Like Apples and Oranges:
A Quinean Reading of Cézanne's
Pommes et oranges (Or, A Proposal
for the Founding of Departments of
Incomparable Literature)

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Abstract

Is comparative literature an exercise in futility, akin, as the old saying goes, to comparing apples and oranges? This is what Cézanne appears to be doing in his 1899 still-life Apples and Oranges. In holding them still, as Cézanne's painting does, something else seems to come to life: the principle of kinship, allowing us to group one thing with another of the same kind. Classifying, Cézanne's work suggests, has the virtue of ontological parsimony, as in Ockham's Razor, which states that entities are not to be multiplied without necessity. Parsimony is central to Willard Quine's theory of ontological commitment: "When I inquire into the ontological commitments of a given doctrine or body of theory," Quine asserts, I am merely asking what, according to that theory, there is" (1966: 126). And within Quine's "regimented theory" what there is, finally, is physical objects and sets. In this paper I posit there is no such thing as literature, only individual things to which we attribute the literary predicate. But if they are not things, what are they? They are, I submit, collections of things; sets or classes. To call particular entities sonnets or tragedies is already to have compared them with other entities, and classified them with those deemed similar. There are good reasons, I argue, why those of us studying literature ought to be wary of our ontological commitments: for they tend to multiply our obligations towards universals at the expense of the object itself.

Key Words: Ontological Parsimony, Comparative Literature, Cézanne, Still-life, Quine.

Prelude: Apples and Oranges

Is comparative literature an exercise in futility; akin, as the old saying goes, to comparing apples and oranges?[2] This is exactly what Cézanne appears to be doing in his 1899 still life *Apples and Oranges (Pommes et oranges)* (image 1). For in holding them still, as Cézanne's painting does, something else seems to come to life: the principle of kinship, and which allows us to group one thing with another of the same kind.

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[2] One might compare this idiom on incomparability with locutions in other languages; e.g., from related expressions such as the French "comparer des pommes et des poires [to compare apples and pears]," and the Spanish "comparer peras con manzanas [to compare pears and apples]," to more distant formulations like the Romanian "baba și mitraliera [the grandmother and the machine gun]." A number of farcical studies have made a show of proving that one can, in fact, compare apples and oranges; a thesis the merits of which depend on treating the idiom as a descriptive rather than prescriptive statement.

Figure 1: Paul Cézanne. *Apples and oranges* [*Pommes et oranges*]. Circa 1899. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musee d'Orsay.

In the meticulously choreographed clutter of the still-life (or *nature morte*), the raw material of *life* made to stand *still* and show itself as what it truly is, we can recognize what Heidegger called the *setting up of a world* that is the particular vocation of the work of art (169-73). For "[t]he world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at hand" (170; italics mine). But the still-life would seem to be a *setting forth (Herstellung),* a gathering up, and a *framing (Gestell)* of things, at once countable and uncountable, familiar and defamiliarized, as just such a mere collection—but whereby the *mere* is the very mark of truth, of the unconcealment of being that is *alētheia.*

One dish for apples, another for oranges; divided thus, they are, effectively, compared and classified. The table and the tablecloth upon which plate and bowl repose (if precariously) constitute, like them (and like the very canvas of the painting itself), the *(back)ground* for such comparisons and classifications. (Although in this painting, we will see, it is not entirely clear what is ground and what is figure.³)

Ontological Parsimony

Let us posit, for the purposes of this paper, that there is no such *thing* as *literature,* only individual *things* to which we may attribute the *literary* predicate. Let us posit that there is no such thing as tragedy, only individual tragedies; no such thing as the sonnet, only individual sonnets.

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3 I refer here to the perception of objects, or figures, against a background perceived as neutral, as described in Gestalt psychology.

Note that saying this is not the same as saying tragedies, or sonnets do not exist - just that they are not *things*. But if they are not things, what are they? They are, we submit, collections of things; sets, in short, or classes. To call particular entities *sonnets* or *tragedies* is already to have compared them, after all, with other entities, and classified them with those deemed *similar*.

A preliminary word is perhaps necessary here on my use of the term *comparative literature* in this essay. The term itself is a contraction for something that ought to be called *comparative literary studies;* the contraction positing object of study as something comparable; as if comparability were a quality inhering in literature itself.[4] René Wellek, in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," notes that scholars of comparative literature perform many other gestures besides comparing, and suggests changing the name of the discipline to "general literature," or, simply, "literature" (290-91). Wellek may be right; not, however, because comparison is incidental to the study of literature, but because it is redundant; in other words, essential. To study literature is to classify it, categorize it, and thus, compare it.

My subject here, I hasten to clarify, is thus not the formal discipline of comparative literature (a relatively modern institution[5]) but the study of literature conceived as an intrinsically comparative gesture (a tradition that goes back to Aristotle's division of literature into genres). Thus Samuel Johnson conceives it, for example, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*:

> What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep, or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains, and many rivers; so in the productions of genius; nothing can be stiled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. (468)

Now it is true that, already in Johnson's conception of the study of literature is the implicit understanding that the *kinds* of works with which other works are to be compared are distinguished by their national identity.[6] The extent to which the literatures comparative literature compares are *national* entities is a question that lies largely outside the scope of this paper - although it could be profitably reformulated, one imagines, along Quinean lines, as a debate over classes and subclasses, sets and subsets.

The question of classification, one can see, remains paramount. To distinguish thus between discrete literary entities and the larger categories to which we ascribe them membership chimes with our everyday experience: whatever the literary is, we appear to encounter it by way of particular objects: we read novels, one at a time, never *the novel* per se. Classifying thus the virtue of what philosophers call *ontological parsimony,* the most familiar formulation of which is *Ockham's Razor,* and which states that within the context of any explanatory model, *entities are not to be multiplied without necessity.*[7] The principle of parsimony is central to Willard Quine's theory

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[4] Jan Ziolkowski offers a similar critique of the disciplinary moniker in "Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not" (21). Long before, in *Experiments in Education*, Lane Cooper called it a "bogus term" making "neither sense nor syntax" (75). In *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparative Literature*, Natalie Melas argues that the "adjectival appendage [in *comparative* literature] has been a source of some consternation over the last eighty years or so" (1).

[5] First institutionalized, arguably, by Irish scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett with the publication of his *Comparative Literature* in 1886, but already implicit in Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur,* and the discipline of historical philology. According to Wellek and Warren's Theory of Literature (38) the phrase *comparative literature* first appears in in English in an unpublished letter in 1848 by Matthew Arnold (10).

[6] The discipline of comparative literature has been riveted from the beginning by what Damrosch, in "Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies," calls the "problematic interplay between nationalism and cosmopolitanism" (100); an interplay already evident in the work of the historical philologists from which comparative literature descends.

[7] The most popular rendering of Ockham's Razor, or the *lex parsimoniae;* apparently John Ponce's formulation in his 17th-century commentary on Duns Scotus: "Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem" (on which see Crombie 30). The principle, which already appears in Grosseteste and Duns Scotus, is never stated explicitly in Ockham's work, although in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard one encounters the following dictum: "Numquam ponenda est pluralitas since necessitate," i.e., "Plurality should not be posited without necessity" (on which see Kneale and Kneale 243).

of *ontological commitment,* and which, for Quine, is largely a function of the way we formulate such commitments in *language*: "When I inquire into the *ontological commitment*s of a given doctrine or body of theory, I am merely asking what, according to that theory, there is" (1966: 126). And within Quine's "regimented theory," what there is, finally, is limited to two entities; namely, physical objects, and sets, or classes of objects. The latter are the only abstract objects Quine concedes; something which makes him, as Alex Orenstein puts it in W. V. *Quine,* a "reluctant Platonist" (55). Quine would dispense with all abstractions if he could; but sets are simply too efficient and too economical at explaining things (including mathematics) to reject.[8]

There are good reasons, I think, why those of us in the business of comparative literature, or simply literature, ought to be wary of our ontological commitments: they tend to multiply our obligations towards *universals* (categories, classes, abstractions), at the expense of the object itself, however we define it. Most of us do define it, however, as, at least in part, a phenomenological entity: something we feel we encounter or experience. Our subject, here, is not ontology, but epistemology; like Quine, we are less interested in what there is than in "what a given remark or doctrine . . . *says* there is" (1980: 15-16). And among the various doctrines that have competed for acceptance, Quine argues that "one – the phenomenalistic – claims epistemological priority" (19).[9] Because Quine makes no distinction between physical and mental entities (such as minds), his epistemology is largely naturalistic: "states of belief," for Quine, are "states of nerves" (Hahn 429), pure and simple.[10]

Note that Quine's predilection for ontological parsimony is not based on a pure nominalism.[11] Thus Quine asserts in "On What There Is" that "we can use singular terms significantly in sentences without presupposing that the entities which those terms purport to name" exist (12).[12] Ontological commitments are made, rather, by our use of bound variables. To say that something is means, practically speaking, that it falls within "the range of reference of a pronoun" (13).[13] From this perspective, ontology is largely a matter of quantification. As Orenstein puts it: "To say that a cow exists is the same as to say that something is a cow. Existence claims are really particular/existential quantifications" (11). Thus Quine asserts in "On What There Is":

> We may say, for example, that some dogs are white and not thereby commit ourselves to recognizing either doghood or whiteness as entities. 'Some dogs are white' says that some things that are dogs are white; and, in order that this statement be true, the things over which the bound variable 'something' ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness. (1980: 13)[14]

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[8] "Physical objects," similarly, Quine asserts in "On What There Is," "are postulated entities which round out and simplify our account of the flux of experience" (532).

[9] Quine's ontology ,in effect, coincides with Berkeley's idealism, as summarized in the famous passage from *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*: "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi* [their *being* is their *being perceived*], nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds of thinking things which perceive them" (104).

[10] One of Quine's most popular books is entitled *From Stimulus to Science;* for Quine, the second is founded on the first, repeated and regimented.

[11] Although Quine did advocate such a nominalism early in his career. Okham's radical nominalism admits of only singular entities: individual concepts in the mind referring to individual objects in the world. Ockham wants to avoid, as Claude Panaccio puts it in "Semantics and Mental Language," "ontological commitment to real universals in the world" (53).

[12] Quine here follows Russell's theory of description, which solves the nominalist problem by showing that names can always be replaced by equivalent descriptions; instead of Pegasus, for example, we may posit "the thing that pegasizes" (1980: 8). By analogy, instead of novels, we may posit "things that novelize."

[13] Bound variable pronouns are pronouns limited by an antecedent quantifying phrase (some, every, who, etc.).

[14] In the language of the logicians, "Some dogs are white" is a "particular affirmative sentence," while "All dogs are mammals" is a "universal affirmative sentence" (Orenstein 14). "Some" is referred to as the "particular or existential quantifier," while "all" is the "universal quantifier" (11).

In similar fashion, to say that "some sonnets are beautiful" commits us neither to sonnethood nor beauty. In order for *this* statement to be true, the things over which "something" ranges must include beautiful sonnets, but need not include sonnethood or beauty.[15] This is in keeping with Quine's parsimonious and strictly empirical ontology: Quine believes he can explain (i.e., give an account of) the world by ways of classes or sets of entities (sonnets, for example, or beautiful objects) without resorting to independent properties or predicates (sonnethood, or beauty). To put this in terms of predication: the only predicate Quine is willing to accept is that of membership, or in set notation, $x \in A$ (*x is a member of A, or x belongs to A*), where classes constitute the value of the variables. That is a predicate we as literary critics ought to be reluctant to relinquish; else we revert to a narrow atomism (like that of the New Critics), in thrall to an ontology made up soley of individual and autonomous texts.

But to say that some sonnets are beautiful is also to allow that some are not: there is an implicit comparison here between sonnets, and comparisons are potentially fraught with ontological commitments. This is why the predicate of membership in this or that *category* or class (in other words, the determination of *genre* - from the Latin *genus*, meaning category or *kind*) remains crucial for the literary critic and the analytic philosopher alike. There are, of course, an infinite number of ways to compare one thing with another; but all of them rest upon the relation of *similarity* (a relation upon which the predication of *difference* is itself contingent). To compare *a* with *b* is to presume that, in one respect or another, *a* is like *b*; and the respect in which *a* is like *b* is something else (*c*), which commands our acknowledgment. In any such comparison, one would add, the very principle of similarity constitutes a fourth entity (*d*), to which we potentially commit ourselves. Quine asks: "When we use the word 'similar,' without defining it in any anterior terms, do we thereby commit ourselves to the acceptance of an abstract entity which is the relation of similarity?" (1966: 127) We do not, says Quine: similarity is merely a function of what sets or classes we determine an object to be a member of; and that determination follows from the particular interpretive strategy we employ at any given moment (for different interpretive strategies rely on different groups of bound variables).

Still-Life as Metaphysical Exercise

To the extent that the still-life is a comparative exercise it necessarily commits us to a certain modicum of universals. A Platonic exercise, apparently: *this, Apples and Oranges* seems to be saying, is what an apple is; and *this* is what an orange is. Cézanne is regularly portrayed in the critical tradition as a metaphysical artist, in pursuit of the essential form of the object.[16] Viewed through Quine's ontological framework, of course, Cézanne's still-lifes seems to make rather more modest claims: not *this is what an apple is, but some apples are like this, and therefore there are things, some of which are apples, and some of which are like this.*

But in the critical tradition Plato's ontology reigns supreme. One phrase in particular, believed to have been uttered by Cézanne late in his career, is almost reflexively invoked: something to the effect that in nature all forms all tend towards the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder.[17] This seems to be borne out by Cézanne's still-lifes: in his *Still Life with Compotier* (image 2),

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[15] Following the same logic, Quine sees no contradiction in finding statements *meaningful* while remaining dubious as to *meaning* in the abstract ("On What There Is" 11); see also "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." Quine's famous theory of the *indeterminacy of translation* is an argument against the existence of meanings as objects independent of language (*Word and Object* 206).

[16] Thus Jean Royère, in "On Paul Cézanne": "Paul Cézanne's painting, like Mallarme's poetry, is in a sense metaphysical" (48).

[17] Roger Fry (52), Maurice Denis (55), and R. P. Rivière and J. F. Schnerb (60) are among those who invoke this axiom, or variations thereof.

"[o]ne notes how few the forms are. How the sphere is repeated again and again in varied qualities" (Fry 48). Another critic observes of *The Basket of Apples* (image 3) that "[e]ach one of Cézanne's apples is very definitively . . . an apple, but its appeal is to our minds rather than to our appetites. It is a description of an apple in the simplest, most essential terms" (Rousseau, Jr., plate 18). (We will see, however, that the s*implest* terms are not necessarily the most *essential*.) And still another writes: "An apple or orange was perhaps the best possible subject he could have . . . such objects presented . . . the possibility of finding those clean and regular forms, like orders of architecture, which are needed for the creation of a monumental art (Sylvester, as cited by Rubin 395).

I would only make one emendation: Cézanne's best possible subject was neither an apple nor an orange but an apple *and* an orange: the search for ideal forms depends, I have suggested, upon comparative procedures - procedures which depend, themselves, upon the gesture of classification (over here, oranges, over there, apples). But do Cézanne's still-lifes represent the triumph or the futility of such procedures?

Figure 3: Paul Cézanne. *The Basket of Apples*. 1899-94. Oil on canvas. Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago.

On the Difference between Difference and Distinction

It may be the case that the literary object (or, by extension, any object) is incomparable.

None of its qualities appear to be *positive* term: terms which, in and of themselves, might be said to simply *be*. This is clearly one of the salient lessons of the structuralist revolution. In language, when it comes to meaning, or what Saussure calls *value* (*la valeur*), "there are only differences, and no positive terms" ("il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs") (118/166). In signifieds or signifiers one is confronted with purely *negative* entities: with only "conceptual and phonetic differences" ("des différences conceptuelles" and "phoniques" (118/166). And thus Saussure performs his greatest magic act, the disappearance of the object, which is effectively constituted in the very act of defining it.

The sign however, constituted by the formal union of a signified and a signifier, is another matter for Saussure: "[t]he moment we consider the sign as a whole, we encounter something which is positive in its own domain" ("dès que l'on considère le signe dans sa totalité, on se trouve en présence d'une chose positive dans son ordre") (118/166). A momentous occasion, it would seem, for Saussure: the sign as the birth of the thing itself, "a fact of a positive nature" ("un fait positif"); something *in the presence of which* one might find oneself; something to which one would consent to commit.

Now what kind of relation may be said to inhere between these things or facts? None whatsoever:

> The moment we compare one sign with another as positive combinations, the term *difference* should be dropped. It is no longer appropriate. It is a term which is suitable only for comparisons between sound patterns . . . Two signs, each comprising a signification and a signal, *are not different from each other, but only distinct.* They are simply in opposition to each other. (119)

> Dès qu'on compare entre eux les signes—termes positifs—on ne peut plus parler de différence; l'expression serait impropre, puisqu'elle ne s'applique bien qu'à la comparaison de deux images acoustiques . . . deux signes comportant chacun un signifié et un signifiant *ne sont pas différents, ils sont seulement distincts.* Entre eux il n'y a qu'opposition. (167).

Thus the alternative to "a differential comparative approach"[18] may not be the "quest for affinities and similarities" (to cite the International Comparative Literature Association call for papers for its 2013 congress)—for to speak of similarities is to predicate differences—but the recognition that literature may be the realm of the incomparable.

Note that Saussure's explanation of *value* constitutes an attack on the concept of *essence*: for Saussure, asking *what a sign means* is the same as asking *what it is.* The unit is constituted entirely by the attributes that distinguish it from other units:

> Applied to units, the principle of differentiation may be formulated as follows. *The characteristics of the unit merge with the unit itself.* In a language, as in every other semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it, nothing more. Difference is what makes characteristics, just as it makes values and units . . . In other words, *the language itself is a form, not a substance.* (119)

> Appliqué a l'unité, le principe de différenciation peut se formuler ainsi: *les caractères de l'unité se confondent avec l'unité elle-même.* Dans la langue, comme dans tout système sémiologique, ce qui distingue un signe, voilà tout ce qui le constitue. C'est la différence qui fait le caractère, comme elle fait la valeur et l'unité . . . . Autrement dit, *la langue est une forme et non une substance*" (167-68).

Thus Saussure's differential approach to the unit represents a rejection of the traditional ontology of the object in the West: one which treats the object as an invisible *hupokeimeno*n or *substance* bearing a set of visible *sumbebēkota or accidents.* Such accidents, for Aristotle in the Categories, include anything we might predicate of an individual subject (2a11-13); they function as categories distinguishing one individual from another.[19] Now once the individual is viewed as entirely differential, its distinguishing characteristics can no longer be regarded as accidents inhering in some prior entity; they constitute that entity.

Is the principle of *form* championed by Saussure just another kind of essence? Deconstruction exposes *structure* as another ontology to which one might be tempted to commit. But although Derrida insists *différance* is not a concept, the latest avatar of the *logo*s, it inevitably demands we grant it a certain modicum of existence.[20] The discipline of ontological parsimony

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[18] One already nascent in Paul Van Tieghem's seminal 1931 description of the discipline in *La Littérature comparée*: "L'object de la littérature comparée est essentiellement d'étudier les oeuvres des diverses littératures dans leurs rapports les unes avec les autres" (57).

[19] Substance "in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word," for Aristotle, "is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse" (*Categories* 5, 2a11-13; trans. E. M. Edghill). The categories which we predicate of true substance, or within which we include it, are for Aristotle substances only in a secondary sense.

[20] "*Differance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept*" (279); "within the system of language, there are only differences . . . What we note as difference will thus be the movement of play that 'produces' (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the differance which produces differences is before them in a simply and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. Differance is the nonfull, nonsimple 'origin'; it is the structured and differing origin of differences. Since language . . . has not fallen from the sky, it is clear that differences have been produced; they are the effects produced, but effects that do not have as their cause a subject or substance, a thing in general, or a being that is somewhere present and itself escapes the play of difference" (286).

would seem to prevent such reluctant commitments; it would seem to encourage the practice of a kind of literary existentialism, in which the *essence* of the literary object would be understood to follow from its *existence*, rather than the other way around. The structuralist-existentialist approach removes the aetiological impulse, the impulse to discover the causes producing effects deemed literary; for such causes would now be understood not to *precede* but *proceed* from such effects: to be, in effect, but the most insidious and seductive of effects themselves.

That literary existentialism is clearly discernable in the post-structuralist approach to literature, whether of the reader-response (e.g., Stanley Fish's "Interpreting the *Variorum*") or the Marxist stripe (e.g., Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*); in both cases it should no longer surprise us that a Quinean ontology is perfectly compatible with a structuralist epistemology (both products, after all, of what Richard Rorty called *the linguistic turn* in philosophy). For Fish, literary features are not "in" the text any more than characteristics of linguistic units were "in" language; they are always "a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear" (2083). Another disappearing act, like that engineered by Saussure, in which the object (in and of) itself is made to vanish. We cannot (or will not) ask what the interpretive act is an interpretation of, for such a question presupposes that there are objects to interpret prior to the act of interpreting them. But we are never in a position prior to the interpretive act. This is where Fish deploys the notion of the *interpretive community*; for it is the interpretive community to which we belong that determines, in any situation (and there is no situation in which we are not in one or more such interpretive communities), how to interpret a text (and indeed, what that text is): such communities -

> are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions . . . The assumption in each community will be that the other is not correctly perceiving the "true text," but the truth will be that each perceives the text (or texts) its interpretive strategies demand and call into being. (2087-88)

For Jameson in *The Political Unconscious,* similarly, texts are never encountered directly, as things-in-themselves; "[r]ather, texts come before us as the always-already read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretation" (1937). For Jameson as for Fish, the text is a product of the interpretive act, rather than its product. But where Fish speaks of interpretive communities governing such interpretive acts, Jameson refers to semantic horizons: distinct and dialectical phases of the "rereading and rewriting" of the literary text: "What we must also note, however, is that each phase or horizon governs a distinct reconstruction of its object, and construes the very structure of what can now only in a general sense be called 'the text' in a different way" (1941).

Both Fish's and Jameson's models of the interpretation bear a striking resemblance to Quine's ontological scheme, which effectively makes metaphysics a linguistic or hermeneutic question: for Quine reality is apprehended only by way of a prior "conceptual scheme" ("On What There Is," 19). The effect is to bracket the question of what objects actually exist: "[v]iewed from within the phenomenalistic conceptual scheme," for example, which Quine views as unrivaled in its economy and explanatory power, "the ontologies of physical objects and mathematical objects are myths" - but they are myths that work.

The Pursuit of Plasticity

In Cézanne's still-lifes, too, as a rule, *things* are defeated by their *interpretations*; *essences* by their *effects*; *objects* by their *myths*. Cézanne may construe nature as a collection of simple forms—sphere, cone, cylinder—but in his still-lifes these forms are "infinitely and infinitesimally modified at each point by his visual sensations" (Fry 52).[21] Cézanne is interested, ultimately, in the plasticity of the object, not its identity; in volume, not form.[22]

In Cézanne's *Apples and Oranges,* as in his other still-lifes, the search for ontological identity is everywhere frustrated by the phenomenological encounter with the object as a *positive fact*.[23] One can detect the signs of that frustration in the obsessiveness with which the extension of the object—its very distinctness—is interrogated: hence Cézanne's fixation with contours: "for painters to whom the plastic construction is all-important . . . the contour becomes at once a fascination and a dread" (Fry 50).[24] By various gestures Cézanne both reinforces and contests the line of the contour; but out of this vexed encounter with the limits of the object a clearer sense of its plasticity emerges. Here is Fry on *Still Life with Compotier*:

> The contour is continually being lost and then recovered again. The pertinacity and anxiety with which he thus seeks to conciliate the firmness of the contour and its recession from the eye is very remarkable. It naturally lends a certain heaviness, almost a clumsiness, to the effect; but it ends by giving to the forms that impressive solidity and weight which we have noticed. (50-51)

One encounters something of the same "heaviness" in Quine's empiricist ontology. Recall Quine's assertion in "On What There Is," already cited, that "[p]hysical objects are postulated entities which round out and simplify our account of the flux of experience" (1980: 532). We will return to this gesture, strangely artistic in the work of a philosopher, of *rounding out* in order to simplify.

Figure 4: Paul Cézanne. *Apples, Bottle, and Glass* [*Pommes, bouteille et verre*]. Circa 1895-98. Pencil and watercolor on white paper. Tresserve, Collection M. et Mme. Adrien Chappuis.

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[21] A virtual topos in Cézanne criticism. Thus Clive Bell, in "The Debt to Cézanne": "It was in what he saw that he discovered a sublime architecture haunted by the Universal who informs every Particular. He pushed further and further towards a complete revelation of the significance of form, but he needed something concrete as a point of departure. It was because Cézanne could come at reality only through what he saw that he never invented purely abstract forms" (80). See, too, Denis, in "Cézanne" (52).
[22] Denis, in "Cézanne": "But still he never reaches the conception of the circle, the triangle, the parallelogram; those are abstractions which his eye and brain refuse to admit. *Forms are for him volumes*" (55).
[23] In Cézanne criticism the figure of the apple is endowed with a special status: it becomes a virtual emblem of the painter's heroic efforts to record the encounter with the real object. Three examples will have to suffice here: Thadee Natanson: "He is the painter of apples, of smooth, round, fresh, weighty, vivid apples whose colour seems to undulate, not those that we should like to eat and whose trompe l'oeil holds the gourmands, but forms which ravish"; (36); Denis: "Of an apple by Cézanne one says: How beautiful! One would not peel it; one would like to copy it. It is in that that the spiritual power of Cézanne consists. I purposely do not say idealism, because the ideal apple would be the one that stimulated most the mucous membranes, and Cézanne's apple speaks to the spirit by means of the eyes" (52); and D. H. Lawrence: "Cézanne's apples are a real attempt to let the apple exist in its own separate entity, without transfusing it with personal emotion. Cézanne's great effort was, as it were, to shove the apple away from him, and let it live of itself. It seems a small thing to do: yet it is the first sign that man has made for several thousands of years that he is willing to admit that matter actually exists . . . after a fight tooth-and-nail for forty years, he did succeed in knowing an apple, fully: and, not quite as fully, a jug or two. That was all he achieved . . . But it is the first step that counts, and Cézanne's apple is a great deal, more than Plato's Idea" (87-88).
[24] Indeed, there are paintings where the encounter with the object appears so fraught that it can only be inferred from its contours; as in *Apples, Bottle, and Glass* (image 4).

Literature as the Incomparable

Consider now the implications of the post-structuralist approach for comparing literary texts, which, after all, represent vast clusters or concatenations of signs, veritable *super-signs*. How to compare this sonnet with that sonnet, or that novel? In the presence of positive facts of this magnitude, one is confronted with an excess of meaning, a surplus value. There are, in other words, an infinite number of ways in which one sonnet may be compared to another; as an autonomous object distinct from other objects, it remains, of course, incomparable.

Quine implies as much in "On Simple Theories of a Complex World": "Any two things, after all," Quine asserts, "are shared as members by as many classes as any other two things; degrees of similarity depend on which of those classes we weight as the more basic or natural" (1966: 243). Such a statement suggests again how *similar* Quine's ontology is to Fish's and Jameson's. For the question of similarity, and the comparative or classificatory gestures it presupposes, is again paramount. According to these critics, what objects there are for us - in other words, what we construe as a *text* - will depend on the interpretive community or semantic horizon, respectively, in which we find ourselves at any given moment. And at any given moment, asking what a text is is equivalent to asking what it *is like*; it depends, in other words, on determining with what other texts it ought to be sorted, or in other words, in what set or sets we ought to grant it membership.

In this case the desire to achieve simplicity represents a violation, not a vindication, of the principle of parsimony; for this desire demands our commitment to additional categories. Our tendency to order literature by way of genre, mode, style, or other abstract categories depends on the same process of classification, and springs from the same faith—a faith, Quine insists, which is worth fighting for—in simplicity. (Let me cite here in passing Gérard Genette's seminal work on genre, "The Architext." Genette's critique of the venerable generic approach, which hypostasizes eternal genres and archigenres based, naively, on content and formal features, in favor of a modal approach, one which distinguishes between forms of discourse based on their enunciating situation, is a powerful blow struck for ontological parsimony. In Genette's new model, no taxonomy or hierarchy of genres can be fixed or natural; how we classify the literary object must always be a function of the historical moment, or a conceptual scheme.[25])

Sometimes we may have to abandon simplicity in favor of explanatory power. (To posit, as Genette does in "The Architext," that classificatory categories such as genres are infinitely divisible is, in effect, to sacrifice simplicity for explanatory power in the service of a parsimonious ontology.) One of the causes adduced by Quine for our "selective bias in favor of simplicity" has its bearing upon the anxious encounter with the object in Cézanne's still-lifes. That same bias, Quine suggests, underlies our tendency to record measurements by way of the nearest round number:

> If we encompass a set of data with a hypothesis involving the fewest possible parameters, and then are constrained by further experiment to add another parameter, we are likely to view the emendation not as a refutation of the first result but as a confirmation plus a refinement; but if we have an extra parameter in the first hypothesis and are constrained by further experiment to alter it, we view the emendation as a refutation and revision. (1966: 245)

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[25] "In the classification of literary species as in the classification of genres, no position is essentially more 'natural' or more 'ideal' . . . There is no generic level that can be decreed more 'theoretical', or that can be attained by a more 'deductive' method than the others: all species and all subgenres, genres, or supergenres are empirical classes, established by observation of the historical facts or, if need be, by extrapolation from those facts - that is, by a deductive activity superimposed on an initial activity that is alwats inductive and analytical" (Genette 214).

Cézanne's still-lifes begin, in just this way, as efforts to encompass a set of data with hypotheses involving the fewest possible parameters (invoking the sphere, the cone, the cylinder); and here, too, the artist soon finds himself constrained by further experiment to add additional parameters, so that the contour of the object is no longer a simple line but a series of a parallel strokes obscured by repeated hatchings. Cézanne begins, in effect, with a round number; with the hypothesis, let us say, that the orange is a sphere.[26] That he is compelled to abandon this geometric solid in favor of something more irregular is understood as a refinement of the original hypothesis, not its refutation. Cézanne's success, if that is what it is, in communicating the mass and volume of the object, is a function, then, not of simplicity, but the effect thereof. As Fry asserts: "We thus get at once the notion of extreme simplicity in the general result and of infinite variety in every part" (51).[27] Complexity, in this case, is a way of limiting, not multiplying, ontological commitments.

Quine points out the "implausibility of the maxim of the simplicity of nature" (1966: 242) without suggesting that we should, or even can, dispense with it.[28] The same can be said for the maxim of the uniformity of nature which follows, and according to which, in Quine's compact formulation, "things similar in some respects tend to prove similar in others" (1966: 243). Our reliance on abstract categories or universals for our determinations about literature—determinations which aim at or invoke the principle of simplicity—suggests an unwitting adherence to this maxim. But already in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume treats the uniformity of nature as an inference (of the kind which argues that if *b* has always followed *a* in the past, it will continue to do so in the future) that cannot be logically justified.[29] It is not correct, then, to say that the practice of comparative literature is tantamount to comparing apple and oranges; it is, perhaps rather more like comparing apples to apples.

The Not-So-Still-Life

Cézanne's *Apples and Oranges* looks like a panicked defense of the uniformity of nature: familiar objects, each assigned to its proper place; the plate and the bowl and the vase, too—another class of familiar objects—resting upon the familiar tablecloth, draped upon the familiar table and couch: emblems of immobility.

And yet everything seems to *rest* rather precariously in this not-entirely-still life. Containers here fail to contain; beyond the plate and bowl stray apples and oranges (but can we be sure anymore which is which?) have wandered off the fold, so to speak, and lie in disarray upon the rumpled cloth, or lost in the treacherous, luxuriant creases of the couch, which looks as if it were ingesting them whole.[30] In the tradition of the still-life such surfaces primarily constitute a background against which the object can be more rendered more distinct; but in Cézanne they appear to serve the opposite purpose.[31]

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[26] Quine's ontology depends on a similar hypothesis

[27] Compare Denis: "Synthesis does not necessarily mean simplification in the sense of suppression of certain parts of the object; it is simplifying in the sense of *rendering intelligible*" (56).

[28] Quine defines the maxim of the simplicity of nature as follows: "If two theories conform equally to past observations, the simpler of the two is seen as standing the better chance of confirmation in future observations" (1966: 242).

[29] As Hume famously asserts in the Inquiry concerning Human Understanding, "No object ever discovers, by the qualities which appear to the senses, either the causes which produced it, or the effects which will arise from it, nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact" (27). No matter how many times we have experienced the appearance of clouds followed by the arrival of rain, we are never justified in deriving the law of causality from that sequence of events; tomorrow there may be rain, but no clouds.

[30] Some of Cézanne's most interesting still-lifes are those in which the main subject is no longer the contained but the container: thus *Kitchen Table: Jars and Bottles* (image 5) or *Bottles, Pot, Alcohol Stove, Apples* (image 6); compare with *Apples, Bottle, and Glass*, where the object has disappeared at the expense of its contour, becoming, in effect, pure container.

[31] Kurt Badt writes: "instead, the folded or crumpled table napkins or table tops now possessed a signficance euqal to that of the fruit, utensils, or other objects in the composition" (256). And Rubin, on the same painting: "There are two different draperies in the background: at the left—seemingly hanging from the wall—the rug with rust-brown purplish squares and a red and dark green design . . . next to it is a brown-beige curtain with a pattern of light green leaves and some traces of red that cascades down, met by the mutlifolded large white tablecloth on which crockery, apples and oranges are assembled" (395).

How still is this still-life? Whatever provisional order has been established here seems in danger of being lost: the plate and the bowl appear perilously close to toppling over, spilling forth their contents.[32] The composition of Cézanne's *Still Life with Compotier* seems to point to an imperious yet recondite order in the stillness of the still-life, of which Fry argues "[o]ne has the impression that each of these objects is infallibly in its place, and that its place was ordained for it from the beginning of all things" (47); indeed, "[o]ne suspects a strange complicity between these objects" (47). But no such complicity seems visible in *Apples and Oranges,* which, in Rubin's words, "presents a cluttered and almost agitated arrangement of opposing elements, colors, and patterns" (395). From a Heideggerian perspective: it is not so easy, Cézanne's work seems to say, to *set up* or *frame*
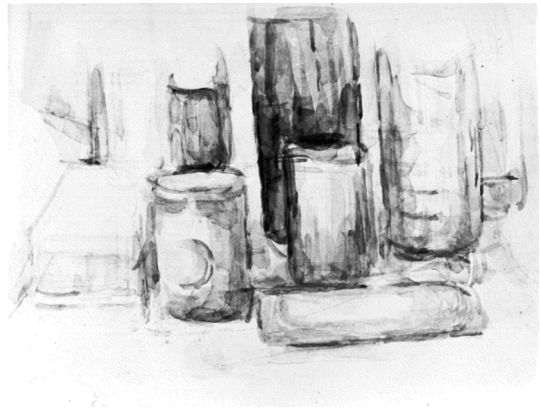

Figure 5: Paul Cézanne. *Kitchen Table: Jars and Bottles.* 1902-1906. Venturi 1148. Pencil andwatercolor on paper, mounted on cardboard. Paris, Cabinet des dessins, Musée du Louvre. Cat. 75.
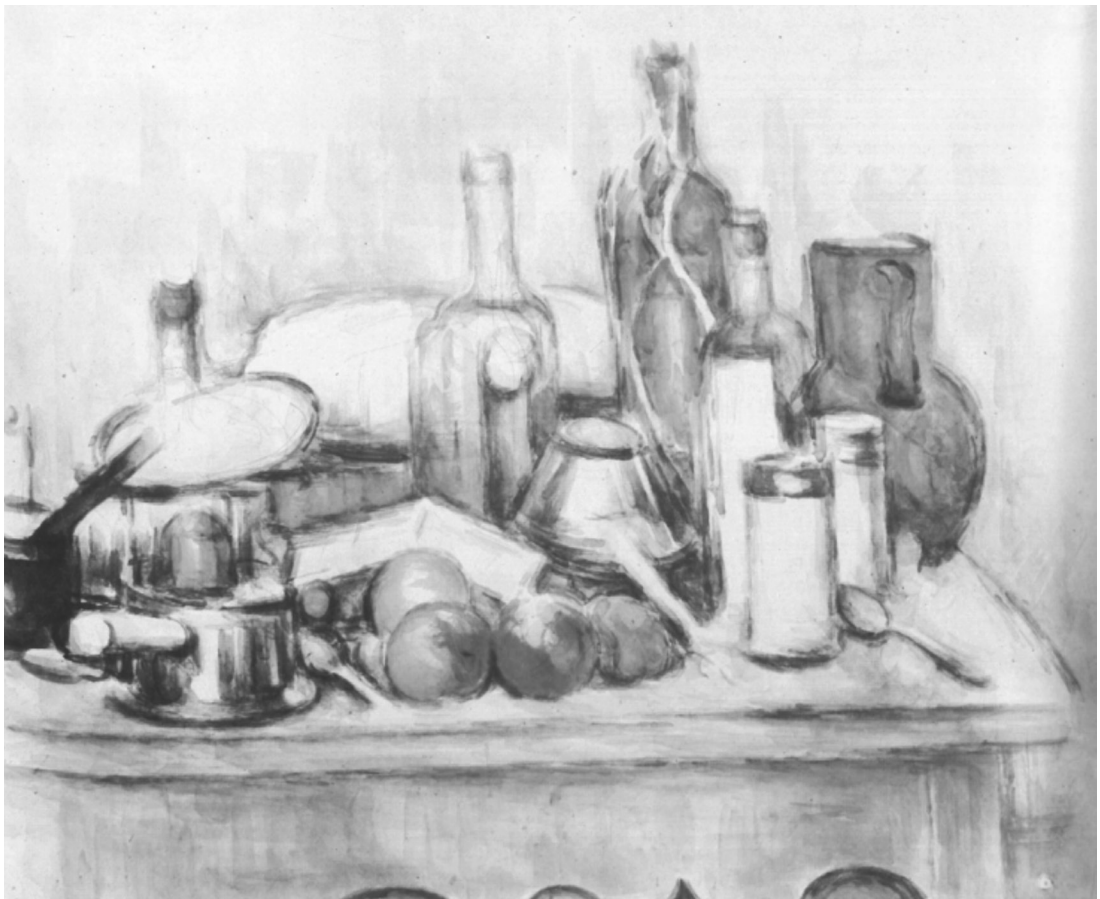

Figure 6: Paul Cézanne. *Bottles, Pot, Alcohol Stove, Apples.* 1900-1906. Watercolor and graphite. Chicago, Coll Mr & Mrs Leigh B. Block.

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[32] Lawrence suggests that, in Cézanne's still lifes, nothing is meant to seem entirely still: "It was part of his desire: to make the human form, the life form, come to rest. Not static—on the contrary. Mobile but come to rest. And at the same time he set the unmoving materal world into motion" (92).

a world. The things which are at hand here refuse to be gathered up, to stay still. Isn't comparing apples and oranges, Cézanne's painting seems to ask, like comparing apples and apples (or oranges and oranges)? Are the latter any more comparable than the former?

Departments of Incomparable Literature: The Example of the Sublime

How does the principle of ontological parsimony force us to rethink the discipline of comparative literature? Are we to open departments of *incomparable literature*? But in what sense could the incomparable be an object of inquiry? For to apprehend the incomparable is already, in effect, to have compared it.

The comparative, of course, is itself a degree of comparison: a sonnet may be beautiful (*positive*), more beautiful (*comparative*), or the most beautiful (*superlative*). All of these statements involve us necessarily in a matrix of ontological commitments. (At first the positive, which appears to assign a property to an object without reference to other objects, looks like a viable option. But properties, structuralism has taught us, are inherently comparative entities. So much for departments of *positive literature*.) Now a quality considered as *absolute*—as something, that is to say, which cannot be predicated as greater or lesser, but only as present or absent—is one which does not admit of comparison: a sonnet either is or isn't beautiful, just as a number either is or isn't prime. Which leaves us, in the end, with the prospect of studying literature as that which does not allow of comparison; in departments of *absolute literature*.

Literature in the absolute degree[33] has historically been equated with the *sublime*.

Longinus (to whom *On Sublimity* is traditionally ascribed) offers no clear definition of the sublime, and refers to it variously as elevation (*hupsos*), grandeur (*megethos*), and genius (*megalophui*) (trans. Fyfe). In fact, Longinus appears to equate the sublime *grosso modo* with (great) literature. Now this lack of definition constitutes in itself a kind of definition. With Longinus we can say of the sublime what Justice Stewart said of pornography: we know it when we see it.[34] Stylistically speaking, sublimity has no specific empirical features: it can only be inferred from its (rhetorical) effects. There is no essence to the sublime; its essence is itself an effect of its effects. These are effects, it goes without saying, of the highest degree: designed to dominate the reader/listener with irresistible force.

In Quine's terms, this notion of the sublime is ontologically parsimonious. For Longinus, after all, the sublime is a phenomenological, empirical event. If for Quine "our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors" (1990a: 19), the same could be said for Longinus regarding our knowledge of the sublime. In locating the sublime in the audience, not the object, Longinus thus looks ahead to Kant's treatment of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*. For Kant "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the one who judges, not in the object in nature, the judging [Beurtheilung] of which occasions this disposition in it" (2.26, 139).

The sublime effect in Longinus is something like contagion or conversion: we are made to submit to the will of an author; we see what he sees, we think what he thinks. But Longinus makes it clear that such coercion can only occur when the interpretive defenses of the target are anaesthetized; otherwise we become aware of a text precisely as a rhetorical enterprise: we are conscious of its technique, which is thereby rendered ineffectual. This neutralization of the critical faculties is fully visible in *On Sublimity*: Longinus does not analyze the texts he cites; he tells us how they affect him. Longinus cannot be said to compare these texts, for there is nothing in them to compare: they remain objects not different but distinct, utterly incomparable.

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[33] Or what Barthes calls "zero degree of writing" ("le degré zéro de l'écriture").
[34] Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964) (Stewart, J., concurring).

And yet we compare them all the same. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant asserts, "We call s*ublime* that which is *absolutely great* [*schlechthin gross*]"; i.e., "that which is great beyond all comparison" (2.25, 131). But surely this predication constitutes a form of comparison; and, indeed, a moment later Kant clarifies, "*That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small*" (134). Kant's list of sublime objects—that is, objects capable of engendering the sublime "in the mind" (2.26, 139), and which are restricted to prodigies of nature ("shapeless mountain masses . . . the dark and raging sea" [2.26, 139])—constitutes a paradoxical canon of the incomparable. For the West has always had its canon of the incomparable.

Coda: On Enjoying Literature, Not Using It

What might ontological parsimony entail as a heuristic practice?

Would it mean taking a stand, along with Susan Sontag, against *interpretation* itself as "the revenge of the intellectual upon art," which involves sacrificing form for content, the work of art for its meaning? Today, Sontag writes, interpretation "makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" ("Against Interpretation" 10). And the rush to categorize, after all, is what we want to avoid as much as possible. But one may have doubts about Sontag's solution to the problem she poses: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." For Sontag narrowly equates such an erotics with a sensual appreciation of the text as something concrete; but surely there are many species of erotics (and just as many species of texts). To the extent that hermeneutics has always pursued the truth as an (elusive) object of desire, it has always been an erotics. The question remains, what is the object we desire?

It is, in the end, *of no matter*; for the object is always a function of the *use* to which we put it (that is to say, the way in which we interpet it). What does matter is that we *enjoy* what we use. I refer here to Augustine's distinction, in *On Christine Doctrine*, between *usus* and *fruitio* (from *fruor*; in Lewis and Short, "*to derive enjoyment from a thing, to enjoy, delight in* [with a more restricted signif. than uti, to make use of a thing, to use it]"), and which, for our purposes, is more *useful* than that which Sontag draws between hermeneutics and erotics. The distinction is crucial for Augustine in designating the mere utility of our terrestrial existence, which is but a means to a transcendent end; for us it helps to establish the essential *perversity* of enjoying literature:

> To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love—if indeed it is something that ought to be loved. (The improper use of something should be termed abuse.) Suppose we were travellers who could live happily only in our homeland, and because our absence made us unhappy we wished to put an end to our misery and return there: we would need transport by land or sea which we could use to travel to our homeland, the object of our enjoyment. But if we were fascinated by the delights of the journey and the actual travelling, we would be perversely enjoying things that we should be using; and we would be reluctant to finish our journey quickly, being ensnared in the wrong kind of pleasure and estranged from the homeland whose pleasures could make us happy. (1.8-9)

Isn't this what we ought to do with the text: *to hold fast to it in love for its own sake*? Why not admit that poetics is, at its best, a kind of abuse, and that in consorting with literary objects we are *perversely enjoying things that we should be using*? Things, also, one hastens to add, that do not belong to us, but to a larger public. To the extent that we do not own the literary object when we read it, but merely hold it in trust, than the business of comparative literature—which ought to be, as much as it possible, the business of comparing things as little as possible with other things (even if such comparison is necessary)—is, in essence, a form of *usufruct*.

In this Augustinian sense, comparing things, on the other hand, would be a way of *using* them (reasonably, legitimately) for *the purpose of obtaining what we love*; something we love, that is, more than the things we're comparing. Even the Scriptures are, for Augustine, a means to an end, something to be used in order to enjoy God. And yet the palpable joy that Augustine takes in exegesis suggests an almost pagan delight in the materiality of the text. In the *Confessions* Augustine declaims -

> How wonderful are your Scriptures! How profound! We see their surface [superficies] and it attracts us like children. And yet, O my God, their depth [profunditas] is stupendous. We shudder and peer deep into them, for they inspire in us both the awe of reverence and the thrill of love. (12.14.17)

In this image of a child seduced by colorful surfaces, and entranced by unfathomable depths, Augustine offers us an image of hermeneutics founded not on avarice, or aggression, but *love*; that is, *agape*; but an *agape* that strangely resembles *eros.*

Love, it would seem, is the driving force behind Augustine's approach to the text, as well as its central message. Augustine is *charitable,* as it were, when it comes to other people's interpretations:

> For all the differences between them, there is truth in each of these opinions. May this truth give birth to harmony, and may the Lord our God have pity on us so that we may apply the law legitimately, that is, to the end prescribed in the commandment, which is charity undefiled. This same precept of charity obliges me, if I am asked which of these opinions was held by Moses your servant, to admit that I do not know . . . As for the rest of us, who all, as I admit, see true meanings in those words and explain them accordingly, let us love one another, and if our thirst is not for vanity but the truth, let us likewise love you, our God, who are the Source from which it flows. (12.30)

Augustinian hermeneutics imposes a third commandment upon the believer: it is not enough to love God and to love thy neighbor; one must love thy neighbor's interpretation. (Augustine loves God; but he loves His words almost as much, and seems loathe to finish with the business of reading them.) In Augustine's hands the principle of charity, ironically enough, becomes an implacable hermeneutic, the eternal rule for rereading - and therefore rewriting the text. (which is the *Text*).[35]

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[35] Augustine's "rule of faith," Fish argues in "Interpreting the *Variorum,*" is, in effect, a "rule of interpretation": "This then is both a stipulation of what meaning there is and a set of directions for finding it, which is of course a set of directions - of interpretive strategies - for making it, that is, for the endless reproduction of the same text (2087).

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http://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-cezanne/compotier-glass-and-apples-1880

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Paul Cézanne. *The Basket of Apples.* 1899-94. Oil on canvas. Chicago, The Art Institute
of Chicago.

Image from The Art Institute of Chicago:

http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111436

Paul Cézanne. *Apples, Bottle, and Glass* [*Pommes, bouteille et verre*]. Circa 1895-98.

Pencil and watercolor on white paper. Tresserve, Collection M. et Mme. Adrien Chappuis.

Image from Universal Prints:

http://www.universal-prints.de/english/fine-art/artist/image/paul-cezanne/39/1/146120/
pommes,-bouteille-et-verre/index.htm

Paul Cézanne. *Kitchen Table: Jars and Bottles.* 1902-1906. Venturi 1148. Pencil and watercolor
on paper, mounted on cardboard. Paris, Cabinet des dessins, Musée du Louvre. Cat. 75.

Image from Rubin 365:

Plate 183.

Paul Cézanne. *Bottles, Pot, Alcohol Stove, Apples.* 1900-1906. Watercolor and graphite.
Chicago, Coll Mr & Mrs Leigh B. Block.

Image from Rubin 364:

Plate 181.