

No  
Center:  
Notes  
on the  
Haiku

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# NO CENTER: NOTES ON THE HAIKU

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## Intro Note

I've read haiku (and books about the haiku) all my adult life and at times I even deluded myself that I could write them—

Currently I doubt whether any non-Japanese poet has ever or can ever write haiku at all.

/

Whether these notes on the haiku will have any value for those interested in the form is doubtful,

and anyway as any reader can plainly see this is a vanity volume, self-published, and ergo is not to be seen as a legitimate book.



## NO CENTER

from Modern Japanese Haiku, by Makoto Ueda:

[Kawahigashi] Hekigoto . . . was a tireless experimenter, and restlessly went from one experiment to another throughout his career.

Of all his experiments [one of the most] controversial [was his] idea of 'haiku without a center of interest,' which he began to advocate in 1910. [This concept] was based on his belief that a poem should come as close as possible to its subject matter, which is part of life or nature. He thought that if the poet tried to create a center of interest in his poem he would inevitably have to distort his subject matter for the sake of that interest.

Hekigoto said:

"To do away with a center of interest and to discard the process of poeticizing reality would help the poet to approach things in nature as close as he can, without being sidetracked by man-made rules."

\*

Hekigoto also challenged traditional syllabic rules:

as Donald Keene writes in Dawn to the West,

"By 1915 Hekigoto had come to oppose a fixed form for the haiku. . . . [His] free haiku no longer had the familiar haiku shape, but tended to run on to prosaic lengths. He himself preferred to call

them 'short poems' (tanshi). This poem, written in 1918, was typical of his new manner:

ringo wo tsumami  
iituskushitemo  
kurikaesaneba naranu

I pick up an apple;  
I've said everything that was to be said,  
But still must repeat.

[Keene notes:] The poem has twenty-four syllables . . . [T]his is hardly a haiku. Konishi Jin'ichi wrote of such poems, 'When one reaches this point . . . haiku disappear[s], both in name and in reality. . . . Hekigoto valiantly forged ahead on his own road, [and came] finally to destroy the road before him.'

(An interesting metaphor: by advancing on his own road, he destroyed the road before him.)

\*

Ueda again:

"An example of 'haiku without a center of interest' which was cited by Hekigoto himself" is the following:

Sumo / noseshi / binsen-no / nado / shike / to /  
nari  
Wrestlers / aboard / ferry's / why / storm / thus /  
becoming

Ueda's translation:

Wrestlers are aboard  
the ferry; why has it become  
stormy weather?

\*

If even the strongest among us must take the ferry in obeisance to the obstacles presented by the physical world, why is it necessary for Nature to present still more signs of its ruthless power? Will none of our submissions and sacrifices appease that deity?

\*

Remember that T.S. Eliot (looking back in a 1953 lecture) asserted that "[T]he starting-point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imager' in London about 1910."

Compare the Wrestlers haiku above to Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound's note on this poem quotes an unattributed Japanese haiku ('The fallen blossom flies back to its branch: A butterfly.'), and then says:

"The 'one-image' poem is a form of super-position, that is to say it is one idea set on top of another."

Both poems, to use Pound's phrases, set an idea (or representation) of the human 'on top of' an idea (or image) of nature.

Wrestlers/ferry : storm.

Faces/subway : spring petals on a wet [rained-on] branch.

Note that both present the human idea in transit, in modes of transportation (ferry, train), in linear (singular/ irrevocable) passage as opposed to the perennial recurrent manifestations of nature.

The human idea is an apparition compared to the ever-embodied, ever-physical presence of the environment.

Thought as opposed to substance.

(Of course rainstorms and petals are more transitory forms of nature than mountains or oceans, but doesn't this heighten the poignancy of the "super-position"?)

\*

Isn't Pound's poem really a simile which refuses to use its "like": the pale European faces seen against the badly-lit gloom of the subway terminal are like white petals on a black branch.

The Hekigoto is not comparing the wrestlers to the storm, or is it?

—Are the sumo here on the ferry when they should be in the sky struggling with the elemental forces to which they seem most akin?

\*

Apples ripen and fall yearly, the human picks one

up and says he's picking one up, and then says that's all there is to be said about the matter, though in response to the repetitive patterns of nature he acknowledges that he too must repeat himself.

\*

Donald Keene: "Hekigoto [advocates] in 1910 the principle of "no-centeredness" (muchushin-ron), by which he meant that natural phenomena should be described exactly as they are without imposing any human standards."

In 1912 Pound writes: "I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object. . . ."

A year later, in 'A few Don'ts of an Imagiste,' he insists that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol."

I've taken these quotes from William Pratt's introduction to *The Imagist Poem*. Pratt comments:

"Pound [is making a] distinction between the image and the symbol . . . the symbolic meaning must have its source in the literal meaning, and not be imposed upon it."

Here, at the "starting-point of modern poetry," Hekigoto and Pound seem to be of one mind:

"Super-position," yes; imposition, no.

# HOLLYWOOD + HERE = POEM

/

Yamazato wa manzai ososhi ume no hana (Basho)

\*

April: and still the Mummers have not come  
Up to our mountain village; plum-blossom.

\*

I wonder why the Mummers have not come  
This year to our mountain town; plum-blossom.

\*

For some reason the Mummers have not come  
This season to our hill-town; plum-blossom.

\*

This year The Rolling Stones have not come  
To fill our stadium;  
The old men fear, and wonder  
If April is really here: plum-blossom.

\*

Up snowthawed roads unplowed the Mummers  
come  
To reach our mountain village; plum-blossom.

\*

This time each year the Mummers used to come  
Appear in our mountain town; plum-blossom.

\*

Springtime is when the Mummers always come  
To play our mountain town; hey, plum-blossom!

\*

Springtime; but where are the Mummers who play  
Each year our mountain town: plum-blossom-spray.

\*

Each Spring a troupe of actors used to come  
To amuse our mountain town; plum-blossom.

\*

It's Spring, but the Actors Troupe has not come  
To strut our mountain village; plum-blossom.

\*

Spring has come, so where's the Actors who come  
To our mountain town each year; plum-blossom.

\*

The Stray Players are late this year—  
Plague or Famine maybe; and we're  
Still stuck in this dullsville hill-town . . .  
Fuck that plum shit: let's get on down!

\*

Carpet's out, where's that Actors Troupe?—  
Stow those town gowns: go bed goodnight.  
Dull mountain village, all lit up.  
Your plum-tree blossoms glare too white.

\*

The mime-troupe of actors is late this year  
To climb to our mountain village up here;  
Is that why the trees in whiteface appear.

\*

The Lookout yells them Actors ain't nowhere in sight—  
Our mountain village mourns; the orchard wears white.

\*

Where the heck are those Kabuki—  
Nowhere to go but sleep tonight . . .  
Our mountain town looks plain empty;  
The trees alone step out in white.

Note:

In Japan, the plum blossom is treated as an early sign of spring. It is pale white with oval-shaped petals.

/

Imagine it's the 17th Century, and you live in a mountain village. During winter you're completely cut off: no phone, no radio, no way of communicating with the rest of the world.

But then, each spring, for as long as you can remember, a traveling theatrical troupe finds its way up through the muddy passes to your tiny hamlet, each year it returns to perform its vaudeville entertainments. What a delight after the endless tedium of snowbound months. What a joy and how appropriate to the season.

—But this year, for some reason, the actors, the comics, the singers and dancers, haven't come. It's springtime, but they're not here.

Who knows why? Maybe half of them died from

cholera and the rest of the company disbanded. Maybe they were crossing a bridge during a flood and it collapsed, killing them all. Maybe they got caught in a war between rival warlords, and the oxen that haul their coaches were confiscated.

In considering the matter, in wondering and noting and remarking the absence of the 'manzai,' in thinking about the human rituals and events that symbolize and vainly hope to regulate the passage of time,

your mind goes away from the omnipresent natural markers, for example the signs of spring which are right in front of you, bedizening the trees of your village—

\*

From the introduction of Hiroaki Sato's book, *One Hundred Frogs: From Tanka to Renga to Haiku*:

"[A passage] from Toho's *Sanzoshi* (Three Booklets) [defines haiku as]:

'As for [haiku], it is, philosophically, the mind that goes off and returns. For example, it is like:

Yamazato wa manzai ososhi ume no hana

In this mountain village the comedians are late:  
plum blossoms

Like the state of mind that simply says, "In this mountain village the comedians are late," and then says, "The plums are in bloom," the mind that goes off and returns is what makes a [haiku].'

The quoted [haiku] is by Basho, and the observation is believed to be his, too. . . . "

\*

The actors [a traveling theatrical troupe] are late this year to our mountain village: plum blossom.

\*

Human phenomena (manzai who strut their brief hour upon the stage) may cease to return, but natural phenomena (blossoms et al) will always return.

(—"Always," that is, compared to the brevity of human existence—since we know that even our planet must ultimately perish—: as Issa puts it in a haiku: This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world . . . )

The haiku finally returns our minds to the moment, the reality of our present state of being.

What, paraphrasing Basho, "makes the haiku"? —

To create the haiku (or perhaps any work of art), the mind must first absent itself. It must leave here for elsewhere. Abscond, escape—

Only after this distancing, this projection of itself afar,

can the mind, returning, again perceive and experience afresh anew its physical true environment,—

know it, see it once more as world,  
as home, as origin: edenically, as it were (Eliot's  
version: the end of all our exploring will be to  
arrive where we started and know the place for the  
first time).

Or: The mind must perform the human symbol  
before it can be acted upon by the natural image.

Performance precedes form.

In Basho's philosophy, it's a two-step procedure—

[or, in keeping with the book where this note first  
appeared, "Movie Muse and Other Acting  
Poems"],

let me call it a two-stage process:

1. Go away. 2. Return.

1. Imagine. 2. See.

1. Fantasy. 2. Reality.

1. Entertainment. 2. Empirical.

1. Hollywood. 2. Here.

/

The formula:

Hollywood + Here = Haiku.

## FALSE FROG

The famous frog haiku by Basho: its "kigo" (word or phrase indicating season) denotes spring:

furuike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

(ya: "In Japanese, kireji—"cutting-words, used to separate or set off statements"—are onomatopoeic, and 'have the meaning that lies in themselves as sounds.' " (Sato, *One Hundred Frogs*) Another quote from Sato: "Basho himself simply said, 'Every sound unit is a kireji.' "

—a possible version (I'm reading "ya" as an expression of astonishment and amazement at the pond's antiquity):

how old this pond is!  
a frog jumps in—  
the sound of water

My interpretation of "ya" must be wrong, however. Not one of the expert commentators in Makoto Ueda's book *Basho and his Interpreters / Selected Hokku with Commentary* reads the syllable "ya" this way.

In fact, none of them even mentions the ya.

—!—

I can't defend my reading against their collective and individual wisdom, except to say that I'm trying to read the poem by following Toho's (and presumably Basho's) definition of haiku: the mind that goes away and then returns. The mind

struck by the pond's antiquity goes away from the present moment, no? To see what was in what is requires some reflective distance from the immediate perception.

\*

Ueda's two translations from the same book render "ya" first as a dash and then as a colon:

the old pond—  
a frog jumps in,  
water's sound

furuike / ya / kawazu / tobikomu / mizu / no / oto  
old-pond / : / frog / jump-in / water / 's / sound

\*

As I said above, my reading must be wrong.

## BASH

—14 syllabic versions of Basho's famous frog:  
*Furu ike ya / Kawazu tobikomu / Mizu no oto*

If I were a pond  
and some frog jumped into me  
I wouldn't respond.

I am a pond but  
when a frog gets intimate  
I keep my mouth shut.

I may look like scum  
but some frogs can poke this pond  
to orgasm come.

This pond is so old  
even its frogs want it sold  
to build the new road.

This pond is old as  
me. That's how bad-off it is.  
Frog-visits, I doze.

You're old, pond—the same  
as me. But when your frogs come  
you recall each name.

This pond is year-scored  
as me. But frogs that shake it  
up just make me bored.

I'll float in this pond,  
fearing each frog that jumps down  
will wash me aground.

This pond is old too—  
But when a frog jumps into  
It, it still sounds new.

This pond is dead earth  
But listen to its rebirth  
When frogs take a bath.

Ya, the old wash-hole—  
wait-a-fuck: a frog?—oh, no!—  
goes splasho Basho.

Ya, the old North Pole  
where Santa Frog (ho-hop-ho)  
chops a splashin'-hole!

Ya, old-boys brothel—  
watch Oscar Wilde get Basho  
to wet his tadpole.

Ya, here's to Basho!—  
there's one frog-boozin' dude you  
should raise your glass to.

## HAIKU SNAFU

On page xii of "The Poetry of Postwar Japan" is a fascinating excerpt from Donald Keene's "Modern Japanese Poetry" (1964),

where he summarizes a 1946 article by a professor of French literature, Kuwabara Takeo, which

"assert[s] that the difference between a haiku composed by an acknowledged master and one by a bank clerk or a railway engineer was barely perceptible.

Taking a hint from a method used by I.A. Richards in "Practical Criticism," [Kuwabara] asked a group of colleagues [fellow professors at Kyoto University] to evaluate various haiku, some by masters and some by dubs, first removing the names of the poets.

The results were so chaotic that Kuwabara felt justified in his claim that most people judge haiku by the poet's reputation and not by the works themselves. . . ."

## MY "HAIKU"

I'm not sure that I've ever written a haiku in my life, though certainly in the past I thought I was doing so, especially when I wrote 3-line poems in a syllabic pattern of 5/7/5 . . .

In fact I even "published" a chapbook of poems with the title "Haikus/Haikuesques" in an edition of about 20 copies, which I now regret doing.

Anyway, here are two 3-line poems I wrote under the delusion that I was indeed writing something that could be called a haiku:

### 17-SYLLABLE POEM

the pink bubbles seem  
redder each time I blow them  
vampire bubblegum

\*

### [APRIL]

raindrops windowpane  
I can't see myself wearing  
more daring outfits

## A HAIKUTRAN OR TWO

At one time it amused me to take poems from various sources and "translate" them into what I called haiku—or perhaps the term "haikutran" would be more appropriate—

the following pages reprint some of these rather absurd efforts:

A beautiful little poem by Margherita Guidacci—here's her poem in the original Italian, followed by a trans., which is followed by my "haikutran":

Sera

É crollata la diga del sole, crollato  
l'ultimo rosso, l'ultimo rose, l'ultimo grigio. Sul  
mondo  
ora le grandi acque oscure dilagano in pace.  
E no entriamo nell'arca fino alla prossima aurora.

/

translation, by Catherine O'Brien, from "In the Eastern Sky / Selected Poems of Margherita Guidacci"... published by the Irish press Dedalus in 1993:

## EVENING

The dam of the sun has collapsed, gone too  
the last red, the last pink, the last grey. Across the  
world  
now the great dark waters overflow unhindered.  
And we go into the ark to wait for the coming  
dawn.

My version:

Now the sunset's dam breaks—  
waters of darkness drown the world.  
What Ark will bear us safe to dawn?

Guiseppe Ungaretti's poem, "Stelle," in its original Italian, followed by two translations and then my haikutran:

## STELLE

Tornano in alto ad ardere le favole.

Cadranno colle foglie al primo vento.

Ma venga un altro soffio,  
Ritornerà scintillamento nuovo.

/

Allen Mandelbaum trans:

## STARS

On high the fables flame again.

They will fall with the leaves at the first wind.

But if another gust should come,  
New scintillation will return.

/

Kevin Hart trans:

## STARS

The fables blaze again high up there.

At the first wind they will fall with the leaves.

But maybe with another gust  
A new radiance will return.

And my haikutran:

## STARS

Fables flame in the sky—  
First wind, they'll fall with the leaves.  
Next wind, they'll shine again.

Note:

The books from which I'm quoting the  
Mandelbaum and Hart translations are both out of  
print. They are:

Selected Poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti, translated  
and edited by Allen Mandelbaum, Cornell  
University Press, 1975.

The Buried Harbor / Selected Poems of Giuseppe  
Ungaretti, translated by Kevin Hart, the Leros  
Press, 1990.

On page 158 of "The Really Short Poems of A.R. Ammons,"

there's a 12-line 28-syllable poem titled  
"MODALITY"—  
I won't quote it here for fear of copyright  
infringement—

/

My haikutran of it runs thus:

A grackle swoops down—  
Maybe the rain has softened  
Those big garbage bags.

/

I did several other of these haikutrans, but I won't belabor my reader with any more—

## MAKE IT NUKE

T.S. Eliot (looking back in a 1953 lecture) asserted that "[T]he starting-point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imager' in London about 1910." If that's true, then—modern poetry begins with Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound's note on this poem quotes a trans. of a haiku ('The fallen blossom flies back to its branch: A butterfly.') by Arakida Moritake (1472-1549).

The fallen blossom soaring back to its branch: the petals on a rain-wet bough.

Both images kigo-ize Spring, the season of beginnings.

Or rebeginnings: April is the cruellest month [because it] stirs dull roots with Spring rain.

Roots and branches. Fore and after. But make it new—

After World War Two, the foremost movement of new poets to emerge in Japan are called the Arechi, or Waste Land Group. . . . (their eponymous magazine is founded by Tamara Ryuichi). . . .

The fallen blossom flies back to its branch: the Bomb falls on Hiroshima: its vaporized bodies rise: the apparition of the crowd is now a cloud that will rain nothing but ends upon us.

## ADDENDUM

I have published a collection of the short poems I've written over the decades, under the title "333 Short Poems"—it's currently out of print [or by the time you read this it may be back in print and available for purchase at Amazon.com: if you're interested, please check there].

Many of the poems in it are three lines or even less, and could perhaps, though not by me, be characterized as haikuesque. Here's what I prefaced that book with:

### Intro Notes:

When I began writing back in the 1960s, the short poem was popular. That vogue soon ended, but stubbornly or stupidly I continued trying to write them. All my poems and my short ones in particular are indebted to Robert Bly, who encouraged my early work.

I don't make the rules about how long a "short poem" is or can be, or should be—"The Oxford Book of Short Poems" set its optimal length for inclusion at 13 lines, and the editors of the recent "Broadstone Anthology of Short Poems" concur. As does the 1999 Faber collection "Short and Sweet" edited by Simon Armitage.

So none of the poems here are longer than 13 lines, with the exception of one entitled "Quickie," which has 14.



—I'm appending here on the following page the Afterword I wrote for my self-published book of five-line poems, titled "Bucks on Roses / Selected Quintains," since it expresses some of my doubts regarding whether any Western poet can actually write haiku/tanka at all:

## AFTERWORD

In the introduction to his great anthology of translations titled *Japanese Women Poets*, Hiroaki Sato writes:

"The prevailing view in Japan is that "the tanka is a one-line poem," to quote the opening sentence of the astonishingly multifaceted argument for "tanka as modern poetry" by the poet Ishii Tatsuhiko (born 1952). In contrast, at least in American academia, the prevailing view is that the tanka is a five-line poem." (page xxxix)

A few pages later (xlii) Sato notes that "Tanka [written] in English are relatively new, and most poets regard the form as a five-line poem."

Sato himself throughout his oeuvre of translating Japanese poetry into English has always rendered tanka as one line, unless the original itself is lineated—

The debates over how to translate Japanese tanka and haiku into English are too complicated to consider here—

Makoto Ueda in his wonderful anthology *Modern Japanese Tanka* always translates them into five lines, even when the original poems in [romanized] Japanese are printed as one line in length at the foot of each page: and his versions follow no syllabic pattern.

The late British poet James Kirkup translated Japanese tanka always in five lines, and moreover insisted that such translations should be syllabic: 5/7/5/7/7. And he himself wrote hundreds of "tanka" in that rigorous mode.

\*

Previous editions of my five-line poems were titled with the word "tanka" which in retrospect I wish I hadn't used.

I don't know, maybe I thought I was writing in that form, especially with the ones I rendered in a syllabic 5/7/5/7/7 pattern—

whatever my aspirations were in attempting these latter, I no longer think it's possible for me to actually write a "tanka". . . .

I'm not going to object when other poets writing five-line poems in English call them 'tanka' if that's what they prefer, but

why that word should be used when we already have a term for it, is beyond me.

\*

Especially since I've realized that I have no idea what a "tanka" is: is it one line, five lines, or what? Is it syllabic or not?—

\*

But I do know what a five-line poem written in English is. It's a quintain.

## AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

As I mentioned on the previous page, in the past I did publish some selections of my 5-line poems under the rubric of "tanka"— here's part of my preface to one of those editions:

\*

In the four-plus decades I've been working with the short poem, its various modes have manifested themselves—

the one-liner is often aphoristic or paradoxical;

two/three liners are if not always haikuesque in treatment certainly haunted by the aura of that discipline;

four lines: probably in mind of the long tradition of the classic epigram;

6 or above, usually more narratively plotted than the briefer ones—

And then the five line poem, which perhaps strives to combine the virtues of those shorter and longer types.

this form, known of course from the Japanese as *tanka*—





