

The Labyrinth of Tanka

by M. Kei

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Introduction

For the last two years I have wrestled with the question of defining tanka. What is this elusive thing we call ‘the tanka spirit’ and why do we resort to such nebulous terms to explain what it is we write? What shapes our intuition so that we have a gut level reaction that tells us whether a poem is or isn’t tanka? Can something be tanka even if the poet has no idea what tanka is, or lived in a different time and culture with no exposure to Japanese literature?

Most definitions of tanka begin with a reference to the Japanese form, quoting 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, onji, sound units, morae, or whatever term the author wishes to use to describe the thing that the Japanese count, but rarely is any attention given to Japanese variations from those counts. It is generally accepted that Japanese poetry and even prose ‘naturally’ falls into patterns of 5-7, but no understanding of when and why this pattern developed. Lately most Anglophone poets have come to understand that Japanese is a very different language from English and therefore tanka must be adapted to the English language. A very common rubric used to define tanka these days is “five phrases on five lines.” Yet, the Japanese wrote their tanka on one, two, and sometimes three lines.

The ‘fiveness’ of tanka is well entrenched in English, so much so that little attention has been given to understanding exactly what a ‘phrase’ is, and equally little attention given to how larger structures within a tanka function. Some accept as a given that tanka has a bipartite structure, but others point out that tanka has traditionally been written in one, two, three, four, and even five part structures. Some translators have experimented with fragmenting tanka even further (*cf.* Steven Carter) into six, seven, eight, even nine or ten lines. Even when a two part structure is used, the position of the break has changed as fashions in tanka have changed. There is an intuitive grasp of the 3-2 structure in which three lines of observation are followed by two lines of subjective response, dubbed the “haiku+2” model of tanka, but little articulation of exactly how and

why this is done, aside from the erroneous belief that tanka is a haiku with something extra added on. There is no awareness of when and why the break changed from the end of line 2 to the end of line 3, or what ramifications that has for the structure and reading of tanka. Even less knowledge is available regarding tri-partite structures, such as the very ancient 5-7,5-7,7 structure, nor any understanding of how that might lend itself to modern works in English. While some attention is given to the “rush of five lines down” (tanka without breaks), equivalent attention has not been paid to four and five part tanka, and the ‘list’ tanka is generally derided in English, in spite of having had a role in the development of Japanese tanka. The early English practice of translating tanka into quatrains has been abandoned without an examination of why early translators adopted the quatrain. Perhaps it is assumed that translators back then thought such poems wouldn’t be recognized as poems unless they had a familiar format, but it is equally possible that translators thought four lines was sufficient to convey the content of the Japanese original in English and saw five lines as unnecessary padding.

Because of the differences between Japanese and English, most poets have abandoned technical definitions of tanka in favor of looser forms, but this leads to a complaint that tanka is just another kind of free verse. It is certain that some free verse has been published as tanka simply because it was written on five lines, but that should not undermine our efforts to understand what makes tanka, tanka. Yet as flexible as the English-language form is, the classical Japanese aesthetic dominates modern English tanka. Few of these principles are understood by more than a few people writing tanka in English, but through their reading of Japanese translations, and their imitations of earlier poets who themselves imitated the Japanese, have developed an intuitive grasp of the “tanka spirit” which enables readers to recognize something as tanka, even when they are at a loss for words to explain what they mean. Consequently the technical details of form have less influence in the practice and appreciation of tanka in English than aesthetic principles.

Form and Formality in Early English-Language Tanka

However assiduously we may study and imitate the Japanese masters, English is not Japanese and we must always make decisions about what is important, abandoning other elements. Translation is impossible; approximation is the only hope. Jun Fujita (1888-1963) and Sadakichi Hartmann (1867-1944), both Japanese-born tanka poets fluent in Japanese and English, raised in Japan, well-educated, conversant with Japanese literature, and assimilated into American culture and the Western literary tradition, made very different decisions about what constituted the ‘tankaness’ of tanka. Hartmann went for prosody and wrote extremely melodious tanka that are easily sung while Fujita went for content, creating slim, supple, illusive poems. One hundred years later, the English-language tanka tradition is firmly backing Fujita and has abandoned Hartmann.

Ah, were the white waves
Far on the shimmering sea,
That the moon shine laves,
Dream flowers drifting to me —
I would cull them, love, for thee.¹

Hartmann explained tanka thusly, “The Tanka (short poem) is the most popular and characteristic of the various forms of poetry in Japan. It consists of five lines of 5,7,5,7, and 7 syllables - 31 syllables in all. The addition of rhyme is original with the author.”² That he named his collection after this tanka and reprinted it in his later *Tanka and Haikai* (1915) shows the high esteem in which he held the poem; thus we must presume that it exemplified to his mind what tanka is and should be. He cannot be faulted for it; he perceived waka (for this work shows no evidence of the tanka reforms of the Meiji period, in spite of his adoption of the term ‘tanka’) as a regular, metrical form featuring classical poetic diction, conventional images and situations, expressed through the

¹ Hartmann, Sadakichi. *Drifting Flowers of the Sea and Other Poems*. Self-published, 1904, p. 10.

² Ibid.

newness of the English language. In this he was following Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) whose poetics are frequently summed up as “old words, new heart.” That is to say, the adoption of classical poetic diction and images to render afresh the sentiments of the human heart.

Hartmann’s work also exemplifies the principle of *honkadori*, which was greatly esteemed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Japan and which remained an important technique throughout its history. *Honkadori* is ‘allusive variation,’ by which the poet alludes to another poem, and by extension, to the whole body of convention of Japanese poetry. This poem calls to mind several different well known classical waka; if the reader recognizes them, the poem gains poignancy, if not, the work is rather trite.

Convention is generally frowned upon by modern Western poets, but the conventions of Japanese poetry were highly appreciated by their practitioners who used them to add power to their poetry. Briefly put, if one knows that ‘haze’ is always a spring time reference and ‘mist’ an autumn one, the choice of such words enables the poet to add layers of connotation and imagery to a poem without having to spell it out. This is part of what makes tanka brief in Japanese and vague in English translation; the ordinary reader needs verbose translation or extensive footnotes to acquaint him with the context the poet assumes he knows.

Hartmann’s work also has something of calligraphy about it in the arrangement of the lines on the page to suggest the shape of a wave. For the classically-trained reader, a poem’s physical appearance—the calligraphy with which it was rendered, the paper on which it was written, the incense with which it was scented—was an important part of the aesthetic whole. Little attention is given to these attributes in English. Conventionally English tanka are left justified and marched down the page in a column. Too much variation from this norm is considered undesirable; strict regularity is expected and ‘tricks’ of formatting are decried. Thus in Japanese, the sound units were regular in their numbers, but the poem flexed visually through its calligraphy; in English, pleasing irregularity is accomplished through variations in line length which may or may not correspond to variations in syllables.

Jun Fujita explicitly chose content over form in his adaption of tanka. Born a generation later than Hartmann, his poetry shows the influence of the Meiji reformists.

There is nothing classical about his poetry; the following poem treats the sea and loneliness (two popular themes in classical waka) in a new and effective way. The result is a thoroughly modern poem.

A strange muteness—
The grey door of your boat-house alone
Listens to ripples,
Tonight.³

Fujita criticized Japanese-American poet Yone Noguchi (and others) for adopting the “carcass” but not the “essence” of Japanese poetry. Fujita sought the “illusive mood, big enough to illuminate the infinity of the universe.”⁴ He also put his finger on another essential element in the same article when he said,

Ethical teachings, philosophy of life manufactured by human intellect, and long narrative stories were entirely absent from [Noguchi’s] poems. He wrote as he felt—this is the essence of oriental poetry. While the West was busy preaching to the people through its poetry, the East discarded intellectual discussions and devoted itself to creating mood; if philosophy entered at all, it was the result of the poet’s feeling and not of his intellect.

Fujita was one of the first to identify Noguchi’s influence on modern English-language poetry; an influence that is generally accepted as an important source in the development of Imagism, which in turn helped to usher in modern poetry as we know it today. That influence has in turn fed back into English-language tanka, thus tanka has guided itself through the rather indirect means of taking a generally unacknowledged trip through mainstream poetry. It also represents an important development in understanding tanka: tanka in English is part and parcel of the Western tradition. We did

³ Fujita, Jun. *Tanka : Poems in Exile*. Chicago, IL: Covici-McGee, 1923.

⁴ Fujita, Jun. “A Japanese Cosmopolite.” *Poetry Magazine*. June, 1922, pp 162-164.

not learn to speak Japanese, Japanese poets learned to speak themselves in English. This point is critical in understanding the differences between English and Japanese tanka.

Classical Japanese Aesthetics in English-Language Tanka

Tanka in English is heavily informed by the classical principles of *aware* (pathos), *miyabi* (courtly beauty, good taste), and *yūgen* (mystery and depth). This is a point with advocates and critics on each side. Some will accept only dead Japanese masters as authorities on tanka while others assert the English tanka is a separate genre with no need to reference the Japanese. Certainly some of the newest crop of poets writing excellent poetry do not obviously recall Japanese classicism. But for good or ill, waka, and to a lesser extent, tanka after the Meiji reforms, has shaped English-language tanka. The principles of *aware*, *yūgen*, and *miyabi*, have had and continue to have great influence on tanka in English, even when there is not a conscious awareness of them.

Aware and Pathos

Aware is not easy to render into English. Its most direct translation is 'pathos,' but pathos has a poor reputation in English. To say something is 'pathetic' is harsh criticism indeed. We must look to the older meaning of pathos to understand *aware*. Earl Miner explained *aware* as

That which is most beautiful tends to be the most ethereal, the most humble, or the saddest. Or to put it differently, what is celebrated may be the least real, the least attractive immediately, the least happy. The beauty of *aware*, which struck the heart with such force, like the depths of mystery called *yūgen*, was usually a reminder of mutability and was sometimes a shaft of death.⁵

This was wrapped up with both the Buddhist awareness of the future annihilation of the self and the Shinto awareness of the cycle of the seasons; that which lives must die,

⁵ Miner, Earl. *An Introduction to Japanese Poetics*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1968, p 16.

that which is beautiful will wither and pass away. The most famous lines in all of Japanese literature open the *Tale of the Heike*, written by anonymous bards soon after the Gen'pei War (1180-1185).

The sound of the bell of the Gion temple echoes the impermanence of all things.
The hue of the flowers of the teak tree declares that all who flourish must fall.
The proud do not endure, they are like a dream in springtime; the mighty must
fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.⁶

The Tale of the Heike chronicles the fall, defeat, and eventual death by suicide of the Taira clan, formerly the most powerful clan in Japan. Thus *aware* lies somewhere between pathos and tragedy. It celebrates a melancholy beauty or pleasurable sadness; it is nostalgia tinged with philosophy. It is equal parts fear and satisfaction: fear of loss, and satisfaction that the seasons are trustworthy in their turnings, even if we are the losers thereby.

The Monk Saigyō (1118-1190), one of the most famous and admired poets of the *ShinKokinwakashū* era, is probably best-loved by Anglophone tanka poets. The Saigyō Award for tanka was named after him, and he is invoked by many critics and poets to explain or justify what they do. His most famous verse translated into English is:

Even one who claims
to no longer have a heart
feels this sad beauty:
snipes flying up from a marsh
on an evening in autumn.⁷
—Saigyō

⁶ Translation by M. Kei.

⁷ Carter, Steven D. *Traditional Japanese Poetry : An Anthology*. Steven D. Carter, trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991, p161.

A pretty poem even in translation, it embodies the principle of *aware*, but deepens it with spiritual undertones. The verb translated as ‘flying up’ is more literally ‘rising up’, and is used not only for the flight of birds, but for the erection of Buddhist temples. Thus we may read the poem as a Buddhist allegory, nature poem, or work of melancholy. There is even a level of self-referential irony. All the various meanings dovetail with one another and enrich and expand the poem well beyond the words printed on the page.

Not surprisingly, *aware* characterizes much of the tanka written in English. Many of its symbols in Japanese correspond well to the traditional *memento mori* of the West: flowers, seasons, musical instruments, parties, carrion birds and the dead to name a few. In each case, East and West, that which gives pleasure is also a warning of doom, for pleasure is fleeting. Man yearns to cheat death, yet never can.

Falling slowly, whirling swiftly—

The horizon, lost in snow.

On a gaunt skeleton

A crow with drooping wings

Peers.⁸

—Jun Fujita

Aware bleeds easily into sentimentality and nostalgia, and links up well with the English language tradition of Romanticism in which melancholy became a perquisite for anyone called a poet. However, the classical poet of Japan was restrained by the bonds of good taste not to give over to the extremes of behavior that led from Romanticism to the Gothic and from there to the modern genres of noir and horror. On the contrary, the classical poets of Japan deliberately rejected the abundant horrors of their world. Civil war, drought, famine, pestilence, earthquake, conflagration, and even a whirlwind (tornado) plagued the capital. Such topics were excluded in an escapist literature in which *miyabi* was the expected standard. Saigyō lived through all of these events, including the Gen’pei War, but they do not appear in his poetry.

⁸ Garrison, Denis M. *Jun Fujita, Tanka Pioneer*. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, p 28.

Miyabi and the Rule of Good Taste

Miyabi, coming from elements which mean ‘capital beauty,’ can be rendered as “embodying the courtly ideal of beauty,” that is to say, courtly, refined, elegant, and above all else, avoiding the ugly and the vulgar. In short, good taste. The courtier-poets thought they were addressing themselves to a higher ideal, and who could blame them? The average American frequently laments the deplorable state of world as depicted on nightly newscasts, the execrable taste of talk shows and reality television, the commercialism of Christmas, the death of civility and the dissolution of youth. The modern reader wants his or her escape every bit as much as the courtiers of a ravaged Japan wanted theirs.

Miyabi and its accompanying principle, *fūryū*, ‘elegance,’ calcified the ideals of Japanese poetry and in the long run nearly killed waka. Yet it is precisely this which attracts Western readers to classical Japanese poetry: it is an idealized poetry, depicting an idealized world. It ennobles us by filtering ugly reality through a refined sensibility. A few poets, most famously Ono no Komachi (c. 825 - c. 900) and Izumi Shikibu (fl. c. 970-1030), extended the boundaries with their passionate poems, but Komachi’s legendary beauty itself became a warning against hubris or an example of *aware*, depending on your point of view. Izumi Shikibu, famous as a profligate woman, nevertheless wrote verses of great delicacy. Her death poem is a masterwork of indirection.

From one darkness
 into another darkness
 I must go.
Light the long way before me,
 moon on the mountain rim!⁹
—Izumi Shikibu

⁹ Carter, Steven D. *Traditional Japanese Poetry : An Anthology*. Steven D. Carter, trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991, 119.

The allure of *miyabi* is evinced by the way in which courtiers were sought after, aped, admired, and deferred to long after they had lost political power and many of them were reduced to beggary. The rest of Japan was hungry for civilization and the warrior ethos of the samurai that had gained the upper hand did not provide it. On the contrary, the military ambitions of the warlords threw Japan repeatedly into conflict, culminating in a period of history named “The Warring States Period.” Ironically, such wars served to reinforce the cultural values of the courtiers even as they stripped them of any real power or wealth. Up through the 1500s, the Imperial court offered the only real ‘civilization;’ if a man aspired to something other than gutting his enemies as gloriously as possible, he had two choices: religion and culture. Religion required cutting oneself off from the pleasures of the world, but culture permitted one to aspire to a better quality of life without sacrificing comfort.

It was not until Sen no Rikyū (1522 - 1591) established a new method of tea ceremony that a powerful new aesthetic gained ground in Japan. Although not the originator of the principles of *sabi* and *wabi*, he popularized them in a form that spread to other arts and all tiers of Japanese society. What seems obviously and characteristically Japanese to us now was a radical departure from the extravagant and expensive tea traditions that had been in place. It was Rikyū’s genius to see beauty in that which was old, worn, rustic, and simple. Yet the notion that even the Shōgun should get down on his knees to crawl into a rustic hut to drink tea from a cracked cup raised eyebrows, to put it mildly. For reasons that are unclear but which reflect differences between the two men, the Shōgun Hideyoshi ordered Rikyū to commit ritual suicide.

When peace and prosperity arrived, ushered in by the stability of the Tokugawa shogunate, the newly safe and prosperous people of the cities gave themselves over to *haikai*, and thus was haiku born. The formidable erudition of the courtiers that had guaranteed them significance during troubled times became irrelevant during peace, and only a small, declining portion of the Japanese population turned to them for poetic inspiration and education. Thus the courtiers’ monopoly on culture ended and the ideal of *miyabi* lost its appeal.

Even so, the classical aesthetics of waka still have a firm grip on modern tanka in English. Plenty of advocates will protest that tanka today admits all subject matter—but

what they subconsciously mean is tanka 'admits all subject matter that interests me' without realizing that their own interests are limited by their experience of waka and the more genteel translations of the modern poets. If 'all' subject matter and treatments are permissible, where are the poems in praise of drugs and violence, the poems of social protest, bodily functions, politics, and war? Where are the bitter satires, the pornographic poems, the odes to ugliness? Where are the poems written in African American street dialects? In Spanglish? For that matter, where are the people of color, both as authors and as subject matter? Common in other genres, they are rare in tanka. Most tanka poets working in English, like the courtiers of old, cling to an ideal that elevates their lives and literature above the ordinary by channeling unpleasant experiences (illness, death, infidelity) through a scrim of good taste. The result is delightfully banal: autumn, flowers, moon, sea . . . To appreciate such poems requires that the reader share a philosophical viewpoint in which nostalgia for the now imbues current events with the same rosy glow formerly attributed to a mythical but persuasive past.

Miyabi is both the reward and the bane of tanka in English. To love beauty is admirable and desirable, but to love beauty more than truth is moral death. Our tanka, like the courtiers of old, does not bear witness to the truth in all its terrible glory. Those few of us who attempt it find ourselves overwhelmed by the immensity of the horror. We can address it only from a safe and distancing distance, or through triteness and sermonizing. We are good at bearing witness to our personal tragedies such as cancer, old age, or a lost love, but incompetent to voice the larger tragedies of our world.

When faced with grand disasters and social issues tanka hardly seems an adequate vehicle. Yet poets have managed to tackle such things: working class Japanese North American poets of the early and mid 20th century frequently touched on issues of social justice, poverty, racism, war, and other ills.

Today at Pearl Harbor,
From the shore line,
At highest tide,
A gossamer mist,

With the deepest stillness.

—Hagino Matsuoka¹⁰

At the factory

Where I work,

The morning bells are sounding,

And again I begin

To burn up my life's energy.

—Keiko Echigo¹¹

Yet even during the period in which the courtiers still held power, both political and cultural, there were a handful of poets working with material that could not be published through conventional venues. Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216), an accomplished waka poet and priest at the Kamo Shrine, switched to the prose poem to write his famous *Hōjōki*. He too lived through the Gen'pei War and the various disasters that befell the capital, topics not mentioned by Saigyō and the court poets. Yet Chōmei felt compelled to bear witness. After describing a fire, whirlwind and plague at Kyoto, he records a famine:

The woodcutters also starving,
firewood disappeared.

With nothing else
some tore down their homes
and took the wood to market.

It was said the value
of this wood

¹⁰ Nixon, Lucille M., ed. *Sounds from the Unknown*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, 1963. p 43.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 85.

was not enough to live on
for one day.

Then, I was baffled
finding kindling painted red,
and catching glimpses
of gold leaf.

I inquired and found
someone had been reduced
to breaking into temples,
and stealing images of Buddha,
tearing out the fittings of the halls
and chopping them into bits.¹²

The autobiographical bias of modern tanka in English may arguably rule out these kinds of subjects. How many North American tanka poets have suffered famine and plague first hand? We were safe in our chairs, voyeurs to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Those of us who weren't there could not write about Hurricane Katrina, we could only write about what we saw on television. This is the very opposite of good poetry: writing about things with which we have no personal connection and utterly failing to do them justice. However moving what we see on television, it is not real life, only a facsimile.

Yūgen and Dreaming Room

Yūgen or 'mystery and depth,' is another elusive yet essential principle of Japanese classical poetics that profoundly shapes our tanka today. This is, I posit, what we are observing when we talk about the "tanka spirit." It defies description, it is a mystery. Yet what is it, exactly, that we are seeing? If we can detect it, surely we can describe it. We

¹² Kamo no Chōmei. *Hojōji : Visions of a Torn World*. Yasuhiko Moriguchi and David Jenkins, trans. Berkeley, CA: Stonebridge Press, 1996, p 47-50.

are poets; words are our business. Yet even the classical poets themselves had difficulty defining it. Kamo no Chōmei described it thus:

On an autumn evening . . . there is no color in the sky nor any sound, yet although we cannot give any definite reason for it, we are somehow moved to tears. The average person lacking in sensibility—he admires only the cherry blossoms and the scarlet autumn leaves that he can see with his own eyes. Or again, it is like the situation of a beautiful woman who, although she has cause for resentment, does not give vent to her feelings in words, but is only faintly discerned—at night, perhaps—to be in a profoundly distressed condition. The effect of such a discovery is far more painful and pathetic than if she had exhausted her vocabulary with jealous accusations or made a point of wringing out her tear-drenched sleeves in one's face.¹³

Not even Chōmei can tell us what *yūgen* is, he can only give us examples from which we may deduce its characteristics. Clear in his example is the implication of far more to be discerned than is explicitly stated; it requires us to be sensitive to deduce what may lie behind the appearance. Also intrinsically wrapped up in *yūgen* is *miyabi*: the jealous harridan screaming at an unfaithful lover is vulgar, the elegantly dressed woman sighing to herself beneath the moon is in exquisitely good taste.

It required the master poet of the age, Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114-1204), to give a succinct and effective definition of *yūgen*. In his words, a poem should

produce an effect both of charm and of mystery and depth. If it is a good poem, it will possess a kind of atmosphere distinct from its words and their configuration and yet accompanying them.¹⁴

¹³ Kamo no Chōmei, quoted by Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968, p 16.

¹⁴ Fujiwara no Shunzei, quoted by Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968, p 101-102.

Here at last we have the origin of the most fundamental aspect of tanka poetics in English, the quality that Jun Fujita named the “illusiveness” in 1922. It has been discovered, described and named repeatedly throughout the history of English-language tanka. Lucille Nixon (1908-1963) wrote about it in 1963,

The image, in other words, the sensory intake, must be clear, but there must be enough space around it so that the reader may delight himself with it by using his own associations.”¹⁵

This is the same quality named as “dreaming room” by Denis M. Garrison in 2007.¹⁶ By “dreaming room” he means, “some empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context.” He offers a poem of his own as an example,

mounted butterfly
hanging under hardened glass
floating over cork
just enough room for your dreams
meadow breeze . . . a sapphire flash

and offers the instruction, “Read the poem as a drug addict. Now, read it as a political prisoner. Now, as an abused wife. Now, as a soldier. Now as a concerned ecologist. Etc., etc.” A labyrinth of meaning indeed!

If anything, poets working in English try too hard to pin down exactly what *yūgen* is, thereby depriving it of its mystery. Mystery is mystery; if it can be precisely defined, it is no longer mystery. Amelia Fielden, translator of Japanese poetry and herself an accomplished tanka poet, refers to a “certain haziness,” noting that the Japanese language and tanka written in it are grammatically vague. Japanese tanka do not use

¹⁵ Nixon, Lucille, ed. *Sounds from the Unknown*. Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, Publisher, 1963, p xvii-xviii.

¹⁶ Garrison, Denis M. ‘Dreaming Room.’ *Modern English Tanka*. Vol. 1. No. 3. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, Spring, 2007, pp 3-4.

titles, frequently omit grammatical subjects, rarely distinguish between singular and plural, and often omit pronouns. The result is fragmentary and ambiguous, and that ambiguity is admired because it opens the poem to multiple interpretations. English grammar is not nearly as flexible as Japanese in this regard, therefore poems in English run the risk of being merely obscure if following the Japanese model too closely. The effect in English is accomplished by the choice of language and image; connotations and allusions enrich a poem. Sometimes English tanka veer into symbolism and surrealism, utilizing the dream-language of the West to express what mere grammar cannot.

In most traditional Western verse the poet seeks to convey a particular package of image and experience to the reader; in other words, the reader is a consumer of the poet's vision. To the degree that a poet is able to share and express things so that the reader can relate, the poem gains power. When people want to know what a poem 'means' it is because they want to know what the poet's message is. When multiple readings are possible, they want to know the 'right' one and get frustrated or bored if they can't solve the puzzle of the poem. They usually accept the poet as the ultimate arbiter of the correct interpretation, therefore much effort goes into studying the biographical and social background of the poet in order to understand his or her work 'correctly.'

Over the past century this demand to know the 'right' way to read a poem has faded but has not been entirely eclipsed. The Western scientific-industrial mind's need to know the right answer still permeates our culture. Thus novices coming to poetry are often frustrated if they don't 'get it.' This also begets the question, with poetry written in the old way in which the poet did indeed intend a particular interpretation, is a varying interpretation acceptable? This is the challenge surmounted by 'New Criticism' which adopted the view that, if it's in the poem, it's in the poem, even if the author didn't intend it. It is a view with both supporters and detractors.

As we can see, Western poetry is fraught with questions of authorship and interpretation. While there is an approach stressing the development of individual interpretation, it is only one of many ways of reading poetry. By contrast, tanka is distinguished by the lack of this critical apparatus. These questions aren't argued in

tanka because they aren't relevant. Tanka was established centuries ago as an interpretive genre in which the reader joins the poet in making meaning. Because of this, meaning will vary from person to person, and not only that, will vary within a person, depending on circumstances. A good tanka is not a map to a destination; it is a labyrinth that invites exploration.

Kyōka and Vernacular Waka

Although the 1700s and 1800s have generally been viewed as a desert for waka/tanka, certain efforts were made during this period that probably helped prepare the way for the tanka reforms of the Meiji period. During this time the *kyōka* ('mad poem'), or humorous waka, experienced a surge in popularity. Originating as light verse in the Heian period, its first known surviving anthology was *Kyōka Hyakunin Isshu*, or *Comic Verses on a Hundred Kinds of Liquor* (early 1300s). Various others followed. Practitioners of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries used it as a way to circumvent the stultifying limits of classical waka. It was very popular as a form of parody on the older waka and it is for this that it is chiefly remembered in Japan. Of the *kyōka* poets, Ōta Nampo (1742-1839) was the most famous, and his style, the 'Edo school,' is characterized by massive numbers of puns and wordplays which is what apparently attracted its fans. Yet there is only so much entertainment to be had from such a form and it soon became passé.

Still, there were *kyōka* circles in operation as late as the 1920s in Japan. More serious *kyōka* poets (although not nearly as serious and pedantic as waka poets of the time), composed light verse and commissioned special illustrated books to publish them. Never as popular or as famous as the poets of the Edo school, they hold a special interest for practitioners of tanka in English. The most famous poet of the style was Nagata Teiryū (1654-1734), who once defined *kyōka* as "a poem composed while wearing a robe decorated in gold leaf that has been tied with a rope",¹⁷ meaning waka written in the common speech instead of the erudite language of the classics. The appeal of waka written in the language of the ordinary people, often with a humorous

¹⁷ Nagata Teiryū, quoted in Keene, Donald. *World Within Walls : A History of Japanese Literature, 1600-1867*. New York: Columbia University Press, p 526.

twist, and treating real life subjects that had previously been taboo, had obvious appeal. Indeed, almost everything written in English today is closer to Teiryū's vision of kyōka rather than the highly formalistic language and conventions of the old waka. Yet while Teiryū and his followers deviated from the waka norms, they did so gently—not for them the bawdy extremes of the more famous Edo kyōka poets.

The following poem was published in one of the many kyōka anthologies, illustrated by no less a figure than Utamaro, the great woodblock print artist:

Conceited skylark
Flying high in the sky;
Even you
Must come down to earth
When night falls.¹⁸
—Zeniya no Kanemochi

Comparing this frank statement of spite to the languishing lady that Kamo no Chōmei admired, we can see that although this verse doesn't seem very innovative in English, for the Japanese it was a refreshing, even titillating, new treatment. Although kyōka is never mentioned in connection with the tanka reforms of the Meiji period (latter half of the 19th century), it beggars belief to think that a form of poetry that was immensely popular from the middle of the 17th to the middle of the 19th century was unknown to Shiki, the Yosanos, and other reformers and readers of tanka. Even if they did not draw directly on kyōka, it must have served as proof that there was an audience for the old waka forms to treat new subjects, new language, and new approaches.

Although 'kyōka' is now used as a pejorative term in Japanese, it is important to remember that kyōka was first and foremost *fun*. The old waka was anything but fun, even in its heyday. Not since the days of the *Man'yōshū* had it been respectable to write humorous verse. On the contrary, kyōka was what court poets wrote after they were too drunk to write serious poetry at their poetry meetings. Consequently, few of the kyōka

¹⁸ *Utamaro : A Chorus of Birds*. James T. Kenney, trans. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 198, unpaginated.

from the time of the *Kokinwakashū* or *ShinKokinwakashū* survive. While many kyoka are not ‘high art’, they possess an immediacy and humanness that is in marked contrast with the distancing refinements of waka. Only a handful of tanka poets working in English today have managed to pierce the artifice and make tanka a vehicle for genuine emotion. Chiefest among these is Sanford Goldstein.

all I saw
was the hole
in my kid’s
sock
when she performed¹⁹

This tanka is a perfect kyoka: human, humorous, artistic, clever, and devoid of literary barnacles. Goldstein rebelled against the prettiness of modern poetry, but even in the face of the hard reality, he could find beauty:

it was a day
of worming through language,
worming through crowds,
and still, once through a train window
cherry blossoms²⁰

Other poets working with a candor that takes them outside classical aesthetics include Dave Bacharach, An Xiao, and Abigail Greene. Although love, including erotic love, has been a staple of tanka since the earliest days, the intimate experience often falls outside the bounds of propriety, both in reality and in other forms of literature. Prostitution, transsexualism, and rape are topics rarely treated in tanka.

¹⁹ Goldstein, Sanford. *Four Decades on My Tanka Road : The Tanka Collections of Sanford Goldstein*. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka Press, 2007, p 178.

²⁰ Ibid, p 85.

on leave
I follow a black girl
to the room
one touch is all
and my money's spent²¹
—Dave Bacharach

you can leave
me if you wish—
i doubt i'd
want me either,
a woman deformed²²
—An Xiao

rape (is) a nasty word,
it's taken years to spell it
out for all the world to see
do you still see me the same
now that you know?²³
—Abigail Greene

It is in the works of African American poets that we break most thoroughly with the Japanese. Lenard Moore's women ironing their hair to straighten it presents a portrait of African American life before hair relaxers and the black middle class. He is followed by Orestes, whose black gay love song is unique in tanka and owes nothing to the Japanese.

²¹ Kei, M. *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Perryville, MD: Keibooks, 2006, p 127.

²² *Ibid*, p 31.

²³ *Ibid*, p 141.

late summer
a woman presses another's hair
in the kitchen—
inch by inch the sun
reaches the folding chair²⁴
—Lenard D. Moore

grasp him by the ears
listen to the rust-colored
song sailing through his
apricot veins . . . he must be
the one to capture my soul.²⁵
—Orestes

When tanka addresses real lives in an authentic voice it escapes the confines of classicism and becomes a living poetry that is both candid and beautiful. Vernacular tanka, which is to say, tanka written in the natural idiom of ordinary speech, gives voice to the experiences of diverse peoples, revealing the infinite array of human possibilities and finding a common humanity in the differences that make each person unique and valuable.

Tanka in English as Form and Genre

In Japan, tanka is a form that can hold any content, but in English it is a genre as much as it is a form. A comparison to the limerick, the five line poem with a catchy rhythm that sounds well when spoken aloud, is instructive. Based on purely technical considerations, it is the English form that most closely resembles tanka. However, the content of the two forms is diametrically opposed, so we see that the tanka and limerick

²⁴ Garrison, Denis M., ed. *Five Lines Down : A Landmark in English Tanka*. Baltimore, MD: Modern English Tanka, 2007. p 48.

²⁵ Kei, M. *Fire Pearls : Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart*. Perryville, MD: Keibooks, 2006, p 44.

are not merely forms but also genres. While we could write a beautiful romantic limerick, it would never be published. Likewise, while we could write a bawdy scatological tanka, it too would never find a publisher. Readers of tanka and limericks expect certain kinds of subjects, language, and treatments, and they are unlikely to embrace examples that stray too far from their expectations.

Yet if we focus solely on the genre aspects of tanka, we could compose a poem of any length and subject. So we see that tanka is a form as well as a genre, and the principle limit to the form is brevity. While Takuboku was willing to accept tanka up to fifty syllables in length, traditionally tanka in Japanese limited itself to thirty-one (or thirty-two for magico-religious tanka). The debate over syllables has led to a general understanding that because of their different characteristics, English conveys more information in thirty-one syllables than does Japanese. English syllables also vary much more than do Japanese syllables; Japanese sound units are about the same length with minor variations, but in English, a word like “stretched” is only one syllable, but takes up more space on the page than the three syllables of “radio.” Thus in Japanese sound and appearance correspond to one another, but in English they do not.

Generally speaking, a poet that aims for about nineteen to twenty-six syllables in English is going to be forcing himself into a compactness that demands controlled ambiguity to make the most of the poem. A poet working in thirty-one syllables has an easier time; he need merely be succinct. Tanka requires an extra turn of the screw when it comes to compactness. This compactness is sometimes named as a defining feature of all poetry, but that is not so. Norse sagas are terse, but they are not compact. Not only that, but many examples from Western literature make a virtue of verbosity. Pope’s ‘Rape of the Lock’ is many things, but ‘compact’ is not one of them. The *Iliad* and other epics are, by definition, *epic*, and the Homeric simile is one that extends itself beyond the norm. Using more words than strictly necessary is a legitimate, effective, and frequently used poetic technique. That discursive poems are no longer the fashion does not mean that they have ceased to be poetry, nor does it mean that techniques currently popular are the enduring answer to the question, “What is poetry?”

Compactness is an absolute requirement for tanka, but it is optional for other forms. Even so, the earliest Japanese tanka were merely brief and made use of repetition and

redundancy. The oldest recorded waka was sung by the god Susanoo no Mikoto for his wedding:

In the eight-cloud-rising
Izumo an eightfold fence
To enclose my wife
An eightfold fence I build,
And, oh, that eightfold fence!²⁶

Succinct, but not compact, the Japanese version of the poem repeats words and sounds to give an exceptionally euphonious result. During the period of the *Man'yōshū*, waka was practiced by everyone from frontier guards to fishergirls to emperors, and a great variety of poems were gathered together in the *Man'yōshū*, or *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*. All sorts of treatments, rhythms, subject matters and voices appear in the collection, but the developing professionalism of an emerging literati is apparent. The best poets working in waka discovered that they could get more out of their poems by eliminating redundancy and repetition. They could amplify their meanings by using pillow words, conventions, wordplay and allusions. For a small homogenous society like the Imperial aristocracy, it could be assumed that every educated person was familiar with the pool of convention from which the poetry was drawn. No such assumption can be made about the modern readership in English. With a potential audience numbered in the hundreds of millions from thousands of different backgrounds, the poem must carry all the information needed with minimal reference to convention, tradition, or allusion.

During the Man'yo period, waka became a literary rather than a performing art, and the principle method for sharing it was in writing. Letters, both formal and informal, the compilation of personal collections and great anthologies, the inclusion of poetry in novels, tales, and diaries, the writing of poetry on furnishings and personal effects—all thoroughly established waka as a written form. Although waka continued to be chanted

²⁶ Attributed to Susanoo no Mikoto, quoted by Cranston, Edwin. *A Waka Anthology Vol 1 : The Gem-glistening Cup*. Edwin Cranston, trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993, p 7.

in public performances, this was not the major way waka was shared, and the elements best suited to music, such as the use of refrains, fell away. Likewise the poetry underwent standardization; while the older poems of the *Man'yōshū* alternated short and long lines ranging in length from three to eight syllables, the courtiers of the Nara period settled on a pattern of alternating five and seven morae with tolerance for minor deviations. Several other poem forms, including the *katauta* (5-7-7), the Buddha's footprint (5-7-5-7-7-7), the *chōka* or *nagauta* (anything from seven to one hundred lines alternating 5-7 syllables, ending with a couplet of 7-7), and the *sedoka* (5-7-7-5-7-7), were still practiced, but were rendered irrelevant by the dominance of waka. Throughout history new forms, such as the *kouta* (7-5, with an indefinite but brief number of lines), *imayō* (7-5-7-5), and *haiku* (5-7-5) also enjoyed great popularity, but never displaced waka as the empress of Japanese literature.

Ariwara no Narihira (825-880) is perhaps the first poet to really master the new compactness; no less an editor than Ki no Tsurayuki (872?-945), editor-in-chief of the *Kokinwakashū* (aka '*Kokinwakashū*'), criticized him as having too much heart and not enough words.²⁷ In spite of Lord Ki's criticism, the poetry of the *Kokinwakashū* demonstrates the compactness that has been a hallmark of *tanka* ever since. So influential was the *Kokinwakashū* that it has both been praised as setting the highest standard for Japanese poetry and condemned for ruining Japanese literature before it had a chance to develop.

Regardless of the state of his reputation today, Lord Ki's analysis of waka poetry left a deep imprint on Japanese literature; it is the *Kokinwakashū* and its later imitator, the *Shin-Kokinwakashū* that set the classical standards we have discussed above. It is worth examining what Lord Ki thought it was all about:

Our native poetry springs from the heart of man as its seed, producing the countless leaves of language. Multitudinous are the affairs of men in this world— what their minds think, what their eyes see, what their ears hear they must find

²⁷ Ki no Tsurayuki. 'Preface.' *Kokinwakashū*. Adapted by Rex Pay, 2001, from *Primitive and Mediaeval Japanese Texts Translated into English* by F. V. Dickins. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1906. pp 379-391, <<http://www.humanistictexts.org/tsurayuki.htm>>. Accessed 16 February 2008.

words to express. Listening to the nightingale singing amid the blossoms of spring, or to the murmur of frogs among the marshes in autumn, we know that every living thing plays its part in the mingled music of Nature.

Our poetry, with effortless ease, moves heaven and earth, draws sympathy from invisible demons and deities, softens the relations between men and women, and refreshes the heart of the warrior. Its origin goes back to the origins of heaven and earth, but its transmission to our time with regards to sunbright heaven began with the work of Shitateruhime and with regards to the earth, mother of metals, with the work of Susanowo no Mikoto.²⁸

The goddess Shitateruhime is also known as Wakahime, 'poetry princess.' It is she that taught men to sing thirty-one syllable songs for daily life and thirty-two syllable songs for magical/religious incantations. The first waka was allegedly a song of grief she sang over her husband's body, but it is not preserved. The oldest surviving waka is her brother Susano's wedding song. Thus brother and sister deities embody both life and death in song, and their songs are both mundane and magical. This then is probably the ultimate source of *yūgen*, 'mystery,' although it was not called such at the time.

No author writing in English has composed a statement of equal impact to Lord Ki's preface. In fact, there has been very little critical writing on tanka. Goldstein is notable for having made the attempt in his editorials in *Five Lines Down*, and his editorial partner, Kenneth Tanemura, later joined with A. C. Missias to produce *New Moon : An Introduction to Issues in Contemporary American Tanka* (2001). Most recently, the *Tanka Teachers Guide* (2007) offers instruction, and by implication, poetics, but the focus is on praxis, not theory.

A Final Definition

²⁸ Ibid.

Compactness coupled with *yūgen*/dreaming room is definitive of tanka in English. While this can happen in other verse forms, in no other form or genre is it so deliberately sought as the highest pinnacle of expression, nor has it been ruthlessly driven to extremes by more than fourteen hundred years of practice. By contrast, the sonnet, the Western form that comes closest to the tanka, is a mere stripling of five hundred years. Although it was all the rage among the Elizabethans and gained a prominent place in Western literature, it did not dominate the literature so thoroughly as to drive out all other competition, which is what waka did to other Japanese forms.

Waka continued to evolve. Renga poets discovered the power of linking, and even made minor experiments with form when they pulled adjacent verses to present as a single poem, sometimes resulting in 'upside down' poems of 7-7-5-7-5 form. Renga in turn gave us haiku. Kyōka was yet another variant, and the reforms of the Meiji period admitted new subjects, treatments, and language. Tawara Machi's *Sarabi Kinebi* (*Salad Anniversary*) reinvigorated tanka by modernizing it still further, and it is being reinvented yet again in 'cell phone tanka,' deplored by Japanese traditionalists as the death knell of civilization. Thus we can deduce another defining element of tanka in Japanese and English: flexibility.

There are lessons in this for English tanka: extraordinarily long-lived fertility is a function of tanka's mystery, which in turn generates innovation and flexibility, permitting the form to be reworked in new ways in new hands. The leap from Japan to English was awkward, but not insurmountable, and English-language tanka, although more than a hundred years old, is still in a robust infancy with many possible futures before it. By refusing to define tanka too narrowly we leave dreaming room not just for individual poems, but for the entire genre. Waka/tanka is exceptionally adaptable and malleable, taking new forms and holding new content, yet always preserving strands of continuity that enable us to trace it forward and backward along its myriad branches.