

JAMES KIRKUP'S HAIKU IN ENGLISH

by Atsuo Nakagawa

James Kirkup, who likes anything long and thin or slender, such as yams, burdocks, radishes, cigarets, *fundoshi*, etc., in which he might see spirit, real strength or vigor, and so on, naturally loves one-line haiku or poems best of all literary genres⁽¹⁾ just as he might love men's sexual organ best of all human parts.

Mr. Kirkup who usually writes only haiku or shortest poems when he is busy, likes the simple modesty of short poems. They are unpretentious, do not impose themselves upon or bore him, he says.

When we see his first English haiku collected in his *Japan Physical*⁽²⁾ which he must have written soon after he came to Japan as a teacher of English literature at Tohoku University in 1959, we find that he just tried to express his fresh impressions of things Japanese in three lines and in around seventeen syllables:

Smile whiter than rice,

(1) One-line haiku or poems could be compared to the above-mentioned objects in appearance. Other longer poems or prose printed on pages usually don't appear slender to my mind.

(2) Published by Kenkyusha, Tokyo in 1969, All the haiku in English cited in this essay are from this book except the one-line haiku or poems.

Beard thinner than first green shoots,
The wild man of spring.

This may be the best of the three, the last line giving a complementary conclusion.

As he tried to render his impressions of scenic places—The Inland Sea—into haiku, they resembled a well-known Japanese haiku:

Morning

Are clouds or mountains
Floating in the island air
Half sea, half heaven?

Then he produced picturesque, yet lively, dynamic haiku:

Apricot petals
Falling, snowing the night-wind's
Star-layered lacquer.

—Spring Haiku

Fresh-planted rice-shoots:
spurts of green rain
in sudden dense showers.

—Summer Haiku

Next, he tried, as the Shinko-haiku (Newly-Rising Haiku) school poets did, to put a new factor in his haiku as the following shows:

In a dark teashop
The boy hands me hot towels,
White, like steaming ghosts.

—Winter Haiku

He also tried a *haiga* haiku:

High in a far
 Corner of the air, a peak
 Hangs on nothing. That is all.

—Two Pictures from Japan

Those were followed by delightful haiku written by him when he was given a Japanese-style wooden residence by the Tohoku University, where he lived for some years. They are serial haiku composed of thirteen. However, they are rather songs than haiku as the title says: "Song of the New Mats". Indeed the form of each poem is haiku—around seventeen syllables, three lines and substitutive punctuations for *kireji* or cutting words. But the joy the poet has expressed in it is really what comes from songs:

What is this rich scent?
 It is the fresh *tatami*,
 Cool, green as crushed grass.

It fills the whole house:
 One room has new *tatami*
 And the house runs wild.

I shall run wild, when
 Each room has clean *tatami*—
 Bare-foot, naked, mad.

Then appeared "Ten Haiku". As their subtitle: 'Love Poems from the Japanese' tells their contents, they are love songs like *dodoitsu*; their

form is just like haiku but they are full of sentimental emotions; their tone being very sweet, they are enchantingly beautiful. They indeed show delicacy and beauty better than the best Japanese *kouta*⁽¹⁾ does. James Kirkup is a great craftsman:

After making love,
Lying with eyes closed, listen
To the melting snow.

We lie together,
Head on shoulder, cheek on head,
Smelling of new grass.

In the single tree
Of our arms our hearts are close:
Doves deep in summer.

When we part, a leaf,
The first grief, falls between us
Like a lost shadow.

After some interval, Mr. Kirkup produced an excellent modern haiku, which is very near to Basho's haiku:

At the Saké Brewery

In the stone garden
We drink the sound of waves ...
Waves drink the garden.

—*Nami-no-oto Brewery* —Two Haiku

(1) The term here is used in a historical wide sense.

This is a very fine modern piece of poetry using metaphorical expression. It gives the reader a vivid reality of the scene as if he were there.

The most haiku-like poems in English written by James Kirkup⁽¹⁾ are the ones the author studied his poem sequence "Japan Marine" with, in that they are objective renderings of haiku-moments. There are no personifications nor metaphors nor similes; just simple expressions of what he saw, heard or felt. Especially the following three are very fine, having the role of musical accompaniment to the main three stanzas describing Japan with an impressive and fantastic touch under the title 'The Sca Outside'⁽²⁾:

Cicadas chant cool
 sutras in temple pinetrees:
 warm stars' throbbing gong.

Last summer lanterns.
 Corncobs grilled at street corners:
 Dirty paper fan.

Windbell, tired child's cry:
 paper poem hangs faded,
 but still it's summer.

Meanwhile James Kirkup produced haiku-like pure poems entitled 'The Autumn Fool':

His smile like a withered leaf

(1) In the sense of the conventional Japanese haiku.

(2) Precisely speaking, "Cicadas chant cool sutras" could be interpreted as a sort of personification, and "Windbell, tired child's cry" as a sort of simile in apposition.

Hangs in the bare
Twigs of his hands.

The trees in a quiet street
Have turbulent windows that
Reflect the sunset's shambles.

They have, like other pure poems, similes, abstractions, and metaphors.

As Dr. Tsutomu Fukuda says in his letter to me, Mr. Kirkup is not satisfied with his English haiku; he seemed to have come to an impasse although he was at first much fascinated with the simplest, shortest poem in the world. He may have found out that, compared with Japanese haiku in general, his English one does not sound like the Japanese counterpart though he sticks to seventeen syllables, because his haiku goes into too minute details as Mr. Hiroshi Hayakawa's study proves it.⁽¹⁾ And thus while he is trying to make his apparently too long haiku poetic, that is, to "load every rift with ore"⁽²⁾, he is lost in making the efforts itself. Therefore what is called 'haiku moment' is lost. At best his haiku are mere imitations of Japanese haiku even though he uses quite different media—English words. In general, his haiku, into which he has also introduced the rhetoric and versification of English poetry, do not sound good in spite of their novelty and strangeness and uniqueness.⁽³⁾

(1) See Hiroshi Hayakawa, 'Eigo Haiku Ron Sandai (Three Arguments on Haiku in English)', *Bungaku Geijutsu*, No. 1 (1968).

James Kirkup admits in his letter to me (October 7, '71) that it is impossible for haiku in English to be like Japanese haiku, and asserts that the great difference in the two languages must be taken into account.

(2) Quoted from James Kirkup's letter to Cyril Patterson (October 24, 1971).

(3) As poems they are fine but not in such sense as we expect from haiku in

Thus he has come to write still shorter haiku—what he calls ‘one-line haiku’. Toward the end of 1970 he began to contribute his one-line haiku to a Japanese haiku magazine called *Shikai* which was advocating a revolution of haiku and printing poem-like one-line haiku:⁽¹⁾

Group I: Cold wind, fresh tears.

Bullet hole, spider’s web of glass.

Pink cattleya—cat’s yawn.

The length of those short poems is less than the half of the seventeen syllables required for the traditional form of haiku and each of them is composed of two nouns or noun groups which are placed in apposition, and the relations between the two noun (group)s make poetry—comparatively simple association in this case. There are no verbs nor sentence connectives.

There are other poems which belong to another category:

G. II: These boiled shrimps are babies’ fingers.

Bargain sale—one heart and a blunt pencil.

A wild boar smiled at a butterfly.

These are very close in form to those I mentioned above; only each has one more noun (group) or one verb added to it. So they have more syllables than the ones in the first group though they are less than ten syllables in length.

general. A. W. Sadler also says in his essay ‘James Kirkup as Haiku Poet’, *Literature East & West*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (1965): “...read well as English poetry; and many are fine haiku.” (p. 242)

(1) Published in Nagoya, edited by Ikehara Gyomindo. Some of the one-line haiku or poems cited in this essay have not been printed in the magazine.

There are still others which would be included in another category:

- G. III: A rose drinks its shadow.
 The headless man choked back his tears.
 Shoeshine boys massage heart in boots.
 A fly buzzed in a hardboiled egg.
 When I waved my hand it flew away.

I am not sure whether these can be called one-line *haiku*; I myself would rather call them one-line poems.

There are others which would be included still in another group:

- G. IV: Critics are the tradesmen of literature.
 A true poem is never poetic.
 Excess of anything is always nothing.

I don't think these can be called poetry at all. They are mere maxims or golden sayings from the author's rich experiences. But if the writer does call them poems too, the problem must be considered from a different angle.

When we view this jumble of shortest poems from the sonic side of the 'poems', we have the following:

- One pencil alone is packed with poem.
 Black man, red blood, white bones.
 Piston, penis: engine, vagina: anus, anus.

When this element of sound is taken into consideration, even the first one of those which may belong to the fourth group, sounds poetic.

But what is the difference between the first two groups and the third, that is, one-line haiku and one-line poems though the author includes the latter and the fourth too in one-line haiku? Mr. Kirkup once told me, when I asked him what the difference was, that those poems which retain something of the traditional Japanese haiku are one-line haiku. I wonder if such a poem as "Black man, red blood, white bones" has anything derived from the traditional haiku.⁽¹⁾

On the other hand, what about the fourth category? Could we call them poems? If we refer to his latest essay: 'The Monostich' which appeared in *Poetry Nippon*, however, he says in it, "It (one-line poem) may be witty or dreamy, eccentric or highly moral." So according to his definition they may be called one-line poems. Anything improper, inexpressible, or unexpected which is compressed or sounds unusual—palindromes, tongue-twisters, proverbs, aphorisms, epigrams, commercials, witty jokes, funny sayings, onomatopoeic words, special or scientific or medical terms, a single line in a prose passage, etc.—can be a one-line poem provided that it gives instant inspirations or illumination, expressing itself immediately man-to-man and making the reader forget himself. That's James Kirkup's definition of his one-line poems.⁽²⁾ And this solves one of

(1) I believe we could call those two groups haiku not only because the author himself does so, but also because they have enough features to be treated so.

(2) In his letter given to me after his reading the draft of this essay, he thinks :

...this (his calling all the one-line poems cited above haiku) was an oversight or an accident, or some sort of explanation for my English readers, who are familiar with the haiku idea. Actually most of them are more like *senryu*....—Kirkup's letter of October 7, 1971.

(3) For further details, see *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 16 & 17(1971).

our questions. But still our bigger one remains unsolved: How is it that he calls those in the third and fourth groups haiku?

At first, when Mr. Kirkup came to Japan and learned about haiku, he knew that haiku is 'ah-ness', or something which comes down into one's mind like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. But as he began to compose haiku he realized that he could not do it in one breath; he grows too conscious, for while looking at things faithfully and accurately, as Emily Dickinson did, he breaks up the image he has acquired, which in its turn produces strange clearness, making him feel a calm shocking like realization⁽¹⁾—the final result sounds good but the process takes too long time for composing haiku. After all, he cannot forget himself while looking for some form for his haiku as a poem. And at best his English haiku look like imitations or, in other words, mere "approximations or pale reflections of the Japanese form"⁽²⁾ as we saw the reasons in the second chapter, while most of the others sound like short poems (not what he calls one-line poems) even though he has imitated the form of Japanese haiku and learned the way of rendering it into English.

Thus according to Mr. Hiroshi Hayakawa⁽³⁾, the author once tried to write prosaic English haiku hoping that his new experiment would produce more haiku spirit, but we have not been shown yet those works which he might have composed.⁽⁴⁾ Meanwhile he has had in mind something of

(1) Hayakawa, 'Kahkappu-san to Haiku (Mr. Kirkup and Haiku)', *Kaze* (October 1964).

(2) Kirkup's letter of October 7, 1971.

(3) Hayakawa, *op. cit.*

(4) But the author himself says that he never told Mr. Hayakawa of such an attempt of his according to the same letter of October 7, 1971.

the one-line poems since he learned about the use of *koan* and *mondo* in Zen Buddhist training. He says:

...Many of these very compact Zen *koan* are astonishing one-line poems and truly produce illumination or *satori* in minds previously blind to poetry or to the spiritual nature of man and the universe....

And he cites one example: "The iron trees are in full bloom," which "works both as a *koan* and as a one-line poem with mind-expanding images."⁽¹⁾

Maybe what he tried to write in prose are these monostiches whose prototype is found in *koan* and *mondo*. As we have seen in the above chapters, some of his one-line haiku are haiku-like, some are pure poems, and others are mere sayings. Yet they may be called poems according to his definition.⁽²⁾ And I believe in the sense that these shortest forms represent the 'ah-ness', compactness, or instant inspiration or illumination expressing themselves immediately man-to-man, and [that they make it possible for the reader to forget himself while reading them, he includes them in one-line haiku.

James Kirkup has at last found the most suitable form of haiku in English in one-line haiku after more than ten years' trial and error.⁽³⁾

(1) Quoted from Kirkup's 'Monostich'.

(2) In the same letter written after reading the draft of this essay, he says :
...I think it is not very important to try to find distinctions between 'one-line poem' and 'one-line haiku'—they are all just 'one-line poems'....

(3) According to his essay 'Sons of the North' which appeared (some months later) on January 1, 1972 in *The Rising Generation*, Vol. CXVII, No. 10, James Kirkup seems to admit :

...this (monostich) is certainly one of the most promising developments in recent haiku composition. (p. 636)