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book review of

Cézanne's Gravity by Carol Armstrong

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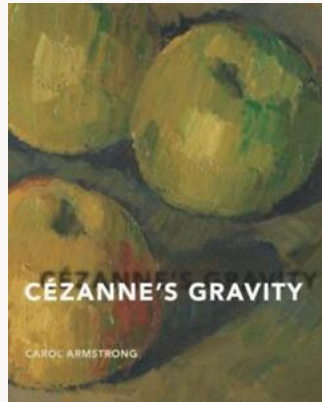
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Carol Armstrong,
Cézanne's Gravity.
New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 2018.
296 pp.; 108 color and 18 b&w illus.; index.
\$65 (hardcover)
ISBN: 9780300232714

Between you, Henri, and me, I mean between what makes up my personality and yours, there is the world, the sun. . . what happens. . . what we see in common. . . our clothes, flesh, reflections. . . that's what I am chipping away at [je pioche].

Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne* (Paris: Editions Bernheim-Jeune, 1921), 118.

Not to mention the difference between thinking-in-physics and thinking-in-painting.

Carol Armstrong, *Cézanne's Gravity*, 75.

If the sociology of art ever reclaims the pungent specificity it enjoyed in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (especially his posthumous *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*), it will have a field day recounting the belated triumph of the nineteenth-century provincial loner Paul Cézanne. No painter did less than Cézanne to secure a written testament of his aesthetic and metaphysical principles; yet few painters have enjoyed such prestige among philosophers, particularly phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Éric Alliez. The poets, beginning with Rainer Maria Rilke, D.H. Lawrence, and William Carlos Williams, were once equally vocal, and Susan McCaslin has recently rediscovered him as a nature poet. And to the art critic and historian, Cézanne, a good century after Roger Fry's first exhibitions and articles, still stands without remainder for the modern, both its promise and its limits. Why is that?

The present book, by an art historian renowned as much for her work on nineteenth-century photography as for French modernist painting, completes something of a trilogy, following studies of Edgar Degas and Édouard Manet. A brisk introduction aligns the youthful Cézanne with his hero Manet, whom he seemed determined to upstage with his

brushy manner and irreverent, at times shamelessly cribbed subject matter. *Couillard*, as he then called his style, normally means “ballsy” (from *couilles*), but *couillon* means idiot, and the young Cézanne walked a fine line between burning ambition and bungling incompetence. As he nears maturity, Armstrong disarmingly changes tack and instead of giving us the developmental story—perhaps less than pressing in the wake of the recent biography and edition of letters by Alex Danchev—turns to the artist’s “afterlives,” *not* for a reception history, but in order to juxtapose Cézanne’s art with the writing of some of his great partisans (Rilke, Merleau-Ponty, Fry, Virginia Woolf), some unexpected bedfellows (Albert Einstein, Luce Irigaray, R.D. Laing), and a handful of artists, many of them women (Vanessa Bell, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Nicolas Poussin, Helen Frankenthaler). Why these and not others? Armstrong explains:

I take up the double challenge of at once detaching this most strange of artists from the aftermath that has served to normalize his work, and of making his art newly strange again. At the same time, I propose to question and revise the historical logic of the modernist timeline . . . at the head of which Cézanne is often placed, along with the old chestnut . . . that the artist should be “of his time,” replacing those shopworn ideas with the model of a jagged series of multiple, overlapping times (18–19).

Armstrong’s understanding of context-smashing is idiosyncratic: Cézanne and Einstein “are both taken as Jacobins of modernism—the driving forces behind radical transformations in key areas of modern thought” (20). Her history, for all its overlapping timelines, is classically modernist in its enthusiasm for rupture and rebellion, Jacobinism writ large. At the same time, Armstrong wishes to register a plurality of voices, making Cézanne “at least two,” which is what Irigaray meant in calling woman *The Sex Which is Not One* in her book by that name. Cézanne is both systematic and spontaneous, macho and feminine, physically intimate and emotionally distant, philosophical about geometry and perceptive “like a dog” (150–51). Even the titular gravity is dual, standing both for the physical concept at the heart of two momentous revolutions in science and for the aesthetic (metaphysical, Armstrong calls it) concept of *gravitas*, Cézanne’s passionate seriousness about painting. One might also add, in the spirit of “two or more”: heaviness, sheer materiality, which plays a role in the paintings and Armstrong’s own assured readings of them, as it does in some of the voices she conjures.

I have dwelt on the book’s historiographic opening gambit because summarizing the chapters won’t give a sense of its ruminative, digressive, and associative rhythm. All of them bear titles on the pattern of “Cézanne’s X,” with “Chronicity,” “Gravity,” “Sensations,” “Colors,” and “Divided Self” filling the gap. Armstrong names the book after the second chapter, which, besides elegantly echoing the “Cézanne’s Doubt” of Merleau-Ponty, places the book among recent humanistic explorations of nineteenth-century science in the wake of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s work on objectivity.^[1] Accordingly, Armstrong tackles relativistic physics in her novel account of the expressive distortions of shape and surface, plunging viewpoints and twisting perspectives, which have puzzled art historians at least since Fritz Novotny in 1930s Vienna. Armstrong is rather *couillard* about physics, skipping lightly from Einstein to a postwar book on general relativity, revising in the process Earle Loran’s loopy diagrams, which purported to show multiple viewing positions and other peculiarities of Cézannian vision, and appropriating Henri Bergson’s boast of “being more Einsteinian than Einstein” for Cézanne (72–75). The upshot of this freewheeling history of science confirms a commonsense formalist view of Cézanne’s treatment of objects as

originating in an embodied vision whose data change over time—from movements of the artist's body to the impingement of colored objects upon each other and upon the canvas or page—relativity in a humble, everyday sense, as it were. This sidesteps more granular recent accounts of Cézanne's kinship with physiological aesthetics and its accounts of eye movement, depth perception and the like.^[2] Armstrong is more interested in the visual quiddity of Cézanne's roiling, mosaic-like paint strokes, which connects this ostensible discussion of ("metaphoric") physics to her discussion of embodied time in the first chapter, as well as to the confrontation and endorsement of Merleau-Ponty's ideas about Cézanne in the third, on "Sensations." The former, devoted to Fry, Bell, and Woolf's overlapping understanding of Cézanne and their dissatisfaction with the atomized beat of "clock time," is particularly accomplished, and connects with some other recent work on the intellectual seriousness and critical penetration of the Bloomsbury writers.^[3] Starting with Woolf's arch aphorism that "On or about December 1910 human character changed," which is meant less to advance any such epochal nonsense than to parody the mechanical precision of the Victorians, Armstrong guides us, under the tutelage of Bergson and Cézanne, to a more supple, experiential sense of conscious temporal flow. (In a more contextualist study, William James might merit a mention.)

In turning from time to space, Armstrong notes playfully that Cézanne *might* have had peers in the imaginative treatment of geometry and experiment. If that were her objective, she "could mention the Viennese Ernst Mach" (though he was not really Viennese), or the art psychologist Robert Vischer, or Jules Verne, or the H.G. Wells of *The Time Machine*, or Edwin Abbot's *Flatland*, to say nothing of the technical jargon "coordinate system (or 'Cs' as Einstein termed it)" (all this on 82–83). But, though she handles this diverse intellectual baggage effortlessly, Armstrong pointedly refuses to place Cézanne in his time intellectually. For one thing, it is nearly impossible to extract his own ideas from the fog of legend and embroidery wherein hagiographers like Joachim Gasquet left them. And as Armstrong suggests, "*our* time is the time of relativity" (84), if by that we mean a proliferation of complex temporalities, and especially, if throughout, we take physics, as well as philosophy, psychology, and other explanatory lenses, as metaphors rather than final arbiters of reality. This transposes into an affecting plea not to invert the usual explanatory priority given to science in our culture in order to portray art as intuitively anticipating it, but to treat them rather like parallel but distinct modes of thought, so that Cézanne and Einstein could agree about "the primacy of the object [or] the pliability and curvature of space." Still, Armstrong affirms a difference, if not a hierarchy: while the scientist's thinking sprang "onto the blackboard, like Athena from the head of Zeus," Cézanne's "was determined by the materiality of his practice as a painter whose body was very much *in* the world that he painted" (85).

To ask for a more historical book on Cézanne and physics might well be to ask for a different writer. But I couldn't help wondering what *Cézanne's Gravity* would have looked like without the assumption that scientific thinking is a disembodied throwing of ideas onto blackboards. Armstrong never gets very close to Einstein's achievements or the profound disorientation they caused even to experts. Instead, we hear a lot about the primacy of objects over space, of the need of objects to establish spatial or temporal relations: much of this was familiar to Descartes in the seventeenth century.^[4] What kept Newton's absolute space and time alive were logical and dynamical considerations hard to match in painting. Still, someone attentive to the texture of period science might be drawn to the 1880s discovery of inertial frames of reference. These relative systems *within which* the objects move as if the law of

inertia held absolutely, taken on implicitly by Einstein in his *annus mirabilis* papers of 1905, may or may not help us understand how Cézanne combined, as if simultaneously, the fruits of consecutive acts of observation.^[5]

Armstrong, in contrast, is guided by a parable from John Wheeler's 1973 book *Gravitation*: an ant runs along the surface of an apple, following the shortest path along its curved surface, which cannot be a planar straight line (65). Gravity curves space like the dimpled pole of that apple. Turning to a still-life with apples in the Fitzwilliam Museum much admired by Fry, Armstrong applies the physicist's image directly to the painting:

As Wheeler put it, "The dimple arises in the apple because the stem is there. I think I see how to put the whole story even more briefly: *Space acts on matter, telling it how to move. In turn, matter reacts back on space, telling it how to curve.*" It is at this point in Wheeler's parable that it becomes clear that space and geometry are equivalent, but with the difference from previous such equivalences that space is mass-and-movement in time, geometry is curvature, and that the one produces and is enfolded in the other [. . .] Meanwhile, each of the dimples in Cézanne's roughly spherical apples is a little "black hole" that indicates a disappearance from sight into the density of the apple's matter. Thus, while they describe objects, not geometrical space, at the same time they suggest a contest between matter and geometry, not to mention color, that was fundamental to Cézanne's own painterly experience (67–68).

I am baffled by the passage and see only a verbal affinity between Wheeler's metaphor for curved space-time and the "black holes" in the apples' polar region.^[6] What Armstrong is really after, it emerges after more still lifes are discussed, together with Cézanne's remarks about "the cylinder, the sphere, the cone," is a kind of poetics of space: "And we are encouraged to wander with our eyes through that space as it is pushed up into the interstices between round objects, which seem to pull it forward, and around and under and over themselves: space as foldable, invertible fabric rather than background" (81). I submit that this could all be true of Cézanne regardless of relativity theory, Einsteinian or otherwise.^[7]

But to insist on the philosophy of space is to misconstrue the book's spirit, summed up by Armstrong in rejecting "the psychoanalytic direction" in her interpretation of the *Bathers*: "I seek to describe the painting in view of an understanding of its intrinsic properties, rather than giving an explanation from 'facts' prior to or outside of it" (195–6).^[8] This results in meaty, vividly described bouts with a wide spectrum of paintings, from the stormy parodies of Manet to the final watercolors, from the portraits of self and wife and Mont Sainte-Victoire to the nudes and landscapes. Armstrong, who has already published a monograph on Cézanne's watercolors, does not shy away from making bold art-critical points: one particular view of Mont Sainte-Victoire in the Philadelphia Museum of Art is especially successful in its "Sisyphean" task of reconstituting the familiar silhouette of the mountain from a chaos of brushstrokes (164–9); just one painting of Madame Cézanne, in the Met, betrays "some ineffable awareness that Hortense is a person, a subject in the personal sense" (178). There are no connoisseurial surprises in again comparing the *Great Bather* of 1885 with the anonymous studio photograph of a male model glued to the back of a drawing in the MoMA (199), but the juxtaposition of a Bibémus quarry landscape, chock-full of crazily tilted earth, with Ellsworth Kelly's tricolor *Train Landscape* of 1953 makes the case of Cézanne's poor fit in the trajectory of a supposedly ever-flattening, ever-simplifying modernism more

eloquently than a volume of anti-formalist screeds. This touches also on the book's central polemical point: Armstrong is especially unsympathetic to facile diagnoses of "abstraction," and the strand of the modern Cézanne literature she tackles head on, if implicitly, is Richard Shiff's argument for flattening and a drift from matching to making, with a particular emphasis on the performance of Cézanne's individual brushstrokes.^[9] Against this, Armstrong stresses the artist's emphasis on observing accurately, the chipping away (*piocher*) of my epigraph: this too seems to unite the creative and by no means identical readings of his constructions by Fry, Loran, Merleau-Ponty, and Rilke. It is true that seeing an apple anew, and *showing* that seeing, is hard work, especially while forgetting the word "apple" (or *pomme*), but a lack of interest in the genealogy of abstraction, particularly the old and ailing psychological (and art-academic) theory of "abstracting away from" attributes of concrete objects to achieve generality, prevents any real clinching of the case against Cézanne's alleged abstractness. After conceding that Kelly's painting "bears reductive comparison" to Cézanne, Armstrong insists that "Cézanne wasn't trying to be Kelly" (214). Very true, but who ever thought he was?

The cumulative effect of the book is of something like attending a master class, a season's if not a professional lifetime's reflections on Cézanne's art, personality, and kindred spirits. This stays with the reader longer than any tortuously hedged thesis about how he resembles R.D. Laing in his portraiture (not in being schizophrenic *per se* but in a "metaphorics" of disconnection). As for the treatment of other modernist writers, the subtle interpreter of Edmond Duranty and Émile Zola does not disappoint: the chapters on Rilke and Merleau-Ponty are definitive in their measured meditation on what Cézanne meant to these unpredictable, powerful intellects, whose social and intellectual climate is sketched with none of the impatience applied to the book's physics. In particular, the reading of *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* (ca. 1877) achieves a seamless cooperation between twenty-first century author and early twentieth-century poet in its interpretation of the weird vibrancy of Cézanne's color and the way it drives form. The conclusion of that chapter, in turn, convincingly speculates that Rilke owed his love of Cézanne, as well as his distinctive approach to the painter, to Paula Modersohn-Becker as artist, woman, and "non-literary" thinker about art. Such inspired riffing, bounded by concrete links of space, time, and shared ideas, reach farther than the somewhat strained allusions to Greenberg's reading of Helen Frankenthaler, or to the anecdote about Erwin Panofsky, disguised as Einstein's chauffeur, leading the great physicist through the Barnes Collection, brought in to clinch the account of Cézanne as a foe of linear perspective and Euclidean space. One might also view the battery of distinguished names with some irony in light of the author's determination to oppose monotonic modernism: Einstein, Bergson, Fry, Merleau-Ponty, and Rilke make quite an illustrious cushion for Cézanne's reputation to rest on. The refusal of reception history robs us of what might have been a very sharp diagnosis of just why *this* painter, with all his strengths and failings, and not a dozen others, should appeal so persistently to both specialists and speculators as a fount of modernist authenticity. To name just two artists Armstrong has mastered: neither Degas nor Manet have had *this* kind of afterlife. Is it because of misplaced faith in abstraction? Absent that, has Armstrong given us another reason to put Cézanne first? If I may be permitted a strained analogy of my own, this overwhelming guide to Cézanne is a surer guide to Carol Armstrong's thinking, writing, and perception about modern art, as well as to one set of directions that may still be open to it. It is a grand, generous, vertiginous vista, exhilarating but not without its pitfalls.

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Notes

[1] Though *Objectivity* the book was published in 2007, the first articles appeared fifteen years earlier: see Lorraine Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," *Social Studies of Science* 22:4 (November 1992), 597–618, and Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations* 40 (Autumn 1992), 81–128. I therefore regard such art historical studies of art and science as Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* and John Gage's *Colour and Culture* (both 1999), as informed by rather than anticipating that work.

[2] In a copiously documented book, Cézanne scholarship is uneven. Crary is challenged not for his physiological aesthetics but for imbuing his four case studies (set in 1879, 1888, 1900, 1907) with a Foucauldian "monolithic" synchronicity (269n24); Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer's name is misspelled, an inadvertent sign of perfunctory engagement with her work on Provençal intellectuals. It is reassuring, then, to have explicit acknowledgement of Susan Sidlauskas's very different readings of the Hortense portraits as sympathetic psychological studies.

[3] See Sam Rose, *Art and Form* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019), and the now-classic Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which Armstrong thinks too Russellian. She may be right, but it is a shame that despite her wide reading of Woolf, the 1925 *Nation & Athenæum* essay on "Pictures" goes unmentioned, since it illuminates Woolf's view of both Cézanne and what paintings can express.

[4] If one were a die-hard anachronist, one might ask why salient analogues to Cézanne have to come from *later* thought. Why not, like Meyer Schapiro in "Cézanne and the Philosophers", compare his empiricist common sense with that of a Scottish critic of Hume like Thomas Reid? See Meyer Schapiro, "Cézanne and the Philosophers," (1977) in *Worldview in Painting: Art and Society*, ed. Irene Gordon and Paul Mattick (New York: Braziller, 1999), 75–105.

[5] Ludwig Lange, *Die geschichtliche Entwicklung des Bewegungsbegriffes* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1886). See Julian Barbour, *The Discovery of Dynamics*, vol.1: *Absolute or Relative Motion?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 12.3, and Herbert Pfister, "Ludwig Lange on the law of inertia," *The European Physical Journal H*, 39 (2014), 245–50. Kindred formulations of relativity by J. Thomson, Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré are also relevant. See Robert DiSalle, *Understanding Space-Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100f.

[6] It is also disquieting that Armstrong claims of these apples that "all their stems have been removed" (68), when that of the lower right (foreground) apple is clearly visible, and enlarged on the book's cover.

[7] There is here, and in comments on 'the sculptural, almost clay-like solidity of the "coarse materials" of paint from pots and tubes, as if Cézanne were a weaver and a potter' (214), the latent misunderstanding that curvature, complexity or irregularity of shape are somehow already opposed to classical physics or Euclidean geometry. To clear up this kind of non sequitur, I recommend an accessible book like Sander Bias, *Very Special Relativity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), which explains the concepts with mainly geometric diagrams.

[8] Curiously, Armstrong's conclusion that "the socialized adult view of the body . . . is mapped onto, and incompatible with, a never-fully-transcended infantile relation to the body . . . never reducible to nameable parts or stable sexing, and never securely distinguishable from other bodies" (196), sounds a lot like the psychoanalytical Lacan and Kristeva, as the author admits.

[9] One might wish the confrontation more outright, or that Armstrong had suggestions for how Cézanne fits into Impressionist and Symbolist theory and practice as careful as those in Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).