

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, my fellow haiku poets! It is my great honor and pleasure to be here at this beautiful Asilomar and to have this opportunity to talk about our traditional genre of literature called haiku.

I would like to begin with a question, why so many people, not only in Japan, but people elsewhere in the world are attracted to haiku. Then I would like to talk about the subject and the form of haiku in Japan, my speculation on animism as the basis for haiku and mutual understanding among different cultures, and finally about the spread of haiku to the West and its influence on Western poetry. So let me begin.

1. Why Does Haiku Attract So Many People?

There are millions of haiku poets in Japan. One or two teachers lead each of hundreds of groups of haiku poets and publish a monthly or bimonthly haiku journal. The largest journal is *Hototogisu*, which is said to have several hundred thousand subscribers, and the smaller groups or journals may have a hundred members or subscribers. Suppose each haiku group has 1,000 members. Since there are roughly 1,000 haiku groups in Japan, we can try a simple calculation: 1,000 multiplied by 1,000 makes one million. Besides that, many haiku poets write haiku without belonging to a group, and submit their haiku to newspaper columns and haiku magazines. Why are there so many haiku poets in Japan?

The three greatest reasons are these:

- (1) Because haiku is short and has the fixed form of 5-7-5 Japanese syllables. This makes haiku more accessible. Longer and freestyle poems are difficult to write and read. A poet needs to find an appropriate length and a style to match the subject each time when writing, which requires a special skill and a substantial knowledge of rhetoric, a philosophical backbone, a passion for love and joy, and more. The longer and freestyle poetry is not for everybody but for a handful of genuine poets.
- (2) Because the theme or the subject of haiku is almost fixed, it is about nature and about seasons. It is easier to find a subject for haiku, such as a slight shift in seasons or seasonal life, and there is no need to add one's emotional

interpretation and express it in haiku. In short, haiku is descriptive. Kigo are classified and listed in order to compose haiku, which are intended to be about a season. I would like to emphasize here that the main theme or the subject of haiku is *kigo*. Haiku is a poetry of seasons.

- (3) Because haiku is short, people can remember them easily. For example, everybody, even foreigners who do not speak Japanese, can learn Basho's haiku by heart due to its conciseness. Its shortness enables many people to write and enjoy haiku.

2. Nature as the Main Subject of Poetry in Japan and China

I would like to give a couple of examples to show the importance of nature in Japanese and Chinese poetry.

To begin with, let me quote from the *Manyōshū*, the first Japanese anthology of poetry that was compiled during the seventh and eighth century AD. The title literary means "The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves". It contains about 4,500 poems in various forms, such as *tanka*, which consists of 5-7-5-7-7 Japanese syllables, and *chōka* written by repeating the 5-7 syllable verses several times, followed by the 7-7 syllable verse at the end. Here are two poems from the *Manyōshū*.

On the eastern fields

I can see the flames of morning rise,

Turning around,

I see the moon sink in the west.

Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (late 7th century AD)

(Translation by Ian Hideo Levy)

Coming out

from Tago's nestled cove,

I gaze:

white, pure white

the snow has fallen

on Fuji's lofty peak.

Yamabe no Akahito (?-736 AD)

(Translation by Ian Hideo Levy)

They do not contain words like "beautiful", "sad", or what the author is feeling; there is no emotion expressed directly in the poems. You may notice that the poems are merely

depicting nature. This is one of the remarkable features of Japanese poetry. The same can be said for poems in Tang Period in China, especially when we take a look at the works of Wang Wei (701–761), Li Po (701–762) and Tu Fu (712–770), who lived in the same age, also wrote many good descriptive poems.

Meanwhile, in the West during the 7th and 8th century, the dominant stream of poetry was lyric poetry of love. I doubt that they had any poems strictly focused on nature during that time in the West.

Later, in the 17th to 18th century, haiku became independent from *renga* and *renku* and began to thrive along with *tanka*. Matsuo Bashō and Yosa Buson wrote many good haiku and both were very active in promoting the genre.

An old pond,
A frog jumps in,
The sound of water. Basho

What quietness!
Penetrating the rocks,
The voices of cicadas! Basho

from now on
every night will dawn
with white plum blossoms Buson

sea in spring
undulates gently
all day long Buson

As you can see, many of their masterpieces are descriptive poems. Thus in Japan and in China, notably in haiku, we can say that nature plays an important role as the subject of poetry.

3. Influence of Regional Features on Poetry

Why then did Japanese and Chinese poets write a lot about nature? I think it is due to the natural features of the east coast of the Chinese continent, and the climate particular to the main Japanese islands. Also, we cannot forget the presence of animism still remaining in our lands in Japan, Korea, and in China.

When we roughly classify the climate in the world, it can be divided into three regions: desert, grasslands, and forest.

In deserts, the ecosystem is rather simple, the lack of water is making life tougher. Quick decision-making is always necessary for survival in such an environment and therefore strong leadership is requested. Monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam started and flourished in such an environment, while animism died out early under such conditions.

Next let's take a look at culture nurtured in grasslands. Europe and most of the North America continent belongs to this mild-weathered grassland zone. Since the climate is mild, polytheism had been thriving for a long time. Greek mythology, Norse mythology, and Celtic mythology were standard beliefs for a long time. And Christianity entered and changed people's life; however, a touch of animistic habit still remained in certain places.

In China, Korea, and in Japan, there are many forests due to the monsoon climate with lots of rainfall. Nature in this region is milder and the polytheism is still believed, preserving animism in this region. I believe this condition played a part in the womb to bear nature poetry, including haiku and other short poetry based on nature. There is plenty of food in the forest, and life is much easier. On the other hand, typhoons show the distractive power of nature. Haiku is a product of a monsoon climate that brings both richness and harshness to the people living there.

4-1. Animism

I would like to give the definition and a theory of animism first:

“**Animism** (from Latin *anima* "soul, life") is a set of beliefs based on the existence of non-human "spiritual beings" or similar kinds of embodied principles”

Also here is a theory:

“Animism is a religion to pray for all the spiritual beings, that is, creatures, phenomena. This is defined by British anthropologist E. B. Tyler, who argued that this is essentially a basis for the origin of religious culture. Tyler's theory that the conception soul is a basis of the conception of spiritual souls and Tyler's evolutionist interpretation of animism are criticized from all the directions later. Thus his theories are out of question.”

4-2. The Meaning of Animism in Modern Times

Animism admits the existence of spirituality in other beings similar to human beings. Generally speaking, animism is characteristic in primitive societies and religions. Animism apparently does not function in cultured and modern societies.

However, when we think of any modern religions, none of them are unrelated with spirituality, or indifferent to dead souls. Consider Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam: we can sense animism at the bottom of their heart. In mythology and literature, animism thrives prevalently. It is said that animism, shamanism, fetishism, totemism, and ancestry worship are deeply related to animism.

In short, we might be able to say that animism is the idea of respecting all and every creature in nature and to live together with them in harmony. Animism emphasizes the coexistence of nature and human beings.

4-3. Season Words and Animism

We can see animism found in haiku by picking up *kigo*, which I think are animistic.

Animistic season words:

Thankfulness for objects and comfort

memorial services for needles (hari kuyo)
memorial services for flowers (hana kuyo)
memorial services for bells (kane kuyo)
memorial services for peonies (botan kuyo)
memorial services for swellfish (fugu kuyo)

Personification of nature

mountain laughing (yama warau)
mountain dripping (yama shitataru)
mountain dressing up (yama yosoou)
mountain sleeping (yama nemuru)

Awesomeness in nature

blazing sun Emperor (entei)
freezing sun Emperor (gentei)
thundering God (raishin)
lightning (inazuma)
snow lady (yuki onna), snow fairy (yuki joro)

Respect and prayer for ancestry

the anniversary of an ancestor's death, the anniversary of Basho's death (shigureki), etc.

Even in a country or area where four seasons are not very distinct, one can find one's own season words through the slightest change in seasons in the course of a year. Native festivals and events can also be used as *kigo*.

4-4. Animism and Haiku

Here are some examples of haiku showing the poet's awe for nature, as well as a sympathy and affiliation for plants, animals, mountains, and rivers:

Basho:

Spring departing—

the birds cry out

and the tearful eyes of the fish

(yuku haru ya tori naki uo no me wa namida)

One field

did they plant.

I, under the willow

(ta ichimai uete tachisaru yanagi kana)

The long rainy days

have not dimmed the glitter of

this great "Hikarido" hall of light

(samidare no furi nokoshite ya hikarido)

A scorching hot day

carried into the sea

by the Mogami river

(atsuki hi wo umi ni iretari mogamigawa)

Buson:

Of Mr. Monkey's

cold night he goes to inquire,

the rabbit

(saru dono no yosamu toi yuku usagi kana)

Typhoon

A bottomless tub

walking tumbling

(soko no nai oke koke ariku nowaki kana)

Dead pampas flowers

almost caught fire

from a will-o-the-wisp

(kitsune bi no moetsuku bakari kareo bana)

Days growing longer

Accumulated

into the far past

(osokinohi no tsumorite tooki mukashi kana)

Rape flowers—

the moon in the east

the sun in the west

(nanohana ya tsuki wa higashi ni hi ha nishi ni)

Please notice that there is no boundary between human and nature; they are all treated and valued equally in these haiku.

Issa:

Lean frog,

do not lose the fight

I am here for you

(yase gaeru makeruna issa kore ni ari)

come, play with me,

you, the orphaned

sparrow

(ware to kite asobe ya oya no nai suzume)

Fly rubbing

hands and legs

Saying “Don’t hit me”

(yare utsuna hae ga te wo suru ashi wo suru)

Murakami Kijo (1865–1938):

a winter bee
dose not know where to die
walking here and there (*fuyubachi no shinidokoro naku aruki keru*)

There is a kingdom of tadpoles
at the bottom of
the river (*kawazoko ni kato no taikoku arini keru*)

Hawk's face
growing old severely
and sorrowfully (*taka no tura kibishiku oite aware nari*)

Takahama Kyoshi (1874–1959):

a falling leaf
from a paulownia
exposed to the sun (*kiri hito ha hiatari nagara ochini keru*)

City of Kamakura
surprised to have
lingering cold (*kamakura wo odorokashitaru yokan ari*)

The swiftness
of a radish leaf
flowing in the river (*nagare yuku daikon no ha no hayasa kana*)

Don't you think
if a butterfly in the mountain
is so strong and rough? (*yamaguni no cho wo arashi to omowazu ya*)

There is something
like a bar penetrated
between the last year and this year (*kozo kotoshi tsuranuku bo no gotoki mono*)

Please notice the eyes of Issa in his works; he sees a frog, an orphaned sparrow, and a fly as if they are his buddies or friends. This is the feeling of coexistence with

nature. When we read haiku by Kijo and Kyoshi in 20th century, we can see they are choosing small creatures or a leaf as their focus for haiku and write in an objective and realistic manner. This is haiku. Since haiku is very short, we avoid having our thoughts or emotion in the poem. And by writing about these small creatures, we are filled with respect toward nature. By worshipping our ancestors and respecting nature, we wish to coexist with nature and other people as well.

5-1. Takahama Kyoshi's visit to Europe

In 1853, Japan reopened her ports to the world after the long seclusion which started from 1639. The reopening of the country was followed by the introduction of our culture to the world. Basil Hall Chamberlain, a visiting professor at Tokyo University, and Lafcadio Hearn who was also teaching in Japan, were among those people who introduced haiku to the world during these times. By the 20th century, Japanese began to travel abroad. In 1936, Takahama Kyoshi went to France and Britain by ship, which marked a great footstep of haiku in those places. He met Paul-Louis Couchoud and discussed on haiku. Kyoshi lamented that although they were writing haiku in the 5-7-5 form, French haiku poets were forgetting about seasons. They were missing the importance of depicting nature scenes, instead, they were writing about society and human life. Kyoshi told them that the most important attitude in writing haiku was to understand one's position in this ever-changing world; to find one's subject of haiku in the shift of four seasons, which is the eternal theme of haiku. Thus the significance of season in haiku was reported in "Comedy", a newspaper in Paris.

5-2 Japanese Haiku by non-Japanese speakers

To my joyful surprise, a few poets who are non-Japanese-tongue are writing haiku in Japanese-language. This is a new phenomenon. I would like to mention their names here: マブソン青眼、アーサー。ピナードドゥーグル・リンズィー、母育新。

5-3 Allen Ginsberg and Haiku

This is the first part of Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, Howl:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix,

My first stay in the USA was in 1959-60. It was the time when Ginsberg's "Howl" was making a sensation. I read the poem and I thought about experiencing the life in the streets of the African American community then. So I moved to their district in Chicago with my wife and a one-year-old baby boy. I deeply sympathized with Ginsberg's acute impeachment. It was the time when I was in my late twenties, I was young then. Ginsberg who had written such a strong poem, on the other hand, had written four haiku. I would like to quote two from "Four Haiku":

Looking over my shoulder
my behind was covered
with cherry blossoms.

On the porch
in my shorts—
auto lights in the rain.

I was surprised at its brevity, and its beautiful seasonal reference. Some critic said that a skill of abbreviation of haiku could be traced in the writing of "Howl", I am not sure about it. However, I do believe that Ginsberg was very much influenced by haiku to write these verses.

6. Haiku Written Outside Japan

Here are some haiku written by non-professional poets outside Japan:

The United States of America:

A bitter morning:
sparrows sitting together
without any necks. J.W. Hackett

rush hour . . .
rear view mirrors glitter
in spring sunlight William J. Higginson

from house

to barn:

the milky way Lee Gurga

summer sunset—

the baby finds his shadow
on the kitchen wall Lee Gurga

fresh scent . . .

the labrador's muzzle
deeper into snow Lee Gurga

Hiroshima day

multi-colored threads
on the weaving machine Fay Aoyagi

low winter moon

just beyond the reach
of my chopsticks Fay Aoyagi

Canada:

warm spring breeze

the old hound runs
in his sleep George Swede

Australia:

from lightning

into thunder
a white butterfly Stephen Hobson

New Zealand:

How welcome the cold

bright winter sun which
warms old bones David Drummond

The U.K.:

daffodil morning—
looking for something
very blue to wear

David Cobb

Croatia:

From the infinite distance
white butterfly
Arrives.

Vladimir Devide

(English translation by Drago Štambuk)

With each koto
tone
one petal falls.

Drago Štambuk

Sweden:

The skier stops
to make room
for the silence of the snow

Kaj Falkman

Tomas Tranströmer

The Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded in 2011 to Tomas Tranströmer “because, through his condensed, translucent images, he gives us fresh access to reality”. He is a member of the Swedish Haiku Society and his works are included in “April Snow”. I would like to read four haiku under the title of “Haiku” from his book, *The Sorrow Gondola*.

The orchid flowers.
Oil-tankers are gliding past.
The moon is full.

Tomas Tranströmer

This really is a very good poem. Nature is its main subject. And indeed, the expression

is well condensed and pellucid. I assume that he has acquired this feature through his training in writing haiku-like short poems. We may be able to call this a haiku spirit.

Gaunt tousled pine trees
on the same tragic moorland.
Always and always.

Borne by the darkness.
I met an immense shadow
in a pair of eyes.

Those milestones
on their way somewhere.

Listen to the voice of the stock-dove.

Tomas Tranströmer

(English translation by Robin Fulton)

Each poem is very much condensed and translucent like in haiku-writing.

Tranströmer has many more longer poems than the haiku-like short ones, but I see this tendency in all of his works. I was extremely delighted when a poet who wrote haiku-like poems was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. At last, haiku was admitted as literature, which brought me nothing but joy.

Conclusion

Here is my conclusion. What has happened to haiku, which had been neglected by the Japanese during the Meiji Era, and which was criticized as second-class literature after the WWII?

A general mass of people in the world are writing haiku-like short poetry, and nowadays top-class poets are also writing haiku. And the winner of the 2011 Nobel Prize in literature is also a haiku poet. I am happy to think that haiku, which was once labeled as second-class literature, is now recognized as first-class literature. The shortness of haiku and the descriptiveness of haiku have become global. Anyone can write a short poem called haiku, and anyone can read and appreciate its world. I strongly believe that haiku can serve as a bridge to cross cultural differences. We should all write and appreciate haiku to achieve mutual understanding among ourselves and bring peace to this beautiful planet. Thank you very much for listening.

Appendix

Haiku is a group activity. Traditionally, when people were writing *renga*, it was written by several poets taking turns to compose a 5-7-5 verse and a 7-7 verse alternatively, say, for up to fifty or hundred links, etc. in Japan. Those who are non-Japanese, especially the people in the West who greatly value individuality, may feel uncomfortable with this idea of haiku as a group activity.

Later Japanese poets added a touch of humor and enjoyed this together in the mid 16th century. This was called *haikai no renga*. During the Edo Period (1600–1867), the genre was polished and became very popular and was called *renku*. One person who promoted the genre was Matsuo Basho. Because the poets sat in a tatami-mat room and wrote *renku* together, it was called *za no bungaku*, or seated literature. Haiku becomes a personal work rather than a group work after Masaoka Shiki's haiku renovation.

As this history shows, haiku is originally the first verse of linked verses, and was therefore written in an agreement that someone else was to give the next verse. Although it was short, consisting of only 5-7-5 Japanese syllables, we have to admit that haiku is far from perfection in itself. From the Western point of view, this must be strange. Basho once said, "What do you get by stating everything in a poem?" It means that we are not supposed to say fully and too much. *Renku* requires teamwork rather than solo play. This is the reason why *renku* is called *za no bungaku*.

Now, haiku became independent thanks to Masaoka Shiki who had denied *renku*, yet this teamwork spirit has stayed. We can see this phenomenon from the prosperity of a *kukai* where haiku is shown and selected among group members. One thing I would like to mention is that, in a *kukai*, all submitted haiku are circulated anonymously to be selected, and therefore it is totally equal, whether you are a member of a master. Once in a while the master gets the least votes in a *kukai*.

This is a crucial feature of haiku. Through these *kukai* the haiku skill of each member is polished, and by the selection process a self-satisfied haiku disappears. Haiku is a personal literature, and at the same time it is appreciated and nurtured by a variety of group members. I would like to share my belief that one of the reasons why haiku stays so popular is this joy of taking part in a *kukai*.