

Dreaming Room

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

— *Denis M. Garrison*

Please indulge me while I wander down a few tangential paths to get to my premise. I need to make a point about haiku in order to extend it to tanka; I need to frame that point with an initial comment about spirituality. After a lifetime of study and practice and over twenty years of priestly service, I have only just begun to understand the fundamentals of my own spiritual tradition. That being the case, I will not attempt to analyze the place of Japanese spiritual traditions in haiku and tanka. Others, far better qualified than I, have done so in lengthy tomes. I can, however, say this much with confidence: haiku exhibits the eremitic asceticism of all monastic traditions.

Anyone who thinks monasticism rejects beauty is badly misinformed. There is a particular aesthetic in the eremitic value system which produces art of exquisite beauty and soul-moving potency. That aesthetic values spartan self-denial, self-effacement, the adamant exercise of restraint, and an austere elegance that is made eloquent by its understatement. It achieves an other-worldly sensibility through rigorous immersion in unvarnished reality. Haiku is the ultimate poetic form for the expression of universal truths in accord with a monastic aesthetic. This same aesthetic has a place in tanka.

Tanka, despite its organic connection to haiku, is very different in significant ways. A more worldly sense of beauty is appreciated in tanka (although not exclusively so), as is the subjective treatment of the matter. At one end of a spectrum of opinion, some hold that tanka is intrinsically biographical. At least, one can say that it cannot reasonably be argued that tanka is as objective as haiku. A broader palette of poetic techniques is permitted to the tanka poet. Of course, tanka is nearly twice as long as haiku. Whatever their ancient common heritage, tanka and haiku are now substantially different forms of poetry.

It has, however, often been remarked that many poets writing tanka in English came to it via an earlier immersion in haiku. Some say (and I agree) that tanka written by haiku poets is distinguishable from that written by poets without training in haiku. What is it that transfers from haiku writing to tanka writing that makes a notable difference? That is, of course, a question which is answered disparately by poets and critics who are dispersed along a broad spectrum of opinion. I stipulate that there are a number of skills which are so transferable.

One haiku technique, I believe, has profound implications when applied to the composition of tanka. It is, however, difficult to enunciate by its very nature. I refer to haiku's exploitation of that which remains unsaid. It is a primary characteristic of haiku and, I propose, also of tanka.

The extreme brevity of haiku forces the poet to be equally extreme in economy of words. Often seen as a vexing limit, this brevity/economy actually is a positive value. In order to be able to say anything about the object of the poem, the subject (the poet or persona) must be invisible or nearly so. One recalls the famous dictum that a finger pointing at the moon must not be ringed—the ring would be a distraction. But far more than economy informs the terseness of haiku. Every specific given reduces the universality of the poem; every value-laden word limits the reader's range of interpretation and, thereby, the reader's opportunity for insight and inspiration. It is a commonplace to say that the haiku reader "co-creates the haiku" by adding from his/her [hereinafter, "his"] own experiential context to the haiku and, thereby, completing it.

A perennial question about tanka is: "What is tanka?" This is not a stupid question; rather, it indicates that the inquirer can see the many similarities of tanka to a five-line poem in free verse. What then distinguishes them? A frequent answer is: "The tanka spirit." But what is that? My own answer to this question often takes the form of hyperbole, so as to make a proposition that is counter-intuitive seem, at least, worth consideration. I like to say that "tanka is both indefinable and unmistakable." Of course, both are fundamentally untrue, but paradoxically they point towards the truth.

The "tanka spirit," with its ancient provenance in Japanese culture, and in Chinese culture before that, will not submit to simple definitions. Even though so many of us (myself included) read traditional Japanese tanka only in translation, still it is an absolute necessity to read it regularly and thoughtfully. Only by such study, only by listening attentively, will we learn to hear the tanka spirit speak. There comes a point where definition becomes irrelevant; a point where you recognize the true tones of tanka like you recognize your lover's voice. So, the first answer is always: "Read, read, and read more!"

That being said, we return to the craft of the poet. How does one write tanka, once one recognizes the essence of tanka? Amongst many correct answers to this question, the one I wish to clarify in this case is: “Leave the reader dreaming room.”

By “dreaming room,” I mean some empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context. To the degree that any poet makes a poem so specific that the poet’s intent is forced upon the reader (i.e., the reader is led to the poet’s pre-conceived notions and conclusions), the reader is limited by the degree of congruence between his and the poet’s life experiences and values. Such a poem means one thing and only that. Readers feel compelled to “get the poem,” to correctly “understand” it. Given the current (and longstanding) fad of obscurantism in English poetry, “getting the poem” is a heavy burden, indeed, for the reader and hardly a pleasant one.

Everyone “gets” a good poem. Obscurantism is cover for incompetence, pomposity, a paucity of insight, and a host of other poetic shortcomings. Obscurantism is a classic technique for the creation of an elite on the basis of a faux meritocracy.

Tanka are notable for their accessibility. Why? Because most good tanka have “dreaming room.” They have been composed with the technique of understatement, of suggestiveness, of open-endedness. Words and details which limit the universality of the tanka have been omitted with careful attention to what is not said. What remains is a poem that is a framework upon which readers from widely different contexts can hang their own experiences and values and discover meaning, experience epiphany. What tanka poet and translator, Amelia Fielden, has called “a certain haziness” in tanka translates into clarity for individual readers. Hence, ambiguity is a positive value for tanka.

Tanka has a special dynamic, a cognitive tension, which is called a turn, that multiplies meaning. Part of the attraction and value of tanka is its special quality of dealing with the ineffable. It is this quality of tanka which puts tanka in the category of high art. This is the quality that was being sought in the pursuit of the “objective correlative” in imagism. Tanka specializes in existential paradox, that is, it does what cannot be done; it says what cannot be said. The secret at the heart of it is knowing what to leave out (like the beginning and end of the story), so that the reader can complete the poem so that it speaks eloquently and directly to him.

There is another lens through which to look at this same technique: the concept of multivalency. “Valence” is used in biology to refer to the forces of reaction and interaction and is used in chemistry to refer to the properties of atoms by which they have the power of combination. This informs the use of the adjective, “ambivalent,” which refers to confusion and uncertainty. So, we use the term “multivalency” to refer to the property of words to react to one another, interact with one another, to be fungible and suggestive. A multivalent tanka is one with dreaming room. It is a poem which may be read in many different ways, all of them correct. It is this freedom for the reader that we refer to as making the reader a co-creator of the poem. The reader’s experiential context determines the true meaning of the poem, for that reader.

If, in your indulgence, you have read this far, please indulge me further and return to the poem at the head of this article. Let us do an exercise. 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. *ad infinitum*.

I certainly am not suggesting that a tanka, to be tanka, must be capable of a full range of alternate readings. I am suggesting that a tanka gains potency through multivalency; that ambiguity is a positive value; that readers need room to dream their own dreams.

— Denis M. Garrison, editor
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