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Intersecting Influences in American Haiku

Tom Lynch

IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN HAIKU POETRY WE FIND A CONVERGENCE of the tradition of the American transcendentalists, especially Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, with the Zen-influenced Japanese tradition of haiku composition. This convergence is most obvious in a shared belief in the ability of the poet to see the world anew, and in the desire to efface the subject/object dichotomy between the poet and the natural world. In the work of many North American poets the transcendental and Zen traditions synthesize to generate a distinctive brand of haiku. Since the mid-1950s, literally thousands of collections of haiku poetry have appeared in the United States and Canada. Hundreds of thousands of haiku have been published in scores of magazines, and the rate of publication increases steadily. Yet English language haiku has so far not been accepted as a legitimate form of American poetry worthy of inclusion in literary anthologies and consideration in critical discussions.

Several reasons may explain why haiku has so far not spurred such attention. Haiku composition, especially in the early years, attracted more than its share of dilettante practitioners. It seemed easy enough, and the exotic atmosphere one could shroud oneself in was alluring. These early poems tended to be sentimental, full of cherry blossoms and incense, written by people not because haiku served any particular function in the furtherance of their poetic practice, but because they were drawn to and sought to ally themselves with an Orientalist image of Japan—precisely the opposite attitude, I might add, from an exacting attention to the mundane details of local, common life that epitomizes the haiku aesthetic. Unfortunately these poems defined the genre for many people and obscured the serious work being done by a few good poets.

Another barrier to understanding and appreciation of American haiku, reinforced by the exoticists, is that it is a fundamentally foreign, highly specialized art from that is a unique product of Japanese culture. Earl Miner argued this point in his 1974 entry on haiku in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in which he contends

that haiku is “too reduced in form and grows too complexly out of its cultural background to be adaptable as a whole into Western languages.”

A native Japanese poet, however, has defended the possibility of an American haiku. Hiroaki Sato had pointed out that the view that haiku is unsuited to American literary practice tends to idealize a body of haiku consisting of “a dozen or so famous pieces by Basho, Buson, and Issa, and not to include pieces from the diversified world of modern haiku” (“Diversified”). In short, Sato contends, it may not be possible to successfully write American haiku in imitation of Basho, but it can be written in the same spirit in which modern Japanese haiku is written. If the poetry of Basho is codified as the model for true haiku, then, Sato argues, not only the haiku of Americans, but the contemporary haiku of most Japanese as well, would be found deficient.

Though I agree with Sato, my perspective on the basis for the viability of American haiku is slightly different from his. In addition to modernizing the definition of haiku, as he suggests, I also wish to approach haiku as a current manifestation of a trend in American poetics that begins in earnest in the writings of the transcendentalists—in particular, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—and that has continued under various guises in the work of, among others, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Richard Wright, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder, and in fact a sizable number of other contemporary poets. In short, I would contend that haiku is a genre that fulfills the poetic aspirations of important trends in American literature that have endured throughout the past century and a half. Assuredly such a slight genre could not otherwise have so greatly influenced such an imposing cast of poets did it not fulfill some deep-seated necessity in their poetic practice.

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These trends link transcendentalist ideas such as the Edenic impulse and the effacement of the subject/object dichotomy with modernist ideas such as Pound's idea of the “direct presentation of the image” and Williams's notion of “No ideas but in things.” These fundamental aspects of such important traditions in American literature and poetics closely correlate with important aspects of the philosophy underlying much of haiku—Zen Buddhism. In linking transcendentalism and Zen I don't mean to imply that they are identical,

or even that they are necessarily all that similar (though such a case can be made), only that on these key issues that have been of paramount importance to poets of both traditions, they share related views that have intersected in the practice of many contemporary haiku poets.

In this connection, the Thoreau scholar Walter Harding described a particularly relevant experience while lecturing about Thoreau in Japan. Over and over again, he reports, "the Japanese would say to me, 'What did Thoreau read of Zen Buddhism? He obviously understands it so much better than most of us do.' And when I said, 'Well, he simply hadn't read anything of Zen Buddhism; it wasn't available in his day,' they were astounded" (Harding, Brenner, Doyle, 87).

While a variety of factors are no doubt responsible for the response of Harding's Japanese audience, their misreading of Thoreau is insightful. A critical formulation of a definitive tendency of the transcendentalists that connects their philosophy to Zen is that encompassed by the term "Adamic" (or "Edenic") as formulated by R. W. B. Lewis in his *The American Adam*. Lewis discusses the way in which this Edenic impulse is revealed in Whitman: "Whitman did go back, all the way back, to a primitive Adamic condition, to the beginning of time" (42). And he later elaborates: "There is scarcely a poem of Whitman's before, say, 1867, which does not have the air of being the first poem ever written, the first formulation in language of the nature of persons and of things and of the relations between them" (44). Thoreau similarly shared this sense of the unique opportunity afforded by America to discover a new relationship to the world. In "Walking" he makes the claim that "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions" (*Excursions*, 177).

The transcendentalists' expressions of an Edenic possibility in the New World contain many paradoxes. Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that the project of seeing the world anew, when conceived in terms derived from the earliest period of the Judeo-Christian tradition—the story of Adam and Eve—is already structured by a past conception. A recent line of argument this paradox has developed challenges the Adamic-Edenic interpretation of these writers. In a discussion of Whitman in *Destructive Poetics*, Paul Bové takes Lewis to task for viewing Whitman as an exemplar of the "Adamic" impulse:

R. W. B. Lewis's treatment of Whitman in the American Adam is the paradigm of all Modernist interpretations of Whitman. The fundamental "mystification" of Lewis's misreading lies in his assumption of the possibility of absolute novelty, of freedom from the past and tradition, of a

human potential for absolute beginnings at any time. Lewis's misreading emerges from this disguised New Critical presupposition that language magically can free itself and its user from the immediate historical past either to return to some ahistorical scene which actually transcends time—Eliade's illo-tempore—or simply to begin again, free of historical consequences. In other words, the New Critical insistence upon the ability of the poet as ironist to choose at any time from an infinity of possibles unrestricted by historical actuality and the ecstatic temporal structure of Dasein is transferred in Lewis's study of Whitman to the myth of the American Adam who is free of Europe, its traditions, its language, its rhetoric, and its failure. To some degree similar assumptions underlie all interpretation of Whitman which see him in an exclusively American context. They habitually presuppose as fact not only Whitman's success in freeing himself absolutely from the past, but the very possibility of such an escape. (134–35)

Bové's critique seems rather too easy, and rather too obvious. Of course their borrowed mythology—Eden and Lethe, for example—and the fact that the transcendentalists thought and wrote in a European language, reveal the failure of their attempt to leave the Old World and its institutions behind and to actually make the New World as thoroughly new as they would have liked. To satisfy Bové they would have needed to invent their own unique language and mythology. What their "failure" may indicate, however, is that the possibility of starting anew was more difficult than they realized, not, as Bové suggests, that it was impossible. Their inability to make the clean start they sought does not diminish the fact that they did indeed see themselves as making such an effort and that they did indeed develop a poetics to facilitate that effort.

Bové questions not only their success, but the very possibility of their success. Yet it seems to me that his perspective is too limited. He criticizes "interpretations of Whitman which see him in an exclusively American context," but his own context, Euro-centered as it is, seems only slightly less exclusive. A broader context that places Whitman in an Asian-American philosophical framework—more appropriate to the actual influences on Whitman—makes the success of the Edenic impulse seem more plausible. Like Whitman and the other transcendentalists, and unlike Bové, the Zen tradition does not doubt the possibility of an "Edenic" escape from preconceptual frameworks. In Zen, however, it is only a rare few, after a lifetime (perhaps many lifetimes) of practice who are able to see the world as the transcendentalists desired, without preconceptions, as though for the first time. I would suggest that, though they did not complete the journey, the transcendentalists were headed in the right

direction, even without the many guideposts available to a Zen practitioner.

Also, while I do agree with Bové that language is a more powerful conditioning force than the transcendentalists and many of their critics have recognized, I believe Bové misreads the transcendentalists' Edenic quest as a nostalgic longing for a distant past and therefore fails to understand why they thought such a quest was literally, not just aesthetically, attainable:

Insofar as the very possibility of the idea of returning to the past as a paradise—either an actual return to a mythic time before the Fall or an aesthetic return to a pleasing scene of the personal or cultural past—is denied, then the total inadequacy of the Adamic-Edenic myth/metaphor to the analysis of Whitman becomes obvious. (141–42)

Bové's misreading here is crucial. If we view the Edenic myth as a myth of return, as a longing for a sacred past, then he is correct; however, I do not believe this is the usual perspective of Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. For them the myth enacts a "mythological present," not a lost past. To read the Edenic myth as a myth of presence provides us with a very different perspective than to read it as a myth of absence. As the locale of a myth of absence, Eden is far away and long ago, and we have been banished from it. Angels with flaming swords, as we have been told, stand at the gate barring our approach. In the transcendentalist version, however, as a myth of presence, Eden is here and now. We simply can't perceive it as such. The Fall, for Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, was not a physical or metaphysical displacement, but a disorienting stumble. Part of the task they accepted as writers was to get us reoriented. To do this, they sought to break through the delusory sense we have of reality—a sense dependent primarily on received tradition rather than on direct experience. This gesture gives to literature a sacred mission, to discover the true ground of being. (Or, if no such firm ground is fathomed—a more likely discovery in modern and postmodern literature—to reveal that fact and to draw the implications from the discovery of such a void.)

D. T. Suzuki describes the goal of Zen in such a way as to make the connection between Zen and this Edenic impulse of American literature apparent: "Zen," he says, ". . . opens a man's eye to the greatest mystery as it is daily and hourly performed; it enlarges the heart to embrace eternity of time and infinity of space in its very palpitation; it makes us live in the world as if walking in the Garden of Eden . . ." (*Introduction*, 45). In Zen, he says, we get to such a state by "a general

mental upheaval which destroys the old accumulations of intellection and lays down the foundation for a new life; there must be the awakening of a new sense which will review the old things from a hitherto undreamed-of angle of observation" (96).

Such a desire to see the world anew is, it seems to me, the primary goal of the transcendental movement, at least as it is expressed in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For example, attaining such a perspective constitutes Thoreau's basic purpose for his sojourn at Walden Pond, where he proclaims:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, in which we can call *reality* and say, This is, and no mistake. . . . (230)

This rejection of received belief and the search for an unmediated relationship to the world, what Emerson called an "original relation to the universe," is common to both transcendentalism and Zen, and has been one of the principal projects of American literature and poetics. In his survey of American poetry, Hyatt Waggoner argues that "American poets have faced the world armed chiefly with their innocence, their 'not knowing.'" (xix).

In his introduction to Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Richard Baker explains the value of a similar sort of ignorance to the Zen practitioner:

The practice of Zen mind is beginner's mind. The innocence of the first inquiry—what am I?—is needed throughout Zen practice. The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything. (13–14)

In addition to this desire to achieve an Edenic mind capable "in a flash" of realizing "the original nature of everything," another and related link between transcendentalism, Zen, and American haiku poetry is the concomitant desire to eliminate the illusory distinction between the self of the poet and the otherness of the world—an effacement of the subject/object dichotomy. Such a desire is expressed, for example, in Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth":

There was a child went forth every day,
 And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
 And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the
 day,
 Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

(1:149, ll. 1-4)

Indeed such a gesture is perhaps Whitman's distinguishing feature. Significantly, the great Japanese haiku poet Basho expressed a similar attitude. As Makoto Ueda recounts, Basho believed that

It is of paramount importance to a poet . . . to catch the "soul" of his subject. He should not try to project his own emotion into the poem. He is a catalyst, a mere agent who leads an object to reveal its inner nature. In a famous passage on the poet's creative process, Doho [one of Basho's disciples] makes this point clear: "The Master said: 'Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo plant from a bamboo plant.' What he meant was that a poet should detach the mind from his own personal self. Nevertheless some poets interpret the word 'learn' in their own ways and never really 'learn.' For 'learn' means to enter into the object, perceive its delicate life and feel its feelings, whereupon a poem forms itself." (*Matsuo Basho*, 167-68)

To do this, Basho developed the aesthetic of "*hosomi*" (thinness in Japanese), by which, according to Ueda, "The poet buries himself in an external object with delicate sensitivity" (*Basho and Poetics*, 426).

A salted sea-bream,
 Showing its teeth, lies chilly
 At the fish shop.

(trans. Ueda)

In this poem Basho identifies himself with the cold fish and feels the coldness himself. Ueda concludes that "*hosomi*, emphasizing the thin string which draws the poet into the heart of an object, again reiterates the basic premise of the haiku form. A haiku poet does not use nature images to express his emotions; he lets natural objects express their feelings" (*Basho and Poetics*, 427).

Such a sensibility is expressed by Whitman throughout the body of his work, but perhaps most succinctly stated in "Song of Myself":

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
 wounded person.

(33: 845)

As both Basho and Whitman seem to suggest, for them the poets' task is to merge with the object, recognize their true unity with it—that place where their souls and its are one—and let the object speak its poetic nature through them.

The modern haiku poet Seisensui expresses a related view. He is, as far as I know, the only haiku poet of stature to have attained the experience of satori (Ueda, *Modern Japanese Poets*, 296). And he, like Basho, saw haiku as a form of momentary enlightenment: "We want to see nature within ourselves or, to put it differently, we want to contemplate nature from within. Instead of interpreting it by knowledge or appreciating it by aesthetic taste, we want to feel it instinctively with our entire being" (*Modern Japanese Poets*, 295).

In sum, several relevant correlations between the poetic theory of Japanese haiku poets and the theory of the American transcendentalists can be deduced: 1) a belief in the interfusion of the self with external nature, seeking to resolve the subject/object dichotomy and to return us to an awareness of the true self that we share with all other things; 2) an understanding that in order to achieve such an interfusion we need to attain what might be termed an Edenic condition in which we efface the ego-self and reject preconceptions and received beliefs; 3) a recognition that for most of us such an interfusion occurs in fragmentary moments of perception; 4) an awareness that the present time is the only time, and the present place the only place, to achieve such a perception.

2

I would now like to consider how these ideas manifest themselves in American haiku poetry. The influence of haiku on the development of modern English language poetry has been well documented. During the years just preceding the First World War, the Poets' Club, including T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, and, most notably, Ezra Pound, was holding regular meetings in London in order to explore new forms of poetry. In his "History of Imagism," F. S. Flint acknowledges the influence of haiku on these writers: "We proposed at times to replace [conventional verse] by pure vers libre; by the Japanese tanka and haiku" (quoted in Miner, "Pound," 573). (Rather ironically, haiku poets in Japan at this same time were revitalizing haiku by replacing their conventional form with something they termed vers libre haiku.) What these Western poets seem to have found appealing about haiku was the conciseness and suggestiveness of its imagery and its lack of overt commentary or explicit logic.

If most students and scholars of American literature know of any one haiku written by an American, it is likely to be Pound's "hokku-like" poem "In a Station of the Metro," our only canonized haiku:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough.

Pound declared that "in a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (89)—that is, it records a moment when the subject/object dichotomy is obliterated.

Two other major poets of modernism who have written poetry similar to haiku are Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Neither of these poets, however, acknowledges much awareness of haiku. J. Hillis Miller's exploration of the work of these two poets, however, touches on several areas that link their work to haiku, though he never mentions haiku and doesn't seem to be aware of the connection between the poetic theories of these American modernists and the Japanese haiku poets. Using Wallace Stevens's phrase "barefoot into reality" from the poem "Large Red Man Reading," Miller remarks:

To walk barefoot into reality means abandoning the independence of the ego. Instead of making everything an object for the self, the mind must efface itself before reality, or plunge into the density of an exterior world, dispersing itself in a milieu which exceeds it and which it has not made. The effacement of the ego before reality means abandoning the will to power over things. (7–8)

In his discussion of William Carlos Williams, Miller indicates that Williams shared with even greater certainty this metaphysical position elaborated by Stevens: "The celebrated slogan, 'No ideas but in things,' is a shorthand expression of the identification of mind and universe presupposed in Williams's work" (291). (The slogan is also a pithy summary of the haiku aesthetic.) Miller claims that in his poetry Williams "establishes a self beyond personality, a self coextensive with the universe. Words, things, people, and God vanish as separate entities and everything becomes a unit" (291). With his poetry based on a metaphysical premise so similar to the premise of haiku, it is not surprising that Williams composed such a remarkably haiku-like poem as "The Red Wheelbarrow":

so much depends
upon

a red
wheelbarrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Though at times writing such haiku-like poetry, neither Stevens nor Williams was more than cursorily familiar with the Japanese haiku tradition. During the early decades of the twentieth century little material had been published in the West on haiku. The end of the Second World War, however, provoked an outpouring of interest in Japanese culture.

Immediately after the dust had settled from the war, several of the most important books yet to be written in English on haiku were published. The first volume of R. H. Blyth's four-volume *Haiku* appeared in 1949. Kenneth Yasuda's *A Pepper-Pod* was published in 1947 and his *The Japanese Haiku* in 1957. Harold Henderson's *Introduction to Haiku* (a more extensive rendition of his *The Bamboo Broom* of 1934) appeared in 1958. Blyth's work in particular emphasized Zen elements in haiku. Additionally, D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts were publishing books on Zen that included discussions of haiku as a Zen art form. Therefore, unlike the previous period of interest in haiku at the beginning of the century, the poets of the fifties were fully aware of the spiritual context of the genre. Indeed most of the poets who wrote haiku in the fifties did so precisely because they saw it as a Zen art.

Many of the poets of the Beat school, most notably Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Snyder, tried their hand at the genre. Commenting on the plethora of bad haiku at the time, Ginsberg celebrates Kerouac's contribution. Kerouac, he says,

has the one sign of being a great poet, which is he's the only one in the United States who knows how to write haikus. [The Beats pluralized the word haiku.] The only one who's written any good haikus. And everybody's been writing haikus. There are all these dreary haikus written by people who think for weeks trying to write a haiku, and finally come up with some dull little thing or something. Whereas Kerouac thinks in haikus, every time he writes anything—talks that way and thinks that way. So it's just natural for him. It's something Snyder noticed. Snyder has to labor for years in a Zen monastery to produce one haiku about shitting off a log! And actually does get one or two good ones. Snyder was always

astounded by Kerouac's facility . . . at noticing winter flies dying of old age in his medicine chest. (52-53)

Ginsberg's last statement is a reference to what is regarded as one of Kerouac's finest haiku:

In my medicine cabinet,
the winter fly
has died of old age.

This poem typifies some of the best of American haiku. It records a specific moment, that is, when the poet slides the medicine cabinet door open and discovers the dead fly. In its melancholy tone regarding the passage of time, it evokes the trait of *sabi*, so important to Japanese haiku. By placing the fly in the medicine cabinet, the poem also links the poet's self to the fly's being in a manner reminiscent of Basho's *hosomi*; the medicine cabinet suggests the poet's own mortality shared with the fly. The sliding medicine cabinet momentarily eliminates the distinction between subject and object, an effect further compounded if one imagines a mirror on the front of the cabinet door whereby the poet's reflected image is replaced by an image of the deceased fly. For Kerouac, *sabi* was the primary emotion of haiku. This suggests why his linkage of haiku with the blues in such works as "Blues and Haikus" is so effective. The blues, like *sabi*, evoke an existential loneliness.

Probably no major modernist American poet has been more influenced by Eastern poetics in general, and haiku in particular, than Gary Snyder. Occasional haiku can be found scattered throughout his work, but his most sustained selection is the "Hitch Haiku" sequence in *The Back Country*, a book that opens with an epigram from Basho. The first poem in the sequence, and one of his best, suggests some of the features of his haiku:

They didn't hire him
so he ate his lunch alone:
the noon whistle

Like Kerouac's "medicine cabinet," this poem contains a precise moment: when the worker's lunch whistle sounds. It also evokes *sabi* in the loneliness of the unemployed worker whose economic poverty is compounded by the social poverty of his isolation from the camaraderie of lunching with his fellow workers. Snyder's own experience as a laborer (he's usually not recognized as one of America's great working-class poets) contributes a distinctive effect to the poem

and also illustrates the idea that haiku moments can be discovered in any aspect of life's experiences, if we are alert enough. Although Snyder has published only a few haiku, many of his poems, in the direct presentation of images, in the juxtaposition of image components, in the concision of his language, and in his avoidance of subjective terms, reveals the influence of Chinese Taoist and Japanese Zen poetry, including haiku.

About the same time that the Beats were experimenting with haiku in the United States, another American writer, Richard Wright, was writing haiku in France during the last years of his life. Wright is almost exclusively known as a novelist who wrote a few poems and travelogues. It is less well known that during the last few years of his life he wrote as many as four thousand haiku. While sick and bedridden in Paris in 1959, Wright obtained a copy of R. H. Blyth's recently published four-volume *Haiku*, mentioned earlier. Wright wrote to Margrit de Sablonière that "During my illness I experimented with the Japanese form of poetry called haiku; I wrote some 4, 000 of them . . ." (Fabre, 159). Robert Tener suggests:

For Wright, the act of writing haiku must have been equivalent to finding a new, powerful way to express what he had felt and yearned for all his life, a belief in the unity and harmony of all things, the sense that man and nature are one and that the point of knowledge is to abolish the division between them. In studying haiku, he surely must have identified those yearnings with some of the Taoist and Zen ideas that permeate the works of the great haiku writers. (273-74)

Although poets such as these and others who established their reputations in other genres have either written or been influenced by haiku, haiku composition and the development of a North American version of the genre have largely been the tasks of unknown writers publishing in obscure literary magazines. In 1963 the first literary magazine devoted solely to English language haiku, *American Haiku*, began publishing under the editorship of James Bull and Donald Eulert. Almost immediately the question emerged as to what a magazine so titled ought to publish. Although the work in its first issue was, like the haiku of the Beats, quite free-form (Higginson, *Haiku*, 66-67), when the editorship was turned over to Clement Hoyt it began to publish almost exclusively haiku in the 5-7-5 syllabic form. As Hoyt says, "I was rejecting everything sent to me" (145). Hoyt felt that most of the poems he initially received were not haiku because they failed to approximate the 5-7-5 form. After berating poets to that effect, he says, he was suddenly inundated with "mordantly rigid" 5-7-5 verses that resembled haiku only in form (145). Hoyt saw haiku

as an exotic form that must be imitated exactly, and he even failed to acknowledge modernist Japanese haiku innovations. One suspects that many of the haiku written in Japan during the twentieth century would have failed to gain a sympathetic reading at *American Haiku*.

Most American haiku poets eventually rejected strict adherence to classical haiku standards. The most commonly (though not exclusively) agreed upon current definition is that expressed by Cor van den Heuvel in his *Haiku Anthology*:

HAIKU:

(1) An unrhymed Japanese poem recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived in which nature is linked to human nature. It usually consists of 17 onji (Japanese sound syllables) in three parts of 5-7-5 each.

(2) An adaptation in English of (1) usually written in one to three lines with no specific number of syllables. It rarely has more than 17 syllables. Sometimes written in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables. (355)

Van den Heuvel goes on to acknowledge that in English most haiku "are now written in a free-verse form of fewer than seventeen syllables, and lack the characteristic 'season word' of the Japanese" (356).

The core of van den Heuvel's definition is the phrase "recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived in which nature is linked to human nature." This remains the touchstone for determining whether or not English language variants on the haiku form ought to be called haiku. Its faith in the ontological power of moments "keenly perceived" also suggests links to the transcendentalist tradition. In the "Over-Soul," Emerson indicates the connection:

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences. (*Works*, 2:25)

In American haiku, the Edenic impulse has remained a key element. Robert Spiess, haiku poet and editor of *Modern Haiku*, suggests: "Haiku poets should give full consideration to Thoreau's observation: 'How much is written about Nature as somebody has portrayed her, how little about Nature as she is, and chiefly concerns us'" ("Speculations," 290). And again: "Haiku allow us to perceive that a new world is born afresh at every instant. With each haiku moment the poet (and reader) is Adam become aware of the manifestations of creation for the very first time and giving names to them" ("Speculations," 279).

Another important haiku poet, Nick Virgilio, professed the ideal that "I like to think I'm a grown-up child who survived my education and can still view the world with relatively uncorrupted eyes" (Avery). And, similarly, he felt he was like "the baby that comes out of the belly and looks around, soaking everything in. Now. Recording everything with no thought. Now. Now" (Petsonk).

Perhaps the brief history of haiku in North America can be divided into four stages: 1) A period of intensive study and translation, which began in the early to mid-1950s with the publication of the works of Blyth, Yasuda, Henderson, and Suzuki. 2) A period of imitation in which the exoticism of haiku was emphasized, and which we can see in the early magazines such as *American Haiku* and in the efforts of Bull and Hoyt to establish a classical form of haiku. (The Beats somewhat abbreviated these first two periods.) 3) A period of experimentation, attempting to establish a more indigenous genre, which would be characteristic of the haiku of the Beat poets and of the work appearing in haiku magazines such as Eric Amann's *Haiku* and *Cicada*. 4) And the current period of rejection of the experiments that have failed and an assimilation of those that have succeeded. To some extent, these stages parallel the stages through which many poets themselves go as they first encounter, explore, and experiment with haiku.

3

I'd now like to consider how some of these ideas are expressed in the work of three contemporary American haiku poets, John Wills, Alexis Rotella, and Bob Boldman.

John Wills began writing haiku in 1968, and quickly published five chapbooks in two years. Wills studied haiku in Japan for several years and acknowledges his debt to the Japanese tradition, but he has not felt bound by it. As he told Michael McClintock, "well, we have and still do learn from the Japanese, of course, and from Western literature, too. But we must after that write our own poetry, there's no other way" ("Conversation," 8).

Wills's haiku are all profoundly simple, and his avoidance of most traditional poetic devices leads to his suggestion that the poems contain no hidden meaning. "Nothing's hidden," he says. Using Zen terminology, he describes his haiku as a sort of "open barrier":

Not a new kind of logic or belief but a way of awareness, or seeing, wakefulness. . . . Like Zen I suppose, haiku teaches us to look at what is

before our eyes, to hear, to smell—all of those things that are plainly before us, in plain sight, now and forever . . . awake. ("Conversation," 7)

A good example of Wills's objective—wakeful—style is:

hermit thrush
at twilight pebbles
in the stream

Wills also seeks to attain what he calls "oneness" in his haiku, that is, an elimination of the self-nature distinction. Sometimes he does this by sharing a common experience with some element of external nature.

the breeze and i
making our way
through the grasses

The most common way he achieves "oneness" in his haiku, however, is not by an indication of the poet's presence, but by the total effacement of the poet from the poem. In poems of this type, oneness is achieved by an interfusion of the poet and the natural world, the subject and the object, in such a way that any apparent barriers between them fall away. Wills discusses how to achieve what he terms "depth" in haiku that bears on this matter:

Sometimes depth is achieved almost entirely through the intensity of the poet's emotions—that is, through his utter (if momentary) absorption in some aspect of the world around him. . . . To write or even to comprehend such poetry as this is to achieve satori.

.
As a rule, depth in haiku . . . carries us beyond the world of the logical into the realm of the metaphysical. That is not to say we need sail beyond the galaxies. Like Basho, we can delve within: strike deep, unearth the Truth in the here and now. Inside nature, yes; but chiefly inside ourselves. ("Depth," 1-2)

Wills's emphasis on this momentary absorption, perhaps not even a "moment keenly perceived" so much as a "moment keenly experienced" links his theory not only with that of Basho, but similarly with Emerson's "brief moments" that contain more authority than all other moments of life.

Wills expresses a sense of his bond with the Taoists of China that bears closely upon his concern for attaining "oneness," or the effacement of the subject/object dichotomy, in his haiku: "I suppose I am

something of an old hoary Taoist. I've never felt closer to anyone than to Wang Wei and his friends, Po Chu-yi, Wei Ying-wu, Tao Yuan-ting, Su T'ung-po, to name only a few" ("Conversation," 6). A brief consideration of Wang Wei might illuminate Wills's interest in their work. Wai-lim Yip argues that in his poetry "Wang Wei is Nature [Phenomenon] as it is: no trace of conceptualization" (v). And again: "In Wang Wei, the scenery speaks and acts. The poet has become, even before the act of composition, Phenomenon itself and can allow the things in it to emerge as they are without being contaminated by intellectuality. The poet does not step in; he views things as things view themselves" (vi).

In his haiku, then, Wills achieves "oneness" by an interfusion of the poet and the natural world, the subject and the object, in such a way that any apparent barriers between them fall away.

boulders
just beneath the boat
it's dawn

beyond the porch
the summer night leaning out
a moment

A poet embodying a very different aspect of American haiku is Alexis Rotella. She chastises the majority of haiku poets by urging them to liberate themselves from tradition: "Most of the haiku I read are imitations of the Old Masters. Basho, Buson and Issa had their own voices. Instead of looking back to Japanese haiku as our only inspiration, it's time to look where the great masters looked—AT NATURE and BEHIND NATURE" ("Haiku's Cardinal Sins," 19a).

An approach Rotella occasionally uses to achieve this might technically be called pathetic fallacy, suggesting that nature actively empathizes with her emotional state. (Though it is also possible to read the tightening rose petals in the following poem as a symbolic euphemism for the physical sensation of the poet's declining sexual desire.)

During our argument
a pink rose
tightens its petals

Rotella, however, does not feel that the (em)pathy between herself and the rose is in fact a fallacy because, she says, "as a student and practitioner of the healing arts, the one thing I rely on is the one

energy that connects us all." And, in a statement reminiscent of Whitman, she continues "I have experienced . . . from the time I was a little girl, that [nature] does empathize with me, understands me, that the flowers, in their own 'language' do speak to me, and always have" (Letter).

In many of Rotella's haiku the interaction between humans and nature serves to reveal some personal characteristic or emotional circumstance of the human subject that harmonizes, if not interfuses with, the natural world:

Graveside:
grandson blowing
dandelion

Late August
I bring him the garden
in my skirt

In a talk presented to the Haiku Society of America in 1985, Rotella analyzed the haiku concept of oneness, presenting a theory describing the unification of all separate ego selves within an encompassing "One Self" in a manner that, in spite of its New Age idiom, is remarkably similar to Emerson's analysis in "The Over-Soul" and "Circles," as well as to Whitman's expressions of the idea in "Song of Myself."

Rotella again echoes Emerson in her consideration of the "All-Seeing Eye." After describing her concept of this eye (making use of the Masonic eye represented on the U. S. dollar hovering atop the pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States), Rotella asks the audience to "Imagine yourself living right in the center of [the] eyeball. Imagine that first diagram of the One Self, the one including all the little circles, as having its being within the pupil of the All-Seeing Eye." What she is asking her audience to do is to imagine themselves in the same position Emerson experienced when he felt himself transformed into a "transparent eyeball":

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (*Works*, 1: 15–16)

It is from such a perspective, Rotella believes, that the best haiku are written.

Based on this metaphysical premise, Rotella identifies four levels of haiku. The first consists of "nature sketches." The second level she

calls "scratching the surface." The third stage, the level of "good to excellent quality haiku," is "where the serious haiku student eventually lands." Poets who have achieved this level are attuned to the oneness of existence, but they must still struggle to maintain that awareness and to recount it in their poems. If these poets are particularly persistent and successful they arrive at the fourth level, where they may find themselves the recipients of "gift haiku." These haiku arrive, according to Rotella, because:

Sometimes we push so hard through new atmospheres of consciousness that we suddenly pierce through an area that's not controlled by gravity. Haiku start coming to the poet as if they had wings. These are what I call the "gift haiku," haiku that seem to write themselves.

For Rotella the process of composing a top-level haiku is a process of purification. Such a purification is similar to the Zen effort to return the mind to its beginning state or to the transcendentalist poet's effort to return to the Edenic condition. As she says, "The purer the haiku, the closer one gets in consciousness to the [All-Seeing Eye, One Self]" and hence the more likely one is to receive "gift haiku." Rotella concludes this part of her discussion with the statement that, "in the most powerful haiku, the small ego or personal I blends with the All-Seeing Eye or No-Thing."

The final poet whose work I'd like to examine, Bob Boldman, takes this effort to eliminate any distinction between himself and the external world of phenomena perhaps as far as it can be taken. Boldman is one of the most self-consciously Zen-inspired haiku poets in North America:

You name a quality of haiku and I'll name a quality of Zen that fits it. The most important thing is that they view the events of man and woman as inseparable from nature. Mankind is not separate from the scheme of things. The haiku writer doesn't search for his insights; he just waits. They appear. What he writes is natural and true. There is no pretension. The haiku writer realizes that any one moment is an expression of all eternity. ("Few Questions," 23)

In a recent poem, Boldman expresses his sense of haiku composition as a process of eliminating barriers between himself and nature:

A Page from Bob Boldman's *Journal*

late night, , writing haiku notes, pointing
at the oneness, leaving the stars
untouched, , haiku is not to be tasted
like poetry, it is to be eaten

i sleep on the floor, wind tonight
 haiku is the art of watching
 piece of moon drifting, ripe melons,
 one can't visit the emptiness,
 one can only enter selfless
 haiku is,
 watching without the watcher,
 noticing without taking notes,
 well, maybe 3 lines,
 there are no explanations to anything,
 don't pretend to give them, write
 haiku like your edges are disappearing, , ,
 oneness is not printing nature-prints,
 haiku is insight, sight inside,
 from the emptiness out, , , ,
 view the world, right one

haiku

This piece reveals Boldman's belief that in order to write haiku the poet must dissolve the barrier between the ego self and the natural world. His effort is to eliminate the edges between himself and nature, to view nature, as it were, from the inside.

As an introduction to *Eating a Melon*, Boldman retells a Zen parable that further elaborates on this idea:

Ken-O and his disciple Menzan were eating a melon together. Suddenly the master asked, "Tell me, where does all this sweetness come from?"

"Why," Menzan quickly swallowed and answered, "it's a product of cause and effect."

"Bah! That's cold logic!"

"Well," Menzan said, "from where then?"

"From the very 'where' itself, that's where."

Boldman's haiku are attempts, by various means, to recreate for us the "very 'where' itself." His most characteristic haiku recreate moments in which the poet's ego boundary seems suffused with nature. He expresses this state in several ways.

In some of Boldman's haiku the poet's mind and the external world interpenetrate:

walking with the river
 the water does my thinking

the plants in the yard
 tonight i find them
 entering my dreams

the round
 luminous moon
 fits in my head

In other haiku this process is carried further, and Boldman seems to look out from within nature itself:

in the moonlight
 the sea
 rolling under my eyelids
 shutting my eye
 one star
 caught

this emptiness
 and my eyes
 in the distant stars

These poems make use of the same eye imagery used by both Emerson and Rotella in order to express the same state they described in which the poet merges with the rest of nature.

At times we find Boldman eliminating the physical barrier between himself and nature and preparing, we assume, to immerse himself physically into the flux of reality:

facing the sea
 i undress

Sometimes, rather than being absorbed by nature, the poet's self is eliminated in its own reverse act of absorbing nature:

drinking the sky
 I'm
 emptied

In a related approach, Boldman has written haiku in which the poet becomes momentarily so involved in his activity that his ego-self vanishes.

swatting the fly
 at that moment the man is empty

Finally, we find some poems in which the poet expresses his literal transformation into nature:

my hands
becoming
crocus blossoms

In all of these sorts of poems, Boldman has carried the poet's ego suffusion into nature about as far as it can be carried and still have him remain a poet, or still have a poem left to recount the experience. Beyond this level the poet and poetry, it would seem, are silent.

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