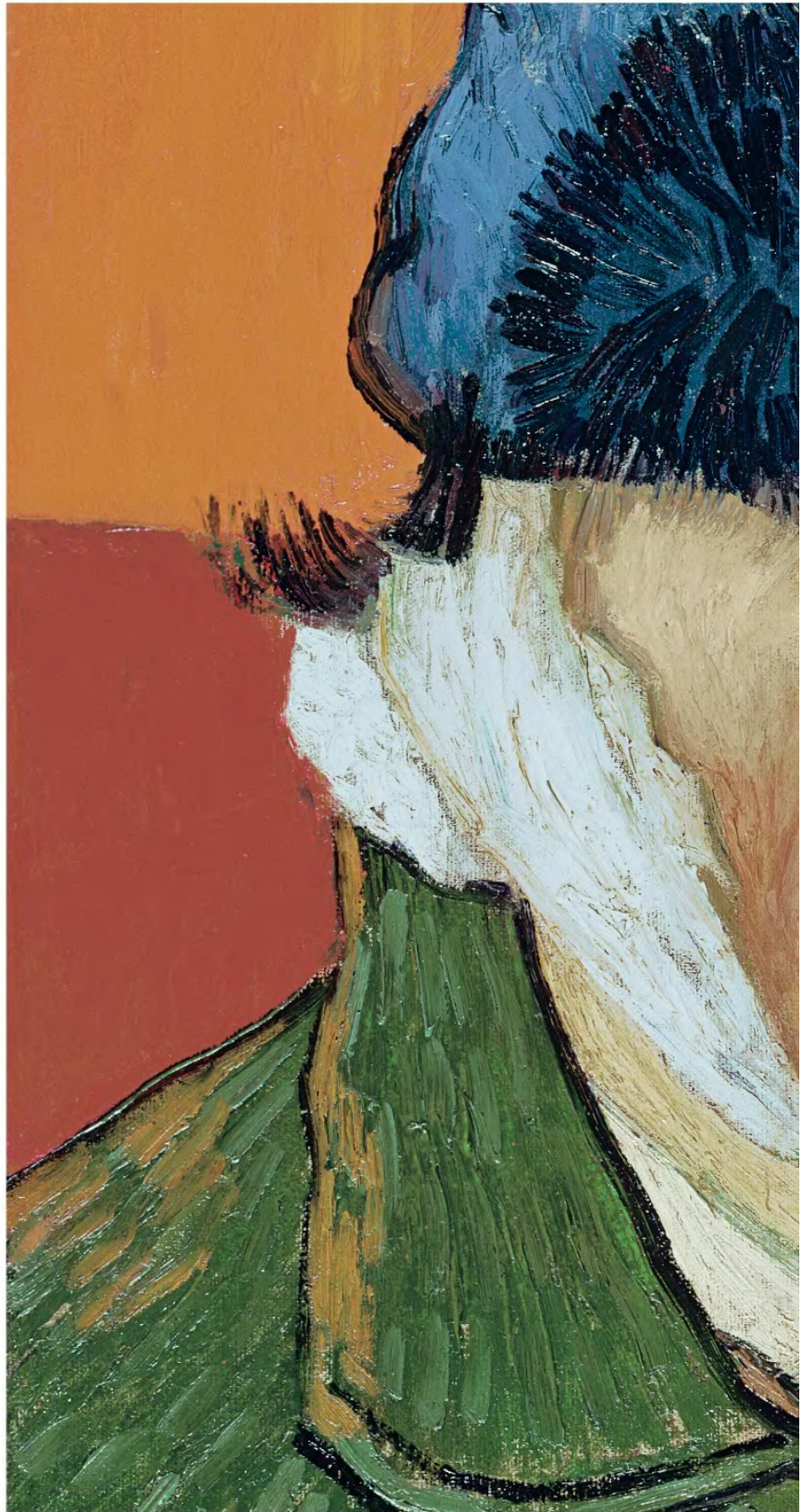


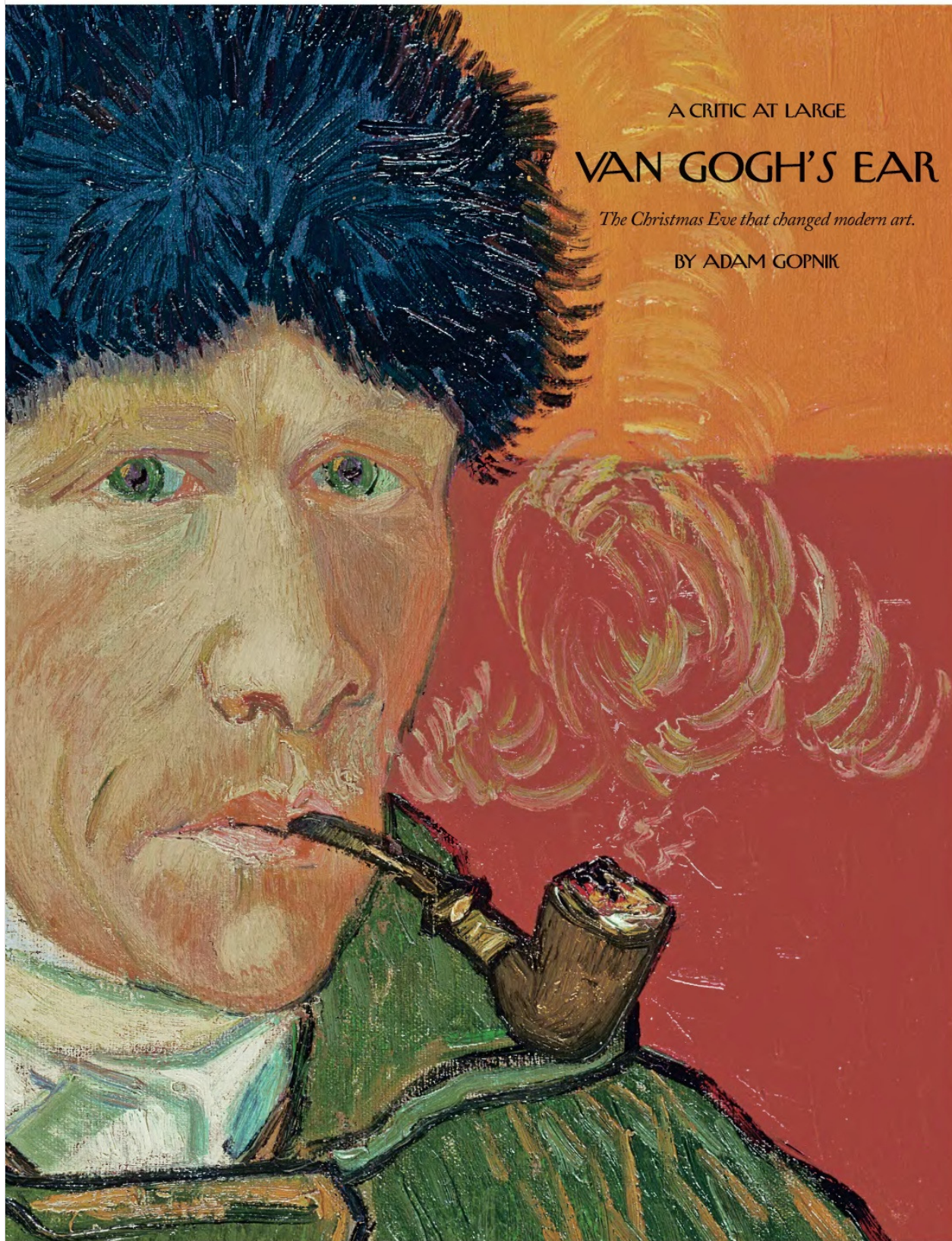
It is, in its strange way, at once the Nativity fable and the Passion story of modern art. On Christmas Eve, 1888, in the small Provençal town of Arles, the police found a young Dutch émigré painter in his bed, bleeding from the head, self-bandaged and semi-conscious, in a run-down residence called, for its peeling exterior, the Yellow House. A few hours before, the Dutchman had given his severed ear—or just its lower lobe; stories differed—to a whore named Rachel in a *maison de tolérance*, a semi-legal bordello, as a kind of early Christmas gift. (She had passed out upon unwrapping it.) The painter, Vincent van Gogh, was known throughout the town as a crazy drunk who hung around the whorehouses too much for his own good, and who shared the squalid Yellow House with another so-called artist, even scarier than he was, though not usually as drunk and not so obviously crazy. That other artist, Paul Gauguin—after being interviewed by the police, and insisting that his friend must have sliced off his own ear in a fit—then sent a telegram to the Dutchman’s brother, urging him to come at once. Then Gauguin left for Paris, as fast as the trains could carry him, never to return.

Gauguin wound up in the South Seas, where he became the first modern “primitive”; van Gogh was hospitalized, then gently urged by his loving younger brother Theo into an insane asylum in nearby Saint-Remy, where he painted the sequence of pictures—including “The Starry Night” and “Cypresses”—that today, shown in any museum, attract crowds larger than the entire population of Arles on that night. When, after van Gogh’s suicide, in 1890, his fame grew, and the story of the severed ear began to circulate, it became a talisman of modern painting. Before that moment, modernism in the popular imagination was a sophisticated recreation; afterward, it was a substitute religion, an inspiring story of sacrifices made and sainthood attained by artists willing to lose their sanity, and their ears, on its behalf.

Last year, though, to front-page headlines around the world, two reputable German academics, Hans Kaufmann and Rita Wildegans, published a book offering a very different account of what happened that night. In “Van Goghs Ohr: Paul Gauguin und der Pakt des



“Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe” (1889). Before the moment that van Gogh



A CRITIC AT LARGE

VAN GOGH'S EAR

The Christmas Eve that changed modern art.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

severed his ear, modernism in the popular imagination was a sophisticated recreation; afterward, it was a substitute religion.



"I'm positive. This is the location for the Tupperware after party."

Schweigens" ("Van Gogh's Ear: Paul Gauguin and the Pact of Silence"), they argue that it was Gauguin who sliced off van Gogh's ear, with a sword that he carried with him for self-defense, and that the two artists—out of shame on van Gogh's part, guilt on Gauguin's—decided to keep the truth to themselves.

It's tempting, and not altogether wrong, to dismiss the question as trivial, or beside the point. But ears do not haunt ages without reasons. It may be that there is a true parable of modern art in the gruesome little story, different from both the old one and its revision. The Christmas crisis had a real, if buried, effect on van Gogh's imagination, turning him from a dream of living and working with a community of brother artists to one of painting for an unknown audience that might someday appear—a fantasy that was, in the end, and against the odds, not a fantasy at all.

Already a weather-beaten thirty-four when he arrived in Arles, Vincent van Gogh had been brought up in a grim Dutch village, one about equally divided professionally between clergymen and art dealers. His father was one of those clergymen, but his beloved Uncle Cent was an art dealer, and got him a job, when he was just sixteen, with an international art dealer in The Hague. The dealer soon sent him to London, where he fell in love with English literary culture. Van Gogh remained high Victo-

rian in imagination. Dickens and the *Punch* cartoonists and illustrators were a touchstone for him throughout his life, and inspired in him the possibility that portraiture with a bright caricatural intensity might be more persuasive than subdued point-by-point realism. After he had the first in a series of breakdowns, in 1874, this one set off by a failed love affair, he tried to cure his heartache in the traditional way, by going to Paris, but he soon made a dash back to Holland. He tried and failed to become a minister, and then, finally, at his brother Theo's urging, in 1879 accepted the truth that the one thing in life he did well was paint and draw. (Theo had also taken a job at the art dealer's, and was making a success of it.)

Those early wanderings made van Gogh the most literary of all the modern painters. Fluently trilingual—in English, French, and Dutch—he read compulsively and he read everything. Maupassant, Zola, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert: he used words as a model for picture-making. And then he is the narrator of his own condition. Twenty years' worth of his letters, published in a spectacular illustrated six-volume edition, by Thames & Hudson, are the longest, warmest, most attentive account of an artist's life seen from the inside that has ever been written. If Trollope, as someone said, demonstrates that sanity need not be philistine, van Gogh demonstrates that insanity need not be insular.

The stripping away of conventional decorum that van Gogh's illness forced on him made him almost unnaturally *present*, alert to the world; when his mind went wrong, he became all heart.

He was a late bloomer. If he had left only the pictures that he painted before he came to Paris, as a thirty-two-year-old, in 1886—earnest, dark, clumsy pictures of peasants and potato eaters, modelled on Millet—no one but a handful of Dutch art historians would remember him. It was in Paris, on the *petits boulevards*, that his eyes were opened to the light. He drank in Impressionist color like oxygen. Perhaps the new palette came naturally to him because, as the art historian Debora Silverman argued in her superb study of a decade ago, "Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art," his motives were essentially religious; he saw it not as a formal choice but as a conversion experience. Bright verdant greens and strange acid blues and, above all, weird peasant yellows—he saw the Paris sun as peasant yarn.

When he left for Arles, in 1888, he had several motives, all mixed. He hoped that the South would improve both his sex life and his spiritual life; he seemed to have imagined it as a place of beautiful pious prostitutes. The Arlésiennes were famously the most bewitching women in Europe, and van Gogh, who approached women with obsession, trepidation, appetite, and a complete inability to put himself over, was eager to try his luck. As Silverman points out, he wanted his pictures to be sacred, but he also wanted them to be "spermatic"—sublimated explosions of a sexual vitality that he could rarely achieve in life.

Most of all, van Gogh was in pursuit of an old romantic dream: the dream of a collaborative community. Art could be saved from mere commodity if artists lived and worked together as they once had done. The Nazarenes, a secretive sect of painters in Rome in the early nineteenth century, seem to have been the first to revive the ideal, while John Ruskin's Guild of St. George, a pseudo-Gothic band of pseudo-Gothic Masons, became, in the eighteen-sixties, the most unintentionally comic. The Impressionists, urban painters par excellence, saw themselves at moments as a band of brothers, but theirs was an infantile form of community. Renoir and Monet played

and painted side by side like two-year-olds, rather than fully engaging in a club like twelve-year-olds. The idea that van Gogh, and others of his generation, pursued was deeper: a sort of religious revival that might be found in a renewed monastic arrangement.

The vision of an ideal community runs through the letters. If we could all work together, we'd be like . . . Icelandic fishermen! Buddhist monks! Peasant craftsmen! Members of the French Foreign Legion! Not long after he arrived in Arles, he wrote to Gauguin, "I must tell you that even while working I never cease to think about this enterprise of setting up studio with yourself and me as permanent residents, but which we'd both wish to make into a shelter and a refuge for our pals at moments when they find themselves at an impasse in their struggle."

In those first spring months in Arles, van Gogh worked feverishly to prepare a welcome for Gauguin, a successful stockbroker who had abandoned bourgeois respectability for avant-garde art. "I regret having spent money on this chest of drawers, but it can save us buying a dearer one," he wrote to Theo, who was now working as a dealer in Paris, with his future wife, Jo. "And when Gauguin comes, he would in any case have to have something there to put his linen in, and anyway his bedroom will be more complete like this."

When Gauguin comes. Gauguin, whom van Gogh had met only briefly, in Paris, had made a reputation painting up north, in the Breton country; he had also made a name as a tough guy, an original, an adventurer, the real thing. Throughout the first spring in Arles, disappointment followed disillusion; those Arlésiennes turned out to be pretty ordinary—"More Mignard than Mantegna," he reported with witty despondence (Mignard was a flashy society painter). Van Gogh's efforts to live cheaply led him to rent the Yellow House, only to find out, pathetically, that he couldn't rent a bed for the house, or even buy one on an installment plan. Yet the dream of Gauguin's arrival kept him buoyant.

In the end, kindhearted Theo basically had to bribe Gauguin to go to Arles and live with his brother, advancing him money on sales that had not yet happened. Gauguin arrived at last, grum-

bling and unwilling, in the fall of 1888. Things went well enough at first, although Gauguin's crudeness put van Gogh off a bit. He reported to Theo, in the tone of innocent exclamatory delight that makes him so touching:

He makes a really interesting friend—I must tell you that he knows how to cook *perfectly*, I think that I'll learn that from him, it's really convenient.

In another letter, to his friend Émile Bernard, he wrote:

Gauguin interests me greatly as a man—greatly. For a long time it has seemed to me that in our filthy job as painters we have the greatest need of people with the hands and stomach of a laborer. More natural tastes—more amorous and benevolent temperaments—than the decadent and exhausted Parisian man-about-town. Now here, without the slightest doubt, we're in the presence of an unspoiled creature with the instincts of a wild beast.

Even more exciting, Gauguin seemed to take seriously the great subject of that commune: "I tell you that our discussions

are tending to deal with the terrific subject of an association of certain painters." There was something erotic, ardent, if unrealized, about van Gogh's excitement in Gauguin's presence. He was acutely aware of his own sexual inadequacy, especially in comparison with Gauguin's hyperactive sex life: even when they were paying for sex at the brothel, van Gogh admitted ruefully, Gauguin got more value for his franc. Van Gogh eventually painted two wonderful symbolic portraits of the artists as their chairs: Gauguin's is robust, lit by a candle, van Gogh's is armless and small. It requires no doctrinaire Freudian to see significant form in the contrast of the erect and flaming candle that sits on Gauguin's chair with the crumpled, flower-shaped handkerchief on van Gogh's.

Yet Gauguin's pictures were on the whole more remote, van Gogh's more immediately sensual. Gauguin's paintings, in Arles as in Brittany, share some of the language of symbolism, a taste for



"It's a mixed-use facility: retail space, low-rent housing, luxury apartments, and an area set aside for making steel."

bright “folk” color married to religious ambitions. Made from memory rather than from the motif, they have what van Gogh called an “abstract” quality: a picture like Gauguin’s “Women from Arles in the Public Garden,” painted while they shared the house, is self-consciously asserting the likeness of the peasant women to the lost classical past—full of obvious references, in its flat processional shapes, to classical friezes and wan neo-classical revivals. Van Gogh, though he used a similar palette, had embarked on a very different task of “sacred realism,” entirely abandoning the myth kitty of allegory and fable and reference. It was just people and things painted with such intensity of feeling, and in such wild and unnatural colors, that they became sacred-seeming. He overestimates his objects—the postman is like Socrates! the old lady is a sibyl and the baby is a sage!—without overloading his allego-

ries. His inability to join the living doesn’t erode his delight in life. A core of plain Northern common sense sits within the drunken Southern colors. When you see a Gauguin, you think, This man is living in a dream world. When you see a van Gogh, you think, This dream world is living in a man.

What went wrong, after that happy interlude of cooking and painting and whoring? Why did it end with mutilation and alienation? Mostly, it has been put down to the evil character of Gauguin, but a lot of it, as Martin Gayford reveals in his 2006 study, “The Yellow House,” has to do with the exasperating character of van Gogh. Lovable as he is on the page, we forget how exhausting he must have been to live with—a man without a stop or even a pause button on his console. To get an idea of what an evening with him was like, you

have to imagine someone sitting down, opening a bottle of absinthe, and reading a van Gogh letter out loud to you—and then another, and then another and another and another. You couldn’t turn down the volume; all you could do was pull out the plug. Sooner or later, people, women particularly, always did—yanked the plug out of the wall—leaving him mute and miserable.

Gauguin was the last man in the world with the patience and humor necessary to get the best out of van Gogh. Van Gogh’s image of Gauguin is uncannily like Scott Fitzgerald’s of Hemingway, thirty years later—he saw him as a “natural man,” a fighter and a beast—with the parallel complication that the tough guy could hold his liquor and the tender guy could not. In truth, Gauguin was cynical, cheap, and utterly self-centered. And he was mean—mean financially but mean personally, too, bad-tempered and constantly discouraging. (When one of his children fell from the third story, he buried the news in the second paragraph of a letter to van Gogh and complained chiefly about the costs.) “With Gauguin, blood and sex have the edge over ambition” was van Gogh’s generous formula, but his definition of these terms as the equation of his friend’s soul suggests his uneasy knowledge that, while he had the terms right, he might have the equation backward.

Gauguin was such a no-goodnik that he became the occasion of an influential philosophical essay on blame and praise, Bernard Williams’s 1976 “Moral Luck.” Arguing against the assumption that we can’t judge people for things beyond their control, Williams points out that Gauguin’s is a prime real-life case where doing the wrong thing—abandoning your wife and children and betraying your friends—appears to be morally justifiable, since the art made was, as it happened, great. Moral assessment, Williams suggests, has a strong component of sheer contingency and chance. You run a red light and no one notices; I run a red light and hit an old lady and I’m the worst guy in the world. Gauguin reminds us that morality has a mysterious fatality about it. His decision to abandon his family for art looks heroic, in retrospect, because luck was a lady—a muse—who blew on his dice.

What Williams didn’t entirely regis-



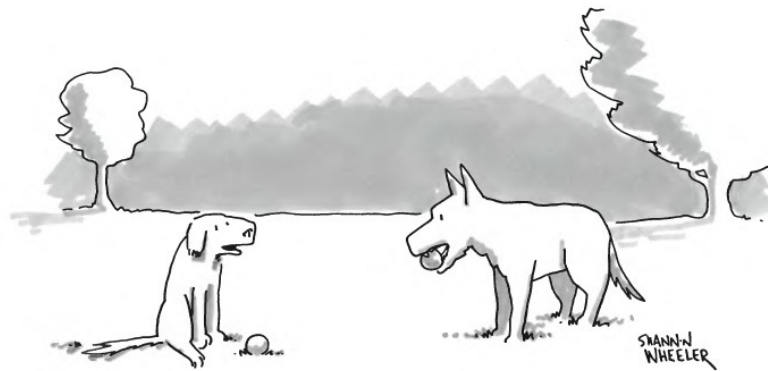
“I’m going to take your blood pressure, so try to relax and not think about what a high reading might mean for your chances of living a long, healthy life.”

ter, though, was that Gauguin isn't just one artist plucked at random out of time, a desperado in a line stretching back to Pygmalion. He's not just an instance of moral luck; he is an inventor of moral luck. He is a model modern artist, and modern art is in many ways *about* moral luck, about the search for it, about raising the stakes to see if it can happen. Modern art makes its own moral luck.

This is evident in the element of chance and randomness inserted into design by painters like Arp and Pollock, but, beyond that, it is evident in the larger urge, shared by poets and writers, to make a career of violations, risks, wagers. Gauguin is the original of the type, of whom Picasso is the most famous realization, of the artist as gambler—the solitary risk-taker, indifferent to anyone's welfare but his own and therefore capable of acts of independence and originality unknown to timid, orderly, nice people, acts that thrill and inspire new acts a century later. It is the *goal* of that kind of modern artist to run the red light and hit the old ladies—the old ladies of custom and convention. Where art since the Renaissance had attempted to limit luck in a system of inherited purpose and patterns, modern art demands that you press the pedal as hard as you can, and pray.

So what really happened? The conventional story is that, sometime on the night of December 23rd, Gauguin stormed out of the house after a quarrel and made for the brothel, or just for the night air. Van Gogh had been talking him to death—about the commune, the meaning of art, the nature of sex—and Gauguin withdrew, as he did more and more often, into a laconic bearishness. Walking down the street, he heard someone call his name and, he claimed later, turned to see van Gogh gesticulating wildly with a razor. Van Gogh approached, and then turned away, in self-dismay. Early the next morning, Christmas Eve, Gauguin found him bandaged, and concluded, as everyone else has since, that Vincent had turned the razor on himself and, in a fit of morbid exhibitionism, delivered the severed part to his favorite prostitute, before returning home to bandage his head and pass out.

The revisionist story, as the German historians tell it, begins with Gauguin's skill as a fencer. (It was part of his tough-



"Are you happy with your current ball?"

guy persona.) He had brought his foils to Arles, and there is reason to think that he carried his sword late at night; Arles could be a seamy place. "In a heated surge of emotion, he pulls out his rapier and makes several lightning-fast fencing moves in Vincent's direction," Wildergans and Kaufmann relate. "He must bring this crazy man to his senses, keep him at a distance! Vincent jerks to the side; he feels a stinging pain in his left ear that makes him fall abruptly silent. He grabs at the area: where is his ear? His hand is bloody. He sees something light lying on the ground. In shock, he picks up the cut-off ear, holds it up to Gauguin, who is frozen, and says, 'You are silent. Indeed, I will be, too.'"

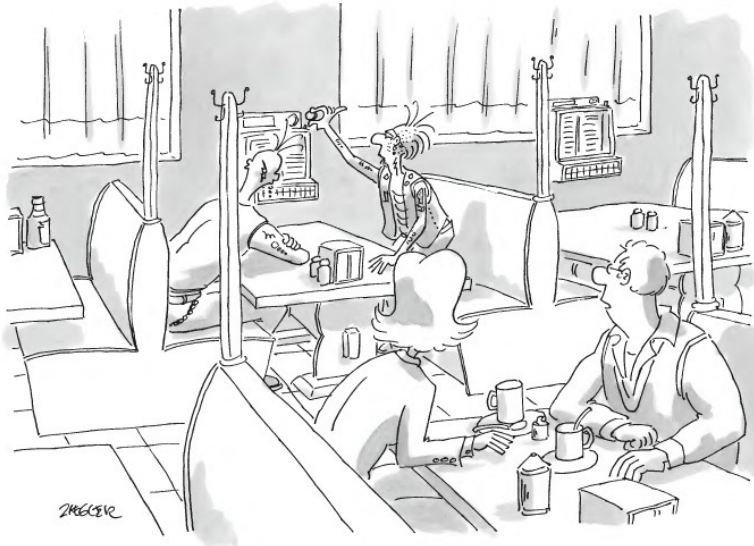
This version is reinforced by several arresting scraps of evidence. One is the surgical-seeming neatness of the slice. Self-mutilation has a long and sad history, and it has even taken van Gogh's name: it's called van Gogh syndrome in the medical textbooks. But it seems that almost no one has ever done what van Gogh did: sufferers mutilate their arms and hands and legs and chests, but they don't mutilate their ears. (Of course, they are rarely quite so self-consciously aware of their ears as van Gogh, the obsessive self-portrait painter, was. He kept a template of his head in his mind.)

Another clue is the cryptic, half-buried references that crop up afterward in the writings of both men. There is, for a start, the hushed, regretful tone of van Gogh's later allusions to the night, which seem more sadly ironic than self-incriminating. "Happily Gauguin, I, and other

painters aren't yet armed with machine guns and other dangerous war weapons," he wrote to Theo. And in a letter to Gauguin, delicately suggesting that he would return the fencing equipment Paul had left behind in his rush to get away, he said, with what seems like an enigmatic point, "I'll pluck up the courage in a few days. . . . Those terrible engines of war will wait until then. I now write to you very calmly, but I haven't yet been able to pack up all the rest."

In the end, much depends on the meaning of a single word: "ictus." It's known to have been a kind of talisman passed between the two artists, said in greeting and farewell. It's found, with a little drawing of a fish, in a letter van Gogh wrote to Gauguin just after the Christmas crisis. Gauguin continued to write it, semi-compulsively, in notes that refer to van Gogh after his departure, and returned to it often, even in the next year. "Saul. Paul. Ictus," he writes in notes that seem obviously to refer to van Gogh, and alongside the phrase "The murderer took flight."

Ictus (or *ichthys*) is Greek for "fish," and it has always been held by scholars to be a reference by the two artists to the practices of the primitive Christians—who used the fish as an acrostic symbol for their sect—and to their own charmed community. It was a half-serious greeting between the two: we are sufferers now, we shall be saints anon. But the German historians argue that the Latin word *ictus* is also a common term in French fencing, meaning a blow or hit. This second, punning sense, they



“Uh-oh.”

suggest, would have been in the front of the mind of a fencer like Gauguin, referring, a little reproachfully, to his instinctive act in countering van Gogh's razor with his sword. Their smoking gun, or bloody sabre, is a cryptic sketch that Gauguin made in 1889 of a snail-shaped form that looks oddly like a severed ear, with the word “Ictus” written inside it; in the same sketch are what resemble, they argue, fencing diagrams.

Greek code or Latin cry? The secret password of a collaborative community or a call of triumph after a competitive thrust? Trust or trespass? The new story is suggestive without being entirely convincing. Whichever side we take, though, we can't help recognizing a descant central to the modern tradition. You always begin with a dream of community—Braque and Picasso in the bohemian hermitage Bateau Lavoir; the handful of painters brave enough to go abstract in the Cedar Tavern—and end with a reality of competitiveness and assault, suspicion and estrangement.

For van Gogh, the story ends conclusively: the Yellow House empty, the dream of community gone, the asylum's doors the only ones open to him. He left the hospital in January and returned to the town, but his behavior was so strange that the people of Arles put together a

petition to have him committed to an asylum or sent back to his family—breaking for good the vestiges of his dream of an organic rural community. Arles was as tight and closed and suspicious as any other small town. In his letters, the old fantasy, the fishermen and the monks, disappears, and the one time that he mentions it there is a new and sadly chastened tone. To Theo he wrote:

Poor egotist that I've always been and still am now, I can't shake off this idea, which, however, I've already explained to you two or three times, that it's thus for the best that I go into an asylum right now. It will perhaps turn out all right in the end. . . . However, the fact that the idea of an association of painters, of housing them together, some of them, although we haven't succeeded, although it's a deplorable and painful failure—this idea remains true and reasonable—like so many others. BUT NO BEGINNING AGAIN.

Yet the Christmas crisis proved instructive, too. “Among artists, we no longer know what to say to each other, we don't know if we ought to laugh or cry about it, and doing, my word, neither one thing nor the other, we are happiest when we find ourselves in possession of a little paint and canvas, the thing we also lack sometimes,” he wrote to his sister Willemien from Saint-Remy. “But any idea of a regular life, any idea of awakening in ourselves or in others gentle ideas or sensations, all of this must necessarily

appear pure utopia to us.” In van Gogh's last letters, there is a subdued realism, like that of Shakespeare's heroes in the fifth act, when death is certain and the readiness is all. (In Saint-Remy, he settled in to read and reread Shakespeare. “Have you ever read King Lear?” he asked her. He had.) He went on:

Alas, we often lack breath and faith, wrongly certainly but—and here we come back to the point—if, however, we want to work we must submit both to the stubborn harshness of the time and to our isolation, which is sometimes as hard to bear as exile. Now before us, after our years which have thus been lost, relatively speaking, poverty, illness, old age, madness and always exile.

Nor is the reference to madness and exile random. It's easy to overlook, for example, that throughout his crisis he kept with him the Christmas books of his beloved Dickens—“A Christmas Carol,” “The Chimes”—which are essentially tales of men who go crazy as a result of hallucinations suffered in Christmas week, and who are led to self-renewal through violent acts of self-transformation. (“The Chimes,” in particular, with its theme of a man nearly driven mad by an auditory hallucination, could not have been far from his mind.)

The only authentic community he found was among the insane. At least they supported one another. “Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened,” he wrote to Theo's new wife, Jo. “And although one continually hears shouts and terrible howls as though of the animals in a menagerie, despite this the people here know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises.” Artists could not be fishermen, or monks, or Legionnaires. They were artists. Collaborative creativity? We live and see and work alone. Collective responsibility? It ends in a crazy house. “I'm thinking of squarely accepting my profession as a madman just as Degas took on the form of a notary.” And elsewhere, around the same time, he wrote, “One must seize the reality of one's fate and that's that.”

Those words shine in his pictures. We tend to see the arc of his work, from the departure from Paris, in early 1888, to his death, in 1890, as more or less continuous, and miss the decisive break marked

by the Christmas crisis. Even through the pictures of 1888 he's still mostly a prose painter, with something of the nineteenth-century illustrator in him—children, postmen, absinthe-soaked café scenes. He still wanted to be Dickens or Daumier. After the Christmas crisis, he accepted that he was only Vincent. His new pictures—"The Starry Night," "Cypresses," and the pictures of the gardens at Saint-Remy—are depopulated, emptied of any vision of common life. Where in 1888 the pictures are still filled with people on top of people—six people in the "Night Café," a dozen in the streets of Arles at night—in 1889, aside from his copies of Millet, van Gogh thinks only in solitary ones and lonely twos, the occasional individual portrait interrupting a world of visionary dailiness. He wrote, simply, "Let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives." Stars wheel, cypresses flame; the whole world comes alive. The common unity is the animism of the ordinary. "Starry Night Over the Rhone," of 1888, has the night sky gently decanted into the gaslight world of the town, and the theme is the likeness of streetlight and moonlight, the modern urban subject—the amusement park at night. In the 1889 "Starry Night," it's all night and stars and rolling nebulae: me and the night and the music of the spheres. He's a man alone, and for good.

Gauguin went on to Tahiti, to become—through his effect on Picasso and also on the entire Malraux-Hemingway generation—a central type of the modern artist. There is another kind of moral luck, though, appealed to by van Gogh in his late pictures and letters, different from the flamboyant self-creation of the more familiar Gauguin-Picasso sort. It is the moral luck of making something that no one wants in the belief that someone someday will. The letters of van Gogh's last year mark his acceptance of his isolation, coupled with the belief that the isolation need not be absolute—that, one day, there will be a community of readers and viewers who will understand him, and that his mistake had been to try and materialize that community in the moment instead of accepting it as the possible gift of another world and time. "One must seize the reality of one's fate and that's that." The

real community is not that of charmed artists living like monks but the distant dependencies of isolated artists and equally isolated viewers, who together make the one kind of community that modernity allows.

The turn toward moral luck puts modern art, however popular, at permanent odds with the society that delights in it. Whether in its benign, wishful form, or in its belligerent "Watch me!" aspect, the pursuit of moral luck remains alien to a liberal civilization that always, and usually intelligently, prefers compromise to courage, and morning meetings to evening dares. Even the shoppers and speculators who wager on the future value of a work of art are engaged at best in a kind of mimicry of the original risk. A society of sure things needs a mythology of long shots. To trust in luck is to be courageous, and courage, the one essential virtue, on which all others depend, is also the one ambiguous virtue, since it is morally neutral: jerks have it as often as gentlemen.

Some stories in history we want to have neatly finished; some we like to have always in play. We accept without too much trouble the ambiguity of the old and new stories because they add up to something similar in the end. Van

Gogh's ear makes its claim on the world's attention because it reminds us that on the outer edge of art there is madness to pity, meanness to deplore, and courage to admire, and we can't ever quite keep them from each other. Gauguin was a miserable moral gambler, and a maker of modernism; van Gogh was a self-mutilating madman, and a poet of all the visions. We accept an ambiguity in the story of van Gogh's ear because the act is itself ambiguous.

It's true that the moral luck dramatized by modern art involves an uncomfortable element of ethical exhibitionism. We gawk and stare as the painters slice off their ears and down the booze and act like clowns. But we rely on them to make up for our own timidity, on their courage to dignify our caution. We are spectators in the casino, placing bets; that's the nature of the collaboration that brings us together, and we can sometimes convince ourselves that having looked is the same as having made, and that the stakes are the same for the ironic spectator and the would-be saint. But they're not. We all make our wagers, and the cumulative lottery builds museums and lecture halls and revisionist biographies. But the artist does more. He bets his life. ♦



"Don't be so chintzy with the life line!"