

“Undressed— / today’s role dangles / from a metal hanger”: Figurativity and the Economy of Means in Contemporary English Haiku*

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Critics routinely assert that the genre of haiku is characterised by an utmost “economy of means” (e.g. Harris 280; Hokenson 694; Takeuchi 7; Norton 81). Just as routinely, they fail to offer a precise definition of this term. Does *economy of means* signify that a haiku comprises a limited number of syllables (quantitative definition)? Does it mean that a haiku employs relatively simple language (qualitative definition)? Does it mean that the genre achieves much with little (relational definition)? If so, how are the terms *much* and *little* to be understood? In this paper, which considers the connection between figurativity and the economy of means in English-language haiku, I will adopt the third, relational definition. A version of this definition is provided by Peter Sprengel in his book *Literatur im Kaiserreich*. Commenting upon a work by the German (non-haiku) poet Otto Nebel, Sprengel notes: “[H]ier herrscht Ökonomie der Mittel, [...] hier gilt jenes ‘Prinzip von dem Minimum der anzuwendenden Kraft und dem Maximum des Leistungseffekts’” (195).¹ Sprengel thus defines *economy of means* in poetry as the principle of using *minimal means* to achieve a *maximum effect*.

If one applies this definition to the English haiku,² one can say that the genre strives for an utmost economy of means in that it employs minimal means with a view to producing a maximum of effect. Minimal means, in this context, is to be understood quantitatively: English haiku comprise no more than 17 syllables, typically fewer.³ The question of how these syllables can be made to yield the maxi-

*For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debwagner02301.htm>>.

mum effect lies at the heart of much Anglo-American theorising about haiku (a substantial portion of which takes place in the virtual space of the internet—on haiku-related websites, open-access journals, blogs, etc.). If one distils the work of the most prominent theorists,⁴ who are generally not averse to couching their poetics in normative terms, one arrives at something resembling a consensus, according to which a haiku achieves the maximal desired effect if it displays the following characteristics as fully as possible: concreteness, immediacy, affective appeal, affective polyvalence, semantic underdetermination, and (with some restrictions) intellectual appeal.

In the context of English haiku studies, these characteristics may be defined as follows. *Concreteness*: instead of offering abstract thoughts or epigrammatic reflections, the haiku presents concrete “images” —a term that, in haiku theory, denotes not only visual images but all sensory impressions of an object, event or action (see Higginson 115). Most theorists voice a preference for a combination of two images, one of which may be more sharply focused than the other (Higginson 116-19). *Immediacy*: the haiku is constructed in such a way that the images are quickly conjured up in the reader’s mind, requiring no lengthy process of interpretation (Willmot 211). *Affective appeal*: the conjured images do not leave the reader untouched but produce an emotional response in her (Harter 174).⁵ *Affective polyvalence*: while creating an emotion in the reader, the haiku does not “tell [...] the reader *what* emotion to feel”; instead, it allows for a wide range of emotional responses (Harter 174, my italics; cf. Higginson 22). *Semantic underdetermination*: the haiku provides “only the bare essentials” of an image, thus allowing and demanding a maximum of readerly participation in the construction of the image (Heuvel x; cf. xv-xvi and British Haiku Society, sect. c). This aspect is neatly encapsulated in the notion of “the half-said thing”—a term that was introduced into the theoretical discourse on haiku by F. S. Flint in 1908 and has been common currency ever since (Pondrom 50). *Intellectual appeal*: when haiku critics speak in general terms, they tend to assert that “the appreciation of haiku should not be demanding intellectually” (British Haiku

Society, sect. e);⁶ when they discuss individual haiku, however, they frequently laud them for a feature that, for lack of a better term, I call intellectual appeal through delayed reflection. Some haiku display the essential characteristics of concreteness and immediacy—they directly conjure up concrete images—, but beyond this, in a temporal and additive sense, they engage the alert reader intellectually. Such an intellectual engagement may be achieved in various ways: a haiku may present two disparate images that induce the reader to reflect on the relation between them (Higginson 116-18, 137-38); it may contain an ambiguity that calls for a resolution (British Haiku Society, sect. c); it may relate intertextually to a literary pretext (Higginson 123-24), etc.⁷ A haiku that displays the features listed in this paragraph as fully as possible produces a maximum effect with minimal means; that is to say, such a haiku is characterised by an utmost *economy of means*.

Anglo-American theorists of the genre persistently argue that figurative language diminishes the concreteness and immediacy of a haiku. Thus, Michael Dylan Welch instructs the haikuist to “[a]void [...] metaphor, simile, and most other rhetorical devices” as “they are often too abstract or detours around the directness exhibited in most good haiku” (Welch); Penny Harter advises haiku initiates to ask themselves whether their poems “present one or two clear images, with no metaphors or similes” (173); Karen Peterson Butterworth notes that figurative language “threatens to corrupt the directness of haiku”; Cor van den Heuvel casts the same point more poetically by observing that “a bejewelled finger distracts from what it is pointing at” (lxvi; cf. xxix). According to this common viewpoint, tropes prevent a haiku from reaching a maximum effect in terms of concreteness and immediacy, thus reducing the *economy of means* in the poem.

The present paper takes issue with this viewpoint in a twofold sense. As I will argue, such devices as metaphor, metonymy, and allegory need not diminish the concreteness and immediacy, hence the economy of means, in a haiku. On the contrary, tropes may heighten the economy of means by allowing a haiku to reach its full potential in terms of the other crucial characteristics: semantic

underdetermination, affective polyvalence, affective and intellectual appeal. If this argument holds, the use of figurative language, which is “generally considered to be taboo in English-language haiku” (Shirane),⁸ should be encouraged rather than discouraged.

The following poem by Lorraine Ellis Harr may serve as an illustration of the basic claim that a metaphorical haiku can be highly concrete and immediate:

The sparkler goes out
and with it—the face
of the child.

Harr’s poem contains what could be called an elliptical metaphor: as the “sparkler goes out,” the face of the child—which was sparkling, filled with light—goes out, too. On reading the poem, we immediately see two concrete images: a sparkler that loses its light and a child’s face that changes accordingly. The elliptical metaphor by no means diminishes the immediate concreteness of the haiku. On the contrary, it is hard to see how that vivid image of a changing expression in a child’s face could have been conveyed without resort to metaphor.

The following one-line haiku, a subgenre that flourished in the 1980s but fell largely out of favour afterwards (see Heuvel xxviii), takes us a step further:

touching the ashes of my father

Literature students who were confronted with this haiku by Bob Boldman immediately saw or felt either of two things: the touching of ashes or the touching of an urn.⁹ This bifurcated response indicates that Boldman’s haiku is concrete and immediate, but crucially underdetermined on the semantic level. This results from the presence of a potential metonymy: the word “ashes” can designate the ashes themselves (literal reading) or it can refer to an urn with ashes enclosed inside (metonymic reading). In everyday discourse, we encounter this type of metonymy fairly frequently, for example when

somebody asks us to “pass the water.” Without the use of the (potential) metonymy, the same degree of underdetermination, which produces a crucial ambiguity, could not have been achieved.¹⁰ By augmenting the poem’s semantic underdetermination, the metonymy also heightens its affective polyvalence; for the alternative visualisations open up different spectrums of emotional response. Whereas the touching of a dead man’s ashes is likely to elicit anything from a simple “Yuk!” to a sublime mixture of the awesome and the awful, the touching of an urn may evoke feelings of sadness, solemnity, or quiet closeness—to name only a few. Finally, by broadening the range of conceivable responses (both visual and emotional), the metonymy indirectly enhances the emotional appeal of the poem.

A similar combination of effects can be observed in this haiku by Alexis Rotella:

Undressed—
today’s role dangles
from a metal hanger.

Despite the metonymy in the word “role,” Rotella’s haiku is readily understandable. Upon reading this poem, students stated almost unanimously that it conjured up two concrete images in their minds: an undressed person and a piece of clothing dangling from a metal hanger. On the downside (as measured against the criteria set out above), the metonymy reduces the immediacy of the haiku slightly, though not unduly. On the upside, it significantly increases the poem’s semantic underdetermination. Even more so than Boldman’s poem, which contains a semantic ambiguity that enables the reader to visualise the image in two different ways, Rotella’s haiku affords an active role to the reader, allowing him to insert any item of clothing into the gap created by the metonymy. Being asked what exactly they saw, students gave such diverse answers as a suit, a waiter’s dress worn during a part-time job, and a short-skirt disco outfit. By provoking such disparate visual responses, the haiku allows for a wide range of emotional responses—people associate different feelings with suits

and disco outfits. To put it more technically: by increasing the poem's semantic underdetermination, the metonymy heightens its affective polyvalence. The metonymy also heightens the affective appeal of the poem; for while the reader may not care about the image of, say, "a suit that dangles from a metal hanger," she is bound to care for an image that she (co-)created herself. All three characteristics—semantic underdetermination, affective polyvalence and appeal—are further enhanced by the possibility of a literal (mis)reading of the poem. In four of the classes in which this haiku was put to the test, at least one student saw not a piece of clothing, but a toilet roll dangling from a metal hanger; for them, this was a haiku about diarrhoea. Of the colleagues and friends to whom I read the poem, some also understood it in this way, visualising an undressed person on a toilet and a dangling paper roll. While the poem does not allow for such a *reading* (the spelling clearly indicates the social *role*, not the toilet *roll*), it does, thanks to the homophony of the words, allow for such a *hearing*. Considering that the genre of haiku is closely associated with oral culture—particularly through the tradition of the "hokku party," an event where poets gather to listen to each other's poems (Hoyt 180-82)—the notion of a literal acoustic meaning as opposed to a metonymic visual meaning is not far-fetched and may well be applied to Rotella's richly textured haiku. It should perhaps be added that a metonymic reading of the word "role" in the second line leads to a partial, retrospective metaphorisation of the word "undressed" in the first line. As "today's role dangles from a metal hanger," the speaker is unclothed in a dual sense: (s)he is without literal garments, but (s)he is also without the figurative garment of a social role, which has been shed or not yet donned. By inviting reflections like these, the metonymy at the heart of Rotella's poem proves an intellectual stimulus to the reader.

An analogous stimulus is provided by the following haiku, penned by Tom Clausen:

sidewalk sale—
wind twists a lifetime
guarantee tag

Clausen's poem immediately presents two concrete images, which are connected by what Higginson calls the "zoom-lens" technique (116). The first image depicts a general scene: a sidewalk sale. The second image provides a close-up of a minute part of that scene: a lifetime-guarantee tag (on a backpack or some other item) that is being twisted by the wind. If the poem were written in one line, as Japanese haiku customarily are, there would be little incentive for a metaphorical reading. As it is—the poem being presented in the tripartite manner of the English haiku—, it is difficult not to read the second line metaphorically. "[W]ind twists a lifetime": human lives are changed in unforeseen ways by powerful, invisible forces. This metaphorical affirmation of change and uncontrollability stands in stark contrast to the literal image of a "lifetime guarantee tag," which emblematises the human wish for constancy and control. At the same time, the metaphor reinforces the symbolic significance of the fact that the guarantee tag is twisted and turned by the wind. Metaphor and symbolism thus combine to launch a powerful attack on the notion, crystallised in the image of the guarantee tag, that human beings have complete mastery over their lives. Whereas Rotella's poem employs a metonymy, Clausen's haiku uses a metaphor to engage the alert reader intellectually.

Two frequently anthologised poems by J. W. Hackett, one of the fathers of American haiku, achieve the same effect through yet another trope, allegory:

Wind gives way to calm
and the stream smoothes, revealing
its treasure of leaves.

Deep within the stream
the huge fish lie motionless
facing the current.

Unlike the haiku discussed so far, which consist of nine to thirteen syllables, Hackett's poems comprise the traditional seventeen syllables. These provide room for more complex images. In the first haiku,

the wind abates, the stream smoothes, many beautiful leaves become visible. Despite the weak metaphor of the “treasure,” which I take to mean plenty and/or pretty, and the implicit personification of the wind and calm entailed by the verb “gives way,” the haiku presents concrete images with great immediacy. The same is true of the second haiku, which conjures up large motionless fish at the bottom of a running stream. In order to decipher the allegorical dimension of the poems, one needs to know that the genre of haiku has frequently been linked to Zen Buddhism and that Hackett himself was a lifelong practitioner of Zen.¹¹ Both facts are well known to the haiku aficionado. Readers who approach Hackett’s poems without this knowledge in mind receive assistance from the paratext, at least if they encounter the poems in their standard context, *The Zen Haiku and Other Zen Poems of J. W. Hackett*. While overtly depicting a natural scene, the first haiku covertly allegorises the process of zazen meditation. Ideally in such meditation, mental activity (“wind”) gives way to a state of quietness (“calm”); the “stream” of consciousness “smoothes,” resulting in a clear vision of reality (“revealing its treasure of leaves”). In his book *Haiku: A Poet’s Guide*, Lee Gurga offers a similar reading of the second haiku, identifying a Zen allegory underneath the surface of the pastoral image:

The fish can be seen as people who have developed a Zen approach to life. Moving, yet motionless, in the stream of life, but unaffected by the currents that carry others away; facing upstream in a world that is moving downstream. (Gurga)¹²

Whether one accepts Gurga’s reading or not, it shows that the inclusion of a trope may significantly enhance the intellectual appeal of a haiku.¹³

According to Shakespeare’s Polonius, “brevity is the soul of wit” (*Hamlet* 2.2.91). Since this dictum applies not only to haiku but also to critical writings on haiku, which tend to be short, I shall refrain from providing further examples and conclude my argument. The poems by Harr, Boldman, Rotella, Clausen, and Hackett illustrate that, while

figurative language need not decrease the concreteness and immediacy of a haiku, it may well increase its semantic underdetermination, affective polyvalence, affective appeal, and/or intellectual appeal. Instead of diminishing the *economy of means* in a haiku, tropes may thus heighten that economy by bringing the poem closer to the ideal of a maximum effect achieved through minimal means. Consequently, the prevalent taboo on tropes in haiku should be lifted and their skilful use encouraged.

Let it be added in the manner of Polonius (who carries on happily after extolling the virtue of brevity) that the widespread, skilful use of tropes may produce two other desirable effects. First, it may result in an implicit metaphorisation of the English haiku canon. We witnessed a version of this phenomenon further above: in Rotella's poem, the metonymy in line two ("role") leads to an implicit metaphorisation of the word "undressed" in line one. The same phenomenon occurs not only on the microlevel of an individual poem, but also on the macrolevel of the poetic canon. Towards the end of a poetry seminar based on the Norton *Haiku Anthology*, two students—who had by then encountered a small number of figurative haiku, alongside an overwhelming number of "literal" haiku—surprised me by offering a metaphorical reading of this poem by Vincent Tripi:

Staring at me
from the roar of the river
a wild horse

While the majority (including myself) visualised a wild horse, the said students visualised a muscular man fixating them "from the roar of the river." Though surprising at first sight, such a metaphorical reading of the haiku is both possible and plausible. The reading is conceivably sparked off by the verb "[s]taring," which is more commonly applied to humans than animals.¹⁴ In addition, the virile image of the roaring river interacts as dynamically with the image of a powerfully built man as it does with the image of a wild horse.¹⁵ The implicit metaphor detected by the students significantly heightens the

poem's semantic underdetermination (two alternative visualisations), intellectual appeal (how do the visualisations relate to each other?), affective polyvalence (wild men and wild horses elicit different reactions), and affective appeal (some readers may care for wild men, but not for wild horses). An increase in the number of haiku that employ tropes (semi-)explicitly is likely to sensitise readers, as it sensitised these students, to the presence of implicit metaphors in ostensibly literal haiku.

Second, the widespread, skilful use of figurative language would contribute to a complexification of the English haiku as a genre. As Shirane points out, the Japanese haiku is, by comparison, more complex. This is partly due to the fact that Japanese haiku are embedded in an intricate web of literary-cultural references and associations that engage the reader's intellect beyond a mere appreciation of the imagery presented in the poem (see Shirane). Another reason for the heightened complexity of Japanese haiku lies in their figurative dimension: "the seasonal word in Japanese haiku tends often to be inherently metaphorical" and the greatest practitioners of haiku, most prominently Bashō, make explicit use of metaphor and allegory (Shirane).

In Japan, the haiku is an immensely successful genre. It is not only an important object of literary study, it is also a widespread social phenomenon:

The writing and sharing of haiku engage hundreds of thousands of Japanese today, not just a few haiku masters. There are a number of large, national-circulation magazines in Japan with titles like *Haiku*, *Haiku Study*, and *Haiku and Essays*. There are hundreds of haiku-club magazines, also issued monthly. [...] [T]he essence of haiku activity in Japan is in the small haiku clubs, where people from diverse backgrounds meet to compose, discuss, and publish their own and one another's haiku. (Higginson 42)

If the English haiku, which is as yet too often perceived as "a small puddle far from the mainstream of poetry" (Heuvel xxxix), is to acquire anything resembling that kind of recognition, it must strive for a similar degree of complexity as its parent genre. One way of achieving this complexity, as I hope to have shown in this paper, is by

breaking with an established convention.¹⁶ Anglo-American haikuists should actively seek to invest their work with a figurative dimension, thus creating the kind of poetry that satisfies the senses *and* the intellect—that is to say, “the kind of poetry that can break into the mainstream and can become part of a poetic heritage” (Shirane).

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NOTES

¹“Here prevails economy of means, here [...] obtains the ‘principle of the minimum force to be applied and the maximum effect to be achieved.’”

²Readers who wish to learn more about English-language haiku are referred to William J. Higginson’s *The Haiku Handbook*. Although published as early as 1985, this book still represents the standard introduction to the topic (in 2010, a “25th Anniversary Edition” appeared, with a new foreword by Jane Reichhold). In chapters 4 and 5, Higginson traces the complex process by which the genre of haiku entered the English-speaking world. Chapters 7 and 8 explore some of the transformations undergone by the genre, as it was transplanted to a new linguistic and cultural context: English haiku tend to contain fewer syllables than Japanese haiku; they are generally written in three lines, not in one; they frequently omit the seasonal word (*kigo*) that is so crucial in Japanese haiku; etc. One transformation that has come to the critical fore in the past two decades, and that partly relates to the omission of the seasonal reference, is not discussed in any satisfactory manner in Higginson’s book. Japanese poets traditionally draw a sharp line between two genres that share a common form but differ in subject and tone: whereas *haiku* focus on the natural world and are serious in tone, *senryu* focus on human actions and are predominantly humorous/satirical in tone (see Shirane). Anglo-American haikuists routinely ignore this traditional distinction, by producing poems that combine a focus on the human realm with a largely serious tone. In this article, I follow the common practice of subsuming such haiku-senryu hybrids under the general category of the English haiku (cf. Shirane and British Haiku Society).

³“A[n English] haiku can be anywhere from a few to 17 syllables, rarely more. It is now known that about 12—not 17—syllables in English are equivalent in length to the 17 *onji* (sound-symbols) of the Japanese haiku” (Heuvel xv). As a result of this insight, poets (including the majority of those cited in this article) have increasingly come to produce ten- to fourteen-syllable haiku.

⁴These include, among others, Cor van den Heuvel, William J. Higginson, Rod Willmot, and Michael Dylan Welch.

⁵Needless to say, affective appeal is no exclusive domain of haiku—as Moreland Perkins observes: “A poem is (commonly) meant to elicit a certain emotion, to have an emotional impact” (99-100). Due to the extreme brevity of the genre, however, haikuists appear to be particularly aware of the danger of penning a poem that fails to reach the reader emotionally, “one of the dreaded ‘So What?’ haiku” (Marsh, “Metaphor”).

⁶The anti-intellectualist strain in Anglo-American haiku theory stems in part from the perceived connection between haiku and Zen Buddhism; for an exploration of this connection, see n12 below.

⁷A well-known example of an intertextual haiku is Frank Robinson’s “the elevator / opens ... / vacant masks / ... closes,” which offers an allusive variation on Jack Cain’s frequently anthologised haiku “an empty elevator / opens / closes.”

⁸As I was unable to procure a hard copy of Haruo Shirane’s prize-winning article “Beyond the Haiku Moment,” I am following Harris (292) in citing the online version of this article made available on *haikupoet.com* (accessed 28 Nov. 2013). Unfortunately, this version does not contain page numbers.

⁹This and subsequent claims about student reactions to particular haiku are based on five literature classes, including a haiku seminar, that I taught at Bochum University between 2005 and 2009.

¹⁰Due to their conciseness, all haiku are semantically underdetermined in the sense that the information we receive is highly limited and selective. Nevertheless, some haiku are more underdetermined than others. It is one thing for a poem not to specify the colour, smell or texture of an object; it is another thing not to specify the object itself. In the latter case, the degree of underdetermination, and consequently of readerly participation in the construction of the image, is higher.

¹¹In his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki defines the essence of Zen as follows: “Zen defies all concept-making. [...] Zen perceives or feels, and does not abstract nor meditate. Zen penetrates and is finally lost in the immersion” (42). In other words, practitioners of Zen aim to move beyond conceptualisation, beyond the constant intellectual web-spinning of the mind, to immerse themselves in the here and now. Following the pioneer British haiku critic R. H. Blyth, who “believe[d] that Zen Buddhism was the dominant influence on [...] haiku,” Anglo-American critics have repeatedly “stress[ed] the sources of haiku in Zen consciousness” (Higginson 57, 67; cf. Amann; and Heuvel liv-lv). Some have gone so far as to suggest that “a true haiku [...] is a moment of total and genuine awareness of the reality of the Now” (Spiess 10) and that the reading of haiku produces “little flashes of enlightenment” comparable to the ones experienced by the Zen adept (Marsh, “Haiku”). Japanologists such as Hiroaki Sato and Haruo Shirane have launched vociferous attacks on this spiritualised and, in effect, anti-intellectualist conception of the genre, arguing that the connection between Zen and haiku is largely a Western construction (cf. Sato 129-31; and Shirane). Nevertheless, this conception has influenced the shape of English haiku, by

inducing many poets to focus exclusively on concreteness and immediacy (the here and now) at the expense of intellectual stimulation. We are thus confronted with the paradoxical situation that the English haiku has been more strongly influenced by a Japanese religious tradition, Zen Buddhism, than the Japanese haiku.

¹²Since I was unable to procure a copy of Gurga's book, I am forced to cite an unpaginated excerpt. This excerpt is provided by Dr. Gabriele Greve (Daruma Museum, Japan) in her well-established blog on haiku-related topics: *wkdhaikutopics.blogspot.com* (accessed 28 Nov. 2013).

¹³Interestingly, Hackett's poems use the connection to Zen, which, on a macroscopic level, has a tendency to weaken the intellectual dimension in English-language haiku, as a means of strengthening that dimension.

¹⁴The *OED* lists more than twenty modern instances of "stare, *v.*, 1. *a. intr.* To gaze fixedly and with eyes wide open"; only one of these applies the verb to animals.

¹⁵It may not be a coincidence that the students who visualised a man were both female. In my teaching experience, some haiku produced a noticeably gendered response. Rotella's "Undressed—," for example, led the majority of male students to visualise some item of clothing associated with work, such as a business suit; the garments visualised by the female students could not be so clearly assigned to one field of experience. This and related observations suggested that the genre of haiku may prove a fruitful ground for a gender-oriented reader-response study.

¹⁶For other suggestions on how the English haiku may increase its complexity, without losing its original character and appeal, see Shirane; note particularly his notion that a haiku should connect its "horizontal axis" (the concrete, immediate images of the poem) to the "vertical axis" of tradition (past events, texts, etc.).

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