

# Nishida's Deodorized *Basho* and the Scent of Zeami's Flower

James W. HEISIG

The crown jewel in the thinking of the man celebrated as Japan's first modern philosopher, Nishida Kitarō, was his "logic of *basho*." In it he swept up a lifetime of thought, clarifying some points, changing positions on others, and unfolding new ideas all the way up until his death in 1945. In the final year of his life he lamented that his critics had not properly understood his intentions. Indeed to this day, despite all the attention given to this highly original logic, it remains so surrounded by misunderstandings and half-understandings that it is hard not to see Nishida himself as complicit in the confusion.

No doubt there are many things about his *basho* writings that leave one with a hint of things going on that never quite make their way to the surface of his texts: leaps in argument, dim intimations of connections never followed through on, oblique allusions and subtle shifts of view that slip by unnoticed, and neglected assumptions. Like seeds sown in the furrows of the text, now and again, at unexpected moments, blossoming into the sweet fruit of a ripe summation, these very ambiguities are part of the charm of his thought. Anyone who has tried to bring Nishida's writings to another language knows how difficult it is to preserve all of

this in translation and how many decisions have to be made without clear guidance from the author.

Nishida himself had encouraged his students to try to get a “feel” for particular thinkers in order to understand their thought. If that was in part a plea for more careful attention to his own ideas, it is doubtful that anyone got it satisfactorily as far as he was concerned. I have been humbled too many times by my failing to grasp where his arguments were going to authorize myself as an exception. Still, there are certain feelings of uneasiness I have about the *basho* texts that refuse to go away, even though the evidence is lacking to justify a full-blown critique. In this essay I would like to address the strongest of those feelings and try to demonstrate it by way of brief contrast with the analysis of dramatic performance given by the fifteenth-century *Nō* dramatist, Zeami. In doing so, I hope to draw attention to Nishida’s bias for spatial and visual metaphors, and to the disembodiment of interpersonal communication that resulted.

### *BASHO: A FRAMEWORK OF ENVELOPING UNIVERSALS*

Nishida opens his seminal 1926 essay on *basho* (NKZ 3: 415–77) by suggesting the need to dissolve the dichotomy between the temporal, changing act of thinking on the one hand, and the unchanging object that is being thought about on the other. In its place he calls for a single, encompassing framework within which the two might be “located.” Such a framework would not erase the subject and object, the relationship between them, or the process that sets up that relationship. All it would do is give them a background against which they could be better understood as doing what it is they do. This is what he designates, in its most elementary form, a *basho*.

A reference is made early on to the empty “receptacle” or *chora* that Plato imagined to hold the eternal and unchanging Ideas after which everything that comes into being is patterned. Insofar as the *chora* is not itself a being, but a place for all of being, it would seem to fit in well with Nishida’s project. In fact, he mentions the comparison only to dismiss it. The *basho* that bore a resemblance to the *chora* is only the first of a

series of receptacles.<sup>1</sup> Far from describing the intuition of a final enclosure, a “nothing” that hems in all of being, Nishida saw this initial *basho* as merely the locus for intelligible “universals,” that is, the place where individuals are located in terms of their substance and attributes. These universals are subject to the logic of the syllogism and the taxonomy of universal-specific-particular. The framework in which they are located is likened to a kind of mirror into which individuals are “transferred” or “reflected” (the Japanese word allows the double entendre) in order to be described and distinguished from each another. This *basho* is not the world of actual, concrete beings but an initial and partial reflection that abstracts part of that world so that it can become intelligible. This mental mirroring of the world occurs in judgments where universal attributes are applied to concrete individuals.

The *basho* at which such judgments “take place” does not exhaust the intelligibility of things. The judgments need to be posited against a second, wider horizon. Even to distinguish acts of judgment from the world that is being judged—that is, the mirrored images from the mirror into which they are transferred—is already to imply location in a more encompassing *basho*, namely, a consciousness that is aware of itself at work. This, too, Nishida refers to as a kind of universal, in that it embraces the particularity of individual judgments but is not reducible to a judgment of the same sort or to an object being understood. At the same time, this second *basho* also extends the range of intelligibility by including the knower’s reflecting on his own knowing in general, that is to say, a *noesis* of *noesis* itself, quite apart from any particular *noema*. Only a universal of self-awareness allows the parameters of a first-level *basho* to be drawn, and then that drawing to be looked at. The standpoint at which all this is taking place is not, and cannot be, outside of consciousness and still be a self-reflection of consciousness. It is as if a second mirror were set up, its back to the world and its front to the mirror of

1. The relevant criticisms of Plato’s *chora* can be found at NKZ 3: 415 and 427. In his essay “Chora,” Jacques Derrida interprets the *Timaeus* in a way that is much closer to the aims of Nishida’s logic than Nishida himself realized; he is also much more aware of the seductions of spatial metaphors. See DERRIDA and EISENMAN, 1997. Not only the unintelligibility, atemporality, and unexpressibility that Derrida finds in *chora*, but the function of grounding place in an act of pure “welcoming” points to the very element we will observe in Zeami.

judgment so that both the objects reflected and the mirror in which they were reflected come into view.

So far, Nishida's logic may not seem very far removed from the ordinary distinction between first-level perception and second-level apperception or thinking about thinking. It also brings into view the apparent infinite regress that is set off in trying to "know about 'knowing about knowing,'" like the endless series of ever smaller images created by facing mirrors. But Nishida does not stop there. Like Hegel, Nishida wants his logic to overcome the dichotomy between epistemology and metaphysics that Kant had recognized but never achieved. But unlike Hegel, Nishida does not merely dissolve contradictions into a higher synthesis as he moves from one *basho* to another. The perimeters of one *basho* are not "sublated" on a higher plane but preserve the demarcations between the inner and outer of each *basho*. Accordingly, he goes on to argue that there is a still more encompassing framework from which this talk about mirroring and the mirroring of mirroring can be "located."

This third *basho* embraces everything that has gone before as a "universal of expression." In other words, consciousness and all its activities—everything it has to say about its knowledge of the world and of its own processes of thinking—can be seen as an expression of a more comprehensive universal, one that relativizes all the other kinds of universals it enfolds. Intelligibility is not restricted to consciousness; on the contrary, it is an expression of something at work in the background, something within which consciousness in its entirety and everything it subsumes is "located."

This is the final frontier of the "intelligible world" and is intended to take the idea of "consciousness in general" beyond knowledge of being, to a *basho* that is not embraced by being but embraces it. It is a consciousness of consciousness, a self-awareness, but one in which the apparently absolute dichotomies of subject-object and knower-known are shown to be relative.

Nishida is quite clear, particularly in the opening two sections of his essay on "I and You" composed six years later in 1932 (NKZ 3: 415–77), that more is involved here than the simple evolution of consciousness from the preconscious natural world. *Basho* logic must be capable of encompassing everything Bergson saw as involved in "creative evolu-

tion” as well as all the evolution of higher life-forms from the lower that Darwin proposed. If knowing involves change, then change, too, must be located in a universal beyond change and the ideas of time we employ to measure it. The universal of judgment is thus seen as a first step out of time and into the eternal presence of the moment, necessary to “rationalize the nonrationality of the real world of being.” It is a first step into a *basho* he calls the “world of life” in a 1936 essay on “Logic and Life.” In other words, the abstraction from time that occurs in ordinary conscious acts is incomplete.

To speak of consciousness in general requires a riverbed in which the stream of consciousness can flow through the world of being. This is provided by the notion of “life,” which moves through space and time without ever being caught in their web. This *basho*, he says, is a kind of “eternal nothingness” within which consciousness works like a pure will, freed of a subject of desire and specific objects of desire. It does not *make* anything within the flow of time but *sees* everything outside of time, as if reflected in a mirror without a tain to cut the seer off from the seen. It is not a consciousness *of* anything in the strict sense of the word, but a *seeing through* of beings in the very act of *seeing* them. The world of life is thus an unadulterated act of locating, transferring, and encompassing the world of nature. Here the self-awareness of a particular conscious self is enveloped in a universal of self-awareness as such. It functions as a kind of self-expression, not merely in the sense of something *expressing itself*, but also in the sense of something *expressed of itself*. Human consciousness alone can achieve this “eternal now” within time and space. It is the zenith of “intellectual intuition,” that is, an intuition that *makes what it sees* in one and the same act.

To be complete, a logic of universals enfolded by other universals must finally come to rest in an absolute universal beyond being that gives a place to all other universals within the world of relative being. At first, this third *basho* seemed to fulfill this function, but in an essay on “The Intelligible World” published two years after his first *basho* essay, he added a fourth and final *basho* that provided his notion of an “absolute nothingness” with a kind of unlocated—or omnilocated and omnipresent—locus. In later works he would liken this locus to the classical image of God as a sphere whose center is everywhere because it has no circumfer-

ence.<sup>2</sup> Here there is no more talk of a knowing self or even of a knowable world; it is the world of the intelligible self of religious awareness. In the transition from one *basho* to another, there is always an internal contradiction at work that necessitates the move. The identity of the knowing self at each stage—the progress in the unity of consciousness—must be shown to be self-contradictory at a particular *basho* in order to open up to a wider one. The individual determines its individuality by negating others, and by negating itself, it affirms the universal that embraces self and other. Within the world of being, this self-contradiction is relative and hence needs to be transcended. Only at the level of a final nothingness beyond time and being does it reveal an “identity of absolute self-contradiction.” This marks a return to the nonrationality of the world that consciousness had broken down for rational understanding. It is here that the notion of the transcendent in religion is liberated from its definition as a mere negation of the immanence of being.

Running throughout this whole scheme is a somewhat confusing discourse of “determination.” As conscious awareness moves from one universal framework to another, distancing itself further and further from the nonrationality of the world of being until it comes to reaffirm that nonrationality in absolute nothingness, individual items in the finite world of space and time are sorted out according to how they define themselves and are defined by their environment. The higher the degree of self-determination, the more encompassing the *basho* that consciousness has achieved. Complete self-determination—and so also complete self-identity—is only possible at the final indeterminate *basho* of religious self-awareness where the opposites of self and world find an absolute ground in a nothingness beyond being. Nishida thought that this had brought him to the quintessence of the “historical world” in its “most concrete actuality.”

Now if “determination” is a function of a relationship, a greater measure of self-determination would mean a loosening of relationships in order to redefine them at a higher order. In fact, Nishida begins his maiden work on *basho* by stating his intention to forge a logic for placing

2. I have traced the history of this image to a medieval pseudo-hermetic text, the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, in HEISIG 2008.

relationships. For Nishida the discovery of the terms of a relationship implies a framework wider than that of the actually related items. This abstraction of the relationship from the related items causes no particular difficulty when one is speaking of the bond between substance and attributes, or judgments and the self-reflective mind. To see space and time as “within” things, for example, would erase the distinction between what is related and what the relationship consists of. From there one can also go on to speak of a level of understanding in which, as he says again and again in “Logic and Life,” the relationship between time and space is transcended so that one can say, “space-in-time and time-in-space” (8: 13, 23, 29, 42; the “-in” translating the copula 即).

When it comes to the relationship and the determinations taking place between conscious minds, however, the more one abstracts from who is related to whom, and how the bond or its disruption affects the related parties, the more this distancing from the world of being would seem to impede our understanding of how humans communicate with one another what they have in mind. For Nishida the transference of conscious contents between two persons is a function of language borne by the movement of matter: “What permits the conscious contents of an I to be transmitted to a you is not a simple vibration of air but the vibrations of an expression carried through the air, namely language” (5: 290).<sup>3</sup> It is unclear whether the “contents” he is referring to are intellectual or include feelings, though elsewhere he links language with thinking.<sup>4</sup> What is clear is that language is the primary, if not the sole means of communicating mental content.

Now if this concrete “betweenness” is seen merely as a function of making the nonrational intelligible, and if it is reduced to the universal description of an act of mutual determination between two persons, the understanding of human relationships would seem to eclipse the very experience it sets out to understand. Yet this is precisely what Nishida seems to do in “I and You.” After reiterating the theory of *basho*, in some

3. At the outset of the essay he includes “writing” here (5: 267), but does not refer to it again.

4. “It is impossible to think without language in some sense being involved, though Plato states at time, in jest, that *dianoia* [thought] is a voiceless conversation” (8: 7).

of the densest and more obscure writing of his corpus, he applies it to the self's experience of another self to end up in an affirmation of an absolute in which that experience dissolves the bond into nothingness. His focus is on the question, "What does it mean that an I knows a you?" (5: 305). The idea of "pure feeling" 純なる感情 (or "pure consciousness") is retained as the "ground of knowledge," but the transfer of feelings in "sympathy"<sup>5</sup> is excluded from that ground for much the same reason he had earlier classified states like happiness and unhappiness as "impure feelings": they inject personal will into the autonomous, aesthetic unity of subjective act and objective content that marks pure feeling; they are "heteronymous" (3: 14, 15–18; 1973, 14–16).

There are two passages in "I and You" to note here. In the first he argues that the "transfer of feeling" between an I and a you that enables each to say that it "knows" the other, needs to be grounded in something that is neither I nor you (5: 291). This ground is the ultimate *basho* of nothingness wherein true personhood is "determined" in such a way that an I and a you can mutually effect and determine their relationship.

The second passage is more direct in its insistence that interpersonal knowledge entails a dialectic of affirmation through negation:

It is not that an I knows a you through the transfer of feelings but rather through one person, the I, directly responding to another person, the you. Thus such knowledge takes place through conflict rather than through sympathy. (5: 306)

As he will argue in his final essay, a final, unbreakable bond is set up between the self-conscious self and the absolute of nothingness. Like the I-you relationship, it entails a contradiction, but this contradiction is not embraced by any higher *basho*.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is subject to an "inverted cor-

5. Nishida refers here to Max Scheler's *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* but translates "sympathy" three times as 感情転入, the transfer or importing of feelings, and only once as 同感 (5: 291, 306). CHEUNG has traced this concept back to Theodor Lipps and provided a critique of Nishida's hasty dismissal of the concept without sufficient attention to the distinctions between modes of sympathy drawn by the philosophers he refers to (2007, 54–62).

6. This helps make sense of his perplexing insistence that, even though the *basho* of absolute nothingness is referred to as a universal of universals, "there is no kind of universal that can envelop an I and a you" (5: 297).

relation” whereby the radical the negation of an absolute other is, the most radical form of affirming the self, and vice versa.

The concepts and categories Nishida employs to understand the workings of individual consciousness as it makes its way to ever higher levels of self-awareness are all in service of the pursuit of identification with the absolute ground of nothingness. This provides him with a way to seek analogies in the Christian mystical experience of the divine found in Boehme and Eckhart. But when it comes to interpersonal relationships, the forfeit of the concrete amounts to the renunciation of understanding what is actually going on in the communication of love and the hatred, the passion and the indifference, the mixture of the rational and the irrational that are the very soul of the I-you relationship. Perhaps we should not make too much of Nishida’s claim that “in actuality there is only one true good: to know the true self” (I: 134; 1990, 145), but the failure to include the “other” in the truly good—both the human and the nonhuman—raises a question of a moral anesthesia at work in the journey of mind through the *basho* to the summit of self-awareness. Nishida’s ethical philosophy aside, we may take a closer look at his logic of enveloping universals to see if we can locate the reason he was so little troubled by the transfer of the relationship between logical universals to the realm of human relationships.

### THE GUIDING METAPHORS OF THE *BASHO*

Even if I have tried to follow Nishida’s terminology in the condensed account of his logic given above, the sketchy reduction of the complex argument was meant to highlight what seems to me the guiding imagery at work in the background and to bring that imagery into question.

Although sorely lacking in concrete examples, the logic of *basho* relies throughout on images of space and sight. In Nishida’s lectures, his students tell us,<sup>7</sup> he drew the *basho* on the blackboard as a series of concentric circles, the final of which was drawn as a dotted line to indicate

7. See, for example, KŌSAKA 1965, 98.

an indefinite or infinite circumference. This same imagery appears in “I and You,” where references to things being “located” within a certain “place” and the frequent description of that place as an “environment” that is “broken through” or “transcended” to a wider environment leave no doubt that such an image was in the back of his mind as he composed his texts. Talk of universals “enveloping” other universals or being “transferred” from one locus to another reinforces the metaphor. It is hard to escape the image of the *basho* as a kind of billiard table suspended in space, with individuals bouncing off of one another until they fall into a pocket and drop onto another table, where the process is repeated until at last they drop into a final pocket and off into outer space, absolved at last of all relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Even the description of time as a “continuity of discontinuity” creates the picture of a line connecting two things in a defined space. True, Nishida viewed time as something purely *noetic* and, unlike space, incapable of becoming a *noema* (3: 533–9); in other words, time cannot be objectified as an item of knowing but is a form change takes in knowing itself. Still, past and future are imagined as somehow concentrated in a single point of an “eternal now” from which they move outwards in opposite directions—again a basically spatial metaphor.

Along with this goes the constant reference to “seeing” as the lord of all the senses, almost as if sight itself were a kind of *basho*. Note the following remark from *Art and Morality* where Nishida’s attempts to speak of the senses collaborating to produce art gives clear preference to the eye and seems to render the rest of the body its tool:

A sculpture sculpted merely by the eye or a painting painted merely by the eye is incomplete. The visual act, which is part of the flow of the élan vital, demands infinite development as *the basic act underlying all acts*. Here the hand of the artist assists at those places where the eye

8. It may be noted here that Ueda Shizuteru’s adaptation of Nishida’s *basho* in suggesting a move from “being in the world” to an “infinite openness” employs the same spatial-visual mode of thought, despite the fact that he brings it closer to the real world of actual experience by introducing a dynamic in which self-awareness advances by moving in and out of absolute nothingness, and the actual historical world that it grounds.

is unable to function.... Here the hand becomes one with the eye; *the entire body becomes the eye*, as it were.<sup>9</sup>

From there it is a short step to elevate seeing above the seen. In the end, the stress on 成り切る, “knowing a thing by becoming it” (6: 13) amounts to reducing the thing to our sight of it and then, in a move that Nishida himself admits is reminiscent of Plotinus’ association of vision and understanding, to our awareness of it. Thus, “becoming” a flower is no different at bottom from a parent’s “becoming its child,” as he himself states explicitly in his maiden work (1: 57; 1990, 174).

Not only knowledge and self-awareness, but even the I-you relationship diminishes the importance of the other senses as it elevates that of vision. Allusions to the “body” remain general. Often enough, of course, Nishida’s language is without any direct concrete imagery, but space and sight seem to be always present, as if waiting between the lines, ready to surface at any moment in his choice of words.<sup>10</sup> The preference for space-and-sight imagery serves to keep Nishida’s logic highly abstract and creates a feeling of distance from the ordinary experiences it is meant to interpret. And even if the transition from one *basho* to another is not strictly speaking intended as a set of stages to be gone through—the former devalued in the move to the higher—the presence of absolute nothingness is the only element that is retained in the background of each *basho* has the effect of a devaluation.

In a sense, the lowest *basho*, the injection of conscious judgment into the “natural world,” is not the one closest to reality but the one closest to our biased view of reality. Yet the closer one gets to what Nishida calls “reality,” the more ordinary experiences seem to fade away. This may be true of all reflective abstraction, which indeed can get us closer to experience than our normal, relatively unconscious modes of abstracting. But

9. NKZ 3: 29; 1973, 26, emphasis added. Nishida is following Konrad Fiedler here. The only critic I know to have picked up on this is GHILARDI 2009, 96–104.

10. It would be interesting to compare the corrective of the Flemish mystics like Ruusbroec to the basically visual and spatial imagery of Eckhart and other *Gruntmystiker* with the criticisms being raised against Nishida, who, as Tanabe insisted again and again much to Nishida’s annoyance, preferred the Platonic mystical idiom to a discourse of embodied historical praxis.

in Nishida's case, the abstracting seems to disinfect reality of its moral dimension and deodorize the scent of the human.

The point becomes clearer if we inquire into Nishida's treatment of the phenomenon of human communication. A scattering of comments on the relationship between an artist's intuitions and the "art" used to express it can be found in his remarks on the aesthetic experience. In each case, however, one notes the absence of those at whom the expression is aimed. *In principle*, he insists that an "expressive relationship is grounded in the relationship between an I and a you" (for example, 6: 88). This "ground" may entail the body, but the crucial ingredient is "the determination of a *basho*," rendering the body a mere "tool" of expression (6: 89). *In practice*, the mediation he sets between artist and art lacks the presence of any recipient and all but completely neglects the body. It is as if the communication were focused merely on the expresser and the expressed.

The oversight is particularly perturbing when his focus falls on the encounter between an I and a you. Surely there is no way to describe, let alone explain, the nature of ordinary interpersonal engagements without looking into the complex transmissions that enable persons to interact with one another. And no sooner does one begin to inquire into the process of transmission than one comes up against one of the profoundest mysteries of human social existence: the meld of sensuality and sentiment, of bodily and spiritual content that are beyond the capacities of concepts to account for, let alone for language to express. Once we have seen this in the interpersonal realm, it is a short step to recognizing something very similar going on—though often we cannot say where the similarities begin and end—with animals that lack the powers of speech. When the dog Argos is the first to recognize his master Odysseus through the beggar's appearance and drops dead in excitement, something has been communicated that nothing in Nishida's logic of *basho* seems up to explaining. The vocabulary we commonly use to describe such events may be philosophically embarrassing. Vibes, aura, ambience, gut feeling—these are all things we know too well to stand by and watch them be swept up into the simple abstractions of a *basho* logic. To leave these things unattended and at the same time lay claim to the "most

concrete” core of consciousness violates our most aboriginal sense of communication.

For Nishida, the highest achievement of the I-you relationship, as we have said, is the discovery of oneself at the ground of the other. It is as if the meaning of the interpersonal bond, even at the profound level of love of the other, were being reduced to an epiphenomenon of self-reflection: *you help me* discover a no-self at my own ground where the dichotomy between *me* and *you* is transcended and opens out into a more encompassing *basho* within which the I-you encounter is relativized and thereby made intelligible as a stage in the unity of self-awareness. Here again, it is the spatial metaphors that are decisive, though in a negative fashion. When Nishida criticizes Bergson’s idea of space as the “relaxation of pure duration” in his 1933 “Preface to Metaphysics” he seems to slide away from the context to make a rather unusual point:

True intuition exists where our personality scrapes together a past that is fading away to break through a point in the present; it exists where the self breaks through the spatial present. It means living through the death of the personality.... In Bergson spatiality is always taken to be merely a relaxation of pure duration. As long as one thinks in these terms, our personalities are dreamlike and unreal. For time to be true time, space cannot be simply a relaxation of time. It must always carry the sense of an absolute negation. Even if one were to think in terms of an extreme relaxation, pure duration is no more than an extended dream.... True pure duration shows up at the point where time that has been lost is recovered. (6: 64)

In fact, Bergson’s reason for rejecting the complete negation of space by time and for keeping pure duration rooted in concrete life is precisely that absolutely dislocated time is dreamlike. The passage from Bergson that Nishida cites in the original French as the basis of these comments has to do with the recollection of a fragmented self that occurs in those rare moments of “self-possession” when we feel consciousness flow with the rhythm of life itself, absorbing and transcending intellectuality. This, Bergson says, puts a strain on the will to gather up the past as it slips away, and casts it into a creative present. A few lines after Nishida’s citation ends, Bergson asserts that this strain on the will can never be per-

fectly relaxed, since this would eliminate will and memory, rendering us completely passive. On the contrary, awareness of our progress in pure duration allows the scattered personality to come together again and propel us to the future with a newfound freedom. To let go of will and memory, for Bergson, would be to surrender oneself to a dream, where the self is once again scattered into a thousand recollections external to one another. In this regard, it is one more example of the “descent into space” of the waking mind, where consciousness coasts around in among particular sensations, reinforcing the idea of independent things floating in a pure spatiality. Thus it is in the ascent from this illusion of pure space to the borderland of pure duration that the unity of things in interdependence on one another comes to awareness.<sup>11</sup>

Nishida's insistence that awareness of the present moment demands breaking through the “spatial present” coincides well enough with Bergson's description. The difference is that Nishida needs to see space as an *absolute negation* of our ordinary idea of time in order to allow the recovery of the past in the present moment to display the eternal within time. In theory, space and time absolutely negate each other, and the historical world is the self-identical coincidence of these contradictions. In fact, space is given a special privilege that allows it to rescue the eternal now from the flow of time, whereas time is nowhere called on to rescue space from physical space.

In other words, if space is the negation of time, then the idea of a “spatial present” occludes a true understanding of the essence of temporality. This would suggest something like a “spatial eternal now.” This space is not mere physical space, but the locus of the “self-determining present,” the *basho* at which time displays its true nature. For Bergson, such a dichotomy is impossible for consciousness to achieve in act and still be conscious, because, as ordinary experience confirms, it undercuts the entire relationship between time and space. Nishida's way around this question is to dematerialize the *basho* and yet retain the spatial metaphor. Thanks to the primacy given sense of sight, it is a short step from the physical viewing of events in space to the mental vision of events in a *basho* of consciousness. In his seminal essay on the logic of *basho*, Nishida

11. The passage in question appears in BERGSON 1944, 218ff.

struggles to preserve a notion of space detached from physical space. While allowing for physical space as one level of “universal *basho*,” he makes his intention clear: “I wish to think of knowing by considering it an attribute of the space of consciousness” (3: 420). Eventually this leads him to inquire into a “space” for the space of consciousness, taking him a step still further away from the physical space in which bodily sensation occurs.

Space becomes the environment of awareness without any need to posit an *omnipresent here*,<sup>12</sup> or an idea of space as continuity-in-discontinuity—both of which were central to his idea of time. On the contrary, the final *basho* of absolute nothingness is a break from space. Consequently, the encounter of I and you is allowed to take place in an *eternal now* that disrupts our ordinary bias of understanding events in terms of what went before and what comes after, while the question of a transcendence of space occurring within bodily, sensual experience is allowed to pass by unnoticed. Yet it is precisely such a question that belongs to the profoundest kinds of communication that occur between an I and a you. By detaching the I-you encounter from its radical challenge to the separating tendencies of ideas of space, the bodily experience of an *eternal here-and-now* becomes little more than the kind of “extended dream” that Nishida wanted to spare his idea of time. The criticisms he leveled at Kant for adhering so closely to an abstract theory of knowledge that he ended up overlooking the beautiful and the good (4: 136–7) come home to roost in Nishida’s own attachment to a basically abstract appreciation of self-awareness, where “the expression of pure internal life is always felt as the beautiful” (3: 222; 1973, 185). The bodily perceptions needed for an I to communicate beauty and goodness to a you waste away in the turn to inner self-awareness.

All of Nishida’s complaints to the contrary that his logic was everywhere focused on the de facto “historical world” and its creativity (10: 431–2), he problem of explaining the unity of the conscious mind that

12. The closest approximation to an “omnipresent here” I recall is a passing remark that “even a single brush stroke drawn in the space of true nothingness is a living reality” (3: 445). There are also numerous allusions in his later writings to the pseudo-hermetic image of the sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

set him off in *An Inquiry into the Good* works a de-historicizing effect. Similarly, despite his insistence that concrete reality is “social in essence,” the *basho* at which the “social determination” of individuals takes place is described as an “infinite spatial stratum in the sense of the self-determination of an eternal now” (6: 59). Space is a locus for self-awareness in which the mystery of sensual, bodily communication that occurs in space and yet overcomes the spatial boundaries that separate an I from a you is overlooked. True, he spoke of feeling as fundamental to consciousness, but the “transtemporal and transpatial intentionality” he attributes to it is none other than “the sense of an universal validity that transcends space and time” (3: 9; 1973, 8–9), something akin, perhaps, to James’ “sentiment of rationality.” Because sensual communication is less “concretely real” than its rational content, there is simply no need to look further into it.

Despite his continued insistence that true self-awareness represented our closest approximation to the real world, I don’t know that Nishida ever claimed outright that his metaphysic of *basho* was adequate to encompass the whole of human experience. His concern seems to have been more at “locating” the most fundamental of experiences, analyzing their structure, and noting the internal contradictions that necessitated an ever-more-encompassing perspective. Geometric space yields to the inner space of consciousness. Environments that determine individuals are void of landscape. Chronological time collapses into the eternal now of awareness. Cultural, artistic, and experiential distinctions describing the rhythm of time stand opposed to time as it is measured.

It is hard to predict precisely how Nishida might have taken the mystery of nonlinguistic communication up in his *basho* logic. At the same time, there are simply too many subtle qualifications worked into his repetition of his guiding ideas to suppose that a more careful reading of his texts would not turn up a solution. Nevertheless, I cannot shake off the general impression, reinforced by the material cited above, that he had allowed this mystery to be eclipsed by the solitary advance of the individual towards greater self-awareness.

Be that as it may, I would like to address this lack with a different description of the *basho* of the I-you relationship that does not rely pri-

marily on visual-spatial modes of thought. For that, we turn to Zeami and his “flower.”<sup>13</sup>

### THE SENSE-EMBODIED *BASHO* OF ZEAMI

In his attempt to describe the conditions for successful communication in a dramatic performance, Zeami (Hada no Motokiyo, 1363–1443) drank from the same Buddhist wells that would later guide Nishida in his first steps towards a theories of self-awareness. Where Nishida chose a largely western philosophical idiom to work out his ideas rationally, Zeami adopted the language of medieval Japanese aesthetics and poetry to give a systematic account of how an actor is able to transmit the *kokoro*, the heart and soul, of a play to his audience. Both shared the ideal of a selfless state of unity and harmony in a nothingness beyond being and the biases of conventional thinking. Of the two, the body of writings Nishida left behind is by far the more comprehensive and rigorously argued. It is also more speculative and contemplative in comparison to Zeami, whose writings are closer to pure *theoria* in the classical Greek sense of understanding by perceptual participation. The physical space in which such understanding occurs is the theater; its *basho* is in a heightened unity of mind and body that allows a special kind of communication to take place between an actor and an audience.

The *basho* of such communication is not a fantasy island, cut off from everyday life. On the contrary, it aims to strip away the illusion of everyday perception to disclose the rhythms of nature itself and to heighten awareness of sensibilities that bind one person to another and make it possible to recognize their own humanness in each other. In this regard, Zeami raises a question of Nishida that, to all appearances, Nishida did not ask himself: In what kind of *basho* does communication between persons take place? How account for the nonrational, heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind, no-self dimension to the expression and the reception of thoughts and feelings?

13. Here I will draw freely on, and at times adjust, the translation of Tom Hare (ZEAMI, 2008).

Perhaps no single image runs more consistently through Zeami's stimulating essays on the art of performing classical Nō theater than that of the flower. The West, largely through its alchemical tradition, had long pointed to the inner core of things as a *quinta essentia*, a fifth element that lies hidden beneath the perceptible elements that make up the material world. This "secret of nature," as Ramon Llull referred to it, lies within all material things in time and space, giving them shape and affecting their changes without itself having shape or time. Japanese took over the ancient Chinese alchemical notion of 精華 or "essential flower" to give it a sense analogous to the English "quintessence." Zeami does not use the abstract term, but, in keeping with his preference for the concrete, simply uses the everyday character for flower, 花, to point to the ineffable essence that dramatic communication aims at, the momentary blossoming in which actor and audience together overcome the limitations of space and time that otherwise keep them apart. Without the bodily perception of the flower as wondrous, he notes, the wonder "in which language is severed and the operations of the mind founder" cannot be known (ZEAMI 2008, 210).

In his early writings, Zeami associated the flower merely with the visual attraction of dramatic action. In time, he made use of the metaphor to include the whole of the attraction, bodily as well as intellectual and emotional. Along with this, his citations of Zen, Pure Land, and Tendai increased, as did his allusions to the Chinese classics. Never bookish and freely citing passages out of context, Zeami draws on his sources to present the theatre as an archetype of existence itself—an achievement all the more admirable for the fact that he presents it the other way around.

In his "Course to Attain the Flower" of 1420 he borrows a classical opposition from Chinese philosophy to distinguish between the substance (体) of a performance and its particular instance (用). The former he likens to the flower and the latter to its scent (136). The two cannot be separated but neither ought they to be confused. On the other hand, when the two are in perfect harmony, the distinction passes away. It becomes an expression of that elusive transmission of "gracefulness" known as *yūgen*. At such time a performative instance is said to reach down into the substance and emanate a scent, bringing the otherwise invisible *yūgen* of the substance into view.

The intermingling of the metaphors of sight and smell is not unusual in Japanese aesthetics. One finds it in other forms, such as the inscription of the two Chinese glyphs 聞香—listening to the fragrance—inscribed on incense holders. Or again, in poetry, as in the deathbed verse of a haiku poet that Nishida cites to explain the essence of a self-awareness that transcends ordinary consciousness of oneself:

Now that I am deaf  
It is clear for me  
To hear the sound of the dew.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that one sense organ takes over the physical function of another, but rather that the judging, thinking subject is suspended and the body as a whole becomes as one with the object of its perception.

The visual attractiveness of the flower is not merely enhanced by the fragrance; it becomes indistinguishable from it. So, too, the successful instancing of the flower's substance is not a mere communication of the joint artistry of the performer and the dramatist to an observing audience; for a brief moment, the essence of the play is loosened from its expression to embrace the theatre as a whole into a single “common sense”—and just as quickly to wilt (*shiore*) without a trace. As Zeami notes in his most comprehensive work, “Transmitting the Flower,” this is what distinguished the “genuine flower” from mere visual appeal. Once attained, it never wilts, even with the deterioration of artistic skills in older age. If the flower's scent is a moment of timelessness, the flower that is being communicated is not. It changes with the years and the seasons. Thus Zeami compares the actor who relies on repeating the techniques he has mastered to one who has thrown away the seeds for a plucked, ephemeral flower. In the scattering of blossoms, he remarks in a late work, there is a sense of freshness that expresses the “essence” of the impermanent and the eternal at one and the same time (207). Lifelong mastery of the flower is not a domination of the art; rather, it is as if one has made the flower the master, so that there are times when nothing can be. But it also means that there is always something not communicated. “Unless you keep it secret, it cannot be the flower” (70). Indeed, an

14. NISHITANI 1982, 154.

essential part of the flower consists in knowing the difference between what is and what is not a flower.

The image of the flower and its scent is also used in an essay dated four years later, “A Mirror to the Flower.” There he speaks of imitation as going beyond mere mimicking to “becoming a thing”:

先其物能成、去其能能似。

This applies not only to identification with one’s role, but also affects the unity of the senses. To accomplish this, he says, the visual effect must flow from the scent created by the sound, so that “what is heard should take precedence over what is seen” (99). He refers to the sound as a “single voice” in which the voice breathes as one with the pitch of the flute, the two joined in the “flower of the melody.” Far from deadening perception or transcending it speculatively, the mind awakened to the flower’s seeds heightens the senses and in turn is excited by them. Only from within such a unity can the visual dance communicate its “wondrous strength,” as if one had tapped into the *nyoraizō* or “buddha-womb,” the inner potential to enlightened consciousness. The communication is only partially disclosed in what the audience sees, the restraint of the body pointing to the richness of what remains in the mind of the actor. This is what he means by “moving ten parts of the mind and seven parts of the body.”

Here, too, it is the atmosphere created by the scent that is all important to “bring the flower into people’s minds.” In this regard, as Zeami’s later writings show, the sense experience is enhanced as it fades first into a state of heightened awareness and then into the nothingness of no-self, an “excitement” that does not display intent and cannot be expressed in words, in which the full wonder of the flower comes to bloom at a place “beyond being and nothingness” (189). At the same time, performance techniques are the seeds of mental mastery; for them to flower, the mind must have awakened to what is living in the seed.<sup>15</sup> Technique must not be understood here as accidental form or as a provisional means; it rather overcomes the dualism between form and substance, means and

15. The image is drawn from the *Platform Sutra*, which Zeami cites in “Transmitting the Flower” (2008, 46).

ends. This is why Zeami sees the true wonder of the flower bloom at those places where one achieves “an attitude without form” and a “not doing of no-mind and no-style” (115–17). Without the seeds, one has only plucked the flowers of particular performances that leave nothing behind.

That said, there is no one way to translate what Zeami means by the flower and the flower’s scent into more “philosophical” equivalents. The suggestiveness of the imagery rather points to something that defies articulation. In the same sense that one cannot describe the fragrance of a rose to one who has never known it for oneself, so there is something in the art of dramatic portrayal that language cannot touch. Conversely, there are things that can be communicated that transcend one’s own understanding and awareness, so that the mind can become an impediment to deeply moving one’s audience without their even being aware of it—the “mindless feeling” referred to in the *Yi jing* and the philosophy of Zhuxi. It is not enough merely to see this as an “expression of nothingness”; one must also realize that nothingness of expression: “form is emptiness” needs to be completed by “emptiness is form,” as the *Heart Sutra* says. In this sense, what is communicated can have nothing to do with differences of social class or education. Like the delight of seeing a beautiful flower, the mindless feeling is not an achievement of one person but the attainment of a feeling that belongs to no one and everyone. This is what Zeami calls “the miraculous flower.”

This, in broad strokes, is Zeami’s teaching of the flower. There is much more that could be said of it, as well as of other interlacing metaphors in his writings, but we may stop here to gather up our thoughts. To those of us who lack the experience of performing Nō theatre, the oracular, almost mystical quality of Zeami’s prose might seem to be no less abstract than Nishida’s. But when we think of the momentary loss of self that one feels when caught up in the majesty of the natural world or in a work of art, or the wonder of coming into touch with another person in such a way that self and other are caught up, with no distinction between body and mind, I and you, Zeami’s words seem by far the richer description. The difference is that Nishida did not even try—or, if he did, at least he did not let us know he was trying—to speak of such things. Somehow the comprehensive description of reality that Nishida was aim-

ing at seems altogether too sanitized by talk of determination and self-determination. It begins to look too selective to include what are for all of us essential aspects of human experience. His inexhaustibly intelligible world, as it were, is missing the scent of unintelligibility that belongs to our relations with the natural world and with other persons.

It would, of course, be a mistake to criticize Nishida for abstracting from experience altogether. On the contrary, the fact of a “pure experience” in which ordinary judgments that rely on a clear distinction between a thinking, perceiving subject and objects in the surrounding world runs throughout his work in a variety of different forms. Moreover, we find consistent reference to a level of self-awareness that suspends the ordinary sense of time. His idea of “knowing a thing by becoming it” combines these two aspects in the sense that one can only know things just as they are by stepping out of the history of subject and object and into their common ground in the timeless. Thus far, his sensitivities do not seem far removed from those of Zeami.

Yet something is missing. It is not a matter of a new set of examples to which his ideas can be applied, but of examples that expose weaknesses in the ideas themselves. If we overlay Nishida’s *basho* logic on Zeami’s descriptions of dramatic communication, we find that there is no accounting for the “scent” that initiates in the performance and reaches out to embrace players and spectators alike, or for its failure, for that matter. As the transference of *yūgen*, the performance illuminates an aspect of communication between an I and a you that overflows Nishida’s categories at every turn. And it does so in a distinctively Japanese mode absent in mainstream western philosophy.

We may note that among Nishida’s disciples it was Kōyama Iwao who was most alert to this missing dimension in the logic of *basho*. Sensing a “lack of substance” in the reduction of communication to a “self-identity of absolute contradiction,” he proposed a kind of “antiphonal” dialectic of call and response, which he insisted “is the most fundamental relationship of human existence.” Watsuji Tetsurō’s notions of “climate” and “betweenness,” Yuasa Yasuo’s theories of “cultivation,” and Kimura Bin’s work on the I-you relationship in schizophrenia represent other, more indirect correctives. In any case, Nishida’s reasons for leaping over the “between” to ground relationships in an absolute of nothingness would

seem to be a function of his preoccupation with the self-awareness of the individual for whom the intelligibility of relationships is valued primarily as something to be transcended. The primary model of self-awareness is the individual “knowing a *thing* by becoming it,” not the discovery of a bond in which the deepest communication between persons can take place. The bonding of the “between” in which self and other are absorbed is never made to define a *basho* of self-awareness in its own right because it can only be a *Grund* for personal interaction but never an *Abgrund* for self-awareness.<sup>16</sup>

Simply put, Nishida is more concerned with locating “betweenness” in a *basho* of self-awareness rather than with finding a place for the experience of a “between.” This devaluing of the experience of relation is finally epitomized in his description of self-awareness as “an absolutely contradictory self-identity,” in which identity preserves the contradictions only by devaluing them. He seems not to have overcome Hegel’s sublation of the opposites as thoroughly as he wanted. And in this regard, it is hardly surprising that the visual preference of allusions to painting drawn from Western philosophers should have been more influential than the total unity of the senses we find in the aesthetic tradition represented by Zeami.

Still, it is surprising that Nishida can set aside so easily the idea of a transfer of feelings through “sympathy” to explain the knowledge one person can have of another in favor of an absolute negation, that mediates the relationship and affirms the existence of the two the more absolute it is. In the end, how an I and a you react to each other is not a function of any unifying activity but of their mutual opposition. Thus sympathy is reduced to the subjective response of one party to another, and the possibility of something finite and limited but *not* subjective in which they are caught up is not considered. And with that, the common experience of “nothingness” of the flower’s scent is deodorized into a privatized awareness of absolute nothingness. This seems to me a fundamental flaw in the explanatory power of the logic of *basho*. For

16. It seems to be that this idea of Boehme’s, and its parallel in Eckhart’s *Ungrund*, were the catalyst for Nishida’s imagining the a logic of absolute nothingness as the ascent to an ultimate place of all places that is not itself a place in any finite sense.

Zeami, too, what is communicated through the scent of a flower coming to bloom in a performance entails a series of negations, but never a negation of the relationship between the actor and the audience or of what is communicated.

Zeami's negations, unlike the negations of Nishida's, are not bound to verbal expression. This is apparent in his discussion of the interplay among the media of communication—words, music, and dance—where the tempo of the communication is as essential as its linguistic content. Only where language and gesture are allowed to play off each other—now in consonance, now in dissonance—can the flower give off its scent. Only where logos and mythos are locked in each other's arms, contending and embracing, can true communication between persons take place. This is the heart of the bond Zeami sees between the performing I of the player and the receptive you of the audience, but to see it merely as something theatrical would be to miss the sense in which he sets it up as a paradigm of the profoundest level at which persons can encounter one another.

In short, the mutual “negation” of I and you is not completed with a single rational decision or flash of insight. It is a process that is reflected in the way language extends itself into the body as if to remind itself that there is more than words can tell. In this sense, the experience of being “lost” in a performance and giving oneself over to its rhythms touches the very ground of the encounter between an I and a you. It requires that one first suspend judgment, then let go of oneself before the other, and then let go of the other for the *kokoro* (the mind and heart of what is meant):

Forget about whether or not it succeeds and watch the performance. Forget about the performance and watch the actor. Forget about the actor and watch the *kokoro*. Forget about the *kokoro* and know the performance. (119)

Granted, no one can know anything in place of anyone else. To that extent, we may endorse Nishida's claim that knowing oneself truly is the one genuine good. Self-awareness can in no sense be reduced to group consciousness, nor can it be shared. In a letter to his great-grandson, the playwright Konparu Zenpō 金春禪鳳 (1454–1520), Zeami, too, for all

his writings on the art of artistic communication, ends up elevating self-awareness to a supreme state of mind:

Beyond the very frame of mind  
that looks upon this mind of mine  
in all its foolishness,  
what else have I to look to  
as the jewel of my awareness? (432)

Elsewhere, in a striking song, he captures the incommunicable solitariness of this frame of mind.:

Though I try to hold it back,  
My passion has, I see, blushed forth,  
So much so that someone asks,  
“Is something on your mind?” What indiscretion!  
Look, tears spilled out here upon my sleeve.  
The word’s already out that I’m in love,  
How could they know when, in this bashful heart,  
I’m only now aware myself,  
And stricken, for that, yet more tenderly  
And stricken, for that, yet more tenderly. (231–2)

Not even the “direct transmission of mind to mind” of which Zen speaks (regarding which Nishida’s views remain a mystery to me) can overcome the solitude of awakening. Nevertheless, as Zeami shows, this does not negate the possibility of an encounter between persons that can excite such awakening and enhance it. If the locus of such an encounter is indeed a “mood” (in Zeami’s language, a 機 which is better described as a fragrance floating from a flower that no spatial or visual metaphor can express), a *basho* that elevates private sentiment, thinking, and temperament to a greater awareness of reality, then it cannot simply be devalued as philosophical superstition or dissolved into the transparent emptiness of an all-encompassing universal. On the contrary, its acknowledgement opens up the possibility of imagining a more encompassing milieu where the deepest human encounters take place and which, for want of a better word we may call “divine.” Perhaps it is there that those brief moments of breathing the air of interpersonal ecstasy and enjoying the respite from

solitude draw their inspiration. In any event, the fact of being transposed by the flower's scent, as infrequently, unintelligibly, and uncontrollably as it comes and goes in the course of our lives, is too stubborn to be forgotten in our philosophies.

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