

Gottfried Boehm. Extract from 'Precarious Balance: Cézanne and the Unfinished'.<sup>1</sup>

'Visual perception and acts of artistic creation are so infinitely different that they possess a specific way of being mutually complementary. Under these conditions, fragmentation becomes the only adequate process. It would be illusory to incorporate both aspects definitively into a work.<sup>2</sup> [Auguste] Rodin drew his own conclusions from this. He came closest to [Paul] Cézanne's approach when, in *L'Homme qui marche* of 1900, for example, he radically distinguished the form of the surface from the anatomy of the figure, introducing a *modele* into sculpture that can certainly be compared with the "patchwork" of Cézanne's painting. Yet Rodin's procedure belongs in a context quite different from Cézanne's. By treating the torso as an allegory of the totality of life, the sculptor used fragmentariness as an artistic tool for achieving completeness. The viewer sees the form emerging from the material, but that form remains encompassed by formlessness. Between the material and the self-liberating fragment of the figure there develop transitions, dynamic relationships in which that which has been endowed with form refers to formlessness, in which both manifest themselves as legitimate aspects of expression.

For Rodin and other fragmentalists, the impossibility of completing a work constituted the real subject matter of art, through which life's totality – as they understood it – could be revealed. For Cézanne, failure was a risk unavoidably associated with the perfection to which he aspired. He assumed that perfection was theoretically possible, even if he doubted whether he himself had ever really attained it. [Émile] Bernard describes this continuous, slow, laborious striving: "In this attentive, patient march, all parts advance, accompany each other, and one can say that every day a more exalted vision is superimposed on the previous day's, until the exhausted artist feels his wings melting as he draws close to the sun, until he abandons his work at the highest point to which he has been able to elevate it".<sup>3</sup> Was Cézanne really an Icarus of painting? He certainly knew when the sun threatened to scorch and annihilate him, but he pushed himself to the limit without plunging into the abyss. At the same time, he was also someone to whom the escape route taken by certain other artists was barred, someone who could not treat the incomplete as a subject in its own right, who could not declare incompleteness to be an aesthetic ideal.

Becoming Classical by Way of Nature.

The aesthetic ideal to which Cézanne pledged his allegiance was, as he occasionally stated, the thoroughly traditional one of the Old Masters. He wanted to realise, to attain perfection, "like the

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Baumann, Evelyn Benesch, Walter Feilchenfeldt and Klaus Albrecht Schröder (eds.). *Finished Unfinished Cézanne*, Zürich: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Zinn 1959, p. 161, explored the history of German synonyms for 'fragment'.

<sup>3</sup> Émile Bernard. 'Paul Cézanne', 1904, in Michael Doran (ed.), 1978, p. 34.

Venetians". Yet the framework within which he operated made that goal hard to achieve. What were the methods and processes he had in mind when he established that positive ideal for himself?

The terms in which he most liked to describe them were of order and the creation of order. These recur frequently in his remarks and we are now in a better position to understand why. His sensations seemed to him to have already been confused at his birth<sup>4</sup> and their representation on the canvas to be "chaotic, fleeting, confused, without logic, beyond all reason".<sup>5</sup> He pinned his hopes on introducing stabilising elements into that contingent initial state. Such elements had a variety of sources: perception itself, strength of character, traditional painting (as contained in the Louvre) and even nature.

Cézanne's dictum about ordering sensations, about becoming classical again through sensations, presupposes that the eye relates to the brain, in other words, that the process of seeing is endowed with an intelligence "that organises powerfully".<sup>6</sup> It seemed to him possible to master the confused mass of visual data, to wrest a systematic order from them, by means of arrangements, patterns, compositional forms, transitions and so forth. In this respect "*voir*" (to see) is always also "*concevoir*" (to conceive).<sup>7</sup> There is no trace of virtuoso handling. Cézanne distrusted such skills, which, incidentally, he himself did not possess. Work was not an easy process for him: he was slow, each painting laboriously worked out step by step. He relied on the powers of *temperament*, the tenacious determination to keep going, not to give up, his whole life long. Absolute goals demand such unconditional dedication; they demand an unswerving, indefatigable will. This discerning approach to perception and the perceived cannot, and should not, rely on ready formulas or theories. Cézanne wanted, as he said, to be right not in theory but before nature. Above all, he had to decide painting by painting what constituted a discerning solution; he had to let the sensations of the moment guide him in identifying the appropriate methods. This involved evaluating each individual situation: the way in which the eye works; how strong he felt on a particular day; the weather; external influences such as interruptions and the conditions of the *motif*.

Cézanne characterised both his goal and his way of proceeding more closely, but the word he employed, "classical", has many meanings, and it is not exactly clear which he intended. Nevertheless, two aspects stand out: the model of the classics – that is, the Old Masters – and the model of sensations that are completely ordered in themselves. "Feel nature, organise your perceptions, express yourself deeply and in an orderly way, that is, classically."<sup>8</sup> Both senses would seem to possess a common denominator.

Ambroise Vollard's report about how Cézanne worked on his portrait contains a surprising hint: "There are two small spots on my portrait where the canvas is bare. I mentioned this to Cézanne. 'If I have a good session in the Louvre this afternoon', he replied, 'I'll maybe find the right

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<sup>4</sup> Letter of 3 June 1899 to Henri Gasquet, in John Rewald (ed.) *Paul Cézanne, Letters.*, 1978, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Gasquet, 'Ce qu'll m'a dit ...', in Doran 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Léo Larguer, 'Le Dimanche avec Paul Cézanne', in Doran 1978, p.15, no. XVIII.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 15, no. XII.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard. 'Paul Cézanne' (1904), in Doran 1978, p.41.

tone tomorrow to fill in those blanks."<sup>9</sup> In other words, studying the Old Masters gave Cézanne useful indications, although what he meant by finding the right tone certainly also involved the observation of pictorial organisation, of compositional forms, and not just the discovery of a particular hue. A certain colouristic tradition provided him with the greatest stimulus here. He consulted the Louvre like an encyclopaedia. Yet even what he found there could not automatically be relied upon; it required critical examination. In particular, Cézanne was wary of "*les belles formules*"<sup>10</sup> by which he meant formulas that, however convincing their pictorial rhetoric, were rigid. For him, every order had to arise anew from his own perception, from the chaos of visual data, and could be justified only in those terms. He strictly forbade himself to shorten his path by adopting standardised aesthetic solutions.'

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<sup>9</sup> Ambroise Vollard. 'Paul Cézanne' (1899), in Doran 1978, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Cézanne, letter of 1905 to Émile Bernard; Bernard, 'Paul Cézanne' (1904-06), in Doran 1978, p.45.