm, and dances, and is memorable. Whether what then 'intrudes' is the ego, the id, or the collective unconscious, is hardly worth asking; and whether writing haiku is a vicious, virtuous, or morally neutral act is the kind of question that might obsess a moralist but needn't delay a poet.

Haiku is closer to painting than photography, and I frame this as a value judgement for illustrative purposes only, since there are many photographers who can paint with a camera, and some painters who merely take photos with a brush. In 'swirling round' there are three simple but effective touches of art: the sense of development created by the ordering of the lines; the rhythmical repetition of 'alder'; and the boldness of the expression 'the mirrored ... tree', in which we see *the tree*, not just the image of a tree. That the fallen leaves cling to this mirrored tree is an illusion, says our rational mind, and the rational mind is usually right - about the rational world. A kaleidoscope can be constructed and deconstructed; but the mystery begins when you look into it. This haiku is simple enough in its construction, but out of the image of the alder it has created a kaleidoscope.

a stone shaken
from the heel of my shoe
apple blossom

- Matthew Paul

One of the skills of haiku is knowing when it is better to be direct, and when it is better to be oblique. If we were seeking only to describe this moment, the third line might be a simple, "That's better!" - enough to convey the familiar relief from a familiar irritation. But that wouldn't make a poem. A poem must go beyond

description, beyond complete depiction, and give us something more, something we can't grasp and can't explain. The sudden switch of attention to the blossom partly conveys the relief from the particular irritation of the stone but it also opens our attention to a wider reality. At first, this is only a distraction, but it becomes absorption.

beneath the floodlights
a winger's shadow
darts in four directions

- Matthew Paul

There are no boundaries to haiku, and its material is everyday life, so haiku can be found at the football match as well as at the market or out on the marshes. At the British Haiku Society April gathering in 2004 Matthew Paul gave a paper on 'sports haiku', arguing that the playing field was a source of haiku as much as any other walk of life. Here he captures an optical effect uniquely found beneath floodlights. He also captures the winger's shimmy. I'm not sure Stanley Matthews ever played beneath floodlights, but whoever the winger is, he seems to have mastered the maestro's bodyswerve.

first frost she brings the garden gnome indoors

- Steve Mason

There is some gentle mockery of the idea of haiku as 'nature poetry' through the set-up of a conventional seasonal phrase given an unconventional result. It is impossible to tell whether the person in the poem is in on the joke. Do we laugh with her or at her? If we see only the funny side we are reading the poem as a senryu, but supposing we try reading it neutrally at the same time, as an objective record of something funny-peculiar rather than ha-ha. Can this be a haiku, with a purely haiku humour? I think it can.

walking alone
this cool summer morning
by now you or I
would have spoken

- Fred Schofield

This poem hovers at the mid-point between haiku and tanka - and not just

because it is four lines. It demonstrates that there is little value in attempting to maintain rigid demarcations between haiku, senryu and tanka once they have been imported into English. The poem says what it says, and the issue of categorisation is entirely secondary. And yet, it makes a difference whether we see it through a haiku lens or a tanka lens. The tanka reading puts emphasis on the conclusion, where the thoughts turn to relationship, and a potentially awkward recognition of the pleasure of being alone. In the haiku reading the last two lines are emotionally neutral and the emphasis falls on line two: The cool morning is appreciated for what it is, irrespective of any wider emotional context.

summer heat -
the tails of the cattle
flicker above the deep stream
- Claire Bugler Hewitt

I would argue that we should treat haiku in English as its own thing, without trying to confine it within boundaries inherited from Japan. If we do that, we have to face the question: is our haiku then *haiku*? And we have to have the strength of mind to answer 'No', if that's the right answer. But just as we were thinking to answer, 'No', along comes a haiku that might have been written by Bashō, Buson, Issa, or Shiki. The feeling for the season is just as strong; and the entering into the subject is just as complete; and the image as a whole is just as vivid. It is reminiscent of several Japanese *haiku*, in particular, for me:

Cold winter rain;
Mingling their horns,
The oxen of the moor.

by Rankō, in Blyth's translation. It is proof - if we need it - that haiku is possible, even in Britain!

Through the wildflower field ...
Our shadows following
At the distance of
A summer evening.

(*Eskdalemuir, Dumfriesshire, 11.7.93*) - Tito

Tito's four lines allow him to unpack and expand concepts that other haiku poets merely make do with. The second half of this poem is just another way of saying that the shadows are long, but it approaches the essential mystery of the moment so much more effectively. How long is any shadow? We don't really

know, and it is because we don't know that we read and write poetry.

the old men talk
a small girl on the sofa
puts hand to chin

- Dick Pettit

In haiku, there is no comment, no attitude. In senryu mode, there is comment, attitude, and judgement. Senryu focus attention on human behaviour, and it's difficult to do this without being forced towards judgmental conclusions, however subtle. Dick Pettit's poem might have been written from a position of complete neutrality, but it seems reasonable to assume that the author, at whatever stage of life, has strongly felt both sides of a similar experience. He has been (we assume) an included (dominating / fascinating / boring) talker and an excluded (dominated / fascinated / bored) listener. If we think of the double meaning of the word 'attitude', we understand the power of body language. The hand on the chin says what words can't say.

lingering heat
inside a small flower pot
a smaller one

- Alison Williams

There seems to be some correspondence between the 'lingering' quality of the heat (probably the heat of the day, but possibly the heat of the whole summer) and the Russian-doll discovery of a nested pot. But the connection is far from obvious. We don't need to strive hard to make it. It is possible just to enjoy the moment of cleaning out the cupboard or the shed and making a small and apparently meaningless discovery. If there is a 'message' here it is probably: you don't find until you start looking. But it would seem to be more important to write, and read, haiku from a position that intuits meaning rather than stating it. Often we don't know why something strikes us, it just does.

a nick in the cucumber
pale within
the moonlit dew

- George Marsh

This is seeing-a-world-in-a-grain-of-sand or, more precisely, in-the-slicing-of-a-salad-vegetable. Something mysterious and dazzling manifests where we least expect it. We needn't imagine that the writer is preparing his salad by moonlight: Line three might be only a poet's evocation of translucency and texture. The result is an extreme example of the elevation of everyday experience. We can also admire the way the writer has resisted putting the cucumber to one side as unusable in haiku.

end of my tether
some bastard on the radio
talks about god

- Matt Morden

Haiku don't always spring from an attitude of contemplative serenity. One of the delights of dramatic verse - and one reason Shakespeare is so famous for his insults and invective - is that it allows us to abandon our neutrality, enter a character, and be uninhibitedly one-sided. Here, Matt Morden's expression, although more properly termed a senryu, has the same uninhibited one-sidedness. From this position, the advocates of high-mindedness and balance are bastards.

Footnotes:

1: *Haiku World* by William J Higginson (Kodansha, Tokyo, 1996).

2: All commentaries from *Stepping Stones: a way into haiku* by Martin Lucas (British Haiku Society, 2007).