

Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and “Cézanne’s Doubt”

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In this essay the concluding pages of “Cezanne’s Doubt” (1945), written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, will be analyzed in detail. These pages call for a rigorous engagement, yet the secondary literature often neglects this portion or merely notes it in passing. This essay will fill in where others have failed, first providing a short exegesis of the concluding pages of “Cézanne’s Doubt”. While doing so, I make the point that at this stage in the philosopher’s career it is necessary to speak of the influence of Freud, especially with regard to aesthetics. What follows will hopefully open the debate on phenomenology, the unconscious, art, and their connections for Merleau-Ponty in his early essay about Cézanne.

Using contemporary scholarship on Merleau-Ponty and psychoanalysis, which often has its focus on *Phenomenology of Perception*, I apply those writings to the essay in question. While the philosopher does not appropriate psychoanalysis wholesale, it is not possible to fully account for Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Cézanne unless Freud lurks in the background. Such is made clear if we look at Merleau-Ponty’s work surrounding this period as well as what followed.

The strongest link that connects Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology with psychoanalysis is the notion of freedom. Merleau-Ponty writes that to understand Cézanne is to look at the artist’s past which informed the present moment of brushing paint onto the canvas. Yet the present also contains what Marjorie Greene calls “the pull of the future”: prior to each brush stroke one’s past is pulled by the future to express itself in the present. What Cézanne was illustrating in his paintings was precisely the realization of one’s freedom; to create, to paint, to be an artist, is to be an embodied agent encountering the world as it has been given over to him or her. This conclusion, which defines those last few pages of “Cézanne’s Doubt”, also encapsulates Merleau-Ponty’s consistent use of Cézanne’s paintings as such. Thus, in my essay, we should clearly see how phenomenology and psychoanalysis were amalgamated by Merleau-Ponty to craft a unique aesthetics outside the limitations of a single discipline.