

# A HISTORY OF HAIKU IN BULGARIA

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## I. TRANSLATIONS AND CRITICISM

The history of Bulgarian haiku begins with the first contact with Japanese poetry, the translation of Japanese lyrics from German and French done by Nikola Dzerov. The small book which contains only thirty-eight pages is called *Sini Chasove (Blue Hours)*.<sup>1</sup> Most poems in it are from the period VII–IX century, before the originating of haiku. Fifteen years later, the same translator published another selection of Japanese poems translated from French, called *Pesnite na Yamato (The Songs of Yamato)*<sup>2</sup> in which we can find a few haiku of Bashō, Buson, Issa, Shiki and others.

Therefore Eastern poetry penetrated Bulgaria mainly from the West. The fact of the appearance of Western language translations had one main result: the wrong idea of Japanese aesthetics. The difficulties in the translation from Japanese are obvious because of the difference between alphabetic and ideographic writing, which adds to the power of the image. When this happens through other languages, the task gets more complex due to the specifics of the transitional language. As in haiku homonymy has a great role, the lack of coinciding of the homonym in different languages brings about additional problems. The issue of translating from German and/or French had one more aspect, and it was the influence of European literary traditions. According to the German poet and researcher Klaus-Dieter Wirth, the impact of German romanticism left a strong imprint on the haiku translations in German during the first half of the last century. The same was also true for French symbolism, which led to an inclination to symbolize the concrete Japanese imagery in Bulgarian translation.

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1. Dzerov, Nikola, selection and translation from German and French. *Sini Chasove. Japonska lirika*, Sofia, “Korali”, 1922.

2. Dzerov, Nikola, selection and translation from French. *Pesnite na Yamato. Japonska antologiya*, Sofia, “Korali”, 1937.

It took almost 50 years after Dzherov's translation for the first haiku book translated from the original Japanese to appear. The title is *Palnolunie (Full moon)*.<sup>3</sup> The foreword of Krum Atsev in the book is the first Bulgarian criticism on haiku—an in-depth attempt for introducing the readers to the secrets of the manner of thinking of the Far East and to its way of seeing the world. The author tried to answer the question: what is the important thing that turns a short poem into haiku. Is it the structure 5/7/5? If a translated work consists of more or less than 17 syllables, is this poem a haiku or not? The connection to nature is very important for haiku spirit. However, there are many Western poems connected to nature. His answer underlines the role of the unsaid. In this way the first criticism on haiku gave very precise directions to haiku readers and poets.

Later many books about Japanese culture appeared and the most important publications among them were the translations and the culture studies of Bratislav Ivanov. Thanks to his books the understanding of Japanese culture and haiku was sophisticated.

## II. HAIKU POETRY

Bulgaria is a country situated between the West and the East. Due to the fact that the “geopoetical” space of Bulgaria is closer to the West than to the East the influence of the Western aesthetics and cultural traditions dominate. However Eastern attitudes are also integrated deeply in our consciousness. This is proved by the intensive haiku movement in the Balkans. The Eastern approach to the world can be found in Bulgarian poetry. The first significant contribution discussing this phenomenon came out in 2003. Antoaneta Nikolova, a poet and lecturer of Eastern philosophy, titled her work *The Language of Void*. The Chapter “Bulgarian interpretations of Void”<sup>4</sup> was included in the book.

As English language poetry has imagism and Romania has its poems of one line, Bulgaria also has its local phenomenon, haiku-like poetry *nava*, which originated in the 1980s and was defined as “Style at the Crossroads,” neither Eastern, nor Western. The short form—from one to three lines—is typical of *nava*. The very few words used do not aim to say something, but rather to bring us beyond the words. Different from Romanian one-line poems, *nava* has much more freedom in form and artistic techniques, sometimes diverging from real haiku and resembling western aphorism. What is more, *nava* cannot be defined as a genre; it is more a trend, a “universal principle,” which can reveal itself in different genres. According to its creator Ivan Metodiev, “an almost entire freedom from rules is one of the main differences between *nava* and the classic versions of haiku.” Actually *nava* shares very important features with haiku connected mainly with Zen and minimalism. At the same time it has a root in Bulgarian ancient traditions. “Nava” is an old Slavonic word. According to the author of the trend, to achieve *nava* is “to inhale and exhale at the same moment.” Defined metaphorically in this way, *nava* denotes going beyond dichotomies of any kind and perceiving the unity of the world.

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3. Lyudmila Holodovich and Georgi Vasilev, translation from Japanese. *Palnolunie. Yaponski tristishiya*, Sofia, “Narodna kultura”, 1985.

4. Nikolova, Antoaneta. *Ezikat na pustotata*, Sofia, Akvarium Sredizemnomorie, 2003.

Here are two poems from the magazine *Nava*:<sup>5</sup>

After each raindrop—  
different silence.

Fragrance of cloud.  
Birds are waiting  
With open beaks

All poets from the *Nava* circle published mainstream poetry as well. They were not a group of devotees. This short form was an integral part of Bulgarian poetry, not an alternative.

From the first translation of Japanese poetry to the first collection of original haiku in Bulgarian, more than half-century had passed. Bulgarian haiku is the youngest in the Balkans, although the translation mentioned above was published in the distant year 1922. Three years after the first haiku translation from the original the first haiku collection of the Bulgarian poet Dimitar Stefanov appeared. The book is called *Gorata na glubarcheto (The Forest of the Dandelion)*<sup>6</sup> and is announced as “attempts at haiku” by the author. Due to the understanding of Stefanov about the genre as a form which can (and should) be used by the Western (in this case Bulgarian) way of thinking and perception of the world, the young Bulgarian haiku tradition was spared the imitation of the Japanese masterpieces, a common negative feature of almost all traditions in the first years of their development. On the other hand it was taken into another extreme—an abundance of metaphors in the narrow sense of the term and imagery closer to the West. The first Bulgarian haiku poet adapted haiku by taking the short form (to the extent of following the 17 syllables rule and the 5/7/5 structure), concrete imagery and the nature theme (though not in all cases). As the aesthetic principles of Zen are linked to the aesthetic categories of Eastern art and to the artistic techniques used in haiku, and they all form the three layers of haiku aesthetics, ignoring them fully is impossible without turning the text into a short Western poem. Because of the respect to the author many of the following “attempts at haiku” were marked with his understanding about the distance from Japanese aesthetics (at the time of the book there were no translations of modern Japanese haiku in Bulgaria, neither translations of European or American haiku and internet technologies were not yet developed). There were many good haiku poems in the book, in which Japanese aesthetics were captured intuitively by the poet, for instance:

Bees searching through  
yellow dandelions.  
Spring is here.

In the full bucket  
trembling  
full moon.

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5. Metodiev, Ivan. *Nava* 4, 1993.

6. Stefanov, Dimitar. *Gorata na glubarcheto. Opiti za haiku*, Sofia, “Bulgarski pisatel”, 1988.

However, the thrust of this book and the direction it gives to Bulgarian haiku is best illustrated by the motto—the popular fragment by Khan Omurtag (IX century) containing 17 syllables, with a caesura in the middle, which can be distributed following scheme of 5/7/5 (in Bulgarian):

Even if a man  
lives well, he dies and  
another is born.

The sadness stemming from the realization of the transitional and ephemeral character of life in all forms in this world, one of them being man, is present as an aspect in almost all Far East aesthetic categories as they (differently from the Western reliance on dichotomies) overlap with no clear borders, but this mood is far more visible in *aware* and *sabi*. The fragment, despite the inevitable element of evaluation (for the West), creates the same atmosphere. At the level of artistry, however, this text is very different from haiku, which most often implies emotion and idea through an image. This fragment is more like a western aphorism regardless of its 17 syllables distributed in the 5/7/5 pattern. This was exactly the way Bulgarian authors took in haiku in the beginning—the form and the emotions but not the imagery and the techniques of haiku.

Two years after the first haiku book of Dimitar Stefanof, the book of three-lines poems *Kaleidoskop (Kaleidoscope)*<sup>7</sup> by Edvin Sugarev appeared. Although its author did not define these poems as haiku, they obviously were inspired by Zen and possessed some of the specific characteristics of haiku poetry. Here are three examples:

Village church  
In the graveyard  
crosses and crocuses

It's dark  
Only wild peonies  
flicker under the moon

I dreamt a dandelion field—  
and the wind  
blew me away

The first Bulgarian haiku anthology, *Dazhdovni semena (Rain Seeds)*<sup>8</sup> was published in 2001. It includes poems by ninety authors and is defined as an *Anthology of Bulgarian Haiku Poetry* although most of the poems in it are just short Western poems (even the title sounds like Western poetry). Very few poets demonstrated mastery of the poetical techniques of haiku but this book was important for popularizing of the haiku genre. Only a few years later two other anthologies drew the attention of the first Bulgarian haiku readers: *Tsveteto (The Flower)*<sup>9</sup>

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7. Sugarev, Edvin. *Kaleidoskop*, Plovdiv, Hr. G. Danov, 1990.

8. Stefanov, Dimitar, selection. *Dazhdovni semena*, Sofia, Haini, 2001.

9. Bilyarska, Ginka, selection. *Tsveteto*, Sofia, Atelie AB, 2002.

and *Ptitsata (The Bird)*.<sup>10</sup> Most of the authors included in these books mastered the main artistic devices of haiku genre.

Today, the initial mistakes have been overcome, and Bulgarian haiku has its powerful examples, which have found recognition in the most prestigious magazines and anthologies in the world.

In 2005, in a short review published in *Modern Haiku*,<sup>11</sup> about the three lingual Bulgarian anthology *Mirrors*,<sup>12</sup> it was said: “This beautifully produced book will be the baseline anthology for work in this important corner of the haiku world [the Balkans].” Only five years before that, Bulgaria had had the least developed haiku tradition among the Balkan countries.

The Bulgarian tradition is young but its processes and peculiarities cannot be laid out briefly. In the book *Haiku: vodno konche pod shapkata. Silata na neizgovorenoto (Haiku: a Dragonfly under the Hat. The Power of the Unsaid)*<sup>13</sup> besides with theoretical themes dedicated to haiku aesthetics and the differences in the literary traditions of East and West, a chapter on Bulgarian haiku is included. It is a critical study at different levels, including the aesthetic principles of Zen, the aesthetic categories of Eastern art and literature, and the specific artistic techniques of haiku in Bulgarian haiku poems. There is a special focus on the possibilities for adapting the rhythm and other characteristic features of haiku to the Bulgarian language.

As haiku uses very few words and most often has three-segment structure, the problem of the word order in different languages is very important. While word order in some other languages is strictly fixed, Bulgarian allows great variations. A typical feature of haiku is to bring an element of surprise, and this is more easily achieved when the place of a word can be freely changed.

Another question which is relevant particularly in Slavonic languages is the wide use of diminutives. What is more, this use of diminutives in these languages does not put a stress on the size of the object, but expresses attitudes such as tenderness, irony, etc. It is important as haiku uses every opportunity to “say more” without words.

On the other hand Bulgarian is not as rich in synonyms and homonyms as Japanese and English are. This characteristic of Bulgarian language is balanced by its pliability. These problems only suggest that unique haiku poetry can be created in Bulgarian using its peculiarities.

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10. Stefanov, Dimitar, selection. *Ptitsata*, Sofia, Haini, 2003.

11. *Modern Haiku*, Vol. 36.3, Autumn, 2005.

12. *Mirrors 101 Bulgarian Haiku* selected and edited by Ludmila Balabanova (Bulgarian, English and French), Sofia, LCR publishers, 2005.

13. Balabanova, Ludmila. *Haiku: vodno konche pod shapkata (Silata na neizgovorenoto)*, Sofia, “Boyan Penev”, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2014.

### III. ORGANIZATIONS AND EVENTS

The first organization of haiku poets, the Bulgarian Haiku Club, was founded in 2000, when Jim Kacian and Dimitar Anakiev visited Bulgaria to organize the Haiku Movement in the Balkans. The first chairman was Dimitar Stefanov, the author of the first Bulgarian haiku book. Today this organization is known as Bulgarian Haiku Union (BHU). The journal of BHU is titled *Haiku World*. Four years later Haiku Club—Plovdiv was founded. These organizations do a good job holding special events for the popularization of haiku poetry.

An important year in Bulgarian haiku life was 2005 when the World Haiku Association Conference 3 was held in Bulgaria.

In 2005 another group, Haiku Club Sofia (HCS), that has special significance for haiku development in Bulgaria, was founded. It is a circle of professional writers, translators and academics who are interested in haiku. Every year they organize a haiku conference together with New Bulgarian University, Sofia, or South West University, Blagoevgrad, and hold a haiku contest. Working to improve the quality of Bulgarian haiku poetry, they translate theoretical papers and haiku poems by authors from around the world. Members of HCS write haiku themselves publishing their works in the most prestigious periodicals and their haiku books in the most important Bulgarian publishing houses. Therefore the poetic art of one-breath revelation has found recognition as a fine form of poetry in Bulgaria.