

Van Gogh's Japan and Gauguin's Tahiti reconsidered

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If the mountain paradise represents one type of ideal place, the other can be categorized as the island paradise. Both in the East and in the West, it has been a common gardening practice to create an isle in the middle of a lake or a pond of a garden. In Japanese the word island (“shima”) was literally a metonymical substitute for the “garden”. A small and isolated “tops” surrounded by water is a miniaturized version, or a regressive form, of the desire for marvelous possessions, to use Stephen Greenblatt’s expression, which prompted people to venture into the ocean in search of hidden paradise. From the Greek Hesperides down to William Buttler Yeat’s *Innisfree* (or rather down to its parody as “Lake Isles” in the “Whispering Glades” by Evelyn Waugh in *The Loved One* [1948]), the imagery of islands is abundant in Western literature. As the roccoco “Embarquement pour Cythère” by Watteau or J.-J. Rousseau’s solitary meditations at the Ile St. Pierre, or the tropical beauty of *Paul et Virginie* (1787) depicted by Bernardin de St.Pierre, the island paradise constitutes in itself a vast topic which defies any easy attempt at global overview¹. With this huge background in mind, I restrict my topic in this paper to the case-study of Van Gogh’s Japan and Paul Gauguin’s Tahiti revisited. In the visions of these two painters, I shall try to analyse how the topography of utopia in the Pacific Ocean overlaps the pathography of the European civilization at the *fin du siècle*.

1

Van Gogh’s Japan represents the utopia of an ideal community of artists maintained by their mutual emulation and brotherhood, free from any mischievous conspiracy. As he wrote to Émile Bernard: “Since long I have thought it touching that the Japanese artists used to exchange works among themselves very often. It certainly proves that they liked and upheld each other, and that there reigned a certain harmony among them; and that they were really living in some sort of fraternal community, quite naturally, and not in intrigues”².

The supposed exchange of works which Van Gogh believes Japanese artists practiced remains a mystery among specialists. According to my personal hypothesis, Van Gogh must have seen some example of *surimono* prints put together and bound as an album. One such album is kept intact today at the Cabinet des estampes in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. This album, composed in three volumes by a Kyôka satirical poet Nagashima Masahide in token of his collaboration with other poets, contains rare *surimono* print illustrations by such famous artists like Santô Kyôden, Hokusai, Shunman, Kiyonaga and Utamaro. Van Gogh might have seen this while he was in Paris, because this album belonged to the former collection of Théodore Duret [fig. 1], who is supposed to have had his collection deposited with the Brothers Goupil, where Theo van Gogh was working as the director of their Montmartre branch³. One glimpse would have been enough for Van Gogh to be convinced of the practice of exchange by the Japanese, as many prints of different size from several artists were assembled together on the face of the folder composed of 8 panels each [fig. 2, 3]. Van Gogh expresses his desire to realize such an album: “Des albums de six ou dix ou douze [dessins à la plume], comme les albums de dessins originaux japonais./ J’ai grand envie de faire un tel pour Gauguin, et un pour Bernard”⁴ [fig. 4].

Inspired by this imagined habitual exchange of work between Japanese artists, Van Gogh fostered the idea of “Gemeinschafts-ideal” (to use N. Pevsner’s terminology)⁵, and dreamed



Fig. 1. James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black, Portrait of Théodore Duret*, 183–84, Oil on Canvas, 193.4×90.8 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 2. The *surimono* album composed by Nagashima Masahide, ca. 1797–1812. Former collection of Théodore Duret, donated to the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris in 1900. Tome I. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, cote: Od.171.



Fig. 3. Katsushika Hokusai, *Surimono of calender depicting a poster for a kabuki theater*, 19.6 × 13.7 cm, the unique piece to be known, found in the Duret album mentioned above, Fig. 2).

was looking at the first issues of *Le Japon artistique*, recently published by S. Bing: “J’ai la reproduction (publication Bing) *«Un seul brin d’herbe»* [fig. 5]. Quel exemple de conscience! Tu le verras un jour” (B. 18). The same anecdote is also reported to Theo, where Vincent develops his philosophy *à la japonaise*:

“If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck’s politics? No. He



Fig. 4. Vincent Van Gogh, *Album of drawings* conceived by Vincent Van Gogh. Sketch in letter 492, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

of realizing an artists’ community at the Yellow House [Maison jaune] in Arles with his colleagues like Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin. The following phrase in his letter to Bernard, mentioned above, must be understood at its face value: “The more we are like them in this respect, (i.e. in “living in a sort of fraternal community, quite naturally, and not in intrigue”), the better it will be for us”⁶. This was a counterproposal to Bernard’s idea of establishing a kind of “freemason” (sic.) type community of painters. “The more we discuss on the matter, the worse the result is”⁷.

2

When Van Gogh was writing this letter, idealizing the Japanese artist as one who made drawings like a “simple worker”, he

studies a single blade of grass (un seul brin d’herbe). But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then every season, the great views of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole. Come now,

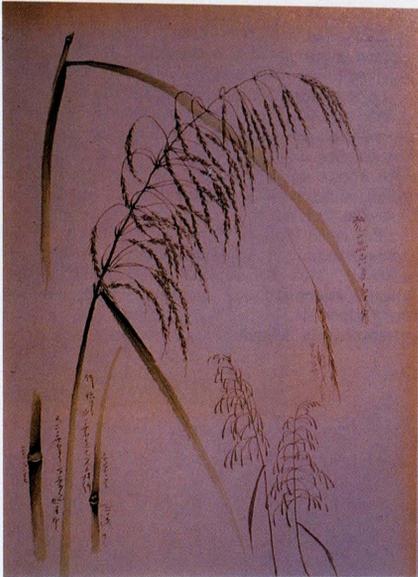


Fig. 5. anonym. *Sketch of “un brin d’herbe”*, which Figures in the first tome of Samuel Bing (ed.), *Le Japon artistique*, Tome I, Nr. 1, May 1888.



Fig. 6. Vincent Van Gogh, *Study of a Sprig of Periwinkle*, Black chark, pen and ink, washed on paper, 47.5 × 40 cm, [May/June 1890], Amsterdam, Vincent Van Gogh Fondation.

isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?"⁸ [fig. 6].

Dr. Tsukasa Kodera and I have already indicated the source of this passage⁹ and demonstrated that it was a re-interpretation of S. Bing's "programme" in the first issue of *Le Japon artistique* where Bing writes that according to a Japanese, "there is nothing in creation, not even the smallest blade of grass, which does not deserve a place in the elevated conceptions of art" ("il n'existe rien dans la création, fût-ce un infime brin d'herbe, qui ne soit digne de trouver la place dans les conceptions élevées de l'art"¹⁰.

The lesson Van Gogh got from this "Japanese" philosophy must also be read at face value, for he is literally saying that by studying Japanese art, people should become much gayer and happier. Here is a magical statement. By his act of drawing and painting like a Japanese, he believed he would become much happier¹¹. By his work he believed he would be able to carry this Japanese philosophy into effect; his handling of the brush and pigment literally realizing on the canvas his Japan as ideal paradise.

"if the weather were always as beautiful as it is, it would be better than the paradise of artists, it would be fully in Japan"¹². By this time Vincent was experiencing an almost euphorical and hallucinatory sense of identification with the surrounding nature of Arles: "From time to time I have a terrible lucidity, when the nature is so

beautiful these days and I no longer feel myself and the painting comes by itself to me like in a dream”¹³. And this was why Vincent, in the following passage, so earnestly insisted on his brother and colleagues coming to Arles, as if it were the only remedy for getting rid of the sickness of civilization¹⁴.

In Vincent's mind, the Arlesian community of artists was the exact transposition of the dreamed Japan as u-topia. Hence the repetitive declaration : “Here in Arles, I am in Japan”¹⁵ [fig. 7].

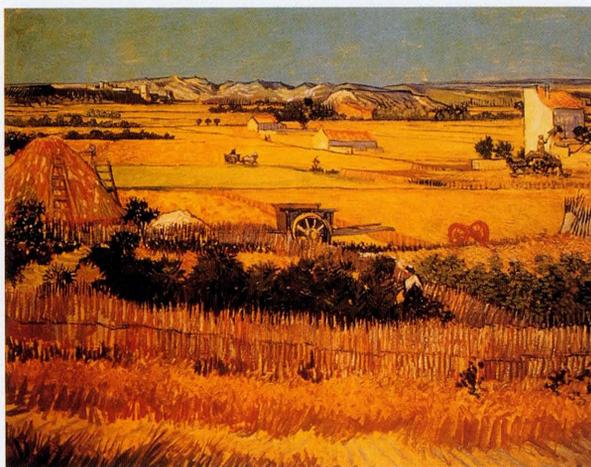


Fig. 7. Vincent Van Gogh, *La Crau, jardins de Maraichers*, Oil on Canvas, 72.5 × 92 cm, June 1888, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

3

This imaginary identification leads him to disguise himself into a Japanese buddhist monk in the famous *«Autoportrait en bonze»* [fig. 8], which was destined for exchange with Gauguin's self-portrait [fig. 9]. Here Vincent at first aimed at depicting “the character of the simple monk [“bonze”] admiring the eternal Buddha, and exaggerated his personality by rendering the eyes oblique in a Japanese fashion¹⁶, as if incarnating that image of the Japanese philosopher, contemplating a single blade of grass.

Further, even the model is contaminated by this Japanization: it is a well known fact that *«La Mousoumé»* [fig. 10] was named after the Japanese word for a young girl, which Vincent

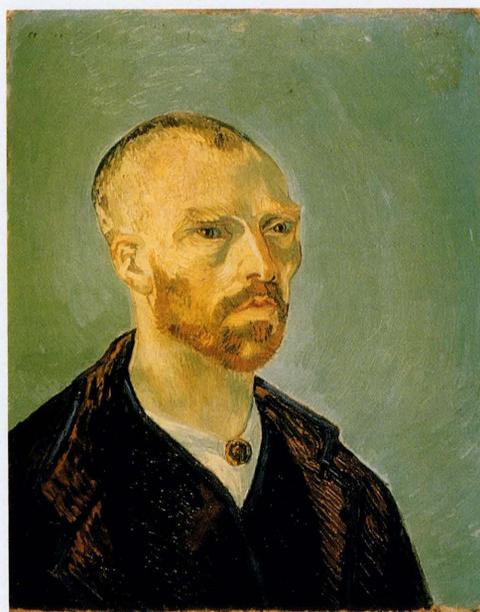


Fig. 8. Vincent van Gogh, *Autoportrait comme Bonze*, Oil on canvas, 62 × 52 cm, 1888, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Fogg Art Museum.

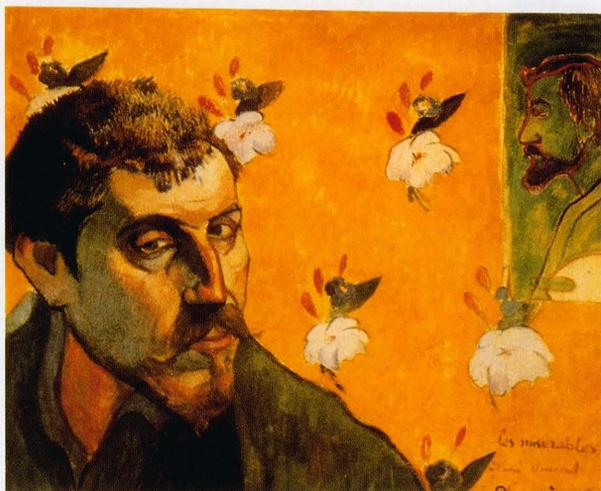


Fig. 9. Paul Gauguin, *Autoportrait dit "Les Misérables"*, Oil on Canvas, 45 × 56 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

tion was to be found on the wall of Vincent's room at the hospital in Saint Rémy.

But, as we all know, this spell of magical identification with Japan is ironically proved to be more illusory than real with Gauguin's arrival in Arles. Within only

found in Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). Vincent adds pseudo-etymological explanation by saying after Loti that the "moue" has the same connotation as the French "moue", meaning "pout" in English. By a curious coincidence, the June issue of *Le Japon artistique* contained a folded huge color reproduction of «Usugumo» [fig. 11] by Kaigetsudô, with the mouth of the girl pouting¹⁷.

It is said that this reproduction



Fig. 10. Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait de Mousoumé*, Oil on Canvas, 74 × 60 cm, July 1888, Washington, National Gallery.



Fig. 11. Kaigetsudô, *Usugumo*, color reproduction from *Le Japon artistique*, June 1888, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Maison du Japon, Cité internationale universitaire de Paris.

two months, the dream of ideal community in Arles was doomed to disaster, when Vincent cut off part of his left ear on December 22, shortly before the Christmas of 1888¹⁸.

4

The *«Portrait de Vincent au tournesol»* [fig. 12] executed by Gauguin in Arles represents the crisis of illusory identification between reality and painting. The crisis of illusionism is directly connected with the mental crisis. Vincent in the painting is painting a canvas, the surface of which is hidden to the beholder, as the canvas is positioned vertically to the pictorial plane. Curiously enough the brush he is handling is not only touching on the invisible canvas but also pointing at the image of a sunflower at the same time. Is Vincent painting a canvas or a “real” flower in the painting? Suspended between this double register, the position of the brush is impossible to locate and this indeterminability is crystalized as such in this two-dimensional picture plane. No one can say for sure what is really depicted on Vincent’s painting in this portrait by Gauguin. It seals off an enigma from our access¹⁹.

Due to this ambiguous double position of Vincent’s brush, the relation between reality and painting can be reversed. The sunflower can no longer be interpreted as a usual still life. Instead this flower is being created by Vincent’s hand in the painting, as if the secret of the invisible canvas were transmitted to the “real” flower created by painting. This work therefore can no longer be a simple copy of the real three-dimensional world. It conceals a secret which can only be maintained by and in its two-dimensionality. From this initial secret on, the act of depiction represented in this painting can enact a magical power over the outer world. It is no longer *we*, who stay out of the painting, that creates the “reality” of the painting, but it is the painter’s hand depicted in the painting which generates the whole creation.

Vincent wrote to Theo on this painting: “it is me, but who got mad”. The

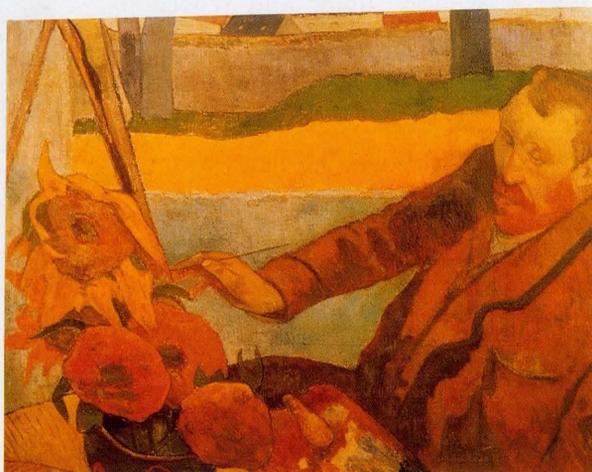


Fig. 12. Paul Gauguin, *Portrait de Vincent aux tournesols*, Oil on canvas, 73 × 91 cm, 1888, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.

sunflower which remains alive, although the painting was executed at the end of November also explains that it was not a copy of outer reality but was an artistic “creation” in the strongest sense of the word. Moreover, this sunflower has, undoubtedly, the same kind of eye as that of Odilon Redon’s *«Il y eut peut-être une vision première essayée dans la fleur»* [fig. 13] which gazes at us, the beholder. Without the eye which sees, there is no visual world possible. As Gauguin’s spiritual mentor, Redon put it, painting is a privileged place which makes the invisible world visible²⁰.

According to this magical thinking, the canvas is nothing but the theater of trans-substantiation where the miracle of making the invisible thing visible was performed by the painter. The ideal place, by definition u-topia, was found nowhere else but on this pictorial plane by and in which Vincent (and also Paul Gauguin) were literally “possessed”, in a demonological sense of this expression. To put it in an ordinary context of aesthetic explanation, the end of *mimesis* has thus prepared to bestow upon the painting the power of directly influencing the beholder’s mental state (“état d’âme”). Let us recall here that Georges Seurat’s psychological scientism and theoretical approaches were nothing but another version of the same desperate effort to capture this magic power of painting²¹.

5

Gauguin shared Vincent’s idea of making a portable album of images and visual sources for study. We read in the *Diverses Choses*, notes and reflections written during his first stay in Oceania, the following observation on his portable museum: “Croquis japonais, estampes d’Hokousai, lithographies de Daumier, [cruelles observations de] Forain, école de Giotto, groupés en ce recueil [en un album], non par hasard, de par ma [bonne] volonté, tout à fait intentionnée (not by accident but by my own will quite intentionally). J’y joins une photographie d’une peinture de Giotto]. Parce que d’apparences différentes je veux en démontrer les liens de parenté [for, from the apparent differences, I want to



Fig. 13. Odilon Redon, *Il y eut peut-être une vision première essayée dans la fleur*, dans *Les Origines*, lithography, 22.3 × 17.2 cm, 1883, Paris, Collection Dina Vierny.

demonstrate the affinities which tie them together]"²².

This passage reveals the secret of Gauguin's *ars combinatoria*, practiced during his stay in Oceania. He freely and intentionally extracted various iconographical sources out of their original context so as to combine them for his own purposes in his artistic creation.

Art historians have made great contributions in identifying many of these hidden visual sources ranging from an Egyptian frieze of oxen [fig. 14-a], which was to be found transposed in the snow-covered Brittany village landscape [fig. 14] left at his *Maison de jouir* in Atuona at the artist's death in 1903 and bought by Victor Ségalen at the Parisian auction the same year; or the Parthenon frieze of horses [fig. 15-a], which will reappear in Tahitian sceneries [fig. 15] and up to the images of buddhist statues of Borobudur which Gauguin had discovered at the Exposition universelle in 1889. It would be superfluous to mention his transposition of Hokusai's wrestlers [fig. 16-a] into the biblical image of *Jacob wrestling with the Angel Gabriel* [fig. 16], and which Camille Pissarro severely criticized as the imitation of "Japanese, Byzantin painters and others"²³.

But as for the logic of this *ars combinatoria*, no substantial remarks have been given by art historians, as far as I know. I propose to call it a "creolization in visual combinations", by extrapolating the idea of syntactical transformation and lexical de-contextualization which are observed by linguists in the process of hybridization and syncretism of languages²⁴.

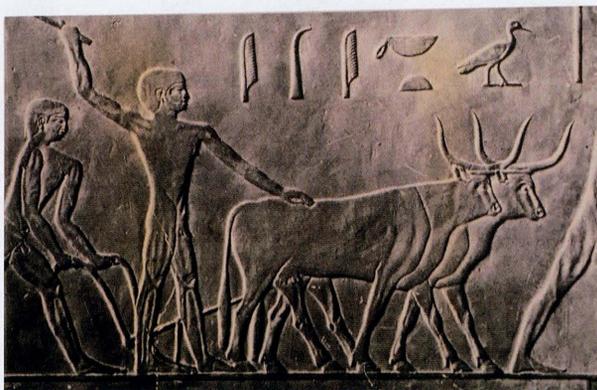


Fig. 14-a. Tombeau de Ti in Sakkarah, from, *Labourage*, *Bas-relief égyptien*, Ph. Giraudon.

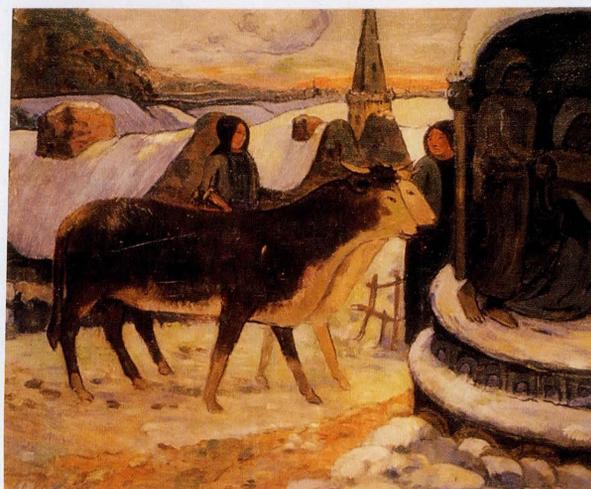


Fig. 14. Paul Gauguin, *Nuit de Noël*, Oil on canvas, 72 × 83 cm, 1894-, Lausanne, Private Collection.



Fig. 15-a. “Détail du cortège des Panathénées”, *Les Frieses du Parthénon*, by Charles Yriarte, Planches photographiques par Arosa. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale.

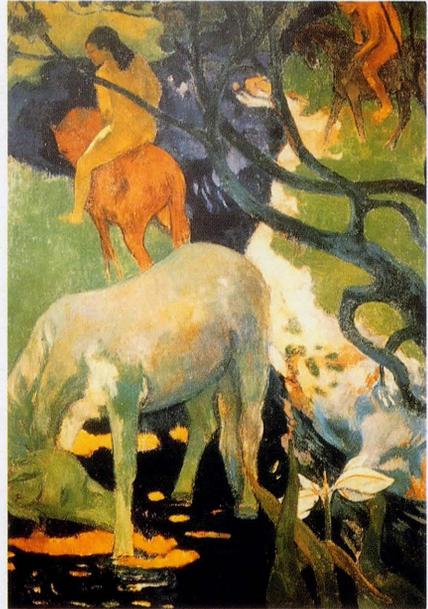


Fig. 15. Paul Gauguin, *Le Cheval blanc*, Oil on canvas, 141 × 91 cm, 1898, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Among many relevant works, let us analyse here, as a typical example, *Te arii vahine* [fig. 17]. Françoise Cachin, among others, has already pointed out two major iconographical sources: *Diana* [fig. 17-a] by Lucas Cranach elder and of course Manet's *Olympia* [fig. 17-b]. The tree at the center with a serpent which coils up its trunk indicates without ambiguity the tree of knowledge and temptation. The subject matter can only be “L'Eve tahitienne”, as Gauguin himself suggests. Although the explanation given by Gauguin does not encourage such an interpretation, the black dog with his red lewd eyes and the ripe mangoas exhibiting their red fruity pulp inevitably connote the loss of virginity (*Perte du pucelage*

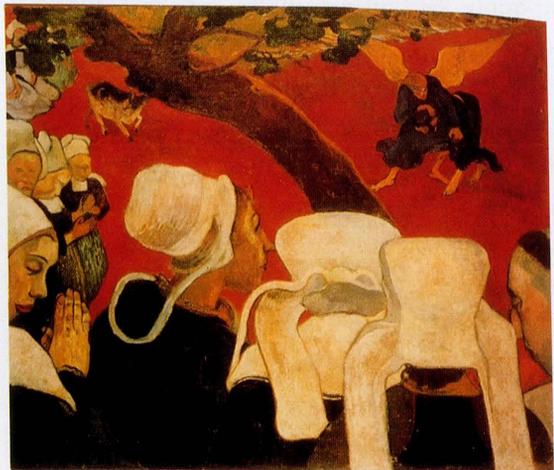


Fig. 16. Paul Gauguin, *La Vision après le sermon ou, la Lutte de Jacob avec l'ange*, Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm, 1888, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland.



Fig. 16-a. Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Manga*, Book III, fol. 6/7, before 1819.

[fig. 17-c] to use the title of one of Gauguin's paintings)²⁵. Still, the message Gauguin would have hoped to transmit remains equivocal, and all the more equivocal as the posture of the model also suggests the image of Nirvana drawn from one of the photographs of the Borobudur stupa in Gauguin's possession [fig. 17-d]. How can the fall of human beings be reconciled, in this tropical setting of Tahitian society, with the Buddhist idea of nirvana? Should nirvana not represent the opposite and "the other side of the shore" of such an infamous human degeneration which characterized the "European Civilization" Gauguin had rejected while being himself rejected from it?

6

To answer this question, it would be appropriate to quote from the interview published in *Echo de Paris* (13 mai 1895). "The Eva of my choice is almost an animal, and that's why she is chaste. All the Venuses exhibited in the Parisian Salon [fig. 18] are indecent and odiously sensual [lubriques]"²⁶. Here is a radical upside-down operation of moral judgement, inevitably tinted with the mythological figure of the immaculate nature of "bon sauvage" Gauguin aspired to be identified with.

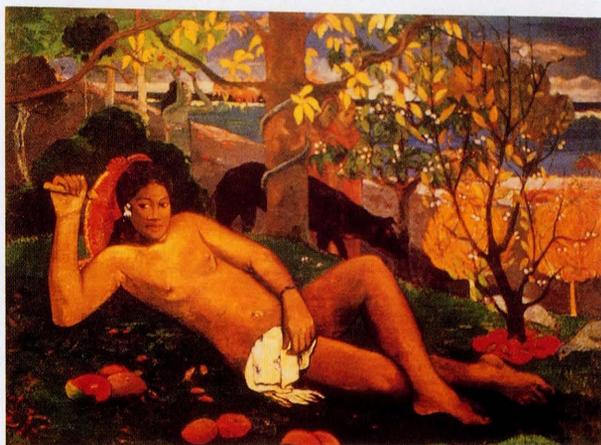


Fig. 17. Paul Gauguin, *Te arii vahine*, Oil on canvas, 97 × 130 cm, 1896, Leningrad, Ermitage Museum.

This confession seems to have been based on a shocking initiation Gauguin had the chance to experience on the occasion of the *Aréois* ritual throne succession after the death of Pomaré V, on June 1892, shortly after Gauguin's arrival in Tahiti. In his ethnological note "Ancien Culte Maori", Gauguin depicts with vivacity the last moment of the ritual of abjection where the newly

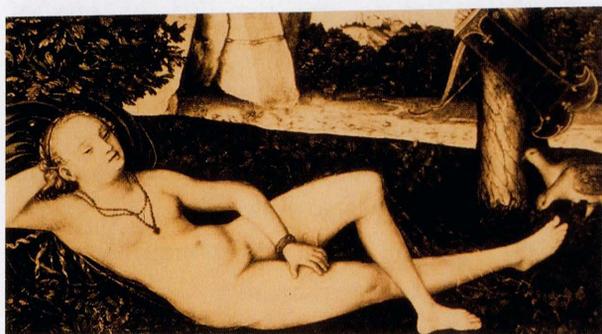


Fig. 17-a. Lucas Cranach, *Le Repos de Diana*, ca. 1537, Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

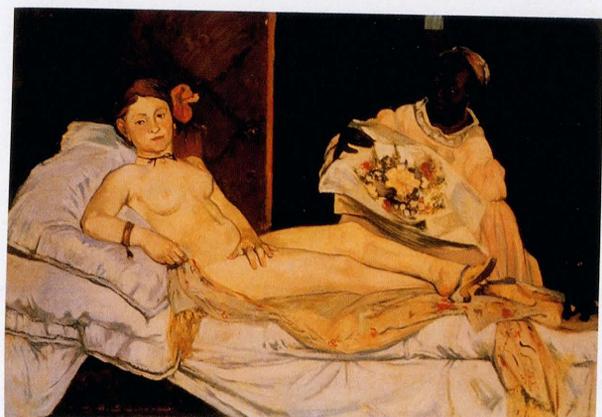


Fig. 17-b. Paul Gauguin's copy of Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, Oil on canvas, 83×130 cm, Feb. 1891, Private Collection.



Fig. 17-c. Paul Gauguin, *La Perte du pucelage*, Oil on canvas, 90×130 cm, 1891, Norfolk, Chrysler Art Museum.

throned king is covered with urine and feces²⁷.

According to Alain Babadzan, this ritual sacrilege is interpreted as the process of symbolic death and resurrection of the newly nominated king. The enthusiastic sexual orgy played in extasy, which accompanies the ritual as a manifestation of human intercourse with divinity, was probably what astonished Gauguin at first and led him later to the revelation of the “savage” notion of chastity. The apparent obscenity was revealed to be free from any European sense of lubricity. This ethical conversion permitted Gauguin to conceive the Tahitian Eva as immaculate even after having committed “original sin”. Let us quote from the original French:

“Elle est bien subtile, très savante dans sa naïveté, l’Eve tahitienne. L’enigme réfugiée au fond de leurs yeux d’enfants me reste incommunicable. (...) C’est l’Eve après le péché, pouvant encore marcher nue sans impudeur, conservant toute sa beauté animale comme au premier jour. (...) Comme

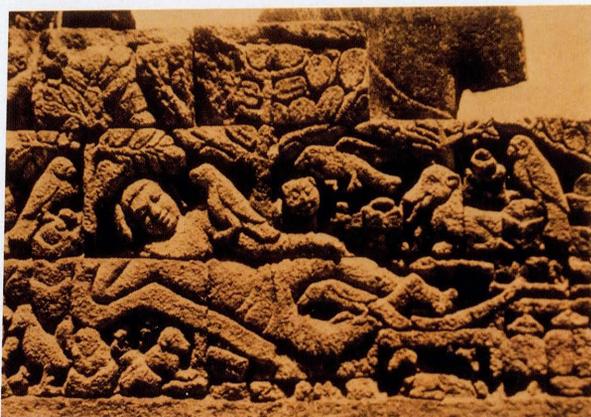


Fig.17-d. Photograph of The scenes from The Awadenas and The Jatakas, Javas, Temple of Borobudur, from *Beshrijving van Barbuden*, II series (B), Ill. VI. Here from the Exhibition catalogue *Gauguin*, Paris, R.M.N., 1989, p. 388.

the Western and institutionalized Christian morality, while already suggesting the basic idea of Gauguin's most famous masterpiece *D'où venons-nous, qui sommes-nous, où allons-nous?* In his note "Question de droit? Les enfants sont-ils respon-



Fig. 18. William Bouguereau, *Naissance de Venus*, Oil on canvas, 300 × 218 cm, 1879, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

l'Eve, le corps est resté animal, mais la tête a progressé avec l'évolution, la pensée a développé la subtilité, l'amour a imprimé le sourire ironique sur ses lèvres, et, naïvement, elle cherche dans sa mémoire le pourquoi des temps passés, des temps d'aujourd'hui. Enigmatiquement, elle vous regarde.— C'est de l'intangible, a-t-on dit./Soit, j'accepte"²⁸.

This passage leads to the fundamental criticism of

the fundamental criticism of the Western and institutionalized Christian morality, while already suggesting the basic idea of Gauguin's most famous masterpiece *D'où venons-nous, qui sommes-nous, où allons-nous?* In his note "Question de droit? Les enfants sont-ils responsables des fautes de leurs parents?", written during his second stay in Tahiti, Gauguin violently denounced the catholic and protestant authorities. According to Gauguin, the legal marriage imposed by the church as a moral duty is the source of all kind of hypocrisy, which has engendered such hideous things as trade of human flesh ("négoce de la chair") and mental prostitution ("prostitution de l'âme")²⁹. This seems to be the virus born from the civilization, for, he maintains, such a question is not asked by the savage people in Oceania or in Africa. Moreover, as soon as the Christianity is propagated among them, the vice which had never been known before appears at the same time as the grape leaves below the navel. Gauguin concludes that such a morality had been preached neither in Buddhist

sutras nor in the Gospels³⁰.

Gauguin tried to justify his seeming a-morality by radically re-interpreting the Biblical texts: “Grow and multiply” (“Crissez et multipliez”) is regarded as a carnal promise (“parole charnelle”); for Gauguin, “multiply” is the imperative for coupling (“accouplement”) without questioning its legality and which is applicable not only to human beings but also to all animals and plants. And the fact that “no woman could stone the adulterous Mary Magdalene indicates that “human being cannot exist without sin and that sin is a necessary condition for humanity”³¹.

7

Gauguin’s illustrations for *Ancient culte Maori* or *Noa Noa* [fig. 19] eloquently expresses this “savage” ethics. The nude (figure below, borrowed from the Peruvian Mummy Gauguin copied at the Musée d’ethnologie [fig. 23-a]), represents Death which is also the soil for the Tree of Life of the upper part, with its anthropomorphism modeled after the Hina divinity. The scene of sexual intercourse on the top of the flower petals represents procreation and regeneration. The mystery of the life cycle is pure from any notion of vice imposed by the civilization: “L’inconnu du vice chez des sauvages”. Moreover Gauguin was fascinated by the Tahitian notion of

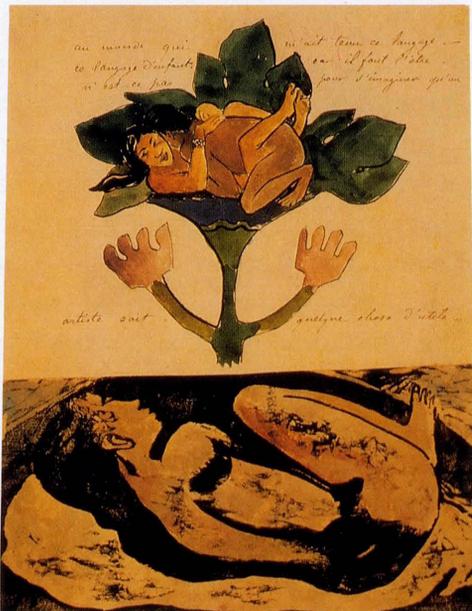


Fig. 19. Paul Gauguin, *Album Noa Noa*, fol.75. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des dessins.



Fig. 20. Paul Gauguin, *Oviri*, gritstone, partly enamelled, 75 × 19 × 27 cm, 1894, Paris, Musée d’Orsay.

“sauvage” and hoped to identify himself with the divinity called Oviri [fig. 20], which meant “savage” in Tahitian. Gauguin explains this “enigmatic divinity” as “the monster which, grasping its creatures, fecundates them with its semen from its generous flanks so as to engender Séraphitus-Séraphita”³².

As is already well-known, Séraphitus-Séraphita was an androgynous angel created by Balzac under the influence of Swedenborg. A note in his manuscript clearly indicates Gauguin’s interest in, and seduction to, androgynous features of the “sauvage” people (“le côté androgyne du sauvage, le peu de différence de sexe chez les animaux”) suggesting also his own desire to become female for a moment (“Désir d’être un instant faible, femme”)³³.

It is in this mystical novel by Balzac that we find the famous phrase: “Do you understand the destination of humanity by means of this visual thought ? from where it comes and where it goes”³⁴. The word “visual thought” (“pensée visible”) is suggestive, as Gauguin himself left at his notebook the following remark which is supposed to have been written for the canvas in question: “Mon Dieu, que c’est difficile la peinture quand on veut exprimer sa pensée avec des moyens picturaux et non littéraires”³⁵ [fig. 21].

Is it then really adequate to try to decipher this huge panel by way of literary approach, as if to suppose that the whole composition conceals a meaning to be analyzed as allegorical symbolism ? Instead of this conventional approach, I here want to propose to follow the process of *ars combinatoria* as Gauguin proceeded it. Faithful to Gauguin’s title, let us try to reconstitute the genealogy of iconographical elements which constitutes Gauguin’s creation: we shall ask: where did the images come from, what the images are, then where the images are to go.

8

For this purpose, let’s have a look at The *Portrait de Meyer de Haan* [fig. 22]. On the table rendered by the diagonal lines subdividing the composition lie two books:

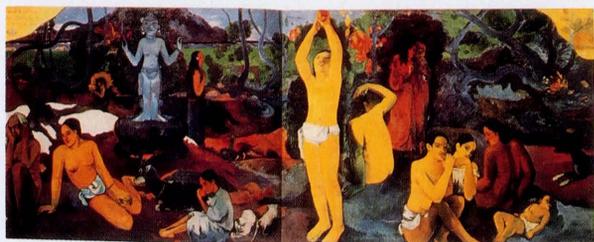


Fig. 21. Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous? Qui sommes-nous? où allons-nous?* Oil on canvas, 139 × 374.5 cm, 1897, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

one is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; the other is Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, where a recurring question was asked: “Who am I ? what is me? A Voice, A Motion, an Appearance—some embodied, visualized Idea in the Eternal mind ? (...) Sure enough I am; and lately was not: but

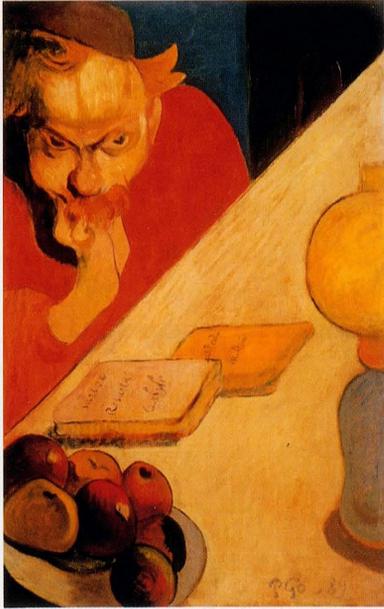


Fig. 22. Paul Gauguin, *Portrait de Meyer de Haan* “*Sartor Resartus*, *Carlyle*, *Le Paradis perdu*, *Milton*”, Oil on board, 79.6 × 51.7 cm, 1889, Private Collection.

whence ? How? Whereto?” which had been translated into French by Hypolitte Taine as “*Mais d’où venons-nous ? O Dieu, où allons-nous ?*”³⁶

It was therefore on this portrait of Meyer de Haan that the haunting question of “Where do we come from, who are we, Where are we going to” encountered for the first time the idea of the loss of paradise. And by a cruel coincidence, Gauguin in Tahiti was actually experiencing the loss of the last paradise on earth, as is clearly observed in the letters of Gauguin’s last days, struggling with the catholic church and local French colonial authorities. Gauguin was convinced of the extinction of a race in the near future. “*Aussi nous assistons à ce triste spectacle qui est l’extinction de la race en grande partie poitrinaire, les reins infécondes et les ovaires détruits par le mercure*”³⁷.

This observation proved to be a tragically faithful description of the disastrous situation the Marquesas Islands were suffering, its inhabitants being contaminated by all kinds of unknown diseases like syphilis, leprosy and especially tuberculosis imported by the commercial whale-catching white fishermen and sailors (which reminds us Herman Merville’s *Typee: A Peep of Polynesian Life* [1846] or *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventure in the South Seas* [1847]). The population which counted about 80 thousand at the beginning of the 19th Century had come down to only 3.500 when Gauguin arrived there at the end of the century. The paradise was literally on the edge of extinction³⁸.

These circumstances permit us to understand that Gauguin’s works, however idealized and therefore faithless to the reality of the islands, as some post-colonial criticism goes, were nonetheless the ultimate images which could be created at the very last moment of the islands history, when the discovery of paradise was only the reverse of its definitive and irremediable loss. It was on this irreversible point of human history that Gauguin’s vision took its shape. The end of the European exploration of the planet coincided with the loss of the last unknown world. With this second paradise lost, as it was called by a visionary Japanese non-academic scholar Aramata Hiroshi, we are convinced that to “know” paradise amounts to its loss, and that paradise is the name of a place which cannot be known without the price of its

disappearance; In the final analysis, the possession of the marvellous is no longer a marvellous possession³⁹.

9

Quite paradoxically Meyer de Haan, whose portrait had predicted Gauguin's destiny to assist at the loss of the Paradise of Tahiti, reappeared in a panel named *Nirvana* [fig. 23] (1890). The background rendering Death, modeled by the same Peruvian mummy [fig. 23-a], was to be re-utilized at the left side of *D'où venons-nous, où sommes-nous...*

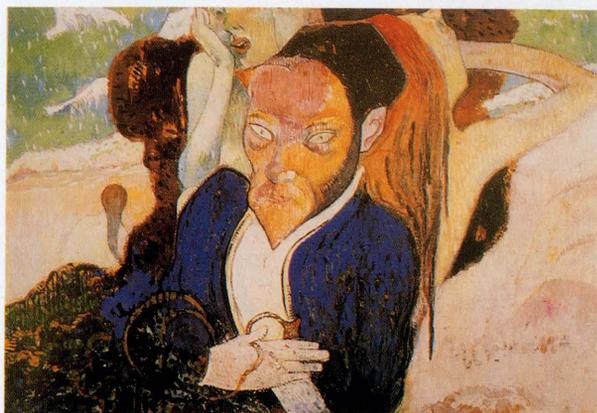


Fig. 23. Paul Gauguin, *Portrait de Jacob de Haan ou Nirvana*, oil on canvas, 20×29 cm, 1889, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum.

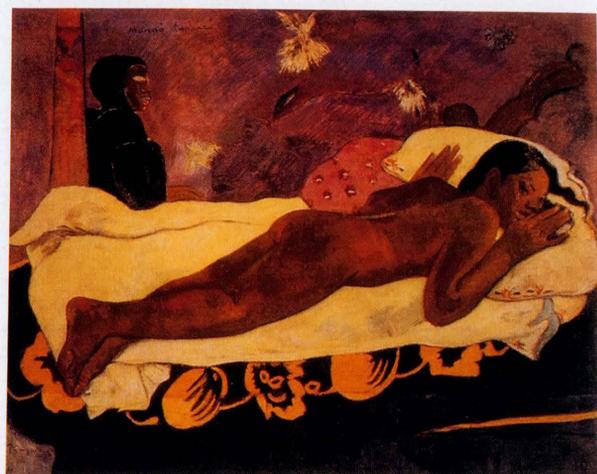


Fig. 24. Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau [L'esprit des morts veille]*, oil on canvas, 73×92 cm, 1892, Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

[fig. 21]. De Haan, who was to die in 1895, also seems to haunt the *Manao Tupapau (Esprit des morts veille)* [fig. 24] as the personified Death, rather than as a dead soul, who was going to deprive Gauguin of his newborn son. Quite blasphemously for the narrow-minded faithful, the scene clearly imitates the



Fig. 23-a. Peruvian Mummy, Paris, Musée de l'homme.

Nativity [fig. 25] or the birth of the Jesus-Christ. As a Messenger of the Dead world, De Haan thus repeatedly appeared so as to induce Gauguin to meditation on Life and Death.

The second genealogical line to be traced back here is a series of pastoral landscapes represented by *Pastoral tahitienne* and *Arearea* [fig. 26], which provide miniaturized archetypal images of an island paradise with a tree of life at its center. Around the tiny isle is a vast panorama of ocean irradiating brocade-like primary colors with vivid contrasts of decorative effect like an “old tapestry”. It is irresistible

to quote from a famous passage from *Diverses Choses*: “là tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, luxe, calme et volupté”...

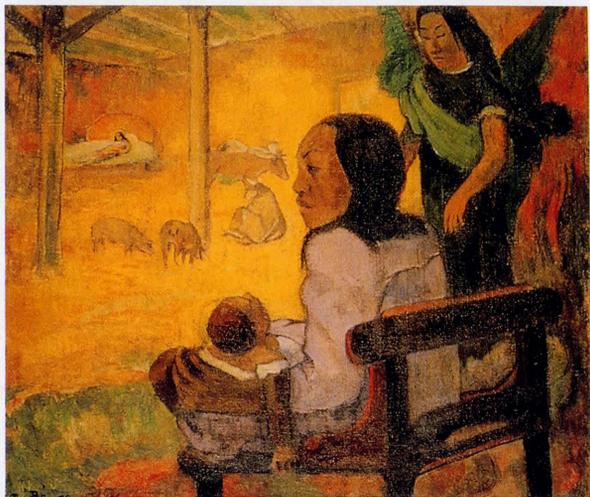


Fig. 25. Paul Gauguin, *Nativité tahitienne*, Oil on canvas, 66 × 76 cm 1896, Leningrad, Ermitage Museum.

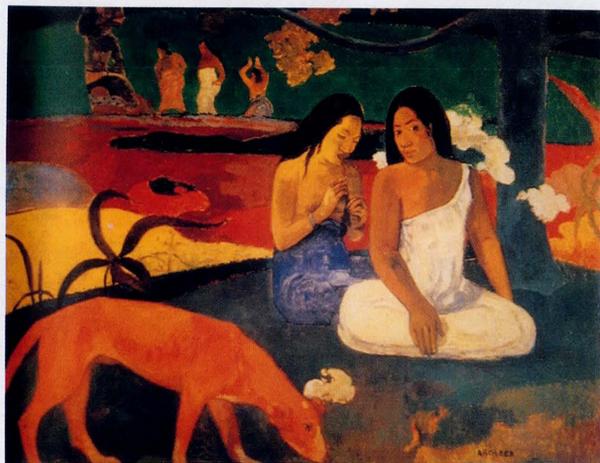


Fig. 26. Paul Gauguin, *Arearea*, Oil on canvas, 75 × 94 cm, 1892, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

“Toute perspective d'éloignement serait un non-sens; voulant *suggérer* une nature luxuriante et désordonnée, un soleil du tropique qui embrase tout autour de lui, il me fallait bien donner à mes personnages un cadre en accord. / C'est bien la vie en plein air, mais cependant *intime*, dans les fourrés, les ruisseaux ombrés, ces femmes chuchotant dans un immense palais décoré par la nature elle-même, avec toutes les richesses que Tahiti renferme. De là, toutes ces couleurs fabuleuses, cet air embrasé, mais tamisé, silencieux”⁴⁰

According to Gauguin's aesthetics, these paintings can be typical examples of the “Truthfulness of the

falsehood" ("vérité du mensonge"). Fully to express the "grandeur and profundity of the mystery of Tahiti" by a canvas as small as one meter square, an unusual density and intensity are required in order to acquire an effect as strong as that of nature itself. To obtain the "equivalent" of Nature, condensing it within a small pictorial plane, the use of primary colors with exaggerated and unnatural crudeness is justified⁴¹. Painting here is clearly conceived of as the "équivalent" of the real world.



Fig. 27. Paul Gauguin *Comtes barbares*, oil on canvas, 131.5 × 90.5 cm, 1902, Essen, Folkwang Museum.

The dog at the foot of the tree in *Pastoral tahitienne*, to be transposed into the right side of *D'où venons-nous* must be Gauguin's double, in guise of his own signature. Inspiring faithfulness, he looks like waiting for his master, who finally arrives in *Arearea* making the pose of Buddhist meditation at the foot of the Tree of Life. This posture, applied from a photograph of Borobudur statues faithfully follows the traditional iconography of the personage under the sacred tree as an invitation to the phase of nirvana [fig. 27-a].

These two genealogic lines, one, the figures of Meyer de Haan, the other, the posture of Buddhist meditation, are finally combined in *Comtes barbares* [fig. 27], supposed to be one of the last paintings by Gauguin. Once again, there is no clear key to

decipher the message and the scene remains enigmatic. Meyer de Haan's feet are transformed into hooked-shaped claws or talons. The female figure at the right of the man in meditation, is identified as Tohotaua, whose husband is recorded as a magician doctor⁴².

And yet this information alone cannot help us read the message of the pain-



Fig. 27-a. Borobudur (Java), details of the bas-reliefs, photos by Van Kinsbergen, 1910, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Archives.

ting. Still, the provenance of these three figures reveals us the plain fact that the messenger of *Paradise Lost* and the enigma of Life of *Sartor Resartus* are juxtaposed with a Tahitian girl around a meditation on the Nirvana. And this spatial co-existence is itself a testimony of a mysterious configuration which would not have been possible were it not for Gauguin's quest for paradise.

These heterogeneous elements are summoned there together for the moment, evoking some "affinity" ("lien de parenté") as Gauguin put it, to be separated from each other at the next moment, to configure another affinity. The migration and "creolization" of these iconographical elements in Gauguin's Work can be seen as a metaphor for Life, which is nothing but the enigma of an eternal succession of configuration and disfiguration, assemblage and dis-assemblage, insemination and dissemination. *D'où venons-nous, qui sommes-nous, où allons-nous* [fig. 21] is no longer a mere title of one of a Gauguin's paintings; in its perpetual "oeuvrement" and "désoeuvrement", by its process of "creolized syncretism", Gauguin's Work as a whole constitutes the allegory of this question of Life which has no petrified answer.

10

Gauguin replied to Emile Bernard when the latter told him of the death of Vincent in 1890. "To die at that moment is a great happiness for him, it's exactly the end of suffering and if he comes back in another life, he shall carry the fruit of his good behavior in this world--according to the Law of Buddha"⁴³.



Fig. 28. Odilon Redon, *Portrait de Paul Gauguin*, Oil on canvas, 66×54.5 cm, 1903–5, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

13 years later, when the news of Gauguin's death was transmitted to France, Odilon Redon compared Gauguin's ceramic work to such "an initial region where each flower would be an archetype of one species" and remarked that Gauguin's strong virtuality and originality would be recognized in the repercussion among other artists around him⁴⁴ [fig. 28].

The mechanism of successive insemination and dissemination, configuration and disfiguration we observed in and within the personal creation of Gauguin is,

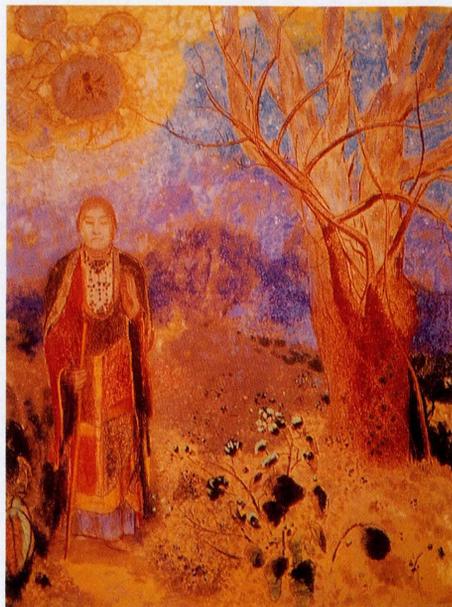


Fig. 29. Odilon Redon, *Bouddha*, Pastel on carton, 90×73 cm, ca. 1905, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

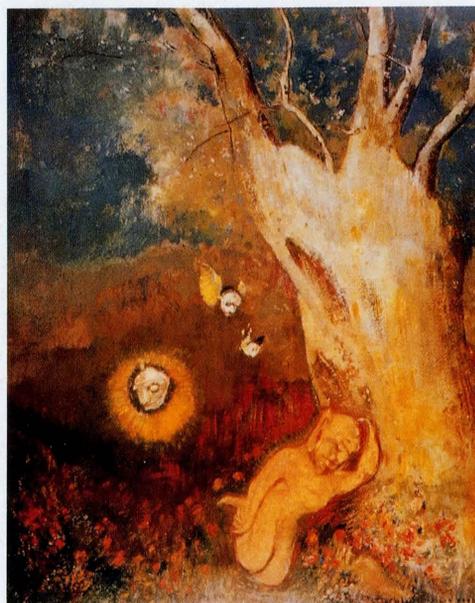


Fig. 30. Odilon Redon, *Le Sommeil de Caliban*, Oil on canvas, 48.3×38.5 cm, 1895–1900, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

according to Redon, applicable to a wider range of history and the spiritual migration goes on beyond the limit of an individual creator. Redon was also an artist who hoped, one year after the death of Gauguin, to be reincarnated in India⁴⁵.

A huge tree is recognized as Redon's source of visual imagination. Swallowing up all the hidden souls from the invisible world of subterranean water currents, the tree lets us see what would have otherwise remained invisible. Beside the tree, Redon is known to have posed Caliban and Buddha as twins⁴⁶. Is it too far-fetched to see in each of them the reincarnation of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin: Vincent as a Japanese Buddhist monk [fig. 29] and Gauguin as a savage Caliban in an island paradise [fig. 30]? Even though this hypothesis is too hazardous, at least we can conclude without hesitation that the dream of Metempsychosis and longing for nirvana were hidden motifs (or rather motives) generating the visual imagination of these three artists who searched for the realization of an ideal-place on and by their pictorial planes conceived as a theater of magical trans-substantiation⁴⁷.

Notes

Unless otherwise mentioned, Letters by Vincent Van Gogh are from *Correspondance générale*, 3 tomes, Paris: Gallimard, 1960/1990, and Writings and letters by Paul Gauguin are from *Oviri, écrits d'un sauvage*, éd by Marcel Guérin, Paris: Gallimard,

1970, which are translated by me into English in the present paper. It is a well known fact that both of these French editions contain some (partially serious) editorial problems which remain to be revised. Although the manuscripts have not been accessible to us, I could rectify several details thanks to the advices of specialists who have direct access to the manuscripts.

1. cf. Toshihiko Kawasaki, *Niwa no Ingurando [The England of the Garden]*, ch. 7 “Umi no nakano niwa [Garden in the sea]”, 1983, University of Nagoya Press, pp. 207–246; Toshihiko Kawasaki, “Tooi shima harukana omoi [Isles far away, Longing insatiable]”, in *Nagoyadaigaku Kenkyûronshû*, Faculty of Letters, University of Nagoya, LXX, 1977, pp. 231–254.
2. “J’ai depuis longtemps été touché que les artistes japonais ont pratiqué très souvent l’échange entre eux. Cela prouve bien qu’il s’aimaient et se tenaient et qu’il régnait une certaine harmonie entre eux; qu’ils vivaient justement dans une sorte de vie fraternelle, naturellement, et non pas dans les intrigues” (B. 17, Sep. 1888).
3. cf. Shigemi Inaga “Van Gogh no mita surimono [Surimono prints as Van Gogh could have seen them]?”, *Honno mado*, Dec. 1993, pp. 16–19. Professor John Clark suggested that Van Gogh could have consulted *Illustrated London News* where Charles Wirgman reported the sessions of Kangwakai (1884–88), organized by E. Fenollosa, Okakura Tenshin and other artists like Kanô Hôgai or Hashimoto Gahô, where the participants made expert appraisal of old masterpieces and critical appreciation of newly conceived pieces. Van Gogh’s *Letters* do not make sure of Van Gogh access to this information. And Kangwakai did not necessarily imply exchanges of works among participants.
4. lettre à Théo, 492.
5. N. Pevsner “Gemeinschaftsideale unter den bildenden Künstlern des 19 Jahrhunderts”, *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 9 (1931), pp 125–154.
6. “Plus nous leur ressemblerons sous ce respects-là mieux l’on s’en trouvera” (B. 17).
7. “L’idée de faire une sorte de Franc-Maçonnerie des peintres ne me plaît pas énormément. Je méprise profondément les règles, les institutions etc., enfin je cherche autre chose que les dogmes, qui, bien loin de régler les choses, ne font que causer des disputes sans fin (...) Ce sera plus beau si cela se cristallise naturellement, plus on en cause moins cela se fait” (B. 18).
8. “Si l’on étudie l’art japonais, alors on voit un homme incontestablement sage et philosophe et intelligent, qui passe son temps à quoi ? A étudier la distance de la terre à la lune ? Non. A étudier la politique de Bismarck? Non. Il étudie un seul brin d’herbe [He studies a single blade of grass]. /Mais ce brin d’herbe le porte à dessiner toutes les plantes, ensuite les saisons, les grands aspects des paysages, enfin les animaux, puis la figure humaine. Il passe ainsi sa vie et la vie est trop courte à faire le tout”./ Voyons, cela n’est-ce-pas presque une vraie religion ce que nous enseignent ces Japonais si simples et qui vivent dans la nature comme si eux-mêmes étaient des fleurs ?” (542).
9. Tsukasa Kôdera, *Vicent van Gogh, Christianity versus Nature*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philaderphia, 1990, p. 57; Shigemi Inaga, “Vincent van Gogh et le Japon—au centenaire de la mort du peintre”, *Jinbun Ronso*, The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, National University of Mie, Nr. 8 1991, p. 79.
10. By the way, is it a mere coincidence that Peter Altenberg was making the same remark in Wiener Fin de siècle context ? : “Die Japaner malen einen Blütenzweig und es ist der ganze Frühling. Bei uns malen sie den ganzen Flühring und es ist kaum ein Blütenzweig. Weise Ökonomie ist Alles!” The words by Altenberg being cited by Hermann Bahr, in his “Japanische Ausstellung”, *Sezession 1900*, ss. 216–224; reproduced in Klaus Berger,

Japonismus, München, Prestel Verlag, 1980, ss. 224–226.

11. “Et on ne saurait étudier l’art japonais, il me semble, sans devenir beaucoup plus gai et plus heureux, et il nous faut revenir à la nature malgré notre éducation et notre travail dans un monde de convention” (542).
12. “le temps ici reste beau, et si c’était toujours comme cela, ce serait mieux que le paradis des peintres, ce serait du Japon en plein” (543, Sep. 1888).
13. “J’ai une lucidité terrible par moments, lorsque la nature est si belle de ces jours-ci et alors je ne me sens plus et le tableau me vient comme dans un rêve” (543).
14. “Mon Dieu il faudrait que ce fût possible que tu vécut dans le Midi aussi, car je pense toujours qu’il nous faut à nous autres et du soleil et du beau temps et de l’air bleu comme remède le plus solide (...) Que je pense à toi et à Gauguin et à Bernard à tout moment et partout. Tellement c’est beau et tellement je voudrais y voir tout le monde” (543).
15. “Ici, je suis au Japon” (W.7).
16. “le caractère d’un bonze simple adorateur du Bouddha éternel (...) seulement j’ai obliqué un peu les yeux à la japonaise” (545).
17. Shigemi Inaga, “Kyôdôtai no mokuyaku aruiha hôhôtekitaikô [Tacit Connivance of the Community or a methodological Regression: van Gogh et/ou le Japon]”, *Eureka*, Dec. 1990, pp. 156–173, esp. p. 166.
18. A blind spot still remains unnoticed in the hypothesis mounted by specialists on the famous incident of Van Gogh’s cutting off the ear is further investigated in our Japanese version of the same quarry, to be published in *Tôgenkyô to U-topia* (tentative title), ed. by Tôru Haga, PHP kenkyûsho.
19. Philippe Junod, “(Auto) Portrait de l’artiste en Christ”, *L’Autoportrait à l’âge de la photographie*, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, 1985, pp. 3–23.
20. “Toute mon originalité consiste donc à faire vivre humainement des êtres invraisemblables selon les lois du vraisemblable, en mettant autant que possible, la logique du visible au service de l’invisible”. Odilon Redon, *A Soi-même*, Paris: Librairie José-Corti, 1979, p. 28.
21. André Chastel, “Une Source oubliée de Seurat”, *Archives de l’art français*, XXII 1950–57, pp. 400–407; *Fables, Formes, Figures*, tome 2, Paris: Flammarion, 1978, pp. 385–392.
22. *Oviri*, p. 162. The texts between [...] are the published version in *Avant et après*.
23. “Je ne reproche pas à Gauguin d’avoir fait un fond vermillon, ni deux geurriers luttant et les paysans bretonnes au premier plan, je lui reproche d’avoir chipé cela aux Japonais et aux peintres byzantins et autres.” Lettre de Camille Pissarro, 20 avril 1891, *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, éd. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, Paris: Valhermeil, tome 3, 1988, p. 66; John Rewald’s edition: *Lettres [de Camille Pissarro] à son fils Lucian*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1950, p. 234.
24. On this problematic of “créolisation” as a metaphor of cultural transformation, see, among others, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature, 1635–1975*, Paris: Hatier, 1991. Imafuku Ryûta, *Kureôrushugi [Créolisme, or The Heterology of Culutre]*, Tokyo: Seidosha, 1991.
25. En dernier lieu, Françoise Cachin, *Gauguin “Ce malgré moi de sauvage”*, Paris: Gallimard, 1989, pp. 108–109.
26. “L’Eve de mon choix est presque un animal; voilà pourquoi elle est chaste, quoique nue. Toutes les Vénus exposés au Salon [en France] sont indécentes, odieusement lubriques...” (*Oviri*, p. 140).
27. “Le chef ou roi, placé sur des nattes, près de l’image du dieu, y recevait ce qu’ils nommaient le dernier hommage du peuple. C’étaient des danses et des représentations de la plus choquante saleté, de l’obscénité la plus grossière, où plusieurs hommes et femmes

entièrement nus entouraient le roi et s'efforçaient de le toucher des différentes parties de leur corps, au point qu'il avait peine à se préserver de leur urine et de leurs excréments dont ils cherchaient à le couvrir. Cela durait jusqu'à ce que les prêtres recommençassent à sonner de leurs trompettes et à battre de leurs tambours, ce qui était le signal de la retraite et de la fin de la fête" (*Oviri*, pp. 86-87).

Cf. Alain Babadzan, *Les dépouilles des dieux, Essai sur la religion à l'époque de la découverte*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1993, gives some relevant insight into this ritual.

28. *Oviri*, p. 170.
29. *Oviri*, pp. 182-190.
30. "Oeuvre de chair ne feras qu'en mariage seulement. Qui ne connaît aujourd'hui le manuel du parfait confesseur, d'un sadisme si effrayant [as the moral of imposing legal marriage]? En consultant les textes, soit de Bouddha, soit de l'Évangile, on peut se convaincre qu'il n'en est jamais question, comme ne faisant pas partie de la sagesse, ne contribuant ni au bonheur, ni au perfectionnement de l'homme. Source de toute hypocrisie, de bien des maux physiques, cette Morale [called legal marriage] engendre le grand négoce de la chair, la prostitution de l'âme; et il semble même que ce soit un virus né de la civilisation, car chez les races sauvages d'Océanie, les peuplades noires de l'Afrique, il n'en est pas question. De plus, aussitôt l'apparition de la chrétienté parmi eux, le vice qui leur était inconnu apparaît chez eux en même temps que la feuille de vigne au-dessous du nombril" (*Oviri*, pp. 186-87).
31. "Croissez et multipliez" semble même dire en tant que parole charnelle (...) multipliez, c'est-à-dire accouplez-vous [et il n'indique aucune forme légale d'accouplement], loi qui s'applique aussi bien à l'homme qu'aux animaux et aux plantes (...) Que celui qui se trouve sans péché lui jette première la pierre", il [Jusus] semble indiquer que personne n'est sans péché, qu'il faut admettre comme une nécessité de l'humanité" (*Oviri*, p. 187).
32. "le monstre, étraignant sa créature, féconde de sa semence des flancs généreux pour engendrer Séraphitus-Séraphita" (*Sourire*, août, 1899), first indicated by Merete Bodersen in her *Gauguin's Ceramics*, London, 1964, pp. 146-152.
33. *Oviri*, p. 113.
34. "Comprends-tu par cette pensée visible la destinée de l'humanité? d'où elles vient, où elle va ?" Passage indicated in H. R. Rookmaaker, *Gauguin and 19th Century Art theory*, Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1972, p. 232; p. 351.
35. *Oviri*, p. 166.
36. Rookmaaker. *op. cit.* (note 34), p. 233.
37. *Oviri*, p. 326.
38. Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin à Tahiti et aux îles marquises*, Papeete, Les éditions du pacifique, 1975, pp. 244-248.
39. Hiroshi Aramata, *Hoa Hoa*, Tokyo, Shinchôsha, 1995, p. 28.
40. *Oviri*, p. 169.
41. *Oviri*, p. 177.
42. See *Gauguin*, catalogue de l'exposition, Paris: Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, 1989, Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, p. 474.
43. "Mourir dans ce moment c'est un grand bonheur pour lui, c'est la fin justement des souffrances, et s'il revient dans une autre vie, il portera le fruit de sa belle conduite en ce monde (selon la loi de Bouddha)" (s.d. à Poldu, août 1890, *Oviri*, p. 64).
44. "Je les compare [les oeuvres céramiques de Gauguin] à des fleurs d'une région première où chaque fleur serait le type d'une espèce, laissant à des artistes prochaines le soin de pourvoir par affiliation à des variétés. Le sculpteur sur bois fut un raffiné, sauvage, grandiose ou délicat, et surtout libre de toute école. Peintre, il fut le chercheur très conscient

- de ses virtualités; il trouva cette forte originalité dont on peut suivre la répercussion chez d'autres. Tout ce qu'il a touché a sa griffe apparente, ce fut un maître". (Odilon Redon, "Quelques opinions sur Paul Gauguin", *Mercure de France*, nov., 1903, pp. 428–430).
45. "Le néant n'est point dans les fleurs, ni les bêtes. Moi, J'attends une immense miséricorde pour nous, si petits dans l'univers. Devenons-nous lui demander la raison de notre être?—Mais je voudrais revivre dans l'Inde, tout de même" (Odilon Redon, lettre à Gabriel Frizeau, Nov., 1904; cf. *Odilon Redon*, catalogue d'exposition, Paris: Éditions des Musées nationaux, 1956/7, p. 91).
46. Cf. Shigemi Inaga, "Le Sommeil de Caliban", *Jinbun Ronso*, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mie University, Nr. 10, 1993, pp. 37–44 gives a new interpretation of the painting.
47. Cf. Werner Hofmann, "Réflexions sur l'Iconisation", *Revue de l'art*, Nr.71, 1986, pp. 38–42.

* My thanks to Professor John Clark and Professor John Dykes who kindly checked the draft and gave many useful advices.