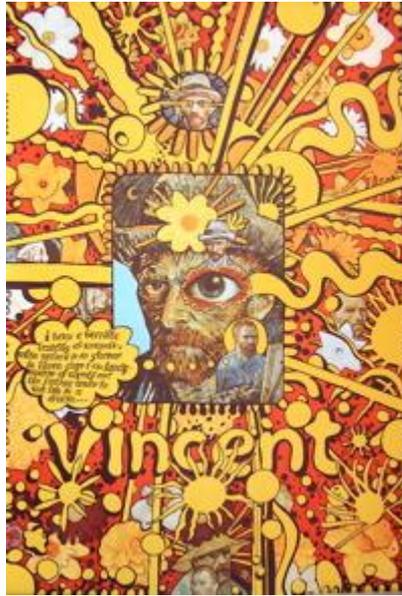


WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2007

## Daffy with Piety

By Keith Hackwood



I want to talk about Vincent Van Gogh, who is described in the title epithet above by his sister, Lies. I want to dwell alongside the images and the works, the emotions and inspirations, as well as the sufferings and denials experienced by a man who on his deathbed, a suicide at 37, is famously reported to have said '*la tristesse duerra toujours*' - the sadness always endures. In parenthetical relationship to this end summation, Vincent also said of his formative years 'my childhood was gloomy, cold and barren', showing a consistency others have denied him in various ways, on account of his cyclical mental ill health.

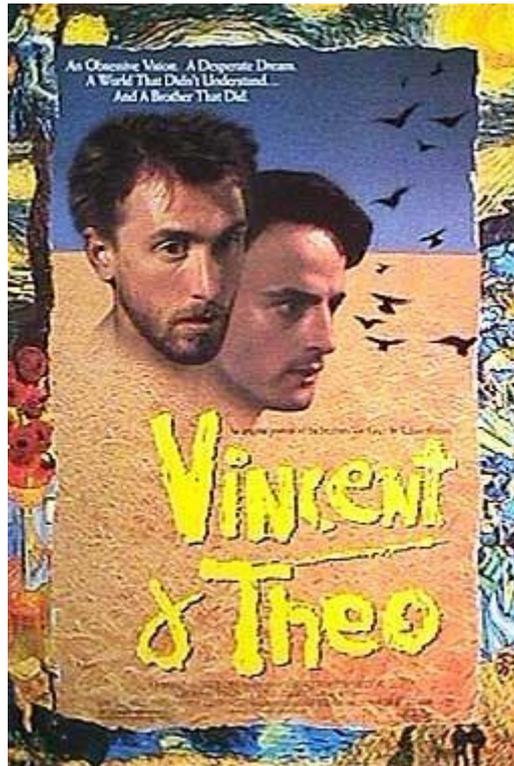


A brief Google of 'Van Gogh + illness' will spawn you a dozen or more learned psychiatric endeavours to unpick the true diagnosis (or dual diagnoses) of Vincent's condition (from schizophrenia to syphilis, temporal lobe epilepsy to intermittent porphyria, lead poisoning to mania caused by ingesting digitalis...) - and all will miss the point most spectacularly. And why? Because Van Gogh is not of interest to us, is not *still alive* for us, because of his psychopathology, nor did his oeuvre spring from that dampness; rather the magnificent creativity and superabundant humanity that causes such fluorescent presence in his greatest works, function as direct thresholds - they take us to the brink of where he stood, not an abyssal edge of mind-warping despair, but the luminous void, the penetrating emptiness of all appearances, the accepting and mindful nod to the figure of the reaper who stands always on our shoulder whether we're writing, fucking, painting or staring at a canvas in a gallery. This divine insight is what sacralizes Vincent's best work, and indeed one could argue, his life; like all the great artists he has holiness in spades, he reminds us (as Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones put it) that great art in any medium consists of 'whatever makes you proud to be human'. Moreover, he reaches us across time, weaving patterns in paint that strike us as profoundly new, yet paradoxically timeless, like dreams enticed into visionary representations of themselves, secular mandalas spun from the heart of a man in love with the fullest face of life, for whom compassion was a necessity, and shadow a hand to hold in the dark. These patterns speak as richly as they ever did and more collectively than Vincent could ever have dreamed, touching and revealing, hinting and inviting

- but never preaching or patronising. For great art, indeed, the function of art, if it can be said to have a function at all, is not to extract or create order from chaos (for as Frank McConnell points out, 'that's God's business - whoever he/she may be') but rather art is 'the dream of order out of the sense of chaos'. Vincent Van Gogh took that journey as he was compelled to do, and he left us shining, enriched by his passage, and blessed with the paintings that contain his alchemical, natural and heart-full apprehensions of enduring mystery.



So where to go? Here we have a major artist whose life is well known and explored (even in film, via the Kirk Douglas vehicle 'Lust for Life' (1956) or through the Robert Altman movie 'Vincent & Theo' (1990) to mention just two English language offerings), whose works are as recognisable and well known to us as leading adverts or brands, who, as everyone knows went mad, chopped half his left ear off and, ultimately shot himself in unremitting despair. What else is there to say that hasn't already been said? Quite a lot, it turns out. For here we have not only the life and the works, but the penetration of the veil. And if sister Lies Van Gogh was right and her impossible brother really was 'daffy with piety', then what does that parabola reveal to us, at this distance of 115 years or more?

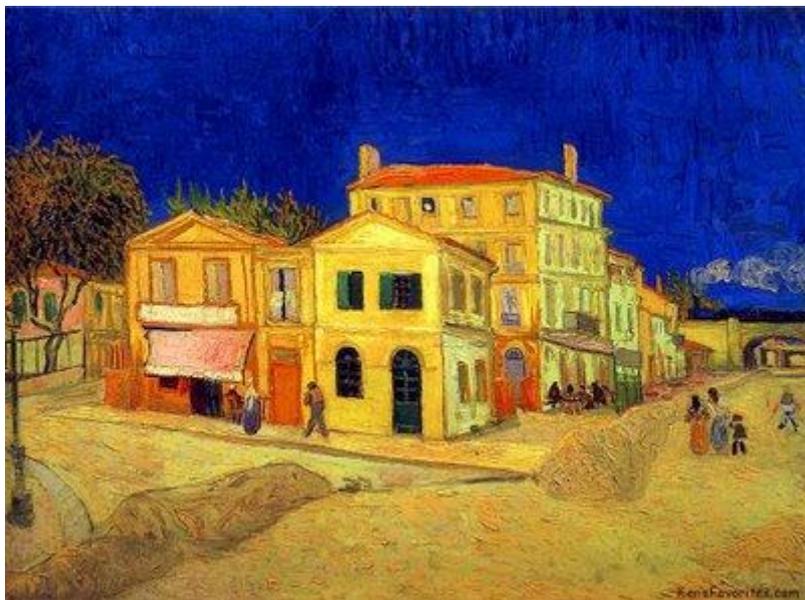


Another question to address early on - why now? Well, the simple answer is that having just returned from a visit (my first) to Amsterdam the most outstanding thing I find myself drawn to writing about is Van Gogh. Of course I'd known his work before (we all have - c'mon this is Vincent we're talking about here) and known some bare outline details of his life too - but something about floating around the Van Gogh Museum and seeing those works in their vibrant fleshy reality, one after another in a cumulative barrage of sensory overload really lit my pipe. Not to mention filling in the back-story and getting down to the fine detail of Vincent's life. I'd no idea how prolific he was, how driven and compulsive his creative mission really was, nor how it was all underpinned with an unshakeable *need* to be of service. Oh, and the fact that he was, par excellence, the great master of colour and through it the alchemy of light. An irresistible subject, and, I hope you'll find too, one it is almost impossible not to be drawn to, not to empathise with, for Vincent, whatever else he may or may not have been (nowadays we're familiar with the ad-man's Vincent, or the artist's Vincent, (post)-Expressionist Vincent, religious maniac Vincent, in his day there was also the ignored by the establishment Vincent, the scandalous Vincent living for a while with a pregnant whore and of course the mentally deranged Vincent chasing Gauguin round Arles with a flick razor) was supremely human, and therefore

reachable, available to our spirit of enquiry. Van Gogh once said, tellingly, of Gauguin's importance to his work

*He gives me the courage to work from my imagination, and certainly things from the imagination take on a more mysterious character*

But the razor incident caused Gauguin to flee the infamous Yellow House at Arles, and thereby to complete the stillbirth of Vincent's cherished utopian desire for an artists' community centred there; even as he took a chunk of his ear to the prostitute Rachel saying "keep this object carefully", a petition of local people brings the police to close the Yellow House, run by the 'fou roux' or redhaired madman.



But let's not get too far ahead of our theme, better to return to a few salient biographical turns to lay the ground - I'll be brief because this is material you can easily obtain elsewhere (try Wikipedia for starters). So Vincent was born on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1853 (making him an Aries - something that informed not only his archetypally red haired passion and staccato 'one-sitting' outdoor approach to much of his work, but also his capacity to be compelled, driven, engaged in martial arts with the process of living and working, fuelled by an unquenchable fire built from a kindling of freedom) the second child of six, in Zundert, Noord-Brabant, in the Netherlands. This northern birthright is also a considerable force in the life of the man - suffused both with a protestant inheritance (his father was a reverend) that has both stark and tolerant aspects, and also tuned to an eye that moves

seasonally, from short dark winter days to broad summer brightness. Remember, this is an artist who is sublimely entwined with place, the *genius loci* is strong in him. His artistic trajectory will always aim south, carrying him to the summerlands, eventually, on the fringes of the Camargue.

Chronologically, the young Vincent then moves around through London and Paris to the Borinage mining area of Belgium where his vocation as artist really commences. Later he will return to Paris, then drift south to Arles, spend a whole year hospitalised in Saint-Remy, before living out his remaining days in Auvers-sur-Oise, where the wheatfield of his self-murder is to be found. During this travail, Vincent wrestled with his early art dealer role, became evangelically infused and made attempts to become (formally) a man of God (he preached a first sermon in Isleworth, near London, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1876), but was rejected and forced back into the maelstrom of his ambivalences and convictions - eventually reconciling the service of humanity with the holy work of the artist.

In all his creative life, spanning in effect just one decade, Vincent produced 900 paintings, 1100 drawings, over a thousand letters (mostly to his devoted brother and confidante, Theo) - he completed 90 paintings in the 2 months prior to his death alone! This is the impact of a man on fire with creative need, and one who moved from passionate but hopeless amateur through the gates of initiation and into the first rank of Artist and Master, in as rapid a transition as I know of. In all that time Vincent is said to have sold just one painting (The Red Vineyard, for 400 Francs) and to have lived a life of poverty and, often, desperation. He says in a letter to Theo somewhere:

*I am reasonably faithful in my unfaithfulness and though I have changed, I am the same, and what preys on my mind is simply this one question: what am I good for? Could I not be of service in some way? How can I become more knowledgeable and study some subject or other in depth? That is what keeps preying on my mind, you see, and then one feels imprisoned by poverty, barred from taking part in this or that project, and all sorts of necessities are out of one's reach. As a result one cannot rid oneself of melancholy, one feels emptiness where there might have been friendship and sublime and genuine affection, and one feels dreadful disappointment gnawing at one's spiritual energy, fate seems to stand in the way of affection or one feels a wave of disgust welling up inside. And then one says 'How long, my God?'*



All his major themes are there, the need for a meaningful way of engaging with life and society, the feelings of being marginalised and excluded for not playing the game (he'd already rejected the art dealer's world of commodification, and been rejected by the world of organised formal Christianity that he had hoped would offer him a place to embed), as if cursed by a blank eyed fate, compelled to suffer and witness. Not difficult things to identify with nor feel the pinch of in one's own history - which is perhaps one factor in our continuing love affair with the man's work - he is the stereotypical 'suffering artist' inscribed in tragic vividness for the modern imagination, hopeless and lost, sainted beyond the grave in an ironic detournment, since when he lived the world had nothing but indifference or hostility or contempt. Once dead (and following the massive devoted efforts of Theo's widow Johanna, and her son, also Vincent) his works began to become known and to capture the hearts and minds of a post Great War generation - and forthwith to become much copied and converted into dollars in an age of the mass media image. The world of commodification that Vincent turned away from swallowed him whole, like no other, and now trades everything from T-shirts to umbrellas to artcards, prints and mousemats from his oeuvre. He who was ignored and unseen is now ubiquitous, as an echo. Even as the brightest colours on his masterworks fade and discolour (the Red Lake colourings especially, but also to an extent his signature Chrome Yellow) he is digitally remastered and re-presented in cyberspace, scanned with laser technologies and repackaged in a matrix of 'permanence'. All of which, I feel having dwelt alongside his shade, would've moved Vincent not at all - but rather horrified him in his fragile, human marriage to transience and the continuity of change:

*...try to grasp the essence of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces, and you will again find God in them. One man has written, or said it in a book, another in a painting*

So let us turn towards the work itself, that vast out-gushing of endeavour compelled from the brush-tip of wounded genius, that stands as itself and speaks today in accents its creator would still recognise (though not in T-shirt form). Vincent's creations are undoubtedly fused with Eros - you don't get that colourful without such a meeting - and the earlier works, the Dutch and Belgian browns and greys, begin that purpose slowly. His first 'masterpiece' some argue, would be 1885's 'The Potato Eaters' showing peasants eating spud-based gruel and musing at their proximity to the good earth. They eat with hands that also dug the ground where their food grew, and though terribly poor and uncivilized, in them Vincent found a romance of the soil, of the worthy and unpretentious heart-filled connection to place, to one's landbase, we might say. And the painting is not without its Eros - after all one of the peasant girls depicted was said to have been made pregnant by the artist - although this was later disproved - but it did enough damage to see Vincent effectively run out of town by the ecclesiastical powers that be (and contributed to his father's musings on whether his son ought to be 'sectioned' as again we might say, detained against his will in an asylum). So even in the early drabness of the northern lands wrapped up in greys and browns, peopled by a lumpen peasantry and characterised by toil and numbing fieldwork, Vincent is penetrating (metaphorically as it turns out) the mysteries, the femininities...

*Oh I am no friend of present-day Christianity, though its founder was sublime - I have seen through present-day Christianity only too well. That icy coldness hypnotized even me, in my youth - but I have taken my revenge since then. How? By worshipping the love which they, the theologians, call sin, by respecting a whore etc. and not too many would-be respectable, pious ladies. To some, woman is heresy and diabolical. To me she is just the opposite.*

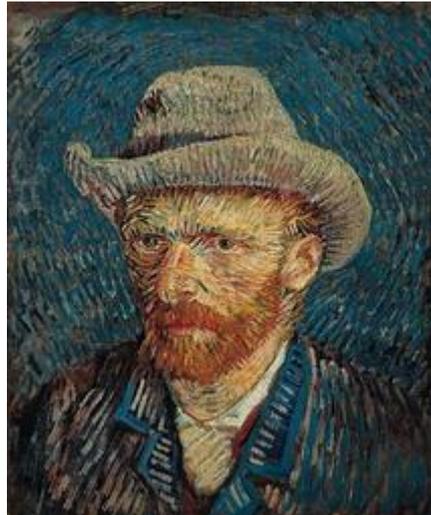
It isn't stretching things too far to see Vincent's remarks here as being about, not only real whores (like Clarissa Maria Hoornik, known as Sien, with whom he lived at times between 1881-83) but also the similarly rejected whore-like Muse with whom he was in, by now, constant creative communion. Needless to say in a life characterised by tragedy and loss, Vincent's women had bad endings - not only

Sien, who drowned herself in the river Scheldt in 1904, but also Margot Begemann, with whom he conducted a disapproved-of-by-both-families affair, who attempted suicide by strychnine overdose. There was also, in 1881, his recently widowed cousin Kees Vos-Stricker, with whom he fell deeply in love and who, in answering his proposal of marriage is said to have replied '*niet, nooit, nimmer*' (no, never ever) and refused to see him. Vincent being Vincent he persisted, even sticking his left hand into a lamp flame and beseeching her parents 'let me see her for as long as I can hold my hand in the flame'. His uncle blew out the light and pronounced his judgement - 'your persistence is disgusting'.

So Vincent as lover had as many travails as the other Vincents' we have met - and the muse was at times an obsessive and indifferent mistress - witness Vincent's malnutrition and self neglect - he lived on the staples of coffee, tobacco and bread and in February of 1886 said in passing to Theo that he could remember eating only six hot meals since May of the previous year! He also had terrible gum disease and toothache and was in constant pain, and had become heavily dependent upon alcohol, especially absinthe (which he became enamoured of during his early Antwerp days). It is also speculated that he was being treated at points for syphilis taking sitz baths and regular alum irrigations. All in all, Vincent's health was in constant decline, and yet his ailing flesh supported a tremendous output of work, even as it loosed the mind from regular embodied relationship.

I've come to think of Vincent's work in several parallel streams, informed by thematics and luminosity, and though far from 'expert' (thank god) in seducing the academicians' eye, I venture them here. There are the early peasant paintings, mainly characterised by earthy colours and deep links to the soil itself where the denizens have

*Dug in the earth with the very hands that they are putting in the dish, and they have earned their food so honestly*



Then of course, there are the self-portraits, which open the psychological dimensions in ways unseen prior to their execution; five in particular stand out to me, all between 1886-1888 and all painted in Paris (there were 35 in total - 29 painted in Paris). Could it be that the city provided the mirror Van Gogh needed to penetrate his own masks, as well as to lighten his palette from the grey-brown north? Of these 'Self-Portrait With A Felt Hat' shines out most prominently - bringing alive the fire of the man, literally the flames of a mystic, green, white and red, in a corona of spiralling light from a point between his eyebrows. There is also the disputed 'self-as-Christ' image in Van Gogh's 'copy' of Delacroix's 'Pieta' where a ginger Christ hangs towards the viewer from the outstretched hands of Mary

*I am not indifferent and in suffering itself religious thoughts sometimes give me a great deal of comfort*



There are the blossom paintings, mainly of 1888-1890 and mostly taking as their subjects trees or whole orchards, in their most explosive and fecund spring revelation, bringing whites and pinks into the palette in a most intense and incredible way. These fuses and fireworks literally shimmer with milkshake joy and childlike apprehension of the specific tree, or the unique leaf or blossom, and crown Vincent's arrival as a nature-poet writing with light in a book of pictures. Following on there are the Sunflower paintings, for which he is perhaps best known - but in which I would include *Irises* (May 1890) and other still life images radiant in golds and rich empathic delight. Remember, Vincent was the man who said

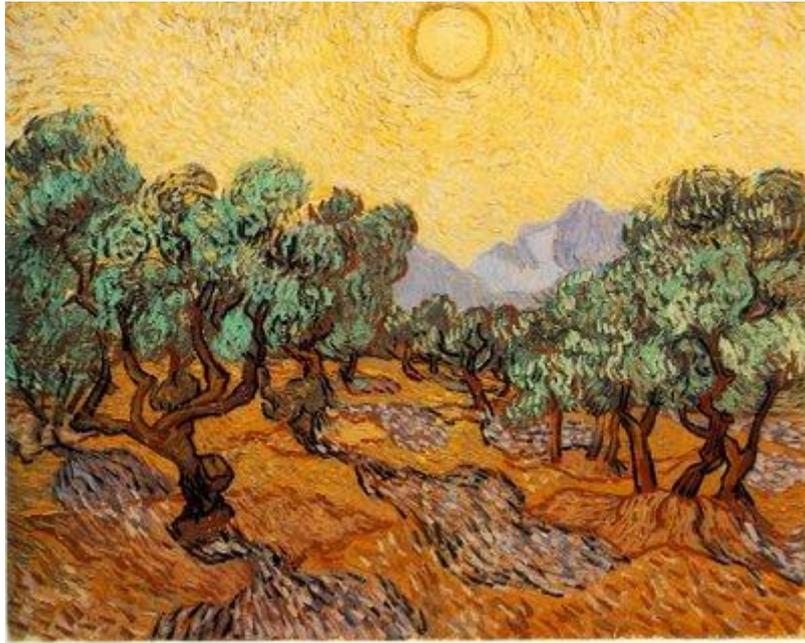
*Isn't yellow lovely? as well as No blue without yellow and without orange*

But what is yellow? Goethe tells us in his *Farbenlehre* that

*In its purest form it carries bright nature in itself and is of light, spirited, slightly provoking character... so it is generally known that yellow makes a warm and cozy impression. We find it in paintings on the illuminated and active side. This warming effect can be felt distinctly by observing a winter landscape through a yellow glass. There is joy for the eye, widening of the heart and lifting of the spirit; a tangible warmth seems to emanate from the glass*

Wassily Kandinsky offers a different take on Yellow in his book 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art'

*Yellow, if steadily gazed at in any geometrical form, has a disturbing influence, and reveals in the colour an insistent, aggressive character. (It is worth noting that the sour-tasting lemon and shrill-singing canary are both yellow). The intensification of the yellow increases the painful shrillness of its note.*



Yellow is also *ratna*, the aspect of consciousness concerned with increase, both riches and material form, but also generosity of soul. As Van Gogh's favourite colour it is tempting to see in yellow the very apex of the paradox of our subject - the synthesis of pure light (especially solar, and southern light) with the power, vastness and overwhelming energy of creative action, yet held in tension with the eruption of unstable shadow and impossible chthonic chaos. Let's not forget that yellow is the colour the human eye can perceive at the greatest distance - hence yellow fluorescent jackets on workmen, on hazard symbols and road signs, or tennis balls. Yellow speaks of distance and motion towards distant phenomena - in his union with yellow Vincent stared deeper than his contemporaries into the far shore, not of some linear future, a cheap trick, but into the farthest shores of soul itself - the *citrinatio* of anima - the 'cup of the warm south' that shines a promise of peace and completion, yet is always apparently just out of reach. Yellow is also a warning - (think wasps and salamanders), as though its presence held too close creates the conditions for loneliness, abandonment, even the poisoning madness of one who has seen to the core, yet remains an isolate, ignored and alienated, wracked with contradictory impulses towards total love and the embrace of all forms, and an unresolved resentment at one's own ugly, unlovable awkwardness. Yellow, queerly, is also associated with cowardice, and some would draw a link to the suicidal self emergent in Van Gogh fearing to live on. But Yellow, if it is anything, is about contrast, conflicting effects, ambivalent irresistible promises. And Van Gogh, if he is anything, is a parable of outsider art cross fertilised with

the mission of a bodhisattva, bringing his posthumous audience inside the light, reflected from his transient canvasses, still singing their simultaneous love songs and fugues underneath the spectrum of ordinary awareness.

No surprise then that another subset of Van Gogh's work could be seen as the Yellow House paintings, where the quest was for 'everything with character', including such gems as the bedroom scenes and 'Gauguin's Chair'. I would also make a case for the green paintings (such as 'Undergrowth', 'Entrance To A Quarry' and 'Tree Roots') where the Dylan Thomasesque direction takes us into the knotted green world of sap and stem and branch, the force that through the green fuse drives the flower, and drives the viewer into a new awareness. Did Vincent precognitively foreshadow the partially emerging ecological awareness of our own age, the ecological self that greens the soul with a senex hand and roots the transcendent urge of the puer artist in the fixity of vegetable place, the aspect of revelation we could call 'matter'? Further subsets might include the winter works, the seascapes and the magical night paintings ('Starry Night' 1889, 'Café Terrace at Night', 'Starry Night Over The Rhone' etc), each of which hold celebrated works and lesser known masterpieces of their own.



There are also the Japanese paintings, 'Flowering Plum Tree' (which informed some of the other 'blossom' works already mentioned) 'The Courtesan', 'Bridge In

The Rain' - borrowing technique and style from Japanese prints he encountered in Paris, and liberating something of his own impressionistic sensibility - the speed and lightness of touch that yields 'enormous clarity' in all things.

*I feel the urge to produce so greatly that it saps me mentally and exhausts me physically*

And yet go on producing he would, unceasingly, through episodes of despair, illness and collapse. Under the care of the homeopath Dr Gachet (recommended by Pissarro) at Auvers-sur-Oise, Vincent found some moments of clarity and release, though Gachet himself was

*Sicker than I am, I think, or shall we say just as much*

And it is here that the last subset reaches its peak epiphanies, through the wheatfield paintings, from 1887-1890, including 'The Sower' of November 1888, where the symbols of death and infinity are explored explicitly in the figure of the corn-reaper

*A vague shape who battles like a devil in the intense heat... I saw the image of death, in the sense that the corn represents mankind being reaped....death almost with a smile*

Elsewhere Vincent speaks of the corn as life-bringing and symbolic of human potential being birthed - the necessary relationship of the cycles include birth, life, death, rebirth, and in recovering these verities he whispers across time, not only to us today, but backwards to Andrew Marvell, to the first renaissance, to the Greeks (you know the ones I mean), and to those who lived and sowed and reaped and died - the seed people at the transition times, the dawn of settled agriculture. This is why the figure is vague and 'battles like a devil in the intense heat' - not only in the furnace of the south of France at harvest time, but upon the face of the sun itself as it burns and bestows life above and within each of us, as Hel or Apollo, or as Christ, and our devilish selves scheme and toil even as we sweat out our toxic need to destroy, which is really just another planting. The unbearable intensity of this heat, the wannabe rubedo striving to achieve combustion, comes out in paintings like 'Wheatfield Under Thunderclouds' (July 1890) where the naked and unadorned landscape itself marries the brooding and violent sky -

*they are enormous sweeping wheatfields beneath stormy skies and I have intentionally tried to express sadness, extreme loneliness in them*

He certainly succeeded. But that isn't all - he also offers us, in the unbound and horizontal plane, his clearest articulation of

*What I cannot express in words, namely how healthy and heartening I find the countryside*

These wheatfield paintings go beyond only archetypal forms, and arrive upon a cuspal vision, fuelled by colour itself, universalising but having specificity in place and time, demonstrating the voidness between and beyond causality, what in the East could be called 'suchness'. Strung out between acceptance and despair, Vincent reached the high tide mark of not only his creative flood, but also his paradoxical nature

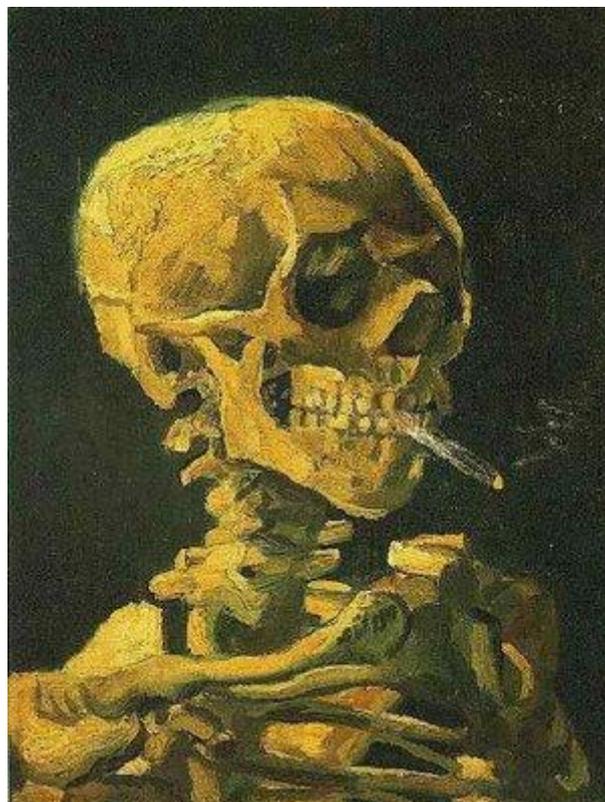
*I feel - a failure. That's it as far as I'm concerned - I feel that this is the destiny that I accept, that will never change*



And the paradox swells to a peak in 'Wheatfield With Crows' - also of July 1890. This is sometimes taken to be Vincent's final painting, although others exist in varying stages of completion ('Daubigny's Garden' for example), and some have read it as an omen of impending death and utter despair. It is indeed a magnificent painting, radiant with golds and yellows and reds in the wheat, struck 'wet on wet' as painters say. There are greens and browns suggestive of paths, an occluded opaque sun orb bleeding on the horizon in a blue-black sky, and from the upper right of the canvas the eponymous murder of crows descends into the frame,

almost bat-like, a host of W-shaped black symbols, death-attendants, carrion feasters, gleaning the future for a pair of painter's eyes, a peck of congealed and fertilising blood. When I saw this painting it was hung between works by Otto Dix and Ludwig Meidner, spinning the mysteries of Vincent's masterwork into their own versions, coloured by the horrors of collective madness and death as enacted through the Great War. Retrospectively, Vincent's work fortells (and remembers) this European apocalypse, and is the more powerful for being so beautifully still.

In terms of his life and intentions, Vincent was still planning further works, and indeed ordering new supplies of paint, right up until his suicide. Did the ego strive to live even as the soul embraced sweet release in death? Or was it the huge soul of Van Gogh that moved to hold fast to life, even as the cracked actor made its deal with the self-devil and pushed the barrel into his own chest, the body seeking communion with the soil, offering itself as fertiliser, or raging at an abandoning god/father? The mystery endures, riddle like, and the life ended in a wheatfield, as though Vincent had walked right into one of his own canvasses and passed through in a shaman's crow-flight. His actual bodily death however was prolonged (it took two days to pass) and agonising - though it allowed Theo time to join him and sit at his side. Theo, intriguingly, died within six months.



There is so much more we could connect with, so many themes and specifics in the warp and woof of the life and works of this big heart. The emotions that Van Gogh captures and fulfils, sadness, loneliness, grief, loss, fear, overwhelm, melancholia, despair, but also delight, joy, beauty, tenderness, exuberance, hope, passion, acceptance; the psychogeography of the lived experience and the profound importance of place and 'feel' to the works and soul; the alchemically attentive disciple of colour bringing Anima Mundi into new relationship with the perceiver through form and theme and above all light, the harmony of colour; Vincent the son and brother, the systemic player in a family of religious and art-infused northerners, the soul biographies of these beings in time, seeking healing; the biographical structure combining severity and orthodoxy with evangelism, art, madness and the irrepressible desire for freedom and belonging; or the historical Van Gogh, the creature of the second half of the nineteenth century, straddling the eruption of industrial life, the swelling steam-driven migration to the urban and the mass leaving of the countryside, bringing mechanistic means of perception, mass media, the passing of embeddedness in nature for attachment to an Imperial dream, destined to bleed away on the next battlefields of Europe's transfiguration. Vincent died at the very dawn of the oil age too, an age we stand at the conclusion of, offering yet another vantage point for digestion.

One final thread that strikes me as important concerns the paint technologies of Vincent's age and the advantage he took of the newly available tube oils, facilitating his *impasto* style and bringing in signature colours - Chrome Yellow, Cadmium Yellow, Chrome Orange, Carmine, Cobalt Blue, Viridian, Lead White and Red Lake. Each has its own tale to tell, its own memories of the red-haired man who broke them into new patterns and combinations, taking the pioneering eye of Jules Dupre (whose colours Vincent found to be a 'magnificent symphony' both 'amazingly calculated and infinitely deep as nature itself') to new planes of realisation. Chrome Yellow, for example, sourced from the mineral crocoite and first formulated by the chemist Vauquelin in the late eighteenth century, was by Vincent's day a vivid oil paint derived from lead chromate salts ( $PbCrO_4$ ), exploited from nature and produced in industrial situations for commercial gain, it was also poisonous and liable to become toxic to users (lead poisoning, among other symptoms, causes swelling of the retinas, and even xanthopsia - or 'seeing yellow') - it also fades in time to a shade of drab - how might these fixing specifics have been facets of the *materia* through which the soul-force that was Vincent Van

Gogh alchemised the life we have skimmed, and the works we return to over and over again?

What remains in Vincent's art is the seal of suffering and the hint of its ending. Instinctively we respond to his works because he brings us inside the light that we always already know, from our dreams, our unacknowledged desires, our chromatic disposition towards the beautiful. And here, with yellow kisses, he dares to show us our own suffering, which is also his own, now as then. But what we share, the taproot of our empathy, is not that we both (and all) suffer, but that we share a deep and unarticulated need to be free of suffering, at a level beyond the merely existential, in ways that we only begin to apprehend through the simple resonance of true art, as through the flash of an authentic wave of love breaking, or at the mystery reflected in death and crowned in birth. It is the moment of awakening, the threshold and the ground of being, it is gone in a moment, but never more than a teardrop away. That Vincent saw it habitually and saw it through any phenomena he focused upon is a measure of his gift to us. His *seeing through* brought him to the interpsychic node at the heart of aesthetics, the synthesis of his small personality self with his indescribable Self, communicating through light across oceans of chaos, to a liminal and interspatial doorway, where through impermanence he shines a recognition of our precious and shared human nature. Vincent is about basics. Human goodness. Human brokenness. Imperfection perceiving and witnessing itself revealed and fulfilled - en-light-ened. Don't believe me? Get yourself to Amsterdam and stand in front of a self-portrait, or a landscape. Let yourself feel, for a moment, the blossom or the sky or the cornstalks, the petals or buildings, let it inside yourself in full awareness that your eyes, your heart, your consciousness, even as it drinks at this nectar-like art-teat, are all but an atom's thickness from their own extinction. The end is present, never announced, always in attendance. All else is show, glamour, trick, defence or guile. Do you dare to see past these truths, accepting all, rejecting none, embracing luminous no-thing-ness? Perhaps its all too much, the Big Truth apparently too vast for the small self to handle. Perhaps that's how it worked with Vincent, why despite his insight and visual articulacy his personality could not but cleave to its own alienation, to the point of desperate self-murder. That is not ours to judge, nor to follow.

We have come full circle, *ouroboros*, returned to the question 'where next?' that will always arise with a subject that has truth, beauty and goodness in it. The provisional answer, at this ending, can only be to return to the artist and the art.

First with words, and finally, the paintings - worthlessly priceless, uselessly essential, transcendently imprisoned on the walls of the art-zoo, ironically pure in their witnessing and kindness, open and empty of expectation, marvellously what they are - decaying, entropic artefacts created by inspired states of human genius, enlivened with love from the flash of a red man meeting a blue-black void, and now they melt into yellow light, even as we who make pilgrimages to view them close up are also melting.

*But as far as my inner self, my way of looking at things and of thinking is concerned, that has not changed. But if there has indeed been a change, then it is that I think, believe and love more seriously now what I thought, believed and loved even then.*

*Do you know what makes a prison disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, with supreme power, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But whenever affection is revived, there life revives.*

*Many people believe that they will become good just by doing no harm - but that's a lie, and you yourself used to call it that. That way lies stagnation, mediocrity... the canvas has an idiotic stare and mesmerises some painters so much that they turn into idiots themselves. Many painters are afraid in front of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas is afraid of the real, passionate painter who dares and who has broken the spell of 'you can't' once and for all. Life itself, too, is forever turning an infinitely vacant, dispiriting blank side towards man, on which nothing appears, any more than it does on a blank canvas. But no matter how vacant and vain, how dead life may appear to be, the man of faith, of energy, of warmth, who knows something, will not be put off so easily. He wades in and does something and stays with it, in short he violates, "defiles" - they say. Let them talk, those cold theologians.*

Kh

Dec 06 -Jan 07

IMAGES: *Vincent* (1968) by Martin Sharp; *Portrait of Van Gogh* (1888) by Paul Gauguin; French poster for the film *Lust for Life* (1956); American poster for the film *Vincent and Theo* (1990); *The Yellow House* (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh; *Sunflower set* (c20th) tatty merchandise by who cares; *Self Portrait with Felt Hat* (1887/1888); *Irises* (1890) ; *Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun* (1889); *The Courtesan* (1887); *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890); *Skull with Burning Cigarette* (1885) all by Vincent Van Gogh.