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moon hooks

An Interview with Makoto Ueda (Part 2) by Eve Lucking

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UNZIPPED

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Mark Harris
True Before It is Made Truth:
an Interview with Makoto Ueda

part 2

by Eve Luckring
An introduction and Part 1 of this interview can be found in *R'r 12.3.*

R'r: What other translators of Japanese haiku into English do you especially appreciate? Can you say why?

MU: I highly admire the works of R. H. Blyth. He did a great deal to introduce Japanese literature to the West, especially in the area of haiku and senryu. The four volumes of *Haiku* and two volumes of *A History of Haiku* are monumental works he authored in the way of making haiku available to English readers. Such famous authors as J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder are said to have come to know haiku through his books. His translations are generally precise and read well in English; especially I like their inclusion of no word that is not in the original, unlike those by most other translators before him. His comments on haiku, based on his rich knowledge of English literature, are full of insightful perceptions and expressed with wit and humor. Perhaps he overemphasized the Zen aspect of haiku, but that was perhaps inevitable in view of the fact that he was a devotee of Zen. With all things considered, I think he must be said to be the most important person in the international community of haiku.
R'r: In the introduction to Bashō and His Interpreters, you comment: “In the final analysis, translation is a form of literary criticism as well as artistic creation . . .”

Could you expand upon what you mean by translation being a form of literary criticism?

How is translation like “artistic creation”? Could you give a few examples of haiku you've translated wherein you feel that the end product (your artistic creation) was especially successful? Why/how so?

MU: I think translation is a form of literary criticism in the sense that the translator’s notion of literature reflects itself in the works he translates. It does so whether or not he is conscious of it. As the critic applies his idea of literature to the criticized work, so does the translator to the translated work. He shapes it in the way he feels a literary work should be.

For instance, Harold G. Henderson translates a haiku into an English poem with rhyme in his book, An Introduction to Haiku. Obviously there is no rhyme in the original Japanese. Henderson defends it by saying that his notion of a short poem has a sort of “frame,” a frame like that of a picture. To take another example, Hiroaki Satō renders a haiku into a one-line English “poem” in From the Country of Eight Islands edited by Burton Watson and himself. His reason is that the original Japanese haiku is always printed in one line and that the English translation should follow that pattern. His one-line translation emanates from his idea of haiku, which is a one-line poem.

Unfortunately I have to decline your request that I show what I think are the best samples of my translation. I have no sample to show to myself or others. I have always endeavored to do my best, but I have never felt I attained that goal.

R'r: You wrote in Far Beyond the Field, “The finest work done by a female haiku poet exemplifies her era just as well as that of a male poet, even though her status in her time's haiku circles may not have been very high” (ix).

Could you discuss this concept of the importance of era (exemplifying era) in haiku composition?

Why do you feel it is so important?

What are some examples of 20th/21st century haiku that you feel represent this concept?

MU: Japan is a small country area-wise, with a large population. Japanese people are less individualistic and more totalitarian, especially so in the feudal times, when they were expected to serve for their family clan, country, etc. Thus
when some new fashion caught the attention of a few people, it might spread very quickly and end up gaining utmost popularity. The situation was the same in haiku. In the first half of the 18th century, for instance, the so-called “plain” style popularized by Kagami Shikō (1665-1731) conquered most areas of the haiku world of Japan. The latter half of the 19th century was mostly the era of what is called the “tsukinami” (conventional) style, a style made up only by conventional words and techniques peculiar to the existing haiku.

In the early years of the 20th century, the hototogisu (mountain cuckoo) school was prevalent among haiku poets. It taught that haiku should concentrate on the beauties of nature for its subject-matter. Its head was the dictatorial Takahama Kyoshi, and I already cited an example of his haiku (“a paulownia leaf . . .”). Here is another:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{shūten no shita ni nogiku no kaben kaku} \\
\text{under the autuminal} \\
\text{sky, a wild chrysanthemum} \\
\text{lacking one petal}
\end{align*}
\]

In a poem the author is to be made to recede backward as much as possible—that is what Kyoshi taught.

In the 1930’s several major poets began to oppose the tenets of the hototogisu school. The most influential among them was Yamaguchi Seishi, who extended the meaning of nature to include a number of modern man-made objects such as a motion picture, a smelting furnace, and a steam-engine. In haiku he looked at them from a cool, non-human point of view:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{shūya au kikansha ni tsuzuku sharyō nashi} \\
\text{autumn night I watch} \\
\text{a steam engine} \\
\text{followed by no car}
\end{align*}
\]

A steam engine is a modern subject non-existent in classical haiku. Usually it is followed by a long train of passenger or freight cars, but in this instance there is none. Does the engine stand for something?
The number of haiku schools gradually increased since the end of World War II. According to the Museum of Haiku Literature, schools that publish “little haiku magazines” total somewhere between 800 and 1,000 in Japan today. Poets have become more individualistic, each with his or her tenet. The concept of “era” in the traditional sense is disappearing—or has disappeared—in the 21st century.

R'r: What do you believe were some of the most significant changes/developments in Japanese haiku poetics during the post-war period?

MU: I think there were three major movements in Japanese haiku poetics during the post-war period. The first was “social haiku”; the second, “avant-garde haiku”; and the third, “surrealistic haiku.”

Social haiku started partly because some poets wanted to oppose Kuwabara Takeo’s argument for haiku as a “second-rate” art form (Note: a translation by Mark Jewel is available at <http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv4n1/features/Kuwabara.html> Simply Haiku 4.1, 2006). Kuwabara blamed haiku poets’ concentration on the beauties of nature with little or no concern with political or social happenings. Especially “humanist” poets, such as Nakamura Kusatao and Kato Shūson, argued against this blame and tried to show their concern with contemporary Japanese society. Other poets, like Suzuki Murio (1919-2002) and Satō Onifusa (1919-2002), did not belong to the humanist group, but wrote haiku that connote the discontents and struggles of the lower class. Here is Murio’s poem published in 1947:

kanashiki kana seibyōin no kemuridashi

how sad—
the smokestack
of a VD hospital

In the background is the image of a large city, with a number of prostitutes serving soldiers of the Occupied Forces. In a short time venereal diseases are widespread, their patients filling hospitals and clinics. The dark smoke coming out of the stack in the poem symbolizes the patient and his secreting fluid.

Avant-garde haiku, meaning a new type of poetry that refreshes the traditional form, had existed many times in Japanese haiku before World War II. The term in the post-war period is applied specifically to the works of Kaneko Tōta (b. 1919), Abe Kan’ichi (1928-2009), Higashigawa Kishio (b. 1927), and others who advocated the expression of the poet’s perception intellectually in terms of images. Haiku, according to them, was a metaphorical presentation of the creative self by way of imagery. An oft-quoted example by Tōta is:
ginkōin-ra asa yori keikō su ika no gotoku

like squids
bank clerks are fluorescent
from the morning

Tōta explains: “In the dark morning each bank clerk holds fluorescent light lonesomely and shows a vivid shape peculiar to the finny tribe. That has settled down into an image.” In other words, he intellectually made his consciousness into two images; he brought the squid and the bank clerk together, though they were distant and unrelated from each other.

Surrealistic haiku are those that make use of techniques like incongruous comparisons, dreamlike metaphors, and abstruse words and phrases. Some free-verse poets, like Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942), Nishiwaki Junzaburō (1894-1982) and Takahashi Shinkichi (1901-87), wrote moving poems in the preceding years, and haiku poets might have read their works. Among surrealistic haiku poets Takayanagi Shigenobu shocked readers by bringing out his first collection of haiku in 1950; above all, his haiku were printed in multi-line form. Other poets like Nagata Kōi (1900-97), Nakamura Sonoko (1912-2001), and Akao Tōshi (1925-81) stuck to the 5-7-5 form, although they used obscure and inscrutable language. I have cited Takayanagi’s haiku before [Note: see part one of this interview, R'r 12.3]; here is an example by Tōshi published in 1957:

ongaku tadayou kishi hitashi yuku bebi no ue

music is afloat—
a snake’s hunger
invades the shore

Are the poet’s spiritual hunger and the uneasiness symbolized in the snake slithering along the shore?

R'r: Charles Bernstein, an American poet, theorist, editor, and literary scholar, recently made the following statement in an interview on The Poet In Today's World:

“... [W]e have many poems translated into English which are much more—they're like expository summaries or paraphrases. ... we have poems translated into English from Spanish, Portuguese, for instance, which are more
comprehensible than the originals. They lose the whole resonance. They become sort of silly—they're like paraphrases. You wanna keep some understanding of the overall incomprehensibilities sometimes of the original.”

Each poem, no doubt, presents different difficulties/issues for a translator. Your book, Bashō and His Interpreters, is a monumental work for a number of reasons, but particularly because it makes every attempt to help readers unravel all the intricacies, allusions, background and cultural capital that might go into, or surround, a haiku written in Japanese.

It could be argued that much, if not most, of English haiku over the last hundred years has been written almost exclusively based upon translations of Japanese haiku (in respectful, reverential imitation). In other words, translations and how they are explicated have had an enormous impact on how English-language haiku and senryu are composed, discussed and intellectualized.

Could you discuss, if possible, this notion of what “resonance” is most often lost when Japanese haiku are translated into English?

And, do you feel that the “incomprehensibilities . . . of the original” is sometimes, or even often times, lost when translating Japanese haiku into English? How so/in what ways?

MU: It is inevitable that a poem loses something when it is translated. In the first place, the original poem has certain denotations and connotations, and while the translator may be able to convey the most of denotations, connotations are often difficult, sometimes impossible, to transmit to readers in a totally different culture. To cite an example easy to understand, here is a haiku by Nishiyama Sōin (1605-82):

\[
\text{matsu ni fuji tako ki ni noboru keshiki ari}
\]

wisteria on a pine—
the scene of an octopus
climbing the tree

The original poems is humorous, for, beside the fact that the whole poem is a parody of famous lines in a noh play, the octopus is a familiar food item in Japan and has been humorously referred to a number of objects like a bald-headed man. In America the octopus is not a familiar object; it is rather an uncanny, bizarre creature seldom appearing in poetry.

Familiarity and humor that go with the image of an octopus are used in a well-known haiku by Matsuo Bashō:
takotsubo ya hakanaki yume wo natsu no tsuki

an octopus pot—
inside, a short-lived dream
under the summer moon

In many critics' opinions, here Bashō identified himself with, or at least had sympathy for, the octopus sleeping in the pot. He wouldn't have done so if the octopus was not so close to him in his mind. English readers wouldn't feel the same way, because the octopus is an uncanny creature living under the sea. The familiar and slightly humorous feeling that makes part of the resonance of the poem is gone from the English translation, and the translator can do nothing about that.

It is especially difficult to convey the whole resonance of a haiku in translation, because the verse form is so short. In a long work like a novel, the translator can try to transmit the resonance by adding words and phrases, or even sentences. I've heard that Prof. Edward Seidensticker, the famous translator of *The Tale of Genji*, did not translate haiku for that reason. According to him, the image of a pond makes the Japanese first think of “the quiet place,” while Americans’ first association of it is “water.” Bashō’s old-pond poem, he thinks, is untranslatable.

As for the “incomprehensibilities . . . of the original,” I have an episode to tell. Prof. Royall Tyler, in re-translating *The Tale of Genji*, said that the original has many abstruse, incomprehensible sentences and that he would try to retain them as such in his translation. Apparently the comment was made to justify his re-translation, for the existing work by Prof. Seidensticker was well known for its fluency and readability. Later Prof. Donald Keene, an expert in Japanese literature and a translator himself, opposed the view and said that English readers would think the abstruseness in translation comes not from the original but from the translator’s lack of skill. I’m on Prof Keene’s side. I think there are incomprehensible Japanese haiku, but I always skip translating them. I see no meaning to translate a haiku I don’t understand.

R'r: Do you think haiku is a dying art in Japan, in the sense that it is no longer really a high-art enterprise?

If you feel that it does, in fact, remain a high-art enterprise, who would you consider to be some of the top poets, and why?
MU: I don’t think haiku is a dying art in Japan. It is hard to call it so when ten million people are writing it and when more than 800 “little magazines” publish their works. Whether today’s haiku can be compared in merit to the best of Bashō and Buson, it is difficult to say. But most of the arts have not fared well since the middle of the last century. Japanese poetry, including haiku and tanka, seems to be in the downward trend. I still think, though, haiku occupies a more significant position in Japan than poetry does in the United States.

I am not well read in contemporary haiku, and so my choice for top poets may be too personal to be taken as a standard one. Before I was stricken by a stroke, I had been translating a good number of 20th century poets, and I will select three from among them. Ōki Amari (b. 1914), also a painter, belongs to a group of poets who write not only haiku but many other genres; her haiku present original impressions of various moments in her fresh, peculiar diction. Tsubouchi Toshinori (b. 1944), Takayanagi Shigenobu’s student, holds haiku to be a poem of fragmentary speech and makes intellectual use of colloquial words and phrases. Natsuishi Ban’ya (b. 1955), another of Takayanagi’s followers, has done a lot of experimental writings, one quality of which is to transcend the sense of the seasons. All those poets work in areas outside haiku as well (the latter two are university professors), and their haiku tend to be intellectual and surrealistic.

R’r: Would you be so kind as to offer us a few of your translations of these three poets? (A few books by Natsuishi Ban’ya have been translated into English, but the other two are largely unknown in English.)

MU: I hesitate to show these, because they are unfinished translations I had been working on before I suffered a stroke. But here they are, two poems each from the works of Ōki, Tsubouchi, and Natsuishi.

Ōki Amari:

*shonen no tsukue ni chizu to utsusemi to*

on the boy’s desk
a map
and an empty cicada shell

*shinu to iu yasuragi fuyu no umi ni nashi*
death—
that peace is nowhere
in the winter sea

Tsubouchi Toshinori:

*aki no kaze shiosaba wo fuku miko wo fuku*

autumn wind
blows at a salted mackerel
blows at a prince

*ganbaru wa nante iu na yo kusa no hana*

“I’ll stand firm!”
don’t say anything of the sort,
flowers of grass

Natsuishi Ban’ya:

*hi izuru kuni no tenshi no midaregami*

in the Land of the Rising Sun
an angel
with tangled hair

*mangetsu ni kizu aru niku niku yasai niku*

a wound
on the full moon—meat, meat
vegetable, meat
R'r: What is the relevance of haiku in Japan, particularly after World War II, especially with regards to the postwar gendai and avant-garde haiku movements?

MU: Most remarkable in Japanese haiku after the Second World War was its popularity. Although haiku, as well as senryu, had been an art for commoners before the war, it has become immensely popular as people began to have more time to spend beside making their living. Today haiku is regarded as one of the respectable hobbies. Many popular magazines and newspapers have a haiku column to which readers contribute their works in the 17-syllable form. Haiku (or senryu) accompanied by a photograph serves as another popular competition in a TV program. For that matter, major haiku poets appear on various television programs. Mayuzumi Madoka (b. 1965), a former Miss Kimono, has become a notable talent who writes in various journals and appears on TV programs.

A number of women have become part of the Japanese haiku world. Some say women occupy about 80% of the Japanese haiku-writing population. Beyond doubt a large majority of them are amateur poets who write haiku in their spare time. But since the end of the war such women as Hashimoto Tahako (1899-1963), Mitsuhashi Takajo (1899-1972), and Katsura Nobuko (1914-2004) have written some of the finest examples of 20th-century haiku. Inahata Teiko (b. 1931), granddaughter of Takahama Kyoshi, is the editor of the most influential of the haiku magazines, Hototogisu.

The post-war period was an era characterized by chaotic, transitional and therefore free creative trends; poets could take liberty in whatever style they would like to. It was in that period when avant-garde and surrealistic schools appeared to experiment with extreme styles. Today’s poets do not seem to go to those extremes. No longer is there any major poet who writes free-style haiku like Hōsai and Santōka. Very few poets who follow Takayanagi Shigenobu use a multi-line form as he did. But they are well aware that modern haiku has gone through those experiments in the recent past. They write haiku in the 5-7-5 form and use season words, yet their poems are more like free verse in implications.

R'r: In your opinion, how does haiku work as a contemporary poetics?

MU: Haiku is one of the shortest verse forms in the world. It is easy to write one. For Japanese people, the 5-7-5 syllable pattern is the basic rhythm of the language, and even elementary school children can produce works without difficulty. For that matter, haiku is being used in American grade schools to teach the basics of poetry. Some mental hospital patients compose haiku to help promote their cure. While poetry is on the decline in many countries, haiku may work as one of the stimulating means to reawaken the significance of poetry.

Haiku is also the type of poetry that makes use of imagery, while leaving its speech fragmentary and suggestive. It creates a good deal of ambiguity, making readers think, associate, and imagine, somewhat like a Zen phrase. It raises questions,
yet gives no answers. Beginners are there, yet endings are not. In today’s world where nothing is clearly closed, haiku may be a fitting art form.
words not in the dictionary
hearing it happens
to the ocean wave

Gary Hotham

one eye on
the green octopus
at the bottom of night

Patrick Sweeney
The night I know the whole
runs its own myth
mystification hollows

black on black, I crawl in—

Rebecca Lilly

Eve Luckring
the fantasy that is me central singularity

George Swede

by proxy I’m bound to show
up jukebox sabotage
dream a deeper desire free the laughter what

Rebecca Lilly
small below a yellow ginkgo
flesh-flies attend
Pio’s stigmata

flesh afterimage of an unreadable page

Patrick Sweeney

Cherie Hunter Day
the word never stood
until I felt
the forest

monophonic ghost frozen river

Mike Andrelczyk
the cold picks you out in a ski mask

john martone

arguing
my eyes
involve every corner

Peter Newton
and gloves what we how

Eve Luckring

the same ice flashes from a satellite dish

john martone
in my sector of the oneness others

Jim Kacian

missing two walls
the ceiling becomes
more important

Tyler Pruett
wet the ratio & wake the threshold spring mud

so greenly history puts forth thorns

Cherie Hunter Day

Eve Luckring
waking up the baby an almanac of stars

Cherie Hunter Day

a blue coffin
one nail escapes
the solar system

Peter Yovu
The removal of the unnecessary, the melding of disparate fragments of language, the not-quite-narrative neither image-sequence nor conversation: all have a strong tradition in modern poetry. Pfleuger’s poems carry that forward excellently with clarity and wit and elegant illustrations picturing what isn’t to be seen. The zodiac as zoetrope with irregular slits.

Tom Raworth

Pfleuger’s poetry glimmers and haunts like light from another galaxy. Transiting internal and external, abstract and concrete, a Zodiac transports its reader into a cosmos of becoming. Every word positioned to its fullest.

Eve Luckring

Release yourself into the plenum which is the rich sense of knowing and uniquely original language Pfleuger inhabits. Haiku that “in the full stop of red engines ago” stop the mind. This is a book about reading limned in images that utilize language to illuminate and outline the seen self: “in the incandescence let me let me read me to you.” — a rare opportunity to indulge in the refuglence of a poet presenting, with a depth of inquiry, what is new about haiku.

Richard Gilbert
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Jason Sanford Brown / founding editor, 2004 – 2008

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Scott Metz: scott@roadrunnerjournal.net
OR
Paul Pfleuger, Jr.: <mrflooger@yahoo.com>

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