

## The Aesthetic Coordinates of Haiku: A Ginkō Towards Mount Fuji

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Can haiku be distinguished from other short forms of poetry? If so, how and by what means? What characteristics mold the aesthetic and the poetics of this genre? Giving a comprehensive answer to this repeatedly asked question would be as legitimate as presenting an imperative definition of poetry or literature in general. Yet, as the following lines argue, it is possible to discuss characteristics and qualities, so that the aesthetic of haiku can be sketched out in an open manner.

To that end, I would like to invite you to a ginkō, a short haiku stroll towards Fuji-san. We will not reach the summit, presumably not even the foot of Fuji, or maybe the journey will end at a nearer mountain. If we are lucky, however, we will find bits and pieces of haiku aesthetic at the wayside, which may serve as a map.

The aesthetic of haiku is—and this may already be disclosed as a debatable and hardly surprising thesis set in a broader context—culture specific, era collective and, as always in the field of poetry, adaptive, and individually subjective. The cornerstones of the aesthetic of haiku can be presented as a coordinate system, which will be demonstrated by examples.

### Haiku Coordinates

Despite its simplicity, haiku is a complex art concentrated on four essential attributes (*shibumi*, *kire*, *atarashimi*, *yūgen*) that may lead to a fifth (*aware*), and can be illustrated as a “haiku coordinate system.” Successful haiku are to be found along a horizontal and a vertical axis:

	<i>Atarashimi</i>	
<i>Shibumi</i>	<i>Aware</i>	<i>Kire</i>
	<i>Yūgen</i>	

An evocative haiku needs all of these elements to succeed. Step by step we're going to learn about the terms of the coordinate system, beginning with the first requirement: *shibumi*. On the formal, horizontal level, *shibumi* means contraction, brevity, understatement, reduction to the essential. A haiku needs at least two words (or one with a graphic addendum, which would rather make it a haiga) and about twenty syllables at most. This brevity depends on the use of allusion to indicate the subject matter and allow space for imagination. Haiku is not narrative. It enables the act of narration: Subjects speak about themselves and consequently, the reader's fantasy tells a story. This is also what distinguishes haiku from aphorisms—the latter provide us with insight in a laconic fashion, the former in an implicit, suggestive manner.

Let's stay on the formal, horizontal level. Haiku also requires a caesura or *kire*. Traditionally, this interjection or interruption in the flow of words functions to juxtapose two elements or layers in the poem. Strictly speaking, however, haiku does not need a caesura, just juxtaposition.

war for water in the future I sip my beer<sup>1</sup>

In this example the individual elements of the text refer to each other in a free, associative manner; they can be interpreted in any direction, respectively. Dimitar Anakiev calls this “linear syncopation,”<sup>2</sup> which is defined by Mario Fitterer as follows: “[...] here it is not the line break that creates the caesura, it is rather the result of the circumstance that the words in the one-liner format are stripped of their syntactic function and purely transformed into objects.”<sup>3</sup>

In haiku *kire* can take effect either by caesura, by “linear syncopation,” or, as in the following two examples, by the judicious use of a verb:

spring light fills the hollow tree trunk<sup>4</sup>

gender god gone deep into the woods<sup>5</sup>

The verbs could be omitted:

spring light in the hollow tree trunk

gender god deep into the woods

But they fulfill their interruptive role by indicating time and bringing about the dynamics of time. In the first example, the verb serves to contrast fullness (“fills”) and emptiness (“hollow”). In both instances, the verbs sharpen the aesthetics of time and make the poems more effective.

*Kire* can always be found if there is a juxtaposition of two elements. This can go as far as having only two elements, two nouns next to each other, as in George Swede’s haiku:

stars    crickets<sup>6</sup>

Or in the author’s haiku, which has been enriched with a possessive pronoun:

her text message    lilac scent<sup>7</sup>

On top of the vertical axis we find *atarashimi*, or novelty, an aesthetic attribute of great importance since Bashō’s Shōmon School. *Atarashimi* means introducing new subjects to haiku poetry or assuming a fresh point of view on old subjects or topics. The paraphrasing of older texts (*honkadōri*) often found in haiku literature also involves the deliberate use of *atarashimi* by emphasizing new aspects of an old text:

an old pond . . .  
a frog leaps in,  
the sound of water<sup>8</sup>

The famous Bashō haiku, for instance, was paraphrased by Ryōkan as follows:

a new pond . . .  
not even the sound  
of a frog jumping in<sup>9</sup>

Bernard Einbond turned it into:

frog pond . . .  
a leaf falls in  
without a sound<sup>10</sup>

*Atarashimi* defies the copy, the mere imitation; it sees the world as a place of permanent (re)invention. It is in this light that Bashō's dictum of "Follow the Creative" (*zoka zuijun*), as stated in H. Shirane's *Traces of Dreams*,<sup>11</sup> is to be understood.

Finally, the haiku coordinate system is completed by *yūgen*, meaning that which is mysterious, everything that lies beyond rationality. *Yūgen* represents the ineffable, ideas that can only be alluded to, that cannot be put into words. In the broadest sense, *yūgen* also implies the qualities and poetics of the past (including the attitudes of *wabi-sabi* (external poorness or plainness; a sense of solitude) and *fūryū* (refined taste in art and lifestyle, etc.)), whereas *atarashimi* tends to the future. In essence, *yūgen* touches on those aspects of reality of which René Magritte spoke when he said, "Surreality is nothing but the reality that has not disposed of the mysterious."<sup>12</sup>

Thus far, the coordinate system has traced what might be considered the four dimensions of space-time. The horizontal, formal axis is the axis of space, while the vertical axis, which is rather concerned with content, refers to time. *Atarashimi* is, so to speak, the pivot between space and time, since it is important with regard to form and content. At the center of the coordinate system is *aware* (*mono no aware*), an aesthetic expression of deep appreciation for beauty as well as a deep melancholy because beauty is fleeting. This is also the point

where the four dimensions of space-time start their journey into non-time or into the multidimensional cosmos.

### Haiku Coordinates in Practice

Here we'll consider some examples of the use of the three "basic skills" or coordinates—*shibumi* (brevity/reduction), *kire* (juxtaposition), and *atarashimi* (freshness/novelty)—in texts that comply with traditional haiku format and with conventional subject matters. We'll also consider whether or not they lead us toward the two more advanced coordinates, *yūgen* (the ineffable) and *aware* (aesthetic appreciation).

crowdedSubway10DimensionsSolitude<sup>13</sup>

the girl's eyes green behind the barbed wire<sup>14</sup>

These examples may be appreciated more by one reader than by another one, but regardless of personal preference, it can be said that all of them exhibit these attributes or dimensions:

1. brevity, reduction (*shibumi*),
2. juxtaposition (*kire*),
3. freshness or novelty on the level of form or content (*atarashimi*).

Brevity seems obvious in both examples. The juxtaposition in the second poem is the pivot word "green," which might refer to the "girl's eyes" as well as to the grass beyond the wire. The novelty in the first example might be the scientific inclusion of "10Dimensions" and, furthermore, the fact that the entire poem appears as one word (which is divided only through capital letters).

Thus, we might say they are three-dimensional haiku, whose craftsmanship corresponds to our sense of reality. If one coordinate were to be omitted, the result would be a flat or two-dimensional haiku, and that does not usually equal

something good, or rather, not something that fascinates.  
A two-dimensional haiku, created by the author ad hoc and  
certainly not a masterpiece, would be:

cherry blossoms  
the entire garden  
full of them

Coordinates 1 and 2 are fulfilled, but coordinate 3, the use of *atarashimi*, is already missing, mainly because the text deals with an often-used topic that leads in this case to no surprising or touching perception. The text suffers from a lack of surprise.

And what about dimensions four and five of the haiku coordinates mentioned earlier? Do these texts hold the mysterious (*yūgen*); do they move us emotionally and aesthetically (*aware*)? Answering this question is notably more difficult, since—where these two qualities are concerned—historic, psychosocial, and individual idiosyncrasies and experiences weigh heavier than with other aesthetic coordinates. What does the writer/reader know, where does she or he come from, what are her or his values and experiences? The effectiveness of the text may result from the sum of all the answers to these questions. It seems most important that an appealing haiku offers something new in form or content or both. An appealing haiku works beyond the “ratio,” leads the mind into the wild woods of wonder where everything has its own unique language. Words turn into images again, turn into the pure energy of reality in a kind of “*unio mystica*.”

We have now reached the end of our metaphorical *ginkō* somewhere near the base of Fuji-san. Readers so inclined may begin the ascent, solitarily or together with others, keeping in mind the following: if a short text shows the first four essential points of the haiku coordinate system, thereby combining poetic imaginative power with existential truth, it generates something that results in aesthetic wonder based on the attentive perception and incidents all around. Then it can be called a haiku, and a successful one at that.

In conclusion, let me paraphrase the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:<sup>15</sup> “Only he or she who discards the map (haiku coordinates) used for orientation on the way to Fuji, may ascend Fuji.” And probably so at the speed of Issa’s snail. In this sense, the haiku coordinate system is not an ultimate guide to the aesthetic of haiku. But it is, surely, an impetus for the conscious development of a fascinating genre, which has not yet reached its end.

## Notes

1. Dietmar Tauchner, in *Presence* 34 (January 2008).
2. Dimitar Anakiev, “New Tools: The Dimension of the Line.” In *edge of light*, Red Moon Anthology 2003 (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2004), 115–119.
3. Mario Fitterer (originally in German), “Das Verschwinden der Schwalbe,” *Vierteljahresschrift der DHG* #67 (January 2005): 5–25.
4. Tauchner, unpublished.
5. Tauchner, *as far as i can* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2010).
6. Cor van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology*, 3rd. edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 212.
7. Tauchner, in *Modern Haiku* 37:3 (summer 2006).
8. Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 16.
9. Shirane, *Traces*, 17.
10. Shirane, *Traces*, 17.
11. Shirane, *Traces*, 257 f.
12. René Margritte, Exhibition at the Albertina in Vienna, May 2012.
13. Tauchner, *noise of our origin* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2013).
14. Tauchner, *as far as i can* (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2010).
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 115.



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