

Male Visions of Arcadia: Virgil's *Eclogues* in Gauguin, Cézanne, and Matisse

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In the summer of 2012, the Philadelphia Museum of Art opened its major exhibition of the year, “Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse: Visions of Arcadia.” Using Virgil’s *Eclogues* as a foundational text, the exhibit sought to draw connections between Virgil’s construction of an earthly paradise and artworks that depicted such a paradise. The exhibition begins with discussions of pastoral landscapes by Nicolas Poussin and Camille Corot, then transitions chronologically to Neo-Impressionist and Cubist works. The show’s focus includes three masterpieces in the largest gallery of the exhibition: Paul Gauguin’s *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1898; Fig. 1), Paul Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* (1906), and Henri Matisse’s *Bathers by a River* (1909-1917; Fig. 2). The Philadelphia Museum of Art makes it clear how they define Arcadia for the exhibition: “nude players gathering in out-of-time, bucolic settings.”¹ Yet in the *Eclogues*, female bathers are not mentioned at all. Males, in fact, are the main inhabitants of Arcadia, though they suffer lost, female loves throughout. The Gauguin and Matisse paintings mentioned above are described as modern visions of Arcadia that reveal the centrality of the Arcadian theme in French modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the exhibition provides older landscapes whose content more closely describes Virgil’s text, the fact that the exhibition features these three works by Gauguin, Cézanne, and Matisse as significant modern Arcadias reveals the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s reinterpretation of Virgilian Arcadia. This interpretation of Arcadia showcased by the museum is less a modern visual expression of a classical text and more an imagining of a generalized

¹ Joseph Rishel, “Introduction and Acknowledgments,” in *Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse: Visions of*

paradise that privileges the male gaze and the male experience. Although the female nude has always been prized and seductive throughout art history, the exhibition reveals through its choice of Gauguin's, Cézanne's, and Matisse's works that these artists respond to the text only metaphorically, reconfiguring the trappings of paradise for a modern male bourgeoisie who would prefer nude, voluptuous women to the fertile landscape of the original Arcadia.

Virgil's Arcadia

Virgil's *Eclogues* describe Arcadia as a pastoral landscape populated by male shepherds and goatherds who sing and played music on pan flutes. Pan, the god of shepherds, is also the principal god of Arcadia. Pan taught men to make pan flutes and took care of their sheep, symbolizing the main activities and imagery of Arcadia: "Pan was the first to teach man how to join the syrinx / With wax. Pan watches over sheep and shepherds, too" (*Ecl.* 2.32-33).² The *Eclogues* are generally vague in their description of Arcadia, but in the fourth *Eclogue* where Virgil describes the birth of a child who will bring a Golden Age of peace, the Roman poet reveals what the paradisiac Arcadia would look like and what it would promise its inhabitants:

All by themselves, the goats shall bring milk-swollen udders
Home, and herds faced with mighty lions shall not shudder.
All on its own, your cradle will provide you blossoms.
Death, even for the snake; and for all poison plants, Death, too.
(*Ecl.* 4.21-25)³

This passage reveals that the protection and productivity of goatherds are crucial to a Golden Age vision. Eroticism and nude women are not mentioned in Virgil's Golden Age vision of Arcadia. This does not mean that they would certainly be excluded from such a vision, and artists have taken liberties to insert female nudes into their depictions. But Virgil's choice not to

² Virgil, *Virgil's Eclogues*, trans. Len Krisak (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 13.

³ Virgil, *Virgil's Eclogues*, 31.

mention female bathers or attractive women suggests that they were not central to Virgil's imagining of Arcadia.

Other passages in the *Eclogues* speak to the gentleness of Arcadia in this Golden Age, where harsh conditions have been eliminated and the work of maintaining a herd of goats is made effortless:

Lycoris, here are gentle fields, here cold, clear springs.
Woodlands lie here; here only Time would slowly take us.
(*Ecl.* 10. 42-43)⁴

Virgil's Arcadia emphasizes mild conditions, where no effort is required to cool or warm the body. It is a place where conditions and way of life are so mild, in fact, that only natural causes at the end of a long life will kill anyone. Bruno Snell writes that "Virgil's Arcadia is ruled by tender feeling...In their rural idyll the peaceful calm of the leisurely evening hours stands out more clearly than the labour for their daily bread, the cool shade is more real than the harshness of the elements."⁵ The Arcadian shepherds and goatherds do not experience intense joy or consuming depression brought on by a chaotic natural environment. Instead, their existence is made peaceful and generally non-extreme by their pleasant relationship with nature. But as Snell writes, this existence is tinged with the melancholy of lost love, a theme that appears throughout the *Eclogues*: In Arcadia "There is only feeling, which suffuses everything with its glow; not a fierce or passionate feeling: even love is but a delicate desire, gentle and sad."⁶ This gentle, delicate feeling that permeates Arcadia means that even death is not a dramatic event, but rather a natural one that Arcadians slide into: "Singers, you'll chorus still these sorrows to your hills. / Arcadians, oh, how softly then my bones would sleep" (*Ecl.* 10. 32-33). According to Snell, it is

⁴ Virgil, *Virgil's Eclogues*, 77.

⁵ Bruno Snell, "Arcadia: The Discovery of a Spiritual Landscape," in *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought* (Oxford: A.T. Broome and Son, 1953): 288.

⁶ Snell, "Arcadia," 288.

unusual in Greek poetry (the *Eclogues* were inspired by Theocritus's *Idylls*) to have death discussed in such an accepted, calm manner: "I know of no passage in the whole of Greek poetry where a man reflects upon his own death with the same sentimental sensuality."⁷ Death, in all of its dramatic power, is treated placidly in the *Eclogues*.

Gauguin's Troubled Arcadia

Gauguin's monumental *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* offers a panoramic view of Tahiti as seen through Gauguin's symbolist interpretation. The work's existentially questioning title, painted prominently onto the upper left corner of the work with a yellow background shape that frames it and makes it easy to see, reflects the figures in the composition, who represent various stages of life and existence. The landscape Gauguin depicts is a Tahitian Arcadia in that it is lush and shaded. The work departs from Arcadia as described in Virgil's text in that it features no male figures and no shepherds, but instead primitivized Tahitian women, some nude and some only covered by a loin cloth. Although this aspect of the work is less Arcadian and more expressive of Gauguin's vision of a male-privileging paradise, the work does capture the sense of gentle melancholy and awareness of Death that Virgil weaves throughout the *Eclogues*.

Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in late 1895, the second time that he visited the country and the last time he would leave France, since he would die in the Marquesas Islands in May 1903. In this period of his life, Gauguin experienced one of the most depressed times of his life and artistic career. He compiled a manuscript called "Diverses choses" ("Miscellaneous Things"), in which he ruminated about art-making, religion, philosophy, and the intermingling of the three. In this manuscript he arrived at the questions that make up the title of the painting in consideration

⁷ Snell, "Arcadia," 296.

here, asking through them, “what is our ideal, natural, rational destiny?”⁸ Gauguin felt that this question could only be answered through pictorial means because “of all the arts, painting is the one which will smooth the way by resolving the paradox between the world of feeling and the world of intellect.”⁹ The painting contains other blends that mimic commentary about Arcadia, such as when Shackelford, in his essay for the “Visions of Arcadia” exhibition catalogue, describes the landscape of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* as “a remarkable combination of the real and the imagined.”¹⁰ Snell writes that the *Eclogues* join myth and reality together in that they blend the mythology of Arcadia, namely the role of Pan, with political clamor that was absent from the *Idylls*.¹¹

Gauguin’s painting also combines myth and reality, a theme that is present throughout his Tahitian landscapes and portraits. These works blend Gauguin’s imagination and observation of Tahiti into one symbolic image. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* epitomizes the mixing of reality and myth. The work is intended to be read, as a linear narrative, from right to left. On the far right is the beginning of life: a sleeping infant with its face turned towards the edge of the canvas, on a nondescript light blue circular shape that is repeated in several other places in the foreground where figures sit. Behind the infant, a black dog sits, the bottom half of his body cut off by the canvas’s edge. Behind the dog, further into the background, is an abstract landscape, ruled by shades of blue and blue-tinged yellow, green, and mauve. Moving left, three female figures sit next to the infant in different stages of undress. Their bodies form an arc that circles the infant and pushes their bodies towards the viewers. The two figures in the front of this arc look demurely at the viewer, while the fully nude figure has

⁸ George T.M. Shackelford, “Trouble in Paradise,” in *Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse: Visions of Arcadia*, ed. Joseph Rishel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 151.

⁹ Shackelford, “Trouble in Paradise,” 152.

¹⁰ Shackelford, “Trouble in Paradise,” 153.

¹¹ Snell, “Arcadia,” 284.

her back to the viewer and looks over her shoulder at the ground, or something out of view. Moving further to the left, a central female half-nude figure reaches up to pick fruit. Behind her and to the right, another nude female with her back to the viewer bends her arm to touch her head. Behind this figure, two females fully clothed in dusty pink robes “confide their thoughts to one another,” in Gauguin’s words.¹² To the left of the woman picking fruit sits a female child eating an orange, with two white cats on her right and a goat on her left. To the left of the goat is a half-nude female leaning on her right arm, which leads the eye to the end of the narrative on the far left side of the composition where an old woman, whose skin is darker than the rest of the figures, crouches and partially covers her face. About this figure, Gauguin wrote, she “is nearing death” and she “appears to accept everything, to resign herself to thoughts. She completes the story!”¹³

The exhibition catalogue does not offer much evidence for the claim that this work is an interpretation of Arcadia. The authors do suggest that Gauguin’s work complicates the notion of a peaceful Arcadia, commenting on the exhibition website that the work “hints at a sinister side of paradise.”¹⁴ This remark suggests that Arcadia did not already contain trouble or melancholy, but the *Eclogues* in fact do speak of trouble in Arcadia, trouble that parallels Gauguin’s construction of a work that juxtaposes a beautiful, bucolic landscape with a solemn acceptance of death. In the tenth Eclogue, for example, Pan laments love’s challenges:

Will sobbing never cease?” he cried. “Tears don’t move Love,
Who’s never had his fill of tears—nor grass of rills,
Nor goats of fodder, nor the honeybees of clover.
(*Ecl.* 10. 28-30)

¹² Shackelford, “Trouble in Paradise,” 153.

¹³ Shackelford, “Trouble in Paradise,” 153.

¹⁴ “Gauguin, Cezanne, Matisse: Visions of Arcadia,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art*, Accessed May 15, 2016, <http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/2012/753.html?page=1>.

Like in Gauguin's work, feeling and landscape are interwoven. Through Virgil's writings, "the hardship provoked by the trials of love is transferred from the calming oaks by the river's edge to a lonely landscape of chill rocks which reflects the soul's state."¹⁵ But while the trials of love were experienced by male shepherds and goatherds in Arcadia, their paradise experienced in the plenitude of goat milk and the harvest, the trials of love and life that Gauguin depicted in his works were his own struggles, and thus his vision of Arcadia was based on his personal desire for paradise, rather than an interpretation of the Virgilian Arcadia set in Tahiti.

"Visions of Arcadia" and the role of *Bathers by a River*

Like Gauguin, Matisse made Arcadia his personal vision of the subject, one that did not closely reflect Virgil's text but transformed the idyllic landscape to include the ideal female bather and served as a platform for formal experimentation with cubism. Around 1900, Matisse chose to go not to Tahiti to find his personal Arcadia, but instead to the south of France. Once he moved to southern France, Matisse began his first works featuring female nude bathers, *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904-5; Fig. 3) and *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905-6; Fig. 4). He referred to the second work as "Arcadia."¹⁶ Through these works, Matisse's goal was to pare down forms to their "truer, more essential character," as he wrote in "Notes d' un peintre" ("Notes of a painter") in 1908.¹⁷ Margaret Werth argues that bathers were a modern interpretation of "the myth of the natural body, the body in nature, but without shepherds and gods—the traditional pastoral and

¹⁵ Michael C.J. Putnam, *Virgil's Pastoral Art: Studies in the Eclogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970): 349.

¹⁶ Stephanie D'Alessandro, "Re-visioning Arcadia: Henri Matisse's *Bathers by a River*," in *Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse: Visions of Arcadia*, ed. Joseph Rishel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 182.

¹⁷ D'Alessandro, "Re-visioning Arcadia," 183.

mythic elements that lent idyll its narrative structure.”¹⁸ Here, Werth argues that bathers are the modern shepherds and gods, expressing the body in nature just as shepherds and gods did in the time of Virgil. Bathers would have been a relevant choice of subject matter in the context of new economic and social structures in early twentieth-century France. Bathing was a form of modern recreation, and increasingly popular suburban bathing establishments were up-to-date subjects for avant-garde artists. Bathing as a subject represented a legitimating return to the figure and the nude within a dialectic of tradition and avant-gardism. Bathing also provided an opportunity to mythologize or naturalize racial and cultural others including women, Breton peasants, or Tahitians.¹⁹

These goals were clearly relevant in Matisse’s first attempts at *Bathers by a River*. The work was originally part of a three-panel commission for the staircase of the home of Sergei Shchukin, a Russian businessman and Matisse’s greatest early patron.²⁰ The early sketches of the work show five nude women, their bodies positioned to emphasize their curves and voluptuousness (Fig. 5). Shchukin decided to reject the work because he did not want to have paintings involving nudity in his home. The other panels he made for Shchukin also received a negative response from the public and from Shchukin, leading Matisse to refrain from revisiting the work until May of 1913. At that point the work resembled more closely its finished state, but World War I cut Matisse’s efforts short, and he did not actually finish the work until late 1916.

The differences between Matisse’s 1909 preliminary sketch for *Bathers by a River* and the finished canvas are striking and represent a further contrast when compared to his other paintings of bathers. The most striking formal shift from earlier idylls was that he dispensed with

¹⁸ Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 157.

¹⁹ Werth, *Joy of Life*, 159.

²⁰ Hilary Spurling, *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse, the Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954* (New York: Knopf, 2005): 138.

the horizontal orientation of the landscape background of *Le bonheur de vivre* and others and divided the pictorial field vertically into a series of bands painted in solid colors. Werth describes these bands as “green vegetation, black river, sunlit shore, and immaterial blue.”²¹ The bathers’ bodies are no longer formed by curvilinear lines, but are instead constructed by strong vertical lines and broad, geometric shapes. Unlike *Le bonheur de vivre* and *Luxe, calme et volupté*, there is no depicted horizon, creating a shallow and disorienting space that emphasizes a sense of flatness. The figure farthest on the left has her elbows lifted and hands behind her head, “a descendant of a Venus or temptress figure, her body now turned away from us.”²² A thick, black vertical line extends from the top of her head all the way down to her feet, outlining the architectural quality of her body. She exists in the foliage-covered band of the painting, with a repetitive, almost decorative pattern of leaves. To the right is a bather whose left leg is lifted as she is about to step into the black band of water. This figure is the most abstracted of the four. Its head is absent, replaced by a rectangle containing curving and straight lines that resemble a pair of bent legs. To her right, a figure holds her hands clasped in front of her, as if she is about to take a dive into the water. On the farthest right is the statue-like fourth figure which directly faces the viewer. The positions of the figures’ arms and legs lead the viewer through the composition; the two curving lines that appear on each panel of color move the eye back into the painting, but keep the eye on the surface in the shallow space.

These figures are larger than life and nondescript, seemingly having very little relation to Virgil’s Arcadia. Although these figures’ austerity and lack of individuality might suggest a sinister interpretation of Arcadia, the muted colors of the composition and the simplification of forms to basic geometric shapes all recall the gentle feeling of Arcadia and the yearning for a

²¹ Werth, *Joy of Life*, 234.

²² Werth, *Joy of Life*, 235.

simplified life, where the duties required for one's livelihood are taken care of for us. In Virgil's Arcadia, the ideal was to make goat herding and shepherding easier. In the modern Arcadia as depicted by Matisse, the ideal was to have no complicated duties except for the basic activities that brought the body closer to nature and represented bourgeois leisure, such as bathing.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is no surprise that the French modernist interpretation of Arcadia would not quote directly from the *Eclogues* in the same way that older artists did. A key aspect of modernism was the redefinition of concepts for the new century, for a new art practice whose goals were fundamentally different from the previous era's. Although Virgil's Arcadia did not look the same as the Arcadia that Gauguin and Matisse pictured in their monumental works, the idea of an Arcadia, of an idyllic place where existence is more gentle than the reality we know, has continued to be relevant to artistic practice and to our personal sensibilities. As the catalogue, which features some contemporary artworks, demonstrates, every age will have their own sense of Arcadia, the features of which will change based on current ways of life, values, and concepts of leisure. For Ancient Rome, Arcadia signified playing music, productive goatherds, and the ability to sing and relax in the shade. For male avant-garde painters around the turn of the twentieth century, Arcadia involved an escape from current life while communicating in terms of modern life. In Gauguin and Matisse there is a tension that exists in the *Eclogues* between myth and reality, where there is a desire to escape reality but also to hold on to aspects of it, or to find a new reality. One can only speculate about what our contemporary Arcadia would look like, but what is certain is that Virgil captured a desire that continues to be relevant to humanity throughout time.

Figures



Figure 1. Paul Gauguin. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Oil on canvas, 1898.



Figure 2. Henri Matisse. *Bathers by a River*. Oil on canvas, 1909-1917.



Figure 3. Henri Matisse. *Luxe, calme et volupté*. Oil on canvas. 1904-1905.



Figure 4. Henri Matisse. *Le bonheur de vivre*. Oil on canvas. 1905-1906.



Figure 5. Henri Matisse. *Composition No. II*. Watercolor on paper, 1909.

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