

HARDLY STRICTLY HAIKAI

—An Introduction—

Haikai no Renga is collaborative poetry of Japanese origin normally written by two or more poets linking stanzas of 17 syllables and 14 syllables according to specific rules governing the relationship between stanzas. *Haikai* collaboration can be as complex as chess, as multi-dimensional as *go*, and as fast-paced and entertaining as dominoes. It is as much about the interaction of the poets as it is about what gets written. The forward progress of its improvisation is akin to that of a tight jazz combo. *Haikai* composition has also been compared to montage in experimental film where the discontinuity of images and vectors achieves an integral non-narrative expression.

Haikai no renga is known variously as *renga*, *haikai*, *renku*, and linked poetry. Generally the term *renga* is applied to an older, more traditional style of linking poetry practiced by the aristocracy and the upper echelon of medieval Japanese society. *Haikai no renga* means “non-standard *renga*” though it has often been translated as “mongrel” or “dog *renga*” which places it in the literary hierarchy as common entertainment.

In the introduction to her seminal study of Matsuo Basho’s *haikai no renga*, *Monkey’s Raincoat* (Grossinger/Mushinsha, 1973), Dr. Maeda Cana offers a further explication of the word *haikai*. “The main characteristics of the *haikai* are partly discernible in the *kanji* or Chinese characters which make up the words *haikai* and *renku*. *hai* denotes fun, play, humor, and also actor or actress, and *kai* friendly exchange of words; *ren* represents a number of carriages passing along a road one after another and has the meaning of continuing to completion while *ku* is expressive of the rhythmic changes in speech and denotes end or stop.”

Renku is a literary game of high seriousness valuing cooperation and rewarding intelligence as well as intuition. A poet’s erudition and sense of language are called upon to clear paths and build bridges that will meander through the landscape of a literary garden. Its cooperative result, a balance of unpredictable language gestures as insubstantial as smoke but possessed of a palpable humanity, is what is important. The echo of the response, its relationship to the previous stanza, and how it extends its meaning, poignantly or allusively, is the esthetic ground for this kind of poetry. The linking process, in *renga*, and in *haikai*, allows a sequence whose subtle oscillation of playfulness and gravity walk the tightrope of language’s built-in ambiguities.

Seasonal themes dominate in *haikai no renga*. Japanese culture and esthetics prize expressive response to the natural world as its lyric mode. “The classification in linked poetry is simpler,” Earl Miner states in his

ground breaking study, *Japanese Linked Poetry* (Princeton, 1979), “there is the sense that a given stanza has but one of two kinds of main topic, season and miscellaneous. . .with subtopics of love, travel, grievance, Buddhism and so on.” *Haikai no renga* allows for humor, common idioms, and the more mundane, sometimes scatological aspects of existence as opposed to traditional *renga*, viewed as exclusive, rigid, esoteric, and ritualized.

As an example of *haikai no renga* styles, and the poets’ eye for humor and fashion, their ear for wry social commentary, Miner translated the following stanzas from *Poetry Is What I Sell* [*The Monkey’s Straw Raincoat*, p 380] as written by the renowned Basho with his partner Kikaku who Miner characterized as “in some ways . . . the most dazzling *haikai* poet.”

*Winter drizzle at Yamazaki
he joins in the umbrella dance
a bamboo grass design
figures his lounging kimono
dyed a classy blue*

— Basho

*A bamboo grass design
figures his lounging kimono
dyed a classy blue
under clouds at the hunting grounds
he yearns in vain for the young lord*

— Kikaku

*Under clouds at the hunting grounds
he yearns in vain for the young lord
the house’s first daughter
has now grown up in the household
of the village headman*

— Basho

*The house’s first daughter
has now grown up in the household
of the village headman
“The Gossip Is She Snores Like Thunder”
was ordered as the poetic topic*

— Kikaku

At the height of its popularity in late 17th Century Japan, *renku* were composed by groups of poets over the course of an evening that included

blossom and/or moon viewing, food, and liberal portions of rice wine. The assembled poets belonged to a *haikai* group, a *ka*. *Renga* sequences are primarily group efforts although there are examples of *dokugin*, solo *renga* composition, most notably by the poet Sogi (1421–1502), of one hundred stanzas or more—thousand stanza *renga* were not unheard of either. The thirty-six stanza sequence known as a *kasen* was one favored by Basho and his disciples, the number thirty-six having a special cultural reference, the Thirty Six Immortal Poets.

Poems were spoken and copied down by a scribe. The *renku* master, known as the *renkushi*, might adjust a line or word, comment on the linking, even reject links too similar to previous stanzas. Socially these *haikai* groups were comparable to a loose aggregation of musicians coming together on special occasions to put into practice what they know of the form and to test their virtuosity in cooperative composition. “Generally speaking, *haikai* is steeped in the wit and banter” as Dr. Cana explains, and “it has a brilliance that shocks. Such brilliance is continual and amazes. . .at every turn.” Poets are under pressure to produce the unpredictable so that the possibilities of cleverness are continually exploited at a tempo that is swift and witty. The *haikai* poets of old delighted in word play, literary allusions, double entendres as well as displays of authentic sensibility. The completed *renku* is as much a certificate of cooperation as it is a multi-page poem and a sequence of short poems. Its literary value is in its effervescent spontaneity and transitory nature, a quality much appreciated by the Japanese.

俳諧

I was encouraged in my curiosity about *haikai no renga* by the poet and calligrapher Keith Kumasen Abbott, a long time friend and associate, who steered me to the publication of Earl Miner’s *Japanese Linked Poetry* in the late seventies. Professor Earl Miner’s explanation of linked poetry, its history, its prosody, in this study, and in the subsequent *The Monkey’s Straw Raincoat* (Princeton, 1981), formed a solid grounding for my understanding of *haikai no renga* and the composition of *haikai*.

Most of the innovations and adaptations of method in *Poetry For Sale* can be credited to Keith Kumasen Abbott and his deep understanding of the form. It was his suggestion that the opening verse of the *haikai*, generally designated the ‘guest’ *hokku*, be taken from haiku literature, both traditional and modern, and explains why the *renku* can open with a stanza by Buson as well as by Jack Kerouac. Abbott created the order of participation, known as the ‘batting order,’ as well as introducing what are designated as ‘specials,’ the

flower and moon stanzas in their predetermined position in the sequence. He also determined that the length of the *haikai* sequence would consist of thirty-six linking stanzas known as a *kasen*.

The idea of doubling the stanzas to place emphasis on the linking process rather than the individual stanzas was Keith's as well. This was done to emphasize, as Professor Miner noted, that the linking of stanzas produced a unique 31-syllable poem resembling a *tanka* and was to be appreciated outside of the sequential flow of the *renga*. In essence, each linked stanza creates its own poem as well as contributing to the integrity of the sequence. The repetition of the stanzas serves as a speed bump for Western readers who are used to reading a column of verse in narrative succession and who might miss the subtlety of the unique linking. Professor Miner's method in his careful exposition of *haikai* was to repeat the verse to draw attention to the linking process. The doubling of stanzas became a feature of our own *renku* even though that aspect does not exist in the original compositions of Japanese linked poetry.

The *renku* were written at a remove rather than in a group setting since the poets involved lived at a distance from each other, and that meant the links were sent through the mail (before the ubiquity of computers and email). Accompanying the linked stanzas were often rationalizations as to why a particular link was chosen or that a previous link was particularly effective, and so on. In reading these conjectures and motivations, the idea occurred to me to include comments by the authors on their particular links and those of their collaborators. Miner had shadowed his representations of *haikai no renga* with a commentary on each of the links in his texts, and that method was borrowed for our own purposes. Dr. Maeda Cana had done something very similar in *Monkey's Raincoat* by way of highlighting process in Basho's *haikai no renga*.

Professor Earl Roy Miner (1927–2004), our *haikai* guide through the agency of his writings on Japanese linked poetry, taught at Princeton and was a noted scholar of Japanese literature. Earl Miner's *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (1958) underscored my attitudes about the importance of Asian literature in the formulation of a personal poetry esthetic. His thorough exposition on Japanese court poetry, *Introduction To Japanese Court Poetry* (1968), gave relevance to the evolution of *renga* and *haikai no renga*, as did the tradition of the poetic diary, *Japanese Poetic Diaries* (2004), and was essential to my understanding of *haikai no renga*. At one point I contacted Professor Miner and revealed myself and Keith as adherents to his views and methods of Japanese linked poetry.

Professor Miner's response was cautiously appreciative—we were not the first to knock at his door looking for validation—yet his sincerity in assessing

our *renku* was encouraging. In a letter dated February 16th, 1987, Professor Miner acknowledged a sample of linked poetry entitled *Bird Feeder Renku* by thanking me for my letter and the enclosed “English haikai or renku.” He went on to write, “I have seen a number of attempts to do versions of linked poetry in English, and I think yours the truest to the spirit of the Japanese. . . I did enjoy your work and would like to see what you finally come up with. You are on to something interesting, and there are Japanese friends who would be interested in what you are doing.” If nothing else, Professor Miner’s reply reinforced my determination in continuing with collaborative efforts in linking poetry.

Subsequent correspondence with Professor Miner confirmed that I was doing something right. In a letter dated January of 1995, Professor Miner thanked me for sending him a copy of *Cloud Scatter* (Tangram, 1994), a selection of what I called *tanka* but technically *tan-renga* (single links), adding that he had been asked by Michael Cooper to review Edwin Cranston’s large book of waka translations, *A Waka Anthology* (Stanford, 1993) for *Monumenta Nipponica*. “My response,” the letter continued, “was an omnibus of *waka* studies of many kinds and forms, and I included some samples of your work that I particularly admired.” Unfortunately, Miner’s wide ranging opinions were beyond the scope of the presentation, and he was “reluctantly” made to abide by the original brief. “You will find with this [letter] the few remarks about you that I squeezed into my frustrated effort.” The outtake Professor Miner provided quoted a few of my *tanka* with the comment, “If *waka* is to take seed in our soil, its leaves must also be those of English words. Many people have essayed haiku in English, and some have done *tanka* that I find superior.” And “With these Dickinsonian sudden rays is a sound as of poetic linking, and it is not surprising to read in the accompanying letter, ‘Some friends and I have been linking verse (by mail) and calling it *renga* for almost ten years now.’” In honor of Earl Miner’s overwhelming influence on the way I collaborated on linked poetry, I nominated the core cohort of *haikai* poets “The Miner School of Haikai Poets,” relishing as well the homophonic pun.

Keith Kumasen Abbott outlined his understanding of how to proceed in an afterword to *Bird Feeder Renku*, the one I had sent to Professor Miner. He begins by citing a linguistics professor of his who stated “that unless one were born into them, the Japanese language and baseball were equally difficult to learn.” Writing *renku*, Keith explains, can be added to that list with the caveat that “the poetry has more irrational rules than baseball and is largely confined to the Japanese language.” As with all the linked poetry we wrote over the years, no claims were made that any of them followed all the

myriad rules of *haikai no renga*. However, certain notions and intuitive understandings gleaned from Miner's texts were observed.

Among the guidelines we adhered to was the idea that, as Keith put it, "two linked stanzas may be read together as a unit, but no three stanzas may be read together without some disruption of either time, place, tone, character, or speaker. All stanzas "[e]xcept for the opening and closing stanzas has to therefore be read twice. Once, as an end to the preceding stanza. And again as a start to the following stanza." This understanding of the doubling of the stanza emphasizes a key element of the linking process. As Professor Miner explained it, "The essential fact to understand is the inviolable principle that no stanza has a continuing semantic connection, as a discrete poetic unit, with anything other than its predecessor or its successor, linked in continuity at each point of juncture but otherwise discontinuous" has the effect of undermining any sense of plot or conventional narrative.

This aspect of subverting the narrative thrust, insisting on a discontinuity in linking poetry, is also what makes *haikai* so appealing. Keith explained it this way: "Since lyrics have a way of ending conclusively, in *renku* the lyric feeling of any stanza threatens the narrative feeling. Too strong, and the sequence doesn't seem to proceed, but ends prematurely. Conversely, a strong narrative link obviously endangers a lyrical link, grounding it in action rather than feeling. Since with *renku* a continuous plot is impossible, the narration rests on the conflicts and resolution of image and style, not character or fate. This is one reason why there are so many stylistic rules for writing linked verse in Japanese, where certain stanzas have to contain a moon or flowers, certain types of words have to be employed in specific places, etc. These rules help guide the writers into finding continuity without a plot."

One of the most obvious strictures in the writing of *renku* as well as that of haiku is the syllable count. However, adherence to the rule in a non-Japanese language can render the stanzas somewhat prosaic, lacking the perceived concision that it seems to have in the language of its origination. Many non-Japanese writers of haiku and *renga* have eschewed the syllable count in their compositions for something that tries to simulate the deceptive simplicity of the Japanese language. There is no easy linguistic comparison of either language. For instance, in Japanese, *ono* is counted as three syllables. On the other hand, in English, *unceremoniously* consists of seven syllables. Some rules, as Keith proposes, can be stretched. "Traditionally the three line stanzas contain 17 syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern, and the couplet contains 14 syllables in a 7-7 pattern. While many of our stanzas contain the proper syllabic count, rarely do they fall in the proper syllabic line counts. This irregularity occurs because we both are cadence-oriented poets and Pat

and I prefer to let the language fall in its appropriate measure of spoken speech, keeping its American tone.”

The Japanese scholar Haruo Shirane in his excellent study, *Traces Of Dream: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho* (Stanford, 1998), talks about what he calls *haikai mind*, the ability to anticipate relationships between stanzas and how they might fit together like molecules in a chemical chain or juxtaposed as disparate images in experimental cinema. Abbott is talking about something very similar when he points out that among Japanese critical terms “there is something called the *haikai change*, referring to the quickness and adroitness of the shift from a scene into another time and place. Sometimes this involves a change in the sex of the character, apparently much easier to do in Japanese than in English, and often the effect has a peculiar flavor of comedy. A serious stanza can become suddenly ironic, teasing or very funny with the addition of another. Naturally this appealed to Pat and I. Not only are we both writers in the tradition of the California Zen poets, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder, we were also raised on American film comedy and its rapid manipulations of point of view.”

As an example, in one of our early *renku*, I presented Keith with a stanza:

long into the wee hours
“I already answered that question!”
—heat lightning

And he returned with:

—unfaithful—bored—she tried
lying even to her housemaid

Abbott explained our adaptations and improvisations thusly: “Since the verse does occur in links, we wrote them trying to explore these possibilities, attracted to the challenge of discontinuous scenes forming an aesthetic whole. In some ways our *renku* resembles an experimental film shot on a minimum budget in each of our backyards, work places and home towns. Jumpcuts, fast fades, slow dissolves, pull backs and tracking shots are all familiar techniques easily employed in writing *renku*, with the most common technique being the match cut where an object or person in one scene is abruptly shown in another milieu altogether in the next. Speaking stylistically, it is possible that a link can be couched in the most common language of a setup in a film script, and sometimes this resonates with suggestive brevity. Often, changing sex of the characters, the links wind

backwards (in chronological time) from old age through domestic discord to a love affair fading out in a possible soap opera TV commercial.”

Haikai composition has obvious similarities to film making (or editing) in that the stanzas are spliced together in a relationship or juxtaposition that appears discontinuous but when viewed on completion reveals an intuitive or visceral unity. Each stanza is an image, or multiple images, in relation to each other, viewed close up or distantly, symbolic as well as representational (scene setting, environment) and presented as a complexity of responses, neutral, active, or passive. The composition of *haikai* is loaded with unpredictability resulting in random, dream-like, metamorphoses.

The end result, the text of a completed *renku* session, can be viewed as the recording of an ensemble’s nuanced and spontaneous intellection. Dr. Maeda Cana, in her introduction to *The Monkey’s Raincoat*, summarizes the effect of successful composition: “As the mind of the reader passes from one short scene to another, there is created an illusion of movement in time and space, relentlessly onward through the vicissitudes of life. Probably because of the associative undercurrent ‘linking’ the verses in each sequence, a *haikai* does appear as an integrated symbolic picture of human existence with its figurative joys and sorrows, its critically decisive moments, tragic inevitabilities and flitting humor. The transitory incidents of life are somehow made to appear as ubiquitous realities in the cosmic continuum.” For the *haikai* poet, being moved to spontaneous expression defines poetic activity and illustrates an esthetic whose basic tenet is that the consistency of human character lies in appropriate awareness, not in dramatic overreaction.

俳諧