

Thoughts on Juxtaposition

by Carmen Sterba

Why is haiku so alluring to each of us who enjoy reading and writing it? For haiku lovers, writing what one considers a successful haiku is likely to create a cathartic response. Once again, the poet hopes to compose a haiku that will not be forgotten.

We often hear that juxtaposition is a key to successful haiku. The contrast of two images in haiku is most often instrumental in creating resonance.

Robert Spiess, the beloved editor of *Modern Haiku*, had this to say in *A Year's Speculations on Haiku*:

Juxtaposition of entities in haiku cannot be simply the throwing together of just anything; the poet must have the intuition that certain things, albeit of "opposite" characteristics, nonetheless have a resonance with each other that will evoke a revelation when they are juxtaposed in accordance with the time-tested canons and aesthetics of haiku.

When I was an editor for the e-journal *haijinx*, I found out how important it is to read each haiku several times before making individual choices. I needed to evaluate the haiku on various levels, but the bottom line was whether the elements of the haiku also allow the reader to relate to a new way of seeing. This may involve both juxtaposition and an open-ended style, besides a careful choice of words.

Here's some contemporary haiku that are subtle or surprising in their juxtaposition. The first is an example of how juxtaposition creates synesthesia by combining more than one of the senses.

night of stars
all along the precipice
goat bells ring

an'ya, *The Heron's Nest*, II:2

Every time I read an'ya's haiku, stars hovering overhead move alongside where the hooves of the goats are dangerously close to the precipice. As the bells ring out in the chilly night the stars seem to ring, too. This is an excellent example of synesthesia.

full moon
mist from my whisper

on her silver earring

William Cullen, Jr, Frogpond, XXIX:1

This haiku is visually provocative in a refined manner. As the wee circular puff disappears (in imitation of the full moon) the repetition of i and s in mist, whisper and silver adds to the sense of intimacy and creates a delicate synesthesia.

the piano hammers
barely moving ...
night snow

John Barlow, Robert Speiss Memorial 2006 Haiku Awards, Second Place

Instead of a focus on the music, the poet zeros in on the hammers of the piano. The tempo of the hammers, and thus the unmentioned tune, is gently transferred to the tempo of the falling snow. Barlow's control of the technique of transference is exquisite. I have noticed this to be true in many of his haiku.

sunlit jar
the beekeeper's gift
on the doorstep

Carmen Sterba, The Heron's Nest, III:6

First, one imagines an empty jar filled by the sun, but the mention of a beekeeper suddenly fills this jar with fresh honey in this example of transference.

after love
the sweet burst
of cherry tomato

G. Claire Gallagher, How Fast the Ground Moves, 2001

If Claire had chosen a different first line, how different this haiku would be. The act of love reverberates in the bite of the cherry tomato. It is all so succinct.

heat lightning --
all the way into Mexico
the mountains rise

Michael McClintock, The Heron's Nest, II:5

At night, flashes of light transform a landscape temporarily. Each time the lightning strikes, this mountain moves again towards Mexico. Without the word Mexico the mountains would still rise, yet with the addition, the poet gives the

mountains a direction in which to move, and this extends the movement.

honeymoon
we wade into the current
of a great river

Kirsty Karkow, *Water Poems: Haiku, Tanka, and Sijo*, 2005, *The Heron's Nest*, IV:2.

Kirsty's coupling of honeymoon with river adds the exhilaration and the weight of a major commitment. This particular river changes into a river of life and lends substance to the haiku for each reader to reflect on in their own way. This is a successful transference link.

These haiku are examples of some of the techniques that the English language poets have learned from the translations of Bashô's different techniques for juxtaposition:

The Master said, "The hokku has changed repeatedly since the distant past, but there have been only three changes in the nature of the haikai link. In the distant past, poets valued word links (kotoba-zuke). In the more recent past, poets have stressed content links (kokoro-zuke). Today, it is best to link by transference (usuri), reverberation (hibiki), scent (nioi), or status (kurai)" (NKBZ 51:503, Shirane, p. 85)

In Bashô's time, these kinds of links were used in haikai no renga (popular-style linked verse) which is now called renku. All the techniques mentioned above are used in renku today. However, transference, reverberation, and scent link techniques are the most useful and effective in haiku juxtaposition.

I have focused on the techniques of transference and reverberation in this article. A status link requires using words that give a clue to the class of people or places. This is appropriate in renku, but not common in English language haiku. Examples of scent link usage are the haiku that have a typically quiet, meditative and lonely mood (sabi). It is a popular style in contemporary haiku in all languages.

Another method that Bashô used at the end of his life is the technique of lightness (karumi). This implied the "recovery of youthful playfulness, spontaneity, naturalness, and a fresh perspective . . ." (Shirane, p. 275) This kind of lightness is definitely alive in English language haiku.

Lastly, a word about haiku with one image: marlene mountain pointed out that though juxtaposition is a technique, "non-juxtaposition is not the opposite and needn't be compared" for it is "a technique too." (Haikumania) And Bashô and his disciples would have agreed, though they called it a "single-object" poem:

The Master said, "A hokku that moves smoothly from the opening five syllables to the end is a superb verse."

Kyorai: If a poet composes by combining separate things, he can compose many verses and compose them quickly. Beginning poets should know this. But when one becomes an accomplished poet, it is no longer a question of combining or not combining." (NKBZ 51:498, Shirane, 111)

In the hands of a highly skillful haiku poet, one-image haiku can be exquisitely successful. Nevertheless, experimenting with different types of juxtaposition may add the depth that creates a memorable haiku; one that does not fail to reverberate again and again.

References

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