Vincent van Gogh's Published Letters: Mythologizing the Modern Artist

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Often the study of modern art entails an examination of the artist along with his works. This interpretive method involves the mythology of an artistic temperament from which all creative output proceeds. Vincent van Gogh's dramatic life, individual painting style, and expressive correspondence easily lend themselves to such a myth-making process. This discussion briefly outlines the circumstances surrounding the publication of van Gogh's letters in the 1890s in order to suggest that a critical environment existed ready to receive the letters in a particular fashion, an environment that in turn produced an interpretation for the paintings.

Throughout the 1890s, excerpts from van Gogh's letters to his brother Théo and to the symbolist painter Émile Bernard were published in the symbolist journal *Mercure de France*.[1] Bernard edited the letters and introduced them in a series of essays to promote van Gogh's art. Since the paintings had been taken to Holland after van Gogh's death, the excerpts became the primary and most accessible expressions of an artist whose work received little attention during his lifetime. The publication of the correspondence did not establish the initial ties to the symbolist group, but the appearance in the journal did confirm an interpretation given to the paintings by two of van Gogh's earliest critics, Albert Aurier and Octave Mirbeau. This evaluation, along with that of Bernard, shall be examined to determine how they constructed a mythology through which van Gogh's paintings came to be understood.

Before beginning a discussion of the criticism which precedes and follows the publication of van Gogh's letters in the *Mercure de France*, this artist's position in the art world of 1890 must be established. Although Théo van Gogh worked as an art dealer at Goupil's, and exhibited Vincent's paintings on a regular basis at his home in Paris, the works were not well-known. The paintings had also been shown in at least nine or ten exhibitions in Paris between 1887 and 1890,[2] yet, the response to these exhibitions seems to have been unsubstantial.

Little critical appraisal appears before Aurier's article of 1890. Occasional and brief mention of the paintings may be found in exhibition reviews.[3] Attention is most often given to a crude technique, a feature that will reappear in much of the criticism of the 1890s. Here technique is regarded as contributing to the subject matter, but later it will be seen as referring to the artist.

The general unawareness of van Gogh's paintings and the summary treatment of the works when reviewed meant that in the highly factionalized art world of the 1880s and 1890s, a nonpartisan artist like van Gogh could be claimed by one of a number of competing groups. Consequently, although van Gogh exhibited his works primarily in galleries showing predominantly neo-impressionist painting, he became associated with the symbolists. Neo-impressionism and symbolism had in common, above all, their existence as variations of impressionism. They might even be seen as attempting to improve impressionism by making it more scientific, on the one hand, and by stressing the universal *Idea* over the personal vision, on the other.[4] The first critics to write about van Gogh's art in any depth were symbolist writers. Once this association is made, the categorization persists in the criticism and forms the predominant interpretation for van Gogh's art works.

In the initial issue of the *Mercure de France*, a symbolist publication that made its debut in January 1890, Albert Aurier printed an article entitled "The Isolated Ones: Vincent van Gogh."[5] First in a series about isolated artists, and fortuitously timed, since some of Vincent's works were shown in the "Les XX" exhibition which opened in Brussels the following month, the essay was also the first substantial treatment of van Gogh's paintings. It presented van Gogh unequivocally as a symbolist artist, and authority was lent to the interpretation by Aurier's well-established position as a symbolist writer.

A brief summary of symbolist doctrine will demonstrate why van Gogh could be easily drawn into the symbolist camp. In 1886, Gustave Kahn defined symbolism in this way: "The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the idea), instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament)."[6] Central to this definition is the idea, which the symbolists viewed as coming primarily from within the artist, rather than in response to the external world. Although the vision is subjective, objectivity or universality would come about through the artist's technique. Thus, a symbolist interpretation of van Gogh's paintings, in an attempt to isolate and define his idea, would focus on his individual manner of painting. The pictorial language could be heightened or deformed so that the artist could more fully express either his temperament or his idea. In van Gogh's case, more often than not, critical discussion of the paintings never passed beyond the identification of the distorted features. Rather, attention was centered upon the artist as individual, or as medium for the *Idea*. For some critics, the *Idea* and the artist's temperament merge, or become synonymous.

It was van Gogh's particular situation, largely unnoticed and working in the south of France, as well as his individual painting style, that commanded Aurier's attention. His acquaintance with the painter's work came in 1888, when the writer met Émile Bernard, symbolist painter and Vincent's friend and correspondent. Bernard brought Aurier to Théo's apartment to see the paintings, and also related the details of van Gogh's life, showing him the sketches and letters that the painter had sent him from Arles.

In this article, however, Aurier chose not to focus on biographical details but on the broader theme of the isolated artist. Since van Gogh's works were known by few at this time, the painter could well exemplify the image of the artist withdrawn from society. The fact that Vincent worked in Arles, rather than Paris, substantiated this. The implication was that such isolation allowed for, or brought about, the ability to express one's temperament through the revelation of ideas lying beyond the appearance or surface of reality. Furthermore, the need for isolation suggested that the society was one which the introspective artist must escape. Isolating oneself from Paris, with its vying artistic factions, could also be seen as more conducive to the development of a personal or original vision, arising without influence from these groups, and distant from the propagation of a common artistic goal; rather, this vision would come about naturally, from within the artist.

Thus the two main themes of isolation (with its biblical/martyrial connotations) and artistic temperament were woven together throughout the essay. Aurier opened the article with a short verse followed by a longer prose poem, which demonstrated symbolist ideas both stylistically and thematically. Emphasized was the author's experience of the art works, indicated by an evocative, free-flowing writing style. Aurier included many images of nature, but it was always nature in violent movement:

> . . . We find trees twisted like battling giants, proclaiming with the gestures of their gnarled, menacing arms and with the tragic soaring of their green manes, an untameable power, the pride of their musculature, their blood-warm sap, their eternal defiance of the hurricane, of lightning, of malevolent nature.[7]

Aurier used such imagery as a means of preparing the reader for a central thesis: that the extreme or strange appearance of the works came about as the result of an extreme or unusual psychological state (hyperaesthetic). The effect of this imagery of violence might also be understood to predispose the viewer to expect a certain amount of distortion, since presumably this was what had caused Aurier's almost apocalyptic vision. The many images of fire, light, and precious stones, added to those of motion, conveyed an impression of an awesome or sublime experience, both the artist's and the viewer's. Later Aurier referred to Vincent as "a terrible, saddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always near the brink of the pathological."[8]

In Aurier's schema, the idea communicated by van Gogh was that he truthfully expressed his artistic temperament, so that both the artist and his style were characterized by the same terms: exalted, intensive, powerful, brutal. Aurier could further explain the strange appearance of these works by asserting that the formal elements were merely expressive means or methods of symbolization, and that if the viewer did not admit this, the paintings would be incomprehensible.

The other major critical assessment of van Gogh's art pre-dating the publication of the letters was an article written in 1891 by the journalist and critic Octave Mirbeau for *L'Écho de Paris*, a liberal Parisian newspaper for which he was an editor.[9] The Romantic sources of Mirbeau's interpretation were evident in such statements as: "It is not possible to forget his personality, whether it be directed towards some scene from reality or towards an internal vision."[10] Mirbeau focused on the artist's personal vision, thereby espousing the Romantic notion of poetry expressed in William Hazlitt's 1818 essay entitled "On Poetry in General," which described poetry by analogy with both the mirror and the lamp, the lamp projecting the poet's own emotional light.[11] So interpreted, van Gogh's paintings were seen to represent the artist's particular view of the world—his truth, as Aurier had postulated.

Written after Vincent's death, Mirbeau's article took the form, in part, of an obituary. Unlike Aurier, Mirbeau's outlook was nonpartisan and nowhere did he attempt to place van Gogh in any of the various artistic divisions. Mirbeau's main thesis was that style was determined by temperament and personality, so he incorporated a recitation of the events of the artist's life and death into his argument.

It is significant that although Mirbeau compared van Gogh's paintings with others exhibited at the Ville de Paris, nowhere in the article did he identify the paintings. Nor did any reproductions accompany the essay. When Théo died six months after his brother's suicide, his widow Johanna moved to Holland, taking the pictures with her. The works were rarely seen in French exhibitions until several years later, when Johanna and Bernard sought to bolster Vincent's reputation. Therefore, what was disseminated in this early exposure was literary rather than visual and established the predominant critical method for analyzing van Gogh's art. The issues, *i.e.*, individuality and original vision brought about through isolation and response to idea rather than external reality, had already been articulated by Aurier and Mirbeau. Later critics simply repeated them, finding the evidence in the artist's letters as well as his paintings.

Mirbeau's critical appraisal, like that of Aurier, included the writer's highly emotional experience of the paintings. Instead of describing those formal qualities which provoked this experience, Mirbeau entered into an exposition of the artist's life, since Vincent's art and life were closely connected for this critic. Just as Aurier had done before him, Mirbeau linked the paintings, which he too characterized as violent and excessive, to the artist, who was seen as embodying similar qualities. Furthermore, Mirbeau implied that this mental disturbance was a necessary condition for the creation of the paintings, and that within the paintings one could detect the mental disorder.[12]

Both writers thus found meaning beyond the actual painting, in the sincerity of the artist and his original vision. Since they were more concerned with individual truth, neither critic dealt directly with stylistic qualities like color, line, or brushstroke. Mirbeau instead described the various ways in which van Gogh saw nature, having equated what is on the canvas with what the painter had actually seen. The description was therefore of an artistic vision rather than of the resultant paintings.

To the myth-making approach established by these writers is added further textual evidence in the artist's letters. From 1893 through 1897, Bernard published extracts from Vincent's letters to him and to Théo in the *Mercure de France*. Since they were published in an art journal with a defined viewpoint, van Gogh's letters came to represent the expression of an artistic ideology. Although they were not intended as such, the letters acted as an affirmation of an artistic creed. Filled with opinions on the important aesthetic issues of the day, the letters also provided an interpretation for van Gogh's art. Thus, Vincent's writings

facilitated the viewer's response to paintings which had previously been discussed, as has been seen, primarily in terms of the artist. Furthermore, this discourse was carried on largely by literary critics, who came to equate the words and the paintings.

The letters were transformed by Bernard's editing, and assumed an aphoristic quality not intended in the original correspondence. Such differences could be detected by comparing the letters published in the journal with those in the unedited volume published by Ambroise Vollard in 1911. Bernard omitted the greeting, thus separating the letters from their epistolary function. By cropping them into short passages centering on one main idea, the letters became statements forming an argument for an art treatise. The deletion of many portions detailing everyday concerns helped the writings transcend temporal boundaries. Also, ordered one after another in the journal, the discussions of technique and stylistic problems reinforced the notion that Vincent was concerned with these issues almost to the point of obsession.

Bernard thus edited the letters to present van Gogh as a painter who worked from his own artistic vision, not from conventional rules. The long descriptions of nature confirmed that the painter studied his chosen models closely. Discussion of past and present artists proved his awareness of the problems inherent in the act and theory of painting, as did the accounts of his attempted solutions; but Bernard also wished to remove to some extent the casual, spontaneous, or informal tone of the letters because he was trying to establish a certain status for van Gogh.

Bernard's intentions in publishing Vincent's correspondence were made more explicit in his introductory essays.[13] There he equated the words and paintings in terms of their relation to their author. Bernard facilitated the viewer's response to the visual images by asserting that "his letters were the most potent means. After having read them, one could not doubt his sincerity, his character, nor his originality; there, pulsating with life, one would find the whole of him."[14]

In this way, Bernard set forth a model for the interpretation of both letters and paintings. Furthermore, his introductory essays functioned as prototypes for later criticism by quoting the letters in place of any substantive analysis of the paintings. Not only did Bernard quote the letters as evidence in a theoretical argument, but he used them so that van Gogh could explain his own art.

Another dominant note in the introductions was the recurring account of van Gogh's life. Along with Aurier and Mirbeau, Bernard directed the reader's attention to the painter rather than the paintings. Bernard gained additional legitimacy because he actually knew the artist, and related anecdotes of shared moments to lend greater authority to his statements about Vincent's character.

Later evaluations of van Gogh's art were guided by the two approaches presented by these writers—experiential, exemplified by Aurier, and myth-making, the stance taken by Mirbeau and Bernard. Two other essays that built onto this myth, written by Adolphe van Bever and Marius and Ary Leblond, also recounted the events of the artist's life as a means of understanding his temperament. For Aurier's experiential approach, the literary style of the criticism itself served as a metaphor for the experience of the paintings. The myth-making method, by contrast, shifted this attention toward the artist's experience while in the act of painting, and therefore relied heavily on his correspondence.

Literary critic Adolphe van Bever wrote his 1905 article in the symbolist journal *La Plume* in response to the van Gogh retrospective at the Independent's Exhibition.[15] Titling his essay "A Cursed Painter: Vincent van Gogh," he opened with the statement: "The destiny of the artist is sometimes inscribed on his work."[16] His other major thesis was that van Gogh was a rebel, both in society and in painting, recalling Aurier's designation of the artist as isolated. Van Bever believed that this very rebelliousness led not only to the stylistic distortions in the paintings, but also to the painter's tragic end. From such a premise, the critic freely drew upon the events of the artist's life and the published letters to substantiate his conclusions. He also included quotations from Bernard's introductions, and from Gauguin's account of the notorious ear-slashing incident at Arles which was printed in the *Mercure de France* in 1903.[17] All were used to confirm the image of the artist as an intense, disturbed individual. The more examples the critic discovered that demonstrated extremity in the artist's actions, the easier it became to explain extremity in the paintings.

By the early twentieth century, then, the critical interpretation of van Gogh's art revolving around the issue of temperament, and substantiated by the letters, had become firmly entrenched. In 1908, some of van Gogh's paintings were exhibited at the Druet and Bernheim-Jeune Galleries in Paris. Among the commentaries on this exhibition was that of the novelist brothers Marius and Ary Leblond, and this appraisal stands out since it mentioned specific paintings, contrary to the generalizing approach of most of van Gogh's critics.[18] Yet, even with the works before them, the Leblonds repeated the themes of earlier symbolist criticism, such as the associations with martyrdom, delirium, and temperament. They placed heavy emphasis on van Gogh's love for the sun, and quoted from the letters frequently for confirmation. While acknowledging the artist's words regarding his relationship to nature, the Leblonds' critical framework was guided by the symbolist interpretation already created for the artist. The sun provoked the delirium which stimulated the creation of the paintings. Indeed, they wrote about the sun as being responsible, both literally and metaphorically, for van Gogh's departure from realism. Like Mirbeau, Bernard, and van Bever, the Leblonds centered critical attention on the artist more than his works, assuming that the explication of one could also explain the other.

Finally, an examination of the symbolist criticism of van Gogh's art demonstrates that Aurier's most accurate judgment of the paintings may have been his assertion that they represented his love of nature and his own particular truth. This truth was expressed in a form that made little sense to the poets and literary critics who undertook to evaluate it. To them, his letters and biography provided the key to the artistic temperament evident in the art works. Through the establishment and perpetuation of the myth of the artist as an isolated and frenzied genius, the paintings and correspondence of Vincent van Gogh were read and interpreted in a particular fashion.

The creation of a critical framework into which a "deviant" artist like van Gogh could be made to fit has implications for much modern art and its criticism. A technique which is so idiosyncratically different that it

comes to be interpreted as being self-expressive means that the predominant critical mode entails an examination of the creator. In van Gogh's case, the artist, his paintings, and his letters have been inextricably linked, a fusion stemming indirectly from the works themselves, but more directly from the criticism of them. Ironically, van Gogh sought an expressive pictorial language which would obviate the need for such mediation; but ultimately it was his sense of failure and subsequent suicide which instigated his recognition as an artist.

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1 "Extraits de Lettres de Vincent van Gogh," *Mercure de France* 7 (April 1892), pp. 333–39; 8 (1893), pp. 1–22, 112–22, 211–17, 303–15; 9 (1893), pp. 263–72; 10 (1894), pp. 28–35, 221–29; 11 (1894), pp. 248–61; 12 (1894), pp. 17–25; 13 (1895), pp. 208–19; 22 (1897), pp. 267–89.

2 A.M. Hammacher, "Van Gogh and the Words," in *The Works of Vincent van Gogh* by J.B. de la Faille (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970), p. 11.

3 Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, ed., *Van Gogh in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), pp. 52–54.

4 *"Idea"* will be reserved for the Platonic universal; "idea" will refer to the artist's personal expression.

5 G.-Albert Aurier, "Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh," *Mercure de France* N.S. 1 (January 1890), pp. 24–29.

6 Gustave Kahn, "Réponse des Symbolistes," *L'Evénément* (28 September 1886).

7 Aurier, "Les Isolés," pp. 24–25 (trans. by Welsh-Ovcharov, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

8 *Aurier (trans. Welsh-Ovcharov), p. 57.*

9 *Octave Mirbeau, "Vincent van Gogh," L'Écho de Paris* (31 March 1891).

10 Welsh-Ovcharov, p. 66.

11 M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 52.

12 Mirbeau.

13 The 1911 Vollard edition includes four essays written by Bernard: the prefaces published in the *Mercure de France*, an 1891 essay written for the series "Hommes d'aujourd'hui," an unpublished foreword for a proposed publication of the letters in 1895, and the introduction to the Vollard volume.

14 *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Émile Bernard* (Paris: Ambroise Vollard, 1911), pp. 40–41.

15 Adolphe van Bever, "Les aînés: un peintre maudit, Vincent van Gogh," *La Plume* 17 (1, 15 June 1905), pp. 532–45, 596–609.

16 van Bever, p. 532.

17 Charles Morice, "Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* (October 1903), pp. 125–33.

18 Marius and Ary Leblond, "Les Expositions: Van Gogh (aux Galeries Bernheim et Druet)," *La Grande Revue* 47 (25 January 1908), pp. 375–84.