

Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh

(1994)

AFTER PUBLISHING THE ARTICLE in 1968, I continued to study the art, letters, and life of van Gogh and his ideas, and owe to some colleagues valuable references to other clues for interpreting van Gogh's art and thoughts. I have added the results of these pointers and my later reflections to what I believe are valid additions to the articles on van Gogh that I published in 1940 and 1968.

I note my indebtedness in this revised text to the French periodical *Macula* and its editor Yve-Alain Bois, now at Harvard University.

I have taken into account the article by Professor Gadamer, a disciple of Heidegger, on Heidegger's changes in his late years, and two hand-written corrections by him in the private copy of the margin of one of his posthumous printed books that were noted by the editor of Heidegger's collected works after the latter's death.¹

The interpretation of van Gogh's painting in my article is supported not only by the texts and work of other artists and writers I have cited but also by van Gogh's own spoken words about the significance of the shoes in his life.

Gauguin, who spent a few months with van Gogh as his guest in Arles in the fall of 1888, recorded in two somewhat different articles a conversation at that time about van Gogh's shoes. The first is quoted on p. 140 in this volume.

Another version of Gauguin's story is in a later article that he published with the title "Nature Mortes" (Still Lifes) in the periodical *Essais d'Art Libre* after van Gogh's death:

"When we were together in Arles, both of us mad, in continual struggle for beautiful colors, I adored red; where could one find a perfect vermilion? He,

with his yellowish brush, traced on the wall which suddenly became violet:

Je suis sain d'Esprit [I am whole in Spirit]

Je suis le Saint-Esprit [I am the Holy Spirit]

"In my yellow-room—a small still life: violet that one. Two enormous worn-out misshapen shoes. They were Vincent's shoes. Those that he took one fine morning, when they were new, for his journey on foot from Holland to Belgium. The young preacher had just finished his theological studies in order to be a minister like his father. He had gone off to the mines to those whom he called his brothers, such as he had seen in the Bible, the oppressed simple laborers for the luxury of the rich.

"Contrary to the teaching of his wise Dutch professors, Vincent had believed in a Jesus who loved the poor; and his soul, deeply pervaded by charity, sought the consoling words and sacrifice for the weak, and to combat the rich. Very decidedly, Vincent was already mad.

"His teaching of the Bible in the mines, I believed, profited the miners below and was disagreeable to the high authorities above ground. He was quickly recalled and dismissed, and the assembled family council, having decided he was mad, recommended confinement for his health. However, he was not locked up, thanks to his brother Theo.

"In the dark, black mine one day, chrome yellow overflowed, a terrible fiery glow of damp-fire, the dynamite of the rich who don't lack just that. The creatures who crawled at that moment grovelled in the filthy coal; they said 'adieu' to life that day, good-bye to their fellow-men without blasphemy.

"One of them horribly mutilated, his face burnt, was picked up by Vincent. 'However,' said the company doctor, 'the man is done for, unless by a miracle, or by very expensive motherly care. No, it's foolish to be concerned with him, to busy oneself with him.'

"Vincent believed in miracles, in maternal care. The madman (decidedly he was mad) sat up, keeping watch forty days, at the dying man's bedside. Stubbornly he kept the air from getting into his wounds and paid for the medicines. A comforting priest (decidedly, he was mad). The patient talked. The mad effort brought a dead Christian back to life.

"When the injured man, finally saved, went down again to the mine to resume his labors, 'You could have seen,' said Vincent, 'the martyred head of Jesus, bearing on his brow the zigzags of the Crown of Thorns, the red scars of the sickly yellow of a miner's brow.'

“And I, Vincent, I painted him,’ tracing with his yellow brush, suddenly turned violet, he cried

‘I am the Holy Spirit

‘I am whole in Spirit

“Decidedly, this man was mad.”²

François Gauzi, a fellow student in Cormon’s atelier in Paris in 1886–1887, has written of van Gogh showing him in his Paris studio a painting he was finishing of a pair of shoes. “At the flea market, he had bought a pair of old shoes, heavy and thick, the shoes of a carter (*charretier*) but clean and freshly polished. They were fancy shoes (*croquenots riches*). He put them on, one rainy afternoon, and went out for a walk along the fortifications. Spotted with mud, they became interesting. . . . Vincent copied his pair of shoes faithfully.”³

My colleague, Joseph Masheck, had called my attention to a letter of Flaubert that illustrates his perception of aging shoes as a personal object—a simile of the human condition. Reflecting on the inevitable decay of the living body, he wrote to Louise Colet in 1846: “In the mere sight of an old pair of shoes there is something profoundly melancholy. When you think of all the steps you have taken in them to only God knows where, of all the grass you have trodden, all the mud you have collected...the cracked leather that yawns as if to tell you: ‘well, you dope, buy another pair of patent leather, shiny, crackling—they will get to be like me, like you some day, after you have soiled many an upper and sweated in many a vamp.”⁴ Since this letter, dated December 13, 1846, was published in 1887, it could have been read by Flaubert’s great admirer van Gogh.

The idea of a picture of his shoes was perhaps suggested by a drawing reproduced in Sensier’s book on Millet, *Peintre et Paysan*, published in 1864.⁵ Van Gogh was deeply impressed by this book and referred to it often in his letters.⁶ The peasant-painter Millet’s name appears over two hundred times in his correspondence. Comparison of Millet’s drawing of his wooden sabot with van Gogh’s painting of shoes confirms what I have said about the pathos and crucial personal reference in the latter. Millet’s sabots are presented in profile on the ground with indications of grass and hay.

It was Millet's practice to give to friends and admirers a drawing of a pair of sabots in profile as a sign of his own life-long commitment to peasant life.⁷

This personal view of an artist's shoes appears in a signed lithograph by Daumier of an unhappy aggrieved artist standing before a doormat of the annual Salon and displaying in his hands to passers-by a framed canvas of a painting of a pair of shoes, evidently his own. The protesting label reads: "They have rejected this, the dopes." It was reproduced in an issue of the comic magazine *Le Charivari*, and later in a volume of Daumier's lithographs of figures, scenes, and episodes of contemporary life. It dated from a time when protest from artists rejected by the jury of academic artists who judged the paintings submitted for admission to the annual salon won the support for a Salon without an official jury from the French emperor, Louis Napoleon III.

One can describe van Gogh's painting of his shoes as a picture of objects seen and felt by the artist as a significant part of himself—he faces himself like a mirrored image—chosen, isolated, carefully arranged, and addressed to himself. Is there not in that singular artistic conception an aspect of the intimate and personal, a soliloquy, and expression of the pathos of a troubled human condition in the drawing of an ordinarily neat and in fact well-fitted, self-confident, over-protected clothed body? The thickness and heaviness of the impasto pigment substance, the emergence of the dark shoes from shadow into light, the irregular, angular patterns and surprisingly loosened curved laces extending beyond the silhouettes of the shoes, are not all these component features of van Gogh's odd conception of the shoes?

These qualities are not found, at least in the same degree, in his many pictures of peasants' shoes. His style has a range of qualities that vary with both the occasion and mood of the moment and his interest in unusual types of theme. It is not my purpose here to account for the marked changes in style when he moves from Holland to Paris and again when he paints in Arles and then in the asylum at St. Remy. But I may note—in order to avoid misunderstanding—that in realizing

that image of his dilapidated shoes, the artist's tense attitude, which governs his painting of other subjects at a later time—e.g. the self-probing portraits, one with his own heavily bandaged face (the result of a self-inflicted wound of the left ear-lobe), his moods and memories in confronting just those isolated personal objects—perhaps induced the frank revelation of a morbid side of the artist's self. There is then in the work an expression of the self in bringing to view an occasion of feeling that is unique in so far as it is engaged with the deviant and absorbing deformed subject that underlies the unique metaphoric paired shoes.

Van Gogh's frequent painting of paired shoes isolated from the body and its costume as a whole may be compared to the importance he gave in conversation to the idea of the shoe as a symbol of his life-long practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage, a perpetual change of experience.

Comparing van Gogh with other artists, one can say that few could have chosen to devote an entire canvas to their own shoes in isolation, yet addressed to a cultivated viewer. Hardly Manet, or Cézanne, or Renoir, hardly his often cited model, Millet. And of these few—we can judge from the examples—none would have represented the shoes as van Gogh did—set on the ground facing the viewer, the loosened and folded parts of shoes, the laces, the unsightly differences between parts of the left and right, their depressed and broken aspect.

While attempting to define what “the equipmental being of equipment is in truth,” Heidegger ignores what those shoes meant to the painter van Gogh himself. He finds in this signed, unique painting of the shoes that the philosopher had chosen to consider as most significant a “peasant's wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and the shivering at the surrounding menace of death.... This equipment belongs to *the earth* (his italics) and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of that secured belonging, the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-itself”—as if these shoes were the ones worn by the supposed peasant woman while at work in the fields. Heidegger even conjectures that his reader could imagine himself wearing these old high leather shoes and “making



FIGURE 1. Vincent van Gogh: *Still Life with Open Bible, Candlestick, and Novel*, 1885, oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ "', Vincent van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

his way homeward with his hoe on an evening in the late fall after the last potato fires have died down.” So the truth about these shoes was not only of the poor peasant woman “trembling before the advent of birth” and “the surrounding menace of death”—as if the artist’s point of view were impersonal, even in placing the isolated shoes before him *unlaced* and facing the viewer, without the context of the potato field or the disarray of the laces.

Heidegger believes also that this truth is divined by him “without any philosophical theory” and would not be disclosed by any actual pair of peasant shoes alone, detached from the feet, as portrayed in a painting.

● One misses in all this both a personal sense of the expression and of van Gogh’s feelings of “rejection” by his own parents and by his learned teachers who had to come to doubt his fitness as a Christian preacher and missionary. These breaks are familiar to readers of van Gogh’s biography and letters.

When one compares the painting with the one preceding it, of his father’s open Bible, its significance becomes clearer. In that large painting with the marginal presence of the small paperback volume of Zola’s *La Joie de Vivre* (a modest statement of van Gogh’s contrasted alternative to the great massive Bible and exposed text of the opened Bible), he acknowledges his respect for his deceased minister father and alludes to his own Christian past, but also affirms his devotion to the secular lessons of his admired living author. Unlike the perfectly legible printed title of Zola’s book on its bright yellow cover, the religious content of the massive open book is barely intimated in the few tiny numerals (LIII) on the narrow band of the upper margin of the exposed right leaf through the few Latin signs of its page and chapter number and the barely visible ancient author’s name ISAL... But the actual words of this great prophet are withheld from the viewer by the thick, vehement overlay of van Gogh’s opaque brush strokes on the immovable massive book and the ironically covered text of those pages, which concern the sacrifices and sufferings of the prophet Isaiah.

The meaning of these contrasts might be deciphered by an habitual scholarly reader of the sacred book, but will remain closed to an ordinary instructed viewer who has freed himself from the authority of

FIG. 1

his pious parents and church and can readily grasp the significance of the small paperback book with the familiar speaking title on the bright sunny cover, *La Joie de Vivre* (The Joy of Living).⁸

In Heidegger's reprint of "The Origin of the Work of Art" in his *Collected Works*⁹ there is a second thought or cautious note that the philosopher had added by hand in his personal copy of the Reclam paperback edition of the essay (1960). It is on the margin beside his sentence: "From van Gogh's painting we cannot say with certainty where these shoes stand ("Nach dem Gemälde können wir nicht einmal feststellen wo diese Schuhe stehen") nor to whom they belong ("und wem sie gehören"). According to the editor, Fr.W. von Herrmann, the handwritten notes in this copy were written between 1960 and 1976, the year Heidegger died (p. 380). The reader of these corrections will recall their author's original lyrical recognition in those shoes of their deep significance as placed on the earth and in the world of the peasants at work.

In publishing a selection from the marginal notes in the new edition, the editor followed the author's instructions to select those essential ones that clarified the text or were self critical, or called attention to a later development of Heidegger's thought.¹⁰ Since Heidegger's argument throughout refers to the shoes of a class of persons, not of a particular individual—and he states more than once that the shoes are those of a peasant woman—it is hard to see why the note was necessary. Did he wish to affirm, in the face of current doubts, that his metaphysical interpretation was true, even if the shoes had belonged to van Gogh?

FURTHER NOTES ON HEIDEGGER AND VAN GOGH

- 1 There is also thorough critical analysis of Heidegger's philosophy in a later book by Jean Wahl bearing on Heidegger's idea of *being*, applied by Heidegger to shoes and art. See J. Wahl, *La Fin de l'ontologie*, 1956, and concluding pages.
- 2 Gauguin, P. *Natures Mortes, Essais d'art libre*, IV, January, 1894, pp. 273-275. These two excerpted texts were kindly brought to my attention by Professor Mark Roskill.
- 3 François Gauzi, *Lautrec et son Temps*, Paris, 1954, pp. 31-32.
- 4 *Correspondence*, I, Editions Pleiade, p.41.
- 5 See English translation of Jean Francois Millet, *Peasant and Painter*, Boston & N.Y., 1896, p.127.
- 6 *Versamelde Brieven*, 1954, I: 322, 323; II:404; III:14, 45, 85, 151, 328; IV: 32, 12.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ironic, for in fact its story is not of the joys of family life, but of the constraints upon the idealistic young members' dedication to a career in music, etc. Judy Sund writes (*True to Temperament, van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature*, pp. 109-113) that such novels had long been bones of contention between van Gogh and his father.
- 9 Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, Band V, Holzwege, p.18.
- 10 *Gesamtausgabe*, V, pp. 377-380.