

GARY HOTTEN

SOME NOTES ON THE PRESENT STATE OF ENGLISH HAIKU*

by Joseph Earner

The Haiku Poet As Deformed Orpheus:

" . . . Learn
To forget you sang. It was of no avail.
True song demands a different kind of
breathing.
A calm. A shudder in the god. A gale."

--Rilke

*Delivered in absentia to the Haiku Society of America's
September 1974 meeting in New York.

(Published by Murderous Monographs, a division of The
Heliopolis Press)

Some Notes On The Present State Of English Haiku

If the English language haiku is to survive and grow, it must do so by English, not Japanese standards. The Japanese haiku arose because of a specific philosophical and linguistic nurturing. To transplant the haiku into English without considering its new soil would be disastrous. To cite one small, technical and, to some perhaps, insignificant aspect of haiku-making: the use of articles. In Japanese there are no articles (as there are not other things), and because there are none a much greater concision, a much tighter grammatical structure, is possible than now exists in English. Anyone who has had any acquaintance with our own western classical languages will know the sort of thing I am referring to. In one sense, Catullus and Martial may be said to epitomize Roman poetry precisely because they work with the epigrammatic line, a line whose power derives from the density of the Roman language, from all that it, grammatically speaking, leaves out. The English line, on the other hand, is more open, in a sense more "loose". Writers of haiku in English are only dooming themselves to failure who think that by simply imitating the Japanese and leaving out all the little unnecessary "extras," they can approach the thing-as-it-is, the thing-in-itself. In English the inclusion of "the" and "a" (and only poets know the feelings, the tones, these little words create in an English line) is as necessary, crucially necessary, to the success of the verse as their exclusion from a Japanese poem.

Let's glance briefly at an example:

warehouse-theatre's
muffled cries the
soft night rain

(Shea)

In this poem the definite article plays an undeniable and distinctive role. By placing it at the end of the 2nd line, the poet has literally "muffled" the cries of the actors inside the theatre and in addition, has prepared more forcefully the entrance onto the stage of the haiku's principal player--the night rain. For the point of the poem lies with the rain. In the 2nd line too, the word "cries," with the higher-pitched sharpness of its i-sound, rises for a moment, somewhat pathetically, only to be quelled and lost in the grey thuddish inevitability of the definite article and its consequent noun. Notice the poem's progression in terms of the visual and aural: from the half-distinct, perhaps unseen warehouse (truncated here, preceded by no defining "the"), through the faint sounds of human strutting and fretting within, to, finally, the drops of the evening rain enclosing all and leaving perhaps, so we feel, "not a wrack behind". Almost a progression in space, until the drops of rain, however soft, acquire a greater expansiveness and we, and the theatre, and the world, are all lost in them.

At the present time, who are writing haiku?

Mostly non-poets. That is, people who want to be poets, who have "poetic yearnings" and have hit on the haiku as a merciful answer to their prayer for self-expression. Why merciful? Because of all the poetic genres now available, the haiku alone, by its very nature, permits them to parade their lack of talent under the guise of "wordlessness". Were these people to open their mouths in any other genre than haiku (and sad it is to relate that many of them do) they would be pelted on the spot with soggy grapefruits. But as haikuteers they escape notice, among themselves, to such an extent that the "haiku magazines" are filled to overflowing with their efforts--which is not surprising, since some of the magazine "editors" themselves are of their number. As a result of this, a cheapening of haiku has taken place which may or may not be corrected. From the collections of haiku I find currently on the bookshelves I am tempted to say that the banal and ludicrous image of haiku perpetrated by these people has grown to such proportions, and spread so wide, that it will entail a Herculean effort to clean it up. On the other hand, from the work I've seen published by a (very) few poets, I think there is good cause to hope. The haikuteers will go on haikuteering, of course, as will undoubtedly the many maiden ladies penning sonnets by the yard, but if enough poets, among them major poets, take up the genre and work seriously with it, the nincompoopery, like that found everywhere else in poetry, will be pushed into the absurd corner where it rightfully belongs.

It might be well to mention here an argument which is repeatedly raised in this context, to the effect that as much bad poetry has been written in past ages as is being written today, and therefore modern haiku should not be unduly criticized. My answer is this: that even though much bad poetry has been written in the past, is being written now and will no doubt continue to be written, it is much more difficult, owing to the hermetic nature of the genre, to tell good haiku from bad. Bad poetry written in past eras was, at least to the intelligent people living in those eras, seen for what it was.* It was easier to recognize as bad. With haiku, the case is altered. Unfortunately, most haiku written today fall into that grey area, as it may be called, where anybody's interpretive guess carries the day. For every bad haiku some sort of meaning can be dredged up. Words are placed on a page without care, or even with care, which do not emerge to significance. And significance is what haiku is all about. Added to this is the haiku poet's claim to spontaneity: it came that way. Well, it may have come that way, to be sure, but if it doesn't come across that way, what is one to do with it? The trick with orphic spontaneity is that, usually, a poem must really be worked on to be spontaneous. I recall Yeats' lines (though I forget in which poem) where he says that oftentimes several hours of hard work must be put into a line to make it seem as though it came in an instant. If Yeats can do it, so can haiku poets.

*By intelligent people I mean people like Dryden and Pound, who visit us from time to time, to our immense poetical benefit. A poet such as Swinburne is only the aberrant escapee from the rule.

Mostly by non-
wordsmen!

The problem of "Nature"

It is a hard fact by now, whether we like it or not, that poetical "nature" for Western Man is an intellectual construct, and the distance traversed from Mr. Wordsworth to Mr. W. C. Williams, despite the latter's purist appreciation for cold plums, is almost an infinite one. To head back toward Wordsworth is, for all that might conceivably be gained from the trip, a romantic flight into exile. Where the modern haiku poet will choose to lodge his poetry is a matter for conjecture, but at the present rate of urbanization it is difficult to see him settling very far from Megalopolis--unless it is in one of those plastic "nature places" devised by socio-geographers to fill up the spaces left between the megalopoli.

Problem: when the word "nature" is used, most westerners think of grass, trees, birdbaths, running brooks, etc. That is, the apart from them. (When most New Yorkers think of nature, if they do at all, it is probably of a cat chasing a roach.) In the East no such separation, traditionally-speaking, exists. The it is I. I am, in a very real way, that tree, rock, brook, cat, roach. Why not, then, I am that building? To paraphrase G. M. Hopkins: "Stare at a building long enough and you'll find it staring back at you". Let's hope, though, that you get your haiku finished before the people in the building complain.

Second problem: most haiku writers look to Japanese models for their haiku-education. Now despite the Eastern mingling of I and It (Nature with a capital N), there is in the haiku of the masters a strict aesthetic categorizing which indicates not so much what "nature" is or is not (the question never really arises), but what in the totality of things-as-they-are is to be dwelt upon for aesthetic consideration. Hence, judging by the Japanese haiku they read (and seldom past Shiki), most western writers admit this false categorizing (strictly observed, by the way, neither by Basho nor Buson; and disregarded by revolutionary Shiki and lice-loving Issa) into their work. Birds are nature (nice); gutters are not (nice or nature). Ironically, it is Basho who is the most avant-garde of the masters (far in advance of Buson). The horse urinating by his pillow would probably have offended, and almost certainly did offend, the purists of his time, as the mention of kitty-crappe would send into shock those haikuteers today who are busily watching for birdies to light on their feeders. Basho is like Shakespeare: he sees in panavision, even to the unpleasant things in a corner of the screen.

But all the problems really resolve themselves into one: to get the Western Individual to see nature as something different, deeper and of far greater significance to his own being than merely an excuse for an outing on a Sunday afternoon. This, I fear, is hopeless. We lack the animistic conditioning of thousands of years which the Japanese (still to a large degree) possess and which is unconsciously present in all their haiku. There is, also, a much deeper reason for our inability to feel-live nature; a reason which is far too complex to go into here, but which involves, among other things, Western Man's post-classical loss of a sense of a static nature time-space (similar to the Oriental conception) and its subsequent replacement by a Romantic and on-going, struggle-against-nature continuum. Spengler treats of this in his Decline of the West, and those who are not easily depressed may find it interesting.

Western Nature as bourgeois

The Way of Haiku, when all is said and done, is the Way of Basho. That is, is the Way of Poverty ("Holy Poverty" as it used to be called) and Selflessness. Beggar poets such as Santōka are closer to haiku, and will always be closer to it, than any American staring out at "nature" through the window of his comfortable middle-class living room, or taking comfortable walks through the hills above his house in hopes of capturing a haiku-moment. On a mere surface level, it may be said that we in the U.S. have never treated nature as anything more than something to be picked, processed and packaged, and the haiku being written today are for the most part little packages of words from the same old packing house. Reading them is rather like visiting one of those wonderful little spots in Disneyland and other artificial places where nature is "so real" you want to reach out and touch the plastic grass, mushrooms, worms and teads. A pretending-toward-something. A wanting-something-to-be-that-cannot-be.

Whatever the modern haiku may come to be, it can't, and mustn't retreat to the old romantic "nature". It must solve the dilemma of what it is, or can be, in the here-and-now, and part of that confrontation must inevitably involve the western intellectual aspect of nature I spoke of before.

The Intellectual Haiku

Is perhaps a contradiction in terms. And perhaps is not. The crux of the problem, of course, lies in the word "intellectual" and in whether Nature itself might not be considered, to a certain extent, a product of the Mind. By "intellectual" I do not mean Social Comment, which in essence is alien to poetry. What has haiku to "do" with ecology, with women's liberation, with the busing of schoolchildren? Even senryu, with its painful universal grin, lies too deep for these. Poetry (haiku) includes them, yet is tastefully silent about them. Given its nature, it is all that it can be.

young black boy writes
(sixty years for assault & battery)
poems in prison

by Beverley Enright, is not haiku, but social commentary, and though it may move us, as it certainly does, and merge painfully into the poetry of senryu (a certain amount of pain being necessary to a good senryu), it moves us on one level only, and once that level is (easily) attained, nothing remains for the sensibility to encompass.

Thought subsumed in sensation, a sensation almost emerging into thought, is haiku. If the emergence is complete, if the thought makes it through, the haiku fails.

But what we shall manage to recapture and to hold is a certain intermediary image between the simplicity of the concrete intuition and the complexity of the abstractions which translate it, a receding and vanishing image, which haunts, unperceived perhaps, the mind of the philosopher, which follows him like his shadow through the ins and outs of his thought and which, if it is not the intuition itself, approaches it more closely than the conceptual expression.
(Bergson)

The trick with the intellectual haiku, if such a thing can exist without continually biting its own tail, will be I think to preserve a tension between thought and sense in which the reader can find himself held, in a sort of poetic suspension. I don't mean now in thought, now in sense, but in both simultaneously, in a unified state (the poetic) whose parts, or properties, or whatever we may choose to call them, are clear and distinct and yet one.

the wind blows the clouds
and through the camphor trees

don't apply here

by Michael McClintock, may be a start in this direction. Is the 3rd line an intellectual intrusion or something arising directly out of the sensation itself? The reader must feel-answer this for himself. He must also decide for himself where the limits shall be drawn between haiku and the purely intellectual poem. This excerpt from a longer poem, "The Alchemist," by Robert Kelly,

folly of alchemists
stretched out on the snow
unlivable abstraction of his skin

is definitely not a haiku, in that the immediacy of the experience prompting the caught-image gets lost, diluted, in abstractions (deliberately so: the shadow on the snow having been "alchemically" thrice removed, or transmuted, from its original strength or suchness) BUT--does it not point the way toward the recognition of a "haiku alternative" more in keeping with the tenor of our time?--asked the Devil's Advocate. Ours is a cerebral century, and whether we like it or not, we are the heirs to a cerebralized Nature from whose thin soil we may yet be able to resurrect something living to sustain us. Poets who wish to experiment in this direction are certainly free to do so, thereby making themselves much more amenable to many an editor for the approbation of whose limited insight haiku "need not apply". However . . . I'm for sticking to haiku-as-haiku, if only for the perverse reason that there is nothing else quite like it, and that, in this age, is definitely a plus.

To the city-dweller, isn't this scene as meaningful, as fully connotative of the meaning of night, as Basho's crow on its withered branch? ("But what the hell's a ratchet?" quoth the reader.)

History, it may be said, has moved toward the city. If that is where most modern haiku are living and moving and having their being, would it not be foolish, if not fatal, to deny them the place from which they derive their life?

* All the poems quoted in this article have appeared in New World Haiku.

The essence of haiku

I've been skirting a most important issue, which is crucial, and that is, in what, exactly, does a haiku consist? Does it possess (apart from its form) an essence which can be isolated out, and without which it cannot live? I think it does possess such an essence, but one which is extremely difficult to isolate and examine. I've seen and judged (awful word: who really "judges" anything?) so many three-line things which are neither haiku, nor poems in any sense of the word. For myself, I would say that a haiku is a moment of perception which is most intense and alive (almost a breaking through, if I may mystically expand here a bit, into a universe parallel to our own which is paradoxically the same one), incredibly so, and which, by a sort of internal combustion, presents that life immediately to the reader-participant, so that he too breaks through, shares in it almost as completely as the perceiver himself. If the haiku is viewed in this way, then the problem of intellectuality encountered above may at least be skirted, if not overcome. The one and only task of haiku is to hit the reader smack between the eyes and jolt him off balance so that he tumbles into the arms of the universe. A fist is not logical or intellectual: it is swift and hard. To be swift it must be short. It must catch the reader off guard where he lives. No pleasing, rhythmic, semi-intellectual line can do this, really, not even the lines of the great:

"that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea"

"whose action is no stronger than a flower"

"hurl'd headlong flaming from th'ethereal Skye"

etc.

An "ordinary" poem can jolt, but it has other concerns besides jolting. A haiku's only job is to jolt--the satori, in a way, of Zen. But a satori is hard indeed to come by. So many haiku written today offer, or try to offer a satori-before-the-fact. That the unenlightened man is the enlightened man, is a principle of Zen, but a realization attained only after one has oneself gone through the stages of enlightenment. The unenlightened man saying, via his haiku, that he is enlightened is nothing more than a literary con-job.

"Haiku is a dagger," said Tantan. But the thrust must be real.

Many things today are passing for haiku. They are masks over nothing, because there is no internal life to be found in them. There is no point to them. The deadliest species one finds among haiku-imitations are those which give the closest semblance of life, and are written by the hundreds. "Traditional" haiku, in most cases--which, like so many traditional things, are lifeless and sterile, leading nowhere, except into a sickening parody of the life from which they originally culled their

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meaning (as old masters are reproduced in Woolworth prints). The outward form is there. The writer knows what he or she should be doing--and is not. The second one looks for the spark within, for the heart-beat, the combustive explosion within the gathered elements or images: zero. A corpse, a cicada shell that never held anything.

On this score, it is gratifying to note that the few genuinely talented poets now working in the genre are ALIVE, and are writing ALIVE POEMS. NEW ALIVE POEMS. Why? Because "the complete man must have more interest in things which are in seed and dynamic than in things which are dead, dying, static." (Pound)

Another species, not so deadly because it is immediately recognizable as nothing, is the three-liner which presents some sort of harmless picture. For example (I'm making this one up):

beer bottle and can
of peas shining in
pile of garbage

To which one might say, so what? These are written by people who do not realize that a picture of anything is not enough, is certainly not haiku. The electrical connection with the life of the universe (its secret life) has not been made. The current has skirted it and gone on.

A third species is more subtle and modern than these: it is an approach toward the experimental, toward a "texture" à la Wm. C. Williams and reminiscent of many pieces of junk now housed (temporarily) in the Museum of Modern Art or the Guggenheim. An example:

on the porcelain
toilet-top the aluminum knob
turned down
toward the blue shag cover

which I've made up and again prompting the question: aside from an interesting arrangement of elements (a presenting of textures), where is the life in this? WHAT IS HAPPENING IN IT?

Before talking about form, or rules, or whatnot, in haiku, we must talk about its essence, that which distinguishes it from all other poetry, including poetry which may be written in three short lines.

The haiku form

I feel this is irrelevant. Why? Because in order to truly reach, to jolt, the reader into a little satori, the poem will create itself in the only form possible to administer that jolt. If the poet is a poet, and not someone who wants to be a poet, he will rely on his creative instinct to gather and put together the right, the only elements to do the job. For each different experience, a correspondingly different response. As many poems as there are living things, relationships among the varied aspects of the universe, to be perceived.

Personally, I'm for the "new" haiku: that which uses the things of our modern world, which accepts them and brings out the latent life in them. If it just presents them, we get nothing. As for the "traditional" haiku, well and good if it presents life. But so many traditional haiku are like so many traditional sonnets printed every year in the magazines: the form is there and nothing else. In Michael McClintock's poem above, who can distinguish, in the poetical universe, the summer moon from that glass building which holds it? One expands the life of the other, including man's life into the bargain. Let's walk across Brooklyn Bridge with Basho.

Lastly on this score, it's all right to talk of haiku not being haiku anymore and becoming something else, something more in keeping with our modern sensibility, but in a way I think this is rather like the problem Frost envisioned when he said that working without metrics in poetry is like playing tennis without the net. It is the net which makes tennis tennis; take away that net and you're doing something else, but not tennis. Should tennis-haiku be kept? YES! AND AGAIN YES! If the net is seen for what it is: not rules or form or number of syllables or whatever--but the inner life, the essence of the thing, that which makes it haiku.

The haiku as dynamo

a small girl--
the shadows stroke
and stroke her

Here is a true "seeing with the eye" (none the less true if that eye is the eye of the imagination) that nearly knocked me out of my editorial chair the first time I saw it. Let the idiots who continually harp on the "wordless" poem and its virtues remain wordless. (Ever notice how these who cannot use language insist that haiku not use it?) Michael McClintock not only catches the secret rhythm of the unsayable, but stays within (and here is his art) a hair's breadth of saying it. The "point" of this poem can only be felt through the very words themselves--the sinister repetition of "stroke," for example--and to start to analyze, un-feelingly, is not only to betray the poem as experience, but the reader as experiencer.

Haiku criticism must always be synthetic, never analytic.

sumac and rabbits
sumac and rabbits
neither corn
nor deer

is another marvellous haiku which, though the last two lines in it appear to comprise an intellectual comment, even a slightly mecking one, is sufficiently dominated by the power of the opening repetition to sway the reader immediately to its side. One can imagine without much difficulty how a less imaginative poet than William Higginson would have handled the subject.

Ditto the following, by Virginia Brady Young, which dispenses gloriously with logic:

in the fog
a man walks--
without a head

though perhaps that dash is logic's tail as it coils quickly out of sight. What is this, another murder in the Rue Haiku? An undiscovered canvas by Magritte? In psychological experiments I have read about, chimpanzees are supposed to be quite, quite upset when shown the decapitated head of another chimpanzee. Something is not right, something is changed, the structure of the Whole has been altered. And logic--or whatever passes for logic among chimpanzees--wants that Whole. But haiku, perhaps, can take us back (as chimpanzees are taken back) beyond the logical Whole to something darker and deeper in us which the quick seeing of haiku alone can reach. "Let's take a stab at it," we say to each other colloquially. What was the "it" we originally took a stab at? Haiku, in a way, remembers.

sleet--
the smoke . . .
is torn to shreds

by Martin Shea, is another example of the haiku's seeing-feeling which excludes thought. What is the "point" of this haiku? Where is its heart-beat? Its secret life is in the ellipsis. It is the ellipsis alone which gives the poem its force, which activates it. For at that ellipsis the reader must wait--wait (as the universe waits) for something that has not yet happened to happen. What are these three dots? Little black planets in Miss Kleimshank's Universal Grammar? They are a pause, an objectively sad and pitiful moment of inevitability that reminds us of such moments in the ancient tragedies: that calm respite before the sparagmos (the "tearing asunder") when the only possible self-destructive course open to the hero(ine) becomes clear at last and he sees it, accepts it, even wills it. The antagonists sleet and smoke (in nature, not really "enemies") meet, but before they do, there is that one moment left to them of their still-possible-not-meeting, and it is such a moment which this haiku captures. They do meet, of course, as they must, and it is the "is"--that sombre, fatal verb--which rings down the curtain. The two are linked forever.

These four poems may serve as examples of the haiku as action, as the blow struck, the punch delivered to the solar plexus of our souls. Back we reel from it into the universe where, hopefully, we are caught. So many things today that pass themselves off as haiku give us, not the jolt of the thing as it happens, but a tedious re-play several hours later. From such "descriptions" we can only flee for our lives to the live channel.

Though Aristotle did not know haiku, we may, perhaps, paraphrase him: haiku is the imitation of an action as action.

Metaphor in haiku

I'm all for it: it is the supreme jewel of the imagination. Good metaphor, that is, not the kind which has given the device a bad name: "the moon was a ghostly galleon," and that sort of rot. What is metaphor, after all, but a joining of elements which to us appear separate, but in the poetic universe are always one? Metaphor is primitive and naive, as haiku is or should be primitive and naive. It takes us back to the period of the myth-makers, the time almost of a universal undifferentiated consciousness we can hardly imagine, when men were seen as "trees walking". I think metaphor is despised generally by people who are not poets, who have never lived in the world of metaphors which the poet daily inhabits. Claiming to be "realists," they cling to haiku, which presents things "as they are," not realizing that things "as they are" are always other things.

"through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones"

(Wm. C. Williams)

Imagination in haiku

Consider the books of haiku criticism now on the stands. Or rather, those dreary doctoral dissipation which have been made into books (one of them recently published and parroting, of course, earlier dissipation).. In all these gems of literary analysis the writing is practically identical: terms such as sene mama issue forth with uninspired ease, while the "poems" held up for admiration are culled from some of the worst haikuteers on the stands. In all of them, inevitably, one general aspect stands out: undisguised animosity toward the imagination. Expressions such as "mere cleverness," "false intuition" are to be found on almost every page. Which to me seems to put the case pretty plainly: not only are the haikuteers writing most of what is now taken to be haiku, they have cornered the "criticism" market as well.

Seldom has Academia (and of late in this country that word should be spelled with a very small "a") pierced to the heart of anything creative. But remembering Chekhov's words that critics (this one included) are a "sort of mildew," we can let the academics go publish and perish. What we can't let perish is the role the imagination plays in haiku. Have we forgotten the care that Basho (touted again and again by the parrots as the Master of Direct Seeing) took, not only in creating his haiku, but in correcting them? In changing them to what he should have seen, to what he should have felt? If the imagination is chucked, then most of Buson will have to be chucked with it (he is seldom quoted by the haikuteers).

Metaphors, we are told, are "false intuitions". If that is true, then most of the greatest poetry from the Chinese and the Greeks onward had best be thrown overboard: we've been riding on illusory ships. In one of the sewing circle gazettes a directive (whose stupidity is exceeded only by its regularity) occurs in each issue to the effect that imagining is verboten; "tell it," the editor urges us, "like it is".

Tell what like it is? A metaphor is telling it like it is. If it is a genuine, inspired and real metaphor, and not the sort of decorative junk the editors, in their limited reading, take for metaphor. If the metaphor is seen-felt genuinely through the intuition, then it is not "false" but as real as rocks, frogs, cherry blossoms and quite as objective. This, however, takes us to a point of departure beyond the ken of most editors, and out of sympathy for them, we should perhaps stop here.

Sequences

The problem here seems to be one of either/or. Either you write haiku, or you write sequences. In most of the "haiku sequences" I've seen so far, the haiku, if that's what they are, have been seriously weakened by inclusion in the larger structure. Being rather thought-up, they have been made to fit the structure, and any integral life which might have potentially belonged to them has disappeared. In this connection, the argument that the whole is greater, or better, than the sum of its parts is misleading and dangerous. The poem is longer or wider, perhaps, but not "better". Modern sequences, which seek to carry a unifying theme or mood are particularly hazardous, since the commanding drive of the poem is to preserve at all costs that unity. In this respect I think it is safer to work on something that verges closer to renku, which allowed for and fostered spontaneous variation. I can't help feeling that the best haiku are those derived from a moment of high and immediate realization, that come as they come, as it were, self-creating, and that the attempt to capture such moments by labored deliberation and insert them into a sequence is bound to fail. For these reasons, the sequences I've seen strike me as so much luggage in a thrift shop window: in order to get the really good one, you have to take the six clunkers around it. In the case of haibun, there is not so much of this. Unfortunately, the prose that accompanies most modern haibun-haiku is banal in the extreme, and usually sounds like something out of Salome Farghuart's Travel Diary ("My Thoughts Before The Taj Mahal"). Perhaps the answer to this problem (haibun-aside), or one answer to it, is to write first, or receive first, the haiku one wishes to use (thus preserving their integrity) and then put them together in an open, somewhat controlled, form. As for those who choose to pursue haibun, they should keep in mind the prose of Basho, which was close, if not equal to the quality of his poetry.

The Senryu

I said a while back that every good senryu involves pain, and to some this may appear strange. Yet it is true. It is not, however, the sort of pain one encounters in other forms of poetry, where an observation on the sad and disheartening facts of the human condition is simply made, stated, and left at that. The senryu's pain must be presented through a picture or an action; that is, visually. We must be made, as readers, to enact the pain.

ruthless;
she speaks of
politeness (Forest Bell)

is good in its observation, but vague as senryu. It would have been better if the poet had showed us her ruthlessness.

the funeral afternoon:
she thrusts vitamins
down the mouth of her cat (Shea)

brings us closer to what we're after. The comic-in-pain, the leer of life, the drawing aside of the veil. Most of the senryu I've seen up to now are not senryu at all, but harmless little statements or pictures which have no depth-quality to them, and whose "comedy" (written by people whose sense of humor is minimal) is pathetic. Let those attempt senryu who have the equipment for it, who are not afraid to look at the unpleasant parts of life, and who can transmute what they see into universal comedy (as Dante's Comedy contains its necessary hell).

The really good senryu comes very close to haiku in its universalism, in its almost-a-part-of-Natureness:

she leaves me:
to the pine needles
freezes the mist (McClintock)

lovers sprawling
naked in the summer heat
careful not to touch (Doris Johnson)

But the senryu poet must touch, explore, dissect. When the painful veins stand out, when the quick has been touched, when "the dead begin to weep," . . .

Punctuation in haiku

There is none! In haiku I think it is absolutely fatal to talk of "syntactical units" and "punctuation". There are no "syntactical units" in haiku; there are in logical discourse. There is no "punctuation" in haiku; there is in a prose sentence. In haiku there are primarily images, things working with or against other things in a meta-grammatical way. Haiku must be looked at pictorially, perhaps even cinematically. Think of the shots and sequences in a film, the cuts, dissolves and pans, and let's keep grammar, which does not exist in nature, out of it.

Grammar as we know it is an artificial, logical way of structuring experience. There are other ways of structuring experience--visual and tonal ways. Of all the poetic genres, haiku is the most visual, the one most closely related to painting. Someone has said that haiku should be seen and not heard. For this visual way of ordering experience, "punctuation," as it exists elsewhere, must be discarded and a new system of notation devised. In haiku a dash can have several uses, or "meanings," not simply the banal one of indicating that something of cumulative import is about to appear, as it does in its prose employment, but also as a visual wedge between two or more states of being. A semi-colon in haiku has a closedness, a finality which it does not have (that strongly) in prose, and its ugliness (it is the least pleasant-looking of all the punctuation marks) should be used sparingly and to advantage when such an effect is desired. The ellipsis in haiku can also indicate many things, as in the smoke/sleet verse quoted above--certainly more than a grammar book would indicate. Punctuation cannot be divorced from the haiku and spoken of as a thing apart, but as something which plays as great a role in the poem as the images and words themselves. When properly understood and interpreted, each of these little marks has a tone, a feeling connected to it quite as powerful as the kireji in Japanese. Is there one meaning, one "feeling" to an exclamation point? Nonsense. It depends on what precedes it, on what is being exclaimed.

Consider the following poem by Lucille Valeis visually:

The crowded market . . .
Children chase a rolling coin . . .
Cantaloupes piled high

This is a haiku which might easily fit into a film scenario. What first attracted me to it was its use of geometric forms, in this case the sphere. The heads of the people seen in a long-shot, the mid-shot of the children chasing the rolling coin, the final drawn-back-to-a-close-up resolution in the pile of cantaloupes. Nature and man gathered together in the agora. On its deepest level the poem is a little parable of the history of civilization, and is it going too far to see those cantaloupes built into a pitifully transitory pyramid?

Consider this one:

summer foliage;
not seeing him--
mailman

by Shea. The eye falls on the word "foliage," and nature is seen doing just that, folding in and upon and out of itself, covering (here via the semi-colon) things that were seen before and taken then for granted, with something new--mystery. Someone (the perceiver, to whom all things are dynamically tied) is waiting. For what? For whom? For someone quite ordinary and natural, someone quite expected, in the general scheme of things, to come. But this morning, something changes. Nature intervenes in the natural. The expected does not come, as expected, but changed now, clothed in mystery. Before, through the trees, through the semi-bare bushes, the mailman could be seen approaching. The world in its static life was grasped with finality, in a long-shot. Now the shot has changed: has shifted focus, become hazier. "Not seeing him," dash, and--"mailman" (not the mailman) is there, suddenly, and new.

Not seen before. Not seen before in the way he is seen in this one and eternal summer moment, almost as having emerged as part of the foliage, as having ex-foliated, unintentionally, and certainly without permission from the Postal Department. For who is this suddenly and miraculously emergent mailman?

A part of nature. A part of the present. A part of the past. A part, still but strangely new, of the "before seen". A part of the background of things, the depth of things. Is it reaching too deep to feel here something that the Greeks must have felt at the approach of a stranger, an unknown being who by the very fact of his strangeness, his never-before-seen-ness, filled them with a sense of mystery, fear, perhaps even secret joy as he stepped from the surrounding mythic Unknown into their lives, sometimes "bearing gifts"?

But by the time all this nonsense is said the mailman has moved on, looking back, perhaps, with a quizzical look at the person gazing, a little more intently now, at the summer foliage.

Let's consider punctuation in haiku as the strokes of a brush in painting, movements which alter a texture, or the rests and flats in music, tonal interventions in time, and exile logic once and for all to the proper desert of prose. It seems to me that haiku will begin to live only when logic dies.

Cliches In Haiku

Even though a genuine poetic experience may inspire a haiku, the poet should be on guard against selecting those aspects of nature which are by now unfortunately haiku-cliches. That is, which are nature-cliches. To list but a few: violets, peonies, weeds etc. peeping through cracks in cement; rainbows on graves; snow falling in cemeteries; owls, bats etc. at midnight--complete the list yourself. The problem here is that the poet may actually have seen snow falling on a grave; may actually have seen-felt something in the snow that corresponded to something in himself and to that grave. But if he uses such an image he is taking a chance on alienating the reader. Why? Because by now we are bored to death, in poetry, with the universal symbols of falling snow, of flowers coming up through cracks, of owls at midnight. The owl at midnight lives still, of course, its life, as do the flowers and the snow. But our aesthetic receptivity has become jaded, and we reject these lives (still in their own world very real and movingly valid phenomena) in favor of other poetic lives equally valid and as yet unexplored. The last successful use of falling snow in connection with the idea of death that I can recall occurs in Joyce's magnificent story "The Dead," and there it works primarily because of a great writer's supreme use of language, which revivifies the snow and brings it once again with full force into our consciousness. In fact, it is Joyce's rhythms that really "carry" the snow. A haiku must work within a much narrower scope. Merely to state that the snow is falling does nothing, and that statement remains, helplessly, a cliché. It is a pity that natural occurrences which have always caused man to approach the poetic universe and its secret life should now, by his having used them over and over, be inaccessible to him in poetry and literature, but such is unfortunately the case. We can only wait (while actively searching) for nature itself and the Imagination to once again erect living totems before our eyes and the eyes of the mind.

Haiku without excuses

Let's face it: among poets and critics alike there is a hardly-veiled, active scorn for haiku and haiku poets. To these, haiku is either not poetry at all or, if it is, then a very minimal sort of no consequence whatever in the mainstream of modern English poetry (arrant nonsense, be it noted). As for those who write haiku, they are poètes manqués who dabble in the hermetic genre for want of "exposing themselves". This judgment is not entirely unwarranted, since most of the haiku seen up to now by the critics has been the sort composed by the haikuteers. But on a deeper level it must be said that what really turns most poets and critics away from haiku is their own lack of comprehension of it and moreover, an unwillingness, strengthened by centuries of a stern intellectual "seeing" of the universe, to come to terms with it.

New haiku poets cannot help but be influenced by such active disregard and dislike. Somehow, they feel, they are not writing "real" poetry, and make excuses for their haiku, regarding it somewhat as the inarticulate friend one talks to when the more interesting conversationalists are not around. (Part of the reason, I believe, for the present interest in haiku sequences lies in this feeling of inadequacy: by putting enough haiku together the haiku poet may approach something like a long(er) poem, with linkages and variations approximating those to be found in modern verse. He can "escape" the stigma of having written an individual, to-the-outsider-unintelligible haiku.)

It is time for the haiku poets to stand on their own two feet and proclaim what they are. And not only to proclaim, but to put down, if necessary, those who would deny them their existence. For if the haiku poets do not take haiku seriously, who, God help them, will?