Serendipity?

That night, I sit in my hotel room and read in Victor Segalen’s Paintings:

Do not turn aside then. Look at what is before you: a huge vista, a

LANDSCAPE,

the first among the magical paintings to be unrolled until now, of which it is the seventh. And yet in China, poets drunk with the brush qualify themselves as above all observers of the land. They have grasped its meaning. They have received its vision: they have kept its surface on the surface. And here is what they have seen:

Not much sky, and a great deal of earth. Piles of hills which are the work, and the witness, and the labor of the earth. Clouds falling from the sky both piercing and raising the solid revetments of the hills. The plain, simply tolerated, sapid, necessary: it is worked over, sown, harvested, but rarely painted. No man here, or merely the bare minimum to give an idea of human scale. But do not conclude there is a deficiency, or even worse an incapacity to paint one’s peer or his portrait: it is yourselves. Spectators, you who should, more than a mime on stage, play the role of mankind here: and in such a way:

That the little which rests of the sky should garnish your brow. That the mountain’s back should come and apply its great mask to your eyes. That the twin mountain faces, perfect for echoes, should muffle up your ears. There are no other men but you? But the landscape, truly contemplated, itself is nothing more than the skin — holed by the senses — of the gigantic human facies. (‘Paintings’, pp. 26-27)

The Blind Cat of Batad

In the evening we are sitting around a lantern. The older men are chewing betel-nut, drinking gin and talking, my host Emiliano is making wood carvings, the children are playing chess or looking at a picture book for learning English, And a cat sits directly beside the bright propane lantern. I ask about the cat. “That cat is blind” answers Emiliano, “He sits too close to the lantern”. The cat ever since it was a kitten sat near
the lantern every evening, allegedly because the hiss and the warmth of the lantern reminded it of its mother. Being constantly too close to the light had blinded it. "But he is very good at catching mice, he knows where they are only by their sound".

Sagada: Caverns

Everywhere beneath Sagada are limestone caverns where underground rivers flow through fantastic rock formations. There are burial caves where caskets are stacked against the cave walls, and strange naturally sculpted limestone cliffs where the caskets are hung from the sides. The purpose is to give the Spirits of the dead more freedom in the afterlife. I read in an architectural publication on Sagada:

My guide explains that the Spirits of the dead have a smoother journey to the afterlife if they are not confined in the earth, that is, buried in the earth. This is done only for small children whose Spirits they consider evil ... they believe that since children have not yet lived a full life, their Spirits become restless and therefore must be contained through earth burial. (H.V. De Jesus, Univ. of Santo Tomas)

Novalis also was fascinated by the earth, the cavern and the mine. In his novel, Henry von Ofterdingen, he compares the task of the writer to the role of the miner.

The miner is born poor and dies poor. He is content to know where the mental powers are found and to bring them to the light of day, but their dazzling glamor has no power over his pure heart. Uninflamed by perilous frenzy, he takes more delight in their peculiar structures and their strange origin and habitat that in their possession which promises so much. They have no charm for him any more once they are turned into commercial articles. (HO, p. 69)

Along with the web of meaning through which we interpret and experience the landscape is something beneath this surface, something alive and always in the process of emerging, which is the mysterious source of the ideas themselves. The naturalist writer Barry Lopez writes in his book, Arctic Dreams:
The landscape is not inert; and it is precisely because it is alive that it eventually contradicts the imposition of a reality that does not derive from it. Second, language is not something man imposes upon the land. It evolves in his conversation with the land... A long lived inquiry produces a discriminating language. The very order of the language, the ecology of its sounds and thoughts, derives from the mind's intercourse with the landscape. (AD, p. 277-278)

My own entrance into philosophy occurred when I was working as an environmentalist for a coal mine engineering company in the mountains of southern West Virginia. I was writing reports on the geological history and structure of the region, the sedimentology of the mining area, the soil formation from the rock spoil at the mining site, the hydrology, the plant growth and succession, and finally the wildlife habitat which results. One cycle grounded upon another cycle, all the way from the Pottsville Sandstone to Wild Boar habitat. And during my evening walks I began wondering about the place of the human being within this vast yet infinitely complex arc of emergence. Is human knowledge and human science a precise mirror of what is in Nature independent of us? Does the circle neatly close upon itself?

One night, while walking along some railroad tracks near Logan, West Virginia, I made a pact with the devil that I wished to live a life in devotion to these mysteries of art and nature, even if it meant a life of struggle and discomfort.

Here and now, years later, I ask again — Does the circle close on itself? Is the mind a mirror of nature?

Sagada: Ceremonies of Emergence

I am sitting in a small bar and some local men are telling me how Sagada was considered one of the best models for a community of indigenous people. The problem however is tourism. "Tourism is like a fire," they say, "it cooks your food but it can also burn down your house." I am told that traditionally the people of Sagada do not like to have their pictures taken, they believe it steals their Spirit away from them. But the tourists recklessly take their pictures anyway.
This idea has always seemed so strange to me. But now I am inclined to agree. We tourists are taking pictures of Spirit, this is the only thing that would interest a tourist. The more exotic the Spirit the better. And the moment of confrontation is such that the tourist is almost stealing it away. They try to take the picture discreetly, as if they were not there, to make the picture as natural as possible.

During the Harvest ceremony, the young men come down off the mountain-side to join the old men in the ceremonial circle (the dap-ay). Everyone is in their traditional dress. The women of the village come bringing gifts: tobacco leaves, gin, rice, candy. Everyone encircles the dap-ay. The shaman conducts the ceremony blessing the coming rice harvest. Soon there is gong playing and dancing. The dance is patterned after the flight of the eagle who hovers over the rice terraces and chases away the birds who eat the rice. And a young man explains the gong playing...

"Hear that gong... clung ... clung ... clung, it is the sound of the mountains."
"Hear that gong... clang ... clang ... clang, it is the sound of the trees."
"Hear that gong... cling ... cling ... cling, it is the sound of the streams."

And so nature emerges and expresses itself in the complex and shifting but harmonious rhythms of the music and dancing.

The mayor of Sagada is sitting next to me, dressed like the others in his ceremonial clothes. He says to me...

"Now you have had your experience. Now you can go back and tell others."

During the week leading up to All Saints Day people are in the Christian cemetery painting the tombstones white and highlighting the inscriptions in black. When the evening of the celebration comes, small fires are built on each tomb. Families sit around the tombs of their loved
ones quietly tending the fires. The younger children run about between the flames. Someone is even taking a picture. The whole mountain top is ablaze. The smoke from the pine branches is rising through the tops of the pine trees and caught by the cool swift winds and carried off into the darkness, somewhere, in the direction of the Sea.

Everywhere, there are practices to facilitate the emergence of Spirit. Can we say that reason itself is one of these practices?

**Back in Metro Manila: The Sea and the Absolute**

... but the Sea  
*Gives and takes memory  
And Love diligently fixes our gaze  
But what remains, is founded by the poet.  
(Hölderlin "Andenken")

I sit at the pier and look out into Manila Bay. I am haunted by the Spirit of my father who crossed this way during World War II, while working on a battleship. It is odd how far I have had to travel to cross paths with him. It is odd that what connects over such vast distances is the sea, which accosts so many foreign shores.

The Sea, where everything has returned to its lowest level, the endpoint of the earth’s gravity, where fixed direction loses itself and the waves and tides oscillate in and out, where the horizon is a paradox of both the perfect simplicity of the line of the earth’s edge and the infinite detail of waves extending toward that line. Land, Water, Sky, and the warmth of the fiery Sun.

And in the Night, the sky looks down with its innumerable glistening teeth, the reflection of the moon is tossed about by innumerable waves.

And beneath the surface – unseen – levels of darkness and life.

Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* was interested in the science of the emergence of the Absolute Spirit. But he recoils from the "inner being of things", the "inner world" of objects. He denies any noumenal beyond.
The inner world is, for consciousness, still a pure beyond, because consciousness does not as yet find itself in it. It is empty, the simple or unitary universal... Certainly we have no knowledge of this inner world as it is here in its immediacy; but not because Reason is too shortsighted or is limited, or because we have not yet gone deep enough,... but because in the void nothing is known.

Hegel points out that this void is devoid of all “Spiritual relationships and distinctions of consciousness”, but so that we can still consider it the “holy of holies”, we “fill it up with reveries, appearances, produced by consciousness itself”.

Even the “Beauty of Nature” for Hegel is a beauty for us. It is the emergence of Spirit, but only insofar as that Spirit is such that we are subjectively receptive to it. So when we experience the beauty of nature in general, we are merely "foreshadowing" its correspondence with the concept. Hegel expresses this in his Lectures on Aesthetics...

*If nature in general, as displaying to sense the concrete concept and the idea, is to be called beautiful; this is because when we look at natural forms that accord with the concept, such a correspondence with the concept is foreshadowed; and when they are examined more sensually by the senses, the inner necessity and the harmony of the total arrangement is revealed at the same time. (LA, s. 183, p. 130)*

To avoid speculating about the void, Hegel fastens on to the “seriousness of the concept”. And the life of the Spirit which originally emerges from the void, now is attributed to the concept. The “life of the concept”, allows for the concept to be the locus of truth and falsity, allows it to be its own motive force of development, and allows the unfolding of the absolute to have conscious content, and self-relation. The Spirit is the rational.

But this approach is completely one-sided in its exultation of the concept and the freedom of the subject. That is, it is too superficial. The value of the emergence is measured according to the foreshadowing of its intelligibility. What is intelligible is real, what is rational is actual, the form of knowing is projected upon the absolute. Where Kant retreats to the knowable, Hegel makes the knowable the only reality. So thinking has again isolated itself on its own island, and it walks around
its circumference and claims that it has walked around the world. But doesn’t the intelligible point to something which is intelligibly expressing itself? Something from the beyond? As Schleiermacher writes:

*The Universe is ceaselessly active and at every moment is revealing itself to us.* (R, pp. 48-49)

There is a manner in which one conceptually and actively approaches Nature, probes into its mysteries, creates distinctions, and another way in which one lets Nature approach oneself, where one thinks the parts with respect to the whole. Schleiermacher aligns this second type of thinking with religion. Hölderlin recognized these two opposing approaches in an early version of his novel, *Hyperion,*

*We tear ourselves from the peaceful en kai pain of the world in order to produce it through ourselves. We have fallen away from Nature and what was one (as we now believe), now conflicts with itself, and mastery and slavery interact on both sides. Often it seems to us as if the world is everything and we are nothing, but often also as if we are everything and the world is nothing.* (Werke, I, s. 558)

Nature confronts us just as much as we confront Nature. This is a conflict that Hölderlin believed cannot be conceptually unified. It only finds its sanctuary in art or in what he calls *“life in general”* which is prior to the concept. We are a part of nature, yet engaged in a conflict with nature, and this paradox is the basis of all art and subjectivity. All of our concepts are a part of this emergence and a reaction to it.

The concept never exhausts what it wishes to explain. It merely cradles a mystery within a protective shell. This is the source of its power in the sciences, it facilitates our control of forces we still do not understand. The concept still remains a kind of myth. To try to appreciate the distinction between myth and concept one usually turns to their structure (such as Levi-Strauss’ bricoleur/engineer distinction). Yet it would be more helpful to look at their relation with their environment. The concept is an interaction with the environment in the same way as a myth. The myth is a relation to a more natural environment and so uses its imagery (animals, plants, human actions). Our artificial environment has been conditioned by our activity, so this conditioning is a part of the object of our conceptual explanation as well as the source
for our conceptual imagery (waves, particles, forces). We forget that all our concepts are myths precisely because we have forgotten how we have conditioned the landscape.

So does the circle close upon itself? *Closure, imitation, precision, objectivity* are themselves myth-concepts. The more interesting question is where did they come from, and where are they going?

And what happens when we are in foreign territory which has its own myths and concepts? We are outside their circle, yet each culture sees the other in a way which they cannot see themselves, as an emergence of *Spirit* in a particular form.

This is the *Exotic* which interests the tourist, who comes armed with a camera. It is a showing prior to the understanding which elicits a reaction - a framing, a photo-graphing. We take a photo to stand in for the concept. Doesn’t this tell us something about photo-graphy and thinking?

*Emerging Questions*

And so philosophers like Kant and Hegel can purify reason and the concept only at a price, by isolating it, by actively and aggressively protecting it against the infidels who misuse it to cross over into the noumenal void. And Kant secretly admits that there is something there, which presents itself, prior to our re-presentations of it. But not only must he practice a philosophical silence, he must maintain a pure division from this mystery. But in the dynamic we have been questioning, this mystery is everywhere, inescapable, in the very core of the familiar, in the very heart of reason. And so, whenever we use reason, we are always crossing over this dark terrain. So I find myself haunted by the same *Spirits* as the troubled student.

And this is of course an academic paper published in a book, and so it itself is a kind of confrontation. And it was initiated by a confrontation. So allow *me* (whoever or whatever it is I am) to confront *you* with some questions.
Do you acknowledge a certain abyss to yourself? One that precedes all conceptuality, something alive, the source of Spirit?

Do you completely understand yourself? Isn’t the subject itself a web. And underneath this web of meaning is a darkness.

Do you understand your own culture? Aren’t cultures something woven over the landscape, to channel the emergence in a certain manner, so that we can unthinkingly inhabit that landscape.

The page is white, but it contains this darkness as well. These words which you read and understand spring out of a place beyond understanding, prior to understanding. And behind your own eyes, another darkness.

And behind the dazzling light of the computer and television screen, the mystery of light itself, which allows itself to be manipulated without giving up any of its secrets.

And we build our own fires upon the graves of philosophers and poets within our papers to conjure their Spirits so they can speak from the dead.

And our writing is a mythic ritual. To attempt to make contact with what we don’t understand, to make contact with ourselves.

And the moment of confrontation, the attempt to understand, is almost like taking a photograph, of that which is emerging towards that moment of understanding,....

Spirit?
Texts Conjured:

Coffee Mug in Shoppersville Supermarket, Katipunan Road, Quezon City, Philippines
Defjesus, Henry V. 'Vernacular Architecture from Sagada: paper and photo exibit'. College of Fine Arts, University of Santo Tomas.


The remarkable photographs are by Eduardo Masferré who lived in Sagada and took photos all over the Cordillera Mountains of Luzon. These were taken from the work:

'People of the Philippine Cordillera: Photographs, 1934 - 1956'. Devcon I. P. Inc. PO Box 1843 MCPO 1299 Makati, Metro Manila