

## The Role of Painting in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty never loses his interest in painting. Not only does he explore the subject in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he seeks in his essay “Cezanne’s Doubt” to establish the relationship between the details of the painter’s life and the peculiar way that Cezanne saw and painted the world. In fact, Merleau-Ponty finds discussions of painting essential for his explorations of the life world; and in preparation for his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he writes another essay on painting entitled “Eye and Mind.”

This continued interest in painting is due not merely to his fascination with this particular form of art. Rather, sensitivity to the way painting relates to the world is essential for his phenomenological project. There is a similarity between painting and phenomenology. While we may not be justified in calling the painter a phenomenologist proper, the former often pursues a task very similar to that of the latter. Merleau-Ponty writes in “Eye and Mind,” “From Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.”<sup>1</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, painting is the human activity that most dwells on an aspect of our perception—the visible. I argue in this paper that painting contributes valuable insight into Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Painting is an example of the achieving of a primitive contact with the world that phenomenology promotes. It is an exploration of visibility that does not depend on language. In fact, the creation and experiencing of paintings is a type of making sense of the world that linguistic description and analysis do not capture fully. Merleau-Ponty’s writings cultivate an appreciation of this art and show that it shares some of the pursuits and outcomes of phenomenology. Painting engages in a phenomenologically minded project in a way that phenomenology as a species of philosophy cannot quite do. Philosophy relies on verbal concept in order to talk about experience, while painting remains closer to the prereflective contact with the world. Painting points out aspects of visual experience to the viewer without necessarily conceptualizing it. Thus, painting is an important supplement to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project.

An examination of the role of painting for Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology raises an important (and far from resolved) question about the relationship between philosophy and art. How ought philosophy approach art in order to do it justice? Is art fully explicable in philosophical terms? Is it possible that philosophy does some violence to works of art when subjecting them to theoretical study? In response to these concerns, Merleau-Ponty develops a philosophy of art that does not seek to explicate the meanings of works. Rather, by highlighting the degree to which we first make sense of the world on a prereflective or prepredicative level and showing that painting is one such way of making sense, he prepares the reader for the encounter with the work. He makes explicit the way painting explores our embodied sense-making so that the reader can be more attentive to the contribution of the work without imposing preformed concepts on that work. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s goal is to develop a philosophy of art that, far from explicating the work of art, is able to deliver the reader to a position from which she can be attentive to the embodied sense-making of art that eludes conceptual linguistic analysis. In this way, Merleau-Ponty attempts to avoid any conceptual violence on the works he discusses.

Since painting celebrates the enigma of visibility, Merleau-Ponty claims that “in paintings themselves we could seek a figured philosophy of vision.”<sup>2</sup> But if visibility plays a significant part in

making contact with the world, then what is visibility? Precisely what philosophy of vision does Merleau-Ponty derive from painting? I will first examine what phenomenology and painting share in common, as outlined in “Cezanne’s Doubt.” I will then turn to the ontological significance of visibility for the constitution of the world of meaning discussed in the above essay and in “Eye and Mind.”

In “Cezanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty,” Forrest Williams writes that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the art of Cezanne “appear to agree in origin, method, and outcome.”<sup>3</sup> We see in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* a theme of returning to something neglected. This theme of returning or recovering is contained in what comes closest to being the slogan of phenomenology: back to the things themselves! We need to return to the things themselves because we have covered them with intellectual frameworks of understanding—frameworks that we bring along with us and apply to things. These frameworks ask a certain range of questions of the things and solicit a certain range of answers. An example of these is science—it treats things as objects—intellectual constructions that it projects into the world as if they were found there awaiting our attention. We force things into explanatory schema that may not give us the clarity we desire. What we neglect is the most primordial way in which we encounter things in the world. Thus, returning to the things themselves is recovering the primitive encounter with the world,<sup>4</sup> where they speak to us. While this is in a sense a return, the reachieving of this primitive encounter is always an innovative act, a way of thinking this contact anew.<sup>5</sup>

Merleau-Ponty ascribes a similar task to Cezanne in “Cezanne’s Doubt.” In his later life, Cezanne shifts from the treatment of fantasies and the moral physiognomies of actions to painting from nature, the exact study of appearances: “less a work of the studio than a working from nature.”<sup>6</sup> Just as Merleau-Ponty, when returning to original experience, opposes theories of vision that explain it as the perception of patches of color,<sup>7</sup> so Cezanne turns away from Impressionism. Merleau-Ponty writes that for Cezanne, the Impressionist paintings present the object as an empty shell of color, a mosaic of color patches. The Impressionists paint the impression of light on the retina, nothing more.<sup>8</sup> Instead, in Cezanne’s work the object “seems subtly illuminated from within, light emanates from it, and the result is an impression of solidity and material substance.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Williams sees in Cezanne and Merleau-Ponty a shared realism. We must note that the realism Williams writes of is not the attempt to establish once and for all the way things really are, independently of us. Rather, it is the attempt of “discovering the real as the invariant structure of a given appearance.”<sup>10</sup> It is a response to subjectivism, which Merleau-Ponty classifies as a species of objectivistic thought.<sup>11</sup> Though Williams uses the term ‘objectivism’ to describe both Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Cezanne’s painting, we must keep in mind that that it does not denote what *Phenomenology of Perception* most resists. Merleau-Ponty’s and Cezanne’s works search for objectivism in the sense that they wish to return to the objects themselves, as they primordially present themselves to us. These are the objects themselves, which allow for our construction of their scientific counterparts. As Williams states, quoting Roger Fry, Cezanne’s greatest achievement is the assimilation of appearances over against willed and *a priori* inventions of the ego.<sup>12</sup>

Cezanne moves away from Impressionism. And neither does he wish to have his paintings of nature look like photographs. In photography and Impressionism, the focus is on projecting patches of color onto a two-dimensional surface. In order to do that, painters and photographers must rely on techniques of transferring the lived experience of sight onto a surface that does not capture it faithfully. Cezanne, on the other hand, wishes to remain closer to the visual world as it is experienced—without relying on techniques that flatten it. The back edge of a table painted by him, when going into hiding behind another object, emerges on the other side failing to align, as if giving us the table paradoxically perceived from two distinct angles at the same time. What manner of painting from nature is that? Cezanne was not after the careful projection of a slice of the world onto a two-dimensional surface. The linear perspective of the Renaissance, the portrayal of objects as smaller in the distance, and the photographic image are all examples of the willed *a priori* inventions of the ego that we bring to the mountain we wish to paint. With them, in a way, we occlude the mountain. Instead, “Cezanne wanted to paint this primordial world, and his pictures therefore seem to show nature pure, while photographs of the same landscapes suggest man’s works, conveniences, and imminent presence.”<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes further: “By remaining true to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cezanne discovered what recent psychologists have come

to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one."<sup>14</sup> In this lived perspective, the objects closer to us appear smaller, and the farther one larger. The circular shape seen from a narrow angle is not elliptical. We need training to see it as an ellipse, so that we can project it on a two-dimensional surface. By attending to this lived perspective, Cezanne wishes to confront the sciences with the nature from which they come.<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty finds a further parallel between Cezanne's work and phenomenology in that Cezanne seems also to have discovered synaesthetic experience.<sup>16</sup> He does not try to suggest tactile sensations through color: "These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses."<sup>17</sup> When painting a landscape, Cezanne's aim is to paint the landscape in its absolute fullness.

We read that painting for Merleau-Ponty is not mere copying of the external appearances. On numerous occasions in "Cezanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind," he states that painting is not an exercise in *trompe-l'oeil* (the attempt to fool the eye into thinking that there is depth, a collection of real extended objects, where in fact we find only a flat canvas). In "Cezanne's Doubt," he treats Cezanne as an exception among painters. Most succumb to devices (such as linear perspective, for example) classed as the willed inventions of the ego. And yet, he finds in painting at large the tendency, though not always realized, to examine the visible, to look into what makes things appear the way they do. Cezanne looks for the primordial vision of things that grounds the scientific inventions, allowing for the Renaissance perspective, the photograph, the Impressionist painting, as well as the paintings at Lascaux. It is a task similar to Merleau-Ponty's—the uncovering of a primitive contact with the world on which all our intellectual constructions are grounded. Merleau-Ponty writes: "The artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it and who makes it visible to the most 'human' among them."<sup>18</sup>

If that is the case, painting, as phenomenology, becomes a method of description. But it is a peculiar one. The opening section of "Eye and Mind" makes a sharp distinction between art and science. He describes the latter as manipulating things and making constructs out of them. As a result, the operative thinking of science "comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals."<sup>19</sup> It treats things as objects-in-general, as if they have no meaning to us. As such, science gives up living in things. Art, on the other hand, "draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore. Art and only art does so in full innocence."<sup>20</sup>

But how does painting live in the world while science fails? And why discuss painting more than any other art? Merleau-Ponty finds the key to approaching these questions in a phrase of Valery's—painters take their bodies with them, lend them to the world when painting.<sup>21</sup> This phrase refers to the inextricable bond between vision and movement. We see only what we look at, and at the same time, "I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it."<sup>22</sup> Everything within our sight is within our reach, "at least within the reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the 'I can'."<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty defines movement as the natural sequel or culmination of vision. Looking at something is always an approach or an opening up to it. When seeing, we get caught up in things, lost in them; and at the same time, they become an annex to or prolongation of our selves. It is because of this relation of sight to movement, and because vision automatically points to what is to be done, that Merleau-Ponty claims: "We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we touch the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere at once."<sup>24</sup>

If existence is understood as the process whereby things take on meaning, as our acts of navigating through the meaningful world, then we can see the genesis of meaning in vision. When we see things, they acquire significance for us. And the good painter, like a phenomenologist, explores this genesis of meaning. The work of the artist is to some extent ontological. Cezanne devotes a large part of his later years to painting the mountains of Aix, aiming to paint the mountain itself as it is encountered in that basic layer of experience and gives rise to constructions such as linear perspective and techniques of projection. "It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself visible by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze."<sup>25</sup>

When most of us look at a mountain, we are devoted to it, it is before us, and we do not ask how it is this way. Merleau-Ponty has already established that when science asks this, its operative thinking prevents it from getting to the bottom of the ontological problem. Our body encounters the mountain as already meaningful and is ready to treat it as a mountain upon sight. Little attention is paid to the way the mountain is shaped by the play of light and shadows, the way glaciers, stone, and vegetation come together to constitute it in its meaning. But the painter asks the mountain to “unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself mountain before our eyes.”<sup>26</sup> The painter investigates what makes something be a particular thing for sight. The painter must live in fascination in order to see what others miss. As we saw earlier, the visual meanings yielded by the painter’s investigation are not simply meanings for the eyes as a visual organ. The visual thing is the thing that we move around with, in relation to which we make a stand and that we treat in a certain way. For Merleau-Ponty, in our antepredicative interaction with the world, vision takes a privileged position. It is in vision, more than elsewhere, that we first take a stand in relation to the world and we find our place in it. Because of this, he gives privilege to painting over all other nonvisual arts.

We note that the phenomenological and ontological properties of painting are extended to all styles of painting in “Eye and Mind.” It appears that after writing “Cezanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty widens his interest. In the earlier essay he opposes Cezanne to the Impressionists, and to the techniques of the Renaissance. Those two, among others, are seen in the same light as empiricism and intellectualism in *Phenomenology of Perception*. They are accused of bringing preformed theories of vision to the visible thing, and thus missing the thing itself as it is primordially encountered from within the lived perspective. In “Eye and Mind,” however, we see that the Renaissance painters are distinguished from their contemporary theoreticians. Thus, while the latter claim that linear perspective is the ultimate tool for projecting a slice of the world onto a flat canvas, the painters see otherwise. These theoreticians pursued a gimmick for creating the best possible illusion. But “the painters knew from experience that no technique of perspective is an exact solution and that there is no projection of the existing world which respects it in all aspects and deserves to become the fundamental law of painting. They knew that linear perspective was far from the ultimate breakthrough; on the contrary, it opened several pathways for painting.”<sup>27</sup> This technique was thus neither true nor false. Instead of an attempt to create an illusion, it is a free experiment with “depth and the presentation of Being in general.”<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, painting is not, as the Cartesian account would have it, the projection of a likeness onto a canvas. It is not the mere copying of discrete patches of color in proximity to one another, reproducing the external visible shells of objects. Such an account presents painting as essentially the play of illusions, in which figures are distorted and flattened onto a plane surface.<sup>29</sup> If such accounts of painting were true, it would seem curious why so much energy has been spent on learning, producing, and preserving paintings. Merleau-Ponty finds in painting more than the activity of trained apes mimicking what they see. Painting is the exploration of the enigma of visibility. Vision is a field in which a primitive contact with the world is made, inextricably bound to movement. To see is to place something within our reach, to establish how we are to move toward or around the thing seen. In doing so, vision brings what we see closer to us. Far from being the function of the eyes only, vision is an overall orientation of the entire body toward what we see. In this orientation, there is a genesis of meaning. In exploring the enigma of visibility, painting investigates this genesis by paying attention to what we for the most part take for granted or ignore. It asks what makes the mountain *this* mountain in front of us, and this means that painting cannot simply dwell in the task of projecting external likeness. The mountain, for us who live on or alongside it, is not merely an in-itself, or an extended object. Thus the good painter is interested in going beyond projecting three-dimensional extension onto a two-dimensional canvas.

If the above description is correct, then Merleau-Ponty is right to note that painting is remarkably similar to phenomenology in origin and aim. He notes that there is thought in painting. To be sure, though painters can speak about already accomplished works, painting does not present theses or arguments. Unlike the philosophical discipline titled phenomenology, the thinking of painting is not bound to words. It is akin to the silent thinking that is linked to vision, whereby things acquire meaning for us. I submit that precisely this is one of painting’s greatest contributions to philosophy. Phenomenology seeks the

primordial experience of sight (among other things) prior to our act of speaking of it philosophically. And yet, it cannot bring it to our attention without articulating thought into speech. It utilizes a philosophical vocabulary, albeit one that is derived as carefully as possible from the things themselves and that primordial experience. Painting, on the other hand, is an example of a phenomenologically minded project that, at its best, does not talk about itself explicitly. There is thought in it, but the painter thinks in painting. What painting unravels in visibility, it does so by playing on visibility—by exhibiting its discoveries to sight and not verbal language. We would probably be too hasty if we said that a phenomenology of sight is impossible without turning to painting. But it would be an understatement to claim that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty benefits and learns greatly from turning to the workings of painting. Perhaps his account of vision is incomplete without his essays on painting. Yet those essays must not be understood as explications of the works of the painters. Rather, they point us to those works and assist us in seeing the exploration of the painters, while at the same time endowing it with philosophical status.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Forest Williams, "Cezanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith trans. (New York: Routledge, 2002), vii.

<sup>5</sup> This remark is vague enough to require an essay of its own, but I include it here to warn against reading Merleau-Ponty as describing the mere recovery of a forgotten phenomenon already waiting for us to recover. The role of phenomenology as a species of philosophy is more complex.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 266-7.

<sup>8</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, "color, in its inmost depths, is nothing but the inner structure of the thing overtly revealed" rather than a shell that conceals an inside, preventing vision from penetrating further than that shell (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 266-7).

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," 62.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers his account as an alternative to those based on either empiricism or intellectualism. While they are engaged in a dispute, he finds that both are objectivist views. They are objectivist in the sense that they regard the body as yet another object among other objects in the world and proceed to analyze the world as an aggregate of scientific objects.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, 169.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Perception is explained by Merleau-Ponty as the operation of the body as a "synergic system." All of its functions are linked together in the "general action of being in the world, in so far as it is the congealed face of existence." In this case, we cannot speak of any of the senses having a proper and exclusive province. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 121.

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- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 123.  
<sup>21</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 124.  
<sup>23</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 146.  
<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 128.  
<sup>26</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 135.  
<sup>28</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 131.

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