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ANCIEN

CULTURE

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SAVAGE TALES

The writings
of
PAUL GAUGUIN

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Mon cher Daniel.

Je ne vous ai pas écrit le mois dernier, je n'avais plus rien à vous dire sinon répéter, puis ensuite je n'en avais pas le courage. Aussitôt le courrier ^{arrivé}, n'ayant rien reçu de Chaudet, ma santé tout à coup presque rétablie c'est à dire sans plus de chance de mourir naturellement j'ai voulu me tuer. Je suis parti dans un cachet dans la montagne où mon cadavre aurait été dévoré par les fourmis. Je n'avais pas de revolver mais j'avais de l'arsenic que j'avais thésaurisé durant ma maladie d'examen est ce la dose qui était trop forte, ou bien le fait des vomissements qui ont annulé l'action du poison en le rejetant, je ne sais. Enfin après une nuit de terribles souffrances je suis rentré au logis. Durant tout ce mois j'ai été tracassé par des pressions aux tempes, puis des étourdissements, des nausées à mes repas minimes. Je reçois ce mois-ci 700^{fr} de Chaudet et 150^{fr} de Mauffra; avec cela je paye les créanciers les plus acharnés, et reconstruis à vivre comme avant, de misères et de honte jusqu'au mois de Mai où la banque me fera saisir et vendre à vil prix ce que je possède, entre autres mes tableaux. Enfin unissons à cette époque à recommencer d'une autre façon.

Il faut vous dire que ma résolution était bien prise pour le mois de Décembre alors j'ai voulu avant de mourir peindre une grande toile que j'avais eu tête et durant tout le mois j'ai travaillé jour et nuit dans une fièvre si ouïe. Voilà ce n'est pas une toile faite comme un Louis de Chavannes études d'après nature, puis carbon préparatoire etc. tout cela est fait de chic au bout de la brosse, sur une toile à sac pleine de noués et rugosités aussi l'aspect en est terrible. ^{On dira que c'est lâche etc...}

† Où venons nous
† Où venons nous
† Où venons nous



Chapter One

THE ARTIST as ANTI-CRITIC

draw on the information in discussions with clients, but should not reveal its source.²⁰ However, despite this promise of exclusivity, Gauguin had sent very similar reports to the dealer's brother Vincent and to their mutual colleague, Émile Bernard. To the former he described it as 'the best thing I've done up to now as regards power and harmony – but the literary side of it is insane to many', emphasising its importance but also vaunting its inscrutability.²¹

With minor differences among the letters, he provided his three correspondents with an iconographic reading that identifies the upper part of the relief as representing the city of Babylon, the lower part a countryside scene, and the main characters as a 'monster', bearing his own features, who grabs a reluctant woman by the hand, and a fox, which he calls an 'Indian symbol of perversity'.²² In themselves, these isolated details hardly cohere into an intelligible narrative, and the closest he came to defining the work's broader significance was to note that the mood belies the happiness promised by the title, thus hinting that it could be interpreted as a parody of romantic love, with him as the anti-hero.²³ This rather literal explanation does not account for the sculpture's full effect (as Gauguin himself said to Vincent, 'you have to see the colour of the wood ... there are reflections where the light hits the parts in relief, imparting richness'), but that is precisely the point: in its very incompleteness the explanation suggests the inadequacy of verbal description, while disclosing just enough information to give the would-be interpreter a starting point, without being so exhaustive as to dampen curiosity.

Gauguin's attitude towards the elucidation of his art was therefore conflicted. He took pride in his obscurity, celebrating his work's difficulty as a natural consequence of its avoidance of narrative legibility, as when he explained to George-Daniel de Monfreid that 'I am sometimes accused of being incomprehensible precisely because people look for an explanatory side to my paintings even though there isn't one'.²⁴ However, he also recognised the need to attract

critical attention by hinting at meanings without divulging them fully. He used his correspondents as conduits for the dissemination of his ideas, but addressed each one as though they were personal confidants, and supplied specific keys to interpretation even while expressing a fundamental distaste for clarification.²⁵ For instance, writing to De Monfreid about *Manaò tupapaú* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, fig. 1.3), one of nine works from his first Tahitian period that he shipped to Europe for exhibition at Den Frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition) in Copenhagen in 1893, he confided 'Here is the genesis (for you alone)', yet he also wrote about this same painting in a letter to his wife, Mette, who was to receive the works from De Monfreid, 'so that you can understand and, as they say, act the clever clogs'.²⁶ He then followed a detailed discussion of the painting with the dismissive statement 'There you have a little text that will make you look clever in front of the critics when they bombard you with their mischievous questions' and concluded that 'What I'm writing to you is very dull, but I think that it is necessary for you over there'.²⁷

Acknowledging the fact that 'naturally many of the pictures will be incomprehensible', he chose to exacerbate their obscurity by inscribing titles in Tahitian on the canvases themselves.²⁸ At the same time, he supplied his wife with a list of French translations, writing 'This translation is for you alone, so you can give it to those who ask for it'.²⁹ Stipulating exclusivity – 'for you alone' – he also implied the expectation of wider dissemination, and indeed Gauguin sent the translations of his picture titles to De Monfreid too. When he exhibited the works at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris a few months later, the catalogue prepared by Morice included French translations alongside the original Tahitian titles.³⁰ In this way, he could intrigue viewers by employing an unfamiliar language, but also provide them with the code needed to interpret it. Several years later, in a passage from *Diverses choses* (*Miscellaneous things*), Gauguin set out to answer those critics who had reacted negatively to his Paris exhibition



ethnographic liberal: as much as he denounced the European coloniser, or the professional writer, their advantages and methods were also his.

Gauguin was not alone among nineteenth-century artists in his conflicted attitude to the written word. Factors including the professionalisation of art criticism and the increasing threat to literary hegemony posed by visual art's move away from narrative themes resulted in antagonism between artists and critics. Painters such as Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) and Odilon Redon (1840–1916) all shared Gauguin's uneasy

combination of a strong commitment to visual art's autonomy and an equally deep engagement with literature and poetry.¹² They intervened in critical debate in an attempt to wrest back authority from writers, whose knowledge of visual art they disputed, but whose personal preferences they knew had the power to make or break an artist's fortune.¹³ Gauguin was particularly vocal in his opposition to the critic's unwarranted power (this is essentially the subject of *Raconters de rapin*) and his jibes at men of letters are often cited in this context.¹⁴ Despite his principled stance on the self-sufficiency of visual art, he was

Fig. 1.3 *Manaò tupapaú* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*), 1892. Oil on jute mounted on canvas, 73 x 92.4 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

was in productive tension with, rather than direct opposition to, the literary.

'A BOOK TO BE SEEN AS WELL AS READ'

Previous discussions of Gauguin's writing have tended to consider the content of his texts separately from their form. A clear instance of this is the assumption that the images that accompany Noa Noa in the Louvre album are fortuitous, since they do not directly illustrate the text. Scholars have concluded that they served merely to fill the space on blank pages reserved for poems by Morice, when these failed to appear.²¹ But Gauguin included similar arrangements of pictures in *Diverses choses*, where there was no need to keep blank pages for awaited contributions from a co-author.²² The preface to this version of *Noa Noa* introduces it as a 'book to be seen as well as read', implying that the images were planned, and it is clear that he conceived of some form of visual dimension to *Noa Noa* as early as 1894, while he was developing his initial draft.²³ It was during this period that he produced a series of ten woodcuts, now known as the *Noa Noa* suite, intended to accompany the text.²⁴ In the course of his attempts to find a publisher, Morice also referred on a number of occasions to 'drawings' by Gauguin that were difficult to reproduce.²⁵ Alongside a related series of monotypes, paintings and ethnographic objects, Gauguin displayed these prints and drawings in a semi-public exhibition in his Paris studio that same year. Reviewers, and

contemporary witnesses who were regular visitors to the artist's soirées, emphasised not only the works on display but also the atmosphere of the studio, where Gauguin read aloud from *Noa Noa* and in one instance publicly printed a woodcut 'in a most primitive way'.²⁶ Therefore, a campaign of visual production did supplement his project from the start, even though no publication incorporating either the woodcuts or the 'drawings' ever materialised, and it is unclear how precisely he expected them to be integrated with his narrative.

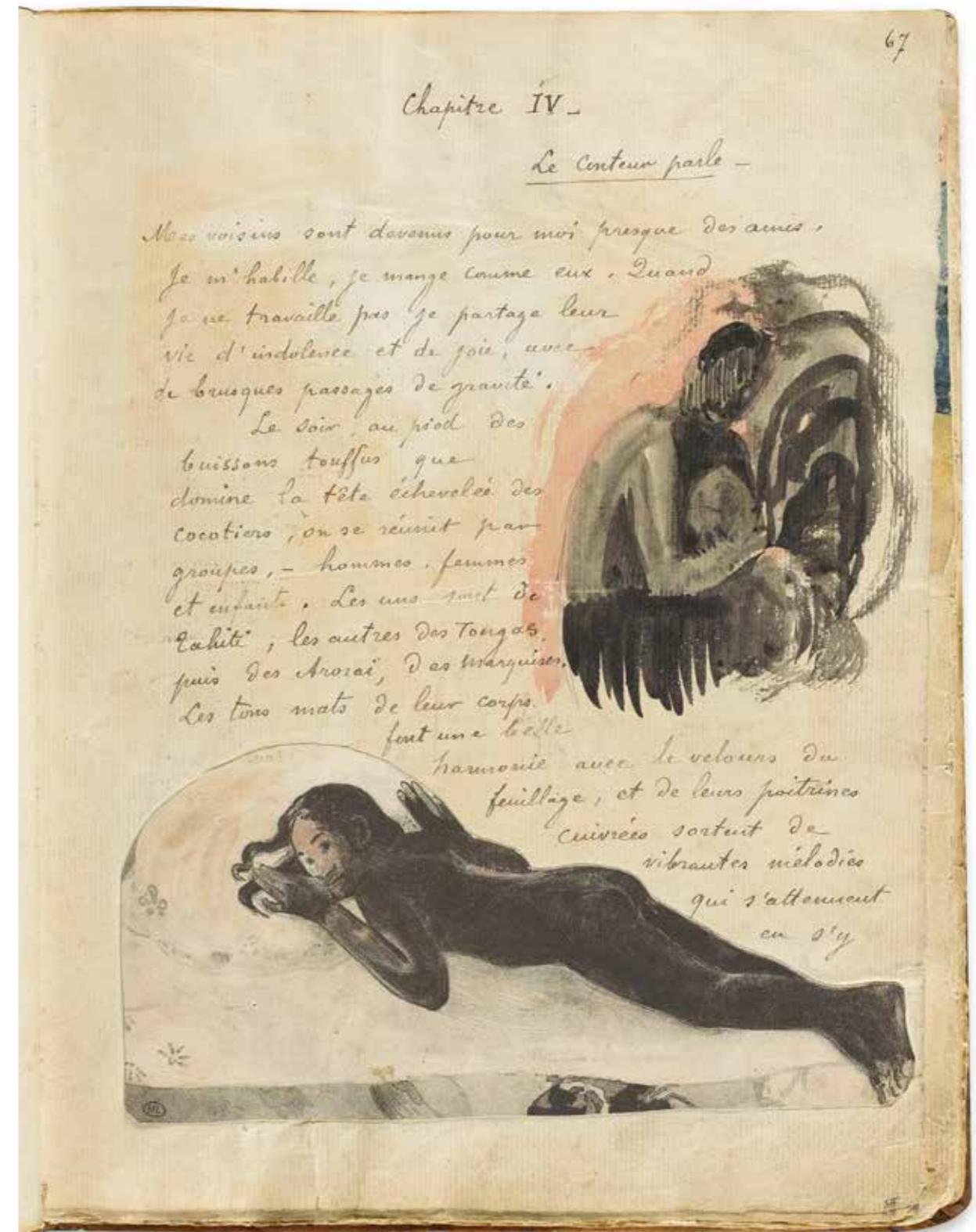
The collaged images that he later added to the Louvre album were also not an afterthought, for they recall the eclectic display that visitors to his studio exhibition noticed in 1894. Alongside his own work, Gauguin also showed some of the Japanese prints from his collection, and reproductions of works by other artists. In his review, Julien Leclercq remarked that 'on the yellow walls of the radiant studio ... there are, between the canvases, Japanese prints and photographs of works old (Cranach, Holbein, Botticelli) and modern (Puvis de Chavannes, Manet, Degas)'.²⁷ Gauguin pasted a similar constellation of images into his album. He also referred to them in terms that evoked the earlier display, calling the 'Japanese sketches, prints by Hokusai, lithographs by Daumier and Forain, school of Giotto' that filled two double-page spreads in *Diverses choses* a 'little exhibition' ('petite exposition') (figs 0-9-10).²⁸ This connection suggests that the distinctive pattern of images in the Louvre album had already gestated several years earlier, precisely while he was rewriting

Fig. 3.2 *Noa Noa*, 1894-1901, folio 37 recto (p. 67). Ink wash after Te faruru (Here we make love). Manaò tupapaú (Spirit of the Dead Watching), before March 1894, lithograph with light watercolour highlights, pasted, 31.5 x 23.2 cm (sheet). Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 7259, 1

Fig. 3.3 *Noa Noa*, 1894-1901, folios 39 verso and 40 recto (pp. 70-01). 'Maison polynésienne', pen and ink and watercolour, pasted, 31.5 x 23.2 cm (sheet). Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 7259, 1

Fig. 3.4 *Noa Noa*, 1894-1901, folios 40 verso and 41 recto (pp. 72-3). 'Apparition'; 'jeune homme près d'une pirogue', woodcuts, pasted, 31.5 x 23.2 cm (sheet). Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 7259, 1

Fig. 3.5 *Noa Noa*, 1894-1901, folios 41 verso and 42 recto (pp. 74-5). Watercolour of couple embracing, and manuscript text; fragment of woodcut, Manaò tupapaú, pasted, 31.5 x 23.2 cm (sheet). Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 7259, 1



par hazard, il pleut. Pourquoi? tout le monde doit être abrité. Le bois et le feuillage ne manquent pas pour confectionner des toitures. Je propose que nous mettions notre travail en commun pendant quelques temps pour construire des cases spacieuses et solides à la place des celles qui sont devenues inhabitables. Nous y donnerons tous successivement la main. Tous les assistants sans exception applaudirent.

- C'est bien. -

Et la proposition du vieillard fut votée à l'unanimité.

Voilà un peuple sage, pensai-je ce soir-là en rentrant chez moi.

Mais le lendemain, comme j'allais aux informations m'enquérant d'un commencement d'exécution des travaux décidés, je m'aperçus que personne n'y pensait plus. et mes questions on ne répondait que par des sourires évasifs qui pourtant soulignaient de significatives lignes ces vastes fronts vœux - je me retirai, plein de pensées difficiles à concilier entre elles. on avait eu raison d'applaudir à la proposition du vieillard, et peut-être avait-on



certitude d'un lendemain pareil au jour présent.
aussi libre, aussi beau, la paix descend en moi,
je me développe normalement et je n'ai plus de
vains soucis.

Un ami m'est venu, de lui-même, et
certes! sans bas intérêt. C'est un de mes
voisins, un jeune homme, très simple et très beau.
Mes images colorées, mes travaux dans le bois
l'ont intrigué, mes réponses à ses questions
l'ont instruit. Pas de jour où il ne vienne
me regarder peindre ou sculpter.

Et le soir, quand je me reposais
de ma journée, nous causions, il me faisait des
questions de jeune sauvage curieux des choses
européennes, surtout des choses de l'amour,
et souvent ses questions m'embarrassaient.
Mais ses réponses étaient plus naïves encore
que ses questions. Un jour que, lui confiant
mes outils, je lui demandais d'essayer une
sculpture, il me considéra, très étonné et me
dit avec simplicité, avec sincérité, que moi,
je n'étais pas comme les autres, que je pouvais
des choses dont les autres étaient incapables.
Je crois que Jotépha est le premier homme



au monde qui
ce langage d'enfant.
n'est-ce pas

m'ait tenu ce langage. -
car il faut l'être,
pour s'imaginer qu'un

artiste soit
quelque chose d'utile...



Noa Noa and experimenting with different ways of illustrating it. Like the walls of his studio, the pages of his manuscript provided an environment in which to bring together visual sources from disparate cultural traditions – ‘beautiful things seen in your neighbour’s house’ – and to explore the links between them.²⁹

A significant number of the illustrations in Noa Noa, in any case, were evidently an integral feature from the start, since the words wrap around them, or they alternate with the script from one page to the next (figs 3.2–5). Nor is the visual-verbal hybridity of the Louvre album an anomaly, as Gauguin had already created similarly composed manuscripts. One of these, *Ancien culte mahorie* (Ancient Maori religion, 1893), was a blueprint of sorts for Noa Noa. Here, in a text that is entirely copied or paraphrased from Moerenhout’s ethnographic account of Tahiti, Gauguin recorded the creation myths of the Polynesian pantheon, giving imaginary form to these deities in vivid watercolours. Essentially all of the legends, and a selection of the illustrations (now divorced from the episodes that they originally accompanied), reappear in Noa Noa (compare figs 0.17 to 3.6–7).³⁰ *Diverses choses*, meanwhile, echoes the format of *Cahier pour Aline*, a notebook that Gauguin compiled in 1893 and dedicated to his daughter. He filled it with anecdotes, proverbs, and passages transcribed from other authors (Poe, Wagner, Verlaine), many of which re-emerge in *Diverses choses*, and bookended it with newspaper cuttings and reproductions that also prefigure the collaged spreads in the later volume (see figs 0.4–5, 0.16).

There is no evidence that Gauguin sought to publish his illustrated and collaged manuscripts as facsimiles, but their format was nonetheless deliberate, as he produced variations on it from one volume to the next. The conspicuous neatness of his handwriting implies that he intended them to be read in their original form, even if only by a small number

of people.³¹ If they appear provisional and personal, it is because this was a calculated part of their effect. Although idiosyncratic in their self-conscious design (predominantly text-based unlike sketchbooks, but distinct from most notebooks or journals in their artful arrangements of images), they share features with a number of textual and visual genres that are similarly positioned between public and private. Notebooks, diaries, travelogues and scrapbooks, despite their differences, all create an illusion of unmediated access to their maker’s inner self, but are typically crafted with a small but significant audience in mind, or with a view to posterity.

Gauguin’s activation of the creative tension between media – particularly in places where he directly juxtaposed original watercolours and commercial photographs (see figs 0.17 and 3.8) – recalls the assortment of sketches, copies, reproductions, and photographs found in the albums or keepsake books of nineteenth-century amateur women artists, as well as vernacular forms like sailors’ journals.³² Related to the Anglo-American tradition of the scrapbook, the album in the French context could denote a variety of compendia, including collections of autographs or prints, as well as volumes that mixed media and incorporated writing.³³ In 1832, writer and caricaturist Henry Monnier pejoratively described the ‘mania’ for albums among amateurs and society women. Originally a means for travellers to assemble sketches, verses, and letters, so that ‘far from home, the book became a travel companion, a friend’, it had lost this affective dimension, according to the author, and degenerated into a ruse for collecting and trading artists’ drawings.³⁴ Monnier’s remarks, although disparaging, indicate that albums were associated with two social identities that were also central to Gauguin’s own projected image: that of the uncultivated rapin, or amateur (as he labelled himself in *Raconters de rapin*), and the traveller.

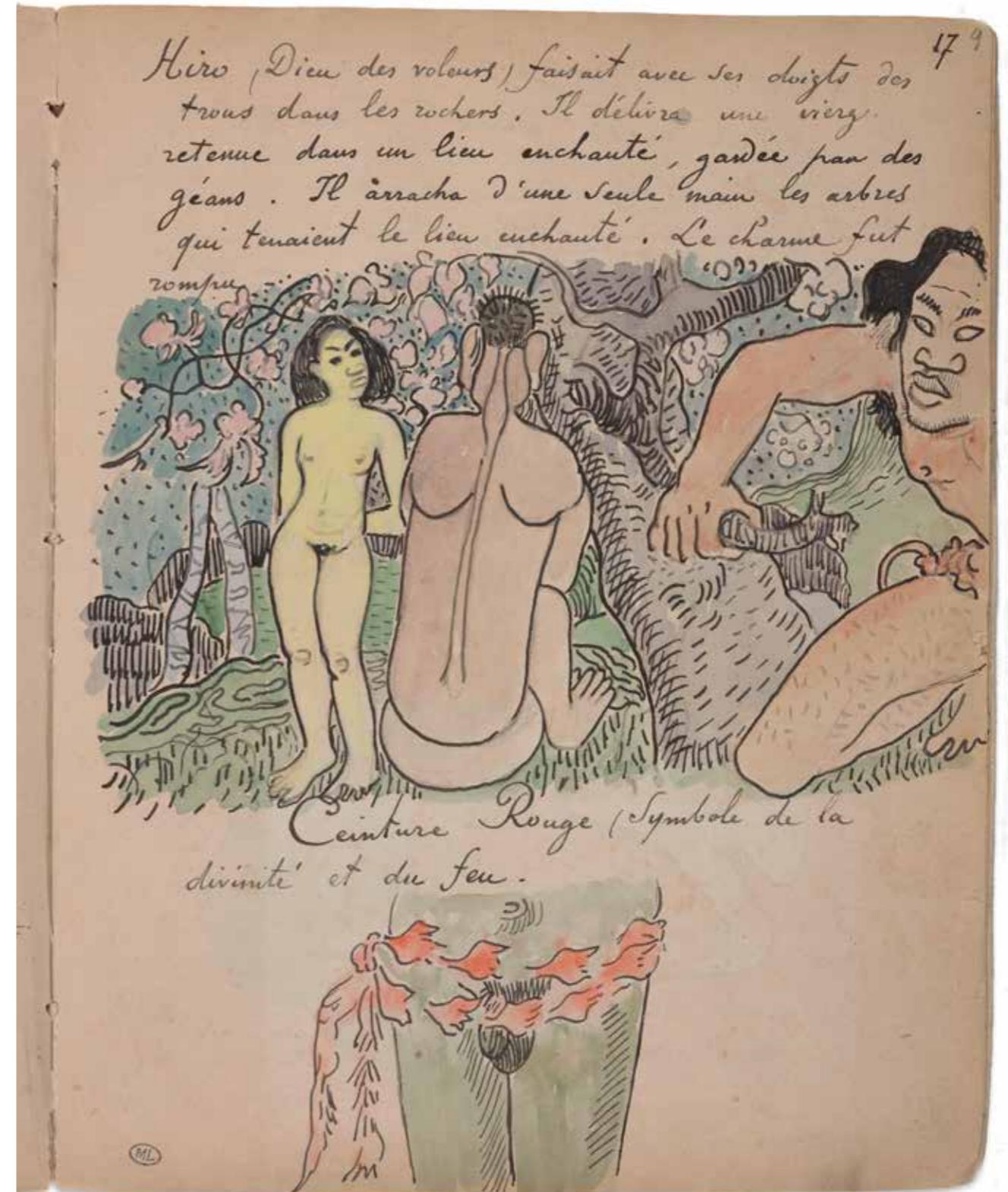


Fig. 3.6 *Ancien Culte mahorie*, 1893. Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 10755-17-folio9

Fig. 3.7 *Ancien Culte mahorie*, 1893. Musée d'Orsay (held at the Musée du Louvre), Paris, RF 10755-17-folio11

Gravé par
M. J. Goussier
N° 28 2614

amoureux, s'oppose au fait de la discussion au point de l'usage son secret.
Ah! mais cela devient très grave - Emma Demonia raconte son
existence seule avec son père dans un endroit envagé des montagnes
de la Catalogne; son père, son créateur, devenu son amant, son maître,
d'enfer, soit, mais au lieu de mon père Demonia, le diable ange
qui a eu mon âme, mais son âme à lui, âme d'airain, d'air
forcée par le maître d'un filon - amour qui brûle sans tourmens
Et le Monstre étouffant sa créature féconde de sa semence des
flames généreux pour engendrer Seraphitus & Seraphita

Emma Demonia pourrait passer l'Égypte mais son ami ne l'eût
plus; il est mort - vengeur, brisé de chagrin de l'ouragan.
Le sultan se tait haute et la foule s'arrête, est en fureur,
vomit l'injure contre Demonia, contre sa fille l'Immortelle
Le bon public estime en masse immortelle sans l'écouter.
Je n'en veux rien dire.

Suivent le réquisitoire - automatiquement il salue à gauche, à droite.
Il est tranquille sans Demonia n'est pas le vrai père
d'Emma, mais il a emporté son secret dans la tombe.
Le bon public se tait apaise, la morale est sauve - Ah! ce bon public
ichit qu'on conduit avec quelques mots! Je n'en veux rien dire.

Bravo Demonia - Bravo cet auteur - Sauvage, voilà qui est bien
penser; un seul acte, net, décisif, vierge, d'oiseux; un réquisitoire en
une minute en quelques
C'est nous
pas la force de nos
échange de notre
source de prostitu
un bon mouvement
applaudirons toutes
aimer sans nous
cette, de notre
Mais sachant
Dora Bora voir
grand théâtre
petite Russie.



Et la Monstre étouffant sa créature féconde de sa semence
des flammes généreux pour engendrer Seraphitus Seraphita.



Journal Sérieux

Tant de délabement personnel, tant de charnement d'idées
amères, quoique folles l'ait été, je rédige le Sourire.
Informes et indécis l'œil proche vos écrits au recit et à l'examen
deviendront précis si vous le voulez. Je ne vous dirai pas la vérité
tout le monde se vante de la dire; la Fable seule indiquera aux
pauvres si toutefois Réver est fautive; maintes fois aussi un dessin
quelques traits seulement Hommes graves, sourires,
Ici le titre vous y invite

Farine de Coco.

En penser quand on attend chez le Chinois son cheval
qui a du feu aux pattes; que feu s'ouvre de regarder chez le
voisin son troupeau d'ânes comme un troupeau d'obéissants
elles s'en vont docilement de la tête inclinant leur regard et
à dire: Oh! qui allons nous, chez Goupit ou chez Cardelle
traîtreusement j'arrache une plume qui sera bécotée et touchée
après l'avoir toujours une plume avec perfide - On dit que
l'Esprit vertige, quelle erreur, il tue - Potins de la rue, significatifs
quelques fois annoncent d'oreille en oreille partant de l'une à l'autre
leur balance folle. Y'écoute et cela me distrait m'intéresse:
Dimanche s'annonce un grand jour - il s'agit de l'inauguration
du chemin de fer de Riposte à Mataïca créé par un homme
bienfaisant. Seuls les gens de la Haute mangeront, tandis que
la foule, pas de bruit pas de bruit - Riposte, je vous réclame
ma carte de reporter et abose extraordinaire je l'obtiens.

Dès le matin de ce jour favorable, la journée
se dévise toute belle malgré une averse exceptionnelle de mer
montant tellement qu'un peu plus elle envahissait les ruelles
surade et par suite les aurait fait couler; il n'en a été rien
heureusement, mais revenons à notre sujet au lieu de nous
égarer dans des faits divers dignes tout au plus du Figaro
- à Villennesant
Or donc, par conséquent, subrepticement comme dirait le
brigadier, je pris le train, sans bagages mais chapeau et feu;
partant au vent de brise, gilet d'association et un veston