

Tr. by James Kugel



Poems in Chinese by the Japanese Zen Monk Ryōkan

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Poems in Chinese by the Japanese Zen Monk Ryōkan
for Philip Whalen

Ryōkan (1758–1831) was a monk of the Sōtō branch of the Zen sect. He was born in Izumosaki in the province of Echigo, the eldest son of a village headman. Known as Yamamoto Eizō, he abandoned his inheritance and entered the priesthood at the age of seventeen, thereafter studying for some ten years under a Zen master at the Entsū-ji. After a period of extended wandering he returned to his native region in 1795 and lived there until his death, staying in various temples and huts or with farm families in the neighborhood, and supporting himself by *takuhatsu* or begging expeditions. He is famous for his *kanshi* or poems in Chinese, of which some 400 are extant, as well as for his Japanese poetry and highly distinctive calligraphy. His poetry in Chinese is profoundly influenced by that of the T'ang dynasty recluse Han-shan, the Master of Cold Mountain; he consciously ignores many of the technical niceties of traditional Chinese verse, and can perhaps best be appreciated in the light of the following declaration:

Who says my poems are poems?

My poems are not poems at all!

*Only when you understand that my poems are not poems
can we begin to talk about poems.*

UNTITLED POEM by Ryōkan

All my life too lazy to try to get ahead,
I leave everything to the truth of Heaven.
In my sack three measures of rice,
by the stove one bundle of sticks—
why ask who's got satori, who hasn't?
What would I know about that dust, fame and gain?
Rainy nights here in my thatched hut
I stick out my two legs any old way I please.

UNTITLED POEM by Ryōkan

I have a walking stick—
don't know how many generations it's been handed down—
the bark fell off long ago,
nothing left but a sturdy core.
In past years it measured the depth of a stream,
how many times clanged over steep rocky trails!
Now it leans against the east wall,
neglected, while the flowing years go by.