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Understanding and Translating: Gauguin and Strindberg in 1895

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Abstract:

This essay analyzes the 1895 exchange of letters between Paul Gauguin and August Strindberg as a form of mutually beneficial mythmaking. This collaborative endeavor performed for readers the intimate processes of understanding, translating, and persisting in the face of failed comprehension. As such, it bolstered the avant-garde myth of Gauguin's painting as incomprehensible, and provided a mythical avant-garde viewer in Strindberg, who modeled for readers a difficult, private journey to the brink of understanding Gauguin's art.

Understanding and Translating: Gauguin and Strindberg in 1895 by Allison Morehead

Failure, Understanding, and Myth

In late February 1895, Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) told his son Lucien that “the symbolists [were] lost,” and that their “leading figure” Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), had “just had a disastrous failure.”^[1] The failure to which Pissarro referred was a sale held at the Hôtel Drouot earlier that month, through which Gauguin had hoped to raise funds to enable him to return to the South Pacific. To highlight Gauguin’s struggles, Pissarro also drew Lucien’s attention to a peculiar exchange of letters between Gauguin and the Swedish writer, playwright, and self-proclaimed “symbolist painter” August Strindberg (1849–1912), which Gauguin had published as the preface to his catalogue.^[2] Pissarro lamented the “poor opinion” that this “Norwegian playwright” had of the Impressionists and opined: “He only understands Puvis de Chavannes.”^[3]

Indeed, in his initial encounters with the work of the Impressionists and that of Gauguin, Strindberg seems to have understood neither.^[4] The opening paragraph of his missive ostensibly refused the preface the artist had solicited from him precisely on the basis of not understanding. “I cannot grasp your art and I cannot like it,” Strindberg wrote, “Your art, now exclusively Tahitian, has no purchase on me.” But in the guise of providing a written explanation for his refusal, Strindberg came to grapple at length with Gauguin’s painting, attempting but ultimately failing to insert it into a historical lineage stretching from Impressionism to Naturalism to Symbolism. Toward the end of his letter, Strindberg acknowledged that his failure to connect Gauguin’s art with that of the recent past—his inability to provide it with a context or a history—was in fact the starting point for his comprehension: “It seems to me,” Strindberg admitted, “that writing has warmed me up and that I am beginning to have a certain understanding of the art of Gauguin.”^[5] Gauguin’s response to Strindberg encouraged the Swedish writer to pursue this burgeoning understanding, likening a growing comprehension of the Tahitian paintings to the difficult process of learning a new, very foreign language, the process of sloughing off the European tongue of Strindberg’s Eve to embrace the “Maori” or “Turanian” language of his own, much more exotic temptresses, such as the one depicted in the painting sometimes called *Annah la Javanaise*, which in early 1895 likely hung in Gauguin’s Paris studio (fig. 1).^[6]

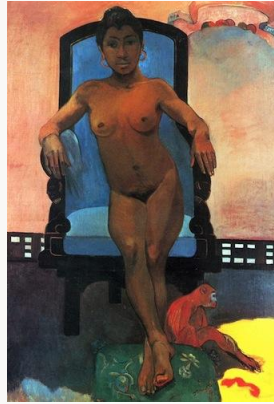


Fig. 1, Paul Gauguin, *Aita Tamari vahine Judith te Parari* (sometimes referred to as *Annah la Javanaise*), 1893–94. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[larger image\]](#)

Early Gauguin biographers acknowledged the self-reflexive arc of Strindberg’s letter, arguing that Gauguin was moved by the intensity of Strindberg’s efforts to understand his painting.^[7] But more recently scholars have characterized the letter as an outright and even hurtful refusal, noting that it marked the end of this “sad metropolitan chapter” in Gauguin’s life, and highlighting its “complaining” tone that Gauguin needed to “rebut” or “revenge.”^[8] Creative credit tends to go to Gauguin for requesting the letter in the first place, a “bold and unusual choice” given Strindberg’s notoriety in Paris at the time, and for subsequently transforming a refusal into the opening gambit of an exchange that could then be published in the guise of a preface.^[9] In the context of recent work exploring the mythical aspects of Gauguin’s self-construction, Linda Goddard has persuasively argued for the strategic and performative nature of Gauguin’s writings.^[10] But she does not allow for a similar reading of Strindberg’s letter, likening it to other anti-avant-garde rants against Gauguin’s work.

Gauguin was extremely adept at fashioning his own myth.^[11] But Strindberg, author of numerous autobiographical novels and self-described dissector of his own psyche, was at least Gauguin’s equal in this regard. With this in mind, the 1895 exchange comes into clearer focus as a mutual myth-making enterprise occurring at a particularly critical moment for both Gauguin and Strindberg, each facing uncertainty regarding his own position within the Parisian avant-garde. This collaborative endeavor, I argue here, performed for readers the intimate processes of understanding, translating, and persisting in the face of failed comprehension. As such, it bolstered the avant-garde myth of Gauguin’s work as incomprehensible, and provided a mythical avant-garde viewer in Strindberg, who modeled for readers a difficult, private journey to the brink of understanding.

Failing Fathers of the Avant-Garde

Strindberg and Gauguin were no doubt aware of each other by 1887, when Strindberg dined with Gauguin’s wife in Copenhagen. Mette Gauguin may have shown him her husband’s paintings around this time, or he may have encountered them through her brother-in-law—the writer and critic Edvard Brandes—or Edvard’s literary theorist brother Georg, both of whom owned works by Gauguin and were in correspondence with Strindberg in the late 1880s.

But the first meeting between the two men likely dates to the fall of 1894, probably not long after Gauguin returned to Paris from a summer in Brittany. Certainly they had met by December, when Gauguin attended the première of Strindberg’s play *The Father* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, where a journalist from *Le Figaro* noted the presence of “an unknown gentleman in an astrakhan bonnet” (figs. 2, 3).^[12]



Fig. 2, Félix Vallotton, Program for *Père* by August Strindberg, 1894. Lithograph. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, Paul Gauguin with His Palette, no date. Photograph. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, Service de Documentation. [\[larger image\]](#)

Born only seven months apart, Gauguin and Strindberg were rare contemporaries in a sea of would-be acolytes. Upon his return to Paris from Tahiti in 1893, Gauguin had surrounded himself with young admirers, men like William Molard, Charles Morice, and Julien Leclercq, all nearly or fully a generation younger, who were lured as much by the constructed exoticness of Gauguin’s studio life and personality as by his artwork (fig. 4).^[13] Leclercq, Gauguin’s “shadow” or “impresario,” and Morice, his literary collaborator, both enthusiastically embraced quasi-filial duties in promoting and publicizing Gauguin’s work.^[14] Strindberg arrived in Paris in the late summer of 1894, about a year after Gauguin’s return from Tahiti, intent on conquering the capital not only as a playwright but also as an essayist and a painter. He was buoyed by the young Aurélien Lugné-Poë’s interest in staging *The Father* after his theater’s success with *The Creditors*.^[15]



Fig. 4, Gauguin's Studio at 6 rue Vercingétorix, seated: Fritz Schnedklud (center) and the musician Larrivel (right); back row: Paul Sérusier, Annah la Javanaise, Georges Lacombe. Photograph. Musée Gauguin, Papeari.

[\[larger image\]](#)

By February 1895, however, both Strindberg and Gauguin were in precarious positions. Both 46 years old, with failed or failing marriages, children they hardly saw and could not support financially, they faced sickness, impending old age, and a good deal of uncertainty about their positions within the avant-garde. An attack on Gauguin by sailors in Brittany in May 1894 had left his right leg broken, and when he returned to Paris a few months later he found that Annah, his young mistress, had ransacked his apartment, leaving behind the paintings but little else. In early 1895, Gauguin told a friend that he had caught an “unfortunate disease,” very likely the syphilis that plagued his final years.^[16]

Despite concentrated efforts, things were hardly better for Gauguin professionally, which Pissarro implied in his letter to his son. The Nabi artists, who had styled themselves his prophets, had begun to establish their own reputations and were no longer intent on being seen solely as his followers. While he was gratified by the critical attention paid to his 1893 exhibition at Durand-Ruel, from which he made a decent profit owing to his having set high prices, he nevertheless expressed his disappointment at having sold only a quarter of the paintings on offer.^[17] Not long after, with a view to returning as soon as possible to the South Pacific, Gauguin had largely given up on courting dealers and had thrown his efforts into his writing, his woodcuts, and direct sales out of his elaborately decorated studio.^[18] Aided by young critics and writers such as Leclercq and Morice, Gauguin presented himself as the ultimate outsider, the “savage” returned only temporarily from the South Pacific, possessor of mystical secrets and erotic powers, who flaunted bourgeois convention not only in his work but also in his louche lifestyle.^[19] While this self-fashioning succeeded in attracting notoriety and admirers, it did not immediately translate into the financial success that Gauguin continued to use, at least in part, as a measure of his overall success. The February 1895 sale was even less successful than the one in 1893. Gauguin sold only 9 paintings out of the 47 lots, necessitating a delay in his departure for Tahiti.^[20]

In early 1895, Strindberg was still riding a wave of publicity in Paris, but his personal, financial, and legal problems had begun to affect his ability to write plays and novels, and he was already suffering from the various physical and psychological symptoms that would distance him

from the Parisian literary and artistic circles that he had so hoped to conquer.^[21] He was increasingly directing his energies to chemical experiments, the physical and psychic dangers of which he would detail in his fictionalized autobiography *Inferno*. The Parisian press noted that the psoriasis on his hands, likely caused by his experiments with sulfur, had made him increasingly unwilling to go out in public (fig. 5).^[22] He began experiencing intensifying paranoia, more frequent delusions, and was much preoccupied with impending death. On his way to the Hôpital Saint-Louis in January 1895 to undergo treatment on his hands, he stopped, as he wrote in *Inferno*, to buy, “two shirts . . . a shroud for my last hour! The idea that my death was imminent obsessed me.”^[23]



Fig. 5, Julien Leclercq, *Strindberg's Hand*, 1895. Photograph. [\[larger image\]](#)

The specter of personal and professional failure forms the backdrop for the first sentences of Strindberg's letter. Although their acquaintance was relatively recent, Strindberg opened his letter to Gauguin in a nostalgic vein, invoking a future in which they would share memories of present experiences that seem more imagined than real: “You absolutely want me to write the preface to your catalogue,” he wrote, “in memory of the winter of 1894–95, when we are living here, behind the Institut, not far from the Pantheon, and in particular close to Montparnasse cemetery.” Strindberg told Gauguin that he wished he could write the preface in order to provide the artist with a “souvenir” to take with him to Tahiti, and insisted that although he had a ready excuse in the “celebrated skin affliction on my hands,” he was loathe to use it.^[24] At this time, Gauguin's milieu centered on the studio he rented from Molard and his Swedish sculptor wife Ida Ericson at 6, rue Vercingétorix just west of the Montparnasse cemetery, and on Madame Charlotte's *crémèrie* on the rue de la Grande Chaumière, to the north-east of the cemetery.^[25] Before his hospitalization, Strindberg lived on the Rue de l'Abbé-de-l'Épée, near the southeast corner of the Jardin du Luxembourg and afterwards near the *crémèrie*, on the rue de la Grande Chaumière itself. None of these addresses were particularly far from the Institut or the Pantheon, but none were especially close. Evoking memories of a winter spent near institutions of official consecration and death, and referring to his own skin affliction and to Gauguin's imminent departure, bound Strindberg and Gauguin together and positioned them at tipping points between success and failure, between immortality and ignominious death. Strindberg's performed refusal to write a preface aligned his failure to understand not only with his own failures, but also with Gauguin's potential failure to produce successful work. Both Gauguin and Strindberg had by then established themselves as controversial and

eccentric avant-garde figures, as the savage and the mad Nordic genius. If Strindberg had failed to understand Gauguin's work, then who among his audience ever could?

Performing Intimacy

Less than ten years later, after Parisians learned of Gauguin's death in 1903, the journal *L'Ermitage* republished the letters between Strindberg and Gauguin as a testament to the last Parisian sojourn, revealing that Strindberg had written his letter in Swedish and that Molard, of Norwegian origin through his mother, had translated it into French.^[26] Molard wrote regularly for *L'Ermitage* and likely provided the information about the translation directly to the journal's editors.^[27] That Strindberg wrote the letter in Swedish and had it translated is surprising, because for more than a decade he had written regularly and often in idiosyncratic but entirely competent French. He corresponded in French with, among others, Emile Zola, one of his literary heroes, published numerous essays in French newspapers and journals, and wrote a number of novels in French that were corrected, not translated, by hired collaborators.^[28] In early 1895, he had just published *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou* in its original French version, a scathing and misogynistic account of his first marriage that garnered enormous attention within the Molard circle.^[29] The book had been written in French rather than in Swedish in the hopes of avoiding a scandal and an obscenity trial in his home country.^[30]

Why write a letter of refusal supposedly for private consumption in Swedish and then have it translated when French had served him perfectly well for private correspondence, published essays, and even novels? Timing and circumstance may have played a role. On the last day of January 31, 1895, Strindberg was released from the Hôpital Saint-Louis and that same night purportedly attended a party at Gauguin's studio where the artist proposed the preface.^[31] This is plausible, since Strindberg's letter is dated the following day. But Gauguin only received it, he told Strindberg in the letter, four days later, on February 5, the date of his own letter, suggesting that Molard was hard at work on the translation in the interim. While Strindberg emphasized that the state of his hands was not the reason for his refusal to grant Gauguin's request, it is not inconceivable that the letter was even dictated to Molard, who may have had a hand in the content beyond translation. For whatever reason, Strindberg seemed pressed for time and having a friendly translator at hand ready and willing to do the job, no doubt without remuneration, may have been too good an opportunity to pass up. Perhaps he wrote or dictated the letter in his mother tongue, intending it to read as closely as possible to some direct experience of Gauguin's work. Regardless, Strindberg is unlikely to have cared at all about the language unless he suspected at least that the letter might actually appear in print.

The conceit of the private letter as published preface or dedication was by this time well-worn. Both Strindberg and Gauguin would have been familiar with a very famous example, Zola's letter to Paul Cézanne that acts as the preface to the *Salon of 1866*. "I feel a profound joy, my friend," Zola wrote ostensibly to his intimate friend, but in reality to a much larger public, "in conversing alone with you."^[32] This friendship, which had broken down after Zola published *L'Oeuvre*, had been much on Gauguin's mind in 1894, when he had worked hard to recover Cézanne's painting of Zola's house at Médan for his own collection, a work he admired enormously and had been loathe to sell.^[33] In his dedication to Cézanne, Zola went on to recall boyhood days spent with his friend outdoors in Provence, arousing memories of late-night, feverish conversations about art and literature. While Zola had recalled the halcyon days of youth, however, Strindberg conjured up the recent past, remembering lives lived close to

institutions of old, dead, and immortal men. It is no coincidence that not long before Strindberg arrived in Paris, Zola had once again failed in his bid to join the Academy.^[34] Strindberg's letter raised the possibility in the form of a private confession that both he and Gauguin would themselves fail to join a modern pantheon.

Translating and Understanding

In the mid-1890s, Gauguin was greatly preoccupied with the notion that his art, and especially his Tahitian art, was incomprehensible. In the manuscript entitled *Diverses choses*, he affected frustration tinged with pride at this particular aspect of his reputation: "Despite the bother of having to talk about myself," he wrote, "I do it here in order to explain my Tahitian Art, since it is reputed to be incomprehensible."^[35] To the same end, he incorporated extensive remarks on the 1892 painting *Mana'o tupap'u* into the manuscript for *Noa Noa*, attempting to explain the "genesis of a picture" (fig. 6).^[36] In late 1893, just prior to the Durand-Ruel show, he began writing a book on Tahiti, "which will be very useful," he wrote to Mette, "in helping people to understand my painting."^[37] Increasingly, he repudiated the role of professional critics and lobbied other painters, as he was doing himself, to take matters into their own hands: "I am pleased to see painters take care of their own business," he wrote in 1895 to the artist and theorist Maurice Denis: "For some time I have felt it to be necessary for young painters to write about Art in a reasonable way."^[38]

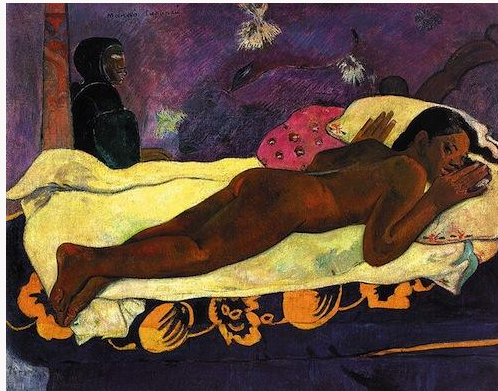


Fig. 6, Paul Gauguin, *Mana'o tupap'u*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. [\[larger image\]](#)

At the same time as he claimed to be working to explain his art, however, Gauguin actively fostered the reputation of his art as difficult to understand in numerous ways, most obviously in his reluctance to translate his Tahitian titles. In late 1892, Gauguin wrote to Mette from Tahiti and included a list of translations for the titles he planned to inscribe on a number of works destined for exhibition in Europe. But he insisted, "This translation is only for you so that you can give it to those who will ask you for it. In the catalogue I want the titles as they are on the paintings. This language is bizarre and provides for many meanings."^[39] Nevertheless and against his wishes, the 1893 catalogue included Gauguin's translations.^[40] In the catalogue for the 1895 sale, however, Gauguin got his wish; none of the Tahitian titles were translated.^[41] When Gauguin's letter urged Strindberg to think of his Tahitian paintings as a non-European language to be learned, he simultaneously addressed the catalogue's readers faced with a list of

works whose generic French titles, such as *Paysage* and *Nu*, only underscored the incomprehensibility of the Tahitian ones.

The Tahitian titles, as Gauguin had written to Mette, constructed the paintings as both exotic and polysemous, but they also positioned the works as difficult to understand for a French-speaking public. Only those initiates who had embarked upon a pathway to understanding, who had put effort into grappling with his work, or who had approached Mette presumably with the intention to buy, would be helped to learn this new language. In exhorting his audience to understand while at the same time setting up barriers to understanding, Gauguin not only courted the romantic myth of the misunderstood genius, but also invoked the Symbolist analogy of art as a visual language that required substantial efforts analogous to learning a new tongue.^[42] Within this system, writing about difficult-to-comprehend art was akin to translating a text. Both Gauguin and Strindberg had a great deal of experience with the practice of translation, from Tahitian to French, from French to Danish, from Swedish to French and German, from French to Swedish and German, and so on.^[43] In 1886, Gauguin had weighed in on his wife's translation of a Zola novel into Danish, recommending that Mette look for "equivalents" for the French slang or even leave words in their original French rather than provide the reader with explanations.^[44]

In likening the appreciation of his art to acquiring a foreign language and to translating, Gauguin suggested that finding "equivalents," or "correspondences" to use the Baudelairean term, between visual forms and words and concepts could be a long, difficult, and at times frustrating process. One could not learn and one should not expect to learn a new language or to translate a complex text instantaneously. His response to Strindberg's letter underlined the laborious nature of these processes and encouraged his interlocutor to persist in the face of initial incomprehension. And Strindberg, for his part, invited that encouragement when he recalled to Gauguin his previous efforts to understand Impressionist painting, describing an inexorable attraction after an initially indifferent encounter: "I looked at this new painting with a calm indifference," he remembered, "but the next day I returned, not really knowing why, and I discovered 'something' in these bizarre manifestations." The recognition of his initial failure to understand, in other words, drew Strindberg back to the works as a challenge, and encouraged him to try to explain—to "translate"—the paintings for his Swedish readers: "Taken with these extraordinary paintings, I sent an article to one of my country's newspapers, in which I tried to translate the sensations that I thought the Impressionists had wanted to render." This effort, Strindberg recounted with a hint of satisfaction, met with its own lack of understanding: My article had a certain success as something incomprehensible."^[45]

The Persistence of the Avant-Garde

As he prepared to conquer the Parisian capital in 1894, persistence in the face of repeated failure was much on Strindberg's mind. His literary hero Zola had once again failed in his attempt to join *les immortels*, a fact of which Strindberg was all too keenly aware.^[46] Just before arriving in Paris, he had commented publicly on Zola's latest bid for the Academy in a survey published in May 1894 in the Parisian daily *L'Éclair*, the same newspaper that would publish the letters between Strindberg and Gauguin prior to the Drouot sale.^[47] As one commentator noted about Zola's persistence, which would eventually extend to over twenty unsuccessful bids, "Each of his candidacies had an aggressive air about it. He did not appear to solicit votes; rather, he demanded them as his due."^[48]

Many writers who responded to the *enquête* expressed a tempered admiration for Zola, but confessed themselves perplexed and troubled by the Naturalist author's ongoing pursuit of official state recognition. Strindberg, however, argued that Zola's obstinate persistence in the face of his country's criticism had already conferred upon him immortality: "They have disavowed him, killed him and buried him, but still he lives," Strindberg wrote in his response to the survey. "He was proclaimed deceased in Paris, and he has just been resuscitated in London . . . this man must be immortal." At a time when Symbolism had largely eclipsed Naturalism, Strindberg also took great pains to identify Zola not as the leader of Naturalism, and by implication a man of the past, but as a master of Symbolism and therefore a man of the present, even of the future: "You, symbolists, honor the master of symbolism, . . . and you, synthetists, honor the greatest of synthetists, also superior in analysis."[\[49\]](#) This eccentric plea to Symbolists to pay homage to Zola might have sunk into oblivion had it not been republished later that year in the Symbolist journal *La Plume*.[\[50\]](#)

Only a few days before his comments on Zola appeared in print, Strindberg had privately referred to his own obstinate persistence and bids for artistic immortality in very similar terms:

They attack me in Stockholm, I'm dead for a day, then up I pop in Karlstad; then they kill me in Christiania and up I pop in Paris. . . . I fell in Rome, was whistled in Naples, and rose like a sun in Copenhagen; was booed in Berlin . . . and popped up at once in Moscow. . . . Last Autumn, *A Madman* was put on trial in Berlin . . . once again I was a *totde* [*sic*] *Mann*. Then Pow! Cherbuliez, the secretary of the French Academy, writes a whole essay about Aug Sg in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. I've Paris dangling on a hook now, the next season is mine. I'm going there this autumn, when everything is ready. . . . *Le Figaro* has interviewed me about Zola's candidacy.[\[51\]](#)

Strindberg identified Zola's tireless search for official laurels not only with his own search for recognition and understanding, but also with Gauguin's. By conjuring up the Academy, the Pantheon, and the cemetery in his performed refusal to Gauguin, he suggested that like Zola, they too were both hovering between immortality and being forgotten by history. For Strindberg and for the reader/viewer that he modeled, persistence became its own reward, for it was precisely in initially failing to situate Gauguin within a context of French modern art that he imagined himself as beginning to understand: "I myself made serious efforts to classify you, to insert you as a link in a chain in order to bring myself to an understanding of the history of your development—but in vain."[\[52\]](#) Strindberg extended Gauguin's mythical status as outsider to Gauguin's place in history, but made his failure to conform to a historical lineage the ultimate virtue. For precisely in recognizing his own limitations, in acknowledging the cultural and linguistic barriers to understanding Gauguin's work, Strindberg's persistence paid off by bringing him to the threshold of "a certain understanding."

This performance of coming to understand Gauguin's art fed the myth of Gauguin's work as comprehensible only with great effort, dedication, and privileged access to the artist and his circle. Gauguin's response shows just how critical the linguistic analogy of translation had become for him and to what extent Strindberg collaborated in promoting the metaphor of Gauguin's art as a form of primitive and ultimately more truthful language. But the collaborative performance nourished Strindberg's own avant-garde mythology, underlining

his persistence to overcome his initial failure to understand, invoking his self-proclaimed role as translator of human psychological experience into prose, and, like his hero Zola, emphasizing his determined bids for and declared belief in his own artistic immortality. In their brief exchange, two highly skilled myth-makers created mutually beneficial and mutually sustaining myths, forming a strategic alliance that revealed as much about their own avant-garde strategies as about the context of mid-1890s Paris, in which collaborative and contrary performances, such as those soon to be inaugurated by Gauguin's admirer and Strindberg's colleague at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Alfred Jarry, would become a hallmark of avant-garde self-construction.[\[53\]](#)

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Notes

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All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[\[1\]](#) “Les symbolistes ici sont perdus. Gauguin . . . vient de subir un échec désastreux.” Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, Paris, February 28, 1895, in Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro* (Paris: Editions du Valhermeil, 1989), 4:39.

[\[2\]](#) Before appearing in the catalogue, the letters were published in the newspaper *L'Éclair*: August Strindberg, “L'Actualité: Le misogynne Streinberg [*sic*] contre Monet,” *L'Éclair*, February 15, 1895, and Paul Gauguin, “Lettre à Strindberg,” *L'Éclair*, February 16, 1895. Gauguin had sent both letters to Arsène Alexandre (February 10, 1895), no doubt in the hopes of stirring the critic's interest and drumming up publicity for the sale. See Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis*, ed. Maurice Malingue (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2003), 303–5.

[\[3\]](#) “Strindberg le dramaturge norvégien . . . a une triste opinion des impressionnistes! Il ne comprend que Puvis de Chavannes” Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, Paris, March 6, 1895, in Bailly-Herzberg, *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 42.

[\[4\]](#) In 1876, Strindberg had published two articles on Impressionism in Swedish newspapers: August Strindberg, [R. M., pseud] “‘Salonen’ och den franska konsten 1876: En studie af RM,” *Post-och Inrike Tidningar*, June 15, 1876, and “Från l'Ermitage till Marly-le-Roi,” *Dagens Nyheter*, November 30 and December 9, 1876. While Pissarro is certainly correct that Strindberg did not entirely understand Impressionism, he did gradually come to appreciate it, arguably because of his long-standing admiration for Emile Zola, and even used Impressionist painting to explain his methods in plays such as *Miss Julie*. See August Strindberg, preface to *Miss Julie* in *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, trans. Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65–66. On Strindberg and Impressionism, see Henri Usselman, “Strindberg et l'impressionnisme,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1359 (April 1982): 153–62.

[\[5\]](#) “Je ne peux saisir votre art et je ne puis pas l'aimer (Je n'ai aucune prise sur votre art, cette fois exclusivement tahitien). . . . Il me semble . . . que, depuis que je me suis échauffé en écrivant,

je commence à avoir une certaine compréhension de l'art de Gauguin." *Vente de Tableaux et Dessins par Paul Gauguin*, auction cat. (Paris: Hôtel des Ventes [Drouot], February 18, 1895), 3, 6.

[6] Gauguin's use of the term "Turanian," a word used in the nineteenth century and beyond to refer to diverse groups, including Ural-Altaic people, Mongols, Huns, the Sami, and Finno-Ugric peoples, stands in here for "primitive." In his letter, Gauguin imagined the languages of the South Pacific to have conserved a certain primitive harshness that was also a guarantee of truth and sincerity. This supposition seems to have been a product of Gauguin's colonialist fantasies rather than up-to-date linguistic research. Bengt Danielsson argues that Gauguin's knowledge of Tahitian was "extremely sketchy" and that in his final years on the Marquesas he picked up virtually nothing of the language. See Bengt Danielsson, "Gauguin's Tahitian Titles," *Burlington Magazine* 109, no. 769 (April 1967): 229. Belinda Thomson, however, believes that Gauguin had more interest in how the language was structured than other scholars have allowed, although she admits his knowledge probably came primarily from the preface of an 1851 Tahitian/English dictionary by the Reverend John Davies. I am grateful to Thomson for sharing her expertise with me.

[7] Pola Gauguin, *My Father, Paul Gauguin* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1937), 221.

[8] Claire Frèches-Thory, "The Exhibition at Durand-Ruel," in George T. M. Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, eds, *Gauguin Tahiti*, exh. cat. (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004), 89; Charles F. Stuckey, "The First Tahitian Years," in Richard Brettell and others, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1988), 270; Richard Brettell, "The Return to France," in Brettell and others, *Art of Paul Gauguin* 330n2; and Michel Hoog, *Gauguin: Vie et oeuvre* (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1987), 231–32. Hoog provides one of the lengthier discussions of the exchange between Strindberg and Gauguin, fleshing out in detail some of Strindberg's writing of the period, and in particular his extraordinary essay "Des arts nouveaux! ou le hasard dans la production artistique," published in 1894 in the *Revue des revues*. Following Jean Cassou, however, he starkly contrasts Gauguin's positive attitude to Strindberg's negative one.

[9] Nancy Mowell Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 208. Strindberg was notorious in Paris at this precise moment, above all for his misogynistic writings including *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou* and the article, "Vivisection: De l'infériorité de la femme," *La Revue blanche*, January 1, 1895, 1–20. On Strindberg's misogyny, see Geneviève Fraisse, "La misogynie de Strindberg, entre politique et métaphysique," in *Les nouveaux espaces politiques*, ed. Georges Labica (Paris: Harmattan, 1995), 73–85.

[10] Linda Goddard, "'Following the Moon': Gauguin's Writing and the Myth of the 'Primitive,'" in *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, ed. Belinda Thomson, exh. cat. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 32–39; and Linda Goddard, "Scattered Notes: Authorship and Originality in Paul Gauguin's *Diverses choses*," *Art History* 34, no. 2 (April 2011): 352–69. Gauguin transcribed both letters in his 1896–97 manuscript *Diverses choses*.

[11] See Thomson, *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*.

[12] Cited in English translation in Michael Meyer, *Strindberg: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1985), 311.

[13] See Richard Brettell, "The Return to France," in Brettell and others, *Art of Paul Gauguin*, 297–302.

[14] See Bengt Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Gauguin à Tahiti et aux îles Marquises* (Papeete: Editions du Pacifique, 1975), 152, cited in Brettell, "The Return to France," 300; and Väinö Blomstedt, "Gauguin," *Konst* (1913): 8–9, cited in Marja Supinen, "Paul Gauguin's Fiji Academy," *Burlington Magazine* 132, no. 1045 (April 1990): 270n15.

[15] Aurélien Ligné-Poë opened *The Creditors* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre on June 21, 1894, and Strindberg had written to a friend about its success: "This is happiness, this feeling of power . . . knowing that right now, in Paris, in the intellectual headquarters of the world, 500 people are sitting like mice in an auditorium, and foolishly exposing their brains to my suggestions." Strindberg to Leopold Littmansson, ([July 14?, 1894]), August Strindberg, *Strindberg's Letters*, ed. and trans. Michael Robinson (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), 2:480. For more on Strindberg in Paris, see Stellan Ahlström, *Strindbergs Erövning av Paris* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956); the essays in *Strindberg à Paris*, actes de colloque, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, October 1975, published in *Revue de la société d'histoire du theater* 30, no. 3 (1978); those in Gunnar Engwall, ed. *Strindberg et la France* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); as well as Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams, "Strindberg and Paris 1894–98: Barbarian, Initiate, and Self," in *August Strindberg and the Other: New Critical Approaches*, ed. Poul Houe, Sven Håkon Rossel and Goran Stockenström (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 91–100.

[16] Gauguin writing to Monfried on the day of his sale at Hôtel Drouot, quoted in English translation in Gloria Groom, “Chronology: August 1893–June 1895,” in Brettell and others, *Art of Paul Gauguin*, 295.

[17] Gauguin to Mette, December 1893, in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 287. Edgar Degas had played a key role in recommending that Durand-Ruel show Gauguin’s work and bought two works for himself.

[18] See Julien Leclercq, “Choses d’art: Exposition Paul Gauguin,” *Mercure de France* 13, no. 61 (January 1895): 121–22.

[19] See especially Belinda Thomson, “Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth,” in *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, 10–23.

[20] Degas was the major buyer at the sale, which realized a total of 2,200 francs. However, Gauguin himself paid 830 francs to buy back a number of his works, making the sale even less successful than it first might appear.

[21] One of his most pressing legal concerns at this moment was the trial in Germany over immorality in *Le Plaidoyer d’un fou*, which had been published there in 1893.

[22] See Julien Leclercq, “Le Plaidoyer d’un fou d’Auguste Strindberg,” *Revue encyclopédique*, February 1895, 63–66.

[23] “deux chemises blanches . . . Le linceul! pour l’heure du supplice! C’est que je médite sur la mort prochaine.” August Strindberg, *Inferno*, vol. 37 of *Samlade Verk*, ed. Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1994), 18. Scholars have argued that Strindberg’s “Inferno-crisis” was brought about at least in part by his guilt at the failure of his first two marriages and his inability to financially and emotionally support his children. See Gunnar Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[24] “Vous tenez absolument à avoir la préface de votre catalogue écrite par moi, en souvenir de l’hiver 1894–95, que nous vivons ici, derrière l’Institut, pas loin du Panthéon, surtout près du cimetière Montparnasse.” “la maladie déjà célèbre de mes mains.” *Vente de Tableaux et Dessins par Paul Gauguin*, 3. Strindberg published an essay in 1896 that used the pretext of a walk in Montparnasse cemetery as a meditation on immortality and God. “Études funèbres,” *La Revue des revues*, July 15, 1896, 97–105. The essay also appeared, with one passage deleted, in the 1898 French edition of *Inferno*.

[25] The Molard circle is most extensively discussed in Thomas Millroth, *Molards Salong* (Stockholm: Forum, 1993).

[26] “Lettres de Strindberg et de Gauguin,” *L’Ermitage*, January 1904, 74–80. News of Gauguin’s death on May 8, 1903 reached Daniel de Monfreid in late August 1903 and death announcements appeared in the Parisian press in September and October of that year. Despite the assumption of many authors that Strindberg had written his letter in French, Bengt Danielsson corroborated the translation, about which he was told by Strindberg’s publisher, Albert Bonnier. See Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*, trans. Reginald Spink (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), 285n142. Strindberg scholar and translator Michael Robinson finds it hard to believe that the letter was translated rather than corrected, but argues, as I do below, that Strindberg at least imagined that the letter might be published. See *Strindberg’s Letters*, 2:528.

[27] “Lettres de Strindberg et de Gauguin,” 74.

[28] Leopold Littmansson, Georges Loiseau, and Marcel Réja (who worked on *Inferno*) all corrected Strindberg’s French. The subject of Strindberg’s French has been the basis of numerous publications, many of them criticizing his editors for removing creative idiosyncrasies for the sake of a putative correctness. See Maurice Gravier, “Strindberg écrivain français,” *Revue de la société d’histoire du théâtre* 30, no. 3 (1978): 243–65; and more recently, the essays in Olof Eriksson, ed. *Strindberg och det franska språket: Föredrag från ett symposium vid Växjö universitet* (Växjö: Växjö University Press, 2004).

[29] See, for example, Leclercq, “Le Plaidoyer d’un fou,” *Revue encyclopédique*, February 15, 1895, 63–66, which appeared on the same day as Strindberg’s letter in *L’Eclair*. Strindberg wrote *Le Plaidoyer d’un fou* in French in 1887–88. A German version had appeared in May 1893, which was subsequently banned as immoral. The book was also pirated in an unofficial Swedish version, which enraged Strindberg, since he had hoped it would not be published in his mother tongue while his first wife was still alive. It appeared sensationally in French in late January 1895, while Strindberg was in the hospital. From Tahiti, Gauguin kept up with Strindberg’s writing. Late in 1895, or in early 1896, he wrote to Molard praising an article Strindberg had written in the *Mercure de France*, almost certainly “Introduction à une chimie unitaire,” *Mercure de France* 16, no. 70 (October 1895): 14–36.

[30] Meyer, *Strindberg*, 179.

- [31] Evert Sprinchorn, ed. *Inferno, Alone and Other Writings* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 62.
- [32] “J’éprouve une joie profonde, mon ami, à m’entretenir seul à seul avec toi.” Emile Zola, “À mon ami Paul Cézanne,” May 20, 1866, in *Ecrits sur l’art*, ed. Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 90.
- [33] See Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, February 5, 1894, in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 293. The painting, usually called *The Château at Médan*, 1880, is today housed in The Burrell Collection, Glasgow. See also Gauguin’s 1903 description of the painting in Gauguin, *Avant et après* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1994), 241.
- [34] Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 611.
- [35] “Malgré l’ennui d’avoir à parler de moi, je le fais ici pour expliquer mon Art Tahitien, puisqu’il est réputé pour être incompréhensible.” Gauguin, *Diverses choses in Gauguin écrivain* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2003), CD-ROM, 132r.
- [36] Notes on the painting appear in the manuscripts for *Noa Noa* and *Cahier pour Aline*, as well as in December 1892 letters to Mette and Daniel de Monfreid. See Dario Gamboni, “Paul Gauguin’s *Genesis of a Picture: A Painter’s Manifesto and Self-Analysis*,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), accessed July 5, 2013, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn03/paul-gauguin-genesis-of-a-picture-a-painters-manifesto-and-self-analysis>.
- [37] Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, October 1893, in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 285.
- [38] “J’ai plaisir à voir les peintres faire eux-mêmes leurs affaires. . . . Depuis quelque temps . . . j’ai senti cette nécessité qui s’imposait à vous jeunes peintres, d’écrire raisonnablement sur les choses de l’Art.” Gauguin to Maurice Denis, (early March 1895), in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 306.
- [39] “Cette traduction est seulement pour toi afin que tu puisse la donner à ceux qui te la demanderont. Mais sur le catalogue je veux qu’on mette les titres comme ils sont sur le tableau. Cette langue est bizarre et donne plusieurs sens.” Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, December 8, 1892, in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 270.
- [40] Many of them can only be considered approximate. See Danielsson, “Gauguin’s Tahitian Titles,” 228–33.
- [41] *Vente de Tableaux et Dessins par Paul Gauguin*, 9–10. Of the 49 paintings listed in the catalogue, 32 were given Tahitian titles and the remainder titled in French.
- [42] The metaphor of “art as language” is a key feature of Symbolist theory. See Filiz Eda Burhan, “Un Art apte à traduire,” in “Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth-Century Psychological Theory, The Occult Sciences and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France” (PhD diss. Princeton University, 1979).
- [43] Although Strindberg usually wrote in his native Swedish, he often chose to write in other languages, notably French and German. He worked with a number of editors and translators, translating his Swedish works into other languages and correcting his imperfect French and German. For a selection of sources addressing the problem of translation in Strindberg’s work, see Michael Robinson, ed. *An International Annotated Bibliography of Strindberg Studies 1870–2005* (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008), 1:205–42.
- [44] Gauguin to Mette Gauguin, [around June, 22–29, 1886], in Paul Gauguin, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, ed. Victor Merlhès (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac), 129. Merlhès argues that Mette was translating *L’Oeuvre*, which appeared in French in serial form in late 1885 and was published in book form in 1886, but it seems more probable, given the mention of the difficulties in translating French slang, that she was working on a translation of *L’Assommoir*.
- [45] “Je regardais cette nouvelle peinture avec une indifférence calme. Mais le lendemain je revins, sans trop savoir comment, et je découvris ‘quelque chose’ dans ces bizarres manifestations. . . . Saisi par ces toiles extraordinaires, j’envoyai à un journal de mon pays une correspondance dans laquelle j’avais essayé de traduire les sensations que je croyais que les impressionnistes avaient voulu rendre, et mon article eut un certain succès comme une chose incompréhensible.” *Vente de Tableaux et de Dessins par Paul Gauguin*, 4.
- [46] Zola made his first bid for the Academy in 1889. See Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 611. For more on the relationship between Strindberg and Zola, see Eva Ahlstedt and Pierre Morizet, “Strindberg et Zola,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, no. 63 (1989): 27–38.
- [47] “Zola et l’Académie,” *L’Eclair*, May 30–31, 1894.

[48] René Peter, “Zola et l’Académie,” *Mercure de France* 296, no. 995 (March 1940): 572, cited in Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 611. Edmond de Goncourt would heavily criticize Zola for accepting the Legion of Honor in 1888. See Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 610.

[49] “Ils l’ont désavoué, tué, enterré, et tout de même il vit. Il est proclamé décédé à Paris, et il va à l’instant même ressusciter à Londres. . . . Cet homme doit être immortel. . . . Et vous, symbolistes, honorez le maître du symbolisme, l’auteur de la *Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, et vous, synthétistes, honorez le plus grand des synthétistes, aussi supérieur dans l’analyse.” *L’Eclair*, May 30, 1894. The use of the term “synthétistes” should not be taken to echo Gauguin’s vocabulary, since Strindberg had used the terms “synthesis” and “analysis” as early as 1886 to characterize Zola’s work.

[50] “La Justice de l’étranger,” *La Plume*, September 1, 1894, 356–58.

[51] Strindberg to Adolf Paul, May 27, 1894, in Strindberg, *Strindberg’s Letters*, 2:469–70.

[52] “J’ai tenté moi-même de sérieux efforts pour vous classer, pour vous introduire comme un chaînon dans la chaîne, pour m’amener à la connaissance de l’histoire de votre développement —mais en vain.” *Vente de Tableaux et de Dessins par Paul Gauguin*, 3–4.

[53] On Jarry’s Symbolist self-performance, see Ryan Hartigan, “‘They Watch Me as They Watch This’: Alfred Jarry, Symbolism and Self-as-Performance in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 52 (April 2008): 165–81. On Jarry’s connection with Gauguin, see Dario Gamboni, “*Mano’o tupapa’u*: Jarry, Gauguin et la fraternité des arts,” in *Intellektuelle Redlichkeit—Intégrité intellectuelle: Literatur—Geschichte—Kultur. Festschrift für Joseph Jurt*, ed. Michel Einfalt (Heidelberg: Winter, 2005), 459–75. Strindberg must have been aware of Jarry, whose *Ubu Roi* appeared for one night only at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre on December 10, 1896, but he mentions Jarry only once in his published correspondence, in 1898, when he tells a friend he is reading Jarry’s 1897 novel *Les jours et les nuits*. I am grateful to Elizabeth C. Childs for suggesting the provocative comparison with Jarry’s avant-garde performance.

Illustrations

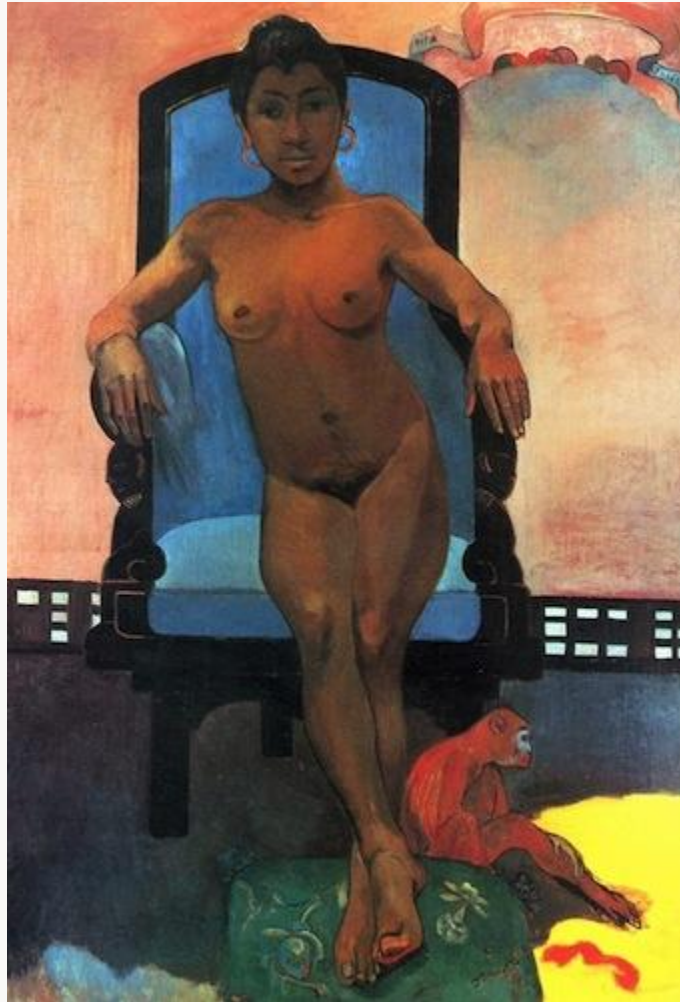


Fig. 1, Paul Gauguin, *Aita Tamari vahine Judith te Parari* (sometimes referred to as *Annah la Javanaise*), 1893–94. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Félix Vallotton, Program for *Père* by August Strindberg, 1894. Lithograph. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Paul Gauguin with His Palette, no date. Photograph. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Service de Documentation. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Gauguin's Studio at 6 rue Vercingétorix, seated: Fritz Schnedklud (center) and the musician Larrivel (right); back row: Paul Sérusier, Annah la Javanaise, Georges Lacombe. Photograph. Musée Gauguin, Papeari. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Julien Leclercq, *Strindberg's Hand*, 1895. Photograph. [\[return to text\]](#)

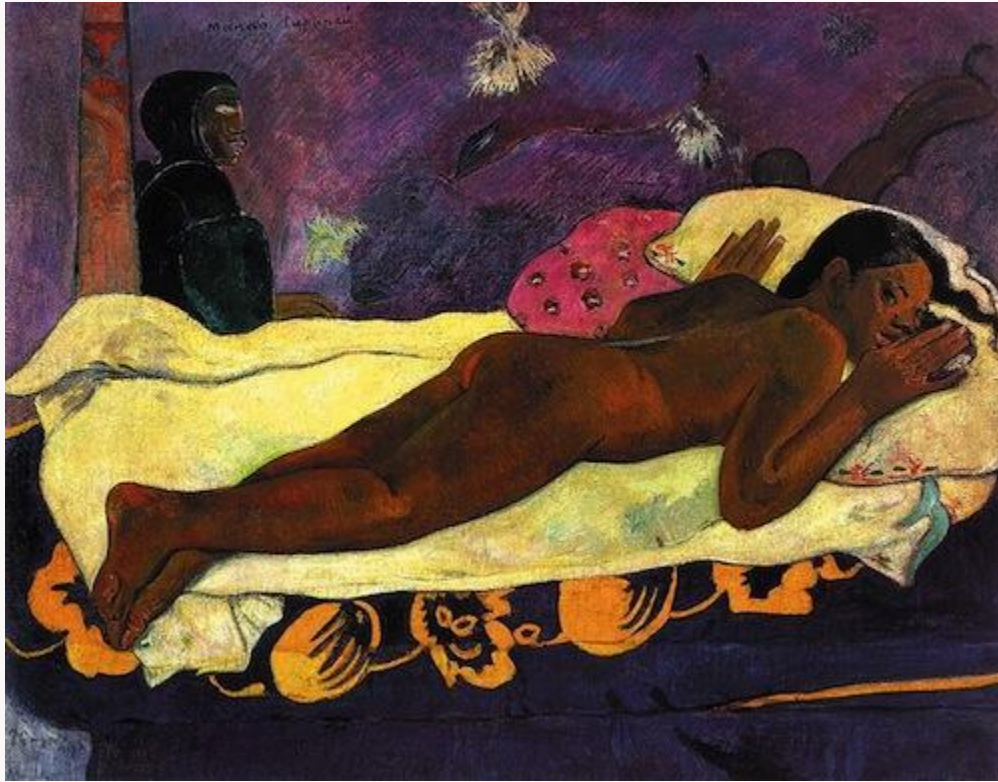


Fig. 6, Paul Gauguin, *Mana'o tupap'u*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.
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