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**Wayne Andersen**, *Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 266 pp. Plates, notes, and index. \$80.00 (cl). ISBN 0-521-83726-X.

Review by Benjamin Harvey, Mississippi State University.

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In casual conversations, art historians will try to persuade you that fewer and fewer texts are being published in their discipline. While this may be true, it is also worth noting that at least one type of book appears to be bucking the larger trend. I refer to the monograph devoted to explicating a single work. A familiar enough concept in literary studies, in art history the idea still seemed like an almost impossible luxury a decade or two ago. But now one barely raises an eyebrow upon seeing a new book on, say, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Holbein's *Ambassadors*, or Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. And if you're currently in the market for a tome on Picasso's most famous early work, then you even have a choice of two texts: one, a multi-authored book edited by Christopher Green, the other, by Wayne Andersen.[1]

These books, you will have noticed, are generally about canonical works. Indeed, the familiar images and titles of these works adorn the covers of their respective books. They are the kind of artworks undergraduates are required to force into their memories (at least temporarily) in order to pass their art history survey class. It is also, surely, this "name recognition" factor that both secures the books a ready audience and makes them a popular choice with publishers.

Wayne Andersen's *Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine* represents, then, a subsection within this genre, for the image of its ostensible subject--Cézanne's oil painting, *The Eternal Feminine*--is likely to be projected only in the most deviant of Art History 101 classes.[2] The painting is, though, probably better known now than it ever has been, due in part to its acquisition by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and partly to its inclusion in several recent exhibitions, most notably the popular Paris-London-Philadelphia Cézanne retrospective of 1995-1996. It is no secret that the Getty has struggled to purchase works of art commensurate to its financial clout, architectural splendor, and institutional ambitions. But one of the things it *has* been able to do is publish monographs about the works of art in its collection. This has served the Getty's pedagogical mission while also helping to raise the visibility of its holdings. It has also resulted in a welcome development: the emergence of a number of books dealing, at some length, with lesser-known works of art by familiar artists.

It thus comes as something of a surprise to notice that Andersen's *Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine* is not a Getty publication but appears under the imprimatur of Cambridge University Press. And if you consider that Andersen is at least partly responsible for the way the Getty's visitors currently experience *The Eternal Feminine*, then it becomes more surprising still. As he reiterates in his book, it was Andersen who first drew attention to the fact that the nude female figure at the center of the work had, at some point, been painted over in order to make her less disturbing and, no doubt, the painting more marketable. This alien hand had added definition to areas that Cézanne had left looking bloody and battered; it had added definition to the figure's breasts and restored her gauged-out eyes. Informed that their newly acquired work had been interfered with, the Getty dutifully restored the painting to its original state in 1991.[3]

Cézanne's importance has always rested less on his individual works than on the totality of his *oeuvre*, on his aesthetic attitude and evolution, and on his general approach to specific genres (still-life, landscape, and bather pictures). Perhaps this partly explains why, to the best of my knowledge, no painting by the

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artist has hitherto received its own monograph. But it is also easy to see why *The Eternal Feminine* is susceptible to just such a prolonged treatment. Painted towards the end of the 1870s—the exact date is a matter of dispute—the work features an elaborate setting, within which we find a large cast of varied characters: a painter at work, a couple wrestling, some musicians, a bishop, various other men in their identifying uniforms, and, yes, that central nude, who is seated amidst this male crowd. There is plenty here, in other words, to satisfy art historians of various persuasions—the feminist, the psychoanalyst, and the iconographer or student of motifs and sources.

This book draws mostly on the latter two or these three approaches, though what really unifies it is its prose style—its voice as much as its methodology. Andersen's writing is fluent and lively; he can be funny, bawdy, and confessional. He also revels in digressions, and aptly describes his approach as “a sort of Lewis and Clark exploration rather than traversing a map with pre-planned stopovers and a destination in mind” (p. xiv). Beginning and ending his text with a direct consideration of the central painting, he spends much of his intervening discussion circling around it, teasing out a number of interrelated themes, and playing with our desire to be handed a conclusive reading. This is to say that the book is not so much about a single painting but “the eternal feminine” in a much broader sense—as a kind of verb as well as a noun, a motive as well as a motif. *Cherchez la femme*.

There are, in fact, several versions of *The Eternal Feminine* to be found among Cézanne's works. A watercolor in a private collection relates closely to the Getty's painting, while a couple of other works-on-paper treat the same theme, but organize the figures around a diagonal axis. Compositionally reminiscent of Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*, Andersen calls this the “alternate version” of the theme. More broadly, a number of other figurative works by Cézanne either treat similar themes or contain figures that can be related to those in the various versions of *The Eternal Feminine*.

Locating Cézanne's sources in other works of art, Andersen offers his reader an engrossing and convincing account of the artist's working processes, outlining the way in which he located, copied, and transformed his art's figurative content. The central nude in the Getty's canvas, for example, turns out to have its origins in eminently respectable sources. The artist has mentally undressed a female figure found in his painting, *A Conversation* (featuring a “bourgeois couple out-of-doors” (p. 54), then reversed her pose and tacked on a head derived from a copy he made, “probably of a female head found in a Rubens painting” (p. 57). “[W]e have a system of linkages,” Andersen notes drolly, “between a proper wife with an adoring husband and a dog in a cozy and private setting and the tormented whore on public display” (p. 55). Such visual arguments are supported in the text by black-and-white reproductions, which are more generous in number than in scale.

Critics, myself included, have attempted to associate *The Eternal Feminine* with specific texts that Cézanne may have had in mind while making his painting.<sup>[4]</sup> But it is another virtue of Andersen's book that he is more interested in the painting's overall structure, with “degree[s] of kinship” rather than “direct influence” (p. 122). Ranging from pre-history (the *Venus of Willendorf*) to post-modernity (Madonna!), Andersen draws on an astonishing array of cultural, literary and visual examples in order to isolate motifs that share compositional and thematic similarities with *The Eternal Feminine*. Accordingly, we are given examples of images and textual descriptions that share the same “familiar structure of personages and idols elevated above worshipers” (p. 26): adorations, apotheoses, homages, triumphs, and so forth. The fact that these works are centered on *exceptional* figures—whether god or genius, pariah or freak—leads to another important claim in Andersen's book. “[I]t's fundamental to the human psyche”, he notes, “that everything adored can be equally debased” (p. 93). Such an approach runs the risk of turning complex cultural forms into somewhat static manifestations of archetypal patterns, into things supposedly “fundamental to the human psyche.” So Andersen is perhaps at his most compelling and sympathetic when he is dealing with how specific historical situations modified these

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patterns—when, for instance, he is discussing how factors such as rising literacy and Mariolatry shaped gender roles in nineteenth-century France, sharpening not only the differences between the genders but also between “the femme fatale and the homebody wife” (p.192).

As the book develops, it increasingly concentrates on this familiar virgin/whore dichotomy, “with the simultaneous adoration and threat of the idolized woman, with the Virgin Mary serving as Venus’s defining device, and vice versa” (p. 82). The Getty painting is fascinating, Andersen is suggesting, partly because it appears to present this ambivalence so forcefully. Drawing on spermatic models of artistic creativity (perhaps even subscribing to them), he imagines the moment of the woman’s blinding, when Cézanne “touched those bloody gobs of paint into the woman’s eye sockets.... As the excitement increased to an unbearable state, he discharged it by attacking the woman, not entirely unlike an orgasm of anxiety vented by an ejaculation” (p. 210).

Taken out of context, such quotes can sound hyperbolic, but I generally find such psycho-sexual accounts of Cézanne’s painting persuasive, and Andersen’s more so than most. There is, it seems, an unusually nice fit between Cézanne’s figurative works and the preoccupations of psychoanalysis. I am less convinced by many of Andersen’s observations about human (generally male) psychology, which tend to be cast in restrictively universalizing terms, and raise doubts even as they seek to express certainties. We are told, among other things, that “love and hate share the same roots” (p. 159), that “all men sublimate desire, resisting temptation” (p. 176), and that the woman’s *sexe* is “the optical target of every man’s lust” (p. 224).

Cézanne seems to have painted at least one further version of “the eternal feminine” theme. Unfortunately, this has not survived, having fallen victim first to the angry slashes of the artist’s knife and then to the purifying flames of his fire. This, at least, is according to the not-always-reliable testimony of Joachim Gasquet, Cézanne’s friend and biographer, who wrote about a painting he saw in the attic of the artist’s house, the *Jas de Bouffan*. The description is detailed enough to suggest that the work was obviously related to the Getty’s canvas. The painting, Gasquet wrote, contained a female nude, crouching on a cloud shaped like a swan, a creature bulging with flesh, with a straining belly, swollen breasts, her face shining, glorious and hideous beneath a tumble of reddish-brown hair, her hands caked with blood, an enormous necklace of gold chain across her thighs, and her body struck, like Danaë’s, by a shower of light and gold coins. Around her, in broad daylight, a hideous, distorted, baying pack of fully clothed men, priests, generals, oldsters, a child, workers and judges, faces in Daumier’s style.[5]

Here, then, is an odd lacuna in Andersen’s discussion. He does not discuss (nor even mention) this destroyed painting, even though Gasquet’s description dovetails so very nicely with his book’s concerns. How, for example, might one reconcile the idea that Cézanne impulsively “attacked” the nude in the Getty’s canvas with the knowledge that he seems to have produced at least one other bloodied nude, albeit one with wounded hands rather than eyes?

What Andersen has provided us with, though, is an eminently readable and thought-provoking book about much, much more than just the painting reproduced on its dust-jacket. Having finished *Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine*, readers might well conclude: that some works of art are powerful enough to pull just about everything into their gravitational fields; that a critic writing ostensibly about a single painting can offer insights into a huge variety of related cultural objects; and that, as an emerging critical genre, the monograph dedicated to a “single” artwork contains more possibilities than they had previously dared to imagine.

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## NOTES

[1] Christopher Green, ed., *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Wayne Andersen, *Picasso's Brothel: Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (New York: Other Press, 2002).

[2] For a reproduction of the painting, see Paul Cézanne, *The Eternal Feminine*, The Getty Museum, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=931&handle=li>, 12 February 2006.

[3] For a reproduction (albeit accidentally reversed) of the painting prior to the removal of the additions, see Paul Cézanne, "The Eternal Feminine: Before Treatment Photograph," The Getty Museum, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?handle=tech&artobj=931&artview=55491>, 12 February 2006.

[4] See my "Cézanne and Zola: Reassessment of 'L'Eternel feminine,'" *The Burlington Magazine* vol. 140, no. 1142 (1998): 312-318. It is regrettable that Andersen's book does not include a bibliography and that several notable interpretations of *The Eternal Feminine* are not formally cited in the text. For another article that has obvious relevance to Andersen's text, see Tamar Garb, "Visuality and sexuality in Cezanne's late bathers," *The Oxford Art Journal* vol. 19, no. 2 (1996): 46-60.

[5] Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, trans. Christopher Pemberton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 72.

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