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Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine

Cézanne's painting *The Eternal Feminine*, painted in 1878, has been given considerable attention in the literature on this artist, although it has generally embarrassed scholars because it suggests aspects of the artist's personality that many connoisseurs in the past would rather have repressed. The painting has been known by a variety of titles and, as Wayne Andersen has discovered, has also been altered. He traced these alterations to an art dealer who made them in an effort to render the painting more marketable. This volume is the first to interrogate the original state of *The Eternal Feminine* and to resolve its mysterious importance to Cézanne and, more broadly, the history of art. Devoting many paragraphs to each of the titles by which the picture has been known, Andersen resolves its hidden meaning while providing a fresh look at Cézanne's artistic process.

Wayne Andersen is Professor Emeritus of History, Theory, and Criticism of Art and Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of a number of volumes on aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, most recently *Picasso's Brothel: Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *The Youth of Cézanne and Zola: Notoriety at Its Source*.

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For Peter Selz
for forty years of supporting friendship

Now hear this, you lover of pleasure
who sits securely in place, who says in your heart,
“I am, and there is no one besides me, I shall not
sit as widow or know the loss of children.”
These two things shall come to you in a moment.
One day the loss of children and widowhood
shall come upon you in full measure
in spite of your many sorceries and the
power of your enchantments.

– *So sayeth Isaiah, addressing the whore of Babylon
who fancied herself eternally feminine.*

Meanwhile, in public places, his wife cries out:
“Since he believes me worthy to adore,
I’ll deal in worship as old idols did,
And, like them, have myself touched up with gold;
Why not? I’ll glut myself with frankincense
And genuflections, gifts of meat and wine –
We’ll see if in so reverent a heart
My smile usurps the humor of the gods!
And when I weary of these impious tricks
The time will come for a laying-on of hands:
These frail and resolute hands, these harpies’ nails
Will claw there way into his waiting breast.”

– Charles Baudelaire

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Preface



THIS BOOK OPENS AND CLOSES ON A SINGLE PAINTING BY CÉZANNE known as *The Eternal Feminine*, painted when he was in his late thirties. The most unusual among his works, the imagery shocked and baffled Roger Fry, the first to comment on it in print, and to this day the motif remains uncanny. Over the years after Cézanne's art dealer, Ambroise Vollard, entered this picture into his sales book, probably in 1895, it has been known by several titles: *La Femme*, *Homage to Venus*, *La Belle Impéria*, *The Golden Calf*, *The Whore of Babylon*, *The Triumph of Woman*.

Each title has solicited a different meaning. In this book, I take up each title and explore its fitness as a way to uncover what meaning the motif may have had for Cézanne rather than, through hindsight, what it has meant to the picture's viewers, while admitting that, when looking back to historical time, we see the past only through a dense screen of subsequence. In a wider scope, I explore Cézanne's method of generating a range of imagery that tends to put subject matter ahead of form, and how he deployed a great inventory of images gathered from relentless copying of works of art in museums and illustrations in books and magazines, the imagery stored in his mind for alteration and reuse.

Because I do not believe he had a clearly defined idea at all levels of his engagement with the subject matter, I will be careful not to predetermine how I might unravel this picture's representations. Imagery as complex as *The Eternal Feminine* – should that title prove to be appropriate – needs considerable background, especially because Cézanne compressed art history like the nucleus of a cell compresses DNA as the whole of organic

evolution. My approach will be tentative, roundabout, and responsive to every clue – in short, a sort of Lewis and Clark exploration rather than traversing a map with preplanned stopovers and a destination in mind. I will take exploratory excursions off to the side, trusting that, should they not lead anywhere, they will nonetheless be scenic.

The core of this book, within its loosely shaped flesh, was an evening lecture I gave in 1976 at New York's Museum of Modern Art and again at the Houston Museum of Fine Art for the exhibition *Cézanne: The Late Work*. Since that date, and even before, I lectured on the subjects covered herein at several universities, including Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Yale, Michigan, and Dartmouth. Three of the chapters were previously published as essays but for this book were rewritten and put into a larger context: "The Miracle of Her Restored Vision" appeared in Barbara Rose's newspaper *The Journal of Art* in December 1990; portions of the chapter, "Venal Venus," appeared as "Os Vulvae in Proverbs and the *Malleus Malificarum*," in *History of European Ideas* 14, no. 5 (1992) Chapter 8, "The Whore of Babylon," appeared as "Cézanne and the Whore of Babylon" in *The European Legacy* 1, no. 4 (1997). My paragraphs on Cézanne and Zola as adolescents and young men draw on material from my book *The Youth of Cézanne and Zola: Notoriety at Its Source* (2003).

I thank Parry Jubert for coaching my writing during the years that I lived in Paris, and Jacques Jubert for his design of my publications while in Paris. Both are treasured friends. My appreciation goes out as well to Sascha Talmor, editor of *The European Legacy*, and Jeffrey Perl, editor of *Common Knowledge*, both in Israel, who invited publication of my essays from time to time in their excellent journals. I am especially grateful to my friend Donald Kuspit for putting this book into this series, and to Beatrice Rehl, Senior Editor at Cambridge University Press, for moving the book through the publication process with efficiency and grace.

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