

OUT OF PLATO'S CAVE: "ABSTRACTION" IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

I. GAUGUIN AND THE ART OF PURE MEMORY

IN A LETTER of September 1888, Gauguin complained to van Gogh of the trouble he was having completing the portrait of Emile Bernard in the upper right of *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables* (Fig. 1). "I am observing young Bernard," Gauguin said, but "I do not yet get him. Maybe I shall do him from memory, but in any case it will be an abstraction." He provided a much more elaborate description of this painting in a letter to Emile Schuffenecker the next month, a letter that – in conjunction with his comments to van Gogh – so completely captures the characteristics of the radically new style called Synthetism that it deserves to be quoted and considered in detail.

I have this year sacrificed everything – execution, color – for style, wishing to impose upon myself nothing except what I can do. It is, I think, a transformation which has not yet borne fruit but which will. I have done the self-portrait which Vincent asked for. I believe it is one of my best things: absolutely incomprehensible (for example) it is so abstract. Head of a bandit in the foreground, a Jean Valjean (*Les Misérables*) personifying also a disreputable impressionist painter, shackled always to this world. The design is absolutely special, a complete abstraction. The eyes, mouth, and nose are like the flowers of a Persian carpet, thus personifying the symbolic aspect. The color is far from nature; imagine a vague suggestion of pottery contorted by a great fire! All the reds, violets, striped by flashes of fire like a furnace radiating from the eyes, seat of the struggles of the painter's thought. The whole on a chrome background strewn with childish bouquets. Chamber of a pure young girl. The Impressionist is pure, still unsullied by the putrid kiss of the Ecole des Beaux Arts.²

Gauguin's seemingly off-hand discussions of this seminal work in fact amount to an essentialist theory of artistic practice that previewed the advent of "abstract" painting. Because

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his essentialism is largely neoplatonic,³ I will emphasize here the centrality this neoplatonism enjoyed in the development of abstract art. As a metaphysical doctrine, it encouraged the transcendence of natural or material appearances typical of abstract art; in addition, because so many artists from the late nineteenth century on used neoplatonic and other analogous doctrines to justify their departures from naturalism, this nexus of theories forms a potent link between the ideas and paintings of the Synthetists and those of Mondrian and Kandinsky a generation later.⁴

Gauguin's iconoclastic theory of art – his working definition of Synthetism – is encapsulated in four terms central to his descriptions of *Self-Portrait*, *Les Misérables*: “shackled,” “memory,” “pure,” and “abstract.” His powerfully visual metaphor of the Impressionist artist “shackled always to this world” is traditionally seen as a reference to the artist as the victim of the hell of society,⁵ but the reference to being “shackled” or to “chains” can also be interpreted as an allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic*.⁶ There the prisoners are “chained [shackled] by the leg and also by the neck.” Light comes from a fire burning behind them and projects the shadows of objects onto the cave wall in front of the captives. Because their fetters prevent them from turning around, these shadows are all that the prisoners can see. “In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of . . . artificial objects” (*Republic*, VII, 514–15). With this powerful and influential myth, Plato divides reality into the Intelligible world and that of mere Appearance, just as he did with the famous image of the Line at *Republic* VI, 509.⁷ Gauguin's reference to the shackled prisoner Jean Valjean does nothing less than tie *the* central theme of Platonism, the “disaffection with terrestrial existence,”⁸ to the practice of painting. Significantly, van Gogh reported that “the effect [this] picture makes on me is that above everything it represents a prisoner,”⁹ a prisoner, I would argue, not only of difficult social circumstances, but more importantly, of the aesthetic chains of both the academic system *and* its would-be rival, Impressionism.

Gauguin goes on in his letter to Schuffenecker to claim, like a proud Platonist, that his colors are “far from nature.” What, then, is his attitude towards Impressionism at this time, since its creed – if not always its practice – was to paint close to nature and to emphasize the vitality of color and light? No doubt he still saw himself as part of the radical break with naturalism that Impressionism represented in late nineteenth-

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Excerpt

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- 1 Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 71.4 × 90.5 cm (Vincent van Gogh Foundation/National Museum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam).

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century France; hence his identification with the “bandit” of *Les Misérables*. Jaworska argues along these lines by maintaining that “the picture was . . . meant to symbolize Impressionism as Gauguin understood it, and the condemnation of Impressionism by the public.”¹⁰ But a reading more in keeping with Gauguin’s pioneering move away from Impressionism is suggested by the neoplatonic connotations of his words. Even at this relatively early point in his formulation of the notion of Synthetism, Gauguin’s phrase “shackled always to this world” is pejorative in a specifically Platonic way. He makes the reasons for this break even clearer in *Diverses Choses*, written nine years later: “the Impressionists study color exclusively insofar as the decorative effect, but without freedom, retaining the shackles of verisimilitude.”¹¹ By specifying here that the practice of copying nature is what has shackled art, Gauguin’s earlier reference to these impediments becomes more specific. In *Diverse Choses* he goes on to formulate his oft-quoted alternative to this mimeticism: the Impressionists “heed only the eye and neglect the mysterious centers of thought.”¹² As early as 1888, then, Gauguin criticized the Impressionists – and thus much of his own background – for staying too close to superficial appearances. He wants to be free from both Impressionism’s strictures and the “putrid” rules of the Academy in order to discover more profound truths. His *Self-Portrait*, *Les Misérables* and the texts surrounding it are early steps in this direction, steps taken within the new context of Synthetism in which Gauguin – in a way that anticipates the other central progenitors of abstraction I will consider – must first purify himself of all external constraints by turning to his inner self. Looking back in 1898 at the fruit that was, as he had predicted, born of this radical change, Gauguin used the metaphor of the cave again. “Painting,” he said, “is now freed of all its chains.”¹³

Gauguin’s reference to memory in his letter to van Gogh may, like his allusion to the shackled prisoners of Plato’s cave, seem innocent of philosophical or theoretical import. But here again, Gauguin was – whether consciously or not – invoking a notion central to neoplatonic thought: the theory of anamnesia, of recollection. To van Gogh he says that he cannot get the likeness of Bernard right by working from the model; the alternative was to work from memory. And as van Gogh discovered when the two artists worked together in Arles in the fall of 1888,¹⁴ Gauguin’s belief in this method was systematic and absolute. Memory was for Gauguin and those artists who followed him *the* essential faculty because,

they believed, it allowed access to a realm of truth inaccessible through the senses. Memory had the same epistemological and ontological priority given to it by the neoplatonic tradition wherein the soul has the ability to recognize Truth because it had prenatal acquaintance with the Forms or Ideas, with absolute Reality. Gauguin's premise that "it is better to paint from memory"¹⁵ is not the merely subjective or idiosyncratic directive that most critics expect from him but rather a self-consciously inward turn to the soul, with a concomitant rejection of external nature or appearances, that is underwritten by neoplatonic theory. It is important to realize here and whenever Gauguin puts forward theoretical ideas that they are anything but recondite speculations. As the passages on memory I have quoted demonstrate, Gauguin is always looking for a method directly applicable to his work. The advice to paint from memory is, for example, supposedly derived from a painting manual composed by "Mani-Vehni-Zunbul-Zadi" and known to Gauguin, but it is more likely that this text is from his own hand.¹⁶ His synthesis in memory of literary images, colors, fantasies ("chamber of a pure young girl"), and observed details about Bernard in *Self-Portrait*, *Les Misérables*, then, is neoplatonism in action.

The soul, not the senses, is the seat of the "mysterious centers of thought" sought by Gauguin and the Synthetists. By turning inward, away from what now seemed to him the mere surface details of Impressionism as well as the anachronisms of academic painting, Gauguin heeded the advice given by Plato, Plotinus, and all those who spoke for neoplatonism. Metaphors of vision are used by these thinkers and by Gauguin to signal the pursuit of the highest reality. For Plotinus, the soul, "withdrawing to the inmost, seeing nothing, must have its vision, not of some other light . . . but of the light within itself, unmingled, pure, suddenly gleaming before it."¹⁷ Through memory, Gauguin can "see" Bernard's essence and without contradiction criticize the Impressionist painter for his dependence on "this world," his attention to "only the eye." Gauguin's reversion to his own self – the ultimate source of artistic freedom – finds direct expression in the "eyes closed" motif found in *Self-Portrait*, *Les Misérables* and other works.¹⁸ Vision of the Ideas through recollection is an inner vision: the "bodily eye," to borrow Caspar David Friedrich's famous phrase, remains closed. Plotinus is the ultimate inspiration for this focus on inner vision: "you must close the eyes," he says, "and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you" (*Enneads*, I,6,8). It is thus

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no mere idiosyncrasy that Gauguin has shown Bernard's eyes closed in this picture, or that Bernard did the same with Gauguin's portrait in his *Self-Portrait* of 1888, dedicated to Vincent.

The most dramatic image of this return to the self, to that place where memory can synthesize experience and knowledge to arrive at essential truths, is Gauguin's *Self-Portrait in Stoneware* of 1889 (Fig. 2). This piece is clearly anticipated in Gauguin's letter to Schuffenecker when he describes "pottery contorted by a great fire." The 1889 image also relies on the self-portrait discussed in this letter, for, as Merete Bodelson has established, Gauguin's *Self-Portrait in Stoneware* is based on a drawing taken from the 1888 painting.¹⁹ This drawing shows the artist with his eyes closed, as does the stoneware



² Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait in Stoneware*, 1889. Stoneware vase, 19.4 cm high (Copenhagen: Museum of Decorative Art. © Copyright Ole Woldbye).

image. The blood-like rivulets running over the eyes in the sculpture are signs of the violent intensity of an *inner* experience, to which access is gained by memory. As Bodelson has it, Gauguin “has portrayed himself *with his eyes closed*, as the painter who has turned his back on Nature and now intends to paint only his *inner visions*.”²⁰ When we recall that the fire in Plato’s myth of the cave is the image of truth, this inner conflagration takes on noetic connotations. In both the self-portraits considered here, memory is a method for synthesizing diverse inspirations, very often recollections of the artist’s own ideas and visions, in order to achieve a depth of experience that can only come through inner experience but whose source lies beyond the individual artist. Gauguin described this method in a letter to Fontainas in 1899: “I close my eyes *to see without understanding* the dream of infinite space flying before me.”²¹

“Purity” is the shibboleth for the hierarchical metaphysic applied to the production of art by Gauguin and the other Synthetists. For Plotinus, for example, the human body, indeed anything material, is the soul’s “prison or its tomb, the Cosmos its cave or cavern.” (*Enneads*, IV,8,3). Plato, he exclaims, “expresses contempt for all that is of sense [and] blames the commerce of the soul with body as an enchainment” (*Enneads*, IV,8,1). But through recollection, the soul knows the true Reality that is passingly tainted by the physical: it must therefore seek to *purify* itself through introspective striving. The soul “is pure when it keeps no company; when it looks to nothing without itself; when it entertains no alien thoughts” (*Enneads*, III,6,5). Plotinus, unlike Plato, discusses purification as a necessary process in art: he uses the example of the sculptor who must look into himself and purify his statue in accordance with recollection of the Ideas (*Enneads*, I,6,9).²² For Gauguin, the other Synthetists, and the Nabis, this process preserves the mystical/religious character of a sacred rite that it had in Plotinus. In practice, aesthetic purification meant simplification to an essential outline (Gauguin’s portrait of Bernard in *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables*), and the use of “pure,” unmixed color that is “far from nature.” In Gauguin’s description, the chrome – a yellow pigment, which, as an element, is “pure” – becomes the background in the “chamber of a pure young girl.” Purity also guarantees artistic freedom, because looking only to himself, the artist indeed abstains from the “alien thoughts” of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, from its focus on the imitation of nature’s appearances. This inner purity was mirrored in Gauguin’s case

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by his physical abstinence from French society during his flights to the “primitivism” of Martinique and the South Seas. In the final line of his letter to Schuffenecker, Gauguin, identifying himself as an Impressionist but moving towards the appellation “Synthetist” that he would use in the Volpini exhibition in 1889, sees himself as “still unsullied,” “pure” in this metaphysical way.

Gauguin boasted that the design of his *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables* was “a complete abstraction.” It is clear from his description of this painting that memory and the simplification attendant upon the process of purification led to what he called an abstract image. Abstraction, then, must in this context relate closely to neoplatonic theory, which was a doctrine designed to help initiates reach spiritual enlightenment. If we follow this reasoning, abstraction also turns out to be more a method than a category of painting, more a means to an end than the result. Abstraction is for the Synthetists – like the notions of memory and purity with which it is inextricably involved – an “instrument” in the Platonic sense, a way to essences that cannot be found or communicated by what were then the traditional, naturalistic means. Gauguin’s abstraction from nature in this and many other paintings is analogous to Plato’s use of the myth of the cave, which Gauguin also employed. This myth, (like that of the Line, reminiscence, and the ladder of beauty), is “methodological” in the sense that it is “invented for the purpose of specifying how thought is shaped.”²³ Abstraction for Gauguin is also a methodological procedure that allows painting to embody essences, in this case, the essential Gauguin, the prisoner (as van Gogh recognized) of contemporary techniques struggling to free himself. And abstraction is not only a practical matter; it also includes Gauguin’s discursive explorations, his “theory,” in one complex but homogeneous enterprise. Gauguin said to Schuffenecker that this new type of work was a “transformation,” presumably of his earlier “style.” If we can say that abstraction is the “style” of this work – in the sense of an active principle of organization that results in an identifiable appearance – then Gauguin’s statement at the beginning of this letter is more comprehensible than it might at first seem. “I have this year sacrificed everything . . . for style [‘abstraction’],” he says, that is, for that element which allows him to reach the essential. Oscar Wilde’s aphorism “it is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style,”²⁴ though he likely meant it in quite another sense, clarifies Gauguin’s meaning further. “Style”

stands for the notions of synthesis and abstraction that, when combined in a new approach to painting, gave access to a realm of truth previously denied any of the arts.

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I have attempted in the preceding analysis to take Gauguin seriously as a theorist and thus to entertain the possibility that he used neoplatonic theory to elaborate a new aesthetic doctrine. This goes very much against the grain of most recent criticism, which views Gauguin as an impulsive egotist largely incapable of systematic thought.²⁵ It is more accurate, however, to understand Gauguin's writings as characteristically synthetic formulations of nonetheless viable theories. As he put it, "I'm not a professional. I would like to write the way I do my paintings."²⁶ Thus his ideas are not set forth in the manner of the Academy, of late nineteenth-century institutionalized philosophy, or even of the literary manifesto, but this difference should not exclude them from serious consideration. Modern critics have commonly followed Maurice Denis's view that "Gauguin was no professor,"²⁷ ignoring in the process the fact that Denis follows this statement with a rather elaborate description of how important Gauguin's theoretical arguments were to the Nabis. Denis reports, for example, that Gauguin wanted to "express the 'inner thought',"²⁸ a clear reference to the neoplatonic ideas discussed above. Gauguin *was*, then, a teacher in a very important sense, but he was not an academic professor. His alternate approach to writing is partly to blame for the lack of serious scrutiny given to his essays. Gauguin began his late collection of reminiscences, *Avant et Après*, for example, with the disclaimer "this is not a book,"²⁹ but like so many of his statements, this phrase is rhetorical. For this reason, we need to investigate the import of his writings rather than avoid the theoretical issues they raise by interpreting Gauguin's "modest" words too literally. For Gauguin and all the Synthetists and Nabis, neoplatonism was not a recondite philosophical system but a living, driving force in their art. Nowhere is this clearer than in the contrast between Gauguin's and van Gogh's work during their collaboration in Arles. This is the context in which to understand the Symbolist critic Albert Aurier's otherwise enigmatic characterization of Gauguin's art as the "plastic interpretation of Platonism done by a savage genius."³⁰

The brief but profound contact between these two artists in the fall of 1888 can be seen as a dialogue about the role of the natural model in painting. Questions and answers regarding abstraction inform their correspondence prior to

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- 3 Vincent van Gogh, *A Lane in the Public Garden*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm (Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller. Photo: Tom Haartsen).

Gauguin's arrival, their short-lived cooperation in the South, and most importantly, their paintings from this period. Just before Gauguin's belated arrival in Arles in October, van Gogh painted four versions of the public garden in Arles (Fig. 3) as decorations for Gauguin's room in their shared house. For his part, Gauguin disliked Arles and suffered from the tensions of his relationship with Vincent. His response to his friend's hard-won artistic accomplishments was unkind: "when I arrived in Arles," he recalled much later, "Vincent was plunged into the neo-Impressionist school, and he was floundering a good deal. . . . With all his combinations of yellow on purple, all his random work in complementary colors, all he achieved were soft, incomplete, monotonous harmonies: the clarion call was missing."³¹ In his inimitably generous way, Gauguin undertook to enlighten the younger artist by encouraging him to paint abstractions, to become less dependent on empirical observation so that he could arrange colors and forms more powerfully and get at the essence of

