

ANTONIN ARTAUD

# VAN GOGH, THE SUICIDE PROVOKED BY SOCIETY

WE may talk about the good mental health of Van Gogh, who, during his whole life in this world we live in, burnt only one hand in addition to cutting off his left ear.

However heartbreaking it may appear, contemporary life preserves itself in its old atmosphere of lechery, anarchy, disorder, delirium, dissoluteness, chronic madness, bourgeois inertia, psychic anomaly (for it is not man but the world which has become abnormal), deliberate dishonesty, flagrant hypocrisy, sordid contempt of everything which shows distinction, laying claim to a whole order founded on the fulfilment of primitive injustice—an order of organized crime, in fact. Everything is going badly because at this moment the morbid conscience has an essential interest in not recovering from its own sickness. And so a vicious society has invented psychiatry to defend itself from the investigations of certain superior lucid minds whose intuitive powers were disturbing to it.

No, Van Gogh was not mad, but his paintings were Greek torches, atomic bombs whose angle of vision, in distinction to all the other paintings existing at the time, would have been capable of seriously upsetting the grub-like conformity of the Second Empire bourgeoisie and of the police spies of Thiers, Gambetta, Félix-Faure, as well as those of Napoleon III. For Van Gogh's painting does not attack a certain conformity of convention so much as the conformity of institutions. Institutions disintegrate on the social level; and medical science, by asserting Van Gogh's madness, shows itself to be an unserviceable, irresponsible corpse. Psychiatry, challenged by Van Gogh's lucidity at work, is no more than an outpost of gorillas, themselves obsessed and persecuted, who have only a ridiculous terminology to alleviate the most appalling states of anguish and human suffocation: a fitting product of their disreputable brains.

Van Gogh's body, free from all sin, was also free from that madness which is only induced by sin. And I do not believe in Catholic sin, but I do believe in erotic crime. It is precisely the world's geniuses and authentic lunatics in the asylums who are innocent of this crime; and if they are not, it is because they are not (authentically) lunatics.

And what is an authentic lunatic? He is a man who has preferred to become what is socially understood as mad rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honour. In its asylums, society has managed to strangle all those it has wished to rid itself of or to defend itself from, because they refused to make themselves accomplices to various flagrant dishonesties. For a lunatic is also a man whom society has not wished to listen to, and whom it is determined to prevent from uttering unbearable truths. But in such a case, internment is not its only weapon, and the social collectivity has other means to subdue those minds it wishes to suppress. Apart from the trifling influences of the small-town witch doctors, there are the vast onsets of world-wide spells, participated in from time to time by the totality of alarmed conscience. By these means the universal conscience, during a war, a revolution or a potential social upheaval, is called in question, interrogates itself and passes its judgements. It can also be provoked and brought out of itself in the case of certain sensational individual examples. There have been the unanimous outbreaks with regard to Baudelaire, Edgar Poe, Gérard de Nerval, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Hölderlin and Coleridge—and there has also been one about Van Gogh.

The few lucid, well-disposed people who have had to struggle on this earth, see themselves at certain hours of the day and night from the depths of various phases of authentic recollected nightmare, overwhelmed by the powerful suction of the formidable, tentacle-like oppression of a kind of civic bewitchment which soon openly expresses itself in the general conventions. In comparison with this universal filth, based on sex on one hand and on mass or some such other psychic ritual on the other, there is no madness in walking around at night in a hat fitted with twelve candles in order to paint a landscape on the spot. As for the burnt hand, that was pure and simple heroism. The cut-off ear was straightforward logic. I repeat: a world which every day and night increasingly eats the uneatable in order to adapt its bad faith

to its own ends is forced, as far as this bad faith is concerned, to keep it under lock and key.

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I believe Gauguin thought the artist should look for the symbol and the myth and expand everything in life into a myth, whereas Van Gogh thought that we must know how to infer the myth from the most everyday things in life. For reality is greatly superior to every story, mythology, deity and super-reality. It is enough to have the genius to know how to interpret reality, which is something no painter had done before Van Gogh.

Van Gogh had reached that stage in illumination when thought flows back on itself in disorder.

It is the tendency of superior personalities, always one step beyond reality, to explain everything through their own bad conscience, to believe that nothing is ever due to chance, and that all the evil which occurs happens as a result of conscious, shrewd and deliberate bad will: an opinion which psychiatrists never hold and which geniuses always believe.

No one has ever written, painted, sculpted, modelled, constructed, or invented anything, except in order to extricate himself from hell.

I will tell you that Van Gogh is a painter because he has re-assembled nature, because he has, as it were, perspired it and made it sweat, because he has spurted on to his canvases in heaps, monumental with colours, the centuries-old struggle of elements, the terrible rudimentary pressure of apostrophes, stripes, commas and strokes, of which we must admit that, after him, natural appearances are made.

And how many repressed elbow movements, ocular shocks recorded from life, observations made in front of the subject, luminous currents of the forces which work on reality, were necessary to overthrow the barrier before being finally compressed, raised on to the canvas and accepted?

There are no ghosts in Van Gogh's painting, no visions, no hallucinations. It is the torrid truth of the sun at two o'clock in the afternoon. But the suffering of the pre-natal is there.

It is nature, pure and naked, seen just as it conceals itself when we know how to get near enough to it.

I remember his cornfield: ear upon ear, and that is all, with a few little, thin-sown poppy-heads in the foreground, bitterly and nervously applied there, knowingly and passionately dotted and slashed.

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Van Gogh will have surely been the most genuine *painter* of all the painters, the only one who has not exceeded painting in so far as painting is both the strict means of his work and the strict limit of his means. On the other hand, he is absolutely the only painter who has completely exceeded painting as the passive act of representing nature, in order to pour out from this exclusive representation of nature a whirlpool force, an element torn out of the heart's centre.

Nothing but painting—no more: no philosophy, mysticism, ritual, psychurgy or liturgy, no business with literature nor with poetry: these bronzed golden sunflowers are painted.

Better than any psychiatrist in the world, this is how the great Van Gogh has described his illness: 'I break through, I lose again, I examine, I grip hold of, I loosen, my dead life conceals nothing, and, besides, the *néant* has never done any harm to anyone, and what forces me to return to it is this distressing sense of absence, which passes by and sometimes drowns me, but I see very clearly into it; and I even know what the *néant* is, and I could tell you what is in it.'

Van Gogh was right. One can live for the infinite, only take pleasure in the infinite; there is enough infinite on the earth and in the stars to satiate a thousand great geniuses. If Van Gogh was unable to gratify his desire to suffuse his whole life with it, it is because society expressly and consciously forbade him.

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No one is alone any more in dying. But in the case of suicide, an army of wicked people is necessary to induce the body to that gesture against nature of depriving itself of its own heart.

Van Gogh was dispatched from the world, first by his brother telling him of the birth of his nephew, and then by Dr. Gachet, who one day, instead of advising him rest and isolation, sent

him out to paint in the open when he really felt that Van Gogh would have done better to go and rest.

For you cannot so immediately oppose a lucidity and sensibility of such a quality as that of the martyred Van Gogh.

There are some temperaments who, on certain days, would kill themselves for a simple contradiction; and for such a thing to happen there is no need to be a marked and listed madman. On the contrary, it is enough to be in good health and to have right on one's side.

In a similar case, I will no longer put up with hearing someone say to me, as has so often happened, 'Monsieur Artaud, you are raving', without committing a crime.

Van Gogh heard this said to him.

And this is why that knot of blood which killed him twisted itself around his throat.

[Excerpts from *Van Gogh, le Suicidé de la Société*, to be published by Editions K, Paris. Translated by PETER WATSON]

## GRAHAM HOUGH

# NOVELIST-PHILOSOPHERS-XII

## GEORGE ELIOT

Now that the last relics of traditional England have just about disappeared, and fewer and fewer people have any idea, even imaginatively, of what it was all about, such pictures of it as we possess are beginning to acquire an almost archæological interest. It is surprising on investigation to find how unreliable many of the pictures are. I don't mean to repeat that Jane Austen took no notice of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars; here, surely, she was entirely just. To take no notice of convulsions in foreign parts till someone actually comes and drops something on you is one of the most permanent English characteristics; but if her *scènes de la vie de province* miss out, as they do, the farming, the horse-coping, the politics and the class relations, not much is left of the actual preoccupations of the time. Dickens, too; many of his social types are the offspring, not of observation, but of the