

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE SPIRIT OF HAIKU

1.

Whether it was Sir Isaac Newton or someone else who first said that we stand on the shoulders of giants, with writers it is much the same way as with scientists. First we catch up on what's already been written, that is, what was published before we were born; then, maybe, we imitate other writers, consciously or unconsciously, while slowly we learn to hear, trust, our own unique voice. In some few cases, this voice, as the muse may be called, is heard early on. By most writers, it is never heard. In some cases, it takes decades to make itself known.

Around 40 years old, I became disgusted with writing modernist poems, sending them to publishers, with rejection slips, tired of the whole Poetry World. I had invested my life in writing, and it had come to nothing. Whether I published a poem or not made no difference. Who read it? I felt that I was wasting my time.

Besides doing some editing—a manuscript of one of Thomas Merton's came my way---, I left the Literary World, began to sculpt and catch up on Art History. I became an Adjunct Curator at the University of New Mexico's Art Museum. A few years later, a friend who was a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department loaned me her copy of Jacques Derrida's *Grammatology*. It reminded me of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which I had read in my early 20s. Both books were barely understandable; but both made a deep impression on me. They changed the pattern of my thinking, which has more to do with the enthusiasm—being inspired by a god---than intellect. It's a transmission of gnosis, knowledge that can be felt but not articulated. What Zen Buddhism calls "ear-whispered teaching."

Soon after that I read Barthes, Deleuze, and the poetry of Edmund Jabès. Postmodern and deconstructive strategies raced through my brain, transfusing my imagination with new possibilities for literature. Also, by then, four years of sculpting, hands wet with clay and hard from carving wood, prepared me to work language by tearing it apart, then reshape it into unanticipated verse.

I began by writing long prose pieces, mainly on photography, for an internationally-distributed Contemporary Art magazine, completely different from anything I had written before, and from anything the magazine had published before. This eventually led me to a project with a photographer/professor who, like I, was interested in how nuclear technology had affected, and was presently affecting, the culture and economy of New Mexico. It was to be a museum show, and I had two years to do the research and produce forty texts. (2)Two years sounds like a lot of time, but it is only twenty-four months! Under the pressure of time and the vast amount of facts—technological, mythological, historical, political—I wanted to include in the prose poems I was writing, I developed a paratext to carry the scholarly weight, along with what I called "hardcopy hypertextual links." This was around 1990, when digital hypertext was not yet available to the public. Unconsciously, then, I was preparing myself for the Internet.

After I had written the initial drafts, the museum's graphic designer, who would turn the texts into posters, told me that she needed a floppy disk. I had never used a computer, even had a fear of them. So friends of mine who were computer literate took me in hand, and as I looked on with complete ignorance I bought an XT computer. These only had high memory, and 20 MB hard drive. I also bought a 13" amber-lighted monitor. My friends gave me a copy of Wordperfect 3.1, and over that weekend, with many phone calls to them, I learned the basics of DOS and

wordprocessing. No, it was more than that. Over that weekend, I began the long process of developing Digital Literary Art, a new genre that resists transcription onto to paper.

My next project was an autobiography titled "Reality Dreams." (3) By this time, the World Wide Web was coming on-line. Soon the first text editors that didn't require hand-coding HTML would become available. What followed was many projects, including the five-year "Inside the Skull-House: A Neuropoesis," (4) and the two-year, "The Silence of Sasquatch: Toeing the Dark Divide." (5) There were also smaller projects, such as "Traces of the Catacombes." (6), and "Come Here Leave Me Alone. (7)

2.

It had been decades since I had published a book, when David Rosen, a friend of some thirty years, came to Portland, Oregon, where I now live, to deliver a talk to Oregon Friends of C.G. Jung. David had become a distinguished Jungian psychiatrist, a Professor of Medicine at Texas A&M University, and a successful author. That weekend we discussed the possibility of collaborating on a book, although we didn't know on what we wanted to write. It would take about a year of emails and phone calls before "The Healing Spirit of Haiku" began to take shape.

Thirty years before this project, I had collaborated on a book with the California artist, Arthur Okamura: "Oxherding: A Working of he Zen Text." (8) Then, about four years ago, I made a trip to the San Francisco Bay Area. I hadn't been back there in almost twenty-five years, and Arthur was one of the people I visited. So when this book came about, I naturally thought of him to illustrate it; and, happily, he agreed.

Because the project was a collaboration, email became a tool without which the process would have been much more difficult. However, one drawback of email is in generic research. Although they can be archived, emails are usually not as carefully composed as the paper correspondence authors arduously write and exchange. In this case, most were scrapes of thought that were casually deleted.

"The Healing Spirit of Haiku" (9) emerged as a collection of haibun, prose capped by haiku poems. We choose "haiku" for title because it is one of those gifted words that defy translation, and is thus universal, while "haibun" is hardly known outside Japan.

During the year or so that we worked on the book, David did much traveling, while I remained in place. This became the dynamic: I would receive a rough draft of a haiga from him, from which I would work on associations that were personal to me. Sometimes these were current, or recent, experiences; sometimes memories; sometimes they came from research. In all instances, they were funneled through heart and mind. On the other hand, the haiku usually, but not always, originated from immediate experience. In all cases, David and I were open to each other's critique, with the result that, although each of us initiated and finalized our respective haiga, there are few instances that are not collaborative. After we had a complete first draft of the manuscript, Arthur Okamura began work on twenty-seven monoprints.

3.

Healing as a concept was something that, at first, I did not appreciate. As physician and psychologist, this was more David's field than mine. Only now, after reading the book, along with commentaries and reviews by some its other readers, have I come to realize how much the spirit of healing, of wholeness and holiness, was instilled into the work. On my part, it was unintentional. I just wrote as deeply and honestly as I could. Some artists aim to create a life from the demands of their work, which is the ethos of Modern Art. Others—I'm one of these—create a body of work *from* their life. The spirit of haiku also comes from the latter, which makes the attitude of these brief poems as timeless as an epic novel. Haiku gives us insight into our relationship with the inhuman world, which is an essential part of our inner being, our psyche, our

soul. Haiku is personal because is it universal. It is also deceptively simple. Reading critiques alerts one to how deceptive haiku can be, the good ones at least. They are not only universal, but can also be deeply rooted in a particular culture.

The Japanese haiku and Zen Buddhist priest, Taneda Santōka, was born in 1882. He died in 1940, in midst of his country's suffering during World War II. What makes Santōka so endearing to me is that he was a failure at everything he did, except for his accomplishments as a poet. He failed at the family business. His marriage failed. He failed as a parent. He failed at being a temple priest. He was an alcoholic, and for most of his life a homeless beggar, a *furabo*, a monk who lives like a piece of tattered cloth dancing in the wind.

He spent his life walking and writing haiku, such as:

valiantly---that too  
pitifully---that too  
white boxes

I quote this particular one to show how time, culture, and politics, too, can play a part in haiku. Its translator's comment reads: "In 1937 war broke out between Japan and China, and the poem is one of several written the following year, when Santōka was viewing the cremated remains of Japanese soldiers killed in action in China as they were brought home to grieving relatives in small boxes wrapped in white cloth." (9) I also want to point out how scholarly commentary can help us understand haiku, especially when we are unfamiliar with the circumstances within it was written. Or the poet can write a haibun and render his or her own explanation.

In "The Healing Spirit of Haiku," David writes about his visit to Hiroshima as "an upsetting, yet profound experience." (p.47) He goes on to say that in the Peace Park Museum "there is a piece of wall that was in front of a bank near the epicenter of the blast. When the Atomic bomb exploded, a man was sitting in front of this segment of the wall; all that remained was his shadow." David's haiku:

Shadow burnt into wall---  
Rain falls, leaving no sound  
Behind

In turn, I said that when I was in Japan I didn't visit Hiroshima. Frankly, I was too ashamed of being an American. But for twenty-three years I lived in New Mexico, where the very bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and, a few days later, on Nagasaki, were conceived and built. But before those bombs was delivered to the military, a similar device their prototype was tested at Trinity Site, in southern New Mexico, fusing the desert's sand into a greenish glassy substance that was named Trinitite. With this in mind, I wrote:

Never before,  
Such sour  
Green rocks

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This paper was read in Portuguese by Professor Jorge Luiz Antonio, at the Universidade Anhembi Morumbi, Sao Paulo, Brazil, May 16, 2005. It is dedicated to the memory of Robert Creeley.

1. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert*. Museum of New Mexico Press, 1983.
2. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/cont-d.htm>
3. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/cont-r.htm>

4. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/skull/intro.htm>
5. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/Bigfoot/intro.htm>
6. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/Traces/intro.htm>
7. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/Come/intro.htm>
8. Cranium Press, San Francisco, CA., 1971.
9. North Atlantic Books, 2004.
10. Burton Watson, Translator, *For All My Walking*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

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