

Poetics & Psychoanalysis

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Introduction:¹

The *waka*, or the “own language poem,” rose to prominence during the 8th Century and became the dominant poetic form in Japan. Stephan Carter notes that, “poetry was at the very heart of court life, used in witty conversations ... for correspondence between friends, and-perhaps most importantly- for messages between lovers” (1989: 74).

We can think of a poem, as a “wide-awake dream” with both manifest and latent content. The *waka* makes this immediately more evident since in its traditional form, it is stripped down of any conceptual elements or poetic devices such as simile or metaphor and simply shows experience. Such devices can function defensively to split the writer’s/ analysand’s consciousness and the reader’s/analyst’s attention.

Waka has a specific and clearly defined structure. It is composed of five lines with the following syllable count 5/7/5/7/7. It typically centers on natural or seasonal themes and includes a bi-directional “pivot” word or phrase traditionally set in line 3. Here is an example:

*This midnight world,
such a cold and lonely place
from this frost-etched pane--
in solitary vigil,
the moon has crossed the sky.*²

The *waka* brings together objective and subjective experience described just as they are. Explicit and implicit language can be used. In the poem above “frost-etched pane” implies winter. As a homophone to “pain,” pane implies a subjective state. “Cold and lonely” in line 2 explicates a specific feeling. The goal is to bring the reader into the experience. The third line of the *Waka* functions as a “pivot” that serves both to unify and to distinguish the two parts of the poem. The first three lines and the second three lines can stand alone with equal strength.

L1- This midnight world,
L2- such a cold and lonely place
L3- from this frost-etched pane.

L3- From this frost-etched pane
L4- in solitary vigil,
L5- the moon has crossed the sky

Psychoanalysis also relies on processing objective outer states such as the analysand’s spoken language simultaneously with subjective inner experiences in a unified way. This unity has been conceptualized in terms of the transference/ countertransference dynamic as it emerges within the specific structure of the psychoanalytic frame. We might say, following Winnicott, that *waka* functions as a transitional object in that it creates and expresses an “intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or outer (shared) reality ... and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and

to imaginative living . . .” (1971: 14). The following poem exemplifies Winnicott’s “intermediate area of experience” as it weaves together the outer with the inner perceptions of the writer:

*I begin to see
That in the whole world there are
Only paths to grief.
Even here in these deep hills
I hear the wild deer crying.*

(Trans: J. S. Mostow, 1996, p. 427)

When we write a traditional waka using objective images from nature, it becomes a translation of unconscious material rendered into conscious form through language. All descriptions of “objective reality” are essentially subjective and reflective of affect states and associated object ties. How this is translated, understood, or interpreted depends on the reader’s/ analyst’s subjectivity. For example, how is the report of a “mix of sun and clouds” translated and understood? Will a writer emphasize the gray clouds or the blue sky? The writer, however, often is not fully aware of how this transitional space is being used and what actually is being communicated. This then touches on the exploration of unconscious fantasy and in the clinical operation of the transference and countertransference dynamic.

Selected Waka:

*Raindrops then snowflakes
swirling in fierce north winds;
Such confusion
under an uncertain sky,
spring's first buds covered in white.*

*The summer storm,
rain beats down on the roof tiles
as clouds burst--
they break the night's silence
and steal away my dreams.³*

*Is it your full day,
or an emptiness of heart?
The distance deepens-
between nightfall and sunrise,
maple leaves redden and fall.*

*In a stand of pines
bent by the weight of snow,
this silent dawn-
the sole trace of fleeing deer;
white whirling from the branches.*

*In the end,
it is your words that remain
as the old year passes-
snow settles on the woodpile;
the black crows have all scattered.*

*In glowing fullness
the moon lights up this path,
though casting such light-
it cannot move a fallen bud.
Will words touch from this distance?*

*Free-flight dream:
broken by the robin's call
as night becomes dawn-
does she greet the new day
or cry for the passing night?*

The sensibilities and conventions developed by the classical court poets can inform modern poetry. The following poem relies less on metaphor and abstraction and more on concrete imagery that attempts to engage the senses and draw the reader into the experience.

Poured in drained out,
purple, pink, violet pansies
smiling from concrete prisons
beneath time-grayed cement benches
along side walk window boxes lost in shadows
spreading from skyscrapers stretched out larger than life
by a hesitant dawn sun as the mini-skirted obese girl spreads across the sidewalk
strutting unabashed, goose bumped thighs, strawberry red in a wind colder than passing frowns.
The price of sliced tomatoes ever-increasing at the Zagat-rated bagel shop,
wall photos plastered: hand-shaking celebrities, mayors, sports heroes
amidst the stink of burned bacon fat and stale cigarettes;
cheese eggs and tomato breakfast specials to go....
And uptown along Riverside Drive, emerging up dark train tunnel steps
middle-aged lovers stop in awe - lost and suddenly found- redemption matters as spring explodes
in torrents of daffodils, hyacinths, flowers that remain nameless kissed by the sun that beams
laughingly.
Lovers kissing as teenagers do in complete abandon, larger than life...larger than galaxies, in
urgency outside the ivy covered limestone townhouses, kissing in innocence, with wisdom,
passion, ecstasy, as if nothing else ever mattered, life concerns, personal histories melted away,
as old clay washed out of the potter's wheel at the storefront school on Amsterdam Avenue,
as the burnt out hippie mom in the faded cotton Kashmiri dress, spins a bowl, soft-edged and
forming, spinning between her thighs as lifetimes whirl through her mind;
burning between her thighs, hips, widened by child births, where a magic world still awaits
visiting to spin out mysteries of heart and flesh, mysteries of half-remembered dreams....to be
continued...

Please visit Paul Cooper's poetry journals:

waka at: <http://cranehaven.livejournal.com/>

haiku at: <http://three-stones.livejournal.com/>

References:

Carter, S. (1989). *Waiting for the Wind: Thirty-Six Poets of Japan's Late Medieval Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mostow, J. S. (1996). *Pictures of the Heart: The Hyakunin Isshu in Word and Image*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London & New York: Routledge

¹ Parts of this Introduction were originally prepared by Paul. Cooper & Karen. Morris for 'The Weather Report' - Poetics, Emotional Turbulence and the Unpredictability of Psychoanalytic Learning: An Experiential Workshop, which was presented at the IFPE Seventeenth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference "How We Learn/ When We Learn/Why We Learn/What Constitutes Psychoanalytic Knowledge?" held November 3 to 5 in Pasadena California.

² All original poems © Paul C. Cooper Three Stones © 2003.

³ 1st Place: Mountain Home Modern Waka, 2004 "Summer Storms Competition"