

Why Haiku?

“All his art is to recapture a moment and seize upon particulars and fasten down a contingency.”

No, this wasn't written to describe the work of a haiku poet. It was written by Herbert Butterfield, the very distinguished British historian and thinker about history, to describe the work of a historian.¹ I only came across this quote recently and found it startling since I have been interested in history longer than poetry or writing haiku. The phrase “recapture a moment” points out an important part of what I like about the haiku and what I am trying to do in writing them. So, the historian and the haiku writer are after some of the same things. It's good to know personally since it says there is a natural affinity for my interest in both.²

Years ago now, but within living memory, three members of the Haiku Society of America, Harold Henderson, William Higginson, and Anita Virgil put together a definition of the English-language haiku.³ One phrase from that definition which to me expresses well the chief goal of a haiku: “the essence of a moment keenly perceived.” There is a lot of emotional energy, excitement and depth in the small events, the brief moments of life. And why not—they are all part of the sweep of history. They are all part of what is significant and important in our lives as God's creatures. The haiku is a great form of poetry with its pinpoint focus for capturing those brief moments in time and re-creating the associated states of being.

I think many have the idea that a haiku is a poem invented by the Japanese consisting of 17 syllables divided into three lines of 5, 7, 5 and a subject matter focused on nature. An easy form of poetry to teach poetry writing beginners young and old how to write since the structure is short and simple. Many get written and of course most of them are bad which doesn't help the haiku's reputation. But so aren't most beginner attempts at poetry whether it's the sonnet or the epic? If you have read my haiku you know I don't adhere strictly to those rules. My focus is on perceiving the essence of the moment with the best words and phrases I can think of. That focus becomes my rules. It certainly limits the number of words although it doesn't arrange them in lines of 5, 7, 5. Too many words would mean more moments and diffuse the sharp edges of the moment. One line, two lines, three lines, four lines—in well, in most cases three lines does it for me. What's the “does it?” I think the lines by separating the words and phrases help intensify them—it gives them some space to expand. At least visually—and even when read aloud the lines make one pause, giving some space to the sounds. Perhaps the space around a word or between phrase is like water on seeds or boiling water poured on tea leaves. Have you ever wondered how you hear the spaces between words? It's certainly easy enough to see them when written. Is seeing space and hearing space between a word the same?

And of course, haiku are not just nature poems. There are lots of trees, clouds, wind, snow, and rain in mine, if that is what defines a nature poem for you. But there are other things in them such as cups of coffee, daughters, famous men, blank forms, soup, dentists, and closets. But even in the ones that look like a nature poem there is us. As far as the materials of the haiku go and its subject matter, all of creation is legitimate. I think the content of a haiku can be thought of in the same way T. S. Eliot describes the materials of the poet at work:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.⁴

I really like how he puts the poet's work as “forming new wholes.” That's what I would like my haiku to be. Of course, in our lives, all of us are forming new wholes with the materials God has given us.

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The Night NATO Started Bombing Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro

1. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1950, first published in 1931), p. 66.

2. And here is a great quote I found a couple years ago, putting poetry and history together, from Martin Luther: "How I regret now that I did not read more poets and historians, and that no one taught me them!" It's from his essay written in 1524: "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools." He also thought children should study languages and mathematics and singing and instrumental music. You might be surprised which subject of study he had to spend his time on and called the "devil's filth." I'll let you discover what that was. The essay I read was in volume four, *Works of Martin Luther*, The Philadelphia Edition (Muhlenberg Press 1931). The quote was on page 123.

3. For the whole definition and a lot of the story behind it check out *A Haiku Path: The Haiku Society of American 1968–1988*, edited by the HSA Twentieth Anniversary Book Committee (Haiku Society of American, Inc., 1994), pp. 43–85. Two other sources for this definition, which might be easier to find: *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974) and *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English* (Fireside Books/Simon & Schuster, 1986), both edited by Cor van den Heuvel. And while we are still down in this footnote let me mention a very good book for those who desire a better understanding of the haiku both from its Japanese ancestry and as it has become in English: *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985) written by William J. Higginson with Penny Harter.

4. From Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1921 and collected in his *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932) p. 247.