

The Segue in Tanka Prose

by Jeffrey Woodward

Introduction

Tanka prose is one type of prosimetrum, a literary composition that incorporates the two modes of writing, prose and verse. It is distinguished from other prosimetra by its selection of tanka as that verse-form which it favors. A chief consideration for tanka prose, as with all prosimetra, lies in a question of technique. How, specifically, does the writer secure a good transition from one mode of writing to the next, from prose to tanka or vice versa?

No formula exists. To propound rules is to live in the expectation that those rules will be broken. An examination of the literature, however, does allow us to identify some common methods that writers of tanka prose employ in the segue. I use the term segue to underscore the fact that transitions in tanka prose lean toward compositional harmony, not dissonance. This trait runs counter to the character of a closely-related discipline, haibun, where the borders between prose and verse are frequently disjunctive and oblique.

Two common methods of segue are *repetition* and *complement*. The prose, therefore, *repeats* or *completes* in some fashion what is offered by the tanka and vice versa. I will discuss below some broad types of repetition and complement while providing examples of the same, using extracts from my book, *Another Garden: Tanka Writings*. I can speak with some authority of my own intent and do not wish, in the cold flaying of poetry that this examination will require, to misinterpret the objectives of others.

Repetition of a Key Word or Phrase

A simple and common technique involves repetition of a key word or phrase. In "Neighbors," a short composition that compared the stubborn human spirit to a barren landscape, I achieved unity between the two modes by introducing in the closing tanka that word and image most prominent in the preceding prose: "stone."

In "Needles by Night," a work that describes a trip through the Mojave Desert, I repeated a phrase:

coming into Needles Gateway to California
coming into Needles on the sly and under cover of darkness drunk still on the
vacancy of that vivid glare some hours earlier tracked through
coming into Needles by way of the main street 10:30 p.m. a digital bank clock
remarks for the record 112 Fahrenheit it reports soberly

coming into Needles
only to pass through
and quickly
into the wide desert
of the night again

Prose and tanka are closely joined here by anaphora, the repetition of a phrase at the beginning of each paragraph and tanka. Iteration of a single word may serve as emphasis or otherwise affect meaning while the insistent and recurring phrase influences rhythm also.

Repetition need not be limited, however, to a single word or phrase. Consider this extract from "The Silence That Inhabits Houses," a much longer work. The bracketed ellipses mark where I've omitted text:

High summer on the Florida coast, shut indoors well-before noon to evade the burning sun, seated alone at the table with Pierre Schneider's exuberant monograph on Matisse, I renew my reading late in the master's career [. . .]

I turn the page, then, to discover *Le silence habité des maisons*. How the yellow of that day in 1947 on the French Riviera dominates the window at the right of the painting. The coastal foliage and far sky [. . .] lavishly spend green and blue on the pair of readers of the large book at rest on a table near a vase—readers without faces, a book without type, [. . .] bare outlines in a yellow borrowed from the window [. . .]

The very anonymity of the readers is comforting; the book that offers nothing legible, inexplicably so. I, too, sit in a room of shifting shadow, well away from an incandescent window that opens onto a day uncannily like that one in 1947, in an interior that closely resembles that of the French painter in his villa.

yellow afternoon
flares at the window—and fronds
of royal palm, too . . .
barely does that sun blush on
the book or reader shut within

"Yellow," "window," "book" and "reader," terms that color the body of the prose, all reappear in the final tanka. Such repetition does not contribute to rhythm, as in the prior example, but the chosen terms are like the significant characters in a stage-play, called before the curtain, at play's end, for a final bow.

Repetition of Sound

The repeated figure of a vowel, consonant or vowel and consonant in combination predates the history of poetry. Rhyme, consonance, assonance, alliteration—all have their place in poetry and, not so alarmingly, in tanka prose. In "Photograph at 19," I attempted to convey the political and cultural climate of the 1960s, with its many contradictions, as experienced by a student with radical leftist political sympathies.

in the days before the truth found itself in exile in the days before *Pravda* and Stalin
collected farmers for Siberia or before peasants harvested famine before a pick-axe found
Coyoacán or an Enola Gay fly-boy a bomber jacket

just back by way
of Hoboken & Hackensack
back from a brief stay

in that drafty warren
in the East Village

I look very bookish
in my bookish glasses
squinting myopically
into somebody's camera
while waiting for spring

Tying prose and tanka tightly together in this instance are the many syllables that terminate in /k/ or /ks/, an example of consonance: "exile," "pick-axe," "jacket," "back," "Hoboken," "Hackensack" and "bookish." The flat assonance of /æ/ in "-axe," "jack-," "back," "Hack-" and "-sack" coincides with this chain of consonants and further serves to render the segue seamless.

The repeated elements in the following extract from "The Trial of Dorothy Talbye, 1638," a composition about an accused madwoman who refuses to enter a plea to the charge of infanticide, show greater subtlety than my earlier examples; their iteration profoundly shapes rhythm and meaning, insofar as they touch upon the chief theme of the text.

Governor Winthrop, to loosen your tongue, threatens to place you under *peine forte et dure*. You mumble at last, *Guilty*, with your world hanging by that thread, but repent you will not.

why deplore the voice
that guides your every step
and whose purpose is
to rain commands upon you?
relent God will not

To the Commons, again, where your fellow pilgrims and your gallows wait. You will not walk, Dorothy, and so you are dragged. You will not stand and so you are lifted and supported.

Will you repent then, good woman?
Nay, nay, it shall not be so.

The "repent you will not" of the prose finds its perfect parallel in the "relent God will not" of the tanka, a kind of concealed and inverted rhyme, for Dorothy Talbye throughout her trial has maintained that her aberrant behavior is directed by God and is not willful. In addition to the negative will ("will not") of Dorothy and God already cited, the narrator adds "you will not walk" and "you will not stand," thereby highlighting the condemned's stubborn resistance before her judges.

Complement: Prose and Tanka as One Sentence

In "Souvenir," I arranged the opening tanka and the prose that follows it in such a way as to allow the reader to read the whole as one complete sentence. The prose, in other words, complements or completes that statement initiated by the verse:

light falls from her hair
onto a gold necklace
and lapis lazuli
a carafe's close shadow
of cerulean hue

reminding me in autumn in this popular pub of you in high summer here at my side your
eastern city far behind

Modern tanka prose doesn't require classical precedent for each of its methods but, for readers who may express reservations about this technique, a reading of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* or *The Tale of Genji* will alleviate their doubts as to its propriety.

Edwin A. Cranston, in the introduction to his translation of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, observed "the ease with which prose and poetry lie together in the same bed" in Heian literature. Cranston presented the tanka in the example immediately below "within an extra set of quotation marks" and without lineation "as if they were prose statements." His observation on this sample from the *Genji* is straightforward and suits our purposes:

Here the statement following the poem can be understood . . . as a grammatical extension of the poem and a comment on it. The translation attempts to convey this carry-over: " 'While I have sighed and wondered if the night would ever come when I could truly meet that dream I dreamt, time has passed and gone, and even my eyelids have not met,' for there has been no night when I could sleep."

One last example from *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* may suffice:

Desiring to know the true state of his mood, and to learn what it was that he had heard, she wrote, "If it is true that you feel as you have said,

I wish that you
Would come this very moment:
However strong my love,
How can I go to you and brave
More scandal flung upon my name?"

In this instance, Izumi's tanka completes the sentence that the prose begins.

Complement: One Mode's Completion of the Other's Theme or Action

The two modes of writing, prose and verse, may also complement one another when one mode completes the theme or action initiated by the first. Let me quote the full text of "Morro Bay."

The girlfriend who doubles as her roommate, she says, came home in the early hours, by car, from her mother's place in Topanga Canyon. I sit by a window nearly as narrow as

the slit of my rum-soaked eyes and stare offshore at a keep of wild rock that tilts a towering shadow like a pointer—toward how many flowering islands?—in the California spring. Her satin robe parts innocently as she tosses back her platinum pageboy with bangs and I taste the salt in the air.

a seaworthy trawler
called from night
fishing to port
rolls with a billow
in the morning glare

Somewhere between midnight and dawn, I misplaced her name. She does not ask me and I do not tell her mine.

The trawler of the tanka acts as a double or stand-in for the protagonist who similarly has been "called from night" and from his own fishing ventures. There's a bitter irony, too, in the judgment that the vessel is "seaworthy." This type of complement, where the theme or a character from the prose is reflected in the verse, is relatively common and efficient way to balance the two modes.

Something different is at work in "Pimento Walk," the last work I'll examine here. I quote it in full.

her cousin Blue
rattling change in his pocket
starts the jitney up
from a beach lined with palms to
a precipitous hinterland

she remembers
her mother's father now
a Maroon he was
what long hair what fiery eyes
sharpening a machete

the road is narrow
and winding higher yet by
mango and waterfall
the macadam is level
only on the mountain top

somebody's goat
nods warily
somebody's skinny daughter
sets upon her pretty head
a pail of water

Thirty to forty simple houses and one shanty-like general store lie scattered along the ridge. The Caribbean, with its diamond-like faceting, sparkles far below. *Pimenta dioica*—with a rich fragrance that recalled for the colonial British landowner cloves and ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg at once, thus winning the sobriquet *allspice*—blossoms in the wild and in the yards, remnants of what, amid the guinep and jackfruit trees, once stood as a great plantation. Out of the jitney, in the aromatic splendor of her childhood home, she remembers her grandmother's tales of her childhood in this place, of village elders born out of slavery, of a genteel Victorian mistress with airy crinoline and parasol and her gentleman beau, hat in hand, on a luxurious walk under the perfumed canopy.

The prose in "Pimento Walk" completes the action or narrative that the tanka sequence set in motion. Each tanka provides a snapshot of the winding ascent while the paragraph, in concluding the work, depicts the destination, a mountain village, as it is now and as it was as remembered by the ancient grandmother of one of this journey's pilgrims.

Conclusion

To summarize, the segue or smooth transition between prose and tanka is a notable characteristic of contemporary tanka prose. Repetition and complement are techniques commonly in use to achieve this end. The repeated figure can be (a) a key word or phrase or (b) an element of sound (rhyme, consonance, assonance or alliteration). Complement (or completion) occurs where prose and tanka are (a) joined in one sentence or syntactic unit or (b) written in such a way that one mode continues and completes the argument, theme or action initiated by the other mode.

Repetition and complement do not comprise an exhaustive list of the means by which segue is achieved in the interest of unifying prose and verse; they may be the most common methods that the reader will encounter, however, in any survey of our genre. It should be acknowledged, too, that repetition and complement are not unique to tanka prose; each method has a long history as a means to unify the constituent parts of a poem or story. Repetition and complement, nonetheless, are rarely employed in creating a segue to wed prose and verse—rarely, that is, outside of the province of tanka prose. Their exceptional role here, therefore, should not be underestimated.

Cranston, Edwin A. *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969.

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