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Haiku and beyond: language, ecology, and reconnection with the natural world

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Abstract

This article presents a detailed analysis of the representation of animals, plants and nature in Japanese haiku. In haiku, animals and plants are written back into the language, appearing for themselves as manifestations of life deserving of empathy and respect. In this way, haiku encourage ecological consciousness in tune with the local environment, in contrast to both industrial and environmental discourses in the west, which frequently portray animals as objects, tokens of species, or resources. The power of haiku, the conclusion claims, lies in its ability to transcend itself and encourage relationships with nature which are unmediated by language.

Keywords: haiku, ecology, language, discourse, ecolinguistics

Introduction

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram (1996) locates the start of the ever increasing separation between humans and the rest of nature in the invention of writing systems. No longer was language something fine-tuned to the community and land in a particular region, instead it became quite literally disembodied, cut free from the writer, and able to spread itself to new domains. Traditional stories about the local animals, plants, rivers and trees became swamped by writing from different bioregions and different times. In addition, writing, and alphabetic writing in particular, facilitates ‘sparsely linear or analytic thought’ (Ong 2002:40), resulting in ‘analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience’ (Ong 2002:42).

In countries where writing is pre-eminent, the relationship between humans and other life forms is increasingly mediated by language and other media. It is becoming more likely for people to come across plants and animals as they are represented in books, magazines, advertisements, films, toys, and clip-art, than noticing them face to face in everyday life. There is growing awareness, particularly when it comes to the relationship between humans and other animals, of the importance of linguistic mediation, and the significant effects this can have (Stibbe 2006, 2005, 2003, Glenn 2004, Schillo 2003, Dunayer 2001, Scarce 2000, Kheel 1995).

From these studies, a picture is emerging of a wide range of discourses which construct relationships with animals in ways which further the separation between humans and the rest of nature. There is the jocular way that animals are used as insults in everyday conversation (Goatly 2006, Stibbe 2001), the more sinister way that animals are objectified and treated as inconsequential by the discourse of the meat industry (Stibbe 2003, Dunayer 2001), and the way that animals are treated separately from humans as part of the ‘environment’ by environmentalist discourse (Stibbe 2004). In addition, ecological discourse often treats animals and the ecosystems they

are part of as resources for human use (Stibbe 2006), conservationist discourse tends to treat animals as mattering only if they belong to a rare and cuddly species, and finally, animal rights discourses represent animals narrowly as passive victims rather than agents of their own lives (Stibbe 2005).

To give just one example of the objectification of animals through discourse, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), commissioned by the United Nations, uses the word 'fish' almost exclusively in three ways: a) as a modifier of a noun - fish stocks, fish harvest, fish productivity, fish kills, etc b) embedded in noun phrases - the catch of fish, quantity of fish, products such as fish, etc and c) as the Affected participant in clauses – being harvested, capturing more fish etc (Stibbe 2006). This form of representation does not recognise fish as animate beings capable of action directed towards their own purposes, or as capable of thought and feeling.

Most studies of the discursive representation of nature have focused on discourses which have the potential to create undesirable relationships between humans and other life forms - relationships of exploitation which lead not only to the suffering of animals, but also to ecological damage and negative impacts on humans. While critical awareness of dominant discourses and their potentially damaging effects is important, the next stage is analysis of discourses which have the potential to construct more harmonious relationships between humans and the more-than-human world.

Abram (1996), Snyder (2000) and Bate (2000) all agree that if people in some societies on earth have lost touch with the natural world around them, and are engrossed in a symbolic world of writing, then it is through this symbolic world that people need to be reached initially and encouraged to enter into new relationships with the more-than-human world. Abram (1996) puts this eloquently, in a writing style consistent with its message:

there can be no question of simply abandoning literacy, of turning away from all writing. Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthy intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves - to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches. (Abram 1996:273)

But how can writers write language back into the land in ways that contribute to more harmonious relationships between humans and the other animals, plants, and soil that make up that land? Answering this question requires a journey beyond mainstream western discourses such as those of industry, biological science, and even environmentalism or ecology: a journey to discover new ways of representing the more-than-human world which break free of the assumptions of dominant western discourses. In particular, it is important to discover discourses which overcome the assumption that other animals and plants are objects, human possessions, individually inconsequential tokens of species, or that their value lies only in their rarity or short-term utility to humans.

There are many places we can look for alternative discourses, from English Romantic poets (Bate 2000, Goatly 2000), to traditional cultures around the world which express a particular intimacy with, and embeddedness in, the natural world. This article explores the discourse of traditional Japanese haiku, analysing the assumptions it is based on, and the way that it represents relationships between humans and other forms of life.

The discourse of haiku

Although this article refers to ‘the discourse of haiku’ it is important that a discussion of haiku does not propose that there is an ‘essence’ of haiku running through every example. The ‘discourse of haiku’ analysed here exists in patterns which run through large numbers of haiku, though by no means all. The patterns come about partly through convention, but also through revolutions caused by great masters, who rejected the style of haiku that came before, gave new directions to the discourse, and provided key examples which many others emulated. There are therefore a large number of discourses within the genre of haiku, and what is described here is just one of these. It is, however, one that can be considered highly significant, both in terms of cultural impact and ecological wisdom.

To discover the patterns which make up the discourse of haiku, a corpus of several hundred haiku was gathered from ten anthologies (Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1996, Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992, Aitken 1978, Bowers 1996, Blyth 1995, Henderson 1958, Higginson 1996, Mackenzie 1957, Miura 1991, Ueda 2003), and one on-line collection (Lanoue 2006). These haiku are very much ‘classic’, coming from the period between 1682 (when Basho revolutionised haiku with his ‘frog’ poem), to 1902, the date when the last of the four great masters, Shiki, died. The haiku of these four masters (Basho, Issa, Buson, and Shiki) form a sizeable part of the data because of their profound influence, though other poets who follow a similar style are also included.

The following sections (i-vii) describe seven aspects of haiku which represent relationships between humans and the more-than-human world in ways very different from dominant mainstream discourses in the west.

i) Appreciation of the ordinary

tsukubaute / kumo wo ukagau / kaeru kana
Crouching / peering up at the clouds- / a frog (Chiyo in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:92)

Rather than valuing others for their rarity, size, cuteness, or usefulness, haiku express appreciation for the ordinary plants, birds, insects and animals that people interact with in daily life. Suzuki (1970:263) describes how Basho wrote haiku on the nazuna herb, a plant which is ‘humble...not at all pretty and charming...’:

Yoku mireba / Nazuna hana saku / kakine kana
When closely inspected / The nazuna is flowering / By the hedge (in Suzuki 1970:263)

Similarly, in discussing another of Basho’s haiku about buckwheat flowers (below), Ueda (1982:66) points out that ‘buckwheat flowers are commonplace in Japan and not especially beautiful; moreover, buckwheat is the main ingredient of one of the plainest foods, noodles.’

Mikazuki ni / Chi wa oboro nari / Soba no hana
Under the crescent moon / The earth looms hazily- / Buckwheat flowers.
(in Ueda 1982:66)

Basho's sense of appreciation for the nazuna and buckwheat flowers is not explicit in these haiku - he does not refer to 'the beauty of the buckwheat flowers', for instance. However, deep appreciation can be inferred because of the nature of the discourse of haiku itself. There are so many haiku which describe culturally appreciated aspects of nature (such as cherry blossoms or fireflies) that the assumption 'the subject highlighted by the haiku is to be treated with appreciation' is built into the discourse, a taken-for-granted background assumption which does not need to be stated. By placing the buckwheat flowers within the same frame as is frequently used for cherry blossoms, Basho is implicitly stating that they too are worthy of similar appreciation.

Like Basho, Issa writes only about common, local plants and animals, a fact that can be confirmed by searching through Lanoue's (2006) impressive collection of 7000 of Issa's poems. Within this collection there are no poems about lions, tigers, elephants or pandas. Instead, there are haiku about a huge variety of common animals and plants of the kind people in Japan were likely to come across in their everyday lives. The following list shows only some of the animals appearing in Issa's haiku:

A butterfly, cuckoo, dog, dragonfly, duck, geese, flea, frog, mouse, mosquito, nightingale, snake, sparrow, swallow, snail, toad, lice, snail, fly, skylark, sparrow, cat, horsefly, puppy, pigeon, crow, deer, titmouse, earthworms, lark, cicada, frog, crab, monkey, fox, silkworm, chicken, pheasant, thrush, horse, wren, fawn, nightingale, ant, turtle, snipe, blowfish, pony, wren, pheasant, winnow, stork, spider, crane, locusts, kitten, cormorant, shrike, rooster.

Despite the large number of plants and animals named in Issa's 7000 haiku, abstract category names above the species level rarely appear, except in the case of tori (bird) and mushi (insect). So we do not find any instances of the words dobutsu (animal), ikimono or seibutsu (living thing), shokubutsu (plant), ueki (cultivated plant), honyuu (mammal), or hachuu (reptile). This is because haiku record and encourage encounters with real animals and plants, rather than rational discussion of abstract categories.

The focus on the actual and the everyday is important because it encourages direct encounters with living plants and animals in natural settings rather than encounters mediated by museums, zoos or linguistic abstractions. Haiku therefore has the potential to contribute to ecological consciousness tuned to the local environment, where careful observation of the way things are in nature is combined with a sense of value and appreciation.

Despite the brevity of haiku, the individual animals and plants that are encountered are never described in isolation from their immediate environment. The linking of the particular animals and plants with their wider context is carried out through a season word (kigo). Kigo are an essential part of the discourse of haiku, placing each haiku in a particular season, and thereby allowing the reader's imagination to fill in missing details of the surroundings. In the haiku which started this section, the season word kaeru (frog) represents spring, which is when frogs make themselves most noticeable through their croaking.

Haiku, by their very existence, demonstrate recognition of special worth in the subjects they describe - enough worth to stimulate the poet to carefully craft a poem

about them consisting of exactly 17 syllables (three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables respectively). This structure gives poets a chance to give special emphasis to the plant or animal through dedicating all five syllables of the first or last line to their name. Both these positions are important because the first line is the Theme of the haiku and the last line provides end-focus. For instance:

hototogisu / ware mo kiai no / yoki hi nari
cuckoo-- / today I'm in good spirits / too (Issa in Lanoue 2006)

In this haiku, the whole first line is the name of a bird, hototogisu, which conveniently has five syllables. Where names have fewer than five syllables, pivot words (kakekotoba) such as ya or kana are inserted, which add further poetic emphasis. Pivot words cannot be translated into English, though translators sometimes use the expressions 'ah!' or 'oh!', for example *suzume-go ya* (ah! baby sparrow) or *kaeru kana* (oh! frog). The addition of a pivot word shows clearly and strongly that the haiku is dedicated to the plant or animal.

By taking ordinary plants and animals, and giving them a prime position within a highly appreciated cultural art form, haiku give the message that they are important for themselves, with no need to recourse to abstractions such as the 'intrinsic value of nature' used in the discourse of deep ecology.

ii) Plants and animals as Agents and Sensors

The overwhelming majority of plants and animals that are represented in haiku are not doing anything unusual, or having anything done to them by humans, but are doing what they would normally do:

Ki wo ochite / hebi no chi wo hau / atsusa ka na
Falling from a tree / the snake slithers on the ground / in this heat
(Shikyu in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:88)

aoyagi ni / koumori tsutau / yuubaeya
A bat flies / along the rows of green willows / in the evening glow
(Kikaku in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:29)

Yudachi ya / Kusaba o tsukamu / Mura suzume
Caught in a sudden shower / huddling sparrows / vie to get at the grass leaves
(Buson in Miura 1991:45)

A closer look at the thematic roles that the plants and animals take in clauses helps to reveal the linguistic techniques that haiku use to represent animals as leading their own lives. Taking an illustrative sample of 36 haiku selected from several of the collections, we find that the most common role is that of Agent of material processes. By giving plants and animals agentive roles, the poets represent them as actively involved in leading their own lives for their own purposes: bees buzz, clover blooms, ants crawl, insects sing etc. Among the 36 illustrative haiku there are thirteen cases of material processes, which can be represented as follows:

material process (Agent): buzzes (bee), blooms (clover), sprouts (wildflower), crawls (ant), stretches (crane), rises (horse), sings (insect), feast (mosquitoes), take baths (monkeys), flits (butterfly), searches (cat), sings (bird), flies (crane).

The second most common role that animals (and in one case a tree) play is as the Senser in mental processes – frogs peer, fish know, birds envy etc. Of the 36 haiku there are nine mental processes, as follows:

mental process (Senser): peers (frog), know (fish), know (ant), envy (bird), know (bird), know (hornet), like (dragonfly), is grateful (tree) and waits (sparrow).

The third most frequent role that animals and plants play is as Addressee in clauses, where the author speaks directly to the animal or plant:

kirigirisu koe wo karasu na asu mo aki
katydid! / don't get hoarse / tomorrow is autumn too (Issa in Lanoue 2006)

Within the selection, haiku are directly addressed to eight different kinds of animal and one kind of plant:

(Addressee) geese, katydids, a frog, spiders, a crab, flees, chrysanthemums and a cuckoo.

A rarer role that plants and animals find themselves in is as the Affected participant in material processes. There are four cases of this: violets are the Affected participant of the process of being picked, chrysanthemums have washing water thrown all over them, roses are cut, and a heron is shot.

material process (Affected): picking (violets), splashing (chrysanthemums), cutting (rose), shooting (heron)

The Affected role is a common place that plants and animals are found in dominant discourses of the west - animals and plants are represented as passively affected by human actions rather than as capable of action themselves. These haiku representations are slightly different, however, in that each demonstrates a degree of sympathy for the suffering of the plant/animal at human hands:

nanigoto ka bara ni tsubuyaki bara wo kiru
whispering / something to the rose / she cuts the rose (Kuroda in Ueda 2003: 203)

tsumu mo oshi / tsumanu mo oshiki / sumire kana
I regret picking / and not picking / violets (Anonymous in Bowers 1996:36)

Finally, in two cases, animals are de-emphasised through being embedded in noun phrases: semi no koe (voice of the cicada), and mushi no koe (voice of insects). Like the Affected role, embeddedness is frequently used in mainstream western discourses with the result of representing animals at a distance. In these two haiku, however, the

distance may reflect the actual indirectness of relationships with insects which can be heard but not seen.

In general then, clause structure in haiku represents animals and plants as beings who are actively involved in leading their own lives in ways consistent with their nature, whether that is flying, slithering or blooming. They represent animals in particular as beings with mental lives, who know, feel and have desires. Both animals and plants are offered the recognition of being living beings directly addressable by humans, and in the rare cases where plants/animals are represented as the objects of human interference, there is a degree of sympathy implied.

All of this would be unremarkable – just representations of the way things are in nature - if it were not for the power of dominant discourses in the west to represent plants and animals very differently: as objects, machines, substances or variables in financial equations.

iii) Things the way they are: sonomama

The vast majority of verbs in haiku are in the plain dictionary form, corresponding most closely with the straight present tense in English. The verbs slither (*hau*), fly/swing (*tsutau*), grab (*tsukamu*), dry-out (*karasu*) and cut (*kiru*) in the previous section were all in this form. Another form, *keri*, appears in Haiku, though far less frequently. *Keri* was originally a past tense marker in classical Japanese, but is also used to give poetic emphasis to events in the present. In general, then, haiku represent an appreciation of the present moment rather than a reconstructed narrative or story of something that happened in the past.

The appreciation of the ordinary, the direct encounter with plants and animals that happen to be around, the way these plants and animals are being themselves, and, crucially, the emphasis on the present moment, link haiku with the Buddhist ideal of suchness (*tathata*), or *sonomama* in colloquial Japanese (Suzuki 1970:230). *Sonomama* is just the way that things are, unsullied by conceptualisations or abstractions which attempt to make them something they are not. Suzuki (1970:17) explains that:

When the mind...free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description, surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight...

If the discourses of the meat industry, environmentalism, and animal rights in the west represent plants and animals in ways which distort their true nature, then haiku is an attempt to distort that nature as little as possible, representing the kind of direct unmediated experience where ‘all sorts of values’ are discovered. Haiku can express the concept of *sonomama* in ways that would be impossible in prose, as the following haiku about the *patrinia* (*ominaeshi*) flower illustrates:

ominaeshi / sono kuki nagara / hana nagara
The *ominaeshi* / The stems as they are / The flowers as they are.
(Basho in Bowers 1996:18)

In the context of the appreciation of the ordinary which is built into the discourse of haiku, this haiku shows appreciation for the suchness of the *ominaeshi* in their natural

state. The appreciation of *sonomama* is not just aesthetic appreciation, but extends to non-violent action too, as expressed by Chiyo:

asagao ni / tsurube torarete / moraimizu
morning glory! the well-bucket entangled, I ask for water (in Bowers 1996:44)

The final 'te' of 'torarete' connects the second and third lines, indicating that the reason for borrowing water has something to do with the fact that the well bucket has been entangled by the flower. There is a semantic 'gap' between these two situations (the well-buck being entangled and asking for water) - how are they related? The gap is filled by a background assumption existing in the discourse of haiku that 'nature needs to be respected and not disturbed unnecessarily'. The meaning of this haiku, then, if we had to write it in full in prose, is: "Having left her house one autumn morning to draw water, Chiyo arrived at her well to find a morning-glory, a common flower, wrapped around the well bucket. Showing a deep respect and appreciation she refrained from disturbing it, borrowing water from a neighbour's well instead." This illustrates the way that when haiku are read in the context of the discourse they belong to, a larger meaning can be extracted from their brief seventeen syllables.

The importance of *sonomama* in an age of genetic engineering is clear, and well expressed by Chang Tzu, who writes from a Taoism perspective influential in the development of haiku:

Every addition to or deviation to nature belongs not to the ultimate perfection...for...a duck's legs, though short, cannot be lengthened without pain to the duck, and a crane's legs, though long, cannot be shortened without misery to the crane (Chang Tsu 300BCE/2001:57)

iv) The avoidance of metaphor

Yase-gaeru / makeru na Issa / kore ni ari
Lean frog / Don't you surrender! / Here's Issa by you (Mackenzie 1957:12)

Mackenzie (1957) and Lanoue (2006) contextualise the above poem in two very different ways. Mackenzie claims it refers to when 'Issa looked down on an uneven duel in Musashi, that home of swordsmen', which would make this haiku a metaphor where the frog stands for a human. On the other hand, Lanoue's explanation is quite different:

In his diary, Issa explains, 'I stooped to watch a frog scuffle on the 20th day of Fourth Month.' Evidently, he did not remain an impartial observer, but plunged into the fray to help out a scrawny frog. (Lanoue 2006)

In Lanoue's version, it is really a frog that Issa saw. This explanation is more likely, because central to the discourse of haiku is the ideal of a poet who 'presents an observation of a natural, often commonplace event, in plainest diction, without verbal trickery' (Stryk 1985:12). It would severely disrupt the imagery of haiku if, every time we read a haiku, we had to decide whether to imagine the actual animals or plants, or think of some indirect reference to the human world. Britton (1974:10) and Ooka (1997:103) both describe how in haiku nothing is contrived, and with each word

only having one meaning, there is no need to seek for hidden references. In this way, the discourse of haiku emphasises the importance of the plants and animals in themselves rather than simply using them as metaphors for the human world.

However, there are, in fact, haiku which contain obvious metaphors, and this is because haiku are created for a wide variety of communicative purposes, including thanking a guest or bidding farewell, and not all record moments of identification with nature. Haiku have even been used for asking for a divorce:

Hechima tsuru kitte shimaeba moto no mizu
If you've severed it / The vine of the gourd plant / Throw it back in the water
(Issa in Mackenzie 1957:45)

This is Issa, writing to his wife after she left him to live with her father. While acknowledging that such haiku exist, they are of little interest here, and are often described as not being true haiku, for instance by Shiki, who insists that haiku should involve 'drawing from nature' (shasei), rather than relying on metaphor and symbol. As Basho explains 'Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo.' (in Yuasa 1967:33).

iv) Identity

Without being symbolic, or metaphorical, haiku do often reveal the identity, on certain planes, of humans and other forms of life. As Lanoue (2006) points out, Issa in the frog haiku above identifies with the frog: 'Because he likes to describe himself as impoverished and hungry, Issa feels a special kinship with the scrawny frog.' Issa could see himself in the frog, something that could be considered a dissolution of subject and object of the kind that Basho describes: 'Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one - when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there' (in Yuasa 1967). The dissolution can be seen in many haiku, especially those about cherry blossoms and other transient natural phenomena:

saku hana ya kono yo-zumai mo ima sukoshi
cherry blossoms-- / residents of this world, too / a short time
(Issa in Lanoue 2006)

It is evident from the particle *mo*, meaning 'too' that this is not a metaphor of cherry blossoms symbolising the transient nature of human life. Instead, the cherry blossom and the human are both manifestations of the same life, which is always transient in one as it is in the other. This goes beyond simile to a literal comparison, which expresses the realisation of identity within a particular plane, in this case the plane of life¹.

The particle *Mo* is frequently used to reveal identity with all kinds of life, for example, between the poet and a dragon-fly, both enjoying the evening, or to a bedraggled monkey, or even a butterfly:

Akatombo / Kare mo yube ga / Suki ja yara
Red dragon-fly / He's one too that likes the evening / or so it seems
(Issa in Mackenzie 1957:65)

Hatsu shigure / Saru mo komino wo / Hoshige nari
First winter rain / The monkey also seems to wish / For a little straw cloak
(Basho in Suzuki 1970:232)

cho tonde waga mi mo chiri no tagui kana
butterfly flitting-- / I too am made / of dust (Lanoue 2006)

The sense of identity expressed in haiku accords closely with Chang Tsu's Taoist concept of identity:

Only the truly intelligent understand this principle of the identity of all things. They do not view things as apprehended by themselves...but transfer themselves into the position of the things viewed...And viewing them thus they are able to comprehend them...(Chang Tsu 300 BCE/2001:23)

Ooka (1997:109) somewhat satirically points out the benefits of this kind of identification with nature: Japanese classical poets 'were unable to establish a clear distinction between self and other, to discover in their dissimilarity to others the foundation of their own individuality, and to consider rivalry and confrontation as something altogether natural.'

vi) Empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence

Empathy is similar to identity, but rather than noticing a commonality of experience, empathy requires imaginatively projecting oneself into the different perspective and emotions of another. Empathy is sometimes signalled with the particle ni (to the):

hanaabu ni kabocha no hana no naka nukuki
to the drone fly / the pumpkin flower's inside / is snug (Tsuji in Ueda 2003:
214)

This shows the ability to imagine the world from another's point of view, as do the following, which use a variety of linguistic techniques:

uo domoya / oke to mo shirade / kadosuzumi
The fish / don't know they're in a bucket- / cooling by the gate
(Issa in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:96)

asamashi to fugu ya miruran hito no kao
maybe pitiful / to the blowfish... / people's faces (Issa in Lanoue 2006)

warera gi wa tada yakamashii hototogisu
our ceremony-- / just a lot of noise/ to the cuckoo (Issa in Lanoue 2006)

Where empathy is for the suffering of others, it is synonymous with compassion, and haiku show a great deal of compassion. It is worth giving several examples of this because of its central place in the discourse of haiku:

Fuyu-bachi no / Shini-dokoro naku / Aruki Keri

a winter bee / no place to die / walking along
(Kijo in Miura 1991:101 translation adapted)

no wa kareru / nobasu mono nashi / turu no kubi
in the withered fields / there's no need for the crane / to stretch out its neck
(Shiko in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:66)

ikinagara tonbo kawaku ishi no ue
still alive / a dragonfly drying up / on a rock (Uda in Ueda 2003: 187)

kago no tori / cho wo urayamu / metsuki kana
the caged bird / envies the butterfly- / just look at its eyes
(Issa in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:56)

Shiragiku ni / Tsutanaki chozu / Kakaru nari
White chrysanthemums! / They've pitched water on you / From the washing
bowl (Issa in Mackenzie 1957:57)

This compassion for all kinds of animals including birds, insects and even plants, is the same compassion behind the word 'itadakimasu', spoken before meals thanking the plants and animals for giving up their lives. It is also behind the strong desire to avoid waste - not on the grounds of 'sustainability' or any other abstraction, but because it means destruction of life, and all life is identical and valuable. With very few exceptions, haiku express positive regard to all forms of life. Issa even shows regard to fleas and mosquitoes:

Nomi domo ni / Matsushima misete / Nigasu zo yo
Come on fleas / I'll show you Matsushima- / Then let you go
(Mackenzie 1957:84)

kabashiraya / kore mo nakereba / kosabishiki
Swarms of mosquitoes- / but without them, / it's a little lonely
(Issa in Addiss, Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1992:82)

Positive regard is implied even when not expressed explicitly, for example:

araigami / onaji hinata ni / hachi shishite
washed hair - / in the same sunlight / a bee is dead
(Hashimoto in Ueda 2003:105)

Some might say this could mean 'good, saved from being stung by killing the bee with the bathwater'. There is no such ambiguity, however, because positive regard is so deeply built into the discourse of haiku that this can be nothing other than a tragedy².

Another feature of haiku is congruence, or genuineness: the ideal haiku is of a genuine encounter with nature, where the poet has experienced a sense of wonder, respect, empathy, compassion, connection, or a perception of 'suchness', and reflects this experience as honestly and directly as possible. As Basho explains 'However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural - if the object and yourself

are separate - then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit' (Basho in Yuasa 1967:33).

These three aspects - empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, are the three 'core' conditions of Rogers' (1961) person centred counselling. This may not be coincidental since Rogers was influenced by Zen (Brazier 1997). The discourse of haiku, then, suggests a relationship to nature similar to that between a person-centred counsellor and their client: allowing nature to flourish through its own power, in its own way, with appreciation and respect but minimal interference.

vii) Simplicity

The discourse of haiku does not simply treat nature as an aesthetic diversion, but places appreciation for nature as an alternative to over-consumption. Material simplicity is not considered a sacrifice, but instead appreciated as a realisation of the cultural ideal of Wabi. Wabi suggests an image of being 'poor, that is, not to be dependant on things worldly - wealth, power, and reputation - and yet to feel inwardly the presence of something of the highest value' (Suzuki 1970:23). Since haiku nearly always represent high value in what comes naturally, for free, and never describe or praise material wealth, wabi is an important underlying thread that runs through the discourse of haiku. One single poem captures its essence:

yado no haru / nani mo naki koso / nani mo are
In my hut this spring / There is nothing / There is everything (Sodo in Bowers 1996:12)

It is not just in their poems that the haiku poets spoke of the joy of simple living, it was genuinely how they lived. Of Basho, Stryk (1985:15) describes how he 'gave up virtually all possessions, his only concern spiritual and artistic discovery'. Of Issa, Mackenzie (1957:23) writes that he 'never ceased to proclaim himself a countryman, and by his frugal example to exclaim against the luxury and artificiality of the town.'

If poetry in Japan had sometimes strayed off into aesthetic considerations separate from everyday life, then Issa brings it firmly back, with the following haiku:

Ora ga yo ya / Sokora no kusa mo / Mochi ni naru
This world of ours! / Even the grasses over there / Give us our mochi (sticky rice)
(in Mackenzie 1957: 49, translation adapted)

This poem was accompanied by the prose 'It is for courtiers and the like to mourn the waning of the moon and to sing the praises of blossoms' (Issa in Mackenzie 1957: 49).

Conclusion

The importance of the discourse of haiku is that, like a Zen koan, it uses language to encourage the reader to go beyond language, beyond the world of intellectual abstractions, and reconnect directly with the more-than-human world. The way it does this is to describe actual encounters with everyday nature, in straight

present tense, using a minimal amount of metaphor and abstraction, placing poetic emphasis on individual animals and plants, representing them as agents of their own lives living according to their natures, with implicit assumptions of empathy and positive regard built into the discourse. This is in marked contrast to the discourse of environmentalism, where terms like ‘biotic resources’ or ‘biomass appropriation’ do not refer to anything as specific and imaginable in the world such as a ‘frog’ or a ‘bee’.

Bate (2000:283) believes that nature poetry can save the world: ‘If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth.’ But Rigby (2001:19) counters this by saying ‘What are poets for? I too would like to believe that poets can in some measure help us to “save the Earth.” However, they will only be able to do so if we are prepared to look up and listen when they urge us to lift our eyes from the page’.

The discourse of haiku shows a way to encourage readers to lift their eyes from the page, because the plants and animals that inhabit the haiku also inhabit the local environment of the readers, and the readers are bound to come across them in their everyday lives. When they do, they may, if the haiku is successful, treat those inhabitants with the careful observation, empathy and respect that the poet showed.

Ecologically, the discourse encourages learning from the ways of nature rather than violating them, which, according to Capra (1997) is the necessary foundation of a sustainable society. Most importantly, the approach to nature is a substitute for, not an addition to, a life spent obsessed by the pseudo-satisfiers of material possessions.

Haiku provides just one example of a discourse based on very different foundations from the abstractions employed by dominant discourses in the west. If language is necessarily a pale and distorted reflection of the reality it attempts to describe, then haiku is an attempt to minimise that distortion and point beyond itself, and beyond language, to more genuine relationships between humans and the whole of nature.

Endnotes

1. The phrase *yo-zumai*, ‘residents of the world’ could be considered a localised metaphor of ‘world-as-house’. Localised metaphors can be found in haiku, but a more important factor is whether the participants are standing for themselves or not. For instance, in Issa’s frog metaphor, the metaphoricity of the haiku as a whole depends on whether the participants, frogs, are actually frogs, rather than whether the verb *makeru* (lose, be defeated) is a localised metaphor or not.

2. Although there cannot be a ‘correct’ interpretation of haiku, the discourse of haiku constrains possible interpretations, allowing readers who are familiar with a wide range of haiku to resolve ambiguities through reference to patterns that have emerged in their past reading. In the case of the bee, the pattern of empathy is so strong across haiku that it guides interpretation, and readers who have read a number of haiku will recognise the empathy for the death of the bee implicit in the poem.

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