

THE HAIKU POETICS OF PAUL O. WILLIAMS: THE ART OF DISCOVERING AN AURA¹

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Paul O. Williams (January 17, 1935 – June 2, 2009) began writing haiku in 1964, publishing his first collection, *The Edge of the Woods: 55 Haiku*, in 1968. After retirement from Principia College in Elsah, Illinois, he relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he continued to write haiku, haibun, tanka, and science fiction novels. In 1989 he helped found the Haiku Poets of Northern California, and in 1999 he served as president of the Haiku Society of America. At the Global Haiku Festival, hosted by Millikin University in 2000, Dr. Williams was one of the founding members of the Tanka Society of America. He was widely published in haiku and tanka journals.

As a literary scholar and creative writer, it is not surprising that Paul O. Williams carefully developed both his poetics and his craft of writing haiku as a literary art. In the introductions to his collections, he becomes the teacher—introducing readers to the art of reading and writing haiku. He wrote essays on key issues of haiku poetics—form, style, subjectivity, fiction, and metaphor as well as a few satirical essays on certain fads in the haiku community. Many of these essays were collected in *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics* published by Press Here in 2001. Through all of his haiku criticism, it is clear that he has read and made deliberate choices about his own practice as a haiku writer, his haiku poetics, and artistic goals.

In this essay I will summarize Williams' haiku poetics based on his essays and introductions, and through examples of his haiku I will celebrate that they have clearly guided his artistic achievement. Paul O. Williams' poetic goal was to write haiku as a literary art within a long-standing Japanese tradition, not for the sake of innovation or fads nor to display the cleverness or wittiness of the poet, but to convey an aura of feeling.

In his collection *Tracks on the River* (1982), Williams writes in the introduction:

When you hear a stone dislodge itself from the high river bluffs and watch it tumble down to rest again, or when the pine branches move slightly in the winter breeze, or when you hear the late winter ice fringe on the river swish and hiss quietly as it breaks up in the current, you know each of these events, together with the human response to it, contains a poem, a complete artistic occurrence. You don't need to do anything to it. In fact, you have to resist adding. The poet's job, then, becomes containing that event and its aura of feeling succinctly, without insertions of wordplay or cogitation. The whole task is that of conveying the individual atmosphere present. Often this aura is so delicate and indefinably itself that while the poet can sometimes tell if he has caught it, he doesn't always know what it is he has caught. He simply recognizes its presence. It always lies beyond the image presented—in the escaping hints of implication of the image.²

Where did his haiku come from? Not just things, like the stone dislodged from the bluff, nor just the human response to it. Nor does his haiku come from wordplay or added cogitation. He does not simply think them into existence. For Williams, haiku come into being through the poet conveying the atmosphere of an event along with the human response to it. “The poet's job, then, becomes containing that event and its aura of feeling succinctly...” which is not merely an objective recording of events, but an attempt to “contain” and “convey” an artistic occurrence. Consider the title haiku from this collection:

a powerboat wake
crosses the sunset's red track —
the restless water³

Williams draws on experiences from the immediate surroundings in Elsah, Illinois, with this haiku likely being written from the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. The haiku appears to be merely descriptive—presenting the image of the powerboat wake crossing the sunset's track—but then it moves into the human response with the word

“restless” in the last line. Ironically, with this single word, the human element, the powerboat and its wake suddenly becomes the ephemeral element or the passing surface perception in this haiku. The water becomes powerful and turbulent, continuing to press on through the river valley beneath the passing beauty of the sunset and the powerboat’s wake. It is the underlying, unseen power of the restless water that provides the deeper, resonating aura.

Or in another haiku from *Tracks on the River*:

from mud
to sky
the heron’s feet⁴

The aura in this haiku is not the mud nor the sky nor the heron’s feet, but how in our imagination we see the graceful lift of its feet carrying the mud into the sky. The heron’s feet belong to both the mud and sky, connecting them in a single flight. We feel the coolness of the mud, the air beneath the heron’s wings, and the grace of its flight. The reader gets to enter into this experience and feel the atmosphere of this simple flight.

Williams enjoys experimenting with perspective, as in this haiku:

from the ridge top
no plowed fields and trees—
only fog⁵

Standing at the ridge overlooking the Mississippi River, in this haiku Williams captures a vision of a thick fog filling the entire river valley. Suddenly the carefully laid plans of people are erased under the fog. There are no neat squares of fields, not even the trees, only fog. From this perspective it seems that we could step out into the fog, just off the edge of the ridge. The fog has no definition, no edges, no shapes. The aura of this haiku is to be an alien in one’s own back yard, but because we are human we remember and know what we usually can see from this location—the plowed fields and trees. Our imaginations can fill in the blanks left hidden beneath the fog. Masterfully, Williams writes this haiku with

minimal response, yet he says so much with that one word, “only.” He conveys the atmosphere and human response to this event.

In the introduction to *Tracks on the River*, Williams refers to his approach as “fairly traditional” with his own caution to himself about not being “mindlessly conservative.”⁶ As an avid reader of haiku being written and published by others, Williams was very aware of manifestos calling for experimentation to create Avant-garde haiku as well as “rules” attempting to prescribe how to write “traditional” haiku. For Williams, both of these strident positions were distractions from his goal of writing within a tradition of literary art. For Williams, “The point of the whole thing is that volatile elixir which lies at the heart of perception.”⁷ Perception is about both experiencing and responding to the aura of an event, an intuitive atmosphere conveyed through language.

As a reader and contributor to haiku magazines, Williams was an active participant in the conversations and debates about the emerging art of English-language haiku. He reviewed new haiku books and wrote essays on the art of writing haiku. Although his writing was fairly traditional, his critical voice called for caution and restraint to all extremists. He didn’t support the rules approach and had little interest in the rigid formalists who were prescribing form with specific 5-7-5 syllable count and formal punctuation expectations. He also did not support the minimalists who eliminated English syntax and phrasing so much that the reader ends up with haiku that read like shopping lists. Williams was never convinced that Zen was the only way to capture that “elixir” of conveying the aura of an event through haiku.

One of his earliest short essays, “Tontoism in American Haiku,” was originally published in *Dragonfly* magazine in 1975. It was republished in his collection of haiku criticism, *The Nick of Time*. Williams explains that “a friend and I originated the term ‘Tontoism’ to describe the tendency of some haiku writers to omit from their haiku, articles or other sentence elements where they would appear in normal English usage.”⁸ He explains that the omission of conventional speech patterns results in haiku that are “only a series of grunts” or reduce haiku to the point of incoherence or absurdity. As an example, he notes “An otherwise good haiku is spoiled when one hears the voice of Tonto grunting the words, ‘Wind in walnut

tree.”⁹ Williams calls for an appearance of ‘artlessness’ and spontaneity in haiku, but that can only be accomplished by carefully crafting effective phrases and conventional speech patterns. Williams calls for the crafting of haiku as a literary art with normal English usage. Williams provided a voice of caution: don’t go too far with minimalism, or you might lose the poetry in haiku, the sound of response in your ears, the elixir of the aura of perception.

In a subsequent essay, “An Apology for Bird Track Haiku,” originally published in *Modern Haiku* magazine in 1981 and reprinted in *The Nick of Time*, Williams writes a satirical manifesto calling for a new bird track approach to writing haiku. In this satirical piece he targets minimalist and Zen-centric approaches to haiku. “Because it is at least a couple of months since anyone has come up with a new form of haiku, I have one to propose—a haiku composed entirely of bird tracks.”¹⁰ To write bird track haiku, the poet simply captures some birds and dips their feet in ink. The birds make tracks on the page resulting in an authentic experience—bird track haiku. This is a satire loosely based on the work of Zen writer, Paul Reps, who created playful books of “found poems” including some created by inking a goldfish and publishing the resulting flops on a page. The primary targets of Williams’ satire are proponents of a “new haiku” based on “the true Zen spirit” and originality: “Thus we have concrete poems as haiku, Christian moral statements as haiku, single words as haiku, and recently so-called language-centered writing as haiku. Why not bird tracks?”¹¹ His third and fourth arguments are that “It represents an improvement on tired old traditional haiku” and “By claiming to be writing haiku, instead of some other form of something, bird track poets will gain an audience.”¹² Although Williams was making fun of the minimalists and the over-zealous Zen haiku books coming out in the 1980’s, he was serious about the literary art of writing haiku. He believed that there was a genuine literary art to the haiku tradition, and he wanted to develop and practice the art of writing haiku.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many haiku poets started to meet at gatherings sponsored by regional leaders of the Haiku Society of America. Jeanne Emrich hosted a haiku weekend in Minnesota that featured a reading of moon haiku by Paul O. Williams and a haiku editing

workshop led by Williams, myself, and Lee Gurga. There was a gathering of Midwest haiku writers in Dubuque in 1986 on the third anniversary of Raymond Roseliep's death and then a group of haiku writers gathered in 1988 at Principia College in Elsah, Illinois, where Williams was a beloved Professor of English for decades. In an interview published in the Principia College newsletter as a result of that gathering, Williams discussed his long-term involvement in the art of haiku: "Once you get into haiku, it becomes a dimension of your thought."¹³ As a fellow-teacher, I immediately realized that I wanted this type of engagement in the haiku writer's habitual thoughts to be a primary learning goal for my haiku students. Since that time, I am pleased to tell my students that one day they will discover their "haiku eyes." They will see the haiku in their lives and memories.

In another short essay in *The Nick of Time*, Williams discusses teaching haiku. This essay, "Haiku Memory," was originally published in *Ko* magazine in 1989. He talks about how his students struggle and resist writing haiku because they have to "lay aside the whole range of metaphorical, rhythmic, and sound patterning techniques they have been studying and focus on perception of things themselves and the implications that radiate from those things."¹⁴ However, he realized that when students get past the initial struggle, they eventually learn to write publishable haiku because of the activation of a universal "kind of thinking that underlies haiku" which he calls "haiku memory" because "Whenever I have worked with individual students on long-term haiku projects, I have found them writing about incidents or perceptions that occurred long ago, well before they had thought of writing poetry or heard of haiku."¹⁵ This is what I mean by finding your "haiku eyes"—an attention to incidents and perceptions that have had lasting resonance for the haiku writer. Williams concludes, "I have begun to think that one reason Westerners have responded so richly to the haiku form is that our own poetic forms give no outlet for these perceptions that all humans have and treasure, while haiku provides a centuries-old, well-tried medium for expressing them."¹⁶

In 1992 Lee Gurga and I published *The Midwest Haiku Anthology* and hosted the Midwest Haiku Festival at Millikin University. Here are a couple of the haiku by Paul O. Williams from this anthology:

upstairs sewing
the graduation dress —
apple petals fall¹⁷

through my hand
the sun's warmth
from the skipping stone¹⁸

In these haiku, it is easy to see Williams' haiku memory at work—going back to special memories but keeping those memories alive for us as present perceptions. With the first haiku, I get a sense of time passing—a daughter growing up and apple petals falling. I can hear the sound of the sewing machine and understand the care and attention that goes into making the graduation dress. It is May, which in the Midwest marks the end of a school year, and the falling apple petals reminds us that it is nearly summer. There are promises of fruit to come in the fall, in the future, from both the apple tree and the graduating daughter.

The second haiku focuses on touch—picking up a stone warmed by the sun. Before skipping it into the water, the stone-holder enjoys feeling its smoothness, its warmth. He knows where the warmth is from—the sun. Ah, to be out in the warm sunshine by a lake, with nothing to do but pick up stones, feel the warmth, and see how many skips this stone will skip. These are haiku about being alive—full of attention to perceptions and our human responses to felt events.

In 1998, I had the pleasure of working with Paul O. Williams to edit and publish a selection of his haiku, in *Outside Robins Sing*. With design help from my students, this was published as an accordion-fold chapbook. If you get a chance to see this chapbook, you will notice that we had fun with the cover design—yes, it's simply a set of bird tracks. The students enjoyed Williams' haiku very much and had a lot of fun sewing the many accordion signatures. In the introduction to this chapbook, Williams revised and elaborated on his haiku poetics about the "aura of haiku," emphasizing that haiku must go beyond mere observation—to achieve a "burst of discovery" beyond the perception:

... almost all haiku contain some sort of burst in them. This is not a bomb burst, or even an aerial bomb on July Fourth. Often it is only the puff of a goatsbeard seed head, or even a surprise of recognition of something. But it tends to be there.

In fact, experiencing that small burst seems the point of many haiku if not most. It also gives the poem a power that it would not otherwise have, a power that enlarges it beyond its diminutive size. It is the poem opening out, implying something beyond its images, leading unfoldment of perception.

As mere observation, haiku would be inconsequential. But beginning with perception, and noting something remarkable about that observation, and built into it, haiku achieves a scope beyond its size.¹⁹

Whereas in his original statement of haiku poetics, the goal was “containing that event and its aura of feeling,” in this statement he wants the haiku to contain a burst of discovery, to note “something remarkable.” This is not a negation of his previous poetics, but a new aspiration for every haiku. He continues in *Outside Robins Sing* to call for that surprise of discovery:

We deal with wonders on a daily basis. It is a matter of astonishment, and haiku tends to point out that surprise of discovery we feel when we perceive these new dimensions. It notes the grace in the wave of a hand, the sadness of drying grass, the tiny tongue of the mouse drinking the river. And by doing so it enriches our everyday lives immeasurably.

This rather than an attempt to discern and continue Japanese poetic tradition, which no Westerner can hope to do anyhow, is what I am after in haiku. Haiku is not cleverness. It is not Zen. It is an opening up to the unexplained happenings of things.²⁰

Here are some of Williams’ discoveries of unexplained happenings from *Outside Robins Sing*:

the widower hangs
the new windchimes,
the wind still²¹

This haiku takes us back and forward at the same time—it is a pivot point in the widower’s life. He has been through a loss, but is trying to rebuild some magic in his life. He is looking for something pleasant to enjoy in the evening, even if it is by himself. He hangs new windchimes, and even though the wind is not currently present, there is a promise that one day it will come and “ring his chimes” again. We don’t have to turn the windchimes into a symbol to understand the feeling of this haiku, the hopefulness of the haiku, how this haiku shows someone on the path to recovery and a return to joy.

pruning roses —
 she and the stems
 bleed together²²

Again Williams writes about a simple act, pruning roses, and yet within this haiku is the opportunity for discovery of something beyond the observation. In this case, it is that both the roses and the pruner bleed together. Roses have their defensive thorns but she is determined to prune them so that they will provide bountiful flowers. It takes work, even sacrifice, to achieve the future beauty of the roses. Meanwhile, the roses are resisting and drawing her red blood out during the pruning. Both are bleeding, will heal, and survive.

I will close with one more haiku from *Outside Robins Sing*, the title haiku:

the conductor
 raises his baton —
 outside robins sing²³

In the silence as the conductor prepares for the orchestra to begin, we discover the robins outside. Who is their conductor? What prepares them to sing? Why do they sing at this time? Ah, there is so much to feel and understand if we let ourselves enter the aura of Paul O. Williams’ haiku.

NOTES:

¹ An earlier version of this essay, “The Haiku, Senryu, Tanka and Haiku Poetics of Paul O. Williams, 1935-2009” was delivered at the Paul O. Williams Memorial Service, Farley Music Hall (Elsah, Illinois), October 4, 2009.

² Williams, Paul O. *Tracks on the River*. Elsah, Ill.: Coneflower Press, 1982, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ Williams, Paul O. *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*. Foster City, Calif.: Press Here, 2001, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ *Focus*: Pincipia’s Intercampus Newsletter, 3. Elsah, IL, 1988, 2.

¹⁴ *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ Brooks, Randy and Lee Gurga, eds. *The Midwest Haiku Anthology*. Decatur, Ill.: Brooks Books, 1992, 105.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁹ Williams, Paul O. *Outside Robins Sing*. Decatur, Ill.: Brooks Books, 1999, unpaginated.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*