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BEFORE OUR VERY EYES

Miura Baien and the Ten Thousand Things

"The volumes of *Gengo* give an account of just what I see."

Gengo Preface, 1775

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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this project is to explore the *jōri* system of the Japanese scholar, Miura Baien (1723-1789) and to understand it better. Baien himself wished to explore the universe and to understand the universe better. As work on this essay progressed, two features of Baien's project became its focus:

Baien is a "realist" in the sense that for him, the vast intricacies of heaven and earth are already there before us. They are there for all to discover, regardless of what anyone has said or thought.

Baien found that in order to comprehend anything of the complexity of the manifold before his eyes, he needed to design a technical language, ruled by what he discovered there.

A study of these features in the development of Baien's system gives rise to the interesting hypothesis that two theses, which at first glance we often take to be incompatible, might be profitably combined:

- i The distinction between the real and the merely conceptual is clear-cut, already determined and beyond our power to alter.
- ii The distinction between the real and the merely conceptual depends on language.

Because Baien's interest in language as a study is confined to what we should nowadays see as a very narrow segment of the field of linguistic phenomena, the hypothesis that these two theses are compatible is not one he would have put forward. But the use to which he puts language in our broader sense of "language" is strong evidence for that compatibility.

In a late chapter of this thesis I have put forward the hypothesis that the distinction between the real and the merely conceptual is both out of our hands, and dependent on language. From this I have drawn the further consequence that reality is not constrained by, nor reducible to, a single set of criteria that distinguishes it from the merely conceptual.

These different sets of criteria are not governed by some master principle behind the distinction. There are "plural realities". Baien's system, too, points this way. His terminological method gives us not a single structure, but constantly shifting views of reality, in such a way that if we take him seriously it is difficult to resist the conclusion that reality itself is kaleidoscopic.

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