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book review of

Savage Tales: The Writings of Paul Gauguin by Linda Goddard

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Linda Goddard,
Savage Tales: The Writings of Paul Gauguin.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
208 pp.; 74 color and 1 b&w illus.; bibliography; index; appendix.
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Paul Gauguin and the extraordinary range of his creative output—paintings and drawings, wood and ceramic sculpture, prints, and prose—pose one of the stickier challenges for historians of nineteenth-century art. An unqualified celebration of his staggering aesthetic innovation and expressive power is no longer an option (if it ever was). He abandoned his wife and children, betrayed friends and colleagues, and exploited the “primitive” cultures of Brittany, Tahiti, and the Marquesas to advance his career as an artist and satisfy his need for social and sexual freedom. His visual art was intended to provoke and shock, and his prolific textual output was riddled with statements that were racist, sexist, anti-French, anti-colonial, and frequently untruthful and contradictory. He was a contrarian, an inveterate liar, and one of the most inventive and compelling artists of the later nineteenth-century.

In her new book, *Savage Tales: The Writings of Paul Gauguin*, Linda Goddard expands on her earlier studies on particular texts in order to focus on Gauguin’s literary career as a whole, addressing him as very much the serious author he constantly claimed he was not. Goddard seeks to correct what she sees as an over-use of Gauguin’s texts for biographical details by scholars, film makers, and novelists. She also critiques the dismissal of Gauguin’s writings as amateurish and narrowly self-serving, and secondary to his larger artistic project. This reputation was reinforced by Gauguin himself in his serial declarations against professional status in favor of the kind of naivety and crudeness he claimed for his visual art, aligning a fragmentary, non-linear, and apparently simple style with his “savage” identity. Goddard makes the point that his primitivist self-fashioning against academic conventions extended to his literary work.

From *Ancien Culte Mahorie*, *Cahier pour Aline*, and *Noa Noa*, all of 1893, to the satirical broadsheet he produced in his final years in the Marquesas titled *Le Sourire*, Goddard’s study peels back this maneuvering to define a distinct authorial practice worthy of serious literary attention. She demonstrates the central role of writing within his larger artistic project, and

the ways in which it was carefully crafted and deliberate, and like his visual art, difficult to tame into categories and coherence while at the same time offering substantial conceptual and aesthetic rewards.

Gauguin came from a writing family: his father was a Republican journalist and his grandmother was the remarkable, radical socialist, feminist Flora Tristan. In addition to the more formally titled manuscripts, his literary output included opinion pieces on art and politics (including anti-colonial tirades), anecdotes, and correspondence. He could be fairly straightforward in describing his ideas and intentions, including explanations of his visual art, and then turn to willful obfuscation, contradiction, and fabrication, all in the name of mystery and aesthetic abstraction. In writing about his painting *Nevermore* (1897), for instance, he insisted that Edgar Poe's *The Raven* (1845) had nothing to do with his picture, despite the imaged raven standing over the reclining nude and the prominent inscription of the poem's title in the upper left of the canvas. While claiming that art needs no verbal translation, he often seeded reception of his art with literary citations and textual allusions. "In adopting this paradoxical stance," states Goddard, "Gauguin was not merely being contrary, but striking a careful balance between intellectual credibility and pictorial autonomy" (56).

Suspicious of art critics, Gauguin dodged others' interpretations in order to maintain control over his artistic strategy (much as Gerhard Richter and Jeff Koons would do a century later). He complained incessantly of the intervention by non-artists into a field of expression determined by feeling rather than rational elucidation. Of course, when it came to his own work, he hardly allowed it to speak for itself. As Goddard puts it, in the case of Gauguin, "art's autonomy ironically required his constant intervention" (61).

Such is the case with his most famous literary work, *Noa Noa*, likely written to accompany the Durand-Ruel exhibition of his Tahitian paintings in Paris in 1893. He seems to have written the preliminary draft himself, into which he invited the collaboration of the poet Charles Morice. Gauguin's texts were elaborated and responsively enriched by Morice's poems, and Morice served as editor to the manuscript. However, the manuscript was still unresolved when Gauguin returned with it to Tahiti in 1895, and he continued to add texts, including a section titled *Diverses Choses*, as well as clusters of both original and reproduced images. More of a "livre d'artiste" than a conventional book, this extraordinary object is currently housed at the Louvre, and includes citations, reproductions, original drawings, watercolors and prints, Morice's poems, and more or less original texts in which Gauguin pens a fictional "memoir" of his Tahitian encounter. Within his account of his island experience, Goddard traces strains of imperialist ideology and romantic travel writing, as well as a darker shift in which the "familiar trope of a land of plenty, characterized by leisure and sexual liberty, whose beauty was embodied by the compliant and youthful Tahitian woman, became tainted by the fatalistic narrative of extinction" (81).

While *Noa Noa* draws heavily on travel-writing tropes, its most compelling dynamic is in Gauguin's complex self-presentation as both primitivized and irredeemably European. Goddard teases out moments in which Gauguin expresses feelings well outside generic European chauvinism. The description of his discomfort, alienation, and loneliness belies the fantasy of a seamless immersion in this exotic paradise. Goddard notes passages born of self-awareness and social insecurity in which he challenges the boundaries of colonial, sexual,

and gender identity, such as his embarrassment at being stood up by the villagers for a communal event, or his recognition of Tehamana's confident serenity relative to his own sense of fearful hesitancy (84–5). He does not, then, feed conventional notions of primitivism as having to do with some essential element of Polynesia, but rather acknowledges it as an ideological construction inextricably bound up with the conditions of colonialism and capitalist modernity.

Perhaps Goddard's greatest contribution in *Savage Tales* is her restoration of the sense of material complexity to *Noa Noa* and Gauguin's other ambitious manuscripts, the richness of which is lost in their transition to later print editions. The collage aesthetic and the brilliant symbiosis of word and image is conveyed through beautiful reproductions of carefully selected album pages. She argues for the aesthetic coherence linking the artist's visual oeuvre to his literary work, involving the "bricolage" of motifs, and the process of appropriation, reiteration, fragmentation, and repetition.

This complex integration of image and text extends to a work that has not yet been published in full and exists in no facsimile edition, *Diverses Choses* (or *Scattered Notes*) (1896–98), the subject of a full chapter in Goddard's book. In disseminating ideas about art, Gauguin intentionally avoided logical linearity and deductive meaning-making in his texts in favor of *assemblage* and the non sequitur. He thus deployed the more suggestive, synthetic approach of visual art to effectively convey his artistic ideas in words. Goddard suggests that his cultivated disjointedness correlates to his experience of the patchwork condition of traditional Tahitian culture under colonialism.

In this way, Goddard wrests Gauguin's writings from conventional literary and critical contexts and restores them to his artistic oeuvre, each "book" or album a discrete work of art whose function and aesthetic overlap with those of his paintings, sculptures, and prints. One of the interesting results of her analysis is an elucidation of the neutering effect of print publications, the creative limits of the typeset page versus the semantic richness of Gauguin's text-based projects. The artist's literary oeuvre challenges notions of the integral authorial voice, linear meaning, the definitive aura of the word, and its position within the hierarchy of media. It also places a research premium on the albums themselves, objects whose fragility requires consultation in facsimile form. One looks forward to the day that these works are reproduced in state-of-the-art digital format in which each page benefits from crystal clear visual quality and, ideally, the annotations of a scholar of Goddard's sophistication and sensitivity.

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