

[Book Review]

On the Publication  
of *dengonban messages* from  
James Kirkup in Kyoto

by Atsuo Nakagawa

*It is a matter of congratulation and also in a sense an epoch-making event that James Kirkup, a British poet who loves Japan living here for almost 20 years, has had a kushu in a format of a collection of one-liners published in Kyoto. Books of English haiku are innumerable today, but that kind of book has appeared in the world for the first time, though a few mini-chapbooks of one-liners have been published by The First Haiku Press in the U. S.<sup>1</sup>*

*Some of the poems collected in it are like the Japanese ichigyo-shi (one-line poems) printed in the Shikai.<sup>2</sup> But as a whole this book is a collection of all sorts of one-liners including slogans and catch phrases for bumper stickers and advertisements. In this sense it is really an international product. Here is a detailed review of the book:*

*dengonban messages* from james kirkup    Kyoto Edition 1981  
Available from Union Services, Osaka.

This seemingly cheap pocketbook is indeed a good work of art which is enjoyable and entertaining.

There is no pagination but it has about 180 pages and contains about 500 "one-line haiku and senryu" besides an introduction titled "the monostich: a tentative study of oneline poems" and "a letter to gyomindo ikehara."

The author who seems to be most interested in writing operas now has always been writing what he calls "one-line haiku or senryu." One time he wrote to Gyomindo, editor of *Shikai* that he couldn't write any more one-liners. And the editor was distressed because he had been printing only Kirkup's English works along with other Japanese ones in the monthly of Japanese one-line poems. So I encouraged him saying that I was sure Kirkup would write some from time to time and send them to him in spite of his words. And I was right. The author seems to have continued to write one-liners which have been collected into this small book.

Kirkup's own view of his one-liners has not changed from the time when he had his first chapbook of one-liners and haiku *Transmental Vibrations* published by Covent Garden Press, London in 1971. His introduction to this book "the monostich" is almost the same as the one printed in that book; only the use of one-liners is expanded so as to be fit for the present world. Reference to W. H. Auden is also an interesting addition. Another addition is the paragraph: "how long should a one-line poem be?" from his short essay "Why Does Kirkup Write One-line Poems?" printed in *Poetry Nippon* (No. 26, 1974) and part of Joan Giroux's review of *Studies on English Haiku*<sup>3</sup> appearing in the same magazine in 1977. The short essay in *Transmental Vibrations* was printed in both *PN* and *Shikai*, too.<sup>4</sup>

The one-liners are printed without any punctuation nor capitalization except apostrophes and *I*'s on the semi-transparent thin leaves, two, three or four poems on each page arranged irregularly or rather casually so that the printed poems may give an impression that they are stray leaves. They range from one-line poems and haiku to maxims, palindromes and nonsense one-liners.

One of the best and shortest one-line poems may be:

a rose drinks its shadow

The one-line haiku I like best are:

stars—the spit of someone's speech

the sinister trinkle of second hand trinkets

The alliterations are effective in spite of his principle:

a true poem is never poetic

The one which I think might become a proverb:

the hunting cat has fish-shaped eyes

Some erotic one-liners are excellent:

an army marches on its sexual organs

from my crotch rises a steam of dreams

There are one kind of one-liners whose number is large—they are poems made from easy association but the one below is superb:

cathedrals—europe's rotten teeth

I like this nonsense one-liner:

horizon: happy hippy hula hoop

The book is designed by ivor kaplin, design international. The cover illustration depicts in an enlarged black-and-white picture a part of a "*dengonban*, the green noticeboard found at most railway stations in Japan on which arriving or departing travellers can inscribe, in white chalk, messages for friends or relatives who may have missed them or may be arriving later." The title of the book is printed in small gold letters. On the flaps of the jacket are printed parts of a scene as seen around the *dengonban* in a station in which some girls are seen talking or waiting.

As a whole *dengonban* is a pocketbook for readers to enjoy poetic imagination while waiting or feeling weary of doing anything as Kirkup says in his introduction:

They can be placed on busses, trains and trams as contemplation material for weary travellers, instead of vulgar advertisements or the tedium of popular press ...

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> They include *Landscapes: Ten Haiku* by Hitoshi Funaki translated by Atsuo Nakagawa, edited by Matsuo Allard, published by The First Haiku Press, Manchester, NJ.

<sup>2</sup> Edited and published by Ikehara Gyomindo, Nagoya, Japan.

<sup>3</sup> Written by Atsuo Nakagawa, published by Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, Japan in 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Appearing in *PN* (Nos. 14 and 15) in 1971, and *Shikai* in 1971 translated into Japanese.