

The Dialogue between Philosophy and Painting:
On Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Cézanne

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How is dialogue between philosophy and painting possible? What form should it take? How is such an exchange to be undertaken?

In recent philosophical discussions a great deal of attention has been given to the question of dialogue between philosophy and poetry. These discussions stem primarily from the thought of Heidegger, especially from his interpretations of Hölderlin's poetry. The discussions have shown that such dialogue requires exceptional receptiveness and subtlety, even though philosophy and poetry share the common medium of language. On the other hand, philosophy and painting do not even share a common medium. Though philosophy can speak about painting and in recent thought succeeds in expressing the intrinsic sense belonging to paintings, painting has no voice; it is essentially mute. And yet, whereas philosophy *says* something about the sense of painting, painting can *show* something, can set concretely before our eyes, the very sense that philosophy expresses. Such dialogue is especially to be found in discourses that such philosophers as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty address to the paintings of such artists as Cézanne and Klee, whose artwork, in turn, renders visible that which the philosophical discourses express.

In his essay, "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty offers a description of the artist: "The artist is one who arrests and renders accessible . . . the spectacle in which we take part without seeing it."¹ This description is applicable to Impressionism. For example, Monet's *Wheatstacks* arrest and render accessible—that is, make visible—the spread of light through the atmosphere, whereas in ordinary vision what we see is not the spread of light but the things illuminated. In some cases the spread of light is presented in the painting in such a way that it actually obscures the objects. Sometimes Monet even paints the appearing (the spread of light) over the things that would be the focus of ordinary vision. Thus, he inverts the order that prevails in ordinary vision: whereas ordinarily one sees the things but not the appearing, the painting renders the appearing so visible that one no longer sees the things.

Yet Merleau-Ponty's description is meant to apply specifically to Cézanne. In many respects Cézanne was allied with the Impressionists. He had a friendly relation with Monet and his circle and often expressed admiration especially for Monet and Renoir. In a letter to the young painter Émile Bernard, he wrote: in the presence of nature "we must render the image of what we see."² Clearly this statement echoes Monet's insistence on rendering his impressions directly before nature. How is it, then, that Merleau-Ponty's description has special pertinence to Cézanne's work? What is it about the spectacle that Cézanne's painting arrests and renders accessible? How is his work thus set apart from that of the Impressionists?

Merleau-Ponty says that Cézanne's intent is to convey "the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the process of appearing, organizing itself before our

eyes.” This still sounds like the intent of Impressionism, in which painting would capture the very appearing of things, *except* that there is a shift toward the object as it organizes itself before our eyes. This shift is decisive. Though Cézanne does not want to abandon the appearing (the sensuous surface), he is convinced that the Impressionist emphasis on depicting the atmospheric spread of light tends to deprive the object of its proper weight, of its density. In Merleau-Ponty’s words: “Cézanne wants to represent the object, to recover it behind the atmosphere. . . . He did not want to separate the stable things that appear to our vision and their fleeting manner of appearing.”³ His aim is to recover the dense, weighty, voluminous object behind the light and atmosphere into which the Impressionists had dissolved it, to render not just the appearing but also, together with it, the object that appears. Cézanne himself refers to this task as that of “making out of Impressionism something solid and durable like the art of museums.”⁴

Cézanne always stressed the importance of the relation of painting to nature. He never tired of repeating the injunction, as in a letter written in 1904 to Imile Bernard: “But I always come back to this: painters should devote themselves entirely to the study of nature and try to produce pictures that will be an education [*un enseignement*]”⁵—that is, pictures that teach the viewer, pictures from which the viewer can learn, pictures from which something about the appearance and the appearing of nature is revealed. Writing to Charles Camoin in 1903, Cézanne passes along similar advice regarding the necessity of attentiveness to nature. He writes: “Couture used to say to his pupils: ‘Keep good company, that is, go to the Louvre. But after having seen the great masters who repose there, we must hasten to leave and by

contact with nature revive within ourselves the instincts, the artistic sensations that live in us.”⁶ The same turn from the museum to nature, is proposed directly by Cézanne in a letter written in 1905 to Imile Bernard: “The Louvre is the book in which we learn to read. . . . [But then] let us go out to study beautiful nature.”⁷

It is unlikely that Cézanne was aware that the turn from the museum to nature on which he so insists is very nearly the same as the turn portrayed by Kant at—and indeed as—a crucial juncture in the *Critique of Judgment*. For Kant the fact that a person of refined taste may choose to make this turn attests to the superiority of natural beauty over that of art; it demonstrates that only natural beauty has the capacity to arouse a direct interest. If, according to Kant, a man sufficiently refined in his judgment of art also has a “beautiful soul,” that is, also has cultivated moral feeling, then he “may be glad to leave a room in which he finds those beauties that minister to vanity and perhaps to social joys and to turn to the beautiful in nature.”⁸ For Cézanne, on the other hand, it is not a matter of the superiority of natural beauty—for art has the capacity to let shine forth what remains unapparent in nature—but rather of the necessity that the artist take his bearings, not from art, but from nature, not from the artworks to be seen in the Louvre, but from his vision of nature. Yet, despite this difference, it is significant that the valorization of one and the same turn emerges, in the one case, through philosophical critique and, in the other case, through the concrete experience or the artistic intimation of the painter. It is as if a dialogue had taken place between Kant and Cézanne.

To designate that which the artist seeks to accomplish in the turn to nature, Cézanne often uses the term *realisation*. Such “*realisation en art*”⁹ is primarily a matter of bringing nature to a certain *realisation* in the artwork. In a letter to Bernard, Cézanne writes of the obstinacy with which he pursues “the *realisation* of that part of nature that coming before our eyes, gives us the picture.”¹⁰

There is perhaps no more succinct and elegant account of *la realisation* than that found in two very brief texts on Cézanne by Heidegger. Both texts, one from 1971, the other from 1974, belong to the series “Gedachtes.” In both texts the words are configured on the page in the manner of a poem.

In the 1974 text Heidegger writes:

Was Cézanne la realisation nennt, ist
das Erscheinen des Anwesenden in der Lichtung
des Anwesens—so zwar, dass die Zwiefalt beider
verwunden ist in der Einfalt des reinen
Scheinens seiner Bilder.¹¹

These lines do not yield readily to translation. Passage into English idiom requires both expansion and syntactic modification. Here, then, is a translation:

What Cézanne calls *la realisation* is
to let things appear in the clearing
of their presence—in such a way that
the separation between (i.e., the twofold of)

these appearances and their appearing
 is resolved in the simplicity (i.e., into the onefold)
 of the pure shining of his pictures.

A closely related passage is found in the 1971 text:

Im Spätwerk des Malers ist die Zwiefalt
 von Anwesendem und Anwesenheit einfältig
 geworden, "realisiert" und verwunden zugleich,
 verwandelt in eine geheimnisvolle Identität.¹²

Again, a transformative translation:

In the painter's late work the separation between
 (i.e., the twofoldness of) things present
 and their presence became uniformity
 (i.e., onefold); it was at once, both
 "realized" and gotten beyond,
 transformed into a mysterious identity.

La realisation to which Cézanne's painting is directed consists, then, in composing the picture in such a way that in it, in its distinctive shining, things as they appear can be seen in their appearing. In the work the painter aims to catch things in their very appearing, that is, to make visible the coming to presence that in ordinary vision goes unseen in favor of the things themselves that come to be present. Yet

Heidegger's formulations make it clear that with Cézanne it is not only a matter of rendering visible the appearing (as in Impressionism); rather, Cézanne's painting aims at both rendering the appearing *and* retaining or recovering the appearance (that is, the appearing thing). Thus, his painting undertakes to set forth, in the painting, the dyad of appearing and appearance. And yet, what is most decisive—and what these passages emphasize—is the transition in which this twofold, having been in this respect “realized,” is surpassed, that is, is resolved into a onefold, transformed—as Heidegger says—into a mysterious identity. Such an identity would be mysterious because its advent is not simply a return to the ordinary state in which the appearing remains concealed. Rather, it is an identity in which the appearing remains openly in play as such, yet without separation from the things that appear. Thus, Cézanne does not paint the appearing alongside or upon the things that appear (as did Monet); rather, he presents it precisely in and through the rendering of these things. In his painting the appearing is made visible in and through the things that appear.

In the 1974 text on Cézanne, Heidegger adds to the passage on *realisation* in the painter's work another in which he identifies its relation to thinking:

Für das Denken ist dies die Frage nach der
Überwindung der ontologischen Differenz zwischen
Sein und Seiendem.¹³

Straightforwardly translated:

For thinking this is the question of the

overcoming of the ontological difference between
Being and beings.

Here Heidegger focuses on the relation between *realization* in Cézanne's painting and the task of thinking. Most significantly, he points out that what Cézanne carries out in the medium of painting is the same as that which is to be carried out in the thinking aimed at overcoming the ontological difference. In other words, the truth that Cézanne paints is the same truth that Heidegger undertakes to think. Just as Cézanne's painting presents the appearing together with the things that appear, so Heidegger's thinking undertakes to bring Being and beings together, thereby overcoming the ontological difference. In both cases the result is a mysterious identity. Thus, there is here a dialogue between philosopher and painter: each discloses the same truth, but each in his own medium.

How in his paintings does Cézanne bring appearances to shine forth in their appearing? What guise does *realisation* assume in his paintings?

In this regard none of his works are more revealing than his paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Situated some ten kilometers east of Aix-en-Provence, Mont Sainte-Victoire rises above the surrounding countryside to a height of more than a thousand meters. Its white limestone peak was a familiar sight to Cézanne from his youth. He often made excursions there and took the mountain as the subject of painting.

Again and again, almost obsessively, Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire. In these paintings he reveals the appearing of the surrounding landscape as bounded by the mountain. He makes visible the lines and forces of attraction by which the

mountain draws the surrounding landscape into its upward draft. In other words, the paintings make manifest the gathering of the landscape to the mountain; thereby they let the appearing become visible. They let the appearing appear. And yet, the appearing is not presented (as in Monet) by being superimposed on that which appears but rather precisely *as* the appearing *of* the landscape as bounded by the mountain. In this way Cézanne presents—in Heidegger’s terms—the mysterious identity of appearance and appearing.

Let us consider five of Cézanne’s paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. We will proceed from the earlier to the later so as to see the intensification, the development, that his work undergoes.

The first of these works was painted in the mid-1880s. It was painted from a hilltop overlooking the Arc Valley, which extends to Mont Sainte-Victoire. The painting lays out the broad expanse of the valley. The railway viaduct serves to display the breadth of the valley, while the distance between the house in the foreground and the mountain serves to display the depth of the valley.

One of the most striking features of the painting is that it avoids the use of perspective. None of the diagonals—the paths, the roof line of the house in the foreground, etc.—converge toward an indefinitely distant point. Rather, most diverge toward the sides of the picture. Consequently, as one looks across the valley, one’s vision does not simply pass over it and converge on the mountain. The valley is depicted in such a way that it does not merely foreground the mountain; the depiction is such that vision is disoriented, and its passage across the valley is deferred. On the

other hand, the valley is not completely disjoined from the mountain. Rather, the composition of the picture is such that various relatively inconspicuous imagings, little more than faint tracings, of the mountain are spread around the rest of the picture. For instance, the sinuous form of the road resembles the silhouette of the mountain, and the slope of the most tilted of the trees on the left side of the picture approximates that of the mountain. In addition, the tones on the upper trunk of the tree in the center of the picture resonate with the rose color of the mountain peak. The tree's dominant position in the picture, dividing the entire field in half and extending even slightly beyond the upper edge of the picture, makes it a counterweight to the mountain. In this way it contributes to the tension by which vision is held back from rushing headlong toward the mountain. Yet its foliage gives it the appearance of gesturing toward the mountain.

Thus, the painting as a whole is composed in such a way that, on the one hand, vision is held back, enticed to linger with the landscape rather than passing directly across it to the mountain peak; while, on the other hand, the subtle imagings or tracings of the mountain on the landscape attracts vision back toward the mountain, yet in a different way, in a way that does not simply abandon the landscape. Rather, the viewer is prompted to draw these traces toward the mountain, to sustain a certain hovering between the appearance of the mountain itself and the traces of it spread around the landscape. The picture is so composed that vision lingers on the landscape, yet in such a way that, as it then moves toward the mountain, it bears with it the traces of the mountain that are spread across the landscape. The painting leads the viewer to enact

the gathering of the landscape to the mountain, and in this way it makes this gathering manifest. By this means it makes visible the very appearing of the landscape as bounded by the mountain; and it makes the appearing visible, not apart from the appearance, but precisely by its way of presenting the landscape and the mountain.

In the second painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire, horizontals predominate, especially near the base of the mountain and in the form of the tree branches extending across the top of the picture; the three branches coming from the right appear as if unattached to the trunk, its verticality thus left unseen. Along with the diverging diagonals on the valley floor in the foreground, the horizontals serve to impede—as in the first work—direct passage along perspectively correct lines to the mountain in the distance. Also, as in the first work, though more prominently, there are features of the landscape that form traces of the mountain on the landscape and that prompt the viewer to enact the gathering of the landscape to the mountain. In this work the traces of the mountain that are found on the landscape are both more numerous and more conspicuous. The three branches on the right trace the contour of the mountain. The lowest of the branches follows quite precisely the slope of that part of the mountain above which, in the picture, it extends. The two branches above it display much the same contour, but inverted. Also on the right side of the picture, appearing just below the three branches, is the viaduct seen also in the first work. But now it is seen from such an angle that it appears to slope at an angle approximating that of the segment of the mountain above it; in fact, its slope is exactly the same as that of a band across the mountain above it. The forked branch extending from the tree on the left, while not

tracing the slope of the mountain, swerves sharply toward it as if drawn by its attractive force. Furthermore, it is as if even the trunk of the tree contributes to this motion, tilting to the side at precisely the point where, in the picture, it reaches the horizon formed by the lower part of the mountain; yet, the tree is drawn back so far into the foreground that both the top and the bottom of its trunk lie outside the picture, and thus as the most extreme frontal limit it is counterposed to the mountain. Thus, the depiction of the tree shows that it both draws vision back from the mountain, hindering any ready passage, and gestures toward the distant peak, letting its attractive force become visible.

There are other traces, too, for instance, the color and pitched shape of the roof on the shelter next to the tree, which allude to the color and shape of the mountain. As one's vision inhabits the landscape and engages these traces, it is drawn, along with them, toward the mountain. It enacts the gathering of the landscape to the mountain. It is in this incipient motion that the painting makes visible the appearing of the mountain-bounded landscape and does so precisely in and through its depiction of this landscape. It is in this way that such paintings bring to light the mysterious identity of appearing and appearance.

Though the third work to be considered comes only shortly after the first two, the progress that Cézanne has made is quite remarkable. The work is dated 1888–90. The viewpoint is no longer from the hilltop overlooking the valley but now is from the valley, from a location much closer to Mont Sainte-Victoire. From this location the viewer looks up at the mountain, and its vertical thrust gains much greater prominence.

The color on its upper slopes is spread in such a way that the mountain appears almost to blend with the clouds that float just above it. Its upward gathering of the landscape, which it now appears to bound much more definitively, is accordingly more powerfully manifest, as is, therefore, the appearing of the landscape. The greater proximity of the viewpoint to the mountain, the shrinking of the periphery of the gathering, also serves to accentuate these features.

As in the previous works, there are horizontal and diagonal forms that impede or divert the usual perspectival tendency, despite the prominence and centrality that the figure of the mountain has now assumed in the picture. There are also, on the other hand, traces that bind the landscape to the mountain. The color traces are conspicuous, specifically, the pink of the mountain duplicated on the landscape and the green of the vegetation picked up on the lower slope of the mountain. But what binds the landscape much more substantially to the mountain are the block-like forms that dominate the landscape. By the use of these forms, Cézanne confers on the objects a certain voluminosity and thus lets them appear *as objects*—and not just as specters mirroring the spread of light. Furthermore, the block-like form renders the objects in such a way that they appear as if constructed out of blocks of stone like that of the mountain. They appear as if in their very composition they were akin to the mountain.

Nearly a decade later, Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire from the site of the Bibémus Quarry located near the foot of the mountain. This ancient quarry of red sandstone had been abandoned by 1890, and thus it provided a place where Cézanne could paint uninterrupted, maintaining the solitude that he cherished.

In the painting in which the quarry figures most prominently, the horizontal elements are gone, though other means have now come into play to restrain direct passage of vision to the mountain peak. The broad, pastoral landscape is thoroughly displaced by an upsurge of forms dominated by two voluminous masses of stone. In these masses the earth itself appears, as it does in the mountain, which now reaches almost to the upper edge of the picture. The upward draft of the stone masses, accentuated by the verticality of the trees in the foreground, is taken up into the ascendancy of the mountain; the trace of the mountain is most conspicuous in the tree near the middle that is directly below the peak of the mountain, its triangular shape and almost vertical brushstrokes casting it as a vegetative image of the mountain peak.

Although the bits of vegetation visible beyond the rock masses show that a certain expanse separates them from the actual foot of the mountain, this intervening landscape is otherwise obscured; as a result it appears as though it is from these masses, which are of the same element as the mountain, that the mountain itself towers into the sky, as if born from the earth itself. Even the large tree in the upper right appears to extend upward into the same space as the mountain, as if drawn by it; only the wavy line of its thin trunk (or a branch perhaps) hints that it is planted on the landscape. All things in the surroundings and indeed the very earth itself are gathered up into the ascendancy of the mountain.

The final work to be considered was painted from the studio that Cézanne built on the hillside of Les Lauves just north of Aix. From the studio and its broad terrace, the artist had an excellent view of Mont Sainte-Victoire, though it was quite a different view

from those in the earlier paintings; from this standpoint the mountain and especially its peak had quite a different look. This work, painted in 1904–06, advances so far toward opening an almost uncanny vision of nature that even to speak, in Cézanne's terms, of progress is to fall far short of reaching what this work accomplishes.

Here the landscape consists almost entirely of block-like forms; except where they suggest the red roofs of houses, these blocks of color are largely not recognizable as determinate objects. As in previous works, these forms give expanse to the land and confer density, weight, and voluminosity on the things on the land; they bind both land and things to the mountain. But in this work the use of color is even freer, the same colors being spread across the entire canvas, binding together not only landscape and mountain but also both with the sky. On the mountain there are colors that belong to the landscape, colors that would not be shown by the white limestone of the mountain peak, not only green but even a patch of red imaging the red roofs of the houses. Even beyond the mountain, even in the sky above it, there is green, binding even sky to the landscape.

To the solidity of the mountain soaring into the heaven, to self-closed earth and the shining of the sky, the landscape is gathered. The very perimeter of the gathering is marked by the forms that in the extreme foreground also image in color the mountain. It is in and through this gathering that the landscape appears, and it is by displaying this gathering that the painting lets this appearing become manifest. The distinctive forms and, above all, the freely ranging colors produce this manifestation of appearing; yet, it is accomplished without in the least detaching the appearing from the appearance.

A year before his death, Cézanne wrote in a letter to Imile Bernard: “I owe you the truth in painting, and I will tell it to you.”¹⁴ This statement, his most celebrated and most discussed, harbors multiple senses and interplays between these senses. But among these senses, these interpretations, there is one that is prompted by the paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. According to this interpretation, the truth that Cézanne owes—and confesses that he owes—is a debt incurred from the moment he became a painter; it is the truth that, as a painter, he is bound to present, to tell in painting, in the medium of painting. It is the truth, the manifestness, of appearing, of appearing in its mysterious identity with the things that appear. In the paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire, it is the manifestness, in and through the landscape, of the gathering of the landscape to the ascendancy of the mountain.

Notes

- ¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1966), 31.
- ² Paul Cézanne, *Correspondance*, ed. John Rewald (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1937), 277.
- ³ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, 23.
- ⁴ John Rewald, *Cézanne: A Biography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 159.
- ⁵ Cézanne, *Correspondance*, 262.
- ⁶ Ibid., 255. The previous year Cézanne had written to Camoin that in Paris he should make some studies of the masters of the Louvre, “but as you would do from nature.” Cézanne added: “But you do well above all to study from nature” (ibid., 246).
- ⁷ Ibid., 275. The previous year Cézanne had written to Bernard: “The Louvre is a good book to consult, but it should be only an intermediary. The real and prodigious study to be undertaken is the manifold picture of nature” (ibid., 261).
- ⁸ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 300.
- ⁹ Cézanne, *Correspondance*, 257.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 276.
- ¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Cézanne*. This “Spätere Fassung 1974” was distributed as die Jahrgabe 1991 to members of the Martin-Heidegger-Gesellschaft.
- ¹² Martin Heidegger, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, vol. 13 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 223.
- ¹³ Heidegger, *Cézanne*.
- ¹⁴ “Je vous dois la verité en peinture et je vous la dirai” (Cézanne, *Correspondance* 277).