HAIKU LIKE IMAGES IN THE MAINSTREAM POETRY
by Zinovy Vayman

(Transcending Hierarchy of Genres)

There's a nice quote in the current issue of The Brief, the newsletter of the British Haiku Society (www.britishhaikusociety.org), as follows: "The movie's far from perfect, but then neither is the book: if you want perfection, go and read a haiku." Philip Pullman in a Sunday Times interview about his novel Northern Lights (2/12/07).

Thanks to Kaji Aso Studio I received exposure to some Japanese art including haiku. I wrote bad haiku but it seems to me that I was able to see good ones! And I see them not only in haiku paddies but in the textual fields of the so called "mainstream poetry".

Years ago I whisked out haiku from the lines of my favorite writers in Russian. I enjoyed this process.

winter evening
in the book of forgotten poets
an old breadcrumb

The more I tuned into haiku the more I saw certain patterns in their distribution among famous, not so famous and not well known masters of verses and poetic prose of the Russian language.

Besides according to the Russian literary critic Yuri Karabchievsky and an American essayist, poet and translator Anne Carson a small part of the longer text may reflect the main thought, the main idea sufficiently good and sometimes even better than the whole rambling creation.

A well known Japanese author Haruki Murakami said in his Harvard address: “If you want to say something, write a haiku. If you are brimming with more elaboration, write a poem. If you want to share a plethora of the cohesive thoughts, make a short story. Only if you are on the brink of epic discoveries attempt to write a novel”.

2008 Nobel Prize winner Le Clezio confides with us:
“There is no need to envisage the course of the whole life, the whole does not speak;
what matters is detail, a second of a life, but a second so rich with past and future that it tells all one can know about the being."
(Harvard Review of Books, Fall 2008, page 9

In the end of the last century I started to share my observations with the Moscow literati.
In 2001 a full article has been published in the Arion, the most prestigious poetry magazine in Russia.

In a nutshell:
The more famous poet is the higher probability that his columns are "japanned" with three liners making good haiku.
It is easy to see haiku in a good poet’s work.
And of course this conformity is statistical, not absolute.
It is like the American poll—the taller person is the higher his or her salary is.
But it may well be that a short guy becomes a millionaire.
The second trend deals with a time axis. Before the 19th century poetic texts of Europe were poor with haiku-like lines.
In the span of the last 200 years poets produce more haiku-like images than our generation. Poets divided in groups and the mainstream poets, especially young ones, do not use haiku-like imagery, only tidbits of the haikuesque strophes.

Conclusion:
The mainstream poetry is getting rid of haikuish lines in its textual universe.
Haiku movement separates itself from the mainstream avalanche of poesy. By doing so the balance of people, ideas and genre perseveres.
Abandonment of life conveniences, unrequited love and proximity to nature generally give some boost to "haikuishness". However mental anguish does depress this parameter.
Idleness helps to write good haiku-like snippets of stanzas. Good senryu-like humor is mostly born in the cities.
It is also interesting to attempt some forecasts, some futurology.
It seems to me that this divide, this chasm between the haikuists and mainstream poets will continue to exist well beyond 2030 though some poets will manage to cross it. It will happen mostly in the senryu domain.
And now I will share with you (time permitting) some other observations and haiku-like lines of the poets who wrote in English; among them Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and others.

Examples:

Philip Larkin

_towing_
_at her back_
_a huge and birdless silence_

_the figurehead_
_with golden tits_
_arching our way_

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Walt Whitman produced a lot of haiku-like images

Low-hanging moon!
What is that dusky spot
in your brown yellow?

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Wallace Stevens is widely anthologized

among twenty snowy mountains
the only moving thing...
the eye of the blackbird

13 ways of looking at a Blackbird

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all afternoon
it was snowing
and it was going to snow XIII Canto

Ezra Pound

The paired butterflies
are already yellow
with August

The River Merchant’s Wife

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Anne Sexton famous, close to nature

…summer evening
the yellow moths sag
against the locked screens

Lullaby

cold in the air
an aura of ice
and phlegm

The Fury of Sunsets
Charles Bukowski  strong haiku feel in his poems

The ice-cream people  
make me feel good  
inside and out

The Ice-Cream People

eating a watermelon  
I spit our seeds  
and swallow{ed} seeds

Ralph Waldo Emerson  rather  haikuish philosopher

Arrives the snow  
and, driving o’er the fields  
seems nowhere to alight

The Snow-Storm

Philip Levine  haikuish author

down the mountain  
tiny white jump-ups  
hiding underfoot

E.E. Cummings, the most published poet in the Anglo-Saxon world
His published writings prove to be difficult to uncover haiku and maeku in his texts. He is too modern for such a “nonsense”. Still he cannot get rid of the manifestations of the pristine remnants of the world entirely- “the voice of your eyes is deeper than all the roses”.

James Merrill

the mother manatees,  
Brought here as babies  
bring their babies here

And, of course, such a popular “album” poet as Emily Dickinson created tons of haiku-like images in her rhymed verse:

when butterflies  
renounce their dreams, I shall  
but drink the more!
Robert Frost is an absolute haiku champion of the American English poetry:

these watery flowers
from snow that melted
only yesterday.

Spring Pools

Such a stalwart of the English poetry as W.H.Auden has a sprinkle of sasei in his highly admired writings.

the airports almost deserted
and snow disfigured
the public statues

“In Memory of W.B. Yeats”

And Yeats himself is a haiku-rich poet

Dropping
from the veils of the morning
to where the cricket sings

“In Memory of W.B. Yeats”

His anthropomorphic snippets-senryu are much easier to find, though

flash fishlike;
nymphs and satyrs
copulate in the foam

But if we apply a haiku sieve to such a witty guy as Ogden Nash we find an absolute zero of haiku-like lines. His senryu-like three liners are spectacular, though

Here’s a good rule
of thumb:
too clever is dumb.

He is a very humorous writer and it looks like haiku and humor are not step in step. But senryu and humor are very compatible. It is possible to write laugh-inducing senryu with haikuish streaks.

…I suppose
every piece of crabgrass…
would much rather be an azalea,

writes Ogden Nash.

…And every crabgrass will say...
I find this exercise of haiku extraction from longer poems very beneficial. It brings a reader in all of us.

**One student asks his professor.**
**No day without a line? Should I write every day?**
**Oh, no, said professor. You should read every day.**

Let's read some Italian poets:

*Giacomo da Lentini* a 13th Century poet who is believed to have invented the *sonnet.*
*Guido Cavalcanti* (c.1255 - 1300) Tuscan poet, and a key figure in the *Dolce Stil Novo* movement.
*Dante Alighieri* (1265 - 1321) wrote *Divina Commedia,* one of the pinnacles of *Middle Ages* literature.
*Francesco Petrarca* (1304 - 1374) famous for developing the *Petrarchan sonnet* in a collection of 366 poems called *Canzoniere.*
*Ludovico Ariosto* (1474 – 1533) wrote the epic poem *Orlando furioso* (1516).
*Torquato Tasso* (1544 – 1595) wrote *La Gerusalemme liberata* (1580) in which he describes the imaginary combats between Christians and Muslims at the end of the *First Crusade.*
*Ugo Foscolo* (1778 - 1827): best known for his poem "Dei Sepolcri"
*Giacomo Leopardi* (1798 – 1837): his *Canzoni* are highly valued
*Giovanni Pascoli* (1855 - 1912)
*Giuseppe Ungaretti* (1888-1970)
*Cesare Pavese* (1908 – 1950)

The above asterisks' shift shows the relative frequency of haiku-like images in poems.

Let's contemplate Montale's

*fiori di bufore-
 and a blood-red lip
 go stiller still*

Cesare Pavese is very senryuish.

*Nel Parco* is yet in the golden age of the autonomous (influenced by French, German, Spanish and English) poetry embedded with haikuish lines:

*con fili di paglia*
*il tuo viso*
[and I needle your face with bits of straw]"
Come the 19th century and haiku-like images started to proliferate and keep this march unabated for 150 years until the great upheaval of the European WW II. They were not pushed away by some neoturgid poetry but rather by arcane individualistic verse libre supported by academia while the masses turned to the pop songs. Their tidbits of haiku lines are not sustained.

Marco Giovenale (born in 1969) poems show well how quasihaiku disintegrate into snippets of some passing nature observations. Even senryu is vey difficult to mine from his texts.

Gherardo Bortolli (b. 1972) with his non-haikuish non-suggestive statements openly talks about the Anglo-Saxon cultural assertion.

Marina Pizzi (b. 1955) is capable of noticing "this rough hewn fence scarlet in the midday morning" but in her elevated solitude and slaps us with "the tortured hoards of fog".

Vanni Santoni (b. 1978) simply writes prose poems devoid of the parallels to the medieval Japanese sensibilities.

Florida Fusco (b. 1972) "plants nails into earth".

Michele Zaffarano (b. 1970) shares with us some wild phantasies.

Alessandro Broggi (b. 1973) is a Conde Nast Traveller editor! His poems are phantasmagoric and almost no haikai are available in his long poems.

Our very superficial attempt in literary analysis shows that the mainstream poets and haiku poets diverge nowadays. They are more or less separated. Only humorous aphorisms may bring them together (poet laureate of the US Billy Collins comes to mind; he also writes his own haiku). It looks like the way to haiku on the map of such renown magazines as New Yorker, Poetry, New Republic, etc. will be paved by the poets who already made their names in the mainstream poetry.