

Aesthetics of Discipline

Tranströmer's Prison Haiku

ALEXANDER B. JOY

ABSTRACT: Tomas Tranströmer's earliest forays into haiku appear in his nine-poem sequence from 1959, *Fängelse (Prison)*. In these brief poems, Tranströmer observes the inmates of the Hällby Youth Custody Center, writing about daily life in the reformation facility. At the same time, Tranströmer uses these intimate glimpses into the quotidian aspects of incarceration to level a trenchant critique of the Swedish prison system. Tapping into the haiku form, and the beneficial discipline it connotes, Tranströmer throws the ultimately damaging discipline of the prison apparatus into harsh contrast, impugning the prison system's role in contemporary society. Situating Tranströmer's approach beside Foucault's assessment of the modern prison, this essay explicates the poems in *Fängelse*, illuminating the critiques hidden in each, and highlighting the haiku aesthetics that enable Tranströmer's critiques to function.

Surely it bodes well for the academic and poetic standing of haiku that the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, recipient of the 2011 Nobel Prize in Literature, and the most recent poet to receive the prestigious literary award, has made several forays into haiku. Tranströmer explores the brief poetic form in his collections *Sorgegondolen (The Sad Gondola)*, 1996) and *Den Stora Gåtan (The Great Enigma)*, 2004), nestling strings of the short poems among the longer works for which he is arguably better known. In addition, Tranströmer has produced one volume comprising exclusively haiku: the nine-poem sequence *Fängelse (Prison)*, which, although published in 2011, was written in 1959 during a visit with a friend and fellow psychologist employed at the Hällby Youth Custody Center.¹ The haiku in this latter sequence are the subject of my present inquiry. I argue that Tranströmer's *Prison* haiku encapsulate powerful critiques of the prison system, and that the efficacy of those critiques is tied to the aesthetic and philosophical roots of the haiku form. The haiku aesthetic is one of discipline, and when

1. Tranströmer himself also worked with troubled youth, taking a position as psychologist-in-residence at Roxtuna, a youth detention center, in 1960 (Bankier 281).

it is used to scrutinize another form of discipline, it exposes the faults of its target.

Appropriately enough for a poet whose collected works are titled *The Great Enigma*, the critical approach to Tranströmer's haiku has been one of bafflement or neglect. Joanna Bankier's entry on Tranströmer in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (2002) mentions his haiku only once, and even then, it is to note the increasing brevity of Tranströmer's poetry following a stroke in 1990 (289). Anatoly Kudryavitsky, in "Tranströmer and his haikudikter" (2007), deems Tranströmer's works to be "an experiment in haiku"—meaning that, despite a mostly charitable reading of Tranströmer's short poems in his essay, Kudryavitsky relegates them to the status of something not quite haiku. Robin Fulton, Tranströmer's English translator, approaches the haiku with a similarly cautious bent in his introduction to Tranströmer's collected poems. "Whether a Japanese haiku master would feel on common ground with the mentality behind these Swedish examples of the form," Fulton writes, "I have no idea. I prefer to regard them simply as a set of syllabic poems (whose syllabic count I have matched) with an ability to surprise and puzzle that far exceeds what we might expect from their miniature dimensions" (xxii). Again, there seems to be a critical attitude toward Tranströmer's three-line poems that bristles at labeling them haiku. How, then, should we go about reading them? Are they really haiku in the traditionalist Zen aesthetic sense, or are they something different?

I propose to read Tranströmer's haiku as being faithful to the Zen roots of the poetic genre, to a certain point. He tinges his haiku with potent psychological dimensions that may at first seem antithetical to the Zen consciousness haiku are supposed to cultivate. I contend, however, that Tranströmer's psychological approach to haiku functions precisely because of an awareness and deployment of traditional haiku techniques, capitalizing on the disciplined metric limitations the genre imposes. Tranströmer's method is perhaps most apparent in his *Prison* haiku, where he productively contrasts two types of discipline: the rigorous routines of Zen meditation, and the confining practices of the modern prison system. Tranströmer uses the haiku form ironically, using the aesthetic of Zen discipline to construct a profile of the prison apparatus, and highlighting how the prison system seems to warp the meditative mindset the Zen aesthetic typically promotes. As such, Tranströmer's *Prison* sequence adopts a critical stance, chastising a prison apparatus that seems more deleterious than beneficial.

Before delving into Tranströmer's critique of the prison, it is important to note that the Swedish penitentiary system is markedly different from the system cultivated in the United States or the United Kingdom—as well as the image of prison dramatized in programs such as *Oz* or *Orange Is the New Black*. Where prisons Stateside suffer from overcrowding, and new facilities seem to be built every day, Swedish prisons are actually shrinking. Richard Orange reports in a 2013 article for *The Guardian* that Sweden's overall prison population declined 6% between 2011 and 2012, with a similar decrease anticipated in the coming years; as a result, Sweden plans to close, or has already closed, four of its prisons. This dramatic reduction in the number of incarcerations in Sweden likely has something to do with the culture surrounding the prison system. To put it bluntly, the Swedes have a different—and far more moderate—attitude toward prisons and prisoners than the Americans or the British. Doran Larson sums up the Swedish policy regarding crime and punishment effectively in a 2013 piece for *The Atlantic*:

[T]hroughout Scandinavia, criminal justice policy rarely enters political debate. Decisions about best practices are left to professionals in the field, who are often published criminologists and consult closely with academics. Sustaining the barrier between populist politics and results-based prison policy are media that don't sensationalize crime—if they report it at all. And all of this takes place in nations with established histories of consensual politics, relatively small and homogenous populations, and the best social service networks in the world, including the best public education.

Where criminal justice is subject to the whims of politicians and their constituents in the United States, questions of detention and correction are left up to more qualified people in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries. Indeed, the culture in Sweden does not provide politicians the opportunity to capitalize on issues of crime and punishment, because it is a much smaller part of the public consciousness—a non-sensationalist media keeps criminals from becoming the celebrities or bogeymen we might find Stateside, thereby reducing the political expediency of advocating for harsher criminal penalties. It helps, too, that Sweden does not have the same histories of racial tension, institutionalized inequality, and extreme political bifurcation that we encounter in the United States. It is a bit easier to construct a functional justice system when daily systemic injustices have mostly been ironed out of your national fabric.

For all of its advances, however, the Swedish prison system still has its dark side. For one, as Larson observes, questions of criminal justice are not part of public debate. While the result is a less capricious criminal justice system, it comes at the expense of subjecting the system to popular discourse. Prisons are not talked about except by those who are qualified to do so. That qualification is often determined by holding a degree conferred by a state-approved institution—never mind that the same state also controls the prisons! Whether this relationship constitutes a real conflict of interest is well beyond the scope of my essay.

Even assuming that the self-actualizing system like the one in Sweden always operates under ideal conditions, where benevolent motives are joined to legislative, administrative, and executive competence, there remains something troubling at the heart of the prison apparatus itself—in both its ideal form and its overall goal. Michel Foucault has observed in his groundbreaking *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (first published in French in 1975) that the notion of what a prison is supposed to do, or the societal function it serves, has shifted gradually throughout history. Foucault charts a movement in punitive and disciplinary practices: away from inflicting pain on the body of a purported wrongdoer in an effort to dissuade the offender (or any would-be offenders) from repeating a trespass against the state, toward targeting the mind of the criminal via incarceration or other isolating techniques in hopes of reforming him or her. It is a shift from punishment toward discipline; a motion away from eradicating offenders outright, and toward refashioning them into acceptable societal subjects. While this movement seems to reflect a humanitarian bent at first glance—for surely it appears more humane to incarcerate offenders than to lash or torture or execute them—Foucault notes that the newer approach has an unsettling totalitarian flavor. Examining two of the progenitors of the modern prison, Foucault remarks upon the tendencies they have contributed to the prison system of the present day:

There are two images, then, of discipline. At one extreme, the discipline-blockade, the enclosed institution, established on the edges of society, turned inwards toward negative functions: arresting evil, breaking communications, suspending time. At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come. (209)

Emerging from the union of facilities for quarantining disease and Jeremy Bentham's plans for the all-seeing Panopticon correctional facility, the modern prison performs a slew of mind-altering operations upon the offending subject that carry far-reaching societal implications. First, the prison is designed to halt the spread of "evil"—to inhibit behaviors that the state finds objectionable by isolating the wrongdoer as though s/he carries some kind of illness, separating him/her from society, and removing him/her from the flow of time. Time and society will progress, but the prisoner will not play a part in it. Similarly, the offending subject will not be returned into time and society until s/he has abandoned whatever objectionable tendency led to the incarceration. Until his/her way of behaving, thinking, and being is reconfigured to match state-dictated societal norms, the prisoner is forbidden from participating in society and its development.² The prison, then, is an apparatus for reducing variation among a society's subjects. It plucks subjects who do not conform to a standardized way of being out of the fabric of society; it does not return them until they are sculpted to fit the standard. If the prison's objective is to reform, to turn criminals into upstanding citizens, its unspoken goal is to limit what constitutes citizenship, to flatten plurality among subjects in the name of a homogeneous future society. Foucault also notices that this tendency toward reducing plurality recurs in many of the state's normality-defining apparatuses, including institutions of health and education:

Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labor, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts on normality, who continue and multiply the functions of the judge, should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons? (227–8)

Wherever the purpose of a given institution is to introduce homogeneity—be it to establish a baseline for health like a hospital, or a minimum of education like a school, or a consistent model for a product like a factory—the image of the prison will recur, for the machinery behind all such homogeneity-promoting institutions is inevitably the same.

Given Tranströmer's training in psychology and social work, it seems reasonable to think that questions of mental health, normality, and the sometimes slippery definitions of each would cross his mind at some point. The challenge, though, is where—and how—to discuss such matters. If criminal justice is not an issue of public concern in Sweden, in what kind of forum could one launch a critique of the justice system? Similarly, if one is a part of that self-same system, working as one of the agents of mental conformity, how could one begin to make a valid critique? The usual channels of discourse for criminal justice issues are themselves part of the system under scrutiny, so a critique made in that context would be participating in the system under the system's terms, and therefore might see its force diminished. What, then, to do? In Tranströmer's *Prison* haiku sequence, I see the beginnings of an answer: confront the prison system through a poetic lens. Tranströmer calls upon the time-honored, minimalist aesthetic of haiku, and the poetic discipline that the form's limited syllables demand, and pits them against a different form of discipline. Through the harsh contrast between form and content, Tranströmer's *Prison* haiku impugn the efficacy, and perhaps the legitimacy, of the prison system.

Tranströmer's approach, however, does raise one pressing question. Why haiku? Prior to the *Prison* sequence, Tranströmer had not dabbled in haiku; his previous two volumes of poetry do not feature

2. Consider, for example, how the practice of felony disenfranchisement in the United States adheres to and extends the reach of this pattern.

any. Furthermore, after *Prison*, Tranströmer did not revisit haiku until *The Sad Gondola* in 1996—some 37 years later. Consequently, haiku does not seem to be the form with which Tranströmer is most comfortable. At the least, his publication record suggests he is not as practiced in it as he is with other poetic forms. Why not write longer poems about the prison system instead, like the kind he has written throughout most of his poetic career? For one, haiku has a rich history, and any poet who invokes the form channels its history at the same time. I suspect, therefore, that Tranströmer's choice has something to do with the origins of the haiku aesthetic, and its links with Zen thought. Further, the choice of observational style that accompanies haiku enacts an uncomfortable recognition of Tranströmer's complicity with the prison apparatus.

Faubion Bowers notes in his introduction to *The Classic Tradition of Haiku* (1996) that haiku evolved from *haikai-no-renga*, a form of linked poetry that joined *haikai*, verses of 5-7-5 syllables, to *renga*, linking verses of 7-7 syllables (vii). The form was a fad among Japanese commoners in the 16th century (Bowers vii). Yet the haiku as we know it comes to us from Matsuo Bashō, who took the *haikai* out of *haikai-no-renga*, and made it a standalone verse called *hokku*—the same word used to describe the opening verse of a *haikai-no-renga* sequence (Bowers vii). Significantly, besides being a poet, Bashō was also a Zen Buddhist priest. In his hands, haiku became an expression of Zen consciousness, focusing on moments of intense meaning where infinity and transience coincide, resulting in a flash of wisdom – or even total enlightenment. Several of Bashō's most noteworthy haiku are celebrated precisely because of their Zen aspects: his legendary frog pond haiku, *furuike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*, where the sound of water follows a frog's leap into a pond, supposedly symbolizes an awakening unto higher consciousness. The haiku that we inherit, then, comes tinged with Zen philosophy, presenting itself as an aesthetic expression of Zen ideals and practices. It is no coincidence that some of the most exalted haiku poets, including Issa and Chiyo-ni, have doubled as priests and priestesses. The writing of haiku is thus an exercise in Zen philosophy, and mimics the ritual of meditation. Like meditating, writing haiku involves the paring away of extraneous thoughts and details, the suppression of individual consciousness, the search for the eternal without its active pursuit, the freedom found within self-imposed constraint. Meditation and haiku are both forms of discipline for the soul, aiming to push one toward becoming a better or wiser person. Between its history and its brevity, then, the haiku connotes an aesthetic of discipline—making it the ideal form for Tranströmer's examination of the systematized discipline of the prison. The haiku form itself suggests what a healthy ritual of discipline might look like, whereas the subject matter Tranströmer depicts is a far less salubrious kind of discipline, whose shortcomings are thrown into focus by their haiku packaging.

At the same time, Tranströmer's use of haiku carries some worrisome ideological assumptions, of which Tranströmer himself seems aware. By monitoring the inmates, and trying to show glimpses of their inner mental lives by presenting observable external details, Tranströmer adopts an approach that has its roots in—and owes its effectiveness to—the same system against which he inveighs. In linking the spread of prison-like structures to all other normativity-enforcing areas of society, Foucault remarks that the resultant society has a “carceral texture” (304), in which the regulation of its citizens is pervasive enough to appear normal. Its ubiquity, furthermore, “assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation” (304). In other words, at no point is the citizen in a carceral society outside of a literal or metaphorical cell—if the citizen is not in prison, s/he is still subject to all kinds of observation similar to it, be it in terms of medical documenting, tracking educational prowess, monitoring job performance, or the like. For all its invasive prying, Foucault notes that the system

has produced a mainstay of modern thought: the idea of an understandable human being. For better or for worse, Foucault writes, the idea that we might comprehend other people via the observation of their external characteristics emerges from the carceral system: “Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination observation” (305). As such, Tranströmer runs into yet another difficulty. Not only is he implicated in the carceral system by virtue of being a psychologist—an enforcer of the norms of mental health—but also, the core assumptions that enable his haiku to function are themselves implicated. If Tranströmer is going to reveal to his readers the inner lives of the imprisoned boys through the haiku form, he must resort to depicting them from the outside, and show how their mannerisms and actions demonstrate what is going on inside. However, matters grow more complicated if he is going to use this approach to launch a critique of the prison apparatus. His approach only works in the first place because the carceral system built the infrastructure that powers it—so how can he attack the system when he and his weapons are part of it? This anxiety lingers in the poems of the *Prison* sequence, and I suspect that it informs Tranströmer’s choice of the haiku form. Perhaps the haiku’s ties to meditation, and the purging of self-consciousness that attends it, could sidestep the carceral-inflected psychological machinery that Tranströmer brings to bear. Bashō’s concept of *karumi*, roughly translated as “lightness,” offers a solution to Tranströmer’s problem. The British Haiku Society, in “English Haiku: A Composite View” (2002), offers a working definition of “lightness” that helps explain why haiku are so appealing for Tranströmer’s project: “[Lightness] does not mean that haiku aspires to be ‘light verse’, flippant; rather, that the haiku poet should be able to present all aspects of life, both joyous and tragic (even his own death!), in a sober, interesting, but disinterested way.” With this principle in mind, an effective haiku is one that looks at things without bringing along additional philosophical or methodological machinery—such as the psychologist’s modes of viewing human behavior. Writing haiku, then, indicates a step away from the problematic associations of psychology. The use of haiku quite possibly bespeaks skepticism or hostility toward a psychologically-governed poetry, as well. Regardless, the haiku form, between its aesthetics and its ideology, seems to be Tranströmer’s most powerful poetic ally in his confrontation with the carceral system, and the haiku in *Prison* all fix a critical gaze upon the titular institution.

The sequence opens with an image of a cherished childhood ritual made oppressive and disappointing by the prison’s impermeable barriers:

Eleven-a-side
sudden dismay — the ball’s gone
right over the wall. (45)³

In the first line, the mention of eleven players on each side suggests a soccer game, perhaps like the kind one would see in a schoolyard at recess. Besides simply being a popular diversion among children and adults alike in Europe, the selection of this sport is especially relevant because of how the game makes use of boundary lines. When the ball is kicked out of bounds in a soccer match, it is not the same kind of letdown one finds in sports like gridiron football or baseball, where play is halted and the game’s action must restart. In soccer, the ball’s escape from bounds signifies a far more climactic

3. All the English translations of Tranströmer’s prison haiku are by Robin Fulton, from *The Great Enigma: New Collected Poems* (2006).

moment, depending upon who was the last person to touch the ball. It presages a shift in momentum, stalling one side's offense and giving a spark to the other; or else it might indicate an oncoming corner kick. (To add a bit of anecdotal evidence, too, I do not think I have ever watched a soccer match where a ball kicked out of bounds did not cause the audience to cheer.) Yet the moment that Tranströmer captures dispels any expectation of joy. The positioning of "sudden dismay" makes it refer to both teams, even though one side would have cause to rejoice under normal circumstances. The rest of the haiku explains why everybody is downhearted: "the ball's gone / right over the wall." Not only has the ball exited the bounds of play, but it has also left the bounds of the prison. We can infer that the game has effectively been concluded, and what begins as a momentary distraction from imprisonment comes to a grinding halt as the oppressive prison environment re-asserts itself. The haiku's final image is the wall, playing on the concept of boundaries. The wall here is the boundary that cannot be crossed; the marker of a milieu that cannot be escaped, either physically or mentally. The emergence of the prison setting shatters the image of innocent childhood fun that the first line suggests, and yet its sudden appearance does not exactly impugn the innocence of the youngsters. The phrasing of the haiku does little to suggest they are hardened criminals; if anything, the interruption of their game makes them seem more childlike, more sympathetic.

Tranströmer's strategy of rendering the inmates in all their childishness recurs in the second haiku, as well, depicting a decidedly juvenile response to boredom. If the first haiku is meant to show one pastime available to the young prisoners, the second haiku shows the sad lack of alternative distractions:

More noise than need be
just to startle time into
getting a move on. (45)

Here we have the eternal complaint of parents, teachers, and all those who share spaces with people far younger than themselves: the incessant, excessive noise. Tranströmer begins the haiku as if he is about to admonish the young inmates to quiet down, much like the stereotypical study hall monitor. Yet Tranströmer abruptly reverses the expected disciplinarian attitude in the second and third lines, providing an understandable motive for the obstreperous behavior. The noise is made in hopes of "startling time" as if it were some kind of animal, making it take flight and "get a move on." In other words, the inmates are bored in their current confines. The noise they produce is a survival strategy — perhaps to speed the passing of a single day, perhaps to speed the arrival of their release date. In either case, the haiku suggests that not enough is being done to keep the youths in a healthy mindset. Furthermore, it hints that the inmates' misbehavior, inside the prison or out of it, might be for want of mental stimulation. It seems like a knock against the structure of the prison in either instance, for incarcerating and inflicting boredom upon a young offender is hardly a viable reformation strategy when boredom is the primary motive behind their transgressions in the first place. Of course, the prospect of "motive" implies that there is some volition behind every action. Tranströmer complicates that causal notion in his next haiku, questioning how much free will the inmates had in the first place:

Wrongly spelled, those lives —
loveliness remains, the way
tattoo-marks remain. (45)

The first line seems to introduce the question of fate, suggesting that the inmates are the victims of some larger scheme over which they have no control. If every action has been written, theirs were “wrongly spelled,” consigning them to an undesirable destiny. Whatever happiness they still enjoy, whatever “loveliness remains,” nonetheless seems contaminated by their unfortunate fates. Its comparison to “tattoo-marks” in the third line likens their former joy to a stain on the skin that can be spotted from afar, emphasizing their current misfortunes.

Tranströmer continues his strategy of humanizing the inmates, portraying them in a similarly sympathetic light in the rest of the poems. In another haiku, Tranströmer plays upon prejudices his readers might have toward the inmates, foiling their expectations of criminal intent. With an opening line that seems to promise a sensational, climactic confrontation later on, Tranströmer turns the tables on the reader by presenting a docile, subdued youth whose actual delinquency is called into question:

When the runaway
was caught he'd gathered pockets—
full of chanterelles. (45)

The opening line introduces us to our main character, an escapee. Immediately, Tranströmer channels the fear inherent in all reports of prison breaks: that the runaway will return immediately to his criminal ways. The second line uses that assumption to build tension. The runaway has “gathered pockets,” so perhaps he has gone on a spree of thievery? The third line, however, complicates the image of the hardened criminal, and indeed makes it ridiculous. The seeming pickpocket has not stolen anything; he has only filled his pockets with edible mushrooms. Chanterelles, mushrooms of vibrant color and flavor, can be gathered in many Scandinavian forests, making it unlikely that the runaway has pilfered them from a market. The question is why he has collected so many of them. Maybe he has been on the run for days, and needs a source of nutrients to survive. Maybe he is simply tired of prison fare, and the want of better food has driven him to break out and scavenge in the forest. Either way, he hardly comes across as the dangerous criminal Tranströmer's audience expects, and his capture further downplays any threat he might have posed. The reader is invited to wonder why they looked upon the runaway as a pariah in the first place—especially if his motives are as innocuous as looking for something to eat. The doubt that this haiku instills in the reader casts some aspersion on the conduct of the prison.

The portrait of the prison apparatus grows a bit more pointed in the next three haiku in the sequence, where a series of laconic, measured observations portray the prison as some kind of otherworldly blight. As if in answer to Bashō's water sounds, Tranströmer brings us the far less serene sounds of the prison:

Din from the workshops
and the watchtower's heavy steps
perplexed the forest. (45)

The image seems fairly value-neutral until Tranströmer drops the word “perplexed” in the final line. The verb tells us that the forest—and the natural world it symbolizes—does not know what to make of the

prison's noises. By extension, it also suggests that the natural world cannot fathom the prison, either. The prison appears here as something unnatural; not solely artificial, but rather, something against nature altogether. Tranströmer pulls the prison even farther away from nature in a clever distortion of the *kigo* in his next poem:

The tall doors swing back.
We're inside the prison yard
in a new season. (46)

The *kigo*, or “seasonal word,” is something of a poetic fiat in haiku (Bowers vii), for it is a marker of time that helps establish the setting for the poem, conveying the season in which the haiku takes place without having to resort to additional syllables. Tranströmer's poem taps into the idea of seasons in its third line, but conscientiously avoids any specific seasonal marker, thwarting the typical time-measuring function of the *kigo*. The prison in this haiku becomes a chamber isolated from the flow of time, revealing the change of season only when it opens its doors. As a result, the prison is detrimental to the inmates' experience of time. All seasons seem the same in prison, eliminating the pleasure to be found in the change of season, and piling on the monotony that Tranströmer has already shown to be harmful earlier in the haiku sequence. Similarly, without seasons to help measure the passage of time, the inmates appear trapped in an eternal present, unable to determine how much longer they must serve their sentences. In the next haiku, the prison's nightmarish divorce from the world becomes so obvious that it can be observed from a distance:

The wall lamps are lit—
the night-flier sees a smudge
of unreal brightness. (46)

After dark, when the lights must be turned on, somebody flying overhead with a bird's-eye view of the prison sees a “smudge” on the landscape—a word connoting an imperfection, a stain, a blight. Despite being a source of light—which is conventionally associated with beneficial ideas like guidance, knowledge, or hope—the prison receives a negative treatment. Furthermore, it is described as being a blight “of unreal brightness,” again emphasizing the prison's unnatural aspects. The fantastic appearance Tranströmer ascribes to the prison in these three haiku makes for a pointed critique. If the prison is supposed to reform, and better equip its inmates for interacting with the “real world” outside, how helpful can its approach truly be when the prison itself is so unlike that world?

In this vein, concerns about the inmates' futures—or their lack of futures—permeate the final two haiku of *Prison*, where Tranströmer turns moments of great vulnerability into genuine questions about what the future might hold. The penultimate poem affords us a glimpse into the minds of sleeping prisoners during a brief night scene:

An enormous truck
rumbles past at night. The dreams
of inmates tremble. (46)⁴

At first glance, the haiku is an image of transferred kinetic energy, where the seismic passing of a large truck rattles the dreams of sleeping inmates like plates in a cupboard. It borders on playful, toying with the impossibility of an immaterial dream being shaken by a change in the material world. Yet the ambiguous word choices in this poem complicate an otherwise straightforward interpretation. “Dreams” in this instance could mean the visions that surface during sleep, but the word could as easily indicate the hopes and aspirations for the future that sustain one’s spirits in the present. Whatever these “dreams” are, they have an air of fragility about them: they “tremble,” as if they are something that could fall and shatter, or as if they are timid creatures that quake with fear as the mammoth truck passes. Tranströmer thus delivers an image of enervated hope, where the inmates’ momentary escapes from prison life—in sleep or in looking toward the future—are shown to be fragile and weak. The final haiku in the sequence pins the blame for this tenuous situation on the prison itself, ending with a tableau with warped parental undertones:

The boy drinks milk and
sleeps securely in his cell,
a mother of stone. (46)

From the outset, the poem forces us to forget labels like “inmate” or “prisoner” or “runaway” – here we have only a “boy,” as juvenile and innocent a moniker as possible. His youthful vulnerability is made all the more apparent when we catch him drinking milk before bed, an old home remedy for sleepless children. The second line of the poem puts the boy to sleep in his cell, but raises a few questions with its adverbial use of “securely.” For whom is the situation secure? Is the outside world made secure by the boy’s seclusion in his cell, or is he the one who feels secure inside the cell? The final line suggests that the latter is the case, for describing the cell as “a mother of stone” hints that the prison has taken on a motherly role for the boy. The prison has become his home, and is the place where he feels most secure. Even so, it is a cold mother, since stone hardly connotes the warmth and support typically associated with the maternal. If the prison has assumed a parental role for him, the mention of the stone mother suggests something unnatural about what has transpired. Whatever relationship exists between the boy and the prison, it does not seem like a healthy one. In this regard, some further remarks from Foucault are instructive:

[T]he delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law, or at least in the midst of those mechanisms that transfer the individual imperceptibly from discipline to the law, from deviation to offence . . .
The delinquent is an institutional product. (301)

For Foucault, there really is no such thing as an “outlaw,” because that label only arises as a consequence of there being a law declaring that person has done something illegal. In other words, nobody is a

4. Probably a reference to Buson’s poem “The heavy wagon / rumbles by; / The peony quivers.” (translation by R. H. Blyth.

criminal until a law exists to criminalize their actions. Consequently, the notion of a “delinquent” — a youth whose behaviors point toward a tendency to commit minor crimes — is a product of a particular disciplinary system. No wonder, then, that the boy in Tranströmer’s final haiku thinks of the prison as his home and the cell as his mother. They are physical manifestations of the institution that brought him into being; they are thus the only home he truly knows.

In the end, Tranströmer’s *Prison* haiku may not function precisely like conventional haiku, but this does not reduce their haiku quality. They certainly seem less interested in the world beyond our own, and more focused on interpreting the world as it is. Yet the concise interpretations that Tranströmer’s haiku offer contain the same piercing insight as the haiku moment, and they arrive with a similar flash. After all, an instant of expertly-delivered social critique that awakens the reader unto a greater social problem is, in its way, comparable to the moment of awakening that accompanies the best haiku. Tranströmer’s haiku, then, are poems with an agenda, using an aesthetic of discipline to show us what discipline ought to be.



Works Cited

Bankier, Joanna. “Tomas Tranströmer.” *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 257: Twentieth-Century Swedish Writers After World War II. Detroit: Gale Group, 2002. 277-90. Print.

Bowers, Faubion, ed. *The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996. Print.

“English Haiku: A Composite View.” British Haiku Society. 2002. Web. 16 January 2015.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.

Kudryavitsky, Anatoly. “Tranströmer and his haikudikter.” *Shamrock Haiku Journal* 2 (2007). Web. 14 October 2014.

Larson, Doran. “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior.” *The Atlantic*. 24 September 2013. Web. 15 October 2014.

Orange, Richard. “Sweden closes four prisons as number of inmates plummets.” *The Guardian* 11 November 2013. Web. 15 October 2014.

Tranströmer, Tomas. *The Great Enigma: New Collected Poems*. Trans. Robin Fulton. New York: New Directions, 2006. Print.