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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Circumambulating Paul Gauguin's *Oviri* as an Archetype of Matriarchal Consciousness: A Visual Analysis from a Jungian Perspective

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Abstract

Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903) was a Symbolist artist best known for his colorful Tahitian paintings. He was also a lauded sculptor. Yet, the symbolic richness of his work is often dampened by conceptions of the artist as working from a colonial gaze or, more troublingly, as a man working from harmful sexual deviancy. In this paper, I aim to challenge notorious assumptions of Gauguin's work by proposing that the artist was working psychologically from a matriarchal state of consciousness, defined by Jungian psychanalyst Erich Neumann as a state of cultural productivity, stemming from a natural unity with the personal and collective unconscious. Thus, I initially set out to a) thematically analyze the artist's published writings for feminist themes; b) qualitatively analyze the artist's background for matriarchal attitudes; c) visually analyzed one of Gauguin's artworks, *Oviri* (1894, Musée d'Orsay) for matriarchal themes, chosen for its great significance in the artist's life (a copy acts as a marker on his grave). Findings point to *Oviri* as an expression of matriarchal consciousness, valuing androgyny as a tool of political resistance. Furthermore, visual iconography, like the dead wolf at the base of the sculpture, points to more collectively minded, sociopolitical concerns, grounding the work as an affirmation of his stance against Tahitian occupation. Thus, findings from this project support contemporary feminist approaches towards Gauguin's work, which regard the artist as an ally rather than a perpetuator of exploitation against an oppressed culture. Findings also support the validity of Jungian psychanalysis as an art-historical methodology.

Keywords: Paul Gauguin, Symbolism, *Oviri*, Tahitian Culture, Androgyny, Jungian Psychanalysis, Matriarchal Consciousness.

1. Circumambulating Paul Gauguin's *Oviri* as an Archetype of Matriarchal Consciousness

> "Before me is the figure of a Tahitian woman… the white paper troubles me"
>
> —Paul Gauguin, *Avant et Après*[1]

Symbolist artist Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) was perhaps best known for his vibrant, colorful paintings, initially inspired by Impressionist and Cloisonnist styles. However, Gauguin was also a prolific sculptor, producing myriad works that today strike the viewer as surrealist in nature. Camille Pissarro, the impressionist painter who mentored Gauguin during the early stages of his career, once remarked of Gauguin's ceramics: "The pottery of Gauguin, so strange, so exotic, primitive, and savage in feeling and so full of style. If you've never seen them, you who appreciate artistic things no matter how unusual, you owe it to yourself to have a look…"[2] These words were later echoed

[1]Paul Gauguin, *Avant et Après (Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals)*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks (Dover Publications, 1997), 89.

[2]Camille Pissarro to Octave Mirbeau, January 12, 1891, quoted in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti*, ed. Mark Polizzotti and Sarah E. McGaughey (MFA Publications, 2004), 138.

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by the art critic Albert Aurier, who wondered: "How can we describe these strange, primitive, and savage ceramics, where the sublime potter molded soul rather than clay?"[3] Clearly, Gauguin's ceramics inspired a *je ne sais quoi* which appeared to stem from a deeper artistic well—perhaps that which psychanalysts call the *collective unconscious*.

Due to the highly symbolic nature of Gauguin's art—paralleled, perhaps, only by the subsequent surrealist movement which emerged in the 1920s—a visual analysis of his work through the lens of Jungian psychology seems particularly apt to generate updated hypotheses about his canon. It is important to understand Gauguin's mindset while working on his art because the symbolic richness of the work often gets occluded by harsh judgments on his character. Part of the scholarship about Gauguin seems to subscribe to the idea of the artist as working from a colonialist mindset, when a thorough review of his work and writings suggests

that the opposite is true. As the grandson of socialist activist Flora Tristan and the son of a radical journalist, it seems that Gauguin was destined to "keep up the fight" in some way—more obviously through his brush and the written word, but perhaps more powerfully through the kiln, as can be appreciated in *Oviri*, the seminal sculpture which today marks his grave (fig. 1, 3).

Figure 1. *Massimo S., Oviri (Bronze Reproduction) Over Paul Gauguin's Grave, photograph (2017, January), Gauguin Museum, Hiva Oa. Source: https://tinyurl.com/oviritomb; accessed 9-3-2025.*

Another common criticism to Gauguin is that of him as a pedophile, a "monstrous sexual predator"[4] who wreaked havoc on Tahiti through his exploitative, colonialist gaze. These accusations stem primarily from his marriages to Teha'mana and Pahura. Glover summarized the common assumption well in a critique of the National Gallery's exhibition, *Gauguin's Portraits*, which ran from October 2019 to January 2020: "Gauguin, on the evidence of this show, was… a near-perfect embodiment of the malignly lubricious male gaze, a man from France who took himself off to the French colonies, and not only sexually exploited many of the women he saw there, but also did his best to exoticize them in his paintings, to lay them out sideways, scantily clothed, in dreamy readiness for everyone-knows-what…"[5] However, it is worth asking if a man who admired his feminist grandmother—who had every book of hers in his collection—and who once wrote to Madeleine Bernard: "The virtues of a woman are exactly the same as the virtues of a man"[6] would have consciously approached a culture which he admired in such a blasé manner. While it is true that Teha'mana and Pahura cohabitated uncommonly young by today's standards, it is also worth noting that these practices were (unfortunately) commonplace p rior to the first half of the 20th century. For some context, Rapa Nui women, Polynesian inhabitants of the Easter Islands, were known to have birthed up to twenty-two children prior to the 20th century.[7] A similar trend may have

[3]Albert Aurier, *Mercure de France*, March 1891, 165, quoted in *op. cit.*

[4]Michael Glover, "Gauguin's Predatory Gaze," *Hyperallergic* (October 26, 2019), https://hyperallergic.com/524297/gauguins-predatory-colonial-gaze, accessed 10-1-2025.

[5]*Op. cit.*

[6]Irina Stotland, "Paul Gauguin's Self-Portraits in Polynesia: Androgyny and Ambivalence," in *Gauguin's Challenge*, ed. Norma Broude (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 43.

[7]Maria Eugenia Santa Coloma, "Los Sesenta del Siglo XX: El Gran Cambio," *Finisterrae* 13 (2005): 43.

existed in Tahiti, where Cook reported approximately 200,000 people on first contact. Likewise, in 1774, the Spanish reported that Tahiti was "densely populous."[8] Such practices were expected of families, in part, to keep up with labor demands in various fields. As such, women were expected to marry young. In this paper, I attempt to reconcile what is currently known about Paul Gauguin as artist, man and sculptor, with possible reinterpretations of his work from a Jungian perspective. Jungian psychanalysis, also known as depth psychology, considers the collective unconscious as a dynamic system capable of greater objectivity than consciousness or even the personal unconscious.[9] According to Jung, the collective unconscious is populated by archetypes, which are often archaic symbols of universal mindsets, feelings and behaviors. For instance, the *uroboros*, the symbol of a serpent eating its own tail, is a common symbol of self-fertilization (self-actualization or self-reflection), found across myriad cultures. Alexandrian Egypt, the Aztec Empire, and even the Chinese Chou Dynasty (ca. 1200 B.C.) all produced the uroboros-type symbols. Notably, these cultures would have never interacted, supporting the idea of an objective unconscious, capable of expressing universal concepts.

According to psychanalyst Erich Neumann, the collective unconscious has two main aspects, each with their distinct set of archetypes: the matriarchal uroboros, which contains images related to the archetypal Feminine, and the patriarchal uroboros, which contains images of the archetypal Masculine. Neumann notes that the term "uroboros" is used to convey the dynamic, self-actualizing nature of the unconscious. Essentially, the unconscious is an active, teleological or growth-oriented mechanism whose primary aim is to encourage growth. In any case, both the matriarchal and patriarchal uroboros encourage growth by encouraging particular states of awareness: matriarchal or patriarchal states of consciousness. It is up to the Hero archetype, an idealized Ego, to reconcile both aspects of human experience for a more enlightened perspective.

2. Gauguin and Matriarchal Consciousness

Many of the Gauguin's attitudes and formal approaches to writing and art can be explained by the notion that he was working from a matriarchal mode of consciousness, which, according to Neumann, "belongs to… the culture-building level operative at the dawn of human history."[10] Briefly, in Jungian terms, psychological development departs from the matriarchal uroboros, because we are both birthed by a mother and essentially one with her during our formative years. As such, the matriarchal uroboros is often characterized as an unbroken unity between the ego and the unconscious. Individuals operating from this mindset are regarded as "simple" in thought and action; however, this apparent simplicity is more so a directness which can sometimes harbor a great depth since essentially Ego and soul are one. In this frame of consciousness, archetypal values associated with the divine Feminine and motherhood are valued above the patriarchal. Some evidence suggests that Tahitians, despite their French-colonial status in the late 18th century, still valued and operated primarily from a mindset of matriarchal consciousness. According to Norma Broude, Tahitian *ari'i*, higher caste women, were able to hold positions of authority,[11] an idea more directly explored by Gauguin in the painting, *Two Women* (ca. 1901-02, Metropolitan Museum of Art, fig. 2), based on an 1898 photograph by Henri Lemasson: "No longer frail in appearance but with strongly chiseled and mask-like facial features, she takes the lead, while the younger woman rests her hand gently on her elder's arm, as a signifier of continuity and connection… a painting that summons up ancestral relationships through the female line."[12]

As the Ego begins to develop in human consciousness (one can argue that it is originally formed, or gestated, in the unconscious), so too does the archetypal Masculine begin making its way towards conscious awareness. These archetypes emerge from the patriarchal uroboros and initially correspond to images of the Father. This "patriarchal activation," so to speak, can be experienced as an overwhelming force, which can overshadow images of the archetypal Feminine (in this case, Mother). According to Neumann, if the archetypal Mother fails to be recognized, she risks becoming either overly submissive or vengeful. It becomes the task of the Ego to embrace the Hero

[8] Jean-Louis Rallu, "Tahiti Population (Re)Estimates and Ideologies," *Population and Economics* 8, 2 (2023) : 237, DOI: 10.3897/popecon8.e116822.

[9] Peter Heinze, "Teleology and the Objective Unconscious," in *Semiotics 2016*: *Archeology of Concepts* (Semiotic Society of America, 2017), 63-71, DOI: 10.5840/cpsem20169.

[10] Erich Neumann, "The Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness," in *The Fear of the Feminine*, trans. Boris Matthews et al. (Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

[11] Norma Broude, "Flora Tristan's Grandson*:* Reconsidering the Feminist Critique of Paul Gauguin," in *Gauguin's Challenge*, ed. Norma Broude (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 87.

[12] Op. cit.

archetype—in a sense, to rescue the metaphorical princess from the claws of the dragon—to rebalance both feminine and masculine aspects of the human psyche and reach a state of higher awareness, or well-earned wisdom.

Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, *Two Women*, ca. 1901-02, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438001, accessed 10-1-2025.

Table 1.1 *Overview of the Three Stages of Archetypal Consciousness*

1) Matriarchal	2) Patriarchal	3) Heroic
Ego consciousness is still"childlike" in its relationship to the unconscious.	Tendency of the Ego to "free itself" from the unconscious (at this point, the "Great Mother").	Self-Discovery
"Great Mother" or Amazon archetypes	Consciousness acquires a "patriarchal accent." Archetypal Masculine (« Great Father ») prevails.	Liberation of consciousness
Masculine side of the uroboros is seen as bisexual; in a sense, always integrated and subordinate to the Feminine.	Separates conscious and unconscious systems.	Embracing tension of opposites for creativity and individuation.

Note: *Each level of consciousness has sublevels ranging from initial stage to final. These distinctions have been omitted for the sake of brevity. Adapted from Neumann, 1994.*

To assess if Gauguin approached his Tahitian works mostly from a non-patriarchal, heroic mindset, I chose to visually analyze *Oviri* due to its archetypal, symbolic composition (fig. 3). With its striking formal closeness to genuine archeological artifact, the sculpture exemplifies the so-called "culture-building level" of matriarchal consciousness. Embedded within the object are myriad associations from both the personal and collective unconscious, some which will be contextualized following the synthetic method as devised by psychanalyst Carl Jung.

3. Jung's Synthetic Method

The *synthetic method* is essentially how Jung worked with opposites to facilitate individuation. It has three stages: Subjective, Objective, and Amplification. "Like gathering firewood, we gather associations to the image; both the conscious and the unconscious are engaged like two sticks of wood rubbing together."[13] In an art therapeutic context, the therapist actively analyzes an image with the patient to uncover its personal meanings. While Gauguin did not produce these images within an art therapy context—nor do we have him in front of us for such an intervention—we can make educated inferences about what the image meant to him on a personal level based on how he formally handled certain works and themes, what he wrote about them, what is known about his life at this time, and how he revisited these themes.

3.1 Subjective

The *Subjective* view pertains to personal associations to the image. According to Swan- Foster, subjective associations pertain to how the image "may have been encountered before"[14]; they also relate to dreams, situations, or other works, and have a

[13] Nora Swan-Foster, *Jungian Art Therapy* (Routledge, 2018), 96.

[14] Swan-Foster, "Synthetic Method", Chapter 5, 97.

phenomenological component. While Gauguin himself rarely divulged *personal* associations to the work (except possibly for *Spirit of the Dead*, which he claimed was based on Teha'mana's frightful reaction to his unexpected late-night arrival after running an errand), it is possible to deduce some associations based on what is documented or expressed through letters. For instance, Anne Pingeot notes a resemblance between the back view of *Oviri* and Rodin's *Balzac* sculpture, which would have been plausible considering that Gauguin's admiration of Balzac was well-known among those in his circle. In a letter to biographer Charles Chassé, written in 1955, painter and engraver Paule Emile-Colin said of Gauguin: "He was a great admirer of the character of Vautrin in 'La Comédie Humaine,' and the idea occurred to me that (…) he might have been Vautrin's brother… He had read widely, and I understood that he had a special preference for the Bible, Shakespeare, and Balzac."[15] Similarly, Gauguin's later allusions to Séraphitus-Seráphita (a reference to Balzac's novel, *Séraphita*) in response to *Oviri,* suggest that at least parts of the artwork were guided by themes of androgyny as explored by the writer.

Gauguin's "silence" on his own works has been noted by Dario Gamboni, who confirmed: "Gauguin rarely commented on his own works and was wary of explanations. But he addressed more generic issues of semiotics and communication, and his written work confirms the importance that he gave to ambiguity and polyiconicity."[16] For context, *polyiconicity* is the appearance of one symbol as another—for instance, the form of hair appearing as the outline of Rodin's *Balzac* or as a veil… or as a whale. According to Gamboni, it was Gauguin's intent to encourage the viewer to form their own conclusions about the work, in a sense "initiating (onlookers)" by "revealing unsuspected 'aspects' (of the work)"[17] To infer meanings based on Gauguin's subjective view is therefore one of the challenges of this visual analysis, but possible by considering what the artist chose to share outside of the context of the work.

3.2 Objective (Personal)

The *Personal Objective* pertains to real events that influenced the analysand—or, in this case, the artist—and his creation. While we may be aware of some events which transpired In Gauguin's life, it is difficult to know if a specific personal or day-to-day event influenced the creation of *Oviri.* Since Gauguin kept explanations of his work mostly formal or mythological. However, there is one possible event which may have guided the creation of *Oviri*, based on an analysis of its formal elements and themes: Teha'mana's pregnancy, as mentioned for the first and only time by Gauguin in a letter to Monfreid in 1892:

> "I shall soon be a father again in Oceanica. Good Heavens, I seem to sow everywhere! But here it does no harm, for children are welcome and are spoken for in advance by all the relatives. It's a struggle as to who should be the mother and father nurses. For you know that in Tahiti a child is the most beautiful present one can give. So I do not worry as to its fate."[18]

… And its possible abortion, per anthropologist Bengt Danielsson:

> "But if, on the other hand, a pleasure-loving Tahitian girl thinks that pregnancy will keep her too long from sharing in the gay parties and mating dances, then everyone—except missionaries and gendarmes—will regard it as her private affair should she prefer an abortion. Teha'mana seems to have decided on the latter course, for she never gave birth to this child."[19]

The implications of Teha'mana's pregnancy and possible abortion will be discussed as part of the visual analysis completed during the *circumambulation* of the sculpture.

3.3 Amplification

Possibly, the one aspect of the synthetic method which *is* most readily accessible to us as an art methodology is *amplification*: the formation and collection of associations relevant to the personal and collective unconscious. Amplification, like polyiconicity, points to multiple

possible meanings underlying an image through a web of interconnected associations. For example, a mirror can be associated with vanity as in the myth of Narcissus or with self- protection, as was the case with Perseus protecting himself against Medusa[20].

[15]Paul Emile-Colin to Chassé, 1955, quoted in Brettell, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, XXIV.
[16]Dario Gamboni, "Gauguin and the Challenge of Ambiguity," in *Gauguin's Challenge*, ed. Norma Broude (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 112.
[17]Gamboni, 114
[1] Paul Gauguin to Daniel de Monfreid, March 31, 1893, in *The Letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges Daniel de Monfreid*, ed. Frederick O'Brien, trans. Ruth Pielkovo (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922), 46.
[19]Bengt Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*, trans. Reginald Spink (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 129.
[20]Swan-Foster, 99.

Circumambulation—the metaphorical circling around the image as if circling around an altar— can expand the range of associations by studying formal choices from multiple perspectives.

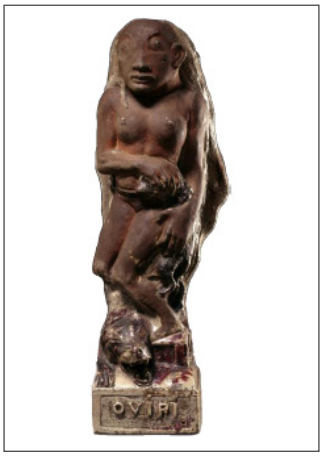

Figure 3. *Paul Gauguin, Oviri, 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source: https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409, accessed 9-12-25.*

4. Amplifying "The Murderess"

4.1 *Oviri*: Frontal View

When the idea of escaping to Tahiti gained prominence in Gauguin's mind, he began to breathe life into his dream by painting and eventually sculpting a Tahitian version of *Eve* (1890).

This sculpture features a lovely, spritely woman as if emerging from the sea (fig. 4). Though biblical in theme, this *Eve* seems more akin to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1484-86, Uffizi Gallery) in execution. Energetically youthful, with a curious gaze, this *Eve* quizzically gazes at the viewer, with no qualms about being perceived. She rises from a mandala-like pedestal that evokes the unbroken unity of the Self with the unconscious: essentially the natural state of early consciousness. In a sense, this is exactly what was sought by Gauguin: that freshness of attitude, unspoiled by Western civilization. His Eve— "(she alone) can logically remain nude before our gaze."[21] Veiled by the inherent innocence of a mindset like the Buddhist *shoshin* (one mind, one action),[22] Gauguin's idyllic Eve functions as the embodiment of psychologically progressive energy: an archetype of the *anima* or the divine feminine.

Figure 4. *Paul Gauguin, Eve (front and back views), 1890, Glazed Ceramic, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Source: https://www.nga.gov/artworks/52381-eve, accessed 9-13-25.*

It is less clear what *Oviri* (1894), Gauguin's masterpiece, appears to represent from a Jungian perspective. Compared to *Eve*, a buoyant representation of ideal femininity, *Oviri* is imposing, brutal, and androgynous. Gauguin called her *La Tuese (The Murderess)*. The poet Charles Morice called her *The Huntress Diana*, alluding to the Greek goddess Artemis, deity of the Moon.[23] Such a classical

[21]Paul Gauguin to August Strindberg, February 5, 1895, in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (University of California Press, 1996), 83.
[22]Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, eds. Trudy Dixon and Richard Baker (Weather Hill, 1970).
[23]Charles Morice to Stéphane Mallarmé, ca. February-March, 1895, quoted in Shackelford and Frèches- Thory, 136.

association might strike one as a bit too polished for the blunt, primitive nature of the sculpture. It is unclear if Gauguin, who once said: "the great error is the Greek" and who, according to Mothéré, viewed "the Greeks and Romans with suspicion and incomprehension," would have personally "approved" of such an association (though he would have been savvy enough to understand that it would have helped the sculpture sell).[24] However, within the context of amplification, such an association is not without merit, and can act as a gateway to other significant ideas, perhaps more aligned with the artistic and personal stances of the artist, if not of the Tahitian collective.

4.2 *Oviri:* Masculine Profile

Artemis was commonly understood to be the twin sister of Apollo, Greek god of the Sun. Thus, their association with *Oviri* points to significant archetypal themes at play: that of the *anima* (soul or divine feminine) and *animus* (spirit or divine masculine). More specifically, the presupposed twinhood of both siblings implies a sense of equality—which would have aligned with pre-patriarchal notions of the archetypal female in relation to the male. In fact, such an archetypal dynamic would have been, according to Neumann, metaphorically comparable to a half-moon: a woman in sync with her male aspects or vice-versa, where it not for the fact that Apollo is archetypally symbolic of the Sun. Because of how patriarchal society is structured, the Sun myth essentially "overpowers" Moon myths, representing the subjugation of the female to the male. According to Neumann, this idea is sustained by the Moon's literal reliance on the Sun for light, resulting in a mythical devaluation of the archetypal Feminine. Aligning with this interpretation, it is possible to note, from a fully frontal angle, a predominantly masculine presentation in Oviri's facial features. Christopher Gray noted how the sculpture's features have been based on a Marquesan idol and how its head resembled the mummified skull of a "great chief who has passed beyond death to become a god"; these skulls also had their eye sockets filled with mother of pearl to signify their godly passing.[25]

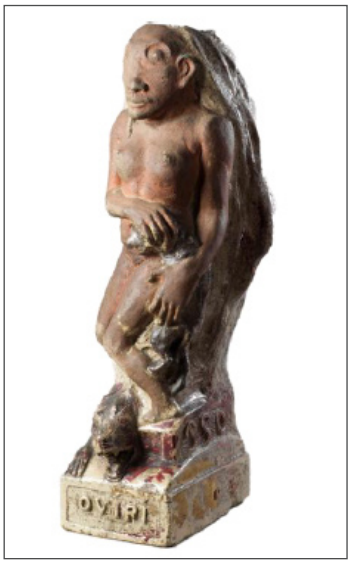

Figure 5. *Paul Gauguin, Oviri (from left), 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source: https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409*

Likewise, one can observe a subtle partition between masculine and feminine sides of the androgynous body: on Oviri's left, the so-called masculine side has been marked by a receding hairline which seems to transform her hair into stone, or perhaps a cave wall (fig. 5). In contrast, a fleck of hair falls over Oviri's right shoulder, as if to mark it as her feminine side (fig. 3). The head of *Oviri* is notable for its mask-like, severe expression and androgynous, gender-neutral construction, said to have influenced Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.[26] Likewise, in Picasso's *Woman with Clasped Hands* (1907, Musée Picasso), one can notice the possible influence of *Oviri* within the androgynous figure, which—like Gauguin's seminal sculpture—appears to have dimorphic breasts (fig. 6b).

[24]Robert Goldwater, *Paul Gauguin*, (Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 32; Richard Brettell, Francoise Cachin, Claire Frèches-Thory, Charles F. Stuckey. *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, (National Gallery of Art, 1988), XXIII.

[25] Pingeot, "Oviri," 140

[26] Brettell, "Oviri," 373. The author notes that Gauguin's influence on Picasso has become increasingly evident in recent exhibitions on primitivism. He stated: "In fact, one of the figures in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, could be based on *Oviri*." Gauguin's influence on Picasso was well-documented in a charcoalsketch from 1902, titled simply *Female Nude in Profile (Hommage à Gauguin),* which he signed as "Paul Picasso" in May 1903 after the death of Gauguin.

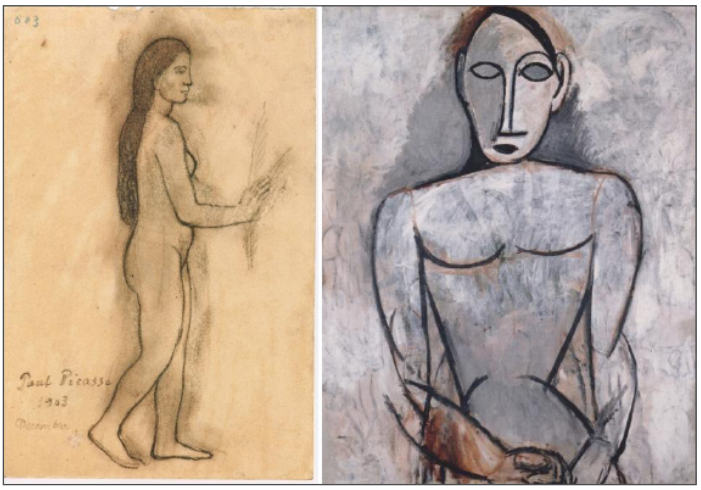

Figure 6a. *Pablo Picasso, Female Nude in Profile (Hommage à Gauguin), 1902, Conté crayon and charcoal on paper, provenance unknown,https://www.everypainterpaintshimself.com/article/picassos_female_nude_in_profile_1902;*

Figure 6b. *Woman with Clasped Hands, 1907, Oil on canvas, Musée Picasso, https://www.everypainterpaintshimself.com/article/picassos_woman_with_clasped_hands_1907*

4.3 Basal View: Angling Towards the Wolf

Another detail stands out as disruptive of a sense of male-female equality: the angling of Oviri's legs. The placement of both legs tends towards the right, towards the "masculine" side. The effect of this placement becomes more striking as one begins to rotate the figure, but from a fully frontal perspective, such a posture directs the eye downwards towards the dying wolf at Oviri's feet (fig. 7). Symbolically, the wolf as an animal has myriad associations, with themes of social inclusion-outcast, of loyalty-treachery, of survival-death and of howling at the moon as expression of presence and pain. There is also a significant well-known association between the wolf and Gauguin: During Gauguin's *First Solo Exhibition* at Durand-Ruel (1893), Edgar Degas, pressed for an explanation about the meaning of Gauguin's art, famously replied: "You see, Gauguin is the thin wolf without the collar," before delving into La Fontaine's fable about the dog and the wolf. Essentially, the dog wonders why the wolf does not trade his wildness for the comforts of domesticity.[27] In *Avant et après,* Gauguin relays the quote, while quipping: "So much for the man. What is the painter?"[28]

Diving deeply into animal symbolism from a Jungian perspective, Barbara Hannah has explained that animals tend to signify the instinctual drive in humankind. Whereas archetypes represent a higher sort of consciousness or intuitive thinking, instincts are simpler and direct—in a sense, more directly connected with the unconscious. Hannah explained the difference through the parable of Socrates' *daemon*, who encouraged him to avoid a danger on the road by "turning left," uttered in a whisper. In turn, an instinct would have simply had him acting in a particular way. In other words, had instinct guided Socrates instead of an archetype, he would have *felt* the "sudden urge" to turn left, rather than noticing a thought or premonition.[29] Thus, if animal symbols are representative of higher instincts, one can argue that the dead wolf here represents the death of an instinct, perhaps one of survival or cunning since Gauguin's ability to survive his Tahitian milieu (and briefly, his last Parisian one) was significantly challenged at this time. We know that his first Tahitian sojourn did not go as planned, shattering his illusion of Tahiti as a *genius loci* or an archetypal "sacred place."[30] Similarly, Gray regarded *Oviri* as "… an expression of the profound disillusionment and discouragement of Gauguin… death, savage and wild," noted by the slaying of the wolf at her feet and the cub at her belly. In a sense, one canunderstand these deaths to mean the literal death of "the savage," noted by Gauguin in *Avant et après*; "The child who is kept in school, deprived of physical exercise, his body always clad… becomes delicate and incapable of enduring a night at the mountains… seeing this leads me to think, or rather, to dream, of the time when everything was absorbed, numb, prostrate, in the slumber of the primordial."[31]

[27]Paul Gauguin to André Fontainas, March 1899 in Chipp, 76. Gauguin's letter to Fontainas was translated by John Rewald, who summarizes the moral of the story: "(because) he prefers liberty with starvation to servitude with a collar."
[28]Paul Gauguin, *Avant et Après*, 55.
[29]Barbara Hannah, "The Archetypal Symbolism of the Cat, Dog, and Horse" (lecture, C. G. Jung Institute, Zurich, Germany, April 26, 1954), 6.
[30]Swan-Foster, 21. Defined as a place considered sacred, needing "protection to maintain a balance," or simply as "having a soul."
[31] Gauguin, *Avant et Après*, 39

Figure 7. *Paul Gauguin, Oviri (Base-Lateral View), 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source: https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409*

4.4 A Note on *Oviri* and her Pose Shift: Progression from Earlier Works

It would be helpful to understand how *Oviri* the sculpture differed from other versions of the motif to contextualize the significance of her pose. Gauguin had previously worked on a series of *Oviri* prints based on two woodblocks (fig. 8). One of the key differences between the woodblock image and the sculpture is the angling of the legs: in the prints, Oviri's legs appear straight, instead of "oddly bent", as Brettell noted.[32] Brettell also noted that the figure in the print is "unreversed" from the sculpture, meaning that Gauguin likely created the block first, then created the ceramic based on the print. According to Brettell and Eberhard Kornfeld, Gauguin most likely created the print in Pont-Aven and Paris, "after sketches and drawings from Tahiti."[33] Likewise, an additional watercolor transfer was likely created early during the series, reflecting initial musings of the idea. Much later, in *Avant et après,* Gauguin mused: "A critic at my house sees some paintings. Greatly perturbed, he asks for my drawings. My drawings? Never! They are my letters, my secrets. The public man—the private man… Before me is the figure of a Tahitian woman… the white paper troubles me."[34] In effect, if one considers the progression of artistic output as mirroring movement from private Self to public persona, it makes sense to think of the drawings and the prints as preceding the sculpture.

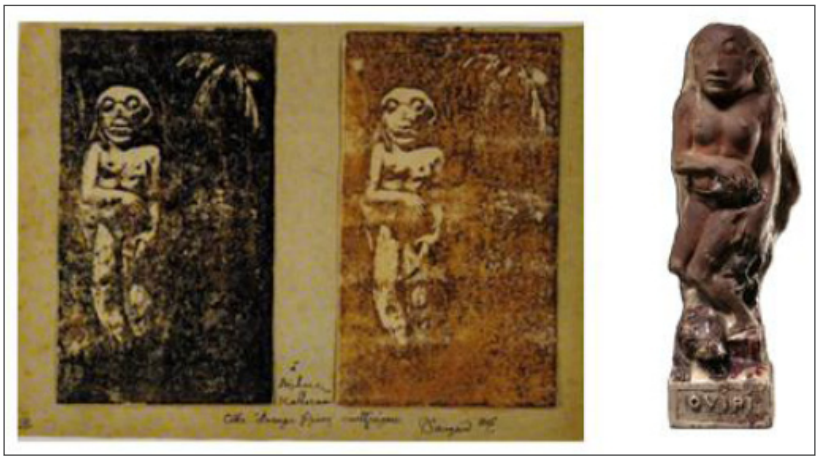

Figure 8. *Comparison of poses between Oviri the woodblock print and Oviri the sculpture. The set of woodblock prints was gifted to Stephen Mallarmé in 1895, with a caption that read: "To Stéphane Mallarmé: This strange figure, cruel enigma." While dated one year later, it is thought that the prints preceded the sculpture. Of note, the figure on the prints has straight legs, while the sculpture has an angular pose. Source: Richard Brettell, Françoise Cachin, Claire Frèches-Thory, Charles F. Stuckey, The Art of Paul Gauguin, (National Gallery of Art, 1988), 375.*

Thus, the angling of Oviri's legs is possibly representative of a shift in awareness, perhaps in how perceived native Tahitian consciousness to be, though also allusive of his own attitudinal stances toward Western patriarchal society. The previous straight-leg composition mirrors *Eve* in idealism: it is the equal stature of the two selves: the archetypal feminine and masculine in full balance. An optimal matriarchal stance, so to speak. However, in *Oviri* the sculpture, the legs have been angled towards the

[32] Brettell, 375

[33] Brettell, *op. cit.* The original caption reads: *« A Stéphane Mallarmé cette étrange figure cruelle enigme. »*

[34] Gauguin, *Avant et Après*, 88-89

masculine, perhaps to reflect the patriarchal shift in social consciousness encountered by Gauguin upon his arrival in Tahiti. In a sense, Gauguin lived this oppression first-hand upon his arrival: he was sneered at by the locals who called him "*taata vahine*", or "manwoman", in reaction to his long hair—possibly not the attitude he would have expected from a more "liberated" place.[35]

From a social standpoint, his window for inclusion into mainstream colonial French society was minimal. Of course, he quite deftly and deliberately opposed such attempts at being incorporated into what he deemed to be the source of the problem. The issue here was less of a failure to "fit in" and more of how his continued rebuffs of French society triggered the ire of religious groups and *gendarmes*, which grew progressively problematic, to the point where he was jailed. While working on *Oviri*, the worse had yet to pass but the "germ" of the insight was already sprouting. The harassment faced against the Western establishment marked his person as a site of clashing ideologies. From this perspective, *Oviri* becomes the visual representation of Gauguin's political body, amplified by the awareness of his dualities—French and Peruvian, archetypally Masculine and Feminine, civilized and savage. The political nature of *Oviri* becomes amplified by its reappearance in *Le Sourire*, Gauguin's political journal, captioned with an allusion to Balzac's *Séraphita*, a novel with an androgynous heroine: "And the monster, embracing its creation, filled her womb with seed and fathered Séraphitus-Séraphita"[36] (fig. 9).

Figure 9. *Paul Gauguin, Pages du journal de Gauguin (erroneously dated August 1891), The Louvre. Source***:** *https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020228262, accessed 9-17-25.*

While it is tempting to dive deeply into the implications of this reference on the work, it is important to note that Gauguin himself identified with *Oviri* as a totem of his savagery. Soon after completing *Oviri*, his last major ceramic work, Gauguin completed a striking *Self-portrait*, *Oviri* (ca. 1920) a bronze plaque featuring his likeness alongside a hibiscus, signed "Oviri" next to his usual "P. Go" (fig. 10), suggesting that the motif encouraged him to explore different aspects of his "savagery"—potentially his archetypal "bisexuality"—with radical honesty. As Balzac once explained: "(androgyny is a) divine state, during which the soul is WOMAN and the body is MAN. This is the last human expression in which Mind predominates over matter."[37] In line with this thinking, Neumann explained: "The matriarchy regards the masculine side of the uroboros, which is bisexual, as part of the Great Mother, as her tool, helper, and satellite."[38] This can be understood to mean that the angling of the archetypal Feminine can, in fact, be pointing to the archetypal Masculine here as integrated and subordinate to the Feminine; a phallic male, so to speak—a symbol which Gauguin often carved.

[35]Nienke Denekamp, "Tahiti I" in *The Gauguin Atlas,* trans. Laura Watkinson (Yale University Press, 2018), 130. According to Denekamp, this anecdote was relayed by Paulin Jénot, a young naval officer who welcomed Gauguin at port and who became friendly with the artist.

[36]Brettell, 371. Translated by Brettell. The original caption reads: *« Et le monstre, étreignant sa creature, féconde de sa semence des flancs généreux pour engendrer Séraphitus-Séraphita »*

[37]Pingeot, 141

[38] Neumann, 15

Figure 10. *Paul Gauguin, Self-Portrait, Oviri, 1894-1895, Bronze (cast ca. 1920), Private Collection. Source: Richard Brettell, Françoise Cachin, Claire Frèches-Thory, Charles F. Stuckey, The Art of Paul Gauguin, (National Gallery of Art, 1988), 377.*

5. Circumambulating *Oviri*: Other Perspectives

« Circumambulation » has been described by Swan-Foster as the "metaphorical circling of the altar" to move through layers of consciousness until one's amplifications become distinctive in quality and scope.[39] Essentially, there is no single interpretation but multiple themes, from personal to collective. Jung viewed images as "sacred objects" from the unconscious; likewise, *Oviri* was a particularly charged object for Gauguin, who ultimately decided to keep it as a marker for his grave. As such, emergent themes from the work can be gleaned from the sculpture as viewed from different perspectives. For instance, a back view of the sculpture evokes symbolism related to the veil and the whale. Likewise, viewing *Oviri* from the right reveals both an equanimous, "hard mother" profile or a strikingly compassionate, archetypal Feminine gaze, depending on the angle of view. As such, examining these additional perspectives can provide insight into attitudes held both by the artist and the society in which he dwelled during his final years.

5.1 *Oviri* Rear View Symbolism

In contrast to the *Eve* sculpture, where Tahitian Eve has a long, flowing mane of blue- tinged hair which seems to cascade back into the ocean (fig. 4), the figure in *Oviri* has a multi- layered structure of "hair" which conveys multiple meanings, depending on angle of view. Anne Pingeot noted a striking resemblance between "the reverse of the sculpture and Rodin's *Balzac*."[40] According to Morice, Gauguin had studied the sculpture "at great length" after its rejection by the Société des Gens de Lettres in 1894.[41] However, the work was first exhibited by Rodin in 1898, so it is unclear just how Gauguin studied this particular work of Rodin's. Could a photograph of the unfinished work have made its way to the media? For "what it's worth," we know that Rodin was aware of Gauguin's *First Solo Exhibition* in 1893, though according to Pissarro, both he and Monet "(found) all this simply bad."[42] In any case, the formal similarities between both outlines are striking (fig. 11).

Figure 11. *To the right of Oviri: Auguste Rodin, Monument to Balzac, 1898 (cast 1954), Bronze, Museum of Modern Art. Source: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80862, accessed 9-12-2025.*

[39]Swan-Foster, "Jungian Theory and Practice," Chapter 2, 28
[40]Pingeot, 140
[41]Pingeot, *op. cit.*
[42]Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien, November 1893, quoted in Shackelford and Frèches-Thory, 86.

5.2 *Oviri* Rear View: A Veil

Setting aside these formalities, a sustained observation of the sculpture's rear reveals two possible symbols emerging from the sculpture's overall configuration: the first, a veil. The veil appears as the folds of Oviri's "hair" contort and expand throughout the relief, resembling a shroud or a veil, that has been brutally pierced as suggested by the sharp opening. Ideas of mystery and revelation, purity and rape all come into the foreground at this angle. Archetypally, then, the pierced shroud can represent the brutal unveiling of a harsh reality, which Gauguin must have experienced during the two years that he spent in colonized Tahiti. According to Carolyn Williams, who analyzed veil symbolism in depth within the context of Islam, "(t)he appearance of the Veil symbol in Islam's sacred myths, stories and rituals often points to an inaccessible theophany."[43] While Gauguin did not identify as Muslim, the similarity of symbolism between Oviri's veil and the meanings gleaned from Islamic texts is striking and supportive of the interconnectedness of the collective unconscious. Certainly, *Oviri* had comparable significance to the artist as a spiritual totem. Williams noted: "Veiling or hardening of the heart is viewed in Islam as an act of willful separation from the Divine. Conversely, an unveiling or softening of the heart creates a state of unity with the Divinity."[44] From an analytical perspective, the hard texture of the veil, appearing almost cave-like in composition, can be interpreted as a literal shattering of the hardening heart, allowing for profound insights from the unconscious to emerge.

5.3 *Oviri* Rear View: A Birth

Within the crevice formed by the pierced veil, appears to exist a primordial, formless figure as if emerging from the depths. This crevice appears lined with a terracotta-like pigment, evoking the hematite-infused drawings of prehistoric cave sites like that of Altamira, which was discovered in Gauguin's time.[45] Similarly, the figure itself evokes the allegory of Plato's cave as man metaphorically rises from the shadows. Seen in left profile, the archetypal Masculine side of *Oviri* appears as if a man facing away from the cave wall, achieving a metaphorical sense of enlightenment as he faces the world instead of the darkness of the cave. Alternatively, because the veiled "figure" ultimately emerges from a birth-giving body, associations like Athena splitting open the head of Zeus to emerge, fully formed, into consciousness also make their way into the foreground of this sculpture.

Figure 12. *Paul Gauguin, Oviri (Rear View), 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source: https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409*

5.4 *Oviri* Rear View: A Whale

The second symbol, seemingly emerging from the sculpture's rear composition, is that of the whale (fig. 11, 12). In *Avant et Après,* Gauguin occasionally included anecdotes and musings about whalers, whom he may have associated with a sense of cleverness and survival instinct: "Out of the coral they will make lime. The whalers, who are very clever seamen, observing

[43]Carolyn L. Williams, "The Symbol of the Veil as the presence of the hidden Divine in Islam's sacred myths, stories and rituals," (Ph.D. diss, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2014), 4, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
[44]Williams, 149
[45]Tim Brinkhof, "The Cave Paintings That Divided the 19th-Century Archaeological World," *Artnet* (September 8, 2025), https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-hunt-altamira-cave-paintings-drama-2674323, accessed on 9-29-25.

that their barometers were behaving in extraordinary ways, foresaw the disaster and set out…"[46] In fact, this bit of anecdote stemmed from a greater reflection about the realities of life in the Marquesas: "I myself was taken in… now my brush must make up for it," suggesting, perhaps, a similar mindset while working on *Oviri*, if not a similar attitude of "making lime out of coral." [47] If one considers Gauguin's previous forays into biblical themes such as *Jacob Wrestling the Angel* (1888) and *Yellow Christ* (1889), the whaling theme can allude to a sense of feeling trapped within a monstruous reality, such as the parable of Job and the Whale. Such an attitudinal shift must have become evident to some in Gauguin's circle like August Strindberg, who in a letter said: "I will have none of this pitiful God who accepts blows. My God is rather *Vitsliputsli* [Aztec war god], who in the sun devours the hearts of men."[48]

5.5 Feminine Profile I: *Oviri* as the Hard Mother

If one observes *Oviri* from her right, it becomes possible to perceive a more decidedly feminine contour, suggestive of the archetypal Feminine (fig. 13). Her femininity seems emphasized by the contours of the veil, suggestive of the vagina and its associations with birth, womanhood, and sexual pleasure.

Figure 13. *Paul Gauguin, Oviri (Profile View), 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source: https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409*

Oviri's facial expression at this angle appears both equanimous and grave. Her lower legs are not visible at this angle, so she appears either trapped by the cave or unable to move. From this angle, the wolf seems to have dropped straight from the woman's crotch, and one wonders if, on a personal objective level, there is a storytelling component embedded in the sculpture. Could this placement allude to the more literal death of his descendance, as represented by the end of Teha'mana's pregnancy? Not much is known about Gauguin's personal response to this event.

However, it is not beyond reason to think that, for Gauguin, it may have represented another disappointment or "ill omen" related to his life in Tahiti. Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa posed a similar question in *El Paraíso En la Otra Esquina,* a novelization of Paul Gauguin's life interpolated with that of his grandmother, Flora Tristan's. Vargas Llosa created a parallel between how Gauguin—Koke, as he was known by the locals—handled Teha'mana's pregnancy versus how he felt towards Pahura's. Essentially, due to timing and a greater sense of connectedness with his European life, "Koke" would have spurned the former *vahine's* pregnancy, focused instead on returning to Paris for an exhibition of his works. Teha'mana's sharp, intuitive character, as already established, would have deduced his unavailability. So when Koke inquired about the pregnancy four months after the announcement, she simply stated: "I had a hemorrhage and lost it… I forgot to tell you."[49] In contrast, the death of his newborn girl with Pahura, his second *vahine*, seemed to have inspired a sense of "spiritual crepitation"[50] which ultimately led to the seminal painting, *Nevermore* (1897, The Courtauld):

[46] Gauguin, *Avant et Après,* 89-90.
[47] Gauguin, *op. cit.*
[48] August Strindberg to Paul Gauguin, February 1, 1895, in Chipp, 80.
[49] Mario Vargas Llosa, *El Paraíso En la Otra Esquina* (Alfaguara, 2003), 40-44. The original quote reads: "*Tuve una hemorragia y lo perdí… me olvidé de contarte."* Translation my own. The novel is well-researched and essentially enlivens what we know about Gauguin.
[50] Vargas Llosa, "Nevermore," chapter 10, 200.

> *"Comenzó a pintar a la niña muerta, tratando de resucitarla desde las creencias y supersticiones de los antiguos maoríes, esas de las que no quedaban rastro o que los actuales mantenían tan ocultas, tan secretas, que estaban vedadas para ti, Koke. Trabajó jornadas enteras… Se sentía asqueado, enardecido… Lo que te mostraba la tela era basura, Koke."*[51]
>
> "He began painting the dead girl, trying to resuscitate her from within the beliefs and superstitions of the ancient maoris, those of which no longer existed or which the locals maintained so hidden, so secret, that they were not available to you, Koke. He worked entire days… He felt disgusted, livid… What the canvas showed you was trash, Koke" (translation my own).

The passage conveys a sense of deeper grief towards the child, perhaps because she was born, and so a concrete interaction took place—however brief—between Gauguin and the solemn creature that he fathered. Gauguin's repulsion towards the image led him to cease painting and drink to exhaustion. Sometime later, he caught a glimpse of Pahura, nude, exhausted, numb with grief, staring at him with disinterest—an expression which intrigued him. Specifically, the passage reads:

> *"En ese desgano crónico de Pau'ura hacia todo había algo misterioso, hermético, que lo intrigaba… Sentías una sensación extraña, una premonición"*[52]
>
> "In Pau'ura's chronic disinterest there was something mysterious, hermetic, that intrigued him… You (Koke) felt something strange, a premonition" (translation my own).

Vargas Llosa's description of Gauguin's emotional state on encountering Pahura resonates with the inscription on the *Oviri* woodblock prints dedicated to Mallarmé: "This strange figure, cruel enigma" (fig. 8). Dated 1895, the carvings would have nevertheless been developed during the Parisian interlude after the first Tahitian trip, during which he lived with Teha'mana. Thus, it is possible that greater reflection on the failures experienced during his stay brought similar emotions to the fore while working on his "*Murderess*."

From a wider sociopolitical sense, which Gauguin may have been working through in this sculpture, a patriarchal accent—the dominance of an archetypally Masculine consciousness—seems present from this angle, represented by the "cutting off" of the legs, which now "belong" to the archetypal Masculine. The square shape of the pedestal, a form associated with compartmentalization, appears to support this notion, which developmentally corresponds to the ego's attempts at freeing itself from the matriarchal unconscious.[53] Compared to *Eve*, where a lone archetypal Feminine appears to emerge from the unbroken, oceanic unity of the unconscious, *Oviri* emerges from a highly regimented, angular space. Moreover, her legs are now in the service of mobilizing the archetypal Masculine, whom Neumann described as "a formless *numinosum*" or something undefined.[54] The formless *numinosum* here can be gleaned from the literal formlessness from which the archetypal Feminine appears to emerge. According to Neumann, while a woman's (or a creative man's) consciousness would initially feel "overwhelmed and defeated" by such a force (as seen in Gauguin's *Manau Tupapau* or *Spirit of the Dead*), it would gradually adapt and accept it as an extension of consciousness. In this sense, *Oviri* can represent the next step in an evolution of consciousness, where the woman (both psychological and sociopolitical) is becoming aware of her archetypal Masculine as a source of empowerment. For Gauguin, as a creative man, this would likewise represent an awareness of the archetypal Female. According to Neumann, this configuration of consciousness risks a sense of overdependence on the male, but that does not seem to be the case here as *Oviri* appears with an impressively stoic and brutal expression. In fact, by referring to *Oviri* as "The Murderess," one gets a sense of the archetypal Feminine here as being that of the Great and "Terrible" Mother—one who would here order the destruction of the wolf and their cubs as a cruel sort of kindness: a wild way of life is no longer tenable in Gauguin's colonial Tahiti.

5.6 Feminine Profile II: *Oviri* as Unbroken Matriarchal Consciousness

In contrast to the grave profile that emerges from a hard sideline view, a partial rotation of the totem from a fronto-lateral perspective reveals a kinder, more compassionate gaze, offering a view of the archetypal Feminine more akin to that of undivided matriarchal consciousness (fig. 14). The gaze is made

[51] *Op. cit.*
[52] Vargas Llosa, "Nevermore," 201.
[53] Neumann, 65
[54] Neumann, 15

the more powerful by the brutal contrast of the action taking place: the snapping of the wolf cub's neck as a possible *rite d'entrée*; a necessary "death of instinct" for Gauguin to understand the realities of Tahitian life, to become one of the group— a wolf in "the country of wolves," as he mused in *Avant et Après*; "I know another enemy of the people [presumably himself] whose wife not only did not follow her husband, but has even brought up the children so well that they do not know their father—so well that *this father, who is still in the country of the wolves*, has never heard 'dear Father' murmured in his ear. At his death, if there is anything to inherit, they will turn up" (emphasis my own).[55] A wolf, stranded in the country of the wolves: However, wolves are highly territorial creatures, and any sort of wolf can find themselves excluded from the pack. Conversely, even if not excluded, wolves *do* set off from the pack to search for their own territory, which can be interpreted, in Jungian terms, as an attempt to individuate (separate) from the unconscious.

Figure 14. *Gauguin, Oviri (frontolateral view), 1894, Stoneware, Musée d'Orsay. Source:* https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/oviri-19409

From this angle, one wonders how Oviri's expression is part of the artwork's genius: such a warm gaze is not evident from any other angle and has the same enigmatic quality as the *Mona Lisa.* Her motherly expression also resembles an earlier artwork from Gauguin titled *Where Are You Going?* (1892)—possibly the first time that *Oviri* makes an appearance in the Tahitian canon (fig. 15a). As was typical of Gauguin, he revisited the figure in an eponymous later work, but Oviri now holds a coconut instead of a cub, angled over her breast, evoking ideas of breast amputation in the style of Amazon women—a theme common to the first matriarchal stage of unbroken unity with the unconscious, where women tend to perceive men as "Other" (fig. 15b).

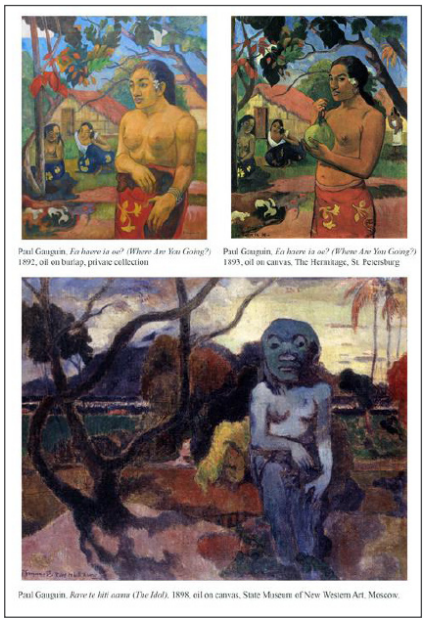

Figure 15. *Oviri as a repeated motif in Gauguin's paintings. One can observe a progression from a "daily" or subjective manifestation of the idol to a more symbolic presentation. Source: Various* [56]

[55]Gauguin, *Avant et Après*, 57

Towards the end of the century, Gauguin once again revisited the image of *Oviri* in a painting entitled *Rave te hiti aamu (The Idol),* where the lone idol rests within a large, mythological landscape (fig. 15c).[56] The color palette, more somber and naturalistic, evokes that of his Martinique paintings. The predominance of shadows here suggests a comparable experience of consciousness, where the archetypal Feminine is experienced as an engrossing *numinosum*, possibly by both Gauguin and the landscape alike.

6. Conclusion

6.1 *Oviri* as a Totem of New Consciousness

While examining the Gauguin's Tahitian canon, it is possible to observe, in a general sense, a more "realistic" approach to Tahitian subject matter in works completed during Gauguin's second stay. Arguably, during the first voyage, Gauguin seemed to maintain a sense of greater connectedness with the artistic milieu in Paris. Whatever work he produced was completed with the intention of going back to France and "picking up where he left off," so to speak. The exoticism of this first line of works is emphasized with the vibrant subject matter of "Eve in Paradise." Similarly, early works like *We Will Not Go to the Market* (1892) lean more strongly towards Egyptian poses and frieze-like patterns, eclectic motifs nevertheless considered orientalist. Gauguin had embarked on this Tahitian quest with support from the government, who granted him "cultural envoy" status. Thus, works produced at this time seem to genuinely attempt to keep up with the pretense. However, as relationships soured, Gauguin eventually found himself requesting to be repatriated—a request made difficult by the authorities.

When Gauguin found himself back in Paris, the situation had dramatically changed: he no longer had the support from before his departure, and new artistic currents were already underway. His *First Solo Exhibition* of 1893 was essentially a disaster, and his personal life suffered dramatic setbacks, from a serious leg injury that would grow worse to the pillaging of his wares by Anna the Javanese. These situations could have plausibly led to the proverbial "dark night of the soul" where *Oviri* emerged in full clarity as a sacred object from the unconscious.

More broadly, however, if one considers the painting as the genesis of an idea conveyed by the sculpture, then *Oviri* can be considered as a philosophical guidepost, so to speak; a psychopomp[57] driving the artist's intuition to and fro the unconscious, addressing a question that would be expanded in his other seminal work: *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897-98) where the artist muses about the origin of humankind and its expansion towards the great unknown. The artistic progression is fascinating in the sense that Oviri, the woman, became the representative of Gauguin's ideal matriarchal mindset—a woman unafraid of her strength. This encouraged an initiation of sorts into the philosophical mysteries shared by the artist and the Tahitian culture, amplified in perpetuity by their foundational nature.

6.2 *Oviri* as a Sociopolitical Symbol of Resistance

That Gauguin revisited *Oviri* in his sociopolitical journal, *La Sourire,* suggests that he understood it to have a universal quality with sociopolitical connotations. The topic of androgyny was a popular one during Gauguin's time; however, it was viewed by religious and mainstream establishments as a source of discord and a deviance to be avoided or punished. In the context of Tahitian culture, Gauguin often admired how there was "something virile in the women and something feminine in the men."[58] In this way, what he perceived to be the androgyny of character inherent within Tahitian society became a beacon of hope for resistance to Westernization and its cultural mores.

As for the formal mechanisms which encourage this line of thinking, one can reflect on Neumann's explanation of the progression of consciousness from matriarchal to patriarchal, from a stance of self-protection to a stance of self-discovery, to understand the possible implications of *Oviri* from a sociopolitical perspective:

> "(W)oman [in this case, Tahiti] is forced into self-alienation in the service of the development of consciousness. She is compelled to develop the masculine side, too, without which cultural achievement is not possible."[59]

[56] Figure 14a. Gauguin, *Ea haere ia oe? (Where Are You Going?)*, 1893, Private Collection, Accessed from https://www.bidsquare.com/online-auctions/500-gallery/paul-gauguin-after-where-are-you-going-6094100, 9-17-25; Figure 14b. Gauguin, *Ea haere ia oe? (Where Are You Going?)*, 1893, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Accessed from https://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/gauguin/05/1paris03.html, 8-28-25; Figure 14c. Gauguin, *Rave te hiti aamu (The Idol)*, 1898, State Museum of New Western Art, Moscow. https://impressionistsgallery.co.uk/artists/Artists/ghi/Gauguin/information/Rave%20te%20hiti%20aamu%20(The%2 0Idol)%20,%201898.html, accessed on 9-17-25 (Fig. 14c).

[57] In Jungian terms, an archetype that acts as messenger between the conscious and the unconscious, like Charon as the ferry between the Underworld and Earth.

[58] Stotland, 44

[59] Neumann, 26

It is important to remember that the "masculine" here is not in the literal social sense, but in the archetypal one, i.e. qualities ascribed to the archetypal Masculine, like abstract thought and intellectual pursuits, as drivers of Ego consciousness. In any case, Neumann promoted the idea that, rather than devaluating the archetypal Feminine—the seat of creativity, associative thought and intuition—consciousness can expand and become all the more nuanced while incorporating matriarchal modes of thinking. Cultural achievement is made possible, in a sense, through Gauguin's effort: by integrating his own archetypal Feminine into his way of being. Neumann further elaborates: "(T) he liberation of the Feminine from the power of the patriarchal uroboros is the task of the male hero, who must redeem the captured virgin from the dragon."[60] Following this line of thinking, it is relatively easy to see how Gauguin is the metaphorical hero attempting to save the captured virgin [Tahiti] from the draconian mores of Western civilization. Thus, *Oviri* became a beacon of sorts for this new, integrated mode of consciousness which became emblematic of his own radical authenticity, and which he hoped to inspire in those around him— a proverbial howl at the moon which continues from beyond the grave.

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