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3 ‘REAL PRIMITIVES’: Cézanne, Wittgenstein, and the nature of aesthetic quality

Paul Smith

In this essay Smith considers Paul Cézanne’s self-image as an artist. Analysing a number of literary as well as visual-representational depictions of the painter and his social milieu in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, Smith himself constructs a complex image of ‘Cézanne’ as a self-consciously self-created individual, laying particular stress on the artist’s sense of himself as an ‘instinctive’ being. Smith’s subtle analysis of this formation involves a challenge to the dominant meaning of ‘primitivism’ and its negative connotations in art historical and post-colonial accounts of art, culture, and society in the age of modern Western imperialism. Smith’s understanding of avant-garde French art in the late nineteenth century partly draws on the ideas of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the value of analogies possible between human language use and other forms of cultural and social life. Though postmodernist theories of representation and meaning drew upon insistently claims that meanings are always relational and conventional — ‘anti-realist’ in philosophical terms — Smith shows that Cézanne’s ‘self-construction’ as an artist and man was necessarily a product of material practices and specific ‘ways of acting’ in the social world. Consider how Smith’s analysis might be either confirmed or undermined by T. J. Clark’s discussion of ‘phenomenality’ in Cézanne’s late paintings (Essay 3). Does Smith’s belief in Cézanne’s ‘instinctive’ life bear some relation — at least in principle— to Fred Ort’s argument for identifying the ‘extra-ordinary self’ in Jasper Johns? (Essay 10).

We have an idea of which forms of life are primitive, and which could only have developed out of these. We believe that the simplest plough existed before the complicated one.

Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions

From the late eighteenth century, many artists, theorists, and critics have argued that art is all the better when it is ‘primitive’ in one way or another, and especially when it issues from a primitive artistic ‘self’. Arguments of this kind are, of course, often problematic. For one thing, they routinely rely upon a metaphysically incoherent concept of the self as an
immaterial ‘thing’.\(^2\) And for another, they are often complicit with colonialist ideologies that mischaracterize other cultures as ‘primitive’ (i.e. as devoid of culture, or as ‘backward’), and the people belonging to them as in some way childish.\(^3\)

But not all attempts to link quality in art to primitive aspects of the self suffer from these defects. Many of Cézanne’s remarks suggest that, by and large, he envisaged his ‘self’, not as a fixed entity, but as an identity that mutated accordingly as he emulated different literary artists or seers, as he fulfilled the diverse roles of artist, public persona, friend and the like, and as he matured personally. Cézanne’s usage of the word ‘primitive’ (primitif) is also consistent with its quite specific and politically neutral use by contemporary critics (and artists) to describe modern painters (including themselves) who had stylistic affinities to the pre-Renaissance Primitives, so-called because they had not fully mastered perspective or anatomy.\(^4\) (In 1886, for example, Pissarro notably referred to one his own paintings as having a ‘modern primitive stamp’.\(^5\)) Either that, or his use of ‘primitive’ connects with its affirmative, and wholly underdogatory, use in Rousseau, where it describes a state of personal and collective innocence, as opposed to corruption and over-sophistication (for all that Rousseau unwittingly gave a hostage to fortune by suggesting it is the ‘child’ or the ‘savage’ who best exemplifies the condition).\(^6\) The mature Wittgenstein also regarded the ‘self’ in an ontologically coherent manner,\(^7\) and used the term ‘primitive’ in a politically neutral way. I want to argue here, however, that the notion of artistic primitivism that Cézanne deployed in his practice, and which Wittgenstein developed discursively, is more than merely tenable, but can fairly be said to comprise the germ of truth hidden inside the primitivist aesthetic. And the nub of this conception, I will suggest, is that art is most exemplary when it issues from ‘primitive’ capacities within the artist’s self.\(^8\)

The thesis about aesthetic quality at the heart of this argument may sound contentious to modern readers accustomed to anti-foundational ways of thinking. But before it is possible to embark on its defence, it is necessary to look in more detail at what the artist and the philosopher meant by ‘primitive’ in order to address the more fundamental issue of whether or not they shared any sense at all of the primitive foundations of aesthetic value in art.

\section*{Cézanne the ‘primitive’}

A good way to appreciate what Cézanne meant by ‘primitive’ is to look at how he used the word to describe himself, which he did on two occasions around 1904–1905. (This is because, on a mature Wittgensteinian view of the matter, which I will adopt in order to be consistent, meaning is something that happens out in the open when people use words in particular ‘forms of life’ in order to do something, or to proceed in life.\(^9\) On this view, there is no necessary connection between the meaning of a word on one occasion and another, hence no constant sense it must have every time it is used.)

According to the artists R. P. Rivière and Jacques Schnerb, who visited Cézanne in 1905, the painter told them: ‘I am a primitive, I have a lazy eye’.\(^10\) It would seem then that Cézanne used the word on that occasion to liken himself to a pre-Renaissance Primitive who drew somewhat ineptly, just as his visitors would have expected (if they had read about him in the Parisian press).\(^11\) But what Rivière and Schnerb did not know was that Cézanne strongly disliked the insubstantiality of the Primitives’ drawing, or that his remark was a typically Provencal blague – pitched so close to the truth that its irony escaped them.\(^12\) But if this were the case, and Cézanne’s irony was only very slight, he must have been toying with the idea that he had something in common with the Primitives. What this was in fact emerged quite straightforwardly in an account given by Emile Bernard in 1907, where he describes how Cézanne had recently told him how ‘he certainly needed someone to carry on for him, because he only considered himself to have opened the path. [He told me:] “I am too old. I have not realised, and will not do so now. I remain the primitive of the way I have discovered.”’\(^13\) ‘Primitive’, in this context, clearly means something like ‘beginner’ or ‘pioneer’ in English, and Cézanne evidently meant to suggest that he, like the Primitives, was starting out on something new.\(^14\) Because meaning is inseparable from use, however, it is also important to take Cézanne’s purpose in making these remarks into account.\(^15\) This is revealed by Bernard’s recollection that Cézanne wanted him as a ‘student’
to ‘carry on after him’, which suggests he was both expressing his sadness at the thought of his project dying with him, and appealing to Bernard to take it up on his account.

To aspire to have Bernard as a ‘follower’, which Cézanne himself said he did,\textsuperscript{16} he must have thought his work was good enough to be worth emulating, despite the shortcomings he and others recognized in it. It is also clear enough from statements of Cézanne’s that he thought his work was good on account of being grounded in primitive capacities within his artistic self. His sense of his being a ‘primitive’ has two aspects therefore: it meant being a beginner of sorts, but also a painter who went back to basics.

In his artistic maturity, Cézanne identified the primitive qualities in his art with the primordial perceptions (or ‘sensations’) it embodied,\textsuperscript{7} and with the basic artefactual processes responsible for its manufacture. To take the first of these to begin with, Cézanne told Jules Borel in 1902: ‘Look at that tree trunk... It’s palpable, resistant, a body... Oh, how I would love to see like a newborn child!’\textsuperscript{17} This remark plainly recalls ideologies of seeing propounded by Taine and other empiricists, who led Cézanne to believe that his vision should be both child-like and invested with tactility.\textsuperscript{18} But theories of this kind do not wholly explain Cézanne’s work, since (inasmuch as they did more than simply supply him with a rhetorical justification of how he painted) they only determined what Cézanne told himself he was doing, not what he actually did.\textsuperscript{19} This is because paintings like Cézanne’s are intentional objects in a dual sense: they are both the objects he intended to make (and not something else), and they are the upshot of the thought and attention he directed at them as he made them. Hence, although Cézanne could state some aspects of his intentions in words (to himself or others), and deploy them as rules specifying how he

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real Primitives

complete explanation, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty does go some way towards putting his achievements into words. This suggests, for example, that Cézanne’s art embodied the kind of ‘primordial perception’ inside which ‘touch’ and ‘sight’ are indistinguishable\textsuperscript{2} for a ‘body-subject’ in ‘primitive’ contact with the world.\textsuperscript{2} Or (to use Merleau-Ponty’s later language), Cézanne’s was a kind of seeing that expressed his reciprocal, and ‘chiasmatic’, relationship with the ‘flesh of the world’.\textsuperscript{2} Granting this much, it would seem that Cézanne’s identification with children was neither wholly ideological nor regressive, but was a metaphorical expression of a wish to reconnect painting with basic human perceptual capacities, prior to elaborating these in novel forms with meanings of their own.

To suggest that a primitive content of sorts makes Cézanne’s work exemplary is not to argue for artistic loutishness, however. The mature Cézanne, at any rate, kept primitive material in its place, and in this respect he exercised precisely the same restraint that Wittgenstein asked of the artist when he argued that the ‘primitive’ content of ‘great art’ should only be present as its ‘ground base’, and not as its melody (in a passage of Culture and Value cited in the next section). Cézanne’s ‘primitive’ vision was, for example, bound up with a sophisticated and ‘imaginative’, Virgilian way of seeing (according to Gauguin),\textsuperscript{21} and also involved complex scientific knowledge (as Merleau-Ponty himself points out).\textsuperscript{7} The later Cézanne was also keen to repudiate his earlier over-exuberance in handling paint,\textsuperscript{22} and perhaps described Van Gogh’s paintings as those of ‘a madman’ because they reminded him of his own youthful works.\textsuperscript{9} In addition, his practice was embedded in a theoretically, socially, economically, and politically elaborate artworld, and to this extent it counts as what Wittgenstein would call a ‘complicated’, as opposed to a ‘primitive form of life’. It nevertheless remains the case that what makes or breaks his art on the particular Wittgensteinian view I will advance is whether or not it exhibits some manifest contact with its primitive grounds.\textsuperscript{23}

Wittgenstein and the ‘primitive’

A good way to begin unravelling this line of thought in Wittgenstein is to consider a passage in Culture and Value dating to 1940 that initially seems to argue quite straightforwardly in favour of ‘primitive’ art, but whose real
virtue is that it prefigures a more sophisticated argument in his later work. The passage in question reads as follows:

Within all great art there is a WILD animal tamed. Not, e.g., in Mendelssohn. All great art has primitive human drives as its ground bass. They are not the melody (as they are, perhaps, in Wagner), but they are what gives the melody depth & power. In this sense one may call Mendelssohn a ‘reproductive’ artist. – In the same sense: my house for Gretl is the product of a decidedly sensitive ear, good manners, the expression of a great understanding for a culture. But primordial life, wild life striving to erupt into the open – is lacking. And so you might say, health is lacking (Kierkegaard).

(For house plant.)

What Wittgenstein does clearly say here is that ‘great’ and ‘reproductive’ art can be distinguished categorically according to an unambiguous criterion, i.e. their ability (or inability) to exhibit a manifest connection with ‘primitive human drives’. But just how Wittgenstein regards these drives, and why they should make art ‘great’, is far from obvious. The one thing that does seem certain is that the distinction has a close connection with an earlier distinction that Wittgenstein’s friend, Adolf Loos, made between art proper, which is born of passion and other later texts. One of its more basic, and readily comprehensible, contentions is that we use language within the ‘complicated form[s] of life’ we develop as adults, as a learned substitute for the ‘primitive’, non-linguistic behaviours that we acted out as children in reaction to situations and events.35 So, instead of simply crying when in pain, as adults we might call attention to our predicament by talking about it in appropriate, institutionalized, situations.36 The bones of this argument are clearly already present in Culture and Value, where Wittgenstein suggests that language grows out of a more basic impulse to react to situations, maintaining in a remark of 1937: ‘The origin & the primitive form of the language-game is a reaction; only from this can the more complicated forms grow. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, “in the beginning was the deed”.’37 It is not unthinkable, therefore, that the sense ‘primitive’ has inside Wittgenstein’s distinction between ‘great’ and ‘reproductive’ art has some affinity with its sense here.

Put simply, Wittgenstein suggests that our ‘complicated forms of life’ (i.e. adult and acculturated behaviours) ‘replace’ the ‘primitive’ behaviours that are given to us as part of our ‘animal’ (i.e. human) nature.38 For example, to be able to cry children do not need to think about it. Nor do adults need to ask why children cry to be able to respond to them sympathetically when they do. (This is not to say that we cannot rationalize about our ‘primitive’ behaviours: we can, and do – although they often remain immune to rationalization.) Wittgenstein, in other words, is not only arguing that ‘primitive’ behaviours precede our more sophisticated, and linguistic, behaviours, but also that they are the grounds of their possibility. Infants learn the names of things, for example, by responding appropriately to adults who point at objects and speak; but to be able to do this they must already have an intuitive understanding both of what pointing means (since this can not be explained to them), and of how it works (i.e. that a finger points ‘forwards’ away from its owner, and not the other way).39 Being given in our ‘animal’ nature, primitive forms of life are inher-
ently meaningful for us. They also give our complicated forms of life their meaning (as opposed to their rational justification), or make it meaningful for us to practise them. Without a basis in an instinctual concern for the distress of others, for example, the practice of medicine would be meaningless in itself, and would only be performed for the instrumental (and other) reasons that justify it. In a like fashion, we make and respond to art because the primitive groundings of the forms of life involved make it meaningful for us to do so – independently of ratiocination. Wittgenstein characterizes our aesthetic responses this way in his Lectures and Conversations of 1938, when he contends that the use of a word like ‘beautiful’ (which we use only rarely), or ‘good’, ‘is taught as a substitute for a facial expression or a gesture’. He also argues here that ‘perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions, e.g. discontent, disgust, discomfort’. This suggests art is born, in part, of a desire to set things right. But art is undeniably rooted as well in simple pleasures. It is indisputable, for example, that children greatly enjoy drawing and colouring, and will practise these activities spontaneously, given only the bare essentials in terms of materials and opportunity. It has even been argued recently that children’s ability to draw, and the forms their drawings take, rest on an innate, generative capacity of the same sort as that which makes speech possible, and its ‘deep structures’ universal.

Instinctual ‘primitive’ behaviours are also shared by members of the species. Even very young children can, for example, understand the facial expressions that express adults’ reactions to them, and respond to these with facial expressions of their own. (A baby exchanging smiles with its mother is an obvious example.) So too, both as children and as adults, we respond to our enjoyment or abhorrence of things by pointing them and making sounds of various kinds in the expectation that other people will know what we mean (just as we will when they perform the same kind of behaviour).

Because they are pre-reflexively (‘just’) meaningful, our primitive behaviours do not simply serve as the condition of our linguistic modes of communication, but can be modes of communication in themselves – independently of any particular social or cultural rules. Conventions do, of course, shape our more complicated behaviours, but only because they can purchase on primitive forms of life that are always already there. We respond, for example, to our own pain unreflectively in the first place, without culture having much say in the matter, but in ways that make sense to others all the same. In a like fashion, our basic reactions of delight or disgust are meaningful long before we come to express them in the complex (and diverse) forms of cultured, adult life. So too, drawing and colouring arise spontaneously; culture merely shapes the specific forms they take. Emulation, moreover, only kicks in once behaviours of this kind are already underway. Art starts primitively, in other words, or more or less on its own.

Our ability to respond to art, like our ability to react to the pain of others, is an important part of what makes us human. But if ultimately we do such things as adults only because our primitive forms of life give them their meaning, and hence their impetus to subsist, by corollary our practices run the risk of becoming empty, and of withering away, when they lose touch with their instinctual bases. This would seem to suggest that art is most fully meaningful, or at its best, when it stays in contact with the primitive roots that nourish it. Since, moreover, any competent artist is not simply a solipsistic spectator of her or his own work, but one who bears its intended audience in mind when working, it makes sense to think that the work of art is best when its primitive roots are allowed to show.

There is nevertheless one relatively local, but significant, objection to this argument, which is that Wittgenstein’s silence on issues of value in the later writings speaks volumes about the impossibility of talking about it. Rather than attempt to define any ‘deep’ ‘essence’ to concepts like ‘art’, for example, he suggests we will understand its meaning better if we look at the variety of uses to which the word ‘art’ is routinely put, because doing so will reveal the ‘family-resemblances’ between the different instances of the concept. But for all that Wittgenstein allows that ‘art’ can mean many things, he does not suggest that this precludes certain values from being more central to the concept than others. Indeed, it has been cogently argued of late that we can only grasp the concept of art properly if we appreciate what makes its central cases ‘good’. Granting this much, aesthetic value, and its ‘primitive’ roots, can play an important role in making art what it is.
is. (And this is still the case if we accept that Wittgenstein did not initially develop his distinction between ‘great’ and ‘reproductive’ art as a theory of art, but rather to express his sense of his own artistic insufficiency.49)

A potentially more damaging consideration, however, is that the later Wittgenstein says little about aesthetic value in art because he held on to his own earlier view that the nature of this value could not be stated. But while he may have done so, it still makes sense that Wittgenstein would remain silent about the value embodied in objects arising out of transparently meaningful, pre-reflective behaviours, since what matters most about such objects must surely be patent in them, in the same way as the content of a smile is in it.

Criteria

One way of appreciating how Cézanne’s work allows its primitive roots to show is to regard it as embodying ‘primordial’ perceptions of the kind described by Merleau-Ponty. The argument here is that because a painting can suggest how it should be developed in ways appropriate to its nature, it can assume a radically novel look that can, in its turn, indicate non-habitual ways of seeing the world—including those primitive forms most of us have lost touch with.50 It was by grace of painting, in other words, that Cézanne came to understand what, and how, he saw when he saw primordially.

This conception of Cézanne’s painterly and perceptual primitivism has a counterpart in Wittgenstein’s argument that ‘The representation of “what is seen”’ is ‘the criterion of the visual experience’.51 On one interpretation at any rate, this not only means that a picture is the ‘outward’, i.e. visible and public, expression of an ‘inner’ visual experience,52 but that, in virtue of being this, a picture can give meaningful form, and hence also definition, to aspects of seeing that the perceiver may have been unaware of prior to making it.53 The argument here runs parallel to those strands of the ‘private-language’ argument, in which Wittgenstein suggests there is no discernible difference between a person’s thoughts and their expression in language, or none we can describe,54 because language is the ‘vehicle’ of thought and not an ‘accompaniment’ to it,55 and is thus to all practical purposes identical with thought. By contrast, the content of any thought hidden ‘behind’ language is at best indeterminate; and by analogy, it is only

when an artist gives shape to her or his visual experience in a work of art that makes public sense that this experience becomes properly elaborated and determinate, or known to the artist as well as the spectator.

The core of the ‘private language’ argument is that anything that can be meaningfully said must at least potentially be capable of being understood by other members of the community using the language concerned.56 Any ‘private’ language, e.g. words that can only be understood in principle by the person inventing them, must therefore be empty. We may, for example, think we are obeying a rule connecting a word with its sense when we are not,57 which implies that only the wider community of language-users can decide when a word is used correctly. Moreover, because the meanings of a word are a function of its use within necessarily social ‘forms of life’, it is a group’s assent in its practices that regulates a word’s meaning.58 We learn the correct use of colour terms, for example, from participating in language-games to do with using coloured things for practical, social purposes.59 Their meaning is not grounded in our own sensations of colour,60 as we might assume—which is why they make sense irrespective of whether or not they call colours to mind when we speak them.61 For all these reasons, colour terms cannot be regarded as ‘criteria’ of sensations, in the sense of being ‘outward’ signs of ‘inner’ experiences. Pictures, on the other hand, can and do serve as criteria of colour sensations, and other visual experiences too.

It is a mistake, therefore, to think that pictures give shape to (logically) ‘private’ visual contents. And indeed, Wittgenstein argues against the possibility of private visual experiences (in addition to private colour sensations) in several places in the Philosophical Investigations.62 For example, he used the famous duck-rabbit drawing (fig. 1) to show how nothing private (like an inner ‘organization’ of an image) changes when it shifts from being a duck to a rabbit, only the drawing (which we can all see).63 For Wittgenstein, therefore, seeing is best conceived of as an activity directed at a world that is available for public inspection, and more specifically as a form of responding or reacting to it.64 The duck-rabbit also demonstrates this argument, in that we respond to it with ‘a cry of recognition’ (or suchlike) when it shifts aspect.65 We may also react differently to the unremarkable duck from how we do to the rabbit, with its peculiar, mildly startled expres-
sion. Seeing thus has little to do with ungrammatical, or nonsensical, notions of ‘having’ such things as ‘visual impressions’, and is more readily assimilated to other things, such as gestures or (facial) expressions, which make the content of reactions to the world public and patent.  

All this would suggest that many pictures are best thought of, not as criteria of sensations, so much as criteria of reactions. This makes sense, for one thing, of how they can make the way a painter sees public, not just what the painter sees. We also respond to pictures, and other works of art, in much the same way as we respond to more familiar criteria of reactions like facial expressions and gestures. Wittgenstein even contends as much in the Lectures and Conversations, where he follows a remark on the immediacy of a ‘picture-face’ by stating that a door (in its frame), or a drawing of such a door, can wear an ‘expression’, or ‘make [a] gesture’.  

Many commentators have, of course, argued independently that paintings can ‘metaphorize’ the body, and by extension its expressiveness. And in Cézanne’s paintings, both the objects depicted and the depicting surface readily evoke corporeal qualities. His fruits, for example, have skins and flesh, and they stand or lean, and huddle together or stand apart from one another. His coloured surfaces also cohere like the ‘machinery’ of the body. And they sometimes gel so tightly that – to use Cézanne’s own words – his paintings ‘join hands’ (in imitation of several of his sitters).  

If Cézanne’s paintings are criteria in this sense, in much the same way as gestures and facial expressions, their content must be public. (Although it may take a great deal of practice and close attention to appreciate them, just as it can require a lifetime to fully discern the expression in some faces.) A good way of corroborating this argument is to show how the counter-argument is patently false. In 1861, for example, the critic Castagnary claimed that Corot’s paintings fell into meaninglessness because in despotically imposing his subjective response to the landscape on the spectator, they succeeded only in alienating him. Better, he suggested, that they had shown the landscape as it was, and had left it to the spectator to experience for himself what had moved the painter. The fact is, though, that many people can see pictures of Corot’s such as The Leaning Tree Trunk of c. 1855–60 (fig. 2) as expressive of a particular kind of response to a landscape – correspondence – inside which it appears to possess a tender, melancholic, or wistful mood with which the artist is in tune, and which can affect the spectator too. (No landscape, of course, literally possesses a mood; but there is nothing remiss about imagining, as opposed to believing, it can.)
Clearly enough, therefore, in failing to see how Corot’s pictures express his response to nature, Castagnary missed something significant about them. His error was tantamount to the aspect-blindness that occurs when someone cannot see the ‘expression’ in a face, only its size.5 By contrast, when the critic Félix Fénéon rounded on the Impressionists for making ‘nature grimace’, he nevertheless appreciated something fundamental about the way their paintings worked.7

Pictures like Corot’s or Cézanne’s are transparently expressive because they arise from ‘primitive’ behaviours to which we are attuned to respond intuitively, without having to draw inferences from them, much as we react to signs of other people’s pain without having to draw analogies with our own pain.7 Artists do, of course, sometimes falsify their reactions as they become more sophisticated. The young Cézanne, for example, used bold chiaroscuro and gestural brushwork in an attempt to make them stand for what he called his ‘very strong sensations’.7 But while cases like this suggest that criteria can be untrustworthy, they are not so untrustworthy as to be unserviceable. Rather, dissimulation is only possible parasitically: it depends for its existence on the primitive, and logically prior, ability of criteria to attest to the particular reactions they do.7 Similarly, ‘criteria’ cannot be purely conventional signs. If they were, there would be no point in faking, for example, pleasure or pain, as the absence of intuitive grounds for reacting to pain-behaviour would mean there was no custom of doing so. Paintings too can only express what they do because they use signs that are not wholly conventional. All in all then, while Cézanne’s works are sometimes forced, and are always inflected by culture, they derive their raison d’être from the fact that painting in its primitive form can offer reliable criteria of aesthetic reactions.

A rather different set of issues are involved by the fact that artists like Cézanne must ensure that their works will be effective for their audience. Unlike actors, who may affect pain quite legitimately, representational artists normally work under a requirement that their paintings really do exemplify the reactions they purport to. (And we justifiably denigrate some paintings – like Cézanne’s early paintings – that do not.) But this does not mean that artists may not legitimately modify their work with a view to their audiences’ response to it. Not to do this would be tantamount to solipsism, or to thinking one is in possession of a ‘private’ language. The mature Cézanne certainly took some pains to adopt the perspective of his audience,80 and must have transformed his paintings to some extent in an effort to make them capable of being understood. He nevertheless made only those concessions to the real public that he considered necessary for reaching the very ‘restricted’ public of his imagination.80 And arguably, because of this, his paintings retained more of their primitive character than more conventional works tailored to the expectations of the Salon-going public.

The fact that the artist acts as spectator to her or his own work has another important consequence, which is that a painting can incorporate the artist’s reactions to it as it emerges. (Something similar, but also different, happens in some complicated forms of pain-behaviour.) So although Cézanne’s paintings are primarily concerned with expressing reactions to things in the natural world, they also express his reactions to them. Many of Cézanne’s paintings of the later 1870s, for example The Plate of Apples of 1877 (fig. 3), exhibit a primitive but deliberate relish in the matière out of which they are made. And later on, even when his use of paint is manifestly sophisticated, it still clearly rests on a primitive love of the medium.82 There is also a sheer, instinctual enthusiasm for colour in all its variety and richness in many of Cézanne’s paintings, which recalls the irrepresible love of colour exhibited by children. Indeed, in The Plate of Apples, Cézanne’s colour calls to mind the ‘absolute sensation’ described in the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon, i.e. colour of such richness that it acquires the same presence in the eye as tastes do for the palate.83 In the last analysis, however, Cézanne did not love colour for its own sake (or for its chromaticity alone), as a purely ‘decorative’ painter would,4 any more than he loved paint for being a fluid that can be spread on canvas, as a Greenbergian Modernist might. Rather paint and colour were media as far as he was concerned, which could stand for something other than themselves, namely the physicality of what he saw. Cézanne’s laborious search for colour harmony, for example, was overriding determined by his ambition to make it work as a kind of ‘drawing’ that could capture the shape and palpability of things.5 So too was his thick paint (which is revealed by sunken contour lines in many paintings of the 1870s).86
Real primitives

The foregoing argument goes some way towards explaining how Cézanne’s paintings could be exemplary in the sense of ‘model’ with the idea that they had the ability – as criteria – to suggest particular responses independently of rules stipulating in advance what these should be like. Criteria can do this even within complicated activities, provided these maintain contact with the primitive forms of life that ground them. At least, Wittgenstein suggests this is possible in the *Philosophical Investigations*, at the end of a passage describing how a group of people amuse themselves ‘by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on’. In this case, it turns out that ‘The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw’; but, he adds, ‘is there not also the case where we play and – make up the rules as we go

For this to happen, it must be the case that we can make up a game (and its rules) in the act of performing it. We might, for example, begin to formalize the rules of our game as our more or less spontaneous reactions to each other’s moves start to take on definite patterns. But we can only do this if primitive actions like throwing a ball to another person can serve naturally as the criteria of a limited range of responses, or further moves, and so on. They can, of course – which explains how, in such a case, the ‘deed’ and not the ‘word’ can come ‘in the beginning’.

If what a painter does rests visibly on a primitive form of life, it too can be exemplary. And because it retained a good deal of its primitive character, Cézanne’s lavish response to the physicality of the world was capable of prompting others to paint similarly. Emile Bernard, for example, looked to Cézanne as his example in the later 1880s, as can be seen in *Still Life with Orange* of 1887 (fig. 4); and a generation further on, the Cubists pursued Cézanne’s responsiveness to the sensuousness of things in their own ways, notably in paintings such as Picasso’s *Bowl and Fruit* of 1908 (fig. 4).
But none of this sanctions any claim that Cézanne invented modern art by himself. His achievement is instead better likened to that of William Webb Ellis, who did not invent the game of rugby when he ‘took the ball in his arms and ran with it’, but facilitated its invention, as Kirk Varnedoe’s suggests in his analogy between Webb Ellis and the modern artist:

Webb Ellis’s exploit still seems to me to be as sharply chiselled out a kernel as we could hope for of what cultural innovation is all about. Someone operating in the context of a set of rules sees that there is another way to go, and takes matters into his or her own hands; and someone else, or a lot of others, chooses to view this aberrant move, not just as a failure or a foul, but as the seed of a new kind of game, with its own set of rules.

What the Webb Ellis story captures so well is the Wittgensteinian argument that meaningful originality can never be an individual achievement, because, if no one can obey a rule ‘privately’, no one can invent a new rule by herself or himself. It is no surprise, therefore, to discover that Webb Ellis was actually exploiting the informality of the rules of football as they were observed at Rugby at the time (1823) – and the lack of penalties for infringing them. The story of the invention of rugby also demonstrates the Wittgensteinian argument that any complicated form of life needs ‘customs’ and ‘institutions’ enshrining its rules for it to become established and subsist, as it took many years, and several societies, to make rugby the game it eventually became. Webb Ellis did nevertheless prompt the invention of a new game and its rules by his deeds (and not words). And Cézanne contributed to the practices of modern art by producing works which other painters could respond to. Moreover, even though some painters tried to extract formulae and rules from his work, especially as the official identity of Cézannist painting became formalized in the early twentieth century, this in no way contradicts this analysis. It merely suggests that art, unlike rugby, is best when it is not too strictly governed by rules.

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate for the art historian to ask for some indication that Cézanne thought of his work this way, particularly because an artist’s sense of her or his own practice normally has some bearing on what she or he actually does (even if it does not wholly explain it). Cézanne’s commitment to making exemplary work, and to passing on his project to other painters, emerges only sporadically or elliptically, however, in a few statements and a few paintings. And whenever it does, it is coloured by his acceptance of how any success he might eventually enjoy would be posthumous. This much can certainly be inferred legitimately from Cézanne’s close identification with figures from literature such as Moses, Phocion, and (the painter) Frenhofer, whose achievements were only recognized after their death (if at all). Cézanne also took a close interest in several essays by the critic Gustave Geffroy, which suggest that the exemplary force of an artist’s work is often only recognized, and fulfilled, long after his demise. According to Gasquet’s recollections, for example, Cézanne would spend long hours in the Egyptian galleries in the Louvre contemplating Geffroy’s essay, ‘Le sarcophage égyptien’, which describes how it took several millennia for the work of one anonymous Egyptian tomb sculptor to gain an appreciative audience. Cézanne was deeply touched too by Geffroy’s allegorical story, ‘Le sentiment de l’impossible’, in which the love of a man for his soul-mate only comes to fruition when, a century later, she is able to accept his love as something she could have foreseen all along.

Fig. 5.
Pablo Ruiz Picasso
Compotier et fruits
1908. Tempera on panel 21 x 27 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel; Gift of Dr H C Richard Doetsch-Beniger, 1960
Copyright © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
after his death, she discovers a cache of his love letters and concludes they must have been written for her.97

Geffroy is also important for understanding Cézanne’s sense of his own primitivism because the painter thanked him for an article of 1894, in which he had suggested that while Cézanne was a ‘primitive’ whose work was ‘frequently incomplete’, he was also the creator of some ‘infinitely expressive pages’.98 Here the idea that Cézanne’s ‘primitive’ efforts were potentially exemplary is only implicit. But Geffroy explicitly connected primitivism with the potential for being exemplary in an article of 1902, ‘Les vrais primitifs’, where he defined ‘the real primitives’ as those ‘searching, obstinate, and naively naturalistic artists’ who make up ‘the innovators of every epoch and period of art’.99 And while Geffroy did not mention Cézanne by name in this text, he must have counted him among the ‘real primitives’, because he had earlier compared Cézanne to those ‘shepherds who, alone in the fields, discovered the beginnings of art’.100

These details are merely anecdotal. The theoretical significance of Geffroy’s work is that it defines artistic primitivism in terms that sit very well with Wittgenstein’s thinking. Geffroy argues, for instance, that the work of the earliest ‘primitives’ was one of the ‘first instinctive manifestations of the artistic faculty in man’, and that the work of ‘primitives’ more generally was the result of ‘instinct before reflection’.101 Thus closely approaching the Wittgensteinian notion that making art is an intuitively ‘given’ form of life in its primitive manifestations. Geffroy also argued that some basic art forms manifest ‘the similarity of instincts’ among different peoples,102 which recalls Wittgenstein’s view that art issues from primitive foundations. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of the present argument, however, Geffroy maintained that the ‘real primitives’ were ‘harbingers of future humanity’,103 thus suggesting – in line with Wittgenstein – that art grounded in primitive instincts can be exemplary for successive generations. It is finally a moot point whether or not Geffroy’s 1903 article expressed Cézanne’s own view of himself, and hence uncertain whether Cézanne understood his primitivism as Geffroy did. But it is far from inconceivable that Geffroy’s writings bore the stamp of views that they exchanged in conversations, or letters, during their brief but close friendship in the mid-1890s.104

Emile: or Aesthetic Quality
If a work of art is only properly exemplary when it is worth imitating, the question remains: how can maintaining contact with its ‘primitive’ grounding make painting aesthetically ‘good’? While the later Wittgenstein is reticent about any specific link between aesthetic quality in art and primitive human capacities, what he says about the relationship between ‘complicated’ and ‘primitive’ forms of life more generally does suggest a connection between the two.

In Wittgenstein’s account complicated forms of life are grounded in primitive forms of life. But rarely is any complicated form of life an elaboration of only one primitive form of life. Medicine, for example, requires complex forms of training, administration, maintenance, etc., and can only subsist at the intersection of multifarious complicated developments of more primitive forms of life. It is often the case, nevertheless, that a complicated form of life derives its intrinsic meaning from only one or two primitive forms of life, which also make it worthwhile. For example, it is our juridical concern for the suffering of others that makes medicine meaningful, and worth doing.105 The force of this line of thought is most readily appreciated if we look at what happens when things go wrong, as when forms of life lose touch with their primitive grounding. When, for example, medicine is not motivated by altruistic concern, but is practised solely for extrinsic reasons (financial gain, professional ambition, etc.), it loses its intrinsic meaning, and is no longer worth doing for itself alone. It becomes ethically empty in other words. When, by analogy, painters paint for reasons extrinsic to art, without maintaining contact with the primitive foundations of their activity, their work can become meaningless, and hence aesthetically empty too. (Which is not to deny that it can still carry ideological meanings and values.) It would therefore seem to be important to a painter to retain some contact with the primitive forms of life on which painting is grounded. A stronger conclusion is that, if painting becomes sterile when it does not stay in touch with its primitive roots, it must gain...
in vitality when it does. By allowing its primitive roots to show, that is, painting can gain in the aesthetic value Wittgenstein called ‘life’.

For all it may seem anachronistic to suggest Cézanne could have held a theory of aesthetic value genuinely, and substantially, similar to the one just outlined, it is not altogether unlikely that he did. As an aficionado of Rousseau’s *Emile*, he would certainly have known the philosopher’s opinions on the value of ‘primitive’ intuitions, and perhaps also his specific argument that such intuitions have the power to ground meaningful and ethically good behaviour, i.e. behaviour that is both virtuous and worthwhile. Indeed, not only does Rousseau’s ethical argument come remarkably close to anticipating Wittgenstein’s, but his too has implications for aesthetic value that are readily extrapolated. Rousseau argues, for instance:

We are born sensitive and from our birth onwards we are affected in various ways by the objects that surround us. As soon as we have, so to speak, consciousness of our sensations, we are disposed to seek out or shun the things that cause them, at first because they are pleasant or unpleasant, then because they suit us or not, and finally because of judgments of them formed by means of the ideas of happiness and goodness which reason gives us. These tendencies gain strength and permanence as we become more sensitive and more enlightened. But once they are constrained by our habits, they become more or less corrupted by our opinions. Before this change they are what I call nature within us. It is thus to these primitive dispositions that everything should be related...  

**Conclusion**

On Wittgenstein’s view of things, what makes art art cannot be explained, but can only be shown: by pointing to features of works of art that command our attention. Appreciating work like Cézanne’s for its primitive qualities is thus a matter of seeing it in a particular way, which also requires us to recognize the limitations of rational explanation.

This way of seeing may seem to deny the importance of those aspects of art that issue from, and are bound up with, the ‘complicated forms of life’ of particular cultures. And it must be admitted that it can neither reveal the ideological content, nor the political virtue, that is part of many a work of art’s total achievement, as both have a strongly cultural dimension. The ideological content of Cézanne’s work, for example, can be identified both with its complicity with contemporary patriarchy, and with the values represented by the Classicism that is rarely absent from it altogether. Its political virtue is no less complicated, and culturally specific, being most readily identified with its attempt to refurbish perception with the very physical density that contemporary capitalism was bent on stripping from it.

But while an intuitive appreciation of art’s primitive dimension can never give us the whole picture, by the same token it impoverishes art like Cézanne’s to disregard its primitive dimension. One reason for this is that people will surely continue to make art as long as they are human, irrespective of all predictions of its imminent or eventual redundancy, and despite all attempts to suppress it, because art is grounded in given, primitive behaviours. An instinctually grounded work of art can therefore affirm human freedom in the face of ideology, or the reasons and beliefs that not only shape but sometimes corrupt our complicated forms of life. Cézanne’s painting arguably demonstrates this argument, at least when it is visibly grounded in intuition, and relatively free of the beliefs and values, and venal motivations, that discredit the work of many of his contemporaries. But this is not to suggest that the (relatively) ‘timeless’ value that art accrues from its primitive human roots must always exist in sublime isolation from the historical world in which art is made. Rather, the value of ‘primitive’ art like Cézanne’s is also dialectical, or dialogical, or something it accrues by virtue of imaginatively resisting the (contingent) world formed in ideology. So while Cézanne’s painting does show what it is like to be in touch with the real grounds of our humanity, it had a particular poignancy in demonstrating this when it first appeared because its primitive, human physicality ran against the grain of the alienating – i.e. spectacular and phantasmagorical – visuality characteristic of Third Empire capitalism. Nor have things changed so much that this value is altogether irrelevant now.
Notes

I am greatly indebted to all the Wittgenstein scholars mentioned below for my understanding of the philosopher’s work, but particularly to Barry, to Cope, and to Durand. The shortcomings of this essay are, of course, entirely my own responsibility. I would also like to acknowledge the Arts and Humanities Research Board (as was) and the Leverhulme Trust for generously funding the research out of which this essay emerged.


5 See Ward, Paisse, p. 73.


7 See Sluga, “Whose House?”

8 The ensuing argument has an affinity with, and perhaps some parentage in, Kant’s aesthetics. Kant argues, for example, that ‘genius’ is capable of ‘originality’, and of ‘producing that for which no definite rule can be given’, i.e. ‘original nonsense’. Hence, for him, the ‘products’ of genius are ‘models’, or ‘exemplary’, and ‘serve ... as a standard or rule of estimating’. Kant also argues ‘it is nature (the nature of the individual) ... that in products of genius gives the rule to art.’ See Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986 [1790]), §46 and §57, remark I.


11 See Shiff, Cézanne, pp. 283–84 for a list of references to Cézanne’s ‘primitive’ nature in contemporary critical literature. To criticise Gauguin (who explicitly criticizes Cézanne) was, of course, the first to call Cézanne ‘un primitif’, while Émile Bernard appears to have been the first to connect Cézanne and the primitive, having mentioned Cézanne’s ‘hais primitives’ in Les hommes d’aujourd’hui, VIII/387 (February–March 1891).


17 On the centrality of ‘sensation’ to Cézanne’s Theory of art, see Shiff, Cézanne, especially pp. 187–96.


20 For a view of the irreducibility of such ‘artists’ statements about them not wholly incompatible with Wittgenstein’s thinking, see Mark Roskill, The Interpretation of Cubism (Philadelphia: AIA Press Alliance, 1984), pp. 189–95.


24 See e.g. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, pp. 38–92, and 175.


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Real Primitives

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32. Aesthetic value is transcendent because it belongs entirely to the ‘willing’ subject, which is not part of the world, but is a subjective perspective on the world from which it is detached; see Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London: Routledge, 1974 [1922]), §6, 5.61, 5.613, and 6.116.1. See also Cézanne’s anthropomorphic description of the painting fruit he painted in Gasquet, ‘Les ions’, pp. 70–89.

33. It is thus to be contrasted to those lines of thought that (like the notion of ‘intention in action’) first emerged in the early, Tractarian, writings and then migrate more or less unchanged into the later writings. It is also different from those arguments that (like the ‘private language’ argument) find onomastic expression in the early work, but leave a recognizable, mature descendant in later writings. See Cora Diamond, ‘Does Bismark Have a Beetle in his Box?’, in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds), Wittgenstein (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 262–92.


39. See Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §§829–30, and §§332. See also Hanfling, Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy, pp. 91–93. This applies not only to normal language, but also to languages and the like, and it also applies to conversations with oneself (or an imaginary interlocutor).

40. Cf. Philosophical Investigations, §620. We may, not for example, always be able to tell whether we have applied the same rule as we did before. See A.C. Grayling, Wittgenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1980]), p. 82.


42. Cf. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Occasions, §381.


44. Ibid., II, §10. Cf. ibid., II, §15.

45. This view, or modified form of it, is of course fundamentally true of medical psychoanalytic aesthetics. See e.g. Jaya K. Segal, ‘“A Psychoanalytic Approach to Aesthetics”, in J. Phillips and L. Stonebridge, Reading Melanie Klein (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 203–22 (especially 208–09).


47. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §§241–2. Wittgenstein’s point is logical, not empirical: he only claims that such behaviours are shared by the broad run of human beings. Since being human is a matter of possessing enough of the right kind of features that make up the ‘family resemblances’ between humans, an inability to respond with concern to the pain of others, or to paint, does not mean on its own make someone inhuman. Moreover, Wittgenstein says nothing to suggest that different individual cannot withhold this kind of pain, to different degrees.


49. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 196e.

50. Cf. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §829. See also Hanfling, Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy, pp. 91–93. This applies not only to normal language, but also to languages and the like, and it also applies to conversations with oneself (or an imaginary interlocutor).

51. See ibid., pp. 189–95.

52. Ibid., pp. 195–204.


56. Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 59e. Cf. ibid., 19e, 59e, 70e–90e, and 94e. Wittgenstein also suggests that to describe Schubert’s music as ‘melancholy’ amounts to ‘giving it a face’. See Wittgenstein, Lectures, I, §80.

57. See especially Wollheim, Painting, pp. 305–5.


Late in life, Cézanne told Bernard: 'Etre peintre par les qualités mêmes de la peinture, se servir de...

Félix Fénéon, ‘Le néo-impressionisme’, 1877. The difference between my sense of my own pain and my sense of other people's pain is revealed in...


Cézanne was attuned to the decorative dimension of painting. In a letter of 3 February 1902 to Charles Camoin, he spoke of the desirability of making copies after ‘les grands maîtres décoratifs, Véronèse et Rubens’. See Cézanne, Correspondence, p. 280.


This was installed in 1980 by the Old Rugbeian committee, who should have known better, and made: THIS STONE COMMEMORATES THE EXPLOIT OF WILLIAM WEBB ELLIS WHO WITH A FINE DISREGARD FOR THE RULES OF FOOTBALL AS PLAYED IN HIS TIME FIRST TOOK THE BALL IN HIS HANDS AND RAN WITH IT THIS ORIGINATING THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE RUGBY GAME AD 1823.


See note 57.

See Jennifer Macrory, Running with the Ball: The Birth of Rugby Football (London: Collins, 1991), pp. 16–36, which cites three accounts by Matthew Blanchard of 1876 and 1880 describing Webb Ellis’s actions, one of which suggests that ‘few and simple were the rules of the game’ played in 1823. Other witnesses, whose recollections were published in the Report of the Sub-Committee of the Old Rugbeian Society in 1897, give a different picture. The Reverend Thomas Harris, for example, recalled: ‘Our Laws in those days were unwritten and traditional, so that I can give no authority beyond custom’, adding that: ‘Running with the ball was distinctly forbidden’. Thomas Hughes, admittedly some years his junior, recalls differently, stating that ‘running with the ball ... was not absolutely forbidden’. And according to the Old Rugbeian Committee’s report, handling had a “doubtful legality” until 1841–42. See Macrory, Running, pp. 26–27, and 34–45. Different schools also observed different rules of football at the time, which may have occasionally added to the flexibility of the rules observed at Rugby. These were eventually written down only in 1845. See Macrory, Running, p. 86.


102 Ibid, p. 15.

103 Ibid, p. 31.
DEATH AND TOURISM

Claude Monet's Paintings of Venice

Stephen Eisenman

In this essay Eisenman considers the place of Venice, and the place of Claude Monet’s paintings of the city at the turn of the nineteenth century. Eisenman’s discussion of Venice as a centre for modern tourism – and for the specific kind of artistic tourism that Monet’s visit to the city in 1908 represented – explores the way in which, under the conditions of modernity, the past itself is refigured/materialized within contemporary life for consumption by tourists of all kinds as idealized spectacle. A self-conscious playing with or management of identity and meaning, Eisenman implies, was not the invention of postmodernist artists or their theorists but a practice of exhibited historical – and historicized – sedimentation always integral to modernity’s own (selective and partial) senses of desirable or fascinating ‘presents’ and ‘pasts’. Venice, perhaps among all southern European cities, has accrued and embodied a dense palimpsest of idealized and demonized representations, some of which found form in Monet’s paintings.

Consider Eisenman’s account of tourism as a kind of deadness of historical meaning in relation to the objectifying portrayals of the rural poor in English landscape painting discussed by John Barrell (Essay 1).

Introduction: Venice Beckons

At last, Claude Monet could not avoid Venice. He had, after all, spent much of his life painting water – the English Channel, the Seine, the Atlantic, the Thames and, especially, his own water garden at Giverny. The canals, lagoons, rivers and sea of Venice, however, remained to be painted, and time was growing short. In 1908, Monet was 68 years old and lately, Madame Monet complained, he refused to leave his garden at all, preferring to spend long days casting his gaze downwards at underwater grasses, or across the water’s surface towards lily pads, willow trees and an arched, wooden footbridge. For six years he had painted almost no other subject than his garden. (In 1907 he portrayed his breakfast – a pair of still lifes composed of eggs, a pitcher and a bowl.) Monet was now a veritable recluse, but he had not closed himself off from the entreaties of family, friends, patrons and dealers. They thought he should accept at least one...