The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Arts and Architecture

PAUL GAUGUIN AND SPIRITUALITY

A Thesis in

Art History

by

Stephanie Swindle

© 2010 Stephanie Swindle

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2010
The thesis of Stephanie Swindle was reviewed and approved by the following:

Nancy Locke  
Associate Professor of Art History  
Thesis Adviser

Madhuri Desai  
Assistant Professor of Art History and Asian Studies

Craig Zabel  
Associate Professor of Art History  
Head of the Department of Art History
ABSTRACT

My thesis on Paul Gauguin offers a more comprehensive study of his paintings’ relationships to Christianity, Buddhism, Sufism, and Tahitian religion. Paul Gauguin’s career is typically broken into two distinct periods, his early years in France and his later years in Tahiti and the Marquesas. Moreover, this binary approach to understanding Gauguin’s art involves a chronological reading. I have taken a thematic approach featuring Gauguin’s interests in religion and spirituality.

Gauguin explores his preoccupation with archetypes and self-identity through religious and literary symbolism. A product of the nineteenth-century, Gauguin desires to escape European civilization and goes Tahiti in search of artistic inspiration. The artist never manages to break ties with the past and spends the rest of his career attempting to reconcile his works with his own position inside and outside of religions and cultures. Gauguin’s spiritual interest reveals itself in his self-portraits as Christ, Satan, Jean Valjean, a Magyar, and one of the Fayum dead as well as in his most philosophical artistic statement, Where Do We Come from? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?

In an effort to understand the complexities of Gauguin’s work, it is necessary to consider his œuvre as well as his liminal position in regard to geography, culture, and religion. My goal is to consider his paintings within a broader religious framework in order to give his works a greater sense of symbolic and visual complexity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. v

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1. WHERE DO WE COME FROM? ....................................................................... 5
  Upaupa ............................................................................................................................. 7

Chapter 2. WHAT ARE WE? ............................................................................................. 15
  A Cast of Characters ....................................................................................................... 15
  A Criminal, an Angel, and a Priest ................................................................................. 26
  Eastern Religions ............................................................................................................ 31

Chapter 3. WHERE ARE WE GOING? ............................................................................. 37
  The Imitation of Christ ................................................................................................... 38
  Sunflowers ....................................................................................................................... 44
  The Fate of the Artist ..................................................................................................... 49
  Rebirth ............................................................................................................................ 51

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 58

Appendix: Figures ............................................................................................................. 60

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 68
List of Figures


3. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897. Oil on canvas, 54 ¾ x 147 ½ in. (139.1 x 374.6 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tomkins Collection.


7. Paul Gauguin, *“Nirvana”: Portrait of Meyer de Haan*, 1890. Oil and turpentine on silk, 7 ¾ x 11 ½ in. (20 x 29 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.


16. Emile Bernard, *Sunflower*, c. 1890-93. Oil on panel. 38 x 36 in. (96.5 x 91.5 cm). Private Collection.

17. Paul Gauguin, *Still-Life with Sunflowers on an Armchair*, 1901. Oil on canvas. 28 ¾ x 35 ¾ in. (73 x 91 cm). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.


19. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, detail.
Introduction

Although spirituality in the work of Paul Gauguin is not a new topic, new research continues to yield novel and different interpretations. In this paper, I argue that there is a greater range of religious references in Gauguin’s paintings than scholars have previously acknowledged. Gauguin’s self-portraits demonstrate the coexistence of religious references ranging from the Judeo-Christian tradition to Sufi mysticism. His depictions of himself as Christ, Adam, Satan, Eve, Jean Valjean, a priest, a mystic, and one of the Fayum dead are not particularly at odds with each other, despite their divergent religious and cultural allegiances. These personas add a greater level of complexity to Gauguin’s œuvre and his interest in world religions, identity, and spirituality.

I would also like to address the relationships between his religious works from Pont-Aven, Tahiti, and the Marquesas in an effort to present a more coherent reading of Gauguin’s œuvre. In doing so, I have chosen to treat recurring elements thematically rather than chronologically. Gauguin paints religious scenes and self-portraits throughout his career and never settles on one particular persona or religion, which is why the topic merits a thematic reading. My thesis is neither attempting to call into question Gauguin’s personal beliefs nor trying to extrapolate from his paintings his religious leanings. My goal is to determine how these religious paintings and self-portraits work together, and how an analysis of his religious themes might contribute to a greater sense of continuity in Paul Gauguin’s œuvre.

Scholars have often addressed particular aspects of spirituality in Gauguin’s work, but either have retained the chronological reading or have handled the works or religions piecemeal. For example, Debora Silverman is particularly interested in Gauguin’s work during the 1880s,
his friendship with van Gogh, and his relationship with Catholicism. However, Silverman is equally interested in modernism and religion in France. In *Gauguin's Skirt*, Stephen Eisenman writes about the artist’s Tahitian periods, and devotes a chapter to post-colonial Tahiti and the Tahitian popular response to Gauguin. These two ends of the spectrum are supplemented with other scholars’ works on particular aspects of Gauguin’s work. The less orthodox highlight Gauguin’s connections to Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Kabala. Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński provides evidence of Gauguin’s interest in esotericism and Egyptian art. Each of these scholars presents a plausible argument and brings a wealth of material to the study of Gauguin’s art; however, the narrow scope and chronological constraints of each of these studies prevent these different aspects from coming together in one place.

I propose a study solely about Gauguin’s art that unites depth with breadth under the rubric of spirituality and religion from France to the Marquesas. I have divided my thesis into chapters on issues of myths of religious origins (“Where Do We Come From?”), Gauguin’s liminal identity in self-portraiture (“What Are We?”), and the artist’s paintings about life, death, and religious dogma and beliefs (“Where Are We Going?”). The goal of my thesis is to suggest a greater level of complexity to Gauguin’s interest in spirituality and to show the consistency of that interest in spirituality.

I would like to make an original argument for Gauguin’s interest in Sufi mysticism and the poems of the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Jalal ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi. I make this connection based upon Gauguin’s literary interests, his associations with Symbolist poets, and

---

his familiarity with artist and wandering Sufi, Ivan Aguéli. I not only base this argument upon these facts but also upon their relationships to Gauguin’s Self-Portrait with Palette and Where Do We Come From?

I would also like to call attention to a greater degree of the literary significance in Gauguin’s work as well as the variety of religious references within his paintings. For example, his paintings (Self-Portrait with Halo, Portrait of Meyer de Haan, “Nirvana”: Portrait of Meyer de Haan, Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables,” and Where Do We Come From?) must be understood as works in constant dialogue on account of their religious allusions and literary references. Gauguin’s writings, Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, John Milton’s Paradise Lost, Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, and the Bible are required reading for a thesis on Gauguin and spirituality. I argue that there are other texts that aid in the effort to reach a more comprehensive understanding of Gauguin’s paintings, especially the Gospel of Thomas. Gauguin’s connection to esotericism coincides with his interest in issues of religion and identity.

Gauguin’s interest in non-European culture is a distinctly nineteenth-century European interest. Within the context of European colonialism, male travelers embrace the concept of “going native” in order to distance themselves from European society and to discover a native “authenticity” through experience and cultural knowledge.4 It is within the cultural and political framework of the nineteenth century and the larger movement of spiritual universalism that Gauguin develops a personal interest in non-European forms of spirituality.5 Gauguin’s association with the Theosophists and his references to Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufi mysticism, and Tahitian religion in his paintings are products of his individual interests as well as products of colonialism.

---

5 Eisenman, Gauguin’s Skirt, 17.
The relationship between European and Tahitian cultures adds a level of complexity to Gauguin’s works from his Tahitian period and provides a framework for interpreting his art. Although Gauguin removes himself from Europe and the European settlement in Tahiti, he calls attention to his identity as a European within a foreign colony on account of his status, appearance, and relationship with the native population. Robert Young, in his book *Colonial Desires*, addresses the colonial construction of racial difference and the desire for difference, which underlies Gauguin’s experience and art.⁶ His interest in different religions and spirituality become his primary means of depicting other cultures as well as his own. Gauguin’s positions inside and outside of European, Tahitian, and Marquesan cultures and should be considered alongside his longstanding investment in matters of religion and spirituality. Gauguin’s ongoing interest in and paintings of religious subject matter as well as his self-portraits provide support for my argument for a comprehensive analysis regarding themes in Gauguin’s art.

1. Where Do We Come From?

Emile Durkheim argues that religion is a necessary ordering principle in the lives of individuals and the group. In his The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, published in 1912, he states that all religions fulfill similar social functions and therefore can never be considered false. Durkheim further suggests that there are common elements among all religions that can be compared on an elemental level. Given these commonalities and the function of religions in the lives of their followers, Gauguin’s own inclusions of different religious beliefs within his works suggest that he understood religion as an ordering principle in his art and life. Although the full expression of Durkheim’s thoughts on religions does not appear until after Gauguin’s death, it is noteworthy that his early investigations of the topic begin at the same moment as Gauguin’s mature works.

One common theme among all religions is the need for an origin story. Paul Gauguin’s preoccupation with origin stories becomes a pervasive theme in his *œuvre*. Indoctrinated into the Catholic faith as a child, Gauguin became familiar with the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, establishing a backdrop for his allusions to the Christian Genesis scene in *Self Portrait with Halo* and in his paintings of his Tahitian Eves. His interest in origins also explains his desire to find a place that was closer to an idyllic Paradise. His efforts to answer this question of origin eventually lead him to Tahiti.

Gauguin journeys to Tahiti with expectations shaped by earlier travelers’ accounts of Tahiti’s beauty, savagery, and women. Relying upon the tropes of earlier travel literature,

---

8 Ibid., 4.
particularly Pierre Loti’s (Julien Viaud’s) *The Marriage of Loti* and J.A. Moerenhout’s journal, *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan*, Gauguin recounts a romanticized experience on the island of Tahiti. As is common for nineteenth-century artists and intellectuals, Gauguin possesses the desire to return to an earlier period of civilization in which mystical rituals and ancestral worship provide a mythical, rather than rational, system of meaning. Durkheim’s own desire to arrive at the elementary forms of religion causes him to write about Herbert Spencer and Edward Burnett Tylor’s research on Australian aborigines and the “simplest” types of religious belief systems. Durkheim’s contributions to the field of anthropology and sociology recall Gauguin’s own identity as a type of ethnographer interested in the beliefs and culture of Tahiti. Gauguin meant for *Noa Noa* to serve as a type of explanatory text for French viewers of his paintings and of Tahitian life and religion.

Tahiti disappoints Gauguin on account of its less savage and more Europeanized culture. He laments that the citizens of Papeete copy European customs, fashion, and civilization. Although Gauguin goes to Tahiti as a government representative assigned to document the people and their ways of life, he soon leaves the capital to live among the natives and away from the Europeans. He does not identify with the Europeans in Tahiti, yet he is obviously not a native, and this situates him as an outsider on all accounts. The colonial anxieties that accompany the politics of difference foreground Gauguin’s choice to distance himself from this network of potential patrons and suggest that he is following his predecessors who rebelled from the standard idea of colonialist propriety (mixing on a superficial level with the native

---

13 Ibid.
population).\textsuperscript{14} He does so by “going native.”\textsuperscript{15} Although he wants to live among and to become like the natives, his choice emphasizes the hybridity of his experience as a European among native Tahitians. As Robert Young writes, “multiplicity must be set against at least a notional singularity to have any meaning. In each case identity is self-consciously articulated through setting one term against the other.…”\textsuperscript{16} Gauguin’s decision to adopt the habits of dress and living quarters of native Tahitians gives him the advantage of gaining provisional access to religious ceremonies and serves as strategy to avoid the European contamination of Tahitian life and ritual.

The hybrid titles of his works suggest the uncertainty of his position as both an insider and outsider in Tahitian society. It is well-known that Gauguin never masters the Tahitian language or diction, limiting his ability to communicate with Tahitians in their native language. This also prevents his assimilation into Tahitian culture and a certain level of engagement with significant aspects of Tahitian life.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, he uses rough Tahitian titles for his Tahitian paintings as a way of establishing and promoting the authenticity of the subject matter to a French audience in Paris.

**Upaupa**

Gauguin paints several images of bonfire ceremonies that coincide with Emile Durkheim’s description of Warramunga rituals based on accounts of religious ceremonies. *Upaupa* (1891) [fig.1] and *Fire of Joy* (1891) are two of Gauguin’s visual responses to native Tahitian religious practice. *Upaupa*, which in Tahitian means to dance or to play, was previously

\textsuperscript{16} Young, *Colonial Desire*, 4.
\textsuperscript{17} Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt*, 17.
titled *La Danse du Feu*, which suggests that this is part of the Tahitian fire-walking ritual.\(^{18}\) This interpretation is further suggested by the priest figures in white robes. Fire-walking is still in practice and familiar to colonialists at the time of Gauguin’s arrival, which means that even if he does not witness the event firsthand, it still merits inclusion into his paintings as a distinctly Tahitian religious ritual.\(^{19}\) This type of ritual ceremony differs from the practice of routine Christian worship and more closely resembles the mystical spirituality of the peasants he witnesses in Brittany, making it an interesting subject for his French audience. The tree branch that bisects the canvas diagonally recalls the trope that Gauguin uses in *Vision after the Sermon* to evoke the supernatural realm.\(^{20}\) This compositional connection equates both works as representing types of religious visions.

Gauguin paints *Fire of Joy* [fig.2] at the same time, again using Tahitian rituals as his subject. Fire scenes with native Tahitians speak to Gauguin’s desire to understand and experience Tahitian ritual and religion as well as to document it for a French public. A sunset or sunrise scene distanced from the viewer, *Fire of Joy* refers to a practice that anthropologist J.L. Young documents in 1925 in which Tahitians burn a fire of coals near an altar from sunset to sunrise for the purpose of fire-walking and conducting a ceremony.\(^{21}\) Eisenman and Stuckey assume that the painting is devoid of figures and note its difference from Gauguin’s other works from the time period.\(^{22}\) The work does, however, include figures – they are just too far away from the artist and are therefore muted. The figures appear as black lines in the distance, further suggesting Gauguin’s own understanding of himself as an outsider.

---


\(^{19}\) George Biddle, *Tahitian Journal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), 111.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 278.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Even Gauguin’s self-portraits represent the artist either in his studio or in religious settings. He includes himself in his Christian-themed paintings, *Vision after the Sermon*, *Self-Portrait with Halo*, and *Self-Portrait, Nearing Golgotha*. Gauguin, however, never places himself within his Tahitian scenes of landscape, daily life, or religious ceremonies. His choices to include himself in his Christian works and to remove himself from his Tahitian paintings evidence his role as ethnographic observer. He becomes a witness rather than a participant.

Durkheim describes a similar religious ceremony dedicated to the Snake Wollunqua, the aboriginal and Maori god of rain and fertility. The ceremony occurs on a mound predominantly at night around a fire with frenzied participants chanting, dancing around the flames, and casting shadows onto the trees that evoke the presence of ancestral spirits. The participants transition from the experiences of their profane daily lives into the realm of the sacred where they unite in their religious fervor. Eisenman and Stuckey’s interpretation of *Fire of Joy* along with Young’s description of a fire-walking ceremony recall similar instances of native religious worship and reveal ritual correlations among indigenous groups.

The *upaupa* can be seen to represent Tahitian cosmology and the differences between Tahiti and Europe. Gauguin dances the *upaupa* in France at his going-away party the night before his second departure to Tahiti. Judith Gérard, a friend and witness, recalls that “Gauguin was overwhelmed by his savage instincts, and anticipating the joy of soon being back once more in his right element he danced an *upaupa*.” The assumption that certain religious behaviors are instinctual suggests that Tahitian beliefs and religion are more closely related to nature and are difficult to contain. Gérard’s account also exposes the French assumption that Gauguin has in

---

fact returned to his savage roots, suggesting the significance of Tahiti’s presumed primitivism and the artist’s origin within that state.

Gauguin does learn about Tahitian religion and inserts elements of it into his canvases and writings. The artist claims in Noa Noa that his young vahine serves as his spiritual guide and teaches him of the ancestral spirits and origins.\(^{25}\) Gauguin actually derives most of his understanding of Tahitian religion and cosmology from J.A. Moerenhout’s documentation of Tahitian creation myths in his book, *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan* of 1837.\(^{26}\) One of the many books that Gauguin reads about Tahiti, *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan* provides Gauguin with a foundation for his own interpretations and expectations of Tahitian religion. Moerenhout’s transcription derives from the oral stories of native priests and his own phonetic spellings of the exclusively spoken language.\(^{27}\) Gauguin copies Moerenhout’s Tahitian Chant of Creation into his book *Ancien culte mahorie* and depicts Ta’aroa (the Tahitian supreme deity and creator of the universe) to symbolize his belief in one universal creation.\(^{28}\) His interest in origins is not limited to the commonalities between Christian and Tahitian tradition but also include the myths and beliefs of theosophy.

Gauguin studies theosophy and the concept of a universal origin which allow him to consider the teachings of Christianity, Buddhism, and Tahitian religion as equals, whose structure all derive from one divine creator. In his treatise *L’Esprit moderne et le catholicisme*, he includes multiple myths of creation and argues that each should be read literally and philosophically in order to appreciate their specific meanings as well as their universal

---


\(^{26}\) Danielsson, *South Seas*, 107.

\(^{27}\) Biddle, *Tahitian Journal*, 74.

undertones.\textsuperscript{29} It is also significant to note in regard to his preoccupation with origins that Gauguin begins his treatise in 1897, the same year in which he paints his most comprehensive religious and philosophical statement, \textit{Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?}

\textit{Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?} (1897) [fig.3] is an enigmatic work within Paul Gauguin’s \textit{œuvre} on account of its size and its composition. The painting is comprised of various scenes and serves as a composite work that incorporates figure studies, religious imagery, and animals all within a Tahitian landscape. The title of the work and Gauguin’s own religious and cultural position support the interpretation that the painting is the culmination of his engagement with unfamiliar cultures and religious beliefs.

Although scholars have often connected this painting to an ancient past, they have typically isolated only discrete figures and incidents to support their arguments. For example, the central figure reaching above his head reaches above his head for an apple from the Tree of Life and recalls Adam or Eve in a pastoral setting and that it is a type of Tahitian Genesis scene.\textsuperscript{30} The idea that all human folly originates in this singular moment explains its significance in the center of the canvas. The figure and the scene from Genesis directly answer Gauguin’s first question for followers of the Christian faith.

Similarly, Gauguin incorporates figure groups from his other canvases to form a pastiche. The nude figures in the lower right of the painting form a nativity scene complete with animals, and this group continues the theme of society’s origins. Jesus becomes a second Adam whose birth leads to the redemption of humankind and represents his own beginning on earth. Gauguin includes an homage to artistic origins, citing Degas’ bathers by including the two crouching nude

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 20.

figures whose backs are turned toward the viewer. Although Gauguin incorporates fragments of other works of his own and others, the painting itself is a complete work with the unifying theme of a search for meaning. It also refers to the Gnostic belief in second baptism, an explanation of which appears at length later in this paper. *Where Do We Come From?* is not merely a nineteenth-century rendition of Giorgione’s *Tempest*, whose meaning proves elusive; however, it may be similar to that canvas given the fact that we do not know and have not been able to explain its full story.

Gauguin’s painting does provide the viewer with an additional yet potentially more confusing clue – its title. In asking broad, philosophical questions about identity, meaning, and the afterlife, Gauguin attempts to reconcile the uncertainty of human origin and the fate of the soul in a way that traditionally derives from one’s religious beliefs. His use of first-person plural situates himself as part of an unspecified group and suggests that there is a common answer that goes beyond a particular religious affiliation and leans more towards a comprehensive interpretation of the world. Gauguin’s curiosity about being and his engagement with other cultures led him to explore meaning through the archetypal symbols of religion.

Visually, Gauguin includes figures from the story of Christian origin, the Hindu pantheon, and Tahitian religion. Gauguin is familiar with Tahitian cosmology and refers to particular deities in his writings and art, including the figure on the pedestal on the left in *Where Do We Come From?* Scholars generally assume that the figure is the goddess Hina whose mystical union with Ta’aroa results in the birth of the universe. Gauguin describes an idea for a similar painting around this time: it depicts a woman being transformed into an idol in

---

31 Eisenman, *Skirt*, 147.
Paradise. A reading of the figure as Ta’aroa coincides with the painting’s Tahitian setting and especially with the narrative’s allusion to the union of the sexes.

Although there is evidence to read the figure as Ta’aroa, the figure could just as easily represent a male Hindu deity. Given Gauguin’s propensity for depicting androgynous male figures (especially those of non-Western cultures as seen again in his *Marquesan Man with a Red Cape*), the statue in the painting may actually represent Krishna. Krishna can take the form of Vishnu and is generally young, which may account for the androgyny of the figure. The figure in turn refers to the androgynous main character taking the fruit from the tree. Krishna can also take the form of a cowherd who plays music and protects his flock, and therefore becomes a correlative to the Greek gods Hermes or Apollo. Krishna is usually represented as blue because his name means “the black, the dark, or the dark blue one.” Assuming that this sculpture is meant to be Krishna, his role is that of the human incarnation of the Supreme Being, Vishnu. In placing this figure among those of Christian religious beliefs, Gauguin emphasizes the similarities between Hindu and Christian divine creators (God and Vishnu) and their youthful, male, human incarnations - Krishna and Jesus Christ. Gauguin’s familiarity with Hinduism and his incorporation of Hindu references in other works support the possibility that the figure is Krishna.

Gauguin’s preoccupation with origin stories and his own desire to return to Paradise become central to his religious works as well as his self-portraits. His constant searching for the

---

34 Ibid., 6.
35 Ibid., 28.
36 Ibid., 10.
answer to the first question “where do we come from?” align with the possibility of a universal origin that individuals and groups try to attain through the explanations of religious narratives.

This chapter analyzes a range of interests within Gauguin’s œuvre, including his interest in other cultures and religions as well as his connection to the discipline of ethnography. Gauguin’s depictions of origin figures coincide with his interest in world religions. *Where Do We Come From?* incorporates figures that derive from Christian, Hindu, Tahitian, and Buddhist traditions. The significance in addressing all of these figures together is that it adds a greater level of complexity to Gauguin’s painting and provides a model for looking into the multiple layers of meaning in his other works.
2. What Are We?

Paul Gauguin’s interest in origins is synonymous with his desire to cast himself in the roles of different religious figures in his paintings. He paints *Self-Portrait with Halo*, recalling the Christian creation narrative in Genesis and casting himself in the dominant role. He reiterates this interest in his self-portraits as Jean Valjean and in Christ’s image, which establish his origin as a child of God. Gauguin’s knowledge of Biblical creation myths and his familiarity with theosophy reveal his efforts to reconcile the ideas of Christianity with principles of other religions and the notion of a universal value system.

Gauguin frequently returns to self-portraiture, but also casts himself in various religious roles. The concept of role-play can call for deference, or it can become mockery. Taking on the role or the dress of someone of a different religion or from another culture, especially given the power structure of nineteenth-century France could easily imply mockery; however, Gauguin’s interests in *japonisme*, mystical religions, and other cultures in general suggest that he considers this role-play a type of homage. Moreover, given his lifelong interest in questions of identity, it is reasonable to interpret his symbolic role-play as a form of identity exploration.

A Cast of Characters

One of Gauguin’s most abstract and potentially heretical self-portraits is *Self-Portrait with Halo* (1889) [fig.4]. On account of the work’s abstraction and simplified title, the figure Gauguin evokes is not easily recognizable. The ambiguity of the role that he assumes identifies him as one of several possible characters from either side of the Biblical origin story of Adam and Eve. In order to determine which option is most likely and how the work responds to Gauguin’s œuvre and identity, it is necessary to consider all plausible alternatives.
This painting is a pendant piece from the inn at Le Pouldu, part of a decorative collaboration between the artist and his colleague Jacob Meyer de Haan. Its other half is Gauguin’s *Portrait of Meyer de Haan* (1889) [fig. 5] located on the door next to the painting [fig 6]. Meyer de Haan stares upward, away from the books and fruit in front of him, and towards the painting of his friend Gauguin. Gauguin looks back over his shoulder and out of the painting in the direction of de Haan. As he touches the apple, Gauguin becomes the tempter and yet retains his halo in the painting. The colors of the paintings reflect each other with the red background of Gauguin’s self-portrait becoming the color of de Haan’s shirt, and the blue of the de Haan background reappearing in the snake in its counterpart. Yellow features prominently in Gauguin’s halo and the painting’s foreground as well as in the lamp and book of de Haan’s portrait. Gauguin identifies the books on the table in *Meyer de Haan* as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. The significance of these works must be taken into account when looking at Gauguin’s self-portrait and its symbolic meanings.

Although there is a Christian theme at hand in Gauguin’s self-portrait, the artist reveals his wit and cynicism about good and evil and his own role in between these binary poles. It must not escape the viewer’s attention that Gauguin creates the works for a dining hall. On a primary level, there is food present within the location and the temptation to eat it. There is a garden outside of the inn to further the artist’s visual pun. Gauguin’s choice to seat de Haan at a table with apples in the bowl of fruit in front of him speaks to the multi-sensory aspects of the work and its location. Gauguin plays with the idea of temptation and the significance of a single apple. It is as if the artist paints these works to make the viewers either chuckle or at least ponder as they dine, possibly even eating an apple, considering Brittany’s proximity to the apple-producing region of Normandy.
One of the reasons why these paintings differ from Gauguin’s other works with regard to their levels of abstraction and wit may derive from the commission itself. These paintings serve as decoration on cabinets and are not intended to be sold to the Parisian art world. The pressure is off in this instance, leaving Gauguin free to do whatever he wants in a relaxed setting without the demands of the art market or art public. Gauguin signs both of the paintings “PGo” - a moniker that sounds like “pégo,” which is the equivalent of “prick” in French slang.³⁷ Gauguin uses this and other derogatory nicknames throughout his career. This nickname works well under the circumstances given that “de Haan” meant “rooster” in Dutch, or in slang terms “coq.”³⁸ Gauguin’s signature contributes to the humorous nature of both works for his Francophone audience. It further distances the artist from his professional identity and allows him to use strategies appropriate for painting at an inn, including the decorative, the erotic, the humorous, and the functional aspects of the rooms.

The uncertainty of Gauguin’s role and the role of the viewer make the painting more enticing and mysterious. The composition itself is perplexing as are the details and colors within it. It is uncertain whether or not the blue stems with yellow tips are flowers from the Garden of Eden or if they are part of a wrought iron gate that prevents the viewer from entering the scene or the garden. They are similar to the blue branches that appear later in Where Do We Come From? which correspondingly represents a type of Eden setting. Gauguin uses the vermillion red often enough for the viewer to treat it as a background color of a supernatural space or vision. The yellow ground may be Gauguin’s abstracted shirt similar to the one Meyer de Haan wears in the pendant piece.

In determining Gauguin’s role, a simple answer would be that he is Adam before the fall. He still wears a halo on his head. Gauguin/Adam then looks at an implied Eve, who holds the snake in her hand. Gauguin’s outward look suggests that the viewer plays the role of Eve or Satan, holding the snake and preparing to take the fruit. Gauguin at times believes that he is cursed with misfortune and that God is against him and his ability to create in his image. As Adam, Gauguin incurs the wrath of God for his knowledge and similarity to him, which is one reason why God punishes and banishes Adam, saying, “‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.’” Gauguin himself spends the rest of his life trying to return to his own paradise where he could live as they did in Eden. Gauguin assumes that Tonkin or any of the other French colonies are paradisiacal places where food is within reach and does not require work. He later compares himself and his Tahitian vahine to “the first man and the first woman of Paradise,” supporting the argument that he plays in the role of Adam in this painting. Gauguin does not write about the symbolic aspects of this painting or its pendant piece, which complicates the viewer’s ability to determine which character from the cast Gauguin chooses to adopt as his spiritual and visual doppelgänger.

An alternative interpretation is that Gauguin plays the role of Christ watching the fall from heaven. Given Gauguin’s propensity to put himself in the role of Christ, this would not come as a surprise. It is also possible theologically, as in the Christian tradition, Christ was present in the beginning, as God foresaw the fall of Adam and is the Alpha and the Omega, who

41 Gauguin, Noa Noa, 73.
knows and sees all for eternity. A reading of Christ as a second Adam could also account for the abstract space of the composition: the pairing could be taken as a type of religious vision or a combination of sacred moments, further suggested by the appearance of the halo in the work.

There is a less obvious role into which Gauguin possibly casts himself – the role of Eve. Taking on the role of a woman is not a stretch for the artist. Gauguin is well-known for his interest in gender-bending. He later recounts in *Noa Noa* that the Tahitians call him *Taata-vahine*, which translates as “man-woman,” because only women wear their hair long in Tahiti. Less distinction, however, is made between gender roles and dress in Tahiti. Gauguin notices that “there is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men.” He continues, “The similarity of the sexes make their relationship easier,” creating a greater level of innocence and purity. Gauguin describes male and female interaction as it would have existed in Paradise before the Fall and laments European culture’s stark gender distinction. His interest in pre- and post-Fall gender roles relates to his own understanding of esoteric religion and knowledge; it also can be seen in his shifting identity.

Gauguin later depicts an androgynous figure picking the fruit from the tree in his Tahitian Genesis scene, *Where Do We Come From?* This comparison suggests that both Adam and Eve share blame for the Fall and therefore merge into one guilty entity. The androgyne of both Eves prior to the fall serves as an allusion to the sexual and spiritual purity that exists between Adam and Eve before they attain knowledge of good and evil. Gauguin’s desire to play with sexuality and gender roles in his paintings and his self-fashioning later in Tahiti help to explain his composite Adam/Eve.

---

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Eisenman, *Skirt*, 145.
Although the artist is still recognizable in the painting with his moustache and facial features, his hair appears to trail down his back in a way that mimics the body of the snake and the length of a woman’s hair. His eyebrows become more feminine and stylized. He accentuates his cheekbones and his eyes, which glare out of the canvas toward a presumed viewer or de Haan, who then becomes Adam to Gauguin’s Eve. Gauguin as Eve holds the phallic snake in the right hand and tempts the viewer/Adam to take or to eat the apple. The halo suggests that the act has not occurred, even as the pose suggests that it will.

Gauguin not only takes on archetypal roles of the martyr, the sinner, and the savior; but also, at times, he shows an interest in Tahitian gender divisions and ambiguities. His interest in gender ambiguity increases with his time in the South Seas and on account of the Tahitian blurring of gender divisions. For example, the artist adopts the local custom of dress, the pareu, or Gauguin’s skirt, as Eisenman calls it. This wraparound sarong becomes a symbol of Gauguin’s attempted assimilation into Tahitian life and culture and is synonymous with a shift in how the artist understands gender differences and similarities. He paints a self-portrait in the pareu, *Ia Orana Ritou (Hello Work)* (c. 1894-95), suggesting that it plays a part of in his Tahitian bi-gendered identity. The artist holds a liminal gender position in Tahiti on account of his age as well as his occupation. Tahitians consider artists more feminine at this time because Tahitians categorize the activities of painting, weaving baskets, and craft-making as women’s work. In Tahiti, Gauguin occupies a space between the binary, European distinction of male and female as suggested by his nickname and paintings.

Tahitians believe that there are three sexes: men, women, and an intermediate sex, known as mahus, which consists of effeminate men who interact solely with women and do women’s

---

46 Ibid., 112.
work.\textsuperscript{47} Gauguin seems to fit in with this group on a basic level due to his hair, nickname, age, and occupation. \textit{Mahus} are not considered homosexual as much as they are a composite of the two sexes, which aligns with Gauguin’s own visual depictions of androgynous figures, including the self-portrait in question.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam and Eve are connected physically by God’s creation of Eve from Adam’s rib coincides with the assumption that there is duality within the sexes at the time of creation. Their origin, coupling, and guilt join Adam and Eve as they leave Paradise together in Milton’s poem and in the Bible. Milton relieves Eve of the entirety of the blame by explaining her good intentions and making her the victim of the serpent. Adam demonstrates his love of Eve and his courage in adversity by choosing to eat the fruit and face the consequences rather than separate from his partner.\textsuperscript{48} Elements of androgyny in Gauguin’s self-portrait and in his other works create a type of composite figure representative of both good and evil within the whole.

Looking at the painting from a different perspective, the hand belongs to Gauguin in the role of the great tempter himself. If Gauguin holds the snake between his fingers, as if he controls the snake, he takes on the role of Satan or Lucifer. This reading coincides with the presence of the halo on account of Lucifer’s status as fallen angel. He becomes jealous of man, and this leads to his demise. The apples remain unpicked on the tree; this suggests that Lucifer has not yet corrupted God’s creatures. As Lucifer, Gauguin is in the process of convincing an implied Eve to take the apple. Once again, this places the viewer in Gauguin’s/Satan’s line of sight and in the role of Eve.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 147.

This assumption pairs easily with Gauguin’s literary allusions, such as the symbolic clues provided within the pendant piece - Meyer de Haan’s copies of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. Satan appears in the epic poem *Paradise Lost* and possesses the serpent in order to convince Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.\(^4^9\) His jealousy of humankind and his fall from grace lead to the couple’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Gauguin’s advanced age in relation to his colleagues and his role as the leader of the Symbolist movement and the potential founder of the Studio of the South place him in a similar position as the tempter, corrupting artists’ styles and attempting to lure them to a faraway land.

Gauguin’s relationship with de Haan actually helps to situate Gauguin in the role of Satan. The benefit of foresight allows viewers to compare this work with a later painting in which Gauguin incorporates a similar image of de Haan, “*Nirvana*: Portrait of Meyer de Haan” (1890) [fig.7]. Gauguin places two nude sirens behind the artist, who stands in the center of the canvas and appears to be in a trance. The most significant element of the painting is Gauguin’s signature and its connection to his Le Pouldu painting of Meyer de Haan. The artist once again includes a serpent in his painting, this time forming the “G” of his signature which runs across de Haan’s hand.\(^5^0\) The way that Gauguin’s first initial takes on the form of a serpent is similar to the manner in which Satan takes on the form of the serpent in *Paradise Lost*. The serpent curls around de Haan’s right arm, as the artist holds the creature in his hand (as Gauguin does in his self-portrait) and close to his body. Gauguin once again takes on the role of Satan via the serpent and casts de Haan as his initiate, his Adam or his Eve. This detail recalls Gauguin’s over-the-shoulder look that he directs towards de Haan in the painting at Le Pouldu.

\(^{4^9}\) Ibid., 9.185-190.
\(^{5^0}\) Maurer, *Pursuit*, 136.
Nirvana is the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and the final step along the Eightfold Path toward transcendence. An individual attains nirvana through gaining knowledge of good and evil and through the sufferings of the world.\textsuperscript{51} Nirvana then becomes a spiritual rebirth that takes the place of the physical rebirths of Buddhist reincarnation. This painting coincides in theme with the pendant paintings from Le Pouldu and their emphasis on a type of spiritual awareness and a spiritual rebirth that requires the attainment of a higher form or religious understanding. Awareness and knowledge come at a price for Adam and Eve with their incarnation into mortal beings on account of their newly-discovered knowledge.

The other book in \textit{Meyer de Haan} is \textit{Sartor Resartus}, which features religious and philosophical questions that coincide with Gauguin’s Symbolist paintings and his disgust of materialism and modernity. The name of main character, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, translates as “devil’s dung” and refers to his relationship with material culture. \textit{Sartor Resartus} includes questions, “Where do we come from? Whence? How? Whereto?,” which are similar to the ones Gauguin later asks.\textsuperscript{52} These questions are likewise wrapped up in the identity of the philosopher and main character whose uncertainty grows with his journeys.\textsuperscript{53} The main character’s disenchantment with modern life and his ongoing search for a new identity mirror Gauguin’s own quest.

Gauguin and Teufelsdröckh both experience a type of rebirth associated with their growing alienation from modern society. Teufelsdröckh’s life-changing moment occurs as he renounces his life and wanders to \textit{Rue Saint-Thomas de l’Enfer}, whose pavement is as hot as

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
“Nebuchadnezzar’s Furnace.” Gauguin writes about a similar furnace in his letter to Emile Schuffenecker of 1888 and claims that the colors in *Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables”* are not found in nature but “are like a furnace burning fiercely, the seat of a painter’s mental struggles.” He goes on to discuss his journey to Arles, which will free him from monetary concerns and allow him to work. Gauguin’s desire to remove himself from the material world coincides with Teufelsdröckh’s desire to wander and attain freedom.

Carlyle’s character in the book experiences a baptism of fire similar to the apolutrosis or second baptism in the Gospel of Thomas; he becomes a new man. The same notion will reappear in greater detail in *Where Do We Come From?* Gauguin experiences his own second baptism in Tahiti in the following years, after which he becomes a savage. This connection between second baptism and enlightenment is part of a larger esoteric belief system that the Catholic Church considers heretical. Attainment of gnosis requires rebirth into the higher spiritual realm on account of the individual’s spiritual rebirth. Irenaeus argues that the true meaning of apolutrosis is not redemptive and is proof that its promoters are inspired by Satan, “to deny that baptism is rebirth to God, and to renounce the whole faith.” This experience, accompanied by the connection with *Rue Saint-Thomas de l’Enfer*, supports the argument that Gauguin considers Teufelsdröckh another literary counterpart whose heretical rebirth Gauguin revisits in *Self-Portrait with Halo* and again in *Noa Noa*.

Teufelsdröckh’s second baptism becomes the precursor for Gauguin’s own Tahitian rebirth described in *Noa Noa*. Carlyle’s character recounts the event and its effect on him:

---

54 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 125.
55 Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Quimperlé, 8 October, 1888, in *Letters*, 105.
56 Ibid., 106.
58 Ibid.
And as I so thought, there rushed like a stream of fire over my whole soul; and I shook base Fear away from me forever. I was strong, of unknown strength; a spirit, almost a god. Ever from that time, the temper of my misery was changed: not Fear or whining Sorrow was it, but Indignation and grim fire-eyed Defiance…It is from this hour that I incline to date my Spiritual New-birth, or Baphometic Fire-baptism; perhaps I directly thereupon began to be a Man.  

Carlyle describes the fire-baptism as Baphometic, which is significant to the argument that Gauguin paints himself as Satan in his self-portrait. Baphomet is a satanic being, who gains popularity in the nineteenth century, as the supposed supreme being of the tenth-century Gnostic initiates known as the Knights of the Templar, a group that was itself the subject of accusations regarding heresy, sodomy, and treason. Emile Bernard, one of Gauguin’s friends and colleagues at the time, writes a letter on the subject of starting an artistic group aligned with the principles of freemasonry and the values of the Knights of the Templar. Although his letter is lost, van Gogh comments upon the topic in his response to Bernard in October, 1888, stating, “The idea of making a kind of freemasonry of painters does not please me hugely….” The date of the letter establishes that Bernard is interested in the idea at the same time as his friendship with Gauguin and in turn at the time of Gauguin’s self-portrait.

These artists’ desire to form an artist colony requires them to establish a model applicable to their interests, including synthetism, theosophy, and symbolism. This is not to say that any of the individuals actually subscribe to the beliefs of the Templar but that they are aware of its existence and respect their organizational structure and possibly its beliefs, among which are included esoteric religious beliefs. This concept of Baphometric baptism also may refer to the

59 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, 126.
60 Tobias Churton, Gnostic Philosophy: From Ancient Persia to Modern Times (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), 204-205.
baptism of wisdom or light practiced by the Templar. Baptism is another symbolic aspect of Gauguin’s interest in origins and spirituality, which he incorporates into the visual and symbolic elements of this painting because the fire baptism of Christ redeems the sins of Adam and Eve at the end of time. The artist once again manages to connect his construction of self and his artworks to Christ and his works.

Despite all of the different aspects of this complicated self-portrait and its potential allusions, the multiplicity of meanings may be exactly what the artist hopes to create. He claims at this time that his works are “utterly incomprehensible,” suggesting that what appear to be contradictions are actually part of Gauguin’s own dualistic nature and self-understanding. He seeks out these spaces between heaven and hell and plays with the idea of himself in either or both. His tenuous association with the Catholic faith is part of the reason why he is drawn to Symbolism and why he chooses to represent others in his self-portraits while at the same time representing himself.

**A Criminal, an Angel, and a Priest**

Another self-portrait that calls into question Gauguin’s understanding of his own liminal identity is *Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables”* (1888) [fig.8]. Gauguin depicts himself as Jean Valjean, the main character from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. This painting is a pendant piece in response to Vincent van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* (1888) [fig.9], with the two artists dedicating their paintings to each other. In 1888, both Gauguin and van Gogh are interested in world religions, especially non-Western forms of spirituality, which explains van Gogh’s choice to depict himself as a Buddhist monk. Emile Bernard discusses his art theories with both artists through letters and paintings in Pont-Aven in 1888. Bernard paints a self-portrait for Van Gogh with a painting of Gauguin hanging on the wall in the background, which explains why

Gauguin’s work is similar in composition, and why it features a painting of Bernard in the background. Gauguin picks up on Bernard’s interest in religion during his time in Pont-Aven and becomes “uncharacteristically pious” in his works during that period.\textsuperscript{63} Gauguin’s self-portrait is itself religious in nature on account of Hugo’s emphasis on Catholicism in his book and in the redemption and resurrection of Jean Valjean.

Gauguin’s proclaimed interest in Valjean informs the viewer of Gauguin’s identification with Valjean’s personality. The artist chooses one of the noblest characters of literature and evokes one that van Gogh often mentions as his favorite.”\textsuperscript{64} Jean Valjean is a convict at the beginning of the book; he had been imprisoned for stealing bread to feed his young relatives. After his escape from prison, he then robs a bishop and takes his prized possessions. The bishop absolves Valjean and asks that he change his ways. Valjean eventually does change: he helps a town on the verge of financial collapse, adopts the daughter of a prostitute, and saves a young revolutionary. Throughout the book, the main character changes names and identities. Jean Valjean is the criminal in the beginning, the convict that Javert intends to capture, and the father at the end when he discloses his identity to the husband of his adopted daughter. In the other parts of the book, Valjean adopts pseudonyms and is therefore not technically Jean Valjean. Despite his different roles, he is always ontologically Jean Valjean, just as Gauguin is always himself despite the guises that he adopts for his self-portraits. This suggests Gauguin’s non-essentialist understanding of his being, as designated by his different identities in his paintings. Gauguin’s identity, like Valjean’s, exceeds the limits of his name.

The character of Jean Valjean allows Gauguin another type of role play similar to the one that the character undergoes in the book. Gauguin projects himself into alternate roles and adopts

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{63} Mathews, \textit{Erotic Life}, 108.
\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 115.
different guises in his paintings, including but not limited to *Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables”*. In this painting, Gauguin wears a dark cloak in his portrait that coincides with the one that Valjean wears when he dresses as a poor man on the streets of Paris to distribute alms to the poor. He does not paint himself as the gentleman or the member of the National Guard, the other guises that Valjean takes the book. Gauguin’s belief that self-portraits go beyond visual likeness and delve into aspects of one’s character strengthens his connection to Valjean and for that matter to all other roles that the artist assumes in his self-portraits. Gauguin explains the reluctance that he feels about painting a self-portrait for van Gogh in saying, “I am not in a fit state to do it, seeing that it is not a copy of a face that you want, but a portrait as I understand the world.” Gauguin’s statement aligns with the Symbolist view of art, in that paintings are bearers and conveyors of meaning speaking for and through the artist – a meaning that is behind the surface and constantly changing.

The background of the painting consists of floral wallpaper: sunflower yellow with three different types of flowers fused onto one stem as if formed into a bouquet. Hugo mentions the garden of the Luxembourg where Valjean and his daughter take their daily walks together and where he realizes that he will eventually lose her to a male suitor. In a letter about the painting, Gauguin claims that he depicts nosegays on the wall of an innocent young girl’s bedroom. This detail further connects Gauguin to Valjean because both the artist and the character are fathers, that being one of Valjean’s most important roles in the novel.

The character of Valjean’s daughter, Cosette, in *Les Misérables* presents another connection between Valjean and Gauguin. Gauguin loves his daughter Aline (whose namesake is the artist’s mother) and even dedicates his Tahitian notebook to her. Although he does not spend

---

67 Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Quimperlé, 8 October 1888, in *Letters*, 105.
much time with her, his memories of her and what interaction they have become part of Gauguin’s narrative and his mourning upon her death in 1897, the year in which he painted *Where Do We Come From?* Valjean’s love for his adopted daughter in the novel represents ideal fatherhood to Gauguin and explains why he depicts himself in the bedroom of the young girl, presumed to be that of Gauguin’s and Valjean’s respective daughters Aline and Cosette.

Gauguin’s allusions to *Les Misérables* are not limited to this particular painting. He continues to cast himself as the sinner/saint and to make symbolic use of the backgrounds of his paintings in other works. Gauguin’s *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* (1888) [fig. 10] alludes to a passage from Hugo’s novel and in turn the self-portrait under consideration.  

68 Hugo writes: “Jacob wrestled with the angel but one night. Alas! how many times have we seen Jean Valjean clenched, body to body, in the darkness with his conscience, and wrestling desperately against it.”  

69 Although Gauguin recalls the Biblical story in his painting, he does so through the lenses of Victor Hugo and Jean Valjean, on account of his painting both *Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables”* and *Vision after the Sermon* in 1888. Based on the correspondence between Gauguin and van Gogh about both paintings, the paintings date to the fall of 1888 and are finished by the time of Gauguin’s letters in October of that year.  

70 Their chronological proximity, the direct reference to the text in the self-portrait, and Hugo’s passage that connects Valjean with Jacob would all suggest that the two paintings relate to each other, to the book, and to Gauguin’s identification with Valjean, and in turn, with Jacob.

Gauguin does not mention these connections in his letters to van Gogh. He merely comments upon Jean Valjean’s “internal nobility and gentleness” and asks, “And this Jean Valjean, oppressed by society and placed outside the law, with his love and his strength, does he

---

not symbolize the plight of the Impressionist today?” Gauguin further identifies with the character on account of his position as an artist on the outskirts of society. His uncertain position and biographical factors, including his voluntary estrangement from his family, factor into his choice. Hugo’s passage in connection with Vision after the Sermon relates to Gauguin’s unending personal struggles as a father, a husband, and an artist.

The Biblical story of Jacob wrestling the angel is another of Gauguin’s subjects taken from Genesis; however, this one emphasizes human redemption. During their wrestling match, Jacob begs for forgiveness of his sins, and refuses to release the angel until he blesses him. At daybreak, the angel agrees to bless him and renames him Israel because he struggles both with God and with humans, and Jacob prevails. Jacob’s renaming further connects the multiple roles and identities of the Biblical figure with Jean Valjean.

Gauguin’s adopted personas in his paintings, signatures, and writings are also connected to his two figures. Although Vision after the Sermon is not generally considered to be a self-portrait, the artist arguably places himself within in the work in the guise of the priest on the far right of the canvas and Emile Bernard’s sister in the role of one of the women. Gauguin’s self-inclusion implies that he is among the worshippers witnessing the vision and as the priest is responsible for their vision. Vision after the Sermon is therefore another in a long line of Gauguin’s religious self-portraits, and the priest becomes another one of Gauguin’s personas.

Gauguin’s interconnected self-portraits and literary references serve as evidence of his complex relationship with Catholic iconography - another relationship that runs continuously throughout his career. In his letter about Vision after the Sermon, Gauguin does not cite Hugo or

---

72 Coogan, Bible, Gen. 32:24-26.
73 Ibid., Gen. 32:28-29.
74 Facos, Symbolist, 99.
the actual Biblical passage but calls the painting, “religious” and “superstitious.” The interchangeability of these two terms aids in bridging the gap between the dogma of Catholicism and the superstitious nature of Tahitian religion by acknowledging the similarities between them and the superstitious aspects of both. Gauguin’s desire to understand and equate different religions becomes an effort on his part to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of spirituality and his own relationship to it.

Gauguin attempts to give Vision after the Sermon to the priest at the church at Nizon, but the rejects it. His gifting of the painting is either a sincere offering or more than likely a blasphemous joke. Gauguin signs the work and accompanies his signature with “A Gift of Don Tristan de Moscoso,” suggesting that he is the heir to his great-grandfather’s Peruvian title. Gauguin treats religion as an expression of spirituality at times and as a type of superstition at others. His interest in aspects of the spiritual/superstitious and his own status as a Catholic and at times a heretic make his works on the subject all the more complicated.

**Eastern Religions**

Gauguin’s interest in Eastern religions typically finds its way into scholarship in regard to Buddhism and at times Hinduism. There is, however, an aspect of Gauguin’s religious interest that has never been mentioned by other scholars: his awareness Sufism. I argue that Gauguin is not only aware of Sufism but paints himself in the guise of a dervish in Self-Portrait with Palette (1894) [fig. 11]. I also address the connections between the Sufi poet, Rumi and Where Do We Come From? in the next chapter.

*Self-Portrait with Palette* is not a blatant response to any textual or religious source.

Gauguin’s friend Aurier writes in a manuscript draft on Symbolist theories (circa 1893): Let us

---

become mystics of art. Examples of Symbolist interest in mysticism support the visual references that appear in Gauguin’s self-portrait. Elements, inside and outside of the canvas, support the interpretation that Gauguin is referring to particular aspects of Sufism. According to Sufi legend, there was a disciple named Jelāl who met another follower named Shemsu-‘d-Dīn. The latter goes mad and disappears without warning, at which point Jelāl adopts “as a sign of mourning for his loss, the drab hat and wide cloak since worn by the dervishes of his order”. The garb of a dervish consists of a dark colored cloak and a hat similar to the one that Gauguin wears in Self-Portrait with Palette. Gauguin completes the painting after van Gogh’s death, which may further connect his adoption of the role of the dervish for one of his self-portraits following his friend’s suicide. The background of the painting is an approximation of the background color of Vision after the Sermon, which he paints at the same time as the self-portrait given to van Gogh.

There are other works that Gauguin recalls in his choice of colors. Eisenman and Stuckey argue that the vermilion background resembles and refers to Self-Portrait with Halo, on account of Gauguin having painted both of the works in Brittany. The combination of the Christian legend of Jacob and the angel with the Sufi legend of Jelāl aligns with Gauguin’s interest in the theosophical beliefs of the Symbolists. In an 1888 letter to his and van Gogh’s friend, Emile Schuffenecker, he writes, “So you talk about my terrible mysticism.” This comment suggests that Gauguin’s interest in mystical religion begins at the time of his association with van Gogh.

---

79 Eisenman, Myth and Dream, 316.
80 Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Quimperlé, 16 October 1888, in Letters, 110.
and Bernard and continues with his paintings from that year as well as those from the following years.

Another detail that need not escape the eye of the viewer is the orientalization of Gauguin’s features, particularly his eyes. The changing of his features may not seem evident unless the painting appears in relation to its photographic source [fig.12]. The accentuation of the artist’s eyebrows and the curvature of the eyes differ as do the overall sharpness of the features. Gauguin’s orientalization is similar to van Gogh’s admitted modification of his own appearance in his Self-Portrait as a Buddhist monk, which he paints for Gauguin in 1888.\(^{81}\) Both artists express interest in understanding Eastern religion and culture; they converse with each other and with Bernard specifically about mysticism. Gauguin claims that in his Les Misérables self-portrait “the eyes, the mouth, the nose, are like the flowers of a Persian carpet, thus personifying the symbolical side.”\(^{82}\) The artist’s interest in Eastern cultures also leads him to develop friendships with artists from other regions and with similar interests.

The hat that Gauguin wears in the Self-Portrait and photograph is actually a gift from the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha. It is a “Persian lamb hat” that his friend Armand Séguin remembers as part of his favorite outfit at the time that makes him appear “to Parisians like a sumptuous, gigantic Magyar, or like Rembrandt from 1635.”\(^{83}\) The hat relates to Sufism because the origin of the word Sufi is actually from the Arabic, “\(tasawwuf,\)” which translates as “‘to wear wool (suf),’ pure wool, like the Jewish and Christian ascetics, like John the Baptist, like the Mandaeans of Harran or Baghdad.”\(^{84}\) The more interesting of Séguin’s two comparisons is his comparison of Gauguin with a “sumptuous, gigantic Magyar”. Magyar is another name used

---

\(^{81}\) Mathews, Erotic Life, 117.
\(^{82}\) Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Quimperlé, 8 October 1888, in Letters, 105.
\(^{83}\) Eisenman, Myth and Dream, 316.
\(^{84}\) Churton, Gnostic Philosophy, 144.
throughout the nineteenth century for people of Hungarian ethnicity.\textsuperscript{85} They were believed to have been related to the Huns, who were considered an Asiatic tribe and spoke a Turkic, non-Indo-European language.\textsuperscript{86} Gauguin’s choice of Magyar or dervish attire and his change in appearance coincide with his growing interest in identifying himself as a savage outside of conventional European society and religion.

Gauguin considers himself a savage as well as a poet. His references to mysticism and his familiarity with literary traditions help connect his costume to the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Jalal ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi. Rumi is best known as a mystical poet who dictated the Persian Qur’an and established “The Whirling Dervishes.”\textsuperscript{87} Dervishes were originally associated with poverty and a monastic lifestyle. Gauguin would have been aware of the Sufi tradition most likely on account of his friend, Émile Bernard.

Bernard trained a student, Ivan Aguéli (later named Shiekh ’Abd al-Hadi Aqhili after his conversion to Islam), a Swedish-born wandering Sufi who founded the Parisian Al Akbariyya society and studied all types of esoteric and metaphysical traditions.\textsuperscript{88} Aguéli was also an anarchist, who was arrested for his association with French anarchists and was acquitted in the Trial of the Thirty in 1894 (the year that Gauguin completed his self-portrait).\textsuperscript{89} Stéphane Mallarmé’s poems were used in defense of the accused criminals, and Mallarmé and psychologist Charles Henry testified at the trial as character witnesses for Félix Fénéon, one of the thirty.\textsuperscript{90} Mallarmé was also one of the Parisian literary figures who advanced Gauguin’s

\textsuperscript{85} Ida Bobula, \textit{Origin of the Hungarian Nation}, (Gainsville, FL: Danubian Research and Information Center, 1966), 58.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{88} Ivan Aguéli (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1986), 4.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 5.
career and protected him from criticism. Gauguin’s self-portrait is a form of silent support for the accused or another chance to mediate his identity by aligning himself once again with criminals and heretics.

Gauguin’s connections to Sufi mysticism and its universal understandings of origins are not clear and are most likely superficial at best; van Gogh writes about them in a letter to Bernard. He mentions when writing about Rembrandt that “just as Socrates and Mohammed had a familiar genie,” Rembrandt’s paintings of Christ and angels were “metaphysical magic.” The theosophical belief that all existence came from one divine creator helps to explain Gauguin’s own spiritual position. This reference also explains the earlier connection between Rembrandt and Gauguin on a level that goes beyond the concept of the artist as self-portraitist and painter of religious subject matter.

It is also at this point after his return from his first sojourn to Tahiti that Gauguin lives with a woman whom he calls “Anna the Javanese.” Little documentation exists about their relationship, but she does accompany him to his salons and interacts with him and his group of artist friends. Gauguin’s relationship with Anna is part of his self-fashioning as a savage: he seems to seek a woman capable of signifying to the French public of his trip and his savage nature. She confirms his exotic stories through her presence as his supposed vahine, symbolizing Teha’amana from Noa Noa. With her pet monkey perched on her shoulder, Anna signs with Gauguin as an interracial and exotic couple on the margins of society: they dress in exotic clothing, perform exotic dances, and spend time among exotic artists. After her relationship with Gauguin ends, Anna begins to model for none other than Alphonse Mucha. The connections

---

91 Jansen, Van Gogh, 226, 228.
92 Danielsson, South Seas, 144.
among these three individuals and the self-portrait imply a greater sense of artistic agency and give the work a greater sense of complexity.

As can be seen in the interpretations discussed in this chapter, Gauguin’s self-portraits evidence his desire to construct his own identity through comparisons between himself and others. These comparisons connect Gauguin’s works with the personalities and visual attributes of fellow artists and writers. In order to signify himself he shifts into a space of signs and frames of reference, particularly through the use of religious tropes. The Symbolists attest that theosophy and religion provide their art with greater symbolic complexity. Gauguin, Bernard, and van Gogh all share a similar attitude with regard to modernism and a desire to escape to what they assume will be a simpler place that is more in touch with nature and spirituality. Gauguin takes this approach in painting his self-portraits to reflexively participate in the construction of his own identity within the spaces of symbolic representation.

3. Where Are We Going?

The identities that Gauguin assumes in his self-portraits symbolize aspects of his character and become a projection of his self-exploration. The figures that he chooses are connected to the supernatural, somewhere between the binary poles of good and evil. His self-portraits in turn move the viewer towards broader issues in regard to life and death. Prior to his attempted suicide, Gauguin asks, “Where are we going?” The answer typically lies within one’s own belief system and therefore puts into play Gauguin’s self-understanding. His familiarity with religious traditions, Catholic dogma, and different cultural beliefs regarding the afterlife provoke him to ask the question and to explain possible answers through his paintings.

Gauguin paints himself in Christ’s image and in scenes from Christ’s life. This approach reflects the sixteenth-century artistic trope of taking on the role of Christ in self-portraiture. Not only does Gauguin align himself with Christ; he places his self-portraits in a genealogy with masters such as Albrecht Dürer, one of the greatest self-portraitists of the Renaissance. Joseph Koerner explores the artist’s desire to depict his likeness as well as his inner self – turning the act of painting of a self-portrait into an exercise of spiritual self-analysis.\(^{94}\) Gauguin’s self-exploration relates to his desire to achieve artistic immortality. The lackluster public reception of his works causes Gauguin to become his own champion through writing, painting, and marketing in an effort to position himself as one of the greatest artists of his time and within the art historical canon.

---

Gauguin’s hard-fought battle to solidify his reputation leaves the artist disillusioned with the European art world. His health problems only exacerbate his struggles and cause him to think about his mortality. After painting Where do we come from? Gauguin attempts suicide. The painting becomes synonymous with his desperation and becomes one in a series of works that turns away from this world and towards the next world – whatever it may be. Gauguin’s final self-portrait presents his quiet acknowledgement of his imminent death and a subtle, final reference to the art of another time and culture.

Along with his mortality and the fate of his soul, Gauguin reflects upon his life and upon his relationship with van Gogh. Gauguin’s paintings of sunflowers and his writings about van Gogh stand out in a line of references to the past and his understanding of the future. Gauguin makes the personal spiritual and the spiritual personal in an effort to arrive at a sense of order. Whether this question derives from the anxieties associated with life and death or from sheer megalomania, Gauguin’s understanding of his future becomes a projection of his past.

**The Imitation of Christ**

Gauguin portrays himself as Christ and compares himself to the savior as often as he depicts himself as the heretic, the sinner, or the criminal. He depicts himself as Christ throughout his career, especially at times when he feels persecuted by the art community for his decision to abandon Europe for Tahiti in an effort to make sense of his own identity. Gauguin compares his actions to the teachings of the Bible:

I act a little like the Bible, of which the doctrines (particularly regarding the Christ) are expressed in symbolical form presenting a double aspect; a form which materializes the pure Idea to render it more palpable, affecting the guise of supernaturalism; which is the literal, superficial, allegorical and mysterious meaning of a parable; and then the second aspect which gives its spirit. And this is the meaning, no longer allegorical but figurative and explicit of that parable.\(^{95}\)

---

\(^{95}\) Gauguin to Andre Fontainas, Tahiti, August 1899, in *Letters*, 221.
The artist’s self-portraits as Christ not only position him as the martyr and savior of art but also as the accused heretic, who falsely claims to be the Messiah according to those who do not believe. Gauguin sacrifices his family, middle-class existence, and modern life in Europe for his art and for the advancement of modern art, which he sees as too rigid and academic. He trades it for what he believes will be a simpler existence among the natives in Tahiti in order to rediscover nature and to return art to an elevated state. Some artists follow him, his “disciples” as he called them, in his efforts to revitalize art and to imbue works with symbolic meaning. Most of Paris does not like or understand his new work and believes that he is losing his mind and dropping out of society.

His own existence and tribulations are meant to recall those of Christ; however, he also considers himself God-like in his role as creator. He encourages artists to “study nature and then brood on it and treasure the creation which will result, which is the only way to ascend towards God – to create like our Divine Master.” Gauguin compares himself to God on account of his creative genius and sheer hubris. He claims that a Tahitian acquaintance once greets him saying, “Halloa! Man who makes human beings!” The artist’s inclusion of this possible encounter brings him as close to divinity as possible. Even the playwright August Strindberg likens him to God, saying that Gauguin, “jealous of the Creator, makes his own little creation in his spare time.”

Gauguin’s representational God-complex is muted in comparison with his self-inclusion in the phrase “our Divine Master.” Although Gauguin admits and at times relishes in his missteps and provocative behavior, he remains tied to the concept of a divine maker in whom his identity rests.

---

96 Gauguin to Emile Bernard, Le Pouldu, August 1890, in Letters, 149.
97 Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Pont-Aven, 14 August 1888, in Letters, 100.
98 Gauguin, Noa Noa, 62.
99 Mathews, Erotic Life, 207.
When Gauguin loses hope and struggles with his economic failures as an artist, he turns to painting himself in God’s image as Christ. In his *Self-Portrait, Nearing Golgotha* (1896) [fig.13], Gauguin’s outlook on life and his painting career reflect his shattered confidence that in the previous year presents itself in his second trip to Tahiti. Accumulating unsold paintings, becoming a burden to friends and a failure in the eyes of his family, Gauguin hopes that a return to Paradise will refresh him and restore his creativity and spirit. Despite his desperate attempt to regain his artistic confidence, he paints himself as Christ nearing Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion. This scene situates Gauguin not as Christ in victory but as Christ nearing the end of his life on earth and facing imminent death. Christ himself is a criminal at this point in his life, as is Jean Valjean in Gauguin’s previous self-portrait. The artist’s return to the guise of a criminal signals his persecution but also his optimism in regard to his eventual exoneration and resurrection. He claims that “a man must follow his temperament. I realize that I shall be understood less and less. What matters if I alienate others; for the multitude I shall be an enigma, for a few I shall be a poet, and sooner or later, merit will have its way.”

In going to Tahiti and then to the Marquesas Gauguin bears his own cross and suffers for his art in body and spirit. Misunderstood and crucified by the Paris art world, Gauguin considers himself a martyr for his cause.

Resigned and expressionless in white, Gauguin as Christ looks out and to the right side of the canvas. His long hair falls down his shoulders similar to standard depictions of Christ. A faint halo glows behind his head. Behind him lies the suggestion of an ominous Tahitian landscape with the faces of spirits surrounding him. A diagonal excerpt on the top left, Gauguin’s standard trope for inserting a religious vision, reveals the wooden post of the cross and a stream of lava flowing down from the side of the mountain, evokes Christ’s blood.

---

100 Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, Quimperlé, 16 October 1888, in *Letters*, 110.
somber mood of the painting reduces Gauguin’s palette to its minimum and the moment to one of quiet foreshadowing.

Golgotha is known as the place of the skull, which some believe represents the site of Adam’s burial. If Jesus is the second Adam, Gauguin sees himself as the second Christ – persecuted for his sins. His role on earth is that of the redeemer, existing to return the world to its state of Paradise. Although Gauguin typically resigns himself to the status of the misunderstood artist, Gauguin still hopes to earn favor with the “stupid” public which he claims to despise.101 His desire for redemption through martyrdom not only associates him with Christ but positions him as Christ at the moment before his crucifixion.

Gauguin claims that his grandmother, Flora Tristan, the famous proto-socialist and women’s rights activist, actually helped found a religion called Mapa, of which she becomes the Goddess Ma.102 [The other founders, Alphonse-Louis Constant and a prophet simply known as Ganneau (or Mapah), will reappear in the section about Gnosticism and Where Do We Come From?] Gauguin’s claim sets him up as the earthly heir to a divine throne, with his role as the nineteenth-century European version of Jesus Christ of the Parisian art world. He admits that he is a cross between a man, a woman, “Buffalo Bill,” an Incan, a “savage”, and a “self-styled Jesus Christ.”103 All of the roles that Gauguin chooses to adopt become part of his identity and lend a level of complexity to his work. His self-portraits exist in constant dialogue with his understanding of spirituality and his liminal identity.

Gauguin’s Self-Portrait (1903) [fig.14] initially appears to be the least symbolic of his self-portraits; however, it refers to the artist’s impending death and the funerary portraits from

101 Teilhet-Fisk, Paradise Reviewed, 9.
103 Gauguin to Emile Bernard, Le Pouldu, August 1890, in Letters, 149.
This portrait may be the most resonant portrait of his career. There are no obvious allusions to any particular religious figure or any other external ones for that matter. Indistinct rays of light emanate from Gauguin’s head, once again suggesting the presence of a halo. The title simply labels it as a self-portrait. The artist wears a white shirt without buttons down the middle, but with a type of pin or button on the right side. It resembles the shirt in his *Self-Portrait, Nearing Golgotha*. A Roman toga would also circle the neck in this fashion and hang in a manner similar to the shirt which Gauguin wears in the painting.\(^{105}\) His haircut differs from its usual longer style in his earlier self-portraits. Instead, it resembles the short-cropped style of the Roman Caesars.\(^{106}\) This is one of the only times that Gauguin sits almost completely frontally for a portrait. His body fills the entire canvas without any accoutrements to compete with the figure. The thin application of paint suggests a weathered look on the surface, similar to his fresco comparison of the crumbling wall in *Where Do We Come From?* His expressionless face and darker skin tone contrast from his appearance in his earlier self-portraits. A very simple painting, it recalls the works from Fayum in Roman Egypt.

Gauguin paints himself as a mummified Roman citizen of Fayum. The Fayum mummies are examples of the shift from cremation to mummification on account of local customs. The mummified bodies are usually adorned with an encaustic or tempera portrait that covers the head of the deceased. Gauguin’s painting would have been appropriate in size because the mummy portrait is positioned frontally and represents the head and upper chest of the figure. Gauguin does not attempt to make any major changes to his appearance; nor put himself in the role of other figures, as he does in other self-portraits, because the Fayum portraits are made for the visual identification of the dead.

---

\(^{104}\) Eisenman, *Skirt*, 184.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.
Gauguin’s mind is on death when he paints this work, as it has been for the past decade. A year before this portrait, he mentions in a letter to his closest friend at the time, Daniel de Monfreid, that all of his friends are dying or dead. He talks about his children and his legacy saying, “Perhaps, apart from the four who bear my name, there are wives and grandchildren who also bear it; and if, after my death, I am famous, people will say: Gauguin had a large family, he was a patriarch – bitter derision. Or they might say: he was a heartless man who abandoned his children.”107 His uncertainty about his reputation and his increasing distance from his family suggest that his reflections on his life relate to his thoughts about his own mortality. He also acknowledges the fine line that he walks between fame and infamy.

The artist’s health at this point is steadily and rapidly declining, and he is well-aware that his condition will never improve. Similar evidence appears in his other correspondences and works around the time of the painting. In a letter to Andre Fontainas in February 1903, Gauguin claims that he is not able to work on account of his condition but that he is completely lucid and writes, “I will resume work in an attempt to finish properly the work I have commenced.”108 It is difficult to say whether he means this in a particular sense, in regard to the work at hand or in the broader Stoic manner of ending life well.

This quiet self-portrait is more introspective than all of Gauguin’s symbolical comparisons to others, his philosophical questions, and his array of writings. The irony of this work’s significance is that it is his closest reference to an actual mask, a death mask, as opposed to the metaphorical masks Gauguin wears throughout his career. The Fayum portraits themselves were meant to be individualized and somber works. On account of this painting being the artist’s last self-portrait, it suggests the reconciliation of his contradictory selves into a coherent whole.

107 Gauguin to Daniel de Monfreid, Hiva-Oa, Marquesas Islands, October 1902, in Thomson, Gauguin, 278.
108 Gauguin to Andre Fontainas, Atuona, February 1903, in Letters, 234.
There are symbolic similarities between this painting and Gauguin’s other works. In his previous paintings he alludes to works from the classical past, ancient Egypt, and a Peruvian mummy.\textsuperscript{109} There are also Fayum portraits on display at the Louvre during the nineteenth century, including the figures of middle-aged Roman males in white togas.\textsuperscript{110} The location of the Fayum portraits in the Louvre and Gauguin’s interest in non-European art and culture suggest a familiarity with these works.

In thinking about his legacy, home, and pending mortality, there exists no better self-reference than one that speaks to his certainties and uncertainties. Gauguin dies on May 8, 1903. The parish priest buries him in the Catholic cemetery of Hiva-Oa; however, his tomb is appropriately decorated with a Tahitian Oviri sculpture.\textsuperscript{111} The translation of Oviri means “savage” and refers to the title of a popular Tahitian song.\textsuperscript{112}

**Sunflowers**

Gauguin’s thoughts about life, death, and the afterlife are not limited to a concern for himself. Gauguin’s illnesses, poor health, and impending death lead to his reevaluation of his relationship with Vincent van Gogh and the way their relationship ended. At this time, Gauguin is no longer in contact with the majority of his friends and family. On account of his inability to paint for weeks at a time due to his health problems, he spends his days lonely with time to reflect on his life. Towards the end of Gauguin’s life Monfreid tells him never to return to Paris.

\textsuperscript{109} Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed*, 16.
\textsuperscript{112} Daniellson, *South Seas*, 166.
because he is becoming famous in the history of art because they already consider him dead.113 This morbid form of success may have brought Gauguin back to a dream he shared with van Gogh. The two envisioned creating the Studio of the South; however, in the end, Gauguin does so alone. Gauguin’s last recorded mention of van Gogh in correspondence occurs in a 1902 letter to André Fontainas, stating that his stay in Arles influenced van Gogh’s work and that the artist admittedly owed much to him.114 He never resolves his feelings of loss and works them out in his writings and on his canvasses for the remainder of his life.

The relationship between the two artists does not end well. The last time that van Gogh travels to Paris, with the hope of seeing Gauguin, Gauguin ignores his message. On account of van Gogh’s subsequent suicide, Gauguin never sees him again.115 After responding to letters about van Gogh’s death, Gauguin does not mention van Gogh again in his writings until the last years of his life when he begins painting sunflowers and writing Avant et Apres. In Avant et Apres, he recounts the story of his final encounter with van Gogh and the incident that leads to van Gogh cutting off his ear.116 Gauguin writes about this merely months before his own death. More importantly, Gauguin acknowledges the whispers, the blame, and the role he played in van Gogh’s life and art, even including the text from van Gogh’s final letter to him: “Dear Master” (the only time he ever used this word), “after having known you and caused you pain, it is better to die in a good state of mind than in a degraded one.”117 Gauguin’s inclusion of this passage in

---

114 Gauguin to Andre Fontainas, Atuona, September 1902, in Letters, 230.
115 Mathews, Erotic Life, 149.
116 Recent research may in the end revise our account of this incident. See Hans Kaufmann and Rita Wildegans, Van Gogh’s Ear: Paul Gauguin and the Pact of Silence.
his journal suggests that it is an apology from van Gogh for the pain that he cause his friend, the way that their relationship ends, and for the pain that will result from his suicide.

His most poignant comment regarding van Gogh comes from *Avant et Apres*, directly after he recounts the way van Gogh dies. He writes, “In *Les Monstres* Jean Dolent writes, ‘When Gauguin says ‘Vincent’ his voice is gentle.’ Without knowing it but having guessed it, Jean Dolent is right. You know why….”

Gauguin’s mourning over his lost friend and contemplation of his own death culminate in his own paintings of van Gogh’s theme – sunflowers. Prior to Gauguin’s arrival at Arles, van Gogh spends the majority of his time preparing for his guest. He buys furniture and most importantly hangs his sunflower paintings in what is to be Gauguin’s bedroom. Through this artistic nesting, van Gogh hopes to create a space that is conducive to creativity. His yellow house is to serve as a good location for artists away from Paris and the overcrowded artist colonies such as the one at Pont-Aven.

Gauguin loves van Gogh’s paintings of sunflowers and takes two of them back with him when he leaves Arles. Theo van Gogh claims that they were Gauguin’s favorite paintings and that he “may have believed that the bright yellow flowers that turned to follow the sun were painted in tribute to him.” Although van Gogh paints a number of different series, his sunflowers are his most symbolic subject matter. Based on the works that both Gauguin and Bernard collect and paint during and after van Gogh’s death, sunflowers become representative of their lost friend.

Gauguin paints sunflowers only once during van Gogh’s lifetime is his portrait of him. In *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* (1888) [fig.15] Gauguin paints sunflowers,

---

118 Ibid.
119 Childs, “Studio,” 140.
which are van Gogh’s favorite subject and refer to their time together in Arles. Dead sunflowers sit in a flower vase next to van Gogh’s canvas of the same subject. The color palette of the entire canvas is lighter than Gauguin’s usual bold and contrasting colors. Horizontal, as if it were a landscape, the painting includes a background of houses, blue tree trunks, and what appear to be passages of sand and water. The middle of the canvas sits empty with van Gogh at the far right, looking down at his palette instead of at the viewer and artist. Although Gauguin paints this as a portrait, it is compositionally atypical of Gauguin’s works from this period.

The only other time that Gauguin paints sunflowers is after Vincent’s death when he is in Tahiti. Bernard only paints sunflowers between the years 1890 and 1893, immediately following van Gogh’s death. In *Sunflower* (c.1890-93) [fig.16], Bernard paints a garden filled with grass, leaves, and various flowers, including a solitary sunflower in its center. It resembles Gauguin’s *Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables”* wallpaper as well as van Gogh’s sunflowers and collection of Japanese prints. The blue that he uses for the branches that frame the sunflower resemble Gauguin’s blue tree trunks and branches that appear throughout his works. This painting and the others that he completes during this period memorialize van Gogh and his friendship.

In 1898, Gauguin asks Monfreid to send him sunflower seeds from France so that he can put them in his garden. Monfreid apparently sends the seeds, which bloom and provide Gauguin with the models for his sunflower still-life paintings. In *Still-Life with Sunflowers on an Armchair* (1901) [fig.17], Gauguin paints a still life of sunflowers in a basket in the center of the canvas. None of the flowers appears healthy. Some of them face downward away from the sun, and others seemed to have lost some of their petals. If van Gogh’s sunflowers facing the sun are

---

a tribute to Gauguin, then Gauguin’s sunflowers facing away from the sun are a tribute to van Gogh.

The blue background creates a visual similarity between both artists’ sunflower paintings. Gauguin includes the profile of a Tahitian woman either outside of the window or within the frame of another painting that hangs on the wall near the flowers. The flowers sit on the chair with a white sheet resembling a shroud hanging on the back of the chair. Instead of placing them on a table, Gauguin gives them the status of a human being sitting in a chair.123 Given the circumstances surrounding the painting the only possibility is that the sunflowers symbolize the reincarnation of van Gogh. This painting becomes a memorial to his friend and a witty reference to van Gogh’s paintings of both sunflowers and chairs as well as to his Buddhist leanings. Gauguin suggests that his friend has returned, reincarnated as his most beloved subject, the sunflower, and is sitting for his portrait.

When Gauguin learns of van Gogh’s death, he mentions reincarnation writing, “To die at this moment was a great happiness for him; it represents the righteous end of his suffering and if he returns in another life he will carry the fruits of his good conduct in this world (according to the law of Buddha).”124 Gauguin’s familiarity with Greek mythology and the trope of the dead transforming into plants and flowers support this possibility. Gauguin’s interest in spirits and the dead in Tahitian religion and mysticism suggest that he similarly thinks of van Gogh as a specter, a different type of spirit watching over him as he paints. It is no coincidence that Gauguin paints these works toward the end of his own life. It is also significant that Gauguin’s first sunflower painting appears almost ten years after the date of van Gogh’s death.

123 Ibid, 372.
124 Facos, Symbolist, 103.
Gauguin paints another sunflower painting around the same time, *Still-Life with Sunflowers and Puvis’ “Hope,”* (1901) [fig.18]. Once again, the flowers are wilting and petals are missing. The flowers sit in a different basket that is decorated with Tahitian figures and on a table in front of a red-orange wall. A solitary flower lies in front of the basket on the table directly above Gauguin’s signature. This flower holds special significance on account of its position and similarity to the anthropomorphized flowers in the previous painting.

On the wall behind the basket is a copy of Puvis de Chavannes’ *Hope* (1872) and what may be one of Gauguin’s early sketches for *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape*. Gauguin includes Puvis’ *Hope* because the Symbolists admire Puvis’ classicism. The title of Puvis’ painting impresses upon Gauguin’s work a similar type of optimism that he displays in regard to van Gogh’s death and possible reward for leading a good life. On the other side of the basket is a small ceramic ashtray and in the center what appear to be matches in an opened matchbox. The details within the painting are muted in comparison with the sunflowers themselves. The entire composition is a second homage to van Gogh. The sunflowers symbolize van Gogh to Gauguin and become for Gauguin a subtle visual reminder of his friend. This subtle form of representation is similar to the ways in which he refers to van Gogh in *Where Do We Come From?*

**The Fate of the Artist**

In *Where Do We Come From?* Gauguin uses the title of the painting to return to the set of philosophical and religious beliefs symbolized in his *Self-Portrait with Palette*. A French translation of the poems of 13th century Sufi writer, poet, and philosopher, Rumi appeared in Paris in 1863. Although a copy does not appear in Gauguin’s library upon his death, this does not mean that he is unaware of Rumi’s writings. Rumi’s poetic style expresses the philosophical
beliefs of Sufism. He also explores the philosophical questions in his poems about the meaning of human existence similar to the questions Gauguin poses in the title.

Although the questions in Gauguin’s title do not appear sequentially in any of Rumi’s known poems or those attributed to him, Rumi’s work and these types of questions would have been familiar to Gauguin given his interest in religion and his interactions with poets and philosophers. Gauguin considers himself a poet and describes his works - and in particular, this painting - as a poem.\(^{125}\) Similarly, Where Do We Come From? can be seen as an attempt for Gauguin to reconcile his various religious beliefs. After treating Gauguin’s first two questions in the previous chapters, with his inclusion of stories of creation and his second question regarding ontological understanding of spirituality, his final question remains.

Although the question (“where are we going?”) relates to the first two questions posed by the work, this last question is a much more personal one given the circumstances surrounding the end of Gauguin’s life. Vincent van Gogh dies in 1890 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. In 1894, Gauguin creates his self-portrait in the guise of a mourning dervish, following van Gogh’s death, as previously mentioned. In 1901, he creates his paintings of sunflowers in honor of van Gogh. Gauguin’s sadness over the death of van Gogh persists and references appear in his paintings and letters until the end of his own life, suggesting that Gauguin also memorializes van Gogh in Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

The Catholic Church considers suicide a mortal sin - an action that, unless confessed and absolved, damns a person’s soul to Hell for eternity. Suicide is the most problematic mortal sin because a person cannot confess and be absolved after death. Having been a Catholic and having presumably attempted suicide himself, Gauguin is well-aware of the spiritual consequence of suicide. Gauguin’s final question “where are we going?” does not imply afterlife and could mean

\(^{125}\) Gauguin to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July 1901, in Letters, 227.
what lies in the future. Given the circumstances surrounding van Gogh’s death and Gauguin’s own narrative about this painting, there is evidence to make a case for reading this work in response to suicide and the afterlife. One’s fate after life on earth depends upon what an individual believes in regard to death and the afterlife, just as Gauguin’s other questions correlate to beliefs about creation and existence. Gauguin inserts a visual allusion to van Gogh in his painting, suggesting that the question relates to his and van Gogh’s fates.

The two upper corners of Gauguin’s painting reveal a yellow wall that makes the painting look as if it were aging and crumbling with time. In the left upper corner, Gauguin writes the title of the work beside an open flower and a flower bud [fig.19]. The yellow wall and the flowers are the same as the background wall and the type of flowers in Gauguin’s Self-Portrait: “Les Misérables,” which he paints for van Gogh. The flowers in the self portrait, however are all in bloom - unlike the single bud of the solitary flower in bloom and the other bud closed in Where Do We Come From? A closed flower bud generally symbolizes death. If the closed flower represents van Gogh’s death, the open one represents Gauguin. The flowers connect to each other at their end to form one branch. In this painting once again, the artist writes the title of his self-portrait on the same yellow wallpaper. The dichotomy between life and death plays into Gauguin’s religious and philosophical final question and demonstrates his attempts to reconcile the beliefs of different religions in determining where both he and van Gogh will spend eternity.

Rebirth

Given Gauguin’s writings and relationship to esotericism, the title’s connection to the practice of apolutrosis, or second baptism, is significant. The ritual of second baptism is reserved for individuals prepared “to move beyond the ‘common’ community to join the more select
circles of the spiritually mature.”

According to the Gospels, the water baptism of John cleanses believers of their sins and brings them into the fold. John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me… He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

The river in the background of Where Do We Come From? suggests the painting’s connection to water baptism. Gauguin sees himself in the role of John the Baptist, initiating new artists into the fold, based upon his letter to van Gogh in May 1890 in which he writes, “And the studio of the tropics will perhaps shape the John the Baptist of the painting of the future….” Gauguin hopes that other artists follow his example and renounce the academicism of modern European painting for the artistic possibilities of the tropics.

Second baptism refers to a type of redemption that comes with spiritual enlightenment or rebirth. Recalling the passage in Sartor Resartus, Gauguin describes his own type of second baptism in Noa Noa. He tells the story of bathing in the cold water of a brook and destroying the civilization within him. He says, “I was reborn, or rather another man, purer and stronger, came to life within me… I was, indeed, a new man; from now on I was a true savage, a real Maori.”

His rejection of Western civilization for life in Tahiti is a way to renounce the sins of the world, and his own identity as one of its inhabitants, in favor of a new existence in paradise as a savage.

The official rite of second baptism focuses particularly upon religious preparation. All candidates of the sacrament must answer correctly a set of questions before advancing in the faith. The Gospel of Thomas refers to the ritual of second baptism and provides the questions that would have been asked:

Jesus said, “If they say to you, ‘Where do you come from?’ Say, ‘We come from the light; the place where the light [first] came into being…’ If they say to you, ‘Who are

---

127 Coogan, Bible, Matt. 3:11.
128 Maurer, Pursuit, 137.
129 Gauguin, Noa Noa, 50-51.
you?’ Say, ‘We are the children [of the light], and we are the chosen of the living Father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your Father in you?’ Say to them, ‘Movement and rest.'”

The questions in Gauguin’s title occur in the same order and only differ in case from singular to plural. The only difference is that, unlike the Gospel of Thomas, Gauguin’s painting does not provide answers to the questions. Gauguin writes about the painting to Daniel de Monfreid, claiming that he “finished a philosophical work on a theme comparable to that of the Gospel.” It is uncertain whether or not Gauguin means one of the traditional Gospels (the four Gospels combined) or if he means the Gospel of Thomas and its reference to second baptism.

Gauguin would have been familiar with Gnostic philosophy on account of the revival of Gnosticism and a growing interest in esotericism in nineteenth-century France. Alphonse-Louis Constant, friend of Flora Tristan and one of the founders of Mapa, began writing about the occult and its relationship to Catholicism. Tristan influenced Constant’s political radicalism, and he, in turn, posthumously published her book, *L’Émancipation de la femme, ou testament de la paria* in 1846. Gauguin’s desire to claim his ancestral heritage to the Goddess Ma suggests that he would have known about Constant, the principles of the group, and its text, *La Bible de la liberté*. Members of the group and later followers eventually formed the Theosophical Society in 1875 and the Groupe Indépendant d’Études Ésotériques and The Cabalist Order of the Rosy Cross in 1888.

This last manifestation of the group would have been most familiar to Gauguin because its founder, Josèphin (Joseph) Péladan wanted to inspire an artistic revolution through spirituality

---

130 Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 140-141.
133 Ibid., 299.
and Catholicism with the artist as priest. The group also held informal salons at the Durand-Ruel Gallery from 1892-98 that were in opposition to the official Salon and privileged the artist as mystic. The Symbolists were the main artists exhibiting at Durand-Ruel at this time, including Gauguin, who had a successful exhibit at the gallery in 1891. Gauguin shipped Where Do We Come From? to Paris along with other paintings from Tahiti, hoping that they would end up with Durand-Ruel. Gauguin’s familiarity with the individuals involved in these groups and his religious subject matter suggest that he was aware of the Gospel of Thomas and the concept of second baptism. Where Do We Come From? joins all of his spiritual questions and connections to Catholicism, Eastern religions, and esotericism in order to create a holistic work.

In 1898, Gauguin again writes to Monfreid about the canvas, this time asking “where does this painting of a picture begin and where does it end? At the instant when extreme feelings are merging in the deepest core of one’s being, at the instant when they burst and all one’s thoughts gush forth…in a superhuman way?...but who can say exactly when the work was begun in one’s heart of hearts?” His description reads as if he is in a trance and that this is his immaculate conception, as if God creates it though him. The artist’s pride in this work and his desire to continue writing about it suggest its personal significance.

In a letter to Charles Morice, Gauguin describes the work in greater detail. He inserts the following poem:

```
In this big picture:
Where are we going?
Near the death of an old woman.
A strange Stupid bird concludes.
What are we?
```

134 Ibid., 308-309.
135 Ibid.
136 Mathews, Erotic Life, 197.
137 Ibid., 229.
138 Gauguin to Daniel de Monfreid, Tahiti, March 1898, in Thomson, Gauguin, 258-259.
Day-to-day existence. The man of instinct wonders
What all this means.
Whence come we?
Spring.
Child.
Common life.\textsuperscript{139}

Gauguin then mentions a “bird who concludes the poem by comparing the inferior being
with the intelligent being in the great whole which is the problem indicated by the title.”\textsuperscript{140}
Second baptism is meant to separate the inferior from the intelligent, as Gauguin’s bird similarly
mentions. A duck and a peacock are the only birds that appear in the painting. One of them may
be the one that Gauguin refers to in the poem. A peacock is the more likely candidate because
peacocks are generally associated with India and parts of Southeast Asia. The peacock also
contributes to the work’s Christian symbolism because it is generally associated with the
resurrection.\textsuperscript{141} This connection further serves as an answer to Gauguin’s question, “where are we going?”

The artist’s letter goes on to discuss the other figures in the painting in terms of good and
evil. He claims that there are two sinister figures by a tree of science “in comparison with the
simple beings in a virgin nature, which might be the human idea of paradise.”\textsuperscript{142} Gauguin’s
references to Eden, the tree of science (which can be substituted for the Biblical Tree of
Knowledge), and the pre- and post-Fall beings align the painting with Genesis and the idea of
Adam’s redemption in Christ. It also suggests the second coming as the scene of the second
baptism.

Gauguin constructs the composition of the painting in a way that reads backwards
biologically (old age to infancy) and forward spiritually (Fall to redemption in Christ). The

\textsuperscript{139} Gauguin to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July 1901, in \textit{Letters}, 227.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Teilhet-Fisk, \textit{Paradise Reviewed}, 156.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 127.
androgynous figure picks the fruit from the tree and bisects the canvas. Although Eve is customarily seen as the one who picks the fruit from the tree, Gauguin places an androgynous figure in her role. The left side of the composition shows a young girl eating an apple, the religious idol or deity, and an old woman near death. On the right side is a nativity scene. The combination of scenes and moments create a Biblical narrative that begins with the fall and culminates in Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection.

The line between orthodoxy and heresy concerns the issue of second baptism as well as the acceptable books of the Bible. The “canon of truth,” which is comprised of the books of the New Testament, excludes the Coptic Gospels because church leaders consider their teachings heretical. Irenaeus of Lyon talks about the “common” baptism of all followers of Christ and claims that those who practice second baptism are followers of Satan. Gauguin refers to the earliest stage of belief in his poem about the painting when he mentions one’s origin as “Spring, Child, Common life.” His desire to move beyond common life into the symbolic realm is what first led him to the Symbolist movement and theosophy. Emile Bernard creates a symbolic language that refers to Renaissance ideals, influences Gauguin, and provides him with a foundation for his own understandings of the symbolic language of the Church.

After his failed suicide attempt and subsequent decline in health, Gauguin considers this painting his last testament. At the same time as he is painting Where Do We Come From? he receives word in April 1897 that his daughter, Aline, died unexpectedly in January. These contemporary events affect his desire to create a final masterpiece, larger in size than his other works and more philosophical in content. It is common for Gauguin to think of his titles as

143 Pagels, Beyond Belief, 142.
144 Gauguin to Charles Morice, Tahiti, July 1901, in Letters, 227.
145 Eisenman, Skirt, 15.
146 Mathews, Erotic Life, 224.
questions; however, *Where Do We Come From?* is much more complex than some of his earlier title questions.  

Similar questions to those in this title are also commonly asked of travelers. In the same chapter of Genesis where Jacob wrestles the angel, he tells his followers that his brother Esau will meet them and ask, “‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’” It also recalls the question that Simon Peter asks Christ in the Gospel of John immediately before he decides to follow him. Simon Peter asks, “‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.’” Gauguin’s self-fashioning as Christ suggests that he views himself as the leader of European art, whom others may not follow now but will afterwards as his disciples.

\[\text{References:}\]

147 Peltier, “Ethnographer,” 53.  
148 Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 140.  
150 Ibid., John 13.36.
Conclusion

In my thesis, I make a case for a comprehensive reading of Paul Gauguin’s art based upon his own engagement with aspects of spirituality and identity. The diversity and complexity of Paul Gauguin’s symbolism does not prevent a thematic reading but rather lends itself to this particular methodology. By choosing to focus on one particular aspect of his career and work, scholars overlook the richness of the connections between the part and the whole. Not only does the part relate to the whole but to other parts as well, leading to an interdependence of references and symbols in Gauguin’s œuvre.

Gauguin’s interests in religion, spirituality, and philosophy suggest that his self-portraits and religious works are a means of working out his questions and uncertainty regarding his personal beliefs and spiritual existence. His taking on of other roles and his shifting modes of self-representation in self-portraits, writings, and other works provide viewers and readers with a fluid understanding of a man seeking answers to the great questions of existence. He writes that his works are “utterly incomprehensible.” This study attributes their complexity to the use of symbols that reach beyond the possibilities of a singular religion to multiple layers of meaning and resist a simpler interpretation.

Gauguin’s artistic and theosophical developments span his entire career and do not lend themselves to a concise conclusion in regard to understanding his paintings. This study suggests that the spiritual aspects of Gauguin’s paintings are less incomprehensible when they are not viewed as individual works but are viewed as symbolic parts of a complex, multifaceted whole. It is also significant that these works are understood as products of the nineteenth century that reflect a shift in the European interest towards non-European cultures, religions, and locales.
Gauguin’s works are directly related to his engagement with other cultures and belief systems and connect him more closely with past European artists and writers as well as his contemporaries. The complexity of his religious paintings and self-portraits becomes representative of the political and cultural circumstances that provide him with a greater range of references and source material. Gauguin’s œuvre gains a new level of consistency on account of his interest in spirituality, providing viewers with a broader scope in considering his paintings as thematically cohesive works.

Paul Gauguin is an artist who remains in constant dialogue with historical and contemporary literature, philosophy, and religion. The breadth and repetition of his allusions to the Bible, Thomas Carlyle, Victor Hugo, and Jalal ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi provide Gauguin’s art with a sense of thematic unity, despite their superficial disparities. A more inclusive interpretation of the relationship between text and image belies the relationship between part and whole within Gauguin’s œuvre. It is through this comprehensive methodology that greater perspective may be gained in regard to Paul Gauguin’s art and his interests in spirituality and identity.

The questions Gauguin asks reveal his conflicted identity and his search for meaning and status inside and outside of his canvases. His ambiguous position in regard to culture and society causes him to ask philosophical and religious questions throughout his career. Gauguin’s restlessness leads him to assume the roles of other individuals in his self-portraits as the means towards defining his own identity. Although Paul Gauguin plays many roles in pursuit of his selfhood, his greatest role is that of the modern artist, constantly doubting and questioning the ordering principles of existence and meaning in his life and works.
Appendix: Figures

1.

2.
D’où venons-nous
Que sommes-nous
Où allons-nous
BIBLIOGRAPHY


