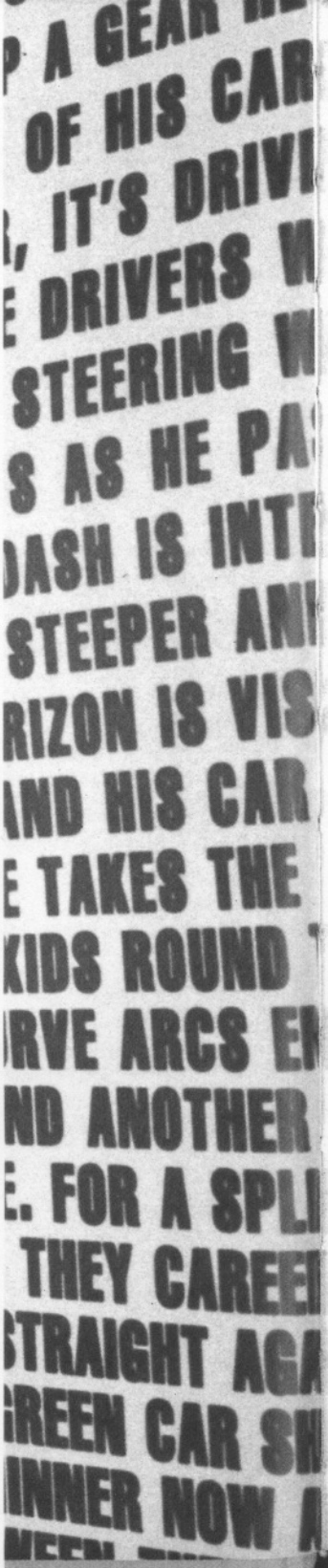
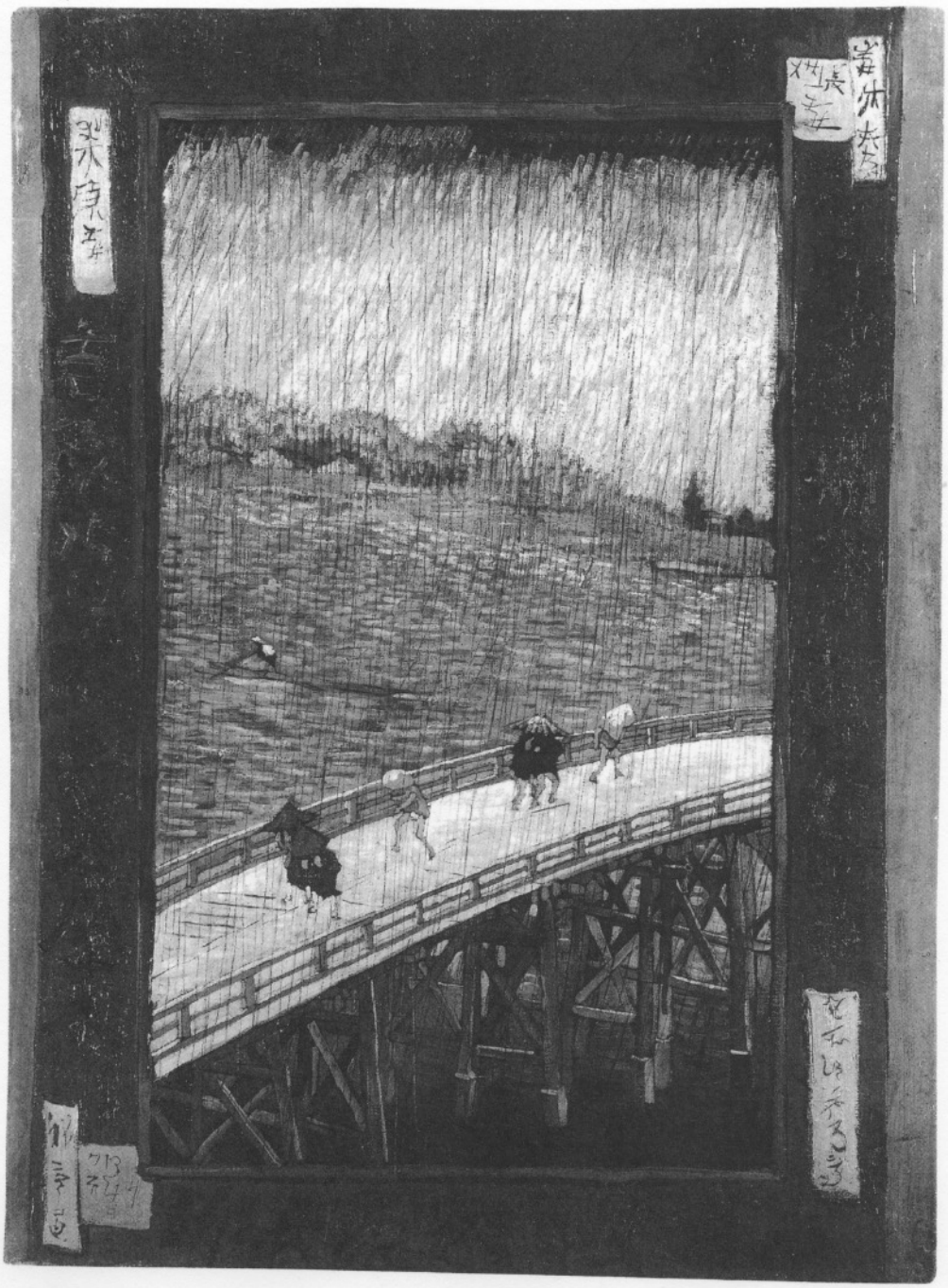


Simon Morley

Writing on the Wall

Word and Image in Modern Art

University of California Press
Berkeley Los Angeles



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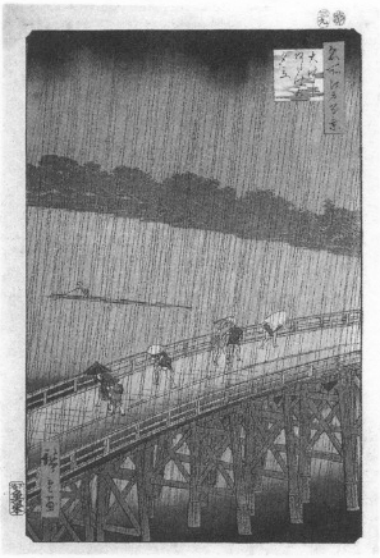
Merahi metua no Tehamana: Symbolist Words

By the late 1880s, the animosity felt towards mass culture by a conservative like Maurice Talmeyer had come to be shared by many artists and writers of a more progressive persuasion. As the periodical *L'Art Moderne* declared in 1889: 'There is now a need for the other-worldly, for remote and *mystical* ideas evoking dreams'.[1] The generation after the Impressionists – the Symbolists – would therefore challenge their predecessors' commitment to perceptual realism and to the painting of modern life; they aimed instead at creating an art that stood in opposition to what was now regarded as the vulgar culture of a basely materialistic society. Indeed, to the Symbolists it seemed that the Impressionists' quest to be free from the excessively literary conventions that dominated academic Salon painting and to make painting a purely visual experience had succeeded only in turning painting into a mere record of sensations, just as the newspaper merely recorded events. The new conception of art, on the other hand, would be an expanded one in which it was possible to incorporate a wider range of associations and experiences. It would thus appeal not so much to perception as to the faculty of memory – a faculty that could be accessed equally through the visual or the verbal. As a result, in the radical art of the 1880s and 1890s written words are not usually present as part of some depicted scene as they were in the works discussed in the last chapter. Instead they would often be employed as weapons in an armoury of anti-naturalism, appearing alongside images in the guise of elusive titles, enigmatic verbal evocations or graphic signs.

The co-presence of word and image was a common characteristic of the kind of art admired by the artists who now sought to escape the influence of naturalism. In his copies of the Japanese woodblock prints that he owned, Vincent van Gogh also incorporated the ideographic writing that is a characteristic part of the originals. In his 1887 painted version of Hiroshige's *The Ohashi Bridge in the Rain* (*c.* 1857), for example, he even painted calligraphic markings all around the image that are not actually to be found in the original; it turns out that these are a combination of real Kanji letters (and shapes like them) which, though legible, have meanings that are apparently unrelated to the subject. It was an exotic effect that van Gogh was after and he employed the 'oriental' inscriptions as part of the decorative and non-naturalistic composition as a whole. The appeal of the calligraphy lay in its unusual visual dynamics rather than in its legibility, and above all van Gogh understood that its presence emphasized the two-dimensionality of the picture plane and carried an energizing trace of the artist's gesture.[2]

The assimilation of non-Western art such as Japanese prints had the effect of revealing the shapes of alternative traditions, ones in which word and image had never been severed from each other as they had in post-Renaissance art in the West, and in which the actions of drawing and writing



25 **Utagawa Hiroshige** *The Ohashi Bridge in the Rain* c. 1857

24 **Vincent van Gogh** *The Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)* 1887
The artist's copy of a woodblock print uses the oriental calligraphy both to create an exotic effect and to generate a surface rhythm. A comparison with the original (above) reveals that van Gogh took considerable liberties.

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were still intimately related. But such visual–verbal interplay could also be found nearer to home in another source that now became a reformative model: medieval art. Interest in the so-called Italian 'primitives' and in the work of the often anonymous craftsmen of the Gothic period drew attention to a *Western* calligraphic tradition, and also to pictorial conventions in which the incorporation of text into the field of the image was the norm. Such historical influences were particularly strongly felt in England. *Proserpine*, a work by the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Charles Rossetti from 1877, shows how the new medievalism could inform easel-painting – the illuminated scroll depicted in the picture contains one of Rossetti's own poems written in Italian, while for good measure an English version is carried on the frame. Another important figure in this regard was the artist, designer and writer William Morris, who made a special study of the evolution of Western calligraphy and of early printing. In 1891 Morris put this research into practice by founding the Kelmscott Press, which went on to publish a number of modern illuminated books in an overtly medievalizing style. Morris insisted on the use of woodcut technique rather than metal punches or lithography, but despite his conscious archaism, his quest to save book design and production from the mediocrity into which it had slumped signalled the beginning of a revival in the medium that runs parallel with and often overlaps artists' engagements with written text.

The context for such assimilations of non-Western and historical sources would be a drive inwards, away from the external world. For growing scepticism concerning the signifying power of representations had the effect of making artists reflect upon their media and try to avoid clear and explicit meanings. The principles espoused by the new generation demanded a retreat from the word and image as they were conventionally used. The poem or the painting in Symbolist theory was meant to evoke not clear, rational and concrete meanings, but rather vague states of mind and poetic moods, the conjuring of a chimera, or of the mysterious, equivocal or indeterminate sign.

In fact, from the point of view of meaning, the vagueness of music and the unstable nature of the visual image now seemed better models for the poet than the clarity and determined nature of verbal language, and in their use of language the Symbolist poets sought an indeterminacy and ambiguity of meaning more characteristic of pictures. Central to the new conception, however, was the image of the universal 'Book', a metaphor intended to suggest that reality was composed of a network of signs to be interpreted, translated or deciphered, and where Nature was envisaged as a vast text to be *read*. This concept would also be central to the visual arts, as painting was remodelled in opposition to the tenets of naturalism and redirected instead towards the pursuit of the enigmatic and all-embracing 'symbol'. In this new aesthetics, a painting was regarded as a surface upon which could be laid a range of signs evoking an allusive and transcendent reality beyond mere appearances. Thus, the Symbolist critic G.-Albert Aurier, in an essay about Paul Gauguin written in 1891, could cite Charles Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondences' (1857) and argue that it was necessary to distinguish between those 'elevated' minds – like Gauguin's – capable of recognizing obscure symbols, and the 'imbecile human flock, duped by the appearances

27 **William Morris** Page from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Kelmscott Press 1896
The medieval illuminated manuscript becomes the inspiration behind the renewal of book design. The images are by Edward Burne-Jones.

26 **Dante Gabriel Charles Rossetti** *Proserpine* 1877
The *trompe l'oeil* manuscripts enhance the medievalizing effect; the one at top right carries a poem by the artist-poet.

that lead them to the denial of essential ideas'.[3] The task of the artist, Aurier declared, was to eschew 'tangible things' so that the deeper, essential reality would appear 'only as *signs*'. These, Aurier wrote, 'are the letters of an enormous alphabet which only the man of genius knows how to spell.'[4] Baudelaire's 'Correspondences' would, in fact, prove to be an important touchstone generally for the Symbolists. In it the poet treated reality not as something that could be clearly described or named, but rather as if it were 'un fôret des symboles' (a forest of symbols), a mysterious and vague territory to be navigated by the visionary power of the artist using a rarefied language of suggestion, equivocation and ambiguity.[5]

So, the new poetics would also involve a wholesale reassessment of goals and of the nature of the relationship between poetic and everyday language. Symbolist poets abandoned traditional metre in favour of the openness of free verse, a style closer to the rhythm and syntax of normal speech. But at the same time they sought to emancipate the writing process from conscious and rational control and texts were made to unfold spontaneously as what Rimbaud had in 1873 called an 'alchemy of the word' took over.[6] Not only was the structure of language changed, but so too was its relationship to subject matter. Furthermore, the Symbolists envisaged a new relationship between work and reader in which there was no coherent grid of reference and in which the semantics of language were no longer anchored in the 'real'. In reading texts imbued with this new spirit, it becomes impossible to decide which particular associations are relevant and which are not; no unitary purpose is manifest and, as a result, an equal or reversible relationship is established between poet and reader.

It is the work of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé that best embodies the underlying goals of Symbolism in literature, and his influence extended to many artists. Of all of Mallarmé's poems, one in particular was to prove of major significance. 'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance) – originally published in 1897 but actually only published in its strikingly typographic version in 1914[7] – highlights the visual status of the verbal sign, making the reader aware of the concrete, material nature of letters and words, and drawing attention to the character of the typeface (the font in the later version is 'Didot') while also highlighting the enveloping blankness of the page. Mallarmé focused on the *form* of language rather than any external references and sought thereby to establish an autonomous space for language beyond the debased everyday world. Like the other Symbolists, he had a fundamental distaste for the mass media, regarding the newspaper as a decadent medium in which language was thoroughly corrupted. But he also recognized that in the quest to free language from its customary roles, the newspaper could be regarded as a potential source of inspiration for the poet, a kind of collective work in which unrelated items were juxtaposed in discontinuous ways. Both repelled by and drawn to the anonymity of this new kind of public language, Mallarmé became fascinated by the loss of the personal voice and the lack of clear authorship the newspaper implied. There, in the bold page displays, he also saw an inadvertent recognition of the essential materiality of the written word and its status as an object rather than a transparent window onto reality. So, in 'Un Coup de dés', Mallarmé draws directly on the kind of

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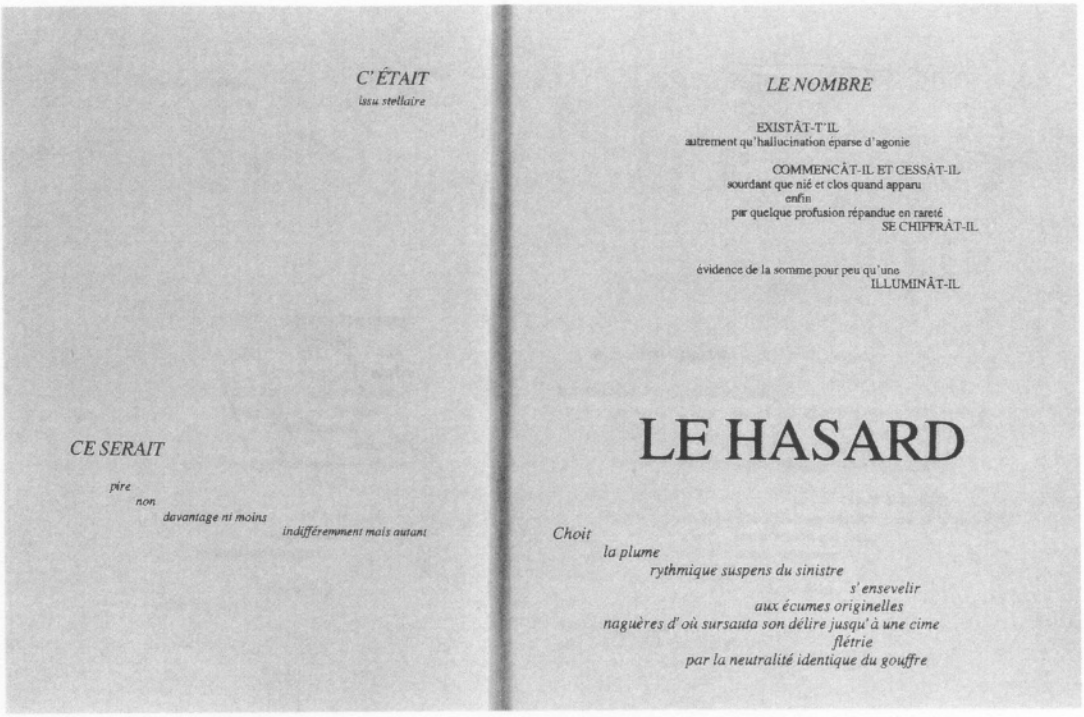

typographic irregularities that are typical of the newspaper: mixing font sizes, using a combination of upper case, lower case and italics, and creating asymmetrical layouts and visually motivated spacings. But the result could not be more different from that intended in the press, and rather than directing us towards a tangibly represented reality we are instead made to ponder the word's materiality, the way in which meaning is constituted by the physical arrangement of letters on the page. Words stand marooned in a sea of pure whiteness, atomized and stripped of their customary ability to communicate, just as they are also devoid of a clear authorial presence.

But the Symbolists were bent on more than simply retreating from the commonplace. In an essay written in 1849 the composer Richard Wagner had stated that his operas sought to express the reality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total work of art'. This new concept was intended to replace the old media forms altogether, drawing all the arts into a new unity, with music as the model. For, as Wagner declared: 'Artistic Man can only fully content himself by uniting every branch of Art into the *common* Artwork.'[8] The literary and the visual arts were to be united in a complex and all-embracing event. The phenomenon of synaesthesia was also central to this new vision, and in the wake of Wagner's example the Symbolists explored the ways in which the distinctions between different media could be blurred on the level of sensation. Synaesthesia could take many forms, including, for example, the imagistic interpretation of the alphabet.

28 **Stéphane Mallarmé** Spread from 'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance) 1914
The conventional layout of the printed text is subverted and the message carried by the words obscured in a page from a poem that would have a huge influence on both writers and artists.

Arthur Rimbaud's 1871 poem 'Les Voyelles' (The Vowels) – a work that would prove to be highly influential – made playful reference to the links between letters, colours and feelings: 'A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles' (A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels), it begins.[9] Mallarmé also made forays into similar territory, and in an essay devoted to the English language suggested that, for example, the letter 'J' expressed, quick, direct action, while 'K' was an image of knottiness or joining together.[10]

As a consequence of the new artistic priorities, the links between the practitioners of the literary and the visual arts grew closer. Artists, poets and musicians became aware of the many ways in which their media and goals overlapped and shared common ground – the fact that Rossetti was both painter and poet illustrates this point. Collaborations between poets and artists spawned a new hybrid genre – the *livre d'artiste* or 'artist's book' – that aimed at providing a balanced dialogue between painting and poetry, staged within the format of the folio book. In these projects, images were used not simply to illustrate a text but rather to complement or enhance the verbal element as an equal partner. The French artist Odilon Redon, for example, in collaborations with poets such as Mallarmé, produced what were in effect anti-illustrations where the image is no longer anchored to text in order to produce some clear meaning but rather expresses similar elusive ideas in another medium. Redon declared that all his works in fact functioned as images in search of unwritten texts, and wrote in relation to the carefully chosen but chimerical titles of his pictures:

> The title is justified only when it is vague...and aspires even rather confusingly, to the equivocal. My drawings inspire and do not provide definitions. They do not determine anything. Just like music, they place us within the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.[11]

Within the more open space of the canvas, painters were actually often better able than poets and writers to explore many of the implications of a verbal language that had been severed from its conventional roles and contexts. For example, words often play a significant role in the paintings of Paul Gauguin. They are usually present in the form of inscribed titles, which have migrated from the frame, the reverse of the canvas, or the gallery pamphlet, onto the composition itself. On one level, as with van Gogh, such verbal presences located within the traditional space of painting have the effect of re-emphasizing what is already made clear through anti-naturalistic modelling and colour, and through avoidance of perspective: that the work is to be understood as a construction, a surface. But the inscriptions also direct the viewer towards envisaging the artwork as a matrix of signs or symbols that are not so much to be *seen* as *read* as part of an enigmatic evocation.

In practice, Gauguin used either a roughly painted sans serif letterform or cursive script, and these texts are not inscribed with much attention to the formal relationship of lettering to other aspects of the composition. Indeed, from the pictorial point of view, and in comparison with oriental and medieval art, they often seem awkwardly sited or weak in visual form, as if text was supplementary to visual image, rather than integrated with it. But their presence within the visual field was clearly of great importance to

29 **Paul Gauguin** *Tehamana Has Many Ancestors (Merahi metua no Tehamana)* 1893
Three different kinds of writing coexist within Gauguin's painting, a portrait of his fourteen-year-old mistress.

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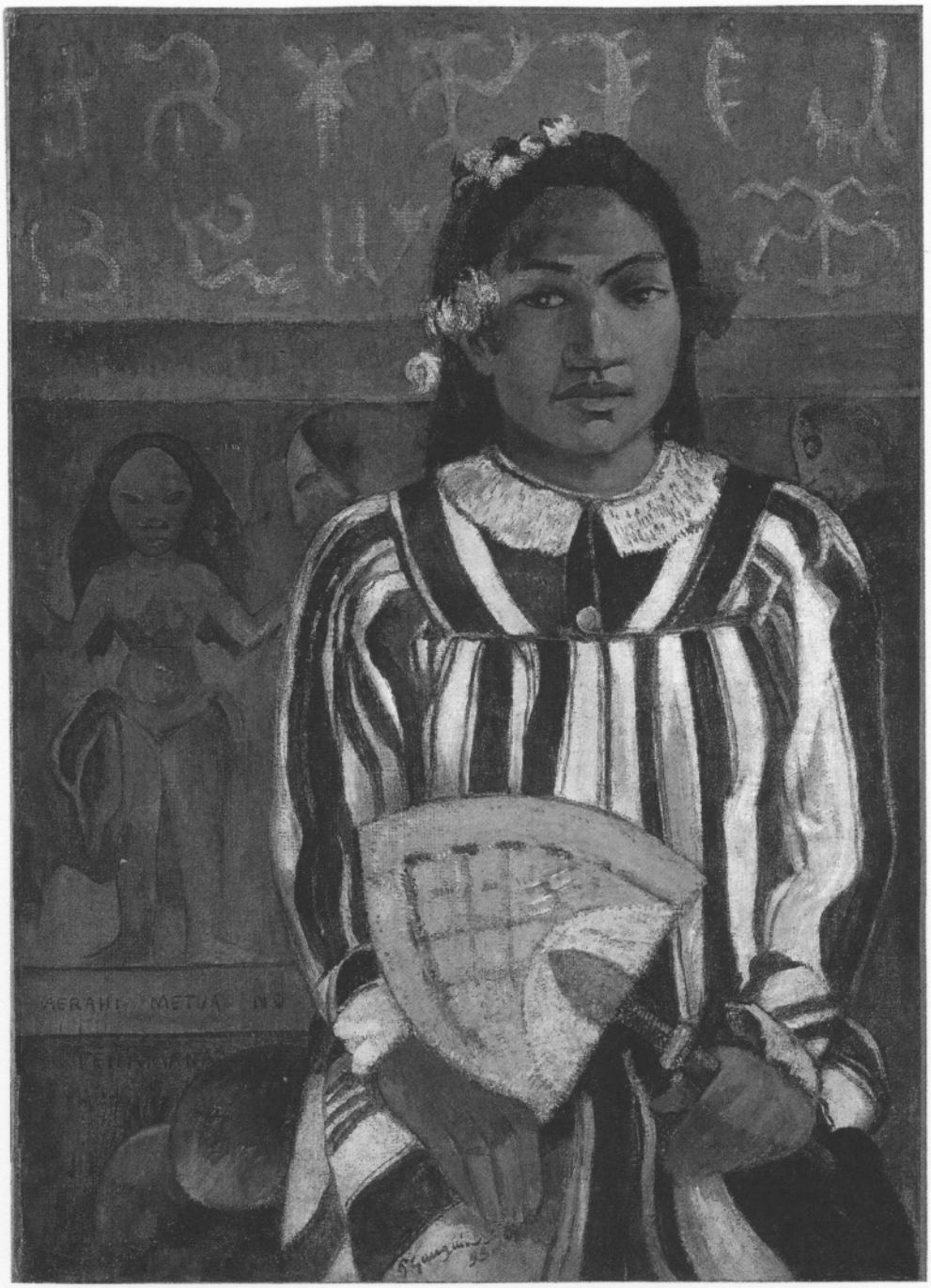

Gauguin, and he claimed that script provided continuity between title, signature and image. He argued, however, that the words were not to be understood so much as a title or as a specific description of the work's meaning but as what he called 'signatures' – personal acts of naming and allusive commentaries on the imagery.[12] Equivocation and evocation are all. Indeed, Gauguin inflicted upon the relationship between words and images a regime of radical indeterminacy, where the anchoring role of words is deliberately undermined.

After his move to the South Seas, such characteristics were exacerbated by Gauguin's habit of painting the titles in alphabetic transcriptions of the oral language of the Tahitians (though subsequent research has shown that he did not actually know the native language very well, and often left out connecting particles and juxtaposed roots in crude pidgin style). A work from 1893, *Tehamana Has Many Ancestors (Merahi metua no Tehamana)* [*29*], for example, depicts a Tahitian girl – Gauguin's fourteen-year-old mistress – set against a background of enormously enlarged glyphs. The painting can be interpreted as a meditation on the relationship between different kinds of language. The glyphs, which are an accurate transcription of part of a stone from Easter Island carrying what is known as 'Rongorongo' writing, were something of a cryptological cause célèbre in the 1890s, but the marks remained linguistic enigmas, signs of an apparently ancient and obscure civilization that Gauguin here explicitly holds up as a reformative model.[13] Such occult carvings, which lie close to the origins of writing as a form of graphic mark-making, are also complemented in the painting by an alphabetic rendering of a phrase in Tahitian. This serves ostensibly as the title, but is also likely to be an illegible enigma. Two forms of writing here collude in Gauguin's broader goal, which is to convey a feeling of essential 'otherness', of the inscrutability and mystery of the subject matter. Only the artist's signature, which constitutes a decisive mark of authorial presence and authority – even colonization – is actually legible in the normal sense, and stands against the general suppression of meaning as a vestige of Western cultural propriety.

Gauguin sought out cultures untarnished by Western materialism and was in thrall to a view of language that was in essence a crude form of reverse Darwinism, that is, one in which language was regarded as progressively weakening as it evolved. The pre-alphabetic 'savage', Gauguin believed, lived in a more essential reality, and experienced a spiritual, moral and aesthetic existence far richer than was possible in materialistic Western cultures. Informed by similar assumptions, artists in the early years of the twentieth century often regarded the written word as an obvious sign of a spiritually vacant and language-saturated culture that neglected the needs of the body in favour of the disembodied and fetishized reason for which the written word was a vessel. The artist cast as a 'modern savage' was someone who identified with pre-literate cultures and who embraced a more spontaneous and authentic oral, imagistic and sensual 'tribal' consciousness.

Inspired by Gauguin and others, the cult of the 'primitive' coalesced in the first decade of the twentieth century in the Expressionist movement. When words appear in such works – as, for example, in posters or books – they are deliberately made to look rough, blockish and archaic. The German

Expressionists, such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, rediscovered medieval woodblock printing techniques, but not the elegance of that period's lettering. By adopting such pre-industrial methods they hoped to produce a typographic style that would be more authentic, as well as being strikingly different in form from both the sophisticated and mechanically produced lettering of the mass media and the more lyrical styles of Art Nouveau.

But hostility to the written word in art could go deeper than an assault on staid forms of typography and decorative organicism. In *The Blue Rider Almanac* (1912) the Russian Expressionist Vassily Kandinsky discussed the difference between the letter as something participating in a conventional code, and the letter as a *thing* capable of resonating with an 'inner' reality: 'When a reader looks at some letter in these lines with unskilled eyes', he wrote, 'he will see it not as a familiar symbol for part of a word, but first as a thing. Besides the practical man-made abstract form, which is a fixed symbol for a specific sound, he will also see a physical form that quite autonomously creates a certain outer and inner impression.'[14] This reduction of text to its textuality should be seen in the context of Kandinsky's conception of the role of the artist as a purifier of the sign. For him, the essence of the letter, like any form, lay not in the part it may play in visualizing speech or denoting meaning, but rather in its being possessed of its own optically generated 'inner' and 'outer' resonances. But Kandinsky's real goal was the achievement of an art in which a direct equivalence between sign and referent could exist, one that he believed would, in effect, be a non-discursive and universal language. In this way, the essence of painting for Kandinsky – as for the other pioneers of abstract art – came to lie in its status as a kind of visual music. The goal of the artist was to challenge the authority and range of conventional symbols and signs, thus avoiding the fall into mediated and discursive modes by embracing a directly expressive vocabulary of the visual. Such essentialism represents a powerful obstacle to the incorporation of words into art. Kandinsky and the other abstractionists rejected the model of both the discursive linguistic sign and the representational image – Peirce's 'symbolic' and 'iconic' signs – in favour of what they saw as the transparency, universality and directness of expressive line and colour – Peirce's 'indexical' sign. Indeed, the constraining net of the discursive was exactly that from which abstract art sought to liberate itself as it embraced a more fundamental and unmediated mode of communication.

But the art of the late nineteenth century can also be seen to have had other, even contrary, implications. By writing titles or other extraneous texts onto the surface of their works artists opened painting up to all that had been excluded from the rectangle of the canvas since the Renaissance. Far from reducing art to some abstract essence, artists were inviting a new degree of interpretative mobility by rendering the frame of the work permeable. Henceforth, in the 'total work of art' the various artistic media would be thoroughly confused and combined, and the relationship between artwork and world destabilized. In the process a multiplicity of written words were decanted into spaces previously reserved for images; but where once they had offered clarity and closure of meaning, they were now used to generate a powerful sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity.

30 **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** *Die Brücke* 1910
Crude but virile woodblock lettering in a German Expressionist poster design advertising an exhibition by the Die Brücke group.