

Japanese Texts: Narrative

"AN ACCOUNT OF MY HUT"

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Kamo no Chomei was born in 1153, and at the age of fifty, he tells us, he renounced the world and became a Buddhist monk. He was of a hereditary line of Shinto priests, and in better times, may well have succeeded his father as a priest at the Kamo Shrine in Kyoto. But the late twelfth century was among the most strife-torn and transforming of all periods in Japan, and this was not to be.

In 1212, ten years after he took the tonsure and assumed a Buddhist name, after he adopted to the life of a recluse in the mountains, Chomei wrote a brief essay. "An Account of My Hut" seems a simple, almost a fragile, literary structure, yet has proven to be among the most resilient and enduring of Japanese texts. Indeed, when we recall how frequently Japanese writing—whether a thirty-one-syllable lyric, a Noh play, or a narrative of over a thousand pages—coheres around the site of a hut or a small sequestered dwelling, located in the mountains or on a strand of desolate beach, at a discrete remove from the pressures of politics and society, we begin to understand the range and importance of Chomei's account. We might also adjust our sense of a literary "monument," of a "classic" work of canonical stature, to accommodate other understandings of how literary strength or spiritual value can be recognized or measured.

"An Account of My Hut" has been variously described, but to begin simply we can say that it is written in two parts. The first is an illustration of suffering in the world. Here the writing is reminiscent of the apocalyptic Buddhist commentary and parables popular at the time, and finds a visual analogue in those medieval picture scrolls depicting a desiccated world haunted by hungry ghosts. The second part, though nostalgic and often brooding in tone, is yet a celebratory record of how the author recovered, under specific conditions, at a particular place, what he calls

"peace," or more minimally, "absence of grief." It is an account, finally, of a cultural survivor, who had witnessed changes as dramatic and abrupt as any in Japanese history. No modern Tokyo writer, sipping coffee under a naked light bulb, recollecting the glow of fireflies, had greater material cause for nostalgia than did Chomei.

Plainly, this short, diary-like rendering we know as "An Account of My Hut" offers no thorough historical record of occurrences in the second half of the twelfth century. (In brief, a ruling family was ousted, bringing to an end a four-hundred-year era of "Peace and Tranquility," while rival military clans fought it out, intermittently attacking, pillaging, or occupying the capital city of Kyoto.) But neither does Chomei ignore completely the sights and the consequences of that history, as does much later medieval writing—where concrete reference to worldly distress seems but a lapse of concentration, so strong is the meditative urge. The "Account," to be sure, is the work of a cleric, whose adopted faith teaches most fundamentally that the world is a place of suffering, that the things of the world are illusory, inconstant, and impermanent. It is a work moreover that, from beginning to end, means to be instructive (when Chomei claims that he is writing to please himself, as though he has no audience, he is affecting a familiar stance taken, among others, by Sei Shonagon when she wrote her *Pillow Book*¹ ca. 996). Yet the didactic tone is modulated, where it does not break off altogether. The will to transmit abstract religious truth fades away, and in its place we find another impulse: to speak in a personal, lyrical way of suffering and of a path toward tranquility. In this sense, the "Account" is no mere tract which heaps scorn on this "cracked husk of a world," but rather a guide directing us to a remote mountain hut, where in solitude Chomei reveals affection for all that the world has torn and scattered—for a whole culture uprooted, unhoused, in need of shelter, however fragile or temporary.

For many, it seemed, religion itself was to provide that shelter. In fact, a number of popular Buddhist revival movements had emerged and were enthusiastically embraced in Chomei's day. Their popularity sprang, no doubt, from the sheer scale of violent change, wherein people of every place in society were daily brought face to face with uncertainty. This historical predicament was given heightened significance in the notion of *mappo*, or the "last days of the Law." According to Buddhist chronology, in this phase the world would lapse into degeneracy, laws and rites would be imperfectly observed, and ordinary suffering would yield

to chaos. This age was to have begun three thousand years after the Buddha's birth (1052 by a numerical estimate) and was to continue for an indefinite period. This put Chomei and his culture squarely within a sick, decadent cycle, and gives a distinctly religious aura to that litany of disasters with which the "Account" begins.

And so the Fire that sweeps the capital, which was a fire in fact and can be documented, assumes figural significance as an inevitable inferno brought on by the vanity of city-dwellers. The Whirlwind, given realistic detail as "roofs of bark or thatch were driven like winter leaves in the wind," also reminds the author of "the blasts of Hell," and is of such uncommon force that "it must be a presage of terrible things to come." The Moving of the Capital, which was a historical occurrence, seems a pure sign of instability and the unexpected, provoking both anxiety and a painful comparison between these days and the past—when rulers were wise and forbearing, and people presumably did not "all feel uncertain as drifting clouds." With the Famine there is the graphic scene of bodies decomposing along the banks of the Kamo River, and of an infant, unaware its mother is dead, still sucking at her breast; yet it also totalizes the author's vision, as he sees that the world is one of "foulness and evil." Finally, the Earthquake seems to signal the end, as "mountains crumbled and rivers were buried, the sea tilted over and immersed the land"; as for damage throughout the capital, "not a single mansion, pagoda, or shrine was left whole." Considered the most benign of the four elements, the earth itself had thus broken apart to afflict the people. With this, Chomei concludes his litany of disaster and extraordinary suffering, drawing out the ultimate lesson "of the vanity and meaninglessness of the world." As mentioned earlier, Chomei's language in this section has parallels in other religious or secular writings of this general period. In the monk Genshin's *Essentials of Salvation*,² for example, a catechetical text and a medieval best-seller, the Hell which awaits karmic evildoers is described as horrifyingly as is Chomei's Kyoto-Hellfire (even as the heavenly rewards awaiting those who attain salvation, in Genshin's portrayal, assume a certain this-worldly form in the pleasures of his hut, in the way Chomei will describe them as he continues his "Account"). Also, in the warrior tales, and notably in *The Tale of the Heike*,³ which grew from oral stories that had begun to circulate in Chomei's day, we find episodes of fire, earthquake, and moving capitals, as well as examples of unnatural disaster and disease, with the reiteration that clearly "the world was fixed on the path of chaos," or

again, that "for men of sensitive souls, the world now seemed a hopeless place." Also noticeable in the *Heike*—whose theme is that of impermanence and the fall of the mighty and whose subject is the historical struggle between the Heike and the Genji clans—is that the reach toward a certain epical breadth is often interdicted by lyrical intensity ("the blood stained the sand like dark maple leaves"). Here, as in Chomei's "Account," a way out, a path toward salvation, follows the path of the exile, haunted by the loss of past glory. Here, too, tranquility is recovered in the quiet of a mountain retreat, where the former Empress, now a Buddhist nun, waits for death "on a velvety green carpet of moss."

When Chomei concludes his opening section with a reflective passage on "Hardships of Life in the World," and when he tells us that in his fiftieth year he renounced the world and took Buddhist orders, we are given both certain biographical facts, as well as the sketch of a literary archetype. Even in better times, indeed, in some of the memorable writing of the lost Heian golden age, we regularly come across the figure of an emperor abdicating or a love-stricken courtier withdrawing to outlying hills and the contemplative life, even though many such world-weary figures never finally take their vows, or continue to return at intervals to the colorful complications of the city.

In that sense, just when he seems most "original"—setting off on his own solitary road, leaving the vanities of culture and society behind—Chomei moves modestly but with grim, focused determination, along a well-traveled literary path. He then fashions a hut "where, perhaps, a traveler might spend a single night." It is this kind of path and dwelling that will carry and shelter Saigyô and later Bashô along their own protracted period of exile and wandering. Here too we identify the traveling priest who, in some out of the way but culturally resonant place in Nature, will discover the heroes and heroines of many Noh plays. The hut which Chomei builds is of materials, wood and thatch. But it assumes shape because of certain cultural materials which Chomei knew and used, and sought to rescue.

Like other influential medieval literati, Chomei was a writer (essayist, compiler of miracle stories, travel diarist, but primarily a poet) and a monk. Literature, and especially poetry, came thus to be practiced and preserved as a religion. And the poet's life, like the monk's life, was one of seclusion or exile. It was spare, unadorned in any practical sense, marginal, and precarious. Yet it did have formidable precedents. Genji himself was exiled to a forlorn dwelling on Suma beach, a dark but crucial chapter in

Murasaki's great narrative—one of its several illustrations of karma leading even the brightest of lives into darkness. And beside the figure of Genji in this scene is that of Po Chū-i [Bo Juyi], the most influential of all Chinese poets for classical writers in Japan, who himself built a hut on Mt. Lu (just as beyond Po Chū-i [Bo Juyi] emerges the figure of the Indian recluse-sage, Vimalakīrti).

This is exile, then, but an enabling deprivation. Lacking color, variety, action, its very blandness (a trait widely celebrated in Taoist [Daoist] and later Ch'an [Chan] or Zen texts) generates other insights, other tastes. These Chomei attempted to identify in his *Mumyosho* (*Notes Without a Name*), one of the most famous of all medieval treatises on poetry and aesthetics. Chomei himself had written poetry in a so-called new style, notable for its "mystery and depth," or *yugen*, an aesthetic category of crucial importance to medieval culture. But here, in the question and answer form typical of such discussion, Chomei feigns ignorance, and asks what "new style" poetry, and its alleged "mystery and depth," might possibly mean. The answer (his own of course, but deferentially attributed to his master, the priest-poet Shunei) gives no definition, but a series of metonymical illustrations:

on an autumn evening, for example, there is no color in the sky nor any sound, yet although we cannot give any reason for it, we are somehow moved to tears. . . .

again, when one gazes upon the autumn hills half-concealed by a curtain of mist, what one sees is veiled yet profoundly beautiful; such a shadowy scene, which permits free exercise of the imagination in picturing how lovely the whole panoply of scarlet leaves must be, is far better than to see them spread with dazzling clarity before our eyes. . . .

it is only when many meanings are compressed into a single word, when the depths of feeling are exhausted yet not expressed, when an unseen world hovers in the atmosphere of the poem, when the near and common are used to express the elegant, when a poetic conception of rare beauty is developed to the fullest extent in a style of surface simplicity—only then, when the conception is exalted to the highest degree and the words are too few, will the poem, by expressing one's feelings in this way, have the power of moving Heaven and Earth within the brief confines of a mere thirty-one syllables, and be capable of softening the hearts of gods and demons.⁴

In the atmosphere of all that Chomei writes, in the contours of his fragile hut and the misty views of autumn twilight it provides,

what if not the old lost world of the Heian court "yet hovers like an unseen world," waiting to be apprehended? Nature immediately and clearly surrounds Chomei in the mountains, but it is the distant world of a fading culture which he consciously gathers about him:

On mornings when I feel short-lived as the white wake behind a boat, I go to the banks of the river and, gazing at the boats plying to and fro, compose verses in the style of the Priest Mansei. Or if of an evening the wind in the maples rustles the leaves, I recall the river at Jinyo, and play the lute in the manner of Minamoto no Tsunenobu. If still my mood does not desert me, I often tune my lute to the echoes in the pines, or pluck the notes of the Melody of the Flowering Stream, modulating the pitch to the sound of the water.⁵

What Chomei sees in Nature are not "unmediated visions," generated by the force of the poet's free imagination. Setting out on an "ambitious journey," Chomei passes through the fields of Awazu, there to "pay my respects to the remains of Semimaru's hut"; crossing the Tanagami River, he visits the tomb of still another Heian poet, Sarumaru. These are lyrical movements in prose, through sights and sounds recorded by other wanderers. Even "the hooting of owls," a startling sound suggestive of the stark isolation of the mountain, contributes to Chomei's "endless pleasure," since Saigyō had also heard and sung of the owl's "eerie cries." Far beyond Chomei's hut, in the city, the world rages and people fall victim to a dizzying flux. But inside the hut (where on a shelf rests his books of poetry and music and extracts from the sacred writings, and beside them a folding koto and a lute) or in the Nature which immediately surrounds it, Chomei lives both in solitude, and in the company of a tradition he willfully places in all he hears and sees.

Throughout the medieval period, it is the poet who most movingly illuminates this forlorn, tumble-down, autumnal scene. But it is in the prose-poetry of Chomei's "Account" that within this scene, if dimly and in monochrome, emerges a human figure—a medieval portrait of the artist, though here an old man. The "Account" warns us of disaster and hardship in the world. And it reveals the path of renunciation, which leads into Nature and the crude but comforting arrangement of a hut ten feet square. Still, it is Chomei himself, the aging poet-priest, who is the hidden—and so in the terms of medieval aesthetics—the truly valuable subject of this "Account."

Chomei is "hidden" insofar as he does not stand forward in this work and present his life for our scrutiny and judgment, which seems to be the dramatic burden St. Augustine or Rousseau bear. His are modest claims: "I seek only tranquility. I rejoice in the absence of grief." When he tells us simply what he knows of the world, of human dwellings, and finally of attachment, Chomei reveals himself as an all-too-human monk. He is weak by the standards of the world he has renounced, and weak before his religion's imperative, since he remains attached to what is, after all, illusory.

But Chomei is strong in a way that is comprehensible, given the history he experienced. He knew that much of the past was gone and much else would not last. He mourned what was lost and gathered about him what was left. In a hut on Toyama in 1212, he recorded the exact site, the day to day moments, where he eked out his own and his tradition's survival.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Explore the uses of landscape in Chomei's "An Account of My Hut." What values are ascribed to the city and its buildings? to the country? To what extent is religious feeling a product of the environment?
2. Like the Book of Job, Chomei's "Account" is one of unnatural suffering. To whom (or to what) does Chomei turn in his need? Does he accept his fate as a sufferer? Does he protest against it? What does he learn for having suffered?
3. What role does culture—the arts of music and poetry in particular—play in the "Account?" Does Chomei renounce culture or does he preserve it? Is the hut which he builds a product of culture, or an extension of life in nature?

NOTES

1. Ivan Morris, trans., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, 2 vols.; Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971, reprinted 1974, 1 vol. paperback).
2. Tsunoda Ryūsaku, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, eds., *Sources of the Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).
3. Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
4. Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 269.

5. Donald Keene, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature: From the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1955; paperback, 1960), p. 208.

REFERENCES

- Keene, Donald, ed. *Anthology of Japanese Literature: From the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. New York: Grove Press, 1955; paperback, 1960. Includes a complete translation of *An Account of My Hut (Hōjōki)*, as well as selections from other medieval prose works.