

I = interviewer

H = Hass

[.....] = overlapping words

(???) = unknown word(s)

16:01 -

1. I: I am intrigued by again this question of how much Japanese you had to master in order to do this or how you were doing it.

2. H: Not very much uh I uh uh I was very attracted to haiku because for the reasons that everyone is attracted is this amazing clarity seen in the poems uh uh and but when I first looked at them I guess I had the excuse that what translations there were of haiku were typically in gift shop books and I thought of haiku as sort of stuffed animal poetry and uh and at a certain point I began to see how impressive their seeing was and then also to get some sense of the depth of the philosophical traditions that underlay what were apparently very simple poems. So I started avidly reading and comparing translations and of course that raises the question—if you read them one translation says “autumn evening” uh “a crow has just settled on a bare branch” and another one says “a crow is perched on a bare branch loneliness,” you think “what did the man write?” So I went to get dictionaries and grammars just to kind of see what was there and (17.29) often what I’d see is with the three or four translations how I would do it so I started making verses for myself the exercise of doing one a day for a long period of time and then I fell in love with these three very different poets who I think are generally regarded as three of the four great masters of this tradition. So I just do one a day. I had no thought at the time of making uh a book I was just uh I was reading, but you have in order to read in this way in translation and at a certain point my publisher said you should do a book of these and I said I want (18.13) to wait until I learn more Japanese and then uh I began working on the Milosz and uh it drifted away and last year I think he said “let’s do a book of the haiku let’s face it you’re never (18.28) going to learn any more Japanese.” So I went through as carefully as I could and read all the English language and most of the French language scholarship on the poems so I could make sure I got it more or less right and could annotate them in interesting ways. (18.41)

3. I: Have you talked to Japanese speakers about them? Have you had any response from [them]?

4. H: [yeah] there I was worried about the scholarly journals would say about and I tried to make clear in the book that uh how limited my Japanese is and they there they responded very favourably . . .

5. I: [good]

6. H: . . . especially because I’ve read all of their criticism [I: ah ha!] and their criticism is wonderful, there’s a lot of (19.16) good work it’s buried in obscure journals but it’s helpful in understanding the poems.

7. I: uh I’d like to hear some of course but there’s one other thing that intrigued me. In the introduction you say that all three of these poets living in the 17th century the end of or the beginning of the 18th century beginning in the last one, Issa, that all three taught poetry uh at the end of the century [H: yes] I was intrigued by that thought that this was an American innovation, the workshop [H: yeah]. so I’m wondering what that meant to them. (19.54)

8. H: Well, it’s a bit complicated to explain, but uh I guess the first thing to say is that haiku as Americans understand it little three-line or 17-syllable poems 5-7-6 um didn’t really exist in Japan as an independent entity until the beginning of the 20th century. um The (???) little verse haiku and it meant roughly a starting verse. There was a practice um it began in the courts and it’s very Japanese. um. It began really centuries earlier in which they would take the typical five-line poem and um um they and improvise it in a call and response form, as if

I wrote “we’re sitting in the studio under the television light” um “it’s an october afternoon outside” those three lines you had to write two more lines to finish the [poem.] (20.58) [I: ah ha!] And then which—you can imagine a couple of renaissance poets or a couple of American poets—as the form developed, suppose your next two lines were um ah ah “there was broken light on the lake when the sun came up.” So it would go “we’re sitting in a television studio under the lights outside it’s a late March afternoon there was broken light on the lake when the sun came up.” A third poet would then take “there was broken light on the lake when the sun came up” and add another three lines [I: uh huh] to make another five line poem. And then those three lines—someone else would take two lines and make [I: a new one] a new one (21.56) and you kept changing the subject. Once you took “there’s broken light on the lake when the sun came up” it can’t be Autumn, it can’t be Spring anymore.

9. I: And it can’t be the lake and it can’t be the sun coming up. . .

10. H: It can be—yes—there’s what you say you know “there’s broken light on the lake and the sun was coming up” . . .

11. I: Oh, I see.

12. H: . . . “and the last leaves are falling from the lime trees on the shore” or something like that. Now we’re in Autumn and then you take “the last leaves are falling from the lime trees on the shore” um um “only one car’s headlights through the village at this hour” suddenly we’re in the dark [I: right] and then you could take “only one car’s headlights through the village at this hour” um um “the sound of frogs on a summer morning” the season of the year keeps changing [I: uh huh] the (world??) shifts what it conveys is a deeply Buddhist sense of the endless mutability of life and that was the practice and people got together and did it and the and the for pleasure as an evening’s recreation. And um it became so popular that teachers were needed to teach people how to do it and to oversee the activity and this profession of being a master of the haku no renga came into being [I: ha] and Basho, Bushon, and Issa each at different times of their life were in this sense haikai—as it was called—haikai masters, [I: teachers] teachers of this social improvisatory social game of writing poetry (???) the nearest thing to it really, in our tradition, would be something like a 1920s jazz band where you have [I: uh huh] somebody like Louie Armstrong [I: lays down the lick] lays down the lick and then people improvise on it [I: right] and he keeps them, he keeps bringing them back and [I: right] and that’s what it was like. There’s really nothing like it and these little individual sections were called haiku and the form emerged from that. (24.18)

13. I: Wonderful. I love hearing you talk about this stuff and I DO want to hear some haiku, but we haven’t heard many of your own poems. I wonder if you’d indulge me and uh and read from your book *Praise, In the Image*. Would you mind reading that—it’s on page 17.

14. H: Sure. (looks for poem) What is this about? I don’t know, I’ll read it I won’t say what it’s about. “The Image.” (reads poem facing directly the camera from 24.45 to 25.21)

15. I: Marvelous. It it reminds me of someone’s definition of myth (hand motion) uh as “at or near the boundaries of possibility.” [H: ha ha ha] It’s looking just over that (???)

16. H: That’s a wonderful phrase. Who is that?

17. I: I can’t say that I remember now where it came from. I wish it were mine.

18. H: You can have it.

19. I: But how about some haiku? We’re just about out of time [H: ok] and I’d love to hear some haiku.

20. H: Um. Let me read some of the comic ones by Issa which delight me. um. “Don’t worry, spiders, I keep house casually.” (26.05)