

# On the Form of English Haiku

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Nearly a century has passed since Japanese haiku was translated and introduced into Europe and America.<sup>1</sup> But it is during the past quarter of a century that haiku has become very popular on the American continent and in other English-speaking countries.<sup>2</sup> It was proper that haiku should have been translated into English triplets of 17 syllables at first, considering the fact that the English verse was once written in strict forms of set numbers of syllables and lines. So naturally some noted English haiku poets who write or render haiku in the three-lines of 17 syllables have appeared: R. H. Blyth (who translated many Japanese haiku), J. W. Hackett (who is compared to Basho), Harold Henderson (a great teacher of haiku in America), Kenneth Yasuda, James D. Andrews, et al. Meanwhile a haiku poet called Tao-Li invented a vertical form of three columns.<sup>3</sup> And there is one well-known translator, Harold Stewart who sticks to the couplet as the vehicle for haiku poetry. There are still others who render haiku in four or five lines. Thus including concrete haiku which are sometimes written, there have been produced a variety of forms as means of expressing haiku.

The number of haiku so far produced is also staggering.

Many haiku poets as well as collections of haiku have appeared in the past 30 years. This boom in haiku production is being further fostered by the introduction of haiku into school education, i. e., creative writing classes and the inclusion of the category of haiku in almost every contest of poetry on the American continent. Thus haiku has been established as an adopted or borrowed form of poetry in the literature of the English language (also in German, Spanish and French literatures).<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that more and more haiku will be written and read in the future as Blyth predicted in his *A History of Haiku*.<sup>5</sup> Will these various forms settle into some fixed ones? Then what form should or will English haiku take in the future? Nobody except one person—as far as the writer knows—has so far made public a definite form which English haiku should take, not even Henderson nor Yasuda. The person is Harold Stewart, translator of two volumes of Japanese haiku<sup>6</sup> who asserts that the couplet is the form English haiku should take. Although there are some problems with his theory<sup>7</sup> Stewart's form will be one of the lasting forms of English haiku. For English is a language with its proper sounds, rhythms, vertical and horizontal, and other prosodical virtues. So the writer believes that English haiku too will eventually take a form akin to one of the

traditional prototypes of English verse, a Golden Section of English poetry—the heroic couplet (iambic pentameter) Stewart discovered—but for haiku, the short (or octosyllabic) couplet (iambic tetrameter) or the heptasyllabic couplet (iambic or trochaic tetrameter) is preferred. It may be an English vehicle fittest for ‘haiku moment’ just as the 5-7-5 syllables in Japanese is the shortest possible Golden Section for poetry in Japanese.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese classic form with a season word is still very popular in Japan because the form is the stablest, most effective vehicle for haiku poetry. Therefore English haiku poets will reconsider Stewart’s couplet—but not rhymed (with exceptions); and octosyllabic or heptasyllabic — because it is close in form to one of the common, traditional units of English verse which are very familiar to English-speaking people. And this corresponds to one of the three forms the writer suggests in his book: two lines of one and a half sound groups.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Blyth’s form: 5-7-5 syllables in 2-3-2 rhythm seems to have somehow taken root in many haiku poets’ minds and has established itself as a Golden Section,<sup>10</sup> so much have his volumes of translation of Japanese haiku been read, studied and appreciated abroad. (Tao-Li’s vertical columns are nothing but a variety of Blyth’s form) And this corresponds to another form of the writer’s three: three lines of one sound

group. Thus both the types will continue to be written for years to come.

On the other hand, however, some haiku poets will experiment with other new forms as in Japan there have always been renovators and revolutionaries.<sup>11</sup> Already many shorter English haiku in varieties of form have been produced.<sup>12</sup> One steady revolutionist is Mr. James Kirkup.<sup>13</sup> He is one of those who have been trying to devise a completely new form which is fit for the English language as we see in his letter to Cyril Patterson.<sup>14</sup> And at last he has found a form called 'One-line(or lined)haiku(or poem).' Its length is around 10 syllables, which he reads rather slowly and thinks it desirable if the poem is provided with such features of English prosody as rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance and so on. This is 'also very similar to one of the three forms mentioned in the writer's book: one line of three sound groups, the hexameter line which also belongs to one of the basic units of English verse. So people will find this form to be a stable, good vehicle for 'ah-ness.' Mr. Kirkup(and the writer himself)are producing lots of poems whose length is more or less hexametric.<sup>15</sup>

Strictly speaking, however, the *classic* haiku form adopted into the English literature ought to have 17 syllables

(how to count syllables is another matter; for discussion on *how*, see the essays in the writer's book and Joan Giroux's book and article)<sup>16</sup> with at least one pause after five or 12 syllables (the columned form the writer suggests is the strictest one conceivable)<sup>17</sup> just as the sonnet which was imported from Italy into England has 14 lines. However as varieties of the sonnet have appeared in English, varieties of the haiku form will surely be produced.

What should the norm or the requirements for composing English haiku be then? Its length would be less than 20 syllables or of one breath, and its contents: 'haiku moment' or 'ah-ness.' (It can never contain voluminous idea or thought in so limited a number of words)<sup>18</sup> It'd have one pause; indirect expression of thought, idea or feelings is preferred; one season word or its substitute which gives the reader a key to grasping the essential background of the poem is desirable. And it may take any form according to the kind of haiku poetry: one line, two lines, three lines, four lines, five lines, etc. But as the writer has suggested above, one (monostich), two (couplet) and three (triplet) lines or columns will prevail.<sup>19</sup>

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed history of haiku-writing or translation abroad, see the writer's essay: "Is English Haiku Established as a Genre in English Poetry?" *The Journal of Gifu College of*



*Economics*, 3, No. 1 (1969).

<sup>2</sup> For detailed information, see the same.

<sup>3</sup> Tao-Li's autonym is Evelyn Tooley Hunt. For details, see the chapter: Atsuo Nakagawa, "How to Translate Japanese Haiku into English" in *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information, see the writer's essay of Note 1 and "An Inquiry into the Reasons Why Haiku Is Popular Abroad," *The Journal of Gifu College of Economics*, 4, No. 1 (1970). Haiku has been written in other three languages too, but it can not yet be said to have been established as a genre in the poetry of those languages.

<sup>5</sup> Published by the Hokuseido Press, Tokyo in 1969. For details, see page 349, Volume II.

<sup>6</sup> They are *A Net of Fireflies* (1969) and *A Chime of Windbells* (1974), both published by Charles E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo.

<sup>7</sup> What is wrong with his couplets is that they are too long, rhymed and have useless titles. For further information, see the essay of Note 3.

<sup>8</sup> H. H. Honda says in his preface to his translation of *The Manyoshu* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1967) that the best English form he found for *tanka*—the second shortest Golden Section of Japanese verse—is not the cinquain but the quatrain, which is another traditional prototype or Golden Section of English verse.

<sup>9</sup> It is a verse of two lines of a half hexameter line. For details, see the essay of Note 3.

<sup>10</sup> Quantity and alteration of quantities in successive lines are common in English poetry. One simply needs to look at Protestant hymnals; one need not go so far as to look for excellent syllabic poems by Dylan Thomas.

<sup>11</sup> See the writer's essay: "A Brief History of Haiku Renovators" in *Studies on English Haiku*.

<sup>12</sup> See the essay of Note 1.

<sup>13</sup> Anita Virgil's one-line haiku cited in *Chanoyu*, No. 9 (1970) by Alfred H. Marks is too long.

<sup>14</sup> Dated October 24, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> A poetry magazine of new-type haiku or one-line poems, *Shikai* (edited by Ikehara Gyomindo in Nagoya, Japan) has been publishing Kirkup's one-line poems or haiku since 1970. The writer has compiled some of his own one-line poems into a collection: *Physical Vibrations* (Nagoya: *Poetry Nippon Press*, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> See the chapter of Note 3, especially Supplementary Note (1), and Giroux's *The Haiku Form* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1974) and review of the writer's *Studies* in *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 37 and 38 (1977).

<sup>17</sup> For an instance, see the writer's supplementary note (2) in the chapter of Note 3.

<sup>18</sup> Some 'revolutionaries' in Japan are trying to cram this short poem with plenty of contents or some grand idea. But the writer does not believe in their efforts, which may spoil the beauty of their poems. See Raisei Rinhara, *Basho wo Koyuru-mono* (What Goes Beyond Basho) (Tokyo: Ohfu Sha, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion on haiku forms, see the writer's "Supplementary Note on Haiku Forms," *Poetry Nippon*, Nos. 39 and 40 (1977).