

Have East and West truly met through haiku?

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Have Western people really encountered haiku? Confronting this important question, my resounding answer is “yes” and “no” at the same time. My ambiguity comes from the fact that almost all Western people encounter haiku only through translations. While admitting that translations are indispensable for our world, how can someone who calls himself a so-called haiku poet not try to learn the Japanese language? Several years ago, in Europe, during an international haiku event, I asked a question of an old man: “Why haven’t you learned the Japanese language to know more haiku?” He replied: “Because I’m too old to do it”. I stopped our conversation.

What do you think about this question and answer between East and West?

First of all, I must say that unfortunately overseas information about haiku is not always accurate. In fact, sometimes the information is strange enough to make me laugh.

A haiku Bible for those who write haiku in English is *Haiku volumes 1~4* (Hokuseido, Japan, 1949~1952) by R. H. Blyth (1898~1964). This Bible I bought when I was a student, but shortly thereafter I sold it to a secondhand bookstore in Tokyo, because Blyth exaggerated what he believed to be examples of Japanese spirituality in haiku, neglecting haiku poetics.

Twenty years later, the more I’ve become familiar with haiku writing in English, the more I find a direct and indirect influence exerted by R. H. Blyth’s publication. In these cyber times, I bought again Blyth’s books on haiku through a bookstore website.

After an initial great joy on my second meeting with the haiku Bible by Blyth, I began to laugh, reading a passage in it. Blyth cites one of Basho’s haiku in *Haiku volume 1* (1949) as follows:

It is a condition of *selflessness* in which things are seen without reference to profit or loss, even of some remote, spiritual kind.

He who loves God will not desire that God should love him in return with any partial or particular affection.

霧時雨富士を見ぬ日ぞおもしろき

芭蕉

Misty rain;

Today is a happy day,

Although Mt. Fuji is unseen.

Bashô

For people who do not understand Japanese, this passage may seem quite persuasive. Even some Japanese scholars praise this interpretation of Blyth’s.

As a haiku poet as well as a scholar, I would analyze Basho’s haiku, beginning with the Japanese delicate words selected by Basho for his short poem. The first word in Japanese is “kirishigure”, which means not “misty rain” found in Blyth’s translation, but means “dense fog”. So, from the first word in the haiku, we are deprived suddenly of sight. This unexpected skill by Basho surprises us. The second word “Fuji” is the highest and the most famous mountain in Japan. This word relaxes and cheers us up. Then, the next word “minu” means “we cannot see” changes the tone once again. This word denies the beautiful and joyous view of Mt. Fuji. The word following “minu” is “hi”, it means “day”. The last word “omoshiroki” is an adjective contradictory to the previous negative tone. It signifies “interesting”. As a whole, in his haiku, Basho says that the day when we cannot see Mt. Fuji is interesting for him.

This haiku is not one of the best written by Basho, nevertheless, it contains several moments and changes that were missed or not stressed by Blyth.

On the other hand, this short poem does not convey “selflessness,” which belongs to the old Japanese spirituality of Zen, as Blyth supposed.

Is there any selfless poet in our world? If a poet arrives at “selflessness,” it can be realized only after passing through many selfnesses, in words, *ego* states.

Basho wrote the quoted haiku in 1684, when he was in middle age, at a time when he was far from “selfless.”

Just think: a man for whom something is interesting cannot be selfless. Moreover Basho at this time in his career was struggling to find a new way of haiku writing.

It is our happiness that R. H. Blyth could find such an old spirituality in Japan, as surely some part of Japanese culture is based on Zen. However, to accept haiku from a preconceived view point as illustrative of Zen is equal to accept Western poetry only from a view point of Christianity. If thought of in this way, would Western people really agree with this preconception of Blyth?

Returning to Basho's haiku cited in *Haiku Volume 1*, our Japanese classic haiku poet doesn't say that the day when he cannot see Mt. Fuji is interesting, but that though Mt. Fuji is unseen, the day is interesting for Basho, because he can imagine Mt. Fuji in his mind. R. H. Blyth misunderstood and mistranslated Basho's haiku.

I would not disparage Blyth's merit for spreading haiku among not only English speaking people but Western people, however, I must say that his misunderstanding and mistranslation of Japanese haiku are based on a simplistic view of their purpose and sometimes miss the mark of Japanese haiku poetics.

Blyth's words in preface of *Haiku volume 1*: "I understand Zen and poetry to be practically synonyms" misled haiku acceptance in Western world and left an indelible influence that to this day has not been shaken. This simplistic understanding of haiku by Blyth came from his teacher, a Japanese Buddhist, Daisetz Suzuki (1870~1966). This Japanese Zen master of the 20th century bravely introduced Japanese culture including haiku to the Western world from the point of Zen Buddhism. Blyth owed his exaggeration of Zen's role in haiku writing to his teacher Suzuki. This Japanese Zen master says in his essay "Zen and Haiku" the following exaggeration.

It is impossible to speak of Japanese culture apart from Buddhism, for in every phase of its development we recognize the presence of Buddhist feeling in one way or another.

(Zen and Japanese Culture, MJF Books, USA)

While I agree partly with this assertion, I would emphasize and re-insert an animistic backbone to Japanese culture. Even in our days, animistic tradition persists in our country. In Tokyo, people still feel awe and respect at a tall and old tree in the middle of the road, because this tree can stand with great composure. Walking around in my residential city, Fujimi, I can easily find *shinto* shrines covered with tall woods.

Without knowing the vastly more influential importance of the Japanese animistic tradition, R. H. Blyth believed naively in Daisetz Suzuki's doctrine. Blyth was a good disciple of Suzuki. Fortunately or not, Blyth has a considerable influence on upcoming poets. Thanks to him, haiku becomes not a short poem, but a mystic and simplified wordplay. After reading Blyth's *Haiku Volume 1~4*, a beat generation poet in USA, Allen Ginsberg (1926~1997), wrote "Four Haiku" in 1955. One of them is the following:

Lying on my side
in the void:
the breath in my nose.

(Collected Poems 1947-1980, Harper & Row, USA, 1984)

Writing this short poem, Ginsberg captured a moment in his ordinary life. But the question remains as to whether this moment really mattered?

In this short poem, Ginsberg recognizes the usual workings of his living body. But does this haiku reverberate? Does it remind us of anything other than a trivial discovery? Silence without any backbone rules these three lines written by Ginsberg.

It may be one of the 20th century's poetry's characteristics to find some trivial beauty or some trivial truth in ordinary life, but something trivial which always remains trivial is not a main subject for genuine poetry.

By the way, I don't know well his relation with R. H. Blyth or Daisetz Suzuki, but a well-known French critic named Roland Barthes (1915 ~1980) mentioned haiku in a curious way in his book "L'Empire des signes" (Editions d'Art Albert Skira, Swiss, 1970).

haïku (le trait) reproduit le geste désignateur du petit enfant qui montre du doigt quoi que ce soit, en disant seulement : ça ! d'un mouvement si immédiat ... rien de spécial, dit le haïku, conformément à l'esprit du Zen ...

haiku (the trait) reproduces the gesture of pointing out of a little child who shows whatever it is by his finger, saying only that "That!" with a direct movement ...nothing special, says haiku, it is conformable

to Zen spirit ...

Though in this book I can find a keen remark on Japanese culture, Barthes's understanding of haiku is extremely strange. Barthes may be an indirect disciple of Daisetz Suzuki or R. H. Blyth.

He considers one of Shiki Masaoka's (1867~1902) haiku as "accent absolu" (absolute accent). Let's quote the Japanese original, a long French translation in Barthes's book, then a short English translation for this speech.

牛つんで渡る小船や夕しぐれ

Avec un taureau à bord,
Un petit bateau traverse la rivière,
A travers la pluie du soir.

A cow on board
a little boat traversing—
autumn evening rain

Why was Roland Barthes interested in such a commonplace haiku of Shiki?

For Barthes, the Japanese haiku poet must be a child free from constrained and old Western culture. For him, haiku must be just contrary to long Western poetry filled with meanings, because he thinks haiku is too short to contain any meaning. Barthes' understanding of haiku is as simplistic as Daisetz Suzuki's and R. H. Blyth's, the difference being that Barthes, a famous critic in France, gives us haiku as a scream to escape from Western culture, simplifying excessively and sterilizing Japanese haiku by prohibiting it from containing any meaning. Needless to say, haiku cannot be free from any meaning. Humanity, including the Japanese, cannot endure meaningless expression. Even apparent nonsense is accompanied with some meaning in all human utterance.

Now, from all I've said so far, I would not want to be understood as denying the value of haiku writing overseas. On the contrary, I'm convinced of the future possibilities of haiku in many languages. To let these rich possibilities become realities, we must establish some depth in the Western understanding of haiku. Haiku is not Buddhist poetry. Haiku is not free from meaning. Above all, haiku must be the essence of poetry. In a microcosm of haiku, we can catch a macrocosm. Only one short haiku can consist of several moments and changes as we saw in a Basho's haiku previously quoted.

When I was young, studying Western poetry, I wrote haiku. I tried to discover a new haiku writing.

階段を突き落とされて虹となる

Shoved off the stairs—
falling I become
a rainbow

(*A Future Waterfall*, Red Moon Press, USA, 1999)

Of course, I wrote this haiku, not from a Buddhist basis. Perhaps to sublimate some bitter experience of mine, I wrote such a haiku. The following is the first draft of this haiku:

階段を突き落とされて貝となる

Shoved off the stairs—
falling I become
a shell

Which is the better for you, "a rainbow" or "a shell"?

In Japanese, "kai to naru" (become a shell) means "keep silence". It's a quite banal expression. As soon as a word "niji" (rainbow) replaces a word "kai" (shell), the whole of this haiku begins to sparkle. This haiku may contain moments and changes unexpectedly. This sublimation is the core of haiku poetics in which I believe.

Some poets of high quality, for example, a Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer (1931~), and a Portuguese poet, Casimiro de Brito (1936~), write haiku in their respective languages. Both of them are not only a representative poet in the country, but they have gotten an international reputation. To our regret, they are not well-known in Japan.

First, let's cite a few of haiku which are quite speculative, written by Tomas Tranströmer.

The white sun's a long-
distance runner against
the blue mountains of death.

The presence of God.
In the tunnel of birdsong
a locked seal opens.

(*New Collected Poems*, Bloodaxe

Books, UK, 1997)

In Macedonia, in the year 2003, I met this poet who is paralyzed on one side, deprived of speaking ability. It was during Struga Poetry Evenings. I recognized that this poet was respected by numerous poets.

The other, Casimiro de Brito is one of my best friends. In his haiku, we can find a cheerfulness without limit peculiar to South Europe, as well as a nihilism.

De canto em canto
vou caindo
no charco do silencio.

De chant en chant
je tombe
dans l'étang du silence.

From song to song
I'm falling
into the pond of silence

(*intensités intensidades*, l'arbre à paroles,

France, 1999)

The haiku is included in his Bilingual (Portuguese and French) poetry publication; it may be inspired by a famous Basho's haiku "Old pond" (Furu-ike ya).

Poeta audacioso—
ousa decifrar as sombras
da luz original

Poète audacieux —
il ose déchiffrer les ombres
de la lumière originelle

An audacious poet—
he dares to decipher the shadows
of pristine light

大胆な詩人
原初の光の
影を読み解く

(*HAIKU PARA KISAKO*, in *Ginyu* No. 26, Japan, 2005)

The haiku above in Portugal, English, French and Japanese has appeared in an international haiku journal "Ginyu" published by me. In it De Brito sings powerfully of the creative role of the poet, and in doing so realizes

this position himself.

Haiku writing or haiku poems may not be accepted so widely and deeply in these poet's own countries. Currently haiku may be accepted mainly because of its perceived exoticism. Superficial exoticism is a mere temporary pastime, but deepened exoticism must bring something new and precious. If the true poetics of haiku will become known in many countries, haiku will be more accepted and give birth to true short poem with poetic substance worth national and international praise. This is justly my ideal of World Haiku.

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