

REVIEWS

Ryūichi ABÉ and Peter HASKEL, translated with essays, *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryōkan, Poems, Letters, and Other Writings*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996. 306 pp. \$49.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper, ISBN 0-8248-1741-9, 0-8248-1777-X.

I WOULD HAVE SAID THAT this is the fifth book in English on Ryōkan to appear in recent years, preceded by Misao KODAMA, et al., *Ryōkan the Great Fool* (1969); John STEVENS, *One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry of Ryōkan* (1977); my *Ryōkan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan* (1977); and Nobuyuki YUASA, *The Zen Poems of Ryōkan* (1981). I see from the bibliography in the book under review here, however, that there is another volume I am not familiar with, Dennis MALONEY, et al., *Between the Floating Mist: Poems of Ryōkan* (1992); and there is also another recent offering by John Stevens (1996), *Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems of Ryōkan*. But whereas these earlier works—and I assume from the titles that the Maloney and Stevens books are no exception—concentrated upon the poetry of Ryōkan, the Abe/Haskel volume aims at a broader presentation of the man and his life, including as it does translations of letters and other writings by or about him and three background essays.

The volume begins with an essay by Peter Haskel outlining the life of Ryōkan, who lived from 1758 to 1831. When confronting such biographical accounts, people customarily remind one another of how important it is to distinguish clearly between fact and legend. In the case of Ryōkan, however, such a distinction is extremely difficult to make. His poems and other writings tell us much about his daily life, but they throw little or no light on several important periods of his career and in most cases leave us quite in the dark as to the motives for his actions. For example, why did he become a monk in the first place? Why did he return to his native region of Echigo or Niigata? Why did he never head a temple, though he appears to have been perfectly qualified to do so? Why, when he did stay at temples, was it usually at Shingon temples and not those of his own Sōtō Zen school or sect?

These are only some of the gaps and riddles that confront those trying to write a life of Ryōkan. To fill out their narrative, they turn naturally enough to the various accounts of Ryōkan left by his friends and contemporaries. But, as pointed out by the authors of the present volume, such accounts are not objective records of biographical data but in most cases memoirs written by close associates, reverent, even adoring in tone, designed to preserve for posterity what the writer saw as most admirable and unusual about the subject. They are the fabric from which has been fashioned the Ryōkan legend as we know it today, but must obviously be handled with caution. The special virtue of the present volume is that, while relating both the facts and the anecdotal lore that have been handed down about Ryōkan, the authors carefully identify the source of each piece of information, indicating something of its relative degree of reliability. They even include a translation of the earliest of such memoirs, the "Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryōkan," written around 1845 or 1846 by Kera Yoshishige, the son of one of Ryōkan's principal friends and supporters, who knew Ryōkan as a child.

The second essay, by Ryūichi Abé, is entitled “A Poetics of Mendicancy” and deals with Ryōkan’s poetry. Abé does not discuss the purely literary aspects of the poetry or its antecedents in Chinese and Japanese literature—for that one must still turn to the excellent treatment of the subject in the introduction to the Yuasa volume cited above. Instead Abé examines the themes treated in the poetry and discusses how these relate to Ryōkan’s way of life and to the Buddhist institutions of his time. Earlier works in English on Ryōkan have not devoted much space to the Buddhist ideas expressed in his poems, probably in part because the writers did not wish to burden the poems with elaborate exegesis that might prevent readers from responding to them directly. However, some of Ryōkan’s poems are decidedly doctrinal in nature, and therefore Abé’s discussion of the philosophical and religious themes underlying them, particularly the Mahayana doctrine of nondualism, represents a very welcome addition to the material on Ryōkan in English.

Abé, it may be noted, employs a great deal of deconstructionist vocabulary in his essay, which may serve to elucidate his arguments or may simply render them murky, depending on how the reader feels about such terminology. I am by no means very comfortable with such language, but I did not feel that it was seriously impeding my understanding, though there may have been nuances and subtleties that escaped me. Nevertheless, faced with a statement such as the following on page 68, “Ryōkan’s poetic texts represent not static structures but productive movements of polysemic proliferation, which not only mediate the sutra texts and Ryōkan’s life, but coalesce each into the other in the poems’ own textuality,” I cannot help wondering if there isn’t some simpler and less ponderous way of expressing the same idea.

The essay section concludes with a piece by Abé, couched in straightforward language, that describes the various biographical accounts upon which the life and legend of Ryōkan are founded, when and by whom they were written, and how trustworthy they are likely to be.

The second large section of the book is devoted to translations done by the two authors, beginning with that of the Kera Yoshishige “Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryōkan” mentioned earlier. Next comes an extremely generous selection—177 poems by my count—from Ryōkan’s *kan-shi* or poems in Chinese, arranged in groups according to theme. This is followed by translations of 52 poems in Japanese, 45 by Ryōkan and 7 by the nun Teishin, accompanied by romanized versions of the originals. Both in terms of accuracy and felicity as English, these rank among the very best translations of Ryōkan’s poetry published so far. I was a little disappointed that the section on Japanese poetry included only one example of a work in the *chōka* form, since Ryōkan’s experiments with this seldom-used form seem to me of particular interest, but translations of a number of his *chōka* are already available in the other volumes cited at the beginning of this review.

The translation section concludes with a number of short letters that Ryōkan wrote to friends and associates, usually thanking them for gifts or favors; several brief pieces on Buddhist doctrine and practice; and excerpts from Ryōkan’s various lists of *kaigo* or “words of advice” on types of behavior to be avoided.

Though, as I hope I have indicated, the volume offers the English reader a wealth of material for understanding and appreciating Ryōkan's poetic works, the authors warn us at several points that it is a mistake to approach Ryōkan simply as an outstanding poet and calligrapher. Rather we are to see him as a "cultural hero," a religious figure who inspires not only through his art but through his whole bearing and style of life, which is how the Japanese typically view him. I must confess I do not quite understand the reasoning behind this. When I did my own book on Ryōkan I had not visited the area of Niigata Prefecture where he was born and lived, but since then I have had occasion to spend three-and-a-half years in what Yuasa calls "Ryōkan country." I have thus had a chance to visit the various Ryōkan museums there, to view the sites and articles associated with him and his family, and to walk many of the same roads and trails he must have traveled. As a result, I have a much clearer picture of the type of scenery and weather conditions depicted in his poetry and the surroundings in which it was composed. But there are still many things about his life and legend that puzzle me.

Clearly his whole way of life—solitary residence in a borrowed hut, reliance on mendicancy, assiduous attention to children—was intended in a sense as a gesture of protest against the Buddhist institutions of his time and the life lived in them, and his writings strongly reinforce this impression. But I for one do not know enough about nineteenth-century Japanese Buddhism to know if such a protest was justified, exactly what abuses it was directed at, and if it had any effect. Although Ryōkan's nonsectarian approach to Buddhist doctrine and practice is surely admirable, should he not have made more of an effort to pass on his own understanding of the Dharma to others, when Mahayana teaching stresses so strongly the obligation to do so? According to the Buddhist beliefs that he himself endorsed, his begging provided believers in the area with an opportunity to gain religious merit by contributing to his support. He grew some of his own vegetables and supplemented his diet with edible plants gathered on the mountainside, but he was clearly dependent on his neighbors for staples such as rice and bean paste and for clothing. Just how much of a burden to the community did these needs represent, particularly in the lean years that occurred so frequently in the Niigata region? Petty though some of these questions may seem, I cannot help mulling them over whenever I try to understand the boundless admiration that so many Japanese express for Ryōkan.

So far as I can tell, such admiration is in most cases acquired in childhood, an attitude learned in school. To fully appreciate the "cultural hero" Ryōkan of which the present volume speaks, therefore, I wonder if one would not have to have gone to a Japanese school and sat at the feet of a third-grade teacher as she told the class tales of how Ryōkan romped with the village children or went off and forgot his begging bowl. I did not have any such experience, my third grade teacher being understandably busy explaining to us about George Washington and the cherry tree or Abe Lincoln and his log cabin, and I was thus not exposed to the Ryōkan legend at a suitably impressionable age. As a religious figure he strikes me as somewhat opaque, laudable and likable in many ways but hardly the type to whom one would apply

the word “hero.”

As a poet, on the other hand, I find him unusually original and appealing, and his works, as this volume amply demonstrates, can come across very effectively in English when translated with care and sensitivity. For foreign readers at least, therefore, it seems to me there is no better way to appreciate Ryōkan than as a poet, for it is the poetry rather than the legend that appears best able to transcend the time and place of its origin.

To conclude with a few quibbles: the fruit given to Ryōkan in the poem on p. 172, *li* or *sumomo*, is some sort of plum, not “pears” as in the translation. The flowers in Ryōkan’s begging bowl in the famous poem on p. 206, *sumire* and *tampopo*, are violets and dandelions, not violets and daisies. Finally, we have surely come far enough in our assimilation of Buddhist terminology that “sutra” can be treated as an ordinary English word; to insist on a long mark over the “u” in every occurrence strikes me as pure pedantry.

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