

Norman Turner

THE ESSAY ON CÉZANNE

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Introductory Remarks

One day during my twenty-fifth year, while a student at the New York Studio School, I stood at a window of the big loft at Bleecker and Broadway where the School was then housed, shut one eye, held my head as still as possible, and with a felt-tipped pen drew on the glass a building across the street. With the slightest movement of my head or even shift of my gaze the edges of the building and the lines in my drawing fell out of alignment. As a practical matter, exact correspondence of drawing and building was impossible. Thus was doubt immediately thrown on a procedure I as yet knew nothing about. Where did I get the idea of trying linear perspective, not in a perspective construction, but in the real world? The Studio School faculty were veterans of Tenth Street and The Club. Two had studied with Hans Hoffman. That I heard mention of optical geometry from them is possible but unlikely. All I can be sure of forty years after is that here my interest in linear perspective began. Only much later, when I began to write on the subject, did I learn that Leonardo says, “Perspective is nothing else than seeing a place [or objects] behind a plane of glass, quite transparent, on the surface of which the objects . . . are to be drawn.”

Cézanne, too, I first encountered while a student at the Studio School, but in this case most emphatically from a teacher. Mercedes Matter was a Hoffman student, a friend of Giacometti, also of Guston, Pollack, Krasner and Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and a distinguished artist in her own right. In France as a young woman she looked up the

painter, Charles Camoin, who had met Cézanne in 1901, while doing his tour of military duty in the South. If Camoin talked to Cézanne about painting, Mercedes talked to Camoin about Cézanne, and I, as her student, heard her speak passionately of Cézanne's way. Though Cézanne was born in 1839, I one-hundred years later, in 1939, by means of her testimony a full century's worth of years were linked together, across the generations. The master of Aix was incarnate for me in the remarkable woman who captured my attention at a time in my life when I was primed to take in what she had to say.

That summer, the summer of 1965, I painted landscape from observation for nearly the first time. With me were two cheap books on Cézanne, one by Yvon Taillandier, the other by Basil Taylor, complete with toxic color plates, biographical sketches and some quotations from Cézanne's letters. Many an hour I spent prowling the back roads of Northern Virginia in a borrowed station wagon, looking for views that resembled the plates in those books. It was a beginner's lesson in trying to match the actual world to a muzzy idea I carried in my head, which idea the green monochrome farm and hunt country could not but utterly fail to resemble. During the evenings, I drank at my thin helping of Cézanne, wondering, all vague and unformed, about the relation between myself, the art I had chosen to pursue, and the raw, indubitable American world sprawled around me.

Returning to the Studio School in the fall of 1965, I fell into fierce debate with two fellow students who believed that notable departures from the ordinary in Cézanne's pictures, usually called "distortions," resulted from a purely compositional motive on Cézanne's part. They had taken to Erle Loran's then well-known and still thought-provoking book, *Cézanne's Composition*, and had become doctrinaire formalists. Cézanne overrode or ignored appearances for the sake of his compositions — this they resolutely proclaimed. In the heat of argument my position shot to the opposite extreme. I insisted, without being able to say why, that the departures had to do with his perceptions of nature. The derivation of this notion is nearly as unaccountable to me as that of trying a perspective picture through a window, for it flew in the face of what seemed the obvious explanation, at least to those of us who as Studio School students resided in the afterglow of Modernism. I now think both points of view have merit, and belong together. It is a question of properly understanding what pictorial composition and looking at the actual world have to do with each other, the question addressed by Ernst Cassirer in the quotation I've taken for my epigram, the question I pursue in this essay on Cézanne.

Instead of measuring the content, meaning and truth of intellectual forms by something extraneous which is supposed to be reproduced in them, we must find in these forms themselves the measure and criterion for their truth and intrinsic meaning. Instead of taking them as mere copies of something else, we must see in each of these spiritual forms a spontaneous law of generation; an original way and tendency of expression which is more than a mere record of something initially given in fixed categories of real existence. From this point of view, myth, art, language and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own. In these realms the spirit exhibits itself in that inwardly determined dialectic by virtue of which alone there is any reality, any organized and definite Being at all. Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension and as such is made visible to us. —Ernst Cassirer¹

For Mercedes
Who doubtless would disagree

Part One: Distortion

"But it takes a long, long time," wrote Ranier Maria Rilke to his Clara. "When I remember the puzzlement and insecurity of one's first confrontation with his work, along with his name, which was just as new. And then for a long time nothing, and suddenly one has the right eyes."²

It is difficult for us today, who find him everywhere enshrined in books and museums, to recapture the baffling novelty and unmitigated impact of Cézanne. His individualistic works, challenging when he died, now have an established place in our minds, where they stand comfortably in the Pantheon of greats. We have looked at them; we have read about them; we understand them. But this does not mean we understand them well. In what understanding we do have, a superficial premise is involved. It is stated in a single word, planted on Cézanne early, while he was still alive. His paintings are thought to contain distortions.

In some paintings the artist includes multiple points-of-view. A seldom remarked but dramatic example is that of the ginger-jar and green olive pot in a *Still-life with Apples* in the Getty Museum (R.770).³ The mouth of the green pot is seen from much higher than that of the ginger-jar, though they sit next to each other. Notorious is the example of one eye seen in profile, the other full-face, in *Man with Arms Folded* (R.850). As to tabletops interrupted by a cloth or some other still-life prop, Cézanne at times paints them as if they were at two different levels. The visible segments of the table seem misaligned, and the viewer, following the table-edge from one side of the interruption to the other, finds it re-appearing unexpectedly higher or lower, a conspicuous example being that of the table-top in *Still Life in Front of a Chest* (R.634).

This painting and the already-cited Getty *Still-life with Apples* display another unusual feature of Cézanne's paintings. It is a commonplace of drawing instruction, and has been a commonplace of drawing and painting in post-Renaissance times, to show round things such plates and mouths of vessels, seen obliquely, as ellipses. Cézanne shows them elongated, irregular, flattened and squared-off. Nor is that all. He treats tabletops, roadways, the sides of buildings, the round shapes just mentioned, or, to broaden the generalization, all things retreating in depth, as tilted vertically toward the viewer. The road in *Turn in the Road at La Roche-Guyon* is one among many instances (R.539).

In a like manner, that is, a manner treating the distant as if it were near, he overlooks what every student of drawing knows, what every photographer knows, too: that parallels seen lying in depth flee toward and converge on a vanishing point. He treats such parallels as elbowing apart and failing to converge, the lane in *Lane Through Chestnut Trees at the Jas de Bouffan* being but one of several examples (R.617). Moreover, he is indifferent to measurable distances such as can be plotted on a map or subjected to the rules of linear perspective. When he paints the *Chateau de Marines* he

hangs the distant building in the nearby trees (R.630). When he stands in the same or nearly same spot to paint several versions of the Mont Sainte-Victoire, he renders the mountain a different size in different versions. The most extreme variation is between the pair of similar views that sometimes hang together in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (R.91; R.912).

During Cézanne's lifetime and after many were unable to accept these singularities as consistent with the art of painting at all. Far too odd to fit any known scheme, they could only be deformities, the result of an optical lesion or mental defect. When Pissarro reproached Huysmans for excluding Cézanne from his book on modern art, published in 1883, Huysmans coolly wrote back,

Yes, he has temperament, he is an artist; but in sum, with the exception of some still lives, the rest is, to my mind, not likely to live. It is interesting, curious, suggestive in ideas, but certainly he is an eye case, which I understand he himself realizes You know that after so many years of struggle it is no longer a question of more less manifest or visible intentions, but of works that are real childbirth, which are not monsters, odd cases⁴

Three years later Zola's *The Masterpiece*, having been serialized in *Le Gil Blas*, was published in book form. As with his previous books Zola sent Cézanne a copy. It confirmed what Cézanne already suspected, that his oldest and dearest friend saw him as an aborted genius, one who had as the result of his life's work "nothing to show." "Could there be something wrong with his eyes that impaired his vision?" wondered Claude Lantier, Zola's genetically flawed hero.⁵

Learning, it may be, to doubt his work in the language and ideas others had given him, much distressed by what he agreed was an optical defect, consequently a defect of his life-work, Cézanne knew well what Huysmans and Zola meant. According to Jules Borely, who visited him in 1902, as the two men sat in front of a farmhouse facing the town of Aix, Cézanne reached out his arm to measure the steeple of the cathedral between his thumb and index finger and said, "How easily things like this can be distorted (*pour déformer*). . . . I make great efforts and have much difficulty. Monet has the ability to look at something and to draw it instantly in proportion."⁶

Similar remarks were made to other visitors. "Thus Cézanne made no pretense of unawareness of the asymmetry of his bottles, the defective perspective of his plates," Rivière and Schnerb reported.

Showing one of his watercolors, he corrected a bottle that was not vertical with the tips of his fingers says, as if excusing himself for it: 'I am a primitive, I have a lazy eye. I have twice presented myself to the École, but I do not get the proportions right: a head interests me, I make it too big.'⁷

Witness the man who towers over twentieth-century painting as Einstein towers over twentieth-century physics sadly apologizing for what he was willing to believe were his deficiencies. The notion of Cézanne's paintings as distorted can be traced to none

other than he who made them. And plainly, to Cézanne the word *déformé* meant something was wrong. He did not intend to forgive himself in the eyes of others. Yet in his lifetime an upheaval in how paintings were made and seen was already under way. With this great change the connotation of the word "distortion" switched from negative to positive.

The extraordinary reversal began as early as 1890, when Maurice Denis sounded an opening blast for the movement, eventually dubbed formalism: "Any painting — before being a war horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote — is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order."⁸ It was their acquaintance with Cézanne's work that in part enabled Denis and his fellow symbolists to agree that organization of a surface was the sine qua non, for a Cézanne was unmistakably a "flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order." To a viewer equipped with this beautifying intelligence, Cézanne's work took on a different cast. Rather than a product of eye disease, as Huysmans said publicly and cruelly in an article published the same year Denis made his epochal phrase,⁹ the singular forms could be attributed to the demands of order. They clearly promoted the integrity of the organized surface, if only they were seen in this way by a viewer prepared to embrace them on those terms. They most definitely belonged to Cézanne's intention, and were not excruciating lapses but contributors to the compositional set. The unusual abstractions still confounded the majority of viewers even as they became pregnant with new-discovered meaning. All the elements of the picture together were seen as expressive in their own right, and could be compared to the self-sufficient relations of music. "Distortion" stayed in the rapidly expanding Cézanne literature — was never questioned — but came to signify a radical innovation and boon to art.

The 1903 Salon d'Automme included some Cézannes. In his review, Mecislas Golberg decided that,

The soul of this Salon is painting in blocks (*peinture par masse*), with which the workers of painting seem intent on replacing the excesses of Pointillism and exquisite nervousness of Impressionism. It's as though the painters, looking through sculptor's eyes, saw things (solely) in terms of surface.

The attempt is interesting in itself as a reaction against analytic excess. While representing an advance, however, it is (also) a negative development, due to the distortions that this art deems indispensable.

From a distance, the heads of Cézanne's card players give me the impression of billiard balls suspended in mid-air.¹⁰

Though Golberg here gave Cézanne a more positive assessment than had other critics, he declined to bless what he termed negative developments. It was Clive Bell who made the leap of faith. Writing in 1922, Bell said the task Cézanne set himself was, "the creation of form which should be entirely self-supporting and intrinsically significant . . .

. To this great end all means were good. To achieve it he was prepared to play the oddest tricks with natural forms — to distort."¹¹

If, in such a view, distortion was certainly there to be acknowledged but was a by-product of major achievement, the magisterial voice was that of Roger Fry. In his 1927 book on Cézanne's development Fry discussed the still-life once owned by Gauguin, (R. 418) (8). Pointing out that rectangular and spherical volumes predominate, Fry continued,

That is to say; the forms are the most elementary possible. But the circles of the Comptier and glass seen in perspective give us ovals, and the oval is a form that . . . harmonizes ill with the circle and the right line. So that one is not astonished to find that Cézanne has deformed them into oblongs with rounded ends.

It is probable that Cézanne was himself ignorant of these deformations. I doubt if he deliberately calculated them; they came almost as an unconscious response to a need for the most evident formal harmony.¹²

Fry commanded the English language. His analysis was balanced, questioning, nuanced and venturesome. A pioneer of Cézanne studies, working with limited access to the work and little documentary material or knowledge of the man, he yet grasped the whole artist, in all his wealth of extremes, his apparent contradictions. In the writings of those who came after, Fry's subtle and qualified views were elided, flattened, compressed into dogma. Hegel's historical determinism was seeping from progressive politics into the criticism of art.

"No earlier book is so well remembered . . . ," wrote Erle Loran of Fry in the introduction to his own book, *Cézanne's Composition*, of 1943. "The distortions," Loran informed us,

were employed here for the sake of making a thrust into space more forceful, there for the sake of holding the plane in related tension to other planes, or to the picture plane.¹³

If Loran mentioned Fry's work, Loran's was mentioned in turn by Clement Greenberg, in his article of 1951, where Greenberg wrote of Cézanne's

mosaic of brushstrokes that called just as much attention to the physical picture plane as the rougher dabs or "commas" of Monet, Pissarro and Sisley did. The flatness of that plane was only further emphasized by the distortions of Cézanne's drawing, which started out by being temperamental . . . but turned into a method . . . of anchoring fictive volumes and spaces to the surface pattern.¹⁴

Writing on Cézanne and Cubism in 1977, William Rubin added to this by asserting that Cézanne was close to the movement that flowered after his death. "There is much in his art that is conceptual," Rubin concluded, reasonably pointing to the many Cézanne images of bathers, done in the studio from imagination.

But most important, it should be observed that the majority of the so — called 'distortions' . . . have no connection with perception . . . These alternations of nature . . . in favor of the picture's compositional structure constitute collectively a sophisticated form of conceptualizing that challenges many of Cézanne's own dicta and suggest that the difference in method between him and the Cubists was as much one of degree as of kind.¹⁵

A definition is in order. To say an actual thing is "distorted" is to imply a comparison. The thing is distorted not in respect to itself, but in respect to a class, type or norm. A plate, for example, is a wide, round bowl of little depth, meant to hold food. It belongs to a class of things, called plates, all sharing these characteristics, though varying within the class. If the plate is of clay and if before firing its lip is bent up like the brim of a cowboy hat, then it is no longer of much use for eating and no longer typical of plates. It is distorted in relation to its class. Human noses, to mention a prodigiously variable example, can be large or small, broad or thin but are restricted to a range determined by genetics and function. No two are alike, but all are within normal limits. Pinocchio's nose, when it grows to the length of a tree-branch, becomes a grotesque, a distortion of human physiognomy, for it no longer falls within the norm.

Turning from actual things to pictures of them, we turn from ascertainable facts relating to physical realities to images. Though material or biological properties and function no longer apply, analogous reasoning holds. To state that the image of a thing in Cézanne is "distorted" as Golberg, Bell, Loran and Greenberg would have it, "deformed," as Fry would have it, "altered" as Rubin would have it, is to imply or state a comparison; only now the comparison is not only to a uniform product or range of sizes and shapes in the actual world but to a pictorial standard. Instead of comparing real individuals to others of their kind, or holding a portrait up to its subject, Golberg, Bell, Loran and Greenberg are comparing Cézanne's imagery to a class of images possessing typical features and saying he fails to conform.

What is the accepted practice, outside the limits of which Cézanne's pictures fall? Roger Fry, using the word "deformation," made clear his basis of comparison when he wrote that "circles . . . seen in perspective give us ovals." Erle Loran, using the word "distortions," made clear his criterion of the undistorted when he compared Cézanne's paintings to photographs made of the motifs:

Photography can record the normal, factual vision of the world more accurately than other mediums, and the photographs used for the present study were taken solely for the purpose of recording the subjects at the very places from which Cézanne painted them.

And:

In general, the photographs are simply offered as the best available means of conveying to the reader what every person of normal vision knows about nature.

And:

Diagram I is a tracing from the photograph of the motif . . . , showing the spatial locations exactly as they are¹⁶

The photographic images Loran referred to, the perspective image Fry referred to, are in principal one and the same, for cameras and linear perspective constructions share the same laws of projective geometry. Both reduce the visible to a numerated, unvarying standard; both can accordingly be spoken of under a single heading as "perspective." And in the belief that perspective shows "what every person of normal vision knows about nature" and gives "spatial locations exactly as they are" Loran is not alone, for it saturates our culture, furnishes every mind. Movies, television, advertising that makes use of photographs and such free-hand art as comes from artists trained in perspective tell us every day that this is how things look to one and all. Perspective is the prevailing visual language of our place and time. Golberg, Bell, Fry, et. al., asserting that Cézanne's paintings are deformed, distorted or altered in relation to a type of picture they evidently think true in an absolute sense (for otherwise they would not resort to the comparison they employ), merely relate them to a type of picture that constitutes, for us, the visual equivalent of a common tongue.

The trouble with saying that Cézanne's pictures contain distortions because they differ from perspective pictures lies, not in equating perspective pictures to some objective features of the visible, as a model is equated to that which it exemplifies, but in equating them, tacitly, to vision. Perspective pictures have universal currency partly because they are thought true to what we see. Though they describe with formidable exactitude certain facts of things; though their projective geometry states a reciprocal relation of viewer to view such that the one can be extrapolated from the other; though people can be taught by drawing in perspective to see in a perspective way, gradually finding in their experience of real things the outward manifestation of an inwardly digested form, so that perspective becomes in their individual case a *form of perception*, human visual experience is neither determined by optical geometry nor inherently characterized by a fixed ratio of progressive diminution. Cézanne's foes thought there was something wrong with his eyes because his pictures failed to fit the standard model. His friends thought he saw things as we all do, that this was identical to seeing them as they would appear in the standard model, and that he then deformed or distorted them on purpose for the sake of abstract pictorial order. Thus do friend and foe alike raise houses of reason on the same bed of sand.

The corrective to this doubly suspect view lies partly with Cézanne himself. If, in one mood, he acceded to the dubious thinking of others, shared, rather pathetically, their prejudice, agreed his pictures must be distorted, in another mood he spoke elliptically, as best he could, of what he was about. Consider some passages from the group of letters on theory he sent near the end of his life to Emile Bernard:

May 12, 1904:

I progress very slowly, for nature reveals herself to me in very complex ways; the progress needed is endless. One must look at the model and feel very exactly; and also express oneself distinctly and with force.

(The artist) must beware of the literary spirit which so often causes the painter to deviate from his true path -- the concrete study of nature -- to lose himself too long in intangible speculation.

The Louvre is a good book to consult but it must be only an intermediary. The real and immense study to be undertaken is the manifold picture of nature.

May 26, 1904:

The man of letters expresses himself in abstractions whereas a painter, by means of drawing and color, gives concrete form to his sensations and perceptions. One is neither too scrupulous nor too sincere nor too submissive to nature; but one is more or less master of one's model, and above all, of the means of expression. Get to the heart of what is before you and continue to express yourself as logically as possible.

July 25, 1904:

I am sorry that we cannot be side by side, for I don't want to be right in theory, but in front of nature.

October 23, 1905:

Now the theme to develop is that — whatever our temperament or form of strength face to face with nature may be — we must render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that existed before us.¹⁷

The program is straightforward, if far from simple, the implications clear. Other segments from the letters are in a similar vein. Cézanne iterates that one learns about art by studying past achievements, but then must make one's own way in the face of nature. Rather than separating the appearance of nature and the formal resources of his art, he ties them together. He ties submission to nature to mastering the means of expression, getting to the heart of what is before you to expressing yourself as logically as possible. Stating that he wishes to record what he can see, he adds the proviso that he wishes to see afresh, that is, forget "everything that existed before us." Above all, again and again, he says in different ways that one cannot be "too scrupulous nor too sincere nor too submissive to nature."

We are invited to understand that the unusual features of his paintings rose from his describing nature as scrupulously as possible, in concert with his formal interests. We are further invited to understand that these formal interests were cloistered from received norms, from "everything that existed before us." Notable among received norms, drummed into students throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, was that

fixture of instruction in private studios and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, linear perspective, father to the photograph.

Evangelical Loran, preaching formalism, convinced that photographs give "normal, factual vision of the world" and "spatial locations exactly as they are," and that Cézanne sees things according to photography and paints them contrariwise purely for composition's sake, is forced by the logic of his position to disregard what Cézanne says. "Cézanne leaves the subject far behind as he penetrates ahead into the world of abstract space that has by now become so widespread in international art," he writes; and: "I have never been able to correlate Cézanne's statements . . . into any pattern that would fit the interpretation I now give to his work."¹⁸

Having mentioned the "picture plane" and the "distortions" of Cézanne's drawing that served to emphasize it, Clement Greenberg similarly writes,

The real problem . . . (was) how to relate . . . every part of the illusion in depth to a surface pattern endowed with even superior pictorial rights. The firmer binding of the three—dimensional illusion to a decorative surface effect; this was Cézanne's true object, whether he said so or not.¹⁹

In other words, as Cézanne never spoke of a picture plane or a surface effect that was his true object, it follows that Greenberg's language, like Loran's, must supersede Cézanne's own language, casting it out.

As to Rubin's view of the matter, Cézanne's paintings of bathers do of course depend at least as much on this conceptual framework as they do on his observations of nature. But does it follow that Cézanne's conceptual bent and oft-stated loyalty to nature are at odds, as Rubin's way of posing their relationship suggests?

In a footnote explaining his substitution of the word "alterations" for the word "distortions," Rubin approaches a whole understanding of Cézanne when he writes,

The term "distortion" implies the *a priori* acceptance of the integrity of an object which is then pulled or pushed out of shape. This is essentially an expressionist device, and therefore the term should not be used for Cézanne. Cézanne's selection of "constructive sensations" from the totality of the visual field proceeds from an assumption of the integrity of a picture rather than that of the natural world.²⁰

Equating constructive sensations and the visual field, Rubin grows warmer, but then grows cold again by breaking the integrity of the picture and the integrity of the natural world apart. Finding that "the majority of the so-called 'distortions' . . . have no connection with perception," and that "these alternations of nature . . . challenge many of Cézanne's own dicta," Rubin, too, is unable to accept what Cézanne wrote.

If criticism is to philosophy what journalism is to literature, then, in terms of rigorous argument, the line of descent for formalist doctrine is from its inception in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* down through Hegel, Schopenhauer, Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne K. Langer. And it is pertinent here to bring to readers' attention the epigram at

the front of this essay, if the reader has not already read it. The summary Cassirer once made of his neo-Kantian views should be mentally inserted here, between this paragraph and the next.

The point to be made without delay, the one upon which my argument hinges, is that Fry, Loran, Greenberg and Rubin have a single-minded grasp on the Kantian exegesis of perceived, perceiver and form, at least as construed by Cassirer, such that their arguments do involve distortion, but not where they see it. They are quick to hear Cassirer say, "Instead of measuring the content, meaning and truth of intellectual forms by something extraneous which is supposed to be reproduced in them, we must find in these forms themselves the measure and criterion for their truth and intrinsic meaning," but stop short of hearing him say, "Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but *organs* of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension and as such is made visible to us."

Claiming for Cézanne a fondness for the picture-plane and a hermetic interest in form qua form, these formalists are able to wave away his commitment to observing the actual world because they unquestioningly accept that perspective images, falling upon the retina, are equal to "what every person of normal vision knows about nature." Failing to discriminate the flexible and symbolic relation between actual things and their portraits, innocently conflating the two, these formalists assume that perspective manipulations are a "record of something initially given in fixed categories of real existence," instead of an "*organ* of reality," creating within geometric limits a phenomenal world. Thus this brand of formalism is a coin with two sides, "advanced" on the face, "retrograde" on the verso. Asserting that "pure" form is an advance because it renounces conventional spatial fictions such as those of linear perspective, with its unwelcome infusion of science and mimeses, these formalists accept with less doubt than did a skeptical Leonardo da Vinci, with whom it originated, the untenable proposition that perspective images are the simple and absolute truth of what and how we see. Reasoning from a class of picture (perspective pictures), to visual perception (which they mistakenly equate to perspective pictures), to Cézanne's pictures (so clearly unlike perspective pictures), to an interest in "pure" painting they blithely attribute to him (never mind what he avowed), they prop up the dead soldier of perspective the better to shoot him again. Perspective is the neutral and universal medium of perceptual truth, but it is irrelevant to "advanced" pictorial culture — such is the slide in their thinking. Which permits them to derive this conclusion: As Cézanne was clearly not involved in perspective, he could not have described things as they appeared to him. He distorted what he saw.

If we accept this brand of formalism, we find ourselves in a tangle; first, because we anachronistically give to Cézanne ideas about the picture-plane and the virtues of non-mimetic art that followed in his wake; second, because we fly in the face of what he himself repeatedly said; third, because we take as a model for vision that which empirical

experiment and phenomenological introspection has long discredited; and, fourth, because our underlying assumptions about perception and conception, reality and pictorial form, are poorly made.

In what follows it will be suggested that the singularities in Cézanne's work serve not to purposely unseat observation from painting (a notion his correspondence makes clear he abhorred) but to further his realization of nature (as he himself would say). It will be brought out that this painter, who was literate, thoughtful and considerably more involved in his project than any of his critics, often spoke and wrote of what he meant to do and was indeed accomplishing. It will be assumed that Cassirer's way of putting the relationship of perceived, perceiver and form is required: that Cézanne's formal devices posited and produced a world of their own; that it was by their agency that the real became an object for intellectual apprehension and so was made visible to him; or, returning to Cézanne's way of putting it, that he better submitted to nature *by* better mastering his means of expression, got to the heart of what was before him *by* expressing himself as logically as possible. It will be shown that in the course of his work perception of nature and conception of the picture were not opposed, as Rubin evidently would have it, but synthesized, "realization" in Cézanne's lexicon being no less than their successful unification. It will be accepted that formalist critics are right in pointing to the rigorous organization of the surfaces, and to its autonomous significance, comparable to that of music, wrong in failing to appreciate how this order derived from, and therefore signified as well, Cézanne's profound involvement with his surroundings. It will be argued that in the only sense meaningful to his art Cézanne painted what he saw.

A distortion, Webster says, is a "twisted or misshapen condition." To distort is to "wrest from the true meaning." An anomaly, though, is "anything out of keeping with accepted notions of fitness and order." The first word points to a categorical precept violated, the second to a rule broken. There are plenty of anomalies in Cézanne vis-à-vis the normative pictorial vision given in the rules of perspective, which rules he incessantly breaks, but no distortions.

Actually, there is distortion in one Cézanne. Resting on the cloth above the platter in *Peaches and Pears* (R.664) is a fruit so diagonally elongated as to border on the unreadable. Looked at with one eye closed, from the extreme upper right, it assumes normative proportions. Like the *Portrait of Edward VI* reproduced by Sir Ernst Gombrich as figure 216 in *Art and Illusion*, like the skull at the bottom of Hans Holbein the Younger's double portrait of the French Ambassadors in the National Gallery, London, it is an



Rewald 664.

anamorphosis, or at least what could easily pass for one. Deliberate anamorphoses are stretched linear perspective projections that are corrected by looking at them with one eye from a fixed position, usually at an extreme oblique angle. They vividly prove perspective while also breaking the promise made by perspective of the straightforward, Albertian sort — that the relative proportions of things as projected will be consistent with their ordinary appearance. Though Cézanne spoke of astonishing Paris with an apple,²¹ though this strange shape would certainly answer to the ambition, whether the fruit is an apple, pear or peach is on close examination of the painting itself fairly uncertain.

Why Cézanne would make an anamorphosis, if he did make an anamorphosis, I decline to speculate. The relevant point is that if the elongated fruit is "twisted" in order to "wrest it from its true meaning" in an what surely resembles an anamorphic exercise, the irregular shape of the platter holding it, by not conforming to the oval of a conventional photograph or perspective picture, is merely "out of keeping with accepted notions of fitness and order." The shape of the platter does not posit a categorical shape which is then deliberately altered. Rather than distorted, the shape is merely anomalous.

Yet this is a painting of everyday things gathered from Cézanne's environment and with this interesting exception soberly described. Not always did he think plain things and a sober way of painting them consistent with his temperament. Initially, he went in another direction, grandiose and willfully unknowing. The devotion to nature evident here came later, a corrective to that extravagant, youthful self.

Notes

1. Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth, trans., Suzanne K. Langer (Dover Publications, 1953) p. 8.
2. Ranier Maria Rilke, "Letters on Cézanne," ed. Clara Rilke, trans. Joel Agee (Fromm International Publishing Corp., 1985). p.43.)
3. Rewald catalogue numbers denote paintings. See John Rewald, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: a Catalogue Raisonné*, in collaboration with Walter Feilchenfeld and Jayne Warman, 2 volumes, (Harry N. Abrams, 1996).
4. Judith Wechsler, *Cézanne in Perspective* (Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 30.
5. Emile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. Thomas Walton, revision and intro. Roger Pearson (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 417, 52
6. -- Qu'il suffit de peu, disait-il, pour déformer cette chose . . . je m'efforce et suis à la peine. -- See "Jules Borély," *Conversations avec Cézanne*, ed. by P. M. Doran (Editions Macula, 1978), p. 19.

7. See "Revèire and Schnerb," *Conversations with Cézanne*, ed. by Michael Doran; trans. by Julie Lawrence Cochran, intro. by Richard Schiff (University of California Press, 2001) p. 86. (The English edition of the work cited in note 6.)

8. John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from van Gogh to Gauguin* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1962), p. 518.

9. Huysmans wrote: "Then some oil sketches of plein-air landscapes, efforts still in limbo, attempts at freshness spoiled by retouching, and, finally, baffling imbalances: houses tilted to one side as if drunk, skewed fruit in besotted pottery"

In short, a revelatory colorist who contributed more than the late Manet to the Impressionist movement, an artist with diseased retinas who, in his exasperated visual perceptions, discovered the premonitory symptoms of a new art" Françoise Cachin, "A Century of Cézanne Criticism I: From 1865 to 1906," *Cézanne* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1996), p. 27.

10. Cachin, "A Century of Cézanne Criticism I," pp. 35-36. Golberg, who lived in abject poverty and died of tuberculosis in 1907, was a strong influence on radical artists in the early years of the century. Matisse's "Notes of a Painter" were written for Golberg's *Cahiers*. For more on Golberg, see Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) pp. 219-221.

11. Cachin, "A Century of Cézanne Criticism I," *Cézanne* p. 55.

12. Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 46. Fry's translation of Maurice Denis, published in 1909-10, includes the following: "What astonishes us most in Cézanne's work is certainly his research for form, or, to be exact, for deformation." Maurice Denis, "Cézanne," trans. Roger Fry, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. xvi, Oct. 1909 - March 1910, p. 276.

13. Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs* (University of California Press, 1985), pp. 1, 32.

14. Clement Greenberg, "Cézanne," *Art and Culture* (Beacon Press, 1961), p. 52.

15. William Rubin, "Cézannisme and the Beginnings of Cubism," *Cézanne: The Late Work* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), pp. 162-165, 198 (n. 66).

16. Loran, *Cézanne's Composition*, pp. 5, 72.

17. Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, ed., John Rewald (Hacker Art Books, 1976), pp. 303, 303-304, 326.

18. Loran, *Cézanne's Composition*, pp. 117, 8.

19. Greenberg, "Cézanne," *Art and Culture*, p. 54.

20. Rubin, "Cézannisme and the Beginnings of Cubism," pp. 198, n. 66. The point of view expressed by these three can be traced at least as far back as Bernard, who wrote of Cézanne, in 1904, "Thus, the more the artist works, the further his work distances itself from the objective; and the further it distances itself from the opacity of the model, which has served as point of departure, the more he enters into the painting stripped naked, with no other goal but itself. The more he makes his painting abstract -- after having begun it narrowly, true to the original, and hesitatingly -- the more he simplifies it and gives it breadth.

Little by little, the work has expanded and has reach the goal of pure design." See "Emile Bernard" in *Conversation with Cézanne*, Michael Doran, Ed., trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran (University of California Press, 2001, p. 36.

21. See Gustave Geffroy, *Conversation with Cézanne*, ed. by Michael Doran; trans. by Julie Lawrence Cochran, intro. by Richard Schiff (University of California Press, 2001), p. 6.