

Pound and the Haiku tradition

by Christina Rohkamm (Hamburg)

I. Japan and the Haiku Tradition

Haiku is deeply rooted in Japanese literature. The origin of the haiku tradition can be traced back to the very beginnings of Japanese poetry.

Originally the word *haiku* or *haikai* meant „to play“ and could be translated as „joke“. It was used for sheer entertainment as its development from the renga would suggest.

The *renga* consists of 5–7–5/7–7 syllables, the first hemistich of which was composed by one person and the second by another. The value of this poem lay in the relationship and genuineness of the two people. However, in most cases the two stanzas fell apart. Gradually the first stanza of the renga gained more and more importance and finally was considered as one poetic entity. By then the form of the haiku was attained. This transformation took place in the 17th century.

In its most genuine form haiku consists of seventeen syllables in three lines of five, seven and five syllables. This is the classical rhythm of Japanese poetry. A translated haiku from the well-known haiku poet Bashô shows this technique:

„Brushing the leaves, fell
A white camellia blossom
into the dark well.“

1 2 3 4 5
„Brush-ing the Leaves, fell
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
A white ca-mel-lia blos-som
1 2 3 4 5
in-to the dark well.“

Usually haiku have no stressed or unstressed syllables. Rhyme is only carefully used. Moreover haiku have alliteration and assonance, and contain a certain inner rhythm and melody which is due to the Japanese language. The translation problems between the Japanese and European languages play a considerable part by the way.

In regard to the contents one could say that nature and seasonal themes predominate in traditional haiku. Thus the haiku tradition offers themes which appear again and a-gain such as 'loneliness in winter time', 'death feelings in autumn' and so on.

It should be stressed that the haiku's form and contents are a unity. For as the poet Otsuji once remarked: „Of course the form is a natural one... When we try

to express our emotion directly, we cannot know beforehand how many syllables will be needed.¹ A haiku is made spontaneously and directly. It expresses the poet's experience and feelings in the most condensed form and in an instance of time which corresponds with the length of seventeen syllables. Moreover in haiku moment and experience should lie truth and beauty.

As already mentioned above, haiku was originally only seen as a sort of game. Only later on was it considered seriously. Nowadays it again serves as another sort of game, which the haiku competition of the Japan Air Lines (1964) shows.

II. The Western World Discovers Japanese Culture

In the 19th century Japan gave up its politics of isolation and opened itself to the Western world. This meant also that the Western world got access to Japanese culture.

Most appealing to the western societies were the Japanese woodblock prints, and soon collecting of Japanese art became fashionable. But besides this vogue there was also serious occupation with Japanese culture. Above all it attracted those artists who were searching for something new.

In the field of literature the American Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was one of the first poets who dealt with Japan in his poems. After his death the American Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) made an attempt „to marry East and West“ in his writings. He translated many Japanese and Chinese poems.

In France Judith Gautier (1846–1917) translated oriental poetry, which had influenced her own poetic work. Thereafter many French poets (in fact all Symbolists) occupied themselves with Japanese poetry.

The American painter James Abott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), who had studied in France, brought the French enthusiasm for Japan to England. His paintings are said to have influenced in terms of Japanese art poets such as Algernon Charles Swinburn and Oscar Wilde.

Another important figure for having popularized Japanese literature in England and America was the journalist Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), later Yakumo Koizumi, whose greatest merit was his translation of Japanese poetry. Almost every writer after the turn of the 20th century, who was interested in Japanese literature, had read Hearn's translations.²

Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century the Western world had discovered Japanese literature. But, except Ezra Pound, there was no poet, who so deeply understood Japanese literature and on whose poetry the most genuine literary form, the haiku, had such a strong influence.

1 Kenneth YASUDA, *The Japanese Haiku*, Tôkyô, 1959, p. 41. Dietrich KRUSCHKE, *Haiku*, Tübingen und Basel, 1970, p. 127.

2 Earl MINER, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, New Jersey, 1966, p. 91

III. Pound's Interest in Haiku

In 1908 the young American poet Ezra Pound came to London. He soon made the acquaintance of poets such as T.E. Hulme and F.S. Flint, who, among other lesser known poets, were the founders of the Poet's Club. Pound joined this group, which was searching for new poetic principles.

The Poet's Club was mainly interested in French and Japanese literature. For this reason they even tried to write imitations of haiku and *tanka*. In Flint's „The History of Imagism“, which appeared in *The Egoist* of May 1st, 1915, the serious occupation of these poets with Japanese literature can be seen. There Flint wrote: „I had been advocating in the course of a series of articles on recent books of verse a poetry in vers libre, akin in spirit to the Japanese... We proposed at various times to replace →conventional verse← by pure vers libre; by the Japanese *tanka* and *haikai*.“³

That Pound himself studied haiku poetry was suggested the first time, when he wrote the poem „To Whistler, American“. This poem was published in the first issue of *Poetry* in October, 1912. The last two lines go as follows:

„You / Whistler / and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts
Show us there's chance at least of winning through.“

What was to be understood of these lines became only understandable when Pound wrote in his biography, „Edward Wodsworth, Vorticist“, in *The Egoist* of June 1st, 1914: „I trust that the gentle reader is accustomed to take pleasure in 'Whistler and the Japanese'. Otherwise he had better stop reading my article until he has treated himself to some further draughts of education. From Whistler and the Japanese, or Chinese, the ‚world‘, that is to say, the fragment of the English-speaking world that spreads itself into print, learned to enjoy ‚Arrangements‘ of colours and masses.“⁴

Pound's interest in haiku became more evident, when he wrote his famous poem „In a Station of the Metro“, which really proves that his study of haiku had entered into his own poetry.

IV. Pound's Poem „In a Station of the Metro“

Pound's *Metro* poem first appeared in his article on „Vorticism“ in *The Fortnightly Review*, Sept. 1st, 1914. In this well known article he told how haiku penetrated into his own poetry. „Three years ago in Paris I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this meant to me... And that evening, as I went home

3 Earl MINER, „Pound, Haiku and the Image“, in: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Walter Sutton, Prentice Hall Inc., 1963, p. 117

4 Earl MINER, „Pound, Haiku and the Image“ in: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Walter Sutton, Prentice Hall Inc., 1963, p. 118

along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying, and I found suddenly the expression... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that – a ‚pattern‘, or hardly a pattern, if by ‚pattern‘ you mean something with a ‚repeat‘ in it. But it was a word, the beginning for me of a language in colour...

I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work ‚of second intensity‘. Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence.

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

Then Pound expresses his indebtedness to Japanese poetry and quotes a *haiku*. „The Japanese have had the same sense of exploration. They have understood the beauty of this sort of knowing... The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the *hokku*.

*The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:
A butterfly.*“

The *Metro poem* became very well known in literary circles, more because of its defects than because of its perfection. Even nowadays it still is a controversial matter.

There is the critique that „the poem is lacking in unity, in that forceful intensity of poetic vision and insight which alone can weld the objects named into a meaningful whole. In contrast, the relationship between the objects named in the *haiku* (quoted above) is quite clear.“⁵ Or a contemporary of Pound wrote: „The relation of certain beautiful faces seen in a Paris Metro station to petals on a wet tree branch is not absolutely clear.“⁶ One even laughed at it as the version of the English poet R. Aldington demonstrates:

„The apparition of these faces in a crowd:
White faces in a black dead faint“⁷

Whereas other critics liked it as for example Earl Miner: „There is a discordia concurs, a metaphor which is all the more pleasurable because of the gap which must be imaginatively leaped between the statement and the vivid metaphor“⁸ or as Donald Davie: „It is surely untrue, therefore, that the poem is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought.“ Its compactness is not superficial, but real and masterly.“ P. 57

Whether one likes or dislikes the poem, its relevance cannot be refuted. It sets a landmark in Pound's own poetry. His theory and technique which he had partly

5 Kenneth YASUDA, *The Japanese Haiku*, Tôkyô, 1959, p. XVIII

6 John Gould FLETCHER, „The Orient and Contemporary Poetry“, in: *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, ed. by Arthur E. Christy, New York, 1968, p. 159

7 Earl MINER, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, New Jersey, 1966, p. 160

8 *ibid.* p. 115

derived from his haiku study is focused on this little two-line poem, (see the following pages).

V. Pound's Theory and Haiku

A year after the *Metro poem* Pound's article „A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste“ followed. It appeared in *Poetry* of March, 1913, thus after his discovery of ‚haiku‘. In this essay his theory about poetry, in particular his definition of an ‚Image‘ is set down. It seems justified to believe that this theory was partly influenced by his reading of haiku. Therefore it may be of interest to compare his theory with haiku theory.

The article begins: „An ‚Image‘ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term ‚complex‘ rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application. It is the presentation of such a ‚complex‘ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest work of art.“ This definition corresponds to what is called a haiku moment. „A haiku moment is a kind of aesthetic moment – a moment in which the words which created the experience and the experience itself can become one. The nature of a haiku moment is anti-temporal and its quality is eternal, for in this state man and his environment are one unified whole, in which there is no sense of time. The total implication of the words in the realization of experience creates that sense of immediacy which Ezra Pound declared was essential for art.“⁹ In comparing these statements it cannot be overlooked that both stress the unity between men and their work of art, a unity which overcomes space and time limits. This quality of eternity which Pound assigned to the image can also be found in the haiku. There is only a difference between their starting-points. Whereas Pound starts from the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, the haiku is based on aesthetic experience. The relationship between poet and image and poet and haiku is defined in a similar way.

The next thought of „A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste“ goes on as follows: „It is better to present an Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.“ This statement can easily be compared with the words of the famous haiku poet Bashō: „He who creates three to five haikupoems during a lifetime is a haiku poet. He who attains to ten is a master.“¹⁰ Here one can see without difficulty that Pound and the haiku poets shared the same high standards of poetry.

In the next paragraph Pound dealt with the concept of language. It begins: „Use no superfluous words, no adjective, which does not reveal something.“ A good haiku implies also that the usage of superfluous, unrevealing words is forbidden. The haiku poet Otsuji once said: „Those who compose haiku without grasping anything are merely exercising their ingenuity. The ingenious become

9 Kenneth YASUDA, *The Japanese Haiku*, Tôkyô, 1959, p. 24

10 Kenneth YASUDA, *The Japanese Haiku*, Tôkyô, 1959, p. 50

only selectors of words and cannot create new experiences from themselves.“¹¹ In a haiku the choice of the words is closely connected with the experience of the poet. Therefore those words which do not convey any experience are superfluous.

Then Pound goes on as following: „Don't use such an expression as „dim lands of peace“. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.“ The haiku poets would probably agree with his statement, because most haiku present concrete images as for example:

On a withered bough
A crow alone is perching;
Autumn evening now.

The old pond!
A frog jumps in –
Sound of the water. Bashô

Usually haiku poets avoid metaphors or similes, the reason can be found in Bashô's words : „Learn of the pine from a pine.“¹² The haiku poets try to render their visions directly and concretely, without any abstractions.

Summing up the above one can conclude that above all Pound's definition of the „Image“ and his concept of language suggest certain similarities with haiku. For this reason it seems very probable that his theory was partly influenced by the Japanese haiku. This supposition is the more to the point, if one takes into consideration that at that time Pound indeed read haiku poems.

Turning back to the *Metro poem* it can be looked at as one of Pound's early steps in the development of his imagistic theory. Apart from this theoretical background Pound also invented a new technique of writing poetry.

VI. Pound's Technique and Haiku

The most important technique which Pound derived directly from his study of haiku poetry is the technique of ‚super-position‘.

In his article „Vorticism“ in *The Fortnightly Review* of September 1st, 1914, Pound explained what he meant by super-position, which he had applied in his *Metro poem*. For this reason it seems more practical to quote this poem again.

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

Pound characterized his poem as follows: „The „one image poem“ is a form of „superposition“, that is to say it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful for getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion.“ If one accepts Pound's definition, one on the other hand could argue that the Metro poem is composed of two images (and not of one) which are made from

11 *ibid*, p. 29

12 Kenneth YASUDA, *The Japanese Haiku*, Tôkyô, 1959, p. 50

two different points of view (Faces-Petals). However, Pound defined it as „one image poem“, and one therefore cannot see it as mere product of his vision, but as an image „which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.“ This „one image poem“ is considered as „a form of super-position“, that is to say as a super-position of two ideas in one image. Under „idea“ one should not understand mere abstraction but as Armin Paul Frank formulated it: „Idea“ wäre demnach gar nicht als „Idee“, sondern als „Vorstellung“, als ein im Geist vorhandenes oder auch dort entstandenes „Bild“ zu verstehen ... as a „Überlagerung zweier Vorstellungsbilder.“¹³ That Pound discovered the method of super-position in haiku, is the more surprising, because it was not discussed in the English language until later on. „Haiku are written in three „lines“ (usually not separated as such, however, when written by the Japanese) of five, seven, and five syllables, and frequently are divided by a „cutting word“ (*kireji*), or caesura, into seemingly discordant halves ... This structural division was not perceived, or at least not discussed in print in English, until 1953.“¹⁴ The following haiku intend to show that the method of super-position was really used.

Harvest Moon
The autumn moon is bright;
Sea-waves whirl up to my gate,
Crested silvery white. Bashô

Here the last line is super-posed. It sums up the beautifulness of the moon. In the next haiku the super-posed line (the last line) reveals the poet's melancholy.

A Crow On A Bare Branch
On a withered bough
a crow alone is perching;
Autumn evening now. Bashô

Lustra, which appeared in 1916, was the first volume to contain the results of Pound's technique of super-position: for example:

L'Art, 1910
Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries! Come, let us feast our eyes.

In this poem the super-posed image lies in the first line, whereas in „April“ it is again in the last line.

13 Armin Paul FRANK, „Das Bild in imaginistischer Theorie und Praxis“, in: *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, Bd. 13, Heidelberg, 1968, p. 181, 182

14 Earl MINER, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, New Jersey, 1966, p. 115

*Three spirits came to me
And drew me apart
To where the olive boughs
Lay stripped upon the ground:
Pale carnage beneath bright mist.*

In most cases Pound used the super-pository technique to attain a striking ending of his poem or stanza, to sum up what has been expressed before, or to go on to what he is going to say next. Throughout his poetry he applied the method of super-position. It can be found in his „Cantos“ and „Pisan Cantos“, in „Hugh Selwyn Mauberley“ as well as in his shorter poems.

VII. Summary – and Further Aspects

The period from 1912 to about 1917 is marked by Pound's occupation with Japanese literature. It began, when he learned from the Poet's Club, mainly from T.E. Hulme and F.S. Flint about haiku poetry. Soon he himself seriously studied these nature poems. From this reading he evolved a great part of his imagistic theory, which mostly affected his definition of the „Image“ and language. Moreover he developed the technique of super-position from it.

This theory and technique had a great impact on many contemporary writers. Nowadays it is known that it had influenced poets such as Richard Aldington, Amy Lowell and John Gould Fletcher.

This paper does not want to give the impression that during this period Pound occupied himself only with haiku poetry. At that time he also read Latin and Provençal poetry. However, the haiku influence did contribute a great deal to the development of his imagistic theory and technique.

When in 1916 he published Fenellosa's translations of no plays, his interests went in a new direction, towards Chinese literature.

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