

Wallace Stevens: Toward a Supreme Fiction

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American modernist poet. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he worked as an executive for The Hartford Insurance Company in Connecticut. The photograph by Sylvia Salmi was taken in the 1940s, at which time he was vice-president of the company. In his free time Stevens wrote poems, publishing his first book *Harmonium* in 1923. Throughout his life he considered poetry as the “supreme fiction,” something that could replace religion in human life, and provide us with a more complete understanding than that provided by science or philosophy. In 1942 he published a set of poems entitled *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, to illustrate the nature and power of poetry.

The Romantic Revolution

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, artists and writers insisted that art should stress individual creativity rather than formal learning, and that the emotional response to the world was more important than the rational. Not everyone appreciated the new poetry. In 1820, the satirist Thomas Love Peacock described *The Four Ages of Poetry*: the iron age of wherein rude bards celebrated the exploits of their chieftains, the golden age of Homer, the silver age of civilized verse lasting from Virgil to Dryden, and the current brass age wherein poets described their feelings. His invective was venomous: he described the characteristics of romantic poetry as

harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes; sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly

spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a response to Peacock in 1821, but he died in 1822, and *A Defense of Poetry* was not published until 1840. Shelley distinguished two kinds of mental action: reason (Greek *logizein*, logic, analysis) and imagination (Greek *poiein*, poetry, synthesis).

Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

He proposed that it is through the imagination that we obtain new knowledge:

The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

And at the end of his essay, he claimed

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

The word hierophant, used initially in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, comes from the Greek *hieros* (sacred, holy) and *phainein* (show, reveal).

Shelley embodied these ideas in his 1819 *Ode to the West Wind* (full text available). This poem describes the west wind of autumn that blows the leaves from the trees and heralds the coming winter. It ends

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

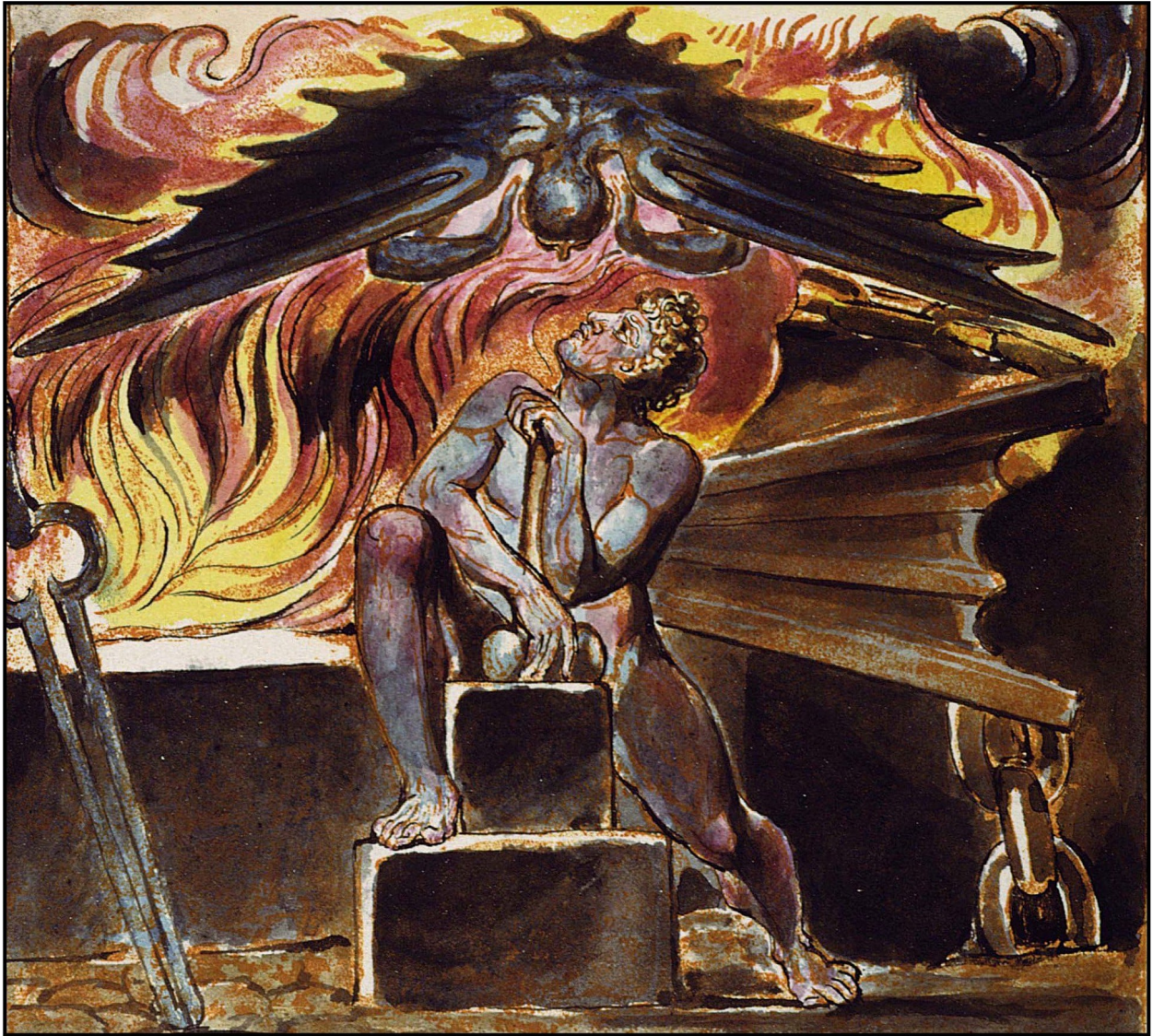
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley was not alone in considering poetry as a great system for creating knowledge and understanding. In his prophetic books, William Blake described Los as the personification of the creative imagination, in despair at the state of the world following the Industrial Revolution. In the 1820 book *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Los is driven by his demonic Spectre to destroy the present state of England (personified by the Giant Albion), and reforge a new world. The following is Blake's representation of Los from page 6 of *Jerusalem*:



Los proclaims

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another
Man's

I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create
(Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1820, p 10)

Modern Ideas of Poetry

Shelley and the Romantic poets were soon criticized for being too idealistic, too removed from the real world, and too emotional. The following quotation is from a critique of

Shelley by George Santayana (1863-1952), a poet and philosopher who taught at Harvard when Wallace Stevens was an undergraduate there. Stevens and Santayana became friends, exchanged poems and stayed in contact long after Stevens graduated (Mariani, 2016, pp 21-23). Santayana claimed that Shelley

could never put together any just idea of the world: he merely collected images and emotions, and out of them made worlds of his own. His poetry accordingly does not well express history, nor human character, nor the constitution of nature. What he unrolls before us instead is, in a sense, fantastic; it is a series of landscapes, passions, and cataclysms such as never were on earth, and never will be. (Santayana, 1913, pp 181-2)

After Romanticism, the Realists had their day. And as the 20th Century began, Modernism came to the fore. Modernists poets tended toward the everyday rather than the fantastic, irony rather than idealism, objectivity rather than passion, and innovation rather than derivation. In his 1942 poem *Of Modern Poetry*, Stevens remarked

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage.

Despite being critical of Shelley's poetry, Santayana nevertheless largely agreed with his idea that poetry creates our understanding of the world. He described the "great function of poetry:"

to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but

indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

Santayana realized that the creative imagination works in science as well as poetry:

Science and common sense are themselves in their way poets of no mean order, since they take the material of experience and make out of it a clear, symmetrical, and beautiful world (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

He also proposed that poetry and religion were closely related:

Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive. (Santayana, 1900, p 290).

These last two quotations recall Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred

These ideas were not accepted by all modernist poets. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) had much more restrained views on the function of poetry:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

(Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, 1940)

Wallace Stevens, however, thought about poetry in much the same way as Shelley and Santayana (Italia, 1993). In his essay *The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet* in his 1951 collection *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens quotes Shelley extensively:

He speaks of poetry as created by "that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." He says that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. It is "indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge . . . the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds . . . it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life." In spite of the absence of a definition and in spite of the impressions and approximations we are never at a loss to recognize poetry. As a consequence it is easy for us to propose a center of poetry, a *vis* or *noeud vital*, to which, in the absence of a definition, all the variations of definitions are peripheral. (Stevens, 1951, pp 44-45).

Stevens' conception of the poet was very similar to Shelley's:

what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (Stevens, 1951, p 31)

Stevens used the term "fiction" to describe the creative process of poetry. "Fiction" comes from the Latin *fictus* the past participle of *fingere* meaning to shape, form, devise, feign; "poetry" comes from the Greek *poesis* meaning a fabrication or creation, which is itself derived from *poiein*, to make or compose.

Stevens' proposal of poetry as the process primarily

responsible for our understanding of the world is similar in many ways to the Martin Heidegger's ideas about Hölderlin's poetry, though neither writer could have been aware of the other:

The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. (Heidegger, 1941, p 58)

What we can express in words we can hope to understand. Poetry is unlike other modes of expression used in religion, law, or science. Poetry is particularly and vividly close to experience, and because of its attention to sound and metaphor it makes that experience memorable. In his essay *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, points out that poetry brings experience "near" to us:

A genuine poem ...allows us to experience "nearness" in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem. What is the nearness that is held there? Whenever we have to hold something, it is because it is transient and threatens to escape our grasp. In fact our fundamental experience as beings subject to time is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more, so that at best they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. But the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. (Gadamer, 1986, p 114)

Gadamer realizes, however, that poetry is but one of many linguistic modes used to gain understanding of the world:

Language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being. (Gadamer, 1986, p 115)

Supreme Fictions

Stevens first used the term “supreme fiction” in his 1923 poem *A High-Toned Christian Woman* (Brazeal, 2007). The main them of the poem (full text available) is that human creativity knows no hierarchy: poetry is as valuable as religion, jazz improvisations as important as choral hymns, and bawdy merriment as meaningful as moral laws. The poem begins

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That’s clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones.

Stevens is indulging in word games: “nave” leads to “knave,” “palm” recalls “psalm,” and the “supreme fiction” brings to mind the “supreme being” who created everything, the creator free of any church, the godhead of Deists and Revolutionaries.

Stevens had given up his belief in the Christian God but still felt the need for something to believe in. That it might be possible to believe in a fiction was suggested in his 1942

poem *Asides on an Oboe* (full text available) which begins

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

Two ideas – the concept of a supreme fiction by which the poetic imagination could create and understand a world, and the need of human beings to believe in something – ran through all of Stevens's thought and poetry. In the *Adagia* (an unpublished collection of aphorisms), he claimed

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly (Stevens, 1997, p 903)

Unfortunately, although the word "fiction" means an imaginative creation, it also carries the connotation that it is untrue. In this regard, Stevens' statements become contradictory since we cannot believe in something that we know to be untrue (Brazeal, 2007). Stevens is using William James' idea of the will to believe. But, as Brazeal points out, it was not James's view that we could just believe in anything. Rather we could believe in what we thought was true even though we had not yet fully proven it.

Stevens discussed the problems about believing in a fiction in a 1942 letter to Henry Church about *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*:

One evening, a week or so ago, a student at Trinity College came to the office and walked home with me. We talked about this book. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility. that there is as no such thing as believing in something that one knew was no true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time.

There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief, if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that are extensions of reality. There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch ancestors believed in it. But Heaven is an extension of reality (Stevens & Stevens, 1996, p 430)

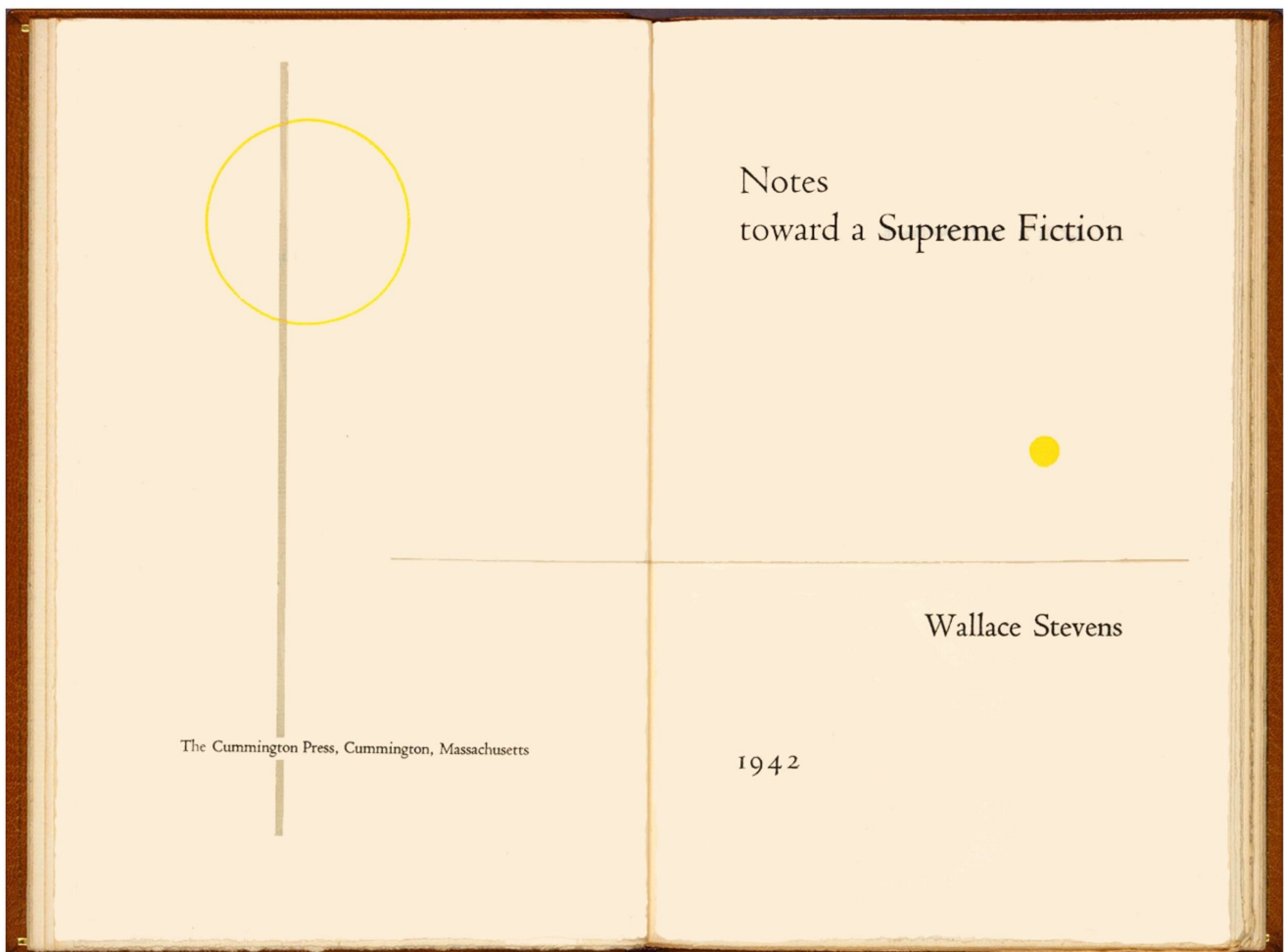
Some resolution of these contradictions may be found in the way we consider fiction. Any worthwhile work of fiction must be "true to life." If it has no relevance to real life, it is not worth reading. This is likely the meaning of Stevens' fiction – something created by the human imagination that represents what could or does happen in real life as accurately and completely (as "truly") as it can. Michael Frayn has discussed some of the complex relations between truth and fiction (2006).

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

In 1942 Stevens published *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* with Cummington Press, a fine press founded by Harry Duncan in 1939 in Cummington, Massachusetts. 273 copies of the 45-page book were hand-printed, 80 of which were signed by Stevens. A second edition of 330 copies was published in 1943. The book was dedicated to Henry Church, a patron of the arts, whose fortune derived from his father's patent for baking soda (with the brand name *Arm and Hammer*). The design for the book's title page was by Alessandro Giampietro. Stevens told Henry Church in a 1942 letter

that the straight lines in the designs of the book represent direction and that the circles mean comprehension. (Stevens

& Stevens, 1996, p 418)



The poem (full text available) consists of a prologue of 8 lines, three sections containing ten poems, each composed of 7 unrhymed tercets (21 lines), and an epilogue in the same form as the preceding poems. The printing was set up so that the title, dedication (to Henry Church), prologue, section titles and the poems were each printed on a separate page.

The title informs us that this is not the definitive description of the supreme fiction. The poetry provides notes – either in the sense of early observations or in the sense of musical notes that can form an overarching harmony. Furthermore, it is “a” supreme fiction – the creation of Stevens rather than of the ultimate creation of everything.

The prologue is addressed to something not clearly identified,

probably the creative imagination with which the poet interacts to bring forth understanding – the “vivid transparency” that leads to “peace.” Older poets would have called it their “muse.”

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparency that you bring is peace.

The three sections of the book are entitled

It must be abstract
It must change
It must give pleasure

These titles denote the essential characteristics of any worthwhile fiction.

A detailed commentary is beyond the scope of this essay, which will limit itself to a few of the poems. Many scholars have provided more extensive analyses: Kermode (1960, pp 111-119), Sukenik (1967, pp 136-163), Vendler (1969, pp 168-205), Bloom (1977, pp 167-218), Cook (2007, pp 214-236), Bates (2007).

The first poem in the first section (It must be abstract) is addressed to an “ephebe,” the name for a young man in training in Ancient Athens.

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye

And see it clearly in the idea of it.

The poet urges to ephebe not to accept what he has been taught – not to believe in the gods – but to make his own understanding of the world

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Umbra is an earth-brown pigment, but the word derives from the Latin *umbra*, shadow, and suggests the shades of the dead. The epithet “gold flourisher” describe the sun’s essential characteristics: the sun as an abstraction.

The final poem in the first section considers the idea of what man must become. The poet envisions a man in clothes too big for his body seeing the world clearly without regard to what religion requires or what humanity desires

Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The 5th poem of the second section (It must change) describes a deserted plantation on a tropical island – likely in the Florida Keys, which Stevens visited many times in 1920s and

1930s.

On a blue island in a sky-wide water
The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
Long after the planter's death. A few limes remained,

Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees
weighted

With garbled green. These were the planter's
turquoise

And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,

A green baked greener in the greenest sun.

These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in

White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.

Before the recurrent hurricanes had ruined the plantations, the Florida Keys were famous for the limes used to make Key lime pie. Stevens' poem about the planter illustrates how our conception of the world must take into account its transience. And find this beautiful. The poem's third verse is remarkable for its portrayal of the sound of the waves upon the beach.

This poem concludes with a eulogy to the planter. Because he is no more, the eulogy is expressed in negative terms:

An unaffected man in a negative light
Could not have borne his labor nor have died
Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang.

Vendler (1969, p 170) transcribes the verse without the negatives:

He lived in a positive light, a man deeply affected by his islands, and therefore he could bear his labor, and could die, in spite of exile and desire, sighing that he should have to leave even so simple and small a pleasure as his banjo's twang.

The 6th poem of the second section deals with birds:

Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
When in my coppice you behold me be.

Ah, ke! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
Ke-ke, the jug throated robin pouring out,
Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.

There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain,
So many clappers going without bells,
That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.

One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
The phrases of a single phrase, ke-ke,
A single text, granite monotony

Stevens was a connoisseur of birds and could whistle a multiplicity of birdsongs (Cook, 2007, p 224). The following are some typical songs of the birds mentioned in the first two verses

Sparrow:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/sparrow.mp3>

Wren:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/wren.mp3>

Bluejay:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/bluejay.mp3>

Robin:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/robin.mp3>

As the poem provides its brilliant rendition of the different birds, it makes passing references to other birds that have found their way into poems. “Coppice” is a reference to Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush*; “pouring forth” and “glade” are quoted from Keat’s *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul
abroad

In such an ecstasy!

Stevens cannot resist the wordplay between the “jug-jug” sound of the robin and “pouring out” from a jug.

However, Stevens notes that most birdsong is monotonous. Because it does not change it is not like the supreme fictions of a poet. Stevens criticizes the tendency of the Romantic poets to liken themselves to birds or to other natural phenomena. The “bethous” that he monotonously repeats are a reference to Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*.

Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Stevens’ poem concludes

These are of minstrels lacking minstrelsy,
Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird

Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
A sound like any other. It will end.

The birdsongs are not supreme fictions because they never change.

In the 8th poem of the second section (It must change) Stevens imagines how Shelley's Ozymandias, who thought he could impose his order on the world, could have been seduced by the beautiful Nanzia Nuncio so that the constant order that the king of kings desired could give way to changing fictions:

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own only precious ornament.
Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
So that I tremble with such love so known
And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

In the 7th poem of the third section (It must give pleasure), Stevens contrasts politics, the imposing or order on the world, to poetry, the discovery of order in the world. And finds pleasure in the changing order of the seasons (Lensing, 2007):

But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible.

The final poem of the third section is a paean to the world we live on, affectionately referred to as the "fat girl," the earth in all its plenitude and beauty, and "my green, my fluent mundo." A world that we can only understand through feeling and through fiction:

That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

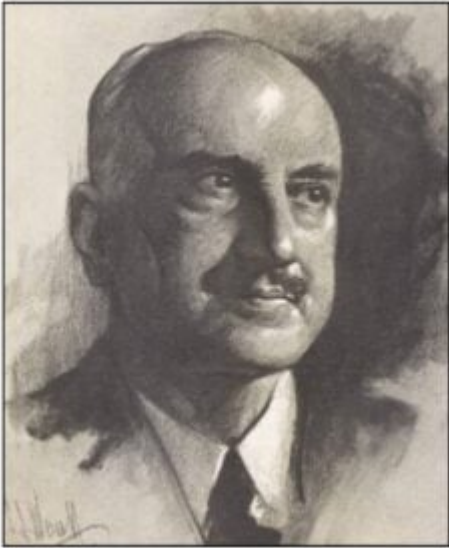
Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction concludes with an epilogue in which Stevens compares the poet to the soldier. Stevens may have thought this necessary in a poem written during war. However, the epilogue really does not work. Poets lay down their lines but not their lives for what they believe in. Stevens claims that poetry can give meaning to the soldier's sacrifice. But as James Merrill pointed out in his 1985 poem *Page from the Koran*:

How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens
"The soldier dies." Or kills.

Death Comes for Philosopher and for poet

George Santayana resigned from Harvard University in 1911 and spent the rest of his life in Europe. He was financially supported by a small inheritance from his mother and by the royalties from his books, among which was the best-selling novel *The Last Puritan* (1935). His portrait by Samuel Johnson Woolf graced the cover of *Time* magazine in 1936.



At the beginning of World War II, the philosopher was living in Rome. It soon became difficult to transfer money from his American publishers to Italy. In 1941, rather than undergo the stress of travelling during wartime, the 77-year-old obtained lodgings with the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, who ran the small Calvary Hospital next door to the ancient Basilica Santo Stefano Rotondo. Since the sisters also managed a hospital in Chicago, Santayana's publishers could pay the sisters in Chicago for his upkeep in Rome (McCormick, 1987, p 420). Santayana continued to live with the sisters after the war. Despite being a confirmed atheist, he enjoyed the liturgy, austerity and tranquility of his Catholic surroundings. Robert Lowell later commented that Santayana believed that "There is no God and Mary is His mother" (in the poem *For George Santayana (1863-1952)* in *Life Studies*, 1959). Nevertheless, Santayana maintained his scepticism to the end and insisted on being buried in non-consecrated ground.

In the summer of 1952, Wallace Stevens wrote a poem about the old philosopher. Santayana died from stomach cancer before the poem was published later that year. As well as describing his situation in Rome, Stevens' poem makes multiple allusions to Santayana's 1923 *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (Griswold works through these references on his website). The poem (full text available) begins

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings...
Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the
extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled...

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The “more merciful Rome” of the second stanza is heaven and the parallel lines becoming one represent death as a transition to eternity.

The poem ends:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, and pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

The “inquisitor of structures” may refer to Santayana’s likening architecture to poetry:

Every human architect must do likewise with his edifice; he must mould his bricks or hew his stones into symmetrical solids and lay them over one another in regular strata, like a poet’s lines. (Santayana, 1900, p 261)

Griswold suggests that the final lines relate to Santayana’s

The ultimate reaches of doubt and renunciation open out for it, by an easy transition, into fields of endless variety and peace, as if through the gorges of death it had passed into a paradise where all things are crystallised into the image of themselves, and have lost their urgency and their venom. (Santayana, 1923, p 76)

The following is Steven’s recitation of the poem

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/To-An-Old-Philosopher-In-Rome.mp3>

Wallace Stevens himself developed stomach cancer less than 3 years after Santayana (Mariani, 2016, pp 394-402). The cancer was inoperable and a gastroenterostomy was performed at St Francis Catholic Hospital in Hartford. During his recuperation Stevens met the hospital's chaplain Father Arthur Hanley and talked to him about poetry and religion. Stevens was discharged but re-admitted a few months later. During this second and final hospitalization he agreed to be baptized by Father Hanley (Hanley 1977). Stevens had been brought up as a Lutheran as an adult he had questioned the need for any organized religion. Although Stevens was prone to irony, it appears that his final conversion was sincere. Perhaps he took to heart the words of his friend Santayana:

Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness. (Santayana, 1923, pp 69-70)

The Internal Paramour

One of Stevens' last poems *Final Soliloquy of the Internal Paramour* was published in the *Hudson Review* in 1951:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

The following is Stevens' recitation of the poem

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Final-Soliloquy-Of-The-Interior-Paramour.mp3>

Stevens does not directly identify his internal mistress. She shares qualities with the idea of the self that, like a shawl, we wrap tightly about us. This formulation is related to Santayana's description of the self:

If I exist, I am a living creature to whom ideas are incidents, like aeroplanes in the sky; they pass over, more or less followed by the eye, more or less listened to, recognised, or remembered; but the self slumbers and breathes below, a mysterious natural organism, full of dark yet definite potentialities; so that different events will awake it to quite disproportionate activities. The self is a fountain of joy, folly, and sorrow, a waxing and waning, stupid and dreaming creature, in the midst of a vast natural world, of which it catches but a few transient and odd perspectives. (Santayana, 1923, p 146).

However, the mistress is also the creative imagination that proposes our understanding of the world: "an order, a whole, a knowledge." The creation of this supreme fiction may be like God speaking the words "Let there be light!" The crucial comment, "We say, God and the imagination are one ..." refers to

one of Stevens' *Adagia*:

Proposita:

1. God and the imagination are one.

2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.

The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one.

Hence, I suppose, the Imaginer is God. (Stevens, 1997, p 914)

The poem harks back to the prologue of *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*, which described the poetic process as a meeting between the poet and his creative self:

In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being

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Cézanne

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) learned to experience nature with the vividness of the Impressionists but evolved his own individual style of painting. How he perceived the world was as important as the way it appeared. For most of his life he lived and painted in Aix-en-Provence. He had no students and his work became recognized only toward the end of his life. Nevertheless, many of the proponents of the modernist movement that began in the first decade of the 20th Century acknowledged Cézanne as their artistic father (Hook, 2021). This post comments on some of his paintings.

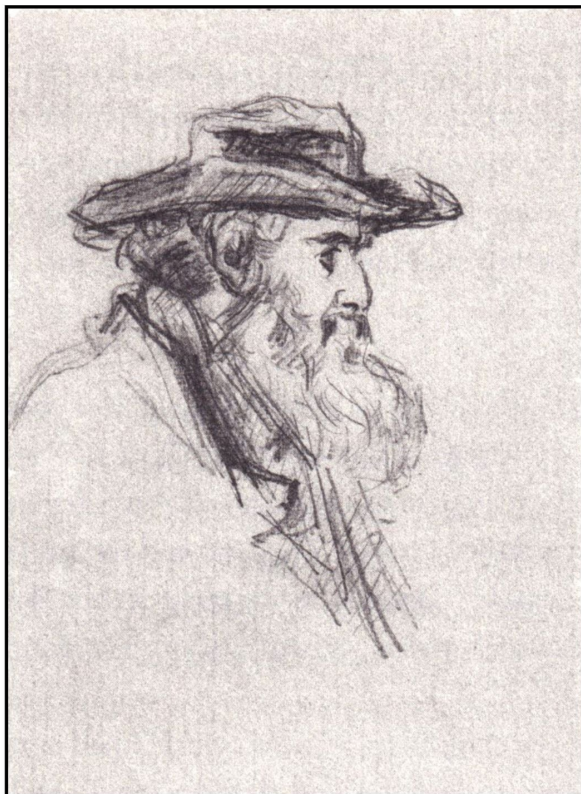
Early Life

Cézanne's father, a successful businessman and banker in Aix-en-Provence, wanted his son to carry on the family's banking business. However, Cézanne wished to become a painter and his father eventually gave in to his stubbornness. The young man came to Paris in 1861, took lessons in some of the painting studios and spent time studying and drawing in the Louvre (Schapiro, 1952; Danchev, 2010). He was impressed by the emotional force of Delacroix and intrigued by the iconoclasm of Manet. He later made his own versions of Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (both exhibited in 1863). He brooded and made paintings of rape and murder. His style was generally dark and heavy. He seemed destined to be just another angry young man without significant talent.

Friendship with Pissarro.

However, during his studies in Paris, Cézanne became friends with Camille Pissarro (1830-1903). Pissarro was older but both were outsiders: Cézanne was an unsophisticated provincial and

Pissarro was a Jew from the island of St Thomas in the Caribbean. Pissarro had taken up the idea of painting directly from nature (*en plein air*), molding shapes in colors rather than defining them with outlines. He was one of the founding members of the Impressionists and exhibited with them from 1874 to 1886. He was full of enthusiasm for this new movement and loved to discuss its theories with his younger colleague. Despite their different personalities – Pissarro was gentle and congenial, Cézanne rough and unsocial – the two painters became fast friends, exchanging pencil portraits of each other (from around 1874, Pissarro on the left and Cézanne on the right).



In the decade from 1871 to 1881, they often worked together in the environs of Paris (Pissarro, 2005). Pissarro lived in Pontoise, and for a while Cézanne lived in nearby Auvers. Sometimes Cézanne directly copied his colleague's paintings, sometimes they worked simultaneously, and sometimes Cézanne would revisit a scene that Pissarro had painted before. Under the tutelage of Pissarro, Cézanne lost his youthful darkness

and began to paint what he saw rather than what he imagined.

However, the two painters maintained their individual styles. Pissarro worked continuously adding tiny points of color to the canvas. His paintings vividly portray the atmosphere of a landscape, capture the color of its light, and accurately delineate its perspective. Cézanne would often spend a long time contemplating what he saw before adding paint to the canvas. His colors were perhaps brighter than reality and they were put on the canvas in "patches" rather than dots. His perspective never really fit a single point of view.

The following illustration shows two paintings of *The Road at Pontoise*. The upper painting by Pissarro was made in 1875 and the lower by Cézanne about a year later. Cézanne's painting has a more limited field of view, his colors show more contrast and less definition, and his landscape contains no people.



Nancy Locke (2021) recounts the observations of a peasant who once watched the two painters at their easels in the countryside:

“M. Pissarro, en travaillant, *piquait* (et mon paysan faisait le geste), et M. Cézanne *plaquait* (autre geste).”

Selon cet observateur contemporain, Pissarro était plus susceptible de travailler avec un pinceau perpendiculaire à la toile, l’approchant avec un mouvement de tamponnage ou de piqûre, alors que Cézanne était plus enclin à se déplacer latéralement avec son pinceau ou son couteau à palette, travaillant ainsi dans le même plan que la toile.

[M. Pissarro, while working, “stung” (and my peasant made the gesture), and M. Cézanne “plastered” (another gesture). According to this contemporary observer, Pissarro was more likely to work with a brush perpendicular to the canvas, approaching it with a dabbing or stabbing motion, whereas Cézanne was more inclined to move his brush or palette knife laterally, thus working in the same plane as the canvas. (my translation)]

Cézanne later described his method of painting to Joachim Gasquet. However, Gasquet wrote down these conversations long after Cézanne had died and the words are likely as much Gasquet as Cézanne:

[L]entement les bases géologiques n’apparaissent, des couches s’établissent, les grands plans de ma toile, j’en dessine mentalement le squelette pierreux. Je vois affleurer les roches sous l’eau, peser le ciel. Tout tombe d’aplomb. Une pâle palpitation enveloppe les aspects linéaires. Les terres rouges sortent d’un abîme. Je commence à me séparer du paysage, à le voir. Je m’en dégage avec cette première esquisse, ces lignes géologiques. La géométrie, mesure de la terre. Une tendre émotion me prend. Des racines de cette émotion monte la sève, les couleurs. Une sorte de délivrance. Le rayonnement de l’âme, le regard, le mystère

extériorisé, l'échange entre la terre et le soleil, l'idéal et la réalité, les couleurs! Une logique aérienne, colorée, remplace brusquement la sombre, la têtue géométrie. Tout s'organise, les arbres, les champs, les maisons. Je vois. Par taches. L'assise géologique, le travail préparatoire, le monde du dessin s'enfonce, s'est écroulé comme dans une catastrophe. Un cataclysme l'a emporté, régénéré. Une nouvelle période vit. La vraie ! Celle où rien ne m'échappe, où tout est dense et fluide à la fois, naturel. Il n'y a plus que des couleurs, et en elles de la clarté, l'être qui les pense, cette montée de la terre vers le soleil, cette exhalaison des profondeurs vers l'amour. Le génie serait d'immobiliser cette ascension dans une minute d'équilibre, en suggérant quand même son élan. Je veux m'emparer de cette idée, de ce jet d'émotion, de cette fumée d'être au-dessus de l'universel brasier. Ma toile pèse, un poids alourdit mes pinceaux. Tout tombe. Tout retombe sous l'horizon. De mon cerveau sur ma toile, de ma toile vers la terre. Pesamment. Où est l'air, la légèreté dense? Le génie serait de dégager l'amitié de toutes ces choses en plein air, dans la même montée, dans le même désir. Il y a une minute du monde qui passe. La peindre dans sa réalité ! Et tout oublier pour cela. Devenir elle-même. Être alors la plaque sensible. Donner l'image de ce que nous voyons, en oubliant tout ce qui a paru avant nous. (Gasquet, 1921, pp. 136-137)

[S]lowly geographical foundations appear, the layers, the major planes form themselves on my canvas. Mentally I compose the rocky skeleton. I can see the outcropping of stones under the water; the sky weighs on me. Everything falls into place. A pale palpitation envelops the linear elements. The red earths rise from an abyss. I begin to separate myself from the landscape, to see it. With the first sketch, I detach myself from these geological lines. Geometry measures the earth. A feeling of tenderness comes over me. Some roots of this emotion raise the sap, the

colors. It's a kind of deliverance. The soul's radiance, the gaze, exteriorized mystery are exchanged between earth and sun, ideal and reality, colors! An airborne, colorful logic quickly replaces the somber, stubborn geography. Everything becomes organized: trees, fields, houses. I see. By patches: the geographical strata, the preparatory work, the world of drawing all cave in, collapse as in a catastrophe. A cataclysm has carried it all away, regenerated it. A new era is born. The true one! The one in which nothing escapes me, where everything is dense and fluid at the same time, natural. All that remains is color, and in color, brightness, clarity, the being who imagines them, this ascent from the earth toward the sun, this exhalation from the depths toward love. Genius would be to capture this ascension in a delicate equilibrium while also suggesting its flight. I want to use this idea, this burst of emotion, this smoke of existence above the universal fire. My canvas is heavy, a heaviness weighs down my brushes. Everything drops. Everything falls toward the horizon. From my brain onto my canvas, from my canvas toward the earth. Heavily. Where is the air, the dense lightness? It would take genius to discover the amity of all these things in the open air, in the same ascent, in the same desire. A minute of the world goes by. To paint it in its reality! And to forget every-thing else. To become reality itself. To be the photographic plate. To render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that came before. (Cochran translation in Doran and Cochran, 2001)

Je peins. Par taches. The French word *tache* most commonly denotes a spot, stain or blemish. In painting it means a patch of color. With these patches Cézanne was able to portray on the canvas what he perceived. Pissarro (2005), the grandson of the painter, remarked about how the French word is close to *touche* (touch) and that this brings to mind how touch is both a sensation and an action. Cézanne's painting was an active participation in his experience, not so much a representation

as a recreation of reality.

Over the years Cézanne began to distance himself from the Impressionists (Shiff, 1984). Verdi (1992) called him the “reluctant impressionist.” As well as heightening his color contrasts, he portrayed space quite differently. Each part of the painting existed on its own plane, and these planes intersected to form the structure of the scene. Cézanne was more interested in the underlying form of what he saw rather than its immediate appearance. His differentiation from the impressionists is visible below in two paintings made in the gardens of the Hermitage at Pontoise: Pissarro’s from 1867, and Cézanne’s from 1881. After 1881 Cézanne retired to Provence only coming to Paris occasionally.



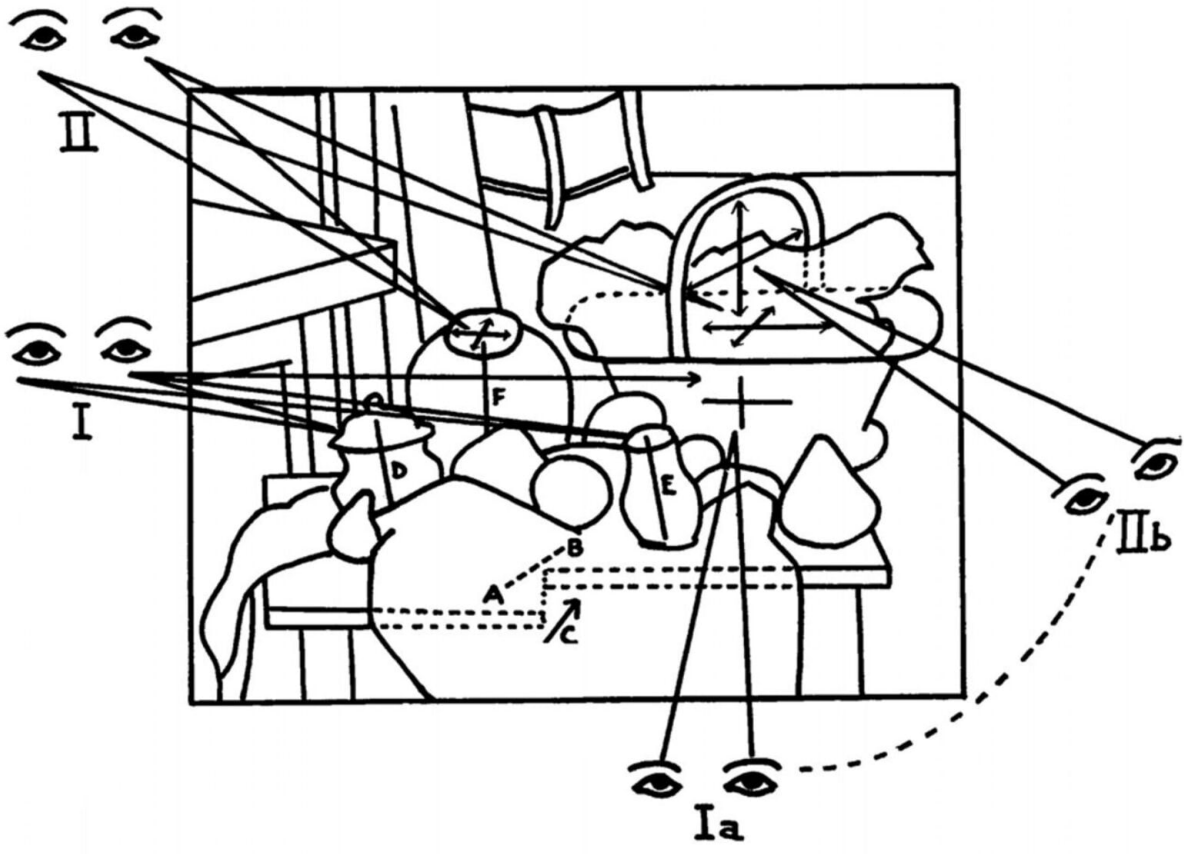
Still Lives

During his association with Pissarro in the 1870s, Cézanne developed his own individual technique for portraying still lifes. French painters had followed the Dutch in their enthusiasm for still life. The illustration below shows paintings by Chardin (1764), Manet (1864), Pissarro (1872) and Cézanne (1874). All contain a paring knife. In Cézanne's painting, the objects do not simply exist. The space tips upward. The objects seem to move towards the viewer, but are restrained by the rumpled tablecloth.



Multiple points of view were characteristic of Cézanne's later still lifes. The following figure shows his 1890 painting of *The Kitchen Table* as analyzed by Erle Loran (1943). The

diagram shows that the objects are viewed from two main heights (I and II on the left); the lower point of view is then located either directly in front or on the right (Ia and IIb). Some of the objects tilt as though they are about to fall (D and E) whereas others stand upright (F). The tabletop on the left is lower than on the right (ABC). These problems of perspective are not due to clumsiness. Cézanne considered each section of the painting by itself and then pieced the scene back together. Such an approach to reality was to become the driving force of Cubism.



The following illustration shows two more of Cézanne's still lifes. In the upper painting – *The Basket of Apples* (1893) the bottle leans to the left, the biscuits tilt upward, and the table top again has two different heights. This instability becomes even more marked in the lower painting of *Still Life with Apples* (1895), about which T. J. Clark (2022, p 75)

The whole array ... is disturbed and unstable (those spilling red spheres, that tipping plate, that earthquake landscape of blue and white cloth) yet composed and crystalline at the same time. And both the orderliness and the disturbance can strike us as features of seeing and features of manufacture – inventions, impositions, flashes of grim wit. Take the crisp fold at the top of the tablecloth, continuing the dark line of the dado [lower portion of a wall]. Or the whole brilliant hard decisiveness of the made pattern – made by machine and then by Cezanne the re-folder – on the blue-and-black drape. Or the anti-colour of the ice-block wall. </p>



The spatial instability of the paintings can make the viewer uneasy. The uncertainty of the artist is palpable. The critic Gustave Geffroy was perhaps the first to mention this *inquiétude* in a review of Cézanne's 1895 exhibition:

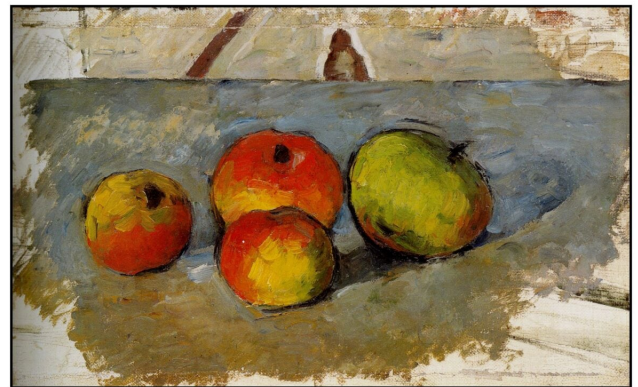
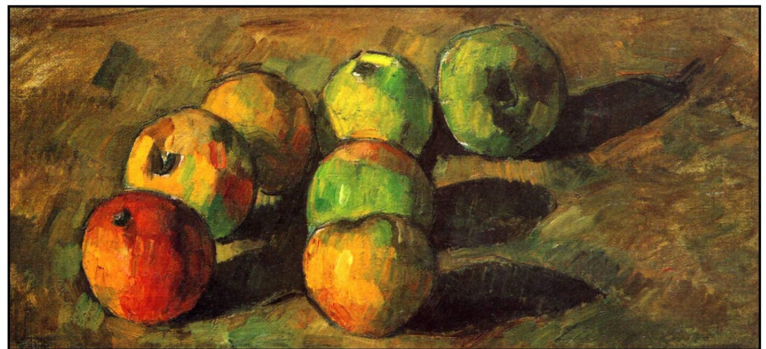
L'inquiétude de l'artiste l'a dominé. Cézanne n'en a pas moins raconté sa sensation profonde au spectacle de l'univers. Il importe peu que sa personnalité ait pris, pour s'exprimer, telle forme plutôt que telle autre. Regrettons qu'il n'ait pas doté son pays et son temps de l'oeuvre grandiose qui était en lui. Mais son individu ne subit de ce regret aucune déperdition, puisqu'il est présent, et bien présent, par toutes ces oeuvres où se mêlent, comme on ne l'a jamais vu davantage peut-être, la réflexion et la spontanéité. (Geffroy, 1900, p 218). </p>

[The anxiety (unease, disquiet) of the artist overcame him. Cézanne nevertheless recounted his deep experience of the universe. It matters little that his personality took, in order to express itself, one form rather than another. We are sorry that he did not endow his country and his time with the great work that was in him. But his achievement suffers no loss from this regret, since he is present, and very present, in all these works which mingle, more than we have ever seen before, reflection and spontaneity. (my translation)] </p>

Cézanne's Apples

At school in Aix, Cézanne had once come to the defence of the young Emile Zola who was being bullied by older students. The next day Zola brought Cézanne a basket of apples (Schapiro, 1968). The two became fast friends and Cézanne's apples became a recurring *motif* in his paintings, many of which simply show a group of apples on a surface (Leca, 2014). As illustrated below, each apple is defined by its colors. There are no outlines, only shadows. They represent things as they exist unto themselves (Armstrong, 2018). In his poem *To an Artist*,

Seamus Heaney (1984) describes “his coercion of the substance from green apples”

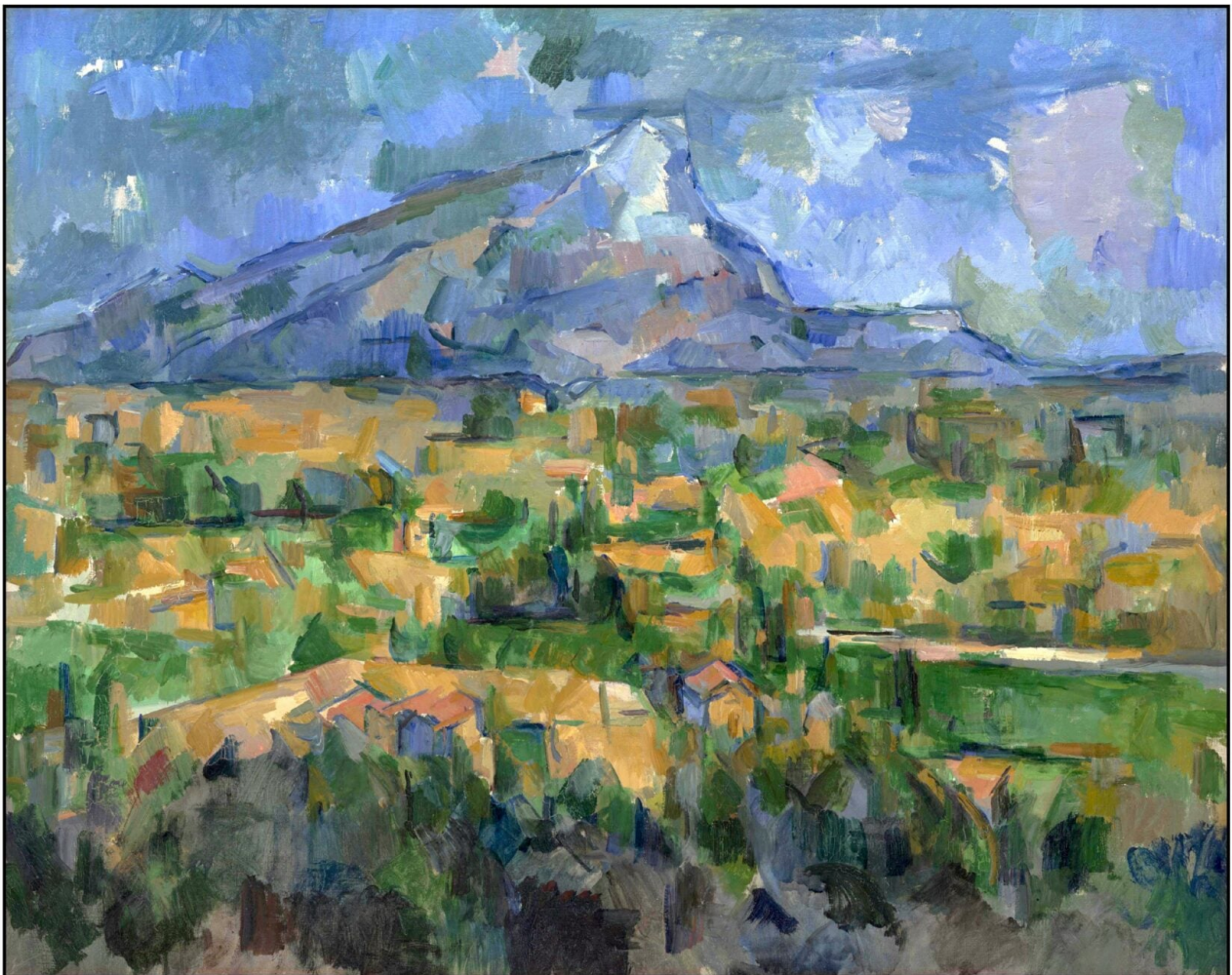


Mont Sainte Victoire

After he returned to Provence, Cézanne began a series of paintings depicting the mountain to the east of Aix-en-Provence: Mont Sainte Victoire. The following illustration shows two paintings from the mid 1890s, the upper one now in the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia and the lower in the Courtauld Collection in London.



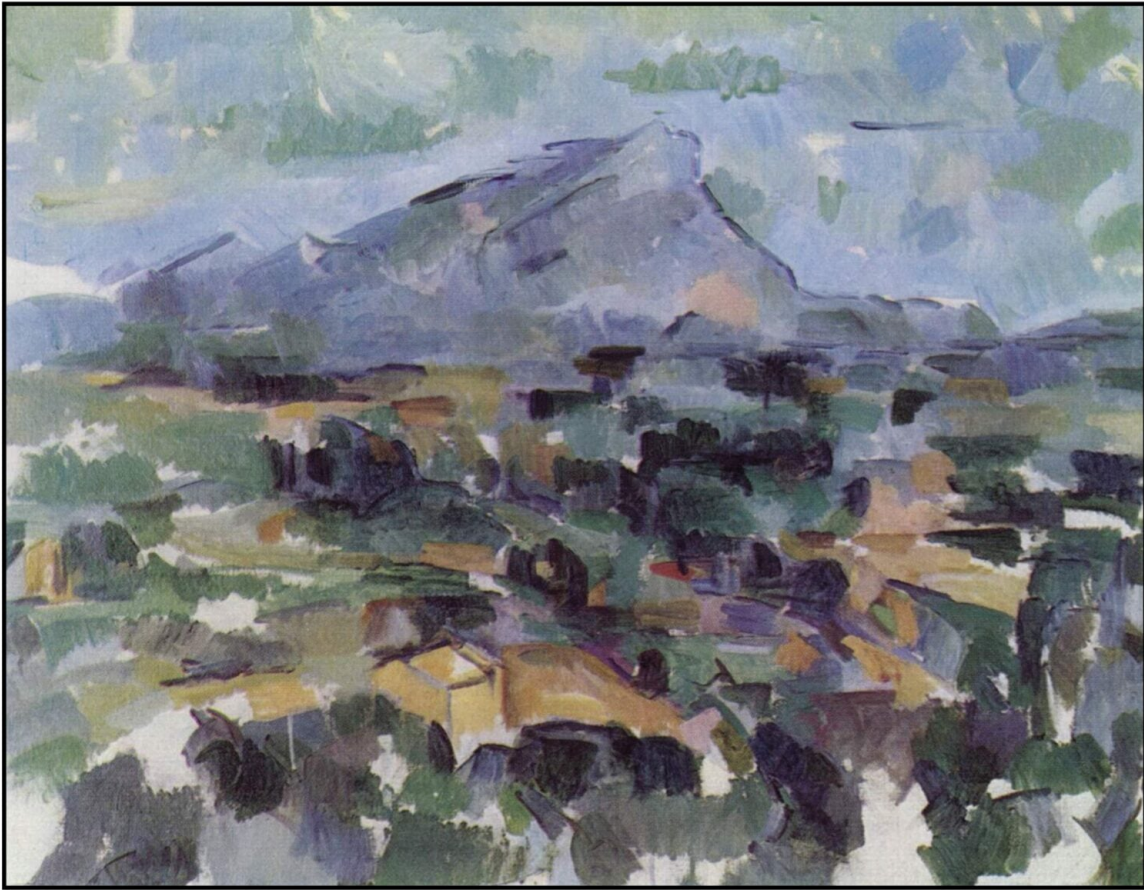
As the years went on the depictions of the mountain became more abstract. The color patches expanded and the structure simplified. The following illustration shows a modern photograph of the mountain together with Cézanne's 1904 painting:



William Wilson commented on the multiplicity of the depiction:

the deep space represented in Cézanne's paintings is not the space of historical events; he has altered that space, bringing the distant nearer, and pushing the near back. As we look towards Mont Sainte-Victoire it is brought towards us, but Cézanne doesn't show the cross that had been erected on it. Anything might happen in historical space, but Cézanne did not want that; he wanted painting to be about what was happening, when what was happening was an experience of successive spontaneous visual sensations which include a feeling of earlier and later, of before and after, along with *now*. Looking at a landscape by Cézanne, it is as though in that space we would go a few yards to the left, some yards back, some more yards upward, and several yards *later*. (Wilson, 1988, p 193)

As the years went by, the paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire became more monumental. The following illustration shows two late depictions.



The paintings have become independent of their source, creations in their own right. The following is a statement by Cézanne as reported (much later) by Gasquet. It is likely exaggerated. The comment that *le paysage se pense en moi* does not ring true as something that Cézanne would have said, but it does depict the way that the critics and painters began to consider his achievement:

L'art est une harmonie parallèle à la nature. Que penser des imbéciles qui vous disent: le peintre est toujours inférieur à la nature! Il lui est parallèle. S'il n'intervient pas volontairement... entendez-moi bien. Toute sa volonté doit être de silence. Il doit faire taire en lui toutes les voix des préjugés, oublier, oublier, faire silence, être un écho parfait. Alors, sur sa plaque sensible, tout le paysage s'inscrira. Pour le fixer sur la toile, l'extérioriser, le métier interviendra ensuite, mais le métier respectueux qui, lui aussi, n'est prêt qu'à obéir, à traduire inconsciemment, tant il sait bien sa langue, le texte qu'il déchiffre, les deux textes parallèles, la nature vue, la nature sentie, celle qui est là... (il montrait la plaine verte et bleue) celle qui est ici... (il se frappait le front) qui toutes deux doivent s'amalgamer pour durer, pour vivre d'une vie moitié humaine, moitié divine, la vie de l'art, écoutez un peu... la vie de Dieu. Le paysage se reflète, s'humanise, se pense en moi. Je l'objective, le projette, le fixe sur ma toile. (Gasquet, 1921, pp. 131-132)

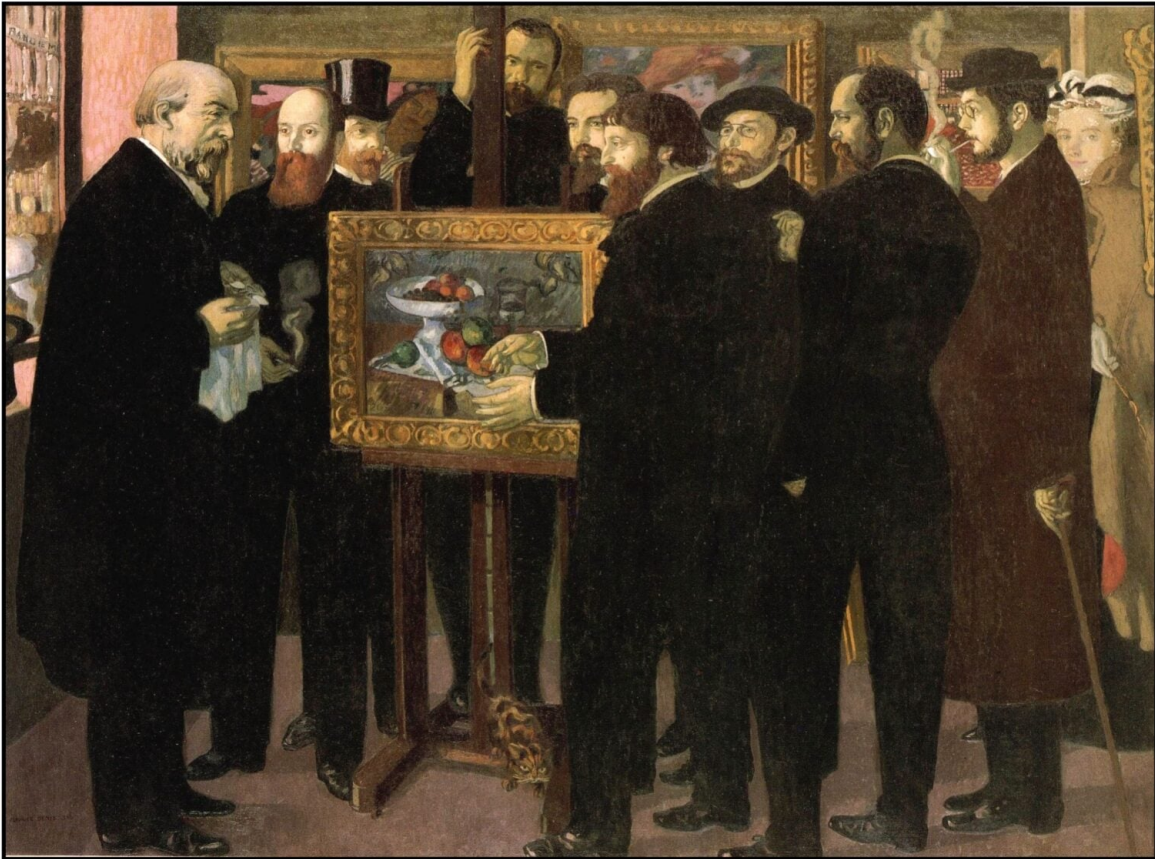
[Art is a harmony parallel to nature. What would you think of idiots who would tell you, the painter is always inferior to nature! They are parallel, if the artist doesn't intentionally intervene ... hear me well. His entire will must be silent. He must silence all prejudice within himself. He must for-get, forget, be quiet, be a perfect echo. Then the full landscape will inscribe itself on his photographic plate. In order to fix it on his canvas, to exteriorize it, his craft comes into action. But it must be a respectful

craft which, itself also, is ready only to obey, to translate unconsciously so long as it knows its language well, the text it deciphers, these two parallel texts: nature seen and nature felt, the nature which is out there ... (he indicates the blue and green plain) and the nature which is in here ... (he taps himself on the forehead) both of which must unite in order to endure, to live a life half human, half divine, the life of art, listen a little ... the life of God. The landscape is reflected, becomes human, and becomes conscious in me. I objectify it, project it, fix it on my canvas. (Cochran translation)

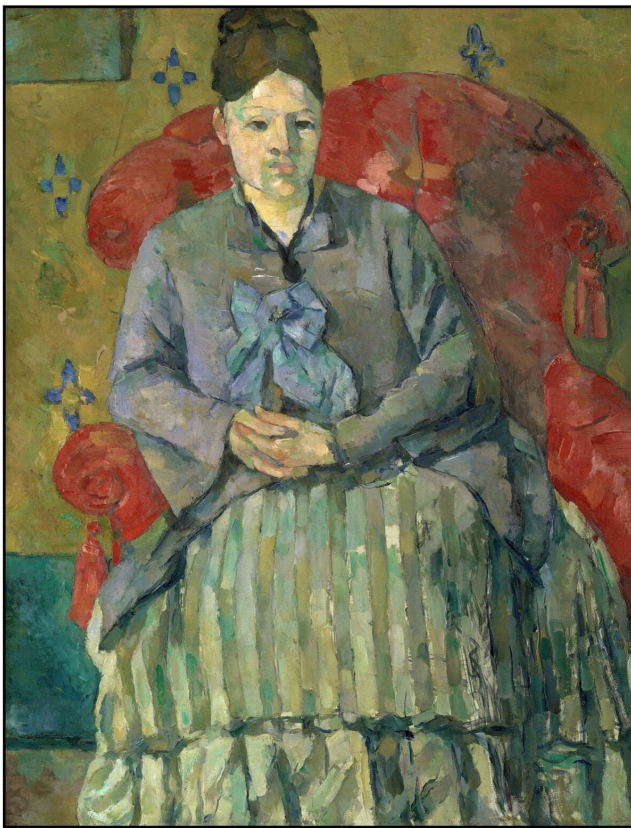
First Recognition

Cézanne bought his paint supplies from Julien Tanguy (the same Père Tanguy that was painted by Vincent Van Gogh) in Paris, and left some paintings with him for possible sale. When Tanguy died in 1894, the dealer Ambroise Vollard obtained some of Cézanne's paintings from the sale of his estate. He then contacted Cézanne, and arranged for his first solo exhibition in 1895. Cézanne suddenly became a success.

Younger painters found inspiration in the vividness and the uncertainty of Cézanne's still lifes. In 1900 Maurice Denis painted his *Hommage à Cézanne* showing Cézanne's 1880 painting *Still Life with Compotier* being admired by artists and critics. The persons illustrated are from left to right: Odilon Redon, Edouard Vuillard, André Mellario (in top hat), Ambroise Vollard (behind the easel), Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard (with pipe) and Marthe Denis.



Several portraits were included in Cézanne's first exhibition (Elderfield, 2017). Below are shown two 1891 portraits of Madame Cézanne (Marie-Hortense Fiquet, his one-time model and mother of his son). The portraits lack the fine detail that characterized the paintings of classical artists. Yet facial perception depends more on general form than on details, and Cézanne's paintings grasp this form. The portraits have a monumentality – as if the sitter was as important to the painter as his beloved Mont Sainte Victoire.



The poet Rainer Maria Rilke was impressed by the portrait on the left:

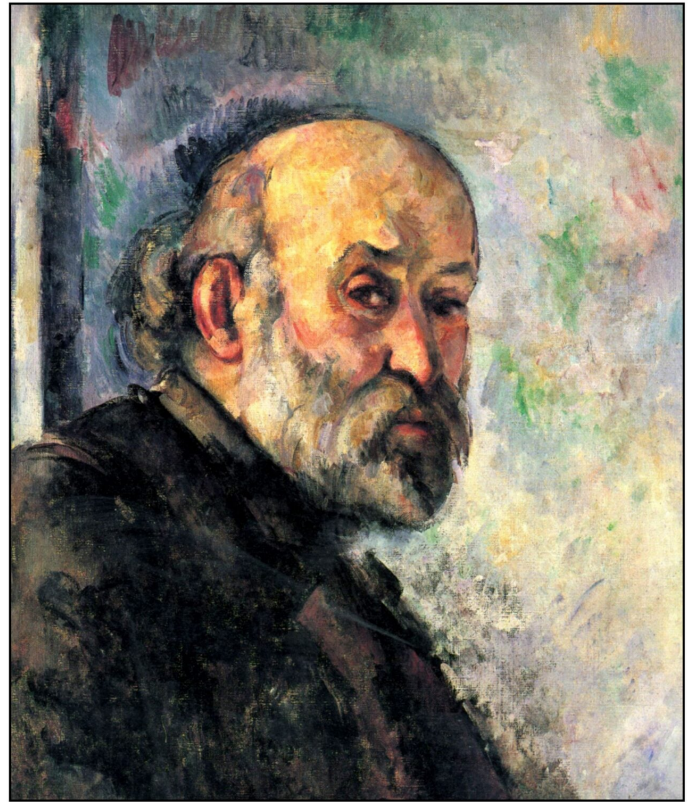
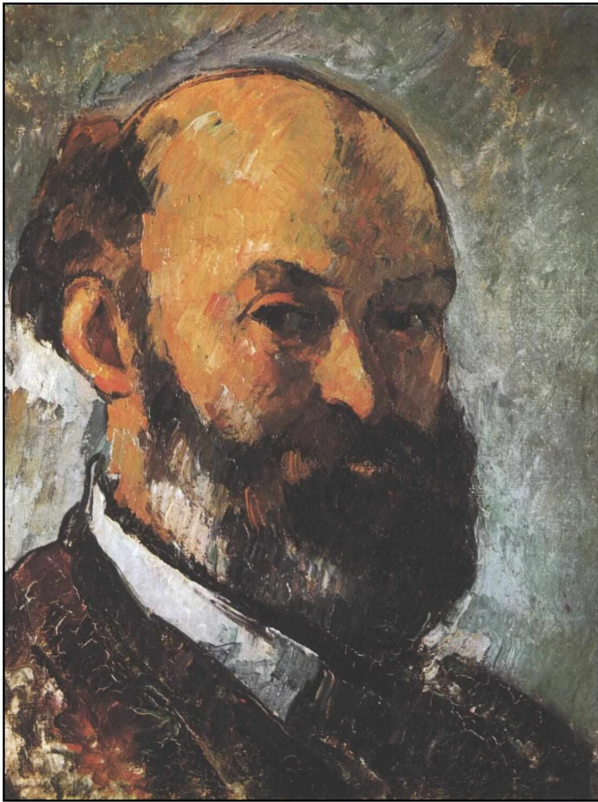
A red, upholstered low armchair has been placed in front of an earthy-green wall in which a cobalt-blue pattern (a cross with the center left out) is very sparingly repeated; the round bulging back curves and slopes forward and down to the armrests (which are sewn up like the sleeve-stump of an armless man). The left armrest and the tassel that hangs from it full of vermillion no longer have the wall behind

them but instead, near the lower edge, a broad stripe of greenish blue, against which they clash in loud contradiction. Seated in this red armchair, which is a personality in its own right, is a woman, her hands in the lap of a dress with broad vertical stripes that are very lightly indicated by small, loosely distributed flecks of green yellows and yellow greens, up to the edge of the blue-gray jacket, which is held together in front by a blue, greenly scintillating silk bow. In the brightness of the face, the proximity of all these colors has been exploited for a simple modeling of form and features: even the brown of the hair roundly pinned up above the temples and the smooth brown in the eyes has to express itself against its surroundings. It's as if every part were aware of all the others—it participates that much; that much adjustment and rejection is happening in it; that's how each daub plays its part in maintaining equilibrium and in producing it: just as the whole picture finally keeps reality in equilibrium. (Rilke, 1907, translated 1985 pp 70-71)

The following illustration shows Cézanne's portrait of the critic Gustave Geffroy (1896) seated at a desk that expands irrationally toward the reader and the unfinished eyeless portrait of the dealer Ambroise Vollard (1899).

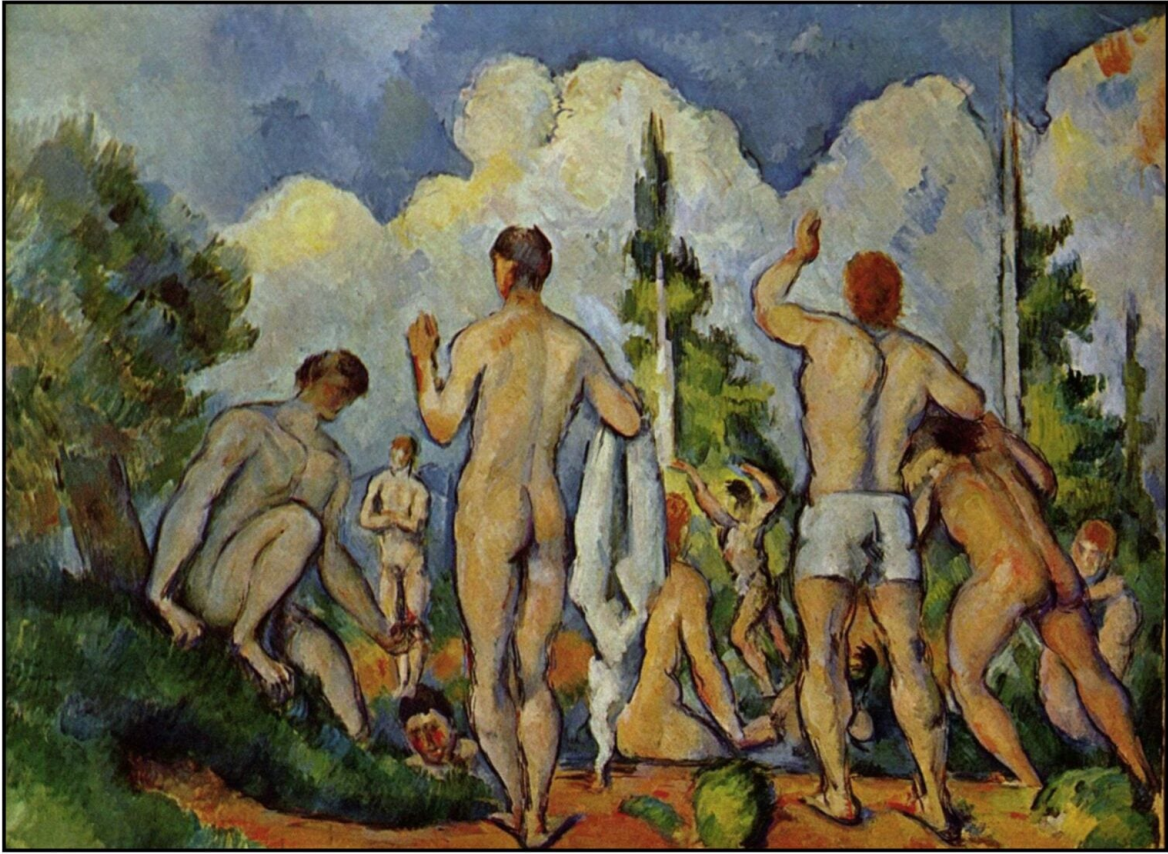


Cézanne produced many self-portraits. Those illustrated below are from 1880, when he had decided on his way of painting, and from 1895, when he had attained success but had begun to doubt his ability to make it significant.



The Bathers

Cézanne's fondest memories of childhood were the times he spent swimming with Zola and other friends in the rivers and lakes near Aix-en-Provence. Throughout his life he painted scenes of bathers (Krumrine, 1989; Garb1996)). In the early years of the 20th Century, he worked on several large paintings of bathers which were left unfinished at the time of his death in 1906. He did not use models. His figures were based on drawings he had made as a student in Paris, on photographs and on prints of the old masters (Verdi, 1992, Chapter 6). The following illustration shows a painting of male bathers from 1894, and one of the large paintings of female bathers unfinished at his death:



The very incompleteness of the late works became part of their appeal. Cézanne was attempting to find humanity's lost innocence. His inability was later interpreted as reflecting the difficulty of perceiving a world that may not be where we wish to live. This conflict between consciousness and reality became a major part of the later philosophy of existentialism – the search for meaning in a meaningless world. Merleau-Ponty remarked in his 1948 essay on *Cézanne's Doubt*

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.

The artist must attempt to create this meaning in his work (Alsdorf, 2010; Rutherglen, 2004). The following is from the poem *Morning in the Studio: Les Grandes Baigneuses* by Maitreyabandhu (2019).

They were like dinosaurs in the swaggering green,
insecurely sexed with their hands above their heads.
He wanted earthed Etruscan statuary; he wanted
voluptuaries of the sun, but some were missing limbs
or had their heads blown off, others had broken
wrists
and severed fingers. They were like crippled monkeys
under cathedral trees: they were the century to
come.

The final illustration shows Emile Bernard's 1904 photograph of Cézanne in front of one of his unfinished paintings of *Les Grandes Baigneuses*. The detail on the left of the painting (now in the Barnes Collection) was later changed but the painting remained incomplete at the time of his death.



The Creative Artist

Medina (1995, pp 122-125) remarks on how a Cézanne's painting becomes independent of the experience that led to it. She likens it to *The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain*, one of the last poems written by Wallace Stevens (1954).

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

Death of an Artist

Cézanne tried continuously to make his painting meaningful. His art was his life. He painted right up to his death:

he was caught in a storm while working in the field. Only after having kept at it for two hours under a steady downpour did he start to make for home; but on the way he dropped exhausted. A passing laundry-wagon stopped, and the driver took him home. His old housekeeper came to the door. Seeing her master prostrate and almost lifeless, her first impulse was to run to him and give him every attention. But

just as she was about to loosen his clothes, she stopped, seized with alarm. It must be explained that Cezanne could not endure the slightest physical contact. Even his son, whom he cherished above all ("Paul is my horizon," he used to say), never dared to take his father's arm without saying, "Permit me, papa." And Cezanne, notwithstanding the affection he entertained for his son, could never resist shuddering.

Finally, fearing lest he pass away if he did not have proper care, the good woman summoned all her courage and set about to chafe his arms and legs to restore the circulation, with the result that he regained consciousness without making the slightest protest—which was indeed a bad sign. He was feverish all night long.

On the following day he went down into the garden, intending to continue a study of a peasant which was going rather well. In the midst of the sitting he fainted; the model called for help; they put him to bed, and he never left it again. He died a few days later, on October 22, 1906. (Vollard, 1919)

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