# THE SOUL OF PAUL GAUGUIN

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Midway through my visit to the National Gallery's current Gauguin exhibition this morning, I was led to wonder whether that fellow Heartfeldt truly did in the end put Gauguin's soul to rest.

An oddball character, to be sure, as characters go. But an artist is an artist is an artist, as they say, and, with Heartfeldt himself being an artist, there were sins one could forgives him which would have others - non-artists - juicily rotisseried.

I was travelling to Los Angeles to cover the Oscars presentations for my newspaper The Era , when I was joined for the leg to Tahiti by this Raphael Heartfeldt as he was eventually to introduce himself, a swarthy sharp-eyed reed of a man wearing a dungaree jacket and astrakhan hat, who had fairly tripped over my feet on squeezing through to his allotted window-seat beside me. No sooner had he sat down than he set to rummaging about in his carry-bag beneath his seat, and no sooner had he found what he sought - a much dog-eared leather-bound book - than he flipped through its mottled pages to the desired place and then clasped it to his chest as if for dear life during take-off, closing his eyes and bating his breath, turning distinctly pale in concert with beads of sweat appearing on his brow and upper lip. When assured that the plane was safely in the air, he wiped his forehead with a sleeve, scratched at a patch of eczema above an ear, and repositioned the hat he wore squarely on his head. A top-of-the-class fidgeter, he could well have been an ill-favoured beneficiary of St.Vitus' dance.

I was myself by then engrossed in a book I had packed for the flight and, my neighbour's antics notwithstanding, was musing over a particular couplet that had caught my fancy, when I felt a nudge at my elbow. The book was Roland D'Silva's latest anthology, *Eden's Outcasts: Adam and His Discontents* , and the lines read:

Delusion sweeps more away
Than common sense can ever salvage.

The nudge that returned me to full immediacy came from my companion in travel.

"Poetry?" he said, with a tilting of his head towards my D'Silva.

His face, bossed at the temples, tapered sharply to the tip of his chin.

"Yes," I replied, ratifying the obvious and more diffusely addressing the void than my neighbour.

"How marvellous," he shot back. "Marvellous! That people should still be reading poetry, that there are still such who show spontaneous appreciation of the arts! " He rose, folded back a leg beneath a buttock, the better to turn side on, and leaned towards me his thin sharp-eyed angular face. "And you," he went on, "And you? Are you yourself a writer, maybe, a poet by any chance?"

I had been a poet, until poetry went the way of adolescence, the one going the way of the other on the advice of editors who counselled pursuit of other vocations.

"A poet, no. But a writer of sorts," I said. "A journalist."

At this, my neighbour became still more animated.

"A journalist!?" he exclaimed. "My, the people you must meet."

True, indeed. The people I must meet, the people I had met.

"It can be interesting," I said, conceding little, and returning to the D'Silva in my hands.

But, "'Vain hope!' quoth she." For my sins - and where so grievous, those I knew of and those I didn't? - my chance-drawn consort clearly had other designs. The flight before us loomed long and he was not about to let it pass unfilled. Had I only had the wits to say I manufactured screwdrivers!

"Interesting?" he said, describing an arc over the heads of the plane-load of passengers with a flamboyant arm. "That's all you can say when, with a word, you can make, with a whisper, you can break millionaires and presidents, union men and clergy, historians and philosophers, and actors, artists and composers. How we're all at your mercy! And how do reputations soar or crumble before your pens!"

I recalled the thousands of hours spent on hack for every hour that yielded worthwhile text. I was about to reply, "It's not quite like that", when, changing position to bend both legs beneath him on the seat, he said, "You who must come across so much, have you perhaps...have you ever come across the name Raphael..." - he swallowed thickly - "the name Raphael Heartfeldt?"

"Heartfeldt?" I said, rummaging through mental files where I might perchance have stored it. "Heartfeldt? Rings no bells."

"No? Heartfeldt the artist? Heartfeldt the York Street solicitor who tossed in the law to become a painter..."

I dared to trust that D'Silva would forgive me as, there and then, I shut him totally to reserve him for Los Angeles or a rainy day.

"Still no, I'm afraid," I said.

Nonetheless, he scanned my face for some contrary tell-tale sign. But, finding none, he held out one hand, prodded at his breast-bone with the other, and said, "Well, meet Raphael Heartfeldt. Raphael Heartfeldt, that is me!"

Scarcely surprised, I fell back on hoary formula.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"And more pleased to see you," he replied. "A journalist, eh? Do I have a story for you! And how gladly would I have you bring to your readers."

"Oh?" I said.

His eyes became agile sparrows flitting about my face. He might not so readily have revealed himself before his doctor.

"Well, for starters, how many folk do you know who give up middle-class orderliness for native landscapes, earth-tied simplicity, the passage of time without clocks?"

How many such folk did I know? In the 'sixties, when I was still a student, there had been any number of back-to-the-land movements. It was a time when droves of visionary youngsters and disgruntled former politicians - latter-day Western-style narodniki all - headed for communes, set up out-of-town nurseries, howed out vegetable gardens on postage-stamp allotments in wooded hills. Such, at least, had been the impression given in newspapers, in counter-cultural books, on community radio stations, on television, in imported film. But, this choreic hyped-up reed of a fellow, Heartfeldt, was right on this point. How many such folk did I personally know? Only Bruce Lowan, the family's paediatrician, who turned gentleman-farmer at fifty-five, Harry Crawcour, my one-time bank manager, who left the bank to sell books, each day at a different market, and my insurance-broker, Wally Brickell, regaining his personal integrity by turning to antiques.

Scarcely what Heartfeldt was talking about as, laying a palm on his astrakhan, which, clearly, it did not occur to him that he may remove, he went on, .

"You see, that is precisely what I am doing! Tossing it all in! The law, family, mediocrity, wall-to-wall bourgeois asphyxiation, leaving it all for Tahiti... yes, Tahiti, there...there..."

"There, to find the fame your mentor found, no doubt?" I interposed, quick and short.

For a second, two seconds, he started. His gaze flitted about my face, left, right and in a circle. It bemused me that he might think me clairvoyant. More mundane truth was that it had sufficed to catch the title of the book he had, on boarding, so doggedly rooted out from his carry-bag to have all the clues I needed. Gauguin's Noa Noa was now well wedged between his thighs as he sat skewed towards me in his seat.

"My, you are observant," he said.

"Habit of the trade," I replied, clipped and sharp.

"Yes, yes, I dare say," he said. "But about Tahiti...No! I mean...I mean yes! That is... Gauguin is, yes, Gauguin is, has always been my mentor. A man who risked a lot, who flew in the face of all convention, thumbed his nose at all opinion, and who acted - acted! - doing what he felt was right. But, fame? That is what you think I'm after? No! No! Not a bit! Just as it wasn't that fame that he was after, either!"

Where, moments before, with Tahiti at least a solid eight hours away, I had been contemplating how best to summons my prostate as alibi to serially free myself from this loose-tongued chatterer, I became sufficiently intrigued to offer a readier ear.

"Not fame?" I said. "Then what?"

"Beauty!" he exclaimed, the swiftness of his reply having clearly anticipated my question. "That's what he wanted! The cultivation of his art in the innermost heart of primeval innocence. Along with..."

He fixed me with a focus that might itself have been Gauguinesque.

"And harmony!" he went on. "And wholeness! And peace! And a lasting repose for his soul which, in Paris, had been trapped...trapped first in his work as a broker, then in selling tarpaulins, and by his domestic life, and by the academicians clap-trapping in their towers, and by the etiquettes and rituals and conceits of Parisian society, all of which - as if just one of these things had not been enough - all of which Gauguin, being Gauguin, had to escape, for his sanity's sake, for freedom's sake, for integrity's sake. For..."- Heartfeldt slapped the arm-rest between us - "For, once a professed artist lets himself remain trapped whilst recognising his entrapment, that man is no true artist. The true artist bows only to one," - he thrust a muzhik's forefinger into the air - "to his muse, which makes every day then spent lickspittling to others yet another day forfeited as a gratuity to death. "

As if charged to some higher galvanism, Heartfeldt changed position again. He pushed back his astrakhan, whereupon, from crown to chin his face took on a starker, swarthier, still more elongated look

"It took me some time to realise this and I must say that on first reading about him, I disapproved of what he did. For, myself happily married with children of my own, how, I wondered, could a man so desert his own family for an indulgence of his own? But, with time, I came to understand. I came to know precisely what he meant when he wrote of wanting to steep himself anew in nature and gain strength from the soil. Just think of Sydney. Think of it as Paris of the antipodes. Balmy weather, exquisite surrounds, a waterway the equal of any Seine, an opera house, theatres, galleries, museums, concert halls, peopled by composers, performers, literati, watercolourists, painters, sculptors, in a place that thinks of itself as jewel, flower, artistic beacon lighting the way to its heirs. But, just scrape a thumb-nail across it. And, for all its vaunted loveliness and cultivation, it is precisely what Gauguin saw in Paris: all surface veneer, gloss, illusion, when more truly it's all so raffish, heathen, incestuous, self-congratulatory, smug, just plain smug."

He paused. His gaze again sprouted wings in curlicuing about my face.

"I haven't offended, have I?" he said.

"I'm from Melbourne," I replied with something of a laugh, not only not offended, but distinctly chuffed as I recalled a visiting columnist on the Sydney Herald who had said, "Had Mahomet only known about us, he wouldn't even have looked twice at Mecca."

My laugh prompted from him a smile, the reaches of which met the furrows of somewhat sunken cheeks. But just as quickly, he returned to seriousness.

"But, back to Gauguin," he said, regathering the threads of what, less than mere narrative, were taking the form tapestried confessional, "I came to understand. As much as he must have loved his Mette and loved their children, just as I love my own Matilda, and Gabriella, Raphaelle and Chlotilde, loving and loyal as they are, as God is my witness, even far beyond my deserts, yet do I understand how they must have stifled, stifled him! Stifled him as I myself have felt so often stifled by Matilda with this-or-that bill for electricity, telephone and gas, or with reminders about the garbage needing to be taken out, or with talk about the children's textbooks, dresses, earaches and socials, and about curtains needing replacement, carpets in need of shampoo, the plaster flaking from the ceilings; and then the children, too, needing attention, needing money, their quarrels over use of the car, their tastes in music, television and film, and their leaning towards the raucous, the garish, the ephemeral and obscene... God, the philistinism of it all! The philistinism everywhere around! Under those circumstances..."

A thin spray of spittle sprinkled the space between us. Diplomatically, I backed away.

"Under those circumstances, how could a man like Gauguin create, truly create - with ecstasy, which was the way he wanted to create - creating that beauty, harmony, perfection and truth which would have him touch, as he so wanted, the hem of divinity?"

With a roused and fervent movement, Heartfeldt removed his astrakhan, flattened it on his lap, and scratched his neck. Without its covering, his head was a shaggy black terrain of much-ruffled curls.

"In the end, he had to choose. Charybdis or Scylla? Them or him? Boorish philistinism or art? Seizing the day or capitulation? Seeking divinity on the wings of the muse or bending to death's executioner? And he chose. He chose the way of his heart, then followed it with all his heart."

He paused to lick his lips. I grasped the opportunity to interpose a reflection of my own.

"And now," I felt constrained to say, pointing to the Noa Noa itself lying flat beneath his hat, "you too are you in a sense doing a Gauguin of your own?"

Heartfeldt sat up abruptly, a stark-eyed owl stung to erectness.

"Doing a Gauguin?" he repeated with a pained repeated shaking of his head. "Doing a Gauguin? No! And no again! He escaped! He fled the intolerable! And I understand him! But I?... No! I am not running away! I go because I must! I am going forward! Forward! Because I must! I must!"

"Because you must?" I repeated, facing him squarely but betraying nothing, the way I had faced many clerics, politicians, missionaries, eschatologists, psychics and would-be universal saviours in a series for my paper.

"You may think me crazy, like Matilda and the others," he said, "but listen..."

He paused, glanced through his window at the darkness falling without, and turned back. His runnel-cheeked swarthiness intensified, he sucked a lip, and momentarily closed his eyes. A tremor entered his voice.

"In recent weeks, something was happening to me which, for all my efforts, I didn't wholly comprehend. As much as I loved Matilda and the children, I felt I no longer belonged to

them, much less to my surrounds - to Sydney, its topography, its air, its art world, not even to the Law which, until then, had been our bread and butter. And then, just over a week ago..."

Heartfeldt peered about him warily. He might be a cabinet minister about to leak information.

"And then, a little over a week ago... I had just seen out a client who was suing his neighbour over six inches of adjoining land and was returning to my desk. But I didn't get to it immediately. At the very middle of my office, I stopped. I looked around. Listened. And listened. I heard nothing, yet the silence was no ordinary silence. It was the kind that, while one knows there is only one person there, yet there are two, the other unseen but indisputably present. I couldn't locate its whereabouts, but as I looked around, I saw myself as if with another's eyes, and what I saw was a legal hack, dutiful foil in others' ludicrous games of vanity and greed, of enmity and power, and upmanship and bluff, in which otherwise sane and ordinary people would spend thousands - tens of thousands! - to win settlements the worth of a deflated tyre, a corkscrew, a scrap of tinsel. And if you..." - he slapped his hat against a palm, twice, three times, four - "And if you or anyone had entered my office then, you might well have thought me either truly mad of possessed. For, on reaching my desk, with one swoop and then another and with a dozen more, I swept all my clients' files to the floor, and swept clean my shelves, and emptied out the cabinets, and upturned every drawer, scattering willy nilly without as much as caring where they fell all the letters, mementos, summonses and briefs, as, with every such sweep, another shackle fell, too, to be replaced by feathers, by pinions, by wings. And in the ecstasy that accompanied it all, I walked out of my office, bent over my unsuspecting secretary, said 'If anyone phones, Judith, tell them I've gone to Eden', and almost floated down the stairs into that legal acre called Litigation Belt below.

"It was a bright day, a brilliant day, and I was flying, flying, but flying as if something else, something mightier than myself, was bearing me aloft, propelling me home, and there, driven to pack my bags, my canvases, my palate, brushes and paints in readiness for flight of another kind."

Heartfeldt was slight and reedy, to be sure, but the thrust of his knee against my thigh as again he changed his position to face me still more directly had a formidable force behind it. Contracted tightly like a coil, he was at once alight and alive, yet, seeming to need so to unburden himself - to a stranger, what was more, even if a journalist - he was not, I sensed, fully master of himself.

And so, he pressed on; had to press on.

"Matilda, when she saw me come home in the middle of the day, took fright. Was I ill? Did I have a fever? Was I in trouble? What had got into me that I should so suddenly want to leave home, leave Sydney, of all places leave for Tahiti? And did I want a doctor? Should she call my psychiatrist-brother in England? Or have any of our friends called over to speak with me? Or perhaps I should take a holiday? Perhaps we could all as a family get away somewhere, even to Tahiti, if that was where I wanted to go? Hard as I tried to explain to her, and then to the girls when they returned from school, why I wanted to leave - the rational reasons that I've already given you for Gauguin wanting to leave Paris that, for me, so related to Sydney - they simply could not understand. Nor any of those friends who had come at poor Matilda's so-desperate summons, who, to my face, called me inconsiderate, selfish, negligent, irresponsible, bedevilled, crazy, mad, and, best of all, and how close they were - could they but have known how truly close they were! - Gauguin-touched."

Heartfeldt replaced his astrakhan on his head. He raised his face a touch, giving his brow a firm solidity and his nose a heightened angular decline, he narrowed his eyes to a focused feline scrutiny, pushed forward his chin in assertive determination, and smiled wryly - or was it with demonic jest? - showing two small rows of tightly-crowded teeth. I yielded to a fanciful notion whether I was seeing Anthony Quinn playing Gauguin, or Heartfeldt playing Quinn playing Gauguin.

Fanciful notion, however, quickly collapsed, gave way to something nearer mystification.

"Gauguin-touched indeed!" Heartfeldt huffed. "Ha!"

He quickly became outwardly himself again - darksome angularity, dithering, given to swift, abrupt and nervous movements, and impelled, as before, to speak, speak, speak.

"No," he went on. "I not doing a Gauguin. I am flying to Tahiti, to be sure. There, I will work, I will paint, I will myself aim for perfection, divinity and, through my work, for every possible tranquillity. But I am not running away I am not running away at all. I go because I must! I must! Where Gauguin had choice and exercised it, I have none. Not the smell of one. The mentor has become master. Buried in the Marquesas, his soul is an onos , it is a wandering spirit in unleavened exile. And that soul, it craves return to his beloved Tahiti; it hankers after the lush bougainvillea and hibiscus of his home; it wants again the shade of its copra and its palm, the openness of its sea and of its soil; and it wants - how it wants! - his people again, his soul's nearest

kin, adopted brothers, sisters all, in whose midst he found and celebrated in turn the primal beauty, innocence and serenity he so sacrificed everything, everything - everything! - for."

Heartfeldt paused and looked again through his window where, save for the plane's lights flashing on a wing, all without was truly darkness.

"And through you," I ventured, "if I understand you, Paul Gauguin is coming home."

Heartfeldt turned back, but looked not so much at me as at the book in his hands. So bent, he knitted his eyebrows, blinked, tapped a finger on its cover, nodded and, still more vigorously, rocked.

"Through me," he said, almost whispered, "Paul Gauguin is coming home."

Just then, in the aisles, the hostesses were wheeling trolleys and dispensing meals and drinks to the passengers. Side by side, we drank our juices, ate and followed the meals with coffee. Neither of us spoke except, in small talk, to comment on the food. After the meal, with our trays having been taken away, I took a stroll to the W.C., and when I returned, Heartfeldt, thin, wiry and coiled, had huddled up in every way foetal and was clearly asleep.

For some time, with the cabin having fallen silent, the most prominent noise being the steady soporific hum of the plane cleaving through the air and an occasional clink of drink glasses, I read my D'Silva; and when the cabin lights were extinguished, I, too, gave myself up to sleep.

I woke, as did Heartfeldt and all other passengers, to a flooding return of lights and an announcement from the flight captain that we begin descent to Papeete in fifteen minutes. He bade all passengers to straighten their seats, secure their belts, and extinguish cigarettes. In an elaborate sequence of movements that involved every part of his body, Heartfeldt did as bidden. His face tightened into a knot, he gritted his teeth, and gripped the armrests with his hands in taughtly-strung preparation for landing. The light outside was grey; midnight back home, it was four a.m. local time.

Between his hip and the arm-rest beside me was wedged his Noa Noa . I asked whether I might glance through it till our berthing. He relaxed for the briefest moment, nodded jerkily as he extricated it for me and resumed his coiled-spring pose.

Scanning through the book, I contemplated asking him how, as an alien, an Australian what was more, Heartfeldt hoped to fare on that French Polynesian island? How would he live when free-wheeling free-spending tourists forced up prices even for the locals? Had Tahiti in the end truly been his idol's wished-for Eden when he had more than once been prey to predatory melancholia, penury and dysentery, or been repository of a goodly dose of clap, or had well known what it was to sleep on a prison palliasse? And, lastly, how did Heartfeldt picture his so-revered paradigm, his model, ideal? As an Adonis, Apollo, god, striding with canvas and palette about a tropical paradisiac terrain, or, more truly as he must have been when lowered into the pit dug out of Marquesan soil, as the runted, syphilitic, pock-skinned cadaver that alcohol and promiscuity had brought him to?

But wherein lay the virtue of unravelling all this before Heartfeldt?

> "I have decided on Tahiti," I read, "and I hope to cultivate my art there in the wild and primitive state."

and:

> "Every day, at the first glimmer of sunrise, the light inside my room was radiant. The gold of Tehura's face flooded everything around it, and the two of us would go, in all naturalness and simplicity, as in the garden of Eden, to seek refreshment in a nearby brook."

Better to preserve that innocence, conserve that hope, leave him in his own mind to honour that mission of his than skittle them with questions the worst of betes noires among the betes . When Hell already had many doors of entry, what need had I to open even one of them?

Hence, I, too, sat back, shut my eyes and awaited the landing.

Finally, the front wheel carriage opened, the plane nosed downward in its descent and, with but the slightest jolting, touched down upon the Papeete tarmac. When I opened my eyes, Heartfeldt, I saw, was perspiring as profusely as he had done on take-off; he was also positively green. Meanwhile, we sped towards the terminal in a rush of sibilance, then cruised more smoothly to an expert halt.

Throughout this time, Heartfeldt had held silence, but as the plane reached its berth and the engines purred to silence of their own and the first passengers rose to disembark, he turned towards me. With pouted lips, with eyes more receded than ever, and the runnels down his cheeks furrowed deep and stark, as he placed a hand on his astrakhan hat, he said, "I know... I

know that you too, like all the others, may think me mad. But should you ever come to write about me, if, after our short time together, we may call each other friends, do be kind. And, if in your heart there is a place for prayer, then, when you pray, pray for me, remembering that, in what I do, I have no choice. Where, back home, I had thought myself trapped, I am today still more trapped. My body answers to Raphael Heartfeldt, but my soul belongs to another. Pray that, by bringing that other to its wished-for rest, mine may yet recover its rightful name."

From the Papeete airport transit lounge, balmy in its tropical plumeria adorning every corner and piquant with a breeze carrying with it the tang of sea, sunflower, citrus, mango and pawpaw, I watched Raphael Heartfeldt in his dungaree jacket and hat as he passed through the Arrivals gate towards Customs. In his passage, he skimmed, scanned and examined everything - ceiling, floor, mirrors, walls, pot-plants, flowers, native porters, clerks, signs in French, signs in English - that had now indeed become his everything; and then disappeared around a corner, walking lop-sided and halting, his carry-bag rapping at his ankle with every step.

What remained of him when he had passed through the gates, and that, only briefly, was an after-shadow of a kind. And then, nothing more, nothing, that is, except, on reflection, a story, an odd disquiet, and - "Hell!" I burst out - Heartfeldt's *Noa Noa* which I still carried, inadvertently held on to in tandem with my own travel-bag and jacket.

To return it, I found an obliging native official who hurried off to Customs. He returned with the book scarcely five minutes later. Handing it back to me, he said with an exemplary courtesy that did not in the least betray the futility of his roundabout, "Monsieur, your friend he says you may keep it. He has written a message for Monsieur."

I thanked him and pressed a dollar into his palm for his troubles. He accepted it with equally exemplary courtesy.

Opening to the fly-leaf of the book, I read:

"Let this be yours with my dearest compliments, so long as you will do as I asked of you."
Raphael Heartfeldt,
Papeete, Tahiti
Home.

Even without the book, I was ready to pray as he had asked - to pray for him and, where need arose, for every body and every soul in search of its private grail. It would have been leather-hearted of me not to. But, against this, there breathed also a Matilda, as once there had breathed a Mette, and, with matilda, also a Gabriella, a Raphaelle, and a Chlotilde. And it came to me that should I feel constrained to pray, then they, too, might no less needfully have sought some comforter's prayer.

Whereupon, I did utter a prayer, a soft, private and earnest prayer which, cast into the vast, far-extending blackness of a piquantly fragrant Tahitian night, wished them well, every last one of them, myself wondering the while how many Raphael Heartfeldts of his own might my poet D'Silva have encountered before penning his verse, "Delusion sweeps more away/ Than common sense can ever salvage"

Raphael Heartfeldt had alluded to the possibility that I might at some time, even if with a prayer, come to tell his story. Promises not made could not be broken. But this morning, on leaving the National Gallery, I deemed that time had come, even if I do not now - nor may ever - know if he did finally lay Gauguin's vagabond soul to rest and reclaim his own.

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From the collection *Voices from the Corner*.