



Cultivate brevity!

**Saito Masaya** talks with Udo Wenzel

**Udo Wenzel:** When did you start writing Haiku, and what was your initial experience?

**Saito Masaya:** I started writing haiku in my late teens...though I don't remember exactly what my initial experience was. Probably, I felt some kind of pleasure while trying with pain to condense my poetic ideas and imagination into a five-seven-five haiku form.

**Udo Wenzel:** What one haiku poet has had the most influence on you as a poet, and why?

**Saito Masaya:** Saito Sanki has had the most influence on me as a poet, because...well, at least, one of the reasons is his passionate concern for the human world, which was expressed not only in his haiku but also in his collection of autobiographical essays, *Kobe*.

**Udo Wenzel:** You translated his haiku into English (The Kobe Hotel). What makes him special within the Haiku-literature. Could you give an example of his poetry?

**Saito Masaya:** Many different elements make Sanki special within haiku literature, especially, as I have already stated, his strong interest in humans. It seems to me that Sanki was a nihilist as well as a humanist.

Middle age-

ripening in the distance

peaches at night.

A laughing fisherman,  
an angry sea snake--  
both naked.

**Udo Wenzel:** In the first haiku I find an erotic metaphor, the second one reminds of a painting or a mythical scene. It seems to be not realistic at all.. On the other hand Saito Sanki had condensed his war experience in haiku too. But both, non realistic elements and a realism, which refers to the cruelty of world, goes beyond the kind of realism, as that Shiki had proclaimed with his orientation on shasei. Is this one more of his specials?

**Saito Masaya:** There's one thing I'd like to make clear: Most of Sanki's war haiku are not based on his own war experience. In fact, he never went to war. Sanki was a little too old for that. Except for a few haiku poets such as Tomizawa Kakio and Kamio Saishi, many of those who belonged to New Rising Haiku movement tended to rely on newspapers, news films, or simply their own imagination to write war haiku. This invited much hostile criticism from traditional haiku poets. One cannot say, however, that Sanki 's haiku lacks reality. Actually, the reverse is the case, for imagination can enhance the sense of reality, making things even more vivid and tangible to the readers by means of language. Of course, it depends what you call reality. At least, for me, peaches in the first poem or an angry sea snake in the second one are so real in that they both seem to reflect Sanki 's deep inner feelings--his soul. Sanki's ability to symbolize his soul through common objects is certainly one of his specialties.

**Udo Wenzel:** What's about the acceptance of the genre haiku in Japan nowadays, especially from literature critics? Does the haiku still play a role within the established literature?

**Saito Masaya:** Yes, even nowadays, haiku is accepted by a large number of people as one of the established literary genres in Japan. When it comes to criticism, however, (at

least on the surface of the literary world in general) haiku is not discussed as vigorously as novels or short stories. For instance, you cannot find too many books of critical essays on haiku even in large book stores such as Kinokuniya. But, this does not indicate haiku 's inferiority to the other literary genres at all. Traditionally, haiku is discussed a lot within each haiku group. And their periodicals often print haiku criticism. This tendency can be said, I imagine, not only about haiku but also about any kind of poetry around the world. Since poetry is not connected with money, the way haiku criticism is nowadays cannot be helped given this formidably money-oriented capitalistic world in which we are forced to live and die.

**Udo Wenzel:** Each month you hold a haiku meeting. How do you teach haiku, what is important to take into account for Haiku disciples?

**Saito Masaya:** Well...I rarely teach how to compose haiku, although I sometimes suggest to those who come to my haiku meeting that they juxtapose two different elements and that they choose some different rhetorical technique to improve their haiku. But I cannot (or maybe shouldn't) teach them how to find those elements for juxtaposition. Needless to say, each haiku poet has to develop the sense necessary to find these elements, according to his or her talent, way of life, and the experiences he or she goes through in their daily life. One good thing about holding a haiku meeting is that participants of different ages and sexes can share their life experiences as well as various tidbits, which may help them to discover something nutritious for their haiku.

**Udo Wenzel:** In Japan, various Haiku-groups are existing. Some of them prefer to compose traditional haiku, others have a preference for the free-form. Is there communication between these groups or are they strictly separated?

**Saito Masaya:** I cannot answer this question, because I'm not informed enough about the communication between the traditional and the radical groups. I do belong to a traditional group, but I'm kind of an outsider there. I feel myself somewhere between the

two camps. I don't regard myself as a member of either group. Maybe, I can say that they are communicating with each other--within me.

**Udo Wenzel:** How important are the rules given by the old masters, especially Basho and Shiki, nowadays and the traditional background for haiku-writing, and how important is the requirement of "atarashimi"?

**Saito Masaya:** Very important. Something truly new can be born only out of tradition, although I believe what impresses us is not newness (atarashimi) but various kinds of poetic elements.

**Udo Wenzel:** Could you give some examples of your poetry?

**Saito Masaya:**

Trying to stay  
Upright in a breeze--  
A balloon

The ancient border--  
Crossing it  
With a balloon

Bare trees  
And through them  
A balloon wanders  
--so red

Waterless river--  
I am walking  
On the bank

A balloon bursting,

Silence

It continues

(excerpted from "Ash")

**Udo Wenzel:** It struck me, that the English poems don't follow the 5-7-5 syllables pattern. One of them has even 4 lines. Do you use the 5-7-5 only in Japanese? Why?

**Saito Masaya:** As you know, my mother tongue is not English. So, I cannot be fully sensitive to the effect of sounds, rhythm and subtle nuances of each word in my English language poems. Today, I rarely write poems in English. The fact that I am not a native English speaker is also part of the reason that I don't follow 5-7-5 syllabic pattern. I cannot sense exactly what kind of poetic effect a particular pattern has in English. But, you know ...in Japan, the 5-7-5 syllabic pattern was born and aged in a long tradition. This has a lot to do with not only the characteristics of the Japanese language but also this country's nature, history, and perhaps even with Japanese racial characteristics. If you think this way, the 5-7-5 syllabic pattern cannot be a universal. Besides, if the syllabic pattern is strongly tied with what I've just mentioned, it must also work on the way it controls haiku readers' attitudes. In other words, their mind is set for haiku when they are ready to appreciate haiku. Maybe, those who try to compose haiku in languages other than Japanese should try to produce other kinds of syllabic forms (or non-syllabic forms) congenial to each different culture, no matter how long it takes for this ripening. Haiku, in each culture, should establish its own physiology. I hope my answer was not too much extraneous to your question.

**Udo Wenzel:** The title of your book is „Ash“. What are your topics? Do you write from reality or from fantasy? Are existential topics playing a significant role?

**Saito Masaya:** It's been years since I wrote *Ash*...nearly twenty years ago. I don't remember exactly what it was that drove me to write the pieces in that tiny book. There's one thing, however, I remember rather clearly. In those days, the sense of happiness was alien to me. I was poor...I still am. I was attracted to death, loneliness and the passage of time ...the sense of transience, if you like...as something to write about. Such daily emotions made me choose the title, *Ash*. In this sense, you might say that some existential topics played a significant role in my poetry. But, were death, loneliness, the passage of time the topics of *Ash*? Most unlikely. At least, I never tried to represent them consciously. Let me say ...they just appeared. I still feel the same way as I write haiku ...No such a thing as a topic. Do you really need a topic to write a poem? Well, anyway ...to answer another question, I write from both reality and fantasy ...but almost always in a realistic manner. I tend to feel good with the concreteness of images.

**Udo Wenzel:** Could you give a brief definition of what a haiku is? What makes a haiku unique?

**Saito Masaya:** I cannot define what haiku is, but one thing I am certain of is that I wouldn't find myself enthusiastic about writing haiku without its five-seven-five syllabic form. A season word may not be essential for haiku...I myself always include it in my haiku, though.

**Udo Wenzel:** What other kind of techniques are necessarily required for the haiku form?

**Saito Masaya:** Often, two different factors need to be included in a haiku...in other words, a haiku can avoid being prosaic and be appreciated as a genuine poem if there is a poetic leap included in it.

**Udo Wenzel:** Could you please explain such a poetic leap, and could you give an example?

**Saito Masaya:** A poetic leap means a juxtaposition of two elements far or somehow alien to each other. Of course, this is not anything original with me. For instance, Donald Keene says the same thing in his Japanese Literature (Tuttle, 1977): "The nature of the elements varies, but there should be the two electric poles between which the spark will leap for the haiku to be effective; otherwise it is no more than a brief statement". For instance, the following Sanki's haiku in my collection of his work, The Kobe Hotel, illustrate such electric poles very well:

On a sheet of iron  
It's so soft --  
a frog's breath.

Autumn nightfall --  
the skeleton of a huge fish  
drawn out to sea.

**Udo Wenzel:** About the future of haiku. What should be avoided, what should be revealed? Do you have any advice for German Haiku poets?

**Saito Masaya:** There's nothing that should be avoided or revealed. Each poet can do anything he or she pleases within the form called haiku. I don't know how haiku is composed in Germany, so I cannot have any advice for German haiku-poets. But, I think that poetic brevity can be accomplished in any language.

**Udo Wenzel:** Thank you very much for the interview.

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