

HAIKU/WEATHERGRAM TALK ESCRIBIENTE 4/5/17

Dale Harris

HISTORY OF HAIKU

Haiku or Hokku comes from Renga, a form of linked Japanese poetry dating from the 11th Century. The Renga phenomena was inspired by a classic work of fiction *The Tale of Genji* written by a noblewoman and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu. The exchange of poetry between lovers plays a major role in her descriptions of the intricacies of court life and romantic intrigue. Lady Murasaki believed that if you received a poem or any deep expression from another person and you made no response in like manner to it, you were heartless and a barbarian. The idea spread from fiction into the real world of Japanese society. So was born the movement of writing a poem responding to another poem and poetry as linked verse among larger groups, known as Renga. In China, a similar poetic form also became identified with and influenced renga.

RENGA GATHERINGS

In Japan during the heyday of renga writing, large numbers of poets would meet for renga parties that lasted for several days. These parties were often fueled by sake. Poets would submit their three line stanzas or *hokku*. A poet participating in a renga party would often have the opportunity to offer only one stanza to the poem. Of course, it was a great honor to have one's verse selected by the Renga Master as the first verse that began the long poem. But alas, there could only be one chosen and many excellent stanzas were left over. In time, these rejects evolved into a stand-alone poetry form known as Haiku.

The Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, renowned for his haiku, was also a renga poet or a *renku*. He is credited as the creator of *haibun*, a composite of poetry, prose, and drawings in journal form. This haiku is from his 1689 travel diary *Narrow Road to the Interior* as he visits a famous battle site:

“Summer grasses
all that remains of great soldiers’
imperial dreams.”

Matsuo Bashō

INFLUENCE OF ZEN BUDDHISM

The time in Japan when Zen Buddhism was at its greatest influence coincided with the growing popularity of renga and haiku. Most Japanese

poets had some Zen training. Simplicity and going to the heart of things was a prevalent aesthetic in Zen and subsequently in haiku. The Buddhist concept of impermanence or *Mujo* frequently shows up in images such as “whirling petals, windblown leaves.” Another Zen concept is *Sabi*, a condition of utter, egoless aloneness achieved by meditation, an artistic vantage point from which some haiku is written, often interpreted as loneliness but more impersonal, like that of a witness.

HAIKU STRUCTURE AND OTHER RELATED FORMS

In Japanese haiku there are 17 elements in 3 phrases. Western *haiku* is a transposition from this Japanese framework, and is structured as 3 lines with a syllable count of 5/7/5. However, this convention is not completely accurate since Japanese characters are essentially images. The Chinese and Japanese languages are pictographic in origin. In English, syllables are sounds that make up words. This makes translation a challenge and often the result is awkward, something to keep in mind as you read these classics. As a case in point, here’s Sam Hamil’s translation of a haiku where Bashō describes being trapped by rain for three miserable days in a remote guard shack in the mountains:

“Eaten alive by lice and fleas
now the horse
beside my pillow pees.”
Matsuo Bashō

Humor is much encouraged in haiku and Hamil certainly captures that in his translation.

TANKA & ARIAKE

Another Japanese poetic form which pre-dates renga and haiku is **tanka**, which has 5 lines. I think of it as haiku with a tail. The first 3 lines are as in haiku, 5-7-5, but the additional 2 lines have 7 syllables each. Usually there is a skipped space between the first 3 lines and the additional 2 lines.

You may see tanka as part of the structure of a renga, or separately as a complete poem. Obviously, as a poet you can say more in 5 lines than in 3, so tanka are often rich and complex. Here’s an example of a haiku that I wrote as part of an exchange by email with 2 other poets:

“Snow caps the cactus;
chill winds ride the country road –
three poets meet, share rice.”
Dale Harris

Now add two more lines, and you have a tanka:

“Snow caps the cactus;
chill winds ride the country road –
three poets meet, share rice.

Hungry for night, the new moon
is an open mouthed woman.”

Dale Harris

Ariake is a short poem of loss, longing, and melancholy usually written by courtesans expressing desire for their absent lovers. Ariake means “the waning moon at dawn”, picturing a time when surreptitious lovers must part after a night of passion. A good collection of these is a book titled *Ariake: Poems of Love and Longing by the Women Courtiers of Japan*.

CONVENTIONS IN WRITING RENGA, HAIKU & TANKA

Historically there are many formalities that grew up around the writing of renga. Most commonly it was a chain consisting of 36 verses with an ideal number of sound units used. In one school, the poets must refer to flowers, usually cherry blossoms, twice, and three times to the moon. Another teaching went so far as to specify a minimum number of intervening stanzas before a topic such as the moon or group of topics could recur. The spirit of the poem was in danger of being stifled by the form! Most writers of renga and haiku today do not adhere to strict constraints. You will notice some common features however such as use of natural images to ground the poem in time and space.

“A heavy cart
rumbles by –
peonies tremble.”

Buson Yosa

There is often a reflection on the human condition, usually couched in the first person.

“the shell I take
the shell it takes
ebb tide”
Vincent Tripi

The “reveal” or “cut” is important, a little surprise. Here a haiku poet writes about seeing the bombing of Tokyo during World War II:

“in the deep fires

I saw the way

a peony crumbles”

Shuson Kato

Heightened awareness is the essence of haiku. Often a question is posed, either personal or universal. Here is an example of the elevation of an ordinary life event into the sacred.

“The taste

of rain

-- Why kneel?”

Jack Kerouac

AMERICAN HAIKU

Which brings us to American Haiku, popularized by the Beat poets in the 1950’s, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Alan Ginsberg. Kerouac was an enthusiastic experimenter with haiku and also a Buddhist. He wrote over a thousand haiku between 1956 and 1966, many available in collections of his work. Kerouac maintained the 3-line convention of haiku but totally got rid of the syllable count. He went for clean, clear images that are often startling.

“Nightfall,

boy smashing dandelions

with a stick.”

Jack Kerouac

“Drunk as a hoot owl

writing letters

by thunderstorm.”

Jack Kerouac

Kerouac’s philosophy was “Above all, a haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and paint a little picture, and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella.”

The current popularity of haiku in the U.S. and worldwide is enormous.

There are haiku societies and numerous publications devoted to it.

Haiku North America will hold its 2017 biennial conference in Santa Fe

Sept. 13 – 17

<http://www.haikunorthamerica.com/>

WHY NOT WRITE HAIKU YOURSELF?

Reading and writing haiku can be a powerful seed into a deeper spiritual state and a great adjunct to a mindfulness practice. Plus it's easy, fun and satisfying. Keeping a poetry notebook is a good place to start. Nature walks are helpful but inspiration can come at any time, when you're in line at the grocery store, sweeping the floor, driving the car (oops! pull over, don't try to write then). I carry a small book where I jot down first and last lines, phrases, just enough to anchor ideas so I can later harvest them into a poem. One exercise is to make a list of images around you as you sit quietly or take a solitary walk. Then let them percolate into phrases.

Workshops or just writing with friends are a great stimulus. Email chains for haiku or renga are a team sport. A few years ago, I participated in a renga writing process with 2 other poets. We'd meet for dinner, decide on our format like how many verses, what the writing order would be, and do a coin toss to see who'd start us off. The rest was done by email exchange. When the renga was finished, we'd meet again for dinner and initiate the next round. This went on for months and was some of the best fun I've ever had writing. I've since done email renga chains as part of a Book of Cranes art project. This evolved into a wonderful collaboration between 12 artists and poets, including calligrapher Ginger Rice. Together we created a large, handmade accordion book that matched art with poetry and became the core of a delightful art exhibit. <http://bookofcranes.wix.com/bookofcranes>

WEATHERGRAMS, THE PERFECT FIT WITH HAIKU

In China and Japan, calligraphy is an integral part of the poetry process. Tying poems to trees and bushes is also a long-standing Asian tradition. Weathergrams are a contemporary Western take on this, started by calligrapher Lloyd Reynolds who made "weather writings" in the 1960's at Reed College. Marrying haiku to weathergrams was inevitable. The Mid-Summer Day art event at the Open Space Visitor Center last August featuring Escribiente's weathergrams was a big success and inspired this year's Poets Picnic planned for May 20th. The New Mexico poetry community is large and diverse and not everyone writes haiku. The poets we reached out to really loved the idea of submitting 3 line or even 1 line poems, for weathergrams. Thanks for including us, it will be memorable!!

Dale Harris poetdale@yahoo.com
<http://www.hummingbirdhollowpress.com/>