Normative Haiku and Beyond

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You may not believe this, but there was a time when some of us thought that we knew what haiku was—or is. R.H. Blyth taught us that haiku is Zen and that Zen is haiku. All we had to do was to learn what Zen was and we were set. And wouldn't that be fun? Kenneth Yasuda taught us that haiku is an experience of aesthetic contemplation called the haiku moment. Herold Henderson taught us that haiku contains a nature image and refers to a particular event in the present, and that haiku uses the technique of internal comparison produced by juxtaposition of images. Then Cor van den Heuvel taught us that concision, perception, and awareness are the essence of haiku. All of that brought us what I will refer to as "normative haiku."

In order to assess what we might do to get to the next level beyond normative haiku, we need to establish the characteristics of normative haiku. We all learned how to write haiku somewhere, many of us from books such as Henderson's *Haiku in English*, Bill Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook*, Jane Reichhold's *Writing and Enjoying Haiku*, Bruce Ross's *How to Haiku*, or even my *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*. For the most part we learned that a haiku has the following characteristics:

A haiku is a short poem, usually written in three lines. If you look at a page of *Modern Haiku*, *Frogpond*, or *The Heron's Nest*, this is mostly what you will see. This is what I will call the external form. A haiku has a seasonal or nature image. As you know, not all haiku have this, but it is part of the normative definition of haiku. I am not treating of senryu here, which may or may not have a seasonal image. And a haiku has two parts or images that are related by "internal comparison" or some other interaction. This is the internal form of haiku. Here is a classic example of internal comparison:

The corn has tasseled —
still the taste of winter
lingers in the well

Robert Spiess [1]

In Spiess's haiku the warm, bright, green/brown crispy dryness of the corn—note the past participle—contrasts with the cool, dark, subterranean taste of the melted snow and ice in the well. A more contemporary haiku that also uses internal comparison effectively:

stolen wombs —
the wind brings only dust
to the village well

Sonam Chhoki [2]

Internal comparison ordinarily employs the "fragment and phrase" construction that has become one of the standards of contemporary English-language haiku. The two examples above have the same construction: they begin with a one-line fragment which is followed by a two-line phrase.

Among the more sophisticated understandings of how this fragment and phrase works is the one presented by Koji Kawamoto in his book *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*. Kawamoto explains that the two parts can be thought of as a "base section" and a "superposed section," that relate in a different way than ordinary internal comparison.

> The base section is a verbal segment carrying a noticeable stylistic interest, a hitch or anomaly in the flow of words which prompts the reader to search behind them for their hidden meaning. The superposed section ... is normally a briefer segment which ... gives the reader an indirect orientation to the plausible significance(s) of the entire piece.[3]

Take, for example,

Hunched egret —
just one more snowy cobble
beneath the bridge

Tito [4]

The base section, "just one more snowy cobble beneath the bridge," certainly does carry a noticeable stylistic interest, "a hitch or anomaly in the flow of words which prompts the reader to search behind them for their hidden meaning." What is "just one more snowy cobble?" The superposed section, "hunched egret," does indeed "[give] the reader an indirect orientation to the plausible significance of the entire piece." Particularly intriguing is the unexpected "hunched" describing the appearance of the bird—and also anticipating the effect the snow has on the landscape. It creates meaning by connecting the animate with the inanimate and the human to the non-human experience of snow and also by adding an additional dimension to our understanding of "hunched."

Notice that the "superposed section" doesn't always come first as in this haiku:

silently
the gossip spreads
evening rain

Srinivas S [5]

Here the phrase "silently the gossip spreads" places us firmly in the human world, and with the word "gossip," not necessarily in the most flattering part of it. Then the fragment, "evening rain," forces us to reassess the significance of the phrase and enlarges the haiku considerably by adding a hidden sound dimension to our experience of the evening rain and to the relationship between the human and non-human sounds.

So this is normative haiku, the kind of haiku that we are all most familiar with as poets and readers. We will all probably continue to write this kind of haiku. Why wouldn't we? It is a great kind of haiku!

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a revolution in English-language haiku. It began with the work of Haruo Shirane,

whose excellent book on Bashō's poetics, *Traces of Dreams*, was published in 1998. Shirane taught us some of the essential elements of the poetics of the Bashō school, including *butsuga ichinyo* (object and self as one), *fūga no makoto* (truth of poetic art), *fueki ryūkō* (the changing and the unchanging), and *zōka zuijun* (following the creative).

Shirane was the keynote speaker at the Haiku North America conference in Evanston, Illinois in 1999. The talk he gave there was published in *Modern Haiku* in early 2000 as "Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths." Shirane taught us that there were two key axes in haiku: one horizontal, representing the present, or the contemporary world; and the other vertical, leading back into the past, to history, to culture, to other poems. Emphasis on the vertical axis encourages us to engage our haiku in a dialogue with poets of the past as well as those of the present. The outstanding example he gave of a haiku with a strong vertical axis was the haiku by Bernard Einbond that won first prize in the 1988 JAL haiku contest:

frog pond…
a leaf falls in
without a sound

Bernard Einbond

It alludes to Bashō's famous frog poem:

an old pond
frog jumps in
the sound of water

Another key event was the publication of Richard Gilbert's essay, "The Disjunctive Dragonfly," in *Modern Haiku* in 2004 and followed by the expanded book-length *The Disjunctive Dragonfly* in 2013. Also significant was the publication of his *Poems of Consciousness* in 2008. In these three publications, Gilbert reminded us that *kire*, or cutting, and fragmentary language are key semantic features of haiku. He also emphasized the importance of what he considered the three genre features of haiku:

perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, and overturning semantic expectation.

Another important event was the 2009 publication of Martin Lucas's "Haiku as Poetic Spell," in which he contrasts the "international formula" with its predictable seasonal phrase, in predictable position, predictable word order, and "cut" position, predictable rhythm, and essentially rational presentation, with haiku of "poetic spell," which he characterized as having an original seasonal phrase, original word order, significant music, and essentially irrational character.

These have led me from where I began, with haiku of "direct experience," such as this:

summer sunset —
the baby finds his shadow
on the kitchen wall [6]

to an exploration of the intersection of the inner and outer worlds and the creation of new worlds within the poem as with:

floating in the sonogram summer moon [7]

Thus, my haiku journey involves moving from a striving for Blyth's "poem of enlightenment" to writing itself as enlightening. I remember Bill Higginson saying that the "aha" moment that we are all looking for sometimes comes in the original experience of nature and at other times in the making of the poem itself. Thus began a shift in the focus of my inner eye from one to the other which has been moved forward by Shirane, Gilbert, and Lucas. They can each provide valuable guidance to today's haiku poet.

In order to help you move your haiku to the next level, whatever that might be for you, I would like to share three quotes that are permanently a part of my life and writing and that I believe will be useful to you on your journey.

First, a quote on the seasonal image in haiku from Kuriyama Shigehisa, from the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*:

> In a poem where the seasonal theme fulfills its true evocative function, the season *expands the scope of the haiku* and creates a background of associations for the specific scene, while the specific scene points out *a characteristic yet often forgotten aspect of the season* and thus enriches our understanding of it. (italics mine) [8]

The second is on the relationship between the concrete and the abstract by Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro:

> The abstract should become concrete and the concrete abstract. That is to say, a perfect equilibrium should obtain between the two, because if the abstract keeps stretching you further towards the abstract, it will come apart in your hands and sift through your fingers. The concrete, if made still more concrete, can perhaps serve you some wine ... or furnish your parlor, but it can never furnish your soul. [9]

The third is by Russian Formalist poet Victor Shklovsky, who wrote in "Art as Technique," about the purpose of art and the technique of art:

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make the object "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the *process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged*. (italics mine) [10]

Each of these thinkers presents us with a challenge. Let's talk about them individually and see how they apply to the writing and reading of haiku.

First, season. How does one "point out *a characteristic yet often forgotten aspect of the season*?" Let's look at some haiku that I believe do just that, haiku in which the seasonal image doesn't merely serve as a "backdrop" for the specific scene, but in which there is a living connection between the two.

winter solstice
just enough light
to sharpen the axe

Ron C. Moss [11]

Here the sharpness of the cold and dim light are illuminated by the razor edge of the axe.

summer vacation —
on a first name basis
with strangers

Billie Wilson [12]

Where but on a summer vacation or a cruise do we find ourselves so comfortably on a first name basis with strangers?

summer fair
our dog retrieves
a lost boy

Debbie Strange [13]

What could be more characteristic of summer than a boy wandering away in search of adventure until he and a dog find each other?

Next, let's look at the balancing of the abstract and the concrete. I think this is one of the most exciting areas being explored in haiku today. Here are some haiku that I think are successful in achieving the difficult goal of bringing something new to haiku.

Parthenon sunset
the pillars lit up
by a golden mean

Jay Friedenberg [14]

This haiku contains an interesting combination of concrete and abstract elements, enriched by the double meaning of "golden" in the third line. Here are a few more that probably need no comment from me:

crescent moon
the air we breathe
is propaganda

Martin Lucas [15]

stepfamily some assembly required

Gregory Longenecker [16]

brackets
within parentheses
deep winter

Sarah E. Metzler [17]

a long list
of side effects …
winter rain

Polona Oblak [18]

Please notice that these last two are also successful seasonal haiku.

Poets trying to balance the concrete and abstract are not always successful, as I am sure you are aware from your own reading or from your own work, but I have found it to be an interesting area to explore and I believe you will, too.

Finally, how do we slow down the reader and thus lengthen the process of perception as Shklovsky suggests? The most obvious—and probably easiest—way is to use the page to take the eye and mind for a journey through the poem. The use of the three-line form in normative haiku, with its two line breaks, is the most obvious way in which we have elected to slow down the reader. This can, of course, be extended in several ways, as is done here:

water against
shore
back and
forth
the dead
seagull

D W Skrivseth [19]

Notice how the form rocks us back and forth against the shore, and how the poet, by first creating the expectation that each of the lines will begin in one of two columns, then violates that expectation by bringing us up short with "seagull."

Influenced by the work of Robert Lax and Frank Samperi, I have been exploring the use of the page as a way to slow down the reader's process of perception. Here is one whose form is influenced by the vertical poems of Robert Lax:

without
syntax

the
bare
skin

of
dawn [20]

And one influenced by some of the less constrained formal experiments of Frank Samperi:

  songbirds
a
  light

on
  the stone
head

  in
the
  garden [21]

Various other techniques have been used within the language of the poem to slow down the reader's process of perception. The fragmenting of syntax—two images juxtaposed—is, along with the three-line form, the primary technique that normative haiku uses to slow down the reader. In addition to fragmenting language in this way, reversal of normal syntax is a commonly used technique. Compare the difference in the effect between these two presentations of exactly the same images:

the river
and the rain
growing old together

growing old together
the river
and the rain

Peter Newton [22]

The first arrangement—simply a rewritten version of Newton's by myself—presents an observation that we can accept or deny. The second engages us by first orienting us with a human-centered image and then switching our minds to a larger significance which oscillates between the human and the other-than-human. This is also a good example of Kawamoto's schema of the "base" and "superposed section" in action. Remember, he wrote, "The base section is a verbal segment carrying a noticeable stylistic interest ... which prompts the reader to search behind them for their hidden meaning." "Growing old together," as the first line, does indeed prompt the reader to search for a deeper meaning, making us wonder who is "growing old together," and what the manifestations of this ageing might be. Newton follows this with a second image that gives us a new perspective on the river and the rain—and what it means to grow old together.

In addition to the above techniques that slow down the reader's act of perception, Richard Gilbert has considerably expanded our vison and toolbox with what he calls three genre features of haiku: perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, and overturning semantic expectation. These techniques also "increase the difficulty and length of perception." In *The Disjunctive Dragonfly* he writes, "These disjunctive genre features are found in all haiku to some degree, and include the use of *kire*/cutting, compression, and *katakoto* [that is,] (a sense of "fragmentary" language.)"[23] We have already seen examples displaying each of these features, but for clarity let's look at each of them separately.

Perceptual disjunction often results simply from an ordinary situation being presented from an unusual perspective:

mown grass
a child rolls downhill
into a sneeze

Cyndi Lloyd [24]

Here, the first two lines give us a purely visual image but then the poet redirects our consciousness from the visual to the aural with the final word, "sneeze." In other cases, the poet forces us to reassess our interpretation of words or phrases as we travel through the haiku:

turning through cartwheels
in her summer dress
the swallow's white breast

John Hawkhead [25]

Here, the poet redirects us by moving us from the human world in the second line to the avian in the third line, thus forcing us to reassess our interpretation of the second line in the process.

dog days
the overheated air
their views

Helen Buckingham [26]

Here we have one of the most effective techniques of perceptual disjunction: a word changing parts of speech as we read, hence creating, in addition to perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, the second of Gilbert's genre features. Here is another example of misreading as meaning:

thunderstorm
the eyes of Shiva
on her tattoo

Sreelatha Nair [27]

The "eyes" begin on the face of the god then shift to the ink of the tattoo, or do they? The ambiguity here is unresolved and unresolvable.

fishing
he brings up
Jesus

John Hawk [28]

Here we begin with literal fishing in the first line, and continue with this perception in the second line. But then the third line holds several surprises. First, with the word "Jesus," we are prompted to reassess our inter-

pretation of the second line. It may no longer be the literal bringing up of a fish from the water but the figurative "bringing up" of a subject of conversation. But that's not all. The word "Jesus" also makes us question our initial interpretation of the first line. Are we actually out fishing or are we merely observing a "fisher of men?" Quite a bit of perceptual disjunction and word magic for a five-word haiku, and an important reminder to us as *readers* of haiku that we should savor each word as we read it, and not just pop each haiku into in our mouth and swallow it whole.

We have already seen several examples of alterations of semantic expectation, but let's introduce a few more that reflect particular techniques we see poets exploiting today. As we just saw a poet can overturn semantic expectation by shifting the meaning between different parts of speech (noun to verb or other). An outstanding example of this shift is by Francine Banwarth:

fallen leaves me with my grudges [29]

This poem begins simply with "fallen leaves," a straightforward nature image. Then "fallen leaves me," which produces a semantic shift as "leaves" potentially changes from noun to verb. When we get to the end of the haiku and its "grudges," we are presented with another cognitive shift as "grudges" forces us to reevaluate our initial understanding of "fallen;" not necessarily referring to the leaves, but possibly referring to our own fallen condition. It is a startling reshuffling of the first three words: the poet who has coaxed us in with "fallen leaves me" now batters us on the rocks with "leaves me fallen." A most masterful haiku.

One of the most interesting ways in which a haiku overturns semantic expectation is when it is capable of changing from literal to figurative meaning and back again. We have already seen this with "fishing/bringing up/Jesus." Another example.

Father's Day
most of the arrows
wide of the mark

Chad Lee Robinson [30]

This ability to change from literal to figurative is frequent characteristic of outstanding haiku.

My purpose in this paper has been to try to expand our understanding of the tools that are available to us as we expand the possibilities of our work beyond the "normative" definition of haiku we looked at earlier. Developing a vertical axis, artfully combining the abstract and the concrete, and slowing the reader's perception, can all help increase the power and significance of our haiku. Exploring the interaction of poem and page as well as the effects of perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, and overturning semantic expectation can help us explore the cognitive effects available to the poet today and tomorrow. These are some of the tools available to the contemporary haiku poet in his or her quest. But why do these things? Am I simply encouraging you to manipulate words for effect? Is it possible to write haiku of real literary value? What is "real literary value?" I think that at its best, haiku—like all fine poetry—creates in the reader an emotion for which a name does not yet exist. Doing so permits the poet, using the vocabulary of haiku, to add a word to the lexicon of human consciousness.

angels
above

the
path
beyond
beyond

dawn
wind [31]

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Notes

[1] Spiess, Robert. *The Shape of Water*. Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1982.

[2] Ramesh, Kala, ed. *Naad Anunaad*. India: Vishwakarma Pub., 2016.

[3] Kawamoto, Kōji. *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*. Japan: Univ. of Tokyo Press, 2000.

[4] *Presence* 64

[5] *Presence* 64

[6] 1990 Mainichi Daily News Haiku Contest, 1st Place.

[7] *Modern Haiku* 41.3

[8] *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. Japan: Kodansha, 1984.

[9] Huidobro, Vicente. *MANIFESTOS manifest*. Copenhagen & Los Angeles: Green Integer Press, 1999

[10] Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique" in *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics,* 2nd edition. Rueven Tsur, ed. Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008.

[11] *Frogpond* 39.3

[12] *Mariposa* 40

[13] *Mariposa* 40

[14] *Presence* 64

[15] Ramesh, Kala, ed. *Naad Anunaad*.

[16] Kacian, Jim, ed. *Dust Devils: Red Moon Anthology 2017*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2018

[17] *Modern Haiku* 50.2

[18] *Modern Haiku* 48.3

[19] *Modern Haiku* 50.1

[20] *Modern Haiku* 51.3

[21] *Otata* 47

[22] *Acorn* 39

[23] Gilbert, Richard. *The Disjunctive Dragonfly*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2013.

[24] *Presence* 64

[25] Kacian, Jim, ed. *Dust Devils: Red Moon Anthology 2017*

[26] *Presence* 64

[27] Ramesh, Kala, ed. *Naad Anunaad*.

[28] Kacian, Jim, ed. *Dust Devils: Red Moon Anthology 2017*

[29] *Modern Haiku* 46.1

[30] *Mariposa* 41

[31] *Bones* 19