

THE HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN HAIKU

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THE BEGINNING

Haiku, a poetry of Japanese origin, appeared first in the Hungarian language in translation. It is curious that it came to Hungary not from the East, but from the West. Interest in Japanese poetry here is connected to the spread of Impressionism at the beginning of the 20th century. Haiku attempts to provide brief impressions, sensations and feelings arising in the world to the reader, so he or she might make these impressions his or her own.

The first Japanese poetic creation in the Hungarian language was by Inoue Tecudzsiró in 1907 in Budapest: *Őszirózsa (Aster)* in translation by Zoltán Nyeviczkey (1887–1940), a lawyer and chief government counsellor. In his books he and his Japanese assistant, Uchiyama Hisanori, translated several Japanese poems into Hungarian from German.

A second Japanese verse collection was edited in 1920 at Temesvár (today: in Romania, Transsylvania), the poet and translator Árpád Bardócz (1888–1953). In addition to Bardócz many Transylvanian poets and writers took to Japanese poetry, including János Barna, Benedek Barátosi Balogh, Zoltán Franyó and István Szombati Szabó. In Bardócz's case German was the intermediate language, and the translator—as he himself notes—should strive not for a precise replication of the text, but to render it in the best possible Hungarian. Naturally in early Hungarian translations there were many mistakes. For example, in a haiku by Bashō, *Hana ni asobu abu* was translated variously as fly, honey-bee, wasp, mosquito, but never gadfly. Translations have improved, of course.

The reformer priest-poet István Szombati Szabó (1887–1934), whose poetry was lauded by the great Hungarian symbolist poet, Endre Ady, edited a small booklet at Kolozsvár in 1923 with the title *Old Japanese Poets*. The Japanese anthology edited in 1924 at Szatmár with translations by János Barna (1880–1934) is much more capacious than its predecessor. This Hungarian secondary school history professor (though of noble ancestry) was elected in 1876 a correspondence member to the Hungarian Scientific Academy for his merits as translator. In these latter two collection we cannot know from which language they were translated into Hungarian.

FIRST SUCCESSES

The greatest impact of Japanese poems on Hungarian culture was brought about by Dezső Kosztolányi's *Chinese and Japanese Poets*, re-edited several times since its first appearance in 1931. Kosztolányi (1885–1936) in truth introduced Japanese poetry to Hungarian readers. He translated from the English version of Miyamori Asatarō's *An Anthology of Haiku Ancient and Modern*. Kosztolányi first published (1933) in the well-known newspaper *Nyugat* thirty haiku under the title of *New Japanese Verses* to which he attached notes “. . . My job was not only to translate the haiku into Hungarian but mainly that—diminishing the distance of the two continents and knowledge—to translate them from Asian into European, taking care not to make long the shortness of Japanese and not to round up the the Japanese variety. That is the only way the virgin and child Asia can get closer to the older and spleened Europe. In Assyrian Asia means *The Country of the Light*, and Europe *The Country of the Darkness*.” Later Kosztolányi in his volume of translations *Foreign Poets* increased the numbers to ninety-six. These later translations brilliantly recreate those sentiments radiating from the Japanese originals. He did not follow the 17 (5-7-5) *mora* count; moreover, occasionally he transcribed a poem into four rather than three lines. He employed rhymes as is typical of Hungarian poetry. He also gave every haiku a title. Nevertheless, his haiku translations succeed in creating the mood that we expect to experience from the original Japanese haiku.

For a long while some believed that these poems were not translations, but were created by Kosztolányi himself. We now know this is not true, and can compare his translations with their originals. Here's an example how Kosztolányi translated one famous haiku of Matsuo Bashō:

古池や蛙飛こむ水のをと

The old pond;
A frog jumps in—
The sound of the water.
(translation by R.H. Blyth)

Tó

Öreg halastó szendereg a langyos
magányba némán . . . Most beléje cuppan
loccsanva egy loncsos varangyos.

Lake

Old fish-pond dozes in the tepid
loneless silently . . . Now, a sluttish toad
squelches splashingly into it

This pearl of world lyrical poetry is one of the most rigorously defined formal poem. As with Japanese ink drawings, where a minimum number of brush strokes is employed, haiku are able to create sentiment with few words. So a mere suggestion is sufficient to give rise to associations inside the reader. This miniature picture suggests an entire world, within which hides Life and Death. The intention of the song is the carving into marble this flying moment.

At the end of the Japanese verse there is no rhyme, but inside the lines there are several examples of assonance. Assonance in Japanese haiku refers not only to the first letters of words, as in Hungarian haiku, but frequently to two or three different *morae* interweaving with each other, thus creating the exciting feeling of diversity and equality. The delicate equilibrium of the poem is achieved by contrasting the first two lines against the third. This contrast of picture and voice, motion and immobility, silence and noise, settles between the two pillars of haiku. And after a short movement we can observe better the timeless quiet and stability.

The classical Japanese haiku, due to its many compulsions (games of words, appearance of known geographical names, the cutting word separating the lines, etc.), deteriorated in the 19th century more or less, and in the second part of the century with the spreading of European and American cultures was forgotten as poets turned towards the more fashionable free verse. With the arrival of Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the traditional Japanese poetical forms were renewed. Shiki's activities began a revolution not only in Japanese poetry but in the lyrical poetry around the world. He elevated the objective tone over sentiment, and the importance of pictures of the everyday. He emphasized the 17 *morae* as essential to this kind of poem. In this way he modernized haiku, in which there is no obligation to use a season word or other formal prescriptions characteristic of classical haiku.

After Kosztolányi poets translating Japanese haiku tried to express less the sentiment of the verse and more its content. Consider, for example, this Gyula Illyés (1902–1983) translation of that same Bashō haiku. Illyés uses end rhymes and maintains the syllable count of the original verse. But where we feel from Bashō's haiku that the immobile and stable world can be changed by a small frog forever, we cannot find here:

Tó. A hinárba
most be egy béka—
micsoda lárma!

Lake. To the reedgrass
Now a frog jumps in
What a noise he makes!

The Japanese original had such an influence on Hungarian literary translators that several made translations. György Faludy (1910–2006) was forced to work in a copper mine in Hungary during socialism, emigrated to the West and returned to his home in Budapest only in 1990. He is a significant literary translator, and a dedicated interpreter of Japanese lyrical poetry. In his own haiku, he sketches his own state of mind. Faludy also worked from the Japanese, but he essentially rethinks them into original creations. Such practice can be felt in his translations:

Lábát kinyújtja hosszan
a versenyúszó béka,
mikor a tóba lottyan.

Stretching his legs a long way
the swim competition frog
when plashing into the lake

Géza Képes (1909–1989) atypically added a title to his translation:

Meglepetés

Ó, az öreg tó!
Egy béka ugrott belé—
megcsobbant a víz.

Surprise

Oh, the good old lake!
A frog has jumped into it—
the water has plashed

István Rácz of Upper Northern Hungary (Slovakia today) worked from rough Japanese translations and compared his translation to German and French versions, and felt it was easier to translate into Hungarian than into any other language:

Sima víztükör
Béka ugrál a parton—
Megcsendül a tó.

Plain sheet of water
Frog is jumping on the shore
The lake is tinkling

Among contemporary translators Dezső Tandori (b. 1938) works also from rough translations, but his versions are more faithful to the form, featuring, for example, noun over verb structures. The static mood thus creates the feeling of stability, the eternal for which people of today long in this rapidly changing world. This is reflected in this translation made by Tandori:

Tó, békalencsés.
Béka ugrik, zsupsz, bele!
Vén vize csobban.

Lake, with small duckweed
A frog jumps, hoops, into it!
Its old water plashed

MODERN HAIKU

More Hungarian poets are writing haiku than ever before. They are writing not only in classical haiku modalities, singing of the four seasons, but also modern tropes, though there are fewer of these at this time.

At the beginning Hungarian poets wrote only haiku-like poems. Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944) did not name his two three-line verses as haiku, but in reality they were that.

Radnóti died in the Holocaust. His life was considerably shaped by the fact that both his mother and his twin brother died at his birth. He refers to this trauma in the title of his compilation *Ikrek hava* (*Month of the Twins*). In his last years, he was rejected by Hungarians for being a Jew, but in his poems he identifies himself very strongly as a Hungarian. His poetry mingles avant-garde and expressionist themes with a new classical style. In the early 1940s Radnóti was conscripted by the Hungarian Army, but being a Jew was assigned to an unarmed “labour battalion.” In these last months of his life Radnóti continued to write poems in a small notebook he kept with him.

Az ökrök száján véres nyál csorog,
az emberek mind véreset vizelnek,
a század bűzös, vad csomókban áll.
Fölöttünk fú a förtelmes halál.

The oxen drool saliva mixed with blood.
Each one of us is urinating blood.
The squad stands about in knots, stinking, mad.
Death, hideous, is blowing overhead.

(translation by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner)

Why is this poem haiku-like? The syllable count is not that of haiku. However, the end rhyme, so characteristic of the Hungarian poetry, is missing. Also it presents as haiku for reasons of content, not only for its season word, but also for its unusual, unexpected end. Its internal contradiction is characteristic of haiku.

In Béla Vihar’s (1908–1978) poetry a lyrical tone couples with a philosophical content. It approaches epigram, the European brother of the haiku, as can be seen in the moral of the end of the poem.

Ketten vagyunk a születéskor.
Ketten vagyunk a szerelemben.
Csak a halálban egyedül.

we are two at birth
we are two in love, lonely
at the time of death

Sándor Weöres (1913–1989) was a Hungarian poet and translator. His first poems appeared when he was nineteen, being published in the influential journal *Nyugat* (*West*) through the acceptance of its editor, the poet Mihály Babits. His doctoral dissertation *The Birth of the Poem* was published in 1939. The imposition of Stalinism in Hungary after 1948 silenced Weöres and until 1964 little of his work was published.

Galagonya
Őszi éjjel
izzik a galagonya
izzik a galagonya
ruhája.

The brambleberry
Eves of autumn
Gleam with the brambleberry's
Gleam with the brambleberry's
Shimm'ring dress.

(translation by Ádám Makkai)

János Pilinszky's (1921–1981) verse has tight, surprising turns which offer haiku-like sentiments. From the few words we receive only signals of difficult survival periods and we try to understand and feel the near Christ-like sufferings in our mind.

Alvó szegek a jéghideg homokban.
Plakát—magányban ázó éjjelek.
Égve hagytad a folyosón a villanyt.
Ma ontják véretem.

Nails asleep under frozen sand.
Nights soaked in poster-loneliness
You left the light on in the corridor
Today my blood is shed.

(translation by Ted Hughes and Csokits János)

It is true for these verses too what the famous Japanese haiku poets said: we have to read twice a haiku, once to understand it and second time to feel it. György Petri's (1943–2000) haiku-like verse is exactly the opposite construction to that of Pilinszky: the first line shocks the reader, followed by the usual contradiction:

Kivándorol egy ország önmagából?
Megjött a villamosod.
Siess. Szerbusz.

Emigrates a country
From itself? Your tram is here.
Hurry up, bye-bye!

HAIKU AS A POPULAR POETIC GENRE

Since the 1980s haiku has become more and more popular in Hungary. Aphoristic haiku is typical, often imparting serious philosophical messages.

Much Hungarian haiku still follow the traditions of classical Japanese haiku the order of the seasons of the year. In these haiku we can find pieces which could have written anywhere in the world. So the blossoming of the cherry, the voice of the nightingale, moonlight, snowfall are frequently the topics of these poems. Such “Japanese” feeling can be found in the haiku of Ferenc Bakos (b. 1946). He has published a book of his Hungarian haiku.

Tücsök morzézik
konténerszobám alól
a sivatagból.

Under my caravan
a cricket sends Morse signals
to the desert.

But we can also find typically Hungarian themes in haiku, such as ladybugs and jumping sparrows. Zsuzsa Beney's (1930–2006) dream-like poem is typical, conjuring “old home winters” while disregarding the syllable count:

Birsalma illata, tűzropogás.
Otthon. A tél ködében
Eltűnő.

Quince-apple' perfume, cracking of fire.
At home. In the fog of winter
disappearing

But Hungarian haiku has taken on a typically Hungarian face. In certain cases its form has been changed, other cases its content has been transformed and we can also read haiku which possess Hungarian characteristics in both form and content. Very few poets keep the typical rhythm of the Japanese haiku, the tonic of the first and fifth syllables. Instead the already accustomed rhythms are applied. “Our poets relate five-syllable lines on one hand with a five-syllable Hungarian rhythm, and on the other hand with the antique metrical poetry of Adonisian dithyramb because the Hungarian five-syllable rhythm is also measured to the rhythm of the Adonisian dithyramb.” wrote Erika Szepes.

In Hungarian haiku the seasons of the day as well as the year appear, mainly dawn, sunset and night. Seemingly, early morning, mid-day or afternoon are not seen to be appropriate to haiku inspiration. Tibor Zalán (b. 1954) personalizes the approaching night in his haiku:

Tigrisek lépte
Puhán és fenyegetőn
Közeleg az éj

Step of the tigers
In gentle and frightening
Mode, night approaches

An evergreen topic of Hungarian haiku is Love. One of the best, and at the same time filled with a fine ironic confession of love, is this one by Ákos Fodor (b. 1945):

Vallomás

úgy szeretem, hogy
nagykabátban is vágnék
vele — aludni

Confession

I love her so much
that even in an overcoat
I would sleep with her

We can generally say that Ákos Fodor's verses are permeated with a serious wisdom and a suffering pessimism, perhaps due to a certain Central European fatalism. He—and some others—provides titles to his haiku, though this is not characteristic of Japanese haiku. These titles are organic parts of the poems, frequently keywords. Another characteristic is his turn of the so-called phrase-sentence, which imparts a new surprise. They induce the reader to think more and increase its shocking effects. Fodor wrote: "Haiku turns two people poets, just like love makes two people lovers. The author is neither a shaman, nor a rhetorician or a surgeon. Nor is the reader inferior, patient or inert. Meeting in this focus, they loosen and get loosened up, heal and get healed, and, as long as they so desire, gain something of a third nature. It is an ascetic form, a protean genre, a vivid mentality that creates rather than consumes time and space. Those who can rejoin and touch each other even for a single haiku moment are blissful."

A characteristic and nice example of the erotic haiku is a poem of László Villányi (b. 1953) the last one from the *Triades*:

Szétnyíló szilva
nyelvem puha húshoz ér
lélegzet szakad.

opening plum fruit
my tongue touches tender flesh
the breath is breaking

What caused this great popularity towards the haiku? As at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries an apocalyptic sentiment appeared, which presents itself again at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21th centuries. The turning of the millennium has been also impregnated with an end-of-the-world life feeling from which we would escape. Therefore our age—this gasping, confused age full with uncertainty—is characterised by a certain type of wish to get away from the unsolved problems to an exotic foreign world. In haiku we retain the hope of beauty, of harmony. The achronism, eternity and stability radiating from haiku is attractive to Hungarian poets. At the same time they are looking for comfort against of the uncertainty of existence in a seemingly easy genre. The issues of life and death, and mainly the pain of mourning, exercise our poets, as here with József Utassy (b. 1941):

Gyászéj

Akkora hold van,
recseg-ropog a mennybolt.
Fiam a földben.

Mourning night

So large is the moon
the firmament is cracking
My son's in the earth

Very characteristic is haiku reminiscent of epigram containing a serious philosophical message. As mentioned, Hungarian poets feel consonant with the brevity of the epigram and bring to the haiku its wisdom content.

EAST-EUROPEAN FATE IN HAIKU

Sándor Kányádi (b. 1929) is a significant literary translator who writes haiku as well as what he calls "nail poems" because of their brevity. He considers syllable count, and eschews rhyme. Here is an example he calls "a tiny little haiku":

Búd és örömöd
bízd a kitavasodott
szomorúfűzre.

your sorrow and joy
my darling, please, entrust to
the vernal weeping willow

Among Hungarian poetesses, Ágnes Gergely (b. 1933) is an excellent formal artist, a real *poeta doctus*. She is a dedicated interpreter of Japanese prose and poetry, and features haiku along with limerick in her lyric poetry.

Küszöb küszöbre.
Beljebb senki nem jutott.
Még a remény sem.

Threshold to threshold.
None were able to get in.
Not even hope

The relativity of time, loneliness, dreams, pain, anxiety and war are frequent topics of Hungarian haiku. A good example of temporality and transience is this famous haiku of Dezső Tandori (b. 1938):

Kavafisz-haiku

Már fél három!
Milyen hamar
Elmúlt egy év

Cavafy's haiku

Already half past two!
How quickly
a year has passed
(translation by Alan E. Williams)

Among religious haiku most verses are connected to Christianity, such as this haiku by Iván Andrassew (b. 1952):

Fia lóg a fán.
Néha Isten erre jár.
Sír, mint egy gyerek.

His son hangs from tree
Sometimes God visits us here
Crying as a child.

A special category of haiku is dedicated to the memory of happy or lonely Christmases. They are concerned with the strength required to bear this moment of greatest loneliness.

Haiku on the themes of wine-drinking and patriotism are also beginning to emerge, either through apocalyptic pictures, or references to the historical past, or through the presentation of our national values. The haiku sequence of Attila Szepesi (b. 1942) (from which we include only one example) is speaking with the voice of the motherland:

Hamu a szélben.
Szavakká foszlott szárnyak.
Messzi kolompszó.

Ashes in the wind
Decomposing to words
Cow bells from afar

Perhaps the most colourful and richest topic for Hungarian haiku speak of disease, hospitals, alcoholism, depression, and poverty. These are words staking a claim. István Turczi's (b. 1957) haiku confesses:

Nincs tér, nincs idő.
Isten penészes szeme
vakablakra néz.

No place and no time.
The mouldy eyes of God look to
a dummy window

Our haiku poets treat Japanese topics as well, citing Japanese gardens, *bonsai*, cherry blossoms, *ikebana*, the taste of *sake*, the world of the *samurai*, Japanese wood cuts, thoughts on

Zen Buddhism, *sumo*, and so on, but in one verse a ladybug wearing a dotted kimono also appears. Gábor Terebess's (b. 1944) haiku shows a *geisha* toddling in a *geta*, a high sole wooden slipper:

Facipőd nyomát
hóval lepi be a tél—
hogyan találsz haza?

Trace of wooden shoe
Is covered by winter snow
How you find your home?

HUMOUR IN HUNGARIAN HAIKU

We should also mention the humorous variation of haiku, *kyōka*. Hungarian haiku poets also frequently write humorous haiku. These poems have a characteristic sarcastic humour which offers a distorting mirror to the reader. György Tímár (1929–2003) dipped his pen into bitter irony

A hiúság fölöslegességéről

Utánam nagy úr
támad majd. De előttem
nagyobb, esküszöm.

The redundancy of vanity

A big vacuum will come
after me, but before me
a bigger, I swear!

Often we feel as though haiku poets are simply sending personal messages, like email, to their readers. Several poets also add titles to their haiku. It's as if they are just beginning haiku, or ending it, just splashing about in the formal charm of the genre. They are also frequently using the enjambment in haiku, or in the haiku sequence, even if in Japanese poetry there is no precedent for that.

THE POET AND THE POEM

Between Far-Eastern and Western poetry, the biggest difference is in the understanding of the role of the poet. In Japanese verse the poet is never present, he withdraws himself wittingly. But he is not simply removing himself to the background: he wants instead to immerse himself into nature, being united with it, to become a part of the universe. The hero of the Western poem is always the poet himself—expressly or unsaid. Let's look at some Hungarian haiku in which the poet shows himself and undertakes his fate openly. We note a few expressions from such haiku in proving this: "I am," "I am his mirror," "my glib talk," "my

pride,” “the tenderness of my heart,” “covering my soul,” “condemned to me,” “I have no more strength,” “I fell into pieces,” “I will be caught . . . will be hanged . . . will be resurrected,” “on my tomb.”

This style of haiku has been called by different names by our poets. We have already mentioned the “nail poems” of Kányádi; László Bertók (b. 1935) calls it a “caressing triplet;” Zoltán Szűgyi (b. 1953) features the gracefulness of haiku and calls it “butterflyhaiku.” Ottó Orbán (1936–2002) offers a formula for writing haiku, perhaps to someone’s envy:

Haiku-por
(Vízben oldható, japán verskivonat)

Hokusai fókuszai.
Időzzél el ezen
á la Zen!

Haiku powder
(Effervescent Japanese verse extract)

The focuses of Hokusai
Take your time hymen
a la Zen!

The author of this paper offers a haiku as well, this 1st prize winner 1st at the World Haiku Conference, an English-language haiku competition in Japan.

Régi kunyhóban
megmerítem vödrömet
a múlt kútjában.

Behind an old hut
I drink from the well of
the Past.

After the World Haiku Festival 2000, the Hungarian Haiku Club was established in the framework of the Hungarian-Japanese Friendship Commission, which organizes meetings in the most beautiful places of the country in every season. These places all have some kind of Japanese relations (e.g. a Japanese garden, a Japanese statue park). The age of club members varies from 7 to 76. There are 60-70 members of the club.

Ezer magyar haiku (One Thousand Hungarian Haiku) was published in 2010 and featured 264 haiku poets. In that same year, from August 6-8, 41 haiku poets from 11 countries gathered in Pécs to celebrate an international haiku festival. Now, in the 21st century haiku has become a beautiful and indispensable genre for modern people.

*Translated from the Hungarian by György Vermes.
Where not otherwise indicated, the haiku in the text are also translated by György Vermes.*