

Jane Reichhold

Sabine Sommerkamp - HAIKU IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA:
ITS INFLUENCE ON IMAGISM, MODERN ART AND LITERATURE

For persons wanting to learn more about haiku, the situation has been like studying the stars through a sieve. No matter how many books one read, persons writing haiku whom you knew, haiku magazines subscribed to, a cohesive understanding of haiku and its place in English language literature was an illusive quest.

Sabine Sommerkamp, for her doctoral dissertation at the University of Hamburg, Germany, under the title, "DER EINFLUSS DES HAIKU AUF IMAGISMUS UND JÜNGERE MODERNE: Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Lyrik", in 1984, has written the first comprehensive explanation of, not only what haiku was for the Japanese before and since 1900, but she has also explored the growing popularity of haiku since its introduction in France in 1906, through the works of American and English authors, starting with Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, William Butler Yeats, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and other influential writers, going on to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Aldous Huxley, J.D. Salinger, concluding with the present haiku writers, still evolving this form of poetry.

It is a joy to find the bits and pieces of information that have gathered around haiku over these years, brought together in a chronological order with a clarity that resembles a flight over your own hometown.

Sabine Sommerkamp assembled an astonishing amount of material. There are over 900 entries in the bibliography, which could be viewed as a lot of dry facts. In her hand, it is not. Her conciseness makes the story of haiku race from idea to idea.

As part of Ms. Sommerkamp's research, she made extended visits to England, Canada and the United States to interview, among others: Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth. Excerpts of their statements about the influence of haiku on their lives and their works is an unique opportunity to learn the backgrounds for their books. Conversations and correspondence with professors Dr. Earl Roy Miner (Princeton University), Dr. Makoto Ueda (Stanford University), Dr. H. Northrop Frye (University of Toronto), balance and give perspective to the thesis theme.

Dr. Sabine Sommerkamp has studied not only the great and wellknown authors influenced by haiku, but she takes a close look at the many authors of privately published haiku books, the journals and magazines in North America, Europe and Japan, for which they write.

Haiku and dance, haiku and music, haiku and film, haiku and photography: all are investigated. She risks what not everyone writing a dissertation on literature could: the use of haiku in therapy and diagnosis for psychiatric treatment. Easier to accept is the idea of using haiku in schools as a teaching tool for language and perception.

However, for me, the greatest feat Sabine Sommerkamp has accomplished in her work is her refusal to take sides in the great debate that begins, "Haiku is this and never that..."

Often writers become infatuated with an aspect of haiku to the point that all haiku are judged against one factor or one set of rules. This limits haiku to the level of the author's arguments.

Haiku, inspite of its brief form, has endless possibilities; many ways of seeing and saying it. Sabine Sommerkamp accepts that haiku can be Zen, so she discusses its relationship with religious feelings. She understands the necessity of clarity and briefness while building a many-faceted polarity to find her way between the haiku which are "too short" and "too long". Her grasp of the thing-ness of haiku, using elements of nature and the seasons, guides her through the welter of efforts made in the name of haiku.

You feel you are in the hands of an authority. As editor of the haiku section of German literary magazine, "apropos", she has earned her credentials.

"DER EINFLUSS DES HAIKU AUF IMAGISMUS UND JÜNGERE MODERNE" is the most complete study of haiku's importance in the western world. For that reason, the dissertation is now being translated into Japanese for publication in serial form in Kobe-Gakuin Daigaku Kyoyobu Kiyo, Bulletin of General Education Division, Kobe-Gakuin University, beginning in October, 1986. Later, it is planned to publish it as a book. For these reasons, it should be made available to the English-reading public. For those wishing to read the thesis in German, it can be obtained from the libraries of the larger universities around the world ("DER EINFLUSS DES HAIKU AUF IMAGISMUS UND JÜNGERE MODERNE: Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Lyrik, Phil. Diss. University Hamburg, 1984).