

HAIKU IN ENGLISH IN NORTH AMERICA

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A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH HAIKU

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A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH HAIKU

The haiku originated in Japan about six to seven hundred years ago and thus is one of the world's oldest surviving poetic forms (Henderson 1958). However, the English-speaking world did not learn of its existence until after 1868 when Japan opened its shores to the West and envoys from England started to translate the form (Giroux 1974). A short while later, French visitors to Japan took up writing haiku and in 1905 published an anthology of their work in France. Then, in 1910, two anthologies of Japanese literature in translation were published, one in France and one in England and both included haiku (Higginson 1985).

While these anthologies created little general interest, they did catch the attention of a much-heralded group of English and American poets headquartered in London and in Chicago between 1910 and 1917 who called themselves the Imagists and who took a special interest in the haiku (Pratt 1963). Its members, among whom were such luminaries as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg and William Carlos Williams, used the haiku as a model (along with the classical Greek lyric and French symbolism of the vers libre type) for what they considered to be the ideal poem, one "in which the image was not a means but an end: the image was not a part of the poem; it was the poem" (Pratt 1963, 29).

While the Imagists thought of the haiku as an ideal, none of them quite managed to ever write a true one. Pound's famous *In A Station Of The Metro* is often described as a haiku by persons with only a tenuous knowledge of the form:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals, on a wet black bough.
(Pratt 1963, 50)

Successful as a short poem, it fails as a haiku because only the first line deals with an immediate experience while the second line involves the memory of an image that the poet uses overtly as a metaphor. A haiku is a haiku because all the images it conveys occur simultaneously in a person's present perceptions of the world. To become a haiku, Pound's poem would have to indicate that he saw the faces at the same time as he saw the actual petals, in the flesh, not in memory.

In *Ts'ai Chi'h*, Pound comes much closer to the spirit of a true haiku:

The petals fall in the fountain,
The orange-colored rose leaves,
Their ochre clings to the stone.
(Pratt 1963, 58)

Here he manages to deal only with things perceived in a particular moment, but fails to achieve the needed brevity which can be defined as a comfortable breath-length (Yasuda 1957).

W.J. Higginson (1985, 52) considers *Autumn Haze* by Amy Lowell to be "one of the best hokku [haiku] by a self-styled Imagist":

Is it a dragonfly or a maple leaf
That settles softly down upon the water?

However, this haiku has the same problem as Pound's *Ts'ai Chi'h* -- it is too wordy. In sum, while the Imagists saw the haiku as a model for their aspirations, they wrote pieces that were either too metaphorical or too wordy and usually both.

After the Imagist movement broke up around 1917 (Pratt 1963), North American interest in the haiku per se languished for several decades until after World War II. Scholars such as Higginson (1985) and Thomas Lynch (1989) have tried to trace the path of the form during this period of more than thirty years and suggest that a continuing interest in the haiku way of seeing was kept alive by the work of a few major poets who made their mark during this time, such as William Carlos Williams (beyond his Imagist days), Wallace Stevens and Charles Reznikoff.

Williams' 1923 poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* is most often quoted as evidence:

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(Williams 1958, 37)

As Lynch (1989, 141) states, "All that keeps this poem from being an excellent haiku is the opening two lines, which by haiku standards are quite unnecessary."

To this editorial comment, I would add that the title is also superfluous. Good haiku do not need titles. The meaning should be apparent from the actual poems themselves.

Both Higginson and Lynch also single out Wallace Stevens' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* as proof of the haiku's influence on eminent North American poets: the first stanza of the thirteen composing the poem is the most frequently quoted:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

(Stevens 1971, 20)

As with Williams' *The Red Wheelbarrow*, only a small change is necessary to make this a true haiku. As it stands, it lacks the immediacy required in a haiku, but this can easily be remedied by dropping the verb "was".

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird was first published in 1917, during the last year of the Imagist movement. Thus the poem might simply have been the young Stevens' lone experiment with haiku-like poetry. But we can find similar writing in later work such as this stanza from the the 1936 *A Postcard from the Volcano*:

At what we saw. The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky
(Stevens 1971, 127)

Nevertheless, such direct images are rare in the more mature work of Stevens which is richly metaphorical in the best tradition of Western poetry.

On the other hand, Charles Reznikoff did show a steady kinship with the haiku way of seeing throughout his long career as Geoffrey O'Brien (1982, 21) points out:

Reznikoff wrote in a variety of forms ... but most typically he employed brief lyrical forms, often grouping short units into such comfortably loose sequences as *Autobiography: New York* and *Autobiography: Hollywood*, sequences which do not rise toward a climax or seek an overall symbolic meaning but rather collect a series of powerful moments related only by their position in the author's experience.

Here is one of his poems that needs no editing to become a true haiku:

About an excavation
a flock of bright red lanterns
has settled.
(O'Brien 1982, 20)

However, most of Reznikoff's work is composed of haiku-like lines imbedded in longer stanzas. The reader has to pluck them out like brilliantly colored feathers from a peacock. Here, for instance, are the last two lines from a five-line stanza:

From the bare twigs
rows of drops like shining buds are hanging.
(O'Brien 1982, 20)

Nevertheless, compared to Williams and Stevens, Reznikoff is probably the strongest strand spanning the years between the Imagists and the the 1950s, a decade which [E.S. Lamb](#) (1979a, 5) describes as the "real beginning of what may be called the haiku movement in the western world".

The chief reason for the renewed interest was American fascination with Japanese culture following World War II. In particular, artistic and intellectual Americans became enthralled with Zen whose history as well as charm Bullock and Stallybrass (1977, 682) succinctly describe:

Zen [is] the Japanese version of the Ch'an sect of Buddhism in China, noted for its simple austerity, its mysticism leading to personal tranquility, and its encouragement of education and art. Some of its scriptures and paintings have become widely known and admired in the West; and Aldous Huxley and others in California led something of a cult of Zen, which in the 1960s began appealing to students as a way of having religious experience without dogmas or religious institutions.

For many this interest grew to encompass Japanese art and literature. As a result, the haiku

translations of scholars H.G. Henderson (1934, 1958) and R.H. Blyth (1949) began to be widely read (Lamb 1979a).

Blyth's four volume *Haiku* became especially popular at this time because his translations were based on the assumption that the haiku was the poetic expression of Zen. Not surprisingly, his books attracted the attention of the Beat school, most notably writers such as [Allen Ginsberg](#), [Gary Snyder](#) and [Jack Kerouac](#), all of whom had a prior interest in Zen. All three wrote haiku as well as about haiku. Kerouac especially played a huge role in popularizing the form. In fact, his book *The Dharma Bums* became:

The bible to a whole generation of American youth ... it introduces the reader to "Japhy Ryder," a character based on Gary Snyder. Japhy writes haiku--and suddenly so do a lot of other people ... Several of the poets I [Higginson] know first discovered the haiku in Kerouac's novel (Higginson 1985, 64).

While the Beats' interest in the haiku contributed greatly to its widespread acceptance, only Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote in the form long enough to eventually produce small bodies of work.

Kerouac (1971) published twenty-six [haiku](#) on four pages in his seventy-six page collection *Scattered Poems* and he collaborated with Albert Saijo and Lew Welch on a prose and haiku diary of a car trip across the U.S. in 1959 which was eventually published as a slim book in 1973 as *Trip Trap: Haiku along the Road from San Francisco to New York* (Ungar 1982). Ginsberg has published haiku here and there throughout his long career and in 1978 produced *Mostly Sitting Haiku* which was the first collection, albeit small, of haiku by a major U.S. poet outside the haiku movement (Lamb 1979a).

A study of the haiku written by these two Beats reveals a good grasp of the form. These two pieces, probably from the late fifties or early sixties, successfully evoke fleeting moments of heightened awareness full of metaphorical resonances:

The summer chair
rocking by itself
In the blizzard
(Jack Kerouac 1971, 74)

I didn't know the names
of the flowers--now
my garden is gone.
(Allen Ginsberg in Higginson 1985, 59)

For Ginsberg, and especially Kerouac, the haiku was a brief diversion from the other writing on which their reputations as well as incomes were based. Time spent on haiku meant time away from their bread and butter.

Around the same time that the Beats were exploring the haiku, so was an American novelist and poet from an earlier generation, Richard Wright. Apparently while sick and bed-ridden in Paris in 1959, he read Blyth's four-volume *Haiku* and "discovered in it something he had been unconsciously seeking to ease his mind" (Michel Fabré as cited in Lynch 1989, 144). The result was an output much larger than that of either Kerouac or Ginsberg--about 4,000 haiku which he sifted down to a manuscript of 800 entitled *This Other World* (Lynch 1989). The collection has yet to be published.

W.J. Higginson (1982) managed to track down twenty-five of these haiku in various articles and biographies. As with the work of Ginsberg and Kerouac, Wright's best haiku reach a high standard:

Coming from the woods
A bull has a lilac sprig
Dangling from a horn
(in Higginson 1982, 6)

In the falling snow

A laughing boy holds out his palms
Until they are white
(in Higginson 1982, 6)

Both are vivid and joyful and resonate with meaning. Because Wright is Afro-American, the second is of particular interest because it can be interpreted beyond a child's play with snow. Is the boy experiencing the fulfilment of a desire to be white or is he feeling the sense of equality which comes when everyone, no matter their skin color, is covered with snow?

By the early 1960s, other haiku translators, such as Geoffrey Bownas (1964) and Peter Beilenson (1962), joined the ranks of Blyth and Henderson. The effect was that even more people grew aware of the haiku and eventually grass roots organizations, in the form of haiku study groups, began to flourish, especially in California (Lamb 1979a).

Haiku interest grew phenomenally during this decade which saw the birth of the "Hippie" culture with its interest in Eastern art, literature, music, religion and philosophy that far surpassed anything generated by the Beats. A major influence during this time was the philosopher Alan Watts whose writings and recordings used haiku (what he called "the wordless poem") as a way of illustrating Zen principles (Higginson 1985, 67). Thus, Watts reinforced the impression left by the Beats that haiku had something to do with Zen (Watts 1960).

In 1963, *American Haiku*, the first magazine devoted entirely to English-language haiku, was published in Platteville, Wisconsin (Lamb 1979b). By the end of the 1960s, the interest in haiku could no longer be considered a fad. Haiku magazines and collections were being published on both coasts of the United States as well as in the Canadian and American midwest.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the English-language haiku became even more entrenched in North American culture with over a dozen periodicals at any one time devoted to publishing the form as well as its close relative, the senryu. Three of them, *Brussels Sprout*, *Frogpond* and *Inkstone* (Canadian), have lasted over 12 years and one, *Modern Haiku*, has survived over 27 years.

Concomitant with the success of the periodicals, has been the establishment of various haiku societies. Three of them, *Haiku Society of America* (established 1968), Haiku Canada (co-founded by Eric Amann, *Betty Drevniok* and me in 1977) and Haiku Poets of Northern California (established in the late 1980s), have emerged as dominant, holding their own regular meetings and conferences as well as cooperating every two years to hold one major event, Haiku North America, that has attracted individuals from around the world. Each of the Societies also publishes a regular newsletter, and, one of them, Haiku Society of America, also publishes its own journal, *Frogpond*.

In the late 1980s, the renku and renga, both variations of linked haiku usually written in collaboration with others, have mushroomed in popularity with the result that about half of the haiku periodicals now publish one or two per issue. In fact, a couple of journals, *Air* and *Lynx*, were founded in the late eighties for the sole purpose of publishing such linked poems.

WHY THE HAIKU FLOURISHED IN NORTH AMERICA

Having established that the haiku has indeed flourished in North America, I think an attempt should be made to explain why it took such strong root in this part of the Western world. After all, French and British scholars and writers were the first to translate the form and to publish the first Western haiku. Should not, then, the haiku phenomenon have begun in one or both of these countries?

I have already given the two usual explanations: American enchantment with Japanese culture following World War II and the stamp of approval the influential Beats gave to the

haiku. But what created this receptivity in the first place? The curiosity of the conqueror about the conquered? Guilt, both American and Canadian, about the internment of Japanese North Americans during World War II? Such explanations are worth exploring, but beyond the scope of this article.

Thomas Lynch (1989) has formulated another interpretation, one that has literary roots and therefore is directly relevant to this discussion. In his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, he posits that an influential group of nineteenth-century New England poets, writers, and philosophers known as the "Transcendentalists" created an intellectual and emotional climate receptive to the haiku. Lynch (1989, 3) argues that especially Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, developed a homegrown philosophy quite similar to Zen Buddhism and that this way of thinking permeated their writing which, in turn, strongly affected the work of important twentieth-century poets such as "Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Richard Wright, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder". Not surprisingly, these names appear whenever haiku scholars, such as Higginson (1985), list the major poets who have written haiku or haiku-like poems.

Lynch's argument is compelling. One does not have to look far in the writing of Thoreau, the Transcendentalist most often cited as an influence by today's haiku poets, to see his concern with the immediate moment:

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line ([1889] 1975, 179-180)

This attitude is very similar to those expressed by Whitman ([1892] 1969) and Emerson ([1840] 1971). Such Zen-like focus on the here-and-now is the sine qua non of haiku composition.

Lynch (1989, 58) goes so far as to speculate that a haiku-like poetry eventually would have evolved on its own in North America:

It seems to me possible, given the circumstances of American life and poetry, and given the direction established by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, that a poetry very much like haiku, and perhaps even a philosophy very much like Zen, would have developed on this continent independently of any direct contact with Buddhism or Japanese literature.

Lynch has formulated an intriguing possibility, but whether these events would have transpired or not, is, in the final analysis, irrelevant. All that really matters, for the purposes of this discussion, is that an influential ideology predisposed North Americans to welcome the haiku because, at first glance, it seems to be a Zen- (or Transcendentalist-) based form of poetry.

What the practices of haiku reading and writing and Zen Buddhism certainly do have in common is that they both stress the importance of the present. Each approach argues that focusing on the immediate moment will result in illumination, or, what in Zen is called "satori", and in haiku is referred to as a moment of awe or wonder. This shared outlook is what attracted the Beats and Alan Watts. It is also what forms the heart of Lynch's hypothesis.

But the haiku is, first and foremost, a form of poetry, not a vehicle for philosophical or religious expression. Study of the haiku's long history in Japan shows quite clearly that it has always been a form of poetry quite separate from Zen Buddhism. While the great Basho and a few other outstanding haiku poets were Zen monks, they all treated haiku as poetry first, and, if at all, as Zen second. It is well-known that Basho made his living by teaching students how to become masterful haiku poets, not how to be Zen monks. Zen instruction was the job of the monks on staff of the Zen monasteries. As eminent Japanese haiku scholar Harold G. Henderson confirms in his classic *An Introduction to Haiku* (1958, 21), "Only a comparatively few of Basho's poems are obviously religious."

In fact, Henderson (1958, 2-3) emphasizes on numerous occasions that haiku is very much a form of poetry, such as when he states:

In the hands of a master a haiku can be the concentrated essence of pure poetry. Because the haiku is shorter than other forms of poetry it naturally has to depend for its effect on the power of suggestion, even more than they do.

Further evidence of the independence of haiku from Zen comes from another Japanese haiku scholar, Kenneth Yasuda. In his also classic book, *The Japanese Haiku* (1957), almost no mention is made of Zen as an influence.

Thomas Lynch has suggested a plausible reason why the haiku form found such a hospitable environment in North America. Without question, the haiku received immediate respectability because of its perceived link with Zen Buddhism, a philosophy which evoked in North Americans, particularly those with a literary bent, the influential nineteenth-century philosophy of Transcendentalism. It is ironic, then, that in the haiku's long Japanese history, Zen played a minor role.

With which viewpoint do most current haiku poets align themselves--Blyth's haiku as Zen medium or Henderson's haiku as pure poetry? My long study of the significant haiku periodicals, the major anthologies, the collections of influential haiku poets and the conferences and agendas of the various haiku societies suggests that Henderson's outlook is clearly the more popular, in keeping with the long-held prevailing view in Japan. A telling fact is that the Haiku Society of America's annual haiku contest, the longest-running and the most prestigious, is named after Henderson and not Blyth.

Nevertheless, the belief that Zen and haiku are inextricably intertwined continues to be held by a small, loosely-knit but active group of haiku poets. Its members feel the Zen practices enhance the composition and appreciation of haiku and some of them regularly meet at various Zen retreats found chiefly in the New England states. I wonder whether the ghosts of the Transcendentalists can be found there as well.

Ironically, West-coast poet James W. Hackett (1968, 1983), the best-known and most influential advocate of haiku as expression of Zen, holds himself relatively aloof from this group as well as the general haiku movement. To the public at large, Hackett became the spokesperson for haiku after winning the first of a series of haiku contests run by Japan Air Lines. Lamb (1995, 10) describes the first one which was also the most successful:

In 1964 something over 41,000 haiku were submitted to their National Haiku Contest. Seventeen contests conducted by radio stations in different parts of the country screened the entries and five winners from each local contest were submitted for final judging by Alan Watts. Japan Air Lines published the 85 national entries in a booklet entitled *Haiku '64*. [James W. Hackett](#) won the grand prize of two round trip tickets to Japan.

Note the date of the contest--1964. This explains why it captured the public's attention in a way no subsequent contest did. As stated earlier, the sixties was the heyday for worship of things Japanese.

By the way, the winning poem by Hackett is considered a masterpiece by the Zen-oriented as well as the regular haiku community:

A bitter morning:
Sparrows sitting together
Without any necks.
(in Lamb 1995, 10)

For three years (1981-83) I ran haiku workshops at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto and found that the majority of newcomers to haiku possessed an already established interest in Zen. They expected to heighten their Zen-ness by writing haiku. In addition to having read some Hackett, many came to the first class imbued with Eric Amann's ([1969] 1978) *The Wordless Poem: A Study of Zen in Haiku*, essentially an essay self-published as a booklet. On page thirty-eight, Amann summarizes the view that these students found compelling:

The main point of this essay has been to show that haiku is not to be regarded primarily as a 'form' of poetry, as is commonly assumed in the West, but as an expression of Zen in poetry, a living 'Way', similar to the 'Way of the Brush' and other manifestations of Zen in the arts and in literature.

Their dismay was palpable when I told them that the workshop was going to focus on haiku as poetry, not Zen. But it was nothing compared to the news that Eric Amann had by this time publicly (at Haiku Canada meetings) divorced himself from the idea of haiku as Zen and was embarrassed by the attention his old views still garnered. In spite of this double-whammy, practically all students stayed with the workshops and became quite proficient at writing haiku as poetry (Swede 1981).

THE INFLUENCE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN HAIKU AROUND THE WORLD

Once rooted, the vigorous North American haiku spread its seeds throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. In 1990, The British Haiku Society was formed and immediately became a powerful force, holding monthly meetings, annual conferences as well as publishing its own journal, *Blithe Spirit*. Shortly thereafter, a couple of independent haiku periodicals took hold as well. Similar developments have occurred in Australia and New Zealand and, not surprisingly, in countries speaking tongues other than English, especially Holland, Germany, Croatia and, most recently, Poland.

Has Japan, where the haiku first blossomed, shown any interest in these developments outside its shores? Most definitely. Currently, a number of Japanese literary periodicals, such as *Ko* and *The Plaza*, as well as more general publications, such as the newspapers *Mainichi Daily News*, *The Daily Yomiuri* and *The Asahi Evening News* regularly publish English-language haiku. Several others, particularly *Poetry Nippon*, have had long commitments to the English haiku, but have ceased operations.

In 1989, the three major Japanese haiku societies, the Modern Haiku Association, the Association of Haiku Poets and the Association of Japanese Classical Haiku, formed Haiku International Association. The purpose for the creation of this new umbrella organization was given in an official announcement mailed around the globe:

To promote friendship and mutual understanding among poets, scholars and others who share a common interest in haiku, though they may live in very distant parts of the world.

True to its stated aim, Haiku International has its own periodical *HI* which publishes work from numerous countries in the original language and Japanese. About half of every issue, however, is devoted to haiku from Japan which are printed in Japanese and English. This makes sense considering that Japan still has far more haiku poets than any other nation.

As we approach the twenty-first century, writers, teachers and scholars of haiku can justifiably argue that the form is the most popular poetry in the world. None of the other long-lived forms, such as the englyn, ghazal, limerick, rondeau, sapphics, sestina, sonnet and villanelle, are considered with such universal interest. This status is in no small way due to encouragement by the Japanese who, in addition to publishing work from everywhere, also hold international contests and conferences to which they invite, often with all expenses paid, the winners as well as the presenters.

Further proof of the haiku's widespread influence is that many notable Canadian and American poets include the form, or approximations to it, in their collections. A quick check of my bookshelves found haiku or haiku-like poems in the works of Canadian poets Milton Acorn, Margaret Atwood, Earle Birney, Roo Borson, Michael Bullock, Christopher Dewdney, Ralph Gustafson, and I stopped the alphabetical search, realizing the futility of listing practically everyone. An examination of my smaller selection of American poets had similar results: John Ashberry, Wendell Berry, Richard Brautigan, John Judson, W.S. Merwin and so

on. Lynch's (1989) thesis about the legacy of the Transcendentalists certainly offers one plausible explanation of why the haiku has had so much influence on poets from both sides of the border.

One more indicator of how the North American psyche has welcomed the haiku is the fact that the current Poet Laureate of the U.S. Robert Hass has "championed haiku for many years" (Welch 1995, 35). An English professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Hass recently has published *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (1994). The book is part of a series put out by New Jersey's Ecco Press called "The Essential Poets," and puts the three Japanese legends of haiku in the luminous company of poets such as Blake, Keats, Poe, Shakespeare and Whitman. It should not be long before the haiku gets the same attention in university curriculums that it now enjoys at lower levels.

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