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Volcano equals head equals kiln equals phallus

Connecting Gauguin's metaphors of the creative act

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> L'Imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d'abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies.
> —*Charles Baudelaire,* Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe *(1857)*[1]

Lava versus ruby

From 1885 onward, Gauguin started to quote and share precepts on painting attributed to Mani (216–277) and allegedly excerpted from a *Book of Crafts* by the Ottoman poet, scholar, and bureaucrat Wehbī Sunbul-Zāde (prob. 1718/19–1809, Vehbi Sünbülzade in modern Turkish). In some instances, he conflated the two writers into a hypothetical "Mani-Vehbi-Zunbul-Zadi," and he variously defined their cultural identity as Persian, Turkish, Hindu, and Arabic.[2] Gauguin specialists now agree that this text, which was often carried by the artist in his pocket and accordingly called *le papier de Gauguin* by others, had been written by himself.[3] The Oriental attribution, typical of his taste for mystification, lent an aura of exoticism and antiquity to statements intended for the competitive milieu of young Parisian "independent" artists. The choice of Mani, the founder of Manicheism as well as a reputed painter, was also fitting for Gauguin's early attempts at defining and spreading his own artistic creed. Moreover, one of the precepts at least was based upon a dualistic opposition, such as is generally associated with Manicheism: "Do not finish your work too much. An impression is not sufficiently durable for its first freshness to survive a belated search for infinite detail; in this way you let the lava grow cool and turn boiling blood into stone. Though it were a ruby, fling it far from you."[4]

Praising the *non finito* and criticizing an excess of details in painting was hardly original, especially in the wake of impressionism, from which the argument of the fleeting "fresh" impression derives. Equally predictable were Gauguin's written applications of this criterion to Gustave Moreau in 1889, Rembrandt in 1890, and Delacroix in 1894.[5] According to the passages concerned, the transmutation of lava into stone, which Delacroix knew how to shun, sprang from Moreau's infatuation with "the richness of material goods" and from Rembrandt's momentary desire of proving his knowledge to the crowd, with the result that an inferior work—*The Night Watch*—came to be regarded as a masterpiece. In a letter of March 1898 to Daniel de Monfreid, Gauguin explained that he avoided a similar fate for his own magnum opus, the mural-like painting *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1897, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), by leaving alone the errors he had come to detect in it:

> The more I see it the more I discover *enormous mathematical* mistakes that I do not want to touch up under any circumstance—it will stay as it is, as a sketch if you wish. But there is this question puzzling me: where does the making of a picture begin, where does it end? At the moment when extreme feelings are melting in the depth of one's being, at the moment when they explode and thought is bursting out like lava from a volcano, isn't that the birth of the work, brutal if one wishes but great and of superhuman

1. C. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 2, ed. C. Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 329.

2. The most complete account and discussion of this complex matter to date is in F. Daftari, "The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1988; New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 46–63.

3. The suspicion was not new and Charles Morice had already introduced the text as written by the artist "in the amusingly legendary style that he enjoyed using," in his monograph *Paul Gauguin* (Paris: Floury, 1920 [1919]), pp. 230–234.

4. *Gauguin's Intimate Journals* [*Avant et après*], trans. V. W. Brooks (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997 [1921]), p. 28; P. Gauguin, *Avant et après* (Taravao, Tahiti, 1989): "Ne finissez point trop, une impression n'est point assez durable pour que la recherche de l'infini détail faite après coup ne nuise au premier jet: ainsi vous en refroidissez la lave et d'un sang bouillonnant vous en faites une pierre. Fût-elle un rubis rejetez-la loin de vous." This is the version that Gauguin had already written down in *Diverses choses* (1896–1897). The version sent by Félix Fénéon to the Belgian journal *L'Art Moderne* (1887) differs in details which do not modify the argument (see Daftari [see note 2], p. 51).

5. See the references in Daftari (see note 2), p. 48, and (for the passage about Rembrandt) Gauguin's undated letter [end of 1890] to J. F. Willumsen, J. F. Willumsens Museum, Frederikssund, Gamle Samling no. 585.

> appearance? The cold calculations of reason did not preside over such a birth, but who knows when the work was started in the depth of one's being, unconsciously perhaps?[6]

In Gauguin's metaphorical descriptions, artistic creation is defined as a psychological, physiological, and geological process unfolding from the bottom up and from the interior to the exterior. Of particular interest here is the fact that such a conception corresponds to the literal sense of the French verb *exprimer* (to express), that is, extracting from a body the liquid it contains. Gauguin resorted to a diametrical opposition between wet and dry as well as between hot and cold, movement and immobility: Impressions, feelings, and thought are hot and flowing like lava, whereas reason is cold, and the search for perfection or abundant details turns what has been expressed into a precious but static and lifeless object. Preserving its inchoate quality—flinging the ruby—means on the contrary keeping the product true to the process, an ideal that can be called genemorphic, in the sense that it valorizes shapes and appearances bearing witness to their genesis.[7]

This ideal corresponds to certain aspects of Gauguin's art, such as his taste for "rough" materials and surfaces in his paintings, ceramics, and sculptures. It can also be related to a constant reuse of motifs, figures, and attitudes interconnecting his various works within an *ars combinatoria* that prevents any of them from being regarded as entirely self-sufficient, complete, and definitive. In the letter to J. F. Willumsen in which he disparaged Rembrandt's *Night Watch,* Gauguin added that there existed for him no masterpieces "except the total work," by which he probably meant the sum of an artist's works, rather than a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's sense.[8] This conception of artistic creation as a continuous series of transformations is particularly evident in Gauguin's prints, where each proof tends to be a unique variation on a theme defined by the matrix.[9] In his late monotypes and *dessins-empreintes,* moreover, he deliberately submitted clear and legible drawings to a technical process that turned them into obscure and ambiguous images, thereby enrolling the spectator in the activation of their dynamic incompleteness.[10]

Sea versus rock

The passage quoted from "Gauguin's paper" can also serve to illuminate specific works, in which its web of metaphors is visualized and expanded. As a young sailor, from 1865 to 1871, Gauguin had countless opportunities to observe the conflict and the interplay between wet and dry, liquid and solid. As a painter, he came to represent them in Brittany, especially in the small coastal village of Le Pouldu, which he discovered in 1886.[11] The most interesting picture in this regard is a painting that he realized during the late summer or early fall of 1888 and sold at auction in 1891 under the title *Au-dessus du gouffre* ("Above the Abyss"; fig. 1).[12] The liquid element, a portion of the North Atlantic Ocean in the Bay of Biscay, takes central stage, but its outline and appearance (including the foam) are determined by the solid element of the rocks enclosing it. Conversely, however, the shapes of the cliffs result from the action of the sea, and as such, are perpetually evolving. The awareness of this fact was expressed by Armand Seguin, one of Gauguin's "disciples," when, after the latter's death in 1903, he evoked the months spent together in Le Pouldu in 1894 and remembered how nature had "spoken" to them: "the rock, continuously sculpted by the wave, keeps the form of unknown monsters it may have sheltered."[13]

6. P. Gauguin, *Lettres à Daniel de Monfreid,* ed. A. Joly-Segalen (Paris, 1950), p. 121: "Plus je la vois plus je me rends compte des fautes *énormes mathématiques* que je ne veux à aucun prix retoucher—elle restera comme elle est à l'état d'esquisse si l'on veut. Mais aussi cette question se pose et j'en suis perplexe: Où commence l'exécution d'un tableau, où finit-elle? Au moment où des sentiments extrêmes sont en fusion au plus profond de l'être, au moment où ils éclatent, et que toute la pensée sort comme la lave d'un volcan, n'y a-t-il pas là une éclosion de l'œuvre soudainement créée, brutale si l'on veut, mais grande et d'apparence surhumaine? Les froids calculs de la raison n'ont pas présidé à cette éclosion, mais qui sait quand au fond de l'être l'œuvre a été commencée? Inconsciente peut-être." Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

7. See for this notion D. Gamboni, "Art Nouveau: The Shape of Life," in A. Sachs, ed., *Nature Design: From Inspiration to Innovation,* exh. cat., Museum für Gestaltung, Zurich (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), pp. 98–111.

8. Undated letter to J. F. Willumsen (see note 5): "Pour moi il n'y a pas de chefs-d'œuvre? Si ce n'est l'œuvre totale—"

9. See R. S. Field, "Gauguin's *Noa Noa* Suite," *The Burlington Magazine* 110 (1968): 500–511; R. Brettell et al., *The Art of Paul Gauguin,* exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), pp. 317–321.

10. See R. S. Field, *Paul Gauguin: Monotypes* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973). On the spectator's role, see D. Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion, 2002), with a chapter on Gauguin and his circle, pp. 86–104.

11. See D. Wildenstein, *Gauguin. Premier itinéraire d'un sauvage. Catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873–1888),* (Milan, 2001), vol. I, p. 294.

12. See S. Crussard's entry in ibid., no. 310.

13. A. Seguin, "Paul Gauguin," *L'Occident* 16 (April 1903): 166: "le roc sous la sculpture continuelle de la vague garde la forme de monstres inconnus qu'il a peut-être abrités."

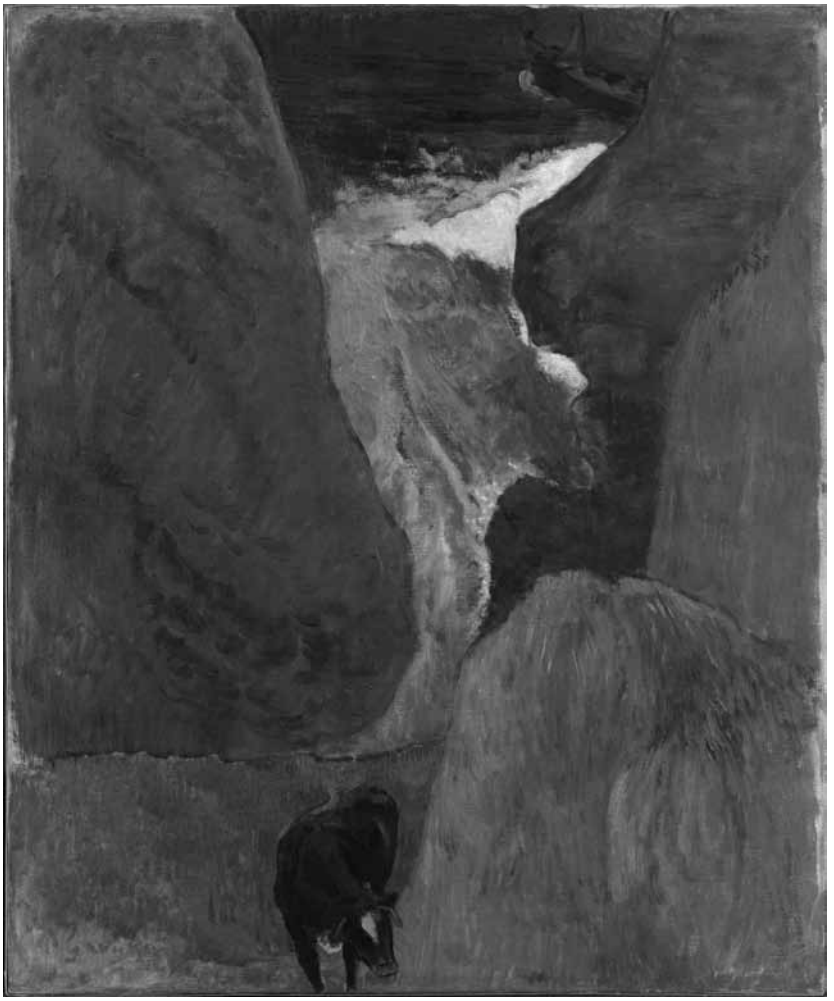

Figure 1. Paul Gauguin, *Au-dessus du gouffre,* 1888. Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 61 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ Patrice Schmidt.

Indeed, the cliff on the left of *Au-dessus du gouffre* resembles the head of the cow at its feet, and the one on the right suggests a monstrous face in profile, with blood on the mouth and orange whiskers and beard provided by the brightly colored haystacks. Because of the central position of the sliver of sea, its lighter tonal value, and its more animated textural and chromatic treatment, its action upon the rocks can be experienced visually: The negative shape tips into a positive one and a figure appears, which can be identified—thanks to two contemporary portraits of Gauguin, the first an anonymous photograph and the second a painting by van Gogh—as the head of the artist turned to the right, his chin elongated by a small beard, his mouth opposite that of the monstrous face, his nose characteristically arched, and his beret extended into a horn of foam.[14]

This apparition may be related to the hints of schematic and often uncanny faces that Gauguin included in his depictions of water surfaces, for instance, in the engraving *Auti te pape* (fig. 2) of the *Noa Noa* suite, intended to illustrate the fictionalized account of his first stay in Tahiti. Two such faces hover on the right, close to the standing woman: The one on top is an animal profile, the one below a human-like mask.

14. See Gamboni (see note 10), pp. 87–89, and idem, *Paul Gauguin: "The Mysterious Centre of Thought"* (London: Reaktion, forthcoming), ch. III.

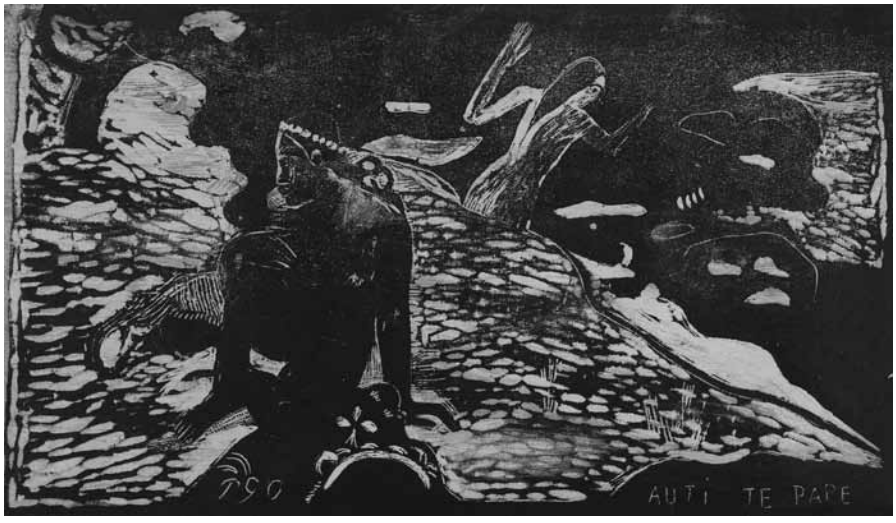

Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, *Auti te pape,* 1893–1894, from the *Noa Noa* suite. Woodcut printed from one block in orange and black ink, respectively, over yellow, pink, orange, blue, and green wax-based media on laminated cream Japanese paper, 20.3 x 35.3 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection.

The woman's upraised arms can express awe or fear as well as the intention of plunging into the water, and it is tempting to associate these faces with the traditional Polynesian method of divination through gazing into a reflecting liquid.[15] The Tahitian title subtly adds to this ambiguity: *haʻuti* means "to play" and "to move" when used as a verb and "turbulent" as an adjective, while *pape* refers to fresh water and a river. In the absence of any binding particle, it is unclear whether the water is moving or made to move, so that the title can been translated equally as *The Fresh Water Is in Motion* or as *Playing in the Fresh Water*.[16]

It must be added, however, that Gauguin had already used a similar motif in a Breton context and that it originally derived from the impressionist cultivation of fleeting aspects, provided by water among other phenomena. In *Au-dessus du gouffre,* this transience reaches another level: The effigy of the artist appears at the meeting point of the two elements, liquid and solid, as a result of their forever evolving reciprocal determination; in the upper part, close to the ship heading for the open sea, its outline becomes porous and it merges with the ocean as foam and spray. This is the spot where "thought is bursting out like lava," and it deserves special attention. The resemblance of the elongated part to the shape of a horn calls to mind several images of men by Gauguin, including self-representations, in which horns stand for sexual potency.[17] The analogies established by the passage from "Gauguin's paper" among volcano, body, and head, as well as among lava, blood, and thought, and among eruption, hemorrhage, and expression, can therefore be extended to include, respectively, the phallus, semen, and ejaculation. The last terms, however, remain implicit in most circumstances—but not all, as we shall see—for reasons of propriety.

Gauguin was able to find a confirmation of the second analogy in Tahiti, since *pape tāne,* combining "fresh water" with the word for "man," means semen—a fact that may also contribute to the latent eroticism of *Auti te pape* (fig. 2).[18] But its anthropological relevance is not limited to Polynesia, and Susan Bergh was able to illuminate the meaning of pre-Hispanic Andean phallic-spouted vessels (fig. 3) by reference to a "modern native

15. E. S. Craighill Handy, *Polynesian Religion,* Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 34 (Honolulu, 1927), p. 165.

16. See B. Danielsson, "Gauguin's Tahitian Titles," *Burlington Magazine* 109 (April 1967): 230.

17. See, for example, Gauguin's self-caricature in his drawing *Portrait of Roderic O'Conor, Meyer de Haan and Self Portrait* (1890, J. F. Willumsens Museum, Frederikssund), reproduced in E. M. Zafran, ed., *Gauguin's Nirvana,* exh. cat., Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford (New Haven, 2001), p. 30.

18. See the online dictionary of the Académie Tahitienne—Fare Vāna'a: http://www.farevanaa.pf/dictionnaire.php. H. J. Davies defined pape as water and "the juice of anything" in *A Tahitian and English Dictionary* (Tahiti, 1851), p. 187.

Figure 3. Vase with double phallic neck joined by a stirrup handle, Vicús culture, twelfth century B.C.E. to second century C.E. Ceramic, 19 x 18.9 x 18.1 cm. Museo Larco, Lima, Perú.

equation between semen, the masculine procreative fluid, and foam or rapidly moving, foamy water, especially fertilizing irrigation water that flows from the highlands during the wet season."[19] Gauguin, who spent his early childhood in Lima, may have already come in contact with expressions of this equation.[20]

The connection between ejaculation and a loss of identity—as represented by the blurring of the outline in the upper part of the head—also possesses a widely documented anthropological and psychological relevance. In a letter to Émile Bernard of July 29, 1888—which, by the time he painted *Au-dessus du gouffre,* Gauguin had most probably read—Vincent van Gogh expressed his admiration for the greatest works of art in the following way: "something complete, a perfection, makes the infinite tangible to us. / And to enjoy such a thing is like coitus, the moment of the infinite."[21]

Revealingly, Romain Rolland later called "oceanic" a feeling of boundlessness and oneness with the world which he regarded as the source of religiosity, and which prompted Sigmund Freud to admit in 1930 that the "sharp and clear lines of demarcation" with the outside world drawn progressively by the ego—both phylogenetically and ontogenetically—could become blurred or even be suspended as a result of pathological processes or "at the height of love."[22] In his own writings on religion and the modern world, in 1896–1897, Gauguin defined the termination of human life as "the final result of the labour of freeing one's individuality" and as the "disincorporation" of the "human chrysalis."[23] "Soul" or "spirit" can be therefore be further added to the lava=blood=semen chain of equivalences, as can death to the eruption=hemorrhage=ejaculation one. The French expression *petite mort* ("small death") for orgasm further attests to the phenomenological coherence of this conceptual network.

Clay, glaze, and wood

According to Gauguin's late recollections, his mother had collected "Peruvian vases" and "solid silver figurines" in Lima, of which there is, however, no trace.[24] His tutor, Gustave Arosa, was in any case a major collector of ceramics, and Gauguin became actively interested in pottery himself when asked in 1886 to collaborate with the great ceramicist Ernest Chaplet. As containers of liquid (at least potentially), vases shape in a basic way the encounter of wet and dry, and they have a rich history of standing for the human body, the human head, and—albeit less frequently—human sexual organs (fig. 3), especially in Andean and Mexican pre-Hispanic art. Gauguin took inspiration from these traditions when he created his own vessels, for instance, from Moche "portrait head" vases for his 1889 self-portrait jug (fig. 4). Although posterior to *Au-dessus de l'abîme,* this work is another confirmation that the resemblance of the negative form in the painting to Gauguin's features is not accidental. In a sense, the jug actualizes the three-

19. S. E. Bergh, "Death and Renewal in Moche Phallic-Spouted Vessels," *Res* 24 (1993): 82.

20. See B. Braun, "Paul Gauguin's Indian Identity: How Ancient Peruvian Pottery Inspired His Art," *Art History* 9.1 (March 1986): 36–53; B. Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York, 1993), pp. 52–91; D. Sweetman, *Paul Gauguin: A Life* (New York, 1995), pp. 22–27.

21. http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let649/letter.html. On Gauguin's reading of van Gogh's letters to Bernard, see D. W. Druick and P. K. Zegers with B. Salvesen, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South,* exh. cat., Art Institute of Chicago, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (London, 2001), pp. 133–140.

22. S. Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* [1930] *und andere kulturtheoretische Schriften* (Frankfurt, 1994), pp. 31–33.

23. P. Gauguin, *L'Église catholique et les temps modernes* (included in the manuscript *Diverses choses*), fol. 154–157 (I. Cahn, *Gauguin écrivain: Noa Noa, Diverses choses, Ancien culte mahorie,* CD-ROM [Paris, 2003]).

24. Gauguin, *Avant et après* (see note 4), p. 154 (*Gauguin's Intimate Journals,* pp. 83–84). See Wildenstein (see note 11), vol. II, p. 574; Druick and Zegers (see note 21), p. 28.

Figure 4. Paul Gauguin, self-portrait jug, 1889. Stoneware, glaze, and gilding, height 19.5 cm. Copenhagen, Designmuseum Danmark. Photo: author.

dimensional potential of the scene: It "contains" the head just as the ocean is contained by the shore and the seafloor, and as the "oceanic head" is contained by the outline of the cliffs. At the top, from where it can be filled with liquid, the jug is as widely open as the oceanic head. Its forehead is not prolonged by a horn, but lines have been found engraved on it "under the glaze, radiating upwards towards the massively cut jags that crown the head like a comb."[25] These lines also served to direct the blood-red sang-de-bœuf (oxblood) glaze that Gauguin let flow down toward the eyes, the mouth, and the chin.

This glaze fulfills several functions: It materializes the lava-like "boiling blood" of the creative act, it serves as a genemorphic trace of the firing process, and it reminds the viewer that its clay, although now cold and dry, became a vase thanks to its plasticity and by going through the extreme heat of the kiln. An anecdote told by Gauguin in *Diverses choses* and again in *Avant et après* shows that he associated this heat with sexuality. As the Japanese peasant-craftsmen fire their enamel vases during the winter months, he related, their families and neighbors gather around the kiln to fuel the fire, sing, laugh, and play, ending up naked and, having nothing left to forfeit, "giving themselves" in "loves of the moment." The parallelism between firing and coitus is made explicit in the aftermath: "It is late and everything is cooling off, slowly, very slowly, the young people and the terrible oven. Rest follows work well done."[26] In other words, the kiln can be added to the volcano=body=head=phallus chain of equivalents. The closed eyes of the self-portrait jug, like the brutal interruption of the neck and the rivulets of blood-red glaze, have often been understood as representing the martyrdom of the *artiste maudit,* in agreement with other self-representations by Gauguin such as his *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1889, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach), but their emphasis on interiority also expresses the creative process of expression and metamorphosis, rather than a terminal act. This interpretation is supported by the contemporary painting *Still Life with Japanese Print* (fig. 5), in which the jug in the shape of the artist's head is used as a vase and puts forth wild flowers—in lieu of thoughts, lava, blood, or semen—which wander gaily through the air like butterflies and enter the visual fabric of the Japanese *ukiyo-e* actor's portrait.

The reference to plants as embodiments of dynamism and vitality is crucial to Gauguin's treatment of wood, his favorite material for sculpture beside clay. His wooden sculptures tend to exploit and emphasize the structure of the material—its grain, its veins, and even its natural shape in the case of the cylindrical statues that he started carving at the end of the 1880s. *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (fig. 6), named after Stéphane Mallarmé's 1876 poem and given by the artist to the poet, thus clearly retains the original shape of the *tāmanu* trunk—or branch, more probably—from which it was cut, particularly at the bottom, which Gauguin left almost untouched.[27]

25. M. Bodelsen, *Gauguin's Ceramics: A Study in the Development of His Art* (London, 1964), p. 112.

26. *Gauguin's Intimate Journals,* p. 25 (Gauguin, *Avant et après* [see note 4], p. 51: "Il est tard, et tout se refroidit, les jeunes gens et la terrible cornue, doucement, tout doucement. Le repos après l'œuvre accomplie.").

27. The *tāmanu (Calophylum inophylum)* is a large tree that used to be planted around the *marae* (sacred precincts), and its wood was used to carve the *to'o* (body of the image of a god).

Figure 5. Paul Gauguin, *Still Life with Japanese Print,* 1889. Oil on canvas, 73 x 90 cm. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

This genemorphic quality finds its apex in the faun's tail, which starts from a knot—that is, from the wood of a lateral branch or twig embedded in the trunk or main branch—and ends in a cluster of leaves. The faun himself, with his goat's lower body and the testicles visible underneath his tail, is an incarnation of natural vitality and sexual potency. Gauguin has not provided him with the traditional horns, which he may have found redundant, but he carved on the top of the cylinder his own monogram "P GO," which Wayne Andersen has connected to "Pego," not only the name of the dog Gauguin kept in Tahiti but also a seaman's term for "prick" or "pecker."[28] The cylindrical shape is distinctly phallic and rises vertically, slightly tilted, with an upsurging energy that overcomes gravity like a plant. In his poem, Mallarmé had already compared, with typical obliqueness, the faun to a phallus and to a volcano:

> *Droit et seul, sous un flot antique de lumière,*
> *Lys! et l'un de vous tous pour l'ingénuité.*
> *[. . .]*
> *Etna! c'est parmi toi visité de Vénus*
> *Sur ta lave posant ses talons ingénus,*
> *Quand tonne un somme triste ou s'épuise la flamme.*[29]

Figure 6. Paul Gauguin, *L'Après-midi d'un faune,* ca. 1892. *Tāmanu* wood and stain, 35.6 x 14.7 x 12.4 cm. Vulaines-sur-Seine, Musée départemental Stéphane Mallarmé, avec l'aimable autorisation du Conseil général de Seine-et-Marne. © Yvan Bourhis—DAPMD/CG77.

28. W. V. Andersen, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (London, 1971), p. 186.

29. "Straight and alone, 'neath antique floods of light, / Lilies and one of you all through my ingenuousness. [. . .] Etna! 'tis amid you, visited by Venus / On your lava fields placing her candid feet, / When

Figure 7. Paul Gauguin, *Oviri,* 1894. Stoneware and glaze, 75 x 19 x 27 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Hervé Lewandowski.

Figure 8. Paul Gauguin, *Oviri,* back view. Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Hervé Lewandowski.

Gauguin used the cylindrical shape again for *Oviri* (fig. 7), his largest "ceramic sculpture" and the one he regarded as his best. The inscription, also present on a bas-relief self-portrait in profile, means "wild, untamed," and Gauguin sometimes called the work *La Tueuse,* "The Killer."[30] It shows a woman with bent knees and large round eyes, like a Marquesan *tiki,* trampling upon a wolf and holding or crushing a whelp against her left hip. This ambiguous gesture and the overall composition have been compared to the famous Assyrian relief of a *Hero Mastering a Lion* from the palace at Dur Sharrukin (now Khorsabad, eighth century B.C.E.), which Gauguin knew from his visits to the new collections of Oriental antiquities at the Louvre.[31] He himself related *Oviri* to Balzac's *Livre mystique* and the ideal of androgyny, when he wrote under a later, drawn version of the work: "And the Monster, embracing its creature, impregnates with its seed a generous womb to engender Seraphitus Seraphita."[32] The "seed" apparently refers to

a sad stillness thunders wherein the flame dies." (Poems: *Stéphane Mallarmé,* trans. R. Fry [London, 1936]).

30. Letter of April 1897 to Ambroise Vollard, quoted in Bodelsen (see note 25), p. 146.

31. See Z. Amishai-Maisels, "Gauguin's Religious Themes" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1969; New York, 1985), fig. 96–97; D. Druick and P. Zegers, *Paul Gauguin: Pages from the Pacific,* exh. cat. (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1995), pp. 26–27; F. N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 266–271; J. M. McBryan, "Gauguin, Gilgamesh, and the Modernist Aesthetic Allegory: The Archaeology of Desire in 'Noa Noa'" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2011).

32. "Et le Monstre étreignant sa créature, féconde de sa semence des flancs généreux pour engendrer *Seraphitus Seraphita*." Drawing on a copy of *Le Sourire,* Musée d'Orsay/Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 28844, reproduced in Brettell (see note 9), cat. 213.

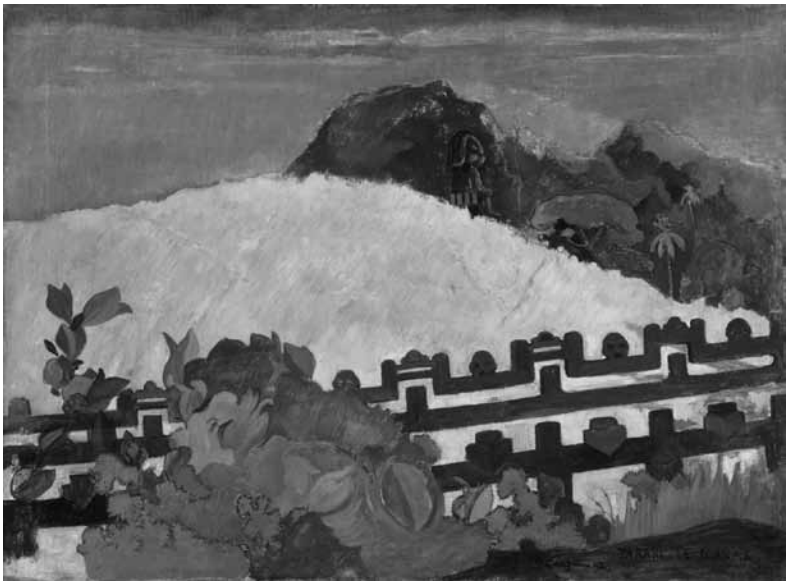

Figure 9. Paul Gauguin, *Parahi te marae,* 1892. Oil on canvas, 66 x 88.9 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee.

the small animal, but the expression becomes easier to understand when one considers the statue from the back (fig. 8): The woman's body disappears behind an amorphous mass of hair flowing from the top, where an opening gap gives a glimpse of the interior. Laurence Madeline has rightly observed that beyond its technical justification during the firing process, this gap suggests analogies with the crater of an erupting volcano, the skin of a molting animal, or the vulva of a woman giving birth.[33] One may add the meatus of an ejaculating penis, in relation to the phallic shape of the statue as a whole, so that the hyperbolic flow of hair can stand for both lava and semen—a simultaneous allusion to the male and female genitalia agreeing with Gauguin's reference to Balzac's Séraphîtüs/Séraphîta. Moreover, the opening at the top of *Oviri* accentuates its resemblance to a kiln, endowing the ceramic with a genemorphic quality which is comparable to, although different from, that of wooden cylindrical statues such as *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (fig. 6). Finally, the coarse stoneware clay chosen by Gauguin for this work gives it a textural affinity with Polynesian *tiki,* made of volcanic stone like the islands themselves.

33. L. Madeline, *Ultra-sauvage: Gauguin sculpteur* (Paris, 2002), pp. 136–137.

God in the detail

Gauguin may have seen an active volcano, El Misti, as a young child, if his stay in Peru included a visit to Arequipa, the home city of his Peruvian relatives, the Tristán.[34] In 1887 he lived close to Montagne Pelée ("Bald Mountain") on the Caribbean island of La Martinique, which would destroy the city of Saint-Pierre in 1902; he represented it in his landscape *By the Seashore* (or *Saint-Pierre Roadstead,* 1887, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen).[35] Finally, volcanoes—although mostly "dormant" or "extinct"—became part of his daily environment on the volcanic islands of French Polynesia, Tahiti, and Hiva Oa, one of the Marquesas.[36] He included their summits in many paintings, one of which (fig. 9) will help us understand how Gauguin conceived of the relationship between the poles of his dualities.

In a letter to his wife, Gauguin translated "Parahi te marae," the Tahitian title of this painting, as "Dwells the *Marae,*" and explained *marae* as a "place dedicated to

34. See Sweetman (see note 20), pp. 6–28; Druick and Zegers (see note 21), pp. 23–29; Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin* (see note 14), ch. I.

35. See Wildenstein (see note 11), vol. II, cat. 242.

36. On volcanism in Polynesia, see, for instance, http://www.ipgp.fr/pages/061204.php and http://www.proscience.pf/proscience3/spip.php?article54.

the cult of the Gods and to human sacrifices."[37] *Pārahi* as a verb means to sit, to be seated, or to dwell, to stay, so that the title intentionally treats the marae as an animated being, a residing divine presence rather than a residence of the divine. The yellow hill depicted does not conform to the descriptions of *marae* that Gauguin had found in Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout's 1837 *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan,* which he would copy and illustrate in his own manuscript, *Ancien Culte Mahorie,* and even less does it resemble the ruined marae he had been able to visit in Tahiti.[38] The only element reminiscent of Moerenhout is an enlarged version of a Marquesan *tiki,* closer in scale to the Easter Island *mo'ai,* situated slightly to the right of the top of the hill. This statue has not only flexed legs, like its Polynesian prototypes, but also appears to be seated, a position corresponding to the bodily sense of *pārahi* and therefore emphasizing its own status as an embodiment of the divine. It is also placed against the background of the mountain and shares its color, so that it appears as a condensation of the mountain—or, conversely, the mountain can be seen as an aggrandizement of the statue. This identification of the two is reinforced by the fact that the silhouette of the mountain surrounding the statue resembles a head in profile, with an open mouth through which a winding line escapes. This detail, which is hardly visible from afar but is carefully delineated, probably represents the ascending smoke of an offering to the god, but it also suggests the breath of the anthropomorphic (and theomorphic) mountain. It suggests in addition that the volcano is not "extinct" but "dormant," asleep, in accordance with its lying position: This is not an eruption but an *expiration,* a breathing out, bringing forth the breath of life as *expression* brings forth the animated and animating fluid.

I have shown elsewhere that Gauguin probably equated this latency with the current state of Polynesian culture, repressed by missionaries and colonists but still alive and capable of being resuscitated.[39] In *Noa Noa,* after attending the burial of the last king of Tahiti, Pomare V, the narrator sets himself the task of "tracking down the ancient hearth, reviving the fire amidst all these ashes."[40] I have also shown that this indigenous vitality is further encrypted in the bright flowers occupying the foreground of *Parahi te marae,* in which comparisons with other works by the artist enable one to recognize the shapes of lovemaking couples.[41] What must now particularly occupy our attention, however, is the architectural and ornamental element of the gate or fence surrounding and protecting the yellow hill, for it visualizes in a more abstract way the dynamic duality that is at the core of this vitality. The fence is also very far from the simple stone walls mentioned by Moerenhout, and it rather evokes—if anything—Maori meeting houses or the sacred precincts of Indonesia and Mesoamerica. The liberty manifested by Gauguin in this regard has been taken by some as proof that his interest in Polynesian culture was superficial, but a study drawing has also made it possible to identify the model of this motif, a Marquesan female ear ornament named *taiana* or *pu taiana*.[42]

Fortunately, these ornaments (like all Marquesan artifacts and tattoo motifs) have been studied in great detail by the German anthropologist Karl von den Steinen, on the basis of fieldwork conducted in Hiva Oa in 1897—a few years before Gauguin's arrival on the island—and a worldwide examination of collections.[43] His typology enables one to identify more precisely to which group of *taiana* the one used by Gauguin belonged (fig. 10) and what distinguished it within this group: The vertical element at the center of the composition does not reach uninterruptedly the head or heads placed at the top, but is instead separated from a horizontal bar by an opening in the shape of an inverted U with long serifs. As a result, this shaft and its base create, together with the opening surmounting them, an oscillation between positive and negative space such as we have encountered in *Au-dessus du gouffre* (fig. 1). Gauguin magnified this effect by repeating the motif both horizontally and

37. P. Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis,* ed. M. Malingue (Paris, 1946), p. 240: "Demeure le Marae / (Marae) temple endroit réservé / au culte des Dieux / et aux sacrifices humains."

38. J.-A. Moerenhout, *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan* (Paris, 1837), pp. 466–467; *Ancien culte mahorie* (in Cahn, see note 23), fol. 11 verso [paginated 22].

39. D. Gamboni, "Parahi te marae: où est le temple?" *48/14, La revue du Musée d'Orsay* 20 (Spring 2005): 6–17. See also Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin* (see note 14), chapter VI.

40. J. Loize, *Noa Noa par Paul Gauguin* (Paris: André Balland, 1966), pp. 19–20: "Retrouver l'ancien foyer, raviver le feu au milieu de toutes ces cendres."

41. See note 39.

42. *Two Tahitian Women and a Marquesan Earplug* (1891/93, Art Institute of Chicago, inv. 1950.1413). See J. Teilhet-Fisk, "Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1975; Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), pp. 61–63; A. G. Wilkinson, *Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture,* exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981), pp. 60–61; K. Varnedoe, "Gauguin," in W. Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York (Boston, 1984), vol. I, pp. 192–195.

43. K. von den Steinen, *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst* (Berlin, 1925), vol. II, pp. 136–148, esp. 144–148.

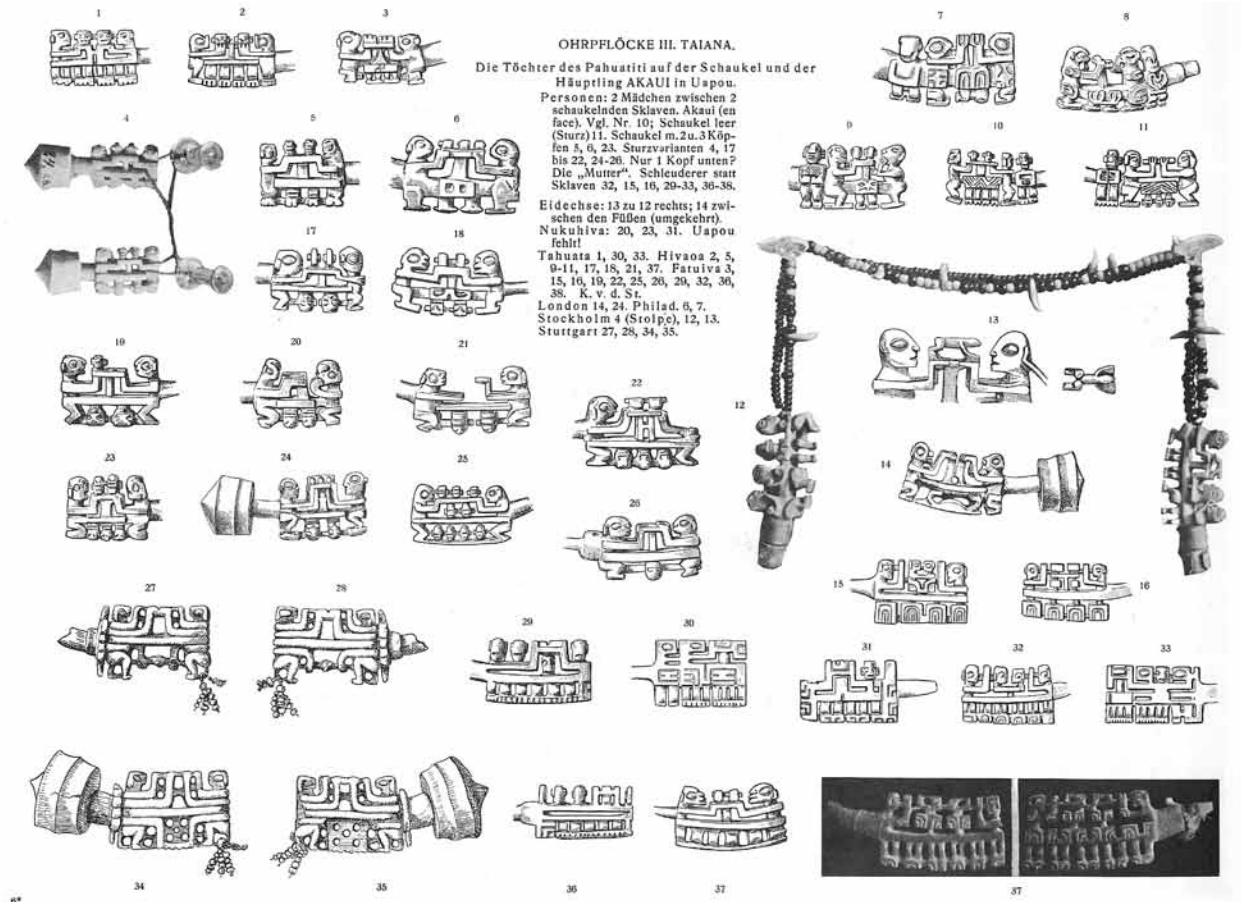

Figure 10. Marquesan ear ornaments (*taiana*) after Karl von den Steinen, *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst,* 1925, vol. III.

vertically as he extrapolated the ear ornament into a fence. He further illuminated the significance of the interrupted vertical shaft in two additional works. The first is a sketch of the *taiana* between an abstract diagram resembling an erupting volcano and two seated figures evoking the large *tiki* and a Buddha.[44] The second is another painting of 1892, *Arii matamoe* (fig. 11), in which the enlarged *taiana* motif serves as a backdrop for the severed head of the *ari'i* ("chief," "prince," and since the nineteenth century, "king"), with the shaft placed just behind the upright head.[45]

These associations, as well the general economy of *Parahi te marae,* suggest that Gauguin took this specific *taiana* as a model because of its oscillation between vertical shaft and surrounding opening, and that he saw this motif as a highly abstract and powerful image of the mutual determination of penis and vagina and of the interaction between the male and female principles. Such an interpretation may have been encouraged by the equally abstract (rather than aniconic) symbol of Shiva as phallus, the *linga*—which includes at times one or several anthropomorphic images of the god's face (fig. 12)—and by its female counterpart, the *yoni,* since Gauguin accepted the widespread hypothesis of the Indian origin of Polynesian culture.[46] The dual character of Shiva as god of creation and destruction also agrees with Gauguin's simultaneous reference, in and around the *taiana* motif, to generation on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to death and "human sacrifices," by way of the severed princely head and the little skulls.

44. *Marquesan ear ornament, Buddha, and other sketches* (undated [1892?], Musée d'Orsay/Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 29877.3).

45. *Mata moe* is a compound word signifying "to be sleepy, to fall asleep" (*mata* means "face" or "eye," and as a verb "to begin," while *moe* means "sleep," "dream," and as a verb "to sleep, to lie down").

46. See Teilhet-Fisk (see note 42), pp. 41–42.

Figure 11. Paul Gauguin, *Arii matamoe,* 1892. Oil on coarse fabric, 45 x 75 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Coniunctio oppositorum

According to Moerenhout's "interpretative commentary of the religious system of Oceania," faithfully copied by Gauguin in *Ancien culte mahorie,* the Polynesian theogony and cosmogony were predicated upon "the idea of a coexistence of two principles, which are god, and out of which all the objects constituting the universe are composed."[47] These two principles were (among other things), respectively, active and passive, spiritual and material, psychic and physical, male and female, and they were represented by the creator god Ta'aroa and his consort Hina. Gauguin illustrated this passage with a drawing (fig. 13) in which Ta'aroa appears seated on a sort of platform, the lower half of his body consisting of a giant erect phallus, which he holds in his hands as a medieval sciapod would hold his sole leg. The phallus is directed toward a giant vulva, which resembles the almond-shaped element in the floral foreground of *Parahi te marae* (fig. 9) and seems autonomous while probably belonging to a crouching figure whose head is visible on the right. The abstract and quasi-emblematic quality of this depiction of the

Figure 12. *Ekamukha Shiva linga* (One-Faced Mark of the God Shiva), made in Uttar Pradesh, Mathura, India, ca. first century C.E. Sandstone, 78.1 cm x 17.1 x 21.6 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Stella Kramrisch.

47. Moerenhout (see note 38), p. 563: "cette idée de co-existence de deux principes qui sont dieu, et dont se composent tous les objets qui constituent l'ensemble de l'univers"; *Ancien culte mahorie* (in Cahn, see note 23), fol. 19 recto [paginated 32].

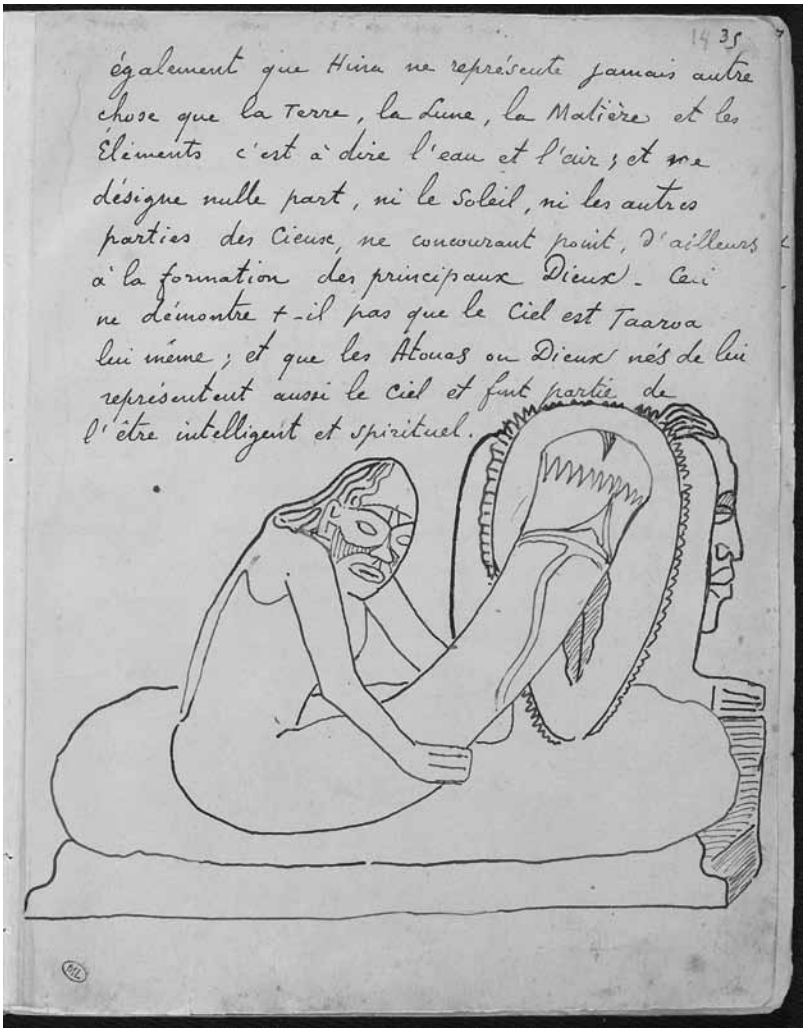

Figure 13. Paul Gauguin, *Ancien culte mahorie,* 1892–1893, p. 35. Watercolor and ink on paper, 21.5 x 17 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, conservé au Musée du Louvre. Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Hervé Lewandowski.

genital organs confirms the symbolic value of the *taiana* motif for Gauguin, and it suggests that the chevron shapes alternating with the shafts on the lower tier of the fence may further stand for the "female principle."

In the final version of *Noa Noa,* edited and partly written by Charles Morice, "Polynesian theology" is compared to the Western theory of evolution, and its dualities appear both fundamental and submitted to the dialectical principle of substantial unity: "once accomplished, the phenomenon towards which the two universal currents had joined each other—generating cause and fecundated matter in the fruit, driving force and object moved in movement, spirit and matter in life—they unite and merge."[48] The "philosophical premonition" thus attributed to the original inhabitants of the South Seas means that for Gauguin, their worldview possessed a heuristic validity and was compatible with

48. P. Gauguin and C. Morice, *Noa Noa* (Paris: La Plume, 1901), pp. 183–184: "une fois le phénomène accompli en vue duquel les deux courants universels s'étaient rejoints,—dans le fruit la cause génératrice et la matière fécondée, dans le mouvement la force motrice et l'objet mû, dans la vie l'esprit et la matière s'unissent et se confondent."

modern science. His knowledge and understanding of it was highly dependent upon early authors (especially Moerenhout) who have since come under criticism, but many of his conclusions were also reached by later anthropologists of note. Edward Smith Craighill Handy, in particular, identified in his 1927 study of Polynesian religion "a systematic theory of dualism in nature which attributed divinity, power, the male principle, light, and life to the superior, heavenly realm; and commonness, impotence, the female principle, darkness, and death to lower nature, or the earth."[49] Handy located the sources of this system in "regions long dominated by Indic religious influence," and considered it best preserved in large island groups on the periphery of Polynesia such as the Marquesas. He described one of its characteristics to be "phallic symbolism" as found in mythology, in ritual, and "in art, in naturalistic and conventional representations having phallic origin, form, and meaning."[50]

This coincidence was partly based upon common sources. During his 1920–1921 Marquesan investigations with the Bayard Dominick expedition of the Bishop Museum, Handy's main informant—to whom he paid homage as "probably the most learned man in all the islands at the time"—was Isaac Puhetete, called Haapuani, a close friend of Gauguin during the artist's last years on Hiva Oa.[51] But Gauguin's main insights into Polynesian art and culture had been gained long before he reached the Marquesas, and on the "foundational" level of his own art and thought, they probably acted as a confirmation rather than a revolution. The appeal that polar oppositions held for him clearly antedated these insights, as is signaled by his attribution to Mani of the lava vs. ruby contrast. Gauguin was a voracious reader and a penetrating observer, often surrounded by erudite and articulate interlocutors, who made no claim to logical consistency—at the end of his life, he defined philosophy as "a weapon which we alone, even as savages, fabricate ourselves."[52] His sources are therefore many, and it may be vain to search in his works and his writings for a consistent, verbalizable "doctrine." But it is nonetheless revealing that Romantic antecedents can be found for many of the themes and preferences we have encountered, such as the pervasive use of analogy, the parallel between natural generation and artistic creation, and the anti-mechanicist understanding of evolution—all in tune with what Handy called the Marquesans' "procreational philosophy."[53]

One could cite here the German idealists, Balzac and Baudelaire, but suffice it to refer to Carlyle, whose *Sartor Resartus* Gauguin discovered through Jacob Meyer de Haan and van Gogh. Among the often paradoxical opinions of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh quoted in the novel are the idea that thought is woven by imagination, with "Metaphors [as] her stuff," and a negation of separateness that anticipates the notion of "oceanic feeling": "all, were it only a withered leaf, works together with all; is borne forward on the bottomless, floorless flood of Action, and lives through perpetual metamorphoses."[54] In his 1864 study *L'Idéalisme anglais,* Hippolyte Taine had commented upon Carlyle's own imagination in terms that call to mind Gauguin's equation of the creative head with an erupting volcano: "The facts seized upon by this vehement imagination melt away as in a flame [. . .]. The ideas, changed into hallucinations, lose their solidity [. . .]. Mysticism makes its appearance like smoke within the over-heated room of the intellect which bursts."[55]

Whatever the sources, Gauguin's dynamic dualism did not imply a strict separation of its poles and did not lead to a definitive victory of one over the other. Rather, as in his and Morice's interpretation of Polynesian cosmogony, it fed a continuous "mutual fertilization," a *natura naturans* extended and reflected by art, an *imago imagans*. In *Auti te pape* (fig. 2), the two women

49. Handy (see note 15), p. 313, and see ibid., p. 37.

50. Ibid., pp. 312, 315.

51. E. S. Craighill Handy, *Marquesan Legends,* Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 69 (Honolulu, 1930), p. 3. See C. F. Stuckey, entry for the painting *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape* (1902, Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain de la Ville de Liège) in *Paul Gauguin: Artist of Myth and Dream,* ed. S. Eisenman, exh. cat., Complesso del Vittoriano, Rome (Milan, 2007), p. 378.

52. *Gauguin's Intimate Journals,* p. 109 (Gauguin, *Avant et après* [see note 4], p. 195: "une arme qu'en sauvages nous seuls fabriquons par nous-mêmes").

53. Handy (see note 15), p. 107. On Gauguin's anti-mechanicism, see P. Verdier, "Un manuscrit de Gauguin: *L'Esprit moderne et le catholicisme,*" *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch* 46–47 (1985–1986): 285, 325 n. 16.

54. T. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London, 1891 [1836]), pp. 48–49.

55. Quoted and translated by H. R. Rookmaaker, *Gauguin and 19th Century Art Theory* (Amsterdam, 1972 [1959]), pp. 40, 290; H. Taine, *L'idéalisme anglais. Étude sur Carlyle* (Paris, 1864), p. 53: "Les faits saisis par cette imagination véhémente s'y fondent comme dans une flamme [. . .] Les idées, changées en hallucination, perdent leur solidité [. . .] Le mysticisme entre comme une fumée dans les parois surchauffées de l'intelligence qui craque." In the same book, Taine compared the "workshop of human ideas" to a blast furnace and called for the historian to bring its cold products back to the forge (ibid., pp. 85–86).

embody opposite attitudes toward sexuality, which are represented and named (with exceptional explicitness) in the painting *Life and Death* (1889, Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Museum, Cairo). The introverted position of the woman shying away from the liquid and moving element is derived—with particular clarity in the painting—from a Peruvian mummy, which had caught Gauguin's attention at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in 1878: a cold and dead body, emptied of its fluids and turned into a statue of itself.[56] But this position also interested Gauguin because it evoked a newborn, and he cultivated its ambiguity in several paintings such as *Mahana no atua* (1894, Art Institute of Chicago) and *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* This conjunction of opposites is perhaps best expressed in the oscillation we have observed in *Au-dessus du gouffre* (fig. 1): Literally in a state of flux, the effigy of the subject appears and disappears at the same time, performing the act of self-affirmation and self-annihilation that Gauguin compared to a volcanic eruption, bleeding, the firing of a vase, self-expression, and ejaculation. This effigy may seem to be one with the ocean and confined by the cliffs, but it really exists only in a glimpse of the encounter between water and stone.

56. See W. V. Andersen, "Gauguin and a Peruvian Mummy," *Burlington Magazine* 109, no. 1769 (April 1967): 615–619.