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Jon Kear, *Paul Cézanne*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 245 pp. Illustrations and bibliography. \$19.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-7802-3573-8.

Review by Benjamin Harvey, Mississippi State University.

Potential readers may reasonably expect a book titled after an artist to be about the life and work of that artist. In the case of Jon Kear's *Paul Cézanne*, they would be partly correct but would also do well to pay attention to the name of the series the book belongs to, a name that appears prominently on the book's front cover: Critical Lives. "Titles in the series," one reads inside, "present the work of leading cultural figures of the modern period. Each book explores the life of the artist, writer, philosopher or architect in question and relates it to their major works" (p. 2). The "critical" part of these lives is not just an acknowledgment of the importance of the subjects; it also indicates that as well as life and work, one can expect a critical approach—a self-conscious sense of the interpretive frameworks that have shaped, or might shape, our understanding of these lives. The implied contrast to critical lives is not unimportant lives so much as naïve life writing.

In the case of Cézanne, Kear seeks to avoid a "rigid, repetitious and formulaic character to the interpretation of his art," which he detects in the "dominantly formalist way of understanding Cézanne's art that held sway in the mid-twentieth century" (p. 214). He names no names, but sees this tradition as failing to do justice to the "exploratory, often-contradictory and difficult character of his painting," and as being "quite at odds with the more diverse interpretations that his art initially provoked" (p. 214). One of Kear's aims, it seems, is to pursue just such a heterogeneous approach. Chapter by chapter, his critical framework shifts to account for the changing nature of the topic. The organization of the text is at once chronological and thematic: each section addresses a different period of the artist's biography, distinctive aspects of his oeuvre, and a discrete set of critical issues.

The book's introduction, "The Myth of Cézanne," surveys the entirety of the artist's career and considers how a succession of texts shaped perceptions of the artist, as well as his perception of himself. Between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s, fictionalized Cézannes appeared in the atelier literature generated by Théodore Duranty, Marius Roux, and Emile Zola—most famously in the guise of the painter Claude Lantier in Zola's *L'Œuvre*. "My mind is filled with the visions of Claude in *L'Œuvre*" (p. 19), wrote Maurice Denis about his first meeting with Cézanne, two full decades after the novel's publication. Along with Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, Denis was one of several symbolist artists and critics who, variously, wrote about the artist, collected his works, and referenced Cézanne's art in their own painting. Equally important, after 1895 Cézanne's art appeared more widely in Paris, first in Ambroise Vollard's gallery and then in the *Salon d'Automne* and other venues. Colorful biographies—not least, Vollard's own—would later add to the growing myth and feed interest in his art. Kear's basic point is that "it is perhaps unfeasible today to have an unmediated experience of the art or the man outside of the representations that subsequently took hold of him" (p. 24); equally, he explores Cézanne's possible complicity in generating this myth. Cézanne posed for Emile Bernard's camera sitting in front of one of his Great Bather canvases, an integral part of his "legend and legacy," which the artist

embarked upon around the time Vollard began to represent him in Paris (p. 31). Connecting Cézanne's bathers with the largely illegible painting in Balzac's *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, Kear sees them as "haunted by sexual guilt and repression" (p. 31), as pushing against the limits of the artist's ability to understand himself and our ability to understand his art.

Cézanne's bathers—albeit this time his male bathers—reappear in the chapter "Memories of Youth," where Kear describes the artist's upbringing and education in Aix-en-Provence. The author stresses the way Cézanne and his Aixois friends—Zola foremost among them—modeled their legendary pastoral vagabonding on classical and romantic literary models; then, from the perspective of adulthood, they produced retrospective, nostalgic, and often public accounts of their shared youth. With its male figures peaceably sharing a Virgilian landscape, Cézanne's *Baigneurs au repos* (1876-1877, Barnes Foundation) reads as a summa of these themes: "[P]ictures like these reflect a personal nostalgia for Cézanne's youth and the landscape that he felt he intimately and integrally belonged to" (p. 49). Here too, Cézanne's painting is just plain strange, a "curiously incongruent and paratactical painting that is made out of separately conceived parts" (p. 50).

The next chapter, "An artist of *Tempérament*," follows the artist to Paris, where he moved in 1861, and describes his rather piecemeal artistic training there, as well as the major influences on his early paintings. Delacroix and Courbet receive their due attention but increasingly it is Manet who emerges as the strong "precursor" with whom the younger artist must contend, if he is to stamp his own presence on the Parisian stage. In *A Modern Olympia* (c.1872-1874, Musée d'Orsay), Cézanne revised Manet in order to demonstrate "a personalized aesthetic that emphasized the unconstrained emotion of the artist as opposed to the 'dispassionate neutrality' or 'objectifying' tendency Zola associated with Manet" (p. 95). As part of this strategy, Cézanne makes himself Olympia's client by placing his own likeness in the foreground of the work, thereby making manifest a position that Manet had merely strongly implied. Cézanne's abrasive assertion of his own character, both in his art and in the art world, had become his chief strategy. Like Courbet before him, he was a "vertical invader" from the provinces, and his "painting, with its emphasis on will, *tempérament*, personal feeling and force of *sensation*, thus went hand in hand with the making of an artistic persona that gave form and character to these attributes" (pp. 69-70). The strategy ultimately failed, Kear concludes, because the artist lacked "the social and political framework within which Courbet's art operated" and his art risked becoming symptomatic merely of "a phantasmagorical world where celebrity, fame and success eclipsed any deeper ideals, where transgression existed for its own sake and sensational pictures reflected mere gratuitous sensationalism" (pp. 75-76). The artist's persona had become an impediment.

Chapter three addresses the 1870s and the topic of "Pissarro, Landscape and Impressionism." Cézanne finds a way out of the previous decade's impasse by working alongside Pissarro, an older and more established artist with a commitment to the rural landscape and a taste for work. Ego-centric *tempérament* softens and gives way to perceptual *sensation*, which (according to Richard Shiff's influential account) was considered to be "the primordial fact or event of perception" and situated at the "intersection of subject-object relations" (p. 119). Cézanne learns Pissarro's lessons in landscape and then takes them in his own particular direction. Pissarro populated his scenes with figures, while Cézanne preferred to avoid them, instead insisting on an unadulterated "contemplation of the spectacle of 'pure nature'" (p. 121); and where Pissarro's landscapes captured fleeting effects of light and atmosphere, Cézanne preferred to stress his paintings' formal and material qualities. The copy he makes of Pissarro's *Vue de Louveciennes* (1872, Private Collection), for example, has a solidity that is "amplified endlessly, the landscape compressed, airless, flattened out and unoccupiable"; Cézanne restores "Courbet's weighty solidness that Pissarro's Impressionism had begun to leave behind" (p. 123). Kear reads the *Chateau de Medan* (1880, Glasgow City Art Gallery), which features Zola's recently acquired house, as marking Cézanne's growing distance from Pissarro and Zola: Pissarro, because the painting features his so-called "constructive stroke," short parallel hatchings that relentlessly stress the material surface of the

painting; Zola, because Cézanne's composition systematically downplays the building's grandeur and ostentation, those potent signs of the novelist's growing wealth and social success.

In the 1870s, Cézanne seems to have been sympathetic to Pissarro's leftist political inclinations. In chapter six, "Provence, the Peasantry and Montagne Sainte-Victoire," Kear describes the older artist's growing cultural conservatism as he became increasingly entrenched in Provence and attracted to the *Félibrige* movement, with its "romantic emphasis on the traditional rural ideals that connected Provence's past to the present," and its hostility to "Parisian centralization" and republicanism (p. 182). Cézanne's growing attraction to regional signifiers—the landscape around Aix, crowned by Montagne Sainte-Victoire; the local workers and peasantry—reflects this shift. At the same time, the artist grew disenchanted with the terrain around L'Estaque, formerly a favorite subject but now ruined for him by encroaching modernity. Already predisposed towards a regionalistic ideology, Cézanne was further encouraged in this direction by a new friend, the young poet and writer Joachim Gasquet, who would later go on to turn Cézanne into a "Provençal Poussin" in his much read biography of the artist (p. 185). Kear traces the limits of Gasquet's attempts to claim Cézanne for his purposes. Their friendship rapidly cooled and important aspects of his late work are better explained by factors other than any commitment to the *Félibrige* movement. In late works such as his landscapes of the Château Noir and his still-lives with skulls, the artist turned to subjects redolent of desolation and death; here he "pulls away somewhat from this more serene and idealized vision of Provence to something more unsettled and disquieted, a confrontation with the destructiveness of time and the imminence of death" (pp. 210-11).

The rest of the book tackles the genres of portraiture and still-life. In chapter four, "Portrait of a Woman," the author discusses the artist's relationship to Hortense Fiquet, whom he met in the 1860s and married in 1886. Though she has typically been portrayed unsympathetically, in recent years there has been a thorough reevaluation of Madame Cézanne and an attempt to produce more nuanced accounts of her character and the couple's relationship. Kear tracks this shift and, like other recent commentators, draws attention to their significant creative collaboration. Cézanne, who was famously demanding of his sitters, made no fewer than "27 paintings of her and many more drawings" (p. 137). Following Susan Sidlauskas's reading of these portraits, Kear sees these works as not producing "a consistent image of [the subject] but the many ways in which she might appear"; the portraits "capture not Hortense herself but the labile process of formation involved in the successive acts of perceiving and materializing her presence before him" (p. 151).

A pattern repeats itself in this book, with variations. Cézanne falls into the orbit of a significant figure and finds himself influenced by them, only to reassert his independence from them: as with Zola and Manet, so with Camille Pissarro, Joachim Gasquet, and perhaps even Hortense Fiquet. But what about in the artist's studio, when the door was shut and he was alone with his still-life objects, those trademark apples, dishes, bottles, and fabrics? Even here, Kear argues in chapter five, there were limits to the hermit of Aix's purported hermeticism; social and intersubjective considerations can never entirely disappear. "Solitary Pleasures" describes the artist's abiding interest in still-life and the role it played in his studio practice; this practice changed in the last years of the artist's life, when Cézanne commissioned a new house on the outskirts of Aix, complete with a generous studio in the upper story. The building was a "humble, traditional *cabanon*, an austere, stripped-down cottage typical of Provence" (p. 159), but it was also a place "where self-fashioned subjecthood reasserted itself over the divided self that inhabited the public domain" (p. 163). In this new studio, Cézanne worked on his late bathers and his still-lives. The two have more in common than one might suspect. Paraphrasing Meyer Schapiro, Kear writes that still-life "became the medium through which Cézanne sublimated and gave acceptable form to his conflicted and guilt-ridden desire" (p. 165). Kear balances out such psychoanalytically informed accounts by introducing an alternative way of looking at the still-lives, one drawn partly from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. These paintings, he proposes, respond to the artist's "horror of the photographic eye." "We do not see nature anymore," the artist said, "we see its representations" (p.

172). While still aiming for pictorial harmony, Cézanne did away with conventions such as linear perspective; simultaneously, the distinctive features he introduced—the distorted forms, the discontinuous or repeated lines, the unstable and flattened spaces—are attempts to prolong the act of perception and to recognize “all that is ambiguous and unstable in perception” (p. 175).

Cézanne’s art, Kear writes in his epilogue, may seem antiquated “in an age of instantaneity and immediacy,” but has value precisely in the way it “preserves capacities and potentialities that might otherwise be lost”: its “untimeliness presents us with possibilities of other forms of thought and experience” (p. 218). This position sees Cézanne as offering his viewer a kind of perceptual primitivism—a way back to true, or at least more authentic experience; but, as we have already seen, elsewhere in the book, Kear expresses skepticism that such a pure view of the artist is even possible. “As Frederic Jameson has argued,” he writes in an endnote, “Cézanne is now a cultural institution, a signifier of the ideology of modernism, and it is impossible to see his work outside of the framework that has encompassed it (p. 219, n. 2). These problems of mediation, of whether it is even possible to see the art truly, are certainly not new in the literature on Cézanne; Roger Fry grappled with them in the beginning of his landmark monograph, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development* (1927), when he vowed to remove the “scales of vague and distorted memories” until he “seemed be face to face with the artist himself.”[1] Fry had a distinct advantage over his reader—access to the Pellerin Collection, which was then the world’s largest collection of Cézannes. Since Kear’s book, like Fry’s, includes only black-and-white reproductions, the reader faces a much harder task. As a necessary supplement, I strongly recommend an excellent digital resource, albeit one absent from Kear’s bibliography: *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne: an online catalogue raisonné*. [2] For whether or not Cézanne offers a corrective to modern life’s “unstemmable flow of images and digitized imagery” (p. 218), it would be perverse to ignore the fact that this flow includes many excellent and freely available color reproductions of his art.

Jon Kear’s *Paul Cézanne* provides a concise biography of the artist and a thorough survey of recent, and occasionally not-so-recent, trends in the literature on the artist.[3] It is this emphasis on critical modes of understanding that most clearly distinguishes the offering from other readily available, short, and modestly-priced primers on the artist, such as those by Richard Verdi and Mary Tompkin Lewis.[4] These last books offer perhaps more easily digestible accounts of the artist’s entire career, but it is Kear’s that provides a superior entrée into the wider field of Cézanne studies.

#### NOTES

[1] Roger Fry, *Cézanne. A Study of His Development* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), p. 2.

[2] Walter Feilchenfeldt, Jayne Warman, and David Nash, *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne*. <http://cezannecatalogue.com> (accessed October 20, 2017).

[3] It is a pity that many intriguing details in the text are not fully referenced in the endnotes, presumably in an attempt to save space. Furthermore, Cézanne’s works are identified only by title and date, which can lead to confusion, especially when they are not illustrated; Cézanne’s works often have generic titles and disputed dates, and it is for good reason that scholars usually eliminate ambiguity by referencing *catalogue raisonné* numbers.

[4] See Richard Verdi, *Cézanne* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), and Mary Tompkin Lewis, *Cézanne* (London: Phaidon, 2000).

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