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Typology & Poetry: Richard Gilbert Experiments

By Jack Galmitz

Richard Gilbert, currently Associate Professor of British and American Literature, Faculty of Letters, at Kumamoto University since 2002, is perhaps best known for his book *Poems of Consciousness* (Redmoon Press, 2008), a book that articulated for English language haiku poets what it was that their poetry was doing, and how they worked. Over the course of the past fifty years, rules and boundaries abounded in the form based on whatever was available in translations of Japanese writers on the subject; English language poets selected what seemed germane or useful in writing, but this actually amounted to fragments of knowledge gathered over time; eventually these rules hardened into prohibitions, proscriptions, and restrictions that limited the poet's field of vision; they stopped looking beyond what they had defined and formed from fragments gleaned from the Japanese. With each new publication of a book on the subject translated from Japanese, some new trends appeared in the English form, but for the most part imitation was most esteemed; creativity and uniqueness questioned, and more often than not rejected.

With the publication of *Poems of Consciousness* all that changed. There were books previously published that paved the way for *Poems of Consciousness*. *Traces of Dreams* (Stanford University Press, 1998) by Professor Haruo Shirane was one such book, as it introduced the modern linguistic model of diachronic and synchronic axes of coordinates in haiku (that always existed in Japan and was missing in its English relative, leaving the English poems flat, ahistorical, not complex enough to generate a literary criticism). Then, there was the earlier edition of *Japanese Haiku 2001* (edited by the Modern Haiku Association [Gendai Haiku Kyokai]). With introductory essays and samples of modernist haiku poets and their works, English language haiku poets had the opportunity to see that haiku in Japan had undergone historical processes in the 20th Century not un-akin to what had transpired in mainstream Western poetry in the 20th Century. For many, this book was a watershed moment for modern haiku in English.

Richard Gilbert was already known to English language haiku poets by his academic and researched essay "Stalking the Wild Onji," an essay that explained to Westerners the distinction between sound units (*onji* in Japanese) and syllables in English; with its publication, the often mistaken idea that haiku in English should be written in three lines of 5-7-5 syllables was revealed to be invalid.

In *Poems of Consciousness*, Professor Gilbert combined a number of earlier essays, including the seminal "Disjunctive Dragonfly" (*Studies in English Language and Literature* 47, Kumamoto University, Kumamoto, Japan [March 2004]), along with translations of modern Japanese *gendai* poets. He offered a typology of types of haiku disjunction (a term he uses in

place of what had preceded it historically in defining haiku: juxtaposition, or super-position, of images), and though not meant as an exhaustive study, it so replenished the vocabulary and understanding of how haiku actually worked as to have changed English-language haiku forever.

Professor Gilbert well understood that there was work that remained to be done in defining methods of writing haiku. Just recently on *Roadrunner (R'r) Haiku Journal's* blog, [Gilbert introduced a new term for haiku: "dis-completion,"](#) where a poem is written in such a way that it disallows completion, and/or disassembles attempts at reaching a significant coherent meaning.

And it is here that I wish to start. As John Cage said: "Where does beauty begin? Where does it end? Where it ends is where the artist begins." And so it is with definitions, typologies (however encyclopedic), and poetry. I recently asked Professor Gilbert about his own sparse output of engaging and complex haiku. He explained to me that he wrote poems/haiku "most often . . . when ideas relating to a new approach or way to explore the possible range of haiku coalesce." Let's begin in 2004, as that is the date from which the first haiku of Richard Gilbert is available.

dedicated to the moon
I rise
without a decent alibi

(*NOON I*, 2004)

The first line confirms what we would expect in our post-modernist age. That is, the unexpected is placed squarely in the poetic; *aporia* is embedded in language, and poetry takes equivocation of meaning as its *topos*: is the first line a dedication, as in a consecration, an avowal to a person, or a celestial sphere, as in the dedicatory of a book (in miniature)? Or, is it devotion, from the Latin *devotus*, to give oneself away assiduously, in a vow to the moon? Is the moon the narrator's solitary goal, an orbiting rock, a satellite, that is dedicated in an equivalent manner to the earth in orbiting it without ever rotating, always facing it? Or is it because they share the linguistic category of "rise?" "I rise," says the narrator; the "moon," we say, "rises." They are coequals, co-equivalents. They both have no meaning as a given; both are bodies in time/space; both travel daily, nightly. Without a creator, without something transcending the structure that sets it in motion, and to which everything refers for meaning—an alibi—it is hardly far-fetched to equate "I" to the "moon," as both lack a "decent" alibi. There isn't even a crime committed that requires an alibi. The narrator does not have to explain his whereabouts at a given time because he "exists," just as it can be said that the moon "exists," and it is no crime to exist.

Or, contrariwise, can we say there is something suspicious going on—rising perhaps in the night (time is not specified, only hinted at by the evidence of the moon)—that even evokes the need for the word “alibi?” Was he sleeping and he arose? Or, did he just “rise” from a prone position?

Was his action voluntary? Can we say we know, or that he knows, how he rises? Does this include the awareness of the physiology of rising, as part and parcel of knowing what we communicate when we write or speak of rising?

If you look at the typology of disjunctives found in haiku in “The Disjunctive Dragonfly” (Ibid), you will not find a category for the issues raised in this poem; hence, its production and its existence is as a possible project for the future.

Let’s have a look now at another poem Richard Gilbert wrote in 2004:

a drowning man
pulled into violet worlds
grasping hydrangea

(*NOON I*, 2004)

A man being swallowed by water (ironically the word stems from the Gothic word *dragkjan*, “to give to drink”), as in drenched, but “violet worlds” is not our customary way of viewing death by drowning. We may think of “violent” here; the first time I read this poem, I misread it based upon expectations of the word that I presumed would follow upon the initial image. But violet reminds us of the beautiful blue/purple of the flower, and hydrangeas, as well. Oddly enough, etymologically the amethyst, a violet quartz, derives from the Greek word *amethystos* “amethyst,” literally: “not intoxicating” from a- “not” + *methyskein* (“make drunk”), from *methys* “wine” (see mead); based on the stone’s ancient reputation for preventing drunkenness. So, we have something of a contradiction in “drowning” being related to being drenched, drunk, swallowed in water, and its opposite “violet,” related to preventing drunkenness, preventing being drenched, drowned. And, what are the violet “worlds?” Is the drowning place plural, as in underwater “worlds,” in contradistinction to “world?” In “grasping hydrangea,” perhaps we have an answer: the man is not drowning literally, but losing his sense of self in “grasping” (trying to deeply understand) the violet worlds of “hydrangea.” Is it the drowning or intoxication of the lineage of Li Po and Du Fu, where these mountain poets used intoxication (drowning) as a substitute for illumination, being deranged, experiencing the loss of boundaries between the ten thousand things and the poets? Literally, a drowning man cannot grasp “hydrangea,” because they do not grow by bodies of water, and they are not so deeply rooted as to allow someone to be saved by holding on to them.

Again, indeterminacy is central to the poem, as it is to language in general.

Let’s have a look at some poems Richard Gilbert wrote in 2008.

after the rush
the hollow sound
of the holy

(NOON 6, 2008)

We like to think, for security, that words such as “after” have a meaning understood between a speaker/listener or writer/reader; but that is not the case. “After” can be any time and dependent on “before,” which is also an indeterminate time. We are not located in time in this poem. Nor does the word “rush” convey a particular meaning. The word is derived from Latin *impetus* “attack, assault, onset, impulse, violence, vigor, force, passion.” Or is its meaning hurdling, rapid? Sometime after one of the meanings of “rush,” (perhaps Newton’s centripetal: center seeking) we have “the hollow sound” of the “holy.” And hollow can be a cave, cavern, a hole, or perhaps from the Old English word *deop*, meaning “profound, awful, mysterious; serious, solemn; deepness, depth.” The holy is not a substantive; it cannot be pointed to. Indeed, it is quite the opposite, and so it usually requires a sense of “emptiness,” and yet needs further words and explanations to interpret it that ultimately have no terminus: it is *not* a presence, let alone a fully present. Yet, it is only the “rush” that allows its opposite, “hollowness” and “holiness,” to be thought (if not explained, except through *ad infinitum* usages of other words).

Let’s look at another poem from 2008:

hungover — ignoble
Jerusalem — cactus
pissing — the cats

(R’r 8.2, 2008)

Is this poem exemplary of metonymy? That is to say, is the contiguity of association of divergent things the operative method of the poem? Or is it words that merely by physical proximity and lineation create a sense of unity where there is none? What of the dash between each word in each line: is this a cutting device used in haiku so often? The en dash can also be used to contrast values, or illustrate a relationship between two things. Certainly, we experience a relationship between being hungover as a moral equivalent of “ignoble.” Then, we may associate “ignoble” with the holy land, “Jerusalem,” as its antithesis. But, if we continue in this vein, we arrive at cactus, a substantive, associatively related to Jerusalem because of its dry, desert-like lands. We have crossed over categories, though, from the judgmental to the

physical, unless we understand “cactus,” as prickly and thus as a means to punish the profligate with punctures by the needles of cactus. Then, we move to “pissing,” which relates to being “hungover,” inasmuch as the drinker may still be saturated with liquor/liquid and drunkenness is often associated with “pissing.” But what about the association to “the cats?” Are we to understand that one who is ignobly hungover, pissing, descends to the animal level, is no more moral than a “cat?” Perhaps, Or, perhaps the only force holding the poem together is the associations, connotations, renderings of each individual reader and is not meant at all to have a final meaning.

Here is another poem from *R'r* in 2008 (8.2):

waning gibbous
the increasing density
of fall

The waning gibbous moon often initiates a rash of questions about seeing the moon during the day. If it rises late at night, you know the waning gibbous moon must set after sunrise. In fact, in the few days after a full moon, you'll often see the waning gibbous moon in the west in early morning, floating against the pale blue sky. And, as the full moon enters this waning phase, so too does the “increasing density” of autumn begin to wane what is in nature: the leaves, the undergrowth, all the living green. What is interesting in this poem is the semantic disjunction between increasing density with waning moon and fall (the density of which is a lack of density, the loss or fall of nature).

Another from *R'r* (8.2) in 2008:

returning bones
a stone unwinds
in the breeze

We have two contrary movements in this poem: centripetal and centrifugal. We have the centering to “bones,” a “returning,” that seems to imply a resumption of life in the body (perhaps in spring), and the “unwinding” of a “stone,” the outward spinning of what had been condensed (perhaps in winter); the conjectures are all based upon “the breeze,” suggestive of gentle weather, of springtime. Of course, this rendering of the poem perhaps oversimplifies it. The phrase “returning bones” is itself quite perplexing, another example of poetry as highlighting *aporia* as its central purpose; its playing with the deficiencies of language as its starting and ending point. The same can obviously be said about the phrase “a stone unwinds,” as this is literally impossible. We could call this, as maybe Richard Gilbert would say, an example of the impossibly true disjunction in haiku, a means whereby the metaphoric takes upon itself the burden of

meaning and transports the reader to an understanding of the real beyond the ordinary categories within which they understand the real; it is meant to be disorienting, indecipherable, a mystery; it brings us back to the impossibility of the definite.

Let's look at an intriguing poem written in 2010 and published in *R'r* (10.1):

When you dream the inside
smoke between cypress trees

When we dream, we think of it as being “inside,” somewhere; Frederic Nietzsche went so far as to say that it was because of dreams that the idea of a soul was first imagined by humans. Here, the poem seems to have a number of enjambments. It could very well mean “the inside smoke” lies “between cypress trees.” Cypress trees are often associated with flame-like trees that bear relations to death. Perhaps that is what Prof. Gilbert had in mind when he referred to the “smoke between” these trees. Cypress trees have a long association with the spiritual, with “the inside smoke.”

The Etruscans were fascinated by the evergreen nature of the cypress, which retained its leaves when all other trees were bare. They believed the tree had supernatural connections and put the plant around their graveyards. The cypress wood is quite resinous and strong in highly fragrant essential oils. These properties cause it to decompose very slowly, making it an ideal wood for coffins and sarcophagi. The Persians, Syrians and Turks all used the cypress for coffins, and the trees were historically planted at both the head and foot of Muslim graves ([What Is a Cypress Tree?](#)). Perhaps the poem implies that within, “inside,” when you “dream,” you are proximate to the spiritual, the “smoke” in the space between these otherworldly trees (that decompose slowly and retain leaves throughout the year, equivalent to a lifetime).

Then there are a number of poems Prof. Gilbert published in *R'r* 11.2 in 2011:

there in the trees to begin with just before and just after love

This is a poem that thrives on the essentially poetic: where you would anticipate “to begin” to begin the poem, it is placed elsewhere, after a phrase that points to nothing particular—“trees” being a class of kinds, not individuals—and “there” and “in” being equivocality, placement without being knowable. As to “just before” and “just after,” we are again, though this time in “time” not “space,” placed in uncertainty, indeterminacy, in the play of language, of signifiers that lead to further signifiers but never to a *referent*, a thing, a place, and/or a time. And “love”? Well, “love” is a substantive, although it is always different, always moving, never static, multiple physical movements we have no knowledge of, so that if asked do you know what, how you make “love,” you really couldn't say for sure, but by social convention you would probably

answer affirmatively. So, Richard Gilbert has written a poem of say the *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, the opposites in alchemy, in Adam and Eve, in the mysterious conjunction of binaries, the *Unis Mundus*.

Another brilliant poem from the 10.1 issue of *R'r*:

as an and you and you and you alone in the sea

How deftly Prof. Gilbert slowly builds, *adds*, one letter from “as” “an” to arrive at “and,” which linguistically is nothing more than *and*, additionally, addition, from “an.” He is playing with the particles of language. And then what does he do? Why he keeps adding, which is “and,” to “you.” And “you and you and you.” And, most ironically, this you, a pronoun of the second person singular, a mere semantic creation in the language game, the field of language, without “real” substance, adding an and and and still coming up with an “abstraction.” For all that this multiple meaning “you,” who has no static existence, but is a trace of all the different allusions, memories, others, technologies, sounds, environs, words, and who in time is unfinished and has no control over who they will be and what further influences and interconnections, intertextualities will pass through them and in them, is *alone* in the “sea” of sensorium. For all that this “you” is anyone in general.

Let’s have one last look at Richard Gilbert, poet.

moon cradled you recall the voice of another I might be the distance

(*R'r* 11.2, 2011)

This poem virtually rings with polysemy. “moon cradled” may refer to the moon as a cradle in the sky, the clouds as pillows, blankets, as it is in Irish lullabies. Whoever is such in the poem is comforted, and they either “recall the voice of another” or “recall the voice of another I”; it is impossible to say for sure how the pauses are meant to be taken. Probably, for the sake of multiple meanings the arrangements of the words intentionally leads to polysemy. If the “you” hears the “voice of another I,” then that might be the cause of the distance that is existing between them. If, on the other hand, the “you” recalls in memory the voice of another, the narrator “I” might be the distance the “you” travels from the present to the past of another (“I” might be the conduit for the travel across time; “I” might remind you of, or call you to, “another”). We are virtually in frisson. We cannot get out. We both deplore uncertainty and willingly embrace it as our fate in language, in our world of language, in our world wholly mediated by language.

As a literary critic, Richard Gilbert creates typologies of kinds of haiku by gathering together, from the whole field, examples of poems that work enough in similar ways to deserve to be classified together. As a poet, however, he does the

opposite. He leads with what is most relevant to poetry: the indeterminacy, the constantly shifting meanings implicit in language. The critical voice is certain, strong, coalescing. The poet's voice is also strong, but it de-centers meaning, and works by the de-centering that already exists in language. It is a meaningful life Prof. Gilbert lives without finality of meaning. That is why we appreciate him; his life is ours.

