

10-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Raepple, Eva Maria, "Art of Life: Gauguin's Language of Color and Shape" (2011). *Philosophy Scholarship*. Paper 27.
<http://dc.cod.edu/philosophypub/27>

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Art of Life: Gauguin's Language of Color and Shape

“Where the tree of knowledge stands, there is always Paradise”: thus speak the oldest and the youngest serpents. (Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Aphorisms. 152)

Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century philosopher (1844 -1900), whose works speak of his unyielding search for an art of life, warns of the serpent's promise, a promise that according to Genesis 3 foreshadows tribulations.¹ On the stage of life the promise to know, to know as a subject that actively grasps the world, is an alluring, call, one that permits free spirits to explore and design life as a work of art beyond the confines of the herd.² A changing role of the knowing and imagining subject in the nineteenth century enticed philosophers and inspired artists, unleashing their creativeness to explore new modes of writing and painting. Employing imagination to “remodel experience,” creating a “second nature out of material supplied by it by actual nature” emerges as the trademark of the artist, often called a genius (Kant, 1978, XLVI).” Yet as Nietzsche warns, knowledge's promise to find Paradise is whispered by serpents. This article will follow the French artist Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) in his pursuit of knowledge in a number of his paintings. It is argued that this search for the tree of knowledge, while holding the promise of Paradise, is paved with questions, uncertainties, and visions about human existence explored by Gauguin in a unique language of colorful paintings and artworks.

The modern artist foremost faces a world to be known and mastered, Gauguin particularly questions this world seeking to bring to life in his artworks. Seeing, painting, and sculpting for Gauguin becomes a language in which formulates his critique and vision of the world, a highly personalized vision that speaks through color and shape. As an artist, Gauguin is not just receptive of visibility as a language in order to reexamine and transform his own existence. In many of his paintings the focus of this artistic language is on human beings, among these several self-portraits such as a work painted in 1889. Simplicity of shape and the striking colors red and yellow foreground Gauguin's face and his elongated hand which playfully holds a serpent. The piece takes

¹ Nietzsche's claim that the structures for the perceiving mind, the rational subject is at the center of the cognitive world is rooted in Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) philosophical argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

² On “perspectivism” in Nietzsche's work see Young. 337-38; 416.

up the biblical story of the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 evoked by Nietzsche above. Gauguin playfully holds a serpent in his right elongated hand [Fig. 1]. What is this modern serpent's promise of Paradise? What does the painter's hand reveal? What is this tree of knowledge, signified by two apples in the right corner of the painting? What kind of saint appears in the self-portrait, already crowned by a halo?



[Fig.1] Paul Gauguin. *Self-Portrait*, 1889

Chester Dale Collection. National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

1963.10.150

Basking in a background of bright yellow and fiery red colors, Gauguin's portrait originally occupied a wooden panel door at the Inn of Marie Henry at Le Poldue (France) where a group of artists had taken up residence. On the panel, Gauguin literally takes the role of the door keeper, "guarding" the inside of a cupboard. The pensive face confronts the world, pondering God's creative abilities as is voiced in his own writings:

I have known, everyone knows, everyone will continue to know, that two and two make four. It is a long way from convention, from mere intuition, to real understanding. I agree, and like everyone else I say, “Two and two make four,”... But this irritates me; it quite upsets my way of thinking. Thus, for example, you who insist that two and two make four, as if it were a certainty that could not possibly be otherwise,-why do you also maintain that God is the creator of everything? If only for an instant, could not God have arranged things differently? A strange sort of Almighty (1968, 21)!

Gauguin, the outspoken critique of religious belief, calling himself an “unbeliever,” continues a passionate dialog with Christian teachings and beliefs throughout his life (Boudaille, 53). He even paints himself as *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1898) explaining the work as representing “the crushing of an ideal, and a pain that is both divine and human” (Huret, 161). In the painting of Christ, grief and suffering is strikingly visualized, rigorously exposing the finitude of being human, which, according to Gauguin, signifies divine pain. Considering Gauguin’s struggle with his Christian heritage, the self-portrait from the inn in Le Poldue makes one wonder whether the modern “Adam” hears the serpent’s promise of Paradise or feels the pain of an ultimate loss. Facing the viewer, Gauguin’s skeptical look seems to deliberately move itself beyond the confines of the religious tradition in which his body is deeply embedded. Eve is absent – the image focuses solely on the modern “Adam” holding the serpent in his hand.

Gauguin’s self-portrait opens the fissure between different orders of textuality of a well known biblical passage and visuality. Yet in this tensional relation between symbolic references to the biblical word and visuality resides an evocative call, underlined by a skeptical gaze gripping the spectator to search for knowledge in color, texture, and the structure of the painting. The artist deliberately thrusts aside easily assumed references in shattering visually the bond between the biblical text and image. Sacred symbolism is placed on a cupboard, meant for daily common usage. The artist uses the symbols of the halo, the tree of life, the apple, and the serpent in a highly uncommon manner, thus confuses well known traditional signification. On the cupboard the reference to Adam is present and absent, forcing the viewer to explore the face in the context of religious belief in crisis. Even if Gauguin’s head was not crowned with a halo, the enigmatic self-portrait defies answers as it invites the memory of the biblical story with its claim to declare the destiny of humankind once and for all. Gauguin’s self-portrait initiates a dialog with Genesis 3, engaging the viewer, precisely because it replaces the unified bond to tradition, perturbing clarity

with a visual colorful polyphony. Arcane symbolism thus puts the gaze face to face with the portrait of an artist whose own life was deeply embedded in a crisis between established values such as family bonds and religion and a search for a new Paradise. Many of Gauguin's works speak eloquently about his longing for this utopian space, highlighted particularly in his choice to leave his marriage and family behind to be free as an artist. His uncommon lifestyle in search for free spirits is well known and documented.³ Like Nietzsche, well aware of the dubious promise of the serpent, Gauguin is in search for a future different from tradition and heritage:

It looks to me as if morality, like the sciences and all the rest, were on its way toward a quite new morality which will perhaps be the opposite of that of today. Marriage, the family, and ever so good things which they din into my ears, seem to be dashing off at full speed in an automobile. (Gauguin, 1968, 18).

Faced with Gauguin's portrait, the spectator is likely shaken out of a comfortable certainty. Traditional norms, values, and beliefs are suddenly questioned since the strange symbolism in the picture does not allow for a conventional and habitual response among viewers. Instead, the viewer is thrown into Gauguin's acerbic ensemble of classical symbols, vivid colors, and lines, an invitation to enter the scene. The location of the portrait as a decoration of an upper panel of a cupboard door in the public space of the Inn at Le Poldue further accentuates the incongruity between sacred symbolism and outright contempt for a long established tradition in painting the Fall. The picture thus transforms not just text but that which has been the normative Christian teaching deeply related to the story into a colorful portrait of a modern Adam. Such is the dialog that the spectator cannot effortlessly find delight in the aesthetical beauty, or submit in pious belief to its symbolic references. On the contrary, to see here means to take part in the artist's struggle. While such a dialog might very well end in outright rejection of the provocative use of religious visual language, one can hardly avoid the question about the modern human self which Gauguin poses by locating himself in the portrait.

The biblical text of Genesis 3, frequently evoked as foundational Christian narrative that substantiates norms and social regulations, is certainly on Gauguin's mind in a number of his

³ Since Morice Charles wrote the first biography about Gauguin, the turbulent flight from a successful bourgeois life of wealth, family, and middle class morality to become a painter inspired numerous biographers and art-historians.

paintings. The artist's contempt for religious and social moral rules is questioned in search for a new morality, knowledge of good and evil beyond the boundaries set by what Gauguin himself calls the "sacerdotal guild of...priests..[that] lays claim to a dogmatic and supposedly inspired and infallible authority" (1996, 169) The painting epitomizes the struggle as well as accomplishments of Gauguin's search for a truth that does not perpetuate the established norms of a society which has fundamentally been shaped by the religious doctrine of a "Catholic theocracy...the authorized, privileged, infallible interpreter of God (1996, 171)." For Gauguin, the failures of the Church authority to recognize the relevance of scientific knowledge, as in the rejection of Galileo's proof of the Copernican system, spur his continuous search for an unspoiled condition of nature and humanity before culture and religion changed and destroyed the original condition. That this search would not reveal Paradise for him on the shores of Tahiti is well known. Yet Gauguin would not renounce his search and continue the quest until his death.

While Gauguin criticizes Christianity in his writings, he never fully abandons his own heritage, the Christian upbringing and morals in which his own story begins. On the contrary, like a thread his conviction of a pure Christian teaching weaves through his oeuvre despite his opposition and criticism. Claiming that "God belongs to the poets, to the realm of dreams," his colorful language provokes a critical stance toward life in the boundaries of traditional civilized upbringing, a stance that is also deeply embedded in the values of this tradition in which Gauguin seeks to define his own self (1996, 164). Accordingly, an enigmatic painting as Gauguin's self- portrait does not hold any potential to dissolve the contradictions that frequently characterize human existence. What it may provide is an incentive to search for what might become possibility in life. The hand that releases the serpent from the bondage to the word opens space to consider an uncommon knowledge, concerned with sexuality, the self and body in the world. The lower part of the portrait is framed by a garland of yellow flowers – mirroring the serpent's move. The painting seems to speak of a promise, yet not an unequivocal one, rather a call to follow the windings of life, an attraction to examine well set established boundaries, to find a new garden Eden in the world. Perhaps one might read the flowers as signifiers of an art of life as formulated in the artist's language. In this context, art of life refers to a search for what is yet to come. This search has its roots in alternative perspectives on a world determined by values and beliefs that are taken for granted because these have long been adhered to. Instead, Gauguin's colorful language suggests a playful criticism with the goal of reevaluating certain values, a language that not only requires the creative artist but the creative

spectator on the way to explore life. In such a context, colors, shapes, and lines but also what is left out, not painted in the picture, the unsaid, the undefined gains importance opening the space that allows imagination to linger and explore new worlds in reinventing new pictures. This means, the process of recollection likely stirs up memories and critique because of the picture's highly unorthodox symbolism. The tensional quality between esteemed interpretations of Genesis 3 and Gauguin's unconventional panel unleashes a spur to imagine a world differing from long-established customs and values, a provocation to search for life to come. Whether the new perspectives open a pristine Paradise or continue the mystery of the human being torn between salvation and perdition must be answered by the viewer who encounters Gauguin's self-portrait.

Gauguin called himself a person adept to an instinct and experience of "the civilized savage," a description that biographers have eagerly taken up and used to make sense of his outright rejection of certain practices, prohibitions, and relations that characterized nineteenth century bourgeois social life in France. His life in the South Seas has fascinated art historians and has become as much of a research interest as his artwork, creating a tale of the once dedicated France citizen fleeing to an artist's Paradise in the South Seas. These research works will not be rehearsed. The focus will rather be on ways in which Gauguin's artwork depicts what appears as a search for human existence in a specific historical context. Who emerges in the picture? What bonds are released or given new meaning? Gauguin's own conviction that he was a genius, endowed with the gift to create great artistic works, certainly spurs his opposition to what he considered all too strict bondages of religious, artistic, and societal networks. His self confidence is clearly reflected on canvas, especially in his self-portraits. Against the tide of opposition Gauguin's confidence in his calling was the foundation for his conviction that his work originated deep inside himself, allowing the artist to glimpse "a higher meaning" as the source for his rebellious discourse (Gauguin, 1976, 37). Hence, seeing and painting the world in a different light, defiant of the old person he once was, becomes a necessity. Beyond the artist's effort in defining the modern "Adam," the painting sets the stage for a much broader discourse in which knowledge of new worlds and bodies emerge, a call to transformation not just of the artist's life but for those who become engaged in viewing his work. The language of colors and shapes becomes the voice (he frequently refers to music as a metaphor) to communicate an immediate relation to life, a search for simplicity that has not yet been submitted itself to the skepticism and burden of an instruction of civilized upbringing. Therefore, Gauguin's work is not only representative of his own dreams, and a sign of his flight from societal

constrictions. Instead, the painting discussed reveals a tensional quality which eloquently speaks of symbols that invest the subject with the freedom to explore life.

Despite the emphasis on Gauguin's "modern" Adam in the above painting [Fig. 1], Eve also appears in a number of Gauguin's artwork and writings as a central character, in which the original story of the Fall reverberates in a spectrum of interpretive modes. In his writings, the ever critical Gauguin castigates what he considers the supernatural doctrine of the Virgin Mary's birth in reprove of scientific knowledge (Gauguin, 1976, 168-9). Gauguin is in search of nature before it had been formulated in the sacred books, a "virginity" not tainted through dogma and burdened by a "sacerdotal guild" in charge of the Word. In the South Seas, Gauguin immerses himself into what he imagines to be an immediate appearance of nature, exploring what he calls "virgin land" in the way a child would do (Gauguin, 1976, 110). Seeking immediacy in life in the South Sea he initially believed that this new path would hold the promise for a world that has not been perturbed by traditional truth claims which invest the human body with meaning. For Gauguin, the Tahitian women merge with the land and nature, representing a virginity that rarely had to succumb to the Western narratives rushing to define their identities as mothers and women.⁴ Gauguin was attracted by exactly this kind of originality, seeking a form of authenticity, which presumably, according to the artist, had long been lost in the cultured Western societies. In this context, Gauguin does not just reject the role of the mystified Christian body, in particular the Virginal Maternal of Mary but replaces it with a new Eve, one who never had to surrender herself to the Christian symbolic economy (2006, 304-323).⁵

Despite Gauguin's hope that the virgin terrain of the South Seas would finally provide the desired access to humanity before its corruption by a civilized society, his artwork reflects the fact that tradition cannot simply be left behind. On the contrary, Eve in Gauguin's body of work eloquently speaks of the tension between the Western tradition and the life experience the artist hopes to reflect in color and shapes. A style that imitated imperfection, serves the artist to capture this

⁴ Although nineteenth century Polynesians were the vassals of French imperialism and subject to the efforts of Christian missionaries, the relatively small Tahitian population proved rather resilient to most influences of their colonizers (Eisenmann, 15).

⁵ Julia Kristeva offers a compelling analysis of the symbolic economy, in which femininity and maternity are very successfully married in the Western narrative of the virgin mother.

original immediacy.⁶ Instead of merely introducing the utopia of a new Paradise, Gauguin visually exhibits regimes that invest the human body with meaning. The topics of sexuality, sinfulness, and knowledge of the self are stirred and compete. The following painting, today exhibited in the National Gallery in Washington D.C. will serve as an example of the role of Eve in Gauguin's oeuvre. Standing on a swirling bed of colors surrounded by flowers and thick forest, a Tahitian woman of dark skin dominates the picture. Her right hand slightly touches the face, while her left hand demonstratively covers her pudenda with a white cloth, signaling shame and sorrow as frequently exhibited in traditional Byzantine and Romanesque sculptures of Eve.⁷ While the posture and gestures are reminiscent of the Western visual tradition of the expulsion from Paradise, the woman's face speaks of a different story. Looking into the eyes of the spectator, a confident gaze does not accentuate her fallen state. The frightening malevolent spirit in the back, the "*varua ino*" devil, referred to in the title appears as an even more ambiguous figure. A frozen face with wide open eyes stares directly into the spectators face. A Green and a red mask in the upper right corner gaze at the viewer. Eyes are all fixed on the spectator in this painting. In the concoction of elements, including a confident Eve aware of her shame and the serpent who perhaps has taken on a human face in the evil demon, the artist conjures up the question of human existence faced with life and death. The *mélange* of oppositions between color and darkness, movement and stagnation, matter and spirit, the Western and Tahitian Eve pose a challenging provocation gazing at the spectator who is forced to look into traditions previously unknown to each other. A hybrid image of the Fall becomes a mirror in which Polynesian and Western imagery meet, forcing the gaze to engage in the enigmatic relation between traditional narrative and values and visual appearance.

⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, examining Gauguin's deviations from the Renaissance tradition, interprets the artist's "imperfect" naturalistic representation as a deliberate attempt to portray a kind of immediacy to an early naiveté, he encountered in the works of medieval craftsmen (175-177).

⁷ Ziva Amishai-Maisels adequately draws this connection between the posture of Gauguin's Eve and a medieval drawing from the Cathedral in Basel. (373-382).



[Fig. 2] Paul Gauguin. *Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil)*.
Oil on Canvas. 1892.

To speak of “language” in the context of *Words of the Devil* and Gauguin’s self portrait [Fig. 1] requires additional qualifications. The artist considers painting to be an extraordinary means of communication, a form of language energized in mesmerizing colors. In a discussion of the works of the French artist Delacroix (1798–1863), Gauguin exclaims: “Color! What a deep and mysterious language, the language of dreams” (1996, 128). Gauguin studied the use of color in other painters, especially the medieval artists Giotto and does not hesitate ridiculing the attempts among Romantic painters like Delacroix to use the law of physics to make sense of color schemes in nature. His interest is in the arcane character of color which, as he believes, provides a tool to achieve a certain level of immediacy in communication with the spectator. This kind of immediacy cannot be mediated via the spoken word. The French audience visiting Gauguin’s exhibitions clearly reacted to the regimes of color but hardly understood the rather uncommon form of language in painting. Considering the significant role of realism in the early nineteenth century French art and the newly emerging opportunities given with photography, such rejection might not have come as a surprise. Gauguin’s energetic colors must have appeared as unreasonable deviation from traditional Western

styles, his very personal colorful response to the straightjacket of artistic, religious, and societal norms, in search for an unspoiled condition.

In a letter to Strindberg, used as the preface to the official catalog for the sale of his works at the Hôtel Drouot, (Paris) in 1895, Gauguin explains his approach to painting the Tahitian Eve:

Seeing Eve as I choose to paint her, using shapes and harmonies of another world, your most vivid memories may have evoked a painful past. The Eve of your civilized conception makes you and almost all of us in fact misogynists. The ancient Eve who frightens you in my studio might well smile at you less bitterly one day...The Eve whom I have painted, (and only she) can logically remain naked before your eyes. Your Eve, in that natural attire, would not be able to walk without immodesty, and, too beautiful (perhaps), would conjure up evil and pain (1996, 105).

For Gauguin, Eve does not simply reflect a tradition based in the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Fall but symbolizes the web of codes defining the life and bodies of women in their relation to the greater society. As the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) argues, human beings see with a body which interprets this world, a body that “is permanently stationed before things in order to perceive them...at grips with the world. Being in the world already is a mode of perception in which “experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them because it always comes into being within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world (252-53).” The artist is able to contrast life and traditional values in a discourse that divides two worlds based on symbolic significance. In this context, nakedness serves as a metaphor unveiling not just Eve’s body but the normative role of clothing, hence Gauguin’s reference to misogynist behavior. Strindberg had actually refused to write the preface for the catalogue, openly rejecting the Tahitian works. Gauguin, disregarding Strindberg’s judgment, instead publishes the letter of the Swedish writer with the above response. In an outright statement, the painter thus highlights presumed distinctions between so called ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ societies, ideals of beauty, modesty and immodesty, pleasure and pain, salvation and evil. Gauguin understands that language is instrumental in the lenses which determine common objections against the Tahitian Eve by the civilized world. Eve, who incorporates the failure of humanity like no other famous women in the Western tradition, becomes the enigma of life and death.⁸ In this context, nakedness and modesty serve as potent metaphors, a

⁸ Gauguin specifically discusses the philological differences between the languages of Oceania and Western inflicted languages in the same response to Strindberg. Yet based on Gauguin’s own poor knowledge of the Tahitian language, his observations are not conclusive nor do they explicate the rather complicated discourse

utopian dream since the Tahitian Eve reveals life, almost forgotten under the spell of the Western regime of thinking, speaking, and knowledge. One must wonder what words the devil has to offer. “Talk about the evil spirit” is likely the literal translation of the title “*parau na te varua ino.*” The painting does not answer whether the words provide a satirical reference regarding the shameful civilized Eve or a dark sense of the finite and infinite in life all human beings are faced with.

Scholars like Linda Nochlin have long alerted their readers to the “genderedness” which is not absent from Gauguin’s work (1988, 147-58). Looking at Gauguin’s self-portrait, man not woman clearly is taking charge, freeing himself from traditional bondages and, in the creative process of the portrait, positioning his stance in relation to a distinct view of the world. Gauguin’s lifestyle as well as art has become important topics in feminist and post-colonial criticism.⁹ Yet despite these charges, Gauguin’s visual interpretations of the Fall also defy all too easy categorizations. One important reason for the spectrum of possible readings of his work must be located in the ambiguous relation between traditional references to the biblical text, the artist “speaking,” the work of painting (colors, shapes, lines), and the spectator. Gauguin’s paintings speak of the narrative of the self and the other in a mysterious language of symbols. The point in Gauguin’s self-portrait is that symbolic reference to the biblical text does not merely rest in analogy but equally on what is contradictory to what would have been expected. Consequently, in the self-portrait as in the Tahitian Eve, the biblical text has lost its unquestioned role to give immediate access to knowledge of the divine voice. Visual impression offers at best a kind of probable knowledge, to be sought in the lines that shape an enigmatic figure who claims to be the artist himself. In the mode of questioning, evoked by the ambiguity of symbolism, the male and female figures appear on canvas as images suggestive of a “knowledge” of what may be possible in life. The figures hardly offer unequivocally judgments but an invitation to make life an art.

I will support the above claim looking more closely into the artist’s use of color. As an artist, Gauguin is well aware of the power of color, its potential to evoke a deep response in viewers without words. Some critics, who ridiculed the artist, suggested that his uncommon use of color

in his own works, especially the “Words of the Devil.” For a discussion of Gauguin’s language use see for example: Bengt Danielson (228-233).

⁹ A recent survey regarding methodological approaches, and lucid analysis of Gauguin’s multi-faceted approach to otherness especially in the colonial context which refines most common traditional interpretations of his work is offered by Eisemann. *Gauguin’s Skirt*.

would probably be quite amusing for children, suspecting poor eyesight as the reason for not being able to respond appropriately to the laws of nature. Gauguin responds to the critique with an elaborate reflection about colors. Conscious of the indeterminate quality of colors, Gauguin celebrates what he calls “the language of the listening eye...its suggestive quality... suited to help our imaginations soar, decorating our dreams, opening a new door onto mystery and the infinite.” Color, a mysterious medium allows the artist to establish a direct relation with the spectator, provoking an experience the artist likens to “musical sensation that flow from it. He claims that colors create a symbolic dimension, “most indefinable in nature: its inner power (1996, 144-45).” Painting color, therefore, provides a discourse in which the commonly accepted structures of language and with it the predetermined customs, norms, and beliefs may be left behind in order to open a space for a new way of life. Color as Julia Kristeva aptly observes holds a unique power escaping “censorship:”

Color condenses “objectivity,” “subjectivity,” and the intra systematic organization of pictorial practice. ..Because it belongs to a painting’s system, and therefore, to the extent that it plays a structural role in any subject-elaborated apparatus, color is an index of value (of an objective referent) and an instinctual pressure (an erotic implication of the subject); it hence finds itself endowed with new functions it does not possess outside this system and, therefore, outside pictorial practice....As a result, color escapes censorship; and the unconscious irrupts into a culturally coded pictorial distribution (1980, 221-22).

Gauguin is interested in the “instinctual pressure” exactly because his goal is to reevaluate traditional customs and norms. Color, liberated from the constrictions imposed by speaking and reasoning provide the musical sensation in which a new “culturally coded pictorial” discourse could be distributed. Pure color, mysterious in character, is the source for what Gauguin considers “nature” out of tune with the traditional Christian code in the painting. Immediacy achieved through color is thus set against a mode of discourse in which the direct connection between language and objects is assumed. Gauguin does not only strive to achieve propinquity with the spectator in his painting, a level of discourse beyond the logos, but creates a surplus of meaning in conflict with the biblical narrative, societal norms, and presumed gender relations, to be explored, as he claims himself, via imagination. In that sense, Gauguin’s often invoked “Paradise” in the South Seas does not have the qualities of realism. Instead, his images serve as the oblique construction of a utopia providing the stage to begin the search for Paradise. The music of color in Gauguin’s work does not permit Paradise to have arrived - unless it is imagined.

An additional comment is necessary regarding Eve who is an active protagonist in *the Devil's Words*. In her work, *The Visceral Eye*, Linda Nochlin challenges the male gaze as the dominant perspective in art historical research and interpretation, arguing that often forgotten is the location of the gaze in historically specific bodies. She argues that to investigate responses to art in the context of social history offers a more comprehensive understanding of the corporeal eye (2006, 15). The gazes in “*parau na te varua ino*” suggest complex relations. While the painting has been composed by a male artist, how does a female spectator see and perceive or in the above case how might the Tahitian woman have taken in Gauguin’s musical colors? The complex issues of race and gender in Gauguin’s work surpass the limits of the study and have been discussed very comprehensively otherwise (Eisenmann). Yet the gaze plays a particularly fascinating role in “*parau na te varua ino*.” Who is watching? The woman? The spirit? The Mask? The spectator? Eve looks at the spectator from the side of her eyes, yet with a gaze that communicates with the world beyond the painting. Eyes and body speak of shame as well as defiance, confidence as well as gift. Yet conversing through the visual happens under the gaze of devil and the mask. Eve speaks through the painter’s brush about life and death, insisting in her gaze on communication with the spectator. In the context of the biblical story of Genesis 3, one might argue that Eve and the modern Adam complement each other in a visual discourse provoking questioning and search for an art of life that is deeply embedded in the struggle with a long-established tradition. How successfully the artistic approach has influenced or perhaps reinforced traditional social norms and customs is another debate.

In Gauguin’s works discussed here the world picture to be developed has lost lucidity – or hasn’t it? Who is the human being, who sees and who is seen? Vibrant colors, vivid symbols and sharp lines merge symbol and sacred text (Genesis 3), sainthood and sinfulness, the self of the painter (as indicated in the title) and the self of the spectator into the mystery. Who is the person evoked by the painting in the tension between Gauguin’s own self and traditional teaching? Adam is of course not alone, Eve joins him as a new Eve in the South Seas. Gauguin’s ‘first couple’ steps into new territory, an experiment with life in which a self reflection resulting in the struggle between tradition and artistic creativeness is explored as new practice in the relationship, brought to canvas to be pronounced and defended before an audience who did not understand or outright rejected the critical implications for morality within its social conditions. Eve and Adam seeking a new Paradise, an art of life without answers as painted by Gauguin, accentuate the serpent’s original promise.

Despite all efforts, Gauguin's brush cannot resolve the original predicament of the loss of Paradise. Instead, painting has become an eloquent language in which a critical mode, the search for knowledge of good and evil, characterizes the modern self.

“Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” (Gauguin)

I can't help but dream about a criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life, it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep...I would like a criticism of scintillating leaps of imagination... it would bear the lightening of possible storms (Foucault, 323).

Michel Foucault's words sound like a dream, an ideal set against the overwhelming power of a pre-determined judgmental mode that all too often informs life. Judgment perceived from the text, written in “stone” may exert devastating power over life's potential possibilities. This is not to say that judgment does not have its legitimate place in life. As a matter of fact, Gauguin in his writings and his visual language on canvas appears to deliver outrageously bitter judgments. Yet in the word “criticism,” as developed by Foucault, judgment takes on a new role as an “ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and experiment with the possibility of going beyond them [*de leur franchissement possible*].” Critique, understood in the above sense, creatively engages in existence, and is ultimately anchored in concrete practices (319).

I suggest that Gauguin's paintings discussed here provide such criticism that has the potential to make preclusive judgment questionable, examining its long established highly regarded place, its influence on norms and regulations in order to unleash a creative mode that takes on the task to redesign existence. Knowledge of the biblical text - the artist studied it between 1859-1861 under the bishop of Orléans - pervades many of Gauguin's works, but particularly his large canvas entitled “*D'où venons-nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous?*” a painting narrative that encompasses life from its inception to its end. Until the end of his life, this most odious, often bitter critic of the official Church shows his fascination with Genesis juxtaposing it with Polynesian myths of creation. The resulting visual tensional composition offers a spur to investigate possibilities without expectation to reach absolute answers. Visuality on canvas seems to potentially evoke what I would call a critical

ethos among those who take up Gauguin's challenge themselves. Criticism begins with questions, questions in search for limits and possibilities. The title for the famous piece: *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* today in the Boston Museum of Art summons Gauguin's artistic mode



[Fig. 3] Paul Gauguin. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

139.1 x 374.6 cm. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Art, Boston. Photo: Torsten W. Räßle.

The painting suggests temporality of human existence; a story that begins with the little infant next to three women engaged in conversation on the left side and is completed with the old woman on the left, lonely in her thoughts. The spectator is transported into a new visual Paradise, a dream in which trees, flowers, river, mountains, animals, and human beings, life and death, the here and the beyond appear at the moment's spur. Reminiscences to the story of the Fall permeate the scene with an androgynous figure plucking fruit dominating the center of the picture. Behind it beyond the back side of the flesh of a naked body, a couple immersed in the darkness of shade, wearing dark

brown sackcloth of penitence, are deeply immersed in discussion, confiding their thoughts to each other. In front, a child clothed in white, curiously tastes a fruit. Regarding the static figure dominating the background of the left side, Gauguin writes: “An idol, its arms mysteriously and rhythmically uplifted arms raised seems to point to the next world (1996, 160).” Hybrid identities embedded in the complex composition raise the questions: “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” Proudly Gauguin claims his work “a philosophical treatise” well aware that words are insufficient as lonely medium to solve the riddle of life. Beyond the old woman on the left sits a bird, its white color of its feathers brightly illuminating the corner connected through whitish flowing ground with the idol. The bird holds a lizard in its claws, “representing the futility of words” so Gauguin (1996, 160).

The riddle of life cannot be solved through, words, theory or doctrine, even if they provide most trusted guidance. To face existence, Gauguin’s paintings leads the spectator into an attitude that tastes color, and hears the symphony of life and death to begin to imagine, to bring ideas to life in reflection on one’s own heritage and tradition. Reflection in narrative or painting can only happen “in medias res.” Gauguin accept this challenge well aware that painting might provide a medium to explore the abyss of human existence and the self, feeling, as he says, his way “with the tip of a brush on a piece of burlap that is full of knots and rough patches (1996, 159-60).” Painting becomes an endeavor to capture life itself, its emotional impact, its sensuality, smell, and music to kindle imagination.

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LIST OF IMAGES

[Fig. 1] Paul Gauguin. Self-Portrait, 1889
Chester Dale Collection. National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.
1963.10.150

[Fig. 2] Paul Gauguin. Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil).
Oil on Canvas. 1892. 91.7 x 68.5 cm. National Gallery in Washington D.C.

[Fig. 3] Paul Gauguin. Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?
139.1 x 374.6 cm. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Art, Boston.