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The Postman's Round by Denis Thériault

Review by Denis M. Garrison

The Postman's Round: A Novel by Denis Thériault, translated by Liedewy Hawke, Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Dundurn Press, 2008, English version of *Le facteur émoi*, XYZ éditeur, Montréal, 2005, 5½" x 8½" trade paperback, perfect bound, 124 pages, ISBN 978-1-55002-785-3, \$19.99 / £9.99.

The Postman's Round: A Novel by Denis Thériault, translated from the French by Liedewy Hawke, may seem an unlikely candidate for review in *Modern English Tanka*. The publisher sent *ME/T* an advance copy (the book went to press May 17th) on the premise that the novel contains tanka and haiku. I am glad they sent it. The book is a most pleasurable read.

First, the publicity synopsis: "In *The Postman's Round*, award-winning novelist and screenwriter Denis Thériault weaves a passionate, tragicomic love story full of twists and turns. *The Postman's Round* revolves around Bliodo, a conscientious postman, and Guadeloupian beauty Ségolène. One day, Bliodo gives in to the temptation to read some of the correspondence he daily delivers to others. After stealing open a letter containing a haiku, Bliodo falls head over heels for Ségolène, a woman he's never met who is writing to Gaston Grandpré, an eccentric individual. After a tragic event takes place before his eyes, Bliodo decides to pursue an illicit correspondence with Ségolène and learns to master the art of haiku as their ardour for each other grows. *The Postman's Round* is rich in dazzling descriptions of lush tropical landscapes and subtle evocations of the sober, precise art of the haiku."

The French original of this novel, *Le facteur émoi*, won the 2006 Japan-Canada Literary Award. The translator, Liedewy Hawke, has won awards for her translations, including the Canada Council Prize for Translation. I mention these accomplishments with the purpose of emphasizing that both the author of this novel and the work's English translator are highly rated; it is germane to my evaluation.

With respect to *The Postman's Round* as a novel, it is a very fine, short novel that engages the reader with the inner life of the main character and also, to a lesser degree, with a few of the supporting characters. It is firmly centered on the postman and the other characters are developed virtually entirely through his perceptions. I read the book in a single sitting and I expect many others will, as well. The book is meticulously structured; careful attention to details will reward the reader. It is a fascinating psychological study of a unique individual. That being said, and inasmuch as *ME/T* is a poetry journal, I turn my comments to the poetry in the novel.

The interaction of Bliodo and his muse, Ségolène, takes place in a series of haiku and tanka which they exchange by letter, one poem at a time. There is a structure here, as

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well: the correspondence which had been going on a long time between Gaston Grandpré and Ségolène entirely in haiku is continued for months by Bliodo and Ségolène in the same manner, followed by a period of exchanging tanka that is in turn followed by a return to haiku.

Evaluating the haiku and tanka in this book necessitates one's mindfulness that the poetry was written in French and translated into English. Our more experienced readers will know how fraught with difficulty such an enterprise is, even with accomplished bilingual poets undertaking the challenge. In this work, the tanka of the translation come out better than do the haiku, if solely judged on their poetic merits.

The first premise of the protagonist (and of the author?) with respect to poetic form is that haiku are 17 English syllables in three lines, two of five syllables and one of seven. Oddly, the formula used is not just 5-7-5, but also 5-5-7 and 7-5-5. This variability in the long line's placement is unusual amongst neophytes (or others) clinging to the 17 syllable formalism. His second premise is that tanka are haiku with a couplet added (again, a characteristic view of neophytes), yet the long lines also move around in his tanka forms. Remember, the publicity for this book notes that "Bliodo ... learns to master the art of haiku." I think that it is crucial to understanding the poetry in this novel that one be mindful that such "mastery" is in the perception of the protagonist, a person who never before dared write any poetry; who wonders, "How did one go about becoming a poet ... Was it something you could learn? Did there exist a course called Haiku 101?"

The haiku by Bliodo violate many of the popularly-held canons of the art, so do those written back to him by Ségolène. Of course, this makes perfectly good sense in the context of the novel. Bliodo is starting flat-footed and his beloved is a haiku-wannabe with only a few years' more practice. The "master" that Ségolène had been exchanging correspondence with is an academic whose own chapbook of haiku has been rejected by a publisher. No one here is approaching mastery!

I think it is of more than passing interest that the tanka in this novel are better than the haiku. Whatever one's take might be on whose poetic voice we are reading (Bliodo's and Ségolène's, the author's, the translator's), it is the same poetic voice at the end of the day. Why then are the tanka more successful? The postman, Bliodo, himself realizes that haiku are too restrictive for their purpose, which is a romantic correspondence. He is, of course, dead right. The attempt to communicate un-related emotions in their haiku is of course one of the haiku's major flaws. Haiku don't work that way.

It also suggests that tanka are more accessible to western poets than are haiku, an idea that is not uncommonly voiced. While I have yet to hear such an argument regarding tanka, it is commonplace to hear debate over whether haiku "is poetry." The gulf between haiku and tanka is wider than some would have it, and widening.

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So, if it is my opinion (and it is) that the haiku in *The Postman's Round* are poor and that the tanka are a little better, why would I review this book in a tanka journal? Because the novel has much more of interest to haiku and tanka poets than its poetry. Much more.

First, this novel is instructive with respect to the re-emerging genre of tanka prose. Including tanka in a novel is at the farthest end of the balance spectrum for prose and verse but that allows it to make a point that applies all along that spectrum: either verse or prose will control and the other will follow. My primary finding about the poetry in this novel is that it has been made to support the novel's fiction which, in this case, demands that the poetry be amateurish. The effects, or demands, of prose upon its accompanying verse will, however, be a matter of concern to the poet regardless what the balance of prose and verse might be. In the closely related form, American Cinquain, the importance of the title is so great that it is commonly referred to as the "sixth line." If even a title have such an effect, how much more so a paragraph, or several pages? At what point on that spectrum of balance does prose outright enslave the verse, as it has done in this novel?

The characterization of Biłodo, the postman, suggests to me that the author, Denis Thériault, understands haiku and tanka far, far better than the actual poems in his novel suggest. Each reader will, of course, have to see for himself or herself. I am particularly taken by the importance placed on calligraphy and orthography with all that suggests for poetry as graphic art in the most radical sense. This is an aspect of Japanese poetry that evaporates all too easily in other languages, an aspect to which poets of any and every genre should be attentive.

Regular readers of MET will know that I am forever on about "dreaming room" in tanka, or its "illusive quality," "multivalence," or "certain haziness." It is true; I am always on about it because it is, perhaps, what makes tanka *tanka*. In *The Postman's Round*, this dreaming room is realized for the main character in his actual dreams and waking reveries while reading the poems. The whole novel is characterized by the dream state, so much so that the translator wisely uses the term *oneiric* more than once, not wanting, I surmise, to draw too much attention to the fact. In any case, few writings so embody the co-creative role of the reader of haiku and tanka as does *The Postman's Round*. For anyone who has any question as to what is meant by the terms here, the experience of Biłodo's dreams and reveries should clarify the matter.

In at least one sense, the whole novel is haiku-like, in that it has its *Aha* moment. This is a novel which can be spoiled by revealing too much too soon. And in its philosophy as well as its techniques, it resonates a haiku-sensitivity. Yes, *The Postman's Round* includes haiku and tanka, but it is an eminently worthwhile read for those interested in haiku and tanka even without the verses. I recommend it highly.

— *Review by Denis M. Garrison.*