THE THEME OF MIRRORING IN HAIKU POEMS

Irina-Ana Drobot
Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest

Abstract: The purpose of the present paper is to look at haiku poems dealing with the theme of mirroring. While haiku poems originate in Japan, they can prove to be adaptable to any culture. We can start from the following haiku poem by master Matsuo Basho, who is believed to be the one who started off the haiku writing tradition: "Harvest moon:/ around the pond I wander/ and the night is gone." Haiku poems are traditionally placed in three lines, 5-7-5 syllables, and with a reference offering a clue to the season where everything happens. The focus is on the here and now. However, current trends in haiku writing show more eagerness to experiment, and bring in changes. The experience of writing haiku proves to be universal, across cultures. One case examined will be that of the Romanian Kukai community led by master Corneliu Traian Atanasiu. The topic of mirroring has been dealt with in an anthology where work from authors in his group was included, in order to popularize for the general public this kind of poem. The translated title could be A paper boat jumping over the clouds, meaning that the paper boat is sitting on a lake or in a pond, and the clouds are reflecting in the lake, creating the optical illusion of the boat floating on the clouds, or in the sky. This is a poetic experience, which is, after all, as real as it can be, due to the way nature works. Basho's poem shows the value of karumi, or gasping at the beauty of nature, once we realize that, through the optical illusion of having the moon mirrored in the pond, it simply lies at our feet, as if it is so within our reach, even if, scientifically, it lies light years' distance from us.

Keywords: figurative language, concrete reality, juxtaposition, defamiliarization, netnography

INTRODUCTION

We may think about haiku poems, once we know that they are originally Japanese poems, which contain the Zen Buddhist mindset and practices of meditation, that they are not only a unique cultural product to Japan, but also that it can only be practiced once we adopt the same mindset. We can adopt the same mindset, we are frequently told in various online social media communities, by "becoming" Japanese, or by changing our way of thinking and seeing the world. However, other views of haiku writers and teachers from Western culture believe that we only need to understand the mechanism of the haiku poem, or the way it works in order to be a good one. This view is shared by master Corneliu Traian Atanasiu, the founder and teacher of the Romanian Haiku online communities, which includes one main blog, several others based on the weekly haiku contest, the haiku club which includes honkadori exercises, or exercises meant to understand the structure of a good haiku poem, then create a different one in the same spirit, or structure, an online bookshop where the publications of anthologies and authors' volume he encouraged or who are part of his community are presented, a Facebook group called Autori de haiku din Romania (Haiku authors from Romania), and others.

These, just like whether or not the haiku poem should have a traditional, fixed form, 5-7-5 syllables and three lines, including a kigo, or an allusion allowing us to identify which season it is, have and still are topics of debate. Additionally, the free haiku movement had started in Japan in the 1910s, with poets such as Hekigoto Shin-Keiko, Seisensui Ogiwara, and Santoka Taneda (Kiuchi & Hakutani 2022). Even an author we hold as a symbolic Japanese personality such as Shiki, who introduced kireji, or cutting line, meaning the the haiku poem was formed of two distinct parts, marked by syntactic break, imagery, or both, challenged the traditional fixed haiku format (McCarty, 2008).

The present paper will present a particular case of haiku poem, namely that based on the theme of reflection, like in a mirror, in various bodies of water, in order to raise awareness about the complexity of this type of poem which is frequently misunderstood by the Western audience not involved in haiku communities and not having dug deep enough into what we already have about the haiku poem. In spite of it being practiced at world level, which shows its compatibility with and adaptability to various cultures, and also various historical ages, it remains relatively little known to the general public. Dictionary definitions present it from a limited perspective, as just a poem about nature, yet it is more than this.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The author of the present paper has witnessed the discussions in the Haiku Authors from Romania Facebook group, as a member, meaning as a reader of other members' poems and as a writer herself, and, especially, of master Corneliu Traian Atanasiu, related to haiku poems and their analysis. This means she can discuss the approach held by Atanasiu based on participant observation method within the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2012), meaning observing, as a member of this online community, the activity, values, mindset and approach to haiku of this community.

Haiku poems about mirroring, or about reflecting surfaces, are not the invention of contemporary poets. They have been around at least since Matsuo Basho, who is consider the founding father of the haiku poem, to the point where Western culture members associate him with the genuine, Japanese haiku, which is, after all, an ideal we are never going to attain. Matsuo Basho wrote the following haiku poem: "Harvest moon:/ around the pond I wander/ and the night is gone" (translation by Harold G. Henderson, in Kratoska, 1965). This poem suggests that the season is autumn, since we have mentioned the seasonal reference, or kigo, harvest moon. The poetic persona wanders about the pond, apparently, all night long. The question readers ask themselves immediately is, "Why?" The answer can lie in interpreting the pond as an occasion to mirror the moon, and for the poetic persona to wonder at its beauty. The beauty of nature leads to moments of revelation, or enlightenment, which can be summed up as karumi, referring to the awe and admiration of beauty found in nature. We can see, literally, the sky lying at our feet, together with the moon, all apparently available within our reach. However, we know that all this is an illusion, and, in this case, an optical illusion. Through reflection, through mirroring, we can have everything so close to us on earth. The sky can become so vulnerable once we can trouble it, both literally and figuratively, with a stone or a drop of water, or with an oar or weeping willow branch, or, why not, with fallen leaves.

Basho's poem about walking round the pond all night, looking at the reflection of the moon, is not a simple description of beauty or of the reality around us. It can show how fragile our illusions can be, once we believe we can grasp certain notions beyond us. The moon can seem so close, yet it is not, and, in addition, it may seem small and simple, yet once we think about the scientific discoveries we know how big a planet it can be. We may imagine various stories and even scientific theories about it, yet we may always be wrong. As human beings, we are just a part of nature, and not the masters of it, according to the native Japanese religion of Shintoism. The change everything is subjected to can be compared to the reflections in a body of water. Everything is ephemeral, and the present moment, the only one we have, is a fleeting one as well. The mirroring clearly makes reference to the ephemeral nature of life, to which Zen Buddhism (Reader, 2002 raises our awareness. We can clearly see the fragility of everything in the mirroring that can be disturbed at any time, by any small detail.

The anthology by Atanasiu (2022) called, in my translation, as it is all in the Romanian language, *A paper boat jumping over the clouds. Haiku. The Anthology of*

Mirroring, presents us with poems gathered from the haiku poets whi are members of the Romanian Kukai group, and which are based on this theme. As a phenomenon, I have noticed, as a member of the online haiku community Romanian Kukai, that haiku poems featuring mirroring experiences are very much appreciated by and popular with the members. For us, Western culture members, they can be considered a totally different way of viewing reality. We can claim that we can look at the everyday life reality around us from a unique, challenging perspective, based on Shklovsky's (1917) theory of defamiliarization, which claims that this is the very purpose of art, namely to surprise us with a fresh, completely different perspective on common, everyday life reality.

One of the poems present in Atanasiu (2022)'s anthology is the following one by Mihaela Cojocaru: "grădină pustie –/ în oglinda fântânii/ tot cerul senin," which I translated as "deserted garden –/ in the mirror of the fountain/ an all clear sky." Here we see a resemblance with the poem by Basho where we picture the poetic persona circling the pond all night long, looking in the pond at the possibe reflection of the moon. Otherwise, why would we have mentioned the moon, and then the action of circling the pond? The reader is prompted to find a connection between the two, which is ensured through the reflection. In the poem by Cojocaru (in Atanasiu, 2022), we see a contrast between a deserted, therefore empty garden and the idea of having everything before us through the reflection of the sky in the fountain. The reader works through to find a connection in this haiku poem as well, and arrives at the figurative meaning, namely that of the fountain being something extremely precious, vital, and allowing us to think that we have everything, since the water in the fountain, once it is drinkable, it can ensure life. The fountain is a symbol of life, and vitality, while the garden is deserted. However, even if the garden is deserted, it can still be regenerated through the presence of water. Aditionally, readers may picture not only an empty garden, but also one where nobody lives, no human beings, and this is why it may have vegetation but it may be untrimmed. In Japanese culture, unlike in Western cultures, gardens are believed that should be allowed to grown naturally, without human beings intervening to much by pruning the plants.

The following poem by Mirela Brăilean (in Atanasiu, 2022), "oglinda apei –/ doar o pană de cocor/ tulburând cerul" can be translated into English as "the mirror of the water –/ just a crane's feather/ disturbing the sky" (my translation). The poem becomes special since we witness the sky being troubled by a feather. Once again, the poem does not offer a simple beautiful image. Instead, readers are prompted to think about the changes in the seasons. The sky can be seen as troubled once it goes through changes. It reflects, indirectly, our own emotions, as human beings, once we see a change in the seasons. The cranes can immigrate during autumn and spring. However, once the feather of a crane falls, we can immediately associate this as readers with the fall of leaves in the autumn. The emotion of being troubled can be considered to be related to an end of the natural cycle, such as autumn, more than to a new beginning, namely spring.

Another poem, "după furtună –/ în ochiul de apă/ oglindit tot cerul" (by Mihaela Cojocaru, in Atanasiu, 2022), sounds as follows, in my English translation: "after the storm –/ in the eye of water/ the whole sky is mirrored." When it is raining and when there is a storm, we can definitely be fascinated by looking at the sky. We can look at the sky before and during the storm, watch the thunder, the clounds, the rain. In the end of the storm, we can be fascinated by the rainbow, as well as by the sun shining and by the clear blue sky. Yet, the poem presents us with the unexpected twist in allowing us to see the sky down, at our feet, as we guess it, mirrored in a piece of water. The image, while a real one, can sound like a poetic, lyrical one to the Western culture readers. Western culture readers can be surprised by the poetry present in everyday life reality, and not created by using the usual Western poetry figures of speech.

A haiku poem by Corneliu Traian Atanasiu (in Atanasiu, 2022), “doar un singur strop -/ lumea-ntreagă-n tremur/ în oglinda apei” and which can be translated as “just a single drop -/ the whole world trembles/ in the mirror of the water” (my translation) shows a macrocosm included in a microcosm, meaning an entire world in a drop of water. Here, we get the message, through the mirroring, that the entire world is not as everlasting and stable as we sometimes think of it. In fact, the world is quite fragile and subject to change.

The poem by Valeria Tamaş (in Atanasiu, 2022), “oglinda apei –/ saltul brotacului/ până la soare” and which, in my translation, sounds as follows: “the mirror of the water –/ the leap of the frog/ towards the sun” reminds of Basho’s famous poem, “Old pond/ frog jumps in/ the sound of water...” (Basho, in csus.edu, 2024). According to the author of the present paper, we can interpret this poem by Basho as the frog being the element of waking us from our daydreaming by the pond, or from our deep reflections, or from a simple moment of silence. We jump up from our moment of meditation, and the frog brings us back to reality. Therefore, in this case, the frog has a function opposite to the mirroring, namely, instead of leading us to a realm of fantasy, it leads us back to the realm of reality. We can, therefore, consider this poem by Basho as an example of extreme awareness of the present moment and of the reality before us, present for what it is. As we have come into contact with so many poems on the topic of mirroring, we may further interpret the poem by Basho with the frog as, maybe, the frog breaking off the reflection of the world, the sky, or the person meditating, of the willows by the lake, and so on, showing us that we may hold too many illusions about the world around and that we should just see it for what it is, not for what we have been taught about it and, in the case of Western culture members, not for being part of our emotional states. In the poem by Tamaş (in Atanasiu, 2022), the frog, which we associate with Basho’s famous frog, leaps towards a realm of fantasy, which is, after all, well-grounded in reality, through the reflection of the sun in water. Definitely, we expect the sun to be soon gone, once its image in the water will be troubled. We can further connect this with the interpretation related to change attributed to Basho’s poem about the frog, namely: “He has contrasted the ancient, timeless quality of the pond with the sudden change induced by the frog. However, such changes are temporary; the sound is gone and the ripples will disappear, and all will be unchanged. Similarly, a man makes his splash in life but leaves it unchanged” (Kratoska, 1965).

The following poem by Eduard Țară (in Atanasiu, 2022), “în urma broaştei –/ un plescăit în noapte/ şi luna ţăndări”, which can be translated as “after the frog –/ a splash in the night/ and the moon shattered to pieces” (my translation), is clearly an intertextual allusion (Machacek, 2007) to Basho’s famous frog poem. Țară (in Atanasiu, 2022) presents the result of the frog’s jumping and the creation of an image reminding of science-fiction and fantasy literature apocalypse. It is the end of a world, it is suggested, and the mirroring of the lake ensures access to a fantasy-like experience. Through witnessing this scene, we can start think along the lines of inevitable change. We frequently say that our world has ended, meaning it has changed, which resonates with the meaning of this poem, rising, from literal meaning to figurative, philosophical, abstract meaning.

The poem by Luminița Ignea (in Atanasiu, 2022), “selfie-n oglindă -/ cioara se uită galeș/ într-o băltoacă” and which can be translated as “mirror selfie -/ the crow looks dreamily/ into a puddle” (my translation), brings us to our modern world, full of gadgets we use on a daily basis. We have a juxtaposition (Gilli, 2001; Shirane, 2019; Trumbull, 2012) between an image of someone, likely a human being, looking in the mirror, taking a selfie, which could be a mirror in a store’s window, and elsewhere, next to this person, a crow doing something similar with its reflection in a puddle. By combining these two parts, we get a comparison between the behaviour of human beings and crows. It is based on the way crows are believed to be very smart and to act, in some situations, just the way humans do.

We can consider, therefore, the experience of mirroring as a magic gateway to a realm of fantasy. Reality around us makes us dream. After all, our inspiration and our work of imagination starts from what we see going on in reality.

RESULTS

The haiku poems based on the theme of mirroring can show us an entirely different perspective on reality which, while apparently leading us into a fantasy world, the world it presents is as real as it can be. The only difference is that it can be an entirely different understanding of the world we know, focusing on what is surprising and different. Otherwise, we can look at the elements present in the haiku poems and consider them separately, not as connected through sky and earth based on the element of mirroring, which can be considered an element allowing us access to a completely different, fantasy, magic realm, just as in fairy-tales. The mirroring is, eventually, comparable to a magic key ensuring the passage from real world to fantasy world, where the world works according to different laws. At the same time, we are aware that all the so-called fantasy world can be so fragile, since the optical illusion may not last for too long.

We can understand the mirroring as a gateway to another realm, or to another perspective. In this case, it is mostly a challenge to the way we see everyday life reality as Western culture members. We do not see it as poetic, but in need to be made poetic through figurative language and imagination.

We can see how the preoccupation with the theme of mirroring starts with the old Japanese haiku poets and ends up with our contemporary, Romanian poets, who can popularize haiku using the poems based on this theme. They can sound appealing due to their poetic and lyrical aspect which is appreciated by Western culture members, since it is a familiar experience they associate with poetry.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We could understand juxtaposition, in the case of the haiku poems based on mirroring, as follows: the mirroring experience connects two distinct parts of the haiku poem. The mirroring experience is what keep the poem together, and helps readers reach another level of meaning. In some cases, this other level includes filling in the gaps and picturing an entire scene suggested through disparate elements, to the point where the readers can have a moment of enlightenment themselves, when they understand what the scene is actually about, in concrete reality. Afterwards, they can reach the level of figurative meaning, which needs not be expressed using figurative language, as Western culture members have become used to in Western poetry.

The present paper shows how we can read a specific case of haiku poems, namely the one based on the experience of mirroring. This experience can be regarded as universal, and not as specific to Japanese culture, which is why it can become an appealing type of haiku poem to Western culture members. The members of the Romanian Kukai online community seem fascinated by the mirroring experience haiku poems, since to them it can be a special experience and perspective while, at the same time, one that sounds very much within the reach of all cultural mindsets. We only need to become more aware of our surroundings and gain a higher, more intense and sensitive sense of observation.

Atanasiu, through his publication of anthologies, and the one about haiku poetry based on mirroring (Atanasiu, 2022), wishes to make the haiku poem well-known and popular for the general Romanian reading public. He believes it is a poem that is quite difficult to understand at times.

This is where the present paper comes to help. The analysis based on the reader-response approach of the author of this paper shows that such poems can be understood by

working out the meaning in a natural way in which we usually think about the world around us, and the usual way in which we make various associations and complete missing details. We tend to form scenarios based on clues given in a poem and this is how we manage to understand haiku poems in a quite easy way once we stop a bit to reflect.

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