

The Essence of Haiku

by Bruce Ross

At the 2007 Second European Haiku Conference in Sweden, values not currently often associated with contemporary Western haiku appeared in several of the talks. One presentation, by Kai Falkman of Sweden, focused on the “transformational effect” of haiku. Another centered on the issue of vagueness (Takashi Ikari of Japan). Still another dealt with the unique metaphor embedded in haiku that produces “deepness” of affect through distancing the objects of haiku (Ludmilla Balabanova of Bulgaria). It was refreshing to hear Falkman talk about the “layering feeling” initiated by haiku. Too much contemporary American haiku is composed to the end of wit or flashy connections between images. Moreover, in such haiku, the expression of visceral emotion is all too reminiscent of the presentation of transparent feeling and empty social exchange in the media. Discussions about states of feeling and their “transformational effect” in relation to haiku are needed to balance these directions in haiku and, in effect, save the essence of haiku. To this end the following article examines or reexamines issues relevant to the essence of haiku: the particular, feeling and emotion, selflessness, the haiku moment, nature and beauty, and wholeness. First, though, I will discuss “absolute metaphor,” a term I have coined to describe haiku constructed upon an organic or existential relationship between the parts of a haiku. Such a haiku poetics opens into the other issues examined here and resonates well with some of the ideas introduced at the European Haiku Conference.

*In these things [of nature] there is a deep meaning,
but if we try to express it, we forget the words.*

—Toenmei

I. Absolute Metaphor

Haiku is after all a kind of poetry, derived from the first stanza of the collaborative poem renga and, ultimately, from tanka (originally waka), each with a syllabic prosody of alternating five and seven sound units.

Like all poems haiku uses imagery, affective content, sound values, figurative language, and so forth. Poetic forms in Japanese are generally short; in fact, haiku is the shortest poetry form in the world, 17 sound units divided into a 5–7–5 pattern in traditional Japanese haiku. The same sound patterns occur in tanka and renga, reflecting line lengths in Chinese lyrics as well as the phrasing of songs and the like in early Japanese culture. Japanese is an unstressed language, and haiku relies on onomatopoeia and, perhaps, vowel values that occur in each sound unit, but not upon rhyme. The 5- and 7-sound-unit phrases repeated over the centuries in poetry forms also help maintain a kind of rhythm.

Haiku's imagery and affective content are unique. Traditional haiku incorporates a kigo, season word, or a kidai, seasonal topic, including recurring human events that are usually connected to natural cycles, such as the rice harvesting. Almost always traditional haiku include a concrete image drawn from nonhuman nature. Therefore one could define haiku as human feeling connected with nature. Such natural imagery has been collected by category in poetry almanacs or saijiki. The appeal of nature's beauty and affective content for a culture whose native religion, Shintô, includes a form of nature worship and whose agrarian status from an early period required constant cyclical contact with nature is not surprising. The natural beauty and corresponding affective content that is celebrated in Japanese culture is likewise a mainstay of lyric poems elsewhere in the world. In haiku this imagery and content are concretized to a bare suggestive minimum.

Traditional Japanese haiku occasionally contains figurative language, such as exaggeration, simile, and metaphor, exactly as used in lyric poetry elsewhere. But such devices tend to overburden such a small poem at the expense of the haiku values of spareness, resonance, and mystery. Moreover, the kigo and kidai with their seasonal associations embed the haiku with an allegory that universalizes the natural world and its cycles.

Haiku may be regarded as a relation of the particular with the universal. Whereas most poetry is dependant on metaphor, with the affective force of the imaginative comparison determining its success, haiku, in its uniqueness, is constructed upon an “absolute metaphor” of the natural particular and the universal. Internal comparison in the traditional haiku is often governed by the kireji, one of several Japanese particles that acts not unlike punctuation in English to highlight the affective content of one part of a haiku or its relationship to the second part and underscores the absolute metaphor. Line 1, for example, might relate to the weather, and lines 2 and 3 might offer the imagery in nature of a particular object or being. Together, the absolute metaphor and the kireji create an affective spark joining the universal and particular.

Here is a contemporary haiku by Alenka Zorman of Slovenia that manifests the absolute metaphor:

Independence Day.
In the warm wind my scarf
touches a stranger.

An existential quality is evident in the poem, which resonates with liberation, humanity, and joy. The holiday name demarcates a historical event of freedom that many countries celebrate. The wind is appropriately comfortable. This wind provides a natural example of what the American poet T.S. Eliot termed an objective correlative, a poetic image drawn from the real world that represents, or metaphorically connects with, internal emotion. In haiku the connection is usually less imaginatively constructed. A sense of synchronicity or of a less obviously determined connection is present. This absolute metaphor has the wind-blown author's scarf touch another person, a complete stranger. This wind allows a moment of shared celebration to become a moment of shared humanity through resonant, concrete imagery. The author and the stranger become one. But perhaps Toenmei is right. Something mysterious is happening in this haiku that can't really be expressed in words but can be felt through words.

I've seen Plato's cups and tables, but not his cupness and tableness.
—Diogenes

II. The Particular

If that mysterious thing is the appearance of the universal, that appearance can manifest itself only in the particular. The particular itself also has its own quality of mystery. In the best haiku it is the mystery of the particular that is its essence. That essence is found in the grasshopper in one of Issa's haiku,

a cool breeze,
the grasshopper singing
with all his might

What could be simpler than to listen to a grasshopper? Issa has particularized, perhaps even personalized, this creature. It is not all grasshoppers exhibiting their sameness, their “grasshopperness,” in this one. In this haiku it is a single creature making its sound with great enthusiasm. It is particularized by its occurrence in this particular moment. The evident aliveness of this small creature makes its efforts both noble and humorous. It is not just an insect or just a grasshopper: it is this particular grasshopper in this particular scene.

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl wanted to base philosophic mental activity, in the Cartesian project, on truthful perceptual content. He suggested a “bracketing” of experience to determine its essence, so his credo was *zu den Sachen*, “to the things themselves.” Haiku is like this. It brackets or, rather, experiences a moment in time while particularizing the components of that moment. Like Husserl's bracketing, there is a central element of truthfulness in haiku experience.

Consider the snail in this haiku by David Cobb of England:

in the dark garden
a distant lightning flash –
the track of a snail

The snail – or rather its absence – is bracketed by the lightning flash, which momentarily illuminates the creature's slick trail. The author is in a garden at night, perhaps observing the distant storm. Then a revelation: a snail's path. Such a track is a small, slick, glistening thing. What is the truth here? The author may be awed or amazed by the glistening brightness of the track and might be viewing a snail, this snail, in a new way, a presence in an absence. Overall, there is a bit of mystery, as in seeing a living ghost, in the track. The snail track's mystery also links to the mystery of the lightning, both bringing brightness and illumination into darkness.

*Yield to the willow
all the loathing and desire
of your heart*
— Bashô

III. Feeling and Emotion

Affective feeling generated through the absolute metaphor of haiku became associated with different kinds of aesthetic values in traditional Japanese haiku. *Mono no aware*, “the pathos of things,” is an overall term for how one is affected by things. Other aesthetic values in haiku include *wabi*, “simplicity,” *sabi*, “metaphysical loneliness,” and *yûgen*, “mystery.” In each case the poet was being moved by something in the world in what John Ruskin has pejoratively dubbed the “pathetic fallacy,” ascribing feeling to things. Contrary to Western poetics (aside from Romanticism), for example, Oriental poetry and poetics was centered upon such states of affective feeling. So rather than being a senseless thing, a flower in a given context could radiate affective feeling for the Japanese haiku poet not as symbol, but as an existentially valid presence. Bashô's haiku above validates the existential connection of a haiku poet and a natural entity, here a willow. If in Western symbology a willow stands for sadness and appears as such on countless gravestones, Bashô's willow is a being in its own right. Thus Bashô, the founder of Japanese haiku, could say, “To learn about this pine, go to the pine,” and Shiki, the founder of modern Japanese haiku, could advocate, borrowing from Impressionism, the sketch from nature, or *shasei*, method of haiku. It should be noted, additionally, that the “feeling” in haiku is usually not the demonstrative emotion of Western poetry. Haiku is not used to express strong emotions, which are usually reserved for *tanka*. Rather it is a mode of receptive feeling between a poet and his natural subject, even though the poet's emotional climate often affects and even directs his/her relation to the subject.

This haiku by Daniel Py of France brings forth an insight into the nature of haiku feeling:

day after the fireworks
the flashes from the storm

The fireworks in the poem are culturally determined modes of excitement and usually evoke strong emotion. The storm flashes are perhaps unexpected and certainly natural occurrences that provoke awe

in the observer. The author's tone is reflective rather than expressive of strong emotion. He is making a sudden, perhaps Proustian, connection between the vividness of yesterday's fireworks and the present-tense storm flashes. In effect, by connecting the storm's natural flashes to the fireworks, he sets up an absolute metaphor that evokes an absolute mystery of bright explosions in the dark sky. This is reminiscent of eighteenth-century Western aesthetics in which storms symbolized strong emotion and religious fervor.

*The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection.
The water has no mind to receive their image.
— Zen saying*

IV. Selflessness

If affective perception determines much of haiku feeling, selfless perception often determines how haiku consciousness exists. For this reason Robert Spiess, the long-time editor of *Modern Haiku*, preferred the term “feeling” (senses centered on nature, aware) to “emotion” (very strong subjective feeling centered on nonrational mind) when discussing haiku poetics. At the most basic level the personal “I” is usually left out of haiku. Basically, the personal “I,” the Freudian ego and its mental constructs, let us say its emotion, gets in the way of the haiku experience. The language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.” Empirical procedures and rational thinking that determine the Western mind also get in the way. The Zen Buddhist idea of an empty mind, the openness to phenomenological presence, is suggestive of an appropriate mental climate. A Zen saying explains the situation: “One thought follows another without interruption. But if you allow these thoughts to link up to a chain, you put yourself in bondage.” How does one not get bogged down in thought and experience haiku consciousness?

A haiku by Kai Falkman offers a response.

The skier stops
to leave room
for the snow's silence

The first two lines of this poem describe the cessation of what Zen Buddhists call the “monkey mind,” a continuous flow of thought. Enlightenment or clear mind, the present-tense clarity of perception, cannot occur when the monkey mind is present. In effect one must clear one's mind to allow, as Rilke would suggest, things to speak for themselves. The phenomenological reduction, the skier stopping, accomplished, the snow, its silence, can speak for itself. Here the personal “I” is not used. The poet, his will, is not stopping the skis. The snow's silence is. The “I,” at least, is not what is important. What is important is the snow's silence. The stopping is a mere notation leading to the snow's silence. In many ways this poem becomes an evocation of a kind of enlightenment experience.

*A monk asked Li-shan: “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?”
” There is no ‘what’ here,” said Li-shan.
” What is the reason??”
” Just because things are such as they are,” replied Li-shan.
— Zen mondo*

V. Haiku Moment

The “haiku moment” might be defined as the conjunction of the particular and the absolute in a moment of time. Haiku is then basically an epiphany. It is seeing with Li-shan that “things are such as they are.” Bashô has said: “Learn how to listen as things speak for themselves.” In a haiku moment the mind does not intervene in the essence of things or the synchronicity of things. The painter Juan Gris

asserted: “You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.” The greatness in haiku is the revelation of reality just as it is in all its wonder and freedom.

Of all poetry forms the haiku most consistently reflects a special case of temporality, a special union of the particular and absolute in a moment of time. Edmund Husserl has suggested that transcendence is the transpersonal but that we know it only through the object. T.S. Eliot in the “Four Quartets” suggests that history itself is a pattern of timeless moments.

A professor of Japanese literature and renku master once told me that haiku are ephemeral. I understood that he was talking about the poem as a physical thing and a genre. As such, I envisioned haiku written on slips of paper naturally decomposing. Now I see that haiku are ephemeral because they reflect the haiku moment. In traditional Japanese aesthetics exceptional moments are unrepeatable in metaphysical sense. In Heraclitus's words, “You can't step into the same river twice.” The river will still be there, but it will have changed the particularities of its nature. Yet there are haiku stones in Japan to preserve such unrepeatable moments. When we read certain haiku by those early Japanese masters, now long dead, and more recent ones, we may thankfully experience within cross-cultural limitations what they felt. We follow the direction of their insight and complete an arc of energy that links the particular and the absolute.

Here is a haiku by Aksinia Mikhailova of Bulgaria that perfectly captures the haiku moment.

the open window
the old curtain
mended with a grey cloud

The poem presents a moment of time with things just as they are. The window is open to allow fresh air in. The weathered curtain covering the window has a hole or holes in it. This recognizable scene has the touching quality of simplicity and of growing old with familiar ordinary things. Yet, by chance, in the synchronicity of the poem's haiku moment, a cloud covers the curtain's hole or holes. That very action spirals our feeling into the simplicity of this natural action and into mystery. The curtain is not really mended but a poetic connection between the human and the natural and the particular and the universal is made. The cloud will pass and the moment will be over, but in that moment such simplicity has been elevated, and not without some humor.

*Spreading a straw mat in the field
I sat and gazed
at plum blossoms*

— Buson

VI. Nature and Beauty

The affective natural beauty of nature is a presiding subject in traditional Japanese haiku. Corresponding issues of affective feeling and beauty as legitimate academic issues in Western aesthetics faded in the late twentieth century. Yet as Shakespeare noted, “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” and as the American writer Gertrude Stein famously declared “a rose is a rose is a rose.” We also have Bashō's own account of his wondering around a pond all night gazing at the moon. Ransetsu addresses the issue likewise in a haiku,

white chrysanthemums
yellow chrysanthemums—
would there were no other names?!

Bashō expressed his own position in regard to affective feeling and natural beauty: “He was obedient to and at one with nature and the four seasons.” In fact, just as a kigo is incorporated into traditional

haiku, at least one flower and one moon stanza are equally incorporated into Japanese collaborative poetry, renga. Cherry blossoms are perhaps the single most used image of beauty in Japan. When the word “flower” is used it is understood that cherry blossoms are intended. Given some theories of cherry blossoms' relation to kami or Shintô god spirits in early Japan, a valid equation for haiku would be, cherry blossoms equal haiku or natural beauty equals haiku.

A haiku by Zoé Savina of Greece explores this equation.

see, in full bloom
out of place, and out of time
acacias in the rain

Acacias are chiefly tropical trees with tight clusters of yellow or white flowers. The poet here is underscoring the absolute metaphor in this haiku moment. The trees are not only reflecting beauty through their flowers. That beauty is enhanced by the rain. Such enhanced beauty elevates the poem's haiku moment into an epiphany of timelessness as expressed in line 2. Further, the poet wants to make sure the readers understand the nature of this elevated beauty by directing them in line 1 to the epiphany. The epiphany is seeing the acacias just as they are in their moment of special beauty.

*How I long to see
among the morning flowers
the face of God*

— Bashô

VII. Wholeness

The absolute metaphor in haiku includes the presentation of a state of wholeness in which the particular leads to the absolute and first things. Bashô here recovers the roots of the cherry blossom equals haiku equation in which sought spiritual feeling is disclosed in natural beauty. Such spiritual feeling has different components. In the words of poet Gary Snyder, who trained as a Zen Buddhist, “Awareness of emptiness brings forth the heart of compassion.” In his Mahayana Buddhist construction, the compassion for all beings that forms the basis of this religious view is predicated on the cosmic emptiness all form shares. In Vedic terms, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” In haiku such Buddhist compassion often supports the affective resonance of the particular in a given poem. In another religious view, one by the founders of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, “Everything created by God contains a spark of holiness.” In haiku such an elevation of all things supports a poetry centered on the affective appreciation of such things and the Shintô resonance where rocks, trees, and waterfalls are considered sacred.

A Taoist would say, “Enter stillness.” Wholeness, the Tao, would be found in such a state. That state, moreover, is found through particulars, the so-called “ten thousand things.” So in stillness, whether in a remote mountain forest or a crowded modern city, things will offer themselves up to you and the result will be a kind of joy, awe, celebration, and wonder, and, for a moment, wholeness.

Ion Codrescu of Romania offers such a moment of wholeness in one of his haiku:

a pond in the field
the scent of harvest lingers
in the night

In this meditative poem the author is moved by the sight of a pond in a farm field at night. It is the focus as a particular in his state of stillness as well as an embodiment of stillness itself. The business of the day is absent. The very field has been harvested. But the scent of the harvested crops and turned earth remain to enhance and elevate this state of stillness. The scent becomes an “organic metaphor” of

the union of the particular and absolute that emerge in the haiku as a state of wholeness, a sublime moment into which a reader or a listener might enter.

In this higher sense of haiku, moreover, in the words of the literary critic George Steiner, “When the word of the poet ceases, a great light begins.”

VIII. Conclusion

It is important to address the essence of haiku at this point in world history. The nature of feeling and emotion are being blunted in the so-called postmodern age. Because haiku is dependent on feeling, the postmodern values will in effect co-opt the essence of haiku by co-opting the nature of feeling. Also at stake is the presiding connection of haiku with nature, because these days nature itself seems in a state of crisis. We all crave a connection with each other and the world, and seek some sort of wholeness. Now less and less relevant in everyday life are nature and beauty, the haiku moment, or attention to the particular. This is perhaps why at the Second European Haiku conference Shôkan Tadashi Kondô of Japan invoked Thoreau when discussing his saijiki-like project “72 Seasonal Spells” and called haiku “ecological poetry.” The absolute metaphor of haiku might help save the particular, our feelings, nature and beauty. It could help preserve our sense of wholeness – even in this postmodern age – and, just maybe, the world itself.

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