

RECOVERING THE SUCHNESS OF THINGS IN HAIKU

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In “Haiku and Defamiliarization” (*Modern Haiku* 48.1), Mike Spikes quotes approvingly of Victor Shlovsky's technique of defamiliarization, an abstruse term which is supposed to guide haiku poets in their pursuit of the art. I wish to highlight the Shlovsky passage from “Art as Technique” that Spikes places importance on:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*¹

Defamiliarization as a poetic technique is resorted to when the spiritual perspective rooted in the early approach of haiku by Bashō and his followers is stripped away or devalued. As a Zen adherent, Bashō didn't need to make the stone “*stony*” because the wandering poet already prized or treasured the suchness of things, including stones, which weren't “things” at all, but beings imbued with spirit or aliveness.

Yes, Bashō endeavored to help haiku lovers wake up from the trance of everyday life, but the father of Japanese haiku was not fundamentally interested in artfulness, which is really *artifice: clever or cunning devices to achieve a particular effect*. Artifice is ego-driven and was not what Bashō was about. Rather, the author of such books as *Travelogue of Weather-Beaten Bones* sought a deeper reality in which the dualistic nature of subjective consciousness was transcended, if only momentarily. Self-transcendence is not naive realism. This extraordinary and unique quality of haiku is at great risk of being lost or buried alive under the weight of defamiliarization and other linguistic acrobatics like dehabituating, which Spikes discusses.

Contemporary English language haiku would benefit from a return to spiritual basics (which is not a self-conscious act of will). One does not need to be a Zen Buddhist to write spiritually-informed haiku, but Zen is useful insofar as it suggests an intuitive approach to haiku poetry that bypasses ordinary consciousness (trance-state familiarity), which allows for insight into the intimate nature of subject-and-object.

Meditative awareness offers a more robust alternative to generating and interpreting literary texts. Relying on meditative awareness, the Zen notion of *suchness* is key in this regard. Of suchness, the late Canadian haiku poet, Eric Amann, observes in *The Wordless Poem*:

... the haiku poet presents things “just as they are”—the suchness of things. He [or she] gives us only the circumstances of an event, and of these only the barest minimum. “Touch and let go” is the secret of haiku art.²

The contrast between Shlovsky and Amann couldn't be starker. The former contends that the “object is not important”; for Amann, nothing could be more important: the object is everything. Why is this? Because, in apprehending the suchness of things, the poet attains an immediate (un-mediated through thought, analysis, preconception) realization that the object and the poet are, spiritually speaking, one. To put it another way: From a spiritual perspective, there really are no objects; All things are subjects. The mistaken belief of the skin-encapsulated ego³ that he or she is separate from the world is seen through and sloughed off. The resulting haiku is a celebration of that transcendence as well as a recovery of wholeness and innocence. Such haiku are thus considered *wordless* precisely because they do not rely on the kind of literary artifice and devices that Spikes elevates.

Amann quotes Zen scholar, D. T. Suzuki, in *The Wordless Poem*:

“Zen insists on handling the thing itself and not an empty abstraction.”

“Handling the thing itself and not an abstraction”—that is also the essence of haiku. A language is a graveyard of dead words that have long lost their relationship to reality, yet continue to be used as if they had flesh and blood.

The whole purpose, therefore, of the technique of 'wordlessness' and 'direct pointing' as we find it in both Zen and haiku, is to avoid this confusion between words and realities and the consequent illusion of the separateness of things.⁴

Amann invokes the British haiku scholar, R. H. Blyth, to emphasize the distinction between haiku and other forms of writing: "a haiku is *not literature inasmuch as it disposes with words as much as possible* (emphasis added)."⁵ In contrast to what Spikes proposes, haiku are not to be conceived of as literary texts so much as pre-reflective, unmediated intersections linking world, poet, and reader.

Bashō translator David Landis Barnbill (*Modern Haiku* 47.3) makes a similar point with regards to suchness in a tactful retort to Jim Kacian's argument, "Realism is Dead and Always Was" (*Modern Haiku* 47.2):

... Bashō takes this [suchness; thusness] as the ultimate ideal, and haiku at its deepest level arises out of such an experience.

Barnbill continues:

In further enriching both our reading and our writing of haiku, I suggest we also need to remain open to the kind of experience that goes beyond the dualisms of subject/object, mind/reality and self/world.... But the nondualistic experience of thusness has been an essential part of Buddhist-informed haiku (and tanka before it) and it can be a part of haiku's further development in the West.⁶

I dare to propose: *take suchness out of haiku and haiku is no longer haiku*. We see abundant evidence of this already in a proliferation of surreal, mystifying, indecipherable poetry that many are calling *gendai* haiku. *Gendai* haiku appear transiently captivating because the subject matter or form is novel, strange, unfamiliar, but such qualities don't make for poetry that endures through the ages. Why? Because such haiku is devoid of spirit and heart; there is little that joins the reader to the poet and the natural world.

Consider Blyth's incisive observation, quoted by D. T. Suzuki in his chapter on Zen and Haiku in, *Zen and Japanese Culture*:

"A *haiku* is the expression of a temporary enlightenment in which we see into the life of things ..."

Blyth continues:

"...*Haiku*... shows the thing as it exists at one and the same time outside and inside the mind, perfectly subjective, ourselves undivided from the object, the object in its original unity with ourselves... It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry-blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, our Buddha-nature. It is a way in which the cold winter rain, the swallows of evening, even the very day in its hotness and the length of the night become truly alive, share in our humanity, speak their own silent and expressive language."⁷

Let me reiterate: A poet need not be a practitioner of Zen or Buddhism to write haiku poetry. D. T. Suzuki, too, is very clear and unambiguous about this: "*Haiku* and Zen, however, are not to be confused. *Haiku* is *haiku* and Zen is Zen."⁸ That said, a moment of enlightenment can happen to Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, or atheist poets. Not only Buddhists have Buddha-nature; Christians also have Buddha-nature, but they may refer to it as divine grace or Christ-consciousness.

What is Buddha-nature? Buddha-nature is the full-bodied awareness of one's intimate, inextricable relationship with the universe. It is this awareness which, I maintain, quietly lights up a haiku poem, gives the haiku life. The absence of such awareness leaves a poem lifeless, bloodless, boring, and forgettable, despite some transient spark fueled by novelty or peculiarity of one sort or another.

Why are countless haiku lovers familiar with Bashō's old pond and frog, crow on a bare branch, monkey and raincoat, or prostitutes and bush clover, centuries after these haiku were penned? Is it because Bashō employed Shlovsky's artful technique of defamiliarization? I think not.

Bashō's poems remain fresh and alive—memorable—because the poet

was fully present in a mind state of reverence. Bashō revealed the extraordinary in the ordinary pond/frog, crow/branch, monkey/raincoat, prostitute/bush clover because the ego-driven division between himself and other disappeared. The familiar became memorable by virtue of Bashō's insight into the intimate connection, the feeling of oneness, with what he saw, felt, smelled, and tasted. It is haiku as revelation, rather than poetry that defamiliarizes or dehabituates, which imbue the imagery with enduring power.

Spikes asserts: "poetic language transforms the world." Bashō, I am sure, would strenuously object to such a contention; rather, haiku reveal the sacred nature of the world beyond the everyday trance which obscures this sacredness. It is meditative awareness that is transformative, not the mediation of language, which stultifies and ossifies, as Amann earlier noted.

For those who aspire to be haiku writers, Bashō advised them to go directly to the pine. Not with the intention of employing a defamiliarizing technique or to emulate the master's haiku style. Bashō's legacy is far more than the pebbled and watery mirroring of the natural world. The father of haiku implored would-be poets to become wholly intimate with their subjects, whatever these happen to be. That way lies true, lasting poetry; in short, sacred life—the only life we have, the only life worth writing about.

If you want to go to the old pond and write a poem about how it gave birth to your twins who turned into flying fish baptized by the Pope, by all means do so. Just know that long after you and your great grandchildren have left the Earth, future haiku lovers will still be reading Bashō's old pond poem, whereas yours will most likely have sunk to the bottom of the postmodern equivalent of that ancient body of water.

NOTES

¹ Spikes, Mike. "Haiku and Defamiliarization." *Modern Haiku* 48.1, 2017.

² Amann, Eric. *The Wordless Poem*. Privately Printed, 1978.

³ Watts, Alan. *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006.

⁴ Amman.

⁵ Amman.

⁶ Barnhill, Davis Landis. "A Reply to Jim Kacian's 'Realism Is Dead (and Always Was)'" in *Modern Haiku* 47.3, 200.

⁷ Suzuki, D.T. *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Princeton University Press, 1938.

⁸ Ibid.