

Review of Cezanne's Gravity  
Carol Armstrong

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The artist Paul Cézanne had a heavy influence on a multitude of artistic generations to follow. He is often grouped within the Post-Impressionist category, he utilized color to build forms like impressionists though Cézanne approached his art with an analytical standpoint. In the beginning of his painting career he followed the trends of romantic styles with a dark tonal color scheme and scenes containing classical elements. Cézanne then tried his hand at the styles of Impressionism, though he did not follow the style completely he did adopt the bright and vivid tones of this movement. He quickly shifted his focus to the study of still life painting, focusing on the technical colors and the weight of forms in painting. Most of the writings on Cézanne today focus on his influence on Cubism or artists like Picasso and Matisse.

Within the book *Cézanne's Gravity* the author Carol Armstrong aims to tackle two grand things. The first being to detach this most eccentric of artists from the stigma that followed him and has only normalized his work, and to make Cézanne's work strange once more. Whilst she revises the timeline inherited from nineteenth century art where Cézanne as an artist is supposed to be kept within. She is not writing another essay on how he was simply a Post-Impressionist artist, or how he influenced Cubism and those artists paid homage to his work. Carol Armstrong, in her own methodological way, pairs the paintings of Cézanne to works and literature of some of the greatest minds from our world.

The major thing that separated Cézanne from the painters of Impressionism, was his thought and consideration of the world as it was. He was intrigued by the solidity or permanence of the earth itself, the things scattered across it, and the sensations he felt from these things as an artist. In Carol Armstrong's words, there was never an artist who took the work of painting more seriously than Cézanne because to him painting was an existential enterprise that had all the

gravity that philosophy, literature, and science had for other individuals.<sup>1</sup> Which is why part of her overall argument in the book is that his paintings are still relevant in our current day and age.

Focusing on the third chapter of *Cézanne's Gravity*, Carol Armstrong focuses on the writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, some pertaining directly to the artist and others barely mentioning him. Armstrong claims that even when Merleau-Ponty hardly mentions Paul Cézanne, the painter still haunts his writings of phenomenology. While Ponty himself believes that painters and philosophers are interchangeable to which Armstrong agrees, and in Carol Armstrong's eyes artists may be more vital to his phenomenology than philosophers. Though before she digs deeper into these statements, Armstrong dives into Cézanne's portrait of Gustave Geffroy.

This portrait is brought up in the Merleau-Ponty essay titled *Cézanne's Doubt*, though Armstrong gives us more context to the overall happenings. Gustave Geffroy was an art critic during the time of Cézanne, and typically when an artist painted a critic it was almost as if they were claiming them as their own. Armstrong relates a portrait like this to Manet's portrait of Emile Zola in the year 1879, claiming them as their critic.<sup>2</sup> Though it is pointed out Geffroy never became Cézanne's critic, in fact this artist did not necessarily have a critic during his lifetime. Cézanne had also painted other critics before and an art dealer, though only in Geffroy's portrait did Merleau-Ponty say the empty space of the foreground is cluttered, which this along with the fact Cézanne left the facial features of Geffroy for last, that is considered to be the doubt Cézanne has.

Not only is this foreground cluttered with a variety of objects and papers, it is also at an open slant. This slant proposes Cézanne placed the outside of the painting which in turn gives the illusion to be in front of the painting. The space of emergence created can also be a space where

the viewer is not able to be shut off from the painting, due to this it can not be finished.

Armstrong claims that with such an open space created leaving the picture open to physical space, there is reason to the logic as being viewed as an unfinished work. This example of a Cézannian unfinished work creates this space of doubt.

Armstrong writes it is doubt like this that made Cézanne so vital to Merleau-Ponty's writings of phenomenology. She then brings in the writings of two German philosophers who came before Ponty. Edmund Husserl who founded the school for phenomenology and Martin Heidegger who followed in Husserl's footsteps shortly after. Carol Armstrong brings these two in stating Merleau-Ponty may have shared the same belief of transcendental primordiality. Which is the philosophical approach to understanding the human experience with qualitative researching methods. She also touches on the term sensation being a prime Cézannian term even if it isn't exclusive to Cézanne alone. This form of sensation being the relations between figures and ground, and the gestalt perception that is of the same importance to the German philosopher Husserl. Though unlike Husserl and Heidegger, Ponty focused on the ambiguous aspects of this concept which is the never completed perception of the world. Merleau-Ponty still understood the phenomenological stance that these two philosophers founded and expanded, though what is unique to him is the fact he focused on the act of the painter. It is this action of perceiving a painter that Ponty views as an equal to a philosophers perception. It is here, Carol Armstrong says it can also be argued that Merleau-Ponty never made a clear distinction between painting and perceiving. Along with the belief that painterly perception fell in the realm of phenomenological thinking, in the essay *Cézanne's Doubt* he wrote that Cézanne as a painter "thinks in painting."<sup>3</sup>

Armstrong then goes into an analysis of the portrait of Gustave Geffroy trying to pinpoint what it was that made Cézanne so uncertain when it came to painting him and his likeness. She analyzes the color palette in particular and compares it to various other portraits by Cézanne, and to her this portrait is no different than the portrait of Joachim Gasquet. These two portraits have very loose brushwork and features on the faces of the sitter, and in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* he says, "a face expresses something only through the arrangement of colours and lights which make it up, the meaning of the gaze being not behind the eyes, but in them, and a touch of colour more or less is all the painter needs in order to transform the facial expression of the portrait."<sup>4</sup> Within the portrait of Geffroy, Armstrong claims there is less of this concept and that there is more of it within the portrait of Gasquet. Furthermore, she points out that it is the gaps amongst the colors of the faces in these two portraits that highlight the doubt Cézanne has even more. It is these two portraits, in Armstrong's eyes, that showcase the doubt Cézanne has and unlike Merleau-Ponty she claims the portrait of Gasquet proves this further when it comes to the doubt of painting the likeness of the sitter.

Armstrong then goes over and analyzes Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* book and takes a deep dive into the two main themes of these writings. The first of the two is the formulation by which things "draw themselves" in perception, and the second is the French term *se dessiner* which is specifically tied to the painter Cézanne. Merleau-Ponty believes that "se dessiner" had to have been Cézanne's bodily reaction to the color blue, and speaks of its use in many of his paintings. Armstrong then brings the portrait of Geffroy back into the scene, the right arm of the critic is laced with blue while the arm is slightly raised as if hesitant to start writing.

Circling back to Merleau-Ponty's essay *Cézanne's Doubt*, he famously wrote "to be schizoid is to be Cézanne." and that this "schizoida" can be seen within the painter's works themselves. Merleau-Ponty did admit to this "schizoid" temperament being pure conjecture. Though Armstrong interprets this as Ponty aiming to show the inverse that it was the work of the painter that gave life meaning in his world. Which is why Merleau-Ponty based his writings of phenomenology on Cézanne's paintings rather than the artist's life, as most philosophers would.

With the multitude of mini statements or arguments throughout this third chapter alone, I do believe Carol Armstrong is successful with having her goal of distinguishing Cézanne back to his strange glory. As well as resurfacing Cézanne's relevance in the field of art history or even philosophy today. It is difficult as someone who is not currently submerged in writings like this to find these arguments or supporting statements within the actual chapter writings. Armstrong gives us an incredibly meticulous and complex rendering of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on phenomenology and the painter Cézanne.

## Notes

1. Armstrong, Carol. *Cezzane's Gravity*, Yale University Press, 2018.
2. Armstrong, Carol. *Cezzane's Gravity*, Yale University Press, 2018.
3. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Cezzane's Doubt*, Northwestern University Press, 1993.
4. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London : New York:  
Routledge & K. Paul; Humanities Press, 1974.