



Merleau-Ponty about *le doute de Cézanne*

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Abstract: Merleau-Ponty's essay about Cézanne's doubt from 1945 is still debated. Merleau-Ponty tries to explain the peculiarities of Cézanne's pictorial language, for instance his abandonment of the geometrical perspective, as the expression of, what he calls, the "primordial perception", which is free from the distortions of metaphysical dualism and modern sciences. There are two main problems here. First, *primordially* remains an obscure notion, which may be explained by Cézanne's work, rather than reversely. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty tends to forget that Cézanne's perception is first of all a painter's perception, inspired by the idea of what a painting should be and by a conception of the physical performances by which it comes into being. Cézanne tries to liberate painting from the Albertinian idea that a work is like a window, opening a view on a section of reality. Contrary to this, Cézanne stresses the autonomy of the work, its presence *as painted* – without giving up its contact to the reality depicted.

I. INTRODUCTION

Merleau-Ponty's short essay 'Le doute de Cézanne' was published in 1945, only months before *La phénoménologie de la perception*. In *La phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty refers to Cézanne, but neither to his earlier essay nor to its dominant notion of 'primordially'.¹ Merleau-Ponty starts the essay by remarking on Cézanne's difficult character. Yet he claims that the key to Cézanne's project as a painter and his doubts about it, lies not in the complex nature of his tormented personality, but in a certain world-view, which Merleau-Ponty calls *the primordial* view of the world and, also, the primordial perception. It is this view which, Merleau-Ponty argues, is

rendered in the work of Cézanne, or expressed or, as Merleau-Ponty sometimes also says ‘created’. ‘Rendering’, ‘expressing’, ‘creating’, however, are very different things, which differences Merleau-Ponty is inclined to neglect.

For Merleau-Ponty, the peculiar properties of Cézanne’s work can be explained by the notion of primordality. ‘Primordial means the same as: ‘original’, ‘initial’, ‘authentic’ and ‘natural’. It points to an experience, which is not distorted by a dualist metaphysics or by the theoretical preconceptions of the modern sciences. A primordial experience bears some resemblance to the conception of *the innocent eye*.

‘Primordial’ is not really a concept though, but rather a loose collection of elements, reaching from Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between the geometrical perspective and what he calls the *natural* one, *la perspective vécue*; to the idea of *un monde inhumain*, a world prior to the presence or existence of human beings; to the experience of a world which has not yet become awake; to a frozen reality, not touched by the breath of life. It is also a world originating, a world coming into being. A world ‘seen for the first time’ confronts the painter with the desperate task to find the first and most authentic perception to match it, the perception that is really faithful to what there is. In contrast with its impersonal character, the primordial experience is nevertheless also an experience of utmost richness, prior to the distinction between the different modalities of sense experience, seeing, hearing, touching etc.²

At the beginning of ‘Le doute de Cézanne’, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that the notion of the primordial experience is meant to explain Cézanne’s work and its peculiar character – as well as the artist’s moments of desperation – but later on the reader gets the impression that, quite the other way round, it is Cézanne’s work which gives content to the rather vague notion of primordality, which is difficult to locate convincingly in the system of our experiences.

II. THE GEOMETRICAL PERSPECTIVE

Let us first explore Merleau-Ponty’s claim that Cézanne tried to go back to the *primordial perception*, i.e. to the very roots of human experience. Merleau-Ponty starts from one of the most obvious traits of Cézanne’s mature works: his apparent violation of the principles of the ‘geometrical’ perspective (which was invented, or discovered, in Renaissance Italy). Merleau-Ponty sees deviations from this tradition in Cézanne’s rendering of objects, of persons in space, and of deformations connected to these – not as something odd or eccentric, and conflicting with what is natural. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty claims that the geometrical perspective is unnatural and artificial, and that the primordial view, the ‘odd’, the ‘deformation’ view, is the only authentic and natural one.

In his critical discussion of the geometrical perspective, Merleau-Ponty points first to the table and tablecloth in the *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy*

(c. 1895), where the table, seen from above, seems to incline towards the beholder; and then to Cézanne's renderings of plates, of the openings of vases and bowls in his still lifes. Where we would expect to see perfect ellipses, Cézanne paints lengthy forms, which allude to an ellipse without being one. Merleau-Ponty tries to show that these 'deviations' are in perfect accordance with our immediate experience, not yet censured by theoretical presuppositions.

There seems to be some truth in this. If we try to focus on a plate before us, for instance, whilst trying to draw it, we may have some difficulty to see a definite contour. Depending on the movements of our eyes, the form seems unstable and shifting. It is this experience that Merleau-Ponty tries to render. To give another example, from my own experience, close to the one of the Geffroy portrait: if I focus my view on my white writing table, on objects dispersed on its surface, things sticking out over the table margin, I see the line of the margin not only as interrupted, but also as not being really straight, as in some way undulating. Also, the surface with the objects doesn't seem to be a plain, horizontally positioned surface, but seems to be inclined towards me, the viewer. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty's remarks seem plausible. The geometrical perspective doesn't truthfully render these experiences.

III. PERCEPTION AND PAINTING

So it seems that the deformation experiences that Merleau-Ponty has in mind occur when we *focus* on an object, *inspecting it closely* – like when we draw or paint an object before us. Such attentive inspection may start with the left eye, handing over to the right. In some circumstances, it may be difficult to unite both views, the geometrical and the attentive, in one coherent vision and it seems that some of Cézanne's deformations, the lengthy plates for instance, are due to such experiences.³ But if, for instance, we watch someone dry a plate following the margins of the object with his dishtowel, we see him circumscribing a perfect ellipse or a circle (depending on the point of view), without the odd lengthening of the form of the object that Cézanne introduces in his work. So our visual experiences of things depend mainly on the character of the situation and on the viewer's attention. It is pointless to look, as Merleau-Ponty seems to be doing, for a single *natural way* of seeing things or of rendering them. Depending on the context and the viewer's attention, there are many different natural kinds of perceiving objects. This concerns the geometrical perspective, too, which arguably is in some respect rather unnatural – it is the vision of one unmoving eye. In a complex spatial situation, we are sometimes inclined to organise our field of vision in terms similar to the principles of the geometrical perspective, drawing imaginary lines, in order to determine the proportions of the objects before us in relation to each other, and to find hold in complex and moving surroundings.



Figure 1: Paul Cézanne, *The boy in the red waistcoat* (Zürich, Sammlung Bührle)

Merleau-Ponty maintains that all of Cézanne's deformations, especially those in his still-lives, will appear completely natural after a certain amount of time. This certainly is not the case. In his still lives, Cézanne uses different types of representation. Some contain elements that obey the principles of geometrical perspective whereas others, follow the so called primordial perception. All this gives the impression, that Cézanne's different perspectives on the object in his paintings do not fit together, which undermines the naturalness of Cézanne's conception of space and objects, Merleau-Ponty sup-

poses. Moreover, the outlines of objects in Cézanne's still-lives usually don't seem to shift as in the case of one's closely scrutinising an object. Instead, they look rather immobilised, which makes them appear rather unnatural, as Merleau-Ponty himself admits. Lastly: imagine a mural, painted in the idiom of Cézanne, meant as a *trompe l'œil*. Would it deceive the viewer? Probably not. Of course, Cézanne never intended such a thing, as Merleau-Ponty underscores. But what could 'naturalness' mean here? That over some time it should convince everybody as looking natural? Cézanne arguably didn't want to give a representation of reality, close to a 'natural and immediate' perception, but had first of all a new conception in mind of what a *painting* should be. At least, that is my thesis.

IV. PRIMORDIAL EXPERIENCE AND THE SENSES

Merleau-Ponty discusses a further aspect of the 'primordial experience':

'In the primordial perception the distinctions between seeing and touching are unknown. It is the science of the human body which teaches us subsequently to distinguish between our senses. The thing, as it is immediately [normally] experienced, cannot be built up, starting from the givens of the senses, but offers itself right away, as the centre from which they are radiating. If the painter is to express the world, it is necessary that the arrangement of colours contains this indivisible whole: otherwise his painting would be an allusion to the things and wouldn't give them in their imperious unity, their presence, in their unsurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of being real.'⁴

Following Merleau-Ponty's suggestions, we can say that it is one and the same object, a tea cup for instance, which looks fragile, feels cool, is white, makes a certain sound when touched with a spoon and so on. I cannot see the sound of course, only hear it, but I can see that this is the kind of object which when it is touched in a certain way will produce a certain sound. I can see that the water of the river is burbling, bubbling *noisily*, without hearing it due to a noise barrier. Apparently Merleau-Ponty has such cases in mind when he writes that in the realm of the primordial perception the distinction between seeing, hearing, touching is unknown. I agree that to some extent in some situations the eye plays the role of the ear. Yet this doesn't mean, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, that in the 'primordial experience' we don't *distinguish* between our different sense organs and sense experiences. On the contrary, we see the summer heat outside through the window of an acclimatised room, or through the door of a cool church interior, but we don't actually *feel* it. In such cases we are perfectly aware of the different kinds of sense experience and of our different senses involved. Furthermore, visual perceptions, auditory or tactile ones may contradict each other. A fabric may look soft, without subsequently feeling soft, which may come as a surprise.

The distinction between different kinds of sense experiences – in this case of touch and vision – is in play from the very beginning. It is not a consequence of an objectifying, ‘scientific’ point of view.

Merleau-Ponty claims emphatically that Cézanne wanted to give a picture of things in all their fullness, plenitude and richness of qualities. But Cézanne’s work doesn’t correspond with this idea, on the contrary. In his paintings, Cézanne usually eliminates most of the surface qualities such as velvet, silken, woolen, being like granite, made from crystal etc., which it was the glory of painters as Terborch, Van Dyck, Chardin and many others to render convincingly and ‘correctly’. Cézanne’s apples, unlike the apples or peaches of Chardin, are not meant to look edible – neither do they look inedible. They are not located in the realm of the edible or non edible, in the same way as Cézanne’s mountains are not located in a world where mountains get climbed and roads are walked on. Tactile material qualities are not always absent in Cézanne’s work. A jug of stoneware for instance, in a Cézanne still-life, looks and feels different from a porcelain plate. There are also various sorts of cloths visible in his still lives, all of them usually of a rather heavy sort. But, in all, the range of tactile and visual qualities is strongly limited. They seem not to hold his interest. Rocks in a Cézanne landscape differ from trees, of course. The roughness of rocks is present to some extent, but, as Novotny pointed out, very often these rocks look slightly weightless. This is due to the fact that Cézanne does not simply imitate reality, but intends to rebuild it in the medium of colour.⁵

V. MODULATION

Things are not normally rendered by Cézanne in the classical way of modelling, of representing material objects by means of the gradations of light and shadow, as was the practice of academic art education, where the apprentice had to learn to draw from sculptures and plaster copies of classical works. Cézanne tries to liberate painting from the example of sculpture and the primacy of drawing. In his paintings of a plaster putto in his studio, he avoids the soft transitions of the classical method. *Modelling* has to be replaced by what Cézanne calls *modulation*. The impression of corporeal presence or of the depth of a landscape, is to be realised mainly by means of the modulation of colours. Cézanne used to paint strings of colour, longer or shorter sequences of hatchings, which get ordered in parallels, very often one above the other - in the late works in a much more spontaneous, or explosive way. The different colours, constituting these bands, don’t get mixed. Cézanne carefully avoids the blending of tones and transitions between them. In short, he avoids the technique of modelling. All this results in an unique colouristic freshness. A freshness which is also due to the fact that Cézanne often (not always) dismisses light reflections on his objects, weakening any possible illusionary

effects. Merleau-Ponty sees this suppression of light reflexes as something ‘primordial’ and natural. How implausible, as though seeing light reflections is not just a very natural thing.

Cézanne’s technique of hatchings is of great importance. On the one hand, hatching provides structure to rather amorphous objects, such as the foliage of trees and bushes. It allows for structural unification and clarification without falling into the schematic, because the basic elements are relatively small and, at the same time, they remain distinct. This permits a great degree of variety, as far as colours and the direction and ordering of whole strings of brushstrokes is concerned. Cézanne’s way of working remains discernible. Often, one can notice where the brush has been applied to the canvas, as a row of stitches.

Cézanne’s procedure in painting is very different from the classic conception of painting, as it was described by Hegel. According to Hegel, painting essentially gives expression to the (inner) life of the human body and soul. The human soul’s main features become especially visible in the representation of eyes, lips, human flesh and skin, animated by the breath of life. In ‘this shining through from the inside’ (*dies Durchscheinen von innen*), Hegel sees the very essence of the art of painting. Human skin is not to be rendered as the mere surface of a material object, but as enlivened from within. It was, as Hegel underscores, the invention of oil colours with their different degrees of density and transparency, which made possible this superimposing of translucent layers, suggesting a miraculous impression of livelihood.⁶

Cézanne breaks with this tradition. In depicting an object, the rhythm and the movement of the brush’s touching the canvas becomes visible (which according to Hegel should be concealed), making it a part of the painting’s *content*. The objects are not *imitated* by the painter, but reconstructed on the canvas by him. They originate before the eyes of the beholder. Discrete colour patches, growing together, make the object appear.⁷

Merleau-Ponty emphasises this genetic aspect, which is so central to Cézanne.⁸ Cézanne doesn’t want to copy a given reality, but wants to show it as something which is in the making in different degrees, in the painting; which in some way is forming itself. His works give the impression of objects on the brink of appearing – which seems an apt description.⁹ Less plausible however, is Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the way in which Cézanne paints, the way in which, in his works, reality takes shape, is similar to processes by which our consciousness of the world gets constituted.¹⁰ To refer to the realm of the primordial in this context does not seem helpful here, because neither the reader nor Merleau-Ponty himself has a clear idea of what primordial processes may be, or if they exist at all.

Merleau-Ponty, who tries to describe the world of Cézanne as the expression of a completely original experience, tends to forget that Cézanne’s project is first of all a painter’s project. In his work, Cézanne tries to get to the roots – not of our experience of the world, as it is *common to all human beings* –

but of what a *painting* is, or should be, in the end. Later on in ‘Le doute de Cézanne’, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the gestures of the painter (les gestes du peintre), whose traces are visible on the canvas. Yet, this doesn’t lead him to conclude that he better abandon the idea that the painter mainly reenacts a kind of primordial perception. The perception in play here is from the very beginning a painter’s perception. A painter, a draughtsman or draughtswoman, looks at the world in a particular way: they see things, persons etc. already in terms of possible actions on their own behalf, of movements of their hands, of pencils, and of brushes. They see things in terms of colours and lines, of a rhythmic organisation and the goal aimed at, and, last but not least, in terms of the media used. Their eye is certainly not the innocent, primordial eye that Merleau-Ponty has in mind.

VI. THE FLAT CANVAS

Merleau-Ponty appears to suggest that Cézanne’s unorthodox use of perspective must be viewed as a truthful *rendering* of our authentic visual experience. In other places, however, he emphasises that Cézanne’s work is creation in process (*création*), that is, something other than the primordial perception from which he starts. The partial suspension of the geometrical perspective by Cézanne has, rather, an artistic or aesthetic meaning. It is not limited to a rendering of a so-called ‘original experience.’ Its threefold aim is to strengthen the idea of the flatness of the canvas; to weaken the appearance of spatial depth; and to emphasise the autonomy of the painting. It is Cézanne’s pictorial strategy to undermine the classical idea of the picture as a window opening the view onto the world. Nor does he see a painting as a substitute for something else. A painting wants to be taken seriously in its own right, as something which has its own weight and meaning, its own personality. I think that Cézanne primarily had this in mind when he said to Émile Bernard: ‘the painting, as it should be, is not a work of art anymore, something artificial, a ‘tableau’, but has become a piece of nature (*un morceau de nature*).’¹¹

Most of the features ascribed to the so called ‘primordial vision’ of the world can be explained away without difficulty in terms of Cézanne’s artistic project: to give a maximum of autonomy and authority to the painting – and to the canvas – while maintaining its contact to reality. Cézanne’s intention, to show ‘reality in the making’ (*un ordre naissant*), is answering to this double demand.¹² The painting is the stage where things seem to get born *before the eyes* of the beholder, where they assume shape and emerge from colour and brushwork (*émergent de la couleur*).

This idea of the autonomy of painting plays an important role in Cézanne’s treatment of contours, as well. Merleau-Ponty points to the fact that Cézanne very often avoids clear-cut contours, as black lines do not exist in our natural perception. Cézanne sometimes interrupts a line’s continuity. Often, the main outline of a tree or of the Mont Ste. Victoire is echoed by accompanying

forms, by which the objects seem embedded in the air while at the same time, becoming integrated in the structure of the painting as a whole. There is thus no reason to interpret this doubling of contours as an expression of a 'primordial vision', as Merleau-Ponty does. Cézanne's treatment of outlines has *artistic* reasons. Moreover, not all outlines that we see in nature – for instance the outlines of mountains on a beautiful summer day – have the wavering, unstable quality of the contours of plates or bowls seen from the side, that we discussed above. Of course, we don't see black lines in nature, indicating the form of the objects, but looking around us, we very often *draw lines*, imaginary ones, when our eyes are *following* an object or person's outline, or when we enter the perspective of a street. Our natural experience of things is not as deprived of lines and 'lining' as Merleau-Ponty thinks.



Figure 2: Paul Cézanne, *Still life (Oslo)*.

Other than Merleau-Ponty suggests, however, Cézanne does not always avoid clearly drawn contours, as we can see in the beautiful still life in Oslo (fig. 2).¹³ We see two green apples to the left which, in some way, seem flat, as if they were cut out. Other ones on a white plate are modeled rather delicately. Yet another apple in front of the lengthy white can decorated with flowers – seeming somehow beneath it – is surrounded by a thick shadowy line which doesn't look like a real shadow but seems to lift the apple from the table, or even from the canvas. The can is presented in different perspectives,

slightly from above and also more in profile – seemingly suspended in the air. The big black stroke against the bluish green wall depicts the baseboard. The constellation of wall, floor and table appear seen from above, which makes the impression of a space that is out of order. The lower part of the table with the drawer, other than the table's top, is seen from the front. The painting looks unfinished here: as if in some way light is breaking through. Substantiality and weightlessness are united agreeably in this work. It confronts us, as do other works of Cézanne, with a combination of different painterly idioms and different levels of being finished.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's disparate combination of perspectives gives us as *in our natural vision* the impression of an *ordre naissant*. Probably, Merleau-Ponty has the case in mind where in an initially confusing situation, an idea of the order of the whole begins to occur. But this interpretation does not correspond with Cézanne's still lifes which confront us with an irreconcilable plurality of rather clearly defined views refusing to be integrated in one encompassing vision. So we better abandon the vague notions of naturalness and primordality and return to the idea that Cézanne's way of working mainly has an *aesthetic* meaning. He apparently felt unsatisfied by the *unifying* and *standardising* character of the geometrical perspective, which allows one to pass rather rapidly through the painting. In contrast with this, the use of different perspectives and different pictorial idioms emphasises the individuality of the objects, giving importance to each of them, underscoring the *'weight' of the painting itself*. Sometimes the objects even look as though they are liberated from the censorship of the geometrical perspective. Because of the impossibility to grasp the whole in one glance, the process of perceiving is *slowed down* and *enriched*, at the same time. The viewer has to go into the painting and follow its inner life. Cézanne's still lifes stage a play – of balance and imbalance, of stability and instability – which cannot be brought to a definite conclusion.¹⁴ Other than the portraits, these still lifes do not have a strongly hermetic character: on the contrary, the bowls full of fruit have an inviting quality, offering their content generously to the viewer.

As I indicated already, Cézanne's treatment of contours is mainly a means to create organic unity and density of structure in the painting and not, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, a reenactment of some sort of absolutely original perception. Cézanne's work displays a non-schematic richness and balance. Merleau-Ponty points to the fact that Cézanne worked on different parts of the canvas at the same time, from the right to the left and from above to below and back. But that this way of painting echoes the primordial process of world constitution, either a collective or an individual one, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is highly implausible. Very often, especially in the watercolours, Cézanne didn't start with the outline of objects, but with the zone of shadows between them, and with only fragmentary indications of contours. From the very beginning we see a tendency to integrate the objects in the texture of the

whole. He lets the whole grow together, starting from rather discreet colour touches; to produce structures free from compositional conventions, forming progressively a kind of lively equilibrium. The colour touches in Cézanne's works usually have no mimetic qualities, they don't resemble the objects they represent (see fig. 3) – in contrast with the flaming lines or curls of Van Gogh's cypresses and cornfields, or the curves of waves in Monet's sea paintings and so on. The absence of resemblance is not a deficiency but is unavoidable, for the artist wants to show the process how by means of brush and paint the image of the objects comes into being.

Because Cézanne doesn't want to give us the image of a readymade world, he uses basic elements which show a certain uniformity, from which the whole is *arising*. Especially in the late works we see roughly rectangular, square or rhomboid colour touches which are just imprints of the brush on the canvas and do not get extended into lines. Although the daubs of paint resemble one another, they maintain their spontaneous character, being ordered rhythmically, but never schematically. In the late Mont Sainte-Victoire landscapes, the spontaneity even assumes an explosive and highly dramatic quality. In the watercolours of this mountain, these touches look like flames, transparent and moving. They seem the results of a process of distillation or dematerialisation, of changing material objects into a kind of fire.

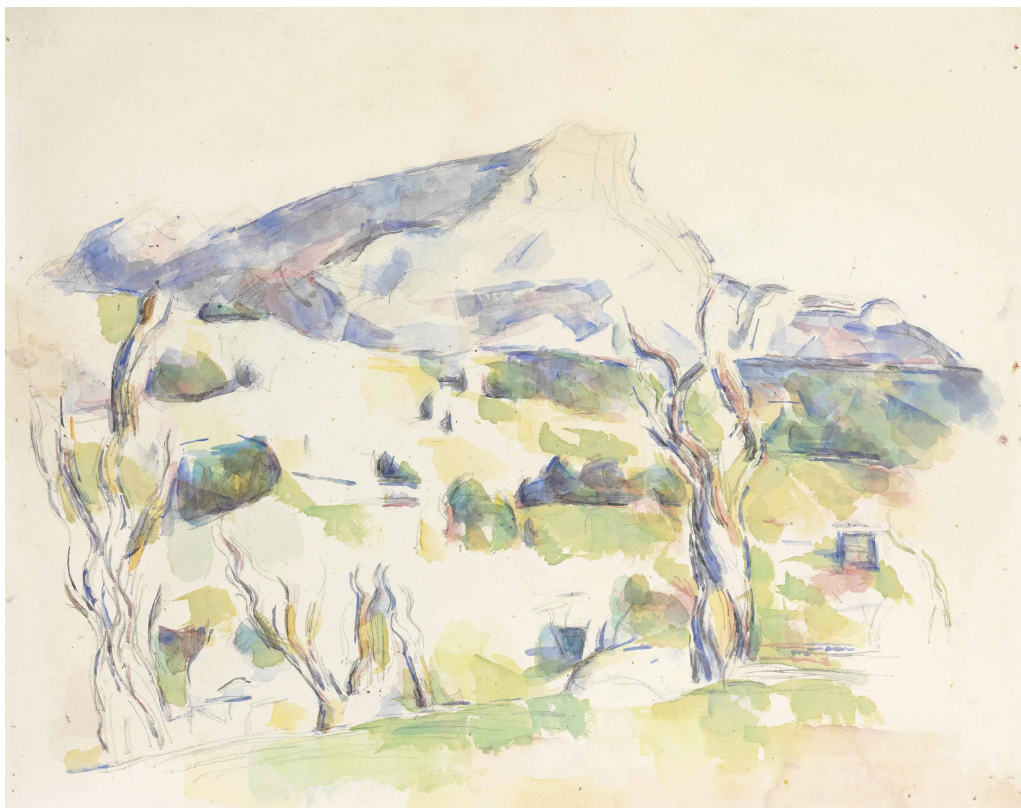


Figure 3: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, watercolour.

The absence of moods, changes of light, and of clouds etcetera, which creates the assumed impersonal, neutral character of Cézanne's landscapes (Novotny), must be seen against the background of this project. A painter who wants to deploy the movement by which the appearance of things gets formed, their ascension from colour touches, must eliminate all elements that might obscure this *fundamental process*. Atmospheric alterations, the change of light and mood due to the different hours of the day or to different seasons, where they represented in the painting, would distract the viewer from the basic movement of how the image of reality is constituted on the canvas.¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty, Novotny and other authors put great stress on the 'dehumanised' character of Cézanne's art. According to them, this quality becomes particularly visible in Cézanne's portraits. People often find these works embarrassingly cold, objectifying, and lacking empathy and genuine interest in human beings. A human face, they think, gets assimilated to just 'a thing'. But taking a closer look, one realises that the situation is more complicated. The portraits of Cézanne's young wife, for instance, often have a moving quality due to the sitter's expression of solitude, patience and a lack of pretension. Cézanne's persons are not communicative, as a Rubens character would be. Usually their mood and temperament, their nature, their place in life are not revealed. Nonetheless they gain weight, dignity and authority, because of how they are painted and located into space. They are powerful, yet mute presences. Very often, the portrayed persons don't look at something. And when they look towards us, they usually don't look at us, their eyes are often overshadowed. At best they seem introvert, or lost in thought. Sometimes, as *The boy in the red waistcoat* (fig. 1), for instance, they seem transformed into an Egyptian type immobility, as if the person, sitting before the painter for hours, has been forgotten by him and has fallen into a state of timeless attending.

But all these features of Cézanne's portraits are not necessarily due to a dehumanising look on persons. They can be explained better in terms of Cézanne's conception of the art of painting. Giving too much weight to the eyes, the look, of the person portrayed, or to her mental state, would disturb or even destroy the balance in the painting, the *overall density* of structure. Cézanne seems to be guided by the maxim that the painter should always *keep the whole in view*.¹⁶ For the same reasons, Cézanne's landscapes are devoid of people. Somebody walking through the fields would provoke questions like, What is he doing here? Who is he? Such questions distract the beholder from the whole of the painting itself.

Especially in Cézanne's portraits, a sense of finality reigns – as if the persons have a kind of definite, enduring existence. It often seems impossible to imagine that they would change attitudes, would get up and leave the scene as they might in the empirical reality. They seem to have turned inaccessible. It looks as if the work and the portrayed person *together* have found their

definite immutable form. These features the poet Rilke probably had in mind when he wrote to his wife, the sculptor Clara Westhoff, about the portraits in the Paris Cézanne-exposition of 1907, that the persons in the pictures seem to have reached a kind of definitive existence-in-the-image, ‘ein endgültiges Bild-Dasein’.¹⁷

A final word about ‘Cézanne’s doubt’: according to Merleau-Ponty Cézanne’s doubts are due to the utopian-sounding task of giving a primordial, absolutely initial image of the world. It seems however, that Cézanne’s hesitations have a more concrete character.



a. ca. 1892-96, Courtauld Gallery, London.

b. 5th version, ca. 1894-1895, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 4: Paul Cézanne, *The Card Players*, oil on canvas.

First, for Cézanne a painting is never a matter of a routine procedure, organised in advance, following a way of working established *a priori*. Especially in his portraits the viewer gets the impression that with each work the art of painting is being discovered anew. Each wrongly applied colour touch could spoil the whole. Compare for instance, the card player in the yellow jacket on the right in the London painting (Courtauld Gallery, fig. 4a) with the same figure in the Paris version of the same motif in the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 4b). The Paris version is rather traditional and looks less vivid. It suggests more plasticity and has stronger outlining – features that Cézanne usually avoids. In the London version, the right figure, especially his jacket, is transformed into a luminous appearance. It is realised via a very differentiated use of the brushes and of mostly blue-green and yellow colour touches, small ones combined with larger ones – especially on the arm and shoulder – which, among other elements, is responsible for the softly glowing yellow in this painting. Cézanne’s complex way of working cannot be put into a formula. It cannot be imitated convincingly. It is always created anew, *surprisingly*, in the pres-

ence of its subject matter. It is this that explains Cézanne's hesitations. His doubts can only be understood in the light of his aims as far as these appear in his works.

Secondly, the spontaneous density of structure that Cézanne was striving for, made him sometimes fear that the work could become unreadable, as happened to the supposed masterwork of Balzac's painter Frenhofer. Cézanne was afraid that by this process of spontaneous growth and the dismissal of structuring lines the spatial relationships in his paintings, for instance in his wood views, would become unintelligible – that the painting would become an impenetrable thicket.¹⁸

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NOTES

¹Merleau-Ponty 1996, 13-33; Merleau-Ponty 1964, 9-25. Merleau-Ponty 1976.

²Some elements of this notion are inspired by the Austrian art historian Fritz Novotny, as Merleau-Ponty remarks in a note in his *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Novotny 2011. Novotny underlines, what he calls, the not-human character (not: 'inhuman') of Cézanne's world-view, pointing to the absence of people in his landscapes as well as to the supposed impersonal character of his portraits, which betray almost nothing of the inner life of the people portrayed. Supposedly, this not-human quality is also present in the absence of moods, or *Stimmungen*, existential feelings in his landscapes, in contrast for instance with Caspar David Friedrich's romantic landscape paintings. Novotny however doesn't seem to realise sufficiently, that this absence of *Stimmungen* in the mature work of Cézanne has its own powerful emotional quality. The steadfastness of the light of the South underlines the indestructible *presence* of things, of houses, rocks, trees, and so on, which appear to us as a counterweight to the restlessness of the human soul. The alleged impersonal character of Cézanne's work is also counterbalanced by the exceptional presence of the painter in every brushstroke that he puts carefully on the canvas.

³This applies also to the sometimes

rather odd treatment of eyes in Cézanne's portraits. See, for instance, the left eye of the *Boy in the red waistcoat* in the beautiful Zürich painting (1888-1890), in fig. reffig:red.

⁴Merleau-Ponty 1964, 14.

⁵When Merleau-Ponty speaks of *le tout indivisible*, he means that every quality of an object is pervaded by the very nature of the material it is made of. They all express their basic chemical structure. But 'wholeness', connectedness taken in this sense, differs from the wholeness that Cézanne has in mind, when, folding the fingers of his two hands together, he demonstrates what a painting should be: a thoroughly integrated structure, which seems to have grown spontaneously; it even seems to grow before the eyes of the beholder. It seems that Merleau-Ponty sometimes confounds in his essay these different meanings of 'being a whole'.

⁶Hegel 1970, 80-81.

⁷This is one of the reasons why especially painters felt attracted to Cézanne's work.

⁸As Novotny and others do.

⁹'un ordre naissant ... d'un objet en train d'apparaître' Merleau-Ponty 1996, 14.

¹⁰'The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.'

Merleau-Ponty 1964, 17-18.

¹¹Merleau-Ponty 1964, 12.

¹²Merleau-Ponty 1964, 13-15.

¹³Adriani 1993, 180.

¹⁴My former colleague, the art historian Wouter Weijers (Nijmegen), always underlined the lability of Cézanne's structures, in opposition to the received view, that Cézanne mainly tried to reconstruct classical harmony by modern means.

¹⁵In this respect, Novotny's comparison

of Cézanne's procedure with Kant's theory of knowledge gains some plausibility.

¹⁶Adriani 1993, 144. Compare Renoir's and Cézanne's portraits of Chocquet.

¹⁷Rilke 1983, 59.

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