GRAHAM SWIFT'S POEMS: SIMILARITIES WITH HAIKU

Irina-Ana Drobot
Technical University of Civing Engineering, Bucharest

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse Graham Swift's poetry technique in comparison with Japanese haiku. The theories by Corneliu Traian Atanasiu (the haiku professor of the Romanian Haiku Group) will add insight to the way Swift's poems both resemble and differ from Japanese haiku. Concrete imagery, brevity, and allusions are features which are found both in haiku and in Swift's poems. Swift combines another culture with his own by adapting haiku techniques to Western poetry. The comparison with haiku helps us gain insight into understanding Swift's particular poetic style.

Keywords: lyricism, culture, ellipsis, juxtaposition, mere-exposure effect.

Motivation. Western versus Eastern poetry

From intertextuality to honkadori, from subjectivity to objectivity, from imagination to reality, Graham Swift's poems and Japanese haiku have much in common. Swift never writes anything about Japanese haiku in his autobiographical writings and never mentions it in interviews. However, we notice the influence of Japanese haiku on his poetry in *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, which consists of his careful choice of words, his allusions, and ways of inviting his readers to imagine something more than he puts on paper. The Japanese haiku is elliptical: the few words put down on paper invite readers to reconstruct a scene, just like Swift's poems do. His poems rely on the readers' imaginations to make connections with his previous writings. It only takes a few words of his poems to bring to mind similar scenes in his novels. In order to draw technical comparisons between his poetry and Japanese haiku, a few words about haiku are necessary.

Poetry is a reflection of culture, and two different cultures could only have produced very different types of poems. Japanese haiku stands as a prime example of a very different sort of approach to reality than the sort we see in Western poetry. Many Westerners have attempted, and plenty of them have succeeded in, understanding and writing haiku. However, a Westerner wishing to write haiku must go into a very different frame of mind. A Westerner must first learn to relate to a totally different culture and to its philosophy of life.

Corneliu Traian Atanasiu, the author of *Slowly Dripping*, draws our attention to the fact that Westerners not only write but feel poetry differently than Easterners. For the Easterners, poetry "Exists the same way reality exists. Perhaps even more than reality". (Atanasiu 2013: 79) For the Eastern poets, "the ontological status of poetry is not different from that of reality" (Atanasiu 2013: 79). In contrast, "the Western art's temptation is a God-like one, of creating other worlds to replace an unworthy reality where you feel you cannot live" (2013: 78).

This is the first and most important feature of haiku poems. We can use haiku as an exercise for viewing the world from other angles. What matters is how we cut through reality to keep only the significant details in the poem, leaving the readers to complete what is not said. Haiku is "an open work" (Atanasiu 2013: 9), we are told right away. Haiku is like "a dramatic

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text with no scenic indications" (Atanasiu 2013: 10), like "a laconic allegory" Atanasiu (2013: 14).

The author discusses various definitions of haiku in order to illustrate that obeying the formal rules does not guarantee that we can write good haiku. He examines the rule of the number of syllables, of the presence of the kigo (a reference or an allusion to the season), of the possibility of finding answers to the questions where, what, how? This is why the book begins with the following: "You will be able […] to get a glimpse of the inside of this small poem by observing its intimate resorts, which make it so lively and full of spirit" (Atanasiu 2013: 5). Reading about and learning the rules only brings you a simplistic idea about what haiku is, claims the author. In order to show us what haiku is, he brings examples and asks us to read them.

The book then analyses cliché symbols typical to Westerners such as the blind beggar and orphaned children. These images are associated in Western culture with pity, but their presence in a haiku does not guarantee its quality. On the contrary. However, Westerners resonate more strongly with such images than with the kigo used by the Japanese.

Intertextuality, allusion, honkadori

Haiku poems originate in Japan. The debate concerning the exact number of syllables is ongoing, and the classic 5-7-5 syllable pattern for three lines is not necessarily common throughout the online haiku communities. Haiku communities have known great development through online communication among members and through the creation of workshop groups and online kukai types of contests. To these, periodical publishing in online and print journals can be added.

Different cultural experiences can combine in order to create a good haiku, and great haiku authors can now be found all over the world. Cultures do not differ completely. We can find in different cultures universal patterns or similar frames of mind which can facilitate Western authors to understand and write haiku, even though this type of poem originated in Eastern culture. Poetry can be seen as part of human nature, and different cultures which produce poetry, although they produce it differently, do have similar features which can be found in their poetry.

However, there are traits specific to certain cultures. Understanding them can get us closer to belonging to the respective group: "Culture is always a collective phenomenon, a collective programming of the intellect, which distinguishes the members belonging to a certain group or category from those of another." (Hofstede, 1994).

In this sense, haiku writers that belong to a certain group, Romanian, African, American, or European, can be regarded as forming a particular culture. Their frame of mind is programmed collectively, according to Hofstede. By belonging to a certain group, or culture, they start forming, each and every member, a particular way of thinking and of viewing the world which is reflected in the way they write poems.

This definition of culture resonates with the way Corneliu Traian Atanasiu defines imitation in haiku writing as a currently encountered phenomenon:

"Imitating without realizing it means that you do it unaware that a similar poem has been written. Determined only by the chance that you had a similar experience and you have

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written the poem in the environment of a community where such experiences have been felt previously and were recorded by the poems." (Atanasiu 2015c)

In his definition, Atanasiu keeps in mind that group influence plays a significant role in shaping its members' minds. As part of the same group and culture, the members of his haiku community influence one another and this is reflected in the similarity of their poems.

In his essay for the Imitating a Good Haiku Contest, with which Atanasiu (2015c) challenges the members of his haiku group for the month of October, he analyses comparatively two similar poems, one by Şerban Codrin: "apple trees in bloom -/ I have everything before me/ on the empty table," and one by Argentina Stanciu: "empty larder –/ in the overflowing bucket/ the moon." In Atanasiu's analysis, the two authors have managed to create two equally valuable poems. The first one, written by Codrin, could be considered the original. The other one, by Stanciu, was written later, and, while similar, is equally valuable. In Atanasiu's words,

"I have rarely met a poem confirming more consistently that quality poems can be written by imitating a good poem. I do not know if the author of the poem which I will be talking about really knew the poem by Şerban Codrin: *apple trees in bloom -/ I have everything before me/ on the empty table*, whether she really took after it as a model or whether she simply imitated it without being aware of that. Either way, she confesses that the meaning of the poem she wrote would ultimately amount to the idea that, in order to be happy, you should not ask for too much, something that any reader can notice after reading both poems." (Atanasiu 2015c)

In proposing this type of exercise, Atanasiu emulates the exercise the Japanese call *Honkadori*, where the disciples (haijin) are asked to capture the structure and spirit of a particular original haiku by writing their own.

These types of experiences bring to mind the theory of intertextuality. Yet, could we talk here about intertextuality or of allusion?

Ziva Ben-Porot, in *The Poetics of Literary Allusion*, 1976: 107-108) defines allusion as follows:

"The literary allusion is a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts. The activation is achieved through the manipulation of a special signal: a sign (simple or complex) in a given text characterized by an additional larger 'referent.' This referent is always an independent text. The simultaneous activation of the two texts thus connected results in the formation of intertextual patterns whose nature cannot be predetermined. […] The 'free' nature of the intertextual patterns is the feature by which it would be possible to distinguish between the literary allusion and other closely related text-linking devices, such as parody and pastiche." (Ben-Porot 1976: 107-108)

Once again, this definition resonates with the theory of imitation proposed by Atanasiu, which can lead to the creation of high-quality haiku poems by authors sharing the same patterns of thinking. Yet, contrary to the function of allusion in most Postmodernist texts, the function of allusion in imitating haiku poems is different. It is not about irony, at least in the examples previously discussed. It is simply about expressing a similar life-experience or means of perception.

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Intertextuality is, according to the *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, a term

"coined by Julia Kristeva in her study of Bakhtin's work on dialogue and carnival (1969a). The basic premise of the theory of intertextuality is that any text is essentially a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts; a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. Intertextuality is not simply a matter of influences which pass from one author to another, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic terms. 'Influence' is simply one mode of intertextuality." (Macey 2001: 203-204)

The examples of the two similar haiku poems show clearly the idea of influence. The influence seems to come from a universal way of thinking and of understanding the world. This experience could originate in the group influence or in human nature. According to Baciu, "The concept of human nature is a common part of everyday thought. All humans, irrespective of origin, race or intellectual standard exhibit some common features that could complete what may be called a 'universal mental software zone'." (Baciu 2013: 18) Thus, this way of seeing life could be part of Romanian culture, to which the two authors both belong, or simply of human psychology.

Tom Furniss, in *Allusion, Influence, and Intertextuality* (2002-2003), defines intertextuality as "an umbrella term for the different ways in which texts interrelate with each other (allusion, imitation, influence, parody, pastiche, and so on)." According to him, "Allusions may be textual or non-textual." Non-textual allusions might be "references to people, events, topics or well-known facts." On the other hand, textual allusions are "deliberate verbal echoes of earlier texts." Thus, according to Furniss, the difference between intertextuality and allusion does not exist if we think of intertextuality as an umbrella term which includes allusion.

From Furniss' definition, only the ideas of allusion and imitation describe the phenomenon of similarity between the two poems. The question remains, however, whether this has been done unawares or simply because the two authors share similar patterns of thought.

The contemporary definition of intertextuality contributes to the understanding of the role of intertextual references:

"In contemporary usage, intertextuality does not only refer to the relationship between texts but also includes everything 'known' by the reader. Thus, it provides depth to the fictional reality (Intertextuality). […] Chandler argues that the usage of intertextuality in modern culture: 'is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition' (Chandler)." (Denne Welin 2007: 6)

In this definition we find once again references to recognized shared experiences. The readers can also be drawn into these shared experiences. Usually, intertextual references are supposed to be there intentionally. The authors are aware of using them and of the effect they can have on the reader. In contrast, the experience of similar haiku poems comes unexpectedly, while the authors believe the experiences they write about are personal and unique.

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Swift's going back to other texts is a means of offering a new perspective to judge the story and the characters. While Swift is uncomfortable with the idea that his writing style is influenced by other authors, he has been able to view his role as a writer from a different angle, based on other writers' experiences. In *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, he claims:

'Which writers have influenced you?' is a complicated question. […] The word 'influence' itself is misleading. It assumes that one writer's writing can directly shape and inform another's, as it can, but surely the most important influences aren't influences in this sense at all. They are those writers who, though they may not leave on you any stylistic mark, yet ignite or reignite your simple desire to write. (Swift 2009: 19)

The writer Swift talks about is Isaac Babel. Later on, Swift judges his beginnings as a writer, and his inspiration, from an outside perspective: he compares himself with John Fowles. Swift reveals his desire to become a writer by comparing himself with an already accomplished writer and his beginnings. Although Swift denies being a faithful copy of Fowles, he notices similarities:

There is the fairly-well-known case of John Fowles, who went to teach on a magical Greek island and found there the inspiration for a successful novel. I don't recall if I saw myself as following his example. […]

There was no magical island. I was sent to Volos, a port on the east coast, largely destroyed by an earthquake in the 1950s and unattractively rebuilt. (Swift 2009: 42)

Like his characters, Swift applies parts of known experience to new experiences - perhaps in an attempt to make sense of them, and to sympathize with other persons. He judges his first editor in comparison with his father:

He was the same age as my father, and there were other parallels. They had the same name – my father taking the double 'l'. They'd both been in the navy in the war, serving on Arctic convoys to Murmansk, which had left in Alan's case (though I don't think my father escaped lightly) some terrible memories and a chronic need for warmth. They both had a quiet, modest core. But there the resemblances stopped, lost in that gulf between South Kensington and South Croydon, now filling anyway with a ruby-pink haze. (Swift 2009: 61)

Here Swift brings his editor closer to himself, since comparing him to his father makes Swift understand him better. At some point in time, father and son come to an understanding: "If I could meet him now/ There wouldn't be that gap between us" (Swift 2009: 233) says Swift in his poem *To His Dead Father*. In a similar way, readers can get a sense of familiarity by finding parallels with previously known texts in Swift's novels.

By judging themselves through other frames of mind authors offer themselves and the readers a new perspective on their present problems, and the occasion to go deeper and understand the others, just as Swift describes it in his poem *Another*: "To see ourselves as others see us:/ That's one thing/ But to see others when they don't see us,/ […] That's another" (Swift 2009: 267). The issue of understanding other characters is common to any novel, according to J. Hillis Miller:

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The fact that a novel is made of words means that it is also a form of consciousness. The reading or criticism of Victorian fiction is therefore, like any other reading or criticism, to be defined as consciousness of the consciousness of another. Through the act of reading the reader tries to identify himself with another mind and to reexperience from the inside the

feelings and thoughts of that mind. Reading a novel is a form of intersubjectivity. (Bloom, ed. 2005: 201)

We go back to the past because it opens for us new possibilities of understanding our present situation, as Swift suggests in his poem *Perspective*: "Understand your position./ Understand the anguish of the painter/ Who long ago in some Flemish town/ Looked from his window and painted what he saw/ So it would remain, it its frame,/ Like another window on another world." (Swift 2009: 265). However, reflection on the past does not fit with the traditional haiku frame of mind.

The extraordinary in the ordinary

According to Lindsay, Swift's novels

deal with the extraordinary in the ordinary. His novels are about ordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. However, in their voices Swift ponders some of the bigger issues of life - death, birth, marriage and sex - as well as the everyday politics of relationships and friendships. His intricate narrative patterns raise questions about the relationship between personal histories and world events, between personal and public perceptions. (Lindsay 2002)

The same can be said about his poems, as he uses the same writing style. Stef Craps (2005: 177) states that Swift's language is "characterized by its attempts to improvise a fugitive lyricism out of the patterns of 'ordinary' speech". Everyday life is presented poetically: "So this is their life, what they do every day,/ [...] No, no, look again. It's not what it seems." (Swift 2009: 232) The words Swift uses in this quotation from *Rush Hour* are very simple. Just like in haiku poetry:

"The supreme elegance of the poem is felt by its relaxed reading. Nothing is forced or difficult in the formulation. It is like reading while you are riding in a vehicle some extremely simple advertisements made specifically for not giving you the work of deciphering and directly saying (only) what there is to say. Without pretensions or unnecessary precious or parasitic words." (Atanasiu 2015)

Some of Swift's poems are in fact very short, such as *Another*, *The Dead*, *Homings*, *Affection*, and *Civilization*. All these poems sound very natural and simple, just like Atanasiu describes haiku poems.

The poem *Another*, in very few words, allows us to reflect beyond the words that are written down. "To see ourselves as others see us:/ That's one thing." (Swift 2009: 267) After these very simple lines, which are written in haiku spirit, although they offer a statement rather than a concrete image we are given lines which remind us of the more familiar Western type of

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lyricism: “But to see others when they don’t see us,/ When they aren’t just part of our own grey penumbra,/ In their own sweet, bright, unshadowed space:/ That’s another.” (Swift 2009: 267) The images Swift uses bring to mind haiku concrete imagery, partly, as he mentioned a “bright, unshadowed space”. At the same time, he combines “sweet” with this type of space, resulting in a personification which is not allowed in haiku poetry.

Another technique Swift borrows and adapts from haiku is that of juxtaposition of images:

“Joining the two parts of the poem is also, apparently, random. It was just accidentally that two phrases, otherwise trivial, happened to be side by side. That is a haiku’s refinement, to give the impression that things were not planned, that behind them there is no intent. To give you food for thought without seeming to do so deliberately.” (Atanasiu 2015b)

Swift searches for the extraordinary aspects found in the ordinary. The joining together of images and statements, in his case, seems spontaneous, yet most likely every single word was deliberately chosen for its power of allusion. In *Affection*, for example, the word mentioned in the title is coupled with several images, “no fires within”, “affection, flickering from skin to skin”, and “Just simple affection,/ Warming the air in between.” (Swift 2009: 267) By using these images Swift offers a better understanding of how he views affection and what he means by it (though statement as explanation is not permitted in haiku). He makes use once again of a haiku technique while simultaneously disregarding the rules:

“Two images whose tension increases when they are placed one next to the other, through the power of the silence where the allusions are at work, amplifying the little that is said in concentric, full of vibrations, contexts.” (Atanasiu 2015a)

Swift once again defies the rules as he refers to issues regarding memory in his poems. For instance, in *Relapse*, he does not only refer to the present. Haiku is the poem of the present. In *Relapse*, Swift uses both concrete imagery and reflections and abstract ideas typical to Western lyricism: “These things that were still there,/ Like scorched flowers under winterloads of ice (Swift 2009: 266)”. The concrete imagery is very striking, just like in haiku. However, unlike haiku, Swift talks directly about memories afterwards: “Memory caving in, an avalanche of the brain”. The image of flowers under ice evokes the way winter flowers were used as kigo theme for the Shiki Monthly Kukai in the poem by Cezar Ciobica: “ice flowers.../ the weight of words/ I never said”. The way this haiku poem works is explained by Atanasiu (2015a):

As you are reading the poem, you hesitate between accepting the tenderness of the ice flower and their being stone-cold, between tenderness and power (weight). The juxtaposition makes you gain an allegorical vision of the poem. The ice flowers are the result of avoiding difficult, heavy words in a conflictual situation, the equivalent of silence, of unspoken words. However, in another situation, where you should confess your admiration, they can also be the words you would like to say but cannot say, as you know they would not live up to the expectations of what is to be said.

The ice flowers are an oxymoron. We find in them the grace and fragility of flowers but also the burden of the heavy ice. Last, but not least, there is the weight, that is, the value, of the

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unspoken words. The delicate and silent arabesque lying on the transparency between two human beings left speechless, overcome by emotions.

Similarly, Swift draws attention to the way memory works, using the image of the flowers preserved under ice. The fact that we notice similar issues addressed in haiku and Western poetry may have to do with mannerism: "Haiku poetry often seems mannerist poetry. Both due to the techniques used and due to the fact that it addresses the same issues." (Atanasiu 2015b)

The rule that Swift often breaks has to do with discretion. In the poem *Relapse*, after using the concrete image, he mentions memory directly. We make the connection right away. In a haiku poem, this would not only be an interdiction but an unnecessary repetition. To an Easterner, just the concrete image would have been enough. Haiku relies only on objects and their power of suggestion. Yet, Swift seems to adapt haiku techniques to be understood by the Western frame of mind. Otherwise, unused to reading haiku, we would have risked misinterpreting the poet's experience.

Ellipsis in haiku comes hand in hand with discretion: "The poem's most important quality is its discretion. The author communicates just a state of things and, by the way in which she discloses it, an attitude towards it – a restraining, distant, unapproachable one." (Atanasiu 2015)

In this way, the reader is left with more to imagine. Even so, Swift adapts this technique, only presenting, for instance, in the poem *To His Dead Father*, a few words and ideas summarized in the end: "We'd be like equals, brothers, friends" (Swift 2009: 233). Something has happened, and memories have taken a son back to his father who is no longer there. Now the same age as his father was, he would like to have a dialogue with him. This idea leads us who know Swift's novels to *Shuttlecock*, where Prentis wonders about what his father has thought and done as a war spy. Once again, like in the poem *Relapse*, we find the image of freezing: "Their age freezes, but we go on". What follows manages to create a contrast like in haiku: "Burning the years" (Swift 2009: 266). Freezing and burning are opposites, yet they manage to come together. Swift uses abstract ideas combined with concrete images, adapting again the Westerners' frame of mind to haiku technique.

While it is not clear whether the similarity of Swift's poems to haiku is a simple coincidence, the resemblance to haiku has been noted by critics. Vianu states about his novels: "Each incident is perfect, a haiku in movement." (2006: 171) The stream-of-consciousness style of Swift has, according to her, a distinctive feature: "Memorable sentences, short poems, almost haiku-like (with European countenance, though), pop up in every paragraph" (2005: 298). Malcolm (2003: 202) refers to the descriptions in *The Light of Day* as "gumshoe haiku". The similarities with haiku in Swift's work could have to do with the influence of Imagism on Modernism. Swift took over the stream-of-consciousness from Modernism. The influence of haiku on Imagism is recalled by the famous poem imitating haiku by Ezra Pound, *In a Station of the Metro*.

Conclusions

Swift's adaptation of haiku technique goes hand in hand with presenting a unique view on everyday reality. However, this very idea is contradictory and built on contrasts reminiscent of haiku.

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Kao (2011) views the poem as "a unique perspective". She draws this idea from W.H. Auden, who believes that a poem "must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective." Swift achieves this both in his poems and in his prose writings. In his prose, he uses allusions to previous texts to describe the way various characters view the same reality from different perspectives. Memories, problems with relationships, understanding oneself and the world one lives in, looking into the past for present-day problems, dealing with the loss of the loved one, all these are issues anyone can come across in everyday life. Everyday life becomes something unique; every incident can gain features associated with poetry in Swift's writings.

However, the question remains of how Swift actually achieves this "unique perspective". His writing style is not the usual lyrical style. Yet it is not the usual, contemporary, colloquial style of most poets either. Sometimes he uses statements, almost like full sentences. Sometimes he seems to write a story with plot (such as in *On the Bridge* and *The Virtuoso*). Sometimes he makes use, as we have seen, of concrete imagery mixed with reflections. Other times the whole poem sounds very philosophical and reflective (such as *The Waves*, and *Perspective*). Why would readers be interested in his poems, after they have been interested in his novels? Swift uses the mere-exposure effect, which states that we prefer something because it is familiar to us. We are familiar with his novels, we have enjoyed them, and now, since most of his poems show us allusions to his novels, and since we recognize his writing style, we will enjoy them as well.

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