

**New Directions in English-language Haiku:
An Overview and Assessment**

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of innovations in English-language haiku over the past decade or so, focusing on American haiku in particular. These are described through discussion of examples drawn from contemporary journals and anthologies, and are seen to involve the freer use of metaphor and opaque language than is found in normative haiku. Broader contextual factors are also taken into account: most notably, the renewed awareness of modern Japanese haiku that has been enabled by recent works of criticism and translation. While haiku in English still occurs mostly within self-contained communities of writers and publishers, recent developments suggest possibilities for recognition of the genre in a wider field of poetry and literary criticism.

The year 2013 marks the centenary of the publication of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," widely recognized as the first fully achieved haiku in English. Although Pound's poem is well known, the subsequent history of English-language haiku has long been neglected by the academic mainstream. This, then, is a timely moment to consider the current state of the art, and here I shall focus on developments of the past decade or so, particularly in relation to the one-line form as a vehicle for innovation. There has been a tendency among American haiku poets, especially, to use metaphor and opaque language more freely, against the grain of the received notion that haiku should be based on direct personal experience of a moment of "ordinary reality," expressed in transparent, everyday language.¹ In most of what follows, my aim is to illustrate this shift in haiku practice, but I shall also briefly outline some of the contextual factors that have enabled it. While recent criticism and translations have shown that Japanese haiku is more various and challenging than English-language poets had thought, there has also been growing interest among haiku poets in the interface between their chosen genre and other innovative short poetry.

Although English versions of Japanese haiku began to appear in the late nineteenth century, and Yone Noguchi tried his hand at composing haiku in English in the early years of the twentieth century, it was not until Pound's "Metro" poem, which first appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1913, that the way was paved for a genuine tradition of haiku in English.

In a Station of the Metro

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

The genre of "haiku in English" was of course not then recognized, and Pound used the old word for haiku in referring to his poem as a "*hokku*-like sentence" (Pound, 1914, 465-67). But as Jim Kacian has pointed out, the poem not only uses "the basic haiku

¹ See Cor van den Heuvel in "A Dialogue on the Experimental" (with Philip Rowland), *Frogpond* 25.3, 2002: "Haiku does not look to an ideal reality, but to ordinary reality. ... [H]aiku poets avoid figures of speech, emotional expressions, and rhetorical or musical decoration" (51).

techniques of juxtaposition and seasonality,” but also “raises many questions that would be debated by practitioners of haiku in subsequent decades” (Kacian, 2013, 312). Should, for instance, haiku have titles? Use metaphor so explicitly? Should they “speak of contemporary topics, like subways, or must they be limited to ‘classical’ content?” (ibid). Some have even argued that Pound’s poem simply does not qualify as haiku. As Haruo Shirane relates in his essay, “Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson, and Modern Haiku Myths”:

I was once told that Ezra Pound’s famous metro poem ... was not haiku. If I remember correctly, the reason for disqualification was that [it] was not about nature as we know it and that the poem was fictional or imaginary. Pound’s poem may also have been ruled out since it uses an obvious metaphor: the petals are a metaphor for the apparition of the faces, or vice versa. This view of the metro poem was based on the three key definitions of haiku—haiku is about direct observation, haiku eschews metaphor, and haiku is about nature—which poets such as Bashō and Buson would have seriously disputed. (Shirane, 2000, 48)

I shall describe the standard model of English-language haiku in more detail shortly, but first, let me highlight the “key definitions” mentioned by Shirane: *haiku is about direct observation; haiku eschews metaphor; haiku is about nature*. This view, which is widely taken for granted, owes a lot to Masaoka Shiki’s Western-influenced concept of haiku as a sketch (*shasei*) based on direct observation, as well as to the writings of mid-century pioneers such as Harold Henderson, R. H. Blyth, and the Beats, who promoted an idea of haiku as a Zen-oriented way of life focused on the present moment.

Despite its deviance from the later norms of English-language haiku, some aspects of the standard model are illustrated by the formal differences between the version of Pound’s poem as first published and the final version in *Lustra*, 1916:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

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

The most obvious difference, the elimination of spaces in the lineation, means that less attention is drawn to the “scaffolding” of the poem. And crucially, the colon is changed

to a semi-colon, de-emphasizing any sense of causality or consequence. The overall effect is that the poem has a more normative look as haiku, albeit one with a title.

So, what, more specifically, are the predominant norms of contemporary English-language haiku? The Haiku Society of America's definition is as follows: "A haiku is a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition"; and until 2004, "the essence of an experience of nature" was defined more narrowly as "a moment keenly perceived." It should be added that haiku in English are usually written in one to four lines, most often three. In *The Haiku Handbook*, William Higginson, following the example of R. H. Blyth's translations, codifies "a 'traditional form' for haiku in English," which would "establish rhythmical proportions similar to those of traditional Japanese haiku" (1985, 105). This "traditional form" consists of three short-long-short line lengths; the first two lines grouped against the third, or the last two against the first; with two accented beats in the first line, three in the second, and two in the third. Here is a haiku by Michael McClintock, from 1975, that Higginson puts forward as an example of the form he is suggesting:

as far toward the trees
as the wire mesh gives—
the fox's nose (Ibid, 107)

And here is another, by Gary Hotham, dating from the same year:

distant thunder
the dog's toenails click
against the linoleum (Modern Haiku 6.2, 1975)

Both poems serve also as examples of normative language and content, involving aspects of nature other than human nature; using sense-based, concrete images; presenting an event as happening now; being based, it would seem, on direct personal observation; and not employing metaphor in any obvious way. With these normative poems and "rules" in mind, let us turn now to some recent new directions in haiku.

Until around the turn of this century, one-line haiku in English were still something of a novelty, although several poets and translators had already argued strongly for the form: notably, Hiroaki Satō, who has always preserved the one-line form of Japanese haiku in his English translations, and the American poet Marlene Mountain. Her “pig and i spring rain” (*Frogpond* 2.3-4, 1979) is a classic example. While surprisingly brief and simple, it does include, in keeping with convention, a seasonal phrase, as well as linking non-human with human nature. The later “thrush song a few days before the thrush,” published in 1990 (*Modern Haiku* 21.3), is similarly oriented towards the outer, natural world, though what makes the poem distinctive is how it encompasses a span of time rather than a single, present-tense moment. Both of these one-liners depart slightly from the norms of English-language haiku in interesting and effective ways, but the following, from 2005, goes further:

spin on dead and wounded any scratch of pines

(*NOON: Journal of the Short Poem* 2)

The reference to media “spin” brings us abruptly into the realm of the contemporary, while “any scratch of pines” serves not only as an “experience of nature,” but also, possibly, as an expression of irritation, or a frustrated call to awareness of what was really going on in the Iraq war.

Mountain’s poem bears close comparison with the following, senryu-like one-liner, by younger American poet Scott Metz:

only american deaths count the stars (*Modern Haiku* 40.1, 2009)

This concisely demonstrates the ambiguity that the one-line form affords. With the word “count” acting as a hinge, the poem makes a general, bitterly ironic claim: “only american deaths count.” However, it also allows for the verb to be read as an imperative (“count the stars”), so putting the claim in a broader, indeed cosmic, perspective—even while “stars” resonates satirically, in the popular sense akin to “heroes.” While traditionalists might dismiss the poem as too “message-y,” it touches on an important political topic and emotion in a particularly concise yet evocative way.

In fact, the work of Scott Metz goes in many, sometimes genre-defying, new directions, too many to explore here, and the online journal he edits, *Roadrunner*, has been the foremost vehicle for experimental haiku since the mid-2000s. I would like to quote two more of his haiku to help show how the renewed popularity of the one-line form has coincided with a linguistically playful turn in the work of 21st-century haiku poets. The first may be seen as a vertical one-liner, touching on the topic of romantic relationship via its unconventional line-breaks:

a
not
her
drop

&

it's
raining

(*Modern Haiku*, 38:3, 2007)

Not that the foregrounding of linguistic features, in form or content, is without precedent in English-language haiku. Metz's "a comma attached to the tip of a flowering branch" (*ant ant ant ant ant 9*, 2011) directly extends the tradition in the line of Robert Boldman's one-liner, first published in 1980:

leaves blowing into a sentence

(*Cicada*, 4:4)

The way both poems articulate the "interference" of language in the flow of experience is perhaps what most differentiates them from the traditional model of haiku.

Indeed, one striking aspect of the anthology *Haiku 21*, which features only work published during the first decade of the 21st century, is the large proportion of one-liners in the book. Another is the frequent recurrence of language "itself" as a topic, leaving the impression that haiku has been catching up with developments in the wider scene of postmodern poetry, "language poetry" in particular. This is in stark contrast to

the poems in *The Haiku Anthology* (3rd edition, 1999), which tend to have a more nostalgic American, pastoral feel, and to use language more simply and transparently. By comparison, many of the poems in *Haiku 21* seem quite opaque, as some of the following examples will indicate.

After Marlene Mountain, Chris Gordon is one of the most distinctive and widely published writers of English haiku in one line. Since the mid-to-late 1990s, he has continually surprised readers of haiku with poems such as the following:

where the lines end and the absence begins an architecture or so

(*ant ant ant ant ant* 5, 2002; *Haiku 21*, 74)

a love letter to the butterfly gods with strategic misspellings

(*NOON: Journal of the Short Poem* 1, 2004; *Haiku 21*, 74)

These might seem to have less in common with haiku than, say, John Ashbery's poetry of aesthetic consciousness: to have more to do with what Ashbery has described as "the experience of experience ... the way a happening or experience filters through to me" (in Shoptaw, 1994, 3) than identifiable, anecdotal experience.² Certainly it is more a poetry of the mind; but as these instances show, the mind, too, has its "moments."

In recent years the work of some more mainstream haiku poets has moved in a similar direction. Compare, for instance, this award-winning haiku of 1990, by Lee Gurga, former editor of *Modern Haiku*:

spot of sunlight—

on a blade of grass a dragonfly

changes its grip

(*Mainichi Daily News* 1, 1990)

with the following, from 2010:

² See also Ashbery's "37 Haiku" in *A Wave* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 37-38.

morning birdsong requiring quotation marks

(*Notes from the Gean*, 2.3, 2010; *Haiku 21*, 81)

While “spot of sunlight” precisely conforms to the “traditional” model of haiku, “morning birdsong” abruptly distances itself from the conventional expectation set up by its opening words, reading, as it were, the natural world in terms of language.

A similar preoccupation with the inextricability of language from experience is the focus of Cherie Hunter Day’s:

looking up

rules of punctuation—

the green hills (*The Heron’s Nest*, 8.1, 2006; *Haiku 21*, 57)

Here the “unnatural” conventions of writing are set against the “unpunctuated” green hills. The writer’s work is paradoxically entwined with her perception, or “reading,” of the natural world.

Eve Luckring is another poet at the cutting edge of English-language haiku, unafraid, here, to reflect on

the metallic taste

of what

I can’t imagine

negative tide (*Modern Haiku*, 41.2, 2010; *Haiku 21*, 104)

Nor does the poet shy away from slowing the reader down—in keeping with the uncertain subject matter—more than the conventional three-line form would allow.

While Luckring’s poem stretches the boundaries of haiku, Fay Aoyagi’s work has drawn the admiration of traditionalists and experimentalists alike. Note the intuitive, rather surreal leap of association, in the form of a question, in this example:

ants out of a hole—
 when did I stop playing
 the red toy piano? (*Roadrunner* 6.3, 2006)

Memory also turns out to be the question in the following, more boldly metaphorical haiku:

icy rain
 at the bottom of the lake
 a door to yesterday
(Cornell University Mann Library *Daily Haiku*, 7 March, 2008)

A humorously confessional mode is also characteristic:

summer festival—
 my Astro Boy mask
 has lost its power (*Mariposa* 10, 2004)

The allusion here is to a robot character in a *manga* series dating back to the 1960s. Thus the poem is comical (in both senses), as well as poignant.

Lastly, I would like to draw attention to the haiku of Peter Yovu, another poet who strikes a fine balance between the experimental and traditional:

October
 the red shift
 you were buried in
(*Roadrunner*, 10.1, 2010; *Haiku* 21, 178)

This poem was picked as “best of issue” by Pulitzer-prizewinning poet Rae Armantrout; her comments are worth quoting at some length. “What,” she wrote,

I really like about it is the way the various connotations of the word ‘shift’ create an interesting instability, a shifting field of meanings. Taken as a phrase, ‘red shift’ refers to the fact that light moves towards the red end of the spectrum when it is traveling away from the viewer. This is how astronomers concluded that the universe was expanding, the galaxies flying apart from one another. However, following the line ‘October,’ the color red also suggests seasonal change or ‘shift’ and falling leaves. ... Now the red shift is something ‘you’ were buried in. It might even be a burial garment. So which of these meanings of ‘red shift’ (if any) is to be taken literally and which metaphorically? ... What I appreciate is the way the possible meanings work together and enrich one another. (*Roadrunner*, 10.2, 2010)

The creation of a “shifting field of meanings” which does not quite resolve into a single, identifiable experience is, I would suggest, what most characterizes the new directions that English-language haiku has taken.

What has helped enable these shifts in practice? First, there is the influence of Haruo Shirane’s book *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho* (Stanford University Press, 1998) and the related essay, directed more pointedly at haiku poets, “Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths” (*Modern Haiku* 21.1, 2000). There, Shirane demonstrates the importance of the imaginative dimension in haiku, in contrast to the North American “emphasis on the ‘haiku moment’” (Shirane, 2000, 55), and argues for a broader conception of haiku in the West:

[If] haiku is to rise to the level of serious poetry, literature that is widely respected and admired, that is taught and studied, commented on, that can have impact on other non-haiku poets, then it must have a complexity that gives it depth and that allows it to both focus on and rise above the specific moment of time. Basho, Buson and other masters achieved this through various forms of textual density, including metaphor, allegory, symbolism, and allusion, as well as through the constant search for new topics. ... Haiku need not and should not be confined to a narrow definition of nature poetry, particularly since the ground rules are completely different from those in Japan. (*Ibid*, 62)

This call for an expansion of the genre, from an authority on Japanese poetry, was doubtless liberating for many English-language haiku poets.

Second, there is the impact that the avant-garde haiku poet Ban’ya Natsuishi has had since around 2000, the year of his co-founding the World Haiku Association, which

has helped promote his views. In presenting the second edition of his first collection in translation, *A Future Waterfall* (1999/2004), he argues that “Western poets perhaps confuse ‘reality’ with ‘fact’. Reality might easily include the imaginative and unreal. What interests me is the totality of human reality” (Natsuishi, 2004, 67). The following haiku is characteristic, and manifesto-like in its emphasis on language as the source of poetic and political power:

Put a period deeply
 into the desert
 at the center of the new world (Natsuishi, 2004, 24)

In this respect, the poem anticipates the language-oriented turn in American haiku described earlier in this paper.

Richard Gilbert’s critical theory and translations have also had a profound influence. In 2004, he published “The Disjunctive Dragonfly: A Study of Disjunctive Method and Definitions in Contemporary English-language Haiku,” later incorporated into his book, *Poems of Consciousness*. As Jim Kacian summarizes: “In this essay, [Gilbert] argues that the conception of haiku we have inherited in the West is unduly narrow, not at all like that found in its native land, and that we would do well to broaden our expectations of what the genre might contain” (2013, 383). Gilbert also proposes a vocabulary by which to consider varieties of “disjunction” (to be distinguished from simple juxtaposition of images) in haiku, while in *Poems of Consciousness*, he gives examples of the *gendai* (modern) directions in Japanese haiku, lending further support to his case. Further, in 2010 and 2011, Gilbert and his Kumamoto-based team of translators published translations of interviews and poems by leading *gendai* haiku poet Kaneko Tōta.³

In the past decade, much contemporary Japanese haiku has reached an English-language audience via Hiroaki Satō. His translations of the work of Japanese women poets are especially worthy of note. One eye-opening instance is “the haiku of

³ *The Future of Haiku: An Interview with Kaneko Tohta* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2011); Kaneko Tohta, *Selected Haiku 1961-2012* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012), *Selected Haiku 1937-1960* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012), trans. The Kon Nichi Translation Group.

Kamiyama Himeyo” (born 1963), presented in *Modern Haiku* 36.1, 2005. Kamiyama uses lineation and varied spacing in her haiku so as, she says, “to release them from the monolinear form into a spatial world” (Satō, 2008, 515):

In the
womb

runs the
equa-
tor

a new century

(from the collection *Yakobu no Kaidan, Jacob’s Ladder*, 2001)

It may also be suggestive to read Kamiyama’s poem as a feminine counterpart to Natsuishi’s “new world” haiku quoted above.

Against the backdrop of these specific influences, there has been a growing interest among haiku poets in engaging with the wider poetry world: to discover, for instance, the “haikuesque” in other poets’ work, and to learn from their practice. Several crossover journals have encouraged this: *Hummingbird: Magazine of the Short Poem* (founded in 1989), *Lilliput Review* (1989), *Tundra* (1999), *NOON: Journal of the Short Poem* (2004), and *Roadrunner* (2004), whose best-of-issue prize judges have deliberately been chosen from outside the haiku scene. The different styles of these journals should, however, be noted. For example, *Tundra* was billed as “a journal for short poetry rooted in the crystal image,” while *NOON* aimed to set a wide variety of short poems in conversation with each other, with more emphasis on the experimental.⁴

⁴ In his welcome preface to the premier issue of *Tundra*, its editor, Michael Dylan Welch, writes: “my primary purpose is to showcase short poems that objectively highlight the crystal image, the defining moment” (*Tundra* 1, 1999, 6-7). For discussion of more unexpected juxtapositions of haiku with other short poetry, see Philip Rowland, “From Haiku to the Short Poem: Bridging the Divide,” *Modern Haiku*, 39.3, 2008.

In conclusion: haiku in English—particularly in the United States, where much of it appears—still occurs mostly within self-contained communities of writers and publishers, but recent developments relate it more closely to the general field of contemporary poetry, so making it ripe for recognition in a wider field of literary criticism. There is a stronger sense now of haiku as *contemporary poetry*, as opposed to an imitative verse form, an exotic hobby, or a spiritual way of life. A wider variety of poetic tools are now recognized as available to the 21st-century haiku poet. While this opening of the field risks blurring the boundaries between haiku and other short poetry, it is worth bearing in mind that the Japanese-inspired genre of haiku in English has always been hybrid; it has necessarily evolved from a fusion of haiku sensibility and Western poetics. In order for it to continue to evolve and avoid stagnation, it must change and at times “push the envelope”; on the other hand, it must remain rooted enough in the tradition to remain, recognizably, haiku. The challenge of finding this balance is what is most interesting and vital about the genre.

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