

## **‘Inky Dinky Parly Voo’: Jack Kerouac and the modern haiku tradition**

Jack Kerouac will always be most famous as the author of the 1957 novel, *On the Road*, but his follow-up 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, was also hugely successful and influential, not least in playing an important role in popularizing the English-language haiku form. Bill Higginson wrote of how the novel became ‘the bible to a whole generation of American youth’ and that several poets ‘first discovered the haiku in Kerouac’s novel’.<sup>1</sup> By the 1950s poets such as Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Amy Lowell had already experimented with haiku, but Kerouac and other Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen helped to establish the haiku zeitgeist of the 1960s. This encouraged poets ‘to abandon their dependence upon and imitation of the classic Japanese model for doing haiku and to strike out on their own in order to build a home-grown English-language haiku tradition’.<sup>2</sup>

Hiroaki Sato has suggested that the peak of *zen’ei* or avant-garde haiku writing in Japan was around 1961–1962 and its key feature was a ‘slightly off-balance aspect’ in the use of *teikei* (i.e. the ‘set form’ of 5–7–5 syllables).<sup>3</sup> The Beat’s experimental haiku spirit was more radical because there was a ‘slightly off-balance aspect’ in the approach not just to *teikei* but to all traditional norms. Higginson referred to Kerouac’s 1959 collaborative haiku book, *Trip Trap*, as something that, when it was finally published in 1973, ‘landed in our midst before we were ready for [its] startling revelations of what a haiku in English might be’.<sup>4</sup>

In the longer term, the Beats’ haiku experimentalism remained marginal to the mainstream English-language haiku tradition, which developed during the 1970s and 1980s in journals like *American Haiku*, *Frogpond*, and *Modern Haiku* with reference to traditional Japanese haiku norms rather than any innovative or avant-garde attitude. But there remains much of interest in

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<sup>1</sup> W.J. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook* (New York, NY, McGraw-Hill, 1985), p.64.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Trumbull, *A History of Modern Haiku* (Lincoln IL, Modern Haiku Press, 2019), p.9.

<sup>3</sup> Hiroaki Sato, ‘Gendai Haiku: What Is It?’, *Modern Haiku* 44(2), 36–49 (2013), p.48.

<sup>4</sup> W.J. Higginson, Book review of *Chrysanthemum Love* by Fay Aoagi, *Modern Haiku* 35(2) (2004); Jack Kerouac, Albert Saijo and Lew Welch, *Trip Trap: Haiku along the Road from San Francisco to New York 1959* (Bolinas CA, Grey Fox Press, 1973).

Kerouac's *Book of Haikus*, which was published in 2003 and which has attracted commentary in, for example, Jeffrey Johnson's important 2011 book, *Haiku Poetics in Twentieth Century Avant-Garde Poetry*, and, more extensively, Yoshinobu Hakutani's recently published work, *Jack Kerouac and the Traditions of Classic and Modern Haiku*.<sup>5</sup>

Kerouac wrote about 1000 haiku between 1955 and 1966, three years before his untimely death from cirrhosis at the age of 47. In 1961 he tried unsuccessfully to publish a collection with the title, *Book of Haikus*, but these and later haiku remained largely unpublished during his lifetime. In 2003 a much-expanded version of Kerouac's *Book of Haikus* was published as a collection of over 500 haiku selected by Regina Weinreich. Weinreich's edition of Kerouac's haiku fittingly opens with the author's own 1961 *Book of Haikus* selection, and this is followed by haiku that appeared in Kerouac's fiction and other books. Weinreich titles this second section, 'Dharma Pops', in part because Kerouac's attempts to 'Americanize' the haiku form included calling haiku 'pops' (and insisting on the incorrect, plural 'haikus').

The remaining poems in Weinreich's selection are taken directly from Kerouac's files, notebooks, and even some letters. They are presented according to a seasonal division of Kerouac's life that he specified in a journal entry: roughly speaking, the mid-1950s constitute spring ('1956: Desolation Pops'); the pre-*On the Road* period is summer ('1957: Road Haikus'); the post-*On the Road* period is autumn ('1958-1959: Beat Generation Haikus'); and the 1960s represent winter ('1960-1966: Northport Haikus').

Kerouac came to haiku through Buddhism, and he came to Buddhism because of a broken heart. In the summer of 1953, as portrayed fictionally in *The Subterraneans* (1958), Kerouac had a relationship with Alene Lee, a Greenwich Village bohemian. Kerouac began to study Buddhism during the depressed aftermath of this affair, a response that was strongly influenced

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, edited by Regina Weinreich (New York NY, Penguin, 2003). All haiku by Kerouac cited in this essay are included in Weinreich's selection, and the page references to Weinreich's introductory essay, 'Introduction: The Haiku Poetics of Jack Kerouac' [ix-xxxvii], are given here in square brackets; Jeffrey Johnson, *Haiku Poetics in Twentieth Century Avant-Garde Poetry* (Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2011); Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Jack Kerouac and the Traditions of Classic and Modern Haiku* (Lexington Books, Lanham MD, 2019). Page references to this book are also given here in square brackets.

by events in his early childhood. Kerouac was born in 1922 in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, to French-Canadian, Roman Catholic, immigrant parents. His childhood was marked not only by Depression-era poverty but also by severe trauma when in 1926 his brother, Gerard, died from a rheumatic heart condition at the age of nine. Gerard's death instilled in Kerouac a strong sense of life's suffering, including deep compassion for the suffering of others; he was attracted by Buddhism's first noble truth ('All life is suffering'), and especially by the Mahayana Buddhist concept of compassion for all living things, including animals, insects, plants and flowers.

*The Dharma Bums* is a fictionalized account of the author's friendship with Gary Snyder during 1955 and 1956. Although Kerouac remained staunchly a Mahayana Buddhist, he was influenced by Snyder's Zen Buddhism and particularly by Snyder's emphasis on the nature-spirituality nexus — 'The closer you get to real matter, rock air fire and wood, boy', the Snyder character in the novel proclaims, 'the more spiritual the world is'.<sup>6</sup>

Haiku feature at several places in *The Dharma Bums* but the most important is when the two friends are climbing Matterhorn peak in California. Snyder sees some yellow aspens and spontaneously composes a haiku, 'Talking about the literary life — the yellow aspens'. Kerouac describes this type of spontaneous composition as that of 'the Oriental poets' who 'just [went] along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression'. Snyder remarks that a 'real' haiku should be 'as simple as porridge and yet make you see the real thing', and he proposes that probably, 'the greatest haiku of them all' is by Shiki: 'The sparrow hops along the veranda, with wet feet.' You can see the wet footprints 'like a vision in your mind', says Snyder, 'and yet in those few words you also see all the rain that's been falling that day and almost smell the wet pine needles'.<sup>7</sup>

Kerouac's readings in Buddhism had led him to R.H. Blyth's four-volume work, *Haiku* (1949–1952), which provided him with a grounding in classic theory and technique. While Kerouac often used *kigo* and seasonal words or allusions in his haiku, he followed Blyth in not considering *teikei* as essential to haiku, and he often replaced *kireji* ('cutting words') with punctuation and

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* [1958] (New York, Penguin, 1976), p.206.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.59.

sometimes included terminal punctuation. Beyond technique, Weinreich comments that Blyth's writings 'gave Kerouac a window into the gestalt and very culture of haiku, the thusness and suchness, the traditional tropes: the seasons, wind, night, dusk, dawn, mist, birds, crickets, the moon and the stars' [xxii]. Kerouac was also influenced by Snyder's sense of haiku as a spontaneously-composed 'simple picture' — it is echoed strongly in Kerouac's oft-quoted remark that haiku must be 'very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella'.<sup>8</sup>

The 'spontaneous' element in Kerouac's descriptions of writing haiku deserves special mention because his literary legacy is founded to a great extent on his practice of 'spontaneous prose'. This approach to writing prose tried to represent thought-as-experienced; Kerouac sought to express rather than second-guess his inspirational flow and he was deeply suspicious of re-drafting and editing processes generally. Although he expressed approval for spontaneity regarding haiku, it was different to his 'first thought, best thought' prose style because his emphasis in haiku was on refining the spontaneously observed image to portray an essential simplicity in the completed poem. In his 1968 *Paris Review* interview he said haiku are 'best reworked and revised' in order to achieve simplicity: 'It has to be completely economical, no foliage and flowers and language rhythm, it has to be a simple little picture in three little lines.'<sup>9</sup>

Bruce Ross remarked that Kerouac's haiku express 'a conciseness of expression that is underscored by reverberations of various emotional coloring, including humor'. Humour is indeed strongly present throughout *Book of Haikus* and Jeffrey Johnson argued that Kerouac's haiku 'featured a comicality that brought haiku back to its origins as *haikai* poetry'.<sup>10</sup> Here are two light-hearted 'simple-picture' haiku, each portraying a single image in three lines:

Two Japanese boys  
singing  
Inky Dinky Parly Voo

The windmills of  
Oklahoma look  
In every direction

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<sup>8</sup> From the 'Explanatory Note' to 'Some Western Haikus' in Kerouac's posthumously published collection, *Scattered Poems* (San Francisco CA, City Lights Books, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> 'The Art of Fiction No. 41: Jack Kerouac', Interview by Ted Berrigan, *The Paris Review*, Issue 43, Summer 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Ross, 'Haiku Mainstream: The Path of Traditional Haiku in America', *Modern Haiku* 43(2), 24–36 (2012), p.30; Johnson (see note 5 above), p.203.

Verlyn Klinkenborg cited 'Two Japanese boys' as an example of Kerouac's ability to render 'strange miracles of inclusion' in three lines, and he described 'The windmills of Oklahoma' as a reminder of the 'fundamentally American' context of Kerouac's haiku.<sup>11</sup> Here are two with a more universal flavour:

Useless! useless!  
— heavy rain driving  
into the sea

Bird suddenly quiet  
on his branch — his  
Wife glancing at him

Weinreich described 'Useless! useless!' as a 'lament on man's endeavors, futile against the inevitability of Nature, [evoking] the timeless and universal spirit of the Japanese poets' [xxiii]. The anthropomorphic 'Bird suddenly quiet' illustrates a notable feature of Kerouac's style, namely the way in which he often 'cuts' his haiku in mid-line. In 'Bird suddenly quiet', the cut or caesura is in the middle of the second line, but in 'Dawn — crows cawing', the first of the following two examples of Kerouac's use of alliterative onomatopoeia, the caesura is in the middle of the first line:

Dawn — crows cawing,  
ducks quack quacking,  
Kitchen windows lighting

Rig rig rig —  
that's the rat  
On the roof

While Kerouac was well versed in classic haiku theory and techniques, these were 'interwoven with his own contemporary concerns', and overall he 'felt free, exercising a kind of poetic license in their experimental use' [Weinreich, xxii, xxvii]. By the mid-1950s, when Kerouac started writing haiku, he had become hugely experimental as a writer generally; it is unsurprising that he constantly digressed from classical haiku norms in diverse ways. Several of his haiku are what he called 'three-line pomes [*sic*]' that have neither a *kigo* nor a 'cut' and therefore no juxtaposition or internal comparison; other poems have a caesura in mid-line; others are three-image 'pops' ('Full moon — / Pine tree — / Old house'; 'The full moon — / the cat gone — / My sleeping mother').

The list of ways Kerouac tried to 'Americanize' haiku goes on and includes also a fusion of haiku and jazz that Jeffrey Johnson

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<sup>11</sup> Verlyn Klinkenborg, 'Appreciations; Jack Kerouac's Haiku', *The New York Times*, April 13, 2003.

described as ‘one of the most important extensions of haiku into lyrical poetics’ in general.<sup>12</sup> This fusion involved a jazz-improvisational approach to reciting and performing as well as writing haiku — the performative aspect is expressed with infectious enthusiasm on Kerouac’s 1958 album, *Blues and Haiku*, on which his haiku readings are accompanied by jazz saxophonists, Zoot Sims and Al Cohn.

Kerouac’s jazz experiments with haiku paved the way for poets like James Emmanuel, whose haiku, along with those of Richard Wright and Sonia Sanchez, are discussed in some detail in Yoshinobu Hakutani’s 2019 book, *Jack Kerouac and the Traditions of Classic and Modern Haiku*. The book is presented as a reading of Kerouac’s *Book of Haikus*, but it also provides historical perspective on the English language haiku tradition in general; in fact, only the introductory essay and four of the nine chapters are devoted specifically to Kerouac. Hakutani sketches the historical foundations laid by the four great haiku masters — there is an entire chapter on Basho, but Buson, Issa, and Shiki are also discussed — and continues to an overview of modernist haiku poetics in general, including an account of how Japanese poetics, especially through Yone Noguchi (1875–1947), influenced poets such as Yeats and Pound and introduced haiku poetic sensibilities to the west. But at the heart of Hakutani’s book are the successive chapters on the relationship between Kerouac’s haiku and classic haiku poetics, Beat poetics, *On the Road*, and *The Dharma Bums*. In total, Hakutani’s analysis references (and lists) nearly 100 of Kerouac’s haiku.

Hakutani emphasizes that ‘much of classic haiku is based on the Eastern philosophies’ [xvii], and he suggests that Kerouac’s theory of haiku composition was grounded in Mahayana Buddhist ontology, particularly compassion for all living things, humans and nonhumans equally. Blyth remarked that Buddhist ontology ‘puts man midway. The primitive animistic ideas of the Japanese fall in with the Buddhist system, and all are united by the theory of transmigration [of souls].’<sup>13</sup> Hakutani’s emphasis on the role of Buddhism in haiku may be contentious but he shows clearly how Buddhism’s non-anthropocentric dimension combined in Kerouac’s haiku with his pre-existing Christian ideas about suffering and compassion.

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson (see note 5 above), p.204.

<sup>13</sup> R.H. Blyth, *Haiku – Volume 1: Eastern Culture* (Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1949), p.19.

In my medicine cabinet  
    The winter fly  
Has died of old age

A bird on  
    the branch out there  
— I waved

The first of these is again more a three-line poem than a traditional haiku, whereas the second anthropomorphic haiku includes a subjective *kigo* following a caesura after the second line — but even the poet's wave in 'A bird on' is integrated as part of the 'simple picture' the poem evokes. Both poems assume a compassionate pantheism, and for Hakutani both also express *mu*, a concept used in Zen to refer to the state of nothingness that is expressed poetically by '[suppressing] human subjectivity as much as possible . . . in depicting an object or a phenomenon in nature'. Hakutani describes *mu* as 'the most important philosophical state of mind that underlies haiku' [p108].

Many of Kerouac's haiku reference the self, but they tend to do so egolessly ('While meditating / I am Buddha — / Who else?'), and he sometimes expressed non-subjectivity quite explicitly ('There is no deep / turning-about / In the Void'; 'Spring day — / in my mind / Nothing'). He also wrote several haiku that put human existence in the broader context of the Confucian idea of heavenly supremacy over earth and humanity:

Reflected upsidedown,  
    In the sunset, pines  
Pointing to infinity

The summer chair  
    rocking by itself  
In the blizzard

Hakutani emphasizes that Kerouac's haiku were influenced by the books he studied — his Buddhist readings are an obvious example — and, in keeping with Basho's advice to 'go to the pine', Kerouac was 'also inspired by his own experiences in wandering and meditating in the fields and on the mountains in America'. For Hakutani, *On the Road* and Kerouac's haiku in the same mode depict a journey in which the author's 'vision of the world widens' from a Christian to a pantheistic perspective [p135].

A bottle of wine,  
    a bishop —  
Everything is God

Early morning yellow flowers  
    — Thinking about  
The drunkards of Mexico

In fact, the concreteness of the first haiku's imagery here helps to express its panentheism rather than its pantheism,<sup>14</sup> but it is certainly, as Hakutani indicates [p.126], far from a Christian worldview. Mike Spikes has argued that a common theme of Kerouac's 'Early morning yellow flowers' haiku and *On the Road* is 'the contradictory, double-edged nature of the drunken life' — both texts, he observes, celebrate drunkenness, but each also offers 'veiled warnings concerning its darker dimensions'.<sup>15</sup>

For Kerouac, those darker dimensions became significant when his success brought a level of media and public attention with which he could not cope. As one of his biographers put it, for Kerouac the glare of fame 'consumed so much of his identity' that he needed the 'crutch' not only of loyalty to his mother (with whom he had a notoriously enmeshed relationship), but also of alcohol.<sup>16</sup>

Kerouac was keenly aware, as Spikes also pointed out, that the haiku form 'affords singular artistic possibilities; [allowing] authors to distill and essentialize truths as no other genre can', and he did not shy away in his haiku from difficult truths about his own life.<sup>17</sup> In 1952, Kerouac became the father of Janet Michelle (or 'Jan') Kerouac, but he denied paternity until a court-ordered paternity test ten years later. He met his daughter on only two occasions, after one of which he wrote a heart-wrenching haiku: 'At night / The girl I denied / Walking away'. He wrote his darkest two-line haiku about his mother, and also some 'pops' concerning alcohol, albeit obliquely and typically making light of matters:

Autumn nite —  
my mother cuts her throat

Well here I am,  
2 PM —  
What day is it?

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<sup>14</sup> Pantheism claims generally that the universe is divine; in contrast, panentheism claims generally that the deity is more than the universe and sometimes, as in Kerouac's haiku, emphasizes that the universe is a manifestation of the deity.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Spikes, 'Haiku and Ockham's Razor: The Example of Jack Kerouac', *Modern Haiku* 44(2), 58–66 (2013), p.60.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York NY, Random House, 1979), p280; Tim Murphy, 'Jack Kerouac: Wounded Heart, Divided Soul', *Dublin Review of Books*, Issue 115, October 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Spikes (see note 15 above), p.66.

There are those who believe Weinreich's edition of *Book of Haikus* published too many haiku from Kerouac's notebooks and that it should have been edited down into a much shorter volume. Weinreich notes that three modern haiku poets — Cor van den Heuvel, Lee Gurga and Allan Pizzarelli — advised her, in terms most haiku poets will understand, that it would be best 'to throw away the clinkers. Even a superb haiku poet will write hundreds before a single good one surfaces. Best not to show Kerouac at his worst' [Weinreich, xxxix]. But Weinreich decided against this 'sound counsel' and opted instead to consider Kerouac's haiku as 'an invaluable record of his language' and to publish 500 of the 1000 in his notebooks [xxxix].

In 2004, Bill Higginson suggested that *Book of Haikus* includes an 'overwhelming number of should-have-been-buried diary jottings toward but never quite reaching haiku',<sup>18</sup> but with the passage of time it is difficult to argue that Weinreich took the wrong course of action. One can say there is an 'internal' and an 'external' perspective on Kerouac's haiku. The internal view evaluates his haiku as one would evaluate those of any haiku poet, and this would mean selecting (for a book, for example) only the 'good', disciplined haiku, nothing else. But the external view insists that Kerouac was Kerouac, not an ordinary haiku poet or an ordinary writer — if we only had his 'good' haiku, we would wonder why his haiku writing was so disciplined and tight compared with his fiction. While many poems in Weinreich's selection might not be accepted for publication by haiku journal editors today, the selection allows his haiku to be read as expressions of, and in the context of, his broader literary avant-gardism.

Literary improvisation and experimentalism, especially from another era, do not appeal to everyone, but for the open-minded, Kerouac's *Book of Haikus* is a complex and inspiring collection. It approaches the traditional with an innovative, experimental attitude in ways that are emphasized in Hakutani's broad survey, which will hopefully bring to wider scholarly attention Kerouac's challenging but knowledgeable engagement with the haiku form.

The trees are putting on  
Noh plays —  
Booming, roaring

Shooting star! — no,  
lightning bug! —  
ah well, June night

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<sup>18</sup> Higginson, Book review of *Chrysanthemum Love*, *Modern Haiku* 35(2) (2004).

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