

## **Nature's Wandering Hands: Painting at the End of the World**

Ted Toadvine  
(University of Oregon)

The first of Joachim Gasquet's three dialogues with Cézanne, titled "Le Motif," is set on a hill overlooking the Vallée de l'Arc near Aix, on a late summer morning in the 1890s, with Mount Sainte-Victoire dominating the horizon.<sup>1</sup> The painting on which the master has been working for the last two months is going well, and he is in a good mood.

"To Gasquet, Cézanne remarks: "I have my motif...(He clasps his hands together.) A motif, you see, it is this . . . ."

"What?" Gasquet asks?

"Oh, yes!" Cézanne replies. "(He repeats his gesture, separates his hands, spreading his fingers apart, and brings them slowly, very slowly together again, then joins them, clenches them, intertwining his fingers.) That's what you have to attain. . . . Try to understand, I guide my entire painting together all the time. . . . Nature is always the same, but nothing about her that we see endures. Our art must convey a glimmer of her endurance with the elements, the appearance of all her changes. It must give us the sense of her eternity. What is beneath her? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. Everything, you understand? So, I join her wandering hands . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Merleau-Ponty knew these conversations with Gasquet very well, of course. Not

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at the International Conference of the Merleau-Ponty Circle, Fordham University, 22 September 2012. I am grateful to Ann Murphy for the invitation.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne* (Bernheim-Jeune: Paris, 1926), 130; Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110. Hereafter cited textually as C, with French preceding English pagination. The accuracy of Gasquet's portrayal of Cézanne has been an issue of perennial scholarly debate. There is wide agreement, on the one hand, that Gasquet presents an "approximate and very personal version of Cézanne's discourse" (Doran, *Conversations with Cézanne*, 108) shaped by Gasquet's own philosophical, literary, and political commitments. Yet, despite its faults, some critics conclude that "it is in certain respects the best contemporary account of Cézanne we have" (Jonathan Kear, "Le sang Provençal: Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne", in *Journal of European Studies* 32 (2002): 147). See also John Rewald's Preface and Richard Shiff's Introduction to *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A*

only are they cited frequently in “Cézanne’s Doubt” and *Phenomenology of Perception*, but Merleau-Ponty returns to this text years later to provide the epigraph for “Eye and Mind.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, both in “Cézanne’s Doubt” and in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty repeats the final line that I have just quoted concerning Cézanne’s effort to “join the wandering hands of nature [*ses mains errantes*],” which Merleau-Ponty interprets in terms of the synergy of our senses toward “the landscape in its totality and its absolute fullness,” toward that “imperious unity” that is achievable only as the expressive confluence of body and world.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Cézanne repeatedly describes his own method as a return to nature by way of “sensation,” and even as a kind of “realism” (C 155/127), Merleau-Ponty rigorously distinguishes this return to sensation from any empiricist obsession with sense-data; in his words, “Nothing could be farther from naturalism than this intuitive science” (DC 23/77). By contrast, what Merleau-Ponty finds inspiring in Cézanne’s notion of a motif that joins nature’s straying hands is, on the one hand, that the motif is nature’s own spontaneous self-organization. He speaks of the “spontaneous order of perceived things,” “the birth of order through spontaneous organization,” and “an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes” (DC 18/73, 18/73, 20/74). This spontaneous self-organization of nature is what Cézanne refers to as the “logic of the eyes” in contrast with the “logic of the brain” (C 144/120). On the other hand, even if this natural logic bypasses the brain, it does not eschew art, technique, or tradition. On the contrary—and this is precisely how Cézanne’s motif joins hands with nature, how it avoids the dichotomy of “nature versus composition” (DC 18/73)—the artist discovers this logic of sensation only *through* the history of art and the refinement of technique, so that this is not a “return” at all but a coming forward to greet nature, an expressive co-creation, a collaborative event by which nature gives itself the means to express what it wants, through us, to say.<sup>5</sup>

---

*Memoir with Conversations*, trans. C. Pemberton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> *L’Œil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 1; “Eye and Mind”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. T. Toadvine and L. Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 351.

<sup>4</sup> See “Le doute de Cézanne”, in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 21-23; “Cézanne’s Doubt”, in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 75-77 (Hereafter cited textually as DC, with French preceding English pagination); *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 303; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 274 (Hereafter cited textually as PP, with French preceding English pagination).

<sup>5</sup> “[I]t was the things themselves and the faces themselves as he saw them that demanded to be painted in this way, and Cézanne simply said what they *wanted* to say” (DC 27/80); “It is certainly I who have the experience of the landscape, but I am aware in this experience of taking

This is why Cézanne's motif can serve, for Merleau-Ponty, as an aesthetic enactment of the phenomenological reduction, of that effort, in Husserl's words, to bring "still-mute experience" to the "pure expression of its own sense."<sup>6</sup> In fact, as Merleau-Ponty presents it, the paradox of expression that Cézanne embraces is precisely the paradox confronted by any philosophical reflection radical enough to admit its own debt to a pre-reflective moment that precedes and exceeds reflection but that can only be expressed through its creative appropriation.

What Cézanne calls "nature" is precisely philosophy's pre-reflective source, that from which philosophy emerges and which conditions its very possibility yet, precisely for this reason, can never be purely thematized by it. In other words, the metaphysical sense of Cézanne's doubt is the inherent contradiction of trying to unearth that moment when nature encompasses us and on which we continue to remain fully dependent even as it escapes us, even as we find ourselves always too late to confront it face-to-face. With Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty embraces this contradiction when he describes reflection as "a creative operation that itself participates in the facticity of the unreflected" (PP 62), thereby charging philosophy with the task of recursively accounting for its own conditioning by a nature that reflection can disclose only indirectly, only in its withdrawal. The key, for both Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne, is that this contradiction must be embraced: it is not a flaw to be overcome, in either artistic expression or philosophical reflection, but rather the very means to disclose our liability to a nature that naturalism has forgotten.

In his discussions of Gasquet's conversations with Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly draw attention to the artist's figural enactment of the motif with the gesture of the intertwined hands, even though this gesture clearly anticipates Merleau-Ponty's own fascination with the touching-touched relation. We know, of course, that Merleau-Ponty's primary inspiration for the analysis of double sensation was Husserl, particularly *Ideas II*, and that Merleau-Ponty had already called attention to double sensation as a distinguishing feature of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP 94-95). But perhaps Cézanne's touching-touched is not so far from Husserl's. First, note that Merleau-Ponty

---

up a factual situation, of gathering together a sense that is cattered throughout the phenomena, and of saying what they themselves want to say" (PP 305/275).

<sup>6</sup> I quote here the famous line from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* to which Merleau-Ponty repeatedly returns to characterize the aim of phenomenological reduction. See, e.g., PP x/lxxix, 253-54/228.

brings Cézanne’s “motif” together with Husserl’s “motif,” that is, with the phenomenological concept of motivation also developed in *Ideas II*.<sup>7</sup> This is explicit in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” which elaborates the account of motivation as a foundation for freedom that had appeared earlier that same year in the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, and it does so precisely by reading the Husserlian and Cézannian *motifs* together. It is interesting, therefore, to see that when Merleau-Ponty returns to *Ideas II* fifteen years later, in “The Philosopher and his Shadow”—a text that is key for understanding his appropriation of the touching-touched relationship—he attributes to Husserl the same chiasmic relationship between nature and spirit that he had found earlier in Cézanne.<sup>8</sup> Note also that the unnamed interlocutor of “Cézanne’s Doubt,” especially the essay’s motivational theory of freedom, is Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre’s own brief consideration of double sensation in *Being and Nothingness* dismisses it both as strictly impossible and as irrelevant for the development of a philosophy of corporeality.<sup>9</sup> We should not be surprised, then, that when Merleau-Ponty returns to the touched-touched relation as the figure for corporeal reflection in his later work, it is at the same moment that he speaks of a “figured philosophy” expressed through painting.<sup>10</sup> All of this suggests that the figural moment of Cézanne’s motif, his enactment of a touching-touched relation with nature, if we can use this language, is an intimation of the ontology of flesh.

And yet the strangeness of this variation of the touching-touched is striking: it is neither the touch of two hands belonging to the same living body, nor the handshake or caress of another body, but somehow the joining of the artist’s hand with nature’s own “hand,” the latter described by Cézanne as the eternal recurrence of dispersed becoming. What can this strange figure for the human-nature chiasmus tell us about our liability to a nature that naturalism has forgotten, and in particular about the role that art plays in its disclosure? I

---

<sup>7</sup> See Husserl, *Ideen II*, *Husserliana* v. 4, ed. M. Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), §56; *Ideas II*, trans. R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), §56.

<sup>8</sup> “Le Philosophe et son ombre”, in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 201-28; “The Philosopher and his Shadow”, in *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-181. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty makes no mention of the concept of motivation or of freedom in this later reading of *Ideas II*. It is as if he has taken up themes from the first half of “Cézanne’s Doubt” to find their parallel in Husserl, but that he is no longer interested in pursuing the parallels that had been suggested in the second half of the earlier essay.

<sup>9</sup> Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 351, 363-64, 408; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1994), 304, 316, 358.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 46-47.

pursue this question here in two stages: First, we will see that, for Cézanne, joining hands with nature is a matter of silence as a return to sensation, where sensation is understood as the pre-reflective condition for perception, its anonymous and immemorial precursor. This brings Cézanne’s notion of sensation very close to that of Francis Bacon, who, according to Deleuze, “reassumed the entire problem of painting after Cézanne.”<sup>11</sup> It is through this notion of sensation that we can understand what Merleau-Ponty means by claiming that the “frozen objects” of Cézanne’s paintings hesitate “as at the beginning of the world [*à l’origine de la terre*]” (DC 22/76). These painting mark the beginning of the world because they capture the transition from sensation to perception, from anonymous life to the personal self, from aion to chronos, from immersion in the elements to the institution of a world. The other side of the beginning of the world is therefore its anonymous and immemorial precursor, the rustling of the elements. This is the second moment of our analysis, the return to sensation as an encounter with the elements, and this brings us close to Levinas’s early descriptions of art in *Existence and Existents*, but also to the recovery of the elemental framing of the look of things in the recent work of John Sallis. We return here to what Levinas calls the “very strangeness of the earth,” a silence that precedes the world and that is perhaps best disclosed through the world-poverty of elemental art, an art of the immemorial moment of nature’s withdrawal and resistance.<sup>12</sup> This will force us to reconsider the role that silence plays in Merleau-Ponty’s thought as the hinge between philosophy and non-philosophy.

### **I. The Silence of Sensation**

Merleau-Ponty speaks of the artist as “returning to the source of silent and solitary experience” (DC 25/78), and Cézanne is explicit that the artist’s submission to nature requires silence: “His entire will must be silent. He must silence all prejudice within himself. He must forget, forget, be quiet, be a perfect echo” (C 131/111). To be this perfect echo, an artist must suspend reflection and become a photographic plate or a recording device, a “receptacle

---

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, “Author’s Introduction to the English Edition”, in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxxi.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 4th ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 116. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 142. See also John Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental”, in *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998), 158.

for sensations” in Cézanne’s words (C 131/111). The artist’s silence, as a receptivity to sensation, is neither passivity nor primitivism; it is not a romantic recovery of a prelapsarian unity. It is too late for us to be primitive or innocent, Cézanne tells us; we are already civilized. And we are already born with a certain facility, with a craft—but precisely a poor one that requires education and training (C 137-38/115-116). This is why the artist must “go to the Louvre via nature and return to nature via the Louvre” (C 140/117). Nonetheless, a silence is required, and this is precisely a silencing of reflection in favor of sensation: Cézanne says that “The artist must never have an idea, a thought, a word in mind when he needs a sensation” (C 138/116). It is a parallel privileging of sensation over representation that, according to Deleuze, places Francis Bacon in the same lineage as Cézanne; what Cézanne calls *sensation* and Bacon calls *the Figure* is a shared method of avoiding figuration. In Deleuze’s words, sensation acts “immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone.”<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, when Deleuze introduces this convergence of Cézanne and Bacon on the privilege of sensation, he refers approvingly to Merleau-Ponty’s chapter on sensing, “Le sentir,” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (FB 39n27/156n1). Cézanne is discussed a number of times in this text, but he is not explicitly mentioned in the chapter on sensing. Nevertheless, several themes from this chapter do have a bearing on how we are to understand Cézanne, namely, the anonymity of sensation and its relation to an immemorial past. Concerning anonymity, Merleau-Ponty writes that

“if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. Every sensation includes a seed of dream or depersonalization, as we experience through this sort of stupor into which it puts us when we truly live at the level of sensation”. (PP 249/223)

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes here that this anonymous “someone” who senses in and through me is distinct from my personal self, from the self who says “I,”

---

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 39; *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31. Hereafter cited textually at FB, with French preceding English pagination.

but is rather that assemblage of “natural selves” that has already sided with and synchronized with the world. For instance, on the very next page Merleau-Ponty writes:

“I grasp through sensation, on the margins of my personal life and my own acts, a given life of consciousness from which these later determinations emerge, the life of my eyes, hands, and ears, which are so many natural selves. Each time that I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being—the one for which I am responsible and upon which I decide—but rather another self that has already sided with the world, that is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them”. (PP 250/224)

“Synchronized” is a key term here, since the anonymous “one” of sensation lives in a “prehistory,” the “past of all pasts,” which is the time of our organic rhythms, such as the beating of the heart (PP 277/250, 293/265, 100/87). This cyclical time, Merleau-Ponty tells us, “is the time of nature with which we coexist,” an “absolute past of nature” incommensurate with the narrative, linear time of the personal self (PP 517/479, 160/138).

This allows us to make sense of the famous lines with which Merleau-Ponty concludes the chapter on sensing, to the effect that reflection only fully grasps itself when it takes into account its own pre-reflective history, a history that constitutes for it “an original past, a past that has never been present” (PP 280/252). This pre-reflective history is the immemorial past of nature, a nature with which we coexist at the level of sensation, but which can never be fully recuperated by the reflective operations of the personal self. As Alia Al-Saji has argued, it is necessary to distinguish here between sensibility and perception proper. “Sensory life,” Al-Saji writes, “would be that ‘primitive complicit[y] with the world’ which is the ‘condition for the possibility of perceptual experience’ but remains distinct from perception proper insofar as it is ‘anterior to the distinctions of subject and object and to the divisions between the senses.’”<sup>14</sup> As the generative ground of experience, sensibility so understood cannot be a conscious experience; it cannot occur within personal time, the time of reflection, precisely because it makes such time possible. It therefore represents, for reflection, an im-possible and irrecuperable past, a past that can

---

<sup>14</sup> A. Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, in *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008), 47, 48.

never be made present. This immemorial past is precisely the “eternity” of nature that Cézanne strives to unearth by immersing himself in sensory life. And insofar as he aims to capture the very “beginning of the world,” the germination of experience and the emergence of objects by spontaneous organization, this is because he aims to paint precisely that moment when perception emerges from sensibility, when eternity gives way to lived time, when the impossible generates the actual.

Merleau-Ponty himself underestimates the disruptive implications of this immemorial past for reflection, as we see from his emphasis on the emergence of balance, order, and wholeness in his descriptions of Cézanne’s works. Yet we can also find glimpses here of what remains disruptive beneath this emerging order, such as when Merleau-Ponty admits that Cézanne’s paintings suspend the handiness of things to reveal the “base of inhuman nature” that they cover over (DC 22/76). This nature is “stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions” (DC 22/76); in other words, it is not that world of sensuous reciprocity so eloquently described by David Abram.<sup>15</sup> This is instead an “unfamiliar” world the experience of which gives us a discomfort comparable, Merleau-Ponty tells us, to a “period of mourning” (DC 22/76). Cézanne’s “beginning of the world” therefore operates at the hinge between the emerging order of perception and its dark precursor, which haunts it from within like a death within life.

These insights from “Cézanne’s Doubt” echo a similar analysis in the chapter on the thing and the natural world from *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty writes that, in the context of our everyday dealings with things, our perception “bears upon the things just enough to find in them their familiar presence, and not enough to rediscover what of the non-human is hidden within them.” Once we suspend our everyday familiarity, then the thing reveals itself as “hostile and foreign, . . . no longer our interlocutor, but rather a resolutely silent Other” (PP 372/336). As illustration, Merleau-Ponty refers to Fritz Novotny’s description of Cézanne’s landscapes as “those of a pre-world where there were still no men” (PP 372-73/337). This hostile and alien “pre-world” is precisely the immemorial nature that precedes and conditions all experience and reflection, and which elsewhere Merleau-Ponty associates with a kind of elementality. For instance, in his discussion of the “natural and non-human space” that underlies our human environment, Merleau-Ponty writes of

---

<sup>15</sup> See Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1996).



focusing his eyes on the stone of a garden wall until he loses his gaze “within this course and yellowish surface, and then there is no longer even a stone, and all that remains is a play of light upon an indefinite matter” (PP 339/307). This “indefinite matter” approaches the elemental character of sensations before the emergence of a world. Recall that, in the passage from Cézanne’s conversation with which we began, he noted that “Our art must convey a glimmer of [Nature’s] endurance with the elements.” Cézanne’s return to the silence of sensation is therefore not merely the effort to capture the emergence of the perceived world but equally to stage an encounter with the elements in their immemorial withdrawal.

## **II. Elements at the End of the World**

To clarify this role that art can play at the hinge between sensation and perception, and the return to sensation as an encounter with the elements, we turn to Levinas’s analyses in *Existence and Existents*. On Levinas’s description, “The I in the world has an inside and an outside,” and the adjustment of inside to outside is precisely the event of meaning or intentionality.<sup>16</sup> For an object to arise in the world is already for it to exist in relation to a subject, for it to be “destined for someone” (EE 75/40). Consequently, as Levinas writes, “The very idea of a totality or of a whole is only intelligible where there is a being that can embrace it” (EE 76/41). Remember Merleau-Ponty’s language about the emergence of the world in Cézanne as an “indivisible Whole” or an “imperious unity” (DC 21/75). The point is that, as soon as there is an I—what Merleau-Ponty calls a “personal self” in *Phenomenology of Perception*—that I finds itself engaged with the objects that compose its world, that have sense for it. And so, as Levinas remarks, “existence in the world always has a center; it is never anonymous” (EE 58/29).

It is possible, nevertheless, for existence to withdraw from the world, and a privileged site for such withdrawal is art, the movement of which, Levinas tell us, consists in “leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation” (EE 85/47). The aesthetic effect of art is produced by its “wandering about in sensation,” which is precisely a return to the “impersonality of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, *De l’existence à l’existant* (Paris: Fontaine, 1947), 73-74; *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 39-40. Hereafter cited textually as EE.

elements” (EE 85-86/47). This is, of course, precisely the movement that we have attributed to Cézanne, and to the extent that we find Levinas’s descriptions here to be reliable, they can deepen our understanding of what this encounter with the elements involves. First, we should note that the elements are what appear at the very end of the world, at its dissolution, which means that they are beyond the distinction of inside from outside, subject from object (cf. EE 87/48, 94/52). The elements are what remain after the destruction of representation (what Deleuze called figuration), when things are released from their destiny of being for someone and can stand forward in their nakedness. The common intention of modern art, as Levinas sees it, is precisely the effort to “present reality as it is in itself, after the world has come to an end” (EE 90/50). This involves stripping away the form that clothes an object destined for our use in order to encounter its brute, impassive materiality. Such art makes possible a “paroxysm of materiality,” in Levinas’s phrase, which anticipates Deleuze’s remarks about sensation’s direct impact on the nervous system, and which suggests a concept of matter having nothing in common with that of classical materialism (EE 91/51).

Secondly, Levinas’s description of this breakup of the world extends Merleau-Ponty’s insight into the “inhuman” character of the elements and of their irrecuperability by reflection. As Levinas puts it, “The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously” (EE 95/53). This “sheer fact of being” in which one is anonymously immersed is what Levinas terms the *il y a*, the “there is.” Now, it is well known that Merleau-Ponty also adopts this expression, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, but his usage tends to follow that of Sartre, who in *Being and Nothingness* deploys the expression “there is” simply for generalized existence, the being of “something.” For Levinas, by contrast, “there is” precisely names the anonymous existence of the elements when there is no longer a world, no longer an I, but only the palpable presence of a kind of silence (EE 94-95/52-53). And this silence is precisely what makes us uneasy in the genuine encounter with nature’s aloof autonomy. Our insecurity, Levinas suggests, is “due just to the fact that nothing approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens; this silence, this tranquility, this void of sensations constitutes a mute, absolutely indeterminate menace” (EE 96/54). The “rustling” of the “there is,” its “murmur of silence,” is therefore a kind of

horror, which Levinas associates with the complete dissolution of all terms into an undifferentiated background, leaving only a “swarming of points,” a “field of forces,” or an “atmosphere” (EE 98/55, 104/59, 96/53, 104/59).

Levinas’s description of the elements suggests a way of making sense of nature beyond naturalism that preserves its inhuman strangeness. As John Sallis has noted, a return of nature under the guise of the *there is* “will forsake its immediacy and familiarity”:

“As it returns it will appear strange, as if belonging to a region distant from and alien to the human world. In a sense it will have cast off its disguise: it will no longer be the nature that is shaped and formed within the human world and in accord with the measures of that world but rather a nature capable, in its excess, of evoking feelings both of sublimity and terror”.<sup>17</sup>

In his reading of Levinas, Sallis holds open the possibility that the absolute strangeness of this elemental nature could provoke a responsiveness that Levinas himself denies, “a comportment that, rather than leading to self-reversion, would be drawn along in the withdrawal, responsive rather than reactive to the very strangeness of the earth.”<sup>18</sup> And later, in his extended development of the phenomenology of elementals in *Force of the Imagination*, Sallis suggests that a “turn back to the sensible opens the way for a turn back to the elements” in such a way that would “redetermine nature itself in and as the holding sway of the elements.”<sup>19</sup> Yet Sallis is led in this later text to distance himself from Levinas’s assimilation of the elements to the *there is*, since for Sallis this merely identifies the elements with the “obscurity of matter” and thereby risks “reinscribing the entire analysis of the elemental within the most classical philosophical conceptuality” (FI 159n17). For this reason, Sallis focuses on the role of elementals—day and night, earth and sky, sun and storm—as “bound[ing] and articulat[ing] the expanse of the self-showing of things themselves” (FI 154-55), rather than as the strange paroxysm by which our senses open themselves to an unbounded. This maintains an ontological difference between elementals and the things that show up in the world, since these elementals structure the very appearing of things, but it closes off any

---

<sup>17</sup> Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental,” 152.

<sup>18</sup> Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental,” 159.

<sup>19</sup> Sallis, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 154. Hereafter cited textually as FI.

insight into the anonymous murmuring of the elements before the world and their immemorial interruptions of our world-making. Levinas's descriptions of the "materiality" of the elements, as we have emphasized, is anything but that of classical materialism; as Levinas himself remarks, this is a materiality that "no longer has anything in common with matter as opposed to thought and mind," a materiality that, insofar as it is unnameable, "can only appear in poetry" (EE 91/51).

In any case, neither Levinas nor Sallis pay sufficient heed to the immemorial character of our encounter with the elements, as the pre-reflective moment that reflection must take into account as its own condition. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had insisted that reflection must become recursive, that it must reflect upon reflection and thereby "understand the natural situation that it is aware of replacing and that thereby belongs to its definition" (PP 75/63). What Merleau-Ponty calls "radical reflection" in *Phenomenology of Perception* and "hyper-reflection" in *The Visible and the Invisible* is this effort of reflection to account for its own foundation in a nature from which it emerges but that remains for it an immemorial past. This irrecuperable past appears within our experience as the resistance that the unreflective offers to reflection, as the remainder that resists thematization even as it conditions reflection and makes it possible. It is our very inherence within nature, the fact that we can only open onto it from a situation within it, and that we can never fully thematize our own emergence from it, that necessitates this immemorial remainder.

This returns us to Cézanne's own figuration of art as joining the hands of nature. It is well-known that the structure of reflection, and particularly its interruption by an unreflected that exceeds it, undergoes a transformation in Merleau-Ponty's later work, where reflection takes the auto-affection of the body as its exemplar. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty famously described the experience of one hand touching another as the primordial event of reflection; yet, as he recognizes there, the coincidence of one hand with another is "always immanent and never realized in fact."<sup>20</sup> Here, the moment of nature's withdrawal and silence is precisely the *écart* between the touching and the touched, leaving behind, in Jacob Rogozinski's words, an archi-factual

---

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 194; *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147. Hereafter cited textually as VI, with French preceding English pagination.

“remainder.”<sup>21</sup> As Rogozinski points out, this remainder is "untouchable for my touch, but also invisible for my vision, inaudible for my hearing; we will never meet up with it in the world, as one element among others in our daily experience."<sup>22</sup> The remainder that the effort to touch ourselves touching always misses conditions the very possibility of touch itself, even while remaining absent from the world of touch.

While Rogozinski is only concerned with the remainder of corporeal auto-affection, we know from Merleau-Ponty that the body's self-touching is only one salient example of an ontologically ubiquitous chiasm, that of the body with the world, or of humanity and nature. This means that when my hand touches an object, there is a "kind of reflection," a subtle form of auto-affection, that eventuates in the touch. The thing touches me as I touch it; it becomes me as I become it. Yet in the moment that this chiasmus crosses over, where self switches into other, there is always a slippage. In the case of the body's self-touching, this slippage gives rise to a remainder or a precipitate, as Rogozinski describes. But in the exchange of the body with the world, the slippage is a consequence of the body's situatedness within the world that it touches, that is, the fact that it is of the world. While we inhere in the world and are of its same stuff, this inherence always splits apart from within. When the world touches me as I touch it, the two touches can never be reciprocal. Nature always has, so to speak, the upper hand. My incapacity to see myself seeing or touch myself touching, what Rogozinski calls the remainder, is precisely a consequence of the situatedness of my efforts to reflect on the nature that encompasses me. I am suggesting that the *écart* of the touching-touched and the resistance of the unreflective to reflection are both variations on nature's withdrawal, its presentation of its own unrepresentability. But, as Cézanne's paintings demonstrate, the fact that the elemental nature that precedes the world is strictly unrepresentable does not mean that it has no register in the world of sense. First of all, this impossible past, as a generative passivity, continues to haunt every present from within. It conditions all that can appear even in its own withdrawal from appearing. And furthermore, the archi-factual, even while remaining absent from the world that it conditions, may nevertheless show up indirectly at the margins of experience or along its fault lines, in experiences that are strictly

---

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Rogozinski, "The Chiasm and the Remainder: How Does Touching Touch Itself?", in *Rethinking Facticity*, ed. F. Raffoul & E. S. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>22</sup> Rogozinski, "The Chiasm and the Remainder", 238.

speaking impossible. The inauguration of such impossible experience, I am suggesting, is precisely the paradox that Cézanne embraces through the work of painting, taking the murmuring silence of the elements that haunt perception from within as his theme.

Now, this suggests that art may play a privileged role in disclosing nature's withdrawal and making its resistance salient. This insight converges with Amanda Boetzkes's characterization of recent earth art as revealing nature's "resistance to being subsumed into representation." "Since it cannot be contained within, or reproduced as, an artwork," Boetzkes writes, "the earth appears as a temporal or sensorial excess at the limit of representational form."<sup>23</sup> In particular, the elemental art of James Turrell or Roni Horn operates precisely by a kind of world-poverty that, rather than tracing the emergence of perception from sensation, allows us a glimpse of the end of the world, of its dissolution into elemental forces that outstrip the compass of reflection.

We have spoken so far of at least two distinct silences that are relevant to understanding this glimpse of the end of the world. The first was Cézanne's silent return to sensation as a withdrawal from the figuration of perception and the representations of reflection. This silence is already impossible, in the sense that, to achieve it fully would entail the very dissolution of the I and its possibilities in favor of the anonymous One—or, better, of the Many natural selves that populate the body. Synchronized with this anonymous pack we identified a second silence on the side of the elements, namely, the silent murmur of the *there is*. These two silences are perhaps ultimately the same, forming as the remainder when the hand of the artist joins the hand of nature. But this silence is precisely not that of a "still-mute experience" which it would be the philosopher's task to bring to the "pure expression of its own sense," to return to Merleau-Ponty's favorite quote from Husserl. This silence has no sense of its own, no sense proper to it, but lies outside the origin of sense, announcing its autonomy only on the margins of sense. Furthermore, the *sens unique* of this passage from silence to expression, in the formulation from Husserl, mirrors Merleau-Ponty's focus on the emergence of the world in Cézanne, covering over the moment of death harbored within this perceptual life. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty's later definition of philosophy as the "reconversion of silence and speech into one another" (VI 171/129)—despite its continued juxtaposition with the Husserl quotation—represents an advance in

---

<sup>23</sup> A. Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 12.

one respect, insofar as it recognizes a bidirectional movement between silence and expression.<sup>24</sup> But even this dialectic recognizes no inexpressible silence, no generative impossibility that appears only in and as a poverty of world. Here we come up against the very limits of a phenomenology of perception. Perhaps the murmuring silence of nature is only a silence, finally, when viewed privatively from the perspective of the world of perception. For example, Levinas speaks of a “musicality of sensation” once it breaks free from the bonds of perception, comparable to the musicality of a word once it has been emptied of its sense. Perhaps the silence of the elements is therefore a kind of music in its own right, albeit one that sings to us at the very edge of sense, at the beginning of the end of the world.

---

<sup>24</sup> I discuss the role of silence in Merleau-Ponty’s thought in “The Reconversion of Silence and Speech”, in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 70 (2008): 457-77.