

Haiku Economics: Little Teaching Aids for Big Economic Pluralists

By Stephen T. Ziliak*

September 9, 2008

Forthcoming in the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*

*Stephen T. Ziliak is Professor of Economics at Roosevelt University, Chicago. His most recent book (with Deirdre McCloskey) is *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives* (University of Michigan Press, 2008). In 2002 he was voted “Faculty Member of the Year” by the Student Government Association at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where in principles courses he taught “haiku economics” to more than a thousand economics, science, and engineering majors.

Haiku Economics: Little Teaching Aids for Big Economic Pluralists

The prophet and the poet may regenerate the world without the economist, but the economist cannot regenerate [the world] without [the poet and the prophet]

Philip Wicksteed, *The Commonsense of Political Economy*, 1910.

Haiku is a species of poetry enjoyed by people coming from all walks of life but it's especially enjoyed, as you've probably heard, by Japanese courtiers, North American beatniks, and sticky-fingered schoolchildren. Haiku is a bigger phenomenon than you might realize, and it is loved and valued by great poets. Certainly there is a commercial market for haiku, great or not. Recent best-selling books of haiku at Amazon.com include *Haiku for Jews*, *Haiku Baby*, *Gay Haiku*, *Hipster Haiku*, *Redneck Haiku*, *Baseball Haiku*, and *Zombie Haiku*. What insights or values, if any, can haiku bring to an economist? What, if anything, can economics do in return for haiku?

Some say not much. Over in the English Department, a teacher claims that writing haiku isn't suitable employment for her colleagues in the Economics Department, and I agree with her. Hey y'all, don't quit your day job. But don't quit on haiku, either. Competing professionally in the 100-meter dash isn't "suitable" for people like you and me, who (it pains me to admit) run rather slowly when compared with Jamaica's Usain Bolt. But the fact that most of us couldn't earn a dollar in a race against "Lightning" Bolt doesn't mean that our hearts don't benefit by occasional, spontaneous, all-out sprinting across a flat or hilly terrain. Haiku economics is like spontaneous, analytical sprinting across the economic plane. It cuts to the logical and spiritual chase of the circular flow, and at a low and constant marginal cost of just 17 syllables.

Making econ work
in seventeen syllables
saves Slutsky some time.¹

The super-tight budget constraint which is holding you back in haiku is more than off-set by a boundless freedom to wander. Haiku is, as virtually any 15-year old can tell you, a charmingly *little* bit of poetry, a palm-sized verse, three lines long, so small you can write a whole poem in the palm of your other hand, a fine art of elite medieval Japanese origin, Buddhist, really, Zen, in particular; it's spiritual, respectful, observant, scientific, wild, conservative, amusing—a thing to memorize by heart, and to recite with others, aloud, or sometimes louder, in a classroom perhaps, or at a poetry slam, at a Parisian café or possibly in a prison yard in the state of Indiana or on a mountain pass in the northern interior of Japan. Haiku was at its origins in seventeenth century Japan an artistic outlet for Zen philosophy, which tended to appear counter-cyclically with changes in GDP and war, and pro-cyclically with changes in season. Being Zen, much of the early haiku strives to attain a

¹ Eugen Slutsky (1880-1948), born and raised in Kiev, made seminal contributions to economic theory and statistics. He is best known for the "Slutsky equation," an efficient mathematical tool of demand analysis which takes more than seventeen syllables to explain.

completely impersonal perspective on man's experiences with Nature—free, for example, of individual ego—a form of enlightenment called *mu*, expressed in haiku. Sometimes—and I say this with deeply felt apologies to Stanley Fish, the late Richard Rorty, and other rhetoricians of “the mirror of nature,” such as myself— Matsuo Bashō's (1644-1694) haiku, like other classic haiku, dwell empirically on the surface of Nature alone with Itself.

A potato leaf
awaits the harvest moon in
a burnt village field.²

As Sam Hamill, an eminent American poet and translator, has observed, in feudal Japan, and certainly in Bashō, “directness of emotion expressed without ornament set the standards [for the haiku] of the day.”³

While the topics and philosophies of haiku have expanded and changed over time and space, its form has essentially remained the same: mathematically, precisely small. Each haiku poem is mathematically complete at three lines of seventeen syllables, arranged in the serial order 5-7-and 5 again.⁴ For example,

² Matsuo Bashō, circa 1690-1694, *Narrow Road to the Interior* (Shambala Classics, 1998), transl. Sam Hamill, p. 150. Bashō, whose importance to the history of haiku should not be underestimated, is widely acknowledged in Japan to be Japan's Shakespeare and rather more.

³ Hamill, *ibid.*, xi.

⁴ Here I follow the conventional form, 5-7-5, but *not* the conventional emphasis on “nature” and “season” which often accompanies it. In 2004 the Haiku Society of America claimed haiku to be “*A short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition*” (quoted in Abigail Friedman, p. 218, *The Haiku Apprentice* [Stone Bridge Press, 2006]; cf. page 282, “Afterword,” in R. Wright's *Haiku: This Other World*). But members of the Society (including Friedman and the Richard Wright scholars' Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert L. Tener) are missing a lot of history and poems by restricting the “definition” of haiku to “nature or the season.” More than forty years ago, Etheridge Knight's haiku proved that “prison yard” could be profitably substituted for “nature” and African American “double consciousness” for “season” (See, e.g., “Knight, Etheridge, haiku,” pp. 91-98 in Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton, eds., *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans since 1945* [Back Bay Books, 1995].) Likewise one hears Elizabeth McKim substituting parts of “bodies/relationships” and “breathing/relationships” for old metaphors found in “nature” and “season” (“Dragonflies in Late Summer: Linked Haiku,” p. 49, *Boat of the Dream* (1988).) Thus if your haiku-economy is a prison or a love-relationship then prison life or relationship provides your season words – the exact details to be revealed in haiku genre by for example *mu* [enlightenment in nothingness] or *senryū* [criticism by incongruity, as in Kenneth Burke's “perspectives by incongruity”] (see R. Wright, *op cit.*, p. 255).

A spring sky so clear (5)
That you feel you are seeing (7)
Into tomorrow. (5)

3 lines

17 syllables

An obvious strength of haiku is its efficiency, a point which was discovered by Japanese poets around the time that Sir William Petty's *Political Arithmetick* (1690) was first published. *Efficiency* is here defined as the ability to deliver maximum-impact stories, insights, and meanings—at minimum cost. As Hamill says, “Zen [haiku] demolishes much . . . of literary criticism by pointing out that, . . . the surface is very deep; inasmuch as cause leads to effect, effect in turn produces cause” (Hamill 1998, *op cit.*, xvii). The appeal of haiku to economists, and especially to economic rhetoricians, ought to be obvious. To date, the mutual and competing strengths and interests of haiku and economics have not been explored together.

The “spring sky” haiku which you have just read is one of thousands crafted by a great American writer, Richard Wright (1908-1960), the author of, among many other things, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.⁵ Wright’s “spring sky” haiku is not exactly what I have in mind when I think of putting haiku and economics together into “haiku economics.” With it the author in exile was trying to free his self from a state of depression and to soothe chronic pains from physical illness (Julia Wright, xii, in R. Wright, *op cit.*, 1998). But on a second reading, Wright’s spring sky haiku can be seen to resemble a martingale, which is a mathematical model, a mathematical metaphor, if you will, used by statistical forecasters in financial economics and other fields, including meteorology. With today’s total information (at time t), Wright’s haiku says, “a spring sky” (a good day, a bull market) is “so clear” (it contains so much information, so much clarity, or, alternatively, so much good) you feel “you are seeing into tomorrow” (into $t + 1$). In general, then, combining haiku and economics adds to the meaning of both, the production possibilities.

Thus the unique strength of *haiku economics* is its ability to deliver big stories, insights, and meanings about *economics and the economy itself*, in a comparatively small package—that is, at minimum cost. For example,

Invisible hand:
Mother of inflated hope,
Mistress of despair!

- which, when said aloud, I’ve discovered, both delights and disgruntles, depending on how the audience is feeling that day about Adam Smith’s parable of the market order.⁶

Or:

Neoclassical
economic scientist:
old wine, new Skinner.

⁵ Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (Anchor Books, 1998), #301, p. 16.

⁶ S. T. Ziliak, “Haiku Economics,” *Rethinking Marxism* 14 (3, 2002), pp. 111-113.

- a haiku “pun” or *senryu* (Hakutani and Tener, in R. Wright, *op cit.*, p. 255), merging the attitudes of the psychologist B.F. Skinner, a founding father of behaviorism, with an icy sociological interpretation of an old cliché.

Or:

Statistical fit:
epistemological
strangling, of wit!

- a rhyming haiku which will sound like blasphemy to an economist who faithfully confuses *statistical* significance with *economic* significance.⁷

Notice that each of these haiku ends in “surprise.” Surprise—particularly the surprise which comes through “irony,” a subset of surprise in general—is the haiku-enlightenment maker; in fact, haiku’s power of enlightenment through surprise has a parallel in economic enlightenment—in the invisible tricks played by the invisible hand, that is, the irony of unintended consequences. Price controls don’t actually “control” market prices: surprise! Import quotas hurt some of the same people the quotas are designed to protect: surprise! Government welfare programs increase the number of families appearing to be “poor”: surprise again!

But haiku economics is useful for more than economic criticism. For example, haiku economics can be used to celebrate the dignity of labor:

Irish garbage man
opens a blue plastic bag
with a regal look.

Or it can point to the amounts of pollution—the negative externalities—in an otherwise beautiful and highly regulated space, in cities from Beijing to Chicago:

The dirty canal
slipped a curvy finger up
skyscraper canyon.

In other words, haiku contributes to the critical and observational sides of our science (both vanishing, it would seem, in the Age of Excel). To be fair to the alternative hypothesis, I don’t have any statistically significant results to prove the truth of my main claim—that asking your students to write haiku will inspire and enhance the pluralistic conversations about economics that you wish to have with them, while possibly clearing their heads and improving their writing. Here I can only hope to inspire a few of you to give haiku economics a try.

What follows is a primer on English language poetry and economics in history. This is a necessarily short section, with no pretension of completeness. I then present a selection

⁷ The haiku are from S. T. Ziliak, “Haiku Economics, No. 2,” *Rethinking Marxism* 17 (4, 2005), pp. 567-569; “significance” is taken up in S. T. Ziliak and D. N. McCloskey, *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives* (University of Michigan Press, 2008).

of haiku, which together I hope shall serve as a useful starting point for future art and discussion.

The Victorian Divide

To arts and sciences colleges, a big benefit of haiku economics is that it brings poetry and economics, the humanities and the sciences, back together again (D. N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, chp. 1).⁸ But division between us is still the norm, harming poets and economists alike. The Victorians shouldn't get the last word on poetry and economics. We gave them the last word on crime, eugenics, and pornography, and look where that got us: *on-line*.

But seriously, judging from the economics of the average poem, and the poetry of the average economics article, Thackeray, Dickens, Eliot, Bentham, Mill, Marshall and other long-stocking dead are winning. Currently it seems as if there is no relation at all between economics and poetry – haiku or other.

A popular philosophy of history says, “what goes around comes around.” And lately, the history of economic thought has, like poetry before it, stopped coming around. It's news to most of us that George Bernard Shaw married poetry to economics in plays such as *Major Barbara* and in miscellaneous Fabian pamphlets and guidebooks now (some say happily) long-forgotten on both sides of the divide. Shaw died in 1950 which tells you, a reader in or after 2009, a bit more about the post-War supply of economic poetry. Like Ambrose Bierce one searches in vain for it in a deep, dark pit.⁹

The gap between poetry and economics was widened and deepened by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), a great British economist, philosopher, legal theorist, and founding father of hedonistic utilitarianism, the stuff we teach. Bentham was not holding his nose when he asserted the “equal value” of poetry and “push pin” – which was a children's game similar to today's pick-up sticks. But in truth it was the piles and piles of poetry which Bentham refused to pick up or commend. Like the logical positivists of the century just passed, Bentham claimed that poetry had no positive role to play in scientific education. Said Bentham famously:

The utility of all these arts and sciences,—I speak both of those of amusement and curiosity,—the value which they possess, is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield. Every other species of preeminence which may be attempted to be established among them is altogether fanciful. Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few. The game of push-pin is always innocent: it were well could the same be always asserted of poetry. Indeed, between

⁸ Also see D. N. McCloskey, “History, Differential Equations, and the Problem of Narration” (1991, *History and Theory*), reprinted pp. 242-57 in S. Ziliak, ed., *Measurement and Meaning in Economics: The Essential Deirdre McCloskey* (Edward Elgar, 2001); P. Mirowski, ed., *Natural Images in Economic Thought: “Markets Read in Tooth & Claw”* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁹ Popular legend claims the American author and humorist never went to Mexico, as planned. It is said that Bierce (1842-1914?) went instead to Arizona, the Grand Canyon, where he intentionally plummeted to his death. His remains have not been found.

poetry and truth there is natural opposition: false morals and fictitious nature. The poet [like the economist] always stands in need of something false. When he pretends to lay his foundations in truth, the ornaments of his superstructure are fictions; his business consists in stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices. Truth, exactitude of every kind is fatal to poetry [still Bentham's words, not mine]. The poet must see everything through coloured media, and strive to make every one else do the same. It is true, there have been noble spirits, to whom poetry and philosophy have been equally indebted; but these exceptions do not counteract the mischiefs which have resulted from this magic art. If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased (Bentham 1825, *The Rationale of Reward* [J. & H.L. Hunt], Book 3, Chp. 1).

Poetry is “false morals,” he said, as most of us including J.S. Mill both listened and agreed. “Of equal value” with pick-up sticks, at best, today's economists seem to agree.

Another perspective, indifference curve analysis, says that without poetry, or without some alternative way of reasoning about incommensurable utilities, ethics, political values, and tribal allegiances, an economist has a deep decision problem to solve. If she is a utilitarian, positivist, or “Blue Meanie” (from The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*), and especially if she is all three of these things, her indifference curves for poetry and economics cross and zigzag. Her split-personality, which is bequeathed, it would seem, from Bentham's own preferences, implies that her own utility function cannot be maximized. See the Figure.

In the standard theory of the consumer, which is just Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus axiomatized, an indifference curve shows the combinations of goods yielding equal amounts of happiness to that same consumer. On the convex or banana shaped curve of the Figure (self 1), a lot of Poetry and a little Economics yield the same happiness to the consumer as a little Poetry and a lot of Econ. On the lexicographical curve in the Figure, the vertical curve (self 2), poetry yields by contrast *no* additional happiness to the consumer, regardless of the level of Economics consumption. “Self 1,” the convex self, is broadly consistent with the preferences of nameable educated economists, from John Stuart Mill and Francis Edgeworth to Albert Hirschman and Deirdre McCloskey. “Self 2,” by contrast, is broadly consistent with the “official” preferences and practices of economists, including the younger Mills and McCloskeys. A lexicographical preference for economics-not-poetry represents the official social construction of our discipline, despite the feelings and insights gained by the poetry readers, that is, by the Edgeworths, the Gilmans, the older Mills and McCloskeys, the Hirschmans, the Kahnemans and the Tverskys, that is, despite the wisdom gained by our second selves.

But with two selves an economist can't uniquely determine his happiness or optimal bundle of poetry and economics. The Figure shows that the educated economist alters his valuation of poetry – and thus of the sociological gap between poetry and economics, which one might refer to as “the Victorian Divide” - depending on which axis or academic discipline he is using to value them. The vertical curve says “I value Econ, not poetry, at any scale or quality” (self 2). That's looked at from the Econ department-axis. The convex curve (self 1) is more balanced. It says “I value Econ and poetry, in different and varying proportions, but with diminishing marginal rates of substitution” - looked at from the side of poetry and humanities. But in the standard theory the rational agent has only one self.

His tastes are supposed to be consistent, transitive, and reflective of a utilitarian motive, “more is better.” In the Figure these assumptions about taste are violated. The two selves of modern economics cannot be bridged by economic theory itself. Something additional is needed to fill the gap.

In other words, today’s utilitarian is out on an emotional ledge, or hiding away in a political corner, and unbeknownst to his students he feels lost, cowering, almost vertigo, lacking a rational rope or compass to help him deal with his own conflicting feelings. Since Victorian times,¹⁰ and especially after ideological Benthamism, we’ve needed an economic-art to bridge the gap between the two selves of an economist.

The utilitarian economist is not alone. Likewise, poets continue to face a similar problem, by viewing economics and the economists themselves through similarly crossed indifference curves. Many recent examples could be cited but the existence of a shared problem of division is clearly expressed in verse in Auden’s 1946 poem, “Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times”:

Thou shalt not answer questionnaires
Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,
Nor with compliance
Take any test. Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science.

Thou shalt not be on friendly terms
With guys in advertising firms, . . .

Thou shalt not live within thy means
Nor on plain water and raw greens.
If thou must choose
Between the chances, choose the odd;
Read *The New Yorker*, trust in God;
And take short views.¹¹

¹⁰ **Mandatory footnote:** “If you were to trace the separation of art from life historically,” the poet Etheridge Knight said, “you would trace it back to the Greeks when Plato and others made the “head thing” the ideal—reasoning being the ideal—there was a separation between reason and emotion” (Etheridge Knight, in C. H. Rowell, “An Interview with Etheridge Knight,” *Callaloo* 19 [4, Fall 1996]: 967-80). “I think the Black Aesthetic differs from the European Aesthetic mainly,” he said, “because it does not separate art or aesthetics from the other levels of life. It does not separate art from politics, art from economics, art from ethics, or art from religion. Art is a functional and a commercial endeavor. The artist is not separate from the people.”

¹¹ Published in 1946 and reprinted in W. H. Auden’s *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House), edited by Edward Mendelson. Also see: page 1084, in William H. Kruskal, “Statistics: The Field,” *International Encyclopedia of Statistics* (New York: The Free Press), vol. 2, eds. W.H. Kruskal and J.M. Tanur.

But the current gap between poetry and economics cannot be explained by a lack of space for them, even in economics itself. A century before Deirdre McCloskey's and Arjo Klamer's pioneering work on the rhetoric of economics, John Stuart Mill himself tried to close a gap between poetry and economics which the former Benthamite and Horace-man had helped to create: "From this neglect both in theory and in practice of the cultivation of feeling," Mill confessed in Chapter IV of his *Autobiography*, "naturally resulted, among other things, *an under-valuing of poetry*, and of Imagination generally, as an element of human nature" (1873, p. 94).¹² Of the "most sectarian period of my Benthamism," the contrite man continued, "the correct statement would be, not that I disliked poetry, *but that I was theoretically indifferent to it*. I disliked any sentiments in poetry which I should have disliked in prose; and that included a great deal. *And I was wholly blind to its place in human culture, as a means of educating the feelings*" (p. 95).

Around the age of 20, conflicting ideas and feelings in a man with no training on how to handle them led to Mill's famously dissected nervous breakdown. As a self-described "traditionally conservative" political philosopher has recently observed:

This breakdown, described in Mill's remarkable "Autobiography," was in part a response to the hard-headed utilitarianism of his father and his circle of "Philosophical Radicals." The cost-benefit morality that James Mill had inherited from Jeremy Bentham, and which he had instilled into his son, left Mill bereft of all emotional succor.¹³

English professors and historians have noted, however, that the young Mill's depression was followed by a long period of ardent mechanical utilitarianism, that is, by years more of Bentham's "cost-benefit morality." In the ego-soaked worlds of economics and philosophy, Mill was unusually intellectually honest, and so in the *Autobiography* he confessed to that breakdown, too.¹⁴

But by 1873 it was too late. The sectarian damage – the blind theoretical indifference to poetry and other theories of moral sentiments – was culturally embedded in the body economic. In the twentieth century few economists would pay attention to Mill's quiet reversal on the role of feelings and poetry to economics.

It's not hard to see why. Holding rare Akerlofs, Coaseans, and Kahneman's aside, today's intellectual descendants of Mill and Bentham – and certainly the high-cream of the economics profession - crave mechanism and finality in morality tales. *De gustibus non est disputandum* is the mantra of their anti-poetry of economic assumptions. Tastes and values, they say, are identical, and both are just like data, coming to us like oxygen. And so despite nervous breakdowns among teenagers, despite the pharmaceutical industry, globalization, racism, the war on terror, carbon footprints, and the specter of campus shootings in America, economics professors continue to allocate little or nothing to the education of *feelings* about economic life and science. They are content with life such as it is on one side of the divide, a mirage.

¹² Reprinted: World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1924. Preface by Harold J. Laski. Emphasis added.

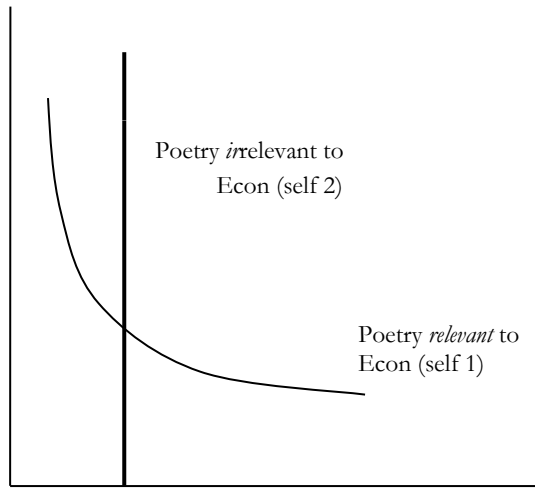
¹³ Roger Scruton, "Thoroughly Modern Mill: A Utilitarian Who Became a Liberal—but Never Understood the Limits of Reason," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2006.

¹⁴ Compare Janice Carlisle's *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (University of Georgia Press, 1991).

But a large opportunity cost of our investment is, as Mill said back in 1873, “Imagination generally” and “poetry” particularly as a means of educating feelings in socio-economic thought. The gap between poetry and econ is deep and wide, true. But as a young Mill discovered, the most treacherous gaps exist inside illogical indifference curves, inside our selves. Thus:

**The Victorian Divide, as Seen by a Neoclassical Economist:
His Own Indifference Curves Cross, Forming a Values Gap**

Poetry and Humanities Axis



Positivism and Econ Axis

Conclusion: Economists lack a Rational Way to Consume and Produce any Combination of Poetry and Economics. As shown by the young John Stuart Mill, a Divided-Self can't Account for the “Theoretical Indifference” to One's own Feelings.

Putting Haiku and Economics Together

Haiku economics can help to bridge the gap between feeling and not feeling in economic discourse. Pairing haiku with economics is methodologically speaking obvious, though historically speaking it hasn't been seriously done. Ironically, haiku and economic methodologies in general form a nearly perfect union. Imagine a Venn diagram, one circle representing haiku, the other economics. What is the overlap? Huge: both subjects claim to be dead serious about two principles - *efficiency* and *counting*. Put the two principles together—efficiency and counting—and you've got econometrics, you've got economic theory, and you've got haiku. Therefore, haiku economics already exists. True. Q.E.D.



Venn diagram-wise the overlaps are larger still:

- The *forms* of haiku and economics-articles are universally recognized and accepted;
- Haiku theory, like economic theory, does not deviate from a simple set of assumptions and rules of conduct (scarcity, parsimony, representative examples, life-cycle approach, etc.): the haiku budget constraint is defined by three lines of seventeen syllables, arranged in the serial order 5-7-5;
- The union of haiku-economics creates unintended irony, insight, frustration, and happiness not produced by the sum of the two arts - the non-overlapping quarter-moons of economics and haiku. “The best haiku . . . are inwardly extensive and outwardly infinite. A severe constraint imposed on one aspect of haiku must be balanced by a spontaneous, boundless freedom on the other;”¹⁵
- Like economics, haiku reveals difficult and cute puzzles and even riddles to be solved.

Try to solve these “biographical” haiku riddles:

Statistics riddle:

I have a plan of action
(though my name frightens.)

Classical riddle:

The fruit of your labor is
93 percent.

Rhetoric riddle:

My miracle metonym
Won't feed picky cats.¹⁶

¹⁵ Hakutani and Tener 1998, p. 249, in Richard Wright's *Haiku: This Other World*.

¹⁶ Answer to statistics riddle: “Savage,” as in Leonard J. Savage (1917-1971), the great statistician and economist who wrote *The Foundations of Statistics* (Dover, 1954). Alternatively, some readers may answer “Arrow,” as in bow and arrow, as in Kenneth Arrow (1921-), a life-long advocate of neo-Bayesian decision theory (Ziliak and McCloskey, 2008, p. 145). Similarly, “Friedman” is a poetically interesting and perfectly accurate answer. A “freed man” is frightening to some, as is, to some others, the freedom-loving economist and statistician himself, Milton Friedman! Answer to classical riddle: David Ricardo (according to George Stigler's take on Ricardo's labor theory of value). Answer to rhetoric riddle: “fish,” as in the biblical “fishes and loaves.” Some readers will answer “Stanley Fish,” which

There is a little more to it. The feeling that a “deep” complexity of the world can be represented by a parsimonious economic model has a direct analogue in haiku, a point which was foreshadowed by Sam Hamill’s observations about Bashō’s haiku. A complex economy brings happiness of one sort if the model promises increase in the growth of the wealth of nations (say). The economic outcome is ironic or frustrating if in the model an interruption of the working of the invisible hand – a government restricting the flow of imported goods, say, or a government expanding welfare programs for the poor – promises a decrease in the wealth of nations.¹⁷ (Import taxes get levied against foreign goods it is said to “help the local economy” but wind-up increasing consumer price levels at home and unemployment rates abroad; generous welfare programs, though possibly noble in purpose, induce some people to “become” poor.)

It’s the same in haiku, before and after the Meiji Restoration: enlightenment arrives through parsimonious identification of the incongruous, “spirit and matter, present and future, doer and deed, word and thing, meaning and sensation,” cause and effect, economist and economy, the social welfare function and the souls it represents, leading to surprise results.¹⁸ Only in haiku economics we get our daily bread as if by the invisible hands of Smith and Kalecki, Lakshmi and Shiva, Rumi and Etheridge Knight. With their digital, divine and parametric help, the haiku coefficient on enlightenment is positive and comparatively large. The reason for haiku’s comparative advantage is simple to explain to an economist. Given the mini-budget constraint imposed by the haiku form, the rational poet is forced to maximize output or “utility” of meaning by searching and finding the optimal bundle of *sounds* or *syllables* equal to seventeen instantiations and no more.¹⁹ Thus the rational haiku poet computes Lagrangeans on a compact real and imaginary number line. As two Richard Wright scholars put it, “The best haiku . . . are inwardly extensive and outwardly infinite.” With haiku methodology, then, one can extract more information from a given set of data – even as Shiva destroys.

Fable of the P’s:
“Private vice, publick virtue,”
(prays the President).

To old haiku-purists, don’t worry: on no altar is Nature sacrificed for Mammon. National income accounting is a green and sandy subject as is the whole idea of actually *using* cardinal utility in the tradition of John Harsanyi. The soil in which human values grow and

also works. Fish is a renowned literary critic who has had a direct influence on the study of the rhetoric of economics.

¹⁷ A fine poetical and historical analysis of “invisible hand”-type arguments is Albert Hirschman’s *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Harvard University Press, 1991). A catalog of invisible hand-type arguments employed in economics and related fields can be found in Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974: 20-22).

¹⁸ Hakutani and Tener, *op cit.*, p. 253.

¹⁹ Approximately seventeen, that is. To repeat, the haiku budget constraint and order of syllables varies across time and space but not significantly. In 17th century Japan, for example, Bashō’s most popular haiku count less or more than seventeen sounds in either language, in Japanese or in English translation. 5-8-5, for example, is common. Still the comparative advantage lies with haiku.

replenish cannot be found in these black swans of economics. Yet utilitarian economists have locked-up values talk for a century and a half inside a gigantic, off-the-path *ceteris paribus* condition - namely, poetry – and proceeded to lose the key. Haiku squeezes-out between the bars of economics and poetry and tries in a small way to assess the mentality of the segregation that keeps us Victorian divided, mentally distorted, inefficient and apart. David Ruccio wrote: “Haiku is the poetic form *par excellence* of condensed, lyrical and enigmatic thoughts and observations about the world” (*Rethinking Marxism* 14 [3, 2002]: vi). Think of haiku economics as you think of academic conventions, only lyrically.

Despite its power to tell an economic *story*, economic haiku may be too parabolic in mood, too direct in word choice, too normative in judgment, too peaceful in soul, too serious in observation, too correct in observation, too *free* in spirit - to be claimed by many economists.

Soon big winds will come
Already hawk flies low-down
bickering with me.²⁰

I reply that “significance testing” and “philosophical utilitarianism” are indulged by those same bickering hawks, and yet you don’t see them admitting to either one of *those* irrational indulgences.

Why should we forsake our most efficient verbal technology? Even *haibun* – a mix of prose-poem with haiku - is a comparatively sluggish form of speech. Matsuo Bashō’s travelogues are written in *haibun*, and are classically sweet. But so too, I can hear my friend McCloskey saying, are the Royal typewriter and 8-track tape-recorders, sweet, though nowadays slow as snails. (That reminds me of a joke: “What does a snail say when it’s riding on top of a turtle?” Give up? “Wheeee!”) If efficiency or speed is the goal, then Matsuo Bashō, other poets, and the economists ought to agree: haiku wins in the economic race to the bottom. Measured by marginal additional output of ideas-and-feelings per syllable, haiku is the Usain Bolt of economic speech. And as McCloskey observes, you need three “states of nature” or “lines” to tell an economic story (or, she argues) *any* type of story, and the mandatory three lines of haiku does the job for you (*The Rhetoric of Economics*, pp. 13-15). Haiku wins again, a triple crown:

The morning glories
ignore our drinking party
and burst into bloom.²¹

Bashō’s “morning glories” haiku is so full of meaning it induces in the reader’s mind a plurality of stories (in nature, in pubs, in science and philosophy), proving further the potential Pareto superiority of the haiku form. A haiku poet may not become the next Bashō but it is good to remember in scholarship as in poetry that diamond and coal are different phases of the same life-cycle.

I first learned about haiku from a friend of mine, another great poet, Etheridge Knight (1931-1991), who was when I met him in 1987 an ex-con, ex-junkie, and prize-winning leader of the Black Arts Movement. In 1991 Robert Bly told me and Knight’s

²⁰ McKim 1988, *Boat of the Dream*, p. 64 (“Winter Solstice: Linked Haiku”).

²¹ Bashō, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, p. 133.

companion, the poet Elizabeth McKim, that Etheridge Knight was “America’s greatest poet in the oral tradition.”²² In a lecture that Knight gave “On the Oral Nature of Poetry” (1987), my friend and teacher asked two questions of relevance to us, namely, “Where do metaphors come from?” and “What do metaphors coming from, say, Shakespeare’s time, have to say to the people living in the economy of now?”

Generally speaking [he told a crowd gathered to hear him at Colorado State University], a people’s metaphors and figures of speech will come out of their basic economy. If somebody lives near the ocean and they fish, their language will be full of those metaphors. If people are farmers they will use that kind of figure of speech. Metaphors are alive. *When they come into being, they are informed by the politics and the sociology and the economy of now.* That’s how language [and therefore economics] is. And when we try to use dead metaphors, metaphors that were relevant in Shakespeare’s time, then the audience cannot get in because the metaphor [used by the old poet or utilitarian economist] is outside of the audience’s experience.

The largely self-educated Knight, who seems to have come up with these insights about the rhetoric of economics on his own, continued:²³

When you’re using language to evoke a knowledge that the audience already has, they know it from experience, and the poet is not lecturing, not handing out data. Gwendolyn Brooks told me, “Poetry is using common language in an uncommon way.”

(Knight 1987 [1988], pp. 13-14, *Painted Bride Quarterly* [32/33]).

Pairing haiku with economics expands the set of “live” metaphorical and “uncommon”-speeches – two criteria, it would seem, for an economic poetry speaking to the politics and the sociology of now. And at the same time their union stands to meet the economist’s and poet’s demand for parsimony and precision in the production of it.

Teaching haiku to students will help to humanize them, and it may improve their economic writing, too. As William J. Higginson, poet, translator and author (with Penny Harter) of *The Haiku Handbook*, observes, writing “haiku will help us make our language more accurate, base our writing in images [not abstractions], and cut our words to the essentials.”²⁴ Higginson is not an economist but we appreciate his attention to cost. My friend Knight learned haiku at the urging of a U.S. poet laureate, Gwendolyn Brooks, who taught and befriended the junkie thief when he was serving time at the Indiana State Prison (1960 to 1968; Brooks, with Dudley Randall, had started in the 1960s a “Poets-in-the-

²² See also: Robert Bly 1988, “Hearing Etheridge Knight,” *Painted Bride Quarterly* (1988, 32/33), p. 31.

²³ Compare Bakhtin, quoted in Henry Louis Gates, p. 2, epigram, and Gates, pp. 47-51 in Gate’s *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford University Press, 1988) and again, McCloskey’s *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985 [1998]), *passim*. The bookish Knight was not I am certain aware of these books and authors. Later, sometime in 1990, I told him about *The Rhetoric of Economics*, which I had found and read in ‘89. The distinction between live and dead metaphors, as Knight said in the lecture, he had picked up from another friend of his, the U.S. Poet Laureate Donald Hall (Knight, *ibid*, pp. 13-14; Hall 1988, *ibid*, pp. 95-96).

²⁴ Page 253 in W. J. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (Kodansha Press, 1985).

Prisons” program long before such things became nationally recognized. Knight was an early product of it.)

[Before Brooks and haiku, Knight said] my poems/ were / too ‘prosy’ – too filled with ‘abstractions’ rather / than/ images . . .

I really got into haiku [Knight said] when I learned . . . that the ‘original’ haiku poets/ were in to haiku *primarily* as/ an/oral/being and the ‘written’ poem as secondary – as simply an/ extension of the spoken word.²⁵

Imagine a new growth theorist speaking about an article he’s just read in the A.E.R. and you get the point. The point is that writing haiku improved a great poet’s poems, and thus there is hope in it for all of us. In *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, which won the 1987 American Book Award, Knight, who also won the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America for Distinguished Achievement in Poetry, included thirty-five (35) haiku. Put simply, he liked haiku. At a reading in February, 1986, “The Great Poets Series” at the Library of Congress, he giggled when he told an audience of Gwendolyn Brooks and others that “This next poem is a haiku. I *like* haiku,” he told them. “Writing haiku,” as Higginson notes, and as Knight proves, “claims and confirms one’s experience of the world, and offers an opportunity to construct ideal experiences which enrich one’s inner life.” Knight, who also abused alcohol, and who, like his friend, the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, spent time in solitary, was able to reinvent his deeply troubled inner-life by writing haiku.

Morning sun slants cell
Drunks stagger like cripple flies
On jailhouse floor.²⁶

Says Higginson, “due to the imposed brevity,” haiku writers “must base their writing in images, the most powerful tool of all writing” (p. 251). Richard Wright, the inventor of Bigger Thomas, I have already mentioned became a late-in-life enthusiast for the powerfully imagistic art-form. Wright’s “factory whistles” haiku exemplifies Higginson’s point:

Factory whistles
Bring flurries of fat snow
In a winter dawn.²⁷

Haiku has healing powers for the psyche, too, as Wright himself learned and as, tragically, the young John Stuart Mill unfortunately did not (Julia Wright, vii-xiv, in R. Wright, *op cit.*, 1998). “One of my last memories of my father during the summer and autumn months before he died is his crafting of thousands of haiku,” said Wright’s daughter Julia. “He was never without his haiku binder under his arm,” she said. “He wrote [haiku] everywhere, at all hours: . . . My father’s law in those days revolved around the rules of haiku writing, and I remember how he would hang pages and pages of them up, as if to dry, on long metal rods strung across the narrow office area of his tiny sunless studio in Paris, like the abstract still-life photographs he used to compose and develop himself

²⁵ Etheridge Knight quoted in *ibid*, p. 254.

²⁶ Knight, *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, no. 3, p. 17.

²⁷ Page 48, no. 190, in R. Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (Anchor, 1998).

at the beginning of his Paris exile. I also recall how one day he tried to teach me how to count the syllables: “Julia, you can write them, too. It’s always five, and seven and five – like math. So you can’t go wrong.”

In conclusion, if writing imagistic haiku can enlighten Bashō, heal Richard Wright, inspire Gwendolyn Brooks, and liberate Etheridge Knight, it may be strong enough to help save our students from spending a career in solitary inside one of Bentham’s cruel joints. Today’s economists needn’t fear experimenting with a little haiku. As an author told his 18-year old daughter, “It’s always five, and seven and five – like math. So you can’t go wrong.”

Selected Haiku

Here’s my Master Trope:
Irony breeds anarchy
Good law and order.

Fidel wears a hat,
Unemployment, illusion,
Fortitude, a glove.

In the warm April,
before a morning shower,
She strips her assets.

An old U.S. dance:
Government-sponsored train-wreck-
Health-care-system-jig.

Prior convictions
You know you don’t have; therefore,
You know your prior.

A law of nature:
Philosopher finds a stone,
Worm buries a fact.

A futures market
on “The General Crisis”
sells short on the spot.

The War on Terror

takes blood from fresh orphan flesh,
No child left behind.

Mrs. Robinson
didn't carry a condom;
"future's in plastics."

The "new" Old Poor Law:
Taxing Bayesians to aid
Popperization.

Global maximum:
Welfare function equal to
my preferences.

Act like a real man:
rule Utilitarian
- Jeremy Bentham!

Hyde Park, Chicago:
The twilight of the idols
Comes after frank night.

White Castle drive-thru
dogs black dude on a green bike.
Pigeons crap on cars.

Pantyhose science:
Walk in someone else's shoes . . .
Run one regression.

Chicago plaza
blackbird /plucks gold with beak –
crawls in paper sack.

He flips a fair coin,
and enters the sample space:
“Now, where is the light?”

The strange plastic fruit
Swinging /from /low standing . . . trees,
Makes a worm vomit.

Who plucks the eyeballs
from a dead-man’s skull? Who wants
corn-crusted scallops?

General resists
Time-table for /withdrawal . . .
Ejaculation.

Immanent critique:
Hayekian *kosmos* is
Indirigible.

Canadian geese
Swoop low, / causing variance
of duck speed to rise.

Seagulls cry for spring
All morning, / tired old man
peers inside a shoe.

Your hair’s like Trotsky’s
Ten minutes into Hayek . . .
Spontaneous, free.

Travelers tear-off . . .
Their shoes, rip-off . . . their clothes, / Guards
Jerk away . . . porno.

The U.S. Mint is
making falafel crap bombs
eating egg drop soup.

This Chinese jacket
Sounds like mice crunching ice cubes.
Dead cows yellow snow.

Johnny Depp movie
Draws hordes of on-lookers as
Starlings shit on stoops.

This Old Jamaican,
His toe is like a mango.
Lizards lick his feet.

Who volunteers for
solitary, /with no rope?
Who killed Maynard Keynes?

Harold's Chicken Shack
Holds taste buds / captive, -
What *is* slavery?

The market whispers
Before the clomp of a horse
Cracks open day dreams.

Girl with wooden leg
Kick-boxes comic villains –
Hummingbirds rise up!

On Golden Gate Bridge,
Content in this other world,
A grasshopper sleeps.