

## **Nagata Koi - a Haijin from Hell**

Of Zen haiku poets, Nagata Koi (1900-1997), in his Mahayana Buddhism, is particularly demanding. Here we find ourselves on the wilder shores of existentially liberative haiku. "We can call haiku religious in the sense that it is always a means of seeking for a way to live, and to discover and express truth, goodness and beauty."

I have relied here on a bilingual selection of a hundred of Nagata's haiku with the warning title of "A Dream like this World", translated by Naruto Nana and Margaret Mitsutani. The book also contains examples of Nagata's unique styles of calligraphy and ink painting – widely admired and much exhibited. Scattered throughout are brief statements about the nature of haiku. Like – "The true writer is a writer from hell." Nagata was undoubtedly a major figure on the Japanese cultural scene, though more admired by post-modern poets than by many in the conservative haiku community.

There are two barriers to the full appreciation of Nagata's haiku. Their translation is made the more difficult by his use of made-up words and compounds, much like Eihei Dogen, the great thirteenth century Zen philosopher-monk whom he so much admired. Some haiku seem quite banal, raising a doubt that we may be losing something in translation:-

a black icicle  
my slip up  
but what a sight !

There are others which strike the English reader as little more than truisms:

a cat in heat dedicates himself to love

The linguistic fog mingles with the philosophic fog of sunyata or "emptiness" – the key doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, at the heart of so many of Nagata's haiku. For our purpose, that refers to the "suchness", the "just-how-it-isness" when we experience something without reference to anything else. For example, at times we may experience our self as simply who we are without reference to being "old now", or "still young". At that moment we step out of fleeting time and into timeless time (though both are equally "real") Here are two instances from Nagata:

I cut a lily  
time stops  
like a flying arrow

a morning glory  
one hundred visits  
and my mother will die

Typically the anxious self, with its ingrained sense of "lack", is always wanting, in matters great and small, for it to be "this" (which will sustain its sense of a solid identity) and not "that" (which will threaten it). The great Buddhist teacher, Krishnamurti, on the stage before a large audience, once raised his hand to show the gap between thumb and forefinger. He then delivered his lecture: "Ladies and gentlemen! All the miseries of the world are created by that gap -- between 'this' and 'that'! "Contrariwise, when we are able to dwell in suchness, beyond this dualism, we live at ease with both self and others. This is what Nagata is attempting to communicate in a significant number of his haiku.

Let us consider first this simple example of Nagata's nondual vision and let it come alive in our imagination.

a winter crow  
steps forward  
the scene steps with him

Instead of seeing the crow as separate from the surrounding landscape we are invited here to experience both as a single happening.

A further step is where we playfully dissolve the dualism of the "real" versus the "unreal", as in surrealism. Nowadays, surreal haiku are by no means rare. Here is one from Nagata:-

furrows  
left alone to play  
in the moonlight

But surely furrows don't play? Maybe they do, if left alone by folks for whom a dull day at the office remains "real" as compared with the "unreality" of a vivid and transformative dream that they had the previous night. Likewise we may encounter a painting which quite transcends our customary "real" experience of that very same subject. "And what if drifting cloud in moonlight, the play of light and shade, were to set those furrows dancing?"

*"How could you find anything more concrete than ideas?"* exclaims Nagata. He continues:

I believe that poetry is what changes existence into illusion. Or you might say it changes reality into illusion. In my old age I find myself using all reality – especially the reality surrounding human beings; even this aging body I see before my eyes -- as the dream of reality, or the reality of the

dream, and this gives me a peculiar sense of joy. In the highest sense, life is illusion.

And so...

how lonely!  
cultivating stone leeks  
in this world of dreams

This is in fact a translation by James Kirkup and Makoto Tamati which catches the spirit of the poet particularly well. Best chewed ruminatively, or maybe swallowed in one gulp. Dissect it and it becomes a dead thing. But does not life sometimes feel a lonely and bleak affair of unrewarding effort, where "reality" itself becomes nightmarish? And may not this feeling give expression to life's just-how-it-isness in a single breath? And may not this shared experience, so poignantly expressed, lift the burden a little?

the guts age first  
the skylark  
soars

Nagata is urging a single experience here, not two -- a good and a bad. So it was with our own Cockney mystic, William Blake: *"Joy and woe are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine."*

Here is a haiku on which Nagata himself offers a commentary:

an old cat straining, shits –  
in such a pose  
my mother dies in winter

One day in a wasteland I had plowed myself I saw an old cat crouched in a frozen furrow taking a shit. God's transparent wing covered the scene like a veil. But I was able to see everything through it. For a long time I watched the hunched up body of that aged cat, seeing in it the primal form of the existence to which it must naturally return. The actual length of time is irrelevant to metaphysical intuition, but you might say that with the eyes of eternity I was witnessing an eternal truth. It had nothing to do with either beauty or virtue. It was truth itself; poetry itself.

In several of the haiku the suchness of their subjects is expressed very explicitly. Suppose you were suddenly to come upon an old bottle lying neglected on the ground and evidently still containing some liquid. For a moment the "this or that" mind may not register whether the liquid is "cloudy" or "transparent", or some halfway state either. There is a momentary release from the bondage of words, allowing things to stand forth in their own right:

old square bottle  
all  
transparent and cloudy

Nagata's output is diverse, and there are many poems which make a ready impact without resort to Buddhist decoding.

a weary man  
lost in thought  
an aged butterfly  
between his thighs

Or, arguably on the same theme of impotent old age:

the autumn wind –  
in my belly  
the face of a maiden

The overall impression of this collection is of a playfulness typical of Zen, where nothing is quite what it seems, but which can help us to ride more loosely in life's saddle. The book is full of "laughing catfish" which pop up all over the place: -

my joints laugh with the catfish  
wriggling in my hands

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*A Dream Like This World: One Hundred Haiku* by Nagata Koi, translated by Nana Naruto and Margaret Mitsutani. Nana Naruto, 4-3-6, Toyosumi, Kashiwa, Chiba, 277-0071 Japan. 2000. With grateful acknowledgement.

*(Reprinted with grateful acknowledgement to Blithe Spirit: Journal of the British Haiku Society, 22(1) 2012)*