

## HAIKU TOOLBOX: SYNESTHESIA

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Issue 23:3 of *Frogpond* (2000) contained an important essay on haiku poetics by *Lynx* editor Jane Reichhold, entitled *Haiku Techniques*. It formalized out loud the seemingly obvious idea that haiku had internal structures, and that different relationships between the two parts of a haiku could lead to different readings. True to this day, overmuch has been made of haiku's historical link to Zen Buddhism, and poems are often explained from a religious or spiritual perspective. Poems are rarely spoken of in technical terms. To use a poem from H.F. Noyes' *Favorite Haiku* series as an example:

The old rooster crows ...  
 Out of the mist come the rocks  
 and the twisted pine

*O Mabson Southard<sup>1</sup>*

When writing about this poem, Noyes commented on: "nature's interpenetration," "sabi and wabi," "suchness," and said, "This haiku calls forth the spirit of the universe. All of life at all times, if we could but see it, is interdependently arising, ever in flux and always meriting our attention." There is no mention of technique.

Elsewhere, Robert Spiess, in one of his famous Speculations, wrote: "Haiku poets do not so much make haiku as that they express the wonder that arises in their heart from the configuration of entities in a now moment."<sup>2</sup> The word "express" seems to suggest that there is no craft involved. As anyone who has ever attempted to write a haiku knows, that is clearly not the case.

A haiku is usually made up of two parts. For example:

old pond / a frog jumps in sound of water

Reichhold argued that what made many haiku successful were the uses of literary techniques between the two parts of the poem, techniques such as comparison, contrast, riddle, double entendre, etc. She looked under the hood of twenty-three such techniques, illustrated with examples from her own work, and suggested there were more to be found.

Japanese poet and editor Ogiwara Seisensui famously remarked of haiku, that one half is completed by the poet while the other half is supplied by the reader.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps this completion by the reader, with all their accompanying associations, that leads readers to feel haiku at the expense of understanding how they work. This is a good thing to be sure. Haiku are poems of engagement and we as poets want readers to immerse themselves in a poem. In the case of Basho's old pond: to feel the stillness of the air, perhaps smell the still pond, to hear the silence—then experience the sharp sound of the frog diving into the water. We want the reader to experience it on their own, in their own way; and they can't do that if the poet's hand is glaringly out in front. To quote a well-known saying in haiku circles: "We should see the moon, not the bejeweled finger pointing at the moon." Robert Spiess encouraged such invisibility in another of his Speculations: "Among the attributes of a haiku of excellence is that although it observes technique it has not the slightest strain of technique."<sup>4</sup> While his mention of technique is welcome, what this means however, is that the role of technique in haiku is usually invisible, and arguably underappreciated. I'd like to reverse that view, if but temporarily.

In this essay I'd like to revisit the technique Reichhold called Sense-Switching, also known as Synesthesia. Toshimi Horiuchi, in his essay *Synesthesia in Haiku*, defines it as "closely associating a sensory experience of one kind with a sensory experience of another."<sup>5</sup> It is in fact, a neurological condition, in which a sensory experience (say a sound) is interpreted by a patient as another sensory experience (say a color, or a taste). In a short form such as haiku, the combination of different sense imagery can produce interesting effects, and help broaden, or even steer a reader's reading of a poem.

## Visual vs. Auditory

The most commonly seen type of sense-switching is the comparison of visual stimuli to aural. A good example is another of Bashō's poems:

the sea darkens —  
 a wild duck's call  
 faintly white<sup>6</sup>

Here a sound (the duck's call) becomes a color (white). The commentators in Ueda's *Basho and His Interpreters* give a number of explanations of the poem: that the white is really the whitecaps on the dark sea, or the whiteness of the duck itself ... or even the imagined white breath of the duck (the poem was written in January). We can't know what Bashō intended, but the switch adds greatly to the reading of this poem. First off, it surprises us! It adds a sense of wonder, of magic. It takes a rather bleak scene (a duck on a dark sea) and makes it extraordinary. Secondly, it heightens the contrast of the duck and the darkening sea, letting each one be seen against the shadow of the other. By adding a second sense, the poet more fully constructs the scene.

A poem from Issa:

The young sparrow  
 calls its parents  
 with a yellow voice<sup>7</sup>

To me, a yellow voice is a light voice, a small voice. Here, a fledgling sparrow—a spring *kigo*—calls to its parents. But the introduction of the color yellow adds an illumination to the scene, an illumination that seems larger than just the small voice, but like the rising sun, is also the expansiveness of the season itself.

These two poems are “transformational”, meaning that one sense becomes another. In both cases, a sound becomes a color. This is more Japanese than American. Americans, most likely because of the stigma against similes, metaphors, personification, etc ... any traditional poetic device,

prefer to use sense-switching in a ‘proximate’ way, where the two senses stand side by side. A good example is a poem by Lee Gurga.

winter prairie —  
 a diesel locomotive  
 throttles down in the night<sup>8</sup>

Read by itself, our reaction to the first line is a visual one: an endless set of low rolling hills, with very little, if any, life. Maybe the one distant light of the Ingalls’ cabin. A train passing through that scene, if only a visual image, doesn’t add much. But the sound of a train does. As readers of this poem, we have now engaged a second sense. The poem is no longer a picture of a prairie, or a picture of a prairie with a train in it; it is now a picture with sound. An analogy might be like going from the old silent black and white pictures to talkies. And that second sense bleeds into the first. In this case the prairie gains a bit of life; and the sound of the locomotive gains a breadth—the breadth of the prairie. It is a sound that much like the prairie lingers long after the poem has been read.

We can also go back to O Mabson Southard’s poem to see how the introduction of a second sense enlivens the scene.

The old rooster crows ...  
 Out of the mist come the rocks  
 and the twisted pine

In this case, the sound makes the rocks and pine a bit sharper, and perhaps more alive as possible animate objects.

The sense-switching in the Gurga and Southard poems isolated each part of the poem, yet strengthened the poem overall. In a poem by Benjamin Moeller, this happens as well, but because of the closeness of the two parts of the poem, it helps to create a more unified scene.

one star  
 now two ...  
 frog songs<sup>9</sup>

The following poems by Harr and Hoyt are interesting, because they are both doing a similar thing, but with different results.

After the snowfall ...  
 deep in the pine forest  
 the sound of the axe.

*Lorraine Ellis Harr*<sup>10</sup>

In that empty house,  
 with broken windows rattling,  
 a door slams and slams.

*Clement Hoyt*<sup>11</sup>

In the Harr poem, the sound of the axe makes the forest that much emptier; yet in the Hoyt, the sound of the house makes it seem livelier.

One interesting feature of sense-switching is its ability to draw attention to a particular part of a poem. In the case of the below poem, the switch forces a particular reading.

the telephone  
 rings only once  
 autumn rain

*Nick Avis*<sup>12</sup>

In this poem, ask yourself if you saw the autumn rain or heard it? The focus on sound in the first half directs the reading of the second half. If the two parts of the poem were switched, and the rain came first, I would expect half of the readers to see the rain.

### Visual vs. Olfactory

The poems discussed so far have all been a pairing of a visual image with a sound. But there are other senses. The following poem by LeRoy Gorman pairs a scent with an image.

for the smell  
 I plane another shaving  
 snow buries my tracks from the house<sup>13</sup>

In this poem, the rich smell of the wood shavings evokes a workshop. When we switch to the visualization of the snowfall, I find—because my sense of smell has been engaged—that the snowfall also has a heavy smell to it. It’s not a workshop scent; but a smell of its own. I’ll admit the scent of snow is rather elusive, but I know it as a heavy, yet clean scent. Another poem by Lee Gurga:

the smell of the iron  
as I come down the stairs  
winter evening<sup>14</sup>

The Gurga poem is wonderful for a number of reasons. ‘winter evening’ on its own conjures up a crispness to the air, which the iron smell seems to flatten a bit (no pun intended), and then I find myself smelling other winter smells: wood smoke, evergreens—none of which would be possible if the iron smell hadn’t opened my reading up to smells. Another:

a shower darkens —  
in the summer bookstore  
the smell of new novels

*Burnell Lippy*<sup>15</sup>

This is a nice contrast. The light, woody smell of new books, against a dim, damp evening outside. In the Procsal poem below, it turns out that the deserted field isn’t so deserted after all.

deserted field —  
on waves of heat  
wild onion scent

*Gloria H. Procsal*<sup>16</sup>

Haiku poets, and editors especially, speak a lot about “showing” and not “telling.” Yet how do you show the unseen onions without mentioning them? In this case, through smell. And the reader make the connection.

## Visual vs. Tactile

Another category of sense-switching is the pairing of visual images with tactile impressions. Another poem from Lorraine Ellis Harr:

A hot summer wind —  
 shadows of the windmill blades  
 flow over the grass.<sup>17</sup>

With a different first line, the shadows—essentially insubstantial—could easily be seen as weightless. But the pairing in this poem with a hot summer wind that we can feel adds a heaviness to the last lines. The Japanese masters used tactile impressions quite a bit, in phrases like “summer wind,” “autumn coolness,” and my favorite, “the heat!” Tactile impressions, especially about the weather, are powerful ways to open a poem to additional senses. A haiku by Michael Dylan Welch,

toll booth lit for Christmas —  
 from my hand to hers  
 warm change<sup>18</sup>

Christmas lights on their own are a cold, outdoor image. Welch adds a humanity, a personalization to them through the touch of the toll booth attendant. That the attendant is of the opposite sex adds a different glow to the scene. One from John Wills:

a box of nails  
 on the shelf of the shed  
 the cold<sup>19</sup>

How much harder do the nails feel because of the pairing with the cold?

earthshine  
 on the new moon  
 first kiss

The Heiberg poem is a wonderfully sensual poem. The sense of newness, excitement, or possibility in a first kiss makes a great contrast to an ordinary celestial event. Yet rather than simply see the moon, we feel it. The pairing brings the moon a bit closer, making it less cold and distant.

#### Visual vs. Gustatory

I found only one example of the pairing of a visual image to a taste—in Jane Reichhold's *Frogpond* essay—which is surprising since it is an interesting pairing of senses. Her own poem:

home-grown lettuce  
the taste of well-water  
green<sup>21</sup>

I'll add my own as further illustration.

van Gogh's *Starry Night*  
the too-sweet taste  
of cotton candy

#### Olfactory vs. Auditory

Because we are such visual creatures, sense pairings that don't involve sight are the least tangible, yet they can produce stunning effects. A pairing of scent and sound from Claire Everett:

scent of snow  
unable to recall  
my father's voice<sup>22</sup>

While she can't recall the exact voice, I find a confusion of all voices in this poem that works nicely with the scent of snow, which I find equally hard to pin down. The last two lines are like entering a crowded room and trying to isolate something unidentifiable that's just a whisper. But

without that “scent of snow” line, the last two lines would just be a comment. And rather than hear a variety of voices, I’d hear just the poet’s.

Another of mine:

the long creak  
of the front door  
her perfume

#### Tactile vs. Auditory

Mathematically, if you have five senses, there are four other senses you can combine each with. But since each is duplicated in the process (sight vs. sound is the same as sound vs. sight) there are really only ten possible combinations. An example from Gary Hotham of combining touch and sound:

unsnapping  
the holster strap  
summer heat

*Gary Hotham*<sup>23</sup>

Summer heat is oppressive, heavy. That tactile impression makes a nice contrast for a sharp, metallic sound. The heat makes the sound linger longer than it would on its own. Here, each sense stands out sharper. Two others:

The sound of a mouse  
Treading on a plate  
Is cold.

*Buson*<sup>24</sup>

Spring morning      gravedigger whistling

*George Swede*<sup>25</sup>

### Multiple and Other

The combination of senses can add to the fullness of a poem, and it would be logical to think that if two senses are good, then three must be better. Horiuchi, in his paper *Synesthesia in Haiku*, seems to suggest so. He offers the following examples<sup>26</sup>:

Islands all around,  
each with its pine tree; and the wind —  
how cool its sound

*Shiki*

The old man's voice  
is the color of his hair  
this frosty night

*Gregory D. Cottrell*

These haiku are too busy for my taste and lack focus. The multiple sensory inputs send the reader in too many directions at once. The best haiku are those that engage the reader, and sense imagery can help to expand the reader's palate, but the best haiku are more importantly focused.

This paper has looked at the major senses and how their pairings with other senses can deepen the reading of a haiku experience, and some would rightly suggest that in addition to our traditional five senses there are the elusive sixth sense, spatial sense, the sense of time, and probably others. For these the benefits of an effective pairing would be the same.

Ultimately, haiku are about engagement—about getting the reader to engage with the scene that the poet is presenting, or more specifically, with the sense images that the poet delivers—that hopefully create a scene. In a form as brief as haiku every image needs to work to its fullest extent. As I mentioned earlier, perhaps the effect of a multi-sensory haiku can be thought of as going from silent films to talkies. That's quite a change.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>H.F. Noyes, *Favorite Haiku: Volume 1* (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 1998), 31.
- <sup>2</sup>Robert Spiess, *A Year's Speculations on Haiku* (Madison, Wis.: Modern Haiku Press, 1995), 30.
- <sup>3</sup>Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Poets and the Nature of Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983), 313.
- <sup>4</sup>Spiess, *A Year's Speculations on Haiku*, 17.
- <sup>5</sup>Toshimi Horiuchi, *Synesthesia in Haiku and Other Essays* (Philippines: University of the Philippines, 1990), 1.
- <sup>6</sup>Makoto Ueda, *Basho and his Interpreters* (Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 123.
- <sup>7</sup>Horiuchi, *Synesthesia in Haiku and Other Essays*, 3.
- <sup>8</sup>Cor van den Heuvel, ed., *The Haiku Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 59.
- <sup>9</sup>*A Hundred Gourds 1:4*, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://ahundredgourds.com/ahg14/haiku09.html>
- <sup>10</sup>van den Heuvel, *The Haiku Anthology*, 65.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid, 88.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid, 6.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid, 51.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid, 59.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid, 106.
- <sup>16</sup>*Frogpond: Vol XXIV No. 2* (2001), 8.
- <sup>17</sup>van den Heuvel, *The Haiku Anthology*, 66.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid, 269.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid, 305.
- <sup>20</sup>*The Herons Nest Vol. XIV #3*, Sept, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://www.theheronsnest.com/page1=123.html>
- <sup>21</sup>Jane Reichhold, "Haiku Techniques," *Frogpond: Vol XXIII No. 3* (2000), 68.
- <sup>22</sup>*The Herons Nest Vol. XIV #3*, Sept, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://theheronsnest.com/page4=123.html>
- <sup>23</sup>van den Heuvel, *The Haiku Anthology*, 85.
- <sup>24</sup>Horiuchi, *Synesthesia in Haiku and Other Essays*, 7.
- <sup>25</sup>van den Heuvel, *The Haiku Anthology*, 212.
- <sup>26</sup>Horiuchi, *Synesthesia in Haiku and Other Essays*, 6.