

From Haiku to the Short Poem: Bridging the Divide [1]

by Philip Rowland

The vast majority of haiku in English appear in journals devoted exclusively or almost exclusively to the genre. While this provides valuable forums for the sharing and discussion of haiku, it also tends to keep haiku apart from the wider poetry world. This paper will consider likely reasons for, and offer some suggestions for bridging the divide, arguing, through discussion of examples, for the importance of having haiku appear alongside and in stimulating conversation with other short poetry.

In order to find out more about the tendencies of haiku poets in this regard, a short questionnaire was circulated, appearing in places such as the *Haiku Society of America Newsletter* and the Web site for the 2007 Haiku North America conference. The following questions were asked, the term “non-specialized” being used to describe publications that are not primarily devoted to haiku and related Japanese genres:

1. What percentage of your total haiku submissions would you estimate that you send to non-specialized publications?
2. What strategies, if any, have you employed to make haiku “more acceptable” to non-specialized publications?
3. What experiences have you had, good and bad, when you have submitted haiku to non-specialized publications?
4. What is the best non-specialized publication you know of that will accept haiku?
5. Do you have any further thoughts on submitting haiku to non-specialized publications? [2]

I should stress that the questionnaire was intended more to clarify some background considerations to, rather than being the principal focus of my talk, and that I had reservations about questions 2 and 4, as I shall later explain, while recognizing the need for them to be relatively cut and dried. Moreover, given that only fifteen poets responded, the questionnaire came to serve more as a springboard into topics I wished to discuss than as a means of empirical investigation. On the other hand, those who responded are haiku poets of considerable note, and most did so at length, so the

questions seem to have touched something of a nerve.

Answers to the first question, it was hoped, would indicate how much of a priority it is for haiku poets to try for publication outside the coterie of haiku magazines and anthologies. The average proportion of submissions to journals not specializing in haiku among those who replied was relatively low, less than 20%, not taking into account one poet who said he was deliberately taking a year away from haiku magazines. Several respondents mentioned that they often save what they consider their best work for the “biggest” haiku magazines, *Modern Haiku* in particular, and for contests, which draw them away from submitting to other poetry magazines as much as they’d like to, ideally. Perhaps it is also fair to speculate, given the range of work considered by quality non-specialist magazines, that it is generally more difficult to have work accepted for publication there (whatever the nature of the work might be), and that even well-established haiku poets may well be put off by rejection when they are fairly confident that the same poems would be accepted by haiku magazines or be in the running to win prizes in a haiku contest.

This also raises the question of whether the relatively unreceptive stance of many poetry magazines towards haiku indicates that their editors simply aren’t “attuned” to haiku, as one respondent suggested (an assumption underlying the second question of my questionnaire). It seems to me that this may well be so in some cases, but hardly across the board. I am a little skeptical of the notion put forward by another respondent, that “reading haiku is definitely an acquired skill.” Of course, one cannot expect to write good haiku at all consistently unless one is reasonably well versed in its literature, but the same cannot apply, to such an extent, when it comes to reading haiku appreciatively — or how would most readers be drawn to haiku in the first place? The idea that editors of fine poetry magazines, many of them accomplished poets themselves, are impervious to the delights of haiku seems dubious to me. More likely, and simply, they do not rate much haiku all that highly in the context of the full range of work received. Admittedly, this is little more than common-sense speculation: although several editors of magazines specifying “no haiku” in their guidelines were contacted, only one replied, the editor of *Slant: A Journal of Poetry*, to say that his journal’s no-haiku policy is “partly to discourage what you rightly call ‘junk 5–7–5,’ and partly I suspect to keep us from using whole pages for very short pieces, as we only print one poem per page.... Poets, as you’re aware, are not a very rule-observant bunch, so the occasional haiku can cross our threshold. I’ve never taken one, but if a brilliant literary haiku were to find its way here, I might be inclined to slip up and let it join our roster. It’s just that most American poets who dabble in the form seem to think that any old 5–7–5 with some connection to Nature counts.” Clearly, not many of those who do more than dabble and who publish haiku in forms other than 5–7–5 (most contributors to specialist haiku publications) have submitted work to that particular journal.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the possibility that the bulk of the haiku that are published in specialist haiku magazines may be of little lasting literary interest, and to read widely and carefully enough to be in a position to begin to judge the matter for oneself. One respondent made the valuable suggestion that one of my questions should have been: “What poetry publications do you subscribe to, other than specialist haiku magazines?” Reading more widely and trying for more range (if only by keeping an open mind about what and how one will write) can only be to the good. One of my aims in editing and publishing *Noon: Journal of the Short Poem* is to encourage this. Much as I am keen to include outstanding haiku, the magazine would not, in my view, be as worthwhile if it featured only work in that vein. I do not mean, of course, to suggest that individual haiku poets do not write distinctively, but that the magazine would not be sufficiently exploratory, that is, it would be drawing on and reinforcing existing communities of poets (or poems) rather than exploring the possibility of new ones. I shall try to indicate this approach through discussion of some examples shortly.

Another risk run by giving over so much space to haiku in specialist publications is that it tends to allow for haiku that are almost too “nice”: neatly crafted, but of disappointingly limited scope, sometimes even painfully quaint. As Lee Gurga suggests in his comments on the correspondence on haiku between Robert Bly and Cor van den Heuvel from the mid-seventies, published in the second issue of *Tundra*, Bly’s notion that Bashô’s poems “convey not only a perception, but a powerful thought, linked to some terrific anxiety, or tension inside the poet’s life” is “something that needs to be considered in North American haiku: Can people living nearly dangerless lives in the most affluent society that the world has ever known write poetry with the kind of depth that a Bashô with an empty rice gourd or a Shiki with a chest full of phlegm wrote? After all, if the choice is not between life and death, but between skiing or going to the beach, will this not make a qualitative difference in the poem?” [3] The qualitative difference it might make, according to Bly, is that our haiku will be “‘soft’ and poetic and bookish” — trivial and self-indulgent, in short.

The same charge can be leveled against much contemporary poetry, of course, and in a recent article in the British poetry magazine *PN Review* (173, January–February 2007), Chris McCully laments “the culture of watery pebbles” pervading poetry journals, picking up on a term used by Sophie Hannah to describe many of the submissions to competitions she has judged, one that seems particularly fitting to haiku, with its peculiarly pebbly and often rather watery qualities. McCully qualifies the notion that in contemporary poetry “watery pebbles rule,” thus: “rather, not so much watery pebbles, but the poet trying to capture ‘my awareness of trying to look at watery pebbles.’ My awareness . . . Precisely. . . I’m sorry, but You are not important.” We might tend to think that haiku avoids, or aims to avoid, such self-centeredness, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the self-absorption evinced by the fact that the haiku poet considers his or

her often very ordinary perceptions important enough to “share.” As McCully says:

My guess — it’s only a guess — is that one type of Creative Writing class might be at least partly responsible for esteeming the viciousness of self-regard. There you are, in your class of five souls, turning up on a wet night somewhere outside Birmingham. And there on the table is a bunch of sycamore twigs in a vase of water. Your assignment for this evening? Write a — why not? — write a haiku about the sycamore-twigs-in-a-vase-of-water.” ... “What in the name of God does such an exercise actually teach? ... That your looking at sycamore twigs in a scarred dump of a Birmingham classroom is some sort of sacramental moment in which you can commit verse? In truth what strikes me are all the more interesting questions such an exercise avoids: Why those sycamore twigs? Why haiku? Why me? Why bother?

Clearly, McCully is having a little fun here, picking on haiku (which I suspect he doesn’t know as much about as he does about other poetic forms), as well as making a more serious general point. Again, it may be useful to consider the difference between “a powerful thought” and a mere “perception,” the former being what sets outstanding haiku apart, giving it a chance of outlasting literary fashion. Furthermore, McCully’s point that

It’s not a question of wanting to self-express nicely in a particular way, but of being able to write verse in any available form, and to do so inevitably, compellingly. To claim that one ‘only writes in free verse’ — or conversely, ‘never writes in free verse’ [for which we might substitute ‘haiku’] — strikes me as aberrant. Why limit oneself? Why not, instead, listen to what the emerging bits of the poem actually seem to want to be, and to how they want to be expressed?

Why not? It takes time. It takes practice. It takes much throwing-away and starting-again. It takes reading, and effort. It’s an understanding of synchronic limits. What can this language do?

This last point really seems to get to the heart of the matter. How often is our poetry — haiku being particularly vulnerable, on account of its brevity — a poetry of the quick fix, or short cut: a neat preemption of failure to think further and really explore what the language can do? Are haiku poets often over-eager to hear the “poem com[ing] right with a click like a closing box,” as Yeats described the sensation of bringing a poem to completion in a letter of September 1936? On the other hand, this is the wonderful challenge of haiku, and what makes those that do embody a powerful thought so compelling: that they manage to take into account so much in so few words. But whether such voluminous publication of haiku

as we see in specialist magazines is warranted is a question worth considering; likewise, whether immersing oneself in such work, to the neglect of other poetry, is likely to help one become a more interesting, as opposed to more proficient, haiku poet. In any case, given the prejudice, not entirely unfounded, against haiku that is held by some editors, it seems particularly important that haiku poets submit their best work when they send to non-specialist magazines, rather than reserving it for haiku contests or the more prominent haiku magazines. Which brings us to my second question: “What strategies, if any, have you employed to make haiku ‘more acceptable’ to non-specialized publications?” Before turning to some of the answers given, let us consider, a little further, some of the likely reasons for the prejudice.

Mostly, no doubt, it stems from the proliferation of junk haiku that has accompanied the development of literary haiku in the West, and the still not uncommon misconception that haiku in English is merely an exercise in 5–7–5. As William Higginson and Penny Harter point out in their article “Haiku Is Mainstream” (*Modern Haiku* 37.3 [autumn 2006]), some editors “may have found that the terrible haiku far outweigh whatever good haiku come in their mailbags, quite literally.” There has also, it seems, been an increasingly voiced awareness of late by commentators such as Higginson, Jim Kacian and Michael Dylan Welch of what Higginson has called “the increasingly fixed and limited notion of haiku that currently pervades much of the English-language haiku community” (that comment from his article in *Modern Haiku* 35.2 [summer 2004], “A Poet’s Haiku: Paul Muldoon”). This feeling may well be another factor in editors’ disinclination to encourage the submission of haiku to their magazines. For instance, the editor of *CLWN WR*, a poetry magazine published out of New York, writes in his guidelines: “We are particularly interested in the experimental, the minimal, and the highly compressed, in prose poems, and in works that touch the sense of wonder. We have little interest in haiku. Pieces will be judged both on their own merit, and on their ability to coexist with the other small poems with which they will be sharing space.” Since haiku is often thought to “touch the sense of wonder,” as well as being associated with compression and “the minimal,” these guidelines indicate that the editor does not see haiku as among the more exploratory or “experimental” varieties of short poem (without, it should be noted, closing the door on haiku entirely). Given “the increasingly fixed and limited notion of haiku that currently pervades much of the English-language haiku community,” not to mention the number of junk haiku in wider circulation, it is an understandable policy, albeit one to which, in my view, an editor of a journal of short poetry should not subscribe unconditionally (and indeed, poems which could well be classified as haiku can occasionally be found in *CLWN WR*’s pages). If a wider range of modern Japanese haiku had influenced the development of a haiku in the West, perhaps the general perception of haiku, as a relatively conservative, un-ambitious genre of poetry, would be different. Indeed, many of the more innovative modern and contemporary Japanese haiku — for instance, those to be found in Richard Gilbert’s recent book, *Poems*

of Consciousness: Contemporary Japanese and English-language Haiku in Cross-cultural Perspective (Red Moon Press, 2008)—do seem noticeably more experimental, or exploratory of what language can do, than the majority of contemporary haiku in English. Thus it is hardly surprising that several of the respondents to the questionnaire should choose not to label their poems as haiku when submitting them to non-specialist publications, lest they press the “wrong button” with the editor before he or she has even got around to reading them.

My doubt about question 2 stemmed from my wanting to qualify the assumption that a poet should try to make his or her haiku “more acceptable” to publications. I believe, of course, that the poet should be familiar with, and presumably like a publication before submitting poems to it (and not send poems that are obviously unsuited to it), but not that there should be a need, beyond that, to cater to the editor’s presumed “taste.” It’s as important for editors to keep an open mind about what they might include — to have, effectively, opportunities to question their own taste — as it is for poets to assess their work with a critical eye. W.H. Auden claims in his lecture “Making, Knowing and Judging” that after twenty years of practice the poet “learns that, if on finishing a poem he is convinced that it is good, the chances are that the poem is a self-imitation. The most hopeful sign that it is not is the feeling of complete uncertainty: ‘Either this is quite good or it is quite bad, I can’t tell.’ And, of course, it may very well be quite bad.” [4] This is a matter editors get to decide, for their own purposes, but they should also be wary of their selections becoming a style of editorial “self-imitation.”

My reservations about the question aside, I suspected that it might raise a common concern, and there were some striking answers given. More than one respondent suggested that one “submit linked haiku as one longer poem,” an approach that, as Higginson has pointed out, is sometimes employed by mainstream journals when publishing haiku and by mainstream poets in writing haiku — notably, Paul Muldoon. [5] There were also suggestions to submit related Japanese forms such as haibun and tanka rather than haiku. One respondent went so far as to suggest that haiku poets “write tanka instead”; and stated that he had “abandoned haiku in favor of tanka,” on the grounds that short poem publishers are more receptive to them. He credited this to their “multi-valency,” though it may have as much to do with tanka seeming less defined, or looser, as a genre, for those writing in languages other than Japanese.

I was also hesitant to include a question about “best” publication, as in question 4 (“What is the best non-specialized publication you know of that will accept haiku?”) — I would, at least, have felt more comfortable with the plural “publications” — and unsurprisingly, perhaps, most respondents preferred not to express a clear preference. The best case against “bestness” that I have come across recently is Lyn Hejinian’s introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2004*, which she guest-edited. As she says:

Art is all about living, and its meanings do not emerge or reside (and certainly they cannot thrive) in the kind of isolation that “bestness” normally confers. Poetry, furthermore, is not a static art form — its sources of energy (its virtues) are not frozen in perfection but flow through time as consciousness and question. Just as meaning in language is created by the linking together of strings of words into phrases and sentences, so the meaning in poetry is created by the linking together of poems to form the large, ancient, and ever new human undertaking of thinking together about the things that matter to us. [6]

This idea of the significant “linking together of poems” to create meaning in poetry is one I want to follow up, with particular reference to haiku and other short poetry. Arguably, the emphasis upon linking is of special relevance to haiku, a genre that not only lends itself to the composition of renku, or linked verse, but can itself be seen as “the world’s shortest poetic form” and “the world’s longest poem,” as Kacian has put it, referring to the “far-ranging community” of haiku poets and haiku moments over the centuries. [7] A similar open-endedness can be said to apply in the context of poetry more broadly. From Hejinian’s introduction again:

As the poet Jack Spicer once said, in a frequently quoted letter to Robin Blaser, “The trick naturally is what [Robert] Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us — not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem.... There is really no single poem.” “Poems should echo and reecho against each other,” he continued. “They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can.”

Such linking makes, for me, the editing of *Noon* particularly pleasurable, giving a sense of creative purpose beyond that of selecting the “best” poems submitted and helping to circulate poets’ work. The “best” arrangement of poems becomes a significant factor, much as, in writing a poem, “the best words in the best order” (as Coleridge famously put it) seems to be of the essence. The “linking together of poems” can play an especially important role in the non-specialist magazine, serving to relate what might otherwise seem an eclectic collection of work — all the more so, when dealing with poems that are “experimental” or somewhat indeterminate as to genre.

Thus I would argue for the importance of exploring various kinds of interrelationship between haiku and other varieties of short poem. In what follows, I shall try to identify some such kinds, drawing principally on *Noon* for my examples, as the journal has been the principal focus of my research, if I may call it that, in this area. In effect, this is to argue

somewhat against the opposite emphasis — as expressed, for instance, by Welch in his introduction to *Tundra*—upon the importance of “not diluting the distinctive aesthetics of haiku,” where he states that “*Tundra*’s goal is to be the journal of short poetry in North America, and seeks to integrate haiku with mainstream poetry without diluting the distinctive aesthetics of English-language haiku and related Japanese genres.” [8] I agree with this insofar as it means simply giving haiku the space it deserves among other short poems, but disagree with the notional risk of haiku aesthetics being “diluted” if it is implied that haiku necessarily depends for its effectiveness upon appearing alongside other haiku or related Japanese genres of poem. I would even suggest that careful, “unexpected” juxtaposition of haiku with other poems can enhance their interest, deepening our awareness of poetic possibilities.

This issue seems to boil down to the question: What does it really mean to “integrate” haiku with other poetry? How might this be done with a view, to recall Hejinian, to stimulating the “ever new human undertaking of thinking together about the things that matter to us”? It has very much to do, I think, with having a wide range of poems “echo and reecho against each other,” creating new kinds of resonance and perhaps even new communities of poets; making us more aware of the limits of language and the syntax of poetry itself, so to speak. It has less to do with ambitions for haiku to become “mainstream” (and besides, one could argue that in some ways “Haiku Is Mainstream,” as Higginson has insisted in his article of that title), or with well known poets like Muldoon and Billy Collins making cameo appearances in specialist haiku magazines — fine as that is.

The scope for interplay between haiku and other forms of short poetry is often limited by an aesthetic approach privileging poetry that is (as Welch has put it) “rooted in the crystal image.” This approach, closely akin to the image-based haiku aesthetic, seems to imply an assumption similar to that espoused by Ted Kooser, whose theory of poetic language is cited by Lee Gurga in his introduction to the selection of Kooser poems published in *Tundra 2*: “reading a poem should be like passing through the printed words into a state beyond the page; no reader should be asked to pull back from this state to puzzle over the surface. This also holds for form or shape; I try to keep the poem’s form as unobtrusive as possible. Form that calls attention to itself draws the reader’s attention back to the surface of the page and away from the poem beyond it.” [9] So much for modernism (let alone the “postmodern”), one might say. Which is not to denigrate such plain-speaking, “transparent” poetry, but simply to point out that there are other varieties of short poem which also deserve our attention, and which might cross-fertilize interestingly with haiku. Besides, as Terry Eagleton explains in his book *How to Read a Poem* (Blackwell, 2007), “it is a mistake to equate concreteness with things. An individual object is the unique phenomenon it is because it is caught up in a mesh of relations with other objects. It is this web of relations and interactions, if you like, which is ‘concrete’, while the object considered in isolation is purely abstract” (142). Eagleton goes on to contrast Marx’s view of the abstract

“not as a lofty, esoteric thing, but as a kind of rough sketch of a thing” with “the Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition,” which

makes the mistake of supposing that the concrete is simple and the abstract is complex. In a similar way, a poem for Yuri Lotman [a semiotician described as “an eminent descendant of the Russian Formalists”] is concrete precisely because it is the product of many interacting systems. Like Imagist poetry, you can suppress a number of these systems (grammar, syntax, metre and so on) to leave the imagery standing proudly alone; but this is actually an abstraction of the imagery from its context, not the concretion it appears to be. In modern poetics, the word ‘concrete’ has done far more harm than good.

Whether or not one is in sympathy with Eagleton’s Marxist bias, it seems worth considering the possibility that theorists of haiku in English (Western haiku being an eminent descendant of Imagist poetry), in making the same “mistake,” limit the scope for exploring the potential of haiku. Let us look at some examples of such broader scope.

Cross-fertilization between haiku and other poetry may take place within a larger body of work — for example, a sequence of poems, or a longer poem divided into sections. Charles Reznikoff’s work provides some classic examples, to which attention has been drawn in publications like *The Haiku Handbook* (Kodansha, 1985). As Higginson and Harter observe, Reznikoff often applies “the haiku principle of getting down exactly the thing seen” (53). Wonderful as Reznikoff’s poems are, it may be more interesting here to consider some contemporary examples of haiku-like principles informing other varieties of work, perhaps less well-known in the haiku community.

Take Jorie Graham’s poem, “Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay,” from her collection *The End of Beauty* (published in 1987), also available in her selected poems, *The Dream of the Unified Field* (Ecco, 1997). The poem is divided into twenty-three short, numbered sections. These are clearly supposed to be read as parts of a single, ongoing poem, though the intervening section numbers and spaces between the stanzas invite one to consider them also as separate units—intensifying the effect of stanza separation. Some of these stanzas consist of a single line (ending with a comma or colon), but towards its end, the poem settles into a series of unpunctuated one-line stanzas (except for the last, which ends with a period), ranging from 12 to 19 syllables, which may well remind us of haiku in one line. I’ll quote from the four-line stanza 16, in which the reference to Penelope at her loom leads directly into the one-liners:

16

Yet what would she have if he were to arrive?
Sitting enthroned what would either have?
It is his wanting in the threads she has to keep alive for him,

Scissoring and spinning and pulling the long minutes free, it is

17

the shapely and mournful delay she keeps alive for him the breathing

18

as the long body of the beach grows emptier awaiting him

19

gathering the holocaust in close to its heart growing more beautiful

20

under the meaning under the soft hands of its undoing

21

saying Goodnight goodnight for now going upstairs

22

under the kissing of the minutes under the wanting to go on living

23

beginning always beginning the ending as they go to sleep beneath her.

Helen Vendler's comments on the collection in which these lines first appeared make no mention of haiku-like manner or resonance, but may be helpful in giving us a fresh, if somewhat slanted, view of a potential in haiku. As Vendler sees it:

to write a poetry of middleness, of suspension, is Graham's chief intellectual and emotional preoccupation in *The End of Beauty*... she defers closure in many poems by a series of ever-approaching asymptotic gestures, each one of them numbered, and each advancing the plot by a micro-measure ... [like] the cinematic freeze-frame ... her numerically interrupted frames say "Look at yourself for a frozen moment; write it down. Gaze again; write it down, and now glance a third time; and write it down." The alternations of consciousness as the pen succeeds the gaze are not concealed; rather they are inscribed on the page, number by succeeding number. [10]

Clearly we are moving away from a poetry of crystal imagery and transparent meaning; nevertheless, lines like, “as the long body of the beach grows emptier awaiting him” and “under the kissing of the minutes under the wanting to go on living” do include elements — “the long body of the beach,” “the kissing” — that can be visualized, partially at least. Such lines occupy an interesting “middle” territory between the abstract and concrete, similar to what we find, sometimes, in Chris Gordon’s and Marlene Mountain’s one-liners, and in some contemporary Japanese haiku. The comparison may seem somewhat less far-fetched when we compare Vendler’s description of Graham’s poetry “of suspension” with Roland Barthes’s notion of haiku as enacting a “suspension of meaning”; and the notion of haiku as “asymptotic gesture” is intriguing. [11] Moreover, the image (or idea-image) of “gathering the holocaust in close to its heart growing more beautiful” is itself quite beautiful. The poet may be “looking at herself for a frozen moment and gazing again,” but with a depth of feeling and an artistic consciousness of “the soft hands of [meaning’s] undoing” that have little to do with the self-indulgent culture of watery pebbles.

To consider another example: some of Jesse Glass’s work shows how well haiku-like pieces can be incorporated into longer sequences. The fifth issue of *Noon* (autumn 2007) opens with a sequence of his entitled “Museum,” which begins thus:

1.

Roman sarcophagus

women carved on it

one seated

face in hands

others playing

timbrels

pipes.

While this sets the scene in a sharply defined way, we move closer to the style of haiku in sections 5 and 6:

5.

unguents

poured

by traces

of an arm.

6.

stone

mirror
fogged with
breath
of

stone.

Notice also the oblique rhyme between “arm” and “stone,” adding an aural to the thematic link between the sections. Glass’s poem might almost be taken as an example of what one respondent to my questionnaire described as “good haiku embedded in longer poems,” adding that “editors who understand this phenomenon will possibly publish more haiku.” The respondent went on: “I think if haiku poets understand that their style and aesthetics are not so different from how poets of any language and origin interrelate images,” but left the sentence hanging there. Presumably he felt it would be a good thing. The resemblance pointed out by the same respondent, between *renku* as a linked form and the serial poem in Western literature, is also apposite to Glass’s poem, which could be seen as a serial poem in miniature. More substantial and well-known serial poems in modern American poetry include George Oppen’s “Discrete Series” and Robert Creeley’s “Pieces.”

The aforementioned respondent, whose answers were particularly helpful, also drew my attention to a comment of Rae Armantrout’s, made in a past issue of *The American Poet: The Journal of the Academy of American Poets*, on the poems of Joseph Massey. Armantrout suggests: “In outward appearance Massey’s small, tightly constructed, haikuesque poems couldn’t be more different from Olson’s. [Charles Olson’s poems tend to be much more expansive.] Still, I find them to be perfect illustrations of Olson’s assertions.” In “Projective Verse,” Olson suggests that a poem “must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold,” an idea which may not be as far removed from the “tightly constructed, haikuesque” aspect of the poems as it appears. Olson’s poetics are also very much concerned with breath. He writes, for instance: “I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that the verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.”¹² It seems to me that a significant feature of Massey’s poems,

one that sets it apart from most haiku in English, is the way they very clearly register “both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.” Take these three short poems of Massey’s, which appeared in the third issue of *Noon* (March 2006):

Hill’s red
tethered
edge —

berries
that numbed
your tongue.

*

Eucalyptus
limbs lisp

wind winds
off the bay.

*

Swallows
whisk the rifts

dusk dims
between leaves
on the tree
whose name

I refuse to find.

Each of the “objects” in these poems is made to hold in the poem’s field with an exquisite tension between sound and sense. Like haiku, Massey’s poems are noun-centered, and each of the above poems could be read in a single, long breath — a notion which, although only approximate, has also been put forward as a characteristic of haiku (see, for instance, George Swede’s Criterion no. 1b in his introduction to the Iron Press anthology *Global Haiku*). Unlike most haiku, however, many of Massey’s poems are explicitly concerned with naming, as in the third of the above poems, with its “tree / whose name // I refuse to find.” The first of the three touches on the topic with its mention of “berries / that numbed / your tongue,” while the second begins with the notion of “Eucalyptus / limbs lisp[ing].” While haiku poets might flinch at the attention called to the aural and visual “surface” of the poem through the abundant use of metaphor and alliteration, it may be more worthwhile to wonder whether there is often

too little interaction of sound and sense in haiku in English.

I would like to quote one more poem of Massey's in order to show how haiku and the haikuesque can stand alongside and play off one another.

Without a Field Guide

Memory
skids across
daylight's
edges.

Moon
mistaken
for a
cloud.

This appeared in *Noon* 5 alongside the following haiku by Roberta Beary:

day moon —
we windowshop
caskets

The structure of Massey's poem invites the drawing of a parallel between "Memory" and "Moon," as if to suggest that an awareness of "Memory skid[ding]" is identical with, or directly related to, the perception of "Moon mistaken for a cloud." The title further frames the thought. Beary's poem, on the other hand, avoids the framing device of a title and any quasi-abstract imagery (pace Eagleton) of the kind that appears in Massey's poem as memory skidding across daylight's edges. The juxtaposition of these poems makes us wonder whether Massey's image, couched in the metaphor of memory skidding, is any less vivid or precisely drawn. In fact, the images in haiku often appear to be rather sketchy or, arguably, "abstract." In Beary's poem, the day moon functions more as a literary kigo than a precisely described phenomenon. The second and third lines, "we windowshop / caskets," give us a small fragment of narrative, which resonates because "day moon" is effectively overlaid onto the suggestion of the death of a loved one in the final line. The slight delay at the line break after "windowshop" makes its object, "caskets," seem more unexpected than it would otherwise; and "caskets" being the only word on the third line of the poem reinforces the parallel between "day moon" and the thought of death, much as Massey's poem draws a parallel between "Memory" and "Moon." I do not mean to suggest that the "sketchiness" of Beary's poem weakens it; on the contrary, it is largely down to our feeling that the small fragment of narrative provided is the crucial one—all that we need of the story, effectively—that the poem succeeds and may aptly be described as haiku. But both poems employ the kind of superposition of images associated

with haiku since Pound.

Other examples of haiku put in conversation with other kinds of poems (in ways that mostly speak for themselves) include Richard Kostelanetz's concrete poem "SNOW," juxtaposed in *Noon 2* with Marlene Mountain's "a loss of content shapes painted over left to their own design." Mountain writes from a background of close involvement with haiku, but arguably both of these poems relate to the tradition, pressing at different limits of the genre.

Another example, from *Noon 3*, is John Kinory's "into the silent tea-time street the thunder of pianos," followed by Jim Kacian's "Sonnet for Philip Glass":

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In *Noon 4*, the juxtaposition of Victor Ortiz's "mortuary garage / a piñata the size / of the birthday girl" with Addie Tsai's prose poem, "You Take the Kids, I Kill You," is more darkly provocative, not only in bringing a nightmarish light to bear upon the black humor of Ortiz's haiku, but also in pairing the two poems as if in a surreal, experimental haibun.

You take the kids, I kill you. You take the kids I burn the house down with everybody inside the mother told the twins the father said. I tell you man she ship you to Philippines she feed you peanut butter banana sandwich she have no problem drop you for big party the father told the two the mother did. Both times, the girls looked out the window. They heard the heat slap the pavement. Saw the crepe paper melt off the trees' branches. Thought back to their little island to their camel's blue-wax lips smacking sideways on her fist of grain to their brown-spotted pony dragging its foot across the sand to the jerking far-away shadow of trees catching on fire.

Another kind of experiment, more closely tied to haiku, involves the eliciting of relationship between haiku related by topic but from quite

different historical contexts. The juxtaposition of Sugimura Seirinshi's antiwar haiku, first published in 1938, "war dead / exit out of a blue mathematics" (trans. Richard Gilbert and Itô Yuki) with Marlene Mountain's "bit by bit a bit on government secrecy" in *Noon* 4 is a case in point. The sense in which the dead "exit out of a blue mathematics" (a more oblique and imaginative image than is found in most English-language haiku) may well be imagined as a kind of secrecy. Mountain's poem is less opaque, but also challenges the conventions of Western haiku through its satirical wordplay and explicit treatment of politically charged subject matter.

Thus far I have looked mainly at examples of haiku in conversation with haikuesque or other varieties of short poem. On a lighter note, to end, I would like to look at an example that "pushes the envelope" even further. Philip Terry is a British writer who specializes in working with Oulipian and similarly constrained writing techniques. As Harry Mathews has said of Terry's book of *Oulipoems*, Terry "has taken the notion that poetry can emerge from arbitrary procedures and transformed it into a sumptuous variety of explosively novel delights." [13] How might haiku be approached in such a way? Terry has tried a number of experiments of this sort, including the amusing "Homage to Catatonia: mistranslations from the Catalan of Agustí Bartra" (several of which appeared in *Noon* 2; all of which may be found in *Oulipoems*), but I would like, here, to consider one in which the relationship with haiku is not so obvious or even necessarily intended. In a long sequence of poems entitled "Advanced Immorality," a play on Oulipo member Raymond Queneau's last book, *Morale elementaire*, Terry uses the form of the grid poem, invented by Queneau. According to Terry's introduction to another sequence of poems constructed on the same model, "Elementary Estuaries," Queneau describes it as follows:

First come 3 series of 3+1 pairs each consisting of a noun and adjective (or participle), freely including repetitions, rhymes, alliterations, and echoes; next, a kind of interlude of 7 lines, each 1 to 5 syllables long; last, a conclusion of 3+1 pairs of words (noun and adjective or participle), more or less recapitulating several of the 24 words of the first part.

Terry goes on to comment:

Supremely visual in its nature, the form has many attractions: its appearance on the page, suggestive of receding flatnesses, seems perfectly adapted to the depiction of estuarine landscapes; and simultaneously, in its mathematical rigour, it functions like a grid or a primitive pinhole camera, able to capture and freeze elements of a place or a landscape as in a time capsule. Then, finally, the form, previously unexplored in English, nevertheless finds its echo in the very roots of English

poetry, the kennings of Anglo-Saxon verse. [14]

In reading “Elementary Estuaries,” I was struck by the haiku-like character of the central sections (consisting of 7 lines, each 1 to 5 syllables long) of some of the poems. This is also apparent in “Advanced Immorality,” in which some of the 7-line “interludes” seem almost to parody haiku style and content. For example (from *Noon 5*):

Colourful pensioners	Crossbred pigeons	Silenced ducks
Sexed animals		
Tinny whistles	Steady hatred	Staple fodder
Equilateral holidays		
Improper nicknames	Opaque surnames	Legitimate first names
Divergent deaths		
The trilobite		
lies fixed		
under the clay		
On top of		
the stump		
herbs		
wither		
Silenced whistles	Tinny hates	Steady ducks
Old-fashioned consonants		

Aside from the camera-like effect noted by Terry, what role do the word-

pairs surrounding the haiku-like interlude play? As well as providing a wildly de-familiarizing context, they convey a sense of sheer delight in the endless novelty of language and the unexpected juxtapositions it can provide.

I would like to conclude with a provocative point of comparison made by Auden in his essay, “American Poetry,” in which he contrasts American and British (/other European) poets. Auden suggests that: “To some degree every American poet feels that the whole responsibility for contemporary poetry has fallen upon his shoulders, that he is a literary aristocracy of one.” And a little further on: “for a ‘serious’ poet to write light verse is frowned on in America and if, when he is asked why he writes poetry, he replies, as any European poet would, ‘For fun,’ his audience will be shocked. On the other hand, a British poet is in much greater danger of becoming lazy, or academic, or irresponsible. One comes across passages, even in very fine English poets, which make one think: ‘Yes, very effective but does he believe what he is saying?’: in American poetry such passages are extremely rare.” [15] Auden’s point may seem a little dated, but does it apply to American vs. British (or other European) haiku in any way? Do such experiments as those described above too readily risk seeming “lazy, academic, or irresponsible”? If so, some consolation may be drawn from another memorable claim of Auden’s: “In the history of literature it is extraordinary how profitable misunderstanding of poems in foreign languages has been” — a statement which may well apply to haiku in English on both sides of the Atlantic. [16]

Notes:

1 This paper was presented at the 2007 Haiku North America Conference “100 Bridges,” Winston-Salem, N.C., August 15–19, 2007.

2 I am grateful to Dave Russo, one of the organizers of HNA 2007, for suggesting most of these questions.

3 Michael Dylan Welch quotes Lee Gurga in a postscript to “A Correspondence on Haiku,” *Tundra: The Journal of the Short Poem* 2 (September 2001), 41.

4 W.H. Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging,” in *The Dyer’s Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 52.

5 See Muldoon’s “Hopewell Haiku” in Hay (1998) and “90 Instant Messages to Tom Moore” in *Horse Latitudes* (2006), both published in the U.S. by Farrar, Straus, Giroux. More recent evidence confirming the appeal of “linked haiku” presented “as one longer poem” is Ron Silliman’s enthusiastic response to Roberta Beary’s collection of haiku, *The Unworn Necklace*: what impresses him most is “the aesthetic here of absolutely minimal strokes accumulating [my emphasis] to create a far more

powerful picture.” See <ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2008/04>.

6 Lyn Hejinian, editor. *The Best American Poetry 2004* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2004), 12.

7 See the “Endnote” to Jim Kacian’s *First Thoughts: A Haiku Primer*, available online at <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/ethicalesq/jim-kacians-haiku-how-to-primer/>>.

8 See <<http://hometown.aol.com/welchm/Tundra.html>>.

9 Quoted in Lee Gurga, “Plain Speaking: The Poetry of Ted Kooser,” *Tundra 2* (September 2001), 12.

10 Vendler is quoted in J. Zimmerman, “The Poetry of Jorie Graham,” <<http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne/poets/jorie.graham.htm>>.

11 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 81.

12 “Projective Verse.” Donald Allen, editor. *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

13 Mathews’s comments appear on the back cover of Terry’s *Oulipoems* (Tokyo: Ahadada Books, 2006).

14 See <http://www.vam.ac.uk/activ_events/adult_resources/memory_maps/contemporary_writing/poetry/terry_p/index.html>.

15 Auden, *Dyer’s Hand*, 366.

16 Harold Henderson quotes this statement of Auden’s in *Haiku in English* (Rutland, Vt., Tuttle, 1989), 68. The full quotation is as follows: “All one can do, it seems to me, is to give students as wide a variety of translated Japanese haiku as possible until they acquire an understanding of how the mind of a Japanese haiku-poet works. Then, of course, a gifted student may find ... that the form can be adapted to one’s own kind of sensibility. In the history of literature it is extraordinary how profitable misunderstanding of poems in foreign languages has been.”