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Paul Cézanne, Claude Lantier and Artistic Impotence
by Aruna D'Souza



Fig. 1 Photograph of Emile Zola, from *Annales medico-psychologiques*, 8th series, vol. 5, 1897

Much ink has been spilled on the extent to which Claude Lantier, protagonist of Zola's *L'Oeuvre*, was modeled on Paul Cézanne. Scholars argue over whether the novel is a thinly-disguised and unflattering biography of a single artist, Cézanne; whether its protagonist, Claude Lantier, is an amalgam of a number of artists including Cézanne, Édouard Manet and Claude Monet; or whether it is a work of pure fiction.¹ One must, of course, be careful in treating *L'Oeuvre* as anything but a powerful, inventive fabrication. And yet how tempting it is to read into Cézanne's work and life some part of the character so compellingly described by Zola! Zola's novel seems to provide one of the few real insights into this most inscrutable artist, not only in terms of the early biography of Lantier, for which Zola clearly mined his boyhood friendship with Baptistin Baille and Cézanne, but also in the kind of anguished frustration with which Lantier faces the very act of painting, in which we hear echoes of Cézanne's own doubts. The "match" between Cézanne and Lantier seems too perfect, too potentially revealing, to discard wholesale.

Previous commentators have tried to account for the apparent similarities between Cézanne and Lantier by enumerating the ways in which the details of the life of the fictional character Claude Lantier were culled from the details of the biography of the artist Paul Cézanne. However, they crafted their accounts first, without recognizing that Cézanne's biography is itself a textual construction, and second, without acknowledging that to an equal extent it was Zola's fiction which provided the model for Cézanne's biographers. There is a circularity, then, in the logic which compels the endless comparison of Lantier and Cézanne. Is there a way to use *L'Oeuvre* to gain insight into our picture of Cézanne, without reducing it to a kind of flawed biographical sketch of the real artist? I propose instead to understand the two texts—that of the biographical "Paul Cézanne" and that of Zola's description of anguished creativity, elaborated in all of *L'Oeuvre's* characters, but most profoundly in Lantier—as parallel but interrelated constructions, forming crucial links in a new notion of the artistic genius that developed in the nineteenth century.

1. "How did we believe that this man who was frightened of other men and who hid himself from women was virile enough to leave a fruitful legacy [féconder l'avenir]?"²

Despite the fact that Cézanne was possibly the most reticent of late nineteenth century French artists, art historians seem to feel relatively certain of at least the following: first, that Cézanne was an artist plagued by doubt, by a fear of failure, by an almost paralyzing anxiety about making his painting adequate to the representation of nature; and second, that he was a man deeply troubled in his relation to women, and perhaps even to his own masculinity. If there is relatively little documentary evidence from Cézanne's own hand to support these assumptions—Cézanne's letters are curiously sparse and characteristically tight-lipped, and almost all of our other biographical information about the artist descends from the not entirely objective reminiscences of

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Autumn 2004

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others³—there can be no doubt that both ideas have been thoroughly incorporated into our contemporary myth of the artist.

Cézanne's artistic paralysis is avowed in Zola's shocking pronouncement that Cézanne was "a great aborted genius,"⁴ in Bernard's overly emphatic denial of Cézanne's resemblance to Claude Lantier while at the same time describing Cézanne in terms of failure and impotence,⁵ in Vollard's tale of the excruciating experience of sitting for a portrait for this artist whose innate "inability to complete" required endless reworkings of the canvas and ultimately resulted in that famous spot on his knuckle left bare,⁶ in Merleau-Ponty's important analysis of "Cézanne's doubt",⁷ and in countless other stories and judgments more often than not recounted by his greatest admirers and supporters. All of these images of Cézanne find witness in the painfully built up surfaces, reworked contours, and patches of untouched canvas out of which Cézanne's pictures are composed; the idea of doubt structures not only our image of Cézanne, but structures the order of his painting as well, it seems.

It is not merely these familiar articulations of Cézanne's doubt, however, but the connection that is often drawn between his artistic anxieties, and his more troubling sexual anxieties, in the narratives of his genius, that is most interesting. He is consistently presented, in the literature that emerged after the great Vollard exhibition of 1895, as a man whose fears and uneasiness about women not only affected his relationships with flesh-and-blood females, but also appeared in every brushstroke that he laid on canvas. Elie Faure, for example, claimed that "this great sensualist feared women more than anything else,"⁸ while Georges Rivière alarmingly found Cézanne's self-imposed distance from women the result of a "ferocious misogyny," born of the fact that "Cézanne saw woman as the traditional enemy of man," possessing a "satanic beauty."⁹ Most telling, perhaps, is Émile Bernard's *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* of 1907, one of the most influential texts to appear on the artist in the early years of commentary. In a text full of ambivalence towards Cézanne's art in general and his images of the nude—his *baigneuses*—in particular, Bernard explains the insufficiencies or *gaucheries* of the artist's engagement with the female form as the result of his sexual anxieties: Cézanne's nudes are eccentric and deformed because he did not work from the female model, and this because "he didn't trust himself with women."¹⁰ Suggesting as it does an almost uncontrollable, or even violent, passion, the phrase signals an important conjunction in Cézanne criticism: the bringing together of artistic doubt with a physical deviancy.

While most recent commentators would reject the determinism of Bernard's formulation, the idea that, at base, these paintings of female bathers contain a sublimated, excessive eroticism born from a deep discomfort with women is almost canonical. It is precisely the notion of sublimation, a term deployed repeatedly by post-Freudian critics of Cézanne's work,¹¹ that links the artist's sexual anxieties or thwarted desires with his "failure to realize" in painting. In fact, as Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis have pointed out, this psychoanalytic concept leads to a familiar narrative in the scholarship, whereby Cézanne finally brings his youthful passions under control by transforming or redirecting them into an aesthetic practice, taming them via the cool detachment of Impressionist naturalism. Such an account allows art historians to salvage some sort of continuity from the radical stylistic and thematic disjunction of the artist's early, "*couillard*" or "ballsy" style and later work; the interdependence of sexual and

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artistic anxiety, expressed through the notion of sublimation, is thus *structurally* or *discursively* necessary to Cézanne's biography in most art historical accounts, or at least those which rely upon a humanist notion of the creative subject.¹² One only has to turn to Meyer Schapiro's classic essay, "The Apples of Cézanne", to find the consummate elaboration of the idea of Cézanne's work as sublimation and displacement of erotic interest. Schapiro reads the artist's still life paintings, those seemingly mute exercises in formal discovery, as part of a continued, buried dialogue with the erotic violence of Cézanne's images of the 1860s.¹³ Likewise, Theodore Reff understands both the rigidly structured compositions of Cézanne's late bather painting¹⁴ and his systematic, constructive brushstrokes, as attempts to master his turbulent desires,¹⁵ while John Rewald insists that Impressionism was the means by which Cézanne controlled his earlier, unbridled "emotional ejaculations" (the phrase is Lawrence Gowing's) on the canvas.¹⁶

Through the proximity of these two realms—thwarted artistic ambitions and sublimated desire—emerges an image of Cézanne as an artist plagued by "artistic impotence," a charge repeatedly leveled at the artist in the early years of writing on his work, the opposite term of the heroic masculinity that was represented in the later nineteenth century by figures like Gauguin and Renoir, and which was most famously and libidinally embodied by Picasso in the twentieth century.¹⁷ Instead, Cézanne, Degas, perhaps even Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, were artists whose legends are structured not by creative fecundity but by an uneasy relation to their masculinity, and to their own representations of femininity.¹⁸ For Cézanne, artistic impotence incorporates both scholarly "givens" which I have elaborated: his post-Romantic doubt, his anguished frustrations over "realizing" his sensations and his desire to reach that near-impossible goal of transcribing nature, all these are somehow intrinsically linked to this other, sexual inadequacy. Cézanne's doubt, then, seems less existential than physical, and one is led to wonder at the source of this particular formulation of Cézanne's artistic genius.

II. "Ah! there is a big difference between this Frenhofer, impotent by his genius, and this Claude, impotent by his birth, that Zola has unfortunately seen in [Cézanne]!"¹⁹

It is here that I would like to reintroduce Emile Zola, whose elaboration of Claude Lantier is crucial to the story I want to tell. Often read as a condemnation—whether of Impressionism in general or of specific painters in particular—the protagonist of Zola's story has come, over the years, to be closely identified with Paul Cézanne.²⁰ It is telling that none of Cézanne's artist-contemporaries who commented on *L'Oeuvre* (notably Monet and Pissarro) recognized Cézanne in it at all;²¹ even John Rewald, whose biography of Cézanne relies in great part on the "evidence" contained in *L'Oeuvre*, acknowledged that the public, in searching for the model for Zola's portrait of an impotent Impressionist on the verge of madness, thought first, and perhaps exclusively, of Manet, for Cézanne was at that time still little known.²² Identifications between Cézanne and Lantier only came years after the book's publication, by a subsequent generation of artists and biographers for whom the Provençal artist was a legend of isolated genius.²³ In fact, almost all of our biographical information on Cézanne comes from the 1890s, well after the publication of *L'Oeuvre*, when Cézanne's self-imposed isolation from the Parisian art world was beginning to wane and a new generation of artists began to have access to him, and most writers on Cézanne from this period relied to some degree on

Zola's text to provide their information.²⁴

In other words, if there is a compelling similarity between Cézanne and Lantier, it may be because Cézanne's early commentators used Zola's novel as the source for their own writings. Emile Bernard's telegraphic description of Cézanne's youth, to cite but one example, is culled almost directly from Zola's novel: "In Provence. A romantic youth, with poems, with poetic promenades with Zola, his schoolmate, by his side; Hugo, Musset, scattered in the leaves of the trees on the banks of the Arc; an excited arrival in Paris, late-night conversations in front of the great city—under the stars. Then a little misery from his surly but rich family; a marriage; public failures, failures next to impotent artists; the paroxysm of theories (his best period thanks to his solitude and search for the absolute)."²⁵ Joachim Gasquet's influential biography of the artist borrows freely from *L'Oeuvre*, not merely for biographical detail but, often, for dialogue as well, in some cases taking Cézanne's words directly out of Lantier's mouth.²⁶ Maurice Denis's journal entry, recounting his meeting with the Provençal artist, epitomizes this borrowing. He describes Aix, the Jas de Bouffan, the paintings he sees on the wall, and then goes on to describe his encounter like this: "My mind is filled with visions of Claude in *L'Oeuvre* (by Zola). *Cézanne. At the door....*"²⁷ Just as Denis's first meeting with Cézanne was prefaced by thoughts of Claude Lantier, we, too, have very little picture of Cézanne outside of *L'Oeuvre*, in the sense that most of what was written on him during his life was inevitably marked by Zola's novel.

Most curious about this phenomenon of writers borrowing from Zola's description of Claude Lantier in their own descriptions of Cézanne is the fact that, while most of the commentators quoted above were the latter's most devoted apologists, Zola's Lantier is, on the surface, hardly the most likely figure on whom to model their idol. How to account for the willingness of commentators to accept Zola's portrayal of artistic impotence in their view of Cézanne? In order to address this question, one must first begin to understand that Zola's novel is far from a morality tale, a condemnation of the failed genius, but rather it reveals an empathy towards him²⁸; and second, one must recognize Zola's text as participating in a larger discourse on the nature of creativity and genius that developed in the nineteenth century, a discourse which hinged on degeneration and the pathologization of genius. For Zola as for others in the later nineteenth century, failure was not the result of moral weakness in spite of the male artist's genius, but was an inevitable outcome of it, perhaps even a sign of artistic authenticity.

Zola wrote *L'Oeuvre* between 1885 and 1886, and he took exactly nine months to do so—an apocryphal detail, perhaps, considering the novel's theme explicitly links artistic creation with the procreative act. *L'Oeuvre* provides a panorama of artistic genius, or rather of the failure of artistic genius, since not one of its characters manages to be an authentic artist and a well-adjusted individual at the same time. Claude Lantier, with his "lesion of the eye," is the most dramatic of these *artistes manqués*; he is plagued by an ultimately fatal "inability to complete" his paintings. Lantier's hereditary deficiency means that he is an incomplete genius, condemned to creative and physical impotence: we see Lantier "slumped on a chair, tortured by his own impotence, his inability to decide where to place his own brushstroke, and at the same time trying to make bold resolutions"(121), or "[refusing] to acknowledge his impotence, burning with the desire to do something, to create something in spite of it"(56). This creative

impotent has decidedly sexual overtones, for Lantier, "chaste as he was, . . . had a passion for the physical beauty of women, and insane love for nudity desired but never possessed, but was powerless to satisfy himself or to create enough of the beauty he dreamed of enfolding in an ecstatic embrace" (49). He falls in love with Christine, a young woman who for a time seems to calm his restlessness, for she is both an outlet for his repressed sexual desires as well as a facilitator of his painting—she is at once lover, wife, mother and model. The two conceive a child on the day Claude's painting is mocked mercilessly by the crowds at the Salon des Refusés. This child, "the child of suffering and pity, scorned from conception by the brainless mockery of the crowd" (168), a sign of Claude's creative potential, is born a cretin, whose head grows larger and larger in inverse proportion to his declining intelligence, and who eventually withers and dies. The young boy is a living testimony to Claude's degeneracy. After a period of frustrated artistic inactivity due to the stability of domestic life, Lantier returns to painting with all of his thwarted passion, and there occurs a horrible struggle between Claude's monumental canvas, his living and breathing wife, and Claude himself—a struggle that ends in Claude's suicide.

Zola completely collapses physical insufficiency with artistic insufficiency, such that the one is not simply a metaphor for the other, but its cause and simultaneous effect: Claude struggles valiantly against his own artistic impotence in the creation of *Plein-Air*, a work which is ultimately marred by his endless reworking and doubt; Claude's son is conceived in the depressed aftermath of the failure of his father's painting at the Salon des Refusés and is thus evidence of Claude's degeneracy (or hereditary lack) as well as the product of his artistic sterility (vis-à-vis the occasion of his conception); the child eventually dies, whereupon Claude paints him and submits this painting to the Salon, where it is accepted as someone's "charity." Claude's painting, *Dead Child*, the only work he ever exhibited at the Salon, is thus doubly sterile—it is a painting that represents his physical failings as well as gives evidence as to his artistic ones. It is, needless to say, another failure.

However, while Lantier's story may be the focus of the novel, all the authentic artists experience the same paralysis as Lantier, and describe it in the same terms of sterility, impotence, and deformed procreation. In fact, for Zola, the lack of such artistic paralysis was precisely the sign of artistic *inauthenticity*. The three most authentic artists in Zola's *inferno*, Lantier, Pierre Sandoz, and Bongrand (a painter of the generation of 1848, who was modeled on Zola's close friend and mentor, Flaubert) all suffer from artistic paralysis, and describe it in similar terms. Impotence haunts them in other ways, too—for Lantier, in the deformed child he fathers, for Sandoz, in his childless marriage, for Bongrand, in his bachelorhood, and for all three, in the failure to leave behind (in the sense of the French *féconder*) an artistic following or school. In contrast, Chambouvard, a self-satisfied sculptor based on Courbet and Hugo, in his lack of self-consciousness or self-examination before the creative task, and thus his lack of doubt or feelings of failure and inadequacy, is the epitome of the inauthentic artist.

Even Pierre Sandoz, the author's alter ego and the most "well-adjusted" of the novel's characters—the one interpreted by most readers of L'Oeuvre as representing Zola's idea of the "correct" path of genius distinguished by sexual and creative moderation—is an artist for whom failure, and indeed impotence, is a constant presence in the creative process. His complaint, though not

fraught with as much tortured passion, mirrors Lantier's own struggles: "When I bring forth I need forceps, and even then the child always looks to me like a monster. Is it possible for anyone to be so devoid of doubt as to have absolute faith in himself?" (304) At Lantier's funeral, Bongrand repeats the same notion, claiming Claude is "lucky to be away from it all, instead of wearing himself out, as we do, producing offspring who are either headless or limbless and never really alive" (425). Sandoz's last words to us—uttered in response to Bongrand's frustration—are thus filled with bitter irony: "And now, back to work!" he says, as if there was any possibility of productive work in the bleak universe which Zola presents.

Claude Lantier's failure, Zola tells us, is not *solely* the result of his hereditary lack, but is also a function of the time in which he lives: in a sort of backhanded eulogy at Lantier's funeral, Sandoz claims that "his trouble was not all personal by any means; he was the victim of his period. The generation we belong to was brought up on Romanticism; it is soaked into us and we can do nothing about it. It is all very well our plunging head first into violent reality, the stain remains and all the scrubbing in the world will never remove it." (419) And indeed, Zola might well be talking about his own struggles with a Romantic legacy, for his fictional creation of the *artiste manqué* has for his ancestors a host of Romantic forefathers who themselves struggled before the creative task—think, for example, of Delacroix's description of the young Michelangelo paralyzed in his studio,²⁹ or Balzac's Frenhofer, descending into the madness of self-deception as he progressively obliterates the near-perfect image of his Belle-Noiseuse in an attempt to bring her to life.³⁰

However, whatever the Romantic heritage of Zola's conception of artistic genius, it is precisely in rooting the creative struggle in the physical body of the artist that Zola declares his modernity. Lantier no longer struggles exclusively with the psychic tortures of creativity, but also with the physical effects of degeneracy; his artistic impotence is not just a psychological despair but is an actual physical deficiency, marked by sterility and impotence.

III. "Genius of the very highest order never, probably, succeeds in completely realizing its conceptions, because its conceptions are unrealizable." ³¹

It is in Zola's dual authorial role as positivist scientist and as creative artist in this installment of his Rougon-Macquart series that the real ambivalence of his Naturalist project is revealed,³² because of course Zola's meditations on the nature of artistic genius are not solely objective observations on the history of degeneration, nor simply condemnatory, but are also self-reflexive. While Zola most clearly identifies with Sandoz, he identifies, too, with other of the novel's characters, not least with Claude himself, whose character has an autobiographical component: the title of Zola's early, frankly autobiographical novel was *La Confession de Claude*, and Zola also used the name as a pseudonym for his early Salon reviews. In fact, even in his identification with Sandoz, one gets the sense that Zola, who was being stung by criticisms of his work by a younger generation of writers who found him becoming complacent in his success, was trying to identify with artistic failure and impotence as a sign of his own continuing authenticity. It is not difficult to hear Zola's own lament in the following passage, for example: "'Oh, yes, I certainly work,' replied Sandoz, rising from his table as if in sudden pain, 'to the very last page of every book I write. But if you only knew, if I could only tell you the torment, the despair . . . and now those

idiotic critics have got the notion that I'm self-satisfied! I, who am haunted even in my sleep by the imperfections of my work! I, who have never read over what I wrote yesterday for fear of finding it so deplorably bad that I shan't have the courage to carry on!" (216)

Contemporary readers were hardly insensible to Zola's identification with artistic failure and self-doubt, or with his identification with his damned character, Lantier. Gustave Geffroy, for one, saw the novel as confessional, and wrote: "It is not only through Sandoz that Zola has represented himself. We also see him in the artist who toils courageously without knowing for sure the outcome or significance of his effort... Passionately devoted to their tasks, furious in their desire to create, devastated by the results, [Lantier and Sandoz] are both *les damnés de l'art* [the victims of art]. Are Sandoz's laments not as painful as Claude's miscarriages? Is Zola, who called himself, astonishingly, 'a perpetual beginner,' not as sad, as disillusioned as the suicide he portrays?"³³

Geffroy was correct in pointing out the ambivalence of Zola's message in *L'Oeuvre*: the opposition of Lantier and Sandoz is not a simple matter of right versus wrong, success versus failure, moderation of passion versus excess of desire. Rather, Zola's novel takes pains to reveal the failure and frustration inevitable in the sincerity of the artistic process. And if Zola presents an inevitable link between artistic authenticity and artistic impotence in *L'Oeuvre*, he does not exempt himself from this fate precisely because of its inescapability.

The inevitability of artistic failure for Zola has two roots. The first is physical, relating to the medicalization of genius in the later nineteenth century. In a period when doctors and scientists were identifying any deviation from the norm as evidence of pathology, creative talent came under scrutiny as a sign of disease or perversion. The crucial treatises on degeneration that appeared after the mid-nineteenth century—including works by Moreau de la Tour, Benedicte Augustine Morel, Césaire Lombroso and Max Nordau, among others with which Zola was familiar³⁴—identified the excessive intellect of the genius, and specifically of the artistic genius, as the sign and source of their potential degeneracy, a degeneracy that may include as its symptoms sexual irritability, sterility, precocity, one-sided talents, eccentricity, and impotence. In Césaire Lombroso's formulation, articulated in his 1897 book *Genio e degenerazione*, "Like men, nature abominates and sterilizes ... those animals who dare to think a little more than their fellow members of the species." An excessive development of one part of the body—the mind—must necessarily be accompanied by the diminishment or decay of another—the reproductive organs; this excessive development that may lead to sterility or impotence, but equally to other forms of sexual "perversions," including "unrestrained and irregular development."³⁵ Lombroso's follower, the physician Max Nordau, was more shrill in his assessment of the literary and artistic figures of his time; his portrait of Verlaine, for example, is terrifying in its description of genius-induced degeneracy:

We see a repulsive degenerate subject with asymmetric skull and Mongolian face, an impulsive vagabond and dipsomaniac, who, under the most disgraceful circumstances, was placed in jail; an emotional dreamer of feeble intellect, who painfully fights against his bad impulses..., and a dotard who manifests the absence of any

definite though in his mind by incoherent speech, meaningless expressions, and motley images. In lunatic asylums there are many patients whose disease is less deep-seated and incurable than is that of this irresponsible *circulaire* at large, whom only ignorant judges would have condemned for his epileptoid crimes.³⁶

Nordau did not limit the physical symptoms of disease to facial and cranial abnormalities, as Lombroso did; he in fact identified the Impressionist painters' "nystagmus, or trembling of the eyeball" as the source of their unique style of painting.³⁷

Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels join these pseudo-scientific texts in presenting a panorama of deviancy, and his portrait of Lantier in *L'Oeuvre* includes the salient traits of the degenerate genius that were being elaborated in the medical discourse. Lantier's son, Jacques, representing the end of the degenerate line, almost caricatures the predicted outcome of the degenerate genius: his overdeveloped brain (in his case, overdeveloped only in terms of size, and not intelligence) necessitates a compensatory lack of physical capabilities, resulting in fatal weakness and loss of vital energy.

In light of these attempts to medicalize the figure of the creative genius, Zola's own identification with the universe of failure that he presents goes far beyond mere psychological anguish at the creative act. Rather, Zola was writing this novel from the point of view of an awareness of, or belief in, his own physical deficiencies, which he believed to be an essential component of his genius. The novelist was intensely sensible to physical ailments, and from an early age seemed to associate this lack of robust health with the pursuits of the mind.³⁸ It is this coincidence of intellect and ill-health (or perhaps hypochondria) that the Goncourts noted in their *Journal* on 3 June 1872: "Zola came to lunch and said: 'look at the way my fingers tremble!' And he told me of an incipient heart disease, of a possible bladder ailment, of a threat of rheumatism in the joints. Never have men of letters seemed more stillborn than in our day, and yet never have they worked harder or more incessantly. Sickly and neurotic as he is, Zola works every day from nine until half past twelve and from three until eight."³⁹

The notion that there is some sort of coincidence between ill-health and genius appears again when, after the publication of the novel, Zola submitted to an examination by Doctor Édouard Toulouse, the results of which were presented in the *Annales medico-psychologiques* in 1897.⁴⁰ This attempt to study Zola's "genius and pathology" linked his fascination with science to a degenerative hereditary condition; Zola agreed to the study, he said, to prove to his detractors that he, as a true genius, suffered for his art with his various nervous conditions. In a letter to Dr. Toulouse, which appeared in *Le Figaro* on October 31, 1896 and was subsequently published as the preface to Toulouse's study of Zola's degeneracy, he writes,

In the end, I do not give you this authorization without some evil pleasure. Do you know that your study victoriously battles the legend of my imbecility? You cannot ignore the fact that for thirty years I was made out to be a boor, a thick-skinned ox with gross tastes, accomplishing my task heavily, in the single-minded and villainous pursuit of riches. Good God! me, who scorns money, me, who has only

led my life according to the idealism of my youth! Ah! the poor *écorché* that I am, trembling and suffering at the least breath of wind, only sitting down each morning to my daily work with anguish, only succeeding in doing my work through the continual battle of my will against my doubt! It made me, the famous ox, laugh and cry at times! And, if I am happy today, it's because it seems to me that you have buried him, this famous ox, and that there will no longer be any question [of my sincerity] for fair-minded people.

Therefore I thank you, my dear doctor. Thank you for having studied and labeled my bag of bones [*ma guenille*]. I think that I have profited from it. [My body] is not perfect, but it is the body of a man who has given his life to his work and who has put, for and into the work, all of his physical, intellectual, and moral forces.⁴¹

The physical marks of Zola's artistic struggles, the effects on his battered flesh, are precisely the signs of the authenticity and sincerity of his vocation and his writings. Given this evidence of Zola's own identification of his physical deficiencies with his artistic genius, it seems fair to say that if he was linking the two in *L'Oeuvre*, it was not to condemn Cézanne/Lantier out of a profound misunderstanding of his art, but was rather, to an equal extent, to put himself under the positivist microscope.

Zola's willingness to picture himself in these terms of degenerative failure becomes clearer when one considers what was for him the second root of inevitable artistic impotence. This second cause is the ultimate impossibility of achieving the idealistic goal which, according to Zola, any authentic avant-garde sets for itself: to represent nature. It is the ultimate task, and one doomed to failure—and it is here we see most clearly Zola's Romantic heritage, for this is a common theme in writings of that period.⁴² That the novel was to explore the theme of the excessive ambition of progressive artists, was elucidated by Zola in his preparatory notes for the book: "It is a question of knowing what rendered [Lantier] incapable of satisfying his aims: him more than anyone, his psychology, his heritage, the lesion of his eye; but I would also like to see our modern art in this, our fever to want everything, our *disequilibrium* in a word."⁴³

If Sandoz escapes Lantier's fate in *L'Oeuvre*, it is not because he always lacked this prideful ambition—a drive that proves the sincerity of the authentic artist—but because he has by the end of the novel given up any hope of realizing it. Sandoz had, from his youth, wanted to compose a series of novels whose conception was not unlike Zola's original vision of the *Rougon-Macquart* series. That he finally renounces his quest for the absolute in art is the very thing that marks his failure at the same time as it saves him from an end as horrible as Lantier's.⁴⁴ Sandoz's capitulation to pragmatism is itself a retreat from artistic authenticity and success; he, too, makes manifest Zola's belief that there is failure inherent in the authentic artist's impossible goal of artistic perfection. This results, according to Zola, in artists who are only able to point out the way, without ever arriving there.

Zola's judgment on this issue was not only made in the realm of fiction; thus he could avow in 1882: "This is why the Impressionist's struggle is not yet over: they remain unequal to the work which they attempt, they stutter without being able to find the word. But their influence is no less profound, because

they follow the only possible course, they march towards the future."⁴⁵ Zola's disappointment at the failure of Impressionism to realize its potential is tempered by a belief, still, in its goals. The Impressionists remain the most important artists on the scene for Zola; it is the worthiness—and unattainability—of their goal which proves the depth of their talent. Their failure, then, is the mark of their genius.

IV. "The sign of impotence and the sign of genius, these are the two extremes that we must reconcile if we want to appreciate Cézanne fairly and productively. Is it such a rarity, or is it not the case for almost all of the great inventors?"⁴⁶

It is in the conjunction of these two roots of the inevitability of artistic failure—the medical and the Romantic—that one can begin to understand the link Zola makes between degeneration and genius, between artistic impotence and cultural regeneration. For Lantier may be the laughing stock at the Salon, with his doubly sterile painting, *Dead Child*, but he has fully transformed the practice of painting, nonetheless: "'The Salon's *your* victory this year,' says Sandoz. 'Fagerolles isn't the only one to plagiarize you, far from it! They're all doing it. They all got a good laugh out of *Plein-Air*, but it nevertheless caused a revolution! Look around you. Look, there's another *Plein-Air*, and there's another, and another, the whole Salon's *Plein-Air!*' . . . He was right; broad daylight, after gradually filtering into contemporary painting, had at last come into its own." (344) Lantier's artistic impotence begets a Salon-full of mongrel creations, hybrids of avant-garde and academic ideas, but it is an ultimately productive legacy in Zola's mind. Claude's aborted genius is posited, ultimately, as a source of cultural regeneration.

This notion of the link between generation and degeneration in the genius was echoed in the scientific literature of the day, specifically in the writings of Lombroso, who argued that the artistic genius represented at once the highest evolutionary development and the most atavistic throwback of the species, since sterility was the inevitable outcome of an evolving intelligence.⁴⁷ In the subsequent debate over Doctor Toulouse's study of Zola's *névrosité*, or nervous condition, a certain Dr. Marandon de Montyel cited the necessary link between degeneracy and progress, and argued for the crucial figure of the deviant genius for cultural regeneration: "This doctrine of a close relationship between genius and degeneracy explains how, at the beginning of civilization, in the first appearances of man on earth, his first advances were so long in coming, whereas today great discovery follows great discovery, and in our days there is no country which lacks some men of genius."⁴⁸ For these scientists, as for Zola, there would be no evolution without devolution, no progression without regression, no generation without degeneration. In this cultural transformation, the artist was a crucial symbol of the health or decay—or of both at once—of a society.

This is the context in which I would like to place Zola's construction of Claude Lantier, and his assessment of Paul Cézanne, both of which have slowly penetrated our contemporary view of the artist. For Zola's assessment of Cézanne not as a great but aborted genius as some would have it, but rather as a great aborted genius, the two terms linked as if mutually dependent and not mutually contradictory, is tied to Zola's conception of artistic authenticity. There is artistic impotence, a failure rooted in the body of the artist itself, inherent in creation at the end of the nineteenth century. Huysmans cites it when he praises Cézanne

as "an artist with diseased retinas who...discovered the premonitory symptoms of a new art;"⁴⁹ Arsène Alexander acknowledges it when he describes the artist as the "discoverer who doesn't profit from what he discovers...an artist without issue but not without utility;"⁵⁰ Bernard feels it, when he writes his *Souvenirs de Cézanne*, in which he was "unable to break free of Zola's Cézanne, or rather of the figure of Claude Lantier,...consistently [picturing] Cézanne as an artist bordering on failure, although in pursuit of the highest goal;"⁵¹ Rilke's early observations on the painter suggest it in his description of Cézanne's masochistic relationship with the creative task.⁵²

For Zola, and indeed for subsequent commentators, this artistic impotence was perfectly embodied by Cézanne. And no wonder, when Cézanne himself recalled his earlier, essentially Romantic identification with Frenhofer very late in his life, in the famous questionnaire and in reported comments to Bernard ("Frenhofer, c'est moi!"),⁵³ and when he was lamenting not being able to achieve his goal of making his painting adequate to nature ("I am the primitive of the way which I've discovered").⁵⁴ No wonder, too, when disciples primed by *L'Oeuvre* met their hero, and saw an old man whose body was in a state of decay due to the ravages of diabetes, whose eyesight was failing him in his attempts to penetrate nature (a sexualized operation thwarted, needless to say). By the time commentators like Arsène Alexandre, Emile Bernard and Ambroise Vollard were making their own judgments about Cézanne, testing the validity of Zola's alleged portrait of the artist as Claude Lantier, Cézanne himself was interrogating old age and impotence, as Linda Nochlin has pointed out, in his pictures of elderly peasants, in "the contrast between the sheer energy of the peasant's bloated bottom as opposed to the implications of impotence of the material referent—actual sagging balls."⁵⁵

If the persona of Cézanne seemed to invite his biographers to portray him as an artist plagued by both artistic doubt and sexual anxiety, as incomplete or as *impuissant*, in the varied senses of those words, it was also because a new notion of artistic genius was developing at the end of the nineteenth century for which these notions were crucial. By virtue of being incomplete, Cézanne joins a pantheon of the troubled masculinity of genius of the fin-de-siècle, an illustrious group that includes the likes of Edgar Degas and Vincent Van Gogh, and perhaps even Emile Zola himself. What I would like to suggest, then, is that if there has been a *failure of biography* to deal adequately with Cézanne's oeuvre, it is because we have not sufficiently recognized that Cézanne's is one of many *biographies of failure*—stories suffuse with notions of degeneration and cultural evolution—to have been written in the later part of the nineteenth century.

This paper was first presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting which took place in New York in 1997, as part of a panel chaired by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Decadence and Degeneration in 19th Century Art." I would like to thank the panel's respondents, James Rubin and the late Charles Bernheimer, for their comments. Professor John McCoubrey was generous with his remarks and suggestions, as was the anonymous reader at the journal; Jason Rosenfeld, Linda Nochlin and Tom McDonough also provided helpful criticism. Research for this paper was carried out in Paris thanks to the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and recent revisions received the support of faculty grants from Purchase College, State University of New York, and Binghamton University. The ideas presented in this essay are further explored and elaborated in my book, *Cézanne's Bathers, Biography and the Erotics of Paint*, forthcoming from Penn State

1. Emile Zola, *L'Oeuvre*, Paris, 1886. I refer in this text to the Oxford Classics translation (The Masterpiece, London: Oxford University Press, 1993); page references appear in parentheses in the text. The classic study of the Lantier-Cézanne connection is Robert J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet: A Study of "L'Oeuvre"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968). See also Patrick Brady, "*L'Oeuvre*" de Emile Zola: *Roman sur les arts. Manifesto, autobiographie, roman à clef* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967); John A. Frey, "The Artist as Failure—Two Brands of Naturalism: *Madame Soudis* and *L'Oeuvre*," *Emile Zola and the Arts*, ed. Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1988); and Jean-Luc Steinmetz, "*L'Oeuvre*." *Le Naturalisme: Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Pierre Cogny (Cerisy-la-Salle: Centre Culturel Internationale, 1978).
2. "Comment eût-on pu croire que cet homme à qui les hommes faisaient peur et qui se cachait des femmes eût assez de virilité pour féconder l'avenir?" Elie Faure, "Paul Cézanne," *Portraits d'hier*, vol. 2, no. 28, 1 May 1910. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.
3. John Rewald's *Cézanne, Geffroy et Gasquet* (Paris: Quatre Chemins-Editart, 1959), provides an explanation of the faults of one of the foundational biographical sources for Cézanne, the writings of Joachim Gasquet.
4. Emile Zola, "Peinture," *Le Figaro*, 2 May 1896. Quoted in Françoise Cachin and Joseph Rishel, *Cézanne*, trans. John Goodman (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1996)
5. Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne, et Lettres* (Paris: La Renovation Esthétique, 1924?).
6. Ambroise Vollard, *En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1985), pp. 56-64. Originally published in 1938.
7. M. Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H. Dreyfus and P. Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Originally published 1948.
8. Faure, "Paul Cézanne," p. 119.
9. Georges Rivière, *Le Maître Paul Cézanne* (Paris: H. Floury, 1923).
10. Emile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* (Paris: Société des Trente, 1912), p. 28. Originally appeared in *Mércure de France*, no. 247 (1 October 1907) and no. 248 (15 October 1907). Translated in Cachin and Rishel, *Cézanne*, p. 498.
11. See T. J. Clark, "Freud's Cézanne," *Representations*, vol. 52 (Fall 1995), as well as the chapter in his book *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), for an attempt to interpret Cézanne's bather pictures via a set of terms that pre-date Freud's notion of sublimation.
12. See Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, "Wilful Ineptitude," *Art History*, vol. 12, no. 1, March 1989, p. 132.
13. Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life," *Modern Art 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1979). Originally published 1968.
14. Theodore Reff, "Painting and Theory in the Final Decade," in *Cézanne: The Late Work*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 1978, pp. 13-54.
15. Theodore Reff, "Cézanne's Constructive Stroke," *Art Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, Autumn 1962, pp. 214-27.
16. See, for example, John Rewald, *Cézanne: A Biography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990). Rewald's claim for Impressionism's sobering influence on Cézanne's work is hinged on the notion that pictorial structure and erotic desire were somehow mutually exclusive— an idea that, oddly enough, has never seemed to be an issue in Picasso scholarship, for example. John Elderfield, in "The Whole World: Color in Cézanne," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 52, April 1978, pp. 148-53, attempts to

modify, to an extent, this idea of Impressionism as sublimation in Cézanne's work.

17. Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 4 (December 1973), pp. 30-39.

18. On Degas's purported "artistic impotence," see Roy McMullen, *Degas: Life, Times, and Art* (Boston: Macmillan, 1984), and Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). A point of clarification here: I am not trying to argue that these identifications are stable, nor that artist's like Cézanne and Degas have not been portrayed simultaneously as fecund, powerful men with phallic paintbrush in hand ready to create—although I would, in the case of these two artists, suggest that these latter, heroic images are less common. Rather, these images have no problem existing parallel to each other. For an interesting example of the other, hypermasculinized representation of Degas for his British contemporaries, please see Andrew Stephenson's review of the Sickert exhibition, "Buttressing Bohemian Mystiques and Bandaging Masculine Anxieties," *Art History*, vol. 17, no. 2, June 1994, pp. 269-78.

19. "Ah! il y avait loin de ce Frenhofer impuissant par génie à ce Claude impuissant par naissance que Zola avait vu malencontreusement en [Cézanne]!" Bernard, *Souvenirs*, p. 44.

20. On *L'Oeuvre* as a condemnation of Impressionism, see William J. Berg, *The Visual Novel: Emile Zola and the Art of his Times* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 40-44; and Brady, "L'Oeuvre" d'Emile Zola. For a study of *L'Oeuvre* as a roman à clef, see Neiss, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet*.

21. Neiss, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet*, p. 82.

22. Rewald, *Cézanne: A Biography*, p. 166. While Rewald explains the lack of recognition to be the result of Cézanne's being relatively unknown, a review that appeared in *La Revue indépendante* late in 1886, the year of *L'Oeuvre*'s publication, suggests that Cézanne had, by this time, been acknowledged as a central figure in Impressionism. See Teodor de Wyzewa, "L'Art contemporain," in *La Revue indépendante*, November-December 1886, quoted in Rewald's own *Seurat* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 104.

23. Cézanne was identified as the source of Claude Lantier by the following writers: Louis Vauxcelles, "Salon d'Automne, le vernissage," *Gil Blas*, 15 October 1904; Arsène Alexandre, "Claude Lantier," *Le Figaro*, 9 December 1895; Georges Lecomte, "Paul Cézanne," in the catalogue of the Collection Blot, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, May 1900, quoted in Rewald, *Cézanne: A Biography*, p. 166.

24. Neiss, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet*, p. 90: "Everything written on Cézanne of the years before 1890 has been based either on *L'Oeuvre* as a direct biographical source, on his letters to Zola, on Zola's letters, or on a small handful of testimonies written by men who knew him more or less well and who left descriptions of him, factual or fictional, which may perhaps—but do not surely—render some or part of the truth."

25. Emile Bernard, "Paul Cézanne," *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* vol. 8, no. 387 (1891). Quoted in Cachin and Rishel, *Cézanne*, p. 29.

26. Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, trans. Christopher Pemberton, intro. Richard Shiff (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 68. Gasquet's liberal borrowings from Zola's text are all the more significant considering the fact that his biography was used as a source by such influential writers as Roger Fry, Merleau-Ponty, and Meyer Schapiro. See Shiff's introduction, pp. 15-16.

27. Maurice Denis, *Journal* entry from 1906, in P. M. Doran, ed., *Conversations avec Cézanne* (Paris: Macula, 1978), p. 93.

28. I use the masculine pronoun throughout the rest of this discussion advisedly: the discourses of genius to which I refer were inseparable from discourses of masculinity and virility. According to these terms, the very possibility of feminine or female genius was inconceivable.

29. Eugène Delacroix, "Michel-Ange," *Revue de Paris*, vol. 15, May 1830, p. 41, and vol. 16, July 1830, p. 165. Reprinted in *Écrits sur l'art*, eds. François-Marie Deyrolle and Christophe Denissel (Paris: Séguier, 1988), pp. 89-124.

30. Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (Paris, 1845).

31. Clive Bell, *Since Cézanne* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922), p. 58.

32. That Zola approached positivist science with ambivalence is a view not generally held in the scholarship. However, if one looks in particular at the character of the examining magistrate-cum-detective in Zola's *La Bête humaine*, it is clear that Zola effects a scathing parody of the very scientific method around which he structured his novels: M. Denizet's reliance on the "scientific" methods of forensics and criminology, modified by an ardent belief in theoretical analysis and logical conclusions, lead him so far away from the truth behind the murder he investigates as to provide an almost farcical counterpoint to the otherwise oppressive atmosphere of guilt and inevitable retribution that suffuses the rest of the novel. In another context, Daniel Pick discusses the way in which the final novel in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series, *Dr. Pascal*, "dramatizes the contradictions, indeed even the disintegration, of the positivism which had hitherto partially structured Zola's own project." See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 4.

33. Quoted in Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 559-60.

34. The works in question are these: Joseph Moreau de la Tours' *La Psychologie morbide dans ses rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou de l'influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel* (Paris : V. Masson, 1859), Bénédict Augustin Morel's *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l'espèce humaine* (Paris : J. B. Ballière, 1857), Césaire Lombroso's *Genio e follia* (1864) and Max Nordau's *Dégénérescence* (Paris : Alcan, 1894).

35. Quoted in Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 20.

36. Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 6th ed. (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), p. 128; translation of *Entartung*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: C. Duncker, 1892-93). Quoted in Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, pp. 10-11.

37. Nordau, *Degeneration*, 6th ed., 1895, p. 27; quoted in Spackman, p. 11.

38. See Brown, *Zola*.

39. Quoted in Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 77.

40. Dr. Edouard Toulouse, *Enquête medico-psychologique sur la supériorité intellectuelle* (Paris: Masson et Cie., 1910). The results of Toulouse's study were widely available before this date, however, through their publication in *Annales medico-psychologiques*, 8th series, vol. 5 (Paris: Masson et Cie., 1897). Pick discusses Toulouse's examination of Zola in *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 76-8.

41. "Enfin, cette autorisation, je ne vous la donne pas sans quelque malin plaisir. Savez-vous que votre étude combat victorieusement l'imbécile légende? Vous ne pouvez ignorer que, depuis trente ans, on fait de moi un malotru, un boeuf de labour, de cuir épais, de sense grossiers, accomplissant sa tâche lourdement, dans l'unique et vilain besoin du lucre. Grand Dieu! moi qui méprise l'argent, qui n'ai jamais marché dans la vie qu'à l'idéal de ma jeunesse! Ah! le pauvre écorché que je suis, frémissant et souffrant au moindre souffle d'air, ne s'assayent chaque matin à sa tâche quotidienne que dans l'angoisse, ne parvenant à faire son oeuvre que dans le continuel combat de sa volonté sur son doute! Qu'il m'a fait rire et pluerer des fois, le fameux boeuf de labour! Et, si je ris aujourd'hui, c'est qu'il me semble que vous l'enterrez, ce boeuf-là, et qu'il n'en sera plus question, pour les gens de quelque bonne foi.

Donc, merci, mon cher docteur. Merci d'avoir étudié et étiqueté ?ma guenille. Je crois bien que j'y ai gagné. Si elle n'est point parfaite, elle

est celle d'un homme qui a donné sa vie au travail et qui a mis, pour et dans le travail, toutes ses forces physiques, intellectuelles, et morales." Emile Zola, letter to Dr. Edouard Toulouse, published in *La Figaro*, 31 October 1896, in Dr. Edouard Toulouse, *Enquête medico-psychologique*, and in Emile Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. B.H. Bakker (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1983), vol. 8, pp. 357-58.

42. Most important, of course, is Balzac's *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*.

43. From Emile Zola, Ébauche ?[Preparatory notes for *L'Oeuvre*], Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS N.A.f., fol. 265. Quoted in Brady, "*L'Oeuvre*" d'Emile Zola, p. 19.

44. Thomas Zamperelli, "Zola and the Quest for the Absolute in Art," *Yale French Studies*, vol. 43, 1969, p. 147.

45. Emile Zola, "Le Naturalisme au Salon," *Voltaire*, Saturday 19 June 1880, p. 3: "Voilà pourquoi la lutte des impressionnistes n'a pas encore abouti: ils restent inférieurs à l'oeuvre qu'ils tentent, ils bégayent sans pouvoir trouver le mot. Mais leur influence n'en reste pas moins énorme, car ils sont dans la seule évolution possible, ils marchent à l'avenir."

46. "L'évidence de l'impuissance et l'évidence du génie, voilà les deux termes extrêmes qu'il faut concilier si l'on veut équitablement, si l'on prétend utilement apprécier Paul Cézanne. Le cas est-il si rare, ou n'est-ce pas celui de presque tous les grands inventeurs?" Charles Morice, "Paul Cézanne," *Mercure de France*, 15 February 1907, pp. 37.

47. Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies*, p. 21.

48. Response to Dr. Édouard-Gaston Dominique Toulouse, "Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie," *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, 8th series, vol. 6 (Paris: Masson et Cie., 1897), p. 124.

49. Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Trois peintres," *La Cravache*, 4 August 1888. Republished in *Certains* (Paris, 1889).

50. Arsène Alexandre, "Le Mouvement artistique: Claude Lantier," *Le Figaro* (9 December 1895), p. 5.

51. Joseph Rishel, "A Century of Criticism II: From 1907 to the Present," in Cachin and Rishel, *Cézanne*, p. 47.

52. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, trans. Joel Agee (New York: Fromm International Pub. Corp., 1985).

53. Cézanne was asked to respond to a questionnaire sent to a number of artists by a Parisian art periodical. Answering the question, "Which literary character do you most identify with?", Cézanne responded, "Frenhofer." On the questionnaire, see Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Les Couilles de Cézanne," *Critique*, vol. 44, no. 499, December 1988, pp. 1031-47. The full questionnaire ("Mes confidences") is reproduced in Adrien Chappius, *The Drawings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 25-28.

54. Paul Cézanne, *Letters*, ed. John Rewald, trans. Marguerite Kay (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).

55. Linda Nochlin, "Cézanne: Studies in Contrast," *Art in America*, vol. 84 (June 1996), p. 67.