

# HAIKU IN SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

## ROADS AND SIDE-ROADS

Saša Važić



It is a widespread opinion and it is the fact that haiku is unduly neglected by the general (especially literary) public and very popular among its lovers. The fact is also that haiku poets from the Balkans are known, according to some sources, to be among the best in the world, in third place (after Japanese and Americans) regarding the global quality of their poems and the number of prizes, commendations and other recognitions. Serbia and Montenegro have but some 10 million inhabitants and, according to one of our critics, “as many haiku poets as there are Chinese.” This doesn’t say much without a good background and analysis.

The history of haiku in our regions (formerly Yugoslavia) began almost 80 years ago but was not continuous, so that it can be said that this poetic genre is but some 35 years young. It came into our literature with a small delay in comparison to its introduction into international literature. This happened in 1927, thanks to the translation-poetic rendition undertaking of Miloš Crnjanski entitled *Pesme starog Japana (Poems of Old Japan)*, including some data on the history of haiku and haiku poems he translated from English and French: “. . . haiku, a comic verse, of fine and tender expression, tiny pictures, short stories . . .”; “. . . an endless Buddhist love and a mix of one’s self with nature . . .”; “. . . expressed in but 17 syllables, one continuous sentence, in fact as short as a breath . . .”. “Haiku poets are painters, those who paint with words. A haikai poet loves every move of plants, animals. In his endless love and compassion, he is considered to be close to an insect, trees, everything that blossoms and withers, all that comes to pass.”), published in our literary journal *Letopis Matice srpske (the Matica Srpska Chronicle journal)*. However, the influence of this genre on our poets was not noticeable until 52 years later, beginning with a pioneer work of Serbian haiku’s only forerunner, Milan Tokin (1909–1962), who left behind him a collection of haiku poems entitled *Godišnja doba (Seasons)*, not published to date.

At that time our haiku scene was enriched by work of one of the most educated haiku poets, Vladimir Devidé, mathematician, academician, ideologist of the Yugoslav “haiku movement.” Despite different opinions regarding his views, his contribution to the haiku development in our regions is undisputable. Vladimir Devidé has published over 150 essays on haiku poetry in some 20 national and international literary reviews and journals and has given over 220 public speeches on poetry, and the literary and cultural history of Japan. His first book of haiku poetry was published in 1970 under the title *Japanska poezija i njen kulturno-povjesni okvir (Japanese Poetry and its*

*Cultural and Historical Framework*). It contains some 500 haiku poems by 100 Japanese poets in his translation from originals into Serbo-Croatian. This book, which still serves as a haiku primer, a haiku textbook, introduces us to Japanese culture and spiritual life, the history of haiku, features of the genre.

In 1975 Aleksandar Nejgebauer (1930 – 1989), translator, literary critic, professor of English and American literature, published the first Serbian (then Yugoslav) book of haiku poetry (*Haiku*) and the first essay, “Metaphor in Haiku,” to be republished outside our borders (*Frogpond of the Haiku Society of America*, May 1980). The first haiku magazine to gather haiku poets from ex-Yugoslavia was *Haiku*, published in Varaždin (1977 – 1981). It is known to be the second main breakthrough of haiku into our literature after the pioneer work of Miloš Crnjanski. In the meantime, and it is worth mentioning, in 1979 two important articles on traditional Japanese poetry were published by a Japanese scholar, Dr. Dejan Razić (on the development of haikai poetry from its beginning to Bashō and the climax of haikai poetry — Matsuo Bashō).

The first Serbian haiku magazine was *Paun (Peacock)*, which was launched in Požega in 1988 (still edited by Milijan Despotović). Haiku has been experiencing greater and greater popularity with the foundation of haiku clubs and their magazines (the first being “Masaoka Shiki” in Niš in 1992 – 1993, with its magazine *Haiku novine (Haiku Newspaper)* in 1993; the first editor was Dimitar Anakiev, and from 1996 on, Dragan J. Ristić). Then “Shiki” in Belgrade in 1992, with the most famous Serbian female poet, Desanka Maksimović, as its honorary president; “Aleksandar Nejgebauer” in Novi Sad in 1993, with its magazine *Listak (Leaf)*, 1993; *Haiku informator* (1997 – 2002); *Haiku ogledalo (Haiku Mirror)* (2000 – 2002), as well as other privately owned haiku journals *Haiku pismo (Haiku Letter)*, edited by Nebojša Simin; Novi Sad, 1995–2001; *Haiku moment*, edited by Zoran Doderović; Novi Sad, 1998; *Haiku moment info* by the same editor, 2002; *Lotos (Lotus)*, edited by Dejan Bogojević; Rajković, 1998 –, *The Rainbow Petal*, an on-line haiku journal edited by Vid Vukasović, Belgrade, 1997 – 1999; *Haiku Reality/stvarnost*, edited by Saša Važić; Batajnica, 2003 –, and several others of minor duration — all in all 19 publications.

A national haiku association was established later: “The Haiku Association of Yugoslavia” (later renamed “of Serbia and Montenegro”), Belgrade (1999 –) with its magazine *Osvit (Daybreak)* (2001 –).

Renewal of interest in haiku occurred and the third breakthrough took place in 1986 when the first (exclusively) haiku publishing library entitled “Matsuo Bashō” was established in Odžaci. National and international haiku contests have been organized in the same town since 1987. The next year a new haiku library was founded with the same name to later (1993) be moved to another town (Kula). According to the latest data there are about 600 authors in our present and ex-country, who have published over 500 titles in the region of Serbia and Montenegro. There are also some 40 collections pertaining to haiku contests held in 7 cities and towns of Serbia and Montenegro (Yugoslav Haiku Festival and later also International Haiku Contest, Odžaci (1989 –); Knjizevna kelija “Sveti Sava” Competition, Paraćin (1994 – 1998); International Haiku and Haibun Contest organized by the Haiku Club “Aleksandar Nejgebauer”, Novi Sad 1998 –; International Haiku and Senryu Contest of the Haiku Magazine *Lotos*, Valjevo, 1999 –, etc.

There are excellent examples of really good accomplishments in compiling and publishing collections and anthologies as well as practical books on the history of haiku, its Japanese masters and the essence and meaning of haiku. Some of them are: *Pesme starog Japana (Poems of Old Japan)* by Miloš Crnjanski (1928); *Ne pali još svetiljku (Don't Turn on the Lamp Yet)* (an anthology of classical Japanese poetry; translations and renditions from several European languages) by

Dragoslav Andrić (1981); *Vetar s Fudžijame (The Wind from Fujiyama)*, a selection of Bashō's travel journals written in haiku form; translations from several European languages by Petar Vujičić (1989); *Haiku antologija japanske poezije od XIV do XIX veka (Haiku Anthology of Japanese Poetry from the 14th through 19th Century)* by Petar Vujičić (1990); *Leptir na čaju (A Butterfly on the Teapot)*, the first Yugoslav haiku anthology compiled and edited by Milijan Despotović (1991); *Grana koja maše (A Waving Branch)*, a collection of Yugoslav haiku poetry representing works of around 400 authors, compiled and edited by Milijan Despotović (1991); *Četiri godišnja doba (Four Seasons)*, an anthology of contemporary Japanese poetry (translations from originals) edited by a Japanese professor at the Belgrade University, Kayoko Yamasaki Vukelić (1994); *Uska staza u zabrdje (A Narrow Road to the Other Side of the Hill)*, translations of Bashō's haibun by Dejan Razić (1994); *Gost sa Istoka: ogleđi o haiku poeziji (A Guest from the East)* by Živan Živković (1996); *Stari ribnjak (An Old Pond)*, translations of Bashō's poems from originals) edited by Hiroshi Yamasaki Vukelić (1996); *KNOTS* (an anthology of southeastern European haiku poetry), edited by Dimitar Anakiev and Jim Kacian (1999); *Peace of the Sky: haiku from an air-raid shelter* by Dimitar Anakiev (1999); *Treća obala reke (The Third Bank of the River)*, about the Novi Sad broken bridges, translated into English, French and German, by Nebojša Simin (2000), *Haiku nestašna pesma (Haiku, a Playful Poem)* by Nebojša Simin (2000); *Iznad praznine (Above Emptiness)*, a collection of Yugoslav haiku poetry by Dejan Bogojević (2002).

Special attention should be paid to the most complex publication of *Trešnjevi cvet (Cherry Blossom)*, published in 2002 by the East Asia Center based in the Belgrade Philological Faculty and edited by Ph. Dr. Ljiljana Marković, professor of English at the Belgrade University, Milijan Despotović and Dr. Aleksandra Vraneš. This edition consists of six volumes representing Yugoslav haiku poetry in the most representative way up to now (essays on haiku, Japanese and Yugoslav authors' bibliographical data, classic Japanese haiku poems in Serbian translations, around 700 haiku of our authors, a volume entitled *Pahulje maslačka (Dandelion Fluffs)*, translations and renditions into Russian done by Prof. Aleksandar Ševo, the most voluminous of this kind up to now. Balkan haiku experienced its international promotion with the *KNOTS* anthology and the Internet websites HASEE (Haiku Association of Southeastern Europe), which was renamed *Aozora* in 2002.

As can be seen from the above, haiku was accepted in a relatively short period of time and gained followers among people of various ages, education, affiliations and occupations (also among professional poets of formerly poetry reputation: Desanka Maksimović, Dobrica Erić, Momčilo Tešić, Miroljub Todorović, Slobodan Pavićević, Mirjana Božin), more than any other literary form that arrived into our literature from the outside.

Serbian haiku poets win an average amount of 40 awards and commendations at national and international haiku contests, but mostly not at really competent, not at literary ones; that makes the picture rather crooked. This crooked picture is in danger of falling down, considering the fact that our editors of haiku journals have established different criteria and have different tastes, sometimes even bad ones resulting in their publishing bad along with good haiku, and even pieces that have nothing to do with haiku. Their aim seems to be to fill their journals (in some cases not published on a regular basis and some published no more than once, which is another question) with "quantity" rather than with "quality." The worst is a double image — one formed in the poet's mind that his/her work is representative and appreciated; and another — presented by competent and well-informed authorities on haiku who state the opposite — even that a good number of our haiku poets have no notion of what haiku really is. So, as a result and owing also to poor financial situation, but to

Serbian temper as well, many publish books at their own expense, not obtaining a catalog number, which are then exchanged among haiku poets, given as a gift, not offered to bookshops.

A special problem, and a question that needs to be resolved, is translation of these poems, mainly into English. These translations, often full of grammatical errors, literal, almost never literary, have been published in magazines and books and sent to competitions. The problem is enlarged as many non-English speaking editors who publish such poems or judges at competitions who select and award them “agree” with them as such. And thus help a bad image of haiku spread and encourage others to follow the wrong path. Instead of attempting to learn more by reading and exploring in depth every kind of national and international (prose and poetry) literature, exemplary articles on haiku and poems of great classic and contemporary poets and masters, to become literate in both Serbian and English languages, to broaden their experience and knowledge, and afterwards try to apply all this it to their work until (nearly) perfect, there are a good number of those who too quickly decide to launch them into space. There are even those who know nothing more about haiku than that it consists of 17 syllables written in three lines (5:7:5).

On the other hand, there is also a good number of those who have risen high, having a good background to successfully try their hands at haiku and produce significant poems and books. There are surely and also poets who show enthusiasm and make efforts to learn more and be constantly informed about the way of haiku and its development. The fact is that, apart from bad financial resources, most of them lack competent literary resources written in our language (a small number of books — translations from original classic Japanese haiku poetry) or at least in a foreign one, most often English (in which case many lack knowledge of the language).

Also, there is no practice of official and constant workshops, and it’s true that our haiku poets are most often deprived of critical words; but what lacks most is self-criticism, self-discipline of spirit, the gift of eastern Zen masters, poets and wise men. Back to competent literary criticism — a missing link — that could help this crooked picture be fixed . . . I would cite two extracts from Živan Živković’s *Gost sa Istoka*:

“. . . However, many such poems are unable to establish communication with a broader readership, particularly with literary criticism so that they are ‘condemned’ to a ‘narrower’ literary space and smaller number of readers, and their authors to anonymity in a world of literary critics who are mainly indifferent toward haiku poetry; some ignore it, some simply haven’t had an opportunity to get to know it — at least in our language — to investigate and value it.”

“. . . why has national haiku poetry been rarely and little written about, or not at all, that is why literary critics — today and here — are indifferent toward this lyric genre enjoying great popularity among both its readers and poets? . . . according to a spontaneous assertion of a renowned and authoritative critic, haiku poetry is a sort of neofolklore that, like anything that is fashionable, borders with trash, in the same way as do newly composed folk songs. He mentions, by the way, that he does not regard haiku as a form that is serious enough to hold the attention of critical spirit.”

To this observation it can be added that many haiku poets are unduly praised by most often incompetent book reviewers, belonging to the same haiku circle to which “reviewed” poets belong or by renowned literary “names” who ask for compensation in specific amount of money for their praises.

This closed circle is sometimes broken by those who manage to obtain support, financial or human, from aside. Or by those who are energetic and courageous enough. There are also (visible

or invisible) “clans” whose aim is to gather like-minded poets with the aim of promoting their common views and gathering more followers, some of whom are often considered to work while others contribute little and enjoy. And to make profit by publishing poor or worthless books. This seems to be a kind of a sect — you give it to me, I’ll give it back to you.

Taking into consideration all stated above, I am of the opinion that such or similar tendencies have always been recorded in any field of human activity that has been trying to make its way and come to a clear path. I also believe that there is no danger that they will disturb the reputation of such an influential poetry and its real values. As usual, true values are those which are appreciated by competent minds of both critics and poets, and they are what will remain. Those who are conscious and able to follow the only and right path and those new ones who appear and enlarge the world’s haiku scene are proof that haiku will live on and be preserved in its purity for future generations.