

Poems about Cézanne

Not for the first time in this series, the word 'about' in my title will be a matter for discussion. *Are* the poems I've chosen about Cézanne? If so, how? These questions fold into a further one: What are Cézanne's paintings about? In particular the paintings of his last years, when death was imminent. (That might have meant 'death' was the last thing his art would be about. [Read that sentence whichever way you like.] But death seems to figure largely in writing about him.) Wordplay aside – and it's striking that Cézanne's art does bring on wordplay – I for one need help deciding on the relation of several of the poems chosen *to* Cézanne. The Charles Wright 'Homage' is the central, difficult case. But so is the Gertrude Stein 'Cézanne', and even the Carlos Williams. Which raises the question: Why do poems about Cézanne tend to put 'aboutness' so markedly in question?

I have included a poem of my own, which will inevitably seem pedestrian, not to say naïve, alongside the others. I stand by the poem; but it may well suggest to many of you why poems 'about Cézanne' don't go in for the kind of description mine does.

Cézanne seems to provoke poetry in English not French. This is strange. As compensation, I add a tremendous poem by René Char on Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, which Samuel Beckett proved to be untranslatable.

Cézanne

The Irish lady can say, that to-day is every day. Caesar can say that every day is to-day and they say that every day is as they say.

In this way we have a place to stay and he was not met because he was settled to stay. When I said settled I meant settled to stay. When I said settled to stay I meant settled to stay Saturday. In this way a mouth is a mouth. In this way if in as a mouth if in as a mouth where, if in as a mouth where and there. Believe they have water too. Believe they have that water too and blue when you see blue, is all blue precious too, is all that that is precious too is all that and they meant to absolve you. In this way Cézanne nearly did nearly in this way. Cézanne nearly did nearly did and nearly did. And was I surprised. Was I very surprised. Was I surprised. I was surprised and in that patient, are you patient when you find bees. Bees in a garden make a specialty of honey and so does honey. Honey and prayer. Honey and there. There where the grass can grow nearly four times yearly.

--Gertrude Stein, c. 1914

I explained that for me, all modern painting is based on what Cézanne nearly made, instead of basing itself on what he almost managed to make. When he could not make a thing, he hijacked it and left it. He insisted on showing his incapacity: he spread his lack of success: showing what he could not do, became an obsession for him. People influenced by him were also obsessed by the things which they could not reach and they began the system of camouflage. It was natural to do so, even inevitable: that soon became an art, in peace and in war, and Matisse concealed and insisted at the same time on that Cézanne could not realize, and Picasso concealed, played and tormented all these things. The only one who wanted to insist on this problem, was Juan Gris. He persisted by deepening the things which Cézanne wanted to do, but it was too hard a task for him: it killed him.

--Gertrude Stein, catalogue essay, 1945

Cézanne

No pretense no more than the
French painters of
the early years of the nineteenth century

to scant the truth
of the light itself as
it was reflected from

a ballerinas thigh this Ginsberg
of Kaddish falls apart
violently to a peal of laughter or to

wrenched imprecation from a
man's head nothing can
stop the truth of it art is all we

can say to reverse
the chain of events and make a pileup
of passion to match the stars

No choice but between
a certain variation
hard to perceive in a shade of blue

--William Carlos Williams, 1964

Rainer Maria Rilke to Clara Rilke, October 21, 1907

. . . But I really wanted to say something else about Cézanne: that no one before him ever demonstrated so clearly the extent to which painting is something that takes place among the colours themselves, and how one has to leave them completely alone, so that they may come to terms with each other. Their intercourse with one another: that is the whole of painting. Whoever interrupts and arranges, whoever injects his human deliberation, his wit, his advocacy, his intellectual agility in any way, is already disturbing and clouding the colours' performance. The painter (or any artist, in general) should not become conscious of his insights: the steps he takes, mysterious even to himself, without making a detour through his mental processes, should enter the work so swiftly that he does not apprehend them in the moment they happen. For the artist who watches for them, alas, who observes, who dwells on them -- for him they change like the gold in the fairy tale which no longer remains gold because some detail of the spell went wrong. That Van Gogh's letters read so well, that they contain so much, speaks in fact against him, just as it also argues against any painter (if we're comparing him with Cézanne) that he *intended* this or that, that knew how to do things, that he had found things out; that blue summoned orange and green, red; that he, the inquisitive one, secretly listening at his eye's interior, had heard about such things in advance. So Van Gogh painted pictures built round a single contradiction, thinking in addition of the way the Japanese simplified color... leading, in other words, to sheer design, sheer arbitrariness – in short, to the decorative...

In Cézanne's last letter, after complaining of his bad health, he says simply: "Je continue donc mes études." And he adds a wish that was soon fulfilled: "Je me suis juré de mourir en peignant." As in some old Dance of Death picture, Death reached from behind for his hand, painting the last stroke himself, trembling with pleasure; his shadow had been lying a while on the palette and he had had time to choose from the half-circle of colours the one that pleased him best; when the brush was dipped in it, he would reach in and paint . . . and there it was: he took hold and made his stroke, the only one he knew how to make.

Homage to Paul Cézanne

At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts
 To stay warm, and litter the fields.
 We pick them up in the mornings, dewy pieces of paper and scraps of cloth.
 Like us, they refract themselves. Like us,
 They keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.
 Like us, the water unsettles their names.

Sometimes they lie like leaves in their little arks, and curl up at the edges.
 Sometimes they come inside, wearing our shoes, and walk
 From mirror to mirror.
 Or lie on their beds with their gloves off
 And touch our bodies. Or talk
 In a corner. Or wait like envelopes on a desk.

They reach up from the ice plant.
 They shuttle their messengers through the oat grass.
 Their answers rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery leaves.

We rub them off our hands.

*

Each year the dead grow less dead, and nudge
 Close to the surface of all things.

They start to remember the silence that brought them there.
 They start to recount the gain in their soiled hands.

Their glasses let loose, and grain by grain return to the riverbank.
 They point to their favorite words
 Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time:
 They stand close to the meanings and take them in.

They stand there, vague and without pain,
 Under their fingernails a unreturnable dirt.
 They stand there and it comes back,
 The music of everything, syllable after syllable.

Out of the burning chair, out of the beings of light.

It all comes back.

And what they repeat to themselves, and what they repeat to themselves,
 Is the song that our fathers sing.

*

In steeps and sighs,
 The ocean explains itself, backing and filling
 What spaces it can't avoid, spaces
 In black shoes, their hands clasped, their eyes teared at the edges:
 We watch from the high hillside,
 The ocean swelling and flattening, the spaces
 Filling and emptying, horizon blade
 Flashing the early afternoon sun.

The dead are constant in
 The white lips of the sea.
 Over and over, through clenched teeth, they tell
 Their story, the story each knows by heart:

Remember me, speak my name.

When the moon tugs at my sleeve,

*When the body of water is raised and becomes the body of light,
Remember me, speak my name.*

*

The dead are a cadmium blue.
We spread them with palette knives in broad blocks and planes.

We layer them stroke by stroke
In steps and ascending mass, in verticals raised from the earth.

We choose, and layer them in,
Blue, and a blue, and a breath,

Circle and smudge, cross-beak and buttonhook,
We layer them in. We squint hard and terrace them line by line.

And so we are come between, and cry out,
And stare up at the sky and its cloudy panes,

And finger the cypress twists.
The dead understand all this, and keep in touch,

Rustle of hand to hand in the lemon trees,
Flags, and the great sifts of anger

To powder and nothingness.
The dead are a cadmium blue, and they understand.

*

The dead are with us to stay.
Their shadows rock in the back yard, so pure, so black,
Between the oak tree and the porch.

Over our heads they're huge in the night sky.
In the tall grass they turn with the zodiac.

Under our feet they're white with the snows of a thousand years.

They carry their colored threads and baskets of silk
 To mend our clothes, making us look right,
 Altering, stitching, replacing a button, closing a tear.
 They lie like tucks in our loose sleeves, they hold us together.

They blow the last leaves away.
 They slide like an overflow into the river of heaven.
 Everywhere they are flying.

The dead are a sleight and a fade
 We fall for, like flowering plums, like white coins from the rain.
 Their sighs are gaps in the wind.

*

The dead are waiting for us in our rooms,
 Little globules of light
 In one of the four corners, and close to the ceiling, hovering, thinking our thoughts.

Often they'll reach a hand down,
 Or offer a word, and ease us out of our bodies to join them in theirs.
 We look back at our other selves on the bed.

We look back and we don't care and we go.

And thus we become what we've longed for,

past tense and otherwise,

A BB, a disc of light,

song without words,

And refer to ourselves

In the third person, seeing that other arm

Still raised from the bed, fingers like licks and flames in the boned air.

Only to hear that it's not time.

Only to hear that we must re-enter and lie still, our arms at rest at our sides,

The voices rising around us like mist

And dew, *it's all right, it's all right, it's all right...*

*

The dead fall around us like rain.

They come down from the last clouds in the last light for the last time

And slip through the sod.

The lean uphill and face north.

Like grass,

They bend toward the sea, they break toward the setting sun.

We filigree and we baste.

But what do the dead care for the fringe of words,

Safe in their suits of milk?

What do they care for the honk and flash of a new style?

And who is to say if the inch of snow in our hearts
Is rectitude enough?

Spring picks the locks of the wind.
High in the night sky the mirror is hauled up and unsheeted.
In it we twist like stars.

Ahead of us, through the dark, the dead
Are beating their drums and stirring the yellow leaves.

*

We're out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky,
The stars streaming and bursting behind the trees.

At dawn, as the clouds gather, we watch
The mountain glide from the east on the valley floor,
Coming together in starts and jumps.
Behind their curtain, the bears
Amble across the heavens, serene as black coffee...

Whose unction can intercede for the dead?
Whose tongue is toothless enough to speak their piece?

What we are given in dreams we write as blue paint,
Or messages to the clouds.
At evening we wait for the rain to fall and the sky to clear.

Our words are words for the clay, uttered in undertones,
Our gestures salve for the wind.

We sit on the earth and stretch our limbs,
Hoarding the little mounds of sorrow laid up in our hearts.

--Charles Wright, 1981

Wright: ... I was watching TV one night – I think I was watching the news – it was just getting dark and I looked out into the field through the window in the door, and there were three white pieces of paper just catching the last light. And I wrote down the line, "In the fading light the dead wear our white shirts to stay warm." Then I said, well, that's interesting. I put it down, I had supper, and then later on the moon came out, and I watched TV again, and by god those same three pieces of paper were so white that they were picking up the moonlight! And so I went back to the line and rewrote it, "At night, in the fishlight of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts to stay warm, and litter the fields." And then the next day I went out to see what they were, and they were sheets of white notebook paper from a kid's notebook. That's why they were so white. It wasn't newspaper or anything. It was blank paper! And so I worked on that particular part of the Cézanne poem for a while and got the first section. ...

... I was doing a lot of looking at Cézanne's paintings, and I'd been thinking about Cézanne a lot at that time. ... I thought that certain painterly techniques – which is to say, using stanzas and lines the way painters sometimes use color and form – might be interesting. ... So I worked on this poem not knowing how the poem was going to go. I thought it was going to be about ten sections. I knew it was going to be about Cézanne by the time I'd finished the first one. Not about Cézanne himself, but about the process of painting. I knew it was going to be nonlinear. I was going to write sections where each had to do with each other, but not consecutively or linearly. ...

... What I was interested in doing was relaxing the line, using the line more as an overall unit in the poem rather than as a bridge from one part of the poem to the other – as one bridge to another bridge to another bridge. In other words, the lines in

the stanza are applied, in a way, rather than narratively leading from one thing to the next.

From Charles Wright, "With Sherod Santos" in *Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews*, 1977-87

Disconnection and association... seem to be linked with the short poem – with the obvious exception of *The Cantos*, of course – and one thinks of Dr. Williams and Company. It was interesting to me to try it in longer reaches – not interminably, like *The Cantos* – and I've made several attempts at that since I saw it emerge... The first time was in "Homage to Paul Cézanne," and it was fairly short and crude. Eight overlays, each different, hoping to form one consistent picture....

From Charles Wright, "The Art of Poetry XLI: *Paris Review* Interview with J. D. McClatchy," in Charles Wright, *Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews*, 1995.

Young: ... why Cézanne rather than say, Picasso, Braque, Monet, Matisse, some other great Modernist?

Wright: Cézanne has a way of looking at a landscape that I find particularly innovative, revolutionary, and pleasing to my spirit. He breaks down and reassembles the landscape the way I like to think, when I'm working at my desk, I break down and reassemble what I'm looking at and put it back into a poem to recreate it, to reconstruct it. I like the idea that in fact he is very much of a realist although up close everything looks abstract. But once you get the right perspective, he is showing you just what's out there. I like to think I'm showing you just what's out there, but as I see it. I put these guys on my covers [The cover image of Wright's *Poems 1980-1980* is Cézanne's *Bend in the Road*, 1900-06, in the NGA in Washington] because I would like to get an inch closer to their genius, not because I put myself anywhere near their company.

from Charles Wright, "Language, Landscape and the Idea of God: A Conversation with David Young," rep. in Charles Wright, *Quarter Notes: Improvisations and Interviews*.

Cézanne *The Repentant Magdalen*

So three tears are enough,
 a little water
to clear the flesh of
 its offences. She loved
much, so is free
 of remorse. Daughters
of Jerusalem – but where
 are they? The tears
are three hooks to hang
 the other sacrifices
from. What she repents of
 is no matter. Mankind's
place beside the crucified
 God is upon
its knees. The harlot anticipates
 sophisticated minds. The painter
standing aside has shown
 us eternity's rainbow
after the human storm.

--R. S. Thomas, 1981

Cézanne: *Hillside in Provence*

Everything in a picture is turned to face us
 But in a good picture the turning is done with tact,
 Almost reluctantly, so that we see a kind of shadow world –
 Shadows softer and brighter than the things that cast them –
 Accompanying the trees come forward to meet us, made out of
 Objects we sense as much as see, forms not belonging to the world we are part of,
 Gradients (unfoldings) of infinite space. The rocks on the quarry wall.
 How this other world takes place in us, and why we fear it,
 Is Cézanne's subject.

Maybe the ivory road (or is it a riverbed?) in the foreground of *Hillside in*

Provence

Is intended to spell this out. It is the floor of the earth
 Emerging after the flood, with colors stacked in a small neat pile to one side, as if
 Waiting to be used. The road is not ominous or remote, just not continuous with
 the world

We know. It is the least anthropological ground plane ever painted.

But then why is the scene erected on top of it, with the road as necessary
 footing,

So entirely alive? Why is its coldness a fire?

There is a poem by Ammons in which a blackbird 'shoots through a

vacancy

In the elm tree and bolts over the house.' The poet wants to show the way the

vacancy

Is full of the life passed through it. I don't think the emptiness
Appearing in the screen of leaves in *Hillside*, like a window carved out of a green
arc de triomphe, suggests for a moment
A maker, a bird of passage. You sometimes can find yourself wishing for a hawk
or a hare
Or a woman at a cottage door in Cézanne, but the next moment you know the
rock face
And the windowless farm have to be as remote from our doings
As they are in Cézanne in order to be our representatives,
us in the world, us become colors.

Courbet: Les casseurs de cailloux

Sable, paille, ont la vie douce, le vin ne s'y brise pas.

Du colombier ils récoltent les plumes,

De la goulotte ils ont la langue avide.

Ils retardent l'orteil des filles

Dont ils percent les chrysalides:

Le sang bien souffert tombe dans l'anecdote de leur légèreté.

Nous dévorons la peste du feu gris de la rocaille.

Quand on intrigue à la commune,

C'est encore sur les chemins ruinés qu'on est le mieux.

Là, les tomates des vergers, l'air nous les porte au crépuscule,

Avec l'oubli de la méchanceté prochaine de nos femmes,

Et l'aigreur de la soif tassée aux genoux.

Fils, cette nuit, nos travaux de poussière

Seront visibles dans le ciel:

Déjà l'huile de plomb ressuscite.

--René Char, 1978

('Sand straw live softly softly take the wine/ Gather the down-drifting dovecot feathers/ Parch with the avid water-channel/ Stay girls barefoot going/ Pierce their chrysalids/ Drink lightly carelessly the well suffered blood// We devour the grey fire's pest among the stones/ While in the village they plot and plan/ The best place still for men is the ruined roads/ The tomatoes in the garden are borne to us on the twilight air/ And of our women's next spite forgetfulness/ And the smart of thirst aching in our knees// Sons this night our labor of dust/ Will be visible in the sky/ Already the oil rises from the lead again.' --trans. Samuel Beckett.)