

The Primordial Affirmations of Literature: Merleau-Ponty and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat"

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Abstract

Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat"—a tale "intended to be after the fact"—affirms Merleau-Ponty's conclusion that "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence." The story dramatizes and reflects on the men's situation in the world, their inter-subjective experience against the background of non-human nature. In facing the imminent possibility of their own deaths as, for each of them, "the final phenomenon of nature," the men become "interpreters" of what is primary in the human condition. The line between the world of the reader and the world of the story, like the line between consciousness and being, is less a line than a horizon.

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"Matter is 'pregnant' with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in 'the world.' We experience a perception and its horizon 'in action' rather than by 'posing' them or explicitly 'knowing' them."

--Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

To the phenomenological philosopher, the primordial level of experience is perceptual. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that the problem of philosophy is "to make explicit our primordial knowledge of the 'real' and to describe the perception of the world as what establishes, once and for all, our idea of the truth" (*Phenomenology* lxxx). Perception is primary: "Thus, we must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather, we must say that the world is what we perceive" (*Phenomenology* lxxx). Perceptual experience gives us the "permanent data of the problem which culture attempts to resolve"

(*Primacy* 25). The perceived world “comprises relations.” It give us “the passage from one moment to the next,” it gives us the field in which we experience depth, and it is “the foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (*Primacy* 13).

Perceptual experience is more basic than knowledge, whether by knowledge we mean that of the mathematician, the biologist, the psychologist, the artist, the laborer, the lover, the philosopher, or the priest. Everything changes,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its ‘conditions of possibility,’ but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought *about* the world. After this, whatever is metaphysical in man cannot be credited to something outside his empirical being—to God, to Consciousness. Man is metaphysical in his very being, in his loves, in his hates, in his individual and collective history.”² To the extent that an artist—a painter like Cézanne or a writer like Stephen Crane—establishes in his or her work “a contact with the world,” that work fulfills the task of phenomenological philosophy. And in that case, we can speak of phenomenological philosophy through the work’s prolonged existence right in front of us. Where does literature affirm the primacy of perception? What else does it affirm about human existence and the meaning of life? Does it show, for example, that man is “metaphysical in his very being”? “Philosophical expression assumes the same ambiguities as literary expression,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “if the world is such that it cannot be expressed except in ‘stories’ and, as it were, pointed at” (*Sense* 28).

For Merleau-Ponty, the metaphysical requires nothing outside of time to make it so; in fact, it is metaphysical only *in* time, which can never be materialized into instantaneous states of being or idealized into eternity or a pure flow of inner life. Our awareness of time’s passing, our sense of dimensions and of movement, our feelings toward one another, our freedom—none of which can be measured, all of which are continuously in life—are as real as the physical objects toward which our minds are directed. The perceived world is composed of relations and of overlapping totalities. Existence is “the perpetual taking up of fact and chance by a reason that neither exists in advance of this taking up, nor without it” (*Phenomenology* 129). In thinking, we think *things*, and in thinking things we catch ourselves thinking—a realization, “which remembers it began in time and then sovereignly recaptures itself and in which fact, reason, and freedom

coincide" (*Primacy* 22). Consciousness and freedom are not things, yet they are not nothing and do not reduce the world to chaos. They are attached to our bodies and to other people as well as to things; they are incarnate. All meaning presupposes the world and there is no meaning outside of the world. Nothing before the fact of our being tells us how to think or act. To "exist" is to "stand out"—to be aware of our being, to be a subject in and have a hold on the world. The *whole* world is metaphysical: the non-human world is the background for human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. We see things in the world, we see ourselves in the world, and we see others in the world who see us as we see them—which is to say, incompletely. The world is partly hidden and it is inexhaustible. And yet *in it* appears "this marvel that is the connection of experience" (*Phenomenology* lxxxv).

According to its sub-title, Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat" is "A tale intended to be after the fact. Being the experience of four men from the sunk steamer *Commodore*" (885). Before the story begins, Crane calls our attention to the fact, or facts, it presupposes—not only the event, the historical or empirical sinking of the steamer (which was on its way to Cuba to deliver arms for the insurrection against Spain), but also the personal experience of the four men immediately after this sinking, and, at the same time, the tale itself. To "intend" suggests action—our mind as it is directed toward things. To intend is "to stretch toward," an attempt *to have* rather than *to be*. The tale itself is an action—"after the fact" chronologically but *in* time and in *pursuit* of the fact, looking forward, stretching toward the fact in the present act of telling, of writing or reading. The story is not metafiction—it is not *about* fiction. It is embodied fiction—fiction with a hold on the world.

The story's opening sentence is full of mystery: "None of them knew the color of the sky" (885). There's no "none of them" outside the mind because there's no nothingness in nature. So we begin in a briefly suspended point of view, external to the world that contains "them"—the point of view of abstract reflection that contrasts with *their* perspective, whoever *they* are. We wonder *where* they are. Why don't they know the color of the sky? Are they blind? And why should they care about the sky's color anyhow? In short, we wonder about their situation, as if we didn't have one of our own, only to reflect more consciously on it once we more fully imagine it.

Crane's stories are full of color. His style is associated with "literary impressionism," in that it often represents the sensation, or rather the sense, of life—what is actually perceived from a limited point of view rather than what is assumed or known. Cézanne said that color is the "place where our brain and the universe meet" (*Primacy* 180). In an essay called "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty shows where Cézanne, though linked to them in some ways, differed from the Impressionists. The Impressionist tries "to capture, in painting, the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses," to depict objects "as they appear to instantaneous perception, without fixed contours, bound together by light and air," and in doing so "submerges the object and causes it to lose its proper weight." Cézanne used more black than they did. He wanted "to represent the object, to find it again behind the atmosphere." His technique consists of "a modulation of colors which stays close to the object's form and to the light it receives." "Doing away with exact contours in certain cases," Merleau-Ponty continues, "giving color priority over the outline—these obviously mean different things for Cézanne and for the Impressionists. The object is no longer covered by reflections and lost in its relationships to the atmosphere and to other objects . . . and the result is an impression of solidity and material substance" (*Sense* 11-12).

Crane's literary impressionism, if that's what it is, is more like the paintings of Cézanne than those of Monet or Renoir: "Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks" (885). There is no mistaking the material substance of these waves—or the men's situation in regard to them. The men are not blind. The world is visible. It has form—and it also, seemingly, has intent: "These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall, and each froth-top was a problem in small boat navigation" (885). The men are primarily in a world not of instantaneous sensation or stimuli and not of the intellect or psyche but of situated being, of time and extension. They discover that "after successfully surmounting one wave . . . there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats" (886).

There is no "behind" in geometrical or purely physical space; there are just things in instantaneous juxtaposition. "Behind" is a fact of perceptual

experience. From the point of view of the men in the boat, one wave is behind another, and only from this point of view can we get an idea “of the resources of the sea in the line of waves that is not probable to the average experience, which is never at sea in a dingey” (886). On the one hand, the most average experience—say, that of reading in a room—can give us the idea of height, breadth, and depth. All we need do is look up and down or across or up from the page or gaze at the bookcase. We need hardly turn the page, and if we close our eyes, our bodies will still, for the most part, tell us where we are. On the other hand, only an extraordinary experience, say, that of these men at sea, can give us an idea of the inexhaustible resources of reality. It is one thing to reflect on the world in a small room and another to be threatened by the dimensions and movement of the waves in an open boat. The story continually mixes average with extraordinary experience.

Calling our attention again to a more distant perspective, Crane writes, “In the wan light, the faces of the men must have been gray. Their eyes must have glinted in strange ways as they gazed steadily astern. Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtlessly have been weirdly picturesque” (886). As readers, perhaps reluctantly, we identify with this detached point of view, yet we have already gotten too close to the waves to detach ourselves altogether. There are other points of view suggested in the tale as well—though these are not as fully taken up. The cook says, “There’s a house of refuge just north of the Mosquito Inlet Light, and as soon as they see us, they’ll come off in their boat and pick us up.” “As soon as who see us?” the correspondent asks, adding that houses of refuge don’t have crews. And then the oiler says, “We’re not there yet” (887).

Several things make this scene “real”: the psychology of the men, which we understand well enough, their imperfect knowledge of the coast, the familiarity of their dialogue, and their sense of being in the world. “We’re not there yet” is a matter of fact. The men know the waves have other waves behind them because they are near to them and might be swamped. “The perceived thing,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question” (*Primacy* 16). On the one hand, the story’s point of view is so near the men’s that it describes their sensory impressions of objects that remain otherwise unidentifiable. It also has access to their reflections, their thoughts and feelings, particularly those of the

correspondent. On the other hand, it is far enough from the men's point of view to call attention to the differences between their perspective, the presumed perspective of others in their world, and the perspective of the writer or reader outside of that world. For us the "object in question" is not exactly "The Open Boat." It is the world we see through "The Open Boat," or according to it.³ Its style makes us aware that this world is "a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views" that may blend together or remain noticeably distinct.

Within the story, the men often see *themselves* as the object in question, for instance when the correspondent, "pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there" (885). The men experience an uncanny and disturbing feeling when they see themselves reflected in the interest of non-human creatures, as in the "black beadlike eyes" of the canton flannel gulls (888), or the circling of the shark that we see first as "a long, loud swishing astern of the boat, and a gleaming trail of phosphorescence, like blue flame" and which "might have been made by a monstrous knife" (900-01). They are aware of their own and of each other's bodies, that of the cook "whose sleeves were rolled over his fat forearms," or "the injured captain, lying in the bow," for example. But unlike the gulls and the shark, they are also aware of their own and each other's subjectivity, of the captain's being "at this time buried in that profound dejection and indifference which comes, temporarily at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when, willy nilly, the firm fails, the army loses, the ship goes down" (885).

Implied in Crane's "willy nilly" is a recognition of the contingency of all human action. Morality rises out of this contingency. It presupposes an inter-subjective rather than an omniscient point of view and always appears in a world where intentions may prove futile or backfire:

It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him. They were a captain, an oiler, a cook, a correspondent, and they were friends, friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree than may be common. The hurt captain, lying against the water-jar in the bow, spoke always in a low voice and calmly, but he could never command a more ready and swiftly obedient crew than the motley three of the dingey. It was more than a mere

recognition of what was best for the common safety. There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heartfelt. And after this devotion to the commander of the boat there was this comradeship that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. (890)

The men may drown. They almost certainly will drown if they don't cooperate—if the captain doesn't keep his eye on the place toward which they should row and on the wind and the waves, if the cook doesn't bail the water from the boat, and if the oiler and the correspondent don't row until one can't anymore and the other takes over. The choice to cooperate, however, is not an intellectual or a moral choice, if by "moral" we mean according to any set of external principles, and it is no guarantee either. The correspondent knows it was not the most logical or religious experience of his life; it was only "the best."

But in what way was it the best? In an essay written in 1945 titled "The War Has Taken Place," Merleau-Ponty writes that

the Resistance offered the rare phenomenon of historical action which remained personal. The psychological and moral elements of political action were almost the only ones to appear here, which is why intellectuals least inclined to politics were to be seen in the Resistance. The Resistance was a unique experience for them, and they wanted to preserve its spirit in the new French politics because this experience broke away from the famous dilemma of being and doing, which confronts all intellectuals in the face of action. This was the source of that *happiness* through danger which we observed in some of our comrades, usually so tormented. (*Sense* 151)

The experience of the men in the boat is not historic, for, in a sense, the story begins where history ends—after the sinking of the *Commodore*. The fate of the men in the open boat does not comprise the fate of hundreds or thousands of people and it has very little to do with institutions. Yet it *is* historic in that the men are moving with one another in a certain direction toward an uncertain end that will be determined as much by their will, strength, and actions as by the contingencies of the environment and by accident.

In the open boat, politics consists of the relationship between four men—their dialogue and interactions against the background of non-human nature. There is a close alignment between being and doing. Yet this alignment does not preclude reflection, for not all reflection is analytical or intellectual, as if detached altogether from being. Reflection is part of the men's existence—it is one of the ways by which they take up of the facts of their unfortunate situation. "As for the reflections of the men," Crane writes, "there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus: 'If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? It is preposterous. If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. . . . The whole affair is absurd'" (894).

It is absurd to have questions that cannot be answered, while every instinct we have tells us to ask. These questions must come at first from answerable ones. Is this animal I face going to kill me? Should I fight it, run from it, make friends with it? Can I ignore it? Is the sky about to open up? Should I look for shelter? We look for answers in embodied signs: a snarl, a rearing up, a look of the eye, a streak of lightning or roll of thunder. But the questions become more abstract—and the signs more ambiguous. Why am I here? Why now? Why is no one coming to the rescue? Many of our answers become habitual. It is our fate. It is God's will—or the will of the gods. It is a matter of cause and effect. It is pure chance. The world is wicked, or meaningless. And none of these answers is altogether satisfactory. Merleau-Ponty writes that "a metaphysical literature will necessarily be amoral, in a certain sense, for there is no longer any human nature on which to rely. In every one of man's actions the invasion of metaphysics causes what was only an 'old habit' to explode" (*Sense* 28). And yet, in the face of this ambiguity, we have the freedom to act as if our actions matter.

There is a sequence in "The Open Boat" that recalls one of the great speeches in literature. The men row near enough to shore to see a man. He's walking along. He stops and faces them. He begins to wave. "Ah, now we're all right! Now we're all right! There'll be a boat out here for us in half an hour." However, these signs and interpretations continue without any development toward certainty. Another man appears. He's

running. He's on a bicycle. He meets the first man. Now both are waving. Something comes up the beach. It's a boat. It's on wheels. It must be the life-boat. No, it's a bus. They must be collecting the life-crew. There's a fellow waving a black flag. Or is it his coat? "So it is. It's his coat. He's taken it off and is waving it around his head. But would you look at him swing it!" "Oh, say, there isn't any life-saving station there. That's just a winter resort hotel omnibus that has brought over some of the boarders to see us drown." "What's that idiot with the coat mean? What's he signaling, anyhow?" (895-97). And then we realize that the lines have rung a bell: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare 5.5.26-28). The trouble for the men in the open boat is not that the man waving to them is an idiot. He's not an idiot because he's not signaling. Only the idea that he might be communicating with them turns the man on shore into an idiot. As they realize soon enough, whatever is waving may not even be a man. Somewhere between things or others in the world and our reception of them, interference takes place.

For the men in the open boat, it is mostly hope. For Macbeth, it is something worse. He has given up his hold on human relationships—all but one, and now that one is gone as well. "The Queen, my lord, is dead" is the information that precedes Macbeth's reflections, which begin with the lines "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.16-18). His own actions, and the prophecies of the witches, have made time collapse and life appear meaningless. And yet he continues to reflect on the world—not only on his own world but on that of human beings generally. The men in the open boat face a nature that is no less equivocal than Macbeth's and that of his world. Through nobody's fault, the non-human world seems likely to do them harm, and the human world—outside of the open boat—seems to have betrayed or forgotten them. Yet they continue to act morally toward one another.

Again in "The War Has Taken Place," Merleau-Ponty observes that the political task that lies ahead is to reintegrate men's political or social relations into their human relationships. "This political task is not incompatible," he writes, "with any cultural value or literary task, if literature and culture are defined as the progressive awareness of our multiple relationships with other people and the world, rather than as extramundane techniques. . . . In man's co-existence with man, of which

these years have made us aware, morals, doctrines, thoughts and customs, laws, works and words all express each other; everything signifies everything. And outside this unique fulguration of existence there is nothing" (*Sense* 152). Signification takes place in the world of human beings, and only human beings can make the world meaningful or meaningless. When they get done cursing the idiot with the coat, the men in the boat go back to rowing. They watch the darkness come. They wonder again if they are going to drown, and if so, why they have been allowed to come so far. "Keep her head up! Keep her head up!" the captain says, and the rower replies, "Keep her head up, sir." Sometimes keeping our heads up—or on—is all we can do. But then the cook asks Billie, "what kind of pie do you like best?" (898-99).

In an essay called "Man, the Hero," Merleau-Ponty writes that "The man who is still alive has only one resource but a sovereign one: he must keep on acting like a living man" (*Sense* 186). He must keep moving toward things and other people, like the men in the boat. Human action and dialogue take place within indeterminate horizons under both given and changeable conditions. Morality is bound up in these conditions. The good we believe ourselves to be doing might in fact do harm. What's good for one person may be harmful for another. Morality is not given once and for all but consists, in a given situation, of considering other people's points of view and acting accordingly. In "Metaphysics and the Novel," Merleau-Ponty writes that "The fundamental contingency of our lives makes us feel like *strangers* at the *trial* to which others have brought us. . . . But that other miracle, the fact that, in an absurd world, language and behavior do have meaning for those who speak and act, remains to be understood." Between the self closed in on itself and an idealism that empties the self into eternity, there is "an effective existence which unfolds in patterns of behavior, is organized like a melody, and, by means of its projects, cuts across time without leaving it" (*Sense* 38-40). In "The War Has Taken Place" he writes that "A judgment without words is incomplete; a word to which there can be no reply is nonsense; my freedom is interwoven with that of others by way of the world." And he adds, "One cannot get beyond history and time; all one can do is manufacture a private eternity in their midst, as artificial as the eternity of a madman who believes he is God. There is no vital spirit in gloomy isolated dreams; spirit only appears in the full light of dialogue" (*Sense* 147).

And yet we wonder at certain times whether meaningful dialogue can take place between an individual and the non-speaking world. A vital spirit can appear in solitude, and the dialogue a person may have in darkness is not necessarily nonsense, though there may be more silence in it than words. Rowing while the others sleep, or seem to sleep, the correspondent has a long night: "The wind had a voice as it came over the waves, and it was sadder than the end." It is here that "the long, loud swishing" comes astern of the boat, followed by a stillness, "while the correspondent breathed with the open mouth and looked at the sea." And then he sees "an enormous fin speed like a shadow through the water, hurling the crystalline spray and leaving the long glowing trail." The other men seem certainly asleep. "So, bereft of sympathy, he leaned a little way to one side and swore softly into the sea" (900-01). While the correspondent swears, the narrator comments:

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with jeers.

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: "Yes, but I love myself."

A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation. (902)

We comprehend the correspondent's isolation, and yet Crane does not seem to be saying that a "high cold star" says nothing.

It is the word of the personification of nature, and it is also a real silence, as real as the silence in any dialogue and against which all dialogue takes place—the silence between speakers and enveloping their speech. In several poems, Crane provides words for these silences. The most famous one reads: "A man said to the universe: / 'Sir, I exist!' / 'However,' replied the universe, / 'The fact has not created in me / 'A sense of obligation'" (*War* 1335). Another reads, "I walked in a desert. / And I cried, 'Ah, God, take me from this place!' / A voice said, 'It is no desert.' / I cried, 'Well, but, the

sand, the heat, the vacant horizon.’ / A voice said, ‘It is no desert’” (*Black* 1314). In “The Open Boat,” where the men’s situation is fully dramatized, we need only imagine the star to be aware of its meaning.

But what exactly is the meaning we get back from the universe—from the desert or the night sky? The sense of beauty? The perception of space or time? The feeling that the universe would be, if not maimed, at least different without the dimensions our looking out at the horizon or up at the star has given it? Something, anyhow, comes back to us from the unconscious world. We are not mad for feeling it, though perhaps we would become so if we were to stay out in it too long—if the verse about the soldier dying in Algiers had not “mysteriously entered the correspondent’s head” and did not seem to him “a human, living thing” (902-03), if the captain did not say at last that he, too, had seen the shark, and if the oiler could not be woken. “‘Billie! . . . Billie, will you spell me?’ ‘Sure,’ said the oiler” (904). The sociability of this dialogue and the simplicity of the men’s actions constitute the only heroism they need. As for what’s out of their hands, that’s where belief comes in—but it need not be a belief that takes them out of the natural world. There is always something hidden in the perspectival world, something beyond what can be perceived. There is always the possibility of wonder.

After this long night, when the correspondent opens his eyes, “the sea and the sky were each of the gray hue of dawning.” Later still, “carmine and gold was painted upon the waters,” and finally morning appears “in its splendor, with a sky of pure blue, and the sunlight flamed on the tips of the waves” (905). These are the colors seen by a man who, like Cézanne, sees himself in the objects around him, whether or not they look back—a man who reflects on what he sees and comprehends that what he sees is there from only one of an infinite number of possible points of view. For none of these points of view are the flames of sunlight the same or complete. And for that very reason, they must really be there. They are the background against which vision takes place. The natural world is Crane’s canvas. Its woven texture, and the fact of its being stretched out before him, appears through the painting.

According to Cézanne, “there are two things in a painter: the eye and the brain, and they need to help each other, you have to work on their mutual development, but in a painter’s way: on the eye, by looking at things through nature; on the brain, by the logic of organized sensations which

provides the means of expression. . . . There is, in an apple, in a head, a culminating point, and this point—in spite of the effect, the tremendous effect: shadow or light, sensations of colour—is always the one nearest our eyes. The edges of objects recede to another point placed on your horizon. . . . The eye must concentrate, grasp the subject, and the brain will find a means to express it.” He adds that “as soon as we’re painters, we’re swimming in real water, in actual colour, in full reality. We’re grappling directly with objects. They lift us up” (Gasquet 221-23). Like a tale of the sea, the still life and the landscape are explorations of what it is for a human being to exist in the world. When the exploration is fully taken up, the ordinary and the extraordinary merge.

No help is coming, the men have little strength left, and though the surf will surely swamp the boat, they head for the beach. Seeing a windmill in the distance, the correspondent “wondered if none ever ascended the tall wind-tower, and if then they never looked seaward. This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent” (905). And yet this very indifference is personified; nature is aware of that to which she turns her back. The windmill stands out from the shore, with a front that can’t be seen. It is there in fact and there in reflection and there, strangely, in its own non-human relation to the background and the men behind her, to the correspondent’s own body as “the always implied third term of the figure-background structure.”⁴ “Objects enter into each other,” Cézanne says. “They never stop living, you understand. . . . Imperceptibly they extend beyond themselves through intimate reflections, as we do by looks and words” (Gasquet 220).

Billie backs the boat in to the rollers. They won’t get very close. Each man steals a glance from the rollers to the shore, and “in the expression of the eyes during this contemplation there was a singular quality. The correspondent, observing the others, knew that they were not afraid, but the full meaning of their glances was shrouded” (906). A third and final wave swallows the boat and the men tumble into the sea. The correspondent faces the fact that the water is colder than he expected: “The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow so mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation that it seemed almost a proper reason

for tears. The water was cold" (907). The confusion is of subjectivity and objectivity at their moment of truth—of an abstract reasoning that is always incarnate; a consciousness that is first and foremost a body in the world. In a chapter from *Phenomenology of Perception* called "The Body as Expression, and Speech," Merleau-Ponty writes, "let us see clearly all that is implied by the rediscovery of one's own body. It is not merely one object among all others that resists reflection and remains, so to speak, glued to the subject. Obscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety" (205). Perceptual experience takes place in "the thickness of the world" and in "a living connection" between the sensing and the sensed.⁵ We learn to know the body and the world by taking them up, in a knowledge that is deeper than objective or subjective knowledge, but nonetheless unsettling and unresolved.

The correspondent sees the oiler swimming strongly. He himself knows it is a long journey and paddles leisurely, but then he is caught in a current and now the shore seems spread before him as in a picture, and he is "impressed as one who in a gallery looks at a scene from Brittany or Holland." He reflects again on the possibility of his drowning, and then he thinks, or Crane does, that "Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature" (908). Philosophical reflection does not take us out of the un-reflected world except to turn us back to it to see what it means—which is also to say, to experience its wonder. "Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world," Merleau-Ponty writes; "rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical" (*Primacy* lxxvii).

The correspondent does not die—he lives to tell the tale. But the oiler dies, perhaps because he had worked the longest, or had swum too fast, or just *because*; in any case, it seems, unfairly. Like the other men, and the rest of us, Billie would have been glad to see "the man who had been running and undressing, and undressing and running, come bounding into the water," and he would have looked forward to receiving comfort from "the men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and the women with coffee-pots"—but the welcome of the land for him was nothing more than "the different and sinister hospitality of the grave" (909).

The story ends with this sentence: "When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters" (909). They could be interpreters not because they knew what it was to have experienced what they did but because they had experienced it. "The world is not what I think," says Merleau-Ponty, "but what I live" (*Phenomenology* lxxx). Yet from life emerges self-consciousness, reflection, interpretation. Literary interpretation, too, is a genuine act of inter-subjective and related experience whose context is the world we share. Whether factual or fictitious, literature is not merely representation. It takes place against the background of the natural world. Its fact and its truth—the essence or form of its fact—is present in each of its sentences. The line between the world of a story and the world of the reader is less a line than a horizon.

At nearly the end of "Eye and Mind," the last work Merleau-Ponty saw published, he asks: "Is this the highest point of reason, to realize that the soil beneath our feet is shifting, to pompously name 'interrogation' what is only a persistent state of stupor, to call 'research' or 'quest' what is only trudging in a circle, to call 'Being' that which never fully *is*?" His answer pertains directly to art and literature:

But this disappointment issues from that spurious fantasy which claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness. It is the regret of not being everything, and a rather groundless regret at that. For if we cannot establish a hierarchy of civilizations or speak of progress—neither in painting nor in anything else that matters—it is not because some fate holds us back; it is, rather, because the very first painting in some sense went to the farthest reach of the future. If no painting comes to be *the* painting, if no work is ever absolutely completed and done with, still each creation changes, alters, enlightens, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates in advance all the others. If creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away; it is also that they have almost all their life still before them. (*Primacy* 190)

This is not the most logical or ideal affirmation of art and literature—or of human existence—but it is the best.

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Notes

1 *Primacy* 12. The essays I have cited from this collection, their translators, and their page numbers are as follows: "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," trans. James M. Edie 12-42 and "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery 159-90.

2 *Sense* 28. The essays I have cited from this collection and their page numbers are as follows: "Cézanne's Doubt," 9-25, "Metaphysics and the Novel," 26-40, "The War Has Taken Place," 139-152, and "Man, the Hero," 182-87.

3 Merleau-Ponty writes, "I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, than that I *see it*" (*Primacy* 164).

4 Merleau-Ponty's full sentence reads, "With regard to spatiality, which is our present concern, one's own body is the always implied third term of the figure-background structure, and each figure appears perspectively against the double horizon of external space and bodily space" (*Phenomenology* 103).

5 *Phenomenology* 211-13. See also "Eye and Mind," *Primacy* 162-64.