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# Reading the Raven

## Hermeneutics in Hagiography

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**A**MONG THE productions of the famed Buddhist tradition usually known as Zen is a thousand-year-old genre of biography unprecedented in its obscurity, oddness, and brilliance. Called *yü-lu* in Chinese or *goroku* in Japanese, these texts represent themselves as life-histories of great Zen masters, but they ignore virtually all that a modern reader seeks in a biography, telling nothing about their subjects' childhood traumas, mature personalities, shopping habits, or sexual peccadillos and little even about their looks or lifestyles. Instead, they give disjointed, decontextualized accounts of entirely incomprehensible dialogues (thus the term *yü-lu* "discourse record") that the masters are purported to have had in the course of their careers. I say "purported" since recent scholarship reveals that these so-called records were rarely assembled until their subjects had been dead for one or two centuries.

Within this peculiar genre, the present manuscript is especially peculiar—in several ways. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the first original discourse record to be published outside of Asia and the first whose various personae are mostly animals (i.e., other than humans). Presumably the dialogues recorded here actually occurred between human beings but have been transferred from lip to beak, so to speak, with the intention of protecting the speakers' identities—but on this point we can merely speculate. In terms of literary pedigree, the animal characters seem to be of ancient and mixed breed. Their European antecedents notably include the talking creatures of Aesop's fables, Grimm's fairy tales, *The Wind in the Willows*, and Orwell's farm, while on the

American side, I would be remiss if I did not note Native American myths and tales, the Uncle Remus stories, Edgar Allen Poe's raven, and Freddy the Pig. Heading the list of Asian forerunners would be the hero of the rollicking sixteenth-century, Chinese Buddhist novel *Monkey*, and the frogs and other beasts who caper across the page in Japanese ink paintings, caricaturing priests and all sorts of other people.

Robert Aitken, compiler and annotator of this record, has little to say about its origins, stating only that the text "came to him mysteriously"—an ambiguous remark, to be sure. However elusive the record's ultimate source, Aitken Rōshi is himself well known, ranking among the foremost contemporary Zen teachers outside of Japan. He studied Zen for thirty years under a series of distinguished Japanese masters—Nyogen Senzaki, Nakagawa Sōen, Yasutani Haku'un, and finally Yamada Kōun, who authorized him to teach independently in 1974. Even now, in his eighties and happily retired, he continues to lecture, write, and give personal instruction as his energies permit. *The Sayings and Doings of Zen Master Raven*, excerpted here, will be his tenth book, and whatever may be determined about its validity as a text or its place within the *yü-lu* genre, that Aitken Rōshi has had such a big hand in bringing it to print attests to its authenticity as Zen teaching. Although I don't understand a single word of it myself, I commend Raven's record to you as a source of pleasure and who knows?—maybe even enlightenment.

Nelson Foster coedited *The Roaring Stream: A New Zen Reader* (Ecco Press, 1996).