What was new and unique about Cézanne?

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Adrian Falk's article posted on 20 January 1999 on the Cézanne exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales provides some valuable insights into Cézanne and his work. However, while it hints at the essential contribution of Cézanne to art and culture, I felt that some critical aspects were not sufficiently developed and elucidated. I felt that the analysis did not come up with definite ideas or formulations that clarified what was new and unique about Cézanne. I am grateful for the opportunity to add to the discussion.

Little assistance, if any, in understanding Cézanne's uniqueness and modernity is to be found in the assessment quoted from Meyer Schapiro. Here it is again:

"Cézanne's accomplishment has a unique importance for our thinking about art. His work is a living proof that a painter can achieve a profound expression by giving form to his perceptions of the world around him without recourse to a guiding religion or myth, or any explicit social aims. If there is any ideology in his work, it is hidden within unconscious attitudes and is never directly asserted... In Cézanne's painting, the purely human and personal...are a sufficient matter for the noblest qualities of art. We see through his work that the secular culture of the 19th century, without cathedrals and without the grace of the old anonymous craftsmanship, was no less capable of providing a ground for great art than the authoritative cultures of the past. And this was possible, in spite of the artist's solitude, because the conception of a personal art rested upon a more general ideal of individual liberty in the social body and drew from the latter its ultimate confidence that an art of personal expression has a universal sense."

When examined closely I do not know that this statement really says very much, albeit that it may be true enough. Much the same could be said of any number of Cézanne's contemporaries, or serious modern art in general for that matter. It does not tell us anything about Cézanne's specific breakthrough in art.

The title of Falk's article and a number of statements do however, seem to me, to approach much closer to the meaning of Cézanne. "One must see nature as no-one has seen it before," implored Cézanne. What was Cézanne getting at with this statement? How was this idea expressed in his work? And how can we account for the circumstance that he made it at all?

Falk makes a number of valuable observations about the process Cézanne was engaged in and I think it useful to quote them again and to use them, if I may, as a springboard for further consideration of the significance of Cézanne's work, and the context in which it took place. About the painting "Still Life With Basket" (1888-1890), Falk says:

"Not just the sensuous, virtually tangible fruits, nor just the atmosphere of the room taken as a whole, form the subject of this painting. It is the coherence of the visual field, its inherent logic, and one is tempted to say the existential standpoint of the viewer, which underlie the experience of absorbing this remarkable picture."

"We find the artist grappling with sight, with vision, as one of the primary forms in which nature is given to us. The task is not to copy or mirror this given, but creatively to bring the seen spectacle into a fertile collision with the artist's fund of memory, imagination and technique. It is to discard the everyday, the unessential and the superfluous, and to show an inner harmony and structure of the scene, of which the only human element is frequently simply the viewer alone."

Further on, Falk observes:

"Although he was inspired by, and learned from, the old masters in the Louvre and the Impressionists, Cézanne set himself the original task of finding a new pictorial method adequate to a new way--such as no one had done before--of responding to nature. The integrity with which he pursued this task shines out from his canvases. For him painting was a kind of research. The unfinished parts of many pictures speak in their own way of Cézanne's task, which was not just to finish some finite number of paintings, but rather to re-discover how to paint, how to organise and render the image in accordance with his determination to clarify the objective."

These statements are getting closer to the heart of the "problem", but still, it seems to me, leave the matter rather elusive and unclear. A number of questions appear to arise from these interpretations however. What was the "inherent logic", "the coherence of the visual field" Cézanne was seeking to render artistically? What, precisely is the relevance of the "existential standpoint of the viewer" in the experience of absorbing the picture? What exactly was Cézanne's endeavour, and what was it about Cézanne and the state of the world he lived in at the time which led him to this task " to rediscover how to paint, how to organize and render the image in accordance with his determination to clarify the objective," "to find a new method--a new way--of responding to nature"?

Falk concludes with the following paragraph:

"Nature, as Cézanne shows us how to see it, is full of life and joy. It has an organic harmony of structure, which he shows us how to find within itself, rather than to impose upon it out of the narrowly conditioned and partial properties of our individual sensations. In this way his pictures achieve a universal validity and are among the finest conquests of social man."

Again, this is true. But it seems to me to suffer from the same lack of specificity as the assessment contained in the quote from Schapiro. Having raised the critical issues about Cézanne in the preceding abovementioned paragraphs this final paragraph strikes one as a resignation into generality which, in the end fails to capture the real contribution and meaning of Cézanne; or to put it another way, fails to answer the question why Cézanne was a revolutionary in art.

Let us take a further, if brief, look at Cézanne, his work and the world in which he lived.

Firstly, let us go back to "Still Life With Basket". There is undoubtedly an incomparable harmony and equilibrium produced by the colour and forms. And yet there is also an unmistakable, if uncertain, tension: the conflict of vertical objects against the horizontal lines of the furniture; the convoluted ornamentation, as it were, all in a heap. The overloaded basket, the crumpled cloth, it all looks like it could come toppling over. And yet this is, in artistic terms a "still life." The objects seem to possess an elemental energy or "life-force" usually found only in figure scenes and landscapes. Cézanne said of his painting of objects:

"Objects influence each other through and through... They spread their influence imperceptibly about, by means of their auras, as we do by means of looks and words. Chardin was the first to sense this; he caught the

atmospheres of objects in gradations of colour... There was nothing he ignored. He got that concept of the minute particles that surround things."

Cézanne was born in 1839. The Age of Steam was born at the same time. In 1830 steam trains had commenced to run between Liverpool and Manchester. The first locomotive, "Northumbrian" swept by at twenty-four miles per hour. On September 15 1830, nearly a million spectators--some jeering, most cheering--lined the track to watch.

By the time Cézanne was twenty, the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) had appeared. In 1859 *The Origin of the Species*, by Charles Darwin was published.

A whole series of developments and discoveries over the course of Cézanne's lifetime in technique and human thinking were breaking down the Cartesian division between body and soul. They were, perhaps most important of all, forcing to the forefront of human consciousness the concepts of motion and process. Men were coming to look more and more at nature as a constantly changing process. The static mechanical world of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) was being shattered.

We should look a little more closely at the momentous breakthroughs of perspective and human understanding that took place as Cézanne painted his way through life between 1859 and 1906. The revolutionary breakthroughs in science and social thought were challenging the fixed categories of reality into which it had been compartmentalised. Marx, Darwin and lesser-known natural scientists such as Carnot and Helmholtz who discovered the principle of the interchangeability of different forms of energy, were all part of this process. They saw that such fixed categories had become barriers to understanding the processes of nature because they failed to reveal the constant interaction between these fixed categories. What they were discovering was that a particular event was the consequence of other events, that it was the relationship between events that yielded up an understanding of nature and society. If we use the concept of space, one would say that the explanation of things lay in the space between them, not in "the thing in itself".

This involved a new, revolutionary perspective. Understanding became a question of revealing the ***relationship*** between things, what was "interjacent", "the particles around objects" that Cézanne had remarked upon. This new way of thinking found expression in the system of dialectical materialism of Marx. As time progressed it became central to all fields of human research. Its first expression in the natural sciences was in the study of electricity. Faraday first struggled with the problem, with the discovery of the concept of the field of force, the "electro-magnetic field". In the 1870's Maxwell formulated the electromagnetic theory of light. This brought together in one comprehensive theory the result of two generations of experiments and theories in different fields of physics--electricity, magnetism and optics--and gave them a simple mathematical formulation. The electromagnetic theory was a crowning achievement that realised the dream of a unified theory of nature; that all the forces of nature could be shown to be related. In 1901, five years before Cézanne's death, Max Planck published the Quantum Theory.

However, the full implications of the concept of the field--the most basic of modern concepts--could not be fully comprehended until Einstein published the Special Theory of Relativity in 1905, that is the year before Cézanne's death. Only then was the field proven to be an independent reality. In that same year Trotsky wrote *Permanent Revolution*, the sociological equivalent of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Once one comprehends the relationship of different branches of human enquiry one can see that this was also no coincidence.

In 1910 Rutherford discovered the atomic nucleus. The conclusions eventually drawn from the Quantum Theory confirmed the impossibility of isolating a single event or object. What the scientific and intellectual discoveries in Cézanne's time were leading to was the acceptance of the indivisibility of nature, that nature was a unity founded on contradictions. In terms of quantum physics, the wave and the particle are the opposite of one another. But under certain conditions an electron behaves as though it was both simultaneously. To put it another way when the scale is small and basic enough, the indivisibility of nature manifests itself in simultaneity.

The second half of the 19th century saw the development of mass production, especially in the 1880's and 1890's. The tempo and scale of life, especially city life was changing. The rate of change was becoming like that of the locomotive itself, and this was quite visible in everyday life. The Eiffel Tower was built in 1889, in Cézanne's 50th year. The Paris exhibition of 1900 had 39 million visitors. There were exhibitions from all over the world. Esperanto was exhibited--an international language to further the unity and accessibility of the world. There were motor cars. There were synthetic materials. There was a thing called "wireless".

The Wright brothers began to fly in 1903. In 1906 Dumont in France made a short flight. In 1908 Wright flew for ninety-one minutes. In 1909 Bleriot crossed the channel.

By the end of Cézanne's life the developments in technique and science had culminated in a completely different way of seeing the world. The English physicist A.N. Whitehead writing in 1925 wrote:

"The reason why we are on a higher imaginative level is not because we have finer imaginations, but because we have better instruments. In science the most important thing that has happened during the last forty years is the advance in instrumental design. This advance is partly due to a few men of genius such as Michelson and the German opticians. It is also due to the progress of technological processes of manufacture, particularly in the region of metallurgy."

This was the context in which Cézanne developed his view of nature in the second half of the 19th Century. Now let us go back and have another look at Cézanne's painting, as he struggled with the "minute particles that surround things," in his "determination to clarify the objective."

Cézanne was a man in constant emotional turmoil. He possessed the self-doubt and tumult of a Hamlet. His art was based on this deeply felt conviction of perpetual doubt. He certainly had a love of the beauty, brilliance and sensuousness of nature and of things. He also had an analytic turn of mind. He had a rigid education and had been forced to study law by his father before breaking away and being able to commit himself completely to his art.

Cézanne was torn by an inner conflict. On the one hand he wanted to create the kind of ordered, harmonious vision of the world bequeathed by Poussin. But with the help of Impressionism he knew that this view was false. On the evidence of his own eyes and his analytical mind he knew that everything was relative. He knew that the aspect of the observed reality differed depending upon the position of the viewer. The Impressionists had shown that the appearance of a landscape was relative to the light given off at different times of day. Degas had painted the effect of rapid movement on the appearance of the visual field. Cézanne was conscious that no single painted view of anything could do justice to the experience of it in reality. The cast of Cézanne's seriousness about this "problem" was unlike anyone that had ever painted before. His image of nature derived from an intense quest for the truth that lay beneath appearances. Fundamental to this was his comprehension of the life of things and nature, if you will, the movement of matter. As the art critic Robert Hughes once said of Cézanne, "...he was the first painter to paint a tree that looked like it could move."

As he watched the artistic developments around him, Cézanne observed that art was becoming more fragmented and disconnected and this ran up against his longing for order and synthesis. At the same time his realisation that the standpoint of the viewer was critical to the resulting perception of reality seemed to make resolution of the conflict impossible. Cézanne broke through in the only way that was possible--with a dialectical solution that allowed both demands.

In Cézanne's later paintings we see the resolution of this conflict. The

painted image varied depending on the position of the observer. In the painting "Trees By the Water" (1900-1904) a large part of the canvas is left blank. Cézanne increasingly adopted this technique in later works. The blank spaces give the viewer the opportunity to add imaginatively to the observed reality. The structure, the order, of a painting such as "Trees by the Water" is to be found between the possibilities that are raised by the various viewpoints. It is an order based on the acceptance of uncertainty. In such a picture nature is no longer a vista laid out before the viewer to observe, it includes the viewer and the constantly changing relationship between the viewer and what he is seeing. Such a relationship implies motion as a necessary ingredient. In all the art before Cézanne a painting was like a scene viewed through a window. Cézanne broke the window. The room became part of the landscape, the viewer part of the view. Having allowed the possibility of simultaneous viewpoints Cézanne destroyed in art forever the possibility of a static view of nature.

This was Cézanne's revolutionary bequest to the art of the 20th Century. It incorporated in art some of the great intellectual achievements of the 19th Century; the understanding that all of nature was interrelated and that it existed in a state of motion.

It is probably unlikely that Cézanne thought specifically about his art in these terms, but that is hardly the point. He expressed in art what other branches of human culture were also discovering and so opened up, in much the same way as the Renaissance artists had at the beginning of the bourgeois epoch; a whole new perspective on man and nature.

Cézanne's influence on subsequent art is well known. His new outlook was most conscientiously pursued by the great Cubist painters as they, if only very briefly, deepened the artistic exploration of nature and society.

The most serious artists struggling to find a way forward out of the veritable impasse in which artistic expression finds itself today, and others interested in art and culture, must go back and look at Cézanne. They must look at the tasks he gave himself and those artists that pursued his endeavours after him if they want to take human culture forward.

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Acknowledgments

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