

The Need for Experimentation

Reflections on Western Poets Writing Haiku

When an art form is adopted by a different culture than that which originated the form, it becomes the new culture's own property and it is made over in the cultural context which it has entered. There are, in every case, many from the original culture who demand adherence to their tradition, but it is futile. It is always futile to attempt to control what one has given away.

It is a delicate balance that one must strike. One must not discard the past in ignorance, but one also must not be constrained by the past. One must assiduously study the rules of poetics and then ignore them. The rules of poetics are not for writing the poem; the rules are for forming the craft of the poet. Every time a poet puts pen to paper, poetry is reinvented - or should be!

There is, of course, paradox in this view, but paradox is the natural condition of humanity driven by base desires and lofty ideals. The orthodoxies about haiku: the haiku moment, haiku mind, objective correlative, purely objective imagery, etc., etc., all fall before the onslaught of paradox and ambiguity.

For what haiku poets of the older Japanese tradition were seeking to accomplish with their haiku, the traditional haiku poetics are necessary and appropriate. For modern poets in Western languages who wish to emulate the same

kind of poetry towards the same ends and with the same philosophic underpinnings, those same traditional haiku poetics are, likewise, necessary and appropriate. However, for modern western poets who find in haiku the greatest value in its crystalline brevity and in the rigor of condensation to a lyrical minim, adherence to the traditional haiku poetics is both inappropriate and needless, since those poetics are intrinsically inconsistent, even incompatible, with English poetic tradition.

To the degree that each poet (or group or school) follows their own values and poetics, there is not any one group which is “correct” and others which are “incorrect.” Artists are free and cannot be constrained by scholastics. On the other hand, to the degree that some poets set themselves up as arbiters of all haiku, including haiku in English and other western languages, then artistic politics enters the arena and “right and wrong” become an issue.

Western poets are intrinsically unencumbered and unobliged by the eastern traditions. They work within their own cultures. Western poets who essay haiku nevertheless need to study the original traditions and understand them as well as they may, and must respect those older traditions even in the breach, because to do otherwise is to rebel out of ignorance, which is inherently wrong. If a western poet is to write haiku, and if that poet is going to go beyond the traditional boundaries of the art form, then she or he had better know where the boundaries are. There is no merit in freedom by virtue of ignorance.

Furthermore, for the western haiku poet, assuming that the poet has indeed studied the original tradition as suggested above and moved beyond it, there is also the ongoing utility of examining anew the craft aspects (the “tools”) of the original tradition in order to discover new and more culturally relevant (in the poet’s culture) ways to accomplish the ends of those tools. For example, while some wish to simply discard the idea of kigo (season-words), others might not. Kigo have changed substantially before. From setting the moment of composition, they have mutated to set the context of the content of the haiku. Now, in an age when many cultures are not agrarian, use of the seasons for context-setting on an exclusive (or nearly-so) basis is questionable. So, there is growing interest in new directions for kigo - including internationalization of natural kigo and consideration of keywords which are not rooted in seasonality. Continuing experimentation with such poetic tools is firmly within the English poetic tradition, certainly, and probably many others’ as well. Choice within freedom, as against doctrinaire constraints - that is the goal.

— Denis M. Garrison

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EDITORIAL

Time for a Truce in the “Haiku Wars”

This final issue of *Haiku Harvest* is our largest ever: 73 poets from seventeen countries! We have been very fortunate, indeed, to have so many fine contributors. One might wonder why *Haiku Harvest* is closing down after this issue, right at the acme of its success. The answer to that question is the subject of this editorial.

First, to put this in context, we are not stopping our publishing efforts. Concurrent with the end of *Haiku Harvest* (*HH*), a new digital and print magazine, *3x5 Poetry Review* (“3x5”), will open for submissions at www.3x5poetry.com. Why the break in continuity? Well, sometimes a magazine’s editorial policy and mission change so significantly that a fresh start with a new name seems the best path to take. That is the case here.

The *HH* mission was always clear:

“*HAIKU HARVEST Journal of Haiku in English* is dedicated to publishing and promoting haiku, senryu, and tanka in English, both in the more classical traditions and in newer related forms. We give generous space to poets so they can demonstrate the range of their poetry and we promote innovation by providing a showcase for poetry in new styles and forms that are serious attempts to assimilate the best of the haiku, senryu, and tanka traditions into a continuously developing English poetic short verse tradition.”

However, over the years, my analysis of the perpetual “haiku wars” over the very definition of haiku and over every conceivable aspect of haiku and related forms has brought me to conclude that, for me at least, the time has come to call a halt to a non-productive course of inquiry and strike off in a new direction. 3x5 is meant to embody that new direction. Anyone who wants to know 3x5’s editorial direction, will do best to read the webpages online at www.3x5poetry.com/masthead.html et seqq. Suffice it to say, here, that defining “haiku” and “senryu” is not on 3x5’s agenda, rather:

“We are interested in fine tercets, including those in the Japanese tradition. Taxonomy and classification of such are not an interest. Whatever definition you might want to use, if your tercet poem is fine, we want to see it.”

The defect in the *Haiku Harvest* mission statement is in the clause “publishing and promoting haiku, senryu, and tanka in English” which suggests that one can identify such forms. At least one famous haiku poet has been quoted as saying that her definition of haiku is that it cannot be defined. The truth of her statement is at the heart of the “haiku wars.” In my personal estimation, a central and controlling dichotomy exists between “Japanese haiku” written in English and “English haiku.” [“English haiku” refers to English generically, regardless of nationality of the poet.] For lack of better terms, I will use “eastern poets” to refer to poets (and critics, etc.) who favor Japanese haiku written in English and “western poets” to refer to poets, etc., who favor English haiku. The dichotomy is in these

two groups' conceptualizations of haiku along the Japanese/English divide.

Eastern poets tend to utterly dismiss the idea that Japanese haiku in English and English haiku are different poetic genres. The common refrain from Eastern poets, when responding to this idea, is “why do people who break the rules of haiku still want to call their poems haiku?” This often-heard question makes perfectly good sense in their own context, in which there is only one haiku, the age-old traditional Japanese haiku, which they are now trying to write in English. It is, however, the fallacy called “begging the question.” The destructive result of this approach to English haiku is to apply many traditionalist rules which have no applicability and, on that basis, to disparage English haiku as defective by Japanese haiku standards.

Western poets, predictably, are generally much more accepting of the idea that Japanese haiku in English and English haiku are different poetic genres. In reaction to that premise, however, there is a wide range of positions taken by western poets, not all of which are equally respectable. Not so respectable is the reductionist criterion by which anything at all written in 5-7-5 is to be considered acceptable “haiku.” By its very definition, this includes doggerel. Some western poets take the position (which I think is misguided) that English haiku should try to follow all the rules of Japanese haiku. They find common cause with the eastern poets in this respect and they find disappointment down the line as their attempts at haiku continue to be rejected by eastern poets. Some western

poets say haiku is whatever they want it to be and cannot be bothered to study Japanese haiku to learn the craft. I have written often that there is no merit in freedom by virtue of ignorance. Yet others try to find the right formula (it always centers on “juxtaposition”) into which they can plug images to crank out haiku; well, formulaic poetry is always bad, in every form, in every language. But, most disturbing to me, western poets continue to engage eastern poets on technical poetics questions and issues which belies their cooption by the eastern poets. Why any working western poet would consider “on” (aka, “onji”) or the orthodoxy of a kigo word in the composition of an English haiku is inexplicable.

I repeat here, without modification, the opening two paragraphs of my 2001 article, *The Need for Experimentation*, reprinted below.

“When an art form is adopted by a different culture than that which originated the form, it becomes the new culture’s own property and it is made over in the cultural context which it has entered. There are, in every case, many from the original culture who demand adherence to their tradition, but it is futile. It is always futile to attempt to control what one has given away.”

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them. The rules of poetics are not for writing the poem; the rules are for forming the craft of the poet. Every time a poet puts pen to paper, poetry is reinvented - or should be!”

I stand by those words today. I find myself in the middle of the “haiku wars,” always the most dangerous position since all shots are fired through the middle. Japanese haiku have so captured me that I have tried to learn to write Japanese haiku in English. (A few kind souls have suggested that I may have succeeded now and again.) I do respect the tradition and firmly agree with the dedication to tradition of those eastern poets whose goal is to continue that tradition as completely and authentically in English as possible. I wish them every success and hope to be included at the edges of their circle.

At the same time, I am a western poet, to the bone, dedicated to the English poetic tradition and, as part and parcel thereof, to assimilating haiku, senryu, tanka, kyoka, etc., into that English tradition, not as a museum artifact of Japanese poetry, but as our own. Such cultural theft IS our tradition. We took the Provencal “sonet” and Italian “sonetto” and made them our own: the venerable sonnet. Virtually every form in English poetry (except, perhaps, the limerick) we appropriated from its parent culture and made our own. There is no reason to stop today. The English haiku will become what English poets make it. There is no stopping it.

So, what about that controlling dichotomy between

Japanese haiku in English and English haiku? My advice (even if it is only worth its price) is that both eastern and western poets would do better to recognize there are two different genres of poetry now and begin to deal with it rather than bashing each other over the “one true haiku” which is, of course, non-existent.

In any case, I am moving my camp into the territory of the western poets with the establishment of *3x5 Poetry Review*. It will deal with English haiku and will not toe the line of Japanese haiku orthodoxy. I can and will take other positions in different venues, but in my magazine, English haiku is the extent of definition. I know this will not be a seamless transition, but it ought not to be such a wrench as one might imagine. *Haiku Harvest* has published the whole spectrum from the most orthodox Japanese haiku to the most radically unorthodox English haiku.

I do not want to close without thanking, one last time, all the wonderful poets, writers, and artists who have contributed to *Haiku Harvest's* success these last several years. Without you, my friends, there would have been no magazine. Thank you!

— Denis M. Garrison, Editor

Editorial in *Haiku Harvest Journal of Haiku in English*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring & Summer 2006. “The Need for Experimentation” essay followed the editorial. Nota Bene: The planned journal *3x5 Poetry Review* morphed into *Modern English Tanka*. From 2006 to 2009, twelve seasonal issues were published, both digitally online and in print editions. They may all be read and downloaded on this blog: <https://tankainenglish.com/>.