

ARTS & LETTERS

Gauguin's Stillness

THE SOURCE: "Old Vagabond" by Barry Schwabsky, in *The Nation*, Nov. 1, 2010.

PAUL GAUGUIN WAS THE MOST paradoxical of painters: a restless, footloose man who produced paintings of "uncanny stasis," writes *The Nation's* art critic, Barry Schwabsky.

Born in Paris in 1848, Gauguin spent his childhood in France and in Peru, where his grandmother had roots that he liked to believe were Indian. As a stockbroker in Paris he was quite successful, and collected works by Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Edgar Degas. In his own right, he was successful as a "Sunday painter." When the markets crashed in 1882, he decided to pursue painting full time. Leaving his Danish wife with their five children in Copenhagen, he set sail for Martinique and Panama, seeking to refresh himself "far from the company of men."

In the late 1880s Gauguin returned to France and was invited to Arles by Vincent van Gogh to help establish a "Studio of the South." After an intense and dramatic collaboration (which some historians now believe ended when Gauguin accidentally severed Van Gogh's ear, though most people place Gauguin in Paris when the incident occurred), Gauguin left for Tahiti, where he produced many of his most famous paintings. In 1901

he took to the seas again, settling in the Marquesas Islands, where he died in 1903.

At the heart of Gauguin's legacy is "the tension between the incessant, restless movement of his life, and the steadiness characteristic of his art," Schwabsky observes. Consider an early painting, *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven* (1888). "What gives this work its atmosphere is the way the three girls embody an inexplicable stillness," he says. The children look more like they are playing at being statues than enjoying a dance. The one exception to motionlessness is animals. "Even when the animals are shown as

still, you feel they could move at any minute; even when the humans are shown in motion, they seem fixed in place."

This stillness in Gauguin's work "reflects his urge to perceive something eternal within the momentary," Schwabsky notes. Unlike many wanderers, Gauguin was not searching for something new, but "something ancient and perhaps close to vanishing."

Many art historians have not known what to make of Gauguin, often treating him with disdain. Judged through the lens of feminism and anti-colonialism in the 1980s, he was deemed "just one more adventurer" with a "passion for exotica . . . and a sleazy thirst for sex with dark-skinned underage women."

More recently, the critical tide has turned in Gauguin's favor. A new show at the Tate Modern in London attempts to make sense of



The human figures in Paul Gauguin's paintings display an "uncanny stillness," says art critic Barry Schwabsky, while animals seem ready to pounce, as in this 1892 canvas, *Arearea*.

Gauguin's legacy "under the rubric of 'narrative.'" It's a misbegotten effort, in Schwabsky's view. Gauguin was not a storyteller. "The bodies and faces of the Polynesian women Gauguin incessantly painted were not simply offered up for delectation and the projection of fantasies. They possess their own intelligence and keep their own counsel; their slyness and self-possession make them resistant to interpretation, almost indecipherable. Gauguin identified with them precisely because he could not entirely 'read' them."

What matters most about Gauguin is his use of color. His "rich cadences of dissonance and harmony [made] out of color and line, the likes of which had no more been seen before in painting than had his Polynesian subjects," capture a moment and a mood, but their stories are hidden.

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Papa's Painful Passion

THE SOURCE: "Hemingway in Love: Four Found Letters" by Jeffrey Meyers, in *Raritan*, Summer 2010.

IT SOUNDS A BIT LIKE A HEMINGWAY novel: An aging novelist, bound for Europe on the *Île de France* with his fourth wife, meets a vivacious, attractive fellow passenger, and during the long Atlantic crossing flirtation blossoms into infatuation. During the ensuing month's sojourn in France, the young woman—to the annoyance of the novelist's wife—joins them, and not even the arrival of the woman's own husband blunts the budding affair.

Four recently discovered love letters reveal the players in this *ménage à quatre*: Ernest Hemingway, fresh from completing *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), his first novel in 10 years; his wife, Mary; Jigee Viertel (née Virginia Ray of Pittsburgh); and Viertel's husband, Peter, also a writer, who later penned a memoir of Hemingway, *Dangerous Friends*. According to Berkeley-based writer Jeffrey Meyers, author of a 1999 biography of Hemingway, "these letters reveal Hemingway constructing and prolonging a romantic fantasy, part paternal and protective, part courtly and devoted." Jigee seems to have both encouraged and enjoyed the older novelist's attention, and made no effort to conceal it from her husband. Hemingway, she told Peter, simply needed to be "a tiny bit in love with someone in order to feel more alive."

"When you went away," Hemingway wrote to Jigee, after she and Peter left for Paris, "I missed you so badly that better not to talk, nor think, nor write it." He told her, "I feel like people feel after big amputations." He portrayed himself, in a letter sent the next day, as "the loneliest worst dressed man in the world," but made no mention of his wife. Yet it was around this time that Hemingway confessed to Mary—as she revealed in a later memoir—"in devastating detail Jigee's campaign to snare him. [Mary] obviously doesn't appreciate you. We'll have a ranch with horses in California and you can give up the heat of Cuba. I understand your wonderful sensibilities."

Despite these intimate glimpses into Hemingway's doings, Meyers aligns himself with Peter Viertel's

impression of the relationship. Hemingway was, as Meyers puts it, "more in love with the idea of love than with the actual woman, and his painful passion for Jigee was probably not consummated."

Hemingway's infatuation with Jigee fits neatly into a pattern noted earlier by F. Scott Fitzgerald, who once observed, "I have a theory that Ernest needs a new woman for each big book. There was one for the stories and *The Sun Also Rises*. Now there's Pauline [his second wife]. *A Farewell to Arms* is a big book. If there's another big book I think we'll find Ernest has another wife." As Hemingway aged, Meyers believes, and became "more anxious, fearful about his health and his creativity, he needed to be 'a tiny bit in love with someone' to ward off despair and remind him of how he felt when he wrote his best work."

Hemingway's battle with despair ended in suicide in 1961. Jigee, too, met a sad end. Peter abandoned her when she was pregnant with their only child, and she became an alcoholic; in 1960, Meyers reports, "she accidentally lit her nightgown with her cigarette, suffered horrible burns, and died after a month in hospital."

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The Death of Dance?

THE SOURCE: "Last Rites" by Sara Hamdan, in *First Things*, Aug.–Sept. 2010.

ONLY A FEW DECADES AGO, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Rudolf Nureyev graced the covers of