

HAIKU IN SWEDEN

Lars Vargö



As was the case in many other European countries, the interest for haiku in Sweden was greatly stimulated by the books of **Reginald Horace Blyth** (1898–1964). His translations and interpretations are easily recognizable in some of the first Swedish books on haiku poetry. Another source of importance was Miyamori Asatarô (1869–1952), whose *Masterpieces of Japanese Poetry, ancient and modern* (1936) and *An anthology of haiku, ancient and modern* (1936) found their way to Swedish libraries. Yet other sources were the works by **Lafcadio Hearn** (1850–1904), and Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), where you could find several haiku in English translation.

Swedish archeologists and explorers had for many years had a focus on China, leading to the establishment in 1926 of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. Through the research by sinologists and linguists like **Bernhard Karlgren** (1889–1978), poetry from East Asia initially came to be interpreted as Chinese poetry. Tang poetry became greatly appreciated and the short poems by poets **Li Bai** (Li Po, 701–62) and **Du Fu** (712–70) had a far greater influence on Swedish readers and poets than **Matsuo Bashô** (1644–94) and **Yosa Buson** (1716–83), who were yet to be fully discovered in the early 20th century.

This all changed with the publication of the book *Haiku: japansk miniatyrlyrik (Haiku: Japanese miniature lyrics)* by Jan Vintilescu (1923–) in 1959. The book only contained a limited collection of the most representative Japanese haiku poets in Swedish translation, but it was published at the right time, when interest in traditional Japanese culture again was on the rise and no longer overshadowed by what had happened during the second world war. The book somehow opened the door to a world that had been shut for at least two decades. Combined with the growing interest for zen and Japanese poetry elsewhere in the West, stimulated not least by the publication in the same year of the book *Zen and Japanese Culture* by Suzuki Daisetz (1870–1966), the early 1960s became a period when things Japanese gained more and more attention. And when the Tokyo Olympics were held in Tokyo in 1964, not only athletes and their coaches went to Japan, also journalists and writers.

However, the growing interest for Japanese poetry was not limited to haiku. *Tanka* gained as much attention, if not more, mostly thanks to the many translations from English by the writer, poet and translator Per Erik Wahlund (1923-2009). He published several books, always keeping the syllable counts of 5-7-5 or 5-7-5-7-7. He was a skillful master of poetry and his skill in finding poetic expressions while also keeping the syllable count perhaps even made other poets lose some of their interest in trying to compose haiku and tanka themselves. Japanese poetry somehow first became the exclusive art for the select few, much in the same way that zen tended to be seen as the esoteric form of buddhism it was not.

Parallel to this development was the radical political movements that spread through the West in the late sixties, mainly in opposition to the Vietnam war, but also as a kind of radicalism that turned against the established norms in our societies, also in poetry. Everything was questioned, including the established forms of poetry. However, haiku became a literary form that transcended politics. It was admired both by representatives of highbrow culture and the radical students.

An interesting fact is that in 1959, the very year Vintilesco's book came out, the 2012 Nobel laureate in literature, the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer visited his friend, the poet and psychologist Åke Nordin, who was then the director of a juvenile prison. In a letter of appreciation, which was sent in the form of a new year's greeting, Tranströmer wrote nine short poems, calling them haiku. They were later published as a small book in 2001, titled *Fängelse (Prison)*. The poems are closer to *senryū* than to haiku, but they follow the 5-7-5 format. Among them were for instance

När rymmaren greps
bar han fickorna fulla
med kantareller

When the escapee was caught
his pockets were full
of chanterelles

and

Felstavade liv—
skönheten kvarlever som
tatueringar

Misspent lives—
the beauty remains as
tattoos

Later, Tranströmer published several other haiku, although his main production has always been free verse. Of the more recent ones, there are a few that include expressions that can be classified as *kigo*, for instance

Kraftledningarna
spända i köldens rike
norr om all musik

The power lines
tightened in the realm of cold
north of all music

or

Och blåeld, blåeld
reser sig ur asfalten
som en tiggare

And blueweed, blueweed
rising out of the asphalt
like a beggar

There are many Swedish poets who write and have written poetry that could be said to follow the haiku idea, be it in free verse or some kind of bound verse. Sweden is a relatively large country, geographically, with a small population of only some nine and half million people and nature has always been present in Swedish poetry, in all its beauty and ferociousness. But most of all, poetry has always been an essential part of our culture. Nordic mythology is full of poetry. You see it in the early poetic Edda and you are struck by it in the poetry of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which, by the way, contains several episodes reminiscent of Japanese mythological stories.

The soul of Scandinavian poets has been described in an intriguing way by the Swedish poet **Werner Aspenstöm** (1918–97). In his poem “Själén i Norden” (“The Nordic Soul”) he writes

O dessa mörka skogar inom oss
där jättarna slumra.
Det som vi kallar själen
är bara en vandrande solfläck
under träden, en uthugning
dit det snedställda ljuset når.

Oh, the dark forests within us
where the giants slumber.
What we call the soul
is just a wandering sun spot
below the trees, a clearing
reached by the slanted light

It is an expression of fascination with both the beauty and the fearfulness of nature. This duality can also be found in movies by the famous director **Ingemar Bergman** (1918–2007) and you find it in the poetry of troubadours like **Carl Michael Bellman** (1740–1795), who drank himself to death from love of life as much as fear and fascination of everything reminiscent of nature. You also find it in the famous lines of the tragic poet **Stig Dagerman** (1923–1954), who before killing himself wrote that “to die is to travel a bit, from the branch to the solid ground.”

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that modern Swedish haiku also keeps this duality, both the admiration of the beauty and power of nature, and the fascination with the fragility of life. In Ingemar Bergman’s movie *The Seven Seals*, the main actor plays chess with the devil. Tomas Tranströmer followed a similar path when he wrote

Döden lutar sig
över mig, ett schackproblem
Och har lösningen

Death leans
over me, a chess problem
And has the solution

Somewhere in the Swedish drama and heavy philosophizing there is, however, also humor, perhaps not as light as in the poetry of the early 15th century Japanese *haikai* poets, but in the same way it takes life and death, from the lighter side. Lars Granström (1953–), a skilful haiku poet, wrote the following poem after seeing a funeral procession passing a very specific road sign:

Statsbegravning—
Gående hänvisas
till andra sidan

State funeral—
Pedestrians are asked to cross
to the other side

The Swedish Haiku Society (SHS) was formed in 1999. From the start a very limited number of members participated, but the society quickly grew and now has at least a few hundred members. It regularly publishes a magazine called *Haiku*. The chairman of the society is Kaj Falkman (1934–), who has written several books on various topics. In one of them he introduced the haiku of the second Secretary-General of the UN, Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–61). Hammarskjöld was tragically killed in a plane crash in Africa in 1961, but after his death it was discovered that he had written a number of haiku, posthumously published as *Vägmärken (Markings)*.

The year after its formation the SHS published the bilingual Swedish-Japanese anthology *Aprilsnö (April snow, Shigatsu no yuki)*, a collection of 100 poems by Swedish haiku poets and 100 by Japanese haiku poets. This was followed up in 2004 by the anthology *Haiku Förvandlingar (Haiku Transformations)*, where 103 Swedish haiku poets published 1 to 15 haiku each. The anthology *Ljudlöst stiger gryningen (Dawn rises without a sound)* published in 2008, contained 50 haiku each by ten poets, and was followed by the anthology *Snödroppar (Snowdrops)* in 2009, by eleven poets with ten haiku each.

Several poets have been represented in all of these anthologies, not least Florence Vilén, whose untiring efforts have also kept the Swedish Haiku Society vibrant ever since its start and who has also been a key person behind the successful haiku workshops in Stockholm. One of her haiku poems:

Bara benen syns
av grannarna på stegar
i äppelträden

Only the neighbours' legs
visible on ladders
in the apple trees

As a reaction to the strict 5-7-5 syllable form of Western haiku, another society, called the Fri Haiku (Free Haiku), was formed in 2008; not necessarily in opposition to the activities of the SHS, but rather as a complement. The idea behind Fri Haiku was that if poets follow the syllable count too strictly, the poetry is easily lost. It is better to concentrate on the poetic idea and just keep the haiku as short as possible. The activities of Fri Haiku was essentially limited to a journal for the internet, but the contents have also been published in regular yearbooks.

With the availability of journals and anthologies the number of Swedish haiku poets have continuously increased. So has the number of *kushū*, collections of haiku composed by single poets. A striking example is a poet called Ola Lindberg. His *Hundraåriga skuggor (Hundred-year-old shadows)* is arranged in five sections, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Miscellaneous (*zō*). He does not follow the syllable count, always uses lower-case letters, but mostly writes in three lines. He emphasizes brevity and thereby comes closer to Japanese haiku, which are composed in one line and follow 5-7-5 on, character sounds. Some examples:

rådjuret
på vårisen
försvinner

the deer
on the spring ice
disappears

sommarskur
kanotisten stannar
under bron

summer shower
the canoeist stops
under the bridge

det är höst
min hund luktar
hund

it is autumn
my dog smells of
dog

Recently a special edition of the journal *Haiku* was published. In it one can find a collection of Swedish haiku from the last decade. Some of them follow the traditional 5-7-5 syllable pattern, starting also with a capital letter, for instance this one by Ulf Åberg

Cyklisten dras in
i en virvel av skogsdoft
från timmerbilen

The cyclist is drawn into
a whirl of forest scent
from the timber truck

But again, there are several others that free themselves from that pattern, for instance this one by a poet who calls himself th. vandergrau:

kranen droppar—
rörmokaren säger
det är hösten

the faucet drips—
the plumber says
it is the autumn

Or this one by Helga Härle:

molnen skingras
i varje pöl
en måne

parting clouds
in every puddle
a moon

The history of Swedish haiku might not be very long, but there has been a remarkable development during the last two decades. Not only has the number of haiku poets grown quickly, but there has also been a surge in publications. The trend is to move away from the bound format of 5-7-5 syllables, while keeping a *kigo*, a word or expression indicating what time of the year it is. This is not surprising, since for centuries Swedish poets have been very fond of contrasting the forces of nature with the peculiarities of human society. The Swedish forests are deep and extensive, the lakes beautiful and mysterious, the wild animals a natural part of our mythology and our stories, and our towns and cities both old and well developed. This is a good basis for creating haiku.