



The Spirit of Freedom

Aspects of Contemporary Haiku

Richard Gilbert talks with Udo Wenzel

Udo Wenzel: Since the nineties you have been living, teaching and researching in Japan at Kumamoto University. During this time you have gotten a deeper insight into contemporary Japanese haiku life. Besides so-called “traditional haiku” there are also “gendai (modern) haiku.” What are the main differences between these two trends?

Richard Gilbert: Prior to my arrival in Japan, like most of my American-poet friends, I had virtually no knowledge of gendai haiku, was looking forward to researching the classical tradition and haiku fundamentals. It was only after living here for a couple of years that I began reading more gendai haiku, and meeting poets. I can say that I found the poetry, techniques, and critical ideas to be eye-opening.

Your question about the differences between gendai and traditional haiku is challenging, because a reasonable answer involves a bit of relevant history, and not only aesthetic but also socio-political considerations. Ito Yūki (Ph.D. candidate, Kumamoto University), has just completed an article on the origins and evolution of gendai haiku, tentatively titled, “New Rising Haiku: The Evolution of Modern Japanese Haiku and the Haiku Persecution Incident”. He focuses especially on the wartime persecution of the New Rising Haiku poets – instrumental to an understanding of contemporary Japanese haiku. Unfortunately, his paper has not yet been published; in fact, it’s not certain he can easily publish it. Below, I’ll paraphrase from two relevant sections (though would have preferred to quote directly).

In the early 20th century, Takahama Kyoshi, one of the two main disciples of Masaoka Shiki, presided over the Hototogisu group (and its journal), which he had inherited from Shiki. Due to his dictatorial and uncompromising style, by the 1920s, several prominent poets had broken with him. Paraphrasing Ito, the 'New Rising Haiku movement' (*shinkô haiku undô*) wished to compose haiku on new subjects, and utilize techniques and topics related to contemporary social life. These poets frequently wrote haiku without kigo (*muki-teki haiku*), and explored non-traditional subjects, such as social inequity, utilizing avant-garde styles including surrealism, etc. Therefore, along with aesthetic and technique differences, the New Rising Haiku poets, who began the gendai (modern) haiku movement in earnest, had strong philosophical, sociological and intellectual differences with Hototogisu and Kyoshi. During the war, over 40 New Rising Haiku poets were persecuted; they were imprisoned and tortured, and some died in prison. These progressive poets were also made to sign false confessions and denounce their own and others' poetry and thought. Various progressive journals were banned and printing presses destroyed. Many of these poets, after a stay in prison, were sent to the front lines of the war. Ito writes that Takahama Kyoshi became the president of a haiku branch of the fascist government culture-control/propaganda group known as The Japanese Literary Patriotic Organization (*nihon bungaku hōkoku kai*), which was devoted to both censorship and persecution, along with a host of other war crimes. At the time, the Director of the society was Ono Bushi, whose title was: The Agent of Investigation of the Minds of the Nation's Citizens (*kokumin jyōsō chosa iin*). Perhaps the most notorious statement published by Ono reads:

I will not allow haiku even from the most honorable person, from left-wing, or progressive, or anti-war, groups to exist. If such people are found in the haiku world, we had better persecute them, and they should be punished. This is necessary. (Kosakai, 169; trans. by Ito, with Gilbert)

At least one poet who survived imprisonment reported that he was commanded by the Secret Police to "write haiku in the style of Hototogisu" (Kosakai, 79). According to the fascist-traditionalists, to write haiku without kigo meant anti-tradition, which in turn

meant anti-Imperial order and high treason. As such, all New Rising Haiku was to be annihilated. Ito writes, "We are reminded of how the Nazis preserved so-called pure nationalist art, while persecuting the modern styles of so-called 'degenerate art.'" (Cf. Kosakai, Shôzô. (1979). *Mikoku: Showa haiku danatsu jiken* [Betrayal/Informer: Showa era haiku persecution]. Tokyo: Daimondo.)

One sees that, historically, "freedom of expression" in the gendai haiku movement was not an idle aesthetic notion. A significant context to modern Japanese haiku history links certain influential persons and groups promoting traditionalist haiku culture with Japanese national-socialism. It would be a mistake to assume, regarding these facts, that traditional approaches are inherently lacking or that traditional haiku culture is by nature nationalist, particularly these days – however, history leaves little to the imagination; more light needs to be shed on these facts, if only so that people outside of Japan can obtain a clearer understanding of the context of gendai haiku.

The war ended half a century ago, and much of this information has been surprisingly hard to dig up, Ito has found. Clearly, the spirit of the gendai poets in the face of fascism, repression and persecution is laudable. The liberal, democratic spirit and freedom of expression exhibited by the New Rising Haiku poets remains at the core of gendai haiku.

Udo Wenzel: In the West, we know especially the "traditional haiku" or the classical haikai of the Edo-period, while gendai haiku is almost unknown here. Do gendai haiku appear in the literary public in Japan, in comparable measure to traditional haiku?

Richard Gilbert: Yes, definitely. There are likely several reasons for the lack of knowledge of gendai haiku in the West. First, there has been a strong focus on the classical tradition, as a traditional and well-established aspect of Japanese high culture and art. We might see this as a general cross-cultural convention; for example in the study of canonical Anglo-American literature here in Japan, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Austen may be academically valued in a way that 20th century authors are not. Conversely, there has been a stronger interest in Heian-era writers, *The Tale of*

Genji, haiku of Bashō, that is, mainstays of the canon, in American studies of Japanese literature.

A second reason for the lack of knowledge of gendai works may have to do with the complexities of modern culture, and modernity. Classical works and authors have an established body of criticism and historical treatises to support research, compared with the modern era; their value is not usually questioned, while modern reputations tend not to be firmly established (in fact, a number of postwar gendai haiku poets are still living). Accelerations of history, rapidity of cultural change, and language reformation also play a role, and not just in Japan. As well, the gendai movement has been anti-establishment – perhaps another reason why academic acceptance, particularly outside Japan, has been slow. It may also be that the poetic techniques and references found within gendai poetry are interpretively challenging. The esteem now expressed for Santoka for instance is relatively recent (as Hoshinaga Fumio reports). So, this reason is related to the first, and has to do with interest and cultural value, both within and outside Japan.

Another reason may have to do with a combination of language, geography and literary aptitude, concerning translators and translation. As well as interest in gendai haiku, one needs knowledge of Japanese, colleagues, co-translators, and some integration into gendai society. Else, how is one to cope with, for instance, irony, nuance of era, sarcasm, cultural reference, slang, elements of wordplay, etc.? Translations from Japanese as well need to have power in whatever target language they arrive in, to create poetic impact. Generally speaking, when the co-translators are competent poets in their mutual native languages, the results stand a better chance than those produced by academicians or prose translators without a strong background in poetic composition. One of the problems with historical haiku translations has been an over-reliance on dictionary translation from afar, combined with a lack of familiarity with the cultural and linguistic contexts involved. This is especially true with concepts of *kigo*, ideas of naturalism in haiku, and syllable counting, among other issues.

Udo Wenzel: Why do we find here (in the West), where modern poetry has arisen, an interest primarily on the so-called traditional haiku? If you ask those responsible in publishing houses, you will hear that only the classical Japanese haiku is saleable. From where are these blinkers are coming? Is the gendai haiku - because of its content and structure - harder to understand in a foreign culture than the image which one might have of the "traditional haiku"? Or, is the West ever searching for something else, which is not available here?

Richard Gilbert: It is a bit ironic, isn't it? I think I've touched on these topics in the above responses, but can add some remarks. Certainly, there are linguists, rhetoricians, Asian Studies researchers, scholars of culture, etc., investigating modern haiku around the world, though they are working for the most part in Japanese. For whatever reason, one sees few professional articles on gendai haiku. Looking to those groups involved in haiku, in North America, serious interest in haiku in English is not very great, judging by the small number of relevant journals, and one wonders about the future of this fledging genre. Within these American haiku groups, there has been a predilection for 'strict' traditionalist-classicist approaches. This is not always a bad thing when trying to establish ground rules, definitions, and compositional guidelines for a young sub-genre. On the other hand, many published haiku are formulaic, lack authorial creativity, and possess little sense of language creativity. At this point in time, the old guard which has presided over the North American scene for some decades is being enriched and provoked, if not replaced, by new views and voices. The interest in gendai haiku is part of this enlargement of the possibilities for, and valuations of, haiku in English.

The future of haiku as an international genre remains unclear. There is not yet a poet in North America who has achieved wider recognition as a haiku poet, and one wonders how seriously haiku will be taken until this occurs. Notwithstanding, haiku do not need to first become popular in order to be highly valued, so it's my hope that new anthologies and critical essays will be published which select fresh and excellent haiku, from an expansive viewpoint, and discuss them, as we are only beginning to realize the potency of this new poetic form.

Udo Wenzel: You are engaged intensively with the problematics of kigo (Japanese seasonal words), and seasonal reference. Following your proposal, the transfer of the Japanese kigo concept or kigo culture into the west is very problematic. Would you please explain why?

Richard Gilbert: I think we have been utilizing something we call 'kigo' in English-language haiku, assuming there is a simple relationship between the word and its naturalistic indication. That is, "spring moon" or "autumn night" is exactly that, right? These words merely indicate the season, and provide a background 'natural' environment for the scene of the poem. What I've learned, and attempted to write about in the kigo articles, is that the naturalistic depiction of season is not the most significant connotation of kigo, in Japan. The paradigmatic differences are so striking, it seems best not to use the term "kigo" at all, outside of its Japanese context, and rather to stick with "seasonal reference" to avoid conflation and misinterpretation. In reality, kigo do not 'belong' to haiku, it's the other way round. Haiku participate in kigo culture, a complex, idiosyncratic, aesthetic literary environment stemming from ancient Chinese literature and culture, creatively adumbrated and evolved over the many centuries of Japanese literature and genius. It is a cultural treasure, and does not seem universalizable. We no longer live in the kind of Confucian/feudal/aristocratic/mythic/animist pre-industrial world out of which centuries of kigo have been spawned, nor are we an island culture with a single 'local' context and set of myths. It is unfortunate that the literal translation of "kigo" is "seasonal reference," because kigo, if taken in their purely literal sense lose nearly all of their (Japanese contextual) poetic resonance.

Another aspect of this misfortune for "kigo in English" is the historical emphasis placed on naïve imagism in haiku. The 'thing in itself' and ideas of 'direct observation/depiction of the image' (qua Imagism), which have resulted in the primacy of the realistic, naturalistic image in haiku, involves a savaging of the haiku environment. If this idea of "sketch of life" as applied to the naturalistic haiku is held to be a primary impetus and expression of Japanese haiku it is both mistaken and reductive – not just in relation to gendai haiku, but to the haiku of Bashō as well. How

can the image (or image-schema) arrive which connotes more than naturalism or literalism, without leaving these entirely behind? Perhaps the *creation* of a novel kigo culture is a fool's errand, but kigo is not what are most fundamental to haiku, in any case. If this were true, haiku would lack the universality they clearly possess.

For a further discussion of kigo, I'd like to recommend the first paper on the list shown here: <http://www.iyume.com/research/kigo.html>

Udo Wenzel: As a result of your teaching activities in Japan you came across various complex problems related to the syllable in haiku. How many syllables does a haiku need to be a haiku, or are we following, here in the West, certain wrong suggestions about what is counted in the Japanese Haiku?

Richard Gilbert: The question of 'syllable' counting is not all that complex, until you begin looking closely at the linguistics of it. One of the early surprises I encountered in Japan was that no one I met here, including haiku professors and scholars, knew the word "onji." This surprise resulted in my first research paper written here: "Stalking the Wild Onji," which details the whys and wherefores of syllable counting, which terms are used here, and some basic information about the history of haiku terms. The short answer is that Japanese people usually use the word "on" which means "sounds" for counting. And, "sounds" are not syllables. So we can say that most Japanese haiku have 17-on (sounds).

The article on "onji" I mentioned is available here:

<http://www.iyume.com/research/onji/onji.html>

Or as a PDF here:

<http://www.iyume.com/research/onji/OnjiStalking.pdf>

I am not a trained linguist, but was helped in my research by two professors of applied linguistics, Judy Yoneoka, and Masahiro Hori, both at Kumamoto Gakuen University (and both bilingual). Judy Yoneoka and I wrote a long paper on haiku metrics, which can be found here:

<http://www.iyume.com/research/metrics/haikumet.html>

or as a PDF here:

<http://www.iyume.com/research/metrics/HaikuMetrics.pdf>

What we were able to experimentally show in our findings, corroborated by linguistics research, is that there is no one-to-one relationship between Japanese “sounds (-on),” and Indo-European-language-based syllables (we stick to English in our paper, so my expansion remains hypothetical). One reason for this fact is that Japanese is a moraic language, that is, ‘syllable-timed,’ while English is accentual-syllabic. Rather than a simplistic one-to-one syllabic relationship with -on, we found instead an accord at a ‘higher’ level of organization, that of the metrical template. What this means in practice is that the ‘best’ emulation of the Japanese verity is not and cannot be based on any set number of syllables. This idea is solipsistic, a linguistic dead end. Rather it seems one needs to consider phonetic rhythm, stress and (musical) time in accentual-syllabic language, in relation to (linguistic) metrical pattern.

We were able to demonstrate how haiku in English with six syllables accord well with 17-on Japanese haiku *and* were able to show how haiku in English with over 17 (English) syllables can also metrically accord with Japanese haiku form. Notwithstanding the potential variability of syllables possible in haiku in English, there are limits related to the metrical template of haiku, and we suggested that this metrical sense not only seems to govern the genre in English, but that almost all haiku compositions written and published in English serendipitously follow the metrical stylism we observed. The metrical template of 8-8-8 (three linked metrical phrases of 8 ‘pulses’), works as an identity between the two languages, Japanese and English. By ‘metrical’ I do not mean poetic scansion (not the idea of regular poetic meter), but refer to an underlying time structure apparent within haiku phrasing. The paper shown in the links above looks at the issue in more detail.

Udo Wenzel: You emanated from the American Beat tradition. In your early days, you had contact with writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder on the West

Coast. They were less interested in kigo and syllable counting; from their beginnings on, they hoped more to achieve a sense of Zen-content in haiku. How do you see the importance of Zen for haiku today?

Richard Gilbert: I arrived at Naropa University at the age of 26. Prior to that, by 1978 a friend and I had founded "The Plant", an arts organization in Danbury, Connecticut; I had published poetry in a few small journals. I grew up as an isolated bassoon-playing kid and early on got into geodesics, taking the train down to New York City's "Town Hall" to attend lectures given by Buckminster Fuller. When in the 10th grade, our high school got a Moog synthesizer, which they stuck in a closet that I inhabited when not reading science fiction. Sometime later, I was accepted into the Department of Electronic Music at Hampshire College, at that time a world-class scene; but penniless, moved into a South Norwalk, Connecticut, slum. After two years of selling high-end audio gear in Norwalk, doing electronics work, welding whatever I could melt, and rebuilding some motorcycles and sports cars, I moved to Danbury, Connecticut, and became an apprentice engine rebuilder. This lasted about five years. The pay got me through a chunk of college as a Math/Computer Science major. Later, I joined a union shop as Director of Electronics Component Assembly at a steam power plant factory. My department assembled and tested the control panels for the steam generators we built for ships, schools and hospitals. Dickensian dingy toxic paint fumes no ventilation and noxious waste; you're close to the money.

So, "The Plant" had an ironic connotation. "The Plant" was a revelation. A Friday night café society was created above a bar in the middle of town, in the midst of this violent, isolative society of immigrant Danbury, which spawned workshops, exhibitions and arts festivals. Around this time, a dancer friend, Colleen, who had driven with some friends cross-country, returned with glowing reports of the Naropa summer symposium, commanding me: "you have to go there." After looking into the courses, I saved my shekels. Around this time I hired the first African-American worker in my company, who also happened to be the first woman hired to work the assembly floor. I was fired less than six weeks later under false pretences (she wasn't, as she was in the union). As I

had read Chogyam Trungpa's *Myth of Freedom and Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*," I was, on the one hand, hungry for spiritual knowledge, while on the other paranoid concerning the possibility of some sort of cultish brainwashing at the hands of those weird people living in the mountains of Boulder, Colorado, at some wacko school 2000 miles from my home stomping ground.

When I arrived in my rebuilt van, December 1980 (possessions contained within), I slept for two weeks in the parking lot of the International House of Pancakes and ate at same, until taken in by Larry who was on the dole due to his psychosis – he had an extra room. I was less stable than he, and grateful for his kindness to a stranger. (In a weird twist of fate, eight years later I became his therapist for a short while.) A few weeks later, during Naropa Registration Day, I was yanked on the arm by Frank Berliner, then-Director of Shambhala Training, who looked me in the eye and said, "Have you ever done meditation, do you want to learn? Do you want me to be your instructor? I'll be your instructor." As an alienated depressed mess it was hard to say yes or no I just showed up a week later to give it a try and the rest is history.

I'm not really answering your question, except perhaps to point out that though I became involved in Tibetan Buddhism and committed to meditation practice and training, I've never located the perfect hot dog. Naropa and meditation have been two of the great blessings of my life, and there are many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, including Frank Berliner, Chogyam Trungpa, Barbara Dilley, Paul Ortel, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Patricia Donegan, Lisa Haight, Shari Cuzelis, Lomi practitioners, dance therapy teachers, and many others. Naropa was at that time an unaccredited school of some 120 degree-attending students and a pretty wild and open situation. My experience is that poetry can't be taught and meditation insight can't be taught; however, teachers can open their minds to you in various ways, offer critical feedback, design various experiential happenings, practices, workshops, studies, and the like. My teachers were at times able to enrich my presence via their own, and extensive permission was given to explore presence, perception, and technique. I already had a sense of what "The Real Work" was (in Gary Snyder's

terms), and Naropa represented my first Real education, in terms of institutional possibilities. It was a lot easier than getting hot sulphuric acid off engine blocks – at first. Later, the moon cried “Mary”; I lost all hope and sense of self. Much later, it was those engines which led to an experience of the interiority of haiku, their cosmic alchemy, and I began to understand the power of alchemy in the elements of welding, burring, surfacing, quenching the psyche – the sensuousness and sheen of surfaces in the shops where I’d been annealing improvisational skills along with valve seats. In this manner I began to understand more of the human.

I think the question of Zen in haiku, or meditation and poetry (and the arts) is a touchy one and tends to float off to the aetheric heights, and thereby loose soul. I don’t believe there is a “Zen haiku” as such, only people who think that’s what they are. There are haiku that do relate directly to Zen experience, just as there are baseball and tennis haiku. That said, there is a long and noble history of Zen interpretation, or a “Zen reading” or “Zen treatment” of haiku in Japan, although not generally outside of Zen institutions. A somewhat similar sense of interpretation can be found in R. H. Blyth, whose voluminous works were a direct inspiration for the Beats (as described in Jack Kerouac’s novel, *The Dharma Bums*). Due to this interpretive focus in North America at least, it seems that historically a Zen-like interpretation has been at times over-emphasized to the point of displacing or strongly mis-interpreting the main intention and even brilliance of haiku as a literary art. Blyth himself, his brilliance and knowledge of Zen notwithstanding, was not an involved practitioner of Zen in the traditional Japanese sense, if by that we mean ‘a practicing meditator within a school and lineage, studying under a teacher generally acknowledged to be accomplished in Zen practice,’ nor have been the bulk of western commentators who have applied Zen-like interpretations to haiku. There is a long history in Japan of utilizing certain haiku in association with koan practice in the Rinzai-school tradition, and Zen culture and perspectives may have much to say about haiku; at the same time, interpretation is not poetry but rather an avenue of discussion, usually directed to a certain purpose or goal. Bashō opened hokku to the field of mind, and thereby made what would later be coined “haiku” into

a high art; Bashō composed haiku (hokku), not Zen haiku. In Buddhism, there are three jewels, the Buddha who serves as an example of actual human possibility; the dharma, which is the teachings; and sangha, one's community. Usually, "sangha" refers to the community of fellow practitioners, a sort of insider's group. Yet in a talk about sangha, Shunryu Suzuki once remarked, "Sangha is whatever awakens you." In this sense, haiku may be sangha. It depends on you.

Udo Wenzel: Finally, would you please introduce some of your own haiku?

Richard Gilbert: I'd like to introduce three haiku:

a nun beats a drum;
fretful by the shrine
at nightfall

a drowning man
pulled into violet worlds
grasping hydrangea

dedicated to the moon
I rise
without a decent alibi

Published in *NOON: Journal of the Short Poem*, volume 1, pp. 25-27 (Tokyo: 2004).
For subscription information contact: Philip Rowland, ed., *Noon: Journal of the Short Poem*, Minami Motomachi 4-49-506, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0012 Japan
e-mail: rowlandnoon@mac.com

Udo Wenzel: Thank you very much for the interview.