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Abe/Great Fool

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Generations have called this beggar-monk of the early nineteenth century "Ryōkan-san," the informal suffix "san" expressing affectionate respect. Only two other eminent Buddhist figures in Japanese history have received this particular honor: "Kōbō-san" or "Daishi-san," Kūkai, the ninth-century founder of Shingon Buddhism, who is remembered in popular legends as a savior-miracle worker; and "Ikkyū-san," the fifteenth-century Zen monk whose eccentric life-style has inspired numerous folk stories in which he is depicted as a marvelously quick-witted child novice. Ryōkan is a singularly attractive figure. Minakami Tsutomu, the celebrated contemporary novelist, explains why, despite countless earlier works examining the minutest details of Ryōkan's life, he could not escape the urge to write about the Zen monk-poet:

The reason is simple. I, among others, would like to follow in the footsteps of this unthinkably kind yet strict Buddhist practitioner, who entrusted his thoughts to kanshi [poems composed in classical Chinese] and waka [poems composed in the Japanese syllabary] and strove day and night in the path of literary art. Why did Ryōkan, who, under the guidance of a famous master, had grasped the depths of Zen, refer to himself as "Great Fool" and say he “belonged to neither priesthood nor laity”? Why did he not live in a temple? He excelled in studying the scriptures, in calligraphy and in poetry . . . yet he ran away from the monastery. And it was in the residence of a lay follower that he died. He is indeed an enchantingly mysterious monk.¹

Minakami’s words provide a clue to Ryōkan’s ever-increasing popularity in Japan. Ryōkan, despite his religious and artistic sophistication, refused to place himself within the cultural elite of his age and lived instead among villagers. It is this curious interplay of opposites—of dig-
nity and familiarity—that continues to inspire books on Ryōkan by historians, literary critics, poets, novelists, and journalists.

Miya Eiji, an authority on Ryōkan’s biography, has commented on the recent upsurge in Ryōkan-related books. Writing in 1985, Miya reported that the past hundred years had seen the publication of over 3,600 books on Ryōkan. In 1930 alone, for instance, sixty-four books on Ryōkan were issued by major publishing houses. Since the 1970s, the number of works published on Ryōkan has grown each year, to 271 in 1980, and in 1983 reaching 362. “In the past three years, new books on Ryōkan have appeared at the rate of one book every day, and this does not include many other forums—magazine articles, public lectures, broadcasts, and so forth—in which Ryōkan is being constantly discussed. . . . No day passes without Ryōkan being discussed somewhere in Japan.” In 1978, the Ryōkan Study Society (Ryōkan kai) was established in Ryōkan’s native region of Niigata, and its membership has since spread swiftly to other areas of Japan. Currently, the All-Japan Ryōkan Study Society (Zenkoku Ryōkan kai), which comprises not only scholars, but literary figures, artists, and, above all, ordinary people who admire Ryōkan, publishes periodicals, supports research, hosts conferences, and organizes exhibitions.

Despite his current popularity and despite the massive literature of Ryōkan studies, it is not an easy task to understand who Ryōkan was. Recently in the West there has been a growth of serious academic interest in Ryōkan. However, the pioneering studies in Western languages have thus far limited the scope of their investigation mainly to Ryōkan’s role as a literary figure. Yet, such an approach by itself does not help in understanding Ryōkan’s phenomenal popularity in contemporary Japan. Nor does it explain Ryōkan’s importance as a cultural and religious figure.

Likewise, Ryōkan cannot be discussed merely as a Zen master. True, Ryōkan was ordained in the Sōtō school of Zen, a school that was established by the celebrated Kamakura Zen master Dōgen Kigen (1200–1253) and by Ryōkan’s day had grown to become one of the largest religious institutions in Japan. Ryōkan also completed rigorous Zen training under the guidance of his master Tainin Kokusen (1722–1791), abbot of Entsūji, a large Sōtō training center in western Japan, and received Kokusen’s inka, the certificate marking the completion of his Zen study. However, identifying Ryōkan as a Sōtō Zen master is as grave an error as labeling him simply a poet or a calligrapher. In contrast to the Zen masters of his time who presided over large monaste-
ries, trained students, delivered lectures, or produced recondite religious treatises, Ryōkan, after an extended period of wandering, returned as a beggar-monk to his native Izumozaki, a port city in the northern province of Echigo. Having no permanent residence in a temple, moving from one rough shelter to the next, he followed a life of mendicancy in the nearby villages. Although Ryōkan appears to have remained faithful to the religious ideals of his Sōtō progenitor Dōgen, there was nothing sectarian about Ryōkan’s Buddhist practice. Among the numerous Buddhist scriptures, the Lotus Sūtra—a popular text not particularly emphasized in traditional Sōtō training but the essential scripture of the Tendai and Nichiren schools—was by far his favorite. He was also fond of the Buddha Amida, associated with the Pure Land schools, and often found himself practicing nenbutsu, the recitation of Amida’s name, together with the schools’ followers. He even delighted in reading the Confucian and Taoist classics.

Ryōkan never took or produced disciples who would carry on the lineage of Sōtō Zen. Nor do we know of a single occasion on which Ryōkan delivered sermons to the villagers who supported his life as a beggar-monk. Instead, he expressed himself through kanshi and waka, which, inscribed by his own hand, were eagerly collected and preserved by the people around him. He could typically be found immersed in play with the village children in the course of his daily rounds of begging. Yet, his expertise in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, his exhaustive knowledge of ancient Japanese phonetics, and his mastery of calligraphy impressed many leading Edo intellectuals who traveled to Echigo and made his acquaintance. He is addressed in various historical records as Ryōkan zenji, “Zen Master Ryōkan.” However, unlike titles of other Sōtō Zen masters, Ryōkan’s title has nothing to do with his status within the religious institution; zenji is the title spontaneously granted Ryōkan by those anonymous people who respected and admired him.

To understand Ryōkan as such is a highly complex task. We began our project of studying Ryōkan with a translation of Ryōkan zenji kiwa (Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryōkan), composed by Kera Yoshishige (1810–1859). An avid student of poetry and the head (ōshōya) of the village chiefs (nanushi) of over forty villages in the region of Izumozaki, Yoshishige, as a child, had been Ryōkan’s regular playing companion and occasional student, receiving lessons from the Zen master in Japanese grammar and poetry. Composed less than sixteen years after Ryōkan’s death, Curious Accounts consists of color-
ful anecdotes and episodes, sketches from Ryōkan’s everyday life. Although it lacks chronological order, Curious Accounts contains valuable information that shows how Ryōkan was understood and remembered by his contemporaries.

Reading Ryōkan’s poems is, of course, essential if one is to meet Ryōkan face to face. Ryōkan produced poems in diverse lyrical moods, ranging over many topics. We have worked to make our selection of translated poems represent, as much as possible, the whole gamut of Ryōkan’s poetry. We also have sought to place Ryōkan’s poems in the context of his other writings. There is, for example, a group of brief essays in which Ryōkan reflects on issues relating to Buddhism and Buddhist practice in his age, issues such as the problem of sustaining the authentic transmission of Dharma, the degenerate state of the Buddhist schools of Ryōkan’s time, and the importance of mendicancy as a means of reinvigorating Buddhism. On the one hand, these essays illustrate Ryōkan’s stand vis-à-vis the Tokugawa Buddhist establishment, a stand distinguished by criticism of and distance from institutional authority. On the other hand, his famous lists of “likes” and “dislikes,” known as kaigo (words of advice), as well as his correspondence show Ryōkan’s closeness to and genuine respect for ordinary people. In his letters, Ryōkan conveys his gratitude to his relatives, friends, and patrons for their gifts of everyday essentials and their loans of various books he studied in connection with his literary activities. These writings will provide the reader with the particular cultural, social, and textual contexts out of which Ryōkan’s poetry emerged.

To further assist the reader, we have prepared three introductory essays, each of which addresses major problems confronting contemporary scholarship on Ryōkan. Reading Ryōkan’s poems without the knowledge of their appropriate historical context has often led scholars to misrepresent Ryōkan as a recluse who turned his back on society. As a result, Ryōkan is often portrayed as a poet suffering from alienation and despondency, a forerunner of twentieth-century poets of existential crisis. Yet, a careful reconstruction of Ryōkan’s biography, as demonstrated by our first essay, “Ryōkan of Mount Kugami,” shows that Ryōkan’s life evolved within a complex web of social relations. No less than the solitude of his mountain hermitage, this network joining Ryōkan’s life with the lives of his friends and supporters was an indispensable ingredient for Ryōkan’s poetry. Indeed, the Ryōkan depicted in this essay is multifaceted: lively, forthright, often contemplative, but never misanthropic.
Ryōkan detested poems composed by professional poets and described his own literary creations as “poems that are not poems at all.” But if Ryōkan’s goal was not to win recognition as a poet, what was his purpose in composing poetry? How is Ryōkan’s favorite activity, the writing of poems, related to his life of begging? In what way do the images of Ryōkan projected in his poems help us understand him better? Ryōkan’s poems are often characterized by their simplicity and directness of expression. Many of his poems, particularly those that have been previously translated into English, seem to be straightforward descriptions of his simple rustic life or of the natural beauty of his surroundings. Ryōkan, however, also left a large number of poems that can be understood as philosophical reflections. In these, Ryōkan manifests his ideas not only in the poems’ literal meanings (i.e., what they say) but in their figurative movements (i.e., how they say it) as well. Even the poems that at first glance appear to be simple descriptions of Ryōkan’s solitary life are often richly troped with metaphorical and rhetorical devices. Hayden White has asserted that “troping is the soul of discourse” because it “is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language.” Tropics—that is, the figurative strategies that White identifies as the “deep level” of the text—“is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically.” It is particularly important for poetic discourse, whose referents do not always have to exist outside the text. “A Poetics of Mendicancy,” our second essay, attempts to study the figurative strategies particular to Ryōkan’s poems and strives to illustrate not only in their literal meanings but in the poems’ tropical movements the intimate relationship between Ryōkan’s writing of poetry and his daily practice of Buddhism.

Because of the proliferation of popular literature on Ryōkan, writers have not infrequently presented an overly idealized picture of the Master, relying on the legendary literature of later periods. We have made a deliberate attempt, whenever possible, to base our observations on the biographical sources recorded by Ryōkan’s contemporaries. “Commemorating Ryōkan,” the last introductory essay, is a bibliographical study that identifies the major primary sources for Ryōkan’s life. It demonstrates that the effort to commemorate Ryōkan and to preserve his writings had already begun during his lifetime and shows that these writings about Ryōkan’s life and Ryōkan’s own writing of poetry were mutually related, not isolated processes.
No historical record, not even the accounts of those who were personally acquainted with Ryōkan, can claim to present the historical reality of Ryōkan's life, but only an interpretation of Ryōkan's daily existence. It is, however, possible to reconstruct the manner in which Ryōkan was represented in various contemporaneous biographical materials as well as in his own poems. We have striven through the web of intertwining interpretations projected by these prosaic and poetic texts to illustrate Ryōkan's multifarious qualities. We hope that our study of Ryōkan will highlight aspects of the Master that have yet to be explored fully by modern scholarship and will come close to presenting the beggar-monk known to his neighbors and friends.

R. A.