

## Seeing Cezanne Through Joyce's Eyes: The Large Bathers



**By James T. Shammass, M. D.**

Many admirers of the post-impressionist painter, Paul Cezanne, will agree that the culmination of his life-long work was his “Large Bathers,” which resides at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is one of three large paintings depicting this motif that he explored repeatedly until the end of his life. Though considered unfinished by conventional standards, its examination can yield insights into Cezanne’s working methods, which seem to correlate strikingly with the aesthetic ideas of James Joyce, the writer. This is noteworthy, since, aside from Joyce’s mention of Cezanne in a letter to Harriet Weaver in 1936, it is not known how acquainted Joyce was with the works of Cezanne (Ellmann 690). This being the case, a comparison of their works in different mediums is particularly instructive.

Joyce, through the character of Stephen Daedalus, defined proper or “static” art (as opposed to improper or “pornographic” art) as that which produces the sublime sense of “aesthetic arrest,” a spiritual epiphany that is experienced by the observer in front of the work of art (Joyce 222). This art is based on the three principles of wholeness, harmony, and radiance, which Joyce extrapolated from his readings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (229). When fully integrated, they are experienced as epiphanies in Joyce’s characters, and more importantly, in us as readers.

Nowhere are these qualities experienced more fully than in front of Cezanne’s “Large Bathers.” Its harmony is expressed beautifully in its composition, part to part as well as part to whole, its fourteen foreground figures forming two groups of bathers in various positions and engaging in various levels of activity, all crowned by a great triangle, the large pyramid of trees acting like a great vault over these monumental figures. The composition of colors is equally harmonious, with rhyming strokes of ochers, greens and blues, highlighted by the unfinished bits of white canvas shining through. One senses a symbolic harmony as well: that between Man and Nature, male and female (Cezanne’s figures are almost all androgynous), and the real versus the imaginary.

When the harmonic patterns of this painting are integrated in one’s mind, a sense of its wholeness can be appreciated. It is seen as autonomous. As art, it is taken out of space and time, a thing unto itself. For example, no one knows what these androgynous bathers

are doing; they may be bathing, but they appear just as likely to be talking, or even fornicating. The time of day is equally uncertain. What is important, with respect to Joyce's aesthetics, is that it stands alone, regardless of what its color patches and brushworks are "supposed to represent." The same applies to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce's words, even as puns and neologisms, must refer to something, yet that something ultimately becomes irrelevant when the book is experienced as a work of art—a harmonic whole.

The presence of the first two qualities, contribute to the third quality of the work: its radiance. It is this that inspires awe. The great mythologist and James Joyce enthusiast, Joseph Campbell, stated that if this radiance does not overwhelm you, it is experienced as beauty. But if the radiance so diminishes your ego that you are almost in a state of transcendental rapture, this is experienced as the sublime (Campbell, 22). This is quite close to what is felt in front of this painting and what so pervades Joyce's canon, essentially all of which are circular, rhythmic and harmonious, all radiating that indescribable "whatness" of the thing, referring back on itself, yet paradoxically and simultaneously, to a mystery that seems beyond our grasp. Perhaps this is the "subject" all great works, be it Virginia Woolf's lighthouse, the "whiteness" of Moby Dick, or Mona Lisa's smile.

This progression to an almost transpersonal consciousness in art merits consideration of another preoccupation of Joyce: that of the three modes of artistic expression defined as the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic (Joyce 232). It appears that the early works of many great artists are dominated by the lyric mode of expression and then, as the artist or writer artistically matures, progresses to a more fully developed and more universal dramatic form. This process is seen in both Cezanne and Joyce, using their respective mediums.

The lyric, in which the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself, is clearly obvious in *Stephen's Hero* and, less so, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The arrogance and egocentricity of Stephen Daedalus is clearly evident, although felt less intensely in the generally accepted superior and less discursive *Portrait*. It seems that Joyce, as author, becomes less of a presence as one proceeds through his oeuvre, until we reach the more dramatic *Finnegans Wake* where "the Artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his fingernails" (233).

This progression of style is also evident through Cezanne's oeuvre. His early work is characterized by a more representative art, often depicting fantasies of sex and violence. Cezanne's personality is clearly palpable in these works. Through his more impressionistic middle period, his unconscious emotions are sublimated through his characteristic "constructive" brushstroke, and the themes themselves become less personal, often depicting still lifes or human subjects stripped of their personal attributes. His art becomes a wholly pictorial one as he attempts to create an art that is "a harmony parallel to nature," a statement he made in a letter to Joachim Gasquet, and which applies fittingly to *Finnegans Wake*, which seems to encompass all that can be expressed about the world, yet repeatedly seems to refer back to itself. When one reaches the end of Cezanne's oeuvre, culminating with the "Large Bathers," figures become less "realistic" as their androgynous bodies smash and blend into each other and all conventional modes of perspective and modeling are abandoned. Yet amazingly, the work remains tied to

Cezanne's reality, as he experienced it in the landscape of his native Provence, much as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* remain intrinsically tied to Joyce's Dublin. Finally, a close examination of this painting will reveal a startling discovery: the presence of a small, enigmatic figure in the center background, standing on the far side of the central body of water. Some have argued that this may be the artist himself, staring back at his viewers and at his work. Like Joyce, he seems to literally stand "behind....his handiwork....pairing his fingernails" (233).

It appears, then, that both artists have reached the zenith of their respective careers, producing mature works that powerfully evoke the phenomenon of aesthetic arrest and epiphany, through highly dramatic modes of expression, as their personalities vanish, leaving the gift of their work behind.

The examples above suggest the notion that a great work of art is as much about the viewer or reader as it is of the creator. The work's universal appeal is its ability to tell every man's story as it simultaneously seems to involve him as an active participant and, in essence, a co-creator of the drama that unfolds. This seems to be why great works draw people back to them, and why reading and re-reading Joyce has the effect of providing multiple levels of meaning. Perhaps more accurately, as Ryf states, "there are no levels of meaning as such. There are, rather, levels of awareness on the part of reader" (Ryf 13). The ability of art to change one in this way is nothing short of profound, and why the appreciation of other works of art are enhanced through an understanding of Joyce's vision.

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