

# The Tanka in Catalonia: Examples by Carles Riba (1897-1959) and Salvador Espriu (1913-1985 )

Denise BOYER

The second half of the 19th century in Europe coincided, as we all know, with what is called the *japonisme* period, essentially in the field of Art. European exposure to Japanese art came particularly with the World Exhibitions in London 1862, Paris in 1867, Vienna in 1873, and the Musée Guimet of Paris from 1879 onwards. However, this interest in Japan also had a linguistic and literary slant: the first chair in Japanese Studies was created at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris in 1868, under the auspices of Léon de Rosny, and translations or commentaries on the classical tankas from the Nara and Heian periods began to appear. The first, or at least one of the first publications of this kind was, in 1871, the *Anthologie japonaise*, written by Léon de Rosny himself. In 1875 the man who created the term *japonisme*, Philippe Burty, published an article in the journal *L'Art* titled, "Histoire de la poétesse Komati" (to be understood as Ono no Komachi), illustrated with two engravings by Hokusai and Hiroshige. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered further publications. Karl Florenz published *Geschichte der japanischen Litteratur* (Leipzig, 1906, C.F. Amelangs Verlag), which dedicated a fair amount of text space to the analysis and translation of the classical tanka. Georges Bonneau published three volumes (of the four he had planned) under the general title *Le trente et une syllabes ou tanka* (Paris, Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner), which were as follows: *Le monument poétique de Heian: le Kokinshû, Préface de Ki no Tsurayaki* (1933); *Le Kokinshû: Chefs d'œuvre* (1934); and *Le Kokinshû: Texte intégral* (1934). The fourth promised volume was to be published some ten years later, under the title *Le Kokinshû: Traduction intégrale*. However, the more recent and apparently more accessible form of the haiku had already been the object of a more important diffusion from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for example, the article by Basil H. Chamberlain on Bashô, in 1902). In fact it was the haiku that had inspired the majority of "Japanese" poems (that is, poems that were more or less faithful to the form, if not necessarily the spirit) that began to be published in Europe and the United States from 1902 onwards. One example is the collection *Au fil de l'eau* in 1905, a collective study by the haiku French scholar Paul-Louis

Couchoud and two of his colleagues.

Whilst these Japanese-style poems had been clearly incorporated into European cultural movements in general, in Catalonia they took on their own peculiar identity in the form of two distinctive features. First, in contrast to the rest of Europe, the tanka was the preferred mode adopted. Second, a kind of genuinely peculiar Catalan model was established, endowed with very strict formal rules, in sharp contrast to examples such as the French Albert de Neuville who in 1908 was writing his *Haikais et tankas, Epigrammes à la japonaise*, in rhymed quatrains! It was the poet Carles Riba (1897-1959) who introduced the tanka to Catalonia, at a moment when he was enjoying a high degree of recognition and prestige. He rigorously, and without exception, imposed the classical structure of 31 syllables according to the model 5-7-5-7-7 (when in fact the Japanese tanka allowed for greater artistic freedom when it came to metre!), and in an attempt to preserve this numeric uniformity, in a language where the verse form is not specifically defined by the number of syllables, but instead by the position of the last stressed accent, he advocated the exclusive use of "feminine" verse lines (that is stressed on the penultimate syllable). Between 1936 and 1938 Carles Riba published a series of 40 poems later published as a collection in 1946 under the title *Tannkas de les quatre estacions*, and also in 1946 he published *Tannkas del retorn*, written between 1943 and 1946 (41 poems). In *Tannkas de les quatre estacions* he added notes where he modestly explains that due to his "indirect" and "partial" knowledge of the Japanese form he is not attempting to do anything other than retrieve a metric scheme.

In fact, Riba's knowledge of the tanka was not so superficial. He had read, at least, the previously mentioned book by Karl Florenz, and *Anthologie de la littérature japonaise des origines au XXe siècle* by Michel Revon (Paris, 1910), which he cites directly. Most probably he was familiar with *Chefs d'œuvre du Kokinshû*, by Bonneau (1934), and the "nocions lingüístiques" which he speaks of in his "Notes" had to allow him to understand at least something of the original texts. Apart from adopting the metre form that can be seen in his poems there are other similarities with the classical tanka. Although the theme of love in Riba's tankas only on rare occasions has the tone of sadness which is characteristic of the Japanese lyricism (doubt, separation, abandonment, etc.). In contrast we can find that all his poems are dedicated to a season, preferably Spring, the changes that take place in nature and more or less melancholic personal experiences linked to them, as they recall the ephemeral nature of all things. Suffice it to simply note the title itself, *Tankas de les quatre estacions* (*Tankas on the Four Seasons*), and the many words that, because of their evocative power, fulfil the classical function of *kigo* ("season word"): *oreneta*, *abril*, *vent*, *rosa*, etc. ("swallow", "April", "wind", "rose", etc.). Furthermore, from a more general perspective, one can see an overall nostalgic tone, notably the word *enyorar/enyorança* ("yearn"/"yearning"), so suggestive in Catalan, which appears in 3 poems, and a passage in his "Notes", where Riba explains that some of his tankas evoke "an act of love or sorrow" (*un fet d'amor o de recança*). So, we are not so far from the definitions of the spirit of the tanka and the kind of

sensitivity expressed through it, at least as described by Western specialists. We can quote Lafkadio Hearn who speaks of that "tendency towards that which is transitory" where he sees the same "genius of Japanese civilisation". There are the nuances that, as it is said, a Westerner can never completely capture, and for this very reason they have for us an exceptionally fascinating power, as for example the *aware*: "nostalgic emotion", according to the French poet Jacques Roubaud, that, in the words of Alan W. Watts, "it is not exactly heartache, nor is it exactly nostalgia in the sense of endeavouring to re-discover a beloved past. It is the echo of what is in the past and was loved". An illustration of this would be the tanka that reads:

*Avui que l'aire  
té el crit d'abril i una alba  
d'ocells que tornen,  
com l'ametller enyoro  
ma flor precipitada.*  
("Tannkas del retorn", 1943-46)

*Today as there is in  
the air an April cry and  
a dawn of birds flying in,  
like the almond-tree I regret  
the flower I dropped on the ground.*  
("Tannkas of the Return")

Among the many Catalan poets who have cultivated the tanka introduced by Riba, Salvador Espriu occupies a special place. He wrote a total of 78 tankas with great dedication: the dates of his compositions cover the entire period of his poetic production, from *Cementiri de Sinera* (1946) until the definitive version of *Per a la bona gent* (1984). As we have seen, by 1946 the Riba tanka had been established in Catalonia for ten years and Espriu had also been able to read other examples by Catalans, in particular Màrius Torres and Rosa Leveroni. Furthermore, some indications point to the fact that he was quite familiar with classical Japanese poetry. It is true that we only have evidence of his reading of haiku, a form which he practised with great frequency (in his personal file there is a list of poets from the Bashô school). However, in addition to his work in verse form he cites four poems that he most probably translated himself from a French anthology dating from the 1930's, *Haïkai de Bashô et de ses disciples* (translated by Kuni Matsuo and Emile Steinibler-Oberlin with illustrations by Foujita, Paris, Institut de coopération intellectuelle, 1936), that comprises one haiku by Kyorai, two by Bashô, and one by Sora. He often spoke of his affection for

Japanese poetry in general and his occasional attempts to work with another far lesser known classical form, the *sedôka*, allows us to suppose that he carried out personal research in this area. Another fact is that his first tankas, in the first edition of *Cementiri de Sinera*, are set out with indentations of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> verse lines, which leads us to assume that he must have read the anthologies by Georges Bonneau where this very same kind of typology is adopted.

As much in accord with the Riba tradition as the Japanese tradition, the Espriu tankas take the defining characteristics we are familiar with to (a 5-7-5-7-7 metre scheme), and "feminine" verse lines. They were invariably written as what is commonly understood as lyrical poetry, in contrast to all the other forms of poetry written by Espriu, including the haiku that often, in contrast, is clearly satirical. These lyrical poems basically divide into two categories. The first, very classical, concerns the changes brought about by the different times of the year or day in a familiar nature landscape (in his case, the Maresme coast). Here many of these tankas demonstrate a clear equivalence of season word: *boixos*, *boira*, *grill*, *hivern*, *tramuntana*, etc. ("holly", "fog", "cricket", "winter", "north wind", etc.) In this first type, the poetic "I" usually remains in the background, in some cases reduced to a mere mention of a glimpse, of a conscience (there are even cases of nominal phrases that are purely denotive). When the personal experience aroused by this landscape is evoked, it is often more or less implicitly a parallelism, a permeation *aware* between the ephemeral character of nature and human beings, not that far from what Ki no Tsurayuki said in the year 905 in the prologue to *Kokinshû*: "[...] upon seeing the dew on the grass, the foam from the water, the poets of olden times contemplated their own fragility." The second type of tanka corresponds to various testimonies to friendship, gratitude, love for a person either dead or alive, a theme that is also part of the Japanese tradition. However, in contrast the theme of love which is so essential in Japanese lyricism, is totally absent in the works of Espriu. Finally, there is the special case of the collection of poems *Formes i paraules* (1975), where the tankas are a kind of open commentary, by a very discrete poetic subject, on a series of sculptures by the Catalan artist Apel·les Fenosa (1899-1988) -in fact, quite well known and appreciated in Japan-: a practice similar to the one noted by M. Capitant-Tsuhakara in the traditional anthologies where some tankas are inspired by an engraving, for example a *shiki-e* or "painting of the four seasons".

Here one can make some observations concerning Espriu's tankas. Whatever his object, the lyricism in Espriu's tankas is often directed at (be it a landscape, a human being, or a work of art) the very traits of modesty, simplicity, and serenity that the poetic subject constantly presents. Also the three words that appear with a high degree of frequency throughout all of Espriu's poetry (*silenci*, *nu*, *fràgil* -"silence", "bare", "fragile") refer to these same qualities. We should also bear in mind that the poet had defined the very same tankas, in praising terms, as "fragile" (*fràgil*) and "tenuous" (*tènue*). This all seems to suggest that Espriu must have considered the tanka as the most appropriate form, as much for

expressing his ideal of life as for carrying out his ideal for a poetic verse form, in his words "a tarnished dull silver" (*d'un vell color de plata*) in opposition to the shining gold that represents ostentation. This metaphor cannot help but to evoke another notion fundamental to the Japanese spirit, the *sabi* (so highly valued in the famous *In'ei raisan -Elogi de l'ombra-* by Tanizaki Junichirô): literally the patina, and figuratively speaking, the "emotional beauty of things that bring with them the mark of former times", according to Erika Peschard-Erlih. At the same time, according to Augustin Berque, the capacity to "discover serenity within the passing of time itself ", and, in the words of Allan W. Watt, "a feeling of peace from within solitude". That is to say, the same condition of the soul that appears in the work of Espriu, particularly in his tankas, as in the next quote that I would like to cite by way of finishing:

*Sota la pluja ,  
arbres, camí , silenci ,  
vides llunyanes .  
Sense recança miro  
com el meu pas s'esborra .  
(Les Hores, 1952)*

*In the rain,  
trees, lane, silence,  
distant lives.  
I watch without regret  
how my footprints fade.  
(The Hours)*

In my conclusion, which is totally subjective, I would venture to say that Salvador Espriu gives the impression of capturing the spirit of the tanka better than Riba, as much in terms of temperament as in his personal circumstances. He was from a small coastal town, Arenys de Mar, where the passing of the seasons could be felt more than in a large city like Barcelona. Also because, as opposed to Riba who was very happy as a husband and father, Espriu's solitary and sad life since his childhood, due to family bereavement and illness, hardly allowed him to be diverted from our mortal condition. On the one hand if we admit that a type of poetry is not defined in essence by the form or the theme, but rather by the peculiar personal experiences that we manage to transmit, then on the other hand the classical tanka is essentially defined by a very peculiar form of sadness in face of the ephemeral nature of things, which tends to include self-acceptance. But, regarding the latter of the two it is clear that one would have to be Japanese to be able to give an opinion with the minimum of authority.

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