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Van Gogh and God

A Creative Spiritual Quest

Cliff Edwards



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Preface

Vincent van Gogh was born in a small Dutch village in 1853 and was buried among the grainfields on a French hilltop in 1890. Of his thirty-seven years of life, sixteen were spent under the guidance of his parents in a Dutch Reformed parsonage, seven as an art gallery clerk, three in religious studies and service in England, Holland, and Belgium, one as an unemployed wanderer, and the last ten as a painter.

One hundred years have passed since van Gogh's death, and books, articles, exhibitions, symposia, psychological analyses, songs, dramas, and even an opera have been focused on his life and work. Nevertheless, the van Gogh mystery becomes deeper and the puzzles and contradictions regarding him increase with each passing year. How can this largely unrecognized and penniless artist who devoted only ten years to painting have gained such phenomenal global popularity in our day? What can account for the willingness of a Japanese insurance firm to pay the extraordinary price of 39.9 million dollars to bring one faded and cracked sunflower canvas by van Gogh to Japan? How can one explain the unprecedented 53.9 million dollars paid on November 11, 1987, for his painting of irises? The price paid for either painting would have been sufficient not only to build an entire modern museum but to adequately furnish it with representative art from all the ages.

Old questions remain unanswered and new questions force themselves upon those interested in van Gogh and the role of art in human culture. Why is it that this artist's work is as highly valued in the Orient as in the Occident? Was van Gogh insane,

and does his work reflect madness? What relationship is there between the dark portraits of peasants painted in Holland and the brilliantly colored landscapes painted in France? Questions range from the popular “Why did he cut off his ear?” to the more philosophic “How could an artist so attuned to the beauty of earth have chosen to leave it by suicide?” “Does van Gogh affirm life or deny life?” Each of these questions is one of our concerns, and will be addressed in this book.

There is, however, a more all-encompassing puzzle which is at the center of our study, a puzzle which may itself be the key to many of the mysteries and contradictions surrounding van Gogh. The puzzle is this: How can it be that among the hundreds of works dealing with van Gogh there is none devoted to a sustained study of his spiritual quest, his religion, his beliefs regarding God, salvation, the Bible, and immortality? Why has no theologian focused a major work on this creative artist who was brought up in a family of pastors, raised in a parsonage, nurtured in an atmosphere of daily prayer, Bible-reading, and worship? Why has so little been done to study van Gogh’s aspiration to be a country parson, his service as lay preacher and teacher in Methodist parishes of England, his being tutored for entry to theological school in Holland, his attendance at an evangelical missionary training school in Belgium, and his work as missionary, preacher, and Bible-teacher among Belgian miners? Why has his spiritual quest not been studied as a possible key to the paradoxes in his life and work?

Interestingly enough, it is the sensitive art critic who has recognized that the uniqueness of van Gogh lies beyond art-critical concerns and moves into the area of theology and spiritual formation. For example, the German art critic, Julius Meier-Graefe, one of the early “discoverers” of van Gogh’s work, confessed that he might well have entitled his van Gogh biography “van Gogh and God.”¹ Likewise, the famous American art critic, Meyer Shapiro, in his 1980 volume, *Van Gogh*, described the uniqueness of van Gogh’s life to be “the fact that art was for him . . . a choice made for personal salvation. . . . a deeply lived means of spiritual deliverance or transformation of the self. . . . an alternative to older moral-religious means.” Shapiro affirmed of van Gogh:

His career as an artist is a high religious-moral drama and

not only a rapid development of a style and new possibilities of art.²

If art critics have recognized that religion and spiritual transformation are central elements in van Gogh's life and work, why is it that theologians and historians of religion have shown so little interest in him? Why have most scholars of religion, in fact, studiously ignored him? Anthologies and studies in religious thought have been broad enough to include the work of persons as diverse as William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, Claude Levi-Strauss, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Karl Marx, Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, and Albert Camus, but no major theological study or anthology has taken serious account of the "religious-moral drama" of Vincent van Gogh.

Perhaps one explanation for the absence of van Gogh from the work of theologians is directly related to the departmentalization of knowledge in the modern academic world. The very fact that in libraries the three large volumes of van Gogh's introspective letters dealing with his religious evolution and theological musings are housed among the art books rather than in the religious studies collections is enough to discourage many. Others may assume that "letters" are not a likely source for serious theological reflection, a rather odd assumption when one considers that the larger part of the New Testament is composed of letters.

It may be that neither the location nor the form of van Gogh's writings is primarily to blame for their neglect by scholars of religion. The heart of the matter may be that the wall Western religionists have erected between "word" and "image" has disqualified van Gogh as theological resource, for his religious quest is expressed not only in words but more uniquely in drawings and paintings. The Western prejudice in favor of "God as Word" has likely led to the avoidance of one who took seriously "God as Image." Theological discourse expressed as Word and words has been so privileged, the verbal manner of doing religion has become so comfortable, that one devoted to the making of images must be suspect and excluded from consideration. Prejudice and habit have led most Judeo-Christian scholars to the unyielding position that religion must be expressed primarily as *hearing* and *obeying*, and cannot be expressed significantly as *seeing* and *creating*.³

My purpose in this book is to help us move in the direction that sensitive art critics have pointed out, to enter the territory that theologians have generally ignored: the creative spiritual quest of Vincent van Gogh that he expressed in both word and image. It is my conclusion, after several years of investigation, that an understanding of van Gogh from the perspective of his spiritual search is a key to the unity of the artist's life and work, casting new light on many of the mysteries and contradictions, and solving certain persistent van Gogh puzzles. Further, I hope that this work will make some contribution toward clarifying problems regarding van Gogh in the art-historical and art-critical areas. More important, I hope that this study will provide a new dimension of meaning and significance for those who view van Gogh's paintings.

Also I hope that this study will raise serious questions regarding traditional limitations scholars have imposed upon theological and spiritual formation studies in the West, that it will suggest new sources for creative theological inquiry, and that it will offer ways of liberation for persons who have felt themselves suffocated, or excluded, by narrow definitions of religion and restricted ways of doing theology.

A brief description of the structure of this study may be helpful at this point. To begin with, there is a chronological guide intended to provide a "bird's-eye view" of the course of van Gogh's life and a chronology of his letters.

Chapter one details factors which seem to have alienated Vincent van Gogh from "proper" middle-class society at an early age, and will describe the manner in which he came to interpret that alienation as a life-mission based upon biblical injunctions.

Chapter two seeks to prove that crucial interpretations of van Gogh's life-development repeated in almost every book on the artist are without sufficient creditable foundation and are likely wrong largely because they have not taken his religious orientation seriously.

Chapter three describes a key element in van Gogh's religious transformation, his conversion from a man of one book, the Bible, to a modern man devoted to contemporary literature as "a new Bible for a new day."

Chapter four presents van Gogh's theology, demonstrating how God is experienced in the depths of the artist's own failures, a God whose vulnerability is viewed as humanity's best hope for

a life beyond death. In this connection, van Gogh developed a unique and creative “theology of the cradle.”

Chapter five, entitled “The Oriental Connection,” examines a little-known facet of van Gogh’s life, his study and practice of Japanese art in order to broaden his own Christian faith with the experience of a Japanese-Buddhist approach to nature. We find the key to the global appeal of van Gogh’s art in his synthesis of Eastern and Western experiences of spirituality.

Chapter six seeks to overcome the limitations of a Western code book, or psychological, approach to van Gogh’s symbolism through a broader East-West approach to *symbol* that is more appropriate to an understanding of van Gogh’s spirituality and his work.

My intention to provide a new perspective on van Gogh carries the responsibility for describing my own limitations and credentials. I am neither an art historian nor an art critic. I have relied upon, and gained much from, the work of experts in these fields. Always at my elbow have been such volumes as Jan Hulsker’s *The Complete van Gogh* (1980), Marc Tralbaut’s *Vincent Van Gogh* (1969), *Van Gogh: A Retrospective* by Susan Stein (1986), and works by Roskill, Rewald, Nordenfalk, Leymarie, and many others. Ronald Pickvance’s catalogues to the New York exhibits, *Van Gogh in Arles* (1984) and *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers* (1986), and a variety of publications from the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh in Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Muller in Otterlo, Holland, have been especially helpful in my work. Also I have made regular use of the two-volume *Verzamelde Brieven van Vincent van Gogh* (1974) and the three-volume English equivalent, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (1958). The translation and numbering of van Gogh’s letters used in the following chapters will follow the three-volume English edition because of its easier availability. In those letters van Gogh clearly indicated that as an artist he preferred the simple name *Vincent*; therefore, I will generally refer to him as such.

My own training includes degrees in biblical interpretation and comparative religion at Garrett Theological Seminary and Northwestern University, theological studies with the Protestant and Roman Catholic faculties at the University of Strasbourg in France, and biblical studies at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. Interest in Asian religious thought led me to spend a year in Kyoto, Japan, at Daitokuji temple, where I studied

Buddhist art and wrote a little book on nature mysticism. Opportunity to deliver lectures on Asian art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts led to a series of papers on the influence of Asian art and Buddhist philosophy on the French impressionists. That study led to an investigation of van Gogh's letters and several trips to Amsterdam and Otterlo to study the artist's work and to view the collection he had made of Japanese prints.

I admit to a feeling of special kinship with Vincent van Gogh which has perhaps allowed me certain insights regarding the artist's background. Vincent was born a year after his parents had a still-born child, and was raised as the oldest of six children in a small village. I too was born a year after my parents had a still-born child, and was raised as the oldest of seven children in a small village. Vincent was a student of the Bible who served as a teacher and preacher within the Methodist Church before beginning his painting career. I was a student of the Bible who served as a teacher and preacher within the Methodist Church before beginning my academic career. Vincent developed a special interest in Oriental art and collected Japanese prints; for the past fifteen years I have done the same. Such similarities have led me to feel an intimacy with the dynamics of the van Gogh family and Vincent's religious quest which began with the Bible and village churches, moved into the wider realm of contemporary art and literature, and finally sought a relationship with Asian cultures.

For me, Vincent van Gogh's current popularity is a two-edged sword. Cutting in one direction, it provides a large and varied audience for this study, an audience already enthusiastic, curious, and moved by Vincent's life and work. That audience has gone out of its way to see van Gogh paintings, owns a van Gogh calendar, remembers Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life*, and has a print of *Sunflowers* or *The Starry Night* on a bedroom wall. I am happy there is such an audience.

But the sword cuts in another direction. I believe there is something bizarre, grotesque, even destructive, in the conversion of a penniless sufferer's rejected and often threatening work into pleasant symbols of popular culture or cultish possessions for the very rich. It was often Vincent's deepest commitments and purposes that made his work an object of scorn and refusal to many people. Further, it was never his wish that the art of dead painters command high prices, but that the struggles of current

artists receive encouragement. Imagine how many creative artists might have been supported for years on the money required to purchase that one iris painting by the dead Vincent van Gogh.

My intent is that this book will draw on a broad and deep popular interest in Vincent van Gogh, and with this in mind I will focus whenever possible upon his own ideas in his own words. My further hope is that this book will uncover the very element in his art which often made it threatening and unacceptable to his contemporaries, allowing us the liberty of a genuine encounter and honest response to van Gogh's life and work.

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1

A Pilgrim's Progress

Vincent van Gogh found deep, personal meaning in the biblical description of life as pilgrimage, and devoted the first sermon he ever preached to that theme. In November 1876, he mounted the pulpit of a small Methodist church in Richmond, England, and affirmed that “our life is a pilgrim’s progress”:

We are pilgrims on the earth and strangers—we have come from afar and we are going far—The journey of our life goes from the loving breast of our Mother on earth to the arms of our Father in heaven. Everything on earth changes—we have no abiding city here—it is the experience of everybody. That it is God’s will that we should part with what is dearest on earth—we ourselves change in many respects, we are not what we once were, we shall not remain what we are now.¹

Vincent, at age twenty-three, convinced that he would follow in his father’s footsteps as pastor, missionary, or teacher of the Bible, seems to have drawn together in this one sermon the experiences of his youth and marked out directions his spiritual quest would take during the remaining fourteen years of his life.

A sense of passing through life in loneliness and alienation permeate the sermon, and “pilgrimage” provides a spiritual interpretation for this experience of estrangement. The related theme of impermanence, “we have no abiding city here,” endows with religious meaning the bewildering changes of late nineteenth-century Europe and the lonely and often unsympa-

thetic rooming houses and workplaces far from home with which Vincent was forced to cope. The "great storms of life" described further on in the sermon soon become storms in "the heart of man," and Vincent applies the theme of change directly to the self, a description of personal transformation: "we are not what we once were, we shall not remain what we are now." Alienation, impermanence, and transformation become key words within the greater religious drama of pilgrimage toward "the arms of our Father in heaven." Both life's problems and the spiritual resources for interpreting and transforming those problems appear deeply rooted in Vincent van Gogh's recollections of his early years and religious environment.

Vincent's personal pilgrimage would lead him from a Calvinist parsonage in the modest Dutch village of Zundert to some of the great cities of his day: London, Paris, The Hague, Amsterdam, and Antwerp; to a new experience of sun and countryside in the south of France; to a final resting place in the hills of Auvers on the Oise River.

His pilgrimage would take place in the midst of the ongoing turmoil of Europe, where the privilege of birth continued to give way to the power of industry and commerce, and the horse and hoe were being replaced more and more by the machine and conveyor belt. These were the scenes of his pilgrimage, but the most profound level of that pilgrimage took place in the recesses of Vincent's own spirit as he struggled with pangs of guilt and promises of salvation, with the narrow path of divinely appointed tribulations and the wider way of a new literature and a new art.

There is an early description of Vincent by a member of his own family. Elisabeth Huberta van Gogh, one of Vincent's three younger sisters, published a personal recollection of Vincent in 1910, some twenty years after Vincent and his brother Theo had both died. Though the recollection is highly stylized and often rather vague, it does provide a sister's description of Vincent in his teens. Elisabeth pictured herself and her sisters playing in the parsonage garden:

Turning around, one of them saw approaching their older brother Vincent, a seventeen-year-old boy as square as he was tall, with a slight stoop for he had the bad habit of walking with his head down. His close-cropped red-blond hair was hidden

under a straw hat. He had a strange, not young looking, face, the forehead full of lines, the eyebrows on the large, noble brow drawn together in deepest thought. The eyes, small and deep-set, were now blue, now green, according to the impression of the moment. But in spite of all awkwardness and the ugly exterior, one was conscious of a greatness, through the unmistakable sign of the deep inner life.²

Apart from her seeking some sign of Vincent's later "greatness," Elisabeth described Vincent as awkward, unattractive, and given to strange mannerisms. She further recollected that he avoided the "watchful eyes" of villagers and much preferred solitude in nature where he became a "young naturalist," collecting plants and insects, and studying birds in their native habitat.³

S. Aertsen-Honcoop, a woman who had worked as a serving-maid in the van Gogh parsonage, had opportunity to observe Vincent as a youngster:

There was something strange about him. He did not seem like a child and was different from the others. Besides, he had queer manners and was often punished. He was covered with freckles. His hair was red as fire.⁴

Marc Tralbaut, a van Gogh scholar, interviewed Hendrik Hoppenbrouwers, a village schoolmate of Vincent's. Hendrik recalled:

He was an ugly red-headed boy who liked to go by himself on many long walks across the fields. . . . Vincent was a good pupil and read a great deal. We were beaten from time to time, but on other occasions we also got up to mischief together. All the same, as I said before, Vincent went off on his own for most of the time and wandered for hours together around the village, and quite a long way from it.⁵

These early remembrances of Vincent's ugliness, unattractiveness, strangeness, peculiar mannerisms, and a preference for solitude are expanded to include unusual ascetic practices, nervous habits, sadness and melancholy, and a peculiar voice as later observers describe Vincent's days as bookstore clerk, theology student, and artist.

At age twenty-four, Vincent worked briefly in a bookshop in

the Dutch town of Dordrecht, rooming and boarding with the Rijken family. Mr. Rijken remembered Vincent as “a queer chap, and no mistake,” who “shuffled” about in his room all night, purposely missed meals, and responded to their concerned questions with the words, “I don’t want food, I don’t want a night’s rest.” According to Mr. Rijken, Vincent wore a blue smock which made him look “like an immigrant,” and he was often teased by others. Mr. Rijken noted, “I keep seeing him as a scape-goat.”⁶

Vincent shared a room at the Rijken home with Mr. Görlitz, an assistant teacher, who left his impressions of Vincent:

He was a singular man with a singular appearance into the bargain. He was well made, and had reddish hair which stood up on end; his face was homely and covered with freckles, but changed and brightened wonderfully when he warmed into enthusiasm, which happened often enough. Van Gogh provoked laughter repeatedly by his attitude and behavior—for everything he did and thought and felt, and his way of living, was different from that of others of his age. At table he said lengthy prayers and ate like a penitent friar: for instance, he would take no meat, gravy, etc. And then his face had always an abstracted expression—pondering, deeply serious, melancholy.⁷

At age twenty-five, Vincent lived with an uncle in Amsterdam and was tutored for entry into theological studies by a young Jewish scholar, Mendes da Costa. The tutor not only described Vincent’s ascetic practices and attachments to the Bible, but also left this description of Vincent arriving for lessons:

In my mind’s eye I can still see him come stepping across the square from the Nieuwe Herengracht Bridge, without an overcoat as additional self-chastisement; his books under his right arm pressed firmly against his body, and his left hand clasping the bunch of snowdrops to his breast; his head thrust forward a little to the right, and on his face, because of the way his mouth drooped at the corners, a pervading expression of indescribable sadness and despair. And when he had come upstairs, there would sound again that singular, profoundly melancholy, deep voice: “Don’t be mad at me, Mendes; I have brought you some little flowers again because you are so good to me.”⁸

A Scottish painter named Archibald Hartrick remembered Vincent from his days in Paris—sometime between 1886 and 1888. He wrote:

I can affirm that to my eye Van Gogh was a rather weedy little man, with pinched features, red hair and beard, and a light blue eye. He had an extraordinary way of pouring out sentences, if he got started, in Dutch, English and French, then glancing back at you over his shoulder, and hissing through his teeth. In fact, when thus excited, he looked more than a little mad; at other times he was apt to be morose, as if suspicious.⁹

Dr. Félix Rey, the resident surgeon at the Arles hospital who had attended Vincent following the mutilation of his ear, told an interviewer:

First and foremost Vincent was a miserable, pitiful man, small of stature (please get up for a moment! About your size), lean. He always wore a sort of overcoat, smeared all over with colors—he painted with his thumb and then wiped it on his coat—and an enormous straw hat without a hatband, of the type usually worn by the shepherds of the Camargue as a protection against the scorching sun.¹⁰

What effect did so simple a factor as personal appearance have upon Vincent van Gogh's relationship to society from boyhood on? Did his contemporaries' impression that he was an "ugly red-headed boy" who grew to become a "homely" young man "hissing" through his teeth estrange him from society and encourage a lifelong sense of alienation which provoked further nervous mannerisms and peculiarities? The evidence suggests exactly that.

That Vincent came to be poignantly aware of the negative impression he made on others becomes clear. At age twenty-nine he confided to Theo:

I shall have to suffer much, especially from those peculiarities which I *cannot* change. First, my appearance and my way of speaking and my clothes. . . . " (Letter 190)

That he could be deeply hurt by negative references to his person, even by those he loved and trusted, becomes obvious in

his description of a scene which took place in the studio of his family relation, Anton Mauve, an established artist he much admired. In a moving letter of 1882 he reported to Theo:

Do not be angry with me, Theo, for troubling you with this. But this is the way things have been all winter long, and what have I done to deserve all this trouble? All the anxiety and worry cannot but make me nervous and flurried in speech and manner. When Mauve imitated me, saying, "This is the sort of face you make, this is the way you speak," I answered, My dear friend, if you had spent rainy nights in the streets of London or cold nights in the Borinage—hungry, homeless, feverish—you would also have such ugly lines in your face and perhaps a grating voice too. (Letter 191)

Vincent here emphasized the role of hardship upon his appearance and voice, but hardship seems simply to have intensified the problem of a homely boy with peculiar, nervous mannerisms of speech and posture.

The effects of Vincent's appearance on others may have been further influenced by the public's fascination in his day with physiognomic classification, phrenology, pantomime, and caricature. The increased mobility of large numbers of people had contributed to the growing alienation of urban workers, who no longer knew their neighbors, and had apparently led many to look to some *science* of physical appearance for help in the evaluation of strangers. The population of Paris, for example, had become avid viewers of the caricatures drawn for the daily papers by Daumier, Gavarni, Grandville, and Monnier, who all employed a vocabulary of facial features and postures that were intended to represent the class, temperament, and quality of their characters and, by extension, their counterparts in society. As one of the many popular physiognomic manuals of the day put it: *Le Dedans jugé par le Dehors* ("The Inside judged by the Outside").¹¹ Vincent's bristling red hair, small deep-set eyes, grating voice, and tendency to hiss and to hang his head may have marked him as a "low class" and suspect person to be avoided.

It is obvious that many crucial factors contributing to Vincent's sense of alienation and pilgrim status lie beyond the narrow focus of "personal appearance." The potential for alienation

resulting from Vincent's birth into a family of Protestant pastors and wealthy art dealers in a predominantly poor, agricultural, Roman Catholic village is hardly to be ignored. Neither is the Calvinist atmosphere of a home in which the pastor-father uttered daily warnings regarding the sinfulness of the outside world, or where parents considered the local school "too rough" and so withdrew their parsonage children. We will broaden our focus to include those factors later, but for now let us maintain our narrower focus and note two fascinating biblical passages which were applied to Vincent's appearance. These two dramatic passages of Scripture seem to have presented themselves to Vincent as ways of interpreting his appearance and the resulting alienation in religious terms. Both passages comment directly upon the relationship between strange or homely appearance and divine purpose.

The first was applied, according to Vincent, by Pastor van Gogh, who sought to contrast his two sons, Vincent and Theo. In a letter to Theo, Vincent reminded him:

Father used to ponder over the story of Jacob and Esau with regard to you and me—not quite wrongly—but fortunately there is less discord, to mention only *one* point of difference, and in the Bible itself there are plenty of examples of better relations between brothers than existed between the venerable patriarchs mentioned above. (Letter 338)

The Esau-Jacob narratives of Genesis (chapters 25–27) are both poignant and revealing when applied to Vincent, for they focus upon external appearance as revelatory of internal character: *Le Dedans jugé par le Dehors*. According to the narrative, two children struggled within the womb of Rebekah, wife of the patriarch Isaac: "The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau" (25:25). Esau is described as a "man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (25:27). Esau is impetuous, unable to curb his appetites, selling his birthright for potage prepared by the "smooth" Jacob (25:34). Though Esau, as firstborn, is rightful heir to father Isaac's blessing and inheritance, Rebekah and Jacob conspire to steal the blessing, and Esau is left alienated, a progenitor of the Edomites rather than of the chosen people. The words Father Isaac spoke

to Esau describe an alienated existence:

Then Isaac his father answered him:

Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwellings be, and away from the dew of heaven on high.
(Genesis 27:39)

Though we must resist pushing the details of the biblical narrative too far, it is a strong likelihood that this imagery suggested by Pastor van Gogh and remembered vividly by Vincent years later had an influence on the artist. Upon his father's death, Vincent renounced his part in the inheritance, sent his father's most precious possession, a Bible, to Theo, and moved out of the parsonage forever (letters 411a and 430).

At the heart of the story of Esau's loss of his father's blessing, is a deception in which hairy animal skins are placed on Jacob's hands so that the blind father Isaac might feel them and believe "the hands are the hands of Esau," coarse and hairy, and so bestow the blessing intended for Esau on Jacob. Vincent, as a struggling artist, believed that people saw him as a coarse animal. He wrote Theo during the winter of 1883:

In the daytime, in ordinary life, I may sometimes look as thick-skinned as a wild boar, and I can understand perfectly well that people think me *coarse*. When I was younger I thought, much more than now, that things depended on chance, on small things or misunderstandings that had no reason. But getting older, I feel more and more differently, and see deeper motives. (Letter 345)

Certainly there is an element of mystery in Vincent's recollections here that defies our interpretation, but some revelation that the apparent "coarseness" of his person had placed a barrier between himself and society since youth seems obvious.

It was during that very period in 1883 that Vincent was seeking a reconciliation with his father at the Nuenen parsonage, but came to feel that the polite and proper parsonage family viewed him as a disruptive animal:

They feel the same dread of taking me in the house as they would about taking a big rough dog. He would run into the room with wet paws—and he is so rough. He will be in every-

body's way. *And he barks so loud.* In short, he is a foul beast. . . .

And then—the dog might bite—he might become rabid, and the constable would have to come and shoot him. (Letter 346)

Vincent's response, as he mused on that imagery, was to interpret his "coarseness" as a God-given role, as a way into nature itself:

I tell you, I consciously choose *the dog's path through life*; I will remain a *dog*, I shall be *poor*, I shall be a *painter*, I want to *remain human*—going *into* nature. (Letter 347)

Vincent came to believe that his own day had so perverted the truth that proper society was now inhuman, and the dog's life was the honest way of remaining human in nature.

Vincent's sensitivity regarding his own apparent coarseness, and his conscious choice of "the dog's path through life," were to have a significant effect upon his art. He accepted the fact that he was "unfit. . .to cope with either dealers or art lovers" (letter 257). He made it clear that ". . . I cannot make 'Types of Beauty'; I do my best to make 'Heads of the People'" (letter 252). As "lowest of the low," he would show "what is in the heart of such an eccentric, of such a nobody":

This is my ambition, which is, in spite of everything, founded less on anger than on love, more on serenity than on passion. It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is a calm pure harmony and music inside me. I see drawings and pictures in the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner. And my mind is drawn toward these things by an irresistible force. (Letter 218)

Vincent hoped that his studio would become "a kind of harbor of refuge" for "a herd of poor people" (letter 278). In his isolation and poverty he would paint "not only with colors, but with self-denial and self-renunciation and with a broken heart. . ." (letter 514).

Vincent felt that Parisians and other "civilized" people made a mistake "in not having a palate for crude things, for Monticellis, for common earthenware" (letter 520). In his own paintings,

which he knew “people will speak of as unfinished, or ugly” (letter 398), he intensified the irregularities and coarseness of the aged, the labor-worn, the poor and sorrowing: “I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people” (letter 404). As he explained of his *Potato Eaters*:

And it might prove to be a real *peasant picture*, I know it is. But he who prefers to see the peasants in their Sunday-best may do as he likes. I personally am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than by giving them a conventional charm. . . .

. . . if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure—that’s healthy, especially for city people.

Such pictures may *teach* them something. But to be perfumed is not what a peasant picture needs.” (Letter 404)

Vincent’s conviction that the coarse, the underside, the crude, was his given domain, and his satisfaction in that mission, is perhaps best illustrated in a painting-experience he proudly reported to Theo:

Recently I have also been very busy drawing horses in the street. I would love to have a horse for a model sometime. Yesterday, for instance, I heard someone behind me say, There’s a queer sort of painter—he draws the horse’s ass instead of drawing it from the front. I rather liked that comment. (Letter 230)

The Genesis narrative regarding Esau, which Vincent heard applied to himself in the parsonage, suggested that external coarseness marked him as alienated from parental blessing and proper society from birth. Vincent accepted that verdict and discovered in it a kinship with the lowly, a mission to the disinherited, the crude, and the ugly. One other biblical passage must be placed alongside the Genesis account as offering an interpretation of ugliness and alienation in terms of spiritual vocation. Vincent himself appears to have selected it as a key to Scripture and as a description of his mission in “imitation of Christ.”¹² It is the famous passage known as the “Suffering Servant Song,” Isaiah 53.

Months after his father’s death in March 1885, Vincent placed his father’s Bible on a small table and painted it in a still

life, then sent both the Bible and the painting to his brother Theo. Though we will discuss the full significance of that unusual painting in a later chapter, here we simply note that Vincent purposefully opened the Bible to a passage of his choice, and clearly painted at the top of the Bible's open pages: Esaie LIII, (Isaiah 53.) Familiar to many as a central text utilized in Handel's *Messiah*, biblical scholars view the prophetic passage as a high point in biblical poetry and theology, a "Suffering Servant Song" devoted to the doctrine of sacrifice and vicarious suffering.¹³ The originally intended identity of the Suffering Servant is a much argued puzzle, perhaps representing Israel, a remnant of Israel, the Messiah to come, Isaiah himself, or some anonymous prophet.¹⁴ But certainly the Servant is distinguished by his ugliness or deformity, and negative appearance is directly related to his God-given sacrificial mission of suffering and death on behalf of those in distress. The heart of Isaiah 53 reads:

For he grew up before him like a
 young plant
 and like a root out of dry ground;
 he had no form or comeliness that we
 should look at him
 and no beauty that we should
 desire him.
 He was despised and rejected by
 men;
 a man of sorrows, and acquainted
 with grief;
 and as one from whom men hide
 their faces
 he was despised, and we esteemed
 him not. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

The passage goes on to describe the despised servant as "smitten by God," "wounded for our transgressions" (53:4-5). He is compared to "a lamb that is led to the slaughter," an "offering for our sin" (53:7, 10). As his mission, "he poured out his soul to death"; he "bore the sin of many. . ." (53:12).

A few chapters later, in Isaiah 61:1-2, it may well be the Servant who is describing his own mission in terms of "preaching the gospel to the poor," comforting "all who mourn." The Gospel of Luke presents Jesus at the Nazareth synagogue as opening the

scroll of Isaiah and reading that very passage from Isaiah 61, and announcing: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16–21). Early Christians identified Jesus Christ as Isaiah's Suffering Servant, and called upon his followers to imitate his sacrificial suffering.¹⁵

Vincent clearly followed in this tradition, described his own mission as "preaching the gospel to the poor," and joined in "imitation" of the "man of Sorrows," the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53. While doing religious work in England in 1876, Vincent chose the Isaiah 61 passage regarding "preaching to the poor" as text for a lesson he taught (letter 77), quoted that same Isaiah chapter to Theo (letter 71), and advised Theo to read fifteen chapters of Isaiah, including the "Servant Song" of chapter 53 (letter 82a). In 1878, as an evangelist in Belgium, Vincent described for Theo a sermon he had preached to the miners in which he described Jesus in the words of Isaiah 53 as "the great Man of Sorrows," who set the pattern of humility for humans who ought to live "in imitation of Christ" (letter 127). Vincent could describe his own "worship of sorrow" (letters 295, 320) and the "wound" he carried (letter 313). He also described painters as "isolated, poor, treated like madmen" (letter 514), calling to mind descriptions of the "Servant," and saw in his own sacrifices a preparation for a "green shoot springing from the roots of the old felled trunk":

The more I am spent, ill, a broken pitcher, by so much more am I an artist—a creative artist—in this great renaissance of art of which we speak. (Letter 514)

Even the Servant's likeness to a sacrificial lamb is echoed in Vincent's description of the choice he believed he and Theo must make in a world of "money-wolves":

. . . it is better to be a sheep than a wolf, better to be slain than to slay—better to be Abel than Cain. . . .

Suppose that it's not just in our imagination, but that you and I are really like sheep among our fellow creatures. All right—granting the existence of rather hungry and false wolves, it would not be impossible that we should be devoured someday. (Letter 344)

Vincent, in fact, described for Theo a "*motive* for keeping one's

serenity even when one is isolated and misunderstood, and has lost all chance for material happiness." That motive was a sense of mission based on "faith" that one's own sufferings, the "oppressiveness of the hours that precede the thunderstorm," would serve the future, would mean "the following generations will be able to breathe more freely" (letter 451).

Vincent van Gogh's appearance and mannerisms from youth struck many of his contemporaries as ugly and coarse, and seem to have played a role in alienating him from "proper" society. His religious resources provided him with a way toward positive meaning in such "coarseness" and its alienating effects, providing him with the image of life as a "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" pilgrimage through suffering and impermanence. Passages in Genesis and Isaiah led him to interpret his "ugliness" as a kinship with the lowly, a sacrificial mission on behalf of the rejected and disinherited of his time.

As we will see later, Vincent's religious resources were not limited to the Bible, and so we will close this chapter with a moving passage Vincent treasured from a book by Jules Michelet, the French historian and social critic. Almost a dozen of Michelet's books are mentioned in over fifty references in Vincent's letters from 1873 to 1889, a period of seventeen years. According to Vincent, "Michelet even expresses completely and aloud things which the Gospel whispers only the germ of" (letter 161), and Michelet's book *L'Amour* became to him, "a revelation and a Gospel" (letters 19, 20). In *L'Amour*, Michelet asserted that surface beauty, "youthful complexion," was of little consequence compared to the deeper beauties that can be developed in the human soul. An anecdote used at that point in Michelet made a lasting impression on Vincent, an anecdote concerning "Socrates, ugly as a satyr" (letter 572). In 1889 Vincent applied the anecdote to his friend Roulin, but as early as 1883 he made clear that he applied the story directly to himself:

Socrates was born as a true satyr, but by devotion, work and renouncing frivolous things he changed so completely that on the last day before his judges and in the face of death, there was in him something, I do not know what, of a god, a ray of light from heaven that illuminated the Parthenon. (Letter 306)

Pilgrimage, impermanence, suffering, and sacrifice were linked

by Vincent to the quest for transformation, and he believed that even one "ugly as a satyr" might hope that through devotion and labor something divine would shine through the coarse exterior to illuminate the world's darkest corners.

Notes

Preface—pp. xi–xvii

¹ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent Van Gogh: A Biographical Study*, trans. Holroyd-Reece (N.Y.: The Literary Guild of America, 1933), xvi.

² Meyer Shapiro, *Van Gogh* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 11–12.

³ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, and a few creative theologians have pioneered in the effort to open theology toward the visual arts. For an account of the problems involved in the relationship between art and religion, see Samuel Laeuchli, *Religion and Art in Conflict* (Phila.: Fortress Press, 1980). For examples of creative works, see John Wesley Dixon, *Art and the Theological Imagination* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1978), and Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988). *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, provides a collection of essays and excerpts on the topic (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1986).

Chapter One: A Pilgrim's Progress—pp. 1–14

¹ "Vincent's Sermon" in *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 3 vols. Introduction by V. W. van Gogh; Preface and Memoir by J. van Gogh-Bonger (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981), 1:87–88; hereafter referred to as *Complete Letters*.

² Elisabeth du Quesne van Gogh, *Personal Recollections of Vincent Van Gogh*, trans. K. Dreier (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), 4; hereafter, *Personal Recollections*.

³ *Ibid.*, 5–7. Compare Marc Tralbaut, *Vincent Van Gogh* (Lausanne: Edita Lausanne, 1969), 29–31.

⁴ Tralbaut, *Vincent Van Gogh*, 25.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Vincent Van Gogh as Bookseller’s Clerk” in *Complete Letters*, entry 94a, 1:112.

⁷ Ibid., Interview of P. C. Görlitz, 1:112. See also 3:595–600.

⁸ Ibid., “Personal Memories” of Dr. M. B. Mendes da Costa, entry 122a, 1:170.

⁹ A. S. Hartrick, “A Painter’s Pilgrimage through Fifty Years,” in *Van Gogh: A Retrospective*, ed. Susan Stein (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986), 81.

¹⁰ *Complete Letters*, 590b, 3:168.

¹¹ See Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 70. Note Vincent’s positive reference to his own reading of Lavater and Gall, *Physiognomy and Phrenology*, in *The Complete Letters*, letter 138, 1:211.

¹² Jan Hulsker, *The Complete Van Gogh* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980), 946 (F117), p. 208 depicts the open Bible with the clear marking “ESAIIE LIII.” Vincent associates Isaiah’s “Man of Sorrows” and “Imitation of Christ” in a sermon in letter 127, *Complete Letters*, 1:184.

¹³ See George Knight, *Isaiah 40–55: Servant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 170.

¹⁴ See Charles Torrey, *The Second Isaiah* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928); also “Who is the Servant?” in A. Herbert, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 10–14.

¹⁵ Herbert, *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 10–14. John Calvin interpreted the Servant to be “Christ and his whole kingdom.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. W. Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 113–15.

Chapter Two: Religious Transformation—pp. 15–37

¹ Johanna van Gogh-Bonger “Memoir of Vincent Van Gogh” in *Complete Letters*, 1:xxiv–xxv.