

Perception Inside Out and Outside In: Japan and the Poetics of the International Avant-Garde

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When a broad range of Western poets began to discover traditional Japanese poetry in translation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many of them perceived in Japanese poetry a model for the reform and revitalization of their own poetry. This brought on a second wave of Japonisme, and particularly haiku was venerated for its concision, the quality of its images, and its employment of juxtaposition. In England, France, Spain, the United States, and throughout Latin America, poetry in general and avant-garde poetry in particular moved toward less narrative elements in the twentieth century, partly under the tutelage of the haiku model. Figures not only increased, but they carried the burden of meaning and were even considered the essence of poetry (Poe and later Verlaine followed by many others called such poetry “pure poetry”). In the 1920s poets of Japan’s Taishō modernism took up the avant-garde banner and readily took to the currents of the international avant-garde. Hirato Renkichi (1893-1922) and Kitazono Katsue (1902-1978), the two poets to whom the discussion below gives the most attention, are two of the earliest and most outstanding of those poets. This avant-garde activity in Japan also took Japanese poetry beyond its own limitations of fixed meaning through poetical allusion.

Willard Bohn refines the discussion of experimental poetry when he classifies the twentieth century avant-garde poets as consisting of two major factions, those using intensified imagery and those using words as a medium on the blank page. For our purposes here we will call the image centered poetry, “haiku lyric”; and the words-as-plastic-objects poetry, “visual analogy.” In both cases, haiku lyric and visual analogy, emphasis necessarily shifted from cognition and intellectualized meaning to intuition, the sensual and perceptual apprehension of objects. To accomplish this shift,

various boundaries had to be pushed if not obliterated. The boundaries between different modes of perception were crossed—synesthesia was very prominent. The boundary between sound and sight, the most active in the apprehension of poetry was particularly under assault—poetry and painting, poetry and photography, and poetry and jazz were the most readily coupled media. Because of its syncopated rhythms and the reliance on intuition, jazz constituted the most significant sound medium subject to avant-garde experimentation, and while experimentation with painting had a long history, it was eclipsed by the new media of film and photography in the twentieth century. These boundary crossings had implications for poetry as music, and poetry as visual art, but also had implications for the greater boundaries between art and life that were of such great import to Peter Bürger. However, boundary breaking not political action was the *raison d'être* for avant-garde artists of all stripes. Making one's chosen medium do what it heretofore could not, while the only goal for many, was a boundary violation with abundant implications for political action for some, as the period of most import to this paper attests, the 1920s.

Haiku lyric and visual analogy, the two forms of avant-garde poetry of concern here were defined by Bohn as such:

One contingent, best exemplified by Ezra Pound, sought to develop an “ideogrammic method” that would retain traditional poetic forms but intensify their imagery. Another contingent, headed by Guillaume Apollinaire and the Italian Futurists, experimented with pictorial forms in an attempt to create “visual analogies” and “lyrical ideograms.” Both factions strove to increase the visual impact of the poetic image and to provide the reader with a moment of epiphany.¹

Haiku lyric and visual analogy had similar goals, but haiku lyric sought to maintain lyricism while employing haiku juxtaposition, what Bohn and others call by Pound's terms superposition or ideogrammic method. Bohn's term “lyrical ideogram” really applies best to Pound's haiku experimentation, rather than the more radicalized visual analogy. In

¹ Bohn 1986, p. 4.

visual analogy, which flowed from Stéphane Mallarmé to Futurism, to Guillaume Apollinaire and eventually to Concretismo, the central poetics are the same as Bohn indicates—the word was treated as an object: a black medium set against the white page. While it would be easy to construe the haiku impact as limited to lyrical poetry, in the persons of J. J. Tablada, Guillermo de Torre, Hirato Renkichi, and then later with a few poets in the Concretismo movement, however, there was a confluence of the two forces.

Although one only sees the bridging of both these veins of poetic practice in the poetry of a few, haiku influenced both sides of this division that splits into two seemingly distinct veins of modernist, avant-garde poetic activity. Both factions drew from haiku and saw in haiku an example for bringing about poetic reform. While Apollinaire and Marinetti may not have been directly influenced by haiku (although they could not have been ignorant of it), their poetics of visual analogy, taken up by subsequent poets in Latin America, including the Concretistas in Brazil, certainly demonstrate connections to Japanese arts and haiku itself. The poets themselves demonstrate in their work that haiku lyric and visual analogy belong together in the same century, in the same movement, in the same volume of poetry—and it is in this poetic experimentation that we find the core of Japonisme in twentieth century poetry. Kenneth Rexroth most clearly saw this trajectory of twentieth century poetry, and claimed that it constituted:

a remarkable example of historical cultural convergence, the forms of Japanese poetry, of Nō drama, and even the Japanese language itself happen to parallel the development of poetry in the West from Baudelaire to Rimbaud, to Mallarmé, to Apollinaire, to the Surrealists. Ezra Pound was very aware of this, and beginning with his first imagist epigram: In a station of the metro / the apparition of these faces in the crowd, / Petals on a wet, black bough; he called it superposition.²

His equation of these poetics with Pound's discovery of haiku juxtaposition, gives high priority to this basic mechanism that Bashō evidently called *toriawase* (combination, assortment). Ōsuga Otsuji's analysis of haiku

² Rexroth 1973, p. 151.

juxtaposition focused on the use of the *kireji* (cutting word, caesura) and the *niku* (two clause), *isshō* (one statement) structure of many haiku. This, he argued was the main mode of haiku, one clause was seasonal, containing the *kigo*, the other was metaphorical (*anji hō*) and created suggestion.³ However, from the twelfth century Fujiwara Kiyosuke (1104-1177) to the twentieth century Kuriyama Riichi, the distinguishing feature of haikai in Japanese theories seemed to be *kyō* (non-conformity).⁴ Haruo Shirane suggests that Bashō's use of "withered images, shigure (winter rains), susuki (pampas grass), obana (pampas grass in ear), karasu (crow), kōmori (bat), dokoro (skull)" along with other non-poetic elements are at the core of the non-conformity employed by Bashō and his school.⁵ Yet, the most non-conformist elements of Japanese haikai are relegated to a virtual footnote in literary history: Nishiyama Sōin (1605-1682), his disciple Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), and the Danrin school of haikai (approximately, 1670-1680) who have been described as dadaesque.

The earliest haikai practitioners emphasized the comic in their verses. The Teimon school was known for its verbal dexterity. Bashō aligned himself with Danrin school for a period and subsequently turned away from their wild word play and loose associational compositions toward classical allusions and lyrical elegance, which was of great import in making haiku the canonical genre that it is today. With Bashō's haiku, and particularly with the verse "kare eda ni / karasu tomarikeri / aki no kure," literary historians mark the elevation of the lowly haikai. He infused it with medieval aesthetics, classical Japanese, Chinese, and Buddhism. Before Bashō's turn away from Danrin haikai, a seventeenth-century renga variant, was low, comic poetry that allowed for mundane and even vulgar subject matter. The characteristic of haikai dealing with non-poetic language and subject matter has carried over into the elevated genre of haiku become art. That is, in certain limited respects haiku maintained the oppositional stance of its origins that are inherent in its craziness, non-conformity, and Danrin, dadaesque qualities.

³ Asano 1962, p. 10.

⁴ On haiku/haikai poetics, see Kuriyama 1972, pp. 13-14, and Matsui 1965, p. 179.

⁵ Shirane 1998, p. 11.

Bashō is not only considered the great master of haiku by many, he is also considered the greatest theorist as well. This is despite the fact that Bashō never recorded his own poetic treatises. Bashō's analysis stated that diction (*kotoba*), intention (*sakui*), and spirit (*kokoro*) were central to haiku poetics.⁶ For the purposes of this discussion this broad and vague insiders' speak is of less help in establishing poetics than William LaFleur's observation that Bashō's own literary production is in a historical line from the medieval Zennist movement that stressed overcoming symbolism.⁷ Buddhist oneness of things meant seeing the mountains as mountains, not bifurcated into symbol (signifier) and symbolized (signified)—the thing-in-itself, to borrow Imagist terminology. Taking Bashō's 'Kare eda ni' as an example, on the surface level the images themselves bear a one-to-one correspondence with everyday life, the branch is a branch, the crow is a crow, and the evening is an evening. This effect is exactly what Pound strove for in his notion of moving beyond metaphor. Ultimately there is a deeper level of meaning, but just as it goes unstated by the poet, it must be intuited by the reader, and therefore was thought to defy the process of symbolization. The epiphany that modernist writers sought was modeled on this kind of satori or "haiku moment."⁸ The haiku effect is to understand the object as object and present it matter-of-factly. The effect should be a flash of insight into the nature of things, and it is achieved in writing through the juxtaposition of images and the merging of the senses. However, haiku-inspired experimental poetry in the early twentieth century in the West marks the apogee of haiku poetics in one important respect. Whereas, Japanese haiku suggested by way of allusion to the Japanese classics (*honkadōri*), a network of reference that created semantic stability and confined the meaning of poems, Westerners interpreted the

⁶ Additionally on poetics, *Sanzōshi* and *Kyōraishō* are reprinted in *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 51, pp. 519-624 and 421-515. The volume has been reissued at least twice, in 1992 and 2001. Also see, Asano 1962; Kuriyama 1972; and *Shiki zenshū* 4 (1977).

⁷ For a discussion of the movement away from symbolism in the arts see LaFleur 1983.

⁸ See Yasuda 1947 and Sanders 1971, pp. 211-7.

suggestiveness as a far more open process and created poetry that was far more dependent on reader engagement, intuitive insight, and interpretation—and pushed the suggestive envelope far beyond what the Japanese tradition could.

Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) was the founding father of haiku the 5/7/5 syllable metric unit as an independent literary genre, and the haikuist who most shaped modern perceptions of haiku theory. Shiki was also the first to champion Yosa Buson (1716-83) over Bashō. In the words of another critic, “Being a painter he naturally described impressions vividly through pictorial and visual imagery rather than by using lyrical effects as in the case of Bashō.”⁹ This emphasis on the visual aspects of haiku found echoes in the haiku translator Paul Louis Couchoud’s writings just a few years later. Shiki argued that while generally literature had a temporal nature and painting had a spatial nature, the brevity of haiku gave it a spatial nature as well—he indicated that haiku, although belonging to temporal literature, approximated as much as possible spatial painting.¹⁰ Shiki’s argumentation runs counter to the conventional distinctions made between the apprehension of visual and verbal media, which has largely been argued with reference to poetry and painting:

Producer and receiver do not divide the work in precisely the same manner in painting and poetry. In a painting, we receive the painter’s project simultaneously with its realization: the painter has not only conceived his idea of the painting, but he has made it perceptible. In poetry, by contrast, an analogous task falls to the reader’s imagination: the poet produces only the canvas that the reader potentially materializes. The poet’s finished work is still only a project for the painter; conversely, the spectator perceives but does not construct, whereas the reader must do both.¹¹

Conversely, it would also be erroneous to assume that the eyes do not

⁹ Ichikawa 1958, p. xxii.

¹⁰ *Shiki zenshū*, vol. 5, p. 80, vol. 4, pp. 117-122, vol. 11, p. 3; vol. 13, pp. 96-98.

¹¹ Todorov 1982, p. 136.

move across a canvas, focus, zoom, etc., as one contemplates a painting or a photograph. The process is in fact referred to as “reading.” Although only briefly mentioned in the analyses above, the transmission of imagery, visual imagery, central to the haiku process, cannot be so greatly different from the process of the eyes scanning a canvas: “If the linguistic model can be applied to the visual, and we can talk of visual metaphor and metonymy, surely we can apply visual concepts to verbal ones.”¹² In this connection Shiki advocated the compositional technique that he called, “sketching” (*shasei*), to produce an analogous experience for the haiku reader. His aesthetic notion that “extreme objective beauty is equated with painting” emphasizes his approximation of the visual techniques and clearly indicates the goals of his composition.¹³ Furthermore, the ‘one breath duration’ of haiku, annulled temporality¹⁴—that is, it created a moment in which the words that created the experience and the experience itself became one.

The poet writes in a temporal frame that has a beginning and end. However, during that brief moment of “oneness” with the object, when awareness of self as a distinct entity from other objects is transcended, his finite nature is lost in timeless consciousness, or is a state of “pure” awareness that does not acknowledge the passage of time. . . . The limit to the duration of this moment is that of one breath, for his very nature, being finite, pulls him away from the state of oneness and back into a temporal consciousness. . . . one of the most striking aspects of haiku nature is that it can express at once the flow of time, by structuring its elements according to a rhythmic pattern, a semblance of time, and yet because of its brevity it can transmit its imagery to the reader almost instantaneously, so that the “whole” can be realized intuitively.¹⁵

These statements also constitute an argument about reading poetry and

¹² Webster 1995, p. 74.

¹³ *Shiki zenshū*, vol. 4, p. 634.

¹⁴ Matsui 1965, pp. 555-7.

¹⁵ Record 1987-88, pp. 250-1.

reading in general as being a far more dynamic process than the linear process of eyes moving across the page and individually picking out words as they appear. On the visual qualities of word deployment without explanatory commentary Shiki wrote:

At first I was very subjective but then I became more and more objective. To extrapolate further, at first I attempted to depict the object as well as the resulting feeling, later, I came to realize that adding my feeling was superfluous. For instance, at the beginning I would write—there is a mountain, there is a river, how beautiful—but later I discarded the ‘how beautiful’ and merely depicted the beauty of the mountains and rivers and let the reader feel the beauty, not explicitly and overtly stating that it was beautiful.¹⁶

Furthermore, in the words of another critic writing on haiku:

the precise “meaning of the poet’s aesthetic experience could never be expressed in discursive language, but must be conveyed indirectly by concrete images which allow the reader to construct the experience.”¹⁷

While Shiki also emphasized reader participation as inherent to haiku and took it beyond traditional Japanese poetics, Western avant-garde artists of the twentieth century provided examples of the radical suggestion that strained the traditional reader-author relationship and aided in the full realization of the potential in these poetics.

Shiki was certainly not the first nor was he alone in his concern with visual-verbal experimentation. In 1904 Paul Claudel indicated that the poem was not composed of the letters on the page but of the white space that remains on the paper.¹⁸ This comment could indicate an encounter

¹⁶ *Shiki zenshū*, vol. 4, p. 482.

¹⁷ Record 1987-88, p. 233.

¹⁸ “Le poème n’est point fait de ces lettres que je plante comme des clous mais du blanc qui reste sur le papier.”

with Stéphane Mallarmé's 1864 *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Cast of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance) which the Brazilian Concretistas cite as the founding document of their visual poetics. The next instance of such radically visual poetry in France was Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1914), in which he "invok[es] the perceptual analogy."¹⁹ The practice of Futurism is similarly described:

by breaking up the linear block-page format, by using various typefaces, and forming words into shapes on a page, by writing poems made of nonsense syllables, and by simplifying or disordering syntax . . . they have the effect of expanding or contaminating traditional genres, whether by theatre or by visual or syntactical means.²⁰

The desired effect was to break down antimonies, and erase all boundaries, not just generic ones, nor just boundaries between visual and verbal media.

Avant-gardists demonstrated concern with the relatively new arts of photography and film, members of the avant-garde were passionate film buffs. The cinema was perceived as an unmediated experience—where artistic production articulated with perception, where life meets art. The attempt to strengthen poetry's relation to visual arts was enhanced by the cinema in particular—the newest, most immediate, and most powerful of the arts in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Sergei Eisenstein made a direct link between the cinematic mode and haiku. His claim that cinematic montage is closest to haiku juxtaposition in poetry was made in his essay on montage. He indicated that "[c]inematography is, first and foremost, montage" and that "[t]he shot is an element of montage." He further indicated that haiku were like shot lists, and referred to haiku as "the most laconic form of poetry," when "[c]inema [was] seeking a maximum laconism."²¹ Montage, this predominant cinematic *modus operandi*, had

¹⁹ Taylor 1985, p. 136.

²⁰ Bohn 1986, p. 4.

²¹ Eisenstein 1949, pp. 28, 36, 30.

analogous modes in poetry and other media: Pound's super-position; Surrealist juxtaposition; visual analogies of concrete poetry; avant-garde modes of collage; and artistic movements such as Cubism. These are its manifestations in other media. The shift of artistic focus to intuitive insight as the essence of art in both production and apprehension constitutes a change on the part of artists, that art *is* perception in the real world, and experience, not thought.

Despite the evident connections drawn above, poetry as a genre (*shi*) has from the start been viewed as distinct from the traditional forms of verse in Japan, and like the novel, viewed as an inherently borrowed and hybrid form. The borrowing of Western poetry had at its center an interest in French symbolism. Translations by Ueda Bin (1874-1916) and Nagai Kafu (1879-1959) of poets such as Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91), were later followed by Horiuchi Daigaku's (1892-) translations of Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), Max Jacob (1876-1944), Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), and others. While the futurist manifesto of 1909 was published in *Subaru* soon after its appearance, it was not until Hirato Renkichi handed out his leaflets in Hibiya Park that anyone took up the banner of the European avant-garde in Japan.

Japanese critics have argued that an avant-garde movement based on the European models of Futurism, Imagism, Dada, and Surrealism could only come about within a modern urban landscape and that the Tokyo Earthquake of 1923 was the Japanese trauma akin to World War I which brought on the kind of movements that one saw in Europe. Others argue that of far greater importance was the fact that the earthquake brought a definitive end to the old capital of Edo and in its stead rose the modern city of Tokyo. It was only after the earthquake that seven and eight story buildings rose to create a modern urban skyline. Radio broadcasts were first heard in Tokyo in 1925. Subways were first built in 1927. Cars first surpassed *jinrikusha* in 1927. Planes first brought tourists to Tokyo in 1928. It is true that the experience of modernity within Tokyo, its speed, mass culture, and machinery only became a Japanese experience after the 1923 earthquake. But, Hirato, a key figure in bringing modernism and the avant-garde to Japan, died in 1922 before the earthquake, and was critical

to the modernization of poetry in the late Taishō period.

Hirato was born in Osaka in 1893. He went to Tokyo after middle school and went on to Jōchi where he studied French but dropped out. He did not write poetry until he was nineteen years old. Then he had poems published in magazines and journals such as *Nihon shijin* while he worked for a newspaper, and later he worked as an editor. Along with Hagiwara Kyōjiro (1899-1938) and Takahashi Shinkichi (1901-1987) he was among the first wave of avant-gardists. Hirato had not yet published a volume of his own poetry before he died in July of 1922, but a volume of his poetry was put together after his death. After Hirato, avant-garde activity slowly increased until its peak in the years from 1924 to 1929. In the 1930s ultra-nationalism proscribed avant-garde activity. In the words of one historian: “For the Japanese poetry world the Manchurian Incident of 1931 . . . marks a significant, if not precise, dividing point to which the post-war generation had to . . . return to, to make a new beginning.”²²

But, in 1921 Hirato, taking cues from European poets, particularly the currents in France and Italian Futurism, brought his poetry to the streets in December when he distributed the leaflets of his “First Manifesto of Japan Futurists’ Movement.” Like Marinetti, he wrote employing images of speed, light, noise and sound effects of city streets. He expressed his opposition to fixed ideas, and his desire for freedom from limits. He explained his formula “Expression + Imagism = Analogism” writing that Expressionism attempted to make poems that were spatially 3D, that is, materialize a psychological reality, and imagism attempted to sensualize a perceptual reality.²³ His analogism then combined these and moved beyond. He took borrowings in his own unique direction and the liberation in the avant-garde penchant for naming and renaming was not lost on him. In connection to the visual experiments cited above and the concern with the lowly, mundane, non-poetic subject matter that find their way into avant-garde poetry, the following poem in futurist fashion takes up a modern machine as object and dwells on the noise it produces:

²² Davis 1979, p. li

²³ *Hirato Renkichi shishū*, p. 116.

Car

swirl swirl
war's voice
my car
dance, dance, dance

ttttttttt

dddddddddd

pppppppppp

rrrrrrrrrr

that way

kapokapokapokapokapo

totetotetotetotetote

close, close, close
dance, dance, dance
fiercely, fiercely
hung on my axle
something
all the world
all, everything²⁴

Line by line the poem moves from the spinning images that give the poem a vortex at its beginning and near its end, perhaps forming the axels of the car itself. Hirato was certainly aware of Ezra Pound's writing as his allusion to imagism also indicates, and this use of a vortex would constitute an allusion

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 126-28.

to Pound's writing on and participation in vorticism. Hirato's reference to machine (car) as war is certainly connected to futurist experimentation, as is taking up the car as a poetic subject in the first place. Also related to the dynamics of modern life as poetic subject is his exuberance and embrace of movement and freedom, expressed in "dance, dance, dance," "that way," and "close, close, close." In aesthetic conjunction with this is the emphasis on noise. Six lines reproduce the noise of the car. One would have to add that the poem in its reproduction of noise and emphasis on motion anticipates later poetry's refusal to mean in the conventional poetic sense and even linguistic sense. Yet, this particular poem appears conventional, and superficially at least, operates as a conventional poem. It is clearly of the haiku lyric variety and the ending with its most exuberant and triumphant lines of "all the world" and "all, everything" constitutes a radical juxtaposition and epiphany. Its greatest difference from later poetry is this exuberance, which is nearly opposite the surrealist objective posture of some of the poetry we have yet to examine.

In a blending of visual analogy and image-centered poetics, Hirato's "Flying Bird" gestures toward conventional meaning, contains highly visual elements, employs Hirato's notion of analogism, and crosses over from haiku lyric to the poetics of visual analogy:

Bird Flying

his figure, soul
somber
black bird
weak and emaciated
fly!
to the shrine
in turbulence
defying magnetism
drink the whirlpool
flutter
dance
the water wheel blade

one bird after another
one
one
one
one
flow and fall
run side by side
revolve
one by one
the curve of a bow
caught in the whirlpool²⁵

Once again we find the expression of a vortex in Hirato's poetry, three times in this particular case. In this poem however he pits the force of the bird's wings against and in defiance of a vortex, the magnetic pull of gravity. The frail bird flies in defiance of the great and powerful pull. The waterwheel has a dual purpose in the poem, it is another expression of the vortex, yet, it is pushed by the force of the water in the same the way that the bird is pushed and pulled by forces. Its blades form an analogy to the birds one after another, and the birds' wings simultaneously. Bird and water wheel are juxtaposed images and analogies. Additionally the flight of the bird defying gravity is equated with the force of the whirlpool. Hirato's formula quoted above, renamed imagism or fused it with expressionism to create his "analogism" (all members of the avant-garde seem to have had this propensity for renaming). The analogies in this poem are the parallels between the bird and the waterwheel, the blade of the waterwheel and the bird's wing, the force of gravity and the whirlpool. The visual analogy lies in the simple use of a rising series of *ichiwa* (which I have rendered as one, one, one) in imitation of a bird's flight and birds in flight.

We have seen expression of Hirato's desire for freedom from limits already, and the following poem works the connection through singularity and plurality as well. His thinking in analogies, and the related blending of

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 107-9.

singular with plural, seems to have been one means to achieve freedom. The images in his poems are often attempts to move beyond limits as this poem, "Minimum-Maximum" demonstrates:

MINIMUM-MAXIMUM

My one hand
my one breath
my one heart

But tonight
infinitely
my hand reaches out
panting
my heart expands

Why?
The moon comes out
the earth and sky in one line
the border with things and hearts
perspective of far and near
folded into a delicate hand

The philosophers say 'return to nature'
the poet composes on the time of dreams

My hand reaches the clouds
(. . . . the busyness of folded hands)

My breath understands all things
and then my heart
at last, the heart of everything

In this way, now
My hands are infinite
my breath is infinite

My heart is infinite²⁶

The poem moves from one to an unlimited number—"my hands are infinite." The other expressions of this overcoming of limits within the poem include: distances are near and far; one and infinitely; the earth and sky in one line; one hand and the multiplicity of clouds; and one self juxtaposed to infinity. These are all non-dual formulations that expand limits, and give expression to the exuberance for science and technology which we all still suffer from.

Along with Hirato in this first wave of the Japanese avant-garde in the late teens and early twenties was Takahashi Shinkichi. Takahashi, like a great many Japanese poets, embraced dada and surrealism. Takahashi was the first poet to work the connection between dada and the Japanese poetic and cultural tradition into his poetry. Takahashi must have come across Tristan Tzara's mention of the relation between dada and Buddhism²⁷ and he incorporated notions of the dada connection to and perhaps derivation from Zennist thought. His poem "the Fly" demonstrates a flash of insight as in a traditional haiku (Issa in particular) and the Zen Buddhist kōan.

The Fly

I thought I would live forever.
Forever was inside a single fly.

When the fly was chased by a hand
he flew away gently.
Toward that attitude of composure
I felt friendliness.

Late at night
with the electric light shining,
listening to the sounds of rain outside,
I was reading a book.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 38-40.

²⁷ Tzara 1975, p. 420.

On a page of the opened book
a single fly
cast a shadow of loneliness without realizing it.

Forever, like a fly's legs, is
thinly bending.²⁸

With “forever” in the opening we have in this poem the fly as a manifestation of the eternal. There are manifestations of haikai/avant-garde concerns merely in taking up the fly as subject matter, that is, taking up subjects that are non-poetic and lowly. Then of course insects are rather short-lived so this is a paradoxical, non-dual formulation—the fly and eternity. Also early in the poem there is the paradox of violence and friendliness in the poet's reaction to the fly, both violent and kind. In ways such as this Takahashi explored the nexus of Buddhism and dada. Hirato and Takahashi present two different relationships to tradition. In Hirato we have a poet who embraces Western lyrical poetics such as imagism and dabbles in the more radical poetics of visual analogy. Takahashi is a poet who upon encountering Western poetics via dada, immediately returns to the thematic fold of Japanese traditional poetics making the avant-garde gesture a traditional, return to Japan gesture.

In the case of Kitazono Katsue, we encounter a poet who was a thoroughgoing member of the international avant-garde without attachments to Japan's poetic tradition. While John Solt in his excellent book, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning* has written that Kitazono anticipated Brazilian concretismo by some thirty years with his radically visual poems, the concretistas themselves trace their beginnings, as we have already seen, to the 1897 poem by Mallarmé, “A Toss of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance.” These experiments by Mallarmé were rather tame in comparison to Marinetti's futurism of 1909 and Apollinaire's 1914 experimentation with visual poetry in *Calligrammes*. But all these pale in

²⁸ *Anthology of Modern Japanese Poetry* 1972, p. 98.

comparison to Kitazono's experiments that not only move beyond lyricism but strain the readers' demands for meaning and comprehensibility.

Kitazono was involved with Japanese dada in 1925 and 1926. Then he was active in surrealist circles in 1927. In one of the Japanese manifestos that Kitazono helped draft, *Shōbi Majutsu Gakusetsu* (Magic Rose Theory) of 1927, the Japanese surrealist aims were defined as achieving a dispassionate imaginative viewpoint; they set out to abolish decoration, superfluous words, promote experimentation with language, and defamiliarize the audience.²⁹ They indicate that their main tools were automatism and the incongruous image. While all this may sound as if he merely held the party line of French surrealist activity, Kitazono's surrealism is an image-centered surrealism, a surrealism that deploys objects and juxtaposes them in order to shock, but is devoid of Freudianism and communist political affiliation.

In his first published collection of poems, the 1929 collection titled *White Album*, Kitazono demonstrated a concern with repetition of sound and image. One poem simply repeats "mizu no hikari."³⁰ Another uses this sort of visual display in the repetition of "umi no umi no umi. . ."³¹ which creates a rhythm and visually cadence which begin to appear to the eye as waves. Clearly these "poems" use characters for their own unique graphic qualities, and there is a concern with repetition and at times variation a la Gertrude Stein. In the entirely visual "Hikōsen no densetsu" (the legend of the dirigible)³² there is a visual effect something akin to graphic design which adds a further dimension to Kitazono's visual poetry. "The Legend of the Dirigible" could not render much of a reading and appears as if a scientific formula, an entirely graphically rendered message. In a series of later and less radically visual poems, his 1979 "optical poems," from the collection *BLUE*,³³ Kitazono produces a series of five poems all run horizontally across the top of the page. Instead of the vertical string of a Japanese line that one would normally find in prose or poetry. A

²⁹ Solt 1999, pp. 51-61.

³⁰ Kitazono 1973, p. 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 723-35.

line of an optical poem consists of a word, sometimes just the grammatical particle *no*. As one progresses through the first four of the five optical poems, line length slightly increases in the fourth allowing more fixity of meaning, but the last poem reverts to lines that consist of one graph, the “empty” *no*. The various meanings at play in the particle include: possessive, attributive, genitive, simile construction, among others, as the grammatical *no* has this range of meaning. Therefore, one manner in which they are optical poems is as print on the page. The *no* is highly context dependent for meaning so that in such brief lines with such high frequency of repetition of this *no*, one is always waiting for the meaning to be clarified, and that clarification is always deferred. The net effect is the juxtaposition of objects whose relation to each other is obscured or always at play. Translation is nearly impossible, because there is no stability of meaning in the original. The first optical poem could be translated as such: “crystal’s square is the wind’s square/crystal’s square is the water’s square/crystal’s square is melancholy’s square/crystal’s square is solitude’s square”—if *no* is translated as the *no* of possession. If we translate it as attributive the translation would be as such: “the square of crystal is the square of the wind/ the square of crystal is the square of the water/the square of crystal is the square of melancholy/ the square of crystal is the square of solitude.” Additional readings are possible but the issue is that the original Japanese is intentionally in a state of semantic flux. The other optical poems present similar problems, and *no* is constantly used throughout these poems. The objects tend to be futurist objects: crystal, cubes, cylinders, cones, etc. The descriptive terms tend to be colors only. The sixth optical poem contains the highest frequency of the grammatical *no* and could be rendered as such:

water of
 wind of
 sound of
 sand of
 cone of
 the inside of sand of
 water of

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wind of
sound of
the inside of the square of
black of
blue of
green of
yellow of
the inside of the square of
yellow of
green of
black of
the spiral of smoke³⁴

As we saw above cadence is certainly important to this poem and in fact many of the optical poems, which of course renders them not exclusively optical.

Along with the spiral of smoke of the last poem, smoke is a frequent image-concept in Kitazono. With smoke space can be depicted and the way objects like smoke call attention to it. The following poem from *Smoke's Straight Line* of 1959 demonstrates a concern with space that must be considered the creation of a new ground for synesthesia. Kitazono's use of synesthesia is in the realm of a relativistic time-space continuum, rather too scientific for any Buddhist intent. This poem is entitled "The Metaphysics of Smoke":

Black

is
a point
that is
salt
of the inside of
the planet Samarkand

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 733-4.

white
is
a straight line
that is
a long and narrow mustache
entangled in an antenna
green
is
a curved line
that
box
with
the heavy wind
of the dream's trombone
yellow
is
a triangle
that
the sun
the bones of night
are controlled slightly
red
is
square
that
above
the pastoral sea
the solitude machine
blue
is
round
that
destroys
human
absolutes

are
sand of absinthe³⁵

The poem in impressionist fashion creates an equation of colors or light and geometrical shapes or objects in space: "black is a point." Then a dependent clause contains a surrealist juxtaposition of incompatible or perhaps irresolvable images: "that is salt." The lines individually and as a whole inexplicably resonate with the title image of smoke, and the movement of smoke. Light strikes an object in space that is almost transparent, rapidly changing and highly transient—smoke rising and dissipating.

Another poem that demonstrates a concern with space and contains a contradictory image in the title, "Vessel without dimension" is from *BLUE* of 1979:

leaving aside a certain meaning

It has to be a stout
within a square pewter
blue figure A or set against figure G
the stout with the gorgeous head
but from this stout
what kind of night from a straight line
it can't be proven
a long time
depending on whether the white is just white or self
even if you could prove that night doesn't exist
but from ABUDARA flows ABUDARA
yellow extinction has a form
that is to say that it is connected to an original weightless
space
a stool disappears in an instant
the relation between linen and enamel is ruptured
two transparent pages are shaped

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 574-6.

that is the long form of nothing
the limits of existence
of sand³⁶

This poem nearly presents the reader/listener with a representational straw to grasp. The references to a head of foam, pewter mugs, bar stools, linen, and enamel all allow the reader to conjure up visions of the poet in a pub composing. However, the lines, “night from a straight line,” “depending on whether the white is just white or the self,” and “it is connected to an original weightless space”—all defy not just reference but also logic. Additionally, the lines “night doesn’t exist,” “the long form of nothing,” “the limits of existence” and “extinction” demonstrate nihilistic concerns which are central to the poem. Yet the indication of language as transparent in Kitazono seems not Pound’s formulation of correspondence of word to thing—but the transparency of emptiness. Just as in Kitazono’s use of the grammatical *no*, which is meaningless until given meaning by its context, he denies us, or leaves meaning in constant flux. It culminates in the line: “depending on whether the white is just white or the self,” and remembering that white, like grammatical *no*, is an empty vessel—we glimpse the depth of nihilism in Kitazono’s work and its connection to the arbitrary nature of language.

Coupled with optical poems and complimentary opposites to them are Kitazono’s “plastic poems.” In 1937 Kitazono’s photographs were part of a surrealist exhibition. His photographs present us with visual poems that use words in their most objectified form—photographs of them. The compositions “study of man by man”³⁷ dovetail with the concerns expressed in the poetry above in that they show humans as word constructed figures. The words are taken from the newspapers and therefore the most mundane and disposable verbal products, which have only the most fleeting concerns.

Todorov wrote that the “symbol speaks to perception” and that the

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 751-2.

³⁷ Kitazono 2002, pp. 47 and 125.

“symbol belongs to the intuitive and sense-based manner of apprehending things [and] the symbolic is a mode of intuitive representation.”³⁸ This notion of the intuitive as it applies to the avant-garde is not just a shift in focus, it is an attempt to make poetry and plastic arts, reenact, or approximate, or preferable *be*, perceptual, even be pre-rational cognitive processes. Thought and reason are construed as inferior to intuition and those forms of cognition related to perception. Parallel to this line of thought, Paul de Man argued that the resort to metaphor in discourse was the failure of reason.³⁹ The proscription of narrative discourse from poetry, to create what Poe first called pure poetry, poetry that conveyed much by saying little and pushed words in new unforeseen directions, flows from the same conceptual framework. The avant-garde attack on reason, syntax, and ultimately meaning, was a push to redirect artistic focus toward perception and intuition—understanding in a flash of insight that circumvents reason.

The poetry of visual analogy relies on the radical objectification of the sign, and therefore forces words into the position of perceptual object. The techniques employed to achieve this included: the placement of letters on the page and the use of the white space of the paper, breaking up linear format, use of various typefaces, forming words into shapes on a page, poems of nonsense syllables, scattering nouns at random, employing synesthesia, abolishing punctuation, linking together distant images, and disordering syntax. Avant-garde visual analogy is written of as “a hybrid of word and picture, emblem and asyntactic juxtaposition, oracular spell and avant-garde gesture, lyric poem and open diagram.”⁴⁰ The implications of this collapse of opposites meant also that an “attempt to overreach the boundaries between one art and another is . . . an attempt to dispel (or at least mask) the boundary between art and life, between sign and thing.”⁴¹ The collapse of opposites which in poetry starts with collapsing the difference between sign and thing is a clear indication that these avant-garde artists focused on the production of an epiphany in the act of

³⁸ Todorov 1982, pp. 200-1.

³⁹ de Man 1983.

⁴⁰ Webster 1995, p. 75.

⁴¹ Steiner 1982, note 25.

aesthetic apprehension—the encounter with the poem produced a flash of insight. Haiku lyric incorporated this flash of insight into its very structure with its abrupt juxtaposition. The means of apprehension was through the readers' encounter of the objects juxtaposed, and the juxtaposition created a shock that wakes the reader out of normal awareness and perception. Haiku lyric accomplishes this because it does not provide connectors; it juxtaposes elements that violate not just the verbal logic of the everyday, but taken to its extreme it violates the tolerable.

The encounter with Japanese haiku gave Western poetics new ground. The West designated the metaphor an indefinable trope that was central to poetry: "the arbitrariness of words is a handicap for poetry, and that, to remedy it, poetry has at its disposal the "pictorial figure," the metaphor."⁴² Metaphor, metonymy, and other figures have long been considered among poetry's resources—if not its essence. They are "defined by the (differently) motivated relation between two meanings of a word; but every image includes a motivated relation between itself and what it represents."⁴³ Metaphor is a verbal expression in which the word is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings. In the comprehension of metaphors one discovers meanings that are not predetermined by language or may not have been encountered in experience. Metonymy is a figure in which one word is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation, a change that operates on the hierarchy of linguistic units. In his essay "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes described the distinction between metaphor and metonymy although he found the distinction somewhat problematical:

We prefer here to evade Jakobson's opposition between metaphor and metonymy for if metonymy by its origin is a figure of contiguity, it nevertheless functions finally as a substitute of the signifier, that is as a metaphor.⁴⁴

⁴² Todorov 1982, p. 142.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 283.

⁴⁴ Barthes 1977, p. 50.

Pound wrote of “language beyond metaphor” in his *Spirit of Romance*,⁴⁵ and moving beyond metaphor, while it may strike many as impossible, was precisely the project from Mallarmé through Futurism and Concretism. The destruction of metaphor (or metonymy) and poetry as we knew it, could be attained by a purely pictorial functioning—or in the case of the ideogram or calligram, collapse of signifier and signified. Haiku lyric also constitutes a violation of the syntax and rhetoric of language in its use of radical juxtaposition without connectives and explanation. Some critics claim that the operation of haiku hinges on a simile with the connective suppressed, but that is a misunderstanding of its origins in the tolerance of the Japanese language for ambiguity—a misunderstanding of Japanese poetics, and a misunderstanding of the Western borrowing of haiku. Haiku lyric operates on the metonymic operations in language, primarily through juxtaposition. Once haiku lyrical poetry was coupled with Futurist experimentation the door was opened to the poetry of visual analogy that evades both metaphor and metonymy by treating the word as an object. In denying meaning at other than a perceptual level through the use of words as a medium on the page and deploying nonsense syllables, visual analogy moved beyond metaphor, as Pound prescribed but was unable to achieve in his own poetry. It should be clear that this was not just a typographic revolution but part of a much larger attack on literariness, grammar, syntax, and language. In fact, it was an attack on the word itself, which was asked to behave as if it were an object not a sign.

In poetry this was attained by a lack of abstraction, the domination of nouns, little or no connectives and little or no descriptive language. This verbal mode harkens back to a primitive state of perception, in the view of Gary Snyder. Enlightened perception has also been linked to this type of primitive perception, when the mountains are mountains—for avant-gardists this was a breakthrough *and* reaching back into a prelinguistic mentality, an awakening from a somnambulist existence and seeing the world anew. The employment of shock tactics in an attempt to provoke a secular enlightenment is a revolution in art that asks the viewer-reader to rearrange all his preconceived notions of the world after

⁴⁵ Pound 1968, p. 14.

the experience of encountering this new art. The products of this art were deployed, appended to the world or decontextualized and recontextualized, and were intended to be experienced or perceived in a new way. The process of apprehension was highlighted in this way and often served as an indicator of the greater processes of creativity, an attempt to reach beyond human intellect, an attempt to understand greater life processes.

Both lyrical haiku and visual analogy provide us with a puzzle akin to the process of encountering something new in the real world. Therefore avant-garde art “defined itself not by static works of art but by movement, action, and creation”⁴⁶—evoking not just action but the perceptive and creative processes. The viewer-reader is denied an “art object” and asked to rearrange all preconceived notions of what the world looks like. Peter Bürger looked to changes on the following order: “Not only does it dissolve the barriers between the reader and the text; it erases the boundaries between the text and the world.”⁴⁷ His position that Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism should be understood in the framework of Marxist history, not by the psychology of actions or the aesthetics of works, but by offering a description of the role that those works and actions played in History, is compelling and has largely formed our critical notion of the avant-garde. His interpretation of its role in history is that the historical avant-garde attacked “art as an institution that is unassociated with the life and praxis of men.”⁴⁸ We understand Bürger’s position as a call to political activism—not that the historical avant-garde attempted to reintegrate artistic practice into everyday life, which may have been the way more artists viewed the move to praxis. The twentieth-century avant-garde was opposed to bourgeoisie values including the separation of art from daily life. In a collage, for example, the parts of the collage “no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art.”⁴⁹ The desired effect of surrealist and dadaist shock tactics were “a stimulus to change one’s conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis.”

⁴⁶ Webster 1995, p. 20

⁴⁷ Bohn 1986, p. 8

⁴⁸ Bürger 1984, p. 49.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78

Bürger points out, however, that in general, shock provokes only “non-specific” reactions and is quickly “consumed”⁵⁰ and the “anti-art techniques which originally by some artists were designed to subvert the notion of autonomy increasingly came to be used for highly individual aesthetic purposes.”⁵¹ Bürger concludes that this, “turns into a revolutionizing of art.”⁵² Indeed, greater modernism, of which the avant-garde was a part, is most often described as highly individualized works and unique artists—yet, avant-garde activity meant a shift in values that included publishing at small independent presses, the declaration of one’s existence and the trumpeting of one’s values via a manifesto, explorations of aesthetic innovation often via performative spectacles, and a Bohemian lifestyle that formed the seamless whole of the art of the artist, political activity, and quasi spiritual and artistic emancipation. Webster’s observation is pertinent here “Semiotics a tool to map relations between object, thing, word, image, symbol, icon, syntax and collage but the relations are protean and can shift due to individual intention and ideology.”⁵³

In the exchange that took place between a number of western countries and Japan within the context of the international avant-garde that forms part of the world we inherited, Japanese haiku provided examples for moving beyond metaphor and metonymy in poetry, while the West took Japan beyond the predetermined meanings found in classical allusions to give free verse a whole new meaning, that extended beyond fixed meaning into Kitazono’s field of semantic play. Certainly, the avant-garde and its successors formed our world in ways that we do not quite comprehend, and if the proportions of the world today are not what some avant-gardists intended, that may be because they themselves were on opposite sides of the political questions of their day.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 80-1

⁵¹ Webster 1995, p. 8.

⁵² Bürger 1984, p. 72

⁵³ Webster 1995, p. 11.

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