

Odes to Van Gogh

Six Poems by Richard Bauckham

Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower* (1888)

These were your fulsome days,
joyous and fervent, unflagging
under the bountiful sun.

With your straw-hatted gaze
and your sun-drenched impastos
you painted
such colour
such undiluted loveliness
such dreaming fecundity
such transcendent sun.

These are the colours of life -
yellow, blue, orange -
life mobile with contrasts,
deep-filled with feeling,
lively with light from the generous sun.

Ripe orange wheat recedes
as the sower strides on
over the field ploughed violet and ochre
simmering under the setting
but splendid
all-nurturing sun.

Once you went forth to sow the Word
but stumbling
you saw a vision of sun
luring you south
to seek and to scatter amazement
on stony soil,
to cast pure joy
along the wayside,
to sow in the warm earth
wonder
that grows toward cosmic praise.

The painting (also known as The Sower with Setting Sun) can be seen at
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/the-sower-sower-with-setting-sun-1888>

The poem also refers more generally to Van Gogh's paintings of June 1888.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom* (1888)

You and I, Vincent, we need
a haven from this insane world,
a soft blue room in a yellow house,
with a world of its own
in the paintings you hung here.

At least, it used to be
what we in northern Europe call sky blue
(pale by Provençal standards)
until the conservators
and the colour scientists
uncovered the faded facts,
pristine at last.

In their digital recolorizing
visualizations
the walls are violet
and the doors lilac,
snug colours, cosy, hygge even.
They are your mood music
lulling you softly to sleep.

Then on the yellow pillows,
in your dreams
of sulphur suns
and sunflower fields,
glowing in all its hues,
from apricot to buttercup,
yellow
restores your soul.

The painting (and a video about the recolorization) can be seen at
<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0047V1962>

In a boat of madness

*In my mental or nervous fever or madness ...
my thoughts sailed over many seas
(Vincent van Gogh)**

What seas your thoughts sailed,
cobalt blue beneath a coal black sky
where frenzied stars
careered in swirling circuits
and the moon turned to blood.

They sailed vast oceans of ripe wheat
where gangs of faceless reapers
walked the waves
with menace in their scythes.

Your thoughts took refuge
under the red coverlet
in your yellow house.

You woke to find your home,
where you had rocked the cradle of your dreams,
now turned to blood.

In Lazarus's tomb
pale faced and fading fast
you waited for redemption.

The poem alludes to several of Van Gogh's paintings, especially
The Starry Night (1889)
Crows over the Wheatfield (1890)
Wheatfield with a Reaper (1889)
Van Gogh's Bedroom (1888)
The Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt) (1890)

*Letter 739, Vincent van Gogh to Paul Gauguin, 21 Jan 1889.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Orchard* (1889)

*My only wish is that they could manage to prove something that
would be calming to us, that would console us so that we'd cease to
feel guilty or unhappy, and that just as we are we could proceed
without getting lost in loneliness or nothingness*

(Vincent van Gogh)*

After the ebullient blossoms
of your orchards come—
the other side of trauma—
these more serious trees.

Rugged and gnarled
they whisper in the breeze
the wistful ruminations
of the very old.

You used to think their silvered green,
so delicately alight
in twilight or bright sun,
too beautiful to paint.

But then your need
emboldened you to take them on,
seeking the solace
of their moody shade.

Gauguin portrayed himself
as Christ in agony
(though with red hair like yours)
but pulled his olive trees out of thin air.

You argued about that—
to paint from sheer imagination
or, as you knew you must,
in an intense encounter with
what challenged all your art
to draw expression from it?

And so you painted olive trees with passion,
trees rooted in the red soil of Provence,
and did not paint the passion of the Christ
who found no solace in the trees,
no more than in his God,
only determined strength
to drink the dregs.

But then—
what did you hear them murmur,
those ancient trees,
musing in the breeze?
Was it “Gethsemane”?

Can any olive grove not
be a site of his memory?
Was it his presence you felt
or his absence?

How to find solace?

The painting can be seen at
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_Trees_\(Van_Gogh_series\)#/media/File:Vincent_Willem_van_Gogh_079.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_Trees_(Van_Gogh_series)#/media/File:Vincent_Willem_van_Gogh_079.jpg)

*Letter 692, Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 29 Sep 1888.

The one you missed

"I must have picked up a good hundred flies and more off the four canvases that you'll be getting, not to mention dust and sand" (Vincent to Theo van Gogh, 1885).

Looking for brushstrokes and paint layers
they found
(and got all excited about)
a grasshopper –
not a neglected detail of your work
but a corpse
entombed in your cerulean
like a fly in amber.

But it disappointed them.
Its promise of dating your painting
to the month of that sad year
(the one you spent stuck
in the asylum
like a trapped insect)
was not fulfilled.
Only had it died from a stroke
of your brush
could the exact span of its brief life
have betrayed a detail of yours.

I'd like to think it would please you
that it was dead already
when it stuck in your paint.

Conservators working on Van Gogh's painting "Olive Trees" (1889) at the Nelson-Atkins museum of art in Kansas City "came across the teeny-tiny body of a grasshopper submerged in the paint" (as conservator Mary Schafer put it). It could only be seen under a microscope. But "paleo-entomologist Michael Engel ... discovered that the insect's thorax and abdomen were missing and there was no sign of movement in the surrounding paint. In other words, it was already dead and desiccated when it somehow landed on the artist's wet canvas and could not be used for dating purposes." But the excitement was not entirely dispelled. Curator Aimee Marcereau DeGalan said, "In an instant it takes you to 1889 in a field outside the asylum where this bug had a bad day — or maybe a good day, because we're thinking about it all these years later."

(Quotations from press reports at

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/08/dead-grasshopper-discovered-in-vincent-van-gogh-painting>

and

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/11/08/562852372/the-grasshopper-in-the-van-gogh>

accessed 9 Nov 2017.)

The painting can be seen at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_Trees_\(Van_Gogh_series\)#/media/File:Van_Gogh_-_Olvivenhain.jpeg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_Trees_(Van_Gogh_series)#/media/File:Van_Gogh_-_Olvivenhain.jpeg)

The Starry Night

Yes, "the mind has mountains, cliffs of fall."
You painted the crags
tumbling into turmoil.
Then the mistral mounted your mind.

And the mind has skylscapes,
swirling torrents of blue,
whirligigs of light,
stars in delirious dances
snaring your sight as you spin in the ether.

But in the blue shelter of the hills,
the somnolent hamlet
is gathered around its church.
The spire reaches to heaven
like the Dutch steeples of your young piety.
It feels nostalgically safe.

So why does that looming cypress
curl like a black flame
flaring above the moon?

Does this hyperbolic sky
blaze with celestial truth?
Does the cypress menace?
Does the steeple aspire?
Have you taken leave
of your blue remembered home?
Are you stunned by the vision?
Struck down?
Is your passion your peril?

The quotation in line 1 is from the sonnet "No worst, there is none" by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Verse 1 refers to Van Gogh's painting Mountains at Saint-Rémy, painted in July 1889, a few days before he suffered a breakdown. The breakdown happened while he was painting another picture and the mistral was blowing. The painting can be seen at

<http://armory.nyhistory.org/mountains-at-saint-remy-montagnes-a-saint-remy/>

The rest of the poem refers to The Starry Night, painted in June 1889. The interpretation of the painting has been much debated. It can be seen at

[www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/the-starry-night/bgEuwDxel93-Pg?hl=en-GB&ms=%7B"x"%3A0.5893999199309583%2C"y"%3A0.44615058562189014%2C"z"%3A10.017400303799482%2C";ze"%3A%7B"width"%3A0.6559934442605351%2C"height"%3A0.8750377349445827%7D%7D](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/the-starry-night/bgEuwDxel93-Pg?hl=en-GB&ms=%7B)