



IRSA

A Paradigm Case for Merleau-Ponty: The Ambiguity of Perception and the Paintings of Paul Cézanne

Author(s): Joyce Brodsky

Source: *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1981), pp. 125-134

Published by: IRSA s.c.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1483119>

Accessed: 17-11-2018 16:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

IRSA s.c. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Artibus et Historiae*

A Paradigm Case for Merleau-Ponty: the Ambiguity of Perception and the Paintings of Paul Cézanne

Paul Cézanne does not readily come to mind when one first encounters some of Merleau-Ponty's key phrases like "being-in-the world" and the "lived Body"¹. The painter was terrified of women, desperately afraid of "anyone getting their hooks into him", and so easily bruised that he often even avoided contact with his friends. He was unable to sever his parental ties, he embraced conservative religion in his mature years, was petit bourgeois in politics, provincial in almost everything else and essentially a hermit in retreat from the events of his time². Yet Cézanne became the paradigm example of the person-artist for Merleau-Ponty and the one who resided at the center of his philosophy of perception³.

In this essay I would like to briefly explore the implications that this choice has for interpreting Cézanne's paintings by showing how the relation of the seer and the seen in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception illuminates the

paintings and in particular the self-portraits⁴.

Cézanne's self-portraits are in part recordings of confrontation and encounter with the nature of things as other. They are the least understood and least explored of all his genres as a result of being neither mimetic-commemorative nor psychologically revealing. They are also not very complex in composition in contrast to most of his other works, and cannot be studied like his still-lives for subtle color interactions. Like the iconic images of the early Middle Ages, they are real and disturbing as presences and difficult to approach because they are ambiguous, tense and puzzling. Cézanne painted in and about anxiety in confrontation with things especially when the other thing was himself. From the late 1850's to about 1900, with concentration in the 70's and 80's, he recorded himself over thirty times, usually in three quarter to full face, often turning suddenly to confront the viewer (self) with one eye focused towards the

I wish to thank Forrest Williams and Garry Brodsky for their suggestions. They are, however, in no way responsible for any errors committed. I want also to thank my colleague, Harold Spencer, for his editorial advice.

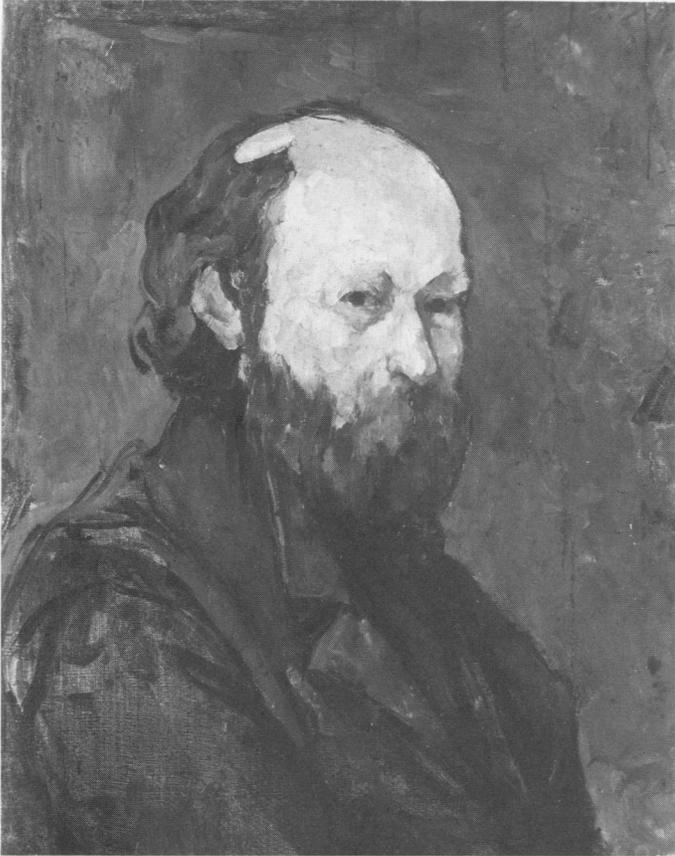
¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, The Humanities Press, 1962, passim.

² See the relevant passages in Jack Lindsay, *Cézanne His Life*

and Art, Greenwich, New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1969.

³ There is almost no work in which Merleau-Ponty did not discuss Cézanne. See in particular "Cézanne's Doubt" in *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 9-25.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty discusses Cézanne and the seer and the seen in "Eye and Mind", *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 162-169.



1) Self-portrait, oil, ca. 1877, The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.



2) Seated Woman in Blue, oil, ca. 1902-1906, The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.

reflection and the other unfocused⁵. It is in those eyes that one can locate the center of disturbance and meaning [Fig. 1].

Throughout the history of self-portraiture one of the standard characteristics of the genre is the difficulty artists have had with painting their eyes as they shift back and forth from mirror to canvas. Because of this factor self-portraits show a peculiar fixity there. When one paints someone else, one can pose the sitter in a great variety of

ways so that eye to eye confrontation can be avoided. This is the case in Cézanne's paintings of others; seldom do we directly encounter eyes [Fig. 2]. The sitter's focus is either downcast or directed towards something within the field of the picture or, if ambiguous as to direction, usually pulled back from direct staring⁶. To see the sitter in a self-portrait is almost, by definition, to confront eyes. Cézanne raises that awkward stare to a significant level of expressiveness and thus makes it the essence of his self-portraiture. The

⁵ For Cézanne's self-portraits see Lionello Venturi, *Cézanne Son Art - Son Oeuvre*, Paris, Paul Rosenberg, 1936, I, Texte, II,

plates and Wayne Anderson, *Cézanne's Portrait Drawings*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1970.

⁶ Ibidem, for Cézanne's portraits of others.



3) Self-portrait, oil, ca. 1880, The National Gallery, London.

content is about confrontation⁷.

Previous analysis of Cézanne's self-portraits, and of his portraits of others as well, has centered on their cold objectivity as investigations of color and form relative to the stylistic stage within which they were painted. In a few cases they have been cited as psychologically revealing⁸. But both the formal and the psychological analyses miss the essential meaning of the self-portraits. They are the least interesting of Cézanne's work from the standpoint of innovative compositional devices or color experimentation so central to his landscape and still life. With the exception of the portrait with angular patterned wallpaper in the National Gallery, London, of the late 70's early 80's [Fig. 3], the Berne self-portrait of the same period that seems to have been painted *en plein air*, and the portrait with easel and palette in Zurich of the late 80's, the self-portraits are compositionally arranged in a simple and repeated formula⁹. Most of them show the upper part of the body, often only bust length, a broad pyramidal form that fills the bottom of the canvas from edge to edge, with the head fairly close to the upper limits of the panel. Often the pose is three quarter to full face, and the background usually consists of only thickly painted space that the body occupies as if in tension with some tangible, weighty substance. The face is painted close to the picture plane and hence to the spectator/reflection and the confrontation is usually uneasy [Fig. 1]. As previously indicated, we feel this particularly in the very peculiar handling of the eyes. One eye confronts and the other retreats in an ambiguous and often organically unnatural manner. Sometimes one eye (the farthest from us) is painted in deep shadow, sometimes distorted, almost cross-eyed in the Zurich *Cézanne with Palette*. If one covers the more distant eye the painter is looking at his canvas; cover the closer eye and the other stares out at us. This covering can be done with many of the self-portraits and the sense of dynamic engagement

and uneasy withdrawal is often overpowering. But the engagement and withdrawal is elusive and does not reveal particular or specific aspects of behavior that one might call "schizophrenic", like those mentioned at the beginning of the essay¹⁰.

Puzzlement about being-in-the world with others and with other things is what Cézanne was painting. His prime concern in "realizing the motif"¹¹ was to try to capture the way that things came to be in the world through perception: a never ending interrogation that accounts not only for those thirty self-portraits, but for over 40 portraits of his wife, more than 35 of his son, about 60 paintings and drawings of the same Mont Sainte-Victoire, over 130 works of bathers in landscape, and the countless still lives often with the same few intimate objects painted over and over again¹². This may perhaps account as well for the startling innovations in color, line and compositional arrangement. They were never made for merely formal exploration but always to lay bare the nature of the visual, the full dynamic encounter with the world. Brilliant simultaneous color contrasts captured the momentary and the contingent and lay alongside a rich vocabulary of tonal color to render the enduring by emphasizing the weight, mass and volume of individual things. Instead of eschewing line as did the impressionists he added many of them not merely to locate the solid object in space, but to locate it dynamically. Cézanne loathed flat static decoration which he associated with the single outline that binds a single colored form, exemplified for him by Gauguin¹³.

Alongside of these elements, compositional distortions were the means by which Cézanne could render the dynamics of the active relation of the seer and the seen. He fixed on the canvas through these distortions a way of capturing seeing in time. He replaced the classical unity that for painting meant grasping the harmoniously bal-

⁷ Although this analysis of Cézanne's work seems to imply a conscious articulation and intention on the artist's part prior to painting, it is just Merleau-Ponty's interpretation that reveals that meaning is embodied in the carnal act of seeing and painting.

⁸ For example, Frank Elgar, *Cézanne*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1975, p. 45. "There is, moreover, little difference between his portraits and his still-lives, since both are devoid of any moral or psychological meaning...They are simply rectangles of paint". Both Meyer Schapiro and Kurt Badt, wrote interesting interpretations of his portraits, the former in *Paul Cézanne*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1963, pp. 32, 40, 46, 50, 56, 58, 64, 82, 92, 94, 104, 126,

the latter in *The Art of Cézanne*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1965, pp. 181-190.

⁹ Venturi, numbers 365, 366, 516.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 10. "...all these symptoms permit one to speak of a morbid constitution and more precisely, ...of schizophrenia".

¹¹ See the interesting chapter in Badt, "The problem of 'Realization'", pp. 195-228.

¹² See Venturi, pp. 402-407 where he lists the paintings by subjects.

¹³ Lindsay, p. 252.

anced whole in space at once, by a novel time-space relationship that necessitated eye movements both sequentially and tensely focused all over the motif/painting. This called into question the whole nature of painting as a pure space art, and is one of the reasons that Cézanne's paintings are often so difficult to look at and to understand. They require of the viewer arduous concentration. The seer must repeat all the dynamic procedures of realizing the motif that the painter went through but now it is through following the intricate relationships of colored passages on a two dimensional surface that the artists procedure is reconstituted. The process is endlessly analytic and rarely results in 'a' synthesis although that was the artist's intention when he spoke of "realizing the motif".

In the "Eye and Mind", the last published essay written before his death Merleau-Ponty says, "Painting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself, for to see is *to have at a distance*"¹⁴. And again:

The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing...it is visible and sensitive for itself¹⁵.

In both quotations that ambiguity of perception at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is unveiled. As we attach ourselves through perception to others or things they remain at the same time separate and detached from us. In the self-portrait we can see ourselves as others see us, we can confront ourselves as another. This presence-in-absence of things, fraught with tension particularly when it is our own reflection, preserves the other as other while permitting our engagement in a continuous, dynamic and never-ending dialogue.

Marjorie Grene discussed Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the seer and the seen, particularly stressed in his late work, in connection with his use of the painter as paradigm.

What the painter gives us is not just things-there but things-to-be-seen, and the seer-seeing, engaged in the effort to see, to evoke on canvas a kind of quintessence, for the viewer, of visibility. He exhibits a restless to-and-fro that

is nevertheless, uneasily, one. Thus being-in-the-world makes possible a kind of detached attachment...the ambiguous containment-detachment, identity-with-difference, of human being that comes into view¹⁶.

She continues, "But the theme that particularly interested Merleau-Ponty was the more developed one: of the ambiguous seeing-body-seen, lived-body-mirrored, a theme that assimilates that of our body to full, ambiguous being-in-the world"¹⁷.

How does Merleau-Ponty use Cézanne's life and his art as paradigmatic of this ambiguity of being-in-the world? He does so by making the art revelatory of the life while he lifts from the particularity of that life an essential way of being-in-the world that Cézanne's paintings exemplify. In his most sensitive essay "Cézanne's Doubt", he says,

There is rapport between Cézanne's schizoid temperament and his work because the work reveals a metaphysical sense of the disease...Thus the illness ceases to be an absurd fact and a fate [Sartre] and becomes a general possibility of human existence. It becomes so when this existence bravely faces one of its paradoxes, the phenomenon of expression. In this sense to be schizoid and to be Cézanne come to the same thing¹⁸.

The ambiguity of Cézanne's nature, his fear of and retreat from the word is for Merleau-Ponty the essential factor in Cézanne's constant engagement with the world through the act of painting. Not in sublimation, but through gestural expression, Cézanne lays bare all levels of his "schizophrenia" which is the very nature of perception.

Further extension of this ambiguity of perception accounts for what Merleau-Ponty calls "intersubjectivity" and is the foundation for relations and communication with others both directly and through cultural forms like art.

It is thus necessary that, in perception of another, I find myself in relation with another "mayself", which is, in principle, open to the same truths as I am, in relation to the same being that I am. And this perception is realized. From the depths of my subjectivity I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear, because the behavior of the other takes place within my perceptual field. I understand this behavior, the words of another; I espouse his thought because this other, born in the midst of my phenomena, appropriates them and treats them in accord with typical behaviors which

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 166.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 162.

¹⁶ Marjorie Grene, "The Sense of Things", *The Journal of*

Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXXVIII (1980), p. 382.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 384.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", pp. 20-21.

I have myself experienced¹⁹.

Although essentially a hermit, Cézanne's fanatic concentration on the dynamics of perceiving put the image of that act before the spectator, through the bodily act of painting. Thus Cézanne was being-in-the world as seer and as "lived body" in the same way that the viewer is. The recluse thus communicates with others through expression.

The ambiguity of perception at the center of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is at the heart of the painter's task and the essence of Cézanne's work whether he painted portraits or mountains. The self-portrait exhibits a particularly poignant formulation of the problem as it records the ambiguous quest for self-perception. It strengthens the analogy with the icon that played such an important role in Christian art, both East and West because it is also expressed the presence-in-absence of the desired object. The term "iconic" serves to describe aspects of Cézanne's portraits, however, now in an entirely modern context. Just as the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, grounded in the ambiguity and dilemma of perception can become metaphoric for modern man's way of being in the world, so Cézanne's images are records of that tension. For both (and different from Sartre), this is not a case of alienation or despair, but a description of the dynamics of confrontation with nature, or things, or other human beings. In some of the later watercolors and oils, for example, of his gardener Vallier, Cézanne portrayed a gorgeous intermeshing of man and nature recorded almost like a great Baroque fugue enveloping the viewer²⁰. Thus for Cézanne, there are moments when the tension appears to dissolve into a unity and the veil of ambiguity seems to lift. For Merleau-Ponty that moment resides in expression.

"The central fact to which the Hegelian dialectic returns in a hundred ways is that we do not have to choose between the *pour soi* and the *pour autrui*, between our own version of thought and the version of others, which is alienation itself, because at the moment of expression the other to whom I address myself and I who express are linked without concession on either side"²¹.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, pp. 17-18.

²⁰ See Shapiro, p. 127, for a painting of Vallier.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 85-86.

²² Lindsay, p. 338. In a letter to his son written a month before he died, Cézanne said, "Finally, I must tell you that I became a painter more lucid before nature, but that with me the realization of

But for both these are only brief moments, for the very nature of encounter presupposes a continual and never-ending quest²².

It is perhaps another way that man is in the world for Merleau-Ponty that directs him to Cézanne and to painting, and enriches the interpretation of the painter's work. If, on the one hand, in the gestural act of painting the artist lives his encounter with and perception of nature and fixes it on canvas; on the other hand, the artist also addresses the past through the tradition of art, in the domain of culture. The artist encounters the tradition in works that he studies as objects perceived in a manner similar to the way he encounters objects in nature. His purpose in this instance, however, is to reflect upon them as problems presented in the history of the discipline as well. The artist wants to know about the fundamental elements constitutive of art and to contribute to the continual exploration and elaboration of the patterns and structures endemic to it.

Cézanne was one of the most traditional of modern painters and his intention was always to locate his art within the tradition. Merleau-Ponty was sensitive to the impossible burden that Cézanne took upon himself, namely that of bringing together direct encounter with nature while framing the encounter in conventions. His inability to "realize the motif" was, in part, a result of this very task which philosophically rendered transforms itself into a nature/culture ambiguity. We can therefore re-interpret each element in Cézanne's painting essential to his investigation of perception as equally essential to his exploration of the conventions and genres of the history of art.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledged the role of tradition in Cézanne's work.

Cézanne's painting denies neither science nor tradition. He went to the Louvre every day when he was in Paris... The task before him was, first to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second through these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism²³.

my sensations in always painful". John O'Neil says in his "Translator's Introduction" to *Prose of the World*, p. xxxv, "The ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty's thought is properly the ambiguity in the tradition of Western philosophy which has elaborated solipsistic and intersubjectivist, nominalist and essentialist, subjectivist and objectivist accounts of the *same* phenomenal world".

²³ Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 17.



4) Mont Ste. Victoire seen from Bibemus Quarry, oil, ca. 1898-1900, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore.



5) Still Life with Apples, oil, ca. 1895-1898, Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Lillie P. Bliss Collection.

In his justifiable association of aspects of modern science (amongst many other disciplines) with a sterile scholasticism that had severed connections with the things of this world and with nature, he rightly saw that Cézanne tried to forget all he had learned from the science of art. At the same time, instead of forgetting the tradition (the past conventions for recording perceptions of the world), Cézanne made it as much the content of his art as the direct perception of nature. He denied, for example, the static center of Renaissance “scientific” perspective and the exclusive methods of optical color sensation pursued by the Impressionists. Although Impressionism was a catalyst for bringing his museum-trained vision to maturity, he considered the arch Impressionist, Monet, “only an eye”²⁴. While eschewing “science”, he proceeded to develop just those frames and those genres formulated by the Greeks and Romans and amplified and extended in renaissances from then on. These conventions are rooted in the tensions between perception and conception and they have been expressed in the western tradition namely by tonal color to suggest sculptural solidity, by rendering observed objects by means of the contour line, and by constructing spatial complexities. These are ordered in a kind of system addressed to the observer so that he believes he is perceiving the real, while he is at the same time aware of the system. The genres — portraiture, still life, landscape, mythological subjects and secular scenes from ordinary life — were formed by the ancients, developed through most of the western tradition, pursued by Cézanne, and remain the genres of many modern artists.

To fully understand how Cézanne revealed in those bare self-portraits that he could be paradigmatic for a fleshed out theory of the ambiguity of perception related to tradition, as well as to direct encounter with the world, lies in analyzing the parameters of his painting as they are fulfilled in each of the genres. Although he utilized many impressionist devices to intensify immediacy and contingency in his landscape, he also used traditional framing devices and methods of organization that are sometimes labeled “Classical” and sometimes “Baroque” [Fig. 4]. He not only framed the view by a tree or branch acting like a curtain or proscenium, a device used by many seventeenth-century artists, but he clearly restricted the part of nature

²⁴ Gerstle Mack, *Paul Cézanne*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1936, p. 181. Cézanne said this to Ambroise Vollard. The statement concluded, “But good God, what an eye”.



6) **Bathers Under a Bridge, watercolor over lead pencil on paper, ca. 1900** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Maria De Witt Jesup Fund, 1951, from the Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection.

he chose to explore by these means. He also viewed the motif often from somewhat above so that relations and arrangements could be more easily studied and assembled. He then activated a complex space by the use of a fundamental western device of illusionistic play; planes in ambiguous tension. Similar means were used, for example, in Pompeian wall painting, some of the works of Tintoretto and Velasquez, and more recently by Hans Hoffman in the “push and pull” of color planes, and by optical color field painters. The ambiguity of what is near and far to perception is thereby related to the ambiguity of fixing any kind of space illusion on a static, flat, picture plane. This is a focal dialectical element, as indicated above, in the discipline of western painting from ancient times to the present.

In still life, Cézanne rendered, often with intense passion, those intimate things that inhabited his every day domestic and studio world [Fig. 5]. He painted humble utensils, a richly patterned cloth, food: those elements found most frequently in traditional still life. But still life is of continuing interest in western painting because it most easily allows the artist to arrange and order the world. The greatest compositional explorations and color complexities are to be found in this genre. Although often considered the most “abstract” of his works they make manifest a



7) **The Large Bathers**, oil, ca. 1898-1905, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Photograph by A.J. Wyatt, Staff Photographer.

dialogue between our perception of things and our conventions even more emphatically than the landscapes.

In another favored genre, Cézanne transformed the gods and goddesses of classical mythology into hundreds of drawings, watercolors, lithographs and oils of nude male and female bathers in the landscape [Fig. 6]. The “gods” of classical mythology were primarily forces of nature in human guise; the bathers of Cézanne are both part of and separate from nature. They are neither dwarfed by, nor do they overwhelm nature; both are given equal weight. The landscape is structured, however, so that it can respond to human order and the dialogue can continue. Sometimes borrowing many motifs from the more sensuous nudes of Rubens, Cézanne controls the carnality of the figure to emphasize order²⁵. Order is established repeatedly in the tradition through geometrical construction. Particularly in

²⁵ Adrian Chappuis, *The Drawings of Paul Cézanne*, Greenwich, The New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973, p. 288, V.I., for a list of copies after Rubens.

²⁶ Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1934.

²⁷ Badt, figs. 8-17.

the large late bathers in oil Cézanne controls the whole composition, figures as well as trees, by forming them into a triangle or pyramid placed directly in the center of the panel [Fig. 7]. Other forms of geometric stability can be found in all the different media he used for his bathers in landscape. As Erle Loran uncovered, linear geometry is at the heart of much of Cézanne's construction²⁶.

In the five paintings of the card players, he focused again on a prime human element, concentration²⁷. Remote from sensuous, primal encounter, yet perhaps an excellent illustration of Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjectivity, man is bound to man in playing a game with shared internal rules. Meyer Shapiro captures both the modern meaning and the traditional format of the motif.

It is the image of a pure contemplativeness without pathos... The problem: how to image the figures as naturally symmetrical, with identical roles—each is the other's partner in an agreed opposition—but to express also the life of their separateness, without descending to episode and weakening the pure contemplative quality, so rare in older paintings of the genre²⁸.

How ironic that Cézanne, who cut himself off from the company of men and women, was able to capture one of the most rewarding engagements between human beings, their involvement in the serious play of games they invent.

In portraits and figure studies, he often used a traditional Renaissance device of posing the figure or figures in a context either revelatory of the sitter's profession or occupation (Geffroy in his study, Vallier in the garden, a servant woman with a coffee pot in the kitchen) or sometimes in an arranged setting like seventeenth century portraits (a boy in a red vest, two figures dressed as harlequins, a young man seated at a table with a skull on it, a young girl leaning on a colorful carpet)²⁹. It is in the tension between the sitter and his setting that the transformation of the traditional genre into the modern one is to be found. Meyer Schapiro writes of the *Boy in a Red Vest*,

The boy, wrapped in a costume that resembles in substance the oppressive drapes around him, looks shrouded in his space... The conventional classic pose of the academy

²⁸ Schapiro, p. 88. See Badt, figure 17 for an example of a “cardplayers” attributed to Le Nain, in the Musée Grenet in Aix-en-Provence, which may have inspired Cézanne.

²⁹ See Schapiro, pp. 95, 127, 93, 105, and Elgar, pp. 132, 69, and William Rubin, *Cézanne the Late Work*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1977, p. 216.

nude..., a relaxed pose of movement and momentary rest - has become a posture of passivity and weakness... The long melancholy figure, with its sad grace, recalls the aristocratic Italian portraits of the sixteenth century in which activity has been arrested by introspection and doubt³⁰.

Different from the self-portraits, the eyes are lowered avoiding direct contact with the artist; or is Cézanne avoiding the eyes of the sitter? Through adoption of the conventions of portraiture, Cézanne poses problems central to the genre, for what is rendered in a portrait has always escaped easy analysis. Does a portrait reveal the sitter, or the artist, or the encounter between the two [Fig. 2]? Is the portrayal about externals that commemorate status or position or the context of the subject, or do the externals reveal particular inner states or psychological dispositions? Are portraits intended as generalizations about universal human conditions? In the tensions between the sitter and the environment, in the distortions that throw the traditional formulas off, Cézanne seems to question the very meaning of the portrait genre. The problem of the portrait is about what is encountered when we perceive another in a context that is both theirs and ours, yet different from ours.

But finally it is in those bare self-portraits that the genres are laid bare. The seer is captured in that ambiguity of seeing that art unveils by framing the very limits of the way that we can be in the world [Fig. 1]. The mirror thrusts back to us the seen, which is, however, an image of ourselves. The self-portrait, stripped of most of the formal and compositional elements that constitute the other genres, is about the very nature of art. It makes visual both the desire to encounter the world and the withdrawal from

it into the cultural frame that man spins around himself out of his nature. The forbidding portrait with easel and palette in Zurich is perhaps the clearest image of that. One eye turns to directly encounter the world, the other turns to the easel, and the palette, flush to the picture plane, locks Cézanne into the world of painting.

Merleau-Ponty was sensitive to these problems even if we lack a fleshed out work on the relation between perception and culture. In "The Primacy of Perception" he says, "I do not mean to say that culture consists in perceiving. There is a whole cultural world which constitutes a second level above perceptual experience. Perception is rather the fundamental basis which cannot be ignored"³¹. Painting, the paradigmatic model for Merleau-Ponty, is as strongly rooted in the tradition of art as it is in the immediacy of encounter with things, with others, and with nature.

Not only can Cézanne serve as the paradigm for the primacy of perception but his self-portraits are the paradigmatic genre of that ambiguous seeing that is perhaps first encountered in confronting our own strange but intimate bodies. Merleau-Ponty intended to articulate that ultimate ambiguity of being-in-the world that Cézanne laid bare in his work: the whole unresolvable tension and ambiguity between nature and culture as "the truth, or better, the origin of truth"³². Through Merleau-Ponty's use of them as paradigmatic, Cézanne's self-portraits and indeed all of his paintings, are engaged at their deepest level. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, when properly centered on Cézanne and painting is grounded in an appropriate model. This symbiosis may stand as metaphoric of Merleau-Ponty's and Cézanne's radically modern articulations of the ambiguity of perception.

³⁰ Schapiro, p. 92.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 33.

³² Grene, pp. 381, 388. This differs, however, from Grene's location of the origin of truth almost exclusively in the natural world.