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Skinning the Fish: Interpenetration in Haiku

-Jim Kacian, USA

For many, perhaps most, practitioners of haiku, it's the process that matters, the growth of spirit and realization of our lives, moment by moment. But the actual products of this process, the haiku themselves, can help us gauge our progress, at least in literary terms. I offer this string of fish by way of illustration.

In the infancy of my encounter with haiku, I wrote

the silver carp leaps
for its dragonfly supper,
disturbing the moon

I was delighted with it at the time. It met all my criteria of the time for excellence: it was 5-7-5 without seeming to strain; it was a single moment in time and yet time seemed to stand still, despite the seeming action, within that moment; it interrelated two disparate objects with some cohesion; and it was a pretty picture to boot. Since then I have come to realize some of its flaws—offering as it does a rather polished and pictorial surface, but not a particularly great depth of insight—but admit to an affection for it nonetheless. There is the fish; there is the moon; they are both portrayed simply as themselves. There is a connection that unites them. So far, so good, but there is a problem, and the problem is not in this connection, nor in the objects themselves, but in the writer: he has not enough insight into the being of these objects. That's just it—the objects remain objects. The poet witnesses, and that is all. It is not too much to say that the majority of haiku written and published in the west have been of this type: we might call them “objective;” Shiki called them *shasei*. They present a picture, sometimes a charming or arresting one. They are occasionally finely crafted. And, very rarely, they are original in subject matter or approach (as the example above is not). As an editor I have published some of these (especially those of originality) willingly. But they are not, for me, haiku of the highest standard.

After a little practice and growth, I wrote the following:

autumn twilight—
the shadow of a fish
stops at the weir

Following the first flush of infatuation, I found this poem to be similar to the previous example, but with this difference: it possesses the beginnings of what we might call sympathy, a cognition of the circumstances of the other regarded in the poem. There is kinship here, in the poet's mind and being, between the failing of the light and the staying of the fish's course; and the even deeper resonance that as the remaining light attenuates, so, too, will the fish's shadow diminish. Moreover, there is an integration of the emotion of the circumstances, a constriction binding the fish, the day, the poet, the reader. The poet witnesses, and shares.

But there can be more, of course—yet a little later:

hooked trout
feeling the life

on the line

This is, in many ways, much the same, but again in an important way it is quite different. Once again, the level of connection with the subject has deepened, beyond sympathy this time to empathy. The difference as stated seems slight, but makes a world of difference in the experiencing: empathy is more than the recognition of circumstances, and a commiseration in kind—empathy is identification with the other, and an actual taking on of the intellectual and emotional reality of the situation.

How like a fish can a human be? and how human a fish? Here the poet explores this question, imaginatively (how else?) partaking in the struggle—conjuring the feeling of the “life” of the fish, and its play, through the connecting medium of the fishing line. He knows the trout's contortions and thrashings, and thus comes to embrace a conjectured version of fish-fear and fish-rage, comparing them to how they are like our own fear and rage. We are directly linked, by the monofilament, yes, but also by our capacity to empathize: the poet witnesses, shares, identifies.

But there is yet a ways to go. In all of the examples above, the poet is manifest—he is observing, approaching, identifying with the other, but there is yet a chasm between them—the chasm of self. As long as self is present, we can get only so near to the other. We are approaching interpenetration. Interpenetration goes as far beyond empathy as empathy moves beyond sympathy. Interpenetration is total identification with the other, outside of one's sense of self. One so totally identifies with the other that one loses one's self, and in so doing takes on a oneness with all else. Consider the following:

some	of	the	sun
glinting	off	the	sea
is dolphins			

Here there is an absolute identification: sun and dolphin and poet (though he is nowhere to be found) are of the same stuff, intertwined and indistinguishable. We are all children of the sun, but only occasionally do we acknowledge it. But here no barrier distorts the oneness—sun and dolphin and poet interpenetrate—identification supersedes witness. Of course, it's not simply a matter of using a transitive verb, or describing one thing in terms of another, to realize such identification. Interpenetration is rarely expressed, even in a medium such as haiku that seeks and honors such states, because it's neither easily stated nor easily achieved. There are many ways to skin a fish, but only at the right angle, in the proper light, will it shine, and then again, only by a refinement of that angle and a focusing of that light will the scales glow from within. It is not enough to look—one must see, and identify, and then recuse the self in the identification.

It's the process, it's worth repeating, that matters most, but specific haiku can illustrate how successful the fishing has been. And, as the Chinese proverb has it, give us a fish and we eat today, teach us to fish and we will be nourished for a lifetime.

Winchester, VA 2008

Republished from *Valley Voices: A Literary Review* 8:1, Mississippi Valley State University, Spring 2008, pp. 58-59, by the author's permission.