

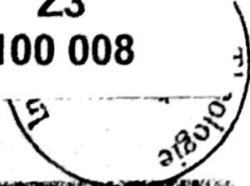
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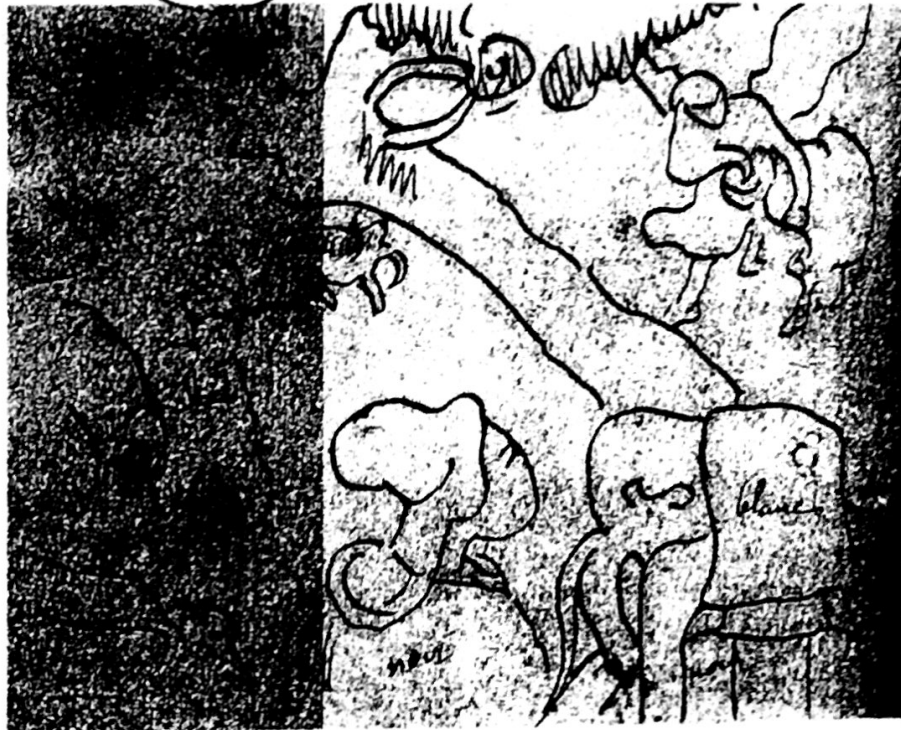


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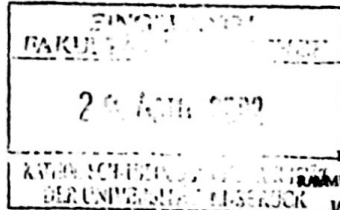
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ditional interpreters seem not to have noticed that what Yahweh
Job at the end of that book is not an answer to the issues Job
—at least not on the level upon which Job raises them. Yahweh does
gage in theodicy; God *transcends* resentment, retribution and
y by *appearing to Job* and speaking to him directly. This anticipates
od would take away the sin of the world by likewise *appearing*
ite in Jesus Christ. The issue of theodicy is not resolved by
ion of right and wrong, nor by power and suffering, but by
ilrous relationship that completely sets aside issues of reward and
ment.

end of retributionism is something of truly cosmic significance.
I discover a need for a new language. We'll have to learn how to use
a "evil" without meaning "that which must be cast out." We'll find
sary to rethink our soteriology, our ethics, our hermeneutics, and
atology, among other things. Thank God for that, because Christian
y has become as stale as dust. Repenting of our retributionism will
save our souls; it will save theology, too. "Heaven and earth will
ay, but my words will not pass away."

GAUGUIN: THE OSCILLATING STRUCTURE OF DISGUISE

Ralph Hajj
University of Montreal

In this essay we will examine Gauguin's self-portraits as ritualistic activity. Through them we will attempt to determine the formal and iconographical consequences of his extensive use of disguise and how this use can illuminate the nature of art in general.

The ritualistic function of disguise

Within the framework of a given social order, disguise functions as a ritualistic activity. Ritual is a *framed* event where concepts—which in a non-ritualistic context are strictly differentiated and which take their meaning from this very differentiation—become undifferentiated. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard studied the function of mask in ritual activity: he concluded that within the function of ritual, which is to reinforce the cultural differentiation through a repetition of its undifferentiated origins, the mask introduces undifferentiation between the self, (the human being wearing the mask), and the other (who or what the mask represents):

Masks stand at that equivocal frontier between the human and the "divine," between a differentiated order in the process of disintegration and its final undifferentiated state—the point where all differences, all monstrosities are concentrated, and from which a new order will emerge. There is no point in trying to determine the "nature" of masks, because it is in their nature not to have a nature but to encompass all natures. (168).

Disguise as a form of ritual activity is the *representation* of undifferentiation or non-representability. It is then a fundamentally paradoxical

activity; an act of undifferentiating which has its condition of possibility in differentiated meaning. In turn differentiated meaning has its condition of possibility in a transcendental undifferentiation which the disguise represents. The mutual determination of the two, the totality of meaning and its negation, which is the condition of possibility of meaning as such, is represented through disguise both as a synchronic state and as a diachronic process. Thus, disguise is one of the forms of synchronic condensation leading to diachronic oscillation. This structure/process of condensation/oscillation is posited here as the universal underlying principle of ritual and in extension of art in general.

The structure/process of condensations/oscillations are seen most clearly in Gauguin's letters and the self-representations put forward in them where he liked to call himself a "savage." It is also seen in his self-portraits of 1888-1890, where he alternatively disguises himself as Jean Valjean, as Jesus Christ, and as a Breton priest, among other roles. A study of the paintings where these disguises occur will allow us to make the connection between his self-representation, as seen through his letters, and its consequences on the formal and iconographical level of these and other paintings. This in turn, will allow us to see how the structure/process of condensation/oscillation affects the form and iconography of his two most complex works; *La Vision après le sermon* [Fig. 1], and *Van Gogh peignant des tournesols* [Fig. 2], both of which were painted in 1888. This choice of paintings will allow us to examine some fundamental generative aspects of Paul Gauguin's work during that period.

Self-Portraits as tropes

In 1888 Van Gogh, who was interested in creating a colony of artists, and as a means of preserving his ties with the painters of Pont-Aven whom he considered as likely candidates, wanted to exchange his self-portrait with a portrait painted by Paul Gauguin representing Émile Bernard and one by Gauguin representing Bernard (Sugana 94). Gauguin, who had trouble painting Bernard (*Correspondence* No. 165, 230), painted a self-portrait instead with an outline of Bernard's profile on the background, entitling it *Les Misérables* [Fig.3] after Victor Hugo's novel. Simultaneously, Bernard painted a self-portrait with Gauguin's profile.

Gauguin's *Les Misérables* [Fig. 3] is typical of his self-portraits, where he is usually disguised, in this case as Jean Valjean. The picture shows Gauguin looking straight at the viewer, his prominent arched nose—which he considered as a sign of his "primitive" origins—emphasized. The



La Vision après le sermon [Fig. 1]



Van Gogh peignant des tournesols [Fig. 2]

background is painted yellow with decorative designs vaguely reminiscent of Persian carpets, except for a green area on the top right of the canvas that contains a linear portrait of Emile Bernard. In a letter written to Shuffenecker in October 1888, he describes this painting and its intentions:

...I did a portrait of myself for Vincent who had asked it of me. I think it is one of my best things: so abstract, it is completely incomprehensible....At first impression, the head of a bandit, a Jean Valjean (*Les Misérables*) which also personifies an impressionist painter, unconsidered and always carrying a chain for the world. The drawing is very special, complete abstraction. The eyes, the mouth, the nose are like flowers from a Persian carpet also personifying the Symbolist side. The color is different from that of naturethe room of a pure young girl. The impressionist is a pure human being, unsoiled by the putrid kiss of the Academy. (*Correspondence* No. 168, 248)



Les Misérables [Fig. 2]



Le Christ au Jardin des Oliviers [Fig. 4]

In this letter, written before having gone to Arles, and before having received Degas' unfavorable opinion during his stay in Paris in early 1890, Gauguin still identified himself against the academy as an impressionist; the influence of G. Albert Aurier the symbolist critic whom he had already met, probably during that summer through Émile Bernard (Townly-Mathews 10), is also present in it. This letter clearly shows that, in the context of his self-presentation, the structure of disguise (the oscillation between being himself and being Jean Valjean) is directly related to the formal structure of his painting, since the disguise he is wearing—including his "primitif" nose which he analogically compares to the decoration on the wall—is presented on the formal level as a citation from a Persian rug. What we propose to do is to study the underlying structure of disguise in relation to the formal and iconographical dimensions of his paintings.

When Gauguin writes that Jean Valjean personifies him, he is saying, "I am *like* Jean Valjean, I unjustly suffer *like* him." This likeness implies both sameness and difference, Jean Valjean and Paul Gauguin are the *same* in terms of suffering, but they are irreducibly two *different* human beings. Gauguin is the one painting this self-portrait and writing the letter, he is the "self" and Jean Valjean is the "other" in relation to that self.

Through the use of disguise, Gauguin is using trope as a means of rhetorical expression. The condition of possibility of trope is the mutual determination of difference and sameness. At the core of every trope there is a condensation of two mutually exclusive classes. The very use of trope implies this, since the tropic expression of a given concept through another

implies as its condition, an essential core of difference between these two concepts. That core of difference is what we will define as the two mutually exclusive classes of a tropic expression. But obviously, in the trope, these exclusive classes are also connected by a zone of ambiguity which belongs *to both and neither*, since the very condition of tropic expression demands that they are the same in some way—in the case of Gauguin and Jean Valjean that similarity is the suffering they both experience. This adds a new dimension in our description of the structure/process of condensation/oscillation; the oscillation between the self and the other implies not only two mutually exclusive classes but also zones which in synchronic terms belong to both, and in diachronic terms can only be perceived as belonging to one class at any given time, thus constituting zones of passage between the two. These zones of passage are the conditions of possibility of ritual as a representation of undifferentiation. This condition of possibility is the space of art as such, where the very act of mimesis, i.e., the transportation of a given reality into the framed or separated space of art, is the transportation of differentiated reality (i.e., non-art) into the ambiguous undifferentiated space of ritual (art). The separation between art and non-art is the same as we find between ritual and non-ritual—the framing of art/ritual into prescribed boundaries functioning as an obstacle to the spread of condensation/oscillation into the world. It functions as a means of preserving the violence that underlies ritual within prescribed boundaries.

The use of the Christic analogy which Jean Valjean represents occurs again in a more literal form in Gauguin's *Le Christ au Jardin des Oliviers* [Fig. 4]. In this painting Gauguin disguises himself as Jesus Christ meditating in an Olive Garden outside Jerusalem before being captured and lead to his death. This moment is presented in the Bible as being the most psychologically painful for Jesus, the moment when he realized the immanence and inevitability of his death and engaged God in a conversation to try to avoid it. The analogy with Gauguin's position as an avant-garde artist is obvious. Christic self-representation is directly related to the valorization of societal victimization within the avant-garde where this victimization is considered as a sign of artistic quality and genius. This self-representation as a victim, and its religious undertones, has a structural resemblance with the function of the image of the artist in art history.

Gauguin's use of disguised self-portraiture occurs again in the figure of the Preacher on the lower right of *La vision après le sermon* (see Demont 36, and Pollack 54) of 1888 [Fig. 1]. A study of this painting will help us understand the structure of disguise, as the condensation of exclusive

concepts, in relation to its formal expression.

La Vision après le sermon and the consequences of the structure/process of condensation/oscillation

La Vision après le sermon is one of Gauguin's most complex paintings. A comparison with some of its immediate predecessors such as *La Ronde des petites Bretonnes* [Fig. 5] shows the enormous influence Bernard's *Les Bretonnes dans la prairie verte* had on Gauguin. It also shows a move away from naturalism—a move that was already inherent in the primitivist subject matter of *La Ronde des petites bretonnes* and the mythological vision of Brittany that underlies it.

La Vision après le sermon is constituted by two discontinuous zones; the Breton women on the foreground and the vermilion area where Jacob and the Angel are fighting. The separation is twofold, iconographical and formal. Iconographically we have two scenes whose juxtaposition together on a same painting is illogical on a narrative level; one of these scenes represents Brittany during the XIXth century and the other represents pre-Christian Canaan in a historically undetermined period during biblical times. This iconographical separation is reinforced formally by an abrupt passage from the blacks, whites and ochres of the foreground, the zone which the Breton women constitute and occupy, to a big area of vermilion red where the battle between Jacob and the Angel is taking place.

Zones of ambiguity connect these two historically and formally discontinuous zones, which belong to both and neither. This includes the tree's trunk that seems to belong to both the women on the foreground and to the vermilion area of the battle between Jacob and the Angel. The ambiguous nature of the tree is deducible from the fact that the tree can be seen as both going parallel to the bi-dimensional plane of the surface, thus belonging wholly to the area of the women on the foreground, and as penetrating perspectively into the tri-dimensionality of the painting, i.e., into the area of the distant Jacob and the Angel.

This three-dimensional perspectivist penetration is reinforced by the cow on the left, which is a lot smaller than it should be if we calculate its distance or if we compare it to the two Breton women on the left. This exaggeration of the cow's distance reinforces the penetration of the vermilion area by the tree trunk because the animal and the plant are merged together by their similar colors and by the fact that their juxtaposition as two independent objects is, in chromatic terms, barely suggested by Gauguin. Even the color the painter uses to create this

separation—a mixture of black and white—is the same as the one he uses to suggest volume on the cow's head and neck. The lower portion of the animal's body which is painted in white is not only chromatically similar but is actually in advance over that of the tree. This offsets the perspectivist advance of the later. So to interpret the animal as either solely being prospectively in retreat or as solely being chromatically in advance in relation to the tree is arbitrary; it is both. Yet we cannot help but choose one of these two interpretations since they are mutually exclusive. So, interpreting the animal as being behind the tree tends to suggest that the tree is parallel to the picture plane. Interpreting the animal as being chromatically in advance in relation to it aids in the suggestion that the tree is penetrating the illusionistic three-dimensional space of the painting. Which means, paradoxically, that a perspectivist interpretation implies its opposite, i.e., the surface, while a chromatic and purely bi-dimensional interpretation, implies the illusionistic three-dimensional space of the painting.

The green zone on the top area of the painting—specifically the light green parts of it—also contributes to the transformation of the tree into an ambiguous element. Depending on where one starts looking, this area can be interpreted as either the tree's foliage or as grass on the ground: looking at it from the vermilion area above the angel's wings, it would tend to be seen as an extension of the ground, as grass. But seen from the intersection of the branches, its description is likely to be foliage. Furthermore if we consider the green zone to be foliage, depending on whether we consider the tree to be parallel to the surface or penetrating into the vermilion zone, we will consider it to be either a part of the Breton women's area or part of the area where Jacob and the Angel are fighting. This ambiguity of the grass/foliage is reinforced by the dark-green forms, which obviously belong to the tree as foliage and are in a relation of figure-to-background towards the lighter greens, thus defining them as possibly distant. Yet, at the same time, the fact that the lighter areas are chromatically more advanced than the darker ones, makes such a figure to background interpretation problematical.

The ambiguity of Gauguin's work has given rise to a lot commentary which in some cases was generalized to include the whole of the Symbolist movement. Robert Goldwater described an ambiguity between the three-dimensional perspective and the bi-dimensional plane found in the works of several Symbolist artists, using it as a means of separating works of the later kind from those of *Art Nouveau* (18-20). Jean-Paul Bouillon describes

this ambiguity as "montage" also describing it as one of the fundamental traits of Pictorial Symbolism:

Even more than their evident double extension in the first abstraction and in Surrealism in its two principal modalities ("the form" of Gauguin and the Nabis, "the image" of the Rose+Croix), it is perhaps, for the artworks, the notion of "montage" that emerges from the diverse modes of approach such as that found in the objects studied here: It corresponds, in practice, to a conscious search for ambiguity.(8)

Jirat-Wasintinsky describes the *Vision après le sermon* as the first radically discontinuous image painted by Gauguin, characterizing this discontinuity as

...one of the immediate results of the use of imagination and memory, rather than the technique of documentary realism, in the production of the work of art. Gauguin's landscapes of 1889 and 1890 are particularly interesting in this respect, because they represent a radical departure from impressionist *plein air* images. (123-24)

In fact Gauguin's use of discontinuity can be traced back to such early works as *Le Sculpteur Aubé et son fils* of 1882, a pastel which in many ways is even more radical than the *La Vision après le sermon* in its use of discontinuities. In fact this is an influence of Degas' compositional techniques on the artist, so it cannot really be described as a departure from Impressionism. What does constitute a departure is the coincidence of this formal discontinuity with an iconographical one—something we never find in the works of Degas—and the effect this has on the narrative of the painting.⁹ G. Pollock proposes a description of this effect:

"In the introduction of his book Jirat-Wasintinsky proposes allegory as an alternative means to narrative in the creation of meaning: "Paul Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* has a meaning or narrative: Breton women, accompanied by a priest, have stepped outside a church after hearing the sermon, probably based on the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, and they experience a 'vision' of that biblical event, perhaps stimulated by the sight of a cow capering in the meadow. The above narrative, setting out the meaning of the painting, cannot be separated from its presentation, that is, from the pattern or composition forming it. (...) Narrative unfolds in time and uses description; however, meaning can be conveyed by other, less naturalistic means, including allegory" (9). However it is not very clear in his text exactly how this allegory functions in the *Vision après le sermon*. Latter on in his book he slightly changes his theory, reducing the way this painting creates meaning

Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* both contains and destroys narrative space by positing within one image two orders of space, two levels of reality and imagination (...). It is unprecedented to demand that a painting manage to function as both an image of a possible gathering of women from a specific French region and the projection of their overheated religious experience. (56)

To elaborate on what she says, we can conclude from her interpretation that the containment of narrative is on the local level of each discontinuous zone; its destruction is on the level of the painting as a whole. We would like to suggest that instead of destruction we have ambiguity. The whole of the painting functions as an *implicit* zone of passage between the two partial and discontinuous narratives that constitute it. Since the relation between the women and the vision is the space of the painting as a whole, their very juxtaposition on a single framed space indicates them as being part of a same ensemble. The relation of this whole, which functions as an implicit zone of passage between the two discontinuous zones, to the zones of ambiguity we have discussed earlier—functioning as localized zones of passage within it—is the relation of the implicit to its explicitation. This unification makes the painting explicit as a self-contained (i.e., framed) whole containing disunities instead of simply being disunities arbitrarily juxtaposed on a framed space. Why is the unification of the whole its explicitation? Because its unification through the localized zones of ambiguity places it in a *signifying opposition* with its constitutive disunity.

The iconographical and formal condensation/oscillation of this painting coincides with the structure/process of disguise. Within this structure/process, Gauguin's use of self-portraiture is explicitly a disguise. He is both priest and painter, giving us the structure of trope of which disguise is but an expression. Gauguin is saying, "I am like the priest" while simultaneously implying, "I am not like the priest." This mutual determination of difference and similitude makes the trope possible. In explicit terms, both figures in this disguise function as the generative element of the painting: as a priest, Gauguin creates what the Breton women are seeing through his sermon, as a painter he creates the vision we as viewers of the painting are seeing. This role of the priest as the creator of this vision is

to the level of an allusion or a metaphor, which according to him, is possibly derived from Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre*, and expresses the struggle of the artist with his medium. It is hard to see exactly what he means or how he reached this conclusion.

made clearer in a letter Gauguin wrote to Vincent Van Gogh:

A group of Bretons pray. Costumes of a very intense black. The bonnets yellow blue, very luminous, very severe. The cow under the tree is very small compared to reality and is bucking. For me, in this painting, the landscape and the struggle only exist in the imagination of the praying people following the sermon, this is why, there is a contrast between the people in nature and the struggle in its non-natural and disproportional landscape. (*Correspondence* No. 165, 230)

The Breton women in the midst of which Gauguin places himself are the representatives of "savagery" and "primitivism" and by representing himself as a Breton priest, he is disguising himself as a "primitive." That disguise implies two mutually exclusive classes, the avant-garde European painter and the primitive church priest. The zone of passage between himself and the priest is the vision created by the latter through his sermon that implies Gauguin as a painter creating a vision for us the spectators. The Breton women and their vision become the primitive counterpart to a spectator implied as both male and Parisian. Gauguin oscillates between being the creator of the vision of the Breton women and the creator of the painting as such. Thus he becomes the zone of passage between the spectator and the Peasant women, two orders of reality as separate as the two found in the painting which is itself in a structure/process of condensation/oscillation. Through the oscillation of the painter between being the creator of the spectacle to being a part of it, we have a passage from the spectator as a *subject* perceiving, to the spectacle or the painting as *object* of perception—two mutually exclusive classes. The oscillation of Gauguin into the priest lead us to the Breton women which as we have seen are in a formal and iconographical discontinuity with the scene of the vision as such, but which are connected to it through the formal strategies we have discussed earlier. This lead us to the scene of the fight itself which, if examined carefully, present the same structure of oscillation/condensation as the one found through all levels of the painting.

The ankle and the hand grabbing it, visible in Gauguin's painting, are in this case the focal point of the traditional story of the battle.¹⁰ It is the

¹⁰The text from Genesis that this scene represents goes as follows: "The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone: and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When

place where the two opposing forces of Jacob and the angel concentrate and eventually resolve their opposition. But until that moment of resolution, the effort of the two fighters are in opposing each other's very effort, thus reciprocally stopping the continuity of each other's actions which tend towards the destruction of the opposing force. So the action of each fighter is geared towards stopping the continuity of the other's while aiding his own. Which means that every fighter creates a discontinuity in the continuity of the other, the place where one of the fighter's action end being the place where the other's begin. Jacob's refusal to release the ankle of the angel in the traditional story is equivalent to him appropriating it—the word release being very adequate since it clearly indicates the action of Jacob as one of appropriation. By doing this Jacob creates a zone of ambiguity in the fight, an area that, in the context of the combat, belongs neither to Jacob nor to the Angel, but to both and neither. Thus, in Gauguin's work the fundamental underlying violent dimension of tropic expression is made explicit. Ritual/art is nothing more than the expression of this fundamental undifferentiation between sameness and difference, between self and other, which occurs through the violence of mimetic rivalry.

But *The Vision after the Sermon* still transfigures one of the combatants into an angel. By defining one of the combatants as an angel—i.e., as transcendence—and the other as a human being, Gauguin transforms Jacob into a zone of passage between the angel, as non-human, and humanity as exemplified by the Breton women. This passage leads to the disguised Gauguin who simultaneously belongs to the mutually exclusive classes of

the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then he said, 'Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Tell me, I pray, you name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him" (Gn 32, 23-30). The parts about Jacob grabbing the ankle of the angel in order to force him to surrender and even the angel himself, were added later on by a tradition which modified the story contained in this text in order to consider this man as an apparition of God. It is this modified version that Gauguin is illustrating as is evident by the wings he gives to one of the fighters and by the hand of the other—Jacob—which is grabbing his opponent's ankle. Jack Miles theorized that Jacob's opponent is in fact Esau, his brother (74). If that is true, we have in the traditional story a historical evolution of the interpretation of a theme found in many mythologies, the enemy brothers or what René Girard calls the *doubles*, a case of mimetic escalation of rivalry which can lead to the divinization of the defeated opponent.

the peasant women and the Parisian spectators that perceive the painting and creates, through their perception, its possibility as a signifying agent. In essence the way the painting signifies relies on a basic opposition between the transcendence of the angel and non-transcendence of Jacob. In effect Gauguin made explicit the way the differentiation that creates transcendental pre-meaning produces meaning through the structure/process of oscillation/condensation which is essentially the undifferentiated structure of mimetic violence. The painting of Gauguin stops one step short of the undifferentiation of the mimetic rivals—the basic sameness of Jacob and the angel—and the instability of meaning it implies. The same undifferentiation is what leads to the expulsion of one of the antagonists into transcendence and his subsequent divinization—in this case as an angel. The condition of possibility of the meaning of this painting is the opposition between transcendence and non-transcendence, a condition which it makes explicit. This basic opposition is what differentiates him from the anti-utopianism and anarchism of a Seurat or Pissarro,¹¹ generating both the form and content of his painting, and leading to his disguise as both implicit civilized and explicit primitive.

Through the matrix of the mimetic theory Gauguin's work becomes an explicitation of ritual—ritual being the representation of pre-meaning within the framework of meaning. Gauguin's explicitation does not have to be deliberate or self-conscious since it is the result of an outside point of view—ours—which is structured by a very specific methodology. But seen from this outside point of view, Gauguin's explicitation is inscribed within the conditions of artistic practice, and can be defined as the condition of these practices coinciding with themselves as their object. This coincidence is self-referential, but in a manner that has nothing to do with that defined by formalism. A self-referentiality conditioned by the reference of an observer to the conditions of possibility of his very observations, the generative function of pre-meaning. This explicitation of ritual is expressed

¹¹Pissarro was opposed to Gauguin's synthetism because of his extensive appropriation of other peoples styles, including Pissarro's own, a feeling of resentment which expressed itself in political terms as seen in his two letters of 1891 and 1893 to his son Lucien (Sugana 12). A complaint echoed by Cézanne who claimed that Gauguin stole his brush stroke and later on by Émile Bernard who claimed that he did nothing more than imitate his synthetism. This shows the proprietary way the achievement of innovation was perceived in the avant-garde. Pissarro, Cézanne and Bernard resented Gauguin because of the way he successfully appropriated their styles which inspired in them mimetic rivalry. A rivalry Bernard would bitterly feel throughout his life.

through ritual as such which in turn is the condition of possibility of this very explicitation.

The Undifferentiating practice of citation

Within that paradoxical process of explicitation, Gauguin's reference to the *Wrestlers* of Hokusai (Sugana 92) in *The Vision After the Sermon* is a means of putting the painting, as a totality constructed of different parts, in a relation of condensation/oscillation with another, the citation functioning as a zone of ambiguity belonging to both the Japanese print and to the painting.

In an Article entitled "L'Original et l'antérieur: Paul Gauguin," Alain Buisine pointed out how extensively Gauguin used citations throughout his career:

We find everything in Gauguin's work, distortions from Corot, Millet, Courbet, Manet, pieces from Pissaro, fragments from Degas, compositions and attitudes imitating Puvis de Chavanes, "pastiche" of Cézanne. It should be stated that we are not talking here of influences: the elements borrowed are too massive, too frequent, too evident, going as far as direct citations and paintings within paintings that explicit them.(114)

Buisine also postulated a possible relation between Gauguin's self-presentation as a savage and his aesthetic project, pointing out the possibility of a relation between Gauguin's self-portraits and his practice of citing works from other painters. According to him the relation between the two is an effort to reconnect with his personal origins:

In my perspective the esthetical work of Gauguin will, before all else, be conceived as a constant effort to rejoin himself as a subject, to rejoin his specifically individual origins. Going back to primitive culture only has meaning in as much as he is simultaneously going backwards in the course of his own life.(104).

This leads, according to Buisine, to the expansion of the self-portrait into the totality of the effigies used by the artist:

If we take into account that so many masculine and feminine figures have a tendency in Gauguin's work to become full-blown idols because of their massive proportions, their sculptural treatment, their simplification and their stylization, we can then ask if the figure Gauguin himself is not

constantly implied in all of his representations of Tahitian and Marquesian men and women, projections of a painter in search of an identification with the Origin. The self-portrait would then be the only palimpsest of his pictorial enterprise. (113-114)

This large syllogism transforms the self-portrait into the generative principal behind Gauguin's work. So it is interesting to note that the way this author defines it is in fact another version of the traditional description of Gauguin's self-portraits as a search for identity. This causes a contradiction, which Buisine himself points out:

Henceforth, there remains to be understood this curious ambivalence that constitutes Gauguin's whole painting: a priori, it is completely closed upon itself in as much as it is elaborated narcissistically as an irresistible expansion of the self-portrait that ends up representing the unique palimpsest of all the painted figures. Nonetheless, it is intimately compelled to always pass through the other, on the chance of turning itself into the other of its own productions: always compelled to cite or elaborate on anterior works that are used as mediations in the same way works of others are used. (119)

The contradictions Buisine is faced with at the conclusion of his article are retraceable to a basic supposition that describes Gauguin's portraits as a search for an identity, i.e., a search for a unity of the self. This supposition is almost universally held in art history circles. The contradictions can only be resolved by abandoning this supposition and examining Gauguin's self-portraits as disguise, which is not the fundamental *generative* principal but one of the *generated term* of the structure/process of ritual.

The ritualistic nature of this strategy of citation is exemplified and taken to the extreme in Gauguin's, *Vincent Van Gogh peignant des tournesols* [Fig. 2], executed during his stay in Arles. On the right side of the painting we see Vincent Van Gogh sitting. He is holding a pallet in his left hand and in his extended right hand a brush. Next to him on a table there is a vase containing a number of sunflowers. By the position of his head we can assume he is looking at—although his eyes are half closed and we really don't see the pupils. Above those sunflowers there is something which we can assume to be the easel, and behind on a wall there is what appears to be a painting.

In this painting there are two mutually exclusive points of view: Van Gogh and the sunflowers are seen from above, while the wall with the

painting is seen from a frontal angle at eye level¹².

The interpretation of this painting we believe hinges on one detail; the fact that the brush in Van Gogh's right hand can be interpreted as touching the sun-flowers in the vase—Gauguin's direct citation of Van Gogh's work—and not the canvas that is supposedly on the easel. We can only assume that the brush touches the canvas by virtually projecting the line formed by the brush, but this is not what we actually see. Even the canvas itself is invisible, its existence is wholly the product of an interpretive construction on our part.

The sunflower/brush contact is further reinforced by the angle of view of Gauguin which frames and depicts the pose of Van Gogh and the angle of the sunflowers from above. And also by the fact that Vincent's body touches the lower and left side of the painting. Both these formal strategies contribute to his flattening on the surface thus placing his hand on the same level as the flowers.

An important point needs to be made here: I am not saying that the brush does touch the sunflowers. What I am saying is that along with the possibility that the brush is touching the canvas there is another possibility, reinforced by formal elements of the painting, and which states that the brush in Van Gogh's hand is touching the sunflowers themselves. Simply stated, both interpretations are correct yet mutually exclusive.

Van Gogh's brush touching the canvas would mean that the sunflowers are inscribed in the mimetic three dimensional space of the painting, that his act of painting is a representation of the flowers—a transcription of its three dimensional reality into the bi-dimensionality of his canvas, the one we do not actually see. It is worth noting that such an interpretation would function only on the iconographical level since the material reality of this mimetic three-dimensional space is bi-dimensional.

The second interpretation, i.e., Van Gogh's brush touching the sunflowers themselves, could mean that the title of the painting, *Vincent Van Gogh peignant des tournesols*, refers to the *actual sunflowers we are seeing*—Gauguin's citation from Van Gogh's work—and not the hypothetical ones on Vincent's hypothetical canvas. This would mean that this Van Gogh on this canvas is painting something that has the same reality as himself. In that same token, Vincent painting the actual sunflowers we see in front of us, defines the rest of the room and himself as a product of that

¹²Bernard Demont, in "L'Ambiguïté dans la Peinture de Gauguin entre 1885 et 1894," also describes this ambiguity as it relates to the still-lives of Gauguin (32).

same constructive action of painting. In essence Vincent Van Gogh is constructing the reality that is constructing him.¹³ The bi-dimensionality of the painting behind Van Gogh becomes the literal indication of the bi-dimensionality of the canvas.

What these two interpretations imply is a passage between two mutually exclusive ensembles, from iconography (and the three-dimensionality it implies as seen from the high angle) to the painting's material bi-dimensional reality (literally indicated by the painting within the painting which is seen from a frontal angle); from Van Gogh painting the sunflowers sitting in a room with a picture behind him, to Van Gogh painting Gauguin's citation of these sunflowers and painting the picture on the wall which implies the bi-dimensionality of the canvas by making its own explicit. Citation is then a point of passage between Gauguin's work and someone else's, a means of ritually undifferentiating both within the confines of representation. It follows the same structure/process of disguise that functions through an undifferentiation of the self/other dichotomy.

In a culture threatened by undifferentiation of meaning and of societal roles, a paradoxical evolution can occur; the undifferentiated can be made explicit and is reinforced in its stature as undifferentiated through ritualistic cultural manifestations. By entering the undifferentiated *as other* into the structure of meaning which defines the differentiated self, the "otherness" of undifferentiation is reinforced—thus excluded. The explicitation and reinforcement of undifferentiation reaffirms that which underlies the differentiated definition of the self, that against which the *meaning* of the self is defined. Art as ritual is the representation of undifferentiation which is separated from differentiated meaning through a tautological opposition to non-art. Thus art negates the differentiations of meaning while negating itself from it.

Within this activity, the image of a primitive Brittany, as opposite to that of modernity, allows Gauguin to operate a series of condensations/oscillations on the levels of his self-representation and on that of form and of iconography, and just as importantly, on the level of the actual and perceptual constructive process of the painting. The structure underlying his contradictory self-representation is found in pictures which are apparently unrelated to it, and is not a psychological "search for an identity" but a

¹³This phrase is directly inspired by Edgar Morin's remark that "we create the world that creates us" in *Order and Disorder, Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium* (108), although we are not wholly in agreement with its radicalism.

ritualistic undifferentiation of the self-other dichotomy.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Gauguin, Paul. *La Vision après le sermon, ou La lutte de Jacob et de l'Ange*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 73 X 92 cm, Edimbourg, National Gallery of Scotland.
2. Gauguin, Paul. *Van Gogh peignant des Tournesols*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 73 X 92 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.
3. Gauguin, Paul. *Autoportrait, dit Les Misérables, à l'ami Vincent*, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 45 X 55 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh.
4. Gauguin, Paul. *Le Christ au Jardin des Oliviers (Self-Portrait)*, 1889, Oil on Canvas, 73 X 92 cm, West Palm Beach, Norton Gallery.

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