

The Legacy of Japanese Haiku in American Poetic Practice

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Abstract

Among Asian influences on modern poetic practice in America, the Japanese haiku has probably had the most profound and extensive impact. Many Americans of all ages write and appreciate haiku and have done so now for many decades. And the form, more generally, has encouraged American poets to practice economy and objective description in verse. It has also helped to give Western poets an alternate way of organizing verses, by counting syllables, and it has probably even encouraged the practice of free verse – as opposed to traditionally rhymed, metrical poems.

The haiku, with a long and complex history in Japan, first became known in the West about 1910, at a time when modernist poets were reacting against Victorian patterns including sentimentalism, generalized content, and didacticism. A loose school of modern poets in America and England including Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, calling themselves Imagists, encouraged economy and objectivity and advocated the use of concrete imagery and the avoidance of abstractions and moralizing. Pound came into contact with Eastern practice, particularly through the writings of Ernest Fenollosa, an American who became an expert in Japanese art and culture; before World War I, Pound was among the first poets to mention haiku and see connections between it and the kind of poetry that he and other Imagists preferred, a sort of image-filled verse that they also found in the short poems of Emily Dickinson, their 19th-century American predecessor. Though few early 20th-century poets actually confined themselves to short poems or to haiku, the form itself took root and helped to generate longer poems that seemed fragmented, often linked together in a given poem by association rather than by logic or the use of narrative. The scholar Yone Noguchi was also influential in helping to introduce haiku to Yeats and other Western poets. The philosophy undergirding haiku is congruent with the "less is more" aesthetic of some modern architects who stressed functionality and were most influential during the mid-twentieth century. Western poets in general have probably distorted haiku because

often they did not understand its philosophical grounding in Zen philosophy and were unfamiliar with its various and complex sets of conventional expectations, developed over centuries in Japan; but even in Japan, many different opinions coexisted (and still coexist) about how haiku might or should be written.

Over time, Americans have come to define haiku simply as an unrhymed 17-syllable poem with lines comprising five, seven, and five syllables, respectively; many Americans also may think of haiku as nature poetry, usually serious in tone, and may link it with the Wordsworthian tradition. Ironically, the fixed, restrictive genre of haiku became popular at a time when poets were advocating greater *freedom* for poets; also ironically, haiku gained its greatest popularity in America after our country's antagonistic encounter with Japan during World War II, and the form became one feature of Japanese culture that post-war Americans readily assimilated, even as Japanese culture itself was being Americanized and westernized. Various individual poets including some of the Beats of the 1950s practiced haiku as part of their interest in Zen, and particular journals devoted to the genre emerged. Since the middle of the 20th century, haiku has been broadly popular as a form that American school children know about and practice composing. Many mature and serious American poets also find the form appealing and challenging. The haiku shares with other modernist poetic forms and practices a tendency to leave much unstated and to convey its meaning indirectly, without any direct moralizing or thematic summary. It has been a form that I myself and several of my university colleagues have enjoyed writing. In America the form still remains a bit exotic because it goes against our cultural tendency toward bigness and showy excess. Though American haiku has probably lost some of the subtleties and cultural nuances of its Japanese predecessors, it shares with the kinds of haiku still being written in Japanese an impulse to get at the essence of important aspects of being human. Like much good poetry, it reduces matters to elemental aspects, and it requires discipline, restraint, and indirection. Because it does not allow room for discursiveness or for narrative, it forces its hearer to "read between the lines" and see implied connections. The likelihood, I believe, is that haiku will go on influencing American practice in positive ways, remaining a popular form that readers and writers of many temperaments and skill levels enjoy, one that urges writers to choose words carefully while trusting readers to amplify minimal, implicit information and thus cooperate in the two-way process of artful, interactive communication.

Key words:

Japanese Haiku, American Poetry

Among Asian influences on western poetry after about 1900, the Japanese haiku has probably had the most far-reaching influence on how American poets practice their craft. The topics of haiku and of modern poetry in the United States—my home—are broad, and in this discussion I do not claim to be either comprehensive or original. Nonetheless, as a guest interacting with my Japanese friends—hosts, peers, and students—I am delighted to have the chance to discuss this topic as a way for us to explore our common literary bonds. People and cultures everywhere, East and West, feel the need for artful expression of universal human experiences. And poetry in particular is a medium that uniquely allows our feelings and thoughts to merge in satisfying and illuminating ways. Poetry, as you know, is hard to define. But it always involves a carefully ordered string of words that assume a formal shape on the page. Further, the content of every real poem addresses some aspect of the human condition. In general, poetry always encourages order and economy and demands precise, carefully chosen words. It often flatters and engages its readers by leaving much unspoken, so that each new reader can supply at least part of the total meaning of a text. The Japanese haiku, at its best, works in all these ways, enforcing discipline on the maker and the reader and encouraging us to consider what it means to be human. American compositions in the haiku form, though often loosely adapted from the models of their Japanese cousins, have these same characteristics. At the same time American haiku are still consciously imitative of an imported poetic pattern that remains somewhat exotic because it is small and careful, unlike so many other aspects of American culture. Thus haiku feels comfortable to us but keeps a bit of its originally imported flavor.

My general purpose here is to try to consider the story of how haiku entered western practice roughly a century ago and has since helped to shape modern American poetry throughout the twentieth century—the century of modernism in Western art—and now into the twenty-first. I hope to explore how the influence of this form—including the mindset it represents and the formal discipline it imposes on language and thought—has been far-reaching and is still vital some one hundred years later, with no likelihood in sight that haiku will ever lose its broad appeal in America. I think that this prediction may be accurate because haiku is a subtle, demanding, sophisticated genre that is still accessible to young writers, even those in elementary school, and to non-professional poets.

Preparing this study has given me personally a chance to explore the roots and evolution of a poetic form that I myself have enjoyed and often practiced. I know that at least three of my colleagues at The University of Tennessee at Martin—Walt Haden, Anna Clark, and Robert Cowser—have worked seriously to compose haiku. Professor Haden was once a visiting professor in Japan. Several of my Facebook friends also tell me that they love the form; one woman posted the confession that she and her colleagues sometimes write haiku at work "to pass the time." I remember that once my son, when he was about five years old, came home from school with a short poem that he had illustrated with an appropriate drawing, an American haiku or something very close to it in spirit:

How nice it is
to drink beer
in the sun.

Other than my impression that the piece was charming and insightful, I remember being a bit embarrassed at how personally revealing the poem was because it showed a private part of what my son had observed in my behavior on our back patio in Oxford, Mississippi, where I was working on my doctorate in English and sometimes needed to take a break, kick back, and just enjoy life.

My son's poem is a tiny example of the way that haiku is firmly embedded in literate American culture and in American educational practice. For about one hundred years it has gradually become a familiar aspect of our culture heritage.

Defining haiku, like defining poetry itself, is not easy. The expert Kenneth Yasuda says that haiku is "a highly compact, evocative verse-form crystallized by the Japanese poetic genius" to allow "a direct, intuitive penetration into nature and life that is at once simple and baffling" (Yasuda, inside cover). By the early 1900s, when the form began to enter the domain of Western poetry, this art form already had a centuries-old history in Japan—a history that I am not an expert on and that is mostly beyond the scope of this paper. However, haiku still remained almost unknown in the West in 1900, as did so much else of Japanese culture. Ironically, though haiku is an ancient form, its features when it first came to the West seemed innovative and original because they differed so sharply from most traditional Western practices.

Haiku entered American practice about 1910, at a time of critical change in English and American poetry. During the preceding Victorian period (c. 1830-1900), popular nineteenth century poets—including writers such as Alfred Lord Tennyson in England,

a long-time poet laureate, and the American poets Longfellow, Lowell, and Whittier— had gained wide audiences of literate middle-class readers by writing poems that typically combined lyric beauty with mostly refined, morally uplifting subject matter; Victorian verse had many virtues including high-mindedness and accessibility to a wide range of literate readers. It also tended to idealize, generalize, and sentimentalize its materials, and it often aimed at instructing its readers in high moral standards. Matthew Arnold in England and Ralph Waldo Emerson in America had urged artists to pursue what was "highest and best." A few English-language poets, notably Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in America and Gerard Manley Hopkins in Great Britain, had taken more independent paths in their writings, writing more originally and concretely and generally avoiding easy moralizing, but these innovative poets remained outside the Victorian mainstream. By the end of the century, naturalistic novelists such as Stephen Crane in America and Thomas Hardy in England had, in the pessimistic content of their stories, also offered sterner and more critical views of life than the Victorian writers had done. In addition, the Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s such as Oscar Wilde in England had questioned conventional middle-class morality.

With the turn of the 20th century, then, the time was right for a "new" poetry in English. Leading in this movement was a loosely associated group of poets in England and America who called themselves Imagists and were at the height of their influence during the years just before the First World War (1914-1918), which shocked the world and ended Victorian complacency for good. Though the Imagists were diverse in their beliefs and practices, they shared the common view that poetry needed to be modernized and that poets needed to move away from Victorian generalities and find a new voice. This new school of poets included the Americans Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and Hilda Doolittle (called H.D.) in a trans-Atlantic alliance with British writers such as Richard Aldington (who married H.D.) and T. E. Hulme, whose lecture on modern poetry and other published writings in 1908-1909 marked the founding of Imagism. Pound and Lowell both lived abroad some of the time and interacted with their British counterparts as expatriates. Collectively, in their reactions against poetic practices and the Victorian mindset, these writers and theorists helped lay the basis for modern poetry, at a time when modernism in other arts such as painting, music, and architecture was also emerging and when the tough, critical twentieth-century mindset was taking shape.

Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, a heavy-set American from a wealthy Boston family, were the main figures who popularized Imagism. Pound gave the movement its name

and helped publish new poems, which were short and concrete, under the title *Des Imagistes* (1914), but he soon lost interest and moved on to a movement he called Vorticism; in the teens, Amy Lowell then became the leading spokesperson for the movement. Pound and Lowell did not always agree, and Pound ridiculed Lowell's brand of Imagism as "Amygism." It is true that her program for change was so broad as to include most of the modern principles of writing—economy, freedom of language and subject, and freedom from sentimentalism and didacticism. Earlier, Edgar Allan Poe in America had urged writers to avoid using literature to teach or preach, and the Imagists echoed that sentiment without following Poe's models for composing singsong verse. The founding of *Poetry* magazine by Pound's friend Harriet Monroe in Chicago in 1912 helped establish Imagism and modernism by publishing examples of the "new" poetry.

According to the Imagists, then, modern poetry was to be more objective than Victorian verse and also freer, more concise, "harder," and less bound by formal rules.

Although the Imagist theories emphasized the importance of sharp description and also tended to encourage writers to compose short poems, almost nobody stayed within the narrow limits of this early form of the movement. Only H.D., Hilda Doolittle, remained in a true sense an Imagist poet her whole life. Nonetheless, the adoption of the principles of Imagism had far-reaching effects.

The story of the Imagist Movement, as you can see, is complicated, and the same is true of Ezra Pound, its earliest leading advocate and the poet and theorist who helped instigate Twentieth Century Modernism in American poetry and also the person most responsible for introducing eastern influences into western poetry. Pound was an agitated, impatient man who moved compulsively from one project to another. He fostered a number of different movements and eventually, much later, drifted into fascist politics and insanity; in his heyday, however, he encouraged a wide range of important British and American writers as diverse as Robert Frost, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. Pound actually saw Eliot's major poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), in its draft stages and assisted Eliot in radically editing the poem, cutting out much that Eliot had written. Though Pound was himself a poet and a translator of some Chinese poems into English, his major legacy is as one of the founding fathers of literary modernism in America.

Even though the movement called Imagism never really caught on in a narrow sense, it had broad influences because it helped to establish a new way to craft English verse. Under the influence of Imagism, the chief unit in a modern English poem became the image, and longer modernist poems in English tended to string together series of

images of various sorts, often without logical connections. In fact, the images in longer modern poems were often held together by association rather than by means of logic or narrative chronology. The emergence of this pattern in poetry coincided with the emergence of the disjointed stream-of-consciousness technique in fiction—for example, in stories by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner written before 1930.

Exactly what changes in poetry did the Imagists propose? During the period 1908-1914, Pound and other Imagist poets encouraged writers to "make it new" and to avoid Victorian abstractions, sentiment, and didacticism by focusing on the "image" itself in writing, an objective representation that, as Pound wrote, "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (qtd. in Goodwin 3). Imagists wanted to get rid of flowery and wordy language, to be tight and economical in diction, and to write free verse that did not conform to the mechanical patterns of a metronome. They wanted poets to stop using rhyme and the time-honored patterns of meter that included metrical feet—the iambs, trochees, dactyls, and anapests of traditional verse. Thus they were encouraging a formal revolution, given that most English verse since the time of Chaucer had used meter—a mathematically regular pattern that including patterns of stress or accent, essentially creating verse lines that have regular "beats," lines you can pat your foot to. Agreeing with Pound, critical theorists such as Richard Aldington advocated "direct treatment of the subject" in poetry and wanted poets to use "as few adjectives as possible." Aldington encouraged "a hardness, as of cut stone" in poetry, along with "individuality of rhythm" and the use of "the exact word" (Goodwin 13). Pound himself wrote, "The image itself is speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language" (qtd. in "Poetic Form").

Now let me get to the subject of haiku after this extended contextual preface: Pound is the person who is usually given credit for introducing Eastern forms and ideologies into Western practice. Pound's interest in the arts of the East began in 1913, when the widow of Ernest Fenollosa, an American scholar and cultural expert who had lived in Japan, asked Pound to take charge of the literary papers her husband had left at his death. (Eventually, in 1936, Pound found a publisher for Fenollosa's essay on "The Chinese Written Character," but much earlier the essay had triggered Pound's interest in Eastern art.) Fenollosa's widow had met Pound in London and decided after reading his modernist poetry that he would be a sympathetic editor of her husband's materials. Fenollosa, who died in 1908, had gone to Japan in the 1870s to teach rhetoric at the Imperial University and had become an admirer and collector of Chinese and Japanese art and literature (Knapp 74). Fenollosa believed, probably wrongly, "that the Chinese ideograph is not primarily phonetic, that it preserves the concrete, pictorial

representation which had been its origin" (Knapp 75). Fenollosa thought that, by contrast, Western culture was grounded in abstract rhetoric inherited from medieval theologians, and he found in "the concrete quality of Chinese written words" a preferable mode for communicating "the rich concreteness of the world" along with abstract ideals. Pound's own interest "in poetry which could suggest a reality beyond the visible" made him admire what Fenollosa thought Chinese ideographs could offer, a "complex illumination" generated by pictographic metaphors, "condensed [...] language which is simple and precise, but powerfully evocative" (Knapp 76). Fenollosa had written, "Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within" (qtd. in Knapp 76), and he found in Eastern writings a method that he thought was preferable to Western practices. Fenollosa also rejected the Aristotelian tendency of Western thought "to break the world up into countless separated parts in our minds," and he thought that Eastern writings focused rightly on "a universe in which 'all process in nature are interrelated' " (Knapp 76).

Around the time when Pound came under the influence of Fenollosa's theoretical ideas, Pound made an early reference to haiku in his essay "Vorticism," another of the movements that he briefly promoted; in 1914 Pound called one of his own short poems "a hokku-like sentence" while quoting one of Moritake's haiku and finding similarities between it and his own work (Hakutani 3). Pound's little poem titled "In a Station of the Metro" is perhaps the closest he comes as a poet to writing in a manner that is like haiku. His poem contains an implied comparison, an analogy between the bleak faces of people in a Paris subway station and an image from nature. It reads,

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound)

Pound at this stage also did "translations" of Chinese verses, working indirectly from rather fancy English versions (because he did not read Chinese) but stripping away the fussy Victorian rhetoric to generate more objective, bare-bones renderings in English (Knapp 72-73). Hakutani says that Pound admired haiku (or "hokku," as he called the form) because of the "instantaneous perceptions" and "spontaneity" that the form encouraged.

Though very few of Pound's own poems stay short and focused, the discipline of sharp, spare observation and the almost instantaneous generation of a complex syndrome of thought and feeling was at the heart of the new technique that he was

helping to invent (Hakutani 71). Indeed, many modernist poems including not only Eliot's *The Waste Land* but also Pound's own modernist work titled *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) can be analyzed as a series of sharply illumination fragments strung together. Critics who like order and clarity in verse have complained that this associational approach has led to fragmentation and logical disintegration in modern poetry. Certainly the modern focus on sharp imagery and an indirect fusion of implicit meanings has tended to create chaotic texts and logical difficulties for readers. The disjointedness of modern poetic structure has tended to separate poetry from ordinary readers who expect poems to offer them comfortable situations, touching narratives, sentiments that can be easily paraphrased, and morally useful "messages."

As the critic Kenneth Yasuda reports, the Imagist poets "knew of tanka and haiku as early as 1909 and felt that they were influenced by them" but may not have had a very deep understanding of the essence of the form.

Yasuda's view is that "the Imagists created what they thought were haiku somewhat as a finger-exercise for the more strenuous art of other poetic forms" (Yasuda xvii)—like little practice-pieces that piano students might do as warm-ups for harder compositions. Yasuda's own conclusion, too, is that Pound's "haiku-like" poem "In a Station of the Metro" lacks unity, poetic vision, and insight because the comparison between the "faces in the crowd" with the "Petals on a wet, black bough" is not sufficiently fused and natural, whereas an effective haiku, Yasuda thinks, would generate a less forced and less artificial kind of integration, a real intellectual and emotional linkage (xviii). Probably Yasuda is right in saying that Western practitioners of haiku have often been both naive and licentious in believing that merely *asserting an objective image* will achieve some kind of profound effect. (I myself recall reading a mock haiku that the writer closes with the playful rhetorical question "So what?"—to underscore the notion that just giving some kind of short, imagistic description of a scene does not necessarily make a profound statement, or even a significant one. My son's report that drinking beer in the sun is "nice" may be an example of a poem that seems deeper than it really is, though at least that text uses a specific action to stand as a concrete equivalent for any kind of leisure that lets one escape the drudgery of life and just enjoy being alive.)

Another important modernist who played a "vital role in disseminating Japanese poetics and haiku, in particular, to the West" is Yone Noguchi (1875-1947), who met the influential English poet W. B. Yeats around 1903 and also met Pound around 1911 (Hakutani 2). Noguchi was important because he saw the connection between the modernist principles of the Imagists and other poets and because his perspectives

allowed him to link Eastern and Western practice; his influence was a two-way street, since he not only helped spread Eastern practices in the West but also helped to influence certain Japanese poets such as Shimazaki Toson, Takamura Kotaro, and Hagiwara Sakutarō (Hakutani 2-3). Under Noguchi's influence, W. B. Yeats became interested in Japanese noh drama and tried to adapt aspects of this form in his own plays (Hakutani 53ff.)

It was perhaps inevitable that Westerners seeking a way to reform Victorian sentimentalism and "useful" instruction in verse would misunderstand or misappropriate what they found in haiku. This is especially true because haiku itself has a long and complex history, because the conventions of haiku are arguable even among Eastern practitioners, and because Westerners seldom respond carefully to the subtle nuances that typically characterize Eastern art. A modern practitioner of haiku in America, who is likely to know Shakespeare, Pope, and Wordsworth, is almost certain to be unfamiliar with the precedents established by Bashō (1644-94), Buson (1716-83), and Issa (1763-1827). Westerners are also unlikely to have much understanding of Zen, which seeks to link nature and humanity; and, as Hakutani points out, Zen is "[t]he philosophy that underlies much of classic haiku" (2). Few Western writers attempting haiku can expect to escape their inherited cultural tendencies toward abstract reasoning, dichotomizing, classification, and hierarchical privileging. Unlike many Asians, Westerners are trained to assume that humans hold dominion over nature and that aspects of the natural and human world *presume* human separateness and human superiority. Westerners are also seldom proficient at achieving what Hakutani calls "a state of mu, nothingness [that is] free of human subjectivity [and] so completely free of any thought or emotion that such a consciousness corresponds to the state of nature" (2).

A further explanation of the shaky understanding that Westerners may have of the conventions of haiku lies in the fact that those conventions are themselves somewhat fluid and controversial. As Harold G. Henderson notes, "probably no two Japanese would quite agree on exactly what constitutes a haiku" (2). Perhaps many would agree with Henderson that a haiku is not just an epigram, that haiku "may be of many kinds, grave or gay, deep or shallow, religious, satirical, sad, humorous, or charming; but all haiku worthy of the name are records of high moments—higher, at least, than the surrounding plane." As Henderson says, they "usually gain their effect not only by suggesting a mood, but also by giving a clear-cut picture which serves as a starting point for trains of thought and emotion" (Henderson 3). As many Japanese readers know, haiku typically may indicate in some fashion or other a *time* including a

season—so that seasonal organizations of collections of haiku is a common pattern—as well as a *place* (3-5). The *Britannica* notes that, in its earlier Japanese history, haiku always included "an objective description of nature suggestive of one of the seasons, evoking a definite, though unstated, emotional response" but that "[l]ater its subject range was broadened," though "it remained an art of expressing much and suggesting more in the fewest possible words" ("haiku"). The haiku, like Pound's "metro" poem, also often relies on "renso or association of ideas," including associational references and external allusions, along with internal comparisons and frequent omission of syntactic elements to create hazy ambiguity (5-7). The Academy of American Poets notes that traditional haiku verses were "written in the present tense and focused on associations between images" and that, though many conventions have been lost or ignored over time in Japan, "the philosophy of haiku has been preserved: the focus on a brief moment in time; a use of provocative, colorful images; an ability to be read in one breath; and a sense of sudden enlightenment and illumination" ("Poetic Form").

R. H. Blyth, an important historian of the genre, contends that haiku usually employ implicit rather than explicit animism, use "little personification," and (rather surprisingly to me) do not reveal a mystical mindset. Blyth says that to Japanese readers "the haiku must express a new or newly perceived sensation, a sudden awareness of the meaning of some common human experience of nature or man" and "must, above all things, not be explanatory, or contain a cause and its effect." In haiku, Blyth believes, things exist for themselves, and "[m]oral elements are [...] rejected as being generalities. Thus haiku has nothing to do with the Good, the True, or the Beautiful." Given these limits, Blyth sees haiku as being "in danger of excessive purity. Devoid of beauty, intellectuality, and emotion, it may easily fall into triviality." Further, Blyth says, "[h]aiku is at its best when it is simply Wordsworthian [...], 'a sort of thought in sense'." And, Blyth asserts, "haiku is not symbolic" even though he acknowledges that many Japanese poets writing haiku in the mid-20th century believed that haiku routinely attempts "to attach a symbolic meaning to particular objects" (11-13).

Differences in cultural temperament, then, along with the variety of views of haiku that exist among Japanese scholars and poets, may make it hard for Americans to understand the Eastern philosophy that undergirds haiku. More certainly, and for obvious reasons, certain technical conventions such as "cut-words" are not directly applicable to English haiku because of basic differences in the two languages, Japanese and English (8). Other language differences—including word order in sentences, employment of articles and of diphthongs, and different ways of construing

syllabification and of specifying number (singular and plural)—profoundly affect the kind of product that a Western practitioner of haiku is apt to craft.

The spread of the practice of haiku since its "discovery" in the early twentieth century as one aspect of the Modernist movement in poetry has been phenomenal, one that Blyth, the historian of haiku, said in 1964 was a "development [...] which nobody foresaw" (2:349). The *Britannica* notes that "[t]he form's popularity beyond Japan expanded significantly after World War II" to become a universal phenomenon ("haiku"). Several of the Beat writers in California—including Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg—became interested in Buddhism as early as their college years, the 1940s, after reading Henry David Thoreau, and the Beat movement itself helped introduce a generalized and somewhat vague form of Buddhism and Zen philosophy into the culture of the United States. Jack Kerouac, a Beat writer, concluded that writing haiku in English was harder than writing in "fluid syllabic Japanese" and so decided just to write "three short lines"; his view was that "a sentence that's short and sweet with a sudden jump of thought is a kind of haiku," full of "freedom and fun" (Hakutani 89ff., 92-93). One of Kerouac's haiku, for example, reads, "Snow in my shoe / Abandoned / Sparrow's nest" (qtd. in "Haiku in English"). While living abroad in France and Africa during the 1950s, the African American poet Richard Wright wrote more than four thousand haiku after studying Blyth and "reading [...] classic haiku"; what appealed to him was the lack of egotism and the paradoxical union of self with nature that the form encouraged (Hakutani 112-15). One of Wright's haiku reads, "Whitecaps on the bay: / A broken signboard banging in the April wind" (qtd. in "Haiku in English"). And Sonia Sanchez, who has been called "a postmodern, postcolonial, and [...] cross-cultural poet," published a number of haiku in her book *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums* (1998), where her poems focus on natural beauty and "the unity and harmony of all things, the sensibility that nature and humanity are one and inseparable" (Hakutani 127-29).

An essay on the history of haiku in North America published on the popular (and not always reliable) web source *Wikipedia* seems accurate in its detailed summary of the anthologizing of American haiku, beginning with an "early anthology" titled *Borrowed Water* (1966) that included works by the Beats and by minority American writers and that helped to popularize haiku in the States. This web source also lists a number of major American poets who have practiced the form, including "mainstream" poets such as W. H. Auden, Richard Wilbur, William Stafford, and several American poets laureate, among them Donald Hall and Billy Collins. As *Wikipedia* attests, haiku has certainly helped introduce young students to poetry and is important to hobbyist

writers. The journal *American Haiku*, which was active during 1963-1968, and its successor *Modern Haiku* (1969-present) have both been prominent among several journals devoted to popularizing haiku. An American English-language haiku society was founded in 1956, and the Haiku Society of America, started in 1968, currently carries on the practice of the form and philosophical discussion of its attributes ("Haiku in English").

Whatever Japanese haiku may mean in a Japan, where the history of the form and its complexity and nuances are familiar, most Americans define haiku only by its form – an "unrhymed Japanese poetic form consisting of 17 syllables arranged in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively" ("haiku," *Britannica*). My colleagues Walt Haden and Robert Cowser, however, have both reached the conclusion that syllable count ought to be flexible, a secondary consideration. My own experience, further, is that Westerners usually think of haiku as somehow a "nature" poem, associating it with the European Romantic tradition that springs in particular from the verses of William Wordsworth. Beyond that, most Western writers including Americans do not put narrow limits on the subject matter of haiku, though I believe that usually writers think of the form as serious, not humorous. (In America, if we want to write a short, funny poem in a fixed form, we usually resort to the limerick, the kind of joking poem that sometimes appears on bathroom walls and contains "low" humor and, often, obscene language.)

Though Japanese haiku conventionally lack titles and do not use rhyme, many Western imitators (including Pound's little "metro" poem) use informative titles to establish context, expand the facts of the text, and focus its meaning. Rhyme is also common, particularly a pattern that rhymes lines 1 and 3 in a haiku text. In fact, Harold G. Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* makes a point of using rhyme in its translations, working on the assumption that Western readers expect it (Henderson).

Though the *Wikipedia* essay on the "Haiku Movement in America" asserts that some scholars view haiku as fairly insignificant in the overall history of poetry in the United States, my own view is that the clean, spare, understated nature of haiku as well as the pattern of syllable-counting that the haiku form introduced into American practice have both had profound effects on how Americans write, read, and view poetry. Admittedly, such influences are impossible to measure. But the fact is that, from its introduction in America, haiku has uniquely embodied the Imagistic notion that poetry ought to proceed indirectly through suggestive association rather than overt statement, and the influence of that general principle in modern practice has been significant.

Poets, of course, have always worked by indirection, asserting their ideas as what T. S. Eliot calls "objective correlatives," concrete metaphoric analogies for the human

realities they depict. One illustrative example that comes to mind is from poet W. D. Snodgrass' little book *Heart's Needle* (1957), in a section that depicts a divorced father taking his daughter, who does not live with him, on a weekend outing. As he pushes the little girl in a playground swing, the speaker says, "You, though you climb / higher, farther from me, longer, / will fall back to me stronger" (Snodgrass). The image itself conveys all the meaning and all the emotional hurt of a father who keeps having to leave his daughter as she grows up, not a regular part of his life. Every time he sees her, he senses that she has moved farther away from him, and the impact of seeing her as she comes back to him is greater.

American poets, then, did not have to rely solely on the Japanese haiku to learn the principle of compression, and that is true partly because our own poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) had already provided a model for cutting materials down in very short poems—usually built of one or more ballad stanzas, the "hymn meter" that Dickinson knew from her girlhood. The Imagist poets recognized Dickinson as an early predecessor and a kindred spirit who was writing very un-Victorian verse all through the Victorian period. My own master's thesis at Duke University, titled "Emily Dickinson and Imagism," was an attempt to evaluate the "imagistic" elements in her complete body of verses. In truth, a few of her poems do have something not only of Imagism but maybe of haiku, even though as a poet she always employs meter, rhyme, and stanza. Her poems, like haiku, sometimes seem to have riddic qualities, challenging the reader to figure out the identity of the subject or understand the implied situation (Graves 46-68). One example is Dickinson's famous "hummingbird" poem, which does not have a title and begins, "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving Wheel — / A Resonance of Emerald — / A Rush of Cochineal—[.]" Here the only clues to the identity of the subject are colorful images, linked to create an objective description of something unnamed. In our own history, then, the writings of Emily Dickinson *and* haiku have helped in seminal ways to establish basic models in modern poetic practice for condensed, concise, and original imagery as the core of poetic statement. Other influences, of course, also encouraged these general features of modern American poetry, but Dickinson's poems in particular share with haiku the elements of brevity and powerful imagery that in itself conveys its own meaning.

To move further, my own belief is that, historically speaking, haiku has also been a principal exemplar of a whole new way of organizing poetic form, a way of organizing language in verse that has been broadly influential. It's true that the English and Japanese syllabic systems are different, but, as the form of haiku became common in English, writers learned to shape their verses by *just counting syllables* rather than by

counting syllables *and* listening for regularly recurring accents or stress patterns. This topic is, like many aspects of poetry, complicated and technical, but let's try to understand these differences. The *Britannica* accurately summarizes the *four* main ways that poetic lines (or verses) can be structured: 1) Quantitative verse, used in classical Greek and Latin poetry, measures the *length of time* each syllable takes, rather much the way musical notation gives notes relative values based on length or duration; 2) Syllabic verse, such as haiku, simply counts the *number of syllables* per line; 3) Accentual verse, common in Old English or Anglo-Saxon poetry such as *Beowulf*, pays attention only to the *pattern of accents or stresses*, with variable numbers of unaccented syllables in a line; and 4) Accentual-syllabic verse, the usual traditional form of English poetry, *combines syllable-counting with attention to the patterns of regular stress or accent*, creating verses that you can pat your foot to as you hear them (see "meter"). As the article on "Syllabic verse" in *Wikipedia* rightly says, "English syllabics have not evolved over time from native practice, but rather are the inventions of literate poets, primarily in the 20th century." The system of syllabics does not convey any metrical rhythm that the ear can detect, and thus it is usually imperceptible to the reader or hearer; instead "is a compositional device" that is "primarily of importance to the author" (*Wikipedia*). My own contention—one not subject to empirical proof but still a reasonable hypothesis—is that haiku has been the principal medium, instrument, and influence by which this pattern of organizing verses has been introduced into English-language practice.

I do know for sure that American and British poets who have practiced syllabics as a significant feature of their compositions include Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Bridges. Thomas in his poem "In My Craft Or Sullen Art," for example, constructs a non-metrical text of seven-syllable lines. Marianne Moore likes to combine syllabics with stanzaic patterns that impose visual form on her material, even though the poems, when read aloud, sound like prose. One other example of syllabics is Sylvia Plath's poem titled "Metaphors," which uses a pattern of nine (nine lines, each nine syllables) in a poem whose speaker is a pregnant woman considering her own condition. In short, I believe that the pattern of haiku has provided at least one important model for the syllable-counting method of shaping poetic verses, a modernist alternative to the conventional accentual-syllabic method that dominated English and American practice from the Renaissance into the twentieth century. Admittedly, syllabics is a minority practice, since the twentieth century has often encouraged poets to write in free verse, abandoning *all* four of the traditional forms of structuring verse lines. Still, without haiku as a model, I doubt that syllabics as an alternate means of structuring verse would have evolved.

Somewhat paradoxically, the introduction of haiku may have also served to spread *free verse* practices because haiku abandons meter and does not pay attention to patterns of stress or accent.

In summing up the influence and appeal of haiku during the last one hundred years among English-language poets and especially American writers, my view is that a small and subtle Japanese form has had an important overall effect. Haiku has given young American writers a form to practice on and learn from; it also provides a formal discipline that challenges mature poets to say *more* in fewer words, to suggest rather than to assert or preach; it appeals to the vaguely zen spirit in all of us, the wish for union between physical and spiritual; it has proven in the cases of some major American poets to be a form worthy of careful and extended practice; in other instances, through its use of syllabics as an organizing principle, it has provided a model for poets to follow in organizing the verses of their longer poems; as one of the few "fixed forms" that modern poets continue to respect for the challenge and discipline they impose—and here I think mainly of the sonnet, the ballad stanza, and the limerick as the others—haiku has offered an alternative to modern "free verse" while still allowing a good bit of metrical and substantive freedom; and finally, I think, it has given us as American readers a sort of bridge into the Japanese soul, which is perhaps more modest and more content with subtlety and minimalism than we as Americans tend to be. With elegant small-scale houses, simple courtyard gardens, small-portioned sushi in delicate presentations, bonsai, origami—with these accoutrements of Japanese culture, the haiku, however we Westerners may have distorted or misunderstood it, has allowed us to glimpse and attempt to appropriate simple, artful elegance in which, to use the popular modernist slogan, "less is more."

I want to close with a haiku that I myself composed several years ago, one that I still like and is personally meaningful because it contains a reference to my daughter, Molly, and to wind chimes that she crafted for me, painstakingly, out of old, discarded silver plate of the sort that can be bought in junk stores and has little monetary value. I think that the poem catches a melancholy moment with objective representation and thus represents at least part of what a haiku in English can do. I also like it because to me wind chimes have always seemed to me vaguely "eastern," even though my own chimes hang in my country yard from the eaves of a log cabin that is decidedly American. In any case, here is the poem:

The wind chimes Molly
made me from old silver spoons

and forks hang tuneless.

In preparing for this lecture, I sent a copy of this little poem to my friend (and now my Hirosaki host) Professor Tanaka in an e-mail letter, and he quickly sent me back this syllabic translation into Japanese, one that respects the traditional syllable count that we Americans expect to see:

wa ga mu su me
tsu ku ri shi fu-u-rin
o to mo na shi (Tanaka)

As a non-speaker of Japanese, I am forever excluded from knowing exactly what these linked syllables mean or precisely how Professor Tanaka has interpreted my poem. My suspicion is that, somewhat similarly, the Japanese haiku and the American haiku (as it has evolved during the last century) will always remain discrete and separate parts of the two worlds in which they have two separate histories. Still, I know for sure that our American practices are tied inseparably to yours, and that the impulse behind both these traditions, yours very old and ours relatively new, is toward order, pleasure, beauty, thoughtfulness, and humane contemplation of the large miracle of life that we all share as people living on this beautiful, mysterious earth.

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