

A Theological Aesthetics of Resistance: Vincent van Gogh as Reader of Dostoevsky

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This paper was given at the international symposium, Russian Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought in a Time of Catastrophe, which took place at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, March 2023 by [Alex Villas Boas](#).

The perspective adopted in this paper is that of political spirituality, in the sense that the intersection between religion and politics mutually produces the insertion of elements from one field into the other in order to create ethical resistance. In this context, the archeology of theological knowledge aims to map how theology constitutes fields for genealogies of both power and ethics. Ethics represents a social practice in which poetics and arts represent discursive and aesthetic practices that are an opening of a space that does not need to be authorized by the established order of reality, a seed of possibility in the cracks of the walls of impossibility that creates bridges for hope. The apparently impossible unfolds not only as contestation but, potentially in culture, as an emergence of the impossible that dwells first in desire. It is the beginning of a new social learning and the engine of a new collective intelligence through empathy for the pain of an era. In this sense, theological criticism can emerge through a new sensibility concerning the suffering of a time—before theological enunciations, through the theological aesthetics of resistance.

1. **Vincent van Gogh and the Crimean War of 1853**

Van Gogh's contact with Dostoevsky is relatively small from the point of view of its materialization; however, it is qualitatively decisive, as we intend to show. In 1877 van Gogh turned 24 and decided to study theology in order to become a Reformed Church pastor. However, having failed the Faculty's entrance examination, he decided to experience missionary work with the miners of the Borinage Coal Mines, on the Belgian border. The young Vincent said of himself: "I am a friend of the poor like Jesus was" (Selected Letters, 64). Nonetheless, he was denied once again.

Some marks left from his experience in Borinage can be identified in times of Industrial revolution in Europe: 1)The human suffering in miserable conditions; 2)The distance of the ecclesial community from this misery; 3)The great

disappointment with the Church unfolded the search for God in a quest for self-knowledge in a shared condition with the poorest people of the coal mines; 4) modernity in the tension between the presence of light and darkness, the former symbolizing life and the latter the exploitation that the coal miners experienced; and 5) the awakening of an interior calling that remapped the route from longed-for theologian to painter. After Borinage, the painter was borne along the trajectory that progressively advances from darkness to light, or in the words of the painter himself: "in COLOUR seeking life" (Letter to Horace Mann Livens, 1886, 569).

In the context of offering hope in the imaginary to those who suffer from the contradictions of the Industrial Revolution, the young painter saw two cartoons on the covers of two issues of the British political humor journal *Punch*. Both were related to the Crimean War of 1853 and left him deeply impressed.



Punch (1855)

The war involved the United Kingdom, France, and the Ottoman Empire against the Russian Empire, headed by Tsar Nicholas I, who had invaded the territory of Crimea in the name of defending Orthodox Christians against Muslims. This contradiction of faith and war seemed to be one of the absurdities that van Gogh identified in nineteenth-century theologies, which were predisposed to justify historical events as God's will. The first cartoon, from 1855, illustrated the fall of the emperor, and parodied the ideological support of the Russian Orthodox Church, depicting the banality of this relationship as if it "fell ill, having caught a cold, and died" (Letter to Anthon van Rappard, 1882, 276). Van Gogh regarded the second cartoon from 1862 in the aesthetic framework of Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* series from the 16th century, in which the

terrible figure of Death is represented invading the daily lives of all sorts of people. In the series, neither political immunity, nor the piety of the simple people, nor the blue blood of the powerful can resist the course of history.



Hans Holbein's Dance of Death (16th century)

But in the second Punch cartoon, van Gogh was impressed by Death itself taking the place of the emperor, dressed as a general, turning War into the very symbol of Death. He was struck by how the combination of these factors, ones that try to justify the war, leads history to dystopia. What's more, the obsession that leads to War seems to be an indication that the humanity within the Emperor had faded away, and through him Death takes on a life of its own as War. (Letter to Anthon van Rappard, 1882, 276).



Punch (1862)

2. **The relationship between Spirituality and Literature in Vincent Van Gogh**

Van Gogh's first painting with a religious motif, *The Bible*, illustrates his understanding of the relationship between spirituality and literature. The Bible is set in the darker side, and access to its literary wisdom needs to be mediated through modern literature, represented by the work *The Joy of Living* by Émile Zola (1840 – 1902), which sits bathed in light in the foreground.



Vincent van Gogh, Still Life with Bible, 1885

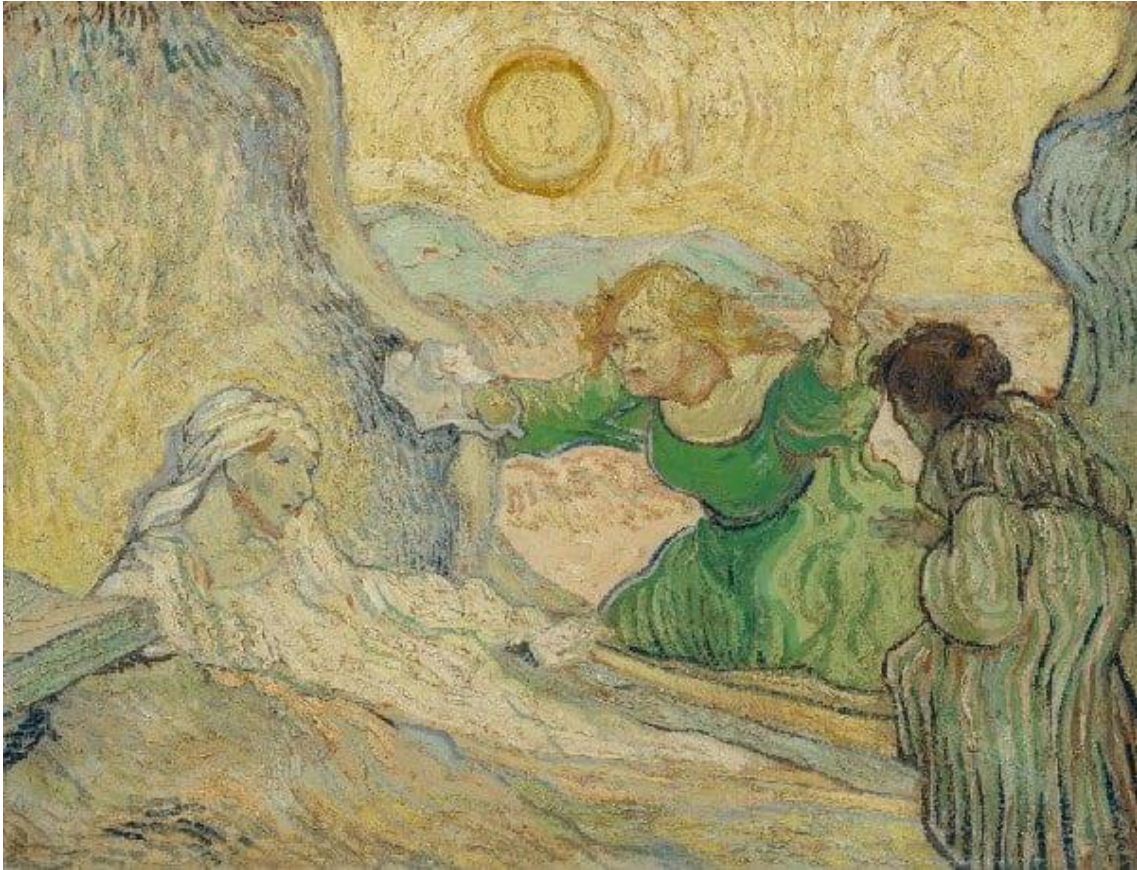
Further confirmation of the way in which literature plays the role of spiritual exercise for the Dutch painter—by capturing the colors of life—comes to light at the moment when van Gogh becomes inspired by Dostoevsky, specifically when the artist began to experience what was diagnosed as epilepsy. A year before being hospitalized, he wrote to his brother Theo van Gogh, saying that he could only work when “moved by something.” Included in the letter was a short article about a theatrical version of *Crime and Punishment* playing in Paris in 1888, which he entreated his brother to attend. He also referred to Dostoevsky’s difficult life as part of those few things that moved him. Van Gogh said that Dostoevsky was one of “the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning” (Letter to Theo van Gogh, 1888, 680). A year after his hospitalization, on October 21, 1889, he wrote to his sister, similarly noting that he had managed to return to work little by little after reading about the conditions in which Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from the House of the Dead*: “I had read an article on Dostoevsky, who had written a book, *Souvenirs de la maison des morts*, and that spurred me on to begin work again” (Letter to Willemien van Gogh, 1889, 812). And once again, a month later he wrote to a friend, speaking of those who are in need of experiencing spirituality through art (Letter to Émile Bernard, 1889, 822).

3. **Theological chromatology: In color, seeking Life**

These moments may be considered the starting point of a new phase in the painter’s life, initiating the elaboration of a theological chromatology in his work: painting in a movement from darker to lighter tones, imbuing new meaning to

his works by identifying sunlight with the presence of the Christus consolator as a friend and source of hope, and relocating this Presence into the lives of people who suffered most from the effects of the Industrial Revolution.





Vincent van Gogh, *Pieta, After Delacroix* (1889), and *The Raising of Lazarus, after Rembrandt* (1890)

For Van Gogh painting in this new phase became like visual literature and took on the task of opening the eyes of those who suffer to resistance against the hard times of life. Dostoevsky's life was decisive for van Gogh's shift in attitude towards suffering through a theological aesthetics of resistance.

4. **George Gittoes and the Yellow House project: Make Art, Not War**

The inspiration that Dostoevsky's life had on the expression of the theological aesthetics of resistance in van Gogh also inspired Australian painter and film producer George Gittoes (b. 1949) through what he has called becoming a "Blood mystic." In March 2022, Gittoes spent three months in Kiev (the maximum time allowed on a tourist visa), carrying out artistic interventions in the cities destroyed by Russian troops with the purpose of "Declar[ing] love on war!", and to "help keep people around the world aware of what's going on" in Ukraine (Gittoes 2016).

Gittoes followed a similar path as van Gogh to a new theological artistic phase. After completing some cinematographic work and paintings of victims of the wars in Cambodia and Somalia, Gittoes underwent a mystical and remarkable experience in 1994 at the Monastery of Saint Katherine on Mount Sinai. There, an Orthodox monk called his drawings "modern icons" and christened Gittoes as a kind of blood mystic. The term harkens to a lineage of mystics, especially medieval one who typically went to plague-infected areas and fields of battle during war, not to take up weapons but to care for the wounded. The monk said to Gittoes that "blood mystics were able to do this because they had certain knowledge of the eternal and indestructible nature of the soul. Their mystical

experiences of life beyond their physical bodies took away all fear of their own death.” Since then, Gittoes has conceived of his entire artistic process as a form of spirituality, and his paintings as “Mystical paints.” An important part of his process is diving into what he calls the “Heart of Darkness,” working “at the crossroads of the history when war is emerging.” The reason for doing is precisely because there is “teaching and encouraging all forms of creativity” as a path to resistance and awakening rays of hope. The space of war becomes a battle waged between armies and artists (Gittoes, 15).

An instance of this theory taking shape occurred when Gittoes, walking through the streets of Irpin while it was under attack, found the decimated Central House of Culture. Out of the building’s rubble, he decided to create a “workspace and hold an exhibition of 90 works by Ukrainian artists.” He called this space the “Blue and Yellow House,” and it functions as a means of making “war on war” (Rose). Herein is a kind of method to resist the war through art: first is going into the heart of darkness where people are suffering, then seeking to “find human stories of hope and redemption,” and finally helping people change the destruction into work of art. This method presents a way to see beyond the rubble to a life that is capable of creating meaning, instead purely historical moments of complete absurdity. For Gittoes, the blood mystic understand that artists and poets are “caretakers of culture” and in doing so are also “caretakers of the soul” (Sargeant, 2022).

Gittoes composed a Triptych of the destruction of the House of Culture depicting the victory that has “not yet” taken place on the battlefield but is “already” present in the imagination and wishes of Ukrainians and Russians who stand against Putin.



Gittoes, Triptych

The first painting, *Bridge of Death*, evokes the attempt at fratricide between Russian and Ukrainian cultures through the image of a bomb attack on a bridge, symptomatically indicating the intention of division. The second painting, *Russian Bear*, can be read as the dual nature of ridicule in the context of war and culture, symbolizing the way in which war ridicules the culture not only of those who are attacked but also of the attacker. The third painting of the triptych, *Through the Glass*, represents the experience of looking out of the window as a transcendent movement. It depicts looking through the glass of a cellphone, in which every explosion sets the person yearning for good news, fearing the bad, immersed in an improvised bunker where life is reduced to voyeurism and mere anticipation of life. In this way, looking out of the window represents a perspective of one aspiring to live and inspired to resist.



Photography by

Max Pixel

Hope blossoms when one looks out of the window in the manner of the love of an old lady collecting pieces of bread and filling bowls with water from a green plastic bottle in order to feed the birds. It seems to me that this picture by Max Pixel expresses the same feeling as Gittoes invokes, to look for life instead of the war. The perspective of Gittoes is quite close to van Gogh's thought that "Truly life is a fight" against everything that wants to steal our life, and that "by fighting the difficulties in which one finds oneself, an inner strength develops from within our heart" (Letter to Theo van Gogh, 1877, 133). The Victory Triptych, like a modern icon, is a way to educate the eyes to see hope for life as a grain of wheat, to evoke, like Van Gogh, what is "not yet" fully realized, but present "already" by the love in us. The arts need to feed the love in us, especially in times of war:

Now comparing people with grains of wheat [...] there's the power to germinate as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germinating. What the power to germinate is in wheat, so love is in us. (Letter to Willemien van Gogh, 1887, 574).

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Image: Vincent van Gogh, Still Life with Bible, 1885

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