

## RUSH HOUR BY GRAHAM SWIFT: THE CROSSROADS OF IMAGISM, HAIKU, AND ROMANTIC LYRICAL POETRY

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse Graham Swift's poem Rush Hour as situated at the intersection of Imagism, traditional Japanese haiku, and Romantic lyrical poetry. Swift is a contemporary writer whose poem can be analysed in relation to Ezra Pound's In A Station of the Metro, to Virginia Woolf's moments of vision, and in relation to moments in his own novels especially in relation to his own theory of capturing immediacy. By studying this poem in particular, we can reach a better understanding of what makes up contemporary poetry.*

*Keywords: poetic language, deviation, travelling, meditation, concrete imagery.*

### Introduction

“The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough” is the entire text of Ezra Pound's poem titled *In A Station of the Metro*. Pound's poem is an example of Imagism and brings to mind Japanese haiku, as it has a powerful visual effect despite being composed of only two lines.

Ezra Pound was an integral part of the Imagist movement, which continues to influence poetry today. Kao (2011) states: “Although the Imagist movement was cut short by World War I, Imagism has had a strong influence on Modernist poetry and beyond (Perkins, 1987).” She believes that “good poetry should ‘show, not tell,’ and contain concrete and specific imagery that forms a deeper meaning in the poem (Earnshaw, 2007).” (Kao 2011) This is what Pound and Swift achieve.

Graham Swift's poem titled *Rush Hour* is longer than Pound's *A Station of the Metro*. However, he uses only a few lines in order to create very vivid images, bringing to mind Pound's poem. For instance, the beginning lines “The fog of their massed breath,/ The still-sleepy glitter of their eyes.” looks a lot like contemporary English haiku. The rule 5-7-5 syllables is often omitted in contemporary English haiku, which try to adhere to the traditional style of Japanese haiku, which is meant to be said in a single breath. These lines, like Pound's, do not form a complete sentence. Swift's first line, just like Pound's, is focused on a common noun (‘apparition’ in Pound's poem, ‘fog’ in Swift's). In the second line, we have in both poems a common noun accompanied by two adjectives (‘wet, black bough’ in Pound's poem, and ‘still-sleepy glitter’ in Swift's poem) as well as an alliteration: the ‘b’ sound in ‘black bow’ and the ‘s’ sound in ‘still-sleepy’. The very title of Swift's poem, *Rush Hour*, suggests transportation and crowds, which are also present in Pound's poem.

Good poetry uses concrete imagery (like Swift's travellers in common means of transportation) which is bound closely to an emotional aspect. This idea is part of Kao's hypotheses (2011) regarding her definition of good professional poetry. The role of syntax in creating the poetic experience was explained by Cureton: “Syntax (i.e., the structure of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences) is one of the major determinants of poetic experience.”

Cureton's observations bring to mind "Jakobson's 'projection principle,' which treats poetic syntax primarily as an instrument of parallelism and therefore of textual divisioning and semantic 'coupling' (Jakobson 1987: 117-266, Levin 1962, Lotman 1977)."

Leech and Short drew attention to the use of parallelism and deviation in poetry. These effects are achieved through syntax, semantics or pragmatics. There is no exact definition of poetry, according to Leech and Short. The distinction they draw between poetic and ordinary language is that "Poetic language may violate or deviate from the generally observed rules of the language in many different ways, some obvious, some subtle. Both the means and motives for deviations are worth careful study." (1991: 5) They say that poetic language is characterized by its standing out. Throughout the ages poetic language has been used in many ways, which is why it needs to constantly reinvent itself. They believe, for instance, that poetic language can include archaic words. "Any deviation from expected patterns of linguistic behaviour will bring about a reaction of disorientation and surprise" (Leech and Short 1991: 10). In his poem *Rush Hour*, Swift deviates from the usual short haiku, while at the same time he preserves some of its features. The first two lines bring to mind Japanese haiku through the juxtaposition of two images. However, a Japanese haiku is traditionally composed of three lines, 5-7-5 syllables, with a dash that breaks the two ideas and with a kigo, a reference to a season, which is missing in Swift's poem. The fog is a reference to a natural phenomenon; it can also be interpreted as figurative when combined with human breath: "The fog of their massed breath". If we think of the figurative meaning, we think of a crowd where individuals do not count, where differences are blurred. If we think of the literal meaning, we think of the way they breathe when it is cold outside. Even this literal interpretation of fog serves to make differences between people in a crowd blurred; it makes their faces hard to distinguish. Figurative language, personification or metaphor, is inadmissible in Japanese haiku, even though it is common in the poetry of our own culture. The link between fog and breath would, in Japanese haiku, not be obviously stated but implied indirectly through concrete imagery. We notice the absence of a verb in the two opening lines of Swift's poem. Usually haikus make use of the present tense and the absence of a verb is a sign of skillful craft.

### **Everyday life presented poetically**

Pound explains what he meant by his short poem:

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that - a "pattern," or hardly a pattern, if by "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour. I do not mean that I was unfamiliar with the kindergarten stories about colours being like tones in music. I think that sort of thing is nonsense. If you try to make notes permanently correspond with particular colours, it is like tying narrow meanings to symbols. ([http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/pound/metro.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/metro.htm))

Although Pound explains what he meant to achieve when he wrote his poem, readers are still left to freely visualize and make use of their own imaginations. This is a feature of a haiku poem. While offering visual images to the readers, relationships between and interpretation of these images are left to the reader's imagination. The Japanese custom of writing haikus is for a group of students and their teacher to go out for a walk in nature, then to express their impressions in haiku poems which afterwards will be discussed. The poems will be analysed anonymously and then the authors will be revealed and the best poems will be chosen. A haiku is written in the middle of nature in a moment of insight and inspiration. For Ezra Pound, the moment of insight and inspiration does not come in nature but in the metro in the city. He does use references to nature, though. The words "petals", "wet", and "bough" create a visual image on which the image for faces and crowds is juxtaposed. Swift makes use of references to nature first to express figuratively and visually the idea of crowds: "The fog of their massed breath". The "smoky-blue dawn" is an image connected to the idea of dreams, as we see from the next lines. By leaving out connecting elements and the expected verb in a sentence, Swift creates images that seem to remain still, to be part of the poet's impressions. Another effect achieved is that the reader is made to stop and watch these images. One of the characteristics of haiku is the use of very few verbs – usually in the present tense or gerund. Haiku is written to preserve the essence and the force of the phenomenon the poetic persona observes. Haiku is always about the present and ephemeral moment; it is also a meditation on man's destiny in the middle of nature, of the world with its phenomena, in this universe. Both Swift and Pound juxtapose images of nature with images from city: men living in, and traveling through crowded places. Swift explicitly invites his readers to see something deeper in these images: "So this is their life, what they do every day,/ [...] No, no, look again. It's not what it seems." Common incidents are reinterpreted through the use of poetic language. This is also in line with Swift's novels, which deal with the extraordinary in ordinary. Rifaterre believes that "a poem says one thing and means another" (p. 1)" (quoted in Culler 1981: 89). His theory adds to the understanding of Swift's poem. When keeping this theory in mind, readers notice that a poem may at first appear to be about one thing, but with further consideration they will see that it is actually about something else. (Culler 1981: 89)

### **The crowds**

Although Pound offered us his interpretation of his poem, readers are free to interpret it in many other ways and to notice details which would place those images in another context.

In Pound's poem, the faces are "apparitions" since they are not seen in detail by the observer. The faces may not be distinct, as they lose themselves in the crowd. The focus is on the crowd, not on any individual face. Then the observer moves from general to particular, as he notices the detail of petals on a wet black bough. The movement can also be from inside to outside, from the interior metro station underground to the outside where there are elements of nature, such as rain and the bough. If the bough is black, it may be that the day is cloudy and rainy, that the dark atmosphere from the underground is preserved in the overcast sky.

Moreover, the dark atmosphere, the lack of detail in the crowd's faces, and the fact that the ones in the crowd are described as "apparitions" (suggesting a lack of substance) suggest the loneliness and isolation of the observer in the city. He seems not to care for those in the crowds - they are mere apparitions. Apparitions also suggest a kind of illusion, of being surrounded by people but feeling lonely, since the observer cannot connect with anyone there.

People in big cities pass by crowds everyday, but in the end they do not connect and remain lonely. The dark atmosphere reflects a dark mood. The underground and the bough might remind the reader of the inferno. When one is depressed, one feels that one goes through the inferno. Figuratively speaking the poem can be about going down, in the underground, in the subway, where one feels like one is in hell due to one's loneliness. Depressed people often have difficulty connecting with others, or finding the energy or empathy to spare for others, and the others are thus apparitions without substance, difficult to see in detail. There is some emotional detachment implied in not noticing details of the faces in the crowd. Also, the speaker feels isolated and discriminated against - he is alone, while the others are united in a crowd. From another viewpoint, the black bough and the metro (underground) are both dark places and help us focus on details such as petals and faces. The black bough works as a background for the petals; we imagine the petals as luminous in the dark. The same pattern of patches of light against a black background is applied to the faces in a dark metro station.

The poem can also be about one of those quick glimpses as one walks or as one finds oneself inside the moving metro. One sees crowds and then focuses briefly, in a flash, on the details, on some flowers being held by a passenger in the metro. It is about busy city life, with the high speed of living. There is beauty in those instants of everyday life in a busy city. The author captures those moments of beauty just like in a haiku.

Baig offers a dark interpretation of the poem by Pound and compares it to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T.S. Eliot:

Both, Eliot's 'Prufrock Song' and Pound's 'Metro Poem', deal with the similar contemporary issues in a critical tone. These poems launch a stark comment on the modern man living in moral world of immoralities, darkened with the evils of capitalism, hypocrisy, indifference, emotional and aesthetic downfall and social alienation. (Baig 108)

Everyday modern human life is compared to life in an inferno:

Eliot's primary concern in the 'Prufrock Song' is that of the hell to which human beings are subjected every day of their lives. The Epigraph to this song has been taken from Dante's "Inferno". [...] This hell of Prufrock is not his alone; it is shared by every human being who ever lived. In Pound's view this could be interpreted as the hell of 'Usura' in the modern world, from where there's no escape for the modern man. The 'faces' at the 'station of the metro' that Pound comes across are all searching their way out of the material hell, however, they're unable to pluck themselves off the 'wet, black bough'. (Baig 108)

Despite the dark associations which would usually come to mind, the beauty of the images remains. It is suggested by poetic language just like in Swift's poem. "Petals on a wet, black bough" can only suggest, after all, an image of the beauty of nature. Swift's poem shows us that the people in the crowd do not just go to work every day. The poem shows us that their lives go beyond what seems at first sight: "This smoky-blue dawn/ That hasn't yet torn them from dreams,/ These lights on their faces." Swift suggests that there is a beauty to life: a beauty that goes beyond routine. Once you visualize these images as a reader you move beyond the level of interpreting the crowds and modern city life in a negative way, or of merely thinking of their isolation.

### Travelling on common means of transportation and reflecting

Swift's poem, as well as Pound's, is made up of reflections and impressions of the other passengers on common means of transportation. Swift also makes use of such reflections in one of his novels, *Shuttlecock*:

I am struck by the way people behave on the Tube. They look at each other beadily and inquisitively, [...] What goes on in the Tube is done with suspicion and menace. It is as if everybody is trying to search out everybody else's story, everybody else's secret, and the assumption is that this secret will always be a weakness; it must be something unpleasant and shameful which will make it possible for its owner to be humiliated and degraded. [...] look at any group of people in an Underground train. You won't see much laughter, smiling or even talk. Not nearly as much, at least, as you'll see in any bus or railway carriage travelling through the genial daylight. Ignore the people whose faces are conveniently sunk in books and magazines. Watch the eyes of the others. Am I right? Everyone is trying to strip everyone else bare, and everyone, at the same time, is trying not to be stripped bare himself. (Swift)

This kind of reflection brings to mind Virginia Woolf's short story *An Unwritten Novel* where the narrator, while riding in a train, imagines possible characters and plots for a novel based on her observations of another passenger whom she calls Minnie Marsh. There is another poem by Swift where we have a reference to travelling. In his poem *The Bookmark*, Swift suggests that imagination is a way to achieve a distance from oneself. The poetic persona opens a book and notices an old bus ticket; he starts wondering about "The story it seems to want to tell" (Swift 2009: 256). He wonders about the person who put the ticket there and at the end of the poem we read "You know, of course, it must have been you" (Swift 2009: 257). Here Swift suggests that there are images that touch us and strike us like moments in haiku. He uses that image as a memory and places it in the past; it is also a moment of reference, suggested by his use of the bookmark. Sometimes, "those images of what might have been/ Can't be so different now/ From images of things that really were./ Memory and longing amounting to the same", as Swift claims in his poem *We Both Know* (2009: 240). Swift is aware of the ephemerality of moments like those expressed in haiku. In haiku, we express the here and now and what strikes us in the moment.

### Conclusions

Swift expresses moments of visions in his poems, reminding us of Japanese haiku. The focus on life in the city and moments of beauty replaces the traditional meditation on the beauty of nature in Japanese haiku. Swift follows Virginia Woolf's footsteps in focusing on the beauty of the city. Readers are familiar with the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the title character's walk through London and her enthusiasm when experiencing moments of vision. It reminds us in turn of one of Wordsworth's sonnets. In *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*, Wordsworth presents London on the one hand as idyllic, on the other hand as de-humanized. According to Pike, the lines: "The beauty of the morning; silent, bare/ Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie/ Open unto the fields, and to the sky", show London on a beautiful morning. In the last lines, London is not alive but "lying still" with its "mighty heart". Different perspectives of London show us that reality is fragmented, reflecting the characters' inner worlds and of their personalities. Their personalities are in a process of change and evolution. This is the way the Romantics view the self in lyrical poetry:

the romantics were fascinated with a particular view of the self, the self that Emerson (1990) described as "that science baffling star [...] without calculable elements [which are] at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity" (pp. 160-161). The self is not rational and calculating, it is expressive and processual. (Streeter 2010: 238)

The fragmented reality does not reflect a rational view of the self, but an "expressive and processual" one. Swift's poems are thus a mixture of Japanese haiku and of Romantic moments of vision which view personality as changing through the characters' observation of present reality. Graham Swift's reflections on the novel<sup>90</sup> are in line with this idea:

Today's news, which may be yesterday's anyway, will be eclipsed tomorrow.

One of the principal things novels can do is depict and explore this very transitoriness. They're there to take the long view, to show change and evolution, human behaviour worked on by time. But none of this means that novels, which can never be strictly of now, cannot have their own kind of "newness" or have something which actually out-thrills the thrill of the merely contemporary. They can have immediacy. (Swift 2011)

Swift shows the novel's focus on character evolution and how the time separating us from the time the characters live in becomes irrelevant, since the novel deals with universal issues. What is more, he focuses on "immediacy" in his novels, just like in his poems. *Rush Hour* depicts a transitory moment: that of travelers in a common means of transportation. Some form of this moment will repeat almost every day, as many of these people travel back and forth. However, the poet's insight, and the connection between the travelers which creates lyrical mood, is far more ephemeral. Although theoretically repeatable, this moment will not have the same effect on the lyrical persona's perception at all times. Swift refers to his experience of this moment as "this one, unrepeatable scene". To others such a moment may pass unnoticed. The relation of this poem to Swift's novels is given by his concern with "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 "extraordinary in the ordinary" (about which Swift also writes in his poem *Unlooked-for*: "Ordinary moments that aren't so ordinary at all") has to do with depth of observation and situates Swift's poem *Rush Hour* in-between Imagism, Japanese haiku and Romantic lyrical poetry. What the Romantics called "moments of vision" can go hand in hand with the ideas of Japanese haiku. Both suggest a deeper level to reality. Imagism also borrows from Japanese haiku the brief and concrete images which often suggest a deeper level than just that of pure descriptive observation.

How is it possible to talk about haiku in a poem that is not written according to its rules of form? Genre is a matter of the readers' interpretation. This is how Jonathan Culler, in

<sup>90</sup> Graham Swift on 'contemporary novels', in *The Guardian*, 4 June 2011.

his book on semiotic approaches to literature, *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), introduces one of Todorov's theories. Although the theory focused on the fantastic literary genre, Todorov's approach can explain the operations readers do with any literary genre. The fantastic genre's striking feature is figurative language; in a similar way, the haiku has features which remind readers of this kind of experience of special moments in everyday life) which gain their attention. "The reader must perform imaginative transformations on the various things seen and heard," Culler (1981: 76-77) describes the reader's analysis of Blake's poems. Readers imagine and interpret. They do not stop at what they expect to be there or at what seems to be there. They are drawn into imagining a genre which is only suggested by Swift's poem. The first two lines of Swift's poem *Rush Hour* are perceived as a haiku. In an interview with Catherine Bernard, entitled *Graham Swift ou le temps du récit* (1996), Swift confirms this when he explains his intentions when writing: "much more important for me is the emotional side of fiction. Whether or not they can say they've discovered some truth by reading my book, I want my readers to have had an experience, I want them to be emotionally involved. If it's not about truth, then fiction is about compassion." (1996: 13). Provoking emotion through imagery is, after all, the purpose of haiku poems.

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