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Aesthetic Contemplation: Between the Swallows and the Shrine

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On a warm May day, I brought my camera and long lens to the river to capture images of swallows in flight as they wheeled over the water and dipped to sip from its stream. Any who stay awhile to observe this graceful behaviour become enchanted. One enters, it seems, another world—a world other, that is, than one's usual perspective, boundaries, and modes of thought. Those modes soon become replaced by *wonder* at the bird's swift flight; *marvel* at its glides, dips, and turns; and, sometimes, sheer *awe* at … what? Words like *beauty* and *magic* suggest themselves where straight description fails to do justice to what is met in the encounter. For nigh on an hour I honed my camera technique, gauging the right depth of field to keep the bird in focus and choosing a vertical plane along the river where I would release the shutter when a swallow came near. The excitement of working to get the desired image mingled with the thrill of observing this exhilarating aerial activity. What a symbol of life, spring, and sheer enjoyment! Then, the swallows' wheels circled so that I was right beneath their airy path. Though harmless and inconsequential, I was surely a living thing to them as they were to me. Our encircling worlds intersected. This would have been *the* perfect time to intensify my manipulating the camera and lens, focussing on the birds, ready at the shutter button—but, right then, standing there, clicking away would have seemed absurd, almost sacrilegious. The only thing to do was to bring down the camera and look face-to-face on the swallows as our worlds briefly meshed.

Peter Cheyne, 'Swallow. Hii River', Fukuoka, May 2007

In such encounters, the aesthetic mode becomes one of beholding. It is a face-to-face contemplation that is full-bodied and engaged, however passive one's outer aspect may appear. The experience is not solely, nor even necessarily, intellectual. One's attention becomes highly active and directed, and something ideal or perfect, of aspects beyond one's normal ken, is acknowledged in an enjoyment that can often pass over into reverence. When such experiences evoke what William Wordsworth called 'natural piety', spiritual transformation becomes possible. Arguably, experiences of intensely engaged aesthetic contemplation occur most often in encounters with wildlife and natural processes, where one is, by necessity, actively engaged within one's immediate environment.

The artificial separateness imposed by the art gallery, theatre, or concert hall are conducive to a different kind of respect and appreciation that can at most imitate, but not recreate, the fuller engagement of natural encounter. This is not to denigrate the human artworld, but only to demarcate for it a different region of aesthetic experience. Yet there is a middle

ground in this continuum. Sites of active worship present communal and conventional activities in designated spaces where visitors are full-bodied participants. In what might be a counter-intuitive observation, the practicalities of religious engagement at these sites usually produce a less intense form of aesthetic contemplation than witnessed in encounters with nature, but in their own way they can be just as remarkable.

Insofar as in contemplation we attend especially to values, and values go beyond the bare facts of what is present, aesthetic contemplation is an experience of transcendence. Value realists argue that such intuitions are often true and point towards, for example, moral realities. A value realist believes that there are at least some values that exist or hold true in some universal or cosmic sense, and that this would be so even if human beings did not exist. Anti-realists, on the other hand, argue that while experiences of value may be socially appropriate and have practical benefits, they are based on projections or social constructions or are otherwise illusory. Rather than argue here for one side or the other, I aim simply to give two examples from everyday experience that show different intensities and modes of aesthetic contemplation. This short essay is more descriptive and musing than academic, but it raises the philosophical question of how certain kinds of encounter or dedicated spaces can open up aesthetic contemplation.

My modest aim, then, is to highlight differences in intensity in experiences of aesthetic contemplation and to draw out three dimensions that pertain to these experiences. My two examples are the face-to-face encounter with nature, with the swallows above, and a more culturally mediated, conventional encounter with the sacred at a shrine. In intense experiences of natural encounter, a contemplative mode of space and time transforms the perceived situation. This may also occur, usually less intensely, at a conventional site, such as a sanctified place of worship. I wish to show how encounters with nature can be transformative through an experience of the sublime or of exhilaration, lifting us out of our everyday concerns. Experiences shaped more by convention, such as religious practice, on the other hand, tend to be transformative in a different way, as when one acknowledges personal problems and concerns before a power that is believed to transcend yet nonetheless care about these day-to-day human worries. Whether imagining the animal life

or the sacred power, the experience is full-bodied and sensory, making the contemplation more aesthetic and concrete than intellectual and abstract.

At sites of worship, people commonly report a sense of grace, which is a religious quality, for sure, but one which also has an important aesthetic dimension. The concept of grace implies excess or gratuity. It is often experienced as a kind of shimmering, when things seem to hover between their bare physical existence and their symbolic meaning. This occurs in cherished artworks as well as in what is felt to be sacred. Such objects and sites provide an *ecstasis*, or standing-out, whereby the beautiful or sacred shimmers out from its ordinary surroundings as something qualitatively and significantly special. This shimmer of the extraordinary often is perceived as calling for an attendant stillness to acknowledge it. A space then arises out of our respect for this out-standing quality: examples include the comings and goings at a place of worship, the sighting of an elusive wild animal in the woods or by a river, or the beauty of dappled shadow and sunlight through green leaves. In such luminous encounters, if intense enough, one is transported out of the ordinary and into a heightened state that is often reported as experienced in a different mode of time, like Wordsworth's 'spots of time', and what T. S. Eliot, in his *Four Quartets*, called apprehending the 'point of intersection of the timeless with time', which, 'for most of us', is approached in 'the unattended moment, … lost in a shaft of sunlight, the wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning or the waterfall'. These bring, in Eliot's phrase, 'hints and guesses' of a transcendence that breaks into the world, forging an 'impossible union' of 'spheres of existence'. This greatened space is what I call the *con-templum*, formed in the experience of contemplation.

Picture a Shinto shrine in a modern Japanese city. People walk briskly in to offer a quick prayer and to light incense before heading off on their motor scooters and so on. Here we find a demarcated place that is at once nestled within yet symbolically set aside from the ordinary world of business, shopping, and daily chores. The site of the shrine or temple has been deliberately *cut off*, as it was for the ancient Greeks, who designated the temple in general as *temenos*, a piece of land cut off and assigned to a god or gods. Contemplation here is active and physical: walking through a symbolic gate, cleansing one's hands, shaking a bell before a shrine, lighting incense.

I recall when my youngest daughter was newly born, in her first week at our Kyoto home. Mother, father, brother, sister, and grandmother take the newest family member to Imamiya Jinja, a nearby Shinto shrine. Baby Martha's grandmother prays to the local deities for thanksgiving and safekeeping. We enter the shrine through a large concrete torii and see venerable pines and an ancient camphor tree, designated as sacred by a *shimenawa* rope tied around them. Torii are symbolic gates, marking the entrance into a sacred site. They do not sit in a wall or fence, have no doors, and are completely open. Having no physical function, it is all the more apparent that they mark a spiritual or symbolic transition. Straddling the posts of some torii sit stone lion-dogs, the left one mouthing Ah, the right, a closed-mouthed Mm. We walk through the centre, embodying the Uu in the middle of that efficient holy word, Aum, with its equivalent alpha, omega, and all in between, expressed in one syllable. Some torii are stone or concrete, moss growing on their north sides. Some are unvarnished dark wood, others taller, gaudily painted in vermillion and glossy black. Each gate marks a further transition into the sacred.

A young woman parks her Honda Cub scooter, removes her helmet, and walks through the torii. She rings the clattery copper bell to signal her prayer to the local kami, the gods and spirits who invisibly abide in nature and influence the material world and our human affairs. With no more ado, she returns, again through the transitional gate, to her bike and her daily round. An old couple leave as we enter. Returning to the city street, they turn to face the shrine through the torii they just stepped through, before bowing to the kami in quietly offered respect. The torii very clearly enacts a *temenos*: it is the sign of a site, a temple, cut off for contemplation.

The site has several small shrines and one main one. Some shrines, elsewhere, have several torii, sometimes scores in succession, emphasizing a special degree of transit into contemplative space. Yet everyday concerns are not put down and set aside. Rather, the mood of concern is transformed. Ordinary human concerns are given space to be revealed more purely in this traditional site that is cut off from, yet adjacent to, the hustle and bustle of commercial life. Visitors cleanse their hands and mouths, ladling water from the maws of copper dragons. And then another transitional step: a short walk to stand before the shrine;

clap three times; then shake the clattering, copper bell by pulling its long, braided rope to rattle one's votive presence to the kami. Then pray. Something short. Bow, and make way for the next person.

This Shinto scene exemplifies a physical, conventional con-templum, where a space is reserved for purer considerations, for beholding and appreciation. The thing contemplated is often something ordinary, but unwrapped, and held up in itself: hope for a job; a new baby; a looming exam; a wish for love; concern for someone's health. Bells semi-randomly clatter and tinkle. Is this how our thoughts and cares sound to the gods? Yet these sounds and movements cannot annoy here. Theirs is a gentle, little motion within the greater stillness of the place. The soft-clattering sound and motion is held sympathetically, in this contemplative site.

There must be many sober pleas made here for promotion, romance, worldly success, and such hopes that are easily framed in petitionary prayer. Little favours are briefly begged of the gods, with the petitioner's motorcycle boots firmly on the ground, helmet ready for return to the busy day. But even still, a space has been set aside. And others bring humble thanksgiving. Stillness. Silence echoes silence, enveloping all little clatters, deepening the spaces within for its own resound. Reserving the space and time for contemplation, one becomes more receptive to the epiphanies it returns. The humble hollowing of the self, when acknowledging a *tariki* (other-power) beyond *jiriki* (self-power), as the Japanese Buddhists put it, creates a hollow that echoes the profounder response to our softly clattering calls. The hollowing holds onto no firm concepts and learns to let drop self-concerned, material wishes to take part, without pretension to holiness, in the wider mood and meaning of the site.

Unlike striking encounters with other living creatures in nature, aesthetic contemplation at cultural sites does not generally tend to promote leaving behind our usual selves and concerns. In the experience of diving swallows, we are lifted out of our everyday concerns and are entirely absorbed in the scene. And if one focuses on a certain kind of visit to a shrine—confessional or petitionary, as in my example—personal concerns and problems are naturally acknowledged rather than set aside. Yet there are experiences of nature and

cultural sites where things may be reversed. Walking through a forest, I am alert to the wind, the sound of insects, and the cry of a black-eared kite, but my thoughts may also stray to myself, my wish to come and live in the mountains, my humdrum job in the city, etc. Thus, part of my aesthetic experience of the place can often involve a perception of my relationship to it. Equally, some experiences in shrines or churches may be of the more dramatically absorbing type: I become, as it were, immersed in the icon in front of me or in the sounding of the temple bells, oblivious to everything else, including myself.

Three distinctions, implying three dimensions of aesthetic-contemplative experience, can be drawn out here.

1. The degree to which ordinary, worldly concerns are abandoned.

2. The degree of cultural mediation involved (minimal in the case of nature, very strong in the case of shrines, etc.).

3. The contemplator's immersion or engagement within an environment.

The main distinction I wish to highlight here is that between experiences that lift us out of the ordinary and ones that release its grip. Sublime experiences in nature are more dramatic and aesthetically, even spiritually, transporting, yet both modes are transformative in their ways. At cultural sites, ordinary concerns tend more to remain with us, yet they are framed differently, so that they can be perceived in their aesthetic aspect and within a wider context. This aesthetic framing enables a more detached or less anxious relation to our emotions and concerns than we have in everyday life, enhancing our self-knowledge in line with what Socrates called the examined life.

There is, then, a practical value in carrying our concerns with us, into cultural sites. It is not that the shrine visitor fails to transcend his or her worldly concerns, but that the experience of bringing them to the site of the sacred amounts to owning up to ordinary gripes and desires even in the vicinity of the holy. The sublime indifference to our everyday concerns in the encounter with nature is refreshing. It transforms us with a glimpse of a joy apart from

our daily desires. Yet the shrine experience is humbling in a different way. Here, we do not pretend to disown ourselves or our cares in some conventional show of higher-mindedness. We admit them and they are admitted into the site, accommodated as cared-for realities. In this situation, in the domesticated sublime of the conventionally sacred, transformation of oneself becomes possible precisely because one's quotidian quibbles and wants are acknowledged, on the human side, and accepted, on the side of the sacred, as the gentle clattering of the human, benignly accommodated by the kami, the gods and nature spirits of the site.

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