

---

---

Zeteo: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary*

*Writing*

## Poetry as Conversation

Discussion, orchestrated by William Eaton, of [Haikus du temps présent](#) by Mayuzumi Madoka, translated into French by Corinne Atlan (Philippe Picquier, 2012).\*



In a museum gift shop I came across a book of translations, *Haiku Love*, credited to Alan Cummings of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Included in this volume was the following contemporary haiku which I quite liked:

choosing a swimsuit  
when did I start seeing  
through his eyes

The original poem was written by Mayuzumi Madoka (黛まどか), who, the Internet soon offered me, was a leading writer of contemporary haiku, as well a big hiker and a television reporter. One of her books inspired a group of Japanese women to publish a

---

\* Note: A few of the poems were translated by Atlan in conjunction with Zéno Bianu and previously published in *Haiku du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle : Le poème court japonais d'aujourd'hui* (Gallimard, 2007).

monthly haiku magazine (subsequently discontinued), and Mayuzumi (pictured above) has served as a cultural ambassador to France. In Paris I quickly found *Haikus du temps présent*, translations of her haiku by Corinne Atlan.

Normally *Zeteo* would not review or discuss a book not available in English, but I am making an exception here. Originally I thought this was to call attention to features of this text that to date I have not seen in English-language poetry books. This original intention has, however, given way to the present larger discussion of poetry as conversation, the view of poetry which may be said to underlie the structure and contents of Mayuzumi and Atlan's book. Thus, for example, the haiku are presented in French on recto pages, and on the verso pages appear:

- The Japanese characters of the original text and a transliteration of the Japanese.
- A line calling attention to the *keigo*—the word(s) in the poem that indicate the season (e.g. *hanabira*, cherry blossom petals).
- Brief comments (2-3 paragraphs) from the author regarding how she came to write this particular haiku.\*
- A more scholarly paragraph or two from the translator regarding how the poem fits within the haiku tradition and Japanese culture more generally.

Thus, for example, there is this haiku (transliteration: *tôjijyu no mi ni oboe naki aza hitotsu*), here in my translation from Atlan's French:

the winter solstice bath  
on my skin signs of a bruise  
of which I have no memory

---

\* One occasionally finds similar commentary in other publications. For example, *The Missouri Review* is now publishing on its website a "[Poem of the Week](#)" which is introduced with comments by the author. James Davis May's explanation of his "A Lasting Sickness" notes that he wrote the poem "after recovering from a vicious fever and an equally vicious series of setbacks: losing my job and having to move with my family away from a house, neighborhood, and city where we were quite happy."

The seasonal word is *tôjijyu*: winter solstice bath. In a first paragraph Mayuzumi talks



about this traditional bath (in water perfumed with *yuzu*) and about how, traditionally, a goal of the day was to chase away disease-bearing demons. In a second paragraph she narrates the events captured in the haiku: She was taking a burning hot bath, saw this bruise, reflected on the joys and problems of the past year. Atlan then writes about the Japanese *yuzu* plant (which has a citrus fruit)—and about how in the past the Japanese were prey to cholera and

other epidemics. Finally, as regards the bruise, she proposes that the Japanese believe that when someone is “*soumergé par une trop grande douleur*” (submerged in suffering), sometimes the only solution is to forget.

Clearly there is a lot here, and particularly in the last remark, but perhaps all this stuff is too much (as if one were to buy a small Christmas tree and load it with ornaments). The poems are not allowed to stand on their own, to speak quietly, and thus perhaps more clearly, to our imaginations and intuitions. My friend Aki Takada, in our e-mail conversations about Mayuzumi and Atlan’s book, observes, “Haiku is such a short, subtle form of poetry—it’s like a firecracker that sparkles and disappears in a blink of an eye, or a bubble in the sea that pops almost immediately after it forms. . . . [T]he minute one starts putting

explanations to [a haiku], the spark is gone.” On the other hand we may note that that the idea that forgetting may be a good thing can turn our reading of the solstice bath haiku inside out, and thus deepen our understandings. But—conversing with ourselves—we can note how personal responses risk being short-circuited by any sense that they might run counter to some “true” reading based in the author’s life or intentions or based in some greater knowledge of history and culture.\*

I find myself reminded of the well-known words of the great labor organizer Eugene Debs: “I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, somebody else would lead you out.”† If we allow our conversation with a poem to be directed by another, are we in fact included in the conversation or just bystanders? I do not think there is right and wrong here. I think, *inter alia*, that our conversations are always directed by others—e.g. by voices of our parents resident in our super-egos, by voices of our peers, by dominant voices in our cultures—corporate advertising and public relations hardly excluded. Allow me to quote, and not for the last time, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin:

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-ownness,” varying degrees of awareness and detachment.

**I**n his famous discussion of the dance of bees, Jacques Lacan proposed that what makes human language language is that it can be misunderstood. The processes of expression and understanding involve translation, censorship, bad faith, distraction, . . . all of which create gaps between what we, rather approximately, call the said, the meant, the heard, and the understood. By contrast, Lacan’s bees, if not bees more generally, avoid all this complexity and confusion because the nectarous location danced correlates exactly with the location of the nectar. And bees avoid the additional confusion caused by thinking that there might or might not be a correlation between signs and what they signify.

---

\* Aki has also posed a rhetorical question: “Is the purpose of poetry to correctly understand the author’s intention and sensibility?” This question/assertion is consistent with arguments put forward by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their seminal 1946 essay, “The Intentional Fallacy”: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”

† Debs apparently used these words and variations on them in many speeches given around 1910. In one variation now available on the Web, Deb’s next sentence contains another important truth: “You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition; as it is now the capitalists use your heads and your hands.”

From this perspective we might say poetry has a tendency to capture the essence of human language and that explication (book review writing included?) risks reducing the strange magic of language to bee-speak.\* As regards *Haikus du temps present*, it seems to me that a reader must hope that the poems are better than the explications. And, with the help of Aki, a translator of English into Japanese, I have found that trying to find Mayuzumi's poems through the fog of multiple layers of translation (Japanese into French, French into English, Japanese into English) may help to bring back some of the magic.

For example, one of the haiku is transliterated *dakiyosete chirashite shimau fuyu no bara*. Atlan's translation begins with *Rose d'hiver* (the *fuyu no bara*, a winter rose) and then suggests, *à la serrer de trop près / on disperse ses pétales*: hold it-she too close / you scatter the petals. As "Rose/rose" can be a she or an it, one might say that with the direct object pronoun *la* Atlan was trying *d'avoir le beurre et l'argent du beurre* (to have her cake and eat it too). When I send news of this to Aki, she, helping me, teaching me, replies, "Japanese is one of those languages where the subject is often omitted . . . The word 'dakiyosete' means to pull someone (never an object) close." She offers the following "direct" translation:

Pull her close  
and the petals fall away  
winter rose

I find myself tempted to revise or play with the first two lines. E.g.:

pull close  
petals fall away  
winter rose

**R**eaders may be beginning to see *qu'il ne s'agit plus*—we are leaving behind the idea of a poem fixed on a page. To quote again from Bakhtin (as translated Vern McGee): "[T]here can neither be a first nor a last meaning; it always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real." In the case of haiku the conversation began sometime before Matsuo Bashō began writing haiku in the seventeenth century, was kept

---

\* N.B.: This may be to cast Lacanian aspersions on bee language, failing to appreciate how differently bee-speak looks to the bees themselves.

more than alive by Buson, Issa and Shiki in the ensuing centuries, to be picked up by, among so many others, Mayuzumi Madoka, whose poems and commentaries then passed into French through the agency of Corinne Atlan and are now lingering, for the space of this present text, in fragments of an e-mail conversation between Aki and myself.

In the introduction to *Haikus du temps présent* Atlan writes, “The art of the haiku is based in connection and exchange.” This connecting and exchanging is with past poets and cultural traditions, with the current audience and the moment that has inspired the creation of the poem and the discussion, and with future readers and writers. One might think of poetry readings in the West at which, in between reading individual poems, the poet will chat with her audience, and these people may indeed be her (or his) friends. The banter, or relaxed supplying of background information, may include comments on how the poem came to be written or about connections to present circumstances or other poets. And afterwards audience members may want to exchange e-mail addresses or get suggestions as to how to get their own poems published.\*

Mayuzumi at one point explains that the haiku is a form of salutation and of honoring. By way of translation one might think of the idea of “hailing” someone that is contained in the English word “hello.” And thus one might think of a haiku as hailing both the present moment and ancestors, past poets and poems most certainly included. This hailing is part of what allows our particular recognition of a moment, part of and yet separated from or raised above the flow of time, of our times.

*gôrukûpâ enten o hitori oi*

Gardien de but —

il porte seul

le poids du ciel du flamme

Bashō famously established three constraints for haiku: the seventeen *on* (phonetic sounds; often translated as “syllables”) divided into three lines; the inclusion of the *kiigo*, the word(s) to indicate the season (e.g. *enten*, the burning sun of summer); and *kiru* (cutting) or

---

\* Coming back to an earlier point about the discontents of explication, I quote from my editor, Walter Cummins: “Having attended many readings in recent years, I always wonder about the fill-in background given by the poet before reading the actual poem, information a distant reader would not have and that suggests the poems can’t stand on their own.” Again, the present piece is not only about conversations with or among others; it is also in conversation with itself.

the *kireji* (cutting word), which creates a juxtaposition and introduces a silence or hiatus in which a deeper resonance may be heard. With this latter idea, of juxtaposition, in mind, the English translation I propose:

the goalkeeper  
alone holds the weight  
the sky on fire

In the commentary Mayuzumi writes that when attending soccer matches she has been impressed by how, for all soccer is ostensibly a team game, at key moments everything depends on the goalie. The matches are often played under a hot sun, and the goalkeeper may be observed alone at his (or her) end of the field, sweating, the sun bearing down,

awaiting this  
seemingly absolute  
offers a very brief  
introduction and  
soccer in Japan. A  
readers to another  
book, and thereby  
Japanese women's  
won the World Cup  
Nadeshiko Japan,  
the *Dianthus* genus



moment of  
responsibility. Atlan  
history of the  
rising popularity of  
footnote leads  
footnote, later in the  
explains that the  
soccer team, which  
in 2011, is called  
after a wildflower of  
(which includes

American carnations and pinks). The *nadeshiko* flower has traditionally been a symbol of the freshness and reserve of Japanese girls.

We are back to Bakhtin: “Any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it.” In her notes and one of her haiku translations (“Saison des œillets!” below), Atlan seems to have ignored that by extension the word *nadeshiko* can mean “girl” or “young woman.” “Kid,” “chick,” “buddy,” “pansy,” “rookie”—we might think of any number of similar words in English. When we use them or something like them to refer to animals or plants we often recall that they may also be used

to refer to humans, but when we use such words to refer to humans we often forget their floral and faunal origins. And thus the soccer team Nadeshiko Japan is not, say, The Japanese Carnations, but simply the Japanese Women's Soccer Team. And further, as the photo should suggest, the word "carnation," which in the United States now refers to a commercialized, often artificial-seeming something sold by American florists, is not, or is no longer, a good translation of either the look or feel of the Japanese wildflower that goes by the name of *nadeshiko*.

**T**his brings us (happily!) to another poem: *nadeshiko ya bitori ni nareba dete namida*.  
Saison des œillets!

une fois seule  
je me suis mise à pleurer

Aki wrote me, "It's unclear whether Madoka projected herself onto the *nadeshiko* flower, or some other woman. In any case, it's clear that the seasonal word [*nadeshiko*] has a double meaning. The direct translation I previously provided was:

Oh *nadeshiko*,  
shedding a tear  
when she finds herself alone

But now I feel it could be:

Oh *nadeshiko*,  
tears fill my eyes  
now that I'm alone

In other words, the subject could be either first person or third. Not sure which is better." Here is my variant (and please note that, *at least on the surface*, the "I" of my translation is not me, an almost 60-year-old man, but rather an I of Mayuzumi Madoka, still in some touch with her younger, girlish self)\*:

*nadeshiko* season

---

\* Translation, we may note, is not only from one language to another, but also from one gender to another and within the self, as we translate from one moment of our lives to another, from what may be wells of emotion to internal and external expressions of our feelings. May I also flag here another wrestle with poetry and translation, in this case involving Baudelaire: [Zeteo is Reading, 11-17 August 2013](#).

I broke into tears  
once alone

These paragraphs above are most of what *Haikus du temps present* has led me to think about. My critical turn of mind pushes me, however, to note further that (surprise, surprise) Mayuzumi Madoka and I would seem not to always share the same sensibility. I have read online that in 2006, in response to media stories of bullying, suicide, and other depressing events, Mayuzumi began delivering haiku e-mail newsletters to Japanese cellphone users, in an attempt to cheer people up. For my part, in *Haikus du temps présent* I was disheartened to read, for example, a commentary in which Mayuzumi was chastising herself for getting caught up in her worries and ignoring that she must face up to and overcome her problems. “[N]othing happens by accident, . . . we ourselves bring on our problems and worries.”\* This is to ignore entire realms: the human predicament (mortality included) and how it must, quite naturally, worry us; and social conflicts (e.g. the exploitation of the unfortunate by the arrogant); and . . . One might also be reminded here of Mayuzumi’s goalkeeper, sweating under the hot sun of awesome personal responsibility, of feeling entirely responsible for the outcome of the match. Certainly this is a feeling that a goalkeeper or any other human being may have at certain moments, but we might call this also a terrible misunderstanding—and a terrible misunderstanding which has caused many wives, Japanese, American and otherwise, to suffer greatly. “It’s my fault that I feel bad.” “It’s my fault that he is not happy in our home.”

---

\* N.B.: Aki writes that she “was also curious what Madoka’s original Japanese words were, that were translated as ‘we ourselves bring on our problems and worries’. The meaning of this sentence, as of some of her haiku, *may* have been distorted as it was translated from Japanese to French, and then from French to English.” Backtracking, let me also note here that Aki has wondered what the basis was for Atlan’s assertion that the Japanese believe that forgetting can, at times, be a solution to suffering. It is hard of course for such matters to be long discussed among Japanese and American people before one thinks of Hiroshima.

I would not,  
however, close on such  
a critical note, but  
instead return to  
Mayuzumi's work and  
to what might be  
considered a simpler  
and more universal  
poem, one in which the



strange magic of language may seem to yield to the simpler magics of youth and of nostalgia. In commenting on one of the summer poems, Mayuzumi describes how she grew up in a mountainous region. When she was in high school, one day during a summer vacation she found herself sitting in a field of clover with a boy, someone who had been a classmate of hers throughout much of her childhood. A hardly culture-specific scene: while the boy talked about home and family, she gazed across the mountains and thought of how, after high school, she was going off to the national university in Yokohama, near Tokyo. All of a sudden the boy plucked a hollow stem of grass and began to blow into it, the way she and her childhood friends often did. The way young people in the United States have stretched blades of grass between their thumbs and blown through them to make sounds. But the sound this boy made had a melancholy that the poet came to understand only much later. Thirty years later, in fact, she wrote the haiku *kusabue o fukeri tooku e yuku na yo to*.

“Don’t go too far away”  
sang the flute  
made of a piece of grass

\* \* \*

*William Eaton is the Executive Editor of Zeteo and also a writer of philosophical dialogues as well as of [Ameraiku](#), a bastard form. As regards Aki Takada—without her generous, expert assistance the present piece would not have been possible. Many thanks as well to Walter Cummins for helping with the English and to Anne Fassotte for helping with the French.*

## Credits

- M.M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, in [\*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays\*](#), edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, translated by Vern W. McGee (University of Texas Press, 1986). Includes the sentences used in the epigraph, beginning “Our speech, that is”.
- M.M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71” also in [\*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays\*](#). Includes the sentence regarding the “chain of meaning.”
- M.M. Bakhtin, [\*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays\*](#), edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (University of Texas Press, 1981. Includes sentences beginning “Any concrete discourse”.
- William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468-88. Revised and republished in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (University of Kentucky Press, 1954): 3-18. Click for [text](#).
- Alan Cummings, [\*Haiku Love\*](#) (British Museum, 2013).
- Jacques Lacan. “Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse” (Rapport du Congrès du Rome tenu à l’Istituto di Psicologia della Università di Roma, 1953). This is the first version of the text, as it appeared under the title “Sur la parole et le langage” in *La psychanalyse* 1 (1956). Note that the words about the dance of the bees have been lifted from my essay “[On Pointing](#),” as published in [\*Agni 75\*](#), Spring 2012.