

Painting as an Implicit Ontology Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Interpretation of Cézanne's Painting

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"Painting was his world and his way of life"
—Merleau-Ponty: "Cézanne's Doubt"

Abstract

Cézanne's painting is regarded by Merleau-Ponty as a sort of modern thought. By refuting with the approach of investigation that analyze the painter's work in light of the influences by his personal hereditary traits, Merleau-Ponty brought forth a positive understanding on Cézanne's longtime pondering before painting. That is to say, the pondering means not the hesitation or indecision, but rather a sort of doubting and inquiring into the world and the relation between man and his surrounding world. This doubting shows that in the painter's work, there is already an original reflection upon the world and the being in the world, which is in a silent, indirect and implicit mode. This primordial thinking reveals, for Merleau-Ponty the possibility of a pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic and pre-theoretical manner of investigation of philosophy, which the philosopher would call "implicit ontology". By revealing this ontological character of painting with the illustration of Cézanne's work, this paper finally points out that, Merleau-Ponty's inquiry to the non-philosophy field in the late period forms a new possible way to approach the mute substructure of the primordial world, and to make philosophy rebirth and have a new interpretation in a sensible manner of reflection, and it will finally contribute to his pursuing of "the logos of life-world".

Ever being one of the editors of *Les temps modernes*, Merleau-Ponty had never lost sight on the modern efforts made by people from different positions in different fields (such as politics, art, sociology, anthropology and psychology, etc.). For him, the philosophy is also a philosophy within the relation with "non-philosophy." And the modern thought, or modern philosophy, is just characterized by this vague definition of non-philosophy. As Merleau-Ponty himself had claimed in his lectures in *Collège de France*, "the philosophy was in crisis," and there was then a "state of non-

philosophy”¹. Facing with the crisis of rationality in the relationship between human-beings, and also in our relation with the nature, working under the background of the decaying of systems and definitions both in philosophy and other fields as mentioned above, a modern thinker is then situated in the corrupted world, with the certitude, the truth and the values vanishing or getting more and more implicit. But this situation of man in crisis is not regarded by Merleau-Ponty in a negative manner. For him, the crisis indicates also new possibilities to construct, or we may say, to re-construct. In this sense, what he had thematized as “notre état de non-philosophie” (our state of non-philosophy) revealed not the end of philosophy, but rather a new starting-point of philosophy. Thus the so-called non-philosophy serves as a plentiful soil and source for philosophy. It is by recouring to the field of non-philosophy, particularly for Merleau-Ponty in his last years, the field of painting and literature, that the philosopher rediscovered “les pensée fondamentales” (the fundamental thinking) and “l’ontologie indirect” (the indirect ontology).² As he believed, “The philosophy will find help in poesy, art, etc., in a more tight connection with them. It will hence have its rebirth and reinterpretation of its own past of metaphysics there, although the latter does not really pass.”³ Taking this into account, I hereby try to draw out a concrete example in his inquiry into the fundamental thought, that is, his interpretation on Cézanne’s painting.

1

At the beginning of *Cézanne’s Doubt*⁴, Merleau-Ponty wrote:

“He needed one hundred working sessions for a still life, one hundred and fifty sittings for a portrait. What we call his work was, for him, only an essay, an approach to painting” (*SNS*, 9).

This description of the process of Cézanne’s creation could be understood in different ways. It would not be surprised for those who are familiar with Cézanne’s career, to find in these sentences, more or less, the implication on the painter’s instability and indecision. Someone, such as the painter’s closest friends, Emile Zola and Emile Bernard, who had made a lot of description on old Cézanne’s behavior, particularly on his timidity with strangers’ contacts, mistrusting with others and fearing of life, even believe that, it is due to these weaknesses in temperament that Cézanne’s endeavor finally turned out to be a failure. However, Merleau-Ponty did not agree with such a point

1 Here I refer to his course in 1958–1959, « La philosophie aujourd’hui », in *Notes de cours 1959–1961*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996. p. 42.

2 Quote from « L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui », in *Notes de cours 1959–1961*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p. 166.

3 « La philosophie aujourd’hui », in *Notes de cours 1959–1961*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996. p. 39.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: « Le doute de Cézanne », in *Sens et non-sens*, pp. 13–33. English translation, see, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus & Patricia A. Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Reference to this text will be abbreviated hereafter as *SNS*, following with the page number of French version at left, and the page number in English version at right.

of view. He criticized that: “these conjectures nevertheless do not give any idea of the positive side of his work.... Zola’s and Emile Bernard’s belief in Cézanne’s failure probably arises from their having too much emphasis on psychology and their personal knowledge of Cézanne” (*SNS*, 11). As far as he was concerned, Zola and Emile Bernard concerned more with their friend’s character than with the meaning of a painter’s work. By this reason, their description and study on Cézanne mainly focused on how the ill-health and the morbid character affected his working. Countering with them, Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation on the same problem of Cézanne’s repetition and hesitation goes in an opposite way.

In view of Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s uncertainty and solitude are not essentially explained by his nervous temperament but by the purpose of his work. Heredity may well have given him rich sensations, strong emotions, and a vague feeling of anguish or mystery which upset the life he might have wished for himself and which cut him off from men; but these qualities cannot create a work of art without the expressive act, and they can no more account for the difficulties than for the virtues of that act” (*SNS*, 19). According to this, it is not necessary that a man with such hereditary traits and such experiences in career would create such painting works. Nevertheless, things go reversely. Cézanne’s life and character seems to us to carry the seeds of his work, but it is by our previous knowing of his works. The so called “influences” on the works by the painter’s hereditary traits is, in fact, a sort of causal relation that is always acquired afterword by the analyses according to our relative knowledge about the painter and his works. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty designated that “the meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life” (*SNS*, 11).

But, this does not mean that the philosopher denies the connection with “life” in painting. Merleau-Ponty added latterly that “although it is certain that a man’s life does not explain his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected” (*SNS*, 20). For him, to enquire into life itself, to disclose the linkages with life, this is just what was aimed to be carried out by phenomenology. His whole enquiry aims to return to the life-world⁵ which has been nearly forgotten during the abstraction by natural science, and to seek the meaning of objects within their primordial connection with life. So was his study on Cézanne.

2

In his first two books⁶, Merleau-Ponty made a reduction on the understanding of “body” from the concepts that exist in the tradition of philosophy, psychology and natural sciences, and claimed that what he aimed to re-discover, was the living body which is not regarded as an object, but which is my own, whereas I live through, whereas I could see the world. We may find that this sort of reduction continued in his study of Cézanne. In the “preface” of *Sense and Non-Sense*, Merleau-Ponty had

⁵ The thesis of “life-world” was thematized by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936). Till his last work, *Le visible et l’invisible*, Merleau-Ponty still designated that his phenomenology aims at re-building an “ontology of life-world”.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le structure du comportement*, and *Phénoménologie de la perception* (abbreviated hereafter as *PHP*, following with the page number of the French version).

considered Cézanne's painting as an example of "how precariously expression and communication are achieved" (*SNS*, 8; 3). For him, Cézanne's expression in painting might not be entirely success without any dispute, but he is regarded as a "winner" because of his insistence and continuous endeavor in attempting to achieve the real expression. From these words, we may find that, Cézanne's work is, first of all, not considered by Merleau-Ponty, as an artwork, but rather it is taken as the representative of the efforts made by human being. That means, what Merleau-Ponty aimed, is not to make Cézanne and his works as the object of the investigation, beneath the title of "painter," Cézanne is found living primarily as only a human being, as a man who struggles for his life and who sees and expresses as just a human being can see and express. To reveal a perspective of human being, it is the way Merleau-Ponty carried out his study on Cézanne, and also it is what he discovered in Cézanne's painting.

Till his last months, Cézanne still wrote painfully that he was "still learning from nature," and it seemed to him he was "making slow progress" (*SNS*, 13; 9). Nature, for him, is all that he aimed to inquire in his life. When replying Bernard for the question on the difference between art and nature, he even said: "I want to make them the same. Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting" (*SNS*, 18; 13). This means, what art means, for Cézanne, is not what we could learn from textbooks or dictionaries, but rather it is of the same meaning with nature. With this regard, his painting is, to some degree, the acquisition from nature; while his inquiry into nature was carried out in the mode of painting. When he was painting in the valley, the relationship between the painter and the landscape is even not that between subject and object. He painted as if he himself was "germinating" with the landscape, while we may also say that, the landscape "thinks itself" in him. Therefore, painting is not only the act of the painter alone, but is participated by both. One may characterize Cézanne's painting briefly as his pursuing to nature. However, it is also this fanatic request for nature that made him fall in difficulties.

Cézanne ever thus described his painting and that of the Classical painters: "they created pictures; whereas we are attempting a piece of nature" (*SNS*, 17; 12). In order to make his painting a part of nature, he refused to use whatever ready-made principles or skills that would disturb the atmosphere and vividness on the canvas. Thus, his work seemed to be particularly strange for painting objects directly with colors but not with following the contours, and for his particular "distortion" of forms rather than the conventional perspective. However, these innovations in painting are not simply for the sake of challenging the tradition, within Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, they are just the manifestation for Cézanne's searching for the true meaning of painting.

According to a classical doctrine, painting is based on perspective. This means that when a painter is confronted by a landscape, he chooses to depict on his canvas an entirely conventional representation of what he sees. On their canvases, there would always be a vanishing point, in relation to which the landscape is then arranged along lines running from the painter to the horizon from which he is depicting. Landscapes thus painted would have a peaceful look, and would remain at a distance and do not involve the viewer. However, Cézanne's painting affords different scenes to us. "Cups and saucers on a table seen from the side should be elliptical, but Cézanne paints the two ends of the ellipse swollen and expanded" (*SNS*, 17; 13). "In a portrait of Mme. Cézanne, the border of the wallpaper on one side of her body does not form a straight line with that on the other"

(*SNS*, 19; 14). The critics laugh at him with these “distortions.” His friend also regarded it to be a sort of “suicide,” because he is “aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it⁷.” But Merleau-Ponty found him to be genius beneath these so called distortions.

For the classical painters, they paint as such, because they know things should be looked like that. When painting a line which is across a wide strip of something, just as the case in the portrait of Mme. Cézanne, they would probably choose to make the visible segments form in a straight line, because whatever the segments look like before eyes, they would know by the knowledge of geometrical perspective, that the apparent vision is caused by the veiling of the strip of paper, and that the segments are, in fact, from the same border of the wallpaper. In view of them, intellectual judgment is always prior than perception.

However, for Cézanne, he painted by his own perception of the world, but not simply by what he already knew and what he was taught to do. For him, “to say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse” (*SNS*, 19; 14). As to the border that does not form a straight line, it is of the same reason: “indeed it is known that if a line passes beneath a wide strip of paper, the two visible segments appear dislocated” (*Ibid*). Thus, although he knew how to draw a normal image according to the geometrical principles and the conventional perspective, he preferred to observe by his own eyes and to inquire by his whole body (in the sense of what Merleau-Ponty had renewed by *Phenomenology of Perception*, “the incarnate subject”). Giacometti ever said that Cézanne had been searching for the depth all his life⁸. This searching is not a searching for skill in painting, but it bears a certain sort of ontological meaning. As Merleau-Ponty had already pointed out in *PHP*, the depth does not belong to things, but to the perspective of vision. It “cannot either be extracted from, or even put into that perspective by consciousness. It announces a certain indissoluble link between things and me by which I am placed in front of them” (*PHP*, 296). The depth could not be seen as an object over there, but it is what makes the vision possible. It is by realizing that the depth only appears through our perspective and within the distance to us, that we fall in the dimensionality of depth. Therefore, to search for the depth, means not merely copying the shape, the ratio of different parts of an object and the positional relationship with other objects in the world. It is not a study of painting skill on the ontic level, but rather an ontological interrogation to the possibility of the existence of an incarnate subject, and the connection between the subject (the incarnate subject) and the world. In this sense, what Cézanne faces when he was painting, was the whole world which is surrounding him, but not only one or some objects in front of him. By painting, he is not only depicting, but rather, he is setting up a world—the world wherein we live through.

According to this, we may find that, “Cézanne’s or Balzac’s artist is not satisfied to be a cultivated animal but assimilates the culture down to its very foundations and give it a new structure: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before” (*SNS*, 24; 18). Cézanne surely did not want to paint like a slave, with the definite subjects and learned skills. For him, “art is not imitation, nor is it something manufactured according to the wishes of instinct or

⁷ Bernard’s words. Cf. “Cézanne’s Doubt”, *SNS*, 17; 12.

⁸ Cf. *L’œil et l’esprit*, p. 64.

good taste. It is a process of expressing” (*SNS*, 23; 17). Every time when he stood before canvas, he entered the mood of creation. The whole world is extended before eyes, and he would have it emerge in front of the spectators for the first time. But could he finally become a master in this world of vision, this world which “is nothing but visible”?

The sentences cited at the start of this paper just showed the difficulties Cézanne met in face of this world. As Bernard recalled, “Cézanne sometimes pondered hours at a time before putting down a certain stroke, for, each stroke must ‘contain the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style’” (*SNS*, 21; 15). The painter’s pondering is, rather than a manifestation of nervousness, a process of finding the expression at hand. For him, all are still happening. What he attempted to hold was not only an instance or merely an object separated from the circumstance, but the still burgeoning world, things within their process of appearing before eyes. However, how could he put the whole with one stroke on the present canvas? It is probably based on such understanding, that Merleau-Ponty concluded that “Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first word. He considered himself powerless because he was not omnipotent, because he was not God and wanted nevertheless to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make visible how the world touches us” (*SNS*, 25; 19). In this sense, Cézanne’s hesitation and indecision could not just be ascribed to his weaknesses in hereditary traits, but it reveals also the confrontation with the real situation in which we all are living. Cézanne was praised by Merleau-Ponty, for he never escaped from this difficulty of expression, even when being refused by almost all the exhibitions, when being attacked by most of the critics with the dispraise of “stupid” or “absurd.” As put by the philosopher in the end of the “preface” of *Sense and Non-Sense*, “failure is not absolute. Cézanne won out against chance, and men too, can win provided they will measure the dangers and the task” (*SNS*, 9; 5).

3

Certainly, it is not only due to his insistence in inquiring from nature and in expressing with efforts from a man’s perspective that Cézanne was preferred by Merleau-Ponty. The philosopher also discovered in the painter’s work an effort which is very similar to that which is made by phenomenology.

More than once, Merleau-Ponty cited the following description from J.Guesquet’s Cézanne:

“In *La peau de chagrin* Balzac describes a ‘tablecloth white as a layer of fresh-fallen snow, upon which the place-settings rose symmetrically, crowned with blond rolls’ ‘All through youth,’ said Cézanne, ‘I wanted to paint that, that tablecloth of fresh-fallen snow... Now I know that one must only want to paint ‘rose, symmetrically, the place-settings’ and

⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *L’œil et l’esprit*, Paris : Gallimard, 1964. p. 26. The original sentence is: “The painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost demented because it is complete when it is yet only partial.” (trans. James M. Edie, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. p. 166)

‘blond rolls.’ If I paint ‘crowned’ I’m done for, you understand? But if I really balance and shade my place-settings and rolls as they are in nature, then you can be sure that the crowns, the snow, and the whole shebang will be there.”¹⁰

This citation appears in the discussion on the relation between painting (expressing) and body, however in each case it was laid there without further discussion. Hence one may doubt that how could this story of Cézanne illustrate the linkage between painter’s body and his painting?

Why did Cézanne say that he could not paint this “crowned”? Couldn’t it be painted according to the perspectival arrangements or by Durer’s grids? For Cézanne, what “crowned” means is not simply the spatial relation between blond rolls and the place-settings, but also the luster emanated from the metallic forks or knives, the contrast between the softness of the rolls and the hardness of the metal forks or knives, the flavor that evanesces within the picture, etc. Like what he had said, which Merleau-Ponty cited for many times, “a picture contains within itself even the smell of the landscape”¹¹, when painting, he required not only what he had seen by eyes, but also what had been perceived by his entire body. The painter paints with his body, with his eyes seeing, his hands ready for drawing, and all his organs of sensation perceiving and expressing. As the philosopher latterly said in *Eye and Mind*, “it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings” (*OE*, 16; 162). In this sense, in the situation of painting, the man who paints is first of all not merely a painter in a traditional sense (the one who stays all days in studio, with the models or objects in front of him), but a man who perceives in the world. And also, what he attempted by painting, was not just the appearances of things—if he could be satisfied with such an idea of art, he might have stopped at an early stage in career, concentrating on the skills created by his predecessors, but was, indeed, the things themselves—not as an object separately, but as what they are in reality which we encounter in our real life. We even could say, what he wanted, was the primordial world, which lies beneath our science, our culture, the history and the tradition, and which is the base, the root, or the source of the latter. Therefore, although Cézanne could certainly not imagine that a philosopher (who was born two years after his death) would develop a new theory on body and perception, which considered the body as a whole without dichotomies, as a dynamic “I can” within the bodily schema, and as the position whereas we stand and realize our existence in the world, he nevertheless previously made the best illustration for this theory.

The whole course of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology aims at bringing the primordial world of perception back to life, and by his last words, “discovering the logos of the life-world”¹². But, in so doing, the philosopher did not work solitarily on the way of philosophical thematization and with the philosophical languages (which predicate by concepts and statements). For him, “philosophy does not hold the world supine at its feet. It is not a ‘higher point of view’ from which one

¹⁰ This paragraph is originally cited from Joachim Guesquet’s *Cézanne*, p.117. We may find this quotation in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 230; and also in “Le doute de Cézanne”, in *Sens et Non-sens*, pp. 18–19.

¹¹ Originally in J. Gasquet: *Cézanne*, p. 81. Merleau-Ponty’s quotation, see *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 368 ; *Sens et non-sens*, p. 20 ; and also *Parcours deux*, p. 41.

¹² Cf. “Notes de travail”, in *Visible et l’invisible*, p. 219.

embraces all local perspectives. It seeks contact with brute being, and in any case informs itself in the company of those who have never lost that contact. It is just that whereas literature, art, and the practice of life—creating themselves with things themselves, the perceptible itself, beings themselves—can (except at their extreme limits) have and create the illusion of dwelling in the habitual and the already constituted, philosophy—which paints without colors in black and white, like copperplate engravings—does not allow us to ignore the strangeness of the world, which men confront as well as or better than it does, but as if in a half-silence”¹³. Cézanne, in this sense, is a colleague with Merleau-Ponty. While the philosopher stumbled forth on the way of renewing philosophy with a new ontology of life-world, the painter just revealed this world silently with his whole life efforts. Merleau-Ponty chose the word “doubt” to describe Cézanne’s pondering before painting. Isn’t it a sort of “doubt” (the doubt which is sensible rather than intellectual) that could compete with what Husserl demanded to be carried out at least “once in a lifetime”¹⁴? Shouldn’t the painter be respected for the efforts he had made throughout the struggling and inquiring all his life, and for the new way of expression he had contributed to us?

One may wonder, so far, if the praise for Cézanne’s work (by Merleau-Ponty) was too much exaggerated, if Cézanne’s work could be thus interpreted as a sensible reflection which is so similar to phenomenology. However, for the philosopher who had been encountered such kind of questions since very early¹⁵, it is just by inquiring into what is regarded as non-philosophy that the real philosophy searches for his real definition. As he put it in the “preface” of *Sense and Non-Sense*, “the highest form of reason borders on unreason.” It is in Cézanne’s painting (also in Matisse’s, Klee’s and other painters’ and litterateurs’ work) that Merleau-Ponty find the original doubting and reflection (which is pre-conceptual and pre-scientific) with in their state of naissance. Maybe this sort of original reflections and primordial expressions could be found elsewhere, nevertheless, he found an approach by the case of Cézanne for inquiring into that primordial world within a sensitive mode. And relatively, it is also by his recourse to Cézanne, that the painter’s ignored efforts and contributions were brought forth to us. The interpretation on Cézanne’s painting just coincides with what Merleau-Ponty inquires by phenomenology. It is probably in this sense that Merleau-Ponty wrote in the end of the “Preface” in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

“phenomenology is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne—

13 Cf. « Préface », in *Signes*, Paris : Gallimard, 1960. p. 40. English translation: *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. p. 22.

14 This is the words of Husserl in *Cartesian Meditations*, the origin sentence is: “anyone who seriously intends to become a philosopher must ‘once in his life’ withdraw into himself and attempt, within himself, to overthrow and build anew all the sciences that, up to then, he has been accepting” (*Cartesian Meditations*, Trans. Dorion Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973. p. 2). Merleau-Ponty cited for several times this expression, “once in his life” (« une fois dans sa vie »), but always in opposite opinion, for, he considered the task of inquiring to what exists to be endless, but not to be carried out “once in his life.”

15 We may find, in the discussion following with *The Primacy of Perception* (1946), the philosopher had already met with the question that his ideas would be “better expressed in literature and in painting than in philosophy” (M. Bréhier’s words). See, *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophique*, Paris: Editions Verdier, 1996. p. 78.

by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being. In this way it merges into the general effort of modern thought.” (*PHP*, xvi; xxiv)

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