Subjective Criticism and Haiku

by Mike Spikes

I look forward to receiving each issue of *Frogpond*. It's always a highlight of the day when it comes in the mail. After briefly perusing the table of contents, I immediately proceed to the sections containing individual haiku and senyru and read them all, from cover to cover. On this rather cursory initial reading, certain poems will instantly strike me as powerful and appealing, while many will not. Sometimes on this first reading I will be able to articulate to myself why I find a particular poem so compelling, but often the draw will be strictly visceral. I will next read all the poems in the issue a second time, more carefully, more slowly, and more deliberately than the first. On this second reading, I will more likely be able to articulate, and articulate in detail, what I found so powerful and appealing about the poems that initially attracted me, and, in addition, I'll frequently be drawn to other poems that on the first reading didn't particularly interest me. Finally, on subsequent readings, I'll go back and further contemplate individual poems, understanding them in even more depth than on the first two readings and sometimes reevaluating my sense of their merit.

I

Why do some haiku appeal to me more powerfully than others? Why do I find some poems better—stronger works of art—than others? Are my judgments strictly personal and subjective; are they the result of my adherence, either conscious or subconscious, to certain universal, objective standards; or is it even possible clearly to distinguish personal, subjective judgments from universal, objective standards of evaluation? And why do second, third, and further readings of poems that initially appeal to me often increase that appeal, and why do subsequent readings of poems that don't initially attract my attention frequently result in my positive reevaluation of them? For that matter, what exactly is it that I'm discovering when I interpret a haiku? What motivates my particular response to it? What, that is, is the source of the poem's sense and significance? And

what exactly is the author doing when they write a haiku? What is it that they are giving me as a reader?

These interrelated questions are mine personally, but, I would submit, they are also questions that might be raised with respect to readers and readings of haiku in general. The answers to them provide possible explanations of what, exactly, a haiku is; the appeal these very short poems have; and how readers cognitively and emotionally process them. Persuasive, illuminating answers to all these questions can, I believe, be found in the work of an underappreciated contemporary literary theorist, David Bleich, specifically in his 1978 book, *Subjective Criticism.*

II

Bleich is a Reader Response theorist. Though its heyday—roughly the late 1960s through the mid-1980s—has passed, Reader Response theory remains influential. There are contemporary critics still openly practicing versions of Reader Response, and many of the movement's essential principles live on, in residual form, in current theories that are not technically in the Reader Response camp. Bleich sometimes received, at the movement's height, due recognition as a leading Reader Response theorist. For example, his work was prominently featured in Jane P. Tompkins's important 1980 anthology, *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Bleich's contributions, however, were generally overshadowed by better known Reader Response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland. In current histories and anthologies of literary theory, Bleich's work receives little attention, most of the space devoted to Reader Response going to Fish and others. In what follows, I will outline some of Bleich's important but too often overlooked ideas, ideas that, I will show, are useful and valuable in understanding how haiku and the reading of them work.

As Tompkins notes in her introduction to *Reader-Response Criticism*, ". . . the reader response movement arises in direct opposition

to the New Critical dictum issued by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 'The Affective Fallacy' (1949): 'The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results. . . . It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism'" (ix). The New Critics, who dominated the American critical scene from the 1930s into the early 1960s, famously argued that literary interpretation should be strictly objective, that the text contains meaning that the informed reader could and should dispassionately extract from it. The reader must filter out any personal reactions to the text that he or she might have and render, in his or her reading of the text, only the meanings contained in the words on the page. Reader Response critics roundly reject this view, arguing to the contrary, as Tompkins puts it, that the text's "'effects,' psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no affective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" (ix).

There is a wide range of views among Reader Response theorists as to how exactly and the degree to which the reader's personal reactions to a literary work enter into his or her interpretation of it. Bleich's view heavily emphasizes each individual's distinct contribution to the construction of the literary text's meaning. It stresses the notion that each reader makes the text meaningful by translating it into the terms of his or her individual values and views. The opening chapter of *Subjective Criticism* is entitled "The Subjective Paradigm." Bleich here lays out the epistemological foundation for the particulars of his personalist theory, which he develops in full in the book's subsequent chapters.

Very simply, a paradigm, a concept which Bleich takes from T. S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), is "a set of beliefs about the nature of reality" (10); it is, in Kuhn's words, a "'world-view'" (11). Bleich argues that the objective paradigm, which was dominant for centuries in all areas of knowledge, from the scientific to the aesthetic, should be replaced by the subjective paradigm. The subjective paradigm posits that "knowledge is made by people and

not found" while the objective paradigm holds just the opposite (18). As he puts it elsewhere, the subjective paradigm holds that knowledge "is invented and not observed or discovered by human beings" (11). It is crucial to understand exactly what Bleich means here by knowledge. He does not mean the initial perception of things but rather what observers make of those things, how they interpret them. To abandon the objective paradigm in favor of the subjective paradigm is, Bleich continues, to recognize that new knowledge represents "a human form of organismic adaptation and that its purpose is to better assure human survival as a species at any historical moment" (12). That is, new knowledge is what people manufacture to better respond to and accommodate their needs and interests at a given moment in time.

Bleich surveys the thought of a number of thinkers preceding him who have formulated views that suggest a move away from the dominant objective paradigm and toward a new, subjective one. In so doing, he identifies insights that the subjective paradigm can yield that the objective paradigm cannot. To cite but one example, he discusses, from the realm of science, Neils Bohr's notion of complementarity, developed in the early part of the twentieth century. In Bleich's succinct formulation, "Bohr's complementarity was devised in order to account for the apparent paradox that light observed in one context behaves like a wave and observed in another context behaves like a stream of particles" (17). Bleich concludes: "The idea of complementarity eliminated the expectation, derived from the objective paradigm, that light, which seems experientially one essential thing, must also be ontologically one essential thing" (17). The knowledge of light is constituted by the cognitive lens through which it is viewed. Looked at one way, light is a stream of particles; looked at another way, it is a wave. In other words, Bohr's view tacitly assumes the subjective paradigm. Yes, light exists outside the mind and is experienced as such by both those who observe it from the context in which it behaves like a wave and those who observe it from the context in which it behaves like a stream of particles. The subjective paradigm does not deny the reality of things in the world and the possibility of their

perception. But the sense and significance, the meaning of those things—the knowledge of them —is a product of interpretation. Bohr's subjectively grounded perspective thus allows the possibility, as the objective paradigm does not, that knowledge of things in the world—in this case light —can be multiple and fluid rather than single and fixed.

The key term in Bleich's theory of literary interpretation is resymbolization. Resymbolization represents the reader's formulation of the literary work's senses and significances, its themes and meanings. In fact, resymbolization is Bleich's name for what is usually meant by interpretation. At one point Bleich explicitly calls resymbolization "the familiar act of interpretation" (96). He notes: "Resymbolization refers to the mentation performed in conscious response to rudimentary symbolizations" (66). It occurs "when the first acts of perception and identification produce in us a need, drive, or demand for explanation" (39). That is to say, resymbolization entails the reader translating the text's language—its symbols—into his or her own language—his or her own symbols. This translation, then, constitutes for the reader an explanation of the senses and significances, the themes and meanings, of the author's words.

The crucial point Bleich's theory makes is that resymbolization is a subjective act, the product of the individual reader's personal interpretation. "Resymbolization is governed by subjective factors only" (39), Bleich writes. It reflects the "subject's motives" (18). It converts the text, its initial symbolization, into "a more subjectively satisfying form," a form that "may be understood as the construction of new knowledge" (213). Or to put it in the evolutionary terms that Bleich uses to explain the operation of the subjective paradigm in general, resymbolization renders the text—yields new knowledge—in terms that are "adaptive to [the reader's] needs" (66). In the opening sentence of the concluding paragraph of the closing chapter of *Subjective Criticism*, Bleich sums up the crux of his entire theory: "Subjective criticism assumes that each person's most urgent motivations are to understand himself,

and that the simplest path to this understanding is awareness of one's own language system as the agency of consciousness and self-direction" (297–298). In resymbolizing a literary work, the reader, on Bleich's view, increases their self-knowledge by framing their beliefs, needs, and desires in terms of the work as they transform it into their own language.

What exactly resymbolization looks like in practice is clearly illustrated throughout *Subjective Criticism*. Much of Bleich's book is pedagogical, devoted to recording and analyzing written responses his students made, in his classes, to various works of literature. In these classes, Bleich instructed his students to explicitly state what they personally found meaningful in the texts they were assigned. To cite one of the briefer of these response statements, a male student wrote the following about D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

> The only meaning I can get out of the novel is that the only way to escape the pressures of society and petty life is through complete love. Lawrence gave an ugly view of the rest of the world. The only beauty that was in the novel was when Mellors and Connie were together in the hut. When you get right down to it, man's attempt to better his society always fails. He is at his best just in the act of love. . . . Here is the only beauty in life. (156)

The student's assertion that the meaning he gets out of the novel is "that the only way to escape the pressures of society and petty life is through complete love" represents his resymbolization of the novel, his interpretation in his own words, of Lawrence's text. In his conclusion—"When you get right down to it, man's attempt to better his society always fails. He is at his best just in the act of love. . . . Here is the only beauty in life."—the student reveals his personal belief, grounded in his personal experience, that motivates his formulation of the novel's central theme. "The ethical precepts formulated" in this particular reading reflect "the dialectic between the reading experience and one's [this particular reader's] own life experience" (158), Bleich asserts.

Bleich's student could have, of course, gone into detail from his "own life experience," revealed specific particulars from it that

prompted his resymbolization of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In fact, Bleich records other student responses to other texts that reveal a great deal of personal information. For example, a student begins her reading of Thomas More's *Utopia* with "[w]hen I was younger and read a lot, I frequently created for myself alone different worlds" and continues for almost two full paragraphs with private experiences before getting to Utopia itself (170). Conversely, the reader of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* might have streamlined his reading—leaving out such words and phrases as "I" and "[w]hen you get right down to it," which call attention to the personal in his take —to produce a more traditional, objective-seeming interpretation. But in Bleich's view such a streamlined interpretation would, in fact, be only objective-seeming. Whether the resymbolization is worded in relatively reserved personal terms, as is the student's reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; or in more expansive detail, as is the student's reading of *Utopia*; or even if the reading of the text is in conventional, strictly objective-seeming language, the reading—the resymbolization—will always in actuality be, Bleich contends, subjective, will reflect the reader's individual motives and perceptions, his or her personal interests and perspectives.

Clearly Bleich prefers critical commentary that at least to some degree speaks in the first person. To explicitly include the personal—to whatever extent—is, Bleich asserts, to produce "genuine, usable, consequential knowledge, as opposed to ritual locutions or sanctimonious declarations of having discovered the true moral [or any other] purpose of the author" (158). Including the personal, Bleich believes, makes explicit the fact that the knowledge the interpretation of a text presents is a product of the reader's subjectivity; it advertises the reality that that knowledge is "genuine, usable, consequential" to and for the reader. Traditional, objective-seeming readings, on the other hand, too often take the form of "ritual locutions or sanctimonious declarations" that purport to yield "the true . . . purpose of the author," though in fact what they yield, given that for Bleich all criticism is grounded in the subjective paradigm, is the reader's individual perceptions, anchored in his or her personal perspectives. As Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker note, even a theoretically

sophisticated interpretation of a text, such as a Marxist, structuralist, or psychoanalytic reading, will, in Bleich's view, ultimately "reflect the subjective individuality of a personal 'response'" (59). If explicit evidence of the personal in the response is absent, they point out, then as Bleich sees it the reading will come across as "empty formulae derived from received dogma" (59). It is Bleich's contention, Selden, Widdowson, and Broker maintain, that "[p]articular interpretations make more sense when critics take the trouble to explain the growth and origin of their views" (59).

It is certainly true that different readers may derive essentially the same interpretation—or at least very similar ones—from a given text in that different readers may share the same general perspectives and values, the same world view. And your reading of a text, articulated in detail, may convince me of its validity, even if I don't endorse your world view, in that your reading reveals and communicates to me, either explicitly or implicitly through its symbols, that world view, allows me to comprehend it and thus enables my acceptance of your interpretation as legitimate, from your perspective, even though your interpretation is not my own. Just as the reader of a literary text perceives its symbols before resymbolizing them, as Bohr's observers of light perceive light as light before interpreting it as either a wave or a stream of particles, so is the reader of another's reading able to grasp and acknowledge that other reading. Though Bleich never explicitly makes these points, they are clearly implicit in his argument.

Also clearly implicit in his argument is the notion that the value of a literary work—its merit—is in the eye of the beholder. Bleich pays scant explicit attention to the question of why a reader might judge some literary texts better, stronger, and more provocative than others. This is not surprising since his focus is almost entirely on how readers make sense of texts and virtually all his illustrations come from students in his classes responding to texts they were assigned, not from readers personally selecting literary works and explaining why they do or do not like them. At least at one point, however, Bleich does clearly suggest, if not spell out in detail, a subjective

standard for judging the relative merits of literary works. Bleich notes that Sigmund Freud was profoundly impressed and moved by Michelangelo's *Moses*, a sculpture and not a literary work of art but a work of art nonetheless. He observes that Freud himself claims "he gets pleasure from works of art," such as Michelangelo's *Moses*, "when he can 'explain to [himself] what their effect is due to'" (90). Bleich further quotes Freud: "'Whenever I cannot do this, I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me'" (90). The subjective paradigm dictates—and this is what Bleich uses Freud's observations to establish—that the value of a work of art is a product of the personal connection its consumer makes with it. Bleich doesn't here directly state that Freud deems *Moses* a great work of art, but such a judgment is inherent in Freud's contention, which Bleich highlights, that he derives enormous pleasure from Michelangelo's sculpture, as he does from certain other works, because it deeply and profoundly affects him on a personal level, and he can explain to himself why it does.

The works that one considers the most powerful—the best—are the ones that one can most relate to, that most personally move one. This is Bleich's implicit conclusion. More specifically, literary value, in Bleich's system, is a function of the degree to which the text motivates the reader to resymbolize it as a result of their judgment of its artistry and relevance to their life. The text's value lies in how useful its interpretation might prove to be in enabling the reader to better understand themself. Thus, to return to the discussion I began this essay with, I now conclude, following Bleich, that the haiku in each issue of *Frogpond* that I find most powerful, appealing, the best—whether on a first, second, or subsequent reading—are the ones that I most strongly identify with on a personal level, subjectively judge most aesthetically accomplished and thematically compelling, that most profoundly and efficiently increase my self-understanding. It is those haiku that I am most inclined to resymbolize in my own language, sometimes orally or in writing though most often simply in thought.

III

In this final section of this essay, I will first briefly demonstrate how Bleich's view informs my own practice as a reader of haiku. I will then argue, illustrating with a book review, that even when haiku critics may not be aware of Bleich's theory, or certainly when they do not explicitly draw on it, they nonetheless often, if not always, implicitly proceed in the general terms Bleich outlines. That is to say, Bleich's theory, I believe, can account for the basic approach that readers frequently take, as a matter of course, in interpreting and evaluating haiku.

The poem I will use to demonstrate my personal approach is a recent one from *The Heron's Nest*. It appeared in the September 2020 issue as an Editor's Choice. This particular haiku stood out for me in the same way and for the same subjective reasons that particular poems in *Frogpond* especially impress me when I peruse each of its issues. The haiku, by Tanya McDonald, is the following:

off-center kiss
the moon enters
earth's shadow

I read this poem as one that asserts that a uniquely personal love connection with another is more genuinely fulfilling than one grounded in romantic clichés. The words in which I have formulated this very general reading constitute, in Bleichian terms, my resymbolization of McDonald's text. This resymbolization, in turn, reflects my personal values and views. It constitutes an understanding of myself and my experience of others. I value this haiku—think it a good one—because it speaks to me, motivates me to formulate for myself, in clear and concise terms, exactly what I believe.

More specifically, I interpret an "off-center kiss" as an expression of love that does not follow the beaten path, that avoids trafficking in romantic bromides. Instead, such a kiss passionately joins two

people in distinctively individual, idiosyncratic terms. It represents not a stock union—the sort portrayed in sentimental films and hackneyed love songs—but one in which two unique individuals connect in their own uniquely authentic ways.

The second and third lines of the haiku deepen and broaden the implications, the consequences, of an "off-center kiss." They focus on one who is the recipient of this kiss. Romantic love, symbolized by the moon, infiltrates the most profoundly personal, genuine dimension of the self. It enters the deepest, most private core—the shadow—of one's truest, most grounded and honest identity —symbolized by the earth. This version of romantic love is not an idealistically ethereal one but rather one that is firmly anchored in concrete reality.

McDonald's poem immediately attracted me, on my very first reading of it, because I intuitively sensed it was confirming, through its figurative language, a view I hold. When I thought through in my own language—in Bleich's terms resymbolized—McDonald's words —her symbols—I judged the haiku to be an aesthetic jewel, given that it crystallized for me, through its rich and compelling tropes, my definition of true love. It mirrored my personal experience of what such love entails and, equally significantly, reflected the quality of the most real and lasting love I have observed in the relationships of others. My critical take on McDonald's poem is, as Bleich contends all criticism finally is, profoundly subjective. The poem, and the interpretation it motivates, helps me better understand myself.

To emphasize and illustrate the fact that reading haiku in subjective, Bleichian terms is not just my personal strategy but one implicitly common to interpretations and evaluations of the genre, I refer to, as one possible example among legions, William J. Higginson's review of Fay Aoyagi's collection *Chrysanthemum Love*, an essay-length analysis that appeared in *Modern Haiku* in the summer of 2004. Higginson, a major haiku poet in his own right, passes judgments that are overtly subjective. For example, in the opening

section of the review, which establishes a context for highlighting the merits of Aoyagi's poems, Higginson dismissively refers to a recently published collection of Richard Wright's haiku. This book of poems, Higginson asserts, "serves to deeply underscore the triviality of his [Wright's] attempts at haiku." Higginson's assertion is obviously and unapologetically personal, one with which others may or may not agree. And when he interprets Aoyagi's "intact zero fighters / at the Smithsonian— / cherry blossom rain" as "about the tender, flimsy lives we all lead, we and our contraptions, not fundamentally different from those of Mother Nature, after all," he is clearly resymbolizing Aoyagi's poem in his own language, a resymbolization that implicitly represents, as Bleich would have it, Higginson's subjectively grounded values and views—an understanding of himself—which others may or may not share.

Finally, let me add in closing an important point concerning why I am persuaded by Bleich's view when it comes to my, and others', interest in and devotion to haiku in general. I love haiku, as I would suggest many others do as well, for their conciseness, for their ability to say so very much in so very few words. That is to say, following Bleich, my attraction to the genre reflects my personal, subjective fascination with minimalist art, haiku being one of the most conspicuous and captivating forms of such art. It is my wager that great many other haiku enthusiasts likely share this view, that a lot of readers are at least to some degree drawn to these tiny texts for the same reason I am: the genius of their brevity.

Sources:

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Mike Spikes is a professor of English at Arkansas State University. His poems have most recently appeared in Acorn, Modern Haiku, Frogpond, Iconoclast, and Mudfish.