

"This is the best book on Japanese haiku available for the Westerner. In many ways, also, it is the best book on Japanese poetry in general."

— Mainichi Daily News

野草  
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KENNETH YASUDA

# JAPANESE HAIKU



Its Essential Nature and History





# The Japanese Haiku



# The Japanese Haiku

*by*

KENNETH YASUDA

TUTTLE PUBLISHING  
BOSTON • RUTLAND, VERMONT • TOKYO

This edition published in 2001 by Tuttle Publishing, an imprint of Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., with editorial offices at 364 Innovation Drive, North Clarendon, VT 05759 U.S.A

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 57-8795

ISBN: 978-1-4629-0199-9

Distributed by

North America  
Tuttle Publishing  
Distribution Center  
Airport Industrial Park  
364 Innovation Drive  
North Clarendon, VT 05759-9436  
Tel: (802) 773-8930  
Tel: (800) 526-2778  
Fax: (802) 773-6993

Japan  
Tuttle Publishing Japan  
Yaekari Building 3rd Floor, 5-4-12  
Osaki Shinagawa-ku,  
Tokyo 141-0032  
Tel: 81 (03) 5437 0171  
Fax 81 (03) 5437 0755

Asia Pacific  
Berkeley Books Pte. Ltd.  
61 Tai Seng Avenue, #02-12  
Singapore 534167  
Tel: (65) 6280 1330  
Fax: (65) 6280 6290

05 04 03 02 01 00 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

To  
Gedatsukongō





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## FOREWORD

IT HAS BEEN SAID that every age produces its Shakespeare. If this be true, it follows that every age has its own unique poetry—its own peculiar emotional stance—and, whatever else may be expected of poetry, it is generally agreed that it should communicate the feelings of its age. Just how these feelings are to be communicated has been a point of strong issue between generations. The generation of Pope and Dryden found Shakespeare to be a barbarian of singular but wasted talent. Our own generation generally finds the Victorians to be uncongenial reading. We feel betrayed by the bright optimism and professed realism of the nineteenth century, and in our resentment often claim its poetry to be bankrupt. Modern Western poetry clearly records this revolt. In this milieu, it would seem that the Japanese haiku has its best opportunity of being understood and appreciated in the West. For modern poetry and haiku share very basic tenets, as Dr. Yasuda demonstrates so clearly in the pages that follow. Our generation in the West has the opportunity, as it has never had before, of reaching a deep and fundamental understanding with that part of the East which Japan represents, perhaps not only in poetry, but in the wider realization of common humanity. The temper of present-day America has much that can find close kinship with Japanese temperament and culture.

It has been my good fortune to have journeyed to Japan, for periods of varying length, more than a dozen times since 1927. Each time I have been impressed increasingly by not only the superb natural beauty of the country, which is something easily grasped, but also by its great artistic achievements. The realization has grown that these achievements are not things of the past, to be seen only in museums and galleries, but form a vital living part of the life of the Japanese people. This art has grown out of that life and continues to be an active part of it.

Each time that I have been a guest in a Japanese home this truth has been further demonstrated. My host shows me some particularly fine painting, recites poetry, or writes in "sumi" a verse for me in incomparable calligraphy that portrays a three-line poems in striking, fluid design. In this and other ways, my host and his family carry me a little way into the living spirit of Japanese art.

This book by Dr. Yasuda, while ostensibly about haiku, in reality penetrates deeply into the totality of this living spirit of Japan. It deals with those aspects which have produced and maintained haiku into the present day. The important key to understanding comes with the realization that in Japanese art one strives always for the absolute. Of the absolute there is no question of degree; it is either attained or lost. Most often, to be sure, it is not attained, but it is the constant striving toward and awareness of that high goal which gives strength and vitality to this living aesthetic spirit which has so impressed me in Japan. It is the failure to understand that which has led some Western critics to claim that *The Book of Tea*, for example, is nothing but exaggerated bombast.

It is this living aesthetic spirit which makes of each trip to Japan a challenging experience. An understanding of this spirit is one of the most valuable contributions that Japan can make

to my country. Any book which can give even an inkling of the nature and aliveness of this aesthetic life in Japan performs a most valuable function. Dr. Yasuda has achieved this in his original approach to the problem of haiku.

—ROBERT B. HALL

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK WAS originally submitted to Tokyo University as a doctoral thesis in 1955 under the title *On the Essential Nature and Poetic Intent of Haiku*. It represents a formal presentation of material—a part of which first appeared in the introduction to my collection of haiku, *A Pepper Pod*—that is the culmination of an interest in haiku dating from many years ago.

I am very deeply indebted to many people for encouraging me to pursue that interest and for their help in clarifying my thinking and poetic practice. Among them are Masao Kume and Kyoshi Takahama in Japan; John Gould Fletcher, Clark Ashton Smith, Babette Deutsch, Mark Van Doren, and George Savage in America. Among Japanese scholars, I should like to acknowledge the great help received from Dr. Yutaka Tatsuno, Dr. Senichi Hisamatsu, and Dr. Isoji Asō, the latter two of whom were kind enough to read the original outline and offer many valuable suggestions; from Dr. Shigeru Nambara, Dr. Shintaro Suzuki, Dr. Naoshiro Tsuji, Dr. Takeshi Saitō and Mr. Kinichi Ishikawa, whose heartening encouragement was so generously given. Thanks are also due to Dr. Robert B. Hall for his kind foreword and thoughtful suggestions, and to Mr. Noboru Takahashi for his help in proofreading and with the

many troublesome details connected with the actual publication. Above all I must acknowledge the most fundamental debt of all to the late Archbishop Seiken Okano and Bishop Eizan Kishida.

For permission to quote from the works listed, I wish to make acknowledgment to the following: George Allen and Unwin Limited for *Mysticism and Logic* by Bertrand Russell and for *Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille* by Benedetto Croce; Brandt and Brandt for "Dirge without Music" from *The Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, published by Harper and Brothers; the executors of the James Joyce Estate for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, published by Jonathan Cape Limited; Constable and Company Limited for *The Poetical Works of George Meredith*; the John Day Company, Inc., for *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, edited by Arthur E. Christy; Faber and Faber Limited for *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Selected Essays*, and *Selected Prose* by T. S. Eliot; Harcourt, Brace and Company for *History of American Poetry* by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska; the Harvard University Press for *Philosophy in a New Key* by Suzanne K. Langer; William Heinemann Limited for *The Essence of Aesthetic* by Benedetto Croce; Henry Holt and Company, Inc., for "The Runaway" from *New Hampshire* by Robert Frost, copyright 1923 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc., and copyright 1951 by Robert Frost, and for "Chicago" from *Chicago Poems* by Carl Sandburg, copyright 1916 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc., and copyright 1944 by Carl Sandburg; Houghton Mifflin Company for "Flame Apples" from *Pictures of the Floating World* by Amy Lowell, and for *Some Imagist Poets*, edited by Amy Lowell; Intercultural Publications, Inc., for "Contemporary Japanese Art," by Chisaburo F. Yamada and James Laughlin, published in *Perspective of Japan*, the January 1955 supplement to *Atlantic Monthly*; Longmans Green and Company Limited for *The Psychologist Looks at Art* by

Louis Danz; Macmillan and Company Limited, London, for *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* by A. C. Bradley and for *Aesthetic as a Science of Expression and General Linguistic* by Benedetto Croce; Macmillan Company for *Science and the Modern World* by Alfred North Whitehead; John Murray Limited for *Japanese Literature* by Donald Keene, in their series "The Wisdom of the East"; New Directions for selection "XXI" from *Spring and All—I-XXVIII* by William Carlos Williams; copyright 1948 and 1951 by William Carlos Williams; Open Court Publishing Company for *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity* by Ernst Cassirer; G. P. Putnam's Sons for *Art as Experience* by John Dewey, copyright 1934; Henry Regnery Company for *Achievement in American Poetry 1900-1950* by Louise Bogan; Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited for *Speculations* by T. E. Hulme; Charles Scribner's Sons for *Aesthetic Quality* by Stephen Pepper and for *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* by Allen Tate; The Society of Authors and Dr. John Masefield, O. M., for "Sea Fever"; the Stanford University Press for *Imagism and the Imagists* by Glenn Hughes; the State University of Iowa for *Rhythmic Verse* (Humanistic Study, Vol. 3, No. 2) by J. H. Scott; the University of Hawaii Press for *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, edited by Charles A. Moore; the University of North Carolina Press for *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* by Cleanth Brooks; the University of Oklahoma Press for *The Heel of Elobim: Science and Values in Modern American Poetry* by Hyatt Howe Waggoner, copyright 1950 by the University of Oklahoma Press; Vision Press Limited for *Form in Modern Poetry* by Herbert Read; *Partisan Review* for "William Shakespeare and the Horse with Wings" by George Barker; the *Saturday Review* for "The Proper Pose of Poetry," by Archibald MacLeish; Babette Deutsch for *Poetry in Our Time*; Harold G. Henderson for *The Bamboo Broom*; Ezra Pound for his writings.

Acknowledgments are also due to the following: Shin



## Acknowledgments

Asano for *Haiku Zenshi no Kenkyū*; Isoji Asō for *Haishumi no Hattatsu*; Taizū Ebara for *Haikai Seishin no Tankyū* and for *Haikaishi no Kenkyū*; Etsurō Ide for *Meiji Taisho Haikushi*; Chikara Igarashi for *Kokka no Taisei Oyobi Hattatsu*; Masao Kume for *Bikushō Zuyihitsu*; Tamio Kuribayashi for *Haiku to Seikatsu*; Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai for the *Manyōshū*; Asaji Nose, Kusadao Nakamura, and Isoji Asō for *Renga, Haikai, Haiku, Senryū*; Shinobu Origuchi for *Origuchi Shinobu Zenshū*; Seki Osuga for *Otsuji Hairon-shū*; Masakazu Sasa for *Rengashi Ron*; Kyoshi Takahama for "Haiku no Tsukuri Kata" in *Arusu Fujin Kōsa*; Yūkichi Taketa for *Manyōshū Zenchūshaku*; Yoshio Yamada for *Renga Gaisetsu*; Kenkichi Yamamoto for *Junsui Haiku*; Kiyoshi Yuyama for *Nihon Shiika Inritsu Gaku*.

Special thanks are due to Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., for permission to reprint selections from my book *A Pepper Pod*.

Finally, I should like to thank the publishers of the present book, the Charles E. Tuttle Company, for their part in making this publication possible. In all fairness to them, I should add that, in order to bring the book out as soon as possible, I myself have assumed full responsibility for the editorial style and the proofreading.

Kotaki-en, Tokyo, February 1, 1957

—KENNETH YASUDA

## INTRODUCTION

MANY QUESTIONS relating to the status of the haiku in English are put to me by interested Japanese each time I come to Japan. On the surface these questions seem simple and insignificant; however, I feel strongly that they represent a basic problem if we consider them in the light of world poetry, especially at present when the East and West have met and the two worlds are more than eager to understand each other. Here are a few representative inquiries:

"Do the English-speaking people understand haiku?"

"Do they write haiku in English?"

"Do the English haiku have any form?"

Such questions represent a problem to be solved not only by the Japanese or by English-speaking poetry lovers alone. For the problem relates to the larger one of mutual understanding among peoples. Considered in this light, these questions on haiku give us a dynamic sense of the impact of the problem of understanding, for they seem to posit some fundamental difference in the understanding of poetry between East and West. There is no such difference fundamentally. The reason for the popularity of haiku in Japan, as a classic as well as a literature of the people, holding their hearts with its irresistible charms and dignity with as much force today as in the past, lies in its nature and in the aesthetic principles that govern it.

These same reasons, I feel, are enough to insure the possibilities of haiku in English, as popular with its audience as the Japanese haiku has been in Japan. For it is my contention that the underlying aesthetic principles that govern the arts are the same for any form in Japanese or English.

Along these lines, Donald Keene has pointed out that the words of the dramatist Chikamatsu written about 1720 are curiously echoed by Ford Madox Ford in 1930. Chikamatsu wrote thus of the creation or rendering of emotion: "There are some who, believing that pathos is essential to a puppet play, make frequent use of such expressions as 'it was touching' in their writing, or who when chanting the lines do so in voices thick with tears. This is foreign to my style. I take pathos to be entirely a matter of restraint. . . . When one says of something which is sad that it is sad, one loses the implications, and in the end, even the impression of sadness is slight. It is essential that one not say of a thing that 'it is sad,' but that it be sad of itself."<sup>1</sup> Ford, through his contact not only with the Imagist group but through Joseph Conrad with the nineteenth-century French writers represented by Flaubert and Gautier,<sup>2</sup> voices a similar opinion: "Poetry is a matter of rendering, not comment. You must not say: 'I am so happy'; you must behave as if you were happy."<sup>1</sup> Such instances of similar views shared by both Japanese and Occidental artists and critics are most numerous; many examples will be given in the following pages. They demonstrate the common ground of arts separated by time and great differences in culture. Consequently, I hope that a systematic study on the possibilities of haiku in English may have a significance beyond that which first appears probable.

My purpose, then, is to try to see and explore the possibilities of haiku in English by analyzing its nature and its unifying aesthetic principles so that we can understand it; through

such analysis it may be shown that haiku, far from being an esoteric, purely Japanese form, incomprehensible to the West, shares common ground with all art in an important and significant manner. It is also my hope to give one answer to the question that Harold Gould Henderson raises in the following passage: "What the final English haiku-form will be, I do not know. It may be two lines or three or four; it may be rimed or unrimed. But I am sure that whatever it is, it will be a definite form, *for a haiku is a poem and not a dribble of prose.*"<sup>3</sup> That definite form, to my mind, can satisfactorily follow the same general pattern in English as in Japanese in regard to the number and length of lines, finding within this framework variations and subtleties as multiple as the poet will need for his vision. Indeed, as will appear from the discussion, I feel that this pattern in English is so fitting a vehicle for the kind of experience that is a haiku that to me at this stage any other vehicle seems completely inadmissible. Many of the principles of Japanese prosody governing the successful use of this form will be enlightening to the poet in English, as I hope to show in the following pages. He will find that the haiku, like the sonnet in its time, can enjoy great popularity.

Just as the sonnet, when introduced by Sir Philip Sidney into English through his translations, retained its original form, affording such insight to poets that eventually they produced masterpieces in English, so that we know the form as ours, the haiku too can become acclimated, once it is understood. For it is not yet understood, in spite of the fact that the Imagists knew of tanka and haiku as early as 1909 and felt that they were influenced by them, as Glenn Hughes has pointed out: "A poet of [John Gould Fletcher's] wide interests and experimental tendencies could hardly be expected to escape the influence of the Japanese. Ezra Pound felt this influence, and so did Amy Lowell. So have many of their contemporaries