

The rest is silence: The senses of Roger Fry's endings

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Wherefore one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)¹

Roger Fry's Bloomsbury's colleagues connected the English critic's judgments to different kinds of endings. In May 1937, three years after Fry's death, Clive Bell performed to the select company of Bloomsbury's memoir club, regaling them with his *Anecdotes, for the use of a future biographer, illustrating certain peculiarities of the late Roger Fry*. Not intended for publication, Bell's memoir makes much of Fry's supposed gullibility, finding evidence of this in the following, possibly apocryphal story. 'Who was it told him', Bell asks, 'of the infallible, scientific method of testing the aesthetic value of works of art? I do not know, but Roger believed him. And so he could sometimes be found in Dalmeny Avenue [his home], swinging a weight attached to a bit of string above a canvas by Cézanne or himself and attempting to measure by the eye the extent of the oscillation'.² With absolutely no segue, Bell immediately launches into his next amusing anecdote: 'It was his son, Julian, I know, who observed that the tides in Southampton Water had all gone wrong, which led Roger to infer that we're in the ambit of "a dark star", which, in all probability, would shortly collide with the planet and annihilate it'.³

Contemplating the to-and-fro of Fry's pendulum, the rising and falling of the tides, one notes that, within the sequence established by Bell's memoir, the desire for critical certainty is quickly rendered trivial by the prospect of planetary disaster. Or perhaps, to an art critic of the time, to a critic who longed for scientific corroboration, these were potential disasters of more-or-less equal magnitude. The Fry of the anecdotes is a Fry of potential melancholia.⁴ What if it could be proved that Cézanne's art was not as great as Fry had claimed? Or, in a happier but no less

¹ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd, 1922, 90. Perhaps in recognition of the silences in Fry's texts, Julian Bell used this quote at the end of his 'On Roger Fry—A Letter to A'. See *Julian Bell: Essays, Poems and Letters*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1938, 258-305 (304); the letter is dated 'Jan 4, 1936'.

² Clive Bell, *Anecdotes, for the use of a future biographer, illustrating certain peculiarities of the late Roger Fry*, London: Cecil Woolf Publishers, 1997, 23-4.

³ Bell, *Anecdotes*, 24. Shorter versions of both anecdotes can be found in Julian Bell's earlier essay, 'On Roger Fry', where they are produced as evidence of Fry's eccentricity and credulity: see *Julian Bell*, 270. Virginia Woolf, who was to be Fry's 'future biographer,' did indeed make use of these two anecdotes but pointedly classified them as 'legends'. See her *Roger Fry: A Biography*, London: Vintage, 2003, 247.

⁴ I allude to Durer's famous print, *Melencolia I*, and to Lars Von Trier's film about an imminent interplanetary collision, *Melancholia* (2011).

strange scenario, what if it could be demonstrated that Fry's paintings were greater than people had generally assumed?

In 'The Royal Academy' (1919), one of Virginia Woolf's occasional but brilliant forays into art criticism,⁵ she too links Fry to the spectre of critical certainty and to the idea of an imminent ending. But she also introduces another element, associating Fry with the final words of her review and the space—the silence, if you like—that immediately follows it. In the review, we find that the Royal Academy's juried summer exhibition has not edified Woolf and, towards the end of the piece, she is in a distressed state, precipitated partly by her impressions of John Singer Sargent's enormous war painting *Gassed* (1919, Imperial War Museum). The show has left her feeling 'jabbed and stabbed, slashed and sliced for close on two hours'.⁶ So she summons a *deus ex machina* from the London art world, a professional art critic who might coolly assess the exhibition in her stead. 'I must leave it', she writes, 'to Mr Roger Fry to decide whether the emotions here recorded are the proper result of one thousand six hundred and seventy-four works of art'.⁷ Of course, since these are the review's last words, 'Mr Roger Fry' does not and cannot cast judgment. If Woolf is passing on the baton to Fry, in a kind of critical relay, then Fry would be unlikely to accept it. As she knew well, Fry had frequently expressed his dislike of the Royal Academy and over recent years had made no effort to review its summer exhibitions.⁸ The knowledgeable reader might have reasonably assumed that Fry, though silent on the matter, would have likely concurred with Woolf's sense of revulsion.⁹

Woolf draws attention to, and renders absurd, one of the most basic functions of art criticism—the attempt to find an ideal, or at least adequate, match between evaluative language and the art that has occasioned it. It is the hope of finding the 'proper result' to the critical equation. And she places this at the end of her own review, a specific and charged textual location. As the essay's parting shot, her reference to Fry extends into that peculiar cognitive space 'beyond' the text itself. She gestures towards providing a critical judgment, a last judgment, even

⁵ First published in *The Athenaeum* (22 August 1919), 'The Royal Academy' is included in Virginia Woolf, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993, 13-18.

⁶ Woolf, 'The Royal Academy', 17.

⁷ Woolf, 'The Royal Academy', 18.

⁸ Fry, the former art critic of *The Athenaeum*, had last reviewed the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in 1905. He was also no fan of Sargent. See his 'J. S. Sargent at the Royal Academy Exhibition of his works, 1926, and in the National Gallery' in Roger Fry, *Transformations*, New York: Brentano's, 1926, 125-35, which concludes with the opinion that 'he was striking and undistinguished as an illustrator and non-existent as an artist'.

⁹ Indeed, when Fry mentions the Royal Academy in his pamphlet *The Artist and Psycho-analysis* (1924), it is only to deny that it even exhibits true works of art. Fry was originally addressing an audience of psychologists: 'I hope I have shown that it is important to know what class of objects we have in view when we talk of works of art; to know that, if you analyze the pictures of let us say the Royal Academy, your remarks may interest us on other grounds, but not for the light they throw on the esthetic process in itself'. Reprinted in Christopher Reed (editor), *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 351-65 (quotation 265).

while she withholds it from us, maintaining that she is not the right person to deliver it.

One can find similar strategies of self-conscious omission, deferral, and self-deprecation in the writing of Woolf's appointed deputy, Roger Fry. This paper explores, to borrow Frank Kermode's eschatological phrase, 'the sense of an ending' found in several examples of Fry's writing,¹⁰ most notably in his landmark monograph *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (1927) and in his essay 'Art-History as an Academic Study' (1933). The end of a text is an appropriate place to acknowledge limits, and it is here that Fry will broach the boundaries of his certainty and of his capabilities; it is here that he will reflect upon and undercut his own critical role, and even invoke more spiritual realms. Consider the last three sentences of his autobiographical essay 'Retrospect' (1920): 'One can only say that those who experience it [the aesthetic emotion] feel it to have a peculiar quality of "reality" which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop'.¹¹ The full stop that he leaves us with stresses both discursiveness and its absence. 'The rest', as Hamlet put it, 'is silence'. Nevertheless, for Fry this very silence often also has an unmistakably evaluative dimension. He will not, when necessary, shirk his fundamental critical duty and will use silence, or a kind of discursive breakdown, to reiterate his basic position concerning those 'one thousand six hundred and seventy-four works of art' or their equivalent.

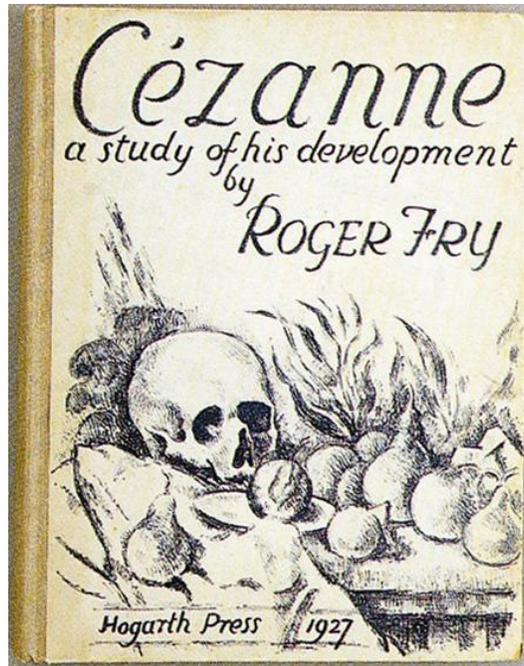
The received wisdom maintains that critics announce their silence, or at least the inadequacy of their words, when they want to indicate approval ('words cannot express...'). As will become evident, Fry certainly exploits this association in his work on Cézanne. Elsewhere, however, he also uses silence to register his disapproval or reservations. In this textual economy, value is connected with the 'spending' of words and, conversely, withholding words indicates disapproval or reservations. Thus in Woolf's essay, Fry's silence (or presumed future silence) on the matter of the Royal Academy's summer exhibition is itself taken to be meaningful: why would he waste his words on these works? A similar logic can be detected at the end of Fry's 1927 book on *Flemish Art*, where he concludes abruptly with a brief, two-sentence paragraph: 'I fear that by now I have tried your patience to its utmost limit', he writes. 'I can now make amends in only one way, that of sparing you a peroration'.¹² The book is based on a lecture Fry delivered at the Queen's Hall, London, in conjunction with a highly popular 'exhibition held at Burlington House'—that is, the Royal Academy's *Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art—1300-*

¹⁰ See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (with a New Epilogue)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1966].

¹¹ See Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1981 (1920), 199-211 (quotation 211). The dramatic temporal dimension of Fry's 'stop' is stressed by the fact that 'Retrospect' is the last essay in the anthology and the most recently written—indeed, it was the only essay Fry wrote specifically for the volume.

¹² Roger Fry, *Flemish Art: A Critical Survey*, New York: Brentano's, 1927, 56.

1900 (1927).¹³ One might initially read the ending at face value, as a courtesy to his audience or reader; it is perhaps only a moment later, and with the rest of the book in mind, that another possibility emerges. It is not simply that he will spare his audience or reader a peroration, but that the art he has been discussing does not, in his opinion, really deserve one.¹⁴ Fry implies that he would rather be reticent and plain-spoken than profuse and dishonest, even though the occasion might seem to demand the latter course of action. Fry's silence—the rousing conclusion he will not deliver, and that the audience might have expected—hangs in the air.



Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*, 1927. Lithograph. Author's copy.

For a quarter of a century, Fry had championed Cézanne in lectures and articles, in the pages of *The Burlington Magazine*, in the Grafton Galleries' two Post-Impressionist shows (1910-11 and 1912-13), and then in his own celebrated monograph. But a large portion of both the British public and Fry's art-world colleagues remained unconvinced of the artist's importance. There is, then, a good

¹³ Fry, *Flemish Art*, v.

¹⁴ Though willing to acknowledge the greatness of certain Flemish artists (Rubens, for one), Fry's general position is that Flemish art depends on 'everyday vision' and that this 'has not been the concern of the greatest painters [who] have sought to place themselves at a greater distance from the phenomena of nature, to view them with a more detached eye, to be less entangled in their immediate references and implications. They [that is, the greatest painters] have sought by that contemplative and disinterested vision to discover those more universal truths which escape the untrained vision, distorted as it is from infancy, by the needs of the practical and instinctive life' (See Fry, *Flemish Art*, 5). Here Fry follows the distinction between the 'actual life' and the 'imaginative life' that he outlines in 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (Fry, *Vision and Design*, 12-27); Fry connects Flemish art with the former, whereas his strong preference is for the latter, the 'imaginative life'.

reason why it is a Cézanne canvas that features in Bell's anecdote about Fry's 'scientific method of testing the aesthetic value of works of art'. How sweet it would be if Fry could somehow establish the exact and incontestable value of Cézanne's art, once and for all! For the critic, Cézanne's work represented the very antithesis of those works that, 'with the intolerable vociferations of gaudy and brainless birds', had 'jabbed and stabbed, slashed and sliced' Woolf in the Royal Academy. For Fry, Cézanne is as silent as the grave or, to invoke the imagery found on the cover he made for his monograph, as silent as a skull.

In *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*, Fry reverses the terms of the textual economy found in *Flemish Art*. Now he sees his own silence, or verbal inadequacy, as a sign of the aesthetic value of Cézanne's art, and as an appropriate tribute to pay it. This, perhaps the best known silence in his criticism, also comes at the end of the text, in a kind of peroration. The fact that it reads as a silence at all follows from this placement. Properly speaking, it is really a prelude to silence. 'In this essay', Fry begins his final paragraph, 'I have tried to press as far as I could the analysis of some typical works of Cézanne'.

But it must always be kept in mind that such analysis halts before the ultimate concrete reality of the work of art, and perhaps in proportion to the greatness of the work it must leave untouched a greater part of its objective. For Cézanne, this inadequacy is particularly sensible and in the last resort we cannot in the least explain why the smallest product of his hand arouses the impression of being a revelation of the highest importance, or what exactly it is that gives it its grave authority.¹⁵

Read this at the beginning of a book and one might immediately drop the tome: read it at the end and it becomes a lesson earned through the author's critical engagement with the art.

Fry's silence here is evaluative and tinged with irony. His words will be more adequate when applied to Cézanne's lesser products, and less adequate for his greater ones. But should Fry's theory be taken at face value? Perhaps not: other parts of Fry's text directly contradict the theory he is proposing. He devotes, for example, his longest analysis, his 'tiresome analysis of a single picture,'¹⁶ to *The Still-Life with Compotier* (1879-80), and this is a work he clearly rates extremely highly.¹⁷ 'One has', he writes in his description of the work:

¹⁵ Roger Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, 83-84.

¹⁶ Fry, *Cézanne*, 49.

¹⁷ Currently in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller, and promised as a fractional gift to the Museum of Modern Art, *The Still-Life with Compotier* has been relatively inaccessible to viewers for many decades. The attention Fry gives it, however, befits a work that had once been in the collection of Paul Gauguin. Gauguin featured the painting in his *Woman in Front of a Still-Life by Cézanne* (1890, The Art Institute of Chicago) and, later, Maurice Denis made it the centerpiece of his *Homage to Cézanne* (1900, Musée d'Orsay). Fry was familiar with both of these paintings. For more about this painting and

the impression that each of these objects is infallibly in its place, and that its place was ordained for it from the beginning of all things, so majestically and serenely does it repose there. Such phrases are, of course, rather fantastic, but one has to make use of figurative expressions to render at all the extraordinary feeling of gravity and solemnity which the artist has found how to evoke from the presentment of these commonplace objects.¹⁸

Conversely, his sole criticism of the painting—the inclusion of ‘the shadow cast by a half-opened drawer in the kitchen table’—occupies just one of the sixteen paragraphs he devotes to the work.¹⁹ So the qualitative logic behind his self-silencing isn't wholly persuasive, even though it certainly accords with a strong formalist imperative in Fry's writing. In his more stringent moments, Fry argued for the divergence of image and text: painting, the silent art, had to renounce ‘literature’. This divergence, however, might not always necessitate the critic's taciturnity or silence. In his discussion of the *Still-Life with Comptoir*, Fry admits that the work stretches his language, but does not necessarily break it. It forces him to work harder as a writer, perhaps even to be figurative and fantastic—to be, that is, copious. Here, Fry moves closer to the position of Virginia Woolf, who numbered Cézanne among the ‘silent painters’ but saw this quality as ‘provocative to the literary sense’.²⁰ His art, in other words, stimulates writing even while eluding it.

In his etching of Fry lecturing, Walter Sickert (Woolf's other ‘silent painter’) points to a strain between formalist vocabulary and visual experience. The title of the etching, *Vision, Volumes, and Recession*, evokes Fry's formalist language, as though he might be using the terms in the lecture he is delivering. But these critical catchwords can also double as a description of the spectral image itself.²¹ Both too vague and too ‘voluminous’ for Sickert's tastes, Fry's own language is being turned around. The critic describes himself.

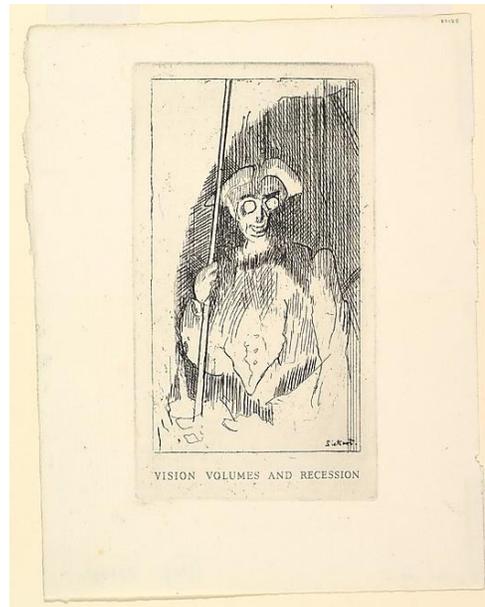
its positive critical reception, see John Rewald, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, 2 vols, cat. #418, 277-80 in vol. 1.

¹⁸ Fry, *Cézanne*, 45.

¹⁹ Fry, *Cézanne*, 47.

²⁰ ‘Cézanne, for example—no painter is more provocative to the literary sense, because his pictures are so audaciously content to be paint that the very pigment, they say, seems to challenge us, to press on some nerve, to stimulate, to excite.... As we gaze, words begin to raise their feeble limbs in the borderland of no man's language, to sink down again in despair. We fling them like nets upon a rocky and inhospitable shore; they fade and disappear. It is vain, it is futile; but we can never resist the temptation. The silent painters, Cézanne and Mr. Sickert, make fools of us as often as they choose’. See Virginia Woolf, ‘Pictures’ in *The Moment and Other Essays*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1976, 173-8 (quotation 177-8).

²¹ To take just the word ‘vision’, it clearly relates to the ghostly appearance of the critic in Sickert's print. It may also allude to Fry's vision (note the exaggerated appearance of his glasses) and to the fact that the word was a prominent part of Fry's critical vocabulary. Thus, Sickert's vision becomes a topic of discussion in Fry's essay ‘The Artist's Vision’, which was included in Fry's *Vision and Design*, 33-8.



Walter Sickert, *Vision, Volumes and Recession*, 1928-9. Etching; second state.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Language is only one type of mediation Fry discusses in the monograph, and he begins the book by addressing other types. Cézanne, he laments in the opening paragraphs, has come to us indirectly, through other 'more easily accessible personalities' like Van Gogh, Gauguin and, more recently, Picasso, Dufy, Vlaminck, and Friesz.²² Only Fry's exposure to actual Cézannes, and specifically the works in the Pellerin collection, allows him to 'depolarize' the works, to remove 'the scales of vague and distorted memories'.²³ He finds himself, before Cézanne's actual works, 'like a medieval mystic before the divine reality, reduced to negative terms. I have to say first what it is not'.²⁴ The structural problem with all of this should be obvious. Fry will merely pass on his dilemma to his readers, who now have Fry's book, and especially his language, as an additional mediating influence that separates them from Cézanne's art. The solution, at least rhetorically, is to step aside and to push the reader towards the originals. Denigrating your own critical tools, while reaffirming the quiddity of the art, is certainly one way of encouraging this. The reader leaves the self-effacing words behind at the end of Fry's analysis, and runs into the black and white reproductions collected together at the back of the book; or closes the text and discovers, on its cover, Fry's own lithographic copy after a Cézanne. There is a movement towards the thing itself. The reader is propelled towards different ways of understanding art: to the hypothetical silence of the gallery and to the mark-making gestures of the studio.

²² Fry, *Cézanne*, 2.

²³ Fry, *Cézanne*, 2.

²⁴ Fry, *Cézanne*, 2. Fry's invocation of the *via negativa* again connects his verbal inadequacy with Cézanne's achievements: the former indicates the latter's magnitude.



Max Beerbohm, *Roger Fry*, 1931. Pen and watercolour. National Portrait Gallery, London.

In another caricature of Fry, Max Beerbohm depicted the smiling critic in profile, stepping forward with a leg and reaching forward with some fingers. It is as though he is approaching and responding to a work of art, albeit one that is 'off stage, left'. The caption suggests that, whether or not he likes what he sees, he knows what he likes—and what *we* should like, too. 'A lawgiver', it reads. 'Roger, first King of Bloomsbury'. In his writing, Fry had a habit of acknowledging such characterizations of himself, and then gently but decidedly taking issue with them. His essay 'Art-History as an academic study' (1933) does just this, pointedly rejecting the roles Beerbohm (and others) eagerly assigned to him: lawgiver and king. The history of taste, Fry argues, cautions us against being overconfident in our qualitative assessments and furnishes us with plenty of examples 'of reversals of generally accepted judgments' and of 'arguments even between highly trained and gifted spectators'.²⁵ Cézanne, for example, was variously 'a great artist' or 'an incompetent bungler and botcher'.²⁶

Published first in pamphlet form, and then as the first chapter of the posthumous book *Last Lectures* (1939), the essay is based on the inaugural talk Fry gave as Slade professor of art at Cambridge University in 1933.²⁷ Narrative endings often create symmetry by echoing their beginnings, and Fry carefully deploys just such a structure here. He frames his discussion of art history's uncertain place in British academia with two tales of absence and desire, both drawn from fables written by or commonly attributed to Aesop. He begins by commenting on the

²⁵ Roger Fry, *Roger Fry: Last Lectures*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1962 (1939), 6.

²⁶ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 5.

²⁷ For the original pamphlet, see Roger Fry, *Art-History as an Academic Study*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933.

weakness of his institutional position. Since, at the time, there was no honours bachelor's degree (or 'Tripos') in art history at Cambridge, he is, he says, a 'Professor without a Tripos, a fox without a tail'. Writing in a Freudian age, Fry is perhaps being a little mischievous as he elaborates upon the story of *The Fox without a Tail*.²⁸ He continues: 'Now greatly as I appreciate the freedom which the absence of that appendage confers upon me, I am so far from wishing to persuade other Professors to have theirs amputated that I am tempted to put in a plea that one should be attached—not indeed to my own person—I am not likely to hold this post long enough to survive the operation, but to the person, or perhaps to the office, of one of my successors'.²⁹ In direct contrast to this, the second fable focuses not on lacking something desirable, but on the dangers of obtaining something you thought you wanted.

Fry introduces it about half way through the essay and in relationship to the question of whether aesthetic certainty is attainable or even desirable. 'Let us consider', he writes, 'what results would follow if, by some device or other, we were able to establish... an absolute scale [of values]'.³⁰ (Would the 'weight attached to a bit of string' mentioned in Bell's anecdote do the trick?) At this point, Fry alludes to Aesop's *The Frogs asking for a King*, which describes how the frogs in a pond petition Jupiter for a ruler. Dissatisfied with the log that he initially deploys to reign over them, Jupiter next sends them a stork. Alas, the bird is true to his nature and promptly eats the frogs up. '[W]hen we ask for objective validity in aesthetic judgments,' Fry writes, transposing the fable to the issue at hand, 'we are somewhat like the Frogs in the fable'. And now he adds his moral: 'We have an excellent King Log who lies there quite imposingly in our pond and each of us is convinced that *if* the King ever spoke it would be to establish the truth of his own judgments. If, however, Jupiter were ever to answer our prayers for King Stork we should find ourselves, as I have shown, in a very different posture'.³¹ Fry has described this posture already, when he imagined distraught art lovers, who, faced with some 'ineluctable evidence of their aesthetic inaptitude' opted to 'throw themselves from the terrace of the National Gallery to perish in the traffic of Trafalgar Square'.³² Better by far be ruled by a lazy log than an aggressive tyrant, by aesthetic doubt rather than certainty. If the university were hoping to employ a stork, Fry, in his opening lecture, aims to disabuse them. Hence the thrust of his essay is that art history's emphasis should be more on the experiences afforded by works of art, less on the conclusions extracted from them. This is reiterated in the essay's own conclusion, where Fry returns to the second of his fables: 'It is the fulness, richness and significance of our feelings in face of works of art that matters—the judgments

²⁸ Fry had discussed Freud elsewhere (see note 9 above), and does so again in this essay. See Fry, *Last Lectures*, 3 and 14.

²⁹ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 1.

³⁰ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 9.

³¹ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 10 (Fry's italics).

³² Fry, *Last Lectures*, 10.

we draw from them are only of value in so far as they may indicate to others the possibilities of experiencing similar emotions. Whatever we do we shall not attain a standard of objective validity. It is better that we should remain the loyal subjects of his Silent Serenity, King Log'.³³

Having started out as a fox-without-a-tail, Fry ends as silent as a log. In fact, he rather pushes this reluctance to speak onto the proverbially silent log: in the original fable, the frogs are merely upset by the log's motionlessness and passivity, of which silence would be only one, unmentioned aspect. The end of the lecture, then, has the effect of performatively connecting words about silence to the actual lack of discourse that immediately follows—the momentary silence of the lecture hall, the end of the essay. This momentary switch of emphasis, from semantic figure to ground, itself suggests the kind of perceptual attentiveness for which Fry argues. Fry's conclusion suggests a certain inconclusiveness, and this is appropriate for a critic who is explicitly refusing the role of law-giver, the role Beerbohm had ascribed to him some two years earlier.

In the essay, Fry finds an acoustic and technological analogy for the experience of looking at art: the wireless. '[T]he artist is the transmitter,' Fry elaborates, 'the work of art the medium and the spectator the receiver. Now for the message to come through, the receiver must be more or less in tune with the receiver'.³⁴ '[A] great part of a humanistic education consists', he continues, 'in learning to attune our sensibilities by continual "listening in", as it were, to the great writers of the past'. Fry had already explored this analogy in a 1929 BBC radio broadcast he had delivered on 'The Meaning of Pictures'.³⁵ Heard in the lecture hall, or on the radio, his acoustic imagery would have seemed more concrete than it does on the page, and listeners would have connected Fry's (famously melodious) voice to the aesthetic experiences he discusses.³⁶

It is possible to detect a religious subtext in the carefully crafted lecture. Raised in a prominent Quaker family, Fry had long since stopped practicing.³⁷ But

³³ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 21.

³⁴ Fry, *Last Lectures*, 15.

³⁵ Reprinted in Reed, *A Roger Fry Reader*, 393-400.

³⁶ On Fry's voice see, for example, Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 149, where she draws a connection between the critic and the most famous Hamlet of the day: 'He talked that spring day in a room looking over the trees of a London square, in a deep voice like a harmonious growl,—"his and Forbes Robertson's were the only voices one could listen to for their own sakes" says Bernard Shaw'.

³⁷ It is unclear exactly when Fry stopped attending Quaker meetings, but it may well have been during his years as an undergraduate at Cambridge. For an account of his Quaker upbringing and heritage, see Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, Norwich: Black Dog Books, 1999 (especially 1-11). Coming from a prominent and active Quaker family, Fry could scarcely have escaped this association; nor did he try to. His activities with both the Omega Workshops, a haven for conscientious objects during the 1914-18 war, and with the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee indicate an abiding commitment to certain Quaker values and organizations. On this subject, see, for example, Grace Brockington, 'The Omega and the End of Civilisation: Pacifism, Publishing and Performance in the First World War' in Alexandra Gerstein (editor), *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshop 1913-19*, London: Fontanka, 2009, 61-9.

his initial image of a marginalized fox might evoke not merely the discipline of art history, or Fry himself, but (at least to those in the know) George Fox, the Quaker's founder.³⁸ Refusing to swear oaths to the monarch, the dissenting Quakers had been excluded from Oxford and Cambridge until 1871, when the Universities Tests Act became law. Fry was a fairly early beneficiary of this change, entering King's College, Cambridge, in 1885; almost fifty years later, and after several failed applications, he re-entered the university as a Professor.³⁹ If a history of institutional exclusion provides one possible connection with Quakerism, Fry's account of his aesthetics suggests another. For in the inaugural talk, he aligns his approach to art with silence and an introspective approach built upon 'humility and diffidence'. Quaker worship, needless to say, places enormous stress on silence as a way to tame the individual will and, further, as the 'medium through which to experience God's revelation'.⁴⁰ 'Quakers', notes Pink Dandelion, 'adopted a "liturgy of silence" in which absence gave way to a sense of the presence'.⁴¹

Fry's familiarity with this devotional framework allowed him to draw from it when he attempted to describe his own model of aesthetic experience. Silence becomes associated with the prolonged and attentive looking through which the 'voice' of art (rather than the divine) is best apprehended.⁴² And it is also a quality he believed he could detect in the life and work of his favoured artists. This is how he put it in a series of lectures on Cézanne, where he translated and elaborated upon words attributed to the artist by Joachim Gasquet: '*Toute sa [the painter's] volonté doit être de silence*'. ('All his will should be but a silence'.)⁴³ Fry returned to this idea at the very end of his third and final talk, as indicated in his lecture notes: 'The

³⁸ Fry might also be alluding to another famous account of Oxbridge's exclusions. The Manx cat (a cat without a tail) famously features in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as a figure of gender difference and of women's historical exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge. Fry's concern that art history is perceived to be a trivial (and thus 'feminine') subject is abundantly evident in the essay: 'Even more than English literature Art must appear to you to be a "fancy" subject' (Fry, *Last Lectures*, 1).

³⁹ A Slade professorship at either Oxford or Cambridge 'had eluded [Fry] for almost thirty years' and he had previously been turned down by both universities. See Spalding, *Roger Fry*, 82, 117, and (for the quotation) 255.

⁴⁰ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 10.

⁴¹ Dandelion, *The Quakers*, 37-8.

⁴² Consider Fry's theologically inflected language in 'The Meaning of Pictures'. Immediately before launching into his wireless analogy, he writes that '[p]ictures, like all other works of art, afford the means to us of grasping such special meanings, and thereby sharing the experiences of the great artists of all times, of entering into intimate communion with the most sensitive, the most profound, the most passionately contemplative spirits of mankind. But they only afford the *means* for this communion. In order that it may take place we must be able to vibrate in unison with the special note of each artist' (Reed, *A Roger Fry Reader*, 394 [Fry's italics]).

⁴³ Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne*, Paris: Éditions Bernheim-Jeune, 1921, 80. Fry translates this section of Gasquet's book in the second of his three lectures. See King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, The Papers of Roger Eliot Fry, REF 1/120, 24. He also extracts from this part of Gasquet's text a 'doctrine of classic art' (REF 1/120, 24a). Delivered in late 1927, the three lectures were timed to coincide with the publication of Fry's monograph on the artist.

silence of the will is the key to it—the refusal of the artist to be an accomplice in influencing the spectator, the necessity for his consciousness to step aside and leave the idea to work of itself, leave it in Cézanne's own words to exhale its perfume'.⁴⁴ But the critic, no less than the artist's consciousness, must also 'step aside' and Fry's Quaker upbringing helps to explain why, at times, he can seem uncomfortable with his own position. While loquaciousness threatens meaningful silence, the critic's function inevitably brings to mind a priestly or intermediary role antithetical to Quaker notions of direct experience and group equality. And so Fry sometimes felt the need to negotiate and temper these aspects of his critical performances. The conclusions of his texts provided him with the perfect place to stage his own silencing, with the opportunity to disappear entirely.

What, then, might have happened *after* one of Fry's critical performances, after the lecture had been delivered or the book closed? Virginia Woolf, in her 1940 biography of Fry, embeds her descriptions of his criticism within her larger text, thereby allowing us to explore this question. For Woolf, in its ability to provoke visual desire and physical movement, Fry's writing serves a sensual, even quasi-erotic function for the reader. She notes that he 'seems to have an inexhaustible capacity for sensation; until at last, whether we see the picture itself, or only what he sees, there is nothing for it but to drop the book and take the next omnibus to the National Gallery, there to gratify the desire for seeing that has been so miraculously stimulated'.⁴⁵ The circle is completed when Fry's reader stands in the same position he once occupied.

Woolf's well-known description of Fry lecturing at the Queen's Hall, London, combines many of the themes I have already identified. Again, there is the desire to move from the mediated object to the thing itself: 'Somehow the black-and-white slide on the screen became radiant through the mist, and took on the grain and texture of the actual canvas'.⁴⁶ And again, there is the suggestion of Quaker heritage and ritual: 'No Fry among all the generations of Frys could have spoken with greater fervour of the claims of the spirit, or invoked doom with more severity'.⁴⁷ Last but not least, there is the moment at the end of the performance when the critical exposition falters and breaks down, silence descends, and the end arrives. 'And finally, the lecturer, after looking long through his spectacles, came to a pause. He was pointing to a late work by Cézanne, and he was baffled. He shook his head; his stick rested on the floor. It went, he said, far beyond any analysis of which he was capable. And so instead of saying, "Next slide", he bowed, and the audience emptied itself into Langham Place'.⁴⁸ Was there ever, one wonders, a next slide? Or

⁴⁴ The Papers of Roger Eliot Fry, REF 1/121, 42.

⁴⁵ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 228.

⁴⁶ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 262.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 262.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 263. In his catalogue raisonné of Cézanne's paintings, John Rewald quotes this passage in own his last catalogue entry, adding that '[w]here Fry remained without words, this commentator must be permitted to do likewise'. See Rewald, *Paul Cezanne*, vol. 1, 559 (catalogue number 954).

was this, as many of Fry's written endings seem to indicate, part of a well-rehearsed and familiar performance? The lecture's final picture is not even one that could be projected. It is a picture, Woolf continues, 'of which the lecturer himself was unconscious—the outline of the man against the screen, an ascetic figure in evening dress who paused and pondered, and then raised his stick and pointed'.⁴⁹ The audience, that is, takes home a mental image of Fry.

In these passages of Woolf's biography, Roger Fry comes across as neither King Log (all passive, silent serenity) nor indeed as King Stork (an aggressive, aesthetic dictator). Rather, in Fry's criticism, as well as in Woolf's descriptions of it, the ultimate self-silencing of the critic also represents the birth of the viewer—the moment when the works are, so to speak, handed over to the reader for independent scrutiny. But, assuming that it happens at all, it would be naïve to think that Fry is entirely absent from this later stage and that the reader-turned-viewer will be entirely independent of him. For the ghost of Fry, the afterimage formed by reading or listening to his words, will follow into the reverent silence of the gallery space. And if readers model their interpretative processes and language on the critic's own then, by following Fry's example, they are perhaps more likely to reach broadly similar conclusions. Fry's silent endings served to persuade the reader that he was a reasonable and open-minded critic. They were informed by his Quaker heritage, by his understanding of language's complicated relationship to visual experience, and by his sense of criticism's limitations and the limitations of critics.

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As with Julian Bell (see note 1 above), it is an example of how later writers have paid tribute to Fry by echoing his endings with their evocations of silence.

⁴⁹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 263