



Thoughts on Tanka Prose

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First of all, let me say that I am a firm believer in the discipline of form; at the same time, however, I am not devoted to the perpetuation of any particular established forms. Thus, while I try to adhere to certain regularities in tanka prose—the five-line tanka written mostly in the form 5/7/5/7/7, but always in the form S/L/S/L/L, in which the middle line seeks, to the extent it can do it smoothly, to pivot between the first and last two lines—I am reluctant to submit to rules regarding appropriate subject-matter, for instance, or rules against ordinary poetic devices like musicality, enjambment, or naturally occurring rhyme or slant-rhyme. I started out thinking of the tanka part of tanka prose as more a genre of five-line lyric poem. For me, this meant that it had to contain elements of music; it had to be a little song of sorts. This is not meant to criticize anyone else's tanka, but to push back against often dogmatic conceptions about the tanka form. Dogma about tanka is always a little ironic because the stricter rules usually involve an extrapolation from ancient rules of tanka in Japanese, another language with its own music.

On the other side, the prose passage must equally seek to be, if not poetic, at least arresting. It must compete with the verse in its style, aiming to be inventive and expressive in its own right. In other words, the prose must also contain material and be written in a style that is itself poetic (an aspiration I would be the first to admit is mostly honored in the breach). The motive underlying all this has been a desire to bridge the distance between tanka prose, on the one hand, and the tendencies of poetry in English, on the other. My models in this regard have included modern and contemporary American and British verse. Among older poets, I have in mind the earlier work of Eliot, Pound, Berryman, Stevens, Roethke, Bunting, and Seamus Heaney, to name just a few off the top of my head. I am enamored of a verse that is open, “projective” (in Charles Olson's sense), and that reaches for something beyond the merely narrative forms that dominate contemporary MFA poetry. Ideas like these have led me to want to collapse most of the formal architecture of tanka prose and to search for a subtler relation between the prose and the verse. In pursuit of these goals I am

looking (still looking!) for a way to write tanka prose so that the whole, rather than being constituted by the bang-bang of the tanka off the prose, is melded into a single poetic form.

The line in modern poetry, as for example in the work of Charles Olson, is “adjustable,” in that its length varies not by adherence to any regular number of feet or beats, but according to the strength of the poet’s breath, the force and momentum of the ideas themselves, and how interesting they look on the page. Thus, between the two elements of tanka prose, the prose passage and the verse, any number of relations can exist. The prose can establish a field and then the verse can ricochet off any or all aspects of that field; or, it might even seek more subtly to extend or refine what had been said there. And, either one can lead the way— the tanka prose can begin with a prose passage or with a five-line lyric poem (or any combination of the two in any rhythm or sequence).

Questions about the difference between prose and poetry arise in this connection, and cannot be avoided. This is a question that has already generated an extended discussion in relation to that other genre-hybrid, the prose-poem. I have had tanka prose rejected, for example, because an editor complained that the tanka seemed to just carry on what was being said in the prose. My reaction is— so what? It is not the conceptual content that distinguishes the poetry from the prose, is it? Traditionally, we may imagine some sharper contrast between the prose and the poetry, calling again upon medieval Japanese examples, but I believe modern poetry in English provides many other more fruitful solutions to this problem.

The line in English-language poetry is a flexible instrument— think of the differences between Whitman and Dickinson, among older poets, or C.K. Williams and Rae Armantrout more recently. The long line and the short line are, on the surface at least, something suggestive of the possibilities within tanka prose. And compositions mixing prose and verse are, indeed, part of modern poetry— think of William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* or the work of Robert Duncan (not to mention Dante and Shakespeare).

My interest has been to draw tanka prose (my own, of course, no one else’s) away from too close an adherence to the Japanese and traditional frames of reference and toward modern poetry in English, to bridge between the two “genres.” There is a kind of insularity among some writers and publishers of tanka prose as if they meant to mummify the form. But poetry either grows and changes or, like the sonnet or the villanelle, becomes more or less a curiosity. Even a little experimentation with tanka prose can open it up to a wider range of interesting approaches. Tanka prose can escape from the Zen garden and the tea ceremony and come to terms with subjects of wider significance in contemporary culture.

The mechanics of what I have myself been trying to do in this sense was to make the prose sections of my tanka prose at once shorter (a brief sentence or two rather than

the short essay that is more common) and more poetic in themselves, more figurative and evocative. In addition I have aimed to create tanka which were less disciplined by traditional “rules” of tanka and which aimed for more lyricity. At the same time, I have tried to enhance the evocative power of the poems by dividing up the tanka into one, two, and three line segments between the shorter prose passages. Often my prose elements have been intended to be more like Whitmanesque poetic lines than small paragraphs.

The elements of the tanka when they are separated often reach, then, both forward and backward to pick up color and implication from the different prose sections. The shorter prose sections become less mere backdrop for the verse and more like poetic lines in their own right. The juxtaposing of elements in this way creates at once a more complicated poem (as the seemingly casual and undirected alignment of images in a painting by Cy Twombly or de Kooning reflect upon and enhance each other). I am surprised over and over by how much more meaning is achieved by these simple alterations in form and mood or tone.

In conclusion, let me leave you with a recent example of what I am talking about.

Stereotypicals

CARMODY: But, doesn't it have to make sense?
BLIGHT: It makes sense to me!

At first, the sunlight could hardly reach us through the miles of interlaced and leafless forest branches.

where the river bends
outside currents abrade the bank

But later, we could separate willow withes from maple boughs and thin oaken twigs deeply in the woods.

there the flood comes through

Imagine, then, a stickle world turned to browns— darkest in the forest shadows, palest on the faded fence.

while slower inside vectors
build and push the river out