

DEFINITION OF THE IDEAL FORM OF TRADITIONAL TANKA WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

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PARAMETERS OF DEFINITION:

- “Ideal form” – We are not attempting in this paper to define a strict prosody to be followed formulaically, viz., for the production of tanka in accordance with a slavishly followed rule or style. Rather, we seek to describe the prosody of tanka that may be confidently utilized, by learners of tanka writing, as an exemplar faithful to tradition, albeit adopted for English, and that may be considered a baseline from which to begin writing tanka. Such a form is “ideal” inasmuch as a poem that complies with such prosody would meet the formal definition of traditional tanka written in English. On the other hand, we consider that, if the fundamentals of traditional tanka prosody are ignored, discarded, or subverted by any poet, the resultant quintain cannot fit the definition of a “traditional tanka written in English.”
- “Traditional tanka written in English” – Our concern in this paper is with poems written first in English which are intended to be in the form of traditional Japanese tanka. While there are linguistic and orthographic differences between Japanese and English that cannot be fully resolved, we believe that it is possible to follow the centuries-old waka/tanka formal poetic tradition to a substantial and meaningful degree. We do not seek to define nor deal with avant garde innovations based on tanka in this paper, nor do we seek to restrain poetic experimentation by any poet. The definition we offer should be taken for what it is intended to be, no more and no less.

Seven essential guidelines for writing “traditional tanka in English” in the ideal form.

1. Five lines. The form for English tanka (which is both singular and plural) is an untitled and unrhymed quintain.
2. Set syllable count. From 19 to 31 English syllables are permissible.
3. The syllabic length of lines is set, which creates the traditional rhythm.
 - A. A short/long/short/long/long syllabic pattern is ideal.
 - B. Syllable counts may vary from a maximum of 5/7/5/7/7 down to a minimum of 3/5/3/5/5, ideally; but some flexibility within the s/l/s/l/l pattern is acceptable, e.g., 4/6/3/5/6 or 3/5/4/5/7, etc.
4. Diction: Use natural English phrasing on each line with no (or very minimal) enjambment. Do not end a line with ‘a’ or ‘the’; avoid ending a line with a preposition. Ideally, each line is one poetic utterance ending with a caesura; this is often referred to as “five phrases on five lines.”

5. Japanese tanka build and build. They do not fall away like some English poetic utterances. The 5th line of a traditional tanka is the most important and significant line. Therefore that 5th line should ideally be at least as long as the 2nd and/or 4th lines. Sometimes the 5th line can be syllabically a little shorter than line 2 or 4, providing it is a ‘strong’ line in meaning and/or utterance, or continues in the reader’s mind, e.g., with an ellipsis (e.g., “so she waited ...” might be okay, in the context of the rest of the tanka). A one or two syllable 5th line is not permissible.
6. A certain amount of ambiguity/dreaming room/ma can be a desirable quality but complete obscurity is not desirable.
7. The content/theme/subject is wide-open, but tanka is lyric verse and should not be didactic. For example, a “polemic tanka” is self-contradictory.

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The following commentary by Denis M. Garrison was published together with the above definition in *Modern English Tanka, Vol. 3, No. 4, Summer 2009* as part of that issue’s editorial.

COMMENTARY

After Robert D. Wilson, one of the authors of this definition, rolled it out in *Simply Haiku* online journal, there was considerable discussion, both publicly and privately. The discussion was animated, to say the least. However, it did not move the authors of this definition (Amelia Fielden, Robert Wilson and myself) to adopt any changes to the definition.

Many comments were in the “how dare you” vein. We did dare to define the ideal form of a traditional tanka written in English. What more is there to say to such complaints? We have not claimed to be tanka masters nor gurus. On the other hand, our individual and joint experience in tanka is not negligible.

Some comments were about aspects of tanka that perhaps should have been included in the definition. My reaction is that, interesting as those aspects are, they are matters of technique rather than fundamentals of identity. This is and was intended to be a very limited definition of an ideal of form.

It was suggested that discussing the tanka aesthetic might be more useful than discussing form. In the great scheme of things, this is probably true. However, the exercise was a definition of form. Likewise, suggestions that we should be defining the new English tanka instead of traditional tanka in English are true enough, but simply not on topic. We defined traditional tanka in English to help newcomers find a baseline, a benchmark, from which they can begin to make some sense out of the great variety of new English tanka.

Some discussion was on our use of the word “traditional.” Some see the newer varieties of English tanka as “our tradition.” We used the word “traditional” in its generic and widely understood meaning; not as a specialist term of art. This definition is meant to be of use to newcomers to tanka, not to specialists.

The argument that defining “traditional tanka in English” as we did somehow de-values or invalidates innovative, avant-garde tanka in English is one that cannot be dealt with empirically. We said explicitly:

“We do not seek to define nor deal with avant garde innovations based on tanka in this paper, nor do we seek to restrain poetic experimentation by any poet. The definition we offer should be taken for what it is intended to be, no more and no less.”

In my view, the definition must be taken as a whole. To take parts of the definition as authoritative while totally ignoring other parts leads to error. As to the implications of the definition, everyone is free to draw their own.

There was a series of discussions on the matter of enjambment. While they were at times off-topic in that enjambment’s use in new English tanka became the issue, nevertheless they revealed a need for closer inquiry into this particular aspect of the definition. Speaking only for myself, I see no place for enjambment when writing traditional tanka in English, while for new English tanka, I am slightly less strict. In any case, I am at the far end of the spectrum of opinion in this specific aspect and think it is only fair to go on record as such. In my personal view, the one-line five-part Japanese tanka translates into a five-line English tanka in which each line is a distinct individual part which, I believe, militates against the use of enjambment. Just my opinion. This is what I mean to convey whenever I use the “five phrases on five lines” rubric to define tanka.

The comment was made that we should have emphasized the unitary wholeness of tanka, viz., that the lines of a tanka must create a unified poem. I most certainly agree with this criterion. Whether it need be included in a bare-bones definition of fundamental form, I am not so sure, but it is a point for consideration in future.

In summary, I continue to stand by the definition of the ideal form of traditional tanka written in English as published. It is meant to be a baseline, a benchmark, a starting place. Anyone who can do better is sincerely and cordially invited to do so. All those who have taken some shots at our definition are people whom I consider friends and whose opinions I respect and value. What tanka in English is, has been, and will be, is a question asked, not an answer

found. I hope the questioning will proceed apace.

Postscript just for *MET* Readers: What does all this mean for the editorial policies of *Modern English Tanka*? Very little, if anything. I have long held these opinions; it is the enunciation of them in an agreed-statement definition that is new. *MET* publishes the entire spectrum of tanka from traditional to avant-garde—always has and always will. No matter what style of tanka you write and/or read, it is welcome in *MET*. We judge tanka by its intrinsic poetic qualities, not by its compliance with any definition or any set of rules or guidelines. We involve ourselves in theoretical poetics only in support of clarifying an ancient poetic tradition for newcomers to it. That is part of our mission of promoting tanka poetry.

— Denis M. Garrison, editor

Posted by Denis M. Garrison on April 12, 2016 in Articles & Essays, Short Verse, Tanka
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