
H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 30

André Dombrowski, *Cézanne, Murder, and Modern Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 310 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-52-027339-7.

Review by Elizabeth C. Mansfield, National Humanities Center.

André Dombrowski's *Cézanne, Murder, and Modern Life* introduces readers afresh to a painter whose career some assumed was already well wrung. "Cézanne," announced art historian T.J. Clark in 2010, "cannot be written about any more." [1] Dombrowski not only defies Clark's prognosis, he also raises the possibility that a significant part of the artist's oeuvre remains misunderstood. "Le doute de Cézanne" is how Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously characterized the painter's leading creative impulse [2]; Dombrowski's book posits an artist less riven by doubt than driven by clear aesthetic aims and self-conscious ambition. What is more, Dombrowski builds his case not on the painter's acclaimed "mature" works (such as his well-known depictions of Mont Sainte-Victoire, still lifes, and scenes of bathers), but instead on the often-dismissed works of Cézanne's early career. Those embarrassing, late-Romantic fantasies of murder and rape; those awkward portraits of Émile Zola; that painting of a marionette-like girl at the piano; those puzzling depictions of stiffly posed women of fashion: far from simply "displays of their maker's erotic fixations and ludicrous egotism" (p. 4)--as Dombrowski summarizes the too-common view of Cézanne's early career--these works confirm that the artist's aesthetic commitments were established early and sustained across four decades.

Dombrowski treats Cézanne's early career as the years from 1865 to around 1872. That the *terminus post quem* coincides with the first exhibition of Édouard Manet's notorious *Olympia* is no accident. Dombrowski contends that many of Cézanne's early efforts record a confrontation with Manet's looming example. "The man in [Cézanne's] *The Strangled Woman* (ca. 1870-72) might have appeared to murder Manet's *Olympia* more than any other woman" (p. 5). Far from the hand-wringing, wayward artist that standard histories of modern art tend to make Cézanne out to be, Dombrowski finds in him a determined challenger to Manet's position as the presumptive "Painter of Modern Life." It is Cézanne, not Manet, who is "dominated by insatiable passion," a characteristic that Charles Baudelaire ascribes to his exemplary modern artist. [3] As Dombrowski explains: "That quintessential modernist text, Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life,' famously thematizes the contrast between expression and its withholding in the modern metropolis. While this text has been widely understood as corroborating Manet's version of modern experience, in fact Constantin Guys, the essay's protagonist, can be seen as actually closer to Cézanne's aesthetic universe" (p. 94).

Dombrowski's Cézanne boldly opposes the disinterested stance of Manet, providing an alternative visual form to the preoccupations of modernity: fashion, commercial spectacles, and a popular press frothing with lurid accounts of sensational crimes. "Often dismissed either as juvenilia or as too nakedly psychological and late romantic, Cézanne's scenes of strangulations, murders, orgies, and interiors pregnant with dread should be seen as attempts to replace Manet's disinclination toward an emotive and narrative idiom with one that was simultaneously more expressive and more authorial, while no less dissident" (p. 5).

Cézanne's approach to modern painting, one that emphasized a kind of expressive realism that accorded with the aesthetic aims of Baudelaire, posited, however briefly, a viable alternative to the cool disinterestedness of Manet's painting. As Dombrowski rightly points out, Manet's modernism is too often viewed as the always-inevitable visual response to modernity. There were, of course, always a multiplicity of modernisms; their absence from standard accounts of the period tells a historiographic, rather than historical truth.

Dombrowski neatly integrates his characterization of Cézanne as a deliberate artistic agent with his methodological commitment to social and intellectual history. Keeping the cultural conditions under which Cézanne produced his early paintings at the forefront of his analysis, Dombrowski astutely recognizes that theories of subjectivity that purport to transcend historical specificity—as psychoanalytic theories, to some extent, do—can undermine arguments derived from social art history. To resolve this, Dombrowski draws upon contemporary accounts of subject formation in his investigation into the personal and cultural factors that contributed not just to Cézanne's sense of himself but to critics' and friends' perceptions of him, too. “The self is, of course, notoriously hard to trace within the archives of the social before Freud, but this text tries to bring to the surface the constructions of the ‘I’ Cézanne would have had at his disposal when he painted his early oeuvre” (p. 9). Chief among the conceptions of self to which Dombrowski turns in order to develop historically plausible notions of identity and agency are those of Charles Letourneau, Antoine Joly, and Hippolyte Taine. Although distinct in their conclusions about the ultimate sources of human nature, all three of these thinkers founded their arguments on materialist accounts of subjectivity. This privileging of materialism not only shaped Cézanne's understanding of human nature, it also influenced his approach to painting. In the case of portraiture, for instance, Dombrowski explains that “Cézanne stages [presence] as a mere autonomous fact....[T]he face is layered on especially thickly, so as to shore up the pictorial indices of the sitter's presence, the ‘subjective’ forms of paint application lending an air of particular intimacy and presence” (p. 104). Cézanne's pulsing, impastoed technique, then, literally materializes his subject's emotional, as well as physical existence.

The *terminus ad quem* of Dombrowski's study also deserves note. Most accounts of Cézanne's career attribute the emergence of his mature work in 1872 to the salubrious influence of the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, with whom he worked closely during the summer of that year. Dombrowski instead privileges social conditions, arguing that Cézanne was deeply affected by the political and military events of 1870–1871, especially the Paris Commune. Here, again, Dombrowski argues against established art historical narratives, which portray the artist as largely indifferent to the collapse of the Second Empire and the bloody suppression of the Commune. Since Roger Fry began writing about Cézanne in the early years of the twentieth century, accounts of the artist's work have emphasized formal, biographical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical concerns largely divorced from the social conditions in which his paintings were produced and received. Even the influential reorientation of nineteenth-century French art history by social art historians like Robert Herbert, Linda Nochlin, and T.J. Clark during the 1970s and 1980s failed to curb the tendency to treat Cézanne as an exception—and exceptional genius. Dombrowski is having none of this.

A thematic, rather than chronological organization of chapters helps Dombrowski to focus on those historical, as well as personal circumstances he finds particularly formative. The first of the book's five chapters addresses scenes of violence. Especially wanton and gruesome murders featured prominently in the Second Empire's newspapers, as much a part of the popular culture of modernity as Baudelairean *flâneurs*, prostitutes, and fashion plates. Thus, Dombrowski argues, Cézanne did not depict rape and murder as a means of exorcising personal fantasies, but rather as a mode of cultural critique. “He returned to the theme [of murder] so frequently in paint because the nineteenth-century specularization of murder allowed him to represent how modern culture continually undid its own illusions of progress” (p. 20). Furthermore, he explains, Cézanne's sympathy with materialist accounts of cultural expression and human behavior led him to fuse themes redolent of humanity's animalistic drives with equally

elemental artistic techniques. “Cézanne’s deliberately unskilled *manière couillarde* and the representation of murder walk hand in hand over the surface of his paintings, both guaranteeing the other’s bodily--meaning unrefined and unstructured--origins” (p. 60).

In chapter two, Dombrowski turns to the painter’s adaptations of Manet’s *Olympia*, contending that these works function as metaphorical self-portraits through which the younger artist lays claim not just to a greater capacity for scandal-making, but to a dominant place in the erotic economy that so disturbed viewers of Manet’s painting when it was exhibited in 1865. Both painted versions of Cézanne’s *A Modern Olympia* (c. 1869-1870 and c. 1873-1874) include a seated male figure, the presumptive client absent from Manet’s representation of the supine prostitute. The figure’s beard and bald head convince Dombrowski that the man is Cézanne himself. In both cases, the reclining nude woman has drawn her legs up to her chest, away from the seated man, as if cowering or recoiling from him. These crucial adjustments change everything. Not only do they assert Cézanne’s presence, his literal as well as metaphoric domination of the scene, they remove all interpretive doubt from the scene: “...there is always already someone in *A Modern Olympia* who has hired the prostitute; the viewer is only the secondary act and his gaze is not constitutive of the painting’s structure. Cézanne’s *A Modern Olympia* erases...what was to Manet perhaps most crucial to the painting of modern life: the perpetual interrogation of our techniques and erotics of vision” (pp. 97-98). Dombrowski’s Cézanne banishes ambiguity, pushes aside doubt.

Cézanne enacts a similarly possessive gesture in his painted and drawn portraits of Émile Zola with the poet Paul Alexis, which Dombrowski analyzes in chapter three. Here, the painting Cézanne refigures is Manet’s iconic 1868 depiction of Zola. As was noted by critics and caricaturists at the time, this painting conveys more information about Manet’s relationship with Zola than it does about the novelist himself. Cézanne, Dombrowski argues, could not have helped resenting this presumption of personal and professional allegiance. Zola’s lifelong association with Cézanne (the two became friends as children, and remained close until at least the mid-1880s) would have made Manet’s bold, public declaration of intimacy feel like an affront. What is more, Dombrowski speculates, Cézanne surely recognized that his aesthetic commitments were more in line with Zola’s than Manet’s ever could be. “Cézanne remade Manet’s painting and seemed to return a measure of individuality and intimacy to Zola’s image, confronting Manet’s portrait proto-abstractions with the actual textures and practices of Zola’s intellectual life...Like the critics, Cézanne turned the consequences of a modernist portrait conception against Manet. This is not to say that Manet’s is an unsuccessful portrait, or that Cézanne’s truly ‘captured’ Zola’s interiority in paint, but that he mobilized the painter’s technical tools to render the illusion of Zola’s psychic presence” (p. 124).

Cézanne’s assertion of his aesthetic commitments emerges even more clearly in the painting that serves as the anchor for chapter four, *The Overture to Tannhäuser* (c. 1868-1869). Dombrowski notes that this painting’s seemingly incongruous title has mostly been ignored by art historians, who often cite the work as *Young Woman at the Piano*. The subject was one that Cézanne treated several times, however, and he was emphatic and consistent in his citation of *Tannhäuser* in association with the subject. This point is worth noting, Dombrowski explains, because Cézanne seems rarely to have made much of titles. The fact that he cared that this scene represented a performance of Wagner clearly mattered to him. Wagner’s reception in France, the fraught business of transcribing orchestral scores into piano pieces, and the importance of women’s piano-playing in bourgeois residences during the Second Empire are among the cultural threads Dombrowski draws together in his analysis of *The Overture to Tannhäuser*. The painting here emerges as nothing less than a manifesto: “Making an original painting about a performance of a transcription of another work rendered the distinction between original and replication moot, offering Cézanne a concrete manner in which to investigate the conditions and possibilities of originality in modernity. The relation between opera and its transcription for piano (and between orchestra and home piano)--high meets low, original encounters its copy--opened for Cézanne an

inquiry into the status of art and the artist under pressure by market forces of mass dissemination and consumption” (p. 157).

Allied concerns direct Dombrowski’s analysis of a suite of three small paintings, the subject of the fifth and final chapter (succeeded by a short epilogue), that show fashionably dressed women apparently strolling out-of-doors or posing in a well-furnished domestic space. Confirming that all three subjects are copies of fashion plates published in the weekly magazine *La Mode illustrée* during the tumultuous years of 1870 and 1871, Dombrowski deploys his considerable sensitivity to visual nuances to reveal not just the formal departures between the original illustrations and Cézanne’s copies, but their conceptual and even ideological differences. And redolent of ideological awareness these paintings are, Dombrowski contends. “Cézanne’s painting [*The Conversation*, c. 1871] was not out to portray the fashions of July 1870; it instead sought to paint a sociological picture of that summer. It directed attention to the gender segregation that came so naturally to the culture of nineteenth-century fashion imagery...in contrast to the real separation that occurred when war broke out and soldiers died. Cézanne’s copy, too, erased the flowers that signaled the season and cut down the original lush green plush garden [present in the original fashion plate] in order to place a tricolor on a rooftop in the background of a much bleaker scene. As flowers allegorize summer in fashion prints, the tricolor now produces new and different historical meanings in the painting, combining bourgeois sartorial display with a culture of wartime patriotism” (p. 207).

So persuasive, in fact, are Dombrowski’s formal and thematic analyses of Cézanne’s early paintings that the occasional absence of direct connections between a particular artwork and the considerable historical evidence presented in the book can easily pass without notice. Dombrowski’s mode of explication—for instance, his assertion above that “Cézanne *sought* to paint a sociological picture” (p. 207); or his statement that the artist “returned to the theme [of murder] *because* the nineteenth-century specularization of murder allowed him to represent how modern culture continually undid its own illusions of progress” (p. 20); or his avowal that “Cézanne *wanted* to...replace Manet...as the most radical of painters” (p. 70), an attribution of sentiment not supported by any documentary evidence, but elicited from an extended engagement with the artworks themselves—conveys the same sort of certainty that he attributes to the artist. Whether or not this rhetorical complicity with the major thesis of the book—that it is canny certainty, not his doubt, that sustains Cézanne’s aesthetic drive—supports or impedes the book’s central arguments is a question readers will resolve for themselves. That André Dombrowski has contributed a highly original and persuasive interpretation of Cézanne’s early work is indubitable.

NOTES

[1] T.J. Clark, “At the Courtauld,” *London Review of Books* 32/23(December 2, 2010): 22.

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “La Douce de Cézanne,” *Fontaine: Revue mensuelle de la poésie et des lettres françaises* 47(December 1945): 80-100; reprinted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), pp. 15-49.

[3] “The dandy aspires to insensitivity, and it is in this that Monsieur G., dominated as he is by insatiable passion—for seeing and feeling—parts company decisively with dandyism.” Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” trans. Jonathan Mayne (London Phaidon, 1995), p. 9., cited by Dombrowski, p. 94.

Elizabeth C. Mansfield
National Humanities Center
emansfield@nationalhumanitiescenter.org

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172