

FRESHNESS IN HAIKU IS NEVER NORMATIVE: A REPLY TO LEE GURGA

Robert Epstein

I like Lee Gurga and respect his many contributions to English-language haiku, including his notable book, *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*. His essay in the previous issue of *Modern Haiku* (52.2) reflects a concerted effort to prompt haiku poets to take their haiku to the next level. (There is an unstated assumption worth questioning that haiku writing contains levels).

Gurga begins with an assertion that most haiku poets are still writing “normative” haiku, a term which barely conceals a patronizing association. Leaving that aside, I did find it helpful—and appreciated—his outline of the elements of so-called normative haiku. I will direct the reader to Gurga’s essay for an explication of these. “Sounds about right to me,” I thought to myself. Haiku poets over the past several centuries have delivered up some pretty extraordinary poetry in my humble opinion; I have intentionally omitted the adjective, “normative,” as I believe it is misguided.

Apparently a number of haiku poets have become restless, impatient, and bored by what Gurga disparages as “normative haiku.” He wants to provoke us so-called “normies” to go beyond the time-tested standard into poetry that stretches words, language, and perception in order to bend our poetic minds into a new level of haiku poetics.

I find myself asking: “Why?” To my surprise, Gurga answers this question in the last paragraph of his essay, which warrants quoting.

Exploring the interaction of poem and page as well as the effects of perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, and overturning semantic expectation can help us explore the cognitive effects available to the poet today and tomorrow.

Gurga goes on to pose a question, which I am sure he would not regard as rhetorical, but real:

Am I simply encouraging you to manipulate words for effect? Is it possible to write haiku of real literary value? What is “real literary value?” I think that at its best, haiku—like all fine poetry—creates in the reader an emotion for which a name does not yet exist. Doing so permits the poet, using the vocabulary of haiku, to add a word to the lexicon of human consciousness.

I would have to respond to his self-posed question: “Yes, Lee, I am afraid you are encouraging me to manipulate words for effect.” This is the poetic equivalent of the bejeweled finger that points to the moon and haiku poets have no need for such sophisticated jewels.

As a poetic descendent of Bashō, I am extremely uninterested in manipulating words to effect. I am averse to relying on artifice in writing haiku. There is already way too much manipulation and artifice in the world; I long for a poetic context in which simplicity and clarity prevail.

More than this: What draws me to Zen Buddhism, which Gurga seems to have lost appreciation for, is the *transcendence* of words, rather than adding to the “lexicon of consciousness,” to use his phrase. I am not persuaded by Gurga’s invitation to write haiku that will name an emotion for which there is presently no name. The poet has no need for this nor, I maintain, does the reader. Rather, haiku poetry transports the reader beyond space and time in such a way that he or she *immediately*—beyond the mediation of extraneous words and language—encounters what the poet realized in the Eternal Now. This is the landscape I want to inhabit, not another dictionary; and this is the landscape I also wish the reader to visit.

Call me simple-minded, but Gurga’s conceptual tools for writing haiku sound abstruse, if not convoluted. If I can’t understand the notions I am expected to base my next-level haiku upon, how am I supposed to compose the best haiku I can write? I fear that relying on abstruse literary conceptualizations will lead, not to outstanding haiku, but to indecipherable or impenetrable haiku, and I have already read far too many of these than I wish to recall.

For some inexplicable reason, I can hear Bashō agreeing with me, though perhaps this is pure projection on my part. Still, I do recall

something Bashō said which continues to echo through the long corridors of the Eternal Now:

All who have achieved excellence in art possess one thing in common; that is, a mind to be one with nature, throughout the seasons.

Maybe I am missing the boat in a big way, but I don't recognize any allusions at all in this quote by Bashō to perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, or overturning semantic expectation. He sounds pretty clear and straightforward to my ears, whether normative or not.

Maybe Gurga is really talking about something besides innovation to shake things up. Perhaps he is advocating something that comes close to sound advice—even wisdom—that Bashō shared several hundred years ago:

[U]nless things are seen with fresh eyes, nothing's worth writing down.

Freshness is what Nature offers, as Bashō understood, and I prefer this to the artifice that Gurga and other innovators are promoting. There is nothing natural, so far as I can tell, in perceptual disjunction, misreading as meaning, or overturning semantic expectations. This kind of arcane terminology reflecting conceptual acrobatics is nearly incomprehensible to me and that serves as a warning signal it is too far removed from the natural world in which haiku poetry is grounded. To put it more succinctly: I have yet to encounter *fish as flying popes* anywhere other than the insular world of Ban'ya Natsuishi.

Let me be clear: there is plenty of room for avant-garde poetry in English-language haiku. I only ask that the leaders of the latest haiku revolution stop the proselytizing, pressuring, and disparaging of other forms of haiku writing that don't accord with their innovative expectations. It only antagonizes. The vast majority of haiku poets and I will write the nature-based haiku (or variants) that we want to write, and others can compose recondite poetry that I am likely to skip over in the journals I read.

If it's freshness that Gurga is advocating, I have no quarrel with him, at all. I would only add that freshness is the fruit of intuition, not artifice. Freshness is also a function of being fully in touch with our finiteness, for life and death are not separate, though Gurga may be forgiven for making no reference to this sacred truth. Zen Buddhists do. So do poets like Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Shiki. While I am not trying to follow in their footsteps, I do seek what these old masters sought; that is, *sacred*—not normative—truths, as when the Buddha silently held up a single flower to impart the essence of his teaching. These lie outside of lexicons and don't call for artifice, just emotional honesty.

in pine shade
for a while I forget
this life will end

A REPLY TO ROBERT EPSTEIN

Lee Gurga

I would like to thank Robert Epstein for his impassioned response to my essay in 52.2. It makes me realize that I did not state some things as clearly as I needed to.

To begin with his assertion that it was my intention to disparage normative haiku: If I had meant to do that, I would certainly not have written, “We will all probably continue to write this kind of haiku. Why wouldn’t we? It is a great kind of haiku!” And I would certainly not continue to write normative haiku myself.

The heart of Epstein’s argument seems to be that haiku is necessarily associated with Zen and that the purpose of haiku is to express, as he puts it, “the Eternal Now.” I can understand his need to defend the association of haiku with Zen because I, too, grew up with R.H. Blyth. But most haiku, as far as I can tell, don’t express the “Eternal Now”; most haiku,

like other forms of poetry, have something to say about the human condition with or without reference to nature. The haiku Epstein closes his letter with aptly demonstrates this point.

Art and artifice. Yes, these are important distinctions. Epstein seems to believe that the kind of haiku he prefers represents “art” while those he doesn’t prefer display “artifice.” While I don’t have an appreciation for much that is published today as so-called avant-garde haiku, I do admire and appreciate the best of it. If Epstein doesn’t see their value that is his loss, not haiku’s. My essay was merely intended to enlarge the haiku toolbox of those interested in doing so. Any haiku should be a gift to the reader and I believe considering some of the approaches I wrote about have the potential to enlarge that gift. Poets are free to try them or not, as they please. I do not prescribe or proscribe.

Being partly of Danish ancestry, I have a favorite Danish proverb: *Some people like going to church; some like cherries.* It appears that Epstein prefers going to church and somehow seems to feel a need to condemn those that don’t. That is his choice, but I don’t see how it advances the spiritual aspirations that he attaches to haiku. The question of where the right balance between tradition and innovation lies will be different for different people, as apparently it is for Epstein and myself. While I think it is important to respect tradition, I also believe that without innovation haiku will not remain a living art. I might point out that there is a third group of people, those who like going to church *and* like cherries. This is where I am happiest and would welcome Epstein to join me there.

pine shade
the wooden bench
worn smooth