

Humour in Haiku

by Susumu Takiguchi

After hard work we need a break. After a serious thing we want something light hearted. Between serious kabuki acts, there are comic kyogen plays. In the same vein, after the serious waka poems there came light hearted and comic verse haikai which meant, and still ought to mean, comic verse.

the few flies that remain
seem to remember me.

Taneda Santoka

From haikai was born what is now known as haiku, even if the word haiku itself is an old entity dating back at least as far ago as the 17th century. Now you are vaguely beginning to see what I am driving at – humour should be restored to sit at the heart of haiku as it is its ancestor. Let's face it. We human beings need both seriousness and lightness. Even if we do not want them they both exist in human affairs, regardless. That's life. We are a rare species who can, and do, laugh a lot. Do horses laugh? They sometimes look as if they do. Dandelions or pansies look cheerful and smiling in the sun, without the worry of anthropomorphism. Even if animals also laugh in the broadest possible sense, we laugh thousand times more.

Crucially, we cannot and must not divide our life and the world into one side which is serious and the other light, nor should or could we conveniently and simply compartmentalise all the things in our life and the world into "serious" and "light". This is simply because our lives and the world are far more complicated than such seemingly simple division can grasp.

How much harm have simple-minded and single-minded people done to humanity! Those simple-and single-minded who have carelessly tossed haiku into the "serious" category and deprived it of the essential "lightness" have a lot to answer for. We are supposed to know that tragedy and comedy are two sides of the same coin. We even know that sometimes they "merge". All the best minds have known this at least since history began and superior pens have written novels, plays and poems accordingly, Shakespeare being only one such example.

I have been trying to show the importance of sense of humour in haiku for

decades. Even in the 21st century, I have continued that effort as I thought it was too important for people to ignore at their own peril. For instance, there is a paper I wrote back in 2001 on the very subject. Nearly 10 years on I see no evidence that things have changed in a meaningful way.

The paper was entitled, *Sense of Humour – A Forgotten Prerequisite of Haiku*, and was given in my position as chairman of the World Haiku Club. The following is what I said then.

A doyen of haiku looked surprised and then amused at the Global Haiku Festival in April 2000 when he suddenly realised that a Japanese speaker had been pronouncing the word "haiku" very differently from how it is said in English. This amused me immensely. The man knew almost everything there is to know about haiku, including the origin and the literal meaning of this very word. And yet it never seemed to have occurred to him how it should be or is pronounced in Japanese. Pronounced in the Western way, haiku could mean "discarded poems", or "useless void". How humble they sound, albeit unwittingly! If this man did not know the correct pronunciation of the word of which he is an undisputed authority, how much chance is there for the ordinary haikin outside Japan to know the first thing about haiku as practised in Japan?

spring rain:
the uneaten ducks
quack

Kobayashi Issa

The doyen's amusement and my own are both in keeping with the true spirit of haiku as the word "haiku" is composed of two parts, "hai" and "ku", and it is the meaning of the former which is often forgotten or never learnt in the first place, creating one of the most serious flaws in Western writing of haiku. The "hai" is part of another word "hai-kai" of Chinese origin, whose Japanese equivalent is "kokkei". Now, the word "kokkei" can be variously translated into English: comicality, drollery, waggery, jocularly, joke, jest, pleasantry, humour, witticism, pun, farce, funny things. etc. No problem with the word "ku", since everybody seems to know what it means, namely a stanza, or a piece of poetry.

bush warbler –
a dropping on the rice cake
at the veranda's edge!

Matsuo Basho

“Haiku”, then, ought to have meant nothing but a comic verse, had it not been for Basho. How on earth is it that when it comes to haiku in the West and by extension in the rest of the non-Japanese world, it looks as though haiku means anything but a comic verse? The confusion between haiku and senryu is one silent testimony to this. The “Zen obsession” which Western haijin have inflicted upon themselves is another.

The lesson we need to learn outside Japan is that we should never forget that humour has always been, still is, and should continue to be, if possible, part of haiku. Without this lesson becoming an integral part of our sensibility, it would be an unending uphill struggle for us to begin to grasp that special frame of mind, or view of life, which is peculiar to haiku: a detached, tangential, light-hearted and humorous way of looking at things.

This is the forgotten half of the essence of “haiku-no-kokoro” (the haiku spirit), the most difficult quality for non-Japanese to understand, let alone acquire. It is present in haiku poems and also in the way of life of their authors, sometimes overt and other times latent, but it is there always, maintaining a delicate balance with “fuga-no-makoto” (poetic truth or honesty). When and where did it go wrong, if it has ever gone wrong?

samurai gathering –
their chat has the pungent taste
of daikon radish

Matsuo Basho

In this connection, we must ask the question, what is the word “haiku” ?, as opposed to the question “what is haiku?” The word was not invented or coined by Masaoka Shiki as is widely believed. The word “haiku” had been in existence at least 200 years before Shiki. What Shiki effectively did was to give this word a special role, that of replacing the word “hokku” (opening stanza) to sever it from the rest of renga (“haikai-no-renga” to be exact) and to make it a genre of modern “literature” in its own right.

At first Shiki used both “hokku” and “haiku” but then started to use solely “haiku” to replace “hokku”, because “hokku” implied that other stanzas were to follow and became inappropriate. Shiki’s so-called haiku reform was first and foremost this attempt of his at making “hokku” (now haiku)

independent of the haikai-no-renga. This also meant that he and his followers had the task of developing now independent haiku in such a way as to let it make sense in the fast modernising and Westernising Japan over 100 years ago.

autumn fly –
all the fly swatters
are broken

Masaoka Shiki

The first haikai document to record the word "haiku" is thought by general consent to be Hattori Sadakiyo's Obaeshu which was published in Kambun 3 (1663). Originally, "haiku" was abbreviated from "haikai-no-ku" and was used as a general term to mean any ku (stanza), whether it was "hokku", or other "tsukeku", in the haikai-no-renga. In the Meiji era, it took some time before "haiku" was established and well circulated. A History of Japanese Literature by Sanji Mikami and Sukisaburo Takatsu (1890), for example, gave the word "haiku" a proper status as a technical literary term and consciously used it to signify an independent form of poetry previously represented by "hokku".

above her sash,
breasts in her way
as she tucks in her fan

Iida Dakotsu

To understand the word "haiku" accurately, we must sort out another commonly used, but equally commonly misunderstood word, "haikai", from which was derived haiku as we know it. "Haikai" is a much wider and more complex term covering not only hokku (or haiku) but also more loosely many of the literary works related to hokku such as renga (or renku), haibun and hairon (haiku theory, or essay), though the narrowest definition of the word would be the haikai-no-renga.

The word "haikai" had been used in Japanese literature before Basho's time. One example is the "Haikai-ka" (or Comic Verses) of the Kokinshu. This tradition goes even further back to "gisho-ka" (farcical poems) of the Manyoshu. Haikai-no-renga was first established by such people as Yamazaki Sokan, and Arakida Moritake and was then developed into a more widespread genre of literature by, among other people, Matsunaga Teitoku

and Nishiyama Soin.

However, it was Basho who elevated haikai to a height comparable to that of "waka", or serious renga or any other literary form of merit. Ever since, haikai-no-renga (and haiku as its modern incarnation) has been bearing the cross, so to speak, of having to do the balancing act between the humorous and the serious.

If it rains,
Come with your umbrella,
Midnight moon.

Yamazaki Sokan

The confusion or misconception about the word "hai-kai" in the West has naturally added to the lack of true understanding of haiku itself. With the surge of the world haiku movement, we should grasp the opportunities it provides us with to unravel all sorts of misunderstandings, misconceptions and lack of true understanding of various aspects of haiku before they are permanently enshrined and made into icons to be worshipped.

If it is in the interest of haiku and its genuine and healthy development in the 21st century to correct these kinds of idols and icons, then we need to have modern versions of desirable iconoclasts. Not those iconoclasts in the past who tried to destroy icons only to become new icons themselves. Make no mistake: these modern iconoclasts should be genuinely supported not persecuted, since their other names are reason, fairness, bon sense, integrity, objectivity, tolerance and last but not least genuine love for haiku.

days getting longer –
I part with a friend who caught
a yawn from me

Natsume Soseki

Thus, if we truly appreciate that a sense of humour is part and parcel of haiku, then the way we look at a specific haiku or compose haiku ourselves should now go through subtle or even drastic changes. For example, we would be looking at Basho's frog pond poem (one of the most misunderstood poems) with new eyes and would be able to see a comic side to it. We would also come to realise that we have been taking haiku far too seriously, to the extent to which such an attitude would faintly verge on

idolatry, fetishism or fanaticism, which are anathema to true haikin. The sense of humour ("hai") in haiku would restore the right balance for us.

wasting in summer:
arms heavier
than iron bars

Kawabata Bosha

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