

Japanese Haiku and Contemporary English-Language Haiku

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Introduction

R.H. Blyth wrote that haiku is Japan's greatest gift to world culture. Who am I to argue with that? It is a great gift and I am grateful to the Japanese people for it. I shall try to show my gratitude today by demonstrating that it has been embraced by the English-speaking world.

I have been asked to address the following questions:

- How are the haiku of Bashō and other Japanese poets understood and appreciated in the United States?
- What kinds of haiku are considered good or are popular?
- How do Americans accept haiku as literature?
- What are the evaluation standards for selecting haiku?
- When one composes a haiku, what are the crucial points?

Bashō and Japanese haiku in the West

To begin with the first question: How are past Japanese haiku, for example those of Bashō, understood or appreciated in the United States?

You might be surprised to hear that a familiarity with haiku in general and Bashō in particular is widespread in the West. So widespread that even the writers of the TV series “The Simpsons” expect their audience to know who Bashō is. There are a surprising number of translations of Bashō’s haiku in English, and more seem to appear every year. This attests to the high regard in which classical Japanese haiku are held in the West. As a result of the introduction of haiku as a Zen art, it is seen by many to be part of a spiritual path. It is thus also of interest to those who are intrigued by East Asian philosophy and religion. Haiku has also become an area of interest for those concerned about the environment; many believe that classical haiku points to a way of life in harmony with the world around us.

What Kind of Haiku Are Considered Good or Are Popular?

This is actually two distinct questions. If one asks, “What kind of haiku are considered good?” it is important to ask, “By whom?” The reason is that poets composing haiku in English often have a very different idea of what is “good” than the general public does. This is because there are two very different and distinct ways that haiku is understood in the West. The first is as a *form* of poetry; the second is as a *genre* of poetry.

First, there is “haiku as form.” Haiku is taught to most elementary school students as a *form* of 5-7-5 syllables in three lines. Any content can be poured into this form or mold and one can call it “haiku.” So we see “Haikus for Jews,” “Computer Error Message Haiku,” and “Haiku News Headlines,” to note a few manifestations of this understanding. It might be better to simply call these “5-7-5s” rather than “haiku.” We who are striving for haiku’s acceptance as a serious literature in the West are sometimes appalled by this understanding, but it has the benefit that almost everyone in the West knows the word “haiku”

and has at least a rudimentary idea of what it is. Beyond this, many have affection for haiku because it was their first introduction to writing poetry. In America, public familiarity with the word “haiku” is so widespread that it is used to market products from computer operating systems to perfume.

It is the second understanding, that haiku is a *genre* of poetry with a serious potential as literature, that I shall be focusing on today. Poets writing haiku with this understanding usually have some knowledge of Japanese aesthetics and as a result are aware that it is *content* rather than *form* alone that makes haiku unique.

How do Americans accept haiku as literature?

There is no question that *Japanese* haiku is accepted as literature in the West. There are numerous books of translations of Japanese haiku available; new books of translations are continually appearing. For the most part, the translations cover what I shall refer to as classical haiku, the haiku from Bashō to Shiki. Probably the most influential and widely read book of haiku translations in recent years is Robert Hass’s *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, & Issa*, first published in 1994. This is now the standard text that is used to introduce haiku at the college level. Hass says of Japanese haiku, “What is in these poems can’t be had elsewhere.” Bashō is the most frequently translated Japanese haiku poet. New editions of his haiku have appeared as recently as 2012 and 2013.

Contemporary Japanese haiku is less well-known. There are a few anthologies of 20th-century Japanese haiku available in English, as well as a few collections by individual poets. These include Yamaguchi Seishi, Ishihara

Yatsuka, Kaneko Tohta, and Arima Akito. Regrettably, none of these seem to have had wide distribution.

As far as English-language haiku is concerned, the situation is a little more complicated. Whether or not haiku is accepted as literature seems to be based in large part on who wrote it rather than what was written. If a haiku is written by a well-known poet such as Richard Wright, Pulitzer-prize winning poet Paul Muldoon or former United States poet laureate Billy Collins, it is immediately accepted as literature. If it is written by someone outside the commercial poetic mainstream, it is much less likely to be accepted as such. This situation has improved somewhat as a result of recent anthologies such as *The Haiku Anthology* and *Haiku in English* being published by a major poetry publisher, but the fundamentals haven't changed.

What are the standards for evaluating haiku and

What are the crucial points in composing haiku?

Standards for writing and evaluating English-language haiku have come from many sources. Among the most important early sources were the translations of Japanese haiku by R.H. Blyth in his four-volume *Haiku* (1949–1952) and two-volume *History of Haiku* (1963–64) and Herald Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* (1958).

Other early books combined a study of Japanese haiku with guidelines for writing haiku in English; early books in this category included Kenneth Yasuda's *The Japanese Haiku* (1957), Harold Henderson's *Haiku in English* (1965), Joan Giroux's *The Haiku Form* (1974), and William J. Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook* (1985). Recent books focused on the techniques of writing

haiku in English include my *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*.

In this last group of books, poets are told that Japanese haiku had several important characteristics and that these characteristics could be adopted in English-language haiku. Poets were told that a haiku:

- is *a short poem*. Usually 17 syllables or less.
- contains *a seasonal image* or *an image from nature*. This could be anything in the natural world or some seasonal aspect of human culture such as Christmas.
- contains *a caesura* or “*cut*” (*kire*) that divides the poem into two parts.
- That this cut results in grammatical incompleteness. This incompleteness produces what is called the “*juxtaposition of images*.” This juxtaposition of images was presented as the primary technique of haiku composition.
- presents *a single event in the present tense*. This is the so-called “haiku moment.”

In addition, poets were introduced to the aesthetics of classical Japanese haiku including *wabi*, *sabi*, *shibumi*, and *karumi*.

More recent books have elucidated Japanese aesthetics at a deeper level, including most notably Haruo Shirane’s *Traces of Dreams* (1998), Kōji Kawamoto’s *The Poetics of Japanese Verse* (2000), and Richard Gilbert’s *Poems of Consciousness* (2008) and *The Disjunctive Dragonfly* (2013).

English-language haiku has also benefited from the publication of several fine anthologies over the years. The first was Cor van den Heuvel’s *The*

Haiku Anthology, with its first edition in 1974, and subsequent expanded editions in 1986 and 1999. Other anthologies include Bruce Ross's *Haiku Moment* (1994) and *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, edited by Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns (2013). In addition, three recent anthologies have been published by Modern Haiku Press: *Haiku 21* (2011), *Haiku 2014* (2014), and *Haiku 2015* (2015). I have had the privilege of co-editing these last three anthologies with Scott Metz, who was editor of the online journal *Roadrunner* from 2009 to 2013. *Roadrunner* was the edgiest forum for English-language haiku in the first decade of the 21st century. Unlike the earlier anthologies such as *The Haiku Anthology* and Bruce Ross's *Haiku Moment* (1994), these new anthologies are international in scope and include haiku by poets in Europe and Australasia as well as North America. I will use haiku from these anthologies to demonstrate the issues that are currently being addressed by poets writing English-language haiku throughout the world.

The most up-to-date source for guidance in haiku practice has been and continues to be haiku magazines, including primarily *American Haiku* (1963–1968), *Modern Haiku* (beginning 1969), and the Haiku Society of America's *Frogpond* (beginning 1978). In recent years online sources have become important sources of essays about haiku. The most important are *Roadrunner* (2004–2013), *Simply Haiku*, (2003–2009), and The Haiku Foundation's Digital Library, all of which maintain online digital archives.

Two recent essays that have been crucial in developing the practice of English-language haiku in recent years include Haruo Shirane's "Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson, and Modern Haiku Myths," which was published in the journal *Modern Haiku* (31.1, 2000) and Richard Gilbert's "The

Disjunctive Dragonfly,” which appeared in *Modern Haiku* (35.2, 2004).

Among the myths Shirane proposed to dispel was the belief that haiku must be based on direct personal experience. He especially emphasized that the haiku of Bashō and Buson contain both a horizontal axis grounded in personal experience, a vertical axis alluding to past history and poetic texts. As Shirane wrote of Bashō’s haiku,

There were two key axes: one horizontal, the present, the contemporary world; and the other vertical, leading back into the past, to history, to other poems.

In his essay, Gilbert argued that *disjunction* rather than *juxtaposition* was the primary technique of haiku. Gilbert argued that effect of the poem *on the mind* is primary while how the poem is constructed, how this effect is achieved, is secondary. Going beyond the aesthetics of classical Japanese haiku in his *Poems of Consciousness*, Gilbert emphasized the importance of *kire* and *ma* for contemporary English-language haiku.

With these sources in mind, we can look at some of the standards for evaluating English-language haiku today. The issues I consider the most important are

1. Form: External and Internal
2. Seasonal Images and Abstract Images
3. Juxtaposition and Disjunction
4. Contrast and Paradox

Form: External and Internal

I'll begin with external form. This is what everyone in the West thinks of first when they think of haiku. Haiku today are almost always briefer than the “traditional” 17-syllable form. Take, for example,

summer clouds

I pull the rope ladder up

behind me

Susan Antolin

This is our classic three-line, “fragment and phrase” English-language haiku. The “three lines with fewer than 17 syllables” is the *external form*. The combination of “fragment and phrase” could be considered the *internal form* of this haiku. “Fragment and phrase” has been the standard construction for English-language haiku from its beginnings. In this haiku, there is an obvious cut at the end of the first line, so it is here that the fragment and phrase are divided.

The grammatical incompleteness resulting from the combination of fragment and phrase produces the *juxtaposition of images*, mentioned earlier, that has been a hallmark of English-language haiku.

Much briefer haiku are not uncommon. Beginning with Cor van den Heuvel's “tundra,” which was included in the first edition of *The Haiku Anthology* (1974) and presented the single word “tundra” in the middle of an otherwise blank page.

tundra

Many poets writing haiku in English today, aware that Japanese haiku are written in one line, are exploring the potentials of the one-line form:

floating in the sonogram summer moon

Lee Gurga

Seasonal Images and Abstract Images

A concrete seasonal image, rather than a figurative image, was a characteristic of early English-language haiku and is still present in most English-language haiku written today. It is recognized by most haiku poets as vital to haiku. This concrete image is still often present, but in many haiku today is balanced with an abstract image rather than a second concrete one. As Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro wrote concerning the concrete and the abstract in poetry:

The abstract should become concrete and the concrete abstract. . . . a perfect equilibrium should obtain between the two, because if the abstract keeps stretching you further towards the abstract, it will come apart in your hands and sift through your fingers. The concrete, if made still more concrete, can perhaps serve you some wine . . . or furnish your parlor, but it can never furnish your soul.

Here are two haiku that effectively juxtapose a concrete seasonal image with an abstract image:

quiet graveyard
warm breeze and an end
to alphabetic order

LeRoy Gorman

not male
not female
snowing

John Martone

Juxtaposition becomes Disjunction

Juxtaposition in English-language haiku has traditionally taken place between the two images of the poem. In today's haiku, juxtaposition can take place in surprising new ways. Sometimes it occurs within a single image, created by combining disparate senses within it, or by overlapping the senses of nearby images, creating a cognitive shift or vibrating field of coherence. This is what poet and theorist Richard Gilbert refers to as "perceptual disjunction."

On the simplest level, one can use the middle line of a haiku as a pivot to create this disjunction. For example, in Cynthia Cechota's

November rain
the slow drizzle
of chocolate

Cynthia Cechota

Please notice that "drizzle" is the central word of the haiku. The shift from cold rain to warm chocolate makes this word the keystone of the haiku, as we shift from the slow drizzle of cold rain to the slow drizzle of warm chocolate. This contrast is made even more effective by the poet's failure (in a good sense, of course) to mention either the coldness of the rain or the warmth of the chocolate.

Contrast and Paradox

Now we will consider paradox. Here is a haiku that goes beyond the simple *contrast* offered by traditional haiku juxtaposition and uses juxtaposition to produce *paradox*

this morning

it takes the iris to open

forever

Michele Root-Bernstein

Which leaves us with the paradoxical questions: Can “forever” be opened? Can an iris open anything other than our minds? A more humorous take on paradox is George Swede’s:

between what

I think and what is

lawn flamingo

George Swede

In regard to haiku such as these, we do well to remember what Carl Jung wrote about paradox,

Oddly enough the paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness... only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life. Non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible. (Jung on Christianity, 192)

As poets writing haiku in English explore new techniques in haiku, and revive old ones, it is important that we keep in mind the Matsuyama Declaration, which told us that haiku is neither merely *personal narrative* nor mere *word play*. That haiku, *at its best* is *symbolic poetry*, that haiku *at its best* transcends the personal and approaches the universal as Marilyn Appl Walker does here:

home alone a pear's empty face

Marilyn Appl Walker

In exploring how to achieve this, Western haiku poets are exploring the possibilities suggested by Haruo Shirane's exhortation to follow Bashō in writing haiku with both a vertical and horizontal axis. The horizontal axis is, of course, *our* present. One can approach the vertical axis in several different ways. One can have references to literature, as Mike Dillon with his:

and the buzzard also rises

Mike Dillon

With its allusion to the title of Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*, or David Caruso's:

columbine, by any other name

David Caruso

With its powerful allusion to a recent school shooting at Columbine High School in the U.S. and to Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet," where Juliet discusses the naming of things, saying, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." What an extraordinary use of a seasonal image!

Haiku 2015

Finally, I would like to share some haiku from our latest anthology, *Haiku 2015*, which demonstrates some of the new trends in English-language haiku. In recent years, in large part in response to the writings and translations of Richard Gilbert, haiku poets in the West have become increasingly aware of the importance of *kire* and *ma* in haiku. Gilbert has written simply, “Without *kire*, we do not have haiku.” Gilbert has also translated Hasegawa Kai’s statement that “The ‘cutting’ (*kire*) of haiku creates *ma*,” and “‘Junk’ haiku are haiku that have no *ma*.” Not all might agree with these statements, but they are being considered seriously by haiku poets in the West.

An additional stimulation to haiku poets in the West has been the development of cognitive poetics. An interest in the mechanisms of cognitive poetics shifts the poet’s interest from the *construction of the poem* to the *cognitive effects on the reader* as being the primary area of interest. This is reflected in the shift from an emphasis on “juxtaposition,” which refers to the arrangement of the images in the poem to “disjunction,” which refers to the effect of the poem on the reader. This disjunction may occur not only between the images but within the images themselves.

summer clouds

I pull the rope ladder up

behind me

Susan Antolin

This is the three-line, “fragment & phrase” haiku we met earlier. As in many

good haiku, *ma* exists in the space between the two phrases, and the element of grammatical incompleteness that they create. When you have grammatical incompleteness, there is always something left unsaid. In this case you have a concrete image in the first line and a simple declarative statement in the second and third lines. However, when you put these together, you get a cognitive shift as a result of the impossibility of trying to make sense of them as a complete statement. Here we find *ma* in the space between cloud and the impossible action of climbing a ladder up into the summer clouds. So, while fragment/phrase is the simplest method of cutting, and thereby the simplest technique for producing *ma*, its effects are by no means necessarily simple or simplistic, as this haiku demonstrates.

Here's a haiku in which language itself plays a vital role:

a new sound

from an old instrument

spring thaw

Cezar-Florin Ciobîcă

Here again we have a haiku that has overlapping literal and metaphoric meanings. The “old instrument” can simply refer to a musical instrument the poet is hearing; or the poet might be suggesting that the spring thaw itself is the old instrument. We find a rich mixture of season and imagination combined in a way that only haiku can. And, remembering that language is the true medium of poetry, how can one not love the contrast between the Anglo-Saxon word “thaw,” the key word in the haiku, with the Latinate word “instrument.” As you can see, here we have something analogous to the use of kana and kanji in Japanese. Like you, we have loanwords from other languages—in our case,

Greek would be another — but the two most important resources for us, with their completely different sound palates, are Latin and Anglo-Saxon.

broken twigs

short end of wishbones

among the tombstones

Brad Millward

Here the poet sees twigs as what we call wishbones, the forked bones of the turkey which we traditionally eat on our Thanksgiving holiday. Our custom is for one person to hold each of the forks of the wishbone. Each person makes a wish and pulls — the person who gets the long end of the broken wishbone gets their wish fulfilled. Here, the poet sees the broken twigs in a cemetery as broken wishbones. Which of them got the short end? Do they all have the short end?

Here is a haiku that engages with Shirane's vertical axis, alluding to Bashō's *kare eda ni karasu no tomarikeri aki no kure*

「枯枝に烏の止まりけり秋の暮」

November dawn ...

an owl in a leafless tree

spreads its wings

Susan B. Auld

Please note that the poet here has not simply copied Bashō, but has changed evening to morning, the ominous crow to the owl, symbol of Athena's wisdom in the West, and opened the wings that were closing in Bashō's haiku to make something entirely new.

earth from space . . .

and here I am

dotting an i

Claire Everett

You might ask, “Where is the seasonal image in this haiku?” Some might say it is simply absent while others might say that we have in “earth from space” an example of what Kaneko Tohta calls a “no-season word (*mu kigo*).” Over the years, I have championed the use of seasonal images in haiku. In my *Haiku: A Poet’s Guide*, I called them “the soul of haiku.” But, as Kaneko and this haiku point out, there are other images, powerful “images from daily life” as Kaneko wrote, that can expand the range of haiku through their judicious use. Could we consider “earth from space” as a *mukigo* of the contemporary world? This is an intriguing possibility to consider.

Here is a haiku that engages fully with the seasonal theme embodied in a fascinating, meditative predator:

a praying mantis

stick-still on the stubble

praise this

Scott Mason

The Psalm tells us to “praise everything.” Here the poet reminds us that some things are easier to praise than others, and so presents us with a conflict between what is and what we might think should be.

And finally, I’d like to close with a haiku that is one of the most interesting in *Haiku 2015*. Here is, one line at a time:

dried up

dried up

earthworm ouro-

dried up

earthworm ouro-

boros condom

Fascinating, isn't it? I would probably have stopped here, with its images of nature (dried up earthworm), mythology (ouroboros), and contemporary life (condom), and thought I had a great haiku. And it is. But the poet went beyond this, into another realm. The haiku finishes with a whiz-bang fourth line that, as you will see, literally closes the circle and engages directly with the Japanese tradition:

dried up

earthworm ouro-

boros condom

enso

Donna Fleischer

Haiku such as these are, I believe, contemporary English-language haiku at its best.

Final thoughts

Haiku poets in the West have been aware at least since the mid-1990s that

there are three streams of Japanese haiku, represented by the three great haiku organizations, the Gendai Haiku Kyōkai 現代俳句協会, the Haijin Kyōkai 俳人協会, and Nihon Dentō Haiku Kyōkai 日本伝統俳句協会. In the West, we have worked to include all styles in a single stream. This is evidenced by the wide range of approaches to haiku that have been included in the major haiku journals and haiku anthologies over the years. Over the past 10 years or so, this has been changing. On the one hand, those with a more traditional bent reject wildly experimental work as simply “not haiku.” On the other hand, poets attempting to push the limits of haiku turn up their noses at those walking more traditional paths. I suspect that as time goes on, we will see an increasing divergence of haiku practice in the West, not based on nationality or on geography, but on poetic stance. People being what they are, it seems inevitable that this divergence will occur. Some will celebrate this, some will lament it; others, myself included, will watch it with curiosity and wonder, hoping always to find interesting haiku in surprising places. Thank you!

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