Haiku: Who's Counting?

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When the environmental activist Greta Thunberg sailed into New York Harbor, her boat was met by a flotilla of other vessels, seventeen in all, each representing by its numbered sail one of the demands to be made at a conference on climate change. When I receive a gift of *sembei*, large crunchy rice crackers, from Sōka, the first place that Bashō stopped after leaving Edo on his journey to the North, there are seventeen inside the box, of different sizes, and I wonder if the number has any meaning. In Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, just when his father has entered a concentration camp and is losing hope, a priest looks at the tattoo on his arm, and says: "Your number starts with 17. In Hebrew that's *k'minyan tov*. Seventeen is a very good omen."[1] Fortune shows that the bearer will survive, and overcome adversity, as of course he does, or we wouldn't have the story. Is there, then, some magic in the number?

Haiku poets in Japan often invoke the number seventeen, of course, that being the one that indicates the form of haiku, and it doesn't really matter whether you call the counted parts syllables, *onji*, or morae, the sum total is the same. It is a prime number, more rhythmical in English than any of those adjacent to it, which may be why Billy Collins chose it for the title of his small book from Modern Haiku Press, *She Was Just Seventeen* (2006): 'eleven' clearly wouldn't be the same. Numerology, at least of the Biblical kind, is not invoked in the book's beautiful design, though the cover does carry the Chinese hexagram for that number, playfully suggesting divination, and it appears again by the epigraph inside, in all its suggestive mystery. More mundanely, I noticed that some paired short verses by a literary scholar, printed in the *London Review of Books* a couple of years ago, were all in the pattern of 5-7-5 syllables, though without any other appreciable poetic quality. What this might mean, or

what it might say about the reception of haiku as an English poetic form, is the subject I would like to consider.

Most dictionaries and reference books mention seventeen syllables, in a pattern of 5-7-5, as well as saying something about nature, in defining 'haiku' as an English word. In Japanese there are two words, pronounced identically: 俳句, meaning 'haiku' composed in Japanese, and ハイク, meaning 'haiku' in other languages or scripts, a clear visual distinction that can be useful in book or essay titles, to show the transition from one to the other, for example, or discuss the global spread of the poetic form. In English, and especially in the popular imagination, the numbers are what define the form. A new volume of translations of Bashō, put out by the Buddhist Society in London, has "5-7-5" on its cover,[2] while another volume due to come out in America next year will render the whole of the poet's work in English syllabic form, I'm told. For haiku aficionados who compose originally in English, this is now often not the case. Indeed I was once told myself that composing syllabically is 'wrong.'

I do not think that, in poetry, there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way, only that some things seem to work, and others not to, for reasons that are complex and mysterious. The best that can be said of a poem is that it 'works,' something we can often recognize without knowing exactly why or how it happens. It is not a prescriptive matter of following the rules, which are often broken. The default pattern in English prosody is the iambic pentameter, perhaps, but a wholly regular beat soon becomes tedious and ineffective. Breaking the rhythm creates interest or freshness, and so it is sometimes too with the 5-7-5 rhythm in Japanese. Yet the idea—which I have heard quite categorically stated—that English is 'metrical' and Japanese is 'syllabic,' is much too simple. Thom Gunn's masterly short poem, "Considering the Snail," composed in heptasyllabic (7-syllable) lines, is plainly both. Even free verse carries the ghost of the formal pattern that it departed from, because poetry must have some kind of rhythm. The verses of the free-form haiku poet Santōka are likewise ghosted by the Japanese tradition out of which they came.

All of the poets who won the Nobel Prize for Literature (Seferis, Paz, Heaney, Tränstromer) and dabbled in haiku, used the regular form. Another laureate, Dag Hammarskjöld, who was posthumously awarded

the Peace Prize, did so too, although W.H. Auden reprised the strict 5-7-5 of the Swedish originals into a more flexible total of seventeen in his English versions. Apart from Paz, all of these poets are European, and I have often noted how the form persists in poetry journals and collections in Britain and Ireland. Frank Ormsby (b. 1947), who lives in Belfast and is currently Ireland Professor of Poetry, has included sequences of such verses, under the title "Small World," in his last four collections. And in an anthology of living poets facing off with dead ones (in which Billy Collins addresses W.H. Auden), the British poet Imtiaz Dharker (b. 1954) takes on Rumi, in a loosely composed poem entitled "Myth," that resolves on the second page into a sequence of syllabic verses: "The mist of my breath / slides off the angled mirror / to reveal your face."[3] In the same poet's collection, *Luck is the Hook* (2018), there are several three-line verses, all with titles, and some precisely in the syllabic form.

There is notable tendency, it seems to me, among the poets who use the syllabic pattern, to create a verse that is something of a puzzle, but that also arguably has the playful quality of *haikai*, out of which the haiku originally came. Here is another by Imtiaz Dharker:

> Light falls from the sky
> like a fresh sheet on a bed
> you will not sleep in.
>
> ("Made, Unmade")[4]

In a similar but slightly more macabre vein, the late Matthew Sweeney, an Irish poet, has half a dozen such verses in his collection *A Smell of Fish* (2000), for example:

> I catch jellyfish
> and leave them on the tarmac
> to swim in the rain.
>
> ("Hobby")[5]

And this exercise extended to the novel that Sweeney composed with his fellow English poet, John Hartley Williams.

The novel, called *Death Comes for the Poets* (2012), is a murder mystery and sends up the poetry scene in Britain, a world of readings and small journals, of editing and workshops and hard-won meager sales. Both of the authors were working poets, and knew all this intimately. The plot is built around a series of murders, and there are jokes about poetic practice, including haiku. At the end of the book there is a rather brilliant brief anthology of the poets' work, with individual faux creations for all of the characters. Their names are arranged alphabetically, from Anita Bellows, through Fergus Diver, Damian Krapp, and Melinda Speling, to the seventeenth and final poet, Manfred Von Zitzewitz, who writes only haiku, and so the book closes with this verse:

> The white stallion
> galloped along the runway
> to meet the airplane.
>
> ("Glad")[6]

It is not of course what we usually expect of 'haiku,' but withal it is a poem, and subsequently appeared in one of Matthew Sweeney's own collections. It is all quite entertaining, but what are we to make of it?

Although the same two poets jointly authored a practical guide, *Teach Yourself Writing Poetry* (2003), for a popular series, and this too has many improvised examples, haiku is never mentioned in that volume. It does, however, take a central role in another novel, a bestseller by the distinguished British novelist Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me* (2019). This futurist tale is actually set in the 1970s, and features a robot called Adam, which is bought by the protagonist and then falls in love with his human girlfriend. Alan Turing is still alive, and appears later in the story to deliver sage remarks:

> "The other day, Thomas reminded me of the famous Latin tag from Virgil's *Aeneid*. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*—there are tears in the nature of things. None of us knows how to encode that perception."[7]

The debate here is about whether the most delicate human feelings and perceptions (*mono no aware*) can be electronically reproduced, and the

answer so far is that AI is not quite equal to the task. Nevertheless, Adam continues to work on his "haikus," and the few examples included, all of them syllabic, do not undermine this argument.[8] But for haiku aficionados the focus lies elsewhere.

The development from syllabic patterns, to freer and usually shorter forms of composition, is easy enough to see in representative anthologies, like those edited by Cor van den Heuvel, or *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*,[9] to which I shall return. Even so, I notice that a new book on James W. Hackett, a devotee of the regular syllabic pattern, by Paul Russell Miller,[10] has seventeen chapters, which can hardly be accidental. Be that as it may, I would like at this point to go further back, to a small but ambitiously pioneering anthology edited by George Swede and Randy Brooks, called *Global Haiku: Twenty-five Poets World-wide* (2000),[11] that came out from a small press in Canada. The focus was narrow, and it was carelessly proofed, but its title announced a larger movement or awareness of haiku as the century was about to turn. Whether or not the chosen poets remain significant is not the point, but rather that the focus had grown. Furthermore, the generous Foreword to the book by the late Makoto Ueda gestured toward some greater potential recognition, in comparing the haiku to the sonnet. I was rather startled by this.

This is not to suggest that Professor Ueda's remarks were uninformed or ill considered in any way, but only that the sonnet has a long history and a well-established position as a poetic form, with many illustrious practitioners, in comparison to which the haiku can still appear novel, and quite slight. The process of adaptation is a slow one, as Ueda says, and it took a century or more for the sonnet to find its place. The new shape that emerged in English had at first either longer or shorter lines than the Italian original, and often simpler rhymes. The 'English' or Shakespearean sonnet turned into three quatrains and a couplet, instead of an octave and a sestet, but still added up to fourteen lines. Since then the form has been played with in all kinds of ways, though the basic idea has remained the same. An anthology that I have to hand, *The Art of the Sonnet* by Stephen Burt and David Mikics (2010),[12] gives a hundred examples, from the earliest poets to the present, covering 450 years, and shows how much the form has been stretched and altered in that time, while still retaining

an essential shape. Notably, three of the poets in this book also appear in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. One of them is Wallace Stevens, while the other two are Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, both Irish. What does this tell us, if anything at all?

While Seamus Heaney's modest offerings in the haiku form are few in number in his published collections, Paul Muldoon has been much more prolific, though both cleave to the syllabic pattern. Muldoon has played extensively with the sonnet, employing it as a stanza in some of his longer compositions, though he likes to say that it is not he who 'plays with the form,' but rather that the form 'plays' with him. The "Hopefield Haiku" in *Hay* (1998) are a dazzling technical achievement, while the *Sixty Instant Messages to Tom Moore* (2005), published by Modern Haiku Press in a beautifully designed small book, became "90 Instant Messages ..." in the poet's next collection,[13] so that the earlier version is likely to become a collector's item. What this might show of how the haiku has turned into an essential part of mainstream poetry (and there are plenty of poets who do not write sonnets) is hard to discern. But the form pops up again briefly in Paul Muldoon's most recent volume, *Howdie-Skelp* (2021). The single verse in question, so wittily off-hand, is called "Chipmunk."[14]

It is difficult to write like Muldoon without sounding like him, so distinctive is his style, but the casual tone belies the careful thematic pattern of each book. He has used the 5-7-5 pattern before to describe animals, which also come in elsewhere in this collection. Oddly enough, the same is repeatedly true of a sequence of 17-syllable verses by the Scottish poet Robert Crawford (b. 1959) that appeared in the *LRB* in February 2021. It is given in the list of contents as a "Poem," and consists of sixty-six numbered verses, in eighteen uneven sections, with the title "Old World," and a double-page spread.[15] It has an epigraph from Matthew Arnold that invokes the "green earth" before cultivation began to change it, suggesting a theme of environmental destruction, and a verse in the last section reprises one from the early part of Bashō's journey to the North: "'*Art's origins lie / Deep in the farming songs / of seed-time*.' (Bashō)."[16] The poet's name has been added to meet the syllable-count. Some of the verses, a little less than half, are in italics. All are evenly syllabic.

Whether Robert Crawford's long sequence constitutes a major work is hard to tell. It is freighted with a strong environmental message, some of it expressed in the same kind of humorous verses described above: "Each morning to wash, / I pack my trunk with water / Then hose myself down."[17] Along with the elephant, anteaters, bees, and bats make an appearance in this guessing game, as do giraffes and albatrosses, pandas and polar bears. It is rather didactic, though 'light' is offered as a ray of hope in various guises, including the light of the moon, so beloved of the poet Bashō, in the closing section. It is difficult to see all this going very far, but the continued use of the syllabic form needs to be acknowledged as one part of the expanding influence of haiku on English poetics. It is still around, as a lingering phantom. The last poet in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*, Rebecca Lilly, though her poems there are short, quite often composes in a total of seventeen, as Auden did. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics ran officially for seventeen days, even though some events took place before it opened. And Ōtani Shōhei, the two-way baseball star of the Los Angeles Angels, who was named MVP for 2021, plays under the number 17.

Notes

[1] Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale II—And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991, p. 28.

[2] White, John, & Kemmyo Taira Sato. *5-7-5 The Haiku of Basho.* London: The Buddhist Society Trust, 2019. A volume of Issa has appeared, in the same format. I wonder what they will do if they go on to Santōka?

[3] Duffy, Carol Ann, ed. *Answering Back: Living Poets Reply to Poems from the Past*. London: Picador, 2007, pp. 54-55. After three more, the last one ends: "My heart grows immense."

[4] Dharker, Imtiaz. *Luck is the Hook*. UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2018, p. 35.

[5] Sweeney, Matthew. *A Smell of Fish*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000, p. 36.

[6] Sweeney, Matthew & John Hartley Williams. *Death Comes For the Poets*. London: Muswell Press, 2012, p. 313. The book is dedicated to the mythical Australian poet Ern Malley, the subject of a famous literary hoax.

[7] McEwan, Ian. *Machines Like Me*. London: Vintage, 2020, p. 180.

[8] It is notable that in Kazuo Ishiguro's new novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), which is also about a robot companion, haiku is never mentioned.

[9] Kacian, Jim, Philip Rowland & Allan Burns, eds. *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

[10] Miller, Paul Russell. *The Wild Beyond Echoing: James Hackett's Haiku Way*. Painswick, UK: Grandad Publishing, 2021.

[11] Swede, George & Randy Brooks, eds. *Global Haiku: Twenty-five Poets Worldwide*. Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2000.

[12] Burt, Stephen & David Mikics, eds. *The Art of the Sonnet*. Cambridge , Mass.: Belnap Press, 2010.

[13] Muldoon, Paul. *Horse Latitudes*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006, pp. 53-75,

[14] Muldoon, Paul. *Howdie-Skelp*. London: Faber & Faber, 2021, p. 110. There is another chipmunk in the shorter syllabic sequence, "News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm", in Muldoon's earlier collection, *Moy Sand and Gravel*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002, p. 55.

[15] Crawford, Robert. "Old World". *London Review of Books*, 4 February 2021, pp. 34-35.

[16] "Old World", XVIII, 64, p. 35.

[17] "Old World", IV, 16, p. 34. As if to confirm the tendency suggested here, the same journal has just published a poem called "Pine Processionaries" by A.E. Stallings, an American poet resident in Greece, consisting of seventeen verses in the 5-7-5 syllabic form. *London Review of Books*, 27 January 2022, p. 24.