

Outré Haiku of Katō Ikuya (1)

by Hiroaki Sato

Among the many anti-traditionalist haiku writers of Japan, Katō Ikuya (加藤郁乎) stands out. He began by writing seemingly conventional (albeit “modern”) haiku but soon turned to the heavy use of such puns—yes, we all know that early hokku and (later) senryū relied on puns—and esoteric, “private” allusions and references that he ended up “slaughtering words,” in the approving assessment of the Japanese authority on the Marquis de Sade Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (澁澤龍彦). (Ikuya laid Tatsuhiko’s wife, the writer Yagawa Sumiko (矢川澄子), and blatantly wrote about it, but that’s another story.) At the same time he started to ignore the haiku format, save the monolinear aspect of it, to such an extent that you can categorize his one-liners as haiku only because he calls them “*ku*.”

(Here I am talking about Ikuya’s eight or so books up to the early 1970s. Born in 1929, he went on to live long despite vaunted binge-drinking with Shibusawa and other *outré* writers, producing, in the process, a great many more books, including commentaries on Edo haikai. His latest, according to the Wikipedia site for him, was published in 2010, and won the Yamamoto Kenkichi (山本健吉) Prize—an interesting turn of events when you

consider that Yamamoto was one of the most knowledgeable explicators of traditional haiku.)

So Ikuya opened his first book of haiku *Kyūtai Kankaku* (球體感覺), published in 1959, with this one:

冬の波冬の波止場に来て返す

Fuyu no nami fuyu nu hatoba ni kite kaesu

Winter waves roll in and out on the winter breakwater

Written in a perfect 5-7-5-syllabic alignment, this piece may bring to mind any of the haiku written by the “modernists” in the 1930s—such as the following by Saitō Sanki (西東三鬼):

水枕ガバリと寒い海がある

Mizumakura gabari to samui umi ga aru

The water pillow zwoomps there's the chilly sea

Yet discordant notes set in even as the majority of pieces included in this book appear to be in 5-7-5 formations.

<<Que sais-je? >>傾き立てるいたどり

<<*Que sais-je?* >>*katamuki tateru itadori*

<<Que sais-je? >>leaning as they stand knotweeds

Incorporating foreign language into haiku was no Ikuya innovation, but how do you parse this? Count the syllables of *Que sais-je* in the standard

Japanese way (*ku-se-ju*), and you get 3, so the haiku consists of 3-7-4. What about the meaning? Did Ikuya imagine the volumes in the famous French series for *haute vulgarisation* (Wiki description) from a stand of Japanese knotweeds with stems looking like bamboo? If Ikuya included a pun or puns in this piece, I fail to detect them.

In *Ektoplasma*, his second book of haiku, in 1962 (republished in an extravagant edition twelve years later), his writings suddenly turn mostly unintelligible—at least on the face of it. Here’s the opening piece:

落丁一騎対岸の草の葉

Rakuchō taigan no kusa no ha

Defective copy single mounted soldier on the other shore blade of grass

The syllabic count may be 4-3-5-4. The “translation” here is nothing more than a word-for-word tracing in English. With this piece we can at least recognize individual words. But what the heck does the thing mean? “A poem should not mean / But be,” Archibald MacLeish said, but unintelligibility was not what the Librarian of Congress, whom my gentle teacher of poetry Lindley Williams Hubbell used to dismiss as miserable and worthless, promoted, was it?

How about the second one?

四月、やはられ矢場のやたがらす

Shigatsu, yarahare yaba no yatararasu

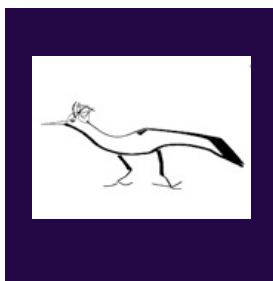
The Roman transliteration is a literal reading (Japanese orthography aside). From the straight reading, I know: *Shigatsu* is April; *yaba* is an archery

ground; and *yatagarasu* is the crow that is said to have guided the first Japanese emperor Jinmu (神武)—a mythology figure—when he set out to conquer the East; he started the conquest of the Japanese archipelago from the southern island of Kyūshū. (Perhaps the transliteration of the crow should be *Yatagarasu*, with the first letter capitalized.) But what does *yarahare* mean? Is it a word?

Noticing that the syllabic formation is 3-7-5, I wonder: Could there be a trick with the first word, *Shigatsu*? After all, there were a number of *poetic* (if you will) names for each of the twelve months before the lunar calendar was replaced by the Gregorian calendar in the second half of the 19th century, when *Shigatsu* is so damned prosaic, no more than specifying the order in which it appears in the year, “fourth month.” So I check and see, among about twenty old names on one list, one with five syllables, *Torikutsuki* (鳥来月), “birds-come-month.” Intrigued, because the reference to birds may be an associative introductory to the crow, I check the word *yaba*, “archery ground,” and see that it has another meaning, “house of ill repute,” “brothel.” Then I realize that the mythological Imperial avian guide—Jinmu had another guide: monkey—is said to have had three legs. Then it dawns on me that *yarahare* may be two words *yara* and *hare*, the first of which can mean “is it?” or “it must be” and the second, an exclamation, “good!” or “wonderful!”

So what does the haiku *mean* or describe overall? Perhaps it is saying, in a deliberately abstruse way, something like: Oh April, I’ve come out of a wonderful brothel, with my phallus swollen!

Are such extended *interpretations* warranted?



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