

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM: LEARNING FROM WASSILY KANDINSKY

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Let me state at the outset that Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is a painfully obtuse book, at least in translation. It is a dense and difficult read. Yet it is lauded for presenting concepts that validated abstract art, and rejected the idea of "art for art's sake" as a "vain squandering of artistic power" (16). Kandinsky was significantly influenced by theosophy, a pantheistic philosophical system based on mysticism that was steeped in the motto, "There is no religion higher than truth." He asserted that all art needed to strive for spirituality, not in a religious sense, but out of a transcendent "inner need." Indeed, Kandinsky says that "spiritual freedom is as necessary in art as it is in life" (62). A Russian painter and art theorist, Kandinsky published his short book in 1912 in German, with his own illustrations, as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, and the book has had wide influence in painting and aesthetic circles ever since. Perhaps, too, it may have some influence on haiku.

What follows is a selection of quotations from the book, in translation by Kandinsky's friend, Michael T. H. Sadler, published in 1914 as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, with my commentary on varying applications of these quotations to haiku poetry. The message, I believe, is that haiku for haiku's sake may also be a vain squandering of artistic power, that abstraction must be grounded in wonder and awe, and find organic form, and that the spiritual motivation and reward we often find in haiku arises out of our own inner need. Just as Kandinsky's manifesto was a clarion call to reject materialism in favour of untainted spiritual transcendence, haiku poets might heed a similar call, no matter what their subject, and aim for spiritual freedom in their poems.

1. “Art becomes so specialized as to be comprehensible only to artists, and they complain bitterly of public indifference to their work.” (20)

It would be easy to attach part of this comment to gendai haiku, or more specifically the influence on English-language haiku by the avant-garde branch of gendai haiku in Japan, to say that it is indeed so specialized and opaque as to be comprehensible only to other avant garde haiku poets (if even them). However, the finger in this pointing hand points equally to all haiku in English—and as Emiko Miyashita mentioned in an email to me recently, “gendai is a recent American haiku movement and not a big issue here [in Japan].” Rather, what risks being overly specialized is all haiku, in any language. Czesław Miłosz has said that haiku, more than any other poetry, requires an informed reader, one who knows to look for the season word, the two-part structure, the allusions, the grounding in images and sensory experience. These are all aspects of what makes haiku rewarding to those who know what to look for, or intuit their effects, but these same aspects also have the power to alienate others. This alienation would seem to be the motivation for such T-shirt slogans and Internet memes as Rolf Nelson’s “Haikus are easy / But sometimes they don’t make sense / Refrigerator.” The bottom line here is that many haiku poets do indeed complain about public indifference to their work. Should they be so surprised when haiku is indeed so very specialized? When confronted with such a gadfly, then, what are we to do about it? Dumbing haiku down won’t help, nor will making it so “accessible” that it loses any depth. I believe the best haiku will find their audience, but perhaps the solution is for haiku poets to caution themselves against being too self-involved, and for audiences to stretch a bit to see where each haiku is coming from. Haiku educators, if not the poets themselves, could do a better job in conveying what the haiku is after, providing a better framework for assessing, understanding, or feeling haiku. But art education—that is, haiku education—may not be the real point. Rather, haiku would seem to need a greater emphasis on the transcendent, the spiritual, the

mystical, while still being concrete and immediate, capturing the suchness of life. This is not to favour any particular religious tradition, eastern or western, but to favour the celebration of truth.

2. “*The apt use of a word (in its poetical meaning), repetition of this word, twice, three times or even more frequently, according to the need of the poem, will not only tend to intensify the inner harmony but also bring to light unsuspected spiritual properties of the word itself. Further than that, frequent repetition of a word (again a favourite game of children, which is forgotten in after life) deprives the word of its original external meaning. Similarly, in drawing, the abstract message of the object drawn tends to be forgotten and its meaning lost. Sometimes perhaps we unconsciously hear this real harmony sounding together with the material or later on with the non-material sense of the object.*” (26–27)

This is the quotation that motivated me to find and read Kandinsky’s book. Edward Zuk shared this quotation with me in an email discussion about my “neon buddha” poems, in which I use that phrase in each of two thousand poems I’ve now written on the topic. I’m reminded, too, of the 1990 haiku book *Pine and Pond* by Tundra Wind (Jim Wilson), which employs the phrase “pine and pond” as the first line for each of a hundred haiku in the book. The effect is that the mind soon skims over the phrase as it loses meaning, and then actively begins to engage with it and even reenergize it by reading it carefully—the reader ends up taking an increased responsibility to energize the words in a conscious attempt to keep them from losing meaning. In this sense, the phrase gains an inner spiritual harmony, serving as a mantra for each haiku in the book. My “neon buddha” poems may not have the same effect (nor do they have that intention), but what’s of chief interest here is the way in which the meaning of words can fade and increase depending on context. Ultimately, what is the “abstract” message of each haiku? What “meaning” resides *beyond* the obvious facts and images presented in the poem? Do the words risk losing meaning because we’ve already read about

a frog or a chair or a rush of autumn leaves? What must we do as readers to reenergize each word, and trust the image, thereby to find the deeper harmony, even a spiritual one, lying within each poem? My answer to this is to endlessly see as a child sees, with wonder and awe, as if we were seeing each thing for the first time—or the last time.

3. “A first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world, to whom every object is new.” (34)

The modernist dictum to “make it new” would seem to find validation here. However, I would suggest the opposite, at least for poetry. I don’t know that it’s necessary to constantly make the poem truly “new” in order to create or recreate that feeling of childlike wonder at discovering the world for the first time. As Bashō said, to write a haiku, get a three-foot child. However, children lack the contextualization and insight of adult experience. Children can never have that context, which will come to them only later, but adults can learn to cultivate and retain that sense of wonder. Moreover, perhaps it’s necessary for *readers* of haiku to constantly put themselves in the frame of mind of the beginner, to wipe clear all preconceptions, as if apprehending the content of each and every haiku as if for the utterly first time. In other words, “making it new” could be seen as a dictum for the *reader* to follow, to make believe that each poem he or she reads is new to them—and also “made new” just for them, as a gift. How differently we would apprehend all haiku if we were to imagine each one gift-wrapped in a fine box with our name on it.

Such a stance, to the extent that we are each able to make it happen, is sure to affect our souls, our deepest senses of existence. Here I am reminded of Rachel Carson, who said in her book *A Sense of Wonder*, “If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of

wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”

4. “Form, in the narrow sense, is nothing but the separating line between surfaces of colour. That is its outer meaning. But it has also an inner meaning, of varying intensity, and, properly speaking, form is the outward expression of this inner meaning.” (39)

Kandinsky’s initial reference, of course, is to painting, but does his observation have anything to say about form in poetry, particularly haiku? As an alternative to a set syllabic form in English, and to the dilemma that 5-7-5 syllables is not linguistically equal to the 5-7-5 sounds counted in Japanese haiku, for at least twenty years I’ve advocated “organic form” for haiku. These ideas are rooted in Levertov and Hopkins, and Coleridge and Duns Scotus before that, and Plato’s *Phaedrus* even longer ago. Louis Sullivan, too, told us that “form follows function.” But what Kandinsky is getting at has more to do with inner *meaning*, not function. What, though, is meaning? Charles Trumbull, in *Frogpond* 35:3, Autumn 2012, has written extensively about this matter, in “Meaning in Haiku.” For haiku, perhaps it boils down to the emotional effect of each poem, the gestalt of each juxtaposition and the leaps we make as readers in intuiting the relationship of the poem’s two parts. To produce that “meaning,” or rather, “inner meaning,” each haiku would seem to necessarily find its ideal outward expression. What does this mean, though, practically speaking? I think it means for the poet to have enough experience with words that he or she lays them down in a smooth and intuitive way to respect, create, or recreate each particular experience, a sort of *flow* that’s as natural as glacier water finding its way around a boulder. Here I think of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990, 2008), which has much to say to haiku poets.

5. “[O]rganic form possesses . . . an inner harmony of its own, which may be either the same as that of its abstract parallel (thus producing a simple combination of the two elements) or totally different (in which case the combination may be unavoidably discordant). However diminished in importance the organic form may be, its inner note will always be heard.” (40)

What is the “inner note” of each haiku? To me, this is haiku’s holy grail. It has something to do with the effect of the “internal comparison” that Harold G. Henderson wrote about in haiku. The two parts of the poem conspire to create something larger than the sum of its parts, an inner harmony that feels, as Yeats said, like it shuts “with a click, like a closing box.” Any form may have its harmony, as we see in musical forms, but *slavish* adherence to an arbitrary external form hinders this inner harmony, whereas organic form often facilitates it. I say this even in the face of set form being normative in Japanese haiku, but there the language makes it far easier to compose in rhythms of fives and sevens. For example, Japanese word order is much more malleable, and you can change the syntax more easily, as Keiko Imaoka emphasized in her seminal essay, “Forms in English Haiku” (*Woodnotes* #29, Summer 1996, 27–33). In Japanese, furthermore, you can add or delete a cutting word or other words to make the syllables fit, although Japanese makes it easier to hide such behaviors, which means that such padding or chopping isn’t as problematic as it is when it happens in English. In English, I would assert that set forms are typically at odds with inner flow and harmony, and the challenge of writing in any set form would be precisely to make the set form unnoticeable—Kandinsky later refers to a “concealed construction” that “may arise from an apparently fortuitous selection of forms” (60). Yet to do so, within the confines of a set form, may suffer from being an intellectual party game, blind to the value of seeking organic form in the first place. Toward the end of his book, Kandinsky reminds us of what matters most: “The artist must have something to say, for mastery over form is not his goal but rather the adapting of form to its inner meaning” (63). He also gives us hope for the challenge of

finding the right form that “The inner voice of the soul tells him what form he needs, whether inside or outside nature. Every artist knows, who works with feeling, how suddenly the right form flashes upon him” (75).

6. “*Every object has its own life and therefore its own appeal; man is continually subject to these appeals.*” (41)

Later on the same page, Kandinsky writes that “As every word spoken rouses an inner vibration, so likewise does every object represented.” This brings to mind T. S. Eliot’s notion of the “objective correlative,” often mentioned in haiku circles, that objects correlate to emotions, to the extent that we trust them as writers and engage with them as readers. Kandinsky also writes that “Nature, that is to say the ever-changing surroundings of man, sets in vibration the strings of the piano (the soul) by manipulation of the keys (the various objects with their several appeals)” (41) and later that “external nature is the sole source of all art” (56). It may well be our duty, as haiku poets, to trust the objects and seasonal changes that surround us, to let them speak for themselves and the emotions they embody. We can trust the emotional impact of “easy chair,” for example, in contrast to “electric chair,” but also trust the impact of “meteor shower,” “falling leaf,” or “sack of kittens” all by themselves. Nevertheless, sharing the unique life and appeal of each object, its liveness, is not the goal of haiku. Rather, with the motivation of one’s inner spiritual need at hand, as Kandinsky is suggesting, the motivation is to put such liveness into service for a greater goal.

7. “*Every form is as sensitive as a puff of smoke, the slightest breath will alter it completely.*” (42)

The truth of this observation is why, at least to me, it is far more difficult to find the ideal internal (organic) form for each poem than to follow an arbitrary external form such as 5-7-5 in haiku, at least in English. I think too of the Japanese aesthetic of *karumi*, or lightness, which I’ve said before, in haiku terms, is like

catching a soap bubble without popping it. Such delicacy and sensitivity, a trait that the successful haiku requires equally of the reader, demonstrates how the form of such poems is indeed as ephemeral as a puff of smoke. Haiku, it may be said, is the art of *seeing* that smoke as it curls and dissipates into nothingness. Later, Kandinsky writes that “an artist can use any form he wishes, so long as he remains in touch with nature” (44), and that “The way to the supernatural lies through the natural” (72). The smoke itself is therefore more important than whatever shape it takes. Kandinsky adds that “The artist may use any form which his expression demands; for his inner impulse must find suitable outward expression” (44). It is therefore only when we have smoke that we can blow it into different shapes.

8. “[T]he subjective element is the definite and external expression of the inner, objective element.” (44)

My first thought is to think that the opposite is true, that the outer objective element expresses the internal subjective element. Yatsuka Ishihara has advocated a sort of haiku that “tells the truth as if it were false,” a stance that is often misinterpreted as “telling the false as if it were true” (the way most fiction is presented). But what Ishihara means is that you present the truth with emphasis, with overstatement, even to the point of absurd irrationality, and by means of the irrational you arrive at the rational, thus heightening the intuition. As the poet Charles Simic once said, “I’m against lying in life, in principle, in any other activity except poetry.” By asserting the impossible, according to Ishihara, haiku can emphasize the possible. In other words, the unreal defines the real. As for Kandinsky’s statement, then, he is asserting that subjectivity can express objectivity. Where the idea of the objective correlative, mentioned previously, would suggest that the objective expresses the subjective (objects bring to mind emotions), Kandinsky is also telling us that subjective elements can bring to mind objective representations of that subjectivity. I’m not quite sure how this might apply to haiku, but it opens an intriguing avenue of exploration. In theosophical terms, which

heavily influenced Kandinsky, the goal is truth, and he allows both subjective and objective means to arrive at that truth.

Here I think of Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming," in which he says the following, as much about poetry as about twentieth-century civilization:

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight

Things fall apart and the center cannot hold. Spiritus Mundi is the spirit of the world, perhaps akin to the collective unconscious, the gestalts of human understanding. If each human mind connects to a single vast intelligence, which causes universal symbols to occur to each of us, isn't that what a haiku deliberately taps into, the *shared* commonality not just of experience but of spiritual harmony?

9. "[A] deliberate search for personality and 'style' is not only impossible, but comparatively unimportant." (45)

Much talk is made among poets of finding one's "voice." I've always thought this to be an absurd and unnecessary goal. You just write. Your voice or style will take care of itself, as a complex amalgam of every influence your life has ever undergone—literarily, experientially, socially, spiritually, and countless other ways, including resistances to particular voices or styles. In fact, you cannot *help* but have a voice that embodies every influence upon your life. Tennyson once said, "I am a part of all that I have met." Yet, with all our creative endeavors, including haiku, it seems plausible that the opposite must also be true, that all we have met is part of who we are—and what we create. In poetry, we are influenced by everything, even if that influence is a conscious decision to avoid doing something a particular way. But more often than not, everything we experience informs what we write

and what we create. Look at the word “inform,” too. If experience “informs” us, it finds form inside us, and inside each poem we write. If we trust experience, and trust the images we write, they cannot help but *inform* the forms in which we write and the style that results. So why search for voice? If it’s to be searched for, it might be *readers* who should do that, thereby making it easier to apprehend your poetry if they understand some of the key influences that shaped your voice. Where Kandinsky surprises us, though, is by saying that voice or style may not be that important. From the writer’s perspective, I would thoroughly agree.

10. “[T]he principle of contrast . . . has for all time been one of the most important principles of art.” (53)

The parallel here to haiku is obvious. The two-part juxtaposition inherent in most traditional haiku, often embodying contrast as well as harmony, is hardly unique to haiku. We see black because it appears next to white, and vice versa. To be perceived at all, the figure requires the ground, and the ground requires the figure. We are fascinated with the edges of things, with boundaries and limits. If we might actively explore anything in our haiku art, with the most fruition, it might well be contrasts, in whatever form they may take. At the very least, we have the contrast between haiku’s two parts to explore, as we master the art of the kireji, or cutting word, central to the haiku art. In her haiku book *Flower Moon Snow* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), Kazue Mizumura defines kireji as “virtually untranslatable emotional shading,” and refers to kireji as “soul punctuation” (8). Indeed, the cut in haiku is designed to affect us exactly there—in our soul.

11. “The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul.” (55)

The context here is of course the painter, but what of the poet, and of the haiku poet? For starters, how does the poet train his or her eye? I would say to see carefully, to observe, to notice—to be, as Henry James once observed, someone on whom nothing is

lost. Such observation, as Thoreau would remind us, provides us with the building blocks for haiku—as he said, “It’s not what you look at that matters, but what you see.” But Kandinsky wants us to go further, to also train the soul. For me, the way to do this is to cultivate a boundless sense of wonder, to be in awe of life in all its manifestations, light and dark. It would seem hard to *train* one’s soul in this manner when surely such awe and wonder would be an innate, unteachable trait. But I do believe haiku can cultivate this trait. By training ourselves to see more carefully—that is, to train the eye—our souls will more readily embrace wonder and awe. And thus the soul will also be trained. We are better off for the training of the soul thanks to various religious traditions, but even without them, we can train the soul through careful seeing, mindfulness, and through a stance of constant amazement at the world around us and within us.

We can also train the soul through self-awareness. Just as haiku trains us to notice the seasons as they unfold, or to catch the subtleties of what we experience through our five senses, so too can haiku train us to notice our inner feelings, our inmost selves. Although he was speaking of tanka, Yoel Hoffmann in *Japanese Death Poems* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 1986, 19–20) said that “The tanka poet may be likened to a person holding two mirrors in his hands, one reflecting a scene from nature, the other reflecting himself as he holds the first mirror. The tanka thus provides a look at nature, but it regards the observer of nature as well.” Our approach to haiku, our growth in it, could be seen the same way.

We can also push ourselves to write differently today than we did five years ago, not to “make it new,” but to reflect the fact that we ourselves have presumably learned something in the intervening time, through self-awareness. And likewise, we might write haiku differently five years from now for similar reasons. What we might learn is not matters of mere craft, although that will inform the evolution of our personal art. Rather, what we learn is experience, ways of living in the world, of making sense of our place in it—of seeing, for example, the value of lightness (*karumi*), yet not shying away from heaviness when the situation

demands. This awareness involves knowing ourselves in a Socratic sense, yet also knowing others and our ways of fitting in with the world spirit—or rather, of recognizing our inherent and inescapable participation in it. That art thou. It's something to be in awe of. Indeed, training the soul is fundamental to Kandinsky's assertion that art must spring from an "inner need," and that this inner need is, at its root, spiritual. After all, as Kandinsky says, "Religion, in the sense of awe, is present in all true art" (67).

12. "That art is above nature is no new discovery." (60)

In the context of several previously mentioned quotations that promote the value of nature, such as "external nature is the sole source of all art" (56) and the assertion that "an artist can use any form he wishes, so long as he remains in touch with nature" (44), Kandinsky surprises us here. It occurs to me to wonder if the word "above" might have been the translator's choice of word rather than Kandinsky's. But in the original German, the text is "Daß die Kunst über der Natur steht, ist keine irgendwie neue Entdeckung" (see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/46203/46203-h/46203-h.htm#VII>), where "über" is indeed "above." Kandinsky offers nature as a vital foundation for art, yet he reminds us, if we choose to agree, that art is above nature. But isn't that obvious? If nature is the *foundation* of art, then of course art will be *above* that foundation, with the artwork set on the pedestal of nature. And art would indeed grow up from nature if nature is the source of all art. If art is a product of the soul, of course it would be above nature because it partakes in the divine and immortal.

This reminds me of E. E. Cummings, who said "since feeling is first," meaning that emotion is more important than intellect. But he did not say that emotion should be valued *instead* of the intellect. Likewise, Kandinsky does not say that art should be valued *instead* of nature, but that it should be *based on* nature—that nature is the foundation of art. The question for haiku poets, of course, is whether the art of haiku is above nature. For some poets, nature and the seasons are the *foundation* for the haiku art. Others, perhaps, are bound to disagree. Perhaps a question

to ask is whether haiku poets should see themselves as subservient to nature, or if nature, including one's inner nature and emotions, is source material that motivates art. If nature stimulates the poet to create art, perhaps it cannot help but rise above nature if it has any artistic value. And yet, in theosophical terms, there may be no above or below at all, in that everything is connected and part of the whole.

13. “The work of art is born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way. From him it gains life and being. . . . It exists and has power to create spiritual atmosphere; and from this inner standpoint one judges whether it is a good work of art or a bad one.” (62)

From this comment we may gain the idea of the *atmosphere* a haiku projects—atmosphere being, of course, the air in which a planet thrives, as well as the feeling or tone that surrounds a piece of writing, both of which are relevant to haiku. Whether a haiku has a spiritual atmosphere is another matter, perhaps a deeper one, but we might start by asking what atmosphere a haiku poem has when we read it, or what atmosphere we wish to create when we write it. I do not mean the context in which we read it, or the context provided by the author's name and biography, but the atmosphere created by the poem itself, such as tones of darkness or light, or any sort of emotional zephyr. In whatever way a poem is born, whether mysterious or not, it cannot help but gain life from every experience of its author. When we consider the quality of a haiku, we can consider standard techniques and basic craft, but we might also consider the spiritual stance the poem takes—a stance that may well transcend easily fixed failures at craft, a stance that has to do with spiritual truth rather than religion. If we train ourselves to see each poem's spiritual atmosphere, we may well recognize a very different form of art in the haiku we read. Perhaps *spiritual atmosphere* is an aspect of haiku that readers of this poetry could train themselves to look for just as much as they look for kigo, kireji, and objective sensory imagery.

14. “If the artist be the priest of beauty, nevertheless this beauty is to be sought only according to the principle of the inner need, and can be measured only according to the size and intensity of that need. . . . That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul.” (63)

It's appealing to think of haiku poets as the priests of written beauty. Yet it seems we should seek beauty out of true inner need, found at the marrow of our souls. This “inner need” finds an echo in *Letters to a Young Poet*, where Rilke says “A work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity. That is the only way one can judge it” (Stephen Mitchell, trans. New York: Vintage Books, 1984, 1987, 9). What's interesting in Kandinsky's thought is the idea of measuring the beauty in art relative only to the size and intensity of the artist's inner need for that beauty. The reasoning feels circular, but it suggests that greater and lesser beauties are to be embraced, relative to the abilities of the artist to envision great and small beauties, or rather, for each poem to do so—indeed, certain poems may deliberately choose lofty or less lofty goals, and each one should be welcomed. Beauty, of course, need not be limited to conventional notions of the pretty or attractive, but can be enlarged to embrace lifefulness, or that which embodies life in all its manifestations. Kandinsky notes early in his book that “joyful vision cloaks a vast sorrow” (18), empowering beauty to have great range. Moreover, as Catholic nun Saint Thérèse of Lisieux once said, “Beauty isn't in things, it's in your soul.” Kandinsky asks us to cultivate the soul as a means of cultivating beauty. Or does he perhaps ask us the opposite, to cultivate beauty in order to cultivate the soul? Surely cultivating either one will cultivate the other, and haiku is a poetic means to such cultivation.

If haiku poets are among the priests of written beauty, and if priests are commissioned to lead others in worship (in a spiritual sense, not of any particular religion), a further thought here is that perhaps we could consider haiku to be prayer. Perhaps haiku is a form of supplication to the natural and human world around us, or an acknowledgment—and celebration—of our interde-

pendence with it. As Henry Miller once put it, “The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” At the very least, as a sort of prayer, haiku is a spiritual expression of inner need. Here it seems worthwhile to share a poem by Mary Oliver, from her 2006 book, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, page 37), a poem that applies to haiku.

PRAYING

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but a doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

In summarizing *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky says that art has three sources of inspiration (66). One is a “direct impression of outward nature,” the material world we see around us, which he calls an “Impression.” Another is “A largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, the non-material nature,” which he calls “Improvisation.” And the third is “An expression of a slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after long maturing,” which he calls a “Composition,” cautioning us that “of the calculation nothing appears, only the feeling” (in other words, we want to see the soaring church steeple, not the scaffolding used to build it). Each of these three approaches to art seems valid also in terms of haiku. Perhaps the *shasei* technique (sketching from nature) finds its most obvious parallel in writing an “Impression.” The

spontaneous is with us repeatedly in haiku, too, and that is clearly at home with “Improvisation.” Finally, we are left with a “Composition,” which may be a more mature expression of mastery in the haiku art—to have an artistic goal and to explore it both intellectually and emotionally, yet still have the poem fall from us as naturally as a leaf falling from a tree. “In this,” Kandinsky writes, “reason, consciousness, purpose, play an overwhelming part” (66). In promoting these ideas, Kandinsky either unintentionally or proactively validated all of abstract art, and perhaps, by extension, he may also be validating abstraction in haiku through the intellectual motive he promotes. He says in the last sentence of his book, written a full century ago, that “We have before us the age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders” (66). That may be laying too heavy a burden on haiku to equate abstraction with spiritual leadership, but I find myself attracted to the idea that abstraction, to a point, has its place in haiku—although this is hardly a new idea. It seems essential, though, that the abstract be driven by a desire to communicate rather than obfuscate, to clarify, in some way, rather than to obscure, to be sufficiently transparent rather than opaque. As Aristotle said, “The soul never thinks without an image.” Or as poet Wesley McNair has written, “Thought [or abstraction] will not be possible in your poem unless you give the feet a place to stand, the hands something to touch, the eyes a world to see.” Even opaqueness, to my mind, should serve to communicate in some way or another, and if it does not do so, then it will simply alienate. More important, though, is the idea that haiku for haiku’s sake is subverted as a vain squandering of artistic power, and that haiku can be, instead, a form of prayer, creating a spiritual atmosphere of transcendence. When we are ready for it, the spiritual aspects of haiku are awaiting our exploration, if they are not what has already attracted us to haiku from the beginning. If we are driven by the spiritual in our haiku, and driven by truth, surely we will arrive at a higher plane than if we are driven by anything else.

ESSAYS

Note: Concerning the Spiritual in Art is now in the public domain, as is Sadler's translation. The preceding quotations are from a 2010 print-on-demand reprint from Readaclassic / CreateSpace, whose page numbers I refer to throughout. The full text is also available online in English at <http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/phil%20of%20art/kandinskytext.htm>, and in the original German at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/46203/46203-h/46203-h.htm>. My thanks to Edward Zuk for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, one or two of which I have paraphrased and included herein.

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Michael Dylan Welch was first attracted to the spirituality of haiku through books on Zen and Taoism, in which haiku translations sometimes appeared, and through Eric Amann's The Wordless Poem. He does not consider haiku to be a Zen art (no more, say, than photography or driving a car), but continues to be attracted to the transcendent suchness of many haiku. His poems, reviews, and essays have appeared in hundreds of journals in twenty languages, and also appear on his website at Graceguts.com. Michael founded National Haiku Writing Month (NaHaiWriMo.com) in 2010, and served two terms as poet laureate for Redmond, Washington, where he also curates two poetry reading series. His latest poetry books are Seven Suns / Seven Moons (NeoPoiesis Press, in collaboration with Tanya McDonald), Becoming a Haiku Poet, and Fire in the Treetops: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of Haiku North America (both Press Here).