

essays

CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN HAIKU

Jim Kacian

If there is such a thing as American haiku—and commentators around the world insist there is—it proves elusive in the actual telling. Like any vast agglomeration of multiple sources and loosely-defined ends, what mostly characterizes American haiku would be its diversity, and it is this diversity which impedes any sort of clear explication. This attempt to express the essence of the haiku we practice in the United States (and for the purpose of this discussion I am treating “American” as referring to the United States) should be understood with this proviso.

We should begin by identifying the debt which American haiku owes to being conducted in the English language. Through no effort of its own, American haiku has the privilege and advantage of utilizing the language globally preferred in our time for matters of commerce, science, scholarship, diplomacy and much else. It is entirely possible that the contributions of American haiku to the burgeoning of the genre would be considerably muted were it not for this circumstance. Add to this that the United States is a large and populous country. Though a very tiny proportion of its inhabitants has anything to do with haiku, because of its size this still amounts to the second-largest haiku audience in the world in terms of sheer numbers, though it is ranked much lower when reckoned per capita. These factors have much to do with the relative weight of American haiku within the larger haiku community.

Next, most obviously there will be some content areas that are unique to the United States. These will include topical matters—our sports, politics, holidays, personalities—to go along

with our indigenous flora and fauna, the most usual images con-
 vened in traditional haiku. Thus a sufficiently skilled poet from
 any country or culture might produce a haiku such as:

After the heavy rains
 So many skies tonight
 Reflecting the moon

Gerald Vizenor

whereas a poem such as:

spentagon
 pentagony
 repentagon

Nicholas Virgilio

could only have been produced by an American. The efficacy of
 such specific and culturally-derived imagery is at the heart of the
 debate of the value of global haiku. Vizenor's poem can be under-
 stood by anyone anywhere, but this ubiquity can also be seen as
 a kind of blandness (in fact variants of this same poem can be
 found by dozens of poets in every haiku culture). Virgilio's poem,
 on the other hand, speaks to its local culture but may in fact be
 closed to most others.

Americans are likewise diverse in their formal treatment of
 the genre. It is possible to find American publications that are
 primarily interested in a traditional 5-7-5 structure using syl-
 lables (for instance *Geppo*, the journal of the Yuki Teikei Haiku
 Society), and those that would have no truck with anything 5-7-5
 (for example, *Otoliths*), and everything in between. There are
 practiced norms—it is reasonable to say that most haiku fall into
 one of two categories, either the one-line monoku or the three-
 line haiku. However, the variety to be discovered in these catego-
 ries is astounding, ranging from this famous poem:

tundra

Cor van den Heuvel

to this:

where the lines end and the absence begins an architecture or so

Chris Gordon

And then again this:

spring wind—
I too
am dust

Patricia Donegan

to this:

In the falling snow
A laughing boy holds our his palms
Until they are white.

Richard Wright

We can add to this a healthy experimentation with organic form,
yielding such poems as this:

the
animal
in
me
can't
be
spo
ken
to
tem
p
o
l
e

Peter Newton

or this:

on this cold
 spring 1
 2 night 3 4
 kittens
 wet
 5

Marlene Mountain

However, while these are all successful innovations in form, it would be difficult to argue that they are specifically American in nature. What may be true is that for various cultural, economic, political and social reasons, American poets are more encouraged, perhaps even compelled, to seek innovation than poets in many other cultures. This has the advantage of freeing American poets from the necessity of imitating original sources that may date back decades and even centuries, as may be found in the haiku practices of, say, the Balkan nations most prominently, if not exclusively.

This may be the most characteristic contribution of American haiku: its willingness to explore the boundaries of the genre. All art evolves through a gradual erosion of its traditional values and practices, and an art that stifles this erosion becomes moribund. Indeed, haiku has faced extinction on more than one occasion as traditional forces crowded out innovation. However, it has been salvaged in each instance by a sufficiently powerful re-inventor of the genre, who, in order to accomplish the overhaul, needed to jettison much of its traditional baggage. American haiku practice might be seen as a more thorough approach to this process, not contained within the personality of a single poet, but rather encouraged by cultural values to adopt such practices on a wide scale.

On the other hand, such an approach risks a loss of contact with the traditional values of the genre. This concern is certainly not unique to haiku, but has appeared in all the arts over centuries of practice. If a study of this process in the arts suggests any-

thing, however, it is that such an approach, rather than destroying the art, revivifies it. And this is what is happening to haiku in all languages around the world, or at least so it appears to me. Haiku is a broader, more capacious, more interesting art for its innovation, capable of expressing more of what its poets need to say, and reaching larger audiences than at any prior time in its history.

In conclusion, what identifies American haiku is not any one style or value or voice, but rather its multiplicity of each of these, coupled, most importantly, with a willingness to drive them to their logical and artistic ends. While this may be found in individual poets around the world, I believe it is much more common in the United States, not only in our very best poets, but as a general operating procedure for the advancement of the genre. This is part of what makes this the most exciting time ever to be involved in haiku.

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