

John Ashbery's "37 Haiku" and the American Haiku Orthodoxy

Dean Brink

Tamkang University, Taiwan

Shaped by R.H. Blyth and later Kenneth Yasuda's seminal introductions to Japanese haiku in the mid-twentieth century, haiku in America has as a form of poetry come to reflect certain premises, expectations and inhibitions. While claiming authentic emulation of the form, American haiku poets have abandoned possibilities for disturbing the fiction of the real, the so-called haiku or Zen "moment," and reproduce fundamentally Orientalist stereotypes that both contribute to its popularity and weaken it as a serious literary form. Below I argue that John Ashbery's haiku transgress this status quo in American haiku. American haiku has primarily focused on a rhetorical presentation of a passively experienced objective moment, which reflects only one approach to Japanese haiku, while in Ashbery one finds not only his own poetics irrupting in the haiku form, but also his re-introduction of writing practices found in traditional Japanese poetry to satirize American haiku. As such, his haiku stand as an amusing performative critique of haiku in twentieth century America and of haiku as received from Japanese models.

Brief Overview of the Rise of the Orthodox Haiku in America

Approaching Japanese haiku in terms of English poetic expectations presents difficulties. There are major differences between the way poetry in Japanese traditional forms is read and the way American verse is read. Though there are many disparities and ways of approaching haiku, we can say that at least as a form in Japanese it does not build upon a tight internal structuring, but rather it relies on commonly understood associations, a matrix of associations, and coded language that is recognized as both poetic and emotionally charged. Traditionalists especially hold to the use of season words in haiku, so as to sustain this reliance on a matrix of expectations—functioning as an *implied dialogic other* (in Bakhtin's sense)—to construct a setting within a prefigured (by the poet or poetry circle) range of poetic associations within a limited lexicon. But, as time passes and the world changes, this lexicon is always expanding, and other intertextually invoked discourses draw new associations into the writing.

To use Foucauldian language, the "thresholds of possibility" suit the setting suggested by the coded words in combination with other coded or lesser-coded language. Thus the Japanese haiku in Japanese relies on a range of conventional emotional expectations and responses by way of its coded language, which we may call a matrix of possible associations, within which change occurs incrementally and the form remains resilient and durable. Haiku historically builds and relies upon tanka, being the primary foundation of all Japanese poetry for over a thousand years, and having a long and rich history. Thus haiku continues to maintain a focus on the associational matrices found in Japanese waka in its integral intertextuality (Brink 2003) by way of the insistence

on a seasonal word or other words that reference a matrix of associations in the sense of fashion discourse as Barthes develops it in his *A Fashion System* (see Brink 2008). Giving weight to the intertextual echoes and lines of reference or vectors drawn in the creation of haiku, the importance of season words in haiku is not limited to what Shirane calls a “poetic essence, the cluster of associations at the core of the seasonal topic, [which] was thought to represent the culmination and experience of generations of poets over many years” (Shirane 1999).¹ The intertextuality in haiku, as in tanka, may be seen as interfacing with other matrices and modes of discourse in our contemporary society, with the pressure of various discourses intertextually shaping haiku today. The conventional orientation established through season words, (poetic) place names, and similar associations forms the groundwork for an expansive intertextual poetics.

In Japanese, haiku and other poetry in traditional forms are on the whole produced for the writing group(s) to which one belongs, and the topics for the weekly or monthly meeting will be set, the range of typical and acceptable materials generally understood within the group context (whether virtual, online, or a meeting at a room in a library or temple). In my understanding of haiku and other Japanese traditional forms of poetry, it is the keying into various registers that invokes contexts out of a collaging of indices to implied matrices (such as the seasonal matrix) with established associations, including conventional emotional responses. It may be understood in the Wittgensteinian sense of a language game, within a linguistic community, overlaid on T. S. Eliot’s idea of an “individual talent.” The canon or genre is sustained through transformations that leave room for creative synthesis but foregrounds continuity with traditional antecedents, as in Eliot’s poetry itself, which sometimes verges on translation and collage. In haiku the poetic lexicon, informed and intertextually situated by thousands of haiku and tanka—including the anticipation of haiku yet to be composed, expected to be altered by expansion or contraction, defining by example the range of acceptable words and expressions—is foregrounded to the extent that the poet is truly close to Eliot’s ideal of a shred of platinum, merely a catalyst, always already writing intertextually into existing echoes, waiting for vectors of convergence in a haiku. The haiku is anything but autonomous in this sense: it breathes intertextually; its automatism and its Other is reproduced in what might be called the reproduction of a linguistic and literary community. Ultimately, as anyone who has participated in a Japanese writing circle will know, members police each others’ decorous or provocative usages.

Thus when haiku are composed with a required season word or other language that lifts them into an intertextually bound matrix of associations, they necessarily index themselves automatically in an “inexorable logic of an automatism that runs the show, so that when the subject speaks, he is unbeknownst to himself, merely ‘spoken’, not master in his own house,” as Žižek writes on Lacan’s *big Other* (Žižek, 8-12, 40-41). One can see this as a version of poetic authority, which is usually presented as some form of a blurring of conscious and semi-autonomous processes in the production of subjectivity. More specifically, we can build on Guattari’s use of

¹ Here, though I agree with Haruo Shirane’s general aim of critiquing American haiku, I would like to move away from the application of an expressive Jakobsonian model of haiku poesis: “On the scenic level, the horizontal axis, it is a description of a scene from nature, it captures the sense of quiet On the vertical axis, it is an allusive variation, a haikai twist on” a famous haiku (Shirane 1999).

Bakhtin in *Chaosmosis*, where he, in contrast to Saussurean and Derridean focus on polysemy, follows Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Bakhtin in focusing on polyphony in the production of the subject—how multiple discourses are made to or allowed to converge. This approach accounts for social relations, for instance, how writers in all forms tend to situate themselves vis-à-vis various others, competing groups, individual poets and stylistic expectations.

In Japan this automatism of an “anonymous mechanism” or “anonymous symbolic order” is nuanced, with various schools of haiku ranging from the unabashedly nationalistic to the revolutionary leftist. In America, there seems to be little understanding of the genealogy of haiku in Japanese literature, nor of its extremely intertextual orientation, which intimates or interpellates a variety of haiku expectations specific to each group. The Harold G. Henderson Memorial Award given by The Haiku Society of America, for instance, still reflects a focus on a Buddhist state of “no-mind,” reflected in the second place award for 2006: “having no thought / we’ve come to see them— / dogwoods in bloom.” There is an imitation in American haiku of the form’s feeling of automatic writing by way of an other and specific expectations, but this other is largely misunderstood or misleading with respect to the form in Japanese.

In Japanese haiku a poetics of allusion and associational matrices in a non-expressive poetics prevails. Each enunciation is already embedded in a ready, emergent network of intertexts, and the associations *to* other Japanese poems are felt. These associations are more or less conventional, and the originality of the poem is not an issue. In American haiku there is automatically, naturally an Other of an expressive poetics of a Western metaphysical tradition, looking for philosophical depths if not surprise within the poem *intratextually*, as a defined real within the poem, with allusions functioning as tertiary adjunct texts. The poems are robbed of the intertextual mulch that allows Japanese poetry to flourish within networks of poetry reinforcing standard, conventional associations. Ironically, this metaphysical orientation has long been problematic in Anglophone poetry in general, as seen of late in postmodern and Language poetry for instance. For mainstream haiku poets and critics in America, the expectations of a segmented verse in three lines also helps retain this logocentric positioning, as opposed to the always already decentered subject in the Japanese haiku’s well-established matrices and the other as projected through the implied construction by the given haiku circles.

Ashbery’s Experiments with Haiku

Ashbery’s “37 Haiku” can be read as a low-key satire of the American haiku tradition and a critique in light of haiku conventions in Japanese haiku. Though it may seem unlikely, given the tone, difficulty of the overlapping and enjambed phrasings and invocations of multiple contexts, and especially given the strange look of these lines within an American context, as they are written in one line, it seems Ashbery has done his homework. From books or friends familiar with Japanese haiku, he has gathered enough data on Japanese poetry

to experiment with a recreation of Japanese haiku in English, presenting a critical revision of the form as we have come to know it in English.

Following standard practice in Japanese haiku, he does not divide the line into two or three lines. His haiku refreshingly do not buy into the American haiku tradition, which invites forced separations, and pauses in line breaks emphasizing conscious divisions. Ashbery, in contrast, lets his haiku come out in one enunciation, as haiku do in Japanese. The 5-7-5 syllabic pattern merely refers to phrases or short clauses in Japanese—expected breaks—but there is syntactical momentum and there is usually little if any hesitation between these phrases in ordinary unsung recital (of course depending on the method of recitation). In contrast, American haiku have vulgarized the spatial divisions, retaining a metaphysical weightiness and, worse, a comical punch-line effect in the closing “line” (final 5 syllables). Haiku in three lines tends to be read as if each line were suspended in italics, set off from other lines, with each line presenting a scene to pause over, overemphasizing the tension between the parts. In short, it tries to preserve a New Critical internal tension and evocation of a singular autonomous affective-expressive work. In Japanese, there often will be one break, sometimes marked by a cutting word (*kireji*), but it is conventionalized, expected, and the verse remains subordinated to the overall syntactical momentum, not divided (as free verse is).

In “37 Haiku” Ashbery treats the form as a line, and adds humor in his critique and satirical rendering of haiku, speaking about the line standing, the virility of the haiku line, which he has brought to American haiku: one long line, not a broken line as if afraid to stand up as a *real* haiku. Ashbery playfully presents a haiku on Viagra: a performative, phallic haiku, somewhat bawdily and literally, as in the opening verse:

Old-fashioned shadows hanging down, that difficulty in love too soon

(Ashbery 37)

This opening verse alludes to impotence based on “Old-fashioned” thinking that sex only follows a long courtship and perhaps marriage, and that “difficulty” arises because of these “shadows” of guilt, with “hanging down” and “difficulty in love too soon” reinforcing this interpretation by association – called in Japanese *engo* 縁語 or “associated words.” Such words appear in proximity to create an ambiguous expression, reinforcing multiple meanings, not one, thus heightening ambiguity and imaginative possibilities. Ashbery is adept at weaving such intertexts and associated words so as to generate multidimensional and playful haiku. As in Japanese haiku, this should not be confused with an expressive poetics per se, for poetic matrices can be accessed in such formations that parallel the use in classical poetry, as in the modern tanka by Tawara Machi (Brink 2008). Japanese poetry tends to invoke this allusive drawing of vectors to various planes of reference into convergence. The intertexts combined in this haiku by Ashbery can be said to surreally mingle Victorian morality (“Old-fashioned shadows”), pearls of wisdom on how love should take its course (“that difficulty in love too soon”),

and a vague allusion to the question of impotence of the haiku itself (“hanging down”). He presents a more vital, dynamic and indeed, as a single unbroken line, a more phallic line. In addition, there are in these haiku an unusually high frequency of references to his gay sexual orientation, as appears elsewhere in the book, *A Wave*.

Some of his haiku begin with clear, characteristic references to time and place, keeping every image tidily conforming to a *mise-en-scene*, yet in the last phrase or few words of the verse will overturn the scene, as he often does in his poetry in general: he introduces gaps and breaks that make constructive demands on the reader. The fiction of the real is broken. Or he will weave two scenes together, or two time sequences, as here:

Some star or other went out, and you, thank you for your book and year

We can see an allusion to scientific discourse: a “star” going out refers primarily to astronomy—the time a sun has burned up all the light elements driving its combustion before it turns into a dim dwarf star of some sort. It can also be read as a metaphor for a light going off, or for a Hollywood star’s passing. Then, as if this were trivial, something seeming even more mundane follows it: a thank-you utterance for giving or returning a book. Then, on top of this, the persona thanks the other for “your ... year,” which certainly is not mundane, as it suggests the other had worked with the persona of the poem for a year, and thus in the juxtaposition invokes sarcasm. Maintaining a low-key voice in the framing of these verses naturalizes the ongoing topping-off of the verse with such wily unexpected extras. He mixes the important and the everyday so as to make it difficult to tell which is which, as the perspective and interest shifts from big, objective discourse (science) to personal discourse (a speech act of gratitude). What marks these as transgressive in terms of the haiku orthodoxy in America is simply the cheery tone and off-handedness of the opening “Some star or other,” and the mid-sentence shifts, “and you, thank you,” which creates tension in the very turning away from the lightly considered “Some ... or other” to the “you,” or the reader. Typical American haiku lack such brevity and levity, in part because they employ tripartite line-breaks. If Ashbery’s verse were written

Some star or other went out,
and you, thank you
for your book and year

we would seem to feel more at home in terms of the American orthodoxy in haiku. Yet even here Ashbery differs in that he has made a point of including multiple scenes—time and setting references—in his haiku, effectively blasting the entire American haiku ideology’s focus on the (Zen or not) *moment* in nature. Ashbery emphasizes artifice and plays with conventional associations just as Japanese writers have done for centuries and continue to do with contemporary grist for the associative matrices.

Thus in one running enunciation the parts are fused into a forced naturalization, which makes his haiku unique—for they are so short, the concentration on the parts selected resembles the language of advertising or descriptive catch phrases in fashion discourse. Ashbery is so adept at integrating modified clichés into his verse

in general, the concentrated one-line poem becomes an opportunity, it seems, for showing off. He is well situated to write haiku. Yet he does not stop with the naturalized line pregnant with idioms suggesting scenes—in one line he manages to enjamb disjunctions and add some closing extra twist that makes it all fall apart (in Taiwan we say he has “added legs to a drawing of a snake”). Thus his haiku come across as syntactically dispersed in the way haiku in Japanese can be, and the way I have argued to be fundamental to a genealogy of tanka historically—internal disjunction forcing the focus on intertextual entanglements or echoes reaching into various planes of reference without forming metaphorical condensations (Brink 2003). Ashbery preserves a sense of having collected a small arrangement of several images. Whereas in Japanese the admixture can begin or end with the focal referent among images, his haiku give weight to an internal conflict or the closing syllables, where not only a focal image, but also a minor enigma arises along the lines of a narrative fragment emerging from relatively straightforward development.

For instance, his haiku, “You have original artworks hanging on the walls oh I said edit,” can be read as referring to the hanging of art to demonstrate one’s good taste, which the poet gracelessly mocks, introducing a shift to writing discourse in topping the line off with “edit.” It also can be read as a comment on the precious attitude often taken in the American haiku, as if the poet were obliged to passively transcribe the Zen moment in which one finds oneself. Ashbery tends to leave lots of gaps to spark the reader’s imagination, and thus this haiku suggests haiku writers give up the passive reception motif in writing haiku. Similarly, in the haiku to follow,

You nearly undermined the brush I now place against the ball field arguing,

we see a playful mixing of contextual cues or vectors of reference. The “brush” could be a painting or calligraphy brush that is placed “against the ball field” while he is arguing. The mixing includes arguing instead of playing ball, and a brush instead of a baseball bat associated with a ball field. There is also a scale issue: the verse suggests that the *you* addressed in the poem is interrupting the poet reflexively *as he paints* the baseball scene—again mixing painting and poetry, and rendering the final “arguing” ambiguous, referring either to *with you* or to the duration of deliberations involved in painting itself.

The bulk of the haiku preceding the final syllables display his wit with regard to how he sees *time* represented in haiku. Ashbery seems to have been irritated by the exotic reduction of Japanese poetic consciousness to the “haiku moment,” as is suggested by commentary embedded in haiku such as the following, which plays explicitly with every moment in time but the present:

The love was a round place and will still be there two years from now

Here *love* and *round place* suggest not only ambiguities with regard to orifices as well as romantic loops of going around in circles in dating proceedings, but the association delineates an experience *as a place* in the past and future, sidestepping the present, the orthodox homeland of American haiku ideology.

Ashbery elsewhere parodies the way American haiku captures the evanescence of the fleeting moment in perpetual mental recession. Ashbery keys in on this aspect by setting up from the opening words a sense of action already in progress, or in the following frames some continuous action, as in

The boy must have known the particles fell through the house after him

This can refer to the not-so-innocent boy running through the house with dirty shoes on, or to an American haiku poet who takes pleasure in forcing innocence and a slow-motion sense of duration on the English language, which as Ashbery demonstrates is capable of much more. Following the messy-boy haiku is one pointing to his method of parodying the temporal, mentioning “taking our time” in “All in all we were taking our time, the sea returned – no more pirates.” *Taking our time* can be interpreted in light of his critique of haiku as taking back the entire temporal spectrum, which suggest the *pirates* stand in for the orthodox American haiku poets who tend to work by privative, subtractive impositions. Similarly, Ashbery writes: “In winter sometimes you see those things and also in summer.” This verse, in committing the unforgivable sin of mentioning quite explicitly *two* seasons, can be seen as commentary on the use of seasonal references, playfully compounding the usual single-season matrix.

Although he toys with seasonal referents, he goes so far as to revive an antiquated literary figure from Japanese traditional poetry, especially prominent in court waka: the pivot-word (*kakekotoba*, in bold), which are used in conjunction with associated words (italicized):

Like him *feeling* him **come** *from far away* and then *go down* to his *car*

In Japanese poetry, a reader would make sense of the pivoting meanings by assembling associated words into possible scenarios, as in Kokinshu #665, by Kiyowara no Fukayabu:

みつしほの流れひるまをあひがたみみるめの浦によるをこそまで
Waxing tides wane but
We can never meet in bright
Daylight I await
The night when floodtides carry
Seaweeds to Mirume Bay (Rodd 240)

The pivot-words—translated into separate words in English, and underlined—include *hiru* “(waning; daytime),” *yoru* “(approaches; night)” and *Mirume*, a place name “meaning ‘chance to meet’ as well as ‘seaweed’” (Rodd 240). Thus the use of associated words (*engo*) accompanies and is more or less a necessity in pivot-word, which is conventional in Japanese use, but still need to have layers of meaning distinguished. Since Ashbery’s poetry in general often includes sharp shifts in dense succession, he is at home in this mode and incorporates a non-conventional pivot-word, “come” (ejaculate, visit) into his haiku. Since this overlapping of meaning in one word is unexpected in English, it serves to obfuscate, for general readers perhaps uncomfortable with references to a gay lifestyle, the meaning in his haiku.

Ashbery’s haiku, rather than attempting to adhere to a traditional short form of poetry per se, treats it more as a surrealist game, the starting point for an experiment. Self-conscious haiku poets might find his haiku to be uninformed and merely parodying the form, by seeming to ignore all the tired strictures dedicated American haiku poets have labored so hard to uphold. He seems to thumb his nose at all the big stereotypes, which indeed can be arbitrary, orientalist, and deserve to be satirized. But, Ashbery certainly is at home in this form himself because he remains playful and irreverent, as he usually is in his poetry. As if feigning to have lost his way and stumbled into the haiku form, he uses it to showcase his own poetics, making the haiku his own. Ashbery mixes and consciously underdetermines the orthodox American haiku—in multiple frames, perspectives, discursive intertexts—refusing the usually over-determined dominant fetish of the moment in haiku, as manifest in the enforced focus on a passively reproduced real.

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Preferred citation:

Brink, Dean. "John Ashbery's '37 Haiku' and the American Haiku Orthodoxy." In *Globalization and Cultural Identity/Translation*, edited by Pengxiang Chen and Terence Russell. 8. Jiaoxi, Taiwan: Fo Guang University and University of Manitoba, 2010, 157-165.