

**Haiku Mainstream:
The Path of Traditional Haiku in America [1]**

by Bruce Ross

Direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective.

—Ezra Pound [2]

Things are symbols of themselves.

—Chogyam Trungpa [3]

*Everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now.
Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things
happen.*

—Jorge Luis Borges [4]

In the introduction to *Haiku Moment* (1993), my anthology of American haiku, I noted: “The history of North American English-language haiku may be viewed as a continuous unresolved exploration of the objective and subjective qualities of the poetic image.”[5] Eighteen years later I find that traditional American haiku is still exploring these objective and subjective qualities. As for the levels of meaning for such poetry, Chogyam Trungpa’s declaration on symbolic value echoes Ezra Pound’s assertion that “the natural object is always the adequate symbol.”[6] Thus the imagery plus the musicality of phrasing in a haiku, its flow of sensibility, leaves an open form of response to that flow. In fact, this privileging of the image and the downplay of figurative language in traditional haiku that Pound’s and Trungpa’s assertions underscore led me to refer to haiku as anti-poetry, in that the essence of a haiku is in its natural imagery, not in a metaphoric presentation of symbolic poetic language. In Japanese traditional haiku, the imagery is built around a *kigo*, a season word or reference. Associations with this season supply through cultural allusion and personal sensibility the poetic resonance to support this small poetic form.[7] An additional dynamic, the *kireji*, or cut, in which two images in a haiku, most often a generalized atmospheric image set against a concrete particular image, create an emotional tension, what I have called an “absolute metaphor,”[8] also heightens the poetic resonance. These two elements, with the addition of the Japanese 5–7–5 phrase structure of haiku (short–long–short in English), occur in most modern English-language traditional haiku.[9] In *Haiku Moment* I delineated four stages of English-language haiku development, which I shall review, and now add a fifth that is reflective of 21st century haiku still clearly interested in the exploration of the image.[10]

The first stage begins during the teens and twenties and continues into the thirties and forties. In his 1913 manifesto on Imagism, Ezra Pound argued that poetry must address its subject forthrightly, whether subjectively or objectively.[11] Reacting against 19th-century poetic sentimentality and clichéd figurative expression, he redefined poetry as a mental union of imagination, emotion, and

perceived external reality. Who can judge poetic sensibility and its periodic redefinitions? World poetry has always concerned itself with the connection of feeling with a nature subject, the mandated *kigo* of Japanese haiku, which perhaps responds to elements of native Shinto animism. Pound and Imagism perhaps sought an equivalent to such animism in English Romanticism—expressions such as “a corporate breeze” or “spots of time”—without the seemingly affected diction of the Romantics. Certainly, as with the poet H.D., such animism was found in the fragments of early Greek poetry where gods inhabited nature, such as Sappho’s three-line haiku-like, perhaps erotic, poem to Eos, goddess of the dawn:

In gold sandals
dawn like a thief
fell upon me. [12]

Other influences during this period on the poetic treatment of the image were Impressionism, which softened the perceived reception of the natural and human world, much like the “atmospheric” connection with nature in most haiku, and the encounter with Japanese art and poetry, which also offered “atmospheric” idioms of simplicity in their expressions of the world in finely-etched sensibility, rejecting the “objective” influence of science then dominating culture and cultivating a similar sensibility. This direction is found in T.E. Hulme’s “August,” considered to have inaugurated Imagism:

A touch of cold in Autumn night —
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children. [13]

Pound’s well-known haiku-like two-liner “In a Station of the Metro” is equally impressionistic in treatment and, as poetry, equally reliant on figurative expression. But it is Amy Lowell who captured the qualities inherent in the haiku beyond the current fashions for Chinese and Japanese art and poetry. Here are examples of this accomplishment, which expresses a sensitivity of feeling and compression of a moment’s experience.[14]

Autumn

All day I have watched the purple vine leaves
Fall into the water.
And now in the moonlight they still fall,
But each leaf is fringed with silver.

The Pond

Cold, wet leaves
Floating on moss-coloured water
And the croaking of frogs—
Cracked bell-notes in the twilight.

Nuance

Even the iris bends
When a butterfly lights upon it.

Nuit Blanche

The chirping of crickets in the night
Is intermittent,
Like the twinkling stars.

Road to the Yoshiwara

Coming to you along the Nihon Embarkment
Suddenly the road was darkened
By a flock of wild geese
Crossing the moon.

Autumn Haze

Is it a dragon fly or maple leaf
That settles softly down upon the water?

Pound and Imagism, particularly with Amy Lowell's poetry, introduced a more emotionally charged, sophisticated, and accurately depicted image into American poetry, treatments that entered into Modernism. William Carlos Williams and Objectivism, an extension of Imagism, insisted that American poetry focus on the inner reality of the object, as in the treatment of the objects in his well-known poem "The Red Wheel Barrow" upon which "so much depends." This haiku-like poem quietly evokes a poetics of the objectively present image by accenting apparently ordinary subjects. As he famously declared in Patterson, "no ideas but in things." Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, showed how American poetry might focus on the inner reality of the subject, as he did in the first line of his Imagist portrait of winter, "The Snow Man": "One must have a mind of winter...." Though comprising mental images, the first of the very haiku-like three-line stanzas of his "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" captures the subjective, Zen-like treatment of haiku images in its depiction of an absolute winter stillness deepened by the movement of a blackbird's eye. These refinements of poetic imagery and mental focus and their relation to haiku were supported by the publication in 1934 of *The Bamboo Broom*, Harold Henderson's introduction to Japanese haiku.

Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac represent the second stage of the American reception of haiku which centered on the Beat movement of the fifties. In reaction to the cerebral academic poetry that dominated the period, their haiku, other poetry, and fiction focused upon the emotional vividness of the subjectively felt present moment. In one of Kerouac's novels, the narrator muses over the Japanese haiku poets who grasp experience like children "without literary devices or fanciness of expression." The character modeled on Snyder adds: "A real haiku's gotta be as simple as porridge and yet make you see the real thing...."[15] The Beats centered their discussions of Zen Buddhism on the work of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts and the haiku translations by R.H. Blyth. Donald Keene's *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (1955) helped clarify the nature of haiku during this period. The Beats' uncritical understanding of Zen and their commitment to passionately lived experience perhaps led the second generation American haiku poets to overemphasize the subjectively felt external moment. Kerouac is the most important of the Beat haiku writers because his haiku express a conciseness of expression that is underscored by reverberations of various emotional

coloring, including humor. His personal studies of and writings on Buddhism and French Catholicism had probably influenced these qualities. Here are six of his haiku.[16]

Nightfall — too dark
to read the page,
Too cold

How flowers love
the sun,
Blinking there !

Ah the birds
at dawn,
my mother and father

Useless! Useless!
— heavy rain driving
Into the sea

There's no Buddha
because
There's no me

Winter — that
sparrow's nest
Still empty

Just as Imagism absorbed some of the haiku-like qualities of Japanese art and poetry translations to produce haiku-like poems, Kerouac and the Beats absorbed elements of haiku-like qualities in Zen Buddhist thought and more accurate translations of Japanese haiku. Kerouac's haiku clearly reflect this latter influence while infusing an intentional emotional exuberance in a clearly American manner.

The third generation of American haiku dates from the late fifties and extends to the late sixties. It is dominated by English-language introductions to haiku by Kenneth Yasuda (1957) and Harold G. Henderson (1958); the establishment of English-language haiku journals, including *American Haiku* (1963), *Haiku Highlights* (1965), *Haiku* (1967), *Haiku West* (1967), *Modern Haiku* (1969), *Dragonfly* (1973), and *Cicada* (1977); the establishment of the Haiku Society of America (1968) by Henderson and Leroy Kanterman and its journal *Frogpond* (1978); and the publication of *The Haiku Anthology* (1974) by Cor van den Heuvel. It was followed by the equally significant *Canadian Haiku Anthology* (1979) which was edited by George Swede. Eric Amann's *The Wordless Poem* (1969) and Robert Aitken's *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen* (1978) were important contributions to understanding haiku. The poets of *The Haiku Anthology* have a greater knowledge of Oriental literature and poetics than the preceding two generations of American haiku poets. They begin to clarify their Williams-like perception of the inner nature of external images. They also develop subjectively perceived experience to emphasize the Zen-like mental climate of Wallace Stevens's "supreme fiction," as in the well-known lily haiku by Nick Virgilio. They also evoke revelations through haiku expressed as a transcendence of

the normal self and of the normal perception of objects. These poets are aware of redefining poetic consciousness: James W. Hackett describes haiku's "emphasis upon moment and selfless devotion to suchness (nature just as it is)"[17]; Cor van den Heuvel characterizes haiku as having "words [that] become an ontological presence offering a glimpse of the infinite"[18]; and Anita Virgil asserts that haiku demonstrates the "nature of all things of this world: their unique identity and yet their sameness, their evanescence and their eternal quality."[19] Defining characteristics of this generation also include experimentation in form and content and a social grounding in the American experience of their time. Here are three haiku by Cor van den Heuvel:[20]

a stick goes over the falls at sunset

by the lawn's edge,
the dog barks at the darkness
then looks back at me

a lone duck
into one wave and out another
the autumn sea

Like many of van den Heuvel's haiku, these have an atmosphere of metaphysical loneliness, a desired aesthetic state of communion with the universe, what the Japanese term *sabi*. Here are three haiku by Anita Virgil:[21]

no sound to this
spring rain—
but the rocks darken

on the lowest shelf
jars full of
autumn sunlight

following me
deeper into my quilt
the wren's song

Virgil here as in most of her haiku offers the simplicity of conversational phrasing and a preciseness of image with seemingly effortless craftsmanship.

The tendency of the fourth generation of American haiku poets of the late seventies, eighties, and nineties is frequently to offer catchy moments of sensibility that often rely on obvious metaphoric figures. They desire to create "haiku moments," but sentiment or imagination intrudes upon the perception of the object, creating haiku determined by ironic Imagism. Some of these poets as well as critics of the form have been able to articulate the poetics of modern English haiku. Thus John Beer suggests that the haiku poet must "transcend himself for a moment as he contacts the universal themes of existence. The key [being] to go beyond oneself in a single moment . . . by realizing that we are part of nature."[22] Robert Spiess similarly notes that a "haiku is not made of self-expression, but rather a full receptivity and universal acceptance."[23] These haiku poets have yet to relieve themselves of treating an object as only a mental image and to master "transpersonal" phenomenologies of subjectivity and objectivity to subvert the tendency in their haiku toward consciously "poetic" exercises in the Western figurative tradition of poetry, dramatically ironic moments, bald nature portraits, or

experiments with surrealism, concrete poetry techniques, and stylistically self-conscious underscoring of Zen-like experiences. Nonetheless haiku societies began to proliferate across the United States and Canada and important studies on haiku poetics, more accomplished translations of Japanese poetry, and admirable individual collections of haiku occur during this fourth generation.[24] This generation has downplayed the form and substance of traditional Japanese haiku: a consistent lack of seasonal references, surrealist techniques and figurative expression are introduced, regular prosody is eliminated, human, rather than nature, subjects, and the erotic are more increasingly emphasized, and psychological and political and social commentary are introduced. One sees a continuous grading of haiku into senryu, a Japanese poetic form identical in structure to haiku but emphasizing, usually in a humorous manner, human nature rather than nature itself. It thus moves away from what Anita Virgil notes as “moments of special awareness that give one pause in the everyday world, make one feel the wonder of the ordinary seen anew.”[25] Notwithstanding the drive to catchy moments of sensibility, the occurrence of haiku offering “absolute metaphors” in the true American traditional stream is maintained and explored as in these haiku:

dusk from rock to rock a waterthrush

John Wills [26]

winter beach . . .
tinkling trills
of water pipits

Charles B. Dickson [27]

moonlight—
a sand dune
shifts

Virginia Brady Young [29]

each waiting
for the other’s silence—
April birdsong

Lee Gurga [28]

Engulfing
the purple rhododendrons
shadows of evening

Tom Tico [30]

Colouring itself across the pond the autumn wind . . .

Vincent Tripi [31]

Notice the heightened use of rhythmic phrasing and musical elements and the honing of the imagery of particular natural subjects that heightens with this fourth generation of American haiku poets mediating

the catchy moments offered in too much haiku of the period.

The regression to senryu continues with the fifth generation of haiku poets of the two thousands. The depth and completeness still found in the American traditional stream of the period was also accompanied by what might be termed “blip” haiku.[32] This was not haiku coming out of a minimalist aesthetic. It was “haiku-with-connections-to-haiku” but truncated in phrasing, words, and image. It is a step away from what was once pejoratively called “telegraph haiku.” Much of this direction was possibly fostered by the new proliferation of online haiku sites, perhaps accommodating to the idiom of Internet communication. The music of poetry, its *melos*, inherent in Japanese haiku, and inherent in the haiku-like poetry of Imagism and beyond, seems to leave such haiku and a flat, truncated image remains. Also, these haiku are often “made-up” and lack sincerity, what the Japanese term *makoto*, and work against the ideas of completion and depth. The attempts with *kireji*, the inner dynamic of haiku, thus appear flat in affect. Notwithstanding, this generation, including haiku poets active for several of these generations, are producing effective haiku, such as the following:

tomatoes ripening
on withered vines
All Souls’ Day

Karen Klein [33]

but
through the mist
apricot blossom

Stephen Addiss [34]

deep in the sink
the great veins of chard;
summer’s end

Burnell Lippy [35]

spring moon—
the baby’s heart beats
against mine

Kathy Lippard Cobb [36]

early darkness
sun-dried tomatoes
snipped into the stew

Peggy Willis Lyles [37]

overnight rain
the whole tree
in a cupped leaf

Catherine J.S. Lee [38]

Wallace Stevens has said, “Not all objects are equal. The vice of Imagism was that it did not recognize this.”[39] One might in general agree with Stevens, particularly when addressing the use of imagery in haiku. What needs to happen when experiencing a haiku moment, that heightened experience whether in a meditative, reflective, or exuberant

state, is the crafting of an “absolute metaphor” that joins the universal and the particular in stated or unstated imagery to produce a musically phrased dynamic of new awareness. Can we judge the quality of a haiku when it follows this understanding of the American traditional haiku? Perhaps a key to an answer comes from a Taoist understanding of real images within the formlessness of Tao and the materiality of things, transcendence and immanence:

To look directly into the vital essence in beings and the information in that vital essence is the method of the higher vehicle. To apprehend images to observe things, matching yin to yang, is the method of the middle vehicle. Ordinary people observe changes in things based on experiences; this is the method of the lower vehicle.[40]

Of course we are all ordinary people, but we are all capable of haiku moments built on absolute metaphors, creating haiku that are not metaphors but manifestations of feeling connected to nature.[41] The more a haiku expresses a “vital essence” in its subject and images, the more it approaches that so-called “higher vehicle.” Starting from here, there is a possibility of considering the idea of quality as a defining characteristic of true haiku poetry.

• • •

Endnotes:

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Haiku Society of America session at the American Literature Association annual conference, Boston, May 2011.
2. Ezra Pound, *Pavanes and Divagations* (1918); <<http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html>>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
3. Quoted from Allen Ginsberg, “Mind Writing Slogans,” no. 35, <[poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/ginsberg.html](http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/ginsberg.html)>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
4. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1942). <www.coldbacon.com/writing/borges-garden.html>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
5. Bruce Ross, ed., *Haiku Moment: An Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku* (Boston, Rutland, Vt., and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1993) xxvi.
6. Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1918); <[poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html](http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html)>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
7. In Section 4 of “The Matsuyama Declaration” of Sept. 10, 2000, perhaps acknowledging the potential insularity of traditional Japanese kigo to world haiku, various leaders in Japanese haiku suggested that a “keyword,” a significant “symbolic” image to a given culture, replace kigo in world haiku: “Globally speaking, it is a keyword that possesses meaning unique to that particular culture.” <http://www.kulturserver.de/home/haiku-dhg/Archiv/Matsuyama_Declaration.htm>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
8. Bruce Ross, “The Essence of Haiku,” *Modern Haiku* 38.3 (autumn 2007) 51–62.
9. In modern English haiku a short-long-short phrasing structure of from twelve to fourteen syllables replace the seventeen sound units in a 5–7–5 phrasing structure of Japanese haiku to avoid a padded

sound.

10. This traditional direction in contemporary English haiku avoids discussing explorations of experimental and word-based haiku and emphasizes the connection of haiku to the natural world and natural, human based feeling. Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the “father” of modern Japanese haiku had two major disciples. One, Takahama Kyoshi (1874–1959), founded the modern line of traditional haiku; the other, Kawahigashi Hekigodo (1873–1937), founded the line of modern haiku, with relaxed rules on kigo and phrasing count. For the many explorations of modern Japanese haiku see Makoto Ueda, ed., *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1976). The World Haiku Club (established in the U.K. in 1998 by Susumu Takiguchi) and its *World Haiku Review* and online multilingual haiku groups routinely separate modern world haiku according to traditional (neo-traditional), modern, and experimental. The Haiku Foundation (established in 2008 by Jim Kacian) makes the same distinctions.

11. Ross, *Haiku Moment*, xvi–xvii.

12. Willis Barnstone, trans., *To Touch the Sky, Poems of Mystical, Spiritual & Metaphysical Light* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 29.

13. The Poetry Foundation Web site, <poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173696>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.

14. “Autumn” and “The Pond” from *The Poetry Foundation Web site*, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/3734>> and <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171720>>, respectively; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012; “Nuance,” “Nuit Blanche,” “The Road to the Yoshiwara,” and “Autumn Haze” from *Terebess Asia Online*, <<http://terebess.hu/english/haiku/lowell.html>>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.

15. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Signet, 1958) 48.

16. Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, ed. and with an introduction by Regina Weinreich (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2003). The haiku are found on pages 8, 8, 35, 75, 147, and 170, respectively.

17. Cor van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology: English Language Haiku by Contemporary American and Canadian Poets* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1974) 256.

18. Ibid., 271. 19. Ibid., 272. 20. “A stick” from Cor van den Heuvel, *Dark* (New York: Chant Press, 1982); “by the lawn’s edge” from *Frogpond* 14:1 (spring 1991); “a lone duck” from *Modern Haiku* 22.1 (winter–spring 1991).

21. Anita Virgil, *One Potato Two Potato Etc.* (Forest, Va.: Peaks Press, 1991).

22. John Beer, “Therapeutic Haiku,” *Dragonfly* 14:1 (winter 1985–86) 44.

23. Robert Spiess, “Speculations,” *Modern Haiku* 16:2 (summer 1985) 74.

24. Ross, *Haiku Moment*, xxii–xxiii.

25. Virgil, xiii.

26. John Wills, *Reed Shadows: Selected Haiku* (Sherbrooke, Que./Windsor, Ont.: Burnt Lake Press/Black Moss Press, 1987).

27. *Woodnotes* 7 (autumn 1990).

28. *New Cicada* 6:2 (winter 1989).

29. *Frogpond* 13:1 (February 1990).

30. *Modern Haiku* 19.3 (autumn 1988).
31. *Frogpond* 14:3 (autumn 1991).
32. See Bruce Ross, "Sincerity and the Future of Haiku," *New Zealand Poetry Society Web* site; <poetrysociety.org.nz/node/315>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012. Originally published in *World Haiku Review*.
33. *Frogpond* 24:2 (2001).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. *The Heron's Nest* 3:6 (2001).
37. *Frogpond* 33:2 (spring–summer 2010).
38. *Frogpond* 33:3 (fall 2010).
39. Quoted by Linda W. Wagner-Martin, <<http://college.cengage.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/stevens.html>>; retrieved Feb. 21, 2012.
40. Chen Kaiguo and Zheng Shunchao, *Opening The Dragon Gate, The Making of A Modern Taoist Wizard*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Tokyo, Rutland, Vt., and Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1996) 125.
41. In *The Proceedings of the Haiku Symposium in Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Haiku International Association on Saturday, November 28, 2009 in Ichigaya Arcadia, Tokyo, Japan* [Tokyo: The Haiku International Association, 2010] 46. Akito Arima, president of the Haiku International Association, accordingly notes, "The Japanese people have an animistic vitality to live in accord with nature, which is also found in haiku."