



Sam Meekings, *The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet* (London: Eyewear Publishing, 2018, ISBN 9781912477180).

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“So now, more than ever, a face of sadness seems important” (129), Sam Meekings proposes, offering in *The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet* a narrative built around sad smiles of connectivity. Looming large in the novel is, of course, the intense sadness of Van Gogh and his poignant interest in penetrating truths of fellow humans. Recently, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith in their biography *Van Gogh: A Life* (2011) have revived the image of the artist’s “fanatic heart” which always “demanded pain more than pleasure” (432). In Meekings’ novel, sadness is hypervisible. It acquires meaning and power in the most magnetic of all the sad faces, the face of Van Gogh’s doctor and carer Paul Ferdinand Gachet from one of Vincent Van Gogh’s last paintings, the famous “Portrait of Dr. Gachet” created before his death on July 29, 1890. The image possesses the force Meekings acknowledges to have placed an enormous weight on him. For Meekings, the painting has been his “life-long ripple”. Spinning the story of Gachet’s life, one of an extraordinary range and complexity, Meekings reflects on the ripple and its impact on his moments of self-understanding. Because he finds so much comfort and solace in the smile, he is also confident that it will be accessible to those who might care to look at it.

Obsessed with Van Gogh’s painting, with its sad smile of Doctor Gachet, Meekings describes a fictional, and we are made to believe a real, journey in pursuit of the answers to the mysteries behind the first famous portrait showing Dr. Gachet in the head on hand pose. Meekings’ intense and prolonged contemplation of the sad smile, “the burn” in the painting, like the Barthesian *punctum*, develops not only into an affirmative story but also into cognitive insight. And if biography is a gesture of friendship, Meekings’ transnational historical narrative concentrating on the life of the “venerable” Doctor Paul Gachet (1828–1909) offers an account informed by empathy and sustained by emphatic characters who,

despite darkness surrounding their worlds, their experiences of “that other shore,” illuminate and enchant.

The intricate web of stories around the profound sadness in the face of Doctor Gachet solidifies an exciting and beautifully executed relation to art. The book has already received significant praise as exuberant and skillfully-narrated historical fiction. Yet, we can approach it, noting as well its reflections on our emotional and intellectual investment in an object of art, an image as a life-form, to use W. J. T. Mitchell’s idea. The portrait represents the face that Van Gogh identified in a letter to Paul Gauguin as “the desolate expression of our time” (10). We follow it from asylums to art galleries, to Paris under a bloody siege, to bunkers of Nazi Germany, to commercial Tokyo and, finally, to Auvers-sur-Oise. One of the major themes and forms of the turbulent life of Gachet as constructed by Meekings is attachment. It originates in a responsive relation, in a stirring that for Meekings, as for Paul, develops into a commitment to images as living agents, a form of autobiographical life. Rita Felski refers to this form of aesthetic and emotional bonding as a valuation which is not received but made. She proposes to think of attachment as a kind of “stickiness” or a condition of being “hooked” which, among others, relies on devices of identification. Regardless of whether critical, ethical, or emotional, identification matters as it can eventually remake a sense of self. In *The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet*, Meekings, in one of his poetic phrases, “got snagged on the past” (120) and while probing facets of Gachet’s heartbreaking sadness, came to explore his own melancholy: “I have to know what it is that makes him look so sad. Because we all fall. But what is it that makes us fall apart?” (26). He looks for answers, while gradually becoming more confident that art can liberate us from the tough constraints of time. Paul Gachet, frozen in time, possesses all the time, and so he can flatter the present with a wider range of suggestions. He “lived for paintings” (174) and he lived for art, he experienced more than he could describe, he collected more paintings than he could display, and he exercised his talent and his boundless kindness, in the light of those of the greatest artists and, at the end, in the light of the genius and greatness of Van Gogh. As an amateur painter himself, Gachet aimed high though he recognized his limitations and his disappointments and failures. Since it is impossible to “portray another human being without displaying oneself” (qtd. in Backscheider 90), in the novel we also engage in direct encounters with Meekings. A young novelist, like Paul, he treads carefully, though consistently. One of the lessons he learns is that sadness is born when, against drives to perfection, we recognize the limitations of our lives, when we compare them with our heroes and decide that their masteries are beyond our

grasp. Meekings shares additional anxieties about the pressure of his own culture to be always the best and to always validate one's selves. A historian, he turns to the past and its cultural conditions in which sadness was not thought of as something infectious. He gets hooked on Gachet and his heart-broken expression; Gachet, he discovers, could empathize. Against the pressure to adhere to the "carefully-curated fictions that our lives are much more exciting than they sometimes seem" (128), against the frenzy of smiley self-images, Meekings, with no naïve eye, concentrates on a single intensive image in which sadness is an object of visual representation, to connect with his own sense of slowing—his melancholy. When Felski highlights alignment as a tool of attachment, she links it to metaphorical semblances. Meeking finds them in the worlds of portraits—especially in the thoughtful faces he has Paul contemplate, faces of those who suffered and died, his dead patients and his ill friends, the forgotten soldiers and anonymous mad people. Paul gazes at portraits of strangers to admire them but also to foster solidarity with their subjects. Following Meekings' musings, we can see how slow and repeated looking at visual representations of emotions can be a way in and out of the slippery and lonely present of the self. Van Gogh hoped that a portrait should be "sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent" (Delphi n.p.). Meekings shows that ekphrastic encounters with these qualities provide relief. They do what images do—they gather us around meanings. In his evocative phrase, they "unbuttoned his brain" (96) and keep him going. Stories of images are also stories of collectivity (Mitchell) and that gathering attraction, the intersubjectivity of images, proves fertile for the novelist.

Meekings insists that a smile can be many things, like social expressions of solidarity or compassion; the smile is "*always*" a political act. The more he gazes at Paul's sad face, the more faces he recovers from it, the more compassionate Paul's face and Meekings' vision grow. When assisting Doctor Duchenne, the father of neurology, Paul regards the "ferocious smile" of a woman patient undergoing electric shocks that Duchenne administers. He hears the famous doctor assert that the "smile is everything" (74) and that the face is the map of human life transparent for all to read. Paul learns not to anatomize it but instead to meet the human face and sustain attention to its sadness and terror. And when he finds that one perfect image to communicate with, Renoir's sad "Portrait dit de Margot," he explains his devotion as a responsibility to "sustain" its subject who is no longer around. For his professional efforts to sustain flickers of life in his patients, for his acts of mercy, he receives gifts; often they are paintings. Thus numerous gestures of kind preservation are exchanged. The most significant one is Meekings' efforts to sustain

Gachet. He laments that except for the painting by Van Gogh, its enigma and, most critically, stories created around it, nothing remains of his life.

We cannot see for ourselves the “Portrait of Dr. Gachet” in any gallery or museum. Its story and the existence of its supposed double version are shrouded in mystery. Van Gogh painted the portrait as a gift and wrote about it in hopeful terms in his letters to his brother. After his death, it changed owners and countries many times. The fact that over twenty years ago it was recorded as the most expensive painting ever sold in the world and the fact that its buyer promised never to expose it to the public eye only helped the portrait acquire more power and more meanings. Though hidden, the portrait lives on. As *The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet* shows, some images tend to return in other media like literature. Meekings’ recontextualizing of Van Gogh’s painting opens up realms of not only meta-portraiture but also of history, memory, and, yes, life writing. It pays tribute to what Mitchell famously identifies as the power of the picture: “any picture,” he argues, “is potentially a kind of vortex—or black hole that can “suck in” the consciousness of a beholder, and at the same time and (for the same reason) ‘spew out’ an infinite series of reflections” (Grønstad 183). And, indeed, the wealth of Meekings’ meditations provoked by the portrait contribute strikingly to the pleasure of reading the novel.

The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet offers meta-comments on the process of writing and remembering a life. We are told that giving justice to a busy life of a long-gone subject from a foreign country can be only a rough translation, an approximation. The narrator’s thoughts on the inevitability of fiction in biography and history, a crucial if slightly overworked current, lead, however, into further interesting probing of the certainty of sadness. Becoming a painting or being reproduced in a photograph, we all participate in the sadness of death. When “fiddling with the past” or “dressing up” the bare bones of history, the writer confronts its force, including eliding, avoiding, subtracting, passing by, failing to note, and minding the gaps. Honing in on the sad face compensates for many losses. In the thirty-two sections of the novel, Meekings stays committed to chronology with temporal scaffolding stretching from 1890 to 2291—a point in the future when we can anticipate the erasure of sadness. But he is not writing history. Frequent interruptions by the narrator introduce trenchant observations made by the twenty-first-century viewer, denying the knowledge claims about the past, and playfully loosening up the spirit of reconstruction. Additionally, multiple templates for casting a life including extracts from letters, imaginary conversations, bits of arguments as well as explorations of frequent metaleptic potential of the narrative, especially when the narrator joins the story world by commenting on the

action but without any physical or verbal interaction, help define his subject in the world defined by slipping and falling. Consequently, we are not surprised that the roots of sadness reach out to the titular afterlives.

“Ah, portraiture, portraiture with the thought!” sighed Van Gogh (Delphi), anticipating that it might and should be relational and communicating and awaken collective emotions like sympathy and compassion. Publishers reproduce the portrait with half of the face of Gachet chopped off to encourage our own reconstruction of the subject. Meekings insists that Gachet’s eyes in the painting are unflinching and that we should not turn away from them. I welcome this invitation to read his poignant *The After-Lives of Doctor Gachet*.

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