

Tanka in French: Translated, Written and Published: 1871-2013 – An Overview

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This article, in six sections, deals with a few literary personalities who, since 1871, translated, wrote or published tanka in French. For clarity, the historical overview will approximate chronology. Writers and poets will be presented in terms of their noteworthy accomplishments in the realm of Japanese-inspired poetry, and I will on occasion provide my own impressions of their work. Also cited are tanka I find especially resonant. I will conclude with an eye to the future.

1. Waka in translation: 1871-1928

I could not begin this article without mentioning the Japanese origins of contemporary tanka and its early days in France. As recommended by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), after 1898 the Japanese moved away from the eighth-century terms “*ūta*” and “*waka*” and instead began to say “*tanka*.” This new word caught on more slowly in the French-speaking world. For the record, in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France, there were three important forerunners of tanka. These literary personalities introduced the Japanese form through translations and adaptations.

1.1 Léon de Rosny (Lille, France, 1837-1914) was the first to publish a book of poems gathered from ancient Japanese writings. His 1871 *Si-ka-zen-yō – Anthologie japonaise, poésies anciennes et modernes des Insulaires du Nippon* [selected Japanese and sino-Japanese verse – Japanese anthology, ancient and modern poems from the Japanese Islands], includes selections from such texts as the *Man'yōshū*¹ and the *Hyakunin Isshū*.² The translator's Introduction provides the rules governing “*outa*”³ as well as waka/tanka, whether sung or chanted. The poem “must contain a complete idea within the thirty-one syllables that make up its two lines: the first of seventeen syllables [5-7-5], with two caesuras; the second of fourteen syllables [7-7] with only one caesura” (p. xv). The first line, he writes, contains “an idea[,]” and the second “provides the *dénouement* or conclusion” (p. xvii). If at first glance his approach seems somewhat adamant, one must admire de Rosny's scholarship and appreciate his having so generously shared his knowledge.

1.2 Next comes **Judith Gautier** (Paris, France, 1845-1917). At the *Exposition Universelle* [Third Paris World's Fair] of 1878, Gautier met the Japanese painter Yamamoto Hōsui. A little later, she was introduced to Kinmochi Saionji, member of the Japanese Emperor's Privy Council, who had come to learn about principles of western democracy. Through the close collaboration of these three friends came the 1885 anthology *Poèmes de la Libellule* [Poems of the Dragonfly].⁴ The statesman rendered literal French translations, and the author, Gautier, adapted these into waka. The eighty-eight poems, from the *Kokin-wakashū*, are preceded by an excerpt from Ki no Tsurayuki's famous preface.⁵ Yamamoto provided illustrations. I have held this book in my own hands and have read it: it is exquisite. The dedication (signed J.G.) from the compiler to Mitsouda Komiosi provides a glimpse of her own style.

I give you flowers
From your beloved islands.
With our tearful skies
Can you recognise their hues
And the perfume of their souls?⁶

Based on this inscription, it can be said that Judith Gautier is the first female literary personality to have written a waka in French, in rhyme [TN: in French, *abaab*] and of 31 syllables (5-7-5-7-7).

1.3 Kikou Yamata, a French woman of Japanese heritage (Lyon, France, 1897-1975), produced two works involving tanka. The first, *Sur des lèvres japonaises* ([On Japanese Lips] 1924) anthologises her translations of texts dating from the eight century on: legends, tales and short poems (haiku and tanka, seven of these by Yosano Akiko). The book opens with a letter-preface by the poet Paul Valéry. Yamata's second book is *Le Roman de Genji* (1928) – her translation of the first nine chapters of the *Genji Monogatari* [The Tale of Genji] by Murasaki Shikibu. The novelist-translator found inspiration in both the ancient original text and the English version by Arthur Waley (her nine chapters corresponding to his Vol. 1). Of note, flower arranging became popular in France because of her passion for *ikebana*.

2. Tanka written in the 1920s

Tanka in France appeared after the Great War. Until recently, it was believed that Jean-Richard Bloch (Poitou, France, 1884-1947) had written the first with his *hai-kais & outas* in 1920.⁷ In December, 1921, he followed with sixteen brief poems called «tankas» in *Les Cahiers idéalistes* [The Idealists' Notebooks].

If the photo is a failure
What will remain
Of that sweet and dear countenance?
– A line in the sand,
An image in memory. (in Maublanc XIX)

According to essayist Dominique Chipot (p. 30), the first French poet to publish a tanka is Émile Lutz, winner of the “Asian poems” contest sponsored in 1911 by the arts journal *Comoedia*.⁸ His winning poem follows the 31-syllable rhythm, and it rhymes [TN: in French, *ababa*].

Underneath our oars
Shadow flowers and branches
Scissor the circles!
And here crossing into those
With their white lines are herons! (in Chipot p. 30)

From my humble perspective, would-be classical contemporary tanka confines itself to a 31-syllable regularity (5-7-5-7-7). Poets who prefer to write more freely choose the short-long-short-long-long formula for line length. In all cases, they compose in five lines. Two lines can flirt with end rhyme but, generally, it would be preferable to have rhymes at the beginning or the middle of a line. In French, assonance and alliteration, enveloping the poem with sound, are appreciated as well. In French there is minimal punctuation, and no capitals other than possibly the first letter of the first word. Tanka requires two parts. Usually the first shows a scene from nature or from the everyday, as perceived by the

senses. The second part produces the poet's impression, intuition or sentiment as evoked by the scene. Ideally, the heart will convey universal themes such that readers can share in the poet's emotion, or even better, experience their own.

In French Canada of the 1920s, the sole author interested in the "outa" was Jean-Aubert Loranger (Montréal, QC, 1896-1942). This journalist, storyteller and poet is also considered Québec's first "modernist." In his second collection, *Poèmes* (1922), the section called "Moments" contains thirty-one tanka "in the manner of the ancient Chinese poems – haikais and outa." These are grouped in strings of two or three poems.

The writer closely followed "the contemporary literary scene in Paris" (Marcotte p. 12). We know he "disliked the classics and read only [Jules] Romains or the *N.R.F*" (Marcotte p. 14). The New French Review attracted vanguard poets who were enthusiastic about Japanese forms. One can suppose that Loranger, curious about modern poets, would have read other periodicals and recent publications before producing his own collection. Of these, one might think of Paul-Louis Couchoud's essay, *Sages et Poètes d'Asie* [Thinkers and Poets of Asia]. Loranger spent time in France, in the capital and on l'Île-d'Aix in Poitou-Charentes, between April 13 and December 18, 1921 (Ouellet p. 14), and could have met and been influenced by Jean-Richard Bloch while in l'Île-d'Aix, because Bloch owned a "house in Poitou."⁹

Rain is falling on the roof:
My acoustic chamber is filling
With the sound of applause.

As the day fades away,
The lamp expands and reaches me. (Loranger in Marcotte p. 80)

I cannot read this brief poem by Loranger without feeling the connection between youth and sadness. Form is not followed, but tanka spirit is. I suspect that the poet toyed with the required syllable count... whether through nonconformity or to approximate the poems of J.-R. Bloch. The topics in Loranger's tanka suggest that he wrote from dusk to dawn, when silence set him to traveling between two worlds, here and elsewhere, and to expressing his moods.

Midnight. The full measure reached.
The clock tells
All of time's hours
Entrusted to it.
The clock strikes and counts its till. (in Marcotte p. 101)

Could Loranger have sensed that his life would be short? That his hour of reckoning would strike early? That his career as a poet would end after this second book?

3. The lone French file: 1948-1972¹⁰

Jehanne Grandjean (Paris, 1880-1982) and Hisayoshi Nagashima (Tokyo, 1896-Paris, 1973), whose partnership was both professional and marital (Chipot p. 135), gave French tanka its wings. In fact, the two devoted themselves to the poem with extraordinary energy and almost religious fervour. In 1948, Nagashima founded the *École internationale du tanka* [International School of Tanka] in Paris, with Grandjean as his right hand. October, 1953, saw the appearance of the *Revue du tanka international* [International Tanka Review]. Grandjean served as general manager and as editor-in-chief until the review's final issue in 1972.

In her spare time, the “creator of regular tanka”¹¹ (i.e. 31 syllables on five unrhymed lines) produced two collections of her own: *Sakura, jonchée de tankas* [Cherry Blossoms, A Spray of Tanka] in 1954, and *Shiragiku, jonchée de tanka* [White Chrysanthemums, A Spray of Tanka] in 1964. Between these two books, 1957 saw the appearance of her *L’Art du tanka: Méthode pour la composition du tanka, suivi de tankas inédits* [The Art of Tanka: How to Compose Tanka; followed by previously unpublished tanka].

In her “author’s notes” to *Sakura*, Grandjean affirms that, “tanka rests on a solid base: [...] nothing is imagined: it is the snapshot of a sensory impression; [...] as well, following the rhythm of heartbeats, it conveys every emotion it carries. [...] In Japan they say that tanka is written in blood: that is, that its words must come from the depths of the soul; and I should add that proper composition is reached through continuous observation and contemplation of things earthly and the celestial.”

The Breton woman
Sings as she rocks her small boy,
Son of a sailor;
But the noise that surrounds her
Is not the sound of the sea... (*Sakura* p. 31)

Some contemporary tanka poets overlook the writings of this advocate of regular tanka. They reproach her for the “continuous observation and contemplation of things earthly and the celestial” – in particular the birds and flowers of her private courtyard or in public gardens. However in some tanka she does share intimate moments.

On watch and all ears
Trying to perceive the sounds
Made by his footsteps...
Without pause, my heart beating:
Hopes ever disappointed... (*Sakura* p. 127)

Given that Grandjean was born in 1880, and *Sakura* published in 1954, clearly a septuagenarian body sheltered a young woman’s heart. Jehanne Grandjean died at the age of 102, nine years after the death of her beloved. The Grandjean-Nagashima’s bequeathed funds to the *Société des gens de lettres* [French Learned Society] which would enable its social aid commission to provide financial help to authors in need.¹²

4. Tanka published between 1990 and 2009

4.1 André Duhaime

This resident of Gatineau, QC (b. Montréal 1948), has always been at the forefront in poetry. As early as 1985, in the bilingual *Haïku Anthologie canadienne/Canadian Anthology* (co-edited with Dorothy Howard), the Foreword states that some poets respect “traditional rules” and others are “more modern and experimental” (p. 11).

And again, in 2001, what Duhaime states about haiku in his Foreword to *Chevaucher la lune* [Straddling the Moon], could apply to tanka: “experts regularly express serious doubts about haiku written in languages other than Japanese [as] poets try to explore and experiment...” (p. 17). Even today he has a different approach to faceting these two jewels from the Japanese archipelago – as would attest his web site.¹³

Duhaime, whom I clearly see as the original promoter of tanka in French Canada, is the first to have written a complete book of tanka. After having read Tawara Machi’s (b. 1962)

sarada kinenbi in English translation (*Salad Anniversary*), he produced his own first book in 1990, *Traces d'hier* [Traces of Yesterday].

The author breaks away from form and from delicate phraseology. For him, it's a matter of "not escaping into poetic dreaminess, but rather to penetrate what is real. Beauty and truth are not always pretty" ("Autour" p. 2). As to the spirit of tanka, he agrees that it is a lyrical poem composed of a triplet and a couplet, "this second part being a reply, or a rejoinder to the first. [...] The couplet is usually the expression of an emotion (or a comment) evoked by something concrete (or by the here and now) stated in the triplet" ("Autour" p. 14).

His poems, like those of Tawara in *sarada kinenbi*, are as intimate and as honest as waka composed in the Imperial Court of the past – only the vocabulary and the tone are different. The theme he explores, that of marital separation, speaks to the intelligence of the heart. Certain breaks in form, as I see it, can be permitted in tanka, decidedly contemporary, as long as the spirit is respected.

first one side then the other
the oscillations
of the fan
have I bungled my life
did I do it on purpose (*Traces d'hier* p. 42)

to drink beer
and to shout more loudly
than the swollen river
hands move on
memories remain (*Traces d'hier* p. 57)

4.2 Duhaime and others

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw tanka take off in Québec. Three authors published books featuring a mix of tanka and haiku: Janick Belleau's *Humeur/Sensibility/Alma* ([Mood/Sensibility/Soul]; 2003); Patrick Simon's *À deux pas de moi* ([Two steps away from me]; 2006); and Duhaime's *Séjours* ([Sojourns]; 2009).

5. Two homes for tanka since 2007

5.1 Patrick Simon

This Franco-Québécois (b. Metz, France, 1953; now domiciled in Mascouche, QC) became so enamoured of this poem that in 2007 he founded the *Revue du Tanka francophone* [The French-language tanka review]. Such a literary journal had not existed since the France-based *Revue de tanka international* ceased publication in 1972. As of the spring of 2014, the *RTF* will have reached its twenty-first issue. Published three times a year, the back cover of every issue describes it as "a creative space for writing and discussing tanka." Aside from the editorial, there are four regular sections: 1, History and evolution of tanka; 2, Tanka by poets today (selected blind by a jury of poets from both France and Québec); 3, Renga, tan-renga and tanka-prose; 4, Presentations of books and of authors, through book reviews and reports.

Indefatigable lover of tanka, in 2008 Patrick Simon founded the *éditions du Tanka francophone* (ÉTF [the French-language tanka press]). As of November, 2013, eighteen books have appeared – twelve by a solo poet (of whom three women), and three by two authors. Of the one-poet books, four are dual-language editions, three of these being French-English – Belleau (March, 2010), Claudia Coutu Radmore (May, 2010) and

Alhama Garcia (June, 2013). The press publishes both in print and in digital formats (e-pub and PDF). The press's catalog includes the *Anthologie du Tanka francophone* [Anthology of French-language tanka], discussed below.

As to his own poems, Simon endorses the rhythms of five- and seven-syllable lines. He therefore prefers to compose regular tanka, as had Jehanne Grandjean, counting out thirty-one syllables. Here are two of his, taken from his anthology.

from bridge to island
raspberries graze the water
so extolled in song
sensitive to your presence
like silk over your body (p. 90)

Orangey flashes
it is the sun going down
on the glass tower
by the time I turn around
I find myself at twilight (p. 91)

5.2 Janick Belleau

As the author of this article on tanka in French, it behooves me to be modest about my own contributions to poetry of Japanese origin.

Janick Belleau (b. Montréal, QC, 1946) is involved in both haiku and tanka. She has edited three haiku anthologies, including *Regards de femmes – haïkus francophones* [Women's Views – French-Language haiku] which she opens with an overview of French haiku written by women. As for tanka, she has regularly contributed both feature articles and poems to the *RTF* since its founding in 2007. She was on M. Kei's editorial team for *Take Five: Best Contemporary Tanka, Vol. 4* (2012). That same year, she edited a special feature, "Chiaroscuro – 25 LGBT Tanka," for M. Kei's electronic journal, *Atlas Poetica*. One of her five poetry collections is *D'âmes et d'ailes/of souls and wings* (March, 2010).

D'âmes et d'ailes/of souls and wings marked the first time in nearly half-century that a woman (since Jehanne Grandjean) produced a complete collection of tanka in French – one which is also bilingual. In its ninety-one brief poems, "[w]ith sensitivity, tenderness and sincerity, the author shares a Life's journey similar to that of many contemporary women..." (back cover). She begins the book with an historical overview of "Tanka by women since the ninth century". The book earned Belleau the 2010 Canada-Japan Literary Award.¹⁴

shower on leaves
carried away by the wind
I would not mind
a never-ending season
the taste of you on my lips (p. 70)

5.3 French-language tanka anthologised

Also in March, 2010, editor and publisher Patrick Simon opened the anthology season with the previously mentioned *Anthologie du Tanka francophone* – the very first to be dedicated to contemporary tanka in French. His Introduction sets the beginnings of French interest in tanka to the second half of the nineteenth century. The decline of the shōguns and the restoration of the emperor permitted Japan to open itself to the West. As of then, works of art showed up at so-called Universal Exhibitions in both London and Paris. It was

primarily due to these that Japanism emerged in the salons where the Impressionists gathered, charmed as they were by Japanese prints. The influence of this pictorial movement extended to literature. Paul Verlaine, in his 1866 *Poèmes saturniens* [*Poems Under Saturn*], was already shaping “poems with five- and seven-syllable rhythms” depicting landscapes, impressions, states of mind. In doing this, the poet touched upon “the aesthetics of classical Japanese poetry.” Stéphane Mallarmé carried on with the “research by poets such as Verlaine and Rimbaud, concerning rhythm, odd numbers of lines, and in particular the 5-and 7-syllable lines found” in tanka (Simon pp. 7-8 *passim*). The anthologist’s comments move along to the author/translator Judith Gautier, and to poets such as Jean-Richard Bloch, Jean-Aubert Loranger and the poetess Jehanne Grandjean.

Finally, the publisher explains that the selection committee favoured “poems which expressed the most intense emotions with musicality, lightness and reserve, all the while respecting the tanka form” (p. 16). Of the forty-seven poets featured, twenty-one are from Canada, twenty-two from France, and there are as many women as men. Of the 854 poems submitted, the selection committee chose 207, most of these previously unpublished.

You steal a kiss
I grab your collar and hug you
so gently
two butterflies on a branch
sway with the breeze

~ Jessica Tremblay, Vancouver, BC (p. 94)

A fragile sampan
appears in the muddy waters
Mekong, oh Mekong!
the toothless smile of
the woman selling fruit

~ Patrick Faucher, France (p. 53)

Time enough to look
the space that’s growing rounder
half sun half moon
two children playing hopscotch
drawing the day at night time

~ Jean Dorval, Québec City, QC (p. 40)

Pursued by wolves
on the roads of their exodus
thousands of people.
the little girl’s lips are tinged
the colour of blueberries

~ Danièle Duteil, France (p. 52)

The chrome motorcycle
outfitted in leather
headed for adventure
two saddle bags
filled with wind...

~ Nanikooo Tsu, Cantley, QC (p. 102)

No fear of being caught
alone in the black night
wind in my hair
hands open and arms outstretched
I embrace the moon

~ André Vézina, Québec City, QC (p. 110)

5.4 Dominique Chipot

Also from the ÉTF press, one of its flagship books appeared in December, 2011: the long-awaited study by France's Dominique Chipot (b. 1958), *Le livre du Tanka francophone* [Book of French-Language Tanka]. Chipot traces the history of the poem in the French-speaking world, from the nineteenth century through to today.

An extremely well-researched book, the sources are diverse, and the footnotes generous. The author meticulously travels backwards in time, and his love of both research and Japan comes through on every page.

Chipot organises his study into five sections: 1. The first tanka in French; 2. The school and the International Tanka Review (followed by profiles of the French and Japanese colleagues, Jehanne Grandjean and Hisayoshi Nagashima); 3. The art of tanka in French; 4. Of poetic genius, the rhetoric of waka; 5. Bibliography.

We should spend time on the instructional aspects of sections 3 and 4. In section 3, the essayist analyses tanka through the lenses formulated by Nagashima and endorsed by Grandjean, "form, subject and spirit." Form determines "rhythm, concision and completeness." Topic requires "simplicity, reality and precision." Spirit demands "sincerity, sensitivity and suggestiveness" (pp. 155-6 *passim*). The author delves deeply into articles by Nagashima and Grandjean in the *Revue du tanka international* of 1953 through 1972, and in Grandjean's *L'Art du tanka* of 1957. As I see it, these sources are most appropriate because, in effect, the roots of tanka in French took hold within those pages.

In section 4, Chipot pays "homage to Japanese poetic genius" by explaining writing techniques "specific" to Japanese poetry. (p. 228) He explains the function of certain words by citing transliterated Japanese poems and their French translations, either by Sumie Terada or by Michel Vieillard-Baron. One of these techniques, for example, is *honka-dori*. Chipot describes the process by quoting Vieillard-Baron. "[A] poet borrows elements from an ancient poem in order to set up 'a play of resonances between the two poems. [§] To succeed, the poem behind the allusion must be clearly identifiable; any unclear use would be deemed a case of theft'" (pp. 235-6).

This next poem, from the *RTF* (18 [Feb. 2013]), shows the technique's successful use.

Morning of love
well after the alarm clock
we caress and kiss
though not tired of each other
still we had to part

~ Michel Betting, France (p. 53)

The final lines of this contemporary tanka are borrowed from a waka by Ki no Tsurayuki: “*Musubu te no/ Shizuku ni nigoru/ Yama no i no/ Akade mo hito ni/ Wakarenuru kana.*” “Water dripping from my hands/ Disturbs the clarity/ Of the mountain well,/ *Though not tired of each other/ Still we had to part[.]*”¹⁵

The *honka-dori* is easily transposable to a culture other than Japanese. Authors today, for their own poems, can borrow a phrase (preferably a single line) from their cultural canon. For readers to understand that this is a compliment and not plagiarism, poets must, as has done Michel Betting, italicise the borrowed text (or use a different font), and indicate the name of the honoured writer.

6. Tanka published *extra muros*

It appears that Patrick Simon’s successful initiatives gave poets writing in French a desire for tanka, either to fly with their own wings, or to build a nest under different skies. This multiplication of venues favours the development of tanka and can only be encouraged.

6.1 Micheline Beaudry

In the haiku universe, Micheline Beaudry (b. Montréal, QC, 1942) participated in the founding, in 2003, of the *Association francophone de haïku* ([the Association for French-Language Haiku,] and its quarterly journal, *Gong*. In 2006, with Belleau, she co-edited the anthology *L’Érotique poème court/haïku* [The brief erotic poem] which was short-listed for the Belgian reading public’s award, *Prix Gros Sel*. In the skies of tanka, Beaudry was closely involved with the *RTF* (writing feature articles and participating in the selection committee) from its inception in 2007 through 2011. In May, 2012, her first tanka collection was published in the country’s two official languages, *comme une étoile filante/like a shooting star*.

In her foreword, the author gives a chronological account of poets who wrote about Love – from Japan’s classical period (the monks Saigyō and Ryōkan, and the nun Teishin), its modern period (Yosano Akiko), and contemporary (Tawara Machi and Mayu). She then follows with Québec poets (Loranger, Duhaime, Belleau) who wrote or who still write about this timeless theme.

The author manoeuvres easily in the poetics of tanka which, she explains, “calls for sensory writing and supreme mastery of the unstated” (p. xi). As such, she lets readers wander through a world of imagination, their own as well as hers.

willow plantation
the solemn chartreuse
of dusk
I leave my body
to touch another life (p. 72)

This reader has the impression the book, with its seventy-seven tanka, is structured according to the author’s memories, as if the poet wants the reading eye to wander with

her through the partially open gate of her secret garden. Are we ever alone on the path of dreams or in memory's park? Can we ever escape the regret of having to leave life behind?

close to the water
I noticed
the cemetery's large trees
is it there, the final shadow
the eternal rustling? (p. 60)

6.2. More anthologies

A year after Patrick Simon's *Anthologie du Tanka francophone*, other anthologists followed. April, 2011, saw the launch in Québec's capital of *J'amour* [I'llove], which gathers sixty-five tanka by thirty-two authors (of whom twenty-one women) from French Canada and from France. The editors, Duhaime and Hélène Leclerc (b. 1972), state in their preface that they "sought to give a contemporary view of love, especially the sort that young people might experience." These would "recognise their own emotions, their questions, their doubts, and would surely find inspiration themselves" (p. 12 and back cover).

i saw her
the blond of my dreams
in the hallway
surrounded by
the football team

~ Mike Montreuil, Ottawa, ON (p. 16)

He hurries
A rose in his hand
Towards someone else
His gaze goes through me
But doesn't see me

~ Geneviève Rey, Québec City, QC (p. 25)

For three days
the magnolia's leaves
have been falling –
Three days I've waited
for your text message

~ Lydia Padellec, France, (p. 40)

In April of 2012, a new small press, located in the federal capital, published a wholly Canadian anthology, *l'estuaire entre nos doutes – tankas de chez nous* [the estuary between our doubts – tanka from home]. Those in charge, Montrealer Maxianne Berger (b. 1949) and Ottawa Mike Montreuil (b. 1958), have given a home to forty tanka by twenty-five poets from French Canada (twenty of whom are women). Three quarters of the poems are previously unpublished.

In their foreword, Berger and Montreuil provide readers with their vision of tanka. "You will notice that nearly all these 'tanka from home' have fewer than 31 syllables [...]. To add

more syllables would sustain [...] the risk of saying *too much*. Because our goal is to spotlight the brief and allusive essence of tanka, we have selected poems which give a voice to the white space around them. It is now up to readers to make that white space talk” (p. i).

perfect circles
of the spider’s web –
autumn’s
blond light slides
into my childhood memories

~ Monika Thoma-Petit, Montréal, QC (p. 28)

September
bursts forth in silence
so deep
your plum gaze
I will take you gently

~ Claude Drouin, Laval, QC (p. 27)

a glass of brandy
as at every anniversary
his yellowed letter
the memory of an embrace
and the call of wild geese

~ Angèle Lux, Val-des-Monts, QC (p. 35)

In April, 2013, Berger and Montreuil produced a second anthology, *nuages d’octobre* [October clouds]. This one contains 61 tanka by 39 poets (of these, 28 are women; and nearly 85% of the poems, not previously published). Two details are worthy of mention: several of the authors are new to the French-language tanka community; and nearly half of the contributors, those not from French Canada, are from Europe – France, Belgium, Switzerland and Romania.

for all these clouds
will my shoulders be
strong enough?
crows turn over in the wind
like Chinese shadow puppets

~ Monique Leroux Serres, France (p. 61)

the whole garden wafts
of lovely summers past
when you were there –
next to your photo I arrange
the reddest of roses

~ Frans Terryn, Belgium (p. 43)

could it too
believe itself loved?
old oak
the birds sometimes visit
before flying off again

~ Vincent Hoarau, France (p. 25)

on my zafu
all is illusion
outside
a woodpecker
reminds me I exist

~ Louise Vachon, Rimouski, QC (p. 70)

the violet
repotted
in my hands
the weight
of a fresh start

~ Huguette Ducharme, St-Pie, QC (p. 51)

Tanka: here now and tomorrow

As previously stated, in 2010 the first French-language tanka anthology included forty-seven poets. In the three anthologies that of 2011, 2012 and 2013, there are fifty-two new names. All told, as of October, 2013, there are ninety-nine poets (half each Canada and Europe) writing tanka in French. This number could increase over the next two years. A new web-based journal for tanka in French, *Cirrus*, directed by Montreuil and Berger, will be launched in February, 2014. Meanwhile, Patrick Simon has just put out a call for submissions for his second anthology (French and Japanese), scheduled for spring, 2015. Perhaps all this activity will lead to planning a tanka symposium that could take place in Montréal, the cradle of tanka written in French.

If the idea of a symposium¹⁶ catches on, it would be possible to try to define tanka outside of Japan. For the French-speaking world, would it be a brief poem, a five-line poem, a little picture? How many syllables should be used to compose a tanka: 31 or somewhere between 21 and 31? Should the five unrhymed lines form complete sentences, or should they be fragments that form a whole? Beyond vision, how and why should other senses be called upon? What are the differences between explaining an event, describing a situation and observing a scene? Can the everyday aspire to being universal? How can an emotion be conveyed without melodrama? Can one learn the art of suggestion and the unstated? Is the notion of juxtaposing a scene from nature with some deep feeling outdated? Would poets writing in French agree on minimal requirements, and would these be acceptable to Japan? Recently, tanka poets seem to want to be published and read in bilingual editions.¹⁷ Is this worth the time and effort, and if so, for whom? For such questions, could there be answers?

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Notes

¹ “*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*.” The oldest poetry collection, compiled during the seventh century.

² “*One hundred poets, one poem each*.” The best poems written between the eighth and twelfth centuries, compiled by literary scholar Fujiwara no Teika (1163-1241). One of the two pillars of classical waka, he is celebrated for his various writings about excellence in poetry. René Sieffert, trans. (1993): *De cent poètes un poème*. Calligraphy, Sōryū Uésugi. Aurillac, Fr.: Publications Orientalistes de France, 2008.

³ French spelling to show pronunciation.

⁴ “1885,” not printed in the book, is taken on faith from the catalog of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁵ “*Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*.” Ki no Tsurayuki (c.872- c.945) was the soul of this compilation. The second pillar of classical waka, he set out its principles in his long preface to this first imperial anthology, compiled between 905 and 913.

⁶ All quoted poems retain original capitalization and punctuation.

⁷ Poems and articles by Jean-Richard Bloch can be found at

<http://terebeess.hu/english/haiku/bloch.html>

⁸ *Comoedia* N° 1506 (14 November, 1911). <http://www.journaux-collection.com/fiche.php?id=443790>

⁹ Jean-Richard Bloch’s poem, “Maison en Poitou” [House in Poitou], can be read at <http://terebeess.hu/english/haiku/nrf.html>

¹⁰ I must be forgiven for not spending time on Renée Gandolphe de Neuville, the independently-minded poetess who was a contemporary of Jehanne Grandjean. Her three books are: *Pétales envolés – suite de haïkai et de tanka* ([Flight of Petals]; Paris: Hazan, 1938); *Sur la natte de riz* ([On the Braid of Rice]; Arcachon: Lucien Pinneberg, 1940); and *Et... un shamisen chantait...* ([And... A Shamisen Was Singing...]; Arcachon: Lucien Pinneberg, 1942). There is not much information about her on the web. The details and events surrounding her life are too minimal or contradictory to be dealt with here.

¹¹ Inscription under Grandjean’s photo in *Sakura*.

¹² Société des gens de lettres de France. Personal correspondence, 2009. See Belleau’s historical overview, “Tanka by women since the ninth century,” *D’âmes et d’ailes /of souls and wings* p. 34, and notes 38 and 39 p. 38.

¹³ <http://pages.infinit.net/haiku/>

¹⁴ These awards “recognize literary excellence by Canadian authors writing on Japan, Japanese themes or themes that promote mutual understanding between Japan and Canada. The funds for these awards come from the Japan-Canada Fund endowment dedicated to a literary award. The amount of \$20,000 was available for this year’s award.” These awards are administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. <http://canadacouncil.ca/en/writing-and-publishing/news-room/news/2010/canada-japan-literary-awards-%282010%29>

¹⁵ Ki no Tsurayuki, translation by Jacques Roubaud in his *mono no aware, le sentiment des choses* [the sentiment of things], Gallimard, NRF: 1970. p. 232. I am grateful to Vanwelde of Brussels for his serendipitous blog entry. <http://entrefejournal.blogspot.ca/2012/05/sagesse-de-ki-no-tsurayuki.html>

¹⁶ I note that a first such event took place September 5-6, 2013, across the Atlantic: the Lyon Meeting for Japanese Tanka Poetry organised by the Lyon-Japan association in collaboration with University Lyon 3 and the office of the Japanese consulate in Lyon. Scheduled activities included two workshops (one Japanese, one French), five presentations, and the first installment of a tanka contest, on the theme of “the sea.” ÉTF editors made up the French jury. The second prize was awarded to Janick Belleau. To read the winners’ tanka: <http://www.revue-tanka-francophone.com/actualite.html#Lyon-2013>

¹⁷ Belleau (2010); Beaudry (2012); Claudia Coutu-Radmore, *Your Hands Discover Me/Tes mains me découvrent*. Mike Montreuil, trans. (ÉTF, 2010); Terry Ann Carter, *Hallelujah: Haiku, Senryu, Tanka* Montreuil, trans. (BuschekBooks, 2012); Luminita Suse, *A Thousand Fireflies/Mille lucioles*. Montreuil, trans. (petits nuages, 2012).

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