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# Japanese and English Poetry Some Similarities and Differences

EDWARD L. HART\*

In a very true sense, poetry does not and cannot communicate experience; rather, it is the mechanical means whereby the reader creates the poetic experience in his own mind as he reads. A poem, then, is like a catalyst, causing fragments of forms, sense experience, and ideas to fuse in the patterns of the poet's words, in much the way that crystal forms are produced in various chemical fluxes under certain conditions of heat and pressure. It is quite obvious that if the reader has had no past experiences, there can be, for him, no poem.

The way in which the poet, as alchemist, transmutes the lead of common experience into refined gold of poetic experience is called technique. And, says Mark Schorer, if we are not talking about the achieved content produced by means of technique, we are not talking about art at all.<sup>1</sup> Most readers will be familiar with the techniques of English poetry; my purpose here is to see if any of these known techniques can be found in Japanese poetry, and, perhaps more important, to see if the Japanese have additional ways of producing emotional response not known in English poetry.

The first thing that must strike anyone who begins a comparison of any such widely divergent literatures as those in

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *Hudson Review* (1948); reprinted in *The Modern Critical Spectrum*, eds. Gerald and Nancy M. Goldberg (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 70.

English and in Japanese is not that they are so completely different but that they are so similar. These similarities are not at first apparent, but they are basic and seem to multiply as one goes deeper.

One might begin by observing that there seems to have been a force operating upon both English and Japanese-speaking peoples pushing them toward some kind of expression that we can call poetic. Why this should be so is beyond the scope of this essay. But within its scope is this question: Why did line length become so important a unit of form in the great poetry of the past of both traditions? This, it seems to me, is more significant as a similarity than is the difference: the fact, for example, that Japanese lines are measured by syllables and English lines by feet. Even here the difference is more apparent than real, for with great frequency the iambic pentameter line, the most common line of English poetry, contains the standard ten syllables, sometimes even the monosyllabic feet that Pope complained about:

And ten low words oft creep in one dull line.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the iambic pentameter line may be varied (by a feminine ending, for example), so irregularities in the lines of the *tanka* often occur by the addition of extra syllables and less frequently by an omission. Neither is it very significant that rime does not play much of a part in Japanese poetry, probably owing to the superabundance of riming syllables available; rime was not a part, either, in the oldest English poetry, and the blank verse of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Frost, just to mention four poets from various periods, testifies that rime is not an essential element of English poetry.

The *tanka* is, probably, more like the sonnet than any other English form. And here is another interesting comparison. The two parts of the sonnet, the octet and the sestet, are often counterbalanced over the fulcrum of a crisis. This kind of structure is likewise apparent in the *tanka*, or *waka*, institutionalized in the Japanese poem in the double meaning of the pivot word. The first seventeen syllables often make a statement and the remaining fourteen, a counterstatement. And, of course, this development took place without the direct influence of Aristotle's concept of beginning, middle, and end to

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<sup>2</sup>*An Essay on Criticism*, I, 347.

guide it. The syllables of the modern *tanka* are divided into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables for the first part and into two lines of seven syllables each for the second part. In the courtly period, the first part was often written as a letter by a lover, and the last part would be added by his mistress. Also, a kind of chain-verse game or poetry contest called the *renga* developed from the *tanka*; one person would begin the verse and others continued it. Eventually, the first part of the *tanka* by itself (three lines of five, seven, and five syllables) came to be recognized as a separate form, known to us now as *haiku*.

Beyond these similarities of mechanically numbered lines is something more, of course. To use Robert Frost's tennis analogy, the mechanical form of a poem is simply the court upon which the game of poetry is played. All kinds of dodging, maneuvering, and alternation of fast and slow drives are possible within the set limits of play. Variety in both the *haiku* and the sonnet may be obtained by similar means. One pattern may be superimposed upon another. The pattern of meaning may not end with a line but run beyond it. In English, we should call this enjambment. The same kind of effect is produced in a Japanese poem when one idea ends and a new one begins in the middle of a line. The line in which the turning point of meaning occurs may be varied from poem to poem, or at least the position within the line may vary, as Pope carefully varied the position of the caesura from line to line. Other patterns may similarly be posed one upon the other in the poetry of both languages: for example, colloquial upon formal, or figurative upon literal.

To pursue the matter of similarities a bit further, before going into differences, I shall look briefly at sound, which is, of course, an essential element in both poetic traditions. When first studying Japanese, I was struck by the notion that there might be some sounds so fundamentally related to ideas that we should find an almost universal manifestation of the relationship. I shall illustrate this notion by just one suggested example, the extremely frequent presence of the *n* sound in words connoting or denoting negation. The *n* sound is in negatives of many of the European languages: all the way from *no*, *not*, and *never* in English to *nein*, *kein*, and *nicht* in German. And what but the *n* sound in *nyiet* has made that Russian

word so ominous and convincing? By way of comparison, a few Japanese negative verb endings are *-nai*, *-nashi*, *-nakatta*, and *-masen*. Perhaps there is more than coincidence here.

Onomatopoeia plays an important part in Japanese poetry, as it does in English. Writers of poetry in English have felt free to use onomatopoeic words when they felt like it: e.g., Poe's "tintinabulation" and Herrick's "liquefaction." The Japanese language abounds in words that exist solely, or almost solely, for sound. There is, for instance, a children's song about the rain:

Ame, ame, fure, fure kasan no,  
Janome no omukai ureshii na;  
Picha-picha, chapu-chapu, ran, ran, ran.

This is simply about a mother coming with an umbrella in the rain to meet a child: "Rain, rain, fall, fall; Mother's umbrella with the bull's-eye design; aren't we happy!" The remainder of the poem, the last line, is made of words that are there mostly for their sound. *Picha-picha* has a dictionary meaning: a lapping or splashing sound, but in this song it might correspond to our *plunk-plunk* or *plop-plop*. And *chapu-chapu* has the sound and rhythm of children's wooden *geta* clomp-clomping through the rainy street. Notice that *chapu* is a better sound than *clomp*, however, which has a dry sound. *Chapu* is the sound of the *geta* swishing through the water and then making a hard but somewhat muffled sound on the stones beneath. *Ran, ran, ran* suggests the skipping movements and the playfulness of the child.

The occurrence of onomatopoeia in Japanese poetry, however, is not limited to children's songs. Here, for instance, is a *haiku* of Buson (1716-1783), one of the four great *haiku* poets. And incidentally, this poem is irregular in that it has sixteen rather than seventeen syllables.

Here and there	Ochikochi	をちこち
There and here,	Ochikochi to utsu	をちこちと打つ
Beating the fulling blocks. <sup>3</sup>	Kinuta kana.	碓かな

<sup>3</sup>The transcription and translation of this *haiku* and of those which follow are from R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, 4 vols. (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1947-1952), I, 235; I, 375; II, 333; I, 378. A few of my exceptions to Blyth's readings will be referred to as they appear hereafter.

In the onomatopoeic words *ochikochi-ochikochi* is reproduced the slapping sound of the cloth beating the fulling blocks. And naturally the sound of the rest of the words contributes to the overall effect also.

Onomatopoeia has many more subtle possibilities than those outlined so far. Sound can suggest states of mind and abstract emotional responses. For instance, in the lines ending Carl Sandburg's "Limited": "I ask a man in the smoker where he is going, and he answers: 'Omaha,' " the repeated *o* sounds suggest a stretching out of time and distance, fading away in the last word *Omaha*. Similar subtleties can be conveyed in Japanese poetry. For example, here is a *haiku* by Taigi:

Not a single stone	Inu wo utsu	犬を打つ
To throw at the dog,—	Ishi no sate nashi <sup>4</sup>	石のさてなし
The wintry moon.	Fuyu no Tsuki.	冬の月

The combination of *u* sounds and the oppressively prickling consonants *t* and *k* contribute to the sense of emptiness, immobility, and futility in the scene. Even the absence of a predication contributes to the imagery: the Zen state of personal annihilation. It is a "not even a stone to throw at the dog winter moon," the whole thing building up toward the winter moon as symbol of cold and empty space. This piling up of attributive adjectival phrases before the noun reminds one of Hopkins, e.g., from "The Windhover": "the rolling level underneath him steady air," all modifying air.

Although the similarities are impressive regarding the ways in which poetic meaning can be conveyed in Japanese and in English, there are, of course, differences. And it is these differences that I wish to examine now. Conventional English poetry employs meter: the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, and Japanese poetry does not. This, it seems to me, is the most fundamental difference. Quite obviously some rhythmical effects possible in English poetry are not possible in Japanese. For instance, the "sprung rhythm" of Hopkins, the contrapuntal effect produced by displacing an accented syllable with an unaccented one and the reverse, can-

<sup>4</sup>For "sate" read "hate."

not be achieved in a language that has no metrical pattern to begin with. Conversely, it would appear axiomatic to say that there are effects possible in a nonmetrical poetry that are not possible in one that employs meter. The lack of meter, for example, might contribute, as in the poem about the winter moon, to the sense of uninterrupted nothingness. There is, as a matter of historical fact, a strong relationship between Zen and the development of the *haiku*. The recurring accents in the English language are, in their regular recurrence, like footsteps, toward something. Any marking of space, at any rate, makes it a void no longer. Perhaps this is part of the reason why there is no significant existentialist poetry in English: English rhythm precludes it by the very way in which its accentual beat marches forward. I shall not push this idea too far, but perhaps this is related also to that quality of character called in English a "bulldog determination."

I wish, in conclusion, to illustrate an impressive way Japanese has of conveying meaning—a way not open to English, or open in only a very crude way. The method I am referring to is the conveying of meaning through linear representation—through an imitation of the forms of nature in pictures. English can certainly go only a limited distance in this direction. It is true that Herbert has a poem about an altar in the shape of an altar, and Dylan Thomas has a prayerful poem in the shape of the beads of a rosary, but much beyond this (or maybe even this) is tomfoolery of the kind Dryden satirized in "Mac Flecknoe":

Leave writing Plays, and chuse for thy command  
Some Peaceful Province in Acrostick Land.  
There thou maist wings display and Altars raise,  
And torture one poor word ten thousand ways. (11. 205-208)

The things the Japanese poet can do with pictorial suggestions, by contrast, are subtle and varied because of the nature of the language. It is true that only a limited number of Chinese characters have an actual pictorial significance, but the poet can make an extremely good use of the resources he possesses.

To understand the kind of poetic suggestiveness I am discussing now, one needs, of course, to see the poem as well as hear it. My first example comes from Buson:

A great fall of snow	O yuki to	大雪と
Just as they are shutting <sup>5</sup>	Nari keru seki no	なりけり關の
The gates of the barrier.	Tozashidoki.	戸ざし時

The third Chinese character in this *haiku* is *seki* (關). The essential radical (門) of this character is the envelope which by itself means a gate. Expressed pictorially this way, it is an open gate, an aperture through which one might pass. But functioning in the poem it is a closed gate, a barrier. The radical filling the passageway conveys to the eye of the reader a sense of shutness, and the pictorial representation, along with the slow rhythm and heaviness of the sound, conveys a sense of the weight of the barrier and of the snow.

Here is another example, a *haiku* by Kubutsu:

A child gazing at the falling flowers	Kuchi aite	口あいて
With open mouth	Rakka Nagamuru	落花眺むる
Is a Buddha.	Ko wa hotoke.	子は佛

The first character of the poem is the word for mouth. What could one do in English to create an image of an open mouth so effectively just by the appearance of letters on a page? True, a closed mouth would be represented by the same symbol in Japanese; but that would be a denotive meaning only and would not thereby preclude the connotive meanings applicable when the mouth is open, as here.

Perhaps one more example, this a bit more subtle, will suffice, this one from Kyorai:

The water of the lake	Mizuumi no	湖の
Has increased	Mizu masari keru	水まさりけり
In the rains of May. <sup>6</sup>	Satsuki ame.	五月雨

<sup>5</sup>This should have been rendered in the past "were shutting."

<sup>6</sup>Blyth inadvertently translated "Fifth Month" as June.



The Japanese reader recognizes the water radical of the first character ( 氵 ) as soon as he comes to it and knows it to be derived from the character for water ( 水 ). In addition, the sound of the first part of lake, *mizuumi*, is the word for water, repeated later meaning only water. And the last character of the poem, rain, *ame* ( 雨 ), contains a picture of four drops of water in the process of falling from the sky. These three identifications give the Japanese reader a sense of the merging of rain water into lake water, conveying a sense of total unity of all water in a world dominated by water during the rainy season.

This brief introduction may be of some assistance to the lover of English poetry who has admired Japanese poetry from a distance. But, as always, when we stand closer we see more detail. There is no full and complete way to the appreciation of poetry of any language short of learning that language. Still, as I have pointed out, the similarities of effects produced in the two languages are great, and whatever one gains from the literature of another language, the pursuit is worthwhile. Both English and Japanese, in their poetry, are true to the force that causes us to humanize the inhuman world by forcing it through the mind of an artist so that it emerges wearing forever the impress of the mind it has passed through and warming forever the heart of the reader who recognizes and is at home in the great human heart. The poetry of each language uses techniques which vary according to the genius of each language. But both are working toward the same central purpose that has always been the goal of poets: the relating of fragments of things and thoughts into a human whole, a whole that carries the hallmark "Made on Earth by Man."