

# James Kirkup's View of Poetry as Seen in His One-Line Poems

—Analytical Notes—

by Atsuo Nakagawa

With regard to James Kirkup's approach to his poetry composition, we can get some glimpse of it in his school textbook: *What's English Poetry?*,<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*,<sup>2</sup> *Let the Poet Choose*,<sup>3</sup> *The Poet's Voice*,<sup>4</sup> *Workings*,<sup>5</sup> and others, but as to his view of poetry the poet does not seem to have so far revealed so much except briefly in his short essay titled: 'The Monostich: A Tentative Study of One-Line Poems'<sup>6</sup> and a little in the *Workings*. In the writer's view, these one-line poems or *haiku*<sup>7</sup> on poetry quoted below—they appeared in *Transmental Vibrations*,<sup>8</sup> and *Shikai*<sup>9</sup>—seem to disclose his view of poetry best.

This short essay is the writer's attempt to analyze those poems and to show what Kirkup thinks of poetry, references made, when necessary, to the essay and publications above mentioned.

Kirkup says in one of his one-line poems:

Poems: turd eternally petrified by permafrost.

Here 'turd' means that anything that exists in this world can be his subject or material. In fact, the poet says he takes up anything as his subject

of poetry; it ranges from medical operation to Japanese gardens.<sup>10</sup> The phrase 'eternally petrified by permafrost' means that poetry materials are so condensed that they are turned into petrification and reveal their intrinsic pure beauty or texture losing their superficial dirty features; so purified with so much cold pressure of rigid crystallization that they will keep their state permanently, not harmed or spoilt by any outer influence.

Poem — development of a single syllable.

Perhaps this one-liner means what C. Day Lewis called "the seed or germ of a poem" that "strikes the poet's imagination",<sup>11</sup> that is, a poem begins with a single syllable which extends into a longer meaningful whole. And "just as the quality and size of the diamonds available to the jeweller affect the design of the brooch which he makes,"<sup>12</sup> so the nature and quality of the original single syllable is essential to the poetry and practically determines what pattern of a poem will be made or how successful a poem it will develop into.

Or it may explain that the essence of a poem can be said to be only a single syllable or word, which is really worth remembering or taking in. And the other syllables, words, phrases and so on, are just subordinate ornaments to embody the essence — decorating, intensifying, smoothing . . . — modify it 'poetically'. In other words, those other non-essential parts *should* make the essential 'poesy' accessible, printable, readable or recitable — poetic. In fact, however, according to Kirkup, "Most normal poems contain too many words. We cannot see the poem for the words"<sup>13</sup> The less the better. Thus he goes still further: "It should even be possible to write one word poems, or one-letter poems."<sup>14</sup> This is quite as a *haiku*

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poet, Tota Kaneko stresses on the effect of brevity referring to a poet Tsuguo Ando's words:

A poem is written in order to impress one word on readers. It is enough for a poem to be able to make his reader memorize one word of it.<sup>15</sup>

A true poem is never poetic.

This shows the same thing as the above two one-liners from another angle—some essential feature of poetry. The essence of what they call a poem is 'poesy', which is far from what is called 'poetic'. It excludes everything poetic—all the poetic embellishments in expression. That is why Kirkup goes on writing one-line poems like aphorisms, epigrams or proverbs which are different from what people in general think or consider poetic as you see these one-liners cited in this essay. This also explains his preference of single ordinary words,<sup>16</sup> special or scientific or medical terms,<sup>17</sup> tongue twisters,<sup>18</sup> palindromes,<sup>19</sup> *button literature*,<sup>20</sup> grotesque phrases from bad translations,<sup>21</sup> slogans used in the commercials,<sup>22</sup> witty jokes or funny sayings made by comedians,<sup>23</sup> small ads in the newspapers, torn letters lying in the gutter, which are all true poems according to him.

Kirkup never uses words for their own sake, still less to decorate or to impress. The poet, a Zen Buddhist himself, is always striving to work towards an oriental frugality of sensation and form, to cultivate a translucent simplicity of expression, to have the solid, lively kernel of thought and idea from which all true flowers of words must spring.<sup>24</sup>

A poem is a root, not a leaf.

This one is another expression of the same thing as those analyzed above. It is a sort of warning against beautifully contrived or versified long trains

of words, phrases or lines. The real 'poesy' is not where general people seek for, but at the root of what is called poetry.

This one-liner also means that the meaning of a poem is hidden like a root, but "it is continually growing, sprouting new beauties with each day of each season, year in year out" in the reader's mind as he grows in experience and insight.<sup>25</sup>

Every poem is a successful abortion.

This means that every written poem is only an abortion successfully had. It is not close to a birth successfully given, i.e., a successful embodiment of original pure 'poesy'. So no composed poem is really satisfactory or complete. Thus the poet strives for better creation of one poem after another.

Or it might explain another feature of poetry. The process of writing poetry is full of danger—"poetry is usually a happy combination of art and accident"<sup>26</sup>—composing poetry is often followed by struggle, hard work, strenuous efforts, sometimes agony, or even despair. But once it is made up successfully, it 'acts upon your system like an amphetamine injection'; 'it acts as a tonic on the kidneys,'<sup>27</sup> as a successful abortion gives the woman a feeling of a heavenly relief and restores her to her former health.

My poem is a hijacked time-bomb.

This poem expresses still another feature of poetry. The word 'hijacked' means impending great danger, intensified by 'time-bomb.' It might explode at any moment. This tells you that his poem is compared to a man balancing himself on a thin, delicate, tight rope with a bomb. Whenever he loses

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his balance and falls down it will explode. This means his poem has potential strong explosive force for a mind which is ready to realize the poetic truth in poetry.

Poems explode in my mouth like liqueur chocolates.

This one-liner expresses the joy of his instant poem-formation or momentary realization of a poem he is reciting in his mouth. This happening produces exciting sweetness, enchanting fragrance, paralyzing charm or spirit.

How many poems can I write with my blood?

This question tells how vital essence of the poet is used to form poetry.<sup>28</sup> The poet might be referring to Milton's famous line: "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit."<sup>29</sup> Anyway he compares his vital essence to blood. He never can tell how many satisfactory poems he can write since his 'blood' is limited in quantity. And yet man's blood is mostly composed of water, and sometimes it is not clean, sometimes dirty or poisoned. So the poems which could be made out of his essence would be limited in number.

It takes a lifetime to write a one-line poem.

This is another expression of how difficult it is to compose a satisfactory poem. Since its composition is a hard (or strenuous or despairing) precarious process full of danger, and yet every composed one is a successful abortion at best, if it is to be a root or something eternally petrified by permafrost, crystallization of the poet's essence, filled with potential highly-explosive forces; to compose an agreeable poem in its true sense, would require one's full lifetime to complete. Poetry-writing is an endless, limitless process



of struggle and efforts on the part of the poet.

In the long history of literary criticism, no few poets and critics have been speaking of poetry and trying to give definition to what poetry is. What Kirkup says in his one-line poems on poetry has often been said by many except his emphasis on brevity — one syllable — of poetry, and unpoeticness of poetry. And for the other points of view, his uniqueness is only a matter of degree of emphasis: the vast range of his choice in subject matter, the recognition of potential strong force, violence and surprise in poetry.

Notes:

- 1 Published by the Eicho-Sha, Tokyo in 1968.
- 2 Edited by Rosalie Murphy and James Vison, published by St. James Press in 1970.
- 3 Edited by James Gibson, published by George G. Harrap & Co., London in 1973.
- 4 Co-authored with Shozo Tokunaga, published by the Kenkyu-Sha, Tokyo in 1967.
- 5 Published under James Kirkup's supervision by the students of his creative writing class at Amherst College in 1968. Nos. 1 and 2.
- 6 Appearing in *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 16-17 (1971) and *Transmental Vibrations* (Covent Garden Press, 1971).
- 7 As to whether or not these one-liners can be called 'poems' or *haiku* as the poet himself actually calls so, see the writer's essays: 'James Kirkup's Haiku in English,' in *Gifu Keizai Daigaku Ronshu*, 5, No.3 (1972) and 'James Kirkup's Haiku-like Monostitches,' in Volume 6 (No.3) of the same (1973).
- 8 See Note No. 6.
- 9 Edited by Gyomindo Ikehara, published by Gyomindo and his group in Nagoya. They appear in Nos. 22-67.
- 10 In his *Workings*, No.2, he advises his students to turn to "the all-comprehending Greeks and Latins," too.

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11 C. Day Lewis, 'How a Poem Is Made,' *Poetry for You* (Tokyo: Nanundo, 1966).

12 *op. cit.*

13 'The Monostitch.'

14 *op. cit.*

15 Tota Kaneko, *Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuyo-Sha, 1972). Translated from the original Japanese by the writer.

In his letter to the writer (1973) Kirkup gives the following examples as one-letter poems: A. Z. O. As one-syllable poems: Dune. Sheer. Frown.

16 Examples: *Tofu. Fundoshi. Gobo. Hadaka.*

17 Ex.: *Tokyaku-sankakkei. Zenshin-fuzui. Shoka-kikan.*

18 Ex.: *Tokyo Tokkyo Kyokakyoku kyokucho.* She sells sea-shells on the sea shore.

19 Ex.: *Takeyabu yaketa.* Madam I'm Adam.

20 This is a term of Kirkup's coinage given to such short sayings as: I'd Rather Swish Than Fight. I'm Tired of Playing with Myself.

21 Ex.: Cats die in water. Who is going to smell?

22 Ex.: Fly the friendly skies of United. My boy friend told me my breath smelt like a moose.

23 Ex.: The main cause of divorce is marriage.

24 *Workings*, No. 1.

25 Marie Philomene, 'What Do Poets of *PN* Think of Poetry?', *Poetry Nippon*, No. 26 (1974).

26 *Workings*, No. 2.

27 'The Monostitch.'

28 Kirkup says of his approach to poetry composition in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*:

In my poetry I have attempted always to express an essence both of myself and experience, a crystallization of my personal awareness of this world and worlds beyond. . . .

29 John Milton, 'Areopagitica,' in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), p.720.