

## Negative Capability

September 15, 2008

James R. Bridgeland, Jr.

I like art museums and have been to a good many of them over the years. For most of those years, I went to museums to experience the aesthetic pleasures of art, and I did not expect to learn from paintings in the same way I learned from books. Oscar Wilde said in one of his aphorisms what I believed about art back then. He said art is "the passion of the soul," and, "it is not meant to appeal to our faculties of reason," by which I assumed he meant that it was the primary aim of art to speak to our emotions, to our feelings, and not to our intellects. In any case, Wilde's aphorism described the way I felt.

Given the way I saw the aims of art in those days, my practice was to wander more or less aimlessly through the galleries stopping briefly here and there before pictures that appealed to me. As I've said, the issue for me boiled down pretty much to the feeling question, "Do I like this painting or don't I," I asked myself, and I did not expend much effort trying to go beyond my simple emotional response.

This all changed for me about five or six years ago - that is, these ideas about how to look at paintings. It was reading an interview Ernest Hemingway gave to the Paris Review that started me in a new direction. One of the questions the interviewer asked Hemingway in that interview was who the writers were from whom he believed he had learned the most. Hemingway answered by naming several writers from whom he said he had learned but then went on to make a special point of telling the interviewer that he had learned as much about life from painters as he had from writers.

Hemingway's answer surprised me, but then I recalled something else I had read about him. It was said that when he lived in Paris he went often to the Louvre, and on each visit he looked for a long time at only one painting. I could see from this, and from what Hemingway said to the Paris Review, that he and I were not on the same page at all when it came to what we expected to derive from looking at paintings. I could see that unlike Wilde, Hemingway must have believed that painters aim to carry us beyond those emotional responses they might arouse in us, and to, indeed, engage our faculties of reason. So if Hemingway were right, while their medium is different, one of their aims is the same, to instruct us about life.

After reading Hemingway's interview, I decided to look more carefully at fewer paintings than I had been doing, and to try to be more analytical in the way I looked at them. I told myself I would attempt to "read" paintings in the way I read books and see if I could get more about life's issues from them, as Hemingway apparently had.

The painter I decided I would concentrate on was Paul Cezanne, the French Impressionist, and I began to make visits to those museums that had good collections of his work. I knew from teaching literature that knowing things about a writer's life could help a reader in understanding what the writer sought to reveal in his work, so I began reading up on Cezanne's life as well.

One of the first things I discovered about Cezanne was how hard it was for him to persist as a painter, how many obstacles he had to overcome. His struggle began at the very beginning with the determined resistance of his father. Cezanne was born in 1839 in the provincial town of Aix-en-Provence, the only son of the town's banker. Monsieur Cezanne expected his son to follow him into his banking business, and if not that to study for a career in law. Strong-willed and narrow minded, Cezanne's father was a self made man who believed his commercial success established the infallibility of his opinions. He had no respect for the arts and could not understand his son's wish to be a painter. He was appalled to think a grown man would not concern himself first with a practical way of making a living. He would admonish Paul to consider his future, saying to him, "One dies with genius, but one eats with money." Exasperated by what he saw as his son's apathy toward the practical aspects of life, he treated him always as a child and kept him on a meager allowance, which provided Paul barely enough on which to live.

Bad as the opposition was at home, the rejection of his work by the critics and the public must have been even more discouraging for the painter. Cezanne's work received little favorable recognition until the last years of his life, and even then much of the world still ignored or rejected it. Many of the critics who bothered to review him at all, and according to his biographers there were few who did, ridiculed his work. One critic who was not untypical dismissed him by saying that his was, "The anarchy of painting ... art in delirium tremens," and another exclaimed simply, "Cezanne [is a] barbarian." As late as 1906, only a few months before he died, a reviewer writing as though he were already dead, would say of him, "Cezanne was nothing but a lamentable failure; perhaps he had some ideas but was quite incapable of expressing them."

The French government's annually sponsored exhibitions, known as the Salon, where showing was key to an artist gaining recognition and sales, rejected him year after year, and when the painter Gustave Caillebotte died in 1894, leaving his art collection to the French people, government authorities rejected paintings by Cezanne, advising the estate they were being refused because they were not fit to be seen by the French public.

The most hurtful blow to Cezanne's morale may have been that delivered by Emile Zola. Zola and Cezanne had grown up together at Aix, and had been close boyhood companions. They remained friends in later life after Zola settled in Paris where he became France's foremost writer

and intellectual. As most of you know, Zola was a prolific and popular novelist, and in one of his widely circulated novels he told the story of a failed painter, basing his book on what he saw as the life of Cezanne. Cezanne recognized himself as Zola's protagonist, was deeply hurt by what his friend concluded about him and his work, and the two never spoke again.

Rocky as the road was for Cezanne, as we all know now, he persevered and his greatness was ultimately recognized. Today, he is acknowledged by those who profess to know art as among the most insightful, revolutionary and influential visual artists in the Western canon. If one should say the test of a great artist is that he made a difference in his art, then most experts seem to agree that Cezanne met that test as well or better than any artist before or after him. Some have gone so far as to say that no Western artist exceeds Cezanne's greatness as a painter.

An important fact in the assessment of what Cezanne achieved in his art is that virtually every artist of the Modern and Post Modern periods has acknowledged his debt to him. For example, Picasso said of him, "He was my one and only master." Matisse professed his debt with a simple metaphor, saying, "He was the father of us all," and in a joint statement following his death in 1906, Braque, Leger and Villon acknowledged that all who came after Cezanne were descended from him.

Given how far Cezanne departed from the norms of 19<sup>th</sup> Century painting, it is not hard to understand why so few of his contemporaries were able to see his greatness. Even today, after more than one hundred years of abstract art, art that his successors concede Cezanne did more than any one else to allow, Cezanne's work remains difficult to grasp.

19<sup>th</sup> Century critics and the public expected to see subject matter that they could recognize as the central point of interest in a painting. We do recognize objects Cezanne puts in his landscapes and still lifes, but these are vestigial and are not presented to the viewer as the painting's primary point of interest. They function as elements of the composition and not as his pictures main players. This different treatment of subject matter was a major change in Cezanne's work that critics and the public did not like.

Not only did Cezanne abandon subject matter as the focus of interest in his paintings, he also abandoned the idea of a single visual perspective, that is, of one sight line that runs from the viewer's eye outward to a distant point in space. He flattened space in his pictures so the eye is not carried out in the way it is for us when we look at things. Objects farther away are moved forward, things nearer are moved back. Nor are we given but one angle from which to view things. In the same Cezanne canvas, we are looking down on one thing and up at another. We are made to see around, over and under things all at the same time.

Though presented in what seems a confused way, Cezanne's paintings do not leave us

with the impression of disassembled and disconnected objects. Each of the discreet areas of his painting, with its different angle of vision, is so integrated with the painting's other discreet areas that they fuse with each other so the overall effect is one of harmony and unity. One might expect that with these changes in perspective Cezanne's paintings would be disorienting, but they aren't. They do not disorient us so much as they reorient us. They take us away from the usual place from which we see things, and put us in rather than opposite to what is around us. By providing us multiple angles of vision all at one time, Cezanne makes us see that nothing exists in isolation, including ourselves; to understand better how ramified and interrelated each moment of our lives is, and how when we view things only from the reference point of ourselves we confine and contract reality.

One of the more interesting questions for me about Cezanne has been, what there was in his character which enabled him to rise above the discouragements he faced, and to persist as a painter? Especially intriguing to me is how he managed to deal with the authority his strong-willed father asserted over him. A quality I think I see in him, and that helped him deal with this, is a cosmic sense of humor. By this I mean a life embracing inward laughter that served as an anodyne to the hardships his father imposed on him, and to the other obstacles he faced.

I get the feeling he had this quality from a now famous portrait he did of his father. Perhaps you have seen it. It hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The painting shows the old man seated in a large throne-like chair. The chair dominates the picture, and implies his father's seat of parental authority. But counteracting the air of authority this big chair lends to the painting is the way the painter has put his father in it. He is not seated in a position of command, but rather uncomfortably askew, reading a newspaper. The artist shows us the paper's masthead. It is a sophisticated Paris journal that reviewed art and literature, subjects his father disdained, and a paper his provincial father was not likely to read. High above his father's head, looking down on him as it were, the artist has placed one of his own still lifes. Easily overlooked in the painting is the shadow his father's figure casts on the back of the chair. It suggests the form of a devil. It is only a shadow, however, a kind of Rorschach blot, and while the picture appears to me to lampoon his father, its overall effect is to give the painter's father an air of dignity and to accord him respect.

I have seen this portrait of Cezanne's father many times over the years, but before I began to look at paintings in the way Hemingway apparently did, I would not have seen in this picture what I now believe the painter shows us with it. That is, how many-faceted the relationship between this father and this son was, how the son's capacity for cosmic laughter served him in accepting that relationship, and by implication, how this same cosmic humor toward life's

vicissitudes might help all of us in accepting the tribulations of ours.

However large Cezanne's capacity for inward laughter might have been, he nevertheless went to great lengths to avoid having to test that capacity by concealing from his father what he knew the old man would disapprove. A most significant event in his life the painter wanted to conceal was his liaison with a young model he met in Paris. He had taken the girl as his mistress, and they had a son together. Cezanne managed for years to keep this relationship from his father, and it was not until the boy was 14 years old that the old man found that he was a grandfather. It was a letter from one of his friends that gave Cezanne away. Although the painter was 44 years old by then, his father thought it was still within his parental prerogatives to open his son's mail. There was a reference in the friend's letter to Cezanne's mistress and their son, and apparently to the fact that Cezanne lived with them when not at home in Aix. When challenged by his father about this, Cezanne denied everything. Whereupon his father announced that since it did not take so much for a bachelor to live, he was reducing Cezanne's allowance by half.

Despite the perennial tensions in their relationship, there seems never to have been a major breach between father and son. Family solidarity survived its surface strains, and before he died, Cezanne's father approved a formal church marriage between his son and the woman he had by then lived with for more than 17 years, and at his death, the banker left his son a sizable fortune.

Though Paris was the Mecca for artists in his day, Cezanne was not a man for cities, and when his father died, he retreated to Aix to live and to work there permanently. Leaving his wife and son to live in Paris, for the remaining 20 years of his life Cezanne roamed alone in the countryside he loved, finding there scenes that transported him. Scenes from his homeland appear in so many of his masterworks, that "Cezanne in Provence" has become an epithet for him. Sainte Victoire, the mountain that overlooks the Provencal countryside, appears in more than 60 of his paintings and watercolors, and art authorities agree that it is with scenes of Provence that Cezanne arrived at the apotheosis of his art.

Of course, the essential element in Cezanne's character, the trait that allowed him to persist and ultimately to prevail against the obstacles thrown up against him, had to be something that went beyond laughing acceptance of life's barriers. He had to have faith in himself, and Cezanne had that faith. He not only resisted the art establishment's opinions, he expressed his disdain for them. Writing about what he believed was Pissarro's good opinion of him and of his work, Cezanne said of himself:

I am beginning to feel stronger than those around me, and you know I have reasons for the good opinions I have of myself. I must work continuously, not to attain some

end, which gives rise to the admiration of idiots. This thing that is so appreciated by the vulgar is no more than craftsmanship, which makes any work it produces inartistic and commonplace.

He could be more earthy in his retorts to the people at Aix who jeered at his paintings. "I shit on you," he would shout at them and he referred to those who refused to allow his paintings to be exhibited at the museum at Aix as "assholes" for their inability to understand. Biographers report of him that he not only expected the paintings he submitted for exhibition at the annual Salon to be refused by the juries, but welcomed their rejection, for to him the juries' decisions only acted to abet his contempt for the establishment's inability to see the significance of what he was doing.

While Cezanne was a man of strong opinions, especially when it came to resisting the art establishment's orthodoxies, he did not let his personal beliefs interfere with his perceptions of reality. He allowed himself to be absorbed in what he saw, taking things in without preconceptions or presuppositions. His demeanor as he worked reflected his absorption and openness. Auguste Renoir recalled what he looked like as he worked at his easel. "What a remarkable sight," Renoir exclaimed "[to see him] gazing with ardent concentrated attention and respectful eyes." Another painter happening on him while at work remarked: "He [was] there in front of [his subject] . . . just looking, without any impatience, without any ulterior motive." Cezanne knew that to comprehend the truth of things and to expose their reality on his canvases, he had to be open and not impose preconceived ideas on them. "If I think when I am painting," he said, "if I get in the way . . . then all is lost." He believed, as he put it, that "it was for the artist to work without self concern . . . [and to be] a sensitive plate."

Reading these things about Cezanne put me in mind of another artist, and of what he said about the necessary psychological state for anyone who hoped to arrive at the truth. Keats called this state "negative capability." Keats coined this term in a letter he wrote to his brothers. The poet had been to a dinner party with some friends the evening before and had heard them speaking disparagingly about the life and manners of Edmund Kean, the noted Shakespearean actor. Keats saw how distorted these men's views of Kean were, and saw too that this was because they filtered their ideas about him through their sense of who they were and the belief systems that made up their notions of their identities. Because of their sense of themselves, they were unable to set aside their personal beliefs and open themselves to Kean's reality, but instead wrenched everything they saw about him to fit their preconceptions and presuppositions. Keats remarked to his brothers how incapable his friends were, and, implicitly, we all are, of letting go of our sense of self, and of letting ourselves be absorbed in our experiences of the world without

first submitting those experiences to our prior judgments of what they are or should be.

That evening listening to his friends talk as they did also made Keats think of Shakespeare and his King Lear. The poet saw how impossible it would have been for the great dramatist to have written such a play with all its fidelity to the truth, and its grasp of reality, if he had not had "negative capability," that ability he had to give himself up to what was around him so that he might absorb the truth of it with disinterested awareness. It is this same quality, this "negative capability" that I can see in Cezanne, and is what I believe allowed him to achieve in visual art in ways that Shakespeare did in literary art.

When Cezanne died in 1906 he left in his studio at Aix a nearly finished painting on which, it is believed, he had worked for about 10 years. It is the largest canvas he ever painted, 8' wide by 7' high. This painting hangs now at the Museum of Art in Philadelphia where it is known as "The Great Bathers" because of its size.

It shows 14 or 15 nudes in various postures ranged along a river bank. The trunks of large trees rise on either side of the painting to arch over the figures, like the facade of a cathedral. A vista opens through these arching trees to the far bank and to the land and sky beyond. A small fully clothed figure stands on the opposite side of the river looking across toward the nude figures on its near bank. What appears to be a domestic work animal is standing beside this small figure. In the distance beyond them are cypress trees and a steepled church, with the large sky opening above.

Of all the Cezanne paintings I've seen, The Great Bathers has captured my imagination more than any other. I've struggled for a long time to understand what Cezanne intended to show with it. In my efforts to analyze this picture and to come up with answers, I've gone twice to Philadelphia to look at the original, and I keep a copy of it on a stand at my desk so I can look at it when I sit there.

Of course I've learned some things by reading what authorities say about The Great Bathers. However, those I've read talk mostly about its compositional and emotional aspects. They speak of its monumental and spiritual air, of the feeling of mystery it evokes, and for the most part, don't attempt to interpret what Cezanne may have meant by it. That is, they look at it as a visual experience engendering feelings, but do not read it as they might a book, to see what it might teach us about ourselves and the way we live.

I have found one authority, and of course there may be others I have not seen, who looks at The Great Bathers in the more story oriented way that I have done. But he interprets the painting as a pastoral scene, and I derive nothing by looking at it in that way. I get no sense of the bucolic, of pastoral life, nor does the picture engender in me that nostalgic longing for a lost

golden age of rural life that pastoral scenes are meant to evoke. What the painting does do is carry my thoughts back to another mythological time; that is to the Garden of Eden and the Fall.

The nude figures are arranged in two groups, one on the left and the other to the right in the picture. Those on the left seem to me to exhibit that primal innocence that the Creation story tells us we had enjoyed before the Fall, before we ate the apple that made us self aware. These figures are absorbed in what they are doing, are lost to themselves in the activity of the moment. They seem neither self concerned nor distracted by the others there with them. They too have negative capability, but it is in the original way, in that primal way before they ate the apple and began to make their judgments about what was good and what was bad in the world.

The figures in the group to the right in the picture give the viewer a different impression. They are contemplative, they seem to be thinking. Some gaze beyond the trees to the opposite shore where the clothed figure with the working animal stands. Two have waded into the river toward the opposite shore with its church and cypress trees. The cypress, as you probably know, symbolizes death in literature and I should think in art as well. So does Cezanne want with his picture to remind us of that moment we become aware of ourselves and by doing so left the Garden? I could go on with these and other questions about our lives that I am suggesting this painting invites us to consider, but I know we do not have the time here tonight to do that, and do not have the picture before us. And, of course, I know, too, that what I might read into The Great Bathers may not be things Cezanne intended to put there. In the end, however, the point is not so much what the painting makes me think of, but that it causes me to think in the way that it does, to consider those human issues with which we must all struggle.

And so what have I gathered from my journey with Cezanne and from his art? It is that art is not just "the passion of the soul" as Wilde said it was, though it is surely that, but that it can do as Ernest Hemingway believed it could, engage our faculties of reason as well. We can learn as much about life from painters as from writers. My journey with Cezanne has shown me too the value of that "negative capability" Keats spoke about, that capacity for self forgetfulness the Creation story tells us we lost in the "Fall." And, finally, it has brought home to me once more that while literature and art may never give us ultimate answers to existential questions, we can know, as Cezanne knew, that we can always be striving forward toward new revelations.