

A HISTORY OF HAIKU IN MÉXICO

Compiled by AMÉLIE OLAIZ



PART I: JOSE JUAN TABLADA AND THE HAIKU IN MEXICO

by Amélie Olaiz (translated by Santiago Daydi-Tolson)

The history of the haiku in Spanish takes us unmistakably to Jose Juan Tablada (1871–1945), businessman, journalist, politician, poet, calligrapher, art critic, illustrator, writer and chronicler of his time. A man of many talents and accomplishments, his major contribution to Latin American literature was a minute detail: the introduction of the haiku, or *haikai*, as he termed his adaptations to Spanish of the traditional Japanese poetic form. He was the first writer in the Hispanic world to adopt the haiku as a poetic genre. A proof of this is his collection of haiku in Spanish included in his book *Un día. Poemas sintéticos (A Day. Synthetic Poems)* published in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1919. Each of the 37 titled haiku of the collection, which deal mostly with small animals and plants, has in the original version an accompanying illustration by the poet. This was the work that gained Tablada recognition as the utmost poet of Japanese inspiration.

Jose Juan Tablada was a constant and enthusiastic admirer of Japanese culture, in particular its painting and the haiku. Written in 1914, the poem “Japan” shows his profound love for that country:

Golden mirage, opium dream,
The source of all my ideals!
garden of a subtle Kaleidoscope:
mental embroidering of its colorful glasses!

Your theogonies have enthralled me
And I fervently love all your glories:
I am the serf of your Mikado!
I am the bonze of your pagodas!

Because of you I am reborn to happiness:
It pours on my sceptic soul
As the rays of the raising sun
Over the snows of the Fusiyama.

You are the narcotic opium
That puts to sleep my sorrows:
My blood—the red priestess—
Sings your praise in my veins.

...

I love your streams and ponds,
Your white deer, your pheasants
And the sad pallid glow of the moon
Bathing the heights of your volcanoes.

I love your arcane mythology,
The weird monsters, the clear flowers
Painted in shady silk of your screens
And in the enamel of your vases.

...

And thus my soul that loves you,
My insane spirit that adores you
Would like to be that star of lively fire
Which lovingly kisses and ardently burns:
The white snow of the Fujiyama!

“In is enthusiasm for singing Japan, Tablada depicts a country of golden mirage, a dream of the opium, a source of all his ideals and a resplendent garden,” writes Seiko Oto.

Tablada was a true lover of poetry, as he puts it in his own words: “Poetry is the essence, the spirit, the synthesis . . . Prose is inductive or deductive analysis. . . Poetry is pure intuition.” Thus, the admiration for the haiku was natural for him. He respected with veneration the works of Bashō and Hokusai and tried to imitate them by making them their own. He knew that in order to reach a true understanding of the haiku it was not enough to read and observe the poems, but it was indispensable to fully understand the culture from which such artistic perception was coming. Then, he devoted himself to the study of the available texts in the languages with which he was familiar, as French, and English, which he knew well.

Why did Tablada give a title to each of the haiku he wrote?

Seiko Oto explains:

Because of its brevity for Western readers the haiku was like a riddle. To avoid obscurity Tablada followed the advice of the abbot (the writer Jose Maria Gonzales de Mendoza) and gave titles to his haiku. The title seemed necessary for deciphering the enigma that this kind of poems represent to some Westerners.

For Tablada the haiku is a talisman, a “luminous revelation”—as Rueda de la Serna calls it—that has secured him a place of honor in the history of literature. Tablada not only brings the literary form to the Spanish language, but he also translates Japanese culture through a clear understanding of the brief Japanese poem, albeit he did not follow its prosodic rules.

Because of his vast knowledge of Japan Tablada knows that it is impossible to adapt to Spanish the tiny, brief and profound poetic representation of the observed instant, of what happens just now; he decides to call them also synthetic poems. Perhaps this is another reason for not following the required verse measure of the original. In his versions, the fundamental elements of the haiku are clearly present as well as a good knowledge of Japanese culture. The practice of accompanying the haiku with an illustration was frequent, as shown by some of the author’s works and documents that have been conserved.¹ That is his great value.²

Debate on Tablada and his work

For many years Tablada was not well recognized in the circles of the haiku. There were even doubts about his having visited Japan. Some of the reasons for this lack of recognition might be:

1. The animadversion caused by his support of Victoriano Huerta (accused of murdering one of the great martyrs of the Mexican Revolution), which led many to look at him with suspicion.
2. His lies about having translated to Spanish poems from the Japanese, as he was never fluent in that language. He had a translator that helped him in writing his versions.
3. The uncertainties, errors of edition and contradictions about his trip to Japan in 1900 casted doubts among many about his having ever been in Japan. (His descriptions of the land of the sun are merely contemplative and provide no specific details, as, for example, the name of the ship and the incidents of the long sea journey. Besides, up to this date no photos of the trip have been found.)

1. Cf. José María González de Mendoza, “Pinturas de Tablada” in *Ensayos selectos*, p. 160. The example of *Un día . . .* in the Archivo José Juan Tablada has the seal of donation of González de Mendoza. Since the critic was not fond of painting and was in possession of the poet’s archive, we can surmise that the images, which are not in color in the original edition, were painted by Tablada in watercolor. In addition, the care taken in producing the edition suggests the participation of someone with some abilities as a painter.

2. For a better knowledge of José Juan Tablada’s figure and his work visit “José Juan Tablada: letra e imagen” <http://www.tablada.unam.mx> and consult the CD-Rom Jose Juan Tablada: letra imagen (poesía, prosa, obra gráfica y varia documental), Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas-Coordinación de Publicaciones Digitales DGSCA UNAM, Mexico, 2003. ISBN 968-36-9942-1.

4. His constant and profound interest in French culture, his command of the French language, and the influence on him of French poets who studied the haiku—as Couchoud, Michel Revon, and Jules Renard—and of painters, like Toulouse-Lautrec, who were clearly influenced by Japanese arts and culture. Also, his knowledge of English and of authors like Aston, Hall, Chamberlain, and others, lead to doubting there was a direct influence of Japanese culture on his work.

5. In the lists of passengers on the ships in which Tablada would have probably traveled on the tentative dates of his trip there is no mention of the 29-year-old man he was at that time.

In spite of all this, the interest in Jose Juan Tablada grew strongly in part because Octavio Paz discovered the haiku through him. Today one can find publications and investigations of his poetic work and chronicles.

In his study of *En el país del sol*,³ Rodolfo Mata states that the majority of the articles Tablada collected in it are chronicles (some dated in various locations in Japan) that were published in several Mexican magazines between 1894 and 1912. Mata considers that in these chronicles the author is trying to underline the testimonial character of the book. Dr. Seiko Ota's thesis *Haiku y japonismo* (2008), published by Fondo de Cultura Económica⁴ is, to my knowledge, one of the most complete studies done on the haiku in Tablada. Also of interest are the studies done by Rodolfo Mata, from the Instituto de Estudios Filológicos of UNAM, and the book by Dr. Jorge Ruedas of Serna.⁵ The essay "Pasajero 21,"⁶ by Martin Camps, of the University of the Pacific, deserves special attention because it deals with the permanent discussion about Tablada's trip to Japan and reveals all that the critic found about the issue in his investigations.

The Mystery Unveiled

Mexico was the first country to sign in 1888 an agreement of reciprocity with Japan, a treatise of equality, friendship, commerce and navigation. Such agreement explains the 7 of May, 1900 entry in Tablada's diary in which he mentions a proposal by E. Lujan of sending Tablada to Japan as a reporter for *Revista Moderna*—a publication Tablada and Lujan had created together—and to write about Japanese culture and industry.

For a long time the mention of this trip was considered to be a lie Tablada's friends had tried to deny with rumors, since he had never left San Francisco for Yokohama. Those in doubt of the veracity of the trip said that Tablada's letters dated in Japan were only a trick: he had found a way of sending them from San Francisco to Japan and from there to Mexico. Rueda de la Serna affirms in his investigations that Tablada never took that trip for fear of the bubonic plague. Also it has been suggested that the influence of the haiku in France had been the real reason for Tablada's interest in the form, since among Mexicans of certain

3. *En El país del sol*. Crónicas japonesas de José Juan Tablada, Edición original 1919. Edición recomendada UNAM 2005.

4. Seiko Ota. José Juan Tablada: su haiku y su japonismo. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

5. En *El país del sol*. Obras VIII de José Juan Tablada. Edición crítica, prólogo y notas de Jorge Ruedas de la Serna. UNAM, 2006.

6. "Pasajero 21", Martin Camps. "Evidencia del viaje de José Juan Tablada a Japón", *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, XI, 80, 2o Semestre de 2014; pp. 377-394.

cultural and social status there had been a strong tendency for adopting all things French during the period of the Porfiriato. Other critics, as Araceli Tinajero in her “Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano,” state that Tablada’s appropriation of the Japanese haiku was not an imitation of French authors like Gautier and Verlaine, but the result of the Latin American opening to the Orient.

The final proof that Tablada went to Japan and had a direct contact with Japanese culture has been discovered by Martin Camps after checking not only the information on ships that left to Japan from Vancouver as well as San Francisco during the probable dates of Tablada’s trip, but also the registry of arrival of immigrants to Mexico in the National Archive. Passenger 21 in the ship America Maru, that left Japan on December 5, 1900 and arrived in San Francisco on the 22 of the same month and year, was passenger Jose Juan Tablada, a 29-year-old writer in good health, carrying US\$40.00 in his pocket and with Mexico City as his final destination.⁷

Some Of Tablada’s Haiku with Commentary by Seiko Ota

THE DRAGONFLY

Dragonfly:
A nail of glass
With tinsel wings

Seiko Ota says this haiku is clearly influenced by the haiku following it in *Sages et Poètes d’Asie*, which Couchoud attributes to Bashō: “Un grain de piment rouge,/Mettez-lui des ailes./C’est la libellule!”

MOTH

Nightly butterfly,
Please return to the naked twig
The dried leaves of your wings

Among the books Tablada had at his disposition, W. H. Aston’s *History of Japanese Literature* offers the first translation of this haiku: “Thought I, the fallen flowers / Are returning to their branch; / But lo! they were butterflies.

Couchoud’s translation to French is as follows: “Un pétale tombé / Remonte à sa branche: / Ah! c’est un papillon.”

The poet wrote this haiku soon after marrying for the second time.

THE ANTS

In a tiny wedding march
the ants are carrying
the petals of an orange blossom

7. “Pasajero 21”, Martin Camps. “Evidencia del viaje de José Juan Tablada a Japón”, *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, XI, 80, 2o Semestre de 2014; pp. 377-394.

Seiko Ota observes that, in addition to representing external reality, this haiku reflects Tablada's own feelings, since in Mexico the orange blossoms are used by the newlywed couple at the marriage ceremony.

THE PALM TREE

In the torrid siesta
not even the palm
is fanning . . .

BAMBOO

Upon growing up, a long-bodied flare,
the bamboo curves down
in a shower of tiny emeralds.

Tablada's haiku, as indicated by several of his critics, are highly visual. This has to do with the poet's talent and interest in drawing and painting. As a matter of fact, Tablada thought at one time of becoming a painter.

Let us consider some of his highly visual haiku:

WASPS

As darts against the target
the returning wasps
hit their nesting hive

BUZZARDS

It rained all night
and the vultures are never done
preening their feathers under the sun.

When dealing with a similar subject Bashō wrote:

On a dry branch
Rests a crow.
Autumn evening

FIREFLIES

Fireflies on a tree . . .
Christmas in summer?

Probably Tablada was inspired by this haiku by Bashō, also about fireflies:

Lights
on the tree,
abode of flowers.

Frequently those who paint, draw, design or take pictures when writing do it based on a visual image more than on an idea; probably that was the case with Tablada, who wrote highly visual haiku.

Seiko Ota compares Bashō's haiku, which is acoustic,

Une vieille mare,
Et, quand une grenouille plonge,
Le bruit que fait l'eau . . .⁸

with this one by Tablada, inspired in the same subject, but mostly visual, instead.

FROGS

Clumps of mud
across the darkened path:
frogs leaping.

In order to write haiku today it is necessary not only to know the rules of the form but also to be in the state of mind achieved through the cultivation of Zen discipline and culture: contemplation. Probably Tablada was able to understand the essence of the haiku because of his knowledge of French and English. In many of his poems it is evident the usefulness of the haiku as the means to expressing the profound admiration he had for the world of insects, to which he devoted long hours of contemplation. Although in several of his haikus moments of contemplation are quite evident, this spiritual attitude is stronger in those compositions inspired in his beloved insects.

Haiku Written by Mexican poets inspired by Tablada

Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz (1897-1930)

THE SCORPION

Comes out of a corner
between a curved parenthesis
and an interrogation mark

Rafael Lozano (1899-1974)

White swans,
under the night:
Interrogation marks

8. In a book Tablada kept at hand—*Sages et Poètes d'Asie*, by Paul Louis Couchoud—he wrote next to Couchoud's translation of this haiku his own translation of the same to Spanish. *José Juan Tablada: su haiku y su japonésismo* (Sección de Obras de Lenguas y Estudios Literarios, de Seiko Ota, Jorge Ruedas de la Serna.

José Rubén Romero (1890-1952)

THE MEDICAL DOCTOR

Gray beard, shiny frock
while telling his old stories
He forgets to charge for the visit

Francisco Monteverde García-Icazbalceta (1894-1985)

MAGUEYS

The inebriating liquor of the earth
ignited the flame
of the magueys⁹

Let us observe in the following poems Tablada's influence in the author's work:

SEAGULLS

Crashes the sea against the rocks
in each plume of mist up in the air
A seagull is borne
Monteverde

SEAGULLS

The sea foam shreds
of the broken waves
become seagulls
Tablada

Octavio Paz (1914-1998) was one of the greatest Tablada's admirer. About the poet he writes:

"His infinite fondness for animals, trees, herbs or the moon leads him to discover the old door which had been shut for centuries: the door that opens to our communication with the instant. At its best Tablada's poetry is a miraculous accord with the world. Are we so insensitive to true poetry to ignore the poet who has had the most alive, the purest eyes of is time, the poet who has shown to us that words are capable to reconcile man with the stars, the animals and the roots?"¹⁰

A MONKEY

The tiny monkey looks at me intently
as if it needed to tell me
Something it has forgotten.

STILLNESS

The moon, a sandglass:
the night empties out
The hour gets bright

9. The maguey is the plant used to produce tequila.

10. *José Juan Tablada: su haiku y su japonismo* (Sección de Obras de Lengua y Estudios Literarios)", de Seiko Ota, Jorge Ruedas de la Serna.

PART II: OCTAVIO PAZ AND THE HAIKU TRADITION

by Seveiro Rodríguez (translated by Rebecca Bowman)

The day opens its hand
three clouds
and these few words.¹¹

On Wednesday, August 2, 1945, the Mexican poet Juan José Tablada died in New York at the age of seventy-four. The day is relevant in more than one way because a young Mexican, just thirty years old, also a poet, called Octavio Paz, was working at the same time in the Mexican consulate in the same city, and a few days later the United States would drop atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,¹² parts of Japan that Tablada loved so much. Within that terrible tangle of causes and effects is where Paz discovers the poet and at the same time his passion for the East and for haiku.

Responding to a request by Columbia University to put together an homage for Tablada, Octavio Paz decides to write a few pages to bid him farewell.¹³ What comes of that petition is that Octavio Paz becomes obsessed with Tablada's poetry. In a certain way he finds himself seduced by the mysticism and the feeling of astonishment that is invoked by the brevity and spirituality of the Japanese poetry seen from the eyes of Tablada. Paz goes to the main branch of the New York Public Library and locks himself up there for a few weeks to reread in one stretch all of Tablada's work.

My passion for Chinese and Japanese poetry arrived before my first trip to the East. It began at the end of 1945, in New York. My stay in that city coincided with the death of Tablada, who had been living in New York for several years. I went to the New York Public Library, I asked for his books and I read him again. Tablada's example drew me to explore Japanese and later Chinese literature on my own account. My first trip to the Orient made me deepen and widen my readings of Chinese and Japanese poetry.¹⁴

The result is a beautiful, mournful piece entitled "The Trail of Juan José Tablada,"¹⁵ which he read a month after the poet's death at a public homage,¹⁶ in this way inaugurating "Tablada's entry in the Mexican contemporary canon"¹⁷ and also introducing Japanese haiku to our literature. "It was through Tablada that Paz became familiar with Japanese haiku, he himself says this."¹⁸ It was also in this speech that Paz tries for the first time to define Japanese haiku.

11. According to Aurelio Asiain, this is the first of Paz' poems that is the fruit of a reading of Japanese haiku, contained in the beginning of "Seeds for a Hymn."

12. August 6 and 9, respectively.

13. Aurelio Asiain, *Japón en Octavio Paz*, FCE, México 2014. P. 14.

14. Quoted by Aurelio Asiain in the prologue to *Japón en Octavio Paz*, FCE, México 2014. P. 14

15. The entire speech can be found in *Obras completas de Paz, Tomo III, Generaciones y semblanzas*. Dominio mexicano; it is the version corrected and restructured by Paz and published in eight volumes by the FCE in 2014 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the poet's birth.

16. Seiko Ota dates the reading of the speech on September 3, 1945.

17. Aurelio Asiain, *Japón en Octavio Paz*, FCE, México 2014. P. 14.

18. Seiko Ota, *José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japoneismo*. FCE México 2014. P. 181.

Tablada introduces into Spanish the Japanese haiku. His innovation is much more than a simple literary importing. That form gave freedom to the image and rescued it from the poem with a plot, in which it was drowning. Each one of these small poems was a tiny wandering star and, almost always, a small, complete world.¹⁹

At that time Tablada was a little-known and widely ignored poet in Mexican intellectual circles. Alberto Ruy Sanchez²⁰ tells us that Alfonso Reyes as well as Xavier Villaurrutia looked at him with disdain and that Paz's essay initiated the revaluation of Tablada in Mexican literature, as the essay does not function just as a simple chronicle of events or as a summary of the life and work of Tablada, but rather Paz goes beyond and elevates the figure of Tablada to the order of an entry into another world, one that he would call "the other half of our tradition."²¹ "One could say that it was thanks to Paz, who was already a great poet, that the perceived valuation of the Tabladian haiku was heightened,"²² and not only that, but that of all of his work in both prose and poetry, which we now know was quite profuse. In contrast to those who thought that Tablada was a minor artist, Paz found in him an invitation to poetry as a way of life, adventure and travel: "Since then, Octavio Paz would disrupt more than once the values of Mexico's literary history and would help to shape the face of our modern culture."²³

Disrupting and reconfiguring was something that throughout Octavio Paz' life would come easily to him. It would seem that he was a born discoverer of treasures. One close example was that of the figure of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, as Paz was the first to discover and translate him and the first to write essays about him. When you go to visit the house in Lisbon where Pessoa lived, now converted into a museum, the first thing the guides tell you about is the famous essay written by the 1990 Nobel Prize winner, "The Stranger to Himself."²⁴ Paz would also leave his own trail, that would catch fire there, when he wrote about Tablada in New York.

The poet has only opened a door and invites us to enter.²⁵

Tablada, Paz tells us in this quoted speech, "is the fleeting poet, the poet of the fleeting."²⁶ Also in a certain way giving us a glimpse of the essence of haiku, that is brief, succinct, ephemeral:

Tablada's work invites us to life. Not a heroic life, not an ascetic life, but rather simply to life. To adventure and travel. He invites us to keep our eyes open, to know how to abandon the city of one's birth and the verse that has become a bad habit, he invites us to look for new skies and new loves. "Everything is moving," he says, "moving towards itself." And, we already know, in order to return to ourselves we must leave and take risks.²⁷

One of the discoveries of Octavio Paz in Tablada's poetry is that it has the main characteristics of haiku: "curiosity, irony, a depth of concentration, agility, the renewed freshness of the

19. Octavio Paz, *Estela de José Juan Tablada, Obras Completas Tomo III*, FCE 2014, P. 147.

20. Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Una introducción a Octavio Paz*, FCE. P. 71-72.

21. Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Una introducción a Octavio Paz*, FCE. P. 72.

22. Seiko Ota, *José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japonismo*. FCE México 2014. P. 181.

23. Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Una introducción a Octavio Paz*, FCE. P. 72.

24. Published by the UNAM, 1964.

25. Octavio Paz, *Estela de José Juan Tablada, Obras Completas Tomo III*, FCE 2014, P. 147.

26. Octavio Paz, *Estela de José Juan Tablada, Obras Completas Tomo III*, FCE 2014, P. 146.

27. Octavio Paz, *Estela de José Juan Tablada, Obras Completas Tomo III*, FCE 2014, P. 150.

image,”²⁸ the same characteristics that Octavio Paz would integrate into his own poetry, one marked by an unceasing dialogue with nature, with the passage of time, and with the eternal search for the present. “Paz truly understands that Tablada’s poem (especially his haiku) is born from conversing with nature.”²⁹ Tablada has an enormous influence in Paz’ poetics, as Paz knows that not only is Tablada memorable for his grand erudition, but also for the depth of his poetry. This is why there are versions of Paz’s poems that are very similar to Tablada’s.

Octavio Paz tries things out over his own reflection, he considers himself the heir of Tablada, and at the same time the new bearer of that poetical fire. Aurelio Asiain tells us in the prologue to his book, *Japan in Octavio Paz*, that Octavio Paz dedicated an entire chapter in his book *The Bow and the Lyre* to the image as a central element of modern poetry. He positions Tablada as the liberator of that image; he turns him into his direct ancestor and puts himself down as his successor. From that moment on his passions and poetry will be different, always connected with the Orient, with the spirituality but above all with the trembling and wonder with which the Japanese (and similarly Mexicans) live life. But just as Paz had already said, it is a cliché to think of the Orient with wonder, on the contrary he describes it as “a self-sufficient universe closed in within itself. An organism that does not need anything, like those plants that secrete their own food, Japan lives off its own substance.”³⁰ Haiku is enrolled in this lightness and naturalness with which Japanese literature looks at the world. Its elegance and brevity, its synthesis is essence, but also a conquering of form, the images dance in their transitory state, they perfume the air or fly in the instant, always suspended in the precise moment: the present. A present that is full and at the same time empty, full because there is nothing more to add to brevity, empty because in its lack of duration haiku is seen as something fleeting, the condition of a cloud, fleeing and always changing. This is why Paz has been seduced so strongly by this poetic form. Life itself is a sequence of these instants; the poet knows how to hunt them down, or, better said, he contemplates them in their becoming and leaves them inscribed in time so they will endure. Paz becomes a contemplative of time, a poet that observes the world and knows that that world does not only occur outside of himself but is a fundamental part of himself, the observer becomes observation: he looks to look at himself, he sees to see that the world is a mirror.

The French Origin

In the essay Octavio Paz writes about haiku, included in his book of essays and titled “The Haiku Tradition,” he speaks about the origin of haiku in Spanish:

I will not refer to the influence of Japanese poetry in English or French literature, it is a very well-known story and has been told several times. The story of that influence in the poetry in our language, whether in Spain or in the Americas, is much, much less well known and there is still no good study on the topic. A deficiency, one more, in our criticism. Here I will limit myself to remembering that among the first to concern themselves with Japanese art and literature one finds, at the beginning of the century, two Mexican poets, Efrén Rebolledo and Juan José Tablada. Both of them lived in Japan, the former for several years, and the latter, in 1910, for a

28. Octavio Paz, *Estela de José Juan Tablada, Obras Completas Tomo III*, FCE 2014, P. 147.

29. Seiko Ota, *José Juan Tablada: su haikú y su japoneismo*. FCE México 2014. P. 181.

30. Octavio Paz, *Tres momentos de la literatura japonesa, Obras Completas Tomo II*, FCE 2014, P. 261.

few months. Their admiration stems, no doubt, from a French contagion. the book Tablada wrote about Hiroshigué—perhaps the first study in our language about that painter—is dedicated to “the venerated memory of Edmundo de Goncourt.” Despite the fact that Robolledo knew Japan more intimately than did Tablada, his poetry never went beyond “modernist” rhetoric; between Japanese culture and his gaze was always wedged the stereotypical image of the French poets of *fin de siècle*, and his Japan was a Parisian exoticism rather than a Hispano-American discovery. Tablada began like Robolledo but soon discovered in Japanese poetry certain elements—verbal economy, humor, colloquial language, a love for the exact and unusual image—that pushed him to abandon modernism and look for a new way.³¹

An economy of words, colloquial language, love, haiku is a bonsai tree cared for by the poet, it is a balance of poetic images. It is here that the poetry of Octavio Paz takes a spiritual direction. “To feel the poem one must comprehend it; to comprehend it, one must hear it, see it, contemplate it—turn it into an echo, a shadow, nothing. Comprehension is a spiritual exercise.”³² Octavio Paz would begin to write and translate haikus under the direct influence of Tablada. The first poet he will translate with total attention will be Bashō.

古池や (*Furu ike ya*)
 かわず飛び込む (*kawazu tobikomu*)
 水の音 (*mizu no oto*)

An old pond
 A frog jumps, splash!
 The sound of water

We find ourselves before an almost prosaic statement of facts, a pond, a frog’s leap, the water’s splash. Nothing less “poetic”, common words and an insignificant fact. Bashō has given us simple notes, as if with a finger he were pointing out to us two or three unconnected realities that, nevertheless, have a “meaning” that we the readers must discover. The reader must recreate the poem. In the first line we find a passive element, the old tank and its silence; in the second, the surprise of the leap of a frog, that breaks the quiet. From this meeting of these two elements. poetic illumination must emerge.³³

The Paths of Bashō

Octavio Paz said about Bashō that his poetry was a “true tranquilizer,”³⁴ maybe because of this he found himself immersed in the adventure of translating for the first time into Spanish together with his Japanese friend Eikichi Hayashiya, the *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Paths of Oku*), marking a milestone in the worldwide diffusion of Bashō’s poetry:

The *Oku no Hosomichi* is the chronicle of a trip that Bashō made with one of his disciples, Sora, through the northern region of Japan in 1689, visiting close to fifty places that were famous for historical, literary and artistic reasons. They traveled over two thousand, three hundred and forty kilometers over five months. The final editing of the text occurred after the trip and were based

31. Octavio Paz, *Tres momentos de la literatura japonesa, Obras Completas Tomo II*, FCE 2014.

32. Octavio Paz, *Corriente alterna*, Siglo XXI Editores, México 2009. P. 71.

33. Octavio Paz, *Tres momentos de la literatura japonesa, Obras completas Tomo II*, p. 343.

34. Octavio Paz, *La tradición del haikú, Obras Completas Tomo II*, FCE 2014, P. 283.

on the notes Bashō had taken: witty remarks and impressions, opinions, observations in prose, followed by a poem. It is surely the most beloved literary work of the Japanese people, not because of its brilliant literary structure, not because of the charm of a narrative thread that it doesn't have, but rather for the feeling of peace that it leaves in the spirit and for its delicate sensitivity. This in itself explains my fear before Paz' proposal (of translation), also my great expectation.

Our way of work was as follows: I first translated a Japanese text literally to Spanish, and when I had completed some chapters I would give them to Octavio, who would return them to me corrected at the time of my next delivery. We saw each other every two or three weeks, sometimes at the office, other times at his house or at mine. that's the way we worked for almost half a year.³⁵

Loose Stones

In *Loose Stones* (1955) one finds an exercise of Paz to try to reproduce the poetic feeling of Japanese haiku in Spanish, but also there is already a syncretism, Octavio Paz takes over the image and moves it into Spanish, to the very roots of pre-Hispanic Mexico. If writing is translating oneself, how to completely possess a culture that is completely different from our own? To translate it, transplant it and keep it pure? I leave the complete poems as an example of poetic agility and also as an able medium to represent the haiku written by Paz. one that in some cases does not respect meter, but that in a certain way does contain the poetic sentiment that haiku requires, the *mono no aware*:

35. Eikichi Hayashiya, "Recuerdos de Octavio Paz y sus Sendas de Oku," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, UNAM, versión electrónica: <http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/1905/pdfs/84-88.pdf>

Loose Stones (1955)

A Lesson of Things

I.

Animation

On the shelf,
between a Tang musician and a Oaxacan jug,
incandescent and lively,
with sparkling eyes of silver foil,
watching us come and go,
the small sugar skull

2.

Tlaloc Mask Sculpted in Transparent Quartz

Petrified waters,
Old Tlaloc sleeps, inside,
dreaming storms

3.

The Same

Touched by the light,
quartz is already a waterfall.
Over its waters floats, a child, the god.

4.

God that Emerges from a Clay Orchid

Among the clay petals
the human flower,
smiling, is born.

5.

Aztec Goddess

The four cardinal points
return to your navel.
In your womb beats the armed day.

6.

Calendar

Against the water, days of fire
Against the fire, days of water

7.

Xochipilli

In the tree of the day
hang jade fruits,
fire and blood at night.

8.

A Cross with Painted Sun and Moon

In the arms of this cross
Nested two birds
Adam, the sun and Eve, the moon

9.

Boy and Top

Each time he throws it
it falls exactly
in the center of the world.

10.

Objects

They live beside us,
we ignore them, they ignore us.
Sometimes they converse with us.

In Uxmal

I.

The Stone of the Days

The sun is time;
time, a sun of stone;
the stone, blood.

2.

Noon

The light blinks,
Time empties itself of minutes,
A bird has stopped in the air.

3.

Later

The light tumbles down,
columns wake up
and, without moving, shine.

4.

Full Sun

The hour is transparent;
we see, if the bird is invisible,
the color of its song.

5.

Reliefs

The rain, dancing foot and long hair,
the ankle bitten by lightning,
descends to the beat of drums:
corn opens its eyes and grows.

6.

A Serpent Carved on a Wall

The wall in the sun breathes, vibrates, undulates,
a piece of living, tattooed sky:
the man drinks sun, is water, is earth.
And over all this life, the serpent
that holds its head in its fangs;
gods drink blood, eat men.

Loose Stones

1.

Flower

The shout, the beak, the teeth, the howls,
the butchering nothing and its commotion,
before this simple flower fade away.

2.

Lady

Every night she goes down to the well
and in the morning reappears
with a new reptile in her arms.

3.

Biography

Not what he could be:
it's what he was.
And what he was, is dead.

4.

Bells at Night

Waves of shadow
wet my thoughts
—and do not quench them.

5.

Before the Door

People, words, people.
I hesitated an instant:
The moon above, alone.

6.

Vision

I saw myself close my eyes;
space, space
where I am and am not.

7.

Landscape

The busy insects,
the horses the color of the sun,
the burros the color of clouds,
the clouds, enormous boulders that don't weigh anything,
the hills like fallen skies,
the flock of trees drinking in the stream,
all of them are there, happy in their being there,
in front of us who are not there,
eaten up by rage, by hate,
by love eaten, by death.

8.

Illiterate

I lifted my face to the sky,
An immense stone of worn down letters:
The stars did not tell me anything.

Bashō-an

The world fits
in seventeen syllables:
you in this shack.

Trunks and straw:
through the slits enter
Buddhas and insects.

Made of air
between pine trees and boulders
the poem emerges.

Interwoven
vowels, consonants:
house of the world

Bones of the centuries,
sorrows now crags, hills:
here they've no weight.

This that I say
is only three lines:
a shack of syllables.

*

DAWN

Upon the sand
the writing of birds:
memories of the wind.

*

CALM

Moon, hourglass:
the night empties,
the hour lights up.

*

PROVERB

mud from the still puddle:
tomorrow dust
dancing in the road

*

ODDS AND EVENS

A word of little weight
to greet the day
a word like a glider
Ah!

*

Big circles under your eyes
In your face it is still night

*

Invisible necklace of looks
that are chained to your throat

*

While the newspapers
lose their leaves
you cover yourself with birds

*

We are like the water in the water
like the water that keeps the secret

*

One look ties you
one unties you
Transparency fades you away

*

Your two breasts in my hands
water tumbling down again

*

From one balcony
(The fan)
to another balcony
(opens)
the sun jumps
(and closes)

*

ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

High sun. The plain sleeps.
Nothing moves.
From between the boulders, Echo peers out.

*

THE BRANCH

On the tip of a pine tree sings
a bird that has perched,
trembling, over its trill.

It sits up, an arrow, on the branch,
it fades away among wings
and in music spills.

The bird is a splinter
that sings and burns alive
in a yellow note.

I lift my eyes, there is nothing.
Silence on the branch
on the branch that broke.

*

WIND AND NIGHT

Hour of the wind
night against the night,
here, in my night.

The bull wind
runs, stops, twirls.
Does it go anywhere?

Frowning wind:
in the crossroads
the soul is broken.

Like myself,
built up rage
without an ending.

It is not surprising that Octavio Paz would discover haiku as a form of poetic contemplation, or what the Japanese call *mono no aware*, “the sentiment of things, according to Paz’ interpretation.”³⁶ Thanks to Tablada, Paz found the poetic precision that exceeded, paradoxically, what he had written up to that point.

Mono no aware

The *mono no aware* (or *aware*), is a word that holds within itself a multiplicity of meanings. The literal translation, according to the Spanish Japanese expert Vicente Haya and from the Buddhist perspective is “the lament for things,” that sadness which one feels for the ephemeral nature of that which surrounds us. Everything ends because everything changes. Life and the very universe are subject to that transitory state. It is a dance between life and death. But this is not a sadness understood as a subject that feels sadness, it is a sadness that emanates from nature itself. A concept that is important for understanding the poetic sentiment of haiku.

The only condition that the world sets down in order for you to write a haiku is that before you write it you have felt an *aware*, a deep emotion motivated by some event. The *aware* is, according

36. Cristina Rascón, “Otras posibilidades de ser,” *Revista Letras libres*, electronic version: <http://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/libros/otras-posibilidades-ser>.

to most scholars of Japanese literature, the key to the national sensitivity. Until Motoori Norinaga took it to its original purity, *mono no aware* was translated as “the lament of things” and was understood, from a Buddhist perspective, as that sadness that emanates from the world for its ephemeral nature. Norinaga reminded the Japanese, and taught all the rest, that the aware is any kind of emotion that the exterior provokes in us. What wakens our *aware* is something that impacts us deeply because it is there, because it has become, and its existence has demanded our attention. Its existence affects us by itself, and not because it has to do with a beautiful creature whose more or less close death makes us sad. The word *aware*, that crowns many poems in the form of *aware kana* (what *aware* it produces), could be understood as a veiled reference to the “I” of the poet if it were not because our particular taste for something never moves us to *aware*. What produces *aware* in us is what would cause it in any member of the human species that would be present and didn’t have his or her bodily senses completely distorted. So, when the writer of haiku says aware it cannot be interpreted as someone saying “How sensitive I am” but rather “how grateful I am for having been present.”³⁷

Aware is feeling without labels, a deep emotion, a moment when the poet feels the amazement of being alive, it is a discovery and a trembling for being part of the world that surrounds him or her, in which there is no implication of “I”, but rather the I is in all, it is the very universe contemplating itself.

The poet makes use of that *aware* to signify what apparently is insignificant, he or she reveals that reality is not one, but many. He does it in a brief form, as if it would respond, not for nothing does Seiko Ota say that haiku is a greeting. However, haiku is not merely that, it is not just writing brief poems. Poetry begins before writing: it is that moment when one is amazed at him or herself and contemplates him or herself as part of existence, always new and perfect in him or herself, so ephemeral and changing that he or she can barely be contained in an instant. This is the specific case of haiku, the written words are the reading of that instant. But just as what happens between poetry and the writing of the poem, the experience of haiku comes before haiku itself, it is found in the present in that slipping-away moment that we call “now.” Bashō, the father of this form in Japanese literature, said that a haiku is simply what is happening in that place and in that moment.

In essence, a haiku is written with the objective of expressing, with only seventeen phonetic syllables, (arranged in three consecutive phrases of five, seven, and five syllables respectively) an emotional state or an event that is developing in the space-time of the person who perceives it just as it is: absolute and complete in itself (*aware*).

When writing—or even reading—a haiku, a state of meditation is immediately triggered, attention is adjusted, it is fixed in the present moment, and then with great clarity and simplicity the instantaneous and its brevity emerge.

Haiku for Octavio Paz is spontaneity. It is a pure intuition of the here and now. It is the contemplation of time and its essence, the ephemeral with fundamental structure. It is writing what can be said in a breath, the very happening of life, what occurs in a thought, what takes place in the mind’s landscape, the brief pause between inhaling and exhaling: change. And his language is as simple and direct as the experience that brought it to life, even if it is the most mundane. The words are synthesized in such a way that each one of them can express totality

37. From the prologue by Vicente Haya, “Aware: el derecho y el deber de escribir un haikú,” from the book *Aware: una iniciación al haikú japonés*, Editorial Kairós.

in almost nothing, it is like a flash of lightning that illuminates the night's reality, unique, unfathomable, and heart-rending.

A Tiny Selection of Haiku

Here are three haiku by Octavio Paz that I find very representative. They are a triad that maintains the 5/7/5 meter, the *aware*, and, at the same time, each one of these could be a poetic on Japanese haiku.

Made from air
between pine trees and boulders
the poem emerges.

This that I say
is only three lines:
a shack of syllables.

Interwoven
vowels, consonants:
the house of the world³⁸

38. Taken from Octavio Paz's book *Libertad bajo palabra*, FCE, 1960.

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PART III: HAIKU IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

by Juan Cervera Sanchís (translated by Mara L. Jiménez Galicia)

The Haiku, a short poetic form, born in Japan and composed of three verses, one of seven syllables between two verses of five, enters the Spanish language thanks to the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada. Although, it must be said he rarely respected the classic structure of the Japanese composition in seventeen syllables.

That said, Tablada's brief poems, are "the flower of the air" which is the very essence of haiku. Radiant microuniverses that are able to live the infinite miracle, because is finite, the wonderful instant, as if the instant itself was a hypnotic eternity.

Haikues are paradoxical and perpetual snapshots, which Tablada named in Spanish "haikáis".

But, who were the firsts to follow him to accomplish this happy spread in the scope of our Spanish language?

Tablada's first haikues or haikáis appeared in 1919 when he published *Un Día (One Day)*. Next year, he brought to press *El Jarro de Flores (The Jar of Flowers)*. Those two miniature lovely books captivate many readers and achieve an unprecedented literary success. Tablada defines those briefest poems under this conception of art: "ART: with your golden pin / butterflies of this instant / I wanted to embed to the wall." (*ARTE: con tu áureo alfiler, / las mariposas del instante/ quise clavar en la pared*) And embedded remained forever in the memory of those readers moments like these: "Peacock, long glint, / by the democratic henhouse / proceeds as a procession . . ." (*Pavo real, largo fulgor, / por el gallinero demócrata/ pasas como una procesi . . .*) Or this: "Rainy Day: / each flower is a glass / lachrymatory" (*Día lluvioso:/ cada flor es un vaso/ lacrimatorio*). Also the unforgettable portrait of the colorful, juicy and fresh watermelon: "From the summer, red and cold / horselaugh / slice of watermelon" (*De verano, roja y fría/ carcajada, / rebanada de sandía*).

The haikues, or haiku, as we call them now, are unlikely to be bettered.

Of course, those haikues, immediately encouraged many others to dedicate to its delicate crop. So, Rafael Lorenzo, also Mexican, published in 1921 his book *La Alondra Encandilada (The Dazzled Lark)* where we find firsts fruits like this: "Geisha: leaves her kimona / as her cocoon / butterfly" (*Geisa: Sale de su kimona/ como de su capullo/ la mariposa*). Yes, kimona, not kimono. Next year, 1922, José Rubén Romero, the legendary creator of Pito Perez,³⁹ ventures into haiku and with a small collection of poems entitled *Tacámbaro*.⁴⁰ Here we find pearls like this: "Golden day. / The lariat closes its interrogation / between the bull's horns" (*Día de oro./ La reata cierra su interrogación/ en los cuernos del toro*).

39. *The Useless Life of Pito Perez (La Vida Inútil de Pito Pérez)* is a novel of the Mexican writer Jose Ruben Romero that was published in 1938. The style mimics the Spanish picaresque novel. It is a satire that criticizes social injustice, which persisted after the Mexican Revolution, the abuses committed by municipal authorities, priests and especially the rites of the Catholic Church. (T.N.)

40. A small municipality in Michoacan, Mexico. (T.N.)

In 1923, Francisco Monterde prints his *Itinerario Contemplativo (Contemplative Itinerary)*, where poetic delights us with findings like this: “Colonial calotte: / above parochial bard, / royal lemon ripens” (*Cúpula colonial:/ Sobre la barda parroquial,/ madura un limón real*). In 1929 Raul Ortiz Avila, another Mexican haiku lover, published *El Poeta Alucinado (The Hallucinated Poet)* and talks about crickets this way: “What do they sharpen at night, / with their small sharpening stone?” (*¿A qué sacarán punta, en la noche, / con su piedrecita de afilar?*). Also he defines ecstasy like this: “In the sky, a star / sleep like a whipping top.” (*En el cielo, una estrella/ se duerme como trompo*). Ortiz Avila is still today an unknown character to those few and rare human beings who still enjoy reading poetry books, for his beautiful book has not been reprinted and is a true miracle being able to obtain it, but from time to time it is possible to find it in a used books library.

Another pioneer of haiku in Mexico was Agustin Haro y Tamariz who gathers his scattered production in 1938 under the title of *Rocío (Dew)*. In the pages of this amazing little book we find this definition of black zapote:⁴¹ “Zapote makes me think, / I’m eating at daytime / and munchies of night” (*Me hace pensar el zapote, / que estoy comiendo, de día/ y a pedacitos la noche*).

In 1939, Jose Villalobos Ortiz, publishes *Amor (Love)*. There, modestly, we find this evocative picture of the waterman’s donkey “Sees the blue water from the well, / thinks resigned, / sky is travelling on his back” (*Vé el agua azul del pozo,/ piensa resignado,/ que va el cielo en su lomo*).

Armando Duvalier, a poet from Chiapas to whom we remember dearly, singer to the negritude, in 1943 published his book *Tibor*⁴² from which we took as a sample of his impeccable mastery that famous haiku which states: “When the twilight came / to Mexico, he bought /a Saltillo serape” (*Cuando el crepúsculo vino/ a México, se compró/ un sarape de Saltillo*).

In 1944, Emilio Uribe Romo in *Jacaranda*⁴³ defines the kite: “Letter climbing / from the daydream of a child / to the cloud” (*Carta que sube/ del ensueño del niño/ hacia la nube*).

In 1946 Juan Porras Sanchez in *Pajaritos de Yerba (Little birds of grass)* portrays the chichicuilotos:⁴⁴ “Reeds run / carrying crippled /little birds, in travel . . .” (*Corren los popotales/ llevando pajaritos/ inválidos, de via . . .*).

Elias Nandino beyond the sonnet and the tenth, would also cultivate, with equal mastery, the haiku, in 1946 he published *Líneas de Poesía (Lines of Poetry)* where he gives us jewels like this one: “Sugar cane, / just by looking, / sweetens us” (*La caña de azúcar,/ con sólo mirarla,/ ya nos endulza*).

That same year Josefina Esparza Soriano publishes *Cauce (Riverbed)* in Puebla de los Angeles where she gives us this delicate haiku titled “Gatito” (“Kitty”), which is itself a caress: “The child wants / that little bag full / of green grey hairs”⁴⁵ (*El niño quiere/ esa bolsita llena/ de canitas verdes*).

41. The black zapote or sapote (*Diospyros nigra*) is an edible fruit, from the *Ebenaceae* Family very popular in Mexico. (T.N.)

42. A large pot, made of clay or porcelain, from China or Japan, generally cup-shaped and decorated externally. (T.N.)

43. Tropical tree. (T.N.)

44. It is a charadriiforme wader of the *Charadriidae* family inhabiting the American shores from the southeastern United States to Brazil; in the Caribbean it is rare. It lives all year in subtropical regions with migratory behavior. (T.N.)

45. In Mexico, when a child is being naughty, is a usage to say he’s going to give his mother “green gray hair” (T.N.)

So many other croppers continue the haiku in Mexico, where masters such as Arturo Gonzalez Cosio maintain the height and excellence of it in books such as *Piedra Franca (Candid Stone)*, published by Fondo de Cultura Economica.⁴⁶

46. See more: <http://www.lavozdelnorte.com.mx/semanario/2010/09/05/el-haiku-en-mexico/#sthash.iAcvE4IT.dpuf>