

## HAIKU SYNCHRONICITY

I was on a train to London the other day. Sitting opposite & next to me were a couple of blokes on their way to Twickenham to watch a rugby match. When they'd run out of their own conversation about things going on in the construction industry, the more obviously affable of the two turned to me and said, "So where are you going today?"

I asked him if he wanted the five hour version or the two minute one; they opted for the latter so I told them I was off to a Haiku Conference (in fact, it was the Annual General Meeting of the British Haiku Society (12<sup>th</sup> November 2016) but that didn't seem quite as grand as 'Haiku Conference'...) Did they know what a haiku was? One of them did. I just said it was it was the result of looking at the world in a different kind of way without thinking about it too much. A particular way originating in Japan.

"You don't look Japanese!"

They wanted to know what I was reading; it turned out that since they'd left school (I'd say around twenty years ago) they'd only read three books between them. I said I couldn't imagine what it must be like not to be reading – "I've been called a 'chain reader': while I'm reading one book I'm wondering what to read next..."

To reestablish rapport I said how I have a passion for brick-laying. The result of my efforts might not pass professional inspection but, "I've been fascinated from childhood by the way the runny stuff you carefully smooth between the bricks in the afternoon goes solid by morning."

One of them said, "I've never thought about it like that. That's a different way of looking at the world – like writing a haiku, I suppose..." No need for my five hour version! It's called 'one trial learning'!

The following day, hunting through a very early volume of *Blithe Spirit*, the British Haiku Society journal which I've often edited, I found an essay I wrote in 1992 which might have formed the basis of the five hour version the two chaps from the construction industry declined. I haven't advanced much in my thinking – or perhaps I've just been consistent.

Here's the essay:-

### **An Apology by a Westerner Writing Haiku**

"Haiku...? What the hell's a haiku...? Japanese poem...? You're not Japanese – what are you doing writing haiku...?"

Occasionally you get challenged by people who don't even write 'poetry' to explain why you write haiku: to talk about the influence of Japanese culture, seems to me to be absurd if you've never been to Japan; the nearest I can get to thinking about making sense is to explain the attraction of [the Alan Watts' version of] Zen as a way of thinking, but people are equally baffled when all you can do to explain yourself is to throw your fan out of the window or tip a glass of water on the floor which is, so I understand, the Zen way.

In any case, I'm not completely convinced that my interest in the 'spirit of haiku' did really begin when I read *The Way of Zen* in the early sixties; I don't think I would have been so captivated by Alan Watts' writing if my mind had not already been made a fertile seed-bed in some other way.

Tracing the mind-trails that lead to present moments is always fascinating; while the trail is being blazed you're too busy doing what they call 'learning' to keep track of the evolving pattern – once the pattern is established it's difficult to unravel: what, for instance, brings one person to see a haiku as a focus for the entire universe while another says dismissively, "So what?" Is there a moment in childhood when some people make a choice to be forever locked into immediacy, concreteness, the Suchness of things, while others fix on, say, money to locate (and therefore lose) themselves in a web of possessions and organised diversions?

More specifically, I wondered if I had read some Western thinker whose ideas might have played on my mind to make it easy to become 'haiku-hooked' when Watts came my way. I have always enjoyed the encapsulation of 'little moments' in poetry because they leave you puzzled, amazed, contemplative; they reverberate in the mind long time to come: D H Lawrence's 'At the Bank in Spain' can serve as a random example:-

Even the old priest, in his long black robe and silvery hair  
came to the counter with his hat off, humble at the shrine,  
and was immensely flattered when one of the fat little clerks of the bank  
shook hands with him.

It is often pointed out that Zen-think, such as this, occurs in literature other than Japanese: it manifests itself in a regard for the moment, for the specificity of objects (*sono-mama*), allows them to stand without comment to do their work in the mind. The opposite occurs '...when we concentrate on a material object... [then] the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object...' Explanations, footnotes, unwrapping ideas (as now) paradoxically work towards the defeat of ideas; a good bit of advice for haiku-writers might be that, '...novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment...' (Vladimir Nabokov). Matter in itself, left to itself, is powerful to fix and subsequently summon up past moments – my personal list might start thus: knot-holes in fences, curious rock-forms, running water, a back garden manhole cover I called, for some inscrutable reason, a 'Putney', a tall fir tree on a distant western horizon...

I recently re-read James Kirkup's *The Only Child*. The reading helped to strengthen a tentative hypothesis that some people make an existential choice early on in life to be concerned for the minutiae offered by experience; such a choice can work towards a particular mind-set that, given an awareness of the form, can lead to habitual haiku-writing.

While '...other people [were] partially deafened by the busy hum of their own bodies...' James found himself unable to make a noise in the company of others; the inward-turning sensitivity, 'lonely but not conscious of loneliness', resulted in a rich haul of potential haiku-moments: the shining door-knob of the house where he was born, the H-shaped boot-scraper, gas-lamp in the street, slightly stirring shadows of flowery lace curtains, far-off moaning of ships, jam jars of dead wall flowers and marguerites amongst gravestones, the grimy boots of newspaper readers in the library, a chipped blue enamel teapot, vivid blue flashes on tram-wires, granny Kirkup's porch smelling of Autumn and sea, telegraph poles in

the lane, magical labyrinth of white sheets on washing day, the dog Rosie, the milkman's horse, sparrows hopping in the gutter, seagulls flying over chimneys, the bandstand in South Marine Park, the travelling spark at the end of the lamplighter's stick, a seagull perching on a rocking buoy, a model ship in a glass case...



Lifeboat in the snow, South Shields

Examining carefully this ‘...rag-bag... that we cannot bring ourselves to part with...’ possessing it ‘...with a fresh and extraordinary strength, we discover at the end of long and tangled skeins a bright pin of truth...’. Haiku is a ‘bright pin of truth’!

Ordinary experience is always fresh and productive when you can relate your soul to it in this way; there, is no chance of being ‘bored’ – ‘...people who get bored are ones who always reckon that something amusing ought to come at them from outside...’ says, Robert Walser [one of James’ favourite authors] in *Jakob von Gunten*). At key moments of perception the observer becomes the door-knob, the H-shaped boot-scraper, a knot-hole in a fence, and so on; the soul goes out to meet experience, constructing itself from events rather than waiting for ready-made amusements as small as a TV programme, as large as Disneyland.

So, perhaps, the nature of one’s childhood choices and sensitivity makes it relatively easy, or not, to accept the haiku process when it comes your way.

I wondered whether I had, in addition, read something in Western philosophy that might have led to a mild obsession for the idea behind haiku-writing. Tracing this mind-trail ought not to be too long a business for in what I like to call my ‘intellectual life’ there were, at the very most, just ten formative books. Of these, Aldous Huxley’s *Perennial Philosophy* which I read in the late-1950’s gave me, from medieval mysticism, the concept of *Istigkeit* – Suchness – which, after I had read Watts, translated keenly to the Japanese concept ‘*sono-mama*’. But, going backwards on the mind-trail, I come to AN Whitehead’s *Adventures of Ideas*. I reach to my bookshelves for a book about Whitehead, recently acquired, and re-discover ideas that I had completely forgotten but which have long since ceased being, in Whitehead’s own term, ‘inert’ in me, and have become my own possession.

Whitehead is against carving experience up into lumps; he denies the conventional division of Nature into apparent and real. Nature is what is given in experience. The fundamental unit of existence is an ‘event’ or ‘occasion’ where subject and object are united, where there is no dichotomy of perceiver and perceived. Promising! Precisely Zen! As I understand it...

For Whitehead, the event/occasion exists momentarily at the intersection of ‘presentational immediacy’ and ‘causal efficacy’: for example, there is a dripping tap in presentational immediacy; for a split second there is a mental construction <dripping tap – ah! – plumber> or <plumbers mend taps – this tap needs a plumber>. ‘Split second’ is a poverty-stricken language attempt to depict the ‘timeless moment’ when the dripping tap is and is not connected with plumber (= ‘causal efficacy’).

Whitehead believes that we come to unique awareness of who and what we are by constructing ourselves out of our contacts with such occasions of experience. Far from our manipulating events, occasions grasp us to become concrete through what Whitehead calls ‘prehension’: the conscious ‘I’ [or set of ‘I’s] is a ‘route for occasions’ to make themselves felt.

I often have the feeling that haiku write me; looking back over a notebook containing a month of haiku I certainly feel that their occasions have made me a route; the momentary awareness we capture in haiku becomes the way we read the world – so it is a constant feedback loop: the frog plopping into the pond constructs the awareness of the poet; without the presence of the poet, no frog, no plop, no pond because no eye to see or ear to hear. Whitehead would say, I think, that there is nothing to choose between the frog and the man whose mind has for a split second become the frog.

At the moment of the occasion I am nothing but the occasion itself. The occasion is a growth of feeling and an ultimate unity and I am that growth and that unity. My actuality, my concreteness, is to be defined by what is present in the occasion, whether derived from the past or conceptually turned towards the future, whether concerned with some present physical feeling or with an idea plucked from empty air.

In Whitehead’s terms, a haiku would be a non-judgemental ‘proposition’ about the world based on pure data without the intervention of any kind of mentalism.

“Haiku...? What the hell’s a haiku...? Japanese poem...? You’re not Japanese...”  
“You’re right, I’m not. But there’s this chap called Whitehead – he says... And I made many choices in childhood that made me content with little events and occasions... And then I discovered haiku and everything clicked into place. Hoorah for the Japanese without whom the vehicle for expressing all this would not exist!”