

Gauguin's  
***AVANT et après:***  
A case study in editorial peritext

Benjamin E. Niehaus





Shortly before his death in 1903, Paul Gauguin completed a manuscript titled *AVANT et après*, a text which included 27 original sketches as well as a front cover illustrated by Gauguin himself. To the back cover was attached a print of Albrecht Dürer's 1513 engraving *Ritter, Tod und Teufel*, and though an intriguing choice to be sure, we shall limit our discussion to the front cover of the work and its peritextual significance.

While the drawings have been included in nearly every edition published to date, the cover art has traditionally only been included with facsimile reproductions of the original manuscript. To further compound the loss of the artwork, the original title is sacrificed in English-language editions in favor of *The Intimate Journals of Paul Gauguin* or *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*.

The aim of this article will be twofold. We shall first seek to analyze and establish the original cover within Genette's framework of editorial peritext, discussing the importance not only of the referential elements contained therein, most important for our discussion being the title of the work, but also the communicative importance of the art itself and its function as a barrier that must be crossed before entering into the narrative world of the text. Having explored the original, we shall then proceed to examine how editorial modifications have transformed the nature of this cover and its elements, concluding with a discussion of how these changes have fundamentally altered the relationships between the text, the cover and the public.

Though information about the original manuscript is more rare today than one would like, its basic history can be charted from its creation in the Marquesas in 1903, to its first publication by German editor and publisher Kurt Wolff in 1914. However, this limited edition was soon to vanish from the market and the text would await a second publication by Wolff in 1918 (Gauguin 1948, NdR). These early editions, as well as the 1921 Boni-Liveright and the 1948 Andersen editions, remain true to work's original form in that they, like the original manuscript, are hard bound with the original front cover. This cover, as ornate as it may be, does not stray far from the traditional structure in that it provides the editorial and authorial information typical to this peritextual location (Genette 1987, pp. 26-27). We find the title of the work, the date and location of publication, and the author's name presented as a first initial with the entire family name, this being the manner in which Gauguin signed the majority of his paintings. It is however the title that shall be most relevant to this first discussion.

Gerard Genette devotes a rather sizable chapter of his seminal work *Seuils* to the study of titles, but finds the traditional categorization of titular functions problematic, as, all titles are basically "artificial objects", but at the same time, they are essential components in the peritextual framework (Genette 1987, pp. 54-55). The work's original title *AVANT et après* is the title chosen by



## Gauguin's *AVANT et après*: A case study in editorial peritext

Benjamin E. Niehaus

the author and the one that appears on the cover of the book. Subsequent changes to the title are the result of either translations or editorial alterations made over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To call the title *AVANT et après* a working title is an intriguing proposition given that Gauguin wrote the text in little more than one month, and then shipped it off to Europe immediately following its completion. However, as the text came prepackaged for publication and not as a loose manuscript, it can be asserted that this is the title that Gauguin sought for an eventual publication and as will be demonstrated, this title is of a capital importance in understanding the text, the cover and their relationship with the exterior world.

As an element in Genette's hierarchy of functions, the title's descriptive capacity as being thematic of the content must be brought into question<sup>1</sup>. The title itself does not necessarily refer to any event, person or character in the text, thus we are left wondering how to negotiate the concept of "before and after". Most research on this subject has asked the question "Before and after what?", searching for some exterior referent. Certain scholars have suggested that it is Paris, its artistic community and intellectual marketplace that serve as "Cette lacune formatrice, cette absence dense et signifiante qui définit 'l'avant' et 'l'après' qui l'entourent" (Reck 1991, pp. 632-633). Gauguin does indeed dedicate a great deal of the text to giving his own critique of Paris, of art in general and of the critics themselves and it is in this sense that we can safely assert that the title does in some way reference the content. However, Gauguin also dedicates many pages to other subjects not related to the *métropole*, such as current events in the Marquesas and Tahiti, the Danish, as well as his own family and his childhood, suggesting that such an interpretation is somewhat limited in scope.

Nancy Matthews offers a very intriguing hypothesis in



Fig. 1 – Paul Gauguin, *AVANT et après*

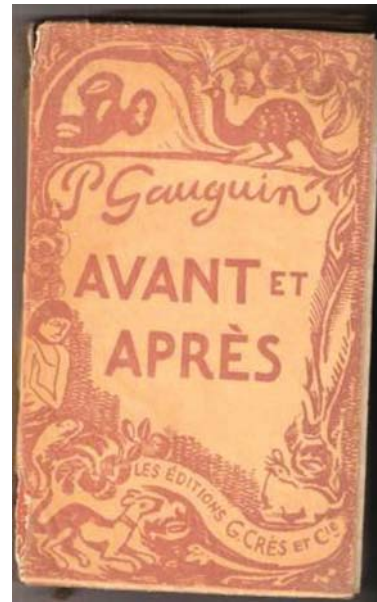


Fig. 2 – Paul Gauguin, *AVANT et après*

her work *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, claiming that the title is an historical reference to the unpublished manuscript of Gauguin's grandmother Flora Tristan, a text bearing the title "Past and Future" (Matthews 2001, p. 247). A third possibility is that Gauguin is linking the title of his literary testament to that of his artistic testament, this being his 1897 masterpiece *D'où Venons-Nous, Que Sommes-Nous, Où Allons-Nous*, the first and last of these questions seeming to align themselves quite neatly with the title of Gauguin's text, but it remains unclear which of these external referents, if any, should be privileged over the others. What does become clear however, is the importance of the title as a link between the text and the world in which it was created. The absence of a readily identifiable thematic connection between text and title allows one to look elsewhere for the "before and after", and it may be asserted that the title is merely one among many paradoxes and juxtapositions on the cover and indeed, in this sense, it does seem to play a central role in determining the cover's function as barrier between the public and the narrative contained within. This leads us to a discussion of the manner in which the information on the cover is presented to the public (fig. 1).

The elaborate use of both Maori and European symbols in the original cover art, seen here in a photo of the 1918 Kurt Wolff edition, would seem to be indicative of the torn existence of the European painter who had sought a new life in the South Pacific. It is the complexity of the words and images provided that gives this original cover multiple significations and layers of meaning, the first of these being to serve as a boundary or a frontier of sorts, while the second is to serve as a metaphor for the journey and vast space that exists between France and the Marquesas and thus to open the new realm in which the narrative tenuously

exists. Gauguin's cover requires the prospective reader to first negotiate the symbols that appear on both the left and right, top and bottom of the cover and thus to move from one place to the next. The public is faced with the daunting task of crossing this symbolic threshold, a concept that in and of itself represents a kind of journey. In order to demonstrate the degree to which the cover is emblematic of the titular conundrum, an analysis of several details would seem appropriate.

The title of this work is based on two concepts wholly dependent on one another for their existence. There can be no before without something coming after, just as there can be no after unless there is something that has gone before. This paradox of interdependence is transformed into one of balance and symmetry through many of the elements on the cover. Even before beginning a limited discussion of the various symbols and phrases, the title itself merits a discussion as it was expressly written, *AVANT et après*. Why should the first word be in all capital letters, seemingly giving it dominance over the second? If we were to take Paris and Europe as being contained in this "AVANT", then it would seem that this is a product of the formality and inescapability of Gauguin's European heritage, something that dominated the "après" and prevented him from truly reestablishing himself in a new Marquesan life. This previous existence is placed into stark contrast with the all-lower-case and less formal "après" that was his life in the islands. One could also interpret the fact that the "AVANT" appears in bold black letters as a symbol of its definition, finality and fixed nature versus the open and lightly shaded "après" where there still is a measure of possibility and uncertainty, though only in the shadow of the imposing "AVANT". The manner in which the title is presented adds yet another layer of complexity that must be acknowledged insofar as



Fig. 3 – Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journal*

it contributes to opening a space for new symbolic dimensions, permitting multiple interpretations. This is a theme evoked in equal measure by the imagery of the cover.

There does seem to exist an overt balance of contrasting images, and these symbols combine to present a fragile harmony between the present and the past, the positive and the negative, the temporal and the eternal. This is most readily recognized in the title itself, but is also carried out by the presence of tropical flowers on the left-hand side, symbolic of the artist's new home, and fleur-de-lis on the right, which have long been a symbol of France, the country and life that he had left behind. Another interesting dynamic is that which is created between contrasting male and female forms just above the author's name. Perhaps the most intriguing juxtaposition occurs in the lexical elements at the bottom of the cover where one reads in a column on the left-hand side "Pour Pleurer, Pour Souffrir, Pour Mourrir" balanced on the right by the sentiments "Pour Rire, Pour Vivre, Pour Jouir". This horizontal symmetry is complemented by a vertical one created between the title at the top, which certainly has its own temporal implications, and the Latin phrase "In Secula Seculorum" that is found at the very bottom of the cover. This suggests that the opening of a temporal dimension by the title is underscored, quite literally in this case, by a certain eternal and infinite component. Through the juxtaposition of this multitude of contrasting images and phrases, Gauguin has established a harmonic that requires careful analysis and that serves only to enhance the appreciation of the text waiting beyond this frontier. He has also allowed for the reader to enter into this tenuous space that exists between France and the Marquesas, between pleasure and pain, between the before and after on a new timeless plane. If we consider

that he wrote this text in the islands but destined it for a European, and more particularly, a French readership, the idea of using the cover to transport the reader from one place and time to another, or even to place him or her in a sort of limbo between the two, becomes rather significant if we take the cover as an indication that Gauguin sought to create a new discursive space for his narrative. It is clear that it is not only a question of what information is presented on the cover, but also a matter of how it is presented that then allows the reader to understand the new dimension into which he or she is venturing. And in spite of the enormous importance and power of the original cover, this art has tragically been forgotten in most modern editions in favor of the editorial manipulations that we shall now discuss.

The editorial evolution of this work is both fascinating and immensely important in determining the nature of the relationship between cover and text, perhaps even more so due to the fact that this is an instance where we can clearly see the cover that the author chose and designed for his work. It is rather rare to be offered such an opportunity as that of seeing a cover designed by the author, but as is the case with the posthumous republications of many works, Gauguin and his estate had little say in future editorial modifications. The fact remains that the original cover is included with facsimile reproductions of the handwritten manuscript, but most modern editions have omitted it in favor of sketches or paintings by Gauguin and even bare covers featuring only the title, author's name and publication information. While a certain number of these changes can be attributed to varying preferences among publishers, the implications of such modifications are profound, especially when taken together with the rechristening of the text that occurs in the Anglophone editions (fig. 2).

While the 1920 Wolff edition was the first to abandon the original cover art, the 1923 Crès et Cie edition is of particular importance in that it has served as the basis for many later editions. This edition chose to replace the original art with a tropical scene reminiscent of Gauguin's decor at the time of the text's composition. One could argue that the change in this edition is due to the fact that Wolff had already made such a modification or that the original publications of 1914 and 1918 had been limited and therefore the text remained relatively obscure and unknown, but Crès et Cie seem to have chosen to do so in an effort to remind the prospective reader of the exotic nature of the text, which, ironically, was something already present in the original. This new cover would serve as the model for subsequent publications and, as important as this transformation of the cover is, it is perhaps the title change in English editions and the addition of new artwork to the cover that have had the most profound effect in reshaping its peritextual functions in relation to the work and the public (fig. 3).

Though the 1921 Boni-Liveright edition includes the

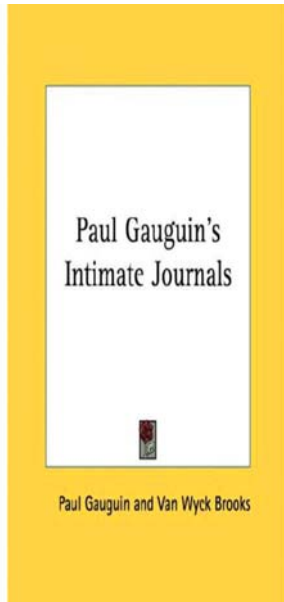


Fig. 4 – Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journal*, *Vorher und Nachher*

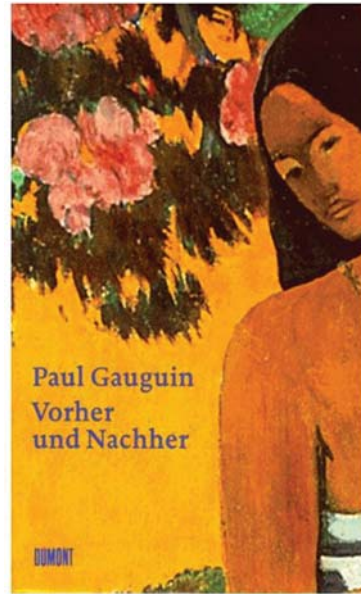


Fig. 5 – Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journal*, *Vorher und Nachher*

original cover art, it is also the first edition not to simply translate the title, but rather to change it to *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*. There is certainly the ethical question of altering the title instead of merely translating it, but this alteration becomes all the more crucial given the functional and referential capacities of the original title. It should be noted that this is almost exclusively an American and British phenomenon, as other editions be they in German, Norwegian or even Japanese, have translated the title into their respective languages, without succumbing to the temptation to adapt or alter it. Within Genette's peritextual framework, the descriptive function of the original title is thematic at most, with no rhematic implications. This newly minted title for the English editions replaces the thematic function and, more important, the referential dimension of the original title and substitutes for it a title suggesting both content and genre. This transformation also eliminates the possible intertextual reference to his grandmother's manuscript as well as that to his own *chef-d'oeuvre* of 1897. In addition, the rhematic implication that this work is an intimate journal also raises serious questions given that journals are typically, and, as the etymology of the word would indicate, the result of daily or even regular reflections, all recorded in a notebook or manuscript. And yet, the text in question was the fruit of little more than a month's work, carried out during Gauguin's "longues nuits d'insomnie" (Gauguin 1918, p. 352). If anything, *AVANT et après* would be more akin to a memoir or collection of thoughts and observations. In a letter he wrote to his friend Daniel de Monfreid, he claims that this text is a "recueil de ce que j'ai vu, entendu et pensé durant mon existence" (Gauguin 1918, p. 352). This is a sentiment he also expresses in a contemporaneous letter to André Fontainas, the man to whom he would send his manuscript. He again uses the term

"recueil" or collection to describe the text in which he would write, "souvenirs d'enfance, les pourquoi de mes instincts, de mon évolution intellectuelle: aussi ce que j'ai vu et entendu" (Gauguin 1921, p. 27). This idea of Gauguin using only one month to collect a life's worth of thoughts is also very suggestive given the temporal issue raised by the original cover and title. It remains, however, that this editorial change and the consequent rhematic implications have a profound impact in shaping our interpretation of both the text and the cover. This effect is only further amplified by the addition of the adjective "intimate" to qualify the type of journal in question.

To describe this work as intimate immediately suggests a barrier between the public and the private spheres. What are we to make of the distinction between a normal journal and an "intimate" journal? In this case it would seem to qualify this journal not only as a personal record of events, but also as a text that exists within the private sphere, something that gives us a privileged glimpse into the innermost thoughts and feelings of the author. And yet, just as was seen with the somewhat arbitrary generic assignment of "journal", this qualification as "intimate" raises its own set of theoretical questions. Gauguin did not write this work with the intention of keeping it private, but rather wrote on the subject to Fontainas stating, "Le lisant vous comprendrez entre les lignes l'intérêt personnel et méchant que j'ai à ce que ce livre soit publié. JE VEUX qu'il le soit" (Gauguin 1921, p. 28; Emphasis is that of the author), where the emphasis that the author places on this desire would seem to be undeniable proof that he intended this work for publication. Calling this work an intimate journal almost seems to suggest that it is some rare artifact found after the author's death and published in order to shed light on the personal life of a mysterious

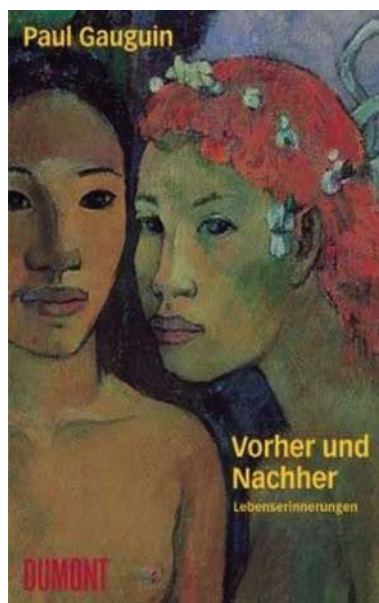


Fig. 6 – Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journal*, *Vorher und Nachher*

figure, an assertion that is patently untrue. This was a text written and packaged for a European public, and Gauguin quite obviously meant for it to be published during his lifetime, even though this would not be the case. In the same letter of February 1903, he even encouraged his friend Daniel de Monfreid to sell all of the paintings that he had sent to him no matter how small the price because he wanted his manuscript to be published “à tout prix” (Gauguin 1918, p. 353). Thus we may say that the English title, adopted in this 1921 edition, is fairly misleading in both its rhematic and thematic functions. This editorial change becomes all the more significant when we look at the addition to the cover of various images and portraits.

Since the 1920 Wolff edition, this work has been issued with a wide range of covers, all varying from one publisher to the next<sup>2</sup>. Some, like the 2007 Kessinger edition (fig. 4) have opted for a bare cover providing only the referential information of title, author’s name and publication data. Others, such as the 2000 and 2003 efforts of German publisher DuMont (figg. 5, 6), published as *Vorher und Nachher*, have chosen to use various paintings that Gauguin had made of the Marquesan people and their islands. It should be noted that the 1998 edition from DuMont renders the original cover in a textual format on an interior page. It contains all of the words of the original cover but none of the art (fig. 7).

Some of these images were taken from the original 27 drawings of the text while others were created at various points in the artist’s career. The third and most important change has been the decision to place portraits or even self-portraits on the cover, reinforcing the idea of Gauguin as an artist rather than a writer. This is the case of the 1994 Table Ronde and the 1997 Dover editions. It is precisely these two cases that will help us to

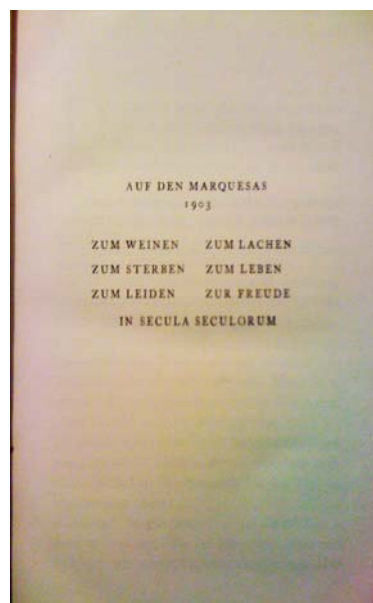


Fig. 7 – Paul Gauguin, *Vorher und Nachher*

see the true extent and impact of how these changes in editorial peritext have modified the communicative value of the original cover.

As it is a French-language text, the Table Ronde edition (fig. 8) keeps the original title of the work, but replaces the art with a portrait of Gauguin that, to the less inquiring observer, might even appear to be a self-portrait. However, upon reading the editorial information, it becomes clear that this is a modern artistic rendering based on a photo taken during the late years of Gauguin’s life. While the nature and origin of this image certainly work to create a certain type of illusion, it is the content of this new cover art that is of most interest for this discussion. The cover shows Gauguin seated, paintbrush in his right hand while he holds the palette with his left. The presence of these objects would seem to reinforce the image of a Gauguin as a painter first and foremost, and it is only through the presence of the author’s name on the cover that we find that it was he who had written the work. Additionally, his heavy winter dress in the foreground contrasts sharply with the floral motif on the wall behind him, hinting at the balance and contrast of the original cover, but in a markedly more subdued manner. It is interesting to note however, that in an appendix to the text, one finds a written description of the original cover and a catalogue of the lexical elements appearing in the original sketches (Gauguin 1994, pp. 253-255). Though the publisher may be commended for including this information, one must still call into question the decision to replace the original cover art and to offer its description only as supplementary information. It would seem that the decision was made in order to privilege Gauguin the painter over Gauguin the author. This very same phenomenon will be seen in the 1997 Dover edition, but will have even further ramifications due to the

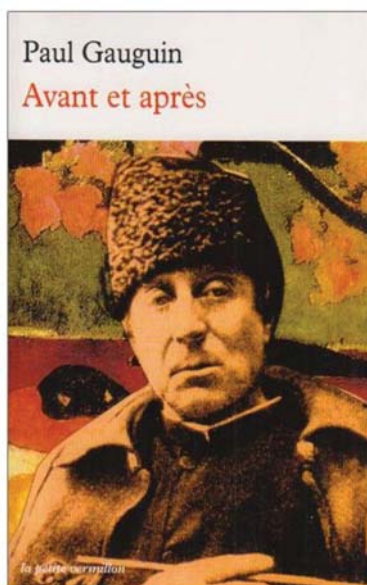


Fig. 8 – Paul Gauguin, *Avant et après*

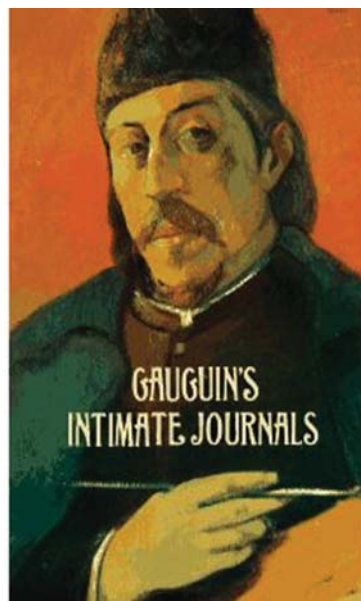


Fig. 9 – *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*

equally impactful title change.

Following the Anglophone model, the 1997 Dover edition (fig. 9) is titled *Gauguin's Intimate Journals* and it too replaces the original artwork, but with a self-portrait, Gauguin's 1894 *Self-portrait with palette*. The choice of this particular painting does far more to transform the function of the cover than did that of the 1994 Table Ronde edition. The decision to use this particular portrait is quite interesting in that it was completed in between Gauguin's two trips to Tahiti, as he had returned to France in 1893 and would depart for good in 1895. The publisher could have just as easily chosen a portrait created during Gauguin's years in the South Pacific, but in their failure to do so, they have unwittingly reinforced the image of Gauguin as a French painter and have abandoned any effort to remind the public that this text was composed on the other side of the world.

With this new choice of portrait, the Dover edition is still insisting on the fact that Gauguin was an artist first, demonstrated by the fact that he is holding palette and paintbrush, but it would also seem to suggest a link between the pictorial self-portrait and the notion that this text is a literary self-portrait. The transformation in the editorial peritext has created a certain brand of Gauguin that is being marketed to the prospective reader. This is no longer simply a narrative penned by the writer Gauguin, but rather the private journals of the French artist Paul Gauguin. The functions of the original title and cover art have been completely lost to the point where it becomes necessary to reexamine the whole series of relationships that depend on these peritextual elements.

It could be argued that in adding the generic classification of "journal", these English editions have relegated the work to the status of epitext in relation to Gauguin's artistic *oeuvre*. The text loses its literary autonomy and

becomes a supplementary tool for understanding Gauguin not as a critic and writer but rather as a painter, again privileging the text's autobiographical content over the rest. The blurbs featured on this 1997 edition further this transformation as we read that, "These revealing journals...throw much light on the painter's inner life and his thoughts", followed by the assertion that this text is, "Crucial for anyone seeking to understand Gauguin and his work" (Gauguin 1997, back cover). It can safely be asserted that they are not referencing his career as a writer even though he engaged in copious correspondence and had written several books and critical essays, dating back as far as the early 1890's. We should not take exception to the text's ability to inform us about Gauguin's life, thoughts and opinions, as these are all topics treated within the work, but rather should we now appreciate how the changes in editorial peritext have affected our interpretation of such material. Before concluding, let us take stock of just how significant these changes have been.

The Dover edition, as do all English editions, changes the peritextual function of the title by giving it narrowly defined thematic and rhematic functions that were not necessarily present in the original title. By defining the work in terms of genre and content, this English title loses the richness and possibility for interpretation afforded by the original. The new title eliminates the possible historical reference to his grandmother's manuscript, the possible intertextual references to his art, the suggestive reference to Paris and any other new interpretations that may come to light. Furthermore, the presence of the self-portrait as painter, as with all other changes to the cover art, sacrifices the enormous symbolic and metaphoric significance of the original cover art in favor of other images and designs that further the idea that this text is nothing more than a supplementary



tool that we may use to understand Gauguin's art. It is certain that all of these alternate covers merit their own individual analyses and are open to interpretation, but the fact remains that none can be of as great an importance as the original, as it was the author himself who decided what the title should be and what images should figure on the cover.

What began as Paul Gauguin's own attempt to control this peritextual space has been transformed over the last century into something far different. The Dover edition, and to be fair, many others, have manipulated the editorial peritext in order market their own brand of Paul Gauguin, that being the artist whose journals and their autobiographical content may be used as a means to better understand his art. Perhaps this is a by-product of the un-marketability of the original, given that the first editions enjoyed a short-lived success at best. Publishers have used the cover as a place to advertise the inclusion of additional drawings, sketches and even a preface by Gauguin's son Émil, all with the goal of offering something more to the prospective reader, but in their efforts to add to this peritextual location, they have sacrificed that which was most important in the original. *AVANT et après* remains a peculiar case in that, while Gauguin wrote this text and meant for it to be published in a certain form, he seems to have sanctioned such alterations by telling Fontainas in that same letter of February 1903 that he would like the text to be published, even "sans luxe" (Gauguin 1921, p. 28), suggesting that he almost cared more for the content than for its presentation. And yet, if that is the case, then why did he go to the trouble to prepackage the manuscript so carefully? Was it a mere artistic whim or did he truly attempt to use this cover as means of confronting and transporting the reader to a new time and place? The answers to these questions will depend on future inquiries, but what is certain is that whatever Gauguin's intentions, the evolution of this cover has demonstrated the immense value and relevance of the cover as the peritextual location *par excellence*.

## Notes

1 In his discussion of titles, Genette distinguishes between their thematic and rhematic functions. Thematic titles are those that reference or are indicative of the content of a work, be it on a narrative, dramatic or discursive level. Rhematic titles are, however, those that reference the genre or nature of the text. For example, the title of Sartre's *La Nausée* refers to a specific element in the work, while the *Essais* of Montaigne alludes to the genre of the text. He also admits that titles may be a combination of the both in that certain elements may refer to the work's content, while others may reference the genre as, for example, the title of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité des hommes* informs the reader of both the genre, "Discours" and the content of the work. For a more complete discussion see Genette 1987, pp. 85-93.

2 While an extensive examination of all editions pub-

lished to date is currently underway, it is beyond the scope of this article and thus the editions chosen reflect general trends in the alteration of the original cover.

## Bibliography

- Gauguin, P., 1918, *AVANT et après*, Leipzig, Kurt Wolff.  
Gauguin, P., 1921, *Lettres de Gauguin à André Fontainas*, Paris, Librairie de France.  
Gauguin, P., 1921, *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, New York, Boni and Liveright.  
Gauguin, P., 1923, *AVANT et après*, Paris, Ed. Crès et Cie.  
Gauguin, P., 1948, *AVANT et après*, Copenhagen, Andersen.  
Gauguin, P., 1994, *AVANT et après*, Paris, La Table Ronde.  
Gauguin, P., 1997, *Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, Mineola NY, Dover Publications.  
Gauguin, P., 1998, *Vorher und Nachher*, Köln, DuMont.  
Gauguin, P., 2000, *Vorher und Nachher*, Köln, DuMont.  
Gauguin, P., 2003, *Vorher und Nachher*, Köln, DuMont.  
Gauguin, P., 2007, *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, Whitefish MT, Kessinger.  
Gauguin, P., 1918, *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, Paris, Crès.  
Genette, G., 1987, *Seuils*, Paris, Ed. Seuil.  
Matthews, N., 2001, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press.  
Reck, R., 1991, "Gauguin écrivain", in "The French Review", vol. 64, n. 4, pp. 632-642.