

Two Very Early Haiku Contests

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The first known haiku contest in the English language appeared in the April 8th, 1899, issue of *The Academy*, a weekly journal printed in London from 1869 to 1915.¹ *The Academy* was a general-purpose, literary periodical that contained book and author news, literary and art biographies, reviews, lists of best-sellers, contests, and occasionally odd bits of literary news such as on one occasion a list of books given as wedding gifts to the Earl and Countess of Crewe. The journal went through several iterations (and editors) and mergers with other journals, at times publishing weekly, semi-monthly, and monthly.

The contest came two weeks after the editors' review of W.G. Aston's *A History of Japanese Literature*. In their review, the editors take Aston a bit to task for his preoccupation with "...the failure of Japanese poets to touch the deeper themes or develop the larger manners..." noting that "... he does not lay quite enough stress on the extraordinary merit of the best in what he has to show." But they assert Aston's authority, so when Aston says that "Japanese poetry is, in short, confined to lyrics, and what, for want of a better word, may be called epigrams. It is primarily an expression of emotion..." they take him at his word. Likewise, they confirm his belief that haiku (what they rightly call 'haikai' at this historical juncture) is simply a tanka "minus its last two phrases." This gives the impression that a haiku is merely a shorter or more efficient tanka.

For examples of haiku, they pull from Aston's translations; including Moritake's famous butterfly haiku and four haiku by Bashō. One of the four is from a historical anecdote on Bashō, which, in the short section of the review that the editors devote to the haiku, takes up half the space.

Travelling in the country [Bashō] came to a spot where a party of rustics were drinking saké and composing the fashionable haikais. They had chosen the full moon for their subject; and taking Basho for a begging Buddhist priest, they urged him, for fun, to contribute. Basho, with feigned reluctance, began:

‘Twas the new moon—

“The new moon! What a fool this priest is!” cried one. “The poem should be about the full moon.” “Let him go on,” said another; “It will be all the more sport.” Basho, undisturbed by the mockery, went on:

‘Twas the new moon!
Since then I waited—
And, lo! To-night!

The rustics were amazed; and, when Basho revealed his identity, apologized for their rudeness to an eminent man, “whose fragrant name was known to the whole world.”

It is an odd anecdote to take up so much space, speaking little to haiku itself; but in fairness to the editors, it takes up nearly equal space in Aston’s short section on haiku—compared to his longer examination of tanka. The other Bashō haiku they cite are:

An ancient pond!
With a sound from the water
Of the frog as it plunges in.

I come aweary,
In search of an inn—
Ah! These wisteria flowers.

'Tis the first snow—
Just enough to bend
The gladiolus leaves!

Aston's extravagant punctuation doesn't help convince the reader that there is more going on in these verses than simple appreciation of nature, if not in an overly enthusiastic way, and might leave the reader to think the Japanese simple-minded. In fact, Aston makes no note of the seasonal component or break, two dominant features of the genre, and while derisive of Japanese poetry in general, he seems to be even harder on the haiku. Two comments from *A History of Japanese Literature*:

To write tolerable Tanka required a technical training, for which the many had neither time nor opportunity, but there was nothing to prevent any one with ordinary cleverness and a smattering of education from composing Haikai.

It would be absurd to put forward any serious claim on behalf of Haikai to an important position in literature.²

The types of contests *The Academy* had previously sponsored were varied. One asked readers to propose a type of physical memorial for a recently deceased author, another for the best translation of Paul Verlaine's "*Chanson d'automne*," while another asked for the list of a dozen books on the shelf of "A middle-aged, unmarried lady, who attends University Extension lectures, subscribes to Mudie's, and lives in a London suburb with a parrot, a Pomeranian dog, and two servants..." As if to partially apologize for the sexism in the last, the follow-up competition noted that a new series of monographs on English writers only included one female writer, George Eliot, and asked readers which other women would be deserving.

Competition 27, which appeared in the April 8th issue, asked for “Haikais,” which they described as “a Japanese form of verse consisting of *three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables respectively, or seventeen syllables in all*” (italics theirs). The reason for their italics was to note that the translations given in “W.G. Aston’s work on Japanese literature [were] loose in construction, and not conforming to the rules... as to syllables.” This was a missed opportunity, and one has to wonder how the history of English-language haiku might have been altered if this difference had been better explored.

After noting that haiku had not been written in English previously, they provided four haiku from their review of Aston as well as rehashed the Bashō anecdote. Additionally, they requested that the haiku reproduce “Japanese lightness and grace...” A prize of one guinea was offered—which in today’s money would be worth roughly one hundred and fifty dollars.

According to the editors, they received entries of nearly two hundred original haiku. If these are not the first English-language haiku ever written, they are close to it. The winner chosen by an unnamed judge—presumably the editors themselves—was R.M. Hansard of Eastbourne, with the haiku:

The west wind whispered,
And touched the eyelids of spring:
Her eyes, Primroses.

The editors were silent on the poem’s merits, except to note that “Spring [was] the favorite subject with our experimentalists.” A few other attempts, the last being rather successful.

A star fell nigh me,
I saw it in the woodland—
Lo, ‘twas a primrose.

Her eyes are the dove's,
Her black locks are the raven's,
But her heart is mine.

I listen at dusk,
To the wind in the poplars;
And dream of the sea

A light rustling stir
In the fall-foliaged tree—
Aha, the squirrel!

Their commentary also makes note of some humorous or satirical attempts, which tells us much of how the form was received by the readership. This may have been on cue from the editors themselves, who noted in the front page of the issue containing the results:

Their eagerness to acclimatize the Haikai, a Japanese form of verse, as will be seen from our Competition page, is... striking. Possibly Haikai-writing may become generally popular, and supply the now neglected ballades, rondeaux and triolets, with a successor. But we fancy not.

As if to confirm that opinion, an original English-language haiku wouldn't be written by a non-Japanese for over a decade.

Another early English-language haiku contest appeared in three issues of *Vanity Fair* in 1915 (August, October, and December). *Vanity Fair* described the judge of the contest as "His Excellency, Kraw Li Ya of the University of Peking."

... the most famous of the small group of Chinese poets known as the Yung Chang school. Of the Shen Si—or landed gentry class—he has devoted his great wealth to traveling and to studying the literatures of other nations. A fanatical adherent of the fallen Emperor, his latter years

have been spent in exile from his native valleys.
He is now passing a few months in New York.
In religion he is a strict Taoist, and is the author
of the politico-mystical romance entitled “Thien
Tao” or “The Way of Heaven”.³

The editors were clearly taking advantage of interest in all things ‘oriental.’ However, the biography was a fiction. Kraw Li was in fact Aleister Crowley, the controversial occultist, ceremonial magician, drug user, and sexual libertine.

Crowley was recently arrived in New York and broke. According to his autobiography, *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, he met *Vanity Fair’s* editor, Frank Crowninshield, at a party and suitably impressed him by accurately guessing many of the guests’ astrological signs.⁴ Whether this is true or not, Crowninshield invited Crowley to write a number of pieces for his magazine, including three on the Japanese hokku—as the haiku was known then. Of Crowley’s 1922 book, *The Diary of Drug Fiend*, Crowninshield would later write that he was “... one of the most extraordinary Britishers—a poet, explorer, mountain climber, an adept in esoteric philosophy—in short a person of so many sides and interests that it is no wonder a legend has been built up around his name...” The feelings were reciprocated. Crowley was “grateful ... for his kindness and patience” and described his benefactor as “the one uniformly pleasant experience of dealing with editors that I can quote.”

The first article appeared in the August issue. It announced the contest and defined the hokku. Crowley’s understanding of the form most likely came from Yone Noguchi’s essay “Hokku” that was interestingly published in the resurrected periodical *The Academy* in 1912⁵ (the essay was reprinted as “What Is a Hokku Poem” in issue 12 of the British literary and art magazine *Rhythm* in 1913).⁶ Indeed, Crowley’s explanation of the hokku, that it contain seventeen syllables, “...should not be alliteration, suggestion, allusion, or epigram...” and that it

“...is a cunningly cut jewel of words... is like a diamond...” is clearly taken from Noguchi’s essay in much the same words. Crowley then proceeds to give an example of “the best ever written.” He presents Noguchi’s translation of Bashō:

On a withered twig
Lo, the crow is sitting there—
Oh, this Autumn eve!

While Crowley doesn’t credit Noguchi with his understanding of hokku, he does share an additional haiku by “my friend Yone Noguchi” as a further example of the form. Whether he and Noguchi were acquainted is unknown. The poem is:

My love’s lengthened hair
Swings o’er me from Heaven’s gate:
Lo! Evening’s shadow!

Crowley’s contribution to his ‘hokku’ definition was metric. He insisted upon the form:

Dactyl—spondee
Spondee—dactyl—spondee
Dactyl—spondee

A dactyl is a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables; and a spondee is two stressed syllables. This format further defines the 5-7-5 form. Yet he closed the article with a “double Hokku” of his own that doesn’t follow his own rules.

Catch me, caress me,
Crush me! Gather a dewdrop—
Star to a system!

God in an atom!
Comets revel around him—
That is a hokku!

Despite the simplistic direction his definition leads, and its emphasis on form, Crowley does get some important points about the haiku right. In discussing Noguchi's haiku he notes that Noguchi "...compared the two impressions..." Similarly, note the clear break after the second lines in the "double hokku" above. Crowley understood the genre's two-part structure. And early in the piece he says that the hokku "...is, in a word—a MOOD." Another way, perhaps, of noting its 'show' not 'tell' aesthetic. Of course, he shrugs off this understanding in his own examples.

Prizes of ten dollars for first place and five dollars for second were offered on the theme: "A young lover, distracted by jealousy, finds himself looking out over New York harbor. The sun is setting. The gigantic buildings and towers of Manhattan are silhouetted against the summer sky."

A modern poet might question the large, narrative theme which seems un-haiku-like, yet in the context of Noguchi's own haiku—unusually lyrical, metaphorical, and full of poetic conceits—it makes sense.

More than five hundred poets submitted poems to the contest according to the second article in the October issue. Crowley claimed to be overwhelmed and humbled by the talented poets, however he then took them to task for not strictly following his metric form, and in some cases not mentioning either the towers or the sunset. Not surprisingly, the poems contained the same lyricism and overblown punctuation as his examples. An example from entrant J.R. Foster:

Monoliths—true love!
Sunset-fury of passion!
What was she thinking?

Crowley finally settled on a poem by M.J. Herzberg, a resident of Newark, New Jersey, as the winner.

Heavenly fingers,
Flushed with delicate blushes,
Tear not my bosom!

A reader, not familiar with the contest theme, would be hard pressed to find it in the winning poem, as there is no mention of harbor or buildings—unless they realized the fingers were stand-ins for the towers. Despite the questionable meter, Crowley justified the award by saying “...in judging hokkus, or indeed any flower of the pen, one must pay due attention to the thought it contains as well as to the form in which it is expressed.”

In view of the response to the contest, another round was offered on a new theme: “A girl in a garden is hesitating between love and duty. She sees a bee alight upon a rose. She decided, influenced by this omen, and expresses her thoughts in a hokku. What does she say?”

The December issue contained the winning poem by Alice Maxwell Appo of New York, New York. Her haiku:

Toiler of ages,
Culling sweetness with labor,
I thy disciple.

While there was no indication from the editors of *Vanity Fair* concerning their feelings on the genre, similar to the contest in *The Academy*, its presence didn't attract much notice in the larger poetic mainstream. This is interesting considering the contests respectively drew two hundred and five hundred entrants.

Notes

¹ Hind, C. Lewis, ed. *The Academy*. London. Online at <https://archive.org/details/academyliteratur56londnuoft/page/418>. Accessed 1/17/20.

² Aston, W.G. *A History of Japanese Literature*. London. Heinemann, 1899.

³ Crowninshield, Frank, ed. *Vanity Fair*. New York.

⁴ Symonds, John and Kenneth Grant, eds. *Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul 1979. Online at <https://hermetic.com/crowley/confessions/index>. Accessed 1/17/20

⁵ Cowper, Cecil, ed. *The Academy*. London. Online at <https://archive.org/details/TheAcademy83/page/n63>. Accessed 1/17/20

⁶ Noguchi, Yone. "What is a Hokku Poem" in *The Academy* Vol. 83 (1912). Online at <https://archive.org/details/TheAcademy83/page/n63>. Accessed 1/17/20