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SOME JAPANESE INFLUENCES ON STYLE AND STRUCTURE IN
BRUCE CHATWIN'S WRITING

I must begin by saying that I have written this handful of personal observations as a musician and as a friend of the author – in other words, as an amateur. So I must beg your indulgence. I have not read *any* of the critical work on Bruce's oeuvre, so what I have to say may well be redundant, off the point and worse still, self-evident.

And I hope I will also be forgiven for beginning on a didactic note.

When starting a course in composition I always tried to explain to my students what I considered to be the difference between merely writing music and composition itself. I define composition as an attempt to re-define reality in music, and I suppose by extension, re-define life. This means that the act of composition must involve going beyond what one already knows into uncharted territory. And going beyond what one knows means going beyond craftsmanship, because by definition craftsmanship employs a set of actions with a *known outcome*.

Composing is more like dancing in the dark - *dancing*, that is, not stumbling! The only thing to guide you is your artistry - a combination of training and intuition - and your personal pleasure.

And it goes without saying, that this transcends 'personality'. Personality is formed and assessed socially and is habitual – dancing in the dark, unseeing and unseen, is strictly private and anti-social. Beethoven *the personality* may have driven Beethoven *the artist*, but it was the intellect, the intelligence and the imagination of *the artist* that created the realms of his music. To me, Beethoven *the music* goes far beyond the tormented soul of its author.

I say all of this because with Bruce Chatwin it is easy to be sideswiped by the glamour of the personality and the life of the author. Indeed, I think that at times the artist and the persona in Bruce were at odds with each other.

Bruce's love of the exotic and his fascination with other people's stories certainly influenced his choice of subjects. But in his life he was always an Englishman abroad – certain of himself, his home base and sure of being able to return there. On the other hand, I think in his work he was more experimental and took far greater risks than he did in life. The work

often wanders into uncharted territory without an idea of how it would return.

It was the compositional structure of the books that first attracted me to Bruce's work. In terms of formal experimentation, within the same literary world he had, for me, only one contemporary rival: J.M. Coetzee.

Bruce often referred to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as his ideal. But there was another book which had I think a more profound influence on his work: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Matsuo Basho (b. 1644). More precisely, it is the Penguin Classics Edition, translated and with a lengthy introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa, which appeared in 1965 (and which is still currently available). The book also contains Basho's *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, *A Visit to the Kashima Shrine*, *The Records of Travel-worn Satchel* and *A Visit to Sarashina Village*. All of these, including the introductory essay, find resonance in Bruce's work.

To begin with, style:

Bruce's writing has often been called 'lapidary', 'pared down', 'polished'. But this begs the question, in what way?

He himself often talked of 'pure description'. By this I think he meant an account of things in which the author attempts to hold his own opinion or perception back as far as possible – a kind of objectivity.

Basho (quoted by Yuasa) wrote:

"Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn."

This approach has several consequences. It means the writer seldom uses metaphor, which by its very nature reveals the hand of the writer. So if there is a metaphor, it is indirect. For example, let's look at Basho's most famous *haiku*:

Breaking the silence
Of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water –
A deep resonance;

The poem appears to do nothing more than state the facts. No comment. But there is the word 'ancient'.

All ponds in the wild are likely to be ancient. However, the only way we would *know* that a pond is ancient is if it were man-made: ‘ancient’, therefore it must be in a palace or temple ground, where a pond would survive for centuries – in a very controlled environment – into which the frog has introduced an element of chaos. The pond is certainly a metaphor for the observer’s mind. But this is *not stated*.

Similarly Bruce tended to understate – tell us something without saying it. He often used a reference to an object or a colour to evoke a mood. It’s almost impossible to find a page in all the later novels without a reference to colour, or something redolent of colour - blood, wine, coal. [Well, I exaggerate a little.]

A random example: on the first page of *Utz* we have pink, grey and giltwood; on the second there’s white, red, red, red, shiny laurel, brown and many-coloured.

The pink refers to carnations and the grey to a man’s hair, the gilt is on the organ, but these colours are also those of a cold late winter’s dawn, when these events are taking place. Similarly, the red and white refer to flowers, the brown to a handbag, but they serve to reinforce the Bolshevik/military intrusion of the second page.

Another example: in *On the Road with Mrs. G*, Bruce frequently records what Mrs. Ghandi was wearing, but I can’t help feeling this documentation is fictitious – the attire being switched around or invented to suit the tone of the next scene. Whatever the case, the reference to colour speaks volumes: a green and white striped sari when dealing crisply with a tricky situation, a floral one to meet and tame the gentlemen of the press. When dealing with hostile crowds, “Mrs. Ghandi arrived in vermillion” would be classic Chatwin. Although on this occasion he allowed himself a metaphor: “Mrs. G., in vengeful vermilion, glared at the crowd.” When he used metaphor, it was startling.

In place of metaphor Chatwin tends to use a structure also found in *haiku* or its older form *waka* - an AB form in which the first part sets up an expectation, and the second part provides a resolution (which is often unexpected). The resonance created between the first and the second parts substitutes for metaphor. The *choice* of material gives an indication of the author’s intention. This is the basis of the structure of Japanese linked poetry which was developed from the 8th century onwards. According to Yuasa, ‘...each poem takes up the suggestion of the last poem and yet opens up a new world of its own, so that the reader is carried through the whole series as through the exquisitely arranged rooms of a building.’ I think this is what Bruce aspired to in his more ambitious moments.

An AB structure runs throughout Bruce's late work in particular – the form is so common as to almost be a personal cliché - and is used both on a small and a large scale.

In some case the setup and resolution is little more than a joke, in others, the he embarks on short passages of poetry, in others still, there is a mere suggestion of poetry.

Some short examples skimmed hastily from various books:

A: “Mrs. Gandhi wore a green and white striped sari. And sat down to a breakfast

B: that never came.” [*What Am I Doing Here*]

A: “They set down the coffin with a show of reverence.

B: Then, attracted by the smell of hot bread from a bakery along the street, they strolled off to get breakfast...” [*Utz*]

A: “Olwen had kicked. The hoof caught him under the chin,

B: and the sparrows went on chattering.” [*On the Black Hill*]

In *Utz* we have near-*haikus*:

“To relieve the pressure of her bunions /
the sides of her shoes were slit open.” (19 syllables).

The opening of *The Viceroy of Ouidah* is almost entirely constructed of contrasting AB paragraphs:

A: The family of Francisco Manuel da Silva had assembled at Ouidah to honour his memory with a Requiem Mass and dinner. It was the usual suffocating afternoon in March.

B: He had been dead a hundred and seventeen years.

A: The Mass was said in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a stuccoed monument to the more severe side of French Catholicism

B: that glared across an expanse of red dirt at the walls, the mud huts and trees of the Python Fetish.

and so on.

There are also passages that are clearly incipient poetry (with a heavy dose of assonance and alliteration, for which Bruce had a weakness):

Turkey buzzards drifted in a milky sky
[- ~ - ~ - ~ - ~ - ~]

6 feet

The metallic din of crickets made the heat seem worse.

[˘ ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ -]

6 feet

Banana leaves hung in limp ribbons

[˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘]

5 feet

There was no wind.

[˘ - ˘ -]

2 feet

37 syllables in all. [*Waka* had 31]

For me it's difficult not to read 'beat' for 'heat' and 'rhythms' for 'ribbons': The...din of crickets made the *beat* seem worse. Banana leaves hung in limp *rhythms*.

With regard to the AB structure, the movement of the first 2 lines contrasts with its absence in the second.

I am not suggesting that these books be regarded as poetry, and I certainly don't wish to make a direct comparison with Basho. By the time Basho was perfecting the art of linked verse, it had been refined over a period of some 800 years. For example, according to Yuasa, Basho judged the link between 2 poems in terms of a number of difficult to define qualities: the aroma (*nioi*), echo (*hibiki*), countenance (*omokage*), colour (*utsuri*) and rank (*kurai*) of the preceding poem.

Bruce would never have claimed to be working on this level of refinement. He was more likely to have echoed Basho's comments on his own writing: "...I must admit that my records are little more than the babble of the intoxicated and the rambling talk of the dreaming. And therefore my readers are requested to take them as such" [*The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel*]

But I am sure Bruce's love of Basho suggested a number of possibilities to him. And we do know that not a single word Bruce wrote was placed carelessly. I was with him, for example, when he agonised for a full ten minutes over whether to use the word "when" in place of "whenever" in the third draft of one of the short stories.

By formalising the material into tight miniature structures, Bruce was able to include a wide range of images, allowing his somewhat baroque imagination to range freely.

It seems that the more one simplifies, reduces and abstracts an idea, the more it lends itself to a larger and broader interpretation. For example, Japanese stone gardens – or Zen gardens, as they are often called. The

isolated rocks surrounded by raked stone suggest not just an extensive landscape, but islands - small worlds - in a vast sea. In other words, the absence of plants – except for lichens and miniature trees on the rocks – permits an interpretation of the garden that is far larger and more sweeping in scale than the grandest of Capability Brown's creations. The same idea is found, of course, in *haiku*.

With regard to the large-scale use of linked AB structures, a case could be made that Bruce sometimes attempted to create a kind of extended prose *waka*- at least in the short stories. The technique of linking ideas in an AB format enabled him to expand the structure. The relationship between A and B usually involves a re-interpretation of an aspect of A in the B section:

For example, the linked stories *Assunta 1* and *Assunta 2* (not his best, in my opinion):

In both stories, the common thread is Bruce in a hospital bed with fever, possibly malaria, and Assunta is the Italian cleaning lady who tells him stories. There is another common thread, which is diagnosis or mis-diagnosis.

In *Assunta 1* the set-up is the story Assunta tells of her neighbour's pregnant python.

In *Assunta 2* the link is the story of her own pregnancy, but with an unpleasant echo of the first - in that she was expected to give birth to a baby which, like the python, lacked arms and legs. Happily it was a mis-diagnosis.

But in *Assunta 2*, the malaria provides Bruce with a subsidiary AB structure, enabling him to tell a story of the Pan-African Ladies' Congress in Accra, where he may have contracted the disease. He sets up a kind of reflection between the French-speaking ladies from Guinea, who needed help ordering food, and Assunta, who overcomes all barriers to communication. For good measure Bruce throws in an aside about the Professor attending him: He is a world authority on snake-bites.

In *Your Father's Eyes are Blue Again* the structure is

A: his mother had a cataract operation and could once more see his father's blue eyes clearly;

B: his father had found his grandfather's yacht, the *Aireymouse*, after a long search, and was going to help restore her. His father's eyes were metaphorically blue again.

The link between the two is a box of old photographs which didn't contain a picture of the *Aireymouse*, but did have one of his father that his mother had kept next to her bed.

There is an AB sub-plot in the story of Bruce's first memory of his father, with a ride on the handlebars of his bicycle – for the three-year-old, this must have been akin to sailing in a yacht - and the tradewind passage his brother arranged for his father on an elaborate modern yacht, that was not a success.

I can't help but feel the perfection of his father's eyes in part A is reflected in the perfection of the lines of the yacht in part B.

In the scant 3 pages of this story, Bruce manages to put together a miniature *Paradise Regained*: the story of his mother's love for his father, his father's love for his 'lost lover', the yacht (I mean no disrespect here), the tenderness of the relationship between the boys and their father, a good deal of family history, a reference to Rimbaud and, conveyed by the colour blue, a sense of the beauty of sailing.

This concision is surpassed in the one and a half pages of *The Fly*, where the 'right kind' of collector, Bertie Landsberg in part A is vividly contrasted with Mr. and Mrs. W. of part B. The pages are positively crammed with detail. The link between the two is a clever sidestep: Bertie tells a story about his wife, Bruce's wife tells a story about the W__s. Bruce claimed both stories influenced their decision to marry.

The same linking structures are found in nearly all the later short stories.

When it comes to the larger scale of the novels, we almost find a macro-structure of links. I don't want to stretch a point here, but I think it's fun speculating:

In Patagonia is about a (presumably real) Bruce travelling through a vast country, collecting stories.

The Viceroy of Ouidah is about a man who travelled from one continent to another to make a fortune, and spent the rest of his life trying to escape the oppressive regime he had landed in and return home. He failed. But in the meantime he 'collected' a dynasty, a vast family. The book begins with his memorial service attended by dozens of his family.

Utz is about a man who *had* a fortune and escaped the regime with his large porcelain collection. He then returns, smuggling his collection back to his claustrophobic apartment in Prague. He dies without issue and the collection disappears. Researching the story is a fictional 'I' who resembles Bruce. The book begins with his funeral attended by two people.

The Songlines is about a people who collect nothing material at all and who travel freely, covering vast distances through the countryside. They have strong kinship ties and a huge collection of stories and songs. Travelling to learn about them is a semi-fictional Bruce and his friend Arkady.

On the Black Hill is about twins who travel nowhere at all– they barely stray from the bed they are born in. They collect very little. They have no immediate family.

The books all cross-reference each other in a complex set of pairs, like an internal scheme of rhyming couplets.

In this respect, and in the fictionalised self, I find an echo in J. M. Coetzee. For example his first novel, *Dusklands*, is written in two parts which mirror each other: the oppressive boss of the protagonist in part one (who is partially responsible for his breakdown) is called Coetzee; the protagonist in part 2 is an explorer called Jacobus Coetzee. In *Disgrace*, the protagonist is the middle aged professor of English in the University of Cape Town, in this respect almost identical with Coetzee himself. The fictional *Elizabeth Costello* delivers lectures that Coetzee published as himself, and she re-appears as a character in another book. And Coetzee used some other slightly experimental forms. For example, *In the Heart of the Country* is written as a set of consecutively numbered paragraphs. (Numbering was very fashionable in the '70's).

For me Bruce's novel with the most interesting structure is *The Songlines*. In form it's almost an exact parallel of Basho's *A Visit to Sarashina Village*: first a prose narrative which gives way to a set of linked verse. Basho, in the company of a pupil, sets off to see Mount Obasute under a full moon. The piece becomes a meditation on the meaning of travel, and journeying as a metaphor for transience of life itself. The linked poems at the end are by Basho and his disciple Etsujin.

A Visit to Kashima Shrine has the same structure. Here Basho is accompanied by a masterless youth and a wandering priest. They proceed without hiring a horse because 'we wanted to try the strength of our slender legs'. The journey is to see the shrine by full moon, but the clouds thwart them.

The linked poems at the end were written by several people, including Basho under an earlier pen-name.

Despite the brevity of each piece, there is attention to detail – the 'somewhat uncouth gold-lacquer work' cups they drink from, the moonlight touching a corner of his room.

In *The Songlines* Bruce travels with a companion, Arkady. [I have often wondered about the choice of this character's name. Is it chosen because

of its connection to Arcady spelt with a c – the 16th century word for an ideal rustic paradise?]

The book is, of course, primarily a mediation on walking, travelling and its meaning.

And the notebooks at the end have links: Petrarch talks of sleeping in a different bed each night. This links to Rimbaud (asking what am I doing here) – to a sleepless night in an hotel in Brazil – to the names of 2 hotels in Cameroon, the Windsor and the anti-Windsor – which provide a link a the British ambassador in Kabul, whose contradictory initiative and insensitivity to local culture leads to a Moorish proverb on the value of men – which prompts a story of a little man who prospects for jewellery in sewers in Miami: “It is not, I can assure you, sir’ he said, ‘ an unrewarding occupation.’” And so on.

And of course, many of the notes are quotations from other people’s writings.

Finally, a brief word about fact and fiction:

Basho’s travel sketches are combinations of prose narrative, and static verse. They are not guide books – and in some cases the narrative of the journey is distorted for poetic reasons. In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* Basho describes places he visited in the ‘wrong’ order to create a symmetry of names and moods.

Bruce always combined fact and fiction.

In *Utz*, for example, he felt that by changing the description of Utz himself: now he has a moustache, now he doesn’t; he would sufficiently undermine the veracity of the story to bring into question the existence of the collection and the self-proclaimed baroness at the end of the book.

By starting his career with *In Patagonia* Chatwin ran into a problem: all the arts are now run by their arch enemy: Business – in this case the Book Industry. And industries love labels. Work must be classified into genres.

Is it fact or fiction? Is it a novel or is it a travel book?

I recall one of the judges of the Booker prize being almost more annoyed at the brevity of *Utz* than anything else. The book didn’t fit into his classification of a novel, and therefore he felt it didn’t belong in the competition! (Imagine Capability Brown’s apoplexy at the sight of a stone garden).

Perhaps because of their age and established position in Japanese literature, there is no classification problem with Basho’s writings. And they are so beautifully named: Travel Sketches.

A travel book is supposed to deal with a factual past. A novel deals with a fictional present, even when written in the past tense. In Basho there is a

separation of the two – the prose is in the past tense, the poetry captures the present.

I think Bruce, in his short novels, almost stripped of the Here and Now of dialogue, devoid of the usual plumping up of cinematographic detail of popular fiction, was aiming at the altogether more timeless genre of the chronicle. There *are* scenes, events, special moments in time that are brought back to life and replayed as in a novel, but many more that are merely suggested.

In *What am I Doing Here* Bruce tells Noel Coward advised him: “Never let anything artistic stand in your way.”

By this I’m sure he meant Art as opposed to Entertainment. Bruce says he followed his advice, but this is more of a stance than a fact. His work is full of *artifice*. Bruce’s taste in art was unusual – he gravitated towards the *artifact* rather than the conventional *artwork* of high art. He was interested in pieces that were repositories of stories, rather than those which aimed at transcendence, the hallmark of western art. (It is not for nothing that Utz is about a collector of narrative porcelain, rather than paintings).

Interestingly enough, artifacts tend to be highly formalised. Often they are completely abstract. The handling of the material is the root of a narrative. The relationship between the artist and the work, the care and precision of the craftsmanship (or lack of it) tell us more of the value of the work to the artist and his society than its subject matter or the material itself; be it an Inuit whalebone toggle, a Neolithic flint arrowhead, an Peruvian feather cape, an Aleutian islands hat, a Hawaiian bark-cloth sheet, a modern fibreglass sculpture or a Mogul miniature.

The first weekend I met Bruce, he produced a 13th Century Japanese red lacquer box, one of his most prized possessions. It was slim, perfectly circular, tending to matt and fading slightly irregularly. It suggested a rising moon.

The form could not be simpler or more perfectly executed, and it had a patina brimming with suggestion of another world and another age.

“This is me,” he said, “this is what I am about.”

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