



A Careful Logic Of Its Own

Order, Disorder, and Magic in Poetry

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIMIKO HAHN

ADAM WIEDEWITSCH

*KIMIKO HAHN was born in 1955 in Mt. Kisco, New York, the child of artists—a Japanese-American mother from Hawaii and a German-American father from Wisconsin. She received an undergraduate degree in English and East Asian studies from the University of Iowa, and a master's degree in Japanese literature from Columbia University. She is the author of seven collections of poetry, including her new book *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (W.W. Norton, 2006); *The Artist's Daughter* (2002); *Mosquito and Ant* (1999); *Volatile* (1998); and *The Unbearable Heart* (1995), which received an American Book Award. Hahn has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts, as well as a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award, the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize, and an Association of Asian American Studies Literature Award. She is a Distinguished Professor in the English Department at Queens College/CUNY, which is offering a MFA program beginning the fall of 2007, and also teaches in the graduate MFA program at New York University. She lives in New York.*

Firsts in No Particular Order¹

Purple towel on Grove, down comforter on South Davenport, deck
in Lonelyville, then of course—that rug burn, outer borough—

A Buddhist Temple storage closet over the humid dōjō—

My mother in a pine coffin on a late morning in early March
before they slid her body into the furnace for all time—

“Ruby Tuesday” on the car radio before the caesarean; “Louie Louie,”
before the vaginal—

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Water radicals—

Grandpa's teeth in a glass and *shame shame for laughing*—

White moiré taffeta. Snow. *Blondie*—

Pinky

Air Pocket

The Waldorf-Astoria—

Olivetti Lettera 22—

Dialectical historical materialism, lumpen proletariat, dictatorship of the proletariat, moribund capitalism—

Levine's "Gin"

Keep her cool. It's a febrile seizure. Not uncommon.

Chlorine

The lights opened on my powdered-white face, tiny red lips and skeins of pink silk—a dance my daughters will dance—

K - I - M M - O - M

Eight hundred quarters—

My mother, my mother—

Rowing with Daddy in the Catskills even while it poured—

Martini up with olives—*was it stirred?*

Adam Wiedewitsch: This poem came from your new book *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, published this past fall, and is an example of a Japanese poetic form that you use throughout the book called *zuihitsu*. How do you understand this form?

Kimiko Hahn: I have constructed my own definition from various other descriptions: *zuihitsu*, literally, means “left up to the brush” or “running brush.” It refers to a poetic text, usually written in prose, that utilizes disorder as its general strategy by employing such tactics as fragmentation, juxtaposition, contradiction, a variety of topics under a prevailing single theme, a variety of forms (list, diary, commentary, etc.), and a variety

of lengths. According to Donald Keene in *The Pleasure of Japanese Literature*, Japanese art in general can be characterized by its embrace of irregularity, of suggestion, of simplicity, and of understatement. In literature you see these elements when reading, say, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*—which is one of the most well-known collections of *zuihitsu*. However, there are few really clear definitions of the term.

AW: Could you talk a little about how this form functions for you as an artist?

KH: In one respect the form is really a continuation of what I love about the modernists, such as William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot—a continuation of what they were doing and how they, themselves, were influenced by Asian literature. My interest and even understanding of the *zuihitsu* was partly inspired by what I read as an undergraduate, which was Williams' poem "Paterson," as well as Japanese literature. On the other hand, it is not a continuation but a deviation from Western literature, so that finally a *zuihitsu* is quite a different creature from "Paterson." I am interested in how paragraphs absorb material differently than a lineated form. And I am interested in how something might look and feel random but have a careful logic of its own. I do not use this as an excuse to get away with chaos.

AW: You also use another Japanese form—

KH: Yes, the *tanka*, which I render as one-line poems rather than strictly lineated 31-syllable poems, Western-style poems. I quite emphatically render them as one line—partly because that is how the Japanese wrote them. Also, I read in *The*

Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics—I think it must be an older edition because I can't find the quote any longer—that it is questionable whether one-line poems are possible in Western literature. Well, that's a challenge! So, my interest in *tanka* arrived from both the influence of Japanese literature and its challenges, as well as a wish to be subversive.

AW: You mentioned that there are very few definitions of the *zuihitsu*. Why is that?

KH: I think the very different and few descriptions underscore my frustration in finding a straightforward definition for this genre—of which there is no European counterpart. Even the scholar Linda Chance in her book *Formless in Form²* does not define so much as describe, compare, and trace the development of the genre. She even questions the differences in how Japanese and Westerners categorize genres—a philosophical issue.

AW: You are currently teaching writing at both Queens College/CUNY and New York University. How does your interest in form function as a teaching tool for young and beginning writers?

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²Linda Chance, *Formless in Form: Kenko, Tsurezuregusa, and the Rhetoric of Japanese Fragmentary Prose*. Stanford University Press, 1997.

KH: I have a real interest in and dedication to play and to generating raw material. This semester I am conducting craft classes and I like to compare such a course to a sandbox, where students feel that they can take risks and hopefully let go of a damaging competition (not all competition is damaging!) and fierce seriousness that can be deadly when it comes to creative work. I also use the word sandbox to promote a shift in attitude: children, when they are in a sandbox, are not only playing but they are working—learning about shapes and about material. Play is how a child works. I think that is what we need to do: go back to the stuff that is both play and work at the same time. As for raw material, I like the notion that you can tap into the subconscious. So your ideas or your initial intention become the means to explore your raw material which, instead of just leading you forward, can take you in other directions as well. One starts out writing about last week's beach picnic and ends up, say, at a funeral for grandma. It's important to allow for that. Young students feel they have to stick to the topic as if writing an essay. With the *zuihitsu*, the topic or idea can be viewed as an organizing principle; or with the *tanka* one does not have the usual unlimited amount of space to explore, so it is a different frame. I think it's healthy to shift one's notion of what a poem has to look like or has to sound like and to take chances. You can always return to what you were doing before! Without play, though, I wonder if there can be real growth; furthermore, everyone can just end up sounding the same after a while and that's no fun. At the end of a craft class on *tanka*, I was particularly pleased with the students' reactions: first frustration, then delight at having to work differently. I remarked to one student: I guess I took away your usual toys!

I think if a piece is successful it is because there's something going on that is holding it together and trying to blow it apart. As students, writers, and teachers, I think we are questioning and exploring this kind of dynamic.

AW: You've mentioned a lot of wonderful things. The notion of the sandbox is not unlike that term, "organizing principle." Are you consciously thinking about this when you write a poem like "Possession" from your earlier book, *Volatile*, and when you are teaching?

KH: Yes, I do begin *zuihitsu*, this disorderly form, with some order. In "Possession," I was interested in seeing how many different ways I could look at meanings for this word. It can be seen as a kind of list-poem, carefully constructed. An organizing principle is really one way to create something that appears random; I think if a piece is successful it is because there's something going on that is holding it together and trying to blow it apart. As students, writers, and teachers, I think we are questioning and exploring this kind of dynamic. In a poem (as opposed to a *zuihitsu*) these elements could be sound, whether there is a formal rhyme scheme, or a kind of constellation of sound. It could be how something is lineated. One identifies what is working, what is organizing the text rather than boiling everything down to a theme. This is what a close reading is—common sense and not a particularly fancy way to read! For example in T.S. Elliot's poem "Preludes," I love that his perfect and slant rhymes are really erratic, that is, without a formal pattern—it's very seductive. I try to steal this kind of fabric for my own work.

AW: Would you explain a bit further what you mean by “hold together and blow apart”?

KH: I began my craft class by discussing how repetition and dynamics—opposites—inform a text (even when it comes to open verse). This is how I usually discuss texts when I teach literature. In fact, I think what makes most art successful is some kind of relationship with repetition and dynamics. Some things are working to organize the various elements in a piece, to hold it together. By the same token, there are opposite elements, destabilizing, or threatening to destabilize. In a sonnet it is the repetition of, for example, iambic pentameter; deviation threatens to blow up that pattern and it delights the ear by breaking up expectation and/or the monotony. It’s not a very sophisticated way of thinking, I’m afraid, but it is simple and useful for creating as well as interpreting. In a classroom we look at such elements in regard to organizing principles. I think of Wordsworth’s poem “She Dwelt Among Untrodden Ways”: the point of view is a close first person but there is no first-person pronoun until the last word. That closure, for me, is immensely important—“But she is in her grave, and oh / the difference to me!” The “oh” begins the unraveling. The sudden entrance of “me” and exclamation point blows open the restrained passion.

AW: How do you think the conveyance of these notions or organizing principles and their relation to form affects the individual writer? Imagine a few assignments that you would give to a class.

KH: The most obvious assignment might be the list poem where the organizing principle is fairly literal: a list of things that are elegant. Or, things that are annoying. These are straight out of *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon. One could begin by listing things as words, phrases, paragraphs; then, in a subsequent draft, one could take a look at the progression of these “things”; and make some decisions as to order (so much for disorder!) The final result might be a poem—or a single image or anecdote which might be saved and become the basis for another draft. This is another way to generate raw material. A good way to work when one has writer’s block is to give yourself these sorts of assignments. It disturbs narrative but could also be another vehicle towards narrative—I don’t have a prejudice either way.

AW: I notice throughout your new book that the speaker will mention a word like *detail*, as well as a word that it closely resembles—a misreading. Does this fit into what you’ve been describing?

KH: Well, another opportunity to blow things up I guess. This kind of wordplay is a part of Japanese poetics—where one word with a double meaning becomes a pivot, a shift. A volta! Aside from that, I loved Gertrude Stein when I was in high school and the idea that you can really play with language—just be playful and not so deadly seri-

Wordplay is a part of Japanese poetics. . . . The idea that you can really play with language—just be playful and not so deadly serious—is really important to me. This kind of play comes to mind when you misread something; I think that’s where magical things can happen, poetic things.

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AW: Returning to forms: you mentioned that this is a deviation completely from Western forms: do you find that writing in English confines you to using Western conventions?

KH: No, I actually feel the opposite. First of all, I cannot write in Japanese! Maybe at some point I will try my hand at translation but I have never been fluent enough. However, Japanese literature has definitely expanded my aesthetic. For example, double meanings are incredibly crucial to Japanese poetics. In Western poetry, this is sometimes considered silly, but I really rely on double meanings to expand meaning and feeling; and for the poem to become more spatial and not quite so linear. I want the poem to break open even at the sight/sound of one word. If I talk about a bale of hay and I use the word “bale,” it might also mean “baling out, getting out.” I want that word to work that hard and that really comes from Japanese literature and its reliance on wordplay.

AW: What are some of the things that you intend for a class to learn?

KH: I guess I mainly try to bring two things. As I described earlier, one is to generate raw material and convey to my students that it is not necessary to have a good idea in order to begin writing; this is especially important for undergraduates. They often think they have to have an idea—a profound idea no less!—so I try to have students just get in the habit of sitting down and generating material that they’ll return to later.

I also try to bring in the idea that revision is a matter of choice and it is not the instructor who is going to make that choice. We are not going to “fix” the poem. Otherwise there’s a reliance on the teacher to edit a poem so that it will be publishable, which I think is a really bad way to proceed and does not teach anybody anything. A workshop is a special environment where students can bring in drafts and hear a number of different comments and questions that they should jot down themselves and return to when they begin to revise. Sometimes those comments are even contradictory—and that’s ok. Ultimately it is the student’s choice whether and how to use these comments. So with those two strategies in mind, I also try to bring to class the idea that people should not feel hemmed in by what they are reading. One day they read something by C.K. Williams, on another day, Sharon Olds or Rigoberto Gonzalez. Furthermore, whether they like those writers or not, I ask them what they’d like to take from them: we discuss how stealing in poetry is different from plagiarizing. I would like them to be exposed to a variety and not so hemmed in by preconceived notions or schools of thought or schools of poetry. This is how I started: undergrad workshops with Louise Glück at the University of Iowa, then, in New York City, I read and met Jessica Hagedorn—who had just completed her first book of poems, *Dangerous Music*. It is

partly a matter of teaching students to read like a writer—back to that notion of stealing. Instruction should be guiding people so they can make choices for themselves.

AW: It seems then that your teaching would inform your own poetry and be a very important influence. Does the classroom ever blow open your own intentions?

KH: Yeah it does. Earlier I used the word, “magic.” *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* contains a wonderful definition of poetry that includes the phrase, “a species of magic,” which I really, really love. I just discovered that definition a couple of years ago when I was teaching a literature course. Anyway, fairly recently I had a student complain in a workshop that too much was being pulled apart and that there was not going to be anything left, no life to the poem left.

What he was suggesting—though he didn’t put it this way—was that we were going to strip the magic out of the poem. Of course I had thought this over the years—but I had never connected it to this workshop tendency to strip the magic out. So I am trying to rethink how to conduct a workshop so we don’t hammer the life out of the poem and suggest that

there’s only one possible revision. I am also trying to do this for myself to ensure that in editing I don’t strip the magic out. Or, if I have a draft that I feel strongly about but there’s not enough going on, I try to add something a little more volatile. Either way, I don’t want a poem to be just interesting material, I want it to be moving, I want it to radiate. If I am holding my students to that, I need to hold myself to that as well. Really, I’ve been trying to do this all along, but in talking and teaching, I understand better what I am requiring of myself as a teacher and a writer.

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AW: In a sense then, you’re saying that when you teach writing to your students, you are also learning things from this exchange that help you with your own work.

KH: I know from my own process what has worked for me all the way back from my undergraduate days: a reliance on what I keep calling generating raw material. I began to comprehend this after reading *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande. Back in the 1930s she was writing about tapping the unconscious. It’s a completely cool book. But back to your question—I do learn from being a teacher, but it is an especially good way for me to become more articulate about process. (I like this kind of dialog—other writers find it loses, I guess, magic.)

AW: Other examples?

KH: A couple years ago I was complaining to Walter Mosley about how difficult it’s become to write about my young-adult daughters, to which he said, “Why don’t you just write it—you don’t have to publish it!” And I replied, “Damn! that is just what I would tell my students!” I hate it when I have to kick my own butt, but that is exactly what you have to do: you have to listen to yourself then turn around and kick (how does that

work!). I have to keep my own self honest. Also, that's a good friend who can say that!

AW: What are your limitations in dealing with the personal? I am thinking of something you mentioned about writing about difficult subjects.

KH: Well—returning to the daughter anecdote—at this point in time I have a really good deal going on with my daughters because as a mother it is my first duty to protect them, so it can be dicey when it comes to being a writer, not wanting to self-censor. My deal with them is that they don't have to read my work. They are very proud of me, but I know they are a bit timid about reading my work and, really, that is very liberating for me. I am glad they are proud and I am glad that they surmise that Mommy has that archetypal sealed-off-room with all sorts of metamorphic vivisections going on (laughter). So, I am grateful for that deal, but it still feels difficult. I mean, do I get to write about their life because what they do affects me? Yes and no, yes and no. My undergraduates ask, "Professor Hahn—but what if someone in my family reads it?" The answer for them, too, is, Don't show it to them, don't leave it on the computer. Why worry over something before you've even written it?

AW: You also talk about embellishing the diary so that it is inevitably fictive.

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KH: I think in the West we tend to call something fiction or non-fiction—even in this day with hoaxes on the Internet, with people blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction—and yet, there are people who still get a little upset when they read something that they think is real but find it's invented. But poetry is not required to be factual! That is poetic license! I don't

understand how people can get so upset. Do you get upset about that?

AW: I don't get upset about it. Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* can do whatever it wants—and I am thinking of an interview with John Berryman in the *Paris Review*. The interviewer asked Berryman to respond to the fact that critics had labeled him as a confessional poet, to which he answered, "With contempt and rage!" (laughter) This goes back to your idea of blurring meaning, and I am thinking specifically of your poems "Pulse and Impulse" and "The Orient."

KH: I like to look at things very dialectically. One opposite of confusion is clarity. We long for words and meaning to be clear. It's true—in an interview I should be clear and say what I mean. In poetry, I like to have that flux between clarity and confusion. It should work towards this species of magic, the experience of poetry. For me, growing up and hearing some Japanese was very confusing, but I love that. I remember not understanding what my grandmother was saying but I loved listening. Later, when I was still little, I learned a few words then, later still, I studied Japanese. I'd like to try to bring to my poetry that confusion and delight that is sometimes very primitive, in the way a child is primitive and intuitive, but also naively sophisticated. To look at the word *fn*, and see

a fish's fin and the French word for end. I want to go beyond all the theory and back to the childlike delight—that blurring and confusion is ultimately delightful.

AW: Can you convey this in the classroom? In your crafted disturbance?

KH: I think that there are two different questions here; one is can we teach blurring in a way that is constructive and productive. If you remember, I put on the blackboard at one point my favorite words: *pine, rose, leaves, hedges*. Then I asked what these words have in common. At first glance, nature. But the answer I am interested in is that they are all both nouns and verbs. So if I use the word *pine*, I am hoping that it immediately conveys the sense of pining for someone as well as a stand of pine trees. Words working hard, that kind of blurring. Students really love to see this blurring, this kind of magic in the classroom. On the other hand, I don't mean to be chaotic in the classroom. I want to promote differing ideas and not to cut off discussion. Another example; a couple years ago I had a student bring a poem to workshop and no one knew how to discuss her work, which had a more—what?—"language" orientation. In her previous workshop also, no one knew how to discuss her work. So I introduced that idea of the organizing principle by asking, what is organizing this poem? This was a different way of looking at poetry and it assisted everyone in being able to actually discuss what was going on and what was working and not working. This became a way to talk about the piece, rather than saying "No, you can't write this way," rather than cutting people out, rather than boycotting the style: no narrative—sorry! That's ridiculous. That's tribal.

AW: Tribes—

KH: Divisions can very easily break down into male-female, black-white, gay-straight, language-no-language, I'm from the north, I'm from the south, whatever, I'm from the city, I'm from the country... It can break down into these things. Those different points of view are interesting to bring to class, not as a way to shut things down, but as a way of breaking things open and having a more interesting discussion.

AW: Like introducing a subversive notion of say, diction?

KH: Yes, breaking down those defenses and fences.

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