
Existence as Letters : Between Cézanne and Sesshu

I. Between Cézanne and Sesshu

If there is a mystery in the world that philosophy has to engage itself with, that is precisely in the simplest fact that we are contained in our bodies and perceive the world as living bodies, and none has ever said that more clearly than Merleau-Ponty. Starting from a phenomenological exploration into the realm of senses, Merleau-Ponty's work was advanced to the point nearly reaching to an unknown territory of human knowledge that grasps the perceptive world itself as a fundamentally ontological question. It is widely known that what lies at the core of this unique, but not necessarily complete, ontology is the notion of "*le chair*"—that is "*le chair du monde*" ("Flesh of the world") and "*le chair du corps*" ("Flesh of the body"). In a very single event of the blooming of "*the primitive perception*," in the *dehiscence* (chiasm/split) that vertically arises in the mutual play of intertwinement, the tangling and untangling of "*le chair du monde*" and "*le chair du corps*," all things about human perception, or even, all the origin of human reason are contained. His late philosophical thought was pursued in the direction that could almost be described as "radical perceptionism."

As anyone can easily notice, painting was a privileged genre of art for such a thought of Merleau-Ponty. Painting for him was neither a simple reference for nor illustration of philosophical thought. Before going into details, however, I must emphasize that painting has been a genre that served as the clearest evidence of the modern Western system of representation in both science and philosophy; ever since a teleology based

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on the linear perspective was introduced and the scientific reduction of space, guided by the idea of calculable preciseness, came to be executed as "the technique of representation." In the West, painting has not only been one of artistic genres equivalent to others, but it has precisely been the manifestation of Western modernism if that can ultimately be defined by the invention of the most powerful system of representation. Put differently, I would say that painting has been correlative to and conjoined with the Cartesian system of *cogito*. To illustrate this point, it would be suffice to see the following prints by Dürer (figs. 1,2) which were meant to explain the method of teleology. In these prints one sees the subject reduced to a mere viewpoint without a body, the representation of space calculated to be equivalent to the actual space in one's scope, and the objects which are completely reduced to a set of positional points; these three elements supplement one another as mutual equivalents while completely segregated among themselves—and this is nothing but the logic of universalism in representation. According to this logic, painting became a place where the system of representation asserts itself—the system that embodies what Merleau-Ponty called "*surveying knowledge from above*."

Of course, we have to immediately affirm that paintings cannot be completely subordinated to such a bodiless system of representation as long as they constitute a form of art. While adapting such a scientific representative system in itself, art could not have but organized resistance to that very system it internalized. As demonstrated on canvases displaying mythical motifs, amorphous and amorphous figures, varied patterns and motifs in repetition, fluidity and ambiguity that are secretly brought in by different touches and styles, and traces of various movements, the painted surface has also been a covert battlefield on which a universal system of representation was constantly embattled by painter's unique bodies.

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In the 19th century, however, this battle became explicit in paintings themselves, when painters began to search for an alternate "depth" apart from the conventional one controlled by a teleological perspective. In other words, "depth" became no longer an objectively positioned one that arises from the separation between the subject and the object, nor the one that is found in an objective form; instead, it became "depth" of perception, or—if I am to use the word attributed to the trend of paintings at the time and since then become a registered landmark in history—"depth" of "impression" or "depth" by "impression." Needless to say, this was done first and foremost by the liberation of colors.

Although I do not have enough space to go into details, I need to mention that Cézanne occupies a unique position among broadly defined Impressionist painters. Cézanne was never a painter of colors, and one cannot describe him as such. Although he fully exploited the *ambivalent power* generated by freshly liberated colors, what he pursued by *weaving differing values of colors* was to grasp the object's existence in space and the form expressed as volume. Instead of separating objects from space, Cézanne attempted to express space as dynamic movements that intertwine with, contain, and run through cleavages between objects in space.

For example, let us look at "La Montagne Sainte-Victoire." (fig.3) In viewing this painting, one cannot maintain the interpretation that space exists as the purest, *a priori*, and formally given thing in Kantian sense, nor that a mountain and its viewer exist first, and then an act of "seeing" follows, and that leads to an act of "painting," seen *post factum* in the manner of a sequence of events. Instead, an act of "seeing" arises as a lived moment, in the gaze that arises through the dynamism of "*dehiscence*" (chiasm/split) where "*le chair du monde*" ("Flesh of the world") and "*le chair du corps*" ("Flesh of the body") tangle and untangle

to each other in space, through which process Mt. Sainte-Victoire as an object to be seen and "I" as the subject to see simultaneously emerge on canvas. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty argued that "painters turn the world into paintings by lending their own body to it."¹ No painters would be more suited than Cézanne to state this maxim, if we understand the word "world" in the limited sense designating that appears to our perception.

Cézanne's adventures in painting bear something that prefigured the ontology of "flesh," the ontology of vertical existence, to which Merleau-Ponty, who devoted all his life to philosophical writings on the emergence of the world in perception, reached at the final stages of his thought. I believe that there was an essential alliance between Cézanne's paintings and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, beyond the former merely being an illustration of the latter. (The relationship between a philosopher's thought and someone allied with it is not at all a marginal question. As exemplified in the relation between Heidegger (after certain period) and Hölderlin, such an alliance seems to indicate the real "quality" or "wealth" of that philosophical thought.)

We could trace, record and criticize this new alliance between philosophy and painting in more details; however, instead of going into that direction, I would instead like to please myself by attempting a modest task of recalling "another painting," "another body" which belongs to a culture that Merleau-Ponty perhaps did not know too well. Here, I place and see another picture of mountain—though I am not sure which country that belongs to—right next to Mt. Sainte-Victoire. By placing them side by side, I am trying to think whether there is any messages that we can send towards the thought of Merleau-Ponty in his final years.

So here is the next mountain to follow Mt. Sainte-Victoire that I am introducing today. This is "Haboku Landscape" (*Haboku sansui ga*, 1945)(fig. 4), the late work of Japanese painter Sesshu from the 15th century, which is selected to be a part of Japanese National Treasure and a

1. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *L'œil et l'Esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 16.

widely appreciated masterpiece by many Japanese people. [image omitted]

Our Japanese and Asian audience may know enough about this genre of Japanese art; but, let me outline the essential for our European and North American panels.

1) Among the different styles of Japanese paintings, this work belongs to a genre called Suiboku-ga, which means ink paintings. This style came originally from China, and it is drawn with ink on a piece of paper. Only a single color of black ink is used. Hanging scrolls (*katagiri*) and paintings on sliding paper doors (*fusuma-e*) are both mounted versions of Suiboku-ga.

fig.4. Sesshu, *Haboku Landscape*.
Tokyo National Museum.

2) Suiboku-ga paintings have a variety of motifs, and this one is a painting of landscape. In general, landscape painting of Suiboku-ga, called "Sansui-ga" (consists of two Chinese characters, the first of which "san" means mountains, and the second "sui" water), depicts mountains and streams. Mountains and streams are essential elements of the landscape in East Asian cultures.

3) For only ink is used as pigment, this simplicity of painting material induced a development of technique. In this painting, a technique called Haboku, or Hatsu-boku, is used, that is executed by flinging ink with strong brushstrokes. This technique is not Sesshu's original invention, but is a part of recorded repertoires of the Chinese Suiboku-ga painting.

4) In Japan, Sesshu is a painter often referred to as "sacred painter." He is said to have visited Ming Dynasty of China to study the Suiboku-ga painting there. After returning home, however, he did not necessarily occupied a privileged position in the art scene of the Capital; rather, he had spent rest of his life in a provincial area of the southernmost part of Japanese main island Honshu.

5) Sesshu had a talent of producing different styles of paintings he learned in China on demand; especially noteworthy among them are *realistically painted landscapes* (*jikkei jishha*) as exemplified in "Amano Hashidate." I would like to show two paintings here for your interest; "Amano Hasidate" (fig. 5) which could be seen as a representative of the "surveying viewpoint," drawn in the painter's perspective from above, and another Sansui-ga entitled "Shûtô (Autumn-Winter) Landscape." (fig. 6)

No other paintings appears more "ambiguous" than "Haboku Landscape," when seen in the teleological perspective of Renaissance that operates according to the principle of "calculable preciseness." What is represented in this picture anyway? One can only see unidentifiable rocky mountains, sporadic trees, a barely recognizable house marked by the line indicative of its roof, the surface of water created by a single brushstroke, the steep mountain range that stands higher at the back—these are assemblies of only few but essential "elements" in the very meaning of the words, of which one is left uncertain whether they are to be read as a representation of actual landscape. Take, for example, the thin line stretching out to the right from the darkly painted part at the bottom of the picture. What should this be? It does not look like a tree; then, would it be a flag or a banner? "What" is that another line coming out of the upper part of the cliff to the right, which is obviously corresponding to the first one? Is it a pine tree, or something else? Indeed, there is little sense to make in asking these questions, since, from the beginning, a definable, precise form to designate "What is" is not intended. The determination of form is not an issue; the idea is not to turn this "ambiguity" into a structurally unified view of a concrete landscape.

Even if this painting is "ambiguous," therefore, one should perhaps

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fig.5. Sesshu, *Amano Hashidate* (part)
Kyoto National Museum.

fig.6. Sesshu, *Shitô Landscape*.
Tokyo National Museum.

not reduce this "ambiguity" to the "ambivalence" between the subject and the object that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. For, the location of the perspective taken here by the viewer of Sansui-ga is not at all clear. In Cézanne's Mt. Sainte-Victoire, the viewer is located in that space, even the perspective is not the same as the conventional one. In "Haboku Landscape," however, the viewer is not necessarily located; and what constitutes the other side of a coin to this is that not all points in the picture are in the representational relation to designate points in space. None would bother whether a blank part of the picture represents an open space in the landscape, or simply left unpainted by the painter. In fact, one finds a large open space at the upper part of the painting, and sees Sesshu's preface to his work, as well as praises he gave to a number of Zen priests, such as Getsuo Shukyo, Ten-in Ryutaku and Ryoan Keigo.

According to Sesshu's preface, this painting was given to one of his students, Josui Soen, as a kind of "*inka*," a title given to Zen Buddhists, when Josui was to leave Sesshu upon the completion of his training. Josui visited famous priests in Kyoto to have their praises written on the paint-

ing, so that new *texts* were added to it by different people one after another. One does not find in this a Western concept of "artwork" that is to be completed by an artist, enclosed in a frame as it is, and cut off from the space of reality. Although there is no doubt that this Sansui-ga was drawn by Sesshu, one cannot easily determine the exact boundaries of this artwork; should the preface by the artist and the praises by others be considered as parts of the painting? All such matters are left "ambiguous."

If so, we should then understand that the "ambivalence" of the painting that allows such an "ambiguous" co-existence between *texts* and images itself constitutes the essential feature of Sansui-ga. The landscape here is surely "painted," but simultaneously, if not more significantly, it is an "inscribed" landscape; it is inscribed not in the sense that *texts* are filling in the blank space of the picture as they can, but in the sense that Sansui is "inscribed" as if a single letter—not as an ideograph, of course, but as a pictograph—from the very beginning.

Obviously, "Haboku Landscape" is a special artwork produced in a unique context, even among the range of Sesshu's works. The performative aspect of this particular work is already strengthening a character of this artwork as "écriture" (calligraphy), which is meant to be passed down, initially to his student, then to priests in Kyoto through him, and eventually to future generations. In addition to that, however, the fundamental feature of Suitboku-ga, that is, the fact that ink alone is used as medium of drawing, further enhances its inclinations for letters. Indeed, to mark letters, they have to be placed in unpainted parts of a picture, and that is impossible in the space of Western paintings which is filled with abundance. Letters cannot find their place in the system of representation that is completely governed by one-to-one correspondence between actual space and the space represented in a picture. Letters can only arise in spaces that are open to the original possibility of writing itself.

That may simultaneously explain why this work of Sansui-ga does not have to be an identifiable landscape representing a concrete, actual place. Here, Sesshu's intention was not to reproduce a landscape in painting;

rather, he seems to have intended to inscribe letters "Sansui"—i.e., "mountains" and "water"—by means of Suitboku painting. Sesshu's brushstrokes are fast indeed: in making of only a few strokes and the breaths of light and shade, he creates a landscape which is impossible to identify where and what, yet undeniably gives rise to "Sansui," making the "world" emerge. Again, "Sansui" is not particular "mountains" and "water" seen by someone at a concrete place. If one sees "Sansui" as letters instead, it is something that should emerge as a meaning, or as a form, at anywhere and at anytime. At this rise of "Sansui," the "meaning" of "what is" is always already given; in other words, "meaning" is—and this is precisely the definition of the word "letter"—not subordinate to the "present," but always exists prior to itself.

I should perhaps advance my argument more carefully along this line; if I am to offer my general scheme of thought without going into detailed discussions, however, by starting from this point we can have a glimpse at the most fundamental possibility of "écriture" in which *texts* and images, or things ideal and sensory, are not yet completely separated from each other. That is to say, it is not that the world, myself, and *écriture* exist in mutual segregation, but the world emerges as "letters," as "écriture," inscribed with a primitive form of reason from its very beginning. What one finds there is the world as "archi-écriture." According to that, Sansui *had been* "in existence-essence" from the beginning of the world, from remote ages well before my own coming to existence, manifesting itself in the form of "écriture" of "Sansui." The word "genesi" (*becoming of itself, emergence*) is a translation of the verb "wesen" (*manifesting essence*) which Merleau-Ponty in his last years arbitrarily borrowed from Heidegger. In other words, the "flesh of the world" has constantly been "emerging" as "écriture," and, as for myself, I merely recites those letters each time as they arise. That is to say, my body simply "writes" or "copies" the "écriture," rather than "seeing" it.

Sansui-ga, or more generally Suitboku-ga, does not aim to represent "light" in the same way as Western paintings do, but rather, it established itself by completely abandoning "light." Light is ubiquitous. What should be represented is not light, nor a gaze, but simply the existence of the

world, the dynamism of the existence of the world itself that repeatedly emerges as "letters" one after another.

Referring to "Haboku Landscape," Norman Bryson, an American art historian, tries to apply Nishitani Keiji's philosophy of "emptiness" to visual theory. He sees in this painting an inclination for "the disfiguration of the form... by throughing images onto an open field of random forces,"² and treats that as an example of the "emptying of the subject." If one sees the painting in the Western mode of conceptualization, it indeed appears that the "viewing subject" as a mere "perspective" fixed at a location is nullified, and a singular and identifiable notion of form corresponding to that is dissolved. And yet, seen from another perspective, one can equally argue that the subject is ubiquitous just as light is, and the form is given a single expression as letters. It seems to me that Bryson should have stepped out, even just a step, of the sphere of "vision," if he was to come near to the original scene of "*archi-écriture*."

The same is true for Merleau-Ponty. In his "Working Notes," he put forward a "criticism on the visual image," and advanced his thought further by arguing as follows: "What I am trying to do is to argue for *the world as the meaning of Being* that is completely different from what is represented; that is, to argue for the vertical Being, or *the primitive Being*, which cannot be exhausted by any representations but can be reached by all representations."³ While so writing, however, it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's writings could never go beyond the visual paradigm to the very end of his life, that operated around its core notions of "mirror," "light" ("the light of the world"), "colors," and "the visible/invisible."

Ink takes the black of the night upon itself. It embodies the existence of earth as opposed to the light of heaven. Letters are the "*wesen*" of existence that vertically arises from this "earth"—and, of course, we can call that "flesh." Letters show more than the "ambiguity" between the subject and the object, that between the viewer and the object viewed; and

2. Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Dia Art Foundation, 1988.

3. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 306.

beyond that, they reveal us of another level of "ambiguity," the ambiguity that lies between the logical and the sensory, and that between "*presence*" and "*essence*."

Wandering in the terrain of Merleau-Ponty's late thought, I have attempted to shed a different light in reading Sesshu's Sansui-ga, rather than reading it as an opposite mirror image to Cézanne's "Le Mont Sainte-Victoire." Of course, I am aware that we have given too much significance to a single painting, but I think that allowed us to glimpse at another kind of fundamental "ambiguity" that we found in the notion of the world as "*archi-écriture*."

It was the lifetime philosophical quest of Merleau-Ponty to pursue the question that the sensory and the logical have the same roots at the most fundamental level. Between Cézanne and Sesshu, or between two different mountains, I have made an attempt to recall this essential philosophical question once again in our own contexts.