

THE HAIKUIZATION OF RUSSIA: A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN HAIKU

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It is a commonplace that the Western societies are based on the Germanic self-reliance and individualism while the Russian and Japanese realms impress us with their communal feel and collectivism, their civil wars notwithstanding. It comes as a no-brainer that the transplanted haiku genus manifests itself cooperatively but with a strong local flair.

Seemingly, the chattering classes in many communities need a sort of the quintessential brevity in poetry. The imported treasures of haiku are successfully filling some vacuoles destined for the forgotten or renovated terseness in many countries, though many national cultures used to come up with their own short verses. Back in the 19th century, Russians invented their brilliant small senryuish ditties—“chastushki.”

Nick is sitting at the door,
Neither dancing, singing nor,
He is sitting, deaf and dumb . . .
Catch the haiku outcome!

But what is haiku? As early as in 1992 Clarence Hugh Holman and William Harmon in their *Handbook to Literature* (McMillan/Collier, New York & London) gave this description of haiku genre-in-making:

A form of Japanese poetry that states in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables a clear picture designed to arouse a distinct emotion and suggest a specific spiritual insight. Unlike senryu, which is also in seventeen syllables but has a lighter mood, haiku poetry is deeply serious and also profoundly conventional. Every season, element, bird, flower, insect, and so forth comes equipped with a large set of associations that the haiku exploits. Approximations of the spirit of haiku have been found in many Western writers—Wordsworth, Thoreau, Pound, Bly, Snyder—usually in short poems but also in short passages of prose; and attempts have been made to produce translations of original haiku (the best by R. H. Blyth and the Greek master George Seferis), but the spirit as well as the form tend to get lost.

For one thing, the Japanese syllable is uncommonly short and uniform, typically consisting of one simple consonant followed by one simple vowel (as in “sayonara”) with no marked stress on any syllable. Because an English syllable can contain as many as seven or eight separate sounds (as in “strengths” and “traipsed”), seventeen English syllables will probably consume more time than seventeen Japanese syllables, so that someone who writes seventeen English syllables under the impression that they constitute a haiku is almost certainly wrong.

A closer formal approximation in English would be eleven syllables arranged in a symmetrical pattern of three, five, and three. The Japanese are not fussy about the seventeen: some haiku run somewhat longer, and nobody objects.

[Reference: R. H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, 2 Vols. (1963-64).]

This definition of haiku in English has not been well absorbed by dilettantes, hack writers, amateurs and numerous school teachers who prefer senryu and senryu-like spoofs which they call “haiku.” The syllable count is a must. The state of affairs in Russia somewhat bears comparison with the West but the capital-led centralization allows for more so-to-speak homogeneity. After all, the number of Moscow billionaires lags behind only New York, London and San Francisco.

In 1998 many Russian *hokku* composers and literati got together courtesy of the Anglia Bookstore in the downtown Moscow. Along with the *wabi-sabi*, the feeling of *aware* and the intricacies of enjambment were talked over. The Russian Haiku Society- in- the- making was also buttressed by the 1998 forum organized by *Arion* magazine based in the capital of Russia. The discussion was led by two trail-blazing editors who devoted their lives to *haikai* transplants and their wide practice and voice—Dmitry Kydrya and Alexey Andreyev.

While on a visit to the Anglo-Saxon West, Mr. Andreyev was somehow attuned to receive a strong dose of haiku poetry. He established a first Russian haiku site on the Internet; and his colleagues planted the Garden of Diverging Haiku. It is still growing and the mind-boggling number of haiku is on a permanent display.

Alexey Andreyev used to pen haiku and senryu like that:

poplar fluff
at whatever you say
my sneeze

Indian summer
in the spider’s web
just the dry needles.

In his manifestos Mr. Andreyev addressed the “great divide” between authors who called any three-liner haiku and aficionados who talked about the sheer impossibility of aesthetics’ transfer from Japan to the Russian poetry realm. Alexey identified the circuitous third way showing the haiku origin (tanka). He compared the Western four-line stanzas with tanka, dismissing the notion that any three-line banality may be haiku per se and stressing the exactness of haiku cue. His definition of haiku included “the bridge’s other side dissolving in fog” which can be visualized like a whole by our quick imagination.}]

Alexey Andreyev also spoke about the temptation to see haiku as an allegory or metaphor. He bestowed on haiku the magic of inducing human states of mind and emotions. Alexey even called haiku the most poetical genre.

Yet Mr. Andreyev lamented that, in the absence of the cultural context, Japanese haiku might stay incomprehensible to the Russian reader.

Nevertheless, he turned out to be remarkably upbeat in his conclusions:

1. Haiku written in Russian in the Russian cultural milieu may be closer to the Japanese aesthetics than haiku translated from the Japanese.
2. Different cultures intersect and along these seam lines texts may be easily translatable and even form an international language.

Dmitry Kudrya, a refined specialist in poetry started to practice haiku, sometimes surrealist ones:

a stump with eyes
by the very ski-track
the former forest

duckweed opening
the stork
takes a good look at itself

Under the aegis of the Russian Institute of Culture Studies, Mr. Kudrya and Natalya Sedenkova also launched the first thick annual haiku almanac *Haikumena* and created a circle of *haijin* that is an ever increasing group of people inside and outside the twelve million strong Moscow.

In his *Arion* article, Mr. Kudrya indicated his keen attention to the problems of translation. Starting with *traduttori, traditori*—translators, traitors, a rather old adage—Dmitry remarked that whence a translator of prose is a slave of an author, a translator of poems is his rival.

Dmitry also recalled Jorge Borges’s “poetry, perhaps, is just variations of words, intonations, or variations of ratios of manifestations of the expressible and the inexpressible, of the obvious and the hidden.”

Mr. Kudrya underlined the centrality of *shiori* in haiku poesy—“many meanings of one word.”

I would add that the Japanese language is especially multi-suggestive (sometimes only the Chinese character/hieroglyph may denote the exact meaning on the same sounding word—just imagine “knight-night,” “cite-sight,” “rhyme-rime,” pairs aplenty).

We must also be informed that the “key creator of the modern literary Russian” A. S. Pushkin highly esteemed by Leon Aron in his latest review on masterpieces (The *WSJ*, January 11-12, 2014) managed to create his celebrated “short lyrical poems, many known by heart by every educated Russian.” It is imperative to mention these lyric verses (“Elegia,” 1830) since they are “largely free from metaphor or imagery—a classical ‘Greek beauty’ that depended so much on what’s left unsaid, as on what is said . . .” Isn’t it an outstanding precursor of haiku?!

Dmitry Kudrya also introduced the quality of *yojo*—something like the afterglow or the sound of echo, the lingering feeling evoked by a haiku.

In his *Arion* paper, Dmitry gave a green light to the haiku techniques in non-Japanese languages including Russian. He focuses on the *traddutori*, discovering such nuances as the aged translation sinking in for good and yet looking like a translation.

Vera Markova seemed to be his translation guru. Dmitry noticed a certain “language drift” in cases when a translator mistakenly used his or her native tongue in its present state (the modern time) instead of trying to unlock the language of the original and find a suitable analogy or even create it in his or her mother’s tongue.

Under Kydrya’s magnifying lens many concrete specimens of translation were scrupulously examined and analyzed.

The burning quest for him was, whether it was possible—in the system of the Russian language—to attain parallel sensations and artfulness. And he wondered whether such keen translators would have materialized.

D. Kudrya formulated the following: “Translation is a venture of culture outside itself. The secret desire of a translator is to make the alien his and to make his the alien. There are other phantasmagoric depths in the translator’s mysterious cult. Translation may happen to be a fake and translation may be just madness.”

Frank Kermode in *The New York Review of Books* (Volume LII, Number 16, 2005) writes about Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator.”

Mr Benjamin shares with us his thought about the reason we value ancient literature [*nota bene*, Bashō and Issa]. It is not usually for what it means but for the way it says it, its “way of meaning.” The translator should be preoccupied with this notion. The reproduction of meaning is not a point according to the essay. Discussions—in terms of fidelity and license—are not important at all. Bad translators are the best if we concern ourselves only with a question of meaning. But the good translator “must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning.” This is deemed as an achievement. Two directions—the attention to meaning and the way of meaning—are worth to ponder while embarking onto a translation project.

A certain degree of foreignization was, perhaps, desirable at the jump-start of haiku assimilation and attunement in the Russian poetics.

We were blessed with luminous translators in Russia and thus *hokku* used to percolate into the Russian literary process in sync with the West. Only recently, cultural hegemony of the English tongue led to the replacement of the Silver Age term “hokku” with the Germanic world’s term “haiku.” The term “tanka” survived gloriously since the times of Andrey Belyi who wrote a brilliant analysis of five-liners and even used a derivative adjective from the noun “tanka”—“tanochnaya.” He did adhere to the exact rhymes, though. The non-rhymed verses were still of low value to the Muscovite poets a hundred years ago.

My 2001 paper “Squinting Eyes” in *Arion* attempted to explain the wider acceptance of haiku in Russia by depletion of haikuish lines in modern Russian body of verse that almost always follows the Western trends. I mean the more arduous mining of haiku-like images flashing out in the Russian hypertext. This small-scale research clearly showed that the older [absolute age] verses of major Russian poets contain more quasi-haiku than the poems of contemporary writers in the Soviet Union and the truncated New Russia. The Russian analog of *The New Yorker* is *Novy Mir* (*New World*). This venerable monthly almost never publishes haiku, though; it lately did include a couple of the Tomas Tranströmer’s poems along with the strophes in Swedish. To my utter amazement, this Russian flagship magazine turned, albeit momentarily, to the semblance of the time-honored and widely circulated magazine *Inostrannaya Literatura* (*Foreign Literature*) which has published lots of lexically-translated haiku

in the last thirty years.

(In parallel with my Russian fact-finding, I scanned the *crème de la crème* poems in English and reported the similar time-wise erosion of haiku-like scintillas in American and British poetry anthologies covering the last century of the last millennium. Many leading *haijin* were attending my presentation within a Haiku North America meeting that took place in Boston in 2001.)

The spiral of haiku history in the recent Russian body of verse is encrusted with the annual contests that are run uniquely different from the Japanese or the Anglos.

All the entered haiku—thousands of them—become available for viewing; the contests are compartmentalized. The latest one had a new rubric “On the far shores.”

The categories include, of course, the classic (traditional) haiku along with the modern haiku and senryu.

The traditional (classic) haiku must be “here and now,”

. . . a genuine life experience. They should address a human condition via nature and they must include a *kigo* word, *ma* (a certain pause) and contain *yojo* (with some room for emotion) and *kire* (the empty spaces which could be more important than the strokes of brush.) This type of haiku is an analog of *hokku* as a part of *renku*.

The contest organizers want to see modern haiku too. This class of haiku may employ stretches of time and the season references are not necessary. It can use tropes and figures of speech. An author’s personality might be present without dominance, though. This type of haiku inherits the quality of inner links in *renku*.

The *senryū* are welcome, especially on the subject of human relations and feelings. Humor, sarcasm, satire, sadness, love, sex, money are acceptable. World imperfections can be included. This kind of haiku is allowed to deal with animals, nature and inanimate objects with an accent on their “human” qualities.

The judges are not anonymous; they choose their independent rosters of the firsts.

The records of sympathies of readers are published as well.

The cases of concurrence of esteemed judges (for the 2013 contest we invited Charles Trumbull as one of a dozen of adjudicators) and the wider circle of connoisseurs and dilettantes are noteworthy.

It is clear that minimalist poetry and haiku—as it is practiced today in Russia—overlap significantly. It leads to a desirable generation continuity. The Silver Age of the Russian poetry is being felt a hundred years later, in our time.

As practiced today, minimalism may derive more from Dadaism, concrete poetry and haiku, and it certainly presents parallels to the visual arts. Minimalist poetry focuses on bare words or phrases, sometimes rearranging them on the page so that their most basic and individual properties disclose something unexpected about themselves.

Though slight in themselves, these little exercises can be thoughtful, entertaining and provocative, exploiting language as does all poetry.

(C. John Holcombe, *Minimalism in Poetry*, 2007; see the Internet site textc.com.)

The ever-increasing throngs of haiku aficionados produce a lot of evocative and exquisite poems without the undue fixation on the syllable count. To wit: there are a couple of holdouts

of the 5-7-5 pattern; the most notable one is Vladimir Gertzik who is still bitter about the ways of haiku in Russian and insists on his quantizations:

I swing open the door
In the air it levitates—
The jumping he-cat.

The Russian fraternity of live journals [ЖЖ in Russian (zh zh)] is playing *kammurizuke*, a game a bit analogous to *bouts-rimés* practiced in France, in England (the *Bluestockings*), in Scotland and in imperial Russia. The poetic pleasure seekers are given a line, say, “poplar fluff” and strive to complete a haiku or *senryu*, if the line is about human affairs. Many strong (and easily translatable) poems appear:

he is no more
the poplar fluff
is still flying
ω12215

prom party
the poplar fluff
is flying
nira_vaci

A lot of camaraderie happens on *ginko* walks and on the motorized *haikai* tours across the huge expanses of the Russian Federation. Haiku poets play *kamurizuke* (capping verses)—the adding of their own version parts of haiku to the tuning fork line or theme. *Haiga* is popular too, yet mostly on the Internet and just a little bit in the anthology *Haikumena*. The Moscow publishing house Ad Marginem placed a lot of good translations in the best bookstores and libraries, among them essayistic tome *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* which casually inserts the following into the Russian milieu of readers, “As in many Japanese haiku the lines of written words suddenly opens up and, instead of the dropped word, an easy image pops up—Mount Fuji or some sardine.” In 2013, there was a haiku convention at the green houses of Catherine the Great in the suburban Moscow and poets were dancing cotillion at the fabulously restored palace of the Empress. On the next day of haiku festivities, poets had a get-together in the five hundred year old palatial halls near the Kremlin. Right there, I ventured to toast the kind of the best Russian haiku that are close to impossible to translate without footnotes, the haiku that are dictated to authors by the language itself. (Muse is a nationalistic dominatrix.)

The best *senryū* of 2013 was about a clothes hanger. In Russian, the diminutive word for the “clothes hanger” is *plechiki* which means “small shoulders,” with a connotation, presumably, towards kids and women. (Russian is a gender-inflected language.) As my mentor Robert Spiess noted, “The three forms of manifestations of haiku are visible words, their phonetics and the essential which enters . . . the heart.”

The resident of Ukraine Mikhail Yezhov (ejjjofff) attained this confluence in his discovery

closet wide open:
your empty *plechiki*
hardly swinging.

The late Sophia Russinova breathed out

wandering over my flat,
I bump everywhere
into your kisses.

Inna Khmel observes in her Russian Ukraine

palace of weddings
the prettiest brides exchange
jealous glances.

Mikhail Sapego apparently knows that the Russian language contains many more curses than any other Indo-Germanic tongue

f . . . boredom
drumming onto the roof
this slow rain.

In his St. Petersburg, he formulates

I'll get sick, I'll die
but for now—
sun, wind, wine, hanky-panky.

His fellow Petropolian Andrey Shlyakhov

furiously splitting
a log of wood
silence inside.

In the nascent haiku world of Moscow Marina Hagen pioneered the brevity, often inexpressible in English:

winter comes the water turns a pillar.

(The word “pillar” easily becomes a verb in Russian and suggests an utter amazement.)

Marina won the first Russian haiku contest by

in the shadows of branches
the jumping shadow of a sparrow.

Mikhail Baru confesses

morning fog
I am trying to get lost
on my way to work.

Roman Lyahovetsky in the Russian State of Israel has won the annual competition in Moscow by this season-anchored haiku:

spring rain
your keys hardly clinking
by the front door.

Polina Pecherskaya leads in the senryu revelations

“love love”
the spell checker removes
the extra word.

Elina Vitomskaya’s formulaic senryu was a trophy from a haiku conference in Bulgaria; it is a rare aberration when the Russian text is much shorter than the English one:

in the morning they climb up
in the evening they descend—
the tile roofs in the mountains.

Indian summer is approximated by the period of an early autumn on the Great Russian Plain. This return of warm weather is called the “summer of female peasants or middle aged women.” Niele Kerushauskene in the Russian-speaking segment in *Kaunas* (Lithuania) won the approval of public by the Nabokovian haiku

Indian summer
a girl reddens her lips
with a watercolor.

Lada Turbina (Tokeda) deepens a Russian haiku

July night . . .
just touching the questions eternal—
the daybreak arrives!

Our truly bilingual haiku poet Zhanna Korobova-Rader made it even into the venerable Haiku Moment compiled by Bruce Ross. She contributed to the 2007 anthology

Mailbox
gulping up a letter,
spitting out the moth.

Petrick (Pyotr Savchenko) submits good haibun and notices

it was so easy
to say “in the last century”
in the last century.

Ira Novitskaya published

under my eyelids
I hide you
I hide you from all.

She is a poet who belonged to the movement of Meloimagists; Ira wrote short couplets and longer poems along with the short unrhymed verse and haiku. Her strict editor-approved senryu often employ the effective technique of refrains.

Jan Swafford noted in the Boston Symphony Orchestra booklet 2013-2014, week 10:

We immediately hear Beethoven's main method: wisps of tune turn over and over, the opening themelet unchanging for ten bars in a row on the first page. A later age, rediscovering the hypnotic effect of repetition, would call this kind of music Minimalism."

A decade ago Dmitry Kudrya progressed to more shortness:

submerged stones of the sky river.

As early as in 1998 Sergei Statsenko was featured among other haiku poets in a mainstream magazine:

a drop falls on a bumble-bee . . . drizzle.

And here we stand. The minimalist movement in Russian poetry has absorbed the marvels of Western and Japanese haiku and—early on—made it its own to move on into the Eurasian haiku future.

falling leaves
I open my eyes
falling leaves

The PR haiku poets led by Petr Savchenko (Petrik) and Elina Vitomskaya organized the "on-the-road" car tours of Russia and the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine. They met local poets and gave readings in the vast territory from Moscow to Berdyansk on the Azov Sea.

They are planning the ambitious ride to the Sea of Japan across the nine time zones. In summer 2014, they hopped on a plane to Tokyo and climbed the Mount Fuji. The visa requirements and finances allow them nowadays—to a certain extent—to match the curious Westerners who made Kyoto and Nara their regular destinations.

gas burner on:
in its blue flame
the flashes of summer

The 2014 haiku festival will take place in Moscow in October. The Japanese haiku poets shall make an appearance.

Olga Chernykh (Olala) in the capital of Western Ukraine writes:

day is over
in the dry grass
the butterfly's wings

We should not leave unnoticed an online magazine *Ulitka* [*Snail*], ulitkaonline.com. It publishes haiku, *senryu*, haibun, *haiga* and even photoku. Its No. 1 (8), April 2013 features Ivan Krotov:

windy
second day in row
the maddening old swing.

Marina Darenskaya submitted

all of it flying away
except the moon—
the apple orchard

this one is not him . . .
what a pity,
I walked by so gracefully.

Nikolai Grankin found a senryu

exhibition hall
it slightly trembles all over—
the photo of a nude.

Andrus Lunyatskas from the Baltics exclaimed

springtime morning
I want to walk
to all sides at once.

Valeria Simonova-Chekon outlined the principles of sci-fi imachi renku when the participants tried to imagine the possible readers 300 years later and futuristically cater to them. Natalia Levi suggested

no difference
yet the different scent of
my clone daughter's hair.

Mrs. Levi contributes a lot to the magazine of senryu and kyōka *Yorshik* [*Ruff* or *Wire Brush*]. Alexey Chernyavsky's poem is discussed in *Haiku Almanac Ros[s]inki* [*Dewdrops*], Igor Belyi, Publisher, Giperion [*Hyperion*], 2014. It might be structured it like this:

express train the length of two stations the rain