GAUGUIN, GILGAMESH, AND THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC ALLEGORY:

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DESIRE IN NOA NOA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation explores Paul Gauguin's Noa Noa ("fragrant" in Tahitian), a fictionalized "memoir" of his first journey to French Polynesia, which includes a transformative episode recounting a trip into the forest to collect wood for carving into sculptures. In Gauguin scholarship, this episode has provoked speculation because of the eroticized way in which the artist describes his relationship with his young Tahitian male guide on the expedition; several scholars have argued that this episode of Noa Noa is designed to trouble conventional bourgeois boundaries, while others have offered sharp postcolonial critiques. I offer a different reading of this episode, arguing that the forest journey in Noa Noa replays the journey to the cedar forest in the myth of Gilgamesh, and that the artist’s transplantation of this ancient Assyrian epic to a Polynesian setting adds a
new layer to our understanding of the transnational and transhistorical nature of Gauguin's primitivism. I argue that as a painter in search of total artistic freedom, Gauguin used Gilgamesh to write into *Noa Noa* an allegory of aesthetic pursuit and to refashion himself as what Roland Barthes would call an "anachronic subject."

This dissertation begins with a discussion of Gauguin's complicated mimetic behavior, positing him as an artist who is suspended between Romantic and Modernist aesthetic modes. It traces the lineage and development of *Noa Noa* as a multigeneric text drawing on many traditions simultaneously. It then proceeds to explore the discovery and translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* by French and English archaeologists and scholars in the nineteenth century, working as part of a larger imperialistic project fueled by nationalistic sentiment. It is within this context that my dissertation turns to the text of *Noa Noa* itself, comparing key passages with the Gilgamesh epic and demonstrating how these passages dramatize symbolically what Gauguin struggled to achieve aesthetically on canvas. I conclude that what has come to be known as the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa* is not just about Gauguin's homoerotic desire for his Tahitian guide; it is about Gauguin's symbolic desire for fusion between thought and form in the work of art.
This dissertation would not have come into being without the insightful guidance and steadfast encouragement of my dissertation director, Professor Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, who saw this project through so many phases and who took it seriously from the very start. I am deeply grateful to Professor Sifuentes-Jáuregui for his kindness, his intense creativity, and his ability to see through to the very core of every issue, where the potential for fruitful complication always lies. He has enriched my understanding of language, theory, and the world immeasurably, and it was an honor to work with him.

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INTRODUCTION:
GAUGUIN, GILGAMESH, AND MIMETIC DESIRE

In antiquity there was no hiatus between mythology and history: historical personages endeavored to imitate their archetypes, the gods and mythical heroes.


The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.

- Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (xiii)

Introduction

It might seem strange to begin a dissertation on Paul Gauguin with a discussion of mimesis. An anti-rationalist, Symbolist, Synthetist egoist, Gauguin made his name by rejecting even advanced Impressionism as being but a weak imitation of nature, a project that would always remain "bound by the shackles of verisimilitude" (WOS 140). Yet for all his obsession with originality, Gauguin was also a master copy-maker; indeed,

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2 Debates about what "originality" meant to Gauguin, especially in light of his many borrowings, disputes, and plagiarisms, have lain at the heart of the battle over Gauguin's legacy since his own time. Critics like Solomon-Godeau and, in Gauguin's own day, Camille Pissarro, reject his sampling of styles, ideas, phrasings, and ready-made images as inauthentic and thieving; as Pissarro once sniped, "Gauguin is always poaching on someone's land; nowadays, he's pillaging the savages of Oceania" (Solomon-Godeau
many critics have faulted him for precisely this tendency. Less a copier of nature than of ready-made images and styles, Gauguin has long been a lightning-rod figure for debates about authenticity and appropriation in modern art. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has written, for example, "From 1881 through the 1890s, one can readily identify a Pissarroesque Gauguin, a van Goghian Gauguin, a Bernardine Gauguin, a Cézannian Gauguin, a Redonian Gauguin, a Degasian Gauguin, and, most enduringly and prevalently, a Puvisian Gauguin" (328). For many modern critics - and even for many of Gauguin's contemporaries - there seems to be no way of knowing who the "real" Gauguin, was, as an artist or as an individual.

The purpose of this dissertation is not quite to answer that question, although I hope to shed some light upon it along the way. Rather, my purpose here is to investigate the many permutations of mimicry and mimesis - perhaps, more precisely, the mimetic impulse - in Gauguin's oeuvre. I plan to do this \textit{vis à vis} one particular moment of intertextuality that opens, kaleidescope-like, an interpretive space in which many of the artist's central aesthetic and philosophical concerns are prismatically refracted. The

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328). On the other hand, defenders like Nicholas Wadley argue that Gauguin "was not party to moralistic obsessions with originality. If a motif was available and of value to him, then it was only natural to use it" (113). This point of view, however, seems to obscure what was a genuine preoccupation with "originality" for Gauguin (as it is for most artists). He certainly saw what he was doing as "original," and often read the public's reaction against his work as signs of their inability to cope with his originality. For example, he wrote to Emile Bernard in 1889, "Attacks against originality are natural on the part of those who haven't the power to create and the strength of character to shrug their shoulders" (\textit{WOS} 39). Later he decried the "peculiar, crazy public that demands the greatest possible degree of originality on the painter's part and yet won't accept him unless his work resembles that of the others" (\textit{WOS} 204). Further, he goes on to remark, "I resemble those who resemble me (those who imitate me)," thus indicating a keen awareness of the problem of "imitation" in the art market and staking a clear claim to what he considers his innovations. Ultimately, whether Gauguin's understanding of "originality" can be classified as "moralizing" may remain unclear, but it seems disingenuous to claim that he was unaware or "not party to" such conventions.
conversation I want to evoke is between Gauguin's *Noa Noa*, an imaginative travel memoir about his first trip to Tahiti, which he penned in the fall of 1893, and the ancient Assyrian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was first published in French in 1873 but had garnered renewed interest via a more complete French edition in the early 1890s. In the chapters that follow, I will argue that certain aspects of *Noa Noa* were inspired by *Gilgamesh* in deeply revealing ways. I will show that this flashpoint intersection between two dynamic texts, one spectacularly ancient and the other quintessentially modern, enhances our understanding of Gauguin's work by underscoring the literary and symbolic nature of *Noa Noa*, forcing us to deal with the book as a work of modernist literature. I will also argue that this unique borrowing should broaden our awareness of the range of influence that infused Gauguin's particular brand of primitivism, which scholarship has a tendency to limit to South American and especially Polynesian imagery. In fact, art of the Middle East and the Ancient Near East - nebulous demarcations in those days - played a crucial role in the development of Gauguin's approach to color and dimension, as well as enhancing his repertoire of symbols.³

In addition, the maneuvers that Gauguin makes with Gilgamesh as a symbolic identity shed important light on his relationships to modernism and to colonial imperialism. His trying-on of the monstrous aspects of Gilgamesh, while rejecting the moral lessons that Gilgamesh offers, reveals a revisionist fetishization of symbols that highlights the contradictions of mythic borrowing in the West, a tradition that can be

³ For example, Gauguin writes in *Avant et Après*: “What the Orientals, Persians, and others did, first of all, was to print a complete dictionary, so to speak of this language of the listening eye; they made their rugs marvelously eloquent. Ah you painters who demand a technique for color! Study those rugs; in them you will find all that science can teach you, but who knows, perhaps the book is sealed and you cannot read it” (146).
hailed as an opening of borders, or decried as cultural plundering. What I see as Gauguin's self-fashioning\(^4\) in the guise of Gilgamesh is essentially an overt "identification" with an exoticized Other, a phenomenon that, as Diana Fuss warns, carries "considerable risks [...], not the least among them the danger posed by the imperializing character of many cross-cultural identifications" (8). Fuss draws on Doris Sommer's phrasing to pinpoint the political problematics of a "presumption of identification" - overly sentimental or self-indulgent identifications that reflect 'the ultimate violence ... appropriation in the guise of an embrace" (Fuss 8). In what follows, we will explore the ways in which Gauguin's "embrace" of Gilgamesh serves to reinscribe him into a colonial position that he purports to loathe.\(^5\)

But first, what can Gauguin and Gilgamesh have to do with one another?

\(^4\) The term "self-fashioning" in literary studies comes, of course, from Stephen Greenblatt's seminal *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). There, Greenblatt defines self-fashioning as "a way of designating the forming of the self" (2), indicating that this is a phenomenon which goes beyond mere public relations and actually profoundly involves self constitution (i.e., "the forming of the self," not just its presentation). My use of this term is meant to evoke the ways in which Gauguin not only presents himself but forms himself *vis à vis* Gilgamesh. In this way, it actually complicates Greenblatt's original notion, because, for Greenblatt, "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This treatening Other - heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist - must be discovered or invented in order to be destroyed" (9). For Gauguin, fashioning himself as a Modernist rather than a Renaissance man, the Other serves as conduit and source material.

\(^5\) Gauguin frequently derided French colonial officials for destroying the country with their puritanical "morality" and their imperialist ambitions. For example, in 1900, he wrote in *Les Guêpes*, "The civilized hordes arrive and run up a flag; the fertile ground becomes arid, the rivers dry up; [...] they poison our land with infected excrement. [...] Everything perishes" (*WOS* 201). However, Gauguin’s actual position on colonization looks a bit more like Conrad’s when he argues that “To colonize means to cultivate a region, to make a hitherto uncultivated country produce things which are useful primarily for the happiness of the people who inhabit it; a noble goal. But to conquer that country, raise a flag over it, set up a parasitical administration, maintained at enormous cost, by and for the glory of the mother country alone – that is a barbarous folly, that is shameful! (*WOS* 197).
When Paul Gauguin returned in 1893 from his first Tahitian sojourn, he discussed with his friend, the Symbolist poet Charles Morice, the idea of collaborating on a book to explain the paintings he had produced while there to the Parisian buying public. The book, to be called Noa Noa - "fragrant," in Tahitian⁶ - was conceived as a uniquely multigeneric text, one that would blend poetry with prose and literature with art. Gauguin's reminiscences of his stay in Polynesia were to be interspersed with colorful watercolors depicting dramatic or symbolic scenes, as well as mysterious woodcuts and even photographs,⁷ and both the prose and the pictures would be executed in the carefully cultivated naïveté of style suitable to Gauguin's personal image and aesthetic interests (Wadley 122). Meanwhile, in deliberate contrast to this literary and artistic "savagery," Morice's refined Parisian verse would be scattered throughout the narrative, bringing into relief the symbolic distance between Gauguin's self-proclaimed "barbarism" and the "civilization" of his European counterparts (Wadley 122). The result, though Gauguin never saw it in its final published form, is a rich tapestry of representation and reference that has yet to be fully treated by scholars as a literary work unto itself. In this dissertation I will argue that one particularly climactic section of this book, commonly referred to by Gauguin scholars as the "Woodcutter Episode," has the ancient Assyrian Epic of Gilgamesh as its mythic intertext and source material.

⁶ According to Wadley, "When Gauguin was asked by a journalist what would be the title of his book, he explained: 'Noa Noa - a Tahitian word meaning "fragrant." In other words the book will be about what Tahiti exhales' " (141).

⁷ The collage-like format of Noa Noa offers a first glimpse into how figuratively it is meant to be received. As Isabelle Cahn has noted, "Gauguin did not hesitate to put some of his original works next to photographs, creating visual shocks through unusual juxtapositions [...]. This close association of drawings with simple commercial photos constitutes one of the most original aspects of Noa Noa's iconography, which was conceived as a juxtaposition of heterogeneous shapes and materials eschewing any linear or explanatory reading of the image" (105).
The Woodcutter Episode is a vignette in *Noa Noa* in which the artist recounts a day-trip into the forest with a Tahitian guide, with the purpose of collecting a special kind of fragrant wood for carving into sculpture (25). It is a climactic episode, occupying a central position in the manuscript, and emphasizing the narrator's sense of transformation from a "civilized" state to a "savage" one; he asserts with satisfaction at the end of the chapter, when the adventure is complete, that his European self is "[b]ien détruit en effet" ["well and truly destroyed" (28)]. In this story, the painter journeys deep into the heart of the forest with his guide, a friend from his village. They find a fragrant rosewood grove, savagely attack and destroy a beautiful tree there, and return home, triumphant, with the wood. The journey is framed with scenes from life in the village, and ends with the artist carving the wood into a sculpture, pleased with what has passed. As we will see, this episode strongly resembles the narrative arc of the first five tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which the hero, accompanied by his primitive friend and guide Enkidu, journeys into the forest to collect fragrant wood (cedar), and carries it back to have it carved into towering city gates.

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8 Rod Edmond has made the important point that we need to keep in mind the fragmentary nature of *Noa Noa*: "Gauguin was much less concerned with sequence than were later commentators on his text. Morice was given a free hand to insert Gauguin's additions and his own contributions where he thought fit" (261). Wadley too notes that the chapter divisions in *Noa Noa* have been questioned by some, but he feels that "there are clear enough indications in the margins of Gauguin's manuscript to justify their retention" (9). Furthermore, throughout *Noa Noa*'s different incarnations, the Woodcutter Episode continued to occupy the same central space in the overall work.

9 All quotations from *Noa Noa* in the original French come from the facsimile edition of Gauguin's original manuscript, which was published by Sagot-Le Garrec in 1954, having lain forgotten in the attic of the Sagot family mansion for many years (for a history of this manuscript, also referred to as the Draft MS, see Cahn pp. 93-95), and which is owned by Rutgers University. Because this is a hand-written document, there are sometimes no page numbers to accompany the French quotations. English translations and their accompanying page numbers come from Wadley's Salem House edition (published in 1985), which makes use of Jonathan Griffin's translations.
Both Noa Noa and Gilgamesh feature heroic protagonists who are guided by androgynous "primitives" deep into the heart of a dark forest. In both cases, the chopping of the wood in the forest is presented as an attack on a sacred living grove, and in both cases the wood is intended for use as a monument to the hero's name. Both heroes are deeply concerned with fame and their own mortality, and both, most strikingly, are drawn to their primitive guides in an intoxicating blend of exotic and erotic desire. These structural and thematic parallels between Gilgamesh and Noa Noa run deep, and invite a wide range of interpretive possibilities. In this dissertation, I argue that the chief contribution that recognizing Gilgamesh as a subtext makes to our understanding of Noa Noa is that it changes fundamentally our understanding of the symbolic weight of the woodcutter character, who was named Jotefa in later drafts. If we understand Jotefa as an analog to Gilgamesh's guide Enkidu, we begin inevitably to see him not just as a primitive but as a doppelgängér (as Enkidu is), and the effect of this deeper symbolic resonance is striking. If the Woodcutter is indeed a double of the artist, then the attraction that Gauguin feels for him goes beyond the colonialist exotico-eroticism of which it undoubtedly partakes. An erotic bond between the self and its double (in this case, a mythic self and a mythic double) demands, on one level, to be interpreted as a symbolic attraction. Our task here is to ascertain what it is symbolic of.

**Representation and Mimetic Desire**

In this dissertation, I will argue that the attraction between Gauguin and his double symbolizes what I will call "mimetic desire." This longing is distinct from the concept commonly known as "mimetic desire," René Girard's terminology denoting a
triangulation of subject-object relations. Rather, I refer to a desire for mimesis itself, a longing for union between the object of representation (in this case, the abstract concept) and its concrete manifestation as an artwork. This desire is allegorized in *Noa Noa* by a dangerous and unappeasable erotic tension, and it unfolds there between two homogeneous units (i.e., two doubles) because it is about a longing for the coming together of two essences of the same thing: inner meaning and outer form; abstract possibility and concrete reality. The symbolic tension between these sames is what drives Gauguin's approach to line, color, form, and material, as well as to Symbolism and artistic production. That he felt that tension and expressed it in terms of desire can be seen, for example, when he writes in *Diverses Choses*: “The painting I want to do is certainly far from being done, the desire is greater than my power, my weakness is enormous (enormous and weakness, hmm!). Let us sleep…” (WOS 135).

Perhaps we need to back up a bit, though. What can "mimesis" be, in the context of Symbolism? For Gauguin, the imitation of nature was the province of the unimaginative, the non-creator, the stultified Salon. "Comme ils sont bien sur la terre, les pompiers," he wrote to his friend Emile Schuffenecker in 1888, "avec leur trompe l'oeil

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10 See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965), where the author elaborates a literary-psychoanalytic theory according to which a subject's desire for an object is always motivated by a rival subject's desire for the same object. In other words, for Girard, desire is always mimetic; a repetition of already-witnessed desire by another. This theory is relevant to the present study in some ways, but will not factor into this dissertation because my approach is an aesthetic one, rather than a psychoanalytic one. I am interested here not so much in the imitation of desire, but in the desire for imitation (mimesis), acknowledging all the while that mimesis goes beyond imitation itself and applies to many different modes of copying, duplication, and creativity. Although I briefly considered adopting a different terminology for this idea - calling it instead "mimetic longing" - I felt ultimately that "longing" does not carry the same affective resonance as "desire." While longing implies passivity and can apply to a wide range of objects, "desire" seems to connote a more overtly libidinal mode and is more immediately recognizable as a force to be reckoned with.
de la nature. Nous seuls voguons sur le vaisseau fantôme avec notre imperfection fantasiste" (Oviri 41). 11 ["How down-to-earth they are, those pompiers, with their trompe l’oeil rendering of nature. We alone can sail on our phantom vessels with all our whimsical imperfections" (WOS 24)]. This is a common sentiment in Gauguin's writings, both public and private. The Naturalists, the Classicists, and even the Impressionists were far too invested in traditional mimesis, in copying nature. Their "trompe l'oeil" created nothing new, and damned their work not only to the horrible fate of unoriginality, but to the equally unappealing ontological status of worldliness. Symbolism, by contrast, was otherworldly, focusing on the contents of the "centre mystérieux de la pensée" (Oviri 172). 12 "Comme l'infini nous paraît plus tangible, devant une chose non définie," he continues in the same letter quoted above, indicating his art's ambition to represent the unrepresentable, to render in material form the immaterial (Oviri 41) ["How much more tangible the infinite appears to us when we are faced with some undefined thing" (WOS 24)].

Yet such an ambition still involves mimesis. As Elin Diamond writes in Unmaking Mimesis, "to use the soul rather than the landscape as model only shifts direction, produces yet another mimesis" (viii). The artist still aims to represent something, though the audience - and even the artist himself - may not know quite what it

12 This phrase, which for many critics is emblematic of Gauguin's main aesthetic goal, will resurface repeatedly throughout this dissertation. It comes from a collection of notes commonly referred to as Diverses Choses, which Gauguin compiled during his second stay in Oceania. Of the Impressionists, he writes, "Ils cherchèrent autour de l'oeil et non au centre mystérieux de la pensée, et de là tombèrent dans des raisons scientifiques" (Oviri 172) ["They focused their efforts around the eye, not in the mysterious center of thought, and from there they slipped into scientific reasons" (WOS 140)]. He considers this the ultimate limitation of the Impressionist project.
is; as Theodor Adorno has written, "no work of art can be accomplished except in so far as the subject puts its own being into it" (AT 60). For Adorno, who defines mimesis as "the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other" (AT 80), mimesis - more than just a copying - essentially functions as the mediating principle not only between subject and object but between universal and particular; between what Gauguin might call the "tangible" and the "infinite." For Adorno, this principle is necessarily present in all successful works of art, whether they be conceived of as abstract or traditionally representational. "Undoubtedly," he argues, "the moment of mimesis that is indispensable to the work of art is universal, but in order to attain it art has to go through the individual subject with its irreducible particularity" (AT 60). Thus, mimesis takes on a reconciliatory power, a synthetic role in which it brings together binary principles. Mimesis is about fusion.

In Michael Taussig's historical narrative of mimesis - Mimesis and Alterity - the imagined power of a true mimesis is spelled out in visceral terms. Taussig sees mimesis as both the product and the site of a type of longing, "a devouring force" that "comes at us from another direction, seducing us by playing on our yearning for the real. Would that it would, would that it could, come clean, this true real. I so badly want that wink of recognition, that complicity with the nature of nature" (xxvi). The language of seduction here is not incidental but fundamental to Taussig's conception of mimesis. In every form it takes, whether aesthetic, linguistic, or behavioral, the mimetic impulse is an expression of longing for access to the True, the Real, the Universal, that Thing which we sense must exist and yet which we, by definition, can never quite represent. This longing has long been equated to - or at least discussed in metaphors of - libidinal desire. The
successful expression of the universal in the particular, that "wink of recognition" that Taussig celebrates, may be nothing short of ecstatic.

The libidinal theory of mimesis has roots in a Platonic tradition, in which erotic desire can serve as a dialectical conduit between the sorrows of the flesh and the divine truth manifested in Plato's theory of Forms or Ideas.13 Closer to Gauguin's own time, among the Romantics, Friedrich Nietzsche might be the best spokesperson for a similar idea. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche imagines the successful artwork as a coupling between the image-making order of Apollo and the mystical, universalizing music of Dionysus. "[T]he continuous evolution of art," he writes, "is bound up with the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in much the same way as reproduction depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation" (14). In this early work of his, Nietzsche imagines these periods of reconciliation as "a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'Will'," which allows them to "engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure" (14). For Nietzsche, the fusion of principles is again the key element in the successful artwork; their coupling, like that of a sexual pair, "engenders" the new. From a modern perspective, the same metaphor is all the more vividly pronounced in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, where he describes the "likeness between sexual and aesthetic experience" this way: "During orgasm the beloved image changes, combining rigidification with extreme vividness. Orgasm is a bodily prototype of aesthetic experience" (AT 253). For him, aesthetic experience echoes the fusion found in sexual experience: not just the joining of male and female, but the dialectical relationship

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13 This Platonic tradition will be fleshed out in Chapter 3.
between universal and particular, the dynamic and eternal immaterial (vividness) and the quotididian present (rigidification). "The dynamic quality of artworks is grounded," he continues, "in the fact that they are man-made artefacts; as such they belong by definition to the 'native realm of spirit,' but in order to be identical with themselves they need the presence of the heterogeneous, the non-identical, the amorphous" (253). Essentially, Adorno speaks here of the coupling between the Dionysiac and the Apolline.

As a Symbolist, painting and writing on the cusp of the twentieth century, Gauguin occupies a position that moves between Romantic and Modernist mimetic modes. Deeply informed by a neoplatonic, antiamaterialist worldview that combined the aesthetic ambitions of his artistic milieu with the philosophical ambivalence of his Catholic seminary education, Gauguin felt the libidinal charge of mimetic desire. As a Modernist, however, he brings to it a dissonant quality as well. For Adorno, "Dissonance (and its counterparts in visual arts)" is "the trademark, as it were, of modernism" (AT 21).

It is recognizable by the way in which it "lets in the beguiling moment of sensuousness by transfiguring it into its antithesis, that is, pain" (AT 21). The appeal of this dissonance serves as a dramatic reminder of the rupture in core principles between Romantic and Modernist aesthetics. What is hinted at in Adorno's praise of dissonance is a sense that the lack of perfection, the slippage, between the artwork and its mimetic object can be fruitful; a sort of felicitous infelicity, to borrow an Austinian term.\footnote{J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech, has influenced literary and cultural studies - particularly with respect to gender - in important ways. At the core of his theory is the sense that there are two kinds of speech - "constative" utterances, which state facts about the world, and "performative" utterances, utterances with which the speaker "is doing something rather than merely saying something." Aside from their status as actions, a chief characteristic of performative utterances is that they cannot be classified as either true or false. Instead, Austin uses the term "infelicity" to describe "[t]he various ways in...
a concept of felicitous infelicity is not itself new to Modernism, but the element of pain that Adorno describes is a profound departure.

To trace an awareness of felicitous infelicity in Western aesthetics, we can turn to earlier writers like Gotthold Lessing, in the eighteenth century, and Walter Pater in the nineteenth. These theorists praised imperfections of imitation where those imperfections improved upon a picture. "There are passions, and degrees of passion, which are expressed by the ugliest possible contortions of countenance, and throw the whole body into such a forced position, that all the beautiful lines, which cover its surface in a quiet attitude, are lost," writes Lessing in the Laocöon (1766). "From all such emotions the ancient masters either abstained entirely, or reduced them to that lower degree, in which they are capable of a certain measure of beauty" (12). Lessing praises this privileging of beauty over verisimilitude as an aesthetic virtue prolonging the vitality of the work of art itself. The same attitude can be seen in Pater's essay on Winckelmannn (who also inspired Lessing's treatise), where Pater writes that great works of art "affect not by accumulation of detail, but by abstracting from it" (138). This principle, says Pater, "keeps passion always below that degree of intensity at which it must necessarily be transitory, never winding up the features to one note of anger, or desire, or surprise" (139). For Lessing, the infelicity adds greater beauty to an artwork; for Pater it adds timelessness. But in either case what is sought is a greater degree of pleasure, not a

which a performative utterance may be unsatisfactory" - that is, the ways in which it fails to "perform" its function. I adopt this term in my discussion of mimesis not only to emphasize that mimesis is performative, but also because it carries the implication that mimetic differentiation in aesthetics cannot be classified as either "true" or "false." See Austin, How To Do Things With Words, pp. 6-8.
(modernist) dialectical conversion of pleasure into pain. Yet this last is precisely the form of dissonance that Gauguin provokes in his writing and his art.

In the dissertation that follows, I will argue that *Noa Noa*, no less than Gauguin's paintings and sculptures, straddles this divide between Romantic idealism and Modernist dissonance. In the Woodcutter Episode, I argue, Gauguin presents us with a parable of aesthetic pursuit and mimetic desire, one that is recognizable as such only through its association with an ancient text allegorizing the same problem.\(^{15}\)

**Mimesis, On the Double**

Doubling is fundamental to mimesis, which Taussig describes as "the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (xiii). The doppelgänger is a copy of the self, a mimetic product of psychic and metaphysical projection. But the doppelgänger is also a copy of other things; as a literary conceit, it is a copy of literary forebears, mimetically reproducing the affective response provoked by seeing two where one should be. Any author evoking such a well-established trope seeks to re-produce in his reader the sensations of recognition and the Uncanny with which she has become familiar in other modes and other contexts: another mimesis. And if the double is to be recognized as such, producing the cognitive pleasure that literary tropes

\(^{15}\) For an in-depth discussion of Gauguin's use of "parabole" (parable) in his paintings, see Vojtech Jirat-Wasiutynski, *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism*, New York: Garland, 1978, pp. 200-207. As Jirat-Wasiutynski shows, the term "parable" implied for Gauguin a certain blending of iconographical conventions meant to provoke an emotional response. These conventions included colors, gestures, forms, and symbols. Parable, in other words, is very similar to "allegory" for Gauguin, and does not necessarily imply a moral dimension.
provide, then the reader must first engage in an active reading, pinpointing sameness, “exploring difference,” and resurrecting or re-producing in her own mind those doubles she has seen before: another mimesis.

As Diamond notes, there are at least “two uses of mimesis”: “mimesis as representation, with its many doublings and unravelings of model, subject, identity” and “mimesis as a mode of reading that transforms an object into a gestus or a dialectical image” (ii). As I hope will be clear in the dissertation that follows, the mimesis that Gauguin performs in *Noa Noa* is inseparable from the political and economic conditions of his privilege; any understanding of his doubling through Gilgamesh has to take into account how his ability to copy – and his freedom to deviate – result from this historical positioning. In other words, Gauguin’s mimetic impulse in *Noa Noa* will be registered as an aesthetic allegory and as a political act, a gestus, that implicates Gauguin in epistemic violence.

When Gauguin recasts himself as Gilgamesh in *Noa Noa*, he engages in multiple mimetic layerings. Not only does he copy the King, and replicate the King's journey, but he also finds (or creates) in his woodcutter guide a copy of himself, as well as a double of the king's double. Yet, as is essential to all mimesis, Gauguin's mimetic products do not stop at the copy; they involve all of the elements that Taussig describes. In addition to copying, imitating, and making models, Gauguin arrives at felicitous infelicities in his doublings, most notably in finding the space to enact a fantasy of savageness and dominance. He uses these infelicities to explore difference and, ultimately, to yield into and become his Other. In doing so, I will show, he copies Gilgamesh yet again.
This mimetic impulse undergirding the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa* thus functions on multiple levels. As an allegory *about* mimesis, it is also a narrative that *enacts* mimesis in a way that can be cast in metaphysical, psychoanalytic, aesthetic, and even political terms. As he did at many other points in his career, Gauguin performs in *Noa Noa* a mythic role; in copying Gilgamesh, he engages in what Mircea Eliade would call "mythic behavior," which involves "the repetition of an exemplary scenario" and which characterizes "the behavior of the man of the archaic societies, who finds the very source of his existence in the myth" (30). For Freud, too, this type of mimicry is a hallmark of the archaic and the primitive; thence derives its uncanniness. He regards the doppelgänger as an emblematic figure of the Uncanny, the hidden-foreign which disturbs the boundaries of the ego.\(^\text{16}\) Such disturbances, says Freud, "are a harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people" ("The Uncanny" 941). Indeed, he ascribes the modern subject's experience of the Uncanny to the fact that "We - or our primitive forefathers - once believed that [supernatural] possibilities were realities, and were convinced that they actually happened" (949). Though we have all grown up and moved on, says Freud, these old beliefs "still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation" (949). And so the

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\(^{16}\) In his essay on "The Uncanny," Freud defines this affective sensation as "related to what is frightening - to what arouses dread and horror" (930). In particular, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and familiar" (930). The ambivalence at the core of this particular aesthetic effect can be observed in its linguistic construction in German; Freud notes that "among its different shades of meaning the word 'heimlich' [homely] exhibits one which is identical to its opposite, 'unheimlich'" (uncanny); "on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Nor 933).
Uncanny, and its emissary, the double, becomes a modern manifestation of the atavistic primitive unconscious still ensconced within the psyche.

But Gauguin is not, himself, a "primitive." Rather, he is a modern man mimicking "primitive," mythic behavior; that is, he mimics both Gilgamesh himself, and the "primitive" mentality that seeks such mythic exemplars. This double mimesis, I will argue in Chapter 3, ruptures the ontological status of Gauguin as an individual, rendering him what Roland Barthes would call an "anachronic subject," one who "simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture [...] and in the destruction of that culture." As such, Barthes writes, "He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse" (*Pleasure* 14). That Gauguin's ability as a subject to perform this double mimesis is a direct function of his privileged positioning within a hegemonic political order reflects the characteristic that mimesis has of being, as Diamond calls it, “impossibly double, simultaneously the stake and the shifting sands: order and potential disorder, reason and madness” (v). Indeed, perhaps in all mimetic acts – in the mimetic impulse itself – there lurks the danger, the epistemic violence, the cultural hedonism that can be either celebrated or decried. This is the dual nature of mimesis: “On the one hand, it speaks to our desire for universality, coherence, unity, tradition, and, on the other, it unravels that unity through improvisations, embodied rhythm, powerful instantiations of subjectivity, and [...] impersonation, the latter involving outright mimicry” (Diamond v).

That Gauguin would seize on the trope of the primitive double to allegorize his own mimetic and anti-mimetic impulses is fitting. The association of the primitive with an uncanny propensity for copying or doubling is not confined to Freud but arises out of a discursive formation that, in Taussig's history, dates back at least to Charles Darwin's
1832 experience at Tierra del Fuego, where Darwin's "wonder at the mimetic prowess of primitives" becomes "a foundational moment in the equation of savagery with mimesis" (xiv). But this confluence of figures also has political and metaphysical implications, for better or for worse. It's clear that Gauguin's ability to seize on an archaic figure as his aesthetic and mythic alter ego arises out of his own uniquely privileged positioning as white European colonizing subject. In particular, the liberties that he takes with the Gilgamesh story reflect this dramatic inequality and appear to qualify his identification here as precisely that type of "self-indulgent identification that reflect[s] 'the ultimate violence [...] appropriation in the guise of an embrace" (Fuss 9, quoting Sommer). It is an example of what Diana Fuss calls the "violent fantasies of displacement that underlie our nostalgic identifications with cultural others - fantasy idealizations that enact imaginary usurpations" (8). In this respect, it models not only Gauguin's privileged political positioning, but also his aesthetic approach, which, as I will show, is infused with a discourse of domination and usurpation centered on foregrounding the centrality of the artist's subjectivity.

Although Gauguin enacts dominance through this particular identification, ultimately the true power of his privilege is to be found in the felicitous infelicities of

17 In The Voyage of the Beagle, Darwin described his encounters with indigenous peoples in the region of Tierra del Fuego by highlighting in particular their capacity for imitating the Europeans. "They are excellent mimics," he writes: "as often as we coughed or yawned, or made any odd motion, they immediately imitated us." Moreover, this tendency is not confined to gesture, but pertains to language as well: "They could repeat with perfect correctness each word in any sentence we addressed them, and they remembered such words for some time." In his account, Darwin marvels at the difficulty of this "ludicrous habit," but manages nevertheless to reduce it to an instinctive and animalistic impulse when he remarks that "All savages appear to possess, to an uncommon degree, this power of mimicry." It is in this moment, Taussig holds, that mimicry and the primitive become fused in the public imagination. See Darwin, The Voyage of the Beagle, pp. 183-184.
mimetic difference. Where critics rightly charge him with inauthenticity, Gauguin also implicitly opens up for himself a space where a metaphysical, transtemporal form of self-fashioning becomes possible, disrupting the boundaries and limitations of monadic selfhood. The type of "mythic behavior" in which he engages, by reenacting Gilgamesh, involves the "instantiation of a transhuman model," and a concomitant "breakaway from profane time through a moment which opens out into the Great Time" of myth, a time that lies outside of the strictures of the historical moment (Eliade 30). Such dispersal of selfhood is endemic to the figure of the doppelgänger, whom Freud considers (following Rank) as "an insurance against the destruction of the ego" and "a preservation against extinction" ("The Uncanny" 940). By doubling himself - particularly in the character of an ancient mythic king - Gauguin insures a bit of his own immortality. And indeed, his failures, his infelicities, his authenticities in this regard may be considered essential to its success as a metaphysical and aesthetic project. "Genuineness," writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, "is nothing other than a defiant and obstinate insistence on the monadological form which social oppression imposes on man. Anything that does not wish to wither should rather take on itself the stigma of the inauthentic. For it lives on the mimetic heritage" (MM 154). In this sense, Gauguin's lack of genuineness allows for an existential resistance to the socially- (and perhaps metaphysically- ) imposed monadological order, and by extension, to the "withering" effects of historical time. In seeking out and conflating exoticist images that were detached from historical specificity, this is precisely what Gauguin seems to have been aiming for.

The notion that a certain inauthenticity would carry emancipatory potential for Adorno is closely related to the power of the felicitous infelicity that I have highlighted in
Pater and Lessing. The artwork's ability to endure, like the subject's, derives from that redemptive slippage between the actual moment of Laocoon's (authentic) pain - which, in a true copy, would be limited by its specificity to one historical moment - and the artist's abstracted, inauthentic rendering of it. The sculptor copies Laocoon's form but shows not Laocoon's pain; rather, pain *itself* becomes the mimetic object. Yet, in abstracting thus, the sculptor preserves in eternal vitality both Laocoon and his pain. Thus abstraction, inauthenticity, the "exploration of difference" endemic to mimesis, becomes the medium for the eternal preservation of an essence that is very much alive. This is a bit of a conundrum; abstraction and mimesis are commonly considered to be opposite impulses. Yet they carry the same life-giving promise.18

Some readers might object to the equation of abstraction with inauthenticity. Yet what do both of these terms imply if not a measured and deliberate distance from the mimetic object? Furthermore, when that object of mimesis is the self, mimetic representation involves a distancing performance that may carry both the charge of inauthenticity and the redemptive powers of abstraction. This principle lies at the heart of modernist literary experimentation, where we see it, for example, in Virginia Woolf's exhortation to her reader to pursue an androgynous mode of writing which, in its very

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18 The belief that there is vitality in abstraction is central to the ideology of primitivism, as evidenced in Gauguin's statement that "You will always find vital sap coursing through the primitive arts" (*WOS* 71) (more on this in Chapter 4). However, my understanding of abstraction differs markedly from that found in prevalent turn-of-the-century aesthetic theories such as those of José Ortega y Gasset and Wilhelm Worringer. In *Abstraction and Empathy*, one of the earliest in-depth treatises on "primitive" aesthetics, Worringer posits abastraction as an attempt to erase the arbitrary and threatening life-essence of things. The will to abstraction was the urge to take the mimetic object out of the "unending flux of being, purify it of its dependence on life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary" (17). For Ortega y Gasset, the abstract quality of modern art "presupposes the annulment of spontaneous life" (22).
inauthenticity, opens up new possibilities for representation, connection, and above all, vitality:

[I]t is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. [...] And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised. Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall; it cannot grow in the minds of others. (104)

For Woolf, true and lasting vitality in literary representation can only come about when the writer steps out of her own monadic selfhood (whether that selfhood be conceived as authentic or socially imposed) and embraces otherness in a performance of aesthetic androgyny. Importantly, such a performance allows for "fertilisation" and "growth"; to complete the reproductive metaphor, she writes that the "marriage of opposites must be consummated" (104). Failure to abstract the self in this way, on the other hand, dooms the work to "withering" - the same term used by Adorno. In the mimetic garden, paradoxically, abstraction is the life-giving element.

**The Double Performance: Androgyny and the Mimetic Other**

It is not by coincidence that I turn to Woolf for a paradigmatic Modernist theory of abstraction. Rather, I choose Woolf in part because her theory of abstraction in *A Room of One's Own* centers rhetorically on the figure of the androgyne. Androgynous literature, for Woolf, is literature that lives and breathes on account of the slippage between the author's authentic self and his or her mimetic production. Woolf's embrace of the androgyne as a figure of aesthetic reconciliation derives from a long tradition stretching, again, back through the Romantics and all the way to Plato. But androgyny is
also implicated in the liberating/dangerous double-consciousness of the mimetic impulse: in addition to being inherently double (male/female), the androgyne is also the product of a double mimesis – copying the self / copying the Other.

Androgyny figures prominently in Gauguin's ongoing project of self-fashioning through the later decades of the nineteenth century, as well as, most notably, in the Woodcutter Episode of Noa Noa, where his Tahitian guide - at once the mimetic double and the object of his desire - is described as "l'androgyne." The guide's androgynous nature is an important parallel to Enkidu's similarly primitive androgyny in The Epic of Gilgamesh, where the latter's hybridity serves to highlight Gilgamesh's own dominating, civilizing impulse. At the same time, the androgyne in Noa Noa functions for Gauguin as a symbol of mimetic reconciliation. He is not just a geographical guide but an aesthetic one - even a pedagogical one - who leads the artist down a path of mimetic desire and into an ecstatic confrontation with nature. As a figure of reconciliation, Gauguin's androgyne evokes other nineteenth-century deployments of the androgynous. For example, Susan Sidlauskas has argued that Paul Cézanne's portraits of his wife, widely criticized for their "dehumanizing" androgynous aspects, in fact demonstrate the power of reconciliation in androgyne and abstraction alike. In her discussion of the Hortense portraits, Sidlauskas offers a reading of her androgynous appearance that highlights the interpretive potential opened by the felicitous infelicity of an abstracted portrait (in itself a paradoxical concept): "Her features have been subtly but unmistakeably geometricized, not away from resemblance (although that is perhaps one consequence of the adjustments) but toward Cézanne's idiosyncratic ideal, formed from equal parts male and female which are now impossible to pry apart" (196). In the case of Cézanne, whom
Gauguin knew, collected, and very much admired, such a reconciliation may have enabled "the resolution of his misogyny," while it simultaneously enacted an ecstatic merging of the disparate artistic media of painting and drawing, color and line. In the process, it is vitality, rather than dehumanization, which ultimately emerges. "In the interpenetration of two media," writes Sidlauskas, "which dissolves both visual and hierarchal distinctions, Cézanne paid metaphorical and material homage to the process by which the living being is transmuted into art" (197).

As Sidlauskas shows, Cézanne's approach to the androgynous in painting - his interest in androgyny as an "idiosyncratic ideal" both signifying and enacting reconciliation - was informed in part by the long tradition of androgyny in French painting that preceded him,19 and in part by a complicated set of shifting priorities and relations in the public's attitude toward gender differentiation at the end of the nineteenth century, a period in which "the idea emerged and gained strength that 'masculine' and 'feminine' are ever-shifting points upon the same elastic continuum" (143). This polysemous matrix of philosophical, religious, cultural, aesthetic, and scientific associations precipitated both a reawakening to an ancient tradition of androgynous reconciliation, and a cultural shift that provided aesthetic inspiration to a generation of artists and writers. Among these was Joséphin Péladan, founder of the Salon de la Rose+Croix, who

19 See Sidlauskas, pp. 148-150. Allegorical painting in particular was an established arena for gender play in representation, because allegorical figures are "free of even the faintest requirements of literal resemblance" (149). As Cézanne and his contemporaries were aware, "Examples of this gender play are legion in a monumental group of paintings at the Louvre" - the *Marie de Medici* cycle - in which "the figure of France, who appears in nearly every picture [...] ranges from a graceful [male] courtier to a full-breasted woman with flowing hair" (Sidlauskas 149).
argued for the aesthetic and moral superiority of [...] the androgyne. He wrote, "What is beautiful in man is what there is that is feminine, the beauty of a woman is what she has that is masculine, in proportions beyond formula but conceivable." His paean to the paragon who incorporated both the feminine and masculine - yet transcended base sexuality - concluded, "Oh initial sex, definitive sex, absolute in love, absolute in form, sex which denies sex, the sex of eternity. Praise be to you, Androgyne!" (Sidlauskas 153)

As we will see in Chapter 1, Péladan's ideas circulated prominently in Gauguin's milieu, and Péladan himself was heavily influenced by the seemingly androgynous and reconciliatory aspects of ancient Near Eastern art. His influence on Gauguin in this respect is likely.

A similar dynamic, whereby the androgyne functions as a symbol of aesthetic and ontological reconciliation, is at work in Gauguin's deployment of the androgyne. In Noa Noa, he emphasizes in particular what he sees as the primitive dimension of androgyny. For Gauguin, as I will show, the androgynous and the primitive are synonymous with one another, and both carry the redemptive power of felicitous infelicity. Thus, just as the primitive is firmly embedded in the modern understanding of mimesis, so it is also in the modern understanding of abstraction (yet another contradiction for us to chew over).

Furthermore, for Gauguin androgyny is a matter not just of representation but of performance. In Noa Noa he lusts over the androgyne, fantasizes becoming himself an androgyne (and a primitive), and finally merges with the androgyne, the double of himself. His yielding-into-other, of becoming-other, begins with mimesis - the recognition, the copy, the double - and ends with abstraction. In this way, Gauguin performs a kind of double transvestism, dressing his (male) self as androgynous and his (Western/modern) self as primitive. In interpreting this performance, I will draw on Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui's understanding of transvestism and performance to show how closely
the performance of "androgyne" and the performance of "primitive" are linked in Gauguin's project of self-fashioning. As Sifuentes-Jáuregui has written, performance, like mimesis, always carries implications of doubling; he pauses to "underline an etymological character of the idea: per-form. This is literally a doubling on the side of another form - also, a simulation of an 'original' or a deformation of such" (2-3). All three of these categories apply in Gauguin's performance of both the primitive and the androgyne. In the Woodcutter Episode, Gauguin both admires and performs androgyny - admiring the androgyne who walks before him, and performing androgyny in his mind, as he imagines himself as a woman. In doing so, he creates a simulation of an "original," resurrecting a fantasy of an originary past, and he also commits a deformation of that original by introducing a quintessentially modernist form of dissonance.

As Sifuentes-Jáuregui's formulation of transvestism indicates, cross-dressing enables, via a mechanism evocative of Adorno's felicitous inauthenticity, a paradoxical form of self realization; in this, "transvestism presents readers and viewers with a challenge" (3). The challenge lies in the gulf between the viewer's perception of the transvestite's performance, and the transvestite's understanding of his or her own inscription in and through that performance. For example, Sifuentes-Jáuregui differentiates the viewer's understanding of transvestite performance:

- Transvestism is about representing the other
- Transvestism is about occupying the place of the Other
- Transvestism is about (re)creating the figure of the (m)other (3)

from the transvestite's own understanding of the same performance:

- Transvestism is about representing the Self
- Transvestism is about becoming the Self
- Finally, transvestism is about (re)creating the Self (3)
In other words, transvestism is about self-fashioning - "a forming of the self," as Greenblatt put it. Sifuentes-Jáuregui notes that "transvestite subjects do not necessarily imagine themselves becoming some other subject, but rather they may conceive of transvestism as an act of self-realization" (4). Thus, as a form of self-fashioning, transvestism carries a special twist: it is about "(re)creating the Self" vis à vis the apparently inauthentic identification with an Other.

This type of self-fashioning resembles Gauguin's primitivist project in terms of both his self-fashioning and his aesthetic pursuits (indeed, the two may be inseparable from each other). In fact, we would do well to think of Gauguin's primitivist aesthetics - with their dual aim at art and personhood, their dual emphasis on savageness and androgyny - as a kind of double transvestism. The unique efficacy of the Woodcutter episode lies in the way that it encapsulates and allegorizes this double duplicity. At the same time, with its infusion of Ancient Near Eastern mythology into a Polynesian setting, the Woodcutter episode epitomizes Gauguin's doctrine of transposition, according to which the melding of disparate mythic symbolic modes functions as the site of meaning making.20 We should perhaps, then, think of Gauguin - especially the Gauguin of Noa Noa - as a cultural transvestite. As he (cross)dresses himself in the garb of the savage, doubles himself in his savage partner, and ultimately fuses with the object of his mimetic longing and erotic desire, Gauguin performs in the narrative of the woodcutter a dance of self-realization that fertilizes and grows out of the abstracted space of the inauthentic.

The challenge that Gauguin's performance presents to us, as his viewers, lies in

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20 As June Hargrove explains, transposition was "the touchstone of Gauguin's aesthetic credo. The quality of the transposition must therefore be deduced from the freedom with which [a] painting's sources are transformed, and sources critical for Gauguin's late works emerge from the repetition of motifs across his oeuvre" (558).
discerning what is authentic in it. To what extent will we call him out for being merely self-serving, and to what extent can we accept it as a valid form of self-realization?

As Sifuentes-Jáuregui's discussion of transvestism illustrates, the transvestite's obsession with "producing an effect of 'realness'" entails a further complication as well, since "on the one hand, transvestism signals a 'crossing' from one gender space to another," while "on the other hand, it is a travesty or a lie" (4). This double meaning produces "a fascinating dialectical movement: by showing the other's travesty through the denaturalization of genders, transvestism produces a 'realness' for itself; and, by re-producing the other's 'realness,' by re-presenting the other, by constructing the other's 'realness,' transvestism also reveals a 'falseness' (that is, the construction) of the other" (4). In other words, the enactment of transvestism has the capacity to highlight, via its own inauthenticity, the unacknowledged inauthenticity of the presumed categories it seeks to recreate. The transvestite illustrates the mutability of gender and the constructedness of "natural" femininity. As Diamond notes, this double action inheres in mimeses itself: “In imitating (upholding the truth value of) the model, the mimos becomes an other, is being an other, thus a shapeshifting Proteus, a panderer of reflections, a destroyer of forms.” Once again, then, imagining Gauguin as a cultural transvestite proves instructive here, particularly with respect to Noa Noa; as he later wrote to Daniel de Monfried, his collaboration with Morice was designed in part to demonstrate the inauthenticity of "civilized refinement": "I thought it might tell us a little about the relative value of the two - the naïve clumsy savage or the corrupted product of civilization" (quoted in Wadley 105).
Scholarship on Gauguin

Gauguin's cultural transvestism enacts a doubling that is as endemic to his personal self-fashioning as to his aesthetic project. Descending from a well-to-do French family that settled for a period in Peru, Gauguin exploited his familial connection to South America to emphasize a split selfhood, a sense that within him there were "beaucoup de mélanges [...] ou pour mieux dire, il y a deux races" (Oviri 275) ["many mixtures [...] or rather, there are two races"]. In Avant et Après, a loose memoir and collection of notes from the end of his life, he wrote hauntingly that "l'homme traîne, dit-on, son double avec lui" ["man drags, they say, his double with him"]. Moreover, Gauguin explicitly tied this motif of doubles and doubling to his artistic project, as in an 1899 letter to Andre Fontainas in which he compared his work to the Bible, "in which doctrine [...] expresses itself in symbolic form presenting a double aspect" (Thomson, Gauguin 172). This doubleness resides, Gauguin tells his reader, in his work's polysemous qualities; "this is the literal, superficial, figurative, mysterious meaning of a parable" (172). Given that he states this aspiration so clearly in connection with his paintings, it only makes sense that we would expect the same doubleness of form and meaning to prevail in the painter's writings. Yet this angle on Gauguin's written work has often been overlooked.

Perhaps on account of the disciplinary split that persists even between closely related fields, Noa Noa has most often attracted the attention of scholars as a rich source of evidence about what Gauguin’s life on Tahiti was like, and how it is reflected in his paintings from that period, and not necessarily as a literary work. This tendency reflects

a disciplinary bent towards the biographical and material elements of artistic production that, I argue, needs to be complicated by symbolic and narratological literary study. Examples of scholarly studies that treat the text chiefly as literature, and only secondarily as history, are comparatively rare. With a few notable exceptions – in particular Rod Edmond’s *Representing the South Pacific* and Edward J. Hughes’s *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature*, both of which will be treated more extensively in later chapters – *Noa Noa* has been handled as an art historical artifact or a memoir purporting to recapture the truth of Gauguin’s experience on Tahiti.\(^2\)

One clear example of this approach is to be found in Nancy Mowll Mathews’s monograph, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*. Since her aims are biographical, Mowll Mathews makes use of *Noa Noa* to interpret certain key elements in Gauguin’s life and public persona, with particular attention to the book’s erotic overtones (these are the most relevant to her purposes, of course). Mowll Mathews does acknowledge that although “certain passages are descriptive enough of what he actually encountered that the writing seems rooted in his actual experience,” overall the “eerie light in which he casts these experiences [...] helps to raise his account above the standard tourist literature to something resembling symbolist fiction” (178). Nevertheless her analysis of the text centers on its relationship to the reality of Gauguin’s life on Tahiti, which she explores using copious and diligent research that allows her to confirm certain aspects of the

\(^2\) A further exception to this tendency can be found in Nicholas Wadley's introduction to his English edition of Gauguin's original manuscript: "*Noa Noa* is autobiographical in character, but it is at the same time essentially an imaginative work, dealing freely in invented and/or ready-made images. Its main sources are Gauguin's own experiences and Maori myth and legend. These are woven into an evocative narrative form, which meanders between external reality, symbol and emotive fantasy. In these senses *Noa Noa*, more than all Gauguin's other writings, is an exact literary counterpoint to his painted and carved images" (9).
narrative (Tehamana was a real person, for instance, and around thirteen years old (179)), while questioning others.

Like many scholars who write about *Noa Noa*, Mowll Mathews pays particular attention to the Woodcutter Episode. This is mostly because the episode itself is infused with a sexual tension between the artist and his Tahitian guide that makes it impossible to ignore, particularly for someone writing an “erotic life.” Mowll Mathews suggests that the Woodcutter Episode is based on an actual experience, a day-trip into the forest that Gauguin took not with a Tahitian guide but with a young French friend called Lieutenant P. Jénot (185). An admirer of Gauguin, Jénot later wrote about the friendship he had developed with the artist during Gauguin’s first stay in Tahiti, and his reminiscences, although subject to the problems of memory, provide important insights into Gauguin’s biography. Based on Jénot’s account in “Le premier séjour de Paul Gauguin,” published in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* in 1956, Mowll Mathews concludes that “it was Jénot who led Gauguin up into the mountains to the home of an old man who could supply wood for Gauguin’s sculptures” (185). For Mowll Mathews, Jénot is another in a long line of younger men who were impressed by Gauguin and who gave themselves over to his dominating charisma on an intellectual, emotional, and possibly erotic level. This “erotic life” is the framework through which she interprets both Jénot and his reincarnation as the Woodcutter, writing that “If, in *Noa Noa*, Gauguin transformed the French lieutenant into a Tahitian, it may have been to protect the man who later returned to France and married, and it may also have been to add the spice of interracial coupling to an already provocative story” (185). Here the shift between the discernible historical circumstances and their presentation in the narrative is explained in a kind of euhemeristic approach:
Gauguin wants to protect his friend and possible lover Jénot from the prying and judgmental eyes of the European audience, and at the same time he wants to pique that very audience’s interest by shocking them with a tale that strongly suggests a double transgression.

Although Mowll Mathews makes a convincing case for Jénot as the real-life inspiration for the Woodcutter Episode, her reading of Jénot’s Tahitian transformation is limited by the need for an explanation of the text that fits her biographical project; it does not account for the literary nature of the work. If, in *Noa Noa*, Gauguin transformed his French lieutenant into a Tahitian, I would argue, we should explore not only the biographical implications, but the literary, political, aesthetic, and philosophical resonances of this maneuver. That journey into the forest may have been inspired by an experience that Gauguin actually had with Jénot, but he is under no obligation to reproduce his experiences on paper exactly as they occurred in real life. When he is found to have changed the script, he is at least as likely to have done so for artistic reasons as pragmatic ones.

The scholarly tendency with respect to *Noa Noa* that I am critiquing here reflects two issues at once. The first is the hermeneutical interest that an art historical approach takes in biography and intentionality as central to its scholarly pursuit. Such an approach has tremendous benefits in exposing contradictions, exploring important influences or relationships, and historicizing innovations in content and form. However, it also entails significant drawbacks in assessing a text like *Noa Noa*, limiting its narrative potential and boxing in its symbolic resonance – in other words, its fragrance. In a sense, it amounts to what Roland Barthes might call "giving a text an Author": "To give a text an Author is to
impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final sign, to close the writing" (Image 147). Although as a scholar I cannot avoid giving *Noa Noa* an Author - and indeed, historical specificity is in many ways essential to my enterprise here - I hope to be able to open the space for interpretation of *Noa Noa* by recognizing and demonstrating its multigeneric nature and its polysemous qualities as a work of art.

At the same time, a second, related issue arises here as well, which is the question of genre: What kind of text is *Noa Noa* if it is not, as billed, “Gauguin’s Tahitian Journal”? I have said that the tendency to evaluate the text based on its historical content in relation to Gauguin’s paintings reflects a desire to see the text as autobiography, rather than literature. Yet autobiography and literature are not, of course, opposite or mutually exclusive categories. Instead they are complex and highly varied practices that inflect and overlap one another in ways that are epistemologically intricate and often difficult to discern. As Paul de Man has pointed out, “Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres” (68). For de Man, autobiography is “not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (70). Thus the problem with interpreting *Noa Noa* as autobiography is twofold, and also paradoxical: it lies on the one hand in the limitations which autobiography as genre places on symbolic depth, and on the other hand in the impossibility of defining autobiography as genre to begin with.

This is not to say that there is no value in collecting biography from *Noa Noa*; indeed, the knowledge that Mowll Mathews has provided – that the trip into the forest
most likely did not occur exactly as it was written – is precisely what opens this episode up so generously to my own literary interpretations. However, it is important to redefine our understanding of the nature of this peculiar text, a simulated memoir weaving together reality with fantasy throughout its structure. In many ways a deeply modernist text, in spite of its early date, *Noa Noa* sets out to challenge the linear structure of conventional narrative, in turn taking a swipe at the conventionality of its bourgeois readership. Thus we should seek to understand Gauguin’s rewriting of the forest journey not just from the biographical perspective that has already been adequately explored, but from a literary one as well. Gauguin was if anything a committed borrower, who once wrote to Daniel de Monfried that as an artist he must “[a]yez toujours devant vous les Persans, les Cambodgiens et un peu de l'Egyptien” (*Lettres* 113) ["have always before you the Persians, the Cambodians, and a little of the Egyptian"],\(^{23}\) and whose thirst for eclectic literary and artistic sources reflected not only, very likely, a troubled sense of self, but also a particular aesthetic drive. Understanding the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a source has important implications for evaluating Gauguin’s aesthetic and thematic concerns, because *Gilgamesh* provided Gauguin with the perfect context for exploring his anxieties about fame and mortality, criminality and power, while at the same time infusing his Tahitian journey with morbid fascination and mythic import. Uncovering this intertextual moment, and examining how Gauguin has made use of it, forces us to come to terms with the close if uncomfortable relationship between the artist’s modernist ambitions and his imperialist drives.

Those imperialist drives can be seen not only in Gauguin's privileged over-borrowing and excessive copying of foreign cultural output, but also in his troubled relationship to nature - a further confluence between Gauguin and Gilgamesh. Indeed, once again Adorno offers a reading of mimesis and abstraction that will help me to underscore the thread of domination in Gauguin's approach to nature. In Aesthetic Theory, Adorno writes that "the shift in aesthetics away from the beautiful in nature, despite the tremendous advances it made possible, especially in terms of conceptualizing art as a spiritual phenomenon, was a mixed blessing. It entailed an element of destruction in relation to nature, as did the concept of dignity in general" (AT 92). Such ambivalence – indeed, destruction – in the expressionist artist’s approach to nature not only is echoed in Gauguin’s writings, both public and private, but also reverberates through Noa Noa in a way that is highlighted by the presence of Gilgamesh. When Gauguin mocks the Salon painters of his day as “down-to-earth [...] pompiers, with their trompe l’oeil rendering of nature,” marveling at "[h]ow much more tangible the infinite appears to us when we are faced with some undefined thing” (WOS 24), he reveals a smoldering ambivalence in his relationship to the natural world. For Gauguin, the “infinite” becomes paradoxically “tangible” when nature is rejected as subject matter. The resulting destruction plays out in the Woodcutter Episode in Noa Noa when Gauguin and his guide "attaquâmes à la hache un magnifique arbre qu’il faut détruire pour avoir une branche convenable à mes desirs” ["attacked with the axe a magnificent tree which had to be destroyed to get a branch suitable to my desires" (28)]. Like in its sister scene in the Gilgamesh Epic, the tree here takes on a sorrowful, almost pleading aura. But unlike in Gilgamesh, in Noa Noa the attacker is never punished for the crime against nature. Instead he returns home
triumphant, satisfied. Here is yet another felicitous infelicity, a space where Gauguin has left open a door for interpretation and, perhaps, for his own escape.

My reading of *Noa Noa*, then, carries the following implications for our understanding of Gauguin and the text. To begin with, it highlights the artist’s roots in Romantic notions of inner and outer selfhood, while at the same time suggesting or prefiguring a strong kind of proto-Modernist struggle with fracturing and fragmentation. Gauguin’s many guises, of which his Polynesian Gilgamesh is one, as we shall see, point to a symbolic fracturing of selfhood that anticipates the aesthetic fragmentation of subjectivity that would later become a staple of the High Modernist canon. At the same time, his ambivalence about the dialectical relationship between the spirit and the body – together with the turn to primitivism in search of resolution – anticipates the agonistic paranoia of later Modernist figures like Antonin Artaud, who incorporated the disintegration of the body into literary practice as a fundamental Modernist trope.

Secondly, my approach challenges the consideration of *Noa Noa* as autobiography or even memoir, casting the text as a literary work that lies somewhere between exoticist travel romance and allegorical aesthetic treatise. With *Gilgamesh* as his source, Gauguin frames his journey as epic and his artistic mission as heroic. Yet he continues to draw on contemporary formulations of the exotic and the travel experience at the same time. This kind of resistance to genre is characteristic of Gauguin’s approach to visual art, and is no less appropriate a measure for interpreting his written work.²⁴

²⁴ In this respect, my view of Gauguin’s writing diverges from that of Wayne Anderson, who writes that “he adapted himself to each different genre of literature that he undertook: he wrote as a critic when writing criticism, as a savant when writing art
Third, my reading of Gilgamesh as a subtext for Noa Noa broadens our understanding of the range of influences that are present and active in Gauguin’s work. Owing in part to the degree of emphasis that has been placed on his Polynesian and, to a lesser extent, South American themes, scholars have underemphasized the importance of the Middle East in the development of Gauguin’s approach to color, form, and theme. To date, only one in-depth study of this question exists, a published dissertation called The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky, by Fereshteh Daftari. Mention of the Middle East crops up as a peripheral point in many studies of Gauguin, but the region generally has not figured prominently in art historical scholarship as a major influence on him.

Finally, highlighting the role of Middle Eastern art in the development of Gauguin’s body of work in turn impacts the nature and meaning of Gauguin’s primitivism itself, because it encompasses not only “primitive” cultures, but also highly complex and sophisticated cultures of past epochs. The almost seamless blending of Orientalist and primitivist impulses in Noa Noa points to a particular interest in the nature of time, since in both cases a remnant of the mythic, primordial past is resurrected and/or found living in the present. The deployment of the Gilgamesh figure in Noa Noa is, I argue, a kind of literary archaeology.

Thus, the recognition of Gilgamesh as mythic subtext here allows for an understanding of Gauguin’s primitivism that includes but also goes beyond a more
classically post-colonial reading which would evaluate his work chiefly with an eye to its political and, by extension, moral shortcomings. Gauguin’s primitivism does indeed reinforce an unjust hegemonic order in crucial ways; hence Stephen Eisenman, aptly, draws on Sartre to distinguish Gauguin as a “rebel” rather than a “revolutionary”: a man who “invented no new ‘order of values,’ either in his life or in his works” (176). Far from advancing the causes of equality and justice among different peoples of the world, Gauguin’s branding of them remained within established traditional power relations and in many ways served to perpetuate the very problems he decried. As we will see, his use of *Gilgamesh* in *Noa Noa* is no exception to this tendency of his. But at the same time, Gauguin’s primitivism does carry an aesthetic message that can ring true in spite (or even because) of the political dynamics inherent within it. It is a message about criminality and traversing the limits of the self; it is about hidden potentialities and the aching desire to see them let out of the bag.

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25 I recognize that there is perhaps no such thing as one “classically postcolonial reading” of a text. What I mean to indicate by my use of this term is that my work with the text seeks to acknowledge and explore the cognitive assumptions and power imbalances that European societies have propagated in non-European corners of the world, while not necessarily making them the focal point of my discussion, except as they pertain to certain key aesthetic issues. It will be particularly important, for example, to note that Gauguin’s conflation of time epochs and regions as vastly different from one another as from nineteenth-century Europe, and his appropriation of images from traditions with which he had no connection, are examples of Edward Said’s notion that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient” (139). In a later chapter, I will explore more fully a more recent theoretical formulation, Frederic Bohrer’s concept of “Exoticism,” which addresses both spatial and temporal distance as equally effective categories for othering. In the meantime, I will also acknowledge that important work on the political implications of and power dynamics within Gauguin’s work has been done by Bohrer as well as by Griselda Pollock, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Nancy Mowll Mathews, Nancy Perloff and others. These scholars have already offered effective critiques of Gauguin, which inform my study in important ways even if they do not function as the central concern of my dissertation.
This dissertation proceeds by exploring the genesis and development of *Noa Noa* within its particular historical context. My first full chapter begins with a look at the consumption of Otherness in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when the practice and cultural valence of archaeology carried particularly strong nationalistic messages. Gilgamesh – as both figure and text – entered into the national consciousness during a period of political upheaval and amid an intensely nationalistic race between France and Britain for archaeological dominance in the Ancient Near East, the image-rich biblical lands where the colossal and mysterious icons of ancient civilizations were unearthed amidst subterfuge and political wrangling. Elucidating this context is crucial for interpreting the reception history of the Gilgamesh Epic itself, which emerged piecemeal over the last three decades of the century, with different tablets and different themes translated and emphasized at different times and in different ways. By the time of Gauguin’s first trip to Tahiti, in 1891, a fairly complete understanding of the text of *Gilgamesh* had emerged, one that carried strong resonances for his Symbolist cohort as they worked through changing thematic and aesthetic issues – representation, nature, power, temporality, masculinity – by drawing on the storehouse of ancient mythic figures uncovered by the generation that had preceded them. I will argue that *Gilgamesh* not only would have been available to Gauguin, but would have been highly relevant to his concerns thematically, and that the context in which the Epic was received placed an emphasis on the confluence between aesthetic relations and power relations that drives my understanding of the text of *Noa Noa* in later chapters.

My second chapter explores the thematic and structural resemblances between the two texts, focusing in particular on the doppelgänger motif in *Gilgamesh* and its mimetic
double in the Woodcutter Episode. Using close readings of both texts, I argue that Noa Noa should be considered a symbolist literary work, and I make the case that in particular what it symbolizes is Gauguin's artistic and personal ambition to achieve mimetic fusion. Taking a broader view, I also discuss the ways in which Noa Noa as a total work - and indeed Gauguin's entire journey to Tahiti - becomes reframed as a mythic enterprise, a *katabasis*, echoing Gilgamesh's, that brings the artist to the interstices of life and death. This mythic behavior is a kind of mimesis that is endemic to Gauguin's project on both an artistic level and a personal one.

My third chapter, “The Text of Bliss: Gauguin's Allegory of Mimetic Desire,” considers the philosophical implications of these structural parallels. This chapter is where I focus on the symbolism of the erotic charge between the doubles as a fantasy of reconciliation between material and immaterial selves, arguing that Gauguin’s vision of the primitive encounter is an allegory for the process of abstraction. In this chapter, I incorporate discussion of several of Gauguin’s most instructive paintings, especially *The Vision After the Sermon*, in order to explore the meaning of material and immaterial essences in his art. This is important for understanding his dialectical approach to the making of art and the process of abstraction, which in turn clarifies the efficacy of his use of Gilgamesh in Noa Noa. Then, taking my literary approach a step further, I examine the ways in which Gauguin uses his transhuman identity to move beyond time, history, and genre. Drawing on Roland Barthes's theory of libidinal reading in *The Pleasure of the Text*, I argue that Gauguin seeks a dissolution in the boundaries of his selfhood that is symbolized in the destruction of form and genre that he enacts in Noa Noa, and that is
further intensified by his cultural transvestism, as he wears the mask of an ahistorical, Polynesian Gilgamesh.

In my fourth chapter, I reintroduce the cultural context in order to more fully situate Gauguin’s aesthetic practice within the imperialist project of which he was, indisputably, a part. I delve into his many and diverse writings to explore Gauguin's complicated and ambivalent relationship to nature, how that relationship shaped and was shaped by his aesthetic project, and how his reworking of Gilgamesh in Noa Noa reflects and allegorizes this complex dynamic. I discuss the important narrative discrepancies between Gilgamesh and Noa Noa - notably the lack of punishment for the hero in Gauguin's version, and the insistence upon innocence for his guide - and argue that these discrepancies carry both aesthetic and symbolic currency in Gauguin's allegory of aesthetic practice.

**History and Development of Noa Noa; Status as a Modernist Text**

In order to understand Gauguin’s attitudes about abstraction and form, and the role of Noa Noa in developing or articulating those attitudes, it is important to take a moment to dive into the complicated history of this text. The early development of Noa Noa remains somewhat unclear, particularly with respect to whose idea exactly the book was, whether Gauguin’s or Morice’s. In his biography of Gauguin, Charles Morice

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26 For more on the history of the genesis and development of Noa Noa, see Mowll Mathews p. 197, Wadley pp. 85-98, or Cahn pp. 92-113.
stated outright that the idea had been his, 27 but in the decades after the final publication of the work he has been cast by many as a villain responsible for corrupting and polluting the painter’s unmannered prose, his message of purity, and his “savage character.” As Wadley points out, this may be attributed in part to the “backwards” way in which the text itself reached the public audience: "public knowledge of Noa Noa has moved successively from the intended final form of the book, containing complete texts by both authors; through an intermediate [...]; to, finally, Gauguin's own first draft for the book, virtually untouched by Morice. At the second and third publications, the most partisan of Gauguin commentators each time welcomed what they saw as a further erosion of Morice's undesirable interference" (8). 28

27 Exhibiting a keen awareness of subsequent debates about Noa Noa, Morice writes: "Je donnerai ici, pour n'y plus jamais revenir, une indication précise et succincte sur la genèse de ce livre. C'est en étudiant les œuvres exposées rue Lafitte en 1893 que me vint l'idée d'une composition littéraire sur les thèmes du peintre, dans laquelle celui-ci s'associerait lui-même avec un poète. [...] Gauguin acceuillit avec enthousiasme ma proposition" (187) ["I will give here, never again to return to it, a precise and succinct indication of the genesis of this book. It was in studying the works exhibited in the rue Lafitte in 1892 that the idea came to me of a literary composition on the painter's themes, in which he would associate himself with a poet. Gauguin enthusiastically welcomed my proposal."

28 Although writing in 1985, Wadley describes a tendency in Gauguin scholarship that persists. For example, in a 2004 publication accompanying the Gauguin: Tahiti exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, Isabelle Cahn writes that "Moric substantially rewrote Gauguin's initial narrative, weighing it down with stylistic frills and naive explanations" (95). However, Wadley points out "[t]hat Gauguin was a very willing party to the collaboration and that - to start with at least - he clearly expected professional editorial advice and help from Morice" (8). In addition, as Wadley shows, Gauguin seems to have welcomed the distress over Morice's contributions that reverberated through his milieu even in his day; "It can't really do me any harm," he reportedly wrote (Wadley 101). For some critics, this is evidence of Gauguin's shrewd planning. "Today we find Morice's lace-ruffled style so unsympathetic and so incompatible with Gauguin's natural manner that our instinct is not to consider it very seriously," Wadley writes. "Maybe, finally, this approximates to what Gauguin hoped for from his readers" (106).
There are three main drafts of the work that are known today: the draft manuscript in Gauguin’s own hand, which he wrote in the months after his return from Tahiti in 1891, and which was published in facsimile in 1954 (the Draft MS); a midway product from 1894 containing Gauguin’s notes intermingled with Morice’s edits and some poems (known as the Louvre MS, because that is where it now resides), which was published in 1910; and the final La Plume version of the book, which was published in 1901, but which Gauguin likely never actually saw (Wadley 97). Because this final version is the one most heavily edited by Morice, but the first to have been made available, the publication history of the text has functioned like a peeling away of Morice’s influence, so that the original version, and the last to come out, seems the most pure. As Wadley has pointed out, this has contributed to the villainization of Morice because it makes Morice’s work on the book appear all the more to have been an adulteration of a project that was perfect in its simplicity. In the present study, I focus my attention on the Draft MS, because this gives me access to Gauguin’s original thought process and allows me, to the greatest degree possible, to separate his fantasies from Morice’s influence, regardless of how welcome that influence may have been. It will also, however, address later versions of the text as their developments reflect important enhancements in Gauguin’s relationship to it.

For a number of reasons, the fact that Noa Noa was the product of collaboration makes it difficult to sort out the book’s initial raison d’être. For the present study, its genesis is linked to its status as a modernist text, and the genre-exploding qualities of the book, together with its multifaceted borrowing from a variety of traditions and sources, contribute to my understanding of it as such. These aspects of the work also highlight the
relative likelihood that Gauguin would have drawn upon a source like *Gilgamesh* in contemplating his project.

Several scholars agree that Gauguin wrote *Noa Noa* in part in order to generate better sales for his Tahitian paintings by making them more accessible to the Parisian public. After a much anticipated but financially disappointing exhibition of the Tahiti works at the Durand-Ruel gallery,\(^\text{29}\) perhaps Gauguin needed another avenue for attracting attention to himself and his art. By writing a book about his journey, and by performing live readings from the manuscript for friends and followers as he went along (Wadley 85), Gauguin may have sought to widen not only his circle of influence, but also his customer base. Mowll Mathews asserts unequivocally that “The book and Gauguin’s theatrical presentation of it were part of his campaign to make the Durand-Ruel exhibition […] a success” (197), while Wadley too brings up the lackluster exhibition sales as a possible motivation for producing the book (85).

There is strong support for viewing *Noa Noa* as a project meant to go hand in hand with Gauguin’s artwork from the first Tahiti period. In a letter to his wife, for example, Gauguin wrote, "I am preparing a book on Tahiti which will be very useful in making my paintings understood"[/sic.\]" (Oviri 97) "Je prépare […] un livre sur Tahiti et \[sic.\] qui sera très utile pour faire comprendre ma peinture" (Oviri 97) ["I am preparing a book on Tahiti which will be very useful in making my paintings understood"]). Wadley considers *Noa Noa* as a response not only to the disappointing financial draw of the exhibition but also to critical attacks from influential people like the Director of the Beaux Arts, who told him, “I do not feel able to encourage your art. It revolts me and I do not understand it”.

\(^{29}\) Wadley points out that although Gauguin wrote to his wife that the exhibit had caused him to be “considered by many people to be the greatest modern painter," in fact he had only sold eleven of his forty-four paintings, and barely broke even (85).
(Wadley 121). He also quotes a letter in which Camille Pissarro, Gauguin’s former mentor, wrote to his son that he had spoken with Gauguin and “told him that his art did not belong to him, that he was a civilized man and hence it was his function to show us harmonious things.” According to Pissarro, “Everyone to whom I talked about Gauguin’s exhibition was furious. […] They are all even more outraged than me” (85). By this account, it certainly seems that the paintings required some degree of explanation.

However, although it is tempting to see *Noa Noa* as an explanation of the paintings, this vision of the origins of the work is again too grounded in practicality to account for the book’s literary and artistic project. For one thing, Gauguin had already begun work on *Noa Noa* by October of 1893 (Mathews 197), and his exhibition, with its attendant disappointments and confused reactions, did not take place until November (Wadley 85). For another thing, there is the important question of what would define an “explanation” of the paintings. In neither content nor form does *Noa Noa* recast Gauguin’s Tahitian journey in terms more palatable to a conservative bourgeois society; instead, the book – both in its draft incarnation and in its intended final manifestation – adheres to the principles of aesthetic and symbolic provocation and obliqueness that

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30 One point to take into consideration here is that Wadley is quoting from *Avant et Après*, another of Gauguin’s memoir-like writings from a later period. In the journal, Gauguin writes, “Here I am, then, before the august Roujon, Director of the Beaux-Arts. He says to me, deliciously enough: ‘I do not feel able to encourage your art. It revolts me and I do not understand it. Your art is too revolutionary not to cause a scandal in our Beaux-Arts, of which I am the Director, sustained by the inspectors’” (*Intimate Journals* 107; emphasis mine). Given the fuller context of the quotation, especially Gauguin’s relish in repeating it, it seems at best unclear whether in fact Roujon actually said this. Furthermore, Gauguin’s delight in the attack destabilizes the notion that *Noa Noa* would be intended to clarify the paintings or ameliorate their effect; rather, it suggests that further “disgust” was the more desirable pursuit, since that disgust is what makes Gauguin a rebel; he finds it “delicious.” This is another example of both a perhaps unwarranted willingness to take Gauguin’s memories at face value, and a perhaps unnecessary search for the “purpose” of *Noa Noa*. 
characterized the paintings themselves. Thus, Mowll Mathews’s conclusion that it was intended to draw attention (and Gauguin seems to have been an early follower of the commonplace that all attention is good attention) is perhaps more believable than Gauguin’s own assertion of the intent to explain. After all, the point of Symbolism, according to Gauguin, was to “Be mysterious.”

Still, to think of a book in terms of a reason for its existence is already to extract it from the realm of literary production, which ultimately does both *Noa Noa* and our understanding of it a disservice. Though he often disparaged literature for its inability to evoke mysteriousness, Gauguin was nevertheless a prolific writer with, as Wadley puts it, “acute perceptions, [a] prodigal imagination, and disarmingly erratic literary abilities” (8). He had read and been heavily influenced by Julien Viaud’s *Le Mariage de Loti*, a bestselling travel narrative about the adventures of the author/narrator (Julien Viaud writing under the pen name of Pierre Loti) in the South Pacific, focusing in particular on his year-long love affair with a young Tahitian woman whose charming physical decline belies her innocent sixteen years (Eisenman 47). He had also read J.A. Moerenhout’s *Voyages in the South Pacific*, of 1837, sections of which reappear copied verbatim into

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31 “*Soyez mystérieuses*” (1890) was the title of the large polychrome wooden bas-relief that Gauguin executed in 1891, and that brought together many of his favorite symbolic and mythic tropes. The injunction to be mysterious appears on a scroll in the upper left corner of a picture that otherwise teems with disparate mythic imagery, and has since served as a defining tenet of Gauguin’s Symbolist message.

32 Gauguin's relationship to literature is ambiguous. For example, in “Notes Synthétiques” (1885) Gauguin writes, "La littérature est la pensée humaine décrite par la parole. [...] Vous pouvez décrire avec talent une tempête, vous n'arriveriez jamais à m'en donner la sensation" (Oviri 23-24). He often returns to the theme that music and painting, because more abstract than writing, are more evocative, more mysterious, and more emotional than writing. However, his paintings were nevertheless extremely literary in that they often depict narrative time and contain distinct literary references. Furthermore, in a letter to Morice he described himself once as “not a scholar but perhaps a man of letters” (Eisenman 142).
Gauguin’s own text in *Noa Noa*, where he places Moerenhout’s words into the mouth of his thirteen-year-old *vahine*, Tehamana. Indeed, Gauguin was generally interested in literary sources, literary production, and, especially, seeing his own words in print. Furthermore, Gauguin often used writing as a medium within and through which to assume an array of different identities, including, notably, the identity of the martyred spiritual painter and prophet Mani, of medieval Persia (Daftari 59). Thus, rather than an anomaly to his interest in artistic production, *Noa Noa*, with its indeterminate genre, its intense visuality, and its classically Symbolist commitment to a kind of intertextuality that resists definitive interpretation, is in many ways the culmination of Gauguin’s thematic and aesthetic ambitions.

Far from functioning just as public relations material, *Noa Noa* is a text that needs to be situated within the field of modernist aesthetics to which it contributed and within the literary and artistic traditions out of which it developed. Drawing on several different traditions at once – travel narrative, anthropology, and Rousseauian confession perhaps most prominently – *Noa Noa* does what Gauguin does best – or by some accounts worst – which is to pick and choose from among his influences to recreate anew what has been done before. Griselda Pollock incisively critiqued this very practice, in the world of the visual arts, as an example of the classic "avant-garde gambit," which is built on three converging elements - reference, deference, and difference:

To make your mark in the avant-garde community, you had to relate your work to what was going on: *reference*. Then you had to defer to the existing leader, to the work or project which represented the latest move, the last word, or what was considered the definitive statement of shared concerns: *deference*. Finally your

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33 In the mid-1890s, Gauguin claimed to have discovered a treatise written by Mani, but most scholars now believe that he wrote it himself. This incident will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 1.
own move involved establishing a *difference* which had to be both legible in terms of current aesthetics and criticism, and also a definitive advance on that current position. (14)

This triptych of aesthetic maneuvers can be as easily applied to Gauguin's literary ambitions with *Noa Noa* as to his painting.

The most obvious literary precursor to *Noa Noa* is the book by Viaud that I have already mentioned, which shares many important structural elements with Gauguin’s narrative. The author, Julien Viaud, assumes an alternative authorial identity as Pierre Loti, and presents his text not as a novel but as Pierre Loti’s own account of his travels in the South Pacific and especially Tahiti. The form of the text is designed to support this confusion as well; in lieu of building steadily through a forward-driven linear narrative, the plot of this novel is developed subtly in unstructured vignettes of daily life, which, like the entries in a diary, vary greatly in length and tone, with some having no clear bearing on the plot at all. Thus, in format, Viaud’s novel heavily anticipates Gauguin’s narrative approach to *Noa Noa*, although without the additional development of pictorial and poetic voices in the text.

Loti’s novel centers around a paradigmatic decadent fantasy, the confluence of sexual and mortal degeneration in the body of an impossibly beautiful, impossibly naïve young girl. Loti, a sailor in the French Navy, is stationed on Tahiti for a year, which he spends engaged in an affair with the lovely but sick orphan Rarahu. Their relationship is tinged with sadness and decay, as she suffers from the simultaneous decline of her culture, at the hands of colonial authority, and of her body, to the ravages of tuberculosis. Eisenman argues that the imagery and the structure of the book, as well as the

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34 Stephen Eisenman gives a more exhaustive comparative account of these two texts in *Gauguin’s Skirt* (47-49).
shallowness of its characters, have the effect of “forbidding close examination of the physical or cultural landscapes of Tahiti” (48). A product of what Eisenman calls the “Golden Age of Racism,” Loti exhibits both a fascination with and a deep commitment to racial categories, which serve in many ways as the catalyst for the book’s romantic action and tragic mood. Of Rarahu, he writes that “there was a great gulf between us – a great gate forever shut. She was a little savage; between us two who were one flesh there was a radical difference of race [...] In truth, we were the offspring of two different types of nature absolutely apart and dissimilar, and the union of our souls could only be brief, imperfect, and stormy” (126). Eisenman sees in this sentiment a point of departure and contrast for understanding Gauguin’s approach to the same region, and the same themes: “Gauguin’s partial success in prising open the closed gate of race was to be one of his major achievements during the more than ten years he spent in Polynesia” (49).

However, I would argue that Eisenman’s critique of the shallowness of Loti’s approach could as easily be lodged against Gauguin, whose Tahiti paintings often feature inscrutable figures crowded into the foreground of a flattened picture plane, denying the viewer access to either spatial or psychological depth. Furthermore, this dynamic extends to Noa Noa itself, in which characters and landscape serve symbolic, rather than empathic, functions. Tehamana is described as “impenetrable, I was quickly beaten in that battle” (35), and although the artist and his teenaged vahine do make advances over the course of their time together, by the end of his stay Gauguin still views her as “some perfect idol” – mysterious, ancient, untouchable (41). Both Gauguin and Vincent van

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35 This critique has been made before; for example, Solomon-Godeau writes that “to contemplate Gauguin’s strangely joyless and claustral evocations of Tahiti and the Marquesas is to be, in the final instance, not at all far from Loti” (323).
Gogh were transfixed by Loti’s book, and it played a significant role in stimulating Gauguin’s desire to travel to Tahiti, in spite of Gauguin's later derision of the book ("Ce n'est plus là une petite Rarahu, jolie," he writes of his own Tehamana, "écoutant une jolie romance de Pierre Loti de la guitare" (Oviri 170) [This is no longer some pretty little Rarahu, listening to a pretty romance by Pierre Loti on a guitar]).

In addition to providing him with a fantasy of colonial paradise, Loti’s book also played into Gauguin’s interest in the theme of sexual degeneration, particularly as it relates to the acquisition of knowledge. In an especially disturbing (from a postcolonial perspective) scene in his narrative, Loti discovers that his young lover has been accepting gifts from a “yellow” Chinese merchant, a “lustful old man” whose “eyes glittered hideously” (41). Suspecting impropriety, Loti spies on Rarahu and her friend as they accept “little boxes of pink or white powder; elaborate little toilet articles, [...] and [...] Chinese sweetmeats – fruits preserved with ginger and pepper. [...] There was a large pink ribbon, for which Rarahu allowed him to kiss her naked shoulder” (41). Although the girls run off before something more can happen, Rarahu spends the next day, in its entirety, sobbing:

Next day, Rarahu, her head in my lap, wept profusely. In the heart of this poor little girl growing up without guidance in the woods, the apprehension of good and evil had remained imperfect. One found there a host of quaint and incomplete ideas absorbed haphazardly beneath the shade of the great trees. [...] From that day on, Rarahu, considering herself no longer to be a child, ceased to appear bare-breasted in public. (43)

Here, Viaud represents Tahiti as a topsy-turvy Eden in which sexual seduction comes in the form of preserved fruit candies, plied by “yellow-skinned” Chinese snakes. Among all the “great trees” there, no tree of the knowledge of good and evil is to be found;
instead, it is Loti himself, the spy, who must give Rarahu the painful corrective. And along with this newfound knowledge, Rarahu acquires the requisite shame.

This problem – the relationship between sexuality and knowledge, and the fall from grace – was a theme that became increasingly complex in Gauguin’s mind by the time he left for Tahiti to recreate the fantasy for himself, and continued to take on layers of complexity throughout his stays there. This ambivalence, as we will see, is explored in the sexual imagery in his paintings as well as in the Woodcutter scene in *Noa Noa*. It also infuses the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where sexual seduction marks the fall for Enkidu from his natural animal state. Most importantly, it carried for Gauguin not only an emotional currency but an aesthetic one, as he struggled to recapture an "innocent" form of representation uncorrupted by the promiscuity of *trompe l’œil* detail.

Meanwhile, the influence of Moerenhout on *Noa Noa* is undeniable and points to the complex and intimate relationship between modernist primitivism and the ethnographic tradition, a relationship which may, in all of its intricacies, lie somewhat beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless it bears some examination here, no matter how cursory, particularly in light of the interrelations between ethnography, anthropology, and archaeology, the latter of which disciplines is certainly crucial for my argument about *Noa Noa* and *Gilgamesh*. *Noa Noa* of course is not a scientific attempt to capture or classify the essence of Tahitian culture for the purposes of European study; on the contrary, Gauguin was extremely ambivalent about science, and was often antagonistic toward the scientific establishment\(^\text{36}\) and the realm of empirical study into

\(^{36}\) As a Symbolist and a Romantic, Gauguin clearly privileged the unseen, the irrational and the mysterious over the cold rationality of scientific inquiry. Towards the end of his life, "Catholicism and the Modern Mind" (1897), he wrote, "Let the fable and the legend
which anthropology increasingly endeavored to insert itself during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He derided the bourgeois sentimentality of the popular travel ethnographies that brought the world to armchair travelers in the late nineteenth century. But Gauguin was always full of contradictions, and as it turns out, he quotes directly in *Noa Noa* from an early and well-known ethnographic text, the Belgian diplomat J.A. Moerenhout’s *Voyages in the South Pacific*, a book from 1823 that catalogues its author’s travels throughout the Pacific Islands and explains the religions, customs, and rituals of the people living there. In a move that has been excoriated by continue as they are, of Utmost beauty (that is undeniable); they have nothing to do with scientific reasoning” (*WOS* 166). Particularly in the realm of painting, Gauguin regarded with suspicion the many claims of scientific technique that swirled around in his day: "The century is coming to an end," he wrote, mockingly, in *Diverses Choses*, "and the masses press anxiously about the scientist's door; they whisper, they frown, faces brighten. 'Is it all over?' 'Yes'" (*WOS* 141). Later he continues, "It is assumed at this time that either through the work of earlier painters [...] or through the latest chemical, physical, scientific research by scholars more enamored of truth than of imaginary things: it is assumed (all of this being gathered in one great sheaf) that the last word has been said concerning painting techniques. Well, personally, I do not think [so]" (*WOS* 143).

James Clifford describes the 1890s as the period belonging to an “intermediate generation” (George Stocking’s phrase) of anthropologists who practiced their craft in between the old-style travel ethnographers and the new anthropology of the twentieth century, which sought disciplinary credibility by embracing scientific and theoretical approaches. In *The Predicament of Culture*, he writes that “The ‘intermediate generation’ of ethnographers did not typically live in a single locale for a year or more, mastering vernacular and undergoing a personal learning experience comparable to an initiation. They did not speak as cultural insiders but retained the natural scientist’s documentary, observational stance” (28). Gauguin’s approach to cultural observation in this intermediate period clearly diverges from the “scientist’s documentary, observational stance.”

In "Gauguin's Tahitian Body," Peter Brooks notes that "Gauguin's version of the myth of Tahiti [...] does not differ in essence from that which exercised its fascination in the European imagination from the very moment of the discovery of the island in the eighteenth century. Especially in France, from the moment Louis-Antoine de Bougainville returned in 1767 from his voyage around the world to report his discoveries, Tahiti was 'l'Ile de Cythère,' the new abode of Venus" (331). Brooks traces the genealogy of this tradition from Bougainville through Diderot, Oliver and Sahlins, up to the doorstep of *Noa Noa* (see pp. 331-334).
critics of Gauguin down the years, the artist lifted whole passages on Tahitian mythology from Moerenhout and placed them into *Noa Noa* under the pretense that they came from the mouth of his thirteen-year-old lover, Tehamana, during long discussions late at night in which she taught him the creation myths of her culture:

> Conversations sur ce qui se fait en Europe sur Dieu, les Dieux - je l'instruis, elle m'instruit.
> Dans le lit le soir conversations [...] Roua (grande est son origine) dormait avec la femme la terre ténébreuse; elle donna naissance à son roi le sol, pris au crépuscule, puis aux ténèbres; mais alors, Roua répudia cette femme.
> Roua (grande est son origine) dormait avec la femme dite grande réunion. Elle donna naissance aux reines des cieux, les Étoiles, puis à l'Étoile Faïti.

[Conversations about what happens in Europe, about God, about the Gods. I teach her, she teaches me…](Noa Noa 37)

Roua (great is his origin) slept with his wife, the dark earth she gave birth first to her king the soil, then to the twilight, then to the dusk; but then Roua disowned his wife.

Roua (great is his origin) slept with the woman called “great meeting.” She gave birth to the queens of the Heavens, the Stars, then to the Star Faïti, the evening star. (Noa Noa 37)]

By leaving intact the quasi-ritualistic rhythm to the telling – the repetition of “great is his origin” after each mention of the god Roua – Gauguin lends the story an air of authenticity and emphasizes the naïve superstition of the young girl reciting it. But as Wadley and others have pointed out, by the time Gauguin was in Tahiti, “Although some aging chiefs might still be able and willing to recite songs and legends for the benefits of Westerners, the oral traditions that had kept Maori mythology alive were gone” (108).

Instead of taking these often erotic stories from the sensual lips of his young mistress,

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39 My translation differs from Griffin's here. He translates this phrase as "She learns from me, I learn from her." I have chosen instead to keep the emphasis on instruction that is in the original.
then, Gauguin had to get them from a book. As Wayne Anderson has suggested, “One can understand Gauguin’s need to hide from his European fellows the humiliation that his knowledge of Maori religion came from a book – worse yet, a book written by a Belgian, published in Paris, and available in the Bibliothèque Nationale” (xv). Yet there is little evidence that Gauguin actually did take pains to hide his source; after all, he copied the passages word for word. It might be more likely that he simply did not distinguish the relative validity or authenticity, in a political sense, of the different sources available to him.\(^{40}\) In any case the irony of Moerenhoutgate is that, like so much of what Gauguin did, it involved placing himself and his work squarely within the political and intellectual frameworks (in this case, anthropology as a bourgeois scientistic practice involving the empirical study of peoples) against which he claimed to be rebelling.

One of the best known critics of Gauguin’s approach to primitivism is Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who set out to demythologize Gauguin studies with a withering article, “Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism,” first published in *Art in America* in 1989. Since the appearance of this article, Gauguin scholarship has more fully explored Gauguin's contradictions and colonial positioning; his moral and intellectual shortcomings are by now well documented. Still, it’s worth revisiting Solomon-Godeau’s point about the Moerenhout episode – what she calls Gauguin’s “paradigmatic plagiarism” – because it is relevant for understanding Gauguin’s mythic enterprise in general, and, by extension, his appropriation of

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\(^{40}\) As we will see in later chapters, Gauguin had a tendency to accept somewhat uncritically the representations of exotic lands that were available to him. For example, as Nancy Perloff and others have demonstrated, Gauguin's private writings about Tahiti were very much influenced by government-produced tourist literature which, given his anti-bourgeois sentiments, should have been anathema to Gauguin.
Gilgamesh motifs in Noa Noa. Solomon-Godeau writes that with the bedtime story scene Gauguin enters into “a double denial; his avoidance of the fact that his own relation to the Maori religion was extremely tenuous, merely the product of a text he had just appropriated, and his refusal to acknowledge that Tehamana, like most other Tahitians, had no relation to her former traditions” (326). It is also, of course, significant that Tehamana does not tell the narrator these stories while out walking, for example, or cooking dinner; it is important that they be explored at night, in bed, with emphasis on the erotic nature of the tales of creation. This is part of Gauguin’s sexualized public persona, but according to Solomon-Godeau it is also part of the discourse of colonization and the “phantasmic construction of a purely feminized landscape” (318). The traveler’s access to the body of a compliant woman signifies access to the compliant, fertile land, and Gauguin takes this a step further by claiming access to the cultural and spiritual history of those people and that land, by way of sexual conquest (319). This is a familiar pattern that Gauguin repeats in the Woodcutter Episode.

The ethnographic tradition is thus far from incidental in its influence on Noa Noa; on the contrary, it is central to the project of the book. There are also other points of ethnographic theater in Noa Noa, which taken together make it impossible to dismiss the

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41 The association of undifferentiated or "virgin" geographical space with femininity is part of a long tradition. In the context of Gauguin, Solomon-Godeau sees this discourse taking shape, for example, in the almost exclusive population of the Breton paintings by women and adolescents. "Why should the character - physiognomic, sartorial, or spiritual - of Breton men be of no interest?" (317). She concludes that "Bretonism [...] supplies a vision of an unchanging rural world, populated by obliquely alien, religious women and children, a locus of nature, femininity, and spirituality" (318). Indeed, the feminization of landscape is visible also in Gauguin’s paintings and writings about Tahiti, such as when he wrote to his wife Mette, "Tahiti is not devoid of charm, and the women - though they lack beauty as such - have an indescribable something which is infinitely penetrating and mysterious" (WOS 59). The way that the artist here uses the character women to evoke and define the character of the country is instructive.
anthropological impulse from Gauguin’s work. There is, in the first instance, the fact that his trip to Tahiti was made possible by the French government with the stated purpose of documenting native life on the island, a pretext that Solomon-Godeau finds “spurious” but that nevertheless frames his entire journey within both the imperial and ethnographic enterprises (323). Then also there are moments of cultural “study” in Noa Noa, such as a vignette in which the artist recounts a seemingly very productive community meeting where the villagers resolve to work together remarkably to solve some pressing community issues, but then the next day forget all about the meeting and its resolutions (24). This episode has no bearing on the plot or character development of the work, but exists in order to document the “childlike” character of Tahitian culture, innocent in its emphasis on community and at the same time utterly irresponsible and lacking any interest in achievement when it comes to reality. Such a characterization of the local population was essential to Gauguin’s claim of kinship with the Polynesian primitive, because it reflects in many ways his own temperament, or at least his public image: ambitious but irresponsible, exasperating but irresistible. However, the image is also entirely in keeping with the existing ethnographic and travel-writing tradition, in which the cliché of the childlike Polynesian had already been established.  

Although Solomon-Godeau has critiqued the quasi-ethnographic mission implicit in Gauguin's Tahitian enterprise, some current scholars still regard Gauguin's representation of Tahiti as anthropological. For example, in a 2004 exhibition catalogue, an article by Philippe Peltier appears with the title, "Gauguin: Artist and Ethnographer." In it, Peltier describes Gauguin's movements among the Tahitian people, somewhat uncritically, as a more or less systematic form of study. "He observed and noted scenes and gestures," Peltier writes, "small daily facts that became the subject of paintings whose titles, often in the form of questions, were so many commentaries on Tahitian psychology" (53). While Griselda Pollock might offer a corrective, reminding us that the paintings and their titles reveal far more about Gauguin than about Tahiti, Peltier seems to accept that Gauguin "plunged into this world, slowly became impregnated with its gestures and customs, tried
Ethnography and travel writing also provided significant channels through which Gauguin could work out his aesthetic agenda, the problem of external and internal forms that characterizes his work. Solomon-Godeau writes that “the structural paradox on which Gauguin’s brand of primitivism depends is that one leaves home to discover one’s real self; the journey out, as writers such as Conrad have insisted, is, in fact, always a journey in; similarly, and from the perspective of a more formally conceived criticism, the artist ‘recognizes’ in the primitive artifact that which was immanent, but inchoate; the object from ‘out there’ enables the expression of what is though to be ‘in here’” (315). In this respect, Gauguin’s travel writing serves as a metaphor for the psychological and aesthetic fantasy that the artist really pursues – “an atavism that is anterior to and more profound in its implications than the search for a kind of ethnographic origin” (317).

Ethnographic tradition offers a point of entry, but also, and more importantly, a conceptual framework that explicitly dramatizes the internal/external problem of representation. It is into this framework that Gauguin introduces his Woodcutter / Enkidu as the embodiment of both exoticized quasi-ethnographic Other and mysterious internal Self.

The ethnographic tradition was also influenced by philosophical thinking on the primitive, and Gauguin’s work in turn has to be seen as deeply indebted to the Rousseauian myth of primitivity. This debt can be traced in both the aesthetic and the to understand and assimilate them while keeping a necessary distance, so as to re-create their echo in his paintings” (53). This is in spite of his acknowledgment that Gauguin actually "borrowed" many elements from European sources to "reconstitute" this same world (53).

43 Rousseau is often credited with coining the term “Noble Savage,” although Ter Ellingson has pointed out that the idea had been around for more than a century by the
thematic realms. On the thematic level, as Eisenman puts it, “The modern history of ideas about the primitive begins with Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (79). Rejecting the overly choreographed and yet emotionally bankrupt and unjust practices of European societies, Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1754) argued that what the study of primitive communities yielded was the “sober conclusion” that “The noblest instincts of the primitive community and men and women in the ‘state of nature’ – compassion for others and the desire for self-improvement – had been perverted by modern society” (Eisenman 79). The echoes of this train of thought reverberate loudly throughout Gauguin’s primitive encounters.

Beyond just providing fodder for stereotyping, the Rousseauian idea is also fundamental to Gauguin’s aesthetic pursuit of the primitive. For Gauguin and his milieu, the art of far-off lands and times had not yet “degenerated” into Western naturalism (Daftari 90). This theme of degeneration became a central point in Gauguin’s art and writing, and can be connected with the supremely important concept of the fall from grace with which he constantly seems to be struggling. Such a fall from grace, figured in the Catholic tradition of Gauguin’s upbringing, is directly associated with the acquisition of knowledge. In the Old Testament of the Bible, Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and are punished with mortality. For Gauguin, the development and implementation of naturalist technique was associated with the acquisition of knowledge, and connected directly with degeneration, putrefaction, and the fall from grace. This is at the core of Gauguin’s atavism; primitives and primitive art time of Rousseau’s writings, and the term does not actually appear in his work at all (xv-xvi).
offered both spiritual and aesthetic rejuvenation, a theme to which we will return throughout this study.

The association of the acquisition of knowledge with a fall from grace is a central message of Rousseau’s thought. Rousseau suspects the horrific criminality of human existence in the modern period to be the consequence of “some fatal chance happening that, for the common good, ought never to have happened” (Discourse 50). The “fatal chance happening” to which Rousseau here refers is the sudden realization that humans could produce more in cooperation with one another than they could individually: “as soon as one man needed the help of another, as soon as one man realized that it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property came into existence, labor became necessary” (51). That momentous event precipitating what he conceives of as the “fall of man” corresponds with the movement of human beings into organized societies, where they began to develop the “reason, foresight, and imagination” that they lacked in their primeval state, and that destabilized their simple, “natural goodness” (Melzer 50). The forms of knowledge associated with organization into cities – “reason, foresight, and imagination” – are posited as the direct cause of degeneration. Thus it is not sexuality but “metallurgy and agriculture” – or, more simply, “iron and wheat” – that are responsible for the downfall of humankind. Still, the association of the acquisition of knowledge with shame is prominent in Rousseau’s formulation, “since the human race, vilified and desolated, was no longer able to retrace its steps or give up the unfortunate acquisitions it had made, and since it labored only toward its shame by abusing the faculties that honor it” (55). The influence of this idea is evident in Gauguin’s forceful critiques of modern society and his constant extolling of
the virtues of unreasoned thought - i.e., intuition and mystery - as manifested in the primitive approach to both life and representation.

Rousseauian thought has a further impact on the aesthetic project of *Noa Noa* itself, which derives from Rousseau not only in its content or worldview but also in its form, as a kind of confessional. Although the confessional mode does not originate with Rousseau, he may have been responsible both for developing it specifically as a literary (as opposed to a philosophical) genre and for engendering the thematic ties between the primitivist celebration of innocence and the aesthetic naïveté of the confessional style. As Lionel Gossman has argued, as a genre, the confession eludes the strictures of literary form in a way that implies a kind of aesthetic innocence – the unselfconsciousness that precedes any knowledge of artistic form. He writes that confession and reverie, with their apparent lack of authorial voice, have “the appearance of being free, untrammeled by the rules of art, and unmediated by established literary codes” (59). Gauguin’s text strives to appear to be all of these things: free, untrammeled, unmediated – not only as a literary device, but also as an ideological one: a representation of his alienation from what he saw as the stifled and codified European way of life.

Further, Gauguin himself references Rousseau in connection with the problems of memory and memoir in a later work *Avant et Après*, a scattered notebook that was published after his death. "Je ne suis pas du métier," he writes. "Je voudrais écrire comme je fais mes tableaux, c'est-à-dire à ma fantaisie, selon la lune, et trouver le titre longtemps après" (Oviri 268). [“I’m not a professional. I would like to write the way I do my paintings, that is, as fantasy takes me, as the moon dictates, and come up with a
Here repudiating genre in writing as well as painting, Gauguin goes on to discuss memoir as a specifically Rousseauian project:

Des mémoires! c'est de l'histoire. C'est une date. Tout y est intéressant. Sauf l'auteur. Et il faut dire qui on est et d'où l'on vient. Se confesser: après Jean-Jacques Rousseau c'est une grave affaire. Si je vous dis que par les femmes je descends d'un Borgia d'Aragon, vice-roi de Pérou, vous direz que ce n'est pas vrai et que je suis prétentieux. Mais si je vous dis que cette famille est une famille de vidangeurs, vous me mépriserez. (Oviri 268)

Memories! That means history. That means a date. Everything in it is interesting – except the author. And you have to tell who you are and where you come from. Making a confession – ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that has been no slight affair. If I tell you that by the female line I descend from Borgia of Aragon, viceroy of Peru, you will say that it is not true and I am pretentious. But if I tell you that the family is a family of sewer cleaners, you will hold me in contempt. (WOS 230)

In this passage Gauguin struggles with memoir as a genre that shapes public personhood for better or for worse. He both flirts with and rejects memoir as a means for communicating truth (“history,” “dates,” etc.) and emphasizes the pointlessness of constructing a narrative that readers will turn into a fiction anyway. His engagement with Rousseau here is emblematic of what Pollock calls the "avant-garde gambit": reference, deference, and difference. He acknowledges Rousseau as his predecessor in both primitivism and confession; illustrates his deference via the "untrammeled" appeal of his writing, and attempts to assert his difference by dismissing the elements of memoir ("history," "dates") as tiresome and inconsequential.

However, Gauguin also takes the refusal of form a step further, repudiating the central tenet of the confessional mode, which, as Gossman says, “usually indicated a repentant criminal’s narrative of his crime” (60). In Noa Noa, Gauguin narrates many crimes, but he remains unrepentant. Furthermore, for Gossman, confessions are “conversion stories, involving a repudiation of worldly signs and pleasure, of art and
literature”; they offer themselves “therefore not as art, but as inmost truth” (60). Here again we can see how Gauguin has assimilated the form but rejected its meaning. Though he certainly regarded his own art as expressing “inmost truth,” he hardly advocates rejecting “worldly signs and pleasure,” establishing himself instead as a kind of libertine – sexually, socially, and intellectually – in spite of his material poverty.

Thus *Noa Noa* is clearly a text that arises out of, and should be read in relation to, at least three different traditions that existed prior to it in French writing: the travel romance, the ethnographic tradition, and the Rousseauian confessional, with its primitivist roots. Ultimately, however, in its non-linear approach to narrative, its blending of genre, its commitment to the overturning or undermining of boundaries between categories like Self and Other and Reality and Fiction, and its “making-new” of traditional formats, *Noa Noa* is a distinctly modernist text. Coming in the middle of the 1890s, it predates many of the best-known examples in the high modernist canon by more than a decade, but it serves as an important example in the intersection between literature and the plastic arts during these years of modernist development. Essentially, in *Noa Noa* Gauguin attempts to do with literature what he was simultaneously attempting to do with painting, and we should note that he often incorporated words into his visual artworks just as he incorporates visual art into his prose here.

Meanwhile, Gauguin subscribed to a particular brand of modernism that took very much as its focus the study of the ancient and the exotic as sources for artistic inspiration. As a founding figure and sometime elder statesman of the Symbolist circle of painters and poets whose collaborations flourished briefly, but passionately, in the 1880s, Gauguin, like his cohorts, took a great deal of interest in the myths and images of the
ancient world for their ability to suggest meaning obliquely without speaking too directly. The art of the Symbolist movement is peppered with images of Sphinxes, seductresses and Biblical myths, often drawing together images from disparate traditions to lend an air of mystery and fate to an artist’s inner thoughts. Gauguin took pride and pleasure in reaching out to exotic cultures in search of images for appropriation and meaning-making, declaring, for example, that the recurring image of the fox in his nudes is an “Indian symbol of perversion” (WOS 35) and rehearsing over and over again the image of a seated woman with her face in her hands because he had seen it in the form of an ancient Peruvian sculpture (Mowll Mathews 120). Solomon-Godeau summarizes Gauguin’s work with foreign cultural symbols within the context of questioning the artist’s originality and authenticity:

Consider, for example, Gauguin’s repeated use of the temple reliefs from Borobudur and wall paintings from Thebes. His borrowings from the Trocadéro collections, and from the tribal artifacts displayed at the Universal Exhibition, are obvious. In certain cases, he worked directly from photographs of Maori sculptures that he never saw; photographs were often the source of individual figures as well. The Easter Island inscription from the Universal Exhibition appears in *Marahī Metue No Tehamana*. … Certain of Gauguin’s ceramic objects are modeled on Mochican pottery. Woodcuts by Hiroshige provide the motif for a Breton seascape. (328)

Here, Solomon-Godeau catalogs some of the most well-known influences on Gauguin, an artist who continually sought to copy what he saw as exotic, and therefore mysterious, forms of representation. An artist, indeed, whose insistent copying - whose uncontainable mimetic impulse - has earned his legacy as much derision as praise.

The myth of an ancient Mesopotamian king would nicely complement this repertoire. For Solomon-Godeau, Gauguin’s use of sources is refracted through the lens of colonial imperialism, in which borrowing is inseparable from appropriation. Gauguin
is also guilty of inauthenticity in that he used, among other things, the photographs of Maori sculptures he had not even seen to project an image of himself as a kind of savage island insider.

Both of these charges ring true, and both could as easily be applied to his rehearsal of Gilgamesh in the Woodcutter Episode. The complicated history of Gauguin’s borrowing provides an important backdrop for the presence of Gilgamesh in *Noa Noa* and is essential for establishing the intersection between aesthetics and themes in his work. As a Symbolist, Gauguin framed all of this borrowing in terms of both spiritual and aesthetic pursuit, which for him were inseparable from one another. He and his cohort felt that primitive art forms exemplified the mysterious multiplicity and depth of meaning that Symbolism held as its core virtue, and the simplicity of form, the fusion of form with color and meaning, that provided the central tenet of Synthetism, another movement of the 1880s with which Gauguin was associated. At the same time, their borrowings, as Solomon-Godeau has pointed out, sought to arrest the forward momentum of time and history: “Stasis – being outside of time and historical process – is particularly crucial in the primitivizing imagination, insofar as what is required is an imaginary site of psychic return” (317). In the coming chapters, we will explore the ways in which Gauguin sought to break himself out of “time and historical progress,” both an aesthetic project and an existential fantasy, and how he made use of Gilgamesh to inhabit – indeed, even colonize – a time long since past. But the anachronic subject is not necessarily a *static* subject. Rather, Gauguin seeks to endlessly re-produce the *dynamic*: the untrue truth, the desire for the unknown, the unresolved dialectic. In his rehearsal of Gilgamesh, I will argue, Gauguin has found a mimetic mode that allows him to “[draw] on the
character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (Taussig xiii).
CHAPTER 1
A TALE OF THREE CITIES:
NINEVEH IN LONDON AND PARIS

Deux tours carrées étroites, cannelées de moulures qui ressemblent à des buffets [sic] d’orgue. Nous sommes en Assyrie. Nous sommes les humbles vassaux d’un escadron de puissants seigneurs, dont la barbe est noire et frisée, dont l’intelligence est courte et dont le sabre ne chôme jamais.

[Two narrow, square towers, fluted with moldings that resemble the pipes of an organ.44 We are in Assyria. We are the humble vassals of a squadron of powerful lords, whose beards are black and curly, whose intelligence is short, and whose swords are never idle.]

- “Chronique de l’Exposition.” Journal des débats politiques et littéraires, July 17, 1889

I. Introduction

The title of this chapter refers to a tangled relationship between three cosmopolitan powers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Two of these powers – London and Paris – served as quintessential sites of modernization and urbanization in the Western imaginary. The third, the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, where the Gilgamesh Epic was found, served as their ideological counterpoint. Buried under thousands of years of rubble and desert dust, obscured by generations of sackings and neglect, and veiled by the curious language and impenetrable script of the ancient tablets on which it was conjured, Nineveh emerged, in the presence of the other capitals, as the specter of Time Lost. It is echoed in the text of Gilgamesh itself by the even older city of

44 A second look at the original French text reveals that it does in fact say "buffets d'orgue." Based on context and for the sake of clarity, I have translated this as "the pipes of an organ."
Uruk, the setting of the epic, the City that serves both as historical backdrop and as a point of intersection between nature and culture, between past and future, fraught with its own anxieties of modernization and metaphysical doubt. But to nineteenth-century moderns, it was Nineveh that resurfaced out of the past and into the complex web of symbolic implications concerning righteousness, power, and the future that influenced Gauguin’s art and his writing.

This chapter explores the emergence of Nineveh and the Gilgamesh figure within the context of late-nineteenth-century French and British archaeological imperialism. Although this dissertation concerns a French painter and his milieu, the British have to be considered here as well. This is because they are the ones who unearthed and first decoded the clay tablets with the curious cuneiform symbols, and because they served as arch rivals to the French in, among other things, their steadfast pursuit of knowledge about and access to the ancient Biblical lands and their wealth of artifacts. The reception history of ancient Mesopotamia in Western Europe radiates out from this nationalistic contest in ways that shape both its historical meaning and its implications for the present study. So we begin with a look at this reception history with an eye to understanding both the likelihood that Gauguin could and would have known the Gilgamesh story, and the meaning it might have carried for him as a writer, an artist, a Frenchman, and an aspiring public figure.

After exploring the development and discovery of the text of the Gilgamesh Epic, this chapter proceeds to examine the ways in which the Ancient Near East was re-imagined in France and England during this period, highlighting in particular the symbolic resonance of this archaeological booty for the Symbolists and their surrounding
milieux. Both the popular culture and the artistic circles in which Gauguin moved were steeped in imagery of the Ancient Near East, and these artists and their public consumed images of this region in ways that were mediated by the nationalistic enterprises that unearthed them. Highlighting this dynamic is important not only for establishing the possibility that Gauguin could have read *Gilgamesh*, but also for interpreting the liberties that he took with *Gilgamesh*, and with other mythic sources, to fashion an aesthetic project and a sense of self that hinged on institutional power while simultaneously proclaiming artistic freedom.

II. The King’s Journey

*Gilgamesh* arrived in France in the nineteenth century as a product of nationalistic rivalries and as an object of nationalistic pride. He brought with him the echoes of an ancient empire, doomed and forgotten, that carried the resonance of biblical warnings and mythological ages. As such, *Gilgamesh* was not just an incidental element of nineteenth-century French culture; rather, he serves as an icon of France’s archaeological obsessions during this period. His reception in the West was in many ways predetermined by the generations preceding it, which had formed their ideas about the most powerful kingdoms of Mesopotamia – Assyria to the North, and Babylon to the South – from Greco-Roman and biblical accounts (Bohrer 49). As Bohrer points out, the region therefore “was seen not on its own terms, but rather through the eyes of its historical antagonists. Through these accounts, largely considered documentary in the early nineteenth century, Mesopotamia was taken as a cautionary tale, a site of sloth, sin, violence, and
transgression: the West’s first great ‘Other’” (49). Indeed, in light of biblical tradition in particular, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers would be engraved in perpetuity in the biblical allegory of the Whore of Babylon, the symbol of evil and “the mother of harlots and abominations of the Earth” (Rev 17:5). Western cultures were rife with their own images and imaginings of Mesopotamia before Mesopotamia’s artifacts were ever found.46

Like many ancient narratives, the Gilgamesh Epic is a fragmentary compilation of stories whose origins are difficult to pin down, and whose structure and meaning have changed over time. In addition, in a way almost eerily parallel to the emergence of Noa, the epic slowly came to light over the course of several decades of research, with ever older versions uncovered after newer ones had already been found, so that modern understanding of the text has shifted as subtly and as fundamentally as the desert sands. The stories comprising the cycle are believed to have originated in Sumer, where there likely was once a historical Gilgamesh, who ruled in the capital city of Uruk, in present-

45 Gauguin demonstrates his own investment in this Western construction of Babylon, in a letter to Theo van Gogh from 1889. In it, he explains his carved relief wood panel, Soyes amoureuses vous serez heureuses (Be in Love and You Will Be Happy), though he remarks that "it is not for examination." "At the top the rotting city of Babylon. At the bottom, as though through a window, a view of fields, nature, with its flowers. Simple woman, whom a demon takes by the hand, who struggles despite the good advice of the tempting inscription. A fox (symbol of perversity among Indians). Several figures in this entourage who express the opposite of the advice ('you will be happy') to show that it is fallacious" (Qtd. in Schackelford 10).

46 The Whore of Babylon is symptomatic of a wider tendency within Orientalist discourse to feminize the imagined Other. However, the gender dynamics at play in the West’s imagining of Mesopotamia are complex. In the case of ancient Sumer, Bohrer argues that the culture was feminized by its Western audience: the “imaginary construction of the Sumerians as a people of great delicacy who fought off their fears with art is fundamentally a feminization of them” (234). But in the case of Assyria there was an emphasis on warlike hypermasculinity (251), particularly as expressed by the iconic image of the Assyrian beard, which is discussed later in this chapter.
day Iraq, around 2700 B.C.E. (Sandars 20). These stories were passed down as an oral tradition, through several generations and among different ethnic groups scattered across a wide swath of what we now call the Middle East, each generation emphasizing different aspects and themes in relation to their own concerns, while still preserving the core elements of the tradition (Sandars 13). When Sumer was sacked in subsequent invasions, the stories of the Gilgamesh cycle were adopted by the invaders, and were thus eventually passed down to the Assyrians.

Thus, several different versions of the text eventually surfaced, and they were dispersed across a fairly wide region. The most complete version of the narrative that is most familiar to us today – and that would have been accessible to Gauguin – comes from clay tablets inscribed by the Assyrians, in the seventh century, B.C.E.. The epic is composed in Akkadian, a language used only by scholars at the time, which utilized the cuneiform alphabet. The tablets formed part of a massive store of literary and cultural clay tablet documents found in the famed library of Assurbanipal, an Assyrian king who ruled and resided in what is now known as Nineveh, in northern Mesopotamia, from 669 to 627, B.C.E.. When Nineveh was sacked and Assurbanipal’s palace destroyed by a

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47 In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson emphasized the centrality of language in the formation of national identities. In particular, he noted that the development of print capitalism – an event discussed later in this chapter – contributed to the decline of sacred languages in favor of the (more marketable) vernacular (18). As a sacred language, Akkadian was the province of a select, elite community within the Assyrian culture. Thus, the decoding of this language by a British researcher represents a dual national triumph: first, there is the physical uncovering of the text, and then there is the deciphering of the sacred language. By cracking the code, in effect, George Smith broke into the elite echelons of a sacred community – a powerful symbolic triumph of British intellectual mastery of the imagined Other.
Babylonian-led coalition of invaders in 612, B.C.E., the library was buried under the
destruction and forgotten for millennia (Damrosch 191). Assurbanipal’s library was excavated by British and Iraqi archaeologists in the 1850s, as part of the ongoing race between the British and the French for archaeological domination of these image-rich Biblical lands. The first maneuvers in this larger race were actually carried out by Paul-Émile Botta, the French consul at Mosul, who in the early 1840s had excavated at Khorsabad, including the palace of the ancient Assyrian king Sargon II (Bohrer 71). Botta published an exhaustive account of his findings in a five-volume work called *Monument de Ninive*, but his archaeological project was derailed by the Revolution of 1848 and never regained its direction (73). Meanwhile, his movements in the 1840s had been closely watched by the British press, which published accounts of his works within months of his initial discoveries (Bohrer 99). This prompted British consular officials to enter the fray, establishing their own archaeological prowess in a region where they vied with the French for political power and access to

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48 This notion of archaeology as the undoing of millennia of forgetting is problematic, of course. Bohrer points out that lead British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard’s own account of his discoveries actually “makes clear that the (largely Kurdish) inhabitants of the area long knew that inscribed tablets and other artifacts could be found in the vast mounds that dotted the area. [Claudius] Rich’s earlier memoirs, moreover, indicate explicitly that not only inscribed tablets, but large figured reliefs had been exhumed by the inhabitants of the region” (68). Regional informants were also crucial in leading the dueling Western archaeological teams to their respective troves (c.f. Bohrer 71).

49 Botta’s *Monument de Ninive* was published and issued at an extremely high cost, with the government spending “almost three times as much on the publication as on the entire course of excavations it was meant to describe. ... [T]he book is not merely a documentation of ancient monuments, but serves itself as the crowning moment of the excavation” (Bohrer 73). The elaborate nature of the publication ensured that ordinary people could not afford to purchase it, with the result that only 300 copies were actually printed (73). In this way, the publication and dissemination history of Botta’s finds highlights vividly the Eurocentric production of knowledge that Said’s “Orientalism” and Bohrer’s “exoticism” theorize: the artifacts of old take on significance only inasmuch as they reflect the power and success of the modern archaeological hero.
resources. Like Botta, the British archaeological hero Austin Henry Layard was also serving as a consul in what is now Iraq. He was stationed in Baghdad, and with the backing of his government and the help of native informants, he had begun digging at Nineveh by 1845. It was his team that uncovered the famed library of Assurbanipal, with the *Gilgamesh* tablets inside (Bohrer 68).

It is no coincidence that these archaeological projects were funded by the French and British governments during a period of intense imperialistic competition between the two powers. The nineteenth century brought to the fore a series of strategic conflicts fueled by expansionist dreams of solidifying influence and access to resources in increasingly remote and “exotic” corners of the world, inevitably creating new modalities for imagining otherness within an increasingly centralized dynamic of power relations. This was part of an ongoing process that had been under development since the beginning of colonialist exploration, but in the mid- and late nineteenth century the centrality of the Near East in the colonialist endeavor carried the particularly heady air of engagement with a richly imagined ancient past. The intensity of these imperial conflicts and the scholarly endeavors that documented, eulogized, and glorified them reverberated throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century history in the West, establishing the Franco-British fault line as the epicenter of Western discourse about the Orient. “To speak of Orientalism therefore,” wrote Edward Said in his foundational work,

is to speak mainly, though not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts and the Biblical lands, the spice trade, colonial armies and a long tradition of colonial administrators, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable Oriental ‘experts’ and ‘hands,’ an Oriental professorate, a complex array of ‘Oriental’ ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects,
philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for European use – the list can be extended more or less indefinitely. (4)

Each of these familiar figures – from the scholarly corpus to the Oriental splendor – played a role in the emergence of a Gilgamesh and a Mesopotamia that would be available to Gauguin and his circle by the end of the nineteenth century.

As Said's list above demonstrates, Orientalism, as much as an impulse, is a collection: a gathering and ordering of objects, ideals, resources, people, images, and contexts. As such, it echoes in important ways the internal conceptual structure of the state museum, the quintessential site of Orientlist collecting. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues for the museum's centrality as a force of nationalization and nationalism, a paradigmatic figurehead of what he calls

a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state's real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth. The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. (184)

As Anderson goes on to discuss, this totalizing grid "allowed the state to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local, Tradition" (181). In effect, what both Said and Anderson are describing is a process of cultural ("the West") and national (French/British) self-articulation, a process that takes place via collecting. In her book *On Collecting*, Susan Pearce writes:

Collections are essentially a narrative of experience; as objects are a kind of material language, so the narratives into which they can be selected and organized are a kind of fiction, and it is no accident that both fiction and collection are a characteristically modernist European way of telling experience, with their formal and imaginative roots deep in the cultural traditions of the long term. (412)

Just as a person's souvenirs narrate a sense of self, the national museum and the exoticist collecting that defines Orientalism are essential elements in the self-fashioning of a state
or even of a hemisphere. The collections of items in museums and libraries, the body of scholarly work, the newspaper reports and artistic depictions and discursive formations of Orientalism - all functioned as the ink with which the West, and in this case London and Paris, in particular - wrote for itself a narrative of triumph and modernity.

Of course, before they could be assembled into a narrative, the objects of collection had to be gathered. Said’s definition of Orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3), and the archaeological endeavors undertaken during this period were not incidental but fundamental to this overarching political framework. The unearthing of Nineveh would be a prime example of this dynamic. As Bohrer notes: “Though they worked at distinct sites in Northern Mesopotamia, around twenty-five kilometers apart […] Layard and Botta were each praised throughout their lives as the ‘discoverer of Nineveh.’ The specificity and difference of their discoveries is mitigated by the existence of but a single term in the Western imagination, ‘Nineveh,’ to describe it” (68). Decoding the meaning of that single term begins with the biblical Nineveh, the “great” and “wicked” city of the book of Jonah, the home of “more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11). In the Book of Jonah, the city is threatened with and then spared God’s wrath (3:10), but His mercy is upsetting to the righteous Jonah, leaving the implication open that its eventual demise at the hands of history amounts to a fulfillment of divine justice. As such, it had already served as a favorite subject of grandiose painting and moralistic writing in the West long before it was unearthed in the nineteenth century; thus, “the actions and artifacts associated with [Layard and Botta] do not mark a creation ab nihilo but rather a supplement to the textual
and artifactual expectations on which earlier artists like Delacroix depended” (Bohrer 69). Included within this textual history is the sense of Nineveh as a crowning discovery, so that “the attribution of Nineveh to the discoveries of each man is a figure not only of the West’s imaginary geography, but the opposition of two nations locked in contest for a common prize” (68).

That contest was not only an underlying narrative but often surfaced openly as a primary focus of its players. This is reflected in the writings, both public and private, of the archaeologists and researchers on the missions, which were infused with nationalistic sentiment, often directed specifically against the rival power. For example, Henry Rawlinson, a British consul at Baghdad and a specialist in cuneiform script who was involved with Layard’s excavations, wrote to Layard in 1845:

It pains me grievously to see the French monopolize the field, for the fruits of Botta’s labors, already achieved and still in progress, are not things to pass away in a day but will constitute a nation’s glory in future ages. (Qtd. in Bohrer 103)

The “nation’s glory” referred to here is, of course, the glory of France, not that of the empire that originally created the treasures now being uncovered. Rawlinson laments France’s ongoing progress because he sees the archaeological project as a nation-building mission, a mission conceived and executed not only for the present but for the “future ages.”50 For their part, the French understood their ancient acquisitions in terms of modern and future national glory as well. In a popular weekly illustrated magazine called

50 Rawlinson’s lament here highlights the central role of archaeology in the development of modern nationalism as a quasi-religious impulse, as Anderson describes it (11). For Rawlinson, archaeology essentially involves digging into the past in order to lay the foundations of national preeminence into the future, in effect re-establishing what Benjamin would call the “Messianic time” observed by the sacred communities of old: “the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement” (263). Anderson calls this idea “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” (24).
L'Illustration,\(^{51}\) an article describing the opening of the collection of Assyrian artifacts at the Louvre in 1847 celebrated the momentous occasion this way:

Nebuchadnezzar, Sardanapalus, or Ninus himself, for we don’t know his actual identity, but the Assyrian monarch, in any case, sets foot on the banks of the Seine. A new, more worthy home has been destined to him, the palace of our kings. The Louvre opens wide its doors to him. (Qtd. in Bohrer 66)\(^{52}\)

In this striking image, the reader can almost picture the Louvre – monument to French power and greatness – opening its doors, like a great mouth, and swallowing the ancient king together with his power and his glory. According to Bohrer, comments like these do not stand out from the norm of the period; rather they illustrate clearly that the archaeological projects of both of these countries were understood as nationalistic enterprises, undertaken in the name of glory, and, more specifically, in the name of a contest in which the two powers were pitted against each other.

The fairly entrenched mid-century attitude towards archaeology as a national enterprise is illustrative of the changing nature, structure, and social meaning of archaeology during the Romantic period. In From Paris to Pompeii: French Romanticism and the Cultural Politics of Archaeology, Göran Blix traces the change in

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\(^{51}\) Bohrer describes the illustrated magazine as “a dominant European institution” during the nineteenth century in Europe. He writes that, “Perhaps more than any other of its time, it served to set in motion the sorts of transformation of subject and audience described by Benjamin in the ‘Art-Work’ essay. ... [T]he illustrated magazine must be understood as both passive and active agent in contemporary visual culture, both reporting and making public opinion” (76).

\(^{52}\) The writer here enacts a classic Orientalist gaze: “The king is identified not on his own terms, but instead as an incomplete version of a modern French king” (Bohrer 66). This is very much in tune with the statement by a French journalist that Said takes as his jumping-off point – that after the ravages of civil war in Lebanon, “the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval” has been destroyed (1991). Neither "the Orient" nor its metonym, the king, is considered to exist except as an object of the Western gaze. Furthermore, this particular reading of the artifact is a mimetic one, reproducing social relations of the West in order to inscribe them onto the East.
archaeological practice that occurred between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth, a shift in perception that he characterizes as a “transition from a purely aesthetic gaze to a historicizing gaze” (9). When Pompeii and Herculaneum were unearthed in the mid-1700s, they ushered in the new art of underground exploration. However, their excavations amounted to little more than disorganized looting, carried out in secrecy using slave labor to extract objects for exchange in an elite, if sleazy, international marketplace.⁵³ There was no scientific or historical integrity here, according to Blix, because there was no sense of an object or a space having scientific or historical value; their attributes were purely aesthetic (12). But gradually, as the archaeological dig shifted in cultural perception from a curious site of artistic treasures to an emblem of the “romantic myth of the city as a lost world magically restored by the powers of archaeology,” the practice of archaeology took on greater and greater cultural cachet (10). By the early nineteenth century, critiques of the profit mode of excavation as “irresponsible” paved the way for several decades of an increasingly scientific systematization of archaeological practices. By 1865, Ernest Renan was hailing Auguste Mariette’s work in Egypt as “the greatest scientific enterprise of our century,” and praising the latter’s refusal to give in to “the frivolity of the elites, the stupidity of the

⁵³ Blix writes that “The cities would in fact be treated largely as underground treasuries, mines brimming with artworks, graves to be robbed for the king’s collection of antiques” (11). Charles de Bourbon, Prince Eugene of Savoy, and Lord Hamilton, the British ambassador to Naples, were among the earliest owners of illicit private stashes of collectibles, which were extracted by means of the cheapest labor possible, including slaves from Algiers and Tunis (13). The excavations were unsystematic, with laborers digging out a room, extracting any artifacts of value, and then refilling that excavated room with earth from the next one as they continued their search (14). Interestingly, these practices inspired in Goethe a decidedly nationalistic lament, as he remarked that he wished it had all been undertaken “systematically by true German mountain-men” (Blix 12).
public, and that vain quest for museum objects which reduces science to a pale amusement” (15). As Renan’s comments illustrate, archaeological endeavor may have been increasingly systematized, but that does not imply democratization. Rather, the right to engage in archaeological practice has been transferred from one type of elite – the moneyed aristocracy after a profit or an aesthetic thrill – to another, the educated scientist toiling in the interest of posterity and safeguarding the past from the rapacious masses below.

The disconnection implicit in Renan’s remarks is illustrative of a broader disconnection that Bohrer traces in the French reception of archaeological objects from far-off lands in the nineteenth century, a breakdown of availability that fell largely along class lines. The archaeological objects were indeed heavily interpreted as national treasure, but this in itself was not a seamless narrative. Even as national treasure, the artifacts also existed as objects of contested ownership – as, indeed, did the nation itself during this period of revolutionary upheaval – with an emerging middle class protesting the stratification of access to knowledge and seeking to resolve the contradiction in their own ways. Bohrer outlines the profoundly uneven dispersal of information about archaeological finds in nineteenth-century France, noting that the Louvre, a museum that was “not vastly welcoming to the general public in the mid-nineteenth century,” did expand its visiting hours “in an effort to meet public demand to see the new discoveries” (76), but that beyond those extra hours, the museum did not provide much in the way of interpretive or historicizing help to its lay guests (76). Meanwhile the only official published account of Botta’s endeavor was the five-volume Monument de Ninive, which was so elaborate and so highly priced that “it was virtually guaranteed that its circulation...
would be confined strictly to those of the greatest means” (73) – suggesting a point of view in line with Renan’s, above, about who should have access to antiquarian knowledge. However, this myopia on the part of the public institutions responsible for the handling of the production of archaeological knowledge was not simply met silently by the public that was left shut out. Newspapers and popular illustrated magazines took up the case, often excoriating the central institutions and offering not only commentary but also historicizing interpretation of the objects themselves.

One such illustrated magazine, *Le Tour du Monde*, published a critique of the dissemination of Botta’s discoveries, pointing out that “Volumes of huge format, whose price runs to many thousands of francs are undoubtedly monuments worthy of a great nation: but as such they are scarcely accessible and will never reach beyond the narrowest audience” (Bohrer 74). This critique came as late as 1863, but newspaper reaction to the finds was actually much swifter than that, all in all, and went a long way to establishing the finds as a matter of public interest. As early as 1848, the working-class journal *Le Magasin Pittoresque* ran a sustained account of the Louvre collection for its readership, including illustrations of the artifacts on display (Bohrer 79). Its treatment of the objects included historical and geographical information, aesthetic evaluations quoted from Botta’s own letters, and even a questioning of the placement of the objects in the gallery – such as the winged bulls – in angles and situations that differed from how they had been uncovered in the palace (Bohrer 79). An 1852 article in the same magazine, “both envious and disparaging to its traditional national rival, was inspired by Layard and the display of his finds at the British Museum” (Bohrer 82). The tone of envy referenced here can also be seen in the article from *Le Tour du Monde*, quoted above, which
concludes with the observation that, when it comes to disseminating information to the public, “the wisely practical spirit of our neighbors across the Channel can serve as an example” (Bohrer 74).

The fact that working-class members of society, for whom it was more difficult to visit the museum during its open hours, were able to participate in the triumphant revelation of the archaeological booty via newspaper is significant on multiple levels. As Bohrer points out, it is essential for understanding the ways in which knowledge of far-off lands and epochs was not only acquired, but produced during this period. To Bohrer, the “knowledgeable criticism” available in Le Magasin Pittoresque is “a paradigm of an active, engaged mode of reception” that allows the reader to be “involved, in some sense, in the production of knowledge usually reserved for the learned world” (79). The disconnections between different branches of society in their approach to the dissemination of ancient Mesopotamian images is, for Bohrer, a function of the exoticist54 enterprise in which images of the Other acquire meaning through an intricate web of historical assumptions, psychological and social needs, and emotional resonances. It is, not coincidentally, this very web that also made these images both available to and alluring for Symbolist artists seeking to emphasize strangeness and to explore emotional resonance while dehistoricizing and decontextualizing the Ancient.

The commerce in archaeological knowledge that was sustained between Britain and France in the late nineteenth century also contributed to the rivalrous climate. Not only did their respective governments and funding agencies each keep an eye on what the

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54 “Exoticism” is the term that Bohrer defines and deploys to characterize the Western European approach to artifacts and cultures separated not only by geographical distance, but by temporal distance as well. This term will be discussed at greater length in the coming pages.
other was doing, but publication of information in one nation was closely watched by the other. And although the Louvre may have been criticized for failing to provide context to its French visitors, Bohrer notes that the few printed guide materials it did produce to accompany the exhibition were actually in English. Meanwhile, when George Smith published the first English translation of the Gilgamesh Epic in 1872, he included plates illustrating key scenes that were derived from art objects held in the Louvre collection. For example, an illustrated plate shows a copy of a bas-relief of Gilgamesh holding a lion in his arm that was on display at the Louvre, with the caption, “Izdubar strangling a lion. From Khorsabad sculpture” (Smith 1872, 197). This same relief would later influence Gauguin, as we will see.

That first English publication of the text of *Gilgamesh* provoked a new firestorm of interest in Assyriology in both Britain and France (as well as in the United States and Germany). Smith was a copy clerk who had taken a position cataloguing the clay tablets in the British Museum, when, with his prodigious linguistic ability and meticulous attention to detail,55 he discovered that a section of the narrative seemed to be recounting a catastrophic flood very similar to the Biblical story of Noah (32). Such a breakthrough carried important religious and political implications; here was a text as ancient as the Bible and yet of a heathen civilization, with a flood narrative virtually identical to the one found in the Bible itself. Damrosch sets the scene in *The Buried Book*:

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55 Damrosch notes that Sir Henry Rawlinson, George Smith’s boss and a major figure in British Assyriology, was “strongly impressed by his ability to piece tablets together, a task requiring an exceptional visual memory and manual dexterity in creating ‘joins’ of tablet fragments. A given tablet might have been broken into a dozen or more pieces, now widely dispersed among the hundred thousand fragments in the museum’s collection” (30).
Within days of this discovery, sermons and newspaper editorials began to engage in sharp debate: What did the Babylonian version prove, the truth of biblical history or its falsity? As the *New York Times* noted in a front-page article, ‘For the present the orthodox people are in great delight, and are very much prepossessed by the corroboration which it affords to biblical history. It is possible, however, as has been pointed out, that the Chaldean inscription, if genuine, may be regarded as a confirmation of the statement that there are various traditions of the deluge apart from the Biblical one, which is perhaps legendary like the rest.’ Smith’s scholarly detective work brought the epic squarely into the middle of the heated Victorian controversy over creation and evolution, religion and science, a debate that continues today. (Damrosch 5)

From the moment of its arrival in Europe, the image of the buried Assyrian kingdom had piqued the imaginations of Westerners fascinated with its mysterious biblical past; but the spectre of the text, with its parallel to sacred myths of old, raised the stakes of archaeological production to another level entirely.

Smith’s initial 1872 translation of the flood narrative, *The Chaldean Account of the Deluge*, was covered in newspapers far and wide, including the *New York Times*, quoted above. It was quickly followed in France by a series of articles on the narrative by François Lenormant, published in *Le Correspondant* in 1872-1873, and then compiled and republished as a book called *Les Premières civilisations*, in 1874. Lenormant noted that interest in the narrative was not limited to England; all of Europe was publicizing the story with greater or lesser degrees of competence. For example, in France, *Le Journal officiel* had printed a translation of Smith’s entire article, and, Lenormant points out, Smith had been granted massive spaces in *The Daily Telegraph*, which he describes as "jaloux de surpasser" the coverage of archaeological and anthropological finds available

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56 The text that Smith translated was not actually Babylonian, but Assyrian. Assurbanipal’s library was uncovered at Nineveh, close to 300 miles to the north of Babylon. There was, however, also a Babylonian version of the text, and fragments or copies of it were also discovered southern Turkey and in Palestine.
in an American paper, the *New York Herald*. Such a level of engagement in England and France, Lenormant declares,

> sera certainement un des faits les plus extraordinaires de l’histoire de la presse anglo-saxonne dans notre siècle, ce rôle qu’elle tend à prendre également en Angleterre et aux États-Unis, substituant son initiative à celle des gouvernements dans les grandes entreprises qui intéressent le progrès de la science. Rien ne pouvait honorer davantage le journalisme anglais et américain, et pareil spectacle est de nature à nous faire de tristes retours sur l’esprit de notre propre presse.

(Lenormant 4-5)

[will certainly be one of the most extraordinary events in the history of the Anglo-Saxon press in our century, this role that it takes in both England and the United States, substituting its own initiative for that of the government in the grand enterprises that concern the progress of science. Nothing could more honor English and American journalism, and the same spectacle is of the sort that makes us look sadly upon the spirit of our own press.]

An awareness of the scientific systematization of archaeology is evident in Lenormant’s characterization of the discipline as one of “les grandes entreprises qui intéressent le progrès de la science,” while his praise of “le journalisme anglais et américain” for their ability to take over functions of knowledge production previously relegated to the government indicates a distinct connection between the press and a keen national consciousness. In Lenormant’s view, the media coverage of archaeological discoveries is about more than the dissemination of the knowledge itself; it is a reflection of national interest and competence in two distinct but inextricably interconnected enterprises: archaeology and journalism.

The prominent role of the popular newspaper in shaping the French reception of Mesopotamia helped to crystallize the nationalist bent to the public conception of archaeological practice. As Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities*, newspapers occupied a central position in the development of modern nations and nationalism. Anderson argues that the rise of print capitalism was one of the key
determining forces in the development of the modern nation as a phenomenon of socio-political organization. This influence was exerted along several different avenues that intersect in complicated ways, one of them being in the dissemination and consumption of the newspaper, a mass-produced commodity whose planned obsolescence “prefigure[s] the inbuilt obsolescence of modern durables” (35). For Anderson, the ephemerality of the daily newspaper, in addition to its narrative fictiveness – the arbitrary way in which unrelated news items are selected for simultaneous display on the front page – “creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption (‘imagining’) of the newspaper-as-fiction” (35). This ritualistic practice of reading the daily (or weekly) paper, necessitated by the brevity of the document’s shelf life, acts as a catalyst to the development of a communal identity which constitutes a foundational step in the formation of a modern nationalism. In the case of the archaeological finds, the content of the newspaper reinforces this narrative of cultural cohesion, even as disagreements about the finds themselves may be under discussion.

The connection between nationalism and newspapers, however, only emphasizes what is clearly a nationalistic drive endemic to the nature and practice of archaeology during this period. Many scholars have theorized a strong connection between the rise of

57 In other words, all readers must agree to two terms of the newspaper: first, that they will imagine the disconnected items on the front page to be meaningfully and justifiably grouped together there, and second, that they will read the day’s paper in the short span of time between when it is printed and when its contents become irrelevant. In part because of these terms, the ritual is therefore paradoxically both public and private: “It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull,” writes Anderson, “Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (35). Thus, the ritual of the daily paper contributes in a substantive and irreversible way to “creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (36).
secularism and the development of modern nations, and archaeology has firm roots in this tradition. Anderson seizes on the phenomenon of the “tomb of the unknown soldier,” for example, as evidence that nationalism is to a great degree concerned with death and immortality, calling it a “quasi-religious impulse” (10), and pointing out that the Enlightenment’s “disintegration of paradise” marked human fatality as arbitrary and necessitated “another style of continuity” (11). For Blix, this process lies at the heart of archaeology’s rise to prominence and increasing systematization during the Romantic period: “Archaeology,” he writes, “or rather its myth, affirmed that nothing perishes, that earthly existence itself embodies a form of immortality, and that the tragic history of modern life carries with it a secular ontology that neutralizes this fragile and fugitive character” (7). This need for a sense of continuity, Blix argues, links nationalism and archaeology inextricably. “As history, in the nineteenth century, came to define the nation, and the nation to ground the state, social stability was in part becoming a question of managing a collective past. [...] Scientific culture was emerging as the precondition for preeminence in the age of nationalism, and the mastery of the past often seemed just as vital as the mastery of nature” (37). By Blix’s accounting, the race between Britain and France for archaeological domination in the Near East constituted the first time that archaeology really began to take on its modern glamour (38), but there is a discontinuity here that is instructive: if “social stability was in part becoming a question of managing a collective past,” then in what sense did ancient Assyria belong to the “collective” past of the French nation?

As it turns out, it did so in a very literal sense. I have already mentioned the biblical origins of the modern French image of Nineveh, but within that context the city
and its inhabitants remains radically foreign – the Others who do not know the right hand from the left. It only becomes part of the collective, French past as a result of archaeological practice and scholarship. A snapshot into this process is visible in an October 28, 1892 article in the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, recounting a recent meeting of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. The article outlines the archeological community’s various triumphs and endeavors from the past year, including the publishing of seven volumes of memoirs on archaeological subjects, and covers topics ranging from the palm trees of Pliny’s day to a recently published set of tablets from Tell-el-Amarna, Assyria. Naming major figures in archaeological scholarship, the writer of the article remarks that “M. Maspero58 espère que la mission archéologique étendra ses recherches sur la Syrie et la Mésopotamie comme sur l’Egypte. L’Orient ancien et moderne nous appartient” ["Mr. Maspero hopes that the archaeological mission will extend his research on Syria and Mesopotamia, as on Egypt. The Orient, both ancient and modern, is ours"]. Here, in one deft movement, the writer dramatizes the archaeological impulse as a simultaneous colonization of both place and history. Like a fisher casting a net, Maspero hopes to spread his research across new, fertile waters, while the past is collapsed into the present in a defining gesture of ownership. The ancient Orient has become part of “our” collective past.

The scientific systematization of archaeological practice during the Romantic period was perhaps both a cause and a symptom of its movement from the sleazy spheres of the black market into its more centralized place at the heart of nationalistic enterprise.

58 Gaston Maspero (1846-1916) was a widely published Egyptologist and Assyriologist whose work on the Gilgamesh epic is discussed later in this chapter. His student, Jules Sauveplane, produced the first French translation of the epic in its entirety as his doctoral thesis and published it in 1893, the same year that the draft of *Noa Noa* was written.
However, the Romanticist counternarrative to Enlightenment enquiry also necessitated a different episteme, one that grew out of the same nationalistic enterprise – and reinforced some of its ideologies – while rejecting its scientific worldview. This is the fierce adoption of the archaeological by those seeking out mystical and otherworldly narratives of human existence. As Norman Levitt has argued, “There has always been something numinous, if not positively spectral, in the stories of ancient civilizations unearthed or ancient writings deciphered. [...] Archaeology, in the public mind, has a long history of association with the uncanny splendor of an alien past” (269). This facet of the field has clearly influenced the reception of archaeological treasures in the West, where “[i]n addition to exotic beauty,” the nineteenth-century public “anticipated the emergence of ancient or unconventional wisdom, spiritual revelation, and the recovery of arcane lore and mantic powers long lost” (Levitt 270). Still, this alternative narrative relies in many ways on the same “mastery of the past” as the more systematic approach does, because such a position with respect to the objects of old is made possible in no small degree by the propensity of each generation to use the past – as we use far-off lands – for its own purposes. “What might be called a ‘colonization’ of the past,” writes Levitt, “is a pervasive cultural habit that erupts for many reasons in many places but which reposes, finally, on the unspoken and unconscious assumption that the past is, indeed, open for colonization; that it is truly malleable and can always be molded nearer to the heart’s desire” (261). Thus, the ideology of national superiority and cohesion is echoed in an ideology of generational advancement; the pliability of the past exists as a parallel and mutually reinforcing meme to the pliability of the far-off Other.
The pervasive atmosphere of national pride as the lens through which the Ancient Near East was imagined and absorbed in France indicates how thoroughly prevalent Assyrian images were in the public consciousness. This Assyriology was not a matter for obscure scholars but a discursive formation that commanded general public attention across a wide range of demographics, and indeed contributed in a significant way to the articulation of a unified public sense of self and nation. The question therefore becomes not “How could Gauguin have known about Gilgamesh?” but rather, “How could Gauguin not have known about Gilgamesh?” Particularly given the heavy investment of his circle in images and dreams of the ancient world, and the relish with which they discussed all matters of arts and letters in their cafés and bars, it is almost inconceivable that Gauguin would not have heard of the story of Gilgamesh – or indeed read it – in some form or another by the 1890s.

The contradiction contained herein is one which continually resurfaces in discussions of Gauguin’s exotic influences: the access that he had to these images was not only provided but emphatically mediated by the very institutions of bourgeois

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59 Although Anderson hypothesizes that the nation developed as a consequence of and in direct relation to the rise of print capitalism, he also acknowledges the power of the image to articulate or disseminate the collective identity of an imagined community. For example, pre-national, pre-print communities in Western Europe imagined themselves through the complex iconography of religious painting, which not only reinforced a political structure organized around sacred and feudal institutions, but also naturalized that structure and its relevance by representing ancient narratives using contemporary cultural indicators. Hence the viewer of medieval or early Renaissance European painting will often notice that “The shepherds who have followed the star to the manger where Christ was born bear the features of Burgundian peasants,” or that “The Virgin Mary is figured as a Tuscan merchant’s daughter” (22). In this way, the universe of Christendom “manifested itself variously to particular […] communities as replications of themselves” (23). Their self-reflection in devotional art can be read as a communal self-fashioning, an affirmation of political and sacred identity that is manifested in the trappings of quotidian cultural iconography (such as clothing).
nationalism that he sought to reject by adopting them. In other words, although he marketed himself as a “savage,” enacting his cultural transvestism via the artifacts and aesthetics of exotic traditions, Gauguin had the privilege and the means of doing so only by virtue of his Frenchness, i.e., his membership in the very community he sought to reject.

III. Translating the Epic

The early debates about the Gilgamesh epic that surfaced in the 1870s focused almost exclusively on the flood narrative, but by the 1890s a fuller picture of the cycle of stories emerged. The flood narrative, which takes up one tablet out of twelve, is not an integral part of the epic itself, and was probably incorporated into the larger Gilgamesh tradition as it underwent its various poetic permutations in oral form. However, it was the first part of the epic to be translated in the West, and it provided the main impetus for further scholarly research because of its close associations with the Bible. As a French newspaper report on the death of George Smith in 1876 noted,

Il mit à part tous les fragments qui lui paraissaient rapporter à des matières analogues; enfin, un jour, ses yeux tombèrent sur ces mots: ‘Le vaisseau s’arrêta sur les monts Nizir.’ Ensuite venait l’histoire de la colonie qu’Izidubar [Gilgamesh], le Noé assyrien, fait sortir de l’arche et qui revient ne trouvant pas où se poser: le récit assyrien du déluge était retrouvé. (Journal des débats, Sept. 15, 1876)

[He set aside all the fragments that appeared to him to relate to the same material; finally, one day, his eyes fell upon these words: "The ship stopped on the hills of Nizir." Then came the story of the dove that Izdubar [Gilgamesh], the Assyrian Noah, sent from the ark, and which returned, not finding anywhere to land: the Assyrian account of the flood was discovered.]

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Izdubar – Smith’s rendering of the name that later became known as Gilgamesh – was not in fact the “Assyrian Noah”; that position belonged rather to Utnapishtim, a distinction that would unfold in later years. Hence the article illustrates the ways in which early research on the text coalesced around Western concerns and mythologies.

As the years progressed, Assyriological scholarship moved away from focusing solely on the flood and began to take an interest in rounding out the larger narrative. Leonidas de Cenci Hamilton's 1884 verse reconstruction of the Epic, *Izdubar and Ishtar*, emphasized the tumultuous relationship between Gilgamesh (known in the West as "Izdubar" until the 1890s) and the love goddess Ishtar, who proposes marriage to the hero and becomes enraged when he rejects her. The changing meaning of the myth for Western audiences is visible in the fact that early efforts at translation focused so narrowly on the deluge myth, while Hamilton’s version elides the flood myth altogether in favor of a exotic / erotic narrative of a goddess spurned. This new emphasis also prevails in 1890s studies of the epic, which reveal that a great deal of scholarship had been completed in the intervening decade. Gaston Maspero’s *The Dawn of Civilization* (1894), for example, includes a fairly detailed summary of the Gilgamesh cycle, beginning with the notion that “The whole story is essentially an account of his struggles with Ishtar, and the first pages reveal him as already at issue with the goddess” (575). However, Maspero’s account does also explore the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu (“Eabani”) in ways that more closely resemble what we know of the epic now. Enkidu is presented as a beloved friend and follower of Gilgamesh, whose death “after an agony of twelve days’ duration” causes Gilgamesh terrible pain and fear (583). Maspero also narrates Eabani’s desire to fight Gilgamesh at their first meeting, and notes that
“Frequent representations of Eabani are found upon the monuments; he has the horns of a goat, the tail and legs of a bull” (576). In this account, Gilgamesh offers Eabani many great things when they meet, and Maspero writes that “It was by such flatteries and promises for the future that Gilgamesh gained the affection of his servant Eabani, whom he loved forever” (579). Thus Maspero highlights key aspects of the narrative that are echoed in Noa Noa: the animalistic nature of Enkidu, his contentious and intense first meeting with Gilgamesh, and the powerful bonds of love between the pair.

Maspero’s book draws heavily on texts that appeared in the early 1890s in various parts of Europe. He remarks in a footnote that excellent sources for studying the epic include an 1891 summary of the text in German by A. Jeremias, Izdubar-Nimrod, and “a complete French translation” by F. Sauveplane, Une Épopée Babylonienne, Istubar-Gilgames, of 1894 (574).61 Like many nineteenth-century books on this subject, Sauveplane’s work was originally published first in a periodical, in this case the Revue des Religions, in 1892-93, meaning that it became available right around the time that Gauguin was returning from Tahiti and writing Noa Noa. Appearing as a series of five articles in the bimonthly publication (the first article appearing in the July-August edition, 1892), Sauveplane’s rendering of the text is straightforward and supple, with characters and images carefully delineated with a refinement that obscures the heavy damage and spottiness of the original. He narrates the tale in prose, and then provides his verse translation, with its characteristic gaps where the tablets are broken or worn.

61 “F. Sauveplane” is Father Jules-Justin Sauveplane, a priest and scholar whose work on Gilgamesh comprised his doctoral thesis, which he produced under the direction of Joseph Halévy and presented to a committee that included Gaston Maspero and Jules Oppert. Given his religious positioning, it is actually quite remarkable to note the level of spiritual respect that he pays to the figure of Gilgamesh, whom he seems to take as a valid theological figure in his own right.
Sauveplane’s introduction to the text offers important insight into the changing views of Gilgamesh that were developing in public discourse in 1892-1893. A scholar and clergyman, Sauveplane seeks to provide his lay audience with a deeper appreciation for the spiritual and cultural import of Gilgamesh as a mysterious ancient figure. In doing so, he shifts the emphasis on the text away from the flood narrative and onto the contributions of Gilgamesh himself. He writes:

Gilgamès, en effet, n’est pas uniquement comme on pourrait le croire d’après un examen superficiel, le grand coureur d’aventures, l’auteur d’héroïques équipées; il est encore, par son côté mystérieux et profond, le chercheur fatidique, l’explorateur intrépide parti à la découverte de ces choses divines, le bien, le bonheur, la science et qui revient exténué, de ce long voyage à travers les pays inconnus. Gilgamès est le prototype d’Hercule. Il est à la fois le dieu sauveur, le lutteur inatigable, le grand devin, découragé hela! par ses propres visions. Gilgamès c’est Apollon, c’est Achille doublé d’Ulysse, c’est déjà Faust. (310)

[Indeed Gilgamesh is not only, as one could believe him to be after a superficial examination, the great conqueror of adventures, the pursuer of heroic escapades; he is also, in his deep and mysterious role, the fateful searcher, the intrepid explorer in search of things divine, goodness, happiness, science, and who returns exhausted from this long voyage through unknown countries. Gilgamesh is the prototype of Hercules. He is simultaneously the savior god, the tireless fighter, the great diviner - discouraged, alas, by his own visions. Gilgamesh is Apollo, he is Achilles coupled with Ulysses, he is already Faust.]

This introduction, following upon a quotation from the first lines of the text referring to Gilgamesh as the one “qui a vu l’abîme, qui a tout connu, qui a pénétré les mystères” (310), demonstrates a new level of engagement with the text and with the character of Gilgamesh himself. At the same time it exemplifies the nineteenth-century Orientalist’s dual mission, which is, on the one hand, to pique his audience’s fascination with mystery (calling him “le grand devin”), and, on the other, to make his image accessible by positioning him as an Eastern forerunner to quintessential Western figures - Apollo, Achilles, Ulysses, and even Faust. In this way, Sauveplane's text illustrates how the
easily the spectre of the Orient could take on the flavor of the uncanny: foreign and familiar at the same time.

One last point on nineteenth-century Western scholarship is worth noting here. Between the 1870s and the 1890s, there was an ongoing debate over the nature of Gilgamesh as a character and the orthographic rendering of his name, which shifted from "Izdubar" to "Gilgamesh" by the time of Sauveplane's edition. François Lenormant's 1874 (so very early) discussion of this issue is instructive:

Le texte [...] est une grande histoire épique sur la vie et les aventures d'un personnage fabuleux dont, malheureusement, le nom est toujours écrit en caractères idéographiques, ce qui en laisse encore la véritable prononciation inconnue. Comme on ne peut pas l'appeler X, ou ***, il faut provisoirement lui donner, comme a fait M. Smith, l'appellation d'Izdubar, prononciacion phonétique des caractères employés commes idéogrammes à écrire son nom. Mais certainement les Assyriens et les Babyloniens le lisaient autrement. (20)

[The text [...] is a grand epic narrative on the life and adventures of a fantastic character whose name, unfortunately, is always written in ideographic characters, which leaves the true pronunciation unknown. Since we can't call him X, or ***; we must provisionally give give him, as Mr. Smith has done, the name of Izdubar, [which is] the phonetic pronunciation of the characters used as ideograms to write his name. But certainly the Assyrians and the Babylonians read it differently.]

As this passage indicates, Western Orientalist scholars were well aware of and able to acknowledge the complexities of resurrecting an ancient character from a lost civilization - "certainement les Assyriens et les Babyloniens le lisaient autrement." But on the other hand, this passage also demonstrates in a profound way how "the mastery of the past often seemed just as vital as the mastery of nature," as Blix puts it (37). Although Smith and Lenormant recognize that Izdubar is not the hero's name, they will call him that anyway, because "on ne peut pas l'appeler X, ou ***." The modern scholar's job is to identify and categorize, to sort and to name; this is a crucial element in the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). In the
process, the exotic Other is often converted into an empty and undifferentiated signifier, waiting to be filled with Western fantasies or anxieties.

IV. The Dreamer and the Dream World

It is important to consider that the Epic of Gilgamesh was not just a text functioning as a subject and product of scholarly labor during the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe, but part of a complex web of meaning that included texts and images drawn from archaeological lands and infused with meaning by the receiving culture. As we have seen, the second half of the nineteenth century was a boom time for French archaeological excavation in the Near East, and Mesopotamian discoveries, with their close relevance to biblical history and their intensely evocative visual resonance, were of great interest in both visual and textual forms. A wide variety of Mesopotamian materials would have been readily available to Gauguin, from the permanent installation of ancient Assyrian artifacts at the Louvre to the Near Eastern Pavillion at the Universal Exhibition of 1889. Furthermore, the mysterious aura of the giant statues and reliefs brought back from the Near East, and the cuneiform writing that accompanied them, would have been both aesthetically and thematically intriguing to him as a Symbolist in pursuit of mystery and meaning.

In recent years, only one book has devoted significant attention to the subject of Gauguin’s Middle Eastern interests: Feresteh Daftari’s The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky. In it, the author examines Gauguin’s interest in Persian art, particularly the decorative arts, which were a key concern throughout his career. Daftari’s research indicates that Persian carpets and Persian miniatures were of
particular interest to Gauguin, because of their flatness, their emphasis on geometric
design, and their fanciful use of color, all attributes that Gauguin admired, and that had
what she describes as "a liberating influence on Gauguin’s use of colors" (46). What
Daftari’s book demonstrates most effectively is the wide availability of Persian objects
for Gauguin to study and explore. These included carpets, miniatures, and other
decorative items from Persia, as well as religious and imperial art not of Persia, per se,
but of the Middle East more generally, including ancient Assyria and ancient Sumer.
Indeed, as she puts it, “the question arises as to whether Persia had any distinctive
identity in Gauguin’s mind” (36). It seems to have included, at the very least, Arab,
Turk, and other “Oriental” identities, a manifestation of the classic Orientalist paradigm
in which entities of the non-West blur together in a haze of ethnic and geographical non-
specificity.62

Frederic Bohrer also highlights this tendency in Gauguin's thinking. He considers
Gauguin a "paradigmatic exoticist viewer of the late nineteenth century," whose
conception of the Orient, "stretching from the Midi to the Middle east," was "as inchoate
and allochronic as any" of his time (266). That Gauguin's Orientalism is "allochronic" is
important, because it highlights the relationship between colonizing spaces and

62 Daftari actually frames her discussion of Gauguin by rejecting the label of “Orientalist”
to describe his work. Instead, she articulates what she sees as an important distinction
between Orientalism as a visual and verbal discourse, and a more genuine Islamic
influence on Western art: “The Orientalist artist paints the façade of Islamic lands and the
Christian East, whereas an artist influenced by Islamic art assimilates the vocabulary of
Islamic art” (1). For Daftari, Gauguin fits into the latter category. This line between
Orientalism and influence may be useful from an aesthetic perspective, but it obscures the
political resonance of Orientalist cultural production in the West, and the importance of
the multilevel assimilation of non-Western aesthetics in that politicized project. As
Gauguin’s example shows us, the assimilation of the artistic vocabulary of another region
can carry the same political baggage as a stereotyped fantasy in Western garb.
colonizing history; central to both of these endeavors is the lack of distinction drawn between different cultures, as long as they are non-Western. Because of the centrality of this dual form of domination to colonialist practice, Bohrer prefers the term "exoticism" to "Orientalism." Adopting a Benjaminian approach to time and history, he proposes that the spatial binary implicit in Said’s formulation of Orientalism (i.e., West / non-West) needs to be expanded to include temporal distance (ancient / modern) as a function and a tool of othering (17). He suggests that the term “exoticism” better characterizes this dynamic at play in the nineteenth-century reception of Mesopotamian cultural artifacts:

Unlike Orient or Occident, not only does exoticism make no claim to be assigned to a particular place, it also does not privilege location in space over location in time. Exoticism thus explicitly opens up analysis to works of historical subject matter, temporally distant from the West. (18)

Thus, Bohrer draws a connection between the dialectic of defamiliarization at play in late-nineteenth-century European representations of far-off places (“the Orient”) and the almost indistinguishable attitudes toward far-off times (“historical subject matter”), noting that often these two forms of distance supplement and complement each other in essential ways. The Orient is, by definition, a thing of the past, and the epochs of the past are no more carefully distinguished from one another than the different civilizations of the “Orient” are.

Archaeology is thus a central feature of Bohrer’s discussion of nineteenth-century European exoticism, in part because the exoticist system that Bohrer describes revolves around reception as an active, social process whereby meaning is not only gleaned from objects but made in conjunction with their discovery. He quotes Irene Winter’s observation that “The doing of archaeology can be understood not so much as the means by which one knows the past, but as a way of generating the past” (63). Thus,
archaeology, for Bohrer and for Winter, is the quintessential act of reception, and it is furthermore inflected – in fact, defined – in obvious ways by the two principal categories of exoticist discourse: spatial and temporal distance. This dynamic further elucidates the “mastery of the past” or “colonization of the past” that we have already seen at work in the newspaper and periodical accounts from the period.

Bohrer also highlights the close relationship between archaeology and the dream image, the latter being a central conceit of exoticist discourse, and of Symbolism. The enduring Western tradition of figuring the Orient as a dream world allowed the West to project its own fears and desires onto the spaces and the cultures that it colonized, or with which it came into contact. For Bohrer, the role of archaeology in erecting this structure of cultural reference is essential; as he points out, for example, the development of psychoanalysis as a discipline revolved in many ways around a vision of archaeology as a metaphor for dreaming or dream work, and vice versa – dreaming became a metaphor for archaeology (1). Like an intrepid explorer, the psychologist mined the dark and foreign land of the psyche in search of answers, wrangling the strange and forbidding symbols found there into a cohesive narrative serving a particular purpose. This parallel between archaeology and psychoanalysis is encapsulated, though not necessarily initiated, in an 1885 letter from the young Sigmund Freud to his wife, in which he describes the Ancient Near Eastern installations at the Louvre as feeling “Like the world of a dream” (Bohrer 1), conveying a sense of the uncanny that, as we have seen, was strongly reinforced by the practice of assembling and mediating foreign objects within the politicized cultural space of the museum.
A similar construct prevails in a newspaper article about the Universal Exposition of 1889, which posits the nervous laughter of Parisian onlookers as a metaphor for the strangeness of the experience: “le rire, qui, suivant les philosophes les plus autorisés, est produit d’un contraste, naît inévitablement de dialogue imprévu, au pied de la tour Eiffel, entre le fantôme de l’antiquité et les electeurs parisiens les plus modernes” (Journal des débats, July 17, 1889) ["laughter, which, according to the most authoritative philosophers, is produced by a contrast, born inevitably of the unexpected dialogue, at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, between the phantom of antiquity and the most modern Parisian citizens"]. Here, the writer highlights the dynamics of time and space that Bohrer signals with his use of the term “exoticism”: the universal exposition represents a confluence of far-off places transplanted into the here, and long-lost times transplanted into the now. However, the emphasis is markedly placed on time, rather than space - thus, “l’exposition du quai d’Orsay est une reproduction vivante, une véritable résurrection du passé” (Ibid.) ["the exposition on the Quay d'Orsay is a living reproduction, a veritable resurrection of the past"] – which is remarkable, given the prevalence at the Universal Exposition of exhibits of primitive peoples as they were living in the present. In this sense, primitive peoples, no less than archaeological finds, are considered as artifacts of an uncannily resurrected past, one which produces an intrigued and delighted alienation, a cosmopolitan laugh.

The relationship between archaeology, the dream image, and the uncanny is essential to the political dynamics of the history of Western exoticism, because the uncanny is different from the merely unfamiliar in that it is both foreign and intimate at the same time. In his classic essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud writes that “the uncanny is
that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (930). He points out that the German word “heimlich” – the opposite of the uncanny, or “unheimlich” – “is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (933). Its opposite, then, would be its opposite on both counts; the uncanny is that which should be familiar but is foreign; that which should be concealed, but is brought to light (934). The Mesopotamian images extracted by excavators represent and evoke images of the East that are familiar by way of their association with Biblical history, and yet utterly foreign in their inscrutable silence. It is this duality that makes the images so readily available for projection of Self-onto-Other – the grafting of dearly held fears and desires onto an unstable set of foreign images, unmoored from local or historical specificity – that lies at the heart of exoticist ideology. It is highly relevant that one of Freud's prime examples of the "Unheimlich" in literature is the trope of the doppelgänger. He writes that the "the themes of uncannies which are most prominent [...] are all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double,'" which in its modern incarnation surfaces as a "harbinger of death" (940). In exoticist discourse, the non-Western, the archaic and the primitive - in other words, the Other - often seems to function as a double of the West. It rises out of a murky history and presents the hegemonic order with a frightening, alluring, dreamlike vision of its hidden/foreign Self.

A particularly salient example of this would be the figure of Assurbanipal himself, the Assyrian monarch out of whose library the Gilgamesh epic was extracted by Layard’s crew. The old librarian king, known to the British as Sardanapalus and to the
French as Sardanapale, cut a particularly striking image in Western lore and served as the subject of many sensuous Orientalist paintings, including one by Eugène Delacroix, whom Gauguin much admired. In the nineteenth century, Sardanapale was known to Westerners as the last great Assyrian monarch, who had himself burned on a great pyre inside his palace, along with his concubines and servants, his horses and his treasure, in order to avoid the fate of falling into the hands of the rebels who besieged Nineveh when the city was finally sacked. Writing in 1919, Sir James Frazer called this episode “one of the most famous incidents in oriental legend” (172), but by then he was also able to point out that “The story is false of the historical Sardanapalus, that is, of the great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, but it is true of his brother Shamashshumukin” (173). Nevertheless, at the close of the nineteenth century, the legend of Sardanapalus maintained a hold on the public imagination. In his *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l’Orient* (1904), Gaston Maspero, in characteristic fashion, dismisses the episode of the funeral pyre as “un roman et rien de plus” ["nothing but a fiction"] but nevertheless recounts the legend itself in great detail, including the intriguing facts that Sardanapale “vivait dans le harem, entouré de femmes, habillé en femme et livré aux travaux d’une femme” ["lived in a harem, surrounded by women, dressed as a woman, and given over to women's work"] (452). In so doing, he demonstrates how deeply the figure of Sardanapalus, doomed king of hypersexed hedonism, was embedded in French culture at the turn of the century: the legend may be recognized as legend, and yet it endures. He also demonstrates the

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63 Gauguin admired Delacroix for his bold drawing and imaginative use of color, which he associated with the Near East. As a result, he Orientalized his vision of Delacroix as an artist, writing in a letter to Schuffenecker: “Delacroix’s drawing always reminds me of the strong, supple movements of a tiger. [...] The draperies coil around like a snake, and the effect is so tigerish!” (*WOS* 6). This is similar to the way he also described Cézanne, as an exemplar of "the essential mystic nature of the Orient" (*WOS* 4).
provocative power of the doppelgänger Orient, the frightening allure of the
good/familiar. The primitive shadow of the idealized Western androgyne is the
decadent Eastern cross-dresser, a titillating image of the double as emissary of death.

Delacroix’s painting, *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827-8), may today be one of
the most well known representations of the legendary king. This initially marginal but
ultimately influential painting, showing the king passively looking on from his bed as his
naked concubines, horses, and treasures are violently heaped up about him to be
destroyed in the coming blaze, presents Sardanapalus as “a cautionary foil to the Greco-
Roman ideal of the active participatory life” (Bohrer 55). Displaying not only his
hedonistic lifestyle but also his famously effeminate leaning, the king merely lounges
here, unmoved by the mayhem around him, “an act marking him as an alien figure of
satiation and passivity” (55). As such, writes Bohrer, “He is the figure of a totalitarian
system that is allowed a curious, repulsive fascination as it is overthrown” (55). In this
way, Sardanapale both allows a tantalizing glimpse into the sexual and material pleasures
of old, and reinforces nationalistic notions about the supremacy of modern Western
society over the lascivious, cross-dressing despots of long ago and/or far away. Further,
the painting is a prime example of the ways in which “The subject of the fall of
Nineveh,” for nineteenth-century Westerners, “floats on a sea of references without being
precisely tied to any one” (Bohrer 56). This is most evident in the convergence of details
extracted from historically distinct periods, lumped together anachronistically, that
appear in the many grand paintings depicting the legendary city. In characteristic
fashion, Delacroix’s attempt at documentary realism involves “painstaking transposition
of archaic Greek, Mughal Indian, Etruscan, and Egyptian sources in various aspects of
the painting” (56). In exoticist discourse, the lack of differentiation between periods and places reinforces the notion of unbounded, formless timelessness that characterizes and constitutes the “dream world” of the East.

Fig. 1. Eugène Delacroix, Death of Sardanapalus, 1827-8. Paris, Louvre.

All of this is to say that by the time Gauguin approached the non-Western world in his art, he had inherited a system in which historical specificity was consistently trumped by emotional resonance. For Gauguin, as we have seen, a wide range of vastly disparate sources were fair game for borrowing, and could be recycled, reimagined, and conflated without concern for historical place and time. In his work, the seamless integration of Peruvian, Breton, Javanese, Egyptian, and Polynesian images is executed without explanation or, it seems, much interrogation. The same is true for temporal distinction in Gauguin, for whom the “old” and the “ancient” are conflated easily with each other and with spatial distance as well. Indeed, the present study outlines the case for the artist having transplanted the mythic images of an ancient Mesopotamian culture
into his contemporary experience with a Polynesian one, without comment or detectable irony. What makes the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa* so fascinating is its distinct blend of Orientalist and primitivist impulses: its imagining of the primitive, the Polynesian, and the ancient Near Eastern as categories of interchangeable symbolic currency. At the same time, the temporal dynamics at play in Gauguin’s deployment of these cultural images resonate loudly with the temporal indeterminacy and the paradoxical dialectics of temporal distance that Bohrer’s formulation of “exoticism as system” highlights.

Bohrer’s assertion that Gauguin’s concept of the Orient stretches “from the Middle East to the Midi” stems in part from his analysis of an 1885 letter that Gauguin wrote to Emile Schuffenecker, a letter that is often quoted because of its richness of aesthetic and personal detail. In it, Gauguin writes the following about his friend Paul Cézanne:

> Look at Cézanne, the misunderstood, the essential mystic nature of the Orient (his face is like the face of an ancient from the Levant); he prefers forms imbued with the mystery and weighty tranquility of a man lying down so as to dream; his colors are grave like the character of an Oriental; a man from the Midi, he spends whole days on the mountaintops reading Virgil and gazing at the sky. [...] The literature of his paintings is meaningful, like a parable teaching a double lesson; his backgrounds are as imaginative as they are real. In short, when you see a painting by Cézanne, you cry, ‘How strange!’” (*Writings of a Savage* 4-5).

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64 The reader will immediately notice how similar this language is to that which Gauguin employed to describe his own work in an 1899 letter to Fontainas, already quoted in my introduction: “like the Bible, where the doctrine is pronounced in symbolic form, presenting a double aspect […]; it’s the sense literal, superficial, figurative, mysterious of a parable” (Thomson 2004, 172). This recycling of images and phrasing was common in both Gauguin’s paintings and his writings, and has been critiqued by some as a kind of self-plagiarism. We will revisit this issue in a later chapter, although in this particular case we should keep in mind that we are looking at letters here: writings that were not intended for publication. The repetition of phrases in this context should probably be taken as an indication that certain key concepts or ideas were particularly important to him, and were likely to resurface continually for that reason.
The insistence with which Gauguin deploys dialectical images to structure his mental picture of Cézanne is immediately remarkable: mystery / weight; literature / painting; imaginative / real. This tendency is a reflection of the exoticist impulse, whose magnetic allure allies in the tantalizing, uncanny confluence of the foreign and the familiar. Furthermore, Gauguin’s letter clearly illustrates the extent to which aesthetic value is bound up in the cult of persona: Cézanne’s art is strange, because Cézanne is strange. His art is the art of a modern Frenchman with the face of an ancient Levantine. The fluid, quarklike structure in which this mixture is suspended is the world of the dream, a place that lies outside of time or space but that can be conjured with one Eurocentric geographic indicator: the Orient.

The dreaminess of the Orient, with its “essential mystic nature” and its “grave” characters, surfaces again, more directly, in Gauguin’s description of the bas-relief of lions excavated at Nineveh and on display in the Louvre museum. Here, again writing to Schuffenecker, Gauguin explicitly links that dreaminess with an aesthetic impulse to abstraction. “I realize it has required an immense genius to imagine flowers as the muscles of animals,” he writes, “or muscles as flowers. All of the mystical, dreamy orient can be found in this” (WOS 32). In this simple declaration, Gauguin reveals the valence of the dream image on a political level (the exoticized image in the cultural space of the museum), on the thematic level (the importance of the dream image as the content or the inspiration of art), and on the aesthetic level (the dream enables formal abstraction, i.e., muscles as flowers and flowers as muscles). In this way the letter encapsulates the fundamental intersection between the aesthetic, the ontological, and the political that lies at the core of Gauguin’s approach to art, and in particular his approach to Noa Noa.
For the Symbolists, the dream image was valuable because of its polysemous nature, and its location in the “mysterious center of thought” – Gauguin’s phrase for the hidden space within the self whose unknown contents should be the subject of serious painting (WOS 140). It was a key element in the Symbolist drive for the ahistorical. This is an important point that is worth a pause to consider more fully. When Gauguin writes, in *Diverses Choses*, that the Impressionists “focused their efforts around the eye, not the mysterious center of thought, and from there they slipped into scientific reasons” (140), he conveys his deep-seated aversion to the scientific practice and worldview. This aversion is predicated on the notion that the scientific worldview restrains the artist’s capacity for self expression – the Impressionist is “bound by the shackles of verisimilitude” (140) – but it also finds its parallel in the Symbolist aversion to systematic historicism. In the Symbolist approach to history, the Romantic pursuit of emotional resonance dovetails with an emphatic renunciation of the limitations of verisimilitude or systematic thought, whether it be of the scientific or the historical kind.

The artifacts coming out of the Orient were, of course, *not* ahistorical; they were the products of complex civilizations deeply rooted in their own historical trajectories. But the exoticist impulse allows for the transmutation of the artifact into dream image, and by extension, its co-opting for political, cultural, and aesthetic purposes. Whether swallowed into the museum or resurrected in an artist’s fantasy, the exotic artifact comes to stand not for itself or its culture of origin, but for the supremacy of the culture that claims it or the subjectivity of the artist who deploys it. As we have seen, Western archaeology in non-Western lands “can hardly be understood as separate from Western imperial, colonial, and national movements” (Bohrer 62). In particular, the assertion of
Western power over the Orient is mirrored in the assertion of the primacy of modern subjectivity over the consumable ancient object, so that nineteenth-century archaeology functions as “a colonization of history in which many of the themes of spatial exoticism are also deployed in its temporal counterpart” (66). This dynamic is perhaps most visible in the conflation of disparate periods and even different ancient cultures or civilizations, as Bohrer has detailed.

It is also clearly visible in the fluidity of the relationship between Orientalist, exoticist, and primitivist impulses in Gauguin’s work, particularly his use of *Gilgamesh*. Ancient Assyria and the Biblical cultures of the Near East were highly developed and far from primitive; they suffered from many of the same ills as modern Western cultures, including anxieties about urbanization, mounting economic and ecological pressures, political infighting, social stratification, and war. As such they seem to offer a vision of human life that is quite antithetical to that found in the primitivist discourse of the “noble savage.” Yet what Orientalism, exoticism and primitivism have in common – what lends them their distinctive allure in the eyes of the Symbolist artist – is the structural lack of historical specificity at each of their cores. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued, there was in Gauguin’s primitivist project an atavistic longing that hinged on a vaguely articulated fantasy of historical indeterminateness: “Stasis – being outside of time and historical process - ” she writes, “is particularly crucial in the primitivist imagination, insofar as what is required is an imaginary site of psychic return” (317). That both the primitive and the ancient allowed for such an exit from the historical register made them into natural bedfellows, even when the material circumstances surrounding their objects differed dramatically. The easy intercourse between these impulses highlights the
fundamentally privileged position from which they originate, a position characterized by
geopolitically concentrated imperial power, even as it simultaneously reveals the
vulnerability inherent in that position: a lack of control over the relentless forward
momentum of time and historical process.

V. Mesopotamia in Symbolist Circles

It was through the multiple influences of museum and magazine, textuality and
visuality, and through a complex series of what Bohrer calls “disconnections,” that there
emerged in French nineteenth-century culture a series of salient images of Mesopotamia
that remained suspended somewhere between the historic and the imaginary, between
nationalism and knowledge.

One example that Bohrer cites of this type of image-making is the prominence of
the “Assyrian beard” in French cultural production of this time. One of the most
distinctive features of the figures portrayed on artifacts arriving in Europe from the Near
East – especially Assyrian figures of Gilgamesh, the warrior king – was the long, curly
beard that appeared to be characteristic of ancient kings and that quickly became a
cultural symbol. This particular image was seized upon to convey a whole host of
meanings about Frenchness, cosmopolitanism, and the exotic Near East, from the earnest
to the tongue-in-cheek. Like many captivating cultural images, the Assyrian beard
contained within it two sides of a coin, representing both antiquity and modernity at the
same time. Its origins were rooted in an ancient and mysterious past, but familiarity with
the beard indicated an engaged participation in the spectacular achievements of French
modernity.
This focus on the Assyrian beard as a symbol of the decline and fall of imperial power might even represent, in some ways, a strange co-opting of that power, a kind of cultural cannibalism whereby the mysterious masculine might that is contained in the image of the exotic pointed beard is subsumed into the new cultural dominant that is imperial France. Note the centrality of the beard itself in this 1889 newspaper article chronicling the Assyrian section of the Universal Exposition in Paris, which Gauguin attended:

Deux tours carrées étroites, cannelées de moulures qui ressemblent à des buffets d’orgue. Nous sommes en Assyrie. Nous sommes les humbles vassaux d’un escadron de puissants seigneurs, dont la barbe est noire et frisée, dont l’intelligence est courte et dont le sabre ne chôme jamais. ([Journal des débats], July 17, 1889)

[Two narrow, square towers, fluted with moldings that resemble the pipes of an organ. We are in Assyria. We are the humble vassals of a squadron of powerful lords, whose beards are black and curly, whose intelligence is short, and whose swords are never idle.]

Here the beard resonates with all of the rich overtones of the West’s Assyria: like a giant, fantastical instrument rising out of the ground, the Assyrian house conjures Assyria itself, which is defined by the fatuous pride of powerful lords whose beards, “noire et frisée,” stand in metonymically for their lack of intelligence and their overzealous – but perhaps admirable – militarism. In this way the appropriation of the beard echoes the appropriation of the artifacts themselves, which, divorced from their context, transfer their strength to the cultural institutions that now own them (“The Louvre opens wide its doors to him”).

One famous fan of the Assyrian beard, and an important precursor to Gauguin in more ways than one, was the French painter Gustave Courbet, considered by many to be a proto-modernist icon, and proclaimed by himself to be “the most arrogant man in
France,” a designation for which, by many accounts, Gauguin would later compete. Courbet’s expansive 1855 canvas titled *Atelier of the Painter* features the likenesses of several public figures, including the painter himself, who is depicted at front and center, seated before a canvas where he works on a landscape. In a letter describing the painting to a friend, he writes that at the center of the canvas the viewer will see “myself painting, showing the Assyrian profile of my head” (Bohrer 85). The “Assyrian profile,” of course, refers to Courbet’s long, pointed beard in the painting, an image that he had also rehearsed in the ironic genre painting, *Bonjour M. Courbet* of 1854 (Bohrer 86).

As Bohrer points out, the bearded profile that Courbet considers distinctively Assyrian actually bears little resemblance to the beards represented on Assyrian statuary, which were not pointy but rather were squared off at the bottom and coiffed with highly stylized rows of curls (88). Thus the “Assyrian profile,” for Bohrer, “is far more an index of the controlling nature of the Western receiver than any aspect of its ostensible referent,
Assyria” (87). In other words, Courbet’s use of the beard image dramatizes the disconnect between French conceptions of “Assyria” and the actual remnants of Assyria that were imported into the French capital. The power relations of colonizer to colonized, and the disconnections endemic to the reception and dissemination of the past in this region, allowed the French to retain fantasy images of Assyria even as they diverged from the reality of the artifacts at the center of French archaeological pride.65

Courbet’s interest in the Assyrian image is important for establishing a foundation for interpreting Gauguin’s approach to Gilgamesh. The latter was a great admirer of Courbet, who in his painting and his persona mirrored many of Gauguin’s own interests and values. Like Gauguin, Courbet actively pursued both fame and controversy, writing in 1845, “When I am no longer controversial, I will no longer be important,” and rejecting in 1870 the coveted Legion of Honor in favor of his own personal and artistic independence. Furthermore, both artists were obsessed with painting self-portraits in a variety of different guises and settings, for example, picturing themselves as famous literary or historical characters. Courbet, like Gauguin later, eschewed the established conventions of French academic painting to express his own vision and experience of the world. He was a realist in the sense that he rejected the solemnity of classicist ideals of perspective, form, composition, and color.66 Like Gauguin, Courbet took great pleasure

65 I am not sure that I actually agree with Bohrer on this one. It makes sense that someone like Courbet would have observed the beard as it is represented on statues and friezes, recognized that it is obviously highly stylized, and adapted it to reality. In other words, does Bohrer assume that the beards that ancient Assyrians wore were actually flat across the bottom? It makes just as much sense to assume that their feet were actually flattened against their bodies.

66 Champfleury’s book Le Réalisme “was published in 1857, effectively defining a broad cultural tendency with which Courbet’s work was by then firmly identified. He was a consistent supporter of the painter’s work, and later of Manet’s. His essay on the Burial
in shocking the public with erotic themes, or by overturning academic conventions governing which subjects and personages would be deemed worthy of devoting dramatic, large-scale paintings to. In response to criticisms of Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*, exhibited at the Salon of 1850-1, Jules Champfleury wrote, using words that resonate with Gauguin’s image in obvious ways, that “One likes to think of Courbet as a savage who studied painting while watching the cows” (*AIT* 367).

It is therefore notable that Courbet’s influence on Gauguin goes beyond personality. His interest in the social-realist depiction of country life, as in the famous *Stone Breakers* of 1850 (now lost), echoes Gauguin’s early quasi-primitivist studies of rural life in Brittany, though Courbet had actually grown up in the province of Ornans that functioned as a setting for his peasant. In 1889, Gauguin painted a picture he called *Bonjour, M. Gauguin*, in homage to Courbet’s famous 1854 painting of a similar title. In it, Gauguin appears standing before a gate as a Breton woman, her back to the viewer, confronts him from the other side. Gauguin does not wear an “Assyrian beard” in this

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*at Ornans* combines a defense of the painting with an attempt to correct the prevailing misconception of Realism: that it was either a brand of terroristic socialism or a form of rustic primitivism, or a combination of the two” (*Art in Theory* 366). In a letter to Champfleury, Courbet later adopted the term Realist to describe himself as well (*AIT* 371).

The two most obvious examples of these transgressions, respectively, are *L’Origine du monde*, from 1866, and *Les Paysans de Flagey revenant de la foire*, from 1850-1855. In the former, Courbet shocks his public with an unsentimental, anatomically detailed rendering of female genitalia, disembodied from narrative context; in the latter, he represents a rural family on an outing, with the gravity and attention to detail that would conventionally have been reserved for a dramatic history scene or mythological theme.


Rather than quite an homage, Griselda Pollock considers *Bonjour, M. Gauguin* a gambit, noting that "Courbet's strategies included the calculated positioning of himself, the artist, within the histories he ambitiously painted. Gauguin's reprise reduces to self-pitying posturing" (69).
painting, but he has rehearsed Courbet’s concept of superimposing the mask of the exotic over his own face, which is rendered with a flatness and a roughness of line that recalls the Peruvian masks he had studied in his uncle’s collection as a young man. These two Bounjour paintings, then – Courbet’s and Gauguin’s – each engage with the dual nature, the double-sided coin, of modernist exoticism. In both cases, the artist represents himself ironically with an exoticized facial form, interacting with primitive peasants in a rustic countryside – as Stephen Eisenman puts it, a “compound image of artistic aggrandizement and alienation” (36). The exotic mask may evoke a savageness that appears crude in relation to the well-mannered simplicity of the European peasant, but in fact it references a cosmopolitan identity derived from active engagement in the nationalistic and technological advances of modern archaeology.

![Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin. Bonjour, M. Gauguin, 1889. Prague: Národini Gallery.](image)

The difference between Courbet’s approach to the exotic here and Gauguin’s, though, is instructive of the shift from Romantic to modernist approaches to the
primitive. It exemplifies a suggestive but deeply problematic distinction made by Daftari between "Orientalism" and "influence": "The Orientalist artist paints the façade of Islamic lands and the Christian East, whereas an artist influenced by Islamic art assimilates the vocabulary of Islamic art" (1). The history of Western exoticist representations of far-off lands and times begins with the selection of salient images from the imagined region, but in traditional Orientalist painting, figures and perspective were still rendered in accordance with classical academic notions of beauty and "realism." The "Assyrian beard" might be accompanied by architectural images (such as columns or palaces) or sartorial images (robes, headdresses and the like) that were meant to evoke a time and a place, a set of cultural meanings, but these messages were conveyed via subject matter and not necessarily form. Exoticist paintings luxuriated in rich detail, presenting snapshots of the Other through the encyclopedic lens of "documentation." 

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70 For example, Bohrer discusses the poster advertisement for the 1867 production of the opera *Sardanapale*, which features the infamous king surrounded by riches while his palace burns. The setting, he points out, “utilized mostly Egyptian forms such as curved architraves, swelling ‘lotus’ capitals, and even hieroglyphics (in the lower left corner). The cache of pots before the king are, like his costume, of classical form. Most prominent among them is a Greek amphora. The only feature that could be decoded as any particular reference to Assyria is that one, distinctly compromised, feature: the king’s prominent ‘Assyrian’ beard. [The] image exemplifies the blank, malleable face of Assyria at the behest of contemporary art and culture in France” (89).

71 Such a concept of "documentation" is a powerful tool of colonialist discourse; "the degree of realism (or lack of it) in individual Orientalist images,” writes Linda Nochlin, “can hardly be discussed without some attempt to clarify whose reality we are talking about" (289). The notion that a painting represented the discrete reality of the exotic orient was deeply embedded within exoticising discourse, which claimed for itself both the knowledge of the Other and the right to disseminate such knowledge as “real.” As Elin Diamond has argued, “Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces ‘reality’ by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths” (4).
Courbet’s use of the Assyrian beard signals the beginning of a shift here, which is one reason he is often thought of as a kind of proto-modernist. He begins by introducing a tension between subject matter and form, painting lowly subjects in glamorous detail. The effect of this is to call attention to the act of representation itself. Then he brings in the Assyrian beard, but not the other expected elements of the Assyrian context. Diverging from, for example, the classic exoticist harem picture, Courbet in *Bonjour, M. Courbet* has transplanted the Assyrian beard – an image of power, corruption, and excess – into a simple, lowly, and yet contemporary setting. The effect of this is to destabilize the meaning of the present-day rustic, and at the same time to destabilize the meaning of the Assyrian beard, disconnecting it from associations of power and luxury.

Taking things a step further, Gauguin was as likely to adopt the aesthetics of another culture as its images. In contrast to mid-century representations of the primitive or the exotic, which seized on popular and evocative images but represented them with the depth, lighting, and detail characteristic of post-Renaissance academic painting, Gauguin was interested in assimilating the entire approach to representation that he saw in non-Western art forms, hoping in turn to inhabit the exotic realm more fully. This shift is markedly visible in *Bonjour, M. Gauguin*, where the entire scene – and particularly the figure of the artist himself – is infused with the mysterious, inscrutable, and foreign effect produced by the rough-hewn brushwork evocative of the Peruvian mask. This is a strong example of the kind of distinction Daftari wants to make between “Orientalism” and “influence,” but to separate out the political from the aesthetic projects here is to oversimplify the effects. The integration of the Oriental (or foreign) aesthetic must also be considered within the political context of the *images* of the Orient (or the foreign) that
it references and evokes, as well as the discursive constructions of foreignness attendant upon those images. In Gauguin’s case, as we have seen, the Assyrian artifacts’ aesthetic approach to musculature is inseparable from their ability to evoke “all of the mystical, dreamy Orient” – that is, all of the land which Gauguin has the Eurocentric privilege of imagining as one long, indistinct, ahistorical dream. Gauguin's project takes as its mimetic object the primitive aesthetic itself, which is conceived as profoundly Other; in this way, he exemplifies why, as Elin Diamond writes, "mimesis has [always] been a political practice, inseparable from interpretation and contestation" (viii).

That Courbet had already toyed with the Assyrian beard in an act of self-fashioning only makes it all the more likely that Gauguin would have been intrigued by the same possibilities. Instead of fixating on the beard itself, however, he set his ambitions on adopting more fully the character of the Assyrian ruler, with all of his attendant connotations of power, masculinity, and exoticism. He would not be the first in his artistic milieu to be drawn to this type of maneuver; preceding him was Joséphin Péladan, whose artistic and personal self-fashioning represents, for Bohrer, “one of the most remarkable examples of Ancient Near Eastern assimilation, and perhaps the most concerted emulation of it anywhere in the nineteenth century” (249).

A novelist, a playwright, and the founder of the Salons de la Rose+Croix, where prominent Symbolist painters like Puvis de Chavannes and Gustave Moreau exhibited their work in the 1890s, Péladan was a politically reactionary figure who rejected the progressive ideals of scientific secularism and early attempts at art-historical objectivism. Bohrer describes him as a man who was “deeply influenced by the mystical Catholicism of his native Lyon,” whose “basic emphasis was on the ideal and spiritual in art,” and
who favored a “selective, judgmental view [of the history of art] which damned certain ages and lionized others” (249).

What really set Péladan apart, however, was his voluble, flamboyant persona, manifest in his writing as well as his own costume and veritable mythology of self. This all met a willing public. Péladan’s voluminous writings often reached several editions. His theatrical productions [...] were well attended and received. In many ways, Péladan’s historical mimeticism is comparable to that of Pierre Loti at the same time. (249)

Indeed, Péladan managed more successfully to carry out a program quite similar to what Gauguin seems to have wanted for himself. It is therefore quite significant that the centerpiece of his mythic self-fashioning was an image of the Ancient Near East, and in particular ancient Sumer, the civilization that originated the Gilgamesh Epic.

It has already been noted that both the Gilgamesh epic and the Gilgamesh figure were translated from their originating culture to that of the civilization which vanquished it, so that the text itself as Gauguin would have known it was an Assyrian one even though the story originated with the Sumerians. But Sumerian artifacts were also known in France in the late nineteenth century, having been excavated in 1877 by Ernest de Sarzec in southern Mesopotamia, and images of them were published and discussed extensively in two widely read popular periodicals: the Gazette des Beaux-Arts and L’Art Ornamental (Bohrer 233). These sources, as Bohrer points out, contrasted the Sumerian artifacts against their Assyrian rivals via a gendered discourse that feminized the Sumerian art by casting it as the tragic product of a disempowered nation while praising its “delicacy, aestheticism, and fragility” (235), and highlighting in particular the Sumerians’ apparent interest in music, “a paradigmatic trope of romantic sensitivity” (233). This conception of Sumer promoted a narrative popular in the historical imaginary – and fixated upon by Péladan – whereby the “sensitive, aesthetically minded” Sumerians
appear as “a caste of magi: a refined, wise group of initiates learned in mystical, spiritual, and aesthetic truths” (250). Their succession by the “dull, materialist, warlike” Assyrians confirmed for Péladan the downward trajectory of historical progress; thus, “Péladan’s deeply reactionary project was to revive the realm of the magi, fused with the mystical teachings he found in Catholicism. On stage, and even in his own persona, he created Mesopotamia anew” (251).

Péladan was particularly invested in reviving the historical figure of Sâr Marduk-Bal-Idin, the last king of Sumer, who had been represented in Assyriological scholarship as “the heroic defender of Chaldea” against the onslaught of the warring Assyrians (254). Seizing on the close phonetic resemblance of their names (Péladan rendered the king’s name as Merodack Baladan), Péladan adopted the royal title of Sâr for himself, and began to think of himself as a mirror image of the ancient king, a “modern mandarin who viewed his limited realm under the dominance of a brutish and base mass movement, and who also led a band of modern magi in the midst of this declining culture” (254). Like a double, Péladan deployed this self-as-king persona as a way of advancing his aesthetic and political ideals while at the same time attempting to live in a historical but profoundly de-historicized past, going so far as to produce calling cards bearing his name (“Monsieur Péladan – Sar Merodak”) and address in both script and cuneiform characters (256). Yet, although the opposition between the Sumerian/Chaldean aesthetic and its warlike Assyrian successor was at its most pronounced under Péladan’s vision, the Ancient Near East nevertheless retained a malleability that continued to make it available for mediating a wide variety of expectations, anxieties, and ends. Thus, in a characteristically dissonant 1891 painting by Alexandre Séon, Sâr Péladan has himself
represented in profile wearing the unbelted robes of a magus, the distinctive curled
hairstyle of the Sumerian figures of Gudea, and the irrepressible, unmistakable, pointed
“Assyrian” beard (255).

Fig. 4. Alexandre Séon, *Portrait of Joséphin Péladan*, 1891. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

Between Gustave Courbet and Joséphin Péladan, then, Gauguin had within close
range two prominent examples of artists whose historical-mimeticist projects of self-
fashioning revolved around a rejection of mainstream culture *vis-à-vis* the adoption of
Ancient Near Eastern motifs, or, in the case of Péladan, an Ancient Near Eastern persona
altogether. A rehearsal of the Gilgamesh epic with himself in the starring role would
have been relatively natural given the revival of an ancient kingship that the influential
Péladan already had under way.72 It also would not have been the first foray that

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72 Gauguin did not much care for Péladan's approach, writing later in life, to his friend
Maurice Denis, "I am a little bit afraid that you will be ridiculed by the Rosicrucians,
although that would be marvelous advertising, as I think there is no room for art in
Péladan's movement" (*WOS* 187). However, this attitude does not diminish the
likelihood that he would have been influenced by Péladan nevertheless. Indeed, a revival
of Gilgamesh would have been a classic example of Pollock's "Avant-Garde Gambit,"
which, as I have outlined in my introduction, involves three simultaneous maneuvers -
"reference," "deference," and "difference" (14). Posing as Gilgamesh, Gauguin *refers* to
Péladan *vis à vis* the Near Eastern connection, *defers* to Péladan by selecting a
Gauguin took into identity play, but instead would have suited very well a desire to project an Ancient Near Eastern self that Gauguin had dabbled in before his first Tahiti trip, as we will see. Finally, the confluence of the Ancient Near Eastern king and the Polynesian context not only would not have troubled Gauguin with its incongruity, but in fact also reverberates through a particular work of exoticist sculpture that he executed in 1894, just after he wrote out his first draft manuscript of *Noa Noa*. In the section that follows, we turn to Gauguin’s own interpretation of the Middle East and the Ancient Near East in order to appreciate more fully what Gilgamesh would likely have meant to him as an artist and a cultural transvestite.

**VI. Gauguin and the Middle East**

In addition to the comments we have already seen that Gauguin made about the Assyrian art in the Dieulafoy gallery at the Louvre – as well as comments he made about Persian carpets in a letter that we will examine in a subsequent chapter – there are two major points in Gauguin’s career when his interest in the Middle East as a discursive tool for self-fashioning can be seen to have shone through brightly. The first of these is a manuscript that Gauguin possessed and which he quoted in several of his writings, claiming it to be an aesthetic treatise written by a persecuted Persian spiritualist of the middle ages. The second was a sculpture titled *Oviri*, which he executed after his first trip to Tahiti and which combines Assyrian and Polynesian aesthetics in dynamic ways that mirror the transposition in *Noa Noa*.

comparable figure to Marduk (Gilgamesh), and differentiates himself by going about the self-fashioning project entirely differently.
The manuscript in question was an essay on aesthetic and spiritual principles, which is written in Gauguin’s hand and bears the title: “Tiré du livre des métiers de Vehbi-Zunbul-Zade. Ainsi parle Mani, le peintre donneur de préceptes” (Daftari 49). In this way, Gauguin attributes the words in the text to Vehbi-Zunbul-Zade, also known as Mani; he later makes the full name more explicit when he writes in *Diverses Choses*, “Ils écoutaient, je ne sais si respectueusement, le grand professeur Mani Vehbi-Zunbul-Zadi, le peintre donneur de préceptes” (Daftari 48) ["They listened, I do not know if respectfully, to the great professor Mani Vehbi-Zunbul-Zadi, the painter [and] giver of precepts"]. He quoted Mani’s words in order to reinforce his own points about aesthetics, including segments of Mani’s wisdom, for example, in *Diverses Choses*, in *Avant et Après*, in *Racontars de Rapin*, in his essay “Huysmans et Redon,” and in a discussion of Delacroix, where he referred to Mani as an Arab (Daftari 48). However, as Daftari writes, with his many references to this manuscript in his possession, Gauguin "creates a confusion. Mani, a third-century prophet, the founder of Manichaeism, and reputedly a painter, was Persian. Sunbul Zade, on the other hand, was a Turkish poet who died in 1809. Gauguin refers to them as one, without indicating the nationality of this almost fictional personage, except to say that the episode he is quoting took place in the Levant" (37). It appears, then, that at the very least there has been a confusion in Gauguin’s mind about the identity, ethnicity, and nationality, and even the historical period of the writer he is citing.

Furthermore, as Daftari’s analysis of the manuscript in its multiple forms asserts, it is likely that the text itself was, in fact, of Gauguin’s own invention (57). She points out that the lack of evidence of any manuscript on painting by either Sunbul Zade or
Mani, together with the turns of phrase in the text that are characteristic of Gauguin’s style, have led scholars like Jean de Rotonchamp to conclude that “Gauguin a lui-même exposé, en une fantasie parabole, les éléments de sa technique propre” ["Gauguin himself has presented, in a fantastical parable, the elements of his own technique"] (qtd. in Daftari 56). Furthermore, the aesthetic principles attributed by Gauguin to the manuscript are in many cases nonsensical in the context of the figure purported to have originated them. For example, in his references to the text in *Avant et Après*, Gauguin interjects the following observations between his quotations:

Quelques murmures se font entendre dans le bosquet: si le vent ne les eût emportées, on aurait peut-être entendu quelques paroles malsonnantes: Naturaliste, Pompier, etc... Mais le vent les emporta, cependant Mani fronça le sourcil, appela ses élèves anarchistes puis continua. (Daftari 57)

[A few groans were heard in the thicket: if the wind had not carred them away, one would perhaps have heard a few ill-sounding words: Naturaliste, Pompier, etc.... But the wind carried them away, however Mani furrowed his brow, called his students anarchists, and went on.]

As Daftari notes, “The impossibility of an Oriental talking about ‘Naturaliste’ and ‘Pompier’ is self-evident. Gauguin definitely invented this passage himself” (57). Here Gauguin, in perhaps characteristic fashion, has conflated two historical figures, divorcing both of them from their respective temporal and spatial contexts, and has deployed the resulting composite figure as a mouthpiece for voicing his own artistic concerns. This is cultural transvestism and aesthetic parable, doubly anticipating the blending of the two in *Noa Noa*.

73 For example, Daftari points out that the formulation “En l’an X tout ceci passa” is one that appears in the Mani manuscript, and that also peppers Gauguin’s other writings, such as an issue of *Le Sourire*, where he writes, “En l’an X de la Dynasie Ramsès tout ceci passa” (Daftari 56).
Gauguin’s choice of Mani as a figure of aesthetic and philosophical self-identification, no matter how garbled in the final analysis, is instructive both of his particular aesthetic concerns and of the role that the nineteenth-century French understanding of the Middle East played in shaping and articulating those concerns. Born at Ctesiphon in 216 A.D., Mani was known in France by Gauguin’s time\textsuperscript{74} as having been a famed painter, a persecuted heretic, and the originator of Manichaeism, a religion whose central tenets included “the essentially evil nature of matter,” as well as a foretelling of “the collapse of the universe and the final dissociation of Light from Darkness” (Daftari 57-59, quoting Sir Percy Sykes).\textsuperscript{75} A strong and apocalyptic dualism such as characterized Manichaeian cosmology carries a deep resonance with Gauguin’s own worldview, particularly around the time when Gauguin first floated his “quotations” of the manuscript, in the early 1890s (the same period in which he wrote \textit{Noa Noa}).

In addition to the blending of names, there is no small amount of irony to be found in Gauguin’s aesthetic ventriloquism through Mani Vehbi Zunbul Zadi. Although Mani was a painter, he left no known writings on painting. Meanwhile, what known treatises there are on painting from the Orient have a tendency to stress aesthetic principles that are quite in conflict with what Gauguin’s shadowy figure asserts: “their

\textsuperscript{74} Available accounts of Mani’s life would have included Mirkhond’s \textit{History of the Sassanids}, which was translated by Silvestre de Sacy in the early nineteenth century, as well as d’Herbelot’s \textit{Bibliothèque orientale}, “the standard reference work in Europe until the early nineteenth century” (Daftari 58).

\textsuperscript{75} This quotation comes from Sir Percy Sykes, “The Influence of Persia on Europe,” \textit{The Nineteenth Century}, Vol. 109, 1931, p. 40. I have not yet been able to get my hands on this text, which is why I’m referencing Daftari here. Daftari also points out that even if Gauguin had not studied anything exploring Manichaean cosmology, “in the French language manichaen is a common expression used to indicate the opposition between good and evil or black and white, as we would say today. Therefore, it is plausible to think that Gauguin’s knowledge of manichaean would have influenced him in the conception of his painting \textit{Hina Te Fatou}” (124).
authors praise an artist when his work has been able to capture the magic of lifelikeness” (Daftari 61). In particular, Mani himself carries the reputation in these texts of an artist who excelled at mimetic representation of nature. For example, Daftari points out, in a seventeenth-century Persian treatise by Qadi Ahmad, Mani is extolled in this way:

[W]hen he drew something
The seal of the fate rendered it permanent:
When he pictured water on a stone,
Anyone who saw it broke his pitcher on it.  (Qtd. in Daftari 61)

Such praise for Mani's realism seems to clash with the precepts presented in Gauguin's found manuscript, such as the assertion that “Il est bon pour les jeunes gens d’avoir un modèle, mais qu’ils tirent le rideau sur lui pendant qu’ils le peignent.  Mieux est de peindre de mémoire” ["It is good for young people to have a model, but they should pull the curtain over the model while painting.  The best thing is to paint from memory"] (Daftari 61). Though perhaps far from breaking a pitcher on a painted stone, this advice is, of course, very close to Gauguin’s earlier advice to Shuffenecker, “L’art est une abstraction: tirez-la de la nature en rêvant et pensez plus à la création qui résultera” ["Art is an abstraction: pull it from nature while dreaming and think more about the creation that will result"] (Daftari 61).

It is easy, and perhaps not altogether inappropriate, to mock Gauguin’s stunt as one of many attempts that the artist made at self-aggrandizement by way of an exoticist fantasy. As Daftari concludes: “it appears that in the 1880s, a decade in which scientific theories were used by artists to elevate the status of the artist, perhaps in order to gain credibility and prestige with Pissarro and Seurat, both of whom were then steeped in color theories, Gauguin opted, in a typical manner, to invent a legend to synthesize his own views and experience of art” (62-63). Still, in order to understand why it had to be
an “Oriental” character, in particular, who served this purpose, we need to form a complete picture of the relationship between the Oriental and the primitive in Gauguin’s mind. What these two categories have in common, as we have witnessed in the coverage of the Universal Exposition and the archaeological finds, is that they are seen to disrupt the forward momentum of time and history. While Daftari attributes Gauguin’s co-opting of Mani to the need to engage in a more scientific model of aesthetic theory, we should also keep in mind his anti-science leanings; both the primitive and the Oriental provide him with the way around science, into the numinous. Ultimately, this episode demonstrates Gauguin’s fluid sense of self as well as his willingness to cross-dress in the roles of the Ancient and the primitive (often simultaneously) in order to subvert the moorings of time and history and in order to communicate aesthetic principles.

A second instance of the Near Eastern influence on Gauguin comes from 1894, in the form of the stoneware sculpture *Oviri*, meaning “wild” or “savage” in Tahitian, which “has long been thought to derive formally from the Assyrian ‘Gilgamesh’ relief from Khorsabad” (Bohrer 268). The sculpture, on account of its materials and its execution, appears to have been carved out of stone, although in fact it was molded in ceramic. It depicts a stylized androgynous nude exhibiting the physical characteristics that Gauguin so admired in Polynesian women: broad shoulders and strong arms, narrow hips, sturdy legs and small breasts. The molding of the figure’s face rejects all conventional perspectives on beauty and proportion, with roughly suggested, circular eyes that sit awkwardly at exaggeratedly different levels on either side of the long, broad nose. The eyes, blank and unfocused, stare off into different directions while the wide, down-turned mouth sits silent and unmoving, and just off center, in a small, pointed chin.
The Near Eastern influence is most discernible in the statue’s pose and formal execution. Like the Gilgamesh relief, Gauguin’s figure is positioned with her upper body facing the viewer and her lower body twisted, as if to lie flat against the flat background. Rather than being fully modeled in three dimensions, the figure is carved in three-quarter relief, and appears to emerge from stone like an artifact. "[T]he relation of image to ground [...] is much like that of an archaeological fragment of a relief," writes Bohrer.

"The unadorned ground behind the figure has a jagged and assymetrical outline almost as if it were torn from a larger work" (268). Gauguin's overt reference to archaeology here has the dual effects of demonstrating his cosmopolitan engagement with his own Western cultural moment, and at the same time recasting the figure (who, as we will see, functions as a kind of avatar for the self) in an ancient and indeterminate temporality.76

The statue stands on a block-like platform with the word “Oviri” inscribed on it, and entwined around her lower body, from her waist to the space beneath her feet, slinks a growling animal with an indistinct face, sharp teeth, and a roughly suggested but highly

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76 The fact that Oviri appears as "an archaeological fragment" is significant not only for the reference it makes to ancient Near Eastern archaeology, but also for the statement it makes about the androgyous ideal that it both engages with and seeks to overturn (the classic avant-garde gambit). As Sidlauskas points out, "Two classical sculptural types are traditionally associated with the androgynous ideal: the beautiful boy (the Apollo Belvedere, for example) so beloved of Winckelmann, and the Juno-esque woman, embodied in Ludovisi Juno [...] as well as in similarly 'regal' figures [...]" (189). However, Oviri embodies neither of these classical traditions. Rather, s/he dramatizes not only the synthetic but also the threatening side of the androgyne, and this is in part asserted through her fragmentary presentation. Sidlauskas writes: "As Joe Black has noted, the ideal figure simply could not be 'represented in a visible, closed plastic form,' only an 'invisible, open-ended dithyrambic fragment.' Such a figure of multi-stable sexuality, he argues, would possess none of the 'restful beauty of Winckelmannn's hermaphrodite' but would rather constitute a 'grotesque and lecherous creature ... we would in fact be confronted by a monster'" (Sidlauskas 184). In this sense, Oviri's dithyrambic fragmentariness expresses both the monstrousness and the impossibility of the androgynous dream.
evocative paw protruding, its four sharp claws seeming to grasp the edge of the rock. The creature echoes a sharp-clawed lion that the mighty Gilgamesh grasps easily in the Khorsabad relief, its claws splayed across his torso and its body intertwined with his. Like Gilgamesh, the “Oviri” figure grabs hold of the ambiguous animal with powerful hands, hands that destabilize the determinacy of her gender with their large size and block-like shape. Like Gilgamesh, the figure’s face remains level, and she neither engages with nor acknowledges the creature with which she wrestles; as Bohrer notes, “the very ambiguity of the action, either crushing or hugging a wolf cub under one’s arm, matches the fundamental paradox of the action in the Assyrian relief and enacts an even more striking version of the same significatory indeterminacy praised by Gauguin in the Dieulafoy lion relief” (268). Here, Bohrer refers to Gauguin’s statement that “all of the mystical, dreamy orient can be found” in the Assyrian reliefs in the Dieulafoy gallery (267). It’s clear that in Oviri, Gauguin attempts to summon that dreamy mysticism by referencing both the stylized approach to representation and the cultural-historical context of the ancient, found artifact.
For all of the formal resemblances, however, *Oviri* is, at first blush, not a copy of the intricate geometry and precise stylization of the Assyrian relief. Rather, with its unrefined approach to line, texture, and proportion, *Oviri* is clearly a much more overt reference to Polynesian art than to anything found in the Near East. What derives from the Khorsabad relief is the “significatory indeterminacy” that Bohrer mentions, which is in many ways a hallmark of exoticist appropriation: the images, motifs, and symbols of the East are available to the West for whatever ends are necessary. Devoid of interiority, the figure of *Oviri* paradoxically evokes emotion by means of her lack of affect; the viewer connects not with the figure’s presence, but with a palpable absence behind the

77 The paradoxical relationship of emotion to (lack of) affect in Oviri is characteristic of other modernist, abstract works of this period. For example, Sidlauskas points out that "many of Cézanne's admirers have assumed that his attention to surface color and geometric form (the building blocks of abstraction) eclipse any attempt at emotional communication" (49-50), but as her work shows, the techniques of abstraction themselves became for Cézanne the medium for communicating "modern emotion."
empty, staring eyes. Like Gauguin’s young lover Tehamana, whom he described in *Noa Noa* as “impenetrable” (35) and a “perfect idol” (41), the statue arrests the viewer with a flatness that rejects interpretation. It suggests mystery, yes, but it also demonstrates the ease with which the symbolic Other can be emptied of meaning, serving its purpose by providing dead space for authorial selfhood or for the viewer’s own expectations to inhabit.78

In addition to blending two dramatically different aesthetic and cultural influences – the Assyrian and the Polynesian – *Oviri* is particularly significant to the present study for the way in which it serves as a rehearsal of a kind of “savage” selfhood for the artist, in a way quite similar to what happens with Gilgamesh in *Noa Noa*. Describing the sculpture as an “ambiguous essay in the assertion of self as other,” Bohrer writes, “If there can be any doubt about this idol’s relation to Gauguin himself, at the same time Gauguin produced a bronze relief in which he displayed his own portrait profile (as Levantine as any he attributed to Cézanne) under the title *Oviri*, directly followed by his own signature” (268). Significantly, the self-as-other that is depicted here is a profoundly split self, balancing between worlds, teetering between genders, and suspended between stasis and movement. Even the proclaimed “savageness” is difficult to attribute with any precision: does it refer to the figure herself, whose placid demeanor belies Gauguin’s descriptor as a “cruel enigma” (Bohrer 268)? Or does it refer to the animal at her feet, whose bared teeth and sharp claw are obviously less human but at the same time far more engaging than the blank stare, and whose open, screeching mouth provides a dramatic counterpoint to the figure’s own tightly sealed, silent lips?

78 Footnote about emptying the feminizing/foreign/exotic/Oriental of signification so you (i.e. Western white male) can fill it with your own fantasy/subjectivity/anxiety/fetish.
That Gauguin self-identified with this sculpture so profoundly that he wanted it used as his gravemarker is instructive. It tells us a great deal about Gauguin's project of self-fashioning and the role that art, narrative, and the Orient played in that self-fashioning. It also tells us, in particular, about the importance of a set of associations that ancient Near Eastern archaeology carried for him: power, mystery, and a profoundly engaging ambiguity. Gauguin's self-portrait as *Oviri* is, at its core, a deeply ambivalent, doubly directed transvestism. The white Western male dresses himself, conspicuously and consciously, in the costume of the savage, while at the same time giving himself the sexually indeterminate features of the androgyne. He has assumed the role of Gilgamesh - the warrior king - and then crossed this hypermasculine figure with a studied concept of primitive hybridity, which is very much the same transvestite maneuver that he carries out in *Noa Noa*. In this sense, I would complicate Bohrer's assessment of Oviri as an "essay in the assertion of self as other," because as I have mentioned in my introduction, transvestism is about "representing the Self," "becoming the Self," and "(re)creating the Self" (Sifuentes-Jáuregui 3). As Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui points out, "transvestite subjects do not necessarily imagine themselves becoming some other subject, but rather they may conceive of transvestism as an act of self-realization" (4). So when we think about *Oviri* and *Noa Noa* as "assertions of self as other," we need to make sure that we stay focused on the *assertion of self* part. Gauguin's cultural transvestism is about using an other to fashion, dramatize, and enact a carefully formulated self.

**VII. Conclusion**
The oppositions inherent in *Oviri* stand as salient reminders of Gauguin’s Symbolist project, with its dialectical approach to the embodiment of meaning. Naomi Maurer has characterized Gauguin as someone who was “always torn between his desire to be provocatively mysterious and his equally strong desire to have his imagery understood and appreciated” (132). In an effort to strike this balance, he turned to the imagery and aesthetics of cultures imagined as vastly separated by space or time – the ancient, the Oriental, the primitive – as a way of preserving meaning while cloaking it in mystery. This dialectical tendency in the Symbolist approach to the symbol can be traced back to a Romantic conception of Symbol and myth, but it also has to be connected to the nationalistic enterprises at the core of globalization’s early period. The symbols of the Near East, the Caribbean, South America, and French Polynesia provided Gauguin with a language that he could use as a claim to meaning, while remaining deliberately opaque: the “sea of referents” that Bohrer refers to in the case of the fall of Nineveh. Bohrer writes of Delacroix’s painting that “Ancient Assyria serves here as a mirror, which reflects the different preconceptions and desires of the representer and viewer as much as any objective fact being represented” (56), and this is certainly true of the other representations of the Near East that we have looked at in this chapter.

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79 For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see von Hendy. For example, he quotes Friedrich Creuzer (1821): "In symbol a universal concept takes on earthly garb and steps as a meaningful image before the eye of the soul" (43). According to von Hendy, this attitude toward the symbol as a tool for dialectical reconciliation was anticipated by Vico, who introduced the concept of "imaginative universals" almost a hundred years earlier. A "forerunner to the Romantic concept of the 'symbol,'" Vico's "imaginative universal" was dialectical in nature: it "communicates univocally the nature of what it represents because it still participates in the concrete and affectively perceived particularities of the signified" (von Hendy 11).
In this chapter I have highlighted the nationalistic framework within which the reception history of the Ancient Near East and Gilgamesh were received and imagined in Gauguin’s milieu, so as to establish two key points. The first is, of course, the likelihood that Gauguin could and would have known about this figure. The pervasiveness of the Near Eastern archaeological narrative in nineteenth-century France firmly establishes the availability of Gilgamesh as a figure and a text for Gauguin’s consumption. The nationalistic bent to this narrative clearly reinforces this pervasiveness within a particular cultural moment.

However, nationalism is also a political ideology, and as such it has the effect of making its tools into talismans; images become symbols, narratives become myths, and personages become epic heroes. In the case of Gilgamesh, the nationalistic bent to the archaeological race during the nineteenth century infuses the history of its reception in the West with an ideology of dominance that resonates both politically and aesthetically throughout Gauguin’s oeuvre. This aspect to his work will be explored more completely in the coming chapters, but for the moment I will highlight two specific ways in which the theme of dominance inflects his work both in Noa Noa and in general.

In Noa Noa, I will argue, Gauguin not only appropriates the Gilgamesh epic for its narrative draw and its mythic resonance, but he also changes it in significant ways to suit his purposes. Jettisoning the myth’s didactic messages, which include the sanctity of nature and the responsibility of a leader to achieve maturity and wisdom, Gauguin seems to revel in those aspects of the myth that resonate with the West’s image of Assyria as a domineering and warlike empire. In so doing, Gauguin co-opts the Gilgamesh legend as
a powerful tool for fashioning an artistic selfhood that is both larger than life and full of mystical and political potential.

At the same time, this approach to Gilgamesh, with its overarching relationship to dominance, carries important implications for Gauguin’s oeuvre more broadly. It serves in some ways as Gauguin’s allegory for the role of nature in the work of art. In Chapter 4, we will explore Gauguin’s attitude towards nature, a term that occupies an ambivalent position in his work. When he describes his Eves as “naturally naked,” he asserts their superiority over classical nudes which commodify sexuality by wrapping it in the trappings of bourgeois respectability. However, when he asserts, to Daniel de Monfried, that the artist must “dream before nature” and never paint from it, he alludes to a strong anti-naturalistic undercurrent to his aesthetic project. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno writes that “The price that aesthetics had to pay for repressing the theme of natural beauty was the shift in the nineteenth century towards an ideological ‘religion of art,’ a term coined by Hegel, denoting the satisfaction of having achieved symbolic reconciliation in works of art” (91-92). In the coming chapters, we will explore the ways in which Gauguin’s approach exemplifies Adorno’s assertion here, as well as the latter’s argument that “The shift in aesthetics away from the beautiful in nature [...] entailed an element of destruction in relation to nature” (92). The fantasy of forest destruction in *Noa Noa* is symbolic not only of an individual’s need for dominance, but of an artist’s need to assert the primacy of his subjectivity over the natural world. In this respect the nationalistic ideology surrounding Gilgamesh in the nineteenth century is indispensable to his mythic currency as a symbol for artistic freedom and dominance.
These themes will resurface in the coming chapters as we explore Gauguin’s work _Noa Noa_, more closely both within the context of his larger body of work, and with respect to the Gilgamesh epic. For now we will turn to an examination of the two texts themselves, _The Epic of Gilgamesh_ and _Noa Noa_, to bring them into conversation with one another and to draw out the thematic parallels that form the basis of my arguments about Assyria’s influence on Gauguin and about the symbolic meaning of this particular literary project.
CHAPTER 2

THE TWO KINGS: GAUGUIN AND GILGAMESH IN THE GARDEN

... l'homme traîne, dit-on, son double avec lui.

["... man drags, they say, his double with him"]

- *Avant et Après* (112).

That whereby art becomes an unfolding of truth is at the same time its cardinal sin, from which it cannot absolve itself. Art drags this sin along with it because it acts as if absolution had been bestowed on it.

- Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (137)

I. Introduction

In the spring of 1894, Paul Gauguin was laid up in bed in Pont Aven, having broken his ankle in a vicious brawl with a group of sailors in Concarneau (Wadley 88).\(^8^0\) He was unable to paint, but he was eager to continue work on the book that he had agreed to produce in collaboration with Charles Morice, so he spent the spring copying out a second manuscript from the one he had earlier assembled, in 1893, from his notes, his

\(^8^0\) According to Wadley, the brawl was set in motion by a group of schoolchildren who shouted insults at Gauguin's mistress, known only as Anna the Javanese, and her monkey. In a letter, Gauguin reported that he had taken on fifteen men and held them off, "until he fell and was kicked brutally with wooden clogs" (Wadley 88). This ugly and distressing incident is illustrative of both the culture clash which Gauguin perpetually inhabited, and his pugnacious nature, which frequently got him into trouble (and which is reminiscent of the despotic, pre-Enkidu style of Gilgamesh).
reminiscences, and his own imagination (Wadley 88). Noa Noa, Gauguin's narrative of Tahiti, had begun to take shape.

This chapter executes a close reading of Noa Noa in concert with the Ancient Assyrian Epic of Gilgamesh, highlighting the close structural and thematic resemblances between these two fragmentary and iconic texts. In particular, I focus on the original 1893 manuscript of Noa Noa, known as the "Draft MS," because it offers the barest access to Gauguin's thoughts and intentions, without the filter of Morice's influence. This is Noa Noa in its raw and unadulterated form, and although the text contains gaps and inconsistencies, even in its early form it presents a unified narrative and sense of purpose.81

Although there are many important points of intersection between Noa Noa and Gilgamesh, all of them lead outward from one central confluence: the figure of the primitive double. In both texts, the double guides the hero into the forest and helps him to bring home fragrant wood that will be used to glorify the hero's name in future generations. Furthermore, in both cases the hero experiences a profoundly erotic longing for connection with that double, who takes on both an animalistic and an androgynous form. It is clear that this longing, at least in Noa Noa and very possibly in Gilgamesh as well, amounts to the paradigmatic exotic sexualization of the colonized Other. However, at the same time, I will argue that we should recognize the ways in which the mythic resonance of the doppelgänger figure emphasizes his symbolic quality, and demands interpretation on that basis. Drawing on Gauguin's own aesthetic theories as well as his

81 Since it is the original manuscript of Gauguin's Noa Noa that forms the basis for this study, all French quotations from it in this chapter appear without page numbers (as there were none in the manuscript). The corresponding English translations, with page numbers, come from Wadley/Griffin, unless otherwise specified.
personal and political predilections, I will argue in Chapter 3 that the longing for the double in *Noa Noa* symbolizes what I call Gauguin's mimetic desire. It is a yearning for reconciliation between the immaterial and material realms, and, more specifically, between feeling, which is abstract, and the inevitably concrete form that feeling takes in a work of art.

Before we can more closely examine aesthetic desire, however, it is crucial to take the time to investigate the interplay of symbols, themes, and conceptual devices between *Gilgamesh* and *Noa Noa*, in order to more fully understand how the mythic subtext in *Noa Noa* reveals the latter's allegorical nature. This chapter is dedicated to that project, focusing especially on two central themes: the primitive double, and the forest journey in search of wood. These are the basic pillars that structure both the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa* and the first six tablets of *Gilgamesh*. Beyond these, there are also wider thematic parallels, most notably Gilgamesh's *katabasis*, which is echoed in Gauguin's journey across the waters of the ocean to a mysterious southern world (i.e., Polynesia), and also Gilgamesh's encounter with Siduri in the mystical Crystal Garden of the Gods, which seems to have an analog in Gauguin's vision of Tahiti itself as a mysterious and forbidden garden, a liminal space on the perimeters of the living world. These wider parallels will be explored in a more peripheral way in this chapter, and will also resurface in later chapters as they contribute to my understanding of Gauguin's aesthetic philosophy. In chapters 3 and 4, we will examine two further structural parallels: the encounter with Humbaba in the heart of the forest, and the aftermath of the triumphal mission.
II. The Forest Journey

What I call the Woodcutter Episode in Noa Noa appears as Chapter IV in the loosely separated chapters of the Draft MS. It recounts an erotically charged day-trip that the narrator (Gauguin's textual persona)\(^82\) takes into the forest with a young Tahitian friend from his village. The episode begins with the artist's claim of needing a particular kind of fragrant wood in order to make a sculpture. Gauguin's "ami naturel," a "jeune sauvage" whom he describes as "parfaitement beau," shares his knowledge of the area. He tells Gauguin, "Il faut pour cela aller dans la montagne à certain endroit où je connais plusieurs beaux arbres qui pourraient te satisfaire" ["For that, you must go up the mountain to a certain place where I know several fine trees that might satisfy you" (25)].

As Gauguin follows this young man up "un bout de sentier que mon compagnon connaissait comme par l'odorat" [a piece of trail that my companion seemed to know by smell],\(^83\) his meditations reveal both his erotic interest and his tendency to frame their relationship in terms of the contrast between the primitive and the civilized:

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\(^82\) Because I regard Noa Noa as a literary experiment rather than a "memoir" in the more traditional sense, I treat the Gauguin character as a "narrator" in this work, rather than referring to him simply as the author of it. In the book, Gauguin clearly crafts a literary character for himself, a fact which is emphasized and clarified by his use of Gilgamesh as subtext, so I treat him as a character in my analysis rather than taking him at face value. I may alternately refer to him as "Gauguin," "the narrator," or "the artist," but in general I will attempt to maintain a clear distinction between the character of Gauguin as he unfolds in the narrative of Noa Noa and the historical Gauguin. I also recognize that the two certainly intersect in important ways.

\(^83\) My translation here differs from Griffin's, which reads, "a bit of track which my companion seemed to smell out" (25). I think it's important to place an emphasis on the verb "connaître" ("connaissait comme par l'odorat" / "seemed to know by smell") because of the centrality of different forms of knowing in colonialist discourse.
Et nous étions bien deux, deux amis, lui tout jeune homme et moi presqu'un vieillard, de corps et d'âme, de vices de civilisation: d'illusions perdues - Son corps souple d'animal avait des gracieuses formes, il marchait devant moi sans sexe...

[And two we certainly were, two friends, he quite a young man and I almost an old man in body and soul, in civilized vices: in lost illusions. His lithe animal body had graceful contours, he walked in front of me sexless... ] (25)

Gauguin's "âme d'artiste" is "enchant[é]" by the "parfum (noanoa)" that surrounds the two friends as they climb the hill. "De cette amitié si bien cimentée par attraction mutuelle simple au composé l'amour en moi prenait éclosion" ["From this friendship so well cemented by the mutual attraction between simple and composite, love blossomed in me"].

The journey up the mountain is a hike through a dense yet idyllic tropical forest, but as the two friends near their objective, the scene becomes infused with tension. "J'eus comme un pressentiment de crime," Gauguin writes, "le désir d'inconnu, le réveil du mal" ["I had a sort of presentiment of crime, the desire for the unknown, the awakening of evil" (25)]; and then: "Je m'approchait, sans peur des lois, le trouble aux temples" [I drew close, without fear of laws, my temples throbbing" (28)]. The eroticism of the imagery intensifies, as the narrator "m'enfonçai vivement dans le taillis devenu de plus en plus sauvage" ["thrust my way with energy into the thicket, [which had] become more and more wild" (28)]. The eventual encounter with the rosewood tree is described as a brutal crime, and it is also the moment in which the duality between the two characters - Gauguin and his guide - fades as they become unified in their nature:

Tous deux, sauvages, nous attaquâmes à la hache un magnifique arbre qu'il fallut détruire pour avoir une branche convenable à mes desirs - Je frappai avec rage et

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84 My translation here differs from Griffins, which reads, "love took power to blossom in me" (25).
les mains ensanglantées je coupais avec le plaisir d'une brutalité assouvi, d'une
destruction de je ne sais quoi.

[Savages both of us, we attacked with the axe a magnificent tree which had to be
destroyed to get a branch suitable to my desires. I struck furiously and, my hands
covered in blood, hacked away with the pleasure of sating one's brutality and of
destroying I don't know what. (emphasis mine)]

The bounty from this transgression is the desired wood, along with the sense that "Bien
détruit en effet tout mon vieux stock de civilisé" ["well and truly destroyed indeed [is] all
the old remnant of civilized man in me" (28)]. The change is welcome. The artist has
become simultaneously wiser and more primitive, an equation designed to provoke
response from Gauguin's bourgeois audience.

Meanwhile the wood he has carried
home retains the memory and meaning of his experience, just as it retains its fragrance of
rose: "Je n'ais pas donné un seul coup de ciseau dans ce morceau de bois sans avoir des
souvenirs d'une douce quiétude, d'un parfum, d'une victoire et d'un rajeunissement" ["I

85 My translation differs slightly from Griffin's: "I struck furiously and, my hands covered
in blood, hacked away with the pleasure of sating one's brutality and of destroying
something" (28). I have translated "je ne sais quoi" as "I know not what," rather than as
"something," because of the emphasis on mystery and ways of knowing that runs
throughout the text.

86 Although Rousseau had inaugurated the myth of the noble savage in 1754 with his
Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, the notion that Europeans could gain real wisdom
from primitive cultures was still a reversal of conventional perspective in Gauguin's day,
particularly in the context of aesthetics. For a detailed analysis of the development of
European thought on "primitive" art, see Goldwater, Primitivism in Modern Art, pp. 16-
43. In particular, Goldwater discusses Alfred Haddon's influential Evolution in Art
(1895), which reflects a strong Darwinian bent and which purports to be a "biological
treatment of art" (qtd. in Goldwater 20). As Goldwater notes, Haddon concluded "that all
stylization in primitive art was [...] due to lack of skill on the part of a series of savage
artists, who copied, or rather tried to copy, each other because they were not equal to
copying from nature. This process, which, significantly, he called 'degeneration,' was
unconscious and not due to any choice on the part of the savage" (20). This view was
largely unchallenged among theoreticians until Wilhelm Worringer wrote Abstraction
and Empathy, in 1906, in which he called for a new approach to aesthetics, which
"regards the history of the evolution of art as a history of volition" rather than ability, and
which holds that "the sytlistic peculiarities of past epochs are, therefore, not to be
explained by lack of ability, but by a differently directed volition" (9).
gave not a single blow of the chisel to that piece of wood without having memories of a
sweet quietude, a fragrance, a victory and a rejuvenation" (28).]

The Forest Journey and Gauguin Scholarship

Scholars of Gauguin have seized on the obvious homoerotic overtones of this
scene as fertile ground for exploring Gauguin's complicated psychobiography, and in
particular his long history of pursuing intense relationships with other, often younger,
men. This tendency is documented, for example, in Nancy Mowll Mathews's monograph
on Gauguin's sexual pursuits, aptly titled *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, in which she
traces his biography by detailing the many ways in which Gauguin consistently sought to
foreground sexuality - especially of the illicit or experimental variety - in crafting his
public persona. It is in this context that Mowll Mathews explores his many close
relationships with younger men over the course of his artistic career, men who provided
financial support and professional connections to the artist in exchange for his wisdom,
companionship and charisma, and who may also have entertained romantic feelings for
their mentor. According to Mowll Mathews, "Without going so far as to practice (or at

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87 An example of the centrality of Gauguin's sexual identity to his public image can be
found in the way that he changed his signature in the late 1880s, adopting the letters
"PGo" as a stand-in for his name. A French slang term similar to the English "prick,"
Gauguin's "PGo" was (to borrow Pollock's term) a gambit designed to raise his profile via
shock value while at the same time publicly asserting a sexualized masculinity. For a
discussion of this period in Gauguin's career, see Mowll Mathews pp. 62-65.
88 Vincent van Gogh is probably the best-known of Gauguin's mentees, but there were
others. Charles Laval, for example, spent over three years mostly at Gauguin's side,
including a largely disastrous trip to Panama and Martinique in 1887 (Mowll Mathews
least announce) homosexuality, the men in the group around Gauguin openly embraced
the concept of androgyny and formed attachments to each other that defied social
conventions" (114). Gauguin in particular, she writes, "courted the affection of many
men who were homosexual or impressionably young, and basked in their adulation"
(65). 89

Mowll Mathews argues that Gauguin may have formed one such relationship
while in Tahiti, with a young French Lieutenant named Jénot, who later described having
had a close relationship with the artist, including long talks on aesthetic principles that
fascinated him. She speculates that "Jénot's youth and eager inexperience, though not the
result of upbringing in another culture, may nevertheless have been intoxicating to
Gauguin" (185). Noting that in his own later accounts, Jénot recalls leading Gauguin into
the mountains, to the home of an elderly Tahitian man who could supply wood for
Gauguin's sculptures, Mowll Mathews hints that Gauguin has disguised Jénot in Noa Noa
but that his homoerotic feelings were in reality directed towards this friend, and perhaps
reciprocated. "If, in Noa Noa, Gauguin transformed his French lieutenant into a
Tahitian," she writes, "it may have been to protect the man who later returned to France

89 It is impossible to ignore the somewhat prim tone that Mowll Mathews adopts here.
The notion of "homosexuality" as something that is "practiced" or "announced," together
with the idea that Gauguin's admirers were "impressionably young," implies not only a
strangely clinical view of human relations, but also a predatory nature to Gauguin's
interactions with these other artists. While it is certainly reasonable to talk about
Gauguin as sexual predator when discussing his exploitation of thirteen-year-old Tahitian
girls like Tehamana, it seems either homophobic or needlessly sensationalistic to assign
the same quality to his many relationships with grown men over the course of his life, no
matter how impressionable they may have been.
and married, and it may also have been to add the spice of interracial coupling to an already provocative story" (185).

I have already taken issue with Mowll Mathew's approach in my introductory chapter (see Introduction, p. 31) as being simultaneously overly speculative and insufficiently interpretive. Although she does acknowledge that Noa Noa as a text functions "as something resembling symbolist fiction," Mowll Mathews nevertheless laments the fact that, "Because of the different times [that] incidents were added to the manuscript, it is difficult to rely on Noa Noa for factual information and chronology" (178). For her, the value of the text is ultimately measured by its usefulness for confirming biographical speculation, and in this context, the erotic overtones of the Woodcutter Episode signify Gauguin's ongoing project of cultivating a sexualized public persona that draws its fuel from transgression but continues to smolder under a cloak of convention. Certainly the air of transgression in the Woodcutter Episode, and in Noa Noa more generally, plays an important role in Gauguin's self-branding, and certainly such a project of self-branding needs to be understood as one impetus for the creation of the book and the collaboration with Morice, as I have outlined in my introduction. But Mowll Mathews's approach to Noa Noa does not probe this text beyond highlighting its function as public-relations material.

Some literary scholars have been more likely to regard the Woodcutter Episode in Noa Noa as allegorical, bringing their work closer to my own perspective. Peter Brooks and Edward Hughes offer examples of close readings that highlight the metaphorical character of Gauguin's forest tale. To Brooks, this scene derives its significance from the role it plays in leading Gauguin to focus his eroticizing gaze squarely on the female body
in the second half of the book, as he develops his relationship with Tehamana, his thirteen-year-old vahine.\footnote{The word \textit{vahine} simply translates as "woman," but is often used as an equivalent to the English word "wife." In this context, it denotes a young girl who is essentially handed over to Gauguin by her family, to act as his household and sexual servant in exchange for room and board. According to Mowll Mathews, this practice was common in Tahiti (179), and the nature of the arrangement between Gauguin and his \textit{vahines} is visible in letters to friends, such as when he wrote to Armand Séguin that he had "a 15-year-old wife who cooks my simple every-day fare and gets down on her back for me whenever I want, all for the modest reward of a frock, worth ten francs a month" (qtd. in Solomon-Godeau 326). This disturbing image reveals the utter disingenuousness with which Gauguin benefitted from local patriarchal customs in Tahiti: like Loti, Gauguin helps himself to female flesh via a "marriage" he feels no obligation to honor. This is the colonial tradition Pollock critiques, whereby "The white man gets a female body by dishonoring local customs, which he uses to enter local circuits of exchange of women without ever intending to regard them as binding. The possibility for such abuse involves both the gender power of men of \textit{all} cultures to exchange women and the racist structures which empowered \textit{some} men to enter and dishonor the kinship system of other men whom they cast as racially and hence socially inferior" (Pollock 36-37).} The attraction that Gauguin feels for the woodcutter, Brooks writes, "leads to an interior experience of his own body as bisexual, to a homoerotic temptation that places him in the role of a woman and thus must be repudiated" (183). As a result the chapter "becomes virtually an allegory of a larger cultural need to maintain the 'laws' of sexual difference. If contemplation of the male body can evoke the temptation of androgyny and a slide toward homoeroticism, it is too dangerous to handle" (184). Brooks's assertion that homoerotic temptation is "repudiated" in the Woodcutter Episode is, I will argue in Chapter 3, belied by the erotic satisfaction that the narrator ultimately achieves. For the moment, however, I want to note the way in which Brooks offers a reading of \textit{Noa Noa} that is allegorical rather than biographical. A similar move can be found in Edward Hughes's \textit{Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature}, where again a symbolic element to the story is emphasized. Hughes focuses on the chopping down of the tree, noting that "[t]he crescendo of physical effort, purportedly to
deliver the raw material for sculpture, heralds a transparently quasi-sexual climax and a personal epiphany, the metaphorical cutting down of the old Gauguin" (35). Like Brooks, Hughes reads the episode as a cultural allegory: "Gauguin sees it as signaling the end to European self-absorption and trumpets this vigorous reincarnation unproblematically as the supreme victory over a nefarious civilization" (35).91

While Hughes and Brooks both pinpoint an allegorical meaning to Noa Noa, they miss one of the central features of the Woodcutter Episodes, which is the androgyny of the desired object (Brooks touches on this but does not elaborate). Like Mowll Mathews, Brooks and Hughes ultimately regard the Woodcutter Episode as a narrative of homosexuality. Rod Edmond, on the other hand, discusses the implications of androgyny, rather than homosexuality per se, in Representing the South Pacific, pointing out how well this episode interfaces with Gauguin's life-long interest in the androgynous as an ontological category. In a subtle reading of the passages in question, Edmond suggests that Gauguin here shows homosexuality to be "corrupt in Eastern but not Tahitian terms," and therefore "another sign of difference between Western and Polynesian cultures" (252). The woodcutter, meanwhile, is portrayed as "not homosexual but 'sexless,' which means genderless rather than asexual" (252). The whole thing thus becomes a study of androgyny and its potentially liberating, even redemptive power:

In Noa Noa the multiform young woodcutter, when in hermaphrodite guise, has moved beyond desire. This, in turn, excites Gauguin's desire, which is both an

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91 Hughes's view of the text matches that of Robert Goldwater, who writes of Gauguin that "each incident that he relates, whether it is about the South Seas or not, each point that he makes, is a kind of parable that contains in itself and explains all the wrongs of the insincere and complicated society that he had left, contrasting them with the simplicity and naturalness of the people of the South Seas" (65).
urge to corrupt such natural innocence and a yearning to share its freedom. The momentary vision of androgyny offers a glimpse of the resolution of other divisions, cultural as well as gender, which *Noa Noa* seeks. (253)\textsuperscript{92}

Such a reading of the scene is valuable in two distinct ways: it highlights the existential concerns lurking within *Noa Noa* - the yearning to be something conceived as fundamentally other than what one is, to be joined to one's opposite and counterpart; and it makes the important distinction that the narrator is attracted to the guide because of his liminal status ("not homosexual but 'sexless'"), as is also true for Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

The most important contribution that Edmond's interpretation makes is to highlight the efficacy of the androgyne as symbol of reconciliation (as opposed to lust). This is consistent with Gauguin's interest in androgyny as a figurative symbol and as a fact of life on Tahiti. Suzanne M. Donahue has argued that Gauguin "appropriated the image of the androgyne from the French Romantic literary tradition to personify an idyllic vision that attempted to restore a positive outlook to this world at the fin-de-siècle" (103) and to "represent humankind itself in a purified state" (104). According to Donahue, this reworking of the androgyne figure reverts back to a prevailing notion in the early nineteenth century, when "the concept of the androgyne emerged as a positive symbol. Often personified as Adam, the androgyne became a sanguine image of health, optimism, and faith in God" (107). For Gauguin, "This symbol would represent [...] a harmonious world, since it depicted both sexes fused perfectly together" (Donahue 109).

\textsuperscript{92} Given Gauguin's remarks about how *Noa Noa* would highlight the superiority of Polynesian culture relative to Europe, I would take issue with the idea that *Noa Noa* seeks cultural resolution. Instead, one of Gauguin's main purposes here seems to have been cultural division, whether out of genuine preference or because of the publicity and sales that he felt would result from a controversial stand.
Later nineteenth-century discourse on gender was, as Susan Sidlauskas has shown, extremely complicated and nuanced. It involved layers of scientific, metaphysical, anthropological and aesthetic ideologies intimately entwined. For example, Sidlauskas has shown how profoundly Gauguin's contemporary and friend, Paul Cézanne, was influenced by the rapidly-changing ideas on gender and sexuality that were in the ether at the close of the nineteenth century. "During those decades," she writes, the idea emerged and gained strength that "masculine" and "feminine" are ever-shifting points upon the same elastic continuum: just as no woman is entirely feminine, no man is wholly masculine. The idea that gender is a fluid construct was not new, of course. [...] But in the last two decades of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries, that fluency was argued with a fresh vigor and determination to ally a fluid gender assignation both to organic, physiological phenomena and to a range of psychological, and even cultural, traits. (143)

What is particularly important to note, for the present study, is how this shifting ideology reverberated through modernist aesthetics at the turn of the century. As Sidlauskas has shown, for Cézanne the androgyne operated as a figure of reconciliation that allowed for different levels of fusion. On the social level, a reconciliation of masculine and feminine was longed for; but on the aesthetic level, a reconciliation of different modes of artistic practice was desired - in Cézanne's case, drawing and painting. In her discussion of Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory, Sidlauskas shows how Cézanne's abstracted aesthetic, manifested in an androgynous melding of masculine and feminine principles in the portrait figure, also carries over into a similar melding of the principles of painting and drawing. "Throughout this portrait," she points out, "drawn strokes assume the gestural vigor, hue, and substance of paint, yet painted strokes are applied with the fineness and precision of graphite. In certain passages, painted strokes even seem to masquerade as graphite" (197; emphasis mine). Like the transvestite masquerading as a
differently constructed, gendered Other, Cézanne's androgynous painting blurs the boundaries of both gender and genre, enabling formal and ontological reconciliation at the same time.

In addition to providing an important historical context within which to situate Gauguin's own interest in the androgyne, Sidlauskas's work illustrates how androgyny could function not only as an allegory but, specifically, as an *aesthetic* allegory: "In *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory*, the interpenetration of media [painting masquerading as drawing] seems not only to grow out of the artist's desire for formal experimentation but also to be a form of meditation on the process of making art" (197). It is precisely this type of reading that, I argue, the figure of the androgyne also invites in *Noa Noa*. While writers like Edmond, Hughes and Brooks all recognize an allegorical quality to the woodcutter episode, they all interpret that allegory as symbolic of Gauguin's personal and societal outlook; it's about reconciliation between genders, cultures, societies, or it's about homoerotic desire and breaking taboos. My reading is different, and builds on Sidlauskas's understanding of the androgyne as an aesthetic principle in the late nineteenth century, a figure holding the promise of reconciliation between idea and form, and a figure capable of functioning as an allegorical meditation on the artistic process itself.

Each of the scholarly approaches to *Noa Noa* I have examined provides valuable insight into the content, the author, the symbolic resonance and the cultural attributes of the text. Yet each of them comes to rest ultimately on a reading of the Woodcutter Episode as essentially an autobiographical tale of personal and cultural frustration. Finding the mythic subtext here, though, opens up a much wider realm of interpretive
categories that destabilize the status of Noa Noa as autobiography, however oblique. Like Cézanne's painting, Gauguin's book is an aesthetic treatise *masquerading* as a travel memoir. It is a transvestite text.

The crucial point to make here is that the Woodcutter Episode as a rehearsal of Gilgamesh reveals the woodcutter himself as an analog to Enkidu, who is clearly established in the older text as Gilgamesh's primitive double. If the Woodcutter is not merely Gauguin's companion but his double, then the narrative is no longer about homoeroticism nearly so much as it is about autoeroticism. What is the nature and meaning of the author's self-love here? What is the symbolic efficacy of each of the elements of the ancient tale - the primitive double, the dark forest, the crime against nature, and the triumphant return? With *Gilgamesh* as subtext, Gauguin himself takes on a mythic form, and his journey to Tahiti becomes infused with mythic import. As John Maier writes, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is "a journey into the archaic" (32). The same may be said of Gauguin's Tahitian sojourn, which, particularly by its association with the ancient king, becomes a journey through historic and cosmic time.

**Gauguin in the Tropics / Gilgamesh Among the Cedars**

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93 Maier sees *Gilamesh* as as a journey through historical time and through cosmic time, simultaneously. It is a journey through historical time because "Human history was thought to have changed profoundly with the event of the flood" (32). By confronting the sole survivor of the Earth's antidiluvian past, which Gilgamesh does in the end of the Epic, the hero charts the foundations of human culture and ontology. At the same time, what he finds at the heart of his journey is darkness, a lack of clarity, an indirection that is maddening and that yet represents in many ways the ultimate truth, what Maier calls "a *via negativa*" (33). In this sense, then, writes Maier, this is also a journey through cosmic time, the cyclical and yet unstructured matrix that holds darkness at its core.
The *Epic of Gilgamesh* begins with a prologue proclaiming the greatness and civic heroism of the king, and then recounts the early days of the king's rulership, which he largely spends tormenting his own people, until Enkidu is sent to contend with and distract him. An ambitious ruler, Gilgamesh is not content to sit still, and once his attention is turned from abusing his people he is ready to set about turning that aggression outwards. He enlists Enkidu's help in planning and executing a journey to the Cedar Mountain to slay the demon Humbaba, keeper of the cedar forest, and bring back the wood for building giant new city gates (Sandars 70-71). In talking up the journey, he imagines it as a heroic and dangerous enterprise, and his advisors and friends implore him not to undertake it. But Gilgamesh will not be swayed, and, together with an army, the hero and his companion set out under the protection of Shamash. Enkidu, who has himself recently emerged from a primitive life among the animals of the forest, serves as Gilgamesh's guide on the cedar mission (76); he has the inside information on Humbaba, in terms of both his whereabouts and his dangers, and it is with his help that Gilgamesh is able to find the monster, slay him, and return to Uruk, triumphant, with the wood for the city gates (84). Shortly thereafter, though, Enkidu dies, in part as reprisal for his role in the slaying of Humbaba, and his suffering and death are so distressing to Gilgamesh that they precipitate his truly epic journey in the second half of the cycle, a long and torturous odyssey to the Land of the Dead in search of the key to everlasting life. This is a

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94 All quotations from *Gilgamesh* in English are taken from the translation by N.K. Sandars (1972), unless otherwise specified.
95 There is a scholarly consensus that the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh changed from the earliest versions of the Gilgamesh cycle to the later ones. In the Sumerian tradition - from which the Epic originated - the pair are described as servant and master, whereas in the Assyrian versions (written in the Akkadian language), they are clearly painted as loving friends and mirror images of one another. "Indeed," writes
journey that ends in failure for the king, but also, as we shall see later on, in a kind of redemption.

The resonance between Gilgamesh's forest journey and Gauguin's extends beyond the narrative of *Noa Noa* and into the larger context of Gauguin's Tahitian experiment. This is evident in the realm of motivation, for example, where both Gauguin and Gilgamesh display their multiplicitous inner selves in their disjointed justifications for venturing out. "Because of the evil that is in the forest," Gilgamesh declares, "we will go to the forest and destroy the evil" (71). But as later events demonstrate, Humbaba's threat to civilization is far less than anticipated (i.e., he crumples instantly), and furthermore his "evil" nature is far from a foregone conclusion (see Chapter 4). No, more to the point is the king's desire for fame, as his tearful prayer to Shamash makes clear for us:

> O Shamash, hear me, hear me Shamash, let my voice be heard. Here in the city man dies oppressed at heart, man perishes with despair in his heart. I have looked over the wall and I see the bodies floating on the river, and that will be my lot also. Indeed I know it is so, for whoever is tallest among men cannot reach the heavens, and the greatest cannot encompass the earth. Therefore I would enter that country: because I have not established my name as my destiny decreed, I will go to the country where the cedar is cut. I will set up my name where the names of famous men are written; and where no man's name is written I will raise a monument to the gods. (72)

Susan Ackerman, "this recasting of the nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship is one of the major innovations of the Akkadian Epic. From the tradition's point of view, this innovation is introduced in order to promote the Epic's larger thematic concern regarding Gilgamesh's desperate quest for eternal life and its futility, for it is only a loss as great as the loss of Enkidu, his second self, that can arouse in Gilgamesh such irremediable fears about his own death and send him on his vainglorious journey to escape it" (44). It is this later version that was uncovered in Assurbanipal's library and translated into Western languages in the late nineteenth century.
If Gilgamesh desires fame, it is in large part because he sees it as the only consolation for his inescapable mortality. Having seen the bodies floating on the river, Gilgamesh needs a heroic enterprise to establish his earthly afterlife.96

In his 1892 French translation of and commentary on the forest journey, Sauveplane emphasizes the rage that impels Gilgamesh forward, "une rage inassouvie," as Enkidu puts it (426). This rage is a marker of Gilgamesh's volatility and arrogance.

"L'insensé!" Enkidu exclaims:

Il vole au combat en aveugle, il se jette à l'aventure en des sentiers inconnus... Et il n'aura ni repos ni cesse qu'il n'ait mené à bonne fin cette campagne. Il veut à tout prix atteindre la forêt de cèdres, fouler aux pieds Humbaba, son puissant ennemi, enfin, extirper le mal, objet de la haine. (426)

He flies into combat blind, he throws himself into an adventure down unknown paths. And there will be neither rest nor stop until he has brought about a successful end to this campaign. He wants to reach the forest of cedars at any price, to trample Humbaba, his powerful enemy, [and] in the end, to wipe out the evil, [the] object of hatred.

By the reckoning of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's quest is-ill advised and motivated by anger and hate. Yet Enkidu will serve as Gilgamesh's indispensable guide, since he knows the wilderness, having lived there himself.

Even though Humbaba is clearly defined as Gilgamesh's hated enemy, the hero's battle with the demon is in many ways figured as a battle with the forest itself.

Sauveplane describes the cedar forest as "[un] rêve d'une forêt merveilleuse, hantée par un monstre, où l'on apercevrait, de ci, de-là, pendues aux arbres, en guise de trophées, des

96 Gilgamesh's forest journey is structurally the same as his later katabasis, in this respect. In both cases, he moves outward from the city into a different, wilder, forbidden ontological sphere in order to secure some hope of rejuvenation or immortality. It would be interesting to pursue a more in-depth reading of the contrast between urban spaces, wilderness spaces, and forbidden spaces in both Gilgamesh and Noa Noa. For me the question remains: Why is a journey across borders associated with finding a solution to this particular problem (the loss of youth)?
têtes de mort" (427) [a dream of an enchanted forest, haunted by a monster, where here and there, hanging from the trees like trophies, skulls could be seen]. A creature whom no one dares confront, Humbaba profits from the projections of human fear:

"L'imagination aidant, il était devenu une sorte de type légendaire" (427) [With the help of the imagination, he became a kind of legend]. Ensconced in his unreachable forest home, "le théâtre de drames mysterieux" [a theater of mysterious dramas] Humbaba enjoys a reputation for ferocity and "tout le prestige de l'inconnu" [all the prestige of the unknown] (427).

The resonance of this image for Gauguin and his contemporaries can hardly be overstated. Sauveplane's rendering of the text conjures a Humbaba that blends the imperialist archetype of the headhunting cannibal, a fixture of mainstream public discourse in the colonial era in the West, with the countercurrent, anti-empiricist dreamscape of the Symbolist. Many a man of Gauguin's day had ventured headlong

97 This cliché can be established with a casual perusal of the titles of popular books published in the late nineteenth century, including Gustavus Hines's *Wild Life in Oregon: Being a Stirring Recital of Actual Scenes of Daring and Peril Among the Gigantic Forests and Terrific Rapids of the Columbia River, and Giving Life-like Pictures of Terrific Encounters with Savages as Fierce and Relentless as its Mighty Tides* (1881); *Pioneering in Formosa: Recollections of Adventurers among Manderins, Wreckers, and Head-Hunting Savages* (1898); and Antonio Teffé's *Un explorateur brésilien: deux mille kilomètres de navigation en canot dans un fleuve inexploré et complètement dominé par des sauvages féroces et indomptables* (1889), among many others.

98 Robert Pogue Harrison's discussion shows how forests became for Baudelaire and his followers "dense with symbolism," and "understood as the reunification of that which ordinary perception obscures or differentiates" (179). In particular, in his poem "Correspondences," Baudelaire asserts that "Nature is a temple where living pillars / Sometimes let out confused words. / Man passes there through forests of symbols / Which observe him with a familiar gaze" (179). As Harrison points out, "[t]he utterance 'Nature is a temple' takes us beyond the realm of literal objects and into the forests of symbols, where ordinary sense perception undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes suffused with memory, analogy, and association" (180). Closer to Gauguin himself was also Mallarmé, for whom, as Harrison notes, "The forest is at once a temple of living
into savage forests where severed heads swayed in the breeze, hoping to bring glory to his name and his country. Indeed, with his sojourn to Tahiti, Gauguin himself proposed much the same thing. Seeking fame, he needed to find a mission on an epic scale, one that could silence his critics and the fears in his own head. Thus Gauguin's mission to Tahiti constitutes what Mircea Eliade would call "mythic behavior" - "the repetition of an exemplary scenario and the breakway from profane time through a moment which opens out into the Great Time" (30). In his mimetic rehearsal of Gilgamesh, Gauguin enters into "Great Time" and reframes his entire Tahitian sojourn as a heroic epic and a katabasis in search of ancient wisdom. Since such mythic behavior is conceived as quintessentially archaic (hence its allure), Gauguin's mission involves discursively "dressing" himself as a primitive in order to engage in it. Like Joséphin Péladan's "historical mimeticism," Gauguin's cultural transvestism is about self-fashioning.

Unlike Gilgamesh, Gauguin isn't motivated by hate in his forest journey; on the contrary, he describes himself as "insouciant, tranquille et aimant" ["carefree and calm and loving" (25)]. Yet Gauguin shares with Gilgamesh a consuming ambition, a need to make a name for himself, and a concern with mortality. He portrays himself in Noa Noa as "presqu'un vieillard, de corps et d'âme" ["almost an old man, in body and soul"], and wrote letters to his friends before his departure, claiming that he was going to Tahiti "to love, to sing, and to die" (qtd. in Perloff 237). In this way, as we will see, Gauguin's trip to Tahiti mirrors Gilgamesh's later katabasis, just as his hike to the rosewood grove mirrors Gilgamesh's encounter with Humbaba. Gauguin travels far away and down below, to a land known only to the imagination or in legend, in search of youth and everlasting life.

pillars and a scene of horror, an enchanted wood and a wood of abandon," as well as "a symbol of symbolism" (183).
Above all, Gauguin's forest, like Gilgamesh's, enjoys "tout le prestige de l'inconnu." This is evident, of course, in the way that he relies on his primitive guide to "smell out" a trail that is invisible to European eyes, it is so overgrown, "so deeply shaded" (25). It is also evident in the narrator's increasingly ambivalent thoughts as he follows his guide: his "pressentiment de crime," his "désire d'inconnu, le reveil du mal."

In yet another layer of mirroring, Gauguin develops an unspoken duplication between the inner and outer realms here - the awakening of evil within himself; the awakening of the evil that lurks in the forest. In either case, the forest in Noa Noa is, to borrow Sauveplane's words, "[une] rêve d'une forêt merveilleuse, hantée pour un monstre," and "le théâtre de drames mystérieux" (427), especially the drama about to play out between himself, his woodcutter friend, and the rosewood tree. "De chaque côté du ruisseau," he writes, "cascadant [sic] un semblant de chemin des arbres pêle mêle des fougères monstrueuses, toute végétation s'ensauvageant, se faisant impenetrable [sic] de plus en plus à mesure que l'on monte vers le centre de l'île" ["On either side of the stream there cascades a semblance of a path, trees pell-mell, monster ferns, all sorts of vegetation growing wilder, more and more impenetrable as you climb towards the center of the island" (25)]. And perhaps most mystifying of all, "Le silence complet, seul le bruit de

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99 Here Gauguin's ambivalent relationship to nature, which we will explore more fully in Chapter 4, echoes Baudelaire's. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire asserts that "Nature can counsel nothing but crime. It is this infallible Mother Nature who has created parricide and cannibalism, and a thousand other abominations that both shame and modesty prevent us from naming" (32). This rather more pessimistic view of nature than the one we encountered in "Correspondences" reveals that, as Harrison puts it, "When nature ceased to be a temple of correspondences it became for Baudelaire an abomination" (181). Most importantly, it reveals that the essence of Baudelaire's contemplation of nature in "Correspondences" lies not in nature itself but in its ability to lead the viewer into realms of immaterial insight. Much the same can be said for Gauguin, for whom the "evil" lurking in the forest can therefore be defined as both morally bankrupt and - by that very token - spiritually and aesthetically redemptive.
l'eau gémissant sur le rocher" ["Complete silence, - only the noise of the water crying against rock " (25)]. Gauguin's mysterious forest is a theater of overgrowth and darkness, of silence and crying.

The encounter with the demon at the heart of the forest continues the close parallels between these two texts. These mirroring encounters will be the subject of chapter 4, where we will examine them more closely for their narrative weight and symbolic resonance. For now, I want to turn our attention to the heroes themselves, as they ascend the wooded mountain.

III. Gauguin's Double Consciousness

As captivating as the structural parallels in the two forest journeys are, the most prominent, and salient, intersection between *Gilgamesh* and *Noa Noa* is the image of the double. Gauguin was obsessed with duality in his own selfhood, and frequently described himself as having a double nature. Most of the time, he conceives of this duality in terms of a "civilized" side and a "primitive" side, as when he wrote to his wife in 1888, "You must remember that there are two types of temperament in me: the Indian and the sensitive. The sensitive has disappeared, and this allows the Indian to walk absolutely straight ahead" (*Writings of a Savage* 23). Here, apparently, the "sensitive" side is that which would enable him to play the role of bourgeois father and husband (in his letter he is refusing his wife's request that he visit her and the couple's children), while the "Indian" side represents a stoic shutting out of tender thoughts and an adamant,
unbridled, almost cruel ambition. Cruelty was not something that Gauguin eschewed, but rather seems to have played an equivalent role to victimization within the complex matrix of his public and private identity. Its association with "savageness" or "Indian" nature strikes a strong chord with *Gilgamesh* and is carefully delineated in the Woodcutter Episode. We have also already seen this association between cruelty and the primitive in Gauguin's *Oviri* sculpture of 1894, in which the *Gilgamesh* bas-relief of lions at the Louvre was recast in a Polynesian style and titled with a Polynesian name meaning "cruel enigma" (Bohrer 268).

Gauguin often presented his duality as something extending from his family's roots in Peru, although there isn't any evidence of his actually having had indigenous Peruvian ancestry. Rather, his was a family of European aristocrats who settled successfully in Peru for some time, and although he spent part of his early childhood in Lima, Gauguin was raised in France from the age of six (Mowll Mathews 7).  

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100 Mowll Mathews demonstrates well how Gauguin asserted his public image as a cruel aggressor who often got into violent physical confrontations with others. He had a reputation among boursiers - his former colleagues - for being a violent man, stemming in part from an incident Schuffenecker remembered many years later in which Gauguin had "beaten within an inch of his life an unfortunate clerk who had dared to make him the butt of a joke" (65).

101 For a more thorough understanding of Gauguin's lineage, see Mowll Mathews 5-6. She writes, "As important as Gauguin's Peruvian bloodline was, his later romantic claim to be descended from the Incas cannot be substantiated. The Spanish roots of the Tristan Moscosos [his maternal family line] could be traced back to the Borgias, and in Peru the family intermarried only with other Spanish ('Criole') families" (6). However, it is also worth noting that this distinction is likely a product of our own historical moment and would not necessarily have been seen as relevant in Gauguin's time. As Benedict Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*, the concept of creole identity complicated notions of blood lineage among colonists in ways that appear archaic from a post-colonial perspective. Anderson notes that "the writings of Rousseau and Herder, which argued that climate and 'ecology' had a constitutive impact on culture and character, exerted wide influence. It was only too easy from there to make the convenient, vulgar distinction that creoles, born in a savage hemisphere, were by nature different from, and inferior to, the
Nevertheless, Gauguin considered his grandmother, Flora Tristan, to be Peruvian, and he often cited her as the source of his "Indian" spirit. As Alexandra Wettlaufer has written, Gauguin's later accounts of his time in Peru reflect a fascination with his dead progenatrix as well as the early beginnings of his self-identification as an outsider, at once French and Peruvian, cultivated and savage, both and neither. [...] This sense of duality, and the constant play between self and other and self as other, thus played a significant role in the structure of Tristan's and Gauguin's lives and works, allowing each to occupy the paradoxical position of perpetual pariah, an outsider identified with the center and the periphery of colonial French cultures. (25)

The dichotomy between "sensitive" and "Indian" coincided well with other dualities that were also present in his personality and sense of self: he was alternately victim and aggressor, bohemian artist and cosmopolitan stockbroker, loving father and abusive deserter, starving visionary and respected teacher. Furthermore, Gauguin's sense of duplicity extended to his art, too, as we have seen, where he struggled with the conflict between a desire to be mysterious and the need to be understood, and where he was most interested in making use of primitive and mythic imagery to cultivate the former. In Avant et Après, a collection of notes and reminiscences that Gauguin wrote in the months preceding his death in the Marquesas, the image of the double resurfaces again, taking on a strikingly Jungian aspect: "You drag your double around with you, and yet the two contrive to get on together" (qtd. in Wadley 134).102 Here Gauguin brings full circle the

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102 This thought may also contain an echo of Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, which Gauguin venerated and cited often. In it, the good Bishop Bienvenu is said to have espoused the belief that "Man has a body that is both his burden and his temptation. He drags it along and gives in to it. He ought to watch over it, keep it in bounds, repress it, and obey it only as a last resort. It may be wrong to obey even then, but if so, the fault is venial. It is a fall, but a fall onto the knees, which may end in prayer" (13). The image of the man dragging his body around with him resonates deeply with Gauguin's embattled

metropolitans" (60). Given the pervasiveness of this concept of creolization, and its crucial place in structuring sociopolitical hierarchies, Gauguin's concept of himself as part Peruvian - even part "Indian" - is not necessarily as unwarranted as it may appear.
theme of primitive-civilized duality in his selfhood, connecting it specifically with the 
figure of the double.

Given this propensity for splitting and doubling in his image of his own selfhood 
throughout his career, an interest in the doppelgänger motif in *Gilgamesh* would seem 
natural for Gauguin as he attempted to wade his way into literary waters. *Gilgamesh* 
foregrounds the figure of the mythic double, splitting the heroic selfhood into primitive 
and civilized parts in a way very similar to how Gauguin envisioned his own self to be 
divided. This splitting makes its way into *Noa Noa* in the form of the Tahitian villager 
who guides the narrator up the mountain forest path, and who, without supernaturally 
transforming into the "spitting image" of the artist, is nevertheless carefully crafted as a 
primitive double, an equal and opposite reflection of the artist's own self. The doubling 
in the Woodcutter Episode needs to be understood within the context of Gauguin's 
personal and artistic obsession with doubling and dialectic, as well as the context of the 
chapter itself, which is structured from the outset as a narrative of transformation. This is 
important because an essential feature of both *Noa Noa* and *Gilgamesh* is the desire for 
union with the double, a desire that is evoked in erotically charged imagery and that 
propagates a poetics according to which the double is imagined as enabling 
transformation. I will argue in chapter 3 that this erotic charge represents Gauguin's 
desire to reconcile material and immaterial elements in representation, making *Noa Noa* 
not a memoir but a parable - a mythic allegory of artistic pursuit.

*Stormy Heart for Stormy Heart*

relationship with the body and its attendant desires and discomforts, particularly as he 
suffered from venereal disease toward the end of his life.
In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the primitive double is a gift from the gods, sent down to distract the arrogant king from tormenting his own people, and crafted to be "as like him as his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart for stormy heart" (Sandars 62). However, like any good double, Enkidu is not in fact *just like* Gilgamesh; rather, he is a distinctive blend of equal and opposite elements, as evidenced by the reaction of the townspeople to him:

- He is the spit of Gilgamesh.
- He is shorter.
- He is bigger of bone.
- Now Gilgamesh has met his match. (68)

Indeed in addition to being shorter and thicker than Gilgamesh, Enkidu is said to have "long hair like a woman's" that "waved like the hair of Nisaba the goddess of corn," and his body is "covered in matted hair like Samuqan's, the god of cattle" (63). These characteristics identify Enkidu as both a primitive and an androgynous figure, and the ambiguity of his status is essential to his role in the epic.

As a liminal figure, Enkidu represents the crossing of boundaries and enables transformation. Maier writes, "the story of Enkidu everywhere emphasizes change. For Enkidu it is a story of birth, development in the wild, a step-by-step initiation into the life of a civilized man, courageous acts, and death. It is the story of Everyman" (15). Indeed, many scholars have interpreted Enkidu's movement from wild animal life to pastoral farming to city dwelling as an allegory for the stages of human cultural development (Sandars 30). But more importantly, Enkidu's entire ontological purpose is to bring newness: "I will go to the place where Gilgamesh lords it over the people," he proclaims. "I will challenge him boldly, and I will cry aloud in Uruk, 'I have come to change the old order, for I am the strongest here'" (68). The primitive double is a figure who, by
unsettling the ontological boundaries taken for granted within the realm of Culture, enables both a personal and a metaphysical transformation for both the hero and the world.

Thus, the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh has to be thought of in terms beyond just opposites; the valence between them is exemplary of transformative dialectic. In the same way that Enkidu is "Everyman," Gilgamesh is not just any civilized man, but an emblematic figure of the very birth and development of civilization. As Robert Pogue Harrison has pointed out, Gilgamesh is figured in the text as a culture hero: "In the Sumerian and Babylonian literature Gilgamesh is commonly referred to as the 'builder of the walls of Uruk.' The epitaph effectively summarizes his civic heroism. Walls, no less than writing, define civilization" (15). Per his own proclamation, Gilgamesh's destiny is nothing more nor less than to leave his name "stamped on brick" - written on the walls that stand for civilization itself. More than just a citizen, a representative of civilization, then, Gilgamesh is instead its chief architect. The Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship is thus, as is often the case among doubles, charged with a particular dynamic of polarity that lends it both a narrative and a psychic appeal.

Transformation occurs both for Gilgamesh and for his primitive double. Indeed, transformation for the hero comes in many ways through his relationship to the double, which is recounted as an intensely visceral bond infused with matrimonial imagery and erotic dimension even before the the two men meet. After the citizens have prayed to the gods for a match to contend with Gilgamesh, "stormy heart for stormy heart" (62), Gilgamesh is disturbed by a prophetic dream that foretells his double's arrival. He asks his mother, the goddess Ninsun, about this dream, in which he approaches a huge object
that he is unable to lift but which attracts him "like the love of a woman" (66). Ninsun responds that this "star of heaven" is something that she has made for Gilgamesh, "a goad and spur," and that Gilgamesh is "drawn to it as though to a woman." "When you see him you will be glad," she confirms, "you will love him as a woman and he will never forsake you" (66). Gilgamesh goes on to tell of another dream, this one of an axe, and declares again, "I loved it like a woman and I wore it at my side" (67), thus reinforcing the matrimonial image with the additional layer of the phallic signifier, the axe. Once more Ninsun confirms that this image foretells his bond with Enkidu (67).

The nuptial air of the bond between these friends is also anticipated on Enkidu's side. When the temple harlot, who is responsible for initiating Enkidu into the world of civilization, reveals her plans for him, her encouragement sounds like that of a matchmaker. "I will take you to strong-walled Uruk," she says, "to the blessed temple of Ishtar and of Anu, of love and of heaven; there Gilgamesh lives, who is very strong, and like a bull he lords it over men" (65). Her description intrigues the primitive man: "When she had spoken Enkidu was pleased; he longed for a comrade, for one who would understand his heart" (65). Again the relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh is foreshadowed with matrimonial imagery when the harlot, knowing that Enkidu cannot enter Uruk naked, dresses him in her own clothes to send him into the city. "Enkidu had become like a man," we are told, "but when he had put on man's clothing he appeared like a bridegroom" (67). Like an excited young lover, Enkidu anoints himself with oil and drinks wine. "He became very merry, his heart exulted and his face shone" (67).

Nineteenth-century translations of and commentaries on Gilgamesh lack the straightforward clarity of Sandars's rendering of the double relationship, mostly because
they lack one crucial line, "He is the spit of Gilgamesh." Nevertheless, nineteenth-century scholars recognized the doppelgänger motif and commented frequently on it, particularly when comparing Gilgamesh and Enkidu to the signs of the Zodiac. In the earliest French account of the epic, in 1876, François Lenormant points out

que la division du texte original en douze tablettes formant autant de chant distincts, dont chacun est consacré à un épisode principal, a une importance fondamentale dans le plan du poème, de telle façon qu'elle a été scrupuleusement conservée dans toutes les copies; enfin que les épisodes que forment la matière de ces douze tablettes sont en rapport avec les douze mois de l'année et les signes du zodiaque. (67)

that the division of the original text into twelve tablets, forming the same number of distinct songs, where each is devoted to a principal episode, has a fundamental importance in the structure of the poem, such that it has been scrupulously preserved throughout all the copies; such that the episodes that form the material of these twelve tablets are related to the twelve months of the year and the signs of the zodiac.

This observation, originally put forward by Sir Henry Rawlinson himself, steered the direction of much of the thinking about and interpretation of the Epic in the nineteenth century, a fact that could be overlooked by modern scholars since it is rarely mentioned in contemporary writing on *Gilgamesh*.

The association of *Gilgamesh* with the signs of the zodiac contributed to a prevailing notion in nineteenth-century scholarship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as doubles or twins. For example, in 1884, James Rogers published a book called *Bible folk-lore, a study in comparative mythology*. Rogers's study predates the Sauveplane translation by several years, but already identifies Gilgamesh and Enkidu (called Eabani then) as twins:

The tale of the twins, one mortal and murdered, the other immortal, is common in Aryan mythology. The Asvins of the Vedas become the Dioscuon in Greece, the twin brethren of Rome. In Egypt they appear in 'tale of the two brothers;' and in Chaldea the twin heroes Eabani, the man bull, who is mortal, and Izdubar the sun hero, who survives, are akin to Shin the moon and Bel the sun, his brother, who
form the divine pair represented by the Zodiacal sign of the Twins, which we know to have been in use among the Babylonians. (12)

Rogers's analysis illustrates how the association of the twelve tablets with the twelve signs of the Zodiac influenced scholarly interpretations of the contents of the tale, and this particular understanding of Gilgamesh and Eabani as "gemini" persisted throughout the 1890s. In 1898, Robert Brown described the Epic as a prototype for the myth of Herakles, conforming to the months of the year and the signs of the Zodiac; he lists them as follows:

1. Ram: Birth, parentage, etc. of Gilgames.
2. Bull: Account of the mysterious, horned Ėabani (‘Ēa-made-me’).
3. Twins: Gilgames and Ėabani.

and so on through the twelve tablets of the Epic (178). As Brown's mapping indicates, scholars commonly considered the tablet narrating the meeting of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to be the third tablet, corresponding to Gemini, the Zodiacal sign of the Twins. In modern renderings, the portion of text narrating their meeting is considered to be Column IV of Tablet II. In any case, there is no doubt that Gilgamesh and Enkidu were considered as twins and even doppelgänger of one another from the beginning of their emergence in the West.

While the twinning of the ancient heroes was firmly established by the end of the nineteenth century, the erotic bond between them was a far less stable, though not less notable, point of reference. According to Susan Ackerman, it was not until the late 1920s that a famed Assyriologist called Thorkild Jacobsen "first argued that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be understood as sexual in nature" (47). But as early as 1911, Freud had recognized the relationship and had written the following in a letter to Carl Jung:
such pairs consisting of a noble and base part (usually brothers) are a motif running through all legend and literature. The last great offshoot of the type is Don Quixote with his Sancho Panza (literally: paunch). Of mythological figures, the first that come to mind are the Dioskouroi (one mortal, the other immortal) and various pairs of brothers or twins of the Romulus and Remus type. One is always weaker than the other and dies sooner. In Gilgamesh this age-old motif of the unequal pair of brothers served to represent the relationship between a man and his libido. (*Letters* 199)

Here Gilgamesh and Enkidu are once again figured as twins, as analogues of Castor and Pollux, but Freud goes a step further to pinpoint the highly sexually charged nature of this particular twin relationship. For Freud, Enkidu not only arouses Gilgamesh's libido but actually embodies it.\(^\text{103}\)

That Freud equates Gilgamesh and Enkidu to "a man and his libido" is illustrative not only of his own particular concerns, but of the undeniably sexual imagery that infuses their interactions in even the earliest translations. In Sauveplane's 1892 text, both of Gilgamesh's sexually ambiguous dreams - usually taken as the jumping-off point for investigating the nature of this relationship - are present, although Sauveplane does not

\(^{103}\) Indeed, as David L. Eng has demonstrated, in Freud's psychoanalytic theories the double, the homoerotic, and the primitive would be a natural triangulation of fantasies. In Freud's view, the extreme narcissism imposed by "Nature" on the relationship between a boy and his penis translates into an adult sexuality whereby, as Eng puts it, "heterosexual man is no more, no less than a (displaced) narcissist who can only love those objects that remind him of himself" (157). Thus, the heteronormatively commanded female body is really just a substitute for the male body. In this case, as Eng explains, the homosexual becomes "the one love object holding the greatest psychic cache for the heterosexual man. Not only does the homosexual man reassuringly and faithfully mirror his body back to the heterosexual man; furthermore, the homosexual man also has a putative narcissism that would be a potent reminder of the renounced libidinal territory the heterosexual man relinquished in his departure from narcissistic to anaclitic (heterosexual) love" (157). In this schematic, the figure of the erotic primitive double (primitive in his evocation of "renounced libidinal territory"; double in his mirroring back to the man a fantasy of his own corporeal completeness) appears as a central tenet of dominant masculinity's rise to power, inhabiting the intoxicating liminal space of the heterosexual man's displaced desire. "[T]he simultaneous (dis)avowal of homosexuality structures the very condition of possibility by means of which conventional white masculinity is allowed to emerge" (157).
comment on them. When Gilgamesh describes to his mother the dream with the axe, he says,

. . . . je l'ai mis à tes pieds
. . . . comme une femme; il a dirigé sur lui [sic]
. . tu l'as placé à côté de moi. (325)

. . . . I placed him at your feet
. . . . like a woman; he turned toward him
. . you placed him at my side.

As in the Standard Edition, Ninsun replies that this dream foretells the coming of Enkidu.

In the next column her interpretation continues:

dele qu'il retourne en son chemin, . . . .
. . et que les grands aiment, . . . .
. . . . . . . son action,
. . . . . . . dont la pousse est frêle
. . . . . . . herbe, cyprès, ton jeune homme,
. . . . . . . de pierre ka, de pierre uknu, et d'or,
. . . . . . . qu'il retourne, qu'il te donne,
. . . . son kununu, ses testicules, ses lèvres
. . . . fut abandonnée la mère, l'épouse,
. . . . il vit, à lui tout seul,
. . . . son cœur à son ami. (326)

[from far that he returns on his path . . . .
. . and that the great ones love . . . .
. . . . . . . his action,
. . . . . . . whose growth is frail
. . . . . . . grass, cypress, your young man,
. . . . . . . of ka stone, of uknu stone, and of gold,
. . . . . . . that he returns, that he gives you,
. . . . his kununu, his testicles, his lips
. . . . abandoned the mother, the wife
. . . . he lives, all on his own,
. . . . his heart to his friend.]

For a nineteenth-century reader seeking mythic resonance and drawn to the appeal of the exotic erotic, this speech, for all its fragmentation, is a goldmine of interpretive possibilities. Like stars peeking out of the night sky, or like the tablets themselves
emerging from the desert dust, here mysterious erotic images shine forth from the dark silence of all those ellipses. An image of Enkidu-as-libido emerges, and at the same time, an image of impassioned friendship and a pledging of hearts. "L'amitié de Gilgamès et Eabani," writes Sauveplane, "résista à toutes les épreuves; elle résista même au temps...
Les deux héros vécurent, jusqu'à la fin, dans une touchante intimité, et mirent en commun leurs plaisirs comme leurs peines" (424) ["The friendship of Gilgamesh and Eabani withstood all tests; it even withstood time... The two heroes lived, up to the end, in a touching intimacy, and shared their pleasures as they did their pain"].

For his own part, Gilgamesh himself does none too poorly in this sketch, either. Sauveplane dubs him "le premiere ancêtre autentique de Don Juan," a characterization bearing relevance to Gauguin's own project of self-fashioning in ways that we will explore more fully in Chapter 4.104 But it is clear that by the time of Noa Noa's writing, Gilgamesh and Enkidu were widely recognized not only as twins but as profoundly sexualized figures. For an artist like Gauguin to complete the picture is no stretch at all.

Twinning and Transformation

104 Because of his overtly celebrated sexual energy, his harassment of the virgins of Uruk, and, especially, his rejection of the love goddess Ishtar's advances, Gilgamesh appeared to nineteenth-century readers in the West as a Don Juan type, and even as a sexual predator. In Chapter 4 I outline how this position relates to Gauguin's own interest in shaping himself as sexually dominant or threatening, and how this dynamic inflects his aesthetic project. What is striking about Sauveplane's comment here is the way in which it illustrates Sauveplane's acceptance of Gilgamesh - a figure from a radically removed, Eastern culture - as the "authentic ancestor" of Don Juan, a classic Western character. It is also significant that Sauveplane, as did his contemporaries, focuses on sexuality as a key marker of the ancient king's persona.
In part because of the fragmentary nature of the Gilgamesh cycle in its present form, and because of its extreme removal by spacial and temporal distance, the meaning of the eroticism that characterizes the doubling relationship within this narrative remains unstable for the modern reader.\textsuperscript{105} However, it is important to note that eroticism infuses and determines both Enkidu's transformation from wild beast into human (by the harlot) and Gilgamesh's transformation from despot into hero (by Enkidu). The same dynamic prevails in Gauguin's Woodcutter Episode, which thematizes both doubling and eroticism within the context of a transformation narrative.\textsuperscript{106} Gauguin begins this chapter by signaling that it will be one that deals with transformation. For one thing, he says, he is beginning to understand the language well (24). In addition, there are physical changes that he marks: "mes pieds nus, au contact quotidien du caillous, se sont familiarisés sur le sol; mon corps, presque toujours nu, ne craint plus le soleil" ["my bare feet, from daily contact with the rock, have got used to the ground; my body, almost always naked, no

\textsuperscript{105} Susan Ackerman has argued forcefully that, in considering Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship as homosexual, many scholars have fallen prey to "the dangers of 'trying to map' our own sexual categories onto ancient texts" (76). She writes that such interpretations "rather facilely assume that our conception of homosexuality - and the dichotomy it posits of homosexual versus heterosexual - is applicable across time and space" (75), when in fact "the Mesopotamian system of categorizing and understanding same-sex (and opposite-sex) erotic and sexual interactions was very different from our own" (76).

\textsuperscript{106} Rod Edmond questions the idea that the Woodcutter Episode, or \textit{Noa Noa} in general, can be taken at face value as a narrative of transformation. "Against the grain of its own assertions," he writes, "the text keeps dramatizing the way in which Gauguin's civilized attributes impede the attempt to become 'a Maori.' Conversion scenes, from which he emerges transformed and rejuvenated, need to constantly be re-enacted, as if the text remains unconvinced by its own assertions" (249). I disagree. While it's true that in some sense the conversion is continually re-enacted, the perpetual backsliding that Edmond points to is indicative less of a specific thematic thrust in the text than of the paradox of Gauguin's outsider persona - a savage in France / a Frenchman in Oceania - to which Wettlaufer, as I have noted above, referred. Nevertheless, Edmond does refer to the Woodcutter Episode as "climactic."
longer fears the sun\). These subtle physical transformations are emblematic of the more profound spiritual change that Gauguin seeks: "La civilisation s'en va petit à petit de moi et je commence à penser simplement, n'avoir que peu de haine pour mon prochain, et je fonctionne animalement, librement […] Je deviens insouciant tranquille et aimant" ["Civilization leaves me bit by bit and I begin to think simply, to have only a little hatred for my neighbor, and I function in an animal way, freely [...] . I become carefree and calm and loving"] (25). But Gauguin is not a savage yet - or at least, not in comparison with his "ami naturel," the woodcutter. It is by means of his relationship to this character that Gauguin experiences fusion with the Other and in the process finds the transformation he craves. Even at this early stage in the narrative, though, Gauguin is playing with primitivity as the site for engendering communion between internal and external selves and realms. The hardened feet on the outside either signal or enable the "carefree and loving" spirit on the inside.

Gauguin's friend, a "jeune sauvage" who is "parfaitment beau," and who will lead Gauguin up the mountain path, is a neighbor from the village. In later drafts, the woodcutter receives the name Jotefa, but in the manuscript he remains nameless, emphasizing his status as a figure rather than a personage. In the course of the episode, the woodcutter is first contrasted with Gauguin himself, then compared, then contrasted again, and then finally fused, or synthesized with the artist's selfhood, in a maneuver that I will argue is representative of Gauguin's style and his approach to dialectic.

107 Griffin’s translation omits the word “bare” (nus), but I think it’s important as a semiotic marker of Gauguin’s outward transvestism, leading to inward transformation.
The woodcutter, who admires the artist's crafting capabilities,\(^\text{108}\) is described as first and foremost "Enfant ... Il faut l'être, pour penser qu'un artiste est quelque chose d'utile" ["A child ... One has to be, to think that an artist is something useful" (25)]. This first image of him signals a sharp contrast between his naïve purity and Gauguin's jaded outlook; the distance between the two men seems great. But the Woodcutter's words in the text immediately take on a mythic quality that serves to bring the two men together in a kind of joint selfhood, beginning with his response to the narrator's stated wish: "avoir pour sculpture un arbre de bois de rose morceau assez important et qui ne fût pas creux" ["to have for sculpture a tree of rosewood, a piece of considerable size and not hollow" (25)]. "[P]our cela," the young man tells him, "Il faut [...] aller dans la montagne à  

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\(^{108}\) In *Gauguin's Skirt*, Stephen Eisenman notes that the androgynous Tahitian men known as *mahus* were identifiable in part by their pursuit of "women's work, including weaving, quilting, and other arts or crafts, waiting a table, and housework" (106). Thus the woodcutter's interest in Gauguin's crafts marks him from the beginning as not only childlike but effeminate or androgynous, a characteristic that will be emphasized as the episode progresses. Eisenman writes, "At the outset of an account that he knows will quickly become eroticized, Gauguin notes the significance of craft labor, age, rank, and social status in the relationship of a young Tahitian male and an older French artist and colonist. [...] As the tale unfolds, however, Gauguin finds it expedient to surrender his position of authority" (113). I'm not sure I would agree that he even begins in a position of authority, however. Instead, Gauguin seems throughout the text to be disguising himself as the disadvantaged, ashamed foreigner, bumbling his way through a new culture. As Rod Edmond points out, for example, when Gauguin arranges his "marriage" to Tehamana, "far from it being an encounter between 'a bragging paedophile and his child-bride' [as Abigail Solomon-Godeau reads it], Gauguin is nervous of her 'independent pride ... [and] serenity,' hesitant about signing the contract, and sharply aware that her 'mocking, although tender, lip showed clearly that the danger was for me, not for her' (35)" (250). Edmond seems to take this portrait at face value, using it as a way of critiquing Solomon-Godeau, whereas I would argue that actually this dissembling is an essential feature of Gauguin's campaign to elide the imperial system from which he benefitted, even as he scorned it. In either case, the position of authority that Eisenman sees in the Woodcutter Episode escapes me.
certain [sic] endroit où je connais plusieurs beaux arbres qui pourraient te satisfaire. 109 Si tu veux, je t'y menerai et nous le rapporterons tous deu" ["For that, you must go up the mountain to a certain place where I know several fine trees that might satisfy you. If you like, I'll take you there and we'll carry it back, the two of us" (25)]. More than just a suggestion, the friend's wording here possesses an incantatory air that presages and promises the kind of oneness with "savagery" that Gauguin craves: "nous les rapporterons tous deu." 

This very aspect of the woodcutter's speech - its poetic cadence - serves at the same time to set him apart, however, from his European observer. It is an element of the mystical theatricality attributed to the noble savage by the colonial discourse into and against which Gauguin inscribed himself to different degrees at different times in his life. But as such it has a paradoxically dual (equal and opposite) effect: on the one hand, it radically distances the savage by casting him in a quasi-mythic role; and on the other hand, in its content, it conscientiously draws the narrator into that mythic role to share it with him through performative speech. The sentence begins with "je" and "tu" and ends with "nous" and "deux": "we will carry it back, the two of us." Thus the journey begins not only with a mythical air, but with a potent image of partnership, duality, and dichotomy: in short, doubling.

109 The same word appears in an earlier episode in Noa Noa, when a kindly Tahitian man arranges for his child to bring the hungry and inept Gauguin some food. "A little later the man went by and with a kindly expression, without stopping, said to me a single word: 'Paia.' I understood vaguely. 'Are you satisfied' " (20). Mowll Mathews points out that "Gauguin's translation of the word 'paia' as 'satisfied' is curious because as an adjective it means 'slippery' and as a noun it means 'sodomy.' " She argues that Gauguin's use of this "salty" word in the text as well as in several paintings was likely intentional; "With his typical sly humor," she writes, "he uses the term in Noa Noa to refer to eating, which a general audience will take without suspicion, but those in his smaller circle would recognize it as sexual" (184).
As the pair set off on their journey, their equality and opposition is reinforced again and again, and at the same time the dynamic between them becomes increasingly sexualized. "Nous allions, tous deux, bien nus avec le linge à la ceinture, et la hache à la main," the narrator tells us, emphasizing the twinning effect of the image; "Et nous étions bien deux, deux amis" ["We went naked, both of us, except for the loincloth, and axe in hand. And two we certainly were, two friends" (25)]. And yet the distance between these two friends, "lui tout jeune homme" and the narrator "presqu'un vieillard, de corps et d'âme," is at the same time equally pronounced. Gauguin meditates on his companion's "corps souple d'animal" ["lithe animal body"] and his ability to "sniff out the trail," which, heavily obscured by foliage and flowers, is invisible to the disadvantaged European ("un bout de sentier que mon compagnon connaissait comme par l'odorat") (25). Indeed the oppositeness is as crucial to the dynamic between these friends as is the twinning, since it is this very oppositeness that provides the site for the growth and intensity of their bond:

De toute cette jeunesse de cette parfaite harmonie avec la nature qui nous entourait, il ce dégageait une beauté, un parfum (noa noa) qui enchantaient mon âme d'artiste. De cette amitié si bien cimentée par attraction mutuelle du simple au composé l'amour en moi prenait éclosion.

Et nous étions seulement the two of us --

From all this youth, from this perfect harmony with nature which surrounded us, there emanated a beauty, a fragrance (noa noa) that enchanted my artist's soul. From this friendship so well cemented by the mutual attraction between simple and composite, love took power to blossom in me.

And we were only the two of us -- (25)

The "simple" and "composite" souls are drawn together by their difference, and united in a fantasy of fragrance. The phrase "noa noa," repeated throughout the text, serves as an

110 The "axe in hand" also recalls the prophetic dreams that Gilgamesh has about Enkidu, where the latter appears as an axe that the hero wears at his side.
incantatory refrain that ties together the thematic elements that Gauguin wants to emphasize. Here, the fragrance symbolizes the union between "simple" and "composite," while at the same time emphasizing the sensuality of the imagined bond. It is perhaps no surprise that the phrase "noa noa" is itself a double word: an echo.

From here on the erotic imagery of the scene becomes more and more pronounced, and thus comes more and more to resemble Gilgamesh's attitude towards his companion. Like Enkidu, Gauguin's companion takes on a liminal status, not only between animal and person, but also between male and female, and in fact his ability to straddle categories of male and female is directly tied to his animalism: "Son corps souple d'animal avait de gracieuses formes, il marchait devant moi sans sexe," the narrator declares, implying that the one condition (the animal body) enables the other (sexlessness) ["His lithe animal body had graceful contours, he walked in front of me sexless" (25)]. But as Edmond argues, sexlessness here signifies a lack of identification, not a lack of appeal. Meditating on sin, and watching his guide's body, the narrator's interest in him actually intensifies. "Je m'approchai," he says, "sans peur des lois, le trouble aux temples" ["I drew close, without fear of laws, my temples throbbing" (28)]. By the time they have reached the end of the path, the narrator has come to see his companion as "l'androgyne," though this image "vanishes" ["avait disparu"] when the woodcutter turns toward him, exposing his chest (28), and the artist cools his desire by plunging into a stream. "Toe toe" ("It's cold"), the guide warns him. "'Oh-non,' respondis-je, et cette négation répondant à mon désir antérieur s'enfonça comme un écho dans la montagne" ["'Oh no,' I answered, and this denial, answering my previous desire, drove in among the cliffs like an echo" (28)]. The deflection of desire at this moment is
ambivalent; the double denial, "Oh non," experienced as an echo, is made complicated by
the image of "driving in among the cliffs" - a penetration into the natural surroundings,
which is, after all, what the author seeks (note that Gauguin the same word - "s'enfonçer"
- to describe his own penetration into the jungle).

Becoming the Other

Ultimately, both Gauguin and Gilgamesh find a way to merge with and, in a
sense, become their own respective doubles. This happens for Gilgamesh when he is
confronted by the death of his friend Enkidu, and he realizes that "What my brother is
now, that I shall be when I am dead" (97). He begins to "rage like a lion, like a lioness
deprived of her whelps" (95), and he loses all sense of kingly composure. Unmoored,
Gilgamesh "wandered over the wilderness as a hunter, he roamed over the plains,"
rehearsing Enkidu's pastoral journey in reverse. Moving from civilization back into
animality, Gilgamesh ultimately appears as a primitive, giving out "a great cry" when the
darkness is thick before him, and distressing the god Shamash, who "saw that he was
dressed in the skins of animals and ate their flesh" (100). John Maier writes,

As his grief intensifies, Gilgamesh strips himself of his office and his identity.
His 'equal' gone, Gilgamesh turns himself into this double, into a savage form for
a very different journey. [...] The agonizing journey of Tablets IX and X is full of
wearing repetition. Everywhere Gilgamesh rehearses the life spent with Enkidu;
everywhere he is asked why he wastes himself in such deep grief. (18)

This self-dissolution, the way Gilgamesh "wastes himself" in grief, is so profound
because of its stark contrast to his manic self-assurance at the start of the story. But it is
also important for the way in which it signals and enables the fusion with the double.
Gilgamesh has to "waste himself" - that monadic, stamped-on-brick, fetishized Self of the
early days - in order to complete his marriage to the mortal flesh of Enkidu, whom, as we have seen, he symbolically veils "like a bride" upon his death.

Strikingly similar is what happens to the hero of Gauguin's woodcutting tale. Much has been made of the sense of transformation here, but it is crucial to note that, more than just transformation into something new, Gauguin's erotic engagement allows him to achieve fusion with his double in the text. Furthermore, this fusion is enabled by a process of self-dissolution that will be central to my reading of *Noa Noa* in Chapter 3, as an allegory of aesthetic desire. Such self-dissolution is manifest in the climactic moment of the scene, when Gauguin cuts down the rosewood tree. As he "hack[s] away with the pleasure of sating [his] brutality and of destroying something," Gauguin sings a song in time with the axe:

> Coupes *sic* par le pied la forêt toute entière (des désirs)
> Coupe en toi l'amour de toi même
> Comme avec la main en automne on couperait le Lotus -

> [Cut down by the foot the whole forest of desires
> Cut down in yourself the love of yourself, as a man
> would cut down with his hand in the autumn the Lotus. (28)]111

The song is followed directly by the assertion that "tout mon vieux stock de civilisé" has been "[b]ien détruit en effet," a fantasy of dissolution that furthermore yields the longed-for transformation - the narrator feels himself "un autre homme  un maorie" ["a different man, a Maori"] (28). And perhaps most striking is the following exchange:

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111 In *Smile of the Buddha*, Jacquelynn Baas points out that this incantation closely resembles a passage from the *Dhammapada*, the sayings of the Buddha, which Gauguin's friend Schuffenecker owned and which was the basis of many discussions between the two friends. Baas quotes the relevant passage: "Whoever overcomes this clinging vulgar craving in the world, so hard to get over, has sorrows fall away, like the drops of water from a lotus. ... Just as a tree will regrow even if cut, as long as its root has not been destroyed and is firm, so this misery will regrow again and again as long as the tendency to craving is not rooted out" (39).
Nous étions l'après midi de retour fatigués - Il me dit - Tu es content - Oui - et dans moi je redis Oui -

[We got back in the afternoon, tired. He said to me: 'Are you pleased?' 'Yes' - and inside myself I repeated: 'Yes.' (28)]

Gauguin's journey to the forest, his erotic fantasies, his triumph over the tree, all enable a self-dissolution that allows him to merge with his estranged material self - the "Indian" side. Hence the echo at the end of the narrative, which hauntingly duplicates the earlier moment at the stream ("this denial, answering my previous desire, drove in among the cliffs like an echo"). Reincorporated into the self at the end, the double speaks this time from within.

Gauguin's inner echo at the end of the episode dramatizes the paradoxical form of self-fashioning entailed in cultural transvestism. While the traditional concept of self-fashioning introduced by Greenblatt involves constituting the self over and against a demonized cultural/racial/gendered Other (Greenblatt 9), cultural transvestism - like gender transvestism - is about "becoming the Self" and/or "(re)constituting the Self" by means of identification with and performance of just such an Other (Sifuentes-Jáuregui 3). Gauguin's narrative of transformation in this chapter is a fantasy of semiotic identification that is paradoxically reached through performance. In this fantasy, the markers of ontological and cultural Otherness (calloused feet, browned skin, loincloths) are eventually internalized and deployed in the activation of an authentic Self-as-Other. The problem, however, as we will see in Chapter 4, is that this tripartite process of self-authentication (cross-dress as Other, behave as Other, become Other) necessitates an act of epistemic violence that confines the Woodcutter to a symbolic role, devoid of subjectivity, and responsible for aiding and abetting an imperial attack on his own
"former[ly] sacred places." Furthermore, as Sifuentes-Jáuregui notes, "by re-producing the other's 'realness,' by re-presenting the other, by constructing the other's realness, transvestism also reveals the 'falseness' (that is, the construction) of the other" (4). I would tweak this a bit to suggest that in Gauguin's case, such construction imposes a certain falseness on the Other, with grave consequences. By claiming access to an authentically "savage" selfhood via typically hegemonic discursive markers of the "savage" (nakedness, brutality, superstition, skin tone), Gauguin profoundly undermines the indigene's right to form - semiotically or otherwise - any authentic self of his own.

In my next chapter, I will return to the questions of androgyny and desire in order to explore more fully their symbolic resonance with Gauguin's overarching aesthetic project. For the moment, however, I want to dwell a bit longer on the uncanny resemblances between Gilgamesh and Noa Noa, in order to reflect on the efficacy of the Gilgamesh myth for Gauguin's ongoing project of self-fashioning.

IV. The Garden of the Gods

Gauguin's journey to the heart of the forest, nestled as it is at the heart of his narrative of Tahiti, invites us into the world of Noa Noa and its larger context by functioning on the level of Symbolism. Gilgamesh-as-subtext reminds us that we are not reading autobiography here; we are reading poetry, even epic poetry. Gauguin wants his

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112 This phrase comes from J.A. Moerenhout's Travels to the Islands of the South Pacific, a key source of inspiration for Gauguin in Noa Noa. Moerenhout describes the ancient groves of tomana trees as "former sacred places" that now merely provide timber to feed the industry of empire, to the dismay of indigenous Tahitians, who maintain a "superstitious respect" (141). This will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.
readers ultimately to think of him as a mythic hero, not just in the chapter with the woodcutter, but in his lifelong quest for artistic glory and his journey to Tahiti, the land that is far away and down below, where, Gilgamesh-like, he seeks wisdom from ancient ones.

That Gauguin wants to position himself as a mythic hero is evident from the beginning of *Noa Noa*, which opens *in medias res* with the narrator's journey to Polynesia.113 "Depuis 63 jours je suis en route," he tells us,

et je brûle d'aborder la terre désirée - Le 8 Juin nous apercevions des feux bizarres se promenant en zigzag - pêcheurs. [...] Nous tournions Moréa pour découvrir Tahiti - Quelques heures après le petit jour s'annonçait et lentement nous nous approchions des récifs de Tahiti pour entrer dans la passe et mouiller sans avaries dans la rade. Pour quelqu'un qui a beaucoup voyagé cette petite île n'a pas comme la baie de Rio Janeiro un aspect bien féerique - Quelques pointes de montagne subm[sic] après le déluge, une famille a grimpé l'haut, a fait souche, les coraux ont grimpé aussi, entouré la nouvelle île.

[For 63 days I have been on my way, and I burn to reach the longed-for land. On June 8th we saw strange fires moving about in zig-zags - fishermen. [...] We were rounding Moorea and coming in sight of Tahiti. A few hours later the dawn twilight became visible, and slowly we approached the reefs of Tahiti, then entered the fairway and anchored without mishap in the harbor.114 To a man who has travelled a good deal this small island is not, like the bay of Rio Janeiro, a magic sight. A few peaks of sub[merged] mountains [were left] after the Deluge; a family climbed up there, took root, the corals also climbed, they ringed around the new island. (12)]

With this opening, Gauguin emphasizes the motif of the epic journey - a world of slowly changing vistas and burning desire for the "longed-for land." Inviting his narrator into his subjectivity, he opens in present tense ("I *have been* on my way"), evoking the tone

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113 This was not the original opening of the text, even in the manuscript form. The facsimile edition reveals a much more prosaic opening, which Gauguin scratched out in favor of the more evocative, more literary version that prevailed. The first line of the original opening reads, "Je ne sais pas pourquoi mon gouvernement m'avait accordé cette mission - pour avoir l'air probablement de proteger un artiste."

114 My translation here differs from Griffin's, which reads, "anchored without mishap in the roads" (12).
and form of a diary - a device he quickly drops and to which he does not return. In a
move that is characteristic of Gauguin's approach to both writing and painting, here he
presents a cliché - coming in sight of land - and then immediately overturns it: "This
small island is not ... a magic sight." What it is, however, is a piece of ancient history, a
fragment of land from before the beginning of time - a few small mountain peaks that
were left "after the Deluge."

The Deluge to which Gauguin refers here is an event in Maori cosmological
history. Yet one can only imagine that he knows perfectly well how that word will
resonate in the minds of his European readers. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the Deluge
was the explosive image that first appeared to George Smith from out of the miasma of
unreadable shapes on the Gilgamesh tablets that he sorted at the British Museum. Its
presence as part of the Gilgamesh Epic was sensational, threatening to call into question
millennia of Western cosmology and worldview. In the Western imaginary, the Deluge
marks a specific point in human history - the unimaginably ancient past. It also marks
the turning away of God from a sinful human race, and reverberates with nuances of
darkness and terror, the violence of the natural world, and the helplessness of humans to

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115 J.A. Moerenhout includes a section on Polynesian flood myths in his Voyages to the
Islands of the South Pacific, the book from which Gauguin copied other passages on
Maori mythology that made their way into Ancien Culte Mahorie and Noa Noa (see
Introduction, pp. 28-31). Among others, he relates the Tahitian story of Roua hatou, "a
kind of Neptune," who "slept at the bottom of the sea in a place that was sacred to him."
When a fisherman disturbed the god's sleep with his nets, Roua hatou decided that the
whole human race should perish. "By that spirit of justice which generally enough
distinguishes the gods from a great number of people, the innocent were punished and the
only one guilty was also the only one spared" (285). The fisherman and his family are
told to climb to a high point, where they watch as the waters rise and destroy all other
life. The dynamics of guilt and innocence in this tale are remarkably suited to Gauguin's
own interests in troubling that theme as it relates to Biblical sources. The fisherman's
selection for survival provides a mirror (i.e. exact opposite) image to either Utnapishtim
or Noah, both of whom are selected based on their great virtue.
control their own destiny. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Deluge is the event which separates Utnapishtim from the rest of humanity; his having been chosen as its lone survivor marks him as an immortal for all eternity. It is this unique characteristic that sends Gilgamesh in search of him, to the land down below and far away, across forbidden waters, seeking to access Utnapishtim's wisdom and to understand how he, too, might achieve eternal life.

For a Symbolist like Gauguin, the image of the Deluge provides a particularly efficacious point of entry into mythic discourse. Rejecting organized religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, Gauguin nevertheless seeks a language with which to access the sacred. The discovery of the flood myth in Gilgamesh and its counterparts in ancient and mysterious religions the world over infuses this image with a metaphysical power that defies both scientific rationalism and religious dogma, existing everywhere and nowhere at the same time. As Moerenhout writes, the flood myth is among those paradigmatic ideas which "seem destined to be reproduced among [the islands] as well as everywhere else so as to give invariably a witness to a community of origin and of destiny" -- ideas that are "both inexplicable and unexplained by physics, but traces of which show up nonetheless in the memories of the entire world" (283-284). It is just this dual sense of inexplicability and ubiquity that lends such images their appeal, by making them seem as undeniable as they are unscientific. Thus, in his opening paragraph Gauguin calmly recounts the Maori flood in simple prose, without comment, as if describing accepted material history. With no mention of religion or myth, he coyly informs his reader that "A few peaks of sub[merged] mountain [were left] after the Deluge; a family climbed up there," marking the beginning of Maori civilization. This is
where Gauguin is at his best, his wry multiethnic blendings flying in the face of accepted
categorizations. His Western reader is meant to experience a double dose of cognitive
dissonance - first to see the Deluge indulged as mere history; second to recognize that
this is a different Deluge from the one they are thinking of, and that - strangest of all -
there may have been more than one.

With this one stroke, then, which is both bold and subtle at the same time,
Gauguin has infused his entire narrative of Tahiti with an aura of mythic fascination that
is very much intended. Tahiti itself becomes an analog to the mystical garden of the
Gods, the last point of departure for Gilgamesh as he sets out to cross the waters of death:

There was the garden of the gods; all round him stood bushes bearing gems.
Seeing it he went down at once, for there was fruit of carnelian with the vine
hanging from it, beautiful to look at; lapis lazuli leaves hung thick with fruit,
sweet to see. For thorns and thistles there were haematite and rare stones, agate,
and pearls from out of the sea. (100)

As Keith Dickson has argued, this mystical garden functions as a liminal space that
metonymically represents Gilgamesh's own liminal position, suspended as he is between
the privileges of divinity and the grim truth of life as a mortal, the fact of his own death.
The crystal garden embodies this contradiction by serving as what Dickson calls "a locus
of difficult questions":

What is this strange garden? How can it transgress the fundamental categories
that structure our essentially binary understanding of the world, with its fixed
boundaries between opposites? Specifically, what makes possible the passage
from mineral to vegetable, dead to living, inert to animate? How can gemstones
be fruit? What kind of plant produces what - despite its generative link to proceess
and change - is in fact imperishable and incorruptible? (204)

In other words, the garden of the gods, with its imperishable, crystalline fruit, functions
as a mythic vehicle that radically destabilizes the fundamental ontological categories of
"living" and "non-living." Positioned as it is next to the Ocean of Death that Gilgamesh
will have to cross if he is to find Utnapishtim, the garden occupies a space that is both luminous and foreboding, a place on the very interstices of life and death; a place where - as in Humbaba's cedar forest - Gilgamesh does not belong. As Dickson writes, if Gilgamesh is partly god and partly mortal, "he is also wholly neither, and in both spaces [the forest and the crystal garden] he therefore always remains an interloper, a kind of freak, a beast-king simultaneously alienated and alienating, a stranger 'come from afar'" (206).

In these fundamental ways, the crystal garden of the gods also resonates with Gauguin's representation of Tahiti in both Noa Noa and his paintings from the period. "Je commençais à travailler," Gauguin tells us - "notes, croquis de toutes sortes. Tout m'aveuglait, m'éblouissait [...] Dans les ruisseaux les formes en or m'enchantaient - Pourquoi hésitais-je à faire couleur sur ma toile tout cet or et toute cette réjouissance de soleil - Probablement de vieilles habitudes d'Europe, toute cette timidité d'expression de nos races abatardies" ["I began to work," Gauguin tells us "- notes, sketches of all kinds. Everything in the landscape blinded me, dazzled me. [...] In the brooks, forms of gold enchanted me - Why did I hesitate to pour that gold and all that rejoicing of the sunshine on to my canvas? Old habits from Europe, probably, - all this timidity of expression [characteristic] of our bastardized races"] (20). The "perpetual pariah," Gauguin, like Gilgamesh, struggles with his instincts. What is all this dazzling brightness? Why is there both dazzle and menace in those golden brooks? And above all, What is this magical garden, on the edge of the sea, where everything is both alive and not-alive, both overgrown and stagnant, both available and off-limits to him?
Like the crystal garden, Gauguin's Tahiti is full of things that seem to inhabit the interstices of life and death. From the moment of his arrival at Papeete, Gauguin's visit is inflected by the death of the Tahitian King Pomaré V, which brings in "an unusual stir of boats with orange sails, upon the blue sea frequently crossed by the silvered ripples from the line of the reefs. The inhabitants of the neighboring islands were coming in, each day, to be present at their king's last moment, at the final taking-over of their islands by the French" (12). Indeed, Pomaré's death structures the central device of Noa Noa's haunting dissonance: the juxtaposition of fecund verdure and dying culture on the island. This is the same juxtaposition that tantalizes Pierre Loti's narrator in Le Mariage de Loti, but for Gauguin the emphasis is not quite on decay so much as crystallization, on Tehamana as impenetrable golden idol ("Sometimes, at night, flashes of light played across Tehamana's golden skin" (35)) and the stasis endemic in the Tahitian culture.

Two paintings from this period help to illustrate, in both aesthetic terms and thematic ones, the lingering connotations of death and the Underworld in Gauguin's Tahiti. Te nave nave fenua (The Delightful Land), a large oil painting from 1892, offers a play on the traditional Eve in the Garden of Eden. Of all the paintings from this first trip, it gives the strongest sense of the "dazzlement" that Gauguin describes, depicting Tahiti as a fantastical garden populated by creatures that straddle ontological lines. The figure of a young Tahitian woman with strong, solid features and golden skin fills the foreground of the painting along the right-hand side. In the background, blue mountains are suggested beyond a rolling patchwork ground of reds, greens and blues, colors which evoke vibrancy and yet not actual, organic life. A tree structures the left side of the painting, its flat leaves each individually articulated in the cloisonniste style, which uses
heavy lines and flat planes of color to suggest the panes of a stained-glass window (see Chapter 3). The leaves cluster, gem-like, about the branches, their rich green color contrasting against their stiff, lifeless flatness. From one of those branches, a jet-black lizard with vermilion wings whispers in the woman's ear, while in the foreground, the woman picks a mysterious flower that rises in a thin stalk from the ground right up to the height of her waist - a flower with a sapphire blue center surrounded by a bursting red halo.

Fig. 7. *Te Nave Nave Fenua* (1892), Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan

While the trope of Eve and the lizard clearly infuses this scene with an air of looming death, it is that sapphire flower that marks the space as a liminal one, on the
interstices of life and death - a space much like the jewelled Garden of the Gods. As Nancy Perloff has written,

the flower bears a striking resemblance to the fantastic plant - part eyeball, part peacock feather - in Odilon Redon's lithograph from *Les Origines* (1883), subtitled *Il y eut peut-être une vision première essayée dans la fleur.* [...] At the turn of the century, the peacock was an important symbol of artificial beauty, indolent luxury, and eroticism. In Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1891-2), for example, Herod offers Salome fifty white peacocks in the hope of quenching the lust that has goaded her to demand the head of John the Baptist. (251)

For Perloff, this discursive formation surrounding the peacock feathers thus "casts a perverse, erotic aura over *Te nave nave fenua*" (251). But more importantly, the peacock-feather-flower highlights the utterly alien nature of this terrain. Like the gemstone trees in Siduri's garden, the flower crosses between ontological categories - is it animal or vegetable? - while staring back at the viewer with an unsettling gaze that connotes both knowledge and death. As Sidlauskas has pointed out, this indeterminacy associated with the flower is a hallmark of its efficacy as a liminal symbol, because "flowers possess a dual nature, being neither unequivocally male nor decidedly female. They live in the worlds of both the dead and the living, the darkness and the light" (192). For these reasons, she concludes, "the flower is a natural hermaphrodite" (192).

A second painting from 1892 illustrates the point further. Mysteriously titled "*Matamoe*" - "Death," in Tahitian - the landscape depicts nothing that overtly carries connotations of death. A lush tropical forest rises up the left-hand side of the picture

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116 Sidlauskas's research explores the hermaphroditic resonance of the flower in the context of Cézanne, a contemporary whom Gauguin much admired and who was influenced by theories on the fluidity of gender of his day. Her discussion of flowers as symbols of liminality and dualism is based on the work of Claudette Sartiliot, whom she also quotes as having noted that flowers can be powerful symbols for those "who want to reconcile subject and object, to find a correspondence between human beings and the world" (192).
plane, with nothing particularly ominous or foreboding about it. It is bordered by a smooth, winding footpath in a cool green, which twists off into the distance, traversed by two barely-discernible women about to recede around the corner. A small thatched hut occupies the center of the picture, and behind it rise tall, rolling, golden hills that call to mind the colors of the hay harvest in Gauguin's earlier Brittany pictures. In the foreground, a young man with a broad chest and brown skin, wearing a blue loincloth, chops wood on the ground as two elegant birds - a peacock and a peahen - stroll by.

Fig. 8. Matamoe (1892). Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

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117 I mentioned this painting earlier in this chapter, because Daniel S. Brown has pointed out that "The landscape which fills the background of Matamoe also symbolizes masculine ascendancy by playing on popular metaphors that likened masculinity to a tropical volcano." He reads this painting as an assertion of masculinity in the Carlylean vein, a theme that is also consistent with Gilgamesh and that we will explore further in later chapters.
The dissonance provoked between the contents of this painting and its title is striking. Is it indicated by the dark forest to the side? The black stones in the very foreground of the painting? Or is death alluded to in the violence of the woodcutter's action, which is belied by his soft and stagnant pose? Perhaps what is most haunting about this painting is the implication it seems to carry that Tahiti itself is the land of death. Here we have an idyllic, peaceful, even bright and colorful scene of villagers living their daily lives, and yet as the menacing presence of the peacock reminds us, they live in a liminal space, a mystical garden on the forbidden edge of the Underworld. Once again, the woodcutter's work with the axe recalls a scene from *Gilgamesh*, a scene which takes place in the Garden of the Gods, just as the hero is about to depart across the waters of death. In rage and frustration, Gilgamesh attacks with his axe the ferryman Urshanabi's boat, not realizing that it is the only boat that can take him across the waters.

"Those things you destroyed," Urshanabi scolds,

their property is to carry me over the water, to prevent the waters of death from touching me. It was for this reason that I preserved them, but you have destroyed them, and the *urnu* snakes with them. But now, go into the forest, Gilgamesh; with your axe cut poles, one hundred and twenty, cut them sixty cubits long, paint them with bitumen, set them on ferrules and bring them back. (104)

In this context, the painting and its intimations of mortality take on a new meaning. The dense tropical forest to the side seems the kind of place where one might find one hundred and twenty poles to cut. The woodcutter's work is the work of killing, in the pursuit of life. On the shores the trees grow thick, but all around are the waters of death.

**V. Conclusion: Gauguin's *Katabasis***
Ultimately it may be impossible for us to know whether Gauguin had read 
*Gilgamesh*, in any of its versions, when he began writing *Noa Noa* in the fall of 1893. It 
is likewise impossible for us to tell whether he set off for Tahiti with the pre-articulated 
vision of himself as mythic hero. We do know, however, that he had a tendency to 
mythologize his experience and his public persona, and that the text of the world's oldest 
extant work of literature would have been available - and likely very appealing - to him 
during this time. And we know that the resonances between his own work and 
*Gilgamesh* are so vibrant and strong as to be almost uncanny. Did he model his Tahitian 
garden on the jewelled Garden of the Gods? Or did he conceive of Tahiti as a liminal 
space, and only then discover, in the ancient story, a vision of liminality that spoke to him 
and that allowed him to rearticulate his experience in epic terms? The answer to this 
question remains a mystery for now, but it is clear that the character of Gauguin that 
takes shape in *Noa Noa* is an aging hero on a quest for wisdom. "I had a sort of vague 
resentiment," he writes, "that, by living wholly in the bush with natives of Tahiti, I 
would manage with patience to overcome these people's mistrust, and that I would 
Know" (14). In order to find this wisdom, which he believes will rejuvenate and 
reinvigorate his soul, his craft, and his name, Gauguin, like Gilgamesh, must journey to 
the edge of the world, to the very waters of death.

In this chapter, I have sought to convey the deep intertextual undercurrents 
running between the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa*, and the larger structural parallels

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*118* Gauguin's fantasy of mystical Knowledge gained via anthropological means illustrates 
a shift that von Hendy documents, from "the romantic or transcendentalist conception of 
myth [that] dominates the first half of the nineteenth century" to "its anthropological or 
folkloristic counterpart. This may be described provisionally as the conception of myth 
as a kind of narrative that *others*, ancient or 'primitive,' remote in time or space, have 
regarded as sacred" (77).
between Gauguin's Tahitian journey and Gilgamesh's heroic exploits. These profound echoes of Gilgamesh in *Noa Noa* serve ultimately to clarify the need to read Gauguin's only literary foray in a new light, as a Symbolist enterprise ringing with mythic allusion and grandiose fantasy. This new understanding of the text opens broad vistas for interpretation, allowing us to discover messages in *Noa Noa* that go beyond facile self-delusion and disingenuousness. It is possible for an artist to be both grotesquely caught up in the stereotypes and privileges of his age - which, as we will continue to see, Gauguin certainly was - and yet at the same time genuinely drawn to the task of creating an authentic aesthetic experience.

In my next chapter, I will probe more deeply into the connections between *Gilgamesh* and the Woodcutter Episode in *Noa Noa*, focusing in particular on the relationship between the doubles. Unlike the scholars mentioned here, I will argue that the Woodcutter Episode needs to be read not as a tale of personal frustration or cultural fusion, but as an allegory of aesthetic pursuit. It is a work that seeks to transcend the categories of time and space, self and Other, literature and art, word and image, and even genre and form. It is a work that mocks us for believing, even as it beckons.
CHAPTER 3

THE TEXT OF BLISS: GAUGUIN'S ALLEGORY OF AESTHETIC DESIRE

I act as my intellectual nature dictates, somewhat in the manner of the Bible in which doctrine [...] expresses itself in a symbolic form presenting a double aspect, a form which, on the one hand, materializes the pure idea so as to make it more perceptible and assumes the guise of the supernatural; this is the literal, superficial, figurative, mysterious meaning of a parable.

- Paul Gauguin to André Fontainas, August 1899

I. Introduction

In the late 1880s, Gauguin's circle of avant-garde painters in Paris began to shift their aesthetic priorities, and the short-lived but intensely productive Symbolist movement in art was born. Although it clearly blossomed out of Impressionism's emphasis on capturing subjective experience, and although at first glance it shares many aesthetic qualities with Impressionist painting, Symbolism differed from Impressionism in one essential aesthetic precept: the meaning and purpose of representation.

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120 For an outline of the timeframe of Symbolism, see Robert Goldwater (1979), pp. 72-75. Goldwater writes that "When, having been honoured at a banquet of poets and painters at which Mallarmé presided, Gauguin left for the South Seas in early April 1891, the first period of symbolism [...] came to a sudden end. It was a short period. Its beginnings in Gauguin's own art can be traced back no further than 1885" (73). Meanwhile, he notes, "there are striking parallels" between the key developments in pictorial symbolism "and those that mark the evolution of literary symbolism during the same brief period" (75). Essentially, in Goldwater's accounting, "by 1892 poetic symbolism too had lived through its most active and cohesive phase, and though, like painting, it was to continue to the end of the century and beyond, it was in a different spirit" (75).
121 Goldwater (1979) describes the birth of Symbolism out of Impressionism, noting that "the impressionism of the seventies, whatever its conscious intentions, was never an
Impressionist art abstracted from nature by simplifying its observable exterior forms - representing them with broad brush strokes, for example, or angular planes of color - Symbolist art aimed at a different purpose. Symbolists attempted to take abstraction a step further, to represent not their experience of the observable natural world, but their experience of the unobservable, internal world - the "mysterious centers of thought."

Writing in 1888, Gustave Khan explained the movement's mission in this way: "Our art's essential aim is to objectify the subjective (exteriorization of the idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament)."  

In other words, Symbolism seeks not only to dramatize the artist's dialectical experience of nature, as Impressionism did, but to project onto the external world an image of the artist's innermost vision. Thus Symbolist art highlighted with renewed urgency the difficulties and rewards of giving tangible form to intangible ideas or truths, a problem that had formed the central mystery of Western representation since Plato.  

'objective' transcription of nature," but that with increasing attention to fragmentary and momentary slices of life, the newer style of painting began to "remove the scene from transcription in the direction of the symbol" (2). By the late 1880s, "the picture has been turned into something complete in itself, something which, paradoxically, through becoming in intention more momentarily accurate has become less temporal, suggesting a duration beyond the moment that gave it birth" (2). But symbolism also pushes back against impressionism in important ways, as we will see later in this chapter.

122 Quoted in Goldwater 1979, 1.  
123 The question of artistic representation in Plato is far too varied and complex for me to unpack sufficiently here. An indication of the intractability of this issue can be found in the introduction to Plato's aesthetics in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which notes that, "If aesthetics is the philosophical inquiry into art and beauty [...], then Plato's aesthetics is a rich subject [...]. For the striking feature of Plato's dialogues in this regard is that he devotes as much time as he does to both beauty and art, but treats the two oppositely. Art, mostly represented by poetry, is closer to a greatest evil than any other phenomenon Plato speaks of, while beauty is close to a greatest good" (Pappas). Rather than attempting to chart the nature of this ambivalence in Plato's dialogues, I am focusing in this chapter on the rhetorical core of his philosophy, namely, that there exists an "unchanging and eternal order" (Republic 189), which is made up of Ideas (also called
This problem smoldered at the heart of Gauguin's approach to artmaking, and it is this very issue - this mimetic quest - that he allegorizes with the figures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in his Woodcutter Episode. The Gilgamesh subtext in *Noa Noa* has revealed Gauguin's woodcutter to be a doppelgänger, bringing a new layer of symbolic meaning to the text. Basing my reading on Gauguin's dialectical philosophy of artmaking, I argue that the relationship between the hero and his double in this text symbolizes the relationship between idea and form in an artwork, and that the erotic longing that dominates the Woodcutter Episode connotes mimetic desire: a longing for the fusion of these principles.

In addition to considering the artwork, and in particular the Symbolist artwork, as an attempt to fuse idea with form, my argument invests heavily in the further conceit that the *successful* artwork - one which manages to achieve such a fusion - provokes in its creator and in its viewer an aesthetic experience that can be expressed in metaphors of the erotic. Theodor Adorno recognizes as much when he writes in *Aesthetic Theory* that there is a “likeness between sexual and aesthetic experience,” particularly “During orgasm [when] the beloved image changes, combining rigidification with extreme forms), and which humans are only able to glimpse via the degenerate and ever-changing sensible things which these Ideas inhabit. Gauguin definitely subscribed to the notion of such an "unchanging and eternal order" - something similar to what he called the "mysterious centers of thought" - and his ambition, in line with Symbolism generally, was to develop an aesthetics that would render that order visible.

124 Terminology threatens to become a source of confusion here, because scholars of Plato often use the terms Form and Idea interchangeably to connote the same thing: the eternal and unchanging Pattern (c.f. Popper pp. 18-34). In the present chapter, however, I use them to designate opposite sides of the Platonic dialectic, in line with Gauguin's own writing. The idea is the intangible mystery that he senses lurking behind the veil of the known world, and its form is its physical manifestation on canvas or in sculpture. The central dialectic remains the same, however, because the terms are relative to one another.
vividness” (253). For Adorno, aesthetic truth is achieved where there is an ecstatic union between two opposite categories: "rigidification" - the solid but stagnant material world - and "extreme vividness" - that dynamic life energy which connects the artist's inspiration and the viewer's instinctive appreciation. Furthermore, he argues, "[i]t is through the moment of sensuous satisfaction that works of art constitute themselves as appearance" (21). Such satisfaction, while libidinal, can also provide access to the metaphysical; thus, "In significant works of art the sensuous shines through as something spiritual, just as, conversely, the spirit of the work may add sensuous brilliance to an individual detail" (21). In this theory, the sensuous and the spiritual are mediators of the eternal dialectic, between universal and particular, material and immaterial; as we will see, they play a role quite similar to that of the eponymous "fragrance" that wafts its way sensuously through the narrative of Noa Noa. In this chapter, I argue that Gauguin's view of aesthetic experience was quite close to Adorno's, in that it emphasized libidinal sensuality as a metaphor for the successful fusion of concrete and abstract, or material and immaterial essences.

That radical split between the idea and the sensible world, and a longing to bridge that gap, was fundamental to Gauguin's worldview throughout his life. As Mark Cheetham has argued, Gauguin's experience of the segregation between the truthful world of the spirit and the petrifaction of material reality has a neoplatonic foundation that runs through many of his writings. His many references to artists being "shackled" or "chained" to the natural world, Cheetham says, "can be interpreted as a parallel to Plato's description of a prisoner's fate in the famous allegory of the cave from Book VII of the Republic" (16). Meanwhile the dualistic worldview also has deep roots in the
Catholic tradition in which Gauguin was educated at an early age, which, as Debora Silverman has demonstrated, exposed him to a deeply pessimistic attitude toward material reality, one that ultimately conditioned his aesthetic approach by dominating his experience of the natural world and his positioning within it. In the Catholic encounter in particular, sexuality, as a function of the body, took on a morally and spiritually degrading criminality that signaled a profound alienation of the metaphysical subject from his own physical body. Silverman argues that Gauguin's Catholic education resulted in his adoption of "a definition of material reality as invariably corrupted, even pernicious" (5), and that this translated into specific, identifiable aesthetic practices later on in his career.

What we have in Gauguin, then, is an artist who by vocation seeks to create material forms for immaterial "mysteries," who by instinct, I will argue, understands the libidinal drive in this endeavor, and yet who by training associates his very desire to achieve such a synthesis with sin and degradation - an association he will seek to overcome by redefining it *vis à vis* the mediating terms and images of foreign and ancient cultures. The result is the Woodcutter Episode, where the artist uses narrative form to symbolize the painful and often dangerous task of navigating the dialectical gulf. His alienation from physicality manifests itself in the classic trope of the divided self: the primitive double, who reveals himself as such through his many parallels to Enkidu. The artist's erotic longing for that double represents a longing for reconciliation with the physical world, a prospect that carries not just metaphysical implications for Gauguin, but aesthetic ones as well. In this way, too, *Noa Noa* mirrors *Gilgamesh*, and in this way, too, the two texts shed revelatory light on one another. In the Woodcutter Episode,
Gauguin fashions both his Platonic longing and his Catholic guilt into a fantasy of breaking down barriers, a tale infused with aesthetic satisfaction and erotic criminality. Endeavoring to overturn the Catholic prohibition on sex, Gauguin adopts a Platonic take on erotic longing, calling to mind Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, in which she argues that, "Like someone ascending a staircase," the lover "should go from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning," ending up ultimately "at that form of learning which is nothing other than that [Ideal] beauty itself, so that he can complete the process of learning what beauty really is" (49). In the *Symposium*, erotic longing gives access to the Ideal via the staircase; in *Noa Noa* it leads the artist up the mountain path.

At the same time, the Woodcutter is also a fantasy of domination and power. It thus reflects a modern colonialist approach to culture and foreignness that once again operates at several levels simultaneously. As personal history, the story forms an essential element in Gauguin's commonly derided self-aggrandizement and personal mythologizing.125 Fashioning himself as an exotic ancient king, Gauguin asserts an unstable selfhood that is unconfined by cultural or temporal limitations and that begins to approach the ontological status of what Roland Barthes calls an "anachronic subject" (14). Meanwhile, as aesthetic history, the narrative formulates an ambivalence toward

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125 Examples of scholars who trouble the self-aggrandizing and posturing elements of Gauguin's persona include Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who describes him as "an immensely persuasive purveyor of his own mythology" (315), Griselda Pollock, who famously criticized his self-exile as an "avant-garde gambit" (Pollock 1993), and Nancy Mowll Mathews, who describes how he attempted to fashion himself as "a haughty, bronzed sun god who appeared in Paris in the fall of 1887 to show [the younger generation] a new path" (91). Current critics are not the only ones to fault Gauguin for this tendency, either; according to Silverman, "[s]ome of Gauguin's contemporaries recognized in his clamoring for public attention a capacity for quite merciless self-aggrandizement" (377).
the natural world that forms a cornerstone of Gauguin's approach to representation. In his fantasy of destruction, Gauguin imagines a world in which both the natural and the artificial are made to crumble to the artist's will for creativity and truth, and to his desire for a union between these principles. In this way, I argue, *Noa Noa* achieves the status of what Barthes dubs the "text of bliss," illustrating that the principles of libidinal satisfaction in aesthetics can apply not only to image but to narrative as well.

In this chapter, I continue and revisit my close readings of *Noa Noa* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, focusing on the parallels between the two pairs of doubles that we explored in Chapter 2. I take the motif of the double as a jumping-off point for exploring Gauguin's dualistic worldview more deeply, arguing for a connection between the doubles in the text and the split sense of self and reality that Gauguin described in his writings, both personal and aesthetic. Using *Gilgamesh* as a backdrop, I read the figure of the primitive double as an allegorical symbol of reconciliation and fusion, and I highlight the efficacy of the erotic energy in this scene as a metaphor for mimetic desire. Finally, turning to questions of genre and form, I show how, in both his artwork and his writing, Gauguin demanded sacrifices so that his own mimetic desire could be asserted and fulfilled.

**II. Gauguin and the Dialectical Double**

Gauguin's deployment of the doppelgänger motif (see Chapter 2) would seem to place *Noa Noa* squarely within the realm of Romantic literature. As Clifford Hallam notes, "The most notable and certainly the most numerous examples of the explicit
Double motif are found in the prose fiction of the Romantic period, so much so that the trope itself has come to be identified with this particular movement (10). Hallam attributes such profusion to "a basic tenet of the Romantic movement: the concern with the creative, passionate, and transcendental self. The double figure is an appropriate agent for these ideas in prose fiction, with a propensity for [...] acting out the central character's secret fears and desires" (10). Examples of the double abound in works by Hoffmann, Poe, Stevenson, Dostoevsky, and Hans Christian Andersen, and thematize the newly-mainstreamed understanding of a complex and often self-opposing nature in humans (10). Yet, as Hallam points out, it is a mistake to conceptualize the doppelgänger as an exclusively Romantic conceit; rather, the double was a similarly fruitful device in modernist fiction, where it reached "new levels of psychological complexity" in, for example, the work of Joyce, Mann, Kafka, Woolf, Faulkner, and Borges (11). In both his very subtle rendering of the double, and the psychological and symbolic complexity for which he aims, Gauguin's Woodcutter Episode has a great deal more in common with these Modernists than with his Romantic forebears.

For Hallam, a critic who privileges depth psychology as the vehicle for literary interpretation, the presence of the double in modern literature signifies an incomplete self for the hero, a psychic deficiency often resulting from self-defense or self-denial in the wake of a traumatic or criminal event (20-21). According to this Freudian schematic, tales of double selves amount to an obsessive re- enactment of criminal events in an attempt to gain mastery over them:

126 Hallam's approach clearly comes from a Freudian perspective and relies on Freud's concept of the "instinct for mastery," which he developed in Beyond the Pleasure Principle 15. There, Freud illustrates the concept of mastery by describing his
The need to reduce anxiety is partly explained by the fact that the narrator feels he has committed a crime, and he is often correct in this assumption, although he might not in every case be legally culpable. But, at the very least, he suffers from the unforgivable sin of self-betrayal. The therapeutic elements, then, are supplied by two overlapping psychological strategies that are commonly motivated by guilt: 1) the compulsion to repeat, that is, to 'relive' the trauma in a way that is less threatening to the ego, in this case using the specific device of the 'fictional' account of the Doppelgänger experience, which can be understood in one sense as an empirical lie, but in another sense as a psychological truth; and 2) the confession, which has long been recognized in both religious and secular contexts as a way to relieve, however temporarily, the anxiety that attends a bad conscience. (21)

Thus, for Hallam, the confessional mode is not coincidentally replete with images of doubles and doubling, figures through which the subject enacts mastery over past traumas or transgressions.127 This is fitting given that Noa Noa overtly plays with both of these literary conventions (the confessional mode and the double). Further, the obsessive interest that the narrator takes in his own double, in Hallan's estimation, would reflect his observations of a small child's game. "The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. [...] What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering the expressive 'o-o-o-o' ['fort'; 'gone']. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['here']" (14). Freud interprets this repetitive game as the child's way of acting out his mother's frequent exits from his view or company, and her subsequent returns. In performing this ritual, the child moves himself from the passive position of watching his mother leave and hoping for her return to the active position of controlling his environment. "It is clear," Freud writes, "that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so they abreast the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation" (16). For Hallam, the same principle is at work in the figure of the double, who mediates the subject's relationship to a past event and/or to an object, allowing the subject to enact a fantasy of mastery over the situation.

127 In this way, Hallam's understanding of the confessional mode and the double complicates Lionel Gossman's concept of the confessional mode's aesthetic of innocence (see Introduction, p. 59). We should remind ourselves that there is a dark side of "innocence," a concept that sometimes is synonymous with lack of transgression but that can also denote merely a lack of responsibility. This complex dynamic reverberates throughout Gauguin's work and life and forms a cornerstone of, for example, Mowll Mathews’s investigation of him.
internal recognition of his own incompleteness (17). The ultimate goal of the confession
would be psychic reintegration, the merging with the double that so dramatically plays
out in both Gilgamesh and Noa Noa.

The presence of the double in both Noa Noa and Gilgamesh is more than just a
structural analog, though, for the double provides a profound source of connection for an
artist who struggled with the dialectical relationship between the self and the world. The
double allows the artist to disperse his selfhood across two mediating personages, one
embodying material existence - body, canvas, paint128 - and the other reserved for the
spiritual essence of the artist - the soul, the “mysterious centers of thought,” the artist’s
abstract idea.129 This duality was central to Gauguin's thematic and aesthetic concerns
throughout his life, and the erotic charge to the woodcutting scene functions not only for
shock value among the bourgeois public but also as a metaphor for the longed-for
resolution between material and spiritual essences. This is true both on the metaphysical
level (i.e., Gauguin's own spiritual struggle) and on the aesthetic level (i.e., Gauguin's
attempt to seek an art that would bring idea and form together in a seamless way).

128 My understanding of “material” in art is actually not just confined to paint and canvas,
but to the form of a painting itself. It is in line with Adorno’s concept of “material” in
Aesthetic Theory: “Material refers to all that is being formed.” It is “the stuff the artist
controls and manipulates: words, colours, sounds – all the way up to connections of any
kind and to the highly developed methods of integration he might use. Material, then, is
all that the artist is confronted by […] and that includes forms as well, for forms too can
become materials” (213). This is the sense in which the “material” in my discussion
echoes the “Apolline” element of art in Nietzsche’s metaphor.

129 Again, Gauguin’s doctrine of the “mysterious center of thought” is not anti-mimetic.
Rather, it privileges an oblique and internal concept of “truth” as the appropriate mimetic
object. In this, Gauguin is closely aligned with Adorno’s understanding of the function
of art in general, which, the latter writes, lies outside of Kant’s prohibition on discursive
knowledge “trying to chart the inner domain of things.” Art lies outside of this because
“Works of art represent a class of objects the truth of which can only be imagined as the
truth of an inner domain. And imitation is the royal road that leads into this inner
domain” (183).
Symbolism and Doubling

The double and the theme of doubling, in conjunction with the splitting of selfhood, were important metaphors for Gauguin as he conceptualized and came to terms with Symbolism as an aesthetic project, from beginning to end. In a letter to André Fontainas from 1899 - almost at the end of his career - Gauguin wrote:

I act as my intellectual nature dictates, somewhat in the manner of the Bible in which doctrine [...] expresses itself in a symbolic form presenting a double aspect, a form which, on the one hand, materializes the pure idea so as to make it more perceptible and assumes the guise of the supernatural; this is the literal, superficial, figurative, mysterious meaning of a parable. (Thomson, *Gauguin* 172)

Here, duplicity is conceived as essential to the project of Symbolism itself, since the symbol is, by nature, double, containing both a narrative purpose and a spiritual one; both “literal” and “figurative,” both “superficial” and “mysterious.”130 The aesthetics of

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130 This concept of the symbol as having a double character was firmly embedded in the Romantic imagination, as evidenced in Thomas Carlyle’s declaration that “In a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation … by Silence and by Speech acting together comes a double significance … There is ever some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, as it were, attainable there” (quoted in von Hendy, 60; emphasis mine). Indeed, this structural formulation goes back to Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*, of 1725, which, as von Hendy argues, forms a major cornerstone of the Romantic, and eventually, the Modern understanding of myth and symbol. Vico’s innovation is his recognition of ancient symbols as “imaginative universals” or “imaginative class concepts,” which go beyond mere analogy. “The ‘imaginative class concept,’” writes von Hendy, “communicates univocally the nature of what it represents because it still participates in the concrete and affectively perceived particularities of the signified. It does not merely represent its particulars; it remains at the same time identified with them” (11). This concept of the symbol underscores the importance of its lived materiality and appearance while celebrating its ability to signify the immaterial, the universal. “In fact,” says von Hendy, “in its ambition to unite cognitive generalities with affective particularities it is the initial registration of what will become a familiar problematic of late nineteenth- and twentieth-
Symbolism revolve around this type of attempt at unification, and the symbols and legends of far-off lands provided particularly fruitful possibilities to this end because they seemed to contain ancient mysteries already coalesced into discernible forms. Indeed, it is worth noting that Gauguin used almost exactly the same language to describe the work of Cézanne, whom, as I have previously mentioned, he thought of as "a man of the Orient" (WOS 4). Writing to Schuffenecker in 1885, Gauguin said of Cézanne that "[t]he literature of his paintings is meaningful, like a parable teaching a double lesson; his backgrounds are as imaginative as they are real" (WOS 4). In this off-hand remark - which we may conclude is actually carefully formulated, given its recurrence in his writings - Gauguin highlights the efficacy of the trope of the double for a Symbolist painter: the confluence of the "imaginative" and the "real."

From the outset of his career as an artist, Gauguin theorized his approach to artmaking in terms of dialectical struggle and the resulting fracture of selfhood. In early letters, this struggle appears as an opposition between feeling and thought - two forces opposing each other, at work within the artist's self. "For a long time," he wrote in that same 1885 letter to Schuffenecker, "the philosophers have been reasoning about phenomena which seem supernatural to us and which we nonetheless feel. The Raphaels and others, people in whom feeling was formulated long before thought, were unable, even while studying, to destroy that feeling and so could remain artists" (WOS 4). In this early schematic, "feeling" is associated with the "supernatural," and is required for artistic creation. We may roughly equate "feeling" here with the mysterious internal idea that the Symbolist artist will, ultimately, seek to externalize in a physical form. But like the century human sciences, and one that will come to seem endemic to modern theories of myth” (11).
Apolline force in Nietzsche's rendering, \(^{131}\) "thought" and "study" are also required in order to bestow that physical form and communicate the idea. Those who would "remain artists" are only those who could hold onto the Dionysian feeling "even while studying," and so the split and struggle within selfhood is born. For Gauguin, from the beginning, the artist by definition is one who lives on the line between these two modes of being, one essentially concrete (thought) and the other abstract (feeling).

While Gauguin began his painting career as an Impressionist, drawn to the subjectivism in the foregrounding of the "impression" as an aesthetic object, eventually his impulse to abstraction outpaced and diverged from the Impressionist project, as he and others developed out of and in contrast to it the Symbolist school. This break in essence revolved around the core of artistic creation, which Impressionism, too naturalistic in scope, ultimately fails to dramatize to Gauguin's liking. Although Impressionism was radical in its foregrounding of the process of artistic creation, \(^{132}\) and

\(^{131}\) In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes that "the continuous evolution of art is bound up with the duality of the *Apolline* and the *Dionysiac* in much the same way as reproduction depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation" (14). As the image-maker, or *Bildner*, Apollo brings order, stability, and visual manifestation to the violent and mystical feelings that Dionysus, the music-maker, originates. Apollo's image "must include that measured limitation from wilder impulses, that wise calm of the image-making god" (16). By contrast, "[t]he Dionysiac musician, with no image at all, is nothing but primal pain and the primal echo of it. The lyric genius feels a world of images and symbols growing out of the mystical state of self-abandonment and one-ness" (30). Relying as it does on heteronormative metaphors of coupling, Nietzsche's aesthetics once again reinforces the notion of a libidinal satisfaction in the recognition of a truly successful artwork.

\(^{132}\) For many scholars, including perhaps most famously Clement Greenberg, modern art in Europe emerged in the mid-nineteenth century with Manet’s impressionistic style, which had the effect of announcing the painting’s existence as a painting. For Greenberg, as Briony Fer paraphrases, Manet was the inaugurator of what he called “successful modern painting,” which was characterized by “an acknowledgement of the surface of a painting – that is, the flatness of its support. By contrast with the illusion of depth
its break from the more unself-conscious attempts at realist modeling that characterized Academic painting, it nevertheless remained concerned with representing the concrete reality of the lived world. By contrast, the Symbolist movement takes as its core task and chief subject the relationship between inner and outer realms, emphasizing not just the subjective experience of the outside world but the outer expression of the innermost layers of subjectivity itself. Hence Khan's formulation of the Symbolist aim - "to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament)" (Goldwater 1). The separation and struggle between internal and external, between meaning and form, is exacerbated for the Symbolist, who must retreat inwards to the depths of the self to find "truth," but must nevertheless discover a way ultimately outwards in order to communicate it.

**Dialectic and Abstraction in Gauguin's Symbolist Practice**

In a rich and telling 1888 letter often taken as a snapshot of the transformative moment in his move away from Impressionism, Gauguin outlines his vision of art and abstraction again in dialectical terms, emphasizing this time the relationship not just between the two sides of the self (as in "feeling" and "thought"), but also between the self and the outside world. Describing to Schuffenecker his now famous self-portrait of the pursued by the ‘old masters,’ this flatness revealed rather than concealed the medium of painting” (Fer). Even earlier than Manet, though, Eugène Delacroix had made important innovations along this frontier. As Blake and Frascina note, “Many Academics identified Delacroix with left-wing politics on the grounds of technique. His use of rich colour and ‘painterly’ and expressive visible brushwork contrasted with Academic taste, which disdained colouristic and painterly effect” (61). This view of Delacroix illustrates how innovations in artistic technique could be described as “radical” on both aesthetic and political grounds, although leftist politics certainly have no monopoly on artistic experimentation.
same year, *Self-Portrait Les Misérables*, which was painted for Vincent van Gogh at the latter's request, Gauguin claims that the portrait is one of the best things he has ever done. "The design is absolutely special, a complete abstraction," he writes, praising his painting for being "almost incomprehensible (for example), it is so abstract" (WOS 4). This letter offers a great deal of information about the meaning of "abstraction" for Gauguin, and the dialectical struggle inherent within that concept. His characterization of his work as "special" and "incomprehensible" - two values he associates with abstraction - makes sense, since the emphasis that Symbolism places on subjectivism and mystery implies a valuing of the unique and the obscure.

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133 In the summer of 1888, van Gogh wrote to Gauguin and to Emile Bernard actually asking them to paint portraits of one another, which he intended to hang in the Yellow House as emblems of solidarity and brotherhood in the founding of a new Studio. However, Gauguin and Bernard were already experiencing friction in their fledgling collaboration, and in the end they each decided to paint their own portraits instead. See Silverman (2000), pp. 27-31.
But more importantly, Gauguin goes on to boast in the letter that he has "sacrificed everything - execution, color - for style" in this painting, an ambivalent turn of phrase that echoes what plays out in the Woodcutter Episode symbolically. Painting is presented as a battle here, an arena in which certain things must be done in. "Color" and "execution" are both aspects of a painting that lend it proximity to nature. For Gauguin, these are the elements that must be sacrificed so that "style" - the abstraction, which is also the assertion of selfhood - can prevail.134 This formula throws into relief that

134 Gauguin's sacrifice of the objective world in order to assert his private vision is very much of his moment. In Rhetoric of Romanticism, Paul de Man discusses Romantic and Symbolist poets' strides toward the destabilization of the sensible world, describing Gauguin's friend Stéphane Mallarmé as "the nineteenth-century poet who went further than any other in sacrificing the stability of the object to the demands of lucid poetic
meaning of painting for Gauguin: it is a constant struggle between the self and the world. It is echoed in his later claim that the "sensitive" self has "disappeared so that the Indian can move forward with conviction," and it is also dramatized in the Woodcutter Episode, in which nature is far more literally sacrificed (in the form of the tree) so the artist can bring about his style in sculpture.135

The letter continues, asserting again that the "color is far from nature" here, and explaining that the "eyes, mouth, and nose are like the flowers of a Persian carpet, thus personifying the symbolic aspect." This direct reference to the Persian decorative art that Gauguin so admired illustrates the fundamental link for him between the foreign and the abstract.136 Furthermore, decorative art was particularly intriguing to Gauguin for its unique ability to bridge the gap between the physical realities of place and thing (i.e., that which it adorns) and the abstract qualities of aesthetic pleasure; in this way, he wrote in an unpublished manuscript, color, in the realm of decorative arts, "becomes essentially musical" (WOS 13).137 Taking the cathedral as an example of the epitome of decorative art, Gauguin writes,

awareness" (8). The peculiar dynamics of this type of sacrifice, and its implications for the artist's relationship to nature, will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

135 Gauguin's relationship to "nature" is often fluid and ambivalent. In this case, it is clear that nature must be sacrificed for art, a principle that plays out in his paintings and in Noa Noa. However, when he writes to his wife that the "sensitive" side of himself has disappeared so that the "Indian" can move forward, which of these are we to consider as closer to nature?

136 For a detailed accounting of Persian miniatures, carpets, and other artifacts that Gauguin had access to and was influenced by, see Daftari pp. 39-41, 65-76.

137 Gauguin's many references to music as the defining force of his aesthetics - particularly with regard to color - are again strong indications of his embeddedness within the Symbolist literary tradition, where music and musical technique seemed to provide access to the Universal. For example, Louis Marvic describes Mallarmé's technique of "unfolding" a poem via a series of variations, as in orchestral music. "Since each verse is the peer of every other, there is no fixed order of precedence among them,
Its windows are decorated with stained glass to which colored light is fundamental. For it is here that the light should arrive in richly colored beams borne by angels, heavenly persons coming from the heavenly vault. But the walls are and should remain walls, all lengthened by a series of columns, all united to hold up the edifice; strength and elegance. (WOS 14)

Taken in the context of this complementary writing, then, decorative art derives its special significance from the fact that it exists in the limbo between concrete reality (exemplified by the stone walls of the cathedral) and the spiritual essences of “richly colored beams borne by angels.” In the 1888 letter, Gauguin clearly attempts to re-imagine his own image, and his own physical self, in the same ontological position as the glass; this is why he can say that, in his portrait, “[t]he eyes, the mouth, and the nose are like flowers in a Persian rug, also personifying the Symbolist side” (WOS 25; emphasis mine).138 Like decorative art itself (the flowers in a Persian rug), the artist as a figure symbolizes and personifies the role of aesthetics in bridging the gap between two realms.139

For Gauguin, the Self Portrait Les Misérables is an abstraction in terms not only of its formal appearance but also of its thematic content, which, according to the letter, hence no storylike sense of progression through time. The technique of variation suits the Symbolist aim of awakening an Uncanny sense of familiarity in the reader or listener, who seems already to have encountered the germinating idea in other variations” (xiv). See Marvick, Waking the Face That No One Is: A Study in the Musical Context of Symbolist Poetics.

138 In order to understand how a flower can "personify the symbolist aspect" of the painting, it's important to keep in mind that Gauguin frequently cross-dressed as a virginal flower in his writings. In Diverses Choses, for example, he writes, "Scientists, forgive the poor artists, they are still children; forgive them out of pity or at least out of love for flowers and heady scents, for they resemble them. Like flowers, they blossom forth at the least ray of sunlight and give off their scent, but they wilt upon the impure contact of the hand that sullies them" (WOS 128).

139 This would be an excellent example of how Gauguin's Modernist self-fashioning via the Other complicates Greenblatt's original idea that self-fashioning usually occurs as a function of rejecting or demonizing the Other.
emphasizes the struggle of the painter to come to terms with the meanings and methods of representation. The self that Gauguin has represented here is a victimized outcast, a “Jean Valjean,” and at the same time “a disreputable Impressionist painter, shackled always to this world.” Here again the emphasis on dialectic in the letter’s artistic theory comes to the fore. In his evocation of the image of the shackle, Gauguin implies a desire for escape at the heart of his nascent Symbolist approach. The Impressionist mode, though interested in subjectivity, contents itself with representing subjectivity in response to the real world, or nature, and fails to engage what Gauguin sees as the more profound rupture between these epistemological realms. Gauguin’s “shackle” narrates a conflict between the artist and the material world, while at the same time infusing that conflict with an air of injustice and criminality. These themes resound throughout both the Woodcutter Episode and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

As Debora Silverman details in *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, such a sense of rupture, including the infusion of criminality, would be a logical extension of much of Gauguin’s childhood education at a Catholic seminary in Orléans. Under the direction of the educational reformer Bishop Félix-Antoine-Philibert Douanloup, Gauguin experienced a curriculum that exposed him to “four central principles of Bishop Douanloup’s renovated Catholic teaching: idealist anti-naturalism; inwardness and imagination; identification; and a cultivation of interior vision, which subordinated the operation of sensory sight to the experience of divine light” (123). These principles were communicated through a dynamic, hands-on curriculum that “[c]entered on a dialectic of admonition and transcendence” and that “alternated the indictment of a fallen world with a glorification of ascent to a higher realm” (123).
While emphasizing “a corrupted nature and transgressive human nature,” and warning his pupils of “an earthly existence fundamentally grounded in suffering, sorrow, and a dolorous reckoning with sin” (123), Bishop Doupanloup also celebrated the unique capacity of the child for “‘breaking the chains’ that bound the soul to illusory rewards” (124). Silverman argues that the influence of this type of teaching is visible in “Gauguin’s emphasis on painterly abstraction and flat surfaces,” which was “informed by a desire to ‘efface reality,’ as he once called it – moving matter to spirit through the paradoxical physical medium of paint” (9). His desire to break free of the shackles of verisimilitude reveals a deep and continuing connection to his earliest intellectual experiences.

The Catholic influence that Silverman details also reverberates with categories endemic in a neoplatonic approach to the relationship between the material and the immaterial that Mark Cheetham has pinpointed in “Mystical Memories: Gauguin’s Neoplatonism and ‘Abstraction’ in Late Nineteenth-Century Painting.”

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140 Gauguin’s contemporary, Wilhelm Worringer, would have described Gauguin's technique differently. In *Abstraction and Empathy*, Worringer argued that, in all periods in history, there is an impulse to abstraction which communicates not a particular level of artistic ability but rather a people's "feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude toward the cosmos" (15). In particular, tendencies toward abstraction in art connote for Worringer "a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space" (15).

141 There is a strong confluence between these two modes of thought (the Catholic and the Platonic) as well, which can be seen in one of Doupanloup’s writings, quoted by Silverman: “It is, then, the purpose of Christian education to teach [...] its pupils that the whole world is nothing [...] that if they wish to quench their thirst for happiness (which longing is at the basis of their nature and which constitutes the immense ardor of their soul), it is at the foot of the altars of grace and the Gospel that they shall find wings with which to fly into invisible regions where they can hope [...] to possess God himself and to be united with Him in the splendors and delights of eternity” (125). Here, Doupanloup’s
argues that the 1888 letter not only gestures towards Gauguin’s aesthetic break with Impressionism, but also lays out a distinctly neoplatonic philosophy of art in its relationship to truth: “Gauguin’s reference to the shackled prisoner Jean Valjean does nothing less than tie the central theme of Platonism – the ‘disaffection with terrestrial existence’ – to the practice of painting” (16). In later writing, as Cheetham points out, Gauguin returns to the same metaphor when, having fully broken with the Impressionists, he writes that they “study color exclusively insofar as the decorative effect, but without freedom, retaining the shackles of verisimilitude” (Cheetham 16). For Cheetham, this repeated use of the image of the shackle is key to recognizing the Platonic foundations of Gauguin’s thought, foundations which would have been widely pervasive but possibly

image of winged souls mounting toward God echoes Plato’s myth of the soul’s chariot in *Phaedrus*.

142 See “Notes on Color,” written in Tahiti between 1896 and 1898. It is striking, but also characteristic, that Gauguin repeats his own turn of phrase here, even though the previous letter dates from nearly ten years before. What this suggests is that the image of the shackle should be taken seriously as one in which Gauguin was heavily invested. In the same essay, though, Gauguin also reveals his practical side when, writing that the “century is coming to an end and the masses press anxiously about the scientist’s door,” he acknowledges that the key question, for him, is “the question of color photography, the absorbing problem whose solution is going to make so many unsavory characters fall down on their backs” (*AIT* 994). The advent of color photography, he contends, will “at last” reveal “who is right, Cabanel, Claude Monet, Seurat, Chevreul, Rood, Charles Henry; the painters, the chemists” (994). All this is to say that, while philosophically stirred by the desire for “truth,” Gauguin was also an ambitious and a practical man, one who clearly was acutely aware of the threat to realism posed by color photography. Taken in this context, the reference to “shackling” may then also gesture toward a fear of the advancement of technology, and the possibility that it will leave behind those painters who are stuck in merely representational modes. Still, although color photography promises to destabilize representational categories as well as market forces, in 1896 it has not yet accomplished this feat; thus Gauguin laments that although there are some talented young artists, “They dare not cast off the shackles (after all, one must earn a living)” (994).
only vaguely articulated among his circle of contemporaries (18),\textsuperscript{143} because the shackle or chain is a pivotal image in Plato’s allegory of the cave in Book VII of the \textit{Republic}. Shackled by the leg and the neck, prisoners in the cave cannot see the real world, only the shadows on the wall which are created by the light of a bright fire burning behind them. “With this powerful and influential myth,” Cheetham writes, “Plato divides reality into the Intelligible world and that of mere Appearance” (16). Thus the use of the metaphor of shackling by Gauguin suggests to Cheetham a parallel formulation of ontological dichotomy, where two different worlds clash with one another, and the friction between them amounts to both the space and the energy of artistic production.

A further, and equally significant, Platonic image that Cheetham points out in the 1888 letter is the image of fire as both a symbol of truth and a purifying essence that serves as the antithesis of the base, material world of mere Apparition. In the letter, Gauguin urges his reader (Schuffenecker) to “just picture a vague memory of pottery twisted by a fierce fire! All the reds, the purples, streaked by flashes of fire, like a furnace blazing before the painter's eyes, where the struggle among his thoughts takes place” (WOS 25).\textsuperscript{144} Such language, as Cheetham notes, resonates profoundly with neoplatonic imagery in which

\textsuperscript{143} Cheetham notes that although many in Gauguin’s circle would have known Platonic theory and some of its descendants, they likely did not systematically distinguish between theoretical traditions (..). In this sense it is useful to keep in mind Robert Goldwater’s admonition that, in looking back on the Symbolists, “There is the danger of refining definitions that at the time were not so clear, theories whose general drift was understood but whose structure was still vague, concepts whose logic was less important than their resonance” (78).

\textsuperscript{144} Daniel S. Brown points out that Gauguin had read Thomas Carlyle's views linking masculinity to an internal, volcano-like flame of intellectual power and abstraction. He quotes Herbert Sussman's paraphrase of Carlyle, in which Sussman notes that "This interior energy was consistently imagined [...] in metaphors of fluid" and represented
[m]etaphors of the eyes and vision are used [...] to signal the pursuit of the highest reality. For Plotinus, the soul, ‘withdrawing to the inmost, seeing nothing, must have its vision, not of some other light ... but of the light within itself, unmingled, pure, suddenly gleaming before it.’ (16)

While the eyes function in Gauguin’s formulation as the windows into the soul, what resides in the soul is that purifying fire of truth, the fire whose greatness humans can only perceive *vis à vis* its effects on the material world (casting shadows, glowing through the eyes, etc.). Again there is a strong dialectical element to the symbolism here, as Gauguin dramatizes the “struggles of the painter’s thought” by contrasting the fiery glow behind the painter’s eyes with the hopelessly material vessel that contains those eyes.

Fire was intriguing to Gauguin as an artistic metaphor, particularly because of the role that it plays in the process of artistic creation itself. An avid ceramicist, Gauguin wrote about the role of heat in producing meaningful colors in ceramics in his first published essay, titled “Notes on Art at the Universal Exhibition,” which appeared in *Le Moderniste Illustré* in July 1889. Gauguin had the following to say about the ceramics that he had seen on display:

> Ceramics are not futile things. In the remotest times, among the American Indians, the art of pottery making was always popular. God made man out of a little clay. With a little clay you can make metal, precious stones – with a little clay, and a little genius! [...] Let’s take a little piece of clay. In its plain, raw state, there’s nothing very interesting about it; but put it in a kiln, and like a cooked lobster it changes color. A little firing transforms it, but not much. Not until a very high temperature is reached does the metal it contains become molten. [...]
So the substance that emerges from the fire takes on the character of the kiln and thus becomes graver, more serious, the longer it stays in Hell. (WOS 32-33)

Like the color in the cathedral’s decorative art, which takes on a musical quality, color in the ceramicist’s world has value not only as an aesthetic pleasure but as a symbol of reconciliation and transformation. The fire of the kiln, echoing Plato’s fire in the cave allegory, purifies the material (transforming it, making it “graver, more serious” – no longer a base lump of dirt) while creating color at the same time, in a kind of primal act of creative energy. The forces at work in the transformation are the fire itself, and the artist’s “genius,” forces which are interchangeable and equally required. Thus fire – the fire of the cave, of the kiln, of the soul behind the artist’s glowing eyes – is the mediating, purifying principle which transforms the base into the beautiful, making the fired pot a symbol of synthesis and reconciliation between matter and the spirit.

In this way, color takes on a new meaning. No longer a representation of nature, color for Gauguin becomes a representation of fire – a symbol of genius, the soul, and the artistic transformation of material. Fire both is and creates purity, so purity resides in color that “glows” or “burns” with meaning, rather than color that merely replicates the natural world. The colors of purity and artistic genius are “[A]ll the reds, violets, striped by flashes of fire like a furnace radiating from the eyes” (33). Glowing, fiery colors take on a spiritual meaning for Gauguin, foregrounding and offering redemption in the struggle between material and immaterial existence.

Gilgamesh and Dialectic

As an ancient and mysterious text, the Epic of Gilgamesh carried an aura of exoticist appeal that allowed Gauguin to reframe his personal journey in epic terms. But
as narrative, *Gilgamesh* also offered an arena for exploring the dialectical struggle that constituted art for him. The doppelgänger motif is the most overt manifestation of this, but there are further important thematic confluences between *Noa Noa* and *Gilgamesh* that demonstrate more fully how deep the relationship between these texts runs.

The first of these involves the name of Gilgamesh himself, who could well have been a figure of synthesis between matter and spirit for Gauguin, particularly considering the artist’s interest in ceramics. Scholars in the mid-nineteenth century originally translated Gilgamesh’s name as “Izdubar,” although by the 1890s they were revising this nomenclature because of changes in their understanding of the Akkadian Cuneiform orthography and pronunciation. In his 1874 study of the epic, published first in *Le Correspondant* and then as part of the two-volume work called *Les Premières civilisations – Études d’histoire et d’archéologie*, François Lenormant explained the significance of the earlier orthographic rendering for his contemporary audience. The syllables *iz* and *bar* together were thought to refer to fire, while the syllable *dhu* interposed between them was interpreted as the word for “mass,” as in earth: “La différence entre l’orthographe par les signes *iz-bar* et celle par les signes *iz-dhu-bar* consiste dans l’introduction du caractère *dhu*, qui a la valeur de ‘masse’” (65). ["The difference between the spelling for the signs *iz-bar* and that for the signs *iz-dhu-bar* consists in the introduction of the character *dhu*, which means 'mass.'"] Furthermore, the combination of the syllables *iz* and *bar*, in particular, according to Lenormant, was recognizable as signifying the concept of godliness, “l’idée de ‘dieu’” (65). Noting that Izdubbar, as a character, appeared in different texts in different forms, Lenormant reasons that “les Accadiens lui donnaient trois noms différents, susceptibles de s’enchanter et
signifiant l’un ‘flamme,’ l’autre ‘feu,’ le troisième ‘masse de feu.’ C’est ce dernier que
lui appartient spécialement dans l’épopée” (65) ["the Akkadians gave him three different
names, which were interchangeable, and meaning, respectively, 'flame,' 'fire,' and 'earthen
fire.' It is this last which especially pertains to him in the epic”]. In particular,
Lenormant notes, the dual nature of Izdubar is emphasized in the epic (as opposed to
other texts that seemed to concern the same character), which “le présente comme un
conquérant et un chef d’empire qui parvient, au travers de nombreuses épreuves, à
l’immortalité” (22) ["presents him as a conquerer and head of an empire, who, through
many trials, reaches immortality”]. Izdubar’s status in the many texts in which he
appears, says Lenormant, hovers between major hero and minor deity, just as his name
hovers between earth and fire. The appeal of such an image to Gauguin’s interest both in
fire generally and in ceramics more specifically is immediately apparent. Like a
brilliantly colored ceramic, Izdubar embodies the union of material and immaterial
essences.

The name “Izdubar” was abandoned in favor of “Gilgamesh” in the early- to mid-
1890s, which is to say, right around the time that Gauguin was writing Noa Noa. This
coincidence only enhances the likelihood that he would have been aware of the ongoing
debates surrounding the meaning and the proper rendering of the hero’s moniker.
Furthermore, Lenormant’s analysis of the name “Izdubar” is instructive of the
possibilities for dialectical embodiment, or dis-embodiment, that Gilgamesh as a figure
carried. In addition to being half earth, by Lenormant’s understanding, Gilgamesh also,
of course, has his companion Enkidu, who, like Adam in the Old Testament of the Bible,
is, to quote Gauguin again, “made out of a little clay.” He is made by the goddess Aruru,
the goddess of creation, who “conceived an image in her mind, and it was the stuff of Anu of the firmament. She dipped her hands in water and pinched off clay, she let it fall in the wilderness, and noble Enkidu was created” (62-3). Here, Aruru exemplifies the artist-deity; she conceives an image in her mind, and then creates it out of material that is both “clay,” and at the same time, “the stuff of Anu of the firmament” – the heavens. Through the process of artistic creation, the materiality of earth takes on a divine aspect. “It is said that God took a little clay in his hands,” wrote Gauguin in *Cahier pour Aline*, “and made every known thing. An artist, in turn (if he really wants to produce a divine creative work), must not copy nature but take the natural elements and create a new element” (WOS 69).

A second thematic confluence between the Gilgamesh legend and Gauguin’s dialectical art theory is in the motif of wrestling. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the first encounter between the hero and his double is represented as a mighty wrestling match, with Enkidu arriving in Uruk just as the despotic Gilgamesh is about to exercise his right to have sex with a bride before her husband on her wedding night:

> In Uruk the bridal bed was made, fit for the goddess of love. The bride waited for the bridegroom, but in the night Gilgamesh got up and came to the house. Then Enkidu stepped out, he stood in the street and blocked his way. Mighty Gilgamesh came in and Enkidu met him at the gate. He put out his foot and prevented Gilgamesh from entering the house, so they grappled, holding each other like bulls. They broke the doorposts and the walls shook, they snorted like bulls locked together. They shattered the doorposts and the walls shook [sic]. Gilgamesh bent his knee with his foot planted on the ground and with a turn Enkidu was thrown. Then immediately his anger died (69).

After a great deal of anticipation, even approaching a ritualistic build-up (recall Gilgamesh’s dreams, Enkidu’s anointment with oil, his appearance as a bridegroom), Enkidu and Gilgamesh finally have their explosive encounter. As they grapple in the
streets of Uruk, Gilgamesh learns that there is indeed (almost) a match for him in the
world. Like a sexual release, Gilgamesh’s anger dissipates immediately, his desire
soothed by his physical union with the double. “So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced,”
we are told, “and their friendship was sealed” (69).

Although wrestling as such does not make its way into the narrative of Noa Noa,
the motif of wrestling was prominent in Gauguin’s oeuvre prior to its writing, even taking
on a symbolic meaning as an allegory for the artist’s internal dialectical struggle.
Gauguin more than once painted scenes of boys or young men wrestling, as in Breton
Boys Wrestling (1888), and, as Belinda Thomson explains, wrestling was a popular theme
in nineteenth-century paintings of the Breton countryside, where young men often
engaged in wrestling matches to blow off steam and take secular enjoyment after church
activities and devotional festivals (Vision 67). But in 1888, Gauguin executed one very
famous painting in particular, known to art historians as the Vision After the Sermon,145
in which he self-consciously deployed the image of wrestling as an allegory for artistic
struggle. Considered by many to be the inaugural work of the new Symbolist style, the

Vision After the Sermon is a painting in which everything from the narrative to the

145 The title of this painting is a minor but still significant issue. According to Debora
Silverman, Gauguin listed the painting in his notebook as Vision du Sermon and also as
Apparition (99). However, art historians typically refer to this painting as Vision After
the Sermon, which unfortunately obscures some of the painting’s mystical intent.
Gauguin’s own title more clearly demonstrates that the painting depicts a group of people
experiencing two different planes of reality simultaneously, an idea that is essential not
only to the painting’s narrative thrust but also, and perhaps more importantly, to its
aesthetic allegory. Silverman handles this discrepancy by adopting the title Vision After
the Sermon, noting, “I use this title here, bowing to common practice, although I would
argue that Gauguin’s own titles provide far more helpful clues for a full understanding of
the painting” (99). I will follow her example here, although I often refer to the painting
more simply as Vision, for the sake of brevity.
composition to the color is finely tuned to point to the constant dialectical interplay between material and immaterial phenomena.

Fig. 10. *Vision After the Sermon* (1888). National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

The *Vision After the Sermon* portrays a group of Breton women, gathered in a semicircle of prayer, where they seem to look upon a wrestling match between two men, one of whom is winged. The women appear up close, pressed along the front of the picture plane, and they are depicted from behind; we see the backs of their Breton bonnets along the lower border of the painting, as if we were standing very close behind them. Their group is headed, in the lower right corner, by a priest shown in half-profile, and continues across the bottom of the painting and up the left side, where the praying
figures recede quickly into the pictorial distance, their faces increasingly stylized and eventually elided. Across the picture plane from the upper left to the lower right corner, a thick, rustic tree trunk breaks the scene into two vignettes, separating the women in prayer, on the lower left, from a pair of wrestling figures in the upper right portion of the scene. The wrestlers, wearing Biblical dress and drawn with cartoonish outline and energetic movement, are Jacob and the Angel: a bearded man struggling to grab a low hold, and a winged one dominating him, grasping at his shoulders and his head. The figures represent the story of Jacob wrestling the Angel told in Genesis 32.146

There are two main avenues for abstraction to take into consideration here: the composition of the picture, and the use of form and color. In terms of composition, Gauguin abstracts by representing different ontological planes at the same time. Rather than casting the biblical narrative itself as the subject of the painting, Gauguin presents the wrestling match as a vision paying out to the Breton women as they listen to the sermon of the pastor. What he seeks to do here is to create a “vision” – not a vision of reality, but a spiritual vision experienced in an inner lived realm. In its composition, the painting expresses the dialectical relationship between the inner and outer worlds by separating the contemplative women from the scene they experience with a boldly

146 Thomson’s summary of the story from Genesis is helpful: “Jacob’s encounter with the angel occurs on the last stage of his homeward journey, after long years of banishment. In trepidation, about to face his brother Esau, Jacob sends ahead his flocks and retinue as a peace offering. He then finds himself alone by the river Jabbok. A man whose identity is unclear wrestles him throughout the night. At break of dawn the stranger overpowers Jacob by touching the hollow of his thigh, thereby revealing his identity. Jacob exhorts his assailant to bless him, and the Angel does so after changing his name, from Jacob to Israel (meaning prince of God). The place of their struggle is named ‘Peniel’ by Jacob, meaning Face of God, ‘for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.’ The maiming of Jacob’s thigh gives rise to the Jewish taboo about eating meat from this animal part” (72).
painted, rustic tree trunk that cuts knobbily across the canvas. The wrestling figures, on one side, and the earthly praying women, on the other, are all oriented toward this dividing tree trunk, which from a traditional formal perspective would not belong in the middle of the scene. The painting imagines both the material world and the spiritual world at once, and the spiritual elements are given the same weight and texture, the same earthly palpability, as the tree trunk itself. The technique of representing the spiritual with a tactile weight equal to the earthly was something Gauguin would return to, as will we. In this way, the painting dramatizes one of the chief aims of Symbolism: to

147 My interpretation of the duality in the Vision After the Sermon differs quite significantly from Debora Silverman’s in a number of key areas. Silverman’s research effectively demonstrates the ways in which Gauguin’s seminary education influenced his pessimistic ontological outlook, but she sees this manifested in his painting as a “dematerialization” of the world, where as I see it more as a representation of dialectical interplay between material and immaterial essences. In the Vision, Silverman writes, Gauguin deployed painting techniques that were “designed expressly to diminish the physicality of the canvas surface as much as possible” (112). She argues that “Gauguin’s brush [...] glided across the canvas in The Vision to make a largely unbroken surface defined by rhythmic linear banding and broad, evenly applied masses of color,” resulting in effects like a “floating tree with vaporized leaves” and an “airily suspended and dainty cow” (111-112). For Silverman, this practice illustrates what she calls Gauguin’s ambition: “to weaken materiality of its hold on consciousness, to invert outer and inner reality, and to repudiate the penetrative, entangling encounter with the embedded stuffs of nature in favor of a transcendent, divinized abstraction” (112). While this interpretation is extremely helpful in understanding the relationship between Gauguin’s formal technique and his philosophical positioning, it does not account for the intense narrative of struggle between forces that inhabits both the subject matter and the formal approach of this painting. While Gauguin may be dematerializing the surface of the painting with his brush techniques, he is at the same time accentuating the clumsy physicality of the figures and the objects in space. With his thick, cartoonish lines and heavy shapes, Gauguin actually emphasizes the bulk – the “stuff” – of the natural world even while he attempts to liquefy its texture; this is characteristic of the “cloissonisme” aesthetic that mimicked the look of stained glass. Furthermore, we must not overlook the fact that he represents a divine spectacle – Jacob’s wrestling match with the Angel – as if it were taking place on an ordinary level of reality. This is essential to the point of the painting, which is better conceived of as, in Silverman’s own words, “a simulated mystical encounter between the natural and the supernatural, between the physical and metaphysical realms” (101) than a total dematerialization of the real.
externalize the internal realm. That the abstraction implicit in representing the inner realm is still a form of mimesis was evident to Gauguin, who wrote in *Diverses Choses*, "Forge your souls, young artists, constantly give them wholesome nourishment, be great, strong, and noble, and verily I say unto you that your work will be the image of your soul" (129).

At the same time, Gauguin abstracts with color and form, thematizing the purity of inner truth again by placing the wrestling match upon a brilliant, glowing red background. A color that does not represent the “natural” appearance of a field, Gauguin’s vermilion instead evokes a fire burning or glowing behind the external surface of the earth, and of the picture plane itself. Belinda Thomson, calling this striking color choice “the culminating point of a painterly obsession” (*Vision* 43), has detailed the many ways in which Gauguin experimented with deep and bright reds throughout the summer of 1888. She quotes Adolphe Retté, who declared, “One cannot imagine all the things that were signified, according to M. Gauguin, by that blazing turf!” (71). Thomson highlights the emotional resonances that, constellated with historical circumstances, this vibrant hue may have been designed to evoke - anger and danger, blood, political radicalism, and religious strife, among them (71). As is often the case for Symbolism, these and other associations may indeed be intended simultaneously. But it also makes sense to read the “blazing turf” as yet another manifestation of that purifying fire that “blazes” behind the artist’s eyes in the self-portrait of the same year. It is no coincidence that Gauguin has taken a narrative of spiritual struggle – Jacob and the Angel – and placed it upon an intensely glowing background that evokes both the spiritual danger and the spiritual hunger that characterizes his artistic pursuit.
The theme of Jacob wrestling the Angel was of great interest to Gauguin because it dramatizes the artist’s dialectical struggle: it is combat between the spirit and material, a symbol of the human being’s incessant wrestling with the divine. Among many possible meanings behind the story, Thomson writes,

One of the most widespread interpretations saw the encounter not as a struggle between two actual adversaries but as the inner struggle that took place within each Christian soul. [...] Nearer to Gauguin’s time, for the Romantics of the early nineteenth century Jacob came to stand for the artist, the man of genius, engaged in unarmed combat with nature to unlock her secrets. (Vision 72)

Thomson's phrasing echoes Gauguin's own in Avant et Après: "In every country I have to go through a period of incubation; each time I have to learn to recognize the various species of plants and trees, of all nature, so varied and so capricious, never willing to give away its secrets, to yield itself up" (WOS 251).

The interpretation of the story of Jacob and the Angel as a symbol of artistic struggle was given by Louis Reau as the meaning of Delacroix's famous 1856 mural on this theme, which Gauguin much admired (Thomson, Vision 72). It also takes on this meaning in the 1856 poems of Les Contemplations, by Victor Hugo, where it is “an image of the perpetually repeated artistic struggle” (“Insomnie,” poem XX), and where the poet lists “the great artists who were not afraid to engage in the dawn struggle with

148 Thomson writes that the theme also surfaces in Hugo’s Les Misérables, which Gauguin was reading during the summer of 1888: “The spectacle of the goodness of bishop Bienvenu presents the reformed convict Jean Valjean with his ultimate moral challenge: ‘He perceived that the priest’s forgiveness was the most formidable assault he had ever sustained ... that the battle (lutte) was now joined, a momentous and decisive battle between the evil in himself and the goodness in that other man’” (74). As we have seen, Hugo was influential to Gauguin, who seized on the Jean Valjean character in particular in the 1888 self-portrait. This enhances the meaning of the image for Gauguin, but I have chosen here to focus more fully on the image as an artistic symbol rather than a moral one. Nevertheless, the problem of good / evil and human / divine is still extremely important for understanding dialectics for Gauguin, an issue that I will return to in a later section.
the divine creator” (“Les Mages,” poem XXII) (Thomson, Vision 74). And the image surfaced once again in Emile Zola’s L’Oeuvre, a novel of artistic failure, “which caused passionate discussion in Impressionist circles when it appeared in 1886” (Thomson 74).

Thomson quotes Zola’s narrative at length:

One day [the painting] would be practically completed, the next scraped clean and a fresh start made. Such is the effort of creation that goes into the work of art! Such was the agonizing effort he had to make, the blood and tears it cost him to create living flesh, to produce the breath of life! Everlastingly struggling with the Real and being repeatedly conquered like Jacob fighting with the Angel! (Thomson, Vision 74)

Thus the notion that Jacob wrestling the Angel dovetails as a symbol of both spiritual struggle and artistic struggle – articulated as a conflict between the artist’s soul and the real, material world with which he had to come to terms in order to create within it – was well established in artistic circles by the time Gauguin painted his Vision.149

Indeed, in the year after he painted the Vision and failed to have it placed, Gauguin wrote a letter to Emile Bernard that echoes Zola’s description of the struggling painter in a resounding and probably not coincidental way:

From reading your letter I can see that we’re all pretty much in the same boat. The moments of doubt, the results that are always inferior to what we dream of, the scant encouragement from other people – all these things combined seem to flay us with thorns. Well, what can we do about it except fume over it, fight against all these difficulties; even if we’re down, we can still go on saying: again,

149 In an essay on this chapter of Genesis, Roland Barthes demonstrates how textual analysis and structural analysis can open up and disseminate multiple possibile meanings for a text. In particular, making use of Vladimir Propp's categories in Morphology of the Folktale, Barthes notes that the figure of "God" in the story functions as both the "sender" and the "opponent," and that "there is only one type of narrative that can present this paradoxical form - narratives relating to an act of blackmail" (138). In most folktales, the opponent guards what the hero seeks; "Here however, as in every blackmail, God, at the same time that he guards the flood, also dispenses the mark, the privilege" (138). This "scandalous" paradox at the heart of the episode elegantly embodies the ambiguity of the relationship between the Symbolist artist and nature, which is seen as both opponent and helper, and which we will discuss further in Chapter 4.
and again. When you come right down to it, painting is like man, \textit{mortal but always living in conflict with matter}. (WOS 35; emphasis mine)

Here, writing to the colleague with whom he had developed the particular Symbolist techniques he deployed in the \textit{Vision}, Gauguin describes the central problem for the Symbolist painter: “the results that are always inferior to what we dream of,” a frustration that is born out of the fact that “painting is like man, mortal but always living in conflict with matter.” Meanwhile, his prescription evokes once again the wrestling match: “fight against all these difficulties” and “even if we’re down,” continue coming after the opponent.

In the \textit{Vision}, then, the symbol of the mortal in combat with the divine synthesizes perfectly with the dialectical approach to form, color, and composition that Gauguin has worked out all on the same canvas, which is why scholars have regarded it as an exemplary work showcasing Gauguin’s dialectical concerns and Symbolist ambitions. There are simultaneously three representations here of the material / immaterial split: the composition of the painting with worldly and spiritual elements occupying the same plane; the color of the painting with its glowing, fiery field; and the narrative of the painting, with its wrestling figures. What is striking is that at least two of these features bear a direct relevance to Near Eastern influences: the wrestling figures, which echo Gilgamesh’s legendary grapple with Enkidu, and the non-naturalistic color of the vermillion lawn, which is a prime example of the kind of non-naturalistic coloring that Gauguin had observed and admired in Persian miniatures, as documented by Daftari.

\footnote{Gauguin would later fall out with Bernard over the issue of who could claim credit for the artistic innovations of the summer of 1888 (see Thomson, p. 30).}
It is therefore not all that surprising that Gauguin would have found in the
_ Gilgamesh_ narrative a compelling archaic symbol that dramatized the dialectical struggle
between material and immaterial essences in a profound and eloquent way. The two
sides of Gilgamel's selfhood – the human and the divine, the earth and the fire – cause
him to be in a constant state of internal struggle, a state that culminates in the wrestling
match with his primitive double. These themes resonate deeply with Gauguin's aesthetic
problems and pursuits, and they are worked out in _Noa Noa_ in the relationship between
the artist and his woodcutter double. In the next section I will explore this relationship
further, highlighting its erotic dimensions and arguing that the desire that Gauguin feels
for his double is symbolic of his desire for reconciliation between the warring realms of
earth and sun.

IV. The Desire

To go from two dialectical halves imagined as in contest with one another to the
two halves sharing an erotic bond is not such a leap as it might seem. I have mentioned
that Gilgamesh's fight with Enkidu yields an immediate release of all his anger, and that
it is both precipitated and enacted in a series of ritualistic, quasi-matrimonial maneuvers.
It is furthermore the act of finally throwing Enkidu that cements the bond between these
friends and doubles, a bond characterized by a weight and intensity that far exceeds the
loyalty of servant and master. Indeed, far from disrupting the erotic potential between
Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the wrestling match symbolizes and embodies it.

Just as the presence of the doppelgänger in _Noa Noa_ symbolizes the artist's
dialectical sense of rupture between material and immaterial realms, his erotic yearning
to fuse with the double dramatizes an aesthetic yearning for fusion and reconciliation between these two realms. I call this an “aesthetic” yearning - and more specifically, a mimetic desire - because, in addition to constituting ontological planes of existence, the material and immaterial realms in Gauguin’s thought also correspond to the elements of artistic production. The material realm is the world of canvas, pigment, and money: the realm where the artwork must eventually take shape and find a way to communicate. What it attempts to communicate, however, is the immaterial – the contents of the “mysterious center of thought.” Hence, in Diverses Choses, Gauguin describes a painting entitled Pape Moe (Mysterious Water) this way:

In an amphitheater of strange tones, like some flowing potion, diabolical or divine, who can tell? the mysterious Water gushes forth for the thirsting lips of the Unknown.

On seeing this seemingly supernatural form (exhibited at Durand-Ruel’s), this form which materializes pure idea, people exclaimed: “But it’s madness! Where did he ever see that?”

They should meditate on these words: ‘The wise man, and he alone, will seek to penetrate the mystery of the parables.’ (WOS 139; emphasis mine)

In Symbolist painting, the ideal work is one in which form and idea are seamlessly fused into one. This is, again, what all that wrestling was about; as Gauguin continues, “The characteristic feature of nineteenth-century painting is the struggle for form, for color” (139).

\[ ^{151} \] However much we might criticize Gauguin’s disingenuousness, especially in his dealings with his family, the weight of these worldly matters took its toll, and certainly factored into his personal and aesthetic sensibilities. As he wrote to his friend Schuffenecker in 1885, "I have done my duty as best I could, and it is material impossibility that will have made me give up" (6).
In this section, I will argue that Gauguin’s desire for his primitive guide in *Noa Noa*, infused with the mythic subtext of *Gilgamesh*, symbolizes his aesthetic desire for unity between “form” and “pure idea.” I will make this case in two steps. First, we will examine in both *Gilgamesh* and *Noa Noa* the symbolic correlation between the hero’s yearning for his double and the existential longing for ontological reconciliation. Then I will proceed to make the connection between ontological reconciliation and aesthetic reconciliation, the burning core of his aesthetic desire.

**Androgyny and Reconciliation**

That the two halves of the dyad in *Gilgamesh* stand for opposing principles corresponding (or interpretable by a nineteenth-century reader as corresponding) to material and immaterial realms is visible in their respective associations with concrete or abstract elements. Enkidu, the primitive double, is associated with the earth. He is made of clay and covered in hair, signifying his closeness to nature, his embodied physicality. Gilgamesh, by contrast, is presented as a legendary builder of walls, which, as Robert Pogue Harrison writes, “define civilization. They are monuments of resistance against time, like writing itself, and Gilgamesh is remembered by them. Walls protect, divide, distinguish; above all, they abstract” (15; emphasis in the original). With his insistent refrain throughout the text that he must “set up his name stamped on brick,” Gilgamesh identifies himself with language and the symbolic, the realm of the absolute. His alienation from an integrated corporeality is evident in his lament to Shamash in the run-up to the cedar forest mission:

> Here in the city man dies oppressed at heart, man perishes with despair in his heart. I have looked over the wall and I see the bodies floating on the river, and
that will be my lot also. Indeed I know it is so, for whoever is tallest among men cannot reach the heavens, and the greatest cannot encompass the earth. Therefore I would enter that country: because I have not established my name stamped on brick as my destiny has decreed, I will go to the country where the cedar is cut. I will set up my name where the names of famous men are written. (72)

In this tearful prayer to the sun god, Gilgamesh reveals the symbolic structure of his ontological positioning. On the other side of the abstracting wall lies the inevitable consequence of corporeal embodiment: the corpse floating down the sacred river. As Harrison writes, Gilgamesh “has seen beyond life to the inanimate corpse – the mere object drifting toward decomposition and reintegration with the earth. He has peered over the wall of history and seen the remorseless transcendence of nature” (16). His own alignment with the fetishized symbolic name is poor consolation, ultimately, for the radical rupture in selfhood that this stark division between abstract and concrete entails. Hence the desire for reconciliation, for fusion with the double.

The dynamics in *Noa Noa* are similar. While his double is “quite a young man,” Gauguin casts himself as “almost an old man in body and soul, in civilized vices: in lost illusions” (25). Like Gilgamesh, the artist has long labored under the illusion that an abstraction like fame, the dominance of a name, can provide consolation for the loss of corporeality that death promises (in December 1888 he wrote to Schuffenecker, “[W]hat concerns me is art, it is my capital, my children’s future, the honor of the name I have given them, all things which one day will be of use to them” (*WOS* 28)). Like Gilgamesh, the artist not only is a product of civilization, but symbolizes the very concept of culture, distilled, for better or worse, into a single figure: "Moi seul portais le fardeau d'une mauvaise pensée, toute une civilisation m'avait devancée dans le mal et m'avait éduqué" [“I alone carried the burden of an evil thought, a whole civilization had been before me in
evil and had educated me” (28)]. Now, reaching middle age, Gauguin longs for reconciliation.

In both texts, reconciliation is offered in the form of the double, who, not coincidentally, is figured as androgynous. We have seen that scholars like Peter Brooks consider the woodcutter in Noa Noa to have a reconciliatory potential, but this needs to be explored further. As Stephen Eisenman has demonstrated (again taking an historicizing approach to the text, but one that is also very useful), the woodcutter resembles a documented class of men in Tahitian society who were known as mahus, and who occupied a liminal space in between the male and female genders. Eisenman writes that mahus had appeared in travel writing and diaries since the time of the HMS Bounty in 1787. He quotes James Morrison, a mutineer on the Bounty, who wrote that in Tahiti they have a set of men called Mahu. These men are in some respects like the eunuchs of India but are not castrated. They never cohabit with women, but live as they do. They pick their beards out and dress as women, dance and sing with them and are effeminate in their voice. They are generally excellent hands at making and painting cloth, making mats, and every other women’s employment. (qtd. in Eisenman 104)

While Morrison’s account predates Gauguin by over a century, mahus showed up in several European accounts of French Polynesia that followed. In a travel narrative from 1871, the French engineer Jules Garnier described mahus in the following way, synthesizing two common fears about Tahitians – that their sexuality is abominably unrestricted, and that they practice cannibalism:

One thing shocks us, and that is to see men crowned with flowers in the manner of women [...]. It is necessary to observe that Tahitian men are effeminate, and their sweetness appears to me more the sign of a degraded spirit than of a good soul; if they are no longer anthropophagous, it is only the fear of displeasing us that stops them, because one sees that they practice gratuitous cruelties far more odious than cannibalism itself. (qtd. in Eisenman 104)
For Garnier, whose transparent allusion to “gratuitous cruelties,” i.e., homosexual acts, illustrates the unspeakable nature of the symbolic Other, the “sweetness” of the effeminate Tahitian man signals a horrifying internal castration – a “degraded spirit” – the more frightening for its invisibility. For Gauguin, however, it offers the opposite potential.152

What is striking about both of these accounts is the way in which Gauguin synthesizes and seeks to overturn them at the same time, emphasizing the mahu’s capacity for dwelling in opposing realms. His companion – sweet, effeminate, interested in crafts – presents the classic mahu traits. But these traits are attributed to an innocent nature, an unblemished soul, rather than the “degraded spirit” that Garnier diagnoses. Indeed, Gauguin was intrigued by the mahu figure and later represented one such character in two paintings from 1902, *Bathers* and *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape*. As Eisenman points out, these two paintings, though very different, seem meant to go together:

152 As David Eng has shown in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, this confluence between physical violence, genotypic Otherness, and sexual abomination was endemic to studies of the primitive from the early days of anthropology, through the development of psychoanalysis and into modern culture. Eng argues that in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud "links an explicitly psychosexual discourse with a Western anthropological tradition bound to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century epistemologies of European dominance and colonial expansionsim” (9). In particular, Freud does this by drawing on what modern scholars call "bad anthropology" to claim that "We should certainly not expect that the sexual life of these poor cannibals would be moral in our sense or that their sexual instincts would be subjected to any greater degree of restriction" (8). Note the casual designation of a race by reference to a presumed act of violence (cannibalism) that is linked, via corollary, to sexual irregulation. Yet, Freud is surprised to be forced to admit that in fact "these savages" do place severe restrictions on one key practice, which is incest. Amazingly, he concludes that "They are probably liable to a greater temptation to it and for that reason stand in need of fuller protection" (quoted in Eng 8). In this schema, writes Eng, "the legitimate mark and proof of racialization," rather than merely measurable by skin tone, "is established through Freud's depiction of the sexual practices and pathologies of primitive peoples" (8-9).
The two paintings are pendants: One is cool and dark, the other warm and sunlit; one is painted with blocks of matte paint, the other with a flickering, almost impressionist touch; one is mysterious, the other almost comic; one shows a clothed figure, the other a nearly naked figure; one suggests Breton woods, the other, a Polynesian beach. The oppositions are crucial to the meaning of the pair; taken together, they describe the composite nature of the Polynesian *mahu.*

These paintings, created after Gauguin had permanently settled in the Marquesas (long after the first draft of *Noa Noa*), thus reflect his enduring interest in the *mahu* not only as a figure of liminal sexuality, but as a figure of duality, specifically.

The resonance between the *mahu* Woodcutter and Enkidu is clearly quite strong. Both are stereotyped as animalistic, and at the same time both are decidedly androgynous. The Woodcutter is explicitly described as an “androgyne,” while Enkidu’s crossover nature is signified by his long, flowing hair and by his appearance in Gilgamesh’s dreams (“you will love him as a woman”). His position as the spouse of Gilgamesh is cemented upon his death: “When Gilgamesh touched his heart it did not beat. So Gilgamesh laid a veil, as one veils the bride, over his friend” (95). That the Woodcutter exhibits the classic *mahu* traits does not preclude him from also being an Enkidu analog; on the contrary, it strengthens the likelihood that Gauguin would have taken an interest in a figure like Enkidu, since his interest in the *mahu* indicates that he clearly was intrigued by the notion of primitivity and androgyny being linked. But what Enkidu helps to clarify is the aesthetic and ontological meaning of sexuality and eroticism in the Woodcutter Episode, because Enkidu thematizes these things within a

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153 Eisenman’s use of the word “composite” here raises a potential ambiguity in Gauguin’s own wording. In the Woodcutter Episode, Gauguin writes that love blossomed from the “mutual attraction between simple and composite” [*attraction mutuelle du simple au composé*]. In the scene, it seems that Gauguin considers himself the composite character and the *mahu* the simple one, but as Eisenman perhaps inadvertently highlights here, the *mahu* is in fact a composite character himself.
didactic mythic context. When we recognize Enkidu underlying the text here, we can see androgyny not just as the site of duality, but as the site of reconciliation.

Indeed, reconciliation is Enkidu’s raison d’être from the very beginning: reconciliation between gods and humans, between the people and their arrogant ruler, between human culture and the natural world it has left so far behind, and even, arguably, between masculine and feminine principles. He is created by the gods in response to human needs; he precipitates and enables Gilgamesh’s transformation and maturation into a compassionate leader; and in both form and deed he moves painfully but fruitfully between the animal kingdom and the human one. But perhaps most importantly, for our purposes here, Enkidu’s animalistic indeterminacy is echoed in his androgynous character; recall that “His body was rough, he had long hair like a woman’s; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of corn” and that “His body was covered with matted hair like Samuqan’s, the god of cattle” (63). Enkidu occupies an ontological position suspended between human and animal and at the same time between masculine and feminine. Further, these two planes of liminality are inextricably connected with one another, so that Enkidu’s movement toward a more masculine mode of being (“the thoughts of a man were in his heart” (65))\textsuperscript{154} is simultaneous with his movement toward a more human mode of being. This inextricability would seem to indicate a sense in which Enkidu’s straddling of gender is what enables his straddling of metaphysical categories.

\textsuperscript{154} The word “man,” of course, does not necessarily in and of itself denote masculinity, since in many languages it could just as easily denote humanness more generally. However, given narrative context, it makes sense to interpret this as referring to a man specifically. The “thoughts of a man” appear in his heart as a direct result of his developing and experiencing sexuality under the tutelage of the harlot, the exemplary and symbolic woman. Thus the “thoughts of a man” here are clearly thoughts of desire for the feminine, demarcating him as masculine and at the same time ushering in a new self-awareness.
Finally, Enkidu’s role as a figure of reconciliation is crystallized in the scene of his death, in which he curses the harlot for her role in his acculturation and the eventual downfall that it has brought about for him.\footnote{The curse against the harlot has some parallels with the Biblical curse against Adam and Eve after they have sinned in the garden. In its entirety, Enkidu’s curse inaugurates the age of the streetwalking prostitute – “You shall be without a roof for your commerce [...] [and] do your business in places fouled by the vomit of the drunkard” (90). There is an implication here that the sexual seduction hitherto associated with sacred duties of the temple has now been transferred to the secular (i.e., profane) marketplace of the tawdry nightlife. This curse echoes the demotion of work from sacred to profane in Genesis, where God originally creates Adam for the divine purpose of tilling the Garden, but ultimately condemns him to toiling for his own (secular) survival.} “As for you, woman,” he rails, “with a great curse I curse you! [...] Let you be stripped of your purple dyes, for I too once in the wilderness with my wife had all the treasure I wished” (90-1). Enkidu’s curse profoundly rejects the value of the woman and of female sexuality (which, in this patriarchal context, are one and the same), but it is not allowed to stand. The god Shamash intervenes, chastising Enkidu and reminding him of the many pleasures that the harlot has provided to him. His rebuff elicits from Enkidu a retraction: “Woman, I promise you another destiny. The mouth which cursed you shall bless you! Kings, princes and nobles shall adore you” (91). Instead, Enkidu turns his anger and recriminations upon himself, taking responsibility for his own role in his downfall. This dramatic reversal signals not only, perhaps, personal growth on the part of the double, but also, on the symbolic level, a promise of reconciliation between masculine and feminine principles that have been at war with each other since the start of the legend (exemplified in Gilgamesh’s rape of the brides, and his feud with the love goddess Ishtar).

That the androgyne makes his way into Noa Noa as a similarly reconciliatory figure has, as we have seen, been argued by scholars like Peter Brooks and Rod Edmond.
In particular, androgyny in *Noa Noa* and in Gauguin’s thinking is associated with harmony between the sexes, and simultaneously with a kind of animality that is characterized by a lack of sexual awareness. The manuscript version of the Woodcutter Episode contains a margin comment, separated from the body of text by a hand-drawn box, in which Gauguin lists to himself the main points that he wants to cover in this chapter:

1 Le côté androgyne du sauvage, le peu de différence de sexe chez les animaux.
2 La pureté qu’entraîne la vue du nu et les moeurs faciles entre les deux sexes.
L’inconnu du vice chez des sauvages.
Desir d’être un instant faible, femme.

1 The androgynous side of the savage, the little difference between the sexes in animals.
2 The purity entailed by seeing nakedness and by the easy commerce between the sexes.
The lack of knowledge of vice among savages.
The desire to be for a moment weak, a woman.

These thoughts are developed in the later versions of the text into a meditation on the problems of artifice and protocol in European bourgeois sex and gender roles:

On Tahiti the breezes from forest and sea strengthen the lungs, they broaden the shoulders and hips. Neither men nor women are sheltered from the rays of the sun nor the pebbles of the sea-shore. Together they engage in the same tasks with the same activity or the same indolence. There is something virile in the women and feminine in the men [...] Man and woman are comrades, friends rather than lovers, dwelling together almost without cease, in pain as in pleasure, and even the very idea of vice is unknown to them.156

Thus Gauguin makes use of the *mahu* in *Noa Noa* to clarify his thoughts on the relationship between androgyny and innocence. Not only is the androgynous body the site of dualism, but it is, more importantly, the site of *reconciliation*, a symbol of men and women overcoming enmity and working together in an egalitarian way.

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The kind of Rousseau-inspired utopian vision of gender harmony that inhabits these passages is what prompts writers like Edmond to see in Gauguin’s androgyne “a glimpse of the resolution of other divisions, cultural as well as gender, which Noa Noa seeks” (253). But this idea should be taken further, into the aesthetic realm, where the subtext of Enkidu and the broader context of Noa Noa reveal a parallel set of binaries revolving not around masculine/feminine but around spirit/matter and idea/form. The artist’s spirit, after all, must find a way to inhabit matter; his idea must find a way to manifest in form. Otherwise there is no art, and no artist. So the androgyne, both in and of himself, as a figure of duality, and as the object of Gauguin’s erotic desire, represents aesthetic principles here as well. This is another profoundly Platonic concept, one that can be traced back to the Symposium and that carried a distinctly aesthetic philosophical resonance at the height of Romantic idealism.157

The Desired Union

If the doubles Enkidu and Jotefa are themselves symbols of the possibilities of reconciliation, it follows that the erotic longing on the part of Gauguin and Gilgamesh could figure as a longing for such reconciliation. This is less easy to trace in Gilgamesh since we know less of what the eroticism of the image might have meant in the ancient Assyrian context. In the case of Gauguin, however, such a libidinal approach to an aesthetic issue - his desire for mimesis - is very much in keeping with what we know about his oeuvre, his education, and his philosophical and aesthetic influences.

157 See for example Warren Stevenson, Romanticism and the Androgynous Sublime, pp. 14-16, where the Romantic deployment of the androgynous as a figure of idealism and reconciliation is traced back to Plato and forward through Freud and Jung.
Silverman has demonstrated effectively that Gauguin’s education predisposed him to a dualistic worldview positing the divinity of the soul and the degradation of all that pertains to the flesh. She has further demonstrated that these ideas influenced Gauguin’s aesthetics in key ways. But her account of Gauguin is a bit one-sided, leaving out an important element of his approach: while Silverman sees in Gauguin’s art an attempt to efface material reality, it glosses over the somewhat contradictory and yet equally powerful longing for reconciliation, that recognition that “painting is like man, mortal but always living in conflict with matter” (WOS 35). Time and again, both in his writing and in his painting, Gauguin interrogates the constant interplay between idea and form, which becomes a major unifying theme in his work. In particular, although he may have experienced sexuality as a burden on the personal level, at a philosophical level he recognized the potential of this mysterious force to function as a unifying principle:

When Jesus says, *Be fruitful and multiply*, he even seems to be saying, taking the carnal meaning of his words: increase, that is, make the body healthy, improve it by means of all the exercises that are necessary to its vitality; multiply, that is, copulate,* a law which applies to mankind just as much as it does to the animals and plants. As for the spiritual meaning of his words, the same law exists: improvement of the soul, creation by means of intelligence coupled with feeling, beautiful and wise.

*And he does not indicate any legal form of copulation. [Gauguin’s note.] (WOS 154)

This passage should immediately remind us of Gauguin’s earlier pronouncement about “[t]he Raphaels and others, people in whom feeling was formulated before thought,” and who “were unable, even while studying, to destroy that feeling and so could remain artists” (WOS 4). In this much later formulation, art and aesthetic beauty are still the products of “feeling” and “intelligence” (thought), but here specifically it is a spiritual
“copulation” between them that leads the soul to a higher plane. The mysterious power of the erotic lies in its ability to connect things to one another.

That the reconciliatory potential of sexual union could have an aesthetic dimension is a core tenet of many aesthetic theories, from the ancient Greeks to the Frankfurt school; indeed, it functions as a unifying thread that often ties together widely disparate ideological points of view. For example, as Diamond writes, both Brecht and Benjamin share "key connections with Aristotle, especially the latter's emphasis on cognitive pleasure" (ix); for the reactionary Greek, as for the progressive Marxists, mimetic behavior originates as an instinctual drive and culminates in the sensuous pleasure of recognition. Where there is the potential for cognitive pleasure, there is mimetic desire: a drive to achieve the pleasurable outcome. In Gauguin’s thought, this mimetic desire delineates clearly Romantic, neo-Platonic tendencies that are nevertheless infused with a decidedly modernist streak.

In the Symposium, Plato, speaking through Diotima, constructs a “eulogy” (50) to erotic desire whereby such desire leads its lover to recognize and seek ever higher essences, ascending ultimately toward the Ideal, which is Beauty itself. Though the lover begins by desiring one beautiful body, such admiration will soon lead him to see the beauty in other bodies (48). From here, the lover will be led to see “that every type of beauty is closely related to every other,” so that, “[l]ooking now at beauty in general and not just at individual instances, he will no longer be slavishly attached to the beauty of a boy, or of any particular person at all, or of a specific practice” (48). Eventually, Diotima says, beauty “will appear as in itself, and by itself, always single in form; [...] it is not increased or decreased in any way nor does it undergo any change” (49). She urges
Socrates to imagine what it would be like “if someone could see beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not cluttered up with human flesh and colors and a great mass of mortal rubbish, but if he could catch sight of divine beauty itself, in its single form” (49).

The rhetorical core of Diotima’s argument is its dialectical proposition whereby the very thing that is eschewed – mortal human physicality – becomes the conduit to its opposite, the transcendental and unchanging Idea, in this case ideal Beauty. Facilitating this reconciliation is the power of erotic love, which provides both the drive and the channel for the individual to connect with the eternal. This narrative closely resembles Gauguin’s friend Vincent van Gogh’s theory of love, which, as Naomi Maurer describes it, consisted in viewing love “as the force within us that allows us to penetrate the world external to ourselves, to comprehend it and unify ourselves with it” (16). In a letter to his brother Theo, van Gogh wrote that “one must love with a lofty and serious and intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence, and one must always try to know deeper, better, and more. That leads to God, that leads to unwavering faith” (Maurer 16).

Furthermore, for van Gogh, as for Gauguin, not only could the longing for the intimate be connected with erotic love, but it was also something to be approached through aesthetic creation. Thus, he wrote to Bernard about his famous painting of 1888, The Sower, that “at work in the fields, he was beset by ‘memories of the past’ and ‘a longing for the infinite, of which the sower, the sheaf are symbols’” (Silverman 82). Like erotic love, the aesthetic symbol can function as a conduit for unifying principles and satisfying a sacred aesthetic desire.

While this strongly Platonic current that is clearly visible in both Gauguin’s and van Gogh’s erotic theories of art and love was firmly established in Romantic discourse,
in Gauguin’s approach – especially in *Noa Noa* – there is also what Theodor Adorno would classify as a distinctly modernist bent to it. For Adorno, the epiphanic moment when a work of art merges with the Idea it attempts to communicate is nothing short of sensual, even ecstatic. Hence his assertion that “aesthetic experience resembles sexual experience, in particular its culmination” (Geulen 99). Such “culmination,” for Adorno, occurs when “petrification is united with the most vivacious” (99): in other words, when the aesthetic object presents its viewers with a perfect unity between the immortal (vivacious) Idea and its real-world counterpart. It is this feeling of aesthetic “culmination” that Gauguin seeks in the creation of a work of art, and that he dramatizes in the Woodcutter Episode. His approach illustrates the underlying truth in Adorno’s claim that “It is through the moment of sensuous satisfaction that works of art constitute themselves as appearance” (AT 21). At the same time, the modernist work seeks to break through the mere sensuality of this type of pleasurable appearance, into something more complex:

Dissonance (and its counterparts in visual arts) – the trademark, as it were, of modernism – lets in the beguiling moment of sensuousness by transfiguring it into its antithesis, that is, pain. This is an aesthetic phenomenon of primal ambivalence. (AT 21)

Such “primal ambivalence,” I will argue in the next section of this chapter, is fundamental to Gauguin’s parable of mimetic desire. The artist seeks not only pleasure, but its dialectical transmutation into its opposite: pain. Such pain is inevitable because the mimetic product of art will never truly capture the same quality as the mimetic objects of the empirical world or of the soul; this is why, as Taussig writes, we end up in "this silly and often desperate place wanting the impossible so badly that [...] we believe it's our rightful destiny and act as accomplices of the real" (xxvi). Yet this impossible
wanting is, for Adorno, essential to successful works of art, which "want us to become aware of what is true and what is false in them" (22). Like the hero disintegrating and merging with his Other, his equal-and-opposite primitive double, the artist seeks both satisfaction and, paradoxically, denial. The undercurrent of Gilgamesh here is crucial for this endeavor because of its role in disturbing the boundaries both of the author’s own selfhood and of travelogue as a genre form.

V. The Text of Bliss

In addition to highlighting the sensuous pleasure of aesthetic experience in the visual realm, Adorno also recognizes the libidinal potential inherent in linguistic practice. “How intimately sex and language are intertwined,” he argues, “can be seen by reading pornography in a foreign language. When de Sade is read in the original no dictionary is needed” (MM 48). This is because repressed desires are “understood instinctively;” they “force their way irresistibly into the innermost cell of meaning, which resembles them” (48). His understanding here is echoed by Roland Barthes, whose Freudian approach to the excitements of textuality describes reading as “an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)” (10). For Barthes, as for Adorno, language functions as a medium for the union of idea and practice, a union that he conceives in erotic metaphors.

In The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes sets forth a paradigm for understanding the libidinal impulse in textuality. In particular, he differentiates between what he calls the “text of pleasure,” that which gives what Adorno would call sensuous pleasure, and the “text of bliss,” which problematizes pleasure with dissonant disruptions:
Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...], unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

For Barthes, the transgression of genre (the “comfortable practice of reading”) amounts to both a denial and a supreme satisfaction, what he calls a “profound hedonism” that carries with it the paradoxical promise of destruction; the reader “enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss)” (14). Thus it is not in the fulfillment but in the denial of the reader’s generically-determined desire that the bliss of reading is achieved.

What Barthes highlights here are two key principles, both of which inform Gauguin’s relation to artmaking as a social enterprise and, I would argue, his aesthetic parable in *Noa Noa*. The first of these is the libidinal quality inherent in aesthetic experience. The second is dynamics of genre, which Barthes recognizes as essentially a socially sanctioned contract between writer and reader. What is promised in the contract is a certain carefully conscripted type of pleasure, the Oedipal pleasure of “denuding,” of finding out what comes next. The result is that the writer actually holds a tremendous amount of power: by disrupting the contract, he or she can challenge the reader’s very relationship to language itself.

Stephen Heath approaches the poetics of genre similarly in “The Politics of Genre,” where he writes that, in addition to being constituted by historically determined “sociocultural operations of language by speakers and listeners, writers and readers,” generically defined works also play to the expected pleasures of their intended audience (168). He calls genre address “an envisaged mobilization of desire, holding the reader or
listener to certain ‘pleasures’ which define his or her genre participation” (169). The structure of genre delineates a path of expectation, where the reader derives pleasure from seeing familiar patterns fulfilled. But for Heath, as for Barthes, the intensity of communion between reader and writer is paradoxically heightened when such pleasures are challenged or ultimately denied. He writes,

the point is to shift from work to text. Where a work resembles, is readable within the genre limits that it follows as a condition of its representation to the reader, the text differs, transgresses those limits in order to implicate the reader in writing that disturbs representations. Where the work is on the side of pleasure, modulating a subject’s cultural expectations of fulfillment, the text is on the other, that of jouissance, coming off from any stability of self in an abruptness of dispersal, the reader pushed out of genres. (173; emphasis in original)

Here the generic “work” resembles nothing so much as genre itself; its capacity for access to truth is limited by its contract with the reader. It is the “text,” on the other hand, that allows for a communion between writer and reader, between subject and truth, that is profound enough to destabilize the very selfhood of both, in an ecstasy of denial and release that Heath calls jouissance.

Heath’s categories of “work” and “text” closely parallel Barthes’s “text of pleasure” and “text of bliss” and Adorno’s “sensuality” and “dissonance.” In each case, the path of desire is dialectically transformed into its opposite: promise into denial, denial into bliss. In Gauguin’s case, it was explicitly the text of bliss that the artist was after, both on paper and on canvas, and the model of the erotic androgynous Other that he found in Gilgamesh provided an ideal symbol for exploring this particular aesthetic principle. Throughout his career, Gauguin made a point of foregrounding the instability of gender as a way of destabilizing both aesthetic and political categories that he found limiting. Because genre forms exist as “mobilizations of desire,” attacking them at their
libidinal roots can simultaneously send both a political message – an undoing of socially
deterministic boundaries – and an aesthetic one – a refusal to create art that merely
“resembles,” as Heath puts it. These dual aims, as we have seen, were central to
Gauguin’s ambitions.

An example of Gauguin’s use of androgyny to attack both aesthetic and social
categories can be found in his many “Tahitian Eve” figures, which provide a forthright
dramatization of the link between the disruption of gender and that of genre. As Peter
Brooks has written, the artist’s antagonism against Salon neo-Classicism was both
aesthetically and politically inflected:

The classical tradition as embodied in Beaux-Arts practice and the innumerable
nudes exhibited at the Paris Salons had clearly become decadent, the nudes
themselves both erotic and prettified, a kind of Second Empire and Third
Republic pinup art that excused what it was doing with worn-out references to
classical motifs: endless births of Venus, *bacchantes*, and artificial bathing
scenes. (336)

Gauguin’s approach to this problem, as Brooks demonstrates, was two-pronged. On one
hand, he sidelines the classical motif for the Biblical one, reflecting “a stubborn and no
doubt accurate perception that Venus was no longer the point, no longer what nakedness
was all about in the Western imagination” (336). Instead Eve, with her attendant
connotations of sin and death, was to Gauguin a more truthful image of what the naked
female body stood for in Western culture. At the same time, Gauguin sought to
complicate the image of Eve herself, swapping out the pale and shamefaced Eves of the
European tradition for what he saw as the frank and unflinching Eves of Tahiti, the
modern-day Garden of Eden. To Brooks, Gauguin’s project has the goal of “revising
Eve, of creating a nude in paradise whose nakedness in meant to be looked at in joy and
erotic pleasure without the sense that her sexuality is connected to evil and pain”
(336). Such a project, Brooks argues, “made his objects of representation call into question traditional modes of looking” (336). In other words, they aspired to function as texts of bliss.

If Gauguin’s Eves were designed to challenge traditional modes of looking, his most potent tool for achieving this aim is the disruption of gender. Painting against a current of academic representation within which the nude is synonymous with a particular and limited notion of female form and attitude, Gauguin unsettled the gaze by representing a female body fetishized according to a dramatically different set of erotic priorities. His Tahtitian Eves were stocky, flat-footed, and stout, with strong thighs, narrow hips, and wide shoulders framing small breasts. To Gauguin, these characteristics were evidence of their savageness, their animality, and it was this very savageness that offered redemption from both Classicism’s decrepitude and Eve’s criminality. “My chosen Eve is almost an animal,” he wrote, “that’s why she’s chaste, though naked” (qtd. in Brooks 336). With his animalistic Eves, Gauguin sought to deny the anticipated pleasures of Salon viewing, interrupting the “work” with a “text” that provides a rupture of identity and a jouissance of looking. Gauguin’s use of the word “chaste” here is therefore ironic; it signifies the unburdened release into sexuality, rather than a freedom from it.

The conceptual link between Eve’s status as “almost an animal” and her androgynous figure is made explicit in the Woodcutter Episode in Noa Noa, where the

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158 I would take issue with Brooks’s assertion that Gauguin’s Tahitian nudes are meant to be looked at in joy and without pain. Their doleful expressions and often moribund contextual cues belie this notion (more on this in Chapter 4). Rather, they seem very much to continue his overall project of connecting sexuality with death and decrepitude, with the historical background of a fading culture enhancing, rather than challenging, this message.
object of representation and the object of desire (one and the same thing) is doubly destabilized by gender and by culture. As a reincarnation of Enkidu, he is suspended between male and female, between animal and human, between East and West, and between ancient and modern. It’s instructive that this is the section of the manuscript where Gauguin has noted to himself, in the margins, that he wants to communicate “The androgynous side of the savage, the little difference between the sexes in animals,” and “The lack of knowledge of vice among savages.” In Noa Noa as in his paintings, Gauguin’s androgynous fantasy is a fantasy of release: spiritual, sexual, societal, yes, but also an aesthetic release. It involves the denial of the reader’s desire – “No,” he mocks, “I will not bring you an island romance!” – that at the same time seeks to release both reader and writer into ecstatic comprehension.

The release reaches its climax at the same time that the Woodcutter Scene does. In order to understand it in this context, it is necessary to return to this scene in detail. As Gauguin meditates on the erotic appeal of his young companion’s “lithe animal body,” sniffing out the mountain trail before them, he is filled with a complex mixture of contradictory feelings, which recall the outlines of the fore-pleasure principle: an anticipation of pleasure mixed with an instinctive dread of its fulfillment. As the artist suddenly realizes that "nous étions seulement tous deux - " he begins to feel "un pressentiment de crime, le désir d'inconnu, le reveil du mal." Then, "Je m'approchai, sans peur des lois, le trouble aux temples." But just at the critical moment, the path reaches its end and the two men have to cross a stream. The young guide turns to face Gauguin, exposing his chest, and Gauguin writes, "l'androgyne avait disparu; ce fut bien un jeune homme, ses yeux innocents présentaient l'aspect de la limpidité des eaux" ["the
androgyne had vanished; it was a young man, after all; his innocent eyes resembled the limpidity of the water"].\textsuperscript{159} The artist cools his desire by plunging into the cold stream, shouting "Oh non," and noting that "cette négation, répondant à mon désir antérieur, s'enforça comme un écho dans la montagne" ["Oh no," I answered, and this denial, answering my previous desire, drove in among the cliffs like an echo" (28)].

As I have already outlined, scholars like Rod Edmond have argued that the androgyne in this scene represents a certain cultural critique. Edmond sees the homoerotic overtones here as symbolic of what Gauguin considers his Western degeneration and decrepitude; the androgyne offers release from these desires by failing to understand and reciprocate them (274). In a similar vein, Brooks (1993) argues that Gauguin must reject his own erotic urges here because they threaten to weaken him, to turn him into a woman (184). However, this type of reading overlooks the curious fact that the denial that drives in among the cliffs is actually the start, rather than the end of Gauguin’s erotic triumph, signifying that the release in this episode is a release into desire and not from it. “Je m'enfonçai vivrement dans la taillis,” Gauguin continues, linking physical violence and savagery with his erotic performance:

\begin{quote}
Tous deux, sauvages, nous attaquâmes à la hache un magnifique arbre qu’il fallut détruire pour avoir une branche convenable à mes désirs. Je frappai avec rage et les mains ensanglantées. Je coupais avec le plaisir d'une brutalité assouvie, d'une destruction de je ne sais quoi. […] Je revins tranquille me sentant [dès lors] un autre homme un Maorie - tous deux nous portions gaiement notre lourd fardeau, et je puis encore admirer devant moi les formes gracieuses de mon jeune ami, et cela tranquille - formes robustes comme l'arbre que nous portions. L'arbre sentait la
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{159} My translation differs from Griffin's here. He writes, "The hermaphrodite had vanished; it was a young man, after all; his innocent eyes resembled the limpidity of the water" (28). I have changed "hermaphrodite" into "androgyne" because of the importance of androgyny as an image. While a "hermaphrodite" may have characteristics of both sexes, an "androgyne" presents elements of the male and the female in harmony with one another - a crucial distinction for the present discussion.
rose noa noa - nous étions l'après midi [sic] de retour fatigués - Il me dit - Tu est content - Oui -- et dans moi je redis Oui -

[Savages both of us, we attacked with the axe a magnificent tree that had to be destroyed to get a branch suitable for my desires. I struck furiously and, my hands covered in blood, hacked away with the pleasure of sating one’s brutality and of destroying something. [...] I returned at peace, feeling myself thenceforward a different man, a Maori. The two of us carried our load cheerfully, and I could again admire, in front of me, the graceful curves of my young friend – and calmly: curves robust like the tree we were carrying. The tree smelt of roses, noa noa. We got back in the afternoon, tired. He said to me, “Are you pleased?” “Yes” – and inside myself I repeated: “Yes.”]

His mission complete, Gauguin’s postcoital mood of “sweet quietude, peace, victory, and rejuvenation” calls profoundly into question the “denial” at the cold stream.

What Gauguin dramatizes in the Woodcutter Episode is the curious dynamics of the text of bliss, whereby it is the very denial of pleasure that leads beyond the world of reading and into jouissance. The narrator’s “Oh no,” his dive into the stream, his denial forcing its way in among the cliffs – these constitute not the end of the story but rather the opening into self-dissolution made possible by the triumphal explosion of boundaries.

The paradox is visible in the narrator’s satisfaction as he chops down the tree, all the while singing,

Coupes [sic] par le pied la forêt toute entière (des desirs)
Coupe [sic] en toi l'amour de toi même comme avec la main en automne
on couperait le Lotus -

These words, offered almost as a prayer, resound with the artist’s refusal to bow to the readerly contract. They represent the modernist’s denial of the veridical potential of the aesthetics of genre, which circumscribes the artist’s relationship to truth by forcing arbitrary, culturally determined rules of representation upon him. These rules include not only narrative considerations, but also color and shading, chiaroscuro, what Gauguin calls “trompe l’oeil” – all of which are functions of the Salon-approved genre forms. Together
with these, the desires mobilized by the anticipation of literary delights – the sea-faring adventure, the pliable island maiden, the contrition of the sinner reformed – must be destroyed, like the tree, in order to gain access to ontological truth and aesthetic bliss.

Furthermore, it is the androgyne in particular who makes this destruction possible, guiding the narrator into truth (and away from convention) as he guides him, Enkidu-like, into the heart of the forest. Where the generic reader expects a loving girl, like Pierre Loti’s paradigmatic Rarahu, Gauguin provides a faultlessly handsome young savage, disrupting the anticipated pleasure. Where the armchair anthropologist, well versed in the hyperbolically oversexed figure of the transgendered mahu in Polynesian travelogues, may then expect an almost demonic lasciviousness, Gauguin provides instead an innocent stare as limpid as the island stream. Where the moralist anticipates reformation after crimes against nature have been confessed, Gauguin recounts only triumph and rejuvenation. And when the historian looks to the memoir for the keys to Gauguin’s life and mindset while in Tahiti, she will find a maze of mythic and pop-cultural allusions that radically undermine the narrator’s authorial integrity, which of course is already called starkly into question by the presence of Morice as an interlocutor.

The rehearsal of Gilgamesh’s forest journey is a fundamental aspect of Noa Noa’s status as a text of bliss. For one thing, it further destabilizes the cultural embeddedness of quintessential mythic figures: just as Gauguin swaps out the neoclassical Venus for his Tahitian “Eves,” so he has replaced Rarahu with his own Tahitian Enkidu, a character whose mythic status enhances his symbolic and alien qualities. This has the effect of destabilizing the work’s generic conformity while simultaneously enhancing its unexpected mythic and erotic potential. At the same time, the rehearsal of Gilgamesh is
essential to the instability of the travel memoir conceit that Gauguin is toying with here. Like the sculpture of *Oviri* I discussed in Chapter 1, Gauguin’s play with the Gilgamesh figure is what Frederic Bohrer would call an “essay in the assertion of self as Other” (268). Silverman has shown that, prior to the Tahitian trip, Gauguin put similar energy into his construction of the Breton peasant, a trope that he deployed as “a tool for metaphysical and metapsychic extension” (109). This type of extension radically disrupts the boundaries of selfhood implicit in the autobiographical mode, leading *Noa Noa* to serve as a prime example of de Man’s thesis that “autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition;” that it should be thought of as “not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (920). By unsettling the relationships and distinctions between writer and reader, and between self and other, *Noa Noa* dramatizes the truth of de Man’s claim, showing how very much the concept of autobiography is predicated on reader expectation rather than authorial intent.

Barthes’s category of the “text of bliss” highlights the erotic potential lurking where text and concept meet, where they achieve a true fusion, and where they succeed in exploding the boundaries not just between themselves but, by extension, between reader and writer, and between self and world. This is the same principle that functions at the heart of Adorno’s erotic theory of aesthetics. The erotic fantasy of the Woodcutter Episode is Gauguin’s way of enacting that dynamic in a narrative form.

**VI. Conclusion: The Anachronic Subject and the Colonization of Time**

In *The Text of Pleasure*, after making his distinction between the text of pleasure and that of bliss, Barthes writes that “the subject who keeps the two texts in his hand and
in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture [...] and in the destruction of that culture. [...] He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse” (14). There can be but few better examples of this precise phenomenon than Gauguin’s coy, rambling, self-effacing, self-aggrandizing *Noa Noa*, where the narrator’s subjectivity is indeed, as I have argued, “split twice over, doubly perverse.” Reaching back into myth, Gauguin has cast himself here as an ancient hero-king, dispersing his selfhood across time and space in a move that both transgresses and traverses.

In my first chapter, I argued that archaeology in Gauguin’s time was surrounded and supported by a discourse of conquest that amounted to what Bohrer calls “a colonization of history” (66). Nowhere is this more readily visible than in Gauguin’s use of Gilgamesh, where the precarious balance between cultural allusion and cultural destruction – the hedonism that Barthes pinpoints – reveals Gauguin at a vulnerable point in his life and career, searching for a transcendent Self that would achieve an anachronic status. Like Gilgamesh, the Gauguin of the South Seas faced the crisis of his own mortality, which he communicated in sometimes subtle and other times not-so-subtle ways both before his trip and after. Before the journey, in letters that Nancy Perloff describes as “steeped in language nearly identical to the official handbook’s reports on the Society Islands,” Gauguin imagines himself running off to a paradise where he will be “free at last, with no money troubles, and able to love, to sing, and to die” (Perloff 237). Throughout *Noa Noa*, Gauguin constantly references his status as “almost an old man” and his perpetual quest for “rejuvenation,” which he claims to have found in the end of the Woodcutter Episode, and then again at the end of the text. “I went away two
years older,” he says, “younger by twenty years; more of a barbarian, too, and yet knowing more” (42). In this way, he seems to present himself as somehow having defeated time.

He has done this by becoming the anachronic subject, split and doubled, doubly perverse.160 Gauguin is doubled not only in his woodcutter friend, but in the shadowy figure whose footprints in history he reinhabits – that is, in Gilgamesh. There remains between these two men an important difference, however: Gilgamesh fails in his quest for immortality and loses the plant of youth. Gauguin, on the other hand, proclaims himself rejuvenated, having plucked, for ambrosia, the flower of the thirteen-year-old Tehamana. This divergence will be the subject of the coming chapter, because it carries important implications for understanding Gauguin’s aesthetic allegory. For the moment, it will suffice to explore Gauguin’s triumph as an anachronic subject. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the king’s lamentation about mortality is directly connected with geographical power and conquest: “I have looked over the wall and I see the bodies floating on the river,” he says, “and that will be my lot also. Indeed I know it is so, for whoever is tallest among men cannot reach the heavens, and the greatest cannot encompass the earth” (72). His impotence in the face of death is paralleled by an impotence in the face of the earth’s immense geography. Hence, both death and land, both time and resources, are objects of conquest, even if it is an exercise in futility.

160 In his essay on "The Uncanny," Freud's discussion of the double motif in literature includes an interpretation - derived from Otto Rank - that the double serves a purpose in the individual's fight against the relentless forward push of time: "For the 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death,' as Rank says; and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body" (940). From this perspective, it is fitting that Gauguin would deploy the doppelgänger as a means to get outside of time and its inherent mortalizing limitations.
In Gauguin’s case, it’s possible that the same logic holds true, and that this accounts for the different outcome. The language steeped in imagery culled from official guidebooks and travelogues reminds us that Gauguin’s experience of both Tahiti and

Gilgamesh was already preconditioned within a colonial context. Furthermore,

Gauguin’s specific interest in Madagascar and then Tahiti was deeply influenced by his experience at the 1885 World Fair in Paris. There, as Perloff describes it, France’s paternalistic colonial ambition found expression in

the idyll of social and racial harmony that emerged from the planners’ arrangement of the various pavilions and ‘villages.’ Pavilions of Algeria, Tunisia, and Annam-Tonkin stood across from the ‘village’ of Senegal, the factory of Gabon, the Tahitian huts, and the pavilion of Guadalupe. Pavilions of Indochina were located close by. French visitors strolled through these displays. Thus the French empire appeared as one glorious and peaceful family, with France at the helm. (234)

Given this scenario, the reality that Gauguin confronted was quite different from what

Gilgamesh described: clearly there were those who were powerful enough to encompass the Earth. Why not, then, conquer time as well?

In this vein it is instructive that after viewing the World Fair, Gauguin immediately began to talk about the rejuvenating potential of the East. As Perloff writes, his letters around this time “express increasing hostility toward Europe. He contrasts the East, where he ‘shall be rejuvenated,’ with the ‘corrupt’ West. He presents himself as an outsider, uncomfortable with the aged, corrupt, Western civilization that spawned him and eager to ‘gain new strength in touching the soil of the East’ ” (235). And yet it was that very civilization, the one which had indeed encompassed the Earth, that now gave him the power and the privilege to travel to one far-off land while reimagining himself as
the hero of another. “Certainly,” Perloff notes, “he had no qualms about benefiting from the colonial system directed by the country he found so corrupt” (235).

Gauguin’s status as an anachronic subject is closely related to his atavistic tendencies; recall Solomon-Godeau’s argument that “Stasis – being outside of time and historical process – is particularly crucial in the primitivist imagination, insofar as what is required is an imaginary site of psychic return” (317). But it is also closely related, vis à vis the colonialist system that enabled such an encompassing of the earth, to the dominating thread in Gauguin’s character and, more to the point, in his aesthetics. My next chapter explores this dominating thread more fully, unpacking Gauguin’s complex and ambivalent relationship to nature and interpreting his reimagining of Gilgamesh in this light. In particular, I will explore the problem of knowledge in Gauguin’s work: the uneasy and conflicting desires to simultaneously reject knowledge as corrupting, and at the same time voraciously seek out and consume cultural materials. I argue that Gauguin’s steadfast rejection, in Noa Noa, of the lessons of Gilgamesh amounts to more than just the arrogance of a privileged colonialist consumer of culture; it carries, once again, an aesthetic message that intertwines with both the spectres of Romantic idealism and the dissonance of modernist pursuit.
CHAPTER 4

REVISING GILGAMESH: ANTI-AGONISM AND THE CRIME AGAINST NATURE

In every country I have to go through a period of incubation; each time I have to learn to recognize the various species of plants and trees, of all nature, so varied and capricious, never willing to give away all its secrets, to yield itself up.

- *Avant et Après* (WOS 251).

The cruel white man and the submissive Oriental lotus blossom mark a narrative of imperial knowledge that is assiduously cultivated and rescripted by the colonial world.


I. Introduction

It is often the case, when writers cultivate mythic subtexts for their work, that the points of divergence between the ancient rendering and the modern one are just as instructive as their parallels. This chapter explores some of the key revisions that Gauguin has made in his rehearsal of Gilgamesh, with an eye to uncovering more about what the text might have meant to him, and about how it functions in *Noa Noa* as an allegory of aesthetic pursuit. In particular, I use this chapter to question why Gauguin, who often projected an agonistic sensibility in his art, his writing, and his public persona, would choose to reject the overtly agonistic lessons that there are to be found in *Gilgamesh*. I argue that the answer lies in two discernible tendencies in Gauguin’s thought: his ambivalent relationship to nature, and his ambivalent relationship to knowledge. These two interrelated tendencies in Gauguin's thought both carry important
implications for understanding his approach to aesthetics. As I will argue in this chapter, they are also both inextricably connected to his positioning as a privileged colonial-imperialist subject.

One of the major differences between the Akkadian *Gilgamesh* cycle as it was unearthed from Assurbanipal’s library and Gauguin’s reimagining of it concerns the outcome of the hero’s forest journey. For Gilgamesh, as we will see, the conquest of the Cedar Mountain is initially triumphant, but ultimately disastrous. As he and Enkidu discover soon after their return to the city, the Gods are less than impressed by their crimes against nature, and the subsequent suffering and horrible demise of Enkidu is their punishment for their hubris and their lack of respect for the laws of nature. Their punishment also reinforces the central spiritual lesson of the epic - that it is the lot of humans to die - a lesson so deeply rooted and so iconic in the *Gilgamesh* cycle that, as John Maier writes, “[G]enerations have characterized it [as] a protest against death” (29). However, in *Noa Noa*, the absence of this aspect of the narrative is as glaringly striking as the presence of the forest journey itself is: upon returning home, not only does

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161 In contrast to this prevailing view, Damrosch cautions against overstating the centrality of the theme of death in *Gilgamesh*: “The problem of mortality is indeed the hallmark of the Old Babylonian version of the epic,” he writes, “but this theme gradually loses its dominance as the epic develops over the course of the second millennium. The epic’s eventual standard form, produced around 1250, interweaves a whole series of themes in a synoptic exploration of the limits and meaning of culture” (TNC 89). The version uncovered in Assurbanipal’s library in 1848 was produced in around the mid-700s, B.C.E., making it one of the later, “standard” forms of the text. As such, it does deal heavily with the question of human culture and its limitations, but it also does so within the context of probing the problem of mortality. In fact, one of the “limits of human culture” is its inability, in spite of great ingenuity, to overcome mortality itself. This very relation is central to the text and also carries deep resonance for a modernist artist writing at the turn of the twentieth century.
the hero face no punishment and learn no lessons, but he proclaims himself rejuvenated, refreshed and renewed.

The second major thematic divergence between the texts follows along similar lines, but probes a complex cultural question that has dogged generations of secular and religious thought. It concerns what I will call the problem of knowledge, which is that it inevitably brings about sorrows as well as rewards. In particular, general human knowledge is very often either equated with or symbolized by the unique phenomenon of sexual knowledge, the acquisition of which weakens a man and hastens his demise; "[i]n short," as Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui writes, "sexual performance - as either a function or differential of sexuality - has been not just a means of identity but a means of knowledge" (3).162 Such is the case in the Gilgamesh cycle, where Enkidu’s fall from a peaceful animal state into a warring cultural condition and, finally, into a painful degeneration and death is precipitated by his seduction by a harlot. By imparting to him sexual knowledge, she also imparts cultural knowledge – “the thoughts of a man” – and thus weakens both his animal strength and his individual autonomy. Enkidu specifically makes this connection on his deathbed, but in Noa Noa the lesson again goes missing. Not only does Enkidu’s counterpart, the Woodcutter, remain blissfully innocent of his own sexual

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162 In The Sin of Knowledge, Theodore Ziolkowski traces the origins of this prominent concern from its roots among three major figures in Western civilization - Adam, Prometheus, and Faust - through to its modern-day ethical and political implications. He writes that, in spite of many thinkers' ambivalence toward the pursuit of knowledge, "we persevere, compelled by what Saint Augustine in his Confessions (10.35) called the human 'appetite' or 'desire' of knowing (appetitus noscendi and libido noscendi)" (xi). Augustine's phrasing, in concert with the biblical myth, points to the way in which this dilemma has been conceived of as fundamentally erotically charged, a dynamic that Gauguin plays up in his working through of the theme and that he also connects with the issue of aesthetic refinement, as we will see.
initiation, but he actually seeks out sexual knowledge - striking up embarassing conversations about "love in Europe" (25) - and he does so with impunity.

These points of divergence are particularly significant because the lessons of *Gilgamesh* would have fit so spectacularly into Gauguin’s self-identification as an agonistic paragon of artistic martyrdom. Indeed, he wrote to his friend Schuffenecker in 1885 that “[t]here is no denying that we are the martyrs of painting” (WOS 7). In this chapter, we will explore the agonistic impulse in Gauguin’s themes and in his public persona, in order to better understand why and how this impulse has been eliminated from *Noa Noa*’s reworking of Gilgamesh, where it would so easily have fit. I will argue that the agonistic narrative fits Gauguin’s vision of himself as a public personality, but that the aesthetic allegory in *Noa Noa* concerns the actual process of committing truth to canvas. Because it reflects a domineering thread in Gauguin's aesthetic practice, *Noa Noa* plays up a domineering narrative, rather than an agonistic one; it presents a fantasy in which the artist is free of physical and metaphysical constraints as much as moral and social ones.

Colonizing History, Colonizing Others

In Chapters 2 and 3, we saw how the figure of the double functions in the text of *Noa Noa*, as both an echo of an ancient mythic character, and an allegorical representation of the artist’s aesthetic desires. I argued that his presence in the text, in particular as an androgynous object of desire and as a rehearsal of Enkidu, amounts to an explosion of textual boundaries, shattering the reader’s expectations and reaching toward a blissful union of writer and reader, artist and image, idea and form. Using the ideas of
Roland Barthes, I suggested that, as a “text of bliss,” *Noa Noa* breaks down genre forms and opens itself up to ecstatic aesthetic experience, and I attempted to demonstrate that the presence of Enkidu, the double of Gilgamesh, is essential to this dynamic. As such, *Noa Noa* reveals its author to be the type of “anachronic subject” that Barthes describes in his theory: a figure who, unconfined to socially determined genre forms, is also unconfined to a moment in history. Reaching back into time, to gather the cultural fruits of an ancient civilization, Gauguin engages in a “colonization of history” which, for better or worse, allows him to enrich his own aesthetic experience and ours.163

The presence of the double in the text thus reflects the culturally dominant and anachronically privileged positioning of its author. Such a reading is supported by Paul Coates’ s theory of doubling as ideology in *The Double and the Other*, where he writes that

> [t]he Double can be said to crystallise under the concurrence of two conditions; when other people begin to be viewed as akin to ourselves; and when the self is projected into a space hitherto defined as other. As they interact, these processes create the climate of colonialism. (32)

Hence, Coates argues, “the appearance of the Double coincides with the rapid spread of colonialism – with a growing propensity to view the other as akin to oneself, or at least potentially so, and the self as already installed, by means of the Double, in the other’s place” (33). In this sense, Gauguin’s deployment of the image of the primitive double

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163 See Chapter 1, page 86 for my discussion of archaeology as a colonial enterprise and a colonization of history. As Norman Levitt has argued, the tendency of cosmopolitan subjects to infuse archaeological finds with numinous powers that reflect modern anxieties is widespread. "What might be called a 'colonization' of the past," Levitt writes, "is a pervasive cultural habit that erupts for many reasons in many places but which reposes, finally, on the unspoken and unconscious assumption that the past is, indeed, open for colonization; that it is truly malleable and can always be molded nearer to the heart's desire" (261).
asserts in its form no less than in its content the position of colonial dominance and the privilege to occupy the space of the Other that Gauguin holds.  

Colonialism and Aesthetic Dominance

This position of colonial dominance has been well rehearsed by other writers, and has been shown to function as a deeply troubling thread throughout Gauguin’s life and work. However, my purpose in this chapter is to explore the ways in which Gauguin’s dominant position also inflected his aesthetic practices. We have already seen in Chapter 2 that there is a fantasy of aesthetic union and aesthetic dominance at the core of the Woodcutter Episode of Noa Noa, and here we will look more closely at the dominant strain in particular, in order to understand how Gauguin’s colonial positioning and his fantasy of aesthetic dominance form a potent, if at times uncomfortable, confluence in the text and in his oeuvre more broadly.

As a practice that involved turning inward and rejecting documentary realism, Gauguin’s aesthetics often manifested a sense of defiance of, or even rage against, the natural world. In this context, the allegory of the rosewood tree reenacts not only a destruction of genre (as I have argued in Chapter 3), but at the same time a destruction of nature itself, which dominated both Salon painting and the ontologically confining

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164 In The Modern Construction of Myth, Andrew von Hendy illustrates the geopolitical implications of high modernist primitivism, which regarded non-Western aesthetics as a point of access to a universal truth inhabiting a realm outside of time and culture. "This pursuasion of the universalizing power of art," he writes, "smoothes the way in turn for the widespread belief, systematized by Hegel, that modern Western art sublates the art of earlier and non-Western cultures in a superior, totalizing synthesis" (135). Von Hendy's analysis, which echoes and draws upon James Clifford (and, lurking in the background, Said), demonstrates the intricate dynamics by which an overt embrace of a colonized culture actually functions to perpetuate the power imbalance.
categories against which Gauguin raged. For example, in his “Notes on Art at the Universal Exposition,” published in *Le Moderniste Illustré* in 1889, Gauguin stressed the value of decorative art, which, he argues, “involves so much poetry” (WOS 32). Because of its inherently dialectical purpose - i.e., its dual role in accessing the spiritual realm and contributing to the materiality of structure - decorative art “is a far more abstract art than the servile imitation of nature” (WOS 32). This comment comes in the context of praising the bas-reliefs in the Louvre collection of Near Eastern artifacts (“All of the mystical, dreamy orient is to be found there”), further emphasizing the strong link that Gauguin saw between foreignness and freedom, as well as between Assyria and dominance (nothing “servile” here). At the same time, it suggests that Gauguin self-consciously positioned his own aesthetic approach as being in conflict with the natural world. As he later wrote in *Diverses Choses*, his art was emphatically not about representing nature, but about expressing the artist’s “mysterious center of thought” (WOS 140). Unlike the Impressionists, who had made progress but who ultimately remained “bound by the shackles of verisimilitude” (140), Gauguin was pursuing an art that “tramples on the mathematical, material, linear rules of natural perspective [...] and replaces them either by equivalents or by other more or less fabulous rules, speaking, as it were, an allegorical language, which [...] when it is translated rationally becomes a noble language” (WOS 140). Here, he unequivocally asserts the artist’s domineering mission – to “trample the laws of nature,” and erect in their place a “noble language” of allegory. It is in this context that we should evaluate his relationship to nature in *Noa Noa* and in his rescripting of *Gilgamesh*. 
For Gauguin, turning away from the “servile imitation of nature” was about more than technique – it was about establishing the primacy of the artist’s selfhood, both as a value unto itself and as the mimetic subject of art. In this, Gauguin is obviously part of a major shift in modern aesthetics, one which, as Theodor Adorno has argued, may contain within it an inherent ambivalence – or worse, violence – against the natural world. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that

the shift in aesthetics away from the beautiful in nature, despite the tremendous advances it made possible, especially in terms of conceptualizing art as a spiritual phenomenon, was a mixed blessing. It entailed an element of destruction in relation to nature, as did the concept of dignity in general. (92)

For Adorno, the Enlightenment’s propagation of the concept of individual dignity is on one hand a great step forward, and on the other “an act of usurpation by a subject reducing unconstrained, qualitatively different entities to mere materials and indeterminate potentials in order to dispose of them” (92). Indeed, for better or worse, this is the crux of Gauguin’s aesthetic approach, which he described in an 1895 interview in this way:

I borrow some subject or other from life or from nature, and using it as a pretext, I arrange lines and colors so as to obtain symphonies, harmonies that do not represent a thing that is real, in the vulgar sense of the word, and do not directly...

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165 Gauguin's relationship to nature exemplifies in many ways what Adorno and Max Horkheimer would later refer to as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in their book by that title. Although Gauguin rebelled against the commodified, rationalistic impulses of enlightenment, agreeing with Horkheimer and Adorno that "On their way to science human beings have discarded meaning" (DoE 3), at the same time his mission to debunk the regime shares with Enlightenment ideology a sometimes ruthless disregard for the Other, whether that Other be symbolized by his double or by nature itself. As Horkheimer and Adorno write, "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and other human beings" (2). There is an uncomfortable echo of this assertion in Gauguin's approach to nature in his writings, as I hope to show in this chapter. In the end, Gauguin's (perhaps unwitting) reinforcement of the power structures he derided seems to support Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (4).
express any idea, but are supposed to make you think the way music is supposed to make you think, unaided by ideas or images, simply through the mysterious affinities that exist between our brains and such arrangements of colors and lines. (WOS 111)

Here, equating the natural world with vulgarity, Gauguin asserts his right to use it “as a pretext,” highlighting the ways in which his artistic process involves “reducing unconstrained, qualitatively different entities to mere materials and indeterminate potentials in order to dispose of them.” His brutal attack on the tree in order to get “a branch suitable to my desires” reverberates, as we will see, with this dominating point of view. The climactic synthesis of feeling and form that we saw in Chapter 3 necessitates not only the destruction of generic expectations but also the destruction of nature itself. Nature - which dominates the Salon, represses artistic freedom, and imposes the tragic limitations of sexuality and mortality on humans, who cannot escape that they are made of matter - gives way to the fantasy of the artist’s aesthetic and ontological dominance in *Noa Noa*.

In place of the worship of nature and natural beauty, modernity and modernism substituted the cult of originality and authorship. As Adorno argues, “The price that aesthetics had to pay for repressing the theme of natural beauty was the shift in the

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166 It is important not to be too simplistic about this point. As Briony Fer points out in *Modernity and Modernism*, "modern painting was a product of modern culture, but not the only product; it was one form of production among many other complex forms of visual representation, including Academic painting, popular illustration, photography, and so on" (13). Her point, echoing Wilhelm Worringer's in *Abstraction and Empathy*, is that there is no single monolithic impulse to representation in any given period of a society's development. What makes a painting "modernist" is obviously not its timing but its foregrounding of a certain set of principles that critics since Clement Greenberg have recognized as "self-critical" and that imply a level of "autonomy" for the artwork; in particular, a modernist painting acknowledges the process of its creation (Fer 13). The details of this are endlessly debatable, but autonomy and self-awareness have long been considered hallmarks of modernist painting, thus highlighting the primacy of the artist's selfhood in the new artistic order.
nineteenth century towards an ideological ‘religion of art,’ a term coined by Hegel, denoting the satisfaction of having achieved symbolic reconciliation in works of art” (91-92). As we have seen, achieving symbolic reconciliation was indeed the core mission of Gauguin’s practice, and the resulting religion of art – and of the artist – is visible in his writings and his artwork. To Mette, for example, he wrote in 1890 that Degas and others were saying of him, “He may be a buccaneer, but he’s sacred. He’s art incarnate” (WOS 45). Later, in Diverses Choses, Gauguin compared himself to Jesus, a motif that also surfaced in his art, when he complained about the younger generation:

Paintings which announce the doctrine are right here before their eyes but as the prophet said: “They cannot read, the book is sealed,” as Jesus says [sic]. It is offered to them only in the form of parables, so that seeing, they do not see and hearing, they do not understand. (WOS 147)

Rather than a pursuit of natural beauty, art is now a cult of mystery, a gnostic religion with the artist at its helm, accessible only to those with the wisdom and virtue to understand. Such a vision of art opens up the space for the artist’s subjectivity to take center stage, but it also opens up a space for the rejection, denial, or outright destruction of the natural world. This is what Adorno might call “the dark side of idealism with its tendency to lay waste to all that is not under the sway of the subject” (AT 92).

Indeed, as a theoretician of his own art, Gauguin repeatedly instructs us to read his pictorial works as parable. We know that in his art he made use of foreign and exotic symbols of the sacred - and indeed of the profane - in order to present his "double lessons," and now we find that in his literature he does the same thing. But in order to understand what those lessons are, we have to pay as much attention to his misuses, or disuses, of ancient symbols as we do to his many allusions. In Noa Noa, Gauguin's revision of Gilgamesh is strikingly lacking the deep moral and metaphysical lessons of its
source. In this chapter, I argue that such divergence is a manifestation of what was for Gauguin a deeply held aesthetic and moral conviction: that the artist has the right, and even the duty, to subjugate all aspects of the lived world to his art. Gauguin's removal of Gilgamesh's punishment for his crimes against nature reflects his own domineering attitude toward nature. At the same time it also serves as a reminder of Gauguin's similarly domineering attitude toward his ancient and exotic source materials: like the natural world around him, they are his for the taking, to dispose of at will.

This chapter proceeds with a discussion of the crime against nature in *Noa Noa*. In this section, I examine the symbol of the tree in the forest and highlight the resonance of this image through Gilgamesh, *Noa Noa*, and other known sources for Gauguin's work. I discuss the divergence between Gilgamesh's downfall and Gauguin's triumphalism - a mode that is quite at odds with the latter's more commonly agonistic tendencies - in order to expand my argument that what we have in *Noa Noa* is an aesthetic allegory. Then, in the second part of my chapter, I examine the theme of degeneration and corruption as a consequence of sexual initiation. Here again Gauguin has elided the lessons of Gilgamesh, where the primitive man, Enkidu, suffers a catastrophic loss of innocence as the result of sexual awareness. In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin crafts a fantasy of sexual intoxication that carries no concomitant downfall; the primitive remains utterly unaware of any metaphysical disruption. Once again, this dynamic functions on both a narrative and a symbolic level, refracting streams of insight into Gauguin's aesthetic ideals, according to which artistic education and refinement are tantamount to degeneration and putrescence. Gauguin's Tahitian *sauvage* is free of these vices, as once more the text defies generic expectation. As I examine both of these
idiosyncrasies in Gauguin's writing, I will show how irrevocably bound up his aesthetic worldview was with the colonial system he purported to hate.

II. Crimes Against Nature

The climaxes of both the Woodcutter Episode and *Gilgamesh* revolve around the dramatic confrontation at the heart of the forest, with a living and defenseless creature being mercilessly destroyed for the hero's personal glorification. In both cases, this confrontation is presented as a crime against the natural world, and in *Gilgamesh* the repercussions for it are steep. The demon Humbaba is a sacred being, and his death will be avenged by Enkidu's. In *Noa Noa*, however, the crime is not only unpunished; it is delighted in, and recounted with pride.

One of the most important facets of the *Gilgamesh* subtext in *Noa Noa* is that it highlights the symbolic sanctity of Gauguin's rosewood tree. In exploring the resonance of this mythic symbol for Gauguin, we should keep in mind the troubled dialectic of spirit and matter that was so central to Gauguin’s aesthetic practice, as we saw in Chapter 3. The materials of artistic production, inasmuch as they are the products of nature, serve a purpose as mediators of Gauguin's dialectical struggle, for they

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167 In his discussion of forests and civilization, Robert Pogue Harrison highlights the mystical nature of forests in the late nineteenth century. He writes that for Symbolists, beginning with Baudelaire, "'Nature is a temple' because it preserves within its forestial enclosure the original familiarity that makes analogies between different things possible" (179). Since it is those analogies, or "correspondances," that reveal the divinity cloaked behind the vulgar materiality of quotidian existence, forests themselves become sacred in the Symbolist imagination; "the forest of symbols is not one symbol among others but rather the symbol of symbolism itself" (180). Gauguin's attack on the rosewood grove is suffused with this widespread imagery of forest-as-temple, but instead of remaining contemplative and in awe of the forest's sacred power, he engages in its destruction.
simultaneously inhabit both the material world and the realm of mystery. For this reason, Gauguin’s emphasis on finding “fragrant” (*noa noa*) wood for carving is not likely to be a coincidence; the "fragrance" in *Noa Noa* has an obvious erotic overtone, but it also contains an aesthetic message. The fragrance of the rosewood tree emphasizes the tree's sacred status as a living embodiment of nature's mysteries, its secret affinities. It is to be desired and sought out, yet it is also available for complete destruction and utter subjugation to the artist's own aesthetic pursuits. In this sense, the fragrant rosewood is an important parallel to the fragrant cedar that Gilgamesh pursues and that also embodies a sacred, living truth.

The Forest Crime

The sacredness of the demon Humbaba is apparent in his status as an appointee of the god Enlil (71). It is further implied in his response to Gilgamesh’s onslaught, and emphasized by the gods in its aftermath. In stark contrast to the king’s early portrayal of him as a fierce and deadly monster, Humbaba is swiftly reduced by Gilgamesh’s force to a pile of tears, and sorrowfully begs for his life:

> The tears started to his eyes and he was pale. “Gilgamesh, let me speak. I have never known a mother, no, nor a father who reared me. I was born of the mountain, he reared me, and Enlil made me keeper of the forest. Let me go free, Gilgamesh, and I will be your servant, you shall be my lord; all the trees of the forest that I tended on the mountain shall be yours. I will cut them down and

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168 Gilgamesh’s initial proposal for the journey to the Cedar Mountain presents Humbaba as a terrible monster: “Because of the evil that is in the land, we will go to the forest and destroy the evil; for in the forest lives Humbaba whose name is ‘Hugeness,’ a ferocious giant” (71). Enkidu initially resists, crying that Humbaba is armed “in sevenfold terrors, terrible to all flesh.” According to Enkidu, “When he roars it is like the torrent of the storm, his breath is like fire, and his jaws are death itself” (71). The eventual encounter in the forest undermines some of this, since Humbaba is swiftly neutralized.
build you a palace.” He took him by the hand and led him to his house, so that the heart of Gilgamesh was moved with compassion. (82)

In this wrenching speech, Humbaba exudes a pathos so profound that even Gilgamesh begins to see him as a living being. “Oh Enkidu,” he asks, “Should not the snared bird return to its nest and the captive man return to his mother’s arms?” (82). Enkidu, however, though formerly fearful, is now unperturbed. “The strongest of men will fall to fate if he has no judgment,” he warns his companion. “If the snared bird returns to its nest, if the captive man returns to his mother’s arms, then you my friend will never return to the city where the mother is waiting who gave you birth” (82). Against further protests from Humbaba, Enkidu urges on his friend: “Do not listen, Gilgamesh: this Humbaba must die. Kill Humbaba first and his servants after” (83). Here Enkidu elaborates on his strategic approach: attack the leader first, and in the confusion that follows it will be easy to finish the job. His advice hits home.

Gilgamesh listened to the word of his companion, he took the axe in his hand, he drew the sword from his belt, and he struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed confusion for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had felled to the ground. (83)

Thus, although initially Enkidu resists the forest mission altogether, knowing from his history what the forest demon is, ultimately he is the driving force behind the slaying, at a decisive moment in the mission.

169 The fact that it is Enkidu who urges Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba forms an essential development in the tragic arc of the life of the "primitive man," who, seduced by the riches of civilization, lends his own expertise to those dominant forces that will eventually bring about his downfall. As Patrick Barron has noted, "The killing of Humbaba clearly represents an assault of Enkidu upon his own kind; in short, he has been coerced into attacking the center of his own deep, wild animal being" (390). The same thing may be said of Gauguin's guide in Noa Noa, who has the dubious honor of betraying the location of his own island's sacred grove to a hungry outsider looking for savagery and artistic triumph.
If the sanctity of the forest demon is implied by his evocative speeches, his appointment by the gods, and the power vacuum left behind when he is gone, it is driven home by the god Enlil’s reaction to these events. In a startling display of the ineptitude of mortals, Gilgamesh and Enkidu present the head of the demon to the very god who appointed him, kissing the ground in offering (83). Enlil is not impressed. “Why did you do this thing?” he rages when he sees what they have brought. “From henceforth may the fire be on your faces, may it eat the bread that you eat, may it drink where you drink” (84). Gilgamesh has performed the mission in part under the protection and sanction of Shamash, the god of the sun, but Shamash and Enlil do not always see eye to eye, and it remains the case that Humbaba was an appointee of Enlil. As such, he held a sacred post, and his death will be avenged by Enlil in the sacrifice of Enkidu.170

In *Noa Noa* there is of course no literal forest monster; there are only two men and the tree that they cut down. But that tree is also uniquely brought to life by the viciousness of the encounter, so that it takes on an animistic and even a sacred aspect. To see how this unfolds, we must return once more to that moment in the text. "Tous deux, sauvages," Gauguin writes, "nous attaquâmes à la hache un magnifique arbre qu’il fallut détruire pour avoir une branche convenable à mes desirs. Je frappai avec rage et, les mains ensanglantés, je coupais avec le plaisir d’une brutalité assouvie, d’une destruction de je ne sais quoi" ["Savages both of us, we attacked with the axe a magnificent tree which had to be destroyed to get a branch suitable to my desires. I struck furiously and,

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170 This information is communicated in the narrative via a dream that Enkidu has after the pair’s triumphant return with the cedar. He tearfully reports to Gilgamesh that in the dream, “Anu, Enlil, Ea, and heavenly Shamash took counsel together, and Anu said to Enlil, ‘Because they have killed the Bull of Heaven and because they have killed Humbaba who guarded the Cedar Mountain, one of the two must die’” (89). Shamash attempts to defend his charges, but this only causes Enlil to lash out at him in rage.
my hands covered with blood, hacked away with the pleasure of sating one's brutality and of destroying something" (28)]. In Noa Noa we don’t see the tree pleading for release, and yet its suffering is palpable. It is a "magnificent" tree, fragrant and pure, buried deep in the heart of the forest. It is completely destroyed by the men, who are after just one branch – the only branch suitable to the artist’s “desires.” There is no moment of moral hesitation here, only the power and satisfaction derived from destruction. The criminality of this scene is evident in the image of the two men’s hands “covered in blood” – their own blood, of course, but one can’t help imagining it as the tree’s. Both Gilgamesh and Gauguin have committed crimes against nature, but in spite of his reputation for ruthlessness, Gilgamesh shows nothing like Gauguin’s glee.

The air of criminality in this encounter is also powerfully reinforced by the narrator in his memories of the moments leading up to it. The language of transgression is invoked early in the narrator’s fantasies about his companion, which carry with them "un pressentiment de crime, le désir d’inconnu, le reveil du mal" [“the presentiment of crime, the desire for the unknown, the awakening of evil” (25)], and criminality infuses the text through the simmering, implied transgression of sexual attraction crossing the taboos of mixed race and unmixed gender. “Je m’approchai,” the artist reminisces, “sans peur des lois, le trouble aux temples” ["I drew close, without fear of laws, my temples throbbing" (28)]. Here, a provocative contradiction: the throbbing of the temples belies the claim to be without fear of laws. His is the dance of split selfhood that accompanies the transgressive act, and from here on the sexual imagery intensifies as the artist and his guide approach the rosewood grove, looking more and more like the language of rape: "Je m’enfonçai vivement dans le taillis devenu de plus en plus sauvage" [“Fiercely I
struck my way into the thicket [which had] become more and more wild” (28)]. By the
time he attacks with his axe, and finds his hands covered in blood, the narrator has
already trespassed in more ways than one.171

The Tree and the Sacred: Van Gogh and Moerenhout

The thought that Gauguin’s attack on the rosewood tree is an attack on a sacred
spirit is bouyed by, but not dependent on, the criminal atmosphere in the scene. To
compare the tree in Noa Noa with Humbaba in Gilgamesh is to highlight the animistic
character of this symbol, a concept that has deep roots in many mythic traditions, and that
resonated profoundly with at least two of Gauguin’s other sources of artistic inspiration,
which we will consider now. One of these sources is again Vincent van Gogh, who had a
deeply animistic take on the natural world, and whose symbolism revolved around
endeavoring to communicate what he felt as the spiritual presence in natural objects. In
Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art, Debora Silverman has argued that
Vincent van Gogh sought to create an art of the sacred by, as she puts it, “naturalizing
divinity, in the service of what he called a ‘perfection’ that ‘renders the infinite tangible
to us’” (50). For example, believing that the sacred existed in the natural world around
us, and that this truth could be expressed in particular through the symbolism of color,

171 As Harrison's genealogy of the forest as a symbol details, Gauguin was heir to a long
tradition in which the sense of illegal trespass is deeply encoded in the image of the forest
as a sacred or forbidden domain. Harrison writes that the word "forest" (in French la
forêt) desrives from the Latin foris, meaning "outside," and forestare, meaning "to keep
out, to place off limits" (69). In the Merovingian period, when the term foresta came into
use, it connoted a space set off limits by royal decree, a place where cultivation and
exploitation were forbidden. As such, the forest, in a profoundly embedded way, "lay
outside the public domain, reserved for the king's pleasure and recreation. In England it
also lay outside the juridical sphere. Offenders were not publishable by the common law,
but rather by a set of very specific 'forest laws'" (69).
van Gogh brought his ideas to bear in a powerful 1888 canvas titled *The Sower*, in which “he attempted a binding together of the sacred and the natural, creating an active laborer invested with spiritual force” (Silverman 89). The painting, which is in many ways van Gogh’s counterpoint to Gauguin’s *Vision*, marks the artist’s early entry into Symbolism, in that the composition, both in content and in form, represents not so much the lived reality of a peasant walking across a field but the divinity inherent in both the peasant and the field itself. This is especially visible in the painting’s “blazing, incandescent sunlight, which seems to blast through and saturate every pore of the canvas surface” (Silverman 89).

As an animist, van Gogh had a particular affinity for the flowering tree as a spiritual and aesthetic symbol. As Janet Walker has demonstrated, 1888 was an important developmental year for van Gogh, during which the Dutchman, a paradigmatic purveyor of *Japonisme*, “constructed an image of ‘Japan’ as nature through a collection of flowering trees” (82). Van Gogh’s interest in Japan echoed Gauguin’s in the tropics; it grew out of a pervasive “‘discours du Midi,’ which constructed lands with warm climates as spaces with creative potential for Northern European artists,” and under the influence of which he “formulated an imaginary idea of Japan as a southern land of sunlight” (86). The desire to move to Arles to paint was born of this construction, which had led van Gogh to imagine that, as a sunny corner of France, Arles was “the equivalent of Japan” (Walker 86). Such thinking was profoundly important for van Gogh’s

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172 In her study of van Gogh’s use of the flowering tree as a symbol of Japan-as-nature, Walker uses quotation marks to differentiate van Gogh’s “Japan” from Japan itself, in order “to emphasize the imaginative and idealizing nature of the artist’s construction of Japan” (82).
aesthetics, yet it demonstrates clearly how powerful Orientalist discourse was in enabling Western constructions and conflations of "peripheral" spaces.

In his writings and his aesthetic and thematic interests during this period, van Gogh demonstrates a strong tendency to associate Japan and Japanese people with nature, a tendency that blossomed forth in particular in the series of flowering trees that he painted in Arles in 1888. As Walker argues, “it is in [this] series of paintings [...] that he communicated more strongly than in any other works of art his image of Japan as nature” (90). As a sensitive painter in search of a personal symbol and a deeper connection with the natural world, van Gogh found in the Japanese prints he collected an innervating source that

encouraged him to paint natural phenomena with an attention to their vital energy. In the Arles paintings of flowering trees, the artist communicated this quality through a concentration on light, the bright light of Provence. In this way, the flowering trees in the paintings [...] “appear to be lit from within, so to speak, and seem in a sense active, rather than passively immersed in sunlight.” (Walker 101; quoting Walther and Metzger)

As he did with his sower crossing the glowing field, in the symbol of the flowering tree (conceived, importantly, as both Eastern and primitive) van Gogh explored the luminous divinity that he wanted to see in nature through resplendent color and an almost ecstatic vision of light.

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173 In addition to living with van Gogh and exchanging aesthetic ideas with him, Gauguin was also influenced by Japanese prints. As Robert Goldwater (1979) has pointed out, the struggling figures in Vision After the Sermon were "taken from a print by Hokusai," the Japanese artist who also figured prominently in van Gogh's Japonisme (79). According to Goldwater, "Gauguin and van Gogh admired Japanese prints and the so-called primitives for their 'honesty,' i.e. their refusal to attempt to reproduce the sensations of the real world, and their acceptance of the means proper to the medium of art, through whose evident statement and even exaggeration were created, not banal limitations of perceptions, but rather metaphors of a more profound experience" (79). The flowering tree would have been one such metaphor, even if it meant somewhat different things to each of them.
The year in which van Gogh created his animistic vision of blossoming trees was the same year (1888) that Gauguin began to articulate his own brand of Symbolism, in his *Self-Portrait Les Misérables* and *Vision After the Sermon*. It was also in that same year that van Gogh and Gauguin lived together in the infamous Yellow House at Arles, entering into a doomed partnership that would leave them both mentally and aesthetically shaken.\(^{174}\) Indeed, as Silverman argues, the aesthetic and philosophical differences between these two artists - van Gogh with his animistic worship of nature, Gauguin with his disgust for the material world - were so intense that their import can hardly be overstated. Yet it is almost inconceivable that Gauguin was not deeply affected by van Gogh's devotionally animistic worldview, even though - or perhaps especially because - it clashed so viscerally with his own antimaterialist philosophy. After all, it is the flowering tree, in *Noa Noa*, that gets destroyed.\(^{175}\)

\(^{174}\) After many months of van Gogh's urging, Gauguin traveled to join him in a small yellow house in Arles in October 1888. There the two artists lived and painted together for just over two months, amid an atmosphere of continually increasing personal and philosophical tension. In the end, van Gogh suffered a mental breakdown that culminated in him cutting off part (or possibly the whole) of his left ear and presenting it to a local prostitute named Rachel. Gauguin fled Arles the next day, and van Gogh spent the majority of the remainder of his life in mental hospitals, where he continued to paint feverishly, off and on. He committed suicide in 1890, by shooting himself in the chest. For a detailed description of the time that Gauguin and van Gogh spent together at Arles, see Gayford. For a discussion of their aesthetic practices there, see Silverman.

\(^{175}\) Gauguin's later writing about the disaster that ended his collaboration with van Gogh in Arles was often poignant, and even leaves me wondering whether van Gogh himself - as intimately associated with the flowering tree as he was - was not symbolized by the rosewood bush. For example, in *Avant et Après*, Gauguin wrote that on the evening of their final fateful encounter, he "felt the need to go out alone for a stroll amid the scent of blossoming laurel. I had got almost to the other side of the Place Victor-Hugo when I heard a well-known little step behind me, quick and jerky" (254). It was van Gogh, with a razor in his hand, and Gauguin stared him down, he says, until van Gogh "lowered his head and ran back toward the house." "Was I cowardly at the time?" Gauguin asks himself in the memoir. "I have often questioned my conscience on this score but have found nothing to reproach myself with" (*WOS* 254). The episode reverberates with many
Another known source of inspiration to Gauguin, in which he would also certainly found an image of the sacred tree, was the Belgian envoy J.A. Moerenhout, whose *Travels to the Islands of the Pacific Ocean* (1837) Gauguin so famously plagiarized in a later chapter of *Noa Noa* (see Introduction, pp. 50-54; we will also come back to this plagiarism later in this chapter). In his study of Polynesian society, Moerenhout describes one of the assignments that he fulfilled while stationed on Tahiti, which was to fill an order “for a considerable quantity of wood,” to be sent to Chile (141). The order was for wood from the “tomana (calophyllum monophyllum) which the inhabitants cut particularly around the marais. I found these trees enormous, which were more than six feet in diameter and often thirty to forty feet high, just the trunk alone” (141). In an uncharacteristically admiring report of Tahitian industriousness, Moerenhout marvels that the natives were able to cut and haul these giant trees from the interior of the forests to the shore, “a distance of more than half a league, pieces of wood weighing at least three tons, without any other help than that of levers or rollers” (141). But at the same time, Moerenhout also observed the inhabitants’ “superstitious respect for the former sacred places”:

I was convinced that, with the exception of the chief, there were very few who did not see these majestic trees fall without fear, a secular witness to the ceremonies of the abolished cult, of the splendor and the decadence of one of the most remarkable religions, these trees which alone had survived the demolition of the

of the themes from *Noa Noa* - the fragrant trees, the bloody encounter, and above all the sense of criminality. As Martin Gayford has pointed out, "Obviously, Gauguin felt guilty; and he had examined his conscience" (Gayford 276). Even more significant, perhaps, is the feeling that Gauguin describes having had upon seeing his friend the next day in bed, sleeping, his severed ear bandaged: "Gently, very gently, I touched his body; its warmth assured me he was alive. *I felt as if all my intelligence and energy had been given a new lease on life*" (*WOS* 256; emphasis mine). Somehow van Gogh's savage attack on his own body left Gauguin feeling rejuvenated, just as he feels after cutting down the tree in *Noa Noa*. 
antique temples whose most beautiful ornaments they were and whose fall completed their ruin. (141)

Moerenhout’s elegy rings with the same decadent regret that characterized most Western writing about Polynesia (including much of Gauguin’s), but in a footnote, the animistic spiritualism of the forest is even more hauntingly evoked. Permitting himself to venture into the literary realm for a moment, Moerenhout writes:

When the great trees had been cut which sheltered an interior marai particularly dedicated to the chiefs of Papara and which had been that of Tati himself and of his children, the cry rang out that the water of a neighboring river had reddened and that blood had gushed from the trunk of the fallen trees. At this idea who would not involuntarily recall the poetic fiction of Polydore and would not believe himself transported to the middle of the enchanted forest of Armide? (172)

Moerenhout's discussion here highlights the sacred, dual character of these fabulous ancient trees. The tomana trees have a mystical place in the metaphysical order, and yet they suffer as living creatures do. Like Humbaba, they are the guardians of sacred, natural temples, and to trespass among them is to challenge the laws of nature. Yet, also like Humbaba, when they are cut, they bleed, and their blood carries with it both the tragedy of human hubris and the horror of divine offense.

Moerenhout's casual dismissal of the Tahitians' "superstitious respect for the former sacred spaces" acts as a chilling reminder of the physical and epistemic violence inherent in the colonizing mission. As an emissary of Western-style Enlightenment (not

176 Armide is a sorceress with an enchanted forest, who ensnares the valiant crusader Rinaldo in Torquato Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered. I am not sure which literary figure Moerenhout is referring to when he mentions Polydore. In Classical mythology, Polydorus, "the youngest and best-loved" of Priam's children, was killed by Achilles during the Trojan war (Graves 702). Later, in Shakespeare's Cymbeline, Polydore is the name of the princess Imogen's long-lost brother, who lives in a forest. It is also the name of Mr. Sage's son in "The Great Garden," a French children's tale about accepting one's place in life, which was published in England in 1788 in the volume The Children's Friend. However, none of these references appear to resonate in a clear way with the episode of the tomana trees.
to mention capitalism), Moerenhout not only ravages the natural and human resources of the island (pillaging wood from one colonial treasure to send to another), but he demonstrates the brutal de-spiritualizing imperative of Enlightenment ideology. With one pat phrase, he manages to reduce the native religion to superstition, while also - even more importantly - wiping out the sanctity of their sacred spaces, reclassifying them rhetorically as "the former sacred spaces." What is disturbing in this formulation is the way in which it simultaneously acknowledges those natural spaces as having once been sacred, and proclaims such sanctity to be a figment of a long-lost past. This of course is notwithstanding the natives' own dread of removing the trees, which clearly connotes an ongoing belief in the sacred.

Ultimately, the tree as a symbol of a dying culture or a lost mystical realm is closely related to the tree as an aesthetic symbol; as we have seen, for van Gogh the flowering plum tree likely pertained to both categories at the same time. Furthermore, the currency of this image for Gauguin’s thought is demonstrated in a comment in his Cahier pour Aline, a notebook of musings on art and life that he dedicated to his daughter, who died of pneumonia in 1897: “You will always find vital sap,” he writes, “coursing through the primitive arts. In the arts of an elaborate civilization, I doubt it!” (WOS 71). His claim both clarifies the emotional resonance of the tree as an aesthetic symbol and highlights his ambivalent feelings toward it as a natural symbol and as a register of colonial power. Coursing with sap, the tree of primitive life provides essential rejuvenating and sustaining riches to the artist who succeeds in tapping it. Yet to do

177 As von Hendy illustrates, the symbol of the primitive, mystical tree coursing with sap was another *topos* that Gauguin inherited from the Romantics. For example, in 1829, Tennyson's famous poem "Timbuctoo" deployed this symbol to narrate a dream-like
so, as is the case both for Gilgamesh and for Moerenhout, one must willfully participate in violence and subjugation; one must invade and destroy. Inevitably, this is the position both of the colonialist, who exploits nature and culture for profit and power, and of the artistic genius, who subjugates nature to his own original vision, for fame, for art, and for posterity.

Crime and Punishment (Or Not)

As alternate sources for imagining the tree as both an aesthetic symbol and a mystical or natural one, van Gogh and Moerenhout together only augment the likelihood that Gauguin would have recognized a similar efficacy in the figure of Humbaba. This confluence of sources highlights the emotional resonance of the rosewood tree in the Woodcutter Episode, and begins to shed light on the multiple layers of meaning present there, which we will unpack in the remainder of this chapter. However, Gauguin’s text ultimately diverges from Gilgamesh in important ways as well, beginning with the aftermath of the forest mission. It is essential to examine these divergences because they offer crucial insights into Gauguin’s aesthetic allegory.

In the Gilgamesh Epic, as we have seen, the hero and his friend are punished for their transgression: the friend with a frightening and painful end, and the hero with
watching him go through it. Enkidu’s final days of suffering are excruciating and filled with sorrow:

Now he was weak and his eyes were blind with weeping. Ten days he lay and his suffering increased, eleven and twelve days he lay on his bed of pain. Then he called to Gilgamesh, “My friend, the great goddess cursed me and I must die in shame. [...]” And Gilgamesh wept over Enkidu. (93)

In the midst of Enkidu’s dramatic decline, Gilgamesh learns from his friend, who has foreseen his own ending in his dreams, that “we must treasure the dream whatever the terror; for the dream has shown that misery comes at last to the healthy man, the end of life is sorrow” (93). As we have seen, Gilgamesh responds to his companion’s last breaths with tenderness, veiling him “like a bride,” and with rage, “like a lioness deprived of her whelps” (95). The death of the double brings to Gilgamesh a dual loss: the loss of his friend is coupled with the loss of his former belief in the significance of his own power and position in the world.

This terrifying and enraging experience is what prompts the hero’s truly epic journey, his journey to the underworld in search of the key to everlasting life – what John Maier calls the Dionysian phase of the Epic.178 Filled with despair, he resolves “to find Utnapishtim whom they call the Faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods” (97), and to ask him how to achieve eternal life, as Utnapishtim has. The journey is a

178 John Maier applies the Nietzschean division of Apollonian and Dionysiac realms to the two major phases of the text: “Where Apollo dominates a world of cause and effect, Dionysus reveals a cosmic unity” (26). Because “[t]he action that dominates the first half of Gilgamesh is the heroic exploit of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in battle against Humbaba,” a staple of the traditional patriarchal impulse to order, Maier designates this first half (Tablets I.i – VII.iv) the Apollonian phase (27). Where the text moves in to the Dionysiac realm is in the second half (Tablets VII.v – XII.vi), which chronicles an altogether different aspect of human existence, the “dark night of the soul,” in which Gilgamesh undergoes a metaphysical rite of initiation, “a kind of learning [...] that we can consider Dionysian” (32).
transformative one, with Gilgamesh wandering over grasslands and through dark
mountains, fighting lions, and weeping much. By the time he reaches the Crystal Garden,
the last stage of his journey, the beautiful Gilgamesh has become gaunt and windburnt,
dressing in animal skins and “wandering over the pastures in search of the wind” (101).
In his suffering over the loss of Enkidu, Gilgamesh has allowed the double to inhabit his
own aspect, transforming into part primitive himself. Though this seems a hardship,
inviting the scorn of others, it represents an essential process of transformation whereby
the halves of Gilgamesh’s selfhood are joined together to bring him, ultimately, peace
and wholeness.

Nevertheless, this process is a painful one. The hero eventually makes his way to
the Land of the Dead, where he meets the wise Utnapishtim, himself a former mortal who
has achieved immortality by finding unique favor with the gods (107). Knowing that
Gilgamesh cannot attain immortality, but that he will never accept this limitation without
learning it for himself, Utnapishtim subjects the hero to a trial that he knows is
unwinnable, telling him he may find the same favor with the gods if he can stay awake
for six days and seven nights (114). Exhausted, and already sleep-deprived from his
years-long journey and his deep despair, Gilgamesh sits down and promptly falls asleep.

179 Utnapishtim’s story of immortality is the story of the flood that so enthralled the
nineteenth-century public because of its close resemblance to the story of Noah in the
Hebrew Bible. It begins with the gods complaining that humans are making too much
noise on Earth, and deciding therefore to terminate all human life with a terrible storm.
Ea whispers to Utnapishtim that he must "despise worldly goods and save your soul alive.
Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the boat:
let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss;
then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures" (108). Once the storm has
subsided, Utnapishtim's boat comes to rest on Mount Nisir. He begins sending forth
birds from the boat, until one does not return, signaling that life on Earth is once again
possible (111). Ultimately the god Enlil declares that Utnapishtim, as the great survivor
of the flood, will henceforth be immortal (113).
In a deeply human exchange, he then responds to Utnapishtim’s waking touch with a familiar denial: “I hardly slept when you touched me” (114). In fact, he learns in horror, he has been asleep for a week, and he has lost his chance at finding the key to everlasting life.

Such a defeat is striking for an epic hero, and the didactic value of the text is rich and complex. Rather than vanquishing and returning triumphant, as in the Apollonian phase of the cycle, Gilgamesh is now forced to come to terms with that over which he cannot hope ever to have power; his strength as a true hero lies in learning to accept his weakness. He is washed clean of the filth of his journey, and restored to beauty and grandeur with new clothing that will never fade until he reaches home (115). In compensation for his travails, Gilgamesh does learn from Utnapishtim that there is a magical flowering plant which gives rejuvenation and regeneration: “it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores lost youth to a man” (116). Gilgamesh succeeds in taking the plant, and his transformation from arrogant ruler to compassionate leader is signaled by his intention to share the plant among his people: “I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be ‘The Old Men are Young Again’; and last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth” (116). But even this small victory is ultimately lost to Gilgamesh on his return journey, when a serpent jumps out of the waters of the abyss and snatches the plant away forever (117):

Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept. “O Urshanabi,180 was it for this that I toiled with my own hands, is it for this that I have wrung out my heart’s blood? For myself I have gained nothing; not I, but the beast of the earth has joy of it now. [...] I found a sign and now I have lost it. Let us leave the boat on the bank and go.” (117)

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180 Urshanabi is the boatman who ferries Gilgamesh across the Waters of Death to the land where Utnapishtim resides.
This time, lacking glory and triumph, Gilgamesh returns home bearing only wisdom. Yet this in itself is hailed in the last lines of the text as his contribution to his people and to human culture. “He was wise,” we are told, “he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story” (117).

What this sequence of events narrates is the development of the young Gilgamesh from an arrogant tormentor totally disconnected from his origins or his place in the natural order into a wise king whose selfhood is complete and who is capable of caring for his people. In the end Gilgamesh retains his formidable power as a ruler, and his great destiny as a civilizer, but he also learns compassion and humility, and possibly also respect for the natural world. He learns to see his responsibilities to his people as valuable. All of this comes at the cost of great suffering, and all of it is set off by Gilgamesh’s original crime against nature, the slaying of Humbaba in the cedar forest. But none of this makes its way into Gauguin’s rewriting of the Gilgamesh narrative, where instead the journey to the forest concludes with victory and successful rejuvenation. In the Woodcutter Episode, although the approach to the rosewood grove is couched in criminality, it is a kind of criminality that is reveled in and that goes unpunished. Whether by design or by lack of understanding, Gauguin has eschewed the central message of the Gilgamesh cycle in favor of other ideas.

There is a clear indication of this stark moral divergence between the texts in the way each of the heroes regards the fruits of his conquest. Both of them see the wood as a living testament to their experience and achievements, but to quite different ends. As
Enkidu lies in mortal agony, Gilgamesh looks out to the city gates of Uruk and curses the wood in them for the suffering that it has brought into his life;

While Enkidu lay alone in his sickness [Gilgamesh] cursed the gate as though it was living flesh, “You there, wood of the gate, dull, insensible, witless, I searched for you over twenty leagues until I saw the towering cedar. There is no wood like you in our land. [...] But O, if I had known the conclusion! If I had known that this was all the good that would come of it, I would have raised the axe and split you into little pieces and set up here a gate of wattle instead. Ah, if only some future king had brought you here, or some god had fashioned you. Let him obliterate my name and write his own, and the curse fall on him instead of Enkidu.” (90)

This is the first step in Gilgamesh’s journey toward self-discovery, his renunciation of the fame and conquest that he once prized above all else.

Gauguin, however, experiences no such change of heart in Noa Noa. He too has a tendency to see his wood as infused with the memories of its capture, but only as a mark of triumph.¹⁸¹ At the end of the Woodcutter Episode, he writes, "Je n'ai pas donné un seul coup de ciseau dans ce morceau de bois sans avoir des souvenir d'une douce quiétude, d'un parfum, d'une victoire et d'un rajeunissement" [“I gave not a single blow of the chisel to that piece of wood without having memories of a sweet quietude, a fragrance, a victory, and a rejuvenation” (28)]. Here Gauguin represents himself as having been successful in his quest. He reaps the satisfaction of a mission accomplished

¹⁸¹ The way in which Gauguin describes himself taking pleasure in the wood, which is infused with sensual enjoyment and spiritual meaning, matches and overturns not only Enkidu's curse of the gates, but also another ancient myth that I will discuss later in this chapter: the myth of the fall. As Theodor Ziolkowski points out, in the Christian tradition this myth came to symbolize Adam and Eve's disobedience, and the human propensity to sin as a whole (not just in the pursuit of knowledge). Furthermore, as Ziolkowski writes: "As a result of its part in the sinful act the tree [of knowledge] itself acquired a share in the guilt. (According to widespread medieval legend [...] it was the wood of that same tree, later transplanted to Adam's grave, on which Jesus was subsequently crucified)" (17). Gauguin inherited a tradition according to which the material itself could be infused with sin; he chooses instead to infuse it with remorseless sensuality.
and works happily on his monument to himself without penalties or guilt; in fact, his earlier guilt (“the burden of an evil thought”) has been utterly soothed (“I returned at peace”). What’s more, he claims not only “victory” but “rejuvenation,” thus foregrounding the central theme of Gilgamesh’s failed Dionysian journey. This conceit is brought full circle in the last chapter of *Noa Noa*, where the narrator describes journeying home aboard his ship, “avec deux années de plus - rajeuni de 20 ans,” having plucked, for his ambrosia, the flower of the youthful Tehamana.

**Agonism in Gauguin**

This unruffled, unrepentant aggressor image is quite different from the persona that Gauguin, who had a lifelong interest in co-opting mythic and literary figures into his public and artistic persona, more commonly presented. Most of the time he used these assumed identities to portray himself as a victim of society or of his circumstances, as when he wore the mask of Christ, of Jean Valjean, or of the martyred prophet-painter

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If we need any further evidence that *Noa Noa* should not be taken at face value as an account of Gauguin’s experiences on Tahiti, we need only contrast his claims of rejuvenation with letters that he wrote to his wife, Mette Gauguin, during that initial trip. “Here, life is very expensive and I am ruining my health by not eating,” he wrote in September. “Soon I’ll be old and I’ve done precious little in this world for lack of time. [...] I must certainly have a badly made heart, every day I can feel it getting worse” (*WOS* 65). In November, he made his predicament the more clear: “I feel myself aging, and fast too. From having to go hungry, my stomach is being atrociously ruined and I become thinner every day” (65). It’s impossible to know how closely any of this reflected his actual experience, since he often exaggerated his suffering unabashedly in letters to Mette (for example, during his stay in Panama in 1887, he worked as a temporary clerk for a subdivision of the Canal Company, but he wrote to Mette that his job was “to swing a pickax on the canal. ... Don’t complain about your work; every day I dig from 5:30 in the morning until 6:00 at night under the tropical sun and in the rain” (Mowll Mathews 82)). The point is that both *Noa Noa* and Gauguin’s letters should be taken as documents that tell us a great deal more about what he wanted others to see than about what his life was really like.
Mani, for example. These identity experiments function as what Renato Poggioli would call the classic agonistic gesture – images of the immolation of the avant-garde artist on the throne of artistic passion. But the agonistic themes that are present in Gilgamesh – and ready for the taking, so to speak – have been written out of the script in the Woodcutter Episode in Noa Noa, where Gauguin chooses instead to emphasize the dominating aspect of his character in a description of violence followed by peace: "Bien détruit en effet tout mon vieux stock de civilisé. [...] J’étais décidément tranquille désormais" [“Well and truly destroyed indeed, all the old remnant of a civilized man in me. [...] I was definitely at peace from then on” (28)]. Clearly, this is not an agonistic mode. For Gauguin, the journey is about the sacrifice of the other on the throne of art, and he represents himself as successful in his quest for immortality and artistic liberation.

Let us examine more closely Gauguin’s use of the agonistic mode in his self-fashioning as an artist, in order to see more clearly the divergence that he takes from Gilgamesh here. This is important for understanding both his approach to his own selfhood and his literary aims, as well as the meaning that the Gilgamesh subtext carries in the Woodcutter Episode.

In his classic Theory of the Avant Garde, Renato Poggioli described agonism as a central characteristic to avant-garde aesthetics and praxis, “no doubt representing one of the most inclusive psychological tendencies in modern culture” (65). Different from and beyond the agone that he associates with activism, or the agonia that he says would be limited to the worldview of the “philosophers of tragedy,”183 Poggioli notes that what he

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183 Poggioli writes, “If agonism meant no more than agonia, it would allude to that tragic sense of life so intensely felt by Pascal and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, by all those whom Leone Sestov called the ‘philosophers of tragedy’: the sense, that is, of
calls *agonism* may be defeatist, but it is not ultimately pessimistic (65-66). It embodies a profound connection between the sufferings of the past and the fertility of the future, which come together in the self-sacrificing struggle of the artist in history:

Agonism means tension: the pathos of a Laocöon struggling in his ultimate spasm to make his own suffering mortal and fecund. In short, agonism means sacrifice and consecration: an hyperbolic passion, a bow bent toward the impossible, a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism. (66)

The agonistic moment, frequently manifest in representations of struggle or of the “artist as victim-hero,” is not only about personal grief but concerns the suffering of the artist as a historical phenomenon. Indeed, Poggioli writes that “the transcendental function, or ideal mission, of avant-garde agonism” is “an idolizing of history, the history not only of the past, but of the present and future, made into a divinity” (67). This idolization of history occurs as much on an aesthetic plane as on a social one, and thus effectively ties the sentiments and anxieties of art to the sentiments and anxieties of a time. The past, present and future come together as the artist’s material and goal; the “immolation of the self to the art of the future” is both an artistic act and an historical one (67).

There is an obvious confluence between avant-garde agonism, as Poggioli outlines it, and the central didactic messages of *Gilgamesh*, so much so that Gilgamesh himself almost seems to loom as an agonistic figure of the ancient world. Though he does not undergo a total “self immolation,” Gilgamesh morphs from an arrogant despot into a human character whose personal suffering takes on historical and metaphysical import. Like the avant-garde artist, Gilgamesh’s quest for knowledge ultimately benefits not him but his culture; his tragic transformation into a wildman, his “dark night of the what the existentialist movement in our day has popularized” (65). Instead, agonism has an aura of struggle to it; a desire to create out of the calamity.
soul,” and his eventual, but fleeting, procurement of the flower of youth, which he resolves to give first to the old men in his city and only later partake of himself, in spite of the fact that he has been warned that the flower will wound his hands when he tries to take it (116), are all hallmarks of the kind of “tension” that Poggioli describes, “the pathos of a Laocoon struggling in his ultimate spasm to make his own suffering immortal and fecund” (66). Further, his very presence in the text of Noa Noa would seem to reflect the “idolization of history” that functions as one of agonism’s key motivating factors.

As such, it is striking how well the character of Gilgamesh would have suited Gauguin’s purposes in his own often agonistic self-fashioning. In fact, the agonistic painter-as-martyr mode of self-representation was ever present with Gauguin, and was always steeped in the flavors of both personal identity and aesthetic pursuit. As Mowll Mathews puts it, “The noble face of Gauguin’s Janus-like persona – which incorporated both strength and weakness – was the martyr, the guise that Gauguin shaped brilliantly in the 1880s” (128). According to Mowll Mathews, this “martyr” character grew out of a period of relative public interest in his work; it had little to do with actual suffering and almost everything to do with developing an intriguing and compelling public image as part of his approach to attracting attention and selling his art (126). But it may also have a great deal to do with the artist’s actual aesthetic quandaries; hence, the close association between martyr images and aesthetic problems. Whether or not we take Gauguin’s sense of personal martyrdom seriously – or believe him deserving of such consideration – it may be helpful to isolate the martyr image as public stunt from the martyr image as aesthetic symbol, in particular because that agonistic martyring is so fascinatingly absent from the Woodcutter Episode of Noa Noa.
The agonistic impulse in Gauguin’s self-fashioning serves as an important example of how closely his personal and aesthetic problems were intertwined. In letters and other writings, he often referred to himself as an unjustly chastised criminal or a victim of social circumstances. However, as we have seen in the case of his 1888 Self-Portrait as Jean Valjean, the motif of the criminal character can double as an aesthetic metaphor. In his letter describing that painting, Gauguin equates the problems of form with “shackles,” indicating that realism – or rather the Real – is a kind of prison to be escaped from. A similar dynamic lies beneath his lamentation to Emile Bernard in 1890, as he contemplated leaving for the tropics: “Yes we (the innovators and thinkers among artists) are doomed to perish under the blows dealt by the world, but to perish as matter. Stone will perish, the word will remain” (WOS 43). Here the artist’s agonistic sense of self reverberates once again with the material / immaterial conflict that characterized his approach to aesthetics. Acutely aware of the painfully limiting materiality of lived monadic selfhood, here Gauguin seems to reach toward a future living self in a divine history, much as Gilgamesh aimed to do.

In addition to the self-portrait Les Misérables, two other prominent works from this period emphasize Gauguin’s agonistic vision of his craft. His Jug in the Form of a Head, Self Portrait, from 1889, is a ceramic piece depicting the artist’s head, severed at the neck, with an open top and a handle at the back, like an earthenware pitcher. As Mowll Mathews writes, “The pathos of his tortured features, shaped to suggest an ancient

184 For example, in 1885 he wrote to Schuffenecker, from Copenhagen, “Here I have been underhandedly sapped by a few bigoted Protestant females. They know I am blasphemous and so they want to bring about my downfall” (WOS 5). Ten years later, in 1895, Gauguin wrote to Daniel de Monfried from Tahiti, where he had returned after two miserable years in France: “I firmly intend to end my days here in my hut, altogether peacefully. Oh yes, I’m a great criminal. So what!” (WOS 116).
Peruvian portrait vase, was accentuated by closed eyes, ears cut off, and a red glaze dripping down his face like blood from a crown of thorns” (127). Mowll Mathews overstates the tortured aspect of the features here – to me the face appears calm and placid – but the suggestion of blood dripping down from the implied crown is clear. Indeed, the very calmness of the facial features creates a jarring contrast to the inherent violence in the image, with its macabre, swirling hues and red severed neck. The jug implies not only an “ancient Peruvian portrait vase” but also a conflation of the mystical violence embodied in the Christ figure with the savage violence of severed heads on sticks popularized in a cultural imaginary that feared the “primitive” as much as it was drawn to it. In this way, the Jug in the Form of a Head was both provocative as an image and instructive of Gauguin’s interest in blending traditional symbols. In a sense, this kind of conflation corresponds directly to what Gauguin does in the Woodcutter Episode as well: an ancient, mystical figure (Christ / Gilgamesh) is blended with a timeless “savage” character (Peruvian / Tahitian) and the artist then inhabits the confluence.

This same agonistic thread comes to full prominence in another piece from this period, an 1889 self-portrait in which Gauguin presents himself even more directly as Christ. Called Agony in the Garden, the painting depicts a Christ figure with Gauguin’s own facial features, bowing under an invisible weight, his hands crossed as he leans forward into the lower left corner of the picture. Behind him a dark and uneven terrain
bears down, with two cliffs crowding the background of the picture plane, producing not only the traditional enclosed feel of the “garden,” but also an imposing, claustrophobic effect. As with the *Jug in the Form of a Head*, here a peculiar cognitive dissonance reigns between the placidity of the face and the suffering of the figure’s pose, which clearly evokes images of Christ carrying the cross, although there is no visible cross in the picture.

Mowll Mathews’s interpretation of Gauguin’s work tends to center on his financial ambitions, his sexual exploits, and the public theatricality of his persona. But her description of this painting highlights its agonistic resonance:

> Showing himself as Christ, Gauguin acknowledges his new leadership position but stressed the suffering he has experienced at the hands of officialdom, which he fears will ultimately lead to his crucifixion. The Garden of Olives theme, however, brings in the added element of anticipated betrayal at the hands of a Judas among his disciples. [...] That fall Gauguin had complained of many “supporters” who had recently betrayed him. (140)

The "supporters" to whom Mowll Mathews refers included Theo van Gogh and Edgar Degas, who seemed to be withdrawing their support or enthusiasm for Gauguin's work because of their disapproval of the new style (Mowll Mathews 140). In response, Gauguin asserts his aesthetic principles in *Agony in the Garden* painting by rendering Christ's (i.e., his own) hair in the same vibrant vermillion color as he had used in the *Vision*, arguably Symbolism's inaugural painting. In *Agony*, too, Gauguin makes use of the thick, bare tree trunk, which rises vertically through the middle of the picture, to separate the quasi-mystical apparition from two possibly real-world figures lurking in the background, much as the tree trunk separates the onlookers from the wrestlers in the *Vision*. 
In both the *Agony in the Garden* and the Peruvian vase, as in the *Self Portrait Les Misérables*, the agonistic impulse is explicitly blended with aesthetic principles. The ceramic head may not be contorted with pain, but it *is* contorted by the “purifying” fire of the kiln, which, as we have seen, carried for Gauguin both a mystical and an aesthetic currency. (Indeed, in his letter describing the *Self Portrait Les Misérables*, he instructed Schuffenecker to “picture a vague memory of pottery twisted by a fierce fire!” (WOS 25); here the connection to ceramics is made complete). Likewise the neo-Platonic fire burning behind the vermillion turf of the *Vision* burns in the brightly colored hair of Christ/Gauguin in his garden of agony. These aesthetic innovations are meant to represent the very process and problem of presenting internal thought within the material limitations of external reality (see Chapter 3). In these agonistic works, that symbolism is all the more explicit because of the direct association with suffering and martyrdom. Furthermore, the blood running in rivulets from the top of the Peruvian head recalls the
rivers of blood running from the last of the tomana trees, as reported by Moerenhout, or the blood on the hands of Gauguin and his guide as they attack the rosewood bush. This inner fire, the essence of both artistic genius and primitive purity, can only be brought out by means of great violence and suffering.

While all of this shows a persistent and significant agonistic streak in Gauguin’s artistic project and persona, it raises an important question at the same time: why, then, would he choose to omit the agonistic message from the *Gilgamesh* narrative? Although Gilgamesh’s history is so rich with the emphasis on suffering and bravery that Gauguin seems to seek out in his characters, here the artist has effaced the agonistic tendencies from the narrative. Instead the artist’s former suffering – his “burden of evil” as he hikes the mountain path – is alleviated by his willful participation and delight in the destruction of a living thing. There are no lessons to be learned nor consequences to face, nor any self-sacrifices on the part of the artist for the betterment of his craft or as contribution to the public. Instead, Gauguin sets up here what later critics of modernism would condemn as a solipsistic pseudo-mythology, privileging the artist's immediate experience over the moral and material conditions of lived reality.185

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185 For example, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Marxist critics of the Frankfurt school engaged in a passionate debate about the political ramifications of modernist trends like Expressionism in art and literature. Ernst Bloch wrote that expressionist tendencies "directed attention to human beings and their substance, in their quest for the most authentic expression possible" (22). He therefore felt that modernist aesthetics held revolutionary potential. However, Georg Lukács argued on the contrary that "Expressionists and those who were influenced by them were prevented from making further progress of a revolutionary kind," largely because of Expressionism's "highflown pretensions to leadership," its "anti-realist bias [...] which meant that they had no firm artistic hold on reality," and its "insist[ence] on the primacy of immediacy [...] conferring a pseudo-profundity and pseudo-perfection on immediate experience both in art and in thought" (51). See Ronald Taylor, ed. *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism*. New York: Verso, 2002.
There are three possible approaches to this problem: the practical, the psychobiographical, and the aesthetic; each has its usefulness. From a practical perspective, it’s clear that Gauguin, though fond of borrowing, was not precise in his research and did not necessarily seek out complex, nuanced, or in-depth exegeses of the works and traditions from which he borrowed. We are by now well acquainted with his willingness to take images and narratives out of context, to satisfy himself with loosely-formed interpretations of their meanings and social functions, and to conflate wildly disparate historical periods and societies by bringing foundational images together in uncomplicated forms. Given this pattern, it is not at all unfitting that Gauguin would seize on the aspects of the Gilgamesh narrative that he found empowering (the forest journey, the narrative of savageness and doubling, the eroticism, the triumph), while feeling under no obligation to explore the more ambivalent messages in the epic. It is even plausible that he might not have known about those more ambivalent messages, moreover, because he would not necessarily have sought out complete accounts or detailed explanations of the text. He may simply have read or heard about the forest journey, in a journal or a sidewalk café, and decided to use it, without necessarily seeing the need to follow up with in-depth research.

From the point of view of psychobiography, we would do well to keep in mind that the victim / martyr image was only one side of what Mowll Mathews calls Gauguin’s “Janus-like public persona” (128). On the other side, Gauguin also liked to see himself as a predator – especially a sexual predator – as well as a tyrant or a bully. Ultimately he seems to have had two equal and opposite responses to the frustrations of bourgeois society and the art market: to imagine himself as their heroic victim, or to fantasize
himself as their triumphant aggressor. With regard to the latter stance, Gilgamesh would have provided a pleasing analog.

Gauguin’s self-image as sexual aggressor comes through in a number of key moments in his biography. The first was during his brief and tumultuous stay in Denmark, where the Gauguin family moved in 1884 after Mette began to feel that their financial situation in Rouen was no longer viable. In Copenhagen, she would have practical support from her family, and she felt that both she and her husband would have the opportunity to restart their careers and eventually find financial stability there (Mowll Mathews 56). But Paul found the cheerful company and polite liberalism of Danish society intolerable and hypocritical, and ever after complained of the Danes in letters and memoirs, calling them uptight and untrustworthy.186 One way of lashing out was to purposely make others feel uncomfortable, as he did when he stared down a friend of Mette’s who was bathing nude with her young child on a women’s beach, as was the custom. His intention of offending her succeeded, according to his own telling, and in her humiliation she retreated, causing him great laughter and pleasure. “[She showed me] all the front,” he wrote in his Avant et Après, “after having shown me the back. I confess that the front again, at a distance, made a very good effect. It was a great scandal. What! To have looked!” (quoted in Mowll Mathews 62).

Other examples of Gauguin donning his sexual-aggressor cap usually involve adolescent girls or young women. Among these were, most prominently, Tehamana, his thirteen-year-old vahine during his first Tahiti trip; a nineteen-year-old known only as

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186 In Avant et Après, he asserts, "I hate Denmark - its climate and its inhabitants - profoundly," and goes on to complain that Danes are perpetually adopting an air of false modesty in order to fish for compliments. He allows, though, that at Danish reception one "eats admirably. That's something anyhow, and it helps to pass the time" (241).
“Annah the Javanese” who lived with him in Paris after his return from that first trip; and the young pubescent daughters of friends and neighbors, whom he lavished with attention and sometimes fondled, according to their own later accounts (Mowll Mathews 205). One of these was Judith Gérard, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Gauguin’s downstairs neighbors in the Paris building where he lived for the two years intervening his two Tahitian sojourns. Judith’s parents allowed her to pose, unchaperoned, for a portrait by Gauguin, but when her mother discovered that he was painting her as a full-length frontal nude, she quickly ended the sessions. Judith later recounted Gauguin having groped her chest and kissing her, and the portrait that emerged capitalized on the discomfort of the transgressive situation. It depicts not Judith, but Annah the Javanese, seated awkwardly on an armchair, the whole of her developed body on view as she stares blankly off to the left of the picture plane. Yet the title of the painting, given in Tahitian, was *Aita Tamari Vahine Judith, te Parari*, or “The Child-Woman Judith is Not Yet Breached” (Mowll Mathews 205).

These forays into public discomfort, together with his adoption in the 1880s of the signature “PGo,” French slang for “Prick” (Mowll Mathews 65), reveal the keen interest that Gauguin had in crossing over from social victim to sexual aggressor.187

187 If we really wanted to get into psychobiography here, we might also delve into Paul’s separation from Mette, after a particularly abusive episode in Copenhagen. According to Mowll Mathews, Mette, at the urging of her family, finally forced Paul to leave the house, but she did not divorce him, and as a result the dysfunctional marriage continued from afar for many years. Mowll Mathews writes,

This halfway method [the separation] of resolving abuse in a marriage harms the wife because she never steps out of the shadow of her husband. But the effect on the husband is also unsettling. His guilt is acknowledged, but his wife does not forgive him, nor is he punished by losing her. He pays dearly for managing to elude responsibility for his unseemly acts: “Being acquitted for the violent act means being freed from responsibility for a large part of one’s individual life. ...
Furthermore, he made deliberate attempts to publicize his aggressive tendencies; aggression in general and sexual aggression in particular were not hidden, secret struggles for him but a fully functioning aspect of a public persona that he crafted and tended to like a work of art (this is evidenced in his provocatively-titled painting of “the child-woman Judith,” for example, which has no other possible explanation since the picture does not even present Judith). In this context, it makes a great deal of sense that he would fixate on the aggressor aspects – sexual and otherwise – of Gilgamesh’s character. After all, Gilgamesh is very much depicted as a sexual aggressor in the Epic, and indeed his behavior in this respect is part of what brings the call for Enkidu to be formed, to stop him. “When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body,” we are told, and “Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty” (61); but his beauty only feeds into his own obscene greed, and so “His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble” (62). Such abuse prompts the people to ask the gods to send Enkidu as an equal, to contend with and distract him, and as we have seen in Chapter 2, Enkidu’s arrival and this great contest with Gilgamesh occur just as the latter is about to rape yet another bride on her wedding night (69).

It is easy for a discussion of Gauguin’s personal self-fashioning to dissolve into gossip and speculation, but it’s important to keep in mind that, unlike someone like his friend Vincent van Gogh, for example, Gauguin was very much invested in aesthetic principles that fused public selfhood with his artistic project; in a sense, the two are

This way of neutralizing the act transforms the man into an irresponsible child.” (64) (Quoting Margarete Hydén)

While psychobiographical readings carry considerable risks, and our purpose here is to trace aesthetic tendencies, nevertheless the psychological parallels between the situation that Mowll Mathews describes and the curious blend of atavism and unpunished aggression that Gauguin describes in the Woodcutter Episode are striking.
inseparable from one another. We have seen this already with the agonistic impulse, where psychic and metaphysical suffering are essential elements of both a public persona and an aesthetic struggle. We should explore the same type of connection in the flip-side of Gauguin’s public face, the aggressive side. What does it mean that he has chosen to embrace this aspect of Gilgamesh as a figure, particularly in the context of the Woodcutter Episode, his allegory of aesthetic desire? In order to understand this maneuver, we need to conceptualize symbolic dominance as a drive that has aesthetic and libidinal roots (related to mimetic desire), as well as political implications (related to colonial imperialism).

Aesthetic Dominance and the Crime Against Nature

Ultimately, Gauguin’s refusal of the lessons of Gilgamesh is symbolic of one of Gauguin’s core aesthetic principles: the artist’s right, and duty, to paint the contents of the inner landscape of the mind, rather than the outer landscape of the world. In this respect, it highlights the painful ambivalence of his relationship with nature.

The lesson that Gilgamesh internalizes by the end of the epic is that, no matter how great he is, he truly cannot overcome death as a fundamental element of the natural order of things; instead of trying fruitlessly to do so, he should accept his responsibilities and his fate with courage and equanimity. But long before he can get there, Gilgamesh first makes the mistake that is almost ubiquitous in human societies: he believes that he can dominate nature, subdue it, take out his rage on it, and that this in some way will lessen the impact or the reality of his own certain demise, which nature in turn has ordained. In examining Gilgamesh’s prayer to Shamash (“I have looked over the wall
and see bodies floating on the river, and that will be my lot also” (72)), Robert Pogue
Harrison offers this reading:

Gilgamesh peers over the walls and sees human bodies floating down the [Euphrates] river in funeral processions. [...] It is a visionary moment for Gilgamesh. In revolt against the scene of finitude, Gilgamesh has a vision: he will go to the forests, cut down the trees, and send the logs down the river to the city. In other words, he will make the trees share the fate of those who live within the walls. (18)

Thus, the mission to the cedar forest has never been about destroying “the evil that is in the land” (71); nor is it even entirely about resources. Instead, it reflects Gilgamesh’s rage against the very forces of nature itself, forces upon which he hopes to take his vengeance by wreaking havoc and by leaving the symbol that quantifies the opposite of nature: his name, stamped on brick (71). Noting that, “If Gilgamesh resolves to kill the forest demon, or to deforest the Cedar Mountain, it is because forests represent the quintessence of what lies beyond the walls of the city” (17), Harrison alerts us to the existential undercurrents of Gilgamesh’s primary motivation, which exist long before Enkidu’s death. As Harrison points out, “Forests embody another, more ancient law than the law of civilization” (17), and it is because and not in spite of this dynamic that Gilgamesh enters the forest prepared to destroy it.

Likewise, it is this "other more, ancient law" - as much as the law of the bourgeois marketplace - that Gauguin, too, seeks to break in his art. In his rejection of material reality, his flight into the dream-world, Gauguin often imagined, not unlike Gilgamesh, that he might be able to overcome this mysterious and faceless force known as "nature." He saluted those masters before him who also refused to submit. For example, he wrote of Delacroix:
I can see traces of a great struggle between his very dreamy character and the
down-to-earth character of painting of his day. Yet his instinct rebels in spite of
himself; often, at many points, he tramples on those laws of nature and yields to
utter fantasy. (WOS 129)

And, as we have seen, he described Raphael as someone whose ingenious style
tramples on the mathematical, material, linear lines of natural perspective (which
are not the same thing as the rules of art, beyond the grasp of the general public)
and replaces them either by equivalents or by more or less fabulous rules,
speaking, as it were, an allegorical language [...] a noble language. (WOS 136)

Once again, genius resides in the "trampling of laws" - especially natural laws - an image
that Gauguin applies to his own ambitions as well: "How difficult painting is! I will
trample on the rules and I will be stoned to death" (135).

It is no coincidence that Gauguin uses the word "noble" to describe Raphael's
"allegorical language," because for Gauguin, the artist - the true artist - is very much an
aristocratic figure. Often the nobility of the artist manifests itself in an affinity for that
which is both mysterious and simple at the same time. "In our day people begin to weary
of analysis carried to an extreme," he wrote in Diverses Choses, "and simplicity, which is
inherent in a great nobleman, cannot be understood by a bourgeois" (WOS 128). Such
nobility in the persona of the artist is not just an aesthetic metaphor, though; rather, it has
in equal measure both an aesthetic and an actual, political dimension. This is evident in
Gauguin's political musings in his Cahier Pour Aline, where he writes,

Philosophically speaking, I think the Republic is a trompe l'oeil (to borrow a term
used in painting) and I hate trompe l'oeil. I become antirepublican again
(philosophically speaking), intuitively, instinctively, without thinking about it. I
like nobility, beauty, delicate tastes, and this motto of yesteryear: "Noblesse
oblige." So (instinctively and not knowing why) I am a snob - as an artist. Art is
only for the minority, therefore it has to be noble itself. Only the great lords have
protected art, out of instinct, out of duty (out of pride perhaps). It doesn't matter;
they caused great and beautiful things to be made. The kings and the popes dealt
with artists as equals, so to speak. (WOS 70)
Like kings and popes, the artist derives his authority from a mysterious, unseen, cosmic order - not from the democratic whim of his subjects. True nobles understand their own superiority "intuitively, instinctively, without thinking about it"; they do not bow down to public sentiment or seek democratic popularity.

This is the same attitude, in Gauguin's theory, that the artist must adopt toward nature itself, as Delacroix and Raphael understood. Furthermore, it was particularly in the arts of the Ancient Near East that Gauguin discovered an intoxicating blend of earthly power and aesthetic power; of kingliness and antinaturalism. Hence his fervent appreciation of the bas-reliefs of lions in the Dieulafoy Gallery at the Louvre, and the "enormous genius [that] was required to imagine flowers that are the muscles of animals or muscles that are flowers" (WOS 32). It is no coincidence that he highlights this particular collection of mighty, kingly, and yet ancient and mysterious decorative art to assert his position that "it takes a tremendous imagination to decorate any surface tastefully, and it is a far more abstract art than the servile imitation of nature" (WOS 32; emphasis mine). Like Gauguin himself, the Near Eastern artists were true nobles, and the positioning of the artist above the quotidian concerns of the plebeians is one and the same impulse as his positioning above the material concerns or "rules" of nature itself. This posture remained central to Gauguin's artistic theory throughout his life; hence, in one of his last writings, he asserts that "When a painter stands before his easel, he is a slave neither to the past nor the present, neither to nature nor to his neighbor" (WOS 226).

It would be inaccurate to describe Gauguin's artistic theory as being single-mindedly anti-nature, however. In fact, his thoughts about nature over the entire arc of his career are at times quite nuanced. In the same article quoted above, for example,
while he derides realism as "servile imitation of nature," Gauguin also marvels at the process of producing color in pottery. "[L]ook how artistic nature is," he exhorts. "The colors obtained during the firing process are always in harmony" (WOS 33). And in his "Notes Synthétiques," compiled in 1884-85, he makes his case for his art in this way: "We are criticized for using colors without mixing them, placing them next to each other. On that ground, we are necessarily the winners, being mightily helped by nature, which proceeds in much the same way" (WOS 10). Indeed, in this article Gauguin even seems to regard nature as a powerful and potent force:

Colors exist only in a visible rainbow; but how right rich nature was in carefully showing them to you next to each other in a deliberate and immutable order, as if each color was born of the other!
Now, you have fewer means at your disposal than nature and you decide to deprive yourself of all the means that nature offers you. Will you ever have as much light as nature has, or as much heat as the sun? And you talk about exaggeration! But how can one exaggerate, since one can't go all the way, as nature does? (WOS 11)

Here, far from being the enemy of the artist, or even that which he must overcome, nature is presented as the artist's master and guide; his superior both in ontological significance ("deliberate and immutable") and in aesthetic production ("Will you ever have as much light as nature has, or as much heat as the sun?"). Indeed, in his article "Huysmans and Redon," Gauguin goes so far as to say that "The artist himself is one of nature's means and, in my opinion, Odilon Redon is one of those it has chosen for this continuation of creation" (WOS 41).

Such paeans to nature itself - as both an aesthetic guide and a formidable master - seem out of character, given Gauguin's more pessimistic grumblings. But this very type of contradiction is in fact quite characteristic of Gauguin's writing, which Mark Cheetham thoughtfully describes as "synthetic formulations of nonetheless viable
Furthermore, this discrepancy - or, complication - might also be untangled if we consider the following, from Gauguin's unpublished article "On Decorative Art":

And what role does nature play, or a copy of nature (I have in mind visible nature)? In decorative art, none, or almost none; only the role that the painter with little creative imagination (creative, I repeat, not the kind that arranges and manages) decides to give it. (WOS 13)

The key here lies in Gauguin's equivocations on what constitutes "nature"; as he writes, he shifts from talking about "nature" to talking about "a copy of nature," to, finally, that ambiguous concept, "visible nature." This formulation of course leaves open the possibility of an invisible nature - one which, as he later put it, has "mysterious affinities, and imaginative power" (WOS 41). It is this aspect of nature with which the artist collaborates (though he still does not "serve" it); it is this aspect of nature he references when he marvels at art and its "wealth of means by which to enter into intimate contact with nature" (10). It is this distinction that allows Gauguin both to praise nature for its harmonious coloring of pottery, and to argue that, in his Self-Portrait Les Misérables, "The colors are colors remote from nature; just picture a vague memory of pottery twisted by a fierce fire!" (25).

The Woodcutter Episode and its Gilgamesh subtext ultimately dramatize precisely this ambivalent vision that Gauguin has. Like Gilgamesh, Gauguin's narrator brutalizes the natural world, breaking sacred laws. But unlike Gilgamesh, Gauguin's narrator is unpunished for the transgression. He will not be a slave to nature, or to his neighbor.
the other hand, he lives in harmony with the fragrance (*noa noa*) that surrounds him, and that offers a kind of communion with the *invisible* side of nature that he intuitively senses, with his noble spirit. While the tree itself must die, its "vital sap" and its fragrant memory provide the bridge from the quotidian to the spirit world. And in the end, its transformation into a work of art by Gauguin himself is what seals its final meaning.

**III. Part II: The Problem of Knowledge**

Gauguin's domineering relationship to nature constitutes, for him, a refusal to submit - a refusal that is equally staunch in the face of all limitations. In *Racontars de rapin*, he writes that "it was necessary [...] to attempt complete liberation, to smash windows, even at the risk of cutting one's fingers, and leave it up to the next generation, independent henceforth, free of all hindrance, to solve the problem brilliantly" (WOS 226). In Gauguin's grandiose vision, the avant-garde march against limits will cause injury, but it is a matter of freedom and independence. One is reminded immediately of the blood on Gauguin's hands as he attacks the rosewood tree with his friend; nature will fall to the artist's will, but at great cost to both. As we have seen, Gauguin's refusal to submit requires him to eschew the ecological lessons of *Gilgamesh*. As we will now see, the same refusal to submit characterizes Gauguin's approach to the perennial mystery of human culture: the downfall that accompanies the acquisition of knowledge.

It is impossible to read of Gauguin's attack on the rosewood tree without thinking of another ancient, sacred tree, the forbidden one that stands in the midst of the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they enter into one of humanity's oldest exchanges:
gaining wisdom while losing their innocence. Their subsequent banishment from the Garden comes with a curse, as well: they will suffer mortality, and they will suffer in their labor - on the fields, for Adam, or in the delivery room, for Eve. God's curse on his own creations in this scene evokes the human subject's awareness of its own precariousness on the Earth. "Cursed is the ground for your sake," God tells Adam. "In toil you shall eat of it / All the days of your life" (Gen 3:17); and worse, "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread / Till you return to the ground, / For out of it you were taken; / For dust you are, / And to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:18). We can so easily picture Adam slowly turning away from the gates, pulling close around him his divinely tailored furs, and submitting somberly to the conditions of his curse. Because of his newfound knowledge, he will toil, he will die, and he will return to dust. In the Bible, he accepts these terms without protest. They are enacted to preserve the superiority of the creator; to prevent the humans from becoming "more like us."

The biblical myth of the fall has ancient Near Eastern sources, including *Gilgamesh*. As Theodore Ziolkowski points out in *The Sin of Knowledge*, "the epic contains virtually all the elements of the biblical account" (15).189 Perhaps most importantly, the Assyrian and Hebrew myths of the fall explicitly tie the catastrophic acquisition of knowledge and the attendant sorrows of degeneration to the mystery of

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189 Ziolkowski points out that what he calls the "essential and characteristic difference" between the biblical fall and Enkidu's fall is "simply, that Adam-Eve sins by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. From Paul (Rom. 5.19) by way of Dante (*Paradiso* 26.115-17) to Milton, to be sure, Christian theology has emphasized the fact of 'Man's first disobedience': it was the act of disobedience that condemned Adam-Man" (17). This crucial element of the biblical fall highlights its efficacy as a prime source of inspiration for Gauguin, who in both his painting and his persona continually asserts himself as fundamentally disobedient - a rebel, a criminal, etc. His refusal to submit to nature or to society is inextricably tied up in his ambivalence about the pursuit of knowledge.
human sexuality, by having their heroes succumb to the seduction of a woman. In Genesis, the offending knowledge-seekers are also made acutely aware of their own (sexual) bodies, first and foremost among all evils. They try to hide their nakedness from their maker, a sure sign that they have been up to no good (Gen 3:7-10). From this moment on in the Western imaginary, Eve, the mother of all life, is also the mother of all death. She bequeaths to her children her pain and sorrow, her shame, and her mortality.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, too, explores the problem of knowledge as a fundamental human condition through the metaphor of erotic awareness, as we have seen. The primitive double, emerging from the forest, is first seduced by a temple harlot, who leaves him weakened and unable to return to his animal life. Having satisfied himself with the harlot, "Enkidu was grown weak, for wisdom was in him, and the thoughts of a man were in his heart" (65). Indeed, an awareness of woman’s power to weaken and capture the man-beast is presupposed in the text, as she is sent out by a local farmer for the express purpose of doing exactly that (64). Yet in compensation for his loss of animal strength, Enkidu also receives the gifts of human knowledge from the harlot, who teaches him how to eat bread, to drink wine, and to dress in human clothing (67). Indeed, the ancient text takes a fascinatingly complex view of the quintessential exchange of innocence for knowledge within the field of sexuality. As we have seen, Enkidu

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190 The importance of bread in the transition to mortal humanness, whether for better or worse, appears in both *Gilgamesh* and Genesis. In the former text, Enkidu is brought by the harlot into the shepherds' tents, where the shepherds, crowding around in curiosity, place bread before him, "but Enkidu could only suck the milk of wild animals. He fumbled and gaped, at a loss what to do or how he should eat the bread and drink the strong wine. Then the woman said, 'Enkidu, eat bread, it is the staff of life; drink the wine, it is the custom of the land'" (67). In this way, bread becomes a major symbol of acculturation in *Gilgamesh* and brings to mind God's curse to Adam in Genesis: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 4:19).
curses these gifts and the woman who provided them, using spectacularly misogynistic language to express his anger at what has become of him in his post-animal life:

As for you, woman, with a great curse I curse you! [...] You shall be without a roof for your commerce, for you shall not keep house with other girls in the tavern, but do your business in places fouled by the vomit of the drunkard. Your hire will be potter's earth, your thievings will be flung into the hovel, you will sit at the cross-roads in the dust of the potter's quarter, you will make your bed on the dunghill at night, and by day take your stand in the wall's shadow. (90)

But, as we have also seen, the gods actually respond to Enkidu’s rage, forcing him to recant his curse on the harlot and to recognize instead the greatness of these gifts of civilization:

Enkidu, why are you cursing the woman, the mistress who taught you to eat bread fit for gods and drink wine of kings? She who put upon you a magnificent garment, did she not give you a glorious magnificent garment, did she not give you glorious Gilgamesh for your companion, and has not Gilgamesh, your own brother, made you rest on a royal bed and recline on a couch at his left hand? (91)

Enkidu retracts his curse after this, and reconciles himself to his demise. He converts his curse into a blessing on the woman.

Patrick Barron reads this curious exchange as an insidious advancement of the interests of human domination, describing it as a "grand, forced cover-up of the terrible failure and cruelty of Enkidu's 'humanization'" (392). I would like to draw a comparison between this "cover-up" and Gauguin's "cover-up" of the "terrible failure and cruelty" of Tahiti's colonization. Orientalist colonialist discourse, like the ancient Near

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191 Barron goes on to argue that such narratives of dominance and "progress" have "many parallels in, for example, rationales for the contemporary capturing of wild animals" (392).

192 My critique here goes directly against the text as it presents itself. *Noa Noa*, as I have said, heavily thematizes the image of the dying culture, and intersperses melancholy scenes of cultural degeneration with direct critiques of colonial culture. "Having only just arrived," for example, Gauguin says that he was "rather disappointed [...] by things being so far from what I had longed for and (this was the point) imagined, disgusted by
Eastern myth, depends on such a cover-up as both ideology and commodity. As Linda Nochlin writes,

The picturesque is pursued throughout the nineteenth century like a form of peculiarly elusive wildlife, requiring increasingly skillful tracking as the delicate prey - an endangered species - disappears farther and farther into the hinterlands [...]. The same society that was engaged in wiping out local customs and traditional practices was also avid to preserve them in the form of records (297)

It is within this critical framework which Nochlin provides that I would like to turn to the question of knowledge and innocence in Noa Noa, as it relates to Gilgamesh. The topos of sexual innocence as a metaphor for artistic authenticity was of paramount importance for Gauguin, but it arises directly out of the truth-denying epistemic violence that Nochlin has pinpointed in French Orientalist painting, in a way that echoes the tragic downfall of the "humanized" Enkidu. We can trace this relationship in the allegory of mimetic desire in the Woodcutter Episode.

In Noa Noa, Gauguin has thematized the dialectics of knowledge and innocence through the sexuality of his double, reflecting a parallel structure to the one found in Gilgamesh. In the beginning of the Woodcutter Episode, he describes the young man who would become his guide as a friend from his village, a neighbor who spent long hours discussing with Gauguin his questions about art and, importantly, sexuality. Gauguin writes that the young man would often ask him “the questions of a young savage who wants to know a lot of things about love in Europe, questions which often embarrassed me” (25). Gauguin’s cultivated coyness here contrasts with the intense all this European triviality, [and] in some ways blind" (13). Thus it would be unjust to accuse Gauguin of denying outright the existence of colonial imperialism. What the text does, however, is in some ways just as insidious, in that Gauguin critiques the imperialist project forcefully, but utterly elides his own positioning within that project. This is the essential aporia at the core of Gauguin's colonial critique.
eroticism of his real thoughts about his double that we have already seen, and the link between knowledge, sexuality, and the fall from grace is made more explicit as the hike progresses and the sexual imagery intensifies. But in contrast to Enkidu, Gauguin’s double in this scene does not suffer a concomitant fall from grace. On the contrary, he is represented as retaining his childish posture and sexual cluelessness, both after the conversations with the artist, and after the artist’s erotic thoughts about him on the trail: “The boy went his way, limpid-eyed,” Gauguin writes; “He had not understood. I alone carried the burden of an evil thought, a whole civilization had been before me in evil and had educated me” (28).

It is curious here that the boy does not understand the artist’s impulses, in part because of how completely this moment overturns the prominent stereotype. As I have noted, Tahitians were, from the time of early contact with Europeans, stereotyped as sexually obsessed, even frighteningly so. They were often described as engaging in sexual orgies and enjoying relatively unrestrained access to one another. Furthermore, these stereotypes seem to have been at least loosely based on what was indeed a fairly relaxed approach to sexuality in the Pacific Islands. Although the specifics of a past generation are difficult to recreate now, in Gauguin’s Skirt, Stephen Eisenman explores contemporary (late 1990s) Tahitian sexuality with the purpose of elucidating the mores of the culture as they are presented in Noa Noa and other Gauguin works. He writes that sexual teasing or joking, especially in the company of mahus, was an integral part of

193 June Hargrove also writes of Gauguin's "fascination with the cult dedicated to [the Maori god] Oro, the Ariori Society. Consecrated to free love, this sect celebrated exuberant sexual rites and practiced infanticide until the society was eradicated by the combined forces of the missionaries and colonial authorities in the nineteenth century" (559). This type of history, and Gauguin's fascination with it, makes his insistence on his guide's chastity all the more intriguing.
Tahitian family culture and even played an important role in the social structure of Polynesian kinship systems. “Children,” he writes, “no less than women and men, learn to master the local billingsgate, and to make frequent and explicit reference to genitals, to masturbation, and to supercision” (107). Describing this tendency as central to an enduring cultural identity, Eisenman goes so far as to credit it, in part, for the fact that “Tahitians have successfully maintained many of the traditional corporate structures of kinship and, to an equally great degree, have resisted French efforts to impose a system of individual land tenure” (108).

Whether and how precisely Eisenman’s late-1990s account can be applied to the colonial-era Tahiti that Gauguin experienced is probably something that cannot be fully determined. But Gauguin himself later wrote about being the butt of lewd joking by a blind woman who squeezed his uncircumcised penis and insulted it (Eisenman 109), and from the day he arrived on Tahiti he was the object of a great deal of attention and joking among locals, who considered his long hair and flamboyant dress mahu-like. Thus, the representation of the Tahitian guide as sexually naïve most likely should not be taken as the product of anthropological study, or as biographical information. Instead, the textual representation of the guide needs (yet again) to be explored as a literary device with a symbolic weight. Why does Gauguin free his Tahitian guide from Enkidu’s fate?

Specifically, Gauguin’s insistence on incorruptibility in this and other Tahitian scenes in Noa Noa should be evaluated in light of his intense fascination with the knowledge / innocence dichotomy that underlies the foundational myth of biblical monotheism, the myth of the Fall of Man. As was the case with most dominant cultural conventions, Gauguin’s relationship to this idea was complicated; on one hand, he was
frustrated by the prudishness and limitations of it, but on the other hand he also adopted it as a structure for his own thought. This knowledge / innocence dichotomy is at the core, for example, of his feeling that primitive and Eastern arts could be a source of purity because they had not degenerated into the falseness and corruption of Western positivistic realism (Daftari 90). This attitude suggests a clear association between the developed knowledge of artistic technique and a kind of qualitative, quasi-moral decrepitude. Along these same lines, we have already seen the letter describing the self-portrait as Jean Valjean, in which Gauguin wrote that he has depicted himself as “pure, still unsullied by the putrid kiss of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts,” again linking aesthetic “purity” with sexual innocence, and casting Western aesthetic refinement - which amounts to an accumulation of cultural knowledge - as a lecherous, predatory phenomenon. This phrasing reverberates with Gauguin’s pride at never having formally trained as an artist, while at the same time linking the knowledge / innocence dichotomy with sexual “sullying,” echoing the biblical Fall.

Indeed, the Symbolist movement as a whole, like others emphasizing subjectivism and the prioritizing of the imagination, arose in many ways out of a backlash against the positivistic ideals of the dominant science-centered discourse of the Enlightenment. As Robert Pogue Harrison writes, there is a discernible and complex longing in the "post-Christian age," an age that "experiences its freedom as a deprivation as well as a gain." The deep conflicts between Gauguin's avant-garde futurism and his fetishization of the past are part of this matrix of regret; Harrison points out that "The countercurrent of Enlightenment's drive to inherit the future is nostalgia" (115). Gauguin sought to work out these conflicts in his art, and he does the same thing, but with a twist, in Noa Noa.
The sex / knowledge / sin dynamic from Genesis is present throughout Gauguin’s oeuvre, and bears close associations to the interest in virginal young girls that we have already explored. Two paintings preceding the first Tahiti trip exemplify this theme well, and date from a period (1888-1891) when Gauguin began to establish the biblical fall as a central, even a signature, theme in his art. The first, called *Eve*, features a nude woman seated at the foot of a tree, her knees drawn to her chest like a child. Tilting her head to the side with an anguished, open-mouthed expression, the woman covers her ears with her hands, resting her elbows upon her bony knees. The small bones, smooth line, and rosy cheeks give the figure a decidedly youthful air, but her body is rendered with pastels, in a pale, sickly white with a blue chiaroscuro that suggests the decaying palor of a corpse. Behind her, a snake approaches from the base of the tree, with sinister eyes and a lashing tongue. While the tree and the figure seem to exist on an island of green, all around them in the foreground and background a fiery yellow earth interrupted by rivulets of blood red suggests heat, violence, chaos, and movement. An inscription reads, “*Pas écouter li li menteur*” – Don’t listen to the liar.
In this painting, Gauguin performs his characteristic maneuvers of juxtaposition and repetition. The woman’s pose, seated, with her knees drawn in and her hands on her face, echoes the pose of a Peruvian mummy that Gauguin had seen at the Ethnographic Museum in Paris, and that he had already used in a previous painting, *The Wine Harvest*, in 1888 (Mowll Mathews 120). The provenance of this pose confirms the deathly tone in the flesh of the falling *Eve* and figures in the Synthétiste composition of the scene: the

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194 Mowll Mathews points out that Vincent van Gogh produced a drawing titled "Sorrow" around the same time, and it also features a woman in almost the same pose. "The plight of the women in both Gauguin's and Vincent's renditions is explicit," she writes, "but the clear emotional content of Vincent's *Sorrow* makes the viewer empathize with the forlorn woman, whereas the eerie calm of Gauguin's *Wine Harvest* suggests symbolism beyond pure emotion" (120). In particular, the mummy-like pose of the woman in the *Wine Harvest* "cast[s] the spectre of death over the scene," while her tousled hair "indicates sexual abandon" (120). In other words, Gauguin's fallen virgins, rather than individuals, function mainly as vehicles for him to explore his obsession with sex and death as both aesthetic and ontological phenomena.
transposition of the Peruvian savage into the foundational monotheistic narrative. This transposition is made complete by the inscription, which, written in Creole French, emphasizes the cross-pollination of cultural images and suggests a primitivist rejection of refined speech. What is most striking about this painting, though, is the ambiance of the composition – the bright dryness of the colors, resembling nothing like the typical Garden of Eden – and the sense of movement brought to life by the pastel work is done in short marks rising from the lower left to the upper right of the picture plane. Eve is alone with the snake on a tiny island of green, surrounded by sun-baked emptiness. There is a stark duality here, between the clunky solidity of the tree on its little grass platform, and the fiery, gaseous chaos all around: once again, the material and the immaterial. The same type of duality characterizes the figure herself, who is both youth and death, both quintessentially Western (as Eve) and radically non-Western (as the Peruvian mummy).

At the same time, the painting clarifies the relationship not just between sex and death, but, more crucially, between knowledge and death. “Don’t listen to the liar!” the invisible voice commands (does it come from the air? from within the girl? from the artist?). The much derided Creole French of the inscription\textsuperscript{195} denotes not only a colonized identity, but an innocent lack of sophistication. Although the title of the painting identifies its subject as Eve, the girl is also Gauguin, fighting off the educating...

\textsuperscript{195} Mowll Mathews explains that the language of the inscription was "disturbing to Gauguin's viewers," because it was "easily recognized by knowledgeable Parisians as the language spoken by the black colonials who had come to live in Paris" (134). Gauguin, who had picked up the dialect while living in Martinique in 1887, used this linguistic device to alienate himself from the bourgeois audience, casting himself as "primitive" while at the same time asserting his privilege as a well-traveled cosmopolitan colonial subject. According to Mowll, Mathews, the gambit paid off; "As one critic indignantly asked, 'What document supports M. Gauguin's assumption that Eve talked pidgin?'" (135).
voices, the social, official, and economic forces tempting him to refine his craft for a bourgeois audience. Whatever her identity, she clearly symbolizes the anguish of being caught between two planes – between life and death, spiritual and material. The “liars,” the snakes, are those who would corrupt her with positivistic technique. The girl must resist these, even in her isolation, or risk losing her immortality, her chance at an immaterial self. The painting, and its central trope of Gauguin as virginal / savage / innocent female, is emblematic of Gauguin's overarching transvestite project.

This precarious and isolated position surfaces again in The Loss of Virginity (1889), this time with a fox instead of a snake as the seducer. Against the backdrop of a richly colored, varied landscape, here a young woman’s nude body stretches stiffly and horizontally across the lower level of the picture plane. Again, the picture vibrates with the dissonance created by the youthful figure rendered with a deathly pallor and stiff pose; the figure’s left foot awkwardly covers the right in a gesture that evokes both a fear of violation (a crossing of the legs) and, not coincidentally, the feet of Christ on the cross, one overlapping the other where the nail is driven through. A sly-looking fox – according to Gauguin, "an Indian symbol of perversion" (WOS 35) – drapes itself over her left shoulder, and she has placed her left hand over it, as if inviting it to stay, although she looks stiffly ahead with a frightened expression. In her right hand, the figure holds a plucked lily flower, already wilting. In the receding background, dark, menacing expanses of land line the edge of the promontory that gives way to a wide, blood-red field beyond.

These paintings represent the early working through of a complex theme that would only become more complex during the first Tahiti period. The association of sex
with knowledge and knowledge with the fall, degeneration, and death depends not only on narrative elements (the obvious snake, for example) but also on the color and tone of the painting, as well as the distinctive interactions between the figures and their environment. In *Eve*, the decaying flesh of the figure stands in stark and tragic contrast to the enchanted gossamer hell of her surroundings. Here, Eve is the foundational figure of dialectic, as she is both mother and mummy; a bringer of life to all humanity as the first woman, and a bringer of death to all humanity as the initiator, through illicit knowledge, of the fall. In *The Loss of Virginity*, she appears as a passive sacrifice, her rigid pose reflecting both an ominous narrative (impending decay) and an aesthetic principle (Gauguin's iconic, primitive stiffness of style). In other words, during this period prior to his first trip to Tahiti, Gauguin worked out the figure of Eve not only as a narrative device but also as a trope enabling him to weave together several of his most pressing personal and aesthetic themes: transposition and juxtaposition; the problem of knowledge; and the dialectical relationship between material and immaterial essences.

All of this concern about knowledge and innocence may also help us to interpret that other paradoxical and much commented-upon scene in *Noa Noa*, in which the narrator recounts long discussions about Maori mythology with his thirteen-year-old *vahine*, Tehamana. In this scene, Tehamana explains to the adoring Gauguin, who represents himself always as her inferior, the foundational legends of Maori cosmogony (See Introduction, p. 29). In later versions, the text here is supplemented with fanciful watercolors depicting these scenes of cosmic disturbance with the same carefully crafted simplicity that characterizes his scenes of women braiding reeds together to make sunhats. But the words that Gauguin attributes to his mistress here were not in fact her
own; rather, they were lifted verbatim from Moerenhout’s *Voyages in the South Pacific*,
the same anthropological travelogue that contained the story of chopping down trees.
Thus, although Gauguin claims to be aligning himself with the “savages” he so admires,
the innocent primitives oppressed by Western dominance, he is in fact quoting one of the
earliest voices of that very order of dominance, in order to craft the picture that he
wishes. Indeed, Nancy Perloff has pointed out that it is actually quite unlikely that
Tehamana would even have been able to provide Maori cosmogony to Gauguin; by the
time he visited Tahiti, most villagers had been missionized and would have known more
about the Christian church than they did about their own native myths (267).

Perloff situates the cognitive dissonance of the pillowtalk scene within the context
of Gauguin’s desire to present himself as a journeyman to far-off, uncorrupted places. In
order to sell his public image (and his art) as one who has dwelt among savages, Gauguin
has to emphasize their persistent savageness, exoticizing their attitudes and reinforcing
their naïveté (267-8). In this and other exoticizing impulses, Gauguin was interested not
only in crafting his public image but also in reinforcing his ideas about art (which were,
of course, closely tied to the public image at bottom). In order to argue for the “purity”
of “primitive” art forms, he needed to represent the purity of primitive cultures. Even
more importantly, though, Gauguin needed to believe in that purity himself. This is why
the desire to reinforce cultural purity is specifically linked to the acquisition of
knowledge – or lack thereof – on the part of the one who would fall: Gauguin preserves
Tehamana’s innocence through her lack of knowledge of Christianity, as he preserves his
guide’s innocence through his lack of sexual understanding. In both cases the innocence
stands for both the cultural purity of the primitive character and the aesthetic and moral
purity of the primitive state. It would be a shame, after all, to cut down the tree and find no “vital sap” but only Western clichés coursing through its limbs.

Ultimately, this scene amounts to a characteristic move on Gauguin's part. Using allegory and cultural transvestism, he asserts the primacy of his subjective selfhood and aesthetic mission over all else. As a writer and an artist, perhaps he has the "right," in a non-moral sense, to do this. But the effects of this discursive maneuver on Tehamana as a historically constituted subject are nothing short of devastating. Discussing *Manao Tupapau*, Griselda Pollock has already demonstrated how Gauguin's painterly representations of Tehamana destroyed her subjectivity, reducing her to "[a] warm, naked, childlike body," a body which was "offered freely, according to local patriarchal customs," and which "was taken, recoded debased, and aesthetically reworked, rendered distant and different, through its colour, the synonym of an infantile superstition against which the European man can maintain his fictional superiority: rational, in control, creative" (47). To this critique I would only add that the bedroom scene with the voice of Moerenhout is absolutely central to the construction of Tehamana as nothing more than a "warm body [...] aesthetically reworked." Whereas Tehamana is given few words throughout the text, and is often represented as silent and impenetrable, "like an idol," in this one scene she is allowed to speak freely, to represent her culture, to narrate her cosmogony, if not her own historically constituted experience. Nevertheless, as Gayatri Spivak has warned us, "The subaltern female cannot be heard or read" (308) ... and sure enough, we come to find out that it is not Tehamana who is speaking here at all, but Moerenhout, an imperial subject whose specific project as a colonial administrator was to
gather information and turn it into "knowledge," to be pressed into the service of collecting, categorizing, and managing the Orient.

In silencing Tehamana and substituting Moerenhout in her place, Gauguin has unquestionably committed an act of "epistemic violence" (Spivak 268). Furthermore, this act is central - not incidental - to his aesthetic project, for the reasons I have mentioned above. Thus Gauguin can be seen to cut down, efface, and consume Tehamana in the same way as he does the rosewood tree, disassembling her and digesting her into individual parts as they prove suitable to his narrative self-fashioning. That he does this in the guise of a naturalist, quasi-anthropological travel memoir is not just an avant-garde gambit, but a quintessential Orientalizing, imperialist gesture. Gauguin's pseudo-ethnographic positioning here gives the text the "claim to objectivity" that "serves to hide the imperial discourse within which [it was] created" (Aschercoft iii). His insistence on Tehamana's innocence is the literary equivalent of the picturesque Orientalist paintings of the Salon, paintings in which, as Linda Nochlin notes, the "Oriental world is a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were [...] drastically altering Western societies at the time" (291). By effacing the actual conditions of Tehaman's colonial and patriarchal subjugation, Gauguin commits a double violence, revealing that he regards her in much the same way as he regards the natural world: "I borrow some subject or other from life or from nature, and us[e] it as a pretext" (WOS 111).

IV. Conclusion
If recognizing the Gilgamesh subtext in Noa Noa reveals the latters as a parable of Gauguin's aesthetic mission, recognizing the many points of divergence between these dynamic and enigmatic texts has just as much to tell us about their deep lessons and their polysemous nature. At its core, Noa Noa's rejection of the lessons of Gilgamesh highlights the complexity of Gauguin's travelogue and of his anxious, self-aggrandizing personal mythology. Ultimately, Gauguin sought the grandeur of ancient symbols but eschewed their moral rigidity, which after all would not have been all that much different from what he had faced in his own detested Catholic Church. As a painter and a dreamer Gauguin claimed the right to dispose of his sources - both natural and cultural - at will. As a cosmopolite, he had, in his era, the same right with respect to people.

What I am most interested in is how Gauguin has used mythic subtext and narrative form to express aesthetic principles as an allegory. Whether deliberate or not, his misreadings of Gilgamesh communicate important aesthetic concepts. For Gauguin, the ambivalent attitude toward nature functioned at several levels simultaneously and resulted in a fractured and often tormented relationship. Frustrated and even enraged at the supremacy that this mysterious force had over him as both an artist and a mortal being, he attempted to assert himself against it while at the same time exhibiting an undeniable longing for communion with it. Indeed, Gauguin's life-long struggle with the concept of nature challenges us even to define what exactly "nature" means to him. When we consider the complexity of this dynamic it seems obvious that he would turn to myth to encapsulate it.

In this chapter I have attempted to show how we can derive meaning not only from the ways in which Gauguin engaged with Gilgamesh, but, just as importantly, from
his refusals (or perhaps failures?) to engage. I have tried to shed light on how Gauguin's idiosyncratic use of Gilgamesh dramatizes certain patterns or tendencies in his thinking that reverberate through many of his most celebrated aesthetic innovations. I see the two main sections of this chapter - one dealing with the crime against nature, and the other exploring the problem of knowledge - as a parallel to the two central struggles that Gauguin faced as he worked to define himself and his purpose over a thirty-year period. I see his freedom to embrace or reject the lessons of ancient cultures as emblematic of his privileged colonial position, and I am interested in what this can tell us about the intersection between art and power on both a macro level - who has access to whose resources, images, and materials - and a micro level - the focussed aesthetic priorities of an individual artist, an individual man.

Above all, I have tried to argue for Noa Noa as a poetic text, one which, far from narrating the story of the author's life, actually serves the opposite function. Noa Noa is Gauguin's platform for dissembling: for obstructing, splitting, enhancing, merging, and playing with identity. It is a symbolic text, whose primary purpose is not necessarily to foreground its author's personal concerns but rather to dramatize his aesthetic ambitions. It is tragic, ironic, political, fantastical, and deeply hypocritical. It is also profoundly fragmented, destabilizing fundamental concepts like selfhood, history and time in ways that provoke a dissonance that is strikingly modernist. However, it achieves these forms of destabilization by drawing on essentially Romantic principles, making Noa Noa a strikingly emblematic transitional text between these two movements. In The Rhetoric of Romanticism, Paul de Man writes that "An abundant imagery coinciding with an equally abundant quantity of natural objects" and "the theme of imagination linked closely to the
theme of nature" constitute "the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism" (2). _Noa Noa_ probes and capitalizes upon these polarities, using them to cast doubt upon the nature of textuality itself.
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