

## **THE "WEBOLUTION" OF HAIKU.**

by William J Higginson

( Excerpts from the Keynote Address at the Global Haiku Conference, Millikin University, 15 April 2000 )

I have mentioned the Internet previously, but let us now focus our attention on our own current and potential involvement on the World Wide Web. During the last five years, the Internet has radically altered the way a fair percentage of Americans do business and spend their free time. Haiku, as a leisure activity, has found a substantial niche on the Internet, and is growing there by leaps and bounds. And it has become increasingly international. I know this, because for the last six months or so I have been an editor on the "Haiku and Related Forms" category of the Netscape Open Directory Project. When I started working on it, the category had about 30 links to haiku-related sites, about half of which featured so-called "bad haiku", "computer-generated haiku", or other stuff that I considered garbage. The category now has close to 90 links [currently over 100] to valid haiku sites, plus another 30 or so sites in subcategories, one of which contains about a dozen sites featuring "zappai", to use Lee Gurga's term for spam haiku, haiku headlines, computer haiku, and the like. Some of the valid haiku sites are for teachers, some give access to bulletin boards and mailing lists of haiku discussion groups, some provide background information about haiku, both the Japanese tradition and the spread of haiku to the rest of the globe. And some provide publication services analogous to print magazines, or access to print magazines, in such a way that poets can submit their work by e-mail, rather than the postal service. One week ago, I conducted a survey of all of the editors I know of who have the capability to receive submissions by e-mail.

### **Survey Results**

Of eleven editors I know of who can receive English-language haiku submissions by e-mail, I received returns from eight--72%--a rather high rate of return. Of the eight respondents, three publish in print only, three publish e-zines on the World Wide Web only, and two publish both in print and e-zine formats. The list of those solicited for the survey included only publishers issuing at least twice a year, and did not include the British Haiku Society's \*Blithe Spirit\* or \*Modern Haiku\*, neither of which currently has provisions for e-mail submissions, though I expect that to change in the future.

An e-mail correspondent recently asked me, "Does posting on an Internet

mailing list mean 'Publishing'?" This was one of the questions I already had in mind, and had included in my survey. In the survey I asked three related questions:

"Do you consider poems that have already appeared on electronic bulletin boards or mailing lists where they are offered for comment or criticism, and where they may have been read by the public in an archive, as on the Shiki and other e-lists, to have been published?

Do you knowingly publish such poems?

Would you prefer that authors inform you if a poem they submit has previously appeared as described above?"

Seven of the eight respondents said "Yes, appearance on a list is publication." Six of eight said "I would knowingly publish a poem previously appearing on a list"--this result included all of the e-zine publishers, and one of three print-only magazines, but one of the three print-only people said "maybe" and the other said "NO!" Six of the eight said "I want to know if a submitted poem has been on a list"; a couple were very emphatic about it; of the two who didn't care whether they were so informed or not, one was a print-only publisher, the other an e-zine only publisher.

These results vary in part because some e-zines are MAINLY edited selections of works that have already appeared on lists--primarily the Shiki List, it turns out--and do not involve much unsolicited submission at all. The Shiki List, an e-mail mailing list to which one can subscribe and thus receive copies of all mail "posted" to the list, has been in operation since 1994. Today the Shiki Team, based in Matsuyama, Japan, operates three mailing lists, one for discussion of haiku issues, one for workshopping haiku poems written by participants, and one for tanka. On the question of copyright on the Internet, their understanding is clearly stated in the following notice, which appears on the Web page where one subscribes to any of the lists:

"All poems appearing on the above mailing lists, their archives and home pages, either individually or as part of a multiple posting, such as the bi weekly kukai, are copyrighted and permission must be received to use any of the poems contained within this homepage in whole or in part. To contact specific authors for permission for use a specific poem or part of a posting, in whole or in part, containing poems, you must send a copy of the post in question to the author along with your request specifying the intended use. If you wish to use a poem where the author is not identified with the poem, you must send a request to the mailing list where it can be seen on the

mailing list board \*and\* recorded in the mailing list archives. If no response is received by either method: \*PERMISSION HAS BEEN DENIED!\*

This seems pretty clear, not to say emphatic, and suggests the same procedure that one must go through to reprint a work previously appearing in a magazine or book. However, the Web is operating under different principles from the familiar print routines we're used to, and those who use the Web a lot are used to repetitions, so they don't seem to be as bothered by the "previously published" bugaboo. As some of the people involved in print are also at some level involved in the Web, they are letting their Web practices and ideals leak over into their print operations.

Everyone surveyed said their e-mail submissions are rising, and most that do print reported that their postal submissions are either steady or falling.

Everyone surveyed said their e-mail submissions are now as good as or better than their postal submissions. One specifically noted that while up to a year ago, e-mail submissions were generally inferior, they are now better, on average, than postal submissions. (Translation: The editors are now taking as high a percentage of e-mail submissions as of postal submissions, or better. This is true both of low-volume magazines publishing only a few poems in each issue and of high-volume magazines with scores or even hundreds of poems per issue, both print and Web-based.)

The electronic publication of haiku, like every other area of publishing, is increasing daily. To those comfortable with the Internet, such publishing looks easy, at first. But when they get into it, they discover, as did their 1950s, '60s and '70s counterparts in the kitchen-table presses of the global counterculture and the desktop publishers of the '80s, it takes hard, continuous work to build anything of lasting value, or even of immediate importance. The main difference between the pre-Internet publishing world and the current expansion of publishing opportunities via the Internet is access. For less than the price of a color television set, one can purchase the primary tool of Internet access. And, although US West and other telephone companies that service rural areas around the world may be having difficulty providing adequate phone lines to some people, the number of people who may even accidentally be exposed to haiku in one form or another has increased exponentially, right along with the Internet itself.

That's Haiku?

One question that naturally arises, then, is what kind of haiku are such

people--haiku "newbies", shall we say?--being exposed to? During the days when the Internet itself was news, in the middle years of the decade just ending, we heard a great deal about "Spam-ku", "Scifai-ku", "Haiku Headlines", "Computer Error Messages in Haiku" and other aberrant varieties. As recently as six months ago, when Penny and I were in the throes of entering the Internet world ourselves, I received from a family member to whom our kind of haiku is as mysterious as the inner workings of an electronic ignition system, a forwarded copy of that now infamous e-mail message that begins something along the lines of "The Sony Corporation has announced a new line of computers, which will deliver error messages in the form of the Japanese verses known as 'haiku'." Somehow, this was new to her though she'd been on the Internet herself for three or four years. She thought I should know about it--a message I'd first encountered from the fellow who sold me my first computer in 1983!

How pervasive are such haiku-manqué, such "zappai" as Lee Gurga has called them, and how challenging to those of us who in some sense adhere to an "orthodox" view of haiku, however conservative or liberal our own approach may be? Do they constitute a threat to "real" haiku? Will they weaken our haiku and somehow overwhelm it in an all-pervasive saturation of the Internet and the other media, so that the very word "haiku" comes to mean nothing more than an inane 5-7-5 on the latest White House sex scandal? I don't think so.

To examine this challenge, I went to some of the search engines and directories available on the Internet, and searched for the word "haiku" two ways. First, I tried to construct a search so that at least the most offensive zappai would be excluded. I searched on "plus-haiku minus-spam minus-headlines", the particular syntax varying according to the search engine in use.

This series of searches was conducted on 12 April 2000, and employed Northern Light, Yahoo, Google, Alta Vista, and the Open Directory. The results not only bore out my impression, but they told me some significant things about the tools I was using.

First, however, I should acknowledge that I use Northern Light all the time, and so am more proficient at searching with it than with the others. Second, I am an editor of the "Haiku and Related Forms" category in the Open Directory, so I have substantial and direct influence on what turns up in such a search there. With these caveats in mind, here are the results of my searches:

. . .

[These "results" are in a table that does not translate well into e-mail, but are summarized below.] . . .

From these limited data, we may make a few generalizations.

First, it appears that a sophisticated search engine, such as Google or Northern Light, produces higher numbers of valid hits. This is not surprising, but when we see that only 25 to 40% of the hits on Yahoo, and only 40% of the hits on zappai or pseudo-haiku in Alta Vista were valid, we might become convinced that it is essential to use the best tools available to obtain even moderately useful results. Unfortunately, not everyone using the Internet is ready to leap out of the obvious route to their hoped-for results.

Three years ago, when I first began searching for "haiku" on the Internet, I too used Yahoo, and found thousands of "hits". But then I was not aware that the trick of a "Web site search" would greatly reduce the numbers involved, nor was I terribly conscious of the time wasted in pursuing dead links--I had the good fortune to be working with T-1 high-speed Internet access on an ISP's server. Now, with a more common dial-up connection, I am a little more jealous of my time wasted clicking on dead ends.

The mess found on an Alta Vista search for "spam haiku" and the like was particularly disturbing. Only 40% of the first ten links provided were valid, that is, referred me to unique, active, Web pages that had the desired content. Yet, Alta Vista told me there were 324,000 such pages! Even when I took only 40% of that figure, or 130,000, they told me that almost two-thirds of the Web pages concerning "haiku" of any type were basically spam. However, when I looked at the "last updated" date on each link, I discovered that very few of the top ten hits had been updated in the last two years. This is hardly the case for "real" haiku pages, even on Alta Vista.

Among the other search engines and directories, "spam haiku" and the like accounted for only one-tenth of one percent up to nine percent of the total haiku hits, averaging 4%. And again, most of these zappai sites had not been updated in the past two years. Google, supposedly a hot, new search engine, yielded only a little more than one-tenth of one percent zappai among its haiku listings. The most persistent of these kinds of sites, "haiku headlines" sites on which anyone can post a 5-7-5 "haiku" encapsulating a current news story, are just about all that is left of this kind of activity aside from old archives of jokes from three to five years ago.

Thus, on the Internet, spamku has come and gone. Sure, the curious still drop by the archived Web pages for a chuckle. And there's even a book about spam haiku recently published, which has been reviewed in a number of newspapers. But like many things in the cyber world, last month's news is this month's archive, and soon forgotten by the mainstream. Like an Elvis museum, these archives may draw hundreds of visitors, but most people don't bother more than once, and the archives don't reflect the current scene.

---

## A POET'S PLAN OF ACTION

I am concerned about the air of control and confusion that currently abounds in global haiku. But when I consider the deepest ramifications of that complex, I realize that as a poet I am free to pursue my own course, regardless of who says what is or is not a haiku. I plan to do the following:

First, I will write the poem that I need now, in the very moment of the writing. I don't much care whether I'm writing from immediate observation, or from memory, or from some vividly imagined daydream. But I must write under the impulse of the moment when I write. That much is clear. This may mean that at one time I am working desperately to capture the action at a birdbath in my back yard, and another to find the meaning hidden in some scrap of an elusive memory. However it happens, the writing time is mine, and not under orders from others.

Second, as I have personally done since I first began to write haiku, I have looked over the haiku being written at the current time, which today means reading recent anthologies, the latest magazines, and a number of Web sites, and decided for myself what kinds of haiku I see out there and admire. To support that work, as you well know, I write books about haiku, and try to give some shape to the kaleidoscopic haiku scene. But at the same time, as a poet, I best support what I think is the best work being written by writing haiku that find common ground with that work--still in my own way, but with a sense of communion with like-minded poets.

Third, I underline again a theme that arose at that first Haiku North America conference, almost a decade ago: The biome that supports our very life on this planet is in danger of being destroyed by our own human ignorance and rapacious greed. To the extent that haiku involves an attempt to actually see the world as it is, haiku can witness both the delights of the natural world and the stupidity of some of our human activity in that natural world, which I remind you, is the whole world, including even this very room. So, once again, I echo Bashô's cry: "Return to nature!" In my poems, may I never fail to demonstrate that essential haiku sensitivity to the world around me, and build, each by each, small shrines to the consciousness that says there is something larger, and more important, than this mere self that does the looking and the scribbling.