

Hungry Ghosts and Hungry People:

Somaticity and Rationality in Medieval Japan

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One dog barks at nothing
ten thousand others
pass it on

- Japanese aphorism*

Excretion is not simply a middle term between two appropriations.

- Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade"

The Somaticity of Specters

Invisible bodies, no doubt by definition, can be done away with much more easily than visible ones. Since angels, ghosts, demons, ancestors, ghouls and the like take up no physical space in our empirical world, the liquidation of them involves no bloodletting, leaves no corpses, and calls for no official inquiry. Whenever such invisible bodies are being deleted from the "chain of being" long believed in by a given people, that act of erasure is a sure sign that the aspiration to be recognized as "modern" has gotten strong among them. Aquinas lived when larger philosophical problems were still linked to positions adopted concerning the bodies of angels; soon thereafter, angelic bodies and, in fact, all references to such beings, fell completely out of discussions considered properly philosophical. In this kind of move, modernity was finding - and founding - itself.

The loss was, of course, widely seen as a gain. The discarded was obscurantism, something for which the medieval mind, it was assumed, had had a penchant; the

*W.S. Merwin, *Asian Figures*, New York, Atheneum, 1975, p. 38.



Monk and gaki

winner was rationality, a precious commodity now free at last to come into its own and to claim the new, modern age for itself. The bond was tight between modernity and rationality; the invisible adhesive making it so was the assumption that it was necessary and natural, not contingent — and, most certainly — not itself a story.

Now even to suspect an *element of the fabricated* in modernity's account of itself — let alone read it in Lotard's terms as "grand narrative" — is, of course, to feel oneself already somewhat loosened from that epoch and the spellbinding story it had been telling about itself. And to query that is also to become newly curious about what the life of the mind was like before the modernity narrative caught us in its spell and had us convinced that the modern's own relationship with rationality was privileged. Now the jump from the medieval to the modern looks less like a chasm and more like a gully — or, more accurately, a series of them. Medieval mentalities, we are increasingly apt to discover, were what they were, not because real rationality or a method peculiar to the sciences was not yet theirs, but merely because the store of information at their disposal was much smaller than it later became for moderns and for ourselves (whatever we are). With the incremental growth of specific knowledge came a gradual reduction in the distance between the known and the unknown: medieval thinkers simply had to make long, often very bold, jumps in places where later peoples got by — and continue to get by — with shorter and shorter ones.

This brings us, with recharged curiosity, back to the invisible bodies in medieval thought and to noticing that they frequently show up in overtly philosophical texts and in ways that seem natural to the discourse there. To explain their presence as "illogical" is circular; to attribute it solely to concessions to folk belief and/or the pressure of religious authorities — as if the medieval thinkers really knew otherwise all along! — is to charge bad faith without clear evidence of such. To the medievalist, then, the nexus between invisible bodies and rationality becomes problematized anew. Ghosts and ghouls may be odd in any age; historical inquiry is interested in why they are less odd in one era than in another. To delineate that difference is the reason for my attempt here to recover — without reclaiming — the intellectual whereabouts of a specific kind of invisible body that had a large role in the life of the mind in medieval Japan. The body on which I focus this inquiry is that of the *yūrei*, an important component in the development of medieval Japanese Buddhist thought. Being Buddhist, it had its origin in India, where the concept of

such beings (termed *preta* in Sanskrit) was first articulated. Along with the expansion of Buddhism, this figure too climbed out of India, spread not only southward but also eastward along the Silk Route. The evidence is clear that it gained for itself a secure niche in the minds of the peoples of southeast Asia but also among the Chinese, Koreans and Japanese.¹

"Hungry ghost" is the usual but rough rendering of these terms into English. The concept, it is worth noting, has been something of an embarrassment to modern Buddhists, including persons of the West who like their Buddhism rational and empirical; although these ghosts pop up all over the tradition, such persons dismiss them as external to "real" Buddhism, things that the popular mind dragged in during weak moments when the Buddhist philosophers — with their usual vigilance for maintaining the rational — were dozing.

I doubt that this is the way to go. It assumes a notion of pure rationality, one easily separable from the folk mind and from the larger social correlates of any view or theory. My own account will not ignore the interestedness of the Buddhist ecclesiastical authorities; nor will it deny the folk their due. It will, on the contrary, suggest how hungry ghosts, as beings with bodies, were — at least for medieval Japan — an important reed that was woven into many places in a cognitive basket that was used to try to hold a lot of things together. To play a role in a synthesis intended to satisfy philosophers, ecclesiastics, a privileged aristocracy, a wary government and a vast "folk" — this was what the concept of the hungry ghost was expected to do. Appeals to some level of demonstrability were part of the argument for it all; it was what passed for "science" in its day.

And for a long time it worked. When it fell apart that happened not because the Japanese discovered rationality but because better and fuller information about the world gradually became more than the old basket could hold. At the same time, contradictions built into the old container's structure became undeniable and finally unmanageable. Improved information about things, combined with a growing awareness of the old paradigm's structural stresses, were both enough to drastically relativize its importance. This meant it had to be reassigned. Whereas in the medieval period, the concept of hungry ghosts had been part of the best science of the day, in the modern it slipped increasingly into a much more narrow domain, one for which the nineteenth-century Japanese invented a new word, *shūkyō* or "religion." The coin-

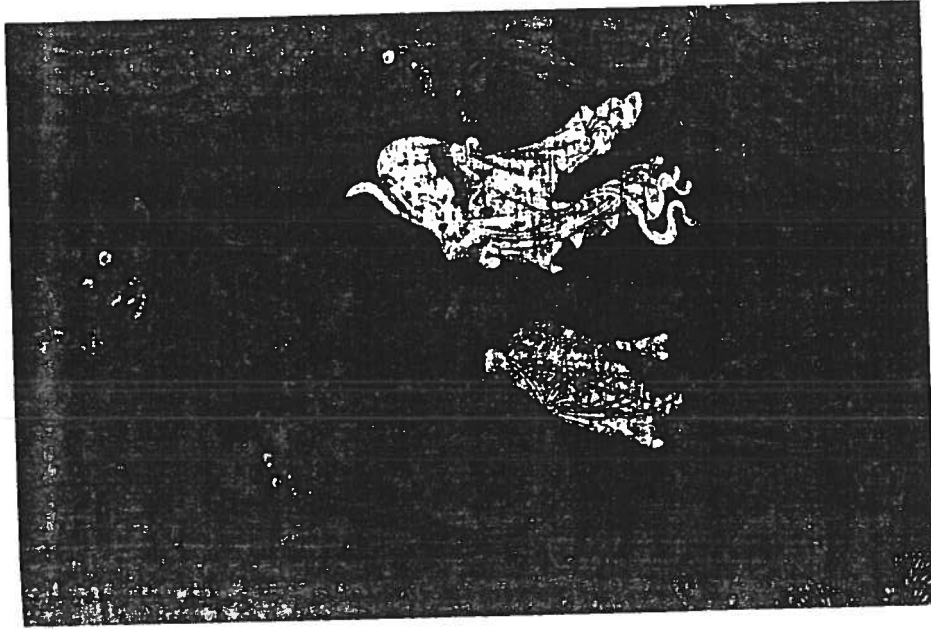
age made a small cage. In it were placed notions like that of the hungry ghost — now something no more than a vivid metaphor for strictly internal and private realities.²

Back home in medieval Japanese thought, however, it had been the somaticity of these creatures that was important. There, they had certainly not been merely symbols of events of psychic pain or hyperbolic representations of greed. Without a body — different from man's and ordinarily invisible to humans, to be sure — these creatures would have made no sense. It is, in fact, the *bodily interaction* between humans and ghosts which was crucial for the medieval people who concern me here.

The classic sources in the Buddhist scriptures are unambiguous about that somaticity: the *preta gaki* are depicted as the real, discrete, and fully embodied occupants of a distinct rubric in the taxonomy of being. Their somaticity is so much a part of them that it is also the locus of their misery. For the hungry ghost is not just periodically hungry. Hunger is in its name because it is constituted by hunger, not merely conditioned by it. For other kinds of beings — mankind, animals and the like — hunger will come and go but for the *gaki* there is only an ongoing, unalleviated gnawing of the stomach and parching of the throat. When the Buddhist canon again and again depicts this creature as one "with a stomach as huge as a mountain but a throat as narrow as a needle," there may be hyperbole in the dimensions, but the antinomy of the structure is of central importance to the definition of this type. That body is this being's horrible dilemma: voracious appetites and absolutely minimal equipment cannot even begin to satisfy it. A painting from Sung China shows it well.

Within the classically defined Buddhist understanding of the "chain of being," this creature had a position only one rung above that of the creatures in hell. Because transmigration through multiple lives was simply assumed to be true, those beings born as hungry ghosts received that fate as retribution for gross moral faults in anterior lives. Their torture was punitive, much like that of the creatures of hell.

The nuance of difference between this fate and that of hell's inhabitants is, however, interesting. Whereas hells are prisons, the hungry ghost was in a place without walls. Because the locus of its punishment was coextensive with its own body and, in fact, constituted that body, the need for walls was gone. These damned were free to wander the world at will because they could never escape their own bodies. The need for hell's externally applied instruments of torture also fell away: the scimitars, corkscrews and hot irons of generic hells. Gone too was the need for a small



Hungry ghosts from a Sung painting.

Because terror was thought to be a facilitator rather than manipulator of such cognition, the *Gaki-zoshi*, for instance, were thought to be apertures into reality as it really is.

And medieval Japan gives ample instances of these pictures doing their intended work. In this, the hungry ghost scrolls were like the scrolls and screens depicting hell (*jigoku-zoshi*). The poet Saigyō (1118-90), who elsewhere depicted his reactions to hell-pictures, records his sense of horror in seeing portraits of *gaki* making and then eating their own children:⁴

Creatures who birth
babies every night, every day
and gulp them down as fast —
a prodigious realm showing
great feats of horror.

Dream-journey narratives, reports of people claiming to have returned from brief sojourns in other worlds and the picture-scrolls seem to have reinforced one another. A thirteenth-century text tells of a man who saw the realm of *gaki* and found them "looking just the way they are shown in pictures."⁵

The point seems clear. The horror shows, the real terror and the making of personal leaps into the Buddhist epistemic web were all connected. Medieval men, women and children learned about these aliens, at least in part, so that they might take the requisite steps in this world to avoid being reborn that way in the next. And undoubtedly the Buddhist temples collected both credence and revenues from this. There were very wealthy temples and elite monks who had personal and institutional reasons for wanting wide and deep public purchase of this view of reality.⁶

Ideological closure was, to be sure, high on their list of desiderata. However, to notice their patent, even blatant, interestlessness does not remove the necessity of our trying to reconstruct how the medieval view of things "worked," how it felt as an episteme — and how and why it eventually fell apart. To see ideology at work here does not preclude the fact that the Buddhism of this epoch also proffered what was to be accepted as the best available science of the day. To detect the signs of manipulation does not negate the fact that these were also configurations of data and theory intended to present — even to the presenters themselves — the era's version of a cognitively satisfying schema of reality.

army of keepers and torture-dispensing thugs. In the case of the hungry ghost, it is not what is done to the body that causes pain but the received structure of the body itself that virtually hurt like hell.

Science and the Fate of Feces

The visual evidence on which I concentrate is drawn primarily, but not exclusively, from two extant scrolls of twelfth-century Japan, sequentially arranged pictures that depict hungry ghosts in a variety of activities. These scrolls, now housed in the Japanese National Museums of Tokyo and Kyoto, are known as *Gaki-zoshi*, inasmuch as "*gaki*" is the Japanese rendering of the Chinese characters for "hungry ghost" and "*zoshi*" pinpoints the documentary, evidential nature of pictures such as these.⁷ The scenes in them, still vivid and captivating after seven hundred years, tell us more than any other resource about *gaki* bodies and how they were imagined by the medievals.

On many points, the ancient Indian Buddhist scriptures and the medieval Japanese totally agreed. For instance, each holds that the hungry ghost, while occupying a distinctly separate place in the taxonomy of being, is a form of existence into which a human being could be reborn with terrifying ease. With karmic transmigration assumed, a slip downward in the taxonomy was often the price to be paid for moral turpitude. This doubled the horror. Not only were humans encompassed by invisible *gaki* in their present life, but they faced the dire possibility of dying and being reborn as such in the next one. And that personalizing of the horror also proximized it; given the fact that such an eventuality might at any given time be no more than one die-and-rebirth event away, there was a "Gregor Samsa" factor here. The terror was real and total. Finding oneself transformed into a body so utterly alien was potentially as close as the other side of one heart failure, one fatally complicated childbirth, one entrapment in a burning building or any other of the many means of sudden death.

Terror was part of argument. Dull minds, it was assumed, needed powerful filips to see reality. Some ascetics may have gotten clairvoyant through their disciplines and were in possession of "heaven's eye" (*tenagen*); they could see how the whole system worked and could literally see the bodies of the *gaki*.

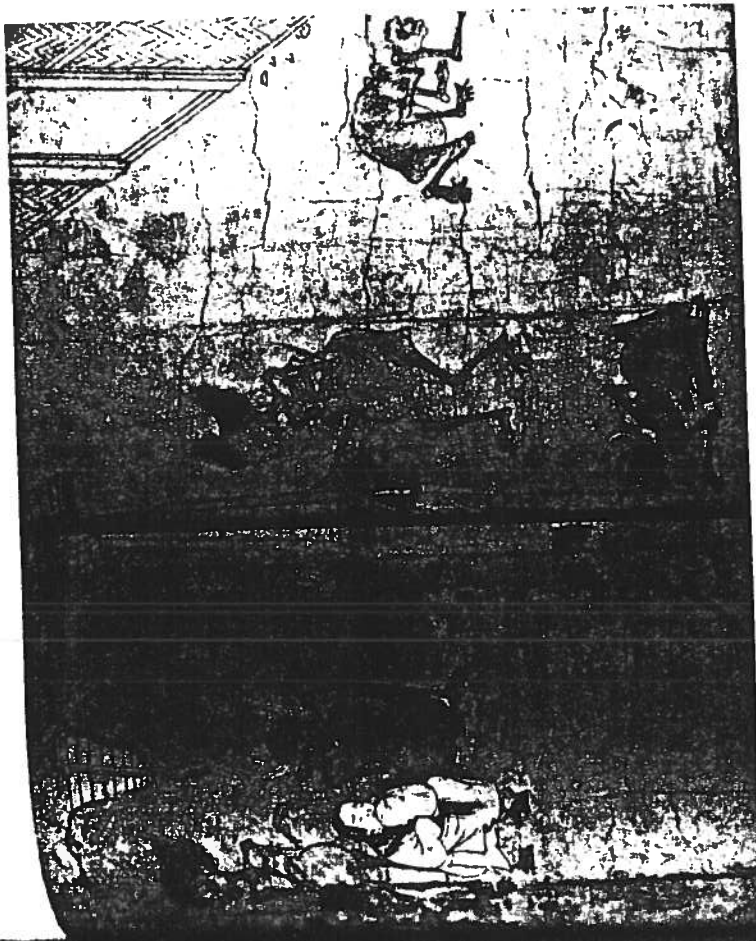
But lesser men and women needed stories and pictures to jog their minds.

This calls for a scrutiny of the scrolls — and, I propose, at the nexus between *gaki* and feces in them. To look at the pictures is to look at the bodies of wraiths — but at wraiths most commonly in places where excrement and other bodily wastes will be found. *Gaki*, the pictures tell us, will invariably be present in latrines and cesspools. In an especially graphic scene from the scroll in the Tokyo Museum we are shown what is happening in a back alley of the capital. The exquisite realism of execution here reinforces the sense that it comprises an aperture into a reality ordinarily unseen — not just in the social sense (because the latrine was in a back alley) but, more importantly, in the ontological sense. The human defecators here are clearly blind to the presence of the *gaki* around them. The painting's viewer, a human like those portrayed, was meant to get the point: "So, too, you are blind to these things most of the time! And this is your rare chance to see what really exists. It is not to be missed!"

This might profitably be regarded as medieval art as ontological X ray. It purports to open the view to two things he or she ordinarily cannot see: first, that *gaki*, in fact, commingle invisibly with humans in their own world and, second, that men, women and children ordinarily live their lives oblivious to the gruesome beings hunched over next to them. The picture functions as aperture but then also reflexively as mirror. It provides a rare chance to really "see" *gaki* but also to get a glimpse of humans — the viewers themselves — living daily life in a condition of epistemic and visual occlusion.

But what the picture says about feces is as important as what it says about human myopia: the "science" is as much a part of it as are the psychology and religion. And that is because this offers the viewer a challenge to "verify" the entire schema's intelligibility. In a word, the viewer of the pictures was implicitly requested to conduct an experiment, one that involves heightened awareness of excrement: what can be observed about it, what is mystifying about it, and how the unknown can be turned into the known. The experiment is one that makes a lot of things "work" conceptually, by positing a cause-effect and strictly *physical* relationship between the voracious mouths of *gaki* and the empirically observable fact that excrement in latrines and in cesspools simply disappears at a fairly rapid rate.

The experiment was certainly circular. But the important thing is that what might be termed the "hungry ghost hypothesis" had a certain conceptual tidiness. Just by

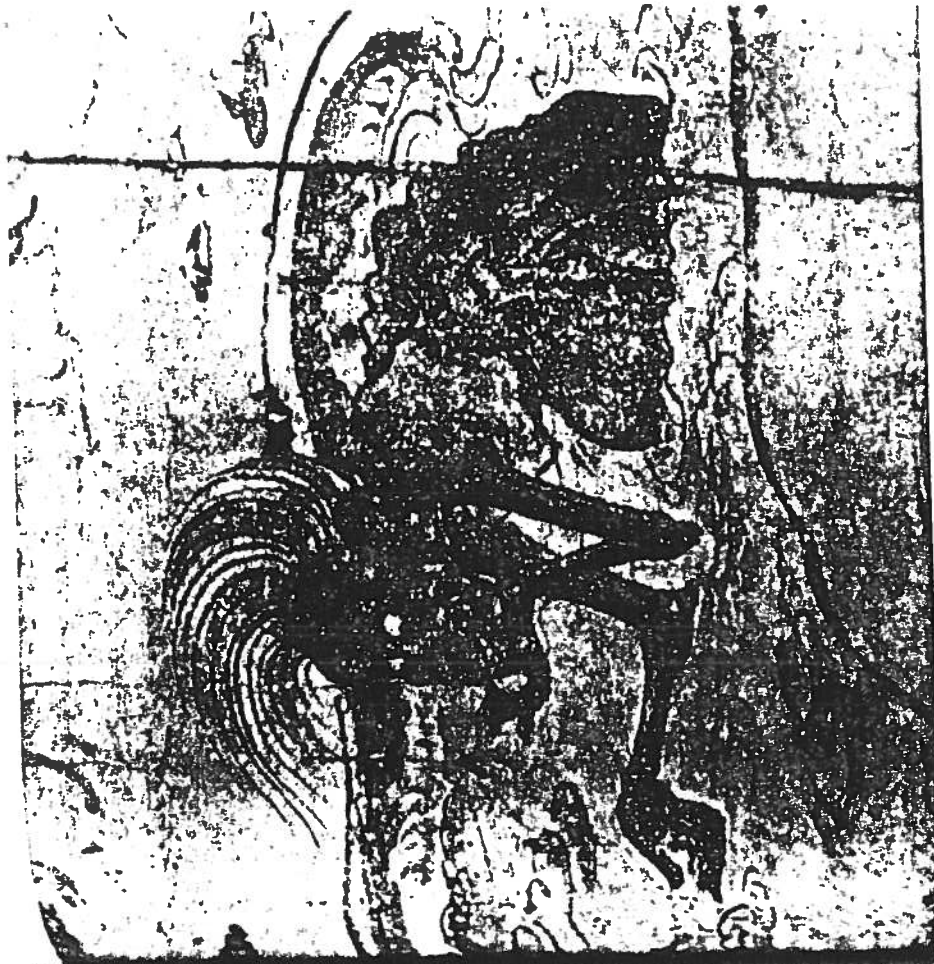


reel scene of defecators.

calling to mind a few basic things, the advocate of Buddhist explanations could show that what the sutras said made sense. Although the ghosts themselves were invisible by definition, humans could certainly observe the *effects* of their presence and actions in their own world: excrement had a limited street-life. It discolored, pulverized and then was gone. And it did so not instantly — but still more rapidly than many other discards in the streets. This rapid-but-not-too-rapid rate of disappearance was itself a source of curiosity but, fortunately, was explained by Buddhist science: the hungry ghost's needle-thin throat made impossible any instant consumption of excrement but, on the other hand, its intense craving guaranteed it would perform its scavenger role with all the energy it could muster. Even the rate of excremental decomposition seemed, in this quasi-empiricist fashion, to shore up the case for *gaki*'s existence. The scriptures explained what went on in the latrine and the latrine verified what the scriptures said. Even if circular it was the best science around just then. And the Buddhist institutions had much to gain from having the best books and explanations of the day.

Coprophagy is the key here. It receives highlighted treatment in the *Gaki zōshi* because of its centrality to the argument reconstructed here. A frame of the Tokyo scroll shows us what I would call a scene of "Coprophagite in Cesspool." This may well be our best peephole into the medieval mind at work here — but only if we repress or overcome our twentieth-century impulse to assume that the really interesting "mind" at work here is the unconscious one. It is, unaccustomed as we are to seeing it so, the *conscious* mind that needs excavation here.

There is irony in this. Precisely because of the cultural success of psychoanalytic theory and the widely held belief among us that to disclose the unconscious is to gain contact with what is fundamental, we in our time are now forced to exert considerable intellectual energy merely to reimagine what it would be like to have one's overwhelming curiosity directed to the mere physicality of shit — that is, its trajectory as material stuff into, through and out of our world. Ours is a case of having been blinded by insight — in this case, the most recent ones of our own sciences. The explanatory power of psychoanalytic discoveries and theories would ordinarily channel us into assuming that we know the meaning — a meaning in and for the human psyche — of the coprophagous ghosts in these pictures. It is, however, our own epistemic that gives us cognitive problems here. Our total absorption of the



Gaki in cesspool.

modern discovery that it is really bacteria which effect the disappearance of feces turned our age's attention to the psychological meaning of such things, thus allowing for a twentieth-century slippage into a kind of cultural amnesia about the priority of questions having to do with the raw physicality of such things. The medievalist, however, must now recollect the intellectual shape of an era in which shit was still largely a substance whose physical properties and transformations were still matters of primary curiosity.

For us to squat for a moment — even if only mentally and through these X-ray apertures — on high-heeled wooden *gera* in a back alley of this street in the capital of medieval Japan may, perhaps, be what is needed to disclose something of the contingency (and maybe even the historical oddity) of intellectual life in the recent West. The painters of these pictures devoted, we must note, a good deal of scroll space to portraying excrement and its transmigrations as some kind of stuff in our world. (This includes, to the joy of historians, pictorial evidence of the "shit-sticks" elsewhere found in East Asian texts.)⁷ The overwhelming impression left by this is not that these people were unusually prurient or obsessed with scatological possibilities. Rather, it appears that their fascination was focused on a question that needed explanation. That is, they wanted simply to know what was happening to feces as feces — as they physically change and then disappear.

And where did this lead them? Given the state of information at their disposal, it brought them right to what I would call the "hungry ghost hypothesis." Here, the texts of Buddhism, already widely touted as giving authoritative information about everything and not limited to the narrow domain of "religion," had an explanation.⁸ They spoke eloquently and in detail about a species of invisible beings, which hovered in and around humans and congregated in large quantities at latrines and other places of defecation. In a word, what we have identified as the work of bacteria was exactly what they saw as scavenging and clean-up duties performed by hungry ghosts.

And, of course, this explanatory scheme did not limit itself to shit. Thought to be physically rather than psychologically related to us and our bodies, *gaki* performed a variety of distasteful but necessary tasks. Condemned by bad karma racked up in earlier lives, the hungry ghosts were forced to consume all the human body's excreta, effluvia and ejacula. Nasal mucus was certainly included. A portion of a *Rokudō-e* or "Painting of the Six [Buddhist] Courses," which derives from the thirteenth

century and is in the possession of Shōju-raigō-ji Temple in Shiga, includes a very important section depicting hungry ghosts. Within this there is a temple scene, unfortunately worn with age. Just visible, however, is a monk who sits along the temple balustrade; the moment grasped is that in which he has turned from listening to the sermon indoors to face outward, holding his nose in a pincer of fingers and ejecting snot. Just below him is a shadowy hungry ghost with hands extended to catch the discharge.

Within this same portion of the painting is another section which has perplexed many. There is, I think, little that is puzzling here. The distinctly female ghost with outstretched "receptacle" hands, the manual action of the walking man, and the white globules that seem to fly into the air behind him all combine, I would suggest, to tell us this is a man engaged in ambulatory masturbation, and it is his semen that the kneeling, female hungry ghost is trying to catch in her hands.

In dying, of course, the entire body becomes a kind of ejecta. And exposed corpses, the medievals certainly observed, lose their form in much the same way feces do. The similarity of the decomposition pattern suggests that here too it is *gaki* that are at work — now not on a part but on the whole. The *Gaki vōshi* capture the point exactly in a scene set in a cemetery. The fate of feces was also, this suggests, structurally that of the fate of the body as a whole. The process is the same: wasted bodies are on large scale what body wastes are on a smaller scale.

The Ghosts in the System

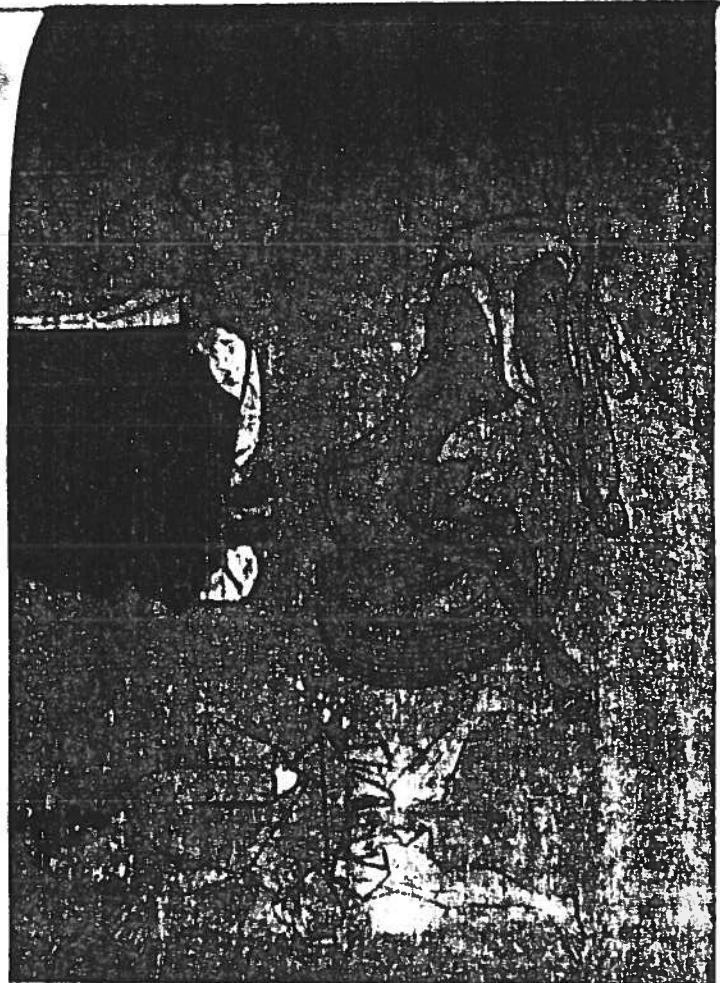
The principal ancient source for what shows up in these scrolls is an Indian Buddhist sutra which had been translated into Chinese during the sixth century. Known in China as the *Cheng-fa nien-ch'u ching* (Japanese: *Shōbōnenjo-gyō*), it not only categorizes all beings in the universe but, within the rubric of the hungry ghost, further stipulates the existence of thirty-six subspecies. The hungry ghosts are typed as: ones with bodies like cauldrons, those with needle-thin throats, vomit-eaters, excrement-eaters, nothing-eaters, eaters of vapors in the air, eaters of the Buddhist dharma, water-drinkers, hopeful and ambitious ones, saliva-eaters, wig-eaters, blood-drinkers, meat-eaters, consumers of incense smoke, disease-dabblers, defecation-watchers, ones that live under the ground, possessors of miraculous powers, intensely burning ones, ones fascinated with colors, inhabitants of the beach, ones with

WILLIAM R. LAFLEUR



Gaki in cemetery

HUNGRY GHOSTS AND HUNGRY PEOPLE



Semen catcher

walking canes, infant-eaters, semen-eaters, demonic ones, fire-eaters, those on filthy streets, wind-eaters, burning-coal consumers, poison-eaters, inhabitants of open fields, those living among tombs (and eating ashes), those that live in trees, ones that stay at crossroads, and those that kill themselves."

On first reading, the list seems to be a chaos of categories — almost as if were trying to be that "Chinese encyclopedia" which Foucault, in the opening pages of *The Order of Things*, said that he found, much to his own fascination, in Borges. Nevertheless, certain patterns exist in this seemingly motley array of types. Although there are exceptions, hungry ghosts in this list are largely classified by what they consume and where they choose to hunker down. And what they eat, aside from things like the Buddhist dharma and items such as "nothing," turn out to be things widely regarded as polluting and/or repulsive.

I am here, of course, less interested in what may or may not have been the principles informing the original Indian selection for this list than in the use to which the medieval Japanese put it. The treatment of *gaki* in the *Ōjizōshi*, written in 985, stands in between the Indo-Chinese scripture and the twelfth-century scrolls.¹⁰ There may be the making of a unified view in these earlier texts, but it is in the illustrated scrolls that the lineaments of a *system* are more clear than ever before. Far from being a picturing of types lifted at random from written sources, the selection of the artist seems to have been careful and calculated to have persuasive power. The presentation of the whole in a format that virtually begs the viewer to "verify" the hungry ghost hypothesis against things in his or her own experience seems designed to serve not just as a portrait but as an argument.

In the *Gaki zōshi*, we can see the hungry ghost hypothesis as it was stretched to provide "explanation" for other things beyond those that are body wastes and wasted bodies. For instance, the invisible ghosts were used to tell what is happening in cases where we would use language about oxidation. Here, in a most literal sense, we have the portrait of consumption, but it is a consumption of — rather than by — fire. The *gaki*, invisible but connected bodily to the visible world, is brought in to explain why flames and conflagrations die out — why, especially, airborne embers, meteors, and lightning bolts seem suddenly to be "caught" in mid-course and then disappear from sight. The *gaki* is a consumer of fires. (Written texts say that in its blind, deluded passion to fulfill the hunger and thirst within, the *gaki* mistakes fire

for food, thus incrementally aggravating its condition. This is why it both emits fire from its mouth and takes more of it into its body.)

And what works for fire works for water, too. Evaporation received its explanation this way: the hungry ghost, the texts were careful to point out, was not only voraciously hungry but unquenchably thirsty as well. One of the scenes of the scrolls is that of an ancestral pillar positioned at the gate of a Buddhist temple. Pious folk would pour water in a purification/memorial rite on the base of the upright stone that was topped with an icon of the Buddha (see below, *Unintentional Exposure*). The laminating item here, of course, is the *gaki* lapping up the water almost as quickly as it is poured out on the stones. The rationale for this seems clear. What we would attribute to the evaporation of moisture was, for that time, an instance of patent, fully obvious involvement by hungry ghosts. What the theory was trying to explain, thus, was not limited to body wastes and things ordinarily thought of as "polluting," but was more ambitious, encompassing and inclusive.¹¹ The congeries of things given in the *Cheng-fa nien-ch'i ching* begin, in the *Gaki zōshi*, to look more like a unified, coherent pattern of mutually supporting instances — to that extent, at least, less like a list and more like a science. The making of these things into a pattern, and therefore "rational," was of prime importance here. That is what, I claim, the *Gaki zōshi* is all about.

To commence the argument with shit and other repulsive things was a smart move on the Buddhists' part. Explicating Bataille, Mark C. Taylor notes that "in the eyes of Reason, *das ganz Andere* is *grotesque*."¹² This means that those who profess mastery of Reason must, sooner or later, try to encompass all alterities. Since that is so, the Buddhist system-builders, precisely by *beginning* with all the bodily, nasty stuff — cadavers, specters, feces, etc. — were tackling the difficult things first rather than last. Their theory would, it seemed, take up and "place" the feces with alacrity. This also disguised what was happening. To have commenced with "mind" would have signaled to all that it was indeed "philosophy" as systematizer which was at work here.

The Buddhists' top-of-the-page treatment of the otherwise obdurate, heterogeneous things probably gained them extra points and a strategic advantage. What they were pushing as a system/philosophy was what, they obviously hoped, would demonstrate "consistent homogeneity... established throughout the external world by everywhere replacing a priori inconceivable objects with classified series of con-

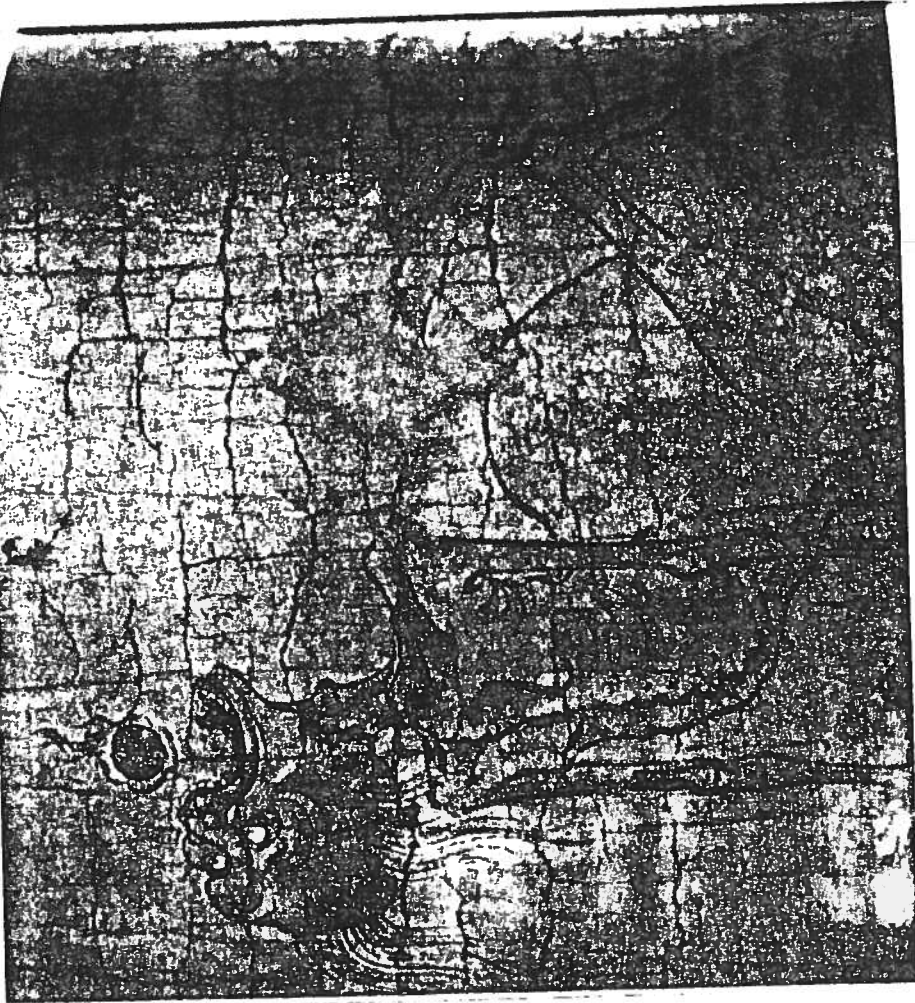
ceptions or ideas."¹³ The lowest of the low was a good place to start; it made everything that followed — a hierarchy to be sure — look sensible. Within that hierarchy, all beings were arranged.

In Buddhism, as compared at least with medieval Christianity, discussions of comparative reality (ontology quantified) were less important than tight equations between moral performance and the weal or woe that followed from that performance. The principle of karmic reward or retribution serviced the system and the taxonomy of species-slots into which beings could be reborn, stretched from beings in hell, on the bottom, to those in heavenly realms, at the top. The nonfinality of death and the inevitability of transmigration were a priori assumptions of the whole scheme, but also things the apologists strove to "prove" again and again.¹⁶

The theory was that morally good lives could enable one to jump out of one species or rubric and into a better one; conversely, an immoral life could, after death, bring transifications downward. A lot depended, of course, on the assumption that the dead are reborn by a moral calculus. The central problem for this "science" was that the single most important operation, the transfer out of one life and into another, lay off the plane of the observable and in a place where it could not be seen. There seemed to be no way to demonstrate with any finality that a newborn was the rebirth of some person (or other sentient being) that had previously died.

A quest to fill that embarrassing hole busied very good minds.

The hungry ghost performed, if not a perfect, at least an important role right there. Since the vulnerable point of the system lay in its dependence upon transactions in a domain just out of ordinary sight, the ghosts (also invisible) and their seeming interaction with a variety of substances (all visible) fit the need for at least "a weak proof." People's eyes told them that this stuff did, indeed, disappear; that much was empirical. The Buddhist doctors had, then, a theory sufficiently viable to let them press their detractors for something even slightly better. "Where," they might ask, "do you suppose the shit in the latrine eventually goes? Or the cadaver that lies exposed out in the public cemetery? Or the semen and menstrual blood that falls from the body to the ground? Or the water sprinkled on memorial stones or ground? Or even the flame that flies through the air and then suddenly disappears without a trace? How, in lieu of the *gaki* and its capacity for consuming such things, can these disappearances from sight be explained?" Skeptics would have been forced into com-



Gaki eating fire

Society's unequal — but karmically deserved — distribution of social status and wealth was, according to the system, "balanced" by a certain equalization in other areas. Illness and death, for instance, were no respecters of person and privilege. Even emperors die. Even members of the courtier class are prey to injury and disease — although apotropaic rituals by well-paid monks and religious functionaries might keep such things at bay.

Just as illness and death came to every class, so too did hungry ghosts. There may be great disproportion in the distribution of material wealth but, said the Buddhists, none in the way the invisible *gaki* were allocated to mankind. The aristocrats may wallow in wealth, but by virtue of being human, they had hungry ghosts all over them, even in the midst of their feasts. One frame of the Tokyo scroll showed how even the nobility had to suffer the presence of small, imperceptible *gaki* during their parties. What are the little beasties after? Crumbs of food left on the face? Saliva? Earwax?

We can only guess. What the painting's patrons were after, however, is much less difficult to discover. The intention of the painting was probably most focused on registering a point among viewers who were not themselves members of the upper classes, persons surely curious about what went on in the houses of the fabulously rich. Here, they were given their window inside. But what they were meant to see is that, in spite of their wealth, the privileged suffer too — at least in *invisible* ways. Poorer or disadvantaged viewers of these pictures were meant to realize that, whatever imbalance existed in the distribution of visible wealth, there was a great egalitarianism in the sharing of the invisible presence of things like hungry ghosts. What, then, could possibly be the justice in any complaint against the way things were set up in the world? Philosophy and the status quo went hand-in-hand.

In this, everyone from emperors down to starvelings have, it was thought, precisely the lives they have karmically earned for themselves. What Max Weber had called India's "perfect theodicy" was alive and well in medieval Japan, providing, through this kind of mainline or cosmological Buddhism, a system to satisfy and support the privileged nobility and the clergy of the great urban temples. Everything fit. The system explained emperors and it explained shit. Philosophy as systematizer was doing what it does best — or worst. Even Hegel would have been impressed.

ing up with better explanations and, since they knew nothing of oxidation, evaporation and the like, they obviously had none.

Thus, the hungry ghost hypothesis also became the hungry ghost "proof"; it had its own work to do in making the whole system seem sensible. The visible and the invisible were woven into one narrative: feces, karma, ghosts, feelings of terror, dreams of hellish tortures were all combined, interconnected and mutually supportive. No single item was foundational. As Wittgenstein held, "What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it."¹⁵ That there was a political/social impact in all of this is beyond doubt. Socially conservative forces in Japan's late Antiquity or early medieval period, for instance, had little trouble seeing the utility, to themselves and to their class, in a system holding that hierarchy was the invisible structure of the cosmos. An added boon for them lay in the teaching that every individual has the status deserved by him or her through good or bad deeds in earlier lives; upward mobility, moreover, ought to and must come through the death and rebirth of an individual — much preferable, to be sure, to any change, large or small, in the existing social system. The cosmology of six basic rubrics was a "ladder of being" that matched and reinforced an empirical social stratification, which ran the gamut from the emperor on down to people so low they were scarcely recognized as human. A graded system of court ranks was as finely stratified as the ranks in the cosmic ontology as taught by the Buddhist clergy. The one reinforced the other.

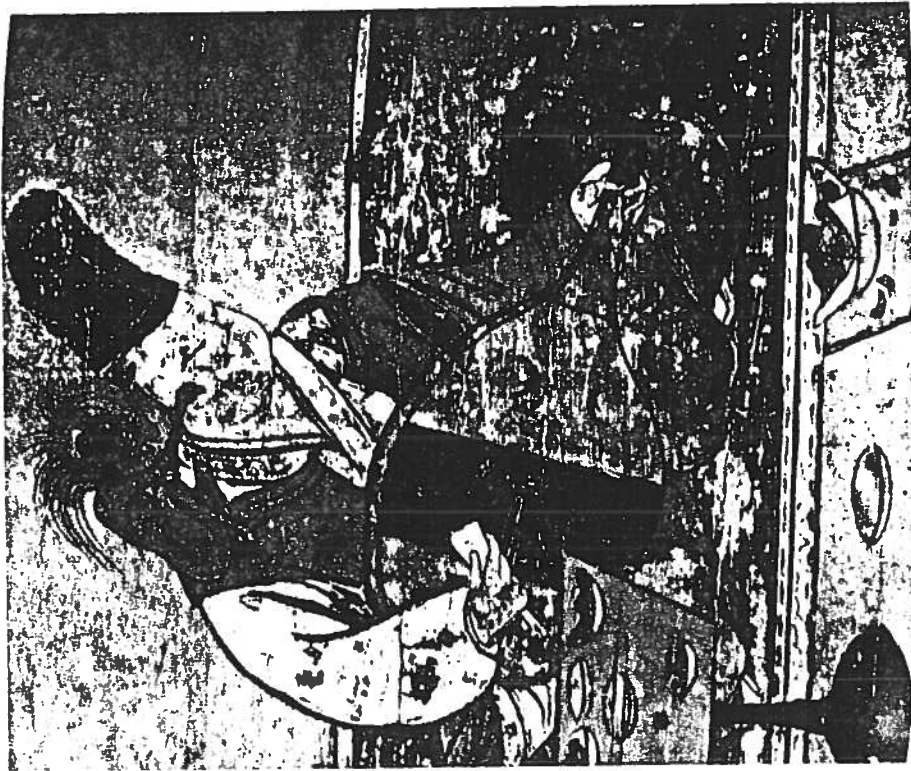
The social payoff for the well-off was clear. During the Heian period (794-1191), those around the emperor liked to be called the class "above-the-clouds," thus implicitly assimilating themselves to the "heavenly beings" rubric in the Buddhist cosmology; those on the bottom lived on dung heaps. And all were, according to doctrine, exactly where they were supposed to be. Those at the social apex lived elegant lives. Beautiful things were "naturally" theirs and, by contrast, were simply out of place in the lives of the lower classes. The tenth-century courtesan, Lady Sei Shonagon, therefore, was merely expressing class candor when in *The Pillow Book* she had a list of simply "unsuitable things" and among these was included: "Snow on the houses of common people. This is especially regrettable when the moonlight shines on it." Since the poor lacked the faculty to appreciate such beauty, the snow was wasting itself, she suggested, by indiscriminately falling on commoners' roofs.

Unintended Exposure

The artist or artists who painted the *Gaki zōshi*, we must assume, were obliged to paint to fit the didactic purposes of the Buddhism of the mainline. Perhaps they were directly commissioned for this but, being temple painters, maybe they did so by habit or by habitus. Their role was not incidental. Hell, hungry ghosts, pariahs, and other nonempirical modalities were, through the medium of the artist's brush, to be brought forward for viewing by men and women who otherwise could not see such things. Those — especially the less privileged — who could "see" the *gaki* through these X-ray-like apertures, were also supposed to see and assent to the naturalness of the entire structure that lay both beyond the quotidian world and, reflexively, gave it its own hierarchical structure. To see the *gaki*, in part, was also to glimpse — and acknowledge — the whole.

Because the pictures had to be as convincing as possible, it followed that the more "real" such an artist could make it all seem, the more the state, the temples and the nobility would feel themselves well-served, well-protected and safer in their privileges. Art could make paradise and hell real for people who otherwise could not see such places; art could also make a miasma behind which the machinations of real power could hide. Culture and contingency would disappear offstage; nature and necessity would step out into the spotlight. This, then, put a premium upon realism. To represent the world of the *gaki* as continuous with the world of empirically observed humans and animals would, by the terms of the project, be expected to be the best way for this kind of art to achieve its goal.

And yet, it is precisely here that things began to come undone. Ironically, it was this grasping for the ultimate in realistic representation that seems to have turned this art into something very much other than what the establishment would have wished to have shown. Perhaps this is because a totally successful mix between ideology and reality is fundamentally impossible. In any case, in these paintings the quest for realism turned sour. What went "wrong," at least as the establishment would have seen things, is that the artists' eagerness for realism drew them away from the scriptures and away from Chinese prototypes and into the streets to find real-life models for their hungry ghosts. The result was that this art, intended to render visible what was ontologically out of sight, ended up showing all too vividly what was supposed to have remained socially invisible. It is, of course, possible that the



Party of aristocrats

artists connived with the poor to give them visibility, but a determination of that degree of intention cannot be read from the pictures. And in an important sense it hardly matters. The significant thing is that, even if inadvertent, what got lifted out of the hovels of invisibility and onto paintings that can still be seen today turn out to be some of the most poor, wretched and emaciated people of Japan's twelfth-century capital. And, placed frame by frame next to the lives of the privileged and well-led nobility in these pictures, the gross social disparity is also rendered for all time and people to see.

For any artist seeking real models for the painting of hungry ghosts, twelfth-century Heiankyō, the old capital (where the city of Kyoto now is), provided starvelings in abundance. The *Hōjoki*, an after-the-fact account reshaped into a classic literary text in the thirteenth century, details what a famine in the year 1181 had been like:

The number of those who died of starvation outside the gates or along the roads may not be reckoned. There being no one even to dispose of the bodies, a stench filled the whole world, and there were many sights of decomposing bodies too horrible to behold. Along the banks of the Kamo River there was not even room for horses and cattle to pass.¹⁷ This literary text, one composed — significantly — after real political power had been successfully grabbed by members of the military class, is clear. During the time of the famine itself, however, we have no such vivid account in prose. The reasons for the contemporaneous silence are as clear as those for the next regime's willingness to see depictions of the stresses and malfeasance of the government it had undone.

And it is also for this reason that the scrolls, contemporaneous with the famine and the political woes of the old regime, become doubly interesting. Once we know about the famine, it becomes clear that the painters of the *Gaki zōshi* did not draw their materials from their imaginations; they worked from having seen hungry people and on the basis of having closely observed the bodily signs of advanced starvation. The gray pallor, the gaunt appearance, the wary look in the eyes of beggars subsisting on the edge of society and the edge of life: these things tell us that the painters of invisible *gaki* modeled their work on the bodies and behavior of visible people.

There was something almost clinical in the exactitude of bodily details. The hair, for instance, is quite remarkable in what it reveals. Although it shows up all over the *gaki* scrolls, the presence here of red and blond hair — in great quantities, in

fact — is not fortuitous. The water-offering section of the Kyoto Museum scroll, discussed above, shows it vividly. In order to grasp what is so remarkable in this, it must be remembered that it was not until much later — during the sixteenth century, in fact — that the Japanese had their first glimpse of naturally red or blond hair. In the twelfth century, at the time of these pictures, no Dutchman or Englishman had yet come to Japan. Moreover, although it is possible that the painting of red-haired beings had been copied from Chinese sources, many of the representations of hungry ghosts in Chinese art give them the black hair ordinarily found on the heads of East Asian peoples (see Sung painting above). This may be because in such cases, the Chinese were doing stylized work, painting their hungry ghosts by combining their imaginations with the formulaic statements about such creatures in the Buddhist scriptures. The Japanese, by contrast, for some reason or another, seem to have taken to the streets to find models. Some art historians have assumed that the red hair on the *gaki* was a stylized motif to heighten their grotesqueness. I suggest that exactly the opposite was the case.

My point is that it is fairly easy to account for these otherwise anomalous hair colors in strictly medical terms. Although black hair is normal for East Asians, it is a fact that the hair of the severely hungry fails to retain its usual melanin, and thus often shows up as reddish or blond. Therefore, it would appear that the painters of these pictures had observed — and on these scrolls, were recording — the physical link between light-colored hair and acutely advanced human starvation. For a people who otherwise only saw hair that was black, the lack of pigment in that of starvelings would have been quite remarkable — as unusual and unnatural, for instance, as it is for black North Africans in the twentieth century. Starvation and severe malnutrition, however, alter what is “natural” in such cases. In fact, part of the pathology of such starvation — referred to as “*k-washiorakor*” by virtue of the adoption of a Ghanese word into Western medical vocabularies — is precisely such depigmentation of otherwise healthy, black hair. The drastic reduction in the protein throughout the body touches even the extremities; twelfth-century Japanese, like emaciated North Africans in our own time, would have discovered, no doubt to their horror, that the body starved for food changes its colors. Skin turns gray and normally black hair turns reddish or blond.

A recalcitrant reality, therefore, seems to have subverted official and socially



Gaki with bright red hair.

useful doctrine about the naturalness of sharp stratification in the universe and in society. What emerges clearly in these pictures is that there was an awesome disparity between the theory of things and the way they really were. The nub of this contradiction was the fact that what was happening on the streets was clearly very different from what the Buddhist-based "science" was saying should be the case.

The theory itself, of course, was bound to be implicitly placed in doubt by these things. According to it, the physiology of the hungry ghost was distinctive, unique. It comprised a discrete species, one actually epitomized in telltale fashion by the fact that its body was structured as a continuous defiance and reversal of a "law" that is built into the bodies of humans. The law in question was that the body demonstrates a quantitative proportionality between the intake of food and the size of the body's midsection. Normally, large amounts of food result in expansion of the body's girth; conversely, a reasonable reduction in intake produces a "reduced" body as well. What looks like a law of proportionality, one known to common observation, is at work in this.

The hungry ghost, by definition, has a body which not only defies that law but seems to embody its opposite. When the scriptures state repeatedly that the *gaki* possesses "a belly like a mountain but a neck like a needle," there is much more than Indian hyperbole and metaphor in this. The significant thing is that this *defines* the body of a certain kind of being; that being is known by the patent and *enstructured* disproportion or inverse relation between the stomach and the throat. The former bespeaks voluminous ingestion of food but the latter suggests the physical impossibility of that. The odd thing about the *gaki* is that, when compared with the human, it is a physiological oxymoron. It takes in an absolute minimum of food but shows the centrally defining characteristic — enormous girth — ordinarily associated with eating vast quantities.

This, however, is only anomalous from the human point of view. The sutras are saying in their metaphorical way that, in fact, the existence of the hungry ghost is structured by its own "law," one that in its content is the opposite of what governs the somatic life of mankind. Although humans did not ordinarily expect to see a hungry ghost, this was, at least in theory, the visual key to spotting one if seen. The reversal of the law operative for humans constitutes the law for creatures of another species altogether. This is the crux of differentiating them; the species were clearly distinct.

The streets of Heian-kyō, however, did not follow the logic of the texts and of Buddhist science — especially in conditions such as those which were to be found there during the famine of 1181. It was at such times that the bellies of starvelings swelled — not with food but, as we now know, with the gases that accumulate in the severely malnourished when the linings of the stomach walls decompose. This condition, edema, is probably the most sure sign of the kwashiorkor syndrome. Today we recognize it, understand it and when possible seek to prevent it.

In twelfth-century Japan, however, edema and the widespread presence of the kwashiorkor syndrome within urban society appear to have had in them the makings of a fundamental epistemological crisis. In a word, the categorical distinction between man and not-man was getting all confused. The supposedly patent truth of the fundamental taxonomy was being undermined. This was because very hungry *human beings* — humans with families, humans known to their fellows, humans even with names — were hit by bit showing in their bodies the telltale feature of hungry ghosts. At first, when there was little to eat, the bodies of these people simply thinned, thereby retaining the proportionality factor. But then, when the condition got really severe, their stomachs swelled and bloated even while the body frame remained little more than skeletal. But all of this was happening where it was not supposed to be happening — namely, within the bodies of humans known to be such.

Really acute starvation, therefore, revealed a patent and gross contradiction between the theory and observable reality. Visible realities were upsetting the theory. The starvelings of Heian-kyō were indubitably human but showed the bodily signs of the *gaki* species. To those who may have wondered on occasion about the viability of the whole theory, this probably fanned further, deeper skepticism. If the taxonomy was in trouble at this point, there would eventually be signs of trouble all the way down the line.

Fecal Matter/Fecal Mind

There is something hard, irreducible and unassimilable about these people in the pictures. They dirty the intentions of the paintings' privileged patrons. Here, these hungry human bodies stand and squat like surds in the very system they were meant to serve. Here is where the epistemic fracture between the ideology and the

reality becomes salient. The X ray turns out differently than expected. Intended to render the metaempirical as real and, conversely, to conceal the power plays of muscle and mind that had stitched this world together, the pictures let the facts of fabrication open. Perhaps it is the chasm between reality and ideology that makes this happen. Or maybe it is an instance of what Bataille referred to as "the intellectual process [which] automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous incremental element."¹⁸

In the *Gaki zōshi*, there is much more expression of the problem than resolution of it. Some features of the painting leave only a tantalizing ambiguity. The scene that is the last one viewed as the Kyoto Museum scroll is unrolled is one that raises questions without giving answers. It portrays monks feeding *gaki*, who come running pell-mell from the woods to get the food offered. We can wonder whether people, especially the wealthy, saw an element of exemplary behavior in this — and whether they drew from it any applications in terms of feeding the starving in their own society.

The inscribed text that accompanies the picture gives little help in answering this. It tells only that the giving of food to hungry ghosts was a practice established by Ananda, a direct disciple of the Sakyamuni, and the formula for continuing to do so. The suggestion, if any, is primarily that of ritual and, in fact, *segaki*, a service of giving food to *gaki*, still exists in Japan today. (Today in Japanese temples, the food ritually-left out for hungry ghosts will be a few grains of cooked rice — most usually eaten by birds or small animals. The chants and their punctilious performance receive the emphasis.) Inasmuch as this scene in the scroll reflects a concurrent practice, it probably tells us that it was invisible *gaki* rather than visible people who were fed in *segaki* ritual contexts.

The theodicy of karma, as Max Weber noted, is a powerful one. Its social correlates are clear, strong and hard to contravene when supported by the powerful. Much of Buddhism — at least, that which was involved with articulating the structure of the cosmos and upholding the stratification of society — took over that portion of the Indian heritage almost without question. This is not, however, to say there was no other type. In fact, within Buddhism itself, there was another tradition which offered a *critique* of that view of karma. Early Buddhists were critical of caste, said

Monks and feasting *gaki*.

300

no aware person need be fated by karma, stressed egalitarian themes, and celebrated compassion as a central virtue.

Some philosophers, pushing the dialectical possibilities in classical Buddhist logic, clearly saw that the hierarchies, both ontological and social, were contingent and constructed. Since their view of reality included no place for a deity, the notion of anything as entirely self-dependent — and in that sense, foundational for a system — struck them as absurd.¹⁹ The carryover of this, especially into Chinese Zen, rendered notions such as “holiness” and “purity” suspect; the critique of these concepts turned to iconoclasm and humor. The *Record of Lin-chi* refers to the sutras as good paper for use in the toilet. With reference to the great Buddhist systems under construction, this Buddhist work refers to them as nothing more than “fashioning models and creating patterns out of illusory transformations.”²⁰ To the classic question “What is the Buddha?” one answer became “a shit-stick.”

There was, then, this *doublet* in the tradition of Buddhism by the time of the troubles of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japan. Yet, the ethical and social correlates for the critical, antihierarchical philosophical position were hard to come by. They showed up only sporadically. Siagyō (1118-90), a monk-poet, thought the court life of the capital decadent and found something terribly artificial in the court poets’ refusal to write about anything socially unpleasant. He broke the taboo by composing verse about the horrors of war and poems that showed sympathy for the grinding poverty of fisherfolk in rural areas — in spite of their karma. The strong-minded Buddhist Nichiren (1222-82) condemned the decadent and consumptive lives of the nobility. Both he and his contemporary Dogen (1200-53) questioned the longstanding view that karma consigns women to a status inferior to that of men. Shinran (1173-1262) and Ippen (1239-89) expressed compassion for the ordinary poor and celebrated personal nobility in the unlettered, impoverished and diseased.

Was it ordinary pusillanimity, then, that kept Japanese Buddhism from reaching out for a more systematic restructuring of society? Or was it due to a keen sensitivity, one often cultivated in Buddhism, to the proclivity for producing only ironic results — especially whenever there are systematized efforts to supplant a given system with another? It is difficult to say.

What seems clear, however, is that those medieval Japanese Buddhists — thinkers and poets — who were skeptical about the naturalness and necessity of the whole

301

karmic/hierarchical structure focused more on what they had found as insight than as social blueprint. Among them, though, Ikkyū (1394-1481), a Zen cleric and poet, was probably the most penetrating. Coddled, celebrated and drastically "tamed" by the distorting memory of later generations — so that he became reduced to little more than a charmingly "eccentric" Zen figure from the past — Ikkyū had, in fact, consistently tried to tear off what struck him as an entire fabric of social lies. He rankled his fellow Buddhists, fulminating against the corrupt and power-craving practices of the great temples. Scatology, eroticism and a deliberate mixing of the pure and impure mark his poems. Whether declaring his deep hatred of temple incense or celebrating the sexual, body "nectars" of Mori, the blind woman he loved, Ikkyū assaulted both the conventions and the power-structure of his age. The whole hierarchical structure of deferred karmic rewards and punishments seemed contrived to him. And when, in 1461, he witnessed starvation — not unlike that of 1181 — in the countryside and city, he wrote a poem that, in effect, collapsed the categories and said what the visible hungry ghosts really were:²¹

Starvation in 1461

The pain and hunger penetrates my body,
The hungry ghosts I see are real people.
Through all its existence the body is a house aflame.
Misery mounts up to the highest heaven.

NOTES

1. Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 33-39.
2. Alasdair MacIntyre noted, correctly I think, that in moving from the medieval to the modern, "the specific character of religion becomes clearer at the cost of diminishing its content." See his "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?" in *Rationality*, ed. Brian R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 62-77.
3. The best reproduction of all these materials is in *Rokudo-E*, with photography by Keizō Kaneko and text in Japanese by Toru Shimbo (Tokyo: Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1977). See also Mico Murase, *Emaki: Narrative Scrolls from Japan* (New York: The Asia Society, 1983).
4. Saigyō, *Sanka-shū* in *Nihon Koten Zensho*, vol. 78, ed. Yoshi Ito (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1971).

poem 980; p. 150. (Author's translation.)

5. Mujū Ichien, "Shaseki-shū," trans. Robert E. Morrell, in *Sand and Pebbles* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 115.
6. William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). My definition of "medieval," when applied to Japan, is also explained there.
7. Hideo Kuroda, *Sugata to Shigusa no Chūseishi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1986), pp. 130-36.
8. On this, see my "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained: Cropping for the Mind of Medieval Japan," *The Eastern Buddhist* n.s. 18.2 (Autumn 1985), pp. 99-113.
9. *Taishō shinhishū daizokuyō* (Tokyo: 1924-32), vol. 17, p. 92a-b.
10. "Genshin's Ojo Yohu: Collected Essays on Birth into Paradise," trans. A.K. Reischauer, *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 2d ser., 7 (1930), pp. 46-49.
11. This is a point of difference from Mary Douglas's important study, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
12. Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 125. Also, Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 99.
13. Bataille, *ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
14. See *The Karma of Words*; and W. LaFleur, *Buddhism: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988).
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 21e.
16. Ivan Morris, ed. and trans., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 50.
17. Donald Keene, ed. and trans., *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 202.
18. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 97.
19. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words*, pp. 20-25, 80-100.
20. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., *The Recorded Sayings of Ch'an Master Lin-chi Hui-chao of Chen Prefecture* (Kyoto: The Institute for Zen Studies, 1975), p. 22.
21. James H. Sanford, trans., "Zen-Man Ikkyū," *Harvard Studies in World Religions* 2 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 184.