I learned about haiku in about 1980 from a book titled *Haiku: Een jonge maan* (“Haiku: A Young Moon”), which contains translations into Dutch of many classical Japanese haiku as well as a lengthy introduction about the origin, development, and character of the phenomenon.[2] It asserted that “a haiku consists of seventeen syllables, usually divided in three lines of five, seven and five, constituting in principle one sentence that can be spoken in one breath.” There is more to it, however: a haiku is about nature and contains a season word. As to the character of this poem the book said: “Haiku presents the artist’s vision of things at that particular moment, when they become full of meaning in their being together as they are and evoke a mood that transcends time and place.” In this there is the experience of oneness, of unity. Furthermore, I learned that Shinto and Zen were significant factors in the Japanese attitude toward life and therefore also partly determined the character of haiku.

Not much later I subscribed to the Dutch/Flemish haiku journal *Vuursteen* (“Flint”). This did not really open new perspectives, for it was mainly inspired by *Een nieuwe maan* and its sources. Several contributors, for instance, declared the importance of the so-called haiku moment: a direct experience, felt to be highly meaningful, that is recorded and communicated in preferably 5–7–5 shape.[3] From these sources I concluded that haiku was a three-line poem of (approximately) 5, 7, and 5 syllables, recording an authentic observation from nature in direct and simple language and suggesting a deeper understanding of reality. So I chased those elusive haiku moments, trying to capture them in the prescribed form.

Though Vuursteen presented other views as well, I did not pay much attention to them at the time. There was for instance an analysis of the 5–7–5 poems of the Dutch poet J. C. van Schagen, who used this format as early as the 1960s in poems that at the time were not considered to be haiku.[4] There also was an introduction to haiku in Canada, presenting poems said to be haiku but not written in seventeen syllables, and some not even in three lines![5] Though the all importance of the haiku moment was often stressed, one of the editors stated quite the opposite: “Poetry is not a description of reality. It is a recreation of our own reality. The haiku is not a description of something in nature. It is a matter of choosing from what we want to communicate about ourselves on the basis of what we see
and what happens to us.”[6] This probably was like cursing in church. In 1991 the author, W. J. van der Molen, started his own journal *Kortheidshalve* (“For Brevity’s Sake”), which offered a much more liberal view of haiku.

These views did not affect me consciously at the time, but with the benefit of hindsight, I know I went through an evolution anyway. For instance, I had arrived at the insight that it is not the haiku moment preceding the haiku that matters, but only the haiku moment that is created in the poem. The only relevant authenticity is that of the poem itself. In 1995 I got acquainted with *Kortheidshalve*. It published haiku that fully met the requirements I knew, but also haiku of much freer form and content, whose resonance often was stronger than that of the rather cozy nature poems I was familiar with and wrote myself! This view of haiku was not opposite or alternative but simply broader and no doubt accelerated the evolution I was already going through.

Extra boosts to my thinking came out of Japan in 1999. First there was in July the International Symposium on Contemporary Haiku in Tokyo. In September an International Convention on World Haiku took place in Matsuyama. Both presented documents asserting that seasonal words are not necessary for global haiku, that the form should do justice to the language used, and that the content of a haiku is not independent from the cultural background in which the poet writes. The Tokyo Manifesto states moreover, “in global haiku, the greatest emphasis should be placed on the poet’s originality.”[7] The Matsuyama Declaration led me to conclude that “it considers form and literary technique subordinate to the poetical expressiveness that is intended—and not the other way around.”[8] I do not take these to be generally accepted views in Japan, but at least they have a basis in haiku’s country of origin itself.

From then on my orientation became more international. I read haiku journals such as *Frogpond, Modern Haiku, Woodpecker, Kô*, and *Ginyû*, participated in haiku groups on the Internet, and met haiku poets from different parts of the world on several occasions. All these influences resulted in my present definition: a haiku is a minimal construction of words with the function of evoking an intensified awareness of being.

One thing I learned is that any definition of haiku can and will be debated. This convinced me that a set definition is impossible. Yet among the multitude of contemporary haiku we find poems that really touch us. Certainly the poets who wrote them must have a notion of what really makes a haiku a haiku. Every one of them probably has a personal vision, as I have mine. To collect those visions, of course, is not a new idea. In 2000 the American journal *Modern Haiku* contacted a number of authorities and published eleven short definitions of what they considered to be an ideal English-language haiku.[9] One of them, A. C. Missias, later published in *Frogpond* an analysis of these definitions and the one used by the Haiku Society of America.[10] She found a total of thirteen
characteristics in those combined definitions. By her count the most frequently mentioned were (1) shortness, (2) base in reality, (3) nature/seasonality, (4) a moment’s duration, (5) insight/intuition, and (6) poem/poetry. “No single definition included all of these essential features,” Missias stated.

Missias’s exercise reinforced my idea that haiku do not follow a set prescription, but that haiku poets follow their own intuition and poetical aesthetics. To explore this further I needed more personal definitions, so I contacted haiku poets all over the world whose work in my perception had real haiku quality. Most of these contacts were in English, the global lingua franca. Though English connects many people, it also creates a barrier for corresponding with some fine haiku poets who are not able to express themselves in English or can do so only in a limited way. Hence, the influence of English-language haiku is probably over-represented in this study.

In a letter to these poets I explained my plan and wrote: “You would do me a great favor by participating in this study by sending me your personal definition of haiku, in preferably no more than 25 (to 40) words.” Almost all responded favorably, and my survey covers the views of twenty nine poets from nineteen countries. Before I present the results I want to stress again that a definite definition of haiku is impossible. As Cyril Childs wrote: “It is critical that ‘haiku’ is an ephemeral term—its meaning has evolved and will continue to evolve—and this makes it unlikely, indeed impossible, that any definition will find wide and lasting acceptance.”[11] Childs also argues: “Asked to come up with a definition each of us would take a somewhat different angle with different emphases. There can be no correct final descriptive definition. None can be the right one with all others being wrong.”

The point that there can be no fixed definition was also made by some of the poets who contributed to my study. Most outspoken was Martin Lucas, who wrote: “My view is that there is no theoretical formulation that is adequate to define haiku. Haiku is only defined by each haiku that is written, and, in a sense, each new haiku redefines haiku.” In a comment on this (non)definition Lucas adds: “This is as much as to say ... if someone asks me, “what is haiku?”, the only really meaningful reply is something like: “the light on the field in the distance where the curlews feed.” Strictly speaking, you can’t even say this is “an example of a haiku.” In fact it is the-light-on-the-field-in-the-distance-where-the-curlews-feed, and we label it as “haiku” only for the sake of convenience inking about it.” Think of that: whenever you write a haiku you are actually redefining the genre!

When I wrote my invitation, I did not realize that the answers I would receive might differ in character. Most of the definitions are descriptive, which was exactly what I had in mind. Others, however, were so different that I created two more categories: intuitive definitions and symbolic definitions. Assignment of a definition to one category or another is, of
course, arbitrary. Furthermore, I have used the word “definition” throughout in a very liberal way. Probably “formula,” a term used by Vasile Spinei when offering his view, is more adequate.

DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITIONS

Eighteen contributions are descriptive in nature.

Vanessa Proctor from Australia is coeditor of *The Second Australian Haiku Anthology* (2006). She also judges haiku and haibun for *Yellow Moon* magazine.

Haiku is a concise poetic form which is often inspired by an epiphany or close observation of the natural world. “The haiku moment” expresses universal human experience which cuts through cultural boundaries.

Rob Scott, also from Australia, lived and worked in Japan, Sweden, and the Netherlands before returning home. He is a founding member of the Australian Haiku Society.

[Haiku is a] short poem with an experience of nature or the seasons at its core that crystallizes (rather than intellectualizes) a keenly observed moment in time.

Dietmar Tauchner from Austria is editor of the *World Haiku Review German*, associate editor of the German-language Webzine *Haiku Heute*, and founder of the German haiku Web site *Chrysanthemum*.

A haiku is a brief arrangement of words (using concrete language rather than abstract terms) that records an insight into nature and/or human nature (including human creations), and all relations between.

Ginka Biliarska from Bulgaria is a journalist and publisher, president of the Bulgarian Haiku Society, and compiler of three haiku anthologies.

Haiku is the model of absolute poetry, a free rhythmical monopoem in 5–7–5 morae / significant words—some of them kigo, auxiliary words, and pauses—a laconic expression of impressions that reflect the changing world.

George Swede was cofounder of Haiku Canada (1977), has published fourteen collections of haiku and one book about haiku, has edited three haiku anthologies, and is an editorial staff member of the annual Red Moon Anthology of English-language haiku.
The haiku is a breath-length poem that describes a moment of insight into the mystery of existence by combining two or three sense images, one of which is always from nature.

Georges Friedenkraft from France has been writing poetry since 1967 and haiku since 1983; he is an active member of the Association Française de Haïku.

In French, haiku feature weakly accented language, and specific style procedures enhance the harmony of the 5–7–5 metrics. Any topic can be a source of inspiration, from existential emotions to wild surrealist dreams!

Alain Kervern from France has been a codirector of the World Haiku Association and a speaker and panelist at the International Symposium on Contemporary Haiku in Tokyo (1999); he teaches Japanese literature and culture at the University of Brittany Occidentale. I quote his full text, of which I consider the final sentence in particular to be his definition.

The accelerated mutations of several human realities, and even in our natural environment itself, reveal a fundamental aspect of our contemporary way of life. The worldwide success of haiku, so readily available and immediate, becomes the artistic expression of that phenomenon, where only instantaneous, temporary, and provisional values seem to matter. This brief poetic form is the way we tell the everlasting shifting story of our reality.

Martin Berner from Germany was speaker and panelist at the International Symposium on Contemporary Haiku in Tokyo (1999), and from 2005 has been president of the Deutsche Haiku-Gesellschaft.

Generally haiku is a three-line poem of 17 syllables at most that does not comment or interpret, but describes a situation directly and graphically.

Ingrid Kunschke from Germany writes haiku in German, Dutch, and English; she has been a member of several German haiku juries and co-compiles an annual German haiku anthology.

A haiku is a terse short poem, evoking awareness of (man’s place in) time by showing aspects of the world in a concrete, vivid, tender way.

David Cobb of Great Britain was founder of the British Haiku Society (1990), its president from 1997 until 2002, and in 2005 an editorial staff member of the Red Moon Anthology.
Haiku: a poem consisting of two juxtaposed phrases, each very concise but respectful of natural language. One component may present a setting for the other phrase; or with a single concrete image it may provide that phrase with an “objective correlative” (T.S. Eliot’s term). The other component describes a present happening or situation in either the world of nature or the life of man.

Angelee Deodhar of India is an eye surgeon by profession and is very active in haiku affairs internationally; she has read papers on haiku and related subjects in England, Scotland, Canada, the U.S., Germany, Japan, and Romania.

A haiku is a three-line, 17-syllable-or-less Japanese poem, usually written in the short-long-short pattern, which communicates a nature experience and links the poet’s milieu interior to the milieu exterior to create a resonance in the reader that transcends socio-cultural and linguistic barriers.

The late Wim Lofvers of the Netherlands was president of the Haiku Circle Netherlands, publisher and editor of the haiku journal *Woodpecker* (1995–2002), and publisher of the Radish series of miniature haiku books.

Haiku: the truthful rendition of the reality that surrounds me and in which and from which I live (as you and all of us do), and this within the scope of one breath.

Ernest J. Berry from New Zealand has judged two international haiku competitions, has had haiku carved in stone on haiku walks, and is an editorial staff member of the Red Moon Anthology.

Haiku: n, a style of Japanese verse characterized by brevity, seasonality, and the (unstated) emotions of a strongly felt, often momentary experience.

Jasminka Nadasdie-Djordjevic of Serbia is coeditor of *Haiga On Line* and the *Aozora* Web site and author of five books of poetry.

Haiku is a pure moment of nature. I try to be invisible and don’t like to disturb the unique moment. Seventeen syllables are not obligatory but rather a maximum. Haiku language is simple and understandable, and it should be imperative.

Kaj Falkman of Sweden, a former ambassador, has written fiction and non-fiction books and compiled an anthology of Japanese haiku in Swedish and an anthology of Swedish haiku in Swedish and Japanese. He is currently president of the Swedish Haiku Society.
Haiku is a short poem that uses concrete images to convey the essence of an experience of nature or of human situations, communicating layers of meaning of various kinds. Originally a Japanese poetry form, now written in many languages all over the world, haiku traditionally consists of 17 syllables, though often less in contemporary practice, and is normally transcribed in three lines. Haiku strives to depict a scene that shows a change, if possible with an unexpected ending or a lingering poetical atmosphere.

Lee Gurga of the U.S. served as president of the Haiku Society of America (1997) and editor (2002–06) of Modern Haiku, the longest-running journal of haiku and haiku studies in English.

Haiku: a short poem that uses an image of nature or the seasons to present an intuitive and emotional complex in an instant of time.

Jim Kacian of the U.S. is a cofounder of the World Haiku Association as well as owner of Red Moon Press; he was also editor (1997–2004) of Frogpond, the journal of the Haiku Society of America.

What strikes me as essential are that a haiku be: (1) brief (as long as it needs to be, as short as it can be); (2) a concatenation of words (this is, after all, a literary art, and the words of a haiku are not the experience it contains; on the other hand, the words of the haiku are another and new experience); (3) an opening (to something, though not always the same thing, but always larger than the flat description would be by itself).

John Stevenson of the U.S. was president of the Haiku Society of America in 2000 and in 2004 succeeded Jim Kacian as editor of Frogpond.

A few chosen words, in humble recognition of the true place of human beings among living things and the forces that make life possible.

By way of analyzing these definitions, let us first relate them to the six characteristics A.C. Missias found most frequently in the definitions she examined.

Shortness was mentioned in some way in all definitions: “short,” “concise,” “terse,” “5–7–5”—all of these can be considered to be synonyms.

The second most referred to characteristic was poem/poetry, which occurred thirteen times, but here one might presume that for those who did not mention it, the poetic nature of haiku is so self-evident that to mention
that would be superfluous.

Nature/seasons was referred to eleven times, generally by mentioning “nature” or “seasonality” explicitly.

Reality was referred to five times, including references like “the changing world” (Biliarska) and “a situation” (Berner). There was no overlap in these two categories, at least not explicitly. Where “reality” is mentioned, however, “nature” is probably implied. That would bring the total count of “nature” to sixteen mentions. Only two authors mentioned neither “nature,” nor “reality,” but more on that later.

Insight as an essential aspect of haiku is mentioned in nine definitions. Insight” embraces “epiphany” (Proctor), “awareness” (Kunschke), “linking ... milieu interior to the milieu exterior” (Deodhar), “layers of meaning”(Falkman), “intuitive ... complex” (Gurga), “opening” (Kacian), and “recognition” (Stevenson). In a comment about his definition Scott explains that rendering the “perceived significance of an event” in a haiku is the “harnessing of this insight.” Had he been more explicit about this in his definition, that would put the count at ten. Maybe Friedenkraft’s “existential emotions” might have been included here too.

Moment duration is the least often mentioned of Missias’s categories, found in only five of these definitions, but there were also expressions that might even be opposite. For instance, when Biliarska mentions “the changing world” she is not talking of a “moment” but of a lapse of time and the changeable nature of things—panta rei, everything flows. Or, as Kervern puts it in his definition: “the everlasting shifting story of our reality.” This view is shared by Falkman too when he states that “haiku strives to depict a scene that shows a change.”[12]

So much for the characteristics Missias identified as most frequent. What else is there in the collected definitions that is not covered by these categories?

Haiku expresses, Proctor says, “universal human experience which cuts through cultural boundaries.” This is mirrored or echoed in Deodhar’s “resonance in the reader, which transcends socio-cultural and linguistic barriers.” One can understand in this that haiku relates to existential and emotional experiences that are common to everyone, regardless of nation, language, culture, religion, ethnicity, political orientation—or whatever other distinctions can be made. All human blood is equally red. This characteristic of haiku is not mentioned so explicitly in the other descriptive definitions, but in several it resonates, for instance, where Tauchner speaks of “an insight into ... human nature,” where Swede mentions “the mystery of existence” or in Friedenkraft’s “existential emotions.” We can label this aspect “existential resonance.” It does not mean that it refers to shared actual experiences, but to experiences we can relate to, that will resonate in the reader. The haiku is not the experience it
contains, but another, new experience, as Kacian said, one in which the reader’s own experience resonates. Existential resonance is related to the characteristic of haiku insight noted in several other definitions.

Some definitions contain notions about language. Haiku requires “concrete language rather than abstract terms,” Tauchner states. This implies that philosophical observations and generalizations are not to be expressed in haiku (which does not exclude such thoughts being expressed by haiku). Berner’s view that haiku does not interpret or comment on things probably expresses a similar attitude, as does Scott’s notion that haiku crystallizes rather than intellectualizes. Cobb’s observation about “phrases ... respectful of natural language” and Nadaskic-Djordjevic’s statement “language is simple and understandable” may both be related to this aspect of haiku, which can be denominated as “noninterpretative language.”

Consider this speculation about a relationship between existential resonance and noninterpretative language: a haiku should not mention existential considerations (requiring abstract terms), yet it evokes an existential resonance. Berry’s “unstated emotions” probably refers to the same core. The familiar expression for this relationship between existential resonance and noninterpretative language is “show, don’t tell!”

Another notion explicitly stated in two definitions is the relationship between nature and human nature, as Tauchner has it, or between milieu interior and milieu exterior, as Deodhar puts it. This same idea may lurk in the definitions of Lofvers (“the reality … in … and from which … all of us [live]”), Gurga (“an intuitive and emotional complex”), and others, but these echoes are to weak to support further expansion.

An aspect of literary technique is found in Swede’s definition, where he says that a haiku combines two or three sense images. Cobb presents a similar requirement, “two juxtaposed phrases,” on which he elaborates. Three definitions noted the Japanese origin of haiku.

As for the two poets who mention neither nature nor reality, Friedenkraft states that “any topic can be a source of inspiration, from existential emotions to wild surrealist dreams.” Of course, this does not exclude nature and reality as subject for haiku; it simply broadens the scope of admissible subject matter to include everything. Kacian does not say anything explicitly about subject matter but holds as essential that haiku offers “opening” (as used here the word seems to be a noun, not a verbal) “to something, though not always the same thing, but always larger than the flat description would be by itself.” One is strongly inclined to relate this idea to the notion of existential resonance and the insight characteristic of haiku. Existential resonance may also be the basis of Friedenkraft’s allowing for anything to be a source of inspiration for haiku. That at least is compatible with Kacian’s view that “the words of the haiku are another and new experience.” To the reader that is the only
experience that matters. Or to put it in another way, a haiku that a reader can relate to does not necessarily recreate an experience, but it certainly creates one, whatever the inspiration of the author.

INTUITIVE DEFINITIONS

Eight definitions were received that are less objective than the descriptive ones but not as subjective as the symbolic definitions. These can be termed “intuitive definitions.”

Boris Nazansky is a writer and journalist, member of the Association of Croatian Haiku Poets and the coeditor of the bilingual (Croatian/English) biannual Haiku and editor-in-chief of *Haiku Calendar 2004* published in Ludbreg, Croatia.

Haiku is a moment of fleetingness, saved as the eternity of the moment.

Nazansky also wrote, “Haiku is a literary bonsai”—but that would be a symbolic definition.

Erika Schwalm was cofounder and driving force of the Frankfurt Haiku Group and a prominent member of the Deutsche Haiku-Gesellschaft; she was very active internationally until her death in 2005.

For me the essence of haiku resides in the fleeting moment of an observation, an experience which nevertheless sets free a certain stream of thoughts. Like this haiku enables me to seize hold of my inspirations by both leaving my inner world and confiding it to the craft of wording in order to compose something surprisingly new, exploiting in this way the potential of my creativity.

Klaus-Dieter Wirth from Germany is a language wizard with a predilection for poetry. He is active in the haiku societies of Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium/Netherlands, and the U.S.

Haiku is a (new) way of perceiving our environment, with ourselves being only a part of the whole, by means of a direct approach: unbiased, alert, receptive, grateful. Haiku is poetry, experience, and elixir of life all in one, as it offers the encounter—though only momentary but comprehensible—with what is valid beyond time.

Vasile Spinei from Moldova is a writer and journalist, a member of the Haiku Society of Constanta (Romania) with eight volumes of haiku to his
name, most of them bilingual (Romanian/English).

My haiku formula: those four seasons, melted together in the flashing flight of intuition and consciousness, emotion, and premonition.

Ewa Tomaszewska of Poland saw *Antologia haiku kanadyjskiego* (“Anthology of Canadian Haiku”) published in her translation (1993), compiled and edited *Antologia polskiego haiku* “Anthology of Polish Haiku”; 2001) and was translator and editor of the first Polish anthology of European haiku (2005).

What is haiku? For me it is a path of three steps. The first step is release from all anxieties, the second is a meditative disillusion, and the third is return to one’s own identity. The aim is to leave behind the emptiness…

Ion Codrescu, Romanian haiku poet and haiga painter, founded the international haiku journals *Albatross* and *Hermitage*, and has presented his views, poems, and paintings in many countries.

A haiku is my response in a form of a tiny poem—with direct images—to the world, which never ceases to amaze me by its glimpses of fragility in eternity, by its moments of mystery, beauty, and diversity.

Zinovy Vayman was born in Russia, now lives in the U.S., and writes in Russian, Hebrew, and English.

Haiku is a unique short poem born out of a trigger-observation and filtered through a poet’s one and only editorial capacity.

Fay Aoyagi of the U.S. is fluent in English and Japanese, writes haiku in both languages, is a member of haiku organizations in both the U.S. and Japan and so stands in two traditions.

For me, haiku is the most suitable form of poetry to express how I live and how I feel. Haiku is a medium to be deep and evocative. The only principle I impose on myself when I write haiku is “show, not tell.”

In these definitions shortness was mentioned twice. Reality can be identified in four, taking Schwalm’s “observation,” Wirth’s “environment,” Codrescu’s “world,” and Vayman’s “trigger-observation” as references to reality. Nature/seasons was mentioned only by Spinei. Moment is mentioned by Nazansky and Schwalm and may be included in Vayman’s “trigger-observation.”
Insight was referred to in six definitions, though not by that term, rather implied in terms such as “eternity of the moment” (Nazansky), “to seize hold of my inspirations” (Schwalm), “what is valid beyond time” (Wirth), “intuition and consciousness” (Spinei), “meditative disillusion” (Tomaszewksa) and “glimpses of fragility in eternity” (Codrescu). Poem / poetry is mentioned three times.

Schwalm’s, Tomaszewska’s, and Aoyagi’s definitions are primarily concerned with the relationship between the poet and haiku, as to a certain degree is the one by Codrescu. Aoyagi simply says that haiku is the most suitable form of poetry for her and a medium in which to be deep and evocative. Of what?—that she does not say. “I do not care about the definition of haiku. I write how I like!” she explained in the comment on her definition, but of course she defines haiku the only accurate way, according to Lucas: with every poem she composes.

Schwalm reflects on how haiku made her seize hold of her own inspirations. This is strongly reminiscent of the link between outer and inner world pointed at in some of the descriptive definitions. Similarly Codrescu describes haiku as his “response … to the world.”

Even more personal is Tomaszewska, who speaks of “return to one’s own identity” and states “to leave behind the emptiness” as the aim of haiku (or haiku writing). This is puzzling, but what she seems to be saying is tat twam asi (“that art thou”)—the Brahmanistic notion of the self, atman, and the all-encompassing reality, the world soul Brahman, not being two, but one, adwaita. The ultimate goal of atman is to be no longer isolated from its true nature and identity Brahman, but to return into it. Which of course again very strongly links the inner and outer world! Is that not also what Wirth indicates when he sees “ourselves being only a part of the whole”? When he describes haiku as “the encounter … with what is valid beyond time,” isn’t that atman encountering Brahman?

Nazansky’s “fleetingness, saved as the eternity of the moment” and Spinei’s “seasons, melted together in the flashing flight of intuition and consciousness, emotion, and premonition joining” seem again to refer to moments of a predominant existential awareness. Vayman does not venture to indicate any of that. There is a what he calls trigger-observation, which is rendered in a few words by an editorial craftsman. The rest, Vayman may be saying by not saying it, is beyond words. Let’s call it the Lucas position.

SYMBOLIC DEFINITIONS

Nazansky’s “Haiku is a literary bonsai” has already been cited as a symbolic definition. There are three others—or four, since Alenka Zorman
Vladimir Devidé of Croatia was seminal in the introduction of haiku in Croatia, if not in all of the former Yugoslavia. He has published books on Japanology as well as literary works, including collections of his haiku in Croatian and English and of his haibun in Croatian, English, and German.

A haiku is the (only correct) answer to the following Zen koan:
You cannot possibly express your experience in words and you have to do just that. What then; speak, speak!


Haiku is only defined by each haiku that is written, and, in a sense, each new haiku redefines haiku…. The trouble is that in talking about it, we mistake the label for the thing, so we think it is meaningful to talk about “haiku” in general terms, whereas the only really meaningful subject is the-light-on-the-field-in-the-distance-where-the-curlews-feed or midwinter-I-cycle-towards-the-setting-moon, or ... you name it!

Alenka Zorman from Slovenia is the president of the Haiku Club of Slovenia, editor-in-chief of its journal *Letni časi* (“Seasons”), and coeditor of *Aozora*, the (now inactive) Web site of Southeast European haiku) and of the Lishanu Web site:

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a short rendezvous
scented with the perfume
“Eternity”
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The six main characteristics identified by Missias are hardly to be found in these three definitions. The only one easily identified is shortness, mentioned by Zorman. Reality may be implied in any or all of these but is too implicit to be countable. Insight, however, is at the core of all three. Certainly to define haiku as the answer to a koan, as Devidé does, is to say that it is something beyond knowledge, requiring insight. In fact, Lucas exactly does what Devidé states: giving the answer to the koan by writing haiku. They are saying that haiku really is beyond definition. That is also the point of the definition Zorman obtained from Borut Zupančič, also from Slovenia, who defines haiku as “the silencing speech of silence.” Zorman’s “a short rendezvous / scented with the perfume / “Eternity”,” disguised in the short-long-short appearance of many haiku, suggests predominant existential awareness again—or insight.

Having looked over all twenty-nine definitions, one can conclude by
simply counting that a majority of the haiku poets polled agree that haiku is a short (20) form of poetry (15) concerned with insight (19). To a lesser extent they say that a haiku is based on a moment (7) experienced in nature/seasons (12) or reality in general (9). One feature, the haiku moment, seems to be contradicted by three others, who stress that haiku reflects the changing nature of things.

Since these six characteristics were originally borrowed from the earlier study by A. C. Missias, it is not surprising to find them all back here, but for whatever it’s worth, it should be noted that Missias found all these characteristics in at least half of the twelve definitions she examined, whereas only three were found in at least half of the definitions collected here. Neither polling was a random sample, so conclusions should be arrived at with caution. It seems, however, that in the perception of Western haiku poets, (haiku) moment, nature/seasons, and reality are relatively less important than brevity, poetry, and insight, but certainly many, if not most, haiku poets still find the source and inspiration for their haiku in moments they experience in nature or in reality in a broader sense.

Apart from these six main characteristics, some poets refer to literary technique, others to a personal relationship with this literary phenomenon. Some poets point at something labeled in this essay as existential resonance, yet others say that haiku uses noninterpretative language. This is not a limitative list of all aspects found in these definitions. The point to be made is that, within the limitation of a short definition, every poet simply stresses those points that he or she thinks are the most important. In other words, the differences in the definitions should only be taken as differences in emphasis on certain aspects, as Cyril Childs already presumed, not as (fundamental) differences in view or attitude. Even though to a degree poets may harbor differences in attitude, most will likely acknowledge the validity of aspects they have not themselves mentioned but feature in the definitions supplied by the others.

It is also worth remembering a point that Missias made in her study in 2000, “there are poems within the body of haiku which are more and less typical of the overall genre.” In other words: haiku lacking one or more of the accepted characteristics still will be recognized as haiku by those who have developed an understanding of the genre.

A distinction should be made between objective and subjective characteristics. Objective characteristics are of a more or less exact nature, shortness being the most obvious example, but juxtaposition as a literary technique, noninterpretative language and references to nature or reality also fit into this category. Subjective characteristics are not as easy to fence in. For instance, what is poetry exactly? And in the specific case of haiku, what precisely is this “insight” we are talking about as an aspect of haiku?
One might posit a theory about the relationship between objective and subjective aspects of haiku: the objective characteristics serve to communicate subjective insight in a poetic manner. The distinction between objective and subjective characteristics thus is a distinction between means and goals. The goals—especially “insight”—are the most interesting.

So again, what is this “insight”? It is hinted at in expressions such as Spinei’s “flashing flight of intuition and consciousness,” Nazansky’s “eternity of the moment,” Proctor’s “universal human experience,” Swede’s “mystery of existence,” Kunschke’s “awareness of [man’s place] in time,” Codrescu’s “glimpses of fragility in eternity,” and others. All these and similar expressions seem to have stemmed from, or are pointed at, the same notion, which we called “existential resonance” (this probably is not so much a label as just an alternative). Deodhar’s “linking the poet’s milieu interior to the milieu exterior” and similar wordings by Tauchner, Lofvers, and Gurga are in the same or a comparable class. The wildest speculations surrounded Tomaszewska’s “return to one’s own identity” and “leaving the emptiness,” in which one might discern a Brahmanistic view of reality (whether she herself would be aware of it or not). This interpretation then suggests a link to Wirth’s definition.

No one can understand an abstract notion unless it is already in some way present in him-or-herself, so maybe we are just taking out of all these definitions what we ourselves put into them. All labels such as “insight,” “existential resonance,” “mystery of existence,” “answer to a koan,” “eternity of the moment,” and “opening” are actually labels for intuitive notions, which are really beyond words. Moreover, all these notions are interrelated, if not synonymous in at least some instances. The core of what Western haijin perceive as the essence of haiku is a complex of interrelated intuitive ideas with regard to the composition of reality. This may not be all that different from the way other poets, specifically Japanese, see it, but such speculation goes beyond the boundaries of the present survey.

Compared to what I first learned about haiku, this aspect of the perception of haiku has not changed that much. At least, when Een jonge maan mentions as a characteristic of haiku “a mood that transcends time and space,” the description certainly strikes me as another intuitive notion with regard to the composition of reality. However, notions about a prescribed form, the indispensability of a reference to nature, or of an authentic haiku moment preceding the actual haiku seem now to be less and less important.

One other important caveat: I take every definition I received to be no less and no more than a random picture of what the author thinks is essential for haiku. At another moment the person’s definition might be quite different. After submitting his definition, for instance, Kacian wrote, “Ask me again tomorrow.” Berry sent in two different definitions within four weeks (only the first one has been used in this study.) Furthermore, the
panel included three poets—Cobb, Gurga, and Swede—who had also contributed to the 2000 Modern Haiku survey. Of these only Gurga maintained his previous definition; Cobb and Swede offered new texts. A poet’s vision of what haiku is evolves through time—or possibly it is just a matter simply of looking at the same thing from a different angle. Maybe haiku itself evolves, since every new haiku redefines haiku itself, if Lucas is correct. Finally, this exercise does not really help to understand haiku nor to appreciate haiku. To paraphrase Bashô: learn about haiku from haiku. Does it sound like we have merged Bashô and Lucas?

In Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Bluebeard,[13] the autobiography of fictional artist Rabo Karabekian, one of the main themes is abstract expressionist painting. Vonnegut introduces a painter in one scene for the sole purpose of answering the question “How can you tell a good painting from a bad one?”

“All you have to do, my dear,” this fictional painter says, “is look at a million paintings, and then you can never be mistaken.”

“It’s true! It’s true!” Karabekian exclaims. And so it is — for haiku as well.

A POSTSCRIPT

This essay was read before publication by the poets cited in it. With one exception, the interpretation and analysis of their definitions were either explicitly subscribed to or implicitly accepted. The one exception was a comment by Kaj Falkman (see note [12]).

Another point is that our presentation of A.C. Missias’s earlier work does not give full credit to her view. In her article “Struggling for Definition” she contemplates that a haiku might still be recognized as such even if it does not meet all or most of the acknowledged characteristics but conforms with just enough of them for the haiku to show a “family resemblance” to the genre. She then proposes to analyze haiku by looking at those “family traits” (a bottom up approach) and not just by analyzing theoretical conceptions (top down).

Charles Trumbull expands on Missias’s normative approach in “An Analysis of Haiku in 12-dimensional Space,” a paper delivered at a meeting of the Haiku Society of America in 2003 and published online in Simply Haiku (September–October 2004). In it he sketches twelve pairs of opposite notions about haiku with each pair defining the ends of a graduated scale. One then might analyze a haiku by deciding the “score” of that particular haiku on each one of these axes.

The terms “top down” and “bottom up” are borrowed from a column by
George Swede also published in *Simply Haiku* (autumn 2006). He wrote it after reading an earlier version of this essay. Both strategies, top-down and bottom-up, have their merits, but what Swede fails to find in several top-down studies, including the one above, is any reference to bottom-up studies, a field in which Swede himself has done some substantial research. He is flat right of course. What can be said in defense of the essay is that it is not about the essence of haiku but about the perception of that essence. The relevance of bottom-up studies is fully acknowledged in my view usually phrased thus: haiku does not follow rules, the rules follow haiku. Knowing what accomplished haiku poets themselves think about what is essential might give us a better idea of what we are looking for in a bottom-up study.

NOTES

[1] A German version of this paper was read by the author on April 29, 2006, to the Haiku Kreis in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The text was published in *Sommergras*, the German Haiku Society’s quarterly and is available online at <http://kulturservernds.e/home/haikudhg/Archiv/Verhart_das%20Wesen%20des%20Haiku_Haijin.htm>. The Dutch version was published in *Vuursteen* (autumn 2006), the Haiku Circle Netherlands quarterly, and it appeared in French in October 2006 on the Website of the Association Française de Haïku at <http://www.afhaiku.org/aphp/page1.php?page=art001>.


[12] Here my interpretation of Falkman’s wording lacks the nuance he intended. After reading this article in an earlier state, he wrote in an e-mail:

“A moment is, in my view, not fixed, arrested in time like a photograph, but also subject to change—like a moment of surprise in a film sequence. Thus, my notion that haiku strives to depict a scene that shows a change. The frog’s jump into the pond changes the view of the pond as well as the change from silence to sound.”

Haiku connects Haijin to their surroundings. Atoms of Haiku is like a rejuvenation process for body, mind and Haiku is not a shriek, a howl, a sigh, or a yawn; rather, it is the deep breath of life. - Santoka Taneda

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