

Emotional Complexity in Haiku - a few thoughts on a rainy night

In its early years the British Haiku Society offered advice on how to write haiku in a document titled 'Towards a Consensus'. Increased knowledge and experience and access to research has debunked many of its ideas. However, the idea that haiku should be objective and that somehow the author should be absent persists. Familiarity with Japanese haiku, either in translation or faithful translations, reveals that this is not present in Japan. The arts are by nature subjective and in modern science even the existence of objectivity is contested. Haiku is a collaborative poetry with writers and readers working together to bring it to completion. We all bring something to the party.

Seasonal references (*kigo* and *kidaï*) can import emotional colour through their associations - for example, 'Spring' suggests lightness and brightness, whereas 'Autumn' is more sober and restrained. Of course, they can also be used to confound our expectations.

In haiku complexity and ambiguity are frequently inter-related. Certain haiku evoke varied emotions on different occasions and so reward repeated readings. Sometimes emotionally complex haiku are explicit and intended. Others are the result of 'lucky accidents' where a combination of complementary or contrasting elements, often taken from the flora and fauna of the non-human world, arouse a sincerity of feeling. Such seemingly random encounters avoid cliché, mawkishness and sentimentality. Some contain a dark humour, sometimes approaching *senryu*.

Below are six Japanese haiku with my brief comments.

failing health and strength my teeth grate on the sand in the seaweed

Matsuo Basho

Here we have the limitations and irritations of advancing years, particularly for those of us feeling the pointedness of our days. Has Basho achieved a state of active acceptance (as distinct from passive resignation)? I think not, at least not yet. In his commentary on another of Basho's haiku, 'fleas, lice, a horse pissing by my pillow', Blyth states that we should read this with the 'utmost composure'. Would he recommend reading this in a similar light?

slowly but surely I adopt the vices of my father

Santoka Taneda

Santoka's father was a womaniser, a drunk and a gambler who dissipated much of his family's wealth. Santoka's mother, probably in despair, threw herself down a well. The sight of her dead body being pulled out haunted him for the rest of his life. There is no indication that Santoka was a womaniser or a gambler but he certainly was an alcoholic. His struggles with and ambivalence to alcohol are recorded in excerpts of his surviving journals. From the comfort of an armchair it is easy to romanticise Santoka tramping the backroads of Japan but we should recognise the hardships he endured to escape his demons.

spring loneliness even the stone I toss falls short of the surf

Masajo Suzuki

Sometimes everything we do meets with failure. How we respond to this is a measure of our character. That the loneliness occurs in Spring, usually a season of hope and new beginnings, makes it especially affecting.

in the bedchamber underfoot the chill of my dead wife's comb

Yosa Buson

While referring to the coldness of the comb, 'chill' also gives us a more visceral shiver. It is well-known that this haiku is fictitious, being written some twenty years before his wife's death. However, I don't think this should detract from our enjoyment. Is not the line between experience and imagination a shifting one?

the long night a light passes along the shoji

Masaoka Shiki

Shiki suffered from tuberculosis, hence the name 'cuckoo'. In Japan it was thought that cuckoos coughed up blood. Dying at the age of thirty-five (in 1902) his influence on the future of haiku is remarkable. In this haiku I find him alone and sleepless on a winter's night. Somebody carrying a lantern passes on the other side of the latticed screen and the paper panels glow with a diffused light. How does Shiki feel? Isolated? Maybe. Or possibly comforted by the activities continuing around him.

from one tub to another stuff and nonsense

Kobayashi Issa

If further proof is needed that Issa is not just a poet for children, here it is. 'Tub' refers to the bath for cleaning the newborn and cleansing the dead. Having experienced many tragic events, it is not surprising that late in life he sometimes thought life was absurd. Some consider this to be his 'unofficial' farewell or death poem (*jisei*) found by his students after his death.

Stuart Quine