

On the haiku

I've never been able to write a haiku. Much as I love the form and much as the works and words of Bashō and Issa touch me, I can't do it. I just don't see how English, which is a stress timed language of strong and weak beats, can do the same tricks as Japanese which is a syllable timed language where you count 5 and 7 and 5 syllables to a line and that gives you the form like an empty bucket you can pour your words into.

Also Japanese lacks articles, *a* and *the* and in English they are, some would say, useful and some would say redundant pointers to things but Japanese doesn't have them. Whatever sense articles may give they also add to the rhythm. If I write without articles my nouns are flat and hard. But an article gives a bounce to the words on the page and help to create a pattern of strong and weak beats that English relishes. But writing a haiku, articles get in the way of the flat, hard syllable count of Japanese.

What can be learned from haiku however is the pattern of discontinuity. Sometimes a haiku will be two or three separate images that the reader has then to connect in order to finish the piece. The gaps between the images are spaces where the reader can get in. Not like in a lot of European verse where everything is finished and thrown at you.

Unlike the rhythms of the language and the forms of its poetry, the principles of Japanese aesthetics can be translated. Essentially there are three:

wabi-sabi - poverty, simplicity, imperfection, being in tune with nature, the weathered beauty that comes with age and use,

mono no aware - the impermanence/transience of things, like the changes of the seasons, knowing that something will soon be lost

yūgen - translates as cloudy impenetrability in the sense of mystery, beyond the intellect

Lots of people have written good stuff on these principles so I don't have to.

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