
REVIEWS

A Silver Tapestry: The Best of 25 Years of Critical Writing from the British Haiku Society, ed. by Graham High. Selected by Jon Baldwin and Margery Newlove (United Kingdom: The British Haiku Society, 2015). 265 pages; 5¾" x 8¾". Glossy white and black card covers; French flaps; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-906333-03-4. Price: \$17.00 from the Society at www.britishhaikusociety.org.uk.

Reviewed by Charles Trumbull

In their foreword to *A Silver Tapestry* selectors Jon Baldwin and Margery Newlove say they considered as many as 400 articles from the twenty-five-year history, four issues a year, of *Blithe Spirit*, the journal of the British Haiku Society. They limited their choices to fifty articles and decided to select no more than one essay per author. Still, they were happy to be able to present the breadth of the Society's concerns, and it is a broad and varied panorama indeed.

I have always admired the quality of the prose writing in *Blithe Spirit*, and I was not disappointed as I revisited my memories of some articles and eagerly read others for the first time. Let me get one major quibble out of the way at the outset, however. A book of this importance deserves to be well edited, proofed, and typeset. The pages here are full of typos, transcription or scanning errors (e.g., "htlp" for "http" and "|" for "/" twice on p. 94); endnote callouts divorced from their referents (pp. 166–67) or not superscripted (p. 26 ff); new errors introduced upon

old (e.g., an “e” added to the already wrong name “F. H. Blyth” as written by Aldous Huxley), and outright gaffes (five authors’ names are misspelled in the Contents, for starters). Further, compiling an anthology of this kind presents an opportunity to standardize the styling of Japanese proper nouns, yet here we find Bashō with and without his macron or with a circumflex—sometimes within the same essay. Often one poet—Bashō, Ryōkan, Santōka, etc.—will wear his macron while others in the same article do not. Throughout, the decision to use a hyphen in all places where hyphens, en-dashes, or em-dashes are called for causes misreadings and textual insecurities. There is a similar indecision about whether to use single or double quotation marks (inverted commas) and/or single or double guillemets (« »). Maybe I am hypersensitive about such peccadilloes because I spend such a large percentage of my waking hours trying to eliminate them from manuscripts I am working on, but editorial carelessness like this truly impedes my enjoyment of a book. It nearly derailed me on this journey.

And one minor item: one essay, Matt Morden’s “Haiku on the Internet: The Next Great Wave” from 1999 seems very dated now (as Morden knew it would be). Most of the URLs cited are either defunct or have changed in the sixteen years since the piece was first published. While it is very well written and was surely instructive in its time, I wonder if it needed to be included; its appeal now is only historic.

More typical of the work in *A Silver Tapestry* is the timeless, marvelously thoughtful essay by Nobuyuki Yuasa, “Englishness of English Haiku and Japaneseness of Japanese Haiku.” Yuasa considers three aspects of haiku: language (including word choice, imagery, and metaphor), form, and *kire* (the break), and compares Japanese with English practice. He sums up his views on tendencies in form as follows: “I should like to see a little more awareness of form among English haiku poets. It was T. S. Eliot who said no verse is free. I think free verse works best when there is a fixed form to destroy. When we have a complete absence of form, I do not think free verse succeeds so well.”

Many of the essayists concentrate on questions of haiku rules, form, and mechanics. In his essay “Between Moments,” which opens the collection, David Cobb concludes that “[p]repositions seem ... to be at the

heart of haiku creativity. Perhaps I may recommend them to you as a focusing device.” William J. Higginson (“A Sense of the Language”) concentrates on the nuts and bolts of haiku, inveighing against overuse and inappropriate use of the “-ing” verb forms—participles and gerunds. Graham High takes an elevated linguistic-taxonomic approach to “The Pun and Related Wordplay in Haiku—Part 1: Types and Techniques” [where is Part 2?]. In “Moving on from 5-7-5 Existence,” Charles Christian considers what haiku poets are actually composing and compares that with constrictively received notions of what a haiku should be. Diana Webb (“Tired Old Sunsets”) offers an explanation of why so many haiku are being written about the same overworked subjects. Lynne Rees’s essay, “Haiku Uncut,” presents some well-reasoned comments about the use, and especially non-use, of *kire* in contemporary haiku. In contrast, William M. Ramsey’s important piece, “Haiku as Improvisational Play,” advises poets essentially to sweep aside the “rules” of haiku composition, relax, and remember that originally *haikai* was meant to be “sportive, comic, or playfully unorthodox.”

Alison Williams offers an interesting take on metaphor in haiku using the—well— metaphor of “The Alchemy of Haiku.” Jesse Peel affirms that literary allusion is an established and valuable tool for the haikuist in “Intertextuality in Haiku,” while Natalia L. Rudychev digs deeply into the idea of “Co-creation: The Case of Haiku in the West,” pushing off from her assertion that “by the act of writing [the] westerner changes (if ever so slightly) the whole preceding [Japanese] tradition of haiku practice as well as the future development of this practice.”

Some authors included in the book probe deeply into the spirituality of haiku, especially haiku’s relationship to Zen. James W. Hackett, for example, in his “Haiku and Spiritual Penetration” offers: “In haiku poetry the concrete Suchness of the thing-in-itself must prevail, or the haiku ceases to be worthy of the name. The point is that haiku demand not only a centred consciousness, but an all-compassionate heart as well. To spiritually interpenetrate—to become one with things—to find our self in union with all things—is to live the Way of Zen.” Ken Jones, too, in “Zen and the Art of Haiku” points out: “As Blyth robustly demonstrated, Zen is not the preserve of any one national culture or institutionalized

religion. He found (even if highly selectively) an abundant Zen spirit in European culture and in Christianity. It is a deepening of contemplative poetic sensibility that is at the heart of the matter.” Mike Chasty (“Aldous Huxley, Haiku and Zen,” calls our attention to an example—beyond the well-known Beat poets—of haiku’s influence on English literature in the mid-20th century. Chasty writes, “That [Huxley] should become acquainted with haiku through Blyth and in turn, literary elder statesman of the intellect that he was, echo it further, proves the immediate effect and stature of haiku, not only on the emerging figures of the day but also in influencing the established literati.” From another perspective, “Too much has perhaps been made in the West of Zen Buddhism’s influence on haiku, and not nearly enough, of Shinto’s,” writes Stephen Henry Gill in “Shinto in Haiku.” I found Gill’s essay and the illustrative haiku particularly useful in recognizing Shinto elements in haiku, which I often confuse with Zen.

Other authors explore the differences between haiku and regular poetry. Geoffrey Daniel, in “Against the Tide: Antecedents of the Haiku in English Literature,” reviews 1,000 years of English literature and, though he will not say that this history led inexorably to minimalist poetry such as haiku, he does suggest that there have been some trends in this direction and asserts “conditions are more right for them now than ever.” Gabriel Rosenstock, in “The Stairway of Surprise: Reflections on Poetry and Haiku,” doubles down on Daniel in his historical panorama: “Early Irish lyric poetry had a compressed form and blessed, clear-eyed view of nature which makes writing haiku in that language a logical continuum of almost 2,000 years of poetry.” Caroline Gourlay shares “Some Thoughts on the Writing of Haiku and Longer Poems,” while Maeve O’Sullivan considers the poet’s focus on the present moment in “Mindfulness, Haiku-poets and ‘Regular’ Poets.”

Organizational matters are covered as well. Colin Blundell advises the editors of haiku journals to ask themselves “Where Do You Stand?” and proceeds with a virtuosic display of current trends in haiku, from “Shiki-orthodoxy” through “Irruptions into Consciousness” to the “Natsuishi drive.” Ernest Berry provides a rollicking set of guidelines for submitting haiku to contests, a subject he knows quite well. Jim McDonald recounts

his experience in “Teaching Haiku to Junior School Children,” and A A Marcoff shares “Some Thoughts on Haiku, Poetry and Healing.”

Three essays included in the anthology are dedicated to a single poet. W A Grant provides a brief account of “Taneda Santoka 1882-1940.” Bill Wyatt, who has been translating the Master, provides “Bashō—Cultivating Simplicity,” and Mark Rutter’s “Bashō’s Narrow Road to Poetry” offers revisionist views of that poet, finding aspects of Bashō’s work that nourish the haiku of Ban’ya Natsuishi and Scott Metz 300 years later. Especially interesting is the essay by prominent diplomat and president of the Swedish Haiku Society Kai Falkman, “Tomas Tranströmer in Japan,” reporting on his experiences at a conference in Tokyo shortly after Tranströmer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Japanese, Falkman reports, are excited by their discovery of Tranströmer’s haiku and feel that there is much that Japanese haikuists can learn from the Swede. Publisher Kyoru Oda is quoted by Falkman: “Tranströmer’s haiku imply a renewal that Japanese poetry must become familiar with. ‘Many of the old school will reject his unexpected metaphors, since metaphor is banned in haiku. But is specifically the use of metaphor that is Tranströmer’s strength!’”

A Silver Tapestry makes a few forays beyond haiku, reprinting essays by Akiko Sakiguchi (“An Introduction to Haiga [part 1]”, a piece so well done that one again wonders where part 2 went), Kota Kurusu (“First Steps in Haiga”), Stanley Pelter (“Haibun—Here, There & Everywhere”), Sanford Goldstein (“The Eye of Tanka”), Michael Fessler (“A Tanka Primer”), and Dick Pettit (“Renga Then and Now”). For the most part I find the personal, “my path to haiku” essays by Susan Rowley, Barry Atkinson, David Hart, and Carol Rimens, less engaging than the other pieces in *A Silver Tapestry*.

Kudos to the BHS for gathering together such a rich tapestry to offer to haikuists around the world on the occasion of the Society’s twenty-first anniversary. With the fiftieth anniversaries of Modern Haiku and the Haiku Society of America (and *Frogpond’s* fortieth) nearly upon us, wouldn’t it be great to see similar anthologies of essays from American haiku journals?