



Tapping the Common Well

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What is it about haiku that cannot be defeated?

It has no particular academic standing. It has no wealthy benefactor. It has no patron saint. It does not appear, at least in a form that serious practitioners would recognize, in the mainstream media. Though many people have heard of the word, few can offer even a single example, and those who can usually quote a poem in translation that is nearly four hundred years old. Even the most serious of scholars can hardly agree upon a definition of the term. When it is taught in schools, it is nearly always taught incorrectly, and with the wrong emphases. And yet despite all these impediments, haiku is more a part of international literature and culture today than it ever has been in the history of the world. How can this be?

The reason, I believe, is simple and important. Haiku, in all its various guises, offers something to people that they must have: a way to speak of the things they value, large and small, in their lives, in ways that are communicable to others. Other forms of art require considerable grounding in theories and techniques, but haiku are simple and clean. This is not to say they are easy to create: they

are as easy as any clear and simple truth, which is to say, difficult in the extreme. But they offer the possibility of such communication which is perhaps out of the hands of most in the medium of painting, say, or music. It is an available art, and the possibility of success looms with awareness and practice.

This, then, is the epistemological grounding of haiku: there is an aesthetic one as well. There is no gainsaying the poet's moment of insight, truth, clarity, oneness with the world. But how well he or she communicates it, once it is published and so available to all, is a matter that affects us all. If the goal of the poet is to help the reader recreate the moment for himself, then the skill with which the poem is constructed and displayed becomes central to its availability to the reader. It thus becomes a literary art, not just a religious or philosophical one, and as such may be judged in terms of literary values. The very best haiku encompass a moment of insight, and do so in resonant language in an accessible and appropriate form. It takes a very great artist to be deep and simple at the same time, and not leave her thumbprint all over the poem. That is why it is adjudged a great feat to create a perfect haiku—not just because one has seen the truth, but because one has communicated it.

Haiku has come to us from Japan, but it is no more Japanese than rain or sun, barn swallow or sea otter. Nor is it English, or Slovenian or Bantu. It is universal, because what it seeks is not the relative truths of nationalities or religions, but the universal truths between people: that which can be shared, recognized, valued around the world. This does not mean rain and sun mean the same thing to all people: certainly desert-dwellers have very different emotions about such things that those who live in a rain forest. Swallows may be a harbinger to some and a nuisance to others. Sea otters are oppressed or illegitimately preserved. There are always points of view. But haiku express values beyond these regional and economic differences, revealing the truth of things as they are, which is more at the core of how we feel most deeply as people. Haiku finds that which is not superfluous in the hearts of men, and expresses the values found

there, as deep as that may go. Man is, after all, the creator of value.

Haiku, then, offer, moment to moment, the structure of the lives of the poets who fashion them. Here we might find the truth of the cumulative moments of lives spent seeking attunement with the truth of things. War, beauty, nature, peace, ugliness, light and shadow—wherever insight is encountered, there the poet finds sustenance. These truths, when well expressed, are communicable to others, not only this side of the border or with those who share the poet's religious orientation. This moves far beyond polemic or ideology. This is where art resides, and however much it might have been misused for polemical purposes in the past, it has no place here, in the hearts of those who would seek and share the beauty, depth and structure of such moments. This is what is indestructible in haiku, what has made it grow from one nation's proud cultural export to a world's form of choice to reveal the truth and beauty of the quiet moments, the true moments, of their lives.

*[This piece, in slightly altered form, appeared as the foreword to the volume *Knots: The Anthology of Southeastern European Haiku Poetry*, edited by Jim Kacian and Dimitar Anakiev (Tolmin, Slovenia: Prijatelj Press 1999).]*