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Practicum Report

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Footnotes to a Book of Stone: Reading Stone, Valuing Nature

I spent my practicum time at my regular place of work, Visemarble, a business that imports natural stone from different places around the world. Out of these slabs of stone we cut and manufacture all custom work relating to natural stone; we make counters, tables, pedestals, and floors among other things. It is a family business that belongs to me and two other partners. My work setting offered an overwhelming number of possibilities for me to explore. However, I narrowed my focus to three themes: first, the social and ethical issues arising from owning and working within a family business; second, the aesthetics of working with natural stone; and third, the theme of time. In fact, one can read time and history on stone. It is cut into sheets, all numbered and in order like pages in a book. Through my practicum experience I propose a reading of The Book of Stone.

Business as Usual and Power Relations

In a business, there is a tendency to safeguard all the answers. Every company has its story, the secret formula, and there is a kind of secrecy about a successful business. If a business is producing and is profitable at the end of the year, questions can be seen as a distraction. For an M.A. student, however, usually, questions are all he/she

has, because in the humanities, the answers are never final. In fact, the answers become questions again. The humanities are a quest for meaning and never a resting place for meaning. In this light, the M.A. student in a business setting faces an unavoidable contradiction, because he/she will be asked to show in what way his/her suggestions or questions will benefit or hinder production and profits. To put into question the status quo of a legally functioning business, is to directly question the levels of production and therefore the amount of its profits. Meaning has come to be seen simply as utility. Human action, more and more, has to produce fast results, by the end of the first quarter if possible. For example, in farming, one of the most elemental and natural human activities, the plant has to grow faster and the fruit is sometimes harvested unripe. Fast production and fast profits are imperative, and the M.A. student seems to be placed in arid ground.

As I mentioned, Visemarble is a family business. Out of its nine employees, five are family. The other four do not have much of a future within the present context of the company. There is no corporate ladder in this business; the family controls the present and the future of the company. There is little hope that any of the other employees might become manager, for example. A united family, such as ours, has better chance of creating a reputation in business; being a family business makes it seem more trustworthy and reliable for some clients.

My studies in the humanities have made me reflect on the exercise of power and control and the idea of the other. It is here that I find that theory in the humanities has helped me better understand the way we deal with our employees and with our customers, and of course, with each other. Personally, my relationship with the

employees is a source of tension and sometimes frustration. Power relations are inevitable. Foucault writes that “while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex” (209). To be alive is to be in a position of power in relation to those who are alive with us, and also to those who are no longer, and those who will come. In other words, there is no relationship without power, because we are never the other, we are always the other of the other. Now, economic power is extreme power, because it has the potential to render the other powerless. Our supremacy is there when there is helplessness; that is, it is best measured against the helplessness of the other. So, I have somehow refrained from exercising power over the employees. And then things sometimes get a little out of hand, and it is rather they who try to exercise their power over me. I then try to reassert myself and do a poor job at it. When I say that I do a poor job, I am referring to my relationship with the employees. I do it badly because I haven’t found the right measure of it. Is there a right measure of power? To start to think of it this way, to put the question itself is absurd, as it seems that this kind of tension and contradiction is inevitable. However, it is something at which we have to keep working, for when I say power relations are inevitable, I am not suggesting resignation, or that we are somehow caught in a cage in which we cannot exercise our freedom, or that we should accept the status quo. It is precisely because power relations are inevitable that we have to be careful about how we engage with one another. Foucault goes on to say that:

When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by government of

men by other men, in the broadest sense of the term, one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. (221)

We can control others because they are free, but it is also in exercising power that we in turn lose our freedom. When we hear the expression that power corrupts, we mean that it eats away at the individual or the community who exercises it; it eats away at the human face. If we were to define the human being as the free being, the being who asks a question when everything seems answered, then we have to see power as inhuman precisely because it is the usurper of freedom. Thus, the exercise of power and freedom are in constant conflict; it is as if we fail the human promise of reconciliation that we carry within us.

Tampering with Nature, Regressing from Beauty

Aesthetic experience and aesthetic theory have been traditionally at home in art galleries and opera houses; they have dealt with the fine arts, painting, music, sculpture, literature and so on, art elevating reality to a higher sphere of being. There was even a connection between art and the sacred: in Plato's conception, poetry was God's breath through the poet. As Socrates says to Ion "you are divine, and not an artist, when you eulogize Homer" (27). And, as Hegel writes: "Art frees the true meaning of appearances from the show and deception of this bad and transient world, and invests it with a higher reality and a more genuine being than the things of ordinary life" (315-16). In this aesthetic view, nature is seen merely as a starting point, as something which does not partake of "genuine being", as something "bad and transient" which needs to be elevated

and perfected through art. And so we turn our gaze from the natural scene and onto the representation of it. My concern is that in looking away from nature, in trying to achieve higher degrees of beauty, it might be possible that, at times, we are actually regressing from beauty. Working with natural stone brings us to the heart of this problematic.

Natural stone can display variation in colour and veining, sometimes one can find fossils in it or rust stains, and it isn't always possible to avoid them. The customer asks us, "Can you avoid this flaw? I would not want it in my kitchen." Sometimes I venture my philosophical answer, "But there are no flaws in nature." I have received a variety of responses, from "Are you trying to sell me a bad, defective slab?" to "Oh, yes, there are flaws in nature, you haven't looked closely enough." Some of our customers are looking to purchase natural stone when wearing the artificial spectacles of an artificial world.

They expect the stone to look perfect and manufactured, as if out of an oven, stone without irregularities. Thus it is that they are looking for stone, but they do not expect to find nature in it. In response to these expectations, some suppliers have resorted to applying resins and dyes to the most porous stones, altering the natural colour and composition. In this way, they bring the stone closer to our experience and away from nature, and so we alter the aspect of the stone which made us respond to it in the first place, regardless of whether one responds negatively or positively. Schopenhauer wrote that aesthetic perception leads to the suspension of individuality and of the will:

Raised by the power of the mind, a person relinquishes the usual way of looking at things, stops tracing, as the forms of the principle of sufficient reason prompt him to do, only their interrelatedness, the final goal of which is always a relation to his own will. He ceases to consider the

where, the when, the why, and whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the what. He does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but instead, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, immerses himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with quiet contemplation of the natural object actually present whether a landscape, a tree, a crag, a building or whatever it may be. He loses himself in this object [...] he forgets his very individuality, his will, and continues to exist only as the pure subject, the clear mirror of the object. (102)

In experiencing nature, we are brought to selflessness because we have to recognize ourselves as just a part of it. We should avoid bringing our readymade rational concepts to bear on the perception of the natural scene, or on the perception of what appears to us, our perception of the stone for example. Aesthetic experience frees us from the demands of the will and from reason because we are lost in the object; we have ceased to try to use the object for our advantage. One can see that in working with natural stone one is at the heart of a deep contradiction, because at the moment of contemplation aesthetic experience of nature vanishes because of interest and utility.

Works of art are aimed at an audience: they require us to listen, to observe, to feel, they are dependent on perception. In this sense, the aesthetic is a dialogue between the artist and those who have come to perceive the art. There are certain expectations from the audience and certain intentions from the artist. We do not experience or create art in a vacuum. However, the experience of nature or natural beauty, it might appear from out of nowhere, that is, it might enter our perception unannounced: the sudden

fields covered in white, the taste of sea water, a foggy mountain. We all have our moments of aesthetic natural experience, where there was nothing premeditated, where we were surprised suddenly out of our habits and expectations.

However, to experience nature has become more and more difficult. We tend to use more the word “environment”, which describes better not nature itself but our activity within it. As such, nature, due to our use and abuse of it, has become less and less natural. If we look closely at the forest in front of us, we will notice the highway cutting through the trees, or the section of trees dead from acid rain, or the greyness of pollution above. Nature is losing the potential to surprise us or to strike us, because it is becoming more and more a world of our making, a world that we know so well. Thus, the aesthetic absorption or contemplation of natural beauty has to lead us to reflective ethical thinking. The suspension of the will has to go from aesthetics to ethics, it has to become a conscious suspension of the will so that we may better protect nature. The aesthetic perception of nature leads us into nature so that from within it we can better care for it, and to value nature.

Time, and Time Again

Modern industrial and technological society is one where time rules people's lives. We have a specific time to go into work and to leave work; there is an amount of time which we spend on streets and highways in traffic jams. And the comment that we hear most often is, “I have no time for anything.” The modern world seems to be one where we can see time shrinking, time has become visible, we can see it moving and controlling our lives and leaving us empty-handed. Tamara K. Hareven says that “the

introduction of the industrial time clock and discipline was a dramatic and traumatic watershed in the history of Western society” (167). At our company, the industrial clock is a source of injustice. How? We have two employees; they both make the same money, but one produces double in the same time period as the other. To be fair, then, the one who produces more should be able to leave at noon. But, should time be the indicator of how much an employee is paid, or should production be? The problem is that in order to measure production one needs a measure of time. So time is always present even if we work against it, even if we produce beyond it. But, is production enough? In our world, production is never enough, because somehow we have come to believe that the more we produce the more we contribute to the betterment of life and to the progress of the world. Somehow we have come to believe that time goes in a straight line, that it is empty and that it has to be filled by the products of our activity. Thus we become the slaves of time and of the paycheque because empty time is never actually filled up. Despite our fast pace at producing and our progress, time presents itself always empty.

The Judeo-Christian tradition used to measure the history of the earth in thousands of years. Biblical narrative speaks of the beginning of time, of God’s creation, of the Fall from Paradise into history and time. All this was supposed to have happened relatively recently - thousands of years would be enough. However, if we look from the Scriptures to nature we soon see that the thousands of years we think about in relation to history are just a drop of water in the ocean. We have to think about *deep time*, about a time that is so vast, so long, that the best way to capture it is metaphorically. Deep time, then, is a well without a bottom, or a well whose bottom is the top again; going down the

well is synchronic with going up- thus the metaphor.

Geological time is the discovery of deep time, time in billions of years. Plainly, it is not easy to make such leap, from thousands of years to billions. Christians thought that God created the Earth for them and placed them on a ready-made world still smelling new when they first set foot on it. For Christians, it is not easy to see themselves as just a part of the whole when they thought they were the inheritors and the masters of the earth. The understanding of deep time requires a great amount of humility. To realize that there was a time when there were no human beings on earth is to realize that there might come a time when no one will be left. Gaining consciousness of deep time should be enough for human beings to lose their pompous attitude toward nature and the earth.

Stephen Jay Gould says:

An abstract, intellectual understanding of deep time comes easily enough-I know how many zeroes to place after the 10 when I mean billions.

Getting it into the gut is another matter. Deep time is so alien that we can really only comprehend it as a metaphor. We tout the geological mile with human history occupying the last few inches (3).

Well, not if one works with stone. Getting this in the gut has been unavoidable for me as a stone cutter. One has to be naïve not to see that life is more vast and longer than we initially thought. Fossils in the stone jump out at me all day; they tell me that nothing has been lost, that they are still here. They say that finitude is the wrong word, that time is not a straight line going forward in one direction, but rather that it is a multiplicity of lines going in all directions.

Limestone is one of the most recent of stones. Compared to other types of stone,

it grows in our backyard. It is composed of organic sediments and the erosion of other stones. So, in limestone, there are already sediments from the erosion of granite. It is in limestone that we find the greatest number of fossils because it has not yet gone through the process of crystallization. Marble, for example, in its transformation from limestone, was exposed to great amounts of heat and pressure and many fossils disappeared. Even though they are in the stone and they form the stone, we cannot distinguish them. This process of metamorphosis in stone is a great metaphor. Limestone is composed of layers, layers of meaning as we come to think in literary studies. This transformation in nature, this crystallization, this moment of crisis in the stone's life offers some insight into our own. Memory also happens in layers, but there comes a moment when it is crystallized, when it loses any connection with other moments of memory. There comes a time when we remember a few moments from our childhood, but not in any chronological way. Crystallization of memories happens when we lose track of the chronology of such memories.

Granite comes from the core of the Earth. It is time which contains origin, it is a still deeper kind of time. But there is a sort of cycle in stones' duration and life. Eroded granite will find life in a different kind of stone, in limestone, for example, and limestone will then be transformed into marble. Nothing in nature seems to be lost. I do not know how human beings ever came to think that they themselves would be lost. It is true that we are eternal. We have just wished to have a different type of eternity, an eternity which suffers no transformation, an eternity that would remain limestone forever and ever, with all the fossils still visible.

Time is not hidden behind nature: rather, it is visible in nature. The

transformations are manifestations of time, but they do not happen chronologically; chronological happening is just the way we humans have found to organize our lives. However, time is deep, it has no hurry get anywhere. And yet, it shoots in all directions. The best analogy for time is perhaps the stars, shooting light in all directions, and yet always falling back into themselves, continuing to radiate even after death. We know that we can still collect light from stars that have long been eclipsed. And, we cannot afford to miss this image of permanence, this image of hope at the heart of time itself. An insight into time has to be one which congregates the eternal, not the scars of the past, nor the hopes of a future, but the eternal in those scars and in those hopes. In other words, we have to see history as time's slave. It is thus that we will see ourselves as part of a vaster reality, part of a greater home than we ever hoped for. We are not going anywhere, we have come to stay.

There is no conclusion yet

I want to propose a reading of stone because I suspect that it will lead us into a more humble attitude towards nature and an acceptance of our destiny within it. Ruskin says: "how many pages of doubtful record might we not spare, for a few stones left one upon the other" (131). It is true: stone keeps the record for longer periods of time. I think of the Inukshuk of the Inuits, three or four stones one upon the other, as a cluster of meaning. The pyramids in Egypt will say more to future generations than perhaps all our books in all the libraries. The book of stone is dense, more durable and more direct in its messages. One has to be patient and read in it the language of time. After all, God himself wrote the Ten Commandments on stone. However, at

Visemarble, the fossil on the stone is God's language before words and signs, it is prior to Moses' slabs because it is the physical language of nature, when nature had not yet suffered representation and could only speak itself. One has to read a message of humility in this fossil in the stone, one has to accept that we ourselves are the stones of the future. If we come to an aesthetical perception of nature, letting go of our will and individuality, we will be better equipped to value nature and to gain a perspective which does not use nature for pure advantage as an instrument or raw material for production.

We will rethink ourselves in relation to others, especially in our exercise of power over our fellows. In reflecting on nature we will come to see the interdependence among all things. This image of the fossil in the stone serves well the purpose of understanding better our destiny. It is a beautiful image and it helps us find ourselves in the stone, we look at the stone as if looking in the mirror.

Thus, aesthetic perception of nature will have to lead us to ethical reflection, and to the realization that we live in a state of urgency regarding natural conservation. We have to feel the menace when in our perception we lose individuality, because it is then that the threat is brought home to us. If we place ourselves within nature, then we are bound to care for it. I think that the best definition of the human being is that of the concerned being, the caring being. We are the beings who hope and care about his/her surroundings. But so far, we have failed to heed the call. For the most part, we have been meddlers into the order of the eternal; cutting deep into the womb of nature, we invented time so that others may remember our passage, we invented history so that there might just be a history of ourselves. We make a counter of stone and we tell our customer that it will last forever, and so it will. And there is a hope that we, ourselves,

along with the client will last forever too. But hope is not enough and our actions so far have been in total contradiction with our hopes. If we think that we can devastate nature because our stay here is transitory, and that a better home awaits us somewhere else, then we have to think again.

We have to come to an insight where we see ourselves again from the inside of nature, from the inside of the stones. Not through a neo-romantic return to nature or contact with nature. That would only serve to stress our subjectivity and would lead to passivity and contemplation. That kind of vision is fishing all the fish and selling Muskoka by the square metre, to use a local example. In the end it does not lead to nature but again to ourselves as masters of it.

What I propose, in the end, is a reading of nature. But this reading is not done in our own terms, it cannot be done in representation. We have to set aside our books, our talks, our words, it is clear that we have missed nature in its original and eternal state. And yet, the book of nature is still open from the beginning. In this view, we can see that the Fall was not from Paradise, but from nature. And we cannot see God yet, precisely because we cannot see nature. However, an image of nature is not one of totality, it can appear in the most humble form. That fossil in the stone is just a moment of such humility, and if we come to see ourselves in the stone, I think that it is still possible to avoid the Fall.

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