SURREALISM & CONTEMPORARY HAIKU
~ OR ~
SURREAL HAIKU?¹

by Philip Rowland

Critics in the field of English-language haiku have often suggested that what distinguishes gendai, or contemporary, Japanese haiku from traditional haiku is gendai poets’ embrace of the surreal. In a review, for instance, of The Acorn Book of Contemporary Haiku, edited by Lucien Stryk and Kevin Bailey, Brian Tasker writes:

Bailey goes on to write [in his introduction to the anthology] that “the haiku is a traditional poetic form native to Japan, and there it should, and will, be preserved.” I think he’s a bit out of touch with what’s going on with haiku in Japan these days, with the avant-garde and surreal coming to the fore.²

Enough said, it would seem, and Bailey is criticized for a “Eurocentrism” from which the reviewer himself would seem to be exempt, in spite of his veiled suggestion that contemporary Japanese haiku poets are losing sight of their own tradition. While I would agree with Tasker’s criticism of the weaker poems in the anthology under review (as poems, in my view, not merely as haiku), his stance with regard to the “avant-garde and surreal” typifies an English-language haiku orthodoxy that has often been quick to claim that haiku is this and definitely not that, or that this haiku is notable, and that is not, resulting in the exclusion and ignoring of much contemporary haiku from Japan.

The charge most often (and arguably, most subjectively) made is that of egocentric subjectivity. A striking instance appears in the late William J. Higginson’s review of A Future Waterfall by Ban’ya Natsuishi—a poet with a reputation for avant-gardism in haiku. Higginson claims that the poem (on p. 34 of the first edition):
Cor van den Heuvel, editor of the influential book of North American haiku in English, *The Haiku Anthology*, has written similarly of what he “hopes to get from a haiku,” its having much to do with haiku’s looking to “ordinary reality.” Without wishing to denigrate this now-orthodox approach, which draws perhaps as much on Thoreau, Williams, Kerouac and American Zen as Japanese haiku, it leaves little scope for radical innovation. The risk, as with any strictly defined poetics, is that the poet-critic’s desire for confirmation of his own conception of the essential nature of haiku will block an openness to work that leads into more uncharted territory.

H.F. Noyes’ review of *Japanese Haiku 2001*, an anthology edited by the Modern Haiku Association, illustrates a somewhat more enthusiastic view of contemporary Japanese haiku. Noyes finds in the book a “plethora of juicy, new-wave haiku, which often strongly relate to the oriental idea of ‘nothingness’ or ‘emptiness.’” The focus is on capturing the inner spirit through the use of vivid, fantastical images.” This last phrase, “vivid, fantastical images,” hints at the surreal, and in the concluding sentence of the review, the hint becomes explicit in a statement that is carefully and interestingly qualified: “Haiku poets don’t have to venture into surrealism, but may well heed these words of Novalis: ‘Poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason.’” What are the implications of Noyes’ statement? Where would one draw the line between “surreal haiku” and haiku which “capture the inner spirit through the use of vivid, fantastical images”? And how fine a distinction would that be? In what follows, I shall focus on several more examples of contemporary Japanese haiku, on recent experiments with the writing of “surreal haiku,” particularly in the pages of the Journal of the British Haiku Society, *Bliithe Spirit*; and, lastly, on the work of an American poet whose haiku are not widely known in the haiku world, despite his being known in the wider poetry world as
America’s most influential, and “for the entire decade of the thirties, America’s sole dedicated surrealist poet”—Charles Henri Ford.6

Perhaps the reason, for critics such as Noyes, why haiku poets may approach but perhaps had better not “venture into surrealism,” is that surrealism might seem to be the polar opposite of the objective realism in which the dominant Western view of haiku is grounded. Thus certain aspects of the work of “avant-garde haiku writers” are banished to the “nether regions of surrealism” by one reviewer, David Brady (Blithe Spirit, vol. 10, no. 2, 52). Nevertheless, what points of coincidence can be found between the techniques of contemporary haiku and those of surrealism?

Both haiku and surrealist poetry depend very much upon unexpected juxtapositions of images, or “parallel images,” which, as Brady rightly points out, are a “form of metaphor . . . in all but name.” While the received view is that writers of haiku would do best to avoid metaphor, it would perhaps be more apt to say that, like surrealist poetry, haiku insists on “The Very Image”—to borrow the title of one of David Gascoyne’s surrealist poems. Edward B. Germain, editor of the Penguin anthology of Surrealist Poetry in English, explains in his Introduction that

Critics who dismiss surrealism as senseless—meaning nothing—or as fantasy—meaning nothing real—fail at this initial step. If the poet writes “A horse galloping on a tomato,” that is exactly what he means, not that the horse trod on the tomato while passing by.7

But where the surrealist poem tends to foreground, or frame, its images, as if to make it clear that these are “just images,” haiku presents them more simply and directly, “unframed,” possibly with a stronger implication of authorial sincerity. Thus, for instance, Gascoyne’s poem insists on “The Very Image” by having all stanzas except the last begin with the words, “An image of,” finally putting “all these images . . . in model bird-cages / about six inches high.” Each image is developed incrementally until it is thoroughly de-familiarized. The first stanza reads:

An image of my grandmother
her head appearing upside-down upon a cloud
the cloud transfixed on the steeple
of a deserted railway-station
far away.
By comparison, haiku is more “one-shot”—due largely, of course, to its extreme brevity. Take the haiku quoted by David Brady as an instance of avant-garde writers’ extending metaphorical figures to “the nether regions of surrealism”:

*Dai-bafuku zō no yume mite yukishi hito*

Great waterfalls:
you who died
dreaming of an elephant  

In this poem, the main parallel lies in the mapping of the image of “Great waterfalls” onto the conceptual structure of “you who died / dreaming of an elephant”—a mapping made explicit in English by the colon after “waterfalls.” There is also a possible parallel between the “great” size of the waterfall and that of an elephant. Obvious connection between the images ends there, however; the interpretative possibilities are left alarmingly (or exhilaratingly) open. Who, for instance, is the “you” of the poem: someone who has actually died, or the spirit of waterfalls, perhaps? Taxing expectations pertaining to “ordinary reality,” the poem demands an intuitive reading. In this respect, it is very much akin to surrealist poetry. Indeed, its author has since moved further in the direction of surrealism, even into the realm of automatic writing, with his long series of dream-like “flying pope” haiku.  

It should be remembered that previous generations of avant-garde haiku poets have also written in ways that verge on the surreal. An outstanding case in point is Tōta Kaneko’s:

*ume saite niwajuh-ni aozame-ga kite iru*

the plum in bloom
blue sharks have come right in
into the garden  

While, given the clear seasonal reference, it is not difficult to grasp the sense-impression of biting cold from the Daliesque image of blue sharks in the garden, Tōta’s image is no less surprising than Natsuishi’s dream-elephant, demanding a similarly bold imaginative leap on the part of the reader. Like much of the best surrealist art, it manages to be at once powerfully disturbing and humorous. Of another haiku of Tōta’s—
William Higginson asks: “is the following poem surreal, or simply a metaphor?” The question is rhetorical, for the poem hardly gives us the chance to decide. To recall Germain’s point about a horse galloping on a tomato, we can only assume that by “the river’s teeth” the poet means precisely that.

I would also argue that both haiku and surrealist poetry, at their most successful, refer us to the experience of non-duality. That is to say, both enact “the desire to break through boundaries between subject and object, between desire and reality,” which Germain identifies as the very “spirit of modern poetry.” A fine example of such breaking through the boundaries of our ordinary, dualistic perception of reality is Yasumasa Soda’s haiku:

\[
\text{Chô yukite modorikuru ma ni gake kiyuru}
\]

In the time it takes a butterfly
to depart and then return . . .
whole cliffs can disappear

which evokes an exhilarating sense of non-dual, spiritual experience. The poem’s distortion of space-time is also reminiscent of one of the finest haiku (in translation as well as the original) from A Future Waterfall:

\[
\text{Sennen no rusu ni bakufu o kakete oku}
\]

For my absence
of a thousand years I hang
a waterfall

This strikes me as both immediate and intriguing, but with respect to “ordinary reality,” it makes no sense. Again, in terms of the dominant Western view of haiku, it would seem to have more to do with “fanciful” surrealism than haiku—which points more, perhaps, to a deficient Western model than deficiency in the poem itself.
That said, in recent years there has been a growing awareness of the deficiencies, or at least limitations, in the existing consensus as to the nature of English haiku, in particular its over-emphasis on the shasei (or sketch-from-nature) model of haiku; on objectivity and the de-emphasizing of self. Here is a selection of some of the more effective “surreal haiku” from two issues of *Blithe Spirit* (Vol. 13, numbers 1 and 2, March and June 2003), which might serve as a further sounding board for the ideas put forward above.

The following poem, by Klaus-Dieter Wirth, is noteworthy not least for its explicit concern with the idea of “nothingness” or “emptiness” which, as mentioned earlier, H.F. Noyes sees as characteristic of “new-wave” Japanese haiku:

Moulding in one’s hand
with the utmost care
what is not the void. 17

In a similarly existential (and in the final line, self-consciously literary) vein, AA Marcoff writes:

a butterfly flits
from grave to grave:
out of my mouth—
the naked and the dead 18

Colin Blundell presents a number of “found surreal haiku,” culled from Dada poems written around 1916, among which:

his pregnant wife
showed her child through the skin
of her belly—still born moon 19

while Martin Lucas helpfully reminds us that a streak of the surreal is not a new phenomenon in haiku, quoting this poem by Issa (in R.H. Blyth’s translation):

*semi naku ya tsuku-zuku akai kazaguruma*

A cicada is crying;
It is precisely
A red paper windmill. 20
Other examples of somewhat surrealistic, classic haiku include Bashō’s:

\[
\text{tsuki izuku kane wa shizumeru umi no soko}
\]

where is the moon?  
the temple bell is sunk  
at the bottom of the sea

Shuson’s commentary on this haiku underlines its highly subjective and imaginative (even “fanciful”) power: “In his mind Bashō saw the light of the full moon and heard the faint sound of the bell. Although there was no moon in actuality, its absence led him to fly on wings of fancy to a mysterious but concrete world in his imagination.”21 Shuson’s comment is a useful reminder that the “mysteriousness” of a perception need not detract from its vividly “concrete” poetic rendering.

Another quasi-surreal haiku of note by Bashō is:

\[
\text{takotsubo ya hakanaki yume wo natsu no tsuki}
\]

an octopus pot—  
inside, a short-lived dream  
under the summer moon

Apropos of which, Watsuji goes so far as to suggest: “Isn’t it possible to imagine that Bashō had completely entered into the mind of an octopus inside the pot? He became an octopus, so to speak.”22 Such outright anthropomorphism prefigures contemporary haiku poet Tsubouchi Nenten’s more humorous and direct:

\[
\text{sakura chiru anata mo kaba ni narinasai}
\]

cherry blossoms fall—  
you too must become  
a hippo 23

In a not dissimilar vein, among the more astonishing haiku on the British front is Stanley Pelter’s:
a pig’s memory
it leads to colours
of hesitant hills²⁴

while both of the above bear comparison with the surreal, cartoon-like humour of
the following, by Nagata Koi (trans. James Kirkup and Makoto Tamaki), featured
in Blithe Spirit as a “favourite haiku” chosen by Yasuhiko Shigemoto:

dojo uite namazu mo iru to iute shizumu

The loach floated up.
“There’s a catfish down here too”
he said, then sank back²⁵

The surreal turning-upside-down of ordinary reality also characterizes Scott
Metz’s:

somewhere
fireflies are
eating rhinos²⁶

At the same time, the concision, topic (fireflies) and playfulness of Metz’s poem
clearly situate it in the tradition of haiku. Wittily reversing the traditional expecta-
tion of a specific context or occasion for haiku, the “somewhere” turns out to situa-
tate a quite specific but objectively “impossible” image. The poem thus enacts a
sudden shift from objective realism to the limitless site of the surreal imagination.

To close this paper, I would like to introduce the haiku of a veteran surreali-
ist poet. The American Charles Henri Ford, who died in 2002 at the age of 94,
founded and edited the first two surrealist-oriented magazines in America, Blues
and View, in the nineteen thirties and forties. In his later years, Ford wrote almost
exclusively haiku. None, however, appear in anthologies of English-language
haiku, nor am I aware of any essays on his haiku in journals specializing in the
genre. His rare collection of Secret Haiku, beautifully designed and produced in
collaboration with Isamu Noguchi, was published in New York by The Red Ozier
Press in an edition of only 155 copies in 1982; and a follow-up volume published
in 1986, Emblems of Arachne, also consists of poems written mostly in 5-7-5 syl-
labic structure. Fortunately, substantial selections from these volumes are in-
cluded in the more readily available Out of the Labyrinth: Selected Poems, pub-
lished by City Lights in 1991. Ford’s allegiance to surrealism comes to the fore in some manifesto-like, if inspired, haiku such as the following:

Break up conventional
Modes of perception! Who
Said roses don’t crawl. 27

Several verge on the obscure; for instance:

Not locking onto
Guide-stars of controlled flywheels.
Dust on the mirror. (98)

By contrast, some of the poems are simple portraits, or sketches, based on compassionate observation—albeit ones of some pathos:

Unwashed, unbedded.
He has fine bones and a
Pellet of hashish. (92)

But a considerable number bespeak a haiku sensibility that feels all the more fresh for the poems’ lack of obvious indebtedness to the principles being espoused in contemporaneous American magazines of haiku. For example:

He’s out on the loggia,
Singing in falsetto
As the rain falls. (90)

When you close your eyes
In the sun, all you want is
The sun on your eyes. (87)

These stand in contrast to the depressed, but wryly expressed, mood of:

Invisible envelopes,
A standstill afternoon.
A rain of merde. (98)
The range of Ford’s haiku also includes Issa-like qualities of down-to-earth, compassionate humour:

In struggling to get  
On its feet the dung beetle  
Knows what it’s doing. (104)

Others convey more of a feeling of sabi, or aloneness:

A place in which to  
Talk to oneself, while a child’s  
Kite flies in the rain. (105)

Gently underpinning Ford’s haiku is his grounding in surrealism, with its intimations of non-duality, as suggested by the following:

What am I dreaming of?  
Nothing. I’m creating the  
Dream. Heavy soul! (90)

In a similar spirit of questioning, my broad purpose in this essay has been to resist the tendency among English-language commentators to delimit the field of haiku. Insistence on a strictly defined opposition between haiku and other (often so-called mainstream) poetry fails to do justice to the diversity of styles that exists in “both” fields, thus ignoring possibilities of poetic cross-fertilization. As we have seen, the brevity and open-endedness of haiku readily lend it to the surrealistic exercise of what H.F. Noyes has described as “the freedom to resort to non-sequitur words and images . . . delightfully left hanging,”28 so pointing to transformational moments of awareness. The rich variety of means available to the poet in giving form to such experience in haiku should not be overlooked.
NOTES

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the World Haiku Association Conference of 2004 and published in World Haiku 2005 (Tokyo: Nishida-shoten, 2004).


5 Presence #18, September 2002, 49.


7 Surrealist Poetry in English, 32.

8 Germain quotes Gascoyne’s “The Very Image” on pages 32-3.

9 A Future Waterfall, 31.


11 The deliberate use of surreal imagery in haiku goes back as far the poets of the “New Rising Haiku movement” of the 1930s, such as Saito Sanki and Sugimura Seirinshi. The example of their (anti-) war haiku, in particular, indicates that the more “difficult” the subject matter, the more haiku poets have tended to make use of non-traditional, uncompromisingly surreal imagery. See: Itō Yūki’s “New Rising Haiku” Simply Haiku (Winter 2007, vol 5 no 4) <http://www.poetrylives.com/SimplyHaiku/SHv5n4/features/Ito.html> or “Gendai Haiku Translations” Roadrunner (May 2007 Issue VII:2) <http://www.roadrunnerjournal.net/pages72/translation72.htm>


14 Surrealist Poetry in English, 52.

15 One Hundred Contemporary Japanese Haiku For The Year 2000 (The Gunma Prefectural Museum of Literature, 2000), 26

16 Ibid., 39. Also, A Future Waterfall, 15.


18 Ibid., 5.

19 Ibid., 33.

20 Ibid., 47.


22 Ibid., 201.


28 *Presence* #18, September 2002, 49.