

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND HAIKU

Edward Zuk

I

In discussions of early haiku in English, William Carlos Williams is the forgotten man. We credit Ezra Pound for writing “In a Station of the Metro,” the first noteworthy haiku in the language, and we recognize Imagists like Amy Lowell and John Gould Fletcher for carrying on the experiment. We remember poets like Wallace Stevens for writing some haiku-like lines and stanzas. It is time that we honour Williams, too. Williams was a key figure in the early history of haiku, one whose contributions matched or even surpassed those of his peers. Pound may have been the pioneer, but Williams was the Modernist poet who did the most for the haiku in the first half of the 20th century.

No other poet of his generation had such an affinity for the form. Pound and Stevens are poets whose interests and techniques drew them in their own directions. Williams, though, wrote poem after poem whose stanzas read like so many haiku. This connection is an open secret among his admirers. Denise Levertov, in one of several essays on Williams, reprints a passage from R.H. Blyth’s four-volume *Haiku* and comments, “Blyth could have been evoking the art of Williams when quoting this haiku by Kyoroku.”

The haiku influenced Williams’s poetry, both early and late. Williams wrote a handful of individual haiku while working on his first books of poetry, and he then incorporated elements of the form into his mature lyrics. Haiku helped shape his imagery, stanzas, and language as they evolved. In turn, Williams would go on to shape the haiku’s future: he had a great influence on a young Allen Ginsberg and, through him, an impact on Beat poets who included Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, and through them the whole later history of haiku in the West.

II

Williams came to the haiku between 1916 and 1921, when he wrote half a dozen early examples. Williams does not seem to have thought highly of these poems, and he omitted several of them from his

early volumes. Nevertheless, these haiku hold up fairly well, and they laid the groundwork for his lifelong interest in haiku-like stanzas and forms.

Williams viewed the haiku in the same way as other Modernist poets: as a short poem in two or three lines written in formal language and arranged around a juxtaposition of two images. His first haiku-influenced poem is “Marriage” (1916):

So different, this man
And this woman:
A stream flowing
In a field.

As the poet Lewis Turco has pointed out, this is a haiku written in four lines, complete with a “cut” and seventeen syllables. Rearranged, “Marriage” reads:

So different, this man
and this woman: a stream
flowing in a field.

The poem uses its juxtaposition well. The difference between the stream (fluid, changing) and a field (fertile, steady, solid) suggests the difference between the man and woman in a way that does not quite fall into cliché. Williams’s other haiku, however, strain after effect:

SPRING (1917)

O my grey hairs!
You are truly white as plum blossoms.

LINES (1921)

Leaves are greengreen,
the glass is broken, bright green.

Neither poem is particularly successful, though both are interesting for their juxtapositions. In the first, grey hairs are juxtaposed with blossoms that are a symbol of spring and youth; in the second, nature is seen, surprisingly, as being less vivid than a broken bottle.

Williams also wrote several three-line haiku:

TO BE CLOSELY WRITTEN ON A SMALL PIECE OF PAPER (1919)

Lo the leaves
Upon the new autumn grass—
Look at them well ...!

THE SOUGHING WIND (1921)

Some leaves hang late, some fall
before the first frost—so goes
the tale of winter branches and old bones.

I find neither of these poems to be all that interesting; in both, there is a reaching after effect. However, Williams did produce a notable three-line poem in “Chinese Nightingale” (1917):

Long before dawn your light
Shone in the window, Sam Wu;
You were at your trade.

The poem offers a nearly perfect approximation of the 5–7–5 Japanese syllable count. More importantly, “Chinese Nightingale” shows a shift away from the haiku as a juxtaposition of images. It provides a sympathetic portrait of a Chinese laundryman at a time when such a figure was an ethnic stereotype, making it an attractive senryu—and one of the earliest in the language. It is a slice of Americana without any O’s or Lo’s, one that pointed to a way out of the haiku’s early limitations.

III

Williams abandoned the standalone haiku after 1921, but the form continued to provide a foundation for his longer lyrics. One can see its ghost behind some of Williams’s best poems from his middle and late periods. It was here that he overcame his early limitations. His writing lost its stilted quality, becoming contemporary and natural. His images grew more sophisticated to the point where we can

sense a real mind surveying a real scene. In these works, in short, we find the blossoming of Williams's genius.

Throughout the 1920s, Williams often used imagistic three-line stanzas for his lyrics. I read these poems as I would a modern haiku sequence. "The Lily," a famous poem from 1928, begins:

The branching head of
tiger-lilies through the window
in the air—

A humming bird
is still on whirring wings
above the flowers—

By spotted petals curling back
and tongues that hang
the air is seen—

Williams has advanced far beyond his early haiku. There are subtle puns (the double meaning of "still" or the ambiguity of "hang"), natural yet wholly unexpected phrases ("branching head" and "tongues"), and a precision in the description ("spotted") that his early haiku failed to achieve. Williams also captures the sense of the mind perceiving the scene. His narrator first notices the lilies, then is distracted by the hummingbird, and finally turns back to the flowers, now viewed with greater detail, with the paradox that the tiger lilies allow "the air" to be seen. The haiku, which began as an Imagist experiment on juxtaposition, is now a vehicle for a Modernist lyric on the nature of perception.

At times, Williams brought his poems quite close to Japanese poetry. He experimented widely with short stanzas, and his 1928 poem "The Source" alternates three and two line stanzas in a way that is eerily similar to Japanese linked verse. For long stretches it reads like a one-man renku:

Beyond which lies
the profound detail of the woods
restless, distressed

soft underfoot
the low ferns

Mounting a rusty root
the pungent mold
globular fungi

water in an old
hoof print

And so on. One even finds Williams recreating renku poetics. “The Source” moves easily from the distant to the near, from the high to the low, from the living to the inanimate. This sort of constant variation is the lifeblood of renku, and Williams grasped it instinctively.

In fact, Williams used haiku-like stanzas to evolve the lyric towards our notions of haiku. A glance through his lyrics of the 1920s and ’30s reveals any number of stanzas that work brilliantly as individual haiku:

Monday
 the canna flaunts
its crimson head

“The Descent of Winter,” 1928

As the rain falls
so does
 your love

“Rain,” 1930

Cattail fluff
blows in
at the bank door

“Porous,” 1939

Anyone who has followed the development of haiku during the past thirty years will recognize the direction that Williams’s poetry took.

form that brings Western poetry close to the one-line form of Japanese haiku, written with all the freedom that certain strains of modern haiku enjoy.

IV

What can haiku poets learn from a study of Williams's poetry? They will, I think, find a kindred spirit. Many haiku have adopted or recreated Williams's innovations (I have seen Nick Virgilio's classic "A bass/picking bugs/off the moon!" written as a triadic line, for example). The connections between the haiku and Williams extend to his thinking about poetry. Today, Williams's influence derives from his ideas on the direction poetry should take, most of which are applicable to haiku. His mantra of "no ideas but in things," for example, might have been written as a rallying cry for haiku poets—it reads like Bashō's advice to "learn of the pine tree from the pine." His calls for new rhythms and a "variable foot" repeats the form's search for short lines outside traditional iambs and trochees. His championing of everyday language is eminently haiku-like. Finally, his lifelong project of writing about the flora and people of America seems like an attempt to see his world as it was, an aim that Bashō also advocated.

There is another lesson to be learned from studying Williams: a more accurate history of haiku in English. We often hear that the haiku inspired a group of Imagists around 1920, but then the form lay dormant until it was revived by the Beats in the 1950s. Williams lets us see a greater continuity. Instead of disappearing for nearly thirty years, the form influenced lyrics in the 1920s and '30s, where it helped shape Williams's explorations of a freer and more immediate American idiom. Williams's work, in turn, influenced the Beat poets, who revived interest in writing haiku in the new poetic idiom that Williams had developed. In short, Williams was a bridge figure, a link between the early Modernists and Beat poets. It is hard to overstate his influence. He pioneered the poetic language that we take for granted, and for three decades mainstream haiku has adopted his innovations. Even now, as our haiku begins to experiment with modes other than a three-line imagistic poem, we seem destined to draw from the poetry that he helped create.

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