

## **Haiku: The Art of Emptiness**

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What does the moon know of haiku? What does the wind know? The rain? Nothing. And yet they are our teachers, or guides, now and for all time.

What do I know of haiku? Nothing. And it has taken me a long time, I can assure you, to know nothing. Now that I know nothing – which is all one needs to know – why would I desire anything else?

There are so many things we know and so many things we forget; but, knowing nothing, what is there left to shed, to lose, to forget? Haiku is the art of emptiness, of knowing nothing; it is the art of the no-mind, the beginner's mind. The innocent mind.

Knowing nothing is where it all begins and ends, if we can talk about a beginning and an end at all: there is the momentary froth of appearance – a shape, a phenomenon, a colour, a scent, a bubble in Issa's cup of tea, and it disappears. And we're left with nothing again, if we're lucky.

True haiku is a celebration of unclutteredness, emptiness, fleetingness, vastness, littleness, nothingness. Bad haiku is a klunky declaration of substance and ego – substance that is awarded the appearance of substantiality when it is, in fact, quite unreal. A shadow chasing a shadow. No more.

Maybe we shouldn't talk about good haiku and bad haiku. There's haiku and then there's non-haiku, that is all.

The world is full of bad haiku (or non-haiku) because the world takes itself so seriously, considering itself to be absolutely real, substantial, solid as a rock, and requiring a constant supply of novels, films, newspapers, philosophical and scientific treatises and so on – even haiku – to describe it, interpret it and guarantee its existence. Bad haiku (non-haiku) is full of stolid, boring, impenetrable objects, glanced at by the lifeless eye.

The path of emptiness leads us to inner spaciousness, immediately or over a lifetime of devotion to the art of emptiness; without this inner spaciousness the world of phenomena cannot be perceived or recorded with the freshness and memorability that good haiku demand.

The haikuist (haijin) should not attempt to arm himself as a novelist, scientist or journalist does. The haijin's art is to pare away, not to fill out or enlarge upon what appears to be large enough already. The haijin's art is to discover the breath of abiding nothingness in phenomena, in heat and cold, drought and deluge, light and darkness and shade; the living breath of abiding nothingness; and he can only do that by becoming nothing himself, gradually over a lifetime, or instantly, suddenly, now.

By becoming nothing, stripped of judgements, attachments, we can enter the abiding breath of nothingness, fleeting and eternal. What do these words mean? They

can only mean something if they reflect your actual experience of reading and writing haiku. Otherwise, all this is just gobbledegook in an ocean of gobbledegook.

Another word for emptiness is 'sunyata' and that was the name of a man who was born in Denmark in 1890. A new book, *Dancing with the Void* (Non-Duality Press 2015) gives us an insight into this innocence, this emptiness which is fertile ground for haiku; not just for haiku but for all the best things in life.

Now, it must be said that reading and writing haiku is a special art, like no other. I have a number of friends and acquaintances and they simply never got it and probably, now, never will – and I'm talking about people from whom I expected more. (Or do I mean less?! Let's not be tempted by wordplay here). Then there are others who surprised me by getting it instantly.

You can't fake it. When someone gets it, you know they've got it. They've been to the boundless realm and drunk the milk of paradise. Three lines of a haiku may look like a shallow rock pool but we know from Chiyo-ni that it is alive, tremendously alive and contains more than we know.

Over the centuries and in our own time, these little haiku rock pools have managed to reveal the complete depth and majesty of the ocean itself, boundlessness, emptiness, fullness.

The truth of the matter is that when we approach the essence of true haiku, we are forced into making statements that seem self-contradictory – something of the nature of a koan, almost – but it is in the apparent shallowness of the haiku form that we find the unknowable depths; it is in the emptiness that we find fullness beyond measure; in the nothingness we find everything, and our own secret core.

How come? Patient, sensitive reading of the haiku masters – and re-reading, of course – can spark off a meditative insight in the reader in which the depth of a haiku is revealed in the reader's own depth, a depth that is sounded in pure, universal consciousness.

This is what makes haiku unique in the literary world. Haiku can subtly transform our awareness of being alive and awaken us from habitual torpor and lassitude. I can't remember when last I may have used the word 'lassitude'. (Most of my oral and written activity is in another language, Irish). I checked the word's usage and found this from *The Man in the Iron Mask* by Dumas, a translation, of course: 'Always on horseback, he had never known what lassitude was'.

I'm not going to follow up on that particular metaphor (or hobby horse) but if haiku forms part of your daily activity, whether reading, writing, teaching or translating haiku, my guess is that you will never know what lassitude is. Or torpor. Because those 17-syllables, or less, are packed with an espresso-like kick, and a powerful aroma.

I'm not going to analyse the kick of that aroma, or spend much time in suggesting what elements go into a haiku to create this shock of consciousness. Disjunctiveness? Parataxis? Interpenetration? Oh, that's called paralipsis, as many of you may know, drawing attention to something by saying one is not going to talk about it!

An example of parataxis from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

'out . . . into this world . . . this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time . . .  
in a god for— . . . what? . . . girl? . . . yes . . . tiny little girl . . . into this . . . out into this . . .  
. before her time . . . godforsaken hole called . . . called . . . no matter'

Parataxis is the lack of conjunctions. We must fill in the empty spaces. Beckett, Pinter, modern masters of breath, of pause, of emptiness.

As I said, in my paralipsis, I'm not going to dwell on these matters of technique. What is truly important is to know that true haiku catapults us into infinity; it creates an aperture which not only suggests infinity, it actually allows us through, into infinity. Haiku is a portal to emptiness. Those who are afraid to enter may fiddle around with the form of haiku, with words and images, but will never experience the spirit of haiku – impossible – without going through that portal.

Going through that portal is 'a naked moment', to use a term in Patricia Donegan's book, *Haiku Mind* (Shambhala Books). Mahavir, who said 'Know the moment', Mahavir had only the cloak on his back, which he gave to a beggar, then off he goes into the forest, naked. Through the portal. Empty.

Entering this emptiness need not be a dramatic event. It can be an ordinary event of extraordinary beauty and significance. Let us taste a haiku now:

the spirit, the truth  
of silent prayer —  
just the moon on the road

Kikusha-Ni (1752-1826)

Kikusha-Ni, the wandering nun, what did she see when she visited Yoshino?

on the summer hills  
I saw a cloud – that's all  
there was in Yoshino

To follow her path today – the path of wanderers such as Santoka – requires a mindset which Kaneko Tohta calls *teijū hyōhaku* or settled wandering.

I take my hat off to Kikusha-Ni. In these two delicate haiku the spirit of emptiness is embodied in prayerful humility. The wandering nun shows us that the haiku path unfailingly rewards us with the surprise of the new. There is no need for gimmickry or sensationalism – the now is new. It has never been experienced before, arising as it does out of emptiness and its infinite creative potential!

Let us lose ourselves to emptiness, over and over again. There can be no clinging to emptiness. Dōgen says:

The track of the swan through the sky  
Never leaves traces –  
Its path is soon forgotten

Let's not forget that the poets and artists most admired by Bashō had the recluse, wandering spirit of Kikusha-Ni: the Chinese Li Bo, Hanshan and Du Fu as well as

the Japanese masters of renku, haiga and the tea ceremony. We must study the masters and study those masters whom the masters themselves admired. Then we begin to see into the life of haiku. In the book *Finding Wisdom in East Asian Classics* by William Theodore De Bary (Columbia University Press) we find a comment on this haiku by Bashō:

*shizukesa ya  
iwa ni shmiiru  
semi no koe*

how still it is!  
stinging into the stones,  
the locusts' trill

Our attention is drawn to the frequency of the 'i' vowel in this haiku – the sound of the locust, or cicada. For me, this sound can be reproduced better in Irish than in English. English closes off sounds with its consonants. Irish and Japanese have more going on in terms of vowel music. Here's the Irish (This is not a subjective thing – the vowels in Irish add more resonance and echo than is possible in English):

nach ciúin atá sé –  
clocha á ndingeadh  
ag giolc an chiocáda

As an aside: are Celtic languages suited to haiku in some special way?

“The infinite delicacy of feeling which characterises the Celtic race is closely allied to its need of concentration. Natures that are little capable of expansion are nearly always those that feel most deeply, for the deeper the feeling, the less it tends to express itself.” This curious observation is from *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and other essays* by Ernest Renan (1823-1892).

I learn from De Bary that four versions of Bashō's cicada haiku exist and the sound of the cicada goes from a verb to mean 'seep' to a verb that means to 'cut' or 'penetrate' or 'sting'. This was an enlightening insight for me. I felt, rightly or wrongly, that Bashō was attempting to cut through materiality itself, to find and explore the nature of silence and emptiness. The sound of the cicada travels through the empty air and stabs the rocks, seeps into them, stings them, cuts through them. And then? It dies in emptiness. Just as a mantra, that is intoned silently, enters the mind and subsides therein, in the vast field of emptiness.

Let me tell you how I teach haiku – through the grace of the masters. Taking haiku by Issa, Bashō, Buson or lesser-known masters, I ask a participant to write that haiku on a whiteboard, where nothing was before. You could have written that, I say (but you didn't). We look at the haiku for a moment, in silence, and after contemplating its beauty, simplicity, emptiness and depth we discuss it, a little, and talk about some aspect or another of haiku aesthetics. And then someone is asked to erase the haiku and we're left again with a tabula rasa. Emptiness. And so it goes. Each haiku moment is the

birth and the death of a moment. We die and are reborn in haiku. This is the truth of haiku but we mustn't become cultish about it!

I have a lot of respect and admiration for the haikuists of Croatia but I fear that the founder and president of The Croatian Haiku Association may be sounding a cultish note when he suggests – if I read his book *Haiku Sequences* correctly (it's full of typos) – he suggests that haiku is the antidote to the evils of the world: on his list are Mexican drug cartels, the IRA, Al Qaida and even same-sex marriage! I'll be steering away from those topics, you'll be very glad to hear.

Let's take another little haiku break now:

picked  
by an old woman's hand  
herbs green and glowing  
Soen Nakagawa

I'm often left speechless by such haiku. Wordless. Everything has gone into that haiku, glowingly. Everything! I'm left with nothing . . . Until the next haiku event and so on in the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Self-emptying is called 'kenosis' in the Christian tradition and the greatest haijin of modern times to embody the spirit of self-emptying was the short-lived Svetlana Marisova (1990-2011). This is a haiku she wrote three months before her death:

swan song . . .  
the limb-loosening rush  
of dark feathers

I was told recently that Svetlana never existed. She was a mere fabrication. Doesn't matter to me. We are all fabrications, of some sort or another.

There is another kind of emptiness in us as well and it is connected with emotion, desire, memory, nostalgia and dream, a gnawing emptiness which haiku can momentarily fill and yet leave us empty again, as in this contemporary Japanese haiku by Fujiki Tomoko:

みちのくや身の裡に雪棲みならし  
*michinoku ya mi no uchi ni yuki suminarashi*

the far north country . . .  
somewhere within myself  
the snow lives on

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Tobias Wolff's phrase 'synaptic lightning' is a memorable description of what happens in a true haiku. I say 'happens'. Yes. Something is happening, a synaptic lightning and there's nothing happening in real haiku that is not true, occurring now and in the endless realm.

Haikuists are not alone, of course, in their experience of the endless realm. Their experience has been validated by others, of course, not all of them artists, or mystics. *The Endless Realm* is the title of a poem by Sun Ra which has these lines:

Nothing is mine  
How treasured rich am I  
I have the treasure of nothing . . .  
Vast endless nothing  
That branches out in the realm beyond realm ...

This type of writing cannot easily be faked. It arises from an experience that shatters barriers. Emerson, who hated quotes, is nevertheless one of the most quotable of modern philosophers and he says: 'Let us be silent, that we may hear the whisper of God.'

Haiku create silences, arise from silence, return to silence. How? Haiku shut out the noise of the world in concentrating on pure phenomena – even when such phenomena themselves contain sound. It becomes a silenced sound, a return to the beginning of sound, the first quack of a duck, or the cry of a pheasant that has just swallowed a whole field, the silence before and after that cry.

A haiku has the ability to present phenomena with such intensity that we feel something unique is happening. Emerson again: 'If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years how would men believe and adore ... but every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile ...'

Had he known about haiku, Emerson would, I believe, have championed the form as an important contribution to the world's wisdom literature, for he says, 'The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.'

It is so for us too, is it not? I think he would have been pleased to champion haiku. Again, he says:

'Even in the mud and scum of things, something always, always sings.' This is haiku philosophy, as I understand it.

What, in recent years, have I learned about haiku? Nothing. Let me expand. On first reading R H Blyth, my first encounter with haiku, I believe I learned all that I needed to learn, that is to say, I absorbed the essentials, tasted the heart of haiku. Everything else I learned was simply a footnote to that experience, some further exposition of the essentials, some other words, phrases or concepts which elucidated my initial understanding, or refreshed my original initiation, words such as these from Thomas Hoover, for example, commenting on Bashō's famous frog haiku: 'To write this type of poem, the artist must completely disengage – if only for an instant – all his interpretive faculties.'

These words simply opened up new ways of re-experiencing and interpreting my first experience of haiku. Hoover says that what happens with real haiku is that the haijin 'becomes one with the world around him, allowing his craft to operate instinctively . . .' This makes perfect sense to me and the process is very well described when he says that 'this instantaneous perception moves directly from his senses to his innermost understanding, without having to travel through his interpretive faculties'.

Very well said! Haiku that I enjoy reading (and writing, or translating) follow this electric pattern which Hoover describes so insightfully. Those haiku that I read (or write) which do not conform to Hoover's description of the event invariably leave me unmoved and disappointed.

Incidentally, Hoover's book *Zen Culture* is available as a free download, a policy I approve of. Who wants to get rich on haiku, on nothingness, which is already such a treasure in itself.

Once visited by the grace of haiku – the art of emptiness – there is nothing more to learn because with it comes a vision that is perfect in itself and renews itself. What we learn thereafter is simply some new way of explaining or describing the experience.

Not that Blyth is perfect in every way. His dismissal of Shinto as a superstition reflected his inability to disengage from the tenets that informed his own Western upbringing.

OK, I hear you saying – gimme some of this emptiness. 'Some' of this emptiness? It's all or nothing. Fine! How do I do it? By letting go, as Mahavir did, letting go of his last stitch. Letting go as the Afro-American master Richard Wright demonstrates:

I am nobody:  
A red sinking autumn sun  
Took my name away

For all his insights, Blyth never fully managed to let go of his own cultural trappings.

The disciples of Bashō were very keen to transmit the precious knowledge imparted to them by their master. One of those disciples, Hattori Tohō (1657 -1730) says in *The Red Booklet* something about the spontaneous nature of haiku which is quite fascinating; he says that the haiku must come 'before the illumination of the object disappears'. This is beautifully and sensitively expressed. It suggests to me that the haiku moment is a moment of grace, an illuminated moment, but we only have an instant to know it, to possess it and be possessed by it – the act of interpenetration – and then the illumination fades, disappears. Now! There! You have it, this is it – the secret of secrets. (I'm beginning to sound cultish myself now).

Better take another haiku break. Two haiku by Geraldine Clinton Little, a name we seldom if ever hear in her native Ireland:

the shadow  
of a single buttercup  
reshaped by wind  
  
the white spider  
whiter still  
in the lightning's flash

~

With landscape and natural phenomena, we really only get one shot at it – since landscape is alive, not frozen. Responding, as I do, to landscape photography and to works of art, usually from the school of Realism or Impressionism, one *can* get a second

chance and, even, a number of chances. I have written different haiku in response to the same photograph by American master photographer Ron Rosenstock, a genius at capturing the pervading emptiness and luminosity of landscape.

Is 'interpenetration' possible with photography as it is with, let us say, the pine tree which Bashō singled out in his advice, 'Go to the pine'? Of course it is, when it is the haiku mind, the beginner's mind, the innocent mind that is brought to the photograph. The great Cartier-Bresson says that 'the creative act lasts but a brief moment, a lightning instant of give-and-take'. Please, note that! Give and take.

In my green and salad days I was deeply influenced by the images of Henri Cartier-Bresson, the French photographer who incidentally was in Ramana Maharshi's ashram at the time of the sage's death. Cartier-Bresson says lots of things which might be of interest to haiku artists. This for instance: 'The photograph itself doesn't interest me. I want only to capture a minute part of reality.' I find that interesting – and inspiring. As is this: 'To photograph is to hold one's breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It's at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.'

Turning to painting, I would like to recall something said by Su Shi (1037-1101): 'In painting bamboos, one must have bamboo formed in one's breast; at the time of painting, one concentrates and sees what one wants to paint. Immediately one follows the idea ... like a hawk swooping down on a rabbit. With a moment's hesitation it would be lost ...'

These are the secrets of haiku enlightenment, of the art of emptiness. Please do not take them too seriously. An enlightened being once said that enlightenment is not such a wondrous thing at all – 'it emits less light than a firefly's buttocks!'

I have only very recently started to compose haiku in response to art. I was delighted to discover that the previously mentioned Geraldine Clinton Little published haiku responses to 18<sup>th</sup> century prints by Suzuki Harunobu. This one was first published in *Haiku Canada* (Vol. 4, No. 4):

heavy with snow – the  
pine of a thousand years  
and the bamboo shoots

Nishiyama Sōin (1605 -1682), a contemporary and acquaintance of Bashō, in *One Hundred Buddhist Verses*, says: 'Above all, the way of haiku is to put emptiness first and substance last . . .' Does the way of haiku – 'emptiness first' – have wider implications other than the author's intentions, which were literary and spiritual, I take it. Yes, why not? 'Emptiness first' can be a critique of the excesses of capitalist consumer culture, for instance.

Haiku is a form of soul travel, from nothingness to nothingness. Masters such as Onitsura (1661-1738), who began to learn the art of haiku at the age of eight, have shown the way:

my soul  
dives in and out of the water



with the cormorant  
(tr.Blyth)

Unlike other literary forms, the totality of each haiku reverberates back to the reader, and there is a silence and an emptiness at the heart of it.

A haiku by Buson:

in Matsushima  
a man gazing at the moon –  
empty seashells

Is he talking about himself or alluding to Bashō who was once so overcome by the moonlight in Matsushima that no words came to him. Empty seashells!

~ ~ ~

As a peace-loving Irishman, I am conscious of speaking to you in Victoria, on the verge of Victoria Day! We associate Victorianism, it's fair to say, with technological determinism. The Victorian era marked the beginning of large-scale industrialisation and globalisation which has been so detrimental to natural habitats; it was also an era of the further expansion of Anglicisation which has had a devastating impact on indigenous cultures. The Victorian era propelled us into the inventiveness that would lead to the technological age and our eventual divorce from the sights, sounds, aromas, silences and rhythms of nature – the very life blood of haiku itself. Victorian inventiveness led to our own age, the Age of Mass Distraction, as it has been called, in which every minute of the day seems to be a conspiracy against silence, as Green Anarchists proclaim. This is not the spirit of Issa – Issa whose favourite, trained fishing-cormorant was the one that surfaced with his beak . . . empty.

The Victorian era ushered in an age of scientific rationalism and Darwinism. What's wrong with Darwinism, you might ask? The Darwinist doctrine is 'the survival of the fittest', a doctrine which justified the Establishment's indifference to Famine in Ireland and India, for instance. This doctrine is not the way of haiku, an art that is imbued with compassion for all things.

Had the age of the machine been informed by the spirit of Shinto (a worldview disparaged, unfortunately, by Blyth), then before we might think of discarding and replacing any of our machines – a car, a typewriter, or a computer, say – we would first bow to it, pray to it, thank it for its service and wish it all the best in its new, recycled life to come!

The Victorians were all out to win and win they did, in many ways. The will to win is the culture of our times, in sports, in business, in wars. Joseph Heller's dark masterpiece *Something Happened* has the gym master complaining about the narrator's uncompetitive son: 'He has to learn now that he has to be better than the next fellow.' Let's hope that this odious philosophy never infects the haiku community. Once it does, with all its egoic trappings, that's the end of haiku – and the beginning of **myku**.

(I know enough about the history of haiku to realise that haiku groups in the past were riddled with rivalry and it's no better today. There's nothing wrong with

argumentation and conflicting ideologies – as long as such behaviour falls short of feeding the ego).

Lest I sound like a conservative traditionalist in these matters, there's no reason why gendai haiku – all forms of modern, avant-garde haiku – should not exist alongside (but not in place of) haiku as we all know it.

The Victorian ethic seems, to me, to be the opposite of *muyō*, which is Japanese not only for 'emptiness' but also for 'uselessness'. Usefulness, indeed, rather than uselessness, seems to have informed the ideals of Victorian entrepreneurship. Is usefulness compatible with haiku? I doubt it. *Muyō*, emptiness, should inform our lives and our haiku; so, let us all then be *muyōsha*, useless persons. To be an accomplished *muyōsha*, a useless person, has never been very difficult for me. (Ask my wife).

This talk is now coming to a close. Haiku has been described as a way of life, a way of living. If it is to survive in the West, each generation should remind itself of what that implies. It is more, much more, than a literary pursuit. It is a call to each and every one of us to weave into our lives something of the essence of the *muyōsha*.

In conclusion, let's have a very brief look at the life of one such *muyōsha*, shall we? The previously mentioned contemporary of Bashō, ex-samurai, now *muyōsha*, Nishiyama Sōin:

'A useless monk on a pilgrimage to the western provinces, I know the use of uselessness and the pleasures of pleasurelessness. Without purpose or discriminations, I know only the virtue of good health. Cared for by villagers and spring blossoms, and teased by the autumn foliage, I pass the years wandering wherever my heart and feet may lead me. As for the idle hours of my journey, I fritter them away composing haiku [haikai]... Above all, the way of haiku is to put emptiness first and substance last.'

[Quoted in *The Aesthetics of Strangeness*, W. Puck Brecher, University of Hawai'i Press, 2023)

Thus ends our discourse on Haiku, the Art of Emptiness. And may it harm no one.

[Gabriel Rosenstock attended Haiku Canada 2015 courtesy of Cultúr Éireann/Culture Ireland)