

freud according to cézanne

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PAINTING AND ILLUSION

With regard to the relationship between psychoanalysis and art, there are many approaches which claim to be authorised by Freud. Rather than once again undertaking an assessment of this area, better made by others², we prefer here to propose a somewhat different problematic, by departing from an apparently minor remark: even if it's not a question of properly applying a supposed psychoanalytic knowledge to a work and of providing a diagnostic of this work or of its author; even if one tries to develop one by one all the lines by which it is linked to the desire of the writer or the painter; and moreover, even if one situates an emotional space opened by the originary lack in response to the demand of the subject at the heart of creative activity³—it remains that the epistemological relation of psychoanalysis to the artwork is constituted in all cases in a *unilateral* manner, the first being the method applied to the second, conceived as its object. Thus the dimension of transference would be reintroduced into the conception of artistic production that nonetheless remains irreducible to the inventive scope and critique of the *form* of the work as such.⁴ The resistance of aestheticians, historians of art and artists to such a distribution of roles doubtless proceeds from the placement of the work in the position of passive object: they know, for various reasons, of the active power [*pouvoir*] to produce new meanings that these objects, supposed to be passive, bear. It is interesting to *reverse the*

relation, to examine whether this inaugural, critical activity might not be applied in turn to the object “psychoanalysis,” conceived of as a work. By questioning in this manner, one soon discovers, at the core of the Freudian conception of art, a striking disparity of status between the two arts that form its poles of reference, tragedy and painting. If the force of production of objects (which not only fulfill desire, but in which desire finds itself reflected or reversed)—the libidinal critical force—is tacitly ascribed to the first, it is explicitly refused to the second.

Jean Starobinski⁵ has shown how the tragic figures of Oedipus and Hamlet, the privileged *objects* of the Freudian reflection, are valuable also and above all as *operators* for the elaboration of the theory. If there isn't a book or even an article by Freud on Oedipus or *a fortiori* on Hamlet, it is because, in Freud's unconscious, the figure of the dead king's brother plays (at least epistemologically) the role of a kind of screen or grille which, applied to the discourse of psychoanalysis, allows him to hear what he does not say, to bring together the disparate fragments of sense scattered throughout the material. The tragic scene is the place [*lieu*] to which the psychoanalytic scene is related at the end of interpretation and of construction. Art is here that from which psychoanalysis draws its resources for work and understanding. It is clear that such a relation was not possible and had no chance of being fruitful unless art, tragedy, offers, if not an analysis already, at least a *privileged representation* of what is in question in analysis, the desire of the subject in its relation with castration.⁶ Such is, in effect, the case of tragedy, Greek or Shakespearian; or again, of a plastic work like the *Moses* of Michelangelo. Jacques Lacan makes a similar use of Edgar Allen Poe's novel *The Purloined Letter* in order to construct his thesis of an unconscious analogous to language.

If we turn to painting, we will observe that it occupies quite a different position in the thought of Freud and in psychoanalytic theory in general. The references to the pictorial object are very numerous in Freud's writings, from the beginning to the end of his work (an entire essay is devoted to it⁷). Above all, though, the theory of dream and fantasy, the central mode of access to the theory of desire, is constructed around a latent “aesthetic” of the plastic object. The central intuition of this aesthetic is that the picture, in the same fashion as the oneiric “scene,” *represents* an object, an absent situation. It opens a scenic space in which, in the absence of the things themselves, at least their representatives can be shown, and which has the capacity to receive and to accommodate the products of fulfilled desire. Like the dream, the pictorial object is thought according to the function of hallucinatory representation and lure. To grasp this object with words which describe it and which will serve to understand its sense will be, for Freud, to *dispel*

it. In order to convert the oneiric image or the hysterical phantasm into discourse, the signification is led towards its natural habitat, that of words and of reason, and the veil of representations, of alibis, behind which it is hidden, cast off.⁸

This assignment of the plastic work, as *mute* and *visible*, to reside in the region of the imaginary fulfillment of desire, can also be found at the heart of the Freudian analysis of the function of art. In effect, Freud distinguishes two components of aesthetic pleasure: a properly libidinal pleasure which comes from the content of the work itself, insofar as we allow it, by identification with a character, to fulfill *our* desire in fulfilling *his* destiny; but also, to speak in a preliminary fashion, a pleasure derived from the form or the position of the work presented to perception—not as a real object, but as a kind of plaything, an intermediary object, in relation to which acts and thoughts that the subject has not accounted for are authorized. Freud entitles this function of misappropriation in relation to reality and to the censorship “primary seduction”⁹: in the “aesthetic” situation, as in sleep, a proportion of the energy of counter-investment, employed to repress the libido, is freed and returned to the unconscious in the form of free energy, which will produce the figures of the dream or of art. In both cases, it is the rejection of every realistic criterion which allows the energy to discharge itself in a regressive way, in the form of hallucinatory scenes. The work therefore presents us with a primary seduction in that it promises, by its artistic status alone, the withdrawal of the barriers of repression.¹⁰ One sees that such an analysis of the aesthetic effect tends to indentify it with a narcotic effect. Here, what is essential is the *realization of the unreality* [*déréalité*] that is the phantasm. From a properly formal point of view, this hypothesis implies two attitudes. First, it leads to the privileging of the “subject” (the motif) in the painting: the plastic screen will be thought in accordance with the representative function, as a transparent support behind which an inaccessible scene unfolds. On the other hand, it invites us to find, hidden under the represented object—like the group of the Virgin, of its mother and of its brothers¹¹ - a form (the silhouette of a vulture) supposedly determined in the phantasmatic of the painter. With the same stroke all non-representative painting is eliminated from the ambit of psychoanalysis, as is every “reading” of the work which is not primarily concerned with locating the “discourse” of the unconscious of the painting which would make phantasmatic silhouettes. On the basis of the categories of this aesthetic alone, it would *a fortiori* be necessary to abandon any grasp on a work of painting in which Freud’s “aesthetic position,” according to which the narcotic value of the work would be censured, is criticized (precisely by plastic means). And yet it is not excessive to think that everything which is important in painting from Cézanne onwards, far from favouring the

sleep of consciousness and the accomplishment of the unconscious desire of the art-lover [*amateur*], aims on the contrary to produce on the support some sort of *analoga* of the space of the unconscious itself, which could only arouse anxiety and revolt. And how, from the same perspective, to account for attempts made on all sides today by painters, but also by people in theatre or by musicians, to take the work from the *neutralized place* (the cultural edifice: museum, theatre, concert hall, conservatorium), where the institution consigns them? Are they not aimed at the destruction of the privilege of unreality which, according to Freud, would confer on the work and its position the power of seduction? It is clear that what is going on today is a situation of the artwork which hardly appears anymore to satisfy the conditions noted by the explicit aesthetic of Freud: the work fundamentally *derealisises reality* more than aiming to realize, in an imaginary space, the unrealities of the phantasm.¹²

One could draw from these few remarks the conclusion that if Freud's analyses on the subject of plastic art appear inapplicable today, it is ultimately because painting has profoundly changed. After all, it could be said, the mission of those who inaugurated the psychoanalytic revolution was not to anticipate the pictorial revolution. This is to forget that the latter began under Freud's eyes and that during the first half of the century, between his first writings (1895) and his last (1938), not only did painting change its subject, manner, and problem, but the *pictorial space* "mounted" by the men of the Quattrocento fell to ruin, and with it the *function* of painting as *representation* which was at, and remained at, the centre of the Freudian conception. That Freud didn't have the eyes for this "critical" reversal of the pictorial activity, for this veritable displacement of the desire of painting, that he was so stuck to an exclusive position of desire—that of the Italian scenography of the 15th Century—cannot but surprise. The critical work began by Cézanne, continued or reengaged in all directions by Delaunay and Klee, by the cubists, by Malevitch and Kandinsky, attested that it was no longer at all a question of producing a phantasmatic illusion of depth on a screen treated like a window, but on the contrary of making visible plastic properties (lines, points, surfaces, values, colours) which representation only serves *to efface*; that it was therefore no longer a question of fulfilling desire through its delusion, but of capturing it and of methodically disappointing it by exposing its machinery. Freud's ignorance is all the more surprising because this reversal of the pictorial function is in many respects akin to the reversal of the function of consciousness by Freudian analysis itself, inscribing as surface effects a vast subterranean upheaval which affected (and continues to affect) the supporting substrata of the Western social and cultural establishment. What has been in question since the 1880s, years which have seen

intermittent upheavals in the nature of the field concerned, is the *position* itself *of desire* in the modern West, the way in which the objects, words, images, goods, thoughts, works, women and men, births and deaths, illnesses and wars enter into circulation and are exchanged in society. If that transposition of anonymous desire which supports the institution in general and renders it acceptable must be put into words, one could say *grosso modo* that while this desire previously fulfilled itself in a regime of exchanges which imposes on the object a *symbolic* value—just as the unconscious of a neurotic produces and relates representatives of the repressed object according to a symbolic organization of Oedipal origin—since the transformation of which we speak (and whose effect was best studied by Marx in the economic field), the production and circulation of objects has ceased to be regulated by reference to symbolic values, imputed to some mysterious Donator, but obeys the sole “logic” internal to the system. This is somewhat like how the formations of *schizophrenia* appear to escape from the regulation that neurosis obtains from the Oedipal structure, insofar as they are no longer subordinate to anything but the “free” effervescence of psychic energy. It is an accepted hypothesis that the Freud-event gives rise to a similar mutation in the order of discursive representation, and whose analogue in the order of plastic—and in particular pictorial—representation is the Cézanne-event. What would remain to be understood would be the motifs or modalities of the ignorance of the second by the first. In order to do so, it would be necessary first to show in what way the work of Cézanne attests to the presence of a similar displacement in the position of desire (here the desire of painting) and consequently in the function of painting itself. We will briefly examine the path that this work traces, and the element in which it is inscribed, from this point of view.

PAINTING AND POWERLESSNESS

Since Venturi’s monumental inventory,¹³ it is customary to distinguish four periods in Cézanne’s oeuvre: dark, impressionist, constructive, synthetic. Liliane Brion-Guerry draws from this account, while dramatizing it on two counts. First of all she shows that what motivates this plastic odyssey is the search for a solution to a problem which is also plastic: the unification of the spatial content, the represented object, and what contains it, the atmospheric envelope. In the second place, she suggests that this desire for plastic unity, in fulfilling itself in the aforementioned four broad approaches, repeats or at least revives the principal conceptions of space that appeared in the history of painting: space moving to several vanishing points, comparable to the painting of antiquity, in the first period (1860-1872); in the second, impressionist period (1872-1887), space of the

Italo-Hellenistic type where the planes of light do not succeed in being integrated into a coherent system; space on the contrary too well structured, too “tight,” of the third period (1878-1892), which suggests a comparison with that of certain Roman “primitives”; finally at the time of the last period, from 1892 to his death in 1906, the rediscovery, if not of the classical perspective of the Quattrocento, then at least of an expression of depth analogous to that of some Baroques, or, better still, some water-colourists of the Far East.

The trajectory of Cézanne’s oeuvre would thus condense almost the entire history of painting, at least the history of perspective, or, better still, *the history of painted space*. In this regard, however, two things must be noted. First, if this is the case, it would be attributed to an originary inability, to a lack which would continually reinitiate the plastic investigation at each stage: the incapacity of Cézanne to see and to render the represented object and its place according to the “classical” perspective, that is to say according to the rules of the geometric optic and the techniques of scalar enlargement [*mise au carreau*] established by the “perspectivalists” between the 15th and the 17th centuries. This incapacity already illuminates a first enigma: why Cézanne could not remain an impressionist. As P. Francastel has shown,¹⁴ while impressionist light may well decompose the object by substituting the aerial tone for the local tone, the space in which the object is suspended remains in principle that of the Quattrocento, which is to say, that of representation. When a landscape of Cézanne’s¹⁵ is compared with one of Pissaro’s of the same view, one senses how much the first is racked by uncertainty, by what Merleau-Ponty called Cézanne’s *doubt*.¹⁶ Even with this period (the second in Venturi’s taxonomy), painting, instead of responding to the question ‘what unitary law does the production of the pictorial object obey?’, seems to hesitate, suspending its response. In fact the picture does respond: *there is no such unitary law*; the question of the unity of the sensible remains open, or this unity is lacking.

Second, it must be emphasised that this deficiency contains potentially the entire critique of representation. If one is not satisfied by the unification of the place [*lieu*] that perspectivalist composition offers, the study of procedures such as the complete review of “primitive” space (third period) may follow, or, on the contrary (fourth period) the suppression of all structure or drawn outline, and the free play of what Cézanne called “colouring sensations.” In each case, these procedures all oppose their status as representations, sharing in common the fact that, far from erasing themselves and slipping away from the opacity of the support in the illusion of a transparent window as is done in the perspectivalist technique, they reveal and recognize the picture as in fact an object whose principle is not beyond

itself (in the represented), but internal, in the arrangement of colours. There is in this modest technical difference a veritable transformation of the relation with the object in general, a veritable transformation of desire.

This transformation is not an achievement but something given; or rather, suffered. Cézanne's pictorial journey moves in the originary element of an uncertainty, of a suspicion in relation to what is presented as "natural law" in the schools of painting, just as Freud's journey supposes the initial rejection of the principle of the unification of psychic phenomena by consciousness and the hypothesis of an irrepressible *principle of dispersion* (sexuality, primary process, death drive). In both cases, this suspicion, this deficiency, is given first and everywhere underlies this work of displacement, whether theoretical or plastic, that it undertakes. This means that it is vain to search in the failure of the composition, plastic for Cézanne, for the (dialectical) reason for the subsequent invention. Every composition is a failure and a success; they only *succeed* each other in a surface history, and are *contemporaries* in the substratum where Cézanne's desire, immobile, generates disconnected figures, divided spaces, contrary points of view.

Through a close analysis of works undertaken in the four periods, it would not be difficult to show the degree to which the principle of dispersion is constantly active. Here we will make do with some rapid remarks on certain of the still lifes. In *La pendule noir* [*The Black Clock*] (1869-1871; Venturi catalogue no. 70), three properties, alone and in combination, open a space of non-locality that is also obtained by other means in the *Vase de fleurs* [*Vase of Flowers*] (1873-75; Venturi 183) in the Louvre, and which appears in what is called the impressionist period. The uncertainty of the scale due to the presence of the glass, the coexistence of two vanishing points which orders two simultaneous systems of linear perspective—incompatible according to the rules of the school—and finally the use of a regime of values by violent contrasts (black/white) which tips the black background towards the front and the first plane bristles with active lines as if to defend itself. In the latter work, in addition to the action of manifest deformations—such as that of the edge of the table or the shadow or the dissymmetry of the sides of the vase—the uncertainty of the place results above all and on the one hand in the desynthesization of surfaces, provoked not only by the (properly impressionist) encroachment on their locales, but the traces ostentatiously left by a violent touch. On the other hand, there is a predilection with delocalization which would render the painted image analogous to the virtual image that a myopic eye forms of real flowers. All of these operations, and others bearing on the ground, lead to the dissipation of all representative illusion. The search is oriented towards what

may be called an *economics* of the psychic system, that is to say an organization not of representatives or signifiers subject to a semiology, but quantities of energy, of pulsional origin in Freud but taken in the Cézannean sense of plastic character (lines, values, and the chromatic energies taught by Pissarro) which induces in the spectator circulations, not of significations, even less of information, but of affects.

If you now take certain versions of the *Nature morte au compotier* [*Still Life with Compotier*], for example that of 1879-1882 (Venturi 341), you will again notice some deformations of a purely plastic character. You will see the famous strict, short, oblique, almost ‘written’ touch intrude, which forbids the eye from losing itself in the vision of the object, and returns it to its own synthetic activity; you will note there a number of paradoxes in the usage of values of which the result is the flattening of the “represented” on the bi-dimensional support. It is true that in this work, which appears in the period called “constructive,” such a flattening goes hand in hand with a rigorous organization of the surface which leaves little of the play of hesitations, so that the delocalization relative to classical space is compensated by an over-localization in an almost abstract space (this is L. Brion-Guerry’s term). But in the final period, the principle of dispersion will once more loosen the grip of constructivism. One observes, for example in the *Nature morte au pichet, aux pommes et aux oranges* [*Still Life with Pitcher, Apples, and Oranges*] in the Louvre (1895-1900; Venturi 732)—in addition to the instability of profiles which recalls that of the first two periods, and the tendency to eliminate the opposition of planes by deformation, as in the preceding period—an organization of colour (here a dominant red polarized between purple/blue and orange/yellow) which, like in the landscapes of this period, suggest only space in the midst of flux and chromatic stases (to the exclusion of line and value).

Rather than denying that *something* went on between the first works and the last, it is a question of refusing the somewhat pedagogical reading which, by putting the accent on the dialectical articulation of periods in the diachrony of surface, leaves in the dark the subterranean principle of *derepresentation* which permanently operates in Cézanne’s approach to the object. Merleau-Ponty¹⁷ was entirely correct to make this principle the core of the work in its entirety, but his analysis remained subordinate to a philosophy of perception that allowed him to rediscover the true order of the sensible in Cézannean disorder, and to lift the veil that Cartesian and Galilean rationalism had thrown over the world of experience. We have no reason to believe that the *curvature* of Cézannean space, its intrinsic disequilibrium, the passion that the painter felt for the baroque organisation of

plastic place, for the Venetians, for El Greco, his equal hatred of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Ingres; that his desire, constantly expressed in his conversations and correspondence, the desire that “works,” this same desire that allowed him, when he wanted to make it understood that for him the curvature is in no way exclusive to a geometric “order,” to choose the example of volumes on a *curved* surface (“treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone”) to the exclusion of cubes and of all polyhedrons on a plane surface (which one appears not to have noticed when one pretends to make of this formula the anticipated programme of *cubism*)—we have no reason to believe that this passion for the spherical is more free from marks of desire and more fit to restore to us in person the phenomenality of the sensible than were Uccello’s passion for perspective, Leonardo’s for the model or Klee’s for plastic possibility. If the psychoanalytic approach to the work has a virtue, it is most certainly that of convincing us that, even if the painter is persuaded that all marking is imitation, “reality,” “nature,” and “motif” will never be something more than an object beyond reach (becoming a picture in its turn, “the picture of nature,” writes Cézanne) for which the activity of painting comes to substitute the object that fashions his reworked desire.

Reworked, in order that the *oeuvre* not be reduced to a symptom lacking in any critical bearing. It is this reworking which motivates Cézanne’s journey in the element of formal uncertainty. If it were necessary to psychoanalyse the work, it would first be necessary to attempt to account for the deficiency of which we previously spoke and to which the penchant for curvature correlates. It would be necessary to again assemble all of the features in the history of the life of the painter which form his psychic portrait, his “destiny”: the father, enamoured of social success, a pawnbroker capable of going to settle in the house of his debtor in order to keep accounts of their household and to be repaid with the savings thus extracted, and in much the same way the holder of his son’s purse strings until his death; Paul himself an illegitimate child, acknowledged, then legitimated by the later marriage of his father and mother, living in turn with Hortense, with whom he had a son three years later in 1872, but hiding his household from his father until 1886 (the painter was then 47 years old) in order to be able to keep the benefit of the pension he received and which allowed him to devote himself to painting; the secret project of a will in favour of his mother instigated and realised in 1883; the episode in 1885, a liaison so well-concealed that we know nothing but what is said on the back of a study in pencil and in some letters to his friend Zola, who was charged with acting as a mailbox; Zola with whom Cézanne breaks in 1886, the same month in which he married (in the presence of his parents), after which the father dies; the life of the painter always apart from his wife and his son. And some

traits less evident, without doubt more interesting: the passion of the young man for Latin and Alexandrine verse, a poem of youth relating “a terrible story” where “the woman in my arms, the woman with rosy complexion / disappears suddenly and transforms / into a pale cadaver with angular contours,” the reiteration in the conversations and letters, up until the end, of the theme “they won’t get their *hooks into me*”; the motif of the apples¹⁸; the bellicose immobility, the impatient reserve, the silences which made Zola fulminate, the incessant moving, the game of continual coming and going between Paris and Aix ...

All this together would still not be enough to make the *oeuvre* known in its double dimension: of lack or originary abandonment, and of the continual displacement of figures and plastic devices. We could certainly venture to draw some correlations in this material from his life. Thus, before the works of the first period, we are justified in thinking that painting fulfills a properly phantasmatic function, and that for the young Cézanne, the act of representation accomplishes the desire to see the woman (the object) which is refused to him (by the father?). Thus, their so-called generic subjects and strong erotic and sadistic content, their theatrical *mises en scène* (curtains, spectators, veils raised by servants revealing female nudes), but also with the unilateral aggressivity of the touch which inscribes itself on the material as if to penetrate it, the mixing up of perspective according to several simultaneous points of view which position the scene in an imaginary non-place, and above all the “brash brushwork [*facture couillardre*]” with tar-like heaviness, operating without chromaticism in black and white, which floods the works with the light of insomnia. It is no more adventurous, though nearly as pointless, to show that if Pissaro “was a father” for Cézanne, “a man to consult and something like the good Lord,” it is most certainly that the *speech* [*parole*] refused him by his father the banker, from 1872, is given back to him by the impressionist painter, and that the appearance of colour on Cézanne’s palette coincides, as with Klee or Van Gogh, with a sort of *redemption* (the word is from Klee’s *Journal*) of the blind, nocturnal virility of the preceding period, by a passivity capable of welcoming its other: light. At the same time, the generic scenes become less numerous, the theme of male and female bathers expands rapidly, attesting that in the place of voyeurism trained on female flesh, the act of painting disperses the body, male as well as female, in atmospheric volumes. A veritable reversal commutes the roles: the object ceases to be intensely libidinal, and is neutralised; the still lifes, where the space is charged with desexualised, chromatic energy, gains increasing importance.

As for the third period, called constructive or abstract, its libidinal “reason” would offer more resistance to analysis if we did not know that in its middle, during the course of the years 1882-1887, the symptoms of a profound disruption accumulate in Cézanne’s life: the will, the liaison carried out in secret, the rupture with Zola, the marriage, and the death of the father. In the work, the weight of the anguish of binding, of constructing becomes apparent, and extends far enough to distort the object and space such that they take part in the “logic” in which Cézanne then seeks to place and bind them. He, who loves that “it turns,” paints landscapes like “playing cards,” where space is flattened and blocks the circulation of the chromatic flux. Above all, it is a system closely tied to a victory over mobility, of parallels over perpendiculars, and therefore, following the word of Cézanne himself, the point of view of *Pater omnipotens aeterne Deus* [God the omnipotent and eternal Father] over that of human beings. In order to throw light on a displacement so contrary to the penchant for the baroque and the search for curvature, and to confront it with the effects of the perceptible tremor in his life, would it not be necessary to advance the hypothesis, this time highly perilous, of a sort of regression in the pulsional play, which would in turn have provoked the tightening of the social and plastic systems of defence, leading Cézanne to occupy, in his family, and metaphorically in his painting, the place of the father?

The final period, with its highs and lows, is marked by the loosening of the constructive grip, the relaxation of volumes, the free play between objects, and even between the dashes, as in the *Saint Victoire* of the time, in the *Baigneuses* [Bathers] in the National Gallery in London, or in the watercolours. The compulsion to control fades away, the construction becomes almost drifting, the space freed, the compartmentalizing pattern disappearing, the picture itself becoming a libidinal object, pure colour, pure “femininity,” a substance at the same time soluble and opaque. To assure oneself of the fact that Cézanne, in his own way, “knew” this, one must merely understand how he poses the problem of “points of contact” between tones, while forbidding himself any recourse to the black line in order to define contours. But even here there remains something that feeds the hypothesis of a correlation with his life, an extreme tension that continues to inflect the 1890s, and only shows signs of diminution around 1903: his consolidation in the position of the master at the centre of a growing/developing circle of young disciples (É. Bernard, Languier, Camoin) or of amateurs like A. Vollard. He compares himself to the “grand leader of the Hebrews”; he “glimpses the Promised Land,” writing to J. Gasquet: “Perhaps I came too soon. I was the painter of your generation more than of mine.” He occupies his paternal position openly, aging with pleasure, dead already at the age of sixty-five, engendering

transference by alleging powerlessness: “You don’t see what a sad state I’ve been reduced to. Out of control, a man who does not exist ...” But this is no longer, as in the constructive period, the object-woman lost and reconstituted by logic, or, in the dark period, by *mise en scène*. On the contrary, it is now the object-woman, the colour, the flesh of the world, received and returned (“fulfilled,” says Cézanne) in the guise of the painting, like a body, in its evanescence, in its fluidity. A living, but fragmented body, a unity always deferred: the erotic body *par excellence*. A secret libidinal involvement must be implicated between the position of the *old master* and the capacity to render, on the canvas, this long-standing *incapacity* (the powerlessness to *bind*). Cézanne “knew” this relation—he writes to Camoin in 1903¹⁹: “I have nothing to hide *in art*,” and to his son eight days before his death: “I believe the sensation which composes the basis of my work to be impenetrable.” (15 Oct. 1906).

A LIBIDINAL “ECONOMIC” AESTHETIC

One can therefore entertain oneself by producing these correlations between *oeuvre* and life, but it is certain that they always end up failing, for at least two reasons. The first is that such a “psychoanalysis” is impossible in the absence of the subject (the painter); the second, that even if he was alive, it will run up against the enigma of an *exploited powerlessness*, of a capacity to bear this abandonment and passivity, to welcome without mastering, to “arrange the void, to prepare the space in which the creative forces can be given free rein.”²⁰ For the flux of energy, this void is the possibility of circulating in the psychic apparatus without encountering the highly structured systems that Freud called bound, systems which can only discharge the energy by channeling it through its invariant—“rational” or imaginary—forms. Cézanne’s immobility before the model is the putting-in-suspense of the action of already known forms or already revealed phantasms. In turn, the work could be conceived as an energetic *analogue* of the psychic apparatus: the pictorial object can also find itself blocked by formal, immutable figures which sometimes appeal to the rules of rationalism and realism (like the perspective of the Quattrocento), and sometimes to the expression of the depths of the soul. This is to say that the energy of lines, of values, of colours, finds itself *bound* in a code and in a syntax, those of a school or those of an unconscious, and can no longer circulate on the support unless it conforms with this matrix.²¹ It is because the paintings of Gauguin or Van Gogh are to Cézanne’s eyes examples of such a blockage, of clenching unconscious forms that have “gotten their hooks in,” that he did not want to hear about them.

Such an hypothesis, should it be formulated, would provide the outlines of an “economic aesthetic” in the sense that Freud speaks of a libidinal economy (concerned with the theory of the drives [*pulsions*] and the affects). It would without a doubt release the “applied psychoanalysis” (of art) from the weight of a theory of representation, without speaking of the burden of an even more dissatisfying [*frustré*] account—of libido, sexuality, Oedipus, castration and the other products on sale in the open market of modern aesthetics—that it continues to impose. It would allow one to show that the semiological or semiotic approach, *a fortiori* scenographic, rests on a major mistake concerning the nature of the act of painting itself: since, in the end, one does not paint in order to speak, but in order to keep silent. It is not true that the last *Sainte Victoires* speak nor even signify—they *are there*, like a critical libidinal body, absolutely mute, truly *impenetrable* because they hide nothing. Since, that is to say, their principle of organisation and of action does not rest *outside* of themselves (in a model to imitate, in a system of rules to respect). They are impenetrable because they have no depth; they are without signifiante, without underside.

If Freud did not elaborate such an aesthetic, if he remained insensible to the Cézannean and post-Cézannean revolution, if he persisted in treating the work like an object concealing a secret, in discovering in it bound forms like the phantasm of the vulture, it is because for him the *image* has the status of a deposed, obscured *signification*, which represents in its absence. Images, and therefore works, are for him screens which must be rent—as he does to those in the book on Saint-John Perse that Jakob Freud, his father, gave to him when he was four years old - *zur Vernichtung*, reducing them to nothing. To make Freud’s theory of resistance the lynchpin of a theory critical of the prevailing modern passion for making everything speak would be one of the tasks, and not the least, of an aesthetics based on a libidinal economics. It would show that this prevalence proceeds from the prevalence accorded by Freud to the figure of the Father in the interpretation of the artwork, as in that of the dream or the symptom—not of the “real” father, but of the Father-function (Oedipus and castration) which is constitutive of desire insofar as, on its terms, demand runs up against a lack of response and against prohibition. Such a prevalence leads the psychoanalytic aesthetic to grasp the artistic object as holding the place of an offering, a gift, in a transference relation, and pays no attention to the formal properties of the object, other than insofar as it symbolically signals its unconscious purpose.

Such was Freud's approach to Michelangelo's *Moses*²²: in analysing the play of the fingers in the beard and the position of the Tablets beneath the arm, Freud extracts that which constitutes the potential force of the work, the Mosaic drama of mastered fury. As this dramatic theme is absent from *Exodus*, he attributes responsibility for it to the transferential relation of the artist with Pope Julius II, whose tomb the statue would adorn. According to Freud, this anger of Moses reflects the violent temperament of the Pope and of the artist himself, and attests in both to the presence of the desire to have done with the law of the Father, to refuse castration; but that it can be overcome, that Moses recovers himself, that he lowers his hand, is itself evidence of the ultimate acceptance of this law. The work of Michelangelo is therefore understood as a *message* addressed by the artist to Julius II. It is this message, assumed to be latent in the marble, that takes hold of Freud's desire in turn, in order to restore the content clearly, that is to say, in words. This desire is articulated therefore according to at least two dimensions: the identification with Moses, and the verbalisation in a discourse of knowledge. One sees that such an aesthetic not only privileges the art of representation—it also arranges its interpretation along the axes of the transferential relation; it aims to refer the work back to Oedipus and castration; it lodges the object in the space of the imaginary and understands it by applying a reading guided by the code of a symbolic.

We could not say that this is false. But we also see that it can blind itself to essential mutations in the position of the aesthetic object. Shouldn't we connect the element of plastic uncertainty that we notice in the painting of Cézanne to a *refusal* (regardless of whether or not it is conscious) to *instantiate* the work, a refusal to place it in a space of donation or of exchange, a desire *not* to put it into circulation in the network governed in the final instance by the Oedipal structure and the law of castration? This *refusal* itself would be what prevents Cézanne from being satisfied with any plastic formula, whether it be, as in the first period, the imaginary and literary restitution of fulfilled desire, or in the third the reference to a strict and transcendent law of the prescribed form of objects on the support. In painting the emergence of a strange desire becomes visible: that the painting *itself be an object*, no longer valued as a message, threat, supplication, prohibition, exorcism, morality, or allusion - no longer engaged in a symbolic relation—but be valued as an *absolute* object, relieved of the transferential relation, indifferent to the relational order, active only in the energetic order and in the silence of the body. This desire makes room for the emergence of a *new position* of the object to paint. The *denial* of the transferential function, of the place that it is supposed to occupy in the drama of castration, its position outside of the circuit in which symbolic

exchange takes place, constitutes an important mutation. We have suggested that it makes the pictorial object slide from a position of the neurotic type to a position of the psychotic or perverse type—if it is true that an object occupying the latter is detached from the symbolic law in general, that it escapes from the rule of sexual difference and of castration, that it is the site of masochistic and sadistic manipulation, that desire is denied and the look fascinated at the same time. The fetish object gathers these features in itself, features that one could justifiably claim to recognize in Cézanne's last pieces. And, inevitably, they will be found in the works of cubism, of Klee, of Kandinsky, of the American abstracts ...

In this way, it would become possible to understand the subsequent success of Cézanne, his importance, and, generally speaking, the reverberation with which the displacement of the object in painting since 1900 has met. That is, if the painted object was submitted to the mutation we have described, ceasing to be a referential and represented object in order to become the place of libidinal operations that engender an inexhaustible polymorphy, we should perhaps advance the hypothesis that the same goes for other objects: objects of production and consumption, objects to sing of and to listen to, objects to love.

We are justified in suggesting that the veritable transformation which capitalism performs on the objects that circulate in society—above all, in the most recent forms, say for Western Europe over the last 15 years—will involve, sooner or later, *all objects*, and not economic objects alone (as an economism a little too confident of the impermeability of its boundaries believes). At issue is not this “belief,” or the “development” of societies, but the annihilation of objects qua bearers of symbolic values underwritten by desire and culture, and their reconstitution in the indifferent terms of a system which no longer has anything *outside of itself* on which the objects that circulate within it can be anchored: neither God, nor nature, nor need, nor even the desire of the alleged “subjects” of exchange. The pictorial object of Cézanne and his successors, insofar as it carries the traits of psychosis or perversion, is much more than a simple analogue of the economic object analysed by Marx in *Capital* or, yet again, of the linguistic object constructed by structural linguistics. By extending in this way the scope of an aesthetic centred on a libidinal economics, one finds oneself in a position to at once put the Cézannean object in its right place, to give a possible reason for the aesthetic blindness of a Freud too attached to identifying a position for the neurotic object, and to take account of this *event* in which we have been submerged since the start of the century: the dislocation of the very position of diverse social objects, the mutation of desire underlying our institutions.

NOTES

1. Translator's Note: This essay was first published as "Psychanalyse et peinture" in *Encyclopædia Universalis*, vol. 13. Paris: 1971, then as "Freud selon Cézanne" in Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973, and in a 1994 reissue of this book from Éditions Galilée. This translation is published with the permission of Dolores Lyotard. Repeated efforts, including the offer of financial remuneration, were made to gain permission from Galilée. Thanks are due to Amélie Berger Soraruff for comments on the translation.
2. See Pierre Kaufmann, "Psychanalyse" in *Encyclopædia Universalis*, Paris: 1971; Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics*. Trans. Winifred Woodhull. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; Jean-François Lyotard, "The Psychoanalytic Approach to Artistic and Literary Expression" in *Towards the Postmodern*. Trans. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts. New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1998.
3. Pierre Kaufmann, *L'expérience émotionnelle de l'espace*. Paris: Vrin, 1967.
4. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*, 2nd ed. New York: George Braziller, 1965.
5. Jean Starobinsky, "Hamlet and Oedipus" in *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989.
6. André Green, *Un œil en trop*. Paris: Minuit, 1969. Partial translation: "Prologue: The Psychoanalytic Reading of Tragedy" in *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
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8. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*. Ed. James Strachey. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 2. London: Hogarth Press, 1953; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Ed. James Strachey. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volumes 4 and 5. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.
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17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Ed. Michael B. Smith. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
18. Meyer Shapiro, "Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life," *Art News Annual*

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21. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

22. Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo" in *Totem and Taboo and Other Works*. Ed. James Strachey. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 13. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.