

## THE JAPANESE HOKKU

(Continued from page 8)

taken from a recent issue of a Tokio paper, will serve to illustrate both the form and the usual sentiment:

Ima ni kuru ka to  
Matsu to wo itaku  
Naburu tsuno ni ka  
Aki no kaze.

The general idea is:

When I am expecting my sweetheart, the pranking autumn wind tricks me by knocking at the door that awaits her coming.

The Japanese poets courted limitations in their art, as if they felt, with the true instinct of genius, that the more restricted the field the greater must be the skill of the artist. Their genius, therefore, has revealed itself chiefly through the power of selection. What riches have been sacrificed in order that these little *tanka* and *hokku* should be perfect jewel-work! We of the West, with our long and majestically flowing poems, may think they have sacrificed too much; but neither their genius, nor the genius of the language, is fitted for

sustained flights. They could have produced long poems, strewn with exquisite thoughts; but not an Iliad nor a "Divina Commedia." They found their own best path of development.

One of the most remarkable of the many limitations the Japanese have placed upon their poetry is that it must not treat of war and bloodshed, or, indeed, of any ugly or revolting themes. Homer would not have been listened to had he tried to sing "Achilles' wrath" in Nippon, and Dante could not have been born in the Japanese air. Some forms, as the *dodoitsu*, are restricted to a single theme, and others, as the *hokku* and *tanka*, are limited to the expression of a solitary sentiment or thought. But the new martial spirit of Japan, and the desire and necessity for fuller poetic expression, have led to the development of longer poems. The *naga-uta*, or "long song," has been in vogue for centuries; but it is merely a string of *tanka*, and is inelastic and unfitted as a vehicle of modern

thought. Another form, the *ima-yo*, consisting of verses of four lines of 7-5-7-5 syllables, but too restricted in theme, is being developed under the name of *shin-tai-shi*, or "new form poem." This is similar to the English ballad measure, and in the hands of masters may be fashioned into an effective, beautiful and noble medium of poetic thought.

But the *hokku* and, in less degree, the *tanka* are still the favorite forms of Japanese verse. Their curt lines and their few but well-treasured words are admirably representative of the genius of the Japanese speech. No other language is more compendious, and not even the Greek has such power or such wealth of suggestion. This is due largely to the under-depths of significance in all Japanese words—the accretion of long tradition.

Indeed, the *hokku* is the exaltation of the phrase. It is of course much more; but it has developed the phrase to a height and beauty not attained in any other language. It is the perfection of phrase that makes poetry quotable. We do not remember poems or verses, but felicitous phrases. The enchanting harmony and linked beauty of Keats' "Nightingale" linger in most minds as a delicious though blurred memory; but the "alien corn," and the "foam of perilous seas," these we bear in our bosoms forever. A great *hokku* embalms a single sentiment or impression in an immortal phrase, and it finds lodgment for all time in all the hearts of Japan.

A comparison of the *hokku* with some of the briefer forms in Western poetry is inevitable. To contrast such a measure as the sonnet with the *tanka* makes the Japanese poem show to great advantage, its thirty-one syllables seeming a mere guard of honor in presence of the heavy cohorts of its rival. But when the sonnet is set side by side with the *hokku*, the English measure seems elaborate and diffuse.

Wordsworth felt it necessary to defend his occasional self-limitation to "the sonnet's scanty plot of ground," and did so in an immortal sonnet—"nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room." His plea is that many souls, like his own, "have felt the weight of too much liberty." But the one hundred and forty syllables of the sonnet afford almost unrestricted freedom, compared with the seventeen syllables of the *hokku*.

With the quatrain the contrast is not so great, and it is still less striking with the heroic couplet; but the latter is not a poem, and even when used as the vehicle of an epigram, does not impress one as a distinct poetic measure, as the *hokku* invariably does. The quatrain is, indeed, the only frequently employed form in Western poetry that may endure a comparison, in respect to brevity, with the *hokku*. But even the quatrain corresponds more nearly with the *tanka*, both as regards length and the treatment of theme. Fitzgerald's golden quatrains, in which he melted down the "dross-allayed" "Rubaiyat" of Omar, and Landon's famous one on himself—"I strove with none, for none was worth my strife"—are more like *tanka*, and are too full and varied for the *hokku*, which demands far greater compression and unity.

It is not the purpose here to consider the comparative excellence of the Japanese *hokku* and the quatrains or sonnets of the West. As one star differeth from another star in glory, it is sufficient to know that in the marvelous *hokku* the world has another form of beauty. Into this tiny cup a nation has poured its heart; and countless artists have labored patiently and lovingly, until the cup has been wrought into a rare and resplendent jewel. The outside world, in all its centuries of song, has not yet found the secret or the art of putting so much beauty into such small compass.



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