Review Essay


*Shots in the Dark* is a tour de force that shatters distorted images of “Zen arts” and “Zen culture” in Japan. It targets in particular the fabricated connections between Zen and Japanese archery in Eugen Herrigel’s influential *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and between Zen and the rock garden at Ryōanji in Kyoto, perhaps Japan’s most famous tourist site. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the increasing prominence of “Zen” in pop culture worldwide and the number of books with titles like *Zen in the Art of*..., referring to just about any conceivable topic, with perhaps only *Zen in the Art of Diplomacy* yet to appear. The visibility of Zen in the West owes much to the writings of D. T. Suzuki, who both informed the wider world about this Buddhist tradition and unleashed it from its monastic moorings in China, Korea, and Japan and its relatively limited cultural influence there. Inspired by the Zen wave early on, Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery* spawned the plethora of books with similar titles. Readers may be less familiar with the scrutiny of this Zen mystique in publications over the past two decades by scholars intent on setting the historical record straight. Shoji Yamada’s *Shots in the Dark* aims to further the agenda of disenchantment but in a more accessible, less academic style.

Let me begin then with a confession of my own awakening to things Japanese and subsequent disillusionment. I first came across Herrigel’s influential book and works by the great popularizer of Zen, D. T. Suzuki, as a graduate student of philosophy in Germany in the late 1960s and became so intrigued with Zen and Japanese ways of thinking that I decided to change career plans and head east for further study. There are some parallels, but also some significant differences, between Herrigel’s Japanese adventures and my own. Like the German philosopher who went to Japan in the 1920s to learn about Zen, I went with aspirations to study Zen while teaching philosophy.
Unlike Herrigel, however, who was directed to kyūdō, “the Way of the Bow,” in order to understand Zen, I entered into Zen in a more traditional way: practicing in temples and monasteries, as foreigners and Japanese laypeople could easily do by the 1970s. I also studied kyūdō for a short time, but as a side interest, not to learn about Zen. It took me less than a year of kyūdō practice to learn that Herrigel’s art of archery was substantially different from what I was being taught. It took a single sesshin, or intensive week of formal Zen meditation, to disabuse me of the illusion that Zen was about intriguing Chinese stories and trans-rational enigmas, as D. T. Suzuki often presented it. And the image of Ryōanji as a Zen garden of utter tranquility was suddenly shattered one day several years later when, sitting in meditation at a sub temple of the Ryōanji complex, I was awakened to the din of loudspeakers across the way, blaring the virtues of the garden to hoards of tourists.

Yamada’s Shots in the Dark systematically dissects both the foreigner Herrigel’s presentation of “Zen archery” and Japanese depictions of the rock garden at Ryōanji, to illustrate how Japanese like to consume idealized images of their culture from abroad and then project these images back into the world. For all its iconoclasm and fact-finding, however, Yamada’s book also constructs stereotypes of its own and takes pot shots at artists and cultural institutions that might appear differently in a more balanced book.

Take the author’s demolition of Herrigel and his work. In summary, Yamada depicts a Herrigel, who goes to Japan because of his longstanding interest in mysticism and then undergoes training in a renegade branch of traditional archery under the illusion, perpetrated by his maverick teacher Awa Kenzō, that this kyūdō was a spiritual discipline equivalent to Zen training and equally capable of inducing enlightenment in the form of Awa’s invented shari kenshō, “seeing one’s own true nature through the shot.” Compounding Awa’s own distortion of kyūdō, Herrigel himself either invents or misunderstands crucial parts of the master’s teaching, returns to Germany and publishes an account of his experience seven years later, and then publishes a much embellished account (the famous Zen in the Art of Archery) twelve years after that, in 1948, when he was barred from his professorship by the Occupation authorities for having been a Nazi rector of the University of Erlangen (p. 99). Herrigel’s book, translated into numerous languages, becomes an enormous success and so the fabricated connection between kyūdō and Zen spreads like wildfire throughout the world; in Japan the distortions and fabrications affect both the public images and the actual practice of Japanese archery as well as Zen. In the meantime, Herrigel’s Nazi connection is suppressed. Shots in the Dark includes, as an appendix, an English translation of “Herrigel’s Defense” at the de-Nazification trials.