

Realism Is Dead (and Always Was)¹

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How do haiku mean? Not what do haiku mean, though that is an interesting question in its own right, but how: how does this short array of words capture attention, imply content, and suggest meaning? Can we expect that haiku will continue to do these things as our culture and language evolve?

To begin, it's important to say what haiku are. What category of object is a haiku? In determining this, we need to make a very basic distinction, one that we all made long ago.

Haiku are very short arrangements of letters, punctuation, and other symbols, or else sounds and pauses, which usually can be interpreted within one language or another. Their intent is almost always to communicate, though what they communicate can vary greatly. They employ one or more strategies to achieve their ends, and these strategies are usually literary—that is, they rely on the tradition of language within a culture to indicate their significance. In this way they're not markedly different than other literary objects, like stories, or essays, or other kinds of poems.

I wish to distinguish this cultural product, this haiku, from the subject matter that it may contain, and also from the source or inspiration from which it has arisen. That is to say, I may write a haiku about the moon, or because the moon has inspired me to do so, but the haiku is not, and never can be, the moon. The moon is a real object, but the haiku is just a literary artifact. Insistence on such a distinction may sound ridiculous, but in actuality it's one of particular importance in the history and practice of our genre.

Haiku has always claimed a close correspondence with what we encounter in the real world. We often say it's a goal to present the subject matter of haiku exactly as it is. We even have a term for it: *sono-mama*, "things as they are." But if we are agreed that a haiku about the moon is not and never can be the moon, what can such a goal mean?

What *sono-mama* is, in fact, is an argument for realism. Realism may be defined as “the quality or fact of representing a person, thing, or situation accurately or in a way that is true to life.”² For a host of reasons, haiku has espoused realism as its chief strategy for most of its four centuries of existence. The great bulk of haiku ever written has aimed at or been informed by realism. Realism, we can say, has been the chief way in which haiku have held meaning. And this has had a marked effect on its development.

Consider this example:

the sun sets
through blackened leaves
a last red pepper

This is one of the first haiku I ever wrote, more than three decades ago. I choose to feature it here not because I’m making any literary claims for it, but because in writing it I was trying my best to follow the rules of haiku as I knew them at the time, and also because it subsequently got published. Its intention is quite clear: it means to have the reader visualize a sunset on a late autumn day, and once that image has been posited, to compare it with another image, that of a red pepper, both seen through blackened leaves. Both images are taken from the so-called natural world, and both are allowed to appear without unusual adjectives or context that might cause a reader to see them in some different way. The result is what I think we can safely call a normative haiku.

And yet, even in this seemingly obvious example, there are questions that might be asked. For instance, what sort of sunset are we looking at? Are there clouds? Is it hazy? How can I be sure that the sunset I have in mind is the one a reader will envision? Of course the answer is: I can’t. I can only hope that the phrase “the sun sets” connotes enough of an overlap in human experience that the poem will be understandable.

But where exactly is “things as they are” in such an arrangement? If even such a simple phrase is subject to individual interpretation, how could we ever hope to express things “as they are”? We might even ask if the notion of “things as they are” actually means anything. Even if we’re all willing to agree that there’s an objective universe out there that we’re all responding

to, there's no escaping the fact that our senses, experiences, predilections, and understandings are all different. I can never get a reader to see the sunset I had in mind even if I go into much greater detail, which in haiku is, of course, impossible.

What we have relied upon in haiku from the very first—what, in fact, defines haiku—are images. If you look at the various definitions of haiku, nearly all will include some language about it being an imagistic poem, with most going so far as to suggest that a haiku is the juxtaposition of two images. We might have a broader notion of haiku today, but there's no denying that this is how nearly everyone has understood haiku throughout history. But what is an image, exactly? I use the phrase “the sun sets” in my poem, and we can visualize, according to our own lights, some version of a sunset. But the image is not a sunset itself. It may not even correspond to a specific sunset, but instead may be an amalgamation of some idea of sunset that we may possess.

And in fact, “the sun sets” is not even a visual entity, but a group of words. Where does the image that I conjure from this group of words exist? Can we point to it? And by extension, how exactly does this relate to reality? Is the conflating of several sunset experiences into a generalized conception of a sunset a representation that is true to life? This seems to be getting farther and farther away from *sono-mama*.

Images are not any part of the real world at all, but are pieces of mentation dependent on an individual's culture, language, and experiences—let's call it mindspace. And we poets use the concept of image in an idiosyncratic way: we mean them not as visual representations, as a painter might, but as artifacts of language; that is, as words. Our images are at yet another remove from the sensory input with which we received them. I'm pretty sure whatever my experience of sunsets might be, it is not at first, or primarily, verbal. Haiku, then, are not the juxtaposition of two images, as we have had it. Haiku are small collections of words intended to manipulate mindspace. My sunset is no actual sunset, though I may have had one in mind. It's simply a verbal trigger to affect your mindspace, to make you reach for your image of sunset.

This is what we're doing after all—supplying opportunity to explore our own and each others' resources. The brain is a high-powered and

complicated comparison machine. Its purpose is to help us make decisions that perpetuate our lives and permit us to live long enough to reproduce, and then to move to some warm climate while spending our Roth IRAs. Some of these choices will be simple but have great consequence: these red berries, but not those red berries. Some will be quite complex but have little practical consequence. $f=ma$ (force equals mass times acceleration) may have been superseded in our understanding of the universe by $e=mc^2$ (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared), but we can still rely on it for virtually every action we will undertake in our lifetimes.

This comparative function is no less invaluable in the synthetic aspects of our lives. Language, for instance, is a wholly man-made phenomenon that calls for comparisons at every moment. The best instances of language—any writing or speaking or persuading or informing that we view as exemplary—are largely the best selections of comparisons—this metaphor, this simile, this rhetorical device.

From its earliest appearance in English, haiku has been the quintessential comparison poem, beginning with Ezra Pound's Metro *hokku*,

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Hugh Kenner, in his explication of this poem in his brilliant book, *The Pound Era*, characterized it thusly: "It is a simile with 'like' suppressed: Pound called it an equation, meaning not a redundancy, a equals a , but a generalization of unexpected exactness." Is this not exactly what we've come to understand haiku to be? Not a redundancy—not, as Gertrude Stein might have it, *faces are faces are faces*—but a generalization of unexpected exactness—*the apparition of faces are as dampened petals*.

Consider again my sunset haiku. At the time my avowed interest was to follow the rules, to make the poem as "haiku-like" as I could. What was the result? A comparison between the image of the setting sun and the image of a ripe pepper, hinged by a middle line that is an image of

blackened leaves. What might be the significance of this poem? Other than trying to come to terms with the new genre, what might I have been trying to communicate? The colors involved—deepening reds against darkening contexts—were certainly the departure point, but so what? Would that be a sufficiently interesting comparison to make it worth a reader's attention? At least one person thought it was—Francine Porad, then editor of the haiku journal *Brussels Sprout*. Why would she do that? What did she find in it that was more than “so what?”

My presumption is that the juxtaposition of those images, in the words so used, conveyed some emotional weight to her. That is, I don't believe she thought the poem was worth publishing because of its prettiness, or even its vividness, but rather because of what its images suggest—a last colorful hurrah of the waning year; a commingling of the source of all life and one of its products, unified through colors associated with heat; and so, a renewal of and insistence on the persistence of life in the face of encroaching death: concepts that reinforce the human values of endurance, determination, and will. So the poem makes its impact not as verisimilitude, but as metaphor: what it stands for, rather than what it is *per se*. Metaphor is the antithesis of things as they are. The sun is the sun, certainly, but it's also a metaphor for so many other things, wherein lies its poetic power. Using images so that they convey emotional freight is precisely the art of haiku. Said another way, manipulating triggers to affect mindspace is what we've always been up to in our art. This is a long way from *sono-mama*.

But it's also a long way from happenstance. How was it that Francine identified the metaphoric value inherent in my poem? Simply: she had trained herself to do so, just as everyone who studies haiku has trained him- or herself. It's no extra work for our brains to compare images in a poem—as mentioned, that's what the brain does as a matter of course. But it is extra work to note how our mentations float about in our mindspace, how they come to mean in relation with each other. This is the knack we talk about acquiring. Not everyone reads haiku with discernment, and most haiku poets have a funny story or two about trying to share haiku with an uncomprehending friend. Anyone can gain the knack, all one has to do is to work at it a while, though there is such a thing as talent, and

some will get it faster and at more depth than others. We can think of acquiring this knack as the dues paid to join a club, a club based on a special ability. The language of this club, of this ability, is metaphor.

Haiku are not reality. Haiku—at least haiku that aspire beyond realism—are metaphors that use images to trigger responses within the mindspace of readers and hearers, what we have come to call resonance. It's the resonance that Francine found in my sunset poem that prompted her to publish it, the accumulation of metaphorical significance from the triggers employed. And because haiku are already metaphors, there has arisen a taboo within haiku against using metaphor overtly in their construction. It's easy to see why—if the significance of a poem is already at a remove from its material, then putting the material at yet another remove makes its meaning even more remote and harder to parse. It's not that haiku doesn't like metaphor, it's that it is metaphor.

If the value of haiku resides in our abilities to manipulate mindspace with verbal triggers to create resonance, then we reside wholly within the activities of art. Things as they are—realism—as a goal may exist, but elsewhere, in some realm that is not art, something perhaps like religion. And once we are free of realism as an artistic goal, we may well ask what's to become of haiku, a genre so long identified with it? What will replace realism as our default strategy?

I don't see the demise of realism as a loss for haiku, but rather, the opening of a portal to much greater possibility. While having an ethos that unifies the genre makes for good community, it also greatly limits the range of what is available to haiku. We have all encountered content prohibitions in our practice, and all these prohibitions were intended to reinforce some version of realism—in some instances a cultural hegemony, in some a reliance on the human sensorium—but in truth much of our lives is lived in the mindspace where images reside. Realism is a way of representing the real world in artistic terms, and nominally the underpinning of haiku, but the modern world has become far too abstract to portray in traditional ways. If haiku is no longer rooted in the real world, what might ground it? Contemporary haiku must be able to account for equity derivatives, mass killing at a distance, the purchase of political power within a democracy, the discovery of the Higgs boson, internet dating

and much much more, that, for all their seeming “real world” causality, are essentially abstract transactions. Haiku is large enough to express the full range of mindspace. If we fail to do so, we are simply limiting the genre, and ourselves.

And, importantly, limning the actual with accuracy remains a tool in achieving the metaphorical resonance that is the true goal of good haiku. It just isn't the only tool, nor a goal in itself. As always, it is what the poem needs that determines what we present, and how we present it. The challenge is not to render things as they are, but rather to manipulate mindspace to achieve the effect we wish to impart to the receiver. All those realist poems are merely one subset of all the possible kinds of poems that haiku can be. We certainly don't need to eschew poems that are sourced in the objective universe. This one, for example, was written from an actual experience:

the high fizz nerve the low boom blood dead silence

Thus goes realism. This poem presents a challenging surface, intentionally so. I could have framed it so that it looked and felt more normative, providing the context that would have made its content more approachable, more obvious. But what seemed important about the poem to me was not its correspondence with actuality, but the sorts of tensions that arise in mindspace from not being certain where this is taking place. In other words, I deliberately withheld information that would have made this an easier poem, because that ease would actually work against its full potentiality.

This version of the poem makes you work harder, and I believe that there are rewards for that work. Of course some people may not choose to grapple with such challenges. Who you write for, and who you trust, will make a difference to whether or not you might be willing to present a poem like this. But it's not a poet's responsibility to make things easy for readers if that ease compromises the value of their poem. Good readers will follow such work, or, more precisely, will explore their mindspace more comprehensively in seeking what is being sought, and this is the most we can really ever hope for.

The logical consequence of this is that real cherry blossoms can be seen, paradoxically, as a retreat from the world rather than engagement with it. It's not that cherry blossoms are to blame for any perceived retreat from reality. Cherry blossoms remain part of the objective universe in which we all interrelate, and as such they remain as likely a subject for haiku as anything else. But as an image they have a history, and as such are emblematic of the limitations that some have placed on the genre. Cherry blossoms are identified with the most traditional aspects of haiku, one of its most common topics, immured in a kind of cultural amber wherein the ideas and emotions contained in such poems are already codified. The image of cherry blossoms in a poem nowadays nearly always conjures an ethos identified with a remote and outdated culture, but one that, curiously, is still regarded as the fit mindspace for encountering and appreciating such work. More, it is held by some to be haiku's only possible mindspace, and that any attempt to update or relativize it is a betrayal of the genre. As a consequence, it's very difficult indeed to write a compelling new poem on the topic, one that speaks to and achieves resonance within our contemporaries.

This is the sense in which I suggest that cherry blossoms and other such images might be a retreat from the world—when they can no longer be seen anew, but only through the filter of cultural heritage. To argue for such a practice is not only reactionary, but betrays a lack of understanding of what is significant in our encounter with our universe as mediated through language. Realism may be untenable, but an ethos founded on a hidebound version of it is even more so.

If realism is debunked, what of the ostensible subject matter of haiku? Haiku has long been considered the poetry of nature. Such content lends itself to an alliance with an objective reality, something outside ourselves, and consequently a relationship with realism.

But, truly, this is a myth as well. We may well have written and appreciated haiku in terms of its natural, and especially seasonal, attributes, but it is the very rare haiku—or haiku poet—where the point of such work is simply to invoke nature. In nearly every nature poem, the real subject matter is the poet's emotional response, stated or implied. It's not just the crows on the withered branch at evening, it's the emotion such

triggers bring into play within us. It can be argued that much of the skill of the poet resides in how well he or she disguises this personal emotional response, but this only means that we enjoy playing and mastering the literary game that such work arranges for us. For poems where we cannot discover this emotional connection, we commonly dismiss it with a “So what?” In my sunset poem, again quite a normative poem, it was only that a good reader found something more than a “so what?” that brought it to publication. Another editor might not have found that emotional charge, and so the poem might never have appeared. It isn’t that the poem is about sunsets, leaves, and peppers—about nature—that matters, but that sunsets and leaves and peppers collectively evoke emotion, a human response, to these natural stimuli.

So haiku need not cease to be the poem of nature, and I’m certain it won’t. Neither do I expect that we will cease to value a poet’s skill in deflecting or underplaying his or her personal emotional response in such poems. The stuff of poetry will not be leaving haiku—we will simply be realizing the larger potentialities that exist within it.

And, I expect subject areas to open to haiku that have been considered off-limits, or controversial, at best. I mentioned a few of them previously, but they can be taken as representative of larger issues: the relationship between man and machine, especially as machines take on a more public role, and approach and perhaps attain consciousness; the relationship between people in such a world, where algorithms determine who they meet, as well as when and how; the nature of nature, as we learn more about it while living less in it; and, as a consequence of this latter, urban living, and what sorts of pressures and wisdoms it imparts; and many other topics as well.

In fact, poets are already exploring these topics, and how could they not? This is our world, certainly more than our world is comprised of daimyos and palanquins. Such triggers are useful for conjuring nostalgia, perhaps, and evoking a historical mindset, but we cannot be limited to them and expect to meet that which we know to be true to us in our own time.

So what can we expect of haiku going forward? Perhaps we are more honest about what the true subject matter of our poems is. Perhaps we

gain a practically limitless array of new triggers and relationships, things we actually encounter in our days and lives. But things won't be all that different. There will still be good and bad haiku written (and too many of the latter published). There will still be a relationship with nature, but we will define that nature more capaciously, and admit our interest in it resides in our own emotional response. And we will still hunt for the best images, and make the best comparisons, and seek to present them in the best manner, since this is how we arrive at resonance, and resonance is what makes our art worth doing.

Realism may be dead, and haiku's dependency on it, but haiku — well, haiku's just beginning.

NOTES

¹ This essay was delivered at Haiku North America 2015, Schenectadt, NY: 14 October, 2015

² Encyclopedia.com. [Web] <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/realism.aspx#4>