

Pictorial Symbolism and The Philosophical Savage

Ralph HAGE, Ph.D.

In July 1888, Gabriel Albert Aurier, already a well-established writer in the Parisian Decadent/Symbolist literary milieu, met Paul Gauguin through a mutual acquaintance; the painter Emile Bernard. Bernard and Gauguin were developing a style called Synthetism and attempting to break away from the pseudo-scientific naturalism of Impressionism through simple, decorative and anti-naturalistic forms. Their meeting with Aurier would transform that style into the more literary and spiritually minded style of Symbolism.

When in April 1889 Aurier started editing his own Journal, *Le Moderniste Illustré*, Gauguin contributed articles to it. This new alliance was very beneficial for both Aurier and Gauguin; the artist became a prominent figure in the avant-garde by placing himself both in opposition to academism and to the naturalism of impressionism and Aurier established himself as an influential critic by defining or "discovering" a new movement; pictorial Symbolism.

While Aurier was editing his own journal, he had become close to the group formed around Alfred Valette the editor of the Journal *La Pleiade*. At the end of 1889 when the *Moderniste Illustré* ceased publication, the group around *La Pleiade* reorganized to found the new *Mercure de France* and Aurier became one of its principal figures.⁽¹⁾ His January 1890 article on Van Gogh⁽²⁾ as well as his seminal article of March 1891, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture: Paul Gauguin",⁽³⁾ were both published in it. That last article⁽⁴⁾ established Gauguin as the current head of a newly defined pictorial Symbolism.

In any study of the beginnings of pictorial Symbolism, probably no moment is as important as the interpretation Gabriel Albert Aurier gave of Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon*. A figure that emerges in that article is that of the so-called "Savage" who is to be a point of junction between the author's social and philosophical views and his search for a

mythological stability of meaning in opposition to the religiously and socially destabilizing role of modern science.

The Philosophical Savage

Pictorial Symbolism as defined by Aurier self-consciously positioned itself against the basic tenants of naturalism. It was a reworking of the more formal Synthetism of Bernard to fit within the philosophical and literary controversies that defined the literary symbolist movement. Through a strategic redefinition of the previously purely formal and iconographical elements of Synthetism Aurier was able to introduce within the discursive space of criticism, an aesthetic position against both the naturalism of the impressionists and academic Idealism.⁽⁵⁾

In an oft-quoted description of the battle between Jacob and the Angel depicted in the painting *The Vision After the Sermon*, G. Albert Aurier resumes his opinion on Brittany and the Bretons:

As these two giants of legend, transformed into pygmies by their distance, fight their formidable combat, women look on, interested and naïve, undoubtedly not really understanding what is going on over there, on this fantastic purpled hill. They are peasants [and from their clothing] we can guess that they are from Brittany. They have the respectful attitude and the open faces of simple creatures listening to extraordinary and somewhat fantastic tales told by some incontestable and revered mouth. We have the impression that they are in a church so silent is their attention, so absorbed, submissive and devout is their demeanor; we have the impression that they are in a church, an impression of a vague odor of incense and a prayer that flutters among the white wings of their hats while the respected voice of an old priest hovers over their heads... Yes without a

(1) Patricia Townley-Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UMI Reaserch Press, c. 1985, p.10

(2) G. Albert Aurier, "Les isolés, Vincent Van Gogh" in *Textes critiques, 1889 - 1892, De l'Impressionisme au Symbolisme*, (Paris, 1995), pp. 66-76.

(3) G. Albert Aurier, "Le symbolisme en peinture, Paul Gauguin", *Mercure de France*, 2:15 (march 1891), pp. 155-165.

(4) Written on the insistence of Bernard but not mentioning him thus precipitating the break between him and Gauguin. See, Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism*, (London, 1979), pp. 74 and 106.

(5) Stephan Pierre Aquin, *Le concept d'Ut Pictura Poesis dans la theorie "Idéist" de Gabriel-Albert Aurier*, (Montréal, 1988), p. 17.



doubt, in some poor church of a poor Breton village...⁽¹⁾

At first he characterizes the attitude of the women as "naïve", then he identifies the women in the painting as "peasants (...) from Brittany" followed immediately by a characterization as "simple creatures". As there are no indication of why he should consider these women to be naïve or simple, what we seem to have here is a regional stereotype; Aurier describes the women as naïve because they are from the distant and economically less developed Brittany, and their naiveté reinforces their identification as Bretons. From this regional identification, he moves on to a further characterization of "respectful attitude" and "listening with reverence", indicating respect for religious authority and its representative, the "old priest". Finally there is one last characterization of them as poor, praying "in some poor church", in "some poor Breton village".

Aurier's opinion of these Breton women, like Gauguin's is squarely inscribed within the Parisian vision of rural France prevalent in the XIXth century.⁽²⁾ The characterization Aurier makes about them being poor, religious, superstitious, naïve and primitive is not deducible from the painting itself but from the shared assumptions about Brittany and Bretons in which both the article and the painting are situated and which they contribute to reinforce. The passages Aurier makes from characterization to identification and vice-versa, show how undebated and unproblematic those assumptions about Brittany and Bretons are in XIXth century Paris. Their importance lies in that they are fundamentally integrated by the writer into his Neo-Platonic description of the process of perception and

artistic creation. Our contention will be that the "primitive" and the "savage" - interchangeable terms for the negation of modernity - are mental constructs that play a central role in Aurier's philosophical definition of Symbolism in its relation to XIXth century society as a whole.

Aurier's Neo-Platonism is part of a new opposition within the avant-garde to the dominance of naturalism and the positivist epistemology that underlies it. This splinter within the avant-garde started to be formally organized and recognized around 1886 and was the result of a new valorization of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Baudelaire⁽³⁾ whose work were viewed as offering an alternative to the naturalism of authors such as Zola. This established them as models for a group of imitators in the second half of the 1880's who opposed literary realism and pictorial naturalism. Philosophically the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*,⁽⁴⁾ as well as those of other German Idealist philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant, and Johanne G. Fichte, were often interpreted in terms of absolute subjectivism⁽⁵⁾ and presented an epistemological model with which to counter the claims of narrow objectivism put forward by the Positivists. These models provided a coherent philosophy with which to appropriate difference from the naturalists and created the conditions of group formation.

The subjectivism put forward in opposition to positivism either led to anarchistic skepticism or to the opposite reaction, the positing of an absolute truth outside any contingently subjective description of the world.⁽⁶⁾ Aurier's Neo-Platonism was the positing of such an absolute in opposition to the relativism and anarchistic skepticism of

- (1) "Tandis que ces deux Géants de légende, que l'éloignement transforme en pygmées, combattent leur formidable combat, des femmes regardent, intéressées et naïves, ne comprenant point trop, sans doute ce qui se passe là-bas, sur cette fabuleuse colline empourprée. Ce sont des paysannes. Et à l'envergure de leurs coiffes blanches éployées comme des ailes de goéland, et aux typiques bigarrures de leurs fichus et au formes de leurs robes et de leurs caracos, on les devine originaires de la Bretagne. Elles ont les attitudes respectueuses et les faces écarquillées des créatures simples écoutant d'extraordinaires contes un peu fantastiques affirmés par quelque bouche incontestable et révérée. On les dirait dans une église, tant silencieuse est leur attention, tant recueilli, tant agenouillé, tant dévot est leur maintien; on les dirait dans une église et qu'une vague odeur d'encens et de prière volette parmi les ailes blanches de leurs coiffes et qu'une voix respectée de vieux prêtre plane sur leurs têtes... Oui, sans doute, dans une église, dans quelque pauvre église de quelque pauvre petit bourg breton..." (Aurier, 1891, op. cit. p.155.)
- (2) For more on this subject see: Eugene Weber, *La fin des ténroires, la modernisation de la France rurale 1870-1914*, (Paris, 1983); Ronald Hubscher, "Modèle et antimodèle paysan", in *Histoire des Français, XIXe - XIX e Siècle*, (Paris, 1983); James F. Knapp, "Primitivism and Empire; John Synge and Paul Gauguin", *Comparative Literature*, 41:1 (winter, 1989); F. Orton and G. Pollock, "Les Données Bretonnantes, la Prairie de la Représentation", *Art History (U.K.)*, 3:3 (Sept. 1980); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native", *Art in America*, 77 (july 1989); Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, (New York, 1992).
- (3) All of which entered the scene before 1880, (Goldwater, op. cit. p. 74.) Baudelaire's theory of correspondance was especially important to Aurier's mystical neo-platonism. Baudelaire was influenced by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg who was in turn influenced by Plotinus. (Townley-Mathews, op. cit. p. 28).
- (4) Which was only translated to French in 1888, but was influential before then through conferences and vulgarizations (Goldwater, op. cit. p. 75).
- (5) Townley-Mathews, op. cit. p. 40.
- (6) Ibid. pp. 39-40.

people such as Remy de Gourmont, Aurier's fellow Symbolist and close friend.⁽¹⁾

Aurier's description of the effect of the sermon of the priest shown in Gauguin's *Vision Après le Sermon*, is a point of junction between the Author's stereotypical views of Brittany and his Neo-Platonism:

What magnificent accent (...) strangely appropriate for the simple ears of his blundering audience, did this stuttering village priest give? All the surrounding materiality have dissipated in a fog, vanished; even he, the one evoking, has disappeared and it is now his voice, his poor pitiful mumbling voice, that has become visible (...)⁽²⁾

Underlying this description of the effects of the priest's sermon is the matrix of Aurier's Neo-platonic theory: The materiality of the priest disappears in order to signify the immaterial Idea. The disincarnated voice perceived by the Breton women creates the visibility of the scene (the mountains, the combat, etc.) The relation between the primitivism of the Breton women and the neo-platonic dissipation of the surrounding materiality takes meaning in an opposition to contemporary society and the philosophical positivism it implies. The importance of the "savage" as an anti-naturalist element is evident in the following passage where in response to the realist aestheticians' Aurier writes:

It is of notoriety that realist aestheticians readily admit to the objective existence of things, that they deny with pleasure the entity of thought and that for them the real, the demonstrated is the objective rather than the subjective, it is important to place oneself on their own terrain of discussion and to admit provisionally with them the heterogeneity of the soul and the objects, the reality of exteriorities.

Well, thus posed, the problem becomes even simpler. The definition given by the naturalists appears to be even more clearly, if at all possible, to be incomplete and insufficient. We cannot, logically persuade ourselves that art, supreme mode of expression, cannot express the universality of the psyche, which our infallible intuition, which even the intuition of the savage,⁽³⁾ guess or discern to the smallest molecules of matter. We cannot persuade ourselves that it can only express, as they are trying to force us to believe, this miserable and infinitesimal thing in the infinity of the world: a man.⁽⁴⁾

The very act of engaging in a debate presupposes that both sides agree upon a certain number of elements; and right in the middle of this discussion about the nature of reality, the "savage" is introduced as an argumentative element: "(...) even the intuition of the savage (...)"⁽⁵⁾ Aurier's unqualified use of the "savage" as some kind of self-evident proof of the correctness of his argument with which he can engage his philosophical adversaries indicates that the author considers this supposed intuition to be one of these agreed-upon elements. The use of the word "even" occurs in another passage where the "Savage" is a representative of the eternal core of the human mind existing outside the possibility of change:

Discussing the Neo-Platonist Ideas⁽⁶⁾ and their status as the fundamental level of reality, Aurier compares "our" perception of them with that of the Savage:

Perhaps it would be rash to affirm that we all have a perfect vision of this Ideal reality; that we all know how to read clearly through appearances the radiant truths that they represent. Most of us are incapable, - either by birth or because education has atrophied in us this faculty more incapable, I believe, than

(1) Loc. cit.

(2) "Quel accent merveilleusement touchant, quelle lumineuse hypotypose, étrangement appropriée aux frustes oreilles de son balourd auditoire, a rencontré ce bossuet de village qui ânonne? Toutes les ambiances matérialités se sont dissipées en vapeur, ont disparu; lui-même l'évocat, s'est effacé, et c'est maintenant sa Voix, sa pauvre vieille pitoyable Voix bredouillante, qui est devenue visible(...)" (Aurier, 1891, op. cit. p.156.)

(3) Italic added.

(4) "(...) il est de notoriété que les esthètes réalistes admettent fort volontiers l'existence objective des choses, qu'ils nient même avec plaisir l'entité de la pensée et que pour eux le réel, le démontré, est plutôt l'objectif que le subjectif, il importe de se placer sur leur terrain de discussion et d'admettre provisoirement avec eux l'hétérogénéité de l'âme et des choses, la réalité des extériorités.

Or ainsi envisagé, le problème devient d'autant plus simple. La définition donnée par les naturalistes apparaît de façon plus manifeste, s'il est possible, incomplète et insuffisante. Nous ne pouvons, en effet, logiquement nous persuader que l'art, *mode suprême d'expression*, ne puisse exprimer l'universalité des psychés, lesquelles notre infallible intuition, lesquelles l'intuition du sauvage même, devine ou discerne jusque dans les moindres molécules de la matière; nous ne pouvons nous persuader qu'il ne puisse exprimer, comme on s'efforce de nous le faire croire, que cette chose misérable et infinitésimale dans l'infini du monde: un homme." (Aurier, 1892, op. cit. p.478.)

(5) Italic added.

(6) Aurier's neo-platonism is different from that of Plotinus in that he did not believe in the "One", the unity from which - according to Plotinus - all other Ideas emerge. Patricia Townley-Mathew theorizes that this is because in the skeptical atmosphere of the XIXth century, the "One" had come to be equated with God. (Townley-Mathews, op. cit. p. 33.)



even the savages whose language, religion, and barbaric artistic sketches, are an intimate witness of a very intimate communion with the immanent thought of nature, with the soul of things. Most of us are prisoners of the Platonic cave, who, incapable of seeing anything other than shadows, deny the existence of the radiant sky and the reality of the beings.⁽¹⁾

Thus, according to Aurier, the Savage perceives neo-platonic transcendence in its absolute stability because he is not spoiled by education i.e. by civilization. Aurier's underlying description and negative valuation of civilization presupposes his own contemporary context, that of the scientific revolution and its effects on French modernity as constant economic, social, political and religious changes and upheavals, which in turn, lead to perpetual instability in that society's shared world-view.

Aurier considers members of his civilization as incapable of perceiving the transcendental stability of Platonic Ideas precisely because they are too focused on the world of appearance and change. Here Platonic Ideas are made to play the role of a negation of fast-changing contemporary society. And if the author posits the intuition of the savage as invariable, allowing him to self-assuredly use it as an argumentative element, it is because that intuition is assumed to be outside of history and the social instability created by modernization.

The Savage's intuition is presented as some kind of equivalent to the capacity for contemplating Platonic Ideas the latter seen as the transcendence with the potential to stabilize meaning in opposition to absolute subjectivism and the contingent objectivism of the late XIXth century most dominant philosophy of science, Positivism.

Opposition to Positivism and Contemporary Civilisation

One of the Characteristics of Aurier's critical works is his

opposition to Positivism, viewed as the direct consequence of the spiritual decline of Western civilization. In an article entitled "The Symbolist" and published in 1892, he heralds the rise of Symbolist artists as a sign of the eminent fall of Positivism and of a change on the level of civilization as a whole:

The XIXth century, after having for eighty years, in its childish enthusiasm, proclaimed the omnipotence of observation and scientific deduction, after having affirmed that no mystery will resist its lenses and its scalpels, seems to be finally becoming aware of the vanity of its efforts.⁽²⁾

This passage clearly shows that Aurier's opposition to his own century and to Positivism is directly related to the destabilizing role of science, which destroys "mystery" and reduces knowledge to a temporary and partial examination of the empirical, always to be improved upon. In the positivist interpretation of science any attempt to attain transcendental knowledge is meaningless.

As an alternative to positivist contingency, Aurier proposed Neo-Platonist transcendental stability. Thus, at the beginning of his posthumously published article "Essay for a New Critical Method", in a passage that resumes his opinion on this destabilizing role of science, Aurier writes:

It will be the characteristic of the XIXth century to have wanted to introduce science everywhere, (...) and when I say word science' it should not be understood as mathematics, the only true science, but rather these obtuse bastards of science, the natural sciences.

Since the natural sciences, or the inexact sciences, in opposition to rational or exact sciences, are by definition unsusceptible to absolute solutions, they inevitably lead to skepticism and to the fear of thought.

They must thus be accuse of having created for us this society with no faith, down to earth, incapable of those thousands of intellectual or sentimental

(1) "Certes il serait peut-être téméraire d'affirmer que nous avons tous une parfaite vision de cette réalité idéique, que nous savons tous lire nettement à travers les apparences, les radieuses vérités qu'elles signifient. La plupart d'entre nous en sont incapables, - soit nativement, soit plutôt que l'éducation ait atrophiée en eux cette faculté, - plus incapables, je crois, que les sauvages mêmes, dont le langage, dont les religions, dont les barbares ébauches artistiques, témoignent souvent d'une très intime communion avec l'immanente pensée de la nature, avec l'âme des choses. Presque tous, nous sommes les prisonniers de la caverne platonicienne qui, ne pouvant voir que les ombres, nient le ciel lumineux et la réalité des êtres." (Aurier, 1892, op. cit. p. 480.)

(2) "Le XIXe siècle, après avoir, quatre vingt ans, proclamé, dans son enthousiasme enfantin l'omnipotence de l'observation et de la déduction scientifique, après avoir affirmé qu'aucun mystère ne subsistait devant ces lentilles et ses scalpels, semble enfin s'apercevoir de la vanité de ses efforts." Ibid. p. 474.

manifestations which we can classify under the heading of devotion.⁽¹⁾

In order for us to connect Aurier's opposition to natural sciences to the other facets of his work and to the context of the XIXth century, we have to place this citation within Aurier's positive view of religious interpretations of the world. Natural sciences were opposed by Aurier because they destroyed the possibility of mythology; defined as realities of an inter-subjective nature based on collective beliefs. Such mythology can only function when such beliefs are shared and undebated. Because of the systematic doubt inherent in the scientific method, natural sciences are always potentially threatening to belief-based world views. As a member of a civilization that went through the Copernican and Darwinian crises, Aurier saw how old religious, philosophical, and pseudo-scientific beliefs can be destroyed by science. He saw this destruction as leading to skepticism, threatening the very possibility of a share and stable description of the world, creating an obstacle to inter-subjectivity. This in turn, leads to "a fear of thought" on the level of society as a whole, which in this context can be described as creating description of the world through faith as opposed to science. In such a society without faith those thousand acts of "devotion" will be absent leading of course to an absence of religiosity.

In Aurier's simple and lucid examination of the effects of science, the social even religious - dimension of his opposition to it emerges very clearly. Neo-platonism stabilizes the contingency of positive facts in relation to transcendence - the absolute Ideas of neo-platonism - thus proposing a way of transforming the partiality of the world as described through natural sciences into a transcendently stabilized totality. Aurier's Neo-Platonism is fundamentally a desire for society with a mythological approach to reality, based on stable and undebated beliefs.

Within this way of thinking the "savage" or the "primitive" represents a point of junction between Aurier's use of Neo-Platonism to oppose science and his opposition to the society that gave rise to the latter. The "savage" is

both a justification of neo-platonic thinking and a criticism of contemporary western civilization to which philosophical thinking as such belongs. This is evident from his uses of words such as the "primitive", the "simple" and the "primordial".

From the Philosophical Savage to Symbolist Art

Aurier uses the concept of "Savage" as a tool for defining pictorial symbolism. Poorly defined and generally accepted words such as "savage" allow Aurier to amalgamate complex ideas; for instance between the simplicity of art as deduced from Neo-platonic philosophical argumentation and its simplicity as conceived through the comprehension of the primitive. This amalgamation is possible because to Aurier's mind both represent the same thing, a-temporality; Neo-Platonist Ideas being outside of time while the savage mind is more particularly outside of historical time, which, using Erwin Panofsky's definition, operates through the mutual determination of historical time and geographic space.⁽²⁾ Both the Savage and the Platonic Idea are then outside the process of change and represent a kind of transcendental stability.

Aurier seemed to believe that art has a major role in recreating the lost stability of Western Civilization and defended Symbolism as a return to a more primitive, simpler way of signifying Ideas. More particularly, he defended the necessity of a simplification of the signifying elements in an artwork. He first demonstrated this necessity through neo-platonic philosophy, arguing that the sign must be absolutely transparent in relation to the transcendently stable Ideas:

To write one's thought, one's poem, with these signs, while remembering that the sign, no matter how indispensable, is nothing of itself and that only the idea is everything, thus appears to be the work of the artist whose eye has distinguished the hypostasis' of tangible object.⁽³⁾

(1) "Ç'aura été le propre du XIXe siècle de vouloir introduire la science partout, même dans les choses où elle a moins affaire - et quand je dis la science, il ne faut point entendre la mathématique, la seule science à proprement parler, mais bien ces bâtards obtuses de la science, les sciences naturelles.

Or les sciences naturelles, ou sciences inexactes, par opposition aux sciences rationnelles ou exactes, étant, par définition, insusceptibles de solutions absolues, conduisent fatalement au scepticisme et à la peur de la pensée.

Il faut donc les accuser, elles, de nous avoir fait cette société sans foi, terre à terre, incapable de ces milles manifestations intellectuelles ou sentimentales qu'on pourrait classer sous le nom de dévouement." G. Albert Aurier, "Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique", in *Textes critiques, 1889 - 1892, de l'Impressionnisme au Symbolisme*, (Paris, 1995), p.1.

(2) Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (New York, 1974), p.7.

(3) "écrire sa pensée, son poème, avec ces signes, en se rappelant que le signe, pour indispensable qu'il soit, n'est rien en lui-même et que l'Idée seule est tout, telle apparaît donc la tâche de l'artiste dont l'oeil a su discerner les hypostases des objets tangibles." (Aurier, 1891, op. cit. p.160.)



The first consequence of that, is a necessary simplification of the sign; a means of destroying its opacity in favor of the idea it signifies.⁽¹⁾ From this simplicity Aurier deduces his definition of an artwork that is, “idealist”, “symbolist”, “synthetic” and “subjective”, leading - through a kind of logical necessity - to an art that is “decorative”:

(...) because decorative painting, strictly speaking, as the Egyptians, and very probably the Greeks and the Primitives understood it, is nothing more than a manifestation of an art that is all at once, subjective, synthetic, symbolic and Idealist.⁽²⁾

This probable coincidence between a decorative art as deduced from neo-platonism and decorative art as deduced from the comprehension of the primitives becomes, further on in the text, an absolute necessity:

The easel painting is nothing but an illogical refinement invented to satisfy the imagination or the commercial spirit of decadent civilizations. In primitive societies, the first pictorial attempts could only have been⁽³⁾ decorative.⁽⁴⁾

Thus, the intuitive thinking of the primitive defines and creates a decorative art that is in accordance with Neoplatonic philosophy and is opposed to the complexity one finds in “easel painting” product of a “decadent civilizations”. It seems then that Aurier views the illusionistic naturalism of easel painting as a symptom of a superficial focus on the appearance of things in Western Civilization. In his view, this coincides with the contingency of positivism and the unstable civilization that it implies. On art in general and those he considers as Symbolists in particular, he writes:

Idealist art, which had to be justified through abstract and complex argumentations, so paradoxical does it seem to our decadent civilizations, which are forgetful of all initial revelation, is then, without a doubt, the true and absolute art, since finally it is identical to primitive art, to art as it was understood by the instinctive geniuses of the dawn of humanity.⁽⁵⁾

The justification of the theory is based on two complexes of ideas that reinforce each other; philosophy implying civilization and intuition implying savagery and primitivism. Aurier’s theory, resulting from “abstract and complex argumentations” i.e. from philosophical thinking, describes/justifies a given way of making art. That art is “primitive”. This primitivism, the result of “génie instinctif” i.e. intuitive thinking, produces the same results as the theory. In effect, we have two opposed modes of thinking that produce the same object - decorative art. Yet, and although producing the same object, they remain opposed methods of describing both in terms of methods and origins.

Civilization and its Symbolist Negation

The interchangeability of Aurier’s use of the adjectives “primitive”, “simple”, “primordial”, is part of a coherent self-justifying description of cultures perceived as non-historical and viewed as outside the contemporary circle of social upheavals of his own “decadent civilization”. The relation he attempts to argue between Symbolist painters and the art of so-called “primitive” cultures, is a rejection of visual illusionism and the positivism it implies. The way he views those “primitive” cultures as interchangeable and the homogeneity of their relation to Symbolists is shown in the following passage:

Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, the British Pre-Raphaelites had already understood in isolation, gloriously and victoriously but without a well defined doctrine (...) [and demanded] the right to dream, to fly above the materialist swamp and having the courage to proclaim the excellence of the true and good tradition: That of the primitives of all schools, the masters of all ages where art, still purely traditional, was not soiled by the sacrilegious desire for illusionism. They are properly speaking, the direct descendants of the great mythological image-makers of Assyria, Egypt and Greece of the royal era, the descendants of the Florentines of the XIVth century, the Germans of the XVth century, the

(1) Ibid. pp.160-161.

(2) “(...) car la peinture décorative proprement dite, telle que l’ont comprise les égyptiens, très probablement les Grecs et les Primitifs, n’est rien autre chose qu’une manifestation d’art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste.”
Ibid. p.163.

(3) Emphasis added.

(4) “Le tableau de chevalet n’est qu’un illogique raffinement inventé pour satisfaire la fantaisie ou l’esprit commercial des civilisations décadentes. Dans les sociétés primitives, les premiers essais picturaux n’ont pu être que décoratifs.” (Aurier, 1891, op. cit. p. 163.)

(5) “L’art idéiste, qu’il fallait justifier par d’abstraites et compliquées argumentations, tant il semble paradoxal à nos civilisations décadentes et oubliées de toute initiale révélation, est donc, sans nul conteste, l’art véritable et absolu, puisque au fond, identique à l’art primitif, à l’art tel qu’il fut deviné par les génies instinctifs des premiers temps de l’humanité.” (Loc. cit.)

Gothics of the middle-ages, and also a bit, the cousins of the Japanese.⁽¹⁾

The group from which the Symbolists are “the direct descendants” and the one to which they are “the cousins” is neither historical nor geographical, it is outside of both. Temporal distance (“Assyria”, “Egypt” etc.) is here equivalent to spatial distance (Japan and - and we can safely assume - Brittany are part of that ensemble); Aurier’s text relies on an undifferentiation between geographical space and historical time:

If, as Panofsky stated, in order to create a historical ensemble, one must use the mutual determination of historical time and geographical space,⁽²⁾ Aurier does the exact opposite. The wildly different historical styles of countries such as Egypt, Sumeria, Florence and Japan styles are amalgamated into a single class; “The primitives of all schools”. Historical time and geographic space are undifferentiated and no longer able to determine historicity. This negation of history is a criticism by Aurier of his own contemporaneity and the instability it has come to represent.

In this opposition between the historical and non-historical, Symbolist artists in general and Gauguin in particular play an essential role; he is a synthesis of all the oppositions we have seen in Aurier’s text; both “savage” and “civilized”, non-historical and historical, and, through his art, he exemplifies the intuitive understanding of the savage and the philosophical thinking of the civilized:

[Gauguin was] (...) one of the first to explicitly affirm the necessity of a simplification of expressive modes, the legitimacy to look for effects other than those of the servile imitation of the materialists, the right of the artist, to be preoccupied by the spiritual and the intangible. His well-known pictorial work is

already considerable. It is imbued with a profound and highly idealist philosophy expressed through elementary means that have particularly perturbed the public and the critics. It is, we can almost say, Plato plastically expressed by a savage of genius. For there is a bit of a savage in Gauguin (...) And it is, probably because of a vague consciousness of this that he decided to go far away from our ugly civilizations, to exile himself in these distant and prestigious islands still unpolluted by European factories, in the virgin nature of the splendid and barbarian Tahiti.⁽³⁾

From the formal simplification of Gauguin, and non-illusionistic techniques, Aurier passes to the immaterial and the spiritual - the idealist philosophy - found in the artist’s work: Gauguin’s savagery coincides with his ability to express Plato. Because of this savagery he decides to “exile himself” into a land - Tahiti - posited as primitive and non-historic i.e. a land outside of the historical ensemble of which he is a part. Exile being the expulsion or self-expulsion from home, it is safe to assume that besides being a savage, Aurier views Gauguin as a member of “our ugly civilizations”⁽⁴⁾ - a synthesis of the mutually exclusive classes of savagery and civilization.

Aurier’s description of the self-exile of Gauguin, presented as the result of a “vague” consciousness of his own savagery, is an exile from the increasingly unstable contemporary society towards its negation, “savage” and eternal Tahiti, posited as transcendence and excluded from the continuous changes of the historical sphere.

It goes without saying that this view of Tahiti is completely imaginary. But the meanings Aurier attaches to the Island represent his own preoccupations, which are the

(1) “Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, les Préraphaélites anglais avaient déjà isolément, avec gloire et victoire mais sans bien nette doctrine, (...) [revendiqué] le droit au rêve, à l’essor hors des marécages matérialistes et ayant le courage de proclamer l’excellence de la vraie et de la bonne tradition: celle des primitifs de toutes les écoles, des maîtres de toutes les époques où l’art encore purement traditionnel n’était point souillé par les sacrilèges desirs d’illusionnisme. Ils sont à proprement parler, les fils directs des grands imagiers mythologistes de l’Assyrie, de l’Egypte, de la Grèce de l’époque royale, les descendants des Florentins du XIVe siècle, des Allemands du XVe, des Gothiques du moyen âge, un peu aussi les cousins des Japonais.” (Aurier, 1892, op. cit. p.482.)

(2) Panofsky, loc. cit.

(3) “[Gauguin est] (...) un des premiers, à avoir explicitement affirmé la nécessité de la simplification des modes expressives, la légitimité de la recherche d’effets autres que les effets de la servile imitation des matérialistes, le droit pour l’artiste, de se préoccuper du spirituel et de l’intangible. Son oeuvre picturale bien connue, est déjà considérable. Elle est empreinte d’une philosophie profonde et hautement idéaliste exprimée par des moyens élémentaires qui ont particulièrement perturbés le public et la critique. C’est on pourrait presque dire, du Platon plastiquement interprété par un sauvage de génie. Il y a en effet du sauvage, dans Gauguin, du primitif, de l’indien qui, d’instinct, sculpte en l’ébène des rêves étranges et merveilleux, bien plus troublant que les banales rêveries des maîtres patentés de nos académies!...Et c’est sans doute par une vague conscience de cela qu’il s’est décidé à partir loin de nos laides civilisations, à s’exiler dans ces lointaines et prestigieuses îles encore impolluées par les usines européennes, dans cette vierge nature de la barbare et splendide Tahiti - d’où il rapportera, il faut l’affirmer, de nouvelles oeuvres superbes et bizarres, telles qu’en n’en peut plus en concevoir la cervelle anémiée et sénile d’un Arva contemporain.” (Aurier, 1892, loc. cit.)

(4) Loc. cit.



result of the increased social instability of XIXth century Paris. Thus, Aurier's imaginary Tahiti creates a neo-platonic and transcendently stable anchor. In the bewildering changes that occurred at the end of the XIXth century, such an anchor was a means of stabilizing the world and restoring its intelligibility.

By linking racially charged and stereotypical images of so-called "Savages" with philosophical and pictorial arguments, Aurier popularized the myth of Paul Gauguin and defined the pictorial Symbolist movement. The image of the

artist, as a savage who escapes the shackles of civilization in search of a tropical paradise was a purely mythical construct that operated as a means of criticizing Western Civilization. But, by using the imaginary image of an eternal and primitive Tahiti, Aurier contributed to the justification of France's annexation of the island in 1880 and the colonization of its "lesser" primitives. These racial politics and their consequences are the true context of Gauguin's images of paradise.

References

- Aquin, Stephan-Pierre. *Significations du concept d'Ut Pictura Poesis dans la théorie "Idéiste" de Gabriel-Albert Aurier*, (Master degree Diss.), Montréal, University of Montréal, 1988.
- Aurier, G. Albert (pseud. Luc le Flâneur). "Enquête de choses d'art", *Le Moderniste Illustré*, (13 April 1889) p.14.
- Aurier, G. Albert. "Le symbolisme en peinture - Paul Gauguin", *Mercure de France*, 2:15 (March 1891), p. 155-165.
- Aurier, G. Albert. "Concurrence", *Le Moderniste Illustré*, 1 (27 Juin 1889), p.2.
- Aurier, G. Albert. "Monticelli - Paul Gauguin", *Revue indépendante*, 18 (March 1891), p. 419-422.
- Aurier, G. Albert. "Paul Gauguin", *La Plume* 2, (1 Sept. 1891), p. 300.
- Aurier, G. Albert. "Les Symbolistes", *Revue Encyclopédique*, 2:32 (1892), p.474-86.
- Aurier, G. Albert. *Textes critiques, 1889-1892, de l'Impressionnisme au Symbolisme*, (Introduction by Remy de Gourmont), Paris, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1995.
- Foster Hall. "Primitive Scenes", *Critical Inquiry*, 1993, vol.20, No 1, p. 69-102.
- Goldwater, Robert, *Symbolism*, London, A. Lane, 1979.
- Knapp, James F. "Primitivism and Empire; John Synge and Paul Gauguin", *Comparative Literature*, 41:1 (Winter 1989): 53-63.1
- Lequin, Yves, et al. *Histoire des Français XIXe - XXe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1983.
- Mathews, Patricia Townley. *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UMI Research Press, c. 1985.
- Mc William, Neil. "Le paysan au Salon, critique d'art et construction d'une classe sous le Second Empire", in, Collective, *La critique d'art en France, 1850-1900*, Saint-étienne, Université de Saint-étienne, 1989.
- Orton F. and G. Pollock. "Les Données Bretonnantes; la Prairie de Representation", *Art History* (U.K), 3:3 (Sept. 1980), p. 314-44.
- Pollock Griselda. *Avant-Guard Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, New York, Thames and Hudson, 1992.
- Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Going Native", *Art in America*, 77 (July 1989), p.118-29.
- Weber, Eugene. *La fin des terroirs, la modernisation de la France rurale, 1870-1914*, translated by, Génies Bernard, Paris, Fayard, 1983.