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“Es ist gar nicht die Malerei, die ich studiere ... Es ist die Wendung in dieser Malerei, die ich erkannte”:  
 The Influence of Cézanne’s Painting on Rilke’s  
*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*

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Und wir: Zuschauer, immer überall,  
 dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!  
 Und überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.  
 Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.  
 Rilke, 8th Duineser Elegie

The last stanza of Rilke’s eighth Duino elegy cited above situates its reader as an observer who recognizes the world falling apart and feels the need to reorganize it repeatedly. Yet rearranging the chaos so as to create an ordered, clear system no longer seems possible. Rilke’s observer is not a subject which controls his environment, but rather a passive observer who is no longer capable of distinguishing between inside and outside. Written at the turn of the century, Rilke’s elegy can be interpreted as a literary description of the emergence of a “heterogeneous space” which French philosopher Henri Lefebvre discusses as a break with the classical “perspectivist space” (26), explicitly with the traditional perspective developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition. Euclid applied one single vantage point to systematize the outside world and thus drew a clear dividing line between observer and observed. The transition from a “homogeneous space” to a “heterogeneous space,” as Lefebvre states, signifies a crucial moment in cultural history: “The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. [...] Euclidian and perspectivist space have disappeared as systems of reference, along with other former ‘commonplaces’ such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth. This was truly a crucial moment” (25). As Lefebvre indicates, this vital turning point can be seen in a variety of areas. Representational artists dismantled the uniform perspectival space that had been the rule for painting since the Renaissance, and

reconstructed objects from several perspectives instead of a single vantage point.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, novelists such as James Joyce and Marcel Proust used multiple perspectives in their narratives.

Stephen Kern refers to the idea of 'conceptual distance' in his argument about the emergence of new modes of thinking about time and space from around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I (7). In his book *The Culture of Time and Space*, Kern shows that the same patterns can be explored in architectural spaces, physics, art history, poetry, literature and music. Various fields often directly influenced each other, as happened, for instance, in Paris during the fall of 1907 at the Salon d'Automne, when Rilke viewed some of Cézanne's paintings. After moving from rural Northern Germany to Paris, the most urbanized city of the time, Rilke found Cézanne's art a catalyst for revitalizing his own writing and discovering new ways of representation. The main source of reference on this subject is a series of letters to Clara Rilke, written between October 6 and November 4, 1907, known as the 'Cézanne-Briefe.'

My essay traces the epistemological changes as well as the poetological influences that occurred in Rilke's writing as a result of his encounter with Cézanne's art. First, I seek to shed light on what impressed Rilke when looking at paintings by Cézanne according to his letters. As the title quote of my essay shows, Rilke acknowledged that it is not the painting that he was studying but its application itself. Using passages from *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, I will show how Rilke appropriated Cézanne's techniques at painting for his own literary use. Rilke discovered a 'Wendung,' or turning point, in Cézanne's paintings, which made the autumn of 1907 one of the most contemplative periods of Rilke's life. The most important aspect of Rilke's 'turning point' sparked by Cézanne's art was Rilke's reconfirmation of his struggle for poetic objectivity. Since 'Sachlichkeit' is a meeting point between the sculptor Rodin, the painter Cézanne and the poet Rilke, it is imperative to discuss how Rilke's Cézanne experience was a sequel to Rilke's Rodin episode.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, I examine several paintings by Cézanne and show how his innovations on canvas are mirrored in Rilke's literary texts by analyzing textual examples from *Malte*. The book, with its self-revelations, impressionistic facets and lack of a traditional plotline, breaks with the closed structure of the

traditional novel. The narration jumps spatially and temporally through Malte's observations. I argue that innovations typical of Cézanne's style, such as the demand of representing totality, the use of multiple perspectives, the emergence of the background and the depiction of a wholesome world with patches of colors are also present in Rilke's *Malte*. My thesis is that Cézanne made a central contribution to Rilke's poetic evolution, which is evident in many of the *Malte* passages. Even if, as Lessing's famous *Laokoon* essay argues, the two arts are ultimately irreconcilable, I argue that Rilke realized a synthesis between the representational arts in many of the diary entries of *Malte*. Segments of this rich novel can be read as homage to Cézanne's art and a search for breakthroughs in expressing the ingenuity of Cézanne's painting in the medium of poetic expression.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his life Rilke turned to the representational arts as a source of inspiration.<sup>4</sup> In Worpswede the painters Otto Modersohn and Paula Modersohn-Becker made a lasting impression on the young poet. In 1902 Rilke married the sculptress Clara Westhof and in the same year became a student of Auguste Rodin. Rilke's monograph on Rodin illustrates the extent to which Rilke's perception of art shaped his poetic language. Rodin trained Rilke in the art of seeing and compositional discipline as well as introducing him to French literature. As a result the *Neue Gedichte*, the most closely related to the Rodin years, are marked by Rilke's turning away from the former exaggerated emotionalism and subjectivity of his *Stunden-Buch*.<sup>5</sup> Rodin's main impact is that "instead of among dreams, Rilke lived among works of visual art until he wished to make his own poems self sufficient and perfectly wrought like them."<sup>6</sup> Rilke's discovery of Cézanne's art in the autumn of 1907 closely followed the poet's separation from Rodin. In his book *Rilke and France*, Kenneth Batterby analyzes the similarities and differences of Rilke's Rodin and Cézanne episodes, showing that in Rilke's life "before Rodin, Cézanne would have been meaningless" (76). Batterby sheds light on the fact that Rilke's Rodin experience would have been incomplete without the Cézanne episode, because Rilke's acquaintance with Cézanne was a confirmation of the training and approach initiated by Rodin but also a step ahead it (77-80).<sup>7</sup> While Rilke did have contact with Rodin, this was not the case with the painter Cézanne,

given his death in 1906. The lack of personal contact between them made the experience of Cézanne's work 'purer,' although Rilke was impressed by Cézanne's vita as much as by his artistic work.<sup>8</sup>

Rilke's shift from Rodin to Cézanne and his interest in the painter's biography are obvious from his letters written from Paris to his wife, Clara Rilke. The poet was touched by the intensity with which Cézanne concentrated on his work, laboring to exhaustion, and denying himself social appreciation and personal happiness.<sup>9</sup> Rilke describes Cézanne as a man of complete dedication and of incredible self-discipline. Rilke had been similarly impressed by the sculptor Rodin's daily routines; according to Rilke, Rodin never left his studio without having completed what he had set out to do that day (Batterby 50). The rigorous principles upon which both Rodin and Cézanne based their creative activities affected Rilke.<sup>10</sup> Rilke's dream was to become a rigorous worker as Rodin, but was forced to realize that a poet does not need the physical contact and manual skill for his art that played such an important role for Rodin. It is important to note that Rilke turned away from Rodin because of the irreconcilability of sculpture and poetry, realizing that poetry is not a process of slow manual work but rather a "creative act punctuated by stresses and tensions, [and] it is movement and restlessness" (Batterby 50). Both Angelloz and Batterby explain Rilke's turning away from Rodin to Cézanne as related to the nature of painting.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, physical dexterity is present in painting as well; however, one important difference between painting and sculpture becomes relevant to Rilke: the use of and reliance on the effect of color. This idea is also present in the first detailed letters of Rilke about Cézanne's paintings that address the theme of color. In accordance with Angelloz and Batterby, I see Rilke's Rodin and Cézanne experiences as "self-contained but inseparable episodes" (Batterby 79), which means, for the purpose of this paper, that Cézanne had a significant impact on Rilke's poetic development.

Rilke's experience of Cézanne is more than mere fascination with the artist's life, for he was interested in Cézanne's work as a fellow artist. As the following quotation illustrates, Rilke had arrived at a turning point in his career and was looking for a direction that would help him find new ways of representation:

Es ist gar nicht die Malerei, die ich studiere [...] Es ist die Wendung in dieser Malerei, die ich erkannte, weil ich sie selbst eben in meiner Arbeit erreicht hatte oder doch irgendwie nahe an sie herangekommen war, seit lange wahrscheinlich auf dieses eine vorbereitet, von dem so vieles abhängt. (Briefe II 390)

The most important aspect of this 'turning point' caused by Cézanne's art was Rilke's reconfirmation in his struggle for poetic objectivity. Rilke writes in letter after letter to his wife that he found the "Sachlichkeit des Sagens" in Cézanne (Briefe II 365-93). It is important to note that this concept is not equivalent to objectivity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sense, which sets up a complete division between the observer and the observed. In art historian Meyer Shapiro's words, Cézanne's aim instead was to paint nature in "complete naiveté of sensation" as if no one had ever painted before (19). Hence Shapiro sees parallels between Cézanne's works and "those of artists of a more primitive style who have not yet acquired a systematic knowledge of natural forms, but draw from memory and feelings" (19). The "primitive style" of Cézanne signifies his turning away from "the already constituted reason of the 'cultured man' toward a reason which contains its own origins;" in his paintings Cézanne did not simply want to create an idea but according to Merleau-Ponty also recalled the experience to "make *visible* how the world *touches* us" (19). This approach fascinated Rilke as well, for he wrote to his wife about the character and effect of Cézanne's colors linking them to the painter's power to capture objects accurately.

As with Rodin, Rilke is preoccupied with the artist's capacity to convey the 'dinghafte Wirklichkeit,' or indestructible essence of an object. In Cézanne he found the ideal artist who can penetrate to the very being of things, as did Rodin in sculpture. Rilke observed that the fruits of Cézanne's still lives are neither part of nature nor set for a meal: "bei Cézanne hört ihre Essbarkeit überhaupt auf so sehr dinghaft wirklich werden sie, so einfach unverilgbar in ihrer eigensinnigen Vorhandenheit" (Briefe II 361). On one hand the apples in the paintings look solid and weighty, while on the other Cézanne paints "tangible touches of color each of which, while

rendering a visual sensation, makes us aware of the decision of the mind and an operation of the hand" (Shapiro 10). Thus the paintings display not only the actual still life, but the process as well, including object and subject, color and outline, inside and outside simultaneously. The objectivity with which Rilke credited Cézanne implied an outward gaze that would draw the outside world closer to an objective or 'sachliches' self.

Despite the difference of medium, the general artistic principle of "artistic integrity" (Batterby 86) appears here, which Rilke could embrace and apply to his own work. Artistic integrity is a steadfast loyalty to the subject: color must be an integral part of the object itself. Rilke was amazed by Cézanne's ability to achieve a perfect balance between object and color. This is an ideal, which Rilke could apply to his own medium, as this principle is not restricted to a particular material. In the field of poetry it means the optimum use of language, but at the same time the language must not outweigh the subject. The goal is "nie mehr, nie weniger, als das Gleichgewicht erfordert" (Briefe II 375). To illustrate this principle I will compare between Cézanne's famous Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings and Rilke's poem "Der Berg."<sup>12</sup> While comparing photographs with Cézanne's paintings, Shapiro shows that the painter, even if he took liberties with his subject, always remained attached to it. In the painting the stable mountain is traversed by restless forms and its side changes its course in several abrupt breaks transporting the firm object into a complex, dynamic form. In Rilke's poem, "Der Berg," a mountain appears as a static image, just like the Mont Sainte-Victoire for Cézanne. Likewise, Rilke's aim is to crack the rigidity of this concrete image and to change its appearance. Hence Rilke's transformation of everything external into inwardness, "die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren ins Unsichtbare," can be interpreted, by using Gerhard Glaser's terminology, as "Entgegenständlichung" and "Dingbewahrung" simultaneously (147). Thus using this approach Rilke incorporates his thoughts into the 'thing' he describes, but at the same time he depicts the object in great detail.

Rilke applies the principle described above in several passages of his *Malte*. Wandering around the streets, Malte describes what he views and in doing so transcends the surface of various objects. One day Malte sees a partly demolished apartment building and one

of its remaining walls. In the constantly changing layers under the gray, dusty surface of the wall, which Rilke describes in great detail, Malte discovers the city and a record of human lives. During this brief moment of observing the wall, Rilke's protagonist experiences the sickness of the city, the smoke of years, the breath of mouths, "der süße, lange Geruch von vernachlässigten Säuglingen war da und der Angstgeruch der Kinder" and even more: "es war noch vieles da, wovon man den Ursprung nicht wusste" (42-3). All these experiences accumulate in Malte and the scene overwhelms him: "Denn das ist das Schreckliche, dass ich sie erkannt habe. Ich erkenne das alles hier, und darum geht es so ohne weiteres in mich ein: es ist zu Hause in mir" (43). The description of this remaining wall is an example for the artistic integrity that Rilke observed in Cézanne's art. While unfolding the stories of decay, mass disease and the vanished generations associated with the house, Rilke incorporates Malte's reflections into the object he is describing, but at the same time stays attached to the wall, with the goal to create a balance between subjectivity and the object itself. It is just such objectivity with which Rilke bridges the gap between the self and the object, so that they can coexist as a unified yet separate entity.

Rilke found the same objectivity in Baudelaire's poetry as well, which creates a remarkable link between painter and poet. Baudelaire's poem "Une Charogne" is woven as an intertextual element into the Cézanne letters as well as into *Malte*.<sup>13</sup> In his letters Rilke was impressed by the fact that Cézanne could recite Baudelaire's famous and shocking poem "Une Charogne" from memory and notes that "ohne dieses Gedicht die ganze Entwicklung zum sachlichen Sagen, die wir jetzt in Cézanne zu erkennen glauben, nicht hätte anheben können" (Briefe II 393). In Baudelaire's poem the poet and his beloved take a walk on a beautiful day and see the carcass of an animal, its stomach exposed and its legs sticking up in the air. The poet gruesomely reflects on his beloved's body, noting that after her death she will resemble this corpse. Malte emphasizes the totality of the image and praises Baudelaire for not excluding any of the shocking parts from his poem: "Es war seine [Baudelaire's] Aufgabe, in diesem Schrecklichen, scheinbar nur Widerwärtigen das Seiende zu sehen, das unter allem Seienden gilt. Auswahl und Ablehnung giebt (sic) es nicht" (Malte 62). It is noteworthy that

Rilke uses a very similar semiology when he describes Cézanne's work:

Diese Arbeit, die *keine Vorlieben* mehr hatte, *keine Neigungen* und *keine wählerischen Verwöhntheiten*, deren kleinster Bestandteil auf der Waage eines unendlich beweglichen Gewissens erprobt war und die so unbestechlich Seiendes auf seinen Farbeninhalt zusammenzog, dass es in einem Jenseits von Farbe eine neue Existenz, ohne frühere Erinnerungen, anfang. Es ist diese unbegrenzte, alle Einmischung in eine fremde Einheit ablehnende Sachlichkeit, die den Leuten die Porträts Cézannes so anstößig und komisch macht. (emphasis added, Briefe II, 391)

The quotations illustrate that Rilke learned from Cézanne and Baudelaire during his time in Paris that it is possible to find truth in ugliness as well as in beauty. Thus the objectivity that Rilke discovered in Cézanne's paintings was a type of representation that, as Rilke believed, allowed for the artist to describe the totality of his perceptions without selection or judgment of the subject. This is also present in Malte's depiction of Paris as an impersonal, destructive and terrifying city, with its crowds, materialism, mass poverty, and a total of seventeen deaths in 227 pages.<sup>14</sup> The novel's shocking scenes of death and decay affirm that art must embrace the whole of experience, even the ugly and horrible.

Like Cézanne whose goal was to experience the outside world as someone who has just acquired vision, Rilke develops a metaphor for emphasizing the primary role of seeing. In the Cézanne letters this new way of seeing is compared with a dog's view. Rilke imagines Cézanne working "[w]ie ein Hund [...] einfach geschaut, ohne alle Nervosität und Nebenabsicht" (Briefe II, 375). This animal perspective enables 'Einsicht' and 'Sich-Einlassen,' which does not systematize or use any filters and is therefore able to show attention without particular interest. Rilke even wrote a poem entitled "Der Hund," in which he compares the sight of human beings ("da oben") and that of the dog ("ganz unten"). According to this concept people constitute their world from "das Bild von einer

Welt aus Blicken," whereas the dog does not arrange what it sees and therefore is capable of perceiving totality (*Neue Gedichte* 119). References to the 'dog's way of seeing' appear in letter after letter in the same context with Cézanne as well as in the novel *Malte*.<sup>15</sup>

In order to summarize the epistemological connection between painter and writer two terms need to be discussed: Cézanne's 'réalisation' and Rilke's 'Einsicht.' According to Anette Gerok-Reiter's analysis Cézanne's 'réalisation' consists of two steps. First, the painter must dissolve the visible objects into "sensations colorantes" so that he can reorganize them. Therefore, the perception of nature still depends on the act of seeing while the object cannot be separated from the artist. Consequently, Cézanne's mountain is "Ansicht wie Innenbild," and the represented object is strongly connected with its way of coming into being (Gerok-Reiter 509).<sup>16</sup> Robert Mühler gives a concise definition of Rilke's 'Einsicht,' which indicates a similar method to Cézanne's 'réalisation': "Es bedeutet die Auflösung der festen Gestalt, andererseits den Übergang des Vorgestaltlichen in die Gestalt" (42). Rilke's awareness of Cézanne's concept about 'réalisation' marks the progress of his Cézanne experience in comparison to his Rodin period. Rilke's ability to formulate his own artistic concept indicates that the principle on which he had already worked under Rodin became visibly manifested in his theoretical letters during the Cézanne episode.<sup>17</sup> Batterby convincingly shows that Rilke has already practiced this theory empirically in his *Neue Gedichte* during his Rodin period, e.g. in his well-known poem "Der Panther" (103-4). I argue that Rilke's involvement with the Cézanne's art theory found its way into the pages of a fictional work. As I will show, Rilke puts into practice what he learned from Cézanne in several passages of his impressionistic, innovative novel, *Malte*.

Rilke notes in his letters that the visitor of the Salon d'Automne has to stand for a long time in front of Cézanne's paintings seeking understanding: "dann lange nichts, und plötzlich hat man die richtigen Augen..." (Briefe II, 371). Following Rilke's observation that one can see all of Cézanne's paintings in two or three well-chosen examples (Briefe II, 371), I selected a still life, a portrait and a landscape to include representative examples typical of Cézanne's oeuvre.<sup>18</sup> In order to illustrate Cézanne's use of multiple perspectives and changing eye levels, I will examine his

*Still Life with Fruit Basket* whose distortions are typical of the later still lifes. In this painting, objects of everyday life are depicted in an unreal arrangement. It implies the randomness and accidental grouping that Shapiro characterizes as a “balanced whole in which some elements themselves are unbalanced” (96). This effect is due to Cézanne’s emotional, non-realistic illusion of space, and his incorporation of several perspectives into one picture (Fig. 1):

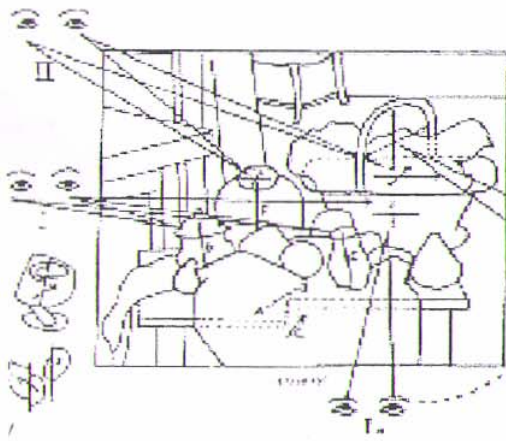


Fig. 1 - above: *Still Life with Fruit Basket* (1880-1890); below: Analysis of the painting (Loran 77)

The first eye level, marked I, takes in, roughly, the front plane of the basket, the sugar bowl, and the small pitcher (the last two objects are seen at slightly higher eye levels). The second eye level, much higher, marked II, looks down at the opening of the ginger jar and the top of the basket, as well as other objects, including the tabletop. (Loran 76)

It is thus evident that Cézanne’s painting seriously violates the rules of traditional perspective.<sup>19</sup> Using perspective according to the rules formulated by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentine painter Leon Battista Alberti, would limit Cézanne. Although the hypothesis about the existence of one single vantage point enables one to systematize the outside world and define a clear dividing line between observer and observed, it also restricts what can be represented. With the violation of the rules of the perspective, it becomes possible to overcome the limitations of the Renaissance system. Thus every point gains equal importance according to Cézanne’s way of ‘seeing around the object’ rather than depicting it from one single vantage point. This approach evokes distortions such as the shift from the left side to the right side of his motifs in order to incorporate front and side view into one object.<sup>20</sup> The relationship of the objects to each other in the composition seems to be of greater importance than the object itself. The fruits and plates on the table form a coherent group, as if there were no independent, closed, pre-existing object but only a multiplicity of sensations.

Just as the 19<sup>th</sup> century visitor of the Salon d’Automne needed to acquire a new way of seeing, while strolling down the Paris streets, Malte also tries to cope with the rapidly changing images of the city. “Ich lerne sehen – ja, ich fange an,” he writes repeatedly in his notebook while complaining about the slowness of the process (10-11). Malte’s seventy-one diary entries are not limited to the Parisian present, but additionally contain references to Malte’s childhood and youth, as well as figures of the Bible and European history. The earlier scenes and childhood memories told in flashbacks are integrated in the locale of most of the events, Paris. In the most developed city of the time, the sense of sight has to deal with a great

number of visual impressions. Rilke therefore invents a new way of narration in order to represent the rapid change of images in the fragmented city. Malte laments that traditional narration happened before his time, “[d]ass man erzählte, wirklich erzählte, dassmuss vor meiner Zeit gewesen sein” (118). Instead of an omniscient narrator and a single vantage point the reader must switch between ‘I’ and the third person pronoun ‘he’/‘one.’<sup>21</sup> Even in the first passages of the diary about electric streetcars running through Malte’s room and automobiles racing over his head, the blurring of the dividing line between subject and object is revealed.

Rilke gives a literal example for the failure of the traditional narration and the autonomous writer, when he describes Malte imagining his hand becoming independent from him and writing things that he had not intended:

Noch eine Weile kann ich das alles aufschreiben und sagen. Aber es wird ein Tag kommen, da meine Hand weit von mir sein wird, und wenn ich schreiben heißen werde, wird sie Worte schreiben, die ich nicht meine. [...] [d]iesmal werde ich geschrieben werden. Ich bin der Eindruck, der sich verwandeln wird. (*Malte* 47)

This quotation expresses the dissolution of the traditional dichotomy of writer and the written text: words become uncontrollable and the writer’s world loses its meaning. This passage along with other entries record Malte’s crisis connected with his growth as a poet and his changing conception of art. As Cézanne questions the traditional Renaissance perspective, Rilke’s *Malte* questions the traditional narrative. Malte’s entry above, just as most of the Cézanne letters, records the struggles and frustration of a difficult poetic maturation.

In accordance with the multiple perspectives of Cézanne’s still life, Rilke tries to represent various motions simultaneously, for instance when he describes an unusual man whom Malte is following. Malte is astonished by the hands of this man, which make two different movements: “eine heimliche, rasche, mit welcher er den Kragen unmerklich hochklappte, und jene ausführliche,

anhaltende, gleichsam buchstabierte Bewegung, die das Umlegen des Kragens bewerkstelligen sollte” (59). Furthermore, a double motion of breaking into objects from the outside and breaking out from the inside of objects can be traced in several passages: objects fall down and break out from their static position after the death of Malte’s grandfather, Christoph Detlev Brigge:

Ja, es war für diese geistesabwesenden, verschlafenen Dinge eine schreckliche Zeit. Es passierte, dass aus Büchern, die irgend eine hastige Hand ungeschickt geöffnet hatte, Rosenblätter heraustaumelten, die zertreten wurden [...] Und von Zeit zu Zeit fiel etwas, fiel verhüllt auf den Teppich, fiel hell auf das harte Parkett, aber es zerschlug da und dort, zersprang scharf oder brach fast lautlos auf, denn diese Dinge, verwöhnt wie sie waren, vertrugen keinerlei Fall. (*Malte* 15)

‘Spoiled’ objects fall and break in the novel, as if Cézanne’s two-dimensional still life were being depicted and set into motion in the pages of the novel. It is remarkable that this passage appears in the description of the old chamberlain Christoph Detlev Brigge’s death, as this is the only passage about which Rilke himself admits Cézanne’s influence: “Der Tod Brigges: das war Cézannes Leben, ein Leben seiner dreißig letzten Jahre” (Briefe III, 54).

Rilke’s growing sensitivity to color can be traced in many of the Cézanne letters as well as in Malte’s entries, especially in his Paris depictions. One of Cézanne’s portraits, *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* (Fig. 2), is discussed in detail in Rilke’s letters. This work, in which Madame Cézanne is reduced to a still life, impressed Rilke mainly because of Cézanne’s use of colors. Rilke attempts to recall the painting in his letter by organizing the color patches into meaningful spatial relations:



Fig. 2 - *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* (1877)

Vor eine erdiggrüne Wand, in der ein kobaltblaues Muster (ein Kreuz mit ausgesparter Mitte: +) rar wiederkehrt, ist ein roter, ganz gepolsterter niedriger Sessel geschoben; [...] Die linke Armlehne und die Quaste, die voller Zinnober von ihr herunterhängt, haben schon nicht mehr die Wand hinter sich, sondern einen breiten unteren Randstreifen aus grünem Blau, gegen den ihr Widerspruch laut anklingt. In diesen roten Fauteuil, der eine Persönlichkeit ist, ist eine Frau gesetzt, die Hände im Schoß eines breit senkrecht gestreiften Kleides, das ganz leicht mit kleinen verteilten Stücken grüner Gelbs und gelber Grüns angegeben ist, bis an den Rand der blaugrauen Jacke, die eine blau mit grünen Reflexen spielende Seidenschleife vorne zusammenhält. [...] *Es ist, als wüßte jede Stelle von allen.* (Briefe II, 404)

Rilke is impressed to see how the elements, the patches of colors of the painting are related to each other and create equilibrium. In

fact one can observe that the objects are not complete; for example it is difficult to determine where floor and wall meet. The work reflects motion, as Rilke notes, "das Bildinnere steigt und fällt in sich selbst zurück und hat nie eine stehende Stelle" (40). Cézanne does this, for instance, when painting the crosses in the wallpaper as if they were floating off the wall towards the observer. He breaks up what lies in one plane and unites at different depths what lies on the picture's surface.<sup>22</sup>

Cézanne's technique of using patches of color to compose a painting seems to be an effective way to depict the vibrant city life, the fullness of the Paris streets for Rilke as well:

Es ist nicht zu sagen, was dann ein lichtgrüner Wagen sein kann auf dem Pont-neuf oder irgendein Rot, das nicht zu halten ist, oder auch nur ein Plakat an der Feuermauer einer perlgrauen Häusergruppe. Alles ist vereinfacht, auf einige richtige, helle Plans gebracht wie das Gesicht in einem Manetschen Bildnis. Und nichts ist gering oder überflüssig. Die Bouquinisten am Quai tun ihre Kästen auf, und das frische oder vernutzte Gelb der Bücher, das violette Braun der Bände, das größere Grün einer Mappe: alles stimmt, gilt, nimmt teil und bildet *eine Vollzähligkeit, in der nichts fehlt.* (emphasis added, 20)

The description of the *bouquinistes* on the quai was first incorporated into a letter to Clara Rilke in October 1907.<sup>23</sup> Just as Cézanne organizes patches of colors into meaningful compositions, Rilke creates a similar description with impressionistic facets to achieve a positivistic representation. With this description Rilke is able to depict simultaneous events, objects next to each other and a multiplicity of impressions typical of the urban environment. Malte creates an urban tableau in which everything matches, and thus the harmonic relation of the elements is emphasized. The individual signs create a system that Rilke admired in Madame Cézanne's portrait. As in the portrait so in the Paris scene the individual elements become powerful in their relatedness to the other colorful objects. Rilke puts into practice in the medium of poetic expression what he observed



in the Cézanne exhibition hall. Rilke realizes in *Malte* exactly the same method he observed in Madame Cézanne's portrait. Later in the novel a color combination of yellow, red and blue appears in Malte's childhood memory of a desk. In the description colors flow into each other and create fluid dividing lines between the objects on the desk: „das Innere war merkwürdig hell, von altem, gelbem Lack, auf dem Blumen gemalt waren, immer eine rote und eine blaue. Und wo drei nebeneinanderstanden, gab es eine violette zwischen ihnen, die die beiden anderen trennte" (*Malte* 73).

A final new technique in Cézanne's painting is the representation of foreground and background. In the early paintings of the Mont Saint-Victoire, a considerable distance can be found, whereas in his later depictions Cézanne ignores the former distinction between the subject and the less important background, giving equal significance to every portion of the canvas. In a late painting of the Mont Sainte-Victoire (Fig. 3), the distant world is brought closer to the eye; simultaneously the things nearest to the viewer in the landscape are rendered with few details.

By reducing the difference between the textures of near and far objects, Cézanne creates the impression that all objects are seen from the same distance. Describing this process as an eruption of the mountain as a volcano, which disrupts the contours of the countryside, Kern notes the "dematerialization of the foreground" (163). This presentation of the foreground seems to go hand in hand with Wolfgang Schivelbusch's description of the panoramic view that the railroad traveler experiences from Europe's train windows:

Velocity blurs all foreground objects, which means that there no longer is a foreground. The foreground enabled the traveler to relate to the landscape through which he was moving. He saw himself as a part of the foreground, and that perception *joined* him to the landscape, included him in it, regardless of all further distant views that the landscape presented. Now velocity dissolved the foreground, and the traveler lost that aspect. (63)

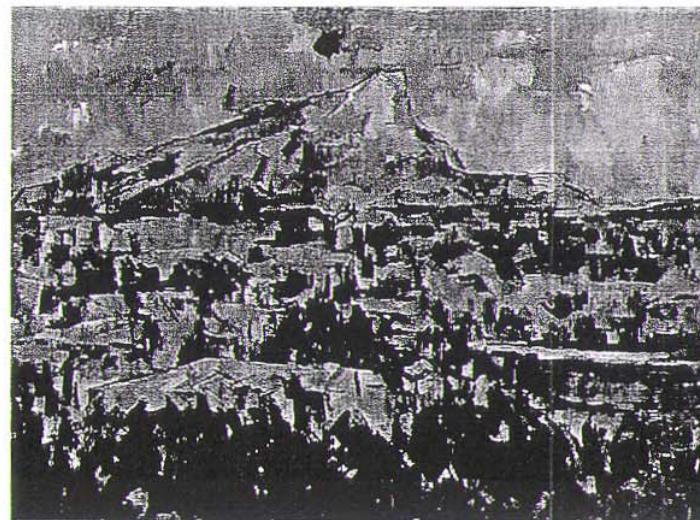


Fig. 3 - *Mount-Sainte Victoire* (1905)

The depiction of foreground and background in Cézanne's work strengthens Kern's conception of "positive-negative space" (153). "Positive-negative space" implies that the background itself is a positive element as opposed to the dichotomy of pure "positive space" (the subject of the painting) and "negative space" (the background). This concept can be applied to Cézanne's portraits in that "he gave as much attention to the shape of the space between the head and the picture frame as the shape of the head itself. In his still life paintings the space between the edge of the table and the edge of the frame are as important as the apples and the fruits on the table. There is no negative space in Cézanne's painting. All forms are of equal value; all constitute the subject of the work" (Kern 141).

This depiction of a blurring foreground and background can be found in Malte's entries as well. In the Paris descriptions, Malte writes:

Da sind Tage, wo alles um einen licht ist, leicht, kaum angegeben in der hellen Luft und doch

deutlich. Das Nächste schon hat Töne der Ferne, ist weggenommen und nur gezeigt, nicht hergereicht; und was Beziehung zur Weite hat: der Fluss, die Brücken, die langen Strassen und die Plätze, die sich verschwinden, das hat diese Weite eingenommen hinter sich, ist auf ihr gemalt wie auf Seide. (20)

Malte experiences the nearest objects as being distant, whereas the background, or spacious parts of the city, is "painted" on the foreground. Thus background and foreground mingle, creating a "positive-negative space" as Cézanne does on his canvas. By giving equal importance to each element in a street scene above, Rilke gives words to Cézanne's principle.

Rilke applies Cézanne's techniques primarily in the portrayal of the urban environment and facets of Malte's childhood. Another example for "positive-negative space" can be found in a later entry, in which Malte evokes his childhood memories in order to fight against the overwhelming control of the city. Malte recalls an evening, when he was drawing a knight on a horse and his red crayon, the one most in demand, suddenly disappeared under the table. As he bent down to look for the crayon, his body parts became independent from him; he could not longer differentiate what belonged to his own body and what was part of the stool:

meine Beine schienen mir zu lang, ich konnte sie nicht unter mir hervorziehen; die zu lange eingehaltene kniende Stellung hatte meine Glieder dumpf gemacht; ich wusste nicht, was zu mir und was zum Sessel gehörte. Endlich kam ich doch, etwas konfus, unten an und befand mich auf einem Fell, das sich unter dem Tisch bis gegen die Wand hinzog. (*Malte* 78)

Under the table Malte experiences a breakdown of absolute distinctions between what is primary and what is secondary in the experience of space, between himself and the less important background. This breakdown leads to a larger question about the

relationship between Rilke's *Malte* and Cézanne's paintings: how far can cross-fertilization take place between the two media of text and image? Why did the two artists apply the same techniques in their work and to what extent can one talk about Cézanne's *influence* on Rilke's novel?

To be sure, Rilke's encounter with Cézanne was a fruitful one for the writer who approached the same turning point in his artistic development as Cézanne himself. Both were looking for new modes of representation and, as I have shown, developed similar theoretical (Cézanne's 'réalisation' and Rilke's 'Einsehen') as well as practical approaches. Their parallel reaction could be interpreted as an answer to their alienation: Cézanne fully devoted to his work in Aix, and Rilke in Paris fled from the modern city into his writing. As Merleau-Ponty points out, Cézanne's contemporaries interpreted his innovations as an answer to a phenomenon of decadence and to a world that had nothing to offer educated people. He argues further that even if Cézanne's nervous weakness possibly helped him to look at nature differently, the meaning of his work cannot be interpreted merely from his biography (11). Merleau-Ponty's approach is applicable to Rilke's work as well, whose autobiographical *Malte* should not be read merely as Rilke's life in Paris.<sup>24</sup>

Rilke's contact with the representational arts through the sculptor Rodin and the painter Cézanne helped the poet develop as an artist and adopt techniques that he could apply in his own field. As it can be traced in his letters, Rilke never supported a synthesis between representational arts and poetry. In a letter from 1921 he rejected to write a critique on a representational artist saying that "nichts [scheint] unzuverlässiger, als die literarische Auslegung malerischer oder plastischer Produktion" (Briefe IV, 374). Furthermore, Rilke describes Cézanne's inability to express himself in a literary language: "Fast nichts konnte er [Cézanne] sagen. Die Sätze, in denen er es [malerische Angelegenheiten auszusprechen] versuchte, werden lang, verwickeln sich, sträuben sich, bekommen Knoten, und er lässt sie schließlich liegen" (Briefe II, 402). These examples show Rilke's conviction that the two media are irreconcilable. Sculpture and painting served for him as a source of inspiration, and Rilke's aim was simply to learn from a creative process he considered different from his own. Rilke's encounter with

the representational arts meant for him a long and painful learning process, which is manifested in the strongly autobiographical *Malte*, written between 1904 and 1910.

Despite of the irreconcilability of the two media and the border Rilke himself drew between literature and the representational arts, I view some passages in *Malte* with the aid of Kern's term "conceptual distance" as literary analogues to Cézanne's painting. In the eighteenth century, Lessing defined the difference between poetry and painting by assigning temporal qualities to poetry and spatial qualities to painting. According to Lessing's theory the factor of time dictates different roles for the arts. Painting is a static representation, as one perceives it with one glance ('Nebeneinander'), whereas poetry stems out of the process of reading time ('Nacheinander').<sup>25</sup> This dichotomy held strong sway in the Western tradition until the penultimate turn of the century, when sweeping cultural and technological changes altered the way in which we perceive time and space.

During the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional notion of homogeneous, atomistic, and reversible time transformed into a plurality of times, which was heterogeneous, flux and irreversible. Along with this came a shift of traditional spatial hierarchies into a plurality of spaces (Kern 8). The representation of fluctuating time presents a challenge for painting, as time has always been a limitation of the genre. The Impressionist movement, with its sequence of paintings, like Cézanne with his pulsating works composed of multiple perspectives and his special use of outlines, challenged Lessing's rules about the inability of painting to represent time. Similarly, Rilke, who constantly reinforces the importance of seeing and whose protagonist's name, Malte, implies 'painting' or 'drawing' (from the German verb 'malen'), applies painterly techniques when breaking with traditional narrative forms. Instead of a linear plot ('Nacheinander') there are seventy-one diary entries about Malte's recently read books by French writers, his observations in Paris, childhood memories, European and family history, and biblical parables. All diary entries, many of which are freely exchangeable, are equally important and valid for Malte ('Nebeneinander'), as they all serve as material through which he can work out his own pressing problems in his poetic development. Certainly it is true that there

is a point beyond which neither writer nor painter can surpass to create a synthesis between text and image. Yet passages in Rilke's *Malte*, written during his encounter with Cézanne's art, are splendid examples of how far one can push the limits within the boundaries of one medium.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The distortion of the traditional perspectives started with Cézanne followed by Cubist painters (Picasso, Braque) who created even more radical treatments of space (Kern 142-3).

<sup>2</sup> For previous research on Rilke's Rodin experience see Barron, Beyer, Freedman and Ryan.

<sup>3</sup> Previous research on Rilke's Cézanne experience concentrated on Rilke's poetic development in France (Batterby), Cézanne's influence on the figure of the blind news vendor in Rilke's *Malte* (Carvill), on Cézanne's influence on European literature including Rilke's and Peter Handke's epistemology (Weber) and Cézanne's influence on Rilke's elegies (Gerok-Reiter).

<sup>4</sup> For a concise summary and a collection of recent essays on the influence of the representational arts in Rilke's work, see Frank Baron.

<sup>5</sup> Rilke dedicated his *Neue Gedichte* to Rodin: "A mon grand ami Auguste Rodin."

<sup>6</sup> The citation is from C. F. Bowra quoted in Batterby 56-57. For a detailed analysis on Rilke's poetic development during his encounter with Rodin see the chapter "Paris and Rodin" in Batterby's book.

<sup>7</sup> J.F. Angelloz formulated plausibly in one sentence the similarity and difference in the relationship between Rilke's Rodin and Cézanne episodes: "Rodin lui a ouvert la voie, Cézanne lui a montré le but" (Angelloz 206).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rilke's letter to Clara Rilke October 9, 1907 (Briefe II, 364ff)

<sup>9</sup> According to Weber, Rilke's perception of Cézanne was already conditioned by his readings about the artist. Rilke had read reports about Cézanne that he had received from his friend, Modersohn-Becker, in Worpswede, before he visited the exhibition. The two of them never

met, Cézanne died in 1906. In addition Emile Bernard, a young painter, published two articles in the 'Mercure de France' on Cézanne's paintings, which Rilke was familiar with. For further information see Robert Mühler's article.

<sup>10</sup> Rilke describes the creative process of Cézanne in a similar way to that of Rodin. For instance he writes in a letter to Clara Rilke: "...die späteren dreißig Jahre seines Lebens nur noch gearbeitet hat. [...] alt, krank, von der gleichmäßigen Arbeit jeden Abend bis zur Ohnmacht verbraucht [...] böse, misstrauisch, jedes Mal auf dem Weg zu seinem Atelier verlacht, verspottet, misshandelt" (Briefe II, 364-5). Later Rilke notes about himself: "Daran, wieviel Cézanne mir jetzt zu tun gibt, merk ich, wie sehr ich anders geworden bin. Ich bin auf dem Wege, ein Arbeiter zu werden; auf einem weiten Wege vielleicht und wahrscheinlich erst bei dem ersten Meilenstein" (Briefe II, 377-8).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Batterby 80-81, Angeloz 205.

<sup>12</sup> The Mont Saint-Victoire near Aix attracted Cézanne all his life. He identified with it like the ancients with a holy mountain on which they set the dwelling or birthplace of a god (Shapiro 84).

<sup>13</sup> According to Rilke Cézanne knew Baudelaire's poem by heart: "Du kannst Dir denken, wie es mich berührt, zu lesen, dass Cézanne eben dieses Gedicht – Baudelaire's Charogne – noch in seinem letzten Jahren ganz auswendig wusste und es Wort für Wort hersagte" (Briefe II, 394).

<sup>14</sup> Pollock discusses Rilke's ambiguous attitude toward Paris and shows that Malte's Paris remained the Paris of Rilke's first days there despite the fact that Rilke was longing for Paris after he had left it (Pollock 118-9).

<sup>15</sup> Rilke often uses this metaphor in his letters: „Und sitzt er im Garten wie ein alter Hund, der Hund dieser Arbeit, die ihn wieder ruft und ihn schlägt und hungern lässt“ (Briefe II, 369); "Ach, wenn das genüge: ich wünschte mir manchmal mir so ein volles Schaufenster zu kaufen und mit einem Hund dahinterzusetzen für zwanzig Jahre" (Briefe II, 362); "[...]da er alt war und schäbig und täglich auf dem Weg zu seinem Atelier Kinder hinter sich hatte, die ihm nachwarfen wie einem schlechten Hund. Aber innen, ganz innen, war er wunderschön, und ab und zu schrie er einem der seltenen Besucher wütend etwas ganz Herrliches zu" (Briefe II, 365). The glance of the dog plays an important role in Peter Handke's chapter on "Der Sprung des Wolfs" in his novel *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*.

<sup>16</sup> For further analysis on Cézanne's réalisation: Vladimir Vukicevic. *Cézannes Réalisation*. Rilke's interpretation: "La réalisation nannte er es [...] Das Überzeugende, die Dingwerdung, die durch sein eigenes Erlebnis an dem Gegenstand bis ins Unzerstörbare hineingesteigerte Wirklichkeit, das war es, was ihm die Ansicht seiner innersten Arbeit schien" (Briefe II, 364).

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent analysis about the relatedness of Rilke's Rodin and Cézanne periods, consult Batterby pp. 43-46 and pp. 76-81.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. "Eigentlich kann man ja an zwei oder drei gut gewählten Cézannes alle seine Bilder sehen..." (Briefe II, 371)

<sup>19</sup> Perspective is also called scientific, mathematical, one-point, or Renaissance perspective, which was developed in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy. It uses mathematical formulas to construct illusionistic images in which all elements are shaped by the imaginary lines called orthogonals that converge in one or more vanishing points on a horizontal line. Linear perspective is the system that most people in Euro-American cultures think of perspective. Because it is the visual code they are accustomed to reading, they accept as 'truth' the distortions it imposes, including foreshortening, in which, for instance, the soles of the feet in the foreground are the largest element of a figure lying on the ground.

<sup>20</sup> In his article Loran does not believe that Cézanne arrived to these effects through a conscious intellectual or theoretical approach. His distortions are developed spontaneously, in the process of painting, for Cézanne worked through feeling and intuition (Loran 77).

<sup>21</sup> A more radical use of perspectives and pronouns can be found in Rilke's later elegies. For a thoughtful analysis of the perspective changes see Gerok-Reiter's article.

<sup>22</sup> Other portraits from Cézanne that reflect the same technique are: *Chocquet Seated* (1877), *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy* (1895), *Boy in a Red Vest* (1890-95).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. "Alles ist vereinfacht, auf einige helle Plans gebracht, wie das Gesicht eines Manetschen Bildnis. Und nichts ist gering und überflüssig. Die Bouquinisten am Kai tun ihre Kästen auf, und das frische oder welke Gelb der Bücher, das violette Braun der Bände, das Grün der Mappe: alles stimmt, gilt, nimmt teil und tönt in der Einheit der Zusammenhänge" (Briefe II, 374).

<sup>24</sup> Robert Musil wrote the following about *Malte*: "When I read Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky and Raskolnikov both have an impact upon me, whereas when I read *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* I only feel Rilke's influence" (quoted in Lichtmann 120).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. "Gegenstände, die nebeneinander oder deren Teile nebeneinander existieren, heißen Körper. Folglich sind Körper mit ihren sichtbaren Eigenschaften die eigentlichen Gegenstände der Malerei. Gegenstände, die aufeinander, oder deren Teile aufeinander folgen, heißen überhaupt Handlungen. Folglich sind Handlungen der eigentliche Gegenstand der Poesie." (Lessing 114) Lessing rejected Horace's definition of 'ut pictura poesis' ("Malerie ist stumme Poesie, und die Poesie ist eine redende Malerei" 4) as well as Winckelmann's Graecoman aesthetics about the

primary position of painting and sculptures in the arts. Lessing's aim was to set free poetry from the influence of fine arts.

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