

*Focillon, Bergson and Buddhist Aesthetics:
A point in Focillon's Reception
of Japanese Art*

*Focillon, Bergson y la estética budista:
una reflexión sobre la recepción del arte japonés
por parte de Focillon*

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on a point in Henri Focillon's interpretation of the aesthetics of Japanese art. Focillon fastens very precisely on a deep difference which exists in the understanding of the idea of aesthetic contemplation in the Western and Eastern traditions. Western traditional analyses of contemplation presuppose and embody assumptions about the ontological ultimacy of individuals that are absent from Eastern traditions in which the ultimate is conceived of as nothingness. In particular, the idea that the absolute is fully manifested in each phenomenal individual is absent from Western aesthetics. Focillon grasped this, and his views are contrasted with those of Bergson, and confirmed by those of the eminent Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō, who was his contemporary.

KEYWORDS: BUDDHISM, AESTHETICS, CONTEMPLATION, ZEN.

RESUMEN

Este artículo versa sobre una cuestión relativa a la recepción por parte de Focillon de la estética del arte japonés. Focillon delimita de modo muy preciso una profunda diferencia existente en la comprensión de la idea de contemplación estética en las tradiciones de Oriente y Occidente. Los análisis tradicionales de la contemplación en Occidente presuponen y encarnan asunciones

sobre el carácter ontológicamente último de los individuos, asunciones que están ausentes en las tradiciones orientales, en las cuales el principio último es concebido como una nada. En particular, la idea de que el absoluto se manifiesta totalmente en cada individuo fenoménico está ausente en la estética occidental. Focillon se dio cuenta de este hecho y sus posiciones son contrastadas con las de Bergson y confirmadas por las del eminente filósofo japonés Nishida Kitarō, que fue contemporáneo suyo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: BUDISMO, ESTÉTICA, CONTEMPLACIÓN, ZEN

I

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT THE ART HISTORIAN HENRI FOCILLON (1881-1943) was one of the more important contributors to the reception and understanding of Japanese art in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century.¹ Focillon studied Oriental art for approximately the decade 1910-20, study which resulted in the publication of three notable books and a number of articles.² In this essay I want to focus on a comment Focillon makes about an important difference he finds between the philosophical outlook he takes to underlie Japanese art in particular on the one hand, and that of Bergson on the other. The latter's philosophy might have seemed to be a close approximation to the Japanese view but is in fact somewhat less like it than might at first appear. Interestingly, Focillon's reaction to Bergson's thought is reflected in that of his Japanese contemporary, the important philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), to which I will also refer. Nishida is a valuable example in the present context, since although he sits squarely in the Zen tradition, he formulates his ideas in the vocabulary of Western thought, making it easier to grasp the difference between East and West in respect of aesthetics I want here to investigate. My thesis is that Focillon's astute comment points to a deep difference in the conception of aesthetic experience in the Western and Japanese traditions, and he deserves credit for pointing this out, especially so early in the process of mutual discovery between Japan and the West, a process which is still going on.

1 Cf., e.g., INAGA, S, «Images changeantes de l'art japonais: depuis la vue impressionniste du Japon à la controverse de l'esthétique orientale (1860-1940)», *Journal of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Tokyo*, Vol. 29-30, 2004-5, pp.73-93 ; FUJIHARA, S., *Henri Focillon et la pensée asiatique de Tenshin Okakura in Aesthetics*. Tokyo: Japanese Society for Aesthetics, 2006, pp. 37-52, and the latter's afterword to FOCILLON, Henri, 1914 [2005] *Hokusai*. Lyon : Fage Editions, pp.163-70.

2 Focillon 1914 [2005], FOCILLON, Henri, *Essai sur le genie japonais*, 1918, reprinted in FOCILLON, Henri, *Technique et sentiment*. Paris: Société de propagation des livres d'art, 1938 and FOCILLON, Henri, *L'Art Bouddhique*. Paris: Henri Laurens 1921. A full list of Focillon's minor publications in this area can be found in Fujihara, *op.cit.*, note 2, pp.50-1.

II

It is appropriate to begin with an overview of the main elements of Focillon's interpretation of the most important ways in which Buddhism affected the art of Japan. His fundamental assertion is that Japanese Buddhism, in contrast with the empiricism of the West, is based on a fascination with the absolute.³ This is Focillon's way of referring to the doctrine of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and adopted in Zen that the *samsara* and nirvana are one and the same or, in philosophical language, that the one and the many are in some sense identical. This doctrine can also be stated as the thesis that infinity is fully present in everything we ordinarily think of as a discrete individual, and can be experienced as such by the mind that has achieved enlightenment.

A number of consequences flow from this basic insight which are important for aesthetics. The first is a belief in the non-separateness of humanity from what in the West we term the environment, a concept which includes a degree of separateness as part of its meaning. For the Japanese, nature is not just the insensible scenery of a drama in which we are the only actors. For them, we are wholly part of and within nature. It is not just a background. Hence the constant prominence, in Japanese art and thought, given to precisely what we in the West think of as the background, the constant oneness from which all individuals temporarily emerge and to which they all, sooner or later, return. From this (Focillon contends) there flows an admirable equilibrium between man and nature, a solemn awareness of the relations of the self and of the All, which in turn gives rise to a powerful serenity.⁴ Buddhist art found a way of suggesting the relations which unify human life with the universe which has been largely absent from the art of the West.⁵

3 FOCILLON, H., *op. cit.*, 1921, p.124. This is one of the areas in which he follows OKAKURA Kakuzo, whose ideas were influential at the time. Cf. the latter's *The Ideals of the East*. New York: ICG Muse 1904 (2000) p.1. [It should be stressed that Focillon does not always accept what Okakura (whose views were very influential at the time) has to say. He was more than able to make up his own mind on matters concerning the interpretation of Oriental art and aesthetics.] This fascination is not restricted to Japan: the elites of all the major Far Eastern civilisations, Focillon notes, find an infinity hidden within the appearances we call individuals. Cf. FOCILLON 1921, p. 68.

4 FOCILLON, H., *op. cit* 1921, pp.117-9; 1918, p.226. The importance of the background in Japanese art can hardly be overstated, and shapes many central Japanese aesthetic virtue concepts. Cf. WILKINSON, Robert «Nishida and Santayana on Goethe», *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* Vol, 23, nos 1-2, 2000, pp.31-52 and «Aesthetic Virtues in the Context of Nirvanic Values» in MARCHIANÒ, R. and MILANI, R. (eds.), *Frontiers of Transculturality in Contemporary Aesthetics*. Milan: Trauben, 2001, pp. 91-104.

5 FOCILLON, H., *op.cit.*, 1921, p.158

It might be expected that the belief in an omnipresent absolute would give rise to a highly abstract tendency in art, but this is not so. Japanese art, as Focillon insists in more than one place, is ‘éperdument phénoméniste.’⁶ The doctrine of the identity of the one and the many entails not that the phenomenal world is uninteresting but on the contrary that everything it contains is a manifestation of the creative life of the whole universe. Nothing can be dismissed a priori as a subject unfit for art:

«Le bloc sculpté par les eaux, façonné par des siècles d’usure et d’intempéries, est aussi ample, aussi riche de sens qu’un beau pan de falaise. Un bouquet noblement composé parle au cœur et à la pensée comme un soir sur un vallon. Les jardins ne sont pas les promenoirs de la sensualité ou la projection des géométries de l’intelligence, mais la suggestion des paysages»⁷

The doctrine of the unity of the one and the many also accounts for the cultivation of the haiku form in Japan: the haiku describes a single incident or moment or individual; but each such is a manifestation of the universe as a whole.⁸

Not only are one and many non-different in this outlook, but also mind and body are not conceived of in the way in which they often have been in the West, i.e. as radically different in nature. Since what is called matter in the West is in this outlook by contrast a manifestation of the creativity of the universe, it is not regarded as purely other than consciousness and passive, the recalcitrant medium which has to be forcibly remoulded in accord with the ideas of the artist. Forms conceived in abstraction from the material in which they are realised are merely blind agitation of the mind. Forms have to be realised in a material, and both they and the material are changed in the process of their realisation:

«Nos songes ne commencent à vivre que quand [la matière] les prend. Elle les enfante, elle les décuple en les mettant au monde. Ce sera pour nous un des bien-

6 FOCILLON, H., *op. cit.*, 1921, p.124; *cf.* his *op. cit.*, 1918, p. 252

7 *Ibid.*, p.227

8 FOCILLON, H., *op. cit.*, 1932 pp.ii-iii. The belief in of the non-separateness of form and material became one of the central convictions of Focillon’s general aesthetic, as set out in his *La Vie des formes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1934, 4th edition 1955) especially, (section III, *Les formes dans la matière*. Focillon was the son of an engraver, and grew up among the tools and procedures of that process. His awareness of the importance of manual skill, technique and materials in the arts dates from his childhood and never left him. He sums up his views in the eloquent essay *Éloge de la main*, reprinted in the 1955 edition of *Vie des formes*. His clear focus on these aspects of art make him unusual among art historians. The relation of mind and body in Oriental thought is of course a huge subject: YUASA Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, tr. S. Nagatomo and T.P.Kasulis. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987 is a good starting point.

faits du génie bouddhique (et c'est aussi là l'excellent des études japonaises) que de nous détacher définitivement des formes usées de l'idéalité, de la conception massive de la matière opposée à la subtile essence du don créateur de l'esprit.»⁹

Ideality (*l'idéalité*) is Focillon's term for art dominated by the intelligence, not conceived with a specific medium in mind and always in his view somewhat etiolated by comparison with art conceived with such a medium in mind *ab initio*.

The thesis of one-many identity also determines one of the most important features of Japanese art, namely its use of suggestion. The reason is analogous to that which caused the European Romantics to have recourse to symbolism, as follows: as has been said, properly experienced, each particular or individual in the phenomenal world is such that the absolute – the nothingness which the Japanese call *mu* – is fully and contradictorily present in it, and can be experienced as such by those who have achieved the state usually called enlightenment or spiritual insight. It is assumed that one of the central goals of art is somehow to convey this to us. Now, if each individual is in some sense infinite as well as finite, then to try to convey this by means of a finite work of art requires a special approach. Exhaustive depiction is not an option, since each individual is inexhaustible. What artists have to do is to find a way to select those details which have an inexhaustible power of suggestion; which fix themselves in the mind of the spectator and resonate endlessly in the memory, continually affording new experience and insight.¹⁰ It is suggestion alone that gives us access to the infinite. To say everything, to try to depict exhaustively, will result in lifeless art. Two or three appropriate tones and the right line are enough to suggest everything, and thereby we approach life. Such a method allows us to grasp and clearly present what is individual and characteristic, that is, living and profound, in each manifestation of reality. Such a method does not immobilise things; it follows the same rhythm as nature, and thus captures its essence. To fix is to kill; to suggest is to respect the *élan* and change inherent in things, and thus intelligence is allowed to participate in the activity of the universe. The West (Focillon claims) studies nature via logic and in a state of stability; it seeks the secrets of the organism in death. The Japanese genius contemplates and suggests.¹¹

9 It is no accident, logically speaking, that the most important aesthetic virtue in such an aesthetic is profundity, since profundity is precisely this power of endless suggestion. See WILKINSON, R. «*El Concepto de lo profundo en Oriente y Occidente*», tr. Raquel García García, *Contrastes. Revista Internacional de Filosofía*. Suplemento 9 (2004), pp.201-214.

10 FOCILLON, H., *op. cit.*, 1921, pp.121-2; 1918, pp.228-9. Focillon argues that Hokusai was a master of suggestion in this way.

11 Examples of such disenchantment-motivated contemplation of nature can be found,

Granted the Buddhist metaphysic, incompleteness of depiction and the use of suggestion in art are almost unavoidable. For the Buddhist, there are no enduring individuals in the world, including enduring selves, only a succession of ever-changing states or aggregates. To try to depict an individual as something stable is not only misleading, it is impossible, since there are no such stable individuals. Further, such depictions are morally undesirable, since they hinder human beings in their progress toward freedom from attachments by reinforcing the false belief that there are stable individuals to which or to whom we can sensibly become attached. Non-exhaustive or incomplete depiction and deft suggestion are the only ways not to do violence to a reality which is an endless flux of temporary associations of aggregates, and of which our own momentary states are an example.

III

Such is Focillon's interpretation of the major ways in which Buddhism has affected the art of Japan. I want now to turn to the comment he makes on the philosophy of Bergson which I mentioned at the start of this essay. As has been noted above, Focillon finds in the art of Japan, deeply informed by Buddhist belief, a special attitude to nature generally not found in the West. This attitude is founded on a belief in the non-separateness of humanity from the rest of what there is. This has a consequence, he claims, for what constitutes the contemplation of nature in each of the cultures concerned. Buddhist contemplation of nature does not have its roots in some form of disenchantment, especially disenchantment with human society¹², nor does it have disenchantment as its consequence. He continues that Buddhist contemplation,

«...va plus loin que l'intuition bergsonienne, greffée sur le courant des forces obscures, et d'un rythme plus égal. Elle plonge au sein de la vie, mais sans perdre jamais pied, sans devenir un torpeur ou un délire. Du haut de son rocher, au fond de ses forêts, le solitaire bouddhiste contemple l'univers, non comme le décor de sa fantaisie, non comme la pensée d'un dieu lointain, mais comme la palpitation d'un infini caché. Sa pensée se mêle au paysage, elle participe religieusement à tout ce qui est en vie en lui»¹³

This contemplative state has nothing of melancholy about it. It is wholly inclusive, excluding nothing:

I would suggest, in ROUSSEAU's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782).

¹² FOCILLON, H., *op. cit.*, 1918, p. 226.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.227.

«L'âme multipliée sent battre en elle toutes les pulsations de la vie. Dans la retraite du sage japonais, il n'y a rien d'une manie inhumaine, rien d'un érémitisme stérile ou de la vénérable démente du yoghi.»¹⁴

Indeed, Focillon argues that to use the term 'contemplation' of the state of Buddhist meditation is inappropriate :

«Le mot de contemplation, avec ce qu'il entraîne de souvenirs, le rite latin qui découpe dans le ciel un espace choisi, l'acte de l'homme qui épie et qui suppute, apparaît désormais comme un contre-sens.»¹⁵

There are here two closely related points of philosophical interest, the one concerning Bergson and the other the way in which contemplation is conceived: I will return to the second point below, which can be better understood after a brief investigation of an aspect of the thought of Nishida. It is of great interest that the point Focillon here makes about Bergson's philosophy is closely paralleled in the thought of Nishida, who was exploring the French philosopher's thought from a Japanese point of view at exactly the same time as Focillon was trying to understand the art and thought of Japan from the point of view of the West.

Nishida spent his entire philosophical career investigating whether the central insights of Zen could be articulated in any of the conceptual frameworks he could find in the philosophical systems of the Western tradition. One of these central Zen insights – the contradictory identity of the one and the many, the *samsara* and *nirvana* – has already been mentioned. Another important aspect of Zen thought (though not exclusive to Zen) is the doctrine that the one is to be conceived of (insofar as it is proper to speak of it being conceivable at all) as what is called in Japanese *mu* or nothingness. It would in fact be better to write the English word as no-thingness. *Mu* is not a void but rather a plenum of possibilities, a wholly undetermined somewhat to which no concepts apply, since concepts imply some degree of specificity, no matter how broadly conceived. *Mu* must escape conceptual articulation wholly, since it is the origin and point of return of everything that comes into and goes out of existence: it must accordingly escape every kind and degree of specificity.¹⁶ When he read the Western philosophies which had become available to the Japanese

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

15 It is to be stressed that the doctrine of *mu* is not just a logical doctrine necessitated by the type of reasoning familiar in one-and-many philosophies. In Japan, it is held that *mu* can be experienced directly in the moment of enlightenment called (in Zen) *satori*. The doctrine of *mu* is accordingly what in the West we call an empirical doctrine, as well as a logical or a priori one – as so often, Western dichotomies do not fit well with Oriental thought.

16 BERGSON, Henri, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, tr. F.L.Podgson. London: Allen and Unwin, 1910, p.101.

after the opening of Japan to the West, Nishida was trying to find some conceptual framework which might accommodate both these notions.

In the thought of Bergson, Nishida initially believed he had found a reasonably close match with his own basic convictions. It follows from the doctrine of *mu* that our ordinary, daily experience of the world is not revelatory of the whole of reality, since it does not include awareness of being-as-is or ultimate reality, i.e. *mu*. Our ordinary experience is of a world of discrete individuals located in space and time, varying in their degree of transiency and in their mutual relations. Our own everyday, phenomenal self is just another such constructed, temporary individual, though of particular interest to us. This phenomenal self is non-ultimate, and Zen includes the doctrine that there is a deeper self, often called our 'original face' in Zen texts, which is revealed when the surface ego is finally shattered after meditational discipline. It follows that the everyday world is constructed by us from something more primitive on the basis of sense perception and reasoning, a construction we adopt because it has a pragmatic sanction: it helps to get about in the world, to survive. Sense perception and reason are the means by which we introduce discriminations into our experience, and it follows that they by definition lead us away from awareness of *mu*. Accordingly, if we are to have direct experience of *mu*, it must be by some other means. When he came to read Bergson, Nishida felt he had found a close analogue to these ideas.

Bergson claims that our everyday experience is remote from the experiential bedrock on which it is constructed. This bedrock is a seamless, wholly qualitative flow which Bergson calls duration (*la durée*). Duration is an organic evolution that is yet not an increasing quantity and within which there are no distinct qualities. The moments of duration (insofar as it is proper to speak of moments in this case) are not external to one another. Duration is:

«succession without distinction...a mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organization of elements, each of which represents the whole, and cannot be isolated from it except by abstract thought.»¹⁷

From this flow of duration we construct the world of individuals which allows us to survive. An important aspect of this constructed world is clock time, which is regular and artificial, the result of (in Bergson's view) assimilating time to space (which he took to be homogeneous and alike in all directions).¹⁸ Equally artificial, in Bergson's view, is the application of the same habit of thought which generates the concept of clock time to our inner life:

17 *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

18 *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

«...little by little our sensations are distinguished from one another like the external causes which gave rise to them, and our feelings or ideas come to be separated like the sensations with which they are contemporaneous.»¹⁹

We construct a misleading and inaccurate image of our inner life as consisting of atomic experiences, remote from its real nature as a seamless flow.

This leads to a further Bergsonian doctrine which was congenial to Nishida. The habit just described of applying external world categories inappropriately to the divisionless flow of the inner life causes us to develop a superficial self, which masks the deep, basic self whose experience is duration:

«...below the self with well-defined states, [there is] a self in which *succeeding each other* means *melting into one another* and forming an organic whole. But we are generally content with the first, i.e. the shadow of the self projected onto homogeneous space. Consciousness, goaded by an insatiable desire to separate, substitutes symbol for reality, or perceives reality only through the symbol. And the self thus refracted, and thereby broken to pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular, consciousness prefers it, and gradually loses sight of the fundamental self.»²⁰

Though he does not go into detail on the matter, Bergson states that while this is so, the deep self does not become wholly inaccessible. At one point he says it can be experienced via a vigorous effort of analysis,²¹ or through deep introspection.²² What techniques are involved in this analysis/introspection we are not told.

The principal epistemological doctrine of Bergson's philosophy follows from what has been said, and was congenial to a philosopher, like Nishida, approaching the subject from a Zen perspective. Bergson contends that what he calls intellect or intelligence (what most philosophers would call reason) does not acquaint us with the real processes which make up reality (i.e. duration) but only with the conceptual constructions we have devised for ourselves. If we are to be directly acquainted with duration, another mode of experience is necessary, and this Bergson calls intuition (the concept to which Focillon refers in his note on Bergson already quoted). Intelligence or intellect or reason functions pragmatically: it divides the world into individuals and their states, and notices as much of the individuals thus identified as is necessary to guide action appropriate for survival. By contrast, intuition grasps its object more completely. In intuition, «the act of knowledge coincides with the act of ge-

19 *Op.cit.*, p. 128.

20 *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

21 *Op. cit.*, p. 231.

22 BERGSON, Henri, *Mélanges*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, p. 773.

nerating reality.»²³ It proceeds by sympathy and results in a complete grasp of its object from the inside. We can get an idea of what this means if we turn to the creative process of the artist. In Bergson's aesthetics, the artist has the gift of perceiving things for their own sake, and has the capacity to grasp their inner life.²⁴

As can be seen from the passage quoted above in which Focillon refers to Bergson's ideas, he (Focillon) considers that Bergson's philosophy is less like the philosophy of Buddhism than might appear, despite the manifest similarities just outlined. Bergsonian intuition Focillon regards as «grafted on to the current of obscure forces» (that is, the unfolding of duration), and different from what he takes Buddhist awareness of reality via contemplation to be. Interestingly, Nishida came to the same conclusion by a different route.

Bergson claims that *la durée* is ontologically ultimate: there is no existent which is more fundamental than duration. Moreover, Bergson claims that duration is unrepeatable, and Nishida argues that the combination of these two propositions is inconsistent, since it can be known that duration is unrepeatable only if there is something which stands outside duration, and such a something must be more fundamental than duration. Only the existence of a deeper, unified consciousness with awareness of duration could give rise to the doctrine of the unrepeatability of duration. The concept of duration as Bergson describes it, Nishida argues, is still to a degree objectified (i.e. conceptualized) and so a product of reason rather than intuition.²⁵ Whatever is conceptualized is to some degree limited and so cannot be the ontological ultimate Bergson claims that it is: it is certainly not the equivalent of *mu* as it is standardly described in Japanese thought. Nishida regards Bergson as overly attached to the notion of time, an attachment which caused him to overlook the need for a deeper level of reality than duration.

IV

With these points in mind, it is appropriate to return to Focillon's remarks on Bergson and their implications for the way in which contemplation of nature is conceived in the Japanese Buddhist tradition.

²³ BERGSON, Henri, *Laughter*, tr. C.Brereton and F. Rothwell. London: Macmillan 1911, p.161.

²⁴ Cf. e.g. NISHIDA, Kitarō, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness*, trs. V.H. Viglielmo, T. Yoshinori and J.S. O'Leary. New York: SUNY Press, 1987, p.166.

²⁵ *Op cit*, p.111. For a fuller discussion of Nishida's reaction to Bergson, cf. WILKINSON, Robert, *Nishida and Western Philosophy*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, ch. 3.

What both Focillon's and Nishida's remarks recognise is (to repeat) a deep and important difference in the way in which nature (or the universe) and the individual are related in the Buddhist and Western traditions. In the Buddhist tradition, what in the West we call the individual is in an important sense non-separate from the rest of what there is. The individual is an element in a whole, not primarily something distinct and separate from the environment. This has a consequence for the way in which the aesthetic experience of nature is conceived, Focillon going so far as to suggest that the Western term 'contemplation' is inapplicable (*un contre-sens*) to the Buddhist case. The Western idea of contemplation, it will be recalled from the passages quoted above, he regards as including a prominent element of personal memory and calculation. Such elements he regards as absent from what for the moment we have to call aesthetic contemplation of nature in the Buddhist tradition.

If we examine one of the most authoritative accounts of the aesthetic contemplation of nature in the recent history of the Western tradition, Edward Bullough's account of the experience of a fog at sea in his essay *Psychical Distance*, the justice of Focillon's remarks becomes clear. In essence, Bullough's claim is that what makes an aesthetic experience aesthetic is that it involves a special attitude which he calls psychical distance, the distance in question being between the phenomenal self on the one hand and its practical purposes and emotions on the other. In the aesthetic experience, Bullough contends, we simply attend to the object of the experience for its own sake, completely ignoring what would normally be uppermost in consciousness, namely its relevance to our generally self-interested purposes. This attitude is particularly evident where the object would normally be conceived of as dangerous to our well-being, as in the case of a fog at sea:

«Abstract from the experience of the sea fog, for the moment, its danger and unpleasantness....direct the attention to the features 'objectively' constituting the phenomenon – the veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesqueness; observe the carrying power of the air, producing the impression as if you could touch some far-off siren by merely putting out your hand and letting it lose itself behind that white wall; note the curious creamy smoothness of the water, hypocritically denying as it were any suggestion of danger; and, above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world, as it can be found on the highest mountain tops: and the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavour of such concentrated poignancy and delight as to contrast sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects.»²⁶

26 BULLOUGH, Edward, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*. Westport: Ed. E.M. Wilkinson (Conn.), 1912 (1977), pp. 93-4 (This edition includes the 1912 essay *Psychical Distance*).

Bullough's description exemplifies those features which Focillon identifies as constitutive of the Western notion of contemplation. Despite its disinterest, it remains the experience of an individual discrete from the order of things in important ways, and deploys a good deal personal memory. It notably does not embody that sense of absolute unity with the universe that is constitutive of the Buddhist attitude to nature and which is exemplified in Buddhist aesthetic experience of nature in the way in which Focillon describes.

The justice of Focillon's claim here is reinforced if we consider what a native Japanese formed in the Zen tradition has to say about intuition in general and aesthetic intuition in particular. Like Bergson (and indeed a number of other philosophers), Nishida reserves the term 'intuition' (*chokkan*) for a special mode of conscious awareness other than standard, conceptualized experience. In his usage, intuition is a direct, non-reflective grasp of concrete reality, and he often qualifies the term with the adjective 'intellectual', to make it clear that what he means is not a form of sense experience – for Nishida, sensations are abstractions we construct from the primal material (as it were) of *mu*, and not at all (as in classical empiricism) bedrock, ultimate data of experience. Intuition is consciousness of the unbroken progression of ultimate reality just as it is: the subject/object division has not yet arisen, and that which knows and that which is known are identical.²⁷ (This is not to imply that intuition transcends the operation of consciousness, rather that intuition establishes the operation of consciousness itself.)

Applied to the context of aesthetic experience, the following doctrine emerges. Aesthetic intuition/experience for Nishida lies at a much deeper level of consciousness than it does for Bullough and indeed for much of the Western aesthetic tradition where it is regarded as disinterested, distanced or contemplative but still highly conceptualised. Rather,

« ...we attain to an even deeper self-consciousness in aesthetic intuition than we do in mere conceptual self-consciousness. It is an error to think that aesthetic intuition is unselfconscious or nonconscious in a sense similar to perceptive consciousness. In aesthetic intuition we transcend the plane of conceptual self-consciousness, include it internally, and truly attain to self-consciousness of the free self.»²⁸

By the term 'free self' here he means the original face of Zen. At this level of depth, all consciousness is always aesthetic:

27 NISHIDA, K., *op. cit.*, 1987 p. 3.

28 NISHIDA, Kitarō, *Art and Morality*, tr. D.A. Dilworth and V.H. Viglielmo. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1973, p.112.

«It is not that the content of feeling is beautiful as mere sensory content. When there is immediate synthesis in the personal horizon – the horizon of absolute will, as pure act in which colors distinguish themselves, that is, the intentionality of pure visual perception – colors suddenly come to life; they become living colors in themselves – that is, aesthetic objects. We *become* eye and ear with our entire being, feeling passes over into things and is naturally accompanied by the flow of aesthetic emotion as expression.»²⁹

As a concrete example of what this experience is like, Nishida gives the following:

«...when we become enraptured by exquisite music, forget ourselves and everything around us, and experience the universe as one melodious sound, true reality presents itself in the moment of direct experience.»³⁰

The relation of these remarks to the ideas of Focillon and Bergson is as follows: what Nishida here makes clear is the deep difference between aesthetic contemplation as it is generally conceived in the West and as it is conceived in the Buddhist tradition. In the latter, it is radically different from standard experience, far more so than in the West. Focillon speaks elegantly and exactly of the profound unity of spectator and object in the Buddhist tradition, a unity based on the philosophical conviction of their ultimate non-difference, and Nishida makes precisely the same point in the philosophical vocabulary he has adopted from the West. This deep unity is precisely what Nishida is indicating when he speaks of becoming eye and ear, or of experiencing the universe as one melodious sound. This is beyond detached contemplation as it is regularly described in the West, even temporary absorption in the aesthetic experience: it is an identity with the absolute present in all things. Nishida's concept of intuition denotes a far more profound and radical experience than that of Bergson.

V

It might be argued that this conclusion is not unexpected: beliefs about aesthetics vary rationally with the context of the metaphysics and epistemology in which they are always embedded, explicitly or not. It might well be expected that, in a philosophy such as Buddhism, in which consciousness is regarded as stratified and is considered to have depths which usually do not figure in Western thought, the aesthetics of the system will have the complexion we have found them to have. Yet it seems to me that it was not common for this point to be understood in the West at the time when Focillon was writing,

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p.15.

³⁰ NISHIDA, Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trs. Abe Masao and C. Ives. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, p.48.

not very long after the first phase of *japonisme* in France, in which Hokusai was admired as a sort of proto-Impressionist. There is a deep and important difference of outlook here between East and West, and Focillon has identified and characterised it exactly.