

HAIKU AND OCKHAM'S RAZOR: THE EXAMPLE OF JACK KEROUAC

Mike Spikes

I

Definitions of haiku are legion, ranging from the highly restrictive—those that insist on the presence of such elements as a fixed syllabic structure, seasonal references, and concentration on nature—to the open-ended, exemplified by Cyril Childs who argues that “‘haiku’ is an ephemeral term—its meaning has evolved and will continue to evolve.... The boundaries of ‘haiku’ are grey and there is no means for us to clearly separate a haiku poem from any other poem” (52). While it is certainly true that examples of excellent haiku can be found that stand as exceptions to the most restrictive definitions of the form, thereby suggesting that such definitions are too narrow and limited, it is also true that there is at least one general characteristic of haiku that is, despite Childs’s claim to the contrary, a constant: brevity. If one peruses books of haiku, or major haiku journals such as *Frogpond* and *Modern Haiku*, one quickly discovers that virtually none of the poems—whether in one, three, or more lines—exceeds twenty total syllables. Many, in fact, are considerably shorter than the conventionally prescribed seventeen syllables. Jim Kacian has recently argued that in its most contemporary incarnation, “Haiku has evolved beyond its early stages into something leaner, stronger, sharper” (25). He identifies the “monoku”—a severely compressed one-line poem even richer in implications than the average traditional haiku—as one of the more interesting and aesthetically productive directions haiku has taken in recent years (40–49). The most distinguishing trait of haiku—perhaps the form’s only invariable—would seem to be its pronounced linguistic economy, an economy that has only been intensified over the past decade or so by leading haiku poets.

In what follows I will argue that this linguistic economy allows things to happen in haiku that cannot occur in longer works, such as novels, short stories, or lengthy lyric poems. More particularly, I will attempt to show, by drawing on a famous Medieval philosophical

principle—Ockham’s Razor—that the conciseness of haiku enables them to achieve an aesthetically satisfying truth and simplicity, and at the same time an intellectually stimulating suggestiveness and complexity, of which no other genre is capable. A very brief comparison and contrast of a haiku and a novel written by the same author and that treat the same theme will serve to illustrate my claim that less can be more. Specifically, I will show what Jack Kerouac is able to do with a particular idea in his traditional three-line haiku “Early morning yellow flowers / —Thinking about / The drunkards of Mexico” (12) that he is unable to accomplish with it in *On the Road*, his most famous work of fiction.

II

Though the New Criticism has long been out of vogue and roundly attacked in literary theory circles, certain New Critical principles nonetheless remain eminently sensible and supremely useful. Chief among these is one developed by Cleanth Brooks in his seminal essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” the eleventh chapter of his 1947 book, *The Well Wrought Urn*. Here Brooks argues that a poem—and by “poem” he implies any poetic, literary text, whether that text be in verse or prose—cannot be reduced to a brief, abstract summation of its theme or meaning. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that it is even a mistake to equate detailed analyses of poems with poems themselves. Brooks observes “the reader may well ask: is it not possible to frame a proposition, or a statement, which will adequately represent the total meaning of the poem” (205). And he very commonsensically responds: “The answer must be that the poet himself obviously did not [think so] ... else he would not have had to write his poem” (206). If there were nothing other to the language of the poem than what might be captured in a paraphrase of it—than in ideas, no matter how briefly or elaborately detailed, derived from the text’s actual words—then the poet would surely not have wasted time writing the poem but would have instead simply presented his or her conclusions in straightforward expository prose, in a paraphrase of some sort.

Obviously it is possible to derive themes and concerns from poems. Brooks readily recognizes that for certain purposes paraphrase, even of the abbreviated and abstract sort, is not only admissible but recommended, most useful. “The point is surely not that we cannot describe adequately enough for many purposes what the poem in general is ‘about’ and what the general effect of the poem is” (196), Brooks writes. “We can very properly use paraphrases as pointers and shorthand references provided we know what we are doing” (196–97). And, of course, Brooks and the New Critics famously made their livings by meticulously analyzing literary texts, by translating them into detailed interpretive paraphrases. Brooks’s aim, then, is clearly not to argue that commentary, of either the abbreviated or extended type, is pointless. Rather, it is to acknowledge and highlight the fact that there is something special and unique about the actual words of a poem. The poem’s words are richer in connotations and play out a more complex drama than the words of an expository prose work (210, 204). That is to say, poetic language incarnates and expresses themes and concerns in a way that transforms them into something other and more than they are in their prose paraphrase. In sum, the literary text, Brooks suggests, enhances and nuances—aesthetically charges—any plain-spoken, analytical statement of its senses.

A prominent theme shared by Kerouac’s haiku “Early morning yellow flowers” and his lyrical, poetry-in-prose novel *On the Road* is the contradictory, double-edged nature of the drunken life. On the one hand, both texts celebrate drunkenness, while on the other hand each offers veiled warnings concerning its darker dimensions. Certainly, this is not the only, or perhaps even the principal, theme of either of these works. Each text is rich, sponsoring multiple interpretations. But both the poem and the novel can be paraphrased, to use Brooks’s language, in these terms. And as I will attempt to show, the haiku incarnates that paraphrase in such a way that gives it a unique and special value, that endows it with sense and significance that this paraphrase lacks in its novelistic expression.

On the Road’s celebration of the drunken life—in both the literal and metaphorical senses of “drunken”—is readily apparent. Sal Paradise,

Dean Moriarty, and company delight in rebelling against the sober lifestyle and mores of middle-class America at the time the novel is set, the late 1940s and early 1950s. In perhaps the most famous passage in the book, Sal, the narrator, declares: “the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous roman candles” (5). An existence drunk on freedom, on intense intellectual and sensual experience that defies bourgeois conventions, is the existence that Sal—and even more so Dean—pursue throughout the novel. Frequently, Sal’s and Dean’s drunkenness is literal, entails deranging the senses with drugs or alcohol in order to achieve a heightened state of awareness or well-being. “I was getting drunk and didn’t care; everything was fine” (30), Sal at one point defiantly asserts. And later he records: “I didn’t know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the tea that we were smoking. Dean had bought some in New York. It made me think that everything was about to arrive” (119). Always, whether the drunkenness is literal or metaphorical, the idea is to know a depth and freshness of experience—an edginess—that is unavailable to the average middle-class American who lives a temperate, regimented, straitlaced life.

Though the novel celebrates the drunken life, it also identifies certain drawbacks of and dangers to it. Dean’s and Sal’s relentless quest for “kicks” is in many ways destructive, leaves a trail of hurt and sorrow. At one point Galatea, a female acquaintance of Moriarty’s, comments on how Dean, drunk on the drive for sensual thrills, selfishly takes his pleasure from women, impregnates them, and then abandons both the women and children he has fathered. “For years now you haven’t had any sense of responsibility for anyone,” Galatea admonishes. “You’ve done so many awful things I don’t know what to say to you” (182–83). Though Sal offers an anemic defense of his friend, the fact that he so honestly and bluntly records Galatea’s accusations implicitly acknowledges their inescapable truth. Likewise, in an incident toward the end of the novel, Sal tries to shrug off Dean’s selfishness but winds up conceding it. Dean, Sal, and Stan Shepherd visit a brothel in Mexico. In

this episode, which the text depicts in decidedly seedy terms, suggesting some implicit degree of criticism of their debauched behavior, the three smoke massive amounts of marijuana and then have sex with underage prostitutes. It is shortly after this incident that Dean, in further pursuit of his mad goals, abandons his friend Sal, who has contracted a severe case of dysentery. Though Sal says he understands “the impossible complexity of his [Dean’s] life,” he is forced to admit “what a rat he was” (288). It might be argued that one of the reasons Sal, at the very end of the novel, finally rejects Moriarty and the road, albeit with pronounced regret and decidedly mixed feelings, is that he sees, at least partially from observing and participating in Dean’s adventures over the years, how empty, rootless, and sometimes sleazy the drunken life can be. Sal finally settles down with a woman who, one evening in New York, offers him not alcohol or drugs but rather hot chocolate (290).

Whereas it takes Kerouac in his novel some three hundred pages to celebrate and critique the drunken life, he is able to do so in just three short lines—ten words, nineteen total syllables—in his haiku. On its surface, “Early morning yellow flowers,” the first line of the poem, is an entirely positive image. “Yellow” suggests the sun, light and life. “Flowers” is an image of natural beauty. And “early morning” is that time of each day when the world comes alive, when darkness gives way to light; it is the season of youth and vitality. Juxtaposed with this image in the poem is another, seemingly very different one: the thought the narrator has of “the drunkards of Mexico.” The fact that these “drunkards” are “of Mexico,” and not someplace in America, does lend them a certain exotic appeal. Still, however, they remain “drunkards.”

The poem’s opening image, in typical haiku fashion, implicitly comments upon the second, endows it with particular sense and significance. “Early morning yellow flowers,” seemingly so different in its connotations from “the drunkards of Mexico,” can, upon closer examination, be read as a metaphor for those “drunkards.” That is to say, the poem counter-intuitively suggests that there is something naturally beautiful, vital and alive, about the “drunkards of Mexico.” It rejects the conservative, socially conventional notion that to be a drunkard is a bad thing and, instead, proclaims the opposite, that there is something

positive, exotic and alluring, about this condition: these “drunkards of Mexico” are as appealing as “early morning yellow flowers.” Furthermore, it is important to note that drunkenness in Kerouac’s poem, as in his novel, can be construed both literally and figuratively: “drunkards” in the sense of drunk on alcohol or high on some other drug, or “drunkards” in the broader sense of drunk on life, on intense intellectual and sensual experiences. In short, like *On the Road*, the haiku celebrates, on multiple levels, a life of intoxication.

And yet, though the poem’s opening image can be interpreted as entirely positive, it can also be read in an opposite way, as connoting lack and limitation. “Early morning” suggests freshness and youth not only in their obvious, affirmative senses, but in their negative dimensions as well. Youth, the season of vitality and exuberance, is also the season of naivety and unrealistic expectations. The narrator thinks of the “yellow flowers” as they are and appear in the “early morning.” Thus, by metaphorical extension, those “drunkards of Mexico,” for which the flowers stand, are also being viewed from the “early morning” perspective, as they are and present themselves in that condition. From the naive, innocent—“early morning”—viewpoint the drunken state is indeed a romantic, visionary, entirely positive one. But from a more mature and seasoned perspective—metaphorically, an afternoon or evening vantage—all sorts of possible problems with the drunken condition, in both its literal and figurative dimensions, suggest themselves. Drunkenness often ends in broken relationships, sordid excess, and burned-out lives, the sort of problems Kerouac subtly identifies in *On the Road*. In sum, the poem, like the novel, critiques at the same time it celebrates the life of intoxication.

The haiku’s ability to incarnate in a very few words the same basic ideas that it takes the novel a number of pages to express gives the haiku a distilled, concentrated truth value that the novel lacks, the sort of truth value the Medieval theologian and philosopher William of Ockham (1285–1349) identifies in his famous principle that has come to be known as Ockham’s Razor. This principle, Bertrand Russell notes, is usually formulated as “Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity.” Russell clarifies: “Although [Ockham] did not say this, he said

something which has much the same effect, namely: ‘It is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer’” (472). Other commentators have variously explained and drawn out the implications of Ockham’s view in similar terms. Ockham’s principle stipulates, Chris Rohmann argues, that “the fewer the assumptions necessary to explain something the better, or the simplest adequate explanation is usually the most reliable.” Writes Rohmann: “The ‘razor’ is that means of simplification, slicing away the superfluous in order to arrive at the crux of an idea” (283). Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl echo Rohmann in slightly different words. Ockham, they contend, values “the overall economy of an explanation: where two competing theories can both adequately explain a given phenomenon, the simpler of them is to be preferred. Hence, Ockham’s razor is also known as the ‘principle of simplicity’” (209). And as James Mannion sums it up, “Ockham’s Razor, simply put, is the belief that when all things are considered, the simplest explanation is the truest one” (50).

Kerouac’s haiku can be read as shaving away “the superfluous” in his novel. “Early morning yellow flowers” reduces the drunkenness theme, which it shares with *On the Road*, to that theme’s “crux.” Put in terms of Russell’s formulation of Ockham’s principle, the poem circumvents the vanity of doing “with more what can be done with fewer”; the haiku’s achievement is that it uses ten words to convey the same idea it takes the novel thousands of words to express. That is to say, in Baggini’s and Fosl’s language, “the principle of simplicity” is satisfied by the haiku. Haiku and novel may be viewed as analogous to “two competing theories” that both “adequately explain a given phenomenon.” The phenomenon being explained, on this analogy, is the drunkenness theme. Each text constitutes a theory of sorts—an explanation—of that theme in that each details and illuminates, illustrates and reflects upon, the theme in particular ways. Given its length, the haiku, obviously, is the simpler of these two explanations. This simpler explanation may, in turn, be viewed as the “preferred” one precisely because of its economy, its ability artistically to transform and express Kerouac’s ideas in the most succinct, essential terms possible. Or, in keeping with Mannion’s articulation of Ockham’s Razor, “the simplest explanation,”

the haiku, is “the truest” in that it renders the drunkenness theme, which it shares with *On the Road*, in its aesthetic and intellectual quiddity.

Ironically, the simpler artistic incarnation of the drunkenness theme is also the more complex in that it requires, in a fundamental sense, the more involved and imaginative reader response. Matthew M. Carillo notes that Bruce Ross “reminds us that in haiku ‘imagery and content are concretized to a bare suggestive minimum,’ which necessitates a highly active engagement with the poem” (44). *On the Road*, with its many characters and its long and involved, meandering plot, specifies considerably more than the haiku does. The novel names and describes particular individuals who live out the drunkenness theme in specific ways, thereby restricting the possible permutations of that theme. And the narrator’s extensive comments determine, both explicitly and implicitly, a well-defined, limited number of rewards and dangers of drunkenness. The haiku, on the other hand, forces the reader to flesh things out almost entirely for him or herself, necessitates a much wider range of personal inferences with respect to the drunkenness theme. For example, to cite only the most obvious point in the haiku where reader participation is demanded, Kerouac’s haiku, as earlier noted, juxtaposes two images—“early morning yellow flowers” and “the drunkards of Mexico”—without any commentary whatsoever. It is left completely up to the reader to work out the possible implied connections between these two images, connections from which the core of the poem’s meaning emerges. As Michele Root-Bernstein observes in relating haiku to Picasso’s abstract paintings, “essence has much to do with leaving things out” (20). Kerouac’s haiku leaves much out that his novel supplies; the haiku condenses the drunkenness theme to its essence, minimizing it in such stark terms as to require a greater, more active interpretive contribution on the part of the reader than does *On the Road*.

III

To maintain, as I have, that haiku can do things—incarnate ideas in distinctive ways—that other literary genres cannot is certainly not to assert that this genre is, in an absolute sense, superior to all

others. Each literary form has its unique artistic strengths. It would surely be possible to argue that *On the Road*, in its comprehensive scope and rich detail, achieves aesthetic and intellectual ends of which “early morning yellow flowers” is incapable. There are other theories of truth, of what constitutes the best and most lucid expression of an idea, besides Ockham’s, which insists on brevity and succinctness. What I have tried to suggest is merely that Jack Kerouac knew what all haiku artists know: the form affords singular artistic possibilities; it allows authors to distill and essentialize truths as no other genre can, to express things in succinct terms that convey special and unique value. Clearly, Kerouac did not write haiku because he lacked the linguistic facility to compose in longer forms. He was a master novelist, as well as a first-rate essayist and lyric poet. He could have contented himself with expressing the drunkenness theme, outlined above, in *On the Road* only. But the fact that he chose to also communicate this idea in a haiku—at a time when very few American poets worked in this literary form—attests to the peculiar, irreproducible powers of the genre.

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