

Recasting the Body: Thinking, Writing, Painting*

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Abstract

Thinking has conventionally been understood as a disembodied activity, that is, an activity devoid of any necessary connection to body. In the mainstream history of philosophy, thinking is being understood primarily as a mental act of contemplation where body is not necessarily implicated. That is, while thinking deeply, we suspend the body, withdrawing our senses to a point where only our mind is awake in the strict sense. Alertness of the mind is the primary point of initiation of the act of thinking, and writing, according to this perspective, is secondary and derivative. Accordingly, writing is a kind of translation; while writing we translate the ideas which precedes it. Why do we consider writing as translation? In the backdrop of the contemporary discussions on writing, the present paper addresses the question of the nature of thinking in painting. Painting, as we see, is an act where the corporeality of the body is irreducibly implicated. The painted images are not the translations of the pure mental images; they come into being by the very bodily act of painting. Painters think by way of painting. This perspective needs to be anchored on a radical recasting of the question of embodiment, and the paper attempts to do this by making use of the observations made by some well known painters like Paul Klee and Paul Cezanne and the phenomenological insights provided by Merleau-Ponty.

Keywords: Embodiment, Self, Touch, Painting, Reversibility.

I

“A line is a dot that went for a walk.

A drawing is simply a line going for a walk: An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal, a walk for a walk’s sake”.

These are some of the startling observations made by the Swiss-German artist, Paul Klee (Klee, 1961: 105), who is best known for his large body of paintings and drawings influenced by various

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movements such as cubism, expressionism and surrealism. These statements, to my mind, offer a very different perspective to look at the artistic endeavor of drawing and painting, and also, more importantly, to rethink the very activity of thinking. In the present paper, an attempt is made to analyze some of its implications especially to have a critique of the conventional understanding of thinking.

Where is a painting actually born? Is it the case that an image is first born in the mind of the artist and then is getting reproduced through the bodily act of drawing or painting? If so, then the act of painting is to be considered as an act of translation; a mental image is getting translated into a canvas. But what if it is through the act of painting that the image is born? If, as Paul Klee stated, drawing is a line on a walk then it will mean the image has no past in the mind of the artist. It comes into being through the very act of drawing/painting. In other words, the act of painting will have to be essentially considered as a bodily act. Painting does not translate something which precedes it. Painters do not first think the images then paint, but rather they think by way of painting.

According to the Cartesian tradition, thinking is being understood as a disembodied activity, that is, an activity devoid of any necessary connection to body. While thinking, we suspend our body, withdrawing our senses to a point where only our mind is awake in the strict sense. Writing, according to this perspective, is secondary and derivative. Only when we engage in writing does the body get implicated. Accordingly, everything written has an earlier mental existence, an existence 'inside', where it has not yet been turned impure by the intervention of the body. All writing, by this logic, is impure.

Auguste Rodin's sculpture 'The thinker' is often considered as an image representing philosophy. The sculpture depicts the image of nude male figure of over life-size. He is sitting alone on a rock with his chin resting on one hand as though deep in contemplation. His mood is pensive, as he sits with his eyes withdrawn from the surroundings. The body of the thinker slips into deep thought, and this posture helps in showing the intensity of his act of thinking. It indicates that the process of thinking can be easily distracted by the sensory perception. The withdrawal of the senses from the world around is supposed to be a necessary precondition for the mind to engage in deep thought. In other words, for thought to progress, the body needs to be suspended.

Philosophical thinking is often understood as a deep level contemplation where body is a possible obstruction, something to be tran-

scended. According to Socrates, life of a true philosopher is a *practice of dying*. Since to philosophize one has to distance oneself from the worldly life and its sensory appeal, he asserts that philosophers practice death while alive. As we know, the main theme of conversation between him and his disciples before his execution was death, where he says a true philosopher should not worry about death because he is already dead while engaged in philosophizing.

The philosophers, who are critical of the foundations of the Socratic or the Platonic tradition of philosophizing, often take art as their model for rethinking the very act of thinking. Art, for them, can be seen as the articulation of the body. The body that performs art, whether it is in painting, dance, and so on, is not one that is lost in meditation and distanced from the sensory world. Friedrich Nietzsche embraces the image of a body that dances rather than the image of the thinker to characterize his own way of philosophizing. (See, Nietzsche, 2001: 381). This image becomes important when we think about thinking in the context of drawing or painting. When read Nietzsche's image together with the earlier quote of Paul Klee, it can be said that a drawing is a line on an ecstatic dance.

What is the relation between thinking and writing? Is it the case that writing is a mere translation of speech, which is, in turn, is a translation of thought? Many attempts have been done in the recent history, especially in the domain of the so called Continental philosophy, to have a fresh look at this question. Edmund Husserl, in his essay on *The Origin of Geometry* (Derrida, 1989), examines this and arrives at the view that practice of writing is essential to both the history of geometry and more importantly to the constitution of its objectivity. Husserl says it is not when the geometry is conceived in the mind but only when it is born into the world or written down and becomes part of an intersubjective world, that it attains its objectivity. The argument is built on the premise that before it was drawn the geometric figures must have had an ideal past life in the mind.

In Husserl's view, all knowledge even in the empirical sciences derives certain of its factors from the mind but what is specific in the case of geometry is its purity. Geometrical truths are derived by deduction. We do not discover 'right angles', 'straight lines', for example, rather they are concepts that the human mind has invented. They are derived from the mind and not availed through the sensory experience. As ideas they have a kind of immunity. The possibility of a curve, for example, cannot be attributed to a straight line. Only when a straight

line is drawn can we consider the possibility of a curve in it. Once it is written down the geometric truth gets freed from the mind. Thus freed from the human mind, geometry enters the world of human transactions and becomes objective, but through this process it loses their purity. That which is written can always be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be understood in varied and distorted ways. It is into this world of uncertainties that geometry is born. Thus, it can be said that for the sins of writing, geometry finally gets banned from its original heaven.

Why does Husserl treat writing as secondary and derivative? Is writing a mere translation of thought? Is it actually the copy of the pre-existent idea or thought? These are some of the fundamental questions raised by Derrida and these questions bring out the tensions within Husserl's arguments. Writing, for Derrida, is not translation but an original and constitutive order in its own right. It is an activity which brings the phenomena it writes about into being. In the case of Geometry, it has no existence prior to writing. It is to be understood as a product of the practice of writing. Derrida's reflections move further touching upon the questions of opacity and contingency of the text, and finally to demonstrate the impossibility of the transcendental signified. We shall not discuss these reflections as they are slightly out of our central concerns in this paper. What is important for us is Derrida's point that the thesis of the primacy of writing is not true in Geometry alone. This could be true for any kind of writing. What is written comes into being through the process of writing.

II

It is true that we cannot easily compare painting and geometry, since painting is essentially an artistic endeavor. What is it that happens in the case of painting? Does the painter think first with her mind and then draw with her hands? Does every painting include a process by which colors are filled in into a pre-existing image in the mind of the painter? More than the question of what comes first the important question here is whether the images have a hidden residence outside the lines and colors that make a painting.

A painting involves paints, brushes and canvases; and they all are connected to the corporeality of the body. In the context of painting, it is just impossible to conceive a moment where the body is not implicated. The brush, the paint and the canvas do not just act as tools to bring out the image in the mind, but constitute the image in a significant sense. Paul Cezanne once remarked: "I select colors, tones and

shades; I set them down, I bring them together...They make lines, they become objects – rocks, trees – without my thinking about them...” (Cezanne, 1991: 148)

The thinking, in the context of painting, is not of the nature of a disembodied contemplation. Rather, it involves the alertness of the body as an essential condition. In Sanskrit, thinking is *Chinta* (derived from the root *chiti*) that implies the meaning of cheta, the alertness. In painting, it is the body that is alert; the body here is not something that is withdrawn from the world but invariably open towards the sensible world. In other words, it is the body that thinks. If the act of painting is not the translation of the pre-existing mental image, then the first moment of creation can be rightly credited to that of a line and not an idea. *The beginning was the line, not the word.* And for the same reason, a painting doesn't have a hidden past life to claim. Similarly, to admire a painting we don't have to look for its hidden meanings; there is nothing hidden in a painting. What a painting does is to speak to our body and what is expected from the spectator is to keep her eyes/senses open to the visible. Paul Cezanne had once so remarked about the fruits that he drew: “They come to you with all their odors, they tell you about the fields they have left, about the rains that nourished them, about the dawns that they searchingly watched”. (Benedetti, 1995:31)

The experience of seeing is not to be understood as an ahistorical act; it is mediated through different historical processes and as such cannot be divorced from the history of knowing. Those scientific interventions that have revolutionized the world around us have also significantly altered the experience of seeing. They have altered the fundamentals of the relationship between the subject and the object of knowing and consequently the very nature of visual knowledge. The Cartesian project also entails a serious attempt to re-define the relationship between the seer and the seen. Descartes' writings on optics can be taken as an example in this regard.

Descartes' reflections on optics, on a closer observation, reveal a very loosely held argument. He believes that we should not consider the experience of seeing as just a sensory exercise. It is not the case that our visual apparatus simply captures the image of what is presented before our eyes. Rather, we have an ability to project things (*pro-jection*), that is, to posit the being of what is presented to our eyes in advance. Obviously, the external eye is not the source of this projection. There is an inner eye, the eye of reason, which is to be taken as the primary source of vision. What Descartes and other rationalists attempted was

to detach vision from the external eyes and to place it as a process originating from this 'inner eye'.

What does this 'inner eye' actually signify? For Descartes, it is not a physical constituent of our body, but simply 'the thing that thinks'. The inner eye that sees is identical with the 'I' that thinks. The point of origination of seeing, thinking and so on cannot be a part of the body because the body itself is something that is being projected from this point. I am able to see my body; the very fact that I can see my body means I am not my body. The point from which the body is seen or projected cannot be a part of the body.

As we know, Descartes had formulated most of his arguments by engaging himself in a peculiar kind of experiment, that is, of staring at his own body. This was clearly an unusual and strange experimentation, as we do not usually observe our body in a detached manner, especially when it is involved in its usual chores. It is only when there is a problem that interrupts this sense of normality that we start to look at the body as if it is an object 'out there'. For example, when an unusual lump appears on my body I would start looking at it as something alien, outside of myself. Descartes looks at his own body in a similar manner, that, body becomes something outside, an object like any other objects of perception. In the perspective of the inner eye, the world is 'out there'; it is something to be observed, analyzed in an objective manner.

How do the painters engage the visible world? If, as we have seen earlier, a painter experiences the world through his or her body and not from the disembodied perspective of an inner eye, then what would be the nature of this experience? Obviously, it would not be of the nature of a subject-object encounter as in the Cartesian perspective. Visual engagement here would be radically of a different kind where body is not just a means; it is the body that sees.

III

In the Cartesian framework, the world is 'out there' in front of me, as something fundamentally detached from 'me'. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, it is to be understood necessarily as a space where I live, a fundamental dimension of my embodied existence. "I am my body, at least wholly to the extent that I possess experience, and yet at the same time my body is as it were a 'natural' subject, a provisional sketch of my total being" (Ponty, 1996:198). I am always already embodied; body and the world are of the same stuff. In his later writ-

ings, Merleau-Ponty used the notion of flesh as part of his attempt of rethinking the materiality of the world in a manner which transcends the conventional understanding, especially of the Cartesian tradition. What is important, in all these formulations, is the view that world is not to be understood as being composed of dead matter. It is essentially a lived space. "I do not see (space) according to its interior envelop; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me" (Ponty. M, 1968:178).

Being immersed in the world, I am always already being touched by the surroundings. It is not the case that I am a seer, a detached spectator, and the world is an object of seeing standing in front of my eyes. There cannot be any hard line of demarcation between the world and myself when their relation is being captured through the image of touching. The lived body or the body-subject does not have a clear-cut boundary of its own, since it is constantly being touched, getting affected, by the surroundings, or penetrated by the world in multiple directions. In other words, the world is disclosed through the body, and in the context of painting, the painted images refer to the way the world reveals itself in and through the body of the painter.

What Merleau-Ponty wishes to articulate here is the thesis of the reversibility of the subject-object relation, and this is obviously in direct contrast to the Cartesian thesis of dualism. As we have seen earlier. Descartes arrives at the dualism of the inner and the outer on the basis of the primacy that he has accorded to the sight in capturing the fundamental nature of man's relationship with the world. What if instead of sight we consider touch? As Merleau-Ponty says, when 'I touch', it is my body that is doing the touching. Only a body can touch. We cannot imagine a disembodied agency behind the act of touching. Also, more importantly, in the experience of touch there is a reversibility of subject-object relation, that, when the body touches something, it implies that it is being touched. What is being a touched touch back at the same time.

In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty extends this analysis to the problem of intersubjectivity, where he claims the self and the other are closely related like 'two hands touching', the intertwining of a chiasmus. It is on the basis of the reversibility of the experience of the toucher-touched that he reformulates a relation to the visible world irreducible to the subject-object distinction in a more convincing manner than that of his own earlier analysis of *The Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, the intersubjective relation, envisioned on

analogy with the chiasmic relation to the visible, is one where the self and the other 'are like organs of one single intercorporeality' (Ponty, 1968:168).

The reason, why seeing was assumed to be different from touching, is that the former was considered to be an experience originating from a disembodied eye. What if like how the body touches, the body also sees? What if in seeing it is the body that sees, as in the case of touching? Merleau-Ponty says, "The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself..." (Ponty, 1968:162) Obviously, the attempt here is to recognize the reversibility of the 'toucher-touched' relation in the experience of seeing; the experience of seeing implies being seen. A painter might feel that the world opens its eyes through his/her body. Merleau-Ponty invites our attention to the words of the French painter, Andre Marchand who said that, 'when in forest I don't look at the trees, they look at me.' (See Ponty, 1993: 121) This is not to be understood as a fantasy, but the very fact of embodiment or our being-in-the-world.

'Color and I are one; I am a painter'. This is another significant statement pronounced by Paul Klee. He made this statement in continuation of his observation that, 'Color possesses me. I do not have to pursue it. It will always possess me.' (Klee, 1968) Interestingly, this provides a powerful challenge to one of the most celebrated traditions of philosophy where 'I' is being conceived as a substance whose essence consists only in thinking. To reframe the above statement as a pun for the Cartesian assertion, 'I think, therefore I exist', would be to say: I draw, therefore 'I' do not exist. Line exists; when the line goes for a walk it becomes a drawing.

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