

# On the Difficulties of Translating Haiku into English

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Alison Kirby Record and Adnan K. Abdulla

The Japanese poetic form known as haiku consists of three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively, and can be used to express a vast range of emotional subtleties. Because of its conciseness, haiku relies on the power of suggestion to induce an experience in the reader, rather than simply conveying a particular thought. The ‘meaning’ in many cases is primarily an intense feeling – not described by the poet, but actively constructed by the reader from a few spare images. The haiku aesthetic, that is to say, relying on noun-dominated language that predominantly denotes natural objects, works in an almost postmodern manner in the sense that its effect depends almost completely on the reader’s creative interpretation of the relations among its parts. It is not merely a collocation of related images, but generates an experience of a moment charged with emotional significance.

Seasonal changes mark universal attitudes – Spring evokes rebirth; Summer, maturity; Autumn decay; and Winter death. Likewise, haiku evokes the seasons and the time of day as important, if not essential, aspects of a *particular* human experience. These elements of nature are often indistinguishable from, or analogous to, the human condition, but they are not enlisted to glorify nature or natural objects for their own sake. Haiku, like all literary forms, is closely linked to the culture that helped shape it, and hence knowledge of that culture and its different aspects – language, religion, geography, customs, and history – is necessary for its effective translation. It is often such culturally specific features that are least translatable.

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Fortunately from the standpoint of translation, the gap between haiku and other forms of poetry has narrowed considerably since Ezra Pound glorified the image (a basic component of haiku) whilst interpreting and translating some poems from the Japanese and Chinese traditions in his own idiosyncratic way.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, many prominent twentieth-century poets, such as Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, either wrote poems that were influenced by the poetics of the haiku, or wrote what they intended as genuine haiku – Richard Wright being a recent example.<sup>2</sup> These developments should in principle be of assistance to the efforts of translators (those frequently unacknowledged negotiators of cultures) to introduce haiku to the Western reader. Despite these developments, however, their versions are very often closer to their own taste and sensibility than to the source text. Because of its apparent simplicity and brevity, haiku may seem straightforward enough, and this why haikus are frequently translated: Bashō's famed 'old pond' haiku has been translated into English at least 100 times.<sup>3</sup> But in reality, these features pose unique challenges.

Because the translation of poetry requires special knowledge and poetic talent, less ambitious translators tend to avoid it. This should be especially so with haiku, but unfortunately it is not, and as a result, many haiku translators handle them as if they were short prose poems. More sensitive translators, it is true, can produce highly poetic and subtle English versions, yet they too struggle to navigate the troubled waters between the source culture/language and the target culture/language. It seems appropriate to discuss the difficulties of translating haiku into English from three perspectives: the very different structures of Japanese and English, the social and cultural subtext that underlies each haiku, and the aesthetics of the literary forms that characterize both the original Japanese poems and effective translations of them.

Perhaps the most relevant elements of the Japanese language here are the absence of articles, a lack of singular and plural markers, the use of special particles that mark case relations, and major differences in word order. With regard to the syntactical position of the headword of any grammatical phrase, English is a 'headfirst' language, while Japanese is 'head-last'; in Japanese, objects come before and not

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by An Imagiste', *Poetry Magazine*, March 1913, 200-6 (hereafter 'Pound').

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (New York, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For a compilation see Hiroaki Sato, *One Hundred Frogs* (New York, 1983; hereafter 'Sato'). See further on translations of this poem Mike Borkent's article in the present issue of *T&L*.

after the verb. Finally, haiku lacks punctuation marks. Instead, the Japanese language uses grammatical markers to indicate case relations and also to suggest a variety of emotive connotations. These have no clearly translatable equivalence in English. One such particle is *ya*, which serves not only as a phrase marker (often to indicate a five-syllable boundary), but also implies a feeling of surprise or awe. This is sometimes indicated by an exclamation mark in English, but the feeling of *ya* is far subtler than this. Some Japanese particles are called *kireji* or 'cutting words', whose function in a haiku is to add emotional nuance or depth of feeling. Such words are completely lacking in English. These differences, among others, often seem to make a fully effective translation impossible.

The Japanese haiku uses all these aspects of the language to create an ambiguous, mysterious, and sometimes mystical atmosphere that resists translation. Translators usually provide the missing articles, choose between singular and plural, punctuate the poem as the target language appears to demand, and at times may even provide titles. Some of the linguistic challenges are due to the idiosyncrasies of English, which requires, for instance, articles preceding singular, concrete nouns, and the distinction between the singular and plural. However, it is not uncommon to find the articles omitted in English versions, which may at first sound somewhat 'pigeon' but may also be seen as simply an attribute of a novel poetic mode (the form already signalling this visually). After all, formal poetry is an acquired taste, and the way it uses language often seems artificial and even 'precious' upon first exposure.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of haiku translation, as well as of writing original haiku in English and other languages, emerges from the huge phonological differences between Japanese and English. At the heart of the controversy is the matter of 5-7-5. Although the term 'syllable' is used to translate the Japanese term *onsetsu*, it is crucial to understand that Japanese *onsetsu* are a very different concept from English syllables. *Onsetsu* are sound units with very precise duration, reflecting the fact that, unlike in English, long and short vowels are phonemically distinct in Japanese. Several other unique characteristics of Japanese phonology are relevant too. For example, the sound /n/ is the only consonant that can end a word in Japanese, and is counted as a separate *onsetsu*. Double consonants comprise two *onsetsu*. These details are important because they cannot be separated from the underlying aesthetic principles governing the properties of the classical haiku, and have therefore had great impact on the purposes, goals, and processes of translation. By comparison, a single syllable

in English can be of very different duration from another and still be counted as just one syllable. English does not distinguish long vowels and double consonants phonemically, and consequently they are not distinguished when counting syllables. English prosody also features a complex variation of stressed and unstressed syllables, which in turn affect the duration of the word and line.

Although these differences may seem too obvious to mention, they have rarely been taken into careful enough account when translating poems into 5-7-5 English syllables. To cite an extreme example to make the point, when one compares the word 'sensibility' with the phrase 'one huge, mean, brown bear', it is clear that although both examples consist of five English syllables, the second example feels much longer; counting in the Japanese *onsetsu* manner, 'sensibility' has five or six while the longer phrase has eleven or twelve (it is not always clear how English sounds should be counted, but the count can be approximated). Obviously, the Japanese 5-7-5 pattern needs careful treatment in English translation, and cannot be simply a mechanical production of 5-7-5 English syllables (though if the sound elements are chosen carefully, it may in some cases work well as 5-7-5). For these reasons, any attempt to fix a definite English syllable count in the translation of a 5-7-5 *onsetsu* Japanese haiku is bound to fail. It might be rendered as 4-6-4 syllables, especially by those who argue that English syllables are generally longer than Japanese *onsetsu*, or it might be a stress pattern of 2-3-2, regardless of syllables, or it could even be somewhat longer than the 5-7-5 pattern. What is needed is a clear and systematic aesthetic principle, and our argument here and elsewhere is that the principle of aesthetic equivalence can be applied to the various difficulties that have plagued the translation of Japanese haiku into English and other languages.<sup>4</sup> Instead of dismissing the Japanese 5-7-5 pattern as impossible or irrelevant to preserve in English translation, attempting to create some equivalent of 5-7-5 allows for both the Japanese original and for the idiosyncratic properties of both languages. This will be explained more fully in the next few pages.

We shall briefly mention two further features before examining some individual haiku. Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, sees spirits not only in living things but also in rocks, wind, sea, and sun. Buddhism and Shinto celebrate man's oneness with nature. Shinto

<sup>4</sup> For detailed explication of aesthetic equivalence, see Kirby Record, 'Haiku Genre: The Nature and Origins of English-Language Haiku' (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Indiana University, 1983) and 'English Language Haiku: Imitation, Adaption, and Influence', *Showa Women's University Journal*, 70/675 (1996), 45-54.

was as important as Buddhism in influencing the animistic tendencies that permeate the world of haiku. Buddhism also advocates unity with nature and respect for all living things. This is why nature is an integral part of every classical haiku. This is more flexible in modern haiku, but the same still generally holds true. More specific to the tradition is the requirement for a *kigo*, or ‘season word’ – a word that specifies which season of the year the poem refers to. Although this is not *de rigueur* in the modern Japanese haiku and its necessity is debatable, the season word was considered as essential to the classical haiku as its syllable count.

With these preliminaries in place, it will now be useful to look at an example of a haiku that every elementary school student in Japan knows by heart. Written by Bashō in 1686, it is probably the most frequently recited, discussed, and analysed haiku in the history of the genre. The Japanese text is given here, followed by the Romanized Japanese version, a word for word translation, and finally a three-line English translation of the whole:

古池や蛙飛びこむ水の音	芭蕉
Furuike ya/ kawazu tobikomu/ mizu no oto	Bashō
Old pond (grammatical marker)/ frog (s) jump in /water's sound	

An old pond  
and a frog jumps in  
the sound of water  
(our translation)

Note that this haiku could be presented as one vertical line down the page (as haiku often were historically), or in three vertical lines from right to left, or in one horizontal line from left to right. This is because the grammatical markers of Japanese and the syntactical morphemes used to indicate parts of speech, tense, or case relations clearly reveal and reinforce the 5-7-5 structure of the poem. Traditional English poetic forms require more rigid lineation.

Two features may be singled out as presenting immediate choices to the translator. The *kigo* or season word, ‘kawazu’ (‘frog’) by poetic tradition referred to the Summer, takes a form which may be either singular or plural, so that the translator must make this distinction based on an interpretation of the whole. A second aspect of the original that cannot readily be transferred to English is the use of the ideographic *kanji*, which connote meaning and feeling well beyond the phonetic reading of the signs themselves. The 5-7-5 structure is echoed by the parallel and contrasting elements of the *kanji* for ‘pond’ (池),

for 'frog' (蛙), and for 'water' (水). Here 'pond' and 'water' are both ideographic representations of water, while (leaping) in between these images, the *kanji* for 'frog' is both in contrast to and in close association with these and broader connotations of water, such as wetness, coolness, life-sustaining ability, and so on. In order for the mind to 'hear' this sound, we must blend the image (and sound) of the old pond with that of the frog jumping in; it is this unique sound of water (that can arise *only* from the frog and the pond) that we hear in the mind just as we 'see' the frog at the moment of leaping, and just after. Although the sequence is presented, as language generally makes necessary, in a linear series, the effect is one of simultaneity. As an isolated phrase, 'the sound of water' (*mizu no oto*) is so amorphous as to have almost no meaning at all.

One way to approach what could become impossibly difficult is to propose a systematic application of the principle of aesthetic equivalence in the treatment of the *kigo* and the 5-7-5 pattern. The aesthetic function of the 5-7-5 pattern is to reflect within the three-part structure the symmetry and balance of the 5 and the 5, as well as the asymmetry of the 7, placed between the two shorter lines. What is aesthetically significant about the 5-7-5 is not the *onsetsu* or syllable count *per se*, but the principle of symmetry and asymmetry created by the durational proportion of the three units. Symmetry and asymmetry are universal features of art whatever the genre and wherever we find it, because any work of art must possess a dynamic with both equilibrium and change, balance and tension. These qualities can be heard in music, seen in painting, both seen and heard in a dance performance, and apprehended through language in works of literature. Based on a principle of equivalence, the translator has numerous options: one might choose one solution for translating one haiku and another solution when faced with another. For example, 5-7-5 syllables could be the best solution in one case, a stress count of 2-3-2 in another, and a quite different syllable count in other cases. What matters are essentially two factors: the overall duration of the original, almost always 17 syllables or slightly longer, or a length of 'one-breath' duration;<sup>5</sup> and the short-long-short structure usually expressed by 5-7-5 *onsetsu*.<sup>6</sup> Surely there are cogent aesthetic reasons for the survival

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku* (Tokyo, 1957; hereafter 'Yasuda'), pp. 31-4, discusses the one-breath duration of haiku as an essential aspect of what he calls 'the haiku moment'. This includes comments on a 17-syllable duration or thereabouts, as a common length in poetic lines from Bashō to Homer.

<sup>6</sup> But not always. Only 10 of Bashō's more than 1000 haiku deviate from the 5-7-5 pattern, a percentage of less than 1%. This percentage generally applies to other haiku masters at least until Shiki.

of the 5-7-5 form for over 300 years, just as there are reasons for the durability of the sonnet form in Western tradition. We do not suggest that one must write poems in 5-7-5 or in sonnet form, merely that in matters of translation, ignoring or subverting the effect of the form will yield a very different result.

It is well known that even the classical masters would occasionally deviate from the norm; in fact, as we shall see shortly, two of Bashō's finest haiku are not 5-7-5 but rather 5-9-5 and even 5-5-7. What is most interesting about this is not the deviation itself but the fact that the exceptions validate the norm. There are very good explanations as to why a haiku master like Bashō would choose to write a particular haiku in a slightly altered form. One must ask how these deviations might be justified within the aesthetic framework previously elaborated as based on universal principles of symmetry and asymmetry. Awareness of the norm is required for readers to appreciate the brilliance of the deviations, and such is the way of art; if there are no norms, innovation and creative deviance cannot be appreciated, indeed cannot exist. These deviations are the result neither of random carelessness nor lack of skill. This matter, too, is illuminated by the notion of aesthetic equivalence.

One of Bashō's most interesting poems has a structure of 5-5-7, as follows:

海暮れて鴨の声ほのかに白し

Umi kure-te kamo no koe honoka-ni shiroshi  
(Sea darkening/the voices of wild ducks/faintly white)

the sea darkens:  
cries of wild ducks  
glow faintly white  
(our translation)

The 5-5-7 structure is unique in classical haiku, but the fact that the second and third lines could be easily reversed, yielding the expected 5-7-5 pattern, is evidence enough that Bashō ordered the lines thus for a specific reason. The blending of the sensory perceptions in this haiku is a strong feature of Bashō's use of synaesthesia, especially in his later work. The cries of the wild ducks are obviously an auditory evocation, but what follows immediately afterwards turns into a visual image. Note that this is not metaphorical in the usual sense of the term. There is no blending or cross-mapping of distinct semantic fields, as we see in traditional Western poetic metaphors, since the hearing of the ducks does not *require* the seeing of the whiteness, nor vice versa. One perception simply follows another. As suggested earlier,

what is most interesting about this metrical deviation is that it is an exception that proves the rule: it validates and draws power from the aesthetic expectations of the norm. By putting the sound of the ducks in the second line and shortening it for attention, Bashō then shifts the reader's perception from the 'hearing' of the cries to the 'seeing' of the whiteness in the ducks' flight. Bashō induces the reader to linger over the disappearing ducks in the elongated final line, which after all reflects a natural progression of events. In fact, it would be strange if Bashō had chosen to invert logical order simply to preserve the 5-7-5 pattern. How likely is it that one would first notice the faint whiteness and then hear the cries of the ducks?

We now turn to haiku translation not in theory but in historical and contemporary practice. Both here and in the writing of original haiku, the 5-7-5 pattern has been the most divisive issue. Although this is by no means more important to the haiku aesthetic than other features (such as the 'season word'), it has stimulated the most controversial responses. It is possible to categorize translators very roughly according to their treatment of 5-7-5, and we will identify here five main approaches, placing a number of the better-known recent translators into one of these classes. Some translators may fall into more than one category in different translations; these could be broken down into sub-classes as well. But our point here is not taxonomy: it is merely to bring out the diversity of approaches.

To a first category belong translators who largely disregard the 5-7-5 pattern and do not mark the boundaries of the three units either by lineation or another form of spacing. These translators instead use structures of either two or four lines, and may or may not restrict the overall duration of the haiku to around seventeen syllables. Such early translators as Nobuyuki Yuasa (four lines) and Harold Stewart (who translates haiku as rhymed couplets) belong here.<sup>7</sup> Both Yuasa and Stewart tend to exceed twenty English syllables in their translations. A second category covers the one-line translators, such as Hiroaki Sato, who generally maintains an overall length of less than seventeen syllables. He also translates the 5-7-5-7-7 *tanka* form into two lines. In this category, the haiku's line divisions tend to be marked: Lafcadio Hearn places a dash between the three units, others use a space. Third come those translators who fairly strictly maintain 5-7-5 syllables. The most prominent are perhaps Harold Henderson and Kenneth Yasuda.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Yuasa Nobuyuki, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (London, 1967). Harold Stewart, *A Chime of Wind-bells* (Tokyo, 1969; hereafter 'Stewart').

<sup>8</sup> Harold Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku* (Rutland, VT, 1957). Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku* (Tokyo, 1957).

Next are those who are not concerned with 5-7-5 but instead adopt some variant of the short-long-short structure which is at its root, and stay within an overall 'one-breath' duration. R. H. Blyth and Earl Miner are among these translators, although they deviate from this practice occasionally.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Addiss also falls into this group for most of his renderings, though he also does not hesitate to deviate.<sup>10</sup> Finally, there are translators like Aitken and Reichold, who do not seem much concerned about the short-long-short structure of classical haiku and feel free to ignore it, though adhering to a three-line pattern.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from even this cursory survey that many different approaches to translating the 5-7-5 classical structure have been taken. We should now devote some attention to the seasonal reference, or *kigo*, and the corresponding seasonal feeling, *kisetsu*. A good deal of the meaning of a haiku involves both explicit and tacit references to trees, flowers, and other natural objects which have become part of the literary tradition of haiku. The seasonal feeling was considered by scholars such as Otsuji Seki essential to the haiku experience.<sup>12</sup> Cherry blossoms and frogs are often associated with Spring, cicadas with Summer, persimmons with Autumn, and of course, snow with Winter. The season words are often, if not usually, unambiguous links to their respective seasons, as with cherry blossoms, persimmons, or snow. The frog is a Spring reference by convention, though of course, we could well see or hear a frog in summer or autumn. Very frequently, however, the season is simply identified by an explicit reference to it.

The following haiku may be considered typical of classical haiku's use of the season word:

春雨やものがたりゆく蓑と傘                      蕪村  
Harusameya monogatari yuku mino to kasa          Buson  
(spring rain/story-telling, walking/(straw) raincoat and umbrella)

Through the spring rain  
Walking and chatting together  
Raincoat and umbrella

(our translation)

This translation preserves the metonymic function of the raincoat and the umbrella, which take on the characteristics of the users. Metonymy

<sup>9</sup> Reginald Horace Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, 2 vols (Tokyo, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> *A Haiku Menagerie: Living Creatures in Poems and Prints*, translated by Stephen Addiss, Fumiko Yamamoto, and Akira Yamamoto (New York, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Aitken, *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen* (New York, 2003). Jane Reichold, *Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide* (Tokyo, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See 'Otsuji's Collected Essays on Haiku Theory', in *Otsuji Hairon Shu*, edited by Yoshida Toyo (Tokyo, 1947).

is much more prevalent in haiku than simile or overt metaphor (in the sense that we are using ‘metaphor’). Here Buson directly evokes Spring rain, arguably in a romantic context. Spring rain tends to induce different feelings from Summer or Autumn rain. Conventional associations, of course, have reinforced this, but they are rooted in the natural cycle of the four seasons. What the reader must do is imagine not only who is walking with the raincoat and who with the umbrella, but also how the quality of Spring rain affects the ambience. Does the scene suggest a young couple, a mother and daughter, two males? One could argue for either or all of these possibilities, and in doing so, invoke a very different experience with each.

What is most important about the season word is its original aesthetic function in the haiku tradition. It provides a backdrop for specific haiku moments, moments of intense awareness of nature and human beings existing within it. Inevitably, questions arise with the translation of seasonal references that do not apply as clearly, or at all, within another cultural context. Such stock seasonal references as persimmons, radishes, and certain birds and flowers may not have the same connotations as they do in Japan, or may not be known at all in other places. Furthermore, these references have specific historical, cultural, or religious connotations. This is just another example of how conventions have shaped haiku through the centuries, but it is problematic within the international haiku genre we can find today in dozens of the world’s languages (extending even to Swahili and Serbo-Croatian). Quite often, in negotiating such elements, translators stray a long distance from the original, as we shall now see from some of the translations of Bashō’s frog haiku compiled by Hiroaki Sato in *One Hundred Frogs*.

The overall point to emerge here is that individual translators interpret the different parts of the poem differently, something which might be felt inevitable. Many go even further, however, omitting significant material and inventing afresh. The following translation by William J. Porter, for instance, does both:

*Stillness*

Into the calm old lake  
A frog with flying leap goes plop!  
The peaceful hush to break.

(Sato, p. 154)

The first thing we notice is that the translator has provided a title, presumably in keeping with Western poetic tradition. Titles never appear in an original Japanese haiku. Their addition to a translation

can be construed in two ways: the translator is trying to impose on haiku a Western literary convention, and/or to supplement the limited amount of information given. Providing titles, however, tends to violate the haiku code because a title usually forms a kind of summary or even a commentary. This inevitably delimits the haiku's meaning and reduces the reader's freedom to participate in generating the poem.

It is true that haiku were once embedded within another context or discourse: until the nineteenth century, no such entity as an independent haiku even existed. Haiku, then called 'haikai' or 'hokku', always appeared in one of two literary forms: the non-fictional narrative – usually a travel narrative – called *haibun*, and the linked verse composed by a number of poets called *haikai no renga*.<sup>13</sup> These distinctly Japanese genres formed a broader context for even the most famous haiku which are now read as independent poems. But a titled poem is a quite different thing from a verse contextualized within a highly sophisticated literary genre like the *haibun* and *renga*. These non-titled forms do not restrict the reader's creative participation in the interpretation/creation of the poem.

Porter's version also uses other means to *explain* the poem to his readers. He provides extraneous explanatory words: 'calm', 'flying', 'plop', 'peaceful', 'hush', 'break'. This renders his translation both redundant and verbose, thus compromising the basic haiku tenet of concision. And the word 'plop', presumably intended to lend the poem a humorous effect, alters the tone dramatically. It is another element in what is effectively the translator's commentary: in fact, the last line and a half are entirely of Porter's invention. They destroy the simple elegance of the original in a kind of unintentional parody.

A version by Clara Walsh creates a very different effect, though no closer to the conciseness and suggestiveness of the original text. In fact, if anything this version is even more discursive, redundant, and comical:

An old-time pond unstirred, from off whose shadowed depths  
Is heard the splash where some lithe frog leaps in.

(Sato, p. 151)

The translator has opted to leave the poem without a title, but has changed the tempo to create two prosaic narrative lines in which a 'lithe' frog leaps in the pond. The simplicity of the original is replaced by a kind of summary in which the imagined 'shadowed depths' of the pond are obliterated by a splash. Walsh explicitly reminds us that the

<sup>13</sup> We draw upon Earl Miner, *Japanese Linked Poetry* (Princeton, NJ, 1979), p. 12.

frog is lithe, though it is difficult to imagine a frog being otherwise. Even more 'academic' and intellectualized is the use of the passive. And what exactly is 'an old-time' pond? Is this a kind of pond that once was common but has become extinct? Is it an elderly pond (like an 'old-timer')? The two-line arrangement is a matter to which we will return shortly, but it clearly eliminates the balance of symmetry and asymmetry discussed earlier as an aspect of the 5-7-5 original pattern.

Another problematic issue in translating haiku is the matter of rhyme, as we see in Yasuda's habitual practice:

Ancient pond unstirred  
Into which a frog has plunged;  
A splash was heard.

(Yasuda, p. 184)

Rhyme in haiku raises a more general problem of translating from any language into another: what to do with literary conventions that occur only in the source or target culture but not both? Aesthetic equivalence is sometimes hard or impossible to achieve in this case, but it is often our best guide. Yasuda is adamant about the use of rhyme, arguing that each language should make maximum use of its own resources. While rhyme does not play a prominent or systematic role in Japanese poetry (ironically, because it is so easy to rhyme in Japanese), Yasuda believes rhyme enhances the poetic quality of the English version. However, the problems of rhyme are at least threefold: it can lead to unnecessary words being added to a verse, as the above example immediately shows. It can lead to awkward violations of more important principles just to conjure up a rhyme, as we see again in this obtrusive use of the passive and slightly stilted, old-fashioned diction. A final problem with rhyme seems more fundamental. Haiku is often thought of as 'circular', 'open-ended', 'timeless'. It is not thought of as a kind of progression through material, nor a kind of argument, which is often what underlies the rhymed couplets and quatrains of Western poetry.

With regard to maximizing the assets of the target language, Harold Stewart reasons similarly to Yasuda, though he takes things much further. He writes:

Lest the reader be troubled by the adoption of the couplet for translating haiku . . . it might be opportune to repeat that the principle governing Japanese verse is the alternation of lines of five and seven in a few basic patterns which accord with the natural phrasing and breath-groups of that language. But English prosody is subject to different laws, depending on the collaboration and conflict between speech-stress and metrical

quality, modified by such factors as texture and tempo, pitch and pause. To reproduce the haiku form by a mere count of five, seven and five syllables without meter or rhyme is deceptively easy to do . . . On the other hand, the form of three lines of variable length, using rhyme in first and third lines, all too often induces distortions and dislocations of syntax, so that the resulting translation reads like a translation. In short, the couplet is an English verse-form, while the haiku is not.

(Stewart, pp. 10–11)

In accordance with his theory, Stewart renders Bashō's frog pond haiku thus:

The old green pond is silent; here the hop  
Of a frog plumbs the evening stillness: plop!  
(Sato, p. 157)

The premise here seems to be that what is most important in translation is that the formal aspects of the poem be determined more by the prosody and poetic traditions of the target language than by the original nature of the poem being translated. If we are to disregard the aesthetic properties of a poetic form simply because they don't already exist in the tradition of the target language, then one may question the value of translating them in the first place. In this case, so many characteristics of the original, and, by extension, those characteristics that have distinguished the haiku as unique among world literary forms, have fallen by the wayside in order to meet the requirements of the English rhymed couplet. We are led to consider the reverse situation: what would Stewart think of an English rhymed couplet being translated into Japanese as a three-line poem (unrhymed, of course)? It would be too extreme to assert that rhyme could never be effective in a translated haiku, but its use should not subvert the aesthetic principles of the original. In this case, too, the principle of aesthetic equivalence could guide the translator in deciding whether the use of rhyme would serve to short-circuit the haiku or return it full circle.

Several other fundamental properties of haiku are dismissed in Stewart's rendering: conciseness, objective presentation of imagery, avoidance of commentary (the original does not say anything directly about greenness, stillness, or silence). Bashō would have assumed that the reader can well understand that the ancient pond, before the frog entered it, existed there in silence, to which it soon returned. Stewart's reader is someone who has to be told this. The overall effect is finally somewhat comical in his ability, in so small a space, unintentionally to travesty so many aspects of his original.

In haiku, form is obviously prominent, so perhaps translators ought to see how close they can get. Much closer to the original form, and feeling, it seems to us, are these simple versions of our own:

The ancient pond  
And a frog jumps in  
The sound of water

Or (quite similar):

An old pond -  
Then a frog jumps in -  
The sound of water

These versions preserve the symmetry and asymmetry of the 5-7-5 with a 2-3-2-stress pattern, enhanced by the dash that extends the duration of the second line. The three consecutive stresses in the second line emphasize the action and extend the duration as well. It may seem a fine point, but the choice between indefinite and definite articles before the key nouns is worth considering. The use of the definite article before 'pond' suggests that the pond is already specified by prior knowledge of the reader, whereas the indefinite article points to any old pond. In contrast, 'the sound' of water has certainly been specified by the context. Both of these versions adhere closely to the content of the original, coming close to a simple list of its key images: old pond, frog jumping, sound of water. As with the original, there is no need to inform the reader about silence or the litheness of the frog, or to provide some phrase that renders the sound of the water (no comic 'plop', nor much too loud 'splash'). It is, after all, a frog leaping in, and we already know roughly what this sounds like (it does not sound like a beer bottle, or a chicken). In fact, Bashō's characteristic precision is exemplified by the fact that only a frog, and no other animal, could evoke the correct 'sound of water' in the context provided. This sound is also the only effective sound that can convey the circularity of the ancient pond's deep silence and the eternity it symbolizes as both frog and sound disappear without a trace.

The haiku poet does not tell but shows. In fact, a translator telling us *about it* makes it impossible for us to experience it ourselves as we can quite effortlessly on our own recognizance. The meaning of the poem arises only in the realization of experience, or as Yasuda puts it, the 'crystallization' of the poem's separate elements (Yasuda, p. 69). The catalyst for this crystallization is an emotional response to the concrete and 'objective' presentation of imagery. Both of the versions just given are almost literal translations of the words in their original order, and

this is sometimes about as good as it can get. At other times, literal translations would make little sense. We might debate the use of the simple present or the progressive, or the use of the indefinite pronoun instead of the definite one to introduce the pond, but otherwise, like Bashō's version, both translations above present the pond, the frog's leap, and the sound of water without embellishment.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of translating this poem is not a linguistic one, nor even a poetic one, but one of cultural expectations. In Japan, frogs are not farcical muppets nor repulsive creatures of fairy tale as they are in the West – nor, God forbid, morsels for the dinner table as they are in France. Perhaps the following translations reveal a misinterpretation of the poem based on a different cultural attitude toward the frog as a figure of fun, and not the beloved creature it is felt to be in Japan. It seems that a disparaging attitude towards frogs led the translators to parody:

Once upon a time there was a frog  
Once upon a time there was a pond  
*Splash!*  
(Sato, p. 170; tr. Kuenstler)

old pond  
frog jumps in  
plop fizz fizz  
(Sato, p. 173; tr. Padgett)

It is natural that cultural attitudes inform a poem's content, and closing the gap can be difficult or even impossible. In Bashō, the image of a frog evokes a momentary eruption of life between the two allusions to water – one eternal, the other transitory – before the reader's consciousness returns full circle, like the pond, to its state of tranquillity. The frog remains a frog, neither disparaged nor prized as a symbol of something else. The question of divergent cultural attitudes creates a genuine translation challenge, for in so restricted a space as the haiku, there is no room to explain or paraphrase. And a moment's reflection tells us that a haiku is the last poetic genre in which editorial or authorial notes could ever seem desirable – a point which takes us back to form.

We can now discuss a translation of another famous haiku in which the second line is expanded from the usual seven *onsetsu* to nine. Written in 1680, it was praised as marking Bashō's mature style, termed *shofu* in Japanese. Our literal translation is here followed by Kenneth Yasuda's rendering.

かれ朶に鳥のとまりけり秋の暮

kare-eda ni karasu no tomari-keri aki no kure

(withered branch/crow(s) stopping/Autumn evening or Autumn's end)

On a withered bough  
A crow alone has settled  
Autumn evening now.  
(Yasuda, p. 242)

Creative ambiguity is a characteristic of haiku language. This crow haiku makes use of a *double entendre* that cannot be translated; the translator must choose between an interpretation of *aki no kure* as 'the end of Autumn', or 'the end of the day'. This double meaning intensifies the emotional power of haiku by evoking the loneliness of the single crow surrounded by the falling dusk, on a withered, dying bough, at the end of Autumn. The bone-chilling cold of Winter is just around the corner. One meaning recapitulates and augments the other. To a reader of Japanese, both meanings are present at once, but the translator must choose between them. One approach is to provide alternative translations for the same haiku, as some translators have done.

Even to Japanese readers, another kind of ambiguity stems from the lack of markers for singular or plural number. When this haiku was first written, an unidentified *haiga* painter represented the crow as seven crows perching on various limbs as twenty more are flying towards it. At first it was thought that Bashō himself had painted this scene, but it seems more likely that a professional artist collaborated with Bashō on the painting. Bashō corrected this early interpretation by clarifying that one crow was suggested, not many.<sup>14</sup> In fact, both Bashō and his disciple, Kyoriku, painted separate *haiga* in which only one crow is present on the withered branch (Oseko, p. 2). What the *haiga* tradition shows is that not only was haiku originally thought of as part of a context, either literary or visual, but also that the blending of words and images is natural to the haiku experience.

The following translation by Leon Zolbrod reflects another important issue for haiku translation:

On a leafless branch  
A crow -  
Autumn dusk.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Leon Zolbrod, *Haiku Painting* (New York, 1982), pp. 8–9.

<sup>15</sup> *1020 Haiku in Translation: The Heart of Basho, Buson and Issa*, translated by Takafumi Saito and William R. Nelson (N. Charleston, SC, 2006), p. 6.

This version reduces the poem's elements to their minimum, but in doing so eliminates some aspects of the original which are crucial to the sense and feeling it conveys in Japanese. First, a 'withered' branch may or may not be leafless, but 'withered' is very different from simply being leafless. The connotation is that the branch is old and weathered – in a state of decay. Second, the crow is not simply there *in situ*, but has stopped or settled on the branch. The Japanese text modifies the main verb *tomari* ('stop', 'rest', 'perch') with the particle *keri*, which does double duty as a past tense auxiliary and a marker indicating exclamation or surprise. While it may be said that simply citing the crow, as the translation does, implies it has stopped, the effect is quite different from placing before one's eyes the image of the crow in the act of settling there, or of having settled there. Third, the symmetry and asymmetry of the original, in which the second line is not seven syllables but nine, must reflect Bashō's intention of lengthening the effect of the second image. The focusing of the audience on the second line in the original intensifies the sense of melancholy and foreboding as both the crow and dusk descend in the chill of autumn's end. We are invited to imagine the crow, not motionless and static, but 'landing', 'settling' – as it is approaching the branch, and then stops. The poem has the circular movement of many great haiku, but it is still movement, and the dramatic shortening of the second line in this translation results in a scene much more static than the original.<sup>16</sup>

A few final observations about lexical choice will be occasioned by returning to Yasuda's translation: 'On a withered bough | A crow alone has settled | Autumn evening now.' This preserves the sense, but it is only to achieve the rhyming of the first and third lines that the word 'now' is tacked on. It makes no semantic contribution, since we already know it is 'now'. So we might prefer:

On a withered bough  
A single crow has settled  
Autumn evening  
(our translation)

But is 'single' really better than Yasuda's 'alone'? 'Alone' points the reader towards 'loneliness', whereas 'single' requires the reader to infer the 'loneliness' implied by the single crow. Both Yasuda's and our versions choose 'bough' for 'eda', but is this choice really superior to

<sup>16</sup> Jane Reichold adopts a similar approach to the above, but her use of the verb 'lands' instead of a bare reference to the crow, as in the previous example, does create a sense of movement coming to a stop: 'on a bare branch | a crow lands | autumn dusk'. Jane Reichold, *Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide* (Tokyo, 2002), p. 59.

'branch', or 'limb'? This is a matter of diction: 'bough' seems more literary, more elegant, whereas 'branch' is the word a forester would use.

Translation is a matter of making very difficult choices, but the principle of aesthetic equivalence allows us to be more systematic about them. The most effective translations of Japanese haiku into English, our examples suggest, share the following characteristics. They give priority to the referential meaning of the original words, insofar as these references can find a clear counterpart in the translated language and culture. They adhere, when possible, to the sequence of presentation. They aim to retain the emotive connotations of the original. They reflect the 5-7-5 form by seeking a balance of symmetry and asymmetry in a long-short-long pattern (not necessarily 5-7-5 English syllables). We believe that most Japanese haiku can be translated in ways that preserve the impetus of the original, while also adopting a simple, not inelegant mode of expression. It has been said before that translation is the art of the possible.

*Yamanashi Gakuin University, Japan*  
*University of Sharjah, UAE*