

Another Attempt To Define Haiku

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It is now generally agreed that the earliest poems were songs, prayers, and incantations to gods. One tentacle of the spread of poetry has been traced from Persia to India, up to China and over to Japan. Even before the written records in Japan (760 AD) people spoke tanka to gods and in praise of the reigning monarchy. Tanka, with its 5-7-5-7-7 sound syllable count, its lofty ancestry, its shortness and ease for recall, became the favorite poetical form of the Japanese Imperial Court. And thus, both reached their highest popularity and brilliance during the same centuries -- ninth to eleventh.

As one of the oldest forms of poetry still active (in 1987-88 Machi Tawara's book *Salad Anniversary* sold over 8 million copies in Japan alone) the form has recently been discovered by writers around the world.

In those years -- 9th - 12th centuries -- when tanka was so fashionable, poets competing in contests revived an old Chinese form by linking tanka poems together in a novel way. The poem was "broken" in half so one author wrote the 5-7-5 part and another responded and finished the poem by adding his (mostly men did this though it was first done by a woman!) 7-7 part. Instead of stopping there, someone else wrote a new 5-7-5 poem to "answer" to the previous 7-7 link and they named the genre *renga* -- meaning linked elegance. This proved to be so much fun poets were soon writing poems of 1,000 and even 10,000 links.

By the 14th century tanka had become stale and staid so *renga* became all the rage. Rules proliferated, schools were founded and splits naturally occurred. There were then two main styles: a serious, courtly style and the comic-bourgeois form favored by the newly rich merchants. Our beloved Basho (1644-94) was a *renga* master of the comic style and for that he was famous also in his day. Because of the popularity of *renga* and the extreme necessity for a really good *hokku* (starting verse), poets began to collect a backlog of "good" *hokku* to stick up their sleeves in case anyone asked them to start a *renga*.

From this, poets began to admire and write single 5-7-5 *hokku* and *haikai* (any verse in a *renga*). Even Basho's students collected enough for an anthology -- *Sack of Charcoal*. *Haikai/hokku* were not as easy to write as Basho made it look so the quality of the poems tended to fluctuate wildly peaking with Buson and Issa (and several other poets lacking good PR departments). In an effort to elevate their own poorer poems, writers began to rip apart Basho's old *renga* with other persons, taking out his poems and presenting them individually. Many of

the haikai made little sense because the missing link was missing. Still they were better than the then current crop of poems and served as examples and snake oil to sell poems of lesser quality.

At the beginning of the 19th Century M. Shiki declared renga officially dead and it died -- in Japan, only to take regrow 60 years later in North America and Germany. Shiki also decided to end the debate about hokku/haikai by combining the name to give us haiku. Thanks! Shiki, we needed that.

Skipping to the present, one may ask what separates a haiku from any other short, light verse. The answers will be as varied and individual as are paths to a religious belief -- a metaphor that is not too far off as haiku writers easily admit to living the Way of Haiku (in an awareness of just this -- this moment) and in the Spirit of Haiku (to hold all things with reverence).

In the beginning is the form. In Japanese a haiku is traditionally 5-7-5 sound syllables. All languages cannot duplicate this method of counting syllables so foreign language writers must decide to either follow the method by writing 5-7-5 syllables in their own language. However if they prefer to imitate the product, the translated Japanese haiku, their poems must consist of less words. In English we cannot have both method and translated product correct in one poem so each of us must choose one system or the other. Beginners (especially if better acquainted with Western poetry) often do well to follow the 5-7-5 discipline at first. Later, when they become comfortable with saying what they want said in the least words, as it is easier to switch to the shorter styled haiku in a natural movement. This does not mean that 5-7-5 haiku are beginners' work; many, many very good writers insist on remaining with the form scheme.

In Japan haiku are written in one line vertically. Again we cannot imitate this so some poets, following as closely as they can (heel to toe, heel to toe), write haiku in one horizontal line. This style, however, hides the natural pauses the Japanese person hears at the end of each 5 or 7 syllable phrase. We also can be trained to hear them in English, but lacking the time and training for that, it was decided to show the pauses with line breaks. Thus, the foreign language haiku took on the familiar three -line shape.

For many of us, an absolute indicator of a haiku is a break or caesura either at the end of the first or second line.

old pond
a frog leaps into
the water of sound

on a bare branch
a crow settles down

autumn dusk

Can you hear where the breaks are?

What is to be avoided is the so-called "run-on sentence" which is usually a sentence fragment.

the strange shape
of the passion flower
and its legend

which only needs to be rewritten to be:

strange shape
the passion flower
and its legend

As you see, having the courage to not follow 5-7-5 allows one to tighten up the poem so it fulfills the break requirement. In Japanese this break is indicated with a "cutting word" which is usually ignored in translation or replaced with a punctuation symbol. Remember the mention of old haikai being ripped out of the renga? The use of these "haiku" has given rise to the haiku which has its break in the middle of the second line; also a possible way of using the break which is now usually indicated with a dash, comma, or semi-colon. If there is a line break at the end of each line (as in the "grocery list" haiku) the poem sounds too choppy.

By reading aloud the Basho samples above you can hear the breaks made by syntax which is considered the best method of accomplishing this. It is also possible to indicate weaker breaks or reinforce them with punctuation.

Because the Japanese language uses articles less and differently than we do in English we must add them to our translations. In imitating this, new haiku writers are often puzzled when to shorten the poem by leaving out the articles (a, an, & the) or propositions (to, in, with, across, from, etc.). It has slowly evolved that it seems to sound best if one allows the shortest part of the haiku to be very brief by dropping these sentence parts. However, if in the two-line connected phrases, the poem can sound like pidgen-english or haiku telegrams if this is followed. It is often best to allow the longer two-line part all the articles and prepositions it needs to sound like a proper sentence fragment. When trying to shorten this part of a haiku you can often get some extra mileage out of using a noun that will also function as a verb.

In Japanese haiku pronouns (he, she, it, they, them, you, me etc.) are rarely explicit so the poem has an air of ambiguity -- more variations are possible for

the reader. When haiku were presented to English writers this aspect was lauded as the "humility" of the poet who spoke of things, not his/her person. And if you are writing a hokku for a renga this is a good path to follow. However, within a renga, Japanese and others commonly refer to themselves or other humans and this aspect is then, more or less (depending on the writer) possible to use in a haiku. Some will say that haiku are nature poems and can only speak of nature and then try to convince you humans are not natural and cities are not nature. Not so! every building, every thing is made of something borrowed from nature and its nature still surrounds it.

Haiku are and must be brief. Avoid adverbs (words describing the verb or action) and adjectives (words describing the noun or things). Use modifiers only to make your haiku images more exact and precise. Let us know if that gate is a garden gate, a prison gate or a swinging gate. Many adverbs and adjectives imply judgment (beautiful, graceful, ugly) so by avoiding them, and more importantly -- your own opinion, the haiku is left with images of things just as they are.

By being concrete -- using only images of things we can see, smell, taste, touch or feel -- the haiku writer avoids those traps of Western poetry: abstract ideas such as love, hate, sadness, desire, honor, glory, of which we have had enough. Haiku demands you use your bodily senses instead of your intellect. Forget what you have been taught; write of what you experience with your body. Check your haiku. See if you can draw a picture (at least in your mind) as result of reading each line. If you have a line -- "so that it was there" -- you can be sure it is one to drop or rewrite.

Haiku are simple. Often beginners try to put too much into it. A good rule is to have at least two concrete images, no more than three. Some schools of haiku (think of fish) are happy with a couple images which paint a lovely scene wherein your mind can wander and wonder.

Others are more demanding. They ask that the 2 or 3 images to compare, associate or contrast. Here, if you find your way, you can use your ability to see metaphors and simile. You have to accept that by putting the images side by side, leaving out the words "like" and "as" and you will be letting your reader make the leaps of imagination and understand your unspoken point.

Here comes the real challenge of haiku. To express an image or two so well that the reader "sees" them in his/her mind and then! you add another image that demands a leap or twist so the two previous images are seen in a new relationship (maybe even your metaphor, if you are lucky). An additional twist is to have images plus leap which reveal some deep philosophical truth or ideal without having to speak of it. Poetry is written vision. You have to show new ways of seeing things to be a real poet. Basho, again, showing us "real things" doing "unreal" things which feel real:

such stillness
the shrill of a cicada
pierces rock

Part of learning to write haiku is learning to read them. Read translations of Japanese masters, read early haiku written in your own language and read all the contemporary works you can find. Be picky. Decide if you like a haiku or not, if it speaks to you or not and if it does -- why. By analyzing the why you can discover techniques to help you say in haiku what you are experiencing. Go ahead and imitate haiku you like. Just never publish those poems because they are only exercises. Besides, the best-known haiku cannot be imitated.

lily
out of the water;
out of itself

jack-in-the-pulpit
out of the earth
out of ... (?) can you really say "itself" again?

Check a haiku. Can any word of it be changed out for another? If so, the haiku is flawed and can be rewritten. Only when each image is so dependent upon the other that whole thing collapses if one word is altered is the haiku "solid".

Because every image is interrelated, be aware of images that reflect a seasonal feeling or spirit. Springtime is for mornings, blossoms and babies, autumn for dying and old folks and evenings. Try to either know through study of kigo lists (lists of season words) which things are associated with which season or by observation. If you use an image out of season, make certain you are doing it for contrast and not ignorance. We non-Japanese are poorly trained in this and it takes study and practice to do that which they do naturally.

Haiku should have a reverence for life and living. To write from the knowledge that even the dead are "alive", that the ugly has something beautiful in it, that even darkness will change to light, is the haiku spirit. Haiku has humor and there is a delight in word-play and puns and the comic of life. Haiku can be written on any subject as long as the writer refrains from being demeaning or sarcastic. If there are times and people who need to speak of things in this manner there is the limerick.

Haiku can be seen as too "cool", too heartless, too objective. Yes, but then you have the tanka form which allows the addition of your subjective feelings and emotions. Accept that different poetry forms grew out of different situations and therefore have a built-in stance or spirit or uprightness. Be aware of what you are feeling and chose the proper genre for it.

Writing haiku is a discipline and if you are interested in haiku you are seeking more discipline in your life. Go for it. Make rules for yourself and follow them exactly, or break them completely, outgrow them and find new ones. We are all students and no one "really" knows how to write a haiku. That, however, does not stop us from trying...

moving into the sun
the pony takes with him
some mountain shadow - jr

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