

Jack Galmitz. *Views*. With an introduction by Beth Vieira. Allahabad, India, Cyberwit.net, 2012, 230 pp., perfect soft-bound, 5.4 x 8.4. ISBN 978-81-8253-314-1. US\$25. (*Views* is also available on Scribd.com: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/103908441/Views-PDF-for-Cyberwit>.)

by Johannes S.H. Bjerg, Højby, Denmark

“ . . . our world wholly mediated by language . . .
the constantly shifting meanings implicit in language.”

~ Jack Galmitz, *Views*, 2012

Reviewing *Views* by Jack Galmitz is a task of some impossibility and yet. . . . The book falls into three sections: “Interviews,” “Reviews,” and “Views,” each providing in-depth analysis of writers and their works with insights from modern language science, philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines, each expanding the reader’s appreciation of same. And I do mean expand. The poetry Galmitz touches on in this book becomes larger, deeper, more profound, more connected than it was when I read it the first time. So this review will be not as much a “valuation” as a “taste” of how I read his book.

Haiku is, like poetry in general, always in process of becoming. Haiku in the West is in the process of becoming Western—if it wasn’t already by the “necessary” adjustments made to make it fit the Western reading mode (top left to bottom right and cut up in three “separate” lines, etc.). If it isn’t already. Or, to be more correct: Some haiku has become Western; that is, it is no longer imitating or pretending to be a branch of Japanese culture in diaspora. Furthermore, thoroughly Western haiku has discarded the methods, subjects, and schematics in which much of so-called modern haiku as a whole seems to have gotten stuck.

Through the years some writers of haiku (some of whom are represented in this book) have managed to make the form /genre so much their own that it comes across as true poetry and not a replication of what has already been done. As

featured in *Views*, these Western writers include Paul M., Peter Yovu, Chris Gordon, John Martone, Robert Boldman, Marlene Mountain, Grant Hackett, Richard Gilbert, Dimitar Anakiev, Mark Truscott, and Fay Aoyagi. These poets have gone through the process of internalizing the “rules, aesthetics and tools /techniques” of haiku, have made them part of their “fabric,” and now their haiku show the *universality* of haiku. The poetic form has been churned in the writer and is now re-emerging as something original, genuine, and different. Western writers are Western, and being Western we have a different background, another soil of culture, language, aesthetics, and history (and with that another “consciousness”) than do Japanese writers.

Let me get this off my chest: this book is to me a liberating one! It doesn't go into explaining anything about haiku. It doesn't line up a specific view on the history of haiku. It doesn't promote a certain kind of writing. It promotes writing. Galmitz sets out from the assumption that the reader knows what haiku is and that haiku is haiku and recognizable in the language and imagery independently of definitions/descriptions. In only a few instances the haiku/not haiku distinction is made and that rests on his interviewees or the writers of the works he lays out for us and on writers who have made a different “kind of poetry” from the roots of haiku. Even though some of them don't see themselves as writing haiku, Galmitz does. He has a brilliant eye for spotting the haiku root and spirit in their work.

Interviews

The book opens with a most interesting and exhilarating series of interviews with writers (i.e., Paul M., Peter Yovu, Chris Gordon, John Martone). These have beyond all doubt arrived at a place where they have made haiku their own. This is sort of a peek into the alchemist's workshop in the sense that we get a glimpse of what moves the writers to write, how they think, and what they think about (their) “writing”—insofar as they are able to articulate what is at the root (the drive/inspiration) of their writing. Ideally—and really—the writing IS. What can be said is said “around it,” so to speak. Galmitz's approach to the work of his interviewees is based

on Western thinking, using a Western philosophic, theoretical, and analytical set of tools, which to me suggests and demonstrates that (some) haiku now has found its Western feet and can be treated and read within our own cultural sphere. The “haiku basics” have been learned, absorbed, and there really isn’t a reason to start treating Western haiku in any other way. It isn’t necessary (or necessarily meaningful) to read these poets in any other way, from any other (cultural) sphere, with any other set of aesthetic values. Galmitz interviews *haiku poets*.

Each of the interviewed poets has his or her distinct style and tone and Galmitz approaches them with respect and an insight that I from time to time sense might have been overwhelming for them. I guess it lies in the nature of the interview situation as such. The writer writes what is inevitably so, what might not be different. The poem is the outcome of a more-or-less conscious process rather than a deliberate construction (at first; later, of course, revisions and alternative versions might have come into play). The poem and the words chosen, the arrangement of lines, if any, the composition, the life of it when it is printed or spoken, all of this is a unity that maybe couldn’t turn out otherwise. The interviewer with a strong analytical mind and (wonderful) sensitivity “sees” the poem from the outside, reads it with another mindset, and to the reader of *Views* opens doors into the inner workings of the poems on quite another level. To me it’s like the old “heart and mind” conversation: the intuitive, the sensed, the created is spelled out and illuminated from other angles that make me want to pick up the mentioned books again and reread them with yet greater appreciation. Galmitz’s “flame of insight” lights up aspects of the poems that to me were hidden. And I’m grateful for that.

Reviews

Part 2 of the book consists of reviews of two books, Ban’ya Natsuishi’s *A Future Waterfall* and Tateo Fukutomi’s *Straw Hat*, and an essay about Tohta Kaneko’s “Poetic Composition on Living Things (*Ikimonofūei*).” The entire section deals with Japanese poets only. My guess is Galmitz put them here because he sees these writers and their works as creating a

“link” between Western and Japanese writing. Or maybe he thinks these poets have such weight that we should listen to them. Indeed they add splendid rooms to the house of haiku, which becomes even more lively.

I’ll let Galmitz himself speak about these poets. First, Ban’ya Natsuishi:

The reissue last year (2004) of *A Future Waterfall: 100 Haiku from the Japanese*, by Red Moon Press, seen in this perspective, is an event of singular importance. It signals the success of the work. This signals that the reshaping of the past in terms of the present as performed by Mr. Natsuishi has struck a chord—atonal and sometimes discordant—in a wide audience. The question remains, though, as to what accounts for Mr. Natsuishi’s widening influence in the world of modern poetry.

Though it is not the centerpiece of the book, or its best poem, the following poem might well stand as the book’s credo:

I came away, abandoning
the Thousand-Year-Old Cedar
dandled by the storm (p. 98)

And on Mr. Natsuishi’s promotion of keywords rather than *kigo*, Galmitz has this to say:

A slippery sex organ
and another
give birth to gold

This poem without a seasonal reference is a good example of how Mr. Natsuishi’s aesthetic of using keywords—here sex—in its place can be used to creative ends. This poem can almost be said to be a meta-haiku, for the poem is about adding two elements and arriving at a third, which the poem utilizes in its construction. The adjective “slippery” is well-chosen: it gives the impression of seals swimming, of moist living beings playing together, and by association is indirectly associated with the waters of spring and life. The finale is fine, like alchemy. Out of our love, sloppy wet or not, comes the most precious element, gold. And, out of his devotion for this art of joining two elements till they fire into a third, Mr. Natsuishi is the archetypal alchemist. (pp. 99, 100)

Similarly, Galmitz's review of Tateo Fukutomi's *Straw Hat* begins by laying some philosophical groundwork:

The world should not lie useless. It should be scooped up in the hands and sifted through the fingers and scored with the ridges of the palm. The whole world is fertile, even the world of memory, even the world of the departed. That is what cultivation serves: it enriches the soil and the self in one fell act. In the art of cultivation, a man eventually takes on the contours of what he has lovingly touched, until it is impossible to say where the world begins and the man ends. A man whose life has been devoted to preparing the field finds himself disappearing into the earth only to be returned by the earth to himself. He knows kinship with the things of the earth. He finds that the world of spirit springs from the soil. If he should travel, he finds he has never really moved. If he should die, he finds that he has never left home. (p. 104)

And later:

A stone bench for no reason
dark falls
among cypresses

Perhaps, the single most important function of cultivation is to show us the beauty of the world at rest. After the work is done, after the simple stone of the field is hewn into the human universe, it resumes its proper place once more in the world as a stone. It was always a bench and a stone and now that cultivation has lifted it out of the prima materia of the universe uncreated, we see it in its pristine nature. It has "no reason," except what we imagine and build. Having lifted it out of primal unity and given it distinction, then all distinctions arise as unity once more. The meaningless cool, dark stone slab is darkness and cypresses. They unite in dark beauty for the mind of light. (p. 108)

With regard to Tohta Kaneko's *Ikimonofūei*, Galmitz takes care to address the "haiku-philosophy" of one of Japan's "most important literary and cultural innovators of postwar modern haiku":

splendid field of gravestones
labia uncovered
the village sleeps

What is central to this poem is its sense of what Mr. Kaneko calls *shakaisei haiku* (social consciousness/awareness in haiku) and *taido*, the importance of an author's "stance" in relation to society. (See Dr. Richard Gilbert's Introduction for further elucidation.) For Mr. Kaneko, haiku that lacks social awareness and an author's stance vis-à-vis society is simply a vapid product, worthless, untrustworthy. Of the many points Mr. Kaneko makes in his address, this is one we as English language practitioners of haiku do well to bear in mind, because for the most part we have viewed these terms as too polemical, too ideological to be included in our haiku . . . (pp. 110, 111)

Views

The third and last part of the book is a collection of reviews of books and oeuvres. Here Galmitz goes into the works (poetry and methodology) of Robert Boldman, Marlene Mountain, Grant Hackett, Richard Gilbert, Dimitar Anakiev, Mark Truscott, and Fay Aoyagi. As is apparent from this list he is dealing with a very wide range of writers and very different approaches to haiku. Yet he treats every writer with utmost "singularity"; that is, he/she has his full attention and is analyzed with a specific "set of tools" and not after the same scheme. It seems to me that meeting one writer's work sets off a line of thought specific for that writer. The meeting with another writer's work sets off another line. This demonstrates an exceptional open-mindedness that is free from resorting to the easy way: having a fixed set of "aesthetics and opinions," he can "adapt" to the particulars of each person and each work.

Galmitz shows an enviable openness in treating/analyzing these works on their own premises. He doesn't want them to be anything other than what they are. He isn't fixed in a certain perception of what haiku is and is not (which also shows in his own writing; Galmitz is an author of a large number of haiku collections and other books of poetry and he keeps exploring short-verse poetry in various forms).

To say that this book is important is probably an understatement. To say it's a "model" for future works of this kind is not

giving it enough credit. In my view Galmitz has offered us a book that in the very way it works deepens one's (my) understanding of haiku as poetry. It doesn't come with a search for things to disapprove of. Here is no need to criticize any genre, form, or approach. Galmitz has chosen works and writers that prove that haiku has become Western. Accepting this fact is liberating. It is possible to write meaningful haiku within the framework of the Western cultural sphere. And why shouldn't it be? The everyday life, language, culture, and "world" of the Western writer provides as good a soil as that of the Japanese writer. In Galmitz's *Views*, Western haiku is a real thing in and of itself.



Johannes S.H. Bjerg is co-editor of Bones, a journal for contemporary haiku and author of three books of haiku: Støv (Danish, Books On Demand, Denmark, 2010), Penguins/Pingviner—122 haiku (English and Danish, Cyberwit.net, India, 2011), and Parallels (English, yettobenamedfreepress, England, 2013).