

# Meaning in Haiku<sup>1</sup>

Charles Trumbull

Often when I receive haiku submissions for the journal I edit I reject them because I feel that they lack meaning. They don't speak to me. What exactly am I saying? What does "meaning" mean? What meaning do I expect from a haiku?

This question comes up again and again in haiku discussions. While Lee Gurga and Scott Metz were discussing work to be included in *Haiku 21*, the major new anthology of modern haiku, Gurga told attendees at the second "Midwest: Cradle of American Haiku" conference in Mineral Point, Wis., in 2010 that he is especially keen to find meaning in haiku. "For a long time my ideal has been haiku that convey a real experience transparently but that also have several other levels of meaning, metaphorical or symbolic or whatever, available to the reader. This is what I believe adds richness to haiku and makes them worth keeping as part of the poetic canon."

Trying to pin down "meaning" in haiku is like trying to nail Jello to the wall. One could delve into historical haiku and its predecessors. One could go deeply into semiology—the study of all kinds of signs, textual, verbal, social, etc. I'll try to steer a middle course. I'll start with a compressed version of what the online *Encarta World English Dictionary* has to say about meaning and its partial synonyms: *mean-ing* is defined as "1. what a word, sign, or symbol means; 2. what somebody intends to express; 3. what something signifies or indicates; and 4. psychological or moral sense, purpose, or significance."

Significantly, these definitions all objectify the notion of "meaning:" it is the target of some sort of effort at communication; the referent of a word, sign, or symbol; the "what" that somebody intends to express or indicate, the purpose of an utterance. Well, then, if *any* utterance has *some* meaning what is it that I'm missing in those haiku submissions that don't speak to me? Can there be such a thing as a haiku completely without communicative purpose? How about computer-generated random haiku? Consider this verse generated specially for me on the *randomhaiku* Web site:

behind the gravel,  
Brazil plundered happily.  
Monkey stops peeking.

This bit of doggerel may be random, but is it really devoid of all meaning? After all, some person invested a lot of gray matter in selecting a lexicon from which the computer could choose words, worked out some form of grammar and syntax to make sure that prepositions precede nouns and participles work grammatically, and devised rules and algorithms to limit the syllable count to 5–7–5.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Frogpond* 35:3 (autumn 2012), 92–118. An earlier version was read at the Seabeck Haiku Retreat, Seabeck, Washington, November 2010.

I would go one step further and say that it is almost impossible for a human who is confronted by a text not to *impute* meaning, even to what was created as nonsense. In that randomly generated haiku, maybe “plundered” is not a past tense verb but a past participle, so the line could be interpreted as “Brazil *was* plundered happily,” thus making it a heavily ironic, politically correct post-colonialist sentiment—or maybe it is suggesting that Brazil *welcomed* the European settlers. Then “the gravel” might be the fringes of the beaches after the Portuguese landed. The “monkey” who has stopped peeking might represent the indigenous population whose curiosity is satiated ... and so on.

Nonsense aside, there is an important point here: when we read or hear something, we immediately *assume* it is a communication and *expect* meaning; if meaning is not readily apparent, we search for it and, if need be, provide it. Most likely we start by looking for first-level meaning—straightforward description, like prose—and then for deeper meaning, perhaps allusion, metaphor, or symbol.

So then, for the sake of argument, let’s say that any scrap of writing has *some* meaning. Haiku such as the random one we just saw unquestionably *exist*, even if we have trouble teasing meaning out of them. Probably my problem is that a given submission to the journal may not have *enough* meaning or the *right kind* of meaning to satisfy me.

## Meaning in Poetry

Perhaps I am barking up a wrong tree in quickly rejecting those *Modern Haiku* submissions on the grounds that they lack intrinsic meaning. Some poets advise us not to look for meaning in a poem, but to accept the poem itself as the object. Witness Archibald MacLeish’s 1925 poem,

### ARS POETICA

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit,  
  
Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,  
  
Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown —  
  
A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.  
  
A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs,  
  
Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,  
  
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind —

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs.  
A poem should be equal to:  
Not true.  
For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.  
For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea —  
A poem should not mean  
But be.<sup>2</sup>

I like the bit about the poem being wordless. It reminds me of Alan Watts's and Eric Amann's consideration of the haiku as "The Wordless Poem." I also like MacLeish's call for the poem to be not true. That reminds me of Yatsuka Ishihara's injunction that a haiku should tell about the truth as if it were false. Applied to haiku, this message as a whole can seem a bit radical, however. We have been taught that the purpose of haiku is for the poet to communicate a witnessed experience, or at least an image, to others. This must be done in a way that captures, condenses, and transmits meaning. We should make our haiku as "wordless" as possible by choosing plain, direct language.

In *How Does a Poem Mean?*, John Ciardi writes that a poem should not be dissected like a corpse and scrutinized for meaning; rather, he says, a poem should be viewed as a performance and analyzed in terms of how well the poet has mastered the words, images, ideas, rhythms, and forms at his or her disposal. He asks not *what* a poem means but rather *how* a poem means. He details devices used to bring power to poetry, not meaning per se.

The French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes considers haiku at some length and depth in his book *The Empire of Signs*. If I understand the gist of his argument, we would be yielding to a Western obsession if we were to examine a haiku closely for its meaning; rather, the haiku exists in and of itself. Barthes comments on this haiku of Buson's:

It is evening, in autumn,  
All I can think of  
Is my parents

by saying, "While being quite intelligible, the haiku means nothing, and ... it seems open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way"<sup>3</sup> or again, "The brevity of the haiku is not

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<sup>2</sup> *Poetry* (June 1926). Reprinted on the Poetry Foundation Web site, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/6371>; accessed Aug. 2, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); quotes are on pages 69 and 75. Barthes examined haiku again in another book, recently translated, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), which is discussed in Jon Baldwin, "Qualities of Haiku (from Roland Barthes)," *Modern Haiku* 43.3 (autumn 2012), 48–66.

formal; the haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form....”

So, does a haiku mean what it says ... or does it mean something else? Or both at once? Gurga discerns two aspects of meaning: “We all know that haiku is composed of two parts—perception and imagination. If we can keep these two in balance, perhaps we can create a contemporary haiku that has both spiritual and social meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Gurga’s “perception” applies to the actual images presented in a haiku; “imagination” is about the efforts of one’s mind to jump the gap between a haiku’s images and their referents.

## Creating Meaning in Haiku

Meaning-making in haiku might be of three types, or occur on any of three levels:

- in *plain-sense writing* and the straightforward statement of perception, to be taken at face value;
- in the poem as imaginative object shaped by *poetic devices*;
- in the poem as imaginative subject of outside referents, metaphors, and allusions.

### *Plain-sense Writing:*

Plain-sense writing is straightforward description, essentially prose, just words and punctuation, with no embellishment and no extra meaning intended or received. To plain-sense descriptive writing can be added various kinds of coloration, which will deepen the meaning of the haiku without changing the singularity of the image:

- Feeling—awe, tenderness, anger, amusement, etc. Randy Brooks has written many haiku about his family that are fairly dripping with feeling:

tonight’s origami:  
a stork and baby  
appear in her fingers<sup>5</sup>

- Tone—attitude towards the reader: confidential, appealing, etc. Roberta Beary is a master of irony and sarcasm:

andropause ...  
an inchworm nuzzles  
the rainspout<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Gurga, “Toward an Aesthetic for English-Language Haiku,” paper presented at the Global Haiku Festival at Millikin University, Decatur, Ill. April 15, 2000, available in print in *Modern Haiku* 31.3 (fall 2000), 59–73 and online at <http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne/form/haiku/haiku.aesthetics.gurga.htm>, accessed Sept. 25, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Randy Brooks, in Randy Brooks and Shirley Brooks, *The Rosebud Bursts* (Battle Ground, Ind.: High/Coo Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Beary, in *Frogpond* 33:1 (winter 2010).

These aspects do not imply much, if any, outside reference. In some cases, however, the reader may detect, infer, or supply a larger framework for the poem, such as:

- Subject—for example, love, death, family, nature, the city, the country, age, youth, war, civilization, pestilence.
- Theme—better to have loved and lost ... respect your elders ... absence makes the heart grow fonder ... the rolling stone gathers no moss ... etc.
- Intention—what is the poet trying to say?
- Moral—is some kind of a lesson being taught? If the haiku smacks of propaganda or presumes to tell readers how to think, it can be heavy-handed, too “messagy” as are these two haiku by Saitō Sanki and Martin Shea, respectively:

A machine gun—  
in the middle of the forehead  
red blossoms bloom<sup>7</sup>

caught shoplifting—  
crying, she beats her child  
for wanting the toy<sup>8</sup>

Starting off to write a haiku *about* something is always dangerous for this reason.

On the other hand, strict plain-sense writing is essentially prose and will usually lead to pretty dull haiku, such as:

Abandoned farm house  
among the weeds  
a single rose

This poem is descriptive, even amiable, but says little to me. In the end, haiku, like any kind of poetry, has to deliver more than simple description or everyday speech. There has to be more than just base-level meaning or prose to make a sentence a poem.

## Shasei

Let's head off on a tangent for a moment and talk about *shasei*. The term was originally developed by Masaoka Shiki on the basis of the realistic style of painting that was influencing

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<sup>7</sup>Saitō Sanki, in his *The Kobe Hotel*. Trans. and with an introduction by Saito Masaya. (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>Martin Shea, in *Modern Haiku* 4:3 (1973); this haiku won the Clement Hoyt Memorial Award.

the Japanese in the last years of the 19th century. According to one interpretation, *shasei* means “writing exactly what you see so the reader could also experience the scene and understand what had moved you.”<sup>9</sup> That is, the meaning of the writing needs to hew closely to reality, and from that the reader can best understand what you have experienced—your meaning. What you write is supposed to trigger resonance—meaning—in your reader based on his or her experience. But at its root, this comes pretty close to falling into the definitional plain-sense writing. In fact, *shasei* has become something of a four-letter word these days, often used to describe gutless, purely descriptive English-language haiku.

Shiki himself discovered that purely descriptive poems often fail to convey much meaning to a lot of people. A sentence like “The boy paints the fence white” is not a haiku. It has meaning, true enough—and it might have a great deal of significance for the poet, but not enough meaning to make it a haiku, even with the implicit challenge to the reader somehow to supply more meaning—as we tried to do with the Brazilian monkeys above.

### *Too Much Meaning?*

- Wordiness, overuse of poetic device—is it possible to have too much meaning in a haiku? Perhaps the haiku with morals or messages that we just saw fall into this category. Certainly haiku that use too many words and lack concision do, as do those that overuse poetic devices. When too much meaning is provided, all the joy of discovery evaporates, as in this poem by Rengé:

scores of birds  
on a staff of wires  
—autumn symphony<sup>10</sup>

This is clever use of language—the puns on “scores” and “staff”—but in the end the poet spoon-feeds meaning to us, and thereby kills the haiku.

- Titles – titles for haiku also usually provide too much meaning. The poets may simply be copying the usual practice of titling long poems, but they may also intend to provide a framework or environment for the poem or haiku. You can see the cheat in this example when translator Harold Stewart supplies a title for Nakao Gakoku’s haiku:

AFTER THE FISHING-BOATS DEPART

The tall white sails emerge above the bay’s  
Low and level veils of morning haze.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Masaoka Shiki. *If Someone Asks ...: Masaoka Shiki’s Life and Haiku*. Trans. Shiki-Kinen Museum English Volunteers (Matsuyama, Japan: Matsuyama Municipal Shiki-kinen Museum, 2001), 2.

<sup>10</sup> David Priebe/Rengé, in *Brussels Sprout* 10:3 (September 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Nakao Gakoku, in Harold Stewart, *A Net of Fireflies: Japanese Haiku and Haiku Paintings* (Rutland, Vt., and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1960), 14.

• Footnotes – footnotes, too, tend to provide too much or at least misplaced meaning. Sometimes poets are aware that readers won’t have a ghost of a chance to understand a haiku and feel they need to explain it. Such a didactic approach might be acceptable for translations, such as what Fay Aoyagi is doing on her *Blue Willow* blog, for example with this haiku by Sugino Kazuhiro:

鷹鳩と化すや地階の灯りゐる  
*taka hatō to kasu ya chikai no tomoreiru*

a hawk into a pigeon  
the basement light  
turns on

Fay’s Note: 鷹鳩と化す（鷹鳩に）“taka hatō to kasu taka hatō ni” (a hawk changes itself into a pigeon) is a spring kigo. Chinese divided a year into 72 sub-seasons. This is mid-spring (after Ground Hog Day) when the temperature gets warm. It is believed that even a murderous hawk becomes mellow and changes itself to a kinder pigeon.<sup>12</sup>

If Aoyagi’s cross-cultural explanations have their place, intra-cultural explanations do not. I would suggest that if the meaning of a haiku is not readily graspable by a fellow haikuist—or if the average reader cannot at least make out the most important characteristic of the puzzling item (for example, that it is a mountain, a Mayan god, or whatever)—it is a failed haiku. Such is the case, I feel, with this verse by the late American poet Ronan,

In Lassen’s shadow  
sulphur streams and fumaroles;  
Tehama whispers still.<sup>13</sup>

which needs—and provides—the footnote, “Lassen Volcanic National Park in northern California, originally called Tehama by Native Americans. The final line of this haiku comes from a Parks Service information sign.”

### *Poetic Devices*

Many devices common in Western poetry have been applied to English-language haiku. I don’t want to get sidetracked into a discussion of the effects of rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, alliteration, metonymy and synecdoche, and the like. Let me just say that these all can be effective meaning-enhancers in haiku—some devices more than others—but over-reliance on them, rather than adding meaning to a haiku, usually takes haiku composition in a wrong direction, away from the integrity and significance of the images. Let’s examine a few other poetic devices that have a contribution to make to haiku writing.

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<sup>12</sup> Sugino Kazuhiro, in Fay Aoyagi’s *Blue Willow Haiku World* [Web], March 15, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ronan, in *HSA Frogpond* 3:2 (May 1980).

- Repetition

Repetition of a phrase or word is a well-tested way to add meaning to a verse. Usually this would be done to emphasize the feeling rather than the purely descriptive aspect of meaning. For example, Ciardi calls attention to the last stanza of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,"

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

The first time Frost writes "And miles to go ..." he means it literally, but the repetition makes the phrase into a symbol ... of what? ... something much darker and more poignant.

Steve Addiss published a short essay in *South by Southeast* in which he advocates repetition as a device to enhance meaning in haiku as well. Here is one of his haiku that uses this technique:

slowly slowly  
November sunlight  
ages the rocks<sup>14</sup>

Addiss's verse echoes Issa's famous

O snail  
Climb Mt. Fuji,  
But slowly, slowly!<sup>15</sup>

and the "slowly, slowly" gives a hint of a sigh as the haiku is spoken, adding to the depth of feeling—and meaning.

- Synesthesia

The perception of one physical stimulus by another—e.g. "feeling" color—synesthesia is one of the more popular devices in Western haiku. Causing a poetic leap in the reader's mind from one sense to another, it is perhaps the most disjunctive of the poetic devices:

a black cat's eyes on us watching the silence in reeds and water<sup>16</sup>

listen!  
the skins of wild damsons  
darkening in the rain<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Addiss, in *Frogpond* 22:1 (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Issa, in R. H. Blyth, *Haiku. Volume 1: Eastern Culture* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949), 221.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Searle Lamb, in *Frogpond* 4:2 (1981).



- Rhyme

Rhyme causes an association between two words in a poem, which sometimes can be unexpected and yield extra meaning. Many early haikuists end-rhymed their work, not very often successfully, as in this case, a haiku by Nicholas Virgilio that also features assonance with the word “hare” and consonance in the first words of lines 1 and 3:

dawn on the prairie:  
a hare has drawn the eagle  
down from its aerie<sup>18</sup>

Internal rhyme works better in haiku. Lee Gurga used it in his

rumble of thunder—  
boy still searching for the ball  
in the tall grass<sup>19</sup>

which also gains meaning from other poetic devices such as onomatopoeia and consonance (“rumbling thunder”) and perhaps an oblique reference to Robert Spiess’s classic “Muttering thunder ... / the bottom of the river / scattered with clams.”<sup>20</sup> I tried rhyming the first and last words of one of my haiku to suggest pressure against both edges of the drawing paper:

whale done in crayon  
she needs another sheet  
for its tail<sup>21</sup>

Tricks like this, however, can easily leap over the wall into empty wordplay.

- Nonsense language

Used judiciously, on the other hand, wordplay or nonsense language can provide another tool for creating meaning in poetry. By definition “nonsense language” lacks meaning—or does it? The effort to add meaning to one’s writing by stretching the meaning of words can sometimes go one step beyond, into the realm of made-up words and nonsense language. Edward Lear was a famous practitioner, as was Lewis Carroll, whose poem “Jabberwocky” opens with the stanza:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Caroline Gourlay, *Reading All Night* (Spalding, Lincs.: Hub Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Virgilio, in *Frogpond* 5:1 (1982).

<sup>19</sup> Lee Gurga, in *Too Busy for Spring* (HNA 1999 anthology).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Spiess, *The Turtle’s Ears* (Madison, Wis.: Wells Printing Co., 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Charles Trumbull, in *Shiki Internet Kukai* 3/9/97 (free-format: “whale”), first place.

Ciardi points out that the “nonsense” here is not exactly “non-sense. “First, many of the apparently nonsensical formulations turn out to be portmanteau words—i.e., a concatenation of two other words—of which perhaps we can ferret out only half, e.g., “Jabber•wock,” from “jabber,” to talk very fast and incomprehensibly + “wock” = ?? Recognizing the form—the ballad stanzas—with a little effort the reader soon catches on that this is a sort of mock heroic ballad, and the meaning, albeit fuzzy, emerges. The reader is creating meaning.

Dr. Seuss was another poet who reveled in invented words and wild rhymes. These are a lot of fun, but the technique would be too much for a delicate haiku:

A flock of Obsks  
 From down in Nobsks  
  
 Hiked up to Bobsks  
 To look for Jobsks  
  
 Then back to Nobsks  
 With sighs and Sobsks ...  
  
 There were, in Bobsks,  
 No jobs for Obsks.<sup>23</sup>

Mark Brooks’s reference to Dr. Seuss’s birthday in a sort of mock-*kigo*, plus the Seussian rhyme, repetition, consonance, and alliteration, all make for a winning senryu:

Seuss’s birthday  
 a dad and two lads plant  
 a plant in a planter<sup>24</sup>

- “Bent” language

Invented words and unusual grammar, what we’re calling here “bent” language, have their place in haiku. Canadian haikuist Anne McKay was a brilliant creator of lush portmanteau words that made her haiku into Western-style poems of the highest order, for example:

small prints  
                   nightmade in snow ...  
 leave me listening<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis Carroll, “Jabberwocky,” from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1872).

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Seuss, from *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950); reprinted on *Poems of Dr. Seuss* Web site, <http://dr-seusspoems.blogspot.com/2010/02/short-dr-seuss-poems.html>; accessed Aug. 24, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Brooks, *A Handful of Pebbles* (Liverpool, England: Snapshot Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Anne MacKay, in *Frogpond* 9:1 (February 1986).

through the narrows  
seamen  
towing moons and nightcargo<sup>26</sup>

James W. Hackett's verses, too, are speckled with words that he alone has used in haiku, for example:<sup>27</sup>

The wakeless way  
of the Jesus bug is revealed  
by lunging minnows.

Resplendent peacock  
flappingly guards his throne—  
a mound of manure.

Words like “wakeless” and “flappingly” don’t appear in my dictionary, at least not in these senses, but the meanings Hackett intended are easy enough to grasp from the context. Such inventions are used in other haiku of Hackett’s, for example: “Puppy lies wag-end up,” which brings a cuteness that I both like and dislike, and mosquito’s knees that are “consolingly white,” seemingly a judgment that doesn’t belong in a haiku at all. What Hackett means in “Noisy woodpecker / is gummed-up by the old pine, to stopping silence” is a mystery to me, as is his phrase “my doling dog.” Further, in order to plump up his poetic meaning, Hackett not infrequently twists intransitive verbs into transitive and turns nouns into verbs that are not recognized as such by Mr. Webster, e.g.:<sup>28</sup> “As Nile dusk deepens / egrets blizzard to the same / solitary isle”; “Come! The mountains / have hazed into a painting / and tea is served ...”; “Swords of the iris: / all so alike, yet some bend, / talling the others.

Bob Spiess was also not above inventing language and using unusual words and expressions. In his poem

gently odd  
a noddy  
in tumbly digs  
trying words  
mumble mumble<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Anne McKay, *Can I Get There by Candle* (Vienna, Md.: Wind Chimes Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> All examples from J.W. Hackett, *Haiku Poetry: Volumes 1–4: Original Verse in English* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1968): “The wakeless way”—HP3, 56; “Consolingly white”—HP4, 48; “Noisy woodpecker”—HP3, 66; “Still going strong”—HP3, 26; “No longer”—HP3, 30; “Puppy lies”—HP3, 36; “My mouser cat”—HP4, 59; “Pampas grass”—HP3, 39; “The cantankerous crow”—HP3, 6; “Resplendent peacock”—HP3, 27.

<sup>28</sup> “As Nile dusk deepens”—*Kô*, spring–summer 2000, 3; “Come!”—*Hermitage* 1:1/2 (2004), 31; “Swords of the iris”—HP3, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Spiess, *Noddy* (Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1997), #1.

he refers to himself as “Noddy” and his house as his “tumbly digs.” The meaning of both of these made-up words is somehow quite accessible, especially if you knew Bob and ever visited his tumbly digs!

### *Externality, Metaphor, and Allusion*

Note that in all cases of inventive language here, the reader/listener is prompted to reach outside the word itself and supply his or her own meaning. This all seems to suggest that meaning is not normally found intrinsically in the words or images themselves but rather resides—if indeed meaning is not completely homeless—somewhere outside the poem. As Humpty Dumpty informed Alice in a rather scornful tone; ““When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.””<sup>30</sup>

Ironically enough, that external meaning is variable, even subjective. When I say “river” do you envision the Mighty Mississippi or the tiny Santa Fe River, which is dry for all but a few days of the year? A raging Alpine stream or a placid Louisiana bayou? In haiku especially, the poem relies on the reader/listener to provide a large share of the meaning.

- Externality

External reference is often accomplished by asking the reader reach into his own experience for information. The poet relies on incompleteness, suggestiveness, and ambiguity to create interest—and to involve the reader in making meaning. This is, in fact, the basic mechanism of classically constructed haiku: presenting two images, with enough left out to supercharge the meaning and enhance the reader’s interest by directly involving him or her in the interpretation. Here are two examples, the first from Bashō, the second from Tanya McDonald:

On a withered branch  
a crow has settled —  
autumn nightfall.<sup>31</sup>

all our differences  
forgotten—  
full moon<sup>32</sup>

It’s interesting to note that one of the images can be missing altogether in some cases. The poem’s environment can provide the missing element, e.g.:

tundra

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter 6.

<sup>31</sup> Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Bashō to Shiki* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 18

<sup>32</sup> Tanya McDonald, in *Modern Haiku* 41:1 (2010).

Cor van den Heuvel's poem,<sup>33</sup> one word written in the center of a single blank white page, is a dramatic example of the interaction of one image with its background, in this case something approximating the white space—pun definitely intended here—that is so crucial to the haiku.

There is a difference, however, between leaving something out and its not having been there in the first place. For me, van den Heuvel crosses the line into meaninglessness with some of his other haiku.<sup>34</sup>

a stick goes over the falls at sunset

the shadow in the folded napkin

Both of these, I think, are too spare and lacking in external references that could enhance the imagery to make them much more than a phrase or a sentence of prose. What they need is a soupçon of suggestion, or understatement.

- Understatement

Much in the way the reader searches for meaning in a poem that doesn't dish it out on a plate, he/she will automatically amplify a little meaning into a lot. Gary Hotham is a master of understatement:

cooler air  
the grey hairs show  
after the haircut<sup>35</sup>

- *Kakekotoba*, zeugma, syllepsis

Related poetic devices that are especially appropriate to haiku are *kakekotoba*, in which multiple meanings are suggested by one Japanese kanji, much like the haiku we have in English that pun on homonyms such as “fall” or “still.” In zeugma and syllepsis, one word modifies two phrases in different ways, thus enriching the meaning of the modifier. Spiess was a fan of zeugma:

from a hill i watch  
earth's shadow eclipse the full moon  
—my shadow, too<sup>36</sup>

- Pivot

Also popular among poets today is the pivot line, in which the middle part of a haiku may be read as connected either to the first or third. In this haiku by Ferris Gilli, for example, the position of the moon—above or below the heron—changes depending on how the reader attaches the middle line.

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<sup>33</sup> Cor van den Heuvel, *The Window-Washer's Pail* (New York: Chant Press, 1963).

<sup>34</sup> Both from Cor van den Heuvel, *Dark* (New York: Chant Press, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Gary Hotham, in *Modern Haiku* 24:2 (1993).

<sup>36</sup> Spiess, *The Heron's Legs*.

minnows dart  
beneath a poised heron  
the daytime moon<sup>37</sup>

Such syntactical shifts work well in one-line haiku as well, for example, this one by Patrick Frank:

in the cafe alone you in my heart<sup>38</sup>

Extra meaning is milked out of “alone” by positioning it between two quite different phrases.

- Metaphor

Many pages could be spent on metaphor in haiku. Gurga sums up the contributions of critic Paul O. Williams to the discussion in an important essay<sup>39</sup> as follows:

While poetic devices can increase the depth and power of individual haiku, it is also true that the use of overt simile or metaphor can have a limiting rather than expanding effect. In my own experience, the poems that have the greatest depth are those that operate successfully on the literal level as well as being potentially metaphorical. This more subtle kind of metaphor has been discussed by Paul O. Williams in a talk titled, “The Question of Metaphor in Haiku” presented at the Haiku North America Conference in 1993, and published for the first time in his new book, *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics* (Press Here, 2000). In his talk, Williams coins the term “unresolved metaphor” to characterize the kind of subtle metaphoric suggestion that he finds most effective in haiku. The technique of juxtaposition makes it nearly inevitable that haiku will have some implied comparison between the elements of the poem. That these elements can be interpreted metaphorically as well as literally adds depth and resonance to many of the finest haiku.

Let me point out a few ways in which metaphor is used to provide meaning. As Williams says, the whole haiku can be considered an “unresolved metaphor.” Consider the following:

thinking about you—  
the remarkable redness  
of this tomato<sup>40</sup>

This haiku of Williams’s, chock full of meaning but difficult of access, and the reader is asked to expend some effort to interpret the poet’s intentions. The two parts separated by the

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<sup>37</sup> Ferris Gilli, in *Haiku Harvest* [Web] 2:1 (2001).

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Frank, in *Still* 3:4 (1999).

<sup>39</sup> Gurga, “Toward an Aesthetic for English-language Haiku.” Williams’s essay “The Question of Metaphor in Haiku” was published in Paul O. Williams, *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics* (Foster City, Calif.: Press Here, 2001), 104–5.

<sup>40</sup> *The Heron’s Nest* 2:12 (2000).

dash are perceived to be in some sort of relationship to one another—not a direct metaphor, which would say plainly “my thinking equals the tomato’s redness,” nor a simile that would read something like “my love is like a red, red tomato,” but rather an implied mutual resonance left to the reader’s own interpretation. The key to enhancing a poem’s meaning through such metaphoric writing lies in how the parts are presented—i.e., their juxtaposition.

- Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition of two images in haiku, or “internal comparison” as Spiess liked to call it, is perhaps the single most important source of meaning in haiku. This is a device, according to Ciardi, that is characteristic of poetry and good writing generally. In drama it is called “the foil”—a second character, perhaps a villain or a sidekick, is created to set off or call attention to or provide a sounding board for the hero. Linguists call the literary technique “parataxis.” Wikipedia says:

[Parataxis is] used to describe a technique in poetry in which two images or fragments, usually starkly dissimilar images or fragments, are juxtaposed without a clear connection. Readers are then left to make their own connections implied by the paratactic syntax. Ezra Pound, in his adaptation of Chinese and Japanese poetry, made the stark juxtaposition of images an important part of English language poetry.”<sup>41</sup>

In haiku, of course, juxtaposition of images is traditionally the basic structure, the relationship between what Koji Kawamoto has called base and superposed parts, Jane Reichhold characterizes as phrase and fragment, and Randy Brooks—in music-like terminology—calls ground and figure. Both parts of haiku have their meaning in the terms we have been talking about, then they are forced together to cohabit in a single verse. It is that act that makes the haiku a haiku. In the space between the two parts—physically called the *kire* or caesura—the haiku is conceived. Meaning is multiplied many-fold.

Conversely, it stands to reason that verses that do not have that juxtaposition, or internal comparison, or *kire* need to be vetted carefully as to their credentials as haiku.

Much has been made recently of “disjunction,” which is simply the other side of the coin from juxtaposition. Juxtaposition describes the act of putting two images together; disjunction characterizes the distance and space between them.

The greatest measure of success for a haiku, one might say, is when the gap between the two parts is set exactly right by the poet so that with a moderate amount of effort the reader is able to experience an “aha!” moment and suddenly be smothered in extra meaning that was not present in either part. The proper regulation of the gap in a spark plug is often used as an analogy to the mechanics of the haiku. A functioning gap will vary for various people, of course.

- *Kireji*: a digression

Parenthetically we might say a few more words about *kire* and *kireji* (“cutting words”), which are of paramount importance to the expansion of meaning in Japanese haiku and, in a derivative

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<sup>41</sup> “Parataxis,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parataxis>; accessed Aug. 24, 2012.

way, in English-language haiku as well. *Kireji* are usually described in the West as syntactical particles that punctuate a haiku and cause a caesura. This definition is slightly misleading in that some *kireji* come at the end of the haiku and cannot, of course, cause a caesura there. In fact, *kireji* do much more than break the haiku into phrases. They actually tell the Japanese reader the emotional weight and tenor of the foregoing phrase. This haiku of Issa's, *akikaze ya mushiritagarishi akai kana*, actually has two *kireji*, *ya* which ends the first phrase and *kana* at the end of the haiku. *Ya* signals that the foregoing phrase is what it's all about: reader, pay attention! This particle is often translated as an exclamation mark in English. *Kana* is a sort of a written sigh or indication of resignation, an emotional commentary on the foregoing phrase, as Walter Cronkite might have said: "and that's the way it is." Often an ellipsis will be used for *kana* in English translations.

Blyth translates Issa's haiku, thus:

The autumn wind;  
The red flowers  
She liked to pluck.<sup>42</sup>

but he transposes the second and third phrases and perhaps downplays the importance of the *kireji*. I would rather render this haiku as:

autumn wind!  
the flowers that she so liked to pick  
are red now ...

trying to bring out the bittersweet irony blown in on the autumn wind, that the dead girl's favorite flowers are now red and in full bloom.

- Transference

Rather than directly comparing or contrasting the haiku's two images, haiku poets often deploy another particularly felicitous and useful metaphoric device in which one image of the poem informs the other. Transference essentially involves coloring the reader's perception of one image by the presentation and treatment of the second image.<sup>43</sup> For example, there can't be much doubt about the warmth of his lady friend's feelings in Marsh Muirhead's senryu,

her cold martini  
the olive  
looks at me<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Blyth, *Haiku 2—Spring* (1950), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Transference is discussed, along with other aspects of metaphor, in Ludmila Balabanova, "Metaphor and Haiku," *Modern Haiku* 39.3 (autumn 2008), 49–58.

<sup>44</sup> Marsh Muirhead, in *Modern Haiku* 39:2 (summer 2008).



- Allusion

At this point, I'll turn to allusion, which is another important device for haiku, especially in its garb of *kigo* and *utamakura*. Literary allusions are still popular in Japanese haiku and are a fertile field for haikuists in English as well. Some literary allusions are nearly exhausted, however; it is almost a cliché now to refer to William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" or Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in haiku. It is definitely trite to allude to, or parody, Bashō's "old pond" haiku. But Raffael de Gruttola packs a peck of allusions to Robert Frost in this haiku:

walking by woods, slowing  
where a broken birch  
blocks the path<sup>45</sup>

Allusions to other art forms are also a good way to expand meaning in haiku. Here are verses by Elizabeth Searle Lamb and Marlene Wills (Marlene Mountain) and that make allusions in the realm of music:

colors of Bartok    clash    in the dim room<sup>46</sup>

alone —  
    bessie's last  
gin song<sup>47</sup>

- Seasonal words: *kidai* and *kigo*

The Japanese poetic convention of *kidai*, season topic, and *kigo*, season word, is a special kind of metaphor or allusion. When a Japanese poet uses a *kigo* in a tanka or a haiku, he or she multiplies his meaning many times by keying into thousands of years of tradition and a substantial corpus of poetry, all of which is suggested by the season word. Moreover, each season topic is held to have its own "essence" and both the *kigo* and the haiku as a whole must be consistent with that essence. The *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* holds that

precise matching of scene and season is imperative if the seasonal theme is to be more than a mechanical convention.... In a poem where the seasonal theme fulfills its true evocative function, there must be reciprocity between the season which expands the scope of the haiku and creates the atmospheric background of associations for the specific scene, and the specific scene which points out a characteristic yet often forgotten aspect of the season and thus enriches our understanding of it.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Raffael de Gruttola, in *Frogpond* 12:4 (November 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Searle Lamb, in *Cicada* 2:2 (1978).

<sup>47</sup> Marlene Wills, in *HSA Frogpond* 3:2 (1980).

<sup>48</sup> Kuriyama Shigehisa, "Haiku—On Writing Haiku in English," in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 3:81.

Seasonality has never been a big deal in Western haiku, and those poets who do use it tend to insert a season word as part of a perceived requirement of the haiku form. This is most likely not the shortcoming of the poet, but rather a given—that Western culture and literary traditions are simply different from Japanese and we do not have the tradition of seasonal reference in our poetry. That’s a shame, because the *ki* system is a convenient way to multiply meaning: a *kigo* is the tip of a very large iceberg.

Here is one of my favorite examples of a Japanese season word not used in a traditional way in an English-language haiku:

moonlit camellias  
café conversations spilling  
into the street<sup>49</sup>

I asked poet Paul Miller why he had used “camellias,” which in Japan are red and whose petals are usually falling in poetry, reminding Japanese of men dying young in battle. Paul told me that he used camellias here simply to have a lush, moonlight-colored shrub that might be, like the conversation, spilling out into the street. Clearly he was using the plant for purposes other than to mark the season. Do you think Paul got adequate meaning out of his “camellias”? Is it possible to develop (and enforce) a system of season words in English-language haiku that will function in any way similar to the Japanese?

• *Utamakura*

Closely related to *kidai* is *utamakura*, using the name of a place or thing that possesses an aura of significance, presumed to be understood by a reader. The old masters used *utamakura* frequently to magnify the meaning of their haiku, as did Bashō here:

Nara’s Buddhas,  
one by one—  
essence of asters.<sup>50</sup>

Japanese readers would immediately conjure up the image of the huge bronze Daibutsu whose nostril was said to be a path to enlightenment. The technique of *utamakura* would seem to have more promise than *kigo* for Western haiku because words that are outside the literary tradition—i.e., historical and geographic places—can be used. Here are two examples, the first by L.A. Davidson, the second by Scott Galasso:

The Mississippi  
a mile wide at Winona  
and still rising<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> paul m., *The Heron’s Nest* 1:4 (1999).

<sup>50</sup> Bashō, in Lucien Stryk, trans., *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Bashō* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>51</sup> L.A. Davidson, *Modern Haiku* 2:2 (spring 1971).

fireflies  
in the wheat field  
... Gettysburg<sup>52</sup>

These haiku assume—yea, depend on—the reader knowing what the Mississippi and Gettysburg are, but owing to that assumption, bucketsful of meaning are added to the haiku.

## Is Meaning Necessary?: *Gendai* Haiku

Some folks have begun to question whether there really needs to be meaning in haiku. Much of what is being written today deliberately subverts meaning in the traditional sense, or avoids it. *Kigo* and traditional form are often abandoned completely. Characteristics of postmodernism—rejection of previous cultural standards and authorities; advocacy of the indeterminacy of meaning; avoidance of meaning beyond the poem itself; regarding life and art as equally fictitious; clamoring for equality of subject matter; and elevation of the commonplace and vapid to positions of prominence<sup>53</sup>—all this has come to haiku.

I don't want to go into a full discussion of surrealism, postmodernism, or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry here—nor am I intellectually equipped to do so—but I do want to expend a few words on *gendai* haiku because of its prominence on today's haiku scene. *Gendai* haiku is the manifestation in haiku of postmodernism. Definition of *gendai haiku* is difficult to come by; literally it means “modern haiku,” and it refers to at least one movement that cropped up in Japan during or after World War II. When I was struggling to understand what is meant by the term for poets today I asked among others Ban'ya Natsuishi, a well-known exponent of the subgenre. His tautological reply: “*Gendai* haiku?—that's what I write.” *Gendai* poets make much of “freedom of expression,” thereby apparently tarring the hidebound rules of the past. Reaction against *shasei*, especially the *kyokkan shasei* of the Kyoshi/Hototogisu variety—i.e., abandonment of form, rules and *kigo*—is especially sharp. Several American and British haikuists have allied themselves with *gendai* haiku poets and are now writing works in models similar to the Japanese.

Although probably not listed among the tenets of *gendai* haiku, much “modern” Japanese haiku is abstract, surreal, heavily disjunctive, and seemingly intended primarily to shock or puzzle the reader.

The embrace of plants  
depends often on  
rumors<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> William Scott Galasso, in *Frogpond* 25:3 (2002).

<sup>53</sup> C. John Holcombe, “Postmodernism in Poetry,” <http://www.textetc.com/modernist/postmodernism.html>, *Textetc.com*, <http://www.textetc.com/modernist/postmodernism.html>; accessed Aug. 12, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Ban'ya Natsuishi, *A Future Waterfall: 100 Haiku from the Japanese*. Trans. Stephen Henry Gill, Jim Kacian, Ban'ya Natsuishi, and Susumu Takiguchi (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 1999).

unable to find  
the cry of the nextdoor boy  
spring rain<sup>55</sup>

in the basement  
of a snowflake  
blackbird and i<sup>56</sup>

In the case of haiku like these—by Ban’ya, Richard Gilbert, and Scott Metz respectively—I have to confess that I am challenged beyond my abilities to find meaning and very quickly become impatient. I am back to the Brazilian monkeys and shadows in folded napkins—trying to make up some meaning, either of the plain-text variety or of some extra meaning residing *outside* the haiku, but failing. Haiku, like other forms of poetry, are vehicles for transmitting meaning. If they fail to mean, they fail as poems. I don’t need to be spoon-fed my dose of meaning, but neither am I willing to spend an inordinate amount of time analyzing a poem, researching its allusions, marveling at the metaphors and other manipulations of words. Please bring me my poems cooked medium rare.

### A Personal Checklist for Meaning in Haiku

By way of summing up allow me to present a personal checklist of questions, a sort of mental protocol that I use to help determine whether a haiku I am considering for publication has an adequate measure of meaning and if that meaning is appropriate to the haiku:

- ✓ Are there two distinct images? Is this a one-image haiku?
- ✓ Is the language purely descriptive? Do the words themselves use any devices to augment meaning? Which kind? *Kigo*, *utamakura*, metaphor, simile, allusion, rhyme, wordplay? Are they appropriate? Is each one essential? to the haiku—or do we have a “date stamp” or a “place stamp” haiku here?
- ✓ Do the images relate to one another as “figure” and “ground”?
- ✓ Are the two images too similar to one another in content or weight? Do we have a “shopping list”?
- ✓ What can be said about the distance between the two images? Too great for the reader to discern any meaning? Too close? Is one image or statement explained by the other? Just right for the reader to add meaning?
- ✓ Is the separation of the images too great? Is the juxtaposition too stark, the disjunction more than the haiku can bear? Does the haiku become surreal?
- ✓ Would *you* accept this poem for *Modern Haiku* or *Frogpond*?

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Gilbert, in *Roadrunner* [Web] VIII:2 (May 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Scott Metz, in *Roadrunner* [Web] X:3 (October 2010).