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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRIVIAL THINGS

[This essay is based on an article originally published in the Japanese edition of *Newsweek*, 3 February 1989.]

I am often asked if there is a quality in haiku that is uniquely Japanese, something—it is suggested—that makes it futile for western poets to attempt the form. While it remains debatable to what extent the more elusive qualities of Japanese haiku (such as *yugen*, *sabi* and *wabi*) are to be found in non-Japanese work, there is plenty of evidence that haiku has successfully taken root outside Japan, and is flourishing, particularly in North America. I am always on the alert for parallels in western literature: additional evidence that the spirit of haiku is universal, rather than culturally determined.

Who would suppose, for example, that the author of so monumental a novel as *Ulysses* could also have espoused literary forms and theories that invite comparison with haiku? Improbable though it seems, a study of James Joyce's early life and work reveals just such an affinity. In 1900 he started to write what were in effect brief prose poems, based on incidents and observations from everyday life. He chose to call them "epiphanies", adapting the religious term (signifying *showing forth* of divinity) to his own purpose. Joyce's brother Stanislaus gives us the following account of this period:

"Another experimental form which his literary urge took while we were living at this address consisted in the noting of what he called "epiphanies"—manifestations or revelations . . . these notes were in the beginning ironical observations of slips, and little errors and gestures—mere straws in the wind—by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal. Epiphanies were always brief sketches, hardly ever more than some dozen lines in length, but always very accurately observed and noted, the matter being so slight."¹

Joyce was later to expound his theory of epiphanies in a key passage of *Stephen Hero*. As they stroll the streets of Dublin, Stephen insists to his companion Cranly that the most prosaic of objects is capable of an epiphany—even the clock on the Ballast Office, he proposes, as they pass within sight of it. He reminds Cranly of the three requisites for beauty defined by Thomas Aquinas: integrity, symmetry and radiance. The gist of Stephen's interpretation is as follows.

In the first stage, our perception separates the object from the rest of the universe; in the second, we note its constituent parts and their relationship, and in the third we enter into, or are filled by, its uniqueness. He sums up: "This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant." It is clear that Joyce believed the object achieves its epiphany only in the mind's response to it. "Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty."

At times it would almost seem that Joyce used the term "epiphany" to describe two quite distinct kinds of experience: the astute observation of unconscious and revealing behavior, as well as far more intense and personal moments of attunement, even apotheosis. In the first category the concern is mainly with people; in the second, with things. There is of course an irresistible parallel to be drawn with the provinces of senryu and haiku—the precise borders of which some poets and critics have in recent years disputed so hotly and so much in vain.

Perhaps Joyce has something to teach us here, for I find that his whole theory of epiphanies is encapsulated in a single sentence that precedes the Ballast Office passage already quoted: *By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself* (my italics). Notice that Joyce's emphasis is on the revelatory quality of the experience, regardless of its source or subject. As the Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann comments, on a closely related aspect: "Sometimes the epiphanies are 'eucharistic', another term arrogantly borrowed by Joyce from Christianity and invested with secular meaning. These are moments of fullness or passion. Sometimes the epiphanies are rewarding for another reason, that they convey precisely the flavour of unpalatable experiences. The spirit, as Joyce characteristically held, manifested itself on both levels."²

It is time to look at some examples. For reasons of space I have paraphrased these (the originals averaging about six lines each), without modifying Joyce's language.³

- A recumbent dog howling at a crossroads, under a dull sky; it begins to rain.
- Two sisters churning butter: one happy and the other gloomy, on account of an absurd figure of a man.
- Lying on the deck of a ship, against the engine-house (a bad crossing from Dieppe to Newhaven, according to Stanislaus).
- Two mourners pushing their way through a crowd; their faces described.
- Dancing with a girl who is engaged . . .
- A young woman who lays her arm for a moment across his knees (probably one and the same, Stanislaus surmised).

A fascinating afternoon could be spent combing a well-stocked library for haiku or senryu that most closely parallel the above epiphanies. Even from a poorly stocked memory it is possible to offer Shuoshi's.

The gigantic dog
rises to receive a guest
in the darkness of May.⁴

by way of contrast with the first, and Ken Hurm's masterpiece of compression

family reunion
under black umbrellas
again⁵

to place beside Joyce's funeral scene. When we look at the two forms side by side in this way it becomes obvious that whereas the epiphanies could not be called haiku *as they stand*, haiku of this quality are certainly epiphanies according to Joyce's definition.

Another important similarity between haiku (at its best) and Joyce's epiphanies must be remarked. This is the total absence of interpretation or comment. An episode or experience is baldly and economically conveyed, without evaluation, leaving the reader to find his or her own significance. Feelings are evoked, rather than named. A second look at the examples above shows this to be consistently true.

If for some readers I seem to be making too much out of tenuous connections, I stand by my opening statement, and would enlarge it: *excellence in haiku will not be found to differ fundamentally from excellence in literature generally*. Such qualities as those so aptly named by Cor van den Heuvel, "concision, perception, awareness"⁶, are timeless. Here is Joyce again: "Classicism is not the manner of any fixed age or of any fixed country: it is a constant state of the artistic mind." And here Basho: "I do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the old; I seek the things they sought."

While it is certainly intriguing as well as stimulating to observe the many correspondences that I have indicated, these need no exaggeration. For a haiku poet it is already exciting enough to know that Joyce was fascinated by the suggestive potential of minor details, and indeed believed that it is a writer's responsibility to record these epiphanies with extreme care, "seeing that they are the most delicate and evanescent of moments."

Nor is it the case that Joyce's epiphanies were a youthful enthusiasm which he later abandoned. For a time he fully intended to preserve them as they stood. This is echoed in *Ulysses*, many years later: "Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep; copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?" Though Joyce never in fact published the epiphanies as a collection, as originally planned, in 1904 he began instead to incorporate them into his stories and novels. In an introduction to the first edition of *Stephen Hero*, Theodore Spencer asserts that the theory of epiphanies ("a theory that implies a lyrical rather than a dramatic view of life") is essential to an understanding of Joyce as an artist, and that we may legitimately describe his successive works as intensifications and enlargements of it. Joyce himself told his brother Stanislaus, of the stories that were to comprise *Dubliners*: "It is my idea of the significance of trivial things that I want to give . . ."

Many are the haiku poets who would echo those words, and who hold that purpose as central to their art.

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1. Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, London: Faber, 1958.
 2. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
 3. Giorgio Melchiori, *Epifanie*. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadore Editore, 1982.
 4. Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Haiku: an Anthology*, University of Toronto Press, 1976.
 5. Japan Air Lines North American Haiku Contest, 1988.
 6. Cor van den Heuvel, *Concision, Perception, Awareness—Haiku*. Book Review section of *The New York Times*, 29 March 1987 (reprinted in *Modern Haiku* Vol XVIII No 3, Autumn 1987).

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SENRYU

Fellow poet—
he'd rather have the money
than trade me a book.

Mother-in-law—
again I'm referred to
as SHE.

Alexis Rotella

in-laws
rearranging
candles on the cake

vincent tripi

old woman:
what are you doing
in my mirror?

Molly Haines