
ESSAYS

THE HAIKU OF JULIEN VOCANCE (PART I)

Paul Miller; haiku translated by David Burleigh

While an awareness of Japanese poetic forms was existent in France in the late 1800s, it was restricted to a small circle of academia. However, in the early years of the twentieth century, French translations of Basil Chamberlain's English-language essay "Bashō and the Japanese Poetical Epigram" as well as W.G. Aston's *History of Japanese Literature* became available to a wider audience. One French poet, Paul-Louis Couchoud, who had travelled to Japan on scholarship in September 1903, and who was familiar with Chamberlain's essay, returned with an interest in the genre and a curiosity to see how it could be applied locally. In 1905, Couchoud, accompanied by painter André Faure and sculptor Albert Poncin, worked on a barge from Paris to La Charité-sur-Loire. Vocance, a good friend of the trio, later wrote of the trip: "A sort of niche was arranged between the crates of sugar, provided with a tarpaulin, some blankets and straw bales."¹ On breaks from handling cargo, the three Frenchmen wrote the first original haiku in French which they anonymously published in a small volume of thirty copies entitled *Au fil de l'eau* (Along the Waterways).

As might be expected, some of the haiku in the collection are derivative of specific Japanese haiku. However, others are original and describe daily life along the canals.

With one hand she beats the laundry	In the violet evening
With the other she arranges	That delightfully arrived.
The hair on her forehead.	We lug sugar sacks. ²

Bertrand Agostini, in his essay, "The Development of French Haiku in the First Half of the 20th Century," published in *Modern Haiku* 32.2 and

available on our website, notes, “Couchoud carefully uses the themes of flowers, insects and trees such as dragonfly, nasturtia, willow, which are traditional Japanese themes. The result is a series of interesting pictures of French rustic life.”³

Couchoud would publish his thoughts on haiku in his essay “Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon” (“The Lyrical Epigrams of Japan”) in five issues of the journal *Les Lettres* in 1906. The essay included adapted translations of Japanese masters by Chamberlain and Claude Maître, since Couchoud didn’t know Japanese.

In his essay, Couchoud agreed with Basil Chamberlain that the haiku’s two essential qualities were brevity and suggestiveness, but whereas Chamberlain was dismissive of haiku as a serious art form, Couchoud saw value in the genre. Couchoud presented a rather romantic view of Japanese haiku masters, yet his understanding of haiku was good for the times. Some quotes from his essay:

[The haikai] is the simplest picture, in three movements of the brush, a sketch which is a brief touch or impression. Abstractions are entirely deleted.

Properly speaking, a haikai cannot be witty because it is devoid of reflection or comment.

They inevitably betray the sentiment ... which animated the composer ... which has all the personality of a definite individual and of a definite instant.⁴

The essay had a major influence upon French poets and between its publication and the mid 1920s—the watershed years of the “*Mouvement Hai-Kai*”—several poets published attempts at haiku.

Julien Vocance was the *nom de plume* of Joseph Seguin, born May 5, 1878, in Lyon, France, the second child to Augustin Seguin and Marguerite de Montgolfier.⁵ His father was a mining engineer who sculpted and painted in his spare time; his mother died when Vocance was young.

After completing a bachelor's degree from the Université de Lyon in 1897, he served ten months of a three-year enlistment in the French Army. He moved to Paris in 1898 to continue his studies at École Libre des Sciences Politiques from which he obtained a Law degree. "Sciences Po," as the university is nicknamed, is a selective university that serves as a gateway to civil positions. Seven of the last eight French presidents are alumni, including the current President, Emmanuel Macron.

After graduation, in 1903, Vocance accepted employment at the Ministry of Public Works in the Directorate of Railways and Waterways in Paris. He married Madeleine Mahieu in 1908 and a son was born the following year. Unfortunately, the son would not survive a bout with diphtheria. In 1911 a daughter, Genevieve, was born. Vocance was appointed deputy chief of the office in 1912.

Upon the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, he was mobilized into the French infantry, where he would rise to the rank of sergeant. However, on May 4, 1915, in the trenches of the Champagne region, he was blinded by a piece of shrapnel, losing his right eye. The shrapnel was removed at hospital but he would suffer headaches for the remainder of his life. He was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* with palms for his service and he was later made an officer of the Legion of Honor. After recovery, he returned to Paris where he resumed his job with the Directorate.

After the war Vocance led a dual life of public service and the arts. Visitors to the family home on the rue Sèvres included the writers Couchoud, René Maublanc, Jean Paulhan, and many others; as well as painters and musicians. He was especially close to Albert Poncin, a fellow Lyonnaise, and the family often visited the sculptor's studio. In 1936 he entertained Kuni Matsuo, the editor of the journals *La Revue Franco-Nipponne* and its successor *France-Japon*, as well as Kyoshi Takahama, Shiki's successor and esteemed editor of the Japanese journal *Hototogisu*. Vocance took an early retirement in 1937, having risen to director. He was again honored by the Legion of Honor, this time in a civil capacity.

With the Second World War advancing, in 1939, Vocance and his wife moved from Paris to a small house in Annonay, Ardèche, where the family had connections and where they had spent summer vacations. He died in 1954 and is buried in the family vault.

Vocance was part of a group of students who had met at Paul-Louis Couchoud's Paris apartment on the rue Champollion as early as 1900. He had read *Au fil de l'eau* as well as "Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon," but by his own account he didn't write haiku himself until years later. In his essay "Sur le haikai français" ("On the French Haikai"), published in the journal *France-Japon* in 1939, Vocance expressed regret at not accompanying Couchoud and the others on their famous canal trip. However, he would more than contribute to French haiku during the First World War by writing the haiku sequence "Cent Visions de Guerre" ("One Hundred Visions of War"), a reference to Katsushika Hokusai's famous series of woodblock prints, "One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji." Vocance's sequence details his experiences in the French trenches through one hundred haiku. "Cent Visions de Guerre" was first published in *La Grande Revue* in May 1916 and would go on to be reprinted in newspapers, journals, and books. Interestingly, Vocance originally planned to title his work "A Hundred Views of War," but he was dissuaded by the editor of *La Grande Revue*.

It is worth noting that the pen-name Julien Vocance comes from the small town of Saint Julien Vocance, which lies a few kilometers from the family home in Annonay. In looking for a reason why Vocance adopted a pen name, two theories suggest themselves. The first is that he wanted to separate his professional life from his artistic one. A second, perhaps more plausible reason, is that publishing poems that detail the realities of war at a time of war might be seen as unpatriotic—especially since Vocance was on a civil career-track. In fact, René Maublanc, Marxist writer, haikuist, and contemporary of Vocance, reports that one haiku from a later sequence on the war published shortly after "Cent Visions de Guerre" was censored by the war-time government.⁶

Before any discussion of Vocance's individual haiku, it must be understood that at this point in French haiku's development, poets were working in poorly charted territory. Both Chamberlain and Couchoud had emphasized the brevity and suggestiveness of haiku, however, little if any mention had been made of the seasonal component that locates it culturally and emotionally, or the importance of the cut—at least until interaction with Kyoshi Takahama in 1936. In this way, much like other early

poets who discovered haiku in isolation, he was creating poetic work from what he understood of Japanese haiku but tailored for his personal uses. He wrote in the *France-Japon* essay:

But first let us say what the French hai-kai must not be, that is to say a sterile imitation, a simple pastiche of its Japanese predecessor. We are not one of those who confuse the container with its contents, the value of a perfume with the shape of the bottle which contains it. So let us reject the idea of imposing on the hai-kai the Japanese rule of seventeen syllables.

Second, we retain the hai-kai's brevity.... And this brevity will oblige the poet not only to choose the most expressive word, put in its proper place, but also to appeal to all the malleable elements of language.⁷

Additionally, in a letter to Kyoshi after a 1936 conference between French and Japanese haikuists, he wrote:

You taught us during your visit to Paris the depths of your haiku, that is to say, the deep feelings of nature and the nuances that characterize the different seasons.... I do not seek to make a pastiche of your Japanese poem, but to be inspired by it to the extent that it can enrich our poetry.⁸

It is worth noting a comment by René Maublanc from his article “Un mouvement japonisant dans la littérature contemporaine: le haïkai français” (“A Japanese movement in contemporary literature: the French Haikai”), in which he declared that the French haiku contains elements which the Japanese haiku does not, notably: “psychological and sentimental analysis.”⁹ William J. Higginson would echo that assessment when he wrote that “many of Vocance’s ‘visions’ are rather grandiose and sentimental.” Yet he acknowledged that “some are sharply focused and come close to hitting the haiku nail on the head.”¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, “Cent Visions de Guerre” was first published in *La Grande Revue* in 1916. In the brief paragraph preceding the sequence Vocance introduces the reader to the Japanese haiku, yet he doesn’t explain it much beyond the narrow concept of “the form” of three lines.

From his Introduction:

These are quick impressions of the campaign, written in the very moment they were lived, "a hundred visions of war." The picture looks strange at first; it borrows the form of *hai-kai*, a little poem of three verses in which the Japanese render either a state of mind, or a species of nature or life. And the form was quite natural for these scattered notations and these direct visions of war.

Readers will note the use of the diminutive words "quick," "strange," "little," and "scattered." They could be excused for thinking the sequence—as well as the genre—an unimportant, disposable one. They would soon learn otherwise.

The first haiku in the sequence describes the setting for much of the sequence's action: the trenches of the French army. Because of the defensive capabilities of the trench system, France and Germany had entered into a virtual stalemate by 1915. It is estimated that close to 1,500 miles of trenches were dug in World War I. Guarded by barbed wire and mines, trenches were normally at least eight feet deep to allow soldiers to move about with some protection from enemy fire, although there were no straight sections longer than a dozen meters. While this construction isolated individual groups of soldiers, it protected the whole. The trenches were often flooded because the water table was often higher than the depth of the trench. A series of wooden duckboards served as flooring in places. Overall, the trenches were rudimentary structures.

The first haiku in the sequence sets the scene. There is a wonderful irony in the use of the word "civilizations."

Two banks of earth,
Two networks of telephone wire:
Two civilizations.

Structurally, Vocance retained the capitalized, punctuated, three-line format used by his teacher Couchoud. Vocance heavily punctuated his poems, more so than Couchoud, perhaps to draw the moments out, or perhaps to make them seem less insignificant in the face of contemporary

French poetry. In his essay in *France-Japon* he stated that he didn't feel bound by the seventeen-syllable Japanese format. At times he goes well beyond that limit; in one example, to thirty syllables. Additionally, Vocance made occasional use of end rhyme.

The haiku in "Cent Visions de Guerre" contain numerous objective details, such as barbed wire, trenches, canons, corpses, rain, rockets, and war-planes that he uses to build a realistic war-scene in which to situate the reader. Additionally, he includes specific terms such as the *Taube* ("Dove," a German plane), *Minenwerfer* (German mine launcher), as well as the 77mm and 120mm caliber guns, that only a soldier would know. Such details lend authenticity to the sequence.

Fifteen days at ground level,
My eye picks out the least bumps,
The tiniest plants.

In this haiku, Vocance looks out from his perspective in a trench. The reader can imagine only the top of his head peering out into what was termed "No Man's Land," the space between French and German lines. The English poet, Wilfred Owen, who was killed in the trenches of World War I, described "No Man's Land" as "like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness."¹¹ The craters were the results of exploded shells and often contained the bodies of fallen soldiers, some of whom were still alive—their cries audible.

In this terrible wasteland, Vocance focuses on some tiny plants, made so much more vulnerable by their surroundings. It is likely he saw himself and his fellow soldiers the same way.

My head hardly down,
A mosquito buzzes and suddenly
The earth ridge caves in.

Even the simple act of sticking one's head up beyond the safety of the trench wall risked death. There are several poems on this theme, including one which appears to detail his own injury—the wound in the eye

that would remove him from the trenches. In the following poem, as mentioned earlier, the numbers refer to the 77mm field gun and 120mm howitzer that the Germans used.

My anxious ear tests the sounds:
Ours ... the Krauts' ... 77 ... 120 ...
To the right ... ahead ... above ... hit!

As would be expected, Vocance's haiku are populated with soldiers who duck, scan the skies, leap shouting from the trenches, hunt for pests in their clothes, and through it all, wait for their turn to die.

Full on the workers,
The searchlight
Makes them fall to the ground.

In this haiku, rescue workers are looking for injured men at night, or perhaps these are men reinforcing or extending the trenches. A searchlight from the enemy makes them quickly take cover, afraid that they will be the next target. The phrase "fall to the ground" doesn't exclude the reading that some might have been shot.

However, not all enemies carry weapons.

Into his flannel
His nails go, picking at
The little beasts.

The "flannels" were the flannel shirts worn by the French soldiers and the "little beasts" were lice. Since the soldiers had little chance to regularly bathe or wash their clothes, lice were prevalent. This smaller war against the pests is a good contrast to the larger war and emphasizes the lack of respite of the soldiers.

Interestingly, one scholar notes Vocance's use of multiple pronouns in the sequence, i.e.: "My head," "the workers," "His nails," "Above us," "We did not."

The referent representative of these pronouns is never named, however the reader can easily infer the referent in context: the soldiers in their community and their individuality.¹²

While ultimately Vocance is the main witness, the poetic actor or actors in each haiku can often be any generic soldier or soldiers—in other words, no particular soldier. This narrative approach, used over a hundred poems, blurs the separation between the individual and the larger army, creating a universal and impersonal narrator. This may be how many of the soldiers came to see themselves: as disposable pieces on a chessboard. And perhaps how Vocance intended the reader to identify.

The haiku shown so far have been fairly objective in their depiction of the war. Not surprisingly, considering the early French understanding of haiku and also Vocance's rejection of some traditional norms, this is not true of all the haiku in the sequence. Several haiku veer into the "sentimental analysis" that both Maublanc and Higginson describe.

The fine cold rain, in lashing gusts,	Above these bones,
Penetrates our bodies and our souls,	These fireworks...
And the very earth itself.	Once again sacrilege!

The inclusion of souls in the first poem, despite the context, is melodramatic. The abstraction signals the reader that the scene isn't realistic which takes away from its powerful immediacy. In the second haiku, shells continue to fall on men already dead. While the haiku contains a nice internal juxtaposition of images, the last line acts purely as a commentary on the preceding lines and isn't needed to make the point. That said, while such overt interpretation is frowned upon in contemporary American haiku, the classical Japanese haiku of which Vocance would have been made aware of through Couchoud's translations provides several examples in which it is acceptable. For example:

Pines at the doorway!
 They mark the miles
 Of the road to eternity.¹³

Raizan

However, in some cases, Vocance's haiku include figurative language not normally used in traditional Japanese haiku, as in the following poem:

Death has surely dug
 These gigantic furrows
 Whose seeds are men.

This is an eerily beautiful poem, albeit not necessarily a haiku. While the objective details are still present, they are overshadowed by the personification of Death and the horticultural metaphor, which allows the reader a chance to step back from the scene, to become an interpreter rather than participant. The reader will be reminded of Couchoud's conclusions that "abstractions are entirely deleted" and "a haikai ... is devoid of reflection or comment."

However, some figurative language is, perhaps, the only way to describe what Vocance experienced.

On its badly greased carriage,
 The shell very high, unhurried,
 Over us has passed.

In this haiku, a shell passes slowly overhead with a screeching whistle. Vocance uses the metaphor of a "badly greased carriage" as a way to describe the awful scream of the shell as it passes overhead. Alternative descriptors such as "shrieking" or "screeching" would be inadequate substitutes for the metaphor.

Other metaphors in his haiku are surreal.

Cla, cla, cla, cla, cla ...
 The sinister noise of a machine gun,
 A skeleton counting its fingers on its teeth.

Something worth investigating, and this essay is not the place to do so, is a possible link between French surreal haiku (such as the preceding poem) and what turned out to be *Shinkō* or "New Wave" haiku in Japan

in the 1930s. Given the exchange of haiku and tanka between the two countries, starting in 1926, it seems unlikely that France's most honored sequence wouldn't have been translated into Japanese.¹⁴

In "Cent Visions de Guerre," Vocance does not shy away from the horror of the battlefield. A particular horror, and a subject he often describes in the sequence, are the bodies that litter the battlefield. Vocance describes "corpses between the trenches, / Blackening for three months," an "advance lookout trips / On a green corpse," and he himself steps into the decomposing body of a horse. Of the horse, he accompanies the image with a wet onomatopoeic sound.

Into the vertebrae
Of the badly buried horse
Goes my foot: *floche* ...

While many of the haiku contrast the horrors of war with a sense of normalcy, this is especially noticeable in the latter part of the sequence when the injured Vocance is taken to hospital. Readers will recall that in actuality Vocance lost an eye to shrapnel.

The white of linens, of walls, of slabs,
Poorly hides
The pallor of the sick.

The hospital haiku include subjects such as white linens, nuns who work in the hospital, and little girls with ice cream cones—among the dead and wounded. If the world of the trenches was unnatural in the first half of the sequence, we see the world of the hospital in much the same way. To Vocance, it was not a restful place. One haiku refers to "Nights of anxiety, nights of terror"¹⁵ while another refers specifically to his lost vision:

This is truly the kingdom of shadows
Wandering and groping,
In the eternal night.

The section includes a frightening reference to the surgical rooms:

The wounded on the stretchers
 Quietly await their turn
 To enter the lions' den.

A few of the final haiku in the sequence detail the wounded and, as would be expected from a man who was wounded himself, question the cost of the war on the individual soldiers.

The original version of “Cent Visions de Guerre” ends when Vocance is discharged from the military hospital and writes to his remaining brothers in arms:

My comrades, my brothers,
 We have suffered enough ...
 Alas! you will win without me.

For reasons unknown, twenty years later, in the version included in his collected haiku, he added two additional haiku which dedicate the sequence to the same brothers in arms, but from the perspective of a veteran writing years after the conflict has ended. This has the effect of creating a temporal distance between the war itself and Vocance’s writing of it—and in turn the reader’s reading of it—which unfortunately dilutes the power of these individual haiku.

As might be expected, contemporary critical reaction to the sequence was overwhelmingly positive. Émile Vuillermoz, a well-known critic, wrote approvingly in *le Temps* that Vocance had “a sharp vision,” and asked: “Is this formula of lyricism in which emotion is born of a discreet suggestion not, in its fine modesty, very beautifully French?”¹⁶ Charles-Henry Hirsch, in *Mercure de France*, called the sequence “truly original,” but took issue with Vocance’s claim in the sequence’s introduction that the poems were “quick impressions,” suggesting instead that Vocance was a “meticulous sculptor.”¹⁷ However, these and other critics had minimal knowledge of the genre and were most likely reacting to the sequence’s originality and rawness.

A year after the publication of “Cent Visions de Guerre,” in 1917, while the war was still ongoing, and after Vocance’s discharge, he published additional haiku in the journal *La Grande Revue* under the title “Fantômes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui” (“Ghosts of Yesterday and Today”). As mentioned previously, one of its poems was censored by the government (it would later appear in the sequence “Protée”). It is worth mentioning that in France, in World War I, all publications had to be submitted to government censors prior to publication. In this environment, considering that casualty lists were routinely edited down, it is somewhat surprising that both “Cent Visions de Guerre” and “Fantômes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui” were published at all.

The first section of the sequence, “Yesterday,” contains thirty-nine additional haiku on Vocance’s wartime experiences, while the second half, “Today,” contains forty haiku on the aftermath of battle.

I felt, small oval tag,
When I placed you around my neck,
The cold of the cleaver.

The first haiku finds him recalling the first time he put on his dog tags, which felt cold as a cleaver. Other haiku mine similar territory as the previous sequence. However, the later parts of “Fantômes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui” detail a break from the battlefields, perhaps Vocance’s own experiences after he was discharged, and show soldiers without limbs on the Parisian streets, sleeping on train station benches, and reuniting with their families.

In one haiku, Vocance creates a strong juxtaposition between the physical memorials that the soldiers bear—their scars and missing limbs—and the memorials to the more famous generals.

The one-legged little soldiers
Gaze with melancholy on
The tomb of the Grand Emperor.

A powerful haiku. The clear cut between the parts and a lack of explanation forces the reader to find their own meaning in the poem.

The second section of the sequence, “Today,” is broken into three further sections. The first finds Vocance exploring the outskirts of a city—most likely Paris—whose suburbs he finds “gloomy and black.” Paris was at times near the front, so it had been bombarded by German aircraft and artillery.

I climb the slippery slope of the fortifications
And suddenly find myself at the top of a cliff
Dominating a sea of ruins: the suburbs.

Vocance—in the sequence—retreats to a region in the southeast of France in which he has family connections, where he climbs mountains and refreshes himself. The last section is domestic and finds the poet happily reunited with his family.

Our bodies having trembled deliciously,
Our hearts promise themselves
Eternal celebrations.

One hesitates to call this a haiku because it is strictly a commentary without any participation required of the reader. Unfortunately, it is similar to other poems in the later part of “Fantômes...” The sequence is interesting, however, because the reader can move through the haiku—from war experiences to civilian life—while at the same time move from haiku that mainly describe things—that “show” things—to haiku that mostly “tell” things.

It might be argued that the reason for this change in style is because in the French trenches the poet was essentially powerless. His reactions to the war were just that—reactions—while after his release from the hospital, he was once again a husband, a father, and a director—and was expected to wear those roles again; roles that required some sense of authority. Vocance undoubtedly also felt the weight of his new role as well-known public haikuist with the responsibilities for promotion of

the genre that came along with that role. An important distinction between a war-time poet and a post-war poet would be the time available to Vocance to think about the individual poetic scenes, and how the genre could be used to do more than just illustrate them, which may have led to the more didactic haiku.

Part II of this essay, which will appear in the summer issue, will explore Vocance's haiku output after the war. Up to this point, his ambitions had been limited to reporting on what he had experienced in World War I and its immediate aftermath. Later sequences would vary between these kinds of experiential haiku and haiku that could possibly illustrate a man's life, including what he called "his grudges, loves, ambitions, hopes."¹⁸ While the majority of his haiku written during this period don't have the war as subject matter, the same questions of "showing" versus "telling" will come into play.

Notes

¹ Vocance, Julien. "Sur le Haikai francais" in *France-Japon* #38, Feb. 1939.

² Couchoud, Paul-Louis. *Au fil de l'eau*. From <https://terebess.hu/english/haiku/couchoud.html>. Accessed October 31, 2018. Trans. Paul Miller.

³ Agostini, Bertrand. "The Development of French Haiku in the First Half of the 20th Century: Historical Perspectives." *Modern Haiku* 32.2, Summer 2001.

⁴ Couchoud, Paul-Louis. "The Lyric Epigrams of Japan." in *Japanese Impressions, with a Note on Confucius*. John Lane, New York. 1923. Trans. Frances Rumsey.

⁵ The majority of personal information on the Seguin family comes from the document "Extraits des souvenirs de Genevieve Seguin-Besson," provided by her daughter Catherine Besson.

⁶ Maublanc, René. "Un mouvement japonisant dans la littérature contemporaine: le haikāi francais" in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Feb. 1923, Mar. 1923.

⁷ Vocance, Julien. "Sur le Haikai francais."

⁸ Chipot, Dominique and Jean Antonini. *History of Haiku in France*. <http://www.association-francophone-de-haiku.com/haiku/HistoireduHaikuenFrance.pdf>. Accessed October 31, 2018.

⁹ Maublanc, René. “Un mouvement japonisant dans la littérature contemporaine: le haïkai français.”

¹⁰ Higginson, William J. with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook*. McGraw-Hill, New York. 1985.

¹¹ Owen, Wilfred. From <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/legends-what-actually-lived-no-mans-land-between-world-war-i-trenches-180952513/>. Accessed October 31, 2018.

¹² Author unknown. From <http://romansfrançaisdaujourd'hui.blogspot.com/2009/03/introduction-ecrits-en-1915-sur-le.html>. Accessed October 31, 2018.

¹³ Couchoud, Paul-Louis. “The Lyric Epigrams of Japan.” in *Japanese Impressions, with a Note on Confucius*.

¹⁴ The 1923 English translation of Paul-Louis Couchoud’s book *Japanese Impressions*, which included haiku from “Cent Visions de Guerre” was translated into Japanese, however the date of translation isn’t known by this author. Additionally, considering the close relationship between Kuni Matsuo and Vocance, it wouldn’t be surprising if parts of “Cent Visions...” appeared in one of his two journals: *La Revue Franco-Nipponne* and its successor *France-Japon*.

¹⁵ Haiku 85 in the sequence. “Nights of anxiety, nights of terror ... / Memories, this evening, haunt him, / The temperature at 40.” Trans. Burleigh.

¹⁶ Vuillermoz, Émile. “Une Leçon” in *Le Temps*. Paris. May 28, 1916.

¹⁷ Hirsch, Charles Henry. “Revue de la Quinzaine” in *Mercure de France*. Paris. July 1, 1916.

¹⁸ Vocance, Julien. “Sur le Haikai français.”

Selected haiku from *Cent Visions de Guerre* (1916)

1. *Deux levées de terre,
Deux réseaux de fil de fer :
Deux civilisations.*

Two banks of earth,
Two networks of telephone wire:
Two civilizations.

2. *La Mort a creusé sans doute
Ces gigantesques sillons
Dont les graines sont des hommes.*

Death has surely dug
These gigantic furrows
Whose seeds are men.

3. *Au ras du sol depuis quinze jours,
Mon œil en connaît les moindres bosses,
Les moindres herbes.*

Fifteen days at ground level,
My eye picks out the least bumps,
The tiniest plants.

4. *Ma tête à peine rentrée,
Un moustique siffle et soudain
Le crête de terre s'écroule.*

My head hardly down,
A mosquito buzzes and suddenly
The earth ridge caves in.

6. *Rumeurs de veuves, d'orphelins,
Bourdonnantes, comme un essaim,
Sur ces pauvres corps déteints.*

Rumors of widows and orphans,
Droning, in a swarm,
Over these poor worn-out troops.

8. *Sur ces charniers,
Ces feux d'artifice !...
Une fois de plus sacrileges !*

Above these bones,
These fireworks ...
Once again sacrilege!

9. *La pluie fine et froide, en cinglantes rafales,
Pénètre nos os et nos âmes,
Et les moelles de la terre.*

The fine cold rain, in lashing gusts,
Penetrates our bodies and our souls,
And the very earth itself.

11. *En plein sur les travailleurs,
La lumière du projecteur
Les fait se jeter à terre.*

Full on the workers,
The searchlight
Makes them fall to the ground.

12. *Le dragon jailli des ténèbres
Sur nous crache ses dents rougies.
Une voile flottant l'escamote.*

The dragon sprung from the shadows
Spits onto us with its reddened teeth.
A floating veil conceals it.

13. *Par la fatigue écrasés,
Ils ont les poses écroulées
Des cadavres de la plaine.*

Worn out by fatigue,
They have the collapsed postures
Of corpses on the plain.

14. *Sur son chariot mal graissé,
L'obus très haut, pas pressé,
Au-dessus de nous a passé.*

On its badly greased carriage,
The shell very high, unhurried,
Over us has passed.

22. *« Par les obus être couvert de terre !
Vite, vite, qu'ils se rapprochent ! »
Impression de néophyte.*

“Showered with earth by the shells!
Quick, quick, they're getting closer!”
The words of a novice.

25. *Tambourins fêlés*
Des coups de départ
Par temps de brouillard.

The cracked drums
That signal departure
In a time of fog.

34. *Vieux châteaux ruinés des légendes,*
Villes fantômes, burgs féodaux des estampes,
En un seul jour dressés du sol.

Legendary ruined castles,
Phantom cities, medieval forts of engravings,
In a single day raised out of earth.

37. *Pour arriver jusqu'à ma peau*
Les balles ne pourraient jamais
Se débrouiller dans mes lainages.

To reach my skin,
The bullets could never get through
The tangle of my woollen clothes.

38. *Dans sa flanelle*
Ses ongles vont, picorant
Les petites bêtes.

Into his flannel
His nails go, picking at
The little beasts.

40. *Le teint fleuri,
Le ventre déboutonné :
Cuisiniers des officiers.*

The healthy complexion,
The unbuttoned belly:
The officers' cooks.

42. *Dans les vertèbres
Du cheval mal enfoui
Mon pied fait : floche...*

Into the vertebrae
Of the badly buried horse
Goes my foot: *floche* ...

46. *Dans un trou du sol, la nuit,
En face d'une armée immense,
Deux hommes.*

In a hole in the ground, at night,
Facing an immense army,
Two men.

49. *Si je sors ma tête, elle aura froid.
Si je sors mes pieds, ils gèleront.
Je me pelotonnerai sur moi-même.*

If I put out my head, it would be cold.
If I put out my feet, they would freeze.
I curl up upon myself.

51. *Hier sifflant aux oreilles,
Aujourd'hui dans le képi,
Demain dans la tête.*

Yesterday whistling in the ears,
Today in the cap,
Tomorrow in the head.

53. *Alouette, alouette,
Qu'elle est indécente, ta chanson !...
Mais non, tu n'es que la nature indifférente.*

Skylark, skylark,
How indecent your song is! ...
But no, you are just indifferent nature.

59. *Cla, cla, cla, cla, cla...
Ton bruit sinistre, mitrailleuse,
Squelette comptant ses doigts sur ses dents.*

Cla, cla, cla, cla, cla ...
The sinister noise of a machine gun,
A skeleton counting its fingers on its teeth.

62. *L'entonnoir creusé par la mine
Se prolonge dans les sapins
Dont les cassures flamboient.*

The crater dug out by the mine
Stretches into the pine trees
That are broken and burning.

64. *Au ras des tranchées,
Les éclats de chat en colère
Des Minenwerfer.*

Skimming the trenches,
The screams of an angry cat
The *Minenwerfer*.

67. *Front troué, sanglé dans la toile de tente,
Sur son épaule un camarade l'emporte :
Triste viande abattue... qu'une mère attend.*

Cleft brow, bound up in tent cloth,
A comrade takes him on his shoulder:
Sad butchered meat ... a mother waits for.

69. *On apporte à la nuit tombée, pour préserver les assistants,
Les victimes de la journée
Dans le cimetière de bois blanc.*

Carried at nightfall, to protect the assistants,
The victims of the day
In the cemetery of white wood.

72. *Noirs oiseaux au vol éperdu,
Dont l'allure se multiplie,
Deux obus sur moi ont fondu.*

Black birds in desperate flight,
At increasing speed,
Two shells come down on me.

76. *Mon oreille inquiète analyse les sons :
De nous... des Boches... 77... 120...
À droite... en face... au-dessus... Touché !*

My anxious ear tests the sounds:
Ours ... the Krauts' ... 77... 120 ...
To the right ... ahead ... above ... hit!

82. *La blancheur des linges, des murs, des dalles,
Dissimule mal
La pâleur des malades.*

The white of linens, of walls, of slabs,
Poorly hides
The pallor of the sick.

83. *Ces corps remplis d'acier, de cuivre,
On les a ligotés, garrottés...
Comme s'ils pouvaient fuir !*

These bodies full of steel, of copper,
Were bound up and tied down ...
As if they could run away!

88. *Je l'ai reçu dans la fesse
Toi dans l'œil
Tu es un héros, moi guère.*

I got it in the ass
You in the eye
You are a hero, me hardly.

89. *Les blessés sur les brancards
Attendent sagement leur tour
D'entrer dans la cage aux fauves.*

The wounded on the stretchers
Quietly await their turn
To enter the lions' den.

91. *La femme de l'ambassadeur s'en est allée.
On dit qu'elle a beaucoup complimenté, réconforté.
Nous n'avons vu personne et n'avons pas encore mangé.*

The ambassador's wife has come and gone.
They say she gave great encouragement and comfort.
We have seen no-one and we have not yet eaten.

95. *Ils ont des yeux luisants
De santé, de jeunesse, d'espoir...
Ils ont des yeux en verre.*

They have eyes shining
With health, with youth, with hope ...
They have eyes of glass.

100. *Mes camarades, mes frères,
Nous aurons beaucoup souffert...
Hélas ! vous vaincrez sans moi.*

My comrades, my brothers,
We have suffered enough ...
Alas! you will win without me.

from *Fantômes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (1917)

1. *J'ai senti, petite plaque ovale,
Quand je t'ai mise à mon cou,
Le froid du couperet.*

I felt, small oval tag,
When I placed you around my neck,
The cold of the cleaver.

2. *Par la lande morne,
Nous marchons ce soir vers la ligne de feu,
Pleins des grands souvenirs de l'histoire.*

By the dull moor,
We are walking tonight to the firing line,
Filled with grand memories of history.

7. *Au petit jour,
Ils avalent goulûment
Le soupe froide.*

At dawn,
They greedily devour
The cold soup.

13. *Dans sa couche de terre battue
Comme ils l'ont proprement bordé,
Eux qui dormiront demain du même somme!...*

In their bed of clay
As they have freshly lined it,
They will sleep the same tomorrow! ...

22. *Sur le sol, comme liquide,
Le jet de vapeur acide
De l'obus, comme un fer rouge.*

Like liquid on the ground,
The jet of acid vapor
From the shell like a red-hot iron.

25. *« Elle est lourde comme une éponge !.. »
On ne peut pas presser la terre
Sans en faire sortir du sang.*

“It’s as heavy as a sponge! ...”
We cannot squeeze the earth
Without drawing blood.

35. *Les petits soldats unijambistes
Mélancoliquement regardent
Le tombeau de Grand Empereur.*

The one-legged little soldiers
Gaze with melancholy on
The tomb of the Grand Emperor.

38. *Dans les cendres, les crachats, sur les bancs de gares,
Comme l'Autre sur sa croix...
Dormez, bons soldats...*

From the ashes, the spittle, on train station benches,
Like the Other on his cross ...
Sleep, good soldiers ...

44. *Je gravis en glissant la pente des fortifs
Et me trouve soudain en haut d'une falaise
Dominant une mer d'épaves: la banlieue.*

I climb the slippery slope of the fortifications
And suddenly find myself at the top of a cliff
Dominating a sea of ruins: the suburbs.

52. *J'arrêteraï avec la main ces noirs nuages...
Ce n'est pas, certes, qu'ils soient bas,
Mais nous sommes si haut !...*

I would halt with my hand these black clouds ...
It is not, certainly, that they are low,
But that we are so high! ...

65. *Nous aurions, Mademoiselle, ce me semble,
Un plaisir très vif à vivre ensemble...
Voulez-vous faire l'essai?...*

We would have, Mademoiselle, it seems to me,
A very enjoyable life together ...
Would you like to try? ...

72. *Nos corps ayant vibré délicieusement,
Nos coeurs se promettent
Des fêtes éternelles.*

Our bodies having trembled deliciously,
Our hearts promise themselves
Eternal celebrations.