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Chopping Wood: “Primitive” Masculinity in Gauguin’s *Man With an Axe*, *Matamoe* and *Noa Noa*

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Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 3.3

Introduction

<1>Practically from the moment of his death, Paul Gauguin’s nude and partially nude female “primitives” have drawn a wide range of critical attention.⁽¹⁾ On the other hand, very little discourse focuses on the male nudes in these same paintings,⁽²⁾ no doubt in part because so few exist. His most recent biographer, David Sweetman, devotes a few pages to the central figure in *Man With an Axe* (1891) and *Matamoe* (1892), although he does not fully address the significance that this is a male figure. Sweetman and Stephen Eisenman, another Gauguin scholar, both draw attention to Gauguin’s description of homoerotic desire from the *Noa Noa* – which centers around the same character Gauguin depicts in these painting – to demonstrate Gauguin’s interest in androgyny. However, recent scholarship in Victorian masculinities, which draws heavily on the ideas of Thomas Carlyle,⁽³⁾ suggests ways in which this erotic male figure represents not so much an interest in androgyny but an idealized view of masculine power and a fixed structure for masculinity.

Carlylean Masculinity and Gauguin

<2>Historians and scholars of middle class masculinity generally indicate that, following the Industrial Revolution, much of men’s work required increasingly mental, abstract and figurative abilities.⁽⁴⁾ Vocations that many men now pursued seemed effeminizing. Art historian Tim Barringer notes that “the sedentary labor” performed by figures like Thomas Carlyle “was to become a flashpoint of anxiety, troubling to the theory of the sexual division of labour and agonizing to Carlyle” (53). Carlyle sought to “redeem the ‘manfulness’ of intellectual labor” and influenced future ideas about masculinity and men’s labor, which required a “self-regulation” that, supposedly, only men could perform (Adams, 6-7). Art historian Joseph Kestner also notes that accepted ideas about masculinity were challenged following the Industrial Revolution (6-8). According to Kestner, Carlyle plays an important role in developing new ideas. He “appropriates to masculinity the tolerance of force and even violence” and equates heroism and virtue specifically with maleness (9). Carlyle’s prominent voice played a major role in maintaining separate spheres of labor for men and women and, furthermore, in promoting an essentialized masculinity that influenced many men throughout the nineteenth-century.

Herbert Sussman provides a good description of the ways Carlyle believed this essentialized masculinity functioned – both its strengths and its potential pitfalls:

Victorians defined maleness as the possession of an innate, distinctively male energy that... could be expressed in a variety of ways, only one of which is sexual. This interior energy was consistently imagined... in a metaphors of fluid... and... an imagery of flame... The ability to control male energy and to deploy this power not for sexual but for productive purposes was clearly specific to bourgeois man... Manliness as control validated the hegemony of the bourgeoisie by valorizing manliness as self-regulation... (Sussman, 10-11)

Because manliness demanded constant self-regulation, however, it could “collapse back into the inchoate flood or fire that limns the innate energy of maleness” (13). In particular, “Carlyle presents a... model of the male psyche always at the edge of eruption, of dissolution, of madness” which traits he then displaced “onto the female” (19). Stability could be “attained by continuously

transforming desire into productivity, negotiating a homosocial world of labor... with chaste yet perilously intense masculine bonding” (19). Sussman believes Carlyle’s readers would find this model of masculinity strongly compelling and would wish to identify with it. It will be shown shortly how Gauguin’s depictions of an axe-wielding Tahitian and his descriptions of encounters with this man reflect these Carlylean ideas.

<3>That Gauguin read Carlyle is an established fact. Gauguin first learned of *Sartor Resartus* through his student, Meyer DeHaan, and later read this work himself in translation (Sweetman, 220, 432). Gauguin’s 1889 portrait of DeHaan shows him viewing a table on which sits, among other things, a copy of *Sartor Resartus*. Another of Gauguin’s paintings, *Barbarous Tales* (1902), features DeHaan in the guise of a clothed satanic tempter of a partially nude female. According to Sweetman, “The key to interpreting this picture has to be Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* with its philosophy of covering and revelation” (508). Both Sweetman and Eisenman see Carlyle’s influence in Gauguin’s most famous painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897). Both point to thematic similarities between the title of this painting and Teufelsdröckh’s exclamation, “Who am I: what is this ME? A Voice, a Motion, an Appearance; – some embodied, visualized Idea in the Eternal Mind?... but Whence? How? Whereto?” (Eisenman, 144). However, while both critics note the similarities in the metaphysical and philosophical ideas of these men, neither looks beyond these obvious connections or at how Carlyle’s views on masculinity affected Gauguin’s.

Man With an Axe

<4>In *Man With an Axe*, Gauguin begins to experiment with depictions of a “primitive” masculinity. The masculine figure in the foreground, hard at work, represents the potential power and energy of the “primitive” male. Sweetman calls this figure Jotefa and says Gauguin referred to him as “Totefa or Jotepha or Jotefa, versions of Joseph,” but realizes that the name may have been an invention (301). The axe in itself, however, represents another symbol of masculine power, one that, like Jotefa, recurs in *Metamoe* and the *Noa Noa*. Sweetman recounts an episode from Gauguin’s earliest days in Tahiti in which he

...Watched intrigued as [a] nearly naked man went to work on [a diseased coconut palm tree], wielding a heavy axe with both hands. It was a sight which Gauguin later recorded with a touch of poetry, noting how, at the top of its stroke the axe left ‘its blue imprint on the silvery sky and, as it came down, its incision on the dead tree, which would instantly live once more a moment of flames...’ (299)

This episode marks the beginning of Gauguin’s fascination with this symbol of an axe-wielding man who can transform, through brute strength, dead wood into fire.

<5>*Man With an Axe* depicts Jotefa permanently frozen in time, his axe raised above his head, ready to strike at a target just outside the right edge of the frame. While Jotefa occupies a space to the right of the center of the canvas, the viewer’s eye moves directly to him, due to his superior stature and the fact that he faces more prominently forward than the woman in the background. His arms draw back in a way that direct the eye to the head of the axe, which indeed resembles a “blue imprint on a silvery sky.” The way the axe head seems to blur in with the sky and the disjointed way in which the shaft bends back in Jotefa’s hands suggest the fluidity of the axe that will take solid form when it strikes its target. In the space to the left of Jotefa, twisted sinews from a bent tree wrap around the axe head and bright red lines snake along the ground, further suggesting the fluidity, motion and latent energy that lie waiting in reserve. Jotefa keeps his head down, focused intently on his work, and pays no attention to the topless woman whose face his upper arm partially obscures. Thus, he represents the Carlylean value of placing productive work over association with women.

<6>Rather than a realistic depiction of a Tahitian man at work, this painting clearly represents something much more fantastic and idealized. Sweetman believes this painting marks the “first of the Tahitian paintings to depart from everyday village life, the first to re-enter the imaginative world which Gauguin believed to be his true vocation” (301). Sweetman believes that because the woman is “bare-breasted... the scene could not have been taken directly from life – such sights were no longer available to [Gauguin]... Rather, the whole picture is an evocation of a golden age of the innocent Tahiti before the missionaries with their Mother Hubbards and their talk of sin” (301). If the female figure represents a pre-Christian symbol of innocent sexuality, the man with an axe represents a pre-industrial symbol of masculine virility.

<7>Ironically, the axe also represents the influence of modern Europeans over the idealized “primitive” Tahitians. Sweetman wonders if Gauguin fully appreciated the historical significance of the axe (316). He says

The axe had been introduced to Tahiti by Captain Cook, who had given hatchets as presents to chiefs only to discover that this useful tool enabled the favoured recipients to produce war canoes faster than their neighbours and thus made them increasingly dominant. The axe became a symbol of the destructive gifts of the Europeans – even more so when the original hatchets wore out and the Tahitians, who had not been taught iron-working, were unable to replace them, but had in the meantime lost the old skills of making tools of wood and stone. (316)

Whether or not Gauguin realized the historical significance of the axe, this does add to the significance of the two boats – the canoe in which the woman crouches and the fishing boat at sea – in the background of *Man With an Axe*. Just as a greater number of canoes would help Tahitians in times of war, they would also help them in times of peace to better harvest the resources of the sea. The vessels looming behind Jotefa represent the products of his labor and the realized potential of his work. Two other of Gauguin’s paintings also situate Tahitian men next to canoes, *Te Vaa (The Canoe)* (1896), and *Poor Fisherman* (1896), further suggesting the centrality of boat-building and fishing to the purpose and identity of the Tahitian male. The axe symbolizes, then, an interference in the daily lives of the Tahitians, pointing more to the power of the society from which Gauguin comes than to the one he attempts to depict. Furthermore, by accentuating Jotefa’s power and productivity, Gauguin points more to the nineteenth-century, Carlylean ideal of masculinity, than to the supposedly “primitive.”

Matamoe

<8>Jotefa, the man with the axe, appears again in *Matamoe*(5) (alternatively titled *Landscape With Peacocks*) in very much the same pose as in *Man With an Axe*. In *Matamoe*, however, he only occupies a small portion of the canvas, although he still stands in the far right edge. This time, the target of his blow, the dead tree at his foot, appears in view. A small fire burns behind him, another symbol of the finished product of his labor and a visual depiction of Gauguin’s aforementioned “dead tree, which would instantly live once more a moment of flames.” Since Jotefa appears so out of focus, dwarfed by the surrounding details, the symbolic function he served in *Man With an Axe* now merely adds one dimension to the masculine symbolism of this painting. What bears closer scrutiny, as the alternate title suggests, are the peacocks and the landscape, which further aggrandize the essential (and essentialist) strength and superiority of the “primitive” male.

<9>Actually, the alternative title to *Matamoe* is slightly misleading, as it appears more to be a landscape with a peacock and a peahen. This is an important distinction to make, as the peacock itself functions as a Darwinist symbol of masculine superiority. In the painting, the peahen, plainer and smaller than the peacock, blends in with the background while the peacock stands out prominently, much in the same way as the woman in the canoe blends in behind Jotefa in *Man With an Axe*. In fact, one could argue that, in *Matamoe*, the peacock stands out in greater resolution than any other object on the canvas.

<10>One highly influential contemporary of Gauguin’s, the naturalist Charles Darwin,(6) refers to peacocks and peahens in a paragraph from *The Descent of Man* in which he discusses the natural superiority of human males over females. He begins this paragraph stating, “when two men are put into competition, or a man with a woman, both possessed of every mental quality in equal perfection, save that one has higher energy, perseverance, and courage, the latter will generally become more eminent in every pursuit, and will gain the ascendancy” (chapter 19, paragraph 16). While this suggests a woman might still gain ascendancy over a man, he attaches a footnote to this sentence in which he quotes J. Stuart Mill from *The Subjection of Women* (1869), saying “The things in which man most excels woman are those which require most plodding, and long hammering at single thoughts,” and to that, Darwin adds, “What is this but energy and perseverance?” He concludes this paragraph stating

Thus, man has ultimately become superior to woman. It is, indeed, fortunate that the law of the equal transmission of characters to both sexes prevails with mammals; otherwise, it is probable that man would have become as superior in mental endowment to woman as the peacock is in ornamental plumage to the peahen

These gender stereotypes were commonplace for Gauguin's time and the idea of using a peacock over a peahen to symbolize male superiority would certainly have come as easily to him as it did to Darwin. Darwin's conflation of "plodding, and long hammering at single thoughts" with "energy and perseverance" harkens back to Jotefa striking away with his axe and the way in which he symbolizes the Carlylean worker/hero. Darwin's "worries" that man might "become as superior in mental endowment to woman" harkens back to the goals of middle-class Victorian men, as noted by Adams, to "redeem the 'manfulness' of intellectual labor" and the goal of raising the stature of abstract, mental work for men in an increasingly industrialized society.

<11>The landscape which fills the background of *Matamoe* also symbolizes masculine ascendancy by playing on popular metaphors that likened masculinity to a tropical volcano. Most significantly, these metaphors conveyed "the idea that men are violent and even at bottom bestial; and, most important, the idea that no particular behavior but something *in* men makes them manly" (Rosen, 22). One of Gauguin's pre-Tahitian tropical landscapes, *Tropical Vegetation* (1887), resembles the landscape of *Matamoe*, both with its lush foliage and palm trees and with its massive, volcanic mountains. *Tropical Vegetation* depicts a view of the bay of Saint-Pierre on the island of Martinique, revealed from the vantage of a volcano, Morne d'Orange, with another volcano, Mont Pelee (which would later erupt and destroy Saint-Pierre), at the farthest point in the horizon (Becker, 2-3). Sweetman notes that Gauguin effaces the city of Saint-Pierre, which "would have been clearly visible to his left" from the painting, giving the "impression of an unspoiled 'native' world" (164). Situating the landscape in this way causes the viewer to both observe it from the masculine perspective of the volcano but to also see this masculine imagery reflected back in righteous affirmation. It also reinforces the idea of the male prophet living alone in the wilderness, only on a volcanic island instead of in the desert. In Oceania, Gauguin would also live in a land of volcanic islands, which one can see prominently in paintings like *Mountains in Tahiti* (1891), *Road in Tahiti* (1891) and *Tahitian Landscape* (1893) and in the distant backgrounds of countless others.

<12>Gauguin couched his own process of painting in terms of violent, volcanic metaphors, particularly in letters to fellow artist and friend, Vincent Van Gogh. In an 1888 letter to Van Gogh, Gauguin tells him, "My head's been full of the crazy paintings I'm planning to do... It's as if I had a need to *fight*, to hew things out with a bludgeon" (Thomson, 88). Since an axe is a type of "bludgeon" it is not surprising that Gauguin picked up on this symbol after his early observations of Jotefa and that he uses it as frequently as he does. In another 1888 letter to Van Gogh, Gauguin attempts to explain his painting, *Self-Portrait, Les Miserables* (1888), in which he visually compares himself to Jean Valjean, saying, "The face is coloured by a rush of blood and the feverish tones surrounding the eyes suggest the *fiery lava* that inflames the souls of us painters..." (Thomson, 92 – emphasis added). A quick glance through Gauguin's letters suggests that he only used this imagery of violence and flame when communicating with Van Gogh, possibly due to the intense, often violent, relationship these men shared.⁽⁷⁾ (In one 1898 letter to another friend, Daniel De Monfreid, Gauguin does describe artistic spontaneity as "thought [that] comes up like lava from a volcano" but he is comparing himself here to Van Gogh (Eisenmann, 139).) Shortly before his death, in 1903, Gauguin wrote, "Between two such beings as [Vincent] and I... *the one a perfect volcano, the other boiling too, inwardly*, a sort of struggle was preparing..." (Eisenman, 181 – my emphasis). Gauguin and Van Gogh had planned for some time to form the Studio of the Tropics, in which the two men would both work together in isolation from modern European society to produce paintings, but it never happened. This project resembles Carlyle's vision of "chaste yet perilously intense masculine bonding" and might explain why Gauguin only revealed this more violent side of his personality in relationship to this intimate friend, Van Gogh.

<13>*Matamoe*, then, captures the symbolism of masculine hard work and productivity shown in *Man With an Axe* and adds to this further notions of an essential masculine nature and ascendancy. Gauguin does this both through the use of the peacock and peahen in the foreground and the mountainous, tropical terrain in the background. These symbols convey a "primitive" masculinity marked by physical strength, strenuous effort, violent eruption and a rugged grandeur. In the *Noa Noa*, a sort of illustrated novel, Gauguin adds to this an erotic desire for and appreciation of the strength and virtue of the "primitive" male.

Noa Noa

<14>Although Sweetman and Eisenman find in passages from the *Noa Noa* an admission of homoerotic desire, these eroticized passages actually serve a much different purpose for Gauguin. (8) Sweetman assumes the central figure from these passages is Jotefa (301, 316). The earliest description Gauguin gives of his friendship with and admiration for Jotefa reads

I have a natural friend who has come to see me every day naturally, without any interested motive. My paints in colour (and) my wood carvings astonished him and my answers to his questions taught him something. Not a day when I work but he comes to watch me. One day when, handing him my tools, I asked him to try a sculpture, he gazed at me in amazement and said to me simply, with sincerity, that I was not like other men; and he was perhaps the first of my fellows to tell me that I was useful to others. A child... One has to be, to think that an artist is something useful. (Sweetman, 301)

A kinship develops between Gauguin and Jotefa in this passage around a mutual appreciation for work, particularly work done by handicraft with tools. This sort of artistic work, creating sculptures, also requires a certain amount of abstraction and intellectual ability that lacks immediate social utility. Speaking of Carlyle, Sussman points out “the intense ambivalence of the male... artist toward... commercial pressure... Artistic practice fantasized as existing beyond the demands of the market retains a purity from the commodification of male energy, yet... is also figured as impotent, unmanly” (6). Although Jotefa thinks Gauguin’s work is “useful to others” (and Gauguin makes sure his reader sees this), he is also “a child” to believe it. This allows Gauguin to make a claim for social utility while at the same time slightly negating it, maintaining his distinction from the marketplace. That the “primitive” “child” appreciates Gauguin’s work also raises the status of his work to something essentially good and pure but that is obscured for modern societies. It also figures that (provided Jotefa actually existed and this encounter actually happened) Gauguin might simply have been flattered and charmed by these compliments to his utility or at least that he desired this sort of admiration from another (“natural”) man.

<15>After some initial descriptions of Gauguin’s feelings toward Jotefa, he tells a story about their expedition into the wilderness to collect rosewood for sculpting. As Sweetman and Eisenman note, he describes this experience in clearly homoerotic terms:

We went naked, both of us, except for the loincloth, and axe in hand, crossing the river many a time to take advantage of a bit of track which my companion seemed to smell out, so little visible (it was), so deeply shaded. – Complete silence – only the noise of water crying against rock, monotonous silence. And two we certainly were, two friends, he a quite young man and I almost an old man in body and soul, in civilized vices: in lost illusions. (Sweetman, 316-317)

In this passage, he evokes several important features about Jotefa that also figure into *Man With an Axe* and *Matamoe*: the loincloth and the ubiquitous axe – here a suggestive phallic symbol. It is important to note that Jotefa is always shown (visually and verbally) “naked... except for the loincloth.” In fact, Gauguin frequently depicts his “primitive” males nude but the genitals are never exposed, nor are the pubic hairs. He does, however, depict pubic hairs on his female Tahitian nudes, such as in *Te nave nave nenua (The Delightful Land)* (1892), *Annah the Javanese* (1893) and *Nevermore, O Tahiti* (1897). This suggests a protection of the male figure and an obfuscation of his vulnerability that he does not extend to his female subjects. For all his appreciation of the “primitive” male physique, he does not expose the “primitive” male phallus. (9)

<16>This passage also points out the disparity between Gauguin and Jotefa. Jotefa, by virtue of being closer to nature, can guide Gauguin through the unfamiliar terrain of the Tahitian wilderness, thus potentially reversing the role of teacher and student. Jotefa is a “young man,” in actual age of course, but also a “young man” on a scale of human development and progression. He represents the potential of a masculinity lost to Gauguin who is “an old man in body and soul, in civilized vices: in lost illusions,” contaminated by modern society. After making this distinction, Gauguin continues his narrative:

His lithe animal body had graceful contours, he walked in front of me sexless... From all his youth, from this perfect harmony with the nature which surrounded us, there emanated a beauty, a fragrance (noa noa) that enchanted my artist soul. From

this friendship so well cemented by the mutual attraction between simple and composite, love took power to blossom in me.

And we were only... the two of us –

I had a sort of presentiment of crime, the desire for the unknown, the awakening of evil – Then weariness of the male role, having always to be strong, protective; shoulders that are a heavy load. To be for a minute the weak being who loves and obeys. (Sweetman, 317)

Eisenman actually reads this passage in a way that makes Gauguin seem quite progressive, as an exploration of androgynous sexuality and a celebration of experimentation with gender roles (119). However, this passage really reveals Gauguin's anxieties about same sex desire and reinforces traditional gender roles. For instance, in a side note to the *Noa Noa*, Gauguin refers, in a less than flattering way, to "The androgynous aspect of the savage, the slight difference of sex amongst animals..." (Sweetman, 318). Jotefa, then, represents not so much a man whom he desires but an androgynous animal – Gauguin's philosophical speculations actually deprive Jotefa of his humanity.

<17>Gauguin also suggests that he feels less than comfortable with his feelings of desire by calling them an "awakening of evil." Eve Kostofsky Sedgwick hypothesizes that male-male desire always falls along a point on a continuum between "homosocial" and "homosexual." By desire, she specifically means a "social force" or "glue" that bonds individuals together. Gauguin's language comes very close to this, when he describes a "friendship so well cemented by... mutual attraction..." What Sedgwick finds most striking about modern, male relationships, though, is the suppression of the homosexual aspects of the continuum. This denial leads to phobic attitudes – Gauguin's "awakening of evil" – and manifests itself in contempt for women and the "feminine" in men (3-4, 19). One of the questions Sedgwick explores, then, is what exactly is meant by a "feminine" identity. For Gauguin, it seems the wish to be "the weak being who loves and obeys" implies the wish to take on the "feminine" role with Jotefa, to abandon his masterly status and submit instead. In another side note, he even reiterates this idea, pointing to, "Vice unknown among the savages – Desire to be for a moment, weak, a woman..." (Sweetman, 318). This allows him to engage in what Adams considers a popular Victorian male fantasy in which a man could "savor a temporary release from the disciplinary burdens of 'political economy,' while at the same time experiencing the extraordinary power of that economy" (114). Instead of actually desiring some sort of role reversal or gender experimentation, this fantasy really calls attention to Gauguin's maintenance of a superior social position. That he can even consider relinquishing this position points to how much he values it.

<18>The climax of this episode reveals, in fact, that Gauguin does not take on this role, does not submit himself to Jotefa despite his temptation. He says, as his desire reaches a heated pitch:

I drew close, without fear of laws, my temples throbbing.

The path had come to an end... we had to cross the river; my companion turned at that moment, so that his chest was towards me. The hermaphrodite had vanished; it was a young man, after all; his innocent eyes resembled the limpidity of water. Calm suddenly came back into my soul, and this time I enjoyed the coolness of the stream deliciously, plunging into it with delight – 'Toe toe,' he said to me ('it's cold'). 'Oh no,' I answered, and this denial, answering my previous desire, drove in among the cliffs like an echo. Fiercely I thrust my way with energy into the thicket, (which had) become more and more wild; the boy went on his way, still limpid-eyed. He had not understood. I alone carried the burden of an evil thought, a whole civilization had been before me in evil and had educated me. (Sweetman, 317)

This passage supports the idea that Gauguin's talk of androgyny actually masks his anxiety, since he regrets his desire once "the hermaphrodite" vanishes and turns out "a young man, after all." Continuing with metaphors of fluid and flame, Gauguin cools his burning desire here by dipping into the river. Gauguin's blaming civilization for his education in "evil" lends him what Foucault calls "the speaker's benefit" (6). According to Foucault, one reason to "define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression... is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (6). By "defying established power," the speaker can "conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution" of the speaker (6-7). The speaker promises

Revolution and happiness; or revolution and a different body, one that is newer and

more beautiful; or indeed revolution and pleasure. What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change laws, and the longing of the garden of earthly delights. (Foucault, 7)

However, the laws of repression must still hold place for the speaker's words to have any impact, thus creating a fixed structure that depends on a regular cycle of repression and release. Another of Gauguin's side notes suggests his desire to idealize the sexuality of the "primitive" body, drawing attention to, "The purity of thought associated with the sight of naked bodies and the relaxed behaviour between the two sexes" (Sweetman, 318). In his study of sexuality, Foucault aims to "examine the case of a society which... denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function" (8). Popular Victorian ideas about masculinity, such as Carlyle's and Gauguin's, fit into this model where they both must denounce social conventions in order to maintain the system that empowers them and the very conventions that they denounce. Gauguin's idealization of the sexual purity and innocence of the "primitive" points to his need to regulate his own sexuality.

<19>He concludes his narrative from the *Noa Noa* by demonstrating just how this regulation of desire can be turned to productive purposes:

We were reaching our destination... There several trees (rose-wood) extended their huge branches. Savage both of us, we attacked with the axe a magnificent tree which had to be destroyed to get a branch suitable to my desires. I struck furiously and, my hands covered with blood, hacked away with the pleasure of sating one's brutality and of destroying something. In time with the noise of the axe I sang:

Cut down by the foot of the whole forest (of desires)

Cut down in yourself the love of yourself, as a man

Would cut down with his hand in autumn the Lotus.

Well and truly destroyed indeed, all the old remnant of civilized man in me. I

returned at peace, feeling myself thenceforward a different man, a Maori. The two of us carried our heavy load cheerfully, and I could again admire, in front of me, the graceful curves of my young friend – and calmly: curves robust like the tree we were carrying. The tree smelt of roses, *Noa Noa*. We got back in the afternoon, tired. He said to me: 'Are you pleased?' 'Yes' – and inside myself I repeated: 'Yes'.

I was definitely at peace from then on.

I gave not a single blow of the chisel to that piece of wood without having memories of a sweet quietude, a fragrance, a victory and a rejuvenation. (Sweetman, 317-318)

Again, Gauguin displays an idealization of intense, single-minded labor that is violently destructive but that also yields productive power. The pleasure he feels at "sating ones brutality and destroying something" harkens back to the ideal of an essential, violent Darwinian masculinity. Indeed, this episode seems to rejuvenate Gauguin, to make him into "a Maori," the savage man from whence, to allude to the title of another of his works, he came. The sublimation of desire, particularly male-male sexual desire, into productive energy achieves the Carlylean fantasy. Gauguin's initial depictions of sexual desire and thoughts about becoming a woman testify to a fear that he might break down, might not manage to deploy his power for productive purposes. By the end of this passage, he overcomes this fear and manages to channel his energy in the right direction, thus successfully completing the masculine plot.

Conclusion

<20>Through Jotefa, then, Gauguin creates a symbol of an essentialist, "primitive" masculinity that borrows heavily from ideas about masculinity expounded by Carlyle. Gauguin builds on these ideas throughout his early works such as *Man With an Axe*, *Matamoe* and the *Noa Noa*. Although some critics and art historians, particularly Eisenman, find significance in the androgynous aspects of Gauguin's male figure, this still clearly represents a *male* figure. In that sense, this male figure represents something supposedly at the heart of all males, "primitive" and modern, but obscured to the modern.(10) This male is essentially bestial, destructive and violent. He is also, however, highly productive, energetic, strong and grand. While his nudity and powerful physique invite erotic desire, Gauguin channels this desire into other directions of work

and labor. The bond he shares with Jotefa resembles the bond Gauguin shared with artists from Paris, such as Van Gogh, a bond that served solely toward the end of creating works of art. Instead of exploring ambiguities of gender roles, Gauguin clearly reinforces them by turning his desire for the androgynous Jotefa into an experience of shared labor and masculine atavism.

Endnotes

- (1) Sweetman uses an example that typifies current attitudes towards Gauguin's female nudes, saying, "...feminist critics today have seized on that prurient image [*Manao tupapau*] as proof that Gauguin was no more than a sexual tourist..." (4). See also Sweetman, 477-8 for more on Gauguin's treatment of women; Eisenman gives a good overview of Gauguin scholarship in his introduction (15-21), citing Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1989) and Griselda Pollock (1993) as key figures in shaping current attitudes towards Gauguin's female nudes.(△)
- (2) In fact, in her Preface to *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*, Solomon-Godeau notes that few scholars pay attention "the construction of masculinity in elite visual culture and even fewer on the dynamics of the male gaze in relation to male bodies" (9).(△)
- (3) Also on philosophers like John Jacques Rousseau, who influenced Carlyle and Gauguin alike (Rosen, 20-21, Eisenman, 79-80).(△)
- (4) In addition to Adams' *Dandies and Desert Saints*, Davidoff and Hall's *Family Fortunes* and John Tosh's *A Man's Place* all address this at great length.(△)
- (5) In attempting to decipher the meaning of this title, Sweetman says it is probably Gauguin's "least helpful Tahitian name" (315). The most he offers is a breakdown "into *mata* – face or eyes, and *moe* – sleep, which means nothing" (315).(△)
- (6) See Rhodes for a further account of Darwin's influence over European ideas about the "primitive" and on modern artists like Gauguin.(△)
- (7) For instance, it is well known that Van Gogh cut off his ear after a fight with Gauguin. See Sweetman for a general overview of the relationship between Gauguin and Van Gogh. In addition to this, Collins' *Van Gogh and Gauguin* focuses entirely on the relationship between these two artists.(△)
- (8) Mathews notes, in *Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, that homosexuality in these passages is presented "so sensually... that his ultimate condemnation of it tends to be forgotten" (183). In her Preface, she notes the shortcomings of Sweetman's and Eisenman's analyses of Gauguin. I agree with her assessment that Sweetman overlooks the importance of sex and violence in his works, while Eisenman's attempt to portray Gauguin "as a... feminist cultural hero" falls short (viii-ix).(△)
- (9) Kestner notes the infrequency of exposure of male genitalia in nineteenth-century depictions of male nudes. "Preservation of the mystery of the penis," he says, "Enabled the penis/phallus equation of the codes of masculinity to develop in the nineteenth century" (38).(△)
- (10) Lisa Tickner notes the importance of primitivism and masculinity in modern art, particularly in that they are often fused with ideas of the powerful, the mechanical, and the industrial and, ironically, the new (206-210). She demonstrates this well at the end of her chapter on Wyndham Lewis, "Epilogue: Masculinity and The Wild Body" (111-115).(△)

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