**Appreciation of Bill Wyatt, Zen monk, Beat, translator, and haiku poet 1942-2016**

The structuralist critic Northrop Frye anatomises the two extremes of literary characters as high-profile *alazons* and low-profile *eirons*. The *alazon* is a noble self-deceiver who tries to be more than he or she is, the magnificent failing hero in tragedy, and in comedy the ridiculous blocking character, butt of all the jokes. The *eiron*, named after irony, is a modest, ordinary, loveable self-deprecator, the hero in comedy and the voice of realism in tragedy, appearing to be less than he or she is. The British haiku world lost its most prominent *alazon* last year with the death of Ken Jones, and now we have to mourn the passing of our loveliest and most humble *eiron*, Bill Wyatt:

*Like Kerouac*

*always too shy*

*to read my poems*

*sitting in the background*

*at pub readings*

*urging the others on (Memory Lozenges, by Bill Wyatt)*

*I’ve got this in a typed MS. I don’t know if it was published or where.*

Bill’s image for himself was appropriately unthreatening and charming:

*Bumping into silky*

*plumes of willowherb*

*I recognise myself*

*Too lazy to learn*

*the difference*

*between right and wrong*

*like willowherb fluff*

*never settling for long*

*These are both from* Gleanings From the Throssel’s Nest *Longread Publishing, Sevenoaks, Kent 2005*

On the day he received an alarming diagnosis Bill wrote the extraordinary line:

*Wide awake as any stone*

*I swallow the moon*

*Handwritten letter sent to me. Also included in the haibun* A Fistful of Frost*, probably published in* Presence*, but I do not have it.*

To these startling self-characterisations we could add a whole genre of wry and amusing ‘old monk’ haiku Bill wrote through the last decades of his life. Bill was, as he said, too self effacing to project himself at pub readings. He was quiet and generous. He gave his friends well-chosen books. It was easy to underestimate him. He had no University education but his autodidact’s scholarship in Chinese and Japanese verse of the zen tradition was formidable, and he made his own versions of many of the classics as a free translator. He used Basho’s principle of direct ordinary language to great effect in *Renga from The Monkey’s Raincoat* (Hub editions 1998) and his own re-imaginings of Tang Chinese verses.

From the very beginning, inspired by the Beat poets of the fifties and visits to the Buddhist Society in London, Bill was at the heart of the great event of our times, the exchange of understanding between East and West; but as one can see from reading the interviews with him in *Presence #51* and *Presence#52* recently, it was very difficult to get him to boast about it. He published haiku and tanka, almost unknown then, in the Penguin anthology *Children of Albion* in the late 1960s. He was the first ordained zen monk in this country, a founder member of Throssel Hole Priory. He published his poems in dozens of American and British magazines over five decades. He was a long-time correspondent and friend of both William Higginson and Robert Aitken Roshi. He sustained his zen practice and his haiku writing from the nineteen sixties to this year, and characterised himself in his self-deprecating way as just a monk, “growing old on wine and clouds/ eyes dim and teeth few.”

Bill had a remarkable way of being funny but profound at the same time, without showiness. These two haiku say as much about Buddhist *sunyatta*, emptiness, as anyone has achieved:

*Cutting through it all –*

*there’s no me & no person –*

*just this itchy nose!*

 *Morning zazen –*

*rain on rooftops – in one ear*

*& out the other*

*These two also from* Gleanings From the Throssel’s Nest

 He did surrealism:

*Solemn as oysters*

*migrating birds on the verge*

*of bankruptcy*

*Handwritten private correspondence sent to me on a DADA card.*

 And he did extreme zen!

*Through the empty window*

*watching the moon – a jewelled*

*rabbit washing his bowl*

 He also expressed for us the sadness we all feel at not being able to hold on forever to a friend:

*Years spent tying a rope*

*to the wind – years spent sewing*

*a net full of tears*

*These last two sent to me in private correspondence but probably later published somewhere.*

George Marsh September 2016