

MARÍA KODAMA

Oriental Influences in Borges' Poetry: The Nature
of the Haiku and Western Literature

In the foreword to his *Collected Writings* (1969), and in other works, Borges has expressed many judgments on poetry and style which indicate the way he gradually assumed the essential poetic forms of the Japanese *tanka* and *haiku*. He attempted those two forms for the first time in *El Oro de los Tigres* (1972) and in *La Cifra* (1981). Borges began his prologue to the *Collected Writings* by claiming: "I have not rewritten the book. I have toned down its Baroque excesses, I have trimmed rough edges, I have blotted out sentimental verses and vagueness and, in the course of this labor sometimes pleasing and sometimes annoying, I have felt that the young man who in 1923 wrote those pages was essentially—what does essentially mean?—the elderly gentleman who now resigns himself to what he penned or emends it. We are both the same; we both disbelieve in success and in failure, in literary schools and in their dogmas; we both are true to Schopenhauer, to Stevenson and to Whitman. In my opinion, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* foreshadows all that came afterwards." He ends by saying: "In those days, I sought sunsets, outlying slums and unhappiness; now, mornings, downtown, and serenity."

These words express not only the writer's feelings on his work, and on himself, but reflect also an essential search, foreshadowed as he tells us, from the beginning. This search, or attempt, is the oldest in the world. It began with Homer, and will continue as long as men write. Its aim is to discover with the utmost formal rigor the center, eternity. This

search has often been attempted in the East, particularly in Japan and in the West, and particularly in Borges.

In the West, literature begins with the epic, with poems which throughout Europe tell the tales of heroes in hundreds and hundreds of lines. A perfect expression is found in the famous beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Arma virumque cano." "Arms and the man I sing," as Dryden translated. The mind accepts the word "arms" immediately; it refers, of course, to the deeds of man. In the West those poems throughout the centuries grow briefer and briefer until they reach the avant-garde schools, among them Ultraism. In the case of Spanish literature this generated some of the most important changes since the introduction of the Italian sonnet by Garcilaso, not so much by itself, but by the changes wrought by its impulse.

Borges' career began with a flirtation with Ultraism, and then followed in his own personal way, a way that led him, in a wide circle, to Japan. He, the maker, even as God Himself, sought what is essential to all poetry and especially to Japanese poetry. Japanese poetry tries to carve into a few precious lines of seventeen syllables the meeting of time and space in a single point. The maker, even as God Himself tries to abolish succession in space.

In his own way Borges has tried to express the same wish in the foreword to his *Historia de la Eternidad* (1936):

I don't know how on earth I compared to 'stiff museum pieces' the archetypes of Plato and how I failed to understand, reading Schopenhauer and Scotus Erigena, that they are living, powerful and organic. Movement, the occupation of different *places* in different moments is inconceivable without time; so is immobility, the occupation of the same place in different points of time. How could I not perceive that eternity, sought and beloved by so many poets, is a splendid artifice, that sets us free, though for a moment, of the unbearable burden of successive things.

In *The Aleph* (1949) he also says:

The Aleph's diameter must have been two or three inches, but Cosmic Space was therein, without diminution of size. Each object (the mirror's glass, for instance) was infinite objects, for I clearly saw it from all points in the universe . . . I saw the Aleph from all points; I saw the earth in the Aleph . . . I saw my face and entrails . . . and felt dizziness and wept because my eyes had seen that conjunctural and secret object whose name men take in vain but which no man has

looked on: the inconceivable universe. I felt infinite veneration, infinite pity . . .
For the Kaballah, this letter the En-Sof, the limitless and pure God Head . . .

These ideological elements form converging aspects sympathetic to the intent of Japanese poetry, which must be examined in some detail in order to understand both its poetic patterns and their purpose.

As in the case of Western literature, Japanese literature begins by groping its way. The task of finding a precise date for the birth of regular forms in prose and verse is not an easy one. The earliest example is the *Kojiki*, a record of ancient matters, compiled circa A.D. 712. Afterwards came the *Nihon Shoki*, a chronicle of Japan, A.D. 720. In the year A.D. 751 there appeared a compilation of Chinese verses written in Japan, the *Kaifūsō: Fond Recollection of Poetry*. Therein are found texts dating from the last part of the seventh century. The Nara Period offers the first great anthology of poetry, the Manyōshū Collection of *A Myriad Leaves*. This compilation was undertaken towards the end of the eighth century. In the *Kojiki* and in the *Nihon Shoki* the length of the lines in the poems and in the songs varies from three to nine syllables though even in this early period we find the habit of repeating five and seven syllables. In the Manyōshū the poems have already a fixed number of lines and the forms are regular. The lines are invariably compounded of five and seven syllables passing from one to the other. An example is the poem in which Prince Arima is getting ready for a journey:

Iwashiro no
Hamamatsu ga e wo
Hikimusubi
Masakiku araba
Mata kaerimimu.

On the beach of Iwashiro. I put the knot together. The branches of the pine. If my fate turns out well, I shall return to see them again. This particular form of thirty-one syllable poems in five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 each is the most frequent and the most lasting of the three forms evolved in the Manyōshū Period. In Japanese poetry it is called *tanka* or *waka*. The other two are the *sedoka* and the *choka*. The *choka* is a long poem with no limit to the number of lines. The longest of these poems attains one hundred and fifty lines. It passes, like the *tanka*, from 5 to 7 syllables ending in a line of 7 syllables. It could also be completed by one or two or more *hankas* or envoys written after the manner of *tanka* and summing up the subject of

the whole poem. However, of all stanzas to be found in Japanese poetry, the most congenial to the Japanese mind seems to be the *tanka*, since it still survives, along with the *haiku* that is engendered by an evolution of the *tanka* towards a greater brevity and a greater conclusion.

During the Manyū Period, poetry tended toward a private lyricism. The *tanka*, however, underwent a considerable evolution, which ended in a new form, the *haiku*. A crucial point was the transition of the caesura or pause in the syntax. In the Manyū Period most *tankas* had their caesura after the second or the fourth line. The poem is thus divided into three units of 5, 7 (12) and 5, 7 (12) and 7 syllables. This pattern hinders the attempt to pass from a short line to a long one and is weakened by the last short unit.

A verse from Hitomaro Kashū provides an example:

Hayabito no
Na ni ou yogoe
Ichishiroku
Waga na wa noritsu
Tsuma to tanomase.

Clear and loud as the night call of a man of Haya, I told my name. Trust me as your wife. [The Haya, a southern Kyūshū tribe, famous for the clarity of their voices, were employed at the Imperial Palace as watchmen. A woman tells her name to signify her assent to a proposal of marriage.]

Towards the end of the Heian Period (794–1185) and in the Kamakura Period (1185–1603), the caesura comes after the first and the third line. The poem is thus divided into three longer units of 5, 12 and 14 syllables. As an example the poem of Narihira is given, from the novel *Ise Monogatari*:

Tsuki ya aranu//
Haru ya mukashi no
Haru naranu//
Waga mi hitotsu wa
Moto no mi nishite.

Can it be the moon has changed, can it be that the spring is not the spring of old times? Is it my body alone that is just the same? This division gave the poet a greater freedom. It favoured the evolution of the imayō style, where the 12-syllable line had a caesura after the seventh. Far more important is the fact that the second caesura is stronger than the first.

This latter style of *tanka* was divided into the two principal parts, the first three lines and the last two lines (17 syllables and 14 syllables). From this division came the form of linked verse, the *renga*, whose initial stanza comprises three lines, the second two lines, the third three lines, and so on. In due time, the initial stanza of the *renga* became independent and took the name of *haiku*. The curious fact that the season of the year was always recorded or hinted at in those first three verses may have favored the process. A mild surprise clung to it, a sudden enlightenment akin to the *satori* of Zen Buddhism. This is the origin of *haiku*, which was essentially in its beginning the old linked poem of the fourteenth century, ruled by the ideas and conventions peculiar to the *tanka*.

Bashō (1644–1694) fixed forever the road of the *haiku*. Bashō stated that the *haiku* should use the common speech of men avoiding, let it be understood, vulgarity. He abounded in images and words forbidden to the *tanka*. Sparrows instead of nightingales; snails instead of flowers. The poet should be "one with the crowd but his mind should always be pure." He should use "common language and somehow make it into a thing of beauty." He should feel pity for the frailness of all things created and feel keenly *Sabi*, a word that stands for solitude, for lonely sadness, and for the melancholy of nature. Above all, he should so express the nature of the particular as to define, through it, the essence of all creation. His seventeen syllables should capture a vision of the nature of the world.

The best example of this teaching is his famous *haiku*:

Furu ike ya
Kawazu tobikomu
Mizu no oto.

An old pond. A frog jumps in, sound of water. First, we have something changeless, the pond, then something quick and moving, the frog, and lastly the splashing water, which is the point where both meet.

In an examination of Borges' poem "Un Patio" from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), we find many elements in common, metrics apart.

With evening
the two or three colors of the patio grew weary.
The huge candor of the full moon
no longer enchants its usual firmament.
Patio: heaven's watercourse.

The patio is the slope
down which the sky flows into the house.
Serenely
eternity waits at the crossway of the stars.
It is lovely to live in the dark friendliness
of covered entrance way, arbor, and wellhead.
[trans. Robert Fitzgerald]

Unknowingly, this poem follows the indications of Bashō.

How could a South American poet, after so many centuries, attain the very essence of the *haiku*? A possible explanation may be found in the fact that the essence of poetry is timeless and universal and when a writer attains it, as in the case of the Greek tragic poets, the achievement has no ending. An altogether different clue may be given us by Borges' childhood. His paternal grandmother was English, knew her Bible by heart and was continually quoting from it. I have been told that she could recite chapter and verse for any sentence in the Holy Writ. After Grimm, Borges read and reread the *Arabian Nights* in an English version and then went on to a now forgotten book, *Fairy Tales from Old Japan* by Mitford, an American scholar. During the first World War, the works of Schopenhauer sent him to the study of Buddhism. Borges explored with eagerness the books of Hermann Oldenberg on the Buddha and his teaching. These many interests gave him an open mind, a hospitable mind, sensitive to the most different cultures. Thus unaware of his path, he followed the century-old road of Japanese poetry towards the discovery of the *haiku*. Things done unconsciously are done well, and writers should not watch too closely what they are writing. If they do, the dream betrays them.

In the early 1970s, Borges deliberately undertook the composition of *tankas* and crowned that attempt in the 1980s with the composition of *haikus*. The stanza has seventeen syllables; Borges wrote seventeen *haikus*. Some may be chosen and examined more closely. The form will not be taken into account, since seventeen Spanish or English syllables may not be heard as seventeen syllables by an Oriental ear and vice versa. Japanese verse is meant not only to be heard but to be seen; the *kanjis* make a pattern that should be pleasant and moving to the eye. This kind of picture is unfortunately lost in a Western translation.

The *haiku* may be defined as an ascetic art. The asceticism is by far the most important element and the most difficult to attain. Therein we find

a fundamental difference between East and West. Ascesis, in the West, is a mean towards an end. We instinctively think of passing from pleasure to suffering; from happiness to sanctity. In the East, ascesis is an end in itself and therefore stands in no need of explanation or justification. Strangely enough, the rigor of ascesis is linked in the East to art. In the West, art passes from life to artifice, from the simple to the complex. The *haiku* is as near to life and nature as it can be and as far as it can be from literature and a high flown style. This ascesis is the reverse of vulgarity.

The chief contribution of Japan to world literature is a pure poetry of sensations, found only partially in Western letters. The great difference between the *haiku* and western poetry is this material, physical, immediate character. It is an exaltation of the flesh, not of the sexual. In the *haiku* we find blended in equal proportions, poetry and physical sensation, matter and mind, the creator and creation. The choice of subjects is significant; war, sex, poisonous plants, wild animals, sickness, earthquakes, that is to say all things dangerous or threatening to life, are left out. Man should forget those evils if he aspires to live a life of mental health. The art of *haiku* rejects ugliness, hatred, lying, sentimentality and vulgarity. Zen, on the other hand, accepts those evils, since they are part of the universe. The heat of a summer day, the smoothness of a stone, the whiteness of a crane are beyond all thought, emotion or beauty which the *haiku* tries to capture. Japanese literature, with particular regard to the *haiku*, is not a mystic one. The *haiku* is, of all artistic forms, perhaps the most ambitious. In seventeen syllables it grasps, or tries to grasp, reality. Intellectual and moral elements are ruled out.

The *haiku* has nothing in common with Good, Evil or Beauty. It is a kind of thinking through our senses; the *haiku* is not a symbol. It is not a picture with a meaning pinned on its back. When Bashō says that we should look for the pine in the pine and for the bamboo in the bamboo, he means that we should transcend ourselves and learn. To learn is to sink into the object until its inner nature is revealed to us and awakens our poetic impulse. Thus a falling leaf is not a token or symbol of autumn, or a part of autumn; it is autumn itself.

Here is a *haiku* by Borges and another by Kitō, Buson's disciple:

Hoy no me alegran
los almendros del huerto.
Son tu recuerdo.

The almond blossoms hold no cheer for me today; they are but your memory. Kitō wrote:

Yū-gasumi
Omoeba hedatsu
Mukashi kana.

The mists of evening when I think of them, far off are days of long ago. In the last poem the mist of evening reminds him of days past. The dim twilight is akin to the dim past. For Borges the almond blossoms bring back a happy, and perhaps recent past. The starting point of both pieces is nature. In another *haiku* Borges says:

Desde aquel día
no he movido las piezas
en el tablero.

Since that day I've not moved the pieces on the chessboard. And Shiki's *haiku* expressed a similar thought:

Kimi matsu ya
Mata kogarashi no
Ame ni naru.

Are you still waiting? Once more penetrating blasts turn into cold rain. Shiki looks back on a woman who may still be expecting him. Her (or his) loneliness may be hinted at by the penetrating blasts of wind and rain. Solitude is also the theme of the Borges *haiku*. The lonely chessboard stands for the lonely man. In this *haiku*, solitude is the solitude of the poet; in Shiki's *haiku* solitude is the solitude of the other.

In another *haiku*, Borges suggests:

Algo me han dicho
la tarde y la montaña.
Ya lo he perdido.

The evening and the mountain have told me something; I have already lost it. Teishitsu (1610–1673) also composed a similar idea:

Kore wa kore wa
To bakari, hana no
Yoshino-yama.

My, oh my! No more could I say; viewing flowers on Mount Yoshino. Teishitsu is overwhelmed by a powerful beauty that he cannot describe; in Borges'

case a revelation has been given him by a fleeting moment, a revelation that he is unable to express.

Further, Borges writes:

El hombre ha muerto.
La barba no lo sabe.
Crecen las uñas.

The man is dead. The beard is unaware of it. His nails keep growing. Which is similar to the composition by Bashō (1644–1649), who wrote:

Ie wa mina
Tsue ni shiraga no
Haka mairi.

All the family equipped with staves and greyhaired, visiting the graves. Death, in Borges' haiku, is not represented as pathetic or memorable, sorrowful or fatal, but rather as disgusting and strange, as a curious physical happening. In this particular haiku Borges fulfills a requisite we have already noted; that the stanza is a meeting point of something everlasting, death, and something going on for a while, such as the grim circumstance of the growing beard and nails. Death in Bashō's haiku is presented in a casually indirect way: the poet sees the family visiting graves and feels that those old men and women will soon be dead. The theme of death was forbidden to the writers of haiku; Bashō, a follower of Zen Buddhism, dared to use it.

The moon presents another image to Borges:

Bajo el alero
el espejo no copia
más que la luna.

Under the eaves the mirror holds a single image. The moon.

This is complemented by an earlier haiku by Kikaku (1661–1707) who composed:

Meigetsu ya!
Tatami no ue ni
Matsu no kage.

A brilliant full moon! On the matting of my floor shadows of pines fall. Kikaku sets a picture before us. The shadows of the pines can be seen because

the moon is in the sky. In both poems solitude is signified by the full moon, absence is the real subject of both, and a fleeting point of time is held by the words. An image of eternity in the Japanese poem is in the full moon; eternity in Borges' haiku is reflected in a quiet mirror.

The sense of loneliness may also be found in two other haikus by Borges:

Bajo la luna
la sombra que se alarga
es una sola.

Under the moon the growing shadow is but a single one.

La luna nueva.
Ella también la mira
desde otra puerta.

The new moon. She too is gazing on her from another door.

Let us now compare a Western haiku and an Oriental one. First here is one by Borges:

¿Es un imperio
esa luz que se apaga
o una luciérnaga?

This dying flash is it an empire or a firefly? Compare it to a haiku by Bashō:

Natsu-kusa ya!
Tsuwamono-domo ga
Yume no ato.

*You summer grasses! Glorious dreams of great warriors now only ruins. The subject of both poems is commonplace: the mortality of all things. We should recall, by the way, Seneca's memorable sentence: *Una nox fuit inter urbem maximam et nullam*, in which the last word speaks of the destruction of the entire city. The two haikus quoted express the futility of all human endeavours.*

Next we might look at this haiku by Borges:

La vieja mano
sigue trazando versos
para el olvido.

This old hand goes on writing verses for oblivion. A *haiku* by Jōsō is complementary:

No mo yama mo
Yuki ni torarete
Nani mo nashi.

Both plains and mountains have been captured by the snow. There is nothing left. Jōsō (1662–1704) was one of the ten special disciples of Bashō and a follower of Zen Buddhism. He tells us that nothing lasts. Even the mountains and their strength are blotted out by the most immaterial things such as snow. In Borges' *haiku*, the *haiku* itself is written for final and relentless oblivion.

Two other *haikus* are presented for comparison. Borges writes:

La vasta noche
no es ahora otra cosa
que una fragancia.

The endless night is now but a fragrance. And the poet Mokudō (1665–1723) wrote:

Haru-kaze ya!
Mugi no naka yuku
Mizu no oto.

A gentle spring breeze! Through green barley plants rushes the sound of water. Perhaps this last *haiku* by Borges is one of his best. The poem refers to a single instant where the unseen night reveals herself to the poet. The last line of Mokudō's *haiku* had been used already by his teacher Bashō in his most famous poem. Nobody thought of repetition as plagiarism; nobody thought in terms of personal vanity. The *haiku* is a splendid habit of a whole country, not of an individual. It is considered that poetry in Japan is a living thing, and every person from a laborer to the Emperor is a poet.

In examining these poems it is necessary to ask if there is a certain virtue common to all poetry in all ages and lands. The answer may be sought in Borges' foreword to *El Oro de los Tigres*, that: "to a true poet every single moment of his life, every deed or dream should be felt by him as poetic, since essentially it is poetic" . . . "Beauty is common in

this world." In the foreword to *El Otro, El Mismo* Borges tells us that "the fate of a writer is very strange. At the beginning he is Baroque, insolently Baroque; after long years he may attain, if the stars are auspicious, not simplicity, which is meaningless, but a shy and secret complexity." This is the way of the *haiku*. The brief *haiku* is the apex of a vast pyramid.

BORGES *the Poet*

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