



Paul Cézanne (1839–1906): *Still Life: Apples and a Pot of Primroses*, 1890–94. Oil on canvas, 28¾" × 36⅞" (73 cm × 92.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951. 51.112.1.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

The Cézanne Inscape

These extraordinary letters, here first translated into English, show to what degree the eye of one artist can penetrate to the essence of another art. The most distinguished of modern German poets, Rainer Maria Rilke, was born when Paul Cézanne had already been painting nearly a decade. It was more than thirty years later that he encountered Cézanne in the memorial retrospective held at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1907, the year after the painter's death. Rilke was himself a mature artist with several volumes already published. Yet another distinguished poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, had already given a name to the unique pattern that distinguishes each art—music, poetry, painting—its "inscape." Hopkins's idea was that a poem's sound is as integral to its sense as a painting's color to its design or music's melody to its form. For Cézanne, who gave landscape a new meaning in painting, the verbal play of "inscape" seems especially apt; it also defines Rilke's winged empathy with the other arts. His letters of enthusiastic discovery, written to his sculptress-wife, Clara, tell that he found in Cézanne's pictures, visited day after day, "all existing things incorruptibly assembled according to their color content." Also commenting here on Manet, van Gogh, Picasso, and Rodin, Rilke emerges as a unique artist who interprets, in prose and verse, the inscapes of others as well as his own.

Jane Bannard Greene

29 rue Cassette, Paris VI^e
October 7, 1907

I was at the Salon d'Automne again this morning. Met Meier-Graefe again at the Cézannes. . . . Count Kessler was there, too, and he spoke to me at length with sincere warmth about the *Book of Pictures* which he and Hofmannsthal had read aloud to one another. All this took place in the Cézanne room where the strong pictures immediately take hold of one. You know how I always find the people walking about at exhibitions so much more interesting than the paintings. This is also true of this Salon d'Automne with the exception of the Cézanne room. There all the reality is on his side, in that thick, quilted blue of his, in his red and his shadowless green and the reddish black of his wine bottles. How humble all the objects are in his paintings. The apples are all cooking apples and the wine bottles belong in old, round, sagging coat pockets. . . .

Paris
October 9, 1907

. . . Today I wanted to tell you a little about Cézanne. Insofar as work was concerned, he maintained that he had lived like a Bohemian until his fortieth year. Only then, in his acquaintance with Pissarro, did the taste for work open up to him. But then so much so, that he did nothing but work for the thirty latter years of his life. Without joy really it seems, in continual fury, at variance with every single one of his works, none of which seemed to him to attain what he considered the most indispensable thing. "*La réalisation*," he called it, and he found it in the Venetians whom he used to see and see again in the Louvre and had unconditionally acknowledged. The convincing quality, the becoming a thing, the reality heightened into the indestructible through his own experience of the object, it was that which seemed to him the aim of his innermost work; old, sick, every evening exhausted to the point of faintness by the regular daily work (so much so that he would often go to bed at six, as it was growing dark, after an insensibly eaten supper); ill-tempered, distrustful, laughed at every time on the way to his studio, jeered at, mistreated,—but observing Sunday, hearing Mass and vespers like a child, and very politely asking his housekeeper, Madame Brémond, for somewhat better fare—: he still hoped from day to day, perhaps, to reach the successful achievement he felt to be the only essential thing. In so doing (if one may believe the reporter of all these facts, a not very congenial painter who went along for a while with everybody), he had increased the difficulty of his work in the most obstinate way. In the case of landscapes or still-life, conscientiously persevering before the

subject, he nevertheless made it his own by extremely complicated detours. Starting with the darkest coloring, he covered its depth with a layer of color which he carried a little beyond that and so on and on, extending color upon color, he gradually came to another contrasting pictorial element, with which he then proceeded similarly from a new center. I think that in his case the two procedures, of the observant and sure taking over and of the appropriation and personal use of what he took over, strove against each other, perhaps as a result of becoming conscious; that they began to speak at the same time, as it were, interrupted each other continually, constantly fell out. And the old man bore their dissension, ran up and down in his studio, which had bad light because the builder didn't deem it necessary to listen to the eccentric old man, whom they had agreed not to take seriously in Aix. He walked back and forth in his studio, where the green apples lay about, or in despair seated himself in the garden and sat. And before him lay the little city, unsuspecting, with its cathedral; the city for respectable and modest citizens, while he, as his father, who was a hatmaker, had foreseen, had become different; a Bohemian, as his father saw it and as he himself believed. This father, knowing that Bohemians live and die in misery, had taken it upon himself to work for his son, had become a kind of small banker to whom ("because he was honest," as Cézanne said) people brought their money, and Cézanne owed it to his providential care that he had enough later to be able to paint in peace. Perhaps he went to the funeral of this father; his mother he loved too, but when she was buried, he was not there. He was "*sur le motif*," as he expressed it. Work was already so important to him then and tolerated no exception, not even that which his piety and simplicity must certainly have recommended to him.

In Paris he gradually became even better known. But for such progress as he did not make (which others made and into the bargain *how*—), he had only distrust; too clearly there remained in his memory what a misunderstood picture of his destiny and of his intent Zola (who knew him from youth and was his compatriot) had sketched of him in *Oeuvre*. Since then, he was *closed* to writing of all sorts: "*travailler sans le souci de personne et devenir fort*—," he screamed at a visitor. But in the midst of eating he stood up, when this person told about Frenhofer, the painter whom Balzac, with incredible foresight of coming developments, invented in his short story of the *Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu* (about which I once told you), and whom he has go down to destruction over an impossible task, through the discovery that there are actually no contours but rather many vibrating transitions—, learning this, the old man stands up from the table in spite of Madame Brémond, who certainly did not favor such irregularities, and, voiceless with excitement, keeps pointing his finger distinctly toward himself and showing himself, himself, him-

self, painful as that may have been. It was not Zola who understood what the point was; Balzac had sensed long ahead that, in painting, something so tremendous can suddenly present itself, which no one can handle.

But the next day he nevertheless began again with his struggle for mastery; by six o'clock every morning he got up, went through the city to his studio and stayed there until ten; then he came back by the same way to eat, ate and was on his way again, often half an hour beyond his studio, "*sur le motif*" in a valley before which the mountain of Sainte Victoire with all its thousands of tasks rose up indescribably. There he would sit then for hours, occupied with finding and taking in *plans* (of which, remarkably enough, he keeps speaking in exactly the same words as Rodin). He often reminds one of Rodin anyway in his expressions. As when he complains about how much his old city is being destroyed and disfigured. Only that where Rodin's great, self-confident equilibrium leads to an objective statement, fury overcomes this sick, solitary old man. Evenings on the way home he gets angry at some change, arrives in a rage and, when he notices how much the anger is exhausting him, promises himself: I will stay at home; work, nothing but work.

From such alterations for the worse in little Aix he then deduces in horror how things must be going elsewhere. Once when present conditions were under discussion, industry and the like, he broke out "with terrible eyes": "*Ça va mal. . . . C'est effrayant, la vie!*"

Outside, something vaguely terrifying in process of growth; a little closer, indifference and scorn, and then suddenly this old man in his work, who no longer paints his nudes from anything but old drawings he made forty years ago in Paris, knowing that Aix would allow him no model. "At my age," he said, "I could get at best a fifty-year-old, and I know that not even such a person is to be found in Aix." So he paints from his old drawings. And lays his apples down on bedspreads that Madame Brémond certainly misses one day, and puts his wine bottles among them and whatever he happens to find. And (like van Gogh) makes his "saints" out of things like that; and compels them, *compels* them to be beautiful, to mean the whole world and all happiness and all glory, and doesn't know whether he has brought them to doing that for him. And sits in the garden like an old dog, the dog of this work which calls him again and beats him and lets him go hungry. And yet with it all clings to this incomprehensible master, who only on Sunday lets him return to God, as to his first owner, for a while.—And outside people are saying: "Cézanne," and gentlemen in Paris are writing his name with emphasis and proud at being well informed—.

I wanted to tell you all this; it is related to so much about us and to ourselves in a hundred places.

Outside it is raining copiously, as usual. Farewell . . . tomorrow I will speak again of myself. But I have done so today too.

Paris

October 10, 1907

. . . Meanwhile I am still going to the Cézanne room. After yesterday's letter you may have some small idea of what it is like. Today again I spent two hours in front of certain pictures. This is somehow useful to me, I feel. I wonder whether you would find it revealing. I don't know how to say it simply. Actually all of Cézanne's paintings can be seen in two or three well-chosen examples, and somewhere else, at Cassirer's perhaps, we could surely have got as far in understanding him as I have now. But everything takes a long, long time. When I remember how strange and disconcerting the first things seemed to me when I looked at them and saw them before me associated with a name I had never heard before. And then nothing for a long time, and suddenly one has the right eyes. . . . If you could be here for a day, I would almost rather take you with me to the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, to the female nude sitting in the green mirror of the leafy wood which is everywhere Manet, fashioned with an indescribable means of expression that suddenly, after trial and error, appeared, and there succeeded. All the methods he used to achieve it have been consumed, dissolved in the success. It seems as though he had used none at all. Yesterday I spent a long time in front of it. But each time the miracle is valid only for the one person, only for the saints to whom it happens. In spite of this, Cézanne had to begin all over again from the very bottom. . . . Farewell until next time.

Paris

October 15, 1907

. . . and now, just think, added to everything else, Rodin drawings. They were expected at the Salon d'Automne. A page in the catalogue lists them in full, but the room originally reserved for them has long been filled with bad stuff. And suddenly today on the big boulevards I read that they are at Bernheim-jeune, more than one hundred and fifty of them. As you can imagine, I gave up everything and went to Bernheim. There indeed were the drawings, many that I knew, that I had helped to frame in the cheap, white-gold frames that were ordered in such prodigious quantity at the time. That I knew. Yes, but did I know them? How much seemed different to me than it did before. (Is it Cézanne? Is it the passage of time?) What I wrote about them two months ago shifted back to the limits of validity. It was valid somewhere still; but as always when I make the mistake of writing about art, it was

valid as a provisional, personal insight rather than as a fact, objectively ascertained from looking at the pictures before me. Their interpretation and interpretability disturbed me, confined me, just as before they seemed to open up all sorts of vistas. I would like to have had them without any comment, more discrete, more factual, left to themselves. I admired several in a new way, rejected others that seemed to shift color in the reflected light of the interpretation, until I came to some that I did not know. Scattered among the others I discovered perhaps fifteen sheets, all from the time when Rodin followed the dancers of King Sisowath on their travels, to prolong his enjoyment and increase his appreciation. Remember, we read of it at the time? There they were, the little, gracile dancers like metamorphosed gazelles, the two long slender arms as though drawn in a single piece through the shoulders, through the slender-masive torso (that has all the slenderness of Buddha figures) drawn as though in a single, long-hammered piece out to the wrists where the hands made their appearance like actors, mobile and independent in their performance. And what hands! Buddha hands that know how to sleep, that, when everything is over, lie down flat, finger to finger, resting there for centuries at the edge of the lap, lying palm upwards or standing up stiffly from the wrist commanding infinite silence. Those same hands awake, just think. Those fingers spread, opened out ray-like or curved in toward one another like a Jericho rose. Those fingers ecstatic and happy or frightened, at the very end of the long arms, dancing *them*. And the whole body used to keep this intense dance in balance in the air, in its own atmosphere, in the gold of an oriental setting. Again in an almost contrived way he managed to take advantage of every accident. A thin, brown tracing paper which when it is taken up forms tiny, many-sided folds reminiscent of Persian script. And the color tones, enamel-smooth pink, intense blue as in the most precious miniatures, and yet, as always in his drawings, very primitive. Flowers, one thinks, pages of a herbarium in which the most spontaneous gesture of a flower is preserved and defined with even greater precision by drying. Dried flowers. Of course, just after the thought had come to me, I read somewhere in his vigorous handwriting: "*Fleurs Humaines*." It is almost a pity that he doesn't leave it to us to think it through. It is quite obvious. And yet once again it was moving to me to find that I had immediately understood him so exactly, as often before. Goodnight. Until tomorrow. . . .

Paris

October 17, 1907

. . . rain and more rain, all day yesterday, and just now it is beginning again. If you look straight ahead, you would say it was going to snow. But last night I was awak-

ened by moonlight in a corner over my bookshelves, a patch of light that did not shine, but covered the place where it fell with its aluminum white. And the room was filled to every corner with cold night. I could tell lying there that it was under the wardrobe too, under the chest of drawers and around the objects with no intervening space, around the brass candlesticks which looked very cold. But a bright morning. A broad east wind that swept over the city in full force, finding it so spacious. In the opposite direction, to the west, blown, driven out by the wind, archipelagos of clouds, island groups, gray as the neck and breast feathers of water birds in a cold, faint-blue ocean, serene and remote. And beneath all this, close to the ground, the Place de la Concorde and the trees of the Champs-Élysées, shadowy, black simplified to green under the westerly clouds. On the right, bright houses, the sun beating on them, and away in the background, in a dove-gray haze, more houses locked in planes with quarry-like, rectilinear surfaces. And suddenly, one approaches the obelisk (where there is always a little ancient, blond heat flickering round the granite, and in the hollows of the hieroglyphics the old Egyptian shadow-blue, lingering in the ever recurrent owl, dried up as in colored shells). There the wonderful avenue flows toward one with a scarcely perceptible drop, swift and rich like a river that ages ago by its own violence cut out the gate in the rock walls of the Arc de Triomphe back at the Etoile. And it all lies there with the generosity of a natural landscape and flings out space. And here and there, flags reach up higher and higher on the roofs, stretch, flap their wings as though they were about to take flight. This is how it looked today on my way to see the Rodin drawings.

First Mr. Bernheim showed me some van Goghs in the storeroom. I have already written you about the *Night Café*, though there is still much more to say about its wakefulness that is ingeniously evoked with wine-red, yellow lamplight, deep and very shallow green. Then a park, or rather a path through a city park in Arles, with black people on benches right and left, a blue newspaper reader in the foreground and a violet woman in the background, under and between the green of the trees and bushes that are executed with bold strokes. The figure of a man against a background which looks as though it were made of woven reeds (yellow and greenish yellow), but which becomes simplified to a unified brightness when one moves away from it. An elderly man with a clipped, black-white mustache, equally short hair, sunken cheeks under a broad skull, all in black-white, pink, moist dark blue and opaque bluish-white up to the big brown eyes. And finally one of those landscapes such as he always thrust aside and yet kept on painting: setting sun, yellow and orange-red, surrounded by its glow composed of round, yellow daubs. Full of rebellious blue, blue, blue, on the other hand, is the curving slope

of the hill, separated by a strip of soothing vibrations (a river?) from the transparent dark antique gold of the dusk in which is visible, in the slanting lower third of the foreground, a field and a huddle of upright sheaves. Then again the Rodins.

But now rain, rain, as loud and plentiful as in the country, its sound unbroken by any other noises. The round wall bordering the convent is covered with moss and has patches of quite luminous green such as I have never seen before. Farewell for this time. . . .

Paris

October 22, 1907

. . . Today the Salon closes. And already, as I return home from it for the last time, I would like to go to see a violet, a green or certain blue tones I feel I ought to have seen better, more unforgettably. Already, although I have stood in front of it so often, attentively and stubbornly, the great color scheme of the woman in the red armchair has become as hard for me to reproduce in my memory as a number with a great many figures. And yet I stamped it on my mind, digit by digit. Emotionally, my awareness of its existence has become an exaltation that I feel even in my sleep. My blood describes it to me, but the words with which to say it pass by somewhere outside and refuse to be called in. Did I write you about it?—A low armchair, all upholstered in red has been placed in front of an earth-green wall on which, recurring at infrequent intervals, is a cobalt-blue pattern (a cross with an open center). The plump, rounded back curves and slopes down forward to the arms (which are closed like the coat sleeves of an armless man). The left arm, and the tassel full of vermilion suspended from it, no longer have the wall behind them, but a wide, low border stripe of greenish blue to which they object loudly. Seated in this red armchair, which is a personality in itself, is a woman, her hands in the lap of a dress with broad, vertical stripes. The dress is very lightly indicated by little scattered splotches of greenish-yellow and yellowish-green up to the edge of the bluish-green jacket which is held together by a blue silk bow shimmering with green lights. The close proximity of all these colors is used in the brightness of the face to produce a simple modeling. Even the brown of the hair that curves around the temples and the satiny brown of the eyes are compelled to protest against their surroundings. It is as though every place were aware of every other place. Each participates so actively; its adaptation or rebellion is so important; each in its way is concerned with the balance and contributes to it. For if it is called a red armchair (and it is the first and final red armchair in all painting) this is only because it contains within it a skillfully computed color sum which, whatever the individual colors may be, strengthens and confirms the red. To achieve this intensity of

expression the painting around the light portrait is very strong, giving somewhat the effect of a coat of wax. And yet the color does not overbalance the subject which seems to be so perfectly translated into its pictorial equivalents that the bourgeois reality, although it is so successfully conveyed, loses all heaviness in its ultimate existence as picture. As I wrote you before, it has all become an affair of the colors among themselves. Each one asserts itself against the others, emphasizes itself, thinks only of itself. As various juices are secreted in the mouth of a dog at the approach of certain things—affinitive ones that merely assimilate, and corrective ones that are meant to neutralize—so within each color are concentrations or dilutions with the help of which it survives the contact with another color. Apart from this glandular activity within the color intensity, the biggest role is played by reflections. (The presence of these in nature has always surprised me, finding the red of sunset in water as the permanent tone in the crude green of waterlily leaves.) Weaker local colors abandon themselves entirely and are content to reflect what is strongest in their vicinity. The interior of the picture vibrates with this give-and-take of manifold, reciprocal influence. It rises, falls back into itself and not a single place is static. Only this for today. . . . You see how hard it is when one tries to get very close to the facts.

Paris

October 23, 1907

. . . I could not help wondering last evening whether my attempt to describe the woman in the red armchair had given you any clear idea of it. I am not sure that I even got the value relations. More than ever, words seemed to me excluded, and yet it must be possible to compel them to serve this purpose. If only a picture like that can be looked at as nature, then it should be possible to express it somehow as an existing object. For a moment it seemed easier to me to talk about the *Self-portrait*. It reveals itself more quickly. It does not extend through the entire palette. It seems to maintain itself at the center of the palette between yellow-red, ocher, lacquer red and gentian blue, and in the coat and hair to reach to the depths of a moist violet-brown that contrasts with a wall of gray and pale copper. On closer examination, however, the inner presence of bright greens and succulent blues is discernible even in this picture. They bring out the reddish tones and define the light ones. Here, however, the subject itself can be captured more readily, and the words that feel so unhappy when they try to give the facts of painting would be only too happy—when confronted with a representation with which their province begins—to recover themselves and describe what is there. There is the right profile of a man, turned a quarter to the front, looking. The thick, dark hair is shoved to-

gether at the back of the head and is placed above the ears in such a fashion that the entire contour of the skull is exposed. It is drawn with consummate sureness, hard and yet round, down the forehead in one piece, and the firmness is still maintained even where, resolved into form and plane, it is only the last of a thousand outlines. At the corners of the eyebrows the strong structure of the skull (that is actuated from within) is again emphasized. But from there the face is suspended, thrust forward and down, as though vamped like a shoe onto the chin with its closely cropped beard. It is as though every feature were hung from it individually. There is an incredible intensity about it, and at the same time, reduced to the most primitive terms, that expression of blank astonishment in which children and country people can lose themselves—except that here the unseeing imbecility of the absorption is replaced by an animal alertness that maintains a continuous, objective vigilance in the unblinking eyes. And the great and incorruptible objectivity of this gaze is borne out in an almost touching way by the fact that he himself, without in any way interpreting or taking a superior attitude toward his expression, reproduced it with such humble adherence to the fact, with the credulity and detached interest of a dog that looks at itself in the mirror and thinks: there is another dog.

Farewell . . . for now. Perhaps from all this you can get a slight glimpse of the old man to whom apply the words that he himself wrote of Pissarro: "*humble et colossal*." Today is the anniversary of his death. . . .

*On the Prague-Breslau train
afternoon, November 4, (1907)*

. . . Will you believe that I came to Prague to see Cézannes? . . . Outside in the Manes-pavilion, where at one time there was a Rodin exhibition, there was (as I luckily found out in time) an exposition of modern paintings. The best and most remarkable were: Monticelli, Monet good, Pissarro represented by a few pictures, 3 things of Daumier. And 4 Cézannes. (Also several each of van Gogh, Gauguin, Emile Bernard.) But Cézanne. A big portrait, a seated man (M. Valabrègue) with a lot of black against a lead-black background. The face and the closed hands, resting below on his knees, excited to orange, stated strongly and unequivocally. A still-life which also is concerned with black. A long loaf of white bread in natural yellow on a smooth, black table, a white cloth, a thick wineglass on its base, two eggs, two onions, a tin milk container and, at an angle with the bread, a black knife. And here, even more than in the portrait, the black treated as color, not as contrast, and recognized as color in everything: in the cloth, where it is spread over the white, introduced into the glass, subduing the white of the eggs and weighing down the yellow of the onions to old gold. (Just as, without having actually seen it,

I had suspected that he would use black.) Beside it a still-life with a blue cloth. Between its bourgeois cotton blue and the wall that is covered with slightly cloudy blueness a lovely big gray-glazed ginger jar explaining itself to the right and left. An earth-green bottle of yellow Curaçao, and farther on a pottery vase, the upper two-thirds of which is covered with green glaze. On the other side, in the blue cloth, a porcelain plate, its color determined by the blue, filled with apples, some of which have rolled out. The rolling of their red into the blue appears to be an action deriving from the color processes of the picture, just as the link between two Rodin statues springs from their plastic affinity. And finally, another landscape, blue air, blue sea, red roofs, speaking to one another against green and very animated in their inner conversation, full of communication with one another. . . .

1959

*Translated from the German by Jane Barnard Greene
(Letter of October 12 with M. D. Herter Norton)*