The vision of a vision : perception, hallucination, and potential images in Gauguin's *Vision of the sermon*

Gamboni, Dario Libero

1. Emile Bernard, *Breton women in the meadow (Pardon at Pont-Aven)*, 1888, oil on canvas, 74 × 90 cm. Private collection; L 114

The vision of a vision: Perception, hallucination, and potential images in Gauguin's *Vision of the sermon*

Dario Gamboni

Few works of art can boast of being made the subject of a full-scale exhibition comprising almost a hundred works and accompanied by a scholarly catalogue and an international conference. This exceptional honour was bestowed in 2005 upon Gauguin's *Vision of the sermon* (see frontispiece) by the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh, which had purchased the painting in 1925 from the English collector Michael Sadler for £1150.[1] For many years, Umberto Eco had been advocating a new conception of the museum, organized around a single masterpiece surrounded by works and documents meant to visualize its cultural context and illuminate its sources, its genesis, and its influence; so far, he had only been able to realize this 'ideal museum' in the time-limited form of a temporary exhibition devoted to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* on the occasion of the Europalia Italia 2003.[2] The project entrusted by the National Gallery of Scotland to Belinda Thomson did not spring from the same theoretical premises, but it provided nonetheless an experiment along the same lines.

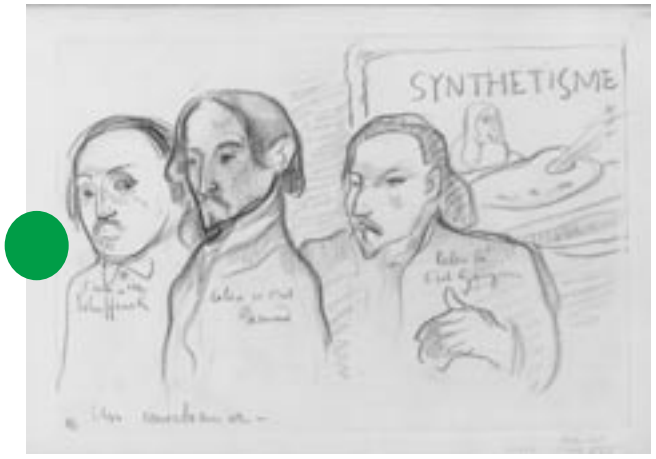
The show was divided into five sections: 'Artists and Brittany', 'Gauguin and his peers', 'Around *Vision of the sermon*', 'The theme of Jacob and the Angel', and

'The impact and legacy of *Vision of the sermon*'.[3] The fact that its topic was a work included in the exhibition gave it a rare coherence and concentration. On the other hand, such a quintessentially monographic format runs the risk of relegating the paintings included for comparison to the level of documentary material, and of exchanging the multifarious connections that arise between original artworks in three-dimensional space for a one-dimensional discursive chain – an illustrated essay displayed on the walls. The organizers of *Gauguin's vision* avoided this risk masterfully and created a show that was aesthetically as well as intellectually stimulating. While logically situated at its centre in terms of space and time (of the visit), *Vision of the sermon* featured both as a painting among all paintings (and graphic works), and as the sun around which all exhibits revolved.

Beyond the eighty years of its presence in Scotland, Gauguin's painting owed this unusual tribute to its power of attraction, its fame, and its standing in the history of art. The painter himself and his contemporaries had recognized from the start that something had changed with *Vision of the sermon*. Gauguin did not send the canvas to his dealer Theo van Gogh by mail, as he was wont, but asked his younger colleague Emile Bernard to take it with him to Paris.[4] He requested for it one of his highest prices and sold it, albeit not until 1891, at the auction he organized at the Hôtel Drouot to fund his trip to Tahiti. Shortly before the sale, in a highly influential article, the young critic Albert Aurier had given a detailed description of *Vision of the sermon* as proof that there existed in the visual arts a movement turning its back on impressionism and paralleling literary symbolism.[5] The complexity and fecundity of this painting may be further proven by the fact that even after the Edinburgh show and the papers delivered on its occasion, new aspects can still be discovered in it.

Painting as wrestling

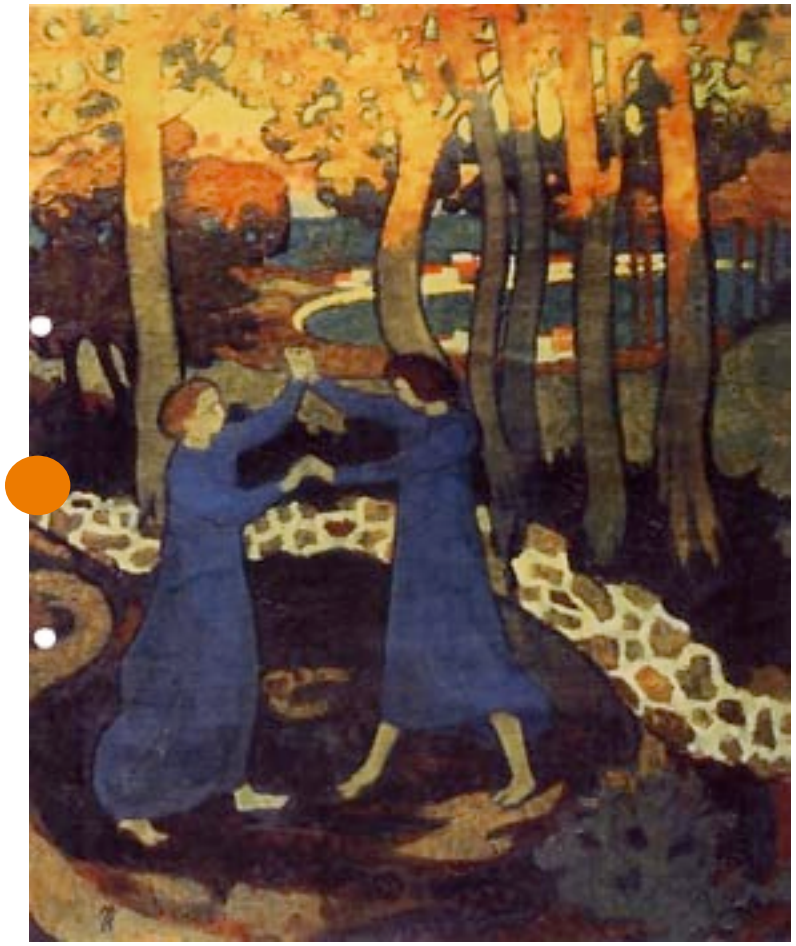
From Aurier onwards, a veritable change of paradigm was attributed to *Vision of the sermon*, replacing the more or less realistic depiction of exterior, optical realities with the ambiguous suggestion of dreams and visions. In the late 1880s, an ambivalent and even explosive mix of solidarity and competition reigned among the artists who could lay claim to such a revolution and whose fame and success depended not, as previously, on state-controlled institutions but on the free market and public opinion, that is, in the first instance, on dealers and critics.[6] To the lasting outrage of Emile Bernard, Aurier mentioned neither this young artist's role nor the term '*synthétisme*' in his programmatic article but hailed Gauguin as the chief representative and the leader of 'symbolism in painting'. In an undated drawing referring to this situation as a 'nightmare' (ill. 2), Bernard gave himself pride of place but showed a malevolent-looking Gauguin standing in front of an



2. Emile Bernard, *A nightmare synthetism*, c. 1888, black crayon on paper, 18.3 × 26.8 cm. Musée du Louvre, département des Arts graphiques, Paris

allegory of synthetist painting, attracting the viewer's attention with his hand. The Edinburgh exhibition made it possible to compare Gauguin's epochal painting with contemporary works by Bernard and especially with his *Breton women in the meadow* (ill. 1), a painting that Gauguin acquired and to which *Vision of the sermon* can be seen as an emulous response. Although the outcome of such a confrontation necessarily entails a historic interpretation and an aesthetic evaluation, most commentators seemed to agree that paying justice to Bernard's contribution diminished in no way the breakthrough represented by Gauguin's painting.

Several reasons have been given for Gauguin's choice of the biblical episode in which the shepherd Jacob encounters an unknown opponent, against whom he fights all night, until at dawn, struck at the hip, he submits to the Angel, recognizes its divine nature, and receives its blessing.[7] Among these reasons are the inclusion of wrestling bouts in the *Pardons* (religious festivals) of Brittany; homage to Delacroix's famous mural in the church of Saint-Sulpice; and Gauguin's contemporary meditation upon Victor Hugo's description of Jean Valjean's conversion in *Les misérables* as a 'vision' re-enacting the biblical struggle.[8] Yet another motive and allusion may have been the agonistic nature of the interaction among 'independent artists'. Both Bernard and Van Gogh objected to this and dreamed of a collective endeavour free from any striving toward supremacy, for instance within an 'association of anonyms', while Maurice Denis, a few years later, would depict Jacob and the Angel engaged in a sort of dance, harmonious and devoid of violence or even tension (ill. 3).[9] But Gauguin, on the contrary, seems to have relished competition and the fight for leadership. In Pont-Aven, a village visited in the summer by hundreds of painters from many countries, he enjoyed a reputation as an uncompromising avant-gardist and was happy to 'convert' young artists hitherto faithful to their traditions. *Vision of the sermon* significantly gives a



3. Maurice Denis, *Jacob wrestling with the Angel*, 1893, oil on canvas, 48 × 36 cm. Private collection

hierarchic view of the two protagonists: the Angel seems to contain easily the bearded Jacob's efforts and forces him into an attitude of submission, with the head lower than the waist. One may suspect that despite his identification with Jean Valjean in the self-portrait he was painting for Van Gogh (ill. 4), and contrary to Delacroix and most painters of this theme, Gauguin sympathized as much with the Angel as with Jacob – as well as, in a different way, with the priest to whom he seems to have given his own features.[10]

With his Prussian blue garment and his golden wings, Gauguin's Angel embodies the message of the painting and announces the superiority of the mind's eye over the eyes of the body. That Gauguin did not shy from endowing his self-representations – in earnest or in jest – with signs of the sacred is well known. In 1889, he would depict himself as Christ in the Garden of Olives (Norton Gallery

4. Paul Gauguin, *Self-portrait with portrait of Bernard (Les misérables)*, 1888, oil on canvas, 45 × 55 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; W 239/WN 309

of Art, West Palm Beach) and give a halo to the self-portrait included in the decoration of Marie Henry's inn in Le Pouldu (see p. 00 [chapter 5], ill. 3). Such identifications with the divine, in triumphant or suffering mode, had an art-theoretical as well as a psychological dimension. On 14 August 1888, Gauguin had written to Emile Schuffenecker: 'Art is an abstraction, draw it from nature by dreaming in front of her and rather think of the creation that will result from it, it is the only way of ascending toward God, by doing as our Divine Master, creating.'[11] At the end of 1889, in a comment on Joris-Karl Huysmans's collections of critical essays *Certains*, he would refer more clearly to the romantic notion that artists are meant to create like nature rather than after nature, by writing that artists are one of nature's means of varying her productions and that Odilon Redon was 'one of those it has chosen for this continuation of creation'.[12]

Religions and apparitions

Although anteceded by many art-theoretical utterances from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, this could sound blasphemous, and we know that when Gauguin tried to donate *Vision of the sermon* to a local church, it was rejected by the priest on the ground that it was not a religious painting.[13] The enthusiastically devout Bernard would also question the depth and sincerity of Gauguin's Christian faith. The depiction of religious practices was in fact a popular subject for genre and salon painters, especially when located in a rural setting like Brittany and thus doubly exotic for sceptical Parisians. The Edinburgh exhibition provided ample material for comparison with pictures of praying Breton women in traditional costume and showed that Gauguin's painting distinguished itself from these in two ways: because of its 'synthetic', strongly anti-realistic style, and because it added to the depiction of believers an evocation of their religious experience, their 'vision'.

Fred Leeman observed rightly during the Edinburgh conference that in comparison with Bernard's (slightly later) pictures of Christian subjects, Gauguin had painted *Vision of the sermon* 'one step removed' and with an attitude akin to that of an anthropologist. One could indeed speak of 'participant observation' in relation with Gauguin's attitude, in Brittany and later in the South Seas. He refused to distinguish and hierarchize between 'religion', 'faith' or 'piety' on the one hand, and 'superstition' or 'idolatry' on the other hand. Among his reasons for staying and painting in Brittany was the fact that in this peripheral and deeply traditionalist part of France and of Europe, daily life was still permeated with religion and Catholicism with pre-Christian elements. In other words, the 'disenchantment of the world' that Max Weber would diagnose as a distinguishing feature of Western culture was not or not yet completed there, a situation that appealed equally to the younger artists inspired by Gauguin's example who would soon call themselves 'Nabis' (Hebrew for 'prophets') and sometime stay or go back to Brittany for the rest of their lives. The same attraction obviously emanated from Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, even though, as Gauguin would find out, the impact of colonization and christianization made the search for living traces of the local religion and culture an almost desperate endeavour. This continuity in Gauguin's efforts made one particularly appreciate the fact that the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo had agreed to lend *Mana'o tupapa'u* ('The spirit of the dead watches') to the National Galleries of Scotland, since this painting (ill. 5) can be regarded as a new elaboration of the *Vision of the sermon* theme in the Tahitian context.

In both pictures, the women depicted experience a supernatural presence or event – Jacob's wrestling with the Angel in one case, the spirit of the dead in the other – that corresponds to their culturally determined expectations and takes a form – a cow here (we shall come back to this point), an old woman there – familiar

5. Paul Gauguin, *Mana'o tupapa'u*, 1892, oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 92.1 × 113.3 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, 1965; W 457

to them from daily life. This comparison can lead to the conclusion that *Vision of the sermon* is not so much about a specifically Christian tradition as about something more general and fundamental: an 'apparition', a mental image, an inner event. Gauguin had indeed first thought of calling the painting 'Apparition'.[14] Seen in this way, *Vision of the sermon* can be put in a broader context and compared with other artistic precedents absent from the Edinburgh exhibition and catalogue. On the predella of Lucas Cranach's *Wittenberg altarpiece* (ill. 6), for instance, an oversized Christ on the cross stands in the empty post-Reformation church, between the parishioners gathered on the left and Luther speaking to them from the pulpit: as Joseph Leo Koerner has pointed out, it represents neither a crucifix nor the Crucifixion but the apparition of the crucified in the mind of the listeners and of the painter himself as a result of Luther's sermon.[15] In a more implicit but equally effective way, the nude woman lying on a cloud of white sheet in Cézanne's *A modern Olympia* (ill. 7) is not the real-life prostitute gazing directly at the viewer from Manet's painting (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), but rather an erotic fantasy

6. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Luther preaching to the Wittenberg congregation*, predella of the *Wittenberg altarpiece*, 1547, oil on panels. Stadtkirche, Wittenberg

floating in an undetermined space as on a screen. Among the means used by Cézanne to achieve this ontological transformation is the inclusion of a spectator resembling himself in an inferior, upward-looking position, similar to the one of the Breton women in *Vision of the sermon*. This additional 'level of unreality' – to use the phrase coined by Sven Sandström for Renaissance wall painting – this insistence on the fictional character of pictorial representation and its affinity with daydreaming were probably part of what made this 'Olympia' *modern* for Cézanne, and certainly for his viewers. Gauguin may have meditated upon the twist it gave to a painting that he greatly admired and consciously emulated in *Mana'o tupapa'u*, amused also by the corroborating fact that a female visitor to his hut in Tahiti had interpreted a reproduction of *Olympia* as a photograph of his French wife.[16]

Misperception and cognition

Vision of the sermon therefore deserves its paradigmatic status also in that it is a self-reflexive work dealing in visual terms with issues of perception, cognition and representation. *Vision* in French means both the sensory perception of visual reality and the inner or transcendental experience of an image. In his 1970 book Mark Roskill proposed an interpretation of *Vision of the sermon* that has not received the attention it deserves. He noticed that a resemblance connects the cow and the pair of wrestlers across the tree dividing the upper part of the painting. The four legs (or, more probably, the three legs and the tail) of the cow parallel in particular the four legs of the two opponents (and the 'tail' of Jacob's garment); the general shapes also echo each other, as Jacob's straightened left leg and starkly bent back

7. Cézanne, *A modern Olympia*, c. 1873-74, oil on canvas, 46 × 55.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

echo the cow's hind portion and back.[17] In fact, one could argue that Jacob and the Angel form an approximate version of the cow obtained by symmetrical inversion, enlarged and complemented in the upper part by the Angel's bust and golden wings. On the basis of this resemblance, Roskill argued that Gauguin's composition may have been meant to suggest the following scenario: after listening to the priest's sermon – the painting has often been called *Vision after the sermon* – the Breton women go out of the church and, as they encounter a cow 'rearing up', they imagine, or rather they *see* the fight between Jacob and the Angel of which they have just heard.[18]

This was a daring proposal and it may be the reason why it was silently discarded. However, it is far from absurd. These additions to Roskill's observations give a supplementary, morphogenetic argument: the symmetrical metamorphosis of the cow into the wrestling pair would aptly visualize the psychological associative phenomenon by which the parishioners transform the one into the other.

This association is not only based on visual analogy, but on semantic proximity as well. Denise Delouche has called attention to the inclusion of wrestling bouts in the *Pardons* and shown that the prize intended for the winner could be a kid goat, a ram or occasionally a heifer, kept bound to a tree or a pole during the contest.[19] A lamb is thus in evidence in Adolphe Leleux's painting *Festival in Cornwall* (1864, Musée des Arts et Traditions populaires, Paris), demurely watching the ongoing fight.[20] Gauguin's cow, on the contrary, is depicted in movement, and can be seen as trying to free itself from a bondage visually expressed by the way in which the tree trunk crops its muzzle. This interpretation is in line with the Breton tradition mentioned by Delouche, so that in the narrative scenario sketched by Roskill, the imaginative transformation of the cow into the wrestling pair could have been triggered not only by an analogy of outline – the aspect that the flat surface of the painting can best transmit – but also by a kinetic and kinaesthetic analogy between the rebellious cow and Jacob trying vainly to free himself from the supernatural grip of the Angel.

Another, more profound reason to take Roskill's hypothesis seriously is the fact that Gauguin had a personal and artistic interest in 'hallucinations', misperceptions and dream images, which had found an expression many years before *Vision of the sermon*. As early as 1881, he had painted his daughter Aline sleeping (*The little dreamer*, Ordrupgaard Collection, Copenhagen) before a background that can be understood as representing a wallpaper but clearly suggests the oneiric or 'hypnagogic' images going through her mind.[21] In Brittany, Gauguin was fascinated by the cliffs and the rocks into which natural and supernatural figures had been seen from time immemorial.[22] Such phenomena were of great interest to the philosophers, psychologists and psychophysiologists who were investigating the workings of the human mind and whose research reached a broad public by way of popular scientific articles. In his classic *Le sommeil et les rêves* first published in 1861, Alfred Maury emphasized the affinities existing between dreams, 'hypnagogic' images (perceived between sleep and waking state), and misperceptions, that is situations in which incomplete or ambiguous visual data are wrongly interpreted, completed or transformed by the mind, leading it to erroneous identifications. Such misinterpretations, he argued, arise not only from specific stimuli but depend also on the perceiving subject, on his or her cultural background and emotional state. He thus mentioned 'superstition' as a factor conducive to misperceptions, as when 'we transform in the night some tree, some ruined, oddly shaped wall, illuminated by the moonlight, into ghosts, spectres, and thieves', and he recalled 'an old female servant, prone to hypnagogic hallucinations, who feared the ugly creatures she saw so much that she constantly kept a light close to her bed'.[23] The strong resemblance of these passages with the situations depicted in *Vision of the sermon* and in *Mana'o tupapa'u* need not reveal a causal relationship, but their similarity strengthens Roskill's hypothesis and confirms that the Christian

'apparition' of Jacob and the Angel should be seen above all as the pictorial evocation of a type of experience blurring the distinction between sensory perception and imagination. In his treatise *De l'intelligence* first published in 1870, Hippolyte Taine had used a provocative and much-quoted phrase to question this very distinction and emphasize the cognitive dimension of sensory perception: 'Our exterior perception is thus an inner dream that happens to be in harmony with the exterior world; and, rather than saying that hallucination is a wrongful exterior perception, we should say that exterior perception is a *truthful hallucination*.'[24]

Suggestions

When Gauguin wrote to Schuffenecker that 'art is an abstraction', he clearly did not use the term in the sense of twentieth-century non-objective art, that is – at least according to part of the corresponding art theory, criticism and history – in the sense of a principled rejection and exclusion of mimetic reference to, and association with, visual reality. The phrase 'draw it from nature' that follows indicates that he meant it in the etymological and 'synthetist' sense of a drastic selection among the visual properties of the natural model, and of a reduction of the formal means employed by the artist. What finally comes next, 'draw it from nature by dreaming in front of her', confirms the coexistence of abstraction and the reference to nature for Gauguin and goes further by drawing a parallel between the artist's creative attitude toward the natural model and the kind of psychophysiological situations depicted in *Vision of the sermon* and *Mana'o tupapa'u*: the painter, like the Breton women coming out of church and Teha'amana surrounded by darkness, should 'dream' in front of nature and thereby reconcile 'exterior perception' and 'hallucination'. One may surmise that the viewers of the resulting work of art should do the same and that Gauguin encourages them to mobilize their associative abilities and to open themselves to the 'potential images' that the formal abstraction of the painting does not dismiss, but contributes to multiplying.[25] Such a call for an active recipient agrees not only with statements and other works by Gauguin and related artists, it is also congruent with the aesthetics of 'suggestion' practised and theorized by the symbolist poets, of which Aurier found a pictorial equivalent in Gauguin's work and specifically in *Vision of the sermon*. It may amount to a challenge for art historians used to see a contradiction between the subjectivity of perception and the objectivity of scholarship, but this is a challenge that can and must be met.[26]

If one considers the painting neither as a (simplified) mimetic representation only nor as pure 'decoration', then formal traits can indeed 'appear' that do not belong to the representational level of explicit iconography but are susceptible of an iconic interpretation and are consistent with the semantic structure of the

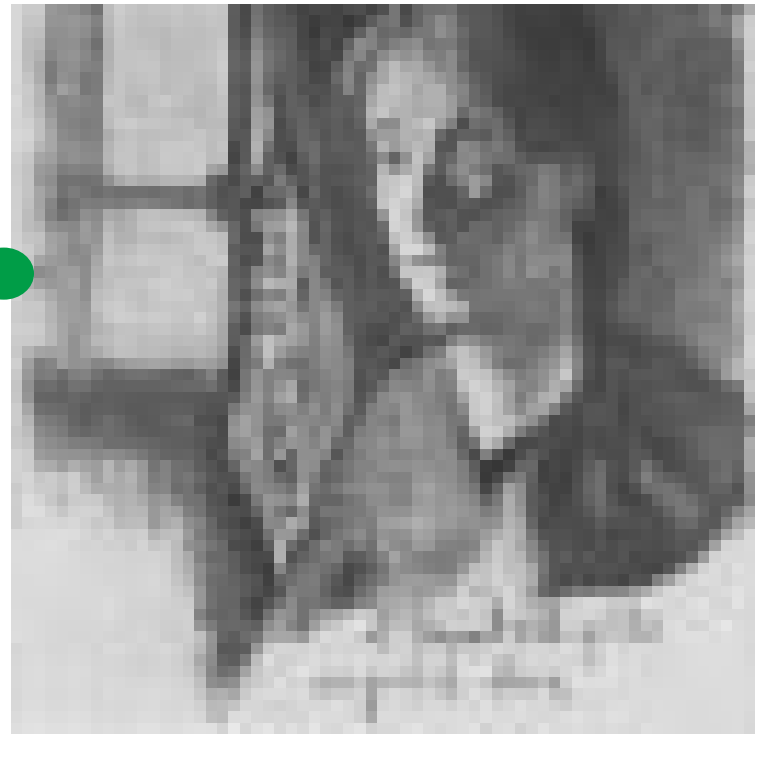
painting as a whole. This is the case of an eye-shape present twice in *Vision of the sermon*, along the oblique axis constituted by the tree. In the upper part, two strangely situated twigs of the tree join themselves shortly after departing from the trunk, thus forming an almond shape reminiscent of an eye. Although a conveniently placed group of leaves prevents us from seeing if they actually join or more plausibly cross each other, the configuration is botanically illogical. It may have been inspired at least partly, like the wrestling pair on the other side of the tree, by a Japanese print, namely by No. 89 of Hiroshige's *One hundred views of famous places in Edo*, *The moon pine at Ueno*, in which a branch oddly forms a circle and frames a portion of the cityscape seen in the distance. In Gauguin's painting, the 'eye' made of branches does not open onto a meaningful fragment of the background but it points toward the side of the 'vision', rhyming in addition with the Angel's wings.

The other eye-shape is located directly beneath (or in front of) the base of the trunk, on one of the women's traditional *coiffes*.[27] Even more than Bernard, who does not appear to have ever used them to such purposes, Gauguin was fascinated by the decorative qualities of this element of the local costumes and, we may add, by their suggestive potential. In the letter in which he described *Vision of the sermon* to Van Gogh, he aptly compared the two last *coiffes* on the right with 'monstrous helmets', thus expressing his valuation of their associative power.[28] In the case of the second *coiffe* from the right, he might as well have spoken of *masque* (mask), since a sort of symmetrical knot suggests a pair of eyes turned toward the spectator.[29] These eyes too are blank, however, and the resulting gaze is blind. Strategically placed at the foot of the tree separating the terrestrial from the divine realm or the immanent from the transcendent one, this blind gaze mediates between the two, and, more specifically, between the woman on its left, who does not appear to see the wrestlers despite her open eyes, and the closed eyes of the women on the far left, of the two *figures seen from behind*, and of the priest on the far right. In other words, it visualizes, on an abstract level and with suggestive means, the closing of the bodily eyes that accompanies or enables the opening of the 'mind's' or spiritual eye. The design of this pair of 'eyes' supports in detail this mediating function: on the left, the eye shape is left open, with the arabesques of the 'wing' and ribbon echoing the other ribbon meandering across the shoulder of the woman with the open eyes; on the right, the eye shape is closed, like the one on top of the tree, chiming with the closed eyes of the woman and man on both extremities of the picture. The relevance of these two eye shapes and of the parallelism between the cow and the wrestling pair is confirmed by their inclusion in the further abstracted and highly selective sketch of the painting sent by Gauguin to Van Gogh (ill. 8).

These 'eyes' are potential images, in the sense that they are potentially present in the painting as a result of the artist's action but depend on the beholder's

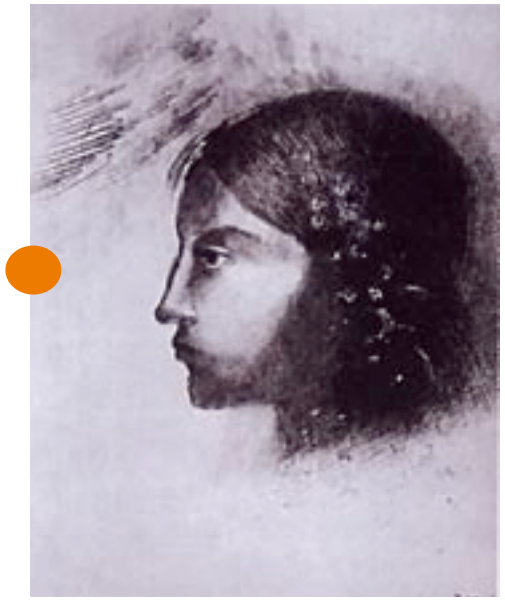
8. Paul Gauguin, sketch of *Vision of the sermon* accompanying a letter to Vincent van Gogh of 25-27 September 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

participation to become actual, to be fully images. They can also be called 'aspects' in the sense used by Odilon Redon in his 1902 definition of the 'sense of mystery' and by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical investigations*, that is to define one way – among others – to see *and* interpret a given picture or detail of an picture.[30] Redon's text concludes by making of this passage from potential to actual an 'apparition': 'The sense of mystery consists in a continuous ambiguity, in double and triple aspects, hints of aspects (images within images), forms about to exist or existing according to the beholder's state of mind. All things more than suggestive, since they appear.'[31] Although *Vision of the sermon* was painted long before this formulation, Gauguin's bold step was probably informed to some extent by Redon's art and art theory, which had been taking shape for several decades – one need only think of the programmatic title of his first album of lithographs, *In dreams* ('Dans le rêve'), published in 1879. Conversely, the closed eyes of Gauguin's Breton women would soon find an echo in a key composition in Redon's oeuvre, *Closed eyes* ('Yeux clos'), of which the older artist produced several painted versions and a lithographic one from 1889 onwards.[32]



One generally assumes that Redon and Gauguin met on the occasion of their participation in the eighth and last impressionist exhibition in 1886. That Gauguin was at least aware of Redon's production and interested in it prior to this date is proven by an 1885 painting carrying the inscription 'The unintelligible / with a hard profile' (ill. 9), deriving from the last plate of the lithographic album *Homage to Goya* published in the same year (ill. 10). How important Redon's example was for Gauguin, and how consonant with the issues raised in *Vision of the sermon*, appears most clearly in the 1889 text already mentioned. In order to exemplify the way in which Redon's art acted as a 'continuation of nature', Gauguin described a work that he did not name but which may have been the second plate from the 1886 album *Night, The man was alone in a night landscape*: 'Amid a black atmosphere, we finally make out one tree trunk, then two; one of them is surmounted by something, probably a man's head. With utmost logic he leaves us in doubt as to that existence. Is it truly a man or, rather, a vague resemblance? However that may be, they both live on this page and, inseparable from one another, they weather the same storms.'[33] Gauguin therefore locates the consonance between Redon's art and the working of nature in its emulation of misperception and stimulation of the beholder's imaginative response.

9. Paul Gauguin, *The unintelligible (with a hard profile)*, 1885, oil on canvas, 42 × 40 cm. Present whereabouts unknown; W 139



10. Odilon Redon, *When I awoke I glimpsed the goddess of intelligibility, with her stern, hard profile*, plate VI from the album *Homage to Goya*, 1885, lithograph, 27.6 × 21.7 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Among the many reviewers of Redon's album *Homage to Goya* was Charles Morice, who would become Gauguin's closest critical associate. Since the caption of its first plate began with the words 'In my dream' and Joris-Karl Huysmans had published simultaneously a 'literary transposition' of the album narrating a nightmare, Morice felt prompted to define what should be understood under 'dream' in Redon's case: 'Monsieur Redon's dream … Let us understand one another! The meaning that must also be given to the word "dream" is neither the common, prosaic one (involuntary visions in sleep) nor the rare, poetic one (voluntary visions when awake), it is both the former and the latter, it is both waking and sleeping, it is, properly speaking, the dream of a dream: the voluntary ordering of involuntary visions.'[34] Redon was so pleased with this explanation that he inscribed a gift copy of the album with the words '… le rêve d'un rêve…'.[35] It had indeed the merit of distinguishing between the 'vision' represented and the representation of the 'vision', thereby using the ambiguous term 'vision' to mediate between the two. One could thus easily adapt it to Gauguin's *Vision of the sermon* and hope that the result would equally please the artist and do justice to the complexity of his work: namely, that this depiction and evocation of an apparition confronts us not only with a vision, but with the 'vision of a vision'.

NOTES

A first version of this essay was published as 'Die Vision einer Vision: Gauguins "Vision der Predigt" in neuem Licht' in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23-24 April 2006, pp. 65-66. This revised and expanded version is part of a project for a book-length study provisionally entitled *Gauguin and the 'Mysterious Centre of Thought'*.

1. Exhibition, *Gauguin's vision*, held at the Royal Scottish Academy Building from 6 July to 2 October 2005; Belinda Thomson, exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, Edinburgh (National Galleries of Scotland) 2005; conference, *Gauguin's 'Vision of the sermon': Interpretation, reception, conservation*, 30 September–1 October 2005, Edinburgh. This essay and those by Judith Simpson, Rodolphe Rapetti and Elise Eckermann published here are based on papers given at this conference.
2. See Omar Calabrese (ed.), exhib. cat. *Vénus dévoilée: La Vénus d'Urbino du Titien*, Brussels (Palais des Beaux-Arts) 2003.
3. See the exhibition checklist in exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, pp. 121-27.
4. For a gathering of the relevant biographical information, documents and bibliography, see the entry by Sylvie Crussard on *Vision of the sermon* in Daniel Wildenstein, *Gauguin: Premier itinéraire d'un sauvage. Catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873-1888)*, 2 vols., Paris & Milan 2001, vol. 2, no. 308, pp. 455-77.
5. G.-Albert Aurier, 'Le symbolisme en peinture. Paul Gauguin', *Mercure de France* 18, no. 15 (March 1891), pp. 155-65; reprinted in Albert Aurier, *Textes critiques 1889-1892: De l'impressionnisme au symbolisme*, Paris 1995, pp. 26-39.
6. See Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and careers: Institutional change in the French painting world*, rev. ed., Chicago & London 1993 [1965].
7. Genesis, 32: 25-32.
8. See Wildenstein, *Catalogue de l'œuvre peint*, vol. 2, p. 456; Victor Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: Documents, témoignages*, vol. 1: *1873-1888*, Paris 1984, pp. 92-95.
9. See Emile Bernard's letter of 19 January 1891 to Emile Schuffenecker in Henri Dorra, 'Extraits de la correspondance d'Emile Bernard des débuts à la Rose-Croix (1876-1892)', in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1980, pp. 235-42, p. 238; Patricia Mathews, 'Aurier and Van Gogh: Criticism and response', *Art Bulletin* 48 (1986), pp. 94-104; Dario Gamboni, '"Of Oneself", "To Oneself": Symbolism, individualism and communication', in exhib. cat. *Lost paradise: Symbolist Europe*, Montreal (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) 1995, pp. 242-50.
10. See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Gauguin's religious themes*, New York & London 1985, pp.18-32, and exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, p. 55. Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers have already suggested placing *Vision of the sermon*, including its emulation of Delacroix, in the context of Gauguin's 'creative competition' with Van Gogh. Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The studio of the south*, Chicago (Art Institute) and Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2001-2, p. 137.
11. 'L'art est une abstraction tirez-la de la nature en rêvant devant et pensez plus à la création qui résultera, c'est le seul moyen de monter vers Dieu en faisant comme notre Divin Maître, créer.' Merlhès, *Correspondance*, vol. 1, letter 47, p. 134.
12. 'La nature a des infinis mystérieux, une puissance d'imagination... elle se manifeste en variant toujours ses productions. L'artiste lui-même est un de ses moyens et, pour moi, Odilon Redon est un de ses élus pour cette continuation de création. [...]' Jean Loize, 'Un inédit de Gauguin', *Nouvelles littéraires*, 7 May 1953, partly reprinted in Paul Gauguin, *Oviri: Ecrits d'un sauvage*, Paris 1974, pp. 59-61, p. 60.
13. See Wildenstein, *Catalogue de l'œuvre peint*, vol. 2, p. 469, and exhib. cat. *Gauguin's Vision*, pp. 68-70.
14. Wildenstein, *Catalogue de l'œuvre peint*, vol. 2, p. 456.
15. See Joseph Koerner, *The reformation of the image*, London 2004, pp. 248-51.
16. *Noa Noa: Gauguin's Tahiti*, ed. Nicholas Wadley, trans. Jonathan Griffin, Oxford 1985, p. 21. Gauguin had copied Manet's *Olympia* in February 1891; see Dario Gamboni, 'Paul Gauguin's *Genesis of a picture*: A painter's manifesto and self-analysis', in *19th-Century Art Worldwide*, autumn 2003, http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn_03/articles/gamb.html.
17. Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionist Circle*, Greenwich, Conn., 1970, pp. 104-5 ('The suggestion seems to be that the four legs and horns of a cow have been transformed by the peasant imagination into the shapes of the struggle itself.'). The possible derivation of this motif from Hokusai's sketches of wrestlers is no objection to this observation: Gauguin may have been interested precisely by the way in which some of these sketches give the impression that the two fighters form one four-legged creature. See Yves Thirion, 'L'influence de l'estampe japonaise dans l'œuvre de Gauguin', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, January-April 1956, pp. 101-4; Amishai-Maisels, *Gauguin's Religious Themes*; Wildenstein, *Catalogue de l'œuvre peint*, vol. 2, pp. 456-57; exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, pp. 43-44.
18. Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and the impressionist circle*, Greenwich, Conn., 1970, pp. 104-5. Gauguin wrote in his letter to Van Gogh that the cow was 'rearing up'. Merlhès, *Correspondance*, letter 165, p. 232.
19. Denise Delouche, 'Gauguin et le thème de la lutte', in Musée d'Orsay and Ecole du Louvre, *Gauguin: Actes du colloque Gauguin, Musée d'Orsay, 11-13 janvier 1989*, Paris 1991, pp. 157-71; see exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, pp. 67-68.
20. See reproduction in exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, p. 66.
21. See Charles Stuckey, 'Gauguin inside out', in Eric M. Zafran (ed.), exhib. cat. *Gauguin's Nirvana: Painters at Le Pouldu 1889-1890*, Hartford (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) 2001, pp. 129-41; Dario Gamboni, *Potential images: Ambiguity and indeterminacy in modern art*, London 2002, p. 87.
22. See Gamboni, *Potential images*, pp. 87-88.
23. 'J'ai connu une vieille domestique, fort sujette aux hallucinations hypnagogiques, et à laquelle les vilaines figures qu'elle voyait faisaient tant de peur qu'elle tenait constamment près de son lit une lumière allumée. [...] Lorsque, sous l'influence de la superstition ou de la crainte, nous transformons la nuit en revenants, en spectres, en brigands, quelque arbre, quelque pan de mur en ruine et à forme insolite, qu'éclaire la clarté de la lune [...]' L.-F.-Alfred Maury, *Le sommeil et les rêves. Etudes psychologiques sur ces phénomènes et les divers états qui s'y rattachent suivies de recherches sur le développement de l'instinct et de l'intelligence dans leurs rapports avec le phénomène du sommeil*, Paris 1878 [1862], pp. 66, 78-79.
24. 'Ainsi notre perception extérieure est un rêve du dedans qui se trouve en harmonie avec les choses du dehors; et, au lieu de dire que l'hallucination est une perception extérieure fausse, il faut dire que la perception extérieure est une *hallucination vraie*.' Hippolyte Taine, *De l'intelligence*, 2 vols., Paris 1883 [1870], vol. 2, p. 13.
25. See Gamboni, *Potential images*, pp. 18-20, 86-96.
26. On the methodological problems involved and the necessary precautions, see Dario Gamboni, 'Voir double: Théorie de l'image et méthodologie de l'interprétation', in Jean-Hubert Martin (ed.), exhib. cat. *Une image peut en cacher une autre. Arcimboldo – Dalí – Raetz*, Paris (Grand Palais) 2009, pp. xiv-xxv.
27. This (double) eye shape has been noted by D. H. Fraser, *Gauguin's 'Vision after the sermon'*, London 1969, p. 23, and discussed by James Kearns, *Symbolist landscapes: The place of painting in the poetry and criticism of Mallarmé and his circle*, London 1989, p. 7.
28. 'casques monstrueux'. Merlhès, *Correspondance*, letter 165, p. 232. For details about the various headdresses depicted, see exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, pp. 29-30.
29. James Kearns mentioned 'faint but distinct elements of a head, part animal, part devil' in the centre of the last *coiffe* on the right, and interpreted their presence as part of an 'emergence towards Knowledge' that, for him, progresses from the right to the left and culminates in the woman with the eyes open (Kearns, *Symbolist landscapes*, p. 7). Although these elements are not as visible as the eye (and arguably the face) in the bush in the foreground of *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* (1888, Art Institute of Chicago; W 300; Druick and Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin*, p. 253; Gamboni, *Potential images*, pp. 88-89), they appear to be intentional and resemble the mask-like woman's face seen from the front, at mid height on the left side of *Vision of the sermon* (for a good reproduction of the detail, see exhib. cat. *Gauguin's vision*, p. 76).
30. See Odilon Redon, *A soi-même: Journal (1867-1915). Notes sur la vie, l'art et les artistes*, Paris 1961 [1922], p. 100; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus: Tagebücher*

1914-1916. Philosophische Untersuchungen (*Werkausgabe*, I), Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 518-20, 525.

31. 'Le sens du mystère, c'est d'être tout le temps dans l'équivoque, dans les double, triple aspects, des soupçons d'aspect (images dans images), formes qui vont être, ou qui le seront selon l'état d'esprit du regardeur. Toutes choses plus que suggestives, puisqu'elles apparaissent.' Redon, *A soi-même*, p. 100.

32. See Alec Wildenstein, *Odilon Redon. Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint et dessiné*, 4 vols., Paris 1992-98, vol. 1, nos. 467-478; Fred Leeman, 'Redon's spiritualism and the rise of mysticism', in Douglas Druick *et al.*, exhib. cat. *Odilon Redon: Prince of dreams 1840-1916*, Chicago (Art Institute), Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) & London (Royal Academy of Arts), pp. 215-36, p. 227.

33. 'Dans une atmosphère noire, on finit par apercevoir un, deux troncs d'arbres : l'un d'eux est surmonté de quelque chose, vraisemblablement une tête d'homme. Avec une logique extrême, il nous laisse le doute sur cette existence. Est-ce véritablement un homme ou plutôt une vague ressemblance ? Quoi qu'il en soit, ils vivent tous deux sur cette page, inséparables tous deux, supportant les mêmes orages.' Loize, 'Un inédit de Gauguin', p. 60. Trans. Eleanor Levieux in Paul Gauguin, *The writings of a savage*, ed. Daniel Guérin, New York 1978, p. 39.

34. 'Le rêve de M. Redon... Entendons-nous! L'acception qu'il faut aussi donner au mot Rêve n'est ni celle vulgaire et de prose (visions fatales du sommeil), ni celle rare et de poésie (visions volontaires de la veille); c'est ceci et cela, c'est la veille et le sommeil, c'est proprement le rêve d'un rêve: l'ordonnance volontaire de visions fatales.' Charles Morice, 'L'hommage à Goya', *Petite Tribune républicaine*, 2 April 1885; quoted in André Mellerio, *Odilon Redon*, New York 1968 [Paris 1913], pp. 133-34. See Dario Gamboni, *La plume et le pinceau. Odilon Redon et la littérature*, Paris 1989, pp. 110-50.

35. See Ted Gott, 'Silent messengers – Odilon Redon's dedicated lithographs and the "politics" of gift-giving', *Print Collector's Newsletter* 19, no. 3 (July-August 1988), pp. 92-101, p. 95.