

For World Haiku

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The word “World Haiku” sounds peaceful as well as painful. It is peaceful, as it reminds us of “world peace”, while it is painful, as it reminds us of “World War”. I must say that between “world” and “haiku”, there is an extraordinary relation.

Probably the West encountered haiku for the first time at the end of the 19th century, thanks to works by W. G. Aston, Lafcadio Hearn, B. H. Chamberlain, etc. Then, just at the beginning of the 20th century, in 1902, an English japanologist, B. H. Chamberlain (1850~1935) published a long essay on Japanese haiku, titled “Basho and the Japanese Poetical Epigram” (Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Vol. XXX, Tokyo, 1902). In the same year, Shiki Masaoka died, without finishing the modernization of Japanese haiku. In his essay, Chamberlain remarked on the two essential matters of classic Japanese haiku.

The first remark is that in haiku there is “no assertion ... for logical intellect, but a natural scene outlined in three strokes of the brush for the imagination or memory”. This remark is quite persuasive even in our days. Of course, haiku is a kind of poetry, one of the verbal arts, but its most outstanding character may be a power to create an image. In Japan as well other countries, they often say that the successful haiku gives birth to an impressive image. So today, not a few people are fond of haiku writing and haiga drawing at the same time. Our World Haiku Association holds a monthly haiga contest on its website; the submitted haiga from many countries show us creative variety. Enjoying each beauty of submitted haiga, a question comes to me. Sometimes I wonder if haiku aims to only create some image. What kind of image is the most desirable for haiku? Is haiku really a tiny picture made of a few words? Though Shiki Masaoka has no direct relation with Chamberlain, one of the aims of his haiku modernization is also to create an impressive image by means of haiku.

Before answering this important question, I had better mention the second remark on haiku by Chamberlain as follows. Haiku is “shattered crystal, each reflecting at a different angle some minute corner of a scene, a brief note of some fact in nature, or maybe an indication of some sentiment or fancy”. Saying so, Chamberlain didn't praise haiku to the skies, but he denied haiku as literature or poetry. I find a crucial encounter of haiku and the West in Chamberlain's denial of haiku as literature.

Now I cannot say haiku has really encountered the East other than Japan, knowing that some Chinese began haiku writing called “kanpai” starting in the 1980s, in China.

Let's get back to Chamberlain's denial. If haiku is only a tiny picture in words, haiku is neither literature nor poetry worth its name. Chamberlain, who clung to so-called Occidental cultural tradition and sense of values, could not predict any possibility of the short poetry that in fact came into flower during the whole 20th century.

The most famous short poem influenced by haiku is “In a Station of the Metro” in only two lines:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Lustra, 1917, USA)

Ezra Pound (1885~1972) composed this in Paris in the 1910s. It is an amazing fact that a poet of the American Lost Generation could compose a short poem in a country other than his homeland. The underground “Station” is Concorde; on it an obelisk brought from Luxor in Egypt stands. This monumental short poem by Ezra Pound is extremely international. Contrary to Chamberlain's keen denial, since the beginning of the 20th century, short poems like haiku have been successful. From this poem, what kind of image can we receive? It is not an ordinary realistic scene, but an impressive, suggestive and unexpected image that reminds us of something ontologic and mythologic.

In 1920s and 30s, French poets were absorbed in haiku writing. For example, a dadaist and

surrealist poet, Paul Eluard (1895~1952) wrote many haiku (under the name “haïkai”) as well as short poems. His most beautiful haiku appeared in 1920.

Le cœur à ce qu'elle chante
Elle fait fondre la neige
La nourrice des oiseaux.

Heart to her song
She makes snow melt
Wet-nurse of birds

(Pour vivre ici, 1920, France)

Mobilized during World War I, Eluard encountered haiku. Short poems like haiku became his ideal poetry, that is a poetic image without any other element. This haiku itself is a pure image beyond our common sense. The image enclosed in the whole short poem is a warm crystallization of Eluard's deep ontology. Again and again, Chamberlain's denial of haiku was betrayed by short poems charged with poetic energy.

In Japan, in the 1930s, New Style Haiku poets tried to create surrealistic haiku based on their experience and imagination during World War II. Hakusen Watanabe (1913~1969) wrote the following haiku in 1939.

Sensô ga rôka no okuni tatte ita

War stood
at the end of the corridor

(Hakusen Kushû, 1975, Japan)

Just like the case of Pound and Eluard, the haiku by Watanabe itself is a pure image. This pure image is realistic because it reflects well the war time; this image is surrealistic because it surpasses our ordinary life.

Now we can say that during the first half of the 20th century, haiku in different countries was finding a new way of creating a pure image. From this way springs out an image that is fragmentary but fully charged with poetic energy. I would like to consider this way as the basis of World Haiku. This basis was born secretly after two world-wide wars in the 20th century. We needed the whole second half of the 20th century to recognize this basis.

Then, what are the possibilities of World Haiku in the 21st century? This is our question. First of all, I would like to say that World Haiku conceives still unlimited possibilities in itself.

Let's cite a few significant examples.

In Brittany of France, Alain Kervern (1945~) wrote some spiritual haiku.

Brise d'aurore
un enfant-lavoir
frissonne

A dawn breeze
a girl washer
shivers

(To Breizh, 2001, France)

Really from his haiku, we can take a realistic image, but this image is colored with pure spirit. In his haiku, the human being and nature exist in primitive relation.

Last year, with a Portuguese poet, Casimiro de Brito (1938~), I composed a renku consisting of one hundred haiku. In this renku, de Brito showed me a haiku similar to a proverb filled with wisdom:

Uma cidade! Um grão
de areia! Fragmentos

da Via Láctea

A city! A grain
of sand! Fragments
of the Milky Way

(Através do ar 1, in Ginyu No.17, 2003,

Japan)

This haiku is typical; its nihilist assertion gives us a cosmic image as well an encouragement after nihilism.

Before concluding this speech, I dare to mention a case concerning me. In the past two years, I have been writing series of haiku entitled "Flying Pope". I don't know when this writing will finish.

Sora o tobu hôô senka wa haneru nomi ka

Flying Pope!
The fire of war
is a jumping flea?

Soratobu hôô nandomo nandomo suna o kamu

Flying Pope
many times many times
crunches sand

(Flying Pope 4, in Ginyu No.18, 2003, Japan)

One day, in a dream of mine, a word "soratobu hôô (flying pope)" was said by myself. Then I began my "Flying pope" haiku writing without noticing what "Flying Pope" means. The image of "Flying Pope" is quite clear, but it may be only a caricature of Christianity.

Writing and writing this series of haiku, finally I found that the viewpoint of "Flying Pope" could be peculiar to our days. From the mobile viewpoint of "Flying Pope", we can watch anything that might occur on the earth. In this century, we can acquire not fixed but mobile and imaginary viewpoints.

So World Haiku will be promising, if haiku poets in different countries find a truly poetic way suitable to our new century.

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