

essays

A Dialogue on the Experimental

[Editor's Note: This dialogue, between two of the leading theoreticians of haiku in English today, was stirred by the article which appeared in the previous *Frogpond*, written by Mr. Rowland. This addressed the important topic of where haiku in English is headed, which certainly concerns all of us. This exchange further emphasizes how important it is to keep abreast of the latest developments in our field, and more than that, in poetry in general. Though at times we feel quite apart in our own little pond, haiku is certainly affected by the activities afoot in the mainstream, and knowledge of not only haiku's poetic heritage but our language's as well is of paramount importance as we come to see how the two come together, if for no other reason than to keep an open mind about what haiku is and what it may become.]

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From: Cor van den Heuvel
To: Philip JL Rowland
Subject: Avant-Garde Haiku
Date: May 28, 2002

Dear Philip,

Thank you [again] for sending me your essay. Reading it in *Frogpond* presented a number of difficulties, not only because of the missing parts, but because the quotations you indicate in the original by indenting the text were not indicated at all in the magazine. Though I enjoyed reading it in *Frogpond* despite the confusion, I certainly enjoyed it much more when I had its introductory first third, could see when you were quoting, and had the means to key the references in the footnotes to their place in the text. [Though *Frogpond* had all the footnotes, including those for the omitted third, they weren't numbered, nor were the places in the text to which they referred.]

At the start of your paper there is a reference to "The Nature of English Haiku. (1996)" You speak of it as a British Haiku Society "consensus." There is no footnote for this. Was it an article in *Blithe Spirit*? Was it by several authors? [Later, you mention a "BHS Pamphlet," is this the same thing?] You quote George Swede from it. I've long regretted that George

has not written more haiku criticism. I think from the discussions we've had at various haiku conferences, particularly the Haiku North America meetings the first five of which we both attended (he was not at the most recent, in Boston), that he has one of the most acutely critical minds in haiku. Yet the best-known piece he has published, "A History of English Haiku," mentions—and that just briefly—only one English-language haiku poet. Rather than discussing the haiku poets who made the real history of English-language haiku, his essay is all about mainstream, or near mainstream, poets who have occasionally flirted with the form or whose work seems to have been influenced by it. He brings in all the usual suspects, from Pound and Williams to the Beats. He even digs up Charles Reznikof and I think he, also, mentions John Ashbery. You would hardly know there was such a thing as a haiku movement—and yet he himself has been right in the middle of it. He used this essay as an afterword in the anthology he edited with Randy Brooks, *Global Haiku*, and it has been posted on several websites. It's title is appallingly misleading. He has done some pieces on the statistical popularity of free-form haiku versus the 5-7-5 and theoretical pieces on what the elements of a haiku should be, but he has not gotten down to the inner workings of actual haiku or the comparative worth of the output of particular poets. It is my feeling that if a critic doesn't do this, he is evading the most important part of his job. Of course, his editing of haiku anthologies serves as an indirect indicator of his evaluation of his contemporaries. [Though this may have been somewhat compromised in the case of *Global Haiku* by the publisher's insistence on the collection being representative of the different countries where English-language haiku were being written.]

48 One of the great impediments to the haiku movement's success has been its lack of good critics. Compared to the number of great haiku poets—John Wills, Nick Virgilio, Alan Pizzarelli and the others I praise in the intros to the various editions of *The Haiku Anthology*—the number of outstanding critics is amazingly small. For several decades there were only a handful: Higginson, Eric Amann, and Rod Willmot were about it. [Though Anita Virgil and Michael McClintock were important critics as well as poets in the early years.] Willmot was almost singular in having the courage, or assurance, to say what was good and what was not, to quote and discuss actual English-language haiku, and to name names. Of course, I did not always agree with him, but his work was always incisive and stimulating. For several years he had a regular critical column called "The Woodcock's Beak" in Amann's magazine *Cicada*.

He dropped out of the haiku scene to write novels—and to race as an in-line skater. It would be a benefit to haiku, I'm sure, if he were to return to the movement, as McClintock has recently done.

Thankfully, more good critics have in the last few years begun to appear in the haiku magazines, especially in *Modern Haiku*. Among them are such sharp critical minds and talented writers as Charles Rossiter, Mark Alan Osterhaus, Paul O. Williams, J. P. Trammell, Edward J. Reilly, Marian Olson, and A. C. Missias. Several of the new, important haiku poets, such as Lee Gurga, Dee Evetts, and Michael Dylan Welch have demonstrated that they are also adept at examining the esthetics and philosophical implications of haiku and in getting down to the nuts and bolts of writing them, each bringing a sharp intellect and a penetrating pen to the process.

The critical awareness and acumen that permeate your article, and the toreador-grace with which your language confronts and analyzes each word in a poem, made reading it a pleasure. As I told Jim Kacian, I was delighted to see it in *Frogpond*. [It may interest you to know that Lee Gurga was also pleased with your article, and immediately looked up Perelman's books.] I hope you will in time deal with the world of American haiku and examine the works of its poets with the same detail and careful attention you've given to the work of those poets you discuss in your article—poets who have, or seem to have been, influenced by the genre but are, or were, not involved with it.

One criteria you cite for an avant-garde that especially caught my attention was that it should be considered, at least initially, unacceptable. Another aspect related to this one, and which you allude to, is that it be inaccessible. Literature, art, or music that is one or the other, but usually both, and that is ultimately found to be of value, has been considered avant-garde. Of course, it is recognized as such only in retrospect. Only its creators and initiates will know it at the time.

Usually avant-garde literature is thought to be obscure and hard to understand because of its complexity. That is what makes it inaccessible and thus unacceptable. However, I think, haiku as it has developed in English over the last half-century, could itself be considered avant-garde, though it has been inaccessible and unacceptable, not because of its complexity, but because of its deceptive simplicity. You have labeled "avant-garde haiku" works that depart from the way haiku has developed within the movement, but if we move back and take a deeper perspective, looking at English-language poetry as a whole, it is the haiku movement itself that has been unacceptable

and inaccessible to, not only the general reading public, but to the academy and the established community of poets. That includes the English departments in most institutions of higher learning, reviews like the *New York Review of Books*, the Poetry Society of America, and The Academy of American Poets. This is most evident by the way the representatives of such organizations and most mainstream poets have simply ignored the poets of the haiku movement—or have occasionally deigned to disdain them. As an example of the latter you might look at the correspondence between Robert Bly and me that was published recently in the second issue of *Tundra* magazine. Those letters written almost thirty years ago reveal that the works of the American haiku movement were both inaccessible and unacceptable to one of America's most respected and celebrated poets. They still are.

As I've mentioned, the avant-garde is expected to be complex and obscure. If I am correct about the American haiku movement being an avant-garde movement, one of the reasons it is so is because it does not seem to fulfill such expectations and yet it actually does. American haiku to the uninitiated seems blank and opaque because it does not possess those attributes thought to be essential to poetry by western standards. We expect poetry to have figures of speech such as metaphors, or to contain romantic expressions of feeling, or to have rhetorical flourishes, and to have some kind of musical rhythm, or at least interesting sounds, assonances or even dissonances. Haiku confounds these expectations or delivers them only sparsely. The general attitude has been that something so simple and clear and, particularly, so *small* cannot be poetry. Something so bare has to be banal and inconsequential: thus unacceptable. It's simple clarity appears as a fragment, inconsequential and empty. Because the reader thinks the poem should contain more he fails to see what is there.

But you do show all this—in passing—by quoting Barthe on how classic haiku does not contest meaning, but suspends meaning or is not concerned with it (or commentary). The haiku [only] presents an image. "So that," you write, "from a Western point of view, paradoxically enough, the classic haiku has, in effect, something rather avant-garde about it."

When you go on to consider haiku in contrast to the new poetics of the post-moderns and the language poets, you quote from Rothenberg and Joris in *Poems for the Millennium*: "the experimental moves [of the new poetics] on their structural/compositional side have involved a range of procedures that bring out the opaque materiality of language as a medium, as against a 'romantic' view of language as purely a transparent

window toward an ideal reality beyond itself."

After mentioning how Shigenobu challenged this romantic view with his iconoclastic haiku [which I would have liked to see an example of since I could not immediately put my hands on the issue of the magazine you cite] you say: "This modernistic approach to haiku is bound to be transgressive simply because it is first and foremost language-oriented. It calls into question the received notion that haiku can point to (even if it cannot represent) 'an ideal reality' and thereby transcend language."

But I would object that this romantic view is not haiku's. Haiku does not look to an ideal reality, but to ordinary reality. If anything is ideal in the process it is the awareness of the poet and his or her reader. In contrast to the techniques employed by the poets of the traditional romantic "view," haiku poets avoid figures of speech, emotional expressions, and rhetorical or musical decoration.

Related to this concern is something you bring up later in your article: Yatsuka Ishihara's idea that the essence of haiku lies in its "telling the truth as if it is false." I have never been able to get my mind around this formulation since I first heard its author state it at Haiku Chicago in 1995. I begin to get a glimmer of what he may mean when you point out that because truth-telling can never be final, never absolute, a poem must be false. Since a poem can never be the real thing it describes or points to, it can't be true. But this is a failure of all kinds of poetry and could even be a truism (also dragging along a false-ism) about language in general. I believe that haiku is the way to overcome this weakness in language, so that we *can* come close to finding reality in words. After all, do we even outside language have a way of truly apprehending reality? To some degree it is illusory and limited by our perceptual powers. So though I think I see what Ishihara is getting at, I don't believe it is true of the best haiku. It may be tied to a peculiarly Japanese way of looking at existence and poetry. I remember when Kenkichi Yamamoto was here in 1978 I could not accept his argument for humor being the essence of haiku. I remember his citing a poem by a haiku poet written during a serious illness in which the poet compared himself to an overturned turtle. The poet, he said, was making fun of himself. This is a kind of falseness, perhaps the kind Ishihara means when he talks about the "essence" of haiku. It is not the essence of the haiku I love. A stronger argument could be made for western poetry telling the truth in a false way. Metaphor and other figures of speech speak of reality in an unreal way. The "lamb" of God is not really a lamb. But the "false" depiction of him as one is supposed to tell us a truth about Christ's nature.

I just received a notice for the next HSA national meeting to be held here in New York City in June and it says Patrick Gallagher will be talking about Ishihara's teachings and giving a workshop on the use of hyperbole in haiku. So exaggeration may be the linchpin of Ishihara's haiku poetics.

Of course, we shouldn't assume that when a particular Japanese haiku master or expert says something about the genre, that it represents the views of all Japanese haiku poets. Any more than we should expect such a consensus from all English-language haiku poets. I'm sure whatever the BHS consensus is on haiku, Marlene Mountain, for example, would disagree with a lot of it. And just as Hekigodo and Santoka differed from Kyoshi about how to write haiku, so there certainly must be some Japanese haiku poets who would say with me, "What the hell is Ishihara talking about?" Modern Japanese haiku seems generally headed towards the use of more western poetic techniques such as figures of speech and surrealistic combinations, while American haiku has gone in the other direction—towards simplicity and plainness. The Iron Press book of 100 English-language haiku, *The Haiku Hundred* (1992), seemed to indicate that British haiku poets tended to like figurative language in haiku, a continuation of their own poetic traditions. However, in the more recent *The Iron Book of British Haiku* (1998), an impressive collection of about four hundred haiku, one will look hard to find even a single example of traditional figurative speech, such as metaphor or simile. As in America, haiku in Britain seems to have moved into the paths of simplicity and directness of language.

Your argument that certain works of John Ashbery, Robert Grenier, and Larry Eigner represent a kind of avant-garde haiku is valid, I think, only if you consider them in relation to those works of American haiku that tend to be clear and simple. As you say, in that world they are generally "unacceptable." (Though some of Grenier's works, as I will try to show, could be considered not avant-garde haiku, but simply haiku.)

In the wider world of American poetry, Ashbery is part of the establishment, and just about anything he writes is now "acceptable." In the circles that "count" his work has been acceptable from the very beginning: when W. H. Auden accepted his first book for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1956. Ashbery's so-called haiku are closer to being snippets of his longer works rather than haiku, avant-garde or any other kind. If Ashbery was ever avant-garde, in the sense of being unacceptable to the inner circle of American poetry, I don't remember it. *The Tennis Court Oath* in 1962 was met with

puzzlement by many reviewers, but his defenders prevailed and by 1975 he had a Pulitzer Prize and the National book Award for *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

As for being inaccessible, even Ashbery's most disjunctive and obscure pieces have been carefully parsed and held up to the light by astute critics. Most notably for me by Sven Birkerts, who has shown how the mystery is composed of smoke and mirrors. [I sometimes think that some of Ashbery's most confusing pieces are continuations of Lucky's monologue in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.] The magician's tools Ashbery uses are such things as non-referent pronouns, jarred syntax, juxtaposition of phrases that don't coalesce into meaning, logical statements that veer off into non sequiturs, incomplete sentences, and so on. The result is that the poem (such as "Leaving the Atocha Station") is always on the verge of making sense, yet almost always slips away into meaninglessness again. As Ashbery says himself in one of his more coherent poems (of which there are many), "Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,/ Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm,/ if it has any, is what it is,/ But the rhythm of the series of repeated jumps, from/ abstract into positive and back to a slightly less/ diluted abstract." [from *The Skaters* (1966).] But, usually what you get in Ashbery is a dry, intellectual, but discursive, discourse. His poetry is interesting, often even fascinating, but it is as far from haiku's concerns as a sonnet by Shakespeare. And this includes his "haiku."

This is not to say, I don't find enlightening your pointing to elements of his "haiku" to fit parts of the "consensus" of what makes an acceptable haiku. I do. But for me the pieces beginning "You lay aside" and "Old-fashioned shadows"—which you seem to think come closer than his others to being (traditional) haiku, because they are more accessible—are as far from being haiku as his "inaccessible" ones, such as "I inch" (and all the other "haiku" by Ashbery). Neither bad haiku nor non-haiku can be "avant garde haiku," which to me is a term of praise.

Larry Eigner is a more interesting case. I was very excited by his works more than a quarter of a century ago. Probably even much earlier, for I associate him with the Black Mountain School, with Duncan and Olson, and I was very into their work in the 1960s after discovering it in the late fifties. I especially like what Eigner does with the space on a page and how the words work through and across it. But ultimately, for me, his poems fade into that space. The word combinations are not memorable, nor are the images. One of the poems you quote:

the fleering snow
off the eaves
of the garage

seems to me an attempt at an image that fails. In spite of all the nice things, as you point out, the “f’s do in the poem, the awkwardness for me of the word “fleering” upsets the sound and the image of the poem. I guess he is trying to create a neologism, combining the words flaring and veering. For me a simple word like blowing, or falling, would have given the image more immediacy. But, I suppose, for you the unusual word calling attention to itself as a word rather than as a mediating counter for recreating an event is what makes it an interesting poem. To find that there is an actual word “fleering” and that it means “to laugh or grimace in a coarse manner” makes the poem even less successful to my mind and I hope this is not what he intended. The other short poems you quote that “could well qualify as haiku” are, if any kind of haiku, failed haiku. From the reverse syntax of “shadows on a bush / the fading sunlight fills” which is antithetical to the common language necessary for successful haiku (and echoes sentimental nineteenth century phrasing) to the trite conceit of “pruning the tree / clearing the skies” which clouds the image with thought, they all—though similar examples *can* be found in the haiku magazines—fail as haiku, avant or otherwise.

When you cite the poem beginning “wide - r a n g i n g / cloud over” with reference to Barret Watten’s approving description of Eigner’s “syntactical jarring of the perceptual space,” and laud the fact that we are left to wonder what is “sunlit,” I am left to wonder to what end. You assert that it “serves to prevent disruption of the ‘nounal state’ into which the final thought dissolves—thereby achieving a haikuesque, Barthesian ‘suspension of meaning.’” I don’t follow this at all. It sounds very important and intellectual, but I am still left with an abstract, unresolved image: something sunlit on a cloudy day with “somewhere enough for a storm.” Supposedly enough clouds. This “jarring” leaves me not only with a “suspension of meaning,” but a suspension of any esthetic response. For me the physical space Eigner creates on the page with many of his poems is much more engaging than any “jarring” of the perceptual space within this poem. If there is space within the poem’s image, let us see it, even if it is artificially fractured, or even flattened like the space in a cubist painting.

Eigner, rather than creating an avant-garde haiku, is in his best works elaborating on the kind of space “fields” that Charles Olson experimented with, and which earlier had

fascinated William Carlos Williams and E. E. Cummings. So, again, in the wider field of American poetry, like Ashbery, though nowhere near as formidable, Eigner is a considerable figure. Yet he is solidly outside the American haiku movement and so cannot be seen as avant to it or after it. If it is avant-garde at all—and a case could be made for its being so forty years ago—I think it has to be in relation to that wider category of poetry of which he is an accepted part.

A haiku poet whose work on the page somewhat resembles Eigner’s shorter works is John Martone—though the poems keep to a vertical line of text, they break up words and use spaces between the vertical elements. It might be rewarding to examine how Martone’s poems fit your criteria for an avant-garde haiku. Which perhaps could be distilled down to: a poem that is a haiku but has such original or experimental new elements that to most readers it seems not to be. I think Martone’s poems are avant-garde haiku because they deliver the immediacy of the natural world, relating the reader to existence as a haiku should, yet perform a further esthetic function by presenting us with the experience of words as words. He even breaks up the words so that we look at them differently and then puts them back together to get the image. Almost at one and the same time we can look at the words as words or objects and then we can look through them to the reality of the image. Our focus can shift back and forth between them, like looking into the kind of kaleidoscope that mirrors fragments of the outside world.

In a chapter I’ve written for a new book about American haiku, edited by Gurga and Welch, I discuss John Martone and his poetry. Perhaps you would be interested in reading the following part of that discussion:

John Martone has been publishing a series of very tiny chapbooks, about twenty of them from 1991 to the present. The poems in them are polished, lapidary, vertical constructions that, aside from a few startling exceptions, look little like regular haiku. They can be anywhere from three to fifteen or more lines long, but most run to between five and ten lines. Each line is usually only one word or one syllable long. The lines are grouped into two- or three-line “stanzas.” These ultra-short lines perhaps owe their genesis to the typographic influence of E. E. Cummings. Other than to haiku poets, Martone has been especially attracted to the modern works of, among others, Cid Corman, Larry Eigner, and Frank Samperi. Corman’s short poems, Eigner’s use of space, and Samperi’s short-short lines (creating narrow

poems) may be seen reflected in Martone's poems—a few words arranged vertically on an otherwise blank page. In a recent letter to me, John Martone said he thinks of the poem “as a charm/amulet/meditative object,” and “the book . . . as space, meditative precinct, garden.”

It is in his little books of poetry about potted ferns and everyday life in and around his house where John Martone's art shines brightest. As it does in these four poems:

not	por	across	kitchen breezes
noti	celain	2 lots	children
cing	shard		water color!
		shack-door	
breath	at	left wide	
until	bottom		
this	of	such	
		a day	
fern	one		
trembles	tree's pot		
	no		
	idea		
	which		

The first two are from his book *shards* (2000). In the first, the passage from the negative “not” to the selflessness of “noti” (not I) to the sing of “cing” to the life of the poet’s “breath” to the life of “this fern” swings the poem like a scented censer swaying at a religious ceremony. And the shards in the second poem become the mysterious hidden remains of some lost civilization. The second two are from *children's guide* (1999). Bob Grumman, who has reviewed a number of Martone's books for *Modern Haiku*, says of the last poem “I think it instructional to point out how much extra quick vividness Martone charges his picture with by drawing it in three short lines of unbroken words—after so many longer poems containing words cut up into syllables nearly as much as full words: a signal advantage of breaking with convention is that one can get a great deal out of the broken convention upon return to it.” That is, by writing a haiku in the conventional three line form.

Of the three poets you discuss in your article, Robert Grenier's poetry seems the most interesting to me. Probably because he comes closest to fulfilling what I hope to get from a haiku, plus giving me something extra in the way of playfulness

with words, a kind of word magic. (I find it interesting that Grenier is an anagram of Eigner with an added r.) I also feel a kindred (to myself) spirit at work. You quote a two word poem of his. I wrote a two word haiku for my first book, published in 1961: rain // tracks. (The two slashes are not part of the poem, but represent the line break and the line of space between the two words.) Grenier's poem:

two trees

While as you say, quoting Perelman and Barthes, this presents itself as two words written “just to write,” the two words also vaguely represent two trees imagistically by their meaning, though without much immediacy. You add that the “visible language is just as much the issue as the concrete imagery.” By concrete imagery, I suppose, since the words' meanings don't give us a very solid image, that you are referring to the words by their shape on the page suggesting two trees. They do so only vaguely. The horizontal shape resists this interpretation. You could, I suppose, look at the two *ts* as representing the trees, but this is stretching things. (*At* is a bit like the Japanese kanji for tree.) Compared to some of the concrete poems of Marlene Mountain, this poem is very weak indeed—as a concrete poem. Its value lies in the other attributes you discuss.

I included a number of Mountain's concrete poems in the second edition of *The Haiku Anthology* including her coyote, frog, peacock, and hoot owl. Also her two word “rain drop” arranged with rain as the first line and drop, without its *o*, as the second line, the *o* dropping down to the third line right under the space left by its absence in the second. I dropped all of these poems, except for the frog, from the third edition. Not because they weren't fine poems, but because I no longer considered them primarily haiku, not even avant-garde haiku, but rather as concrete poems with, to use your term, haikuesque attributes. I did keep the frog because though it too is a concrete poem it is also very much a haiku since it, I think, presents the reader with the *isness*, the essence, of a frog. Perhaps it is an avant-garde haiku, since I'm sure there are many readers who would not accept it as a haiku. It is also a two word poem, though the second word is the same as the first, only put back together.

This demonstrates how difficult it is to decide when something is avant-garde, for, as I think you point out, we can only know after the fact. An artistic or literary experiment has to be unacceptable when it is first presented to the public to be avant-garde, but it can only be considered avant-garde when

it is later proved to be of value. If it is not so proven, then it will continue to be unacceptable (and not avant-garde), or more likely, just forgotten.

I think you make a good case for Grenier's "except the swing bumped by the dog in passing" as an avant-garde haiku. I would consider including it in *The Haiku Anthology*—even knowing a good number of that book's readers would think it unacceptable as haiku. It is a radical departure from what we expect a haiku to be. I'm with you on his "or the starlight on the porch since when" also. I like the sense of mystery and suggestiveness this achieves with its incompleteness. The "starlight" has a sense of immediacy and presence because of its contrast with the more abstract connectives and prepositions surrounding it. Yet these latter by leading to the unspoken are what creates the suggestiveness. I suspect if there were a lot of such grammatically fragmented haiku being written that their effectiveness in creating an ambiguous suggestiveness would be lost. Readers might get tired of them and see the method as an arbitrary gimmick. [Perelman in a poem called "Chronic Meanings" does something similar. Almost every line in this long poem of twenty-five four-line stanzas is an unfinished sentence ending with a period. Yet none have the resonance of the two from Grenier—though perhaps I should examine them more closely. This poem is included in Paul Hoover's very interesting anthology *Postmodern American Poetry*.]

Your quoting Louis Zukofsky's "speculation" about the importance of the articles *a* and *the* was of interest to me. A number of years ago, I wrote a long article for *Woodnotes* about the importance of prepositions in haiku with special emphasis on the preposition *of*. I also pointed out how its counterpart in Japanese, the postposition *no*, plays a ubiquitous role in Japanese poetry, especially in haiku. [As you are probably aware, Cid Corman a few years ago published a two-volume collection of his poetry under the title *Of*, writing a kind of tribute to the word in his introduction.]

The two last pieces you quote by Grenier, "SNOW," with the line "snow covers the slopes covers the slopes" repeated four times, and the one liner "the snow with snow," are to my mind, if haiku at all, ordinary haiku rather than avant-garde. The first is similar to haiku written by haiku poets such as Larry Gates and LeRoy Gorman. If I remember correctly, Gates, about thirty years ago wrote a poem about grass that looked on the page very much like Grenier's SNOW. I think it was more successful. Looking closely one saw the word snake hidden among all the words of grass. Of course at that time it was avant-garde haiku.

One liners are now quite common in haiku. When people like Marlene Mountain and Matsuo-Allard were first doing them in the 1970s they were avant-garde. A special point you make about the Grenier piece,—"the snow with snow"—is that the word "with" helps to lessen the "referential bite," of the poem. That would place it, I should think, in the category (genre?) of language poetry, not haiku. Another point you make about it is that there is a "significant difference between 'the snow' and 'snow,'" and that the "small aural and semantic shifts" this presents cause the reader to find the "essence of snow" in the poem. I think a reader would become more conscious of the importance, in an abstract way, of the word 'the' and that the word 'snow,' in both instances, would continue to lose its referentiality. The essence of snow, not the word, but the stuff that falls out of the sky, is, if not absent, at least lacking any immediacy. Again, reason to give it to, or let it remain in, the land, or pages, of the language poets.

To return to Eigner for a few moments. You say of his work that you consider it the most haikuesque of the three poets discussed in your essay. And of several of the poems you quote, I grudgingly agree, up to a point. For example: the one with the "phonepole." Just the combination of a few of the words—back yard, phonepole, branches, sky—are enough to start seeming haikuesque for me. But the beginning phrase—world without end—with spaces between the letters, is anti-haiku. It is abstract and a cliché—and it drains the immediacy out of any image trying to form in its wake. It reminds me of William's "Red Wheelbarrow," which has been wheeled in so often to show the difference between traditional western ideas of poetry and that of haiku. Without "So much depends upon," the argument goes, the poem would be a haiku. "World without end" it seems to me is much more of an intrusion into the haiku spirit, if there were any of that spirit to begin with, of Eigner's poem than Williams's comment is to his.

I disagree with you about "the cat up/ the roof slope" poem. Though the image is haikuesque, I think the words "s t i l l" and "s l i g h t" add little to the experience, especially with what looks to me like an affectation: the putting of spaces between the letters. The word "still" written normally would add an effective element. The "uncertain process" you speak of, I guess, is the process of reading the poem and interpreting the image. Though you may also mean the process the cat used to get up the roof and under the pane? But why make the reading more uncertain by spacing out those two words? To call attention to them as words? Again, this may be an exciting exercise for language poets, but for most haiku poets, I think,

it would seem an intrusion on the haiku moment.

Although you say you are using the term *senryu* “loosely” when you find *senryu*-like elements in Eigner’s “happy chicken,” “bowels brewing,” and “that dog messing,” I think you are still reaching too far. I’m afraid I don’t find them funny. I don’t know why you bring in “O J e r u s a l e m,” (again with the spaces) here. You say it is “politicized and aphoristic.” That doesn’t make a poem *senryu*—or haiku. The only thing this piece has in common with either is that it is short—but not short enough.

Your last example from Eigner—of the Escher-like “up/ the wall” poem—is a nice way to segue into your appeal for more openness in haiku, but it is still just an interesting short poem with nothing to recommend it as a haiku or of even being haiku-like. However, I certainly agree with you that it would be interesting for poets to try new paths in haiku, in technique and subject matter. And your last paragraph suggests, as does your whole article, a number of ideas that could be rewarding for haiku poets to seriously consider.

Knowing how much your thinking is influenced by language poetry, I have also sought out *In the American Tree* to examine the phenomenon at first hand. I found a number of things to admire in the poetry of Grenier, Eigner, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian and a few others. These four are all in Hoover’s book also, though the selections are less representative. I like what Hejinian does in *My Life*. In these prose poems the narrative at the same time all hangs together and falls apart. Many of the sentences, though seemingly out of synch with those immediately adjacent to them, pick up on the meaning of earlier sentences so that meaning weaves in and out of the text in new ways. Some of the sentences are freshly aphoristic—
60 “But a word is a bottomless pit.” Some make the reader conscious of the reading process—“Are your fingers in the margin.” Some of her phrases have a lapidary fineness, like haikuesque fragments—“A pause, a rose, something on paper.”

Well, I have gone on a bit. I hope I haven’t tried your patience too much. I am grateful to you for opening up new avenues of language for me to explore. Haiku poets should be aware of what other poets are doing with words. Thanks for helping me to take a look.

Yours for Poetry,
Cor

PS: If you don’t have the second issue of *Tundra*, I would be happy to send you a copy. Just give me an address to mail it to.

July 15, 2002

Dear Cor,

Thank you for your close reading and stimulating comments on my “avant-garde haiku” essay. I was glad that a few readers such as yourself found their appetites sufficiently whet to ask to see the complete version of the essay. Which was, no doubt, Jim’s main intention—mine also: to whet, provoke, open up (as you wrote) some alternate “avenues.”

Perhaps I should add that the version of the title as it appeared in *Frogpond*, “Avant-Garde Haiku,” was Jim’s. The essay embarked on life as a paper entitled “Avant-Garde Haiku: A New Outlook” (the title accorded to it by Susumu Takiguchi for his World Haiku Festival 2000); before which I’d conceived of it, more longwindedly, as “Towards a Poetics of Avant-Garde Haiku in English.” I mention this because these previous titles are, if rather pompous, also more precise in qualifying the “labelling” to which you refer when you say: “You have labeled ‘avant-garde haiku’ works that depart from the way haiku has developed within the movement.” This is basically correct, but I would emphasise that the labelling was tentative, and provisional—done more to open certain avenues in relation to haiku than to make bold claims for the status or quality of the works themselves.

First, I addressed the slippery notion of the “avant-garde” in theoretical terms, so as to open the field for consideration of poems not written as haiku. I underlined the “impossibility” of my case by appealing in the third paragraph to Ashbery’s paradoxical definition of the term, and to the spirit of Dada with its stress upon the need to be against itself, even, as a movement. You argue convincingly that “from a deeper perspective” the haiku movement itself could be seen as avant-garde, particularly with regard to its reception by mainstream poets. Your point reminded me of something I’d just read in *Modern Haiku* (Vol. 33.2), in John Stevenson’s review of Paul O. Williams’s book *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*; where Stevenson lauds the idea “that those who believe themselves to be promoting the ‘avant-garde’ in English-language haiku through use of startling language or subject matter, or the heavy use of abstractions, metaphor, simile, concrete poetry techniques, etc. are actually taking a step backward from what is truly new to our culture by infusing haiku with the familiar mechanisms of Western poetics.” While I think this is a strong argument, I am sceptical of the notion of “the truly new,” not least because it presupposes a clear-

cut view of “our culture” and that of the Japanese, and primarily because it seems to me that the closest poets get to “the new” develops out of “infusion” of one kind or another. The “familiar mechanisms of Western poetics” also strikes me as reductive. Of course, I can’t speak for Williams or Stevenson, but find myself still (happily) grappling with the mechanisms of much Western poetry—much of that included in Rothenberg’s anthologies, for instance. The mechanisms of contemporary haiku in English can seem far more familiar, at least to those with an interest in the genre.

But to return to your own assertion: I wonder whether the practice and appreciation of haiku in English hasn’t, simply, become too widespread to warrant its being seen as avant-garde, even from that “deeper perspective” taking into account its neglect by academe and many mainstream poets. You mention your correspondence with Robert Bly as an example; and in a different context (in connection with John Martone), you also mention Cid Corman. Given Corman’s greater bearing on haiku, both as poet and translator, his dismissiveness with regard to the haiku movement in America—at least, as expressed in a conversation I had with him back in 2000 [available at <<http://www.flashpointmag.com>> (issue 4)—is, perhaps, more unsettling. While acknowledging that there are “some people Ö writing pretty good haiku in English,” he is clearly unwilling to dwell on the subject; precisely because, it would seem, he resists the notion of a “movement,” or more specifically the homogeneity and hobbyism that can come of it. While I wouldn’t concur with his verdict on the state of contemporary haiku, I do feel that resistance in the form of continual questioning (of their own mainstream and that of the poetry establishment) and experiment is at least as important as the sense of community/identity that a movement provides. In the essay, my approaching the question of avant-garde haiku in English from (as you rightly saw) “within the movement,” was based on the assumption that there is, now, not just a movement but a veritable (if still incipient) “tradition” of haiku in English. Excellent anthologies such as your own—now from big, mainstream publishers such as Norton, Kodansha and Tuttle—indicate that there is.

I appealed, also, to a characteristic of much twentieth-century poetry that has been seen as avant-garde, quoting Rothenberg and Joris on its bringing out “the opaque materiality of language, as against a ‘romantic’ view of language as a purely transparent window toward an ideal reality beyond itself.” You object that “haiku does not look to an ideal reality, but to ordinary reality.” While I am reluctant to take issue with your

point, a cornerstone of haiku aesthetics, I should say that I intended mine more as an observation on the sort of imagery usually deployed by haiku poets in English, in line with Rothenberg’s and Joris’s speaking of “moves on the structural/compositional side.” It still seems to me that haiku’s “simple clarity” relies (as your phrase suggests) very much on the expectation of transparent reference to outside reality—even if, in its character as something “half-said,” and less “romantically,” not much stock is set in that capacity. So, for example, in the context of haiku we would prefer to see “two trees” as two trees, rather than, say, looking for trees in the shape of the *ts*. But because that’s all there is to Grenier’s poem, it frustrates our need to see through to a clear “idea” of a world in which to “really” see those trees. Whereas in haiku, language is not supposed to get in the way of the “ideal” (if still “ordinary”—or perhaps, ideal because ordinary) reality upon which our initial comprehension of the poem depends.

Nevertheless, I would stress the word *toward* when speaking of haiku’s “view of language as a transparent window toward an ideal reality beyond itself,” because the interesting thing about good, “ordinary” haiku—and this is where our points, I think, converge—is that it subscribes to the “‘romantic’ view of language” only to suspend it. As well as Barthes, this recalls Alan Watts’s idea of haiku as the “wordless poem”; and from that vantage the concept of avant-garde or, at least, experimental haiku strikes me very much as one of haiku *with* words. Precisely as you suggest when you describe Martone’s haiku as, among other things, “presenting us with the experience of words as words.” Like yourself, I admire most of what I’ve read of Martone’s poetry. You mention the influence of Frank Samperi and Cid Corman, and it is worthy of note that Samperi was “discovered” mainly through Corman’s magazine *Origin*; also that the first Selected Samperi is due to be published in December of this year, edited by Martone. Samperi’s is another body of work that should be of particular interest to haiku poets. Here’s one of his more haikuesque poems, from *sanza mezzo*, 1977. (Tellingly enough, my copy has Gary Hotham’s name in it as, I suppose, previous owner):

over
bridge
down
road

stars thru
wood

However, the points at which many of his poems differ from the conventions of haiku as it has developed in the West may prove to be of as much interest—not least as foil for our assumptions. But that would be an essay in itself.

Incidentally, I wonder whether Martone has been influenced by the work of another late, expatriate American poet, Robert Lax. Your writing of how Martone “breaks up the words so that we look at them differently then puts them back together to get the image,” along with his thinking of the poem as “meditative object,” brings to mind Lax’s approach, as stated in a letter to Susan Howe, quoted in the preface to his book *A Thing That Is* (1997):

...
i like white space &
i like to see a vertical
column centered
...

verticality helps the
poet withhold his
image until
(through earlier
images) the
mind is prepared
for it.

64 Or as editor Paul Spaeth describes the work, in ways as applicable to Martone: “The poetry of Robert Lax is a simple affair—simple and contemplative. . . . Lax’s poetry is simple because he uses few words to say much. Not only is there an economy of words, but many times the line itself is pared down to the point of containing one word, a part of a word, or even a single letter. . . . There is also a singleness in the image and idea being brought across in Lax’s poems. The image and the meaning are not buried under excessive verbiage.” On the other hand, Martone’s poems are generally briefer, and Lax’s more various in style and subject matter. Martone’s vision of the poem not only as “meditative object,” but also as “charm/amulet,” could suggest a certain preciousity/ spiritual fancifulness—or risk of it; while Lax tends towards the “black and white” plainness of abstract, chant-like repetition. I hesitate to lift poems out of the context of their sequence or book, but the following poem by Martone (from *island*, 1999) could serve as an example of what I mean, as to his poems’ verging, sometimes, on affectedly refined understatement.

may
be

hear
a
mouse

to
night

The poem’s carefully holding “a / mouse // to / night” may well evoke some wonderment, relating to the contrastive juxtaposition of the specific sound of the tiny, unseen but busy, living creature, and the diffusely large, visibly enveloping, silent entity, “night.” A mouse and its noise are things we can “pin down,” while “night” is a presence we tend more to “feel.” And in various senses, we may well feel that night goes about its business unseen, too. The poem also foregrounds, with mouse-like hesitancy, little words such as “may” and “be.” And so much depends on that stanza break between “mouse” and “to.” Perhaps, I would suggest, a little too much depends on too little. Lax’s objects of contemplation tend to depend less on our bringing our subjective sympathies to bear on them. For instance, a sequence entitled “Solemn Dance” begins with, well, little more than a dancing solemnity:

the
dance
of
the
waves

is
an
order-
'd
dance

the
dance
of
the
waves

is
a
solemn
dance

a
solemn
dance

an
order-
'd
dance

the
dance
of
the
waves

the
dance
of

the
waves

Turn the page and you find a further breaking-up of certain elements:

sol-
emn
dance

sol-
emn
dance

Becoming (a few pages on):

danc-
ers

danc-
ers

in
state-
ly

move-
ment

Here the stanza breaks lengthen to great effect; as, also, in the poem that succeeds it (the last of the sequence):

66

danc-
ers

danc-
ers

high

in
the
air

True, in poems such as these we may miss the more particular grain of the imagery to be found in haiku. But they are available objects of contemplation; going with the grain of things, rather than seeking to capture it. Of greatest interest to me is the way they really breathe—in acts of attention akin to haiku.

But to return to the essay and your dissatisfaction with the “unresolved image” we are left with in Eigner’s “w i d e - r a n g i n g / cloud over / sunlit / somewhere enough for a storm.” Indeed, one question I wanted to raise through Eigner was whether “ordinary reality” in haiku need be so “resolved”—given that in life it often isn’t. Even so, what I get from that poem is simple enough: a sweeping view, charged (or “lit”) with immediacy through the change of pace in the final line (largely created by the syntactic gap after “sunlit”), and the idea of the cloud’s being “somewhere enough for a storm.” My comment that we are left to wonder what is “sunlit” was, I now think, overstating the importance of what that “something” is. Incidentally, your criticism of the word “fleering” in Eigner’s poem, “the fleering snow / off the eaves / of the garage,” was particularly instructive as I hadn’t realized that the word (as used here) was a neologism! Which goes to show how subjective these things can be; the word had, simply, worked for me. But I do tend to find, like yourself, that the most stimulating thing about Eigner’s work is his use of “the space on a page and how the words work through and across it.” This is a feature of his work on which, I thought, haiku poets might want to reflect.

To recap and qualify a bit, particularly as to my suggesting, somewhat dubiously, that your “ordinary reality” is itself “ideal.” When you comment on Grenier’s work coming “closest to fulfilling what I hope to get from a haiku,” I can’t help wondering what scope this knowing clearly what you “hope to get from a haiku” would leave for the possibility of radical experiment. Which brings me to Ashbery’s haiku. I agree with your view of his “haiku” as being more part of his larger body of work than a departure from it, and I was interested to find you pursuing thoughts on his work generally, not least because around the same time I was gathering my own thoughts for a presentation relating to it. There I quoted Ashbery (from an interview) as follows: “I think every poem before it’s written is something unknown and the poem that isn’t wouldn’t be worth writing. My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this: my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that’s already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of

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respect for him." I don't want to make too much of this, or to lift it, or indeed your comment, too much out of context, but it does provide a provocative contrast with your knowing what you "hope to get" from haiku. This contrast could also relate to a difference in our conceptions of truth-telling. You interpret Ishihara's pronouncement about haiku "telling the truth as it is false" in a way that seems to locate "truth" primarily outside language, when you say: "Since a poem can never be the real thing it describes or points to, it can't be true. But this is a failure of all kinds of poetry: I believe that haiku is the way to overcome this weakness in language, so that we can come close to finding reality in words." I would conceive "truth" more as a function of language than as outside it. You suggest as much with your next sentence: "After all, do we even outside language have a way of truly apprehending reality?" But then this would call your notion of the general "failure of poetry" into question. If the poet were indeed to proceed on the assumption that there is no way of truly apprehending reality outside language, wouldn't the fundamental strength or potential of language, as our basis for conceiving and mediating reality, seem more the issue than "its failure to be the thing it describes or points to"? This would suggest a different "end" of poetry, akin to Shigenobu's seeking "to encounter a certain language cosmos in order to conjure up 'the world that reveals itself only once and for the first time through written language'"—where the encounter is seen to "transcend reality" ("ordinary reality"?) situated outside the poem. In his poems Shigenobu doesn't seem to contest that "reality" as much as these words might lead us to expect—certainly not as much as the Language poets whom you mention—but here (as you requested) are a couple of examples—the first from the issue of *Modern Haiku* to which I referred in the essay, as translated by Masaya Saito:

the door being pounded
a secret amulet prayed to
this
rope ladder

And another as quoted in a paper on "Free Haiku in Japan" by Ban'ya Natsuishi:

Toward the sea
toward the night
the river is perishing
a pistol of the estuary

(*umi e
yoru e
kawa ga horobiru
kawaguchi no pistoru*)

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To address one other query: the British Haiku Society's pamphlet on "The Nature of English Haiku" (1996) was printed and photocopied on six sides of A4 paper; and distributed to new members—at least, it was to me. I don't know exactly who wrote it, but do remember reading somewhere in the society's literature that it was written collaboratively, or at least approved, by a number of (committee) members. I also saw, not so long ago, notice of a slightly revised version, available upon request. I described the document as a "consensus" following the lead of the authors, who in the introductory section write: "something like the following represents an informed consensus in the West."

Well, I hope this reply does more, on the whole, to clarify than obfuscate! I may well have misread some of your comments. But clearly we agree as to the importance of being, as you put it, "aware of what other poets are doing with words," even while trying—and probably I tend to underestimate the importance of this—to be clear about what differentiates haiku, and justifies the use of the term. Thanks again: it's good to be reminded so compellingly.

With best wishes,

Philip Rowland

* * *

Favorite Haiku

east wind
this inlet
of tossed stars
*Laurie Stoelting*¹

One of my all-time favorite phrases in a haiku: tossed stars. Don't we feel the waves' propulsion as if it were happening to ourselves? A haiku of great immediacy—in the sight of the sparkling spray, with the ear-piercing sound of the wind.

H. F. Noyes

1. 2nd Place, Hawai'i Education Association Haiku Contest 2000.

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