

The Haiku Form Revisited,  
with a Thought on Alternatives for Kigo

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Haiku Society of America

The two topics I have chosen to discuss today—the line formation of the Japanese haiku and a proposal for alternatives for *kigo*—may again put in jeopardy my relationship to our guru Bill Higginson, which once became precarious indeed. As some of you may remember, about a decade or so ago Bill dismissed as a "misunderstanding" my (or shall we say, to make it less personal, the) observation that the haiku, in the minds of many Japanese, is a one-line form. And, for some time now he has been trying to introduce the idea of kigo in haiku written in English.

The notion that the haiku is a three-line poem, and the tanka a five-line poem, both of which happen to be printed in one line in Japanese, became a number of years ago "the customary one" in America, as Earl Miner put it recently in an exchange on his entry on classical Japanese verse for the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. The view has become so ingrained that contradicting it is to put oneself in a ludicrously disadvantageous position.

I have already mentioned Bill's reaction. More recently, it has sealed the fate of a manuscript at an Ivy League university press. The anonymous peer reviewer

picked by Columbia a few months ago to read my manuscript advised its rejection by simply characterizing my argument for translating tanka in one line as a "personal crusade." One marvels at the subtlety of the choice of the phrase, yes, but one is also left to wonder how it is that proposing a new approach can be condemned in such an unscholarly, partisan fashion. Perhaps, as Henry Kissinger observed when asked where his superior skills in bureaucratic maneuvers came from, stakes are so low in academia that infighting there is that much more savage and anyone who doesn't follow the will of the majority must be immediately captured, hanged, drawn and quartered—especially when the unwilling party isn't one of them.

Luckily, of course, practicing poets are unlike academics, and are far more accommodating, as witness the general acceptance of one-line haiku since the mid-1970s. Still, in order to avoid the possibility, if remote, of endangering amity in our batrachian world, I'd like to make clear that I am not here to challenge Bill—or anyone else. I will simply try to be as descriptive as I can.

Because of the existence of the Yūki Teikei Group on the West Coast, most of you are aware of the word *teikei*. It is a difficult word to find the English equivalent for, even though "verse" comes close. As my teacher of poetry Lindley Williams Hubbell used to point out years ago, we now live in a world where "poetry" is no longer one and the same as "verse"—where, to put it somewhat

differently, "verse—prose," rather than "poetry—prose," is dichotomous. Also, the term "verse" is in some disrepute.

At any rate, in the strictly Japanese context *teikei* means the haiku and tanka composed in the traditional formats, and the formal definition of the *teikei* haiku includes not only the syllabic formation of 5-7-5, but also *ichigyō hyōki* or the writing of the 17 syllables in one line. Similarly, the formal definition of the *teikei* tanka includes the syllabic formation of 5-7-5-7-7, as well as the writing of the 31 syllables in one line. (The anonymous reviewer of my manuscript declared that he—or she—was "not convinced" by the point I made to this effect. But DAAHLING, I'd say a la Tallulah Bankhead, there's nothing to be convinced about; it's a fact!)

The point about *teikei* has most recently been made by the haiku poet and critic Nihira Masaru (b. 1949). In the December 1989 issue of the quarterly *Haiku Kūkan*, he quotes his earlier analysis to look at the following haiku by Iida Ryūta (born 1920):

*Ichigatsu no kawa Ichigatsu no tani no naka*

(word-for-word tr.)

January-of-river-January-of-valley-(of)-in

To paraphrase Nihira's argument: This haiku consists of two syntactical portions, with the break coming after *kawa*. Nevertheless you can't print the poem in two lines:

*Ichigatsu no kawa*

*Ichigatsu no tani no naka*

Why?

The attraction of the haiku does not only lie in the transitional linkage between the first five syllables, *Ichigatsu no*, and the word that immediately follows, *kawa*, which is modified by them; but it also lies in the way the phrase, *Ichigatsu no*, is immediately repeated. If you break up the haiku syntactically after *kawa*, the reinforcing power of the repetition will be lost. At the same time, the second *Ichigatsu no* goes on to modify *tani*, "valley." To break this haiku up into syntactical parts would be to deprive the poem of this effect.

Incorporating some of Nihira's points, the haiku may be translated: "The January river yes January the valley here," rather than, "The January river: in the January valley." It goes without saying that for Nihira, to break this haiku in accordance with the syllabic formation of 5-7-5 is out of the question.

Nihira provides this analysis to demonstrate a point made by another poet-critic, Sugaya Kikuo: "The haiku is a poetic form based on the contradiction that,

while making a bi-sectional structure an inherent part of it, it never externalizes (breaks up) that structure as a *nigyō shi* [two-line poem]." The "bi-sectional structure," of course, refers to the traditional view, which goes back to Bashō, that the hokku depends on the combination of disparate elements — although, as I have noted somewhere, there seems to be a bit of disagreement among scholars as to whether the elements are supposed to be two or three.

Nihira's point that the requirement of a particular line formation generates certain prosodic techniques that are possible precisely because of that requirement is largely self-evident. However, I'd like to cite another haiku he analyzes. It's the most famous piece written by Saitō Sanki (1900-62):

*Mizumakura gabari to samui umi ga aru*

(word-for-word tr.)

Water-pillow-zwoomp-cold-sea-there-is

A large part of the startling effect of this haiku derives from the onomatopoeic word, *gabari to*, and that reminds me of another long-running argument I've had with Bill about my translation of Buson's hokku famous for its use of an onomatopoeic word:

*Haru no umi hinemosu notari notari kana*

The spring sea sloshes, sloshes all day

Naturally, I am not satisfied with my own choice of "slosh" for *notari*, but to find an English equivalent for *gabari* may be even more difficult. It describes the sound the water makes when it shifts, as here, in a sealed container, as well as the sound an object of a substantial size—say, a hippopotamus or *Godzilla*—makes when it suddenly emerges from the lake or the sea.

Let us analyze this haiku by incorporating some of Nihira's argument, here far more loosely than in the case of the haiku cited above.

Syntactically, the syllabic unit of seven in the middle, *gabari to samui*, works both as the predicate for the first five syllables, *mizumakura*, "water pillow," and as the adjectival modifier of the word that follows, *umi*, "the sea." So the haiku may be generally interpreted to mean something like, "The zwoomping sound made by the water in the water-pillow has conjured up the image of a cold sea that fills up my being." At the time Sanki was suffering from some kind of chest disease.

Looked at in some detail, the onomatopoeic phrase, *gabari to*, though highly imaginative, coming as it does right after the "water pillow," evidently suggests the link between the two. But then it goes on to modify *samui*, "cold." This comes as a surprise. In Japanese a distinction is made between when you feel cold as in certain weather (*samui*) and when something is cold to the touch (*tsumetai*). Here, because

what's described is obviously an inanimate object, one might expect the adjective that follows to be *tsumetai*, not *samui*. But that expectation is betrayed. And because an animate object or, shall we say, the speaker of the poem, intervenes, the first twelve syllables become a compressed description: "The water pillow has made a zwoomping noise, and the damned thing has reminded me that I'm cold."

This is immediately followed by a second twist: *samui*, "cold," describes an inanimate object after all: it modifies *umi*, "the sea." So the phrase, *gabari to*, works in both ways: it suggests that the sound was made by the pillow as well as the sea. This effect will be lost if the haiku is broken up into two or three lines.

I will refrain from similarly describing the tanka form because I have done so elsewhere. I'd like to point out, though, that Tsukamoto Kunio (1920-2005), an avant-garde tanka poet who went on to become an ardent student of classical tanka, even frowned upon the practice of breaking up a tanka into two "lines" for reasons of printing space.

What we have to ask is this: Even if we recognize that the haiku and tanka forms as conceived and written in Japan are regarded as one-line poems, what relevancy does that fact have to their translation and writing?

In translation it has a good deal of relevancy, I venture, if we are to agree that conveying the original format is one role of translation. In composing original haiku and tanka in English or any other non-Japanese language, however, relevancy is probably negligible. If the haiku and tanka forms are conceived as

three- and four-line poems in English and other languages, so be it. In reviewing my book, *Eigo Haiku*, for the weekly *Shūkan Dokushojin*, Nihira said:

[the haiku selected in the book] come in various ways, from those of the conservative school who stick to the requirements of kigo and the 5-7-5 or a total of 17 syllables, to those by the writers of one-line poems; but I find it particularly fascinating that many of the pieces are written in the form of three-line-poem. If [in English] haiku-esque expressions can exist apart from the *teikei* in Japanese, what is essential [to English haiku] may not be the kigo or the 17 syllables so much as the form of three-line-poem.

I agree with Nihira's observation. And, conveniently, it brings us to my second topic today, kigo.

You all know Bill has been running a column entitled "Seasoned Haiku" in *Frogpond*. In starting and writing the column, I'm sure he has given all the usual reasons explaining why and how the idea of kigo came into being and has been maintained to this day. I'd like to add one reason—a speculation, really—for the maintenance and expansion of kigo in Japan, which Bill may not have touched on: i. e, the professionalization of verse-writing in Japan, accompanied by the sense of social hierarchy which remains strong in that country. To devise such complex

rules and keep them up, you have to have a society of people willing to accord certain status, respect, and loyalty to pedagogues. The United States is weak in that tradition, as I understand it, and I don't know if Bill's efforts will bring fruit in the United States. However, prediction is neither my forte nor my cup of tea. I have decided to touch on this subject today because I recently received from my friend Natsuishi Ban'ya (born 1955) a book, his latest, entitled *Gendai Haiku: Keyword Jiten* (Modern Haiku: A Dictionary of Keywords, Tachikaze Shobō, 1990).

Many of you are familiar with the word *saijiki*, "seasonal accounts." Originally, in China, these accounts described festivals, events, court functions, and other notable goings-on by season; as such, they were rather more like literary calendars. In Japan in recent periods a *saijiki* usually refers to a book describing kigo, grouped by season, and citing haiku using each kigo. As you can imagine, the stress on the seasons—here five, with the New Year added to the usual four—has worked to exclude non-seasonal haiku. The tendency even puzzled Bashō and has no doubt frustrated generations of haiku writers who may have felt that their best pieces were in the non-seasonal categories.

Natsuishi, an avant-garde poet, would like to change all this. In his Preface to the book he says:

If what can be entrusted in this short poetic form [i.e., haiku] were no more than the feelings of the seasons captured in a diary mode, that would be

terrible. The sort of poem that can't deal with matters that go far beyond the seasonal feelings—the world, the universe, and man—can go to hell. If the haiku is what in Japanese can express cosmology and humanity most acutely, we naturally need categorical standards that transcend season or non-season. So I have set up "keywords" as poetic cores.

And Natsuishi defines "key" of "keyword" as that which leads the known world on this side to the unknown world on the other.

What he has done in his new book is to select a total of 245 such "keywords" from 415 books of haiku published during the Shōwa era (1926-89), and choose and comment on haiku containing each of those words. The keywords are arranged in the order of Japanese syllabary. For example, the section of *a* contains *ai* (love), *akanbō* (baby, little one), *akebono* (daybreak), *asa* (morning), *ashi* (foot, leg), *asu* (tomorrow), *atama* (head), *ana* (hole), *ani* (older brother), *anusu* (anus—yes, asshole!), *ane* (older sister), *ame* (rain), and *ari* (ant).

Let's take *akanbo* as an example. Natsuishi cites three haiku:

*Akanbō ni taiyō ga kuru hige ga kuru*

To the baby comes the sun comes the beard

Saitō Mikio

*Kan mangetsu kobushi o hiraku akanbō*

Cold full moon: the baby has opened its fists

Mitsuhashi Takajo (1899-1972)

*Reizōko ni hairō to suru akanbō*

Trying to get in the refrigerator, the little one

Abe Seiai (b. 1914)

Of the three, only Abe's piece contains a proper kigo: *reizōko*, "refrigerator," which is for the summer and suggests, if I may say so, how silly kigo can be. Mitsuhashi's haiku contains what appears to be a kigo but is not (according to Kōdansha's *Nihon Dai-saijiki*): *kan-mangetsu*, which is a mixture of *kan-mikazuki* (cold crescent, winter) and *mangetsu* (full moon, autumn). No matter. Even if a kigo is included, it will be accidental for Natsuishi's purpose.

As Natsuishi sees it, Saitō's haiku celebrates the existence of a new "life force" by bringing close to it the sun, the source of energy for our universe, and the father, the holder of the beard. Mitsuhashi's expresses wonderment and mystery at the cold heavenly body in the winter sky and a baby's fist with a vast expanse between them. And Abe's haiku describes the amusement and fright you are prone to experience when faced with the unthinking curiosity your baby displays. In sum,

these haiku capture the essences of the baby: its wondrous life and extreme vulnerability.

Just one out of the 245 "keywords" may not suffice to illustrate what Natsuishi proposes, but I'd like to end this talk by noting that his idea is comparable to Rod Willmot's proposal to use objective correlatives or, because the term is deemed too nebulous in some quarters, we can simply say "stage props." In some ways such "keywords" or "stage props" seem to have, I venture, a greater universality than the kigo as traditionally conceived and defined.

Touched up on 10 August 2007.

See Higginson's pamphlet, *"One-Line Haiku": Misunderstandings and Possibilities, Part I: Misunderstandings*, 1982.

Lindley Williams Hubbell, "Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry," *Miscellany* (Nan'undō, 1972), pp. 93-94. (10 August 2007 addition: *Teikei* may well have been the original translation of the term "set form.")

*Shiteki Rhythm: Zokuhen* (Poetic Rhythm: Sequel, Yamato Shobō, 1978 & 1986), p. 132.

Nihira's essays giving these analyses are included in his book, *Shiteki Nationalism* (Poetic Nationalism), Tomioka Shobō, 1986.

"Lineation of Tanka in English Translation," *Monumenta Nipponica*, Autumn 1987.

September 1989 issue of the monthly *Kadan*.