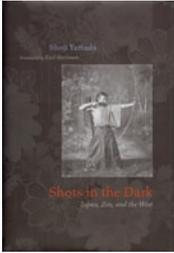


REVIEWS



Shoji Yamada, *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen and the West*

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. viii + 304 pages, 8 halftones, 6 line drawings, kanji for names and terms, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth; ISBN 978-0-226-94764-8.

SHOJI YAMADA's book focuses on two cultural icons, Eugen Herrigel's book *Zen in the Art of Archery* and the sand garden of the Zen temple Ryōanji in Kyoto, aiming to illustrate the process through which "Japanese culture" was defined in the post-war period. The Western foreigner's gaze is an essential part of this process of cultural definition. Westerners who believed that Zen was the heart of Japanese culture took Herrigel's book and Ryōanji as concrete confirmations of their beliefs. In turn, the Japanese accepted this Western redefinition of Japanese culture for themselves and convinced themselves that Japanese archery was really a form of Zen, and that Ryōanji was really a Zen garden. Yamada's image for this process is the distorting mirror of a fun house. In a Western-made distorting mirror, the Japanese chose the reflection they found most attractive. Yamada's book intends to bust the myth of Herrigel's book *Zen in the Art of Archery* and deflate the mystery of the Zen garden of Ryōanji.

Herrigel and Zen in the Art of Archery

During his tenure as a lecturer at Tōhoku University from 1924 to 1929, Eugen Herrigel (1884–1955) trained in Japanese archery under Awa Kenzō, a well-known but somewhat eccentric *kyūjutsu* master at the time. After returning to Germany, Herrigel gave a lecture on Japanese archery in 1936 to the Berlin branch of the German-Japan Association, which was translated into Japanese and published as *Nihon no Kyūjutsu* in 1941. He published his book, *Zen in Der Kunst des Bogenschiessens* in 1948; it was translated into English in 1953 as *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Although a slender book of only ninety pages (in the 1971 Vintage Books edition), it went on to become a worldwide bestseller with enormous impact. For years standard reading for those interested in Zen, even now it is described as a "classic" of Oriental spirituality. The

very first of the “Zen and Art of ...” books, of which there are now several hundred titles, it also helped create the split between kitchy Zen and serious Zen (10). From the beginning, because it expressly identified Japanese culture with Zen, *Zen in the Art of Archery* was widely discussed in Japan. Yamada comments, “I do not know of any other document on the theory of Japaneseness that has been accepted this uncritically. *Zen in the Art of Archery* was a magic mirror that, for Japanese people, reflected the ideal image they had of themselves” (4).

Comparatively little was known about Herrigel’s life before and after his stay in Japan, but Yamada gained access to documents in the archives at the University of Heidelberg that shed light on these two periods. From his early years Herrigel was interested in mysticism. In the years before he left for Japan, he became good friends with many of the Japanese students who were then studying philosophy in Germany, including Mutai Risaku, Amano Teiyū, Kita Reikichi, Miki Kiyoshi, and others who on return to Japan became prominent academics. Also among the Japanese residing in Germany at the time was Ōhazama Shūhei, a Zen Buddhist lay teacher and a recognized disciple of Shaku Sōkatsu. Ōhazama was author of a serious book on Zen and before he left for Japan, Herrigel was involved in publishing the German translation, *Zen: Der lebendige Buddhismus in Japan*. In the picture which Yamada paints, prior to his departure for Japan, Herrigel had had significant opportunity to learn about Zen from informed people. However, it is Yamada’s account of Herrigel’s life after his return from Japan which will shock people. Interested parties to date have deliberately attempted to suppress details of this period. Yamada confirms that Herrigel was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party (his party membership number was 5499332). He officially joined the Nazi party on 1 May 1937 and thereafter he rose quickly through the ranks at the University of Erlangen. He was head of the Philosophy Department from 1936 to 1938, vice rector from 1938 to 1944, became an official member of the Bayern Science Academy in 1941, and was rector of the University of Erlangen from 1944 to 1945. Yamada says that Herrigel could not have enjoyed such a successful career without being a member of the Nazi party (81). After the war, Herrigel wrote a defense of his actions for the denazification court, but the court concluded that while Herrigel had not been a committed Nazi, he was guilty of being a *Mitläufer*, a passive fellow traveler (99).

Yamada focuses his argument on the actual training in archery which Herrigel received while in Japan. In his book, Herrigel recounts that when he first began training, he thought that archery was about hitting the target with the arrow. Not so. The Master corrected him, “The right art is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede” (35). Herrigel’s book describes the suffering he experienced trying to master the proper way to draw the bow, to breathe, to release the arrow—effortlessly, without purpose, without will (35). The frustrating part, for Herrigel, was that the very effort required to do these things prevented him from succeeding. Years went by while Herrigel was

constantly berated and admonished by master Awa. Then one day, after releasing an arrow, Awa cried “Just then, ‘It’ shot!” (37). That is, it was not the individual person Herrigel, with his intention to shoot, who released the arrow. “It”—something other than Herrigel’s usual willful, purposive, self—shot! Yamada says that at this point the myth was born that the secret of Japanese archery is Zen (46–55). It is this myth that Yamada intends to explode.

First of all, Yamada points out that starting in 1927, Awa had created his own religion around archery called *daishadōkyō*, Great Doctrine of the Way of Shooting (65), after having had a religious experience in 1920 (63). Though religiously inclined, Awa himself, however, never trained with a Zen teacher (66). Yamada’s point is that Awa was teaching an archery-religion of his own creation which, on one hand, was not traditional Japanese archery and, on the other hand, was not traditional Zen. In addition, Awa did not speak German and Herrigel did not speak much Japanese. To communicate, the two depended on Komachiya Sōzō, a university colleague of Herrigel and a student of Awa, to translate. Awa often spoke in cryptic sentences which Komachiya himself did not fully grasp (48–49). Did Komachiya understand Awa correctly when Awa reportedly said “‘It’ shot”? Yamada puts forth two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: Herrigel fabricated the doctrine of “‘It’ shot” when he wrote *Zen in the Art of Archery*; Hypothesis 2: Miscommunication occurred between Awa and Herrigel concerning “‘It’ shot” (51). His final conclusion is a bit of both. Awa probably said merely “That’s it” (*sore desu*) where “it” (*sore*) does not really refer to anything specific. But this was mistakenly translated to Herrigel as “‘It’ shot,” and the indefinite “it” got reified to mean “something which transcends the self” (53). Yamada wants us to conclude that the Zen in the art of archery consists of a mis-translation and a misunderstanding.

The Zen Garden of Ryōanji

The rock and sand garden of the Ryōanji Zen temple in Kyoto consists of a flat rectangle of raked white sand in which are placed fifteen rocks in five clusters. The garden is located to the south of the abbot’s quarters and is meant to be viewed by someone seated inside those rooms. It is said that only fourteen of the rocks are visible at any one time from any given angle. A plain earth wall surrounds the garden. The garden enjoys a reputation for being a concrete expression of enigmatic Zen; it is daily visited by crowds of Japanese and foreign tourists who all agree on its unique importance to the understanding of traditional Japanese culture. It has also become a universally recognized international symbol; Yamada gives a list of several other gardens constructed in other parts of the world which were clearly designed with Ryōanji in mind (18–22). But Yamada raises a question: until around 1950, Ryōanji was a poor, deserted temple standing in a bamboo grove, rarely visited by anyone. The garden was not considered beautiful (indeed there are people who

say it was overrun with weeds and unsightly stones), few people associated it with Zen and it attracted no tourists (110). What happened?

Part of the story is historical-political, although Yamada does not give it sufficient attention. During the Meiji period, Buddhism in Japan suffered a persecution that shut down temples, forced ordained people back into lay life and in general suppressed the expression of Buddhist thought and faith (there is a bare mention of this on page 144). Although the Buddhist persecution itself ended in late Meiji, there was no freedom of religious expression until the end of the war. Furthermore, prior to the appointment of Ōsaki Ryōen in 1907, Ryōanji had not had a chief priest for close to three hundred years (166). It was only in the postwar period that the temple enjoyed simultaneously a priest to look out for its welfare and a free cultural environment that allowed the chief priest to promote the temple.

The other part of the story is the cultural shift that put increasing emphasis on the Zen interpretation of the garden. In early twentieth-century mentions of Ryōanji in contemporary literature, the pattern of the stones in the sand garden is described as “tiger cubs crossing the river” (108). Yamada says this has nothing to do with Zen (162); he does not attempt to say why. To track the change in the way the Ryōanji garden has been viewed by the Japanese themselves, Yamada has done a thorough search through prewar and postwar school textbooks. Prior to the war, only four textbooks mention the Ryōanji garden but after the war, Ryōanji is discussed in school textbooks with increasing frequency, photographs of the garden appear, an explicit connection is made to Zen culture and the temple itself becomes a popular destination for school field trips (113–28).

Is the sand garden beautiful? And if so, why is it beautiful? What is an expression of Zen? To answer these questions, Yamada has done a survey of the voluminous literature on Japanese gardens and art history (the chapter on Ryōanji covers 79 pages) and finds that although many people said that the garden was beautiful, there was little agreement on why it was beautiful. However one element is certain: when foreigners started to associate the garden with Zen, the Japanese took notice and the garden of Ryōanji became more and more revered as an icon of Japanese culture (108–9). In 1975, Elizabeth II, Queen of England, and her husband Prince Philip visited Ryōanji where they sat in contemplation viewing the garden for ten silent minutes. The Japanese press gave the event full coverage (the British press did not think the event worth covering) impressing on the Japanese population the clear importance of Ryōanji as an example of the Zen of Japanese culture (237).

What drives this cultural dynamic? Yamada’s explanation is that Japan has been trying to imitate the West. While the economic boom of the 1960s allowed it to catch up materially, Japan felt it could not compete culturally —until it discovered that Japan possessed a wonderful something which the West found fascinating, “Zen.” “To curry favor with the Western point of view, the Japanese went so far as to change their own view of their own culture. This gave birth in the 1960s to the

phenomenon of forcing all of the interpretations of *kyūdō* and Ryōanji into the Zen mold” (241). This leads Yamada to describe Zen as “a self-generated narcotic” and “Japan’s postwar endorphin” (242).

Myth Busting

The accumulated scholarship on Orientalism and “Reverse Orientalism” has now made us aware of the cultural dynamic in which an Asian nation negotiates power for itself by catering to the exotic stereotypes that the West holds of the Orient. In particular, Yamada’s book fits neatly against Robert SHARF’s “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism” (1993) where such ideological maneuvering is a main theme. Yamada’s explanation of how this works in Japan in connection with exotic Zen is thus not a new story. But what is new is the intensity of his attempt to deconstruct the Zen connection in both Herrigel’s account of archery and the garden of Ryōanji. However, I am not convinced.

In the name of full disclosure, I should point out that I am an ordained monk in Rinzai Zen; in fact, Kobori Sōhaku, whom Yamada mentions with approval (209) is the priest under whom I was ordained. So I am not reading this book “at arm’s length.”

The Zen element in Herrigel’s account of his archery training is “‘It’ shot.” Yamada attempts to explain away “‘It’ shot” as a mistranslation and a misunderstanding. I doubt Yamada’s explanation since there were several occasions, not just one occasion, on which Awa talked about “it.” There could have been a mistranslation on one occasion but it is unlikely that such a mistranslation would have continued over numerous occasions spread out over several years. In *Zen in the Art of Archery*, there are six different occasions in which Herrigel records Awa talking about “It” (HERRIGEL 1971, 58, 59, 65, 67, 68, 69). They include extended conversations like this:

One day I asked the Master: “How can the shot be loosed if ‘I’ do not do it?”

“‘It’ shot,” he replied.

“I have heard you say that several times before, so let me put it another way:

How can I wait self-obliviously for the shot if ‘I’ am no longer there.”

“‘It’ waits at the highest tension.”

“And who or what is this ‘It’?”

“Once you have understood that, you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I would be the worst of teachers and would deserve to be sacked!” (HERRIGEL 1971, 58–59)

On another occasion, Awa explained to Herrigel:

The spider dances her web without knowing that there are flies who will get caught in it. The fly, dancing nonchalantly on a sunbeam, gets caught in the net without knowing what lies in store. But through them both “It” dances, and inside and outside are united in this dance. (HERRIGEL 1971, 65)

Perhaps Awa was using the common indefinite Japanese pronoun *sore*, but if these passages convey the general import of Awa's remarks, then it is clear that he meant something quite definite, something "which transcends the self"

More important are two further facts inconsistent with Yamada's two hypotheses. "It' shot" expresses the notion of *mui* (Ch. *wuwei* 無為), literally "non-action," a teaching with a long history in East Asia. *Mui* is not absence of action but action done naturally, spontaneously, without premeditation and intention. I am surprised that Yamada has no discussion of *mui* and the readily available scholarship on this notion. In Japanese, Yamada could have consulted a standard work like MORI Mikisaburō's "*Mu*" *no shisō* [無]の思想 (The idea of nothingness, 1969); in English, there is Edward SLINGERLAND's recent *Effortless Action* (2007). A little investigation would have made it clear first, that Zen has wholly absorbed the notion of *mui* into its teaching and practice, and second that Herrigel did not "fabricate" the doctrine of "It' shot" (hypothesis 1). "It' shot" is Awa Kenzō's version of *mui*, effortless action, a concept long shared by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Awa may not have trained with a traditional Zen teacher but that does not mean that there was no Zen in what he was teaching. His teaching of *mui*, effortless action, as expressed in "It' shot" certainly resembles an aspect of Zen.

A second and more important fact is that "it" is taught in Zen. Shibayama Zenkei 柴山全慶 (1894–1974) was the rōshi of Nanzen-ji; he was a well-respected Zen master of a well-respected temple in Kyoto. He is not connected with the kitchy Zen Yamada describes in the early part of his book; he is part of the "stoic" discipline Zen which Yamada claims to admire in the last pages of his book (247). Shibayama Rōshi has written *The Gateless Barrier*, a commentary on the *Mumonkan* kōan collection. In explaining what "Mu" is in Case One, Shibayama writes, "... you yourself and the whole universe are nothing but 'Mu'. Further, 'Mu' itself falls short, it is ever the unnamable 'it'" (SHIBAYAMA 2000, 22). A little later on in discussing Case Five, he says "If you fail to get 'it,' so vividly presented here, Zen is completely out of your reach" (SHIBAYAMA 2000, 57). In Case Six, he makes the statement, "Therefore, just as it is, 'it' is here right now. If you truly cast yourself away, True Dharma is ever luminous here and now" (SHIBAYAMA 2000, 63). In Case Seven, he says, "Once having awakened, he has always been in 'it.' Essentially he has always been 'it,' the Truth. His walking, standing, or sitting are all nothing but 'it'" (SHIBAYAMA 2000, 69). These are just a few examples of "it" taken from the first pages of the book. The English-language version of *The Gateless Barrier* is a translation of Shibayama's Japanese-language *Mumonkan Kōwa* 無門関講話. From the Japanese text, we know that the word translated as "it" is *shako* 這箇 (SHIBAYAMA 1977, 42, 95, 105, 112), a word common in Zen kōan texts. *Shako* is only one term of many with the same referent: *Mu*, Sound of One Hand (*sekishu onjō*), Original Face (*honrai no menmoku*), Master (*shujinkō*), and many other terms. In ordinary conversation, a Zen teacher does not often use the word *shako*; he is more likely to use the indefinite pronoun *sore* and mean by it *shako*. Here we have an authentic Zen master using "it" in much

the same way as did Herrigel. There is an explicit word, *shako*, in the original Japanese, which is accurately translated by “it” in English. The word “it” in English is not being used in some vague indefinite sense and does not result from mistranslation (hypothesis 2). Yamada claims that the teaching of “It’ shot” results from a mistranslation and a misunderstanding. Maybe so, but there is also a definite possibility that Awa meant “It’ shot” in exactly the sense that Herrigel claims to have heard it.

Yamada writes a very long chapter, reviewing any and every Japanese author, it seems, who has ever written on Ryōanji, arguing that there is no substance to the claim that Ryōanji is a Zen garden. Unfortunately this chapter suffers from overkill. Yamada systematically demeans any author who writes approvingly of the garden:

He tries his best to recover from this by saying, “the more I looked at it the more I came to like it,” but it appears to me that he is trying to force himself to like the garden. This seems like another example of a person being intimidated by the supposed beauty of the rock garden. (157)

...I suspect that Ikeda really wanted to make a clear statement to the effect that the garden was not so great. But he could not do it. What crossed his mind at that moment? Was it the idea that the garden had to be beautiful? Or was Ikeda afraid of being labeled an artist who did not understand the garden that expressed Zen? (161)

...Saying that the rock garden is Zen simply because one can liken it to a *kōan* is nonsense. I feel sorry for Mizuno for having to say this, but his obsession is too extreme. (168)

Not satisfied with just reading their words, Yamada reads the minds of anyone who finds the garden beautiful; they must be “intimidated,” “afraid,” or “obsessive.” Such writing has a quite negative effect on the reader who expects a more unbiased scholarly stance.

Hisamatsu Shin’ichi was the first to call Ryōanji an “empty garden” (213). Hisamatsu, a scholar, was well aware that “empty” is a technical term in Mahāyāna Buddhism and in Zen. Emptiness is the absence of what in Sanskrit is called *svabhāva*, a fixed essential nature. In reality, all things are empty, according to Buddhism, but to our ordinary gaze they appear each to have a fixed essential nature. The garden at Ryōanji however is obviously without fixed essential nature; it is obviously empty. Ironically Yamada’s long catalog of all the various and different reactions people have had to the garden shows that the garden has no fixed essence nature and for precisely that reason, it deserves to be called a Zen garden.

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