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FOUR VISIONS OF TAHITI IN TWENTIETH CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE
GAUGUIN, SEGALEN, CHAUDOURNE, T'SERSTEVENS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Exoticism - an interest in foreign lands and peoples - has long held a place in major world literatures. From the History of Herodotus, the Germania of Tacitus, the travels of Marco Polo and the fantastic voyages of Pantagruel and Panurge down to the Typee and Omoo of Herman Melville, the Oriental, Polynesian and Turkish delights of Pierre Loti, the South Seas enchantments of Robert Louis Stevenson, the japonaiseries of Lafcadio Hearn, the lusty adventures of Jack London, the passages to India conducted by Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster and John Masters and the literary returns to the paradise of the South Pacific by Charles Nordhoff, James Norman Hall and James Michener, there have always been readers interested in, and literary men writing about, strange lands, their inhabitants and the effects of contact with them. It would seem reasonable, moreover, for us to expect this type of literature to grow both in volume and in importance as the world is increasingly shrunk by technical advance and the intermingling and interdependence of peoples are accelerated.

A thread of exoticism has run continuously through French literature ever since the Crusades brought the Occident into contact with the silken elegance of the gorgeous East and the discovery of America introduced Europe to the noble savage. Very frequently French exoticism took on a philosophic cast, and although many writers described foreign or imaginary lands merely in the spirit of adventure or exploration or fascination with the marvelous or the picturesque,
many others used their depiction of exotic societies to raise questions of ethics and to stress contrasts implying criticism of conditions at home.

As a result, two main philosophic currents have developed in French exotic literature, one, represented by Rousseau, attacking the complicated artificialities of civilization and glorifying the noble savage, particularly the red man of the American forests - the other, exemplified by Voltaire, praising civilized luxury and convenience, deprecating the noble savage, reveling in the sumptuous refinements of the Levant and of the Orient and extolling the wisdom of the noble sage.

The trail of the primitivist tradition of Rousseau leads from the **Cannibales** and **Coches** of Montaigne, the **Bétique** of Fenelon's **Telemaque** and the Troglobytes of Montesquieu's **Esprit des Lois** through the **Discours** of Jean-Jacques and the **Paul et Virginie** of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to the **Atala** and **René** of Chateaubriand.

Meanwhile the contrasting exoticism - the rationalist, epicurean - even sybaritic orientalizing of the type of Voltaire - after an early debut with the French version of the **Book of Marco Polo** and an eclipse during the Renaissance when American discoveries made the noble savage the fashion - returned to literary favor during the **grand siècle** of Louis XIV with such **turqueries** as the **Bajazet** of Racine and the Turkish ballet in Molière's **Bourgeois Gentilhomme**. The 18th century added the **Lettres Persanes** of Montesquieu and a veritable host of novels of harem life, of which **Le Sapha** of Crébillon fils and **Les Bijoux Indiscrets** of Diderot are perhaps the best known.

And finally the anti-primitivist view of exoticism found its most
complete statement in Voltaire's *Le Mondain*, *L'Ingénu*, *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, the article "Luxe" in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, the section "Homme" of his *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, his *Siècle de Louis XIV* and his famous letter to Rousseau with the ironical comment that reading Jean-Jacques's *Discours* give one "envie de marcher à quatre pattes."

In the realm of philosophical exoticism, therefore, the contrast was clear by April 6, 1768 between the cult of Rousseau's noble savage and Voltaire's noble sage. On that date Antoine de Bougainville, the first French commander ever to do so, sailed his vessels into the limpid waters of the lagoon surrounding what has been called the most beautiful island in the world. There the gallant navigator and his enraptured companions beheld what to their delighted eyes were the noblest savages of them all. The name they gave to that smiling country, suggestive of the *fêtes galantes* pictured in the idyllic canvases of Watteau, was *La Nouvelle Cythère*. It is also known by the Polynesian name of Tahiti.

The discovery of Tahiti added a new note to exoticism and new stature to the noble savage. The previous title holder in this category, the American Red Indian, may have been noble, but he also could be fierce, taciturn, gloomy, dirty and even ugly; moreover, the rigorous climate of French Canada, the American region best known in France, would offer little contribution to the charm of his legend. The Polynesian, on the other hand, as reported by Bougainville and his fellow voyagers, as well as by the English navigators Wallis and Cook, was unanimously held to be physically beautiful, generous, joyful, sunny in disposition, relaxed and easy-going in his approach to life,
constantly bathing in the island's many streams, possessing a velvety skin scented by perfumed oils and inhabiting a land completely free from dangerous reptiles or ferocious beasts and blessed by eternal summer.

With such an introduction it is not surprising that the subject of the South Seas has attracted writers to the extent that it has ultimately come to constitute a special category of exotic literature distinct in itself.

Between Bougainville and the end of the 19th century, the two most notable appearances of Tahiti in French literature are, of course, Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* and Loti's *Rarahu*, later re-named *Le Mariage de Loti*. In each of these the Tahitian native retains very much the *beau rôle* of the noble savage, and the civilized European appears something less by comparison.

In the late 19th century and in the 20th century, with the increased complication and mechanization of life, the blackening of industrial cities, problems of political and economic unrest, strikes, wars, (giving existence in the civilized world the aspect of an ordeal), it is natural that a literature of exoticism should flourish, whether in the form of philosophical protest setting up the noble savage in contrast to the evils of civilization, or in the form of literary escape to the picturesque shores of some cleaner, greener land. Conversely, there have been defenses of civilization in various terms, including those of the white man's burden. The continuance is detectable, both of the primitivist tradition of Rousseau and the anti-primitivist tradition of Voltaire.
As might be expected, writings about French Polynesia have been abundant during this period and they suggest an interesting field for investigation.

Notable studies in the development of the noble savage legend in early French exoticism have been made by Gilbert Chinard* and Geoffrey Atkinson. Development of the noble savage legend with special reference to British Romanticism has been treated by Hoxie Neale Fairchild in the famous work The Noble Savage, and James Baird in his Ishmael has dealt with primitivism and the South Pacific principally in terms of symbolism rather than of other considerations, and, as the title implies, with its emphasis upon the Pacific writings of Herman Melville.

In France, an excellent amount of French colonial literature up to 1930 has been produced by Roland Lebel. However, in order to include mention of the great number of selections, particularly those concerning Africa and Indo-China, that such a study implies, M. Lebel has limited

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his treatment of each work to a brief summary, often no more than a paragraph, and sometimes to the mere listing of the title and author.

Extending the time of the material studied up to post World War II and particularly concerning itself with the attitudes of the authors towards the traditionally leading elements of exotic literature (primitivism or anti-primitivism, the noble savage, escapism, the picturesque) it is the purpose of the present study to examine the continuing development of French exoticism through the literary visions of Tahiti presented respectively by four French writers during the 20th century: Paul Gauguin, the renegade bourgeois and bohemian foe of conformity; Victor Segalen, like Loti a naval man who found color and aesthetic delight in both Tahiti and the Orient; Marc Chadourne, of the disillusioned "lost generation" following World War I, the escapist who couldn't escape; and Albert t'Serstevens, antithesis of Gauguin and Rousseau, sharing Voltaire's disdain for the noble savage and his belief in the ultimate superiority of the morality, as well as the convenience, of civilization.
"It is not too late to give Gauguin his place as an original writer—one of those whom you seem to hear as you read them," writes Jean Loise.¹ "Even as a writer, Gauguin was an innovator."

Six years before the discovery of Gauguin's best writing, the original version of *Noa Noa*, the critic Maurice Malinge had already declared that Gauguin's literary style was "tres vivant et suggere avec force" and that his literary works are "parmi les plus interessantes que nous ont laissees des peintres."²

Of his chef d'oeuvre, the above mentioned original version of *Noa Noa*, Gauguin's translator, Jonathan Griffin states, "It is a beautiful piece of writing: amusing, acid, wide-eyed, moving."³

Roland Lebel, in his history of French colonial literature, gives Gauguin a very definite place as a writer, praising *Noa Noa* as a work of "toucheante sincerite, ou l'on sent une âme d'artiste, avide de rentrer dans la beauet de la nature." Tahiti is "l'île Heureuse ... terre d'amour et de beaute" and Gauguin "comme Loti, plus que Loti ... en


Not only a painter, but also a writer, Paul Gauguin participated importantly in developing the South Seas legend. Together with Herman Melville, Pierre Loti, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rupert Brooke, Somerset Maugham, Frederick O'Brien, Robert Keable, Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, Gauguin belongs with that group of writers who have contributed the branch of exoticism which has concerned itself with the Polynesian dream and the ideal of the noble savage of the Pacific islands.

The published writing of Paul Gauguin includes several elements: first, the account of his first Tahitian sojourn, *Hoa Noa*: a bewildering variety of editions, resulting from the different stages of Gauguin's involvement with a collaborator, the symbolist poet Charles Morice. Second, there are published collections of Gauguin's letters to his wife and to various dealers, artists, writers and other correspondents connected with the Parisian art world, as well as letters to the

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5 Existence of Gauguin's original version of *Hoa Noa* was not made public until 1954. Before that it was known in a form containing poems interlarded by Charles Morice and also some embellishments the poet thought fit to make to Gauguin's own text. Gauguin accepted most of these modifications, however, copying them into an illustrated album of *Hoa Noa* he prepared during his second visit to Tahiti.

trusted friend of his last years, Daniel de Monfreid. Finally, the writings of Gauguin's final unhappy period of sickness and disillusionment devoted largely to bitterness, polemics and invective are the short-lived news-sheets Les Guêpes and Le Sourire and, more importantly, the curious work Avant et Après which has been translated into English by Van Wyck Brooks as The Intimate Journals of Paul Gauguin.

This latter work, completed in 1903, just a few months before Gauguin's death, has been called by Maurice Malingue "beaucoup plus représentative de l'esprit de Gauguin que ses autres œuvres écrites." But as to the creation of an image of the islands, the same critic admits that it is above all in Noa Noa that Gauguin "a exprimé l'envoûtement de la nature tahitienne."

Of the above writings, the letter collections, contain much personal material and like the polemics of his political news-sheets, have little to do with Gauguin's projection of a vision of Tahiti, his expression of its meaning to him, and his feeling of his own place in it. For this we must turn to Noa Noa, Gauguin's literary revelation of Tahiti, which covers the time of his first stay there from 1891 to 1893, and Avant et Après, Gauguin's literary revelation of himself, a landmark of the final stage of his flight from civilization to the Marquesas islands from 1901 to 1903.

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8 Maurice Malingue, op. cit., p. 64.
9 Ibid., p. 48.
This period of Gauguin's literary production from the last decade of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th, was one of strong currents and great activity both in literature and world affairs, and Gauguin could not remain unaffected by them.

In world politics, the period represents the high tide of European imperialism. In Africa, Asia and Oceania the march of colonialism was proceeding inexorably; the choicest morsels having already been appropriated. In the Pacific islands the major powers were sweeping into their colonial empires the few remaining bits of free territory hitherto neglected because of remoteness, poverty, or relative insignificance.

In the French sphere in Polynesia it was the turn of the Iles Sous le Vent: (Huahine, Raiatea, Tahaa and Bora Bora) to be finally absorbed into the colonial system. Attempts at persuasion having failed to obtain the submission of these islands, preparations to annex this group forcibly were started as early as 1888 following a proclamation by the Governor of Tahiti, the same Lacascade so bitterly attacked by Gauguin in Noa Noa. These preparations continued through the first period of Gauguin's residence in Tahiti and well into his second, the final "pacification" of the Leeward archipelago by military action.

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11 Russier, op. cit., p. 170.

taking place in January and February of 1897.

Various stages of this affair are mentioned by Gauguin in his letter to Charles Morice, written from Tahiti (Gauguin did not go to the Marquesas until August 1901) about January 15, 1897. In this letter, as throughout his writings, Gauguin shows his hatred of colonialism and his contempt for the hypocrisy and self-glorification of the empire builders.

If the drama of imperialism being enacted on a world-wide stage found an echo in the writing of Gauguin, so also did the French domestic political scene, particularly in his last and most personal work, *Avant et Après*. We are sharply reminded, that this was the bitter period of the Dreyfus case, and that anti-Semitism in France at this time was particularly vicious. Two of the most rabid anti-Semites, Deroulede and Drumont, are mentioned several times by Gauguin, always unfavorably. But that even Gauguin himself could be influenced by this atmosphere of racial hate is shown by the anti-Jewish story he inserts, with no apparent connection, between a laudatory discourse on Japanese peasant makers of choisome vases and one of his typical blasts at the colonial gendarmerie.

The fact that this was a period of such pervading hatreds in French politics, with the fratricidal days of the commune neither forgiven nor forgotten, and the order of the Third Republic under

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recurring assault by both royalists on the right and anarchists on the left, may well have made the peace and easy-going spirit of Tahiti seem to Gauguin all the more admirable by comparison and may well have contributed to the frame of mind which led him to write, in Noa Noa, "Civilization leaves me bit by bit and I begin . . . to have only a little hatred for my neighbor." ¹⁵

Besides situating the period of Gauguin's writing with reference to world political tendencies and French domestic affairs, we may also note its relation to the literary and intellectual currents of the time. In this sense, both as an artist and writer, Gauguin belongs to the symbolist and romantic reaction against naturalism that characterised the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Chronologically and spiritually he belongs to the period of Rostand and Moreas and Mallarme and Maeterlinck. An admirer of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, Gauguin called himself a synthesist-symbolist during his significant period of painting in Brittany in 1888-89, and it was a symbolist poet, Charles Morice, whom he chose as his collaborator for the book, Noa Noa that was originally conceived as a sort of key to make the painting of Gauguin's first Tahitian period comprehensible to the public. His feeling against the prosaic, unimaginative, earth-bound ugliness of Naturalism is evident throughout Avant et Après, where he seems to fulminate against Zola almost as frequently as he denounces his favorite enemy, the gendarmes.

Together, *Noa Noa* and *Avant et Après* present Gauguin's vision of Tahiti. It is a picture in black and white. Tahiti, the native, the savage are all good; civilization, the white man and his ways are all bad. Everything indigenous to the islands is admirable; everything imported is harmful. Gauguin has three themes: the good native, the wicked white, and finally, for the artist himself, the importance of escape from civilization.

*Noa Noa* means fragrance. It is Gauguin's paean of praise of Tahiti and its people. Of it, Robert Rey says, "In delightful chapters . . . Gauguin wrote pages marked by singular power of evocation and deeply poetical."¹⁶

Gauguin speaks of the silent magic of the Tahitian night,¹⁷ the lush vegetation, the shady mountain paths, cool streams and cascades.¹⁸ The inhabitants of Gauguin's Eden are beautiful with a savage dignity. They are frank, generous, kindly and disinterested. They love children. Both men and women are splendid in their physical naturalness.

Gauguin pays tribute to the calm beauty of the Maori smile,¹⁹ to the frank proud look of the country girls,²⁰ to the indestructible glory

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¹⁷ *Noa Noa*, p. 9.


of the Tahitian woman at any age, which shines through the dowdy gimp- 
crack frippery that civilization has imposed on her. 21

In a letter to Strindberg written in Paris in the interval between 
the two Tahitian sojourns, Gauguin again exalts his Tahitian Eve, saying 
"she alone can remain naturally naked before us." 22

In the same letter Gauguin compares the elaboration of European 
tongues with the pure, simple, blunt naturalness of Tahitian. "Every­
thing is bare and primordial in the languages of Oceania, which contain 
the essential elements, preserved in their rugged forms . . . without 
regard for politeness." 23

Gauguin never abandoned the cult of his Tahitian Eve. Despite 
the sufferings of his final years, he strikes, in the last pages of 
Avant et Après, the same note that he had sung from the manuscript of 
Noa Noa ten years before. "These nymphs. I want to perpetuate them 
with their golden skins, their searching animal odors, their tropical 
savors." 24

If the proud savage Tahitian Eve is a dominant figure both in 
Gauguin's canvasses and his writings, his praise none the less extends 
to all aspects of Tahitian life. Two words in the Tahitian language 
Iaorana (a greeting, literally 'May you live") and No'atu ("Never mind")

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21 Ibid., p. 10.
22 Paul Gauguin, Letters to His Wife and Friends, p. 197.
23 Ibid., p. 198.
Iaorana represents the welcoming kindliness, hospitality, helpfulness, generosity of the natives exemplified by such acts as accepting the stranger as one of themselves, by sending him gifts of food, inviting every passer-by to come in and eat, offering to take a foreigner into their home to live free of charge indefinitely, as Gauguin says was done to him.26

No'atu, meaning "Don't worry," "Never mind," "I don't care," stands for simplicity, naturalness, freedom from the destructive cares, vices, complications of civilization.

Other writers, notably Albert t'Serstevens, eventually were to choose other words and quite different traits to exemplify the Tahitian, but in the works of Paul Gauguin, at least, the Polynesian, in the heroic role of the noble savage, stands forth in all his glory, pure and serene.

There was a serpent in Gauguin's Eden - the white man. Strong as he was in his praise of the Tahitian native, Gauguin was even more vehement in his castigation of European colonialism and all its representatives. All levels of the colonial administration from general inspectors, governors, magistrates and department heads down to minor clerks and simple gendarmes constitute targets for Gauguin's furious attacks. The inspectors are indifferent to the welfare of the native


26 Noa Noa. p. 17.
population;\textsuperscript{27} the governors are adulterous and corrupt\textsuperscript{28} and they openly invite their colleagues and subordinates to plunder the colony;\textsuperscript{29} one way to promotion is to offer one’s wife to a higher official;\textsuperscript{30} even minor officials, used to shabby lives back in France, take on insufferable arrogance and pretention as they become little lords in the colonies.\textsuperscript{31}

Gauguin finds the wives of the fonctionnaires equally disgusting. They are dowdy, vain, pretentious little snobs: they prostitute themselves for position in the colonial hierarchy; they behave like fishwives in public.\textsuperscript{32} When he sees a Tahitian girl and a European woman side by side, Gauguin feels ashamed of his own race.\textsuperscript{33}

Missionaries fare no better. Gauguin shows them bigoted, hypocritical, grasping, and even lecherous,\textsuperscript{34} corrupt,\textsuperscript{35} and viciously cruel.\textsuperscript{36} Storekeepers are the object of at least one blast,\textsuperscript{37} and as for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27}\textit{Intimate Journals}, pp. 165-66.
\item \textsuperscript{28}\textit{Noa Noa}, p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{29}\textit{Intimate Journals}, p. 56.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Ibid., p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{32}\textit{Noa Noa}, p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{34}\textit{Noa Noa}, p. 22, \textit{Intimate Journals}, p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{35}\textit{Intimate Journals}, p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{36}\textit{Noa Noa}, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{37}\textit{Intimate Journals}, p. 128.
\end{itemize}
gendarmes, *Avant et Après* seems one long diatribe against their brutality, cowardice, venality and fantastic bumbling.38

Even the Chinese, whom several writers on Tahiti have taken as convenient scapegoats to blame for the desecration of the island paradise, receive fairly mild treatment from Gauguin in comparison to the furious vituperation he rains on Europeans. Gauguin was not unaware, however, of the growing influence of the Chinese merchant in Tahitian life, for he points out that in the country districts of Tahiti the Chinese storekeeper "deals in everything" even "men and beasts."39

But nothing can divert Gauguin for long from his two principal themes: his praise of the Tahitian, and his onslaught on white colonialism. The destruction of native culture, the spread of disease in the islands and the decimation of the native population are all blamed by Gauguin on Europeans, both in the opening pages of *Noa Noa*, written in 1893,40 and at the end of *Avant et Après*, ten years later.41 And as for such supposed benefits of the white man's burden as the use of engineering science for public works, Gauguin has this to say about flood control in the Marquesas: "The Administration, unintelligent as usual, has done just the opposite of what it should have done."42

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38Ibid., pp. 22, 105, 128, 170.
39Noa Noa, p. 19.
40Ibid., p. 8.
41Intimate Journals, p. 204.
42Ibid., p. 91.
In this world, then, of the noble savage and the ignoble colonizer, what role does Gauguin see for the person like himself: the sensitive, sympathetic European, the artist, the escapist? Can he, despite the complications of his civilized upbringing, succeed in freeing himself spiritually from the evils of civilization and become a noble savage? Gauguin's answer is yes. But the evidence of his actual practice would seem to say no.

In an eloquent and symbolic passage in *Noa Noa* he describes an excursion into the Tahitian mountains to fetch rose-wood to carve a statue. Guided by a handsome native youth, Gauguin makes his way into the cool uplands and there, while in the act of chopping down a tree, he suddenly feels that, in the same act, he is destroying the evils of civilization within himself. This, he says, is his moment of final and definite release, and henceforth he speaks of himself as having become a savage.43

But both his art and his writing show that his past could not be rooted out. Even the "savage" paintings of his Polynesian periods continued to show the influence of Christian iconography; the very last pages of *Avant et Après* are primitive neither in subject nor in method but rather display a variety of preoccupations with the European intellectual world quite beyond the scope or interest of a savage.44

And the last painting Gauguin ever made, there in his savage Eden of the

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44 *Intimate Journals*, pp. 245-254.
Marquesas, was a winter landscape of a Brittany village under the snow.

Nevertheless, Gauguin's vision of Tahiti, expressed in his earnest, direct, deeply-felt, moving phrases, seems capable of delivering an effective and disturbing message. For who can read either _Noa Noa_ or the tortured _Journals_ of his later years without feeling a desire to strip himself of the excess vanity, artificiality and materialism encumbering and complicating modern life, and return in his mind and his ideals towards the simple and kindly type of naturalness of which _Noa Noa_ presents such a fragrant vision.
CHAPTER III

THE TAHITI OF VICTOR SEGALEN

We have seen that Paul Gauguin whose writings on Polynesia had already received the praise of critics, attained new stature as a writer following the revelation of his original version of *Noe Noa* in 1954, and the publication of Jean Loise's laudatory post-script to the English edition of 1961. In that same year, publication of a biography by Henry Bouiller extended merited recognition to Victor Segalen,¹ a worthy companion of Pierre Loti and Claude Farrere in the list of French naval officers who have contributed with distinction to the literature of exoticism.

Gauguin and Segalen, were the products of different generations, of widely differing backgrounds, and the vision of Tahiti came to them, chronologically, at exactly opposite points of their careers. For Gauguin it was at the end, after a turbulent, wide-ranging life of conflict and bohemian adventure; for Segalen it was at the very beginning, on his first assignment immediately on the completion of his studies. It was his first moment of really adult independence.

Gauguin, the former sailor, stockbroker, vagabond, reached Tahiti in his forty-third year. He had only twelve more years to live, and he was to end his days in the islands. Segalen, the only son of a conservative naval family of Brest, came to Polynesia at the age of

twenty-five. His studies had made him a naval doctor, but he was already an accomplished amateur musician and his taste for literature had already shown itself in his choice of thesis subject at medical school, *Les Cliniciens en Lettres*, and by the correspondence he had initiated with his literary idol, J. K. Huysmans.

Like Somerset Maugham who also wrote of the islands, like A. J. Cronin who wrote (as Segalen was to do) of China, like Axel Munthe who wrote of Capri, Segalen is another doctor in literature, a combination that has often proved interesting and successful. His scientific approach is evident in the ethnological nature of his Tahitian masterpiece, *Les Immémoriaux*. and his medical training is shown when, like Gauguin, he discusses the diseases brought by Europeans to the islands; but, unlike Gauguin, he examines them with a medical man's attention to symptoms and detail.

Gauguin, the stockbroker turned painter and rebel against social convention, never seems to have included music as one of his important interests, while Segalen, very musically inclined, became a close friend of Debussy who even contemplated collaborating with him in the production of an opera. Moreover, Segalen, never became an open rebel or even outwardly unconventional, never broke with society or stepped outside the sphere of conventional social life.

Gauguin, born in the "year of revolutions," 1848, lived through the Second Empire, the Franco-Prussian war, the Commune, and finally the turbulent unsteady period of the Third Republic's uneasy beginnings and constant crises, boulangerist, anarchist, royalist, Panamanian,
Dreyfusard. Even in art, this was a period of bitter factionalism. The works of Impressionist painters were jeered and hooted at during their early attempts to enter salon exhibition; and in literature, there was the wide gulf between the stark, intentionally brutal factuality of the realists and naturalists on one hand, and, on the other, the products of the intense Parnassian and symbolist reactions against them.

When Victor Segalen was born in 1878, Gauguin was thirty years old, and while Segalen was still a student, Gauguin had already reached his final hermitage at Atuona on the island of Hiva-Oa in the Marquesas. Gauguin, as we have seen, reached Tahiti at forty-three, Segalen at twenty-five. Gauguin's mental attitudes, which, on coming into contact with Tahiti produced *Noa Noa* and *Avant et Après*, had been developing for many years before he reached the islands, are a reflection of his experience in the ideologically embattled world in ferment of the last half of the 19th century. Victor Segalen, coming to Tahiti fresh from the Naval Medical College of Bordeaux, had behind him no such long and varied experience, and such experience as he had, came from a world that was already politically, artistically and intellectually different from that of Gauguin's youth.

First of all, in relation to the world political scene, particularly the realm of European imperialism, the time to which Gauguin belonged was the last stage of an era of conquest. Segalen's young manhood, in contrast, belonged to the beginning of an era of consolidation.
In the domain of French colonial expansion, the annexation of Cambodia (1893), the war of subjugation in Madagascar (1895), and, as mentioned in Gauguin's own correspondence, the final military taking over of the Leeward Islands in Polynesia, only 100 miles from Tahiti itself, were all events occurring during Gauguin's Pacific years when Segalen was not yet out of his teens.

The apogee of western imperialism with the "battle of the concessions" in China in 1898 and the concerted action of the powers in the Boxer Expedition of 1900 marks one dividing point between the world that Gauguin had lived in and the one that Segalen was entering.

In French domestic affairs, both political and artistic, the atmosphere of Segalen's time was in some ways more that of an aftermath of battle than of battle itself. The Third Republic had passed through its early crises and no longer seemed faced with the constant threat of revolution or coup d'état.

In the arts, there was an increasing acceptance and recognition of original painters and styles. It was, in fact, the first Salon d'Automne in October 1903, at which Matisse, Rouault, Marquet and Bonnard exhibited, that included the Gauguin Memorial Exhibition which brought Gauguin at last into the limelight and put his work before the leading Parisian circles both in art and in fashionable society.²

Despite the differences in the times, backgrounds and formative influences affecting Gauguin and Segalen on the literary plane, there

was one element they had in common before Segalen ever had any indication that Tahiti and the islands of the South Pacific would become factors of importance in his life. Segalen, like Gauguin, was already partisan to the reaction against naturalism that was coming to include symbolists, mystics and romantics of all kinds. We have seen that in music his idol was Debussy; in literature, J. K. Huysmans. Like Gauguin, his anathema was Zola; in his later years his closest literary acquaintance was none other than Claudel whose presentation in the twentieth century of a new, modernised, intensified and highly symbolic literary version of Catholicism seems to harmonise remarkably with the combination of symbolic mystery and stark simplicity shown by the religious paintings of Paul Gauguin's symbolist-synthesist period in Brittany in 1888 and 1889, such as the famous "Yellow Christ" and "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel."

But here too Segalen belonged to a quieter time. As in art and politics, the greatest battles seemed to have been fought. The public was tiring of naturalism and the death of Zola in 1902 was to remove the naturalist in chief, the embattled advocate of the experimental novel. True, naturalist and symbolist tendencies still continued to oppose each other to some extent in French literature and even in French music as may be seen by contrasting Gustave Charpentier's naturalistic opera Louise of 1900 with Debussy's symbolic, epoch-making Pelléas et Mélisande of 1902.\(^3\) But in all, the sharpness and extremity of divergence between

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partisan camps was less than during Gauguin's thirty-third to thirty-eighth years, for example, 1881 to 1886, which saw, on one side, the appearance of such a realist-naturalist phalanx as Flaubert's *Bovary* et *Pécuchet*, Maupassant's *La Maison Tellier* and *Une Vie*, Zola's *Germinal*, Daudet's *Sappho*, de Goncourt's *Chérie*, Becque's *Les Corbeaux* and *La Parisiennne*, and, confronting them from the romantic-symbolist forces, Verlaine's *Sagesse* and *Jadis et Nougère*, the *Contes Cruels* of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Ce Qui ne Meurt Pas*, Regnier's *Lendemains*, Bloy's *Le Desespoir* and Pierre Loti's *Fêcheur d'Islande*.

It is, as a successor to Loti that Segalen is sometimes listed in manuals of French literature, along with Claude Farrère. But when it comes to the question of resemblance of Segalen to Loti, we have almost the opposite of the comparison between Segalen and Gauguin. In the latter case, external dissimilarities covered over several basic points of agreement, the proof of which is that Segalen chose Gauguin as the model for the hero of his unpublished manuscript, intended as a sequel to *Les Impérissables*, which he called *Le Maître du Jouir*. In the case of Loti and Segalen on the other hand, surface resemblances masked fundamental differences. Both were naval men (Loti even had a brother, who, like Segalen, was a naval doctor); both came from conventional backgrounds; both became world travelers; both wrote of Polynesia and of the Orient. But their resemblance as men can only stand in contrast to

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5Boüiller, *Victor Segalen*, p. 106.
the basic dissimilarity of their works. The backgrounds of Lieutenant (later Admiral) Julien Viaud and of Marine Surgeon Victor Segalen may have been much alike, but their visions of Tahiti, on close examination, could hardly have been more different.

Although both Le Mariage de Loti and Les Immémoriaux start with substantially the same theme (which was also, in large part, Gauguin's theme in Noa Noa and Avant et Après), the extinction of the spirit of the Polynesian race and eventually of the race itself as result of contact with the European world, differences in tone can be felt from the very first. Whereas Loti's vision of Tahiti remains throughout soft, tender, pale, sentimental and subjective, Segalen's is hard, even brutal, vigorous, and, from an ethnological point of view, coldly scientific, descriptive and impersonal.

The Segalen of Les Immémoriaux has also been compared to the Flaubert of Salammbô as the recreator in detail of a strange, remote and colorful world, but here again the resemblance is only superficial. As Bouiller points out:

Dans Salammô les sciences sont au service de l'intrigue, tandis que dans Les Immémoriaux l'intrigue, s'il y en a une au sens courant du mot, semble souvent secondaire. Aucun archéologue n'aurait l'idée saugrenue de proposer dans une bibliographie savante le roman de Salammô, tandis que Les Immémoriaux ont pu paraître à la fois un prix Goncourt possible et figurer aujourd'hui dans une collection d'ouvrages ethnographiques.

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6 Bouiller, Victor Segalen, p. 92.
Regardless of what interest Segalen may have found in Flaubert and Loti, his real master in Tahitianas, Paul Gauguin.

Segalen landed in Tahiti on January 23, 1903. Gauguin, still alive, was at that time apparently not in the thoughts of the young naval doctor. It was not until several months later in Segalen's tour of duty in Polynesia, when the vessel to which he was attached, the Durance, was cruising in the Marquesas that he came face to face with the memory of Gauguin which was to have such an important effect on him.

The painter had died on May 8, 1903 while Segalen's ship was still voyaging among some of the other French Pacific Islands. It was not until August of that year that the Durance reached the Marquesas group. The first port of call in that archipelago was the island of Nuku-Hiva, the administrative capital. It was there that Segalen made his first direct contact with the spirit of Gauguin. After Gauguin's death his remaining effects were transferred from Hiva-Oa, the island where he had lived and died, to the capital island of Nuku-Hiva where, at the time of Segalen's arrival, they were being kept in the custody of the resident administrator, and it was there that Segalen saw them. How little Segalen had previously been occupied with Gauguin seems to be shown by the entry made in Segalen's Journal de Voyage dated August 4, 1903, and which appears to bear all the marks of being Segalen's initial discovery of the rebellious painter as a subject of special interest to him.

Des moments émus d'autrefois - les autrefois de mes Pèlerinages au travers de l'Ecole Symboliste - revécus dans ces îles lointaines grâce aux reliques Gauguin.
Among Gauguin's papers that Segalen was to examine so curiously were some notebooks of a never-published manuscript which the painter had labelled *à ma fille Aline*, writings originally intended for Gauguin's daughter of that name, his favorite child who had died in 1897. Segalen copied excerpts from these *Cahiers* directly into his *Journal des Iles*. It is, therefore, interesting to note that it was through his life and his writing, rather than through his painting, that Gauguin seems to have made his first really strong impression on Segalen.

On reaching Hiva-Oa, Segalen, now thoroughly attracted to the study of Gauguin, visited the cemetery where the painter was buried and talked with the Pastor Vernier and Gauguin's Marquesan friend Tioka, two of the last persons to have been in close contact with the artist before he died.

As Segalen's *Journal* continues one sees the increasing place Gauguin is taking in his consciousness. One feels that Gauguin is already beginning to assume the stature of a kind of legendary hero in Segalen's vision of Polynesia. Writing of Gauguin, Segalen says:

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Il était aimé des indigènes qu'il défendait contre les gendarmes, les missionnaires, et tout ce matériel de "civilisation" meurtrière. Il apprit ainsi aux derniers Marquisiens qu'on ne pouvait les forcer à suivre l'école. Ce fut un peu le dernier soutien des anciens cultes.8

In his Journal Segalen also mentions visiting Gauguin's native-style house and seeing an inscription painted by Gauguin's own hand, which read:

Les dieux sont morts, et Atuona meurt de leur mort9

This sentence, may, be taken as a summary of the theme of the great Polynesian work, Les Immémoriaux, that Segalen was soon to produce.

Gauguin himself was immediately to become a subject of Segalen's writing, first in the article Gauguin dans son dernier décor that Segalen published in the Mercure de France in June 1904, and later, in his unfinished and unpublished work, Le Maître du Jouir.10

Still on duty on the Durance, Segalen left French Polynesia on September 1, 1904, returning to Toulon via Noumea, Java, Colombo and Sues. His stay in the islands had lasted a little more than a year and a half. Its effect lasted all his life; one of his last literary projects which unfortunately remained unfinished when death overtook him in 1919 at the early age of forty-one was to return to Tahiti to


9Ibid.

10Bouillier, Victor Segalen, p. 60.
complete *Le Maître du Jour* with Gauguin as its heroic protagonist.\(^{11}\)

Before that, in 1916, twelve years after his return from Polynesia and even after his experience of China which had impressed him so greatly and produced so much of his most outstanding writing (the poetry *Stèles, Peintures*, his essay on Chinese art, and the novel *René Leva*) Segalen had already turned again to the islands with his *Hommage à Gauguin*, intended as a preface to the eventually published collection of Gauguin’s letters to Daniel de Monfreid.\(^{12}\)

But Segalen’s Pacific masterpiece and indeed, if we accept the view of some critics, one of the great masterpieces of all exotic literature, is *Les Imémoriaux*.\(^{13}\)

In view of the virtual unanimity of critics, both French and otherwise, as to the excellence of *Les Imémoriaux*, and of the many interesting aspects of Victor Segalen’s life and his literary career, it seems indeed regrettable that neither any translation of this work nor any biography of Segalen himself has been published in English.

The virtues of Segalen and of *Les Imémoriaux* are clearly recognized by the American scholar, James Baird, who writes in *Ishmael*:

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 106.


Of all works of art dealing with the native life of Oceania, this study of the meeting of cultures is the only one possessing the distinction of exact psychological realization . . . Segalen accomplishes an almost unparalleled insight: with accurate knowledge of the Tahitian consciousness, he succeeds in describing the confusion resulting from the loss of an established native religious system.14

Baird compares Melville's Oedo and Loti's Barahy with Les Immémoriaux, entirely to the advantage of the latter, calling Segalen's work "an expert novel" and "a brilliant success."15

French critics have been equally favorable. Roland Lebel calls Les Immémoriaux "le grand livre océanien:"16 J. M. Gautier says, "Les Immémoriaux marque une date dans l'histoire littéraire."17 Praising both achievements, Rene Lalou compares Segalen's penetration of the Polynesian mind with Lafacadio Hearn's absorption of the spirit of Japan.18

The historical period in Tahiti covered by Les Immémoriaux is roughly from 1798, date of the arrival of the Daff, vessel bringing the first representatives of the London Missionary Society, to about 1820,

15 Ibid., pp. 121, 151-152, 191.
when the religious conquest of the island was complete. 19

Segalen's theme, like the inscription on Gauguin's hut, is that "the race dies because the gods are dead." To this Segalen seems to add the bitter corollary that the Tahitians almost deserved to die because they did not resist with greater determination the destruction of their traditional religion by the imposition of an alien cult that was completely out of harmony with the spirit and fatal to the real sources of health and strength of the Tahitian race. It is readily seen how Segalen would be attracted to the image of Gauguin as a resistant, and had planned to use him in Le Maître du Jouir as the symbol of a hopeful return to the freedom and vigor of the old Tahitian view of life.

And what, as Segalen presents it, exactly is the spirit of Tahiti represented by this view? Is it the idyllic sweetness and light of Bougainville's Nouvelle Cythère, the childlike tenderness of Loti's Barahu, or even the kindly nobility of Gauguin's noble savage? Not quite. Segalen's savage is savage first, and noble, if at all, very much afterward.

Gauguin's Tahitians were superstitious, but not maliciously so. The first native Segalen shows us, on the contrary, is a priest engaged in casting evil spells upon his supposed enemies. 20 Before his first chapter is over, Segalen has introduced us to the facts that in old

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19 For a French historian's account of the events of this period, see A. C. Eugène Caillot, Histoire de la Polynésie Orientale. (Paris, 1910).

20 Les Immortels, p. 17.
Tahitian society, the native chieftains delighted in warfare, to which they were incited by native priests, and that prominent among the institutions of La Nouvelle Cythère were human sacrifices and slavery.

Gauguin's Tahiti had consisted of the noble Polynesian and the wicked white man, source of all evil. Segalen's view is more complex, more sophisticated, less combative, more reflective. There are no real heroes or villains. Indeed, if the central theme is that the Tahitians have degenerated because they have forgotten their gods, then the greatest villain in this context is the Tahitian protagonist himself, Tarii, who, baptised as Takoba, becomes a Protestant deacon. And the most sympathetic character of all (if not the most heroic) is actually a white man, Aute, the young Englishman who seeks to preserve the memory of the old Tahitian lore.

The very title itself condemns the Tahitians. Les Insémiories are the Tahitians themselves, the ones who have not remembered their past, their traditions, their own culture. Les Insémiories are the Polynesian meekly and catastrophically consenting to their own downfall. That Segalen censures them for doing so is shown by his sympathetic description of two natives, Teao and Fao'ai, who, in contrast, dare to resist.

The story of the annihilation of the old Polynesian culture as a result of contact with the European world is told through the eyes of Segalen's Tahitian protagonist, Tarii, later called Takoba. The novel is divided into three parts. The first section is Segalen's famous reconstitution of ancient Tahiti as it was before the white man; the second is an interlude to cover Tarii's twenty years of wandering away from the islands as a sailor on European ships; the third and final part
tells of Terii's return to Tahiti, now virtually under the rule of the London Missionary Society, and shows his reactions to the changes that have taken place, his initial astonishment eventually followed by his hypocritical and self-seeking conversion to the new religion, and his traitorous betrayal of his former friends and associates, such as the heroic Paofai, who still resist.

It seems evident that among the noble savages peopling Gauguin's vision of Tahiti, one would search in vain for Polynesians capable of the maliciousness, hypocrisy, corruption, vanity, callousness, selfishness and treason shown by Segalen's Terii. This difference becomes even more striking when we realise that Segalen was writing of the Tahiti of 1800 and Gauguin of the Tahiti of 1900, when a hundred years more of decadence and degeneration had time to take place. The result is that Segalen's vision of Tahiti, even though dealing with an epoch in the historical past, seems today more modern and realistic than Gauguin's. We may therefore not be wrong if we assume that much of what Segalen shows in the third part of Les Immortels is a direct reflection of his own observation of life in the islands during the years 1903 and 1904.

Various actual historical events and personages are mentioned by Segalen. We see the native king Pomare II, first as a despised minor chief, then as ruler of all Tahiti, thanks to munitions supplied by the missionaries. We hear the preaching of the missionary leader, Mott, and we finally see him, in a fictitious sequence, persuading Terii to act as a spy to betray those Tahitians who, illegally, have either remained pagan or who have secretly embraced the forbidden Catholic faith. We
hear Terii told of the decisive battle of Fei Pi (1815) which took place while he was absent on his wanderings from Tahiti, and in which the upstart Pomare's muskets vanquished the princely, but pagan and hence musketless, leader of high lineage, Opufara. We are shown the historical event of the baptism of Pomare II and the promulgation of the missionary-inspired laws forbidding dancing, carving, working on Sunday, and enforcing church attendance and the wearing of European-style clothes. For his documentation of these facts, Segalen apparently relied upon missionary sources themselves, as is suggested by J. M. Gautier in his most interesting article "Les Immémoriaux de Victor Segalen et leurs Sources Anglaises."  

Segalen and Gauguin are in agreement that the importation of foreign religion and customs was disastrous for the Tahitians. Their reasons for holding this view, however, are somewhat different. To Gauguin, Tahitian ways were good because they were savage; European ways were bad because they were civilized. To Segalen, Tahitian ways were good for the Tahitians simply because they were their own ways, based on the development of their own culture; European ways were bad for them because those ways were alien and unsuitable. Nowhere, however, does Segalen suggest that savagery in general is better than civilization or that a European should attempt, as Gauguin did, to throw off the heritage of his own background and try to become a savage.

Yet Segalen, although actually no advocate of the noble savage

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per se, is most praised for his two-fold achievement of first, producing a colorfully detailed reconstruction of Tahitian life as it was before the arrival of Europeans and secondly, penetrating the primitive Tahitian mind to the extent that his interpretation of the thoughts, attitudes and reactions of his native protagonists ring true, convincing and not only believable but inevitable.

Typical is the way imported articles, never before seen by the Polynesians are described from the native viewpoint in terms of similarity to familiar objects; spyglasses are long bamboos, books are bundles of marked leaves, horses are pigs to carry men, and so forth. Also typical is the way certain aspects of Christianity, particularly some of the sterner passages of the Old Testament, for example those dealing with massacres of conquered cities, are approved by the primitive mind which, as Segalen frequently shows, admires force and strength before justice, and tends to regard mercy and pity as signs of unworthy weakness.

Emphasis on this Tahitian ideal is shown by Segalen's vivid description of the native leaders, the twelve chiefs of the Arioi society, robust in animal vigor, as compared to the pale, gloomy, sombrely and clumsily dressed missionaries and their wives. In making this contrast, we see Segalen in harmony with Gauguin, evidence of whose influence keeps reappearing throughout Les Immémoriaux.

Segalen's name for an Arioi chief belonging to the highest category was, in fact, Le Maître du Jour, the master of pleasure, the very title he had selected for his intended sequel to Les Immémoriaux in which Gauguin was to be the title character.
Perhaps the most strikingly illustrative passage in all of Segalen's recreation of the Tahitian society that has passed away is his presentation of those twelve great, almost sacred, leaders, Les Douze:

Ils parurent, les Douze à la Jambe-tatouée. Ceinturés du maro blanc sacerdotal, poudrés de safran, ils marchaient, peints de jaune, dans le soleil jaune qui ruisselait sur leurs peaux onctueuses. Leurs immobiles et paisibles regards contemplaient la mer-extérieure; des souffles passaient dans leurs cheveux luisants, et remuaient, sur leurs fronts, d'ampalpables tatu. Leurs poitrines, énormes comme il convient aux puissants, vibraient de lissée et de force en jetant des paroles cadencées. Entourés de leurs femmes peintes, les divines Ornées-pour-plaire, aux belles courbes, aux dents luisantes comme les dents vives des atua-requins, les maîtresses figuraient les douze fils voluptueux de Oro, descendus sur le mont Pahia pour se mêler aux mortels.

Ils passaient lentement, certains de leur sérénité. Auteur de leurs ombres, invisibles mais formels, les esprits de la paix et du jouir peuplaient le vent environnant. Les atua glissaient dans leurs haleines; illuminaient leurs yeux, gonflaient leurs muscles et parlaient en leurs bouches. Joyeux et forts, ... ils promenaient à travers les îles leurs troupes fétiches et magnifiaient les dieux de la vie en parant leurs vies mèmes de tous les jeux du corps, de toutes les splendeurs, de toutes les voluptés.²²

We have seen that Segalen's picture of the Polynesian native is more varied, more extensive, more nuancé than Gauguin's. The same applies to their presentations of the white man. Gauguin's European is constantly and thoroughly bad. He is a corrupt oppressor, a bringer of disease and a bigot guilty of the repression of the spirit, and hence of the destruction of the life, of an entire race. He is the brutal

gendarme, the lubricious priest, the incompetent, adulterous and rapacious public official lining his pockets at the expense of the governed. In the early 1800's of Segalen's *Les Immémoriaux* we cannot meet the gendarme or the colonial official, but here again Segalen avoids the singleness of Gauguin's view and, employing greater subtlety, depicts a greater range.

His missionaries, unlike Gauguin's, are not all outright scoundrels, they are merely missionaries, just as Segalen's Tahitians are not demi-gods but very human savages. And, for Segalen, all Europeans are not necessarily bad. He agrees with Gauguin that they have brought disease and destruction of the old way of life, but there are among them sympathetic, tender souls like the scholarly Aute (whom Segalen's natives, true savages, tend to despise for his tenderness) who seeks to preserve as much of the old lore as can be collected before it is too late.

And there are also the *Faranï* (the Tahitian word for French). True to his background, Segalen remains to the end a Frenchman and a Catholic. Throughout *Les Immémoriaux* Segalen makes it clear that the stern, dour missionaries who are destroying the Tahitian spirit and love of life are Englishmen and Protestants. The French sailors he also depicts, with their gaiety, their gifts of wine and their jolly parties may also be contributing to the disintegration of the Tahitian character, but at least they are cheerful and pleasure-loving and to that extent they are more in harmony with the Polynesian way.
In Segalen's Tahiti, the white man is not really the villain at all. The villain is the weakness, the vice, the forgetfulness of tradition in the Tahitian character itself.

The far from noble savage, Terii a Fausurahi, later Iakoba, into whose skin Segalen enters and with whose feelings Segalen makes us feel, shows us all this as we follow his thoughts from the opening sequence where, in his duties as a native priest in an ancient temple, he suddenly stumbles and forgets the sacred incantations, to the final scene where, as Iakoba, now a Protestant deacon, he sends his beautiful young niece Irene (with the enthusiastic approval of his native congregation) to prostitute herself to sailors so as to obtain nails with which to build a new church, not so much to the glory of the Protestant God, but essentially as a monument to his own selfish vanity.
CHAPTER IV

THE TAHITI OF MARC CHADOURNE

Paul Gauguin, descendant of the Borgias, of a Viceroy of Peru, of Flora Tristan, a blue-stockling anarchist agitator, and of a republican journalist who had to flee after the coup d'état of Napoleon III, went to Tahiti (after having first tried Martinique and considered Madagascar) in 1893 to become a savage. Dr. Victor Segalen of Brest, descendant of Breton sailors, went to Tahiti in 1903 because the Navy ordered him there as a ship's doctor. Coming from Limousin (like Jean Giraudoux) and the son of a small town provincial notary, Marc Chadourne, after obtaining his Licence en Droit and studying at the Ecole des Sciences Politiques went to Tahiti in 1920 as an administrator in the colonial service. He was then twenty-five (the same age as Segalen had been when he reached the islands). Between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four he had served in the French army during World War I, first in the artillery, then as an airplane pilot.

Marc Chadourne came to Polynesia, then, as a member of that corps of fonctionnaires whom Paul Gauguin had repeatedly denounced as plaguing and plundering the colony.

In Segalen's view of Tahiti, however, Chadourne would surely enjoy the beau rôle of the sympathetic white man (like the character Aute in Les Immémoriaux), a respecter and preserver of Tahitian culture. Even before the publication of his much-discussed novel Vasco,¹ Chadourne had

translated a collection of Tahitian legends which he introduced with a preface in which he clearly shows his kinship with Gauguin and Segalen in his appreciation of Tahitian lore and his regret at its disperition.2

Photographs of Chadourne taken during his term of administration in Oceania from 1920 to 1924 when he was between twenty-five and twenty-nine years of age show a man who is much as we might expect Segalen's Aute to look. He is of slight build with curly tousled hair and a small moustache. His eyes are large, dark and dreamy. It is the portrait of a sensitive esthete, a romantic and an intellectual.

Although embarked on a non-literary career of a government official, Chadourne, like Segalen, before his experience of Tahiti ultimately revealed him as a writer, had undergone some literary influences and had some contact with the literary world. His elder brother, Louis Chadourne, was a traveler and a writer of exoticism, whose books reveal a mystic questing, a constant self-interrogation and a searching for a meaning in life. These elements are prominent in the character and preoccupations of Marc Chadourne's protagonist in Vasco. And it is to Louis Chadourne, who died young, after a life of Vasco-like wandering and brooding, that the novel is dedicated.

Gauguin's Noa Noa is a strongly presented idealization of the noble savage; Segalen's Les Immémoriaux is a reconstitution of the society and a dispassionate observation of the psychology of the real savage in Polynesia; Chadourne's Vasco is the novel par excellence of the white man in the South Seas and of the effect of the South Seas upon

2Marc Chadourne and Maurice Guierre, Marchurehu, (Paris, 1925).
In 1920, the real Marc Chadourne and the fictional Vasco, both veterans of World War I, the conflict that in France still remains La Grande Guerre, went to Tahiti. Chadourne, as we have seen, went as an administrator, an official of the colonial service, a fonctionnaire of the Third Republic. Vasco went with the title of manager of the Tahiti branch office of a mythical trading company, Le Grand Comptoir du Pacifique Sud. As such he shows us a new side of European and half-caste life in Tahiti. Gauguin had pictured gendarmes and officials; Segalen had shown English missionaries and French sailors. Chadourne was to be the first to depict the petty, intriguing, malicious, back-biting, small-town commercial world of Papeete that Vasco found at the end of his journey instead of the idyllic delights of La Nouvelle Cythère.

Besides showing Vasco's wanderings among the dusty streets, shops and offices of Papeete, Chadourne completes his picture of the white man in French Polynesia by placing his protagonist in succeeding episodes in two of the remote isolated worlds of the Pacific where white men can and sometimes do find oblivion and lose themselves forever, the blindingly white coral atolls of the Tuamotus and the misty, rock-walled depopulated valleys of the Marquessas, the last home of Paul Gauguin.

Vasco's odyssey of disappointment and frustration actually starts the moment he boards the vessel that is to take him to Tahiti. Among his fellow travelers there are inhabitants of l'île heureuse, both native and white, returning to their island home. Before the ship has even left the dock they have already dispelled part of the vision of the South Seas that Vasco had learned from Bougainville; Loti and Gauguin have given
Vasco his first taste of disillusionment.

The first disillusionment of all comes not from a European but a Polynesian. A native girl laughingly greets Vasco by name, having identified him from the list of passengers. Everyone on board hails this girl as if she were an old acquaintance, yet she admits that she has met none of them before. How then does it happen, Vasco asks, that they all salute her with such familiarity? Her reply:

De la main elle comprima une nouvelle fusese de rire, puis, avec une contorsion de vanite: "Tiens, il a reconnu Tahiti!"3

With that, Vasco experienced the first shock of his voyage. For this dowdy, unprepossessing girl was no glorious Tahitian Eve à la mode de Gauguin. Was she to be accepted as the symbol of the Polynesian Eden?

Tahiti! C'était juste. C'était a Tahiti, non a la fille que s'adressaient ces bonjours . . . Je regardai avec stupeur ce corps maigrot dans son tailleur rapé, cette peau sans éclat . . . C'était donc cela Tahiti! . . . Je restai abasourdi . . . Pour ou m'étais-je embarque? Pour le pays de cette fille?4

The Europeans on board seem to take pleasure in adding to Vasco's disillusionment and in trying to destroy his Polynesian dream. One of

3Vasco, p. 67.
4Ibid.
the most venomous is Frelon, a merchant of Papeete who tells Vasco that everything in Tahiti is "pourri" and that the Chinese have brought "leur camelote et leur opium, leur lepro et toutes leurs veroles." Vasco tries to protest:

Et les Tahitiens, criai-je avec l'accent du défi. Il ne voulait tout de même pas, ce mercantl malade, m'enlever cela: la belle fresque de Gauguin, les doux Maoris de Stevenson et de Loti.

But Frelon's reply only offers further discouragement:

Les Canaques? . . . N'en a plus. La grippe a tout pris. Tahiti, ça a été, c'est fini. A present . . . c'est le pays du rhume . . . rien de plus.

In 1920 these words of Frelon were, in fact, particularly à propos. Old residents of Tahiti even today speak of the years 1918 to 1920 as decisive, with their wave of post-war epidemics that more than decimated the population, in sweeping away the last vestiges of the old douceur de vivre.

In 1903 Paul Gauguin, and very naturally, the medically-trained Victor Segalen, had already bemoaned the ravages of disease among the

\[5\] Frelon's every appearance and utterance is characterized by such venom that students of Voltaire may wonder if Chadourne might not have named this character after the Freron of the famous epigramme:

L'autre jour au fond d'un vallon
Un serpent piqua Jean Freron
Que penses-vous qu'il arriva?
Ce fut le serpent qui creva.

\[6\] Vasco, p. 70.

\[7\] Ibid.

\[8\] Ibid.
Polynesians. But horrifying as they found the health conditions of their time, the gradual annihilation of the race witnessed by Gauguin and Segalen was far surpassed in grimness by the dramatic wholesale dying that took place throughout the archipelago during the post-war epidemic years referred to by Frelon.

Having assaulted Vasco's illusions concerning the Tahitians and having inserted his dose of vitriol against the Chinese, Frelon next provides the young traveler with a cynical view of the European life of Papeete.

And, well aware of Vasco's intention to lose himself forever in a life of Polynesian oblivion, Frelon reserves the most vehement portion of his abuse for the dreamers, the beachcombers, the followers of Gauguin.

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9Vasco, p. 73.
Regardless of the disappointing shortcomings that Chadourne finds among the inhabitants of Tahiti, he, like Gauguin, Segalen, Loti, Bougainville, and indeed virtually every writer who has described the island, falls under the spell of its natural enchantment, its scenic beauty. He even has some kind words to say about the little town of Papeete as he found it in 1920 (it has greatly changed since) with its wide-verandahed frame residences and plaster-columned colonial style government offices all crumbling drowsily and romantically, smothered in the rich overgrown, casual, untended luxuriance of their tropical gardens.

As to the people, Chadourne presents a larger and more varied cast of characters than either Gauguin or Segalen. He has included three groups which find no place in either Noa Noa or Les Immémoriaux: the merchants of Papeete exemplified by the venomous Frelon and the brutal Gibson, the would-be beachcombing, lotus-eating drifters and dreamers represented by Vasco himself and his strange fellow-wanderer Plessis, and finally the half-castes, the Européans, the métis, or as they are called in Tahiti, the demis. These last have become numerically (and in some ways economically and politically) the most important group in Tahiti today. It is the group for which the most important future
political role is certainly reserved, and the one which gives the
dominant flavor to modern Tahitian life. It is the one great inter-
mediate mass of tan replacing the extremes of white and brown which
Gauguin and Segalen had pictured. Chadourne's pessimistic conclusion
concerning this group would seem to be, although he does not explicitly
say so, that the demi tends to combine some of the worst features of
both his European and Polynesian ancestry.

In his preoccupation the question of the white man in the islands,
Chadourne gives the Tahitian native somewhat less attention than did
Gauguin or Segalen. Reference here is to the pure or almost pure-
blood Polynesian, usually a country dweller, as distinguished from the
half-caste of the towns. Among his natives, however, Chadourne does
include a portrait of a country girl in whom we can detect the heavy
blunt strength, the robust simplicity and the animal odors of Gauguin's
Tahitian Eve:

Le village était plein de belles filles indigènes, durcies
aux courses, aux nages dans l'eau froide des torrents, et
brunies, qui avaient le même onduleux vêtement de cheveux,
ma même noble et svelte allure. L'une un jour...avait
passé le seuil, confuse, le menton dans son chale, carrée
sur ses pieds un peu lourds, cornée par la danse. Une
belle bête au grand regard tendre.11

And, agreeing with both Segalen and Gauguin as to native decline
and degeneration under European influences, Chadourne depicts, perhaps
even more vividly than either of them, the last Marquesas, apathetically
lingering survivors of a dying race:

Les derniers ... Il fallait les voir au seuil de leurs cases, entre leurs enfants mal ingres et leurs cochons noirs, espant d'un oeil narquois dans leurs figures cernees d'ombres, la mort et les enrangers.12

Chadourne does not exalt the native as Gauguin did nor does he study him with Segalen's scientific detachment, nor denigrate him, as t'Serstevens was eventually to do. Chadourne's natives are simply set down as he sees them and hears of them, forming part of the background, but not occupying the *avant-scène* of Vasco's Polynesian experience. They are not noble savages. Chadourne shows that he is well aware of their faults and more than aware of the brutality and cruelty to be found in the golden age of *La Nouvelle Cythere* before the arrival of the whites.13

The half-castes have been mentioned in connection with the general opinion Chadourne seems to have formed of them. Specifically, there are four half-caste characters in roles of some importance in *Vasco*, two men and two women. The men are Krohn, Vasco's bumbling assistant and only employee in the dusty little office of the *Grand Comptoir du Pacifique* in Papeete,14 and Tauf,15 the drunken, brutal overseer of a plantation in the Tuamotus. The women are Tauf's wife,16 petty, spiteful, even more vicious than her husband, and Dinah,17 the

14*Vasco*, pp. 109, 110.
beautiful métisse who becomes the shared mistress of both Vasco and his friend Plessis. Of these, we see somewhat more of Krohn than any of the others, and it is in him, one might assume, that Chadourne concentrates the essence of his portrait of the modern, town-dwelling, commercially-employed half-caste. The outstanding characteristics of Krohn are that he is stupid, lazy, disagreeable, dishonest, vindictive and resentful of the white man. He seems to admire successful skulduggery and would like to pride himself on being a master of sharp practice, but he is so inept that even his rascality is a clumsy fiasco. Dinah, Vasco's paramour, fares somewhat better. In between sulks, she is capable of sporadic cheerfulness, but when she gives herself to Vasco and imposes a ménage à trois on Plessis, the older man with which she has been living for years, her morals seem to leave something to be desired, even from Chadourne's very tolerant viewpoint.

We next come to the Chinese in Tahiti. On this subject, Chadourne, like Gauguin, has but little to say. He recognises, as Gauguin did, that the Chinese have become important in trade, and he describes, with delicious accuracy, the dusty littered jumble of a Chinese shop in downtown Papeete. Chadourne also has the vitriolic Frelea, as we have seen, denounce the Chinese for importing disease. But that is all. We feel that Chadourne, like Gauguin, would consider it ridiculous to blame the Chinese for the degeneration of the Tahitian people and the deformation of the spirit of life in Tahiti. Both Gauguin and Chadourne

18 Ibid., 97-98.
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18 Ibid., 97-98.
would no doubt agree that this damage was almost entirely accomplished, as Segalen shows, through the influence of the white man long before there was ever a single Chinese in any of the archipelagoes of French Polynesia.

And this brings us to the white men himself. Chadourne's white men in Polynesia are of two types, the doers, the business men, like Frelon and Gibson (the callous and violent plantation owner who employs the half-caste Tauf as his labor boss) who are absolutely unprincipled scoundrels but who are materially successful, and, on the other hand, the dreamers and idealists like Vasco and Flessis who are failures at everything they do. These last, because of their temperaments, because of their unwillingness to accept what they see as the madness, the hardness and the ugliness of the modern world, flee from Europe and America to Polynesia, seeking beauty and calm. They are doomed to disappointment, Chadourne seems to say, for calm exists only within oneself, and cannot be achieved by a mere geographical change of setting. To the end Flessis and Vasco continue their restless, unsatisfying wanderings, but Vasco, at least, seems to realise that it is all in futility.19

Among the white men, there is one final type of character who figures in the Polynesia of all three of the writers discussed so far. This is the missionary. Gauguin's churchmen were, as we have seen, selfish or cruel or corrupt or lecherous. Segalen's were human, with human failings, but without the diabolical vices lent them by Gauguin.

Chadourne, in his turn, shows us only one missionary. He is a French Catholic priest in a remote station in the Marquesas. Like Hawaii's Father Damien, he is a priest in a community of lepers. After long service in this outpost, he has become afflicted with leprosy like the members of his flock, and also with elephantiasis. He continues his labors, devoted and uncomplaining. He is a saint.

20 Vasco. p. 234.
Marc Chadourne and Victor Segalen were both twenty-five years old when they came to Tahiti. Gauguin was forty-three when he first reached l'île heureuse. To Albert t'Serstevens, the experience of Polynesia came when he was past sixty.

Chadourne and Segalen started their careers in the islands. For Chadourne it was his first post in the colonial service. For Segalen, it was his first duty as a naval surgeon. Paul Gauguin came after a turbulent vagabonding life as a controversial avant-garde painter. Alone, of these four, Albert t'Serstevens was already a recognised man of letters, a successful professional writer, when he landed in Papeete.

The career of Albert t'Serstevens, as recorded in Who's Who in France,¹ has been "entièremment consacrée à la littérature." He has been awarded the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française (1932), the Grand Prix de la Mer et de l'Outre-Mer (1953) and the Grand Prix de la Société des Gens de lettres (1960). He holds the decorations of Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, Officer of the Order of Christ of Portugal and the Order of Leopold of Belgium. He was born on September 24, 1886 in Brussels, Belgium, the son of a notary. He married, in 1947, Melle. Amandine Dore, an illustrator. It was with her that he undertook the voyage to Tahiti which resulted in his penetrating account of travel and observation in the islands, Tahiti et

Marc Chadourne's *Vasco* and Victor Segalen's *Les Immemoriaux* were novels. Gauguin's *Noe Noe* was a semi-fictionalized account of a significant episode in his life, his first attempt to shake off civilization and become a savage. In contrast to all these, *Tahiti et sa couronne* is strictly non-fiction. There is no element of plot. The author is merely concerned with setting down, directly and factually, the details of his trip and his impressions of the islands and the people of French Polynesia.

Another difference between *Tahiti et sa couronne* and the other works examined in this study is the period in time, the era, under consideration. Segalen showed us Tahiti in 1800. Gauguin pictured the islands around the turn of the present century. Marc Chadourne wrote of the early nineteen-twenties. With t'Serstevens we have reached the years following World War II.

In the realm of colonial affairs this was the time when England was recognizing the necessity of withdrawing from many overseas areas but France was still attempting to subdue by force the nationalist aspirations of some Asiatic and African territories. War was already raging in Indo-China and was soon to break out in Madagascar and Algeria, while a serious crises was brewing in Morocco. Even in Tahiti, a native leader, Pouvana a Oopa, was fostering an ill-fated independence movement which was eventually to collapse after its chief was sentenced by the French authorities and transported to imprisonment near

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Marseilles for allegedly conspiring to burn the town of Papeete.

During this period of agitation, those who opposed extending self-government to Tahiti advanced the contention that the Polynesians were incapable of governing themselves. It seems at least possible that t'Serstevens may to some extent have been influenced by this attitude in his repeated emphasis upon the childishness and general unreliability of the Tahitian character. This particular preoccupation of the author seems to carry with it an undertone of suggestion that the Polynesian native is not only unprepared to govern himself, but is actually unworthy of independence.

In this respect t'Serstevens would seem to reflect the feelings of those Frenchmen whose attitude toward the colonial question was based upon a last-ditch "never let go" policy of obstructing and resisting, rather than helping or preparing dependent populations who were hoping to achieve autonomy.

The plan of Tahiti et sa couronne follows a systematic itinerary of travel around Tahiti and through the island groups of French Polynesia. The author gives us his first impressions on arrival, takes us with him as he circles the capital island along the seashore road, stopping in various districts along the way, then returns us to Papeete for his examination of the little colonial town. After that, we embark with him for a voyage to the outside island groups, the Marquesas, the Tuamotus, the Gambiers.

As far as the concept of the noble savage is concerned t'Serstevens takes us to the utmost point in progression away from the attitude of Rousseau and Gauguin. Indeed, this author seems to approach the entire
legend of Tahiti as an earthly paradise with an intent to demolish it.

Although t'Serstevens does make some qualifications and concessions, still, if one were called upon to sum, in a single phrase, his vision of Tahiti, one would be tempted to say that to t'Serstevens, Tahiti as a paradise and the Tahitian native as a noble savage are outright frauds.

From the very first, from the romantic moment of the Tahiti landfall, the beauty of which writers rarely fail to praise, t'Serstevens is already finding flaws and attacking what he considers exaggerations:

Celui qui debarque à Tahiti imprégné d'une littérature que depuis sa découverte n'a cesse de l'embellir des couleurs les plus chatoyantes ... se trouve déçu. Il tombe de toute la hauteur d'une imagination surexcitée par ses lectures ... 3

Travelers and writers, says t'Serstevens, have made of Tahiti, first a utopia like that of the Golden Age, then a paradise of love and romance. His terse comment on this is that "ni l'un ni l'autre n'a jamais été vrai." 4

Even the scenery, which both Victor Segalen and Marc Chadourne, no great subscribers to the noble savage legend, had found admirable, receives but limited appreciation from t'Serstevens. The island is beautiful, yes, but "il n'y a de riant que la bande cotière. Tout le reste est imprégné d'une mélancolie ... ." 5

As for the idea that Tahiti is the most beautiful island in the world, "ce sont les excès de langage qu'il faut laisser aux

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3Tahiti et sa couronne, I, p. 13.
5Ibid.
In fact, viewed from the sea, the author finds that Tahiti "est peu marquante" and "présente un profil monotone." To which he adds, "elle n'a pas une seule baie digne de ce nom." 

Having disposed of the scenery, T'Serstevens turns to the matter of the air, which he finds:

"est hydatisé à l'extrême limite de la saturation. Tout s'y rouille ou s'y oxyde, tout s'y amolit, même les cerveaux. Laisses du sel à l'air pendant douze heures. Il se transforme en pâte fluide."

T'Serstevens next takes up the question of the climate in general. Unlike Chadoume, T'Serstevens is not principally concerned with the white men in the islands, but his discussion of the Tahitian climate offers him the occasion to make some telling observations as to its ultimate effect upon Europeans who, like Chadoume's Vasco, may have been seduced by the deceptively easy charm of Polynesia.

Cette tièdeur constante, dans une atmosphère saturée d'humidité et d'effluves végétaux, affaiblit à la longue les nerfs et le cerveau, engendre une nonchalance d'autant plus menaçante qu'elle porte en elle sa volupté... Peu de blancs sont capables de lui résister; la plupart se laissent aller à une apathie qui parfois devient de la déchéance. J'ai vu dans les îles, à Tahiti surtout, de telles abdications de la dignité humaine, et tellement nombreuses, que je me suis demandé quelquefois s'il ne valait pas mieux tourner le dos aux paradis océaniens.

To a Gauguin fleeing from the complexities of civilization, to a Vasco turning away from the turmoil of an unsettled world, T'Serstevens

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7Ibid., p. 15.
8Ibid., p. 16.
9Ibid., p. 21.
obviously considers the promises of Tahiti to be illusory.

L'inquiétude universelle qui étreint l'humanité d'aujourd'hui peut faire considérer comme un asile de paix et de beatitude cet îlot... éloigné... de tous les continents explosables. On peut se demander cependant si ce bonheur immobile vaut le sacrifice de tout ce que l'homme a de grand, y compris son inquiétude.10

In Noa Noa the white man in Polynesia is denounced as the supreme villain of the Polynesian tragedy. In Les Immémoriaux, the white man, if not a devil, is at least an intruder. In Vasco he is either a malicious small town tradesman like Frelon (whose villainy sometimes suggests the rascally Lheureux of Madame Bovary) or a confused misguided drifter like Plessis or Vasco.

In Tahiti et sa couronne, t'Serstevens recognises the two foregoing types presented by Chadourne. The Vasco type vagabond and beachcomber receives, as we have seen above, a warning to beware of the insidiousness of the climate. The small town commercial pirate is given a treatment much in the spirit of Chadourne, with whose observations t'Serstevens seems to concur.

The majority of the businessmen of Papeete are to t'Serstevens:

... menus profiteurs qui ne sont même pas de fripouilles car ils s'en ont ni les moyens ni les éléments... Ils ne se considèrent pas moins comme des gaiards très forts, capables d'exploiter des foules plus nombreuses et plus averties que les quarante mille indigènes nonchalants de tous les archipels. A Paris, ces petite voleraux qui se croient de grands pillards auraient un bureau d'une pièce mansardée au sixième étage d'un immeuble de faubourg. Ils ont ici figure de coquins, tant le prisme équatorial

et la naïveté du public grossissent les objets.¹¹

Fonctionnaires and missionaries come in for neither strong
censure, as in Noa Noa, nor praise, as in Vasco, and t'Serstevens even
mentions that among the merchants there is actually a respectable
minority who carry on their affairs honestly.¹²

But there is some difference of tone between Chadourne's and
t'Serstevens's views of modern Tahiti. In Chadourne, we have the
constant feeling of foreignness between France and Tahiti, and even his
heroic priest is like a strange explorer in a remote non-French world.
In t'Serstevens, on the contrary, one seems to feel some intent to
convey a feeling of the permanence, the naturalness of the French
presence in Polynesia. The Frenchman in Vasco seem pictured essentially
as strangers in a foreign land. In Tahiti et sa couronne, the Frenchman
is at home in his own territory. One tends to feel that in t'Serstevens's
view the French who are in Tahiti, whether officials, priests or even
swindlers, are there not by intrusion but by right.

This attitude is shown by t'Serstevens in his brief treatment of
the demi, the half-castes, among whom, the author says, are to be
found some of the worst enemies of France. The reasons for this
hostility, he declares

	tiennent à l'amour propre et à l'ambition. Il est
humiliant de voir des "étrangers" s'emparer des postes

¹¹Tahiti et sa couronne, I, p. 183.
¹²Ibid.
In the foregoing quotation, the fact that t'Serstevens uses quotation marks around the word "étranger" seems eloquent. Whatever the Tahitians and the demis may choose to think, t'Serstevens seems to suggest, the French, officials or businessmen, in Tahiti today, are no more to be considered foreigners than the natives.

If, for any reason, one prefers not to blame the white man too severely for the disfigurement and the misfortunes of Tahiti, the Chinese immigrant seems to present a convenient and relatively defenseless whipping boy to use for this purpose. Unlike Chadourne, t'Serstevens seems to have succumbed to this temptation. Gauguin and Chadourne both mention the importance of the Chinese in local commerce, but neither makes the Oriental immigrant the target of an attack.

t'Serstevens devotes nearly fourteen pages to a discussion, which is virtually a diatribe, of the Chinese in French Polynesia. Ugliness, disease, corruption and the crowding out of the native Tahitian (over whom t'Serstevens generally wastes few tears) are blamed on him.

T'Serstevens view of the Chinese element in the Tahitian population is clearly and baldly stated:

Je n'ai jamais rien rencontré sur la boule terrestre qui soit plus antipathique que ce magot... Outre sa disgrâce physique, il est affligé d'une laideur morale... qui atteint chez lui à l'outrance...15

13Tahiti et sa couronne, I, p. 182.

14Ibid., pp. 168-182.

15Ibid., p. 168.
But the real preoccupation and perhaps the greatest merit of Tahiti et sa couronne is t'Serstevens highly observant, albeit unflattering, study of the Tahitian.

Gauguin had written that two expressions revealed the native character: Iaorana (Greeting) and Hoatu (Never mind). The impression formed is one of good-natured tolerance. As keys to the Polynesian temperament t'Serstevens has chosen three different expressions which create a somewhat different image.

The first is Aita peapesa, which literally means "no trouble," but which t'Serstevens, for the purpose of character portrayal, interprets as "it's too much trouble." The second of t'Serstevens' key expressions is flu ("I'm fed up") and the third is mea haana ("it's shameful").

By his choice of the expression aita peapesa, t'Serstevens means that the Tahitians are lazy. Flu is to indicate their short attention span. But mea haana, dealing with the question of shamefulness, is the one that t'Serstevens uses most effectively to demolish any lingering nobility that may have been considered to adhere to the Tahitian savage.

Examining the matter of what the Tahitian does and does not consider shameful, t'Serstevens declares that in the judgment of the native

Voler et mentir ne "fait pas honte" mais semble au contraire la marque d'une grande habileté: En revanche "c'est honte"

16 Tahiti et sa couronne, I, p. 259.
17 Ibid., p. 267.
18 Ibid., p. 270.
que de porter plainte contre quelqu’un même contre celui qui vous a volé . . . Abandonner ses parents devenus vieux et impotents, ce ne fait pas honte . . . Battre sa femme n’est pas honteux . . . Ce ne l’est pas non plus que d’aller au bateau pour se procurer une robe, mais c’est une honte de garder la même robe pendant une journée entière. Ce n’en est pas de “jouer” avec le premier venu des Blancs, mais c’en est une que de n’en pas recevoir un cadeau. Mendier, cela fait honte, mais ruser pour avoir quelque chose, et l’obtenir, c’est de l’adresse. 19

Etre avaré, se plaindre, être malade, . . . dire merci, devenir vieux, tout cela fait honte; mais . . . donner des coups de pied dans le ventre de son chien, avoir des poux, vivre au crochet de son voisin, marauder ses cocos . . . se saouler, avoir des enfants de cinq ou six pères, cela ne fait pas honte et même, dans les deux derniers cas, vous donne de la considération. 20

As part of his assault on the myth of the noble savage t’Serstevens devotes considerable space 21 to exploding the legend of the Tahitian Eve. His conclusion is that both physically and temperamentally she has been enormously overrated. He particularly stresses her lack of tenderness, her respect for nothing but physical force, her desire to be beaten physically, the provocations she offers for this purpose, her obvious lack of capacity for any kind of intellectual companionship, her moods of sulkiness and boredom, her laziness, her wastefulness, her malicious gossiping.

Even as a partner in purely physical love, a department in which some writers have tended to give the Tahitian Eve a place of honor, t’Serstevens will have none of her.

19 Ibid., p. 271.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., pp. 305-349.
J'ai l'impression qu'il leur manque bien des choses, notamment la calinerie, l'esprit des entractes, la discrétion... l'imagination, la variété, les raffinements et la délectation. J'en conclus que si elles peuvent contenter des forts mangeurs, il leur est bien difficile de satisfaire des gourmets.22

In contrast, throughout t'Serstevens entire Polynesian journey, we feel the charming presence of his French wife, Amandine Dore. We sense that she is tender, kind, graceful, imaginative, talented, intelligent, cheerful, enthusiastic and co-operative, all that t'Serstevens has contended that the Tahitian Eve is not.

The impressionable reader, on finishing Noa Noa, is in love with the Tahitian Eve. On finishing Tahiti et sa couronne he is convinced that the civilised woman is her superior in every way, just as the civilised man is superior to the savage.

Albert t'Serstevens, like Voltaire, has absolutely no "envie de marcher à quatre pattes."

22Ibid., p. 331.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The four distinct visions of Tahiti presented respectively by Paul Gauguin, Victor Segalen, Marc Chadourne and Albert t'Serstevens indicate the changing attitudes of French *litterateurs* towards the traditional escapist concepts of the noble savage and the tropical island paradise. They also form an important element in the continuance of the exotic tradition in the French literature of the twentieth century.

Each of these writers offers evidence of the fact that exoticism remains a matter of considerable interest in French literary spheres. Moreover, the development from the study of the relatively simple and primitivist social backgrounds treated in the works of Gauguin and Segalen, to the more complicated set of conditions in Tahiti today shown by Chadourne and t'Serstevens indicates that the changing times are continually presenting ever new opportunities and challenges to writers in the exotic field. Just as the Tahiti of Gauguin and Segalen has largely vanished, the Tahiti of Chadourne and even of t'Serstevens is in the process of such radical change that a new interpretation of the Tahitian scene would be of interest and value. Since t'Serstevens' journey through the islands, Tahiti has become the location of an international airport and has entered the jet age. t'Serstevens remarked that by the time of his arrival in Polynesia, Karahu had become an office stenographer. She has now become an air hostess.
Already she is awaiting the airborne Loti who will write her adventures in this new sphere.

Rarahu may adjust to the modern world, but the noble savage, one fears, is finally and irretrievably dead. In the long debate, it would seem to be Voltaire, and not Rousseau, who has prevailed. Although Paul Gauguin opened the century with enthusiastic praise of the Polynesian in particular and the savage in general, it was not long before Victor Segalen in Les Immortels was approaching a historical reconstitution of primitive Tahiti in a purely objective, uncommitted, non-partisan, scientific spirit. Segalen shows European influences, especially the introduction of European religion, destroyed the traditionally unifying factors of the old Tahitian culture, but he does not preach. On reading Segalen we tend to feel regret at the disappearance of the old Tahitian attitude based on a pagan love of life and a cheerful enjoyment of the world, yet at the same time, we are never permitted to forget the callousness, brutality, maliciousness, superstition and cruelty that was also a part of the Polynesian way.

When we come to Chadourne, the element of regret at the disruption of Polynesian culture by the white man is almost entirely absent. Such regrets as Chadourne makes us feel seem solely in connection with the medical aspects of deterioration of the Polynesian race. He shows us, as we have seen, the health of the Marquesan natives suffering from the importation of European diseases, and their numbers dwindling in consequence. This, however, is shown purely as a sociological fact; it is not presented, as it is by Gauguin, as an accusation. And when we leave Chadourne and turn to t'Serstevens, we find complete
repudiation of the Tahitian native as a model of exemplary primitivism. T'Serstevens flatly declares that the Tahitian is not now, nor ever was, a noble savage.

During the twentieth century, then, French writing about Tahiti, *La Nouvelle Gythere*, the fabled island paradise *par excellence*, has tended to dispel rather than maintain the legend of the Polynesian as a noble savage and an innocent, lovable child of nature. We may next ask, what of the paradise itself and the possibility for the white man to escape the cold mechanisation, the maddening complexity and the destructive turmoil of the modern world by turning lotos-eater and taking himself to such a remote, sun-blessed isle of dreams, lost in a sea of forgetfulness, *l'île perdue dans la mer*. Gauguin's answer, as given in *Noa Noa*, is essentially affirmative; the Tahitian is lovable; Tahiti is glorious; the noble savage and the earthly paradise exist; let the European who would know reality and free himself from sham go there and become a savage, too. In *Avant et Après*, however, we see even Gauguin's partially avowed disillusionment. His Eden has already been defiled by white officials, missionaries, merchants and gendarmes; disease and the despondency of broken spirits have even diminished the glory of the noble savage and the Tahitian Eve, and despite Gauguin's insistence upon the desirability of casting off civilisation and becoming a primitive, it is all too evident that his own experiment in this direction has brought him bitterness, sickness and distress.

In *Les Imaginaires*, Segalen's purely objective presentation of Tahiti, both in its so-called golden age before European discovery and in the confused period following, never pretends to picture a vision of
earthly paradise. And as for the one white man, Ante, who does, like Gauguin, seem inclined to attune himself to Polynesian life and lore, we see him facing disappointments arising from the weakness of the Tahitian character itself. We also see his qualities of kindness, tenderness, sympathy and loyalty rejected and even despised by the natives. If this, then, is what escape from civilization is to mean, it can scarcely be called a satisfactory solution to the modern ordeal.

To Chadourne the island, and even the town of Papeete, are attractive, but a hopeless, numbing sinking into degeneracy and stagnation awaits those who, like Plessis and Vasco, succumb to Tahiti's deceptive charm. And certainly no place peopled by such characters as Frelon, Gibson, Krohn, Tauf and Tauf's wife, could possibly be called an earthly paradise. Moreover, the last three of these characters named, let it be remembered, represent the demis which today make up the largest element of the population.

As for t'Serstevens, he is categorical: the Tahitian is not a noble savage; Tahiti is not a paradise, and the white man who seeks escape there ends by burying his dignity and all that makes life worthy of being lived.

In the realm of exotic literature other men of letters will no doubt write of Tahiti again, and they may well say that it is interesting and colorful and that it presents, at its present stage of political and social development, some fascinating problems of international and inter-racial mingling, but they will probably not say that it is ideal. For we have come to the end of the Tahitian
dream. Only by willful misinterpretation and self-deception could
the reader of t'Serstevens, Chadourne, Segalen and even Gauguin preserve
illusions of the sort nurtured by Bougainville and Loti of La Nouvelle
Cythere, of the noble savage, of an enchanted island of beautiful,
lovable people and of blissful, benevolent forgetfulness of the evil
and ugliness that is to be found in the world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Primary Materials


B. Secondary Materials


