

SENRYU AS AN ART FORM

by Joseph Earner

FOREWORD

Seer Ox: American Senryu Magazine, which I established and edited in the mid-1970s, was intended to showcase some of what could be accomplished with senryu in English. Joseph Earner's essay, reprinted here from *Seer Ox* 4 (1976), 14–16, reflects the direction *Seer Ox* pursued, seeing senryu as capable of a tragicomic vision relating to the human condition, informed by the deeper roots of human psychology as then understood vis-à-vis Jung, et al. We found no artistic or compelling philosophical reasons to limit senryu to vulgar humor, cheap shots, shallow satire, or what passed for wit on the school playground. Our estimation of senryu was, I think, essentially in parallel to that of R.H. Blyth. At that time, we also kept our eyes open for opportunities offered by tanka in English (via *kyōka*), and the prose-poetry of an emerging haibun literature, to apply these same approaches and thematic expectations.

—*Michael McClintock*
Clovis, Calif.
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The “problem” of the senryu is an interesting one and, for our purposes in English, would seem to involve, at its very center, two qualities that people who carry themselves rather flatulently would do well to recognize: vicious self-parody and evil-natured fun. For the senryu does not look at man and say: that's what *you* are, but I still love you. It looks on him and says that's what you are and if that includes *me* too, buddy, then god help us all.

The senryu in English seems to have gotten watered down (via our Angon-Saxel inability to see a dog as a really shameless, stupid beast, a cat as his more intelligent, vicious obverse, and man as a composite of the two) into a gentle, fun-provoking picture of our more delightful foibles. It isn't really. It's pretty nasty, when you come down to it, and was recognized to be such by the Japanese, who kept it well apart from what they considered poetry.

Senryu, in fact, stands much closer in tone to the Greek and Roman epigram than it ever did to the haiku (despite the easy tendency of the latter, depending on where its stress is placed, to swerve from nature toward man at his worst). Take this one, for example, written by one of our editors during a particularly senryuish period:

her eyes spoke volumes,
most of them
pornographic

Now *that's* nasty. Whether an actual observation, or wish-fulfillment, who can venture to say? Catullus, in any case, would have liked it, as well, perhaps, the First Senryū himself. It's human, detestable, and downright groinish. For let us ever recall, brethren, that in the sub-sub-basement of most senryu there lurks the bobbing green head (or is it purple?) and hairy red body of Lust. This is why, of course, senryu are so interesting and why kulchured Japanese, for centuries, have been sneaking into bookstores to peep at them.

The senryu, then, sees man holding a particularly, though naturally repellent position in the scheme of things, under the aspect of comedy. The real "problem" sets in, however, when the exercise, as horribly funny as it can get, starts getting *unfunny*. Yet even here, cruelty and pathos may combine to bring about the sort of laughter one hears sometimes in the deepest core of things, a chuckle not of our making, true, but the sort Lear (so we are told) picked up out there in his foolish stage, and we now and again may in our daily lives catch just enough of to dismiss at once for fear of it ripping us apart, but recognize and retain, somewhere within us, as properly-attuned recording devices of the gods.

she is so homely
he talks women's lib

Let's be objective, now; poetical if we can, and not political. There is humor here—not the sort, perhaps, we would rather hear, but humor still. Who is it that can smile at this? Not the politician, certainly, not the sociologist, not the leaders of “serious” revolutions. For these must of necessity carry their blinkers always with them, and march unerringly light-lipped and straight. But the poet—delays, stays back, steps off the shiny asphalt occasionally to investigate less shimmering (and sometimes quite pungent) things, sees the gentleman slip on the banana, or the banana slip on the gentleman, the decorous matron pick her nose, or the nose her matron, or most cruelly and comically of all, the child born without a nose wear colorful, pretty dresses on the chance that no one will notice, or imagine he noticed, as noticed Nathaniel West.

The last case would seem to take senryu beyond humor as it is commonly understood into something much deeper and more remote, and few of us there are who would be so unwise as to journey with it. We want the laughs that are true, but not too true, that hurt but not too much. And this is perhaps what the senryu can give us more readily than any other form of humor, even the terse epigram: the extrapolation of our sad evilty presented *in itself* and without comment, a mirror in a room carefully locked, with the blinds drawn, watching.