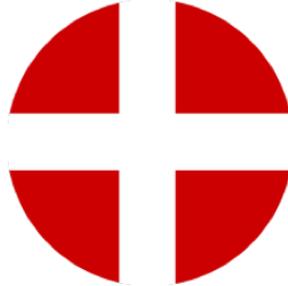


HAIKU RIPPLES IN MODERN DANISH POETRY

Thorvald BERTHELSEN



In 1853 Japanese leaders opened the country for trade. This meant that Japanese culture became accessible to foreigners. Haiku were spread all over the world in the 160 years which have passed since then—even to our country Denmark.

In 1958 the Danish tennis champion, jazz critic and writer Torben Ulrich published the first Danish translations of Japanese haiku in the periodical *Bazar*, which he edited together with the Danish poet Jørgen Gustava Brandt. Amongst them was the famous Bashō haiku on the pond and the frog. He translated the ending sound with the Danish onomatopoeia, “Blop,” which is still the best translation of that particular sound.

Torben Ulrich, himself a Zen Buddhist, and Jørgen Gustava Brandt were inspired by the American Beat poets and their revival of the American haiku tradition from the Imagists combined with Zen Buddhism. Specifically by the publishing of *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. In that novel a character based on Gary Snyder writes a lot of haiku.

Before 1958 they had planned the content of *Bazar* in details. And their plans involved both publishing of Japanese haiku and Gary Snyder. The year before Jørgen Gustava Brandt also published his collection of lyrics, *Trails of the dragon*,¹ where probably the first haiku inspired poem in Danish was printed:

Nightbrooder

Heavy and starring
the living room at wake
turning on the night lamp
flies will buzz²

1. *Dragespor*, 1957.

2. *Natgrubler/Tunge og stirrende/vaager stuerne/Tænder jeg natlampen/summer fluerne.*

This didn't spread the Danish awareness of haiku very far. It was the publication of "haiku" in 1963 by Hans-Jørgen Nielsen that triggered the broader haiku influence on modern Danish poetry. He had translated large samples of the Japanese haiku masters from German, English and French translations. This also meant that he neglected the formal syntax and rules of classical Japanese haiku. He translated them into the "broken" syntax of modern poetry. And he saw haiku as concrete images without metaphoric function like the Imagists. Thus using the experience in his later writing of Concrete Poetry of which he was the leading spokesman in Denmark.

One of the greatest modern Danish poets, Ivan Malinovski, responded to this in 1965 by writing and publishing a whole book of short poems inspired by haiku, *Poetomatic*. In it he wrote poems that question the Zen Buddhist and introvert tradition in haiku. He develops the short lyrics into modern civilization critical poems. In a section of *Poetomatic* he prints Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's translation of a Buson haiku on one page and writes a poem with his own comment on the opposite page:

On the temple's
great bell, completely at rest
a butterfly sleeps

Too steep
the fire
too big

no
birds taking off

During the 70/80s of the 20th century Dan Turell, Klaus Høeck and Peter Laugesen were strongly influenced by the American Beat poets, Zen Buddhism and haiku. Peter Laugesen wrote several haiku poems and mixed them in with his other poems in his different books. He has continued doing so throughout his career. Here's an example from *Blues* (1977):

the snow clutching
beneath the clogs
coming through the park³

As the literary scholar Anne Borup⁴ has pointed out: Danish literary critics didn't recognize the literary renewal, because they didn't see or understand haiku. Erik Skyum-Nielsen wrote about one of his haiku: "It could have been the start of a poem. But alas Laugesen lets the lines stand alone, like the following short sight."

Frozen panties
dangling from the string
winterfish in Flower⁵

As always with Laugesen his poem is rooted in everyday experience — here, laundry hung out to dry in cold weather. The sight makes you associate flat or flying fish with flower heads, and

3. *sneen klampede/under træskoene/på vej gennem parken.*

4. Information, 17th November 2001.

5. *Frosne underbukser/dinglende på snoren/vinterfisk i blomst*, Peter Laugesen: *Konstrueret situation*, 1996.

the poem jumps abruptly into a surreal image: winterfish in bloom. It is haiku and imagism at once. And it captures the essence of haiku. It is a snapshot of the moment in its microcosmic uniqueness.

In 1982 Susanne Jorn published her haiku translations directly from the Japanese in *Efter blæsten*. It contains translations closer to the original of the same haiku masters, whom Hans-Jørgen Nielsen had published In 1963.

In the 90s and first years of the new millenium authors like Susanne Brøgger, Hanne Hansen, Viggo Madsen, Pia Tafdrup and Lone Munksgaard Nielsen wrote haiku or published haiku books. Lone Munksgaard Nielsen has written *Rimgræs* (2003), in which the following haiku appears:

He leaned
too far back and
fell out of his body⁶

The poem is compliant with the 5-7-5 syllables rhythm, but the classic themes from the original haiku is gone, although the poem is about the entry into a Zen-insight in the essence of everything, a cosmic overall awareness.

In 2001 The Haiku Group of the Danish Authors' Society was founded by Hanne Hansen, Niels Kjær, Kate Larsen and Sys Matthiesen, who are all avid haiku poets. Hanne Hansen, who was also the initiator of the group, writes haiku exclusively. She has also released several collections. Since her example many haiku books have been published in Danish.

A large selection of haiku by Kobayashi Issa has been translated and published by Arne Herløv Petersen⁷ and two books of Bashō haiku translations have been published by Niels Kjær.

In 2011 the Haiku Group of the Danish Authors' Society published their 10th anniversary anthology *Blade i Vinden (Leaves in the Wind)*.

In 2012, the Danish haiku group had the opportunity to meet with Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, who is well known for his love of haiku and for publishing his own book of haiku in 2010.

On that occasion the group made a supplement in English and Danish to *Blade i Vinden. Danish Haiku Today 2012* is an extended edition, which includes more poems as well as more poets. It introduces the English-speaking world to 28 contemporary Danish haiku poets.

Some of the Danish haiku poets address nature, the seasons, cherry blossoms and other subjects addressed by the Japanese haiku masters. And they do so in a more classical haiku language and syntax. The following are all examples of this:

6. *Han lænede sig / alt for langt tilbage og / faldt ud af sin krop.*

7. *Dugdråbeverden*, 2006.

snowflakes dancing
over the bare graves —
the sky is open
Niels Kjaer

white wooden houses
at the foot of the mountains
their snow covered tops
Hanne Hansen

withered leaves
rustle under my feet
the shadow moves silently
Jette Slaaen

Others are deeply integrated in the ways of expression of modern Danish poetry and don't comply with most of the rules of the Japanese haiku tradition:

a word that takes time defoliation
Johannes S. H. Bjerg

A sky of Italian marble
butcher's counter
oh, how I need
you
Viggo Madsen

Behind the looking glass
In a place for
nobody grass is meeting
butterfly scales
Thorvald Berthelsen

In the development of Danish haiku the Beat poets of America and even Zen Buddhism have played a smaller and smaller part. There are several different opinions about what a haiku is amongst both the Danish and the American-European haiku poets. Some use rhymes, metaphors, titles and other poetic expressions, foreign to the classical Japanese haiku forms. The key is that haiku poems put a momentary experience into perspective in its microcosm and expands the experience. And whether they write classical inspired or more modern haiku Danish haiku poets are all more or less deeply influenced by modern Danish poetry from the last 60 years.

In 2011 the Haiku Group of the Danish Authors' Society published their 10th anniversary anthology *Blade i Vinden (Leaves in the Wind)*. Their website, HaikuDanmark.dk (www.HaikuDanmark.dk), includes an English section.

In May 2012, through an arrangement with former European Union president Herman Van Rompuy, they made a supplement in English and Danish to *Leaves in the Wind* for the meeting. This is the second extended edition of that publication, *Danish Haiku Today 2015* (<http://ravnerockforlaget.dk/Rompuy%20202.udgave%20A5%20Endelig.pdf>), made in connection with The Haiku Foundation World of Haiku feature (July 2015) on Danish haiku culture.