

Japanese Influence on Richard Wright in His Last Years: English Haiku as a New Genre

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It may seem strange that Richard Wright (1908-60), primarily known as a black novelist, with his *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and other novels and short stories, should write *haiku*. But among his unpublished papers were found several thousand short poems in the form of *haiku* written shortly before his death in Paris. Since then, twenty-three of these last poetical works have been published. Many of them are excellent pieces of literature. For example:

Standing in the field
I hear the whispering of
Snowflake to snowflake¹

There is in this poem the delicate, subtle, and sensitive response to nature similar to that in many good Japanese *haiku*. Richard Wright wrote this kind of short poem on a variety of subjects.

With a twitching nose
A dog reads a telegram
On a wet tree trunk²

Here is the kind of humor often found in the early *haiku*, through personification of a domestic animal. Sometimes the humor is grotesquely reminiscent of Wright's early sympathy with the Naturalists.

The dog's violent sneeze
Fails to rouse a single fly
On his mangy back³

The poem is closer in its sensibility to *senryū*.

There are some poems with "deeply personal" tones. During the summer of 1959, after visiting Africa, Wright fell ill from "amoebic dysentery" and was hospitalized in the American Hospital in Neuilly, a western suburb of Paris, where he started writing his *haiku*.⁴

An empty sickbed
An indented white pillow
In weak winter sun⁵

Hidden under the seemingly indifferent description of cleanliness of the white pillow, in the "weak winter sun," we catch some of the enfeebled, *febrile*, helpless, and lonesome feeling of the patient weakened by fever.

I would like a bell
Tolling in this soft twilight
Over willow trees⁶

In this beautiful poem, watching the colorful twilight over the willow trees, the speaker wishes that he could hear a bell toll. But again the poem seems to reflect something deeper in the poet's mind. Peaceful twilight toward the end of the day suggests calmness and silence close to an end. The weeping willow is the symbol of accepting one's fate. It cannot easily be denied that the poem has an overtone of the poet's wish for peace of mind at the time of the bell's knell for him.

Some poems have what may be called "reverberations," not only auditory, but olfactory and tactile.

From across the lake
Past the black winter tress
Faint sounds of a flute⁷

The spring lingers on
In the scent of a damp log
Rotten in the sun⁸

A freezing morning
I left a bit of my skin
On the broomstick handle⁹

The sound of the flute, the scent of the damp log, and the coldness of the broomstick handle seem to last for some time in the ear, the nose, and the hand of the reader. This lingering sensory effect may be said to be close to what Basho called *hibiki*, or reverberation.

In all these short poems by Wright, written on a variety of subjects, are some common denominators. Each line in every poem presents an image with a new sense of mild surprise, arousing in the mind of the reader a fresh sensation of calmness and beauty. And there is nothing at all of that sense of fear or "the terror of white men" which had dominated his earlier novels and novellas. Nor do we find "the white threat . . . hovering near," or "that thirst for violence that was in me, for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders," as recollected in his autobiography, *Black Boy*.¹⁰ Each poem is endowed with subtlety, freshness, suggestiveness, delicacy, and a sense of contentment, quite close to Japanese sensibility.

One may wonder why Richard Wright persistently wrote so many of the short poems belonging to a totally different culture. He read R. H. Blyth's *Haiku* in 1959, and discovered in it something he had been unconsciously seeking to ease his mind. Just as he "hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement" of the novel when he had been told by a schoolteacher, Ella,¹¹ a part of the story of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*, so he seems to have "hungered" for the world of Oriental poetry when he read the book on *haiku*. The editors of the *Richard Wright Reader* write:

In 1959, Wright discovered the Japanese haiku. He was entranced by the 17-syllable form and jotted down several thousands of the brief poems, mostly during his treatment at the hospital. "Maybe I'm fooling around with these tiny little poems, but I could not let them go. I was possessed by them," he wrote a friend in May 1960, just six months before his death.¹²

He may have read some *haiku* in French translation. He may have been familiar with the form through Imagism. He may have read Henderson's *Introduction to Haiku* or Yasuda's *Japanese Haiku*. But I would guess that Wright's encounter with R. H. Blyth's *Haiku* was a great event for Wright. He borrowed the four volumes from a friend, read them, and attempted to write *haiku* himself.¹³ It is evident that Wright followed very closely what Blyth had written about the *haiku*:

This 5, 7, 5 has a wave-like character of flow, suspense and ebb, it is symmetrical, yet in odd numbers. Further, there is a kind of syllogistic nature about the form which gives it the utmost clarity while actually containing no logical elements, often no intellectual connections between the parts.¹⁴

Wright observes the syllable count of 5, 7, 5 fairly strictly. He sets down the three lines not in logical, syllogistic order, but in what may be called a "syllogism" of images, by presenting, step by step in each line, an independent but related image.

Concerning the *kigo*, or the seasonal reference word, Blyth writes:

There is almost always a season word in haiku. This word may give the atmospheric background, it may be a kind of seed, a trigger which releases a whole world of emotion, of sounds and scents and colours.¹⁵

There are some liberals in Japan who decline to follow the book of collected season words, who insist on being freed from their conventional associations. But many *haiku* poets follow the tradition in order to render their specific emotion in the poem still more specifically and poignantly in terms of the season. Wright was probably unaware of the existence in Japan of the old, voluminous lists of season words. But there is almost always a seasonal reference word in each of his "*haikus*." Most of the time, however, his unorthodox use of the season words, with Western connotations and associations, accompanies fresh and unexpected beauty connected with specific seasonal feelings.

Blyth makes a further comment in relation to the classification by seasons:

Haiku have been for long classified according to the seasons and the subjects of the verse. There are, as it were, five seasons: the New Year, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter; there are also a few verses that will not go into any particular season.¹⁶

Before his death Wright arranged the copies of his typescript "*haikus*," dividing them into four sections — Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. In his letter to Margrit de Sabloniër, his Dutch translator, on March 19, 1960, Wright writes:

During my illness I experimented with the Japanese form of poetry called *haiku*; I wrote some 4,000 of them and am now sifting them out to see if they are any good.¹⁷

From the material he left, one can gather that, probably after "sifting them out" in March, 1960, Wright classified his "*haikus*" into seasons. He wrote some more of them in the spring, summer, and fall of 1960, and before he died in november 1960, he had "sifted" again, and classified them into four seasons, obviously in preparation for publication under the title, "This Other World." Division by seasons was suggested by Blyth's similar pattern in his books.

Blyth spends about a hundred pages on the Buddhist influence on *haiku* in the section, "Zen, the State of Mind for Haiku," explaining such terms as "selflessness," "loneliness," "grateful acceptance," "contradiction," "humor," and "simplicity," immanent in the works of the representative Japanese *haiku* poets. It is apparent that Wright read this section very carefully and was greatly influenced by the thought underlying it. "It is a condition of *selflessness*," Blyth writes, "in which things are seen without reference to profit or loss, even of some remote, spiritual kind."¹⁸ He continues:

This losing of one's life, when attained in the will, is a state of rest and ease When we are in the this condition, we can look at anything and everything and see with its eyes, hear with its ears, fly with its wings.¹⁹

"Selflessness" and the sense of "rest and ease" prevail in Wright's "*haikus*." His strong and uneasy consciousness at being a Black American in his early years is gone. The figure of the poet abstracted from the personae speaking in his *haiku* is thin in character and almost as transparent as air. To be "selfless" is often compared to being like air. But "selflessness" in Buddhism is "selffulness,"²⁰ and the "selfless" but "selfful" state of mind is often symbolized by the wind. Though probably unconsciously, Wright often adopts the image of wind in his poems.

A soft wind at dawn
Lifts one dry leaf and lays it
Upon another.²¹

A leaf chases wind

Across an autumn river
And shakes a pine tree.²²

Having appointed
All the stars to their places
The summer wind sleeps.²³

“Loneliness” is likewise “lonelilessness.” Wright exquisitely expresses the paradox in the image of a soaring, stately mountain peak.

In the afterglow
A snow-covered mountain peak
Sings of loneliness.²⁴

It is difficult to calculate how much influence Blyth had on Wright. But the *haiku* seems to have provided Wright with an important outlet for peace of mind as an enlightened man accepting and transcending his fate, while the novel was the outlet for his violent, black consciousness. The change in his attitude toward life is so remarkable as to seem almost a religious awakening. Indeed, some of his “*haikus*” suggest his spiritual rebirth.

Enough of dawn light
To cause pearly pear blossoms
To burn from within²⁵

By presenting the image of the pear blossoms glowing and burning “from within” at the first sunlight from the east, Wright might be subtly suggesting his mind glowing and changing within him.

Coming from the woods
A bull has a lilac sprig
Dangling from a horn²⁶

This seemingly pastoral and pagan poem may also be taken as suggestive of the joy of a spiritual rebirth, or, at least, a spiritual change of the poet.

I am nobody
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away²⁷

Though echoing the *Invisible Man* by Wright's friend Ralph Ellison, the poem can be taken as an expression of his realization of the importance of a "self-less" attitude to life, suggesting also the rejection of his previous way of life.

I am not suggesting that Richard Wright was converted to Buddhism, but rather that he deeply understood the teachings of Zen through Blyth's book on *haiku*, and derived comfort from it. Sick in the hospital, toward the end of his life he was certainly tired of fighting racism. He had been trying to escape it since he left Natchez for Memphis and then for Chicago and New York. Finally, he left the United States in 1948 to live in Paris. Perhaps the last spiritual resting place he discovered there was the world of the *haiku*.

But still he was unable to cast away all his past.

The crow flew so fast
That he left his lonely caw
Behind in the field.²⁸

On the surface, the poet's position in the poem seems close to that of the speaker who watches a lonely crow passing him, leaving a caw behind. But the poet may be identifying with the crow. The poem seems an indirect expression of the poet's awareness of his still being a "Jim Crow," as he used to call himself, as in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," who is now fading away into an unknown world, leaving his voice behind. Richard Wright never forgot that he was black, of which he was rightly proud.

His attempts to attain selflessness and his wish for escape and self-denial seem to have been mixed with his sense of loss at the death of his mother in 1960.²⁹ The image of death haunts his last pieces.

Out of winter mist
A funeral comes slowly,
Then fades into it.³⁰

A sick cat seeks out
A stiff and frozen willow
Under which to die.³¹

Glittering with frost,
A dead frog squats livingly
In the garden path.

However, the more Wright was obsessed by the idea of death and self-denial,

the more his imagination would "blaze"³² again and again till the very last moment:

Keep straight down this block
Then turn right where you will find
A peach tree blooming.³³

Richard Wright was not the only American who wrote *haiku* in the late 1950s. Even earlier Allen Ginsberg had read R. H. Blyth's books on *haiku* in Berkeley and written 21 examples of *haiku*, as he had recorded in his journal in 1955.³⁴ But still earlier Gary Snyder had written a *haiku* with a *haiga* on Crater Mountain, while working as a fire lookout in the summer of 1952.

A butterfly
Scared up from its flower
caught by the wind and swept over the cliffs
SCREE³⁵

Indeed the American interest in *haiku* can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century when the Imagist poets tried short poems based on Ezra Pound's "theory of superposition" which he thought he discovered in the Japanese *haiku*. A number of poets wrote poems like Pound's "In the Station of the Metro" during the last decade of "Japonisme": Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, Wallace Stevens, Arthur Davison Ficke, John Gould Fletcher, Hilda Doolittle, and Yvor Winters, to name some of them:

But the interest in *haiku* after World War II in America, especially since 1960, was remarkable. School children were taught to write *haiku* in primary schools, and in many towns *Haiku* Clubs were organized. In 1963, a magazine called *American Haiku* was started by those who were more seriously devoted to *haiku* in English. Though it ceased publication in 1968, such magazines as *Haiku*, *Haiku West*, *Modern Haiku*, and *Dragonfly* have appeared. The *Haiku* Society of America was founded in New York in 1968 under the auspices of the Japan Society.

The Haiku Anthology (1974), edited with an introduction by Cor van den Heuvel, gives a brief history and a bird's-eye view of the American *haiku* after World War II. Certainly some of the works by the American *haiku* poets show that they "see the spiritual depth *haiku* embodies."³⁶

The vacuum cleaner
 drowning out mother's grieving:
 my dead brother's room

(Nick Virgilio)³⁷

The poet Nicholas Virgilio has been writing poems on his brother killed in the war in Viet Nam. The poem presents a domestic image, suggesting that humanity suffocates in the highly mechanized society. In the next poem the speaker's direct contact with nature leads her to the realization of its religious implication.

Mountain brook water:
 to drink it in my cupped hands
 I kneel on the earth.

(Marjory Bates Pratt)³⁸

The act becomes symbolic as in the ritual. The following poems may also show how the Americans are breaking away from traditional Japanese images such as those listed in the *Saijiki*,

Glimmering morning
 silence unfolds all
 the yucca

(Michael McClintock)

Blue jays in the pines;
 the northern river's ledges
 cased with melting ice

(Robert Spiess)

These explorations into the new field of "American *haiku*," including that of Richard Wright, are characterized by a spectrum of ideas about the nature of that type of poetry. Some of the poets insist on holding to the orthodox 5-7-5 syllable count, while most others count far less strictly, and a few of the most experimental poets attempt "concrete" *haiku*, or "eye-ku." Some try to express religious depth, and some are overtly a-religious. Some try humorous poems, closer to *senryū*, a witty, often ironical, verse in the same 5-7-5 form as *haiku* without particular reference to nature.

Yet there are factors common to those "American *haiku*" poets. (1) Though some write in four lines and some in one or two lines, most of them write in three. (2) They present concrete images in utmost concentration. (3) They are likely to be suggestive and pithy. These common factors are not to be wondered at, because, as they confess in their biographical notes, these American *haiku* poets in *The Haiku Anthology* have mostly been inspired by books such as those by Blyth, Yasuda, and Henderson.⁴⁰

Surely there is a strong lyric impulse among modern American poets toward compact gem-like minimalism in poetry, even as they are attracted to the Whitemanesque, all-inclusive poetry. If more Americans continue to produce as many good *haiku* as they have in recent years, and if they continue to be guided by those books which refer to classical examples of *haiku*, it is possible that some day the *haiku* may become as well-established a genre in the English language as the sonnet.

Notes

1. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre, eds., "Haikus," *Richard Wright Reader* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 252.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 875. The editors of the book (one of whom is the widow of Richard Wright) write that "Wright was able to inject a deeply personal tone to these pieces." *Ibid.*, p. 243.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
9. Quoted from Richard Wright's typescript by courtesy of Mrs. Ellen Wright and Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. File 162, "Winter," p. 5.
10. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), ch. 2.
11. *Ibid.*, ch. 2.
12. Wright and Fabre, eds., *Ibid.*, p. 243.
13. According to Fabre, Wright "borrowed the four volumes by R. H. Blyth on the art of haiku in order to systematically learn the complex rules of its composition." Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. from French by Isabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 505.
14. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1949), I, p. 373.
15. *Ibid.*, I, p. 382.
16. *Ibid.*, I, p. 384.
17. Michel Fabre, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

18. Blyth, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
21. 22. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 161, p. 37 and p. 39.
23. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 162, "summer," p. 1.
24. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 162, "Winter," p. 4.
25. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 161, p. 5.
26. Wright and Fabre, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 252.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
29. David Bakish, *Richard Wright* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 96.
30. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 162, p. 2.
31. Richard Wright, "Haiku," Typescript, File 161a, No. 12. The next poem is from the same file, No. 19.
32. "She [Ella] told how Bluebeard had duped and married his seven wives, how he had loved and slain them, how he had hanged them up by their hair in a dark closet. The tale made the world around me be, throb, live . . . My imagination blazed." Wright, *Black Boy*, ch. 2.
33. Wright, and Fabre, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 253.
34. Allen Ginsberg, *Journals: Early Fifties Early Sixties*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: Grove Press, 1977), pp. 92-95.
35. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 8.
36. Cor van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. xxvii.
37. Quoted from the typescript haiku of Nick Virgilio. His brother was killed in the war in Viet Nam.
38. Marjory Bates Pratt, *The Light on the Snow* (Pennington, N. J., 1979), p. 7.
39. Cor van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology*, pp. 84, 136.
40. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949-1952), 4 vols. Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku* (New York: Doubleday, 1958). Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History, and Possibilities in English* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1957).

