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Translating Poetic Form and Device

If we look up haiku-writing on 'wikihow' this is what we find:

Haikus follow a strict form: three lines, with a 5-7-5 syllable structure. That means the first line will have five syllables, the second line will have seven syllables, and the last line will have five syllables

(<https://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Haiku-Poem>)

However, plenty of English haiku writers agree that this 5-7-5 rule is not the only way to write haiku in English – for proof of this, just scan through this issue of *Presence*. In fact, as David Cobb suggests, such a strict adherence to that rule can be punitive:

To insist on 17 syllables, willy-nilly, may result in the 'half-said thing' becoming the 'too-much-said thing

(David Cobb, 'English Haiku: A Composite View',
<http://britishhaikusociety.org.uk>)

It is probably hardly necessary to rehearse the reasons for this to *Presence* readers, but there are a number of items to consider when composing haiku in English rather than in Japanese, all of which have a bearing on a decision about how much weight to place on syllable count. Japanese haiku originally used one line, not three; Japanese syllable counts are often less rigid than 'wikihow' implies; Japanese words usually consume far more syllables than English words; Japanese is a syllabic language while English is accentual-syllabic so an emphasis on syllables risks ignoring the differences between these languages and in particular the heavier use of rhythm in English.

There is one more item to take into account. Japanese orthography is packed and dense – it is formed of three different writing systems and the core of it is the *kanji* or Chinese character. Each *kanji* can have many different aural and visual readings and allusions, and many characters are made up of radicals or root *kanji* that hold their own meanings. In contrast, the English alphabet can appear skinny and superficial, lacking that rich deep complex depth. A focus on syllable count alone in English does not begin to speak to this particular difference.

Given the number of differences itemized above, it seems logical that a writer will want to make adjustments when composing haiku in English instead of Japanese. The decisions relating to such adjustments are ones that translators often grapple with. This parallel is no surprise, because, essentially, writers who choose to write haiku in English are indulging in acts of translation – the translation of poetic form, and also the translation of a poetic culture.

In fact, the translation and composition of poetry are closely connected. Translation, as Pierre Joris has observed, can be described as a very close form of reading/creativity. Tony Baker writes:

Pierre Joris, an immensely gifted translator, has long insisted that translation is the closest kind of reading we can do. A translator has to scrutinise his or her responses to a text so closely that someone else's words can get under the skin and occur, via a sort of biological absorption, in another language; to which there's a necessary admixture of new material that advances the translation into an original domain, placing it at a unique point on an evolving energy-spiral.

(*The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, ed. Will Rowe, pp.93-94)

Similar observations apply to the translation of poetic form.

I am going to digress here into the subject of translation of Old English poetry, riddles and gnomic verse. However, this digression will lead us back to haiku soon enough. Consider the work of JRR Tolkien: the famous riddling scenes in *The Hobbit* when Bilbo Baggins plays a riddle-game with Gollum in the orc passages of the Misty Mountains. For his riddles, Tolkien was inspired by the Old English riddle-format. It is worth taking note of Tolkien's decisions here as a rewriter or translator of form, since he was an eminent philologist and expert on Old English language and Old English poetry. Crucially, for our purposes, it is worth observing that, although his riddles are clearly modeled on the ancient riddle-poems in the Book of Exeter, he chooses not to emulate the strong alliteration which binds the lines of Old English riddles. Instead he focusses on repetition of words and phrases and on rhyme. Of course, these are both related to alliteration in that they mark shift from repetition of letters to repetition of words and sounds in words, but they are not at all the same thing.

First, to give a sense of how the alliteration works in Old English, here are the opening lines of an Old English riddle in both Old and an alliterated modern English:

Ic þurh mup sprece mongum reordum,
wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe
heafodwoþe, hlude cirme,
healde mine wisan, hleoþre ne mipe.

(Riddle 8 in the Exeter Book)

With one mouth I talk in multiple tones,
fine-tune my melodies, often flip
mode, make music loudly,
stick to my song, not concealing my sound.

(My translation)

In contrast, in Tolkien's riddles, alliteration is softened and rhyme comes to the fore:

Riddle: What has roots as nobody sees,
Is taller than trees,

Up, up it goes
And yet never grows?
Answer: A mountain.

Riddle: Thirty white horses on a red hill,
First they champ,
Then they stamp,
Then they stand still.
Answer: Teeth in your mouth.

Riddle: Voiceless it cries,
Wingless flutters,
Toothless bites,
Mouthless mutters.
Answer: The wind.

Tolkien has recognized that when translating a form from one language to another the same effect produces different results, and, conversely, a different or altered effect might produce results closer to the essence of that form.

When adapting form and device from Old English to 'modern' poetry, the poet and Old English scholar Bill Griffiths took the opposite route from JRR. He drew on Old English form and devices to write his *Shanties (through London to Essex)*. This is what Griffiths said about *Shanties*, as recorded by Tony Baker,

Bill has pointed out to me that *Shanties* is really a set of haiku in which alliteration replaces syllable count, which doesn't work in English, as a binding device; so the Anglo-Saxon source is 'valid but indirect'
(*'From Black Cocoa Out'* in *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, note to p, 89)

In Griffiths' haiku, instead of the minimalist syllable count of the Japanese, he makes use of Old English alliteration, and also, like Tolkien, of repetition and rhyme:

Swelling, the sea-swell
at the tape of the boat, tapping
and turning, a tower of noise

Fishing, the night fishermen
set out houses of lighted floats, bright floats
bobbing in the black

Anchoring, letting the anchor out
shallowish the sea but hard to see
clouded with the same clouds as a sub-blue sky

So sure:

sailing up the dark side of the mountain

sailing down the bright

(*Shanties (through London to Essex)* in *The Mud Fort*, extracts from pp.39-42)

Thus, Griffiths dug back through the English language to find an equivalent for the Japanese haiku that suited the characteristics of modern English. He landed on Old English alliterative techniques, and his *Shanties* explores what can be attained by use of repetition, underscored and highlighted by alliteration. The result is some delicate, hypnotic, poetic, mysterious and yet very physical verse.

Griffiths himself articulates possible reasons for the effects such acts of repetition, whether alliterative in terms of letters or repetitive in terms of rhyme, can create in his extraordinary work *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*. He explains why a strong skillful use of alliteration and repetition helps to suggest a deeper meaning:

Repetition, of lines, phrases, formulae [...] assists structure and memory, but surely its basis is also emphatic, the assertion of word-importance, indicating the assumed power of statement over event. (p. 169)

Alliteration [...] is an effective way of organising words in patterns, for the purpose of remembering, or giving aural pleasure, but also of imparting special energy. For the pattern rehearsed by the arranger of the words seems to have its own validity, as though this is what it is sensible and right for the words to do, revealing through the arrangement their inner power and potential. (p. 170)

His choice of alliteration as a formal device is very apposite to the writing of modern English haiku. Repetition fits haiku because in Japanese the orthography is repetitious. The kanji or Chinese characters hold a concentration of meanings and allusions which the English alphabet cannot replicate, and these allusions and multiplied meanings are often drawn on in the Japanese haiku form. In addition, the syntax in Japanese poetry allows for more double readings, allusions, nuances, than the English language affords. The device of the pivot word, another technique very evident in Japanese verse, also involves repetition, the word doing double duty with both the phrase preceding and the phrase after it. Here is an example in Stuart Quine's tanka, in which lines 3 and 4 can be read both with the first two and with the last line:

after the funeral
he sleeps
on her side
of the bed
winter sunlight

(*Presence* #3 (November 1996), p.9)

Perhaps Griffiths' choice of form and device for his haiku was influenced by his work on Scandinavian and Old English poetry. In *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic*, he includes translations of elements of an old Norwegian runic poem, in which two separate parts are linked not so much by sense as by sound. Here are some extracts with English translations:

Fe vaeldr fraenda roge:
fodesk ulfr I skoge.

Wealth causes friends' discord: lives the wolf in the forest.

Ur er af illus jarne:
opt loypr raeinn a hjarne.

Dross comes from bad iron: often leaps the reindeer over the icy snow.

Hagall er kaldastr korna:
Kriistr skóp haeimenn forna.

Hail is the coldest of grains: Christ created the world of old.

Is kollum bru braeida:
blindan thar at taeida.

Ice we call the bridge (that is) broad: a blind man must be led.

Maðr er moldar auki:
mikil er graeip á hauki.

Man is the ground's outgrowth: great is the claw of the hawk.

Yr er vetrgronstr vida:
vaent er, er brennr, at svida.

Yew is the greenest of trees in winter: it is liable, as it burns, to crackle.

(from *Aspects of Anglo Saxon magic*, pp.228-230)

The lack of a logical link between the two parts of each piece echoes Japanese aesthetic practice, in which images are placed in juxtaposition, working with links created by associative

rather than progressively logical means. Griffiths picks this element out in his observations on the Norwegian runic poem, when he writes that

The couplets are linked by alliteration and rhyme, but the second line has little subject relevance to the head-word in most cases. This may derive from a gnomic tradition of constructing poems from varied proverbial material, but this in turn might have a competitive, oral basis – one poet proposing a first line, a second having to match it, at least metrically, from the same pool of commonplaces.

(p.228)

This form has undeniable resonances with Japanese poetic traditions, and could well have contributed to Griffiths' happy abandonment of 5-7-5 and exploration of other resonances between Japanese and Old English/Scandinavian alliterative forms.

The current trend in English haiku writing, as observed by David Cobb, seems less adventurous. Cobb notes that

The majority of those who write haiku in English have come to feel that a haiku length of less than 17 syllables, with something like 6 or 7 beats overall, typically in three phrases with the middle line a little longer than the other two (i.e. with extra syllables and possibly an extra beat) sounds 'natural', 'right', 'light' and 'enough for our purpose.'

Griffiths leaves the haiku world with a much deeper challenge: to keep considering the options that particular languages offer, and to keep on, and then on and on, considering those options. As Rowan Williams writes of language under pressure, in the haiku and in other writing,

The 'more' that there is to say is, paradoxically, represented in some circumstances by seeing and saying *less*. What has been buried in normal perception and description has to be set free from overloaded or indulgent habits of speech [...] the point is to make us see what we otherwise don't

(*The Edge of Words*, p.135)

How can we avoid the indulgent habits in English haiku writing? In terms of rendering the haiku form in English, what options have we not yet explored? Griffiths perhaps but points the way.