

PAUL GAUGUIN<sup>14</sup>

The case of Paul Gauguin was a tragic one. Though consumed by a passion for painting he was obsessed by fear of the beautiful, or rather, as he used to say, of doing something pretty (*“faire du joli”*).

He had all the defects and the few qualities of the Bretons: obstinacy and stubbornness, paranoia and morbid sensuality, no ability to restrain himself or correct his weaknesses, but also, an acute intelligence and sensitivity for the strange, sad and unusual. His abnormally sensual nature greatly influenced his art, revealing, as we will later see, the weakness at its base.

Self-taught, he knew nothing of academic discipline, training and drawing. He held just and acute opinions on classic and modern art. About Ingres he said, “Ingres was obstinate, one eye on nature the other on Greece. He created a beautiful and logic language for his exclusive use, and speaking Volapük, became a master for all. There are points of contact between Cimabue and Ingres, among which the ridiculous, the beautifully ridiculous. This would make one believe that there is nothing more like a masterpiece than a really bad painting”. Of the impressionists he said: “Their art is all superficial, flirtation, purely materialistic”. He also felt the metaphysical element and focused on the mysterious in art. Speaking of an incident that had made a strong impression on him and which had influenced his work for two months, he said: “in one who paints a picture there are emotions which cannot be made concrete to the eye of the public, at most a pale reflection of the mystery can be rendered”.

“It is good to start from nature”, Gauguin said, “with imagination everything can be found, but one must not carry out from nature”. He did advise, however, to establish the principal lines of a landscape from nature, to take note of rare details chosen among those that are most characteristic, to add here and there in important points a touch of local colour, and later complete the canvas in the studio. But he did not advise working for more than an hour in a chosen spot. In this he returned to the systems of the classics, systems dropped by the impressionists who insisted on finishing their landscapes directly in nature.

Gauguin also used to say: “Beware of perfection; may the fear of making monsters never prevent you from being sincere. Love the gothic and the primitive of all races. Marvellous Greek beauty is a serious danger; it leads to Volapük”. It is thus that he reached deformation.

His terror of Greek beauty was so great that he compared the shape of the horses of the Parthenon to little wooden horses, the marvellous toy, he said, “of my childhood”.

And yet in affirming that Greek beauty leads to Volapük he contradicted himself: Ingres was also inspired by Greek beauty and it had not led him to Volapük as Gauguin himself had made clear. Certainly it is not given to all to penetrate the metaphysical sense of such beauty and taken only on its superficial and obvious side it is easy to fall into banality and cliché.

Perhaps the reason for the deep aversion he always had for clean beauty is to be found in the life he led from the start, from his race and the region he came from. But I’m inclined to think that the reason he disdained this was because of his incapacity to reproduce it; that he hated it because he felt it was so far distant, beyond the limits of his own plastic possibilities.

Gauguin, like every good Breton, had been a sailor in his youth. Until the age of 25, museums and exhibitions were absolutely unknown to him. When he began to work at painting influenced by the

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impressionists, he set himself to study the nude but at home and alone. It is probable that he learned little in the way of craft. He never drew from the classics, never studied in school. He used to remark that in all paintings, naked feet standing on the ground seemed taken from a statue on a pedestal or from a model standing on a platform; they never seem to be set on the ground; he also said that in female nudes the breasts appear always as if seen from below.

His intelligence prevented him from being sectarian. Having a sufficiently broad comprehension, he accepted the most varied manifestations from Puvis de Chavannes to Henri Rousseau, from Cézanne to Gérôme. Speaking about the latter with a friend one day he mentioned one of the old academician's most famous paintings: *The Cockfight* and as his friend looked at him in astonishment, said, "But, yes, it is a painting and even fine in style".

He was also a sculptor. The phobia of beauty persecuted him in this art as well. He used to mix clay with sand saying: "This creates difficulty and prevents one from falling into scholastic sweetness", and speaking of academicians he would ironically add: "A pleasing dab of the thumb grossly attaching the nose to the cheeks, that's their ideal".

These were Gauguin's aesthetics.

He first presented himself to the public in a corner of Café Volpini, near the *Galerie des Machines*, at the universal exhibition together with Emile Bernard, Anquetin and a few others.

As it inevitably happens in such cases, the public did not understand; but painters noticed him, a few writers perorated, and thus synthetism and symbolism were born. He later exhibited with the Independents competing with the scientific neo-impressionism of Georges Seurat. He had partisans and imitators. His multiform and restless spirit also became fascinated by the art of ceramics and for a long time he studied this difficult craft that Bernard Palissy, the martyr of the Bastille had rendered immortal. In ceramics he produced some *grès flambés*, beautiful and rich in colour, which, together with a few wooden sculptures were at that time the least criticised of his works.

He was curious and interested in everything. He left many manuscripts behind: letters, thoughts and poetry that revealed the qualities of a good writer. Some of these manuscripts preserved by the painter D. de Monfreid have been published by J. De Rotonchamp in an illustrated volume (Druet, Paris).

In 1891 Gauguin left Paris, friends, polemics, discussions in cafés and one-man exhibitions, and went off to Tahiti. He spent two years there and returned to Paris where however, he suffered much bitterness and many disillusionings; many imitated his painting and sculpture, vulgarising his theories, but no one spoke of him.

He retired to Brittany in disgust, but came back with a broken foot that he suffered in a fight with some fishermen. He tried to exhibit again; he collected all his available works, but it was a complete fiasco. Profoundly discouraged he left Europe, which he was never to see again. Paul Gauguin died on Sunday Island (Marquesas Islands) on 9 May 1903. He was 55 years old.

Of all the places he had lived, the island in Tahiti was the one that had most profoundly impressed Gauguin. Tahiti o Otaiti, named Sagittarius by 15<sup>th</sup> century Spanish navigator Fernandez De Quiros and New Cythere by French navigator Antoine de Bougainville, is the largest and most beautiful of the Society islands. It is covered with dense forests full of game, blessed by a delightful climate; the soil is very fertile and great reefs of coral surround it.

The natives are a fine, robust, olive-complexioned race. At the time when they were under the queen Oberea, the island was the one most frequented by Europeans in of all Polynesia. The voluptuous habits of the

Tahitians became famous among sailors. Some English missionaries who established themselves in Tahiti in 1915 somewhat changed the aspect of the island making the natives adopt European habits, dress and religion.

It was on this island that Gauguin created the art for which he is known. Here his sensuality could develop itself freely.

As I already mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Gauguin was morbidly sensual and among the various symptoms of his sensuality one can place the mania for travel and adventure that continuously tormented him. Sensual stimulus is always present in every brusque action, great and unpremeditated decisions, sudden departures, bursts of rage, robbery and murder etc.

This physiological state, which was deeply ingrained in him, is characteristic of Bretons. In Brittany, that primitive region of France, swept by stormy winds, surrounded by mournful rocks against which the ocean rages constantly in a boiling of foam, the inhabitants live in an atmosphere of superstition, mysticism and morbid sensuality.

Other characteristic traits of the Bretons include an enormous greed for milk and milk products, hypomania, or mania for sleep (some of them are capable under normal conditions of sleeping as much as 18 or 20 hours on end) and a morbid love for girls.

I cannot consider Gauguin a great artist as many do. Neither was he, in my mind, a painter of talent; talent demands a normally balanced nature, discipline and education and reveals from the start the predominant and characteristic qualities of an artist. Now, when one examines Gauguin's painting prior to his departure to Tahiti, we find very mediocre trials of impressionism: portraits, landscapes, still lifes; paintings weak as to substance and form, that are vaguely stylised.

One is forced to recognise that what he produced in Tahiti is scarcely better. It is no better in its painterly progress in fact; but on that island far from Europe his paintings were not contaminated by the influence of his contemporaries, and though deficient and weak, they avoided current vulgarities and as such present themselves as tolerable.

The tentative quality of Tahitian period works are not so much due to any particular painterly quality as to the influence of that colonial spirit which acted positively on the psychology and work of several French painters.

As I said in my article on Renoir, the colonial spirit often influences transalpine artists in a pleasingly way. Not that artists of other nationalities are deprived of this spirit (one can give examples of English and other colonizing nations such as Belgium, Germany etc), but with these the influence of the colonial spirit is inclined to the anecdote in its sentimental, comic or even grotesque form; but with the French this influence is purely lyrical and metaphysical, of a very subtle lyricism, which we in Italy unfortunately do not possess.

Among the many French works accomplished under the influence of the colonial spirit, it is worthwhile to remember Pierre Mac Orlan's best book *La maison du retour écéurant*. This book in various passages gives admirable examples of colonial metaphysics. The most characteristic is the description of the murder of baby François Villon, whose tiny corpse is thrown into the lavatory by the assassins who pull the chain to flush it down and whilst washed down by the water the corpse of the poet-child rolls down the pipe, one hears a sweet song of a negro scullion rinsing dishes by a window open onto the serenity and clarity of an autumn afternoon.

Gauguin like many others is a direct product of our epoch; a very idiotic and confused epoch.

Had he had the misfortune to be born a century earlier he would never even have attempted to become a painter for from the very first experiments he would have felt his own weakness.

This is the hurtle and the ridiculously sad side of our day: men corresponding to zero or thereabouts with regard to their ability, manage to cheat their fellow men for years and years in the most concrete and clearest of arts, that of painting. In Italy we too have our Gauguins, our feeble paranoiacs, inferior to the Frenchman for they have not got his yearning for the unusual, for the metaphysical and the colonial which pardons him in many things; as I say, they do not possess even this, nor do they, as the Frenchman does, give themselves the trouble of crossing the Ocean in search of new horizons and especially girls attainable without the usual long hypocrisy of our old Europeans society, but they stay sitting quietly in their domestic warmth, masking their ignorance, their impotence, their stiffness with small plagiarisms and lamentable imitations.

They too will pass. Gauguin is on the way to being forgotten in his own country. He has still some success in Germany and in especially in Scandinavian countries. But Germany, besieged by hysteria, does not count in matters of art nowadays, and Scandinavians have always been poor psychologists.

Psychology generates irony, two excellent correctives to use against things the surface of which is not convincing and of which one would like to study the substance.

This is what happened to me, here, in speaking of Paul Gauguin as painter, poet and mystic; after the usual talk, just like that of a critic paid to rinse art's dirty dishes on the pages of a daily paper, I had to use a bit of psychology and scrape the surface. I have been forced to come to sad conclusions and melancholy reflections on the nature of the man and the value of the artist.