

A Poet's Haiku: Paul Muldoon

by
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The word “haiku” has been used in many ways in English, on top of a few in Japanese, of course. As members of an English-language haiku community devoted to the tradition, we may not be pleased with such things as the “Spam-ku,” “headline haiku,” and “computer error message haiku” that once abounded on the Internet but are now mostly the ghosts of passé fads. Long before the World Wide Web or even the personal computer became factors in the creation and publication of English-language haiku, however, members of this community found that they were not the only ones writing poems based on various understandings of the Japanese haiku. Not too surprisingly, some professional poets got there first.^{[1](#)}

We have generally been aware of the first attempts at haiku-like poems by such poets as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, and some of us were even encouraged to take up haiku ourselves by the writings of Jack Kerouac or Allen Ginsberg. At the same time, we frequently criticize the so-called “haiku” of our own contemporaries who happen to be professional poets. For the most part, such criticisms occur mainly in private conversations or correspondence, but if my experience is any guide, quite a few haiku poets find these professional poets’ “haiku” lacking some of the more important characteristics of what they understand as haiku.^{[2](#)}

All of which prompts me to take up this topic, the so-called “haiku” of professional poets and how they may or may not fit into a traditional notion of what “haiku really are.” The astute reader may immediately see my real purpose: Undermining the increasingly fixed and limited notion of haiku that currently pervades much of the English-language haiku community. In the meantime, I propose to enjoy looking at some poems.

Of course, any serious poem-maker, worker with words and images, may certainly do as she or he pleases. Professional poets perhaps push beyond the boundaries of our expectations more often than haiku poets. Perhaps we will learn a thing or two by looking at their work—serious, humorous, or both at once—whether we think this or that poem is a haiku or not.

Right now, Paul Muldoon has moved into the spotlight among serious (and humorous) poets writing in English—on both sides of the Atlantic. *The Literary Supplement of the Times of London* singled him out as “the most significant English-language poet born since the Second World War.” His

2002 collection, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in the U.S. and the Griffin Prize in Canada in 2003, and he teaches poetry at both Princeton and Oxford Universities. As his two most recent books feature substantial sequences of haiku and haiku-like poems, it seems appropriate to begin what I hope will be a series of occasional articles with a look at some of them.

The following poems appear in “Hopewell Haiku” (published in *Hay*, 1998; the sequence also appeared as a chapbook the previous year). “Hopewell” refers to the New Jersey town where Muldoon lived for a time. I take the poems out of order for the sake of this discussion.

LXVII

A bullfrog sumo
stares into his bowl of wine.
Those years in Suma.

“Those years in Suma” refers to the time Prince Genji, of Genji monogatari, was exiled from the capital at Kyoto. The passage in the life of the fictional prince aptly encapsulates the feelings of desperation associated with Suma from its use as a place of exile for actual nobles whom various governments literally “wanted out of the way.” (Execution was not generally a punishment for nobles in Heian Japan, who were more painfully punished by such banishments.) It also reminds me of Bashô’s verse written at the Buddhist temple there:

sumadera ya fukanu fue kiku koshita yami

Suma Temple . . .
I hear the unblown flute
in the shade of a tree

In the real war almost two hundred years after *The Tale of Genji*, the war epically recorded in *The Tale of the Heike*, the young Taira general Atsumori was killed by a Minamoto warrior named Noazane, near Suma. Noazane, father of a warrior son the same age as his victim, then discovered on Atsumori’s body a flute, and, reflecting on the insanity of a world in which such killing takes place, he became a Buddhist monk to pray for Atsumori’s spirit. That “Green-Leaf Flute” remains a treasure of Suma Temple to this day. (The temple was founded in 786, some 400 years before the war and 900 years before Bashô’s visit.)

Bashô plays with the tradition of sadness, isolation, death, and giving up the world at Suma, making the sound of the unplayed flute a metaphor for Zen koans (on silent flutes, clapping, and so on) that lightly dissolves into the pleasant shade of a tree under summer’s sun in this desolate place. But note how that shade suggests again the “Green-Leaf Flute”—and the death

of Atsumori. Light as the last line of Bashô's poem may seem on first reading, it grows deeper with the next.

Muldoon's poem, in contrast, begins with the humorous overlay of a metaphorical bullfrog characterizing a sumo wrestler, shifts the wrestler into an inner, personal loneliness, then deepens that mood with the Genji reference, and finally comes round to humor again as it ends in the feminine slant-rime "sumo/Suma." Bashô's "haikai twist" involves the dissolution of loneliness and intimations of mortality into a pleasant physical comfort, but subtly reminds us again of the vanity of this world. Muldoon's changes involve a full-circle progression that begins and ends with humor encapsulating a dark night of the soul. Bashô would bow to such craft put to the service of exploring the range of human emotion and the interactions of place and cultural memory.

LXXV

I've upset the pail
in which my daughter had kept
her five—"No, six"—snails.

I cannot read this poem of Muldoon's without thinking immediately of Shûson Katô's famous haiku:

ari korosu ware o sannin no ko ni mirarenu

killing an ant
I have by three children
been seen

Snails and ants share the distinction of being seasonal topics in Japanese haiku (both summer). Whether a nearly unthinking action against them seems deliberate, as in Shûson's case, or accidental, as in Muldoon's, the intense righteousness of one's child or children brings the shocking tableau into sharp focus. We will not soon forget such a moment.

At the same time, each poem displays its poet's willingness to push the craft while gently touching the emotions. Muldoon's poem begins as seemingly prosaic speech in the past tense, but juts into immediacy with his child's cry, neatly interrupting the rhythm and distracting attention from what might otherwise become a thumping rime on the object of all this attention. Shûson's begins immediately with the small creature, moving from phrase to irregular phrase to that silent accusation. (The original's rhythm is 5-8-6.)

We might even say that there is a haiku tradition of witnessing a killing. I think of one of the most controversial of Bashô's poems:

saru o kiku hito sutego ni aki no kaze ikani

you listening to a monkey—
to an abandoned child in the
autumn
wind, what . . . ?

I have rendered the English a bit more closely to the original than most translators, who usually do not reflect the contrast between the poem's longish opening phrases and abruptly ending rhythm (7-7-5) or the awkward mid-phrase break, and often fill in some blanks, making it obvious that the first line refers to a sound traditionally felt as sad, that presumably the child is crying, and that the last line might be expanded to "What would you say to (or do about) this dying child?" In other words, they like to tell us what the poem (supposedly) means in an expanded paraphrase, rather than letting us wrestle with it a bit ourselves.

As Makoto Ueda has pointed out, the Chinese conceit of sadness as the characteristic emotion of a monkey's cry was well known to Bashô and shows up in Japanese poems as well (103-04). It appears in many Tang Dynasty poems, including, for English readers, Ezra Pound's famous rendition of a Li Po poem entitled "The River Merchant's Wife." In the prose passage of the diary where Bashô's poem appears, he tells of tossing some food to the child as he goes by. While some Western commentators on Bashô's poem have decried the Master's indifference, Japanese writers note that leaving a young child out to die was not unheard of in those difficult times, and that Bashô's poem directly challenges the polite sadness of the Sino-Japanese tradition with this real-life example of a truly sad event.

Bringing this back round to Muldoon's poem, I would only point out the craft of the halting rhythm in its last line, that brings the child's cry directly into his otherwise deliberately flat language. Like Shûson, like Bashô, Muldoon knows how to jar our expectations, and does so when the event and its emotional impact demand it.

LXXVI

And her homemade kite
of less than perfect design?
Also taken flight.

Why does this Muldoon piece immediately make me think of Chiyo-ni's lament for her son?

tonbo-tsuru kyô wa doko made itta
yara

dragonfly-chasing
today, how far
has he gone?

At various times, the present object (or its absence) suggests a more perfect present that the past has not allowed, and we can only wonder, along with the twentieth-century master Kusatao Nakamura, as we take note of what is no longer here:

*naki tomo kata ni te o nosuru goto aki ni
nukushi*

like my dead friend putting
a hand on my shoulder
the autumn sun warms

The Japanese tradition of death-anniversary haiku for famous people of the past as well as more personal laments for absent friends and family members usually goes to particulars, as here the kindly touch of a friend, the favorite game of a child. Like Kusatao and Chiyo-ni and Muldoon, we are left only with small fragments of memories that touch us one day or another. That particularity brings a smile to our lips, though tears may also well.

In Muldoon's more recent book, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, he offers a shorter sequence of end-rimed, 5-7-5, haiku-like poems called "News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm"; here is one that amuses more than we might expect at first:

X

Behind the wood bin
a garter snake snaps itself,
showing us some skin.

It's hard to read a verse on a common snake and not think of Kyoshi Takahama's well-known poem:

hebi nigete ware o mishi me no kusa ni nokoru

the snake flees—
the eyes that saw me
remain in the grass

While I'm sure that Kyoshi meant his poem to be amusing, an undercurrent of dread, a bit of a threat, lurks there too with the memory of those eyes. Muldoon's garter snake, on the other hand, leaves only its skin behind. Both poems play with the reader. Kyoshi's poem depends on an

illusion of the mind, while Muldoon's twists a common phrase with some sexual innuendo into an entirely new—and presumably asexual—context. Of course, the sexual undercurrent in Muldoon's poem is not entirely lost, given the relationship of the snake to Adam and Eve. So, perhaps not so far apart after all, both of these poems play on our expectations and the afterimages left in our subconscious minds.

In a letter to Muldoon asking for permission to quote his poems in this piece, I said "I see your work as challenging 'us'—the 'haiku community'—in ways similar to the challenge thrown down by even the most conservative modern haiku in Japan. As I've been saying for a decade or more, our 'haiku' has become too narrowly focused on the Zen/moment/meditation thing, and not enough air and humor has been around for too long. Not to mention serious craft." I think the poems above pretty clearly surpass any view of haiku so limited in mode and theme.

Let me share two more of Muldoon's "Hopewell Haiku" for which I have not bothered to look for comparable Japanese haiku:

LXXII

Like a wayside shrine
to itself, this sideswiped stag
of the seven tines.

LXXVIII

Fresh snow on the roof
of a car that passed me by.
The print of one hoof.

In the first of these, Muldoon has found words to uplift the commonplace death of a deer beside the road—something no doubt often seen in or near Hopewell, just as it is not far from my home. As often as I have seen such road-kill, very few specific instances stick in my mind, but the image of that "shrine of the stag of seven tines" will live in my memory for a long time.

Also doubtless, some Japanese haiku may depend on an element of the unusual for impact. This second poem brings a smile to my lips like the freshness of a Chagall painting. A place where some deer lightly touched the car as it leapt over a road in a suburban park? The single "tick" of one of Rudolph's feet guiding Santa's sleigh? Whether this poem finds precedents in Japanese or not, or in our haiku or not, who cares? It does

what a short poem must do, it leaves us wondering.

Finally, I come to this verse, also from “Hopewell Haiku:”

XXV

A hammock at dusk.
I scrimshaw a narwhal hunt
on a narwhal tusk.

I knew that this echoed an old Japanese haiku the moment I first read it, but could not recall which. Letting go of the quest, I simply moved more deeply into the mind of this Muldoon, the man primitive in his concentration, carving a scene as magically sympathetic in its mood and meaning as any painting in a Paleolithic cave. (Note that a hammock is the usual sleeping accommodation in old sailing ships.) Weeks later, looking at the poem again, it flashed on me where that same concentration had occurred in a similar Japanese haiku by Issa:

aki no yo ya tabi no otoko no harishigoto

autumn night . . .
a traveling man's
needlework

Of all the pairings of poems discussed here, this one probably comes closest to being a direct parallel. What refreshes me in Muldoon's work, though, is that no reader of Issa's poem (even in my hyper-literal translation from *The Haiku Handbook*) could predict Muldoon's poem on its basis.

Beyond their haiku characteristics, Muldoon's verses form rimed sequences. “News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm” runs in terza rima throughout. As David Burleigh brought to my attention in correspondence, the rimes in “Hopewell Haiku” leap across pages. The apparently unrimed end of the middle line in the first poem provides the end-rime for the first and third lines of the sixth poem, and so on. Rimes from the last five poems wrap back to the beginning five. This “skipping terza rima,” though likely subliminal on first hearing, does provide another kind of unity for the whole sequence. The plan may be intellectual, but the effect is not. (I think of the recurring images of moon and blossoms in Japanese linked poems, and wonder what other surprises lurk here.)

The game of Japanese haiku's mere influence on Western poetry is over. Others may occasionally parallel or parody a particular Japanese haiku in a poem of their own, as does a young Amy Lowell with her poem,

Peace

Perched upon the muzzle of a cannon
A yellow butterfly is slowly opening and shutting its
wings.

(*Pictures*, 19)

that so closely resembles Buson's "on a temple bell/alighted and
sleeping/this butterfly" (tsurigane ni tomarite nemuru kochô kana), or a
young Allen Ginsberg with his

A frog floating
in the Drugstore jar:
summer rain on grey pavements.

(*Journals*, 92)

to which he appends "after Shiki," so we know he's alluding to a particular
poem. (He must have read Shiki's poem in 1955, in R.H. Blyth's
translation, thus: "A frog floating/In the water-jar:/Rains of summer."
[mizugame ni kawazu uku nari satsukiame], *Haiku*, 3:61). But Muldoon
has replaced that game of imitation and parody with a new and richer one:
Rimed, syllabic poems written in exquisite English—every bit as lightly
witty and deep with human pathos as the best of classical and modern
Japanese haiku.

Generally speaking, I am not happy with so-called "haiku" in seventeen
syllables, and I do not encourage any beginners to get involved with end-
rhyming haiku. Maybe some of us with even a more "purist" attitude think
that end-rime must never show up in haiku in English, despite Harold G.
Henderson's adroit use of it in his translations throughout *An Introduction
to Haiku*. For any who think that way, let's just call these haiku-like,
seventeen-syllable, end-rimed poems by Paul Muldoon "Muldoons"! And
anyone who wants to write Muldoons should be encouraged to gain as
much wit and humanity as shines so brilliantly through these and his
others—even though some of them seem less like haiku than those I've
quoted here. Some of these, I fondly hope, will be considered among the
classics of English-language haiku.

Notes

1 For this article, I take as "professional poets" those who
write poems and engage in related activities (such as
publishing, giving public readings, and conducting workshops
related to poetry) as a vocation, not as an avocation.

2 By "haiku poets" I mean poets who devote all or a majority
of their poetic efforts to haiku. Certainly, one may be a
"professional haiku poet"; for the purposes of this discussion,

such a poet would be grouped with the “haiku poets” simply because I believe they generally share the views of the larger haiku community.

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