

Haiku–Senryu Distinction: A Twitter Conversation, April 28, 2016

Denis M. Garrison

In response to a comment on Twitter by another poet, I posted the following comments regarding the distinction between haiku and senryu. The comment was that many of Issa’s haiku seemed, to the commenter, to be senryu. My comments (edited only for comprehension – abbreviations, dropped articles, etc. for brevity) follow:

“May be. Haiku-senryu spectrum in my humble opinion has no bright line at center. Many poems are arguably both. “Nature” vs. “man in nature” is too shallow for me. I consider poems about human nature/foibles as senryu. On a practical level both haiku and senryu are haiku, I say. Of course, I am not dogmatic about that. My definition works for me. Everyone’s entitled to their opinion. I write in English. Re: haiku-senryu distinction in Japanese poetry, I leave the matter to those who write in Japanese. I’ve no dog in that race.
[The following poems are my own.]

baby food aisle
the woman standing still
her empty cart

Clearly senryu by my standards; yet, there are natural parallels of such loss.

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blown by traffic
the wren’s wing in the gutter
flutters ... flutters

To me, this is haiku but I can imagine arguments that it is senryu.

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flying fishes
sea-wet yet sunlit
take me with you

This one is neither because it is both. This is why I don’t let the (haiku-senryu) distinction rule.

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harvested field
faded mouse trails
follow the rows

To me, this is haiku & not at all senryu despite the human reference: ‘harvested rows.’

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dishwasher explains
how good sauce is made—
the chef’s smile

This is an example of what I would consider to be senryu indubitably.

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The senryu distinction is more interesting, of course, in the poetry of masters of verse on human nature such as @tankaqueen Alexis Rotella. By the way, for those who love senryu, a must-read is *OUCH: Senryu That Bite* by Alexis Rotella. It will be worth your time to find a copy. Regarding *OUCH: Senryu That Bite*” so you know what to look for (go to): <http://poets.kohalibrary.com/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=83250> Another giant of senryu is Alan Pizzarelli. Check out his page on Wikipedia for a general introduction. He is the real deal regarding senryu.”

—————End of Twitter posts.—————

POSTSCRIPT: Please keep in mind that I am discussing above the distinction between haiku and senryu as I see it within the context of writing these poems in English. I am not commenting on their usages in Japanese poetry, in which the distinction is, I agree, a significant one. Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that the distinction is without value in English haiku. Rather, I believe that the distinction, while of considerable interest to me (else I would not have founded and published the fine journal *Prune Juice: Journal of Senryu and Kyoka*), is not essential for poems written originally in English. I write senryu often enough, but personally consider it to be haiku in English. There are many very fine poets writing in English who probably disagree with me on this point. I completely respect opposing opinions. I have nothing against the concept / distinction of senryu but I adamantly believe in poetic freedom. That is why, for years, my poetry blog was named “Haiku Unchained” and, later, “Haiku and Tanka Unchained.” Haiku and tanka as poetry in English are new forms, perhaps a century old, and there is always the tendency for academicism (“traditionalism or conventionalism in art, literature, music, etc.”) to ossify formal verse. That tendency should be fought by all generations of poets. We must not allow rules to become chains.

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