

Haiku

by *Paul Kratoska*

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Harvest moon:

around the pond I wander
and the night is gone.

Bashō,

translated by Harold G. Henderson

HAIKU poetry, although relatively unknown in America, is a very significant part of the culture and heritage of Japan. The twin arts of writing and reading haiku are widespread and, rather than existing as an “ivory tower” endeavor within the universities, they are practiced by the entire populace: housewives, laborers, and scholars. Mr. Henderson, in his book *An Introduction to Haiku*, estimates that in 1957 there were about fifty successful monthly magazines devoted solely to haiku, and that these printed over one million verses per year.

Haiku originated as part of the slightly longer verse form, *tanka*, which consists of lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables. Centuries ago, it was a court pastime to have the first three lines of a *tanka* given, with competitors attempting to provide the remaining two. The word “haiku” [pronounced hi'-(.)kü] comes from the Japanese *hokku*, which means “starting verse.” It is uncertain when the three-line stanza first came to be considered as a poem in itself, but haiku had definitely appeared by the thirteenth century. Early haiku was for the most part mediocre, and it remained for the perceptive genius of Matsuo Bashō to bring the art to fruition in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Subsequent generations have produced additional masters, and various schools of thought have arisen and advanced theories concerning haiku.

It is difficult and perhaps undesirable to formulate an all-inclusive definition of haiku. Certainly there are technical and topical conventions which must be observed, but the essence of haiku is its emotional content. Technically, haiku are deceptively simple: three lines containing five, seven, and five syllables with neither rhyme nor set rhythm. Mr. Henderson explains that rhyme is not used in haiku because all Japanese words end either in a vowel or with "n," which would make rhyme within a seventeen syllable framework unbearably monotonous. The Japanese language precludes rhythm patterns because it relies on varying pitch rather than a stress pattern to create emphasis.

Despite the differing viewpoints expressed by the great masters of haiku (such as Bashō's religious outlook, the artistic vantage of Buson, and Issa's humanitarianism), the limitations imposed by the form have maintained a common quality in most haiku. The brevity of the verse necessitates the use of impressionistic techniques, the presentation of key phrases which suggest a complete picture. Since there are no titles, and there is virtually no space for background material or explanation, haiku must deal with a common and universal experience in order to be understood. (It is because seasonal changes of weather are common to all men that the convention of including a seasonal reference in all haiku developed.)

Such are the technical considerations which haiku must meet, but haiku is much more than a poetic form. It is an attitude, an emotional reaction to life. To cite Mr. R. H. Blyth's explanation, it deals with the ordinary and everyday rather than the exceptional, the splendid, or the magnificent; with the small and subtle rather than the vast and sublime, and ". . . is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things."

The spirit of Zen Buddhism is inherent in haiku, which embraces the animistic concept that all things, including the inanimate, share an underlying unity—the Buddha-nature. This accounts for the extensive use of natural events as subject matter for haiku, for when the haiku poet speaks of nature, he is dealing with a subject not far removed from man. Zen, like haiku, defies definition. It involves a zest for life, a deep awareness of relationships of all kinds, and its

goal is enlightenment, which is spiritual insight into or a sense of communion with nature. It is the suppression of the ego, the "I." Wordsworth says, "We see into the life of things," but in Zen, seeing *is* the life of things.

It is said that all Zen is not haiku, but all haiku is Zen, and it is this principle which governs most translations of haiku. Thus, although the traditional 5-7-5 syllabic pattern is rarely altered in writing original haiku, most translators sacrifice it and rather strive to reproduce the original effect of the work. Rhyme is occasionally introduced to emphasize that the piece is a poem and not simply a "dribble of prose."

Comparisons between occidental works and translated haiku which deal with the same topics provide insight into the differences between their respective outlooks on life. R. H. Blyth, in his book *Haiku*, gives the following example: St. Paul said, "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together until now, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God." Issa, with characteristic haiku simplicity and insight, humorously says:

For you fleas too,
The night must be long,
It must be lonely.

Here the underlying unity of all nature appears with sudden clarity. There is no element of didacticism or moralizing, but rather the simplicity of an emotion familiar to all men as they face their destinies. (The seasonal reference is somewhat obscure; long night traditionally implies winter.) Similarly, Wordsworth's "To a Butterfly," which begins:

I've watched you now a full half-hour,
Self-poised upon that yellow flower;
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep or feed.
How motionless! . . .

expresses in nineteen lines the same emotion that Buson (this and subsequent translations are by Henderson) places in these three:

On the temple bell
has settled, and is fast asleep,
a butterfly.

In a radically different mood, Buson writes:

What piercing cold I feel!
 My dead wife's comb, in our bedroom,
 Under my heel.

Bashō is thought by many to be the greatest of all haiku poets. The following is his simple statement of an event so common that it often passes unnoticed, which his perception has endowed with a great wealth of meaning:

Old pond—
 and a frog-jump-in
 water-sound.

He has contrasted the ancient, timeless quality of the pond with the sudden change induced by the frog. However, such changes are temporary; the sound is gone and the ripples will disappear, and all will be unchanged. Similarly, a man makes his splash in life but leaves it unchanged.

Much of Bashō's writing expresses the contemplative attitude of Zen:

Clouds come from time to time—
 and bring to men a chance to rest
 from looking at the moon.

Here on the mountain pass,
 somehow they draw one's heart so—
 violets in the grass.

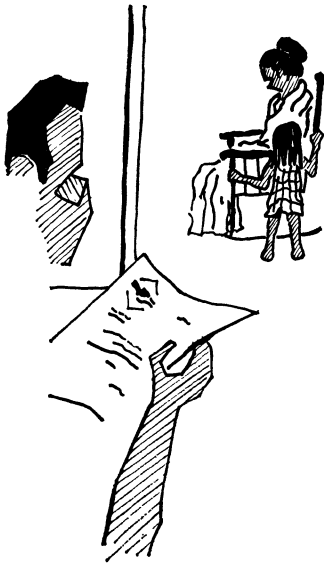
The matter of whether or not true haiku may be written in languages other than Japanese and, if so, what criteria must be followed provides a subject for much scholarly dispute. The most widely accepted view is that, while dogmatic adherence to the 5-7-5 syllable arrangement is not wholly essential, it is desirable to use such a pattern in order to produce the disciplined effect of the Japanese haiku. Far more important is the Buddhist animism and the simplicity of subject matter for, lacking this, a work is merely a collection of words—perhaps a poem, but not haiku. The following are samples of original haiku:

Bright flowers drooping
 on dark and rainy mornings,
 longing for the sun.

On cold, dark mornings
people intently passing
overlook the day.

Faint morning cobwebs
lie wetly on summer grass,
sparkling in the sun.

Zen illuminates,
all nature—man—together feel
the deep light: Haiku!



The Few Who Find

*by Larry Edson
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“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that
leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Matthew 7:14

THE AIR is heavy in the small room. It mingles with the floating dust and draws small beads of sweat to the face of the child squatting beside the low bed. The “Breed” turns suddenly in a restless sleep, clawing at his body beneath the