

Nature, Aesthetic Engagement, and Reverie

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'Aesthetic engagement' could be heard blandly: as a portmanteau term for our aesthetic attitudes, stances and comportment towards the natural world. Or it could be serving as an alternative to 'artistic engagement': referring, therefore, to 'environmental art', landscape architecture, garden design, and so on. Or – and this is how I shall be taking the expression – it could indicate a particular and rather fashionable conception of the aesthetics of nature that owes primarily to Arnold Berleant in his book *Art and Engagement* (1991) and many related articles (eg. 1993 and 2002). These days one hears a lot of the 'engagement model' of appreciation of nature.

After a brief resumé of Berleant and his followers' proposal, I shall argue that this proposal is both less novel and less threatening to 'traditional aesthetics' than they imagine. I shall go on, in the more 'constructive' half of the paper, to recommend to you a mode of aesthetic appreciation of nature to which, I think, the engagement model is inhospitable.

The engagement model belongs to – indeed has inspired – what Berleant calls 'the new field of environmental aesthetics' (2002: 3), and is contrasted by him with one rooted in what he sees as the 'traditional aesthetics' of art. The latter, he argues, is a bad model even in the domain of art, let alone that of nature. (Indeed, one of Berleant's main ambitions – though not one I shall discuss – is to 'reinterpret the artistic aesthetic by the natural' one that he has developed (1993: 228).) The defining feature of 'traditional aesthetics' – whose most conspicuous champion, for Berleant, was Kant – is its embrace of 'the contemplative ideal' (1993: 230). According to this ideal, the aesthetic appreciator – whether of artworks or natural places – should be a passive, disinterested and, in a double sense, 'objectifying' contemplator (1993: 229f). It is upon discrete, isolated, distanced, and 'framed' *objects* that his attention should rest, and these are objects in the further sense of being set over against *subjects*, and not anything that we 'participate' in, are 'assimilated' into, or have 'unity' with (1993: 234ff).

Every aspect of the contemplative model, argues Berleant, should be rejected – at least in the domain of natural appreciation. When we 'deal with beauty in nature', he tells us, we are typically 'active' – 'physically participating', 'somatically engaged' – and 'surrounded by the "object"', not passively staring at some 'framed' object before us (2002: 231f). Typically, there is a relation, not of 'distance', but of 'continuity', 'assimilation', 'participation' and 'unity' between subject and object: in effect, a dissolution of the subject/object distinction. Partly for these rea-

sons, our stance toward natural beauty is not disinterested. And there are other reasons for this: as one admirer of Berleant puts it, when writing of garden appreciation, ‘from the point of view of disinterest, [this] is too enmeshed in our purposes and needs’ (Miller 1993: 99) – and the same will go for less cultivated nature, where we are typically involved as backpackers, say, or canoeists. Berleant concludes that ‘the aesthetic mark’ in our relations with nature ‘is not disinterested contemplation but total engagement’ (1993:237). Nature provides us, not with ‘objects’ admirably to view, but ‘occasions’ for sensory, somatic, imaginative and other modes of activity.

II

Does this engagement model provide a ‘new’ and viable environmental aesthetics or aesthetics of nature? In my judgement, it offers little that is new and, where it perhaps does, it is not viable. When ‘traditional aesthetics’, like Kant’s, is rescued from the engagement theorists’ misunderstandings, it is perfectly compatible with some aspects of the engagement model. What it is not compatible with – to its credit, however – are some exaggerated claims that champions of engagement often make. Let’s begin with these.

Consider, first, the insistence that natural appreciation is ‘too enmeshed in our purposes and needs’ ever to be disinterested – that, as two authors put it, ‘utility and form, perception and use’ are too difficult to separate for the ‘contemplative ideal’ to be approached (Kemal and Gaskell 1993: 33). But the ordinary backpacker – if not the intrepid kayaker riding the rapids – is surely able to set aside whatever utilitarian purposes and needs, such as getting fit, may have motivated his expedition, and disinterestedly (in Kant’s sense) to enjoy the scenery around him. That something is ‘enmeshed’ in our practical purposes does not preclude a disinterested aesthetic regard for it. If it did, no painter or gardener could ever pause, take stock and objectively appraise the fruits of their labour.

Consider, second, the claim that our ‘unity’ or ‘assimilation’ with nature in engaged experience of it is so great that the ‘very foundation of modern [ie. ‘traditional’] aesthetic theory’ – ‘the subject/object dichotomy’ – ‘collapses’ (Miller 1993: 178). Now there are, of course, bad accounts of the subject/object distinction that reflections, like Heidegger’s on our engaged ‘being-in-the-world’, may help to refute. And it is true, as we shall see later, that

there are experiences of nature which understandably elicit talk, however inadequate and vague, of a 'oneness with nature'. But, with most of us surely, the head begins to swim when we read that there is no distinction between subjects and objects. How could anyone deny a distinction between conscious persons and the world of things of which they are conscious? Kant and other 'traditionalists' were not, as far as I can see, committed by their aesthetics to any particular account of that distinction, but in accepting that the distinction cannot be 'collapsed', they are surely on the side of good sense.

Stripped of such exaggerated claims as the two just mentioned, there is little or nothing in the engagement model that the traditional one, when properly understood, is unable to accommodate. Champions of the former model are guilty, above all, of misconstruing the notion of disinterestedness in roughly, if not precisely, Kant's sense. Accurately construed, disinterestedness in that sense is not incompatible with several aspects of 'engaged' aesthetic appreciation. This is just as well for the champions of engagement, since it is hard to see how appreciation could count as aesthetic were it not disinterested in *something* like Kant's sense. Malcolm Budd is right to maintain that it is necessary to any aesthetic response that it is *not* a function of 'a desire' – practical, moral, utilitarian – that the world should be a certain way' (2002: 111).

What *is* difficult to see is that disinterestedness, so understood, should require, as Berleant imagines it does, aesthetic appreciation of nature to be the 'passive' contemplation of discrete, 'framed' objects set at a distance from the observer – and nor, to my knowledge, did the great aestheticians of the 18th and 19th centuries require this. (Nor, of course, did they exclude the possibility that aesthetic experiences might be of that kind, and it is surely peculiar for engagement theorists to give the impression that backpackers and others communicants with nature *never* just 'passively' look at natural objects, like a flower or a rock, standing before them in the way that a literally 'framed' work in an art gallery might.)

While it is possible to cite passages from Shaftesbury or the phenomenon of the 'Claude glass' in support of the idea that aesthetic appreciation must be of discrete, 'framed' objects, it is clear that this idea was not generally shared in the 18th century. Kant certainly did not share it, for his items of appreciation include such 'un-framed' – indeed, un-object-like – ones as the changing shapes of a fire and rippling brooks (1952: 89). And nor, for ex-

ample, did enthusiasts for the informal 'English' style of landscape design. The point of Horace Walpole's famous remark that William Kent 'leaped the fence and saw that all Nature was a garden' was precisely that Kent, like 'Capability' Brown later, had, as it were, 'de-framed' the garden so as to let its boundaries indistinguishably merge with its uncultivated surroundings (Qu. in Hunt and Willis 1988: 313).

Nor was it a 'traditional' maxim that objects of aesthetic appreciation should be set at a distance before the observer. Most 18th century writers on nature would, I suspect, be as puzzled as Ronald Hepburn is today by the suggestion that, when we are 'in' nature – surrounded by, immersed in, it – our experience of it cannot be contemplative and disinterested (see especially Hepburn 1984). There is no good reason to suppose that Kant, for one, subscribed to any such maxim, either in connection with nature or art appreciation. In the latter case, for example, he distinguishes a 'mere piece of sculpture, made simply to be looked at' from architectural works, designed for 'public concourse' and dwelling – ones, that is, which we are 'in' (1952: 186f).

Nor, finally, does disinterestedness require that the admirer of natural scenes must be 'passive' – either physically, by just staring, immobile, at them or mentally, by simply receiving, like a blank tablet, what is given by them to the senses. 18th century English parklands, for example, were designed to be enjoyed on the move – offering surprises and changing vistas to the walker or rider. And some of them provided 'emblems' or 'narratives' – that of the *Aeneid* in the case of Stourhead – which the visitor was intended actively to decipher or engage with. It would be strange, moreover, to describe Kant – for whom aesthetic pleasure resides in a highly active and 'free play' of the imagination and understanding – as supposing that aesthetic appreciation is a 'passive' affair. Berleant, recall, contrasts the passive contemplation of 'objects' with the active, engaged appreciation prompted by 'occasions'. But 'occasion' would not be a bad label for what Kant himself supposes that appropriate items provide: stimuli for that 'free play' in which, at the end of the day, aesthetic pleasure is taken.

Let me now turn to the notion of contemplation, for it is the 'contemplative ideal' of 'traditional aesthetics' that, recall, the champions of engagement explicitly oppose. While they do not, as far as I can tell, explain in any detail what they mean by 'contemplation', it seems that by linking it with passivity, objectification and so on, they have in mind a rather particular form among the many forms of activity (or non-activity) that can be described

as ‘contemplation’. The picture seems to be that of the physically and mentally stilled observer merely looking at some discrete item. If so, then it is not what Kant and many other older writers intended by ‘contemplation’. Kant uses ‘contemplative’ as a virtual synonym for ‘disinterested’ – as when he contrasts the ‘merely contemplative’ with what is ‘practical’ in the sense of ‘bring[ing] about an interest in the object’ (1952: 64). If therefore, as I argued above, disinterestedness is compatible with an engaged aesthetic stance, so is Kantian contemplation. Or consider Ruskin’s notion of contemplation. Contrasted with ‘the mere ... consciousness of ... pleasantness’ is an ‘exulting, reverent, and grateful’ experience of it which Ruskin describes as ‘full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful’ (1903–12, Vol. 4:42). Contemplation so characterized hardly sounds to be disengaged spectating – an impression confirmed when Ruskin equates it with the Greek notion of *theoria*. Whatever the *theoria*-ist is indulging in, it is not mere spectatorship.

Contemplation, in short, is an elastic notion, and there are modes of contemplation, like Ruskin’s, that are not captured by the engagement’s theorist’s talk of ‘the contemplative ideal’ and which, indeed, are perfectly compatible with the idea of an engaged aesthetic relationship to nature. Doubtless, too, there are modes of contemplation less compatible with this. Indeed, in the remainder of this paper, I focus on a mode to which, it seems to me, the engagement model is at any rate inhospitable – and regrettably so, for I want to recommend this form of contemplation as an important aspect, for some people at least, of aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. (I won’t be returning to the issue of the engagement model’s inability to welcome this mode of contemplation: so let me just record my impression that the model is too muscular and activist – too ‘masculine’, one might say – to accord importance to this mode.)

III

There is a valuable insight into the aesthetics of nature that goes back at least to Adorno, who identified an ‘essential indeterminateness’ in the appreciation of ‘natural beauty’ (1997: 70), unconstrained as this is by the considerations of tradition, genre, and artistic intention germane to art appreciation. Malcolm Budd puts the point well when he refers to a freedom ‘integral to the aesthetic appreciation of nature ... which means that much more is up to the aesthetic observer of nature than of art, a freedom

which is one aspect of nature's distinctive aesthetic appeal' (2002: 148). It is, you could say, one aspect of that one aspect that I would now like to bring out.

The aspect I have in mind is a mode of contemplation that two inspirations for my ensuing remarks – Rousseau and Gaston Bachelard – describe as '*rêverie*'. (Bachelard's translator prefers 'day-dreaming', but that word has connotations of absent- or empty-mindedness not intended by the two Frenchmen's term *rêverie*.) When, writes Rousseau, he walks through nature in reverie, his head is 'entirely free and ... [his] ideas follow their bent without resistance or constraint', which is why reverie is 'pure and disinterested contemplation' (1992: 12, 94). Reverie, for Bachelard, in taking us into 'the space of elsewhere', is 'original contemplation', whereby 'we open the world' up to ourselves (1994: 184). For both authors, then, reverie is a form – perhaps the most important form – of contemplation.

Reverie, as I – and to a large extent my two mentors – understand it, is characterized by at least the three following, related properties. First, and perhaps foremost, it is a state of what might be called 'self-disengagement', not only in the sense that, in reverie, attention is not focused upon oneself, but because the thoughts, ideas, images or whatever which occur 'follow their own bent', unpiloted by the agent or subject. This, perhaps, is what Bachelard meant in referring to reverie as taking us into 'the space of elsewhere', and it is a point made explicit by Rousseau, who 'never dream[s] more deliciously than when [he] forget[s] [him]self' (1992: 95). Mute and unthematized as this self-disengagement is during reverie, it is a condition that, when 'recollected in tranquility', not unnaturally prompts the rhetoric of 'oneness' or 'unity' with nature. When, however, Rousseau speaks of feeling himself 'one with' this 'beautiful system' (1992: 92), or Bachelard of 'a feeling of participation in a flowing onward' (1994: xvi), they are not proclaiming – and nor am I – the 'collapse of the subject/object dichotomy'. The point, rather, is to lend poetic force to the completeness of the 'un-selfing', as Iris Murdoch calls it (1997: 375ff), that takes place in reverie, and to the sense thereby induced, perhaps, that we subjects, like the objects before us, may owe our being to a single, encompassing 'ground' or 'source'.

Second, when Rousseau remarks that 'everything which pertains to ... [his] needs ... spoils his reverie, and laments that there are those who 'no longer see in plants anything but instruments of our passions [and] practical concerns' (1992: 94, 99), he makes plain that reverie must be disinterested, in the relevant, broadly

Kantian sense. Perhaps this is why Bachelard seems, rightly or not, to privilege the experience of forests over cultivated, tilled fields: the latter, involved as they are with our practical concerns, are too much 'with-me, with-us' to facilitate pure reverie (1994: 188). Notice that, for neither thinker, does disinterestedness require physical distance from 'framed' objects: Rousseau's reveries accompany his *walking through* forests and valleys.

Finally, reverie is to be contrasted with at least the more grueling and 'heavyweight' forms of reflection – from thinking something through, reasoning to a conclusion, deliberation, and so on. 'Reverie relaxes and amuses me', remarks Rousseau, whereas reflection 'tires' and thinking has 'always been painful for' him (1992: 91). For Bachelard, the person in reverie is not concerned to examine the 'causality' of the images that present themselves, but stands open to their 'reverbrations' (1994: xv). Reverie is altogether freer, more fluid, less 'intentional' than other, more regimented or 'cognitive' forms of reflection. It is looser, less crisped even than Kant's 'free play of the imagination and understanding', of which it nevertheless has clear echoes.

Here are a couple of examples of reveries, prompted by encounters with nature that illustrate a style of contemplation whose neglect in the academic literature belies its familiarity. One, belonging to his 'philosophical phenomenology of nests', comes from Bachelard. The bird-nest he examines is a 'precarious thing', but it may nevertheless 'set us to daydreaming of security', even arousing a sense of 'cosmic confidence in the world', fragile a place as that is too. And it may evoke images of a 'happy household' – our own, with any luck – as a 'flourishing nest', its members as close and cosy as the birds in their nest. And from there our imagery may extend to a picture of the world itself as 'the nest of mankind' – a protective place that to the child at least is one of 'well-being' and intimacy (1994: 97ff). A second example comes from myself who, in the best empiricist spirit, went for some walks at the time of writing this paper to confirm the role of reverie in my own enjoyment of nature. (Not easy to do, incidentally, since my intended abandonment to reverie was prone to be obstructed by awareness of what it was that I intended to do.) So what happened, then, when, leaning on a gate to a field, I looked about me? Well, nothing dramatic, and nothing as profound, probably, as Bachelard's musings on the cosmic significance of bird-nests. But here, in somewhat stream of consciousness prose, is my recollection of one short sequence of experiences: slowly panning a hillside beyond the field, my eyes dwell on some cows.

Do they get bored eating grass all the time? Are they as miserable as they look, or is theirs the truly contented life? I don't grapple with these questions. Instead my eyes wander to the field, recently ploughed; thick lumps of 'gingerbread soil' – a phrase of Karel Capek's, whose charming book on gardening comes briefly to mind. Images of the many different sorts of soil that farmers and gardeners deal with. The imagery is interrupted by shadows of clouds scudding over the field, blown by the wind that is also, I notice, rippling the surface of the nearby river. That surface is very pleasing. Why?, I wonder, and briefly enquire whether Kant could explain it, for it isn't, it strikes me, either sublime or beautiful by his criteria. Back to the munching cows, but unsuccessfully, for the thought of Kant recalls me to the paper I am writing for the Nordic Society of Aesthetics.

IV

If I am to succeed in recommending reverie to you as an important aspect of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, I need to persuade you of two things: first that nature is an especially appropriate source and object of reverie, and second that reverie is an authentically *aesthetic* engagement with nature. Time prevents my saying anything about the former, beyond remarking that I am *not* claiming that *only* nature appropriately invites reverie. (Most of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is, in fact, concerned with the reveries prompted by *built* places – cellars, attics and other 'felicitous spaces'.) But I do want to say a little about the aesthetic credentials of reverie induced by encounters with natural places and things.

Might we not justly accuse someone standing before a painting of a bird-nest or ploughed field by Constable, say, of failing in his aesthetic duty towards the painting if he allowed his mind freely to wander – to 'day-dream' – in the manner of Bachelard and myself in the examples I described above? Wouldn't such fancies be irrelevant, or worse, to a proper attention to, say, the painterly merits of the work or its fidelity to a genre of painting? So doesn't reverie *detract from* authentic artistic appreciation? Perhaps, but then we need to recall the Adorno-Budd insight that a main difference between nature and art appreciation is that the former is less 'determinate', more 'free'. The appreciator of nature is altogether less constrained by, as it were, duties of appropriate attention. And I want to suggest, more positively, that reverie in nature is typically characterized by features that render it – ex-

cept on *parti pris* or axe-grinding conceptions of the aesthetic – an aesthetic dimension of engagement with nature.

To begin with, reverie in the company of nature involves *aisthesis*, the engagement and alertness of the senses: for it is the look and feel of the warm, rounded nest – or the sound and sight of the wind rippling the surface of the river – that induce and attract reveries like those sketched. Second, it is, as already shown, a disinterested mode of experience, free from preoccupation with one's purposes and needs. Disinterested sensory receptivity is already, surely, a putative mark of the aesthetic character of reverie. There is more to say, though.

Aesthetic engagement or experience is something that, by and large, is valued. If it were not, then we would not, I suspect, spill so much ink writing about the aesthetic and discussing it at conferences like the one this paper was written for. I suspect, as well, that we value it for at least three roughly distinguishable reasons. First, much of it is enjoyable, pleasurable. Second, much aesthetic experience is – or is of – what is good and wholesome for human beings: it can edify. Third, some of it is – or is of – what is deep and of genuine human significance.

I want to say that reverie, by and large, is something to value for the same reasons. Typically, as we know from Rousseau, it 'relaxes and amuses': it can be 'charming' or 'delicious', 'tranquil' or 'diverting'. Second, it is often, though not always, good and wholesome: for it is generally good to allow the imagination to flow, to renew one's contacts with the living world around one, and to 'unself' or 'forget oneself'. This may even be a moral good, for, as Iris Murdoch, for one, has argued, we can expect little from a person incapable of a 'selfless respect' for what stands outside his or her sphere of practical concerns. Finally, some reveries in 'felicitous space' – Bachelard's in front of the bird-nest, if not mine leaning on the farmer's gate – are deep: they may show us something about the world and ourselves. It may even be – to leave the last word to Bachelard – that 'the values that mark reverie mark humanity in its depths' (1994:6).

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