

Liberative Haiku



I have a small green book into which I enter any published haiku which I feel will be deeply sustaining and inspiring in truly hard times. And at such times I take down this book and it does its work well. As to my own work, at my best I write haiku (and haibun) to live, rather than live to write haiku. Nevertheless, only a few of my own poems would qualify for the little green book.

My concern here is to investigate what it is about some haiku that makes them existentially liberative. Existential here refers to the human condition, or rather the human predicament, in which we struggle to evade what we don't want and are constantly frustrated in our pursuit of what we do want. Liberative denotes here at least some release from the root anxiety and sense of lack from which the human animal characteristically suffers. In other words, existentially liberative haiku convey some spiritual insight and release. And the writing and reading of them offers a spiritual practice. Many such haiku have a Zen Buddhist flavour, and haiku have been included as one of the several Ways of Zen practice. I have earlier written about [Zen and the Art of Haiku](#) (1), in a companion essay to this one. Here I am concerned with an inclusive and perennial "inner path" spirituality that breathes no word of spirituality.

Existentially liberative haiku are more evident in some times and places than others, as for example, in the work of Basho, Issa, Buson and Shiki,

and modern Japanese haikai like Santoka Taneda (2), Saito Sanki (3), Hosai Ozaki (4), to name just three personal favourites. Of Western haiku journals the Dublin based Haiku Spirit was particularly prominent.

Most haiku (and senryu, haibun, tanka, renga) are relatively trite in terms of the grave and constant themes of our lives. As George Marsh has observed, "averagely well done haiku, especially in bulk, can seem pretty frivolous. Good observation, some clever phrasing, but so what? A thing so small, so easy to pass over, has to have a lot of coiled tension below the surface to deliver any kind of kick". The great majority do not profoundly deepen our sensibilities as human beings and would not claim to do so. They entertain and delight us, and brighten our lives a little, and we should be the poorer without them. Most depend for their effect on their plumage, their attractive and striking imagery. And there is another large class which rely upon cleverness and contrivance (and here I include senryu in the generic haiku). *Kissing in the kitchen / the dough / slowly rises* exclaims Ms Carrie Etter. Others make a more thoughtful and reflective point, like this by W.J.Fenny: *Back in the real world / the actress wipes off greasepaint / and puts on make-up*. Neither kind leaves space for the reader, except to laugh. We are just told something... We chuckle ... and move on.

The problem of reader exclusion applies to another category of mainstream haiku which has larger pretensions. I refer to the heavy symbolism of the closed metaphor. Many acclaimed haiku poets, who also on occasion produce fine existential haiku, are sometimes given to beating their readers over the head in this way.

I recall a collection by George Swede (5) where the symbolism is relentlessly heavy, whether of widows or fishermen: *clothes line / the widow's black lace panties / covered in frost and around the eyes / of the old fisherman / permanent ripples*. More sophisticated is this from Caroline Gourlay: *Last day / a cold spark from two flints / then the paper catches*. If metaphor is insufficiently open then the poet's meaning invades the imagery. Readers are obliged to share the writer's subjectivity and left no space for their own.

Let us now return to existentially liberative haiku. First, there are a comparatively small proportion whose purpose is as explicit as it can be without being obtrusively didactic and crossing the border into religious poetry. Here are two Zen examples from Natsume Soseki and Basho respectively. The first is a play on a well known koan and the second refers to the law of karma.

What is your
Original Nature
snowman?

The whitebait
opens its black eyes
in the Net of the Law

And here is a haiku by Basho, and a tanka by Michael Gunton on the practice of "bare awareness". In the inkstone haiku by Mitsui Suzuki "one brush" refers to the Mahayana "emptiness" which contains the relativities of both joy and grief (as with Blake's "Joy and grief are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine").

This is all there is:
the path dies out
at the parsley bed

No time
to be lonely
just this
peeling an apple
in between

Inkstone cold
joy and grief
one brush

In this vein are others with such strong poetic metaphor (and simile) as to put purist haiku credentials in question. Here are three varied examples, from Issa, Ishikawa Tokobaku and Nagata Koi:

In this life
we walk on the roof of hell
and view the flowers

Like a pebble
that rolls downhill
I arrive at today

How lonely it is
cultivating the stone leeks
in this world of dreams

These, however, are untypical of existentially liberative haiku. As Basho observed:

How admirable
he who thinks not "life is fleeting"
when he sees the lightning!

As the great thirteenth century Zen master Dogen said, "When the self withdraws, the ten thousand things advance". Lee Gurga reminds us that "haiku record the world as it is rather than as we should like it to be ...the issue of ego vs. true receptivity is one of the most persistent and distressing issues of haiku" (6). Only when the mind is still does it become a clear pool in which "the thousand things" are faithfully reflected. It is from the contemplative mind that existential haiku come forth. Existential haiku achieve their effect through a selfless clarity of perception of the suchness of things. As Ch'an sage Seng-t'san has it: "When the mind makes no distinctions, all things are as they are". This offers a subtle, if fleeting, liberation from the ache of wanting things to be otherwise. The reader can experience a mysterious and fleeting moment of release, of joy – "Ah! just so!" Thus, for Basho –

To the willow –
all hatred, and desire
of your heart

This joyful release is evident in all the mystical traditions, and with it comes a life-affirming empowerment. Somewhere Edward Thomas wrote this 'found' haiku:

I arose and knew
that I was tired
and continued my journey

In its small way the imagery of the existential haiku has this same startling, fresh and liberating clarity. Moreover it is infused with a subtle warmth of feeling, the shared humanity of this most selfless of literary gifts, as with Shiki:

Pitiful ... fearful
those poor scarecrows look like men
in autumn light

Subject matter is also relevant. Sickness, death and the fleeting years of life are more compelling concerns than, say, a broken love affair. But they are only so to the extent that the poet has deeply experienced them and is able to give them effective expression. Here is Saito Sanki on the hunger years of post-war Japan – or anywhere, anytime in the terrible twentieth century:

Those in line
watching the wind
sweep the earth

A powerful device employed in many existential haiku is the use of disjunction (juxtaposition). Commonly with the third line – though it could be elsewhere – the haiku suddenly makes a creatively disconcerting swerve, revealing the subject of the haiku in a new light. The first two below, by Cicely Hill and Jim Norton respectively, both make a very common use of this device, as does the well-known example by Buson which follows them. Some feeling is spelled out, which is then powered by poignant imagery (or vice versa). Note how, in contrast to the use of heavy symbolism (above), this separation allows the imagery to stand in its own right, and of readers to make of it what they will, given the prompt in the other line or lines.

Pausing to watch
breeze over the hayfields
forgotten names

Such a sky
the ache of loss is answered
and returned entire

Ah, grief and sadness
the fishing line trembles
in the autumn mist

Less common, but with a more direct factuality, is the juxtaposition of two contrasting images. For the spark to jump, the association needs to be not too obvious, not too remote. In the existential kind of haiku both images are thus infused in a single universal poignancy. Here are four examples, from Hosai Ozaki, Santoka Taneda, Saito Sanki, and double juxtaposition from Buson.

Sprinkle salt in the pickle tub, for this did my mother give me birth

No road but this one;
spring snow falls

A monk on board --
How quietly
the black battleship leaves

Slanting lines of rain
on the dusty samisen
a mouse is pattering

There are some existential haiku which express certain spiritual truths, (not that this was any concern of the poet or need be of any concern to the reader). As with a joke, explaining it may make it that more difficult

to "get it". It has to be swallowed in one gulp, as with the following by Fusei ("All things are one thing, one thing is all things"), or Seishi's which follows ("The self exists only in mutuality with what it commonly supposes is other")

Cat dozing on the stove
is there one thing
he doesn't know

With every cry
of the shrike
I know who I am

And in other existential haiku there is an imagery which fires the imagination beyond the normally fogged up windows of perception, as in these two by Basho and Buson:

The sea darkens
and a wild duck's call
is faintly white

The ends of the warriors' bows
as they go, brushing
the dew

However, there are other instances where the imagery is unremarkable yet the effect is strangely moving, as in these three by Buson, Kikaku and Hosai Ozaki:

The sudden flare
of the mosquito wick
her flushed face

A summer shower
a woman sits alone
gazing outside

Lake houses in a row
catching small fish in the cold
their life

What is an existential haiku and to what extent, is, of course, a subjective matter. Nonetheless it is a perspective which has brought together in fruitful fellowship a "Haiku Sangha" of a dozen experienced poets over several years. This essay grew out of one of our meetings in Wales. It is very much work in progress....

References

- (1) Ken Jones ["Zen and the Art of Haiku"](#).
- (2) Santoka Taneda *Mountain Tasting* trans. John Stevens. Weatherhill, 1980.
- (3) Saito Sanki *The Kobe Hotel* trans. Saito Masaya. Weatherhill, 1993.
- (4) Hosai Ozaki *Right Under the Big Sky, I Don't Wear a Hat* trans. Hiroaki Sato. Stone Bridge Press (Berkeley, California) 1993.
- (5) George Swede *Almost Unseen* Brooks Books (Decatur, Illinois), 2000.
- (6) Address to the British Haiku Society Conference, Ludlow, April 1998.

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