

The Light of Cézanne*

(Errancy into the Sun)

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1. *Ardour*

Paul Cézanne's painting *Le grand pin*—a work which brings out the flagrancy of the colour green in an unforgettable way—may echo a passage from the first letter that the artist wrote to his friend Émile Zola on April 9th, 1858:

Do you remember that pine tree, planted on the banks of the Arc, which soared with its crowny top above the gaping abyss at its feet? That pine which, with its leaves, protected our bodies from the ardour of the sun—ah! may the Gods preserve it from the baleful assault of the logger's axe!

The artist most certainly has nothing against lumberjacks. He simply recalls the difference between the eye of the painter, for which the indoles of the pine is no mere indifferent, general concept, but rather the retracted origin of the uniqueness and singularity of *this* or of *that* tree, and that of the common vision which is imposed by utility, according to which pine trees belong to the stock of so-called natural resources, and which shows *a priori* the character of being transformable into timber and firewood. The logger's axe cannot perceive the richness understood as flagrancy of the green colour in its contrast, on one hand, with the ardour of the sun and the celestial azure, and, on the other, with the darkness of the terrestrial abyss—a richness that is profusion and copiousness of truth. The axe sees, as per its constitution, only the potential of the useful, useable and employable—the “substance” and the “profit”. The painter thus invokes the Gods that they might save *the* pine tree—exactly that one—from the assault of return and of value; that they might absconce it, that they might make it seem *useless*.

We must therefore think of the painting *Le grand pin* as a way of letting go of the useable tree in order that the tree of flagrancy might be free, that it might clear—with all due respect to lumberjacks. The painting—which is not a “reproduction” of a pine tree nor, much less, its “representation”, but rather an *entruing of its being*—imposes a transformation of the common vision (the eye of the “lived impact” and of contingency) in *pictorial seeing*: that seeing which refers and is

* The passages cited in this chapter are all from Paul Cézanne, *Correspondance*, recueillie, annoté et préfacée par John Rewald. Paris: Grasset, 1978. (English edition: Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, edited by John Rewald, translated by Marguerite Kay. New York: Da Capo, 1995). The English translations are original.

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dedicated solely to the truth. Indeed, Cézanne will write in his famous “promise” to Émile Bernard that “Je vous dois la vérité en peinture et je vous la dirai”, only in the autumn of 1905; nonetheless, this promise actually constitutes the north star of the artist’s errancy *en plein air* in his art *d’après nature* (i.e., “from nature”).

The ardour of the sun returns in a letter to Pissarro from l’Estaque on 2 July 1876:

Mais il y a des motifs qui demanderaient trois ou quatre mois de travail, qu’on pourrait trouver, car la végétation n’y change pas. Ce sont des oliviers et des pins qui gardent toujours leurs feuilles. Le soleil y est si effrayant qu’il me semble que les objets s’enlèvent en silhouette non pas seulement en blanc et noir, mais en bleu, en rouge, en brun, en violet. Je puis me tromper, mais il me semble que c’est l’antipode du modelé.

Let us translate now, making the more salient points as clear as possible:

But there are some *motifs* which would require three or four months of “torment”¹—time that it would be possible to find given that the vegetation never changes. They are olive and pine trees that always keep their leaves. The sun here is so awful [and as such ravishing, i.e. *capable of creating magic*] that it seems to me that the concretes, having appeared in front, each retract into a silhouette [*i.e.* they overshadow themselves and cloud over, they shade themselves], not only in black and white [or in *chiaroscuro*], but in blue, red, brown and violet. I may be mistaken, but it seems to me that <all this> is the opposite (at antipodes) of modelling”.

That which we call Cézanne’s prime percept emerges in this brief passage. What is this exactly? Clearly—given the rapidity of the steps—it is a percept that the other painter, Pissarro, seizes, as they say, “on the fly”². In order for us too to seize it as simply as possible, we must elucidate the sense in which the sun is experienced here as *effrayant*.

This elucidation will take place in three steps.

2. *Solar Anfulness: Light and Flagrancy*

The sun is *anful*, it dismays and disquiets, it *ravishes* (that is, at the same time, it abducts, captures and enchants)—and this is not so much for the vehemence of the scorching heat, but rather for

¹ It is said that Cézanne used to invoke the Gods of *travail* and of *intelligence*. In French, the word *travail* has a different meaning than our own word “work,” with which we usually translate it. *Travail* indeed comes into English as “travail”, and is therefore a torment, a suffering: in other words, the firmness with which a man dedicates himself to a constitutive task. *Travail* in its originary sense means: to suffer being by taking care; to offer one’s own bidding to it as encompassing, and without any calculation: to dedicate one’s own being to the being of something else. Thus, intelligence is “that” which must always accompany this self-dedication so that it does not degenerate into mere busy work, into sterile self-torture. *Travail intelligent*, the intelligent torment or dolour of the painter, would therefore be a dedication to the painting by supporting that which its inscape requests each time.

² J. Borély, in his testimony of 1902, reports the following sentence by Cézanne: “As per old Pissarro, he was like a father to me. He was generous with his advice and something like the good Lord”.

the singular instress of (its) light. The light of the sun can become so blazing that it constitutes a sort of invisible gush of obscurity. Indeed—as the painter notices—the appeared things *s'enlèvent en silhouette*, which is to say they retract, they disappear, letting themselves be envisaged as mere shadows, like concretes that have vanished in their clear-cut contours (the verb *s'enlever* means “to abscond”, “to escape”, “to leave”, “to disappear” and also “to vanish”, “to go away”; the noun *enlèvement* is the subtraction and removal of something, but also abduction): the trees, houses, roads, meadows, hills, mountains, clouds etc. all go away “letting themselves appear” solely in the mould of lines and profiles. The sun flagrates among the concretes, reducing them to imprints of themselves, to appeared appearances (semblances).

This means that *here* the light of the sun is no longer seized as a beam from an illuminating body which irradiates objects and the eye, but rather—free of any sort of radial character—as a “letting there be light”, as the irruption of allowing to see and making appear, but also of letting disappear and vanish, as the irruption of transparency *and* obscurity; in a word (or rather in two): as freeing-clearing and *simultaneously* as absconcing.

Thus the luminosity of the day takes place not only in a growing and then a diminishing of the solar irradiation on the earth's beēnts³ and the earth itself; but rather this luminosity irrupts each time *in a contrast* between transparency and obscurity, between the sheerness of appearing and the somberness of disappearing; luminosity generates itself, in the end, as a *contention between clearance and absconcedness*, or, more simply, as “clearance”, with the understanding that this single word contains within it the *very contention itself*—a contention which we also call “jet of flagrancy”, and which the Greek thinkers named ἀλήθεια, and which we, following Cézanne, call *vérité*⁴, and, following Heidegger, *Lichtung*⁵. And so, for the painter, the concretes are that which they *are*, the tree *is* tree, the meadow *is* meadow, the mountain *is* mountain, and so on, not due to whatever, and in itself concealed, “prime cause” or “physical law”, but first and foremost thanks to the truth as clearance, as freeness. That a concrete *is* will thus mean that: a concrete attempts its own being in the fact that it clears itself, such that it is precisely to this “fact”—which is the clearance, the jet of flagrancy—that the painter's attention is turned. In the end, the clearance is that originary phenomenon which requires care and study, a sound eye (eye glance) and a sound hand—that is: the work of art. Thus, we can understand the appeared concretes as “the flagrant”, “the

³ For the origin and meaning of this neologism, see OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*; www.oed.com/view/Entry/16981?redirectedFrom=beent#eid).

⁴ ... to be understood and intended as the gift of being (supported by man) for the concretization of concretes.

⁵ It is not difficult to see how the *Lichtung* has nothing in common with things or images such as a “(luminous) glade”, “forest grove”, “clearing”, “opening”, *et similia*. On this point, see I. De Gennaro and G. Zaccaria, *Da-sein : Da-sein*, Milano: Marinotti, 2007, and G. Zaccaria, *Da-sein*, in E. Mejia, A. Schild, I. Schüssler (eds.): *Heideggers Beiträge zur Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2009.

clearanced”, “the cleared,” that is to say, with the entirety of the phenomenon in mind, as *the cleared in (the full) flagrancy of absconcedness (i.e. taken in flagrant absconsion)*. (It is possible to show how the cleared always subsist waiting to be and attending (to) their being—and that the work of art is in itself the quieting of this hope. “Le soleil brille et l’espoir rit au cœur”, “the sun shines and hope smiles on the heart” [*i.e. on the courage of creating*]” the artist exclaims in a letter to Joachim Gasquet on June 13th, 1896). Cézanne thus seems to follow Goethe’s dictate word for word (*Maximen und Reflexionen*, n. 993) which reads:

Man suche nur nichts hinter den Phänomenen: sie selbst sind die Lehre.

(Look for nothing behind phenomena: they themselves are the teaching and the lesson.)

This dictamen is also found in the following passage of Giacomo Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* (p. 2710):

La natura ci sta tutta spiegata davanti nuda ed aperta. Per ben conoscerla non è bisogno alzare alcun velo che la copra: è bisogno rimuovere gl’impedimenti e le alterazioni che sono nei nostri occhi e nel nostro intelletto; e queste, fabbricateci e cagionateci da noi col nostro raziocino.

(Nature is completely laid out before us, naked and flagrant. To really know it there is no need to lift any veil covering it: we need to remove the impediments and alterations that are in our eyes and intellect: and these, we have created and caused for us by our own ratiocination.)

3. Colour

To recapitulate: for the painter, solarity shows itself all of a sudden as “awful”: the sun not only lightens, and thus grants appearing and perceiving—that is to say, it clears—but it also conceals and absconces. The (profusion of) light defaces the (usual) appearing of the appeared, allowing only their shapes to show up in the foreground. This leads to the intuition that luminosity is not conceivable *only* in terms of irradiation: rather, radiance now takes on the aspect of a *de*-formation of fulgour: the overflows and torrents of brightness, in the same way as its iridescent rivulets, and the darts and lightening bolts, the flashes and glimmers, coerced within the colourless (lackluster) geometrisations of the radial format!⁶

“Light”, on the other hand, now primarily means: irruption of a clearance *for* the concretes, which, thus seized and experienced, now become (with a variation on the previously used words) “the hoping for (while they in flagrancy of the) truth”. The light finally “illuminates itself” in what

⁶ We use this word to indicate the unquestioned basic assumption of every “theory of light”.

it originarily *is*: a clearing-absconcing inscape, a clearance-al inscape and nothing more.

Painting *d'après nature* thus learns to listen to the *manner* in which the light of the sun makes it so that “the concretes, having appeared in front, each retract into a silhouette”⁷. The painter realizes that the luminous profusion absconces the concretes in a different guise from that which one would have been expecting, and therefore “would note” and “would observe” when reasoning in terms of radial format. The *radial modality* of the concretes’ retracting into their shapes would in fact be that of black and white, or of *chiaroscuro*, of the light-shadow dyad: that which Cézanne *actually perceives*—immersed in the *effrayant* sun, in the solar awfulness, in the ravishing magic of the ardour—is above all a receding in the way of colour, a *coloured* going away of the appeared, their self-absconcing (though always hoping) by colours (in profuse light, every appeared appears while disappearing in coloured traits and looks).

This percept means only the following: colour no longer shows itself as a “quality of the thing”, in turn pre-determined (pre-formed, pre-objectified) as a plexus of (internal) content and shape (external form, outline, contour); *now colour is experienced as the primary trait, or even the principle, of clearance, as the very fulcrum of truth.*

But we must be more rigorous still and say that: the contention between clearance and absconcedness unfolds *in primis* as colour, as this or that colour, here and now as blue, there and now as red, here and now as brown, there and now as violet, and so on according to the whole polychromy of the flagrancy.

For the painter of a clearance-al inscape, colour *is* being itself—or rather “to be”, for Cézanne, means: to clear through colours. The lesson that the artist learns from the “phenomenon of phenomena”, from polychromatic clearance, can thus be summed up in the saying: *nothing will be, where colour fails.*

He finally *senses* colour as the irrefragable principle of the jet of flagrancy—and as such he now *sees* it.

4. *The Painting of Truth*

All of the preceding can also be indicated in the following way: in the solar awfulness—continuing with this formula which seems to adequately define the leap that seeing takes in its seconding the clearance-al inscape of the light and therefore in its yea-saying to colour as fulcrum of truth—in the solar awfulness, therefore, the hoping are no longer *modelled*, or delineated and

⁷ Or rather: they disappear by way of appearance from the flattened contours.

profiled (and thus ready) to finally take on colour. The so called “modelled”, in nature, literally does not take place, it *is* not; within the *en plein air*, lines and lineaments do not obtain, nor do features, countenances and semblances, but only ruptures and irruptions, scissions and tears, breaches and schisms, or rather, as Cézanne explains, *contrasts*—which are never resolved in the “dynamism” of *chiaroscuro* or of the dyad of light-shadow, but which are adverting clearances of colour. Clearing through colours is more originary than any mode of delineation, outlining or profiling; on the contrary: profiling (the appearing of a profile) is always a consequence of chromatic contrasts.

Whence comes the most essential and simplest teaching for painting, which we indicate as follows: *if the principle of the jet of flagrancy is colour; if, consequently, colouring (taking on colour) constitutes the fulcrum of truth (such that ‘colouring = clearance’), then colour must also be—in the seconding of the nature in which true painting actually consists—the prime principle of the form-giving, which is to say, of the figure.*

Now drawing will no longer be a modelling; that is, a profiling and delineating of objects through some form of “pictorial technique”, though this may be respectable in and of itself, but rather, *ab initio* and *ex abrupto*, it will be the act of “harmoniously” laying the colour in such a way that the concretes can appear in their originary—and thus unminded and oblivioned—instress which was, or as the cleared in the hope of polychromatic truth. Drawing will be in the first place painting (from Latin *de-pingere*, a colouring variegation, “to pierce” and “to incise” by chromas). Painting, as Cézanne says, is a form of “modulating” and not “modelling”. (“To model” means to assume the being in front of you as an object-model in order to reproduce it starting from the contours and considering the application of colour as a supplement—of the complex of the lines—which is able to give, as they say, “plastic emphasis to the image”; consider in this case the technique of *chiaroscuro*. “To modulate”, instead, means to let the concrete appear as a cleared, and therefore to make it so that, *only as such*, it re-appears through colour touches and tones, or through measured chromatisms, which Cézanne called *sensations colorants*⁸).

5. Naturalness of the “Grand Magicien”

Cézanne’s first percept, which Pissarro, we supposed, must have seized on the fly, should now be clearer. Just as should be clearer—pictorially—the hinted at epithet with which the artist addressed himself to the sun one day: *le grand magicien*, “the grand magician”.⁹

⁸ Painting founded on modelling belongs to thinking in values: the colours here would be “chromatic values”, while the laying down of colour would be a way of strengthening the so-called “real given”, or the object to portray, already previously adopted as a “complex of lines”. Cézanne will say of himself, in fact, “Je ne suis pas un valoriste”.

⁹ See the letter from September 2, 1897, addressed to Émile Solari.

The sun is a *magician*—provided that one hears in this word the trait of purification and therefore, for us, of clearing absconcedness—in at least four inter-related senses: as the master propitiator of the interplay of jets of flagrancy; as the chanter of chromatic enchantment; as the artificer of colour as a clearing intermediary between the hoping and their figures; and therefore, as the diviner of truth in painting.

The solar awfulness ravishes the painter, in the marvel of *en plein air*, as long as the sun is always and already felt as the “grand magician” of clearance. The sun, fulgent with extraneousness, inaugurates from the null—daily, and each time all of a sudden—the awaiting of and attendance to the work of (pictorial) art as a setting-of-truth-into-the-work, as the colouring modulation *d’après nature*.

And thus, unexpectedly, a Greek sentence comes to mind; this sentence, which presupposes an understanding of nature as φύσις (*i.e.* as assurgency), goes as follows:

ὁ ἥλιος νέος ἐφ’ ἡμέρηι ἐστίν¹⁰

It comes to mind, however, with a tone that is just as unheard of as it is unthought. In Cézanne’s erring, in fact, the ancient φύσις-nature “disarms itself”, it cedes and becomes mute so that it might finally effulge and sing its absconced future origin: the (already) advened ἀλήθεια: the prelude—let us say (keeping the aforementioned adage of Leopardi in mind)—of the hitherto never attempted *naturalness*.

“I am too old,” notes Cézanne at the end of his life, “I have not realized, and I will not realize now. I remain the primitive of the path I have perceived.”¹¹

The path along which ever again

the “grand magician” paints—in *the ephemeral*—the advent of naturalness.

¹⁰ Heraclitus, fr. 6 DK.

¹¹ See Paul Cézanne, *Correspondance*, p. 73.