

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM READING JULIEN VOCANCE'S  
*ONE HUNDRED VISIONS OF WAR?*

Julien Vocance. *One Hundred Visions of War*. Translated from the French by Alfred Nicol. Wiseblood Books, 2022.

REVIEWED BY JOHN ZHENG

Thanks to Alfred Nicol's thoughtful translation of Julien Vocance's *One Hundred Visions of War* (*Cent visions de guerre*) from the French, contemporary readers are bestowed a valuable opportunity to read how Vocance presents in the form of haiku a sequence of horrible visions of the First World War. This translation is significant because it helps readers relate to the war in Ukraine. About this, the translator emailed to this reviewer, "In fact, the war in Ukraine also served as prelude to my translating this work. The scenes we began to see on the nightly news immediately following the invasion of Ukraine called to mind Vocance's WWI poem, but it was terribly apparent that the talking heads on television did not include people with direct experience of the war. Rather than watch the news in quiet despair, I decided to add the soldier-poet's voice to the discussion and set about translating his poem." Nicol's words show his responsibility as a serious translator and his sense of justice as a sympathetic human being.

Julien Vocance is the pen name of Joseph Seguin, a French poet born in 1878. *One Hundred Visions of War*, published in 1916, marked his debut as a poet. It is a sequential poem that combines one hundred haiku to show different war views. As a poet interested in Japanese haiku, Vocance must know that haiku can be the ideal form to present not only the visual moments of war but momentary stays against confusion and trauma. These moments, when strung together, are like a shocking montage recurring visually and mentally. A few of Vocance's haiku are short poems composed in three long lines, so they lack the terseness of haiku. To make them read like haiku, the translator has done a wonderful job by using the 5-7-5 pattern, as Nicol says in his introduction: "I have chosen to count syllables in making these translations, adhering to the traditional 5-7-5 pattern, as Vocance himself did not, to ensure that these short poems are recognizable to contemporary readers as the haiku he clearly intended them to be." The book title, as Nicol mentions, reflects the Japanese influence as well, as it echoes the title of *One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji*, the three volumes of woodblock prints by Katshushika Hokusai (1760-1849), a ukiyo-e artist of the Edo Period. Probably because of that, the translator uses Hokusai's woodblock print as the interior image, a portion of which is used on the front book cover.

Different from many haiku collections that focus on describing nature's beauty, Vocance's book, like a collection of woodblock prints, focuses on human cruelty. In this sense, *One Hundred Visions of War* is a se-

quence of senryu, not haiku, because senryu ridicules human flaws with a satiric or ironic tone. It is a collage, as powerful as Picasso's *Guernica*, that assembles the disharmonious fragments of nature and humans as well as the physical and psychological suffering of human beings from an evil force of war, as seen in these two fragments:

Castles from legends,  
market towns from old etchings,  
all razed in one day. (p. 37)

A sea of fire!  
The shells set the swamp ablaze.  
The vines are crackling. (p. 49)

These horrendous views are shocking to the eye and mind. The war razes to the ground legendary castles and old towns with historic etchings and sets fire to nature. Nature, in other words, is an image of death, as symbolized by a beetle in the following haiku:

A wriggling beetle,  
upside down on the slick slope,  
pinned by his pack's weight. (p. 47)

The deeper meaning of this haiku, however, is the suffering of human beings because the pinned beetle represents an endured situation of human torment.

Further, with its focus on war, suffering, and death, *One Hundred Visions of War* carries a bitter sense of humor or a funny tone that works to alleviate emotional pains. The following vision conveys such a sense of humor:

The small, gray-breasted  
*taube* dropping its pigeon shit:  
a bomb or rocket. (p. 20)

Here, *taube* is a pun. The translator provides a helpful footnote that *taube* is a German word meaning dove, but it is also the name of a birdlike German plane bombing France in the First World War. So, the pun and the juxtaposition of pigeon droppings upon bombs and rockets creates immediately a tragic irony, thus adding a bitter tone of humor to the tragedy. Ironically, *taube* or dove, which is supposed to mean peace or compromise, gains a new meaning of war and anti-peace.

Humor is a necessary haiku element. It sparks like healing in a painful situation. In the following haiku the irony is that the soldier's coexistence with trench mice is unavoidable:

Smelly old field mice,  
at least don't sing. We share  
one bowl, one shelter. (p. 57)

In addition, humor carries not just an ironic tone but presents a concrete, “panting” view, as in this haiku:

The cannons exhale  
flames, like blasts from a forge—  
panting from slaughtering. (p. 59)

It uses personification and simile to vivify a killing ground where even the cannons used to slaughter human lives are tired from exhaling and panting. In the following haiku, black humor makes a grimace when bullets almost kill the soldier. The irony is that even the woolens can be crusted like scars:

To reach my skin, how  
would bullets ever get through  
my crusted woolens?

As a soldier who throws himself into war, Vocance gains firsthand experience and witnesses with his naked eye the slaughter of human lives like worthless weeds:

Bloody machine gun.  
Before it died, it spread out  
its fan of corpses. (p. 62)

This visual horror tells us that war is a meat grinder that kills soldiers in large numbers. In his preface to Nicol's translation, Dana Gioia mentions that the shocking number of casualties from the Battle of Verdun alone is 700,000, “not counting the ‘lightly wounded.’ Losses were nearly equal on either side. There were too many corpses to be adequately counted or buried” (v). See how the following two haiku present the visually stunning views of bodies:

Blackening three months  
between the trenches, the dead  
have lost all their hair. (p. 3)

Rumors of widows  
and orphans swarm over  
these poor pale bodies. (p. 4)

Vocance is wounded in a battle. The following haiku presents a brave yet wounded soldier shouting to encourage his comrades to win although he is not able to fight side by side with them:

Comrades, my brothers,  
we've suffered a lot...Enough.  
Go win without me. (p. 101)

But any battle means casualties and is the fuse of human misery. History tells us that human misery moves in a gyre and never comes to an end since cruelty and selfishness are the two inseparable components of the human mind. Tragedies, like preset scenes, stage themselves as if they are devils to turn the world once again into turmoil, as described by William Butler Yeats in "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

In Vocance's eye, civilization is a symbol of desolation with both sides as sworn enemies trying to destroy each other:

Two rows of trenches,  
Two lines of barbed-wire fences:  
Civilization. (p. 102)

A careful reader will notice the use of the colon to suggest a metaphoric comparison. Suggestion, a basic element of haiku, challenges a reader to think and link the two parts of the haiku for a second looking, which is an aesthetic process. Moreover, the ironic tone also suggests that killing and separating each other are hard facts of civilization. Therefore, the colon here not only suggests a comparison but reveals the true sense of civilization symbolized by trenches and barbed wires. In today's world, the war in Ukraine serves as a good footnote to this haiku because it proves that humans have never learned a good lesson from previous world wars.

In comparison to the colon, the semicolon functions technically as a better haiku element for metaphoric comparison. It avoids the obvious comparison by means of simile or metaphor but divides the two parts as independent phrases for the reader to link and juxtapose through an aesthetic reading. For example, this haiku—

A movement of troops;  
the noise of cracked tambourines  
fading in the fog. (p. 27)

—is separated by a semicolon into two independent parts, but the punctuation challenges the reader to link rather than divide them. So, the linkage of “movement” to “noise” and of “troops” to “cracked tambourines fading in the fog” creates at once a view of troops retreating in a hurry.

It is evident that *One Hundred Visions of War* is a vivid psycho-historic record that offers a window into how Vocance turns his war experience into a slideshow of the violent war. It should provoke deep thinking about whether humans must use war to destroy each other or settle conflicts, must live each day as doomsday, or must die in terror. How can we prevent the terror described in the following haiku from happening again in our current world:

Terror in his eyes,  
his own death snarling at him,  
he bolts from the trench. (p. 60)

and how can we avoid the recurrence of tragedies witnessed in the following haiku:

Every day, you see  
new ones spring up from the ground:  
white wooden crosses. (p. 26)

Every human needs to ask such questions as the world is elevating its anxiety level and understand this world should not be the arena for the win-or-lose game.

It can be reckoned that Julien Vocance’s name may have faded out of sight in his readership though a century ago he was one of the first French poets to explore Japanese haiku and use this terse form to record his war experience. Today, his name shines again through the significant translation of *One Hundred Visions of War*. Its value, as the translator asserts in the introduction, lies “in its witness to the experience of the human being caught up in a battle” (xi). Therefore, the publication of Vocance’s haiku book is timely and illuminating especially when today’s world seems to be standing on the brink of chaos. In short, Nicol deserves acclamation for doing a truly meaningful translation.