

JAMES KIRKUP'S HAIKU-LIKE MONOSTICHES

—A Further Study of Kirkup's Haiku in English—

By Atsuo Nakagawa

In my analytical study of "James Kirkup's Haiku in English" which appeared in this bulletin last year,⁽¹⁾ I referred to his one-line poems or haiku, saying that though some of his one-line haiku are haiku-like, some are pure poems, and others are mere proverbial sayings, all of his one-line haiku may be called monostiches according to his definition, and that in the sense that those shortest forms represent the 'ah-ness', compactness, or instant inspiration or illumination expressing themselves immediately man-to-man, and that they make it possible for the reader to forget himself while reading them, he included them all in one-line haiku. Then in footnotes I added Kirkup's own answers to my questions that he does not think it very important to find distinctions between 'one-line poems' and 'one-line haiku'; they are all just 'one-line poems' even though his calling them all 'haiku' might be interpreted to be an oversight or an accident, or some sort of explanation for his English readers; and I also cited his admission in his writing which appeared later than my open lecture based on that study that his monostich is certainly one of the most promising development in recent haiku composition. Thus he still keeps

(1) Atsuo Nakagawa, "James Kirkup's Haiku in English," *Gifu Keizai Daigaku Ronshu*, 5, No. 3 (1972).

writing one-line poems, and part of which are printed in *Shikai*.⁽¹⁾

Certainly all of his monostiches satisfy all or part of the requirements provided in his definition.⁽²⁾ And I believe Kirkup is right in saying that he gave the name of 'monostich' to this jumble of short 'poems' since if we study closely the haiku that have so far been produced in the past hundreds of years in Japan including *avant-garde* or modern free haiku, every sort of haiku which satisfies Kirkup's definition has appeared. However, if you see his monostiches from the conventional, critical point of view which has been cherishing or defending some traits of haiku-likeness proper, it seems to me that only those which sound 'haiku-like' have more or less 'haiku' beauty, and therefore they must be distinguished from the rest.

But what is a 'haiku-like' poem? I mean by it a poem that has one caesura or its equivalent dividing the line into approximate proportion of five to twelve or *vice versa* (Its length must, of course, be more or less 17 syllables)⁽³⁾, one season word or its equivalent,⁽⁴⁾ and harmony in meaning, expressing a state of mind.

Here, I try my own analysis, in further detail, of Kirkup's monostiches,

(1) Published in Nagoya, edited by Ikehara Gyomindo. Some of the examples given in this essay have not been printed in the magazine.

(2) See James Kirkup's "A Tentative Study of One-line Poems," *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 16 & 17 (1972).

(3) My former essay on Kirkup's haiku treats the length of his monostiches in some detail.

(4) The equivalents or substitutes for season words will be explained a little later on; for further information, see Tohta Kaneko's *Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuyosha, 1972).

making, at the same time, my definition of 'haiku-like' clearer :

Ex. 1. Cold wind, fresh tears.

2. Autumn moon, bruised fruit.

If the author reads them aloud, they would certainly sound like tetrameters—in place of the caesuras we can see unstressed syllables unwritten. So the form itself is a type fit for lyric. We see season words. We feel their loneliness. In the latter a reader might see some social consciousness of our sacred moon made dirty by man's landing on it. Sonically, 'fresh tears' makes us hear the sound of a cold wind and newly-wooing tears. As for the latter, the 'oo'-sound makes us feel a sort of sadness, depth and darkness. Except for their metrical rhythm which is exceptional and more lyrical,⁽¹⁾ they satisfy all my requirements of 'haiku-like' though the ways of expression of the two are different—the former having a natural way of expression: causal relation, and the latter being an example of 'super-position'.

Ex. 3. Stars, the spit of someone's speech.

4. Splashing through rainpools: Japanese language.

These two are also examples of 'super-position'. Unlike the first group, however, they have vivid movement which is expressed very effectively in the sounds of 's', 'sh' and 'th'. And at the same time they lack lyrical tone. Their rhythms are very modern, though their larger rhythms made by caesuras are those of haiku's.⁽²⁾

Ex. 5. Pink cattleya—cat's yawn.

(1) Hexameter lines are preferred for haiku forms. See my "Haiku-ron" in *Poetry Nippon*, No. 22 (1973).

(2) See my same essay in *PN*. In short: "larger rhythm" is one made by "sound groups" in each haiku—usually made up of three.

6. A wild boar smiled at a butterfly.

The latter has a verb, but their poetical effect is the same—funniness. They both lack lyricism and in this sense they belong to an exceptional pattern as Issa's do in the history of Japanese haiku.

Ex. 7. Spiders attack plum petals, ghosts of butterflies.

8. For a moment a rainbow makes a new hill.

9. Autumn trees weep dry tears.

All of these have verbs and are in a sense dramatic, or have small surprises. And yet they have some harmony of meaning.

Ex. 10. Bargain sale—one heart and a blunt pencil.

11. My navel screws itself into a wink.

The phrase 'Bargain sale' of Example 10 is abstract, and the word 'navel' of Example 11 is not a season word, but they may be interpreted as the substitutes for season words since they are words of our daily life and have much implication in themselves, thus giving us some background for better understanding of the poems. Besides, Example 11 has a verb, but the whole idea is static. So both of them can be included in the category of 'haiku-like' since they have a sort of harmony in meaning, the latter belonging to the exceptional third group.

Ex. 12. When I smiled my face filled the sky.

13. I saw a cloud pass behind the moon.

These two describe happenings which are not static, and the poetic effect the author aims at seems to be a surprise, a drama or a shock, which he says he has learned to derive from *koan* and *mondo*.⁽¹⁾ Indeed, some Japanese haiku express occurrences but they mostly have their cyclic meaning by

(1) Kirkup, *op. cit.*

means of special ending words or after-echoes which bring the reader's mind back to the beginning, while those haiku by Kirkup seem to me mere statements of events and nothing else. (Shock or surprise is left behind of course) Besides, the latter example (No. 13) has no caesura or its substitute. So, though they have something like season words and they fulfill his definition of monostich, they could hardly be called 'haiku-like'. They look like mere short passages from pure modern poems. Therefore in my opinion what the poet intends to express may sometimes be found in well-written good poetry or even in prose, as the author himself admits that even a passage from prose can be a monostich.⁽¹⁾ The author might say that they are entitled to be called by a special name just as a picture of landscape is called a piece of art only because it is cut off from the rest. But since their likes are found in other types of literature their significance as an art of a special type is lessened. In fact, most Japanese haiku poets do not think highly of those which sing of dramatic happenings even if they are shaped very well in the haiku form.⁽²⁾

Ex. 14. The headless man choked back his tears.

15. A fly buzzed in a hardboiled egg.

The author has gone further in abstraction using metaphors.⁽³⁾

Ex. 16. Excess of anything is always nothing.

17. A true poem is never poetic.

Indeed these examples tell why Kirkup writes more and more 'poems' of this kind with confidence. However, in the common reader's eye they

(1) *Ibidem*.

(2) cf. Shu'ohshi Mizuhara, *Gendai Haiku Techo* (Tokyo: Sogen-sha, 1972).

(3) Some Japanese haiku have metaphors.

would look nothing but mere didactic sayings. We do not see a season word or a state of mind in them. They are far from 'haiku-like' though they might be very close to haiku in essence. Some reflection and time required for most readers to understand them well, their meaning would not flash through the readers' mind. One might say they are some concluding lines of stories or essays. So their significance as a piece of poetry belonging to a special type is further lessened. They are just compact statements that make the reader forget himself while reading them.

Ex. 18. A man, a plan, a canal: Panama.

Palindrome which is included in the poet's monostiches is in most cases nothing but a nonsense poem like tongue-twisters which he says he can also include in this category. We see nothing of these kinds in Japanese haiku.

Last of all, those which I like best are his poems of landscape:

Ex. 19. First snow, a pastel sketch of winter.

20. Stone garden winter: frozen ripples.

21. Dark rocks lashed by storms of apricot petals.

They appeal strongly to our sense of beauty. How compactly the scenes are presented in 'ah-ness'—a state of mind. They are pretty pictures of brocade (the first one sounds like a pastel work because of the word 'pastel' though). Kirkup has a lot of monostiches of this kind about Japanese gardens. Their form, being short, is different from that of the conventional English counterparts of Japanese classic haiku, yet they satisfy all our requirements of 'haiku-like'. There is static harmony in them. And we see no personification, the technique of which he sometimes introduces in his haiku.

(Concluded)