

Refusing to play Vasari: Roger Fry's Cézannian anecdotes

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J'ai acheté un livre bien curieux, c'est un tissu d'observations d'une finesse qui m'échappe souvent, je le sens, mais que d'anecdotes et de faits vrais! — Et les gens comme il faut appellant l'auteur paradoxal. — C'est un livre de Stendhal: Histoire de la peinture en Italie...

(Cézanne, letter to Emile Zola,
20 November 1878)

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.
(T. S. Eliot, East Coker)

A kind of melancholic belatedness lies at the heart of Roger Fry's relationship to Cézanne and, by extension, at the heart of his attitude to the Cézannian anecdote. The main early authorities on the artist had known him personally: they were his dealer (Ambroise Vollard) or they were the younger artists, writers, and critics who sought him out, eager to associate themselves with him (Emile Bernard, Maurice Denis, and Joachim Gasquet).¹ Fry, by contrast, first wrote about the artist in the year of his death, 1906, and claimed that he hadn't seen examples of his art before 1905, despite all evidence to the contrary.² The one original anecdote about Cézanne Fry had to offer involved not the artist so much as his critical reception, and lamented the fact that the critic hadn't seen the painter's art earlier. Cézanne, Fry wrote in his monograph on the artist:

(...) faded out so completely from the general artistic consciousness of his day that the present writer, when he was an art student in Paris in the

¹ For a convenient collection of early writings about Cézanne, see Michael Doran, ed., *Conversations with Cézanne*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

² Fry tended to exaggerate the apparent lack of overlap between Cézanne's life and his own interest in the artist's work. This is most evident in his essay 'Retrospect', which was published in 1920 and includes his description of 'converting' to Cézanne: 'By some extraordinary ill luck I managed to miss seeing Cézanne's work till some considerable time after his death [in October 1906].' See *Vision and Design*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1920, 191. It's impossible to be precise, but Fry had probably first seen Cézannes around a decade before the artist died. See also note 42 below.

nineties – a very ignorant and helpless, but still an inquisitive student – never once heard the name of the recluse of Aix.³

It's a kind of primal or meta anecdote for Fry. His own youthful experience, or lack of experience, is taken as proof that the artist had 'abandoned his struggle with the world and veiled himself in unbroken silence'.⁴ But it also explains the fundamental absence of contact between writer and subject, and consequently excuses the fact that he has no 'real' anecdotes to contribute. Simultaneously, we see a path not taken and are encouraged to imagine what might have been had Fry heard the name, seen the pictures, and hightailed it to Provence.

Those other writers – the writers Fry could never become – naturally took a memoiristic and often anecdotal approach to their subject, putting especial emphasis on their own interactions and conversations with the artist. They drew attention to this personal connection in their section and chapter titles: 'What I know or have seen of his life', 'What he told me', 'Memories of Paul Cézanne', 'A conversation with Cézanne', 'My visit to Cézanne', 'Cézanne paints my portrait', and so forth.⁵ Fry's relationship, by way of contrast, was with Cézanne's art, starting with his role as the main curator of the French art included in the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910–11 and 1912–13 (London, Grafton Galleries). But, as a critic, he also had to recognize and negotiate these other texts about the artist and in this respect his writing between 1917 and 1927 shows at least one noticeable shift. In 1917, he fully engaged with the Cézannian anecdote (or 'Céz-anecdote' as I am tempted to call it) when he reviewed Ambroise Vollard's biography of the artist. A decade later, Fry's attitude had reversed and his monograph on the artist, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development* (1927), is largely devoid of anecdotes. The qualifier is important, for he does find room for two short biographical stories. Just why he selected these two anecdotes, as well as his own primal anecdote, and how he deployed them in the service of a tale about an artist's acquisition of humility, are my main concerns here. Fry's shift recognizes an established distinction between two basic types of art writing – biographical and connoisseurial – the one focusing on life, the other art. Fry's desire, however, is also to see a potential harmony

³ Roger Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, London: Hogarth Press, 1927, 38. Fry is referring to 1892, when he was a student at the Académie Julian in Paris.

⁴ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*.

⁵ Joachim Gasquet's *Cézanne* is divided into two parts: 'What I know or have seen of his life' and 'What he told me', Paris: Les Editions Bernheim-Jeune, 1921; Emile Bernard's 'Memories of Paul Cézanne' and 'A Conversation with Cézanne' appeared in the *Mercure de France* in 1904–6 and 1921, respectively; and 'My visit to Cézanne' and 'Cézanne Paints my Portrait (1896-1899)' are chapter titles in Vollard's *Cézanne*, Paris: Vollard, 1914. Maurice Denis established a similarly close connection to the artist in his painting *Cézanne à son motif* (1906), which shows Cézanne at work and in conversation with Denis and another Nabi artist, Ker-Xavier Roussel. Fry's translation of Denis's 1907 article on Cézanne, along with Fry's prefatory remarks, appeared in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1910.

between these two modes and, more specifically, to enlist the biographical mode in support of the connoisseurial. Gesturing to that which is outside the frame of art confirms what is thought to be found inside. And, as it happens, the anecdotes Fry chose concerned frames and framing, actual frames as well as institutional frameworks.

Before looking at Fry's monograph in more detail, I want to consider some of his earlier writings on Cézanne with anecdotes in mind, starting with his review of Vollard's biography. Written in 1917 and published in *The Burlington Magazine*, the review reached a larger audience when it was reprinted a few years later in Fry's popular anthology *Vision & Design* (1920).⁶ 'Monsieur Vollard has played', Fry suggests, 'Vasari to Cézanne and done so with the same directness and simplicity, the same narrative ease, the same insatiable delight in the oddities and idiosyncrasies of his subject'.⁷ It is apt to compare Vollard and Vasari because of Vollard's ability to tell pithy, memorable, and repeatable stories about his subject. Taken together, these anecdotes construct a vivid picture of Cézanne's character and eccentricities. But Fry extends his parallel further when he also considers Vollard's shortcomings. 'The art historian may sometimes regret', Fry proposes, 'that Vasari did not give us more of the aesthetics of his time'. Indeed, although 'the human document remains of perennial interest to mankind', and Vollard provides this in abundance, Fry also wants the artistic document, the work as well as the life.⁸ Potentially damning notes of criticism temper his otherwise effusive praise for Vollard. 'Should the book ever become as well known as it deserves', Fry writes, 'there would be, one guesses, ten people fascinated by Cézanne for one who would walk down the street to see his pictures'.⁹ It is not an encouraging ratio!

Although Fry notes that it may be too early to write 'the complete appreciation of Cézanne's work'¹⁰ this doesn't stop him from demonstrating how Vollard's book might be read somewhat against the grain, for its pictures rather

⁶ See 'Paul Cézanne' in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, 168–74. The two texts are now found together in a reprint of Vollard's biography — an indication that Fry's review is largely positive and supportive. See Ambroise Vollard, *Cézanne*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1984 [1914].

⁷ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne'.

⁸ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 169.

⁹ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 169. Aside from the anecdote, Fry briefly identifies another type of writing in Vollard's biography that he sees as important to understanding Cézanne, and that he contrasts favourably to Vollard's 'good stories': 'Fortunately M. Vollard has collected also a large number of Cézanne's *obiter dicta* on art. These have all Cézanne's pregnant wisdom and racy style. They often contain a whole system of aesthetics in a single phrase, as, for instance: "What's wanted is to do Poussin over again from Nature."' (Paul Cézanne, 173). These *obiter dicta* are like anecdotes in that they are pithy, suggestive, and oft-repeated, but they have the double advantage of being directly about art and of seeming to originate from the artist himself. Fry, as we will see, prefaces his monograph on the artist with just such an *obiter dictum*.

¹⁰ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 173–4.

than its words, and he ends the review with notes on Cézanne's art prompted by three of Vollard's reproductions, which also accompanied the review. It's a thumb-nail sketch of the artist's development, from 'his early works', through a 'great change' in his art, and culminating in his 'later works'.¹¹ Fry, in other words, had an ambivalent relationship to Vollard's book. He praises it and sees it as an indispensable source for future scholars of the artist; it is 'the most important document existing' and 'a monument worthy of Cézanne himself'.¹² At the same time, reviewing it immediately prompts Fry to imagine other books that might compensate for its shortcomings.

Was Fry recommending himself as the potential author of just such a corrective? That possibility did not escape Walter Sickert, Fry's friend, but also a key interlocutor and gadfly when it came to the question of Cézanne. (Sickert, like many in the London art establishment, thought the artist overrated, and thus found Fry's promotional campaign fundamentally misguided.¹³) Fry had written that Vollard's book was 'so full of good stories that I must resist the temptation to quote',¹⁴ but a few years later Sickert would accuse him of doing precisely this. Fry's piece on Vollard, Sickert observed in a published lecture:

is one of the most charming articles that one ever read, but it was in the form of a notice on a book on Cézanne (...). [T]his book was filled with personal details extremely amusing, interesting and illuminating; and, on the whole, Mr. Fry re-told us in English (and told us extremely well) what Vollard said... It did not tell us very much about the reasons why we were to abandon the faith in everything we had care for, and set up for Cézanne.¹⁵

Sickert continued to goad Fry. 'My theory is that Mr Fry is a little shy of his own Deity [i.e. Cézanne]. It attracts him, but, at every point I find, when he comes to take the fence, he gets down and walks round. He does not take it'. By the mid-1920s, then, the question of whether Fry would, or would not, 'take' Cézanne like a shy horse finally clearing a fence (that is, write a book about him) had become intertwined with the issue of Cézannian anecdotes and their seductive repeatability.

¹¹ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 173.

¹² Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 174.

¹³ For a brief account of Cézanne's critical reception in the country, see Anne Robbins's 'Less a luxury than a necessity: collecting Cézanne in Britain' in *Cézanne in Britain*, London: National Gallery Company, 2006, 17–26.

¹⁴ Fry, 'Paul Cézanne', 172.

¹⁵ Sickert's lecture was delivered at the Southport Science and Art Schools, 23rd January 1924, and published in the *Southport Visiter* [sic] the following day; Sickert went on to deliver it in other venues across England and Scotland. It is reprinted in *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 470–9; quotation 475, my ellipses.

If these stories, these 'personal details'¹⁶ taken from Vollard and other writers, are omitted then what remains? What form might such a book about the artist take?

The following year, in the summer of 1925, Fry had an opportunity to begin addressing these matters when he wrote a review of Cézanne's first British retrospective, which was held in the Leicester Galleries, Leicester Square, London. Writing for *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, Fry begins with an anecdote acknowledging his position as a less-than-disinterested person to review the show. His introduction also serves as a response to Sickert's earlier remarks, or others like them. 'Mr. W. Richard Sickert,' Fry writes:

in one of those exhilarating discourses in which his wit almost obscures his erudition, once told how, driven from his studio by the iterative volubility of a neighbour's parrot, he took refuge in a lecture-room where I was expounding modern art—only to find that, I too, was saying Ce-zanne, Ce-zanne with the same monotonous insistence. I admit the essential truth of the caricature, but what can I do?¹⁷

While Sickert accuses Fry of being Cézanne's parrot, an unthinking and habitual champion of the artist, Fry subtly points to a problem with Sickert's own story. Why, after all, would Sickert's wit 'almost obscure his erudition'? Any attentive reader of Ambroise Vollard's biography of Cézanne — Sickert himself, perhaps — could have recognized similarities between the anecdote and a story told by Vollard. Vollard informs us that Edmund Duranty, in his novel *Le Pays des Arts*, included a fictionalized version of Cézanne in the guise of the character Maillobert. Vollard quotes from a section of the novel that describes a visit to Maillobert's studio. 'At this point', Duranty writes:

I heard a parrot screaming: "Maillobert is a great painter, Maillobert is a great painter!..."
"That is my art critic," said the artist, with a disconcerting smile.¹⁸

Fry hints, then, that Sickert's story is borrowed from Duranty, by way of Vollard. The problem of repetition, of source and echo, lies at the heart of this anecdote and perhaps at the heart of anecdote in general. It is, as Kris and Kurz have suggested, 'the "primitive cell" (...) of the biography of artists' and anecdotes have a tendency to be excised, adapted, and repeated in new contexts and for new

¹⁶ Sickert avoids the word 'anecdote' but this phrase comes close to one of the meanings of the word, a secret or private story.

¹⁷ Roger Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries' in *The Nation & The Athenaeum*, 11th July 1925, 458–9 (quotation 458).

¹⁸ Vollard, *Cézanne*, 44.

purposes.¹⁹ Fry is using his anecdote to turn the tables on Sickert, who is revealed to be guilty of the very charge — parroting Vollard — that he had earlier directed at Fry, only with this difference: Fry at least acknowledged his source.

It is as though Fry needed to dispense with the lingering question of the Cézannian anecdote before proceeding to the task of writing about the artist without using it. The rest of the Leicester Galleries review does just this, offering the same kind of close formal analyses of paintings that would later fill his monograph. Fry's concern has shifted from describing the artist's character to attempting to identify his artistic personality, the underlying visual characteristics and habits that emerge when scrutinizing multiple artworks. 'His intimate feeling,' Fry writes, 'was always for the most directed and simplest aspect of things — the aspect, that is, of primitive art'.²⁰ He identifies this tendency in a portrait of Madame Cézanne, as well as repeatedly in the landscapes on review:

Again and again in the landscapes we look across an even terrain to the edge of a wood or a rocky mass seen with its great extension parallel to the picture plane; and this rectangular simplicity, this parallelism of successive planes, persists throughout every part of the design.²¹

Fry not only identifies parallels and parallelism as a key aspect of Cézanne's artistic personality, he also creates parallels in his own writing. The Leicester Galleries review has a kind of poor analogy/better analogy trajectory, whereby Fry begins by rejecting an obvious parallel for the artist and ends by asserting his affinity with more distant, more revered artists. He stands, Fry states at the end of his first paragraph, '*hors concours*, in a class apart, to be related no longer to the other artists of his day, but rather to the great names of a remoter past'.²² In his last paragraph, Fry reveals his preferred comparison: 'It was reserved to Cézanne to make apples on a table or the trees at the edge of a wood, take on the imperturbable serenity and poise of Giotto's figure compositions'.²³

¹⁹ See Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1934.

²⁰ Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries', 458.

²¹ Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries'.

²² Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries'.

²³ Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries', 459. Fry's lengthy essay on Giotto was reprinted in Fry, *Vision and Design*, 92-123; given my concerns here, it is worth mentioning that Fry finds that some of Giotto's figures express the quality of humility, 106, 112. Fry, an Italianist, would presumably have been aware that Boccaccio turns Giotto into an embodiment of humility in the *Decameron*: 'he bore the honours he had gained with the utmost humility and although, while he lived, chief over all else in his art, he still refused to be called master, which title, though rejected by him, shone so much the more gloriously in him as it was with greater eagerness greedily usurped by those who knew less than he, or by his disciples'. See John Payne, trans., *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*, New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1900, 303.

The Leicester Galleries provided an opportunity that was then a rarity in Britain, an immersive encounter with Cézanne's art. 'The effect', Fry observed, 'when once again one enters a room filled with his works is rather surprising'. But the exhibition was limited by its modest size and by the fact that the pictures on view, as Fry pointed out, 'all belong[ed] to the later period of Cézanne's development'.²⁴ Writing about the Pellerin Collection in Paris presented no such constraints. It was the largest collection of Cézanne's art in existence at the time, and rich in works from all phases of the artist's career. In May 1925, Fry visited the collection and by the end of the following year his lengthy article based largely on Pellerin's works, 'Le développement de Cézanne', appeared in French in the journal *L'Amour de l'Art*. During the summer of 1927, Fry translated his words back into English and recast the expanded article in book form. By the end of that year, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, his friends and the owners of the Hogarth Press, had published *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*. Fry designed and made the cover himself, a lithographic study after Cézanne to match the 'study' that had now been added to the title of the piece. The English text was not just a translation of his own French, for he also made a few additions. The theme of parallelism, for example, was now picked up in the epigraph: 'Art is a harmony parallel to nature'.²⁵ And space was also found for a table of 'Important Dates in Cézanne's life'. Many of these dates relate to basic events not even mentioned in the text proper: the artist's birth and death, for example.

'Sympathy and experience', Virginia Woolf observed of Fry's monograph, 'have enabled the critic to place the timid little man with only a sentence or two of biography in his setting of time and circumstance'.²⁶ Anecdotes had been entirely absent from 'Le développement de Cézanne', as though to mark Fry's rejection of them, but the critic reintroduced them, or at least a 'sentence or two' of them, at the very next opportunity. They reappeared in a three-thousand word article the critic wrote for *The New York Times* magazine. Published on Sunday May 1st 1927, the piece focused on Cézanne's early years, up until his period working alongside Pissarro in the early 1870s.²⁷ Then, in *Cézanne. A Study of his Development*, new versions of the exact same stories were woven into Fry's larger account of Cézanne's development. There were three of these stories: two about Cézanne, and a third about Fry's belated discovery of Cézanne's art — that is, his primal or meta anecdote.²⁸

²⁴ Fry, 'Cézanne at the Leicester Galleries', 458.

²⁵ Fry attributes the quote to 'Paul Cézanne, quoted by M. Joachim Gasquet'. Gasquet is quoting from a letter he received from the artist (September 1897).

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry. A Biography*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1940, 4–5.

²⁷ See 'New Laurels for the scorned Cézanne. France to Set Up a Statue to the Neglected Painter Who Founded a New School', *The New York Times magazine*, 1st May 1927, 6, 7 and 22.

²⁸ In the *New York Times* article, Fry's primal anecdote appears in his opening paragraph. It is notably longer and more detailed than the version he included in the monograph: 'More than thirty years ago the present writer was working as an art student in Paris. He was

In the monograph, Fry carefully chose the perfect moment to insert his two stories about Cézanne's life. They appear, back to back, after he has considered Cézanne's early, so-called 'Romantic' or 'Baroque' works but before his description of the artist's turn to Impressionism in the early 1870s. For Fry, Cézanne's new openness to nature forced him to abandon his former attitude of 'pride and intransigence' and heralded 'a new humility' in his work²⁹ – a quality almost entirely absent from the grandiose early work. Humility, Fry explains:

is a phenomenon of the greatest importance, because all artists of the highest order have to pass through this state. A Veronese or a Frans Hals may dispense with humility. Their virtuosity is sufficient for their spiritual needs. But every artist who is destined to arrive at the profounder truths, a Rembrandt, a Velasquez, or a Daumier, requires an exceptional humility.³⁰

As this makes clear, Fry's attraction to the pride/humility binary extended beyond the monograph on Cézanne, while also suggesting a need to identify humility in the artist's life and work. For how else would he be guaranteed a place in the ranks of the 'profounder' artists?

ignorant, but anxious to learn all that could be picked up about art. He eagerly sought for the works of those who were generally considered to be the leading masters of the day. He studied, wherever he could find them, the paintings of Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, Monet and Sisley, but never once in his inquiries did he so much as hear the name of Paul Cézanne.' As we have seen, the monograph glosses the anecdote with the observation that it demonstrated that the artist had 'abandoned his struggle with the world and veiled himself in unbroken silence'. But in the article Fry adds a lengthier commentary, taking his youthful unawareness of the artist to be a consequence of Cézanne's withdrawal from the Parisian artworld and his lack of interest in conventional success: 'At that time Paul Cézanne had long abandoned hope of winning any recognition from the public. He had long ceased even to submit his pictures to the rejection of hanging committees, or, in the event of their passing that test, to the uncontrolled expressions of contempt with which the public greeted his efforts' (Fry, 'New Laurels for the scorned Cézanne', 6).

²⁹ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 18 and 29, respectively.

³⁰ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 29. Fry never really defines precisely what he means by humility, a traditional Christian virtue that has been discussed at length by such eminent figures as St. Augustine, St. Benedict, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Relying on a commonsense understanding of the word, Fry's criticism stresses humility as: (1) an acceptance of personal limitations, of learning to work within one's area of competence, no matter how limited that area might be; (2) as modesty and a rejection of earthly ambition and success; and (3) as a rejection of the ego and of egocentric desires. Following convention, Fry opposes humility to notions of vanity and pride. Humility's connections to the earth (*humus*) and to a kind of rootedness are also perhaps relevant to Fry's understanding of the word; for Fry, it is Cézanne's commitment to the landscape, to Pissarro's tutelage and to a *plein-air* methodology, that triggers his path to humility.

Immediately after his list of exceptional humble artists, Fry introduces his two anecdotes about Cézanne. He presents them as biographical stories that have been carefully chosen, and juxtaposed, in order to illustrate his larger theme:

How much this acquisition [of humility] cost Cézanne one may guess from the descriptions of his old age, from his suspicious, defiant misanthropy. Or we may gauge it by comparing two incidents in his life.³¹

The first involves Cézanne's letter of 1866, written to the State Superintendent of Fine Arts and calling, unsuccessfully, for the reestablishment of the *Salon des Refusés*. Vollard had included the letter, which was in the Louvre's archives, in his biography; Fry quotes selectively from both it and the official's response, which was scrawled in the letter's margins, and thus never reached the artist. He proceeds to explain his decision to include the document. The letter, Fry writes:

has been disinterred from the official files to show the sublime arrogance and self-confidence of youthful Cézanne, to show how long and hard a fight he was destined to wage. First of all a hopeless fight against official prejudice, and then the fight with the exuberant romanticism of his temperament, which he won so triumphantly.³²

Fry straightaway turns his attention to his second incident, which is set three decades later in late 1895, and related to Cézanne's first solo exhibition. 'The second anecdote of Cézanne's life', he writes:

which affords so vivid a contrast with the one above is that when, after a lifetime of solitude and neglect, he heard that M. Vollard had organized at his shop in the rue Lafitte what was really the first exhibition of his works that had ever been held, he and his son went furtively to visit it, and that, as they came away, he said to him, "And to think that they are all framed!"³³

³¹ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 29.

³² Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 30. In the *New York Times* article, Fry's account of this incident is much shorter and suggests habitual action, rather than a single event: 'In those early years, when his work had been refused by the jury of the Salon, he wrote proud, indignant letters claiming his right as a serious worker to come before the public. It is hardly necessary to say that the letters remained unanswered. They show his belief that such a strong, self-confident attitude would meet with some recognition' (Fry, 'New Laurels for the scorned Cézanne', 6).

³³ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 30. Here is how Fry tells the story in his *New York Times* article: 'When he was an old man and his work had just begun to be recognized by a few intelligent connoisseurs, the picture dealer Ambroise Vollard arranged a small exhibition of his works at his gallery in the Rue Lafitte. Thither Cézanne came with his son and, as they walked away, he said, glowing with grateful satisfaction: "And to think that

Fry's source here is not Vollard's biography but Joachim Gasquet's. Gasquet has informed the artist about the stir his one-man show at Vollard's gallery is creating:

I had told him this; he had shrugged his shoulders. Now we went in. He walked round the show slowly, like the humblest visitor. Two or three times he blinked in front of a magnificent landscape. As if ashamed, he nervously shook the hand of the dealer who was praising him to the skies. He was visibly in a hurry to escape. We left and were barely out the door when he said: "It's amazing! He has framed them all."³⁴

In his account, Gasquet avoids mentioning Vollard by name – he is simply 'the dealer' – and it is Gasquet himself who is given the role of the artist's chief adviser and companion. But in Fry's more compressed retelling, while Vollard's name is firmly reinstated, Gasquet's is nowhere to be found, and instead it is the artist's son who accompanies him to the exhibition and who receives the punchline about the frames. Fry thus inadvertently demonstrates one of the chief reasons to be suspicious of anecdotes, their tendency to shift and evolve over repeated tellings and retellings.

Should we even trust Gasquet's account at all considering his propensity to take other people's words and stories and make them his own?³⁵ There are, after all, striking similarities between his story and one Vollard had included in his earlier biography. In Vollard, the dealer is accompanying the artist to the Luxembourg Museum in Paris, where they come across Cézanne's two landscapes from the Caillebotte bequest.³⁶

I pointed them out to the master. He glanced at them, and stepped closer to me: "You know, Monsieur Vollard", he said in a low tone, "I've learned a lot through the portrait I'm doing of you.... At last they're putting frames on my pictures!"³⁷

they are all framed!" What a history of gradual and bitter renunciation of the proud claims of his youth that phrase reveals' (Fry, 'New Laurels for the scorned Cézanne', 6).

³⁴ Christopher Pemberton, trans., *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir With Conversations*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1991, 123. Gasquet's general theme is Cézanne's suspicion of the art market and official awards as reliable indexes of an artist's worth.

³⁵ As Richard Shiff notes, Gasquet 'drew copiously from his predecessors, usually without obvious indication of their presence. His text is an odd compilation of documents reassembled apart from initial contexts and interspersed with a set of observations that are sometimes quite different, Gasquet's own' (*Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne*, 15).

³⁶ Logically the story must postdate January 1897, which was when the two landscapes finally entered the Luxembourg Museum.

³⁷ Vollard, *Cézanne*, 36.

A generous, or perhaps naïve, interpretation might see these similarities not as Gasquet appropriating and retelling Vollard's anecdote, but as two separate incidents faithfully recorded by two witnesses. If so, the repetition itself seems to undermine the authenticity of Cézanne's response, as well as any humility one might want to detect in this response. Just how many times could an artist be surprised, or feign surprise, upon finding that his paintings have been framed? The Cézanne in Vollard's anecdote sounds more ironic and teasing than modest or humble.³⁸

To recap, one of Fry's biographical incidents is rooted in a reliable document from 1867, the other in a mutable, and rather less dependable, anecdote about events around 1895 or later. The friction between the two creates Fry's point: taken together and held in contrast, they serve the critic's need to illustrate his belief that the artist's chief attitude changed over the decades from one of hubris and pride to one of modesty and humility.³⁹ In his review of Vollard's biography, Fry mentioned the artist's 'paradoxical humility' – paradoxical because the humility often seemed intermingled with ambition and pride – but now this admixture is separated out into its constituent parts and becomes developmental, tracing a journey towards humility. The path repeats, of course, the one Fry identifies in the art, as Cézanne orients his practice away from expressionistic, Romantic, and 'literary' subjects and towards a more rigorous perceptual engagement with the external world, towards the supposedly lesser genres of landscape, still-life, and portraiture. The gloss Fry provides after telling the two stories makes this connection between art and biography explicit:

Cézanne learned thoroughly the lesson of humility, and nothing is more touching, in the effect of his great masterpieces, than the intense humility which they evince by their utter denial of bravura or self-consciousness.

As in life, so in art. This, incidentally, was precisely the language D. H. Lawrence picked up on in his *Introduction to these Paintings*, a piece written partly in response to, and aimed at, Fry's monograph. 'Mr. Fry', Lawrence writes, 'says he had to learn humility, which is a bad phrase (...). What Cézanne had to learn was not humility – cant word! – but honesty, honesty.'⁴⁰

³⁸ In contrast to these various versions of the anecdote, consider Cézanne's letters, where he discusses frames in a consistently matter-of-fact and attentive manner, but with no sense that he is giving them undue symbolic significance. See, for example, his letter to Octave Maus of 21 December 1889.

³⁹ Part of Fry's point is that our expectations have been confounded: youthful rejection merely engendered more pride from Cézanne, rather than chastening him; on the other hand, his first solo show (a sure sign of artistic success and therefore a reason for feelings of pride) elicited a modest response from the older artist.

⁴⁰ See 'Introduction to these Paintings', reprinted in Edward D. McDonald, ed., *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, New York: Viking Press, 1936, 551–84, quotation 573.

The two stories also tackle Cézanne's relationship to a larger public, or lack thereof. His denial of a place at the salon, and even at a re-established *Salon des Refusés*, contrasts to his later visibility at Vollard's commercial gallery; those frames Vollard added stand for a larger transition from studio practice to public presence, from works in progress (or abandoned) to carefully curated commodities. At the end of the next section of the book, and having described Cézanne's years painting alongside Pissarro, Fry briefly returns to the first anecdote, as though to remind us of it:

Disillusioned and discouraged no doubt he became. The author of those high-spirited letters to the Ministry of Fine Arts, of those celebrated gibes at the official clique of the salon, no longer had the heart to trouble them with any sign of his existence. He faded out so completely from the general artistic consciousness of his day that the present writer, when he was an art student in Paris in the 'nineties (...).⁴¹

And so, after evoking his first story about Cézanne, Fry has segued back to his primal or meta anecdote. He implicates himself in the tales he chooses to repeat. When Cézanne, as biographical subject, is most present in Fry's text, so is the author's autobiography. The connection back to Fry might also help to explain why he preferred to paraphrase the frame story from Gasquet's book, rather than the similar one told by Vollard. Set in the Luxembourg Museum, Vollard's story reminds the reader that Cézanne's work was on permanent display in Paris. Through no fault of their own, a periodic visitor to Paris might easily have missed a temporary exhibition at a relatively obscure dealer; but, after early 1897, any 'inquisitive student' of recent art could reasonably have been expected to visit the Luxembourg to see the notorious Caillebotte bequest. Vollard's version, in other words, tends to draw attention to the fact that Cézanne's obscurity was not the only factor governing Fry's belated recognition of the artist: another was Fry's failure to grasp the artist's merits when he did see his works.⁴²

The stories were not merely included to help give an article the required bulk of a book. A connoisseurial approach – one narrowly centred on formalist close-readings – risks feeling like a closed shop, and Fry needed to reassure his reader that the developmental narrative he was extracting from these paintings was more than merely a projection on his part. Biographical elements, even though used extremely sparingly, serve to broaden his criticism's epistemology, pointing to events outside of the picture frame. Predictably, this mutually reinforcing relationship between art and life can be detected most clearly in his discussion of

⁴¹ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 38.

⁴² One such occasion was the Universal Exposition of 1900, which Fry reviewed for the *Pilot*. But he made no mention of the three Cézannes included in the collection of nineteenth-century French art assembled at the *Grand Palais*. Among the three was the famous *Still-Life With Comptoir*, the work that Fry would later subject to a long and 'tiresome analysis' in his monograph (Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 42–51).

that most confessional of genres, self-portraiture. At one point, Fry brings together three self-portraits, painted at different stages of the artist's career, to produce what he calls 'a most illuminating sequence'.⁴³ Fry finds the last of the three to be the most objective, a product of careful observation. '[H]e looks at his own head', writes Fry:

with precisely the same regard that he turned on an apple on the kitchen table. But with this renunciation of all *parti pris* how much more eloquent and vital is the presence revealed to us.... We see by what degrees Cézanne has descended from the fiery theatrical self-interpretation of his youth to this shrunken and timid middle-aged man. His eyes no longer flash out a menace; he is no longer interested in what effect he may produce on others; all his energy is concentrated in that alert, investigating gaze.⁴⁴

Similarly, Fry finds his proud-youth-to-humble-man parable on another level — that of entire creative lives. Having rejected Zola as Cézanne's biographical double at the beginning of the book,⁴⁵ he eventually alights upon Flaubert's life as providing the better parallel. Flaubert was also a great classic artist 'made by the repression of a Romantic'. The painter and writer 'both described in their lives such similar curves that the comparison between them is not altogether unilluminating'.⁴⁶

The poor analogy / better analogy structure found in the Leicester Galleries review repeats itself again here, but now with novelists as the reference point, rather than artists. By moving from art to writing, Fry is preparing to consider something fundamental to his formalist enterprise, the relationship between art criticism and the art it describes. For Fry to write a really convincing sermon on the theme of pride and humility, he must himself perform acts of humility and renounce his ambitions as a critic or at least acknowledge his limitations. Words must fail him, and sure enough, they do. 'It must always be kept in mind', he writes in the monograph's last paragraph:

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.⁴⁷

⁴³ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 56.

⁴⁴ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 56.

⁴⁵ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 5–6.

⁴⁶ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 87.

⁴⁷ Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*, 88.

The better Cézanne's art becomes, the worse Fry's criticism must be. His futility becomes a symptom of Cézanne's success. If Cézanne's best art is beyond words, Fry is encouraging us to seek out the things beyond the words and mechanical reproductions of the book, the objects themselves. All the stories, all the anecdotes, should point back to the art, so that there might be (to reverse his comments on Vollard's biography) ten people fascinated by Cézanne's art for one who would read a biography about his life. But while Fry indicates the strict limits of his own critical activity, and of words in general, the act of pointing out this difference paradoxically draws attention to a deeper structural kinship with his subject. The critic humbles himself before the products of a humble artist. Like the book's cover, Fry's study copies Cézanne's example, but in the process, the critic opens himself up to the charge of practicing a brand of false humility, one that has performative and presumptuous overtones. Is he, in short, implying that the ultimate parallel is between himself and his subject?

In 1927 Fry's extremely sparing and judicious deployment of anecdotes was primarily a textural strategy; his surviving lecture notes from the same period indicate that in this more ephemeral and freewheeling mode, he was also more liable to draw on stories and other materials culled from Bernard, Vollard and Gasquet's books.⁴⁸ Fry, I have argued, reached the conclusion that the developmental story he was writing required at least two contrasting anecdotes but perhaps no more, and that these 'human documents' should serve larger thematic purposes. After publishing the monograph, Fry continued to deliver not just formalist art criticism, but also actual sermons on the theme of humility. In the last year of his life, for instance, he contributed to the book *Sermons By Artists*, where he took as his starting point Proverbs 16: 18. 'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall'. Humour, the scientific method, and humility, Fry proposed, can serve as necessary correctives to 'the disturbing illusions and the dangerous pretensions of human pride'.⁴⁹ Remembered as a formalist and as an 'anti-literary' art critic, Fry nevertheless had a story that he wanted to tell, and retell, through his writing. In her biography of Fry, Virginia Woolf identified the story's basic plot:

[T]he less the artist gave himself the airs of genius, the humbler he was; the more detached and disinterested, the more chance he had of becoming what Roger Fry sometimes called "a swell" – a member, though it might be a very

⁴⁸ Extensive notes survive for a lecture he delivered on Cézanne at University College Bangor (17 Jan 1927) and for a series of three lectures he delivered at the Queen's Hall, London, timed to coincide with the publication of the monograph. See King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, The Papers of Roger Eliot Fry, REF 1/119-22.

⁴⁹ See Fry's contribution to *Sermons by Artists*, London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1934, 41–5 (quotation, 43).

humble member, of that confraternity to whom "Cézanne and Flaubert have become in a sort the patron saints".⁵⁰

Fry envisaged writing one more monograph, but seems to have barely started it. One imagines that Rembrandt, the book's proposed subject, would – like Cézanne – have provided him with a final opportunity to trace an artist's path from youthful hubris to mature humility.

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⁵⁰ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 242. Woolf is quoting, or rather slightly misquoting, Fry's *Cézanne. A Study of His Development*: 'And both have become in a sort the patron saints of their Confraternities' (Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 88).