

# The Brush Stroke as Catastrophe: Gasquet's *Cézanne* and the Paintings of Bibémus Quarry

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## Article abstract

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# The Brush Stroke as Catastrophe: Gasquet's *Cézanne* and the Paintings of Bibémus Quarry

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## Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine les représentations de la carrière de Bibémus par Cézanne dans le contexte de l'essai *Cézanne*, dans lequel le poète symboliste Joachim Gasquet rend compte de ses conversations avec l'artiste et commente la façon dont il peignait *sur le motif*. Je m'intéresse en particulier aux métaphores géologiques dont Gasquet se sert pour décrire l'usage que fait Cézanne du coup de pinceau ou de la *tache*—des métaphores qui sont de nature plutôt hybride sur le plan idéologique et esthétique et évoquent par là avec d'autant plus de force le processus pictural cézannien. Entraînant la discussion vers l'analyse formelle de trois des peintures de Bibémus tout en veillant à ne pas tomber dans le formalisme (et son insistance sur l'autonomie esthétique), l'article tend à faire ressortir certaines des implications scientifiques, sociales et implicitement philosophiques qui caractérisent la facture particulière du peintre.

Towards the end of his life, Paul Cézanne made ten oil paintings in Bibémus Quarry, the source of a deep golden-to-orange-red limestone prized as a building material in his native Aix-en-Provence.<sup>1</sup> The site had been quarried from Roman times until the 1830s. When Cézanne began to paint it in the 1890s Bibémus was therefore a sort of ruin, with the sharp, geometric cuts in its face visible but dramatically overgrown and eroded.<sup>2</sup> He pictures the quarry variously as a territory so broken down that it is almost a conglomeration of raw materials rather than a fully realized landscape (fig. 1); as a shifting proscenium from which rises a Mont Sainte-Victoire that seemingly belongs to another world (*Mont Sainte-Victoire vue de Bibémus*, Baltimore Museum of Art); as wild, overgrown, tight-focus corners of the earth (figs. 2, 5); as a forbiddingly top-heavy wall (fig. 6); and, perhaps most oddly, as a tomblike enclosure for a faceless, almost impossibly small man seated on the quarry floor (fig. 7).

These are very different representations, and scale and point of view are indeterminate throughout, making Bibémus extremely difficult to tally as the sum of the paintings' individual parts. The first several generations of writers on Cézanne are largely silent on questions of where we, as viewers, might be and how one corner of the quarry might relate to the next. For them landscape motifs counted less as individual places than as points of departure for more grandly philosophical destinations, the ideal structures beneath nature's phenomenal surface, or "the logic of organized sensation."<sup>3</sup> In the last few years, though, discussions of Cézanne's work have focused increasingly on his devotion to his Provençal origins and especially on his conviction that the Provençal landscape could be made to stand for origins as such, be they individual, material, or philosophical.<sup>4</sup> With its primal character and emphatically unformed materiality, Bibémus plays an important role in these discussions: both Paul Smith and Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, for example, point out that it would be easy to imagine this landscape as the handiwork of demigods or giants, and argue that Cézanne would have very much liked the way such mythological explanations literally ground Bibémus and his other Provençal subjects in the dawn of Creation.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Paul Cézanne, *La Carrière de Bibémus*, ca. 1892. Oil on canvas. Private Collection (Photo: Bridgeman-Giraudon / Art Resource, NY).

These recent arguments thus differ substantially from formalist analyses in both method and (implicit or explicit) politics, but they share certain strengths and weaknesses with the earlier approach. In describing a search for perceptual, metaphysical, or personalized mythological foundations, they offer a means to approach the *strength* of Cézanne's compositions, the apparently solid structure that many writers have seen as being generated out of Cézanne's "constructive stroke."<sup>6</sup> Regionalist arguments have been less helpful, though, in dealing with the other side of Cézanne's painting: a disorienting quality—



Figure 2. Paul Cézanne, *Le Rocher Rouge*, ca. 1896–97. Oil on canvas, 92 x 68 cm. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY).

prominent in the Bibémus paintings—that stands paradoxically against the sense of compositional coherence and that makes Cézanne's late paintings notoriously difficult to describe.

It is my contention that the Bibémus paintings offer us a means to approach the paintings' perceptual instability and structural strength not as contradictions but as parts of a whole. The paintings stage Cézanne's act of painting in a special way, both because of the quarry's visual properties (especially the unusual geometric cuts and their dramatic contrasts with the effects of erosion) and its historical status (quarries were significant, as we shall see, in the then-contentious science of geology). Later in this paper I will look closely at the former of these factors, examining three paintings in detail. The task more immediately at hand, however, is to situate Cézanne—as thinker and as painter—in relationship to the latter. This will require a close reading of Joachim Gasquet's *Cézanne*, a memoir that was published in 1921 but written about ten years earlier and based on conversations Gasquet had with the aging painter, often *sur*

*le motif*, between 1896 and 1900—the years in which Cézanne painted most of the Bibémus canvases. The accuracy of Gasquet's reporting and the motives with which he wrote out their “conversations” have been questioned on multiple levels.<sup>7</sup> His language often reveals his biases, however, and these in turn often tell us a good deal about the manifest content of his analyses. In what follows, I will attend closely to Gasquet's prejudices and his claims, focusing especially on the geological metaphors that he uses with startling frequency in his descriptions of Cézanne's stroke-by-stroke paint application. Questions of structure and its dissolution arise with equal insistence throughout Gasquet's discussions, and thus they allow us to address both sides of Cézanne's production, keeping formal concerns very much at play but in the end refuting the idealist logic of formalism.

On the face of it, any anti-idealist claim founded on Gasquet's commentary might seem unlikely. “I see by *taches*,” he has Cézanne declare at one point, handing us one of the chestnuts of formalist Cézanne criticism: the *tache* as the central instrument of an epistemological project, an index of the point where artistic sensibility and the deep structures of the visible world dovetail perfectly.<sup>8</sup> But Gasquet differs in both ambition and language from the empirically minded formalists who would develop this line of analysis in the twentieth century. As fiercely Catholic and regionalist as he was *fin-de-siècle* vitalist, Gasquet found Cézanne's landscapes to be direct, even natural expressions of the spirit animating the Provençal soil.<sup>9</sup> He tends accordingly to draw his metaphors from the forces of nature, particularly from geology, so that his language roots the *tache* deeply in the workings of the earth. Gasquet was reasonably well informed, and his scientific metaphors are quite specific. They are also, however, inconsistent, mixed in such a way that he forces opposing views of nature, god, and man to occupy the same place. Understood within the context of the quarry, I suggest, this inconsistency can be pressed to describe a real instability in the character of Cézanne's brushstroke, and, by extension, in any epistemological project that might be imagined out of the form that stroke generates.

The Bibémus paintings are not, of course, any more “geological” than those picturing Mont Sainte-Victoire, Le Tholonet, or the forest around the Château Noir. The special status of Bibémus arises instead because it is more difficult than those other sites to see as purely “natural.” Bibémus is a historical site—even an early industrial one—and is thus quite humanized even if the forces of nature are at work within it. We can see man's intervention into the wildness of live rock and we can see the effects of the geological processes that undermine this man-made geometry. Gasquet's text suggests, I argue, that Cézanne's brushstroke sought not simply to represent this world, but to identify the position of the artist within it and in relationship to it.

The problems presented to us by the quarry paintings thus open onto one of the great debates of the late nineteenth century: what precisely did Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* imply for the relationship between the human and natural world? Objections that humans had descended from lower species were, of course, strenuous; the deeper philosophical issue, however, was the epistemological one: how does one gain perspective on a world in which one is always a participant—subject to the same forces of change as all of the rest of it—never an objective observer? Gasquet's *Cézanne* is shot through with these problems, particularly when he addresses the nature of Cézanne's brushstroke. There is thus some value in thinking of the special character of the *tache*, as Gasquet presents it to us, as having something to do with the transfer of this problem into a representational register: how is a painter at once to picture the world and to be a part of it? And what better place to think about these questions than Bibémus? Because the quarry is a space by which we are surrounded but on which we can gain no perspective, one in which the human increasingly cannot be separated from the natural realm, the quarry is also a place in which the problems that arise in the abstract with Darwin move firmly into the experiential realm: the paintable realm.

To address these issues though, it is necessary to step back from a narrow focus on the brushstroke. Gasquet's interest in geology and Darwinism was strong but conflicted, and it is in teasing out these conflicts that terms drawn from scientific debate become useful in discussing Cézanne's paintings. The first step back is to the level of the quarry itself. It was to a large degree in such places that the earth was opened up not only to human use but to human knowledge. Fossil-rich inland sites—including many Provençal quarries—and other irregularities in the geological record, such as extinct volcanoes and discontinuities between strata, did much to spur the beginnings of geology as an independent science in the eighteenth century. How could such things exist if the earth had been created only once, in its present form, six thousand years ago? Could the earth change over time? And were the fossilized lower life forms embedded in the rocks really extinct, or had they too transformed into something else?

One of the first comprehensive theories developed to address these questions was catastrophism.<sup>10</sup> Its proponents—most influentially, Georges Cuvier, whose *Discours sur les révolutions* came out in 1817—argued that neither Earth nor the species inhabiting it were susceptible to gradual change, but that they achieved their forms catastrophically, all at once. The most recent catastrophe had been the biblical flood, so the Bible could account for the two most recent ages of the earth's history. Awkwardly, however, it took at least twenty-five earlier ages, each a new creation initiated by a worldwide catastrophe, to explain the millions of passing years recorded in the earth's strata.

Such embarrassments did not, however, prevent scientists from becoming celebrities by arguing that marine fossils proved the myth of the flood and that extinct volcanoes offered evidence of earlier upheavals.<sup>11</sup>

Catastrophism's primary opponents were the followers of Charles Lyell, whose 1830 *Principles of Geology* argues that, given enough time, ordinary natural processes such as seasonal transitions, snow, rain, and individual earthquakes and volcanoes would bring about geological change.<sup>12</sup> Lyell's position came to be called uniformitarianism, since it spoke of a slow, uniform, ongoing development. And just as catastrophism was closely related to the theory of the species' immutability, so did uniformitarianism come to have its biological complement: it was reading *Principles of Geology* on the H.M.S. Beagle that convinced Darwin of the need to understand and describe the evolution of species.<sup>13</sup> After the 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species*, the problem of refuting the concept of gradual, uniform change challenged the catastrophist position all the more.

The literal accuracy of Genesis is probably the highest-profile point on which catastrophists and believers in the immutability of species argued with Darwin's supporters. But at its root, the argument between the two positions is at least as philosophical as it is religious. Cuvier's arguments for catastrophism and the immutability of species were motivated more by an understanding of Kant's "Critique of Teleological Judgment"—strata and species were ends in-and-of themselves, organized forms were not subject to change over time—than they were by a religious desire to find God in the details.<sup>14</sup> Lyell's proposition that, geologically, those conditions were mere accidents of weather was, from this perspective, patently absurd. And Darwin, by moving his mentor's arguments into the realm of living organisms, pushed that difficulty even farther:

Battle within battle must be continually recurring with varying success; and yet in the long run, forces are so nicely balanced, that the face of nature remains for long periods of time uniform, though assuredly the merest trifle would give the victory to one organic being over another.<sup>15</sup>

Darwin admits a high degree of disorder, precisely of the sort catastrophism had originally been meant to explain away. His assertion of the merest trifle's ability to shatter a long run of stability, for instance, along with the small but species-altering variations that he was willing to posit without having the slightest idea what might be their cause, suggest a world that advances arbitrarily, all at once, without a single stable form—whether geological or biological—ever coming finally into its own.

One striking fact of Gasquet's geological metaphors for Cézanne's painting is that catastrophist metaphor collides, in various ways, with Darwinism and uniformitarianism more generally. This is, in part, due to Gasquet's use of sources. One was

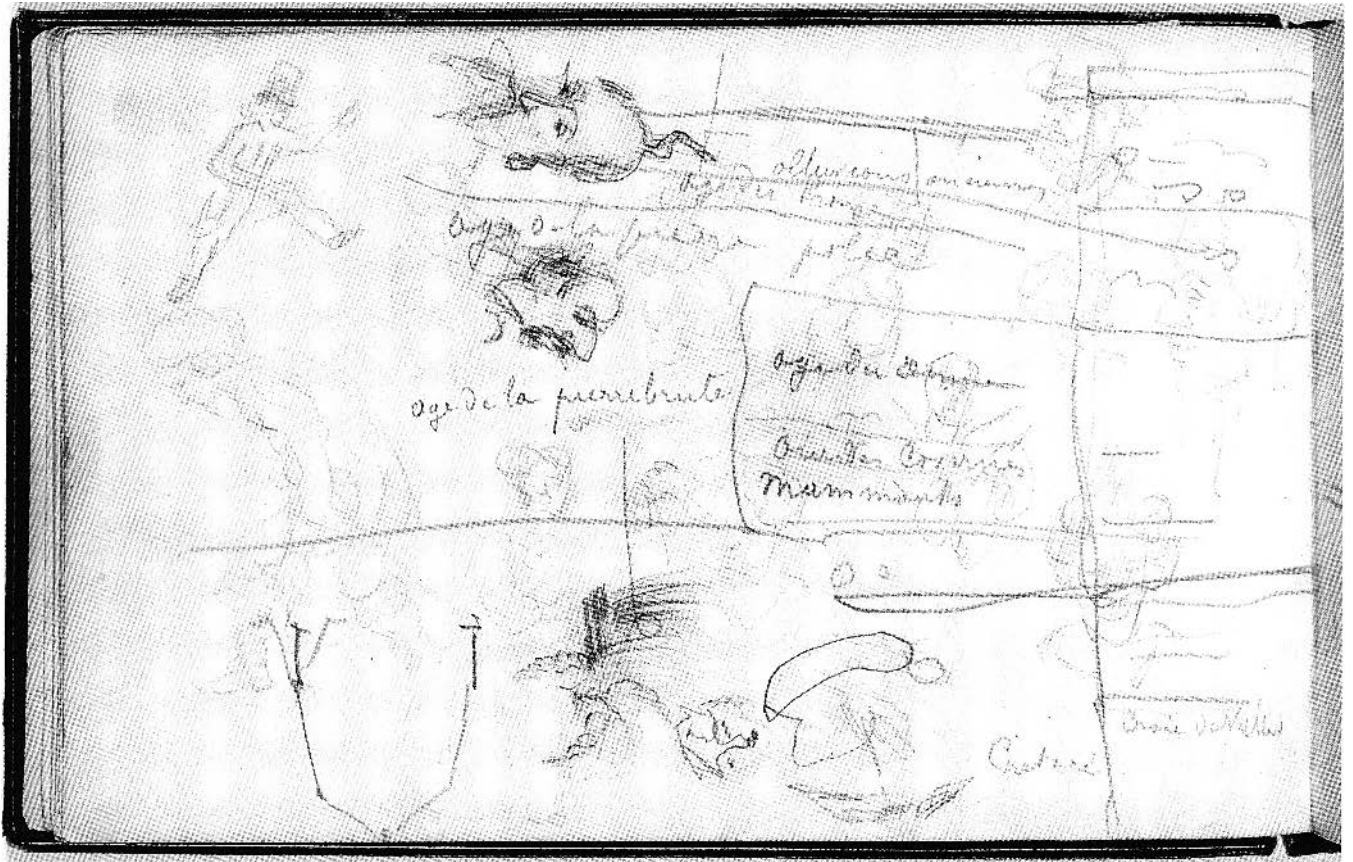


Figure 3. Paul Cézanne, *Sketch with Geological Study*, ca. 1855. Ink on paper. Musée de Louvre, Paris (Photo: Thierry le Mage, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY).

Antoine-Fortuné Marion, a childhood friend of the artist who, by the 1890s, had become a well-established naturalist, a specialist in geology and paleontology and a supporter of Darwin (who admired him in return).<sup>16</sup> Cézanne and Marion's friendship involved shared interests from early on. Marion painted, and Cézanne seems to have taken some interest in geology: his notebooks from the late 1850s contain two pages inscribed in both his own hand and Marion's (figs. 3, 4).<sup>17</sup> The naturalist's contributions include, on one page, notes on the different geological ages (the evocative "l'âge de la pierre brute" and "l'âge de la pierre polie" seem especially to have appealed to a young man who, at the time, was nearly as interested in poetry as he was in painting) and, on the other page, a stratigraphical breakdown of the geological epochs. About a decade later, the two brought their primary interests side-by-side in a practical manner, hunting together in the countryside surrounding Aix-en-Provence—Cézanne for motifs and Marion for fossils.<sup>18</sup>

These artistic and scientific interests, Gasquet suggests, remained sympathetic enterprises well into the 1890s, when he

befriended the painter and the scientist. On the occasional Sunday, he writes, Marion would come to visit Cézanne, set up a canvas alongside him, and describe the landscape in scientific terms. "With deep lines he would sketch out the history of the earth—the birth, in that corner of Provence, of the landscapes they were painting, their first outcropping from beneath the ice, their ancient transformations, and how their perpetual, living origins are inscribed in all their colours and nuances."<sup>19</sup> That these conversations took place at the men's easels is interesting in itself, but the truly striking thing is that Marion's efforts to describe the history of the earth (as Gasquet recounts them) should present geological change and the act of composition as evolving in parallel. It is not merely that in both cases colour arises from blankness. The evolution of the landscape, from its origins, is inscribed in a continuous present—unbroken by any catastrophe—for which the canvas's two-dimensional immediacy stands in very well. The means and evidence of that inscription—colour and nuance—are, of course, also the means of creating form that Cézanne, ever railing against Ingresque



canvas, passes a night of obliterating rest in retreat from the painting, and returns to work the next day:

The next day, a beautiful morning, slowly geological foundations appear to me, the strata establish themselves, the major planes of my canvas; I compose the rocky skeleton mentally. I can see the outcropping of stone under the water; I feel the weight of the sky. Everything falls into place. A pale palpitation envelops the linear elements. The red earths rise from an abyss. I begin to separate myself from the landscape, to see it. I disengage myself from it with this first sketch, with these geological lines. Geometry, measure of the earth. A tender emotion comes over me. . . . An airy, colourful logic suddenly replaces the somber, stubborn geometry. Everything organizes itself: trees, fields, houses. I see. By *taches*. The geological strata, the preparatory work, the world of drawing cave in on themselves, collapse as in a catastrophe. A cataclysm has carried it all away, regenerated it. A new era is born. The true one! The one in which nothing escapes me, where everything is simultaneously dense and fluid, natural.<sup>27</sup>

The general outline of this narrative is that of an abbreviated genesis tale, one in which a period of intense creative activity is followed by a period of rest, after which the work of creation powerfully resumes. “Slowly geological foundations appear to me, the layers form themselves, the major planes of my canvas. . . . I begin to separate myself from the landscape, to see it. I free myself with this first sketch, with these geological lines.” Gasquet seems here to suggest that the underlying composition and the preparatory sketch *are the same thing* as the geological strata. The preparatory work comes into existence through the same process of sedimentary accretion as Provençal limestone. When the “red earths rise from an abyss,” something more is happening than the application of paint: the painting, the drawing, is somehow the site of massive inorganic change. And this change will become more massive still, catastrophic, in fact, as this edifice—rock and drawing, strata and form, phenomenal and material bedrock—comes tumbling down. “The geological strata, the preparatory work, the world of drawing all cave in, collapse as in a catastrophe. A cataclysm has carried it all away, regenerated it. A new era is born.” This catastrophe, then, is a perfect, simultaneous coming-together of destruction and recreation. Afterwards, the painting belongs to a new era, the “natural” one. The catastrophe has transmuted art into nature.

Gasquet, then, turns to Marion and Zola, respectively, in order to describe the earth’s evolution as a form of painting, and painting as the eruption of a geological force. That he should mix his metaphors in doing so may seem like a simple exercise of his prerogatives as a poet: in the end he is more concerned that his language be evocative than scientifically consistent. What Gasquet wants to do here is, in part, to show us Cézanne-

as-divine-creator—shining the Romantic trope a bit, though, with the gloss of modernity—and we should not be surprised that there would be some logical inconsistencies in an ideological move of this sort. But it is when we lean on the inconsistencies that Gasquet’s rather trite construction of agency gives way to a perception that is very helpful in looking at Cézanne’s paintings, even if it was not a perception Gasquet would have wanted to explore, or could have.

At the beginning of the passage just discussed, Gasquet figures Cézanne’s artistic powers in terms consistent with Cuvier’s vision of the rational divine at work in nature. The foundations that appear on his canvas are as geometrical as they are geological; due to the rationality with which he is said to sketch, they are distinct from Cézanne himself. If it is true that the strata, at moments, threaten to become independent actors (appearing to him and establishing themselves), it is also the case that he has a firm handle on these forces, converting, by “mentally composing” them, into form that behaves predictably and has an internal unity that depends on but does not include him. It is through the catastrophe that Gasquet insists on this dependence: it is an instrument that allows Cézanne to remake the canvas as completely as when he established its initial strata, creating a new form in which all of its parts are logically interrelated and inevitable.

But from the moment colour enters the picture—its airy logic replacing stubborn geometry—the work does not proceed in this rational manner. Increasingly it confuses agency and its absence, form and its dissolution, the artist and his surroundings. For the agent of the catastrophe is not the artist in his role as divine creator, it is the *tache*. Cézanne, Gasquet writes, *sees*, but it is the trees, fields, and houses that *organize themselves*. The geometrical order that he has laid down collapses as though under the weight of colour, which, for all that Gasquet may attribute to it an “airy logic,” achieves this transformative force in the materialized form of the *tache*, and as such gains a momentum of its own. When the new era is born out of the *tache*’s cataclysm, its form is no longer necessarily logical, it is “dense and fluid, natural,” and in transition. It may well enter a state that we are content to call form, but there can be no pretense that it is absolute, inevitable, or permanent.

Gasquet’s self-contradiction is interesting not because it demonstrates what he did not know about geology or biology, but because it suggests what might be at stake in imagining a Cézanne who is not content to picture the forces of nature but must picture *as* those forces. If the *tache* is an agent of catastrophe, then it is, paradoxically, one that behaves in a decidedly Darwinian manner. This fantasy is itself, I would argue, nearer to having Darwinism than catastrophism at its origins, for it requires that there be a model for understanding man as a part of nature. And Gasquet’s memoir offers ample evidence that the

poet found Darwin compelling. In describing Marion's Sunday visits to Cézanne, for example, he points out admiringly that Marion "is working to establish the great evolutionary theory of the migration of the trees from the polar regions, the struggle of the vegetable species to adapt themselves."<sup>28</sup> As in the case of the painted subjects that organize themselves, *tache* by *tache*, we are back here with reflexive verbs, with an absence of hierarchy governing nature's smallest details, which instead organize the world from the bottom up. Such a perspective would not square badly at all with Gasquet's Catholic vitalism if only the world it pictured could be imagined to have an organizing intelligence behind it.<sup>29</sup> In the case of a painting, that intelligence is, of course, the painter. But because there is little room for the painter in the fantasy of painting *as* Darwinian nature, especially when each *tache* seems to insist on its own status as an actor within the painting, Gasquet must import the opposing figure of the catastrophe so that his Cézanne will be capable of giving form to geological processes as he paints them. I am proposing, then, that the consequent jumbled metaphor speaks to Gasquet's worry about the precise nature of the *tache's* form-giving capacity, that it seemed to him potentially as arbitrary as Darwin's merest trifle upsetting the balance of the world, and so to lack the clear logic that he—and modernists after him—wished to see in Cézanne's painting.

It does not seem too far-fetched to imagine that it was at Bibémus that Gasquet began worrying about the way in which Cézanne's paintings take form through the *tache*. For the quarry, at least as Cézanne paints it, offers itself emphatically to a *participant's* knowledge: knowledge that is partial, contingent, riddled with blind spots, distorted by overemphatic focus, and finally not quite up to the task of gauging its own relation to its object.<sup>30</sup> We are all, of course, limited in our knowledge by our participation in the world all of the time. I suggest that Cézanne's painting in general responds to that point and may even be predicated on it, for the *tache* is a vehicle of both knowledge and of participation. If some earlier paintings do seem, just as Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg claim, to hint that the *tache* might serve as a rational means by which to take the measure of the world (which would imply observing it from a distance), then the Bibémus works emphasize the extent to which the *tache*, in coming to know this world of which it is so emphatically a part, is subject to the same distortions and arbitrary variations that drive the nature it pictures, bit by bit. Of course these movements become part of the record only by undergoing a process of selection, in art as in nature. Perhaps it is time to think of the logic governing Cézanne's selection as being provisional, with each mark on the canvas being subjected to a test of *fitness*, rather than one of rigorous unity.

If there is a painting that refuses to allow nature to remain external to it—as simply responding to the sense data nature



Figure 5. Paul Cézanne, *Rochers et branches à Bibémus*, 1900–04. Oil on canvas, 61 × 50.5 cm. Petit Palais, Paris (Photo: Bulloz, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY).

provides would require—it is *Rochers et branches à Bibémus* in the Petit Palais (fig. 5), which is so lacking in perspective as to thwart any certainty that it has been hung the right way up. It is possible that there is some kind of angle up from the foreground: both the rock at right and the vegetation at left have a kind of stepped quality. But this angle is too steep to describe as a recession, and equally resists being called ground. We are, instead, confronted with a decontextualized section of cliff face, but what exactly the section contains is impossible to judge. Some configuration of dead, dying, or otherwise fallen trees reaches disorientingly down from the top of the painting. It could be only a branch; it could be much more; there is no way to establish scale. We are equally, and excessively, close to it in either case.

Despite this extreme proximity, the painting disallows the fiction that the viewer's consciousness is somehow merging—Romantically—with the subject matter. Neither the organic nor the inorganic elements invite emotional projection; as strangely rounded as the vegetation in the lower left may be, for example, it would not do to describe it as voluptuous. If on the one hand, then, the viewer is brought disorientingly close to the quarry,



then she is also brought to a point where it is impossible to see or feel the artist as an empathetic or desiring presence. Gasquet's implication seems right: Cézanne is somehow absent from the painting, and that is part of what makes it so disorienting to look at, even if his *tache* is all over it.

This sense of absence is, it seems to me, consistent with the fantasy Gasquet offers of a painting that proceeds not because its artist is uniquely receptive to nature (there is no *openness* in this proximity), but because his *tache* mimics the processes of nature. "Nature," in this case, means not just the array of rocks and trees that confronts the artist as empirical data or offers itself up to his imagination, but rather something that has been theorized in ways that condition his perception of it. (When asked by a questionnaire to identify the greatest masterpiece of nature, Cézanne replied not "its beauty" or "its harmony" but "its infinite diversity," a proper through-the-eye-of-the-Darwinian answer if there ever was one.<sup>31</sup>) On the one hand, this conception of nature reinforces the sense that the *tache* is not external to it, since the concern to which Darwin most famously brought attention in the late-nineteenth century was precisely that man—and thus his productions, artistic or otherwise—was not separable from nature, but was subject to the same processes as the rest of it. At the same time this participation in nature is profoundly alienating: artist and viewer cannot see the *tache* as taking place within natural processes of uniform change without conceiving it in a geological or evolutionary timescale.

But what would it mean to imagine that the *tache* is acting in an evolutionary narrative or time scale rather than a historical one? It would mean, I suggest, that we are to suppose that *taches* become painted forms in the same way that such forms come into being out of the "infinite diversity" of nature: through the accretion of variations, through cooperative and competitive responses to one another, through mistakes that turn out to have been right after all, through advancing all at once. Most obviously, in the case of the Petit Palais painting, the marks have been laid on so variously that one could well feel that this rock is subject to phase changes, that it drifts and flows as it moves between the three alien inorganic species that inhabit the painting's lower-right, upper-left, and upper-right corners. But what happens here seems to go a step farther than this. If we are to understand the *taches* as enacting nature from within, at once participating in it and representing it, then it is not merely to external nature that they are responsive—flowing brush strokes look like flowing rock—but to each other, and it is this interaction, as much as reference or representation, that comes to structure the painting. Only in a few places do the organic and inorganic elements maintain their distinctions with any firmness; perhaps the most definite is in the stony, rigidly geometric forms in the upper-right corner, in which the brush strokes run in verticals and horizontals that seem to declare an

allegiance to the cut rock. But how are we supposed to read both this corner and the two adjacent to it as being composed of the same substance? Each is roughly the same colour, and one suspects that while the upper-right corner has been quarried, the curves of the other two sections are naturally worn. But it is difficult not to feel that the rock has borrowed attributes here from the vegetation in the canvas's center: that somehow the free, unstructured marks giving the lower-right corner its sedimentary feel have shaken loose from the foliage, or that the dendritic black slashes in the stone on the upper-left are amplifications of the tree's branches. *Tache* by *tache*, one form seems to mutate into another. The central branch of the tree darkens in a shadowy crevice and then wishbones, half of it appearing to retain its identity in the darkness while the other prong moves back into the light, seemingly having become the contour of a rounded red rock. And at the painting's center, the intense responsiveness of one *tache* to another seems nearly to disregard reference to what lies outside the canvas. Colour allows the viewer to assign the various *taches* to their origins as rock or tree, but this somehow does not seem quite enough. That which has helped elsewhere in the painting to guarantee the integral nature of the thing it depicts (brushy leaves, geometric cuts in the earth) here seems content to offer up identity only as a kind of colour-coding.<sup>32</sup>

Gasquet is right, then, to insist on the form-giving capacity of the *tache*. But he is also right to worry (as he does implicitly with his catastrophist metaphor) that the forms it creates are (like species and strata) arbitrary or provisional, for, on the one hand, the process by which they have come into being has made the question of where they respond to their model and where they deviate from it meaningless; on the other, when one is working in this mode it is not really possible ever to stop at the end. A species or stratum is never finished, is never an absolute category. It is only that thing which is so slowly in transition that we are content to point at it and call it a form, even as it randomly produces or responds to that "merest trifle" that will send the whole category askew.

Of course the analogy to paintings here is imperfect because the painter always stops painting eventually; he makes rational decisions about when to do so and what marks to make before he does, and as a consequence of these facts we are left with something final to call form. But there is, in the ongoing discussion of works being finished or unfinished, ample evidence of a sense of provisionality that worries certain Cézanne interpreters a good deal. They may respond to this anxiety with the insistence that the logic on which Cézanne builds is there from the first mark, so that even the most radically unfinished canvas can read as a complete painting. He advances his canvas, after all, all at once. But as the Petit Palais painting shows in such extreme fashion—for from a certain perspective, it could seem here that



Figure 6. Paul Cézanne, *La Carrière de Bibémus*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Museum Folkwang, Essen (Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY).

Cézanne did not know where to stop—there is some descriptive value in imagining that slight variations and mutual response of brushstrokes in a canvas being advanced all at once will, eventually, radically undermine any logic that might be apparent in the first mark, since the conversation between the brushstrokes will eventually supercede the original organizing intelligence.

In this respect, the Essen Bibémus painting (fig. 6) seems to be the polar opposite of *Rochers et branches*. While in the latter painting the material density is so high that even rock seems overgrown, the paint application is thin over the whole of the Essen picture. The weave of the canvas shows through throughout. Occasionally, as in the bald, imposing, almost trapezoidal ochre plane of rock on the far right side, the canvas breaks through to the surface. In other places there is a bit more build-up of paint: the left edge, for example, seems to have received more than its share of attention, although it is not quite resolved. Only one form, the rock face just to the right of centre that seems to have had its support cut perilously out from under it, has been defined (though not bounded) with sharply drawn contours. It is delimited on one side by the hard black edge of the trapezoidal plane at right, and a strange curve outlines its bottom. This contour seems, compared to the evenness otherwise marking the painting, to have an almost calligraphic hardness and flourish. But this is only in comparison: gauged more absolutely, it is refractive, more echoing wave than bounding line. Neither of these contours, nor the bits of exposed canvas, disrupts the sense that the *taches* collectively offer of having come together to produce one thing. If the dense surface of *Rochers et branches* speaks of an ongoing evolution born of infinite

variety, of the work it requires over time for forms to come into being, then in comparison the Essen painting might seem to promise a certain unity and immediacy: perhaps even Marion/Gasquet's "living evidence of the landscape's origins perpetuated in its colours and variations." Surely the economy with which each *tache* has been laid down refers back to the moment when each red, ocher, or grey of the rock first came to light: the original moment laid out in the canvas's eternal present. ("It is a minute of the world that passes. To paint it in its reality! And to forget everything else for it. To become that moment."<sup>33</sup>)

Except that perhaps "economy" is the wrong descriptor for the thin handling. "Stretched to the breaking point" might be better, for if there is a sense in which this seems to be a painting about collapsing geological time into a single moment, then there is a powerful feeling as well that it is barely able to contain the massive forces at work in its adoptive timescale. Part of this sense arises from the motif itself, and part from the character here of the *tache*. On the one hand, the motif is powerfully monumental; in its verticality and upward thrust it bears some resemblance to that classical figure of the sublime, the cliff face (although here, again, it is not so much that the landscape dwarfs the viewer; rather, it is large, though not on a cosmic scale, and the viewer has no particular size at all). Each plane occupying the space just below the centre of the canvas has an incredible heft and solidity.<sup>34</sup> All of this magnitude, however, has been rendered extremely precarious. The arch-like cuts into the rock at ground level seem to be holding much too much; the trapezoidal plane at right tips just a bit too much towards us; even the thin, sharp contours around the central rock face threaten somehow to dislodge it from the whole. That all of this results in a sense of suspension rather than of threatened collapse speaks to the solidity of these forms and to our certainty in the slowness of geological change—but also to our sense of that change's inevitability.

The latter awareness is heightened, I suggest, by Cézanne's laying on of paint. The quarry face and painting have come into existence through analogous processes of accretion—slower, less glamorous versions of Gasquet's red earth rising from the abyss. And while the *tache* has built the rock face into its present monumental state, its refusal to cohere into a glossy *fracture*—even to cover the canvas entirely—refers visually to a dissolution or erosion of the surface. On the one hand, then, the sense of unity that I suggested was one of the *tache's* effects in this painting comes to have its dark side, for this erosion gives the painting an orientation towards the ultimate future, in which this unity must be final and entropic rather than originary or catastrophic and regenerative. Taken more as a mark of paint than as sedimentary crumbling, however, *tache* acts on the rock in the Essen painting almost as a physical restraint, a microstructure that finally and permanently holds the top-heavy forms above in suspension, so



Figure 7. Paul Cézanne, *Dans la Carrière de Bibémus*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas, private collection (Photo: reproduced in Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne in Provence: The Painter in His Culture*, Chicago and London, 2003, 170).

that they can make reference to gravity, to erosion and an increase of entropy, but never succumb. And this creates a remarkable tension: what the *tache* is holding back is the rock's absolute indifference, and ultimately resistance, to the *tache's* own timescale. It seems a very thin container for the millions of years the earth's processes have spent arriving at this point, and an even thinner barrier against the millions to come.

This brings us back to Gasquet's insight that there is a deep relationship between the "geological foundations" and the "major planes of the canvas," between "this first sketch" and "these geological lines." And this also demonstrates what is—in the *tache*, in the red rock of Bibémus, in landscape—so unnerving, so in need of a divine cover-up. For in Gasquet's description the painting arrives at a place where art might proceed in the same manner as nature—or imagines it could—which does not leave much room for the artist. And so the Essen landscape does precisely what the genre was constructed to ward against, in that it acknowledges that all will ultimately go on without it, its maker, and everyone who looks at it.

If the Essen picture almost theorizes the insecurities of participants' knowledge that run so rampant across the surface of *Rochers et branches*, then *Dans la carrière de Bibémus* (fig. 7) goes one step further, trying to test out participants' knowledge as if from the outside. The man is an unpromising proxy, however, since not only does he not face the quarry, he has no face, no hands—nothing with which to sense or to gauge the world around him. All of which suggests that he is not taking (or giving the viewer) the measure of the quarry, but that the experimenter, the painter, is using the quarry to take the measure of him. One suspects, however, that the experiment was not conducted under the most objective of conditions, that the man's puppet-like woodenness, his smallness and inconsequence, were all foregone conclusions. This could equally have been the case if Cézanne had inserted such a figure into the foreground of one of the Mont Sainte-Victoires, or even one of the townscapes, because there is a substantial indifference to human presence in many of these works. But that it should be in Bibémus that Cézanne chose to conduct this experiment seems right. To treat the measure of "man in nature" as an encounter with a great whole in the earth opened by adzes and chisels seems to be the experiment with the most to say about the conditions confronting Cézanne in his desire to be absolutely faithful to what he saw, unfiltered by human preconception. The quarry offers up a kind of devil's bargain; its man-madness preexists any abstract conceptions the artist might have (of nature in general, or this motif in particular), but it does so by already having built them into the landscape. Geometry and artificiality are there, as are the entropic forces—growth as well as erosion—that undermine them. All of this alters what might constitute unfiltered visual experience. It is never just nature that is out there; it is the catastrophic collapse into one another of all the worn and cut rocks, all the trees and grassy slopes, all of the unstoppable processes of uniform change to life and land. The relationship of the painting to the world could hardly be more direct, since the *tache* insists on being a full, material participant. But it is a participation that makes impossible the kinds of fantasies that landscape is supposed to offer of an external world that we can inhabit and possess in our imaginations.

The Bibémus paintings might thus be seen as records of exhilaration and pessimism. The stakes are high, and the gains must be judged to be greater than the losses, but it is being haunted by loss that gives any victories their thrill. This precarious balance could begin to explain the manic edge to the misanthropy of *Dans la carrière de Bibémus*: the painting does not merely state the little man's negligibility in his surroundings, it takes a great perverse pleasure in it as if the power of the uncaring world were on the side of the painting, mobilized against its maker. (Because in the end, much as one would like to avoid the obviousness of such a conclusion, it is difficult not

to see the puppet on the quarry floor as Cézanne himself, viewing externally the immersion in the quarry of which the other Bibémus paintings give a first-person view.) But exhilaration and pessimism might also help to explain why the Essen picture's grimness and the disorientation of the Petit Palais *Bibémus* contribute so much to their power as paintings. Humans cannot match the earth's indifference, but maybe here Cézanne manages to formulate it as visual experience, to make its power uncomfortably but nonetheless aesthetically available. To give himself—and us—something productive to do with our caring so much about nature's caring so little.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- 1 John Rewald, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Vol. I (New York, 1996), 502.
- 2 Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne and Provence: The Painter in His Culture* (Chicago, 2003), 171. Bibémus became an active quarry again after the Second World War, and no longer exists as Cézanne painted it. See Rewald, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne*, 501.
- 3 Lawrence Gowling's "Cézanne: The Logic of Organized Sensation" represents very well the idealist formalist approach to the artist's work. In Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley, 2001), 180–213.
- 4 Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's book is a key instance of this development, as is Philip Conisbee and Denis Coutagne, eds., *Cézanne in Provence*, exh. cat., Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art (New Haven, 2006).
- 5 Paul Smith, "Cézanne's Late Landscapes, or the Prospect of Death," in Conisbee and Coutagne, *Cézanne in Provence*, 65–66; Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne and Provence*, 174. Benedict Leca also discussed Bibémus Quarry in the paper "Paul Cézanne: Provençal Peintre-Ouvrier," presented at the College Art Association Conference in February, 2006.
- 6 Cézanne's *tache* was first described as a "constructive stroke" in Theodore Reff, "Cézanne's Constructive Stroke," *Art Quarterly* 25 (1962): 214–27. In recent years scholars have objected that the effect of this "constructive stroke" is often unstable, even destabilizing, because Cézanne is at least as likely to ironize the apparently constructive function of the brush stroke as he is to capitalize on it; each *tache* is as likely to undo the work of the others as it is to clarify them or move them towards an overall order. See Kathryn Tuma, "Cézanne, Lucretius, and the Late Nineteenth-Century Crisis in Science," PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000, 281–94; and T.J. Clark, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis, 2002), 108.
- 7 Roger Fry, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Meyer Schapiro all make ample use of Gasquet's account, as do Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, Smith, and Kathryn Tuma. There has also, however, been a long tradition, initiated by John Rewald, arguing that that the poet is unreliable. For more on Gasquet's reception, see Richard Shiff, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne* (London, 1991), preface, 7–8.
- 8 The most comprehensive and deeply analytical account of the *tache* as such is to be found in Tuma's "Cézanne, Lucretius."
- 9 Paul Smith, "Joachim Gasquet, Virgil and Cézanne's Landscape," *Apollo* CXLVIII (October 1998): 13–18.
- 10 On catastrophism, see William Coleman, *George Cuvier, Zoologist: A Study in the History of Evolution Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 130–40; Loren Eiseley, *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered it* (Garden City, New York, 1961), 69; Michael Ruse, *Darwin and Design: Does Evolution Have a Purpose?* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 94; Martin J.S. Rudwick, *The Meaning of Fossils: Episodes in the History of Paleontology*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1985), 109; Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time* (London, 1965), 141–42.
- 11 Cuvier's follower Louis Agassiz published his catastrophist *Geological Sketches* in 1875, and his great popularity, in the United States in particular, ended as a consequence of an adultery scandal rather than due to a general rejection of catastrophism. See Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life In Science* (Chicago, 1960), 252–301.
- 12 C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1990).
- 13 Ruse, *Darwin and Design*, 57; Rudwick, *The Meaning of Fossils*, 230–32; Toulmin and Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time*, 189–99.
- 14 Ruse, *Darwin and Design*, 60–61.
- 15 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life and The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York, 1936), 58.
- 16 Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne and Provence*, 157, n. 20, 278–89.
- 17 These sketches were first discussed by Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Cézanne and Provence*, 160–61.
- 18 John Rewald, *Paul Cézanne: A Biography* (New York, 1939), 76.
- 19 Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 50. "Il trace, à profonds traits, l'histoire du globe, la naissance dans ce coin de Provence des paysages qu'ils peignent, leur premier affleurement au-dessus des glaces, leurs séculaires transformations, et que dans toutes leurs couleurs et leurs nuances se perpétue la vie inscrite de leurs origines."

- For most translations of Gasquet, I have consulted Christopher Pemberton, trans., *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, (London, 1991), but provided my own, usually more literal translations.
- <sup>20</sup> "Quand la couleur est à sa richesse, la forme est à sa plénitude." Émile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* (Paris, 1912), 31–32. My translation.
- <sup>21</sup> Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 50.
- <sup>22</sup> Tuma first noted the importance of Zola's essay for Gasquet (and most likely for Cézanne as well) in "Cézanne, Lucretius," 148–52.
- <sup>23</sup> Victor Duruy, *Introduction générale à l'histoire de la France* (Paris, 1864).
- <sup>24</sup> "Nous datons notre âge de six mille ans; les êtres qui nous ont précédés dataient les leurs de plusieurs millions d'années, d'incendies et de convulsions qui secouaient à toute heure les entrailles du monde. Nous avons derrière nous un passé effrayant de profondeur, vingt et quelques terres différentes, des milliards de peuples, une histoire inconnue et terrifiante. La création, pour arriver à nous, a longtemps vécu, se transformant et se perfectionnant." Émile Zola, "La géologie et l'histoire," *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. X, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris, 1968), 100. My translation.
- <sup>25</sup> Tuma, "Cézanne, Lucretius," 142.
- <sup>26</sup> "L'histoire du monde date du jour où deux atomes se sont rencontrés," in Zola, "La géologie," 99; and "Songez que l'histoire du monde date du jour où deux atomes se sont rencontrés, où deux tourbillons, deux danses chimiques se sont combinés," in Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 83. These translations are taken from Tuma, "Cézanne, Lucretius," 148. Tuma is the first to have pointed out this correspondence, which she takes as one of the starting points for a different, and very interesting, reading of Cézanne's brushstroke.
- <sup>27</sup> Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 83. "Un beau matin, le lendemain, lentement les bases géologiques m'apparaissent, des couches s'établissent, les grands plans de ma toile, j'en dessine mentalement le squelette pierreux. Je vois affleurer les roches sous l'eau, peser le ciel. Tout tombe d'aplomb. Un pâle palpitation enveloppe les aspects linéaires. Les terres rouges sortent d'un abîme. Je commence à me séparer du paysage, à le voir. Je m'en dégage avec cette première esquisse, ces lignes géologiques. La géométrie, mesure de la terre. Un tendre émotion me prend. Une logique aérienne, colorée, remplace brusquement la sombre, la têtue géométrie. Tout s'organise, les arbres, les champs, les maisons. Je vois. Par taches. L'assise géologique, le travail préparatoire, le monde du dessin s'enfoncent, s'est écroulé comme dans un catastrophe. Une cataclysmes l'a emporté, régénéré. Une nouvelle période vit. La vraie! Celle où rien ne m'échappe, où tout est dense et fluide à la fois, naturel." I have cut this passage slightly for length at the ellipses, excising some euphoric but unspecific words on sunlight and colour.
- <sup>28</sup> Marion "est en train d'établir la grande hypothèse évolutive de la migration des arbres devant les froids du pôle, de la lutte des espèces végétales s'adaptant entre elles." Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 50.
- <sup>29</sup> Gasquet's brand of vitalism was not uncommon at the time; such thinking was at the heart of Transformism, described by Debora L. Silverman as "a *fin-de-siècle* French scientific theory that assumed the continuum of being and the unity of all matter." Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley, 1989), 226.
- <sup>30</sup> Read a bit differently, this last point might look much like the collapse of the distinction between subject and object that Merleau-Ponty finds in Cézanne's paintings. The distortions that arise from the participant's knowledge to which we are emphatically limited at Bibémus do not seem to me, however, to have to do with perception in quite the manner that Merleau-Ponty's "lived perspective" would suggest. See "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Herbert Dreyfus (Chicago, 1964), 15. If, for example, the spatial construction of the Essen *La Carrière de Bibémus* is at all warped, this nonetheless is not a defining characteristic of our interaction with the painting. Rather we are made participant-knowers by the way that the painting puts us in the quarry without exactly placing us there: it is a participation that emphasizes the boundaries of our bodies in addition to the situatedness of our vision.
- <sup>31</sup> Cézanne, "My Confidences," *Conversations with Cézanne*, ed. Michael Doran, trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran (Berkeley, 2001), 102.
- <sup>32</sup> It is interesting that there is a similar effect in the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) *Château Noir* (dated, like *Rochers et branches*, to 1900–04). Not only is it similarly heavily worked, but it also seems to push the identities of the objects represented further and further towards unity or confusion. In particular, the craggy branches reaching in from inner right seem to continue as massive cracks in the château's façade, while the blue of the sky appears in the building's windows, on its façade, and in its foundations, as if to suggest that this human edifice is nothing more than a thin, crumbling veneer. The *Château Noir* was built of Bibémus rock, and because it was never completed it was, like the quarry, in some state of ruination. We might think of the château as a sort of complement to the quarry, approaching the dissolution of boundaries between the natural and the artificial on the same terms but from the opposite direction.
- <sup>33</sup> "Il y a une minute du monde qui passe. La peindre dans sa réalité! Et tout oublier pour cela. Devenir elle-même." Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 83.
- <sup>34</sup> Indeed, they lead Nina Athanassoglou-Kallymer to compare this work to the ancient dolmens that dotted the nearby landscape, and this seems to speak to their massiveness. I would more or less agree, as well, with her argument that this painting was meant to recall Provence's prehistoric past, but I would insist that any sense that this painting gives of such a grounding relationship to regional origins oscillates with the more threatening evocation of a pre-human deep past. Athanassoglou-Kallymyr, *Cézanne and Provence*, 171.