

THE POUND PARADIGM

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Today I'm going to talk to you about Ezra Pound, English language haiku, and my life as a practicing haiku poet. I will try to be as clear and concrete as possible. Let me begin with some personal history. I have been writing poetry for fifty years. Originally I wrote in Western poetic forms exclusively. (Sonnets, *ottava rima*, etc.) After coming to Japan I began writing haiku. Expats are often advised to take up one of the traditional Japanese arts in order to enhance their understanding of the culture, and haiku was the most natural one for me, so that's the one I chose. I had written some proto-haiku in the past but nothing serious.

THE SECRET HAIKU YEARS

I always refer to my early years as a haiku poet in Japan as “The Secret Haiku Years.” Though I was a student of haiku (an independent one), wrote haiku, and published haiku in various newspapers and journals, I rarely ever revealed to friends and associates that I was a haiku writer. Why was that?

First, I sensed that most Japanese people were highly skeptical of haiku in any language other than Japanese. Trying one's hand at English language haiku might seem “cute” and have some collateral *eikaiwa* benefits, but it was not the “real deal.” Typical reactions to English language haiku were doubt and

disbelief. Just as common was complete bewilderment.

When it came to my compatriots (fellow Americans) I was equally reluctant to reveal my vocation. Haiku were not taken seriously Stateside (in spite of the heroic efforts of the haiku societies). Haiku were misunderstood, ridiculed, stuck on bumpers, regarded as trinket art or spam. They got no respect. They were not included in discussions of mainstream poetry, and some journals specified, “No haiku, please.” They were a sub-genre. Once again, but from a different angle, haiku in English were not considered to be the real deal.

But there was a third reason I kept my haiku under wraps. Paradoxically, though I was writing and publishing haiku (or what I considered to be haiku) I didn't entirely believe in the genre myself. Only rarely in my readings did I find haiku that affected me deeply. Most haiku in English appeared to be rather odd. They were written in a peculiar kind of English: namely, fragments without verbs, articles omitted, and no transitions (just dashes). It was as if the writers were “speaking-in-nouns.” It is probably true, as Thomas Gray said long ago, that the language of the age and the language of poetry are always different, but most haiku in English seemed artificial and mannered. If they weren't Japanese, they weren't English either. But as noted, I was writing them myself.

EZRA POUND: MAKER & BREAKER

The work of Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was my single exposure to haiku, or haiku-like poetry, before I came to Japan. I studied his poetry when I was a university student. That would have been way back in 1966. (I was fortunate enough to have as a teacher, Marjorie Perloff, the well-known scholar of Modern and Contemporary poetry.) Pound plays an important if not seminal role in the development of English language haiku, and I should say a few

words about his life and poetry in case you're not familiar with them. There are sharp differences between his life and my own but there are some parallels.

Pound was a maker and a breaker.^① That is, he was a maker of traditional poems (a craftsman; fabricator) and he was a breaker of traditional forms (an innovator; a trend-setter). He wrote in pentameter and “broke the pentameter.” His literary views were focused and sharp but he broke up cause & effect in many of his poems. He was the quintessential artist-iconoclast. His whole life was dedicated to poetry. He went door to door with it. On the dark side, he was an anti-Semite and a propagandist of Fascist ideology. His views in these areas were abhorrent and that needs to be said upfront. And I disassociate myself from them.

As a poet, Pound was ever on the lookout for new directions and new methods of creating poetry. He was forever racing ahead. He passed through, and was a founder or co-founder of several phases and movements: Neo-Medievalism (heavy use of thou & thy & thee), Imagism, Vorticism, Confucianism. (But not Buddhism. Unlike Blyth, the other great influence on English language haiku, Pound was not Zen.) He finally settled down to write a long Modernist poem, the *Cantos*, and that dominated the latter half of his life. He was a gifted editor (Eliot called him *il miglior fabbro*): his specialty was excision and one of his key words was “cut.” He excised anything that was not absolutely necessary. The enemy was “emotional slither.”

In both life and art Pound was an uneasy combo of gruffness and aestheticism. He had a blunt sense of humor. He was irreverent and satirical and liked to ridicule the bourgeois mind-set. He was flamboyant and attention-seeking. The novelist, Ford Madox Ford, remarked on his colorful attire: “He would wear trousers made of green billiard cloth, a pink coat, a blue shirt, a

tie hand-painted by a Japanese friend, an immense sombrero, a flaming beard cut to a point, and a single large, blue ear-ring.”^② He was eventually declared insane. But he wrote some wonderful poems.

When I was a young writer I passed through a Pound Period. I acted out the role of poet-aesthete, wore clashing clothes, expressed clashing thoughts. I engaged in outlandish, colorful behavior. On the other hand, I had no taste for politics.

EZRA POUND AND HAIKU

Pound was not a haiku poet *per se*. Nor is it necessary for our purposes that he be regarded as such. For sure, many of his short poems have haiku-like elements, and many of the passages in the *Cantos* can be read as haiku. Here's one of Pound's early haiku-like efforts (a poem with haiku ambience):

TS'AI CHI'N

The petals fall in the fountain,
the orange-coloured rose petals,
their ochre clings to the stone.^③

The poem has three lines, a seasonal reference (rose petals), and the third line performs a 'sudden jump' in thought. ("Sudden jump" is a Jack Kerouac phrase, roughly equivalent to the *kire*, or cut, of Japanese haiku.)^④ It is a pretty poem, and it represents the delicacy of which Pound was capable. His place in haiku history, however, rests on a different poem.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO (TEXT & ANALYSIS)

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.^⑤

“Metro” has achieved iconic status within the American haiku community. Comment on it has become virtually compulsory. In 2013, a full century after the publication of the poem, it became the point from which the anthology, *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, was dated. Jim Kacian, the chief editor of that anthology, referred to Metro as the “first fully realized haiku in English.”^⑥

The back story of the poem is worth looking into. Pound provided the details in an essay he wrote for *The Fortnightly Review* in 1914^⑦ He informs us there that “Metro” was written in Paris where he was living at the time. The station in question was the Place de la Concorde. Pound was confronted with the “faces in the crowd.” The experience was a vivid one, and he wanted to preserve it. He tells us that initially he wrote a thirty-line poem (which he found unsatisfactory and destroyed.) Later, he wrote a poem half that length but discarded that one as well. He then composed what was the original version of the Metro poem (which was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1913). In the *Fortnightly Review* Pound referred to the poem (a reconfigured version) as a “hokku-like sentence” and cited the influence of Japanese poetry and the Japanese aesthetic of discovery. In fact, he lined it up parallel to two Japanese haiku. In 1916 “Metro” was included in Pound’s volume, *Lustra*, in the version that I’ve cited, which is now considered the standard one.

Why has this poem received so much critical attention? What are the

reasons for its influence?

First, it's a good poem. Very clean and nicely cut. Nothing extra. No 'emotional slither.' Though it is verb-less (speaks-in-nouns), it has a natural feel to it.

Second, it is one of the key poems of the Imagist movement. Cor van den Heuvel has remarked that Pound "with his call for clarity and his emphasis on the importance of the image in poetry" was one of the poets who "led the way in preparing the ground for an American haiku to take root."⁸ In the Imagist Manifesto Pound set down the goals of the movement, among them: "... *to employ the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word ... To present an image ... To produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.*"⁹ In a Station of the Metro meets all of these criteria. One feels that Pound has achieved Flaubert's ideal of *le mot juste*, or use of the precise word. If you recall, he claimed in his long poem *Mauberley* that "His true Penelope was Flaubert."¹⁰

Third, Metro is structurally innovative. The poem is composed of two parts (faces; petals), and there's a cut between them. In a sense, "Metro" is a comparison-not-drawn. Pound doesn't use "like" or "as". He breaks the simile. The two parts are not explicitly related to one another. Pound referred to this technique as a "form of superposition, that is, one idea on top of another." Such juxtaposition or "cutting" (which Pound borrowed from Japanese haiku) is a departure from customary Western *modus operandi*. It constitutes what I call the Pound Paradigm: two elements super-positioned and resulting in a discovery.

Metro contains other important haiku features: suddenness of apprehension (an apparition), a season word (petals), brevity (two or three lines depending on how you expand or contract it). The aforementioned *Ts'ai Chi'h* might be

more beautiful and exotic, but it looks back and has not had nearly the impact. Metro looks ahead. (Metro is not retro.)

Of course, Pound's overall reputation and prominence as a poet have focused attention, and kept it focused, on his work in the haiku genre. But Metro is not just a case of reflected glory (or notoriety). It is an excellent poem. A benchmark haiku. The only thing that has not survived is the use of titles. Later generations have jettisoned that feature. At any rate, when I first started to write haiku, the Pound Paradigm was very much in my mind.

THE POUND PARADIGM, BOB SPIESS, AND MODERN HAIKU

I want to interject a few words at this point about Bob Spiess and relate his activities to what I've been saying about Pound. Bob was one of the most important figures in the North American haiku community during the last century. He was a haiku-poet, a haiku-thinker, and the long-time editor of *Modern Haiku*. He was awarded the Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Award in 2000. Bob had a lot to say about the structure of haiku, and though it is not often emphasized, some of his central views carried forward, and were consistent with, the Pound Paradigm as I have defined it. Though spiritually in the Blyth tradition of haiku, Bob was practically a 'Poundian.' Here are some of the points he made in his Speculations column in *Modern Haiku*: "*Most haiku of good quality juxtapose [two] entities that often seemingly are disparate ... [Such juxtaposition] "does not aesthetically incorporate a cause-effect relation ... [The haiku-poet needs to possess] "the intuition that certain things, albeit of opposite characteristics, nonetheless have a resonance with each other that will evoke a revelation."*^①

These are apt descriptions of what happens in IN A STATION OF THE METRO. In other words, it contains a set of entities seemingly disparate

(faces, petals) that have a resonance (coloration & shape) and evoke a revelation (“apparition”). It is worth noting here what Allen Ginsberg said in the Paris Review: “In the haiku you have two distinct images, set side by side without drawing a connection, without drawing a logical connection between them. The mind fills in this space between them.”¹²

ANALYSIS: TWO EXAMPLES OF MY OWN HAIKU

During the last decade of the Twentieth Century my haiku began appearing regularly in *Modern Haiku* when Bob Spiess was the editor. Here’s one that illustrates some of the features I’ve been discussing so far:

cherry blossoms
against a gray sky
white gymnasium¹³

The poem is rather sharp and it super-poses two disparate entities (blossoms, gymnasium). Everyone writes about cherry blossoms so I wanted to give the poem a twist. The reference to the gymnasium is meant to temper the prettiness and de-romanticize the scene.

Much later I published another haiku, this time in *Frogpond*, journal of the Haiku Society of America (and subsequently included in *Haiku 21*) that exhibited similar characteristics.

the circumnutation
of morning glories
memories of linoleum¹⁴

The unifying image of this haiku is *curling*. Both the flower and the linoleum turn up at the corners. I think of it as a metaphysical haiku, a cerebral poem about (e)motion. It is also slightly funky. “Linoleum” is a deflationary word.

Both of these poems are far different from Pound’s Metro poem, but I don’t think it is far-fetched to say that they show the influence of the paradigm that he established. Of course, I write other types of haiku as well.

MAKE IT NEW (THE AGE DEMANDED)^⑤

In 2013 I published a haibun entitled, *Escalator Haiku, Clangor of Place, Blank = The New Cool*.^⑥ It was an attempt on my part to follow Pound’s exhortation: Make it New. I was pursuing in particular the question of what the “age demanded” (Pound’s famous phrase from *Mauberley*) and whether what it demanded was worthwhile pursuing in haiku. Haiku had originated in the agricultural age, continued through the industrial, and was now in the digital. Did the present age demand a new kind of haiku? If so, what would it be like? In my haibun the speaker, a haiku-poet, goes (where else?) to Akiba to find the answer. While there, he writes a number of “digital ku.” One is a monostich: it’s like a hologram, and causes a double-take.

just passing through myself

It could mean: “I’m a stranger here too,” or, “I’m merely a 3D projection.” Is the poem a haiku, a senryu, or something else entirely?

HAIKU-NESS

Superfluous to say, I don’t have the answer to the many questions and objections raised about English Language haiku. Nonetheless, I think there is

something called “haiku-ness,” a quality which is identifiable but not definable, mysterious but authentic, and that exists irrespective of any particular language. Pound said in the Paris Review, “I think the artist has to keep moving. You are trying to render life in a way that won’t bore people and you are trying to put down what you see.”¹⁷ I would only add that a good haiku makes you want to go out and write haiku.

ENVOI: HAIKU BY MICHAEL FESSLER

Let me close by citing a few more of my own haiku.¹⁸

*putting everyone
in the same position
the freezing wind*

*August heat
umpire and manager
nose to nose*

*traffic light
a man with an eggplant
singing*

*persimmons dangle
in front of an ATM
some almost ripe*

the old year passes

*I pry open a pistachio
with a pistachio*

*A ladybug
flies out of my hand
April Fools Day*

*at the tip
of the pine needle
yesterday's rain*

*melon flowers
are generally yellow ...
my exciting life*

SOURCES

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- ② *Return to Yesterday* (London 1931). In Peter Ackroyd, *Ezra Pound* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 21.
- ③ Ezra Pound, *Lustra* (New York, 1916). See also *Des Imagistes*, anthology, ed. Ezra Pound (London 1914).
- ④ Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, ed. Regina Weinreich (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xxiv.
- ⑤ *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. (New York: New Directions 1956-7), 35.
- ⑥ *Haiku in English, The First Hundred Years*, ed. Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), xxii.
- ⑦ "Vorticism," *The Fortnightly Review* 96 [n.s.], (1 September 1914), 461-471. Online.
- ⑧ Cor van den Heuvel, *Amazon.com Profile*. Unpaginated.
- ⑨ "Imagist Manifesto," *PoetryLibrary* (August 30, 2006). Online.
- ⑩ "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," *The Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*, 61.
- ⑪ Michael Fessler, "The Bob Years," *Bottle Rockets*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2010), 65.
See also Robert Spiess, "Speculations," *Modern Haiku*, Fall (1999).
- ⑫ Alan Ginsberg, "The Art of Poetry No. 8," *Paris Review*, No. 37 (Spring 1966),
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- ⑬“cherry blossoms,” *Modern Haiku*, XXI:3 (Autumn 1990), 33.
- ⑭“the circumnutation,” *Haiku 21*, ed. Gurga and Metz (Lincoln, Illinois: Modern Haiku Press, 2011), 65. (Originally published in *Frogpond*, 33:1, 2010.)
- ⑮*Make It New* (London: Faber & Faber 1934) and “Mauberley,” 61, 73.
- ⑯“Escalator Haiku / Clangor of Place / Blank = the New Cool,” *Bottle Rockets*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Issue 29 (2013), 52-56. (The haiku, *just passing through myself*, is contained in the haibun.)
- ⑰Ezra Pound, “The Art of Poetry No.5,” *Paris Review*, No. 28 (Summer-Fall 1962), online, unpaginated. (Pound was interviewed by Donald Hall.)
- ⑱Haiku by Michael Fessler (Publication Data):
- “putting everyone,” 2004 First Place (Season Word Category) Twenty-Seventh Annual International Haiku Contest, Hawaii Education Association.
- “August heat,” *Baseball Haiku*, ed. Cor van den Heuvel & Nanae Tamura (New York: W.W. Norton 2007), 57. Also in *Past Time* (Red Moon Press: 1999). Originally published in *Frogpond*, XXI:2 (1998), 16.
- “persimmons dangle,” *Bottle Rockets*, 8:2, Issue 16 (2007), 76.
- “traffic light,” *Modern Haiku*, XXX:3 (Fall 1999), 14.
- “the old year passes,” *Blithe Spirit*, 17:3 (September 2007), 13.
- “A ladybug,” *Frogpond*, XVIII:1 (Spring 1995), 32.
- “at the tip,” *Frogpond*, XX:2 (September 1997), Title Page.
- “melon flowers ...” *Blithe Spirit*, 25:2 (May 2015). 68.