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Selecting Haiku: Observations

Every publisher of journals concerned with haiku-life is nowadays confronted with too many submissions, has only limited publication space, and is in addition under pressure of time. Inevitably, selection must – and often will – be part of the editorial process. In consequence, the process of selecting from among a big batch of haiku requests a lot of its decision-makers.

For example, they are – even first of all – expected to be unbiased. Therefore the author's name is usually separated from his submitted material, i. e. the text is made anonymous. This is a common and approved approach. In general, any text stands independently from its writer and as such has to speak for itself. In other words: A writer's intention, planned or by accident, is from the beginning irrelevant unless these intentions are already included.

The author's awareness and own recognition of his intentions during his writing (of haiku, tanka, haibun etc.) may show, whether he is capable of repeating and controlling his skills. It may also help him to assess the qualities and effects of his writings. This in turn may help him to make his own pre-selection among his writings more efficiently before submitting them to an editor.

If submission-guidelines allow to send in more than one text, the experienced writer will exhaust this possibility. For a higher quantity of his texts will probably tell more about his writing skills, creativity and what he definitely intended. So on the one hand, the writer's own ability of critical observation, reading, and interpreting will help to improve the quality and impact of his texts by a straight to the point approach. On the other hand, it will enable the author to estimate his own writings from an editor-like point of view. Such an attitude implies some of the knowledge that guides an editor's expectations.

However, the concepts and interests of haiku-writers tend to differ quite naturally from those of the editors, sometimes even considerably³, – as they do from one editor to another. Usually the respective submission-guidelines not only inform about general proceedings with respect to quantity of texts, deadline, and formalities of how to submit, they sometimes also describe important other requirements illustrated by (haiku-) examples. These policies and the overall concept contributing to the profile (“house style”³) of a haiku-journal within the haiku-genre are supposed to inform and help the writer. That means, writers as prospective submitters should familiarize themselves beforehand with several issues of the journal (in print and web-based) taken into consideration and inform themselves carefully about the following questions: What has been actually presented there? What concept, what policies are pursued, and what views of haiku are propagated? What constitutes a haiku as presented in the journal? Do some of your haiku fit in? Are other journals probably more suitable?

For haiku-writing is not at all a streamlined text production according to definitions and editor policies. While imposing any rules and advice, this is also something

editors should have to consider more consciously and time and again; – especially when intending to publish haiku accurately for their readers. Thus guidelines may facilitate and encourage the writer, but again, every editor has to evaluate at all times what he is superimposing onto each text in each phase of the selection process.

To be absolutely clear: First and above of all, writing haiku is a natural event-determined creative process of imagery. It reflects the writer's specific view of the ordinary and the general within the unique. The message for others derives from this general character of a particular text. We face here an unique organic floating process that contributes to naturalness, vividness and innovation in comparison to the preceding² works within the genre of haiku.

Well, how do these texts speak¹? Often quite simply in this way: They appeal to the editor because they please him. This means, a particular text deals with a topic, an event, or with a feeling which the editor has experienced himself, thus subjectively relates to. He figures that his enthusiasm for this haiku must have the same impact on other readers, and haiku with such a catching impact is exactly what should be presented in his journal.

Likewise some decision-makers adhere to a particular literary genre and style. Hence they are delighted by haiku reminding of these characteristics. But a haiku may also appear as too sophisticated, too philosophical, also too slobbery, or simply overdone. It's probably not simple or stripped enough, or not natural, – or may be quite the opposite: the haiku is too banal, meaningless, or too commonplace and only reflecting mainstream taste.

Someone else will argue that the treatment of language seems too curious, too excessive, too complicated, or too high-flown; in short overwritten. Some find punctuation and capitalization completely unnecessary³ and rigorously refuse haiku which are not amended to this principle. Others favor exactly the opposite in this matter. Many believe in mixed, or at least sparingly used punctuation as a general compromise, but most certainly no period (since everything needs to be left open).

In order to present a well-balanced variety of texts under these circumstances, it is quite common practice for editors to use a small group for selection. Some work even with a regularly rotating jury.

On the whole such procedures, principles, and assessments may seem evenhanded towards the writer, but are they unprejudiced regarding the text itself? After all we can ask, do these rather subjective opinions prematurely prevent a juror from vital insight, and therefore deny him and the reader something that is particularly essential to a certain text? And when we ask this, we see that this does not even include the difficult and not entirely definite haiku criteria, neither does it presuppose a conclusive haiku definition⁸, – that might not exist anyway. In addition, punctuation, style, choice of words and form is a matter of each single context and not a question of principle, because they must directly suit the text. As a matter of fact it is on the particular imagery and intended meaning that their functioning depends. Therefore, in order to determine and understand these functions, nothing else but the text itself needs to be considered precisely; opinions and general principles do

not help.

Thus any dealing with poetry – which also includes any selection for print – focuses in the first place on the most difficult and demanding art of correct reading^{2;6}. The more concentrated (and therefore less explicit) and artfully crafted a lyrical text is – in the case of the shortest poem, the haiku, concentrated to its utmost – the higher is the risk of misunderstanding or even not understanding at all. Often these circumstances lead to rejection or well-meant, but questionable text-invasive advice.

Of course, tastes and other personal factors are not entirely inevitable. Nevertheless, for factual text-handling it is not the most possible agreement, nor the highest number of favorable votes that is appropriate, but only methodical, repeatable, and fact-based text analysis with clear criteria⁹. In order to be truly capable of interpreting poetic imagery not only subjectively, the juror entrusted with selection needs to be especially schooled in analyzing text structure. He must have sufficient experience with the subject to do full justice to the imagery, sound and meaning of an accurate depiction as wrought by its author⁵. Only a broad knowledge of the literary, cultural, and historic spectrum in content and quality will ensure that all possible allusions (also in style!), and cross references are recognized^{2;7}. This is necessary as well when there are at stake the realization and determination of plagiarism, partial theme-enhancement/reinvention, and true poetic innovation of the form or content within and outside the haiku-genre^{7;9}. A juror must be capable of revising his first impressions and hypotheses during the reading process. And his final rating of a text, which leads to its acceptance or rejection, – also in regard to a specific haiku-definition and -style – is only meant to conclude the methodical and fact-based text analysis, hence factual assessment. To sum it up: Whether and how a haiku is presented, does not solely derive from the quality of submitted material, but also depends on the reading ability, experience, knowledge, scholarship, and constantly further education of the respective juror.

Moreover: Some haiku will even reach beyond the editor's understanding and that of his jurors, because the text quality can only be recognized in a larger context of an author's entire work. In this actually most important situation of assessing haikuculture and -life, only scholarly research will help⁹. The single editor, even if he col-laborates with a jury which selects „anonymized“ haiku, is simply unable to cope with this issue, unless he is also a literary researcher.

In our time, editors with their policies and requirements influence to a high degree what haiku concepts and -styles are preferred by the public. Thus they preset to what extent and at what level writing, information, and also entertainment occur. Different from the situation in Japan, where everybody who can write, is relatively knowledgeable in terms of literary haiku, and understands many ways of allusion, the haiku in the West is by comparison at its beginning of cultural integration⁴, and it still waits for true recognition by, and integration into the life of literature. In this respect, too, great responsibility rests on the shoulders of any Western editor, as to present the haiku properly in all its diversity and therefore to contribute to its definite recognition.

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