**The Ten-Foot-Square Hut**

In the early 13th century – the year 1212 to be precise – the poet-monk Kamo no Chomei wrote his *Hojoki*, or ‘Record of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut’. In it, he documented a life of seclusion in his *hojo*, or one-jo-square hut (jo being a linear measurement equivalent to ten feet), a place of tranquillity far from the madding crowd. Chomei’s text is considered a masterpiece of Japanese literature, not least because of his Zen Buddhist predilection to see analogies between ourselves and our dwellings, intertwined documentations of our impermanence in the world:

‘The river flows on unceasingly, but the water is never the same water as before. Bubbles that bob on the surface of the still places disappear one moment, to reappear again the next, but they seldom endure for long. And so it is with the people of this world and with the houses they live in … no different from the dew on the morning glory’ (Watson 1994, p.47-8). He went on to muse that if a dwelling is as temporary as its inhabitant, why shouldn’t it be small? ‘The hermit crab prefers a little shell because he knows the dimensions of his own body … And I am the same. Knowing my own size and knowing the ways of the world, I crave nothing, chase after nothing. I desire only a peaceful spot’ (Watson 1994, p.72).

Chomei’s work continued a tradition of Asian writing about the simple life, in a simple dwelling, which began in 9th century China with the T’ang Dynasty poet Po Chü-i’s ‘Record of the Thatched Hall on Mount Lu’. Translator Burton Watson notes: ‘The house as a metaphor for the householder, or for the particular kind of life lived in it, is a very old idea’, one which indirectly remarks an ‘underlying sense of the world and what is to be valued in it’ (Watson 1994, p.xi). The choice of the ‘record’ as prose form for these writers’ musings is as plain and unadorned as what it records. Yet readers are drawn into a wordless circle of enquiry underlining the marks on the page, and the spaces in between characters and lines. Before long we find ourselves asking: ‘What constitutes happiness in this life, how should we pursue it, what are its minimum requirements?’ (Watson 1994, p.xiv).

Another writer in this lineage was the famous 17th century Japanese haiku poet, Matsuo Basho, who had the temerity to call his hut a ‘phantom dwelling’, such was its seeming lack of longer-than existential presence: ‘The grebe attaches its floating nest to a single strand of reed, counting on the reed to keep it from washing away in the current. With a similar thought, I mended the thatch on the eaves of the hut, patched up the gaps in the fence, and at the beginning of the fourth month … moved in’ (Watson 1994, p.90-1). By the end of his record, during which he has sat ‘quietly in the evening waiting for the moon so I may have my shadow for company, or light a lamp and discuss right and wrong with my silhouette’, he is drawn to ponder that ‘we all in the end live, do we not, in a phantom dwelling?’ (Watson 1994, p.94-5).

However simple these writers’ spaces, none ever mentions poverty or a sense of feeling poor, theirs a conscious choice to welcome simplicity into their lives via the spaces they decide to inhabit. So-doing, simplicity naturally infuses their state-of mind – and vice-versa. Chicken-and-egg-like, we wonder which came first – the simplicity of outer space or the emptying of inner mind? In the end, we only have these written reports as witness for our contemplations. Nevertheless, each expresses how the writer believes himself to be at home within his dwelling as much as at home within himself.

Po-Chüi: ‘Like a traveller on a distant journey who passes by his old home, I felt so drawn to it I couldn’t tear myself away’ (Watson 1994, p.7). Chomei: ‘The fish never tire of the water, yet if one is not a fish, one can hardly understand what is in the fish’s mind. Birds long only for the forest, but if one is not a bird, one cannot understand why. The same applies to these delights of the quiet life’ (Watson 1994, p.75). Basho: ‘I moved in for what I thought would be no more than a brief stay. Now, though, I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll ever want to leave’ (Watson 1994, p.90-1).

**Space and self**

Space is relative, time as well – truths self-evident if we observe the way in which we live our lives without ever needing to turn to Einstein for mathematical proof. An oft-repeated axiom in business
circles is Parkinson’s 1955 management law which states that work expands to fill the time available for its completion, a phenomenon equally observable in our disposition to spatial availability. How we see ourselves, and our way of being in the world, is mirrored by the spaces we inhabit as much as by the objects with which we fill them. Following Parkinson’s logic, therefore, whatever we think we ‘need’ (and in whichever quantity) seemingly expands to fit the ‘container’ we have available rather than the other way around. Whether it be data storage capacity, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the size of a car’s boot or (as I was to discover countless years ago) the volume of a mother’s nappy bag, the tendency is to fill the space able to be filled. The ‘supersize-me’ state of supermarket shopping trolleys is a classic (consumerist) example. Reduce the available space for purchases and we quite soon discover the difference between economic wants and needs.

My point, however, is not about the space available, per se, but the dimensional debate itself – how much space we really need, and what we really need in it. If we follow the reasoning of our ten-foot-square hut writers, this involves reflecting on who we really are – our dwelling and its contents acting as a representative mirror of our state-of-mind, our sense-of-self, as surely as the clothes we wear or the smile gracing our face. The space acts as a kind of outwarding of our very being, an extension of our skin into the world beyond. As much as we define its nature, it seems, its nature defines us.

The philosophy underlying this notion is one which ascetics across religious traditions have engaged down the millennia, stripping out sensory stimuli from their spatial worlds to transcend the material plane and rest solely in the ‘empty’ realms of spirit. The early Christian desert fathers or the famous ash-covered sadhus of Hinduism are examples of same. In the Orthodox faith, such eremitic practice is called hesychasm, from the Greek hesychia for stillness or silence. A process of retiring inward, ceasing to even register the senses in order to know God ‘in one’s heart’, necessitates, to their way of thinking, a space in which this can occur – a cell or cave free of as much external stimuli as possible.

However this is not the intent of the ten-foot-square hut according to our writers. Simplicity of form and function, and a ‘lightness’ on the landscape, bespeak their dwellings’ presence. But ‘presence’ it still has. Similarly, for each occupant, the idea is not to deny sensory perception but instead open fully to the beauty of the world. Indeed, one can still know God ‘in one’s heart’ via this route: ‘And now that I have come to be master of the house, I gaze up at the mountains, bend down to listen to the spring, look around at the trees and bamboos, the clouds and rocks, busy with them every minute from sun-up to evening. Let one of them beckon and I follow it in spirit, happy with my surroundings, at peace within’ (Watson 1994, p.9). For Po Chü-i, twelve hundred years ago, immanence was his entry-point to the Ground of Being rather than transcendence, something I contemplate from a different perspective in this essay.

Hence, no separation from the world of senses is required, but rather immersion in or mergence with landscape, with space, describes the lived experience of our writers as their conduit to the divine. The simplicity of a ten-foot-square hut sets in motion a fluidity between inner and outer spaces, the borders of our very self porous with the space in which we feel at home, at peace within, and with the world, in concert with the landscape beyond our door.

A sense-of-home can thus develop seamlessly with a sense-of-self, infused with a felt-sense that our existence is nowhere (and no-time) other than here and now – mergent wherever, whenever and with whatever that may be. It is not without good cause that Sierra Club founder, John Muir, wrote that ‘going out was really going in’ (Muir 1938); while Thoreau, on the fluid thresholds of Walden Pond, was drawn to remark: ‘This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself’ (Thoreau...
1992, p.98). Lyrically, Ryokan provides this word-image of the seamless fusion between his sense-of-home and his sense-of-self (Tanahashi 2012, p.178):

If someone asks
where I live,
say,
“The farthest end of
the heavenly river shore.”

Han-shan – Cold Mountain – a man in place, in space

Han-shan could be considered the life and soul of mergence – with each in-breath, each out-breath, he conceived of inner and outer spaces as one. Indeed Han-shan was both enigmatic person and place – the stuff of mergent legend. Translated as Cold Mountain, the (perhaps) 6th, 8th or 9th century Chinese poet-hermit took the name of his ten-foot-square hut as his own. In each of his poems we find an osmotic existence described in full expressive flow, and wonder: Is it himself or his dwelling which is the subject here (Snyder 2009, p.44)?

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain
Cold Mountain: there’s no through trail.
In summer, ice doesn’t melt
The rising sun blurs in swirling fog.
How did I make it?
My heart’s not the same as yours.
If your heart was like mine
You’d get it and be right here.

Of course we know they are one-and-the-same. We merge with space as space merges with us as surely as it does for Han-shan – the only difference being his lucid recognition of this simple fact coupled with a teasing prod to his readers to likewise cleanse the ‘doors of perception’ (Blake, 1790). By consciously living an all-is-one spatial reality, mergence actively opens Han-shan to an ‘interactive sphere of increasingly expansive awareness’ (Irwin 1996, p.192), to a beyond beyond the furthest horizon, an infinitely extensible plane of consistency, or as I hold, a vision of the one life. Again Snyder’s translation (2009, p.61):

My home was at Cold Mountain from the start,
Rambling among the hills, far from trouble.
Gone, and a million things leave no trace
Loosed, and it flows through galaxies
A fountain of light, into the very mind –
Not a thing, and yet it appears before me:
Now I know the pearl of the Buddha nature
Know its use: a boundless perfect sphere.

Constellating spaces

If we agree, with Han-shan and our ten-foot-square hut writers, that the outer spaces we inhabit mirror our inner state and fundamental sense of being, then it follows that we have the ability to constellate such spaces in which we feel at home, at peace, populating them with objects equally reflective or resonant of same. If, further, we agree with our writers that mergence with said spaces has the capacity to act as a conduit to the divine, it follows that any space we constellate – with love as our core purpose, our conscious intent – is an opportunity for the living presence of the sacred to be welcomed within. It becomes a place of communion, direct and unmediated, with the Ground of Being, a place
in which immanence and transcendence can meet face-to-face. The ritual of constellating, or creating, such a space is the same as with any object infused with sacred energy. Whether text, icon or stone, the object becomes an immanent container, or chalice, for our love and blessing, as well as a connective transcendent thread or portal between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Our ten-foot-square hut could therefore be any space or object ‘made’ or ‘baptised’ with this purpose at heart, an intimate three-dimensional mandala which grounds our meditations and opens us to the impulse of the beyond.

Irigaray writes: ‘It is in the intimate of ourselves that a dwelling place must be safeguarded for them, a dwelling place where we unite in us sky and earth, divinities and mortals … where we discover as proper to us the near that lives in us and that remains foreign to us’ (Irigaray 2002, p.51). Like the yin of earth and the yang of heaven, nested fishes hosting a spot of the other’s colour as their connective thread to transform duality into solitary fusion, we navigate our way through spatial openings between this and the Otherworld in order to enable an “ongoing exchange between Self and Other … (through) active space(s), echoing and reverberating in communion” (Springgay et al 2005, p.906).

Years have passed since I first met Mr1300BC. From the beginning, our relationship reflected Irigaray’s way of love, one forged on reciprocal recognition. Initially he appeared to assist my outreach with the souls of the dead, those who would help return Laleima’s treasure to the land of time, a task resulting in the work of prose fiction, The Taste of Translation. An architect of space, together we focussed on developing a toolkit for constellating the becoming landscapes in which I could meet my interlocutors on equal terms with shared intention. Only with love as my core purpose, a natural matter-of-course which I discuss in this essay, would a ‘current’ of energy flow between the worlds.

Equally, it is love that I see shining through the writings of our ten-foot-square hut poets, loving the world, merging their inner selves, their outer dwellings with the all of creation. I see an energetic current so harmonically honed, like a Pythagorean monochord, that the flow of their one life in the one space is nothing short of perfect wu wei. To Han-shan again (Snyder 2009, p.54):

Cold Mountain is a house
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall a blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The east wall bears on the west wall
At the centre nothing.

Emptiness pure, and openness to the divine assured, it is an embodied knowing I too experience in a ten-foot-square hut, as expressed in this hymn of praise:

My Cold Mountain is a place
A window on the world
High wide and wondrous
And clear as the frozen night sky.

Sacred space – constellated, created, sculpted by a loving hand – has its own energy. Indeed it has its own resonance, a heart-breath of life, of love, cradled at its core. That which brought it into being in the first place now rests within its own ‘self’. And if we listen closely, quietly, with the ear of the heart, we are certain to hear the resonant hum rising up from the subtle bones of the space to re-infuse us, in turn, with the self-same love – mirrored, reciprocated, to us, its creator, like a tuning fork for the heart strings. It’s a hum, a murmur, an Ohm, that says: Welcome, it’s good to have you home. In a home created by our own loving intent, a space we carry within on our journey of the heart – the first, last and only-ever pilgrimage, played out over, over and over again. Homegoing, homecoming, all one-and-the-same, we know. Home, to the centre of being.