Cézanne and the poetics of metonymy

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Painting is poetry and always written in verse with plastic rhymes, never in prose.
—Picasso, from a letter to Françoise Gilot

Throughout Cézanne’s personal and creative life, water and bathing served as emblems of an idealized unity between nature and mankind. The aquatic pastimes of his youth in Aix found reflection in Cézanne’s early adult letters and poems that harp on his nostalgic yearning for bathing in the Arc River. Although later, in his paintings, this lifelong fascination with water and its eternal forms took on a more sophisticated shape, water’s proximity to poetry remained consistent in Cézanne’s mental categories. The suggestive poetic quality of water ultimately would bring Cézanne to innovative forms of painterly expression, not surprisingly in works depicting water and bathing. Moreover, in applying the poetic principle to his painting, Cézanne inadvertently exposed what would emerge as one of the basic laws of the modernist aesthetic, namely the transcendent quality of the fine arts: music gives birth to poetry, poetry to painting. Music and poetry helped Cézanne to understand the meaning of nature to man, the desire to return to and dissolve in nature’s eternal flux, and he was able to express this discovery in a single artistic medium.

One of Cézanne’s earliest poems (May 3, 1858) is of particular interest for its exploration of the theme of man in nature.¹ Here Cézanne goes beyond simply bemoaning the end of the bathing season. Water emerges in this poem as the chief of the four elements that give shape to his artistic worldview. The poem insistently and systematically depicts the elements flowing and melting into one another in an endless cycle based on water. The muddy water (‘une eau rouge et bourbeuse’) is the earth entering into and becoming water. The melting hail (‘la grêle … se mêle’) represents a liquid and fast-dissolving sky: the air is not sufficiently buoyant to hold moisture, which it willingly yields to the stream. The fourth element, fire, enters the poem after the abrupt shift of meter as a metaphor of the poet’s passionate love, which suddenly returns to him at the sight of nature’s majestic harmony: ‘d’un amour subit j’ai ressenti la flamme’. The artist’s sense of rediscovery (ressenti) in this line, the re-enchantment with life inspired in him by nature’s fluidity, cannot be stressed enough here, an idea to which I will return. The fact that this most interesting and rich of Cézanne’s poems is unfinished sets it apart from the majority of his others. Given the importance of its subject, its abrupt ending speaks volumes. Cézanne appears to have been unable to treat the theme of man in nature in verse. His poetical talent was unequal to his subject. For years to come Cézanne would continue to struggle with this subject in his paintings, particularly in his celebrated bathers, where his responsiveness to poetry would eventually allow him to achieve what he could merely intimate in verse.

It is true that Cézanne’s poetic sensibility, a point of view that has persistently been regarded as a predicate to both poetry and painting,² does not make him an innovator merely by virtue of approaching painting from a poetic direction.³ As the poet Wallace Stevens noted, ‘Generalizations as expansive as these: that there is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything or that there may be a fundamental aesthetic of which poetry and painting are related but dissimilar manifestations, are speculative. One is better satisfied with particulars.’ (p.111). And so, although it may generally be true that ‘at the level of artistic vision […] poet and painter merge, become one — the Artist⁴ — the originality of Cézanne is that he persistently brings a quite particular poetics to bear on his painting. I would argue that Cézanne used the trope of metonymy — so characteristic of the poetic and musical arts — to break through the traditional mode of painting by way of metaphor. My working hypothesis for this essay is that Cézanne salvaged the principle of metonymy from poetry to apply it to painting, and that he used the metonymic fluidity maximally in his later works.

In a 1935 essay on the Russian poet Boris Pasternak, Roman Jakobson discussed the tropes of metaphor and metonymy as representing two fundamental methods of poetic creation.⁵ Metaphor asserts an affinity between objects previously unrecognized as similar, and the more different the compared objects seem, the more evocative the metaphor. For this reason, a dead metaphor is merely a metaphor in which the surprise of the identification has been weakened or destroyed by excessive use, a metaphor that has become a cliché. Metonymy, by contrast, establishes similarity or identity by virtue of spatial or empathetic proximity and contiguity: synecdoche and pathetic fallacy are two common metonymic figures. Jakobson’s basic distinction between metonymy’s world of contiguity and metaphor’s world of similarity as manifestations of ‘linguistic form’ has proved productive in describing painting as well as poetry.⁶ Jakobson himself argued that the cubists, substituting an object with a set of synecdoches, are metonymic, while the surrealist painters are metaphorical (1956, p.78). Similarly, the creative path of Cézanne can be mapped out between the poles of metaphor and metonymy, so
that various phases in the evolution of Cézanne’s painting style may be characterized by the predominance of one trope or the other — what Jakobson called aphasia (1936, pp. 78–79). Cézanne is most overly metaphorical in his still lifes. According to one critic, “[r]ead Balzac, Cézanne thought of painting, recording that the task he initially set himself as a painter was the rendering, in paint, of a literary metaphor, Balzac’s metaphor of napkins as white mountain tops in *La Peau de Chagrin.*” Whether or not we believe that the shell in the *Black Clock* alludes to the ‘intimacy between the friends [Cézanne and Zola]:’ most would agree that the shell is a metaphor for something else. Metaphor is an important trope in Cézanne’s painting and should not be underestimated, especially in view of the fact that the unimpeachable opinion of Baudelaire linked metaphor with the artistic imagination. 

Yet the great innovation of Cézanne’s painting is in its activation of the metonymic principle. While the use of line, at a first glance, may seem to be a metonymic device (i.e. one that stresses continuity and contiguity), line tends, in fact, to separate objects that would otherwise unite and blend in a quite natural sort of metonymy. Moreover, color, which we tend by force of habit to associate with metaphor through the clichés inherent in ‘color symbolism’ (red=passion, black=evil, etc.), actually facilitates metonymy in painting. At least this is the case in Cézanne’s painting, where color works to establish affinities between adjacent objects and to create a sense of the fluidity of forms. Oddly enough, this idea may have been suggested to Cézanne by the art criticism of Baudelaire, who had insisted on the primacy of colors over line in an unorthodox move that flew in the face of reigning Salon judgment, as previously represented by Ingres in the neoclassical tradition of French painting. In *Salon de 1859,* Baudelaire went as far as to state the need for a painting to be rendered as ‘a world’, by which he seems to have had in mind a uniform, fluid vision of life of the kind that Cézanne would later realize through metonymy. In his later years Cézanne came to be a metonymic painter through his fervent refusal of the outline, ‘les contours d’un trait noir, défaut qu’il faut combattre à toute force’. Picasso seemed to sense the intrinsically metonymic nature of Cézanne’s still lifes when he said that while ‘look[ing] at Cézanne’s apples, you see that he hasn’t really painted apples, as such. What he did was to paint terribly well the weight of space on that circular form’. Picasso has essentially identified Cézanne’s ingenuity in an unexpected use of metonymy: Cézanne insinuates an apple into his composition by forcing the desired object’s immediate proximity, the space that is contiguous with the apple, to conform to — even to empathize with — something D. H. Lawrence would describe as ‘appleyness’. The weight of space here is as integral to the composition as the apples themselves, which, if Picasso is correct, are only present by a suggestive sort of synecdoche that could be achieved exclusively in the absence of the anti-contiguous barrier of the black line.

Lawrence was one of several poets who have taken a marked interest in Cézanne’s painting. Cézanne’s two rooms in the 1907 Salon d’Automne inspired Rainer Maria Rilke’s prolonged panegyric, recorded in his letters to his wife. By adopting Cézanne as a beacon for his own creativity, Rilke did not so much arbitrarily erase the boundaries between poetry and painting, but rather, tapped into the painter’s inherently poetic disposition. Gertrude Stein, whose search for fluid literary form attempted to realize Cézanne’s poetic vision of things, detected in Cézanne something that literature had hitherto lacked, a secret previously imparted only to the painter. He taught her, in Stein’s words, ‘how to see … with his eyes’, an ability which she brought to bear upon her experimental hybrids of poetry and prose. A much later poet affected by the artist is the painter and poet Charles Tomlinson. Unlike his colleagues, Tomlinson does not consider Cézanne solely a painter. For him Cézanne’s early verses are symptomatic of his later developments as painter.
recapturing ‘the flesh of essence and matter’ in the apple, Cézanne transcends the metaphoric mode of painting and activates an art of metonymy. In Lawrence’s words, Cézanne wished to displace our present mode of mental-visual consciousness, the consciousness of mental concepts, and substitute a mode of consciousness that was predominantly intuitive, the awareness of ‘touch’ (p. 68). But in fact, this awareness of touch, the tactile sense of Cézanne’s art that he gave to poets, was something that poetry had first given to Cézanne.

Poetry and painting have a deep history of comparison and interchange. Virtually from the very beginning, the classical notion of ut pictura poesis had the purpose and effect of promoting painting to the level of poetry. Well before the time of Cézanne’s earliest letters to Zola, the major poets of the century had all but ratified a hierarchy in which poetry was regarded as the reigning form of art. Théodore de Banville’s radical book, Petit Traité de poésie française (1872), is of primary interest in tracing the evolution of the ideal, ut pictura poesis, in nineteenth-century France. Banville praises poetry as the art of the most developed synthetic potential; for him poetry est à la fois Musique, Statuaire, Peinture, Eloquence; elle doit charmer l’oreille, enchanter l’esprit, représenter les son, imiter les couleurs, rendre les objets visibles, et exciter en nous les mouvements qu’il lui plaît d’y produire; aussi est-elle le seul art complet, nécessaire, et qui contienne tous les autres.

In such a climate, the desire to become a poet in an artistically inclined youth appears quite natural. As previous commentators have argued, Cézanne’s love of literature may have ‘caused him as a youth to hesitate between poetry and painting’. According to Mack during the initial phases of the Cézanne’s correspondence with Zola and Baille, ‘poetry occupies a much more important place in Cézanne’s thoughts, or at any rate in his letters, than painting’. Gowing believes that the threesome seemed to have ‘more poetry and romantic fantasy in their heads than painting’ (p. 4). This is fully supported by Zola’s later memoirs, where he dwells on the importance of poetry at the time for him and Cézanne:

Our loves, at that time, were above all, the poets. We did not stroll alone. We had books in our pockets or in our game-bags. For a year, Victor Hugo reigned over us as an absolute monarch. He had conquered us by his powerful demeanor of a giant, he delighted us with his forceful rhetoric. We knew entire poems by heart and when we returned home, in the evening at twilight, our gait kept pace with the cadence of his verses, sonorous as the blasts of a trumpet [...]. Then, one morning one of us brought a volume of Musset [...]. Reading Musset was for us the awakening of our own heart. We trembled: Our cult of Victor Hugo received a terrible blow; little by little we felt ourselves grow chilled, and his verses escaped our memories [...]. Alphonse de Musset alone reigned in our game-bags [...] he became our religion. Over and above his laughter and schoolboy buffoonery, his tears won us over; and he only became completely our poet when we wept on reading him.

In Zola’s reminiscences of the friends’ hunting trips poetry resurges again and again, while the hunt itself ‘barely interrupted the one of us who was reading aloud, perhaps for the twentieth time, Rolla or Les Nuits!’ Even after Zola’s departure for Paris, Cézanne is said to have recited Alfred de Musset’s verses during his painting trips to Mount St Victoire in the summer of 1859.

Poems make up a rather conspicuous part of Cézanne’s correspondence with Zola and Baille of 1858–1859. At times the poems Cézanne would regularly include in his letters drew on the ideas of the surrounding prose; elsewhere they seem quite unconnected to the letters that contain them; and elsewhere again a poem replaces the letter itself, which is to say that the letter is written in verse. The poems quickly became such an integral part of the correspondence that when a letter came without a promised verse, Cézanne would attempt to justify his omission: ‘Je suis très occupé, morbleau, très occupé. C’est ce qui t’expliquera l’absence du poème que tu me demandes.’ At some point Cézanne vehemently insists on conducting the correspondence in verse: ‘Je veux — non, je ne veux pas — mais je te prie de tout mettre en vers.’ To facilitate his correspondent’s versification, he includes in his letter to Zola from July 9, 1858, a selection of rhymes he put together — something like a template for creating verse epistles. Zola did, in fact, play along, so that there is an exchange of poems, although he time and again recognizes Cézanne as the greater poet. As a student at the Faculté de Droit in Aix, Cézanne continued to compose ‘interminable poems on historical or eerie themes’ and to exchange his verses with Zola. So central did the discussion of poetry become in the letters that on March 25, 1860, Zola gripes about the predominance of poetry talk over discussions of visual art in their correspondence: ‘Nous parlons souvent poésie dans nos lettres, mais les mots sculpture et peinture ne s’y montrent que rarement, pour ne pas dire jamais. C’est un grave oublé, presque un crime.’ Zola writes a farewell to Cézanne-the-poet in a letter from August 1, 1860, after Cézanne had at last chosen painting over poetry as his future vocation and moved to Paris to study painting. Nonetheless, Cézanne’s last known verse was written as late as January 5, 1863, some two and a half years later. At least one critic considers it ‘one of the best that Cézanne ever wrote.’

Even after the exchange of verses between Cézanne and Zola had finally ceased, Cézanne continued to discuss others’ poetry in his letters. In a letter from July 1868, Cézanne writes to Numa Coste about Alexis’ recitation of verses and his enthusiastic reception of them. Cézanne’s estimation of Alexis as possessing the tricks of the trade (‘Il a déjà enrichi la pâte du métier’) implies that his past dabbling in poetry puts him in the position to arbitrate the artistic worth of contemporary poetry. In the same fashion, some thirty-five
years later Cézanne crowned his young poet friend Joachim Gasquet with poetic laurels: ‘Le titre de jeune maître vous est acquis.’ Cézanne’s warm attachment to young poets and writers in his later life — among them Joachim Gasquet, Léo Larguier, Germain Nouveau (whom Cézanne aided financially), Jean Royère — is hardly accidental. In their company Cézanne attempted to revive a great joy of his youth, reading poetry. Gasquet in his memoirs tells of how Cézanne recited for him Verlaine’s poetry while at the Arc River, and how he still could hear the painter ‘intoning Baudelaire’s ‘La Charogne’ in a strange voice like a schoolboy’s or a priest’s, or asking Gasquet to read him ‘Un Pounacé’ from *Jadis et Nageure*.

What is more, the juxtaposition of poetry and painting in Cézanne’s correspondence is directly linked with the formation of the concepts of nature, realism and abstraction. Not surprisingly, Cézanne’s reading practices aided in the development of his artistic doctrine: ‘figure-toi que je ne lis presque plus. Je ne sais si tu scras de mon avis, et pour cela je ne changerai pas, mais je commence à m’apercevoir que l’art pour l’art est une rude blague.’ Once estranged from the written word, the artist escapes the spell of the subjective and self-contained literary universe where art tends to engender more art without the mediation of outside objects such as nature. The literary is regarded with suspicion as that which tempts an artist away from nature and towards abstraction. This was a temptation Cézanne dreaded, doubless because he felt himself susceptible to its persuasion. From 1904 onwards, Cézanne openly warned against the effects of literary modes of thinking on visual art, writing that the artist must beware of the literary spirit: ‘il doit redouter l’esprit littéraire, que fait si souvent le peintre s’écarter de sa vraie voie — l’étude concrète de la nature — pour se perdre trop longtemps dans des spéculations intangibles.’ Resolving the opposition of poetry and painting, for Cézanne, meant choosing between nature and abstraction, object and subject: ‘Le littérateur s’exprime avec des abstractions, tandis que le peintre concrète, au moyen du dessin et de la couleur, ses sensations, ses perceptions.’

(“Significantly, the above quotation comes from the letter signed ‘Pictor P. Cézanne.’”) He also maintained that painters must devote themselves exclusively to the study of nature. Hence the need to block off all literary influence that forces the painting along the way of abstraction and away from nature. But as a late letter to Bernard shows, Cézanne could never completely escape the influence of the literary and of literary abstraction: ‘Or, vieux, soixante-dix ans environ, les sensations colorantes qui donnent la lumière sont chez moi cause d’abstractions qui ne me permettent pas de couvrir ma toile, ni de poursuivre la délimitation des objets quand les points de contact sont tenu, délicats; d’où il ressort que mon image ou tableau est incomplète.’

Over the years, Cézanne recognized the proximity of literary and visual arts, and fluctuated in telling ways in his assessment of the relative merits and dangers of the two forms. An awareness of the interrelation of poetry and painting may predicate Cézanne’s hesitation in recognizing his success in either of the two arts. As early as 1858, when Zola had already chosen his vocation as a writer, Cézanne began to express his uncertainty about whether his poetic gift was sufficient to allow him to follow the same path. When a verse epistle foundered, Cézanne dwelled on his poetic failings: ‘ces vers sont stupides/ Ils ne sont pas pleins de goût/Mais ils sont stupides/En valent rien du tout.’ In prose, too, Cézanne seemed to look for reassurance from Zola, as he admitted to the perceived failure of his own writing: ‘je te vois […] branler la tête en disant: ‘ça ne roule pas chez lui la poésie’…’ Zola responded by attempting to dissuade his friend from abandoning versification, saying that Cézanne is more of a poet than Zola because Cézanne’s poetry comes from his heart, not his mind: ‘Oui, mon vieil, plus poète que moi. Mon vers est peut-être plus pur que le tien, mais certes, le tien est plus poétique, plus vrai; tu écris avec le coeur, moi, avec l’esprit.’ In Zola’s view, poetry was an integral part of Cézanne’s artistic nature, and he reprimanded his friend for the lack of gratitude for this intrinsic poetic talent: ‘dans l’artiste il y a deux hommes, le poète et l’ouvrier. On naît poète, on devient ouvrier. Et toi qui as l’étincelle, qui possèdes ce qui ne s’acquiert pas, tu te plais; lorsque tu n’as pour réussir qu’à exercer tes doigts, qu’à devenir ouvrier.’ To make sense of Cézanne’s decision to abandon poetry in favor of painting, Zola presented poetry to Cézanne as a mode of art that subsumes painting, writing and music: ‘Le poète a bien des manières de s’exprimer: la plume, le pinceau, le ciseau, l’instrument. Tu as pris le pinceau, et tu as bien fait: on doit descendre sa pente.’ But while accepting Cézanne’s decision to ‘follow his own bent’ and to become a painter instead of poet, Zola bemoaned the loss of a future literary colossus: ‘Oh! pour ce grand poète qui s’en va, rends-moi un grand peintre, ou je t’en voudrai. Toi qui as guidé mes pas chancelants sur le Parnasse, toi qui m’as soutenu abandonné, fais-moi oublier le Lamartine naissant par le Raphael futur.’

Ironically, after trading a pen for a brush, Cézanne seems to have transferred his doubts about his poetry to his paintings. As late as 1879 he admitted that he is still trying to find his way as a painter (‘à trouver ma voie picturale’). Later yet, in 1894 Monet described Cézanne to Geoffroy as ‘un véritable artiste’ who doubts himself too much (‘est arrivé à douter de lui par trop’). The following year, in his own letter to Geoffroy, Cézanne provided justification for Monet’s description, writing about being unable to bring to a satisfactory conclusion (‘ne pouvant mener à bon fin’) a project that surpasses his strength and that he should not have taken up in the first place (‘le travail qui dépasse mes forces, et que j’ai eu le tort d’entreprendre.’). Indeed, as he advanced in years, Cézanne’s insecurity with respect to his profession grew. In the year before his death Cézanne expressed grave doubts about his success as a painter: ‘mon âge et ma santé ne me permettront jamais de réaliser le rêve d’art que j’ai poursuivi toute ma
And in 1906, the year of his death, he gave vent to the following sobering, saturnine thoughts in a letter to Bernard:

Arriverai-je au but tant cherché et si longtemps poursuivi? Je le souhaite, mais tant qu'il n'est pas atteint, un vague état de malaise subsiste, qui ne pourra disparaître qu'après que j'aurai atteint le port, soit avoir réalisé quelque chose se développant mieux que par le passé, et par là même devenant probant de théories, qui, elles, sont toujours faciles; il n'y a que le prevue à faire de ce qu'on pense qui présente de sérieux obstacles. Je continue donc mes études.64

I would argue that the difficulty Cézanne experienced in accepting his vocation as a painter may partially be due to the ghost of the poet that continued to haunt the painter. Only by learning to paint poetically could Cézanne begin to put this ghost to rest.

In order to test my hypothesis about the importance of metonymy in Cézanne’s late painting, I would like to analyze the Philadelphia Grandes Baigneuses (figure 1, c. 1906).65 In following the concept of ut pictura poesis, I take Charles Baudelaire’s poem ‘Correspondances’ as the interpretational key to this painting.66 According to Gasquet, not only was Baudelaire Cézanne’s favorite poet, but he knew by heart the cycle Les Fleurs du Mal, in which ‘Correspondences’ appeared.67 Cézanne may have taken a grandiose poetic image, pre-defined and ready in Baudelaire’s programmatic poem ‘Correspondances’, as the central image for his Large Bathers. It is, I think, plausible, that Cézanne should have used the poem’s main concept in what he considered his masterpiece in the making, the Large Bathers, which was to take its place in a museum alongside the old masters. ‘Correspondances’ appears

Figure 1. Grandes Baigneuses (c. 1906), Oil on canvas, 208.5 x 251.5 cm. W. P. Wilstach Collection (W’37-1-1), Philadelphia Museum of Art.
to be nothing short of a metonymic manifesto in a cycle of otherwise metaphoric verses. To be sure, the main concept of the poem rests on the metaphor of the first line, that ‘nature is a temple’ (‘la nature est un temple’), but having made this identity, the poem everywhere asserts the power of metonymy, contiguity and commingling. ‘Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent/Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité/Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté/Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.’68 The blending in unison — in short, correspondences — of the senses of smell, sight and sound are characteristic operations of metonymic art. They prepare the way in Cézanne for a synaesthetic-like blending of artistic media: poetry and painting.69

The bathers in the picture in fact compose a ‘profound unison’ (‘profonde unité’) with nature.70 This effect is achieved through the subtle correspondence of the hues of the females’ bodies to the trees, to the river bank from which they grow, to the sky and to the river. The hair of the two bathers depicted against the trees, one in the right, the other in the left portion of the composition, seems almost to graft itself onto the bark, while the outstretched limbs of the women resemble tree trunks. The buttocks of the seated figures fluidly grade into the dun tones of the soil, as if the bathers like the trees were some organic outgrowth of the soil. The long braided hair of the women repeats the elongated shapes of the trees, and the two bathers on the extreme left and right almost dissolve into the forest around them. This highly contiguous sense of drawing accords with Jakobson’s view that one of the outcomes of metonymic art is the ‘anthropomorphism of the inanimate world’.71 We may as well add that another natural consequence of the aesthetic of contiguity is the naturalization of the anthropomorphic world. Cézanne’s people become trees, his trees — people, and so on, all through the suggestive power of proximity. One might even say that the bathers lack a human quality and resemble instead some large mammals for whom the only harmonious state is the naked one. Metonymy is at work in the landscape itself. The foliage of the trees blends with the patchy sky so that it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends. It is indicative of water’s exemplary activation of the metonymic function that the forms and colors that have already begun to dissolve on the land and in the air enter into an ideal fluid interchange in the river’s magical reflection.

The ultimate unity with nature is achieved by the swimmer in the middle of the stream.72 Her shapes are like a highlight on the water, the supreme paragon of metonymy. Like the freed persona of another of Baudelaire’s poems (‘L’Homme et la mer’; also from Les Fleurs du Mal), the swimmer plunges ‘into the heart of [her] image’, the sea (p. 33). By merging with the water, the swimmer sheds her black outline — the discontinuous yet thick black lines that still define the bathers on the ground, setting them apart from their surroundings, even as their coloring acts to harmonize them with that same milieu. In contrast, the true bather — who is in fact a swimmer — has actually become one with the elements, an extension of the water, a part of the all-pervasive, all-penetrating flux of nature. She has parted with her body, which is only present by dint of a synecdochic suggestion. (It bears repeating that synecdoche, the substitution of the part for the whole, is perhaps the most telltale trope of metonymy.) But by implication the bather has done more: she has forsaken her human identity, her consciousness of being different and apart from nature. Pascal’s famous characterization of man as the ‘thinking reed’ comes to mind here. For the French philosopher, all of nature exists in a unity that harmonizes the part with the whole; yet man is a stranger at this continuous festival of life. Only he is conscious of the ‘privileged’ status of his existence, and he suffers from the collision of his sense of otherness with the union he nonetheless cannot help craving. From suffering is born man’s complaint, his cry of solitude’s tragic pain. It is unclear whether the bathers on the shore suggest the human apartness of Pascal’s thinking, the plaintive reed. Perhaps they do not. But the figure immersed in the water is the apotheosis of the trend toward the re-establishment of lost unity that we already see in the other bathers: in their nudity, in their celebration of nature’s fruits (the picnic of the foreground) and in their sympathetic, if still tentative, mutual permeation with the elements.

The body of water is very much the altar of the ‘temple of nature’ (first stanza) that is the central metaphor of Baudelaire’s poem, and by extension Cézanne’s painting. The trees, in their metonymic empathy toward the bathers, bend to shape a steeple in repetition of the church belfry of the background, recalling Baudelaire’s metaphor of ‘living pillars’ (‘vivants piliers’). Nature literally becomes a temple.73 (This steeple is all the more pronounced in the latest, Zurich version of the Bathes and is hardly present in the National Gallery of London painting, the earliest of the four final canvases.) But now, it will be objected, we are in the realm of metaphor.

The truisms that we have been overlooking in discussing this predominantly metonymic painting is that metonymy and metaphor are by no means mutually exclusive tropes. To the contrary, the accumulation of metonymy leads irresistibly to a ponderous metaphor, while strings of metaphor usually work to create the all-connected world of metonymy. Here lies the difference between the poet Baudelaire and his admirer, the painter Cézanne. In Baudelaire, it is the first line’s metaphor of nature as temple that engenders the subsequent metonymic ‘correspondences’ of the poem, where one sense commingles with another as the usual definitions of words are ‘confused’ (‘confuses paroles’) and ‘blurred’ (‘se confondent’) by their unexpected juxtaposition. But Cézanne’s painting persistently uses metonymy in order to tease the temple-like qualities out of nature. Jakobson saw that ‘the [metonymic] poet defines art as the mutual interchangeability of images. Any images one cares to choose harbor more than similarity alone, and can consequently be mutual metaphors — all images are in some way potentially contiguous’ (1987, p. 312). Just so, Cézanne
Figure 2. Drawing from a letter to Zola, June 20, 1859.
makes his bathers interchangeable with his trees, with the earth, with the air, with the water, and so on. The overall effect is the restoration of man to the harmony of nature. Cézanne’s painting finally arrives at the metaphor with which Baudelaire, who, after all, worked with the freer medium of words, began his poem. Nature is a temple, and Cézanne’s bathers have come to worship in it. As the land-bound bathers perform their ritual sacrifice with the fruits of the earth, the water-bound bather, who suggestively, metonymically, swims immediately above their repast, sacrifices her human identity, her sense of self, to nature’s unity. This is the ultimate sacrifice, and the only remaining question is to what extent the painting’s subject, the artist (and perhaps viewer as well), participates in it.

To pose this question differently, is the proximity of subject to object the nearness of empathetic metonymy, or the distance of intellectual metaphor? Jakobson claims that the metonymic artist uses ‘images of the surrounding world … as coniguous reflections, or metonymic expressions, of the poet’s self.’ But the literary critic’s formula seems not to hold in our example from pictorial art. Recalling Cézanne’s legendary fear of being touched — that is of biographical, physical, actual metonymy — it is tempting to believe that Cézanne’s art was an ideal realm where the artist’s loathing of touching, his inability to make the supreme sacrifice of identity, could be transcended. Cézanne’s 1859 amateur drawing from a letter to Zola depicts the two correspondents, along with Baille, bathing in the shade of an overgrown tree (figure 2). Cézanne’s later bathers may have been an attempt to return to the physical contiguity with other artists, people and nature that was a part of his past. As Wallace Stevens reminds us, what unites painting and poetry is their ‘compensation of what has been lost’ (p. 120). Here we recall Cézanne’s unfinished and unsuccessful poem of nearly a half century past in which the future painter had tried to express in art the sense of re-enchantment and re-engagement with nature, life, and love, that the liquid element seemed to promise him.

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I dedicate this paper to the memory of Professor Kermit S. Champa whose 1996 graduate seminar on Cézanne at Brown University prompted me to think of Cézanne in poetic terms. I also would like to thank Professor Richard Shiff for his generous help in preparing the final draft of this paper.

NOTES

3 — Earlier painters like Delacroix and Corot were also praised for just such a quality. See Richard Shiff, Cézanne and the End of Impressionism, A Study of the
6 — See Rogers, pp. 120–121.
8 — For this interpretation see Gowing, p. 18.
15 — Of the first poets to admire Cézanne was Joachim Gasquet, the son of a childhood friend and a Provencal poet of the naturalist school. It is hard to tell whether Gasquet valued Cézanne as a great painter or a great man, but Gasquet did not state his admiration for Cézanne until much later.

17 – Rogers, p. 23. See Weber who speaks of ‘the metonymic axis’ in Stein’s prose p. 31.

18 – Tomlinson compares the late watercolour Base Trees [by a River] c. 1904 in the Fary of the Wind with Cézanne’s early poem: ‘A tree, shaken by raging winds/Waves in the air, like a gigantic corpse/Its naked branches which the mistral sways’, see ‘The poet as painter’, in Poets on Painters. Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 265–287. Tomlinson even came up with a poem about Cézanne using the painter’s ‘ethic of perception […] where, by trusting to sensation, we enter being, and experience its primal fullness on terms other than those we dictate’ (pp. 273–274). Tomlinson’s own attempts to engage metonymy in painting are also instructive: he found it difficult even to imitate Cézanne’s effect in painting precisely because he did not know how to imitate their metonymic nature (see pp. 275–276). Having failed to create metonymic compositions unmarred by black outline, Tomlinson turned from painting to poetry — a medium more accommodating of metonymy. The resolution of Tomlinson’s dilemma came when, following the directions of the Spanish Surrealist Oscar Dominguez, he produced a painting in gouache and covered it, still wet, with another sheet of paper. The end result seemed a metonymic representation in which contiguity at last prevailed. Tomlinson was relieved to see that ‘he was working now as poet and painter once more.’ (p. 277).

19 – See Keith Aldritt, The Visual Imagination of D. H. Lawrence (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p. 201; also see Jack Lindsay, ‘The impact of modernism on Lawrence’, in Paintings of D. H. Lawrence (London, 1964), p. 39. For an extensive comparison of Lawrence and Cézanne see S. Betsky-Zweig, Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters, 15/1 (1985), pp. 1–24; and Howard Mills, ‘The world of substance; Lawrence, Hardy, Cézanne and Shelley’, English, 53/177 (1994), pp. 209–222. According to Aldritt, ‘The painter Cézanne is for Lawrence an exemplar of the artistic function in a way that no modern novelist or poet is’ (p. 201), Lawrence’s relationship to Cézanne is further complicated by his own paintings, which he saw as a continuation of his written work (but which we may be more inclined to see as a continuation of Cézanne’s painting).


21 – ‘An introduction to these paintings’, p. 69.

22 – Torgovnick, p. 51.

23 – Torgovnick, p. 55.

24 – Lawrence’s notion of Cézanne’s metonymic bend came to be reflected in the later art-historical literature. In 1961 Richard Shiff perceptively cited analogy as ‘the general principle at work in [Cézanne’s] art’ (p. 142). According to Shiff, Cézanne made paintings’ detail mutually correspond so that, as Shiff put it ‘the relationship of subordination is reciprocal, with each term of the analogy conceivably a dependent one’ (p. 144). Talking about the Philadelphia Grandes Baigneuses, Shiff also proposed that Cézanne pursued of visual analogies ‘liberated’ the painting from the tradition of ‘correct’ proportion and ‘correct perspective by substituting the accepted domination of looking with that of touch, Cézanne’s trademark metonymical feature (pp. 144–145). However, Shiff’s argument for Cézanne’s use of metonymy is different from mine in this essay because he stresses the centrality of visual analogy and considers continuity only insofar as it relates to physical touch (hand-to-brush-to-painting) — an important notion in c. 1895 Cézanne’s criticism that Shiff takes as the base for his chapter on Cézanne’s physicality. Tamar Garb’s 1996 interpretation of the Grandes Baigneuses. ‘Visuality and sexuality in Cézanne’s late bathers’, The Oxford Art Journal, 19/2 (1996), gives some overtly metonymic descriptions of the canvas ‘hands fuse with feet, heads with foliage…’ (p. 52), but in Garb’s view Cézanne breaks up his metonymy along gender lines (pp. 53f).


26 – Scott, pp. 17ff. It has been argued that an ‘analogy between the arts presupposes both a challenge to, and an acknowledged superiority of, the literary’ and that ‘such a rivalry is implicit in much of the relationship between literature and the visual arts in the nineteenth century’. It is not entirely unlikely, in fact, that Degas was accurate in claiming that the falling out between Zola and Cézanne in the aftermath of the publication of L’Oeuvre was brought about by Zola’s need to reassert the primacy of the written word over painting, in Artistic Relations. Literature and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France, eds Peter Collier and Robert Lethbridge (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 9.


31 – Quoted in Rewald, 1948, p. 6.


34 – Paul Cézanne, Correspondence, recueilli, annotate et préfacé par John Rewald (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978), pp. 39–41. Rewald pointed out that artistic questions were an important part of the young friends’ letters (p. 9).

For more on poetry in Zola–Cézanne correspondence see Andersen, pp. 20ff.

35 – Ibid., to Zola, May 3, 1898, p. 22.

36 – Ibid., p. 29.

37 – Ibid., p. 29. The relative success of Cézanne’s rhymes suggests that he may not have been a total loss as a poet. Mack’s praise that Cézanne’s rhymes ‘are ingenious enough’ (p. 296) is important. Chronologically closer to Cézanne, Banville stressed the great importance of good rhymes in poetry: ‘La Rime…est tout le vers’ (cited in Scott, p. 74). As Scott reminds us, the prosodic convention which most consistently motivated the aesthetic organization of words and images in Romantic poetry was rhyme (p. 73). Baudelaire believed that a poet not versed in rhymes is incapable of experimentation with ideas (from a projected preface to Les Fleurs du Mal, cited in Scott, pp. 73–74).


41 – Ibid., to Numa Coste, p. 109.

42 – Mack, p. 119.

45 – Ibid., p. 365.
46 – Mack lists yet other writers among Cézanne’s later acquaintances: Edmond Jaloux, Joseph D’Arbaud, Emmanuel Signoret, Marc Lafargue and Louis Aurene (p. 349).
49 – Ibid., to Bernard, pp. 301–302.
50 – Ibid., p. 303.
51 – Ibid., references to the need to study nature are abundant in Cézanne’s letters. For some examples see pp. 309, 312, 327 and 331.
52 – Ibid., p. 315.
53 – Ibid., p. 38. See Rewald’s commentary.
54 – Ibid., p. 27. See Andersen, who cites this letter fragment as a realization of painting finally taking precedence over poetry (p. 37).
55 – Ibid., p. 39.
56 – Ibid., p. 87.
57 – Ibid., p. 73.
58 – Ibid., p. 88.
59 – Ibid., p. 88. Andersen believes that the June 14, 1878 letter where Zola inquires if Cézanne presently paints or writes poetry is indicative of Cézanne’s career uncertainty at this point (p. 33). Overall, Andersen offers a different explanation of Zola’s role in Cézanne’s progression from poetry to painting. Andersen sees Zola’s encouragement of Cézanne’s painting talents over his writing as somewhat manipulative. In one instance Andersen implied that Zola thought of himself as a writer and wanted to see his artistically-inclined friend as a painter who might illustrate his, Zola’s books (p. 115). Then, he presented a more expansive argument of that Zola’s determination to bend Cézanne towards painting and away from poetry was driven as much by Zola’s own failure at poetry, as his genuine admiration of Cézanne’s drawing talent. Andersen also believes that Zola’s insistence on that Cézanne should abandon his law studies an Aix and join him in Paris came from Zola’s loneliness and his lack of motivation to be a productive artist (writer) (pp. 135ff).
60 – Ibid., p. 183. In her recent article ‘Merleau-Ponty’s doubt: Cézanne and the problem of artistic bioigraphy’, Word & Image, 20/3 (2004), Susannah Rutherglen innovatively proposed that the mythology of ‘Cézanne’s doubt’ originates from the uncertainty and clarity of those who attempt to understand his artistic path (p. 220).
61 – Ibid., p. 240.
62 – Ibid., p. 244.
63 – Ibid., pp. 311–312.
64 – Ibid., p. 326.
65 – Oil on canvas, 208.5 × 251.5 cm, W. P. Wiltstach Collection (W’37-14).
68 – Cézanne thought highly of Baudelaire’s understanding of painting, marveling at how Baudelaire ‘il ne se trompe pas [sur] les artistes qu’il apprécie’ (p. 366). That a poet should have special insight into the inner workings of pictorial art ring true to the former poet Cézanne. Perhaps the young Cézanne had himself dreamt of becoming a ‘painter-poète’; Baudelaire’s admiring description of Delacroix from ‘L’œuvre et la vie de Delacroix’, one of the last books Cézanne had read (p. 320). In 1866 Cézanne lived at 22, rue Beaufreil, where Jeanne Duval lived in 1838–1859. Baudelaire, her lover, frequented the home.
69 – ‘Like long echoes which in a distance are mingled/In a dark and profound unison/Very as night is and light/Perfumes, colors and sounds answer one another’.
70 – Baudelaire laid out the interconnection of the arts in his essay ‘Richard Wagner et Taunhaiser à Paris’ (1861). See Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres Complètes, vol. II, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). In it, he cited the first two stanzas of ‘Correspondances’ as a demonstration of how poetic images are born out of music (p. 764). For Baudelaire poetry and music must transcend the limits of a single artistic medium (p. 791). An overture becomes a dramatic poem, and Wagner’s music is poetry (pp. 795 and 803). Baudelaire concluded that ‘l’œuvre la plus complète du poète devrait être celle qui, dans son dernier accomplissement, serait une parfaite musique’ (p. 791). The borders among the arts become less and less definite as the one art imitates the forms of its neighbors. Claiming here that his own poetic images were inspired by music, Baudelaire asserted elsewhere that Delacroix’s visual images were born of poetry. Cézanne particularly approved of Baudelaire’s analysis of Delacroix, whose ‘la lecture de poètes’ — so said Baudelaire — laisait en lui des images grandiose and rapidly défines des tableaux tout fait, pour ainsi dire (p. 746).
71 – See Joseph Rishel, who has noted in the painting ‘the unity […] between figures and landscape, humans and nature’, in Philadelphia Museum of Art Catalogue (Abrams, 1996), p. 303, while Mary Louise Krumrine pointed out that in the Large Bathers the ‘[l]andscape and figures respond to each other’, see Paul Cézanne, The Bathers (Basil and Edilson: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), p. 214. Garb refers to this blending of humans and nature as ‘the interaction of figure and ground, of body and surface’ and ascribes the painting’s modernity to this very interaction (p. 38).
73 – A strikingly similar figure appears in Carlos Schwabe’s illustrated edition of Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris, 1900). Schwabe’s drawing, a vignette above the poem ‘Bénédiction’, shows a female ‘swimming’ through the bed of flowers with a harp in her outstretched arms. ‘Bénédiction’ is the first poem of the ‘Spleen et idéal’ section which also includes ‘Correspondances’.
74 – ‘The temple of nature’ as it is transposed from ‘Correspondances’ to the Large Bathers, fits Shift’s definition of the ‘single dominating analogy’ of Cézanne’s painting (1991), p. 144.
76 – 1987, p. 307 (see note 71). Also see Fowlie’s introduction (p. 3) where he states that the idea of the merging of consciousness and sensibility of a poet with the universe is characteristic of the metaphysical system of modern poetry.
77 – ‘Decades before the Bathers painting, Zola evoked the youths’ swimming parties as a pinnacle of their shared happiness: “Tu te rappelles nos parties de nage, cette heureuse époque, là, sur le bord de l’eau, … rien n’est plus pénible qu’un souvenir heureux dans les jours de malheur”, in Paul Cézanne, Correspondance, recueillie, annotée et préfacée par John Rewald (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978), p. 77. Zola used this image attempting to make Cézanne revitalize their friendship by joining him in Paris. Given the importance of Cézanne’s subsequent response for Zola, we should accept the shared significance of their swimming idyll in Aix. Krumrine believes that Cézanne disguised himself twice in the Philadelphia Bathers, p. 218. For more on Cézanne’s memories of boyhood swimming see Shapiro, p. 44 and Garb, p. 55.