

EDGES AND THE IN-BETWEEN
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Morning is not hidden from the Possessor of Two Eyes,
who distinguishes the in-between from the in-between.

— *Ibn 'Arabi, cited in Wm. C. Chittick, "The In-Between:
Reflections on the Soul in the Teachings of Ibn 'Arabi"*

Everything will flourish at the edge . . .

— *Jacques Derrida, "Parergon"*

I

I am painting a water color in Stonington, Maine — trying, not altogether successfully, to capture something of the local spirit of this place, a fishing village and former granite quarry on Deer Isle, off the coast of east central Maine. First I pencil in the large lines of the harbor and the islands and the sea beyond; then I apply a clear water wash to the entire piece of paper; finally, I apply colors to different parts of the emerging image – cerulean blue in the sky, cobalt blue mixed with black for the sea, various greens for the distant heavily wooded islands. All the while I am doing this, I am aware that I am working within the edges of the painting. I am navigating between them. What does this mean? What does it mean to be between edges – more to the point, to be in-between them?

First of all, it does not mean that I am taking account of them as objective presences – as measuring, say, 11" one way and 8" the other. Nor does it imply that I am assuming them as literal limits: where my painting activity must *stop*. The edges of the painting serve more as frames than as limits: they act to frame, to shelter and support, my earnest but flawed efforts. A frame is a provisional structure that makes something else possible. In this capacity, the edges of a painting act not to close off but to open up possibilities for the emerging image. They act not merely to exclude further brush strokes but to expand their outreach: to give them a special energy they would otherwise lack — an energy expressing itself in several dimensions, spatial, temporal, and above all placial. But here I am getting ahead of the story.

My painter and philosopher friend Parviz Mohassel says that in painting one must "respect the edges."¹ What does he mean by this dictum? He means that an artist must at all times *keep the edges of the work in mind*. Such keeping-in-mind involves two kinds of edge: edges of mental space, edges of the canvas or (in my case) cold-pressed watercolor paper:

(a) *edges of mental space*: these are the implicit, tacit margins of mentation, where intuitively or conceptually explicit mind cedes place to something that is pre-conscious in

1 Parviz Mohassel, "Ten Guidelines for Painting," unpublished text of August, 21, 2007.

status – and where the edge between mind and body is not distinct, thanks to the pre-reflective status of the lived body as experienced by the body subject.

(b) *edges of the canvas or paper*: these are spatial edges, directly in contrast with mental edges, which are pervasively temporal (thought may be “quick” in Hobbes’s word, but it requires time in which to occur). But the phrase “spatial edges” is equivocal, given that there are no limits to space considered as infinite, as on the paradigm of the modern Western conception of space. Thus I suggest that we substitute “place” or “locus” for “space,” and speak rather of “placial edges.” These are at play in a given painterly surface. Such edges set forth the place of creation; they establish the scene of such creation, and thus determine *where* it is happening – there and nowhere else. These outer edges of the work allow us to say: *in that place* the work is now happening. This is true for the person creating as well as for the person looking at the completed work, each of whom requires the finitude of placial edges for a visual art work to be *this* work and not some other.

It will be noticed that in regard to both kinds of edge *margins* are at stake. Just as my thoughts trail off at their margin, so a painting gathers itself up into its own margin – whether this be expressly posited (as I tend to do myself: my brush strokes rarely come right out to the external edge of the paper) or implicitly felt, as when the eye encounters a margin in the form of a tacitly felt frame or, lacking this latter, the immediately surrounding wall space. Either way, we have to do with the pictorial logic of truly *visual* edges – which is to say, the edges of a phenomenal or perceptual field in which (as the Gestalt psychologists liked to say) the ground counts for as much as the figure. Put more positively, I as perceiver (artist or spectator) *leave a margin* around a central image, and if I can’t find one existing there already I create one: Think of Mondrian’s efforts to suggest that the bands of solid color that go to the edges of his paintings (and sometimes wrap around their three-dimensional physical edges) continue forever in an unending margin or envelope of space. (For that reason, Mondrian liked to speak of these bands as leading into “infinite space,” though I would question this locution: it is rather a matter of reaching into a place of indefinite, not infinite, extent.)

So we are here in between two sorts of edge, mental and visual – and not just between two (or more) physical edges, as we tend all too reductively to think. (These two sorts of edges, moreover, often occur together in an intimate interplay, as when we “take into account” what we perceive the edges of the artwork to be: here a mental act interfaces with the perceptual field.) This shows in turn that, first, edges themselves come in a plurality of types; second, that the between itself is not univocal but is very much a function of the edges that we negotiate in painting – and doubtless in other arenas of life. In short, when we are in the midst of any activity we are *in-between* edges.²

2 There is at least one instance of an edge so singular that it is not associated with another edge across an in-between interspace. I refer to the visual *horizon* that itself exists in-between earth and sky. This is an edge that is always only *one* in a given landscape vista – in contrast with the edges of discrete things and

We can, of course, also be *on the edge*, but I take this to be a special case of being in-between edges: in that case, we move to an extremity of the scene itself, be it artistic (not just the visual arts but those of music and performance as well) or practical (as in the “front lines” of a political action, the “peaking” of an economic crisis, etc.) or cognitive (as when we move suddenly, in a flash of insight, to a solution that is found at the edges of our conscious cogitation).³

II

And what of the “in” of the in-between? The sheer between will not serve us well. Shorne of the “in,” the between signifies two things: measurable distance (“how many miles between Stonington and Deer Isle?” we say, looking for a rather exact answer) and juxtaposition (not the same thing as contiguity or literal next-to-something: on a map, Stonington and Deer Isle are juxtaposed spatially as two towns on the same island off the coast of central Maine even if they are not at all contiguous in geographical actuality). These two senses of the between are precisely what is *not* at stake in the edges of paintings, or (for that matter) in political or economic action. What is at stake in the in-between is something much less determinate – as we imply when we say that we are “in-between jobs now,” that is, situated between having one definite job and taking up another definite job: but exactly where is not at issue, since we are just *somewhere* between these two distinct positions.⁴

I suggest that we look elsewhere by taking the preposition “in” seriously and then asking ourselves: what kind of in are we in when we are in-between edges? One thing is certain to start with: the in here at stake is not the strict “in” of containership, the sense of “in” at play in Aristotle’s *Physics*, according to which to be in something is to be strictly surrounded by that something whose inner surface coincides with the outer surface of the item being contained.⁵ In other words, the edges of this item are in direct physical touch with the edges of the container. The latter are regarded as “unmoving” – like the bed and banks of a river that contain such a body of water. On such a model, the sense of “in” is so strict that there is no breathing space left between that which is held in place

events: these latter are always *many* and fill up every scene in the unfolding life-world. Such a singular horizon contrasts with the “internal” and “external” horizons that Husserl specified as populating the perceptual world: these are the two great classes of the many edges that make up this world.

3 On the neurological bases of such insight, see Jonah Lehrer, “The Eureka Hunt” Why do Good Ideas Come to us When they Do?” *The New Yorker*, issue of July 28, 2008, pp. 40 – 45. It is of interest that the crucial part of the brain that is operative in creative break-throughs is the pre-frontal cortex as it recognizes associative activity in a fold on the surface of the right hemispheric region called the “anterior superior temporal gyrus” – that is to say, on the outer edge of the right side of the brain. So creative thinking occurs literally at the edge – of the brain itself.

4 I owe the example of being “in-between jobs” and its implication to Christina Maile (conversation, August 6, 2008).

5 See Aristotle, *Physics*, Book IV, chapter 3.

and what contains it — no margin is allowed, no quarter is given. Clearly, this will not work for the in-between operative in artworks, nor (it could be shown) in other instances of creative activity.

A clue toward a more constructive notion of the “in” of the in-between is found in the hyphenation of this very phrase itself. The hyphen exhibits a visual link that is the typographical equivalent of a very different idea of the “in,” that which is active in experiences of in-habitation or in-dwelling. No longer is strict containment at issue; what matters now is what happens when someone (or something) “settles in,” gets acquainted with a place, takes up residence there, and comes to know it *from within*. Heidegger reminds us that an ancient root of “in” is *innan*, which connotes dwelling (as we see in the cognate word “inn”).⁶ At stake here is a sense of interiority or inwardness – not of persons but of a given place: their domestic interior, which we can know only from within by residing there for some significant stretch of time. Moreover, the “with” of “within” acts to intensify the “in” itself by lending to it an important nuance of *in-timacy*. This is not precisely the same as knowing a place “from the inside out” – which means in considerable detail – but, instead, knowing it by direct acquaintance, by our bodily being there. When we say that we know a place “by heart,” we are referring to this special sense of insider’s knowledge. As if to confirm this, “heart” and “hearth” are cognates, and the latter is located deeply within a given residence. The familiar saying that “Home is where the heart is” is exactly parallel to Frank Lloyd Wright’s rule of thumb whereby the hearth is essential to any house in which people continually reside. Also part of the nexus of terms associated with a lived-in place such as a house or home is the “familiar” as well as the “habitual” – each of which signifies further aspects of the intimate knowledge coming from being acquainted with a place within which we are accustomed to dwell.

Now that we’ve learned something about the “in” of “within,” we need to consider the *with* of this dyadic preposition imagined as “with/in” (where the slash mark stands for a transgressable limit). There are two primary employments of the “with”: my body being with an object; one person being with another.

- (i) *being with objects*. Merleau-Ponty remarks that when my arm is next to an ash-try, this is not a case of one object coming closer to another – a matter of mere proximity, of being “beside.”⁷ Instead, it is a matter of a lived body actively occupying the vicinity of an instrumental object – the object being there *by*, and more especially, *with* my lived body. As Hume had observed how often we perceive things “with” a particular sense (“I see it with my own eyes”), so Whitehead speaks of “the with-

6 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. MacQuarrie & E. Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 80.

7 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. C. Smith (with revisions by F. Williams and D. Guerrière) (New York: Routledge, 1962), p. 98: “If my arm is resting on the table, I should never think of saying that it is *beside* the ash-try in the way in which the ash-try is beside the telephone. The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross.” (His italics)

ness of the body” as a basic, undefeasible structure.⁸ Such withness is admittedly asymmetrical (though not strictly unilateral), since the lived body characteristically takes the lead in its relation with a given object: it is the praxiological agent that can carry out its own designs by realizing them through the object – and, across it, come into touch with a network of other objects, ultimately an entire environment.

(ii) *being with others*. Here I have in mind Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein*, “being-with-others.”⁹ Once more, the relation is asymmetrical, but now there is a genuine reciprocity between myself and the other (another human being typically, but also other animals): an intimate interaction, even if not necessarily one between equals, as mediated by language and other semiotic systems, amounting finally to a shared history and sociality. The interaction includes negative modalities as well – being with others in anger, jealousy, or hatred. In every case, however, lived bodies are the effective agents on both, indeed (in the case of plural relations) all, sides. Such bodies don’t operate mainly on or through objects – though these may serve to mediate human or animal relations – but *with each other*. It is a matter, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s title, of *Being Singular Plural* – that is to say, a nuanced and diversified-relationship with other human beings or animals regarded as unique singularities who co-inhabit a world together.¹⁰

In sum, just as we always find ourselves in-between a congeries of objects, so we are never not in the company of a number of other human beings and animals — not to mention the trees and rocks that populate any given landscape of which we are part. Which ways we are with each of these kinds of thing is distinctively different, but there is no doubt that we are in a complexly configured with-world in every instance. The multiple withnesses of this world complicate (and literally im-plicate) the “in” of the basic relation of *within* that is the very basis of the in-between. If the “in” takes us ever more deeply *into* this world – a world *with us* as much as we are *with it* – the “with” ramifies out into the world of things, animals, and other persons: a world that is at once instrumental and perceptual, actional and historical, social and linguistic. Described thus, such a plural world of many withnesses rejoins Heidegger’s emphatic sense of “world” (*Welt*) in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.”¹¹

And the earth – the counterpart of world on Heidegger’s schema — what are we to

8 See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), *passim*; Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. D.R. Griffin & D. W. Sherburne (New York: MacMillan, 1978), p. 62: “We see the contemporary chair, but we see it *with* our eyes; and we touch the contemporary chair, but we touch it *with* our hands.” (His italics) More generally, “we feel *with our body*” (*ibid.*, p. 311; his italics).

9 See *Being and Time*, sections 25 – 27.

10 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, tr. R.D. Richardson & A. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 1 – 99.

11 Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” tr. A. Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper, 1971), esp. pp. 38-56.

make of this? In the current context, earth can be considered the concrete ground of the in-between. This would mean that just as the in-between is situated in the midst of the two main kinds of edges, so all such edges and the in-between taken together are found between earth and world – as *their* in-between. Spatially configured, this would look somewhat like this:

World
Edges as Limits < in – between > Edges as Margins / Frames
Earth

This diagram indicates that earth and world taken as epicenters of human activity hold in their embrace the intermediate realm that is composed of congeries of edges of many sorts: edges of things and events and persons that together constitute the in-between realm in which history happens: where art is created, philosophy is conceived, political actions emerge.

III

Edges and the in-between are active presences for one another – indeed, they *require* each other: take away the edges and the domain in-between is undermined by being rendered wholly amorphous.¹² Without edges, there is no in-between; without an in-between, edges would not be able to distinguish one object or event from another. My watercolor of Stonington requires both, as does any presentation or re-presentation of the visual world. In the immanence of the in-between, edges clash and reconcile, limning and profiling what occurs there in the actual occasions that populate earth and world.

We can say two further things about edges as they configure the in-between:

- (1) Edges supply BOUNDS to the in-between, where by “bounds” I mean a species of *boundaries*, that is, porous edges that take in as well as give out – in contrast with *borders*, which act to delimit institutions and concrete practices in the life-world; borders characteristically call for linear representation, boundaries do not .
- (2) The in-between offers a MATRIX for edges, a concrete nexus in which they are located: a ground, a field, an earth (though not necessarily the literal planet on which we reside) – a bed if not a bank, a home if not a hearth, a place if not a space.

Thinking this way suggests two rules by which we can think about edges and the in-between in such diverse domains as art and geography:

Rule # 1: There is no edge of edging, no ultimate edge in the activity of having or giving an edge to something. We see this in the successive framing of a painting (as of all art works, e.g., a theatrical stage or a piece of music). Thus, a watercolor painting – in a certain Western tradition of the last century – calls for a mat (sometimes in two layers:

¹² I owe this last observation to a question posed by Virginia Foster: “Take away the edges and where is the in-between?” (conversation, August 6, 2008).

two “formats”) and then for a frame. Beyond that, it seeks a wall on which to be exhibited, a building, indeed finally an institution.¹³ The gyres spin outward, each with its own characteristic edge. In short, there is edging out and out and out, but there is no definitive or final edge.

Rule # 2: The in-between is also unending – precisely as im-measurable: it has no determinate distance, no strict center-point, nor is it confined to the literal surface as such or its effects. It has a depth of its own that is part of the surface itself: “the depths are on the surface,” as Wittgenstein said.¹⁴ This is what we found in exploring the perceptual logic of the in-between, especially its unique ways of being a place of the with/in – where the “with” showed itself to be variously realized (e.g., as body with instruments; being with others; etc.), while the “in” implied a whole arc of in-habitational possibilities, especially the interiorities of heart, hearth, and home. Thanks to the depth of the with/in, its matrix-like character, we can be with and with and with, just as we can also be in and in and in. The in-between shows itself in its sheer ramifying potential.

On the basis of these guiding rules, two concrete corollaries follow:

A first conclusion is that painting will never exhaust itself; there is no ideal painting, and no last painting (just as we will never know what was the first painting). Every painter knows this: at the beginning of a painting, she does not, indeed cannot, know what precise painting will emerge. She only knows that it will be distinctively different from previous paintings not only by herself, even when done in the same genre or style – or in a series of very similar works, e.g., monotypes. Indeed, the proliferation is more radical than with edges as such or the in-between as such: where both of these are essentially several (i.e., exhibiting a distinct number of kinds or types), the engendering of paintings is truly protean – open-ended, having no outer limit: no determinable end-state.

A second corollary, closely following upon the first, is that the relation between edges and the in-between is neither merely dyadic (i.e., a matter of indifferent pairing) nor grossly dialectical (as in Plato’s or Hegel’s senses of the term). It is a matter of dynamic Becoming – of a measureless pro-ductive interplay. Or perhaps we can say: of an intense intertangement in which each element pervades the other in endless permutations.¹⁵

We witness the concretion of both corollaries in an accomplished landscape painter such as Paul Hotvedt: his ever proliferating paintings of the landscape around Lawrence, Kansas, exhibit an undelimited series of variations. Their parameters are provided by the particularities of discrete locales and the changing character of the weather. These

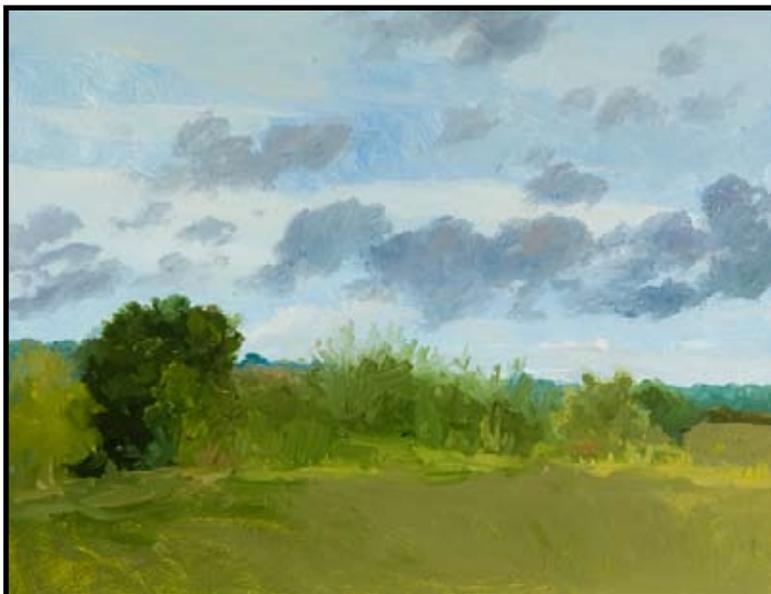
13 The mention of “institution” means that there is nothing absolute about an edge: it is always to some degree culturally relative – as we can see in the example of the “Ring-world” in the novel of that name: such a world is infinitely long but its edges are only twenty miles apart.

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E. M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 178.

15 For a complementary analysis of edges in art, see my article “Keeping Art to its Edge,” in Francois Raffoul & Eric Sean Nelson, eds. *Rethinking Facticity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 273-288.

extraordinary paintings are inexhaustible in the interplay they present between edges and the in-between: those of the surrounding landscape and those of the paintings that transmute them. They are exemplary of a Becoming that refuses to stagnate into Being: a continual evolution of the image of landscape, its re-presentation in an unending display of colors and shapes, at once bounded and open, setting forth an uncontainable matrix of ways of seeing the same land in different seasons and different places.¹⁶

16 Concerning the idea of “re-presentation” in landscape painting, see my book *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).



*Above left: Spring Sunset, 8x9".
Above right: Sunflowers and Sky,
Early Fall, 10x8.25". Left: Scud
Clouds After a Storm, 7.75x10".
Oil paintings on panel, 2009, by
Paul Hotvedt*