

Barriers and Possibilities – Haiku Poetry in Poland

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1. Barriers

Haiku, a micro-literary format emerging from ancient Japanese poetry, has become a synonym for short-form poetry, one often not taken seriously. It is widely mistaken for aphorisms, comic poetry, and seen as playful and far from serious. Adding to this perception are numerous publications labelled with the genre name. In my review I would like to draw attention not so much to the formal, linguistic aspect of this Far-Eastern short form poetry translated into Polish, but also to its cultural transposition and literalness. The Polish haiku examples being analysed here represent creative transformations of the genre, allowing for the emergence of new artistic qualities.

In spite of numerous doubts related to this poetic form, many articles have been published on the haiku genre, most recently in an extensive monograph by Beata Śniecikowska *Haiku po polsku. Genealogia w perspektywie transkulturowej* (*Haiku in Polish. Genealogy from a trans-cultural perspective*). Piotr Michałowski in his book *Miniatura poetycka* (*Poetic miniatures*) speaks about certain forms seeking to imitate haikus:

Regardless of the effects, when it comes to imitations a poem should be considered a haiku by fitting into this paradigm unproblematically. There are no “manifestations of lack of stylistic clarity” at all, such as those which appear so frequently in Grochowiak’s writings; there is also a lack of signals indicating apotheosis, or contradictions between the poetics quoted and the poetics achieved. This is however a programmed reaching for the source, far removed from the experiences of one’s predecessors. Form in this case doesn’t represent any sort of problem, only a challenge. It is an act of faith, and not a topic for discussion. We are also witnessing the author surrendering that which is their ‘own’ and that which was so fiercely defended by the author of *Haiku-images*. ‘Haikuists’ simply practice without noting the cultural conflict and the problem of oriental poetic models. Their compositions are in some sense anonymous replicas of typical motifs, reminiscent of translations of the Japanese masters. Much like the early works in the genre, what dominates is the schematic and the ‘school’, and therefore, academic and classicist elements (...)¹

¹ P. Michałowski, *Haiku*, [in:] ibidem, *Miniatura poetycka*, Szczecin 1999, pp. 106-107.

In his diagnosis the researcher points to a few key elements, and especially to the replication of templates and how cultural differences tend to be ignored. Michałowski refers to Stanisław Grochowiak's *Haiku-images* (1978), a book published after the author's death, in which the poet was clearly influenced by Anglo-American imagism² – a genre which utilised motifs and forms of poetic imaging taken from the Japanese haiku form. The rules this genre is bound by have been modified in a number of ways, while the classic template is based on several rules: avoiding the use of the author's own experiences, sparing use of stylistic devices (it is sometimes noted that metaphors are disallowed), with a delicate touch of sadness (*sabi* category) and a gentle use of humour, overlapping images in the poem, hinting at the time of year (*kigo*). The haiku emerges from the initial part of a longer interconnected song (*haikai no-renga*); hence from its genesis we can read a certain obtuseness, openness, focus on the reader, a unique form of clarity. The very formal shape of the haiku in European languages – 17 syllables in three verses (5-7-5) – is the result of the original Japanese form being adapted for the needs imposed by other alphabets. Not all the aspects of this genre are easy (or at all possible) to translate. A key role in classic haikus is played by the abruptly ending word/syllable *kireji*, which aids in juxtaposing the layering of images in a poem. In the Polish language, poets achieve this effect (or fail to achieve it completely) using other devices, most often by simply “clashing” two images – the first, presented in the first two verses, and the next, found in the final verse – or else the opposite – one image presented in the first verse and the next in the next two; sometimes a hyphen is utilised. This is the case with most translations of Japanese masters of the form:

Stanę na chwilę
wtulony za wodospadem
Początek lata³
(Basho, tłum. A. Żuławska-Umeda)

I will stand a while
nestled behind a waterfall
The start of summer

Kwitnący rzepak –
na zachodzie krąg słońca,
na wschodzie księżyc⁴.
(Buson, trans. R. Krynicki)

Blossoming rapeseed –
to the west the disc of sun,
to the east the moon.

All readings and analyses of haiku poems should involve an awareness of genre conventions, bound inherently by Japanese aesthetic categories. Translations (not only linguistic) of Far-Eastern miniatures involve the transplanting of a fragment of one culture onto the ground of

² See. L. Engelking, A. Szuba, *Obraz i wir. Antologia anglo-amerykańskiego imagizmu (Images and whirlpools. An Anthology of Anglo-American Imagism)* Warszawa 2016.

³ *Be haiku*, trans. A. Żuławska-Umeda, ed. B. Jewiarz, Warszawa 2017, no page numbers.

⁴ R. Krynicki, *Haiku mistrzów*, [in:] ibidem, *Haiku. Haiku mistrzów*, Kraków 2014, p. 67.

another, something Kazuo Sato captures in his elegant formula: *Is it possible to transplant a rapeseed flower?*⁵

What is most vivid in this case is the genre background, understood as a collection of cultural sub-codes. Roma Sendyka, pointing to “cultural factors which play a part in the life of genres” writes: “The lines between genres have once again become interesting, though not as a place of rigorous separation – but as a space for dynamic clashes, links, blurrings, intersections of differing properties”⁶.

It is the clashes pointed to by Sendyka which are specifically interesting in the context of adapting Japanese small forms to Polish territory. A great deal of light is cast upon the problems of researching (Polish) haikus by Beata Śniecikowska and her observations regarding methodology:

The numerous aspects of how haikus are approached complicates methodological decisions. It turns out to be impossible to find one theoretical prism through which we could research all of the aforementioned text groups. I admit that in analysing miniatures, which are very close to examples of Eastern literature, it is worth giving into temptation and treating a haiku as an invariable collection of characteristics. In this case, what might work is a typological understanding of the genre. How to study works – ones often artistically remarkable – which only touch upon (from a range of directions) the haiku aesthetic? What about poems that para-textually, and not always for obvious reasons, signal their connection with Japanese 17-consonant verses? In such cases I choose a prototypical modelling of genre⁷.

I will draw attention here to one more thing – Śniecikowska writes about works “very close to the characteristics of Eastern miniature”; hence in this aspect we can encounter doubts as to which works can be considered such. We must keep in mind that an incredibly important context for haikus are the Far-Eastern religious and philosophical systems: Zen buddhism, Shintoism and Taoism. Meanwhile a widespread practice in (though not only) Polish productions involve narratives related to Christian religion. This phenomenon is connected with implicating a local character into the groundwork laid down by foreign forms, which would hereby involve replacing the less well known in any given culture religious system with one which is well-known and widespread. Piotr Michałowski calls this method of transplanting the local into the foreign (making use of Erazm Kuźma’s findings) “invasive”⁸.

We should therefore consider whether haikus which exceed thematically and/or formally the demands imposed by the original genre should not be perceived as misunderstandings. The

⁵ See. K. Sato, *Czy można przesadzić kwiat rzepaku? (japońskie haiku i ruch haiku na zachodzie) (Is it possible to transplant a rapeseed flower? Japanese haiku and the haiku movement in the West)*, trans. A. Szuba, *Literatura na Świecie* 1991, no.1.

⁶ R. Sendyka, *W stronę kulturowej teorii gatunku, (In the direction of cultural theory of genre)* [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy (Cultural Theory of Literature. Main Concepts and Problems)*, ed. M. P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Kraków 2006, p. 277.

⁷ B. Śniecikowska, *Haiku po polsku. Genologia w perspektywie transkulturowej / Haiku in Polish. Genealogy from a trans-cultural perspective*, Toruń 2016, p. 18.

⁸ P. Michałowski, *Polskie imitacje haiku / Polish haiku imitations*, *Teksty Drugie: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 1995, no. 2, p. 47.

author of the monograph dealing with Polish versions of Far-Eastern miniatures questions Christian haikus and points to works which clearly refer to religion, as well as those which embody something we could call “Polish Zen”:

Polish ‘Zenistic’ haikus are works which are far from moralising, not expressing any sort of mission, but simply affirming instead. With a monumentality which is typical of them, and a focus on moments experienced, they strongly contrast texts which are uniquely ‘spiritual’, referring to *not clearly defined metaphysical spaces* [my emphasis – M.S.]. It is not possible to firmly establish whether these poems refer to Christianity, or other religions and even spiritual paths. These are works which angle uniquely elated senses, referencing uncharted spaces, subtly alluding to religion⁹.

An example of this idea is the haiku penned by Fr. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb. In his volume titled *Morze, obłok i kamień* (*Sea, Cloud and Stone* 1992) the poet uses the three titular elements involving nature which is trans-human in order to communicate existential narratives, with a clearly religious tone:

a cloud is the foretelling
a stone is an answer
a sea is fulfilment

a cloud Annunciation
a stone Easter
a sea fulfilment¹⁰

who throws
the stone bones of clouds
who plays with the earth sea us?

A cloud tied up
a stoned sea
who won?¹¹

Pasierb doesn’t follow the formal rigours of the haiku syllable order. He remains faithful to the formula of three ascetic verses, and yet the number of syllables in individual poems varies – some are more developed than others. What is interesting is the solution he selects to the problem of imaging – the author of *Butelka lejdejska* uses just one image formed out of the natural elements mentioned in the title. Using minimalistic forms of expression, Pasierb casts a new light upon them, all the while crafting before the reader a simple vision of a seascape, all the time programming differently the way we respond to this scrap of reality, while his observations lead to cosmological divagations. Alongside Biblical topics in his haiku we also find theological reflection, including the question about the One “who plays with the earth, the

⁹ B. Śniecikowska, op.cit., p. 460.

¹⁰J. S. Pasierb, *Morze, obłok i kamień*, cit.op: *Antologia polskiego haiku*, ed. E. Tomaszewska, Warszawa 2001, p. 95.

¹¹Ibidem, p. 96-97.

sea, with us?”. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb doesn't write however a “catholic haiku”, but makes use of minimalistic Japanese conventions to express religious ideas (some of the poems refer to Christianity through Annunciation, Easter or stoning), as well as metaphysical notions, not necessarily connected with specifically religious dogmas.

2. Possibilities

A breach of genre conventions, unique miniature forms which utilise numerous classical conventions, while at the same time modifying them with the aim of securing new qualities, are often much more interesting projects than those striving to be faithful to the original Japanese model. Twenty years ago, Czesław Miłosz hinted at the potential hidden within the haiku form:

Haiku poets stick to the sidelines and are not part of the landscape of contemporary poetry. The discussions they engage in involve the question of how much rules should be followed, those particular to this genre. In the end they abandoned the syllabic construction and began to write free-form verse in three lines, taking care to be as succinct as possible. For some even three lines was too much and they introduced the one-line haiku. Another issue is that of the experiences that are expressed: are these religious or aesthetic? The majority of authors, influenced by Zen Buddhism, look for religious enlightenment, while others use moments of other kinds of experiences, including erotic ones. In any case, the diversity of topics tackled leads us to conclude that something new has come into being, fitting for a tech-commerce civilisation in which attention paid to nature (rejuvenating) has specific significance¹².

Miłosz's comments can be understood to refer to the present day. Although it has been often noted that the haiku form offers possibilities within the realm of “attaining a new way of seeing¹³”, until now this potential has not been analysed in terms of new methodologies and interpretative practices, such as the example of *ecopoetics*¹⁴. Excluding one's own experiences from poems and accentuating the equal value of each natural feature moves aside the anthropocentric view of the world in the name of a more equal relation, one stressing the co-existence of all species. Awareness of the importance of unity with the non-human natural world is found, for example, in this poem by Jadwiga Stańczakowa:

The sky blue of space
the green of grasses beneath one's feet
cosmos is home¹⁵

The haiku penned by the author of *Depresja i (Depression and divination)* is very diverse: among works which follow closely the classic template, one can also find some in which the author uses the haiku form to express the experience of not being able to see, such as

¹²Cz. Miłosz, *Wprowadzenie / Introduction*, in: ibidem, *Haiku*, Kraków 1992, pp. 16-17.

¹³See. D. T. Suzuki, *Satori, czyli zdobycie nowego punktu widzenia / Satori, meaning a new way of seeing*, [in]: ibidem, *Wprowadzenie do buddyżmu zen / Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, trans. M. and A. Grabowscy, Poznań 2004

¹⁴See. J. Fiedorczk, G. Beltrán, *Ekopoetyka. Ekologiczna obrona poezji / Ecopoetics. Ecological Defence of Poetry*, Warszawa 2015.

¹⁵J. Stańczakowa, *Haiku*, Wrocław 2015, p. 10.

Wreath made of larch
 blind she lays it on a grave
 and the heart can see¹⁶

Wianek z modrzewia
 ślepa kładzie na grobie
 i serce widzi

and

A ladybird in hand
 covered in braille
 and so I can feel it

W dłoni biedronka
 w kropeczki brajla
 więc ją wyczuwam¹⁷

Stańczakowa's haikus are both true to their Japanese masters and a testimony to her own way of seeing the world. The word "seeing" is key here. For the poet not being able to see is part of her identity. It is not a lack, but a different way of experiencing and seeing the world, something the haiku form can be a creative outlet for.

In 2014, Ryszard Krynicki published *Haiku. Haiku mistrzów. (Haiku. Haiku of the masters)* – a volume of poetry divided into three parts: in the first he collected miniatures he called *Prawie haiku (Almost haiku)*, and in the second the previously unpublished *Haiku z minionej zimy (Haiku from a gone-by winter)* – works which through their subject matter and syllable arrangement were close to the classic template, while the third *Haiku mistrzów. (Haiku. Haiku of the masters)* was a collection of works by Japanese masters: Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki (Krynicki did not translate from the Japanese original – instead he used English and German translations). A haiku written by the author of *Organizm zbiorowy (Collective organism)* can be seen as an entry point on his poetic journey. Clear inspiration by this Japanese form can be seen both in the minimalistic form, as well as the topic matter handled in the poems preceding the author's use of convention, by which we mean texts the poet termed *almost haiku*:

Prawie haiku

*nisko kołuje kruk niewidzialny
 widzicie go?*

*The invisible crow circles low
 can you see it?*

Hans Arp

¹⁶Ibidem, p. 28.

¹⁷Ibidem, p. 55.

The wedge-shaped crow writing in the snow:
 – I am not dead yet.
 You who are reading this

Neither¹⁸.

Nadal nie wiem

I still don't know

My beloved Issa is said to have written 3000 haikus.
 I read about this 14 years ago
 and I still don't know what to think about it¹⁹.

In the “correct” haiku by Krynicki, arranged in the cycle he called *Haiku z minionej zimy* (*Haiku from a Gone-by Winter*), we find the following existential reflection:

Rusałka pawik?!
 Kruche piękno w żałobie
 Stulonych skrzydeł²⁰.

Nymph, peacock butterfly
 The frail beauty in mourning
 Of folded wings.

This careful observation of the natural world leads towards broader considerations, presented in more direct terms than we find in classic haikus. Krynicki creates essentialist, philosophising miniatures, in which the rigours of the Japanese form allow him to apply great linguistic precision. In the poet's repertoire we also find more invasive examples, showing local colours, firmly tied to Polish daily realities:

Tramwaj, dziewczyna
 żegna się z koleżanką:
 – No to pa, kurwa²¹!

Tram, girl
 saying goodbye to her friend:
 –And so fucking bye!

Another author of short-form poems related to the Japanese genre is Leszek Engelking, a translator of miniatures by English language poets and imagistic poems. In his earlier miniatures,

¹⁸R. Krynicki, *Prawie haiku*, op.cit., p. 21.

¹⁹R. Krynicki, *Nadal nie wiem*, op.cit., p. 22.

²⁰R. Krynicki, *Haiku z minionej zimy*, op.cit., 35.

²¹Ibidem, p. 42.

the poet remained closer to conventional haiku forms, while his later works in the volume titled *Komu kibicują umarli* (*Whom the dead cheer on*, 2013) are filled to the brim with dark humour. All three-verse poems are given the title *Haiku*. This specific reference to the subject of death forces us to see the macabre in Engelking's small forms:

Haiku

msza pogrzebowa
nagle z trumny dobiega
dzwonek komórki²²

a funeral mass
suddenly from the coffin
cell phone ringing sounds

The poet is able to achieve the effect of contrast similar to the layering of images in haikus – Engelking puts together a heightened mood (a funeral mass) with a grotesque form of humour (the sound of a cell phone ringing from inside the coffin). Bringing these elements together frequently allows the author of *Supplement* to achieve interesting effects:

Haiku

napisał kredą
symbol nieskończoności
i wybuchł śmiechem²³

he used chalk to draw
the infinity symbol
and burst out laughing

In this poem as well as in his other miniature works, Engelking uses laughter mixed with seriousness; grotesque motifs introduce both a note of comedy, as well as philosophical reflections about passing. By using a haiku-style asceticism of form, the poet has presented his own unique perception of the absurdity of existence marked with the desire for eternity. Life however turns out to be as fragile as the matter his hero, unnamed, indicates solely through the personalised form of verb – he draws an infinity symbol. The human drive to triumph over mortality ends with a burst of laughter, the human distancing himself from his own desires, aware of the bitter truth of existence. In the volume titled *Komu kibicują umarli* (*Whom the Dead Cheer On*) death is often shown in clear terms:

Haiku

w przestworze gwiazda
na parapecie mała mucha
obie zdychają²⁴

²²L. Engelking, *Haiku [msza pogrzebowa / Funeral Mass...]*, [in:] ibidem, *Komu kibicują umarli / Whom the Dead Cheer On*, Poznań 2013, p. 31.

²³L. Engelking, *Haiku [napisał kredą...]*, dz. cyt., p. 28.

²⁴L. Engelking, *Haiku [w przestworze gwiazda...]*, dz. cyt., p. 24.

in the heavens a star
 a small fly on the window sill
 both dying

Another time death is shown more gently, in almost impressionistic form:

Haiku

cmentarz wieczorem
 światła się zagnieździły
 w śniegu na grobach²⁵

evening cemetery
 lights have nested
 on snow covered graves

Engelking's haiku brings to mind the tradition of writing death poetry²⁶, even though the poet is more direct than those in writing about the topic of all things ending, removing the barrier of a lack of literal expression, balancing between lyricism and his own brand of drastic expression.

It is also worth noting the visual aspects of the way haikus are printed on the page – the rich tradition of miniatures and related phenomena, such as the *haiga* – combining poems and graphics – allow a wide realm of possibility to open up in the printed book medium (though it is not limited to it). In order to review the relations between haikus and the visual arts we needn't reach as far back as ancient Japanese works – the potential found in the aesthetics found in Far-Eastern small forms is also utilised (with greater or lesser success) in Polish publications. An example of this can be found in *Niepełna pustka. Haiku (Not-full emptiness. Haiku)* published by Austeria, in which Elżbieta Tabakowska's poems are *sumis* created by Lidia Rozmus – monochromatic images reminiscent of calligraphy.

Another interesting project is a book issued by Blue Bird Press – *Be haiku* is a combination of the works by Japanese masters (translated by Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda) with minimalistic, conceptual artwork by Ryszard Kajzer. In this particular selection of poems, next to the Polish language translations (done directly from the originals by Żuławska-Umeda, a renowned expert in Japanese culture who works to make the haiku form popular), the original Japanese versions have also been printed. Even for readers who do not know this language, this format can turn out to be a wise decision, allowing readers to be aware of the difference between the originals and the translations in the way they appear on the page. The question of visual perception is key here – to put it succinctly: the poems look oh so different. This book is further enhanced by the addition at the end of pages of “blank” dotted three-line sections, encouraging readers to fill these empty spaces, according to Beata Jewiarz's introduction: “a tattoo on the margins of consciousness”²⁷. In looking at the potential of Japanese miniature forms, I also want to point out problems with

²⁵L. Engelking, *Haiku[cmentarz wieczorem...]*, dz. cyt., p. 34.

²⁶See. *Japońskie wiersze śmierci / Japanese death poems*, trans. & introduction M. Has, Kraków 2004

²⁷B. Jewiarz, *Pomiędzy / Inbetween*, [in:] *Be haiku*, ed. B. Jewiarz, Warszawa 2017, no page numbers.

haikus published online. According to Beata Śniecikowska²⁸, artists crafting online *haiga* and haikus tend not to use the full gamut of possibilities offered by online platforms. Most poems published online could look just the same on the printed page, in a traditional book format²⁹.

Even so, we should point out that the perception of haikus and the kind of perception demanded of Internet users contains a certain analogy. The World Wide Web and mobile devices allow readers to become accustomed to quick readings of content, a specific sort of “catchiness” in short text (and text-image combinations) communications, which also makes small poetic forms more popular. Perhaps the haiku along with its minimalism and impressionistic character has the chance to fit with modern forms of reading texts.

We should stress that setting excessively broad borderlines for Oriental lyrical forms involves a certain risk of Japanese miniatures being seen as synonymous with short poems. And yet, as we see in various analyses of individual translations, works which go beyond the limits of the genre are able to fit in with the maxim “minimum words – maximum content”. The tendency to perceive haikus as banal is connected with the way in which poetic miniatures are trivialised on the whole. Short forms, though favoured by many renowned poets, are often not valued highly, and are treated instead as an addition to “proper forms”, by which we mean longer texts. Marcin Telicki wrote:

Many professional readers agree that works which utilise minimal amounts of words and masterpieces are difficult to fit together. Short-form poetry is often ignored. (...) widespread reception of short-form poetry as being uncomplicated, simplified, stripped of stylistic diversity and lacking in cognitive and/or artistic valour is unjustified. It can even – paradoxically speaking – much harder in terms of reception than ‘traditional’ poetry. Where does this sense come from?³⁰

The haiku fits perfectly into the category of “*minor poetry*” – remaining outside the *mainstream*, utilising formal minimalism, emerging from a different cultural milieu. All of this means that contact with Japanese poetry can lead to misunderstandings. Nevertheless, far-eastern miniatures are in their asceticism and clarity of form exceptionally focused on interaction with the readers. As a result, dealing with classics of the genre, as well as faithful renderings and interesting creative variations on the haiku theme can prove for readers a fruitful experience allowing for a change in perception and leading to new ways of seeing.

translated by Mark Kazmierski

²⁸B. Śniecikowska, op.cit., p. 633.

²⁹We could refer here to classic selections of haikus, which appear in both digital and print formats: <http://www.haiku.art.pl/> [access: 30.06.2018].

³⁰M. Telicki, *Krótkie formy liryczne wobec problemu / Problems surrounding short lyrical forms presenting reality* Przestrzenie Teorii 2006, no. 6, pp. 85 – 86.

KEYWORDS

HAIKU

short poetic forms

ABSTRACT:

This article discusses haiku adaptations in Poland. The author deals with problems related to the reception and translation of Japanese miniatures, as well as doubts about the way the genre is understood. In the second part of her work we find indications of the possibilities of using haiku to achieve new creative effects. This includes an analysis of works by Jadwiga Stańczakowa, Ryszard Krynicki and Leszek Engelking.

miniatures

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