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The vacant eye

by J. C. Scharl

One Hundred Visions of War, Alfred Nicol's translation of Julien Vocance's *Cent visions de guerre*, is a remarkable volume. It is a new edition—not merely a new translation—of Vocance's little-known masterpiece of one hundred haiku written around the year 1915 describing the horrors of World War I.

As Dana Gioia writes in the preface to Nicol's translation, in the face of the Great War, "old worldviews no longer fit the horrific reality. Artists had to reimagine the modern world and develop ways to present it truthfully." This resulted in an explosion of poetic development, from Charles Péguy's attempt to render the war in traditional martial forms (and thereby to redeem the suffering caused) to Guillaume Apollinaire's farcical "evasion of the national nightmare," as Gioia describes it, to David Jones's effort to elevate and hallow the blasted reality of the war into a *chanson de geste*. If Jones's epic *In Parenthesis* stands at one end of the spectrum, Vocance's volume is at the other, unmatched for its spareness and clarity.

Of the scores of poetic voices forged in the trenches, Vocance's is unique, for only he brought the haiku, with its fierce limitations, to bear on this context. *Cent visions de guerre* is one of the first major attempts to compose haiku in a Western language. Traditionally, haiku are almost always based on nature; they are brief and often faintly melancholic considerations of flowers, fruits, trees, waterfalls, mountains, the seasons, and the passage of time. Before Vocance, poets did not often use haiku to describe human action or to tell a story. Traditional haiku is not a narrative form but a contemplative one that focuses on subtle shifts in nature and time rather than violent upheaval and destruction.

Vocance exploits the attentive nature of haiku, composing poems that exist simply to bear witness. He is not here to reflect, to depict, to compare the war to other things, or even to make claims or assertions. He is here to see and say, as in the fourteenth haiku:

Out of the east springs
the dragon, spitting red teeth.
Pull the canvas shut.

The dragon is not representing anything in particular; it is simply what the speaker experienced. Vocance does not sit with the image or explore the relation between the dragon and, say, guns or artillery. He simply recounts what is happening: there is a dragon, and nothing to draw against it except a flap of canvas.

The poems, as we see from this example, need little annotation. They reveal not by allusion but by meticulous exposure. They are small miracles of clarity, with the kind of divinely clear sight that makes a fact oracular and a statement about the present a prophecy. They swarm with detail; they are distinct yet linked, each complete on its own yet contingent upon the rest. They are tiny flashes of consciousness, lucid yet impossible to plumb.

One of the characteristics of the haiku is that its size allows the reader to encounter the entire poem at a glance. It is as close as language comes to being visual art. A painting can be experienced all at once, whereas a poem shares with music the quality of being time-bound. With haiku, we stand on the very brink of experiencing language outside of this sequencing.

The visual compactness of haiku means that we encounter words outside of their grammatically assigned meanings, as in the sixth haiku:

In dirt-colored clothes,
men in furrows shovel dirt.
There's glory for you.

"Clothes," "furrows," and "shovel" are all words that can be either nouns or verbs. The shovel here is a shimmering composite of noun and verb: a shovel that shovels on its own. We can never escape the impression made by "furrows," which plunges through the heart of the poem, ripping up the earth. There is violence at the center of this otherwise humdrum glimpse of daily life in the trenches. This grammatical ambiguity gives haiku a unique immediacy, something Vocance exploits in his recollections of war.

Though Vocance himself was French, he did not write a definitive French version of the poems. The author seems to have fumbled about a bit to find how best to present his work to the world. The poems appeared first in the May 1916 edition of *La Grande revue*; after this, different sources presented the haiku in different orders. Vocance penned more than a hundred haiku for the *Cent visions*, and different versions contain a few different poems.

For a translator as thoughtful as Nicol, the abundance of haiku appears to have presented an opportunity rather than a frustration. Nicol has selected the strongest hundred poems and organized them to correspond with an implicit narrative. The haiku progress in sequences, from a long series entitled "Trenches" to an unforgettable "Hospital" to a grim "Postscript," as the wounded veteran faces "the post-war years/ [that] will tear him to shreds." The most dramatic difference between Nicol's ordering and the original ordering in the 1916 *La Grande revue* is that

Nicol has moved the opening haiku to the end. This is a tasteful choice. The poem—not quoted here because it is best come upon without warning—must be earned, its resonance dependent on that of the preceding ninety-nine haiku.

The book itself is an unusual and impressive thing to behold. From the black-and-white cover featuring a stripped-down detail of one of the woodcuts from Katshushika Hokusai's series *One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji* to the layout of one small haiku near the top of each page, this little volume is a specimen of that selectiveness that lies very near the heart of art. *One Hundred Visions* is an uncommonly flawless poetic experience. The volume's simplicity, accessibility, and clarity is the result of Nicol's thoughtful editorial decisions. There exists everywhere a friction between the deliberateness of the volume and the arbitrary nature of the war it describes.

Julien Vocance was a nom de plume for Joseph Seguin, "vocance" very close to the French word for "vacancy." The poet himself vanishes into the poems, hollowed out by wartime experience. Vacancy is, perhaps, the hidden figure that guides the whole collection, devoid of common figures of speech. Vocance leaves commentary, theology, philosophy, speculation, and even description of the war to the works of others. In the human eye, vision is only possible because of the vacancy of the pupil, which permits light to enter to be processed within the eye. In accepting the limitations of the haiku form, Vocance becomes a lens refracting light, giving us a sight starker and more harrowing than any of his peers did.

J. C. Scharl is an American poet, playwright, and critic.