

Thoughts on Haiku and Sentimentality

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In 2010 I was invited to Punjabi University to lecture on the practice of haiku. At the end of my talk, a young man asked an essential question: “There is so much sentimental poetry being written today by students and so-called professionals—how do you keep it from progressing?” Good for him, I thought. No one else had brought this up. Perhaps most of the students did not consider sentimentality in poetry a problem. But it is, and haiku, especially, has no room for sappiness. Class was about to end and there wasn’t enough time to give a thorough answer to the question. But the student had time after class, and so did I, so we took the opportunity to stroll the campus. With the open air, green lawns, and a breeze through the trees, my head aired and my thoughts gelled. I’m presenting them here, somewhat expanded, in the order that they came to me:

First thought: Keep it simple. Here is Jack Kerouac’s adage:

“I propose that the ‘Western Haiku’ simply say a lot in three short lines . . .

be very simple and free of poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet

be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella” (1)

Kerouac is often stereotyped as wild and Beat, while his solitary, introspective side is overlooked: the person who probed the Dharma, who studied the history and philosophy of Buddhism, and, who wrote—among his many novels, odes, psalms, and blues—hundreds of haikus. I like his definition of modern haiku. Keep the picture simple. Free of poetic trickery. Airy. Pastoral. The latter implying “rustic,” of the natural world; the former implying nothing ornate, no unnecessary adjectives or sentimental addendum. A writer working in the East could replace “Western” with “Eastern.” And “Pastorella” might easily be swapped for “Raga.” Here is a poem from Jack Kerouac’s *Book of Haikus*:

the summer chair
rocking by itself
in the blizzard (2)

No sentimentality here. Only the empty chair, its spooky back-and-forth motion, and the force of the wind-blown snow. Reading the first two lines, one begins to form a picture of a peaceful summer evening, a rocking chair on a porch, a slight breeze giving it momentum. But the third line “detonates” the first two lines. It provides the surprise that is essential to haiku. Our picture of a mellow summer evening is suddenly jolted out of place and replaced by a raging blizzard. No author is present in the poem, no emotion or interpretation hinders the picture. Nothing is raised above the ordinary into the cerebral, ie: not lifted above “what is” into “what you *think* it is.” There is only the haiku eye at work, recording the instant. We are drawn to the chair, suddenly animate, rocking by itself, subject to nature’s changing states. Another haiku by Kerouac:

Blowing in an afternoon wind,
on a white fence,
a cobweb (3)

The web lifts and lowers, vulnerable to the wind, almost invisible against the white fence. That’s it. There is no attempt to be clever or to display intellectual brilliance. Kerouac is writing from real experience, not sitting behind a desk dreaming things up. He is out walking—not driving—through his neighborhood, going for a newspaper or a carton of milk—antenna up, haiku-eye alert—when the cobweb surprises him. Dutiful to his craft, he takes out his pocket pad and jots a few words. Perhaps the picture is perfect as is, scribbled in his pad. Or maybe it will require revision to compress it into a crisp three-liner. Such is the poet’s life: senses tuned, pencil and paper at hand, time and tools ready for the required crafting. One is at work 24 hours—even doing nothing, even in sleep.

On the topic of writing from real experience, sans emotion, we might consider Basho’s famous haiku:

summer grasses
all that remains
of warriors' dreams

The impact is in what is not said. In the first line we see the grasses. They may be green or wilted, at rest or waving, depending on our view. In the second line we realize that season after season, grasses grow, die, come to life again—they remain after we pass through. In the third line the “warrior” comes in, providing a juxtaposition of the human world with the natural. We imagine soldiers—some young, some old—all with dreams of victory. But Basho’s haiku lets us realize that warriors’ dreams are not always fulfilled. Someone loses. Someone’s bones are under the grass. Someone’s dreams have become mulch for new sprouts of green. The poem was written in the 17th century, when Basho visited the site of a bloody 12th century battle. For me, the poem has reverberations: the Kalinga War, the Battle of Little Big Horn, Vietnam, Cambodia’s killing fields. But I don’t step into the poem through sentimentality. Basho makes no emotional comment. He gives us only a picture, in three short lines, to ponder. If he had written: “Like the wilting grasses of summer, I felt...” all the attention would have been toward Basho and his feelings, not on the futility of war.

Second thought: Become your subject. Take “I, me, mine” out of the picture. Let the imagery speak. Remember Basho’s dictum: “If you want to write about the pine you must become the pine.” First-time students of haiku often forget to become the “absent traveler,” the poet who walks, watches, listens, becomes still, and dissolves into his subject. It is tempting to be there in the poem, doing something. We mostly live our daily lives ego-bound, speaking and writing from the first person, actively involved with things. When it comes to haiku, the great practice is to become thin, vanish, let things in the background come forward to stand by themselves. This haiku by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) is a good example:

The sound of scissors
clipping roses—
a clear spell in May (4)

It doesn’t matter if it is Shiki himself or somebody else clipping the roses, what is important is the sound itself—and its relation to the sharpness of the sky. One hears the scissors, sees a flash of light from the blades, smells the roses, feels the clarity of spring. Everything works in this haiku, nothing stands apart. Shiki doesn’t interrupt the poem with statements of “joy” or “happiness.” The picture paints it all. No need to step in the way of the reader’s capacity to interpret the picture by stating something personal and emotive. Nor is there need to get sappy with comparisons or metaphor—they have no role in the world’s shortest poem.

Third thought: Read the masters. Seek what they sought: clarity, simplicity, spontaneity, the “as-is-ness” of things. Basho admired the 8th-century T’ang Dynasty poets of China, and they are a good place to start: Wang Wei, Tu Fu, Li Po, Po Chu-i. Then read the Japanese poets: Basho, Buson, Issa, Chiyo-ni, Shiki. Or begin with the Japanese and move in reverse towards ancient China. The reading and writing of haiku can be, as Poet Edith Schiffert says in her introduction to *Haiku Master Buson*, “a kind of lone meditation, a moment of realizing actual life.” (5) Any student interested in haiku who reads and investigates the lives of the Chinese and Japanese masters will enjoy many contemplative moments, and plenty of inspiration and spontaneous learning. Such is the way. 18th-century haiku master Yosa Buson once said: “There are no gateways to haiku, there is only the haiku gateway itself.” (6)

Fourth thought: Open your awareness to non-ordinary reality. Allow what is unique—something usually overlooked—to surprise the eye. Consider the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, a difficult term to define, especially in our modern age where the emphasis is on tossing out the old and acquiring the new. *Wabi-sabi* has to do with the Japanese aesthetic of transience and imperfection—the unique beauty that comes with aging, wear and tear, deterioration. A wind-weathered barn. A stone goddess polished by centuries of touch. A farmer’s sickle, its wooden handle given a patina by years of toil. The uneven mud wall of an

earthen home, smoothed with the hands, capturing light in a way that a modern suburban home cannot. A clay tea cup, its shape and texture suggesting the unrefined but sincere lifestyle of the maker. This beauty—or anti-beauty—has the power to evoke emotional response in the beholder. It may inspire a longing for a more simple way of life, arouse a spiritual yearning, or cause a wave of melancholy to sweep through one’s mental state. The bottle of buttons in grandmother’s sewing kit. Father’s old handsaw dangling on a hook in the work shed. A deceased child’s doll. The way things remain after our ancestors depart—how they preserve their touch, their way of life—may cause sentimentality in the beholder, but they are not, by themselves, sentimental.

While teaching in India, I was re-reading Van Gogh’s selected letters. I hadn’t read them since university days, and this time around I found many parallels between Vincent’s way of seeing and how the Japanese haiku masters saw. Without the term being used, the letters had many references to wabi-sabi—passages about the artist’s appreciation of things imperfect: a peasant’s chaff-dusted jacket faded to a rare hue; a pair of tongue-curved laborer’s shoes, a tobacco-darkened factory-worker’s pipe, a weaver’s shuttle varnished with toil. A color plate showed Vincent’s paintings of the two chairs he purchased from the carpenters in Arles—rustic objects, certainly not fashionable in the eyes of the well-to-do. But they had feel, character, a beauty of their own. Overlooked, uncelebrated, it took the artist to get them appreciated. Vincent writes about Gauguin sitting in one of these chairs, staring up at Vincent’s painting of a sunflower. *“It’s... it’s... the flower itself!”* he exclaims—a statement that might easily have been made by Basho.

Fifth thought: Make it new! No over-used, tried-and-worn images. Basho clearly injected haiku with a fresh spirit after it had suffered decades of recycled images—frogs singing, cherry blossoms falling, dragonflies floating, etc—favored by privileged party-goers, members of haiku circles entertaining each other with cloned and obvious imagery. Basho’s “make-it-new” rule still holds.

Leave the classroom, get away from the computer screen, the I-phone—go outside, walk, amble off the path, sans agenda. Taste, listen, experience, *feel*. Leave the self behind, become the wavering rice paddy, the outstretched hand of the sleeping beggar, the sparrow upside down on the bell rope, the turquoise earring of the herdsman crossing a stream, the guy dangling thirty stories up bolting a skyscraper beam into place. It’s a sure-fire guarantee that any student of haiku who chooses to go out and get lost, will soon find the notebook filling up with novel imagery, things that have never before happened in haiku.

Sixth thought: Substance over style. Allow your own voice, not a copied or cloned voice, to ring true. Look at Basho or Tagore or Ghalib, but do not take on their voices. Basho warned of this when he quoted an earlier Zen master: “Do not follow in the footsteps of the ancients; seek what they sought (7).” If you practice slowing down and embracing a temporary state of “nothing doing, everything unfolding,” you will find the substance—the gist—of things taking forefront. Note the order of the way images appear: sometimes flashing randomly in the brain; sometimes appearing one-two-three in a specific order; sometimes filling the body like wine into a vessel—causing a blush. This order (or non-order) will influence how you write your haiku. The kind of subject matter that fills your palette—its place, circumstance, action, non action, juxtaposition with other images—will determine how the poem will look. Whether it will be a long poem, haiku, or haibun. Whether it will ultimately reach the page as a single line, three horizontal lines, a couple of vertical slashes, or a compact square of prose punctuated by a haiku. In presenting pure imagery, sentimentality will not be there. Unless we step into the picture and get personal. Here’s a poem by Chiyo-ni, Japan’s celebrated lady of haiku:

clear water is cool
fireflies vanish—
there’s nothing more (8)

This was the last haiku she wrote, a few weeks before she died, in 1775. Imagine such a lucid and detached state of mind, even with death approaching. Years of haiku practice, behind this, of course. And decades of solitude. Which leads me to:

Seventh thought: Solitude. Yes, get some scholarly advice in the classroom, sit in a coffee house and hash things over with comrades. Walk the city and fields endlessly. Plant your toes in the Andaman Sea under planet light. Get to know your own watershed, source of water, names of plants, position of stars, influence of weather, history of place. But don't forget solitude. At home, on the road, within the realm of mountains and rivers, solitude is a means of becoming attuned to a world greater than the one we usually inhabit. American poet Gary Snyder writes: "We and nature are companions; a vast, subtle music surrounds us, accessible via clarity and serenity." (9)

My wife has a busy work schedule, but she makes time in the mornings before work to sit quietly and absorb whatever is there before her: room shadows, the crow on the post out the window, cloud patterns, change of seasons, change of heart. This "whatever is there" she crafts into a five-line Tanka, another form of the Japanese short poem. Sometimes there is no Tanka, though. Just the settling into the body, the vessel that miraculously sustains us. The practice of poetry becomes both a meditation and a way of entering the day, or letting the day enter you. Finding solitude does not mean one has to give up the family and head for a shack in the hills; it can simply mean making an effort to be apart from others, even for a little while, at some point in the day.

Eighth thought: No flowery, obtuse, overblown language. Write how you speak, in the language you speak. Edit your poems by reading them aloud—to yourself, to the four walls, to the trees, to each another. Do not mistake haiku for witty sound bites, aphorisms, or twitter. Don't strangle yourself with 5-7-5 syllable rules—simply make each line brief. Use juxtaposition to achieve surprise. Think: subject / circumstance / action or non action / jolt! Have the courage to let whatever thing or circumstance that caused a moment of surprise stand by itself. Again, stay out of the poem, unless you are indispensable to the picture.

Meeting the students of Punjabi University was a fine experience for me. And so was strolling the campus with the student who provoked this essay. Maybe a few too many thoughts

rambled through my head amid the greenery, but they untangled immediately, when, finding myself keeping to the cement walks between the lawns, I suddenly veered away,
leaving the walkway
to follow the zigzag path
of a butterfly.

References

- (1) p x, Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, Penguin Books, 2003
- (2) Ibid, p 36
- (3) Ibid, p 90
- (4) p 86, *Masaoka Shiki: Selected Poems*, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 199
- (5) p 20, Edith Schifert, *Haiku Master Buson*, White Pine Press, 2007
- (6) Ibid, p 193
- (7) p 139, Basho quoting Zen master Kūkai (774–835). David Landis Barnhill, *Basho's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Basho*, State University of NY Press, 2004
- (8) p 155, *Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku Master*, translated by Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi, Tuttle Publishing, 1998
- (9) p xi, Gary Snyder, from his foreword to *Mirror for the Moon*, poems by Saigyō (1118-1190), translated by William La Fleur, New Directions, 1978

Further Sources

- David Landis Barnhill, *Basho's Haiku: Selected Poems of Matsuo Basho*, State University of NY Press, 2004
- Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Provence*, Mariner Books, 2006
- Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, Stone Bridge, 1994
- Irving Stone, *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh*, Doubleday & Company, 1937

1. "The contract between the author and the reader is a game. And the game . . . is one of the greatest inventions of Western civilization: the game of telling stories, inventing characters, and creating the imaginary paradise of the individual, from whence no one can be expelled because, in a novel, no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be heard and understood."

- Carlos Fuentes, *Myself with Others: Selected Essays*