



News of the Day, News of the Moment

Gary Snyder talks with Udo Wenzel

Udo Wenzel: Unlike to the haiku in English the German haiku scene made its first experiences with the so called "free-format haiku" only a few years ago. Since that time it is an unanswered question how to define a haiku or how to distinguish it from other lyrics and poetry styles. You started more than 50 years ago to write haiku. And from the beginning you didn't pay attention to the most common definition of what a haiku is or might be: 5-7-5 syllables-counting and the required use of a seasonal word. How did this happen?

Gary Snyder: I have never called my brief poems "haiku" except in certain rare cases where a brief poem met what I felt were the key aesthetic requirement of a top quality haiku — which means among other things, freedom from ego. I do not think we should even "think" haiku in other languages and cultures. We should think brief, or short poems. They can be in the moment, be observant, be condensed and meaningful, detached or not, or have many other possible qualities except perhaps satire, parody, anger, and such. That territory belongs, in Japanese, to "Senryû."

I don't think counting 5,7,5 syllables is necessary or desirable. To reflect the natural world, and the season, is to reflect what is. Many modern haiku in Japan won't have a kigo, a "season word."

Udo Wenzel: Do you believe that the haiku at heart is not portable into other languages and cultures? Do you think, the American or European Haiku is a "sham package"?

Gary Snyder: As I am trying to say, the haiku is a Japanese poetic form. It has elements that can indeed be developed in the poetries of other languages and cultures, but not by slavish imitation. To get haiku into other languages, get to the "heart" of haiku, which has something to do with Zen practice and with practiced observation -- not mere counting of syllables.

Udo Wenzel: In 1956, after you had left the North American West-Coast and the community of beat poets, you moved to Japan, where you lived for the next twelve years, studying Chinese and Japanese language and receiving teachings in a Zen-monastery. Did you come in touch with haiku? What would you say, did your view of haiku change, as you faced it in its origin country?

Gary Snyder: I met no haiku poets with the exception of *Nakagawa Soen* Roshi at his temple near Mt. Fuji. I stayed there two nights, and went for a walk with him up the mountain. We never talked about poetry. Later I learned he was a very highly regarded haiku poet as well as a Zen Master. Some of the Zen monks down in Kyoto thought little of him, saying "If he was serious about teaching Zen he wouldn't be always going to those haiku poet meetings in Tokyo."

I didn't have a fixed view of haiku when I went there so I can't say it changed.

Udo Wenzel: It is well known that you are not a Haiku Poet primarily, but you have used haiku within prose (it reminds me of the tradition of Bashō's haibun). Above all you've integrated haiku within longer poems. Did you have literary models for this technique?

Gary Snyder: I have certainly integrated tough, stand-alone brief image-poems that carry a load of meaning within my longer poems. I don't call them haiku. It's part of my poetic strategy. It owes something to haibun, but also to aspects of various oral traditions where songs are woven into the storytelling (and such oral performance is not "prose.")

Udo Wenzel: Could you please give us your definition of what a haiku is?

Gary Snyder: A haiku is a short Japanese poem that is both very easy and extremely difficult to do. Huge numbers of people all over the country write them daily. Many are in the newspapers. They have a set of rules and guidelines which are not followed slavishly. It is hard to appreciate haiku fully in translation because much of their power is in the tricks done with the syntax. Although the greatest haiku are among the finest utterances in the world, the huge number of lesser haiku play a valuable and enlivening role in the culture. Non-Japanese societies can learn from this tradition and feel free to write brief poems that are strong "news of the day, news of the moment" – and fundamentally without ego.

Udo Wenzel: Who writes, if a haiku is written without ego? Would you please explain, what does it mean to write without ego. How can one recognize such a haiku? Could you give us an example?

Gary Snyder: Hakuin Zenji's "Song of Meditation" has the line "true nature that is no-nature, far beyond mere doctrine." Dogen Zenji says, "We study the self to forget the self." No nature is true nature, non-ego is the mysterious power of creation. How do you recognize such a haiku and what are examples? Just remember the great haiku from the Japanese tradition that first made you fascinated with haiku when you were fresh to the field, poems by those we call "the masters."

Udo Wenzel: Even though the Japanese Haiku could be better described as seasonal poetry than as nature poetry, nature and landscape were always in the core of haiku poetry. In *Dharma Bums* one could read, in which kind you created haiku in the fifties. Following oral poetry traditions, you called out the haiku to each other on hikings and you did not write it down. I suppose this discounts the aspect of Japanese haiku being linguistic works of art, as we know, the haikaijins polished it often for a long time. What would you say today, which value has language in haiku poetry?

Gary Snyder: You can't call out, sing, speak, write or say any song or poem without language. Language always has syntax. Some people have a talent for language more than others. To get good at language you have to listen a lot.

Udo Wenzel: In your writings you often turn against conventional dichotomies, for example against the dichotomy between nature and language/culture order nature and civilisation. On the one hand you extended the term of nature into the human realm, on the other hand „wilderness“ is an important concept for you. What is their part related to poetry?

Gary Snyder: My prose book of ecological philosophy, "The Practice of the Wild", has detailed explication of these questions, and careful definitions of the words "nature" and "wild" (which should be understood as not identical with "wilderness.") Hanfried Blume has recently finished his German translation of this book and it will be published by Matthes and Seitz press in the coming year.

Udo Wenzel: For the haibun „The Narrow Road to the Deep North,, Bashô visited during his long journey the so-called *utamakura* ("poem pillows"), places which were already enriched with cultural and literary meanings, and he wrote about them in a fresh and fancy manner. You often described in your poems and prose the landscapes of the North-American West. One of your main projects is „Mountain and River Without End“. In what way are you influenced by Bashô?

Gary Snyder: "Mountains and Rivers Without End" was finished in 1996. Bashô was an earlier influence for me but so was Buson. The biggest single literary influence on this long poem was Noh drama, in particular the play "Yamamba".

Udo Wenzel: Once you labeled yourself as a „Buddhist poet“. How would you personally describe the connection between religion and poetry?

Gary Snyder: I like what the Zen Master Dôgen said in the 13th century. "We Study the Self to forget the Self. When you forget the Self you become one with the entire phenomenal world."

Udo Wenzel: Did you write poems which are close to haiku recently? Would you kindly present some of it?

Gary Snyder: The place best to find my recent short poems and "haibun-like" poems is in my recent volume of poetry called "Danger on Peaks". This was recently translated into German published by his Stadtlichter Press. Sebastian Schmidt (transl.) *Gefahr auf den Gipfeln* (Berlin: Stadtlichter Presse, 2006). This has a block of very short poems, and also a whole section called "Dust in the Wind" which has prose-block plus brief poem.

Here's a recent brief poem:

*Ravens in the afternoon control-burn smoky haze
croaking away.
Coyotes yipping in the starry early dawn.*

Udo Wenzel: Thank you very much for the interview.