

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?



Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*, 1897–1898. Oil on canvas, 139 cm × 375 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

I never get tired of Paul Gauguin's, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*. I have stared at this huge—over 12 foot long!—canvas for hours, probably more than I have contemplated any other art work in the world. I am always astounded by the composition of Gauguin's masterpiece. A truncated dog (goat?) runs in from the right, leading the viewer to a scene of three women and a baby; two of the women are looking out at us, the woman with her back to us is looking down to her left, and the ignored baby is looking back to the right. At this point the viewer might say "Okay! I get it! This is where we come from—our birth." (But there are mysteries here. Which of the women is the mother? Presumably, the two women looking coquettishly at us are not she, but then if the nude, darker-skinned woman is the mother then why is her back to the baby and her head turned away? What is motherhood anyway?) As if to accentuate these mysteries, in the background of this first scene we can make out two cloaked women in a grotto, striding to the right. In front of them, the curved arm of a spot-lighted nude woman looking at this pair leads our eye to the dominant figure in the painting, an androgynous person reaching up to pick an apple; anyone with even a vague familiarity with Western culture will identify this scene as the genesis of the Original Sin. From its toes to its outstretched arms, this Tahitian Adam/Eve provides the right-hand frame of the central scene, where we see a child smelling an apple while sitting next to two cats and a tethered goat; above the child is an exotic bird and a clothed woman looking back to her right, as if reflecting on her childhood from her new viewpoint of sexual maturity. To this woman's left is a ghostly, incongruous, Bodhisattva

idol that provides the left-hand frame to this scene, the idol's opposing hands dividing the central scene from the final scene on the left. Here a partially clothed woman leans to her left, the angle of her body leading us to the final figure, a crouching old woman with white hair, holding her hands to the sides of her head as if in despair in contemplating her approaching death; above the old woman's head we see the tangled roots of an island purau tree mirrored in a pool of water, emphasizing the theme of self-reflection. At the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, paralleling the dog/goat coming in from the right-hand side of the painting, a white bird with a dead lizard in its claws turns its head back, forcing us back into the picture.

I do not want to bore my readers here (as I did with generations of students in the dozens of time I taught this painting!) with an exhaustive biography of Gauguin's sad life.¹ We might just note that when he painted this masterpiece in Tahiti, the Post-Impressionistic syphilitic Frenchman was depressed, in poor health, and facing financial problems; after finishing the painting, Gauguin attempted, unsuccessfully, to commit suicide. We might also note that, when he was a child, Gauguin had attended a Catholic school where the Bishop of Orléans taught an unorthodox catechism that featured three fundamental questions: "where does humanity come from?", "where is it going to?", and "how does humanity proceed?" That Gauguin's *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* should be seen as a religious painting is supported by the upper right and upper left corners, painted in a bright yellow reminiscent of the gilding on Greek Orthodox icons; in the upper left corner, Gauguin gave the title to the piece (in all uppercase letters and without question marks), while in the upper right corner, the artist added a floral scene and signed the work.

From the letters Gauguin wrote to acquaintances back in Paris after he had shipped the painting there to be sold, it is clear that, as George Shackelford put it (2013, p. 37), "... Gauguin did not intend *Where Do We Come From?* to be read bit by bit, as a compendium of symbols with a cumulative meaning or allegorical unity." Be that as it may, I might defend my bit-by-bit reading of the painting as an innocence-sin-death allegory by noting that visual artists are often incapable of articulating the "meaning" of their work. I could also add that, in our postmodern world, we have rejected the analytical approach that the job of a reader or viewer is to discover the "meaning" an

¹ The best place to start a study of this painting is George T. M. Shackelford's pamphlet, *Paul Gauguin. Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* MFA Publications: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2013.

author or artist intended their work to have, much less needing an authority—a pontificating professor—to reveal that “meaning.” There is just the text or the canvas, and the reader/viewer. (So, please feel free to “read” this painting with your own eyes!) And, it is clear that Gauguin himself was well aware that his masterpiece belonged to a tradition of allegorical figural landscapes that stretched back from Puvis to Poussin to Botticelli, artists from whom he drew inspiration for his masterpiece.



Bill Waterston, *Calvin and Hobbes*, 4 May, 1992.

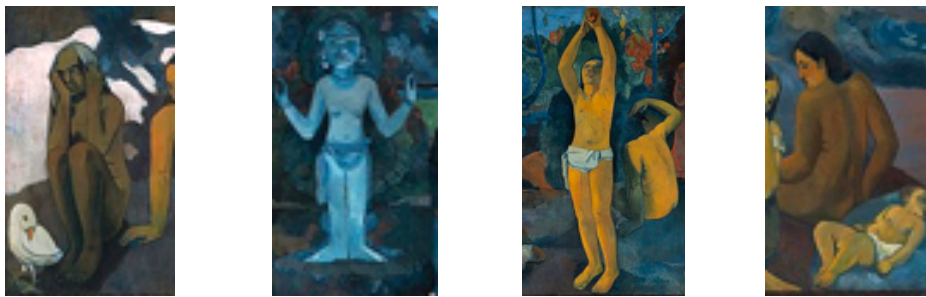
I have, as of late, been writing memoirs about how my childhood helped shape the life-paths I’ve taken as an adult (cf. “[Shiny Bits](#)” and “[Looking from Both Sides](#)”), and Gauguin’s masterpiece seemed like a good place to start to answer the question I raised in “Looking from Both Sides”: “. . . what happens when one intentionally cuts the ties to one’s natal land yet does not replace them with another national identity?”

I first came face-to-face with *Where Do We Come From?* when my wife and I moved to the Boston area in the early 1990’s as I took a job at Boston University and my wife started to work at the Museum of Fine Arts. Over the next decade, I would often stop by the museum, almost always making time along the way to stand in front of *Where Do We Come From?* And after I left BU and was teaching high-school and community-college humanities courses in New Hampshire, on occasion I brought my students on a field trip to the MFA, with *Where Do We Come From?* invariably on the tour agenda.

Part of the affinity I feel for this Gauguin painting is that it, like me, has had an itinerate existence. In 1898, Gauguin shipped the painting from Tahiti to a friend in Paris who consigned it to a gallery to be sold; it was bought by a collector in Bordeaux, resold to another gallery back in Paris, then sold to a collector in Oslo, resold again to a different Parisian gallery from whence it was shipped to New York and later purchased

by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1936. By the time that I had moved to New Hampshire and was teaching this painting, I had lived in Illinois, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, Maryland, and in Greece and Cyprus. (When I bragged to my community college students that I had had over 25 mailing addresses in my life, I was put in my place by a 25-year-old student who said that, because her single-mother had to move frequently because they couldn't afford the rent, she also had had as many mailing addresses, albeit all in New Hampshire.)

And, as an ex-pat who fled the US for Spain after Donald Trump was elected President, Gauguin's self-exile to Polynesia also resonates with me. Of course, as a former teacher with a modest retirement fund that is quite sufficient to live well here in the *Paraiso natural* of Asturias, I do not have to struggle the way Paul Gauguin did to make a living in his Paradise, shipping his paintings and sculptures back to the Paris from which he fled and relying on friends and dealers to sell them.



Now, to return to the question I posed above: how do ex-pats live in the no-man's-land of not really being full participants in the culture where they have transplanted themselves while at the same time no longer really belonging to the cultural life of the land from whence they uprooted themselves? Here Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From?* offers a clue. A world traveler himself, Gauguin has amalgamated a pastiche of religious images in his masterwork, from the crouching old woman modeled after an Incan mummy he had seen in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, to the imaginary Buddhist/Polynesian statue, to the Apple-picker and the Infant reminiscent of Christian iconography. So too, all of us who have left our native lands—whether voluntary exiles like Gauguin and myself or the millions upon millions of refugees forced to flee from war or famine—carry with us the mental baggage of where we came from into the places where we are going to. We ex-pats are like poorly scraped palimpsests, with new cultural patterns laid on top of older ones that can still be seen beneath the surface.

One final point: In Western semiotics, one normally reads an image or a text from left to right, from the given to the new—from “this is what was” to “this is what happens next.” In his own descriptions of the piece (and in my own explication of the work above), Gauguin upends this semiotics and describes *Where Do We Come From?* from right to left, which makes sense if one takes the painting as an allegory of childhood-maturity-death.

But what if we read the painting as one would normally do, from left to right—that is, from old age back to childhood?

As I am writing this essay, I am weeks away from my 70th birthday, rapidly approaching the Biblical life-limit given in *Psalms* 90:10. (I have written about this in my [Accepting Senectitude: Some Thoughts on the Occasion of my Approaching Seventieth Birthday](#).) And, like the white bird on the bottom left corner of *Where Do We Come From?*, I am turning back to look over the palimpsest of my life. I am trying—with limited success—not to give in to the despair shown by the old woman with her hands to her face and adopt a more Stoic attitude when contemplating my own coming demise. And looking back over my life is like staring into the verdant island landscape of Gauguin’s *Where Do We Come From?*, memories mostly covered in tangled blue darkness, with a few bright patches peeking out. I can see bits of my professional career as an archaeologist, excavating in Israel, Jordan, Libya, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Spain. I catch glimpses of my career as a teacher in Philadelphia, Athens, Hoboken, Tampa, Atlanta, Boston, Hinsdale, Annapolis, Claremont, and Keene. I can make out happy days with my wife as we raised our wonderful son in Cambridge and Brookline. Looking deeper in, I see my graduate school years in Philadelphia and Athens, Greece, and my college years at Oberlin. Beyond, I see flashes of a more-or-less happy childhood with my parents and three brothers in Doylestown, Ridgewood, and New York City, and our annual summer vacations at the grandparents home in Gatesville, Texas.

And now, as I have retired as an ex-pat in the paradise that is Asturias, Spain, I am painting new imagines of “what I am” on top of all of those places where I have lived.

As John Lennon put it in the opening lyrics to the Beatles’ 1965 song “In My Life”:

There are places I'll remember
All my life though some have changed
Some forever, not for better
Some have gone and some remain . . .