

Orientalism in the Works of Japan Scholar

R. H. Blyth

Patrick Heller

In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.”¹ This charge of deciphering Asian literature plainly “for and to the West” carries with it, on the one hand, the author’s admiration for a “foreign” culture along with his urge to share his excitement about it, while on the other hand, the author propagates implicit and explicit ethnocentric assumptions through translations, interpretations and/or creative work. This irony is precisely the case with British born author and translator Reginald Horace Blyth 1898-1964, whose literary productions were so clearly the result of his deep admiration for Japanese Literature and Zen Buddhism. However, in spite of his earnest attempts, Blyth often distorted the very aspects of Japan that he admired, and subsequently imparted misrepresentations and exotic conclusions to generations of “Japanologist” including such writers and poets as Gary Snyder, Richard Wright, and J.D. Salinger.² Through the use of Edward Said’s introduction to *Orientalism* I will show how R. H. Blyth’s work exhibits a fundamentally distorted Orientalist view of Japanese literature and religion.

Despite R. H. Blyth’s massive four volume collection on *haiku* rendered in English, his five volume collection *Zen and Zen Classics, Zen in English Literature*, and his *A History of Haiku* much of this inspired work tends to

1 Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010. (1882)

2 Romano, John. “Salinger was Playing Our Song,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1979.

possess exotic distortions, misrepresentations, and a heavy reliance on Western literary and biblical contexts to decipher the Japanese literature and Zen Buddhism to the minds of the West.

However it should be noted that Blyth is not alone in misrepresenting Japanese culture, or its literature. Since July 8, 1853 when Matthew Perry made his famous landing in Edo Bay, in effect beginning formal political and cultural ties between the United States and Japan, foreign writers “have accepted the basic distinction of East and West as the starting point of elaborate theories, epics, novels, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so one.”³ For example, in her study of white women and American orientalism *Embracing the East*, Mari Yoshihara writes on this fundamental conceptualization. Using the example of *Madame Butterfly*, Yoshihara writes, ever “since the publication of John Luther’s original story [*Madame Butterfly*] in 1898, David Blasco’s stage production in 1900, and Giacomo Puccini’s opera production of 1904, . . . [the Asian characters in *Madame Butterfly*] have provided a classic trope symbolizing the politics of race, nation, and gender in the U.S.-Asian relation.”⁴ Similarly, in 1901 Ernest Fenollosa was leaving Japan for the last time with several notebooks of his studies of the poetry of Rihaku, the Japanese name for the Chinese poet Li Po (701-762), and Noh. These notebooks would eventually become *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, a work that served as an aesthetic springboard for poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Moreover, Pound took these cultural representations from Fenollosa and would produce *Cathay*, a collection of nineteen poems from Rihaku, and *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* 1919.⁵ Still there is the case of poet Amy Lowell, posthumous Pulitzer Prize winner of 1926, who frequently employed themes associated with Asian culture and

3 Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (1867)

4 Yoshihara, Mari. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. (100-106)

5 Kenner, Hugh. *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. (196)

who brazenly acknowledged she knew no Chinese or Japanese and intended never to try to learn them.⁶ And finally there is Arthur Waley, a self-taught Japan scholar who had never been to Asia, and who brought English readers a variety of “translated” work: *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1918), *Japanese Poetry: The Uta* (1919), *The No Plays of Japan* (1921), *The Tale of Genji* (published in 6 volumes from 1921-33), *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (1928).⁷ While much of this work invigorated a new aesthetic for Modernist writers and fueled the imaginations of their readers with many exotic tales of Japan and China, they promoted a Western ethnocentric interpretation of Asian culture, aesthetics and religion.

In addition to distortions and exotic treatments by Western deciphers as a mark of Orientalism, Said also states “Orientalism depends on [a] flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of positional relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.” One way in which this relationship of power is maintained is through a Western dominated discourse that remakes the other culture in a manner that attempts to mirror the dominant culture. For example, when Blyth writes about Japanese *haiku* and Zen, he almost always provides quotations from European authors to validate his assumptions and opinions. In doing so, he colludes these ideas and gives the reader an artificial understanding of the other culture through its similarity to the dominant culture, often times a false similarity. That is to say, what is Japanese is ultimately a mirrored version of what is Western, but always a lesser copy of the original.

In a 1962 review of Blyth’s *Zen and Zen Classics Volume 2*, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*,⁸ Kazumitsu Kato writes of this process of comparison saying that “Blyth refers to William Wordsworth, on thirty-six

6 Yoshihara, Mari. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. (100-106)

7 Kenner, Hugh. *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. (198)

8 Kato, Kazumitsu. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1962), (459-462)

pages, Shakespeare on twenty-four; Thoreau appears on sixteen pages. There are numerous excerpts from European prose and poetry.” This reliance on the cultural and artistic discourse of the West as a mean to interpret another culture’s literature is in line with the subtle working of Said’s Orientalism. Here is another example of Blyth’s musings that leads to an egress misrepresentation that subtly exalts Western literature while giving praise to another literature, as is this statement on *haiku*:

I hold haiku to be the flower and culmination of all Eastern culture, and that it occupies the same position in one half of the world as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe do in the other half of the world. Let us look then at Buddhism and haiku, taking haiku as representing the national character of the Japanese as expressed in 17 syllable.

Said writes, “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.”⁹ The frequent comparisons employed by Blyth encourage readers to understand the foreign culture in terms of what is similar or familiar, there by nullifying an entire history of cultural development in one sweeping generalization, and unconsciously validating the similarities in the mind of the reader. Consider these open lines of Blyth’s *Haiku Volume I*: “the aim of this and succeeding volumes is to show that *haiku* requires our purest and most profound spiritual appreciation, for they represent a whole world, the Eastern World, of religious and poetic

9 Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (1871)

experience. *Haiku* is the final flower of all Eastern culture; it is also a way of living.”¹⁰ What Blyth does here is first, project his *ideal* of the “East” as a uniform region that shares a common system of culture, beliefs, and aesthetics whose ultimate outcome in the creation of seventeen syllables of poetry. Secondly, Blyth propagates his false *ideal* that *haiku*, a poetic form with a centuries-old historical literary development, into an exotic, mystical form of poetry that blends religious elements of both Christianity and Buddhism. I think we would find Blyth’s logic clearly suspicious if we were to conclude that the Elizabethan sonnet was the sum total of European culture, aesthetic, and religion.

Japanese scholar Donald Keene writes in *World Within Walls Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600-1867* that after the death of one Japan’s most distinguished haiku poet’s, Matsuo Basho (1644 – 1694) , *haiku*, then known as *haikai*, lost its “dignity and grandeur” and the form became “popularized.” Keene continues, “it no longer was necessary to display depth of feeling or even knowledge of tradition provided one was clever enough to twist the seventeen syllables into an amusing comment.” This is a very different idea than that of *haiku* being “a way of life,” or the representation of “Japanese national character.”

Blyth did more than reinvent *haiku* for Western readers. In addition to his many translations, Blyth worked on Zen Buddhism, or more accurately, he worked to meld his view of *haiku* with Zen Buddhism. For Blyth there is always a required blending of a Japanese cultural element with something from the West. Of Zen he writes, “Zen is the ultimate simplification of both Christianity and Buddhism.” Clearly this is an oversimplification on a grand scale. How can a theological religion with its cornerstone belief in a supernatural power that divides the world into good and evil be at all similar to a form of Buddhism that has no element of belief? In fact, for Zen

10 Blyth, R. H. *Haiku*. Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1952. Preface (iii)

practitioners' religious knowledge is achieved through emptying the mind of thoughts and giving attention to only one thing, rather than by reading religious writings.¹¹ Through this kind of one-to-one association, Blyth appropriates an entire cultural heritage and redefines it to fit his desire for Buddhism to be like Christianity. Another of Blyth's Orientalist conclusions is his tendency to "discriminate between Zen and Buddhism, as if they were separate streams of thought."¹² For Blyth, Zen is a school of universal thought that belongs to no nation. However, according to *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature*,¹³ there have been at least twelve distinct Buddhist sects in Japan since 538 when the first images of Buddha arrived in Japan from Korea. During the Kamakura period (1185-1333) three distinct Zen sects emerged. Clearly, it would be difficult to argue that out of the multitude of practices and interpretations of Buddhist texts that there is one unified ideology.

Another concept of Said's Orientalism is the relationship of power. Although writing specifically of the power relationship between Palestine and the West, Said's views can be applied to Japan and the West. Said states "There is nothing mysterious or natural about power authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive, it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value, it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces."¹⁴ Blyth's history with Japan is in itself a fascinating story of influence that reflects Said's theory that power "is instrumental, persuasive, has status, and establishes canons of taste and

11 Cambridge Dictionary 2003

12 Journal of the American Oriental Society, 82.3. 1962.

13 Miner, Earl Roy, Hiroko Odagiri, and Robert E. Morrell. *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985. (368-376)

14 Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (1881)

value.” Blyth left England in 1924 to pursue a teaching opportunity at Keijo University, a Japanese university in Seoul Korea during Japanese occupation of Korea. There he first read the works of D.T. Suzuki who was one of the first Japanese Zen scholars to write about Zen in English. As work broke out 1939, Blyth left Korea for Japan where he was interned with other foreigners in a low-security detention center. After the war, Blyth became somewhat influential with the Occupation Forces since he was proficient in speaking and reading Japanese. On one occasion, Blyth negotiated with General MacArthur on behalf of the president of Gakushuin University, then the school for the imperial family and other nobility, on whether the schools should remain open. Blyth suggested the school open its doors to the public, a solution that satisfied both MacArthur and the university president. As a token of gratitude, the president of the university offered Blyth a position. Also, in 1946, Blyth met Emperor Hirohito and played a hand in persuading the Emperor to travel throughout Japan to present himself to the nation as “ordinary mortal.” Still more striking is the meeting where Blyth, at the request of MacArthur, tried to persuade Emperor Hirohito to change his religion. Blyth’s mediation consisted of “explain [ing] Christianity to members of the Imperial family and to encourage their understanding of the Christian point of view.”¹⁵ The historic context is important to understanding Blyth’s relationship to power, since it is through this proximity to power that Blyth’s expertise becomes instrumental and persuasive. His “informed” version of Japan becomes highly motivated and unchallenged.

In part due to his being in the right place at the right time, Blyth’s work on Japan was elevated to an influential status through his proximity to channels of power that qualified his “unchallenged centrality” of an “Oriental world.” However, as recent as 2000, the effects of Blyth’s “established canons

15 Blyth, Reginald Horace. *The Genius of Haiku: Readings from R.H. Blyth on Poetry, Life, and Zen*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1995. (3-10)

of taste and value,” that is to say the bulk of his writings on *haiku* and Zen Buddhism were still rippling through the academic world. On an archive of discussion on the Pre-Modern Japan Studies discussion board from Thu, 16 Nov. through Tue, 21 Nov. 2000, the following comments by Richard Bowring, Professor of Japanese studies Richard Bowring Cambridge University, and Robert Morrell, Professor Emeritus of Japanese Literature & Buddhism at Washington University were produced. Bowring writes, “Although it is undoubtedly true that [Blyth’s] books have had extraordinary influence, and I too was undoubtedly drawn to study Japanese in the first place by the likes of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, I now find Blyth’s books quite appalling.” Robert Morrell echoes a similar comment suggesting Blyth’s books be kept “out of reach of impressionable undergraduates.”

Although R. H. Blyth gave the English-speaking world an opportunity to peer into the history of Japanese poetry and to learn about Zen Buddhism, he left much confusion for Japanese literary scholars to sort. Yet Blyth’s larger negative contribution was to freeze Japanese literary history in the past, and to characterize that past to readers as reflections on contemporary Japan. Through his admiration of a romanticized past where haiku was a purported cultural center and through his personal version of a Zen Buddhism that transcends and embodies all world religions, Blyth propagated false assumptions of Japanese culture, aesthetics and religion to Western readers.