

Richard Wright's Haiku and the Blindman as a Subject

by Dominic Dulin

With a Zen attitude, Richard Wright portrays a wealth of poetical subjects in his haiku, including a prostitute applying lipstick on Christmas, a lonely scarecrow, a snowy mountain, or a man sweeping snow from the sidewalk. In a handful of his haiku in *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon*, Wright also turns his attention to the blindman. Wright shows many sides of the blindman as a character and subject in his haiku: the blindman is at times comical, curious, and revered in his Buddha nature.

As one would expect, there are many instances of the blindman interacting and being a part of nature in Wright's haiku. One instance of this is Wright's haiku involving the blindman and his dog:

Pulling him ahead,
The blindman's dog takes a path
Between summer graves.
(61)

It is worth noting that, in this haiku, the dog seems to overshadow the blindman in a comical, yet practical way as he is at the mercy of the dog pulling him through the graves. To the dog, the graves mean nothing and if the blindman is not aware of where he is then perhaps the blindman also shares the dog's ignorance. On the other hand, perhaps the trek of the blindman and his dog follows a stop at a relative or lover's grave where a more dramatic and less comical scene of remembering, nostalgia, and mourning took place.

There is also a bit of contradiction in the "summer graves"

as summer is usually a time of relaxation and joy while simultaneously the graves invoke the reality of death, more characteristic or appropriate of an autumn or winter *kigo*. Perhaps here is another area of comical contradiction, where walking through the graves in one sense is part of a beautiful summer walk and in another an accidental disrespect or purposeful apathy towards death. Although, maybe this contradiction just is and as R.H. Blyth says we shall “feel no call to ‘understand’ it, to explain it.” (*Haiku Volume 1: Eastern Culture* 192).

Somewhat similarly, the thing-as-it-is and simplicity can be seen in haiku 286, one of the plainest and most direct of Wright’s blindman haiku:

With intense effort
The blindman’s eyes are squinting:
How bitter the cold!
(Wright 72)

The squinting of the eyes is not due to focusing on sight, as they would be for sight reliant individuals, but as a sensory and emotional reaction to the bitter cold. The eyes act as would the sour face of a person tasting unknowingly spicy food or as a turned-up nose to a pungent or repulsive smell. It is possible the “effort” on the blindman’s part comes from his trek through the bitter cold, facing the bare, icy wind with an uncovered face. The bitter cold is a culmination of one aspect of “the world, the flesh and the devil” which “are at us all the time” (Blyth 233).

Another blindman poem which is similar in its *yugen* style to Basho’s “A crow / Perched on a withered tree / In the autumn evening” is Wright’s 367:

An old blindman
Playing a black violin
Amid fallen leaves.
(92)

While “An old blindman” not only deals with autumn, the same *kigo* in Basho’s “A crow,” it deals with aging (*sabi*) and with darkness (*yugen*). The “old” blindman (*sabi*), the “black” violin (*yugen*), and the fallen and aging leaves of autumn (*sabi*). The similarities between these two poems are stark as they both involve the *kigo* of autumn, something old and a dark and mysterious scene.

Wright’s “An old blindman” also embodies a bit of *wabi*, too. Despite the man being old and blind in chilly autumn the blindman has music, more specifically his violin to bring joy not only to himself but to fellow passerby’s. The blindman may be old and the leaves may have fallen, the world may be cold and unforgiving, but there is music where “things are seen without reference to profit or loss” but as a “spiritual kind” (Blyth 155).

A more direct interaction between human and non-human can be seen in 597:

A slow encircling,
Inquisitive butterfly
Follows the blindman.
(Wright 150)

Here the focus is not on the blindman himself but on the butterfly following him. In this way, Wright gives the non-human butterfly human characteristics of curiosity and inquisitiveness as it follows the man. As butterflies are silent in their flight, unlike bees or mosquitos, it is unclear and purposely left ambiguous as to whether the blindman knows if the butterfly is following him or not. For a blindman even with heightened senses it would be a large feat to be able to hear a butterfly flapping its near silent wings.

Wright follows the butterfly haiku with, “The blindman stumbles, / Pauses, then walks slower / Into the autumn night.” (Wright 150). Here we see the blindman stumble, perhaps on a root on the trail or a large stone, and it is reflective of our

own journey towards death encapsulated in the *kigo*, “autumn night.” While some might find it comical to see him stumble, reading this haiku as a humorous poem would be erroneous. Wright rarely, if at all, represents the blindman as comical relief in his haiku. This is a haiku of practical caution. We all walk on our own path. Walking too fast literally or figuratively could cause us to trip and fall, so slowing down after a stumble or mistake is good advice.

In another memorable haiku by Wright, there is this most reverent and Buddha-like representations of the blindman.
241:

A blindman’s eyebrows
Condensing the autumn fog
Into beads of light.
(61)

This haiku brings up allusions to the brow of Buddha (Buddha Eyes of Wisdom or Wisdom Eyes) often carved into singing bowls and represented in art in temples, most often used and represented in Nepalian sects. The “condensing the autumn fog” and morphing it into “beads of light” is a mystical and beautiful image in line with *samadhi* which Blyth defines on page 195 as “the power of the imagination is the power of our Buddha nature, our profoundest instinct.” Arguably this poem is the most joyful of all of Wright’s haiku involving the blindman, and I would argue that it is one of his very best of the whole collection.

Blyth notes that in haiku one must be honest and objective as in “all extremes of thought and feeling there arises the perception that *the active acceptance of the inevitable is life, the life of perfection*” (171 [my emphasis added]). It is obvious but important to say that the blindman must have had to accept his fate / reality of being blind, having to trust his other senses to guide him through life.

Wright clearly sympathizes with the blindman as can be seen

in the way Wright chose to put haiku 127, “Why does the blindman,” and 128, “This autumn drizzle” together:

127

Why does the blindman
Stop so still for a second
In the drizzling dusk?

128

This autumn drizzle
Is our bond with other eyes
That can see no more.

(32)

Wright begins with an inquisitiveness not unlike the butterfly of “A slow encircling” and paints a beautiful scene in which to frame the blindman. The reader’s curiosity is aroused as to why the blindman stops. Perhaps the blindman hears something in the distance, something Wright with all of his senses intact might not have heard. There is almost a sense of wisdom or thought. What does the blindman contemplate as he stands “still for a second / In the drizzling dusk.?” In that second Wright exalts the blindman to the stature of a guru or Buddhist monk. 128 “An autumn drizzle” seems to be a continuation of the first poem. In this haiku the “autumn drizzle” creates a direct bond between blindman and poet. This bond brings about a solidarity with the blindman that transcends the sense of sight and shows the natural connection between all beings.

Wright seems inspired by the blindman and honors him in the non-discriminating philosophy of Zen and haiku. We don’t know if the blindman has gratefully accepted his situation, but Wright has painted a picture of him in which the blindman displays no bitterness. Wright’s portrayal is sympathetic and without pity and the haiku in which feature the blindman are some of Wright’s best

Works Cited

- Blyth, R.H. *Haiku Volume 1: Eastern Culture*. Heian International, Reprinted from Public Domain 2018.
- Wright, Richard. *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon*. Edited by Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener, Arcade, 1998.