

Poetry As Resistance: An Ecocritical Reading Of Sameh Derouich's Haiku

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Introduction

Sameh Derouich is a pioneer of Moroccan haiku who published his first haiku collections in 2015, in post Arab Spring Morocco¹. *100 Haiku, I Am Many* and *Illuminating Beetles* are the titles of his three haiku collections. Derouich who is a prolific writer has also published many collections in other poetic forms². While he has begun his literary career as a free verse poet, Derouich moved a few years ago to haiku poetry, writing the innovative poems he is best known for. More than a type of poetry, his haiku is an ecological project of an extraordinary range. By writing complex and elusive, yet concise visual-verbal haiku, he engages singularly with being on earth. This article aims at developing an eco-poetic approach to Sameh Derouich's haiku poetry. I propose to read the poet's recent poetry collections as a response to the contemporary environmental crisis as well as a way of resisting the ordinary and the obvious. Derouich broke away from familiar ways of verse writing in Morocco and adopted a poetic form which is regarded by many Moroccan poets as an inferior form of poetry writing. In spite of its pronounced linguistic economy, haiku poetry helps him challenge the confines of the city and express an acute awareness of the limitations of the urban space he lives in. On the other hand, the haiku form reflects the city experience itself; its constrained length resembles the closed spaces of the city.

Haiku is a poetic form that has centuries of tradition behind it. It is usually associated with the old haiku poets, Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson and Kobayashi Issa. It was first invented in the 16th century when Basho transformed the hokku from its status as the introduction of haikai into an independent form of poetry. In the 19th century, Shiki coined the term haiku to designate an independent 5-7-5 syllable poem with a season word³. But haiku has managed to cross the Pacific and thrive so far from its place of origin. It has evolved beyond its early stages into an international poetry form which is free from the traditional rules set by early Japanese haiku poets. It is characterized by its brevity, its unadorned language and its concrete imagery. The haiku moment describes a situation which gives the author insight into the mystery of existence.

An in-depth analysis of Derouich's poems reveals that there are three characteristics in his haiku poetry: a startling use of language, surprising imagery and a juxtaposition of lines that subverts expectations. These qualities help Derouich tie his haiku poems together and achieve a variety of purposes: he drops away the boundaries between the self and the world or the city and the countryside, paving the way for a trans-influence of energies, human and natural. Derouich's poems are riddled with an urge to dismantle boundaries between humans and elements of nature. For him, nature is not some idealized place of nostalgia and longing, but rather an equal other. The poet does not merely seek beauty in nature and faithfully reproduce it in his haiku. His haiku poems are characterized by the qualities that form the crux of modern poetry: complexity, passion and imagination. They demonstrate an ecological

¹Derouich expanded the haiku experience to art visual forms of expression and created "The Frogs Club" which is composed of various poets and artists from Oujda in tribute to Basho's famous frog haiku.

²*With an Acrobat's Agility* (2015) and *The Wanderings of Derouich* (2015) are the titles of poetry collections Sameh Derouich wrote in free verse.

³Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* (University of Toronto Press, 1976) 8.

thinking grounded in the sense of caring for the natural world. His poems are part of the history of Gafayt⁴, his native village, socially and environmentally.

Following the theoretical advances of Jonathan Bate⁵ and Scott J. Bryson⁶, I will present the ways in which Derouich's conception of "nature" is close to the implications engendered by ecological awareness. Bryson defines one of the "three primary characteristics of ecopoetry" to be "an ecological and biocentric perspective recognizing the interdependent nature of the world" (2). In considering Derouich as an ecological poet, many questions arise: if ecological thinking ultimately implies that we are all connected, what exactly does this mean in the case of Derouich? What is the significance of the natural world in his haiku? I will attempt to answer these questions by using poems published in Derouich's haiku collections as a corpus. In the sections that follow, I first scrutinize Derouich's haiku closely for images, overlapping voices, non logical relations, and suggestiveness and explain how they locate him in ecopoetry. Then, I show that Derouich takes solace in a return to nature, and that he does so subversively through his experimentations with haiku.

Derouich's Poetic ecology

At the heart of Derouich's haiku is the awareness that everything changes and everything is connected. As Jane Hirshfield writes in her book, *The Heart of Haiku*, "Poetry can be thought of [as] the recognition of impermanence, ceaseless alternation, and interdependence—the connection of each person, creature, event, and object with every other" (142). Derouich's haiku do not merely embrace nonhuman nature; they respect its selfhood and give rivers and streams, trees and birds a life of their own. In the following poem, Derouich projects his own body into nature, and conversely, practicing a radical breaking of the boundaries between poetry and nature.

بحجر حفرت قلبا،
حين أمر
أحس للصفصافة نبضا.⁷

[Translation]

With a stone I dug a heart,
when I pass by
I feel the pulse of the willow tree.⁸

The poem could only have been written by a person in love with nature, one who sees with his whole body. The choice of the word "dug" tells us much about what to see and feel in the poem, and how to interpret the poet's relationship to nature. The unexpectedness of this word draws us right away in the poem. How can one dig a heart? And whose heart is it? The poet says that the speaker dug a heart with a stone and that he can hear the pulse of the willow tree when he passes by. The words are simple but they tell a very improbable story. It is common to engrave hearts or the names of the beloved on trees; yet, hearing the throbbing heart of a tree is a very improbable experience. The poem reveals the emotional state of the speaker; he

⁴A small town in the province of Jerada in the east of Morocco.

⁵Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001)

⁶J. Scott Bryson, *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2005)

⁷*Illuminating Beetles* (The Literary Convoy Publications) 57.

⁸All translations are mine.

must be in love, so much in love that he can hear the pulse of the heart he dug in the willow tree. But this haiku is open to another interpretation which is very telling of the relationship between Derouich and the natural world. It plunges us into a life where there is no difference between elements of nature and us. Trees are living beings with pulsating hearts. The heart dug by the speaker and the tree's heart are one heart that says how interconnected humans and non humans are.

Another poem shows how haiku provides the poet with a form that helps him reconfigure and expand the notion of nature poetry. Intimate, this haiku awakens both senses and psyche and establishes a new way of existing in the world. As Jonathan Bate explains, ecopoetry "is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it" (2).

صباح صباح،
وجهي على صفحة الماء
تخالجه السماء⁹

[Translation]

A cloudless morning,
my face on the surface of water
cuddled by the sky.

The poet has created a poem that is only half finished, engaging thus the reader in co-creating it. The above haiku offers a unique joining of elements; it presents a surrealist scene in which the speaker's face is simultaneously on the surface of water and in the sky. Line three moves the narrative in ways we couldn't have expected. The word "cuddled" surprises by its tenderness; yet, it is necessary because it brings us back to the first line. The weather is fine; there are no clouds in the sky. The river is calm and its surface reflects the speaker's face. However, the strange juxtaposition of imagery is meant not merely to describe the scene but to express the way it is experienced by the speaker. The poem expresses Derouich's vibrant, multi-sensorial ecology since it relies on the senses of sight and touch as the site of perception and corporeal immersion in nature. The word "cuddled" shows how intimate the relationship between the speaker and nature is. It expresses the poet's wish to dissipate the self in a larger living whole.

Haiku provides Derouich with a form through which he can remember or imaginatively re-experience the natural landscapes that are absent from the city. Struggling to exist in an unfamiliar space, the poet recreates his everyday world through haiku. He turns reverie, solitude, and walking into haiku poems. He retrieves nature through words while his real world, the city does not offer the scenes he celebrates. Solitary reflection upon the natural world holds long associations with the Romantic Movement; but far from advocating romanticized aesthetics, Derouich adopts anti-Romantic and anti-pastoral concepts that ask for a redefinition of nature itself. He is not an escapist romantic who finds refuge in his memories; he is a rebel and his haiku are a linguistic struggle against environmental injustice. As Neil Astley writes in her introduction to *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems*, "Ecopoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues [...] Ecopoems dramatize the dangers and poverty of a modern world perilously cut off from nature and ruled by technology, self-interest and economic power"(15).

⁹ *Illuminating Beetles* 25

بصدق الرقراق،
اليوم أسر لي وادي "زا":
أنت ضفتي الثالثة!¹⁰

[Translation]

With his flowing honesty,
Za river told me today:
you are my third bank!

Za is a large river which flows through many towns in the east of Morocco. However, both human and industrial waste is choking the river. Today, water pollution is a serious threat in this region. However, instead of overtly calling attention to the devastating effects of the river's pollution on the local ecosystem, Derouich has chosen to pay tribute to Za river by giving it a voice. He thus encourages an awareness that recognizes interaction between all living beings and asks his readers to focus on the relationship between themselves and their immediate environment. Derouich knows he may be engaging in a losing battle, but his determination to carry through propels him, and thus his ecologically oriented haiku, onwards. Telling him, "you are my third bank," Za river reminds him that his role is to be a catalyst for its needs. Derouich asks us to develop a new relationship with the earth and encourages an awareness that recognizes interconnection between all living beings. He proclaims a new kind of nature that is purposefully located in the space offered by his haiku. His poetry is the lyrical evocation of home; "home" in the sense of "the oikos", "humankind's original habitat in nature". As Jonathan Bate explains, "the oikos created by the poem is the place of dwelling" (75), and "the qualities of poetic language are attuned ecologically such that the "meter itself—a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat—is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself" (76).

Derouich's haiku invoke modes of being that are close to meditation and the unconscious; they are inhabited by a sense of peacefulness and belonging within the cyclical flow of time. In the following haiku, the poet's self dissolves into egolessness and outer reality is evoked in terms of inner experience.

أنا والقمر،
وجهان لخلوة واحدة،
معا، نضيء في خشوع.¹¹

[Translation]

The moon and me,
two faces of the same retreat,
together we shine in devotion.

Instead of offering us a romantic landscape where the speaker finds solitary refuge in nature and meditates about life during a moon-lit night, the poet uses imagery in a unique way that opens the poem to multiple interpretations. The poem begins with what appears to be a naturalistic description but the two last lines tease the reader's imagination and invite him to complete a half-finished story. Solitude provides the speaker with an extraordinary opportunity to explore his mind and reflect on his relationship with the universe. He and the

¹⁰ *Illuminating Beetles* 16

¹¹ *Illuminating Beetles* 26

moon are equal beings reunited in the worship of God. But the word “moon” opens up to include multiple readings. The poem can hence also be the metaphorical description of the intimate encounter of two lovers.

Derouich does not directly address the issues of environmental destruction and ecological (im)balance. By dissolving the boundaries of the urban and the rural, the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the technological, he projects a new kind of nature into the city space. Confronting urbanity, ecology, and the environment, his haiku perform a radical dismantling of the nature/city binary to create a new space in poetry.

وسط المدينة،
أحدق في أزهار برية
كأبله.¹²

[Translation]

In the middle of the city,
I stare at wild flowers
like a fool.

The poem is minimalistic; it is an execution of the maxim, “less is more”. It conveys a mindfulness to details in the space Derouich lives in as well as poignant recollections of the places he left behind. The flowers seem uncannily familiar; the city loses its immediacy. The wild flowers are extracted from a scene in the past but seem to come from somewhere far distant. They echo the beauty of faraway places as if to erase the desolation of current surroundings. While an initial reading may suggest only the poet’s love for nature, attentiveness to line one and line three (in the middle of the city/like a fool) shows that Derouich does not merely express his nostalgia for a lost natural environment; his haiku conveys the paradoxical experience of adjusting to a new environment while simultaneously longing for home. This poem can thus be read as a metaphysical enquiry which recognizes our profound connection with the natural world and a critique of the absence of nature from the urban space.

الوادي،
ها هو بين العمارات
يتفقد مجراه.¹³

[Translation]

The river,
here it is between the buildings
seeking its course.

This is another poem which expresses Derouich’s protest against the disjunction between people and the cycles of nature. Instead of conveying the emotional impact of being uprooted, the poet creates a poetry of resistance to an urbanity in which nature has no place. The no longer existing river which the poet imagines is seeking its course can stand for the poet’s inability to find peace in a crowded urban life. Derouich is reluctant to locate himself in the present and stubbornly sticks to his past memories and to the inevitable seasonal progression that allows occasional glimpses of the familiar. His is an attempt to remember

¹²I am Many 4

¹³Illuminating Beetles 71

home and come to terms with his new life in the city; but it is also an effort to denounce environmental injustice.

النرامواي،
بيدو برأسين،
مثل أم أربعة و أربعين.¹⁴

[Translation]

The tramway,
seems to have two heads,
like the centipede.

Struggling to exist in an unfamiliar space, the poet recreates his everyday world through haiku poems which suggest that there is only the present—though a deep present that resounds with memory. This is another poem which shows how haiku poetry provides Derouich with a form through which he can imaginatively re-experience the natural landscapes that are missing in the city.

سحابة د كناء،
خرير السواقي أيضاً
تكرر.¹⁵

[Translation]

A gloomy cloud,
the burbling of streams is also
perturbed.

In another haiku, the natural environment is used to express the poet's gloomy state of mind. Nature's state is joined to the poet's feelings through a silent metaphor. The very sound of water is altered; the scene is both powerfully strong and painfully obscure. The grim environment and the poet's mood are probably the result of the change that negatively affected nature. Derouich conveys the change of the seasons not with a sense of renewal but as a reflection on the physical and psychological ravages of rapid industrialization.

Haiku as resistance

According to James Longenbach, "The marginality of poetry is in many ways the source of its power, a power contingent on poetry's capacity to resist itself more strenuously than it is resisted by the culture at large" (1)¹⁶. Derouich was liberated by the marginality of haiku poetry to express his subversive ideas. Haiku can be considered as a form of struggle for the power of expression and speech. To protest against the new waste land, a new kind of poetry was required. Derouich reinvented the haiku and transformed it into a Moroccan poetry form which he opposed to the existing poetry, breaking thus the central authority of Morocco's literary tradition and giving nature a renewed authority. His haiku are written in opposition to a cultural apparatus and a literary tradition that inferiorises immediacy. But, can haiku

¹⁴ *Illuminating Beetles* 78

¹⁵ *I am Many* 17

¹⁶ James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2004)

transform the world? Can poetry do anything about global warming, water and air pollution, the destruction of forests? For many, poetry is powerless, incapable of changing people or communities. In *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, a book about the cultural power of poetry, American poet Adrienne Rich explains that poetry is as necessary to daily life as clean air, roads and water, not because of its immediate political function, but because it helps us see the world in a new way.

Poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire ... where every public decision has to be justified in the scales of corporate profits, poetry unsettles these apparently self-evident propositions- not through ideology, by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire. (xx-xi)

Jane Hirshfield also writes about poetry's unexampled power in *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. According to her, poems instruct us how to see, hear and feel.

Poetry's addition to our lives takes place in the border realm where inner and outer, actual and possible, experienced and imaginable, heard and silent, meet. The gift of poetry is that its seeing is not our usual seeing, its hearing is not our usual hearing, its knowing is not our usual knowing, its will is not our usual will. In a poem, everything travels both inward and outward. (12)

In *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, John Felstiner also explains how poems word our experience of things and shape our changing consciousness of the world around us. For him, "Once alerted, our eye and ear find environmental imprint and impetus running through a long legacy. Starting with Native American song, the Bible, Asian haiku, and much else, poetry more than any other kind of speech reveals the vital signs and warning signs of our tenancy on earth" (4).

Derouich's poems express a real desire for creating change, but they are not explicitly activist. According to Jonathan Bate, even though ecopoetry is meant to encourage "doing," its language must achieve this through the re-creation of experience rather than any explicit political activism¹⁷. Derouich writes dissident poetry, not protest poetry. James Scully explains the difference between the two terms in his book, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*:

Most protest poetry is conceptually shallow ... such poetry is issue-bound, spectatorial- rarely the function of an engaged artistic life ... it tends to be reactive, victim-oriented, incapacitated ... it seldom speaks the active rage or resolution of ... oppressed or exploited people ... dissident poetry, however, does not respect boundaries between private and public, self and other. In breaking the boundaries, it breaks silences: speaking for, or at best with, the silenced; opening poetry up, putting it in the middle of life ... it is a poetry that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it. (xv)

¹⁷*The Song of the Earth* 42

Derouich's haiku exemplifies the struggle to change not the world, but the eyes that look at it. Careful reading of his haiku shows the transformative language of his poems. The choice of words offers provocative explorations of experimentation with temporality and experience. His haiku are subversive, deviant and built on multiple layers of meaning. They renovate, expand, and intensify both experience and the range of language. His poems do not just express; they make us see and discover the world in a way that would be impossible otherwise. In his them, the objects of the world are made new, transformed by their passage through the poet's imagination. His haiku have an ability to surprise and puzzle that far exceeds what we might expect from their miniature dimensions. Like Traditional haiku masters, Derouich expresses thoughts of boundless depth and beauty in a few words. "The conciseness of haiku enables [poets] to achieve an aesthetically satisfying truth and simplicity, and at the same time an intellectually stimulating suggestiveness and complexity, of which no other genre is capable."¹⁸ Jane Hirshfield also explains how haiku poems are paradoxical due to their "scale and speed." "In the moment of haiku perception, something outer is seen, heard, tasted, felt, emplaced in a scene or context. That new perception then seeds an inner response beyond paraphrase, name, or any other form of containment" (61)¹⁹. However, Haiku is unreadable except when raised by the awakened imaginative mind. What is fascinating about Derouich's haiku is his way of ending-the-poem-without-ending. Readers are invited to open their selves wide enough to embrace all that the poems offer them and contribute to their meaning. In Derouich's haiku, both author and reader participate in the creative and re-creative process. According to Makoto Ueda, haiku works as a literary artistic experience both for writers and readers. "Any poem demands a measure of active participation on the part of the reader, but this is especially true of haiku. With only slight exaggeration it might be said that the haiku poet completes only one half of his poem, leaving the other half to be supplied in the reader's imagination" (vii)²⁰.

The following poem is an example of how Derouich shakes out old linguistic habits and transforms poetry itself into an organ of perception. The poem which does not simply express; it makes and sounds in a startling way. The unexpectedness of its words is more than sustained by the freshness of imagery. The reader feels the tactile pleasure of language. Line one offers an interesting example of the way Derouich breaks away from conventional linguistic properties in order to express the fusion between himself and all that lives. The poet disappears into nature, complicating thus the poem's ecology by immersing the reader in a multi-sensorial ecosystem with the "I" standing for all the living beings, and the falling dewdrops introducing new sensory experiences: olfactory, sonic, and haptic.

مَا أَكْثَرَ نِي
مَعَ قَطْرَاتِ النَّدى
أَنْقَاطِرٍ²¹.

[Translation]

I am many
I grow
with falling dewdrops.

¹⁸Mike Spikes, "Haiku and Ockham's Razor: The Example of Jack Kerouac" *Modern Haiku* 44.2 (Summer 2013): 59. http://www.modernhaiku.org/issue44-2/MH44-2_HaikuOckhamsRazor-Kerouac-Spikes-2013.pdf

¹⁹*The Heart of Haiku* (Kindle Edition. Amazon Digital Services, 2011)

²⁰*Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* (University of Toronto Press, 1976)

²¹ *I am Many* 95

Language itself is a cultural litter to be recycled and renewed. Applying the aesthetics of haiku gave Derouich a new angle and a new vocabulary. The following haiku offers an example of the way the poet revels in duplicity and disjunction.

بركة صافية ،
العصافير
تحلق في الأعماق²².

[Translation]

A clear pond,
The birds
Fly deep inside me.

The thrill of this poem lies in its unpredictability. The haiku evades definite interpretation in spite of the familiar words it uses. There are hints of a back story, but the understated quality of the poem makes the emotion conveyed raw and powerful. In his search for sincere self-expression, Derouich juxtaposes the three lines of his haiku in a disturbing way: a clear pond, flying birds and the speaker's inner self. At first reading, the poem seems paradoxical. The speaker sees the reflection of the flying birds on the clear surface of water but the third line says that they fly inside him. What was the poet thinking, feeling when he composed this poem? What was the occasion? The poet is many different things at different times. These multiple selves exist contemporaneously; they are connected by their relationship to nature. The significance of the poem is not in the words, but in the wordless part of the haiku — the pauses, the silences, the unspoken associations. The poem is not just the outer scene it describes; the surprising juxtaposition of the lines helps render an ordinary moment in a unique way. We don't only sense vibration in water, but we also feel its depth and temperature. The speaker is so absorbed in the calmness of the scene that he becomes part of it. He believes living beings and himself are equal and interdependent. He is not just an observer; he is the sky where the birds fly. Birds use vision to navigate deep inside him, and this is where they will find their way home. Or maybe the speaker expresses his desire to soar, to be as free as birds.

هذا صفيها،
بداخلي
تزمجر الريح²³.

[Translation]

This is her whistling,
inside me
the roaring wind.

Breaking away from expectation and preconceptions of what a poem is, hierarchies are broken down and replaced by uncertainty, indeterminacy and pluralities. In this poem, the wind is rumbling inside the speaker. The natural environment which is in traditional haiku a

²²I am Many 6

²³Illuminating Beetles 90

source of peace and rejuvenation is here invoked to reflect feelings of uncertainty and restlessness. Again, something outer is seen, heard, tasted, and felt. But deliberate silence incites us to imagine what the author does not overtly express, thus transforming an intimate experience into something the reader can engage with. The poem is charged with anxiety and rage. The speaker is angry; but the poem does not tell us what happened. In the first and third lines, the roaring wind is used, creating a vivid image of vocal energy; whilst the second line hints at the untold story of the poem. The poem is consonant with Derouich's poetic project as a whole: the oneness between all living beings. But the wind which roars inside the speaker is both the wind and more than the wind. The inward life of the speaker is transfigured into a material substance, a fragrance and a sound. The choice of the image and the words can only originate from all the violence that his psyche must have undergone.

Conclusion:

Careful ecocritical reading of Derouich's haiku poetry brings about a new understanding and placement of his haiku poems. Derouich does not write haiku because he lacks the linguistic facility to compose in longer forms. He is a brilliant novelist and free verse poet. The exploration of his haiku does not exhaust their potential meanings. On the contrary, it highlights the fact that haiku poetry contains multiple contradictory senses, and gives a new way of understanding and valuing the genre's brevity. Furthermore, Derouich is not someone in a privileged position who is unaffected by the world and aloof from the reader. His poems are not merely intimate or confessional; they have epistemological, ontological, social and political import and they insist on the participation of the reader. Derouich is a haiku writer who meditates and seeks the quiet voice within himself. The cultivation of intimacy and the process of meditation lie at the heart of his poems and his ecological thinking and being. In letting go of illusions of idealized nature, he offers a renewed version of romantic poetry which is combined with an ecologically informed practice.

Derouich's haiku is intimately tied to the history of the Moroccan countryside, socially and environmentally. Yet, there is no need to be acquainted with the cultural context to respond to his poems. Derouich celebrates the recurrence of natural cycles by including references to nature that situate his poems in a universal context. His poems can be defined in their linguistic immediacy; unmediated by cultural pre-requisites. Like other haiku writers, Derouich is an international citizen of the world using haiku to bridge cultures. As Bruce Ross writes, "traditional haiku poetics became opened up to the cultural traditions and settings of any given country." The linguistic and cultural differences between Japan and the other countries freed "world cultures to make the form of haiku their own while, moreover, also incorporating the poetic sound values of their own language into haiku."²⁴ Derouich's haiku deserve wide readership and recognition for their aesthetic and emotional value and for their vast glimpses of the natural world. They help to illuminate the role of nature in our daily life and to renew our relation with the earth. Derouich is a masterful haiku poet and his ecology is vital to his mastery.

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