

Some Thoughts on Contemporary Haiku Practice

Martin Berner, translated by David Cobb

Primarily, I don't judge haiku, as unfortunately often happens, according to formal criteria. Haiku is poetry. And our own poetic traditions you might characterise, in a grossly simplified way, as being discursive, descriptive of feelings, and metaphorical. Haiku has in all these respects something new to offer.

Let's try to make a list of what haiku is and is not:

not haiku

banal
surreal/dadaistic
arcane
aphoristic
extensive

haiku

revelatory
actual, everyday
plain and simple
imagistic
compressed

Now the arguments can begin, e.g. What do you mean by banal? In our century a haiku that states simply that a twig is in bud, or that buds are bursting into blossom, seems to me banal. To be taken seriously, a haiku about buds and blossoms must now contain something more than that. I expect—and here I know that we could immediately find ourselves arguing with Japanese or Japanese-oriented traditionalists—that a haiku will reveal to me something that I haven't read or seen for myself before. I cling to our artistic tradition which expects the artist to create something original.

“A haiku originates in direct experience. It is only valid when really lived.” If we accepted this statement literally, and each of us applied it to our own store of haiku, I imagine at a single stroke there would be thousands fewer haiku in the world. Where does this idea about real experience come from? Sure, a haiku should not falsify, but “yes, it could have happened like this” is the charm of many a haiku. There's just no way around it. If haiku is poetry, like other poetry it is a work of art, something that is highly crafted.

The subject matter of haiku is congenial. I find the Japanese way of regarding Nature very refreshing. There is no conflict with human existence, rather Nature is seen as its basis. That the classical Japanese haiku is a nature poem is easily explained and understood. But why our haiku in the twenty-first century should be limited in that way is something I can't understand. Why shouldn't there be haiku about sickness and death, about joblessness, poverty and matrimonial strife

(even if haiku poets in Japan writing in the traditional mode wish to ignore these unpleasant things)? They are part of our lives, and so they should be “celebrated”.

I consider a haiku to be successful when it presents something new, or something familiar but from a different angle, as briefly as possible. And this “briefly as possible” brings us to the matter of form. It is my belief that not a single word should be present that is not absolutely essential to the content. As the focus is not syllables but sense, my plea is, let’s stop counting them. Such counting doesn’t correspond to our experience of language. For hundreds of years we have been counting beats, and to substitute a rhythmical pattern of two-three-two beats doesn’t really take us forward. Haiku should be pithy, and the loss of any word must take away its meaning. Normally, haiku should be written in three lines, but if everything that needed to be said can be put down in two lines or even a single line, well done! The artist has taken the right decision. Four lines? I’m afraid I find them a bit more problematical. Fortunately, there are few German writers of haiku who use this form.

If we agreed that haiku shouldn’t contain unnecessary word, it follows that none of the lines should contain a useless word or a word that really belongs in one of the other lines. When I read German haiku this is one of the things that frequently makes me throw up my hands in despair: lots of unjustified enjambments. The reason for them? Simply to preserve the formula 5-7-5. So many haiku are cut up and hacked to pieces in this way. Why do you poets treat your poems like this? Of course, enjambment is a reputable trick of the poet’s trade, but so often it is no more than a clever mannerism.

Why do so many German haiku end with a full stop? We regard resonance as one of the fundamental qualities of haiku, and then, with a big, fat blob, some seem to say: there you are, that’s it, there isn’t any more. I can imagine there are occasions when a full stop can really express something, but only if we don’t make it a rule to always end with one.

Punctuation within the poem is a more complex matter. A dash is a common method of indicating a pause. But on examination, don’t you think many haiku could manage perfectly well without this crutch? It is the same with exclamation marks. If this mark is needed to make the statement seem more important, perhaps there’s a weakness in the statement itself that we need to remedy. It’s not so easy to state a principle about commas and question marks, though I feel they disrupt the flow of the text. Sometimes they are justified as clarifying the text. My preference is for totally unpunctuated haiku and it’s with that kind

of haiku that I like to experiment, especially as they create interesting possibilities of ambiguity.

In German, the use of capital and lower case letters is, unfortunately, still prescribed by the latest official spelling reform. Like many of my friends abroad, it seems to me that this disrupts the flow of the printed haiku. However, this is something we can't do anything about: unless we dare to look incorrect, nouns simply have to have capital letters. But the use of capital letters at the beginning of each line, even when the first word isn't a noun, in the tradition of German lyric writing, breaks the tiny haiku up much too much. Do we want that?

All sorts of guidelines on haiku writing emphasise the need for a "cutting word". These come from the Japanese source, from a people whose language actually possesses words of this kind. According to German "rules", this means a cut. And what, please, is this "cut"? A pause, a hiatus, a caesura, they say. And the purpose of this pause—is it an aid to reading silently, or reading aloud? Lucky Japanese, with their *keri* or *kana*. We German haiku writers just have to trust that anyone reading our haiku aloud will pause correctly, having understood our poem properly. This is a fundamental problem with all kinds of poetry in performance; up until now we've managed without any signals of this kind, and it should be possible to continue that way for the next few hundred years. So, I would say, why bother with dashes and cutting signals at all?

It is reported from Japan the one of the differences between haiku and senryu is the cut—the former must have it, the latter omits it. Does this mean what we are writing are mostly senryu? And does it even matter? Surely, in the end, all that matters is that our poems are good and move people who read or listen to them.

A haiku takes place in the immediate present. You believe that? Than what about Basho's

nothing in the cry
of the cicada intimates
how soon it must die

What really fascinated me when I first came into contact with Japanese haiku, and continues to fascinate me, is the high degree of uncertainty or unfixedness which the Japanese language affords. How many different translations of the same poem seem to be possible. In traditional haiku, according to my knowledgeable informant, one should avoid verbs wherever possible. "The noun contains a verb." That's something we could learn from. Let's try writing haiku without verbs, also without personal, possessive or any other kind of pronoun. It is the exciting kind

of indeterminacy, leaving open to readers and listeners the possibility of shaping the haiku creatively for themselves, that I most wish to see in our haiku.