

Tomas' Haikudikter

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Tomas Tranströmer's collected work, *Dikter och prosa / Poems and Prose*, published in a handsome edition by Bonniers, Stockholm, to coincide with his Nobel Prize that year, contains three groups of three-line poems each of seventeen syllables (5+7+5). The first group, of nine, were written in 1959 but not published until 2001. The second group, of eleven, were included in his 1996 collection, *Sorgegondolen* (lit. *The Grief Gondola*), and the third and largest group, of forty-five, made up the bulk of his last collection, in 2004, *Den stora gåtan / The Great Enigma*.

It is hard to tell how far this late predilection for very short forms may have been a result of the catastrophic stroke that inflicted him with a form of aphasia in 1992, but it is obvious that, with the exception of the more relaxed manner of *Östersjöar / Baltics*, 1974, concentration and brevity have been hallmarks of his poetry from the very beginning.

It is important to notice what Tomas himself called these short poems — "*haikudikter*," i.e. "haiku-style poems." They vary greatly, from the limpid to the baffling, and while some do appear to be "genuine" haiku, many are not and were not meant to be. The syllabic structure seems to be their only consistent feature. As I tried to translate them, I often wondered how an oriental haiku master would regard them, for to my (amateur) mind the distance between Japanese characters and English syllables seems too far to jump over. I came across many definitions of what a haiku should or should not be. At one extreme there is the vague assumption that a haiku is any old poem with seventeen syllables, or even any old poem with three short lines. At the other extreme, we find stern injunctions from "haiku societies" (many of whose members don't seem to read Japanese) as to what constitutes a "proper" haiku, and in so far as some of Tomas' *haikudikter* contain abstractions, similes,

metaphors and hints of narrative, he has clearly sinned against the rules.

Responding in October 2011 to the Nobel Prize announcement, Lennart Svensson berated Tomas for having “misunderstood” what a haiku is, and lists various shortcomings, in particular his failure to remain concrete.¹ Like Svensson, Anatoly Kudryavitsky admits that some of Tomas’ *haikudikter* do manage to be proper haiku, but he is stern about those that fall short. At least he realises that Tomas “writes haiku in his own way.”² We find a wider perspective in comments on a haiku conference in Japan, in November 2011, from Jim Kacian, President of The Haiku Foundation.³ He recounts the enthusiasm expressed for these short poems by their Japanese publisher, Kyuro Oda, who was “immediately entranced” and was convinced that they imply a renewal that Japanese poetry must become familiar with. Their striking use of metaphor, according to Oda, makes the Swede a potential model for Japanese haiku poets. Tomas’ Japanese translator, Eiko Duke, writing in the Swedish magazine *Vi*, assured us that his efforts were on a par with those of the best Japanese masters.

How far do these issues need to concern the translator? Not much, I would suggest. Faced with these sixty-five three-line, seventeen-syllable little poems, the translator accepts what the original poet gave us and that is what must be presented as reasonably as possible in another language. It is not the translator’s job to “improve” anything. If the poet went to the trouble of arranging his lines in a pattern of 5+7+5 syllables then the translator ought to try to preserve this. Many translators have felt free to ignore the counting of syllables. When I asked Jacques Outin, Tomas’ French translator, if perhaps he ought to have kept the syllable count, he brushed off my question with a charming shrug: “Why should I? I am a poet!” Some languages may well present insuperable problems, but I see no point in claiming, as Kudryavitsky does, that Swedish is “far more suitable for writing 5-7-5 haiku than English.”

Whether or not we call them haiku (and it is surely better not to), these concentrated little poems present the translator with many of the problems of translating poetry

in general. It can often be awkward if the translator's language needs fewer or more syllables than the original, and it is obvious that the constrictions of the 5+7+5 pattern may demand an even greater degree of ingenuity.

If the English needs more syllables than the Swedish then we may find ourselves cutting out something essential. Here's an example from Tomas' 1996 collection:

Den vita solen
träningsslöper ensam mot
dödens blåa berg.

My first version, as printed in my complete editions,⁴ was not good:

The white sun's a long-
distance runner against
the blue mountains of death.

The splitting of "long-/distance" is clumsy, and "*ensam*" has been lost. Since it's the sun that is imagined as a runner then we're not dealing with someone out for a jog, nor with someone who needs a map to avoid getting lost. Something of a heroic undertaking seems to be implied, even a doomed one. I'm not sure if "orienteer" is right here but it saves a syllable and that can make all the difference. A "runner towards" would sound like a mistake for a "runner on the way to;" "*mot*" as "against" might do if we think of the mountains as a kind of barrier but not at all if we think of the runner competing with the mountains.

Fifteen years after my unsatisfactory version appeared, my improved one emerged:

The white sun, lonely
orienteer on the way
to death's blue mountains

Here is Patty Crane's version:

The white sun, training
alone, runs the long distance
to death's blue mountains.⁵

(I just wonder if this implies that the runner has actually reached the mountains?) Michael McGriff and Mikaela Grassi make the mountains singular, unless we just have a misprint:

The white sun
trains alone, running toward
the blue mountain of death.⁶

And here are versions in French, German and Italian—Jacques Outin:

Le soleil blanc
S'entraîne seul face
aux monts bleus de la mort.⁷

Hanns Grössel:

Die weisse Sonne
in einsamen Trainingslauf zu den
blauen Bergen des Todes.⁸

(Ending a line with an article may be hard to avoid at times but ideally it ought to be avoided. If in the Swedish there is a good reason for a line ending where it does, that ought if possible to be mirrored in a translation.)

Maria Cristina Lombardi:

In sole bianco
S'allena e corre al monte
blu della mort.⁹

(If we elide the adjacent vowels in the second line we get 5+7+5.)

Gianna Chiesa Isnardi is more generous with her syllables:

Il sole bianco
si allena correndo da solo incontro
alle montagne blu della morte.¹⁰

(We might wonder how far a haiku-style poem can expand without losing its concision.)

What if the English needs fewer syllables than the Swedish? To keep the 5+7+5 pattern we need to fill out the number of syllables without any appearance of padding. For each syllable must pull its weight. That is where the temptation to drop the pattern can be strong. There's a good example in Tomas' 2004 collection:

Taket rämnade
och den döda kan se mig.
Detta ansikte.

It's immediately clear that English "needs" fewer than seventeen syllables to convey this. My attempt was:

The roof broke apart
and the dead man can see me
can see me. That face.

Kudryavitsky sees this as proof that these *haikudikter* should not be translated as 5+7+5 units. His version is:

The roof cracks open
and a dead man sees me—
this face . . .

I preferred to keep the past tense in the first line and "can" in the second. My version is not a "proper" haiku and is not meant to be; it is not very neat, perhaps, but the idea of the repetition was to emphasise the stare of the dead person.

Robert Archimbeau and Lars-Håkan Svensson give us:

The ceiling rent open
and the dead one sees me.
This face.¹¹

From 1996 we can take this:

Orkidéerna.
Tankbåtar glider förbi.
Det är fullmåne.

The first line in Swedish is five syllables anyway. “The orchids” is three. I added “purple” to make it up to five. Naughty to the purists maybe, and the colour is irrelevant, I know.

The purple orchids.
Oil-tankers are gliding past.
The moon’s at the full.

This one, in its original Swedish, is hailed as “perfect” by Lennart Svensson, i.e. a “proper” haiku.

Patty Crane adds “blossoms” to get up to five syllables:

The orchid blossoms.
Oil tankers are gliding past.
And the moon is full.

McGriff and Grassi are briefer:

Orchids.
Oil tankers glide past.
The moon is full. (2+5+4)

(We might wonder how far a haiku-style poem can shrink without sounding like a telegram.)

As in most poetry translation, a single and apparently simple word can turn out to be a puzzler, or even a stumbling-block. One of the 1959 “prison” poems runs:

Natt—en långtradare
går förbi, internernas
drömmar i darrning.

The *långtradare* would in current British parlance be a Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV). I thought of using “a long-distance lorry,” which would have suited a British context in the 1950s, but omitting the article or making the lorry

plural, in order to get five syllables, would not have done. I chose, reluctantly, the American “truck.”

An enormous truck
rumbles past at night. The dreams
of inmates tremble.

I tried to echo the alliteration in truck, rumbles, dreams, tremble. Robert Bly, the real American, came up with a neat first line:

Night—a twelve-wheeler
goes by making the dreams of
the inmates shiver.¹²

(I’d rather not see that “of” hanging at the end of the second line.)

The Swedish *port* needs care: we find it in this poem from Tomas’ 1996 collection:

Närvaro av Gud.
I fågelsångens tunnel
öppnas en låst port.

Port can mean a variety of things, perhaps a humble street door leading into a block of flats, perhaps something grander, a portal or imposing entrance. Both French *porte* and German *Tor* allow for similar variety. I think we lose something if we opt for simple “door” or “gate.” Here we have McGriff and Grassi:

The presence of God
in the tunnel of birdsong
a locked gate opens.

And Outin:

Présence de Dieu.
une porte close s’est ouverte
dans le tunnel des chants d’oiseaux.

Then Grössel:

Anwesenheit von Gott.
Im Tunnel des Vogelgesangs
wird ein verschlossenes Tor geöffnet.

Lombardi is economical:

Presenza di Dio.
Nel canto degli uccelli
S'apre una porta.

Isnardi less so:

Presenza di Dio.
Nel tunnel del canto degli uccelli
si apre una porta chiuse a chiave.

Rightly or wrongly, probably wrongly, my own version took
a chance on being different:

The presence of God.
In the tunnel of birdsong
a locked seal opens.

I must have been thinking of *The Seventh Seal*.

Notes

1. www.lennart-svensson.blogspot.no
2. www.shamrockhaiku.webs.com
3. www.thehaikufoundation.org
4. My latest edition is Tomas Tranströmer, *New Collected Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, 2011. An American edition, called *The Great Enigma*, appeared in 2006 from New Directions, N.Y.
5. www.blackbird.vcu.edu
6. *The Sorrow Gondola*, Green Integer, L.A., 2010.
7. *Œuvres Complètes* (1954-2002), Le Castor Astral, 2011.
8. *Sämtliche Gedichte*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997.
9. *Poesia dal Silenzio*, Crocetti Editore, 2011.
10. www.larmegliamori.wordpress.com
11. www.samizdateditions.com
12. www.guernicamag.com