

On New Trends in the American Haiku

by *Atsuo Nakagawa*

About a century has passed since Japanese haiku were translated and introduced into Europe and America, and nearly 40 years since Japanese culture was taken abroad in bulk by soldiers who had come to occupy Japan for years after the termination of the Second World War. In the exported culture was haiku poetry which was, in its early stages, imitated in Roman characters. As J. W. Hackett's haiku in English¹ appeared and the haiku magazine *American Haiku*² was published, the English haiku reached its culmination in the now-conservative or classic haiku form of 5-7-5 syllables.

Then free-form English haiku began to be written. Further encouraged, probably, by Nick Virgilio's prize-winning haiku³ which had a form quite different from that of Hackett's haiku, more and more English haiku in free forms appeared. This is what I hoped to see in the western haikudom.⁴

Today there are, in fact, more various forms of English haiku than one could imagine. And the practical applications of the haiku poetry to things in other fields are also beyond conception.⁵

Meanwhile the first assessment of the western haiku was made by Dr. Eric Amann, the founder of the Canadian haiku⁶ and George Swede, one of the most active Canadian haikuists, in their present publication *Cicada* last year. On the other hand in New York, Geoffrey O'Brien, the new editor of *frogpond*,⁷ who had edited a poetry magazine before, announced that the renga would pave the way to the future world of western poetry.

Thus this is the very occasion not to be missed by me a Japanese to comment on these two distinctive happenings in the haiku history.

The haiku magazine *Cicada* (Vol. 4, No. 4) published by the Haiku Society of Canada in 1980, carries Eric Amann and George Swede's article, "Toward a Definition of the Modern English Haiku." In it they have surveyed the haiku printed in *Canadian Haiku Anthology*⁸ and *the haiku anthology*⁹ and conclude, after examining a number of the classical guidelines for haiku composition and comparing them with the writing practices of contemporary English haiku poets, that they find only four of them to be really essential to a valid definition of haiku today:¹⁰

1. A haiku is a short poem which can be read aloud in a single breath.
2. A haiku evokes a moment of deep emotion or insight in which some aspect of man is related to Nature or suddenly shown in a new and larger perspective.
3. A haiku relies mainly on simple images to convey mood and meaning.
4. A haiku is always in the present tense.

That is to say, the conventional or classical pattern of 5-7-5 syllables in three lines is no longer observed by the majority of haiku poets today. Already, in 1974, when Cor van den Heuvel's anthology was published, only 52 (22%) out of the 233 haiku were written in the strict 5-7-5 style. In the *Canadian Haiku Anthology* the percentage is even smaller, though the majority of haiku, in Cor's anthology too, is written in the three-line form. Besides, more and more haiku appear in the shape of one-liners, or two-liners, or even in non-linear pattern (visual or concrete haiku or "eye-ku") in haiku magazines, they add.

With regard to the season-word, out of the same 182 haiku

in the Canadian anthology, only about 64 % have words or images that link the poems definitely to one of the four seasons. They further add that the type of imagery used by the modern English haiku poets is often more urbanized and sophisticated, and specific reference to season is no longer of the same great significance as it once was in haiku, while reference to nature (or some other force or power outside man) is still important today.

As to the taboo on giving the poet's views and comments in haiku, they say that western haiku, even from its beginnings, tended to be more individualistic and personalized—a sense of the man behind the work, the shaping personality that has itself been shaped by experience. Thus most of the major haiku poets write with a distinct personal “signature.” In the type of imagery they select, in mood and outlook and—above all—in the way they arrange their words on the page, there is a world of difference among poets.

In my view, even if they say that the changes mentioned above form a new trend in the English haiku, they are not new in the Japanese haiku world of *jiyuritsu* (free-form) or *kohgo* (spoken-language) haiku, the haiku-renovators' schools, which has a history of some 100 years,¹¹ even though the majority of Japanese haikuists—the conservative haiku poets—still stick to the classic pattern. If individualistic and personalized image should be stronger in some western haiku, it is just a matter of degree. In Japan too, we can read some personal signature in haiku in spite of what we call *dai-ni geijutsu ron*.¹² Besides, that tendency comes from western poets' long literary tradition. As for the less use of the season word, the tendency was seen in Japan long ago as evident in Kaneko Tohta's modern haiku.¹³

Another conspicuous trend in the western haiku world is the keen interest shown in the renga—linked poetry. This type of

poetry appeared a long time ago in the *Dragonfly*,¹⁴ and in the *Cicada* they began to print some renga a few years ago. Then in the *frogpond* of a new format, its new editor Geoffrey O'Brien, states his intention of putting emphasis on the genre from this year. They had some influence from Earl Minor's *Japanese Linked Poetry*¹⁵ and some other translations of Japanese renga such as "Three Poets at Minase." O'Brien believes that

the development [of the linked poetry] is of great potential interest not only for the haiku community, but for the large Euro-American poetic scene as well. Linked poetry is not just a different form of poetry, but something that puts the poet in a different relation to his work. Rather than the situation of the solitary poet writing for an audience (an audience which these days often proves to be imaginary), we have here a form which makes the concept of audience irrelevant. What counts is the interrelation among the poets participating in the poem. Everything hinges on attentiveness and response to the work of the others.... In the context of linked poetry, to read poetry and to write poetry are aspects of the same act.... The renga is the product of the midpoint which separate individuals have converged on, by tuning in to each other's voice....¹⁶

He also adds that it can prove fruitful even to the poet working alone. It is as if he were thinking of old times in Japan when a linked tanka, *sedoka*¹⁷ or renga sometimes used to be composed by a single poet.

They take as their starting point of departure the Japanese form of renga, but there is obviously no attempt to duplicate that form, O'Brien says. However, in fact, the practitioners of haiku in English are now reversing the historical process by tracing haiku back to its source in linked poetry.

The western poetry has gone too far from nature¹⁸ or at least from human-nature-oriented poetry to estranged, abstract, metaphysical madness. So haiku poets have become aware of the harm in writing and reading modern poems and now they are going back to the kind of poetry called "haiku" which, in my

view, retains something of the primitive songs.

And I believe the goodness of the haiku consists in its brevity and the instant inspiration and illumination it gives, and the depth and significance that are contained in it, while the linked poetry in English which they are now beginning to produce has no such virtues. They are just long poems which are composed of a number of a-few-short-line stanzas or poems with some form of connection in each link. It takes a certain amount of patience and time according to its length to understand a linked poem as a whole. In this sense it is not different from other longer forms of poetry. Yet what is detrimental to it is that it never gives such intense pleasure as we get from reading other short or long poems. It has no such magic as drives the reader to continue to read it to its end as fast as he can. The reader is interested only in the way how the following poem has been connected or associated with the preceding one. And whenever the link fails to attract him, the poem stops there for the reader. Composing a renga is just a game.¹⁹

According to my interpretation, they are now being forced to go back in the history of the Japanese literature because they compose haiku in solitude—as lone poets. In this sense they are not different from other poets who are alone and individualistic. They do not compose haiku in groups or criticize one another's works at poetry parties. They are not less lonely individuals than other poets writing longer forms of poetry—only they are closer to mother earth when they write haiku because of the nature of the poem.

Yet this trend may develop to some extent because some haiku poets are always searching for variety or they are not just satisfied with writing the shortest form of poetry day in and day out.

I have no intention of discouraging those renga writers so

long as the *fad* provides the poets with a sort of diversion or outlet for their emotional furnace. I'd rather think this trend has some potential as O'Brien says, which remains to be seen in the future world of poetry.

In fact I was delighted to find some interesting "linked one-line poems" in some of the haiku magazines mentioned above.²⁰ I like *rensaku* or *shudai rensaku* like James Kirkup's prize-winning one titled "Tokyo Snow" which is composed of several haiku, each of which is a complete poem. Yet as a whole it depicts beautifully Tokyo in snow.²¹ Rather than *shudai rensaku* I prefer a mere *rensaku* written with a title or a theme in which each poem shares the same common emotion or inspiration the poet felt or experienced.

I hope this type of linked-poetry will be written more and more in the future, and help haikuists join other poets writing longer forms of poetry in producing such poems as satisfy them all.

Notes:

¹ James William Hackett (1929-) discovered haiku through the writings of R. H. Blyth and Alan Watts, and has several books of his haiku published. They include *The Way of Haiku*, *Bug Haiku* and *Haiku Poetry*, Vols. 1-4. His classic haiku won first prize in Japan Air Lines Contest 1965.

² Its first issue appeared in 1967 edited by Robert Spiess, James Bull and Gary Brower. The haiku magazine was published semi-annually by American Haiku Press in co-operation with the School of Arts and Sciences of Wisconsin State University. Its publication lasted only a few years.

³ Nicholas Virgilio (1928-) discovered haiku through Kenneth Yasuda's book, *A Pepper Pod*. His experimental haiku in a free form won first prize in Japan Air Lines Contest. He is now the director of the American Poetry Center, Camden, N. J., U. S. A.

⁴ See Atsuo Nakagawa, *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976).

⁵ See the same.

⁶ Eric Amann (1938-) His interest in haiku started through R. H. Blyth's books. He issued the first Canadian haiku magazine in 1967. Its

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publication lasted for years, and then founded The Haiku Society of Canada, whose organ is the *Cicada*.

⁷ Published by The Haiku Society of America, Inc., New York.

⁸ Edited by George Swede and published by The Haiku Society of Canada in 1979.

⁹ Edited by Cor van den Heuvel and published by Doubleday, New York in 1974.

¹⁰ Of the seven classical rules, the left-out ones are:

Rule III: A haiku contains some reference to nature and season.

Rule VI: In haiku the poet's personal views and comments should not intrude on the poem.

Rule VII: Simile, metaphor, personification and rhyme should not be used in haiku.

In addition, Rule I has three corollaries, and two (rules about the pattern of 5-7-5 in 17 syllables) of them are ruled out.

¹¹ As to a brief history of the schools, see Nakagawa's book on English haiku mentioned above.

¹² For instance, you can find a great difference between Issa's works and those of Buson when we read each poet's poems as a whole. Mizuhara, one of the modern haiku masters, who died this summer, advocated putting "subjective tone" in the works of his group *Ashibi*.

The critical term meaning controversies on a second-rate art comes from the fact that the haiku is too short a poem for the poet to brand his personality or characteristic traits in his work.

¹³ See his book: *Haiku: Tanshikei no Konnichi to Sohzo* (What the Shortest Form of Poetry Is Today and Its Creation) (Tokyo: Hokuyo-Sha, 1972).

Mr. Kaneko asserts that new haiku require new subject matter and words, and goes so far as to say that the human body (its members), time (morning, noon, night, etc.) and earth (trees, rocks, mountains, etc.) can become *kigo*.

¹⁴ A quarterly haiku magazine edited and published by Lorraine E. Harr at Portland, Oregon, U. S. A.

¹⁵ Published by Princeton University Press in 1970.

¹⁶ Pages 3-4, *frogpond*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (1981).

¹⁷ The oldest form of Japanese love song which consists of a couple of *kata-uta* in 5-7-7, 4-7-7 or 5-7-5 syllable pattern.

¹⁸ Supposing that ancient Greek poems were their source.

¹⁹ Renga in contrast with *haikai-no-renga* or *renku* is generally thought to be a serious poem but after all it is a game.

²⁰ I admire Marlene Willis's "sequences" printed in the above-mentioned *frogpond*. I'd like to call it *shudai rensaku* (a number of one-line haiku grouped under a subject), not *renga*. Her sequences are rather a long poem

in the disguise of one-line linked poems.

²¹ Here is Kirkup's "Tokyo Snow":

Tokyo Snow

—for Fumiko—

Snow falling
is the wind
made visible

large white flakes
fall in an orderly manner
as in a woodblock print

the city's dark
secret surfaces
discovered by snow

I heard wild birds
cry in the night
morning crushed by snow

the whole sky
seems to have fallen
silently overnight