Jewel in the Crown: How Form Deepens Meaning in English-Language Haiku[1]

by Patricia J. Machmiller

Imagine you own a precious unset jewel. How would you store it? Would you toss it on top of your dresser? Or drop it in a desk drawer? Or plop it on a mantel to gather dust? To preserve it in a way commensurate with its value you might, instead, consider commissioning a specially carved wooden box with a fitted lid that closes snugly so that you can feel the care that has been taken to construct the box, care that speaks to the preciousness of the stone inside.

You could think of form in relationship to haiku that way -as a container in which to store your words. On the one hand, that box might be no more than a showy but unnecessary accessory. On the other hand, form can work as more than a mere "container". It can become an integral part of the haiku, supporting, reinforcing, and amplifying meaning just as the setting of a jewel becomes part of a brooch or ring.

Consider these examples. The first by Deborah P Kolodji uses five-, seven- and five-syllable lines. The success of her poem depends on her choice of this the most widely recognised form for haiku in English:

his oxygen tube
stretches the length of the house
winter seclusion [2]

The idea of the father's confinement is reinforced by the feeling that the words themselves are being constrained by the form.

Another example of a haiku that depends on use of this same form to heighten its impact is one of my own:

maple on the edge
of the garden at the bare-
est edge of turning [3]

The notion of being on the cusp, of being right on the edge, is amplified by the hyphenated word "bare-est". The break in the word forced by the form gives a physical representation to the abstract idea of cusp.

But there are other forms for haiku which can be equally effective. This example by Graham High uses a form that he invented just for this haiku:

Garden chairs put away
for the year. Two squares
of yellowed grass. [4]

High chose to write this in two sentences; the subject matter of the poem is two chairs and the two patches of yellow grass. The way the two sentences fold over the three haiku lines, imitating the way aluminium chairs collapse as they are folded for storage, is very ingenious and thought provoking.

A (Very) Brief History of English Language-Prosody

Before any further consideration of haiku form and its contribution to meaning, it is useful briefly to review the ancient roots and history of English-language prosody in which accented and syllabic structures partner, sometimes one leading, sometimes the other. In the ancient world the Greek poets were writing accented verse in the form of the heroic couplet, rhyming pairs of dactylic hexameter lines. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* used this form. Here are a few lines from the *Odyssey* as translated by Richard Lattimore:

I am Odysseus son of Laertes, known before all men
for the study of crafty designs, and my fame goes up to the heavens.
I am at home in sunny Ithaka. There is a mountain
there that stands tall, leaf-trembling Neritos, and there are islands . . . [5]

Later at the time of the Roman Empire the classic Greek poems came into Latin and later still from Latin into English.

The Anglo-Saxon (Old English) poets also used an accented form, as for example, in *Beowulf*. Here are a few lines from the opening of the epic:

Seaward consigned him: sad was their spirit,
Their mood very mournful. Men are not able
Soothly to tell us, they in halls who reside,
Heroes under heaven, to what haven he hied. [6]

Another early influence came from the Celts and the Normans. The Celts (Old Irish) were writing/singing in syllabic verse, as were the Normans (Old French). In the 11th century the Normans invaded England and their language, and eventually an Anglo-Norman amalgam thereof, became the language of the English court and the intelligentsia through the 15th century. In the 14th century Chaucer brilliantly brought together these two streams of prosody, the accented and the syllabic forms, when he wrote *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English using the accented-syllabic form that he invented. In an accented-syllabic form both the number and position of the accents and the syllables are accounted for.

For the next four centuries the development of the accented-syllabic form was explored and refined: think Marlowe and Shakespeare in the 16th century; Milton and Donne in the 17th century; Shelley and Keats in the 18th; Wordsworth, Yeats, and Swinburne in the 19th. This intense focus on iambic pentameter was somewhat interrupted by Thomas Campion,[7] composer, poet, and critic of the late 16th-early 17th century, who argued that poets should pay attention to the long and short vowels of the syllables in determining the meter of their lines. He wrote poems, as did Spenser and Sidney, using this method. Nevertheless, the iambic pentameter line became the form for writing poetry. Poets became so proficient in its use that upon reading Swinburne someone later said: eight lines of Swinburne are exquisite; 800 lines are exhausting.

At the dawn of the 20th century poets began seeking ways to break away from the tyranny of iambic pentameter. One of the mechanisms was free verse, as explored by Pound, Stevens, and Williams, for example. Another was the syllabic line used by Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, John Logan, and Thomas Gunn, among others. In 1950 Charles Olson published "PROJECTIVE VERSE (projectile (percussive (prospective vs. The Non-Projective."[8] In that seminal essay he proposed that poets pay attention to the syllable, saying, "it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born", thereby launching the post-modern movement of language and experimental poetry as represented by poets such as Hillman, Scalapino, Armantrout, Heijinian, Palmer, Bernstein, and Silliman, to name a few. As we begin the 21st century there is a re-emergence of the use of some of the stricter forms, such

as the sonnet, the sestina, and so on, although with a more relaxed application; Dana Goia and Paul Muldoon are two examples.

Into this 20th-century resurgence of the syllabic, throw the haiku form, which came into English from the Japanese. In Japanese, haiku were written in one vertical line in phrases of five, seven, and five on or syllables. In English, that syllabic structure would be adapted, tested, and modified as more and more writers experimented with the concept.

Haiku Forms in English

With this history of English-language prosody in mind we can gain some perspective on how the use of form has evolved in English and appreciate the versatility and music-producing properties of the language. English is an accented language, and paying attention to the accents can be a powerful tool for the poets. But overly strict adherence to the accent can lead to a deadly metronomic quality. To avoid this pitfall, poets have found that giving attention to the syllable, either by taking into account the length of the vowels or by counting the number in a line, can introduce variation and thus have a moderating effect.

So what form should a haiku in English take? Let's look at the various approaches that have blossomed in English and examine what each brings to the poem.

Traditional (Syllabic): This is the earliest form used in English: three lines of five, seven, and five syllables each. The grace and balance of this form give the poem a feeling of formality that enhances a meditative or philosophical quality. Here are examples by J.W. Hackett, Richard Wright, Jerry Ball, and Kiyoko Tokutomi, respectively:

Bumblebee bumping
against the window . . . something
you want me to see? [9]

An empty seashore:
Taking a long summer with it,
A departing train. [10]

the cry of the deer
down each hill and past each stone
still hangs on the leaves [11]

Chemotherapy
in a comfortable chair
two hours of winter [12]

Other poets to consult for their use of five-seven-five syllable count form are Clark Strand and Edith Shiffert.

Modified Traditional (Syllabic): Two other forms that use the syllable to determine line length are modelled on the five-seven-five form; they use either four-six-four or three-five-three syllable counts, thus preserving the grace and balance of the longer version, but yielding a lighter, and in the case of the pared down three-five-three syllable form, a less formal, more sprightly feeling. The four-six-four form still is able to retain a bit of the meditative quality of the traditional form, but the three-five-three, like a plum tree in winter, is pared down to the essentials. One caution about using the four-six-four syllable count: because the lines have even numbers of syllables, it is easy to fall into a pattern of iambic feet which can become overly repetitious when writing, or especially when reading or hearing, large numbers of poems in this form.

Here are some examples. The first by Pamela Miller Ness uses the four-six-four form. The next two are by me:

Easter morning -
the Madonna's roses
wrapped in plastic [13]

Tinseltown -
filmy clouds drifting
through moonglow [14]

gold painting
from another time -
whiff of pear [15]

Modified Modern (Accented): This form, first advocated by R.H. Blyth and later by both Bill Higginson and Lee Gurga, counts accents or stresses: two stresses in the first line, three in the second, and two in the third. It was felt in comparing the Japanese on to the English-language syllable that there was considerable difference in both the spoken length and in the meaning conveyed.[16] In an effort to more closely match the speed and brevity Blyth and Higginson observed in Japanese haiku, they put forward this accented form. The feeling given by a two-beat line, with the exception of the spondee (one foot of two accented syllables), is one of balance, resignation, and perhaps fatality. A spondee gives a feeling of emphasis, of proclamation, or finality. A three-beat line, on the other hand, introduces a feeling of change, of energy, of urgency. The three-beat line in the middle moves things along to the conclusion to be had in the last two-beat line. See the following examples by Hilary Tann and me:

after dinner
the brothers-in-law smoke
in different rooms [17]

New Year's -
the silence before the bell
the silence after [18]

Note that the opening of this last poem, a spondee, gives the feeling of an announcement or proclamation.

Free Verse (Accented): Many English-language haiku are written in free verse. Free verse does not mean that the verse is free of form: it means the form is created to suit the subject matter. What we need to examine is the feeling that is produced as the poem unfolds: a one-beat line is light and unbalanced, moving; a two-beat line is balanced with a feeling of acceptance, resignation, or fatality; a three-beat line brings a sense of energy, change, even urgency; a four-beat line in haiku would be emphatic, assured, declamatory, attention-getting; a five-beat line in haiku would be an extreme distortion and would signal a very unsettling aspect. In the examples below the stressed syllables are capitalised:

Lily
out of the water . . .
out of itself. [19]

LIly:
OUT of the WAter . . .
OUT of itself

This famous poem by Nicholas Virgilio opens with a changing rhythm. Virgilio's mastery is in the last two lines where he effectively uses a falling rhythm at the end of the second two-beat line and a rising rhythm at the end of the third, the rising rhythm being almost an affirmation of the lily's rise.

Nagasaki Anniversary
I push
the mute button [20]

NAgaSAki ANNiVERsarY
i PUSH
the MUTE BUTton

The above poem remembering Nagasaki by Fay Aoyagi opens with a jarring, discordant five-beat line fitting to the subject; the second line, one beat, at the other extreme is a changing, active line leading to the final two-beat line with its feeling of resignation and fatality.

One-Line Form: In the continuing effort to emulate the way haiku works in Japanese - one line, concise perception, rapid absorption - English-language writers are experimenting with writing haiku in one line. Jim Kacian has done a thorough survey of this form, which he calls monoku, in an article in *Modern Haiku*.[21] Here are four examples of one-line haiku by John Stevenson, Marlene Mountain, Fay Aoyagi, and Kaneko Tohta respectively:

a man in a crowd in a man [22]

pig and I spring rain [23]

a "forever stamp" on a letter to the ocean [24]

my long-lived mother delivered me as if a shit [25]

This form allows the reader to take in the haiku in one glance. Since the various phrases have a more equal weight in this for than in other lineated forms, one has the feeling of floating, of being untethered, free. As the reader one is at liberty to place the emphasis wherever one wishes. There is a decided lack of tension that needs to be compensated for by forceful or provocative language, double readings, or surprising syntax. The form on the page gives an expectation of brevity and speed.The expectation is that, like Italian espresso, you down it in one swig; one expects it to be strong and deliver a jolt.

Unique Forms: Some poets have developed unique forms for the particular idea they are trying to convey. Graham High constructed a unique form for his end-of-summer image of two chairs leaving two patches of yellowed grass, mentioned earlier. Another example of a unique form would be Cor van den Heuvel's

tundra [26]

This poem was first published on a page by itself. The word sits in a vast world of white space creating a visual image that amplifies the meaning of that word.

A Personal History of Finding Form for Haiku

So which comes first - form or content? Poets have approached the issue from both directions. There is no "correct" answer. For some poets, having the form as a starting point is easier; for others the content leads the way. I have experimented with both approaches, working with both the five-seven-five and the three-five-three forms extensively. While writing more than 500 poems over a span of time focusing on one form or the other, I was able to learn some things from the process:

1. The more I wrote the more easily words fell into the chosen pattern
2. The capabilities of the form - its strengths and its limitations - became apparent.

For example, I discovered that the five-seven-five structure accommodates a more complex vocabulary - words with Latin roots, abstractions, and so on -

evoking clusters
of algebraic symbols -
scent of tangerine [27]

absentmindedly
eating a ripe persimmon
in the poet's house [28]

whereas the three-five-three structure best served pithy words of Anglo-Saxon origin:

two-legged
bounce of the sparrow -
spring morning [29]

champagne brunch -
a woman in jade
eats a peach [30]

I have also written starting with the content and shaping it to find the form that best fits. I had an experience while on vacation in South Dakota. I had just come out of the Crazy Horse Museum in the Black Hills when I encountered a magnificent tepee. It was large, maybe three times my height. Staring up at it, I could see the tepee poles; they made the most beautiful white geometric pattern against the blue sky. It's an image I can still see today even though it is now years later. At the time I jotted down a few words and phrases to aid my memory: the tepee poles were like shafts of light, white, pale, geometrically arranged, precise, of aspen wood, bone-like, arrayed in a cone shape, skeletal; the sky was blue, deep blue. After some thought, I settled on the kigo "high sky" to describe that all-blue sky that goes upward forever. And I liked the phrase "bone-like cone" to describe the teepee poles. So I had this word sketch:

high sky -
the bone-like cone
of tepee poles

I was quite happy with this: I liked the sound of the long "i"s in the first and second lines and the long "o"s in the second and third lines. But the form seemed flat; it was two beats, two beats and two beats - rather boring. So I went back to my list describing the poles and found the word "white" with its long i sound to be just what was needed. And so with this small revision, I was able to settle on the final form:

high sky -
the white, bone-like cone
of tepee poles [31]

The spondee in the first line, "high sky", is so fitting, I think to the feeling of the infinite sky and the magnificent tepee structure. It gives the feeling of awe that I wanted. The second line with its changing beat builds anticipation, which is then resolved with the two-beat last line.

Even though haiku comes in a small package, that package can be shaped in such a way as to enhance the meaning of the haiku. If the mood the writer is seeking is reflective, then the formality and meditative quality of the traditional five-seven-five might be chosen. If an expression of fury or disgust

or disbelief is sought, then choosing a shorter, unbalanced form would be more appropriate, for example, free form or the one-line monoku.

We all have our preferences: some prefer to take in our haiku like we were drinking tea - we like to breathe in the aroma first, warm our hands around the cup, and finally in gradual sips line by line, savour the moment. On the other hand, some of us are looking for that sudden jolt of java, that instant when the caffeine hits the bloodstream and we feel suddenly and startlingly ALIVE! Whatever one's preference, the English language in all its versatility offers the writer opportunities that should not be overlooked to meld the form of the haiku to the feeling and content of the text, creating not just a jewel, but a crown jewel.

Footnotes:

1: A version of this paper was presented at Haiku Pacific Rim 2012 (Asilomar, California). Some of the ideas were first shared with participants in a Yuki Teikei Haiku Society workshop on form in Castroville, California on August 27, 2011. I am also indebted to: Robert Hass, "Listening and Making", *In Twentieth Century Pleasures* (The Ecco Press, New York, 1984), and Lewis Turco, *The Book of Forms* (3rd ed. University Press of New England, 2000).
2. Deborah P Kolodji, in *Wild Violets*, Yuki Teikei Members' Anthology (2011).
3. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Modern Haiku* 33.1 (spring, 2002).
4. Graham High, in *GEPPO* (September/October 2001).
5. *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richard Lattimore (Harper & Row, New York, 1967). [Lattimore in his introduction writes, "I have tried to follow, as far as the structure of English will allow, the formulaic practice of the original."]
6. *Beowulf, An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem*, translated From The Heyne-Socin Text, translated by Leslie Hall, July 19, 2005 [eBook #16328]. From "The Life and Death of Scyld," lines 51-55. An e-book retrieved April 10, 2013 [Hall writes in his preface "The measure used in the present translation is believed to be as near a reproduction of the original as modern English affords."]
7. Thomas Campion, "Observations in the Art of English Poesie." In G.B. Harrison, Samual Daniel: *A Defense of Ryme* 1603 and Thomas Campion: *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* 1602 (Barnes & Noble, New York, reprint 1966).
8. Charles Olson, "PROJECTIVE VERSE, (projectile (percussive (prospective vs. The Non-Projective." In Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry, A Norton Anthology* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1994). [This seminal article was first published in 1950 by Poetry New York.]
9. J.W. Hackett, in *The Zen Haiku and Other Zen Poems of J.W. Hackett* (Japan Publications, Tokyo, 1983).
10. Richard Wright, in *Haiku: This Other World* (Arcade Publishing, New York, 1998).
11. Jerry Ball, in *Autumn Deepens*, the Yuki Teikei Haiku Society (YTHS) Members' Anthology (2010).
12. Kiyoko Tokutomi, in *Kiyoko's Sky: The Haiku of Kiyoko Tokutomi*. Translated by Patricia J. Machmiller and Fay Aoyagi (Brooks Books, Decatur, 2002).
13. Pamela Miller Ness, in *Frogpond* 26:3 (winter 2003).
14. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Frogpond* 34:1 (winter 2011).
15. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Mariposa*, Haiku Poets of Northern California (spring/summer 2007).
16. Lee Gurga, *Haiku: A Poet's Guide* (Modern Haiku Press, Lincoln, 2003); William J. Higginson with Penny Harter, *Haiku Handbook*. (Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1985). For an in-depth discussion of the differences between the Japanese on and the English syllable, see Richard Gilbert's "Stalking the Wild Onji," *Frogpond 22*, Supplement (1999).
17. Hilary Tann, in *Frogpond* 26:3 (winter 2003).
18. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Modern Haiku* 43.2 (summer 2012).
19. Nicholas Virgilio, in *The Haiku Anthology*. Cor van den Heuvel, ed. (Simon & Schuster, New York,

1986).
20. Fay Aoyagi, in *Chrysanthemum Love* (Blue Willow Press, San Francisco, 2003).
21. Jim Kacian, "The Shape of Things to Come", *Modern Haiku* 43.3 (autumn 2012), pp. 23-47.
22. John Stevenson, in *Haiku 21: An Anthology of Contemporary English-language Haiku*. Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, eds. (Modern Haiku Press, Lincoln, 2011).
23. Marlene Mountain, in *Frogpond* 2:3-4 (November 1979).
24. Fay Aoyagi, in *Haiku 21: An Anthology of Contemporary English-language Haiku*. Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, eds. (Modern Haiku Press, Lincoln, 2011).
25. Kaneko Tohta, in *The Future of Haiku: An Interview with Kaneko Tohta*. Translated by Richard Gilbert, et al. (Red Moon Press, Winchester, 2011).
26. Cor van den Heuvel, in *The Haiku Anthology*. Cor van den Heuvel, ed. (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1986). [This haiku was first published in The Window-washer's Pail in 1963.]
27. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Mariposa* (spring/summer 2003).
28. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *One Hundred Gourds*, Haiku Poets of Northern California (2003).
29. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *flying white*, YTHS Members' Anthology (2006).
30. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *Haiku International* 69 (2007).
31. Patricia J. Machmiller, in *GEPPO* (May-June 2012).

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Mountain Trails, a book of haiga, features her brush paintings and haiku. With Fay Aoyagi she has translated Kiyoko Tokutomi's haiku from the Japanese published in Kiyoko's Sky by Brooks Books. She writes a column of haiku com
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