
REVIEWS

Haiku Poetics in Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Poetry, by Jeffrey Johnson (Blue Ridge Summit, Pa./Plymouth, England: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011). 262 pages; 6½" × 9½". Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7391-4876-1 (hardback); 978-0-7391-7104-2 (e-book). Price: \$70.00 + \$5.00 s&h from the publisher at <orders@rowman.com>.

Reviewed by Edward Zuk

Haiku Poetics in Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Poetry is an important book. Jeffrey Johnson has written a study of the haiku's influence on the Imagist and Beat poets in English, various avant-garde movements in French, and modernist poets and the Latin American vanguard in Spanish. Johnson argues that the haiku was "the most powerful influence upon western poetry for more than a century" and that modern poetry developed, in large part, from the lessons that Western poets gleaned from the form. This is a large claim, one that Johnson cannot quite prove—he cannot link influential poets like Hardy, Yeats, Frost, Moore, Auden, Thomas, Plath, Lowell, or Larkin to the form, for example. Nevertheless, his book does provide a fascinating look at how the haiku influenced the main currents of poetry in the last century, and it deepens our understanding of haiku in the West.

How did the haiku come to have such a reach? Johnson suggests several answers to this question. First, the haiku had a directness that was revolutionary. Avant-garde poets responded to the form's "simple deployment of concrete particulars" and "the shock potential that could awaken everyman's conduct with the everyday." Second, haiku presented Western poets with a "counterbalance" to their own cultures, which were about

to tear themselves apart in two world wars. The historical moment made these poets receptive to the haiku and the non-Western, Buddhist aesthetics that informed it. Third, through the technique of juxtaposition, the haiku suggested a new type of “synaesthetic” poetry. Haiku ignored “hierarchies of syntax and logic” in favour of something more intuitive. The form suggested a new way of seeing, “a viable model for pure poetry” that proved irresistible to the poets who encountered it.

Some of the greatest poets in Europe and North America fell under the haiku’s spell. The Imagists based their work on “the poetics of juxtaposed particulars” that they learned from the haiku, while Jack Kerouac drew inspiration from the haiku’s comic, spontaneous roots. Many poets will be interested in the book’s discussion of Surrealism, the main influence on *gendai* haiku. Johnson reminds us of how loopy and brilliant the Surrealists were:

The artists involved in Dada and Surrealism felt that the concept of man as a self-conscious, rational being had been discredited. Words, as they existed in the context of those years, deformed and betrayed life’s authentic character. Dadaists and Surrealists considered reality a discontinuous sequence of immediate experiences. They felt that artists must make themselves available to chance and recreate the very syntax of art and experience to accommodate this modern condition.

The Surrealists turned to haiku to represent the discrete moments of experience, to shock their readers through the form’s unexpected juxtapositions, and to suggest what lies beyond everyday reality in the space between its images. In the hands of poets like Paul Éluard, the haiku became a vehicle for the irrational and surprising:

<i>Le vent</i>	The wind
<i>Hésitant</i>	hesitating
<i>Roue une cigarette d’air.</i>	rolls a cigarette of air

<i>L’automobile est vraiment lancée</i>	The automobile is truly fast
<i>Quatre têtes de martyrs</i>	four martyred heads
<i>Roulent sous les roues.</i>	move beneath it

Johnson also discusses directions that have not been explored fully in English-language haiku. French soldiers in the front lines of World War I adopted the haiku. Julien Vocance, for example, wrote some masterful poems on his war experience:

<i>Deux levées de terre,</i>	Two mounds of earth,
<i>Deux réseaux de fil de fer:</i>	two nets of wires
<i>Deux civilisations.</i>	two civilizations.
<i>La mort dans le coeur,</i>	Death in the heart
<i>L'épouvante dans les yeux,</i>	the fear in the eyes
<i>Ils se sont élancés de la tranchée.</i>	they are scurrying through the trench

These poems suggest how to write haiku about events from within, not merely as a detached observer. Another road less taken is a metaphysical haiku that treats ideas or speculation. Johnson's discussion of Jorge Luis Borges suggests how such a haiku might look:

<i>Desde aquel día</i>	Since that day
<i>no he movido las piezas</i>	I have not moved the pieces
<i>en el tablero.</i>	of the chessboard
<i>La vieja mano</i>	This old hand
<i>sigue trazando versos</i>	continues to trace verses
<i>para el olvido.</i>	into oblivion

Others may find inspiration in Johnson's discussions of Brazilian concrete poetry, Antonio Machado's lyricism, or Federico García Lorca's adaptation of haiku imagery in his theatrical work.

However, haiku poets should be aware that the book has its limitations. *Haiku Poetics* does not provide a thorough study of haiku in the 20th century. Many significant haiku are not discussed in its pages. Johnson never mentions that William Carlos Williams wrote haiku, for example, or that Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" may be the most successful adaptation of the form into English, or that James Merrill wrote a moving tribute to a friend who

had died of AIDS in a series of haibun, or that John Ashbery has dabbled in the form at various points of his career. Haiku poets should also realize that Johnson is more interested in poetics than haiku. He will veer away from actual haiku to explore how the haiku's techniques and subject matter were adapted for longer, more famous poems. Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, H.D.'s lyrics, and the longer poems of Gary Snyder receive more discussion than any actual haiku. Haiku and haiku-like poems tend to disappear for pages at a time in favour of a discussion of techniques that the form inspired.

That said, there is much in *Haiku Poetics in Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Poetry* to engage and inspire any serious haiku poet. I would recommend hunting down a copy at a local college library if the price is prohibitive. It is well worth the search.

Nick Virgilio: A Life in Haiku, edited and with an introduction by Raffael de Gruttola and an afterword by Kathleen O'Toole. (Arlington, Va.: Turtle Light Press, 2012). 137 pages; 5½" × 8½". Glossy yellow and four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-974814-73-5. Price: \$14.95 from the publisher at <www.turtlelightpress.com>.

Reviewed by Christopher Patchel

My introduction to the work of Nick Virgilio was *The Haiku Anthology* (1999) edited by Cor van den Heuvel. The section devoted to Virgilio in that volume is one of the longest (only John Wills commands more space). Fourteen pages, a mini-anthology, it starts with the iconic "lily" haiku and artfully sequences through thirty-nine classics from Virgilio's twenty-seven-year span of published work. The poems are primarily memoir-like observations of Nick's day-to-day life in Camden, New Jersey. And whether scenic, urban, lighthearted,