Chapter 13
Gardening at a Japanese Garden

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Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine,
or go to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo.
And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself.
Otherwise you impose your self on the object and do not learn.¹
—Matsuo Basho

Editors’ Note: The notion of gardening at a Japanese garden functions as a metaphor for our enactive geography. This chapter illustrates the geographical turn in epistemology and ontology in which a non-substantive geographicity is developed. It captures metaphorically our notion of a non-dualistic, ambiguous field of being, but in a way that deconstructs our residual ways of thinking, which is apropos of the Zen thematic. What is Japanese of a Japanese garden is neither an essence/substance nor a social construction, but rather is a spatialized/spatializing enactment, a participatory process of cultivation—a cultivation of neither self nor garden, but the “spatiating” (the genesis of space) event.

13.1 Introduction

How does one go about writing about gardening at a Japanese garden? Is one not better off observing gardening at a Japanese garden, rather than reading about it? Doesn’t writing or reading about it testify to our being removed from what we are writing or reading about? Doesn’t observing what we write or read about provide us with a direct access to itself without mediation by writing and reading? Conventional wisdom tells us that a picture is worth a thousand words, and we can even go further in our conventional wisdom and say that that which the picture is the picture of is worth a thousand pictures. Why embark on an indirect route when a direct route is available to us? If our objective is to learn about gardening at a Japanese garden, are we not better off putting aside talking about it, writing about it, reading about it, or looking at a picture of it, instead of observing it directly? But if we observe it directly does not observation still hold us aloof? Is to observe not to stand at a distance from what we observe? And what is this distancing other than the distancing that estranges us from the truth of what we are observing? And ultimately, why should we believe that we are better off observing what we are writing about than writing about it? The answers to these questions, if indeed there are answers, are likely to come from the experience of observing what we observe or what we write about. In the light of what is at stake in this writing, it is

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In the light of the above directive from Basho, the difficulty of the task ahead of us becomes evident. To set out to learn about gardening at a Japanese garden we are called upon to leave our subjective preoccupation with ourselves. But how do we set our subjective preoccupation aside when subjective preoccupation with ourselves keeps on intruding on our desire to learn? In regard to the matter at hand, how do we learn about gardening at a Japanese garden without the preoccupation with ourselves standing in the way? This difficulty is not encountered only when learning about gardening at a Japanese garden. It is to be encountered in learning in general. Moreover, the difficulty may be complicated by the ever-present possibility that we may be unaware of the extent to which we are subjectively preoccupied with ourselves. If this difficulty is to be overcome, an emancipatory self-critical reflection on the extent of our subjective preoccupation is necessary. Such a reflection demands that we project ourselves ahead of ourselves; that is, we set ourselves apart from ourselves, and this is problematic in that we have to set ourselves apart while at the same time not setting ourselves apart. After all, in every instance of learning our own being is at issue. Socrates encountered a similar difficulty in his quest for wisdom. He tells us,

I have been wondering at my own wisdom. I cannot trust myself. And I think that I ought to stop and ask myself, what am I saying? For there is nothing worse than self-deception—when the deceiver is always at home and always with you—it is quite terrible, and therefore, I ought often to retrace my steps and endeavor to “look for and aft.”

In the quest for wisdom, for understanding, and for knowledge, we are among our worst enemies. We are among our worst enemies when we cease dwelling in wondering at our own wisdom, when we are absolutely certain about our understanding, when we are absolutely certain about our knowledge, when we absolutely trust ourselves, when we forget that the deceiver is not only at home in our being, but also when we forget that this deceiver could be none other than we ourselves. Again, as Socrates reminds us, many modern philosophers:

in their search of the nature of things, are always getting dizzy from constantly going round and round and moving in all directions. And this appearance, which arises out of their own internal condition, they suppose to be a reality in nature; they think that there is nothing stable, or permanent, but only flux and motion and that the world is always full of every sort of motion and change.

We hear the same words in the following passage from Zen Buddhist literature:

The Wind was flapping a temple flag. Two monks were arguing about it. One said the flag was moving; the other said the wind was moving. Arguing back and forth they could come to no agreement. The Sixth Patriarch said, “It is neither the wind nor the flag that is moving. It your mind that is moving.”