

# A Study on an American Tanka Poet Who Writes in English

by Atsuo Nakagawa

The Tankaist in question is nobody but Reverend Neal Henry Lawrence, who was

born in Tennessee, entered Harvard University hoping to be a doctor, but soon became interested in literature. After graduating, he joined Lever Bros. Co., specializing in marketing and advertising. With the outbreak of World War II he volunteered for the [U.S.] navy and was trained at Harvard Supply School and the U.S. military school at Columbia University. He took part in the invasion of Okinawa, which he found such a shattering experience that he decided to devote his life to working for peace. With the end of the war he played a part in the military government of the Ryukyus, being in charge of restoring the economy, and was instrumental in getting the pottery kilns there back in operation. In 1946 he returned to Columbia University, with a view to working for the UN of the State Department, and in 1947 was appointed to the Foreign Service and sent back to Tokyo, to the diplomatic section of SCAP. His life took a different turn when he became acquainted with the Benedictine Order through visiting St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. In 1954 he entered the novitiate, and was ordained priest in 1960, and sent again to Tokyo, to St. Anselm's priory, where he has now been for over thirty years. In addition to his priestly duties, he also taught for many years at several universities, including Tokyo and Keio, and was a longtime president of the Association of Foreign Teachers in Japan, of which he is still an active member, as well as being a member of the Harvard Alumni Club. He has been a Vice-President of the ASJ for many years, taking care of the publicity.

Fr. Neal's interest in *tanka* began after World War II, when he became friends with Dr. Shigeru Nambara, first postwar President of the University of Tokyo. He translated Nambara's *tanka* for *Poetry Nippon*, the magazine of the Poetry Society of Japan, . . .

—*The Asiatic Society of Japan Newsletter* (May, 1992)

Along with the existing phenomenon of wonderful popularity of haiku poems, as some of you may know, there have been ardent appeals for the promotion of tanka poetry among tankaists (Please see Masanao Mizukami's Preface to *Tanka Journal*, No.1: "A Big Step Forward," 1992). Haiku, a mere derivative of tanka, is so popular outside Japan. Why not tanka, Japan's oldest, proud original song of songs? This question is uttered even by foreigners engaged in translating tanka. Among them is Rev. Neal Henry Lawrence. His appearance as a 'natural' tankaist is a mystery, indeed a great wonder in the world literary history.

His own stories as a tanka writer have already appeared in the *Mainichi Daily News* (June 7, 1987), *The Japan Times* (April 6, 1979) and *The Daily Yomiuri* (March 2, 1979), and other publications. Reviews of his tanka books also appeared in Japanese English newspapers, so some of you might have read them. (I myself am one of his closest friends working with him on tanka; I'm also editor of a magazine of English poetry which carries his tanka, and wrote an introduction to his first tanka collection published in the U.S., so I could say that I have the honor and privilege of introducing the tanka poet to the public) As can be seen in the English tanka quoted below, Lawrence's great talent is that he composes tanka in English as naturally as a Japanese tankaist does in his or her daily life. Even with haiku, one wonders how to produce its unique rhythm in foreign languages.

Haikuists writing in English, for instance, does not actually seem to pay much attention to the pleasant Japanese rhythm of haiku; if asked, they might say that English haiku has its own English rhythm. Thus American haikuists have not yet invented their own haiku forms. There is still no agreement on what form or pattern the English haiku should take. These questions I myself asked in my books on haiku and tanka: *Studies on English Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1976) and *Tanka in English* (Tokyo: NCI, 1985). Unfortunately, the answers have not yet been recognized or accepted by readers who compose haiku or tanka in foreign languages. In some countries they only imitate the 5-7-5 syllable

form in their own languages—German poets, for instance. In Lawrence's case, the same is true. But what is amazing is that he says that for him the 31 syllables in the 5 syllabic segments of 5-7-5-7-7 is as natural as it has been for Japanese from earliest times and continues to be so today. The rigid syllabic form comes very naturally to him, meaning that the form must be a real poetic form to Lawrence. He says that he writes tanka wherever and whenever he travels. He has also come to learn that the tanka form is suitable for the English language. There is something natural for human languages about this form of 31 syllables in five segments of 5-7-5-7-7, he says.

The reasons he gives for that statement are that first of all, he follows the ancient Chinese poet Lu Chi's teaching that all poetry is "capturing Heaven and Earth in the cage of form." And second that the poetic quality of Lawrence's monastic life shows itself in the rhythm and disciplined activity of "Ora et Labora" (Prayer and Work). A monk of over half a century in Japan, Lawrence has developed a discernment and sensitivity of the deepest mysteries of life, of the interaction of head and hand and heart, the goodness, truth and beauty of the world in which he lives.

The roots of his poetic interest are traced to his learning of poetry in school and to a great professor (Theodore Spencer) at Harvard University. His reading of the Bible in the monastery gave him sensitivity to poetry, because it is full of most moving and lyrical poetry in the world. In addition, his experience in an advertising agency taught him the need for brevity.

Now we can understand that what he says of his natural ability in writing tanka is true, when we see his tanka poems recently produced and included in his new tanka collection (*Shining Moments* (Gualala, CA: AHA Books, 1993):

Ex. I:           a) A naked boy lay  
                    Upon a tropical beach  
                    After the flood passed;  
                    No more to swim or run

in the sunshine and the wind.

\*

- b) The ripe golden wheat  
Harvested and on a ship  
Arrived at the port;  
Only a few miles away,  
Africans starved, for no trucks.

\*

- c) The rain on the leaves  
Makes such a comforting sound  
For the thirsty earth.  
How sad must be Africa  
Where silence reigns, but not rain.

Reading the above series, one can see how naturally and rhythmically the tanka poems come into the poet's mind in the five syllabic segments of 5-7-5-7-7, without feeling any incongruousness or jarring. Indeed Neal Henry Lawrence is a natural tanka poet composing in English. What he says of his tanka form is true. They were written of world affairs, maybe seen on TV. Yet a touch of pathos which is often read in tanka, is felt in reading them. As examples containing a bit of loneliness, which is also essential to tanka poetry, here are two pieces the writer quotes also from Lawrence's new tanka collection:

- Ex. II:           a) The simmering sound  
Of the *koto* and the husky  
*Shakuhachi*  
Evoke nights of mystery  
Spent alone and lonesome.

\*

- b) Angelic voices  
From the chapel in the woods  
Rose in praise of God.  
Brilliant reds, yellows and rusts

Give glory to creation.

In them we appreciate audio and visual beauties, and a bit of loneliness essential to tanka poems.

As for other poetic virtues of his tanka, here are quotes from Lawrence's two tanka collections: *Soul's Inner Sparkle* (1978), and *Rushing amid Tears* (1983).

Ex. III:           a) The rustle of leaves  
                      Stirs memories of childhood  
                      The sound of voices  
                      Of gleeful children kicking  
                      The leaves high into the air.

\*

b) Surveying his work  
    With pride and admiration  
    The carpenter stood—  
    With his bright red *haramaki*  
    And pure white *hachimaki*.

We read in these poems, his vigor, joy and sweeping rhythms.

And here is his first tanka, one of his best, which shows how talented he is in producing tanka in English:

Ex. IV:           Through crystal windows  
                      Beauty of cherry blossoms  
                      Filled my heart with joy.  
                      Yet when my eyes looked beneath,  
                      Fallen petals saddened me.

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