

“‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’” These are the first words of “The Fact of Blackness,” the central text of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) by Frantz Fanon, the great analyst of colonial subjectivity, and they restage a primal scene of imposed identity that “fixes” Fanon in two ways at least: through the look of the white subject (“Look, a Negro!”) and the association of blackness with dirt (“Dirty nigger!”).<sup>1</sup> Here I want to consider this look and that association in the context of the primitivist painting of Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. This painting is also a primary instance of the secret sharing between modernist art and psychoanalytic theory.

In the original scene a white boy, startled by the presence of Fanon, cries out with these words. In such scenes Fanon feels objectified, and yet, “in the eyes of the white man,” he lacks this “ontological resistance” too. He lacks this resistance, Fanon suggests, because he does not cohere: “in the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema” (B 110). There is an echo of Jacques Lacan on “the mirror stage” here, and Fanon means these “difficulties” literally: in the mirror of the white man the image of the black man is disturbed, the formation of his I impaired. This is so, according to Fanon, because a “historico-racial schema” is projected “below” his corporeal schema in a way that interferes with it: “a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” transform him into a scattered congeries of racist stereotypes. “My body was given back

to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day” (*B* 110–113). This violated (non)subject is left to pick up the pieces, and Fanon takes it as his psychopolitical task to make them over into a different “schema” altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Such is the trauma of this primal scene of “blackness.” But what of the boy who provokes it with his cry, “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” (*B* 112). What of his trauma of identity, his sudden subjectification as not-black, his “schema”? Obviously there is no symmetry here: the power in this encounter is radically uneven. Yet we might miss a critical insight into the colonial subjectivity that the boy represents if we ignore him altogether. If blackness is a “fact” even when it is revalued and embraced (as in political movements of the 1960s and 1970s), or bracketed and deconstructed (as in critical discourse of the 1980s and 1990s), it is also a “fantasy,” one with great effectivity as such. In “The Fact of Blackness” Fanon does not really explore this other side of the fantasy; I want to do so here in relation to the primitivist encounters of Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner at the turn of the twentieth century.

#### WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

Confronted by the irrational force of colonial racism, Fanon turned to Freudian psychoanalysis, and I will follow his lead. Yet in matters of race as of gender this turn is always ambiguous, for psychoanalysis cannot be removed from its imperial context any more than from its heterosexist assumptions. A primitivism is inscribed in psychoanalysis too, one that correlates fantasies of racial otherness and female sexuality.<sup>3</sup> And yet, since fantasy is one of its primary concerns, psychoanalysis is also crucial to the critique of primitivism—as long as its own primitivist fantasies are questioned at the same time.

The imbrication of primitivism in anthropology, the other great human science of otherness, has been much discussed in the last two decades. Ever since “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” the 1984 exhibition concerning “affinities” between modern art and tribal art staged by the Museum of Modern Art, this critique has considered primitivist art of the twentieth century as well.<sup>4</sup> Yet the

imbrication of primitivism in psychoanalysis is still not much remarked upon. This primitivism involves, first, an association of racial others with instinctual impulses and/or symptomatic conflicts, as in the subtitle of *Totem and Taboo* (1913): “Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics.” Often it also includes a further association of tribal peoples with pre-genital orders, especially oral and anal stages, an association in which adult genitality is correlated with proper civilization as achievements somehow beyond the reach of “savages,” as in an early line from *Totem and Taboo*: “their mental life [is] a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development.”<sup>5</sup> What work do these primitivist associations do in Freud? How bound up is his psychoanalysis with the racist discourses of the nineteenth century? How are these connections confirmed and/or contested in modernist art? For other schools of psychoanalysis, some of these questions are moot: followers of Melanie Klein dispense with developmental “stages” in favor of structural “positions,” and students of Lacan disdain the analogies between the infantile, the neurotic, and the primitive as part of the early (“biological”) Freud. Nevertheless, a primitivism remains inscribed in much psychoanalytic theory, and thus, given its discursive importance still today, in much critical theory as well.

It is a familiar question: how to use and to critique a theory at the same time? Here I will retain the conception of stages in Freudian psychoanalysis, but not its association with tribal peoples. Or, more precisely, I will reverse the import of this association—to see “primitive anality” not as the property of any tribal people, for example, but as the projection of particular kind of modern subject onto such societies. The question then becomes not: what is primitive anality? but: why is such a notion fabricated in the first place—out of what desires and fears?

Freud also associated the base instincts with social others, particularly the proletariat. This, too, is a typical association of his time, which encompasses other figures as well, such as women (especially prostitutes) and Jews. From the normative position of the white bourgeois male, all these figures are deemed primitive in psychosexual development, moral aptitude, and civilizational capacity.<sup>6</sup> Despite his ambivalence (particularly as a Jew), Freud participated in this

ideological association, which implies that the sublimation of the instincts—as the very labor of art, the very purpose of civilization—all but necessitates the sublimation of these primitive figures too, a process from which they are then excluded, or at least rendered marginal.<sup>7</sup> In what ways do these figures threaten the bourgeois norms of white masculinity under which Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner also lived? And, because ambivalence is at issue here, in what ways do they entice these artists as well (fig. 1.1)?

Clearly, this ambivalence concerns sexuality, and it does not begin with Freud or, for that matter, with racist discourses of the nineteenth century. Consider the old binary of the noble savage and the ignoble savage. Long crucial to the European construction of cultural otherness, these figures were often split between Oceania and Africa, the Arcadian paradise of the South Seas and the barbaric sexuality of the “dark continent” (a metaphor which Freud also used to evoke female sexuality).<sup>8</sup> These binary figures continued in the nineteenth century, often with the noble savage presented, in neoclassical style, as a stray version of the antique ideal, and the ignoble savage presented, in romantic style, as a primary instance of cultural nativism. During this time the savage was still understood according to a few fixed practices, such as cannibalism and incest. At least since *The New Science* (1725) of Giambattista Vico, these primitive practices have marked the limits of human society, and in modern thought, too, they are conceived as fundamental taboos by Freud, Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille, and others. Yet precisely as taboos they are also ambivalent, sometimes transgressive fantasies: we civilized neurotics are attracted to the idea of such instinctual gratification—such complete oral freedom as cannibalism, such total genital freedom as incest—even as we are also revolted by it.<sup>9</sup> In this way the fantasmatic figure of the savage elicits an oscillation between esteem and disgust, with murderous envy somewhere in between, an oscillation that might underpin the opposition between noble and ignoble types.<sup>10</sup>

What do these ambivalent fantasies have to do with modernist art? Often they are active in its primitivist painting as well, and sometimes in the primitive scenes of Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner they pressure a particular construction of white masculinity to the point of crisis. I intend “primitive scenes” here to

resonate with “primal scenes” in Freudian psychoanalysis—that is, scenes in which the child witnesses or imagines sex between his or her parents, or, more generally, scenes in which the subject riddles out its origins (they are all but universal, according to Freud). Such pondering of origins is frequent in Gauguin, most explicitly in his *summa* of 1897–98, *D’où venons nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous?* (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?; fig. 1.2, pl. 1), a painting concerning the cycle of life and death made following a suicide attempt. For Freud, such questions involve “primal fantasies” of other traumatic origins as well, such as the origin of sexuality as imagined in the primal fantasy of seduction, and the origin of sexual difference as imagined in the primal fantasy of castration. Might the first trauma of seduction and sexuality be evoked in another fundamental painting by Gauguin, *Mana’o tupapa’u* (Spirit of the Dead Watching, 1892; fig. 1.3, pl. 2), the image of his frightened girl-bride Teha’amana naked on her bed? And might the second trauma of castration and difference be treated by Picasso in his even more epochal painting, *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907; fig. 1.4, pl. 3), the image of a fraught encounter with five prostitutes? My verbs—“evoked,” “treated”—are imprecise, but this imprecision hedges against any reading of the paintings as direct representations of such fantasies. Rather, my claim is that the paintings and the fantasies share certain elements of psychological motivation, pictorial imagination, and historical *episteme*.

For Freud the primal fantasies about the origins of identity, sexuality, and sexual difference are often mixed in our psychic lives, and they are evoked in similar fashion in the primitive scenes that interest me. There are other origins at issue here as well. On the one hand, these scenes might involve the founding of a new *subject* (for example, Gauguin hoped that *Spirit of the Dead Watching* would convey his savage identity to the Old World); on the other, they might also concern the founding of a new *style*, sometimes announced in a specific work (Gauguin treated *Spirit* as the artistic manifesto of his first South Pacific sojourn, 1891–93, and *Where Do We Come From?* as the testament of his second, 1895–1903). On occasion the stylistic founding invokes the subjective founding, and vice versa, as if the one impelled the other into being, or as if, in retrospect, they



1.2. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98. Oil on canvas, 54¾ × 147½ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tompkins Collection. Photograph © 2003 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1.3. Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 28½ × 36⅞ in. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., A. Conger Goodyear Collection, 1965 (1965:1). Photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.4. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 96 × 92 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York: the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (333.1939). © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York.

#### PROSTHETIC GODS

could be understood only in terms of each other (for example, Picasso looked back at *Les Femmes d'Alger* not only as a stylistic break but as a personal epiphany, his first “exorcism painting”).<sup>11</sup> In their primitive scenes, then, Gauguin and Picasso tease out questions of identity in terms both psychological and aesthetic, and they do so at a time when conceptions of both psyche and art were transformed, not least by colonial encounters.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes in these scenes various differences (cultural, racial, sexual . . .) are mapped onto one another in a conundrum of oppositions of European and other, white and black, male and female, active and passive, pure and perverse, heterosexual and homosexual. This overdetermination does not stabilize these oppositions; on the contrary, it volatilizes them. Not only are the artists both attracted and repelled by the primitive (this ambivalence is especially evident in Picasso), but they also both desire the primitive, often as an erotic object, and identify with it, often as an alternative identity (this ambivalence is especially evident in Gauguin). Again, these tensions are sometimes so great that they threaten to crack the oppositions that supported normative subjectivity at the time.

I want to stress this cracking in part to complicate the feminist critique of the masculine mastery of the primitivist avant-garde.<sup>13</sup> To insist on the fragility of this mastery, to underscore the volatility of its fantasies, is not to diminish the realities of power and the effects of domination underscored by these critiques. To be sure, the primitivist avant-garde was politically ambiguous at best, and at the very least it helped to manage conflicts and resistances provoked by the imperial dynamic of capitalist modernity. Yet this avant-garde was also ambivalently critical: its partial identification with the primitive, however imaged problematically as dark, feminine, and perverse, remained a partial disassociation from white, patriarchal, bourgeois society, and this disassociation should not be dismissed as insignificant.

#### SPLINTERED UP

In order to explore the crisis in masculinity that is sometimes intimated in primitivist painting, I want to draw on the classic text on the primal scene in Freud,

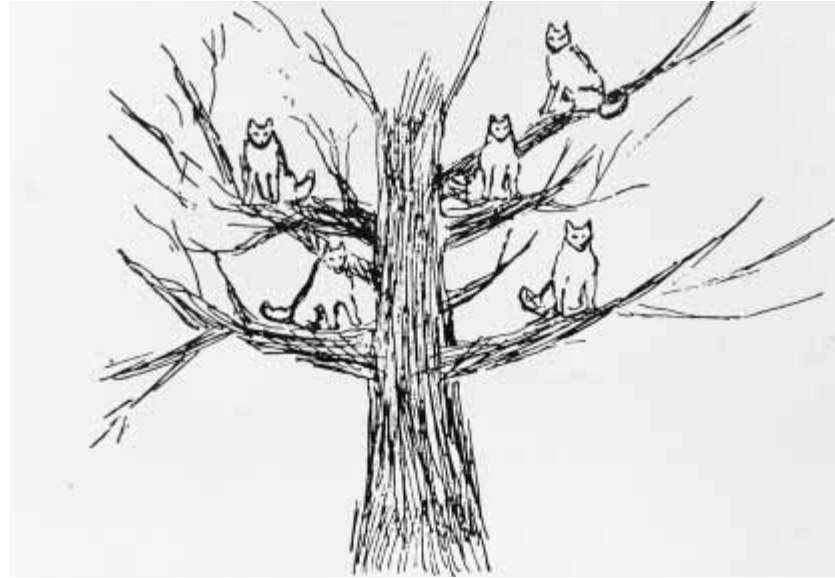


“From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918), written in 1914–15, only several years after the art works at issue here. The “Wolf Man” case history, an analysis of a young Russian aristocrat named Sergei Pankejeff, is a privileged text in critical theory, and there are readings richer than my account. For me here its chief importance lies in its detailed deconstruction of a particular formation of male subjectivity; whether it can be adapted to other subjects of the time—such as Gauguin and Picasso in moments of crisis—is a question I leave open.<sup>14</sup>

Freud refers the neurosis of the Wolf Man to several events of his early childhood. Three are most important: a great fear of wolves provoked by nursery tales; an enigmatic seduction by his sister around the age of three, with the boy in the passive position; and a later seduction of his nurse, with the boy in the active position, but with the seduction refused. At this point, Freud claims, the young Wolf Man was “thrown back” to a pregenital order of the drives, specifically to an anal sadism, which was later exhibited in his marked cruelty to servants and animals alike (note the tell-tale association of the two [*W* 170]). His sadism was also turned around in masochistic fantasies of his own beating, according to Freud, and in this manner an extreme ambivalence developed—an oscillation between active and passive positions, between sadistic and masochistic scenes—played out most intensely in relation to his father. In his active mode, Freud argues, the Wolf Man identified with his father; in his passive mode he desired his father—that is, desired to be *his* object of desire.

At this point Freud presents the famous dream (which he dates to age four) along with an explanatory drawing by the Wolf Man; compared to the dream, the drawing seems vapid, but perhaps it is protectively so (fig. 1.5). The boy dreams of six or seven wolves in a tree (only five appear in the drawing), all with bushy tails, utterly still, silently staring. Freud relates the traits of the dream to the wolf phobia of the boy as imaged through his nursery tales. But the “dreamwork” has turned these traits inside out: such is the force of his anxiety that they are not simply distorted but completely reversed. Thus the abundant tails point to no tail at all, that is, to his own feared castration; the stillness of the wolves indicates the sexual activity of his parents; and the silent stare of the wolves reflects his own

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.5. Drawing of the dream of the wolves by “the Wolf Man,” n.d.

fixed gaze within the primal scene. In short, the dream radically restages the most important elements of his primal scene proper (dated to age one-and-a-half), in which the young Wolf Man witnessed his parents in coitus *a tergo*, from the rear, with the genitals of both exposed—necessarily so for Freud, so that the little boy could see that his mother lacked a penis.

This account is open to question, of course, especially as a (re)construction, and a very tendentious one. However, for Freud the primal scene need not be actual; even if it is completely imagined, its traumatic effect can be real enough. Moreover, this effect develops over time, through deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), retroactively. For the boy cannot understand this scene in the first instance; it becomes traumatic only after his own sexual researches begin; it is only then (again, around age four) that he dreams his dream, only then that he remembers (or believes that he remembers) his father upright like the wolf in the nursery tale, and his mother “bent down like an animal” (*W* 183). Significantly, Freud terms this sexual position of *more ferarum* “phylogenetically the older form” (*W* 185), and, implicitly in his evolutionist correlation of the sexual formations of individual and species, it is the primitive that serves as the marker of this prior stage, of this psychosexual regression (again, “a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development”).<sup>15</sup> According to Freud, this position provokes a lifelong anal eroticism in the Wolf Man, which renders him precisely primitive. More, this primitive position, this primal scene, “splinters up” his sexual identity (*W* 187), divides him between his love for his father and his anxiety about the castration that he imagines to be necessary for its consummation. Finally, it is this anxiety that is figured in the wolves of the dream, whose gaze threatens his own vision (for Freud, fear of blindness often signifies fear of castration).

The analysis does not end there; in fact, it never ends for this expert patient, who gives up the couch only for the deathbed. However, its key aspects are all in place for my reading: faced with a castrative threat or a genital crisis, the subject regresses to a pregenital order, in which he oscillates between an anal *eroticism*, a passive masochistic mode (associated, as usual in Freud, with the feminine and the homosexual), and its active complement, an anal *sadism*—an oscillation that indicates a great ambivalence of psychosexual position.<sup>16</sup> My intention is not

to impose this profile on Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner, but, rather, to use its analysis of ambivalence to explore the dynamic of their primitivism. Yet how are we to locate such ambivalence in art? One danger is to move too directly between the presumed unconscious of the artist and the given work of art in a way that occludes the different determinations of each.<sup>17</sup> Another danger is to conflate the historical artist and the contemporary viewer in a way that collapses their different formations as well. Is the ambivalence of the primitivist encounter immanent in the image, activated in its address, or both? At least one point seems clear: this ambivalence exceeds the individual psyche of the primitivist artist. In fact, it is already inscribed in the two principal traditions out of which such artists work: avant-garde representations of the nude and exoticist representations of the other (especially in Orientalist and *japoniste* painting).

Consider first the avant-garde nude, which *Olympia* (1863; fig. 1.6) exemplified for Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner alike.<sup>18</sup> Here, as we know, Manet crossed the high genre of the nude with the low figure of the prostitute in a “desublimation” (an opening of the art work to bodily drives and/or social associations deemed base) that his primitivist followers competed to outdo. To this end, Manet also adapted a given sign of marked sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe: the black female servant who attends Olympia. The cultural historian Sander Gilman has related this figure to “the Hottentot Venus,” a fantasmatic image extrapolated from an actual African woman named Saartjie Baartman. According to Gilman, this figure represented an excessive black sexuality as part of a nineteenth-century ideology of absolute racial difference—a difference marked physically on her body in her large buttocks.<sup>19</sup> This sign of an excessive black sexuality was then incorporated in some representations of the dangerous white prostitute, as Gilman suggests through a juxtaposition of the Hottentot Venus and the rotund *Nana* (1877) of Manet. This incorporation in turn abetted the conflation of primitive and prostitute that became common in avant-garde studios (not to mention in police reports) well into the twentieth century. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* is only the most extreme instance of this “perfect image of the savagery that lurks in the midst of civilization,” as Baudelaire put it in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863).<sup>20</sup> A prime token in the mimetic rivalry of

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.6. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 74 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

primitivist modernists, the image of the primitive-prostitute was filtered through diverse styles, and it provoked such different temperaments as the moderate Matisse in his *Blue Nude (Memories of Biskra)*, 1907; fig. 1.7), whose hips are rotated in a way that protrudes her buttocks excessively, and the theatrical Kirchner in his *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella* (c. 1909; fig. 1.8, pl. 4), where this “primitivist contrapposto” is even more extreme.<sup>21</sup>

To cast these women in such poses is to refer them to an animalistic nature, and it can be decried as a pictorial act of gender subjugation. But are images like *Spirit of the Dead Watching* and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, *Blue Nude* and *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella* straightforward expressions of masculine mastery, or are they not fraught elaborations that bespeak a feared *lack* of this mastery? Do masterful subjects force such aggressive moves, or do these images not suggest an anxious ambivalence—which is thereby managed, perhaps, but not completely so? (André Salmon wrote that Picasso experienced great anxiety during the composition of *Les Demoiselles*; and Matisse shied away from the psychological implications of paintings like *Blue Nude*: “Above all I do not create a woman, *I make a picture.*”)<sup>22</sup> A critique that does not allow for this psychological ambivalence, let alone its pictorial transformation, might totalize more than deconstruct a particular construction of white masculinity. It also might mistake a will to mastery for the real thing, and so bestow on this masculinity a phallic authority that it did not (does not) possess.

The ambivalence of these artists toward the primitive often seems multiple. First, even as the primitive is privileged in this art, it remains the sign of the primal and the regressive. Second, the artist might aim to become the primitive as well as to possess it; again, the primitive might be an object of identification as well as of desire. Finally, the very desire here might be double—a desire for mastery over the primitive as well as a desire for surrender to it. In *Les Demoiselles*, for example, does Picasso position his masculine viewers (of which he is the primary one) to dominate his prostitutes or to be dominated by them? It is not clear: the painting is a stand-off, a stare-down. It is this overdetermined ambivalence that I want to examine, in part through the model presented in the Wolf Man case history, of eroticism shot through with sadism.

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.7. Henri Matisse, *Blue Nude (Memories of Biskra)*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 55 in.  
The Baltimore Museum of Art: the Cone Collection (BMA 1950.228). © 2003 Succession  
H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: The Baltimore Museum  
of Art.

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.8. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella*, c. 1909. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 31½ in. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. © Ingeborg & Dr. Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.



Ambivalence is also in play in the other tradition that adumbrates primitivist painting: the exoticist tradition. Often in Orientalist art and sometimes in *japoniste* art, racial others are presented as passive, feminine, given over to the masculine viewer, even (or especially) when the figures are male. A colonial gaze doubles a sexual gaze in a manner that seems to confirm masculine mastery. But here, too, this mastery hardly seems secure; again, it would not require such displays of submission if it were. The visual theatre of Orientalist painting often plays on voyeurism and exhibitionism as well as on sadism and masochism in ways that it does not always control. In this regard consider two prime instances of Orientalist painting, early and late: *The Death of Sardanapalus* by Delacroix (1827; fig. 1.9), a romantic scene with sadomasochistic currents if ever there was one; and *The Snake Charmer* by Gérôme (c. 1880; fig. 1.10), an illusionistic exhibition designed for our voyeuristic gaze. The Delacroix stages an erotic fantasy of a harem under the knife, as the doomed Assyrian king made famous by Byron gazes down indifferently on the murder of his concubines, with a fantasy of an orgy compounded by a fantasy of a massacre. The Gérôme advertises its erotic promise in its very title: a shapely boy stands in the foreground, wrapped in nothing but a massive snake, which he holds erect for the depicted audience of Muslim men in front of him, but also, with his rear exposed, for the actual audience of European viewers behind him. The Delacroix is a double fantasy of absolute power and abject submission: contemporary viewers could both identify with the sexual authority of the king and delight in his political downfall (a perfect compromise for an audience still concerned, in 1822, about royal despots).<sup>23</sup> The Gérôme is a homoerotic scene, but with the homoeroticism projected onto the exotic other, where it might be both privately enjoyed and publicly denounced—as the perverse practice of an immoral people in need of colonial correction (this moral might be extracted from *The Death of Sardanapalus* as well).<sup>24</sup> However, even when Orientalist painting aims to reassure the European viewer in these ways, its very appeal to erotic fantasy might produce a volatile ambivalence: identification and desire might tangle, masculine and feminine positions blur, active and passive aims cross.

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.9. Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 153 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 195 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.10. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, c. 1880. Oil on canvas, 33 × 48 in. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Such ambivalence is more intense in primitivist painting, perhaps because the primitive was associated more directly with the unconscious and the infantile. (The Near East could not be denied civilizational status in the same way, while the Far East was often portrayed as a third term, at once civilized and primitive, decadent and childlike.) Of course the valences of West and other are also different in primitivist discourse; in his Tahiti writings, for example, Gauguin often presents the European ego as the perverse term and the savage other as the pure.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the structure of values persists in this very reversal, as does the discourse of pathology (terms like “degeneration” and “decadence” abound in Gauguin as well); moreover, the ambivalence centered on the (anally) erotic is even stronger in primitivist art than in exoticist art. On the one hand, in primitivist discourse there is an explicit desire to break down the cultural oppositions of European and other (white repression and dark sexuality, culture and nature), as well as the psychic oppositions held to underlie them (active and passive, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual), a desire that is very pronounced in Gauguin. On the other hand, there is a reactive insistence on these same oppositions, a revulsion at any such crossings over, a reaction that is very pronounced in Picasso. This contradiction cannot be resolved, because the primitivist seeks both to be *opened up to difference*—to be taken out of the self sexually, socially, racially—and to be *fixed in opposition to the other*—to be established once again, secured as a sovereign self.

Might this psychological ambivalence also inform the political ambiguity of primitivist personae? At once bourgeois and bohemian, Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in a cowboy hat inspired by Buffalo Bill, and his activities there were sometimes mocked on the indigenous side and often condemned on the colonial side. In his own terms, he was both “sensitive” and “Indian,” Parisian dandy and Peruvian savage (his maternal grandmother, Flora Tristan, a socialist bluestocking with whom Gauguin identified, was from an old Peruvian family, and he spent six years of his childhood in Lima); and he tended to see his psychological and political conflicts in these physical and racial terms—as a direct result of his “two kinds of blood, two races” (*WS* 236).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, might this tension between the desire for an ecstatic difference and the need for a stable identity-in-opposition

#### PRIMITIVE SCENES

contribute to the aggressivity frequent in the primitivist encounter—an aggressivity intermittent in Gauguin and overt in Picasso? Again, this ambivalence can be so intense as to involve a cracking in this masculinity, in its genital heterosexuality; hence the importance of a theoretical model whereby such a subject, faced with a threat deemed castrative, is “thrown back” to a conflictual anal phase, with both active sadistic components—components of mastery over the other—and passive masochistic components—components of surrender to the other.<sup>27</sup> This is not to psychologize the art or to pathologize the artists; it is only to suggest the traumatic knot that some primitivist art might work over.

#### VIOLENT HARMONIES

I have deferred the particular narratives of primitive scenes in Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner in order to prepare them theoretically, lest they be taken as iconographic keys to the art. In fact these stories are suspect as accounts of specific works, but then the primitivist painting is always a working over of multiple encounters—artistic precedents, prior schemes, imaginary scenes, actual events. Crucial here is that the artists were compelled to contrive such origin myths in the first place, and to do so in a melodramatic idiom of desire and fear. More is at stake, then, than the usual portrait of the artist or legend of the avant-gardist, for the primitive scene is a performative act of a special sort, often a staging of rebirth sited in the field of the other (again, in a way that speaks to the popular imagination of imperial subjects at home). As might be expected, these sitings are national: Gauguin travels to French territories (first to Martinique and Panama, twice to Tahiti, and finally to the Marquesas), while Picasso favors objects that flow to Paris from French territories in Africa and Oceania, and Kirchner is especially drawn to a beam frieze from Palau, a German colony in Micronesia.

The Gauguin story is from *Noa Noa*, his 1893 memoir of his first stay in Tahiti. It tells of his rite of passage into “savage” life, but it reads like an account (to paraphrase Freud) of “some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction” between different bodies. Although the story is well known, it is too resonant not to quote at length:

I have a native friend [who] comes to watch me whenever I work. . . . This young man ["Totefa" in later versions of *Noa Noa*] was thoroughly handsome and we were very friendly. Sometimes . . . he questioned me as a young savage wanting to know many things about love in Europe, and I was often at a loss to know how to answer him.

One day I wanted to obtain a rosewood trunk, fairly large and not hollow, from which to make a sculpture. "For that," he told me, "you have to go into the mountains, to a certain place where I know several fine trees that might suit you. If you like, I'll take you there and we'll bring it back together."

We left early in the morning. The Indian paths in Tahiti are difficult for a European: between two mountains that cannot be climbed is a cleft where water emerges through rocks. . . . On either side of the cascading stream, the semblance of a path, trees pell-mell, monstrous ferns, all of the vegetation growing wilder, becoming more and more impenetrable as we climbed toward the center of the island.

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

From all this youthfulness, from this perfect harmony with the natural surroundings, emanated a beauty, a perfume (*noa noa*) which enchanted my artistic soul. From this friendship, which was so well cemented by the mutual attraction between the simple and the compound, love was blossoming within me.

And there were only the two of us.

I had a sort of presentiment of crime, desire for the unknown, awakening of evil. Then too a weariness of the role of the male who must always be strong, the protector having to bear the weight of his own heavy shoulders. To be for one minute the weaker being, who loves and obeys.

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

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

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

“*Toe toe*” (“It’s cold”), he said to me.

“Oh, no!” I replied, and that negation, answering my earlier desire, resounded in the mountain like a sharp echo.

I plunged eagerly into the bush, which had become increasingly wild; the child continued on his way, with that limpid gaze. He hadn’t understood a thing; I alone bore the burden of an evil thought, an entire civilization had preceded and had instructed me in it.

We reached our goal. . . . Several trees (rosewood) spread their enormous boughs. The two of us, both savages, began to chop at a magnificent tree. . . . I wielded the ax furiously, and my hands were covered with blood as I cut with the pleasure of brutality appeased, of the destruction of I know not what. In time with the sound of the ax I sang: “Cut down the entire forest (of desires) at the base. Cut out love of self from within you. . . .” All the old residue of my civilized emotions [was] utterly destroyed. I came back serene, feeling myself another man from now on, a Maori. Together we carried our heavy burden gaily, and again, but calmly this time, I could admire the graceful lines of my young friend as he walked ahead of me,

lines as robust as the tree we were carrying. The tree smelled like a rose; *noa noa*.

By afternoon we had returned, tired.

He asked me: "Are you content?"

"Yes." And inside myself I said again: Yes. No doubt about it, I was at peace with myself from then on.

Every stroke of my chisel on this piece of wood brought back memories of a sweet tranquility, a fragrance, a victory, and a rejuvenation.<sup>28</sup>

There are many twists in position here. Totefa comes to Gauguin with questions above love in Europe, but Gauguin is the novice in secrets of the island. The landscape is gendered feminine, a wilderness of clefts and ferns, and Totefa is intimate with her (he leads "by scent alone"), while Gauguin is not ("the Indian paths in Tahiti are difficult for a European"). Although they are united as two men on a quest ("naked with a loincloth . . . an ax in our hand"), this solidarity breaks down into differences of age and culture—the corrupt, old, "compound" European versus the pure, young, "simple" native—and Gauguin marks these differences sexually: as Totefa delves deeper into feminine nature, he becomes degendered, "sexless." At this point Gauguin appends, in the margin of his manuscript, two extraordinary notes: "1. The androgynous side to the savage, the little differentiation of sex among animals. 2. The purity brought about by sight of the nude and the freedom between the two sexes. The way vice is unknown among savages." This primitivist association of savage, animal, and androgyne is pronounced in Gauguin, and he often celebrates the affinity between the sexes in Tahiti. Far from "sexless," this affinity is erotic for him, and he is aroused ("unafraid of laws, my temples pounding"). As Totefa is degendered—or, more precisely, regendered as androgynous—Gauguin retains a masculine position, but only for a moment, as he wearies "of the role of the male." Here, in another exceptional note, Gauguin admits a desire that he cannot name in the text: "Desire, for one instant, to be weak, a woman."<sup>29</sup> Apparently he can imagine sex between



men only as androgynous, as passive, and finally as feminine (remember that he is behind Totefa on the path). Yet Gauguin cannot tolerate this conundrum for long, and soon he condemns his desire as homosexual “vice,” “crime,” “evil.” At this point Totefa turns, and “the hermaphrodite” disappears; lest his own identity be utterly confounded, Gauguin moves abruptly to reclaim a masculine position. His return is marked by a plunge into water: this singular feeling “negates” his promiscuous vision.<sup>30</sup>

The landscape remains coded as feminine, however, and the initiation ends, conventionally enough, with its violation; penetration is here displaced onto nature (“I plunged eagerly”). No longer rendered androgynous, let alone homoerotic—that was too dangerous—Totefa is remade as innocent (“limpid as clear waters”), even infantile (“the child . . . hadn’t understood a thing”). In the end he must be the novice, for, along with the feminine coding of nature, this positioning reestablishes Gauguin in his dominant identity, his European masculinity, at the very moment when he believes it to be shed. The situation is not yet stable, however, and at this point his sexuality betrays its sadomasochistic tendencies (“I wielded the ax furiously . . . my hands were covered with blood”). This act of cutting purges him somewhat, and “with the pleasure of brutality appeased,” he returns “serene.” (Gauguin painted this activity in *The Man with the Ax* [1891; fig. 1.11], here sited on a beach.) Along with a purging of desire, perhaps the cutting of wood represents a reclaiming of difference, a restoring more than a destroying of identity, of “love of self,” through the very act of cleaving. For in the end Gauguin is “serene” only in his difference, precisely because of his dominance, not as a result of an overcoming of either. He can sublimate the primitive, internal as well as external, whose “graceful lines” he now “admires” more than desires, and he looks forward to carving as the means of this sublimation. (Perhaps, if cutting reestablishes difference, carving sublimates it.) Already the “presentiment of crime” is a memory to be recalled in “tranquility.”

However, this “peace” is temporary, even illusory; his ambivalence is never resolved in his art, thematically or formally: with its different cultural references, discordant color schemes, and bizarre spatial constructions, it remains conflicted

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.11. Paul Gauguin, *The Man with the Ax*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 27½ in. Private collection, Bridgeman Art Library. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library.

to the end. As Gauguin said of his writings, his paintings are, “like dreams, as like everything else in life, made of pieces.”<sup>31</sup> Or, as August Strindberg once remarked, Gauguin is like a “child who takes his toys to pieces so as to make others from them.”<sup>32</sup> Yet his ambivalence is not expressed so directly in the heterogeneity of his art; among other mediations, it is run through the various operations of his symbolist aesthetic. Often Gauguin writes of his “synthetist” fusions of color and drawing and memory and perception, and sometimes he does so in terms of a synesthetic mixing of the “high” faculties of the visual and the visionary with the “low” senses of touch and smell. “I dream of violent harmonies,” he wrote famously of *Where Do We Come From?*, “in the natural scents which intoxicate me.”<sup>33</sup> These allusions to harmony and scent are in keeping with symbolist notions of the time—of music as the paragon of the arts, and of smell as the sense of affinities—but the “violence” of this “intoxication” is distinctive. For the most part Gauguin seeks to elevate the low senses, associated as they are with the primal and the primitive, the other gender and the other race, and this act of sublimation points to the ideological role of smell in primitivist thought (as we will see, this role is pronounced in Picasso too).

For the historian Alain Corbin, the degradation of smell is part of a bourgeois code of the senses that became dominant only in the nineteenth century. Only then was the odor of waste deemed a threat to social order—a threat associated first with the peasant, then with the proletariat, and finally with the primitive.<sup>34</sup> None of these figures could escape this cultural association with smell; it was a double bind: they were regarded as either sensitive to smell, and so natural in the sense of pure, as Totefa is, or insensitive to it, and so natural in the negative sense, as primitive. In *Noa Noa* and elsewhere, Gauguin seeks to revalue this affinity, to see the primitive as a figure not only of smell but of fragrance (such is the meaning of *noa noa* for him), and it is an important aspect of his synesthetic ideal—indeed, of his symbolist aesthetic in general. Yet this “unsettling of all the senses” (as Rimbaud famously termed it) has other implications as well. At once primal and refined, this fragrance, this *noa noa*, is intended to confound the order of European sense and, implicitly, to question the social hierarchy that sub-

tends this sensuous order. Even if Gauguin only elaborates on the old French fantasy of Tahiti as a place of free love, gift exchange, and so on (already a received idea when Diderot wrote his *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage"* in 1771), he also speaks to the historically specific desire that the depleted sense of old Europe be "rejuvenated," even "intoxicated," and that capitalist divisions of labor, property, and class be slightly assuaged thereby.<sup>35</sup> This connection between synesthetic sense and fantasmatic freedom from the division of labor, property, and class is essential to the primitivist vision, and, however compromised by Club Med familiarity, this vision still has psychological force.<sup>36</sup> Might Gauguin mean to extend this imaginary freedom to another division, that of sex? That is, might release from sexual difference be the unconscious goal not only of the notion of *noa noa* in his text but, more importantly, of the androgynous figures and amorphous passages in his paintings—a seductive blind, a lush surface resistant to the depth of vision, of its incisive, even castrative effects? Might syntheist fusing and symbolist mixing bespeak a desire not only for synesthetic sensuality but also for polymorphous sexuality?<sup>37</sup>

In his *Early Manuscripts* (1844), Marx relates the refinement of the senses to the development of society, to the division of labor in particular; in this sense, too, "sublimation" goes hand in hand with "civilization." Even as Gauguin participates in this sublimatory project, he also works to complicate it, in part to reverse it. Perhaps this tension is another expression of his ambivalence, for he seeks refinement as well as regression in the senses and in the drives alike. That is, he seeks an aesthetic in which to sublimate is to not to moderate desire so much as to heighten it, to "sublime" it, and both sublimation and desublimation are at work in his "violent harmonies."<sup>38</sup> Here again, *noa noa* is an overdetermined term, for it seems to signify—to comprehend, to suspend—both base smell and fine fragrance, both regression and refinement.<sup>39</sup> It is as if the term captured a primary conflict of desire in Gauguin: to nuance difference in art as much as possible, *and* to undo difference in life altogether. As we will see, it also points to a deep fantasy: to arrive at an origin in which difference is not yet (or no longer) traumatic.

## EXORCISM PAINTING

Like Gauguin, Picasso seems to undergo an epiphanic transformation in his primitive scene, but his initiation is framed as a warding away of primitive “spirits” more than a coming into “savage” life. Here ambivalence is even stronger, less subject to management, than in Gauguin; certainly Picasso does not share in the synesthetic ideal of *noa noa*. Stirred by the power of the tribal objects in his primitive scene, he is also disgusted by the putative smell of the primal other, and the senses as well as the drives activated in his primitivist work seem to resist extensive sublimation.

As celebrated as the Gauguin tale, the Picasso story recounts his visit to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris in June 1907 (then called the Musée de l’Homme). As is well known, Picasso reworked *Les Femmes d’Alger* soon after this encounter with tribal objects; in particular he “primitivized” the faces of three of the five prostitutes, the two on the right side, squatting and standing, and the one at the far left, in profile, the most Gauguinian in style.<sup>40</sup> Formally, the painting is a palimpsest of two different conceptions: an “Iberian” composition completed after many studies in late May and/or early June (fig. 1.12), which included two male figures, a sailor in the center and a medical student at the far left (this version was influenced by a Louvre exhibition of Iberian sculpture in winter 1905–06, as well as by a Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d’Automne in 1906); and an “African” composition completed in early July, in which the transformed prostitutes alone remain—the sailor drops out, and the student metamorphoses into the prostitute in profile. The two central prostitutes retain Iberian visages, however, and according to European conventions of beauty they appear almost comely in contrast with the prostitutes masked in an African manner—a tension between attraction and repulsion that Picasso worked to achieve. Psychically, the painting is also a telescoping of two different scenes: a visit to a Barcelona bordello, which he treated as a traumatic sexual encounter, read through the visit to the Trocadéro, which he experienced as a traumatic racial encounter.<sup>41</sup> Thus the “montage” in the painting is at once temporal and spatial in a manner closer to the Freudian structure of the primal scene than

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.12. Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1907. Pencil and pastel on paper, 18¾ × 25 in. Öffentlich Kunstsammlung, Basel. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

any other primitivist work. Moreover, the old conflation of primitive and prostitute inherited from Gauguin appears complete, as do the crossings of desire and identification, objectification and personification. This ambivalence was still active when Picasso recounted his Trocadéro visit to André Malraux in 1937:

Everybody always talks about the influences that Negroes had on me. What can I do? We all of us loved fetishes. Van Gogh once said, “Japanese art—we all had that in common.” For us it’s the Negroes.

When I went to the old Trocadéro, it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell. I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn’t leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood that it was very important: something was happening to me, right?

The masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. But why weren’t the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean? We hadn’t realized it. Those were primitives, not magic things. The Negro pieces were *intercesseurs*; ever since then I’ve known the word in French. They were against everything—against unknown, threatening spirits. I always looked at fetishes. I understood; I too am against everything. I too believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! Everything! Not the details—women, children, babies, tobacco, playing—but the whole of it! I understood what the Negroes used their sculpture for. . . . All the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious (people still weren’t talking about that very much), emotion—they’re all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but not all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism-painting—yes absolutely!<sup>42</sup>

This is only one account of *Les Demoiselles*, of course, and it comes late, thirty years after the event, in the context of surrealism (which is also to say of psychoanalysis) that must have influenced the vocabulary of trauma here (“Spirits, the unconscious [people still weren’t talking about that very much]”). Nevertheless, despite its blindnesses, such as the simple equation of “Negro” and “fetish,” this reading has its insights, such as the consideration of the tribal objects in terms of ritual value. Like Freud and anthropologists from James Frazer to Mary Douglas, Picasso regards the primitive as intimate with the sacred—indeed, as sensitive to the imbrication of the sacred with the defiled; and he locates the tribal objects in this confused realm of taboo and pollution as agents endowed with fetishistic power—as *intercesseurs* and “weapons.”<sup>43</sup> (Incidentally, this is why the tribal objects are “magic things” for him, while “the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean,” courtly artifacts of the sort that Gauguin favored, are not. The latter are “primitive” only in the old art-historical meaning of the word, that is, outside the classical canons of Western art.) At the same time, Picasso shares in the ambivalence also imputed to the primitive by Freud, Frazer, and others, for he wants both to participate in this power and to be distanced from its effects, among which he counts not only spirits, the unconscious, emotion, but “women, children, babies.” In short, Picasso seeks to use the tribal objects apotropaically (as he imagines, in part rightly, that they were used): he wants to deploy the primitive, however, to ward away the primitive, to array spirits to defend against spirits—to turn the unknown and the indistinct against these same threats.<sup>44</sup> More explicitly than Gauguin, Picasso displays the ur-primitivist ambivalence between a desire for desublimation and regression (“something was happening to me, right?”) and a demand for sublimation and autonomy (“to help people . . . become independent”).<sup>45</sup> In fact he stakes this autonomy directly against the desublimatory threat of the feminine (“women, children, babies”) as well as against the fetishistic debasement of the other (“the Negro pieces”).<sup>46</sup>

On the one hand, Picasso associates the tribal objects with dust and smell, and reacts against this realm of dirt and shit with disgust. Such “matter out of place” threatens him with indistinction, and this association of indistinction with femininity and blackness makes the scene regressive for him.<sup>47</sup> On the other



hand, he is drawn to this regression, for it seems to promise subjective release as well as artistic innovation: it is a *regressive* realm that might be put to *transgressive* use. Perhaps from a retrospect of thirty years, Picasso could claim this point: that *Les Femmes d'Alger* had forced a break not only with the academic tradition of figure painting (desublimation of the nude and activation of the gaze are more radical here than in *Olympia* or *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, *Blue Nude* or *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella*) but also with the very structure of Western painting as understood since the Renaissance. Picasso initiates this break in both the stylistic diversity and the spatial complexity of *Les Femmes d'Alger*; and yet, as Yve-Alain Bois has argued, it is fully achieved only in the semiotic multiplicity of the collages and constructions that he developed five years later, perhaps in a relation of deferred action to the primitivist painting.<sup>48</sup> Crucial here, however, is that this move of avant-garde transgression is underwritten by an impulse toward psychic regression that is perceived, by Picasso no less than by Freud, as anti-civilizational, that is to say, as primitive.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud relates the development of civilization to the formation of the subject: the renunciation and/or sublimation of the drives is essential to both processes, but even more fundamental is the reaction against dirt and shit, against any anal-erotic involvement in these things. For Freud, this “reaction-formation” is the sine qua non of civilization and subject alike, and it is the crux of his own origin myth in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. When “man” first stood erect, Freud speculates there, his orientation both to the body and to the world changed utterly, and one result was the subordination of the anal and the olfactory in favor of the genital and the visual.<sup>49</sup> This reaction against shit and smell, dirt and disorder, is also at work in art: to defy its order is literally to mess with it. “Anal eroticism,” Freud writes elsewhere, “finds a narcissistic application in the production of defiance,” a formula that might be adapted for avant-garde defiance too, given all the anti-aesthetic gestures, from Dada to “abject art” in the 1990s, that have invoked dirt and shit.<sup>50</sup> Of course Picasso does not push his avant-garde defiance to the point of utter desublimation; in his primitive scene he flees this point—he hates the dirt and the smell projected there. Thus, however taken he may be by the potency of this disorder, he

reacts against it fiercely; he is desperate for distinction, eager for mastery—to the point of an aggressivity, even a sadism, that he also projects onto the primitive (“they were against everything . . . I too am against everything”).

Again the question arises: how is this ambivalence registered pictorially? Even less than with Gauguin can it be referred to the stylistic diversity of *Les Demoiselles*, for, as Leo Steinberg has shown, its abrupt shifts in manner are all purposive.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the double encounter with the prostitutes and the tribal objects was traumatic for Picasso, syphilophobic and superstitious as he was. The painting also came at a time of erotic crisis, prompted not only by fears about venereal disease but also by conflicts with his lover Fernande Olivier, and it is often read in these biographical terms. I have noted his anxiety during its making and the terror of others upon its viewing.<sup>52</sup> Yet *Les Demoiselles* does not resolve this anxiety or temper that terror. If it is “a form of visual abreaction,” a discharge of traumatic affect, as William Rubin suggests, it is not complete as such; rather, the painting (re)enacts this anxiety, and this (re)enactment is essential to its disruptive effect.<sup>53</sup>

How is this effect achieved? In the final version, Picasso transformed not only the content but also the address of *Les Demoiselles*, and here again the tribal objects at the Trocadéro must have influenced him. As Rubin has demonstrated, Picasso shifted the painting from a narrative register—perhaps an allegory of syphilis with the sailor and the student (as in the Basel study; fig. 1.12)—to an iconic register, in which these surrogates for Picasso and/or his imagined viewer are elided (as in the Philadelphia study; fig. 1.13). In linguistic terms, this is a shift from a neutral mode of indirect narrative (as in history painting) to an active mode of direct discourse.<sup>54</sup> Rubin sees this shift from narrative to iconic as a gradual achievement of Picasso over this period (it is already advanced in *Two Nudes*, 1906): “a progressive detachment from anecdote, an increased emphasis on frontality, a shift from dispersal to intense concentration in the play of pictorial forces, and a movement toward verticality in the format.”<sup>55</sup> As Gauguin remarked of his own figures, so Salmon commented of *Les Demoiselles*: they are neither “allegorical nor symbolic,” and the breakdown of these modes in the move to a more

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.13. Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. No. 145)*, 1907. Watercolor, 6¾ × 8¾ in. Philadelphia Museum of Art: A. E. Gallatin Collection. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

direct address is crucial to the breakthrough in high-modernist painting to a more immediate visuality—more frontal, flat, and abstract.<sup>56</sup>

“They are naked problems, white numbers on the blackboard,” Salmon also remarked of the prostitutes. “Thus Picasso has laid down the principle of the picture-as-equation.” This statement is usually taken to underscore the abstractive aspect of *Les Demoiselles*, radical enough for its time to be conveyed by a mathematical simile, as well as its conceptual aspect, which was supported by the example of the African objects. But this trope might also point to another aspect of *Les Demoiselles*, its modeling of the picture after an imaginary projection or psychic “equation.” For in the shift to the iconic register, *Les Demoiselles* becomes not only more direct in address but also more hallucinatory in effect: it becomes the encounter of the viewer as well. For us the stare of the prostitutes has some of the force that the stare of the wolves had for the Wolf Man: our look is doubled, both taken over and thrown back, and, male or female, we might well be suspended between desire and identification, attraction and anxiety. In short, more is at work in this epochal transformation of pictorial models than “proto-cubist” faceting, stylistic diversity, and direct address; there is also an intuitive tapping of the psychic force of such events as the primal scene.<sup>57</sup>

Some of the similarities between the dream of the Wolf Man and the painting of the prostitutes are superficial, such as the odd coincidence of five figures arrayed in an ambiguous space (with the penile tree of the dream matched in part by the penile gourd in the painting), but others might be more profound. For instance, in both dream and painting there is a confusion of human and animal (as in the nursery tales recalled by the Wolf Man and the African masks seen by Picasso). This bestial debasement is extreme in the squatting prostitute: with her back to us, head rotated and legs spread, she is, like the mother in the Wolf Man primal scene, “bent down like an animal.”<sup>58</sup> The other figures also undergo violent transformations—above all the two prostitutes in the middle, who, though prone on a disheveled bed, are thrust upright to the picture plane. Here, as Steinberg has argued, *Les Demoiselles* proposes “a reciprocity of engulfment and penetration” that “insinuates total initiation, like entering a disordered bed”: the space is made to heave, to draw us in and to push us back, in a phenomenological

#### PRIMITIVE SCENES

mimesis of the sexual act.<sup>59</sup> So too, as in the primal scene, there are confusions of subject position in the painting—not only in the process of its making (for example, the student transformed into a prostitute) but, more importantly, in the terms of its viewing. As we look, all eyes are fixed on us (even, or especially, the frontal eye of the prostitute in profile): like the Wolf Man before his scene, we are utterly still, silently staring. If the “similitude of sexual energy” seems to shatter the space of the painting, with each prostitute “singly encapsulated,” then this doubled gaze seems to lock it back together.<sup>60</sup> It also sets up a charged exchange of ambivalent effect—of actual immobility and imagined mobility, passivity and aggressivity, eroticism and sadism, castrative threat and fetishistic defense.<sup>61</sup> And what does this traumatic relay evoke if not the structure of the primal scene, which, for all its motility, is also framed like a picture and riveted by an exchange of silent stares? In the painting, as in the primal scene, there is an intense crossing not only of the optical and the tactile but of the active and the passive, to the point where the viewer might begin to feel almost as “splintered up” as the Wolf Man, all civilized hierarchy of senses and sexes confounded.

This is quite different from Gauguin; and yet one must ask of Picasso as of Gauguin: to what end is this staging of ambivalence performed if not in part to manage the masculine anxiety of such a primitive scene?<sup>62</sup> Picasso acknowledges that the primitive-prostitutes are apotropaic “weapons” against the very sexual-racial otherness that they otherwise represent, and the fact that he provides such “exorcism” might explain some of the cultural privilege granted both the painting and the painter for the performance. Nevertheless, this palliative aspect of *Les Demoiselles* hardly cancels its disruptive effect.

#### PRIMITIVE ENVY

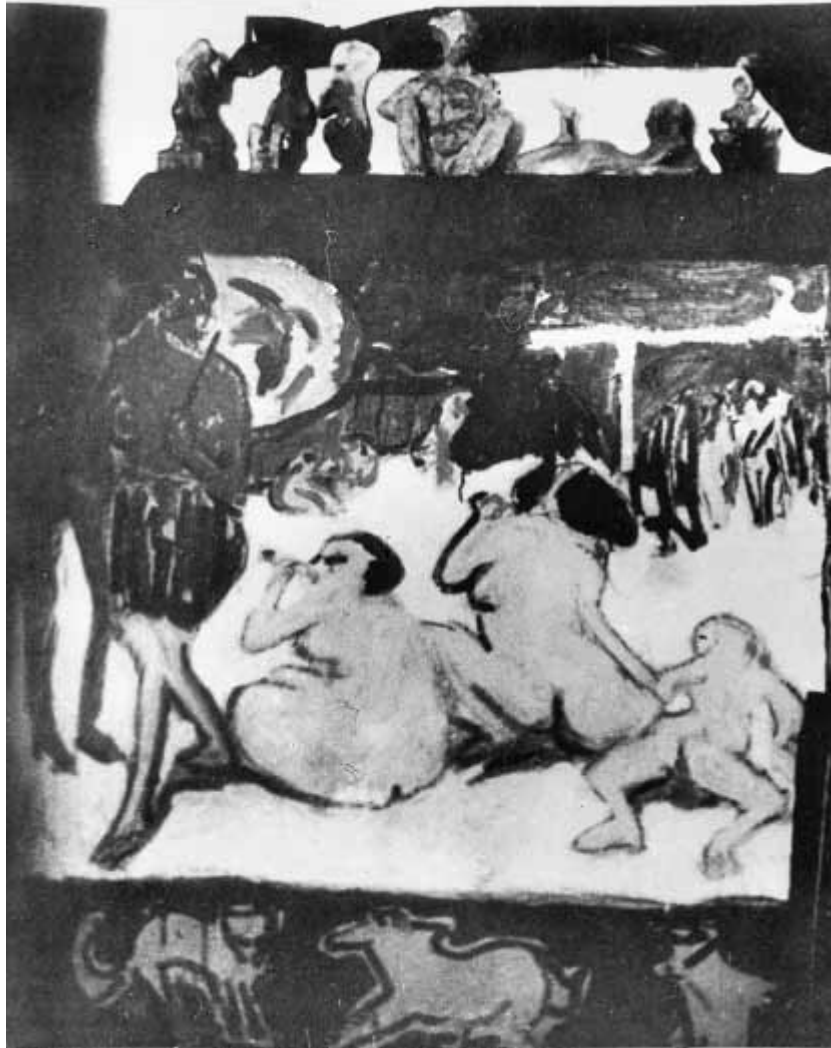
There is no Kirchner story like the Gauguin and Picasso tales. The primitivism of *die Brücke* was bohemian in spirit, a matter of life styles as much as of art styles (of a new relation to nature and sex in particular), and the expressionists who did travel to the South Seas, such as Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde, did so mostly in emulation of Gauguin. But then primitivism is always second-degree, even

with Gauguin, and a late start did not prevent Kirchner from fervid involvement in its visual world, especially from 1909 to 1911. If Picasso pushed primitivism to a pictorial extreme, Kirchner took it to a performative limit; perhaps there was no alternative, given the rapid acculturation of the primitive during this time.<sup>63</sup>

In these years Kirchner visited the tribal displays at the ethnological museum and the zoological gardens in Dresden. In one letter he writes about tribal objects one moment and a zoo exhibit of “Samoans and Negroes” the next.<sup>64</sup> This slippage between tribal art and racist entertainment was common among primitivists, at least since Gauguin had visited the colonial displays at the Universal Exhibition of 1889, but it was pronounced in Kirchner, as was the mapping of primitive onto prostitute. This figure involved Kirchner more than any other primitivist, and its frequent siting in urban milieus hardly diminished its primitivity for him; on the contrary, it suited the contemporary discourse of the city as a place not only of modern dynamism but of primitive degeneration.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Kirchner stressed the anal sign of primitive sexuality more than any other primitivist (with the possible exception of the squatting prostitute in *Les Femmes d'Alger*). In November 1909 he filled his little Dresden studio with related images—batik curtains covered with roundels of bathers and lovers, often viewed from the rear and often bordered by animal images, punctuated by wood sculptures of primitivistic nudes set on stands (fig. 1.14). There, too, he acted out a private theater of dancing and playing with friends and models (including two black jazz dancers known only as Sam and Milli).<sup>66</sup>

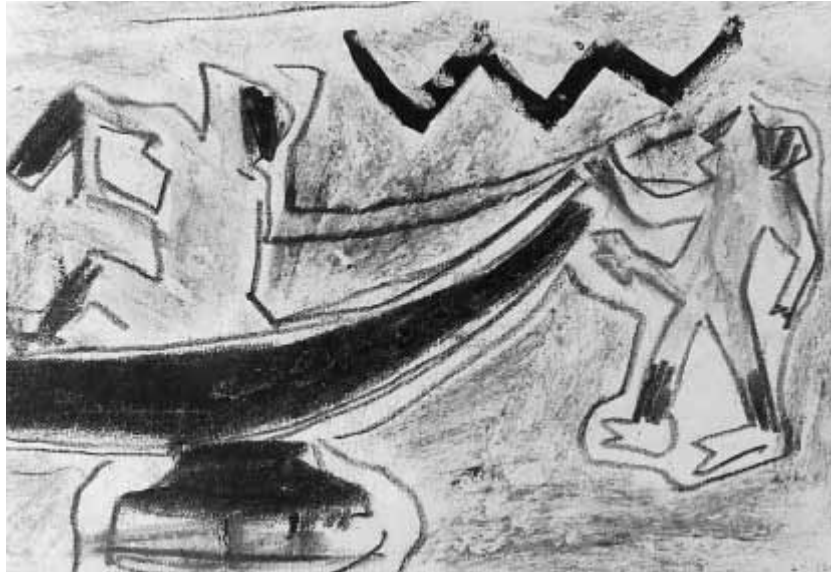
But where is his primitive scene? In a sense, it is acted out across these studio pictures and theatrical performances, which were clearly important to Kirchner (he photographed them extensively). Yet one image, a sketch sent as a postcard to fellow expressionist Erich Heckel in June 1910, suggests a particular fantasy at work here. In his visits to the ethnological museum, Kirchner was drawn to two beam friezes from a bachelor house in Palau in western Micronesia, which show schematic figures (similar to the ones in his studio decorations) involved in various activities, both everyday and mythological. In his sketch Kirchner focuses on one scene depicting a myth of coitus *a tergo* involving a man with a giant penis (fig. 1.15). Might this be a special sign of primitive sexuality for

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.14. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, decorations and sculptures in his studio, Dresden, c. 1909.  
© Ingeborg & Dr. Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern.

PROSTHETIC GODS



1.15. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, postcard drawing after a Palau frieze, c. 1910. Maler Erich Heckel, Dangast b/Varel, Oldenburg. © Ingeborg & Dr. Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern.



him? In his version the penis is even larger, the buttocks of the woman are even bigger, than in the frieze, as if under the force of an anal-erotic fantasy. Kirchner repeated the image around his studio; it is there, too, above his greatest primitivist figure, *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella* (fig. 1.8, pl. 4), perhaps produced before the postcard (it is dated c. 1909, though dating in Kirchner is problematic). This figure appears under a Japanese parasol, studio emblem of all the exoticisms that prepare the primitivisms of Gauguin, Picasso, and Kirchner; more importantly, she appears under the sign of anal eroticism, and in the most extreme of primitivist contrappostos (Kirchner also deployed this radical contrapposto in several sculptures).

In his art, Kirchner tended to elide the phallic figure of his postcard sketch, as did the other primitivists. Perhaps this fantasmatic figure of a superior masculinity produced too much anxiety. (“At the extreme,” Fanon writes, “I should say that the Negro, because of his body, impedes the closing of the postural schema of the white man” [B 160].) Perhaps this figure had to be elided so that the artist could take his place in the primitivist scenario—for only then could the artist assume this greater sexuality without too much risk, only then could he act out his racialist version of “male penis envy.” What I mean here is that the sexual ambivalence of a primitivist like Kirchner (or, indeed, Gauguin or Picasso) might be compounded by a racialist ambivalence—a conflict between a presumption of racial superiority and a suspicion of sexual inferiority. Again, the sexual power projected onto the black other was rarely acknowledged as such; rather, it was registered in displaced terms like “the magic” of the African tribal artist, or “the power” of the American jazz performer. But the projection seems active nonetheless, and it betrays a split in the self-image of the primitivist. As Woody Allen once remarked, Freud was wrong about penis envy: it is not a problem for little girls so much as it is for little boys, that is, for all men who suspect that they are little—and that is all men at one point or another. Moreover, this male penis envy often has a strong racial coloration.<sup>67</sup> This racial version of penis envy might compound the ambivalence of the primitivist, bind him even further to a conflicted hierarchy: on the one hand, to an overt paternalism regarding the other (as racial inferior), and, on the other, to a secret obeisance regarding the other (as sexual

superior). This imaginary hierarchy also suggests why it was difficult to feminize the primitive male in the manner of Orientalist and *japoniste* representations of exotic men. Sexual-racial anxiety could not be so assuaged in this case; hence the figure had to be elided, the position evacuated—but, again, with the effect that the white subject might also stand in his stead. In this respect, the primitivist identification with the black man involved his erasure, which is essential to the enactment of the primitivist fantasy.<sup>68</sup>

However partially, Gauguin was able to sublimate his ambivalence in his synthetist aesthetic, and Picasso to work over his anxiety in his apotropaic invention—to hold psychic regression at the point of artistic transgression. Perhaps Kirchner was more pressured by historical events than the others; in any case, he often seems to display his ambivalence more openly in his work. Called up for World War I, Kirchner had a nervous breakdown; hysterically paralyzed for a time, he depicted his own body image as severely disrupted in his famous *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (1915; fig. 1.16), a symbolic automutilation of the most graphic sort. Here, in the severely angular style of his Berlin years, Kirchner appears in military uniform; pressed to the picture plane, his sickly face stares out blankly, his eyes nearly in line with the breasts of the naked woman behind him (a model? a prostitute? a fantasm?), his amputated hand nearly in line with her sex. Contrary to art-historical legend, Kirchner was quite productive in his Swiss exile after 1917; though he was also often institutionalized, this crisis was hardly terminal. At the same time, he lived through a Nazi armoring of masculinity posed in outright reaction against ego disturbances of the sort evoked in *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*—an armoring that, in life as in art, insisted on a phallic body purified of all primitive sexualities (see chapters 3 and 4).<sup>69</sup> Like its political regime, this new aesthetic brooked no turn to the primitive; as is well known, all figures associated with the primitive were branded “degenerate”—Jews, communists, gypsies, homosexuals, prostitutes, the insane, and many others. Similarly branded in the infamous “Degenerate ‘Art’” exhibition of 1937, Kirchner committed suicide in June 1938. And for all intents and purposes, modernist primitivism met its literal catastrophe, its culmination and its counter, in the very different atavisms of the Nazis.<sup>70</sup>

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.16. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 27¼ × 24 in. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio: Charles F. Olney Fund, 1950. © Ingeborg & Dr. Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern.

## MARVELOUS EQUATION

To conclude, I want to return to Gauguin, to his version of beginnings and endings in such paintings as *Where Do We Come From?*, and to explore further the pictorial structure developed there (fig 1.2, pl. 1). So familiar is the painting that we forget how odd it is, with figures that are disconnected, colors discordant, and spaces discontinuous. And yet, as often in Gauguin, this disunity is counter-vailed, made articulate, by a greater unity, one that is analogous, in some respects, to the paradoxical unity of the dream, with its broken narrative that is at once fragmentary and fluid. As with my reading of *Les Demoiselles* in terms of the primal scene, I speak here only of formal analogy, not of symbolic interpretation (much less of direct representation); nevertheless, I think the parallel illuminates some of the force of the paintings.

The analogy between art and dream was common in symbolism. More than once Gauguin describes his texts as “sparse notes, lacking continuity, like dreams, as like everything else in life, made of pieces,” and this description holds for some of his paintings too.<sup>71</sup> It is not only his fragmentary “pieces” that evoke the dream; his citational “notes,” drawn from various sources (including his prior images), do so as well. Yet if they lack “continuity,” what frame holds the paintings together? Gauguin liked to relate his images to friezes and frescoes; and in “Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin,” an important essay of 1891 that preceded the Tahitian paintings, the critic Albert Aurier makes a similar allusion. “One might sometimes be tempted to take them for fragments of enormous murals,” Aurier writes of the Breton paintings of the late 1880s, “and they almost always seem ready to burst the frames that unduly contain them.”<sup>72</sup> This allusion to frames “ready to burst” is telling. “All the ambient material realities have gone up in smoke, have disappeared,” Aurier remarks of *The Vision after the Sermon* (1888), the great painting of the Breton maids huddled in the foreground who, inspired by a sermon, behold Jacob wrestling the Angel in the background. This bursting of the pictorial frame or burning away of “material realities” is in keeping with the idealist ambition of symbolism in general, but it also intimates a specific sublimation of the physical support that allows the painting to approximate

“a marvelous equation”—another trope from Aurier that suggests a spatial projection of images, as in a dream.<sup>73</sup>

These notions, which Gauguin might have originated, circle back to him as well. In a letter of February 1898 to Daniel de Monfried, he compares *Where Do We Come From?* to “a fresco whose corners are spoiled with age, and which is appliquéd upon a golden wall”—a further intimation of a broken story of the past translated into a vivid projection in the present, with the intense visuality and enigmatic narrativity of the dream.<sup>74</sup> This model is also implicit in the contrast that he draws to Puvis de Chavannes. “He is Greek whereas I am a savage,” Gauguin tells Charles Morice in a letter of July 1901.<sup>75</sup> That is to say, Puvis invokes a classical (sometimes biblical) frame of cultural reference that allows his paintings to be read in “allegorical or symbolic” terms, whereas he, Gauguin, has no such consistent code. Of course, Gauguin often states his desire to create such a mythic code (to be cobbled in part out of biblical allusions too, hence all his native Tahitian Eves and Marys), but much of the power of the Tahiti paintings stems from the fact that they sustain enigma rather than solve it. “The unfathomable mystery remains what it was, what it is, what it will be—unfathomable,” Gauguin writes in a manuscript titled “Catholicism and the Modern Spirit” (drafted in 1897–98, in the same period as *Where Do We Come From?*). “The wise man will seek to enter into the secret of the parables, to penetrate their mystery, to imbibe the enigmatic element in them” (*WS* 163–164). Above all else, desire is the enigmatic element in his new myth, and enigma and desire are bound up in Gauguinian primitivism as much as they are in Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>76</sup>

There are other similarities to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which Freud drafted in 1896, the year Gauguin returned to Tahiti after his two-year stay in Paris. Aurier relates the Breton paintings to “hieroglyphic texts”; Freud uses the same analogy in the dream book. Yet more suggestive here is his account of the dream as “a picture-puzzle,” a rebus of characters to be read not directly as manifest content but symbolically in relation to “real and imaginary events.”<sup>77</sup> Rhetorical parallels also exist between the dreamwork according to Freud and the art of painting according to Gauguin. In Freud four “factors” govern the double mission of the dream to express desire and to avoid censorship, and all

are pertinent to Gauguin. There are the operations of “displacement,” whereby psychic energy connected to one idea (image, event, or fantasy) is conducted to another idea along an associative chain, and “condensation,” whereby one idea is invested with the psychic energy of several associative chains at once. And there are the constraints of “conditions of representability,” whereby the ideas selected for a dream are shaped into images, and “secondary revision,” whereby these idea-images are arranged so as to form a continuous (if not coherent) narrative. It is not that Gauguin was Freudian *avant la lettre*, much less that Freud was somehow Gauguinian, but rather that Freud thinks the dream, in quasi-symbolist manner, as a kind of picture, just as Gauguin thinks the painting, in quasi-psychoanalytic manner, as a kind of dream. Indeed, the notions of “conditions of representability” and “secondary revision” seem to be modeled on pictorial practice.<sup>78</sup>

What kind of dream does Gauguin privilege in his Tahiti paintings? Two of the most important, *Mahana no atua* (The Day of the God, 1894; fig. 1.17, pl. 5) and *Where Do We Come From?* (1897–98; fig. 1.2, pl. 1), concern the enigma of origins and ends explicitly. “You have to return to the source, to the childhood of mankind,” Gauguin remarks in a 1895 interview (*WS* 110), and both paintings do evoke primordial states and uncanny correspondences that query the primary differences of male and female, nature and culture, human and divine.<sup>79</sup>

Three feet wide, *The Day of the God* is divided into three roughly equal bands that correspond to three roughly distinct spaces. In the background, under a pale sky streaked with cumulus clouds, we see blue sea and white surf; to the right lies a yellow beach with a brown hut, and three figures in a brown outrigger and one on a black horse. In this distant area, then, Gauguin sketches various interfaces of nature and society. The middle ground, on a slight rise, is a mostly human realm, yet it is governed by a dark idol that represents Hina, Polynesian goddess of the air and the moon. On the left of this central idol (whose small body is overwhelmed by a massive headdress) are two women in profile, twinned in light-blue sarongs, who carry an offering for the god on their heads, while a man with a pipe sits under a spindly tree. On the right of the idol a couple embraces, two more twinned women in orange-red sarongs dance, and a woman

PRIMITIVE SCENES



1.17. Paul Gauguin, *The Day of the God (Mahana no atua)*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 36 in. The Art Institute of Chicago: Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection (1926.198). Photograph © 1997 The Art Institute of Chicago.

gazes out to sea. In this middle area, then, is a sequence of individuals and couples involved in secular and sacred activities. Below this frieze of figures appears the most important group: three youths on rose-pink sand that slopes down to a wildly colored lagoon. On the right is a boy, in almost fetal position, his back turned to us, his right fist across his face; on the left is his near twin, in a similar pose but turned toward us, eyes open, toes in the water. In the center, in line with the idol, sits an older girl in the supple contrapposto that Gauguin often uses for his Tahitian women. (Drawn in part from a Buddhist figure from the Borobudur temple in Java, its arabesque is quite different from the brutal contrapposto of rotated hips and protruded buttocks discussed above.) She gazes at us, one hand in her long hair, her feet in the water, as an orange-red cloth (the same color as that of the dancers) snakes from her lap across her loins down to the lagoon. Arrayed in complementary poses, these figures suggest ambiguous states of (non)being—between dreaming and waking, between near-androgynous pre-pubescence and sexual difference.

Below these figures lies the foreground, a bizarre lagoon painted in lurid pools of discordant colors—yellows, reds, and oranges, greens, blues, and blacks. They can be understood as water and rock, refractions of the bottom and reflections of the sky, but the primary effect is of a primal formlessness, or, more precisely, of a thermal mixing-into-form of spermatic and oval shapes. As we scan up the painting and back into its spaces, a passage is thus suggested from the inchoate life of the lagoon to the sexual latency of the children, to the differentiated world of the adults involved in secular and sacred activities, to the village, sea, and sky beyond—a passage from the amnionic through the human and the cultural, back to the oceanic.<sup>80</sup>

In *The Day of the God* there is a double focus on the two central figures, the girl and the god, situated between water and sky. The girl is captured at a crucial moment in the ritual passage between childhood and adulthood (the red cloth across her loins might suggest the onset of menstruation). If she is in sexual transformation, the god appears beyond sex—or rather, sex is displaced here to the huge headdress, at once phallic and ovarian in shape; in this light she is another Gauguin androgyne, perhaps the primary one. (Gauguin elevated Hina beyond



her importance in Polynesian cosmogony, perhaps because of her frequent combination with the god Ta'aroa as a single androgynous deity.)<sup>81</sup> With her outstretched arms and upturned hands, this figure of in/difference seems to orchestrate—at once to divide and to connect—the different grounds of the painting, the various traditions of its sources, the diverse activities of its figures. Perhaps *The Day of the God* represents a ritual “day of the god” that reenacts the creation of the world, of its original division into difference. But if so, it also suspends this moment (as a painting it cannot do otherwise), and this suspension of origin at the point of difference—of difference before it divides, as it were, traumatically—seems to be the great desire of Gauguin here. Indeed, throughout his primitivist work he evokes various states of in/difference both in terms of gender (paintings of women alone, of men alone, of both together, different and alike) and through interfaces of nature and culture and man and god. Again, as in his primitive scene, his art often puts difference under pressure in a way that suggests a great ambivalence regarding its founding and its unbounding alike. Like Freud, Gauguin sees life, not death, as the great force of discontinuity, and eros as an essential way, in life, to restore the continuity that life otherwise disturbs (this also anticipates Georges Bataille).<sup>82</sup>

*The Day of the God* represents a cycle of differences and indifferences, of correspondences and comminglings, in a world that is “oceanic.” Freud considers this term in the first pages of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In response to his prior book, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), his friend, the French author Roman Rolland, had written Freud that “the true source of religious sentiment” lies in a “sensation of ‘eternity’ . . . limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic.’”<sup>83</sup> Freud is skeptical of the notion: “I cannot discover this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself.” And his own myths of origin do center on the founding, not the unbounding, of difference: difference from the animal, as in the rising-upright of man in *Civilization and Its Discontents*; difference as articulated in language, religion, and other symbolic systems, as in the guilt-ridden expiation following the murder of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo*; and so on. In a sense, Gauguin hedges the positions of Rolland and Freud in his primitivist work; that is, he seeks the point between oceanic oneness and symbolic division, again as if to hold the two prin-

ciples in suspension. Such suspension is imaged in the inchoate lagoon of *The Day of the God* and in similar passages throughout the Tahiti paintings. It is there, for example, in *The Man with the Ax* (fig. 1.11), where, as in his primitive scene, difference is figured as both destructive (a literal cleaving) and creative (a symbolic making and/or marking). In *Noa Noa* Gauguin writes of the “long serpentine metallic-yellow leaves” that appear “on the crimson ground” in this painting. They are literally, deeply, of the earth, yet at the same time he regards them as “a whole Oriental vocabulary, the alphabet (it seemed to me) of some unknown mysterious language” (WS 80). It is this tension—between the autochthonous and the fabricated, the formless and the differentiated, the pre-symbolic and the symbolic—that Gauguin treats, especially in *Mahana no atua*, as a fundament of all creation, personal, pictorial, universal: “It seemed to me they spelled that word of Oceanic origin, *atua*, ‘god.’”<sup>84</sup>

Painted some three years after *The Day of the God*, *Where Do We Come From?* is over four times larger; its size alone suggests the grandeur of the last testament that Gauguin intended it to be. Once more he gives us a sequence of figures, solitary and grouped, almost all female, set in the midst of domestic animals and wild birds “on the bank of a river in the woods.”<sup>85</sup> Hina reappears with a similar gesture, but she is more feminine, less fierce, than in *The Day of the God* (her headdress is reduced, and her color is lighter). “She seems to point to the next world,” Gauguin writes in his famous letter concerning the painting to Monfried (WS 160); and she does recede in favor of the human figures, especially the man reaching for fruit in the center. Here the day of the god, of ritual creation, has passed to the time of man, of the human pondering of creation: where from, what, where to? As commentators have long suggested, the painting is a riddle about life and death: from the sleeping infant on the right, free of care, to the old woman on the left, her head in her hands—from obliviousness to “resignation” or, perhaps, from helplessness to “futility” (this is how Gauguin describes her attitude). Yet, like the passage from lagoon to sea in *The Day of the God*, this movement from right to left implies a cyclical return (a left to right movement would have suggested a closed narrative of life to death). “Man, they say, trails his double after him,” Gauguin writes in *Avant et après*, his “intimate journals”

written a few months before he died in May 1903. “One remembers one’s childhood; does one remember the future?”<sup>86</sup>

Along with seven other paintings, *Where Do We Come From?* was exhibited in July 1898 at the Ambroise Vollard Gallery in Paris, where it was deemed obscure, fragmentary, a *mélange* of parts. This is true enough; yet these attributes are also in keeping with its dream logic, with some figures semi-allegorical, and others not, with some “out of all proportion, and intentionally so,” and others not. The painting is “a philosophical work on a theme comparable to that of the gospel,” Gauguin told Monfried, but it was not understood at the time, in large part because of its very insistence on enigma. Again, no code is offered, only citations of other art: the old woman is drawn from his own *Breton Eve* (1889), while the man picking fruit evokes both a tempted Eve and a crucified Christ (he is probably based on a study of *Christ at the Pillar* by Rembrandt). Gauguin performs this rewriting of “the gospel” in a primitivist idiom in other paintings as well; but here as elsewhere he leaves us between myths, neither in the old nor yet in the new. If *The Day of the God* suspends the creation of the world in its ritual reenactment, *Where Do We Come From?* combines Paradise and Fall, with more resignation than redemption (the old woman outweighs the sleeping infant in this respect).<sup>87</sup> In his famous letter to the critic André Fontainas (which includes the line “I dream of violent harmonies”), Gauguin sees the painting as an “imaginary consolation for our sufferings” that stem from “the mystery of our origin and our future.” He also states that its questions—of origin, identity, and fate—are “not so much a title as a signature.”<sup>88</sup>

This identification is key: it suggests that the painting is less a gospel than a riddle, perhaps along the lines of the Oedipal riddle, with Gauguin in the position of the Sphinx and the viewer in that of Oedipus.<sup>89</sup> The Sphinx asks Oedipus: What animal walks on all fours in the morning, on two feet at midday, and on three in the evening? Gauguin asks us: What animal sleeps in the morning, strives at midday, and huddles in the evening? Like Oedipus, like Gauguin, we know the answer in the abstract—“man”—but not the individual destiny, and that, Gauguin suggests, is our condition. Again: “The wise man will seek to enter

into the secret of the parables, to penetrate their mystery, to imbibe the enigmatic element in them” (*WS* 164). Not to solve them but to survive them.<sup>90</sup>

Note that Gauguin asks “*what* are we?,” not “*who?*”—*que*, not *qui*—as if the subject here is not yet (or no longer) formed, as if it were still (or once again) in the inchoate realm of enigmatic signifiers (see chapter 8). This is true, too, of *The Day of the God*, but *Where Do We Come From?* is less inchoate, more discordant, than *The Day of the God*: creation as division, as traumatic difference, has already occurred here; there is no ritual re-creation of the moment of origin, only a resigned waiting for the coming of the end. But after the end, as before the beginning, there is a release from difference, from ambivalence. Close to death, Gauguin wrote in *Avant et après*: “I dreamed I was dead and, oddly enough, it was the true instant when I was living happily. . . . I have begun to think, to dream rather, about that instant when everything was absorbed, asleep, overwhelmed, in the original slumber” (*WS* 296). It is a dream of existence, *avant et après*, free of difference.