

Haiku, Language, Thought: Creative Freedom through the Space of Mind, by Richard Gilbert (Champaign, Ill.: Modern Haiku Press, 2025). 336 pages; 5½" × 8". Matte four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-9741894-4-4. Price: \$25.00 from www.modernhaiku.org

Reviewed by Victor Ortiz

My hope is to communicate the excitement of new discoveries, ideas, and possibilities for haiku. — Richard Gilbert (2025)

Richard Gilbert, Professor Emeritus of British and American Literature at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Sciences, Kumamoto University, has been writing about the intersection of Japanese and English-language haiku for decades, beginning with his first influential book, *Poems of Consciousness: Contemporary Japanese & English-language Haiku in Cross-cultural Perspective* (2008). Many readers may already be familiar with Gilbert's groundbreaking work, *The Disjunctive Dragonfly: A New Theory of English-Language Haiku* (2013) but less familiar with his broader views in his follow-up book, *Poetry as Consciousness: Haiku Forests, Space of Mind, and an Ethics of Freedom* (2018), published in Tokyo. Gilbert's newest book, *Haiku, Language, Thought: Creative Freedom through the Space of Mind* (2025), is an extensively revised edition of his 2018 book and I think extends the theoretical stance of his view regarding how haiku create novel worlds, steeped in imaginative thought.

The quote above from Gilbert's excellent new book, *Haiku, Language, Thought*, is a rousing plea for and defense of the value of a poetic imagination that is deeply rooted in the mythopoetic realities of imaginal space. In particular, he wrestles with why haiku have such a powerful effect on its readers and what doors of understanding we may step through to grasp the depths of haiku. Rather than concerning himself with poetic techniques as in *The Disjunctive Dragonfly*, Gilbert's interest throughout remains focused on the psychological, philosophical, social, and spiritual stance of a poem that widens our perceptions of being human. Later, I will tell you what I've learned from Gilbert's book and the exciting possibilities you might consider in crafting your own haiku poems.

Gilbert's is an ambitious undertaking that calls for an inventive approach. His method encourages multiple ways to explore the poetic imagination while maintaining its complexity, embracing the mystery of the poetic process, and defending the freedom of the mental spaces where creativity is born, and where new worlds emerge. The same creative freedom that Gilbert deems necessary in the creation of haiku poems he honors in his own first five chapters, where he resists reducing the interrelationship of haiku, language, and thought to only one theory and embraces the freedom to use many doors of understanding to gain access to sources of consciousness. Thus, he acknowledges that chapters I-V do not proceed in a sequential manner but rather blend three types of approaches: cognitive poetics, literary linguistics, and depth psychology. By these methods, Gilbert seeks to understand what he calls the space of thought, or "thoughtspace," which embody thirty-six qualities that give rise to haiku poems and to which we respond as haiku readers. His discussion of "thoughtspace" lays the groundwork for his analysis of 325 haiku poems in part two of his work, which begins with chapter VI, 1-7 "Haiku, an Ethics of Freedom," where Gilbert illustrates the thirty-six qualities of "thoughtspace." It may take a little getting used to Gilbert's terminology and a glossary of specialized terms would have been helpful, but it is worth the effort.

Gilbert's first identifies seven properties of "thoughtspace" that arise from psychopoetic landscapes of thought, and from these seven properties he identifies thirty-six qualities in chapter VI, 1-7 as follows: **1) Space:** Minimal Creation, Novel Worlds, Immeasurability, and Unknown Unknowns; **2) Language:** Concreta vs Abstracta, Conceptual Blending, Neologism, Possible Worlds, Inferred Narratives, and Staging—Theatres of Story; **3) Thoughtspace:** Philopoetic Volition, Practice of Invention, and Spatial Thermoclines; **4) Metaphorics:** Fantasy Imagery, Paradox, Alternativity, Idiosyncrasy, Crafting Presentation, and Mimesis; **5) Architectures:** Design-architecture, World Building, Construction, Temenos, Precincts, Construction—Sacred Construction, and Notions of Anarchic Sanctuary; **6) Soul:** Soul, Remembrance and Distance, Grit, Guts, Desire, Passion, Emotion, and With Risk; **7) The "Third":** Distance, Forms of Resistance, Inhabitation, Place, and Consciousness—Revisions of World and Self.

In addition to the 325 haiku poems discussed in chapter VI, 1-7 and the five chapters that lay out Gilbert's approach: I. "Space of Mind," II. "Philopoetic Volition," III. "The Shape of Jazz to Come," IV. "Privacy Matters," and V. "Sanctuary," the reader will find a valuable introduction and conclusion, as well as appendices that provide concise material for important references in the text: "36 Qualities of Thoughtspace," "Disjunction in Haiku—Strong and Weak," (revised and enlarged from *The Disjunctive Dragonfly*, 2013), "Forethought," "Sanctuary Survey," "Glossary [of Publications]," "Endnotes," and "References."

I learned a great deal from the way Gilbert analyzes the 325 haiku poems in chapter VI, 1-7, and this, I think, is a great strength of his book, but I would suggest reading this chapter slowly, perhaps one section at a stretch to allow time to engage with the unique perspectives of the poems and Gilbert's commentaries regarding how each section illustrates one of the thirty-six qualitative descriptors of "thoughtspace." Due to the length and complexity of chapter VI, 1-7, it's not possible to present a summary of each section, but I will say something about one section that I found especially rewarding.

My brief take focuses on two topics in section 4 of chapter VI, "Metaphorics:"

First, I appreciated the deep discussion of how *ma* cuts through time and space, offering alternate dimensions, and how this cutting relates to *toriawase*, as a shift to a different level of reality, employing the imagination and layering of metaphoric realities. I think this understanding would extend the possibilities for writing English-language haiku. The following poem by Joseph Salvatore Aversano is a good example of this, which poem Gilbert compares to Basho's "old pond,"

it's enough if
at thought's edge
a crow

Joseph Salvatore Aversano, NRez11 2019

Related to this and to appreciate the broadly psychopoetic perspective Gilbert takes, he highlights the view of Professor Hasegawa Kai, a

distinguished Japanese poet and expert on haiku poetics, that haiku are not poems of realism but explorations of the “psyche in haiku.”

Second, Gilbert walks us through an insightful way to understand exploratory or progressive English-language haiku and its use of abstraction, disjunction, conceptual metaphors, and conceptual blending, along with its seemingly enigmatic and indecipherable features, when he discusses a poem by Jennifer Hambrick,

antimatter
a smattering
of broken gods

Jennifer Hambrick, a silence or two, RMP, 2024

After Gilbert’s analysis of this poem “antimatter,” I felt and understood the emotional impact of Hambrick’s haiku even more profoundly. These are two salient aspects of *Haiku, Language, Thought* that readers will likely find thought-provoking, if they take the opportunity to consider Gilbert’s psychological and mythopoetic views of where haiku originate.

Another strength of *Haiku, Language, Thought* is something many of us would likely agree on. Gilbert’s insistence on the importance of safe spaces where psychological risks may be taken in an atmosphere of freedom, whether while writing our haiku or participating in anarchic groups. To understand what he means, he explores the notion of creative freedom in “thoughtspace,” the authenticity of the heart, and sanctuary in communities where “new forms of creative expression” can take place.

There is so much more that I could say to recommend *Haiku, Language, Thought*, but I do have a few minor suggestions for improvement. The book could be more user friendly if it had an index, if there were an easy way to navigate the endnotes back to their specific pages (perhaps by providing a Notes to Pages with page numbers at the top of each endnote page), and the addition of a glossary of specialized terms would be helpful. Still, Gilbert has produced a unique book that grapples with the hard question of why haiku touch us so deeply and how they can potentially transform us. Indeed, Gilbert has again sought to expand the boundaries of what we think English-language haiku should be or could be.