

«THE WILD HAS NO WORDS»

THE MODERN SHORT LYRIC AS A WAY OF APPROACHING THE WORDLESS THROUGH IMAGES

The imagistic short lyric is perhaps one of the most influential inventions of 20th century Modernism.¹ In this article I will look at a few of its modern practitioners in Iceland and compare them to one of this genre's most famous practitioner in the Nordic countries, the Swede *Tomas Tranströmer*. Tranströmer's poetry has been well-researched in this respect and is therefore a good starting-point for a study of this kind. Very little has been written on the modern short lyric in Iceland, which is surprising considering its prominence in Icelandic Modernism. I have chosen three leading Icelandic poets who can be said to represent three different generations. The first one is *Snorri Hjartarson* who was born in 1906 and died in 1986. He produced four volumes of poetry during his lifetime and was awarded the literary prize of the Nordic Council in 1981. The second poet, *Stefán Hörður Grímsson*, was born in 1919 and died in 2002. He produced six volumes of poetry during his lifetime and was awarded the Icelandic literary prize in 1990. The third poet, *Hannes Pétursson*, was born in 1931 — the same year as Tranströmer — and is still alive. He has produced nine volumes of poetry so far and was awarded the Icelandic literary prize in 1994. Only one of the Icelanders, Stefán Hörður, can be claimed to be a Modernist in the fullest sense of the word. He was counted among the so-called Atom Poets around the middle of the 20th century and broke radically with traditional Icelandic poetry, writing free verse in the face of such poetic conventions as alliteration, regular rhythm and endrhyme.² The other poets, Snorri and Hannes, can be seen to combine Modernism and tradition in ways that are interesting with regard to the development of the short imagistic lyric in Icelandic literature.

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

Let us first look at the short poems of Tomas Tranströmer and the ways in which they can be seen to reflect various aspects of Modernism. I will base my account mainly on Niklas Schiöler's book, *Koncentrationens konst*, published in 1999. Although the book centres on the later poems of Tranströmer it also takes notice of the poet's earlier work and can be thought of as a kind of continuation of Kjell Espmark's 1983 book, *Resans formler*. Schiöler claims that Tranströmer's poetry can be described in general as an *art of concentration*. He writes an individual chapter about the later compressed short poems of the Swedish poet («Den komprimerade kortdikten») and begins by looking at the following

poem:

Från mars —79

Trött på alla som kommer med ord, ord men inget språk
for jag till den snötäckta ön.
Det vilda har inga ord.
De oskrivna sidorna breder ut sig åt alla håll!
Jag stöter på spåren av rådjursklövar i snön.
Språk men inga ord.³

The speaker is weary of «all who come with words, words but no language». Schiöler says: «Both the barely meaningful and the overly exhaustive irritate. *Words* are seen as dispensable, whereas *language* is sought: concentration, meaningfulness, and an absence of superfluous verbiage. Experience is rendered succinct in compressed form, transformed into poetry.» And he adds:

Compression comes at the cost of narrative qualities and mimetic transparency. Cohesive links between phrases are often discarded. The construction of clauses still remains simple; main clauses dominate. Yet precisely through the compressed form concise and densely metaphorical passages are laid *over* rather than — as in narrative — *after* each other. Everything seems interrelated. Passages are paralleled and phrases made to orbit around a pivot of meaning. The result is not *words*, but *language*.⁴

Schiöler's insistence on concentration as a key factor in Tranströmer's poetry isn't surprising. The concentration of meaning has, after all, been considered one of the main issues and hallmarks of Modernist poetry.⁵ What is a bit unusual in view of Modernism in general is Schiöler's definition of the extra-linguistic — «not *words* but *language*» — which admittedly is based on Tranströmer's allusions to a language outside words, but may sound somewhat perplexing or even contradictory. On the other hand, Schiöler supports his claims by such acknowledged elements of High Modernism as *epiphany*, a religious concept James Joyce famously introduced into secular discourse. Schiöler defines epiphany accordingly as «a sudden and tangible manifestation of a spiritually imbued whole».⁶ He follows in the footsteps of Kjell Espmark who has written extensively on the role of epiphanies and mysticism in Tranströmer's earlier work.⁷ Like Espmark, Schiöler tries to regain some of the religious or mystical dimension of the concept of epiphany and claims that Tranströmer does have a strong connection with the mystical tradition: «The unveiling of hidden dimensions of reality and various metaphysical qualities link Tranströmer to the Mystics. Another similarity is evident in that the epiphanies allow an unforeseen symbiosis of distinct places and epochs into an intense *presence*, a vivid *now*.»⁸ He points out that Tranströmer's poems often «*open* their closing lines toward a tacit *other*. Suggestively and mysteriously, these poems hint at an immaterial dimension to reality» (324).

This is also what connects Tranströmer's poems to *Symbolism* in Schiöler's view: «Similarities can be seen in an aesthetics of correspondence, in a will to grasp the connections between the physical and metaphysical, and also in an ambition to disclose

hidden relations — to collect and concentrate, in order to point to interrelatedness. But the parallels also include the common Modernist postulate that poetic language is *a language different from any other*» (327). The insistence of the 19th century Symbolists on the use of the symbol is known to have been a major influence on the 20th century Imagists' insistence on the use of the image in poetry. Schiöler sees Symbolism and Imagism as major influences on Tranströmer. He investigates «Tranströmer's affinity with the Symbolist-influenced poetics of T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound» and concludes that the «Imagist program of these authors, propagating stunning metaphors, precise expression, and lyrical economy as central tenets, has to a large extent been realized in Tranströmer's poetry» (327). It is interesting that even if Schiöler considers T.S. Eliot to be the most important single Modernist influence on Tranströmer's poetry in general, he thinks that Eliot has not had a marked influence on his short poems (224). But Eliot's famous idea of the *objective correlative* has clearly influenced Tranströmer in his use of images and metaphors as vehicles of emotion (210—211). Needless to say, finding an objective correlative to express an emotion is a key factor in the art of the short lyric, and so Eliot's influence can also be seen to filter through to Tranströmer's poems of this kind.

The often *surrealistic* images in Tranströmer's poetry point to yet another Modernist influence according to Schiöler:

Tranströmer's daring imagery also has its roots in Surrealism. With this school he shares a stance toward dreams as important sources of surprising experience and knowledge of the human. Yet it is not an unregulated flow of subconscious impulses that governs his technique of making his mental room come alive. Tranströmer's imagery seldom goes beyond possible visualization. Surrealist tendencies are above all detected in those *individual* images that with hallucinatory clarity combine highly disparate sensory impressions. Furthermore, the structure of his poems guarantees a whole where *all* parts interact and cooperate — this also hints at the fact that the poet's method is anything but immediate and automatic. The images are not random nor exchangeable (328).

Schiöler thus sees a closer connection between Tranströmer's poems and what he labels *Post-Surrealism* — with such poets as Paul Éluard and Rafael Alberti — than with the poetry or automatic texts of the original Surrealists.

In recent years, Tranströmer has written a number of *haikus*, short poems under the influence of this well-known Japanese poetic tradition (he published some of them in his 1996 collection, *Sorgegondolen*, and the great majority of the poems in his 2004 collection, *Den stora gåtan*, are haikus). In view of Modernist principles, this doesn't come as a surprise. The Imagists were strongly influenced by Eastern poetics and especially by the image-orientated Japanese poetic tradition.⁹ One could therefore say that Tranströmer was going back to the roots of Imagism by writing haikus. According to Schiöler (commenting mainly on the *Sorgegondolen* haikus, as his 1999 study precedes the publication of many of the haikus that were to be included in *Den stora gåtan*), Tranströmer honours this age-old Japanese tradition by centering on «the haiku moment», by making momentary or fleeting things reflect a kind of eternity, which is in fact an aspect of Zen Bhuddist thinking.¹⁰ One might add that this way of thinking is not foreign to Tranströmer,

considering that he has all along been trying to give the reader a sense of the beyond or opening his poems towards a kind of eternity, even in his early work. The haikus are therefore based on the art of concentration which may be seen to be a key element in Tranströmer's poetry as a whole. He uses the traditional number of syllables in each of the three lines of the haiku (5 + 7 + 5) and often alludes to the seasons, as is almost obligatory in poems of this kind.¹¹ Here is a recent example:

De bruna löven
är lika dyrbara som
Dödahavsruddar.¹²

This haiku touches delicately on the subject of the 'language of nature' which we also encountered in the poem «Från mars — 79». We can gather from the haiku that a kind of writing is to be found in nature, in fact as valuable as the 'word of God' that is preserved in the ancient scrolls found by the Dead Sea in the middle of the 20th century. By a simple simile, Tranströmer 'rolls up' a whole philosophy or theology into a three-line haiku (it is an apt simile, as some of the scrolls have broken down into pieces that are indeed leaflike). The warped, brown leaves scattered all around in autumn suddenly become meaningful and precious. One is less likely to step heavily on the ground after reading such a poem.

When tracing the influences on Tranströmer's short poems, the *classical background* should also be taken into account. He was very enthusiastic about such classical poets as Sappho and Alcaeus early on and has continued to write poems in their metres and style throughout his career.¹³ Poems in the Sapphic metre are, for instance, to be found in Tranströmer's first collection of poems (as is a poem in the Alcaic metre). I will cite two of them, just to show how compact and terse they are and also how striking the imagery is:

Höstlig skärgård
Storm

Plötsligt möter vandraren här den gamla
jätteeken, lik en förstenad älg med
milsvind krona framför septemberhavets
svartgröna fästning.

Nordlig storm. Det är i den tid när rönnbärs-
klasar mognar. Vaken i mörkret hör man
stjärnbilderna stampa i sina spiltor
högt över trädet.¹⁴

Here classical balance and objectivity go hand in hand with the Imagist insistence on *showing* instead of saying. We get a vivid mental picture of the Nordic autumnal landscape and at the same time this strong image opens up into something celestial and powerful, when the signs of the zodiac — another classical inheritance — suddenly come alive as stampeding animals above our heads. The classical poems of the Greeks thus seem to be among the models Tranströmer used early on when moulding his own short poems. As in the case of the haiku, this recalls the practices of some of the original Imagists,

especially the Hellenism of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), who often sought inspiration in the clear and hard poetic style of the classical Greeks.¹⁵

SOME VERSIONS OF THE SHORT OR IMAGISTIC LYRIC IN ICELANDIC LITERARY HISTORY

As we have seen, Niklas Schiöler points to a number of traditions when accounting for the shape and development of Tranströmer's short poems, in particular Symbolism, Imagism and the Eastern poetic tradition of the haiku and Post-Surrealism, but the classical tradition of Sappho and Alcaeus should also be taken into notice. Even if the short lyric may be the simplest form of poetry in practice, it can be shown to reflect surprisingly many traditions and cultures. Still further traditions come into play in the case of the Icelandic modern short lyric. I will account for a few of them in order to show what kind of tradition the Icelandic Modernists had to break with when trying to shape a new kind of poem in the 20th century. In fact, some poets didn't break altogether with the tradition in this respect and it is therefore important to realise the background of the short poem in Icelandic literary history.

Descriptive short poems have a long history in Icelandic and Nordic letters. The court poems (*dróttkvæði*) of the Middle Ages were terse and image-rich, but often based on a complicated kenning-system and metre that made strict demands on the poet (*the dróttkvætt metre* and its many variations). Longer poems of this kind were composed by the court poets to eulogize the Scandinavian kings, but single stanzas often featured as occasional verse (*lausavísur*), especially in the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). This is, however, a genre that does not seem to have appealed to the Modernists, although one could say that some of them — and not only the Icelandic ones — definitely have something in common with the often obscure and elitist court poets of the Middle Ages. In both traditions, a certain degree of difficulty and obscurity can be seen to be a virtue, not a vice. But there is another medieval tradition that appealed to some of the modern Icelandic poets — *the Eddic poems (eddukvæði)*. These anonymous, uncomplicated, lightly alliterative poems certainly influenced some of them as we shall see later on. Though admittedly not short in general, they are based on a simple poetic diction, unlike the court poems, and their imagery is often striking and direct. Although only existing in Icelandic manuscripts, the Eddic poems were part of a common Nordic heritage, and even if they have not influenced such poets as Tranströmer significantly, they are known to have influenced other important Scandinavian Modernists. A case in point is the Norwegian poet *Rolf Jacobsen*, or to quote Øystein Rottem:

Selv mener Jacobsen at hans måte å skrive dikt på var den opprinnelige: «Den går helt tilbake til Edda, helt tilbake til de gamle dikt i middelalderen og oldtiden. Det er bilde på bilde på bilde.» Og han har fortalt at det først var etter å ha lest Edda-diktene at han selv begynte å skrive dikt. Den ordknappe formen oppfattet han som ren poesi. Edda-diktene gikk rett på sak, var visuelle og framkalte bilder.¹⁶

According to this interpretation, Eddic poetics are very similar to Imagist poetics. It is a pity that Ezra Pound didn't read the Eddic poems early on, because they might have influenced the Imagist credo just as the Japanese (and Chinese) poems did and thus be

channeled to international Modernism and received greater recognition than they have, at least outside the Nordic countries.

Another common form of the Icelandic short poem is the rhymed *ferskeytla*, a four-liner that emerged with the *rímur*-genre in the late Middle Ages and continued to be the most popular every-day form of occasional poetry for centuries. Writing a *ferskeytla* was — and to an extent still is — a kind of national pastime, somewhat like the short poetic genres favoured by the Japanese. It is a social and playful form of poetry in a similar sense as the *tanka*, two or more participants taking turns in composing a first part (the first part of the five-line *tanka* is in fact a three-line *haiku*), which another participant is supposed to add to, so that the poem is complete according to the rules of composition (the Japanese term is *renga* or chained verse).¹⁷ The *ferskeytla* is not necessarily descriptive, but simple and striking images are often to be found in this kind of poetry as the following example shows:

Fljúga hvítu fiðrildin
fyrir utan glugga;
þarna siglir einhver inn
ofurlítill dugga.¹⁸

This well-known *ferskeytla* by the classicist Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791—1852) simply juxtaposes two images: «White butterflies are flying outside a window; there, some tiny boat comes sailing in.» The colour of the wings and the implied white sails make the butterflies and the far-off sailing boat look alike. It is a visual poem very much in the vein of Imagism, although preceding it by a century or so. The technique is similar to the one used in such famous Modernist miniatures as «In a Station of the Metro» by Ezra Pound:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.¹⁹

What does the trick in both poems is not a formal simile, nor a metaphor, just a very effective juxtaposition — or *super-position*, as Pound sometimes called this technique, referring to the Japanese poetic tradition of setting one image or idea on top of another.²⁰

When Symbolism began to influence Icelandic literature around 1900 the poets often turned to such simple, popular forms of poetry, not least the *ballad*, a revival which may actually be more related to Romanticism around 1800 rather than contemporary European Symbolism (the best-known example being Coleridge's and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* 1798). In the first decades of the 20th century, Icelandic Symbolists (or Neo-Romantics) such as Jóhann Sigurjónsson (1880—1919) wrote short lyrical poems which formally resembled the ballads and folk poetry of earlier times but which were highly wrought and based on the use of symbols and correspondences according to the tenets of Symbolism. Some of them are in fact written in the main metre of the Eddic poems (*fornyrðislag*) and so compact that they can be seen to foreshadow the modern short lyric. This is especially true of the poem Jóhann wrote in remembrance of Jónas Hallgrímsson, Iceland's best known Romantic (1807—1845):

Dregnar eru litmjúkar
dauðarósir
á hrungjörn lauf
í haustskógi.
Svo voru þínir dagar
sjúkir en fagrir,
þú óskabarn
ógæfunnar.²¹

The «soft-coloured death-roses», drawn on leaves that are about to fall in the autumnal wood, become symbolical of the «sick but beautiful» days of the poet who died at a young age and is addressed as the «best-loved child of bad fortune». The poem centres on a single — albeit symbolical and decadent — image, as does the modern short lyric in general. Jóhann Sigurjónsson can also in other respects be seen to be the precursor of Icelandic Modernism. He wrote a poem in free verse around 1910 which points ahead to the Atom Poets around the middle of the 20th century. This poem is called «Sorg» («Sorrow») and is based on associative images that are both sublime and apocalyptic. Interestingly enough, this avant-garde poem has been shown to be strongly influenced by one of the most classical and institutionalized of texts — the *Bible* (the *Book of Revelation*).²² After Icelandic Symbolism had run its course in the 1920s some younger poets, such as *Halldór Laxness* (1902—1998) and *Jóhann Jónsson* (1896—1932), experimented with various kinds of Modernism, including Surrealism and Expressionism, but the real breakthrough of Modernism in Icelandic poetry did not come until the middle of the 20th century.

SNORRI HJARTARSON

I just mentioned Rolf Jacobsen's Edda-inspired views on compactness and imagery in poetry. But Jacobsen wasn't the only poet in Norway turning his eyes towards these medieval poems in the 1930s. Snorri Hjartarson went to Norway at the beginning of the decade and stayed there until 1936. He wanted to become a painter and studied at the Academy in Oslo 1931—1932. He then changed his mind and decided that poetry was his true calling. Snorri has often been called «the painter» among Icelandic poets, because his poems include many word-paintings and adjectives and other words referring to shape and colour. Snorri's first book of poems, *Kvæði*, was published towards the end of the Second World War, in 1944, the year in which Iceland became an independent republic. Snorri can be said to combine tradition and Modernism in his poetry, especially in his later books issued in the Sixties and the Seventies, which put an ever-increasing emphasis on imagery and compactness.

From the beginning his poetry was under great influence of the Eddic poetry, whose compact lyricism Snorri valued highly. Throughout his career, he made frequent use of traditional alliteration in the Eddic style, combined with a symbolic and modern use of word-sounds, making his poems at the same time sound musical and look painterly. He invented new verse-forms and put traditional ones to creative use, for instance the sonnet, and can in that respect be compared to Modernists like W.H. Auden, as Páll Valsson has

done in his study of Snorri Hjartarson's poetry.²³ His life-long search for images and metaphors to express thought and emotion also shows the influence of Eliot's idea of the *objective correlative*.²⁴ Short poems become Snorri's preferred way of writing, especially in his later work. Many of them can be said to conform to what Snorri Sturluson, in his 13th century *Prose Edda* (*Snorra-Edda*), called *nýgjörvingar*, i.e. when a single image or metaphor becomes the basis of a whole poem (the word itself could almost be translated by Ezra Pound's famous dictum, «Make it new»). Here is an example:

Kvöld

Á grunnsævi kvölds
flæðir gullinn straumur
um þéttriðin net
nakinna trjáanna
og fyllir þau ljóskvikum fiskum

Bráðum kemur rökkrið
undir brúnum seglum
og vitjar um aflann. (116 [1966])²⁵

Kväll

På kvällens grunda vatten
flödar en gyllne ström
genom de nakna trädens
tättknutna nät
och fyller dem med glittrande fiskar

Snart bryter mörkret in
under bruna segel
och vittjar sin fångst. (53)²⁶

We are made to see the trees and the water in terms of a single metaphor of catching fish in nets. Darkness itself is the fisherman, sailing under brown sails. We can see the impact of the Imagist credo in this poem: It *shows* rather than says, through connected poetic images. Perhaps the glittering fishes in the trees look a bit surreal, but on the whole, Snorri's images are not of that kind. He is, however, under some influence of Symbolism, like Tranströmer and many other modern poets. A number of his poems can be said to adhere to the philosophy of symbolic correspondences, i.e. linking the sensory world with a beyond in an almost systematic way. Here is an example:

Við sjó

I
Flýgur tjaldur yfir mynd sinni
út blælygnan vog
fljúga tveir tjaldar
breiddum faðmi
móti hafi himni hvor öðrum
inn í sólhvíta þögn
og hillingar langt út á firði.

II
Gulstirnd og græn
breiðist muran um grjótið
og hunangsflugur sveima
milli stjarna.

III
Undarleg tákn
skrár tildran í sandinn
eilíf tákn
sem inginn hefur ráðið

Vid havet

I
En strandskata flyger över sin bild
ut över den vindstilla viken
flyger två strandskator
med utbredd famn
mot hav himmel varandra
in i solvit tystnad
och hägringar långt ute på fjorden.

II
Gulstjärnig och grön
breder gäsörten ut sig bland stenarna
och humlor svävar
mellan stjärnor.

III
Underliga tecken
skriver roskarlen i sanden
eviga tecken
som ingen har tytt

nema mjúk aldan
sem máir þau út. (182—183 [1966])

utom den mjuka vägen
som stryker ut dem. (96—97)

At first sight this may look like an Imagist poem. But the symbolical correspondences are there, from the first to the last part of the poem. The first bird's reflection becomes another bird, bees are flying «between stars» (a play on the word *gulstirnd*, 'yellow-starred'), and the bird in the last part writes eternal signs in the sand which no-one can decipher «except the soft wave which erases them». This is what has been labelled *transcendental* Symbolism, but Snorri can also be said to use the other kind, *human* Symbolism.²⁷ He often endows such natural phenomena as the elements, the seasons, weather, landscape, vegetation and animals with symbolic value. Heath and fog, for instance, symbolize man's erring ways in the world; fire (sun) is symbolical of that which can save him, and so on.²⁸

This is Symbolism of a kind but it is also reminiscent of Romanticism. Nature features prominently in Snorri's poems and in some ways he can be said to be a post-romantic poet. He is filled with awe towards nature and in the spirit of such Romantics as William Wordsworth he suggests — but never preaches — that much is to be learned from nature. But this is not to say that he goes about his business in a conventional way:

Inn á græna skóga

Ég vil hverfa langt
langt inn á græna skóga
inn í launhelgar trjána

og gróa þar tré
gleymdur sjálfum mér, finna
ró í djúpum
rótum og þrótt
í ungu ljósþyrstu laufi

leita svo aftur
með vizku trjána
á vit reikulla manna. (136 [1966])

In i gröna skogar

Jag vill bege mig långt
långt in i gröna skogar
i trädens lönnliga helgedom

och växa där som träd
glömd av mig själv, känna
ro i djupa
rötter och kraft
i ungt ljusstarkt löv

söka mig sedan åter
med trädens visdom
till vacklande människor. (69)

It is interesting to compare this poem to «The Tree» by Ezra Pound:

I stood still and was a tree amid the wood,
Knowing the truth of things unseen before;
Of Daphne and the laurel bow
And that god-feasting couple old
That grew elm-oak amid the wold.
'Twas not until the gods had been
Kindly entreated, and been brought within
Unto the hearth of their heart's home
That they might do this wonder thing;
Nathless I have been a tree amid the wood
And many a new thing understood
That was rank folly to my head before.²⁹

Leaving aside the question whether Snorri was influenced by Pound in this case, it is interesting not only to see the likeness but also the difference between the two poems. Pound uses the classical Greek mythology as his frame of reference, whereas Snorri simply lets the speaker dream of becoming a tree in some wood. Pound's poetic form is close to being conventional, but Snorri is really writing free verse with just a little alliteration. Pound's poem is reflective, it *says* rather than shows. Snorri's poem talks directly to us, enabling us to identify with the natural world through simple images. One might ask: Who is a traditionalist and who a Modernist?

In his later poems, which are often so short as to remind one of the Japanese haiku tradition, Snorri repeatedly writes about a kind of epiphany which can be achieved in nature, when man experiences harmony or eternity in a fleeting moment. All the emphasis is put on the image, as can be seen in these three very short poems:

Allt í einu

Á langri göngu
um grýtt urin hrjóstur

lindarniður
græn tó. (212 [1979])

Hrossagaukur

Hrossagaukur flýgur
undan fótum þér í blánni

þú hrekkur við
hlustar

er það hjartað í brjósti þér
eða hnegg hans við ský. (222 [1979])

Mynd

Rauð
í framrétttri hendi
fjallsins

ársólin. (246 [1979])

Oförmodat

På lång vandring
i steniga kala marker

källsori
en grön gräsplätt. (115)

Horsgök

En horsgök flyger upp
framför dina fötter på myren

du rycker till
lyssnar

är det hjärtat i ditt bröst
eller fågelns gnäggning i skyn. (120)

Bild

Röd
i fjällets
framsträckta hand

morgonsolen. (135)

The poems often are open-ended — a characteristic also discernable in Tranströmer's poetry — as if the poet intends the reader to finish them and draw his or her own conclusions from what is being said — and also from what is *not* being said. In the last poem, for instance, we see a clear image of the morning sun in the outstretched hand of the mountain, and we don't have to go any further with this poem than just to enjoy this clear and beautiful image. It is as perfect in itself as a Japanese miniature painting. But if

we look closer we can gather from the outstretched hand that something is being offered to someone. In Snorri's poetry this something is often the gift of nature, a perfect harmony or a new day. Instead of shouting *Carpe diem!* he lets the silent image convey a similar message to man. Snorri's technique could also be compared to the one William Carlos Williams used in his well-known poem, «The Red Wheelbarrow» («so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow ...»), published in 1923, which David Perkins has described like this: «the poem notes first a color and then an object, and thus enacts a process in which a bright, pleasing quality is located in an ordinary thing»³⁰ Snorri's poem is extremely compact, being only six words, none of which is a verb — an elliptical sentence, common both in Modernist poetry and in the haiku tradition.³¹

Even if Snorri does not preach and most often chooses the way of the Imagists to *show* rather than to say, he can occasionally point out that we ought to keep our eyes open and our senses alert, because the important moments in life can easily go by unnoticed:

Ský og tré

Ský hefur tyllt sér
á háar naktar greinar

aldinré hvítt
fyrir blómum

horfðu vel
myndin er hverful. (247 [1979])

Molnslöja och träd

En molnslöja har slagit sig ned
på höga nakna grenar

ett fruktträd vitt
av blommor

se noga
bilden är flyktig. (136)

For a moment, a passing cloud endows, as it were, the high, naked branches of a tree with white flowering — again Japanese-like, resembling the blossom of a cherry tree — but only for a moment. Snorri Hjartarson excels at the art of approaching the wordless through poetic images, celebrating in as few words as possible the wonder of being alive and open to each precious moment, especially when one is close to nature. This is a concern we also see clearly in the poems of the second Icelandic poet we will discuss, Stefán Hörður Grímsson.

STEFÁN HÖRÐUR GRÍMSSON

Stefán Hörður started off traditionally in his first book of poems, *The Window Faces North*, which was issued in 1946. But during the next years he experimented a lot with free verse and image-based poems and was under the influence of the father-figure of Icelandic Modernism, *Steinn Steinarr* (1908—1958). In 1948 Steinn published an influential cycle of poems, called *Time and Water*. Using the words of Archibald MacLeish, «A poem should not mean / But be», as a motto for the cycle, Steinn forged a new poetic diction, concrete and abstract at the same time, musing on such concepts as time in a terse style marked by striking images and paradoxical word compounds. By making time his subject, Steinn was following in the footsteps of such High Modernists as the T.S. Eliot of the *Four Quartets*, but he was also trying to do something similar with words as

had been done with colour and form in abstract painting. *Time and Water* is a complicated cycle of poems and this is not the place to plunge into its deep waters, as it is hardly an example of the imagistic kind of short lyric, because even if the individual poems are short and often image-based, the cycle as a whole is more akin to a reflective long poem, revolving around abstract concepts. But it is clear that the cycle and other late poems of Steinn Steinarr had an effect on such young poets as Stefán Hörður and turned their minds to Modernism.

Stefán Hörður's second book of poems, *Black Elves' Dance*, issued in 1951, put him at the forefront of Icelandic Modernism. Here is an example of his compact, image-based approach:

Vetrardagur

Í grænan febrúarhimin
stara brostin augu vatnanna
frá kaldri ásjónu landsins.

Af ferðum vindanna eirðarlausu
um viðáttu hvolfins
hafa engar spurnir borizt.

Litlausri hrímþoku blandið
hefur lognið stirðnað
við brjóst hvítra eyðimarka.

Undir hola þagnarskelina
leita stakir bassatónar
þegar ishjartað slær.

Á mjóum fótleggjum sínum
koma mennirnir eftir hjarninu
með fjöll á herðum sér. (48 [1951])³²

Vinterdag

Op i den grå februarhimmel
stirrer søernes brystne øjne
fra landets kolde ansigt.

De hvileløse vindes færd
over himmelhælvets vidder
har ingen hørt nyt om.

Blandet med farveløs rimtåge
er vinterens vindstille stivnet
ved hvide ødemarkers bryst.

Under den hule tavshedsskal
søger enkelte bastoner ind
når ishjetet banker.

På deres spinkle ben
kommer mændene ind over isskorpen
med fjelde på deres skuldre. (14)³³

It is a landscape in the dead of winter, and a historical/political reading of this poem could interpret it in terms of the Cold War and the Atomic threat. A «devastated geography» of some kind is common enough in Post-War poetry.³⁴ But this poem also signals Stefán Hörður's concern with man's position and attitude towards nature, as the image of the men with mountains on their shoulders powerfully implies. It is a delicate yet depressive image of humanity in the face of the Nordic winter, if you like, but this could again be linked to the Post-War period and the burdensome angst of the Atomic Age. In his later books of poems, Stefán Hörður became ever more concerned with modern technology and the ruinous impact of heavy industries on nature. On occasion he preaches against the powers of modern capitalism, but more often he tries to make the reader realise the importance of nature by using alternative view-points and even post-surrealistic images in his preferred type of poem, the short lyric:

Steinninn

Vetrarlangt hefur steinninn

Stenen

Hele vinteren har stenen

horft til mín úr varpanum
og vetrarlangt hef ég óskað
að vorsólin kæmi
og þerraði kaldan saggann
af hinum þögla vini mínum.

Í morgun hefur hið bálhvíta ljós
fallið á steininn og sjá:
það skriðu ormar úr holum hans. (47 [1951])

kigget hen på mig fra kanten af tunet
og hele vinteren har jeg ønsket
at forårssolen kom
og tørrede den kolde fugt
af denne min tavse ven.

I morges faldt det flammehvide lys
på stenen, og se:
der kravlede slanger ud af dens indre. (13)

Nature often provides a background in these poems, not intruding but always there behind the post-surreal play of images and words which can verge on being enigmatic:

Heyannir

Við hundadagsbirtu
orti ég þetta
ljóð í kvist-
gluggakistu
á svartan vegg
í baksýn (73 [1970])

Høhøst

I hundredagenes lys
skrev jeg dette
digt i en kvist-
vindueskarm
på en sort væg
som baggrund (28)

Mynd án veggs

Ó í sumar þá ætlum við að synda í bláasta
vatninu á Íslandi
og við skulum láta sólina þurrka okkur
og ég á að horfa á þig
en þú átt að horfa á vatnið (105 [1981])

Billede uden væg

Å til sommer skal vi svømme i den blæste
sø på Island
og vi vil lade solen tørre os
og jeg bør kigge på dig
men du bør kigge på søen (46)

Næturljóð

Þessi smákornóttá tilvera ..
nótt í hásléttuborg
og þaðan kemst enginn allur
sem siglt hefur eftir stjörnuhröpum
hitabeltisnætur
og skynjar fjarska hunds í mannabyggð
í skíru tungsljósi ...
Þessa óendanlegu nálægð! (122 [1987])

Nattedigt

Denne fintkornede tilværelse...
nat i en by på højsletten
som ingen forlader uskadt
der har sejlet ud
efter troppenattens stjernesud
og opfatter afstanden til en hund
i en bebyggelse i klart måneskin...
Denne uendelige nærhed! (50)

Stefán Hörður turned towards eco-thinking in his later years and became, for instance, very concerned with the large-scale drainage of the Icelandic wetlands begun in the 1940s in order to gain more ground for the farming industry. As Eysteinn Þorvaldsson has pointed out, Stefán Hörður can be considered to be the first Icelandic poet fully to adopt an eco-critical standpoint in his art.³⁵ He was especially concerned with the birdlife that thrived in the fertile marshes and was and still is threatened by this process. Through metaphors and by shifting angles the poet can often make us see the wetlands from

another point of view. He opens up our eyes to the marshes as the habitat of birds and flowering vegetation, in an epiphanic moment of original images. In this case he focuses on the fate of the *flórgoði* (*Podiceps auritus*), a bird that makes a nest of floating vegetation anchored to marsh plants:

Var

Kylja leikur um síki. Flórgoði mjakar
húsbáti millum brothættra stöngla
og festir við trausta stö
langt inn í skjóli bylgjandi systra
og hverfur.

Hverfur. (163 [1989])

Læ

En kold vind leger over en grøft. En
lappedykker flåder sin husbåd frem
mellem skrøbelige stængler og fæstner den
til et sikkert strå af stargræs
langt inde beskyttet af bølgende søstre
og forsvinder.

Forsvinder. (65)

The image of the houseboat and the delicate anchoring involved make us see the marsh as a natural habitat for the bird. This may not be an inhabitable place by human standards, but nevertheless the poet uses human terms to enable us to adopt another point of view. Paradoxically perhaps, it is through such words as «houseboat» and «sisters» that we can approach this non-anthropocentric world and try to understand its significance. The repetition of the last word of the poem can both be read as a reminder to the reader to catch the fleeting moment and also as a further reminder that the birdlife depicted here is threatened and can easily disappear altogether if nothing is done to protect it.

The following poems can also be read with regard to the poet's great concern for the fate of the wetlands and the woods of the earth. Yet they are playful and almost Magritte-like in their post-surreal or slightly absurd way:

Sýnd
(Þjóðstef)

Maður í regnkápu
kann að vera rigningarlegur
en hann er ekki regn

Hann er ekki regn
handa gróindum

Hann er með hettu
sem hnýtt er undir kverk (170 [1989])

Skin
(Folkevisen)

En mand i regnfrakke
kan nok være regnvejsagtig
men regn er han ikke

Han er ikke regn
for jordens grøde

Han har en hætte på
som er bundet under hagen (67)

Árablöð

Þá sungu merkur;
sungu —
sagt er
í skjölum.

Það er satt

Árgamle blade

Da sang skovene
sang —
hedder det
i papirerne.

Det er sandt

að þær sungu,
en það var í sólskini
í lok regntímans.

Enda sungið
í mörk,
en það skjáfar
í skjölum.

Skrjáfar
sem í skorpnnum blómum
þegar lindir þorna. (196 [1989])

at de sang
men det var i solskin
sidst i regntiden.

For der blev sunget
i skovene
men det knitrer
i papirerne.

Knitrer
som i visne blomster
når kilder tørrer ud. (74)

The last poem tackles the problem of deforestation, a grave problem in Iceland which was probably largely covered with bushes and birches at the time of the Settlement of the country in the 9th century, but is now all but empty of woods, owing to man's mishandling and sheep's heavy grazing through the ages. Stefán Hörður also used other poetical forms to this end, especially the prose poem, a genre he started to use around 1970, as did Tomas Tranströmer, another modern master of this difficult genre. Here is a short prose poem that can be understood as an ironic but heavy-hearted allusion to deforestation in Iceland:

Þegar ekið er

Þegar ekið er eins og leið liggur uppúr dalnum og komið er framhjá Þögnuðuholtum verður mörgum lítið í bakspegilinn. Um það er ekkert nema gott eitt að segja. En þetta hefur alltaf farið lágt. (89 [1981])

Når man kører

Når man kører lige ud ad landevejen op gennem dalen og har passeret Tavshedsgården er der mange der kommer til at kigge i bakspejlet. Herom er kun godt at sige. Men folk har altid gået stille med det. (39)

This is in fact a subtle play on the word «Þögnuðuholt», literally 'the woods that became silent', which in the prose poem looks like the name of an Icelandic farm but implies that once there were woods that now have become silent. The wind doesn't blow in the trees anymore and neither do the birds sing there, because the woods have disappeared. The rear-mirror is an image that points to the past, when the country is supposed to have been covered by woods, but deforestation is not something that the Icelanders are proud of and they therefore keep silent about it, according to the poet.

«The wild has no words», as Tomas Tranströmer puts it, but nature and the wordless can be approached by the playful use of poetic images and a brevity that verges on silence. In a sense, the silence of nature and of the unknown can be made to speak through such carefully crafted images. The third and last Icelandic poet we will look at, Hannes Pétursson, is particularly concerned with the borders between land and sea when it comes to this kind of writing.

HANNES PÉTURSSON

Hannes Pétursson is a more traditional kind of poet than Stefán Hörður Grímsson, even if he is of a younger generation. He is closer to Snorri Hjartarson in the sense of combining Modernism with tradition — a moderate Modernist, perhaps. Like Snorri he is fond of the romantic heritage and has written scholarly works on some of the Icelandic Romantics (Steingrímur Thorsteinsson and Jónas Hallgrímsson). And like Snorri Hjartarson he values the Eddic poems highly and uses light alliteration throughout his work, along with simple but often very effective poetical images and metaphors.

Hannes Pétursson's debut book of poems, *Kvæðabók*, was a sensation when it was published in 1955. The author was only 24 years old and the critics agreed that seldom had an Icelandic poet showed such a great promise at so young an age. His poetry developed gradually in the books that followed during the next two decades and then, a quarter of a century after his debut, he went through a remarkable poetic self-renewal. This renewal was inaugurated by the poems issued in two collections in 1980 and 1983, called *At Home by the Sea* and *36 Poems*, respectively (they were translated into Swedish by Inge Knutsson and issued together in one volume as *Hemvist vid havet* in 1986). Hannes had then recently moved to Álftanes, a peninsula near Reykjavík, and was inspired by living so close to the shore and the sea. The poems in these two collections are short and lyrical, often catching the fleeting moment in a gripping poetical image or metaphor. At the same time, Hannes is looking inward, musing on his own past and places he has been, reviving memories through carefully controlled imagery. *At Home by the Sea* is first and foremost concerned with the shore and the sea, but *36 Poems* is more introspective and centres on memories of people and places.

Hannes is concerned with language and whether it is possible to represent the wordless with words. It is perhaps only in the breakdown of language that man can fully sympathise with nature on an equal basis. Thus in an encounter with a bird on the shore:

Heimkynni við sjó, 2. ljóð

Látinan mín
liðaðist sundur í veðrum
eina tungumálið
sem tjaldurinn skilur.

Nú horfumst við í augu
hérna, niðurvið sjó
eins og tveir steinar
stakir, í sandinum. (300 [1980])³⁶

Hemvist vid havet, nr. 2

Mitt latin
föll sönder i väder och vind
det enda språk
strandskatan förstår.

Nu ser vi på varann
här nere vid sjön
som ett par ensamma
stenar i sanden. (18)³⁷

Yet artistic images — achieved with colours or even words — can bring about an epiphany, an awakening of the conscience of the individual from the humdrum of everyday existence. Hannes suggests this in two poems that perhaps can be seen as a reflective kind of Imagism:

Heimkynni við sjó, 8. ljóð

Ljóð mín biða mynda

Hemvist vid havet, nr. 8

Mina dikter väntar på bilder

sem merkingum hnika til
sundra þó ekki hlutunum
en sýna þá snögg, svo þeir hrökkva
upp af dásvefni þungum
sem dagarnir læsa þá í.

Manstu, til dæmis, kerta-stjakann
í stólnum hans van Goghs? (306 [1980])

som kastar om betydelsen
men inte styckar sönder tingen
utan visar dem snabbt, så att de vaknar
upp ur den djupa dvala
som dagarna försänker dem i.

Minns du till exempel ljusstaken
i van Goghs stol? (24)

Heimkynni við sjó, 21. ljóð

Auðvelt
er að orða það sem *spyrst*
frá einni stund
til annarrar — taka
Dag og Veg sér í munn
og móta það á tungu.

Vandasamt er mér hitt:
að veiða flöktandi glampa
orðs og orðs
innar hörundi mínu
að lyfta þeim upp úr hyljum
handar minnar — að veiða
sjálfan mig í hyljum
svefnugrar handar minnar. (319 [1980])

Hemvist vid havet, nr. 21

Det är lätt
att tala om det som *sägs*
från ena stunden
till den andra — ta
likt och olikt i munnen
och forma det på tungan.

Det andra är svårt för mig:
att fänga enstaka ords
fladdrande sken
innanför huden
att lyfta upp dem
ur min hands fördjupning —
att fänga mig själv
i djupet av min sömmtunga hand. (37)

It is interesting to compare these poems to Tranströmer's definition of poetry as a meditation and an awakening:

De konventionella språken och synsätten är nödvändiga när det gäller att *handskas* med världen, att nå avgränsade, konkreta mål. Men i de viktigaste ögonblicken i livet har vi ofta upplevt att de inte håller. Om de får dominera oss helt leder vägen mot kontaktlöshet och förstörelse. Poesin ser jag bl.a. som ett motdrag mot en sån utveckling. Dikterna är aktiva meditationer som inte vill söva utan väcka.³⁸

It is primarily by concentrating on and juxtaposing particular poetic images that the poets try to keep us awake and alert. These are comparable to the images painters use, as Hannes suggests in the earlier poem, although the medium is different. In the painting known as *Gauguin's Armchair* (1888), Vincent van Gogh placed a lighted candle in a candlestick on the chair of his fellow painter, Paul Gauguin. This juxtaposition of images — or super-position, to apply Pound's term — is not only visually arresting. It also makes us think about why the lighted candle is there, whether it is a symbol of the armchair's owner or whether it has been left there for other reasons, and so on. Indeed, there is something literary about this painting, as two books are also lying on the chair along with the candle in the candlestick, although Hannes does not mention this in his poem. The painting can thus be said to give us a powerful and even puzzling image of the act of reading, where the reader/artist is absent.³⁹

Juxtaposition is a pervading principle in Hannes's art and involves not only things but

also the speaking subject. In one poem after another, he juxtaposes himself with a natural object, a stone or a bird, often decentering the human factor or comparing man unfavourably with animals:

Heimkynni við sjó, 29. ljóð

Á þessari stundu
flýgur þytlaust hjá
hrafn: bládimmur
bassatónn í fuglsliki.

Horfir til mín fast
ofar freyðandi báru
sér hugsun mína klofna
í kvíða og hikandi von.

Það er svimandi langt
til hans svörtu fjaðra. (327 [1980])

Hemvist vid havet, nr. 29

I detta ögonblick
flyger en korp ljudlöst
förbi: en mörkblå
baston i fågelform.

Stirrar oavvänt på mig
ovanför en skummande våg
ser min tanke klyvas
i ångest och tveksamt hopp.

Det är svindlande långt
till dess svartblå fjädrar. (45)

The raven signifies (one could almost say symbolizes) an instinctual existence, a complete being well beyond the reach of the worrying animal: man. If Hannes's reverence for all things great and small can sometimes resemble that of a sympathetic Zen master, then this is Zen with a modern twist. The special moment — the vivid *now* — can become a chilling experience, striking images often evoking the pangs of existential angst:

Stroka

Ég lýk upp dyrum.
Daufgrá lóðin og hrímuð.

Kuldi læðist inn
lágt, meðfram gólfinu:

silfurrefur smýgur
sýldur inn í húsið

hann strýkst ósýnilegur
við ökkla mér. (362)⁴⁰

Kvíði

Kjallaraskonsa
köлкуð, grjóthlaðin.

Sólarljós fellur
inn um suðurglugga, júnilegt.

Drifhvítir veggir.
Og dordingull sem hangir
lóðrétt

36 dikter, nr. 2

Jag öppnar dörren.
Tomten är grå och rimfrusen.

Kyla smyger sig in
lágt längs golvet:

en silverräv slinker
nerisad in i huset

den stryker sig osynlig
mot ankeln på mig. (82)

36 dikter, nr. 4

Ett källarkyffe
vitmenat, av sten.

Solljus faller in
genom ett söderfönster, juniaktigt.

Snövita väggar.
Och en husspindel som hänger
lodrätt

á ljósið að utan.

Í skurðpunkti alls þessa
skelf ég andartak. (364)⁴¹

í ljuset utifrán.

I deras skärningspunkt
darrar jag ett ögonblick. (84)

But although these poems often remind one of Japanese short poems in their emphasis on the momentary images that can open up into eternity, their debt to the Eddic tradition is also easily felt, as the poet himself gracefully acknowledges:

Heimkynni við sjó, nr. 11

Stafir eddulegir
einn í línu, eða tveir
sjálfvaktir koma
inn í kvæði þessi, rimlaus
ljóðstafur í móti
ljóðstaf, innan boga
setningar, hugsunar —

eins og væri stuðlaður
hver andardráttur minn! (309 [1980])

Hemvist vid havet, nr. 11

Eddaliknande bokstäver
en per rad eller två
kommer självmant
in i dessa dikter, rimlösa,
allittererande bokstav mot
allittererande bokstav
inom meningens, tankens bågar —

som om varje andedrag
jag tar vore ett uddrim! (27)

The Old-Norse poetic tradition, an Eastern influence and a modern way of thinking here go hand in hand, and the result is a fresh way of looking at the world and oneself in a kind of poetic snapshot of the modern soul and its surroundings.

MAPPING THE MINIMAL

The three Icelandic poets we have looked at in view of their contribution to the short lyric have many things in common, although each has gone his separate way. Images and metaphors are their medium, but they differ in their combination of tradition and Modernism. Snorri and Hannes make continual use of the Eddic tradition, but Stefán Hörður often chooses the path of Post-Surrealism and even Absurdism. They are all preoccupied with nature in various ways and they all try to capture fleeting moments and achieve epiphanies by an imagistic use of poetic diction. At the same time, they all try to find a way to express the inexpressible, to give the reader an insight into the otherness of nature and the unknown. Hannes is the most self-conscious of the three, often reflecting on himself and also on how and if poetry can really account for that which is outside the world of language. In comparison with such practitioners of the short lyric as Tomas Tranströmer the Icelanders are less prone to mystical musings and allusions. When trying to capture the out-of-the-ordinary, they still have their feet on the ground. Snorri does, however, sometimes base his poems on symbolic correspondences, like Tranströmer. These four poets all share a willingness to present themselves on the field, so to speak, not only to reign supreme over their poetical objects, but to show themselves openly as living creatures among other creatures, honouring that wordless *other* of animals and all living things. Tranströmer has written about the Swedish archipelago, Snorri about Icelandic birds and vegetation, Stefán Hörður about Icelandic wetlands and woods

that have disappeared, and Hannes has placed himself humbly among birds and stones on an Icelandic seashore. They can all be seen to be under the influence of Eastern poetic traditions, although none of the Icelanders has attempted to write Japanese haikus as Tranströmer has done in recent years.⁴² Both Snorri and Hannes try to capture a kind of «haiku moment» in their image-based short poems, and Stefán Hörður also achieves a similar epiphany in his short pieces, be they lyrical or prose poems, often with a post-surreal or absurd twist. Tranströmer has also written poems in the style and/or form used by Sappho and Alcaeus. The Icelandic poets have not attempted any such revival of the classical short lyric, but the Eddic poetry has perhaps served a similar purpose in the case of Snorri and Hannes, providing them with a traditional model which can be put to new and creative use in modern times.

The influences and traditions involved are shown in the following table:

*Four modern practitioners of the short lyric in Sweden and Iceland
and their connection to various traditions that are based on
the particular use of imagery and/or formal brevity*

	Symbolism	Imagism/ Eastern trad.	Post- Surrealism	Eddic trad. ⁱ	Classical trad. ⁱⁱ
Tomas Tranströmer	+	+	+		+
Snorri Hjartarson	+	+		+	
Stefán H. Grímsson		+	+		
Hannes Pétursson		+		+	

ⁱ i.e. image-based, alliterative, non-rhymed poetry in the style of the Poetic Edda.

ⁱⁱ i.e. short lyric poetry in the style or metre of Sappho, Alcaeus etc.

To this table one could add non-literary factors, for instance *the interest in painting* which seems to be common to all the poets included. They all write about certain painters (Hannes and Stefán Hörður both write poems on van Gogh, Tranströmer writes a poem about Vermeer and Snorri muses on Rembrandt in a poem, just to mention a few examples), and one of them actually started out as a painter (Snorri). The interest in imagery thus seems to be connected to an interest in painting or the visual arts. Another important factor is *the interest in nature*, as all of these poets frequently allude to natural objects and scenery. The visual and sensory side of the poems often seems to be affected by the poets' own experiences out in the open, but it is difficult to decide what exactly orders the artistic formulation, as many of the images of nature seem to be influenced by the way other artists — writers and painters — have depicted and channeled them through literary works and paintings known to these poets. Nature, after all, has no palette and «the wild has no words», as Tranströmer puts it.

It would be interesting to take further steps towards «mapping the minimal» in trans-Nordic poetry. Perhaps more traditions would be shown to come into play if other modern poets would be studied in this respect. It has, for instance, been pointed out that the poetry of some of the Finland-Swedish Modernists tends to be laconic, objective and compressive.⁴³ Rabbe Enckell, Gunnar Björling and Bo Carpelan have written poems of this kind, and Solveig von Schoultz also issued a collection of tankas in 1959.

Comparing these and other Nordic poets would no doubt throw further light on the short lyric and its transformations. Many questions arise and need to be answered. Does laconism have a particular appeal to Nordic poets, and if so, why? Is it perhaps culture- and/or gender-related? Do many modern women poets fancy this sort of lyric? I can certainly think of some Icelandic poetesses, such as Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir (born 1930) who has written excellent short poems (including tankas),⁴⁴ but I do not think that they feature as prominently in their poetical output as in the output of the male poets studied here. It may well be that this type of poetical utterance — really trying to get away with saying as little as possible — is more in line with «the silent type», a gender role men have been playing or supposed to be playing for a long time. It is also interesting to note that some of the poets studied here show a growing tendency towards brevity as they grow older. «Orð / ég segi alltaf færri og færri orð» («Words / I always say fewer and fewer words») is a well-known line from a leading Icelandic Modernist, Sigfús Daðason (1928—1996).⁴⁵ Perhaps brevity and general distrust in speech is an age-related thing or a mark of maturity. In Tranströmer's case, this is a complicated matter. Aphasia — the loss of speech — is one of the themes in his *Östersjöar* (1974) and he himself was later to lose his speech partially, through illness. With this in mind, Tranströmer's recent haikus — poems so short that each word has to be weighed and, as it were, wrestled from the grasp of silence — become all the more meaningful.

There has been much talk of «empty transcendence» in the wake of Hugo Friedrich's influential book on Modernism, *The Structure of Modern Poetry* (*Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*, 1956). It may be true that modern poets have lost that *other* which many of the Romantics took for granted, that they cannot turn their poetic discourse towards someone or something «out there» in the same way as before. It may be true that in modern poetry the old rhetorical devices no longer work, that the apostrophe doesn't ring true anymore. Yet poets continue to write about what is «out there» and beyond, and perhaps we should rid ourselves of such notions as «empty transcendence». The modern short lyric proves to be one of the ways in which we can place ourselves poetically in the world and remain open to what is «out there» and beyond. Or in the words of Tomas Tranströmer in his impressive poem, «Vermeer»:

Den klara himlen har ställt sig på lut mot väggen.
 Det är som en bön till det tomma.
 Och det tomma vänder sitt ansikte till oss
 och viskar
 «Jag är inte tom, jag är öppen».⁴⁶

NOTES

¹ On the general history of Imagism and its influence on English and American poetry in the 20th century, see e.g. Glenn Hughes: *Imagism and the Imagists. A Study in Modern Poetry*, new edition, Biblo and Tannen,

Stanford/California/London 1973; Stanley Knight Coffman: *Imagism. A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry*, Norman, Oklahoma 1951; David Perkins: *A History of Modern Poetry from the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, Belknap, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London 1976; and John T. Gage: *In the Arresting Eye. The Rhetoric of Imagism*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana/London 1981.

² This movement is tackled in the main scholarly study of poetical Modernism in Iceland, a book by Eysteinn Þorvaldsson: *Atómskáldin. Aðdragandi og upphaf móðernisma í íslenskri ljóðagerð*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík 1980. Eysteinn has also written on individual Modernists, including Stefán Hörður; see his collection of essays: *Ljóðaping. Um íslenska ljóðagerð á 20. öld*, Ormstunga, Reykjavík 2002.

³ Tomas Tranströmer: *Samlade dikter 1954—1996*, Bonniers, Stockholm 2003, 222. Formerly published in *Det vilda torget* (1983).

⁴ Niklas Schiöler: *Koncentrationens konst. Tomas Tranströmers senare poesi*, Bonniers, Stockholm 1999, 323—324.

⁵ See e.g. Ingemar Algulin: *Tradition och modernism. Bertil Malmbergs och Hjalmar Gullbergs lyriska förnyelse efter 1940-talets mitt*, Natur och kultur, Stockholm 1969, 16—18.

⁶ Schiöler 1999, 324.

⁷ Kjell Espmark: *Resans formler. En studie i Tomas Tranströmers poesi*, Norstedts, Stockholm 1983, 36—102.

⁸ Schiöler 1999, 324.

⁹ See Earl Miner: *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/New Jersey 1958, 97—213, and also the doctoral dissertation by Sabine Sommerkamp: *Der Einfluss des Haiku auf Imagismus und jüngere Moderne. Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Lyrik*, Diss. Universität Hamburg 1984. The Japanese poetic tradition became well-known throughout the Western world in the 20th century. The Imagists made it known in literary circles in the first decades of the century, but the success of Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, with its thinly veiled portrait of the American haiku poet Gary Snyder in the character of Japhy Ryder, enhanced its popularity considerably.

¹⁰ Schiöler 1999, 40—43.

¹¹ Not all Western poets have chosen to stick to strict syllable counting when adapting the principles of the Japanese haiku to their own languages. Jack Kerouac voiced a different opinion when he said: «A 'Western Haiku' need not concern itself with the seventeen syllables since Western languages cannot adapt themselves to the fluid syllabillc Japanese. I propose that the 'Western Haiku' simply say a lot in three short lines in any Western language. / Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella.» (*Scattered Poems, City Lights, San Francisco* 1971, 69.)

¹² Tomas Tranströmer: *Den stora gatan*, Bonniers, Stockholm 2004, 46.

¹³ See e.g. Schiöler 1999, 45—49.

¹⁴ Tranströmer 2003, 8. Formerly published in *17 dikter* (1954).

¹⁵ See e.g. Perkins 1976, 339—340.

¹⁶ Øystein Rottem: *Norges litteraturhistorie. Etterkrigslitteraturen*. Bind 1. *Fra Brekke til Mehren*, Cappelen, Oslo 1996, 201—202.

¹⁷ Kenneth Yasuda: *Japanese Haiku. Its Essential Nature and History*, new edition, Tuttle, Boston etc. 2001, 161—185. The Icelandic terms for the ferskeytla are *fyrripartur* (first part, i.e. the first two lines of the poem) and *botn* (bottom) or *botna* (a corresponding verb for the last two lines of the poem).

¹⁸ Sveinbjarnar Egilsson: *Ljóðmæli Sveinbjarnar Egilssonar*, ed. Snorri Hjartarson, Mál og menning, Reykjavík 1952, 75.

¹⁹ Ezra Pound: *Personae. The shorter poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, New Directions, New York 1990, 111. This poem, which was finished in 1912, is in fact a cut-down version of a much longer poem Pound wrote in 1911.

²⁰ See Miner 1958, 112—123, and Gage 1981, 12—15, 47—50 and 61—63.

²¹ Jóhann Sigurjónsson: *Rit I*, Mál og menning, Reykjavík 1940, 239—240.

²² Hannes Pétursson points this out in the article «Hvar eru þín stræti?» in the periodical *Skírnir* 1973.

²³ Páll Valsson: *Pógin er eins og þaninn strengur. Þróun og samfella í skáldskap Snorra Hjartarsonar*, Studia Islandica 48, Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, Reykjavík 1990, 33—34 and 47, where Páll points out that Snorri himself acknowledged his debt to such poets as Auden.

²⁴ Páll Valsson 1990, 57—61.

²⁵ Page numbers in brackets will henceforth refer to the following edition of Snorri Hjartarson's collected poems: *Kvæðasafn*, ed. Páll Valsson, Mál og menning, Reykjavík 1992. The year in which each poem was originally published in book form will be added within square brackets.

²⁶ The translations of Snorri's poems are taken from *Löv och stjärnor. Dikter av Snorri Hjartarson*, urval och översättning Inge Knutsson, Rabén & Sjögren, Angered 1984 (page numbers in brackets).

²⁷ On transcendental and human Symbolism, see for instance Charles Chadwick: *Symbolism. The Critical Idiom* 16, Methuen, London 1971, 2 ff.

²⁸ Páll Valsson writes illuminatingly about this in his aforementioned study of Snorri Hjartarson's poetry (1990, 87—99).

²⁹ Pound 1990, 3. Formerly published in *A Lume Spento* 1908. Kristinn Björnsson compares these two poems briefly in the epilogue to his Icelandic translation of selected poems by Pound (Ezra Pound: *Kvæði*, Almenna bókafélagið, Reykjavík 1970, 95—96).

³⁰ Perkins 1976, 551.

³¹ Ingemar Algulin counts «syntaktisk kompression» among the hallmarks of Modernist poetry (Algulin 1969, 18); for ellipsis in the haiku tradition, see Yasuda 2001, 76—77.

³² Page numbers in brackets will henceforth refer to the following edition of Stefán Hörður Grímsson's collected poems: *Ljóðasafn*, Mál og menning, Reykjavík 2000. The year in which each poem was originally published in book form will be added within square brackets.

³³ The translations of Stefán Hörður's poems are taken from *Når det bliver morgen. Digte i udvalg på dansk ved Erik Skyum-Nielsen*, Aschehoug, Oslo 1995 (page numbers in brackets).

³⁴ See e.g. Edward Brunner: *Cold War Poetry. The Social Text in the Fifties Poem*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 2001, 131—142.

³⁵ In my covering of the issue of eco-concern in Stefán Hörður's poetry I am indebted to Eysteinn Þorvaldsson's essay on this subject, «Framhjá Þögnuðuholtum. Náttúruvernd í ljóðum Stefáns Harðar Grímssonar,» first published in the periodical *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 1997 and also published in Eysteinn Þorvaldsson 2002, 185—199.

³⁶ Page numbers in brackets will henceforth refer to the following edition of Hannes Pétursson's collected poems: *Ljóðasafn*, Iðunn, Reykjavík 1998. The year in which each poem was originally published in book form will be added within square brackets.

³⁷ The translations of Hannes's poems are taken from *Hemvist vid havet. Dikter av Hannes Pétursson*, tolkningar Inge Knutsson, Rabén & Sjögren, Kristianstad 1986 (page numbers in brackets).

³⁸ Quoted by Schiöler 1999, 201.

³⁹ In a letter written in February 1890 to the critic Albert Aurier, van Gogh describes the painting as follows: «It is a study of his [Gauguin's] armchair of somber reddish-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent one's place a lighted torch and modern novels.» *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, vol. 3, new edition, Thames & Hudson, London 1999, 256 (letter no. 626a).

⁴⁰ Formerly published as poem no. 2 (without a title) in *36 ljóð* (Iðunn, Reykjavík 1983).

⁴¹ Formerly published as poem no. 4 (without a title) in Hannes Pétursson 1983, where the conclusion reads differently: «Í skurðpunkti þeirra / skelf ég andartak.» The added title also shows that the poet has put further emphasis on the 'moment of shiver' and suggested that it should be taken as a trigger of 'anxiety' (*kvíð*), whereas in the earlier version it can simply be taken as an aesthetical thrill to see the crossing lines of the tiny spider and the sunlight.

⁴² Many haikus (and tankas) were translated into Icelandic (though not directly from the Japanese but through English, Swedish and German translations) and published in 1976 by Helgi Hálfðanarson, a prominent translator and poetic advisor to both Snorri Hjartarson and Hannes Pétursson (Helgi had also published a collection of Chinese poetry in a similar translation in 1973). Although Snorri and Hannes must have become aware of such Eastern traditions early on, Helgi's inspired translations may have encouraged them to rely still further on the poetic image as a vehicle of thought and emotion. In any case, the most «haiku-like» poems of Snorri and Hannes were the ones they wrote in the late Seventies and early Eighties. Younger poets, such as Gyrðir Eliasson (b. 1961) and Óskar Árni Óskarsson (b. 1950), have made extensive use of the Japanese tradition. Óskar Árni has also translated haikus into Icelandic (though not directly from the Japanese but through English and Swedish translations), mainly in four collections issued in 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1997. Unlike Helgi, he has chosen not to stick to syllable-counting and seems to have similar views on Western haiku adaptations as Jack Kerouac (see footnote no. 11; some of Kerouac's haikus are included in Óskar Árni's 1993 collection, along with haikus by other American poets). By the late 1990s the prominence of the haiku tradition had become so great in Iceland that the writer Hallgrímur Helgason (in an article in the magazine *Fjölhirn* 1/1997, 50) declared that the Icelandic lyric was «limping and walks by a haiku» (a word-play as *hæka* — the Icelandic word for haiku — sounds almost like *hækja* or a crutch).

⁴³ See e.g. Algulin 1969, 17, and Michel Ekman: «Poesin från trettioal till femtioal,» in Michel Ekman (ed.): *Finlands svenska litteraturhistoria. Andra delen: 1900-talet*, Atlantis, Stockholm 2000, 144—151.

⁴⁴ Some of Vilborg's poems, including a few tankas, have been translated into Swedish and printed in *Europa slutar här. 5 isländska lyriker*, transl. Maj-Lis Holmberg, Schildts, Helsingfors 1983, 32—45.

⁴⁵ Sigfús Daðason: *Ljóð*, Iðunn, Reykjavík 1980, 46. Formerly published in *Hendur og orð* (1959).

⁴⁶ Tranströmer 2003, 267. Formerly published in *För levande och döda* (1989).