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Final Paper

Final Paper, Art and Perception

In *Cézanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty makes two references to Cézanne's 1895 Portrait of Gustave Geoffroy. More specifically, he is interested in the work-table that 'stretches (…) into the lower part of the canvas.'[1] Though this distortion is characteristic of what makes Cézanne's work appear so odd to us, it is also this which exemplifies why Merleau-Ponty, as a phenomenologist, appreciates his work so much. Cézanne's mission is to render objects exactly as they first appear to an embodied human eye – incorrect as that fidelity may seem when frozen on a flat surface. His discussion of the artwork serves the purpose of constructing his thesis on how Cézanne's work revives the idea of art as 'man added to nature,' showing both the raw world and human structures that let the world appear at all.

Merleau-Ponty mainly focuses on how the work table in the portrait 'stretches (...) into the lower part of the canvas.'[2] He notes that this goes against a textbook law of perspective which would make the nearer edge larger. Merleau-Ponty comments on how this technique 'giv[es] up the outline' of the table by not having it behave as we would expect it to.[3] This is a first key concept Merleau-Ponty holds on Cézanne illustrated in this example. Merleau-Ponty maintains that Cézanne actively refuses to use (or 'gives up') 'outlines,' preferring to depict less defined extremities to objects, more akin to how we perceive them in real life. Merleau-Ponty describes this as Cézanne 'abandoning himself to the chaos of sensation.'[4] In other words, Cézanne deliberately discards the usual buffers, contour lines, single-point perspective, and so on, in order to capture something more 'chaotic' but also more similar to raw perception. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that such ambiguity 'would upset' objects and

[1]Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "Cézanne's Doubt".3
[2]Ibid
[3]Ibid
[4]Ibid

'suggest illusions' if not for our judgments setting 'these appearances straight.'[5] By saying this, Merleau-Ponty seems to acknowledge how the way Cézanne paints is odd to us. When we perceive, there are ambiguities and 'illusions' – which Cézanne depicts – but our brains correct for them and so we do not actually fully experience the world that way. Merleau-Ponty seems to be suggesting that Cézanne does not correct for this, and so, the illusions and ambiguity remain in his work.

The second time the table is referenced, Merleau-Ponty reinforces this claim, outlining how exactly the stretched depiction of the table resembles our actual perception of it. He argues that when our eyes 'run over' large surfaces, the 'images they successively receive' are ones from 'different points of view.'[6] By using 'run over,' Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how perception is active and kinetic, not passive. This shows Merleau-Ponty's view of Cézanne's project as one of trying to depict a lived perspective, one with movement. He points out that doing so 'warpe[s]' the 'surface,' making it look odd to us when we view it on a canvas.[7] Painting in such a way 'freeze[s] these distortions' onto the canvas,' which makes the painting seem odd to us.[8] Merleau-Ponty outlines a seemingly paradoxical element of Cézanne's work, he is trying to depict active perception, in a frozen, static medium.

The discussion of Gustave Geffroy's portrait in *Cézanne's Doubt* is not an idle aside; it is a concrete witness to the painter's larger project of **'**returning to the object' while still letting nature serve as the model.[9] For Merleau-Ponty, a photographed object is not the same object we meet in lived vision. He proves the point with Cézanne's refusal to turn a tilted cup-rim into a

[5] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "Cézanne's Doubt". 3
[6] Ibid. 4
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid. 3

neat ellipse: instead the rims appear, in his word, 'swollen and expanded,'[10] true to the way a circle half-reveals itself, half-withholds itself, when a moving eye surveys it in real time. What looks strange on the canvas is, phenomenologically, more faithful than the camera's correction.

The stretched work-table goes a step further. It demonstrates how Cézanne stages the paradox that Merleau-Ponty wants the reader to feel: the painting veers away from geometric objectivity in order to disclose a deeper, bodily truth. One might characterize this as a move towards subjectivity, since it honours the distortions our embodied senses impose on the world. Yet Cézanne refuses the opposite temptation — letting the intellect clean up every ambiguity, veering completely towards the subjective — because the canvas itself cannot supply the innate compensations for perceptual ambiguity our brains perform. The result is an image that hangs in the delicate interval between the purely objective object in itself and the entirely subjective image of the object we have in our mind, exactly the field that phenomenology sets out to describe.

Thus, this view of Cézanne's work leads Merleau-Ponty to make the claim that he 'revives the classical definition of art: man added to nature.'[11] Cézanne's artwork produces 'an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness.'[12] This comes from the aforementioned interpretation of Cézanne's work as one which resembles the 'phenomenological' endeavor inhabiting the paradoxical depiction of lived, embodied perception in a static way on a canvas. This leads Merleau-Ponty to say that Cézanne's art is paradoxical in another way. On the one hand, it reveals the 'base inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.'[13] This is similar to claims made earlier about how Cézanne's work

[10] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "Cézanne's Doubt". 3
[11] Ibid. 6
[12] Ibid
[13] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "Cézanne's Doubt".6

manages to represent perception in and of itself without the subsequent human order we impose on our perceptions. At the same time, he also argues that the ability to do this is what makes his art unique to humans as we are the only animals who can 'penetrate right to the root of things' in such a way.[14] This is how Cézanne's art gives us a glimpse not only into a more objective non-human view of the world, but also in doing so, an insight into what it means to be creatures who can look at the world in such a way (humans) and our function as seers in the world. In this way, Merleau-Ponty says that Cézanne revives the definition of art as 'man added to nature.'

While Merleau-Ponty's description of Cézanne's artwork and everyday objects do share similarities, their roles are fundamentally different. In daily life the body's silent corrections seal the gap between sensation and object; the journey from raw perception to intellectual experience is seamless. In painting, by contrast, the gap is artificially held open — fixed pigments keep the moment of hesitation eternally present — so that we are forced to inhabit the interval between raw perception and conceptual cleanup. Encountering Cézanne's artwork is akin to encountering a phenomenological analysis of something. The artwork is already 'man added to nature,' thus, Merleau-Ponty's observations of artwork are at an order higher than his observations of objects. In a way, this strengthens the link between Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty as perhaps it could be said that Cézanne's paintings themselves are akin in a way to the phenomenological observation Merleau-Ponty makes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Perhaps then too, could it be said that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological mission is one of 'man added to nature.'

In conclusion, by focusing on Cézanne's distorted work-table, Merleau-Ponty develops his larger, heavier philosophical argument about the nature of Cézanne's art. The stretch is not a mistake but rather a deeper record of a moving, embodied gaze. Doing this allows Cézanne to

[14] Ibid

vindicate the idea of art as man added to nature. It also allows Merleau-Ponty to demonstrate Cézanne's work as one which is inherently phenomenological. Thus, his analysis of Cézanne becomes a meta-analysis of a similar way of observing the very same things Merleau-Ponty analyses in the *Phenomenology of Perception.*

Works Cited.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1993. "Cézanne's Doubt" in The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting. Edited by Michael B. Smith. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, (59-75). [1945]