Introduction

Cultural Responses to Disaster in Japan

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日本を潰し日本に汚れ春の海

crushing Japan
soiling Japan
the spring sea
SEKI ETSUSHI

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The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age, that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

DYLAN THOMAS

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It may be said that the twenty-first century is the age not so much of the ‘revolt of the masses’ as of the ‘revolt of nature’. The spread of scientific-industrial civilization and consumer capitalism around the globe has created an immense ‘global middle class’ but it has also damaged our planet’s natural environment to such an extent that ‘natural disasters’, if not actually directly caused by human activity (as in global warming), are certainly made even more disastrous by those activities. The mega-disaster in northeastern Japan on 11 March 2011, is a prime example of this, with an (avoidable) nuclear accident following quickly in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami. The warning that Rousseau issued after the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami of 1755, just on the eve of the Industrial Revolution, that humans were unwise to live crowded together in large cities, alienated from nature, and thus suffered far more from nature’s wrath, has now, over two-and-a-half centuries later, become less easy to dismiss as the comical rant of a crackpot romantic ‘nature-lover’. (And, of course, the heirs of Rousseau are to be found all around us today, and, as we shall see,
include some of the Japanese writers mentioned in this book.) Humanity today is suffering from its ‘alienation from nature’ or ‘abuse of nature’ in ways that even Rousseau could not envision. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that the study of disaster in all its multifarious aspects is an area of urgent and increasing interest for many of us as we await with trepidation what the future might bring.

As an emerging academic field, ‘disaster studies’ incorporates both scientific and humanistic disciplines. The sub-field that investigates ‘cultural responses to disaster’ may not be quite as wide-ranging but, as I think this book amply demonstrates, still lends itself well to a multidisciplinary approach. The contributors to this volume include scholars of Japanese religion, anthropology, history, intellectual history, literature, music and popular culture. One of the things that interested me most as editor was to see how a number of common themes or *leitmotifs* emerged quite ‘naturally’ despite this diversity of disciplines and approaches and certainly without any prompting on my part. Perhaps the most striking of these was what Brian Victoria usefully calls the ‘shamanistic’ response to disaster and, more particularly, its associated idea of disaster as *tenbatsu* or ‘Heaven’s punishment’ (84). Other important leading themes which emerged spontaneously in the same way include social-anthropological, political, cultural and even aesthetic issues, and I will touch upon some of the main ones in what follows. The four thematic or subject headings below fall roughly within four disciplinary areas – religion, anthropology/cultural studies, literature and art, and politics – but they are not meant to imply that the book is divided up along strict disciplinary lines into four discrete and unrelated segments. As even my discussion of these ‘four main disciplinary areas’ will reveal, the chapters ‘overlap’ with each other thematically in many interesting and thought-provoking ways, not all of which I will elaborate here. Here I am merely pointing to some of the most significant convergences, or some of the more suggestive ways the chapters may be seen to ‘mutually illuminate’ each other.

1 **Religious/Theological Responses**

Devastating disasters confront us, in the most immediate and violent way, with the precarious, arbitrary and contingent nature of our existence; they can induce a sense of existential crisis, shaking the foundations of our most cherished and fundamental beliefs, or of our very sense of reality and of moral law. Thus, when we address the question of the cultural impacts of disaster, it seems natural to begin on this most fundamental level, with its impacts on