

American Poetry and Hegemony

ABSTRACT: When American poetry is read in the context of American global power, at least three insights follow: 1) American poets' understanding of Asian literature during the twentieth century was shaped by power relations between the U.S. and Japan, 2) postwar American literary and "spiritual" borrowings from East Asia, notably haiku and Zen, were imbued with racist and imperialist ideologies, and 3) although American hegemony is not seriously discussed in the United States, at least some American poets have begun to read their tradition and its poetics from a foreign, non-hegemonic point of view, seeing it as a regional and particular form of writing rather than (hegemonically) as the innovative leading edge of world literature.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary American Poetry; Hegemony; Robert Hass

For the past twenty years, most American academic literary research has been historicist, attempting to understand literary works by recovering their original contexts. In the same period, the United States has acquired global military and economic hegemony. If scholars of the future ever situate the American literature of our time, its context will pretty clearly be American power. Admittedly, trying to think historically about the present is a questionable maneuver. Nevertheless, if we were to attempt a historicist reading of contemporary poetry, what kind of interpretation would result? Would it be possible gain insights into a California poet, for example, by reading his or work in the context of American hegemony in the Pacific?

In this essay I offer only the sketch of such a reading, concluding my remarks with a look at "Visiting the DMZ near Panmunjom" (2007), a haibun poem by the West Coast writer and Berkeley professor Robert Hass (b. 1941). Granted, Hass makes such my interpretation a bit too easy. He began publishing during the Vietnam War, has translated Japanese poetry, and, as a product of postwar Bay Area culture, is as interested in East Asian literature as he is in European. Indeed, as we will see, this poem is easy to historicize because Hass himself has already situated it in a Pacific context. However, because I want to suggest that a non-negligible body of American poetry is embedded in American power relations, whether or not its authors grasped their situation, I shall turn first to earlier and less self-conscious writers and try to outline modern American poetry's connections to East Asia.

There is no use in overselling these connections. In the twentieth century, few American poets took a serious interest in East Asian literature; their "tradition," if one wants to call it that, is slender. It begins with Ezra Pound's Cathay (1915), and thereafter runs through the works of Pacific coast writers, especially Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Hass himself. The Beat Generation, and Jack Kerouac in particular, comes into the story because the Beats were enthusiastic about Zen. So too were the writers who invented and popularized the haiku as an English poetic form. But, glancing backward over the previous hundred years, it must be admitted that when most twentieth-century poets thought about poetry, their touchstones were European, not Asian.

Of course it is true that most American writers have been indifferent to foreign literatures of every stripe; indeed, the insularity of American society is a well-earned cliché. After 1945, American cultural producers, just like the military-industrial complex, were in a position to dominate world markets. Hollywood was the leading manufacturer of global mass entertainment, and New York was the center of the international art scene. Poets, like other Americans, were accustomed to thinking of the U.S. as a cultural exporter. The myth of

"development," according to which some countries are said to be further ahead in history than others, was applied to culture, too. And so it is best to admit right away that during the Cold War and the present period, cultural influence, like political and military power, has tended to flow from the center to the periphery, not the other way around.

Nevertheless, even if one sticks with the tradition of Asian-influenced poetry that I have already introduced, not much digging is needed to expose connections between American writing and American power in the Far East. Take, for example, Pound's great influence, Ernest Fenellosa. Raised in Salem, Massachusetts, Fenellosa went to Japan in 1878 to teach political economy and philosophy at the University of Tokyo, which the Meiji government had established the year before as part of its furious drive to modernize; his students, as Van Wyck Brooks wrote, "looked to Fenellosa to transplant a Western wisdom useful to Japan" (4). Clearly the more important transplant occurred years later in London. My point is that transpacific relations are thus more circuitous, and much more determined by power, than one imagined: had Japan not been threatened by Western imperialism and sought to modernize, there would have been no Fenellosa notebook and thus no Cathay, and as a result Chinese poetry would have had less impact on sinophilic writers like Rexroth.

Although interrupted by the war, these cultural influences--embodied in just a handful of key proselytizers--continued to move in both directions. For instance, the foremost representative of Zen, D. T. Suzuki, after studying at the same institution where Fenellosa had taught (by then renamed the Tokyo Imperial University), returned along the path of the American by becoming a visiting professor in the U.S., most famously at Columbia in the 1950s, when the Beats first encountered him. (A drunken Kerouac visited him in New York in 1958.) Furthermore, as Robert Sharf argued in an important essay, "Zen and Japanese Imperialism," Suzuki's idea of Zen was largely of Western origin; in addition, Suzuki himself something of an East-West hybrid, having lived as a young man in an Illinois town while working for--and being hugely influenced by--a transplanted German thinker named Paul Carus.

After the war, such relations were constrained by American power, which unilaterally shaped the possibilities of travel and foreign residence by propping up dictators in some countries while fostering democracy in others. Snyder, for example, who greatly admired Suzuki and became a serious student of Zen, spent the late 1950s and the 1960s traveling back and forth between California and Japan. Obviously, Snyder could adopt this lifestyle only because the U.S. had occupied Japan in 1945, created a space for civil society, and supported economic development, which by the 1960s was making the country rich. In a way, there was no where else for a foreign student of Buddhism to go. In other parts of what Bruce Cumings calls the "archipelago of empire," such as Taiwan and South Korea, literature was censored, civil society was suppressed, and foreigners were surveilled.

My last figure in this sketch is the Englishman R. H. Blyth, whose four-volume Haiku (1949-1952) got the haiku movement going in the West. Blyth, another expatriate academic, arrived in Japan in 1937, was interned during the war, and afterward assisted both MacArthur's staff and the Imperial Household. (He is buried beside Suzuki.) In the 1950s, his popularizing treatments of Japanese poetry and "Eastern Culture," like Suzuki's books on Zen, found a receptive audience among American readers. As we begin to turn to poetry, it is worth asking why.

Clearly one reason for the haiku's popularity was its apparent similarity to imagist poetry. Amy Lowell, who in 1915 began editing anthologies of imagism (or "Amygism" as Pound

called it), wrote haikus and collaborated with a Chinese translator named Florence Ayscough in the 1920s. Lowell's interest in Asian literature was sparked not only by Pound but also by her older brother Percival, who had known Fenellosa in Japan and had written popular books about the Far East in the 1880s and 1890s. By the 1950s, the New Criticism was making sure that imagism and modernist poetry in college English curricula. And so in the 1960s, as a significant number of New Critically educated American poets began to take jobs in the expanding American universities, haiku presented itself as a form which had modernist credentials but was also easy to write and even easier to teach.

A more interesting reason for the haiku's American success, however, was undoubtedly postwar bohemians' interest in "Asian spirituality." Haiku not only present vivid imagery but they also, at least for those inclined to think in such terms, offer Zen moments of perception: serene, undistracted, and somehow awakened to the reality of things. This notion of Zen as "pure subjectivity" that "utterly transcends discursive thought," was, as Sharf shows, in fact borrowed by Suzuki and others from phenomenology (via Japanese commentaries on Heidegger and Husserl). It was deployed in prewar Japan to convince the Japanese that they were "racially and/or culturally inclined to experience the world more directly than the peoples of other nations." After the war, these dubious ideas were imported by the United States and other Western countries and could be simply appropriated by anyone who wanted to find in "Asian culture" a more authentic spirituality, a spirituality "rooted in an experience of oneness with all things."

Almost overnight, then, a religion that before 1945 had been synonymous with samurais and bushidō became associated with peace and compassion. So too, wartime stereotypes of the Japanese as subhuman aggressors were replaced by postwar stereotypes of spiritual, pacifistic people who had deep insights to offer the materialistic West. In a country like the U.S., which after 1950 had committed itself to huge military expenditures and permanent readiness for war, it is not hard to understand the appeal of such stereotypes. Nevertheless, they are stereotypes, and despite the arrival of millions of Asian immigrants after the mid-1960s, which ought to have demystified the East once and for all, they continue to infect American literary attitudes toward Asian-derived literary forms.

To take a trivial example, the editor of a late 1990s anthology of American "haibun" poems says in his introduction that Kerouac was correct when, in his novel The Dharma Bums (1958), he wrote that "the oriental poets" had composed "perfect gems of haikus" because they were "going along fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices of fanciness of expression" (60). "As Kerouac's narrator suggests," the anthologist says, "one must have an oriental consciousness in order to receive experience like a child" (60). The ignorance of statements like this have a kind of overdetermined causality, blending Beat fantasies, Zen propaganda, and racist notions of the "oriental mind," along with the American counterculture and therapeutic movements.

I want to stick with the anthologist a moment longer, however, because despite his confusion about literature, culture, and religion he does accurately sketch the basic characteristics of the so-called haibun, which is the form that Hass's poem is written in, too. Basically, the haibun (俳文) is a hybrid poetic form in which a passage of prose is followed by a haiku. Its source in Japanese literature is Oku no hosomichi, the famous travel journal of the seventeenth-century poet Matsuo Bashō, but, like the haiku, the haibun was borrowed and transformed by poets in the West, and today it is as much an American form as it is Japanese. The anthologist explains that whereas a haiku is a "moment of unexplained emotion," a haibun "offers us a

narrative of the process of arriving at a given revelation"; a haibun, he says, is a "narrative of an epiphany" (74).

We can make this point less fuzzy by saying that the prose part of the haibun puts a discursive framework around the purely imagistic content of the haiku without which the haiku's meaning remains elusive. Here it is worth noting that, according to Masao Miyoshi, Japanese writers, including Bashō in his travel diary, have traditionally sought to "document the circumstances in which a poem was conceived, written, and read" (121). The prose part of the haibun situates and "documents" the purely poetic part. I am tempted to say that this hybrid form reads itself. In any case, the prose performs on the poem an operation that is similar to the historicist reading that I began this essay by describing.

It is easy to see why a poet like Hass, who is known for his essays and for his experiments in prose-like poetry (especially in Human Wishes [1989]), might try his hand at a haibun. Perhaps a more immediate reason, though, was his desire to write of travel as Bashō did, documenting the circumstances of poetic composition. That the form is East Asian adds another impetus, for the travel described in "On Visiting the DMZ at Panmunjom" is to the site where the Korean armistice was signed in 1953. That year could serve more or less as the moment when the present-day configuration of power in the Pacific was first locked in place. The poem thus records a trip from one side of the Pacific to the other which could also be seen as a return to Year Zero. Embodying this movement in a form that is itself the product of transcultural influences could be seen as a sign of cultural understanding.

After all, don't we know more today? Haven't the democracy and human rights movements in East Asia, China's entry into the world economy, the successful assimilation of millions of Asian immigrants in the U.S., and the digital communications revolution, not to mention two wars on the continent, helped to re-orient American writers intellectuals toward the other side of the Pacific and taught them to pay attention? Wouldn't it be quite plausible today for academics to begin teaching courses on "Pacific Culture," just as they do on "Western Civilization"? L.A. gangsta rap, Northwestern grunge, Japanese manga, Korean TV dramas, Taiwanese film: surely such mass cultural products, at least, circulate within the same sphere. Surely the citizens of America's client states, satellites, and military dependencies, when they compare notes, find much in common.

Hass, however, is not optimistic about this sort imaginative flexibility and openness. Like others poems in Time and Materials, the haibun's opening prose passage focuses on war. Its tone is matter-of-fact: "The human imagination does not do very well with large numbers," he begins, running through casualty statistics (e.g., "A million South Koreans died, four-fifths of them civilians") and deciding that, "There is no evidence that human beings have absorbed these facts . . ." before restating his opening assertion: "It / may be the sheer number of bodies that is hard to hold in mind" (82). The poem then shifts from the mental accounting of dead bodies to the poet's own situation in Korea, but this shift only confirms his sense that, from the point of view of power, he and the others tourists are nothing more than bodies themselves:

That

is perhaps why I felt a slight onset of nausea as we moved from the civilian bus to the military bus at Panmunjom. The young soldiers had been trained to do their jobs and they carried out the transfer of our bodies, dressed for summer in the May heat, with precision and dispatch that seemed slightly theatrical. They were young men.

They wanted to be admired. I found it very hard to describe to myself what I felt about them, whom we had made our instrument.

The poet's nausea is his reaction not only to power's typical treatment of human beings, which is to see them as physical "instruments," but also to the fact that as American he himself is complicit in such degradation.

When the poem moves to its haiku conclusion, then, the reader understands that its context is modern history, the nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus wanted to awaken. And it is precisely the displacement of the American poet from the empire's center to its periphery that allows history to enter the poem. Ultimately, I think Hass is entertaining the idea that American poems' continued reliance on a modernist poetics of immediate revelation, that is, of making something--an image or a word--appear to be present in a moment of time that is outside of history, makes them complacent about and leads them to ignore actual circumstances. American poetry is, as a result, more than a little unreal or cut off, like egrets in the DMZ:

The flurry of white between the guard towers
 --river mist? a wedding party?
 is cattle egrets nesting in the willows.

The "human imagination" may be well suited to creating and consuming images, but if poetry is actually to reflect on its conditions, it needs another kind of faculty, something closer to discursive reason. The poetic apparatus of the haibun is well-designed to make that need evident.

In conclusion, whether or not it is possible to historicize the present, if Hass's example is at all meaningful there seems to be new effort in American poetry to try, either through formal and stylistic means or through actual travel to foreign countries, to put American poetic conventions into context, a project that must ultimately entail seeing American poetry as a regional and highly particular art with plenty of quirks, prejudices, and blind spots, rather than as the leading edge of a universalist art form.

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