

The Ego and the Gods of three Swedish Haiku Pioneers

By KAI FALKMAN

The date of birth of Swedish haiku is 1959. In that year three prominent poets began to compose haiku poems in Swedish, unaware of each other and secretly from others.

The first to publish a haiku poem in Swedish was the well-known poet in his Spanish cloak, Bo Setterlind. Having visited Japan in the autumn of 1959 two years later he published *Några ord att fästa på siden* (*Some words to fasten on silk*) with 25 haiku poems.

During the autumn of 1959, Dag Hammarskjöld, as yet unknown as a poet but well-known as Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote 110 haiku poems which he entered in his secret diary *Vägmärken* (*Waymarks*). Not until 1963, two years after his death, was *Vägmärken* published, and the haiku poems were the greatest surprise. (In 1964 an English translation by W.H. Auden was published, wrongly entitled as *Markings*. The original title derives from the Bible, Jeremiah 31:21: "Set thee up waymarks...")

The third poet who began to test the haiku form in 1959 was the already renowned poet Tomas Tranströmer. He wrote 9 haiku poems with themes from a juvenile prison where he was working as a psychologist. The poems were not published until 2001 under the title *Fängelse* (*Prison*).

What inspired these three poets to compose haiku, a relatively unknown Japanese short form for poems in the 1950s in Sweden?

In the case of Tomas Tranströmer, the question has been answered by the poet himself. He said he was inspired by the first introduction of Japanese haiku in Swedish, Jan Vintilescu's anthology *Haiku, Japansk miniatyrlyrrik* (*Haiku, Japanese miniature lyrics*), which was published in 1959. The previous year Vintilescu had already presented a selection in the press with an elegant description of haiku: "Impressionist and low-key intimations with a few strokes of the brush, it leaves it to the reader to create for him/herself associations to a situation scenario illuminated for a second."

Bo Setterlind was probably also inspired by Vintilescu's introduction but, as far as I know, there is no express evidence of this.

Regarding Dag Hammarskjöld, after his death the book *An Introduction to Haiku* by Harold G. Henderson (1958) was found on his bedside table in New York, an annotated anthology of Japanese haiku poets from Basho (1644-1694) to Shiki (1866-1902).

It is remarkable that these contemporary Swedish haiku pioneers each in his own way took liberties in relation to the rules of Japanese haiku. Bo Setterlind did not bother to follow the requirement of 17 syllables but wrote free verse in three lines with

less than 17 syllables. He was aware of his disobedience to traditional haiku and wrote in a foreword "It is not a question of haiku in the recognised sense, only momentary pictures".

Dag Hammarskjöld observed the requirement of 17 syllables but deviated from grouping them in the order 5-7-5. He adhered to the division in three lines but the structure of the syllables in these lines differed according to the needs of the contents and not according to the formal requirements.

Nor did Hammarskjöld call his poems haiku in the accepted sense but only *seventeen syllables*.

Tomas Tranströmer followed the formal rules for division in 5-7-5 syllables but infringed instead the requirement that haiku should avoid metaphors and abstractions. Tranströmer's poetry has generally attracted much attention for its surprising metaphors and this imagery has also been given a place in his haiku poems. In Japan his haiku metaphors have been praised for their subtle and indirect character, making visible without comparing and therefore appearing natural and unaffected.

Felstavade liv
skönheten kvarlever som
tatueringar

Wrongly spelled lives
beauty remains as
tattoo-marks.

This is a pregnant observation from the juvenile prison with a hitherto incompatible concrete and abstract combination of words in the first line and a surprisingly concrete picture in the third line. Here the young poet already shows an accurate perception of the basic nature of haiku to reproduce a surprising picture of reality, even if it is with an arbitrary freedom in the treatment of words and pictures that shakes traditional haiku.

It is usually said in Japan that the haiku is too small to make room for the poet. It is the poet's objective visual picture that is to be illuminated so clearly and simply that the reader can see it for himself. The reader does not need to see the person who has experienced what is shown – this is apparent from the name of the author!

Ett grönt parasoll
vandrar upp till templet
Ingen är hemma

A green parasol
wanders up to the temple.
No one is at home.

In this haiku picture there is no I, not even a he or she who carries the parasol. Even the temple is empty. This is an experience reproduced by Bo Setterlind from a visit to the great Shinto temple the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. As an attaché at the Embassy I led him to the temple, he made notes but did not reveal what he had written.

The point of the poem is that the Shinto temple's innermost room is always empty while waiting for the *kami* (god/gods) to descend from heaven and fill the room with its spirit. Emptiness which plays such an important role in Japanese beliefs, myths and culture, is not empty in the Western sense but filled with meaningful presence, invisible to the eye but revealed in the mind.

In Setterlind's other poems the ego and God occur in many contexts, but in his haiku poems Setterlind does not mention God's name. In them the word *God* has been replaced with *Heaven*, a traditional designation in East Asia for the most holy.

Himlen har landat
på ett grässtrå
därför darrar det.

Heaven has landed
on a blade of grass
therefore it trembles.

Bo Setterlind came to Japan because he loved islands and wanted to see "the earth's most beautiful mirage, the snow-clad eternal Fuji sailing in the sea of the Spirit." The snow had not yet come to Fuji when we finally on an autumn day in 1959 got to see the top of the slumbering volcano when the fog had lifted:

Vandraren stannar
i tystnad.
Fuji har lämnat Jorden.

The wanderer stops
in silence.
Fuji has left the Earth.

Earth, Heaven and Man in between are the trinity in East Asia's article of faith.

Dag Hammarskjöld's 110 haiku in *Vägmärken* are an autobiography in miniature depicting childhood memories from Uppsala, the awakening of the age of puberty, impressions of far-off countries and philosophic and religious thoughts around his destined path to high office. The ego in the autobiography is replaced by the third person's *he* in order to give distance to the self-exposing lines.

Han sänkte blicken
för att ej se kroppen
till att begära den.

He lowered his eyes
so as not to see the body
to desire it.

It is usual in Swedish short poems that after a concrete, down-to-earth opening the poem ends with an abstract thought, explanation or conclusion intended to lift the poem to a higher level. This habit has been carried into the haiku – a third of Hammarskjöld's haiku are of this type. When he at times skips the down-to-earth opening and goes straight into an abstract philosophic poem, it can no longer be called a haiku but should rather be designated an epigram with haiku verse:

Detta tillfälliga
möte av möjligheter
kallar sig Jag

This accidental
meeting of possibilities
calls itself I.

This three-line philosophic poem is far from the haiku's concrete reality and likewise far from Hammarskjöld's determinist view of destiny. It reflects the philosopher Henri Bergson's view of development as a chain of momentary choices. Hammarskjöld's formulation has a touch of self-irony: To call himself I with a capital letter seems presumptuous to him when millions of other sperms could have produced a different I from the same meeting.

Hammar skjöld's faith means "putting himself in God's hands every day" and when he forgets this and takes the credit for his achievements himself "he opens the door to chaos".

How terrible is not our responsibility, writes Hammar skjöld, "If you betray it is God who, through your betrayal of him, betrays humanity. You fancy you can take responsibility before God, can you take responsibility *for* God?"

Hammar skjöld felt he was "called" and once answered yes. His texts are about agreements, not to betray his promise to God, about the courage to *believe* and the betrayal of *doubt*.

Hammar skjöld's description of his responsibility to God is reminiscent of Tranströmer's poem *The Half-Finished Heaven*. It is a title that urges man to contribute towards completing heaven during his time on earth, that is to say to make a contribution according to his ability to improve the world's condition. The poem is not a haiku but gives an eloquent picture of Tranströmer's world of ideas: "Every person a half-open door/ that leads to a room for all."

Perhaps it was lines of this type that caused an Asian in conversation with Tomas Tranströmer to ask a direct question: "Are you a Buddhist?" A visiting Chinese commented on the question with the following sentence: "Tomas is not a confessing Buddhist but rather an intuitive Buddhist".

The "half-open door" may be likened to *the Buddha nature* in man, thus an existing opening which on awakening (*satori*) is fully opened to a pure mind liberated from all illusions (imagined perceptions of reality).

A Vietnamese *sutra* (holy text) describes this state with the following words: "In every human being, independent of reason and want of reason, there is a Buddha nature. What differentiates people is their illusions."

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

Presence of God.
In the tunnel of birdsong
a locked gate opens.

This short poem in haiku form 5-7-5 by Tranströmer also has a Buddhist touch. The highest degree of man's abstraction is God, invisible in reality and therefore invisible in haiku. But God is present in man's imagination and Tranströmer therefore has the boldness to mention His name in several haiku poems – and in the above even in the first line! God's presence is simply established there. For those who are not completely convinced, the poet offers an alternative that leads to this awareness: to follow birdsong in a tunnel, the earth's most beautiful mating song which leads to a locked gate which is opened to the divine presence. The tunnel protects against all the noise outside and is perhaps as narrow as the auditory meatus to consciousness. All the noise outside may be likened to "the ten thousand things", the concept for the concrete world in ancient Chinese terminology.

Awareness of God's presence does not necessarily have the same meaning as "the union of the soul with God", which according to the Christian mystics involves denial

of the ego. At the beginning of his haiku composition Tranströmer refrained from mentioning the ego in his poems but later he introduced it in order to spirit it away in the poem and let it disappear entirely. Tranströmer has described this process of changing places with the finished poem as great poetic joy.

To a question put to Tomas Tranströmer in an interview about whether he was a mystic: "A mystic has stood face to face with God. I have only seen him run past from the side." This formulation also has a Buddhist touch.

When I asked Buu Y, a Vietnamese writer, how man's Buddha nature could be translated into a Western concept, he hesitated a while in answering before saying: "Perhaps man's Buddha nature can be translated with *the echo from a holy source*." In this concept a touch from a moving holiness is expressed similar to Tranströmer's picture of God whom he sees "running past from the side" - not a constant as in Hammar skjöld's perception of the concept of God.

Dag Hammar skjöld's tone in the haiku poems brightens on remembering his meeting with Asia.

Solflimrande
når flöjttonen gudarna
i födelsens grotta.

Shimmering with sun
the flute note reaches the gods
in the cave of birth

This is a charming and mysterious image, mixed with and blinded by light and sound. It is a recollection from a visit to Nepal where Hammar skjöld walked up a winding path to the great Buddhist temple Swayambhunat, whose precipice at the summit of the hill "dreamed a dream of a world beyond pain and fickleness in the shadow of the timeless mountains", not far from Buddha's birthplace. Here the word God can no longer be used and became *the gods*.

For the Secretary-General of the United Nations, God has many names in the world's religions, which Hammar skjöld expressed at the inauguration of the UN's meditation room in April 1957. The iron ore block in the centre of the room "we can see as an altar, empty not because there is no God, not because it is an altar devoted to an unknown God, but because it is dedicated to the God man worships under many names and in many forms."

In spite of all the differences, the three Swedish haiku pioneers show in their poetry how the ray of light that hits the heavy stone may be a symbol for how the light of the spirit gives life to matter.

KAI FALKMAN,

retired Swedish diplomat, founder of the Swedish Haiku Society (1999), author of *A String Untouched. Dag Hammar skjöld's life in haiku and photographs* (Red Moon Press 2005), *Överraskningens poesi. Upplevelser av haiku* (Atlantis 2012) (*Poetry of surprise. Experiences of haiku*) and most recently *Ekot från Vietnam* (Carlsson 2014) (*The Echo from Vietnam*)