

Melancholias: partial efficacies of sinthome?

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Its intense colors, its short, excited brushstrokes have been populating our gaze since the end of the 19th Century. Was painting a sinthome in Vincent van Gogh? And if so, what was its reach?

A fate of very severe consequences brought Vincent to life. A first son to his parents died at birth. On the same date, exactly one year after, the painter-to-be child was born and given the same name as the little dead brother, thus sealing a fragment of destiny for the newly born. Vincent meets with a taken mirror, overshadowed by an absence, with a maternal Other who has been unable to mourn for the first child. Idealized absence for whom Vincent, the living one, will always be an imperfect substitute.

The grieving disavowed by the parents shows early on its effects on the child. He is portrayed as original, rebellious, eccentric: an absent inscription in the Other's desire shows up. When a son is "born for", forclusive effects will not take long, a reminder from Lacanⁱ. The first incorporation of Other's emptiness failed. What failed was the symbolic side to love, the one that makes *jouissance* condescend to desire. And the real side of love failed too, the bestowal of emptiness. Captured in the maternal fantasy, the child does nothing but reveal the truth of that objectⁱⁱ. On his part, the father, an excessively rigorous evangelic pastor, was an "educator" father, an excess the son pays for. "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge", Biblical wisdom preaches.

A surrogate of an unforgettable presence, marked by this lack of symbolic inscription in the Other's desire, cornerstone of its melancholia, Vincent drifts through life, without an anchor. He finally embraces painting in a feverish manner, inflamed by the passion of seizing the absolute or holding on to it.

Freud's words "the shadow of the object has fallen on the Ego" are more appropriate than ever. As Lacan says, the object which melancholic suicide attempts to abolish. At 36, Vincent shoots himself on the chest.

Two years before, he had attempted to talk his younger brother, Theo, into going to Provence together for painting. He needs Theo as an "imaginary walking stick", a usual resource in psychosis, an attempt to mend with fragile stitches the original forclusion.ⁱⁱⁱ Theo does not accept - his wife and affairs in Paris hold him back. Vincent leaves for Arlès, vastly weakened. He invites Gauguin to live with him and set up workshop-living quarters for painters. The project falls through; Gauguin does not accept the imperative demand for such a fusional relationship as Van Gogh addresses to him. He decides to return to Paris.

First unchaining: Vincent tries to attack him with a jack-knife; failing, he cuts his ear.

In hospital, during his compensated intervals, he paints desperately. Sometime later, Theo and wife have a baby, and they call him *Vincent*.

Final unchaining: a replica of the original sore: again, another *Vincent* leaves him with no place in the Other.

If painting performed the function of *sinthome* for Van Gogh, its effect had been partial. It proved unable to maintain registries knotted in an already shattered structure, which had already lost its *mentality*. It did afford him a possible treatment of the intractable, to this unknotted real that overshadowed his life. His bright canvases, full of light, transformed those misty colors of Northern Europe, where he had spent his childhood and where his mother frequently took him to visit his dead brother's tomb, with his name, his birth date, and his (whose?) inscribed death's date.

The paintings were sold by his widowed sister-in-law – Theo died a few months after his brother – and only then did Van Gogh's work become known. In life, he was unable to make a name of his own, effect of *sinthome* in the symbolic. Sad paradox: today, a Van Gogh is an enormous name on its own. But for Van Gogh the subject, his work did not achieve a naming function.

Bent on trapping color and light in that area close to the Mediterranean, his artistic artifice was so close to “the Thing” that in his attempt to give it a painted border, he leaned out on the abyss of the incandescent.

If on this final stretch of his life, painting enabled him to partly shape the shapeless horror dwelling in him, still he was unable to rest on his work to cope – when more collected - with social bonds. “Success is the worst that may overcome me”, he writes on a letter to Theo.

My proposal: if painting operated as *sinthome* in Van Gogh, its effect was verified exclusively in the register of the real. It was not a surrogate that would knot and stabilize, as in Joyce. Van Gogh’s surrogation, paradoxically, is at the onset of his life, he himself as the surrogate of an idealized dead brother, which marks his fate with an unfaltering melancholic identification.

With some sort of naïve but effective knowledge, perceiving the benefic effect that painting had on the real, the hospital treating physicians allowed him to go out and paint during the periods when he was compensated.

Now a few clinical strokes in a non-psychotic melancholia, in a severe narcissistic neurosis, such as those which Freud called traumatic neuroses in peace times^{iv}, where the query on *sinthome*’s partial effects is posed once more.

The analysand revealed her fantasmatic place already over her first interview many years back. All her sisters had a clear place in the desire of the Other, not her. In the circlings of analysis, we were able to approach the specific nature of this “not her” in her place: a second daughter, she was the “not a boy” for her mother. And this “not” presides over her narcissism in an irreducible way.

The analysand resorted to writing at critical times. With that accumulated material, she started fictionalizing fragments of disturbing dreams, and with much analysis support,

she was able to publish an excellent book of stories. But the sinthomatic magnetization of the structure was lost as soon as she published the book.

The object, which -while the work was being written- had been able to operate as a cause, recovered the melancholic heaviness. The analysand was unable to turn the book into *escabeau*, to pick up her narcissism; nor could she make a name of her own with her work, making it gain a naming function.

The *sexual relation* effect of her temporary sinthome vanished, it only lasted as long as the work was in execution. It was a device in the real which she could put to use exclusively, and for a time, to give her a possible treatment for the disturbing nature of the real.

Subject/object irreversibility in the fantasy was only verified while the book was on the make.

The *Liebeversagung*, amorous refusal, seems to leave indelible effects, not fully transformable in the subject.

In wrapping up, I underline my hypothesis; in melancholy -both vignettes trace back to an early loss of love - these sinthomatic artifices, which during the time of execution fit the subject *hand in a glove* - had a significant though partial effect, allowing *jouissance* to find a course. It was insufficient, in Van Gogh's case, to save him from his pain for existing, or his pitiable *finale*.

In the analysand, this fourth consistency has not proved a permanent resource either.

ⁱ LACAN, J.J. *Seminario XXI. Los incautos no yerran*. Cours du 19/3/74. (*Seminar XXI. The non-dupes err*) <https://www.bibliopsi.org/docs/lacan/26%20Seminario%2021.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ LACAN, J.J. "Nota sobre el niño". *Otros Escritos*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Paidós, 2012. (*Note on the Child. Other Writings*)

ⁱⁱⁱ LACAN, J.J. *El Seminario. Libro 3. Las Psicosis*. Cap. XV. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Paidós, 1992. (*The Seminar, Book 3. The Psychoses*)

^{iv} FREUD Sigmund. *Introducción al Simposio sobre las neurosis de guerra*. Obras Completas, Tomo XVII. Buenos Aires. Amorrortu editores, 1990. (*Introduction to the Symposium on War Neuroses*)