CÉZANNE'S CARD PLAYERS

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He Painted

RICHARD SHIFF

"Having become rich, he changed nothing of his way of life. He continued as before, painting assiduously, never taking interest in anything except his art. The years seemed to go by while leaving him isolated": this is the situation of Paul Cézanne, explained by Théodore Duret.[1] Because Cézanne's career was still progressing, Duret set some of his descriptive passages in the present tense. The account constitutes a chapter of his *Histoire des peintres impressionnistes*, published in 1906, apparently during the autumn, close to when Cézanne died.[2] Even with the artist deceased, Duret's conclusion remained correct: "The times had worked in favour of Cézanne". Since the late 1890s his paintings had been selling at a respectable rate, despite the disconnect between the social conservatism of this *bourgeois riche* and the public fantasy of his wildness – *Communard, anarchiste*, as members of his own class called him, unable to abide the look of his art.[3] Isolated or not, revolutionary or traditional, by the beginning of the twentieth century Cézanne appeared assured of recognition, at least among a vanguard of young painters and critics.[4]

Duret's presentation of Cézanne implies that social and emotional detachment does not impede and may even contribute to extraordinary artistic accomplishment. The writer seems to imagine a shadow history of expressive form that runs parallel to the main line of social history, not necessarily moving in tandem with the everyday needs and desires of social life, yet a feature of the same world. Cézanne's technique counted as a main event in this shadow history – his method of "strokes next to each other, then on top of each other". Duret reaches for a metaphor: "We might go so far as to say that, in certain cases, he lays his painting with bricks ... an accumulation that seems gross, barbarous, monstrous".[5] Apparently, Cézanne created no monsters in the eyes of Duret himself, a longtime champion of controversial figures, particularly Edouard Manet and James McNeill Whistler, both of whom painted his portrait. His personal collection included a number of Cézanne's works – not chance gifts but thoughtful purchases.[6] Several clearly fit the "masonry" characterisation, such as a view of Mont Sainte-Victoire used as an illustration for Duret's *Histoire* (fig. 43). So Cézanne had a distinctive form, a procedure, his own individual means –

Cat. 12, detail

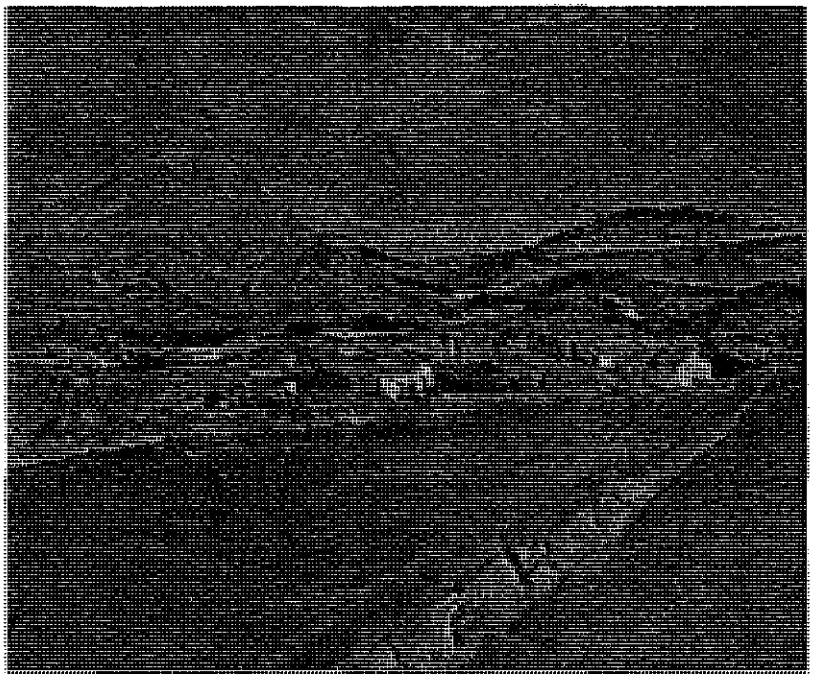

Fig. 43
Paul Cézanne
Towards Monte Sainte-Victoire, 1878–79
Oil on canvas, 45 × 53.3 cm
The Barnes Foundation,
Merion, Pennsylvania

"rough in spots ... leaving certain areas bare ... repetitive strokes juxtaposed or superimposed ... a technique [without] any trace of what we could call virtuosity". Yet, even with virtuosity lacking, and perhaps because of this, "strong, direct expression" resulted.[7] Whatever the lineage of this technique – Duret mentions the importance of Gustave Courbet – its historical trajectory need not engage the forces driving social history at any given time.[8] The possibility of aligning aesthetic and social stars hardly motivated Cézanne. Duret believed that critical opinion never guided him, just as the fame that would follow from approval never tempted him. Cézanne painted according to his desire as he alone felt it: "He continued painting as his exclusive occupation, because he needed to satisfy himself. He paints because he is made for painting.... He paints solely for himself." Apparently, painting for oneself yields painting in itself – a freedom, an autonomy. Cézanne's "superior achievement", Duret claimed, corresponded to "the quality of painting in itself [*la peinture en soi*], inaccessible to [typical bourgeois] viewers".[9]

It would be reasonable to argue that Duret's notion of such a rarefied, untethered practice of painting, accomplished by an artist in social isolation, was no more than a myth, that it must have been serving a political or ideological charge of the writer's own moment (which, in this instance, coincided with the painter's moment – they were of the same culture, same class, same generation). It was becoming common at this time for critics to

refer to "pure painting" and to identify it with a technique of "abstraction", in the sense that various extraneous concerns were abstracted from the work.[10] Either of two complementary actions might be conducted. A painter could remove (abstract) the narrative or symbolic significance of the subject from the picture, or extract (abstract) the expressive form of the picture from its nominal subject. This is the phenomenon of the loss of subject or the absent subject: "The subject disappears; there is only a [formal, abstract] motif".[11] The words are Paul Sérusier's; they correspond to the thinking of many other artists and critics who reached professional maturity during the 1890s, the era of Cézanne's series of *Card Players*, which, recognizable as genre painting, ought to have had a subject.

Every society, every culture and subculture, has its mythologies, a defining aspect of its historical course, perhaps the best guide to its members' moral choices and conduct. Mythologies enter the bloodstream of the mind; you think them without thinking. Why develop a myth of "painting in itself", this "pure painting" produced by an artist who "paints solely for himself", as Duret put it? If you regard the failings of your society and its culture as a serious threat, you might look to someone apart from society for inspiration – a way out. This would return social value to social isolation and respond even to the challenge of images appearing "gross, barbarous, monstrous" – images isolated from social standards of quality and taste. It would explain how, in the case of Cézanne, social history made contact with a channel of expression regarded as independent of social history. To break a chain of social failings (which becomes a subculture's social need), turn outside the customary social framework. Look to the extremes or the isolated case.

"Never taking interest in anything except his art." Georges Braque, an early admirer but not among those who met Cézanne personally, repeated Duret's notion more than a half century later at the end of his own career, expressing it all the more succinctly with a typically French use of chiasmus: "With him, you find yourself at the antipodes of decorum. He bound his life into his art, his art into his life."[12] If, for the generations who followed, Cézanne had indicated a way out of a modern cultural impasse, he did so by folding in on himself, within the closed circle of his life-into-art, art-into-life existence. Did Braque repeat this view of a hermetic Cézanne merely because thinking otherwise had become unthinkable? Braque's opinion contributed to the cumulative authority of a cultural icon, by then well established – the mythical Cézanne. But perhaps he was merely proud to recognize his self-image in a revered predecessor – two monomaniacal painters equally extreme in devotion to their practice.

Solitaire

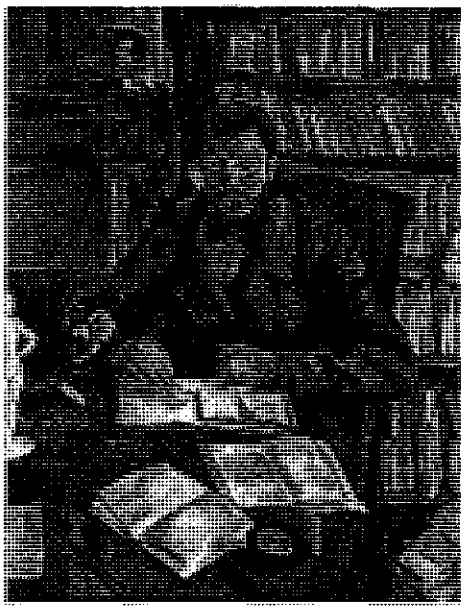

Fig. 44
Paul Cézanne
Portrait of Gustave Geffroy, 1895
Oil on canvas, 110 × 89 cm
Musee d'Orsay, Paris

It was not only emulative artists who persisted in perceiving Cézanne as a dedicated solitary. Even those who viewed pictorial imagery as direct reflections of social forces left Cézanne's representations to Cézanne, this force of one, wrestling with his personal technique and its associated pleasures and anxieties. In 1952, the historian Meyer Schapiro discussed the *Card Players*. His terms were not those of social engagement but psychological withdrawal: "Cézanne preserves a characteristic meditativeness and detachment from desire .... [He represents] the experience of the qualities of things without regard to their use or cause or consequence." When accounting for the unrevealing appearance of Cézanne's portraits from life, in particular that of the painter's supportive critic Gustave Geffroy (fig. 44), it served Schapiro to refer back to the *Card Players* as a more accommodating subject: "Cézanne often reduces the singularity of human beings; he is most happy with people like his card players, who do not impose themselves, who are perfectly passive or reserved, or immersed in their tasks. The portrait [of Geffroy] becomes a gigantic still life."[13]

Duret had reached the same conclusion by the inverse route: "Cézanne's paintings manifest a range of colour of great intensity, of extreme brilliance. A force independent of the subject derives from this, so that a still life – a few apples and a cloth on a table – assumes a presence equal to that of a human head or a landscape by the sea."[14] Duret's opinions came first-hand. During different periods, he owned one of Cézanne's most impressive still

Fig. 45
Paul Cézanne
Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair, 1888–90
Oil on canvas, 80.9 × 64.9 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago, Wilson L. Mead Fund

Fig. 46
Detail of fig. 45

lifes and a portrait of Madame Cézanne (fig. 45), which, perhaps more than any other, reduced Hortense Fiquet's facial features to coarse graphic signs. To quote an evocative, recent analysis, it is as if expression were "sealed inside [and] tumescent skin has been stretched to bursting".[15] The dark punctuations on the volumetric surface of the figure's head are analogous to (and complements of) the spots of yellow or white with which Cézanne would add an abrupt highlight to an apple or a ceramic jug (figs. 46 and 49). The play of features gives a face personality; the play of light gives an object personality. Both become articulated surfaces, marked by elements of internal difference.

Cézanne developed each of his *Card Players* series, including the large five-figure version (cat. 2), by using a facture that remains coarse at the scale of individual objects. This limits any precise characterisation of facial expression. In the four-figure version (cat. 1), a single stroke or two indicates each shadowed or downcast eye (fig. 47). The only exposed lips, those of the central figure, may have been completed by a single touch of violet-red over a broader stroke of pure red – upper lip over lower. Should we say that this player purses his lips? Or clenches his jaw? Have you ever seen a Cézanne smile? One of Schapiro's contemporaries described Cézanne's human subjects unforgivingly: "The countenances show an emptiness of expression bordering almost on the mask".[16] This is the portrait of Geffroy; this is Madame Cézanne; this is the *Card Players*.

Cézanne's technique somehow equalizes and neutralizes all subject-matter. If meaning lies in differences – as the semiotics of his own era

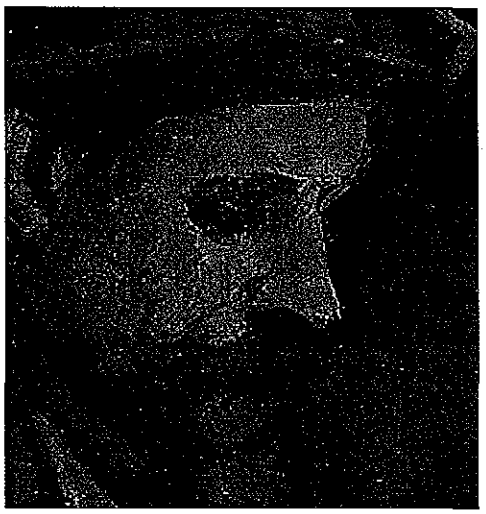

Fig. 47
Detail of cat. 1, showing downcast eye

Fig. 48
Paul Cézanne
The Stoneware Jug, 1893–94
Oil on canvas, 38.2 × 46 cm.
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel

Fig. 49
Detail of fig. 48

established – then, by the implicit standards of his critics, Cézanne was rendering his subjects meaningless through excessive resemblance: one face appeared as impassive as another and, to make matters worse, all were constructed like an apple or a jug. To put it positively, Cézanne's direct way of recording visual experience broke with his own cultural prejudices, obviating numerous cultural hierarchies and the usual order of knowledge.[17] This is what had constituted "pure painting" for those sympathetic to the notion at the beginning of the twentieth century.[18] No doubt, such abstraction of visual form from a known subject could be perceived in the art of earlier periods, but at a certain moment it acquired a special significance. To both the politically left (Duret and Geffroy) and the right (Maurice Denis and Cézanne's friend Joachim Gasquet), "abstraction" – extracting painting from its contemporary turn-of-the-century culture, or removing cultural habit from the painting – offered a way out of conformism, stultification and general oppressiveness.[19]

Though the subject might be neutralized into "meditativeness and detachment from desire", linear configurations and colour harmonies retained a more active expressiveness. Schapiro noted "the arrangement of the books behind [Geffroy], projecting and receding, tilted differently from shelf to shelf". This casual formal order, he realized, seemed "more human than the man".[20] Cézanne had animated the books but not the figure. Here was a semiotic difference. Or perhaps not. In fact, Cézanne had animated both by applying his painter's touch to both. Yet human observers – Duret a century ago, Schapiro a half century ago, we ourselves now – expect to discover more life in people than in things. When technique has been applied uniformly without regard to distinguishing people from things, we tend to judge the organic, human elements as under-animated, while regarding the inorganic elements as over-animated. This is a common human prejudice, and it can sway interpretation. The "pure painting" of modern art, a mid-twentieth-century critic quipped (thinking of Cézanne), has "that strange vegetative stillness, [not] the stillness of still life, but a stillness without life."[21]

Confront Cézanne, and these witticisms fade. Focus on the play of his colour. The emotionality, the indescribable affect of the *Card Players* shines forth, as Schapiro himself observed: "A subtly contrasted expression [of colour] .... The inherent rigidity of the theme is overcome also by the remarkable life of the surface. There is a beautiful flicker and play of small contrasts."[22] 'Flicker' is the right word, both in a literal sense (brightening, dimming, brightening) and as a metaphorical evocation of filmic effects. Cézanne animated entire surfaces with sequences of alternating light and dark values and warm and cool hues, often with a surprising continuity, given the abrupt juxtaposition of his strokes. We see this effect in the five-figure *Card Players*, in the brilliantly patterned top plane of the table,

perhaps covered by a backgammon board.[23] We see it as well in the predominately light-blue sleeve of the rightmost figure, where passages of dark blue and red-violet, both under-painted and over-painted, cause the surface to warp away from its material flatness. Yet Cézanne's characteristic warp does not necessarily adhere to the representational anatomy or the logical arrangement of a figure in the space of a room. His paintings gain much of their coherence from the insistent sequencing of parallel marks and alternating colours, a feature destined to violate the integrity of the depicted subject.

Note a detail as simple as the knob of the playing table drawer. Cézanne treats it as if it were one of his apples, unable to resist letting the colours of the plane beside the knob enter into it from the right. Simultaneously, in an exchange of properties, he allows the curving strokes of this rounded knob to pass into the flat of the drawer (fig. 51). Turning from the five-figure to the four-figure *Card Players*, we see that Cézanne obscured the upper edge of the same knob (fig. 52), overlaying it with a stroke of pale green, part of a complex play of greens, pinks and blues sustained throughout all surface planes of the table (and similar to his rendering of the plane of the background wall; fig. 50). What motivated the painter to counteract the descriptive integrity of his picture? It must be the technique itself. Look

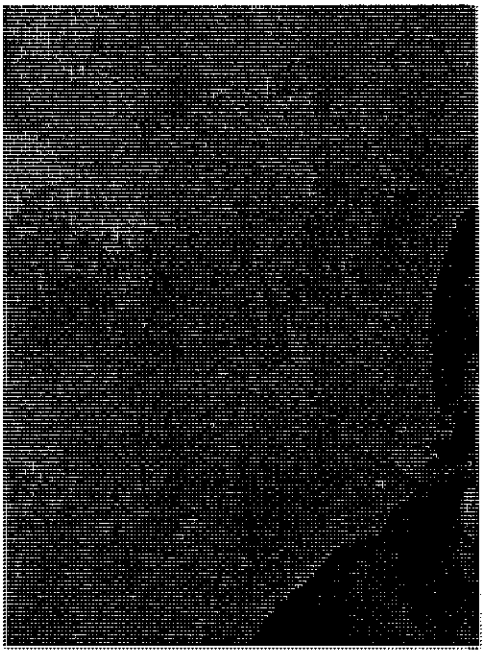

Fig. 50
Detail of cat. 1, showing rendering of the plane of the background wall

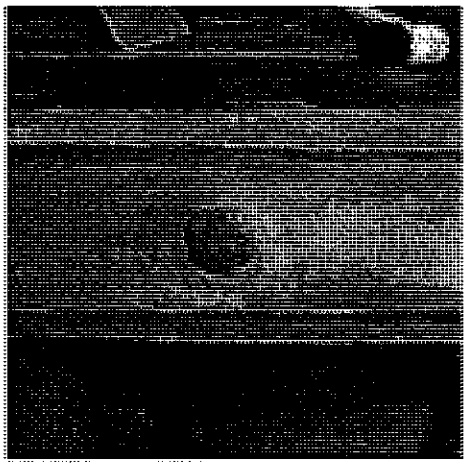

Fig. 51
Detail of cat. 2, showing curving strokes of the knob and flat strokes of the drawer

Fig. 52
Detail of cat. 1, showing the complex play of greens, pinks and blues of the table

just below what appears to be a tobacco pouch on the playing table: a sequence of parallel bars of colour moves from the table-top to the table front and its drawer in this order – light red-orange, pale green, pale yellow-green, light blue, deep blue (the shadowed edge of the table), pale orange and finally the swatch of pale green that obscures the knob – essentially, an alternation of warm and cool. By this technique, all becomes equally animated and similarly volumetric, whether rounded or flat in reality – or, in certain instances, neither rounded nor flat in reality, because correspondence to reality appears utterly lacking. The stem of a pipe resting on the table coexists at its end with the dark pip of a playing card (one spot signifies both). Its bowl disappears beneath a nondescript patch of paint, a non-representational mix of white, blue and red. As a comparison, think of Cézanne's arrays of fruit and how often a contrasting colour emerges at the edge of a rounded contour, for example the pale blue that curves along a green apple in a still life painted around the time of the *Card Players* (fig. 48; detail fig. 53). This blue violates the representational order by eliminating the continuity of the table edge it covers. It has no representational referent, no subject. It is neither a solid nor is it illumination. It is painting – the so-called pure painting of the 1890s – infecting the surface with self-propagation.

Just as Cézanne introduced draped cloth into still lifes, manipulating the chance breaks and continuities of patterns and borders, his method accommodated the gathering of folds of clothing in figure paintings.

Fig. 53
Detail of fig. 48, showing pale blue curving contour of green apple

Fig. 54
Detail of cat. 4, showing folds of clothing

In a single-figure study for the *Card Players* (cat. 4; fig. 54), blues and ochres alternate around the collar of a peasant's smock, corresponding to a similar effect along the cuff of the sleeve, as well as to the differentiation of playing cards held in the hand. The reverse sides of cards would normally be of uniform design, but here as elsewhere Cézanne presents a play of oppositions – light blues against darker blues, various cool blues against warm violets. In the same spirit, to the left of the framed picture in the five-figure *Card Players* (cat. 2) bands of violet and bright blue parallel the strip of dark gray-blue shadow. Still more abstracted – that is, generated by a formal motif as opposed to the requirements of conventional representation – a band of bright blue parallels the yellow stem of the rightmost pipe suspended from a pipe rack (fig. 55). This blue accords with a technical principle of alternating colours but obscures, virtually erases, the presence of the rack itself. The four-figure *Card Players* (cat. 1) has an analogous detail, causing the wall to appear to stand beside the pipe rather than lie behind it; pipe and wall assume equivalent presence (fig. 56). The various sets of non-referential marks – integral to the technique but abstracted from the subject and subverting its logic – have the same pictorial status as the pale blue that Cézanne cast against the curving edge of his green apple. Call these marks what you will: see them as descriptively procedural and incomplete, or as witnesses to the artist's existential state and suitably vague in relating to representational and conceptual orders. Procedural or existential, the demands of the evolving motif seem to overrule those of any thematic subject.

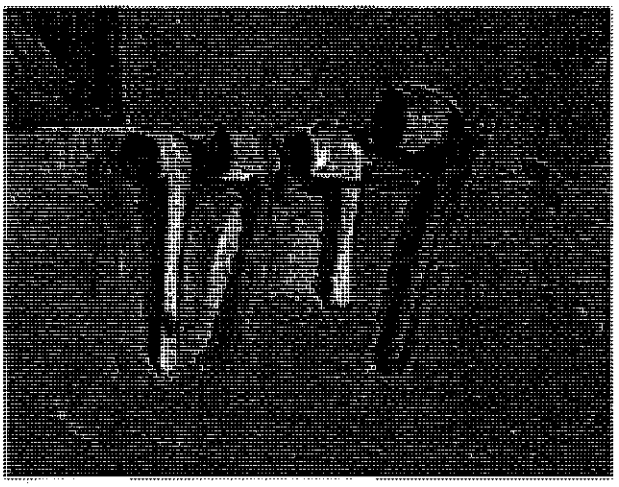

Fig. 55
Detail of cat. 2, showing pipes

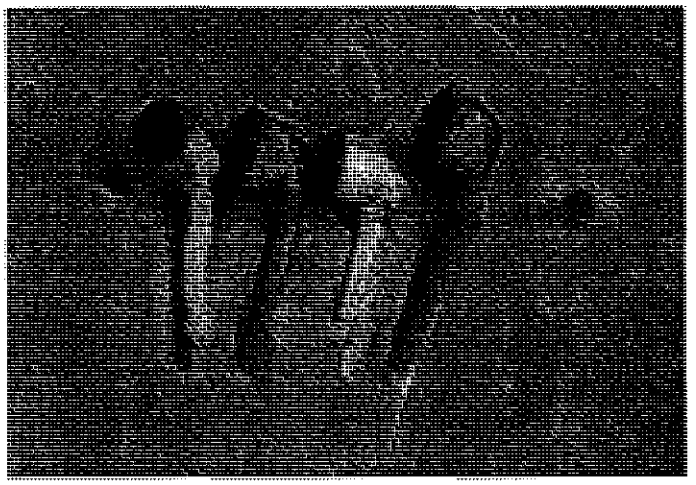

Fig. 56
Detail of cat. 1, showing pipes

A different form of Schapiro's "flicker" – all the more filmic in its sense of animation – occurs in the organisation of legs under the table shown in the five primary *Card Players* compositions. In the four- and five-figure examples we easily imagine a rhythmic pulse allowing the visible fragments of legs to swing, rock or pivot around their points of angular conjunction. In the two-figure versions, knees under the table resemble the volumes of Cézanne's pears and aubergines in still lifes; at the least, the likes of Geffroy and Duret saw it this way, even though art historians today are inclined to resist. Having once been conditioned to see the form at the expense of the representational reference, we have been reconditioned to see the subject at the expense of the form. There are gains in perception, and there are losses. Imagine that each version of Cézanne's table was, in the eyes of his supporters, framing a playful abstraction. Or, to put it more accurately – because his was hardly "abstract art" in the sense of being non-mimetic – his rendering of anatomy abstracted it from its social, thematic context, allowing knees to be interpreted as volumes equivalent to any other volumes.

During the last year of Cézanne's life, one of his admirers wrote to another (André Derain to Henri Matisse) that both were fortunate to belong to the first generation free to capitalise on an acknowledged fact: whatever material an artist chose to use would assume "a life of its own, independent of what one makes it represent".[24] Cézanne, who had pointed the way, belonged to an older generation unable to accept fully the implications of their own practice.[25] Perhaps he believed that, with his technique and its colouristic harmonies and linear rhythms, he had succeeded in revivifying a stilled subject (analogous to "remaking Poussin from nature").[26] If Cézanne's technique had a motivating principle, it may have been this:

let one movement generate the next. The movement of sensation becomes its own motivation. This creates a motif.[27] Cézanne's pencil sketch of a seated man (fig. 57), presumably drawn from life, becomes a cascade of curves, a set of counterbalancing, rapidly executed strokes that resemble each other more than any feature of the generic figure they represent. This is representation by motific infection.

But now turn from focusing on the play of colour and line to concentrate on the human theme as such: all becomes contemplative, emotionally grave, even deadened. In the Card Players Schapiro noted the lack of an animating "drama of rival expectations", essential to gaming as usually experienced. Nor did Cézanne capture the regional flavour of card playing in Provence, "convivial and loud".[28] By Schapiro's description, Cézanne's card playing became "a kind of collective solitaire ... a model of his own activity as an artist". With this remarkable characterisation, the writer succeeds in presenting the painter's theme as appropriate to his position in isolation from society. Yes, card playing is a social activity, but one that allows its participants to remain solitary: "collective solitaire". Schapiro's

Fig. 57
Paul Cézanne
Seated Man, c. 1892–96?
Sketchbook II, p. xxiii verso
Graphite on wove paper
Sheet 18.4 × 12.7 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter H.
Annenberg, 1987

analysis of a two-figure version (cat. 12) produces a Duret-like result, a picture of self-motivation: "It is the image of a pure contemplativeness without pathos .... For Cézanne, painting was a process outside the historical stream of social life, a closed personal action."[29]

Like Schapiro but a generation later, Theodore Reff identified a single form of expression in the totality of Cézanne's art: "The gravity and reserve of the cardplayers are equally characteristic of Cézanne's other figural subjects .... [A] pervasive psychological tone ... reflects the artist's deeply serious personality in everything he paints." If only by default, Cézanne directed all subject-matter toward the same meaning. Reff nevertheless enlisted a set of interpretive metaphors as if they were specific to the *Card Players* – "massive, brooding concentration", a "profoundly meditative mood", "monumentally calm and impersonal peasants". Rejecting the parallel impulse, he argued against an analogous consistency of expression factored through the materiality of painting: "Earlier writers had impoverished the pictures by reducing their human subjects to mere forms".[30] The two interpretations, however, would be much the same with regard to their descriptive language – concentrated, monumental, impersonal, and so forth. One interpreter's loss is another's gain. Whether perceiving the cultural meaning of the subject or the play of the material, each of these conflicting impulses seems to depend on the other for its metaphors. Slanted whichever way, shifts in interpretive judgment announce no advance in understanding but represent instead historically specific applications of prejudice. If not evidence of a general cultural syndrome, the interpreter's attitude reflects an individual psychological need. Some will not rest until able to identify a phenomenon as a sign that bears communal meaning. Others will value the same phenomenon as concrete sensation – a bit of experience, the feeling of an isolated moment or situation, which may or may not acquire contextual significance.

Loss and gain

Roger Marx, a prominent figure in the Parisian art establishment, wrote in 1904: "From Cézanne has come the tendency, so prevalent today, to express in all fullness the beauty and life of [painting's] materiality [*la vie de la matière*]".[31] What was instigating this turn to material experience? Around 1900 Cézanne could be viewed as both its initiator and its culmination; he seemed to have made a career of material experimentation.[32] His emerging status as "pure painter" was enhanced in November 1895, when Ambroise Vollard began to show his work in Paris. This caused the artist's old Impressionist colleagues to take a serious second look, but it did not result in the painter himself, his physical presence, becoming any more evident in the capital.[33] Geffroy noted Cézanne's invisibility in statements both before

and after the exposure of his art through Vollard – "living in determined isolation", "working in secret".[34] Cézanne's admirers observed that isolation agreed with him during his "retirement" as a "Provençal landowner".[35] "I always found him completely alone," Charles Camoin remarked to Matisse long after the fact, not certain what to make of this memory of absent family, absent friends.[36] Paradoxically, Camoin had experienced at first hand Cézanne's capacity for good humour and camaraderie.[37] Another witness to the artist's behaviour speculated that he had been dissembling: "He often exaggerated the strangeness of his conduct in order to protect his freedom".[38] Just let me be, Cézanne may have thought: a painter needs to paint. But he also seems to have been pleased to share a meal with old and new acquaintances alike.

The various indicators of the conditions of Cézanne's life, and of his psychological reaction to those conditions, conflict. No doubt influenced by the contemporary mythologies that guide our own lives, we continue to question the degree to which Cézanne may have either enjoyed or suffered his existence in Aix-en-Provence during the years preceding and following the notoriety of his Parisian exhibitions. Parallel to questioning his quality of life, we wonder to what degree the quality of his art may have benefited from his social isolation, however severe (or not) it actually had been. In 1927, Roger Fry was wondering. As Schapiro would do, though in his own way, Fry hedged his bets, reconciling the use of living models with the painter's need to keep to himself: "He evidently studied [this subject] in some humble café in Aix .... He could rely no doubt on the fact that these peasants took no notice of him."[39] It seems just as likely – or perhaps quite certain, given the various witness accounts including that of Léontine Paulet, the young girl depicted in the five-figure version of the theme – that card playing served to ease the boredom of the workers of Cézanne's estate while they posed for their employer.[40] They could remain inside their social world, even as he remained inside his (anti)social world.

Following Cézanne's death in October 1906, there were several probing assessments of his significance. Among Anglophone art historians today, Maurice Denis's is the best known, perhaps because Fry translated it into English long ago; but Charles Morice took as broad a perspective as Denis did, and his account may be the more balanced.[41] Unlike Denis, Morice had little direct stake in Cézanne's career; his professional investment was in Paul Gauguin.[42] In a series of reviews preceding his essay devoted to Cézanne, Morice developed the argument that two distinct lines of response to the conditions of modern life had become dominant within advanced artistic practice. Different in intent, they manifested a common aspect: they were jointly responsible for giving contemporary painting its increasingly abstract or technical look. Morice believed that the repetitive, abstract marks of the Neo-Impressionist followers of Georges Seurat

derived from a mistaken faith in science, whereas Cézanne's abstract marks were a product of withdrawal and isolation.[43] The cultural impact was the same, a loss of humanistic content coupled with exaggerated materiality – the condition of the absent subject. After Cézanne's death, Morice, who admired his work, summarised the situation: "We hardly dare say that Cézanne lived; no, he painted .... [His is] painting estranged from the course of life, painting with the [sole] aim of painting ... a tacit protest, a reaction [to society]."[44] From Duret to Fry to Schapiro to Reff, interpretation never ventures far from Morice's conclusion: "He painted ... painting with the aim of painting".

Morice took Cézanne's apparent withdrawal from society and culture, his involvement with "art reduced to technique", as a signal that conventional notions of aesthetics were failing present human needs: art would no longer be effective in revealing either universal or personal truths; it would no longer express the spirit of a nation or era; nor would it embody a collective beauty, suitable for public decoration.[45] In 1907 Morice called Cézanne's aesthetic one of "separation", so thoroughly did it break from these traditional ideals, cutting itself off (abstracting itself) from life, whether everyday life or a more idealized existence. Yet, a different sense of living, of existential continuity, would emerge – not life experienced as a narrative sequence of human events, but as an enduring aesthetic sensation, intensely personal. Although the artist never actually ceased to be concerned with the outside world, his peculiarity was to take "no more interest in a human face than in an apple .... People and things impassioned him only with regard to their quality as objects to be painted ... Nothing else: painting in itself [*la peinture en soi*]." Or, to turn from the work to the artist, not painting in itself, but sensing in itself – sensation. The commentary is Morice's, from statements of 1905 and 1907, before and after Cézanne's death, though it sounds like Duret (whom Morice in fact quoted to similar effect) and even like Schapiro.[47]

The subject of genre

Painting in itself impresses us with "the value of art itself [*la valeur de l'art lui-même*]." This was the position of Théophile Thoré, a Romantic era critic.[48] To privilege sensation over subject was not an innovation of Cézanne's time; it had a history. Thoré wrote that "the subject [in art] means nothing".[49] Out of context, his statement becomes an empty polemic, for a subject that means nothing is hardly a subject. A subject, a representational theme, a topic – such conceptual entities belong to established fields of meaningful discourse. In fact, Thoré was alert to the endless flow of meaning and interpretation. He would admit that even artists who set about to eliminate connotative subject-matter were not immune to commentators

intent on allegorizing the aesthetic product.[50] A critic can perceive difference and discover meaning in anything.

Ironically, the context of Thoré's remark – "the subject means nothing" – is its justification. He was describing a particularly unyielding genre study by Adriaen van Ostade (fig. 58), a work distinguished more by its technique than by its theme. With a few touches of brilliant colour, the painter had uncharacteristically "cut through the bituminous harmony" of seventeenth-century Dutch painting. "The subject means nothing," Thoré concluded, "and we are deeply embarrassed in describing such naïve compositions, which have no distinct character other than their quality of execution." Apparently, Thoré realised that his thematic interpretation was unilluminating. It went nowhere, contributing to the embarrassment: "To the left, two little boys do who knows what; one is lost a bit in the shadow". Thoré then found the gain in the loss: "But these paintings prove all the more the value of art itself, because here serious thinking, with its profound conceptualisation, amounts to absolutely nothing .... Study these naïve masters, who might pass for naturalists making daguerreotype reproductions, and you will

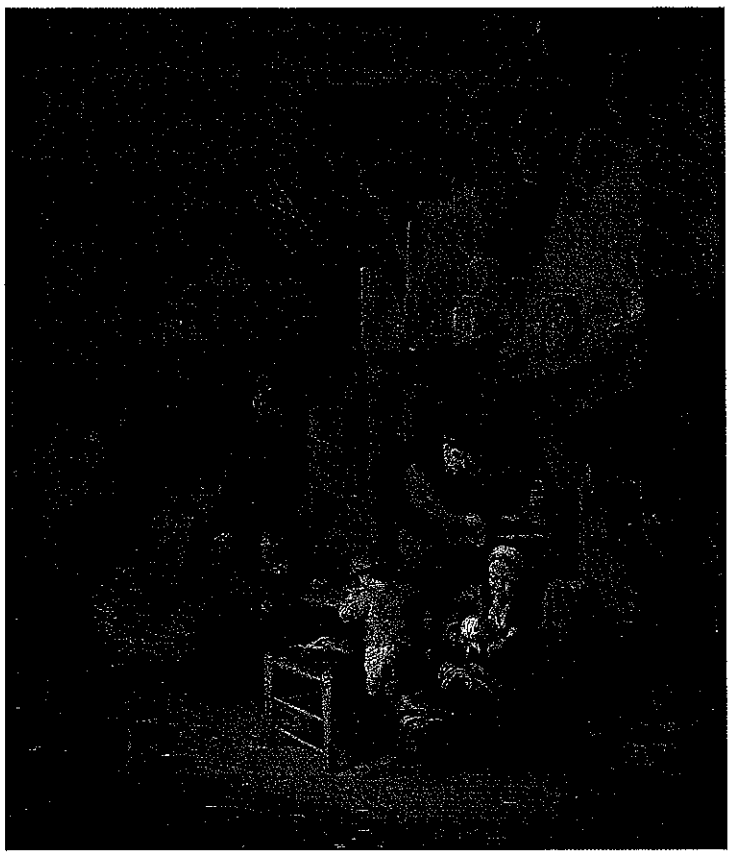

Fig. 58
Adriaen van Ostade
Peasant Family at Home, 1647
Oil on panel, 43.1 × 36.5 cm
Budapest Museum of Fine Arts

understand that there is nevertheless invention and genius in their impression of nature."[51]

To explain – invention and genius would enter the image naturally, because every human being, every political individual, has a capacity for invention and a share of genius. Thoré was democratic. He believed that all art, sincerely produced, expresses the value and dignity of the human. By comparison, the product of the daguerreotype machine was not devoid of value; but its image was still. Stillness, lack of living sensation, was the problem for Thoré, neither the directness of recording nor the reproducibility (the daguerreotype, as a positive imprint, was in any case unique). A hand-rendered image moved as feelings and sensibilities move, varying from one painter to the next and from one painter on one day to the same on another day.[52] Academically trained artists, attempting to regularize the presentation of a theme, suffered from the desire to eliminate vagaries of emotional mood. They sought an execution that would polish each message to lustrous clarity, as if viewed through a transparent medium. Countering this ideological ideal, Thoré stated bluntly: "[Artists] cannot abstract their personality". Individuals cannot conceptualise personal feeling, cannot create abstractions of the self, removing from the standard thematic product the blur of their idiosyncrasy. The same point has anchored a century of viewing the *Card Players*: Cézanne's "deeply serious personality [is] in everything he paints" (Reff). To put it another way: no thoroughly objective representation exists. Or, to make a political point, an individual cannot follow someone else's rule, or even his or her own rule, if it takes form as a collective, rational abstraction. "Relative to oneself," Thoré wrote, "everything that exists assumes a form and a colour in accord with one's own organic system."[53] We should not expect to divide our feeling from our thinking.

Perhaps volatile feeling has the final say, not structured reason. Life is manifold, messy, inherently anti-ideological. This is the truth that at least some of Cézanne's early admirers believed his art confirmed. It made them tolerant of the singular opacity – or the utter banality – of images like the *Card Players*, where marks and their colours attracted more interest than the theme. The subject of Cézanne's genre painting was Cézanne – his sensation, his seeing, his way of moving and emoting with elements of form. He painted. The early critics were not embarrassed to leave interpretation at this level, despite the natural suspicion that the subject might actually have meant something particular and perhaps quite personal to the artist who devoted such energy to it. His following could survive not knowing. If Cézanne had merely posed his card-playing workers "with regard to their quality as objects to be painted" (Morice), this would count as meaning "nothing". In the context of 1895 or 1905, meaning "nothing" meant something. It signified a cultural gain – at the least, an opening to possibility.

NOTES

I thank Martha Lucy, Jason Goldstein and Roja Najafi for essential aid in research.

1 Théodore Duret, *Histoire des peintres impressionnistes*, Paris: H. Floury, 1906, p. 189 (here and elsewhere, author's translation unless otherwise noted).

2 Charles Morice gave Duret's book a brief laudatory review in 'Revue de la quinzaine: Art moderne', *Mercure de France*, vol. 64, 15 December 1906, p. 625. The bibliographic supplement to the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (vol. 36, 1 December 1906, p. 523) listed it as a publication of the second half of 1906. An English translation appeared a few years later as part of a larger study: Theodore Duret, *Manet and the French Impressionists*, trans. John Ernest Crawford Flitch, London: G. Richards, 1910. Duret published a revised French edition in 1919, adding supplementary biographical facts to the beginning and end of the Cézanne chapter: *Histoire des peintres impressionnistes*, Paris: H. Floury, 1919, pp. 115–34.

3 Duret 1906, pp. 192, 195.

4 One example from a Cézanne obituary: "His evident influence on young [artists] is already, in itself, very telling", in anonymous [Charles Morice?], 'Mort de Paul Cézanne', *Mercure de France*, vol. 64, 1 November 1906, p. 154. See also Richard Shiff, 'Introduction', in Michael Doran, ed., Julie Cochrane, trans., *Conversations with Cézanne*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. xix–xxxiv.

5 Duret 1906, pp. 178–79.

6 See Duret's comments recorded in Charles Louis Borgmeyer, 'A Few Hours with Duret', *Fine Arts Journal*, vol. 30, March 1914, p. 127.

7 Duret 1906, pp. 179, 183–84.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 182. Duret's opinion in 1914 conveys the same image of Cézanne, who "painted with the greatest difficulty, one might say with hard labour, and yet whatever he did remained broad and strong .... First and last he pleased himself": Borgmeyer 1914, pp. 118, 124.

10 The following statements to this effect are particularly relevant to the history of Cézanne's reception: "Painting for itself": Émile Bernard, 'Paul Cézanne', *Les hommes d'aujourd'hui*, vol. 8, no. 387, February–March 1891, n. p.; Cézanne "abstracts the picture": Émile Bernard, 'Paul Cézanne', *L'Occident*, vol. 6, July 1904, p. 21; "Painting in itself, the pure act of painting": Maurice Denis, 'De Gauguin, de Whistler et de l'excès des théories' [1905], in *Théories, 1890–1910: Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*, Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1920, p. 208; "With Cézanne, we think only of the painting": Denis, 'Cézanne' [1907], *ibid.*, p. 247; "The subject no longer matters or hardly matters .... It will be pure painting": Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Du sujet dans la peinture moderne', *Les soirées de Paris*, no. 1, February 1912, p. 2.

11 Paul Sérusier, quoted by Maurice Denis, 'Cézanne', in Denis 1920, p. 252.

12 Georges Braque, in André Verdet, 'Avec Georges Braque', *XXe siècle*, vol. 24, no. 18, February 1962, supplement, n. p. Braque's statement (in French: "*Il engage sa vie dans l'œuvre, l'œuvre dans sa vie*") is a variation not only of Duret but also of Gustave Geffroy: "Surely this man has lived and is living a beautiful inner fantasy, and the demon of art dwells within him": Gustave Geffroy, 'Paul Cézanne' [1894], *La vie artistique*, 8 vols., Paris: Dentu [vols. 1–4]; Floury [vols. 5–8], 1892–1903, III, p. 260. In a manuscript draft for this essay (Archives of the History of Art, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles), Geffroy likewise referred to Cézanne's having turned his artistic strength in upon itself. Reflexivity – rhetorically, a figure of self-isolation – has remained a common explanatory device in Cézanne commentary. One writer identified all of the artist's mature work with "complete surrender to loneliness": Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, trans. Sheila Ann Ogilvie, London: Faber and Faber [1956], 1965, p. 143.

13 Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, New York: Abrams [1952], 1988, pp. 16–17, 100.
14 Duret 1906, p. 180.
15 Susan Sidlauskas, *Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 132. For Duret's still life, see John Rewald with Walter Feilchenfeldt and Jayne Warman, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols., New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, no. 417. Duret sold this painting at auction in 1894.
16 Fritz Novotny, *Cézanne*, New York: Phaidon, 1948. p. 6.
17 Duret: Cézanne's aim was "to fix on the canvas what was before his eyes" (1906, p. 183); Schapiro: "Cézanne differs from his [abstractionist] successors in the twentieth century in that he is attached to the directly seen world" (1988, p. 17).
18 Around 1903–04, "a mass of scientific irrelevancies and intellectual complications had come between the [conventional] artist and his vision, and, again, between the vision and its expression": Clive Bell, *Since Cézanne*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922, p. 49; "About 1912, [the remedy] was called pure painting": Robert Delaunay, 'To Sam Halpert' [1924], *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen, trans. Arthur A. Cohen and David Shapiro, New York: Viking, 1978, p. 36. See also note 10 above.
19 See, for example, Denis, 'A propos de l'exposition de Charles Guérin' [1905], in Denis 1920, pp. 43–44.
20 Schapiro 1988, p. 100.
21 Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw, Chicago: Henry Regnery, [1948] 1958, p. 133. Sedlmayr associated "pure painting" with a play of colour divorced from the constraints of line (pp. 84–85) as well as a loss of thematic subject: "Now we no longer have 'Diana and the Nymphs' but simply 'Bathing Women'" (p. 86).
22 Schapiro 1988, p. 94.
23 See Joseph J. Rishel, 'Paul Cézanne', in Richard J. Wattenmaker and Anne Distel, eds., *Great French Paintings from the Barnes Collection*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 126.
24 André Derain, letter to Henri Matisse, 15–16 March 1906, quoted in Rémi Labrusse, *Matisse: la condition de l'image*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999, p. 53.
25 On pointing the way, see Richard Shiff, 'The Primitive of Everyone Else's Way', in Guillermo Solana, ed., *Gauguin and the Origins of Symbolism*, Madrid: Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2004, pp. 64–79.
26 On the significance of Poussin, remaking, and revivifying, see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 175–84.
27 See Richard Shiff, 'Sensation, Movement, Cézanne', in Terence Maloon, ed., *Classic Cézanne*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, pp. 13–27.
28 Schapiro 1988, p. 16. Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, although establishing a far more specific social context for the *Card Players* than her predecessors, acknowledges the same contrast of emotionality between the theme and its rendering. She refers to the lively display of *sociabilité* one would expect to see, as opposed to the "permanence and stability", the "weighty volumes, solid forms" that actually characterise Cézanne's image: Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne and Provence: The Painter in His Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 214–15.
29 Schapiro 1988, pp. 16, 94.
30 Theodore Reff, 'Cézanne's "Cardplayers" and Their Sources', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, November 1980, pp. 109–10, 112, 114–16.
31 Roger Marx, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 32, 1 December 1904, p. 464.
32 "They say that Cézanne spent his life clarifying for himself and for others problems of technique, without caring about the results": Paul Jamot, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 36, 1 December 1906, p. 466.
33 Camille Pissarro, letter to Lucien Pissarro, 22 November 1895, in Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 5 vols., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France [vol. 1]; Valhermeil [vols. 2–5], 1980–1991, IV, p. 121.
34 'Paul Cézanne' [1894]; 'Paul Cézanne' [1895], in Geffroy 1892–1903, III, p. 249; VI, p. 218. Geffroy first published the former essay in late March 1894, more than a year and a half before Vollard's initial Cézanne exhibition, when it was still difficult to find works of the painter. He mentions Duret's collection as a source (III, p. 250). In fact, the essay may have been inspired by the sale some days earlier of works from Duret's collection: see JoAnne Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting*, New York: Garland, 1985, p. 344; Merete Bodelsen, 'Early Impressionist Sales 1874–94 in the Light of Some Unpublished "Procès-Verbaux"', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 110, June 1968, p. 345.
35 Thadée Natanson, 'Paul Cézanne', *La revue blanche*, vol. 9, 1 December 1895, p. 497.

Geffroy also referred to retirement or withdrawal: 'Paul Cézanne' [1895], in Geffroy 1892–1903, VI, p. 218.

36 Charles Camoin, letter to Henri Matisse, July 1941, in Claudine Grammont, ed., *Correspondance entre Charles Camoin et Henri Matisse*, Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1997, p. 157. On living alone, see Cézanne's letter to Egisto Paolo Fabbri, 31 May 1899, in John Rewald, ed., *Paul Cézanne, correspondance*, Paris: Grasset, 1978, p. 270.

37 See the witness accounts of Cézanne's joking around with Camoin and others in Edmond Jaloux, *Les saisons littéraires 1896–1903*, Fribourg: Editions de la librairie de l'université, 1942, p. 104; Léo Larguier, *Le dimanche avec Paul Cézanne*, Paris: L'édition, 1925, pp. 32, 121; André Warnod, *Ceux de la Butte*, Paris: René Julliard, 1947, p. 248.

38 Jaloux 1942, pp. 75–76.

39 Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*, London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1927, p. 71.

40 Robert Ratcliffe interviewed Léontine Paulet in July 1955; on this and other documentation regarding the circumstances of Cézanne's use of models for the *Card Players* series, see Reff 1980, p. 105.

41 Maurice Denis, 'Cézanne', *L'Occident*, vol. 12, September 1907, pp. 118–33; 'Cézanne', trans. Roger E. Fry, *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 16, January–February 1910, pp. 207–19, 275–80; Charles Morice, 'Paul Cézanne', *Mercure de France*, vol. 65, 15 February 1907, pp. 577–94. Morice was a critic of literature and the visual arts and had been Paul Gauguin's (not always congenial) collaborator on the publication of *Noa Noa*. He authored the first book on the emergence of a Symbolist literary movement in France: Charles Morice, *La literature de tout à l'heure*, Paris: Perrin, 1889.

42 See, for example, Charles Morice, 'La IVme exposition du Salon d'Automne', *Mercure de France*, vol. 64, 1 November 1906, pp. 34–48.

43 See, for example, Charles Morice, 'Le XXIe Salon des Indépendants', *Mercure de France*, vol. 54, 15 April 1905, pp. 542, 552–53, 555; 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Mercure de France*, vol. 58, 1 December 1905, p. 390.

44 Morice 1907, pp. 577, 593.

45 Morice 1905, pp. 552–53. The prevalence of private studio imagery (still lifes, models, views from windows) in early twentieth-century painting resulted, at least in part, from isolation being regarded as a suitable response to conditions of modernity. The studio, like the bourgeois home, could be a place of refuge. Artists represented the nude – traditionally, much more than a studio object – "as if they were making a still life, interested only in relations of line and colour [and turning the model into] a decorative accessory": Charles Morice, 'Art moderne: nus', *Mercure de France*, vol. 85, 1 June 1910, p. 546.

46 Morice 1905, p. 552; 1907, pp. 592–93.

47 Morice (1907, p. 592) quoted the passage from Duret's *Histoire* referring to Cézanne's having arranged his figures not to express a theme but "above all to be painted".

48 Théophile Thoré, 'Galerie de M. le Comte de Morny', *L'artiste*, vol. 10, 1847, p. 52.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 52. For virtually the same thought, see Thoré-Bürger (Théophile Thoré), 'Salon de 1847', in *Les Salons*, 3 vols., Brussels: Lamertin, 1893, I, p. 447: "The subject is absolutely indifferent in the arts". In other words, the subject-matter does not determine the quality or emotional value of the work.

50 Thoré, 'Salon de 1845', in Thoré 1893, I, p. 105.

51 Thoré 1847, p. 52.

52 Thoré, 'Salon de 1847', in Thoré 1893, I, pp. 477–78.

53 *Ibid.*, I, p. 478. Coincidentally, using an etching, Cézanne made a copy of the same composition by Ostade that had been Thoré's example: see Rewald 1996, no. 589. In Thoré's terms, Cézanne, who used his characteristic blues for the copy, remade Ostade "in accord with his own organic system". When, to the contrary, an artist seemed to have succeeded in abstracting the personality, it could be grounds for critical objection – here, commentary on Edgar Degas: "His paintings say nothing of his inner being; he is removed [*c'est un abstrait*], self-contained; we know nothing about him, neither his delights, nor his feelings": Camille Mauclair, *L'impressionnisme: son histoire, son esthétique, ses maîtres*, Paris: Librairie de l'art ancien et moderne, 1904, p. 98.