

Aural Experience: Sound and Rhythm in the Haiku of Nicholas A. Virgilio

by John W. Sexton, Ireland

These days Nicholas Virgilio is celebrated for two haiku in particular, both of which, it is universally agreed, helped change the way in which haiku was practiced.

Lily:
out of the water . . .
out of itself

Bass
picking bugs
off the moon

These often-anthologized poems demonstrated how spare haiku could be, and the techniques were imitated and perfected by those many haiku poets who followed. In recent years, however, much else of Virgilio's work has been neglected, and the mass of it is never reprinted, with the regular exception perhaps of half a dozen pieces. The current, and apparently widespread view amongst many editors, is that the bulk of Virgilio's haiku lack subtlety to their message and are long and over-wordy in comparison to today's practice. On the surface it is hard to disagree with this view, and many admirers of Virgilio find his body of work sadly and largely disdained as some outdated fossil.

Although Virgilio is remembered for these two haiku, both being lean and direct in their execution, the larger corpus of his haiku is wordier, often demonstrative of both rhythm and rhyme, and other aural effects nowadays deemed self-consciously poetic. Within some schools of thought, obvious musicality in haiku is generally considered as inappropriate to contemporary practice.

The following brief examination of some of Virgilio's haiku is to demonstrate that many function, to this writer's mind at least, as capsule melodies, and to pose the question: is it really necessary to reject overt music in haiku in order to maintain its integrity and purity of form?

Virgilio's first appearance in *American Haiku*, 1963, was with a poem obvious in its rhythm and rhyme:

Spring wind frees
the full moon tangled
in leafless trees

But rhyme and rhythm were something he retained throughout his haiku career, deepening the sophistication of its practice as he progressed as a poet:

one wild apple
ripples the rain puddle:
evening sun

The combination of those fluid consonants (the conjoined *ps*, *ds* and *ls*) gives us a tonal rippling that's physically palpable. Although the word *ripple* is said only once, the reader experiences three rippings, in the words apple, ripples, puddle. Interesting, also, is how the poem begins and ends on the same resonantly hard consonant of the *en* sound; like something being struck, although in this case water. This effect is further added to by the placement of that same hard consonant towards the end of the middle line. The governance of speed is such that the spacing of all those intermediary open vowels allows a breathing between each rippling. Such balanced chiming as occurs in this haiku reveals beyond any doubt an ear sensitive to tonal effect.

A similar effect of sound, but far more subtle, is achieved in

the knifegrinder's bell
fades in the afternoon heat:
cicada

The word bell is embedded, lost almost, between *knifegrinder* and *afternoon heat*. Tonal distance, the time it takes for the word bell to appear and then be left behind, adds to the effect of sound-loss described in the haiku. And that final word, *cicada*, with its soft echoic qualities, accentuates the idea of a fading bell. All this works side by side with the actual expressed meaning of the poem: a bell's sound fades in the afternoon heat, while the cicada resonates, becomes the new chiming.

always returning
to the turd on the tombstone:
cemetery flies

In this we observe not just the obvious alliteration of *turd* and *tombstone*, but also the wonderfully balanced ticking of those *t*-sounds in the first and final lines. Because of the preceding weak stresses the four initial *t*-sounds in returning, *turd*, *tombstone* and *cemetery* are equally placed, with *tombstone* containing that extra, riding *t*.

In many current haiku schools of thought such overt rhythmic and alliterative usage is largely frowned upon. This following haiku in particular would be very easy to dismiss by today's standards of composition, because it contains very obvious alliteration and rhyme:

her photograph fades:
the widower at the window
shadows the torn shade

A further negative would be that it's 5-7-5. (I'm making an educated guess here that Virgilio intended the pronunciation of widower to be elided, otherwise the haiku becomes hyper syllabic.) However, at what point can we safely discard poetic effect in any body of poetics?

Looking again at this haiku we cannot but fail to be aware of its atmospheric resonance. Because of the very language employed, the very obviously poetic devices, and the retarded speed in which it's delivered, the slow motion, the slurring caused by that alliteration, this haiku is haunted by its central image. And as we read it we are as haunted by that dead woman as the widower is.

Hauntings were something that Virgilio was quite good at, and they reappear throughout his work. Little wonder, really, for he was haunted himself:

my dead brother . . .
hearing his laugh
in my laughter

A perfect senryu, I would venture, managing to be both bitter and joyous in the one breath. This is a poem that wouldn't be remiss in any contemporary haiku journal, but let us not ignore the fact that it contains both rhyme and repetition, some of the things we've learnt in our apprenticeships to discard. The trick of the craft, however, is to know when it's right to retain something. In structure this particular senryu is syllabically symmetrical, being 4-4-4, and its stresses are fairly regular. And that symmetry, I would argue, helps to convey the shock that's experienced by the reader who starts with an encounter of death and ends with the sound of laughter. The effect is accentuated because the poem is confined in such a tight, enclosed box.

The death of Virgilio's younger brother in Viet Nam had a profound consequence on his work. His poetry became darker, nature appeared less innocent.

beneath the coffin
at the edge of the open grave:
the crushed young grass

Metaphor is inescapable here, yet the metaphor is strengthened by the sounds running through the poem: *beneath the coffin* is soft, insidious; and that final line, *the crushed young grass* is sibilant, oozing betrayal.

Control of speed, a timed steering of his poetry, is evident in yet another of his elegies to his lost brother:

my dead brother . . .
wearing his gloves and boots
I step into deep snow

All poems end where they end, as do all sentences, all things. But this haiku doesn't merely end. It is end-stopped. And it stops us up. The rhythm of the second line is such that it delivers itself quickly to the reader, yet with step and deep we are held up, until finally, with the word snow, the poem literally sinks. In reading the final line we take those steps, interpenetrate with Virgilio's stopping.

Language not only has meaning, not only rhythm, but its sounds often suggest movement, for many words mimic what they describe.

rising and falling . . .
a blanket of blackbirds feeds
on the snowy slope

Here the alliteration, Virgilio's favourite effect, as well as the rhythm, caused by the groupings of weak and strong stresses, suggests movement, covering, and finally (with snowy slope) soft, temporary ground. In this haiku everything is in motion, yet Virgilio manages to end on an image of stillness, without, it should be said, actually stating that anything has stopped.

Not all of his haiku were presented in three lines, but his usage of devices was, admittedly, much the same throughout most of his work.

her shadow shaving the hair from its legs: the heat

The most common criticism aimed at him, however, is that his devices can be obvious, and the haiku compromised as a result:

approaching autumn:
the warehouse watchdog's bark
weakens in the wind

If the above haiku were presented at a poetry workshop in these more sophisticated times, it would probably be edited mercilessly. The alliteration would more than likely be toned down, if not eradicated completely. That would be a pity, for we would be depriving ourselves of a small song. Virgilio's work is peppered with such songs, all following a tradition of haiku practice that in times gone by was considered quite normal. In the attempt to objectify the capturing of the haiku moment such approaches as Virgilio's were abandoned. In our age, it seems, we see no need to return to them.

In his introduction to Virgilio's *Selected Haiku* (1988), Rod Willmot picks out the above haiku to point up how the alliterative *w* suggests the woof of the barking dog, but also (Willmot falling prone to alliteration himself) how it further suggests "something weak and whining" about the creature in question. None of this can be denied, and there is an innocent and indulgent pleasure in enjoying the effects of sound in this wonderful little poem. The same pleasure we find in most popular song and verse. Which brings us to another of Virgilio's perceived sins: his facility of craft, his ease of accessibility to a general readership.

Rod Willmot quotes a later, and much sharper haiku that uses similar effect:

barking its breath
into the rat-hole:
bitter cold

As Willmot, and not fancifully I think, points out, the repeated alliterative *b* here also denotes a snapping bark. Here we have a haiku that wouldn't be out of place in a modern journal, but one that still utilizes the poetic effect and devices of sound.

Of course, one must not forget that Virgilio also experimented with minimalism, which he could employ quite effectively for political satire:

spentagon
pentagony
repentagon

or as an expression of transformation, as in:

Hiroshimagined

And even in minimalism he did not abandon the roots of haiku as nature poem:

nowl

However, it is neither in such minimalism, nor in the tight constructions of the anthology favourites, that Virgilio's work typically resides, but in the small songs, the one-verse alliterative hymns to nature and to experience, his tiny sculptures of sound and atmosphere. It is in these that we find his true legacy.

the first snowfall:
down the cellar staircase
my father calls
