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## Absence and loneliness. On a painting by Van Gogh

**Abstract:** I have in mind, to begin with, a well-known painting by Van Gogh, *Vincent's Chair*. Some of the simple things you see there (for example, a chair, a pipe, a door, a bed or a crate) seem utterly ordinary and somewhat randomly placed. Except that, if we linger over them, they become unexpectedly strange. They ultimately reveal absence as such and a certain loneliness that descends over the place. The “image” in this painting has been interpreted in many ways. They have taken into account, for example, its new style and how it re-signifies elements of the real world, the painter’s correspondence with his brother Theo, but also what he himself said about the painting (“my empty chair”), or his friendship with Paul Gauguin. Psychoanalysis was not slow to intervene. Phenomenological description or existential analysis were even more relevant. But I do not believe that there are or should be “interpretive keys” and “messages”. In this case, a certain understanding of the work does not presuppose any such thing. Moreover, I find more suggestive precisely those interpretations that open up, discreetly, to the extraordinary world that such a painting reveals, its free play full of contrasts.

**Keywords:** *Vincent's Chair*, the strangeness of banal things, absence and solitude, possible interpretations.

We are familiar with a painting signed by Van Gogh, *Vincent's Chair*, dated December 1888<sup>1</sup>. The chair we see on this canvas is unexpectedly ordinary and placed in a normal place. Its reality and that of the space in which it is placed appear commonplace, even banal. All the elements that make up this poor and dreary reality are from the simple world of an ordinary room. Nothing special, just a few objects in a common and austere space.

„It is just that, as soon as you let such things catch your eye, something does not leave you in peace. First of all, the very image of that chair on which no one is sitting, and which seems to be sitting there for no one. You can see that it is a complete alien to the place, placed almost at random, because it reminds you of no one and refers to nothing else. The fact that the painting is titled in a certain way does not help you in this

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respect, it may only express a sad irony of the painter. Not only the chair in the picture lacks a place of its own, but also the other things, the pipe, a door, a bed or a crate, in so far as they are what you see. They appear cut off from one another, each isolated in its own way, with no obvious and natural spatial relations, no sensible time to hold them together. It is precisely this unnatural situation, subject rather to dislocation or to contingency itself, that makes their image so unusual, so strange.

So, a few simple, utterly ordinary, and somewhat randomly placed things that become unexpectedly strange.

Seen in its simple composition, the chair in the picture says almost nothing. Although recognizable as such at first glance, it tends to be a mere abstraction: with no particular place and time, no reference to other things or to any possible addressee. It can still be called a chair and nothing else only in conventionally sense. It withdraws from the eye almost everything you wish to see or recognize as its own. If, however, it leaves anything out, it would be an absence. I would venture to say: absence as such. But it is not marked in any particular way, it is not brought forward with any care, in one detail or another, in fact nothing speaks directly of such a thing. The absence of what? Possibly the absence of whom? Difficult to say, except that it, absence itself, seems to be at stake where a few simple things show themselves and at the same time evade their ordinary condition.

It is not only this absence that unsettles the gaze, but also a certain loneliness that dominates the place. "Vincent's chair", empty and without a specific place, without any sign that it belonged to someone or that it was waiting for someone, is revealed to a gaze that suddenly feels the aloneness of that thing. And also, of the improper place in which it appears. We do not usually speak of the loneliness of things, but of the loneliness that people experience at certain moments, and it seems to be precisely to them that such loneliness seems to be peculiar. Only this time, a certain loneliness hangs over the very things that appear in the image. One might wonder whether it is loneliness or solitude. As we know, Gadamer made a careful distinction between the two: "Loneliness is a loss; what we lose is the nearness to others" (Gadamer 1988, 104)<sup>2</sup>. And loss is experienced as suffering, as when one is deserted by one's friends or forgotten by one's loved ones. What he loses in such a situation is the closeness of others. Thus, loneliness refers to a negative fact: being abandoned or forgotten by others. In contrast to loneliness, solitude can be sought. In modern literature, the search for solitude is a well-established theme, for example in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. And the one who seeks solitude appears as a stranger to others. "Loneliness is an experience of loss and solitude is an experience of renunciation. Loneliness is suffered – in solitude something is being sought for" (Gadamer 1988, 104). This distinction is worth-knowing, especially nowadays.

I don't know whether, in the case of Van Gogh's painting, such a distinction is as straightforward. There could be something perfectly ambiguous at stake, both loneliness and solitude, hidden suffering and a search for something outside ordinary life. But the world that chair describes offers no sign of it. It does not speak of the absence of a place of its own, of a 'home', perhaps not even for the gaze of the one who, here, sees himself directly. The lonely eye no longer seems to find a place to aim for, nor a time for itself. What, then, is the source of the loneliness that dominates the things seen and the air between them? It has not its provenance in the fact that the chair is alone there, empty and isolated, as well as other things around it. A solitary thing, even when you expect to meet more than one, does not create by itself the feeling of loneliness. Such a feeling should rather be related to the way certain things are seen or felt. In Van Gogh's painting, they appear without any obvious relation to each other, as if any of them might be missing or might appear elsewhere. A kind of total contingency leaves things so alien to each other that you immediately sense their strangeness. In fact, it is not that things as such are like that, but it is precisely a particular way of seeing them that makes them appear to us in this way, they become precisely as they are seen. And they are seen, at least sometimes, analogously to the way in which one sees oneself or the way in which one feels around them. I would not rule out that they can also be seen reactively, in the sense of a disanalogy, to distance oneself from self-perception. It is just that even in such cases the above relation can be sensed. Which means that the painting can appear in the way of a testimony - deeply ambiguous, however - of how one perceives oneself at a given moment.

The 'image' in this Van Gogh painting has been interpreted in many ways. For example, the new style in which he paints, and more specifically the new spatial vision he brings (Hulsker 1996), (Hardy 1997). The way he re-signifies or transfigures elements of the real world, its objects and processes. The correspondence with his brother Theo (in particular the letters of November 23, 1888, January 17, 1889, February 10-11, 1890) and what he himself says about this painting ("my empty chair", as he says in the letter of January 17, 1889). Or his special friendship with Paul Gauguin, whom he missed in an absolutely dramatic way. Could it be Gauguin to whom he sends the absence that that empty, solitary chair makes him feel? We don't know if it was prepared for him. Incidentally, another painting by Van Gogh is entitled *Paul Gauguin's Chair*, painted in the same period as *Vincent's Chair*, December 1888. Both bring forward the absence of the named, but the latter offers a strange self-perception: to see oneself absent, to regard one's own absence with apparent serenity or even irony. Psychoanalysis has therefore not been slow to intervene in this matter (Lubin 1996)<sup>3</sup>. But neither has phenomenological or existential description,

even more relevant in the case of the experience that this painting makes possible<sup>4</sup>. It is understandable as long as the painting hints, through the very ambiguity of what is depicted, at a way of situating oneself in the world or, at very limit, a way of being.

For instance, Heidegger, without referring to this painting, invokes the name of the painter early on. In his 1923 writing entitled *Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, specifically where he speaks of the „every-one” i.e. “the no-one which circulates in factual Dasein and haunts it like a spectre” (Heidegger 1999, 26), he will recall Van Gogh as an example of “the search for his own Dasein”. He immediately tells us that, at the critical period of this quest, Van Gogh writes to his brother: “I would rather die a natural death than be prepared for it at the university”. Consequently, the painter continued to work as if “he drew the pictures in his paintings from the depths of his heart and soul, and went mad in the course of this intense confrontation with his own Dasein” (Heidegger 1999, 26-27). The conclusion in the last words is not easy to support, but I would retain the thought that precedes it, that the painter worked as if “he drew the pictures in his paintings from the depths of his heart and soul”<sup>5</sup>. One immediately thinks of the genesis of a singular way of looking and, at the same time, of the unpredictable way in which appearances on the canvas and, with them, a world of their own emerges.

In *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (specifically in the section named “Animus et anima”), Eliade mentions in passing the painting invoked above and returns to an idea that follows him almost all his life. It is the idea of the camouflage of meaning in the insignificant, a phenomenon that he considers truly relevant to this history. At one point he refers directly to his own prose, in which he tries to recognize the miraculous element in the very mundane matter of the everyday world. For example, in *The Forbidden Forest*, a novel in which “a certain symbolic meaning of the human condition” is glimpsed in the very space of the meaningless. He believes that, after all, what transgresses historical life is camouflaged precisely in the flux of this life, just as the extraordinary sometimes hides in the ordinary. “Aldous Huxley wrote of the vision conferred by LSD as a *visio beatifica*: it enabled him to see forms and colors as Van Gogh saw his famous chair. It is beyond doubt that this gray reality, this everyday life of ours, is a camouflage for something else” (Eliade 1982, 177-178).<sup>6</sup> So something seen speaks rather of something else. And something unseen shows itself partly through what is seen. It lets itself be seen at the same time as it withdraws (if we accept this figurative way of speaking). I would note as eloquent this paradox of the camouflage of the significant, the double hermeneutic operation that it provides. By cultivating such a paradox, Eliade goes beyond the classical scheme of binary options: seen/unseen, revealed/concealed. Such an option is visible whenever a simple opposition

is at stake. We know, for example, that André Breton, in *Crisis of the Object*, believes that the real, in the literal sense, is not something given before our eyes, but rather something hidden by the very presence of the given. But, thinking in this way, the second term is just as vulnerable as the first, simply by opposition to it. Eliade leaves behind such an opposition. What is announced by what is seen is neither something simply hidden, nor something that can be deciphered as such. A narrative, for example, gives us the possibility of encountering something strange even in the ordinary world. This is not peculiar only to a particular kind of writing, such as the fantastic narrative, nor to a particular form of creation. It concerns, Eliade says, every mode of life and every form of creation, from the minor to the truly elevated. One of his confessions is formidable in this sense. "In all of my stories the narrative progresses on several levels, in order to achieve a gradual revelation of the "fantastic" that is concealed beneath everyday banality. Just as a new scientific axiom reveals a hitherto unknown structure of reality—in other words, provides the foundation of a new world—so fantastic literature reveals, or rather creates, parallel universes. It is not a matter of escapism, as certain critics think, because creation—at every level and in every sense of the word—is the specific characteristic of the human condition." (Eliade 1982, 178)

I have mentioned these interpretations, only some of the well-known ones, not because any one of them provides a key to understanding Van Gogh's painting. After all, I do not believe that such keys exist or that they should be sought. Slightly more suggestive to me are those interpretations which first of all recognize the distinctive world to which a particular work opens, and which thus allow us to glimpse something of its free play, such as some unexpected levels of signification or the contrasting dynamics it reveals. Possibly, a certain sense of life (Afloroaei 2021, 96-107). These interpretations usually claim less about the work as such. They do not speak with the pretense of telling us what it means and what it says, what message it would convey and in what way it does so, in what place of art or culture, under what style or with what hidden human motivations. On the contrary, they seem to place themselves, quite honestly and with a sense of their own limits, close to that world which the work itself is capable of opening up.

One suggestion of what some interpreters have said concerns the deeply ambiguous structure of our ordinary world. And, of course, of our everyday life. The latter, though mostly mundane, prosaic, is occasionally touched by something unusual. Although grey as we usually see it, it is sometimes disturbed by the emergence of something worthy of attention. Its insignificant world, as it most often appears to us, gives way to surprising signs or data. In other words, possible "meanings". But the latter term has led to much misunderstanding. This has happened because, more often than not, its substantive rather than its verbal meaning is taken to refer to

certain and taken-for-granted messages, rather than to the varied experiences of the human senses and mind. In a certain and taken-for-granted message you find rather the end of understanding. Or an appearance of it, a mere abstraction. In order to rediscover the human desire for understanding, which involves both the senses and the mind, you have to see it where it is truly alive, as it confronts itself and others, sometimes antinomical in itself.

That is why I would not risk saying that Van Gogh's painting, invoked above, has such and such a meaning. Or that it conveys such a message. On the contrary, I think it suggests that we should leave behind such reflexes of thought or trivial ways of looking at things. Nor would I say that it is simply incomprehensible. The usual way of judging such paintings, whether on the basis of some meaning or of something cryptic, mysterious, easily reveals its superficiality. The same applies to those interpretations which tell us that, after all, any perspective, any attitude of the beholder, including the one who sees nothing.

What would I finally add though? If you look at the painting as if you do not want to say anything about it, simply and as far as possible at some distance from certain interpretations, you cannot help feeling the eerie air in the image of that banal space. Likewise, the very absence itself seems to mark each thing that is seen. Although it is not seen as such, it seems to show itself in the last instance. And, with it, the unusual loneliness of the place. It is possible that this is coming from someone's gaze. After all, the empty chair in this painting ("my empty chair", as the painter says in a letter) shows what is not visible in itself. It brings into presence - if we again accept a paradox - absence itself. Perhaps that is why the ordinary things that can be seen suddenly appear totally unusual. Although familiar and simple, of an absolutely elementary banality, they easily let you feel something utterly strange.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I mention that this text reuses, in part and in a revised form, a fragment from Ștefan Afloroaei, *Existential fable*, section V, "What is not seen". (Afloroaei 2018, 115-121)

<sup>2</sup> I discussed this matter in an article named "Loneliness, here present and yet out of date" published in Cătălin Cioabă and Bogdan Mincă (eds.), *Liber amicorum. Studii și eseuri în onoarea lui Gabriel Liiceanu*, ZETAbooks, București, 2012, pp. 119-134.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Albert Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth. A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh*, 1996; The title of this book is inspired by a verse from Psalms 119:19 ("I am a stranger on Earth...").

<sup>4</sup> In his late "Self-Presentation" (*Selbstdarstellung*), Gadamer makes an important point in this respect. "We were attracted by van Gogh's *Letters*, by Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* which he opposed to Hegel, and behind all the daring and daring of our existential commitment was - a still hardly glimpsed threat to the romantic traditionalism of our educated culture - the

huge figure of Friedrich Nietzsche, with his ecstatic critique of all [these thinkers] and of the illusions of self-consciousness.” (Gadamer 1993, 482)

<sup>5</sup> In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger would come back to an image present in several of Van Gogh’s paintings, that of old peasant shoes, to speak of the distinct world of the work of art. (Heidegger 1992, 158-161)

<sup>6</sup> In a footnote in the Romanian translation - *Încercarea labirintului (Convorbiri cu Claude Henri Rocquet)* -, Doina Cornea makes a comment worthy of attention, namely that, in that painting by Van Gogh “the empty chair suggests, rather, a lonely and meditative presence” (n. 173).

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