

WOLFGANG ISER AND HAIKU

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Haiku happen. The best not simply are, but rather become. A distinct pleasure of these very short poems is how much is left to the reader. They do not merely invite but demand reader participation. Everything in the poem, however, is not left to the reader. The poem's words, few as they are in a haiku, designate particular meanings, as rich in connotations as some of these meanings may be. The poem, then, occurs in the intersection between its fixed senses and what is left to the reader to add.

This partnership between text and reader that haiku require is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the traditional three-line poem that features a *kireji*, succinctly defined by Bruce Ross as "an emotional and linguistic break [between two distinct images] that creates 'an internal comparison.'"¹ The specific content of the comparison is not dictated by the text but instead is left to the reader to manufacture. Many haiku leave open multiple possibilities for connecting the two images. That is to say, a single haiku, paradoxically, has the potential to be multiple poems in that each particular meaningful connection between images the reader makes constitutes a distinctly meaningful text.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological theory of literary interpretation serves as an excellent model for understanding how haiku, especially but not exclusively traditional three-liners containing a *kireji*, work and for evaluating their merit. In what follows, I will outline the key components of Iser's theory and demonstrate how they may be productively applied to illuminate the machinery of a traditional three-line poem, a demonstration that will suggest how these principles might also be used to interpret and evaluate less conventional haiku as well. Iser's theory, I believe, can fully account for exactly how haiku happen, for the role both the reader and the text play in actualizing these short poems, as well as measure the strength of individual instances of the genre.

As Vincent Leitch points out, Wolfgang Iser was one of the leaders of a group of reception theorists in West Germany, located principally at the University of Constance, that flourished in the nineteen sixties and seventies. In this country Iser's phenomenological approach exerted a major influence on literary theory from the mid-seventies well up into the eighties. His two major works, in English translation, were *The Implied Reader*, published in 1974, and *The Act of Reading*, appearing in 1978.² Perhaps Iser's single most widely read and anthologized piece, however, is "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," which originally appeared in 1972 in the journal *New Literary History* and later became a chapter in *The Implied Reader*. Here he succinctly delineates key principles of his theory, principles which will serve as the basis of my application of that theory to haiku. It is certainly true, as Paul H. Fry observes, that Iser is "almost exclusively a scholar of the novel," that his theory is "grounded in the notion of literature as fiction."³ It is also true, however, that Iser's theory may be applied to the interpretation of poetry, as Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooks clearly illustrate in their use of it in a reading of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal."⁴ And though the heyday of Iser's views has indeed passed, his approach nonetheless remains, I believe, most relevant and useful for understanding and interpreting fiction and poetry alike.

"Central to Iser's intuition," Elizabeth Freund notes, is "that reading consists of an interaction between the structure of the literary work and its reception."⁵ She continues: "Meaning is not directly accessible or even present in any way either in the reader or the textual object, but is something that emerges (a product or assemblage) in the process of interaction between the two poles." Or as Sara Upstone succinctly sums up Iser's position, "Only by taking together the actual text and the reader's conception of it can we get the actual literary text."⁶ In the opening paragraphs of "The Reading Process," Iser formulates this view—the core of his theory—in his own words. "The phenomenological theory of art," Iser writes, "lays full stress on the idea that, in considering the literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to the text." More specifically, what Iser calls the "literary work" consists of two distinct poles,

the artistic and the esthetic: “the artistic refers to the text created by the author and the esthetic the realization accomplished by the reader.” The literary work, as opposed to either the author’s text alone or the reader’s realization of it, is, then, “virtual.” It marks the conjunction of “the reality of the text” and “the individual disposition of the reader.” The literary work is not “completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two.”⁷

Iser’s theory, Leitch stresses, fully acknowledges the existence of an objectively meaningful text. Though it certainly recognizes the central importance of the reader’s input, it steadfastly refuses “to transform or dissolve the text into the reader’s subjectivity or the interpretive community’s codes and conventions,”⁸ as do the views of certain radical reader response theorists such as David Bleich and Stanley Fish. The text, Iser insists, contains meaning, meaning the reader must extract from it if he or she is to accurately read it. As Freund observes, Iser’s reader is “constrained by the patterns supplied in the text; the text proposes or instructs...”⁹ In “The Reading Process” Iser himself refers to “the various perspectives ... offered by the text,” “the patterns and ‘schematized views’” comprising it, the “knowledge” the text conveys, its “given factors, the fixed points.” Iser comments, with specific reference to works of fiction, that the “sentences are ‘component parts’ insofar as they make statements, claims, or observations, or convey information and so establish various perspectives in the text.” This objectively given portion of the text, Iser continues, “imposes certain limits” on the reader’s interpretation of it.¹⁰ In Jane Tompkins’ succinct formulation, Iser “does not grant the reader autonomy or even partial independence from textual constraints.”¹¹

There are, however, gaps in the text. In fact, as Freund observes, for Iser the text is “full of ‘gaps’ or ‘blanks’ or ‘indeterminacies’ ...”¹² Works of literature do not connect all the perspectives they provide, the schemata they present, but rather leave open spaces among them that the reader must bridge in order to actualize the work’s full meaning. The information in the text is incomplete in that it requires the reader’s input in order for the reader to realize the text’s final sense and significance for him or her. In reading, Iser asserts, “we uncover the unformulated part of the text, and this very indeterminacy is the force that drives us to work out

a configurative meaning...”¹³ Writes Karlheinz Stierle, for Iser “the construction of meaning...[is] an essentially creative act in which the reader fills the gaps and blanks of indeterminacy” in the text.¹⁴ In discussing works of fiction, Iser remarks that it is “only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism.” In such works “the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections ... for filling in gaps left by the text itself.” It is “the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text,” Iser concludes, that allow for, in fact demand, the reader’s imaginative contribution.¹⁵

What marks the literary text as truly literary is the presence of gaps, and what measures the text’s strength is the degree of openness of these gaps. Non-literary as well as weak literary works contain either no gaps or very restricted ones. In expository texts, Iser writes, we as readers experience a “confirmative effect;” everything is laid out in clear and complete terms. Though a virtue in expository texts, this “confirmative effect” is “a defect in a literary text.” Likewise, weak literary texts, such as “broader forms of the detective story,” leave little or no room for the imaginative participation of the reader, offer “nothing but a harmonious world,” containing no, or very limited, gaps. “No [literary] author worth his salt,” Iser concludes, “will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader’s eyes.”¹⁶ As Fry notes, for Iser “[i]f it [the literary text] doesn’t surprise, it doesn’t have value, it’s what critics and Iser himself call ‘culinary’—overly familiar like routine cooking.”¹⁷ It is the gaps, the blanks in the quality literary text that provide the surprises.

Though Iser argues that “[i]f the reader were given the whole story and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which invariably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us,” he also cautions that a text “may go too far,” have so many and such unlimitedly open gaps that the text produces “overstrain” in the reader, a condition as likely to cause the reader to “leave the field of play” as boredom.¹⁸ Fry cites James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* as an example of the sort of text Iser has in mind, as one that may strike the reader as “making demands on us that are too great.”¹⁹ Iser recognizes that many “modern” texts advertise their gaps, “are often so fragmentary that one’s attention is almost exclusively occupied with

the search for connections between the fragments,” but he sees this as a positive value, a trait that “make[s] us aware of the nature of our capacity for providing links.”²⁰ These modern texts are not the same as ones, such as extreme cases like *Finnegan’s Wake*, which “may go too far,” in which the gaps are so numerous and so open, the text so polysemantic, that the result is “overstrain” in the reader, resulting in a sense of interpretive freefall for him or her. Fry nicely sums up the two textual limits in Iser’s theory: “If there are no surprises, there’s no point in reading the text. If the surprises are too great, they induce overstrain and we throw the book away in frustration.”²¹

Granted, Iser is conspicuously silent on how much surprise in a text is too much, and how much is not enough. He never explicitly defines either the upper or lower limits of the gap’s elasticity, never specifies how many gaps in a text are too many and how many are not enough. His stance is rather, implicitly, a case-by-case, pragmatic one; he assumes that the reader will intuitively sense, at least roughly, in his or her experience with an individual text whether or not it is unsatisfyingly too closed or frustratingly too open. As already suggested, however, Iser is quite explicit in his assertion of the primacy of the reader’s role in actualizing, by completing, the text’s meaning through the filling in of textual gaps. Moreover, he stresses the fact—this is central to Iser’s theory—that reading is “a creative process.” In a very real sense, the reader writes a portion of the text him or herself by constituting, by finalizing the “consistency” of the inherently open work. And this act of constitution, the filling in of the blanks to produce consistency, reflects the reader’s personal values and views. As Selden, Widdowson, and Brooks observe, for Iser the literary text is “‘concretized’ by the reader in relation to his or her extra-literary norms, values and experience”²² In Iser’s own words, the text comes to “reflect” the reader’s “disposition” and thus “in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror” for the reader. As Jane Tompkins cogently puts it, Iser insists that the reader is a “co-creator of the work.”²³

To be sure, the reader is shaped and formed by the information the text’s language provides as much as the text is shaped and formed by the reader through the filling of its gaps. As Iser remarks, “the reader is bound to open himself up to the workings of the text.... we must suspend the

ideas and attitudes that shape our personality before we can experience the world of the literary text.”²⁴ But in the true work of literature, not only are there gaps left open for the reader to fill—opportunities given him or her to co-create with the author—but these gaps themselves are extremely flexible, capable of being bridged in different ways by different readers, and even completed in multiple ways by the same reader. “[O]ne text is potentially capable of several different realizations,” Iser writes. He asserts: “completely different readers can be differently affected by the ‘reality’ of a particular text,” and “a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first.” Iser goes so far as to posit the potential “inexhaustibility of the text.”²⁵ The best literary works are marked by their openness to a myriad of interpretive inputs, both by different readers and by the single reader him or herself. Freund neatly sums up Iser’s view: “Since the gaps in a text can be filled in many different ways every text is potentially capable of many different realizations and no reading can exhaust the text’s full potential which is always infinitely richer than any of its realizations.”²⁶

As noted at the outset of this essay, I will, for the sake of brevity, confine my application of Iser’s theory to the classic three line haiku containing a clear kireji. To repeat Bruce Ross’ succinct definition of it, the kireji is “an emotional or linguistic break [between two distinct images] that creates an ‘internal comparison.’” This “break” corresponds exactly to what Iser calls a gap or a blank. Moreover, Iser’s theory allows for the full appreciation of the classic haiku as a self-consciously esthetic object, a work of art, a text that does not pretend to seamlessly mirror objective reality but rather calls attention to the demand it places upon the reader to complete it, to “search for connections between fragments.” Even centuries old haiku, those by such Japanese masters as Bashō (1644–94), Buson (1716–83), and Issa (1763–1827), fit Iser’s definition of “modern” texts in that their kireji “make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links.” Iser’s theory can fully account for both the haiku’s artistic pole—the information the poet provides—and its esthetic pole—what the reader imaginatively provides through the filling of gaps.

Any number of classic three-line haiku could be used to demonstrate in specific detail how the kireji in them might be usefully understood to

function in Iserian terms. The poem that will serve as an illustration here is a contemporary one, a selection from the recently published (2013) *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. It's a haiku by Gary Hotham: "fog. / sitting here / without the mountains."²⁷ The poem consists of two clear and distinct images—fog, and a narrator contemplating the absence of mountains—and there is an obvious kireji, a clear and distinct break, between the two images.

The fog and the narrator contemplating the absence of mountains constitute what Iser calls the text's artistic pole. They are what the poem's author gives us, what Iser variously refers to as "the perspectives offered," the text's "patterns and schematized views," its "given factors, the fixed points." These images comprise "statements... observations" that contain and convey the "information" the text provides. The haiku's kireji—the "emotional and linguistic break" between the fog and contemplation of the absent mountains—is, then, in Iser's words, "the unformulated part of the text," that which marks its "indeterminacy." The kireji represents a blank or gap the reader must fill in order to make Hotham's poem wholly meaningful. This is the place in the text where "the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our faculty for establishing connections." It is where we as readers are invited to imaginatively participate in writing the text. It is what Iser calls the esthetic pole.

Measured in Iserian terms, Hotham's poem is an admirably strong one in that its principal gap—the kireji—is extremely flexible, open to a wide range of reader inputs. Let me suggest two possible ways that immediately occur to me in which this gap, the kireji, might be filled. Fog is a traditional image for confusion, bafflement. Mountains, especially their peaks, might represent high goals and ambitions, ideals. The poem may thus be read as one about losing sight of one's goals and ambitions, one's ideals. That is to say, the gap between the fog and the contemplation of absent mountains may be filled by imagining the metaphorical fog as that which the narrator is lost in, which in turn causes him to lose his vision of the metaphorical mountains. More specifically, due to some sort of emotional turmoil or life upheaval, the narrator becomes baffled and confused—unclear—as to what his ambitions and ideals, which he once had clearly in sight, truly are. On this reading, the poem conveys the sense of

frustration, and perhaps even depression, that one experiences in such a state of lost vision. But fogs dissipate, lift. Thus the poem also implies hope, the expectation that if one patiently waits things out, the confusion and bafflement—the fog—will eventually dissolve and one will once again find one's way, will be able clearly to know one's purpose for living.

As well as representing confusion and bafflement, fog also has more positive symbolic meanings. For instance, a fog might metaphorically connote a comfortable state of oblivion, a condition of blissful ignorance. And mountains, as well as signifying goals and ambitions, ideals, might stand for monumental challenges and obstacles in life. Read in this way, the poem is about the peace of mind and spirit that come from ceasing to focus on, of divesting one's attention from, one's problems, the difficult challenges in one's life. That is to say, the gap between the fog and the narrator's contemplation of absent mountains may be filled by imagining a very different, from the first reading, sort of fog that the narrator is lost in, which in turn causes him to lose his vision of a very different, from the first reading, sort of mountains. On this reading, the poem conveys a positive feel. The narrator in the poem is metaphorically turning a blind eye to the difficulties in his life and thus escaping the worry and stress those difficulties induce.

But once again, fogs dissipate, lift. The implication is thus that there is no way of avoiding life's challenges—its mountains—forever; they will eventually come back into view. This fact, however, might be interpreted either positively or negatively. Read negatively, the poem suggests that temporarily ignoring one's problems—being in a fog with respect to them—does nothing but delay the grim inevitable, possibly making the problems, in the end, even more difficult to surmount than they would have been if one had faced them down from the beginning. Read positively, the poem implies that even a brief respite from one's challenges might work to renew one's spirit and resolve, allow one to take on these challenges, when one eventually emerges from one's fog, with an increased energy and enthusiasm that enables one to deal with them more effectively than one would have been able to without such a brief period of relief, a period in which one was in a fog.

There are a number of other ways in which the principal gap, the kireji,

in Hotham's poem might be filled, depending on how one interprets the key terms I have focused upon—fog and mountains—as well as other elements in the poem, such as sitting, which I glossed over. For instance, mountains might be viewed as images of immovability, fog as a metaphor for isolation, and the fact that sitting is a very different condition from standing or moving about might be stressed and explored. Each of these permutations would afford the reader yet other opportunities to imaginatively participate in the poem's completion. Though in Iser's sense Hotham's poem is "modern" in that it features its openness, highlights a call for reader participation through the kireji, it certainly avoids the danger, which Iser warns against, of being so open that it induces "overstrain," frustration in the reader. The information the text provides establishes clear parameters for the multiple ways in which its principal gap might be filled. In sum, Hotham's poem is a model of what Iser would label a true, effective, high quality literary text, an example of the artistic power of which haiku are capable.

Close reading of Hotham's poem might reveal other gaps in it besides the principal one dictated by the kireji. And it is certainly possible to locate gaps in other, less conventional haiku that do not so conspicuously feature a kireji. For example, Stuart Quine's monoku, "bolted and chained the way to the mountains"—another selection from *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*—leaves it open to the reader to determine the meaning of the connection between the mountains and the fact that the way to them is locked off.²⁸ As noted at the outset of this essay, my focus on the kireji in the traditionally constructed Hotham poem was not intended to exhaust the possibilities for applying Iser's theory to an understanding and appreciation of haiku. Rather, it was meant to illustrate how that theory might be applied to one prominent form of the genre, and one prominent element in that form, and thereby suggest how Iser's ideas might be extended to include other sorts of haiku as well.

Archibald MacLeish famously quipped in his 1926 poem "Ars Poetica" that "A poem should not mean / But be."²⁹ In light of Iser's theory, and the very nature of how haiku work, MacLeish's dictum might be amended and revised to read: a poem—specifically a haiku—can only fully "be" through the reader's participation in the realization of its several different

potentials for meaning. Hotham's poem, like all the best haiku, is not, in its full sense, a static, fixed and final object, but it is instead a dynamic event, a potential happening that is actualized when the reader creatively responds to the prompts in the poem that the author provides. Iser's theory of gaps, his view that the literary text consists of both an author/ artistic and a reader/ esthetic pole, fully accounts for, and productively illuminates, the way in which quality haiku happen.

NOTES

¹ Ross, Bruce. *How to Haiku: A Writer's Guide to Haiku and Related Forms*. Boston: Tuttle, 2002.

² Leitch, Vincent B. *American Literary Criticism From the Thirties To the Eighties*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

³ Fry, Paul H. *Theory of Literature*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2012.

⁴ Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooks. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 5th ed. New York: Pearson/ Longman, 2005.

⁵ Freund, Elizabeth. *The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

⁶ Upstone, Sara. *Literary Theory: A Complete Introduction*. Croyden (UK): Hachette, 2017.

⁷ Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980: 50-69.

⁸ Leith.

⁹ Freund.

¹⁰ Iser.

¹¹ Tompkins, Jane P. "An Introduction to Reader Response Criticism." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*. Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980: x-xxvi.

¹² Freund.

¹³ Iser.

¹⁴ Stierle, Karlheinz. "The Reading of Fictional Texts." *The Reader In the Text: Essays On Audience and Interpretation*. Eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980. 83-105.

¹⁵ Iser.

¹⁶ Iser.

¹⁷ Fry.

¹⁸ Iser.

¹⁹ Fry.

²⁰ Iser.

²¹ Fry.

²² Selden.

²³ Tompkins.

²⁴ Iser.

²⁵ Iser.

²⁶ Freund.

²⁷ Hotham, Garry. "fog." *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. Eds. Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Alan Burns. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013: 40.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ MacLeish, Archibald. "Ars Poetica." *A Pocketful of Poems*. Ed. David Madden. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996: 70.