

Blueprint for a Benji: A Virtual Poem

The benji is a 100-line poem wedding Japanese linked verse, *renga*, to Italian *terza rima*. I conceived it during the winter of 1982 in cohorts with Richard Haly. We named it after his dog, buried in the Berkeley Hills.

The hundred lines of the benji are broken into six 15-line stitches, at the end of each of which the underlying five-line *waka* form of the *renga* (5-7-5-7-7 syllables) and the *terza rima* scheme (aba-bcb-cdc) coincide.

The first *waka* of a stitch thus concludes on the second line of a *terza rima* stanza, with a previously unheard rhyme. It is considered weak.

On the other hand, the final *waka* of each stitch is strong, the syllable count landing converging with the tercet rhyme. The inner or second of a stitch *waka* is called middling, but offers more than middling resources. Though its terminal line is the initial one of a tercet and therefore seems to hang, it profits from repeating the inner rhyme of the prior tercet, and announcing the second line of the next *waka*.

Paradoxically, the final *waka* of a benji is middling. Since each stitch has three five-line *wakas*, at the end of the 90th, there is space only for two more *wakas*. These two final *wakas* may be thought of as an envoy, one encompassing, given the order of things, first a weak and then a middling *waka*: the 100th line rhyming with the 98th, the 99th with the 97th. Inevitably, a benji ends *in media res*.

The apparent rigor of this form is tempered by two factors. In English, five-seven syllabic count is best expressed by alternation of beat, in this case three-four. Rhyme in the benji is allowed its largest sense and includes assonance, consonance, slant and crossed rhymes, or any other device that makes the reader stop and think.