

A modern melancholia: Van Gogh's portrait of Dr Gachet¹

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A DISPUTED DIAGNOSIS

It would be unwise to hazard a diagnosis for those attacks of illness to which Van Gogh was subject and which he dreaded. Karl Jaspers (1922) believed it might be possible to speak of schizophrenia, but few people today would retain this diagnosis as there is no indication of it in either the paintings or in the copious writings. Psychomotor epilepsy has, more recently and with greater plausibility, been proposed while certain symptoms are suggestive of attacks of vertigo of labyrinthine origin. The outbursts of anger, the anxiety attacks contribute to a clinical picture indisputably exacerbated by absinthe abuse. And there were frequent periods of dysphoria and depression. But who would dare to pin any of the classical labels of melancholia on Van Gogh?

Nevertheless, after leaving St Rémy de Provence where he had been a voluntary patient, and settling in to a very modest inn at Auvers sur Oise, the diagnosis of melancholia was mentioned to Van Gogh. Dr Paul Ferdinand Gachet, in whom he confided, seemed convinced that this was the illness from which he had suffered and one which could recur. We do not have to accept this diagnosis, but it does indicate that the concept of melancholia, which had been current in medical discourse for centuries, was still in use. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo at about the end of May 1890:

He has told me that if my melancholia, or anything else, becomes too overpowering he might still be able to do something to lessen its intensity and that I must not be afraid to be honest with him. Although everything has been fine until today, the time when I need him may certainly come.

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Some weeks later, on 29 July, Van Gogh shot himself in the region of the heart and died several hours later.

Dr Gachet was an unusual man who certainly does not deserve the insults which Antonin Artaud directs at him in his book, *Van Gogh, The Suicide of Society* (Artaud, 1947), a work abounding with flashes of vivid intuition:

Dr Gachet was a grotesque Cerberus, a pus-ridden and purulent Cerberus in a blue jacket and frozen linen put before Van Gogh in order to deprive him of all his sane ideas.

Gachet's medical practice was in Paris. At Auvers he only kept a private residence where he neither looked after patients nor took them under care. He was himself a painter and engraver and at Auvers he either joined up with his painter friends or encouraged them to come and stay in neighbouring villages. Pissarro had chosen to live at Pontoise. Cézanne had spent several months at a house in Auvers with his wife and child. No doubt Gachet did not always keep his medical opinions to himself, and he received some superb canvases in exchange or as gifts.

GACHET'S CHARACTER

Many attempts have been made to conjure up Gachet's personality. It is not my purpose here to recall the great variety of his interests and activities. The more reliable witnesses convey the impression of a hyperactive, even slightly hypomanic personality, whose medical and social views were both fairly unorthodox. He knew times of weariness and despair. When Van Gogh met him he had been a widower for some years and the process of mourning had affected him deeply. Van Gogh thought he could perceive a deep sense of despondency in Gachet, something with which the painter could identify, as his

correspondence makes clear. Writing of Gachet, Van Gogh comments that he was 'as discouraged with his profession of country doctor as I am with my painting'. He also wrote, 'he is subject to a nervous disorder almost as serious as my own'. Van Gogh refers to 'a face stiffened with sorrow', which by a strange coincidence was crowned with a mop of red hair. Gachet wanted Van Gogh to paint his portrait (and also that of his daughter) and Van Gogh was only too eager to accept, as he saw in Gachet his own double. The following passage in the letters is explicit:

In Dr Gachet I have found a true friend and something like a new brother, such is the physical and moral resemblance between us. He, like me, is highly strung and extremely odd... It is the portrait... the modern portrait which excites me most... I would like to paint portraits which a century later will appear to be apparitions... Now I am not trying to do this by means of photographic resemblance but by emotional expressiveness, using our modern science of and taste in colour as a means of expressing and ennobling character. Thus in his portrait, Dr Gachet's face is the colour of sun-baked brick; he has reddish hair and a white cap set against a landscape of blue hills, his coat is ultramarine... this makes his face stand out and look pale despite its reddish-brown colour. His hands are those of a midwife and are paler than his face... In front of him on a red garden table are yellow novels and a dark purple foxglove. My portrait of myself is almost exactly the same; the blue is a delicate Midi blue and I am wearing pale lilac.

The following lines come from an unfinished letter to Gauguin found among Van Gogh's papers:

I now have a portrait of Dr Gachet wearing the 'grief-stricken' expression of our times. *You could say* somewhat like your Christ in the Garden of Olives, not intended to be understood – up to this point I am following in your steps.

Van Gogh goes into the minutiae of colour relationships. He uses colour as a means of expression, but what is he trying to express? The 'grief-stricken expression of our times', as he puts it, does not apply only to Gachet: 'My portrait of myself is almost exactly the same...'. And as he makes clear, a similar relationship has been established with Gauguin's Christ in the Garden of Olives. To this could be added Delacroix's Dead Christ and Rembrandt's Lazarus, as copies of both were executed by Van Gogh, sketching their faces in his own image.

The verbal focus of these various identifications is the term 'grief-stricken', with the sense of 'injury' being implicit.

MELANCHOLIA: SUBJECT FOR A THESIS

Let us defer an examination of Dr Gachet's portrait. It is opportune to recall here that Gachet had been attached to Falret's department at the Salpêtrière where he had gained some first-hand experience of mental pathology. For his medical thesis undertaken at Montpellier he chose to write *A Study of Melancholia* (Gachet, 1858). It was at this time that he became acquainted with Bruyas who had taken up Courbet's defence and had a collection which Van Gogh admired. In his medical thesis Gachet goes over numerous classical ideas which were commonly repeated in medical manuals and dictionaries. He justly emphasizes the retardation and the inhibition characteristic of depression: 'It is as if there is an obstacle within the person which has slowed down, diminished or even completely blocked off the vital force' (p. 47). And he continues:

In the face of this obstacle, thought and movement endlessly collide with each other; they founder upon each other ceaselessly and in vain because the obstacle cannot be broken through; the interruption continues, becomes permanent and results in inertia. All the powers of the human being are concentrated at this one point. Whether this concentration is the result of a conflict which already exists and which has exhausted the reactive forces, or whether all the vital forces act contrary to the laws of life and movement to which every living being is fatally subjugated, the result is inactivity... This state of constant incubation, of permanent and indefinite concentricity is the culminating point, the touchstone of all depressive illnesses. To a great extent the melancholic assumes all the characteristics of complete and profound inertia. The vital principle which holds sway in every being is quiescent, and along with it, the organs, the senses, the wits, the instincts and the passions are also silenced. Man resembles a vegetable, a stone.

In a fantastical vision deriving from Renaissance cosmology, Gachet regards melancholia as a principle which can affect natural objects: 'Melancholia is prevalent throughout Nature. There are animals, vegetables and even stones which are melancholic.'

From Gachet's typological portrait of the

melancholic I have selected some of the more striking traits:

It is as if (...) the organism becomes more dense, sinks into itself, shrivels or tries to occupy the least space possible. The patient's posture is very characteristic (...) The body stoops, the arms are held up towards the chest (...) the fingers are clenched rather than flexed (...) The head hangs down over the chest and leans to one side. All the muscles of the body are in a state of permanent semi-contraction, most particularly the flexors; the facial muscles appear taut, twitch and impart a particular hardness to the face; the ocular muscles are permanently contracted and seem to hide the eyes while emphasising the sockets. The ridges of the eyebrows protrude and two or three vertical creases separate the two eyebrows. The mouth is closed in a straight line, the lips seem to have disappeared (...) The naso-labial groove is more apparent, the cheeks are sunken, the skin seems to be stuck to the cheekbones, the skin has a yellowish or unhealthy hue (...) The gaze is staring, anxious, averted, focussed on the ground or to one side.

Some of these symptoms are no longer considered truly pathognomonic, but others certainly are and Gachet has done very well to note them, either from his observations or his reading, notably the 'vertical folds' separating the eyebrows, and the contraction of the 'eyebrow' muscles. Bleuler's classic treatise (1918) describes 'Veraguth's Sign' as follows: 'The inner third of the cutaneous fold of the upper eyelid is stretched upwards and a little backwards, making the arch which is at this point into an angle' (7th edition, p. 338, 1943).

THE MELANCHOLIC DOCTOR

If we examine Van Gogh's famous portrait of Gachet and also the etching executed at almost the same time, we find the eyebrow crease, the creases between the eye-sockets, the accentuation of the naso-labial fold, the pinched mouth, the leaning head and shoulders. There is a surprising correspondence between the somewhat awkward description encountered in the thesis and the image produced by Van Gogh's paint-brush. The same can be said of Van Gogh's face in some of his self-portraits, although the body is not bent over. Gachet would have been able to recognize in his own portrait the descriptive characteristics which he himself had attributed to the melancholic. There is here a strange consensus which goes beyond

the gaze and sympathy of the painter. It would take a great deal of effort to find these 'characteristics' in the portrait of Gachet which Norbert Goeneutte painted in 1891.

In classical paintings the slanted body with the head resting on a closed fist constitute the posture constantly attributed to *Homo melancholicus*, Saturn, patron of melancholics or to the allegorical female personification of Melancholia. Van Gogh makes no mention of this in his description of his portrait of Gachet, but he possessed a great knowledge of the ancient masters and could not have been unaware of this posture. Here it is appropriate to recall the vast repertory of images illustrating Melancholia, starting with Dürer's famous engraving. It is also relevant to recall Edvard Munch's canvases, painted in 1891, which are entitled 'Melancholia' and in which the painter has represented a man leaning slightly to one side, with downcast gaze and a hand supporting his head. The Norwegian painter was doubtless unacquainted with Van Gogh's portrait of Dr Gachet but he was himself continuing the same figurative tradition. However, he was working in a different colour range and with a different technique; on a distant twilight seashore he has drawn the silhouette of a couple, the woman soberly indicated by the whiteness of her dress. A 'story' is contained within this picture and is the psychological justification for the melancholic state of the person in the foreground. The woman has turned, moved away and joined another man; the melancholic anguish is jealousy. Dr Gachet was a widower and remained in mourning. Van Gogh knew this but there is nothing in his painting to indicate the cause of the 'grief-stricken' expression. The loss is evident but remains unexplained. We are confronted with Melancholia itself.

All the same, there are some signs to be read in Dr Gachet's portrait, but how should they be interpreted? The red table, the yellow books, the branch of purple flowers have chromatic values and acquire their pictorial sense by being opposed to other colours – hands, face, clothing, background, etc. There is no doubt that for Van Gogh a colour had its own meaning. No one, for example, can deny the associations by which the colour yellow brings together the sun, ripe wheat, sunflowers and book-covers. Colour is the vehicle of analogies and contrasts. But in the

hands of the Doctor the foxglove carries yet another meaning. There is some evidence that Gachet wished to have this medicinal plant figure in his portrait: its value in the treatment of certain forms of cardiac disease had been well established for more than a century (Withering, 1785). If we are to believe the biographers (notably Doiteau, 1928) Van Gogh wished to put 'a symbol of the profession' of his sitter in the painting and Gachet chose the sprig of foxglove, a personal choice of an emblem outside pictorial tradition. The yellow books are novels whose titles can be clearly read on their spines: *Manette Salomon*, *Germinie Lacerteux*. These two works by the Goncourt brothers were not chosen by chance. The first concerns the world of painters, and the second concerns a pathological case with a fatal outcome, in which the authors adopt a medical point of view in accord with their realistic concept of aesthetics. These books are a clear indication of the aesthetic interests of Dr Gachet and bear witness (perhaps at his request) to his favourite authors. Thus, what is expressed in his face is supplemented by these examples or emblems of the intellectual activities of the sitter: science (the art of healing) and the fine arts.

The picture can also be read in another way. Let us again run through the images of legendary melancholics (Salvator Rosa's 'Democritus', for example) or the best known personifications of Black Bile – Domenico Fetti's 'Melancholia' in the Louvre, or G. B. Castiglione's engraving of the same subject. These figures are bending over various objects of symbolic value: scientific instruments, geometrical figures, musical scores, books, water-clocks, cut flowers, skulls. These objects proclaim the limits of knowledge, the futility of pleasure, the transient nature of human existence and are found gathered together in Vanitas paintings, a genre practised in Western Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. These are paintings which have as their moral aim to remind mankind of the vanity

of its profane occupations and its temporal joys, paintings which often denounce the false enticement of the mirror, that is to say of painting itself.

The leaning figure of Dr Gachet undeniably belongs to the ancient and continuing 'Tradition of Melancholy' and there is a great temptation to read the objects he has in front of him as emblems in the Vanitas tradition. Nonetheless, in my opinion it is most improbable that Van Gogh intended to make a deliberate allusion to this. The possible interpretation that I have suggested is an optical illusion of the museum visitor, the informed spectator. It is enough to remark that Van Gogh has not excluded this reading. This work which is so modern, destined to be understood one hundred years later and which appears before us, as Van Gogh wished, like an apparition, remains firmly linked to the image which the past has created for Melancholia. Using a language which he has violently reinvigorated, an artist has explored one of the great themes of Western morality, the torture of individual existence in its solitude and in the anguish which goes with the retreat of its vital forces. This doctor who is prey to anxiety bears witness to the painter's own anxiety. Where can we turn if the person from whom we seek help is himself in need of help?

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