

Structure and Autonomy

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## Structure and Autonomy in Tanka Sets and Sequences

by M. Kei

In working with sequences both long and short, I have been perplexed by some points and so have evolved my understanding of the form. I have arrived at some opinions by carefully considering the form as it is, opinions which differ in certain ways from other authors who have addressed the topic.

To begin with, I have come to regard 'sequence' as meaning a group of tanka that are intended to be read in a particular order. While there may be flexibility in this, the poet put the tanka in a particular order for a reason, even if he was not consciously aware of doing so. By contrast I regard a 'set' as a group of tanka that may be read in variable order, either because the poet imposed no order on it, or because he deliberately wished to create a multi-dimensional poem that could be read in many ways. In other words, the basic structure of a sequence is linear and that of a set is non-linear.

This simplifies the growing welter of descriptive terminology that has developed ad hoc to describe different sorts of tanka groups, whether they be sequences, sets, strings, double strings, clusters, montages, collages, mandalas, haibun-as-poetry, or what have you. The discriminating reader who encounters a group of tanka arranged differently than he is used to has no vocabulary to draw upon and starts inventing names for the things he observes. This article will attempt to offer a description of the two basic elements of tanka in groups: structure and autonomy.

There are many different forms that these structures could take. In long sequences we often wind up with a narrative that unfolds chronologically, but that is hardly required. The structure could be one of mood, tone, color, emotional development, character sketch, travelogue, or even, as a former friend of mine did, a catalog of the different kinds of Buddhism in verse. It goes without saying that the poet can impose any order he wishes upon his work. The work might take the reader to somewhere new, or deliver him back to where he began. In this I differ from Sanford Goldstein who regards a tanka sequence as having a beginning, a middle, an end, and which transforms the narrator in

some way. While such sequences do exist, I think it narrows the generally understood meaning of 'sequence' to give it such a specific definition in tanka.

If a 'sequence' is a group of tanka arranged in a linear fashion, then perforce a 'set' is a tanka group arranged in a non-linear way. Some of these sets are kaleidoscopes which invite the reader to shake them up and contemplate the new arrangement. Poems of this nature are sometimes arranged upon the page as webs or circles, as well as in the more usual lines upon a page. Some poets have even gone so far as to provide diagrams with explications of the methods whereby associations can be read and interpretations made. Sets of this nature get called collages, montages, mandalas, webs, circles, and more.

When dealing with tanka in sets and sequences, we are accustomed to looking for 'strong' tanka because we are used to the publication of verses that are ruthlessly judged as individual poems. But in a sequence the poems must work together. A chorus cannot be composed entirely of soloists. Perhaps the reason we seem to prefer shorter sets and sequences is because it is possible to arrange several strong tanka in a group where they work together but each is obviously a soloist in itself.

Yet in longer sets and sequences such is not possible. In longer chorale works there are parts for chorus, soloists, duets, and other configurations of voices and instruments. This gives considerable interest and sustains both the creativity of the composer and the attention of the audience. Clearly, certain passages are of sufficient merit that they are frequently excerpted and presented as complete works in themselves, but that by no means invalidates the importance of the work as a whole.

It is accepted as a given that all tanka in a set or sequence must be able to stand on their own merits, but what is not often said but which is of equal importance, all the tanka must work together to form a gestalt. They must give and take meaning based on their association with the other verses. If we accept that tanka in a set or sequence must relate to the other verses, then we open ourselves to accepting that certain verses will give and take more than others. This might be expressed as some verses are 'weak,' and others are 'strong', but this is a terminology I don't wish to accept.

I do not think that a full chorus would be referred to as 'weak' compared to the voice of a soloist, though I will agree that a soloist must have a strong voice. Still, to be part of

a quality chorus, no individual voice can be weak. They must all be strong, achieving a certain mastery of skill and tone. The analogy to a chorus breaks down, perhaps because I do not have enough musical knowledge, or perhaps because tanka is a literary art and not vocal one, even if it is a performed art. The elements that create and bind a group of tanka together are literary ones, not musical ones. They are written, not scored.

That being the case, in a long sequence some verses will be more dramatic than others while some must serve as backgrounds against which the dramatic verses stand out. The question then becomes one of how the poet manipulates the inevitable modulations in tone and action to best effect. Here the relationship of the set and sequence to longer literary works such as the novel and the play becomes apparent. I deliberately do not compare them to shorter works because short works usually do not have room for rising and falling action. It is a unique strength of a tanka group to be a sort of novel in miniature. Thus a verse in a sequence can be likened to a chapter in a novel: it is coherent in itself but plays a part in building the larger work.

We traditionally think of novels as being plot-driven, and going back as far as Aristotle we are almost compelled to define a novel as a literary work with a plot, but that is hardly necessary. There have always been novels with other structures. With tanka groups we have the good fortune not to have any particular embedded structure, so we need not fear being shot dead with the criticism, "It has no plot." Although in our case perhaps the equal criticism would be, "It has no structure." Fortunately for us, we have only the haziest notions of how structure functions in sets and sequences, so it will be a long time before we need dread the critic skewering us on this point.

The upshot of dealing with longer sets and sequences is that we must reorder our evaluations of individual poems and their relationship to one another. If we are dealing with a sequence of forty or more poems we would be hard put to name an example in which all forty poems are of equal merit and dramatic intensity. In fact we would probably object if they were. Such a poem would be much like certain movies in which the action is fast and furious and never lets up. Such movies lead the audience to lament, "It had no plot." By which is meant that it was uninteresting because it was

composed entirely of plot, the artificialities of which were abundantly apparent due to the way they set up the special effects.

Those representatives of the cinema which we love and are likely to retain their popularity are those in which there are interesting scenes, engaging characters, and something that matters above and beyond the special effects. Even among the special effects spectaculars, there are variations. Consider *Star Wars*, which in one early scene showed a lone human figure limned against a desolate wasteland with the sun going down. Change the actor's clothing and such a scene could have been played in the American West, the deserts of Arabia, the steppes of Mongolia, or even the outback of Australia. It could have just as easily been a vast and empty ocean or a glittering glacier. Man against the wilderness with the sun sinking speaks to us no matter who we are. Such scenes give meaning and context to other scenes within the work, which in turn gives the movie lasting appeal.

The question then is: How do we do something interesting with a large group of tanka? What sorts of elements serve our genre well, and which don't? We are as dependent as the cinema upon interesting scenes: the image is as integral to the tanka as to the movie. Likewise, we must hope to appeal to the universal human heart, but while an image and an emotion pretty well fill up a tanka, a set or sequence needs something more.

What more?

This is something I cannot presume to answer, but it is intricately bound up with the question of how we perceive the relationships among the tanka in a set or sequence, and how we evaluate the ways in which a group of tanka works or fails to work. It also impinges upon the interpretation we give to individual poems, which brings us to autonomy. But just how autonomous is 'autonomy?'

Given the duties that must be performed by an individual tanka in a set or sequence, it seems sufficient to ask that autonomy consist of being grammatically independent with a content that is intelligible on its own. The verse may be uninteresting if presented solo, but to evaluate it purely upon its merits as a solo piece is to ignore the function it performs in the larger structure of the tanka group. It may very well be that the verse gains in meaning and value by being included in the longer work—and I hope that it

does! There really is no point in presenting tanka in sets and sequences if the total is not greater than the sum of its parts.

These background verses perform an important function by contextualizing the poems in the group. A truly strong tanka will stand out even when it stands alone, but when a tanka participates in a group, it must take on as well as contribute to the color of the work as a whole. Perhaps it will be objected that such a placement will limit options by constraining a poem to a single 'correct' interpretation, but I think not. Such a poem contributes its multiplicity of meanings to the larger work and thus, in a truly excellent group, it should be possible to pick out multiple threads of interpretation. To confine ourselves to the obvious interpretations of a tanka group is as much a mistake as to confine ourselves to the obvious meanings of a lone tanka.

When we consider strands of meaning built up by the juxtapositions, connections and contrasts among multiple verses, we realize that 'autonomy' is a chimera. To be truly autonomous a verse must resist its context, or else dominate it so that the other verses acquire interpretation based upon the domineering poem. If the former, what is it doing in the group in the first place, and if the latter, has it not eliminated the autonomy of the subjugated poems? Clearly, this cannot be what we intend when we speak of 'autonomy.'

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, if we confine ourselves to short sequences of tanka, then it is possible to arrange a small number of strong poems in a complementary way. We might call this the 'ensemble' model of tanka, permitting us to accept the literary equivalent of duos, trios, quartets, quintets, sextets, septets, and so on. But just as small musical groups grow into something larger, we just as quickly slide away from the small ensemble model of tanka into something larger and more difficult to name and identify. Maybe this means that short and long groups of tanka need to be structured and judged by different standards.

This raises a separate question, namely where a long group of tanka could be published. There are not many journals that publish tanka groups, period, and it is a rarity indeed to see a truly long group published in English. Perhaps this reveals an inherent assumption that groups of tanka will rarely exceed ten or twelve verses and that to speak of a 100 verse tanka sequence in English is an absurdity. Still, in

Japanese, the 100 verse sequence of tanka was established by the time of Fujiwara no Teika, and different formats of long verses are well established in renga. Any discussion of tanka in sets and sequences had better be able to handle both short and long forms.

Unfortunately, discussion of tanka sequences in English is limited by the small reservoir of works that can be studied. *The Tanka Splendor Awards*, Modern English Tanka Press with its journal and anthologies, and a handful of other resources preserve a small body of tanka in groups. Some have been published as chapbooks, including Goldstein's *At the Hut of the Small Mind* and Carol Purington's *The Trees Bleed Sweetness*. My own *Heron Sea* was deliberately sequenced, and Amelia Fielden's recent *Baubles, Bangles, and Beads* is a book composed entirely of groups. The oldest book of tanka sequences in English is Jun Fujita's *Tanka: Poems in Exile*.<sup>\*</sup> Each of the four seasonal sections is exquisitely sequenced, a fact which is not usually remarked upon. There are others. Necessarily, any descriptions of tanka in sets and sequences must be taken as preliminary and in need of further research and discussion.

Nonetheless, for a discussion to be had, it must have a starting point. Therefore I offer a definition of tanka in sets and sequences, as opposed to tanka in random groups by author's last name or some other device, as a work composed principally of tanka poems in which autonomy and structure are balanced to create a whole. Within this form I see two major subforms, that of the linear sequence (whatever its organizing principle) and that of the non-linear set (and its plethora of forms). Hopefully we will see critical work in which the structure of tanka sets and sequences is described and explored, the merits and demerits of various techniques and executions discussed.

<sup>\*</sup> In the years since this was written, numerous additional sequences have appeared in print, both in journals and as book-length works by individuals or by pairs or groups of poets. The longest sequence of all in English, *Fire Pearls 2*, at 750 poems, was published June, 2013.