

***Gauging Proximities:  
An Inquiry into a Possible Nexus between  
Middle Eastern and Western Painting***

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to explore the boundaries between the Middle Eastern Miniature tradition and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophy of art. Orhan Pamuk's novel, *My Name is Red*, provides the initial inspiration for such a project. In order to investigate possible proximities between Middle Eastern and Western forms of painting, we will focus on Pamuk's narrative for the Eastern part of the discussion, and evaluate Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's ideas on the subject for the Western part. At the end, we will try to reframe traditional ways of thinking about these two art forms. It will emerge that Pamuk's novel suggests possible links between two art forms which appear to be historically as well as philosophically unrelated.

The blind and the seeing are not equal.  
*The Koran*, "The Creator", 19

There is nothing more going on between the things and the eyes,  
and the eyes and vision, than between the things and the blind  
man's hands, and between his hands and thoughts.  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", 302

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## 1. Introduction

Nobel-Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk stages an exploration of the art and philosophy of Ottoman miniature painting in his 2001 novel, *My Name Is Red*. Pamuk's work clearly suggests parallels between the Middle Eastern miniature tradition and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophy of art. Why would a contemporary reader with a Western education find *My Name Is Red* appealing? Why do Middle Eastern paintings themselves, or Islamic philosophy, seem to lack the proximity to the West that is suggested by the novel? A response may perhaps be found in another set of questions: What could be the inspiration for a 20<sup>th</sup>-century author who writes about Ottoman miniaturists? Ottoman history, clearly. Islamic philosophy, perhaps. But what about 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophy?

This paper primarily examines whether the proximity between Islamic and modern Western philosophy of art implied by Pamuk is really possible, or whether Pamuk's assertions are instead influenced by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophy of art, including the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida. I believe that the philosophy of art portrayed in *My Name is Red* is at least unconsciously conditioned by, if not consciously fashioned after, recent Western philosophy of art. Nonetheless, the novel opens up a space for inquiry into a possible nexus between two art forms, specifically miniature painting and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western abstract painting, which seem to be not only historically but philosophically radically apart from each other.

## 2. "To God Belongs the East and the West"

*The Koran*, "The Cow", 115

The old masters of Shiraz and Herat [...] claimed that a miniaturist would have to sketch horses unceasingly for fifty years to be able to truly depict the horse that Allah envisioned and desired. They claimed that the best picture of a horse should be drawn in the dark, since a true miniaturist would go blind working over that fifty-year period, but in the process, his hand would memorize the horse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pamuk (2001), p. 24.

We read in *My Name is Red* that a miniaturist needs to paint the same figure over and over again to achieve a depiction that is “perfect”, or in accordance with God's perception. After many years of illustrating the same form, it would appear, the process is memorized not only by the miniaturist's eye, but also his<sup>2</sup> body. Thus, a miniaturist can carry on painting even after the loss of his eyes to the demands of his work.

According to the miniature tradition described in *My Name is Red*, going blind after having devoted a lifetime to painting is reason to be proud. It is believed that God's vision or perception of the world can be manifested only through the memory of a blind miniaturist. Blindness is the final destination of the miniaturist in his search for God's vision; the inimitable perspective of God can only be attained through memory, after the eyes have perished.

When this image comes to the aging miniaturist, that is, when he sees the world as Allah sees it through the darkness of memory and blindness, the illustrator will have spent his lifetime training his hand so it might transfer this splendid revelation to the page.<sup>3</sup>

However, the substitution of visual and bodily memory for eyesight is more important than physical blindness. As Pamuk puts it, “a blind miniaturist could see the horse of God's vision from within the darkness; however, true talent resided in a sighted miniaturist who could regard the world like a blind man”.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of God's darkness is central to the thought of miniaturists in *My Name is Red*. This darkness exists before the art of miniature and will continue after it.<sup>5</sup> Both color and sight come from darkness, and, by using them, the miniaturist attempts to regain God's darkness. Therefore, to illustrate is to remember the darkness.<sup>6</sup> Remembering is crucial for a miniaturist, since without it, God, and his darkness, are lost.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the third-person singular masculine nominative case, since all the miniaturists at that time were male.

<sup>3</sup> Pamuk (2001), p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>5</sup> According to Sufi tradition, light is the symbol of existence and darkness the symbol of nonexistence. It might be suggested that, for instance in Ibn Arabi, there is a kind of darkness which refers to the non-representable source of all phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> Pamuk (2001), p. 92.

The project of Ottoman miniature painting as described in *My Name is Red* ultimately entails the elimination of a painter's individuality, or of any kind of distinction between the miniaturist on the one hand and God (or God's vision) as well as the world created by God on the other. Thus, perspective is banned because it implies a human point of view that does not coincide with God's perception. Further, individual artists ought not to distinguish themselves through signatures or particular styles. The signature is seen as a sign of arrogance, while style can only imply imperfection: "It was Satan who first said 'I! It was Satan who adopted a style. It was Satan who separated East from West'.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. *The Darkness of God***

Wherever the blind miniaturist's memories reach Allah  
there reigns an absolute silence, a blessed darkness  
and the infinity of a blank page.<sup>8</sup>

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his essays "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945) and "Eye and Mind" (1961), engages in a multifaceted scrutiny of painting as a form of vision and of coming into being. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a paradox in vision; when we perceive, we not only perceive things around us in the world, but also ourselves in the world. To understand the nature of painting, which is the bodily relation of the painter to the world, one should primarily comprehend what it means for a human being to be 'in the world'.

For Merleau-Ponty, our abilities to perceive and move are inextricably entangled, and thus vision cannot be made up of thoughts or representations.<sup>9</sup> Vision and movement both belong to the body. The human body, then, experiences itself kinesthetically, visually, and also as a part of the world. If the perceiver perceives things from among them, we cannot take for granted that there is a difference between the perceiver and the perceived. Even before there is any kind of subject that perceives, the body is taken up in a network of perceptible things. Both the seen and the seer are

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 294.

perceivers and perceived at the same time; they are made out of the same stuff.<sup>10</sup> The Cartesian view only presents an assumed dichotomy between the inside and the outside, or subject and object.

As Merleau-Ponty states, “the world is made of the very stuff of the body”.<sup>11</sup> Perception, body, and the world are all of the same fabric, or, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, the same “flesh”. By proposing his notion of ‘flesh’, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the unconscious ground of conscious experience as a unified thing. He also calls the flesh “brute and savage being”,<sup>12</sup> an ontological basis or a condition of possibility and of all relations. The concept of flesh is the “anonymous visibility”<sup>13</sup> which precedes the dichotomy between self and other as well as any identification of individual beings.

Merleau-Ponty also approaches the issue of perception through his concept of the “universal narcissism of perception”.<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, perception is called universal because in the endless interplay of perceiver and perceived, it resists any kind of subjectivity. It is called narcissistic because whatever I see, and whatever I am seen by, is ultimately made up of the same stuff. The exchange of gazes cannot be ascribed any subjective origin; it is there before I start perceiving, but what is perceived has not started the game, either. Further, the perceiver has a perception of their own perceiving. All in all, this amounts to what Merleau-Ponty describes as “a total or absolute vision, outside of which there is nothing and which closes itself over” both perceiver and perceived.<sup>15</sup> We are speaking here of a field of vision that shows itself abruptly as being made out of the diacritical relations between all things as both perceiver and perceived.

This is a point at which Merleau-Ponty's and Pamuk's thoughts seem to come intriguingly close. The former's “anonymous visibility” and “total or absolute vision” would seem to correspond to the latter's “darkness of God”. The concepts on both sides are neither just material nor just intellectual; Being is both the invisible ground and the visibility manifested

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 295.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1969), p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

through it.

#### **4. *The Miniaturist's Doubt***

According to Merleau-Ponty, through painting, Cézanne articulates what phenomenology only indirectly endeavors to show via philosophical language, i.e., pre-reflexive perception. By considering not only the real object but also its appearance to our unstable senses, Cézanne paints a world that has already and, more importantly, continues to *come into being*. In other words, he paints the world in the process of coming into being.

Cézanne's ambition is to account for how we perceive the world as completely accomplished within the temporal finitude of a moment.<sup>16</sup> Nothing can be added to this moment; at best, we can attempt to illustrate it. This kind of perception is a homecoming to nature. It is a brute kind of perception, a bodily one, not judging the world, but bodily digesting it. An 'inhuman' perception that perceives the world as free from human concerns and projects, not yet structured by scientific objectivism/intellectualism. What needs to be discovered is the world as pre-given in its facticity: that which Merleau-Ponty calls *there is*.<sup>17</sup>

However, while we may be made out of the same flesh, things are neither completely familiar nor completely strange to us. Merleau-Ponty sheds light on this imperfect interwovenness of perceiver and perceived through the fundamental reality of *écart*<sup>18</sup> (gap): there is no exact coincidence between either me as a perceiver and me as the perceived, or me as the perceiver and the thing that is perceived.<sup>19</sup> Since any part of the body

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945), pp. 277f.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> At the same time, in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty mentions his concept of *manque* (lack). He speaks of a lack inherent in reality, a lack of coherence, a lack in the immediately graspable, rendering our perception incomplete, thereby prompting us to respond to this lack and incompleteness, interrogating us, as it were, to elicit a response from us, an attempt to supply that which is lacking, the lack of which we have uncovered through our own interrogation of that which is in front of us. Thus, a double interrogation takes place, going in both directions between perceiver and perceived. This is as true for the painter and that which she is trying to depict as it is for the spectator who in turn beholds the painting as a completed work of art.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 297.

can be touched and touch, there is always an *écart* between these two actions. One cannot be sure whether she is touched or also touching at the same time. However, since the two acts are reversible, this does not lead us to rationalize a dualism. In other words, the human body can shift between two positions, such as touch and be touched; perceive and be perceived. The perceiver and the perceived are interwoven rather than completely overlapping. For Merleau-Ponty, then, there is no absolute stranger. But neither is everything so familiar that I can properly understand it. The similarity between our bodily way of perceiving and the world we perceive renders the issue of the separation of inner and outer uncertain. When inner is outer, and outer inner, what belongs to me, what to the world? Where to draw the lines, according to what criteria, how?

The paradoxical character of Cézanne's painting, for Merleau-Ponty, is that Cézanne is trying to do something impossible. He wants to paint brute nature, by contemplating nature, studying nature and landscapes, while also studying his own emotions, the sensations of the painter. The tensions and oppositions leading to this paradoxical character are situated between nature and sensations, but also between sensations and a proper philosophical form of thinking: how can one have ambitions of thinking/understanding the world clearly, while at the same time being exposed to the very sensations one is attempting to think about and understand? This, I believe, is Cézanne's doubt. Cézanne doubts both himself and his artistic ambition; whether he is able truly to render what he sees, and whether he can paint it, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, in the way God created it.

A miniaturist's doubt may take on a similar form. According to Pamuk, a miniaturist is not painting an image of the world as we know it, either. His intention is to reach the "truly agonizing depiction of the world from an elevated Godlike position attained by drawing".<sup>20</sup> He doubts both himself and his artistic ambition; whether he can comprehend what God sees, and whether he can paint in the way God sees it. It would appear that the miniaturist's quest in *My Name is Red*, albeit following a different route, leads the artist to a paradoxical and impossible challenge not too different from that of Cézanne. Illustrating according to God's perception appears

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<sup>20</sup> Pamuk (2001), p. 85.

similar to illustrating according to an 'inhuman', brute perception. In both cases the effort seems to be a struggle without end.

### 5. *Painting The 'Memoires'*

According to Merleau-Ponty, painting something visible is actually about the invisible; namely, feelings, sensations, affectivity. Painting is not the depiction or reproduction of the way things exist in the 'outside world'. The painter attempts to reveal something invisible, something we do not see. But actually, painters paint the invisible regardless of what their ambitions might be. Even if they attempt to paint something representative or illustrative, at best, they paint *memories*. In Pamuk's words,

[E]ven the most untalented painter – one whose head is empty like those of today's Venetian painters – who draws the picture of a horse while looking at a horse will still make the image from memory; because, you see, it is impossible, at one and the same time, to look at the horse and at the page upon which the horse's image appears.<sup>21</sup>

Another twentieth-century thinker who connects painting and blindness/memory is Jacques Derrida.<sup>22</sup> In *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), Derrida claims that drawing is blind; drawing a line, in order to either write a word or sketch something, is an act of the blind. As Derrida states, the essence of drawing is anticipation and memory. Drawing substitutes a kind of seeing for another, namely mediated for direct seeing. The artist's gaze is turned away from the thing to be drawn on the canvas. There is an invisibility between the thing and its sketch. Therefore, the origin of painting does not reside in perception but in memory, "The trait must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision".<sup>23</sup>

Derrida illustrates this point through a certain kind of drawing, namely the self-portrait.<sup>24</sup> One is blind while looking at the line or stroke (the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> To be clear from the outset, there is no continuity between the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida here. They are both mentioned simply because they relate, in different ways, to what Pamuk expresses regarding miniature art.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida (1993), p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> According to Derrida, drawing is always the drawing of itself, a self-portrait. It is narcissistic and subsequently blind.

trait) in drawing a self-portrait; one has to draw from memory, which is blind. Equally, when one looks at one's own reflection in order to draw one's own image, one cannot observe the stroke or the line. Thus, one has to continue blindly. One sees without one's eyes: the process involves both the trait and the re-trait, it is one of appearance and retreat. Derrida states that "The subtitle of all these scenes of the blind is thus: *the origin of drawing*. Or, if you prefer, *the thought of drawing*, a certain pensive pose, a *memory of the trait* that speculates, as in a dream, about its own possibility. Its potency always develops on the brink of blindness".<sup>25</sup> According to Derrida, "in losing his sight man does not lose his eyes. On the contrary. Only then does man begin to *think* the eyes", and he continues: "he sees between and catches a glimpse of the difference, he keeps it, looks after it in memory".<sup>26</sup> The exact same point is stressed by Pamuk with regard to miniature:

First, the illustrator looks at the horse, then he quickly transfers whatever rests in his mind to the page. In the interim, even if only a wink in time, what the artist represents on the page is not the horse he sees, but the memory of the horse he has just seen. Proof that for even the most miserable illustrator, a picture is possible only through memory.<sup>27</sup>

However, the conclusion that the miniaturists draw from this observation is unique to its cultural context: "The active worklife of a miniaturist [is] but preparation for both the resulting bliss of blindness and blind memory".<sup>28</sup>

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

To Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne was a genius not only because of his force as a colorist but also because he shows us a new way of seeing; a non-scientific one. What Merleau-Ponty sees in Cézanne's paintings is an ul-

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida (1993), pp. 2f.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Pamuk (2001), pp. 97f.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

timate instance of phenomenological work with colors. As Husserl's phenomenological reduction tries to emancipate itself from the presuppositions of both the Galilean and Cartesian traditions, Merleau-Ponty believed Cézanne and he himself faced the same dilemma: a new way is needed, a way which will emancipate one from a dichotomous way of thinking and enable the split between the self and the world, the subject and the object, to be overcome.

As we have seen, God's perception was to miniaturists what brute perception is to Merleau-Ponty: a way of transcending that which is 'human', i.e., based on our preconceptions, in perception. Miniaturists were defending this kind of perception against the increasing onslaught of Western art, with its 'ungodly' innovations, such as perspective. Ultimately, the battle was lost, and the art of miniature, along with its attendant form of transcendent perception, was superseded by Western forms of artistic expression. Merleau-Ponty would seem to come full circle in trying to regain, through the means of Western painting, the very kind of perception that the art of miniature, as described by Pamuk, originally lost in its encounter with Western painting.

To what extent a real connection exists between the philosophies behind Middle Eastern miniature painting and modern Western painting is a question yet to be explored, but it seems safe to say that Pamuk's portrayal of miniaturists is to some extent influenced by his own, Western-influenced cultural envelopment. Whether this portrayal is the result of an intentional fallacy aimed at appealing to a Western audience or not, at the very least, one can speak of an unconscious influence on the author, resulting from the fact that one cannot escape one's own historicity. Still, I believe that Pamuk's novel opens up a space for inquiry into a nexus between the East and the West in terms of philosophy of art. After all, an established practice of abstract painting existed in the Middle East centuries before Western art started exploring similar forms of expression, partly influenced by miniature itself, as seen in the work of painters such as Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee.

For Merleau-Ponty, we do not so much look 'at' a painting as we see 'according to it', i.e., *selon*.<sup>29</sup> Aesthetic contemplation is not a matter of

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<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1961), p. 296.

subjective attitude, but of how a painting appears to us. I believe a painting teaches us how it wants to be looked at according to its own visual categories. But it is not only our way of perceiving the painting that is influenced by it, but also our way of perceiving the world. The richness of the painting depends on the painting itself, rather than on what the spectator brings to bear on it. Exemplary paintings thus always hold a promise of further meanings, yet to be discovered. In my opinion, Middle Eastern miniature painting also teaches us a new way of perceiving. It is as rich as Western traditions of painting and promises the possibilities of many further readings since it was originally produced only in the service of the court and was largely kept away from scrutinizing eyes for centuries. It is yet to be “discovered”, both in a literal and in a Merleau-Pontian sense.

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