

Homage to Cézanne

from *Powderhouse* by Jens Bjørneboe

Translated from the Norwegian by Esther Greenleaf Mürer

In May I participated in a reading commemorating the 20th anniversary of the death of the Norwegian writer Jens Bjørneboe (1920-1976), several of whose novels I have translated. Due to the proximity of this event to the Cézanne exhibit in Philadelphia I include this excerpt from Bjørneboe's novel Powderhouse (1969) [2000 update: — published by Dufour Editions in 2000. For further info see my web site [Jens Bjørneboe in English](#)] —Ed.

.... Paul Cézanne, man of private means, petit bourgeois and amateur painter, a man who ran away from the war against the Prussians, who ran away from the Commune, who didn't give a damn for France, for freedom or the revolution—who sat among his apple trees and his wonderful faraway blue mountains, which he painted again and again. The old *rentier* and amateur painter. An old, old fool, who thought he was a painter, who sat among his flower pots, his greenhouses and his big, blue mountains, who moved to the south of France—solely because the seasons were more stable there, and his observations could continue under unchanged conditions month after month. The old village idiot, Paul Cézanne—no, he had no relation to the revolution of '71: he didn't eat rats and he wasn't a sharpshooter. He was no revolutionary—at any rate not at that moment; he ate his cheese and drank his red wine, as every decent petit bourgeois in this fantastic brutal land of the Guillotine has always done, without letting himself be bothered by the smell of blood from the scaffold.

He just painted—like the old, crazy amateur he was, picture after picture—he often took months to plan one or two brush strokes. He was an old *rentier*, an old bourgeois who thought he was a painter. And in the meantime the revolution passed by. The old *rentier* and amateur went on painting.

Slowly, surely and quietly he changed our image of the world. Our whole world looked different after Paul Cézanne had painted it. Systematically and from the bottom up he reconstructed our whole image of the world into a new one, using cubes, circles, ellipses and cylinders, treating his materials in a way the like of which has never been seen in the history of the world: he made white lead, cobalt blue, siccative, linseed oil and turpentine unite in a surface which was more beautiful than any gem, lovelier and truer than any enamel.

But the most important thing was: he *rebuilt* our image of the world.

After Paul Cézanne the world was different from before.

What did his contemporaries achieve in Paris during the Commune? Not a little! Their names live, and we love these names. But who *changed* the world? The old *rentier* and petit bourgeois, with his little house and his bank account—he rebuilt the world.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #3, Fall 1996

There is no opposition in this, only clarity. Only *clarity!*

One day a very old man, an old *rentier* and idiot who thought he was a painter, went out once more to paint from nature, the way *he* saw it. Not as others had thought it or felt it or seen it.

He painted—as a faithful naturalist and witness to the truth—his own picture of the world, and it has become ours. Then came the rain, and the old man packed up his painting gear, and the wind was strong and the rain was violent, and the next day they found a very old *rentier* and amateur painter lying beside the road—still with his paintbox under his arm.

He still needed three days to die. So strong was the old man.

What is left today of the Paris Commune of that time, aside from a couple of plays about it, good but never altogether true? I don't know, but it isn't much.

What remains of the petit bourgeois with the bank account? What remains of Paul Cézanne—of his thick, blue-black beard and his bald crown?

What he left behind is a changed world.

One can ask oneself: who was the *great* revolutionary? Was it the pistoleers in Paris (*no evil shall be said of them!*)? — Or *was* it the little petit bourgeois in Provence, Paul Cézanne, with his bit of cheese, his red wine and his paintbrushes carefully rinsed in turpentine?

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page revised July 2001