When talking about excellence in haiku, the larger context of what makes for excellence seems intrinsic to debates concerning art, and poetry, in general. From this wider perspective, it's possible to examine historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural strands of evolving critique.

The main historical currents regarding excellence (in art, poetry, haiku) presuppose arguments (theory) related to critical judgment. To gloss the topic, in the US, poetic theory, from Imagism through the Beats, has swung through pendulum arcs between objective and subjective formulation. When excellence is critically objective, this implies that there are (provably) definitive elements of excellence apparent to the observer — un-reliant on and apart from subjective (personal) opinion. New Formalism is taken as a move in this direction. The violent reaction of more objective-oriented criticism toward Ginsberg's "Howl" reveals this polarity and a seminal moment in American poetry — perhaps the last time poetry can be said to have shaped the nation.

(Aside:) Of the 88 books selected by the Library of Congress in 2012 to define “Books that Shaped America,” six are poetry collections. Of these, three remain bestselling, those by Whitman, Dickinson and Ginsberg. Two being 19th century poets, Ginsberg’s Howl and Other Poems singularly tops the charts (rivaling sales of Shakespeare’s Collected Works) for poetry collections in the 20th century, to date.

If objective critique were to be perfected and agreed upon, artworks could be judged (ranked) in terms of excellence according to defined criteria. Objective critical theory would be then quantifiable; thus the “formalism” in new formalism. For this critical approach, excellence can be defined, objectively (i.e., formally).

Of late, science has studied human beauty, and via large-scale research studies, arrived at certain formal measures of facial structure which are statistically (multiculturally) identified as evincing beauty (e.g. formal features such as left-right facial symmetry, eye spacing). As within the field of poetics, this approach reveals an intriguing agon (tension) between qualitative, subjective impression (phenomenology) and formal (scientistic) verity — an issue central to modernity.

Subjective criticism, on the other hand, is reliant upon “the person of taste.” That is to say we presuppose a few masters of taste (as there are master chefs), who due to their knowledge and experience should deservedly be seen as arbiters of excellence. Perhaps our most notable literary critics ultimately follow this line, in that objective criticism has foundered in its comprehensive program.

Seen this way, there exists a conundrum: we seek to arrive at formal determinants of excellence, and fail (though one may stump for partial success). We seek to find a critical view (a person/ those critics) which might provide the proper schema — yet do not find satisfaction.

The subjective-objective conundrum is a Cartesian duality which never completely resolves itself. We rely on critics for (subjective) personal insight, yet may also rely on (objective) articulations of formal determinants — neither alone quite suffices. As a result, idiosyncratic brews (admixtures of both types of approach) are formulated. Formulations such as these tend to be playful mutts. A majority of published criticism in haiku has been of this sort. For example, a haiku critic who does not understand
Japanese language and has not lived in Japan, or associated themselves with Japanese poetry offers up Japanese terms and presents Japanese culture — and often feudal culture as well — as objective verity — as “haiku-objective” knowledge. This represents just one critical boner in haiku studies, so it’s not surprising “haiku studies” outside of Japan Studies, are not found in the university. It was just a few years ago that Gary Snyder, well-aware of Japanese poetics and culture, in his Ehime Award Lecture stated that the term “haiku” should be limited in use to indicate Japanese-language-only haiku (I take issue, but also admit his rationale).

In any case, I first became acutely aware of the objective-subjective conundrum reading Egalitarian Typologies Versus the Perception of the Unique, by James Hillman (Eranos Lecture 4, Spring Pub., 1986), whose school of Archetypal Psychology is founded on the conception of psychological creativity (rather than pathology and/or the presupposition of a normative psychology). This small book of 59 pages contains examples from poets like Wallace Stevens, to help articulate its main points.

A typology is a schema, and presents itself as a formal basis for quality. Racism would be a non-egalitarian typology. An egalitarian typology, on the other hand, presents an equality of value among its “types” or groups. In personal and spiritual psychology some examples are Jungian typology (including personality types as determined by the “Myers-Briggs Type Indicator”), and the enneagram (created by Oscar Ichazo). Familiar historical typologies include the 12 signs of astrology, the I Ching, Qabalah (Sephirothic tree), and geomantic and cosmological concepts (e.g. Fludd, alchemy), as well.

Last year, in my book of haiku criticism, The Disjunctive Dragonfly: A New Approach to English-language Haiku (recently reviewed by editor and Field Notes contributor Lorin Ford, at http://www.ahundredgourds.com/ahg31/exposition06.html), I proposed 24 “types” of techniques found in 275 haiku examples (presented in support). In composing this work I was aware of the problems inherent in objective critique. Nonetheless, if lacking any formal (objective) schema, one is left only with “persons of taste,” and opinion. That is, endless and generally fruitless debate regarding questions of excellence and quality.

Hillman interests me because he poses a deeper polarity or dichotomy, regarding excellence: egalitarian typology versus the perception of the unique. It may be that any critic (“person of taste”), in advancing a rationale for excellence, unavoidably presents a schema as part and parcel of a logical, formal argument for quality. For haiku, one can speak of yugen, shibumi, karumi, wabi-sabi, etc. These terms, taken together, form an egalitarian typology. Critics will say that this or that haiku possesses more or less of one and another.

What does this mean, to say that “this haiku is excellent because it possesses yugen,” or “this haiku is an excellent example of karumi”? Here the “person of taste” enters with their subjective judgment. We may agree conceptually with the definitional typology (those Japan-origin qualities), but can we agree on matters of taste? In fact, were we to agree as a community on a select group of haiku, say five per each representative Japanese-aesthetic category — we would then have achieved pure artistic totalitarianism. There is a real societal danger in combining egalitarian typologies with “persons of taste” who then dictate to the community — and one must either follow their pronouncements or exit (sometimes violently). In Japan, a study of Kyoshi’s role as totalitarian dictator of Hootogisu is a case in point. One understands that in the history of haiku in North America, this has been a social issue, one that has involved the exclusion of talented haiku poets from publication, and by extension, the publication of many atrocious haiku — all in the name of (purity of) taste. That is, “taste” was defined or grounded in judgment by “persons of taste” (predominantly or entirely male at the time; haiku journal editors and book publishers) who claimed proper knowledge of the Japanese form and therefore the English-language form of haiku. They were right and if you took exception, you were wrong. A documented case would be some decades of rejection of Marlene Mountain’s thought, along with many of her haiku — her work and thought are these days looked upon quite differently.
Hillman proposed an intriguing solution to the dichotomy of typology vs. the unique. He suggested a means of collapsing the duality, by shifting the basis of critical thought to “aesthetic arrest,” an embodied experience (of an actual human being). Implicit here are kinesthetic truths, a kinesthetic phenomenology. Hillman talks about the “in gasp” — the sudden indrawn breath, from which we get the word “in-spiration.” We may not all agree on which experiences cause aesthetic arrest, but have probably all experienced this at one time or another.

From this perspective some interesting ideas can be drawn. The first is that a “person of taste” in defining excellence in a particular poem, or group of poems, may provide intellectual understanding, and at the same time not in any way move you, the art participant, the reader, towards aesthetic arrest. As well, a poem may in fact be intellectually excellent, and provide new motifs in art, which is grand — yet you may not be especially moved by it. From the perspective of aesthetic arrest, there exist varieties, diversities of excellence, according to the diversity of persons, within poetic community — from the point of view of each reader or person.

The experience of aesthetic arrest is a personal experience. So it would seem subjective. But on the other hand, the experience itself is likewise archetypal, universal, Hillman would argue. One may not know why precisely a given experience occurs in a given instance. Aesthetic arrest may begin through moments of “stopping,” yet such an experience may also indicate a longer involvement in an artwork as an enriching contemplation, occurring over many years. Aesthetic arrest in this sense is not only that “moment” in which we in-spire, are arrested, it is also evolitional, subtle, complex — interwoven into what we value in life, in art: aesthetic arrest as instigation, as subversion, seduction. As tantra, viral.

I muse that excellence must partly be related to taste, which itself is linked to aesthetic arrest (in both critics and readers). Aesthetic arrest, as savor, may likewise be evinced by the poetry of criticism. I was never so consciously arrested by the pleasure of the text, as and until I read The Pleasure of the Text. The pleasure of Barthes has never truly left me. Aesthetic arrest may be instigated by study, generating a heightened, embodied sensitivity towards the work.

Yet this is not enough. Aesthetic arrest implies something genuine in our experience, and suggests that arts (artworks) have the ability to touch what is deep, in experiential value — yet the aesthetic does not necessarily reside in the artwork, any more than it resides in Basho's “pine,” or a beautiful sunset, or a lover's kiss. Aesthetic arrest cannot be “typed” or troped in this way. It's never about what’s supposed to happen in engagement (or how a given poem is supposed to move you). Critics are fairly hated for their insistence in this regard. In fact, if an engagement is specified, arranged, predetermined, it's as likely to diminish aesthetic impact, or confuse it. “I will read this haiku to you, which is the best by Ms. X, and you should feel this from it and have such and so-and-so an experience” — really won’t cut it.

Is aesthetic arrest up to us? I think this is the crux: the perception of the unique. The point Hillman made which launched me into contemplations of how to critically articulate works involves the perception of unique, as cultural value. The unique, Hillman argues, is something that is continually devalued, forgotten, discarded or sublimated, in art, in criticism, even in conversation, in society. The perception of the unique is invisible. Is the repressed.

Most obviously, the problem is that one's perception of the unique cannot be easily shared (a talent for articulation in this regard must be assumed crucial, for the critic). And perceptions of the unique do not necessarily organize themselves either normatively or intellectually. Hillman argues that, nonetheless, the perception of the unique is at the core of aesthetic arrest, implying that this should be a central concern of criticism.

In my own work, I designed an egalitarian typology in order to present modes of technical similarity between groupings of example-haiku. Yet my (subversive) desire was to present haiku to which I respond aesthetically, am moved by — that are arresting in some way. It’s not too much to say that I
love all the haiku I selected. Of course, it’s laughable to say that I love them, merely. So the typology was useful.

That said, my love is not yours, nor should it be. Nevertheless, in each haiku presented I find an abundance of what is unique: both beyond compare and beyond comparison. This is something beautiful. And the more you give voice to it, the less unique it tends to become, in its arresting dimension. In psychology, one way to diminish the impact of a dream is to explain the story away, through interpretation. For this reason I generally avoid definition, meaning those modes of interpretation which extract meaning from the poem, essentially to its deficit, as a primary critical move. “This haiku means this or that.” Stories (and poems) are often put to death when ostensibly resolved by meaning.

At this point I feel I’ve answered the first part of Peter’s question, when he asks: “What elevates a haiku above the average, or brings it down to marvelous earth? Or both.” (The answer must partly be your own, partly arrive from elsewhere, and partly relate to matters of intellectual and poetic engagement with formal verities, to the extent they exist, or you take them as existent values: an excellent haiku surprises, is in some manner genuinely aesthetically arresting, and appears as a unique “face” of perception, existentially and essentially incomparable in some way.) Now, as to the last: “Are you willing to provide an example or two of what you consider excellent?” In The Disjunctive Dragonfly are 275 haiku, all of which (I feel) are excellent. It would be against principle to select out some small number — this would defeat the concept of an egalitarian typology, altogether. So I don’t feel I’m avoiding the question, or challenge, and would rather in turn challenge the reader to gather like-gems from sand all those works that move you, through their uniqueness.

The depth psychological move is to return in mind to those active dream figures, to treat them as alive, animate — to open to those images (and poems, like dreams, are fictions or halfway to such stars) — in this way to become more receptive to their uniqueness, those unique faces of appearance which stir or disturb. Unfortunately, critics like therapists tend to become too meaning-addicted. Though like love-making, interpretation can be done well.

When you walk around — right now, in daily life — how aware are you of the unique? This very single breath, your partner's face. A shadow, a tree. Aesthetic arrest can't be willed, yet for those into haiku, certain poems move us, deeply, and we experience — what? Depth, emotion, presence, resonance are some of the terms in play.

What distinguishes haiku from other poetic forms most clearly relates to concision and “cutting,” formal notions. In particular, the various ways a given haiku “cuts” relate directly to aesthetic sensibility — the landscape of aesthetic arrest. What would a criticism look like, which begins with the perception of the unique, leading the reader further towards considerations of the unique, towards its greater valuation? This move would raise the valuation of the unique, rather than discarding its power via explanatory meaning, as we might discard the power of the poem, or dream.

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http://research.gendaihaiku.com/field-notes/what-thought-is-like.htm

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