

VAN GOGH AND IMPOSSIBILITY

Eli Mandel

Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism, an Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario from January 24 through March 22, 1981.¹

However one thinks of "modernism" or the "modern" in contemporary art, without question they are movements bound to the life and extraordinary work of Vincent Van Gogh. The quite remarkable exhibition shown at the AGO from January to March 1981 brilliantly focuses on Van Gogh's work in relation to one of its major developments, his association in thought and style with a group of artists during the last six years of his life; hence the title: Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism. If Turner and the great impressionist painters, Monet, Renoir, Degas, mark the beginning of the modern style, and Cezanne — in Northrop Frye's words — "is the hinge on which turns [the] specifically 'modern' movement to a new sense of "the sheer imaginative act of painting in itself",² Van Gogh and his friends began the thrust to new forms of expression, the end of which we have not yet begun to understand.

Modernism is one of the primary movements in contemporary thought, not only about art but about our conception of ourselves, our limitations, our potential. One of the reasons Van Gogh has in himself become symbolic — an icon of vision, prophetic power, and madness — one suspects, is the degree to which his life and work embody the very conception of being a modern man, of living with the problem of an impossibility. The exhibition fascinates us to the degree that its articulate, brooding, passionate forms and images hurl us toward questions we still cannot answer: how to deal with visionary and criminal art. Or to use another term, equally problematic: revolutionary art.

One point of beginning might very well be the paradox that as the exhibition was collected its value increased to the point where it became almost too costly to show. A second matter has to do with the *meaning* or our *understanding* of the great portraits, the images of the human face, shown here; the third, the significance of Cloisonism itself, a formal distortion of figure and perspective, combined with new uses of colour. These questions are political, psychological, perceptual. They are questions of social history, of moral definition, of ways of seeing. And whatever structure of argument one chooses to follow, long after the arguments have been worked through, over all will remain the suffusing glow of light pouring over a landscape as if from a molten living sun, the burning eyes of a man who looks not so much through you as *into* your own living heart, asking unbearable questions, the vibrant

VAN GOGH

colours of irises and sunflowers.

The exhibition consists of “about” 145 works including oil paintings, watercolours, pastels and several large zincographs. So, at least, the official gallery news release informs us. The word “about” refers to the fact that since the exhibition consists of loans from many sources, significantly from the Rijksmuseum Van Gogh (37 works), it is difficult to arrive at a final count. The major portion is by Van Gogh and Gauguin (80 works) but 65 are by others, the post-impressionists of the Cloisonist group: Henri Toulouse — Lautrec, Emile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, Jacob Meyer de Haan, Paul Serusier, Charles Laval, and Maurice Denis. These figures became, in Van Gogh’s term, the “Impressionists of the Petit Boulevard”, as distinct from the older established artists, the “Impressionists of the Grand Boulevard”.

In the spring of 1980, a convulsion of the international art market occurred. Prices set at two New York auctions resulted in a re-evaluation of similar works everywhere so that the value of the Van Gogh show increased alarmingly to reach at one point an estimated \$250 million dollars though this figure was later somewhat scaled down. Costs rose accordingly for the showing. The point is worth considering, not simply because of the threat it posed to the exhibition, but because of its more general impact. Arguing from a Marxist point of view, John Berger notes that under capitalism, social alienation and fragmentation — the constant sense of insecurity — sets into motion the paradoxes of the romantic view of the artist; outsider and criminal, he is also “hero of societies unable to see a way out of the frustrations they inevitably encourage.”³ Paradoxically, the very conditions that destroy him invest his life — and therefore his work with which it is identified — with the incredible value denied in his existence. \$250 million for poor Vincent. There are, of course, answers to Berger’s line of argument. It can be argued that Van Gogh’s life is demonstrably *incidental* to his work (Berger’s point). Consider Van Gogh’s letter to Theo, so touched with humanity as to be read only with pain and love: “Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half foundered because of it — that’s all right.”⁴ His *work* transcends his *life*, exists *in spite of*, not *because* of its condition. But this Marxist humanism comes up against another interpretation. Not his social alienation (the work he does) but his madness (the embodiment of literal alienation) may be argued to be the matter. The political question becomes a psychological one.

Unfortunately or not, Van Gogh’s life became the very emblem of the life of another mad artist who, in an extraordinarily brilliant essay, chose to argue a stunning case about Van Gogh’s madness from a point of view the obverse of Berger’s. It was not Van Gogh’s madness that alienated him, but his sanity. So argued Antonin Artaud in his “Vincent Van Gogh the Man Suicided by Society” in an award winning essay written the year Artaud emerged from his nine years in French asylums and just after seeing a Van Gogh exhibition in the Orangerie in Paris. On the face of it, this position looks like a version of

ELI MANDEL

Berger's view, but it turns out to be very different. Indeed, this curious issue in art history would be by the way except for two astounding matters. One I have mentioned: the political matter of the truly astonishing prices our society chooses to put on works they mythicize as insane. The second point is the curious influence of Artaud's essay. "This essay", remarks Martin Esslin in his study of Artaud,

is above all, a furious polemic against psychiatrists and psychiatry. Part of it was published in an English translation by Peter Watson in the number of *Horizon* for January 1948. That is where R.D. Laing read it as a young student; he has since said that it came as a revelation to him and played a decisive part in his development.⁵

The same claim, though in a more guarded and qualified way, appears in Ronald Hayman's *Artaud and After*. Both Hayman and Esslin point to Artaud's (and through him Van Gogh's) influence on "thinking in our time in the field of psychology, psychoanalysis and their social applications," but from rather different points of view. Foucault, Laing, and Thomas Szaz, among others, have considered the terminology and phenomenology of madness from radical points of view. For Laing, like Artaud, the matter of the madman artist is put before us once more in a revisionist version of the poet-maudite, for it is Laing's contention that far from being incidental to his life, the artist's madness as expressed in his work is the expression of his life, the very means by which he lives. To argue, in these terms, for the paradoxical "sanity" of Van Gogh returns one to a romantic reading of his painting and necessitates the re-evaluation Berger seeks to avert. To take an example: though apparently arguing for the mutual exclusivity of art and madness, Foucault sums up the position of Artaud and not only links him with Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Holderlin and Nerval but as well with Barthes's version of the revolutionary meaning of paradoxical speech:

The moment when, together, the work of art and madness are born and fulfilled is the beginning of time when the world finds itself arraigned by that work of art and responsible before it for what it is. Ruse and new triumph of madness: the world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud.⁷

VAN GOGH

There are two portraits in the exhibition that raise the same questions. One is Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait With Straw Hat* (1887); the other Gauguin's *Self-Portrait, Les Miserables*. The first elicits this commentary from Artaud:

let him who once knew how to look at a human face take a look at the self-portrait of Van Gogh, I am thinking of the one with the soft hat. Painted by an extra-lucid Van Gogh, that face of a red-headed butcher, inspecting and watching us, scrutinizing us with a glowering eye. I do not know of a single psychiatrist who would know how to scrutinize a man's face with such overpowering strength, dissecting its irrefutable psychology as if with a knife.⁸

If you shudder, you have seen the painting, its flecks of blood on the face, its burning eyes, its unbearable questions. "For a lunatic is a man that society does not want to hear but wants to prevent from uttering certain unbearable truths."⁹ So Artaud.

As for the other portrait, *Les Miserables*? Berger's comment is revealing and precise:

The large lumbering body, the big hooked nose, the dark eyes whose expression is defensive and gives nothing away, the whole face — like one carved forcefully but with a blunt knife out of crude wood — are seen bitterly, cynically, as though the image Gauguin saw in a mirror of how a convict might strike a prison visitor, or how a man might appear, brought up from a dark cell for interrogation.¹⁰

The butcher. The criminal — or the Indian. Primitive. So art has come to this. It is a problem now. An unbearable question. A rejection. An affirmation, but of things we dare not say we have seen. These views are extreme, though it is worth noting they are clearly implied by the portraits themselves. Gauguin, after all, chose the title *Les Miserables* because of Jean Val Jean, the criminal as a type of an artist. He chose too a symbolist technique, "the colour . . . pretty far from nature . . . all the reds and violets streaked by flames like a furnace radiating from the eyes, seat of the struggles of the painter's thought . . ." And the flesh, as Van Gogh saw it, "a dismal blue". Bernard's painting of himself, included in the upper right corner, shows the painter with his eyes — significantly — shut to all exterior reality.¹¹ But a third view possible as between revolutionary (Berger's view) or madman

ELI MANDEL

(Artaud's), is suggested by Orwell's remarkable reading of Dickens. Perhaps it is not accidental that Van Gogh's wide reading concentrated especially on his beloved Dickens, whose:

radicalism is of the vaguest kind, and yet one knows that it is there. That is the difference between being a moralist and a politician. He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong. All he can finally say is, "Behave decently," which as I suggested earlier, is not necessarily so shallow as it sounds. Most revolutionaries are potential Tories, because they imagine that everything can be put right by altering the *shape* of society; once that change is effected, as it sometimes is, they see no need for any other. Dickens has not this kind of mental coarseness. The vagueness of his discontent is the mark of its permanence. What he is against is not this or that institution, but, as Chesterton put it, "an expression on the human face".¹²

I begin with the portraits because some of the most vexed questions about Van Gogh's achievement reside here but also because, aside from the questions of modernism and modern art, the nature of his very great accomplishment can here be seen not as revolutionary, nor as mad, but as (in Orwell's terms) moral. The achievement represents Van Gogh's humanism, arising from choice his sitting and arrangement, his use of colour and form in his subjects, and probably as well from his deep links with both peasant reality and the French realism of J.F. Millet. The *Portrait of Père Tangay* (1887) for example, whose own warm humanism shines through in his direct pleasant gaze, his clasped hands, his sturdy peasant-like figure facing us, while in the background is a rich display of Japanese prints. Or *La Berceuse: Madame Augustine Roulin* (1889) who holds a rope with which to rock a cradle, her green dress, her orange hair setting her off strikingly against a background of floral patterns. The title indicates something of the reference intended: Lullaby from a novel of Pierre Loti, focusing on the women as madonna. His women, in fact, present a series of human roles and type, never sentimentalized: *La Segatoni: The Italian Woman with Daisies* (1887), again with floral motifs and sharp colouring, the face passionate, intense; *L'Arlessienne: Madame Genoux with Books* (1889), the forceful colours and simple forms contrasting with the poise and dignity of the woman. The collection is both dazzling and humane, a product of deep concern and love.

VAN GOGH

Technically, too, the portraits point to Van Gogh's Cloisonist concerns with line, form and colour. Figures are sharply outlined or flattened, colour present in flat surfaces and contrasts, line strongly separating areas and forms. Though there are still disagreements over origin and source, the Cloisonist aesthetic shows a much more clearly defined history than some of the accompanying variations and developments, and it is by no means too much to claim for it a significant, important advance on impressionism toward the proliferation of possibilities that marks modernism. This point is the one at which contemporary art criticism demands a finer, subtler vocabulary and set of distinctions than those I have been so crudely and roughly deploying here. What is this rude talk, the academic art historian asks, about revolution, politics, morality, the sanity-insanity inversion? Given so elaborate and extensive an exhibition as the Van Gogh, we are expected to produce genuine discourse about synthetism, symbolism, pointillism, plastic colour, expressionism, even fauvism. No doubt, the technical vocabulary has its functions, especially for art history. Finer distinctions are needed. But for my purpose, at least in cultural criticism as distinct from art history, the crucial point, on which so much else of this argument rests, remains the meaning of "modern" as opposed to (for want of a better word) "ancient." A few major commentators may be cited more or less at random along a recognizable spectrum of possibilities and attitudes on this point. Northrop Frye, a liberal humanist, remains determinedly cheerful about "modern," taken as a cultural, not a chronological term. Modern, in art, signifies the active, dynamic creative as opposed to the passive responses of propaganda and advertising encouraged by the media. Frye admits to areas of confusion and difficulty in the modes of perceptual and anti-art. At the opposite pole, Berger, the marxist (rather in the style of Lukács), remarks on the triviality and pathology of alienated art (either romantic consolations of formal or technical perfection for its own sake *or* subjective chaos) as opposed to the human achievement of objective discovery or the "capacity to disclose that which exists" (defined, often, as "work" to parallel "labour").¹³ Dennis Lee and George Grant, the conservatives, equating modern with technology and "progress," offer glum consequences. Harold Bloom, reading the past in Freudian, if not Gnostic, terms proposes a "mis-reading," the re-writing of the past so that it appears to have imitated us; Turner is Van Gogh's follower. And finally Steiner, elitist and academic, sees the modern as barbaric except as structural linguistics, the strange loops of self-referring forms.

In brief, the most impressive cultural analyses we possess either deplore or dismiss modernism. And one can hazard a guess as to why: a loss of clarity, of order, of formal convention, of coherence, of objectivity, of "the capacity to disclose that which exists." The loss is attendant on abandoning perspective, clear formal order, spatial coherence. Cloisonism has its fairly clear

ELI MANDEL

definitions and to summarize the consequence as barbarism is sheer philistine brutality. But the consequence of the turn to distortion and incoherence is enormous. Passion, conviction, colouring, intensity do not finally offer consolation — or hope. Berger's condemnation (not of the early 'modern masters' — Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Juan Gris, Braque, Matisse, but those who follow into extremism) is fierce but not brutal, not philistine:

Behind the extremism of the so-called *avant-garde* is the desperation of despair. The *avant-garde* today are so terrified of what the world is becoming that they try to reduce it to the dimensions of their own unconscious, whilst boasting that these are the dimensions of the cosmos itself.¹⁴

Is it wrong to see this beginning with Cloisonism? The exhibition catalogue gives a fair description:

derived from a type of inlaid work which had been widely used in Byzantine and related Western Medieval forms of religious art. The chief characteristics of this style were fields of flat bright colouration separated into compartments by outline contours of wire or ridges left by gouging a metal plate. The result was analogous to stained glass windows and other forms of mediaeval art featuring intense colours, strong figured outlines and little, if any, modelling in the art.¹⁵

Anquetin's *Avenue de Clichy: Five o'clock in the Evening* (1887) is the work providing the name *Cloisonism* to the critic and symbolist, Eduard Dujardin, who wrote of it in a significant article. But if the style suggested the end of perspective, the beginning of distorted form and new modes of colouration, *Avenue de Cliche* pointed further as well. Anquetin had discovered the relationship between colour and psychological mood; the evening blue contrasts sharply with the yellow-orange interior light creating a special sense of place, time, attitude. Van Gogh's *The Cafe Terrace on the Place des Forum, Arles at Night* (1888) plays with the same contrasts of night (natural light), stars and artificial light (gas-jets on the terrace) for uncanny contrasts. Two aspects of distortion for powerful effect had emerged: separation of forms and colour-forms for perceptual and emotional expression. Under the excitement

VAN GOGH

of new possibilities and in connection with his own project for a school of the south at Arles, Van Gogh worked out a number of his greatest paintings, some as always under the influence of or modified by the work of other painters whose methods or structures he followed or improved on. Among the most famous, included in the exhibition, are: *The Mowers, Arles in the Background* (1888) which follows Anquetin's ground-breaking *The Mowers at Noon: Summer* (1887), both "primitive," intentionally naive, in the use of simplified forms and flattened images under a single predominant colour; *Vincent's House on the Place Lamartine, Arles* (1888) the blues and yellow in striking, almost ominous contrast; the extraordinary *Vincent's Bedroom at Arles* (1888) — "The colour" wrote Van Gogh "is to do everything and giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general."¹⁶ Yet there are no shadows and the objects attain the clarity and luminosity of dream images. There is, too, his *The Sower* (1888), an odd figure under an immense sun that throbs above, and beside the asymmetrically poised peasant a dark huge tree-trunk diametrically thrusting across the picture. And *The Langlois Bridge with Women Washing* (1888), like so much of his work, points to a third element, not only new design and colour but the effects of Japanese prints and motifs.

Here perhaps we find the most difficult aspect of post-impressionism, its primitivism. Van Gogh's Japonism is, of course, explicit, as in the colourful and bold assertions of *Japanoiserie: the Courtesan (after Kesai Eisen)* (1887). But Gauguin's urge toward the savage remains, like the painter, in a sense closed, mysterious. His figures lurch toward us out of dark dreams: three Breton women, green wooden figures lowering a green Christ behind a peasant woman in blue and red in the foreground. The passion of Gauguin or the peasants? The background has hills, colour, the sea. *The Yellow Christ* (1889) is a gothic Gauguin on the cross before three women in peasant dress, the fields orange, "the great rustic and superstitious simplicity" said Gauguin "of the Breton peasantry." But who is superstitious? There is a desolate Goya-like creature at the foreground of *Grape — Gathering — Human Misery* (1889); two ghost-like creatures in black and blue shawls in *Women at Arles: The Mistral* (1888); most mysterious of all, a landscape with a nude who lies like a funeral statue, embracing a fox, a small flower in her right hand. The title? *The Loss of Virginity* (1890-91).

Powerful, complex, such images point to another direction of extremist art, the modernism of the criminal artist as outcast and savage: Gauguin as *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1889). The Breton paintings of the school of Cloisonism explores a variety of other religious imagery, explicit and covert, from Bernard's gothic abstraction in *Christ at the Foot of the Cross: Lamentation* to his complexly-organized *Breton Women in the Meadow: Pardon at Pont Avon* (1888) (echoed in Van Gogh's *Breton Women in the*

ELI MANDEL

Meadow [1888].) But there are as well powerful plain peasant motifs, as in Jacob Meyer de Haan's *Breton Women Scratching Hemp* (1889) and Charles Laval's *Going to the Market* (1888).

Splendidly various as the exhibition is, it is by no means confined to Breton landscapes or the scenes of Arles. To anyone who has travelled through Brittany, its Celtic otherworldly atmosphere does reach out to a Tolkien-like world of the life of peasants, the figures of dream, the atmosphere of haunting and grief-stricken oppressed figures. Arles burns forever under the yellow sun, the starry night. Yet the post-impressionists could not forget the boulevards of Paris. Yet another mode touches the forms they explored: the expressive nervous and mannered line anticipating the style of Art Nouveau. It appears in Anquetin's *The Bridge of Saint-Pères: Gust of Wind* (1889), in the manes of horses caught in the motion of a woman's shawl and cloak, all seen against a Paris river-bank. *The Rond Point at the Champs Elysée* (1889) is more stylized in the Cloisonist manner though the horses and women echo the motifs of *Gust of Wind*. With Toulouse-Lautrec we enter the circuses, the dance halls, the world of models, bohemians, painters, later to become images of Art-Nouveau, though here still Cloisonist, as in *At the Circus Fernando* (1887) and the Ball at the *Moulin de la Galette* (1889). With Anquetin's *The Dance Hall at the Moulin Rouge* (1893) it is as if the two styles or rather several modes mysteriously blend: Japanese prints, the flat colouring of Toulouse-Lautrec's posters, the simplification of figure, the colour and crowds of bohemian halls (for at the centre is Toulouse-Lautrec's Jane Avril in the same pose as in his famous version, alive in the one as in the other to link new and old visual languages).

It is, in fact, in the variety built on so few structural devices — colour divisions, formal line design, figure distortion — that the modernism of the post-impressionists emerges. Berger would have it, correctly I think, that the "early modern" masters "put all their revolutionary fervour into their art considered as art. Because they did not see how to make a revolution in the streets, they made one on their canvass."¹⁷ They did not see either, the more terrible consequences. The revolution eats its children.

Department of Humanities,
York University

Notes

1. Bogomilia Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1981. I am grateful to Professor Christopher Innes and Professor Ekbert Faas for information about Antonin Artaud and Vincent Van Gogh.
2. Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 62.

VAN GOGH

3. John Berger, *Permanent Red*, London: Methuen, 1969, p. 34.
 4. *Van Gogh A Self-Portrait*, Letters . . . Selected by W.H. Auden, Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1961, p. 398.
 5. Martin Esslin, *Artaud*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1976, p. 61.
 6. Esslin, p. 106.
 7. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard Tavistock, 1967 cited in Ronald Hayman, *Artaud and After*, Oxford, 1977, p. 159.
 8. Jack Herschman, ed., *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, Second Revision Revised, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1970, p. 160.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
 10. Berger, p. 201.
 11. *Welsh-Oucharov*, p. 46.
 12. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *George Orwell, Collected Essays, Journals and Essays*, Vol. I, London: Secker and Warburg, 1968, p. 457-458.
 13. Berger, p. 33. On the question of the triviality of contemporary work, Berger remarks tellingly, "The artist has . . . been forced to his knees, and there tries to find significance in the scraps around him on the floor. Although it would be a mistake to make a rigid formula out of this, the thinness, spikiness, and broken, fragmentary nature of most forms in post-war painting and sculptures surely reflect the failure of nerve that I am discussing."
 14. Berger, p. 213.
 15. *Welsh-Oucharov*, p. 45.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 17. Berger, p. 212-213.
-