

DILECTION: ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF CHILD DRAWING AND THE GENESIS OF POETIC EXPRESSION

ABSTRACT

In light of a contemporary reinvigoration of the discourse of drawing, this essay re-considers the frontier between writing and drawing as expressive compartments, specifically through the theoretical discourse of child drawing. Through discussions of the psychologist Georges-Henri Luquet, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the poet Francis Ponge, the essay argues that, between the poles of attention and expression, the discourse of child drawing demonstrates the importance of an affective notion of selection. Developing a theory of ‘graphic infancy’, it discusses the role played by an embodied, selective disposition towards the phenomenal world – of which the linguistic field is a part - in the development of artistic and poetic expressiveness.

ABBREVIATIONS

CPP – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, translated by Talia Welsh, Northwestern University Press, 2010

PP – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, Routledge Classics, 2002

OC I Francis Ponge, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 1, Gallimard, 1999

OC II Francis Ponge, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 2, Gallimard, 2002

VT Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things*, edited and translated by Beth Archer, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972

INTRODUCTION

The backdrop of this essay is a contemporary and cross-disciplinary reinvigoration of the art of drawing. In the US, note major exhibitions like the Museum of Modern Art's 2010 retrospective *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, through to the opening of galleries and centres dedicated entirely to drawing, most prominently the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston in 2018. In the United Kingdom, the popular embrace of the medium (not to mention its concomitant uptick in market value) was epitomised by the country's first art fair dedicated to drawings, at the Saatchi Gallery in 2019. It is a trend in theory as in practice: on the continent, in addition to similar such exhibitions and events, doyens of French philosophy like Jean-Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou, have, in recent years, written potent essays on the philosophical primacy of the poetics of drawing.¹

Of course, such trends are diffuse phenomena with complex determinations. My opening hypothesis is that the historical role of technology – that is, technologies that both rend and reunite drawing and writing - is an important current informing the trend. Whereas the cultural hegemony of figurative painting – and the perspectival mode of drawing underpinning it - met an epistemic challenge with the advent of photography (sloganized with Paul Delaroche's 1839 pronouncement that 'painting is dead'), drawing as a medium in its own right encountered a technological upheaval on an additional front. Since it shares its material supports and media with writing, drawing was caught up in the advents of print and type: the supersession of the felt expressivity of graphic writing by the standardization of type. For Martin Heidegger, this advent had the status of a tremendous ontological event, nothing less than a 'transformation in the relation of Being to man' (*Parmenides*, 80). As much as it transformed our relation with writing, the epistemic shift from inscription to type equally altered our relation with paper, alienating writing from the material surface and thus from its close proximity, as an inscriptive mode of expression, to drawing. This alienation, and its attendant nostalgia, plays its own part in the theoretical stances of post-

structuralism. Jacques Derrida reflects, in an interview from the 1990s, on the role played in his own thinking (or, rather, writing) by a ‘nostalgia for the colour, the weight, the thickness, the resistance of a sheet of paper’ (20). That is, for the sensory and phantasmatic investments of manual graphism that are co-extensive with—but not simply reducible to—writing; a nostalgia not just for manual writing, but also for the graphic situation of child drawing, where expression emerges from tactile exploration and experimentation.

Now, more recently, this technological history has been inflected toward the emergence of technologies, like tablets, touchscreens and digital styluses, which have re-approximated the simple technicity and ready-to-hand portability of paper and pen, and which go some way toward re-imbricating writing and drawing. The online emergence of the ‘asemic’ movement (which exists somewhere between drawing and writing), where technology served rather than suppressed manual graphic practice, is an instructive case.² It is a turn that belies the somewhat outmoded critical tendency to dismiss as Luddite, sentimental, or ‘somatocentric’ any theoretical approach to the written word that makes serious claims on behalf of the manual and the graphic as entry points into the material and phenomenological geneses of expression.³

My claim is that there remains an intellectual imperative to reconsider drawing and the roles it plays in how we relate to and express the world. In this essay, I will focus on the discourse of child drawing in order to lay the groundwork for a critical analogy between the micro orthogenetic narrative of graphic development and the modes of subjectivity implied by the macro historical trajectories I have been sketching here. The discourse of child drawing provides a means for thinking the cultural persistence and functions of graphism in a way that is not merely sentimental or primitivistic, and which, more importantly, foregrounds the essential and formative kinship between drawing and writing as expressive comportments. In so doing I aim to make a contribution to the discussions in expression theory, in which it is commonplace to locate the origin of artistic expression in everyday communicative expression. Jenefer Robinson, for example,

argues that ‘expression and expressiveness have their home in ordinary life and then are extended to the arts’ (19). Taking this to its logical starting point, my focus, specifically, is on how the ‘expressiveness’ of child drawing extends into other modes of expression.

Robinson’s reference to the ‘home’ of expression and expressiveness offers me a route into a brief illustrative reading of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘Sestina’. ‘Sestina’ looks back to a domestic scene as a cauldron of expression, and dramatizes all the main themes—child drawing, expressivity, the transactions between visualization and verbalization—that I intend to put into play in this essay. Bishop exploits the recursive mode of the sestina form to create a poetic equivalent to what the psychologist Georges-Henri Luquet labels the ‘internal model’ of childhood drawing—the idea that children draw objects from a mental image by aggregating individualized parts. Bishop selects a limited array of tangible elements with which to construct the visual world of the poem, relying on simple, declarative clauses to sketch a house populated by a ‘stove’, an ‘almanac’, and a ‘kettle’ (121). The poem, as such, mirrors the child’s drawing that it describes: it is a straightforward example of how the condensed visual grammar of child drawing may be refigured verbally into the patterned expressiveness of lyric poetry. The final line of the poem - ‘and the child draws another inscrutable house’ (122) – understands not just the repetition-compulsion of child drawing, but, more importantly, that here expression originates less in a will to communicate than it does in a private wrangling with perceived phenomena.

Coming to terms with the problem that expression originates in ‘inscrutable’ experience, my approach to child drawing seeks something in the vein of Giorgio Agamben’s account of infancy. By infancy, Agamben refers to an extra-linguistic experience that sustains itself in speech: *‘In terms of human infancy, experience is the simple difference between the human and the linguistic. The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant—this is experience’* (50). While Agamben’s account of infancy unfolds in the domain of speech, I want to argue for a comparable persistence of *graphic* infancy in the domain of writing. I will also be aided by art historical scholarship, with

the caveat that child drawing is largely resistant to a disciplinary lens that tends to focus on vertically inherited traditions and institutionally sanctioned schemata. In direct contrast, the discourse of child drawing is predicated on visual expression that is untutored, ignorant of schemata, and uninformed by any direct pedagogical influence (instead, the indirect influences of the child's milieu).⁴

At the centre of my focus will be the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose critical engagements (on the subject of children's drawings) with the Georges-Henri Luquet and the poet Francis Ponge lend this essay its overarching structure. Through a discussion of Luquet, Merleau-Ponty, and, finally, Ponge, I want to elaborate what I am calling a phenomenology of selection. This refers to a process whereby child drawing – and, beyond that, modes of expression that exploit the routes of perception that child drawing makes available – emerges from a primary 'choice situation' (a term I take from E.H. Gombrich) based on material circumstances that are brought to bear upon the sheet of paper as a field of action. Here, selection emerges as a third term from a theoretical spectrum comprising the poles of attention and expression. Ponge is exemplary for the way in which he both viewed poetic expression as a material engagement with the world, but also in his complementary critical fascination with modern drawing. I will argue, through Ponge, that this selective phenomenology is markedly poetic, since it informs and undergirds a linguistic attitude that treats language as a material reservoir of possibilities negotiated on the page. Here I am at odds with critics who turn to drawing – and, in particular, child drawing – as a means of charting the discontents of a perceived linguistic turn. Lawrence Alloway, for example, describes drawing as 'the projection of the artist's intelligence in its least discursive form' (38). Jonathan Fineberg sees child art as offering a route away from 'logocentrism': 'a powerful mode of reasoning that is not verbal' (12). My aim is to show instead how child drawing, as graphic infancy, *informs* modes of verbal reasoning.

Eventually, I will tie this phenomenology to the word that gives me my title: dilection. This is a term used by Ponge to describe the drawings of Pablo Picasso's Blue Period. Obsolete in English, dilection comes from the Latin *diligo*, which means both 'to love' and 'to select'. Emphasising this double-value, I use dilection to name a co-determination of affect and selection (whereby to love is to select and to select is to love). I wish to develop a poetic concept of dilection as a name for visual and verbal instances of affective expression that do not transcend the choice situation of which they are permutations, that therefore do not subtract the object from its surroundings and contexts, but which are constituted and sustained by their derivation from those choice situations. This intervening co-determination of affect and choice oscillates between attention and expression, and is, I want to argue, the principle of graphic infancy.

Before I move on, I will give a brief outline of what I have referred to as the spectrum of attention and expression, the spectrum that the related terms of selection and dilection are deployed to resist. To a significant degree, the history and theory of drawing plays out upon this spectrum. On one end is the academic model of mimetic attention, stretching back to the Renaissance ideal of *disegno*, through to the Romantic rhetoric of John Ruskin's '*innocence of the eye*' (18) – which constrained drawing to the rectitude of resemblance at the cost of expressive freedom. 'It is not required of your drawing that it should be free', Ruskin finger-wags in *The Elements of Drawing*, 'but that it should be right' (23). Ruskin's innocent eye – which stands for a perception that is direct, unmediated, formally autonomous – therefore aspires to a condition of infancy, what Ruskin calls a 'sort of childish perception' (18). With this in mind, I will refer back to Ruskin's concept later in the essay. On the other end of the spectrum is the ideal of drawing as a kind of pure expression, which probably hit its apex in the Surrealist practice of automatism. For André Breton, what he called 'the essential discovery' of Surrealism is that 'without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write and the pencil that runs in order to draw spin an infinitely precious substance' ('Artistic Genesis', 68). The Surrealists divorced drawing from the

will to trace the contours of the external world and allied it to the subject instead of the object - and also to writing or *écriture* sooner than painting.

This is not to assert that the history of art is a kind of migration *en masse* from attention to expression: the spectrum is not chronologically progressive. Leonardo's copious drawings, for example, encompass the whole field. Going back further, the two foundational myths of drawing in Pliny's *Natural History* provide a further illustration. On one hand, there is the attentive exemplar of the story of Butades, a Corinthian potter whose daughter originated the art of drawing by carefully tracing the outline of her beloved on a wall. Elsewhere in Pliny's text is the expressive model of the celebrated painter Apelles who, on a visit to his rival, Protogenes, left behind the drawing of a single, sinuous line as the irreducible expression of his artistic identity (a forebear of William Hogarth's famous line of beauty). The polar figures of Butades and Apelles cast long shadows over the history of drawing. The critical encounter between Merleau-Ponty and Luquet, in the next section of this essay, begins on this same spectrum.

FROM LINE TO POINT: MERLEAU-PONTY'S MODIFICATION OF LUQUET'S THEORY OF CHILD DRAWING

At the risk of conceptual over-determination, I want to overlay the attention/expression spectrum with the classical pairing of mimesis and poesis. For Luquet, as an activity of attention, child drawing aspires to direct mimesis. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, child drawing is an expression that corresponds to poesis. I intend this in the sense that Martin Heidegger, an important forebear in Merleau-Ponty's thought, invests in poesis as a 'Bringing-forth' (*Basic Writings*, 230), but also a sense of crafting and bricolage: bringing forth by bringing together available elements. Through Luquet and Merleau-Ponty, I want to underscore the selective

compositional energies that inform graphic expression. My aim is to conceptualize further a phenomenology of expressive selection that finds, here, its purest articulation in the drawing of children, but which also, given its withdrawal into a judicious subject-position of picking and choosing, lends itself to an inter-medial perspective.

An unprecedented longitudinal analysis of child drawing, Luquet's 1927 *Le Dessin enfantin* (*Children's Drawings*) exerted a deep and enduring influence in the field of developmental psychology, from Jean Piaget's early adoption through to more recent scholarship in the field.⁵ In the lectures given by Merleau-Ponty while Chair of Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne (from 1949 to 1952), Luquet appears as one of the philosopher's key references and, on occasions, theoretical punch-bags (though Merleau-Ponty accepts, and builds upon, many of Luquet's observations). Luquet and Merleau-Ponty share the premise that what is especially interesting about child drawing, and what merits theoretical investigation, is its innocence – exactly the kind of quality that Ruskin suggested all drawing should emulate. As this convergence suggests, the history and theory of art, though seldom drawn to children's drawings as objects of study in themselves, is conversant with the discipline of child drawing insofar as it posits childhood as a mimetic (or indeed expressive) ideal. Particularly instructive for my argument is E.H. Gombrich's refusal, against Ruskin, of a 'sharp division' (310) between mimetic and expressive acts. Gombrich argues that neither representational nor expressive art is innocent: 'In our response to expression no less than in our reading of representation', he writes, 'our expectations of possibilities and probabilities must come into play' (316). The meaning and affective force of both figurative and expressive art – and our ability to recognise them as such – require our knowledge or intuition of the available conventions ('we cannot judge expression without an awareness of the choice situation, without a knowledge of the organon') (319). Art history becomes the discourse and repository of those choices and relations.

To return to the corresponding distinction between representation and expression in the drawing of children, one has to contend, precisely, with the ignorance of what Gombrich calls the ‘organon’ - the established conventions of formalized drawing. The choice situation for the child drawer is not one of an established system or code -- it is more material than it is structural, more grounded in the immediate phenomenal situation of the act of drawing (the choices among crayon colours and visible or known objects and their constituent elements). In their accounts, Luquet and Merleau-Ponty alike are not interested in the child’s acquisition of learned and constructed methods of pictorial representation, though Luquet makes brief remarks about the child’s later ‘development in technical skill’ that is ‘acquired in a specialised culture’ (142). I therefore want to remain sensitive to the implicit theories of innocence – in both its sensory and experiential modalities - in both Luquet and Merleau-Ponty’s approaches.

I will start with Luquet. As I discussed in relation to Bishop’s poem ‘Sestina’, for Luquet, children draw from an ‘internal model’ (47): a secondary mental image of a perceived object, as opposed to a direct attempt at visual representation (which, according to Luquet, is how adults draw). In contrast with the contemporaneous flourishing of psychoanalytic interest in child drawing as sublimation (Melanie Klein in Britain, Sophie Morgenstern in France), Luquet’s approach to drawing is undergirded by a philosophy of perceptual realism.⁶ Luquet sought to demonstrate how the child’s graphic development reflects an increasingly refined awareness of objective realities, culminating in an ability to observe and represent things as they really are (it is, therefore, a journey from one form of innocence to another: from the innocence of undeveloped ability to the innocent eye of unclouded representation). The course of this development is guided by two factors: firstly, it is concomitant with the child’s increasing capacity to be attentive to things - to attune their attention to the world – and, secondly, it is constrained by the expanding range of their graphic aptitude and ability. Individual expression and aesthetic sensibility play next to no role.

Luquet's model is split into stages. The first is 'fortuitous realism', with which Luquet beholds the scrawling and scribbling play of toddlers ('mere lines with no figurative intent') and focusses on the way in which drawings of this kind sometimes bear 'accidental resemblances' to objects (87-88). The second stage is 'failed realism', where a will-to-represent succeeds the non-figurative play of the first stage. 'Children want to be realists' (93), Luquet argues, a will derived from a need to know, adapt to, and master their environment. But, at this stage, their ambition outstrips their ability – owing, primarily, to the 'limited and discontinuous character of [their] attention' (93). Drawings of the failed realism stage are hamstrung by what Luquet calls a 'synthetic incapacity', that is, a failure to co-ordinate elements of a given object into a coherent, recognisable whole (98). The third and most important stage is 'intellectual realism', where the child starts to draw from the abstracted image of the internal model, and thus the stage that for Luquet is most characteristic of child psychology. As if overcompensating for their previous synthetic incapacity, the intellectual realist tries to synthesise a composite ideal of a given object – 'to present the greatest number, if not all, of the essential elements of the represented object' (105). There is a characteristic lack of linear perspective. A good example of an intellectual realist drawing is a potato field drawn by a seven-year-old Dutch boy, executed as a plan, and comprised of two elements that are invisible in an actual field of potatoes: the squared boundary and the subterranean rows of tubers, arranged horizontally (incidentally resembling the planar linearity of writing).

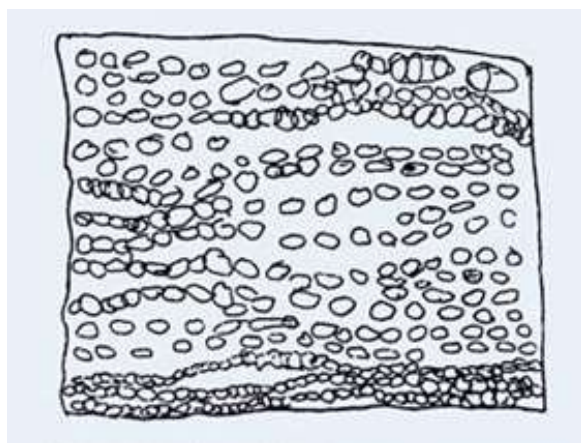


Fig 1. Drawing of a field of potatoes by a 7-year-old Dutch boy. (*Children's Drawings*, 104)

Finally, like hermit crabs, children ‘abandon’ the final provisional stage of intellectual realism for the straightforward ‘visual realism’ that, for Luquet, is characteristic of adulthood (123). In short, Luquet takes child drawing and subjects it to the rigid order of a single, straight line: from mind to eye, a direct trajectory from early scribbling to the ultimate telos of mature mastery, the aesthetics of exquisite resemblance that is epitomised by, say, Leonardo’s *Study of a Woman’s Hands*.

Broadly considered, there are obvious shortcomings to such a narrow and narrativized approach, least of all, as Norman Freeman points out, the peculiar inflexibility of the stage model, a model that Luquet insists is universal (141).⁷ Luquet’s account clearly conforms to a structure of innocence, in that it takes place as a series of irreversible progressive transitions. As Christopher Green puts it, ‘Luquet leaves the unmistakable inference that the ways a child and an adult see cannot mesh in any sense’ (221).⁸ Like all narratives of innocence, it foregrounds the internal journey of the subject – even when the child becomes an adept drawer, this occurs as the fruition of an innate potential sooner than it is informed by external influences and examples. With his focus on the mere chance operations of resemblance in the ‘fortuitous realism’ stage, Luquet relegates the expressive, exploratory and affective forces of infant drawing to secondary status. Similarly, his approach to ‘intellectual realism’ takes one of the most distinctive and multivalent aspects of drawing as a medium – its capacity to visualise conceptual intensities and links, its interaction with *thinking*, in addition to seeing – and reduces it to an auxiliary process of formative mimesis. And with his chronology of stages, there is little place for the anterior role of infant drawing in the development of other faculties (notably writing), nor for the way in which aspects of Luquet’s earlier stages overlap and persist into adulthood – with, for example, practises of doodling and ‘non-figurative’ drawing that are, surely, more widely practised than works of studied draughtsmanship.

While Merleau-Ponty accepts Luquet's work as 'consistently accurate' (*Lectures*, 165), for him the greatest flaw of *Le Dessin enfantin* is Luquet's reliance upon a normative discourse of attention. As I have already suggested, whereas for Luquet, drawing relates to attention and thus the negation of expression, for Merleau-Ponty this formulation is reversed. '[D]rawings of children', he writes, 'can never be seen as a copy of the world which offers itself to them, but rather as an attempt at expression' (*CPP*, 165). Indeed, 'attention', for Merleau-Ponty, is a kind of conceptual anathema, which stands for a loose agglomeration of what he regards as faulty assumptions on both sides of the realist/idealist coin. It is instructive to return to Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the history of attention early on in his 1945 book *Phenomenology of Perception*. With one of his characteristic metaphors, Merleau-Ponty pictures attention as a 'searchlight' (*PP*, 26), which illuminates something that has always been there, and which, by corollary, will activate the same inherent sensations in all who direct their attention towards it. The spectator of the searchlight is passive. 'The history of the concept of attention' presupposes the 'priority of the objective world' (*PP*, 24), Merleau-Ponty writes. Such a presupposition is made at the expense of what Merleau-Ponty conceives as the primary role of perception.

I suggest that Merleau-Ponty resists a generalized concept of attention in part because theories of attention so often elevate quantitative activity over the qualitative domain of phenomenology. To give another example, a more contemporary historian of attention, Jonathan Crary, defines attention as a subtractive process: 'a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a *reduced number of stimuli* [my emphasis]' (1). Behind this, we can discern the influence of Henri Bergson's similarly subtractive account of what he refers to as the 'necessary poverty' of perception (*Matter and Memory*, 31). I also want to point back to the terms of Luquet's intellectual realism, with its overcompensatory overwhelming of the 'greatest number' of details in a representation of a given object, as a kind of additive countermovement of the subtractive force of the child's attention. For Merleau-Ponty, the quantitative activity implied by such concepts of attention misses the point:

‘Consciousness is no less intimately linked with objects of which it is unheeding than with those which interest it’ (PP, 28). Merleau-Ponty’s thinking here is inflected by the Gestalt principle that figure cannot be separated from background; consciousness – and, by extension, the untutored drawing of children -- does not divide up the world *partes extra partes*, nor really engage in the kind of counting and subtracting that the discourse of attention imposes upon it.^{9[19]}

In the notes from his Sorbonne lectures on child psychology and pedagogy, Merleau-Ponty critiques Luquet’s *Le Dessin enfantin* on the basis that it is geared around an ‘adult-centric’ norm of attention (CPP, 168). The discourse of attention is always normative, always making judgements as to what is an adequate or inadequate exercise of attentiveness. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not at all that the child drawing is the product of what Luquet calls a ‘limited and discontinuous’ attention, but that:

The objects to which one “does not pay attention” are not actually present in the configuration of the actual field. For example, when the child constantly draws things as separate, it is because this is the way they correspond to his actual mental experience [...] it is necessary to understand that the drawing corresponds to the loose structure of the child’s perceptual field. (CPP, 168-169)

The actual correspondence between graphism and perception *is* the foundation, rather than secondary evidence of a prior ground – and, as this foundation, graphism and perception feed into each other in a cyclical way, mediated by what Merleau-Ponty calls here ‘mental experience’.

Luquet generally only allows for experience in the narrow sense of *practive*. Whereas for Luquet the exigency of drawing derives from the fact that all children, as dutiful copyists, are possessed by a mimetic urge, for Merleau-Ponty it is motivated by an active, fundamentally expressive process. In this context, expression does not mean the sovereign, reflexive capacity of a subject to express an interiority of its own, but, instead, a dialectical and continuous co-determination of subject and object, which Merleau-Ponty refers to as a ‘junction’: ‘a drawing is

an expression of the world for the child and never a simple imitation [...] we must take “expression” in its full sense, as the junction between that which perceives and that which is perceived’ (*CPP*, 170). Expression, as Gombrich reminds us, cannot but draw selectively from a repertoire of given possibilities: but here, the expression of the child’s drawing, as poesis, draws directly from the world (and thereby, in a twofold movement, *brings the world forth*, to make good on my promise of a Heideggerian register). Though it is not explicit in his lecture notes, what fascinates Merleau-Ponty about child drawing – and, indeed, one of the things that attracts him later to the impressionism of Cézanne, in ‘Eye and Mind’ – is that it is free from the mediating conventions of academic drawing. Drawing, for Merleau-Ponty, ought to be *immediate*.

On the topographic dimensions of their arguments, contrast Merleau-Ponty’s junction – a mobile point of convergence – with Luquet’s narrative linearity. Whereas Luquet’s narrow aesthetic telos is graphic mastery, Merleau-Ponty’s account moves in a more inter-medial direction, and against the unidirectional structure of innocence-to-experience. The comportment of child drawing, of selecting and expressing the world, remains ever available to perception. That is not to say that Merleau-Ponty rehabilitates Ruskin’s innocent eye, since he reverses, or rather dialecticises, the traditional structure that *subjects* the eye to the external world. The eye of the drawing child is not innocent, because it always, from the very beginning, brings its experience to bear on the world it perceives and expresses. Furthermore, drawing cuts materially across sensory modalities – it is significant as both a visual beholding and a manual holding. ‘The child’s drawing is a *contact* with the visible world’ (*CPP*, 419) Merleau-Ponty writes, in direct contrast with Luquet’s internal model.

At this point, I want to return briefly to *Le Dessin enfantin*. Merleau-Ponty’s resistance to Luquet under the sign of attention downplays Luquet’s own internal reservations about his model. Specifically, Luquet is closest to Merleau-Ponty in the reflective and speculative final chapter of his book, where he sets out his own resistance to what he refers to, not unlike Merleau-Ponty, as

‘the general empiricist thesis of the passivity of mind’ (145). This is important for my argument since, against empiricism, Luquet alights at the importance of selection – ‘a selection guided by the importance children give to the elements [of the object they are drawing], and the interest they take in them. Thus, at the very outset of childhood, the mind is very far from purely receptive, but is, instead, active in a fundamental way in elaborating what is presented to it’ (145). Luquet thus sets up an internal tension between the mimetic drive and an attendant, affective relation to the object that is not reducible to straightforward representation. Selection becomes the hinge between attention and expression.

Merleau-Ponty leans on this hinge to the extent that he refutes one of the axiomatic distinctions between writing and drawing: as Tim Ingold puts it: ‘writing is a *notation*; drawing is not’ (CPP, 120). Opposed to imitation, drawing, in Merleau-Ponty’s account, becomes an *indexical notation of a perceptual experience*: ‘marking down on paper our symbol of coexistence with the thing’ (CPP, 418). It is precisely because of this notational quality that Merleau-Ponty connects drawing to writing: ‘drawing is, in some ways, a particular case of writing [...] it is no more necessary to think of the drawing as the projection of the thing on paper than it is necessary to assume that the child’s “A” must just look like the letter “A”’ (CPP, 418). Correspondence to a standard model is less significant than expressive content. The sheet of paper, as the flattened field of expression upon which the child makes their exploratory contacts with the world, plays an important role in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking: ‘Since the drawing represents an attempt to transpose onto a single plane what we see in depth, we use expression more than imitation’ (CPP, 164). The plane is to drawing as grammar is to writing – a conditional constraint that makes the subjective expression of the phenomenal world possible.

It is through this broader theorisation of expressiveness that Merleau-Ponty identifies an analogue between child drawing and the poetry of Francis Ponge. Merleau-Ponty suggests that Ponge’s poems (as well as Cézanne’s paintings) evince the ‘same tendency’ as child drawing, since,

as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘each object is a *complex*’ (CPP, 172). By ‘complex’, Merleau-Ponty is referring to the way that any object before our perception is a site of overlapping relations, aggregated discrete elements, and linguistic determinants (Luquet makes the point that the title assigned by the child to the drawing is *part* of the drawing). Faced with an awareness of these pluralities, the drawer – like the poet – must commit to a series of selections that best express how the object affects them – and what those selections exclude are equally significant in the constitution of the expression. Elsewhere in the lectures, referring to Ponge’s famous poem ‘Le Galet’ (‘The Pebble’) from his 1942 collection *Le Parti pris des choses*, Merleau-Ponty resumes the analogy between the poet and child drawer: ‘Ponge observes things in the impact they have on him and not as exterior to him. The pebble he analyses is the pebble of the child’ (CPP, 421). This account of Ponge’s poetics corresponds to what Jane Bennett, writing within the New Materialist current of thought, has recently referred to as ‘writing up’, by which she refers to a mode of writing attuned to the continuities and permeations between the material world and the embodied consciousness of the writing subject (and which thus complement’s Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical account of expression). Bennett, who herself makes the direct analogy between writing up and doodling, provides a sharp theoretical lens through which to frame the modes of expression I am discussing.¹⁰ Ponge ‘writes up’ the pebble as the child draws an object - that is, the expression of the object proceeds from a mode of selection that can never isolate the object from the unlimited spatiotemporal networks and relations that constitute it and support it before perception. For Ponge, the pebble is contiguous with the whole sea: ‘il laisse à travers lui passer toute la mer, qui se perd en sa profondeur sans pouvoir en aucune façon faire avec lui de la boue’/ ‘it lets the whole sea filter through, which disappears into its depths without in any way being able to make mud out of it’ (OCI 56/ VT 76).

Merleau-Ponty’s references to Ponge in his lectures are brief and illustrative, *en passant*; my aim, in the next section of the essay, is to take seriously the equivalence that he suggests, and try to flesh it out from within the terms of Ponge’s own aesthetic project.

TAKING SIDES, DRAWING LINES: FRANCIS PONGE AT WORK

That Francis Ponge loved the art of drawing and felt a deep affinity with modern *dessinateurs* is amply demonstrated by his spellbound essays on the drawings of Braque, Picasso, and the lesser-known modernist Jean Hélion.¹¹ Much like Luquet and Merleau-Ponty, Ponge believed in the primacy and persistence of drawing – for him, the drawings of masters like Leonardo and Rembrandt were more enduring than their paintings, which were, in contrast, subject to the generational vagaries of taste: ‘Nous pouvons l’être éternellement de leurs dessins’/ ‘[W]e can be eternally sure of their drawings’ (*OC II* 585)/*VT* 161). This enthusiasm for drawing – particularly artists, like Picasso, who regarded child drawing as a model—accords with Ponge’s own poetic quest for a particularly childish mode of seeing. In his diaristic ‘My Creative Method’, he outlines the ideal of a ‘naïve classification puerile des choses’ (‘a naïve childlike classification of things’), which would ‘rénové le monde des objets’ (‘renew the world of objects’), and thereby provide a level means of relating impressions of the world to ‘sensibilités contemporains ou futurs’ (‘sensibilities of today and the future’) (*OCI* 521 / *VT* 88). In the drawings of the masters, and in his own childish method, he perceived a similar futurity, a similar amenability to universal resonance.

This is, of course, redolent of Ruskin’s conception of childishness, but even more indebted to Charles Baudelaire’s updated definition of creative genius in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ as ‘childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with man’s physical means to express itself’ (11).¹² Like Luquet and Merleau-Ponty, both of whom emphasise the selective comportment of graphic infancy, an ethic of selection is central to Ponge’s conceptualisation of his method: ‘les qualités de tel ou tel objet choisies pour être explicitées seront de préférence celles qui ont été passées sous silence jusqu’à présent’ / ‘the characteristics of the object selected for explanation

will be preferably those neglected until now' (*OC I* 521, *VT* 88). Poetic expression proceeds from an attitude of affective selection, here based upon a principle of novelty, but derived from the selective affinities originally cultivated in child drawing.

My entry point into Ponge's poetry will be the most literal, thematic example of drawing from *Le Parti pris des choses*, in the poem 'La Fin de L'Automne'. My focus will be on Ponge as a poet of the selective phenomenology characteristic of child drawing – an expression of the world made through an embodied disposition towards a choice of available, differential objects, both the visible objects that one draws and the tangible objects with which one draws. I want to focus, in particular, on two minor and complementary objects that figure in 'La Fin de L'Automne', which are equally objects of draughtsmanship: the ruler (as instrument) and the desk (as work surface, as ground, and as a field of selection). Like 'Le Galet', 'La Fin de L'Automne' concerns itself in part with the generative difficulty of expressing an object in transition (what Merleau-Ponty calls a 'complex'), and thus distinguishing it from the anterior and posterior states that constitute it but which are themselves, of course, equally transitional. The poem is not about winter, but the period spanning the marginal overlaps from the end of autumn to the beginning of spring. With the approach of spring and its 'petits bourgeons' (*OC I*, 16), or little buds, the poem cuts off, and does so through a first-person incursion of the actual moment of writing - the graphic event of the writer drawing away, quite literally, from the act of description: 'Mais là commence une autre histoire, qui dépend peut-être mais n'a pas l'odeur de la règle noire qui va me servir à tirer mon trait sous-celle-ci' (*OC I*, 17) / 'But here begins another story, which depends on perhaps but does not smell like the black ruler that will aid me in drawing my line under this one' (my translation). On the face of it, this is Ponge concluding with the commonplace metaphor, in both English and French, of 'drawing a line' beneath a subject as a way of leaving it behind. However, the otherwise superfluous details of the colour and, almost parodically, the smell of the ruler, serve to root this moment in the sensory experience of the graphic act. Note the similarities with Matthew Battles' Barthesian essay on the 'sensuous and immediate' pleasures that are peculiar to the act of doodling:

‘the pliant bouquet of crayons and the stink of coloring markers’ (‘In Praise of Doodling’, 108). This kind of sensuous immediacy ensures that Ponge’s line is in fact the *least* figurative moment in the poem.

It is a critical commonplace that Ponge’s poetry is a written poetry sooner than it is a spoken poetry.¹³ But, with the drawing of the *trait*, Ponge’s writing is foregrounded as a manual, graphic process – though mediated and supplanted by typography (one of the visual effects of Ponge’s blocks of prose is that they foreground a kind of alienated textuality). Drawing relates to writing as one season relates to another. The black ruler figures in the poem as a minor, transitional object (in the Winnicottian sense of an object that mediates between the interiorized subject and the exteriorized world), a spatial analogue of temporal seasonality. It aids the shift from the poetic subject, half-present at the end of the poem, to the ‘things’ in the world that Ponge will go on to address, describe and define in a sequence of discrete performances. The ‘*histoire*’ – the writing - of spring ‘depends’, in both senses of the word: intransitively, in the sense of being suspended and left unfinished, and transitively, in the sense of depending *on* (‘*depend* [...] *dé*’) the technical objects that furnish the graphic, linearized act of writing.

Given not just the conceptual kinship, but also the obvious similarities of diction, Ponge’s dependable black ruler is a French cousin of William Carlos Williams’ red wheelbarrow.¹⁴ The rule, like the barrow, is a manipulable, manmade object whose utility as a tool is elided in favour of its thingly interconnectedness. In this respect, Ponge (like Williams) subscribes to an ontology that things, like words, are differential. Ponge himself, in ‘My Creative Method’, underlines the importance of the ‘differential quality’ afforded by analogies (the main remit, for Ponge, of poetry): ‘Nommer la qualité différentielle de la noix, voilà le but, le progrès’ / ‘To name the differential quality of the walnut, that is purpose, that is progress’ (OC I 537/VT 107). The function of the ruler is that it facilitates the differential movement of Ponge’s *trait*.¹⁵ That *trait*, as a passage of withdrawal executed via a transitional object, is also, equally, a *retrait*. The end of ‘La Fin de

L'Automne', with its possessive 'mon trait', is notably one of few instances of first-person interpellation in a collection famous for its essays in suspending the self. 'La Fin de l'Automne' is the second poem in *Le Parti pris des choses*, after the inaugural poem 'Pluie', whose descriptions of rain – which anticipate the waterlogged motif of 'La Fin de l'Automne' – occur as the observations of a situated viewer. That viewer is subject to the possibility of physical and linguistic dissolution among illimitable taxonomies of rain, since such a transitory, vigorous plenitude threatens to overwhelm the selective affection of the subject. The drawing of the line in the subsequent poem, 'La Fin de l'Automne', serves to announce the actual dissolution of that situated viewer. Ponge sides with things via ruler and line.

Emily McLaughlin has recently explored how, throughout *Le Parti pris des choses*, Ponge develops the analogy between plant growth and writing.¹⁶ 'La Fin de l'Automne', in contrast, is concerned not with growth but with the decline of vegetal life, the 'dépouillement' (*OC I*, 16) or stripping that precedes renewal. As such, Ponge's analogic focus is on a stripping back of the scene of writing to its bare materials: a quest for the genesis of writing. A personified Nature 'déchire ses manuscrits, démolit sa bibliothèque, gaule rageusement ses dernier fruits' / 'rips up her manuscripts, demolishes her library, angrily thrashes her last fruits from the trees' (*OC I* 16, *VT* 33). Like graphism, both written and drawn, 'La Nature' as the subject of Ponge's poem is understood as a site of potential action coterminous with a loose aggregation of materials. The end of autumn, a time of dearth and death ('Habillé comme nu'/Dressed in nakedness' [*OC I* 16, *VT* 32]), becomes difficult to define and pin down, precisely because its aggregation of materials is characterised by a relative lack of dynamic and therefore distinguishing features. Selection, and thus expression, becomes a task. Ponge's figure for this breakdown is water: an 'amphibiguité salubre'/'salubrious amphibiguity' [*OC I* 16, *VT* 32]), where the stuttering portmanteau 'amphibiguité' performs lexically the collapse of differentiating features that it describes. On this wintry wateriness, where the differential discretion of objects collapses into liquid indifference, there is a resonance with the late deluge drawings of Leonardo, where the artist abandoned the

intricate, individualized studies of his earlier work for a submerged mode of drawing, *a perspective that struggled for perspective*.



Fig. 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *A deluge*, c.1517-18

Maintaining, again, an equivalence between the ecological and the graphological, Ponge writes that Nature ('La Nature'), at the start of winter, 'se lève brusquement de sa table de travail' ('abruptly gets up from her desk' [OC I 16, VT 32]). Nature becomes defined by its own *désœuvrement*, or worklessness. The 'table de travail' – the desk, the work-table – stands for a phenomenal field of potential expressive action, which has been *cleared*; by this potential, recalling Merleau-Ponty's dialectic, I refer both to the expressive possibilities of nature (where nature is understood precisely as a field of expressibility), and the expressive potential of the subject. The desk is not merely the support for the work of writing or drawing: it is, at the same time, the field upon and from which the subject organises the combinatory elements—notations of experience—with which the work will be crafted.

The work-table or desk, the material surface upon which equally material elements are selected and manipulated in an activity of poesis, is a recurrent motif in Ponge's writing. It belongs to a cluster of terms related to the space of composition, notably the 'atelier' (workshop or studio) – the subject of one of Ponge's later prose poems - and the 'établi' or workbench. These latter two terms feature prominently in Ponge's essay on the drawings of Georges Braque (published as *Braque-Dessins* in 1950), to which I will now turn. An ekphrastic impulse animates Ponge's evocation of Braque's 'atelier', since it implicitly takes its cue from the artist's own *Atelier* series of paintings. Commenced in 1939 with the painting *Atelier I*, these works depict vibrant interiors enlivened by accumulated domestic objects; they depict the scene of painting, painting painting itself. Focussing on Ponge's evocations of Braque's workspaces, I want to tease out some of the internal connections between poetry and drawing in Ponge's aesthetics. For Ponge, the workbench of drawing is where the artist retreats from the easel to find solutions, to think, to combine elements and ideas: 'L'on voit alors notre artisan quitter sa forge [...] et s'approcher de son établi, don't il débarrasse un coin. Il prend bout de crayon sur son oreille, il prend un bout de papier, et il y pose son problème, et il y trace son dessin, il y trouve sa solution' / 'We see our artisan leave his forge [...] and go over to his workbench where he clears a space. He takes the pencil stub from behind his ear, takes a scrap of paper, puts his problem on it, sketches his drawing, finds his solution there' (*OC II* 588/ *VT* 164).¹⁷ Braque clears his workbench as La Nature clears her desk in 'La Fin de l'Automne': expression literally takes the place of the object, that is, it is conditional upon an act of clearing. This act of clearing, combined with an effort of thought, is of the same order as the evacuation that occurs with Luquet's 'internal model', whereby the drawn object is not present, but is both reconstituted and revealed on the page. Here we can discern the affinity between Luquet's account of child drawing – as a non-perspectival 'co-ordination' of discrete elements – and Braque's cubist drawing. Braque's drawings, for Ponge, are not merely preliminary studies, the workings-out before the work, but the location of a more immediate contact with the world – where the world is discovered and uncovered 'à chaque instant' / 'at every moment' (*OC*

II 588/VT 165). Drawing, for the *dessinateur*, is a means of expressive *reconstruction* of the world, ‘le monde par fragments, comme il leur vient’/‘the world in fragments, as it comes to them’ (OC II 586/VT 163). The world arrives, but arrives in disarray: the passivity of this arrival cedes immediately to the imperative of work, the necessary labour of expression. Ponge compares the modern *dessinateur* to the ‘small-town mechanic’ who puts automobiles back into order ‘avec les moyens du bord, souvent réduits’/ ‘with the means available, often very limited’ (OC II 586/VT 163). This is poesis as bricolage, as the assembly of raw parts into expressive wholes.

For Ponge, words and things, in their manipulability, are materially equivalent. As Gerald Bruns puts it, in Ponge’s ontology, ‘words cease to be instruments of the spirit and become instead components of the thingworld’ (205). The ‘thingworld’ is thus at the expressive disposal of the poet. Ponge himself sums up his method with the equation: ‘PARTIS PRIS DES CHOSES *égale* COMPTE TENU DES MOTS’ / ‘TAKING THE SIDE OF THINGS *equals* TAKING ACCOUNT OF WORDS’ (OC I 522/ VT 89). In the world, words and things alike are characterised by a diachronic mutability, fraying and disseminating across space and time. As graphic notations, writing and drawing mark words and things as moments of sense in otherwise fluxional continua. Always aware of the etymological journeys of words, when Ponge writes in his essay on Braque: ‘Dessein, dessin, design... Ce sont trois forms de meme mot, jadis unique’ / ‘Dessein, dessin, design... Three forms of the same word, once unified’ (OC II 588/VT 164) – he is not just highlighting the semantic and etymological proximity between *dessin* and *design*; he is, more importantly, *demonstrating* how the attitude of designing – that is, assembling, graphically, available related elements – informs his own attitude towards language.

Ponge is affected by each individual word, affected in and by his selection of each word, in the same way that the child affectively selects each element that comprises the drawing. He describes this affect in ‘My Creative Method’ with a painterly register, collapsing the distinction between visual and verbal expressiveness: ‘No word is used which is not immediately considered

an individual; whose inner light is utilized, and shadow too' (*VT* 100). Ponge's attitude toward the affective presence of individual words, and the role played in processes of expression by the poet's *responses* to those affective presences, bears the influence of Surrealist poetry. André Breton calls this the word's 'aspect': 'the expression of an idea depends as much on a word's aspect as on its meaning' ('Words without Wrinkles', 101). To return to Ponge's words, the individuation only occurs with the isolating act or *consideration* of the affective choice of the artist. Ponge evokes the *dessinateur's* technique of chiaroscuro to encapsulate both linguistic difference – the metaphoric play of light and shadow that constitutes differential meaning-making – but also the literal satisfactions of graphism in the poet's manual reckoning with the 'aspect' of the word.

This brings me, finally, to the notion of *dilection* – the coextension of choice and love, selection and affection. By this, I mean the way in which expression takes place as a series of affective investments in chosen elements. In his essay on Picasso's drawings, Ponge distinguishes between the artist's Blue and Rose periods with the respective words *dilection* and *delectation*. For Ponge, these terms are distinct but related, referring to complementary modes of drawing. *Dilection*, for Ponge, relates to the choice of the *dessinateur* (and choice's interplay, in the execution of the drawing, with chance). Consulting the dictionary, Ponge writes that 'la racine de la dilection est le choix'/ 'the root of dilection is choice' (102/167). *Delectation* relates, on the other hand, to the transient proprietorial pleasure proper to drawing. The root of delectation, Ponge notes, is *lacire*: 'faire tomber dans un lacs, c'est-à-dire une sort de piège fait d'un assemblage de cordons, ce qui convient généralement aux dessins et surtout à ceux du genre qui nous occupe: simple et déroutants, comme des tours de ficelle' 'to catch in a trap of laced string, which generally applies to drawings, and particularly to drawings of the type we are talking about: simple yet perplexing, like windings of string' (*OC II* 641/ *VT* 169). The trace – the signifying graphic mark – becomes the thread – the line of continuity, to be followed but not unwound. Ponge's description here could equally apply to writing – the transient 'capture' of inscribing fixed but delicate moments of sense within a durational graphic trace. Delectation is conjoined with *dilection*; affection is conjoined

with choice: an originary co-determination that sustains the practices of poetry and drawing alike. Both Ponge and Picasso seek the *dilection* of the dilettante (to indulge, like Ponge, in the pleasure of etymological associations): the amateur, who comes to both words and things with an attitude of innocence—innocence defined here precisely by an openness to the co-determination of affect and choice in the development of expression. The art of the dilettante sustains graphic infancy into adulthood.

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¹ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, translated by Philip Armstrong, Fordham University Press, 2013 and Alain Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, Verso, 2014.

² For a critical survey of the asemic movement, see Peter Schwenger, *Asemic: The Art of Writing*, University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

³ In reference to Roland Barthes' drawings (or 'scribbles'), Andrew Brown uses the word 'somatocentrism' as a way of characterizing Barthes' 'anti-technological ideology'. See Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing*, Clarendon, 1992, p. 179

⁴ This is the case in Luquet and Merleau-Ponty. See also Jonathan Fineberg, a leading figure in the study of child art: the two edited volumes *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child*, University of California Press, 2006, *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism*, Princeton University Press, 1998, and the monograph *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁵ See, for example, Richard Jolley's *Children and Pictures: Drawing and Understanding*, Blackwell, 2010, and Norman Freeman's *Strategies of Representation in Young Children: Analysis of Spatial Skills and Drawing Processes*, Academic Press, 1980

⁶ See Melanie Klein's 'The Role of the School in the Libidinal Development of the Child' in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 5, 1924, 312-331, and Sophie Morgenstern's *Psychanalyse infantile: Symbolisme et valeur clinique des créations imaginatives chez l'enfant*, Paris, 1937.

⁷ See Freeman, Norman, *Strategies of Representation in Young Children: Analysis of Spatial Skills and Drawing Processes*, Academic Press, 1980

⁸ Such criticism of *Le Dessin enfantin* tends to overlook Luquet's own internal reservations about his model. The final chapter of *Le Dessin enfantin* sets out a number of qualifications – not least the admission that the stages are 'less clear in practice' (142). Luquet also concedes that some adult drawing conforms to intellectual realism, although this is framed in terms of a developmental impairment.

⁹ For two useful articles on Merleau-Ponty's complex relationship with Gestalism, see Benjamin Sherados, 'Merleau-Ponty's Immanent Critique of Gestalt Theory', in *Human Studies* 40, and Lester Embree, 'Merleau-Ponty's examination of Gestalt psychology' in *Research in Phenomenology*, 10 (1)

¹⁰ See Jane Bennett, *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up With Walt Whitman*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (2020), pp ix-xxv

¹¹ I retain the French *dessinateur* here in the absence of a serviceable equivalent in the English language ('drawer' being too denotative of furniture and 'draughtsperson' too awkward, inflexible and technical).

¹² 'The Painter of Modern Life' is arguably more concerned with drawing than it is with painting; Constantin Guys as the consummate *dessinateur* of modernity, with his 'on-the-spot drawings from life' (9).

¹³ Robert W. Greene, for an earlier example, describes Ponge as the '*scripteur* par excellence' (61)

¹⁴ Andrew Epstein notes a kinship between Ponge and American poetry and thought, especially the Objectivist strain inaugurated by William Carlos Williams ('The Impossible Everyday', 48).

¹⁵ Note, also, the amount of verbal qualification – broaching the sensory body of the *scripteur* – inserted by Ponge between '*depend*' and its corresponding preposition '*de*', and how this functions comparably with the enjambment that separates the same verb from its preposition in Williams' 'so much depends / upon' – that is, inflecting a felt reticence into a poem that otherwise claims to do away with a subjective locus in favour of an unadorned, philosophically realist presentation.

¹⁶ See McLaughlin, Emily 'How to Think Like a Plant? Ponge, Jaccotte, Guillevic', in *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st-Century French Literature and Thought*, edited by Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan, Liverpool University Press, 2000, 242

¹⁷ Note the resonance between Braque quitting his forge and Ponge drawing away from the poem in 'La Fin de l'Automne'. The physical act of withdrawing is always a *part* of the work; drawing, where each line marks a duration, makes this withdrawal manifest in a way other arts do not.