

## **NOTES & REVIEWS**

**MAKE THE FUTURE GREAT AGAIN:  
HIRATO RENKICHI'S SPIRAL STAIRCASE  
REVIEWED BY MATT TURNER**

Hirato Renkichi, *Spiral Staircase*.

Translated by Sho Sugita.

New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017. 205 pages.

The last few years have been good for translations of vanguard Japanese poetry: Sagawa Chika, Hagiwara Sakutarō, Yoshimasu Gozo, and now Hirato Renkichi have all received excellent translations — so the better for us yankees. And the writing even has ties with Euro-American modernism: Japanese surrealist Kitasono Katue corresponded with Ezra Pound, Sagawa Chika translated James Joyce, and Hirato Renkichi understood his writing to be contiguous with the Italian Futurists.

What does that mean? Thematically, someone like Hirato Renkichi's poetry explores a number of typically modernist tropes. In his poem "Ball Polishing," for example, he states that his "destiny will open inside the mirror" — the mirror image being the supreme trope of modernist self-reflexivity. Apposite that, in his "Manifesto to the Japanese Futurist Movement," he states that "Intuition must replace knowledge; the enemy of Futurist anti-art is concept."

But this goes further than the familiar: the mirror has become negative image, destructive image, and finally physical shock. And for this reason, after Hagiwara Sakutarō's initial experiments in free verse, Hirato can be spoken of as the principle innovator of new Japanese poetry in the twentieth century.

However his writing career, according to translator Sho Sugita, "was a brief six years," between 1916 and 1922, when he died, still in his 20s, of pulmonary disease. His manifesto reads like a statement about the literal future, consisting of not only futurism, but "synchronism," "analogism," and other -isms that are still waiting to be realized.

Even his *Selected Poems* was published nearly 10 years after his death, only collected by his friends. So in keeping with Hirato's ideas' late arrival, it's fitting that his collected work is published in English now for the first time, as *Spiral Staircase*: it's 2017, and we could use

some futuristic thinking. And iterations of that in literature, too: poems that unabashedly look ahead, as when Hirato claims that “on the sky projected/ is my heart.”

Hirato demands we look towards the horizon.

Yet another, more important, aspect of Hirato’s poetry is his cosmopolitanism. According to his translator, “unlike many of his contemporaries, who acclimated versions of European verse to Japanese poetry, Hirato saw Futurism as an international movement that he was actively involved in shaping.” Part of this was by rejecting an accepted cultural heritage, and then embracing the new pace of city life.

“On a technical level, Hirato dropped the extended 7/5–5/7 syllabic patterns used by Japanese Romanticist and Symbolist poets that imitated the meter of Romance languages. Stripping his poems of this syllabic meter and familiar form, he turned to anaphora to create a sense of rapidity.” The example given, from the poem “Insight”:

The heartfulness of moving things,  
The moving heart of  
The heartfulness of moving machines! [9, 48]

Eric Selland, a noted translator of Japanese, also notes in his afterword that “[i]n the fast-paced urban environment of 1920s Japan, you could listen to jazz at the Zebra Club in Kobe or the Blackbird in Tokyo. A newly affluent middle class dressed in the latest fashions and engaged in “Ginbura” (strolling along the Ginza). There were flourishing avant-garde movements, such as MAVO, and active revolutionary Marxist and anarchist movements.”

Hirato left early experiments with haikai to pursue his Futurism, but Hirato’s poetry was the future of a century ago. For example, his poem “Ginza, Color, Light, Reverberation, Stench, Curiosité, Éphémère.”

Life born during the day, dying by night  
Dancing dancing dancing  
In pieces in pieces  
In the show window  
Of the metropolis  
And in houses of ghost towns

In the accidental exterior light  
 Shining, shining  
 Drops of stars  
 Earthen blade  
 Of *alpine flora*  
 Comfortably within my senses  
 The stench brushed by the side of the road  
 From the American cinema style hand  
 A fluid flame of a moment  
                                     In darkness  
 Disappearing, disappearing  
 Whistle of a *vagabond*  
 Siren of a racing fire truck  
 On the artery of the underground  
 Applying pressure on the mouth of the iron pipe  
 Cataract cataract cataract  
 Cataract of water cataract of gas  
 Cataract of a transparent amber poison  
 Reverberation of a great flood  
 Facing afar

*tant tant nombreuse curiosité.....* [63]

In the poem's title alone we get urban vibes and foreign loan words. The poem runs on anaphora, each line pushing, needling the next. As Hirato's Chinese contemporary Guo Moruo (who lived in Japan on-and-off during this time) put it in his poem "Skydog" (1920), Hirato seems to be running on his nerves, pulling his sensoria together into a poem.

I fly fast,  
 I bark wildly,  
 I burn.  
 I'm like burning fire!  
 I'm like a big sea barking wildly! I'm like a machine bolting!  
 I'm bolting,  
 I'm bolting,

I'm bolting,  
I'm peeling my skin,  
I'm eating my flesh,  
I'm chewing my blood,  
I'm nibbling my heart and liver, I'm running on my nerve,  
I'm running on my spine,  
I'm running on my brain.

I bring up "Skydog," a poem spoken in the persona of a mythical animal of lunar eclipse, because it nicely parallels Hirato's poem "Moon Dog." Instead of persona and myth, however, "Moondog" gives us a quasi-scientific description of another lunar event, a paraselene. This description becomes a narration of the world of empirical sensation, another mark of modernity: the poet takes the world as is, goes with it, and tries to change how we see it.

Tonight, the sky and earth's breath's dissolve into one, heaping up inside a porcelain mortar, expanding in a deep lukewarm color, and the moon, as though facing a sickbed, begins to dilate a dull halo. [133]

Of course urban life is neither modern nor contemporary, but the sensations of modernity are distinctly urban. When Hirato engages with the non-urban past in his writings, what would be called "East Asian tradition," he's not a nationalist or essentialist trying to get in touch with his ethnic roots, but narrating that past elsewhere.

When, in his poems "Gourd Garden" and "Shakyamuni," he discusses aspects of Buddhism, it's not a retelling of myth, but a way of disjoining ideas about what constitutes the aesthetic present. Buddhist dependent origination ("thirsting" and "finding") is, of course, about the person's perception of the world.

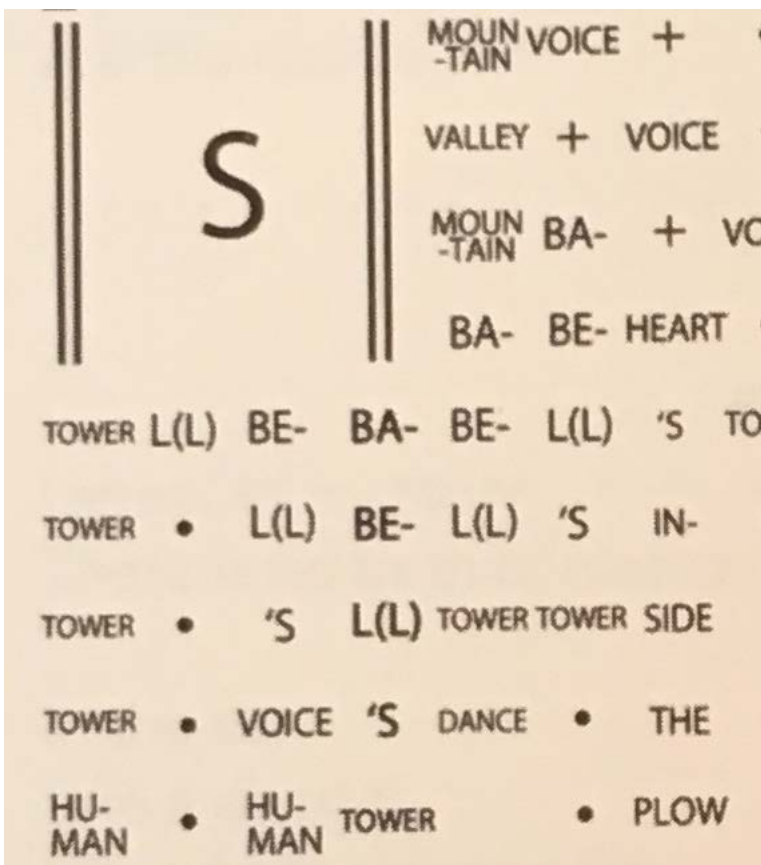
But this thirst, I can't..... while being indecisive, gorogorogoro a thundering sound to the east, a black cloud hangs over my head like a beast. ["Gourd Garden," 35]

[H]ow quaint, some say this place was a beautiful flower garden in the remote past, a cool eternal breeze carried through here before the night and swarms of snakes settled down. Let's find the key to open this door together, and one after another, what kind of treasure will come out of there?" ["Shakyumuni," 128]

While it may not be unreasonable for some poets to retrieve the past, and to even attempt to capture its spirit in some ways, to show that we rarely outlive it even, Hirato makes it more urbane vis-à-vis interruptions and distractions. It’s bricolage that uses everything at hand.

But should readers today simply appreciate these poems as period pieces, examples of universally admired literature, or models for their own bricolage? If we intellectually admire the poems, we don’t take seriously Hirato’s claim that his poems are “anti-concept,” poems of tactile sensation. If we take them as practical models we run the risk of reducing them to roadmaps for poetry (another Futurist no-no).

What do we think of this detail from “Ensemble” [68]:



As Gertrude Stein notes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, writing is most exciting when its new. But these kinds of typographic experiments aren’t new anymore, even if they may still be exciting. However Hirato wasn’t writing for the newness of text itself, but to

note and create new sensations. The fact that Hirato didn't affiliate himself with the poetry ghetto, academia, makes this proposition even more interesting: he considered himself to be writing a "proletarian poetry" — poetry for those, and by those, who labored for the rest.

Now, it's tempting to want to write work for the audience, for "the people" or for some vague subset thereof ("das Man"). For anyone who wants to understand work like Hirato Renkichi's, it might be necessary to think about who he was writing for (A: mostly a coterie of avant-garde poets), and what larger goals he had.

This doesn't mean that we all get jobs at factories, but rather that the means of production doesn't lie in admiration. Possibly, just possibly, the way to read Hirato Renkichi is to take its most exciting, and even admirable, aspects — internationalism and multilingualism, urban stimulation, a staccato history in which the past is impacted by and impacts the present (and more importantly, the future), as well as poetry for those who do the stimulating (the laborers) — and make it our own. Some already do this, but why not make more new sense in 2017 and beyond?

## **A PASSIONATE INSURGENT: PAM REHM**

**BY STAN MIR**

In the mythic confines of Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop's house, a party guest is likely to admire the innumerable items on their shelves, walls, or floors at some point in a night's visit. These items range from early books by Duncan and Dorn, seltzer water out of old-fashioned blue bottles, Keith's own collages, and a mysterious black Easter egg.

When I asked Keith about the egg, he said, "Oh, that's from Pam Rehm, but we've never opened it."

"Does it have something in it," I asked.

"Yes."

John Taggart, on the back of *The Garment In Which No One Had Slept*, describes Rehm as "clothed in an intense hesitancy, a serious shyness."

Does it have anything in it?

Yes.

Rehm describes her book, on the Burning Deck website, like this:

The poems are all experiments with form: all the dresses tried on. I was trying to feel through words in contrast to having a feeling and trying to describe it...just like myself, these poems are wanting without knowing what they want. They were my trying to figure out what to believe and where to begin. I was trying to stand, to understand all the movements inside my own body. I think the poems were my first questionings of what it means to be in relation.

The phrase, "in relation," seems to echo Martin Buber in *I and Thou*:

Primary words do not signify things,  
but they intimate relations.



Primary words do not describe  
Something that might exist  
independently of them, but being  
spoken they bring about existence.

As a writer, I am often “wanting without knowing what I want,” and the only way to know is “to feel through words.” These intimations make relationships between people and things more apparent, but they also insist on the interrelationship of language and thing. At my worst, I forget the possibilities of English when the media appropriates words like “insurgency” over and over, in combination with words like “bombing.”<sup>1</sup> The media’s assumption and limiting of words’ meanings creates an opposition to the complexity of a language made various in its capacities throughout history.

Rehm unveils further modulations of language in her work. It’s as if she removes the governor that dictates how words move. As she wrote in “Of Single Intent,” from her book *Gone to Earth*, Rehm sees “the world within/the word begin” and must “be all curiosity.” The poet “bring[s] about existence,” as Buber might put it.

*The Garment In Which No One Had Slept*, which was pared down from longer thesis version at Brown University, was published twenty-four years ago, in 1993. Before this book, Rehm published two chapbooks, and she has since published *To Give It Up* (Sun & Moon, 1995), *Gone to Earth* (Flood Editions, 2001), *Small Works* (Flood Editions, 2005) and *The Larger Nature* (Flood Editions, 2011).

In addition to her published books, the spring of 1994 saw the ambitious *apex of the M* (1994-1997) appear with Rehm, Lew Daly, Kristen Prevallet, and Alan Gilbert as editors. By the fifth issue, Rehm and Daly moved into assistant editor roles. And by the sixth, the project came to an end.

The first issues contain editorial statements full of idealistic pronouncements: “We believe at this time that poetry must catalyze and aid in the sustainment of a passionate insurgency.” The editors hoped that following Dickinson, Melville, Stevens, and others that “a new understanding of their task as iconoclasts and not innovators will emerge.”

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1 This review was published in an earlier version during the Iraq War.

Dickinson defined “spirit” as “Conscious Ear.” The editors of *apex of the M* believed one must possess this spirit in order to resist “any language that creates or reflects the kinds of diversions and sedations required for the triumph of capital, [which] is, finally, a language of denial.”

Rehm’s resistance also reflects some uncertainty. She wrote in “THUS I FIND MY LEGS,” from *The Garment In Which No One Slept*:

We are paying for all of this unnecessary construction. Knowing  
this hasn’t seemed to move us into devotion or out onto the missile  
fields. We are afraid. To act.

This paralysis, especially our fear to act, will always be just under the surface. It rears its head in all we do, from forging a new poetics to operating as citizens in a country seemingly bent on destruction.

But love is central to the task of the iconoclast, and in Rehm’s case, this emotion “brings about existence.” In her book, *To Give It Up*, Rehm writes in the poem, “An Elegy On My Having Not Lived:”

All these thoughts I feel    I cannot turn  
the silence from    A reference is made  
from self to self, a simple suspension  
between letters    For which the mind  
makes a face for and a heart  
And a part which can’t be reached  
but doesn’t stop it from reaching

Rehm is an iconoclast not because she is, at times, formally inventive but because she reaches for what can’t be seen. Her insurgency should become ours. Rehm is not the only one who must “figure out what to believe and where to begin.” Each of us must open our cabinets and break open the black egg that hides our conscious ear.<sup>2</sup>

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2     Rosmarie has since opened the egg to find a slip of paper with the words, “surprise” and “Überraschung.”