Notes on Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt” (1945)*

"The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness."
Paul Cézanne

There is a Japanese weeping cherry tree just outside my window. The long slender leaves of the cherry, turning late October yellow, blend into and are in places indistinguishable from the orange maple trees behind it. The leaves scattered on the grass, the branches, the mountains on the horizon, the grey sky intertwine in a broad but shallow space.

I take a snapshot of the scene. It seems to capture what I see. But the photo is false. The leaves, the branches, the trunks of the tall trees are all there, in focus, top to bottom, left to right. What I see before me is present in the photo, but not as I see it. The way it shows up in my lived, perceptual field is far more complicated, messy, a vague jumble of indistinct impressions the further I get from the center of focus. In spite of what we think, the photo is actually more like a seamless assemblage of all the various elements — foreground, background, left and right of the cherry tree, leaves, branches, horizon — as they appear when I look directly at them, individually, not as I take them in all together at once.

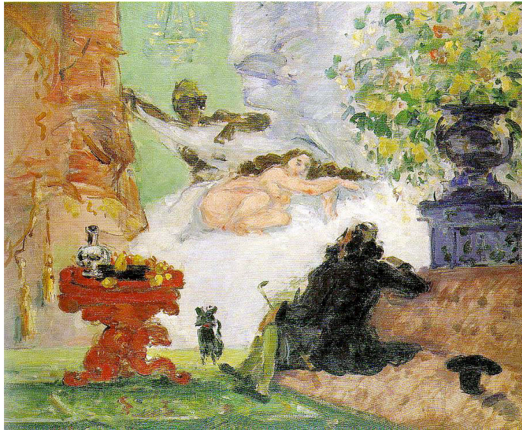
It's very difficult to describe this phenomenon. We just assume that a clear photo captures the way things look. But if we bracket our preconceptions and pay close attention to what actually appears to us, we learn that seeing is not at all what we assume it is. This is what the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes from the artist Paul Cézanne — what he claims Cézanne shows us — the way things show up for us as sensation and **become** perception.

To get there we must first be disabused of our naive assumptions which pass as common sense. Only then will we be in a position to understand how we are situated in the world as human beings.

The Phenomenology of Perception

Merleau-Ponty begins his essay on Cézanne with a fairly detailed description of his approach to painting, his goal and technique. M-P contrasts, or rather compares and contrasts, Cézanne's evolution of personal style with what we generally refer to as Impressionism. He does this not

only to distinguish Cézanne's painterly style from the analytic, the quasi-scientific, approach that influenced so many late nineteenth century French artists and theorists. He's also telling us a story about Cézanne's breaking free from his early, awkward attempt to paint the world as he felt it, from the inside, so to speak. Impressionist emphasis on light, atmosphere, nature on the outside, as we experience it, helped him see beyond his passionate and personal obsessions.

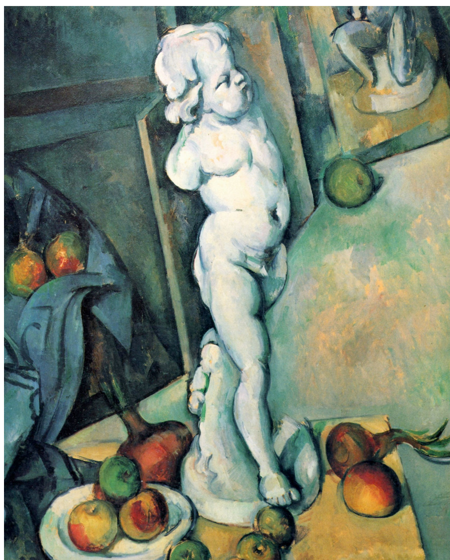


Paul Cézanne, *A Modern Olympia*, 1873–1874
Musee d'Orsay, Paris

But the philosopher doesn't want to linger too long on the artist's psychological development. Cézanne was a bit of a recluse, it's true. But there was ultimately much more at play — a larger and more profound direction. "It is quite possible that...Cézanne conceived a form of art which is valid for everyone. Left to himself, he could look at nature as only a human being can. The meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life". (11)

M-P also rules out art history and Cézanne's "own judgment of his work" in assessing its meaning and value.

"It is thanks to the Impressionists, and particularly to Pissarro, that Cézanne later conceived painting not as the incarnation of imagined scenes, the projection of dreams outward, but as the exact study of appearances: less a work of the studio than a working from nature." (11) [This observation suggests Iris Murdoch's distinction between **fantasy** (what we see in Cézanne's early work) and **imagination** (attention to the real world beyond self-interest). I'm referring here to her essays from the late 1950s into the early 1960's, culminating in "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" of 1967.]



Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Cherub*, 1895
Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

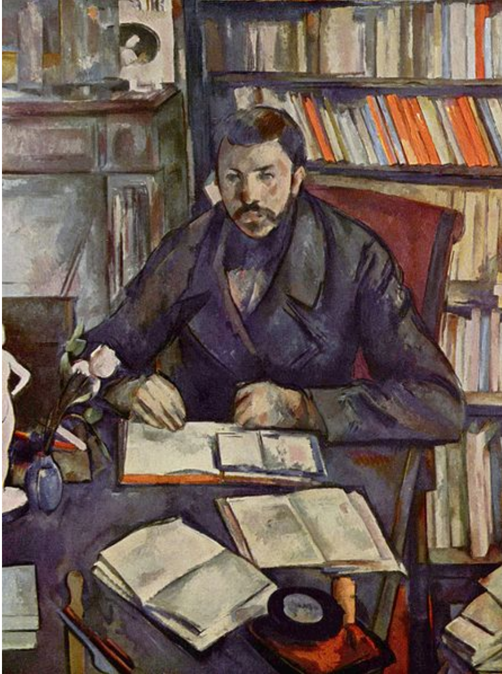
M-P emphasizes the fact that Cézanne learned a great deal from Pissarro and Impressionism, but was pursuing nature as such, rather than a technical reinterpretation of nature. "One must therefore say that Cézanne wished to return to the object without abandoning the Impressionist aesthetic which takes nature as its model." (12)

"It is clear from his conversations with Emile Bernard that Cézanne was always seeking to avoid the ready-made alternatives suggested to him: sensation versus judgment; the painter who sees against the painter who thinks; nature versus composition; primitivism as opposed to tradition.... Rather than apply to his work dichotomies more appropriate to those who sustain traditions than to those men, philosophers or painters, who initiate these traditions, he preferred to search for the true meaning of painting, which is continually to question tradition. Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, between order and chaos. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization." (13)

It is here, on the understanding of perception as a fundamental aspect of "being-in-the-world", that Merleau-Ponty finds Cézanne's work so insightful and provocative.

Here are several key passages from M-P's essay to emphasize and expand this point:

"By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cézanne discovered what recent psychologists [c.1945] have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one." (14)



Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy*, 1895
Musée d'Orsay

"The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the center from which these contributions radiate. We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor. If the painter is to express the world, the arrangement of his colors must carry with it this indivisible whole, or else his picture will only hint at things and will not give them in the imperious unity, the presence, the insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real.... Nor did Cézanne neglect the physiognomy of objects and faces: he simply wanted to capture it emerging from the color. Painting a face 'as an object' is not to strip it of its 'thought.' 'I realize that the painter interprets it,' said Cézanne. 'The painter is not an imbecile.' But this interpretation should not be a reflection distinct from the act of seeing." (15)

"[W]hat motivates the painter's movement can never be simply perspective or geometry or the laws governing color, or, for that matter, particular knowledge. Motivating all the movements from which a picture gradually emerges there can be only one thing: the landscape in its totality and in its absolute fullness, precisely what Cézanne called a 'motif'.... The task before him was, first to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second through these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism." (16)

"Art is not imitation, nor is it something manufactured according to the wishes of instinct or good taste. It is a process of expressing." (17)

"'Conception' cannot precede 'execution.' There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said." (19)

"The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere — not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which 'cultured men' are content to shut themselves, toward a reason which contains its own origins." (19)

"It is not enough for a painter like Cézanne, an artist, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson.... The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art will have united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium, nor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition." (19f)

The Question of Freedom

"[L]et us make no mistake about this [the artist’s] freedom.... Let us not imagine an abstract force which could superimpose its effects on life's 'givens' or which cause breaches in life's development. Although it is certain that a man's life does not *explain* his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that *this work to be done called for this life*." (20ff)

"Two things are certain about freedom: that we are never determined and yet that we never change, since, looking back on what we were, we can always find hints of what we have become. It is up to us to understand both these things simultaneously, as well as the way freedom dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world." (21)

Timothy Quigley, 21 Oct 12

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* Based on the Dreyfus translation in *Sense and Nonsense*, Northwestern University Press, 1964