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Tanka intrigue: The short poem of deep mysteries

Abstract:

This article introduces the term, *Tanka intrigue*, for examples of tanka that accentuate an element of mystery. Tanka intrigue accommodates the Japanese aesthetic of *yūgen*, described below, which is its nearest existing term. Not all tanka possess this quality – perhaps five per cent – but those that do so are notable for their suggestive powers. Tanka with intrigue build on the innate tendencies of what has been a stable form in ways that accord with contemporary poetry informed by postmodernism, and in doing so renew that form. I argue that tanka with intrigue feature at least three of five attributes, and sometimes all five in the same piece (as examples will demonstrate): incompleteness, otherness, indeterminacy, the fragmentary and the absent centre. The discussion of examples concludes with reflections on my own practice and how Tanka intrigue has informed it.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Yūgen, mystery, intrigue, tanka, poetry

Introduction

This article introduces the term, *Tanka intrigue*, for examples of tanka that accentuate an element of mystery. Tanka intrigue accommodates the Japanese aesthetic of *yūgen*, described below, which is its nearest existing term. Not all tanka possess this quality – perhaps five per cent – but those that do so are notable for their suggestive powers. Tanka with intrigue build on the innate tendencies of what has been a stable form in ways that accord with contemporary poetry informed by postmodernism, and in doing so renew that form. I argue that tanka with intrigue feature at least three of five attributes, and sometimes all five in the same piece (as examples will demonstrate): incompleteness, otherness, indeterminacy, the fragmentary and the absent centre. The discussion of examples concludes with reflections on my own practice and how Tanka intrigue has informed it.

The tanka form

The earliest anthology of Japanese poetry is the *Manyōshū: Collection of myriad leaves* (9th century). The *Manyōshū* included poems in what we would now call free verse forms, together with a number of “envoys”, which summarised or restated the themes of the longer poems. They were written in 5/7/5/7/7 *onji*, and usually translated into a poem of five lines in English. The envoy gained popularity and became known as *waka*, or short song – they were often sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument such as the *koto*, so that they have a similar association with the lyric as much Western poetry, once sung to the lyre, does. These poems later became known as tanka, and have endured into the present day. Indirectly, through the practice of *renga* (linked writing) from the 12th to the 17th centuries, the more widely known form of *haiku* subsequently evolved.

Critics and readers now understand that writing tanka, or haiku, is not about counting syllables; that syllables are an approximation to Japanese *onji* (sound units), but not the same (Lucas, 2002, p. 16; Lucas, 2007, pp. 5–6; Reichhold, 2013, pp. 27–29; Welch, 2016). Contemporary tanka in English are likely to range from 18–25 syllables, and many are about 22 syllables. The first translators of Japanese tanka and haiku into English took syllables as the nearest equivalent to Japanese *onji* (which they are). But *onji* include pauses and forms of punctuation. Yet in English we do not count a dash or hyphen as a syllable. The freer form of English-language tanka that has developed nevertheless has some pronounced structural tendencies. They often feature a two-part structure, comprising an observation of nature, followed by a philosophical or emotional reflection on that moment. If emotional, the emotion is evoked with a sense of restraint, rather than overt display. One can use the two-part structure as method, by going out into nature and making an observation, noting it down in two or three lines, then reflecting on the scene and on what has just been experienced in the second part of the tanka. In some cases, the reflection might come first, before the observation. The movement between the two sections is sometimes facilitated by a pivot line – often, but not always, the third line (Bullock, 2008). Not all tanka are written this way, but this fragmentary structure is relevant to many of the examples discussed, and a notable feature of Tanka intrigue. Many contemporary tanka in English retain a short/long/short/long/long patterning of lines, as a way of referencing the

tradition of Japanese poetic rhythm in this form, even though syllable count has become less rigid. In some circles, this can seem like a form of orthodoxy, but, in general, it's not prescriptive, at least in my experience.

Tanka intrigue

As a poet and an editor, the question of how to write effectively preoccupies, even obsesses me. I have observed from my reading of tanka that some of the most powerful examples have what I call *Tanka intrigue*. One dictionary definition of intrigue is: raising “interest” (Collins English Dictionary Online), which is closer to my meaning than the romantic sense of this word that has evolved from it, though some connections between these two meanings will sometimes be relevant to the discussion that follows.

Tanka might be called ‘a lyric with space’ (or simply ‘lyric space’): as within the narrative element, the whole story is not told. There is room for the reader to make their own interpretations of the situation they are faced with in the poem and decide what attracts them; consciously or otherwise. To my mind, it is often tanka which are curiously incomplete, or unresolved, or where the referent is elusive, that are the most attractive. They have intrigue, partly because it is not possible to completely understand them – I am drawn to things I do not understand; they are intrinsically more interesting than things I do understand. This is because they open up questions, which make one active and engaged.

The closest concept in the Japanese nomenclature to what I am calling *Tanka intrigue* is *yūgen*, usually now translated as “mystery” and/or “depth”. In Japanese aesthetics generally, the term has a complex history. It is a compound word – *yū* meaning cloudy impenetrability and *gen* meaning obscurity – but it is not considered something that is beyond human experience (Suzuki, in Tsubaki, 1971, p. 56). The original Chinese concept of *yūgen* meant “to be so mysteriously faint and profound as to be beyond human perception and understanding” (Nose, in Tsubaki, 1971, p. 58). The oldest use of *yūgen* in Japanese is in the Buddhist literary work, *Isshin-kongo-kaitaiketsu*, written by Dengyo Daishi (767–822), which differed little from its Chinese origin and emphasised profundity. In poetry, it came to incorporate ideas of loneliness and melancholy, and incorporated the concept of *yojō*, which describes a hidden, suggested meaning (Tsubaki, 1971, p. 58). Its range of meaning was much expanded by the aesthetics of Noh theatre developed by Zeami Motokiyo in the 15th century, and included the idea of gentle gracefulness (which captivated the popular consciousness at the time), as well as the concept of *sabi*, which describes a kind of sadness or isolation of things in nature. As the concept of *sabi* became more established, *yūgen* lost this connotation, as well as that of gracefulness (Tsubaki, 1971, pp. 61–63). Tendai Buddhism further influenced the concept of *yūgen* where it is said to affirm indeterminacy of meaning (LaFleur, in Park, 2005, p. 10).

In more contemporary commentary on aesthetics, *yūgen* has been described as “profound suggestiveness” (Hoover, 2010), and “mysterious profundity” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). Amongst practitioners and critics of tanka and haiku, Lee Gurga describes *yūgen* as “graceful beauty suffused with ineffable mystery” (Gurga 2003, p. 127). Sometimes

it implies an aesthetic virtue (Kacian, 2006); one that helps the reader connect with the work, emotionally, in an inexplicable way (Barlow & Lucas, 2002, p. 192). Jane Reichhold writes about *yūgen* as a technique, suggesting that it forces readers, “to delve into the everyday sacredness of common things” (Reichhold, 2000). She also quotes a letter from Jeanne Emrich saying that *yūgen* could be achieved by having something appear or disappear suddenly, or by using specific settings such as night, fog or empty streets (Reichhold, 2000).

Terms and techniques of haiku and tanka composition are closely related, and sometimes commentators (myself included) have their own terminology, or talk about similar dynamics with slightly different language. Susumu Takiguchi has warned against allowing the profundity of *yūgen*, which may or may not lurk beneath apparent representations, to become an excuse for vagueness (Takiguchi, 2018). Although not citing the term *yūgen*, William Higginson invokes something like it when he suggests that although haiku poets avoid “wide-open ambiguity” they also take a risk with what might seem vagueness, to great effect (Higginson, 1985, p. 122). The sensibility is no doubt ancient, as Gurga confirms in asserting that *yūgen* is an aesthetic principle borrowed from classical Japanese poetry (Gurga 2003, p. 127), bringing us back to the free verse antecedents of *waka*. Discussing the period of *waka* composition which culminated in the *Kokinshū* anthology (presented to court in 905 C.E.), Makoto Ueda refers to poets who cultivated a “rhetoric of omission”, communicating much more through their poetry than was expressly stated (Ueda, 1996, pp. xii–xiii). It has been claimed that the way juxtaposing images can work in tanka, producing a third implied image, constitutes an example of *yūgen* (McClintock, 2017). The often subtle, glancing connection of tanka’s two-part structure in itself raises interest, but as already suggested, some pieces accentuate this attribute.

Responding to implied connections, we fill out the missing details with memories of our own experiences, an important factor that all readers bring to the page, and well-documented regarding literature generally (Rosenblatt, 1978; Fish, 1980; Slatoff, in Belsen, 1980). In the tradition of tanka, as well as in mainstream poetry, we find a sense of otherness in the works, which beguiles the reader. A kind of relativism in language embraces rather than pushes away the indeterminacy of poetry and its attendant sense of otherness. Postmodern texts may embrace or promote deferred meanings (Perloff, 1989, p. xvi). This includes the development of a sensibility “prepared to occupy itself with the gestures of mystery and defer clarification of the content of mystery” (Perloff, 1999, pp. 28–31), a contemporary outlook surprisingly similar to that of *yūgen*.

Elsewhere in my research, I have explored indeterminacy and the resistance to fixed meanings in the work of contemporary New Zealand poet Michele Leggott, especially in relation to unspecified relationships between elements of a poem (Bullock, 2018). After all, single meanings are not really what we are looking for, since they close the poem down rather than open it up to multiple, productive readings. Invention in literature is impossible without a sense of otherness, which has also been linked to the unconscious (Cixous & Clément, 1986, pp. 84–85). Poetry has been described as using omission and otherness to convey suggestive meanings (Easthope, 1983, pp. 37–38). One can certainly say that otherness suggested by the use of

language is important in invoking reader response, and it is response and engagement that tanka with intrigue achieve.

Tanka with intrigue include incompleteness alongside that indeterminacy. They can be metaphorical, but are more often actual, using omission to highlight a lack or create a sense of mystery. Overwhelmingly the tanka work through suggestion. In avoiding the emotionally demonstrative, they include significant and suggestive detail of emotion. Their suggestiveness is often assisted by use of fragmentary structure, something which postmodern works have been said to celebrate (Barry, 2009, p. 80; Dix, 2011, p. 328) in such famous poems as Eliot's "The Waste Land". In postmodernism, "the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (Jameson, 1991, p. 14). The fragmentary element of tanka seems not so much to displace alienation as to create distance from difficult feelings, in ways that do not deny them but still evoke their sadness or longing. We are sometimes unsure of the connections the fragmentary elements of tanka espouse, or those connections are delayed or disrupted. They make us ask innumerable questions, as well as encouraging us to fill in gaps with memories or imaginings.

Many of the examples discussed below effectively refer to material outside the poems. A feature of poststructuralist thought, more or less converging with postmodernism, is that texts are often dependent on absence, as reflected in Jacques Derrida's idea of the centre being exterior to structure (Derrida, 2001, p. 352). The idea of absence helps define the information that is included, and forces readers to look for possible resonances and connections outside the text. Readers build their own favoured links between ideas. The omission of possible 'centres' of the text of the tanka discussed below suggests that a common trait of literature in our age finds expression in this short form just as readily as in other kinds of literary texts. At the same time it reflects the possibilities of omission understood by *yūgen*, communicating more through poetry than is expressly stated (as suggested above).

As poets, we want to capture the reader's attention, and techniques or concepts such as *yūgen* or Tanka intrigue are an important method for doing so. Discussing examples will illustrate the points I wish to make about intrigue and give some models for best practice. The particular tanka that started me thinking about this mysterious attraction in short-form lyric poetry was the following piece by New Zealand poet Patricia Prime, published in the Australian tanka journal *Eucalypt*:

you have come back –
but your experiences
are no good here,
listen: it isn't your adventures
that now hold my attention
Patricia Prime (2010a, p. 21)

The poem enjoins the other to listen, because that person is not hearing what really interests the speaker. It is not necessary to know what adventures the one addressed has returned from,

that is moot point, instead the other needs to re-adapt to this place and to the person whose company they now share. At the same time, what is left out of the poem raises our interest, simply because we want to know more. Or, to put it another way, we might find our own answers to the riddle set up by the phrase “it isn’t” with a statement beginning “it is”, at an imaginary sixth line. This tanka sports incompleteness, indeterminacy and otherness. There is also a sense in which the centre of the poem is absent from it; implied but not declared.

After encountering Prime’s tanka, I looked for others with similar qualities and found several in the same issue of *Eucalypt*:

jabiru’s beak
deep in mangrove mud
probing ...
almost scot-free till that
last awkward question
Rodney Williams (2010, p. 39)

The word “probing” is an excellent pivot, anticipating what is to come, as well as summing up the jabiru’s action. We do not know what that awkward question is, or the context. We do notice the similarity between how the speaker feels and the formidable aspect of the bird’s beak, and that is enough to make arresting poetry. Again, there is a sense of incompleteness about the tanka, and of the centre of the topic being absent but implied. The poem is also quite fragmentary, featuring a sharp contrast between its two sections. Use of the word “that” sets up a sense of otherness associated with the one who has asked the awkward question, a question which seems to drift away into a less fraught lyric space, perhaps suggesting that, even now, the voice of the poem wants to get away “scot-free”.

sometimes
the old thoughts return
... those nights
when the moon
cannot be seen
Linda Galloway (2010, p. 22)

What old thoughts are they? Loneliness? Perhaps, but we do not know for sure. It could be a sense of failure, of not having lived life to the full; a regret over family, or a lingering childhood insecurity. We can relate to this poem entirely from our own experience because the poet has not put a huge stamp on it; this fact, this incompleteness, makes the poem more inviting than if the exposition were demonstrative, and as the emotional “sometimes” helps create this lyrical feeling of longing.

beyond the limits
of myself, there is you,
a wind-wave

of fading light
on the French doors

Patricia Prime (2010b, p. 43)

Here, we do not know what limits the voice is referring to, or the identity of the “you” addressed. As with the first example, above, use of the second person pronoun helps generate intrigue. Names are not used, and even if they were we would not necessarily be any closer to the truth of the character in such a short poem; we are reminded that the very brevity of tanka can assist one in writing an intriguing poem. The “you” in question is also *other*, perhaps beyond the limit of our comprehension. The “you” addressed is also fading, so that the door can seem more real. Amidst this incompleteness and indeterminacy – the word “you” could even refer to the wind-wave that is next described, so that the middle line is a flexible pivot – we tease out possibilities, and the poem enthralls. It is quite fragmentary, with, arguably, three main images: of “myself”; of “you”; and of the wind-wave of light.

the caterpillar
not yet
cocooned
also crawls
toward flight

Marilyn Hazelton (2010, p. 8)

Isolation of the word “cocooned” gives it special emphasis, and that word’s own repetition of the (hard) *cee* sound seems to make it echo itself. Use of the word “also” on the fourth line bespeaks an incompleteness and absent centre to the poem: we can only guess at what it means. Perhaps it connects the caterpillar’s world with the human world; it is the same world, after all, and yet the caterpillar is *other* to us. The writer, or someone else, is preparing to fly, metaphorically; to be free in some way. Perhaps this state is tentative, hesitant. The situation in the poem is not enunciated, or bold, much like the state of mind to which it so subtly alludes. How possible it is then to have a personal reading of the poem, especially for any reader in a similar state to the caterpillar, emerging into a new life stage, or with memories of such a time. This tanka draws us in, even as the caterpillar moves towards its next incarnation; it has definitely raised interest and created intrigue.

Though I had made discovery of several tanka with intrigue in the same issue of *Eucalypt*, this did not mean that the phenomenon or approach was universal, and I searched much more widely in journals and anthologies before finding others. This included going back to the genius of Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), which greets us with insights into the mysteries of other people’s lives:

Once, far over the breakers
I caught a glimpse
Of a white bird
And fell in love

With this dream which obsesses me
Yosano Akiko (1976, p. 14)

The word “this” is so easily overused in poetry, and in writing in general; it can cover a multitude of less than subtle omissions. In Akiko’s hands, having engaged the reader with concrete images of breakers and a white bird and then mentioned falling in love, the use of “this” – though necessarily incomplete – does not confuse. Nor is it a cheap shortcut; it is a hint that we respond to with the feeling that we know something of which she speaks. But is the dream of the other, or did the other get in the way of the dream? Is she remembering a vocation? The reader answers such questions from their own experience evoked by this lyrical short song.

The following tanka is mysterious at every level – *what is it about?* we might ask:

when dawn
erases our
memories ...
and dark clouds
stand over bridges
Robert D. Wilson (2011)

The ellipsis at the end of the third line helps suggest loss of memory. That loss could be stimulated and memory re-ignited by the details which end the poem (and with whatever else the reader associates with them). The cupboard of semiotic possibilities might seem bare at times, but it is never empty, even if there is also a sense that the poem drifts away again into loss. The fragmentary link between the two sections of this piece compounds its indeterminacy. The conditional “when” means that the poem begins in *medias res* and never resolves: its centre is decidedly absent.

Disruption in the order of presentation, and the ways in which external and internal reflections resonate with each other, is sometimes key to achieving an effect in tanka:

sometimes
before falling in love
with my wife
again and again
the cries of swifts
Alan Summers (2012, p. 13)

The romantic and the everyday are firmly linked in this poem. The breaking off at line three, or line four, creates a lovely fragment which speaks to the whole, through contrast. It sounds like the relationship is wonderful, but so too are the swifts, and the voice of the poem notices both, almost equally. Line four acts as a pivot and belongs as much with the lines before as those after it. But what, exactly, is the connection? Something that cannot be explained, but

only alluded to by analogy? It could even be that, in the transition, the speaker involved in a conversation is suddenly distracted by an unexpected sight.

The following tanka retains a similar sense of a story whose background we might try to guess:

summer
on the cusp of autumn
the man
who always walks alone
walking a dog

Martin Lucas (2012, p. 158)

We know something about this man by the change of circumstances. He “always” walks alone, and use of that word helps create contrast, as well as being faintly ironic: that nothing stays the same, nothing is “always”. The poem perhaps suggests he is single. But now he has a dog. Does this mean that other things can change too, and that a relationship, or the renewal of one, is possible? Or has he given up hope of that and looks instead to a faithful canine for company? Does the man actually have a partner who is unable to walk with him because of illness or infirmity? Perhaps he is perfectly content as he is and has simply chosen a new way of walking or is looking after a friend’s dog. The repetition of “walks” and “walking”, so similar but with slight differences, also begs the questions whether the situation is much changed. To me, it is a sparkling example of Tanka intrigue, and, as a reader, I can ponder its parameters endlessly. The possibilities stem from the incompleteness of what we know about this individual and how we see them.

I will end this first section into the exploration of tanka as we began, with work by Patricia Prime:

plans laid out
already it feels like another
phase of life
before the phone rings
and everything changes

Patricia Prime (2014, p. 7)

The poem is tantalising: a mini cliff-hanger. The news that has wrought this effect is unknown to us, but the tanka offers an arresting impression of an important process through the ideas about plans and phases of life. It does not ultimately matter what the new event is, the need to adjust to change is what the poet, again, stresses. The situation was changing anyway, and now another disruptive change has occurred. The poem is incomplete, indeterminate. Line four is a gentle pivot between closely related sections; the intrigue is assisted by the centre being absent. The reader fills in the gaps with a memory of their own life-changing episode, perhaps also connected to a phone call.

*

I first presented these ideas about Tanka intrigue at a workshop of the same name as part of a retreat held by the Canberra-based Limestone Tanka Poets, convened by Kathy Kituai, at the Blackburn Homestead in 2014. This included visitors from further afield, such as well-known and highly regarded Australian tanka poet David Terelinck. He spoke with me about Tanka intrigue in relation to a review I had written of his first tanka collection, *Casting Shadows* (Cedar Press, 2011). Though in general praising the collection, I had commented that the declaration of emotion was more overt than it needed to be in some of the tanka, and that they might instead allow the situations depicted and the introduction of more specific examples of emotions do the work (Bullock, 2012). He agreed, and had taken these comments to heart, endeavouring, he said, to write with greater restraint. After the retreat, I read his second collection, *Slow Growing Ivy* (Cedar Press, 2014), which included many tanka delicate in their evocation of emotion and were compelling examples of Tanka intrigue.

upon the cusp of
this almond-scented dawn
there still exists
within your eyes
some dark connection

David Terelinck (2014, p. 14)

Connection to what? Is this a person dying, vague, dissociated? Or is the connection with the speaker, and one that is treasured or hoped for? No one can answer these questions definitively. The poem creates the questions through the alluring but incomplete description of what can be seen in the other's eyes – we do not know what the dark connection pertains to, but we want to plumb the secrets of this dark lyric.

fragment moon,
scent of iris
and sage bush ...
will this be the night
you refuse to go?

David Terelinck (2014, p. 24)

This poem's markedly fragmented nature is further emphasised by the description of the moon. On balance, we might say that death is the topic here. But this interpretation is by no means certain, and not being sure means that we are likely to make others. Perhaps it is simply about not going to bed. Or not doing what is expected. This intrigue is intoxicating, and again works by incompleteness. The "you" is other and ultimately unknowable.

This tanka displays subtle links between its two sections and affirms uncertainty:

chalk horses,

blue-stoned sacred circles –
sometimes
not knowing why
is the greater joy

David Terelinck (2014, p. 36)

The poem boldly asserts the value of mystery. We do not understand the past. Perhaps mystery in life is attractive. In any case, the details of the moment, and the sibilance that accompanies them drift into the past. The piece includes the attributes of incompleteness, indeterminacy, the fragmentary and the absent centre. It is deeply mysterious, akin to Robert Wilson's "when dawn".

In the next poem, use of the word "that" is familiar as an unassigned referent:

sudden crack
as a bunya pine cone
splits open –
no way to prepare
for that kind of news

David Terelinck (2014, p. 38)

The onomatopoeic "crack" is an effective beginning, and beautifully analogous. The use of the indeterminate preposition, "that", for something which would probably already have been mentioned in a longer work, creates the mystery. The tanka reflects the way we speak at such moments of realisation, with tremendous economy and directness, the third, pivot line linking the juxtaposed sections. The situation is obvious enough, but we fill in the details. As already suggested, tanka tend to avoid unnecessary exposition, part of the implicit challenge of working in such a constrained form, where things like emotional restraint are closely allied to this need. Though the two-part structure, patterning of lines and visual poetics found in recurrent features like ellipses and dashes are common, the challenge is to ensure the poem does not become too much of a formula. It is difficult to write well within these limitations, and consistently. Terelinck's collection is full of beautifully elusive moments and reflections, in some way captured in five lines.

last glow
of summer's succulence –
it's not just the fruit
that ripens too fast
and falls ...

David Terelinck (2014, p. 44)

It is not just the fruit ... but what else is being referred to here? Again, the poet has us asking questions through the work's incompleteness and indeterminacy. The two fragments of the poem produce a sharp contrast, yet it shines with a sense of accord; the topic could be almost

anything, its centre seems absent. A sense of the erotic pervades the poem with that juicy sibilance throughout, but juxtaposed with an allusion to ageing. Something remains, a last glow, perhaps love, as well as desire.

the steady seep
of chlorophyll from leaves –
could it be
I brought this all
on myself

David Terelinck (2014, p. 50)

This piece begs the questions what has the voice of the poem brought on himself? The “steady seep” of the tea suggests a parallel, slow realisation. Are there also tears here? How strong is the emotion accompanying this insight? The poem refers to material outside its own scope – the absent centre – frustratingly so, perhaps, with the word “all” seeming to add little, yet feeling right for the tanka’s voice. The poem is inevitably incomplete and indeterminate, yet the fragments suggest much more.

I will conclude this section of the article with a recent tanka which, for me, takes Tanka intrigue to a new level of possibility:

if you ever
come to see me
poppies in bloom
near the wild sea
where we first kissed

Rajendeep Garg (2020, p. 14)

This tanka takes the unresolved clause to new heights. It builds on a concept like *yūgen* and its allusion to something potentially so faint as to be beyond human perception and understanding that is noted above. The conditional “if” seeks a corresponding “then” which never appears. It sees the poem begin in *medias res* and never reach resolution. The disruption of this cause-and-effect relationship is an extreme form of absence, and it opens up new possibilities for tanka which represent states of emotion and trains of thought. The poem is incomplete and indeterminate, since we have so little context, yet its lyricism still delights. It is fragmentary, but is the centre absent? We know roughly which emotions are implied. Suggestion is taken further than is common by the dominance of that cliffhanging “if”. As with Terelinck’s “chalk horses” and Robert Wilson’s “when dawn”, the poem is mysterious at every level and utilises many attributes of Tanka intrigue. That conditional “if” takes the lack of resolution even further than a poem like Wilson’s “when dawn”, and leaves the reader hanging to an even greater extent. Yet, this sudden caesura is intriguing in the extreme.

Conclusion: How Tanka intrigue has informed my own practice

I have been publishing tanka regularly since the year 2000, and analysing these examples of Tanka intrigue have helped re-invigorate my writing in this form and pursue new directions with it. I offer five recent examples of my own engagement with Tanka intrigue. The first hides the context in which its narrative, written from memory, was played out:

he has me hold
the scissors which fall apart
each time I touch them
before he cuts
stem into flower

If I reveal that the poem narrates a childhood memory of assisting a magician at a summer show, and the embarrassment that accompanied the business with trick scissors (which would not work when I used them but worked perfectly for the performer) does the poem benefit? I think not. It is all the better for the sense of uncertainty it leaves the reader; the phrase “each time”, for example, can then be more ongoing. But has the true context been divined already? Perhaps, and if so, neither an explanation nor more overt use of exposition or description of the emotion of embarrassment would be beneficial. It is my hope, as a poet, that the incompleteness of the poem gives the reader the pleasure of interpretation.

Likewise, the second tanka provides no context for the acceptance perceived as important:

red roses
almost black now
fade into the shadows
that surround them –
for a moment, I accept
Owen Bullock (2021, p. 39)

This absence emphasises the idea that acceptance, *per se*, is a strength. Yet, one can still wonder whether it is, specifically, the fading or the shadows that the voice is trying to accept. It is a more fragmentary tanka than the first, its centre resolutely absent. The way in which it manipulates incompleteness has, by this stage in my process, become internalised and intuitive, rather than calculated or part of an editorial strategy that prunes back to essentials. The writing of the poem was accompanied by an understanding that the instance of acceptance, though important, was less significant than having reached a place of acceptance, generally.

The next piece instinctively withholds the subject of the poem, perhaps because, when we make an observation in a tanka we are operating from a place of immediacy: we already know and recognise what we are seeing, and there may not be space to include all the information we think we might need. Having written it, we realise that enough is present to convey a scene, perhaps even a representative one, though based on instances.

they inhabit
the streets, this city
like no one else
sitting rooms outside
for all to see

Hopefully, the absent centre of this poem helps create a sense of irony, or accord, in the context of the openness of the mode of living described. That mode is celebrated here, especially through line three. I have often felt that homeless people inhabit the city more fully than anyone else, and although the idea would be all too easy to romanticise, it is perhaps a legitimate one nevertheless.

The fourth tanka responds directly to Rajandeep Garg's tanka (above) and, similarly, uses many of the tropes of Tanka intrigue.

if you ever
ask me who I am
what I came for
what kind of art
I like best

Garg's particular open-endedness suggested new possibilities to me as a practitioner. My poem even begins with the same line. I saw nothing wrong with stealing it, especially since it is common practice in haiku composition to write a number of pieces with the same first line (a technique I have explored in strings of haiku in the past), and given historically, we know that some haiku masters (such as Senryu) set competitions with a specific first line prompt. What I like about the openendedness of this approach, with its incomplete conditional, is that it creates an artwork which is merely a hint, and that seems to be followed by a huge lyric space. The "then" that might follow this "if" is that one might be known and seen by the other.

The centre of the fifth tanka is again resolutely absent, begging the question: who is the voice of the poem thinking of calling, and why?

the same
broken branches
in the park ...
I think again
of calling

Owen Bullock (2020, p. 33)

The poem's incompleteness hopefully attracts intrigue, founded on two strongly juxtaposed sections. This is very much a lockdown poem, written when I was thinking of ringing my

brother in the UK to see how he was faring, an act that is often fraught with hesitancy since we do not often communicate in this way; a hint of otherness pervades it.

The effect of Tanka intrigue on my process has been less about pruning back to the core of the poem to generate intrigue – though that does sometimes happen in the editing phase – than helping me to develop a greater awareness of the most important details at the generative stage; reinforcing the knowledge that not every aspect of context needs to be delivered within the poem for it to succeed. In this sense, the work can surprise and intrigue me with how little is needed to be able to explore beyond the imagery and the personal or philosophical responses that an event commands. Practising Tanka intrigue has convinced me that it is a model which helps tanka fulfil its subtle potential to evoke deep mysteries even more powerfully. The way in which Tanka intrigue accommodates both *yūgen* and postmodern Western aesthetics also suggests that it may represent an updating of tanka itself into a more postmodern form – a realisation that might be explored in further research.

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