QUAE SUPERSUNT

THE HERESY OF LATIN HAIKU

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate syllabi, curriculum guides, and the canon-within-the-canon of typically taught Classical authors seem to exclude much hope of achieving the often exalted goal of "thinking outside the box." Yet teachers try, or at least dream, to do something different, if not this year then next. They must try if they are to avoid the insanity that derives from what Classical educator and foreign language guru Lorraine Strasheim used to refer to as the "deadly sameness" of lessons that get reheated and reserved *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*. Perhaps the dreams occur during a stolen moment in line at the copy machine or on the drive to or from school. How can I awaken my students to the excitement of Latin, both the language and its people? How can I rekindle the spark of my own enthusiasm? And how can I accomplish all this while meeting the expectations of the guidelines that shape my classes? No matter what we attempt, we are left with committing heresy. When we consider that heresy is in essence the adherence to one aspect of truth to the exclusion of other components, then we can understand why every sermon, lesson, or lecture is, in a way, heretical. We simply cannot cover it all.

And so we arrive at the heresy of Latin haiku. The blending of a traditional Japanese poetic style and the unique structure of the Latin language can bring new life to any curriculum. It can excite students and teachers alike and, as we shall see, provide a means through which to address the National Foreign Language standards. It can even help in the teaching of grammar and culture as well as in preparation for engagement with A. P. and I. B. authors. It can. We as teachers, however, cannot. We must consider it a successful day in which we have achieved even some of these goals, and it is to this end of what some might consider partial accomplishment that I offer a description of how the reading and writing of Latin haiku can dispel the "deadly sameness" of established curriculum.

For more than two millennia, the Latin language and its literature have helped shape and reflect humanity. Haiku, a relative newcomer to the stage of world literature, is but a little over four hundred years old. Yet their eventual joining seems inevitable. As the primitive settlement of Romulus expanded, it adopted and adapted elements of the surrounding cultures. Menander and Homer found their literary offerings recast in Plautus and Vergil, and Cicero would surely not have so endangered his life in the *Philippics* had he not had Demosthenes for a predecessor. Though the days of Roman territorial conquest are past, Latin does not weep with Alexander, for there are still literary worlds, if not to conquer, then to embrace. The beauty, clarity, and precise yet ethereal quality of

haiku have made it an attractive genre in which modern Latinists can try their hand.

"Latinists, yes," the question may arise, "but what of Latin students?" At this point I would like to focus on the National Foreign Language standards, or "The Five C's," as they are commonly known. By examining how the study of Latin haiku addresses the goals of Communication, Communities, Connections, Comparisons, and Cultures, it will become clear how such units and lessons can help satisfy the needs of the most demanding curriculum. Beginning with communication, we can see that the slight form of the haiku is ideally suited to students at early stages of language acquisition. Three lines of text present a less daunting sight than, say, thirty lines of prose stretching from margin to margin. Grammatical constructions are frequently simple, and since the poem's message must be communicated in such a short space, there is little in the way of expressed context through which to wade. Students quickly grasp the message of a Latin haiku while achieving a sense of accomplishment for having processed one or more complete poems.

After reading several poems, students are often able to compose haiku of their own. Again, the very form of the haiku, together with the experience of success in reading, gives students the belief that composition is an attainable goal. With this confidence established early, students can readily transition to more complex compositions at higher levels of study. Writing Latin haiku can also serve the communication goal in upper levels. When students are asked, for example, to recast as a haiku a moment from the *Aeneid* or Catilinarian conspiracy, they have the opportunity to review fundamental grammar and to demonstrate understanding of a text by presenting it in a different format.[1]

The goal of reaching into the community is one of the most challenging, but at the same time one of the most vital for Latin teachers. As the emphasis on the pragmatic remains entrenched in the American mind, challenges will continue to arise regarding the need to start, build, or continue Latin programs. While it is necessary to maintain the fight

[1]The following is an example of a haiku dealing with Aeneas. It was composed by Rachel Hock, a fourth year Latin A.P. student at North Central High School, Indianapolis, Indiana:

Cruor amoris
Surgit redundans nihil
Sed officio.

In my opinion, the Latin is powerful with robust, violent imagery that nearly bursts the boundaries of the haiku. Rachel has also worked up a loose rendering of her Latin haiku as an English haiku:

Sailing in a sea
Tainted with his lover's blood
He never looks back.

on this battleground by citing improved verbal test scores and writing abilities in English, this is far from a complete strategy. Not only is this argument alone incapable of sustaining the pragmatic onslaught, but it also fails to address the deeper, broader value of Classical education. As the following examples illustrate, interaction with the community is an immediate benefit to all who participate, and a step to building lasting foundations for Classical studies.

In an age of sound bites and rapidly changing visual stimuli, haiku is a viable and enjoyable way to introduce students to the respected Roman tradition of poetry reading. Whether done during a class period or after school, community members such as parents, business partners, or local poets can be invited to share in the experience. When students read aloud their compositions and discuss their inspiration and the challenges of composition, the community becomes privy to what teachers know so well, that students are capable of more than we imagine. When the students receive feedback from their audience, either from established poets or perhaps from Japanese citizens who enjoy seeing part of their culture given new birth, they realize that what they have composed is respected, authentic art.

Another avenue for community involvement is through a local bookstore. Frequently bookstores allow artists or writers to perform, and local establishments are often supportive of area schools. Not only does a student-led reading and discussion of original poems serve as a gift to the community, but it also establishes the Latin program and the cause of Classics more firmly in the broader community awareness.

The goal of connections can be one of the most interesting to approach, because it involves joining with other disciplines. One hallmark of Japanese art is watercolor. A combined unit with a school's art department not only introduces Latin students to this graphic element of Japanese art, which can then be employed to illustrate the students' own poems, but also allows students who may not study Latin or any foreign language to see some of the exciting and non-traditional activities taking place.

Another art form often associated with Japanese is calligraphy, and here is a natural connection with Latin. As Latin was transmitted in written form, the letter shapes most often took on one style of calligraphy after another, from Roman Rustic of the first century through Gothic Textura Quadrata, or Blackletter, in the Middle Ages. A wonderful book by Marc Drogin, *Medieval Calligraphy: It's History and Technique* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1980) not only provides a history of these scripts, complete with manuscript samples, but also includes detailed and easy to use diagrams for how to make all the letter shapes. With even a little practice, neophytes can achieve a certain measure of accomplishment, and haiku copied in a traditional Latin calligraphic style connect even further the East with the West.

Latin students typically explore the comparisons between the cultures and languages of ancient Rome and the modern United States, but

few compare Rome with other modern societies. As Latin teachers and Classicists seek to establish or maintain Latin as the cornerstone of foreign language study, interaction rather than competition is the key to success. A cross-language haiku project is an optimal way to accomplish this.

One such project involves combining students from Latin and one or more other language classes. After introducing all the students to the genre of haiku, and building on whatever knowledge they already have of this form, the students then compose haiku in their own language of study. After providing English translations of their poems, students exchange their haiku and translate the work of their peers, again into their language of study. This activity provides a springboard for fruitful discussion on the similarities and differences between the culture and language of the Romans and those of others. In each language students must grapple with how to express certain words and ideas for which they may not have direct equivalents. By joining again at the end of the project to share their works, they can explore further the differences and similarities in idiom and subject matter.

The final standard relating to culture has already been addressed in several of the activities already described, but here we are concerned primarily with the practices and perspectives of the ancient Roman culture. By reading and composing Latin haiku, students can better assess the significance of traditional Roman poetic genres and themes. What can be understood, for example, from the commonplace use of dactylic hexameter, the popularity of a martial epic such as the *Aeneid*, or a vocabulary rich in synonyms for verbs of killing? Though teachers can approach such topics in a variety of ways, such understandings come into sharper relief when contrasted with the form and style of traditional haiku.

It is hoped that the above suggestions and ideas will launch further exploration of Latin haiku in the classroom. The activities described here are by no means inclusive of all that can be done with this poetic genre. As a necessary heresy, this article is but a step in exploring the Latin connection to the world at large. Quintilian noted, "*satura tota nostra est*" (*Inst*. 10.1.93). Perhaps we can now say that haiku is ours, too.

STEVEN R. PERKINS
North Central High School
sperkins@nclatin.org