

The Haiku of Philip Whalen

by
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Philip Whalen, one of the original Beat poets, was published by numerous small presses and also in some major collections during his life. The work was scattered, however, until editor Michael Rothenberg brought it all together in the 932-page volume *The Collected Poems of Philip Whalen* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007). Embedded throughout the collection, which is arranged chronologically (Whalen was a strict dater of his work), are numerous tiny poems in the haiku tradition. For example,

Awake a moment
Mind dreams again
Red roses black-edged petals

Whalen was one of the poets at the 1955 Six Gallery reading in San Francisco, a seminal event in American poetry, where Allen Ginsberg read "Howl" for the first time. Whalen went on to a lifelong social—if not aesthetic—association with the Beats, but his place in poetry is more closely allied with writers of the San Francisco Renaissance and with mentors such as Kenneth Rexroth and William Carlos Williams. "A fat bespectacled quiet booboo," was how Jack Kerouac described Whalen, whom he immortalized as the character Warren Coughlin in his 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums* as well as in later novels as Ben Fagan, "a hundred and eighty pounds of poet meat." That was Philip Whalen when Kerouac met him, fresh out of a stint in the army where he served but did see action in World War II. He had recently graduated from Reed College in Portland, Ore., where his roommates were Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, both to become major poets. Born in Portland and raised in The Dalles, Ore., Whalen lived for a few years in Japan but spent most of his life in San Francisco. The landscape of the Pacific rim was one of his influences, along with philosophy and the Zen Buddhism he eventually settled on as a practice. Whalen was the only Beat writer to be ordained as a Buddhist priest, and in his later years he ran a temple in the Castro District.

As a poet Whalen was not a self-conscious practitioner of haiku. Indeed, Kerouac was more devoted to his understanding of the form, and consciously practiced it. Allen Ginsberg is credited with developing his "American sentence," a sort of one-line haiku in English. For Whalen some of the impulse to short poetry was similarly epigrammatic, or aphoristic, in the tradition of Western wisdom literature. His work is also often humorous or quirky in the senryu tradition. Whalen did note, however, perhaps with some surprise, that his most anthologized poem,

written in 1964, was one he thought of as a haiku:

Early Spring

The dog writes on the window
with his nose

This poem is indeed emblematic of Whalen's work in the form. To begin with, he titled his haiku. Yet in many cases his titles might serve as conventional first lines in a haiku. If the title "Early Spring" is considered as the first line of the poem, we have a very fine haiku—the dog impatient to get out into warm weather, the window maybe a little steamy, the humor of a poet seeing "writing" in an unusual spot.

In another example the "title" of the haiku is also its date:

25:1:68

Sadly unroll sleepingbag:
The missing lid for teapot!

Here again, in senryu fashion, there is a moment of humorous surprise—tidying up the sleeping bag resulted in losing the teapot lid. Now that it is found, the world is complete again, with necessities taken care of—a place to sleep and tea to drink. The tension between sleeping and waking is also seen in

Awake a moment
Mind dreams again
Red roses black-edged petals

After all, tea keeps a person awake and that wakefulness has meaning in a Zen context. In "Awake a moment" worlds blur between dream and consensus reality. The reader can't tell any more than the poet can where these red black-edged petals are located.

A sense of the malleability of the self is also found in

Where Was I ?

New desk, old chair
I look at them, hopelessly
Where's the man who writes
there?

Without the title, this poem approaches the classic haiku form. It is almost a Zen koan, asking which is the real self, the one writing or the one who seems to be blocked? Others of Whalen's haiku-esque poems were written

as gifts, in the Asian tradition. A 1960 "Haiku for Gary Snyder" has the same use of presence and absence, or negative space and inhabited space, as "Where Was I?":

IS
Here's a dragonfly
(TOTALLY)
Where it was,
that place no longer exists.

In contrast, "Haiku for Mike" is more of a senryu, although it also poses a question— humorously —about existence:

Bouquet of HUGE
nasturtium leaves
"HOW can I support myself?"

One of Whalen's later poems gives a self-conscious nod to the senryu tradition. Section 4 of "Epigrams & Imitations" reads:

False Senryu

A cough
waits for the bus.

It's false of course because senryu wouldn't usually use this kind of trope, where a part of the body stands for the whole person—but it has its own humorous charm.

Perhaps most in the haiku spirit, with a bit of humor in the word "pestering," is

Ginkakuji Michi

Morning haunted by black dragonfly
landlady pestering the garden moss

Here the image is a complex one. The dragonfly, that image of speed, rotates through the garden. By contrast, the gardener is focused on the immobile moss. To the poet's mind, however, these activities are haunting, pestering. It is as if there is a longing for stillness in the center of the work.

Whalen's poems are certainly unconventional in terms of American haiku, and purists might not consider them haiku at all. Throughout his poetic career, Whalen took an experimental approach to form, and haiku is no exception. He did not experiment simply for the sake of novelty, however. He was trying to track his mind, its twists and turns, in meditative fashion.

Ordained as a Zen monk in the Sôtô lineage, Whalen spent his last years as abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco. He wrote little or nothing at this point, partially stymied by ill health but also absorbed in practicing Buddhism. His haiku, then, are an extension of his poetic practice of observation and mindfulness. Whalen's short poems—indeed all his poetry—are about the instantaneous and the ephemeral. In this, he participates in his own way in the classic tradition of haiku.

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