

Tom Raworth: An Interview

by Paul Pfleuger, Jr.



Collskip, Tom Raworth

PP: For starters, Tom, I wanted to ask you about a specific book of yours- "Haiku" released in 1968, that you collaborated on with John Esam and Anselm Hollo. I haven't for the life of me, been able to locate a copy. Could you tell us about it? Also, have you tried haiku or senryu? If you have, could you share some? What interests you most in haiku? Have you followed the progression of this poetry?

TR: The "Haiku" book turns up occasionally. If you hit:

<http://tinyurl.com/2w9krqa>

it'll eventually run up the Addall search page and scrolling down to where they're trying to sell copies of the smaller hardbound/signed edition you can read a pretty decent description of the physical book.

It came about because Asa Benveniste, who ran Trigram Press, felt like doing a book of Haiku. . . . so he asked Anselm, and John Esam (whom I didn't know particularly well. . . . He was [maybe is] a poet from New Zealand who was involved in organising the famous Albert Hall reading in the early 60s. . . . I heard years after that he was was doing falconry in Saudi) and myself. I remember doing my 15 one afternoon. They were completely standard (as then) format. . . . 5 syllables 7 syllables 5 syllables. The complete fifteen are in my Collected Poems (pages 63 to 65). Sometimes it's amusing to see what can be done within a rigid form (not that I think the haiku is ONLY that form). No, I haven't played with it since, nor senryu. My taste is to make a new form each time. Occasionally back in the 70s when I sometimes taught "creative writing" I'd use it as a disciplinary exercise, useful to see what expansion from contraction students could manage: almost forty years later that's so old hat as to be embarrassing. The minor problem with taking the single line approach is that it becomes difficult to distinguish the result from a one-liner. I can't really say I've followed the progression of this poetry as I don't particularly follow poetry per se; merely what interests me.

PP: I have the "My Son the Haiku Writer" section here from your 'Collected Poems' (for purchase at [here](#) and at Amazon USA and UK.). Were they truly inspired by your son writing haiku? This would have been more than 40 years ago when the 5-7-5 approach was often used in English Language haiku. They're intriguing. I particularly like:

wax filtered sounds through
earth where imagination
spreads a boned circle

and

the problems of form
within this limitation
he drops a sylla . . .

and regarding the latter of the two, I can't help notice similarities to the well-known:

To express oneself
 In seventeen syllables
 Is very diffic-

from John Cooper Clarke. Didn't your version come out several years before this one? I'd like to hear about how these came about. And would you allow us to include some work from 'My Son the Haiku Writer' in your Collected Poems?

TR: I think I answered the MSTHW question (how it came about) in one of my other messages. The title was simply a riff on the cliché-proud-

Jewish-mother remark “And this is my son the doctor..... and this is my son the lawyer.....” Yes, I guess that was a decade at least before JCC. Well, the two you mentioned originally, and then, say, any other three you like. Five seems a decent echo of the old traditional English first five-syllable (or sound) line.

from *My Son the Haiku Writer* in Tom Raworth *Collected Poems* (Carcanet Press Ltd., 2003):

time under pressure
dawn, and the green butterflies
crossing the ice-cap

bells of red thunder
the cross of an ape in dreams
my house where i sleep

wax filtered sounds through
earth where imagination
spreads a boned circle

PP: How much of a critical “form” is English-language haiku? How worthy of literary study and critique is it? Do you think it will ever figure into the western literary canon?

TR: These are meaningless questions to me. I am not an academic, read only what catches my interest (no study, no critique) and have absolutely no interest in literary canons.

PP: How might poets writing haiku improve their work and therefore be considered for publication in traditionally non-haiku journals?

TR: Why would they want to be? As far as I'm concerned one writes because one likes to read: and because one doesn't like to read shit one attempts not to write it. I assume work improves with both reading and writing; and by reading your own writing with the same sharp eye, ear and intelligence as you read anyone else's.

PP: Regarding the deconstruction of the image, Marjorie Perloff has suggested in Radical Artifice (1991) three ways which contemporary poets are critical of the image:

“(1) the image, in all its concreteness and specificity, continues to be foregrounded, but it is now presented as inherently deceptive, as that which must be bracketed, parodied, and submitted to scrutiny - this is the mode of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, more recently of Michael Palmer and Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman;

(2) the Image as referring to something in external reality is replaced by the word as Image, but concern with morphology and the visualization of the word's constituent parts: this is the mode of Concrete Poetry extending from such pioneers as Eugen Gomringer and Steve McCaffery, Susan Howe, and Johanna Drucker; and

(3) Image as the dominant gives way to syntax: in Poundian terms, the turn is from phanopoeia to logopoiea. "Making strange" now occurs at the level of phrasal and sentence structure rather than at the level of the image cluster so that poetic language cannot be absorbed into the discourse of the media... (Pg.78).”

As you have seen, a number of poems found here in Roadrunner seem to at least partially subscribe to some of the contemporary criticalness of the image that Perloff identifies. Being that haiku is often perceived as a poetry that relies on “objectively real images” how do you see contemporary haiku benefiting from applications of what Perloff has called attention to here?

TR: I imagine Marjorie's observations are accurate. Reflex or muscle-memory: anyone's choice. To the last question I can only answer with the brief poem:

4.33

bird no sing in cage

PP: You have been associated in the Language Poets movement for decades now. Placing emphasis on words themselves and not the images they evoke in haiku could be seen as standing in direct opposition to the ever-dominant western interpretation of Shiki's shasei or “realistic sketch from life” technique. Do you see a place for this in haiku?

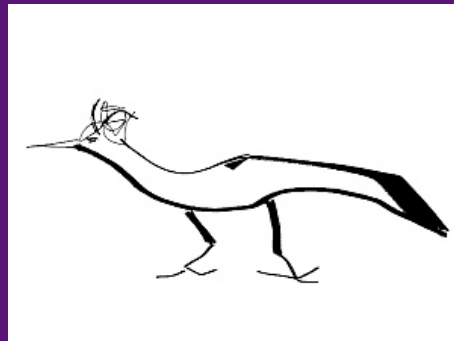
TR: I haven't been involved in any movements intentionally and I suppose I could argue that words are images. There are no rules (though many would like there to be): that is the central beauty of art. A place for everything and everything in its place.

PP: Thanks for your time, Tom. We appreciate it.

Bio

Tom Raworth's favourite hot sauce is Jonkanoo and he can see the sea from his window. He was born before WW2 and has been writ-

ing to amuse himself for half-a-century: for the last twenty years of which he has also played with visual images. He's pretty tired at the moment and his right foot aches.



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