

H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 24

Linda Goddard, *Savage Tales: The Writings of Paul Gauguin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 208 pp. 74 color and 1 b&w illustration, bibliography, index, appendix. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0300240597.

Review by Dario Gamboni, Professor Emeritus, Université de Genève.

Savage Tales is the culmination of Linda Goddard's long-standing research into Paul Gauguin's written oeuvre, the results of which have been appearing since 2005 in numerous articles, contributions to collections of essays, and exhibition catalogues, as well as in the book-form publication of her doctoral thesis, *Aesthetic Rivalries: Word and Image in France, 1880–1926*.^[1] It provides a welcome synthesis of these studies, together with new insights and a generous illustration, which gives flesh to the author's arguments about the "visual-verbal hybridity" of Gauguin's manuscripts and the semantic relevance of their materiality (p. 104). The book is lucidly written and beautifully produced. It does justice and lends force to Goddard's conviction that Gauguin's writings deserve to be taken "seriously as a literary endeavor," were "an integral component of his creative practice" (p. 11), and constituted "a central element in his construction of an artistic identity" (p. 25).

Gauguin's writings are neither unknown nor unstudied, but Goddard notes that they have been mostly undervalued and used in an ancillary fashion, as sources of information about their author's life and his visual works (especially paintings), rather than "analyzed in literary or visual terms" for their own sake (p. 9). In this book, she examines a larger range of texts than in her previous studies, and addresses "the role of writing in [Gauguin's] negotiation of an identity on the borders between the French colonial and the Polynesian communities" (p. 33). She does not strive at being exhaustive, however, arguing that the task of identifying Gauguin's writings and his sources is an ongoing one. An attempted exhaustivity might have been illusory, since, as she observes, at least eight of the thirteen manuscripts remaining in the artist's possession at the time of his death are unaccounted for. But systematicity would have been a more valid aim, and one may regret, for instance, that no greater attention is given to *L'Esprit moderne et le catholicisme* (1902) and its first draft "L'Église catholique et les temps modernes," included in *Diverses choses* (1896–7).^[2]

The first chapter, "The Artist as Anti-Critic," is in line with the core argument of *Aesthetic Rivalries*, and shows how Gauguin resorted to the written word in order to challenge what he called the "regime of the man of letters," that is, the authority over the interpretation and evaluation of artworks obtained by professional writers thanks to the rise of art criticism as a literary genre and to the establishment, in the late nineteenth century, of the "dealer-critic

system.”[3] This is not new, but Goddard points out that the issue of the relative competence and legitimacy of artists and writers, respectively, in matters of art was “a theme indigenous to criticism itself” (p. 40),[4] so that Gauguin’s efforts at “counter criticism,” like his defense of the specificity of visual expression, were “in productive tension with, rather than direct opposition to, the literary” (p. 95). Goddard also examines the explanations of some of his works given by the artist and proposes to understand their apparent inconsistency as an attempt “to disrupt the authority of literary interpretations by disseminating multiple, contradictory accounts” (p. 45), which could be “opportunistically tailored ... according to the recipient, and are also a measure of his conflicting desire to both elucidate [the work’s] symbolism and simultaneously protect its inscrutability” (p. 56).[5]

Chapter two, “*Noa Noa* and the Artifice of Autobiography,” contributes to the current reevaluation of Gauguin’s collaboration with the poet and critic Charles Morice for *Noa Noa*, the most famous and complex of his literary endeavors, and it illuminates the division of labor between the two. Goddard also provides elements of contextualization by comparing *Noa Noa* with earlier and contemporary travel writing about Polynesia, in which she identifies shared motifs such as the “sense of disillusionment” experienced by the travelers on their arrival in Papeete (p. 82), “followed by symbolic penetration into [the] wilder depths” of Tahiti, or what she calls “the mythical notion of a bygone era destroyed by a ‘fatal impact’” (p. 83), that of colonization and Christianization. She does not conclude that Gauguin merely passed off conventions as his personal experience, however, but underlines how, in comparison with Pierre Loti’s *Rarahu* (1879), for example, “*Noa Noa* more strongly conveys the narrator’s sense of alienation as an outsider” (p. 85), vacillates “between scenarios of domination and surrender,” and challenges “conventional boundaries of colonial, sexual and gender identity” (p. 86).[6]

In “Scattered Notes,” her third chapter, Goddard focusses on the “multivocality” (90) developed by Gauguin in manuscripts such as *Diverses choses* (1896–8), the opening sentence of which announced “Scattered notes, without sequence like Dreams, like life all made up of fragments ...”.[7] She takes note of the fact that the artist “explicitly aligned his citational and non-consecutive approach to literary composition with a primitive mentality” (p. 91), yet relates it to literary traditions and developments such as the epigram, the common place book, the *fait divers*, the Romantic cult of the fragment, and the Symbolist aesthetics of “suggestion,” exemplified by Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Divagations* (1897).[8] In *Diverses choses* and in the Louvre manuscript of *Noa Noa* (bound in the same volume), as in other manuscripts such as *Ancien Culte mahorie* (1893) and *Cahier pour Aline* (1892–3), moreover, Gauguin cultivated a “visual-verbal hybridity” (p. 104), which Goddard compares with that of nineteenth-century albums or keepsake books (notably by amateur women artists), sailors’ journals, and scrapbooks. Recognizing that he did not try to have his manuscripts published as facsimiles, which happened posthumously, she observes that the neatness of his handwriting nonetheless implied an intended “small but significant audience,” which is consistent with Gauguin’s efforts at gathering followers and with his calls for fellow artists to “group together like the disciples of a new religion” (p. 104).[9] Less convincing is Goddard’s contention that “Gauguin’s anti-linear, fragmentary approach to textual composition was likewise premised on an opposition between the logical, temporal flow of narrative and the all-encompassing immediacy of the visual image,” since this Lessingian dichotomy is contradicted by the artist’s use of two- and three-dimensional visuality, which was not directed toward an “all-encompassing immediacy” but, on the contrary, fostered the temporality of perception in order to produce a multiplicity of aspects, viewpoints, and meanings (p. 113).

Goddard's fourth and last chapter, "Gauguin's Avatars," is the most novel of the book. It deals with the artist's copious written output of the last five years of his life and especially with his polemical, journalistic activity, which enabled him "to position himself as heir to the literary legacies of his Republican journalist father, Clovis Gauguin, and radical socialist feminist grandmother, Flora Tristan" (p. 24). Gauguin's articles for the Tahitian monthly newspaper *Les Guêpes* (1899–1901) and his own newspaper *Le Sourire* (1899–1900) have received comparatively little attention so far. Goddard demonstrates their value for an understanding of the artist's complex position in Polynesia and of the creation of "multiple authorial positions in his texts," a process that she parallels with his "propensity for role play and impersonation in his self-portraits" (p. 125).^[10] An intriguing suggestion is that in his *Cahier pour Aline*, which bears the inscription "Journal de jeune fille," Gauguin would have written less *for* his eponymous daughter than *as* her (p. 131): this might be put in relation to the explanation he gave to Vincent van Gogh of the yellow background in his *Self-portrait (Les Misérables)* (1888): "That girlish little background, with its childish flowers, is there to testify to our artistic virginity."^[11]

Goddard contextualizes Gauguin's "ventriloquism" (p. 32) with reference to the satirical press—which remains a *terra incognita* of the cultural history of the period, despite its enormous impact and inventivity—and she compares *Le Sourire* to Mallarmé's *La Dernière Mode* (1874), another one-man newspaper resorting to pseudonyms, including female ones. In her conclusion, titled "Writing Primitivism," she defines Gauguin's "shifting authorial personae" as "symptomatic of his troubled, liminal position" in colonial Polynesia (p. 155). She also introduces the first reader (and purchaser) of Gauguin's late manuscripts, the physician and writer Victor Segalen, and rightly notes that his encounter with these writings "had a formative influence on his theory of exoticism" (p. 157), an unfinished attempt at defining the cognitive and aesthetic value of the *divers*, the different (from oneself).^[12]

With its insistence on the fabrication of Gauguin's manuscripts and their "visual-verbal hybridity," *Savage Tales* agrees with recent scholarship emphasizing the materiality of books and the inventiveness of *fin-de-siècle* print culture.^[13] In its treatment of Gauguin's behavior in Polynesia, where he wrote the majority of the texts under scrutiny, it can be seen as part of the ongoing revision of the "late-twentieth-century postcolonial and feminist dismantling of the long-standing Gauguin myth"—a revision of a revision.^[14] Goddard inherits the critical and moralistic approach to the artist's relationships with people and cultures in the Pacific, but she is careful to take into account both the historical context and the evidence of the texts that she studies, observing for instance that Gauguin's use of Western sources such as Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout's *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan* (1837) does not allow to charge him with "plagiarism" and "denial," since he revealed these sources himself (p. 120).^[15] Her interpretation of the artist's position and its evolution has room for nuance and complexity, as when she proposes to explain his increasing distance from French colonial society at the end of his life as follows: "His opportunism, anti-establishmentarianism, and empathy for the social outcast, meant that an enemy in one context might become a friend in another..., and support and sympathy for the Indigenous community increased when it intersected with his own liberationist goals" (p. 189).

The only theoretical objection that can be made to such analyses is their openness to the risk of finalism and teleology, of turning effects into causes, as suggested by the abundant use of notions such as "strategy" and "conflicted identity." One may agree, for example, that Gauguin interpreted "the patchwork condition of traditional Tahitian culture under colonialism from the

point of view of the European fascination with the fragment” (p. 121); whether “it was the incomplete nature of that experience that attracted him in the first place” (p. 91), however, is another, less assured matter. This applies particularly to what Goddard calls Gauguin’s creation of “multiple authorial positions in his texts” (p. 125): while strategic—or, more modestly, tactical—motives may have been involved, there are reasons to think that role playing also resulted from Gauguin’s love of play for its own sake. A comparison with his artistic endeavors can be illuminating: Gauguin appears to have wished to illustrate the edition of *Noa Noa* with woodcuts, and failed, because he became so engrossed by his experimental use of the medium that he produced matrices that could not be edited; the result was the *Noa Noa* suite, “a revolution in the art of printmaking,” and a remarkable instance of the law of unintended consequences.[16]

All in all, *Savage Tales* is an excellent book, an important contribution to the literature on Paul Gauguin, and the best introduction to an exceptional case of word-image relationship. Since it does not attempt to exhaust its subject, and is relatively sparing in close analyses, one hopes that its call for taking Gauguin’s texts seriously and considering them integral to his creative practice and artistic identity will be heeded, not only by fellow Gauguin specialists, but also by art historians at large, students of literature, and semioticians.

NOTES

[1] Linda Goddard, *Aesthetic Rivalries: Word and Image in France, 1880–1926* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012). The thesis itself was defended in 2004 at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. References to the author’s publications on the subject can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 254–255, and in *Savage Tales*, p. 198.

[2] See Philippe Verdier, “Un manuscrit de Gauguin: L’esprit moderne et le catholicisme,” *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch* 46–7 (1985–86): 273–298, with a transcription of the manuscript on pp. 299–328. *Savage Tales* includes a list of “Principal Manuscripts, Newspapers and Editions” (pp. 162–163), which is useful, because up to date, but which, since it does not aim at exhaustivity, does not replace the “Primary Bibliography: Writings by Paul Gauguin” included by Russell T. Clement in his *Paul Gauguin: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 43–56, curiously absent from Goddard’s bibliography. She signals a scholarly transcription of *L’Esprit moderne et le catholicisme* in preparation by Elizabeth C. Childs (Washington University in St Louis) to be made available via the website of the Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri (p. 163).

[3] Paul Gauguin, *Raconters de rapin* (1902; Paris: Falaize, 1951), p. 29. See Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (1965; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[4] On this point, see also Dario Gamboni, “Critics on Criticism: A Critical Approach,” in *Art Criticism since 1900*, ed. Malcolm Gee (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 38–47.

[5] One might object that, in accordance with the Romantic and the Symbolist theories of the symbol, this symbolism was inherently inscrutable and polysemic, so that no conflict or contradiction needed to be involved.

[6] On these aspects, see also Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

[7] The reference to dreams suggests another direction, not taken up by Goddard, that of Gauguin's interest in dream life and its study by French oneirologists. See Dario Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought* (London: Reaktion, 2014), pp. 83–91.

[8] One could add the cento. A major proponent of the fragmentary form, both influenced by Gauguin and read by him, was the art critic Jean Dolent. See Pierre Pinchon, *Jean Dolent, 1835–1909. Écrivain, critique d'art et collectionneur* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

[9] Undated letter to Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (end of 1890?), J. F. Willumsens Museum, Frederikssund, Gamle Samling no. 585.

[10] One may add Gauguin's precocious use and appropriation of found objects. See Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark, "Kunsten at finde ting. Om Gauguin og l'objet trouvé" [The Art of Finding Things. On Gauguin and *l'objet trouvé*], *Meddelelser fra Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 1990–1994*, vol. 46–50 (1994): 147–169, and Anne Pingeot, "Paul Gauguin (Paris, 1848–Atuona, 1903): Inventor of the Readymade?", *Getty Research Journal* 13 (2021): 157–176.

[11] "Ce petit fond de jeune fille avec ses fleurs enfantines est là pour attester notre virginité artistique." Gauguin to Vincent van Gogh, 1 October 1888, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, online edition, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, Huygens Institute-KNAW, letter 692, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let692/letter.html>.

[12] See Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme. Une esthétique du divers* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978).

[13] See for example Anna Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Évanghélia Stead, *La Chair du livre. Matérialité, imaginaire et poétique du livre fin-de-siècle* (Paris: PUPS, 2012).

[14] Norma Broude, "Preface and Acknowledgements," in *Gauguin's Challenge: New Perspectives after Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. xv. See this volume and, especially, the editor's "Introduction: Gauguin after Postmodernism," pp. 1–12, and her own essay, "Flora Tristan's Grandson: Reconsidering the Feminist Critique of Paul Gauguin," pp. 69–100. Linda Goddard contributed to this volume with "Gauguin's Alter Egos: Writing the Other and the Self," pp. 15–40.

[15] The reference is to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper Collins / Icon Editions, 1992), p. 326.

[16] Charles Morice, "L'atelier de Paul Gauguin," *Le soir*, Dec. 4, 1894, 2. See Dario Gamboni, "Cats. 51–60 The *Noa Noa* Suite, 1893/94, Commentary: 'Veiled in a Cloud of Fragrance': Gauguin's *Noa Noa* Suite", para 10–45, in *Gauguin Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works at the Art Institute of Chicago*, eds. Gloria Groom and Genevieve Westerby (Art Institute of Chicago,

2016), <https://publications.artic.edu/gauguin/reader/gauguinart/section/139805> (last accessed 1 February 2021).

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ISSN 1553-9172