

Gauguin's Heritage

His Family and Their Nineteenth-Century World

What I wish [to explore] is a still undiscovered corner of myself.

To Emile Bernard, end of August 1889

Paul Gauguin's paternal grandfather, Guillaume, and his uncle Isidore Gauguin appear to have been small property owners in the region of Orléans. His father, Clovis, had been a political writer on the staff of the left-leaning, anti-Bonapartiste *Le National* before sailing for Peru in 1849, with his wife, Aline, their year-old son, Paul, and their daughter, Marie. He intended to found a newspaper in Peru, but he probably also left France in fear of reprisals from the leaders of the coup that brought Napoleon III to power. Clovis, who suffered from a heart ailment, never made it to Peru; he died on the way.¹

The cultural background of Gauguin's maternal side is much better documented. His maternal grandfather, André Chazal, descended from a family of printers and was one of two artist brothers specializing in decorative designs; what little of his work has been identified reveals considerable decorative talent and technical skill.² In 1821 he married one of the employees in his printing and lithography workshop, Flora Tristan y Moscoso (fig. 1), the illegitimate daughter of a Peruvian nobleman who resided in France with her French mother. The couple had considerable marital difficulties.[FIG 1]

Flora left her husband and two children in 1825 and worked to support herself. In 1830 she wrote her Peruvian uncle Don Pio Tristan y Moscoso to request part of a family inheritance. Don Pio had commanded the royalist forces

1 Flora Tristan y Moscoso, grandmother of the artist. Lithograph. Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris/Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library.



against Simón Bolívar and his revolutionaries, and been nominated interim viceroy by his generals before the final defeat at Ayacucho. He claimed an aristocratic lineage going back to “the Borgias of Aragon” on the Moscoso side—actually the Spanish Borjas, dukes of Gandia, and the kings of Aragon. He was also related to the Braganza dynasty of Portugal. To these should be added the French Bourbons, through Henry IV of France and Navarre, an Aragon descendant.³

In her letter to Don Pio, Flora mentioned that her parents were married only by a priest and not by a civil authority, so they were not legally wed. Consequently, Don Pio responded, she was owed nothing; he nonetheless sent her a small sum and awarded her a minimal living allowance. Hoping to receive a more substantial share of the family’s fortune, Flora set out for Peru in 1833, reaching Don Pio’s country estate in Arequipa, where she was graciously received. After a few

months there, Flora reiterated her request, to little avail. All Don Pio offered was to let her stay in his household as a family member and to continue providing her small pension. Resigned at first, she soon became outraged. She had been keeping a meticulous and charming diary of her voyage, but after Don Pio’s refusal, it acquired a dramatic confessional tone in the Romantic manner. She also began to assume a strong feminist stance: “I revolted against the cruel social order that had so victimized me, that had sanctioned the exploitation of the weaker sex, the plundering of the orphan, and I promised to myself that I would engage in the intrigues of ambition, rival in audacity and cunning with the monk [she had described], to be like him persevering, like him without pity. From now on Hell is in my soul!”⁴

A civil war that had started in Lima and soon reached Arequipa further stimulated Flora. She evoked the tragedies of battle in a colorful and dynamic style. Her writing became particularly powerful when she described the fierce Peruvian camp-followers, the Ravanas, seeing in them paragons of feminine self-assertion:

They are armed; they load onto mules pots, tents—in sum, all their baggage. They drag behind them a multitude of children of all ages. . . . When nearing an inhabited place, they precipitate themselves toward it like famished beasts, asking the inhabitants for supplies for the army. When these are given with good grace, they do no harm. But when finding resistance they fight like lionesses, and because of their ferocious courage, they always overcome the opposition and pillage and ransack the town, bringing back the booty to the camp to be shared among themselves. These women take care of all the soldiers’ needs; they receive no pay, and have for their salary the entitlement to steal without fear of punishment. They belong to the Indian race . . . they are not married, they give themselves to whoever wants them. . . . [They are] horribly ugly, as might be expected in view of the hardships they endure. . . . They are creatures outside of all that is ordinary. . . . There can be no more striking mark of the superiority of woman in primitive populations. Would it not be likewise in a more advanced civilization if both sexes were given a similar education? May the day come when such an experiment will be attempted.⁵

Beyond her ardent feminism, Flora associated the emancipation of woman with her Romantic idealization of the noble savage—heralding, so to speak, Gauguin’s passion for the primitive.

Back in Paris from Peru in 1834, Flora turned her diary into the two-volume *Pérégrinations d’une paria*, published in 1838. Flora also traveled to England, making three trips between 1826 and 1839.⁶ These trips gave her the opportunity to study women in all walks of life, from those in schools and hostels, to factory workers, to streetwalkers and denizens of brothels, to inmates of asylums and prisons. She also looked at the upper classes of society. She was influenced in her work by the medical-anthropological studies on the condition of underprivileged women by Dr.

Michael Ryan in London and A.-J.-B. Parent-Duchâtelet in Paris.⁷ She turned her data into yet another passionate, sometimes blood-curdling text: *Promenades dans Londres, ou L'aristocratie et les prolétaires en Angleterre* (1840).⁸

In 1837, having determined that her husband had attempted to molest their daughter Aline, she gained custody of the girl by court order. In 1838 she obtained a legal separation from André. A year later, under the pretext of her supposedly adulterous relationship with a ship's captain, revealed in the autobiographical *Pérégrinations*, André shot her, permanently lodging a bullet near her heart. She was to survive for five years; he was condemned to twenty years in prison, of which he served seventeen, dying a year after his release.

Flora, in sum, had been a passionate crusader defending abandoned women and their offspring, women held in near-slavery by their mates, and she spoke generally on behalf of the underprivileged of all classes and races, writing about their plight with stirring empathy. Beyond her literary work, she was a political activist, devoting the last decade of her short life to a relentless campaign for workers' rights (she founded a workers' trade union) and the emancipation of women. She died in 1844, at forty-one.

Gauguin had Flora's *Promenades* in his possession after his mother's death, for he asked his wife to send him the volume, which he lent to his young artist-friend Emile Bernard.⁹ He very likely also had access to his grandmother's other books, for his mother's house had contained a "rather important" library, which must have included Flora's works as well as those she is known to have collected of writers sharing some of her views. Incidentally, the house also contained a collection of Peruvian silver and ceramics. Although the house was destroyed in a fire set by the occupying Prussians in 1871, four years after his mother's death, when Gauguin was twenty-two,¹⁰ he had probably spent his home leaves there during his seafaring years, and he was a voracious reader. Most important, he was to articulate themes similar to Flora's in his works, particularly in connection with the various Eve themes, in which seduced and abandoned women are condemned to a life of misery and suffering, followed by time in Hell. At times he decried the bondage of inequitable wedlock. At others, he depicted women who, impervious to sin and the resulting state of disgrace, were able to right themselves in the eyes of society through their will and their abilities, thus asserting their independence, and to make a new start in life. On occasion, he even hinted at happiness in a good relationship.

Flora had died four years before Gauguin's birth, but he was certainly aware of her personality and her achievements. He summed up his impressions at the end of his life, describing her as both "a very pretty and noble lady" and "a strange old dame." According to Gauguin, "Proud-

hon said she had genius.¹¹ Not knowing anything about it, I trust Proudhon. She invented all kinds of socialist stories, among them the Workers' Union. The grateful workers built a monument [in her memory] in the cemetery of Bordeaux. . . . " When she died, Gauguin added, "Her coffin was followed by many delegations. I know that she devoted her entire fortune to the cause of the workers, traveling incessantly. . . . It is likely she did not know how to cook. [She was] an anarchist bluestocking. Some say that together with old Enfantin she founded a certain religion, the religion of Mapa, of which he would have been the god Ma, and she the goddess Pa."¹²

Flora also counted among her friends another significant socialist utopian, one who strenuously advocated greater freedom and well-being for women: Alphonse Esquiros,¹³ whose work appears to have offered Gauguin some important themes. In addition, according to Gauguin, "she was the intimate friend of [the distinguished poet] Madame [Marceline] Desbordes-Valmore," who, just before she died, in 1859, had received official academic honors and was eventually acclaimed by significant members of the new generation of poets, including Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé.¹⁴ Madame Desbordes-Valmore's brilliant daughter, nicknamed Ondine, became a close friend of Aline's and a witness at her wedding.

Gauguin fully realized that Flora's sustained bid for the emancipation of women implied the same sexual freedom for women as was customary for men. But he may not have quite realized the breadth of her personal conception of sexual freedom. She wrote in a letter to her friend Olympe Chodzko, a married woman, in 1839: "Your letter makes me shudder with pleasure. You say that you love me, that I have a magnetic effect on you, that I cause you to fall into ecstasy. . . . I have possessed you for a long time. Yes, Olympe, I breathe through your bosom. . . . Two women can be in love; likewise two men." In the same breath Flora also revealed how self-centered and indifferent a lover she could be—ultimately as callous as any man or woman: "But I am all at once so ambitious, so demanding, so greedy, so epicurean in my tastes that all that I am offered does not satisfy me."¹⁵ Gauguin appears to have inherited both his grandmother's sexual greed and her ability to hurt—if not her homosexual ardor.

Aline (fig. 2), for her part, was still a pupil at the Bascan's boarding school for girls in Paris at the time of Flora's death. It was "an essentially 'républicaine' house," as Gauguin put it—imbued with the ideals of the Age of Reason, including religious skepticism and anticlericalism, an attitude he was himself to espouse.¹⁶ While still at school Aline had friendly relations with novelist George Sand, who wrote to a bachelor friend of hers in his forties: "[Aline] seems as tender and kind as her mother [Flora] was imperious and choleric. . . . Her mourning [for her mother], her beautiful eyes, her [air of] isolation, her modesty have touched my heart. . . . I advise you to fall

2 Aline Gauguin (Aline Chazal-Tristan), mother of the artist. Lithograph. Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris/Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Art Library.



in love with her; this should not be difficult. Invite me soon to your wedding.”¹⁷ Aline married Clovis Gauguin, a frequent visitor at the establishment, the following year. [FIG 2]

Aline was well educated and very sensitive to Romantic literature: “Even a book-binding bearing Lamartine’s name reminds me of my adorable mother,” Gauguin wrote. “[She] did not miss an opportunity to re-read her *Jocelyn* [Alphonse de Lamartine’s two-volume poem about a priest’s love and its sublimation].” She was also temperamental, subjecting her child to the brusque mood swings that modern psychologists see as the cause of childhood neuroses: “In her quality of a very great Spanish lady, my mother was violent, and I received a number of slaps from a small hand, supple as rubber. It is true that a few minutes later she would kiss and caress me as she cried.” And in a gesture of filial gallantry: “How graceful and pretty [she] was

when she wore her Lima costume, the silk mantilla covering her face and leaving only one eye visible: that eye so sweet, so imperious, so pure and caressing.”¹⁸

Paul was born in Paris in 1848, within earshot of the guns of that year’s revolution, but the next year his family left for Peru.¹⁹ He was to retain vivid memories of the family’s four-year stay in his grand-uncle’s mansion in Lima. The patriarch “fell very much in love with my mother, so pretty and so like his beloved brother, Don Mariano.”²⁰ There is a good chance that Gauguin’s memories of life among people of a markedly different culture, as well as the sight of form and colors richer and more vibrant than anything he would see in Europe, affected his aesthetic responses.²¹ Likewise, life in considerable luxury among these elegant and refined people must have contributed to both his expensive tastes and his later belief in at least some of the advantages conferred by an aristocracy of mind and soul, as well as of money—including the cultivation of beauty and the arts. Finally, this upbringing may well have stimulated his aspiration to the social status of an officer and gentleman.

In 1855 Aline and her children returned to France, and the children soon received a small inheritance from their paternal grandfather. The family lived in Orléans at first, where Paul became a boarder at the strict Catholic Petit Séminaire de La Chapelle Saint-Mesmin nearby. There the bishop of Orléans himself, Félix Dupanloup, a member of France’s leading literary body, the French Academy, formerly a professor of sacred literature at the Sorbonne, and an effective speaker as well as a consequential polemist, taught a course in biblical literature. Gauguin later referred to “certain theological studies of my youth,” before excoriating the Catholic Church for its dogmas and rituals. He nevertheless also wrote: “I will not say . . . that this education counts for nothing in my intellectual development; I think, to the contrary, that it did me a lot of good.”²² But, in keeping with his anticlerical background, he noted some of the moral failings of the establishment: “As for the rest, I believe that it is there that I learned from an early age to hate hypocrisy, false virtues, tattling . . . and to distrust anything that was antagonistic to my instincts and my reason.” He clearly had strong ties to the Age of Reason.

In describing his psychological and mental development, Gauguin pointed out his gift for preserving the privacy of his thoughts and his tendency toward introspection: “I also acquired a touch of the *esprit d’Escobar*,²³ the art of rationalizing, which is a not insignificant strength in one’s struggles. I have also learned to concentrate within my own self, ceaselessly observing the game of my teachers, creating my own entertainments, my hurts too, with all the responsibility they entail. But this is a special case, and, on the whole, I believe that this kind of experimentation is dangerous.”²⁴ He was thus aware of both the advantages and the pitfalls of self-analysis. After the Petit Séminaire, he appears to have attended a lycée in Orléans for a while.

In 1860 Aline moved to Paris, setting herself up as a seamstress in the center of the business

district. She fell ill, however, and retired to the countryside in 1865, shortly thereafter settling in Saint-Cloud, immediately across the River Seine west of Paris, where she died in 1867.²⁵

While in Paris, Aline had sent Paul to Lorient, a private school, to prepare him for the very demanding École Navale’s entrance competition. The young man’s first disciplined training in drawing likely dates from that time, for the examination required drawing from plaster casts and living models as well as mechanical drawing and map-making.²⁶

Gauguin was not ready in time for the competition, and the age limit barred him from applying for the next. He nevertheless qualified for acceptance as an officer-cadet (*pilote*) in the merchant marine in 1865, took three trips to South America, stopping at ports in Brazil, Peru, Chile, as well as in Martinique, and reached the rank of second lieutenant at eighteen, deriving a tangible benefit from his studies.²⁷ He selected the navy for his military duty, embarking as sailor third class on the speedy yacht allocated to Napoleon III’s cousin Prince Napoleon, a little before the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War. It was initially sent on “scientific” cruises for the benefit of the princes and their learned guests, in the Mediterranean first, then the Arctic. The ship was eventually assigned to combat in the North Sea. A stop in Copenhagen afforded Gauguin a first acquaintance with Denmark.²⁸

Released from duty after the conclusion of hostilities, he settled in Paris. Aline had appointed as the legal guardian of her underage children Gustave Arosa, a Parisian financier of half-Spanish descent whose summer residence was near her home in Saint-Cloud. Gustave and his brother had assembled important art collections ranging from Delacroix to the Romantic-naturalist Barbizon School. Gustave’s family also counted the impressionist Camille Pissarro among its acquaintances and owned a number of his paintings.²⁹ Gustave himself had a considerable knowledge of the old masters as well as the more recent luminaries and had launched an enterprise dedicated to publishing photo-lithographic reproductions of works of art—which Gauguin had the opportunity to study.

The Arosas enjoyed entertaining when Gauguin fell into their orbit. Through the brothers and their acquaintances, the artist was introduced to an intellectual milieu of international tastes. There he met a young lady from Copenhagen, Mette Gad, a judge’s daughter and formerly a governess to the children of a Danish minister of state. She had accompanied a friend to Paris so that they might both polish their cultural education. Paul and Mette were married November 22, 1873. They were to have five children.³⁰

Gauguin’s first documented job in Paris was with the financial brokerage Bertin, associated with the Arosas.³¹ He was able to support his young wife adequately: indeed, they lived quite well, if not in the most luxurious quarters. Among Gauguin’s business colleagues was Émile Schuffenecker, who together with his wife, Louise, became friends of the Gauguins. Schuffe-

necker had trained at the Union Centrale des Beaux-Arts, which specialized in the applied arts, and would eventually turn to art as a career, obtaining a post as a teacher of drawing in a suburban Parisian lycée and participating in exhibitions. Although mediocre, both as a man and as an artist, Schuffenecker came to greatly admire Gauguin and frequently assisted him financially when Gauguin was in dire straits—only to be held in sovereign contempt by the latter.³² Schuffenecker may well have reinforced Gauguin’s interest in art at an early stage. He was very influential in another respect: according to his daughter Jeanne, Schuffenecker had been one of the initial members of the Theosophical movement, founded in New York by Russian-born Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875.³³ This movement had spiritist and esoteric overtones but was also dedicated to establishing the “universal brotherhood of humanity” on the basis of the “ultimate wisdom of all religions.”³⁴ Schuffenecker designed the cover illustration for the 1892 issue of *Le Lotus Bleu*, the movement’s French publication, which reveals that he was by then quite familiar with Theosophical symbolism. Gauguin appears to have referred to Theosophical beliefs in numerous works and discussed them at length in his later writings.

Gauguin’s own passion for art was beginning to be evident. Already in July 1873, when Mette had returned to Copenhagen to assemble her trousseau, her Danish friend noted: “Paul is terribly distraught without his beloved and devotes his spare time to painting; he is making great strides. Last Sunday he painted for ten hours.”³⁵ Gauguin’s early oils were Romantic-naturalist in style, inspired first by Camille Corot, and then more directly by the Barbizon tradition.³⁶ He exhibited a commendable painting in that style at the Salon of 1876.³⁷

By the end of 1876, Mette’s friend confided: “Paul’s business affairs are not going well, I do not believe his job is secure. This worries Mette.”³⁸ But the artist went on painting in his spare time with increasing diligence. Between 1876 and 1879 he appropriated the light palette, broadly contrasting color areas, and dashing brushwork characteristic of Édouard Manet, intended to capture instantaneous effects of changes in light. He then joined the ranks of the younger impressionists, emulating them in applying comma-like strokes consisting mostly of pure colors. The colors were selected on the basis of what these artists called divisionism: pure hues intended to recombine in the viewer’s eye, consisting of the hue of the ambient light or relative shade, the local hue of the object, and reflections from other objects. The impressionists also made use of Michel Eugène Chevreul’s Law of Simultaneous Contrast. Chevreul maintained that the eye perceives around each area of color a halo of its complement—when the two complements are adjacent to one another, they cancel each other out at a distance, producing essentially tinted grays, but they vibrate and intensify one another when seen at close range. With this technique, impressionist artists could render the luminous and atmospheric effects of the here-and-now, thus achieving one of the technical aims of naturalism.³⁹

Early in 1879 Gauguin befriended Camille Pissarro, who had taken an apartment in Paris but went on prolonged sojourns in the then-distant, and still quite green, Parisian suburb of Pontoise, where Gauguin sometimes painted at his side. At this time Gauguin received a last-minute invitation from Pissarro and Edgar Degas to participate in the fourth impressionist exhibition, which he accepted. He would continue through the eighth and last such exhibition, in 1886. He also came to frequent the impressionists' favorite café: the Café de la Nouvelle Athènes.⁴⁰ By the spring of 1879, furthermore, Gauguin had acquired his own collection of impressionist works of outstanding quality.⁴¹

There is an indication that around 1879 the artist obtained another job: with the banker and stockbroker Bourdon.⁴² In 1880 he found yet another lucrative position—the last in his financial career, one that he lost by October of 1883, following the 1882 stock market crash.⁴³

When Gauguin started to sell a few of his works at the 1881 impressionist exhibition, he began to consider devoting himself to painting full-time. He wrote Pissarro: “I cannot make up my mind to remain in finance all my life and [as only] a part-time painter; I have taken it into my head that I shall become a painter. As soon as I find the horizon less gloomy [and] that I can earn a living that way, I'll go full steam ahead, and so it is that I am infuriated when I realize that [the possibility of] a *désunion* [falling out with Mette] is the cause of all this ——[presumably ‘frustration’].”⁴⁴ And a few months later he told Pissarro: “As for abandoning painting, never!”⁴⁵

Still unemployed almost a year later, he made up his mind: “I have no job in sight. . . . So, from now on, I shall concentrate on cultivating the [art] dealers. . . . I want to work night and day, and seize the bull by the horns, with energy, and you know how much active strength I have. . . . I have reached an impasse . . . the love of my art fills my head too much for me to be a good worker in a business, where one must not be a dreamer, and yet I have too large a family, and a wife who is incapable of handling misery. . . . I absolutely must seek my existence in painting.”⁴⁶

Gauguin must have been strengthened in his resolve by the favorable press received by the 1882 impressionist group exhibition, in which he had twelve works, and by the commercial success of some of the impressionists. Claude Monet participated in several exhibitions, and his work fetched decent prices.⁴⁷ When Manet died on April 30, 1883, the press widely covered this event, and Manet's coffin was followed by an impressive group of notables in artistic and official circles. He would soon be canonized as a great artist.

In the meantime, the Gauguin family had to cut down on expenses despite Mette's being “incapable of handling misery.” The Pissarros happened to offer a good example of how a still unrecognized impressionist painter and his large and growing family could make ends meet: they lived in small villages, where they rented peasants' buildings. Life in the country also offered a multitude of subjects.

Gauguin decided to leave Paris for Rouen, on January 4, 1884, in search of a lower cost of living, possibly intending to live eventually like Pissarro. Mette, the maid, and their children soon followed. The family rented a small house, but the situation soon became grim. According to Gauguin, they had saved enough to live on for “at most six months, [but] . . . Mette [was] unbearable, [finding] everything disappointing . . . seeing a bleak future. And one must admit that it does look bleak.” By the end of July, Mette and two of the children had left for Copenhagen, where they stayed at her mother's; she would eventually give French lessons. Six months later, at the end of November, Gauguin, the maid, and the remaining children joined Mette. He intended to paint and exhibit in Copenhagen, and he had been appointed an agent for Denmark and Norway of a French tarpaulin manufacturer, although he was working on commission only.⁴⁸

In late May 1885 he complained to Pissarro: “At the present time I have reached the limits of my courage and my resources—misery in a foreign city! Without credit or money; every day I ask myself whether I shouldn't climb to the attic and slip a rope around my neck. What keeps me here is painting, and [painting] is at the root of the problem. My wife, the family, everyone blames me for that damned painting, pretending that not earning one's living is shameful.” And yet “I can only *do one thing*, paint.” By June 22 he and one of his sons were back in Paris, staying with the Schuffeneckers at first. He wrote the impressionist dealer Paul Durand-Ruel that he was “obliged” to return to Paris penniless “by the lack of business abroad.” And he told Pissarro it was “impossible to withstand the tempest in Denmark.” Later, in response to Mette's recriminations, he wrote: “What would it be like if I had abandoned you forever? Many others would have done it . . . without remorse, since your family encouraged a rupture [between us].”⁴⁹

Gauguin visited Dieppe, on the Normandy coast, where he had a reunion with Degas; then he went to London for a short while before settling in Paris with his son. Their home was tiny. After trying again to work in a brokerage firm, he was reduced, for a while, to making his living by pasting posters in railway stations. And he continued to paint. After placing his son in a boarding school outside Paris, Gauguin moved to Brittany, settling by July 25, 1886, at the Pension Gloanec in Pont-Aven, a fishing village known for its abundance of inexpensive produce and fish as well as cheap and pleasant inns. The place had been discovered by a number of artists, and it soon attracted the attention of a younger generation.⁵⁰

Gauguin's politics during those years may be gathered from his correspondence with Pissarro. From 1883 to 1885 he was associated with a group fomenting a revolution in Spain, which was spearheaded by a group in exile in France led by Manuel-Ruiz Zorrilla, who had the support of the Arosas; he even stayed near the border in the summer of 1883 in anticipation of a coup in

Madrid—abortive, it turned out. Zorilla was in effect advocating a parliamentary monarchy, and his views seem compatible with Gauguin’s *républicain* inclinations—a taste for adventure and the possibility of a mercenary’s bounty might also have been incentives. He was still involved in these affairs at the time of his visit to London in 1885.⁵¹ That he should have informed Pissarro of his undertaking is not surprising; Pissarro was a dedicated anarchist who contributed cartoons to the movement’s periodicals,⁵² and as such must have endorsed most kinds of revolutionary activities. Pissarro, nevertheless, did not have unmitigated faith in the purity of Gauguin’s intentions or in his political perspicacity: “I am beginning to think that my poor Gauguin does not always see straight. . . . He is always on the side of the cunning ones. . . . He is more naïve than I thought.”⁵³

Because of his *républicain* outlook, Gauguin shared with Pissarro at least a desire to support a more egalitarian political system. But telling differences nonetheless became apparent: “You are preaching to a convert when you say that we are headed for a moral cataclysm,” he wrote Pissarro. “Be confident. The movement [i.e., egalitarian liberalism] is mapped out for centuries, and it is the natural outcome of the unification of man by means of universal rights and the resulting [progress] in education. Money, property for all; the same share of the sun, etc. Yes, there is improvement, and in keeping with my whole *républicaine* philosophy, I cannot find fault in what I have always wanted since I became a man.”

And yet, believing that, as their lot improved, the masses would fail to support the arts, he argued:

I see in this slow revolution a good future at close range, but from the moral standpoint we would be losing much. You think that it will be the same for art, but I believe that you are mistaken, because it will go in the opposite direction. Everyone will have talent, much as everyone will be educated. When everyone is king, no one is expected to support one’s neighbor, [but] when there is nobility, when there is government by the few, there is protector and protected. In sum I maintain that the more the mass is uniform, the less it needs art. [In order to instill such] needs, there has to be contemplation, a love of the luxury born from greatness, [an acceptance] of irregularity in the social scale, [and] a little [in the way of selfish] calculation. It so happens that the new society will increasingly distance itself from all this. Does one have time for contemplation? No, the theaters, etc., are here to draw you away from it. . . . Can one do away with [selfish] calculation? No, the [demands] of life are too rough for a man to put his enthusiasm ahead of all else.⁵⁴

And some eight years later, for the benefit of his daughter Aline in 1893 in a notebook she never received: “Long live democracy; it’s all there is! . . . [And yet] I love nobility, the beauty of del-

icate tastes and that old-fashioned motto: *Noblesse oblige*. I love good manners. Politeness, even that of Louis X[IV]. I am therefore by instinct, and without knowing why, ARISTO.”⁵⁵

In sum, Gauguin in these last passages subordinated political considerations to the needs of art: much as he supported democratic principles, from his standpoint as an artist he felt closer to the ideals of a thoughtful, generous, artistically inclined aristocracy, since it was more likely to support the arts than would a democratic state.

Ultimately, Gauguin also subordinated ethical considerations to aesthetic ones, but he was unquestionably concerned with ethics. Later in life he asserted, albeit with some irony, that as a practical matter morality had to be relative: different situations called for different rules, and, most important, individual classes or professions had different ethical codes. Each class or profession, moreover, was hypocritical in the way it judged the others. But Gauguin also implied, as we shall see, that there were absolute principles to be respected and followed. In his words, there is the “morality of one’s private parts [*du cul*], religious morality, patriotic morality, the morality of the soldier, of the policeman, . . . one’s duty in the fulfillment of one’s responsibilities, the military code (for or against Dreyfus),⁵⁶ the morality of [the virulent anti-Semite] Drumont, and of [a milquetoast poet as well as an ardent supporter of would-be strongman General Boulanger] Déroulède.” But then, just before this statement, he had acknowledged deeply felt ethical principles, here summarized in the notion of human brotherhood, and made short shrift of the above-mentioned relative moralities. He was, in fact, threatened by them: “Like floods, morality crushes us, suffocates freedom, hates fraternity.”⁵⁷

Gauguin’s own practical, relative morality was conditioned by the fact that he was originally destined for a naval officer’s career, had descended from a long line of Spanish military men on his mother’s side, and considered himself to be very much a member of the social caste of officers and gentlemen. At a superficial level, he took great pride in his fencing training and skills—the gentleman’s sport par excellence.⁵⁸ And wherever he went he took his fencing foils, mask, and gloves. For him, the code of honor of the officer and gentleman—permissive in some ways, draconian in others—prevailed. In business affairs he was honorable or at least did his best to be so. He took advantage of the credit innkeepers often extended to their guests, for instance, but made considerable efforts to settle his debts before leaving their inns.⁵⁹ And to the friends who helped him financially, as did Schuffenecker on numerous occasions, he gave works of art.

As far as sex was concerned, Gauguin appears to have been a faithful and loving husband throughout his early married years. After that he took up the life of the carefree bohemian milieu of the artists of his day, nonetheless abiding for the most part by one of the principal rules

of the code of honor: no illicit sex with a member of one’s own class unless—and this is a major caveat—all concerned manage to maintain absolute discretion.⁶⁰ To the dangers of social scandal and of being named a correspondent in a divorce trial that such an affair entailed,⁶¹ the code of honor added the risk of a duel. An illicit relationship with a member of a lower class, on the other hand, entailed very few social risks and almost certainly no duel. In this last respect Gauguin upheld his grandmother’s advocacy of free love, but he was not hypocritical about his failings:

I have been good sometimes; I don’t congratulate myself for it.
I have been bad often; I do not repent.
A skeptic, I look at all these saints, and do not see them [as being] alive. In their cathedral niches they have a meaning—only there. The gargoyles too, unforgettable monsters: my eye follows the accident [of their form] without dread, bizarre creations.⁶²

Indeed, the artist revealed a full and frank acceptance of his sinfulness in his works as well. In this he shared Baudelaire’s notion that many vital impulses are rooted in evil, so that evil must necessarily figure in aesthetic experience—a notion that may well distantly reflect the emphasis on original sin in the Catholic tradition. In this respect at least, nonbelievers though they were, both Baudelaire and Gauguin appear to have been deeply affected by their strict Catholic early education.

Gauguin’s works and his writings occasionally reveal deeply felt ethical principles. Failure to uphold human brotherhood was a major failing. The advent of such a humanitarian attitude has been linked with his reading of Victor Hugo’s *Les misérables* during the summer of 1888, his subsequent stay with Vincent van Gogh in Arles, and his becoming aware of Swedenborgian spirituality through his reading of Honoré de Balzac’s *Séraphita*.⁶³ This humanitarian impulse vigorously asserted itself at that time, but its roots went back to an earlier period, to a concern that reflected Flora Tristan’s own humanitarian endeavors, expressed in a series of works devoted to allusions to lovemaking in rustic settings and the subsequent distress of little peasant Eves.

In a broader sense, the symbols in Gauguin’s work unfold in the same manner as fables; cryptic on first impression, they evoke for those who make the effort to decipher them the greed, deceit, and brutality of some, the foolishness and innocence of others, and ultimately intense anguish and despair. And they do so with simple, almost childlike simplicity, sometimes with sardonic cynicism, sometimes with compassion, and often with both. Reflecting on his art of the previous year—the works that first manifested the full import of these humanitarian concerns—Gauguin asked Emile Bernard in 1889: “Is it nothing, a human cry?”⁶⁴ In his Polynesian works Gauguin stressed the brutality, harshness, and intransigence of the old faith and customs as well

as the gentleness and poetry he sensed in the population, and in nature’s abundance and luxuriousness. In all cases he demonstrated a compassion that reflected his profound humanitarianism and ultimately the echoes of the great religions that had touched him.

Gauguin’s anticlericalism and suspicion of blind faith and the rigid adherence to the letter of the scriptures remained with him all his life: “What must be killed never to be born again is God,” he exclaimed in Nietzschean fashion in 1897.⁶⁵ What he meant, as we shall see, is that he could not accept the notion that an almighty power controlled the fate of the universe with a fierce will and an unerring hand. He was against such a god-creator, he was to assert in later years, and thus drastically altered his religious iconography. Instead, he sought out exemplars of personal generosity and abnegation. He asserted that after he studied “Buddha, simple mortal who never conceived nor apprehended God, and conceived and apprehended all the intelligence of the human heart and arrived at eternal beatitude, Nirvana, the ultimate destination of the soul,” he acquired “a certain comprehension of [his] own heart . . . [and] set out to study the Gospels, trying to decipher [their] meaning.” And, he added, “I concede that when I *believed* I understood them, I always found [in them] the wisdom, the elevation of thought in its noblest state.” In conclusion: “I have loved God without knowing it.”⁶⁶ Victor Hugo, Vincent van Gogh, and Swedenborg must all have played their part. Perhaps even, against Gauguin’s will, so had the bishop of Orléans!

Such feelings played a significant role in Gauguin’s creative output. And while it plays a less significant part in his work, Theosophy must also be taken into account. Gauguin was far too much a man of the Enlightenment to dabble in the occult or to be a mystic. And yet however pedantic and trivial the Theosophical approach to the world’s religions may have been, it helped him articulate some important ideas. By the time Gauguin executed his first work showing evidence of Theosophical influence, the carved-wood *Jewelry Casket* of 1884 (fig. 6; see chapter 2), the movement had spread around the world, through lectures and articles in what came to be a specialized press.⁶⁷ According to one of the definitions given by its founder, the Theosophical movement was a “universal brotherhood encompassing the faithful of most world religions,” drawing from each “that divine wisdom that manifests itself in everything.”⁶⁸ While she endeavored to appeal to members of all faiths, Blavatsky and her immediate followers were particularly attracted by spiritism and the occult. It is significant that her early publication, *The Theosophist*, bore on its cover the motto “Devoted to Oriental Philosophy, Art, Literature and Occultism: Embracing Mesmerism, Spiritualism and Other Secret Sciences.”⁶⁹

One side of Theosophical teachings proved particularly germane to Gauguin’s thinking and his art: the affirmation that rather than taking literally the accepted texts, rituals, and liturgy of ancient religions, Theosophists sought what they considered to be their common spirituality. In

Blavatsky’s words: “Theosophy is . . . the archaic *Wisdom-Religion*, the esoteric doctrine once known in every ancient country having claims to civilization. This ‘Wisdom’ all the writings show us as an emanation of the divine Principle; and the clear comprehension of it is typified in such names as the Indian Buddha, the Babylonian Nebo.”

Blavatsky gave Christianity short shrift at that point, for Theosophy had been “tracked like wild beasts by the Christian clergy—to be known as a Theosopher amounted hardly a century ago to a death warrant.”⁷⁰ A year later she had become more inclusive: “a ‘Universal Brotherhood,’ . . . The Theosophical Society is a harp with more than one string. . . . Are you Christian, Buddhist, Brahman, Jew, or Zoroastrian . . . Spiritualist . . . Freethinker? . . . You have only to affiliate with the [appropriate] branch.” And, incidentally, again placing the spirit above the letter, she admitted Christ into her pantheon: “It is not necessary to know Christ . . . nor Buddha, nor Zoroaster, nor Parabrahman . . . according to the flesh, but the *ideal* Christ, that is to say the eternal son of God, that divine wisdom which manifests itself in everything.”⁷¹ Other leaders of the movement, particularly the head of the French branch, put a greater emphasis on Christianity: “There is a great religion of all humanity . . . and its true name is Christianity.”⁷²

And yet there can be little question that the prime interest of most Theosophical writers of the time was Buddhism, for the movement sponsored at least three studies of that religion.⁷³ Moreover, for some Theosophical theorists (particularly Blavatsky) Hinduism, while not ranking quite as high, also held a privileged position among the world’s religions.

By 1888–89 Gauguin referred specifically to Buddhist philosophy in his compositions, just as he alluded to Christian themes. As for his own interest in Buddhism, just before he stayed with Vincent van Gogh, Vincent wrote him a letter reminiscing about an article by the Far East scholar and advocate of Theosophy Emile Burnouf, titled⁷⁴ “Le bouddhisme en Occident,” in the prestigious *Revue des Deux-Mondes*.⁷⁵ It is more than likely that he and Vincent discussed it when they joined forces: Burnouf particularly valued the absence of religious hierarchy in Buddhism and that it professed to uphold the “natural equality” of men. It followed “certain rules, certain formulas which happened to be very broad.” The principal commandments of Buddhism were “voluntary poverty, . . . the overcoming of desires, . . . celibacy, . . . inalterable patience and universal charity.” Killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and drinking alcoholic beverages were forbidden. To war had to be opposed “humility”; and good deeds had to be practiced secretly and effectively.⁷⁶ There is no doubt that Burnouf was sympathetic to the Theosophical movement; he praised the “Société théosophique aryenne de New York”⁷⁷ and referred to *Cathéchisme bouddhique* by Blavatsky’s U.S. lieutenant, Colonel Olcott.⁷⁸

In keeping with the encompassing vision of Theosophy, Burnouf drew parallels between the spiritual messages of Jesus and Buddha. In both traditions good was opposed to evil, the latter

symbolized by Satan and Mara, respectively. And both posited spiritual perfectibility: Christianity, through the stages of earth, purgatory, and heaven; Buddhism, through metempsychosis—the transfer of still-imperfect souls to other bodies at the time of death. What the Ascension was for Christians, Nirvana, the ultimate state of bliss, was for Buddhists.⁷⁹

Gauguin may already have been fully aware of the Theosophers’ strong leaning toward Buddhism, but in Burnouf’s article he would have found messages relevant to his thinking and his art. He was certainly aware of Vincent van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* (1888) as “a bonze [Buddhist monk of the Far East], a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha,”⁸⁰ as this painting was dedicated to “*Mon ami Paul G.* [my friend Paul G.].”⁸¹ Later, in his own *Self-Portrait with Halo* of mid-November to early December 1889 (fig. 55), Gauguin, would wrap himself in the characteristic saffron-colored robe of a Buddhist monk. Allusions to Buddhism would become frequent in the artist’s work from that time on.⁸²

Gauguin also reflected Theosophical thinking in his works by juxtaposing allusions to different faiths as if to bring out the poetry of their common humanity. Just as important, in keeping with the notion that a Theosopher is one “who gives you a theory of God, of the works of God, which has, not revelation, but his own inspiration for its basis”⁸³—and more specifically, with the distinction between the literal acceptance of scriptural writings, rituals, and liturgy, on the one hand and the “Wisdom-Religion” of various faiths, on the other—Gauguin made a point in several of his later writings of distinguishing between the appearance of a religious scene or the literal sense of a scriptural text (either of which could be trivial or even absurd) and its symbolic message, which could have profound philosophical meaning. He thus asserted in a letter to an art critic:

The [doctrine] of the Bible presents itself under a double aspect (especially in relation to Christ). . . . The first gives material form to the idea so as to render it more readily perceptible to the senses, [thus] taking on the demeanor of surnaturalism; it is the literal, superficial, figurative, mysterious [aspect] of a parable; and then the second conveys the latter’s Spirit. It is no longer the figurative; but the figured, explicit, sense of that parable.⁸⁴

For Gauguin, in religious parables the accepted definition of metaphor is reversed: the signifier, usually considered to be factual, becomes mysterious because it flouts common logic, whereas the signified is “explicit,” inasmuch as its philosophical meaning makes good sense. Incidentally, Gauguin was particularly articulate and virulent in his attacks on the Catholic Church’s literal interpretation of the scriptures, rituals, and liturgy in his late manuscript *L’esprit moderne et le catholicisme*.⁸⁵

Gauguin’s comment here also gives a significant clue to his own handling of symbolic asso-

ciations and metaphors. He had introduced the above passage by explaining to the critic: “I act a little like the Bible [in my use of symbols].” In other words, however crude, incongruous, ironic, or disarming the visual associations and metaphors in his work might be, their symbolic meaning was sensible and philosophically profound—at least for those willing to make the necessary effort of comprehension and feeling.⁸⁶

In broad terms, Gauguin’s acceptance of some Theosophical principles contributed to the universality of the humanitarian vision he infused into many of his important works. It enabled him, in particular, to establish sympathetic parallels and oppositions between the religions of differing cultures—what will be called his syncretic approach. Gauguin also drew on Theosophy’s speculations on nature, the universe, and evolution in general, evoking these more richly and provocatively, and certainly more imaginatively, than did the scientists of his day.

While Gauguin may have tackled religious subjects or simply raised ethical matters in his work, he was neither a religious painter nor a moralist. He was primarily a fabulist, evoking human predicaments, sometimes with bitterness, even sarcasm, often with compassion, but always at a very high aesthetic level. The failings and sins of common humanity prevailed in the blissful pastoral settings of Brittany and in his paradise of the tropics—without detracting from the richness and beauty of either.

Ultimately, aesthetics usually superseded ethics in Gauguin’s scale of values, as articulated in a metaphor he had borrowed from Vincent van Gogh, in which Christ becomes the supreme artist: “What an artist this Jesus, who has chiseled right into humanity.”⁸⁷ As has been pointed out, Gauguin was paraphrasing a passage of van Gogh’s letter to Bernard: “Christ alone—among all the philosophers, magi, etc.—has affirmed as a principal certainty of eternal life the infinitude of time, the nonexistence of death, the necessity and *raison d’être* of serenity and devotion. He lived serenely, *as an artist greater than all the artists*, ignoring marble and clay and color to work with living flesh.”⁸⁸ Although Gauguin never seems to have mentioned John Ruskin in his writings, he would probably have agreed with Ruskin’s notion that teaching the arts renders humans more ethical for the simple reason that “the faculty for art is a visible sign of national virtue,” and the arts “spring from the whole of humanity” and “their object is the whole of humanity.”⁸⁹

Finally, Gauguin’s increasingly complex symbolism had an effect on his relationship with Camille Pissarro—as if the newly declared divergence in their political views in 1885 were not enough—for Pissarro had become close to Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, and the neo-impressionists and to a considerable extent took up their techniques, continuing to do so until 1890, when he returned to a more spontaneous impressionist treatment. Gauguin’s quarrel with Seurat and Signac around mid-June 1886⁹⁰ put an end to his contacts with both artists and, apparently, with Pissarro as well.

Gauguin’s eventual repudiation of impressionism—his century’s final manifestation of naturalism—in favor of symbolism came as a shock to Pissarro. After seeing a work in the new mode—*The Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* of late September 1888 (fig. 49), which was also Gauguin’s first religious subject—Pissarro wrote his son: “I reproach him for not having applied his synthesis in the service of our modern philosophy, which is absolutely social, anti-authoritarian, anti-mystical.”⁹¹ Yet, aside from an occasional slight, Gauguin mostly praised the older artist, confiding one year before his own death: “He was one of my masters and I do not deny it.”⁹²

What Pissarro failed to recognize in Gauguin’s development was the ability to introduce complex ideas in his work—and, of course, to convey them by purely plastic means. Indeed, Gauguin was proud of his own meditative argumentation, writing late in life:

Philosophy is heavy-going if it is not [already] in me, by instinct. [It is] sweet in one’s sleep, together with the dream which adorns it. Science, it is not . . . or at most [it is] a germ [thereof]—multiple, as is everything in nature, evolving ceaselessly. It is not a consequence [of a deductive process], as solemn personages would have us learn, but rather a weapon we, as savages, build on our own. It does not manifest itself as a reality, but as an image—just like a painting: admirable if the painting is a masterpiece.

Art brings with it philosophy, as philosophy brings with it art. Otherwise what would happen to beauty?⁹³

Such “philosophical” thoughts appear both in Gauguin’s correspondence and in his copious handwritten notebooks. The latter, compiled mostly at the end of his life, transcribe passages he had collected from his readings over the years. In some cases he names their authors, in others not. The passages are often followed by his own pithy commentaries. And much of the time the ideas are very much his own. The texts are also replete with jokes, political wisecracks, personal anecdotes, and important reminiscences. Spontaneous and untidy, they are further marred by countless repetitions, or rather endless futile attempts to add philosophical rigor to his commentaries. But they are at times witty and frequently quite amusing. Most important, they often lucidly convey the principal thoughts that inform Gauguin’s artistic production.⁹⁴