

HAIKU TOOLBOX: DANGLING PARTICIPLES (OR HAPPY PARTICIPLE ACCIDENTS)

Paul Miller

An interesting technique of haiku involves sleight of hand created through grammatical assumptions. In some cases the poet may not even be aware they are doing it. Take for example the following haiku by Elmedin Kadric¹:

making small talk...
the gravel path
to the graveyard

Because haiku normally consist of two parts, often in a contrasting or comparative relationship, the average haiku reader will know to treat the two separate parts as two independent wholes. In this case the break between the two parts is helped by an ellipsis. In reading Kadric's haiku a reader will look to relate the phrase "[I am/we are] making small talk" to the separate phrase "the gravel path / to the graveyard."

This is a charming comparison, and the reader can find much to enjoy. For example: the sounds of speech compared to the crunch of gravel or the evasiveness of small talk compared to the larger questions of a person's life.

However, if this was an ordinary sentence found outside of haiku, it wouldn't be unremarkable to assume the participial phrase "making small talk" modified the noun "the gravel path." This creates a secondary reading of the poem, which reordered for clarity becomes "the gravel path to the graveyard is making small talk," or in its original order: "making small talk, the gravel path to the graveyard." A talking path is obviously fantastical, yet it adds a wonderful layer to the poem. What would a graveyard path say if it could talk? Would it be comforting or philosophical? Is it interested in the countless lives of those who cross it or does it complain about the traffic?

Of course, haiku don't always use punctuation breaks, usually because the poet assumes the reader will know themselves where to break the poem. In the two examples below an experienced reader of haiku will know to break the poem after the second lines.

color-coding
my to-do list
spring morning

*Francine Banwarth*²

filing away
the unsent letter
late Spring

*Peter Joseph Gliviczki*³

In the first haiku the poet is organizing their spring to-do list, an appropriate activity for the time of year; however a secondary reading might be that the season itself is doing the color-coding, and depending upon how the reader experiences the season (lamb or lion) might determine additional meanings.

In the second haiku there are any number of reasons for an unsent letter. However, a secondary reading—where the season itself didn't send the letter—is especially interesting since we tend to think of Spring as being an unbridled season. That such a boundless season might have its own reservations might never occur to the reader without this sly misreading.

Whether the above poets intended these secondary readings is something only they can answer, but frankly, beside the point, since through the haiku's selected structure the reading exists. This uncertainty may suggest that the designation 'technique' which implies intent should be replaced with 'effect.' Regardless, the fact that these readings are there means they must at least be considered.

Such secondary readings are the result of some English-language haiku history. In early incarnations, English-language haiku tended to eschew the personal pronoun. This may have been the result of following English translations of Japanese haiku. Haiku poet and theoretician William J.

Higginson noted in his judge's comments for a 1993 New Zealand Poetry Society contest: "In Japanese haiku such words as 'I'/'me'/'my' rarely occur, so translators have often resorted to leaving them out of English translations and using just the '-ing' form of the verb, creating dangling participles in the process."⁴ This doesn't mean that Japanese haiku writers don't write about themselves or in the first person. Higginson added: "Japanese has other strategies for indicating the grammatical first-person." Additionally, some writers may have felt that omitting the personal pronoun made their poem seem more objective, and perhaps more egoless—a goal of Zen-oriented haiku.

Higginson himself was not comfortable with dangling participles in haiku, insisting that they often yielded "ludicrous results." He gave the following example:

choking, coughing,
the moon shining over
the quiet lake

Bill Higginson

It is indeed hard to reconcile a "choking, coughing" moon with one shining over a quiet lake. In this case the secondary reading seems jarring and out of place. Higginson suggested changing the first line to "he chokes and coughs..." as a fix. For the previous haiku, the substitution of the personal pronoun ("I make small talk," "I color-code," "I file away") would work similarly.

Ferris Gilli, in her essay, "The Power of Juxtaposition,"⁵ made a similar argument. She referred to readings "when the unwritten subject... in one part of a poem is not the same as the written subject in another part" as the "spillover effect." She cautioned that "if there is spillover of the first line into the second line in the reader's perception, even if for only an instant, that instant of distraction may be all it takes to destroy a mood and diminish resonance for the reader. The poet should strive to avoid the possibility of confusion or unintended humor."

Such "ludicrous" or "spillover" readings may be why some readers outside of the haiku community, unaccustomed to the norms of haiku

composition, dismiss the genre as light verse. Not understanding that a haiku has two independent parts, uninformed readers may read the fanciful reading as the primary one. This is perhaps an argument against such a technique if a poet is concerned about the larger poetry community understanding their haiku.

However, this structure can add interesting nuances.

tuning the cello
finches turn their heads
this way and that

*Bob Lucky*⁶

Its use in the Lucky poem, and I'll argue in the first three haiku, adds a delightful dimension. Finches are songbirds, and the image of them turning their heads as they tune a cello—as if cocking an ear for the right note—is a wonderful bit of fantasy. It adds a sense of playfulness to the scene, something in character for the small, musically active birds. It also adds a sense of playfulness to the cellist himself.

This effect, however, isn't limited to the standard three-line form. One of the charms, and indeed the power, of the one-line haiku is its ability to show several sides of a situation without making any single viewpoint the predominant one. While this can often make them harder to read and digest by some readers, what Gilli might call “that instant of distraction... it takes to destroy a mood and diminish resonance for the reader,” some other readers might enjoy the opportunity for what are normally secondary readings to come to the fore and be treated equally. An example:

whispering through the dead-nettles the sides of a vole

*John Barlow*⁷

How should this haiku be read? As: “[I am / we are] whispering. Through the dead-nettles the sides of a vole” or the very different “whispering through the dead-nettles, the sides of a vole”? Both readings have their own resonances and I suspect there is no right answer. In fact, the

opportunity to have multiple, yet equal, entranceways or points of view in a haiku seems to be a major draw of the one-line form.

Ultimately it is up to each poet—each craftsperson—to decide when any one technique is appropriate, in this case, with an understanding of the risks that Higginson and Gilli mention, yet also with an eye toward any offsetting reward.

NOTES

¹ Elmedin Kadric in *Modern Haiku* 45.2

² Francine Banwarth in *The Heron's Nest* XVI.1

³ Peter Joseph Gloviczki in *Modern Haiku* 45.2

⁴ William J. Higginson, "A Sense of the Genre, a Sense of the Language," in [Haikuworld.org](http://www.haikuworld.org), accessed April 1, 2014 from <http://www.haikuworld.org/begin/whigginson.sep2003.html>

⁵ Ferris Gilli. "The Power of Juxtaposition," in [poetrysociety.org.nz](http://www.poetrysociety.org.nz), accessed December 3, 2014 from <http://www.poetrysociety.org.nz/juxtaposition>

⁶ Bob Lucky in *Modern Haiku* 45.2

⁷ John Barlow in *Frogpond* 37.2