

Charles Tomlinson

Renga and Renshi: Linked Poems, Linked Traditions

‘There is some paradox,’ writes Earl Miner in his excellent *Japanese Linked Poetry* (1979), ‘that interest in renga should be widening so rapidly now that it has ceased to be practised as a living art.’ I had learned about the genre precisely ten years before, and about a tradition that extended from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century whereby some of the masterpieces of Japanese poetry came into being written by two, three or four poets, though Sōgi in the fifteenth century achieved a solo performance of a hundred stanzas. An attempt to transfer the renga to Europe took place in 1969 when, on the instigation of the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, then living in France, the publisher Gallimard invited Paz and three other poets – Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti and myself – to compose the first European renga in Paris.

Reading about the traditional renga, one forms the impression that some of those gatherings under thatched roofs, often in times of war, must have been fraternal and convivial, loosening the more rigid social bonds of feudal Japan. That air of friendship and conviviality certainly prevailed at the Hôtel Saint Simon where our meetings took place. We worked hard each morning for the better part of a week, then adjourned to a nearby restaurant. I think that we perhaps worked *too* hard. As the week wore on, I began to feel a little exhausted, and one morning tried to excuse myself from the lunchtime gathering. Octavio, a man of great energy and vivacity, remarked, “A true Englishman, you want to found a church of your own.” This was not exactly the case but, a true Englishman, I compromised, feeling I had introduced a false note; and so I joined the party which also included (except for Roubaud) the wives of the poets. In this respect we outdid the wholly male gatherings of the Japanese.

When we returned to our separate homes there was still work to be accomplished, namely to translate the renga into our own languages. There were eventually editions in each of these, except for Italian, bearing the title, *Renga*. I suppose one of the reasons for my exhaustion was that, during our sessions of composition I was frequently consulted as the one member of the group who could move, however stumblingly, among all four languages. At any rate, we had a basic European form in common, that of the sonnet with its clear divisions, which gave cohesion to our efforts, a sensible substitute for stanza forms that in Japanese followed a syllabic pattern and would have been unnatural and constricting if transferred into English. We used the sonnet divided up into four parts, though in each of the four sonnet sequences that resulted the final sonnet was to be written by the poet who began it. This afforded a means of tightening the overall structure in our renga, a form that can prove tantalisingly non-sequential. Earl Miner has written of the stanzaic components in Japanese renga, 'The essential fact to understand is the inviolable principle that no stanza has a continuing semantic connection, as a discrete poetic unit, with anything other than its predecessor and successor. We can choose if we like to consider it in itself. We must consider each as a fresh view of its predecessor, which it completes. And we must consider it also as the basis of the next stanza, which alters it in making a new poetic unit. It has no such *connection* beyond . . . Of course linked poetry must qualify for artistic integrity in other ways if not by plot, and . . . has numerous practices to give a sequence wholeness and integrity.' A simple example of one of these practices would be the repetition of a given motif, like the repetition of a theme in music. Indeed, the unpunctuated appearance of traditional Japanese poetry and the elusiveness of Japanese syntax possess something intrinsically musical in their creation of an aura of the indefinite, resistant to more coolly conceptual ways of thinking.

After the conclusion of our Parisian renga, Octavio Paz and I wrote a two-man linked poem of our own. This began almost by accident. Octavio and Marie-Jose had been staying with us in Gloucestershire and the train that should have transported them back to London failed to materialise at our local station. We had adjourned to a nearby pub to await the next arrival and found ourselves talking about

creating a renga sonnet sequence by post, what Octavio called ‘renga in slow motion’. There were to be two series of poems, each centred on a different theme, *House* and *Day*, the house being the one where we had been together for a few days – the Pazes as yet had no house of their own; the day was our last day together, during which the forces of nature put on a Constable-like display of the kind one dreams of for foreign visitors. I began *House*, Octavio *Day*, the last sonnet of *House* being completed by Octavia and the last sonnet of *Day* by me – one of those devices Earl Miner speaks of ‘to give a sequence wholeness and integrity’. *Airborn* was a title supplied by my wife, air mail being our means of communication once the Pazes had returned to Mexico. Finally, I made an English version of the whole and Octavia a Spanish one.

Both *Renga* and *Airborn* attracted a certain amount of attention in the West as well as the East, and I suppose it was my presence in both poems that in 1998 brought an invitation from Japan to take part in a renga session there which was to result in the poem, *Departing Swallows*. This marked the first occasion on which the Japanese had proposed such an initiative with western poets on native soil. I was also asked to suggest a younger poet to accompany me and it was stressed that this should be someone capable of co-operation with other writers and not obsessed by the competitive spirit. That excellent poet, short story writer and novelist, James Lasdun seemed an obvious choice. I had, twenty years before, been his supervisor at the University of Bristol and quickly learned to respect his intellectual probity and admire his poetic talents. So thanks to the generosity of the Japan Foundation, the Saison Foundation of Tokyo (one of whose directors, Takashi Tsujii, is both poet and novelist) and our own British Council, James and I met with three Japanese poets to compose a renga.

Our renshi master was the poet and literary critic, Makoto Ooka, and it was he who laid down the rules of the form we were to follow, an alternation of five and three line stanzas. I use the word renshi since this indicates a renga that departs from strict traditional form and content – something I was unaware of at the time of *Renga*. Although we avoided many traditional stipulations, we did abide by the old rule that the moon should not be mentioned too often. The

five and three line alternation of stanzas seems a happy compromise with Japanese forms. Clearly Makoto Ooka was thinking of the frequent use of the five and three line stanzas of tanka and haiku, though contrary to these, there was no obligatory syllable count. Now that free verse has largely replaced traditional forms in Japanese poetry, our Japanese friends could readily share in the ease of the renshi master's solution. That sense of ease, once we came to the writing, was greatly facilitated by the skills of our two translators, Janine Beichman (Japanese to English) and Masahiko Abe (English to Japanese).

A sense of ease characterised all our proceedings at Hatake Hotsprings in the setting of the Daiseyna Hotel with its carp ponds and the vista of rice paddies that extended towards miniature mountains in the distance. One could work in the room set aside for writing and translating, or take one's three or five lines to one's own quarters – I was fortunate enough to have the use of a traditional Japanese room with tatami matting on the floor and low table. Proceedings were recorded by a television crew, something I had begun by opposing, but since it was the television company who had asked to be let in and not our sponsors who had gone to them on bended knees, asking for us to be noticed, I felt it only courteous to withdraw my objections. They would be discreet. They would not ambush us in technical paraphernalia. Their own answering courtesy was a refreshing surprise and in no time at all we were good friends.

Writing a renga, as I had discovered in Paris, takes a lot of concentration both in finding a linkage to the preceding stanza and in steering one's own course. As a foreign guest, it fell to me to start the poem, which I did by referring to our presence there and then moving on to a statement of the spiritual theme of much Japanese poetry, *mono no aware*, the feeling for things or even the pity of things. The work was spread throughout the whole day and thus some of the strain of those packed mornings in Paris was avoided. The experience was nearer to that of writing *Airborn* though one occasionally felt the wind from time's wingèd chariot hurrying near, however silently. The very many, often diminutive and delicious courses of the midday and evening meals seemed like parts of a culinary renga themselves, contributing unforeseen portions to a harmonious whole. Around us,

the growing renshi was brushed onto a long scroll and suspended across the wall. We seemed to be inhabiting a house of our own unhurried yet nevertheless rapid creation.

I began by quoting Earl Miner on a widening interest in renga in recent times. The accuracy of his remark was confirmed when we returned to Tokyo to give a public reading of the poem which we had produced, at a British Council symposium. In the large room the completed work spanned the wall behind us. Before us was a considerable audience who showed an intent interest in what had been done, questions and discussion freely following the reading itself. Our translators were once more called back into action. All that James and I had to do was to explain our intentions and procedures.

They had to make an on the spot rendering into Japanese and English of some often quite intricate conceptions. I realised once more how impossible the whole venture would have been without the swiftness and intelligence of their linguistic knowledge.

CHARLES TOMLINSON, MAKOTO OOKA, JAMES LASDUN,
HIROSHI KAWASAKI AND MIKIRO SASAKI

An extract from *Departing Swallows*, a renshi composed in Hatake
Hotsprings at the Daisenya, 1998

I

October: the departure of our swallows:
Their aim is Africa, but this year sees
An English pair among the Japanese,
Learning new tunes, new names for flower and tree,
Before cold comes and mono no aware

Charles

II

Mono no aware can always be found anew –
Look! Even through the heart of the pathless oceans,
beautifully opening a path go forth the fish

Makoto

III

A path. A clearing. A habitation...
And how rapidly what seemed pure
Obstruction yields a window then a door...
Careful though: what you thought you came here for
May have already changed

James

IV

The children were playing store
Holding an umbrella, one of them said
This makes a good rain-listening machine

Hiroshi

V

On top of a bamboo leaf
a small rain-frog, and on top of that
its soul, the size of a raindrop, sighing
upward

where clouds are breaking

Mikiro

VI

Clouds that keep removing the mountains
Above the Dutch landscape,
The Mondrian rice-fields of Izu

Charles

VII

These fields about the ones where I grew up
Grasshoppers used to jump around and we'd
Catch them and eat them boiled, with sugar and shoyu,
The food crisis made life hard even for grasshoppers
I'd not yet heard of Van Gogh or Rimbaud

Makoto

VIII

The maple, the flowering red maple
I felled in the meadow last spring
burns a little too fiercely in the woodstove

James

IX

I've heard of butterflies whose breathing stopped
as they sipped nectar, clinging to the flower.
Or consider the cicada: drained of life, songs all done,
it's lifted by the ants, who link the life to what comes after
Such happy endings!

Hiroshi

X

A nameless wind keeps nameless lives afloat
Sailing on the boat of genes, the buoyant earth
travels on

Mikiro

XI

You learn it too late - when a leaf
Sprouts from the mast, when ivy vines your oars,
When your bottle-nosed sailors,
Fin-armed, dive overboard -
Too late you learn your vileness trapped a god

James

English translations by Janine Beichmann