

**From contrapuntal writing to antipodal carving:
Paul Gauguin’s Polynesian
“Afternoon of a Faun”**

Antonio Viselli*
University of Canterbury

Abstract

This article examines the adaptation of Mallarmé’s symbolist poem, “The Afternoon of a Faun,” by Paul Gauguin. During his first trip to Tahiti, Gauguin carved a cylindrical wooden totem that recreates the faun’s lustful dream in Mallarmé’s poem, replacing the faun and nymphs with Polynesian mythology. Memory is understood here from an intertextual, intermedial, and intercultural perspective, where the contrapuntal musico-literary qualities of fugue suggested in Mallarmé’s poem permeate through its afterlives as a palimpsest, culminating in Gauguin’s “primitive trinket.” Finally, to reverse the colonial gaze and to push adaptation and intertextuality further, the Pacific gains more agency once we consider the afterlife of the totem reproduced in the recent film *Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti* by Edouard Deluc.

Keywords: intermediality, adaptation, myth, desire, subjectivity

Whether described in terms of (anxieties of) influence, homage or dialogue, the relationship between a work of art and its afterlives manifests itself in many forms and dynamisms: from adaptations, pastiches, and translations, to inter and intra-textual references or allusions. Together, these transform the spatio-temporal boundaries that contextualize both the hypotext – or source text – and hypertext – that which derives from a hypotext –, to borrow Gérard Genette’s terminology. Brought together, these originals and their transformations unite in a liminal, third space, at once dovetailing and “palimpsestuous” (Hutcheon, 2006: 21). The purpose of this analysis is to explore memory from an aesthetic and intermedial perspective, by examining Paul Gauguin’s “The Afternoon of a Faun” (ca. 1892), based on Stéphane Mallarmé’s symbolist poem of the same name (1876), which Gauguin sculpted during his first visit to Tahiti.

As I examine what Camille Mauclair describes as Gauguin’s “primitive trinket” (Ilouz, 2012), I seek to explore what is lost and/or gained, and what remains when we cross over not only from one culture and theology to another, but from one artistic medium to another. Subsequently at stake here is the potential enhancement as well as violence that comes from adaptation and the permeation of one medium’s presence woven into another, to offer a very broad definition of intermediality. Mallarmé’s poem, which arguably already evokes another artistic medium, musical fugue, represents half of the overlapping mythologies present in the wooden carving that unites Polynesian myth with the Greco-Roman world.

* **Corresponding author:** Antonio Viselli, University of Canterbury, antonio.viselli@canterbury.ac.nz

Becoming “savage”: Gauguin’s first trip to Polynesia

Gauguin undertook his first trip to Polynesia between April 1891 and August 1893, promising friends and family to return to France a rich man, both financially and in terms of inspiration and artistic growth, hoping to be revitalized by the “savage” idylls he would at once internalize and propagate on the European market. This period of artistic creation would certainly transform his poiesis and sense of aesthetic self, which, judging by his travelogue was arguably already quite performative. In a desire to remove himself from the conventionality and artificiality of current European art, he believed he could become “savage,” as in an attempted return to a Rousseauvian state of nature, a process he describes in his travelogue *Noa Noa*, a text in part autobiographical and partly inspired by Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout’s *Voyage aux îles du Grand Océan* (1837) and Edmond de Bovis’ *État de la société tahitienne à l’Arrivée des Européens* (1855). Despite portraying this transformation in a positive light and primarily for aesthetic ends, Gauguin nevertheless actively perpetuates a Eurocentric exoticization of the Other by self-proclaiming as “savage,” a denigrating term which further underlines colonial superiority over the indigenous people. Gauguin’s work has provoked immense praise and criticism alike, and it seems impossible to dissociate terms such as syphilitic, “colonialist, chauvinist, exploiter,” and “amoral” with an artist who abandoned his family, amassed great debt, had little regard for his own health, and who had child lovers (Searle: 2010). What is of interest in this article, beyond the blurring of artistic boundaries where music, poetry, and sculpture entangle, is also the gender confusion propitious to both aesthetic creation and an attempted refashioning of the self, however primitive or modern that self might be.

In the following passage from *Noa noa*, in search of wood for his carvings, the narrator heads into the mountains with a young Tahitian, Jotefa. Teilhet Fisk explains that this “ascent into the mountains [is...] analogous to man’s ascent to his desired state of perfection, which for Gauguin was to become a Tahitian,” a journey similar to Buddha’s ascent to *Nirvana*, Teilhet-Fisk adds (1983: 66). This ascent symbolizes transcending the effect of *Maya* – defined as an illusory image or deceit, and exemplified in the image of the hermaphrodite below (67).

Both of us were naked with a loincloth about our waists and an ax in our hands, crossing and recrossing the river to rejoin a bit of path that my companion seemed to follow by scent alone, it was so shady and hard to see... and there we two were, two friends, he a very young man and I almost an old one, in both body and soul, made old by the vices of civilization, and lost illusions. His supple animal body was gracefully shaped, he walked ahead of me sexless.

[...]

I had a sort of presentiment of crime, desire for the unknown, awakening of evil. [...]

I drew nearer, unafraid of laws, my temples pounding.

The path had come to an end, we had to cross the river; my companion turned just then, his chest facing me.

The hermaphrodite had disappeared; this was definitely a young man; his innocent eyes were as limpid as clear waters. Suddenly my soul was calm again, and this time I found the coolness of the stream exquisite¹ revelling in the feel of it.

We hadn’t understood a thing; I alone bore the burden of an evil thought, an entire civilization had preceded and had instructed me in it.

We reached our goal...

¹ These motifs recall the “cold blue eyes” of the chaste nymph in Mallarmé’s poem, a narrative situated alongside a stream (Mallarmé, trans. Richard Howard, 2004).

Several trees (rosewoods) spread their enormous boughs. The two of us, both savages, began to chop at a magnificent tree that had to be destroyed so that I could have a branch such as I desired. I wielded the ax furiously and my hands were covered with blood as I cut with the pleasure of brutality appeased, of the destruction of I know not what.

In time with the sound of the ax I sang;
 Cut down the entire forest (of desires) at the base
 Cut out love of self from within you, just as
 With the hand in autumn
 One would cut the lotus. (Teilhet-Fisk, 1983: 66-67)

In this supposedly autobiographical narrative, the narrator recounts his becoming “savage,” decolonizing himself and shedding his middle-class European identity amidst a Tahitian – and yet almost Dantesque – forest, in which he seeks to cut the “forest (of desires) at the base,” in order to set himself on the righteous path. Gauguin’s sexualized middle-aged reverie traverses its own dark forest, the *selva oscura* in the incipit to Dante’s *Inferno* which culminates in the Empyrean rose in *Paradiso*. In lieu of the rose, in this passage it is the lotus, figurative of the body’s purity in Buddhist tradition, which further symbolizes this subjective, metaphysical, and aesthetic journey of self-realization and purification. And there is spiritual, libidinal, and aesthetic severing in order to reach his goal. This break is an attempt to both metaphorically sever his roots and literally transform nature into art, as he is cutting the very material – wood – with which he creates his totems and trinkets in order to clear his physical and metaphorical path. Mallarmé, in a speech pronounced upon Gauguin’s return to Paris, summarizes the effect of travel on the artist’s conception of alterity, describing his “superb conscience” as that which “exiles him, toward distant lands, yet toward himself” (Kearns, 1989: 1).²

The ebb and flow of a creative conscience that requires uprooting in order to better define the artist’s liminal identity, at once self and other, colonial and “savage,” echoes the gender hybridity prevalent in this excerpt as well. The collapsing of multiplicity into one through the figure of the hermaphrodite, for example, represents a third space of amalgamated binaries. Furthermore, the ambiguous depiction of Jotefa employs a combination of animalistic and anthropomorphic terms, with the “*supple* animal body” following “on scent alone.” The flexibility and fluidity of movement and gender find their geographical and aesthetic counterparts in the crossing and re-crossing of the river, as well as the zigzagging echo to musical fugue present in Mallarmé’s poem, where the contrapuntal river nymphs arouse the faun’s desire, embodying the intangible, unquenchable desire, and the oneiric. The faun – a hybrid figure himself – and two nymphs become the polyphonic, intertwining voices of fugue, three discordant layers that represent a hybrid dynamism of fragmented, non-linear subjectivity.

To conclude on the gender ambiguity in this passage, it is difficult to ignore parallels between Gauguin’s first arrival in Polynesia and the taboo awoken within the narrator by the potential hermaphroditism in Jotefa: the “presentiment of crime, desire for the unknown, [an] awakening of evil.” In Polynesian culture, the figure of the Māhū holds a prominent spiritual and cultural place in the fabric of society. Originally priests and healers, the Māhū are a third, non-binary, gender who were also traditionally teachers – of dance, song, and hula – and those who passed down genealogies (Kaua’i Iki in Matzner; 2001). Colonialism and European “laws” – of which the narrator is now supposedly “unafraid” – stigmatized and criminalized Māhū, marginalizing them, making them

² Author’s translation.

taboo. Could the passage above be a projection of Gauguin's desire to unshackle himself from colonial, biblical laws, to unbound himself from a homophobic and transphobic *xenia* (pact) and embrace the Other, the *xenos*, however potentially "evil" that other might be? After all, an interesting inversion takes place when we consider how the locals reacted to Gauguin's arrival: according to Mario Vargas Llosa, the Tahitians believed Gauguin was Māhū due to his eccentric choice of clothing (Llosa, 2015). Evidently, within the laws of hospitality, we are always someone else's other.

Gauguin's Faun

The thirty-four centimeter-high cylinder carved from Tāmanu wood ca. 1892 is more than a mere materialization of Mallarmé's poem recontextualized. It represents two recurring deities in Gauguin's repertoire from Polynesian mythology: moon-goddess Hina and earth-god Fatu (Tefatou), where the former raises her hand as a rejection of Fatu-faun, whose back, tail and hooves are visible. Unfortunately, there is very little scholarship on the cylinder which is currently on display in the *Musée Stéphane Mallarmé*, and some recent criticism from French scholars in particular remains ambiguous. For example, Jean-Nicholas Ilouz and Camille Mauclair identify the deities as Māori (Ilouz; 2012). While many Māori gods of the heavens and myths about creation have their counterpart in Polynesian cultures, Fatu is a Tahitian god while Tina is indeed part of the Māori cosmology. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any record of Gauguin describing this totem as Māori. Such ambiguous observations highlight both the hybridization of mythologies and cultures in Gauguin's creations, where Greco-Roman, Egyptian and Buddhist iconography and symbolism unite with the Pacific, as well as a tendency to amalgamate Pacific cultures into a homogenous, exotic Other.

In terms of narrative, little action actually takes place between Hina-nymph and Fatu-faun in Gauguin's "Afternoon of a Faun." What is most intriguing in the scene, however, is Hina's gesture of refusal, Fatu's tail, and the very substance and shape of the totem. Dario Gamboni describes the cylinder, cut from a tāmanu trunk "which Gauguin left almost untouched" in the following terms:

This genemorphic quality [the fact it is left untouched] finds its apex in the faun's tail, which starts from a knot—that is, from the wood of a lateral branch or twig embedded in the trunk or main branch—and ends in a cluster of leaves. The faun himself, with his goat's lower body and the testicles visible underneath his tail, is an incarnation of natural vitality and sexual potency. Gauguin has not provided him with the traditional horns, which he may have found redundant, but he carved on the top of the cylinder his own monogram "P GO," which Wayne Andersen has connected to "Pego," not only the name of the dog Gauguin kept in Tahiti but also a seaman's term for "prick" or "pecker." The cylindrical shape is distinctly phallic and rises vertically, slightly tilted, with an upsurging energy that overcomes gravity like a plant (Gamboni, 2013).

The cylinder is at once metaphorical and metonymic in its sexual potency, representing the faun's desire, as well as the nymph's resistance to phallocentrism, the death drive, and rape. This analysis becomes further evident once we consider the intratextual recurrence of this *mise-en-scène* of Hina's refusal in other works by Gauguin with similar characters.

For example, in the carving known as the Toronto Cylinder (housed at the Art Gallery of Ontario), Hina raises her left hand in a gesture of refusal similar to "The Afternoon of a Faun" cylinder;

however, on its reverse, “Teilhet-Fisk identifie[s] this pair as Hina and Ta’aroa (Tahitian god of creation), and suggest[s] that the stalk of a plant in the background between them may allude to their offspring, Fatu. If she is correct, the sides of the Toronto cylinder contrast the fundamental dialogues mandating life and death” (Brettell; 1988: 255). According to Tahitian mythology, represented most emblematically in the oil painting “Hina te Fatou” (ca. 1893) which Gauguin narrates in *Noa Noa*, “Hina [says] to Tefatou:

Make man live again after his death. The God of the Earth replied to the Goddess of the Moon: - No I shall not revive him. Man will die, the vegetation will die, as will those that live from it, the earth will die, the earth will be finished, finished never to be reborn. Hina replied: Do what you will. As for me, I shall revive the Moon. And that which was Hina’s continued to be, and that which was Tefatou’s perished, and man must die (Maurer, 1999: 155-156).

In “The Afternoon of a faun,” the refusal is reversed: Hina does not ask for humanity’s eternity, but in turn resists the potential incest – if we accept Ilouz’s reading – and pushes the hooved faun-god Fatu away. Ilouz does not seem struck by the potential incest in the scene, describing, in lieu of taboo, the wooden piece as “a small totem, which represents the fugue of desire, or the impossible entanglement of god and goddess” (Ilouz, 2012).³

Impossible too might be the fulfillment of the artist’s desire, given the signature-pun on the totem-phallus as per Gamboni’s description, which metonymically links Gauguin to the cylinder. According to this logic, Hina’s gesture could also symbolize the Pacific’s attempted refusal of the colonial gaze and phallogentrism, no longer willing to be the objectified, exotic muse. Gauguin cannot entirely possess the other he also wishes to become, and his reverie aligns with the faun’s, as both culminate in a lack: for the faun, it is an irretrievable sensual dream; for Gauguin, the (forest of) desire he thought to have severed – the evil presence lurking as he gazes at Jotefa – manifests itself here as a retrieved, prosthetic phallus. Could it be that Gauguin imagines himself as both faun and Māhū, where binaries collapse into a third space?

From fugue of desire to musico-literary fugue

Mallarmé’s symbolist “Après-midi d’un faune,” perhaps the most beautiful poem in the French language according to Paul Valéry, has had many afterlives, most notably Claude Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* and Nijinsky’s ballet over Debussy’s music, to which Ilouz adds Gauguin’s woodcarving. The original poem recounts the waking, liminal moments of a lustful faun’s sensuous dream of nymphs, and his desire to perpetuate them in reality in order to reach the height of his oneiric *jouissance*: “If only they would stay forever – nymphs” (Howard, 2004).

Ilouz alludes to Gauguin’s woodcarving as a “fugue of desire,” much like the symbolic forest of desire Gauguin chopped down in the mountains, and the choice of terminology is particularly resounding. The same Paul Valéry described Mallarmé’s poem as “a sort of literary fugue” (Valéry; 1960: 670), an observation that has received some critical attention, most thoroughly from D.J. Mossop in *Pure Poetry: Studies in French Poetic Theory and Practice, 1746-1945*.

³ Author’s translation.

To summarize Mallarmé's poem briefly, the two nymphs and the faun suggest – *suggest* being a fundamental term in the symbolist movement – the defining characteristic of counterpoint, a polyphonic interweaving of subject-answer-countersubject that unites in overlapping voices or melodies. Given the syntagmatic (linear) nature of literature, it can only suggest the overlapping (vertical) simultaneity of voices in music via theme and motif (for example, the contrapuntal nymphs are antithetical in their motifs of cool and warm, as well as in their colours and contexts). In reverting to the amimetic nature of music, which adheres to a different semiotics from language, Mallarmé arguably adds a second level of significance beyond the word; or more destructively, he attempts to unravel linguistic meaning in hopes of creating a purer form of poetry. Destroying language through language is not wholly unlike the impetus behind Gauguin's desire to become "savage," to sever ties with his civilization in hopes of a spiritual and aesthetic rebirth.

The intermediality of a fugal poetics is present in the mythological references Mallarmé alludes to as well: for example, Syrinx is described as a "malign" "instrument of flights," in distinction to the goddess' chastity and her flight from the amorous Pan who chases her (Mallarmé; 1914). The motifs of transformation and music are once again present here – and more importantly, a transformation into wood! –, as the river nymphs transform her into hollow water reeds, which echo eerie music when the frustrated god breathes over them: the origin of pan pipes, as he cuts down the reeds to make his instrument.

Music and intermediality carry the impossible retrieval of the oneiric pleasure, what Jacques Lacan refers to as the *objet petit a* or the object cause of desire: in this case, the impossible union of faun and nymph, most notably in the verse "trop d'hymen souhaité pour qui cherche le *la*" ("No sign of how they could have fled the piper's longed-for consummation") (Mallarmé; 1914. Howard; 2004). Translating this verse is particularly problematic, as it seems impossible to transmit the paronomastic musical note "*la*," which is also the feminine definite article "the," and whose counterpart is the preceding, contiguous, masculine "*le*." The impenetrable hymen, it would seem, is applicable to both sex and the arts. Although musical fugue is suggested in the poem, the poem remains intact and autonomous – it does not *become* music, unlike Syrinx. The refusal motif further amasses signification.

The fugal interweaving, however, does point to further interdisciplinarity, underlining a bifurcating significance between semantics and phonetics: for example, the sound "*tresse*" (tress, braid or even knot), which signifies "threefold" is present three times in 110 alexandrines: in "*tresse*" "*traîtresse*" (traitor) and "*Tressaille*!" (a tremble or quiver): appearing in the opposite order, moving from a sensation to the unattainable female body, metonymically to the symbol and acoustic image on its own.

Tant pis ! vers le bonheur d'autres m'entraîneront
 Par leur tresse nouée aux cornes de mon front :
 Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre et déjà mûre,
 Chaque grenade éclate et d'abeilles murmure ;
 Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,
 Coule pour tout l'essaim éternel du désir.

And what of that !
 Others will take me all the way to joy,
 wreathing my horns within their simple curls ...

You know, my passion, how once red and ripe,
 pomegranates burst in a murmur of bees;
 how our blood, so taken with whoever will take it,
 flows for all the eternal swarm of desire

The symbolic hymen – or refusal – is at the base of a lustful desire that does not cease to grow. The empty grape skins that the faun blows into at the poem’s end represents the unattainable *objet petit a*, the very centre of Lacan’s borromean knot that represents subjectivity, alterity and *jouissance*, not wholly unlike the figure of the braid or tress, so present in Polynesian culture, or the three interweaving polyphonic voices of fugue.

Eternity and desire

Is there a memory of fugue that remains in Gauguin’s carving? Although musical fugue is not explicitly present in Gauguin’s work, remnants of a psychogenic fugue, to write in psychoanalytic terms – or to recall the “fugue of desire” as Ilouz puts it – exist within this manifestation of the faun’s fugacious dream, and this hybrid creature’s inability to situate his modernist fragmented sense of self⁴: he is caught between reality, the oneiric and fantasy, confusing what Paul Ricoeur defines as the paradigms of memory and imagination. After all, the very material used to create the music (reeds) is, via synecdoche, rooted in the context of the poem as well: a forest near a swamp in Sicily. And the natural knot in the wooden cylinder carved by Gauguin is the faun’s very tail. Signification depends on the inextricable relation between content and form, which, to echo Ross Gibson’s keynote presentation at the international conference “Oceanic Memories: Islands, Ecologies, Peoples,” held in Christchurch (Nov. 30 – Dec. 2, 2017), is “complicated” in the etymological sense of the term: in other words, content and form fold and bend (from the French *pli*) into each other.

Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s’achève
 En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré **les vrais**
Bois mêmes,⁵ prouve, hélas ! que bien seul je m’offrais
 Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses (Mallarmé, 1914).

My doubt,
 the residue of all my nights, dissolves
 into a branching maze, this grove of trees:
 proof that what I took for rapture was
 an artifice of ... roses (Howard, 2004).

The “true woods” become a “branching maze” in Howard’s translation, with added mythological intertextuality, embodying the locus of doubt, of disorientation.

What Gauguin’s sculpture does unite is desire and the eternal, to return to Hina’s imploration – her plea/*pli* – in the myth Gauguin recounts in *Noa Noa* (the moon as eternal; men as mortal), with the fugue as a theoretically endless musical style; not to mention the incomplete satisfaction of the faun’s desire and Hina’s refusal in Gauguin’s carving to subject herself to his desires. Furthermore,

⁴ Fugue has been likened to subjectivity since Bach hid his name in his fugues as an enigmatic motif, perhaps not wholly unlike Gauguin’s signature of PGO discussed by Gamboni.

⁵ The emphasis is mine.

this piece, more so even than in literature, is able to combine the syntagmatic (linear) and paradigmatic (vertical) axes, as the observer can visualize the verticality and horizontality – and therefore the simultaneity – of narratives, where palimpsestuous arguably meets incestuous.

The psychogenic fugue is a tabula rasa of one's identity, usually due to a traumatic event. However, taken symbolically, Gauguin's self-imposed exile and his need to become "savage" in order to renew himself and his poesis also represent the very dynamism embedded in such a fugue. This is, in part, the very definition of modernity according to Charles Baudelaire: the fugitive – note the shared etymology with "fugue" – and the transitory on the one hand, and on the other, the immutable and the eternal (Baudelaire, 1863: 11).

Contrapuntal conclusions: A final twist in the tail

More afterlives ensue. Gauguin gifts his Māori "Afternoon of a Faun" to Mallarmé in order to thank him for his financial support, which assisted in making his trip to Tahiti possible. The sculpture was kept on Mallarmé's coffee table for all to see during his famous Tuesday evening soirées. It was kept, interestingly, beside one of Rodin's sculptures, which stands *against* – both antagonistically against and contiguously, brushing up against – Gauguin's creation: Rodin's "Minotaur" represents the faun who indeed caught his desired nymph in the maze, and will forever lustfully gaze into her hair, into her tangled tresses.

At the 2018 French Film Festival organized by the Alliance française, Rodin and Gauguin meet again with their eponymous biopics contiguously brushing up in the programme guide, similar to their sculptures on Mallarmé's table. In *Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti*, directed by Edouard Deluc, the young Jotefa cited above in *Noa noa* becomes the artist's protégé. He quickly perverts any sacrality and (Benjaminian) aura in the art Gauguin is creating, however, by recreating the same cylindrical wooden sculptures Gauguin carved, and selling them at the market. The commodification of art and the perversion of the "primitive trinket" mirror the intermedial adaptations of Mallarmé's verse, while also offering the Pacific more agency than it ever had in Gauguin's art. Finally, the director chose to imagine a historically inaccurate love triangle between Jotefa, Tehura – the artist's child-wife – and Gauguin, adding yet another triangle or tress to the layers of rewritings and adaptations of Mallarmé's poem, afterlives synonymous at once with fidelity, ingenuity, and treachery.

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Author's biography

Antonio Viselli is a Lecturer in French at the University of Canterbury, whose research focuses primarily on symbolist poetics as well as intermediality in European Modernism and the Francophone world. His most recent publications include articles on Tristan Corbière in *Romantisme* and the *Cahiers Tristan Corbière* (Garnier), as well as an edited volume on icons entitled *Iconoclasm: the Breaking and Making of Images* (McGill-Queens University Press).
