

A Brief Analysis of Contemporary English Haiku

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To begin with, what the writer means by “Contemporary English Haiku” must be made clear. It would be a difficult task to define it since nobody has ever surveyed the English haikudom spreading over a large part of the world. Even the number of the haiku magazines is not known, let alone that of the haikuists. Therefore for his analytical purpose, the writer thought of making use of the English haiku entered for The 10th Year Haiku Contest held by the Poetry Society of Japan in July 1977. Although the participants and entries are not said to be plenty since its publicity was limited, the writer assumes that the entries represent the contemporary English haiku fairly well because the participants whose number amounts to 100 are scattered over nine countries, and yet those who took part in the contest are supposed to cover most of those haikuists who have confidence in the quality of their works, for, as far as the writer knows, they hold important positions in the poetry world of today, and their works are good.

Thus it is on this assumption that the writer tries to analyze contemporary English haiku in the following:

The total number of the English haiku is 202, except for nine unqualified ones, by 98 haiku poets except for unqualified six. The exact numbers of the contestants, the entries and their nationalities are as follows (the figure in each parenthesis stands for the number of persons followed by that of entries):

The United States of America (42, 83); Japan (27 foreigners, 66); New Zealand (12, 18); Japan (8 Japanese, 12); Canada (3, 9); England (2, 4); Hong Kong (1, 3); Australia (1, 3); France (1, 2); Holland (1, 2).

That is, the U. S. haiku poets and their works occupy nearly a half (43 % and 41 % respectively) of the whole, while the foreign poets living in Japan and their poems take up approximately one-third (28 % and 33 % respectively).

These figures are—the writer guesses—reflective of the fact that the United States holds more than a half of all the English haiku poets in the world, seeing that the publicity of the contest was poor, while more foreigners living in Japan than were expected took part in the contest because of good publicity and their keen interest in Japanese culture.

Next, if we turn our analytical eye to the form of the haiku, those with titles number 29 out of the 202 (14 percent); the classic type (Form A, which resembles R. H. Blyth's ideal form: 2-3-2 rhythm in three lines) amounts to 160 (about 80 percent); shorter one (Form B, in three lines, but not in 2-3-2 rhythm) counts 15 (7 percent), and the other forms (Form C: one, two, four or five lines) totals 27 (13 percent).

That is, B and C forms occupy only 20 percent of the whole. From these figures it is supposed that the majority of the English haikuists write in the classic form—this inference seems correct as far as the writer surveys the haiku printed in the four major haiku magazines¹ published in the United States and Canada. And even the poems printed in the Haiku Issue of *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 39 & 40² endorses this rate (four out of the twenty are not in Blyth's form). Besides, it does not seem that most of the contestants deliberately chose the classic type because the contest was held in Japan.

On the other hand it is very interesting to note the following

data when we compare the foreign haikuists living in Japan with those in the United States. That is, 43 haiku (65 percent) out of the 66 from Japan are in the classic form while 72 (87 percent) out of the 83 from the U. S. are in the conventional form. And all the entries from New Zealand, England, Hong Kong are of the same classic type, and those from the other countries (Australia, France and Canada) 11 out of 14 (79 percent) are in Form A. Furthermore, if we examine the entries from the Japanese haikuists, only seven out of 12 (58 percent) are in the classic form.

From these figures the writer concludes that in Japan, the homeland of haiku, English haikuists, especially Japanese English writers are using freer forms as vehicles for their haiku poems, probably because they are well aware that the English language is quite a different tongue and that it seems impossible to give the 5-7-5 pattern of the Japanese language to the haiku in English, while in foreign countries, since most Japanese haiku introduced there were in classic forms,³ still the haikuists stick to the conventional form.

Thirdly if we direct our attention to the contents of the haiku, "nature" poems which are written about outside world of nature amount to 174 (86 percent); "metaphysical" or "didactic" poems number six (3 percent); and "semi-nature" haiku combining objective natural things or happenings with mental or imaginary things or creations count 22 (10 percent). Yet to the writer's surprise, 15 (68 percent) out of the 22 are found among the poems written by the foreigners living in Japan. Just a look at the winning and selected poems printed in the Haiku Issue of *PN* supports the above proportion: "Wild geese depart/ seized/ by the sky's void" by Stephen Wolfe and "trickles and torrents,/ spring eve shakuhachi—/ my heart is a paper boat." by Robert Brady have some metaphysical qualities, while "Even now in death/ His hand lies trustingly in mine/ As I clip his nails." by Barbara Ruch is the only one (out of

the three haiku written by foreigners living in Japan, found in the issue) which is close to "nature" poetry. These data, the writer concludes, mean that just as the 17: 5-7-5 pattern is stuck to by the majority, the conception that haiku is a nature poem has taken firm root in the general haiku poets' minds. On the other hand the foreigners living in Japan have a better grasp of the Japanese haiku and their modern trend.

In a nutshell: 1) English haiku poets are found not only in the English-speaking countries but also in other countries in Europe and Asia.⁴ 2) About a half of the haikuists are living in the United States. 3) Some 80 percent of the poets stick to the conventional form of haiku. 4) Nearly 90 percent of them seem to consider that good haiku are nature poems. 5) The foreigners who are living in Japan seem to have keen interest in Japanese culture and use freer forms for haiku poetry having grasped the modern trend of the Japanese haiku.

Notes:

¹ They are *Modern Haiku* (U. S. A.), *Bonsai* (U. S. A.), *Cicada* (Canada), and *Dragonfly* (U. S. A.).

² The Haiku Issue of *Poetry Nippon* which carries five winning haiku and 15 others selected from among the entries in The 10th Year Haiku Contest was published by the Poetry Nippon Press in September, 1977.

³ Earlier translations of Japanese haiku (than Blyth's) were not always in Blyth's ideal form, though they were usually accompanied with explanations.

⁴ It is known that there are many English haiku poets in Taiwan.