Nietzsche and Van Gogh

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Imaginations of 1888

By

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For the Fold

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NOTE ON SOURCING

I'm a proponent of the 'open source' ethos. I therefore have attempted to utilize information which is as accessible as possible. In our world of digital ubiquity, where the reader is far more likely to have a computer ready-to-hand than a print edition of Van Gogh or Nietzsche's letters, this means citing online databases.

The foundation of credible information I have used concerning Van Gogh's life in Arles come from the website VanGoghletters.org. This is a site curated and sponsored by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute. It contains an easily searchable archive of all the extant letters Vincent authored, as well as many extant letters he received. Every letter has received a litany of helpful footnotes and chronological number, for example the Arles period corresponds to letters 577-771. I have cited each letter as simply as possible for ease of reference by giving only the number and date of the letter.

Likewise all of Nietzsche's outgoing letters are available on the free database Nietzschesource.org. The letters are likewise numbered chronologically. The letters to Nietzsche are not available free online, and so I cite Colli and Montinari's *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefe von und an Friedrich Nietzsche.* I provide letter number and date sent.

Nietzsche's notebooks are a special case, and I have deviated from the convention of citing them in-text according to Colli and Montinari's KGW. This is because the KGW version does not provide the level of detail and accuracy suitable to the nature of my work, which is to hold a microscope up to the last year of Nietzsche's career. Some of the dating in the KGW is mistaken, and the nature of the notes is obscured. One example of this is that if Nietzsche wrote down a note, but later crossed it out, it is generally not found in the KGW. I thus will cite both *Abteilung IX* and the eKGW (found on Nietzschesource.org) for accessibility and ease of reference, but only *Abteilung IX* when the note can only be interpreted accurately in that volume.

I thus owe a great debt to all the editors of Ab. IX: Beat Röllin, Marie-Luise Haase, Nicolas Füzesi, Hubert Thüring, Martin Stingelin, Bettina Reimers, Ilona Hadasch, Constantin Rupf, Daniel Weißbrodt, Karoline Weber René Stockmar, Jochen Strobel, Franziska Trenkle, and Falko Heimer.

My dating for specific notes by Nietzsche adheres as closely as possible to Beat Röllin's *Chronologie der Manuskripte 1885–89. Nachtrag zu KGW IX,* found in *Nietzsche Studien* 53. However, There were occasions where I simplify the story of Nietzsche's manuscripts for the sake of readability. This is indicated in the footnotes.

PARABOLISM IN HUMAN PERSONALITY

At the beginning of 1888 Nietzsche and Van Gogh were living in despair in France: Van Gogh in Paris, and Nietzsche in Nice. Both the thinker and the artist had spent the past decade lonely and loveless, losing more friends than they made. Neither man had held a job since 1879, both were monetarily dependent upon others. The pair were chronically ill, and their symptoms were ominous enough to convince each man that he didn't have much time left to live.

Work was their sole means of relieving these myriad forms of pain, and they threw vast quantities of their life's energy into their craft. By 1888, neither Nietzsche nor Van Gogh had any professional obligations, social constraints, or even hobbies. Their daily routines were devoted to production: each regularly spent over ten hours a day writing or painting, most often working every day of the week. Yet despite keeping their discipline over the course of many years, they had found the same renown as if they had merely squandered these years in indolence—there had been no 'public response' to their efforts.

The archetype of the misunderstood genius is old, but history does not provide us with any more paradigmatic examples of brilliant individuals passing their lives in such unqualified failure as that of Nietzsche and Van Gogh. A figure such as Nikola Tesla might have been unknown outside of certain esoteric circles during his time, but he was still able to support himself with his work.[1] The more common examples of *artists* who died in states of unrecognized achievement, such as Vermeer or El Greco, were likewise still perfectly capable of selling paintings during their lifetimes. This is something that as of 1888 Vincent had not yet done. A writer like Spinoza or thinker like Socrates might have been misunderstood and persecuted by their contemporaries, but Nietzsche was simply not even *known* outside of his family, and an ever diminishing group of friends.

The immensity of fame that both Nietzsche and Van Gogh eventually achieved makes the intensity of their obscurity during their lifetimes all the more bewildering. Despite the fact that his brother was an *avant-garde* art dealer and would occasionally show his works, not a single buyer expressed

interest in purchasing one of Vincent's oil paintings during or prior to 1888, but a quick reed pen sketch he made the same year recently sold for more than ten million dollars.[2] Nietzsche's closest friends privately voiced their opinion of his literary mediocrity to each other,[3] and yet one day his books would be widely blamed for what was called at the time 'The War to End all Wars'.[4] The extremity of this posthumous revaluation which occurred in the public's estimation of this artist and thinker is unparalleled, no other historical figures approach the velocity of their ascent in the esteem of humanity.[5]

However, this book is not about the process by which the public belatedly recognized the achievement of these two men, rather it tells the story of what they actually achieved under the cover of obscurity. The idea that it is possible for a human being to 'break-through' the shackles of their own history is the hope behind most modern formulations of happiness. The *feeling* of propulsion, of the disintegration of chains, of *acceleration* is nearly the definition of human joy. 1888 is widely recognized as Van Gogh's 'break-out' year: before it he was a talented artist, but during which he became immortal. During this year he painted over one hundred and fifty oil paintings, including some of his finest masterpieces: *Bedroom at Arles*, *The Sunflowers*, *The Sower, Starry Night Over the Rhone,* and *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin*. 1888 was likewise a year of manic increase in Nietzsche's productivity. By the end of the year he had finished five books: *The Case of Wagner, Antichrist, Twilight of the Idols, Ecce Homo,* and the *Dionysian Dithyrambs,* and edited a collection of his earlier writings, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Following a year of unprecedented parallel achievement, in December of 1888 Nietzsche and Van Gogh both experienced psychotic breaks within just a few days of one another.

While the speed of their production is in itself nearly a unique event in the respective history of western art and literature,[6] the quantity of output was only a symptom of what actually enthralled humanity with these works. There was something within the psyche of these two men which adhered to the quality of their production, something of these ephemeral feelings of 'breaking through' which have preserved themselves in the text and canvas. It is the very ineffability of this quality in their work which has given rise to over a century of debate about whether or not this 'break-through' quality which mesmerizes the public is nothing less than their latent mental illness.

Nietzsche and Van Gogh were engaged in a kind of work in which the 'style' of the product is paramount. In other words, work which derives its value from the manner in which it conveys the personality of its creator,

work which might even be considered to *primarily be* a conveyor of the personality of the creator. The work is only valuable in itself as a means for the viewer to get a closer glance at the workers' *psyche*.

This difference between this branch of creative work and other forms of labor can be shown plainly in the example of the Yasuda Sunflowers, also called the 'Tokyo Sunflowers.' The Yasuda Sunflowers were ostensibly created by Van Gogh in 1888, and purchased just under a century later in 1987 by the Yasuda Fire & Marine Insurance Company for more than $30 million dollars. It was hung at the SOMPO Museum of Art as an emblem of Japan's 'miraculous' economic growth throughout the decade. The painting turned out to be a good investment, since it was recently valued at $250 million[7]—if it is real. Very shortly after purchasing the painting, a debate arose between Japanese and European experts over its authenticity, and the scholarly consensus seems now to be that the Yasuda Sunflowers were probably *not* painted by Vincent, but rather are a forgery created by Emile-Claude Shuffenecker. The aesthetic difference between one of Vincent's *Sunflowers* and the Yasuda sunflowers was imperceptible for a century. Yet, if it is conclusively shown that this painting was made by someone other than Van Gogh, its value would drop more than two thousand fold, since Shuffenecker's paintings rarely fetch more than a hundred thousand dollars. The art market is animated by admittedly very strange animal spirits, but the magnitude of this discrepancy between a real Van Gogh and a fake indicates to us the primary importance of Vincent's personality; the Yasuda painting derives its value solely from the supposition that it is an expression of his unique *pathos*. The fact that there even exists a fake Nietzsche text, *My Sister and I*, speaks a similar story.

Although this book will engage in textual and artistic analysis, it is primarily an analysis of what lies beneath the text and the painting: the personality of these two figures. This is why the blinders have been put on to focus on a singular year, so that the questions which surround a human personality can be discussed. The personality of an individual is something so multifarious, so ambiguous, and so immeasurable, that one can only hope to gain an understanding of it if one pays careful attention to a host of many minute details. This text attempts to hold a magnifying glass to the habits and activities of these two figures, in order to bring to light how the manner in which they passed their days launched their work to parabolic ascent.

Plutarch

The Roman dual-biographer Plutarch provided a model for what sorts of examinations biographical works such as this can undertake. Plutarch's writings exhibit something of a disregard for traditionally historical questions, but an intense curiosity for problems associated with the nature of a personality. His *Parallel Lives* consist almost entirely of chains of anecdotal rumors, parables and vignettes. These are by definition descriptions of contingent circumstances which become *fateful* because they give the reader deep insight into Plutarch's subject: an individual's personality. It is the nature of a human personality to be elusive, many sided, *polytropos*, only to reveal itself in partiality. Heraclitus wrote: "Traveling on every path, you will not find the boundaries of soul by going—so deep is its measure."[8] Much of human fantasy is directed at trying to bring about circumstances in which our personality can *shine*, emanate, reveal parts of ourselves that are otherwise hidden. The parable is a tool for unveiling the character of a human being, a map which goes far beyond the territory it covers, an amplification of personal history—in the sense that the individual expresses not just the concrete moment they are enmeshed in, but also the vast expanses of time that the subject has endured.

The culmination of each of his *Parallel Lives* is the *Synkrisis*, the comparisons which acted as afterwards to the dual narrations. As a reader of Plato, he had learned the power of dialectical juxtaposition, the benefit of combining what was like and separating what was unlike, in order to consider the temporal whole of a human existence. Through the comparison of two lives Plutarch arrived at the hardest questions which the biographer can ask, questions which could be called 'questions of the personality'. What is happiness?[9] What is possible to achieve within time? What can an individual reasonably expect out of a life, or out of a singular moment? What does it mean to have a 'destiny', and could one deviate from it? The questions pursued in Plutarch, and in this work, are the 'practical' concerns of life—taken in its etymological sense of 'passing through.'[10]

The fact that Plutarch was able to achieve more than moderate fame with his writings during his lifetime was perhaps due to the fact that he emerged from a culture which generally found the questions of the personality more engrossing than we do. Throughout every province of the Roman Empire there flourished multiple strata of professionals whose sole duty it was to interpret contingent events and determine their relation to the individual. There were famed ecstatic diviners, experts in reading animal entrails or star constellations, as well as multitudes of cheaper diviners who threw bones,

observed smoke rising from incense, measured physiognomic structures, considered how oil mixed with water, and interpreted how flour landed when tossed.[11] In the capital it was the College of the Augurs, those who specialized in interpreting the behavior of bird swarms, whose practice was considered the queen of the ominous sciences. These experts in ornith-anomaly were held in such high esteem that it was legally necessary to gain their approval before anyone was to assume any form of public power, a practice still attested to by our word 'inaugurate.' The key here is that all of these professional classes developed around the interpretation of extraordinarily *malleable* phenomena, precisely in order to observe the arbitrary coincidence of subtle forces upon a singular moment. The way smoke rose from incense, or flour landed when tossed, the shape assumed by swarms, these were all delicate measuring devices which absorbed and reflected back the variability of the forces which influenced them; they were instruments which created a sign by which one could contemplate contingency.

By Plutarch's time, the Stoic school of philosophy had expounded philosophies justifying the art of the diviner, attempting to explain the underlying reasoning behind so many practices which appeared from the outside to be merely meditating on pure arbitrariness. Although much of the Stoic writing has been lost, it appears that the center of their philosophy lay upon the emergence of an intuitive, or perhaps even a '*natural'* meaning inherent in the co-incidences between sequences of events, which they named *Sympatheia*.[12]

How to characterize this singular moment in which the diviner attempted to measure this co-incidence between many different sequences of events? The first axiom of this theory of *Sympatheia* between objects within the configuration of any moment was that somehow these objects are not indifferent to one another. There is something in between these objects, a sum that is more than its parts. *Sympatheia* does not imply an anthropomorphization of these objects, still less anything approaching 'panpsycism,' but rather the stoics asserted that a collective (*sym*) mood (*pathos*) inhabited every configuration—one that can only emerge from the relation between objects within that configuration. This word *Sympatheia* does not imply that we have entered into the universe of meaning, as if lighting bolts held direct semiotic connotations, rather, a co-incidence of several sequences variegates the space and time which it inhabits; a series of coinciding sequences give birth to a 'pathos' which is proto-linguistic, presencing.[13] As Seneca attempted to explain:

> all things are managed by Divine agency, not, however, in the sense that the wings of birds are immediately directed by God, or the bowels of cattle arranged by Him in certain forms under the priest's axe. It is in far other way that the roll of fate is unfolded; it sends ahead in all directions intimations of what is to follow, which are in part familiar, in part unknown to us. Everything that happens is a sign of something that is going to happen [...] An event that belongs to a series thereby becomes capable of being predicted. But why, then, is the honor conferred upon the eagle of giving omens concerning great events? or a similar function assigned to the raven and a very few other birds, while all the rest give no presage by their notes? The reason simply is that some departments have not yet been brought within the sphere of the art of augury, while some are incapable of ever being brought within it, because our acquaintance with them is too slight. As a matter of fact, there is no living creature whose movement or meeting with us does not foretell something.[14]

It is in this sense that Plutarch's work as a biographer can be seen as emerging from the more ancient discourse of the diviner.[15] Plutarch likewise attempted to see far into the unfamiliar, asking questions concerning the destiny of a personality, for which we do not even today have a solid language to pose. If the diviner observed the manner in which bones, birds, or animal entrails arranged themselves under the influence of multifarious and unpredictable forces then Plutarch had discovered an even more sensitive instrument for reading the effects of contingency: the human *psyche*.

The arbitrary configurations of circumstances which surround a human life take on a supernatural character in the presence of certain individuals. Nietzsche penned a line of *Ecce Homo* "At this very moment, the postman delivers me a Dionysus Head,"[16] Van Gogh painted a few strokes of *The Sunflowers* in the sweltering heat of midsummer, having consumed nothing that day but bland coffee. The aim of the biographer is to faithfully but parabolically reimagine these moments, and pursue the questions of contingency that only the imagination can portend.

It should be clear now in what way Nietzsche and Van Gogh develop parabolic personalities. Their experience of life contained many severe moments, in which the *Sympatheia* of their circumstances provoked volcanic expressions of *pathos.* This makes them opportune subjects for the biographer, who attempts to divine an interpretation of these augural moments.

Although I have attempted to reach questions which reflect back on the essence of a human personality, I also have, like Plutarch, tried to write

something that can be used to stave off boredom for an hour. Given my subject's penchant for the stage, I have wondered occasionally if I ended up writing more in the tradition of the Roman Colosseum built in Plutarch's youth than in that of his *Parallel lives*. There is probably some residue in this book of the delight many Romans found in those entertaining spectacles made of human beings' anguish. Although it is obscene, it is undeniably true that Nietzsche and Van Gogh both *posed* as martyrs, perhaps aware the details of their stories would be more palatable to imagine after a certain distance of time had elapsed.

Biography in the 21st Century

It seems to me that now is an appropriate time to reimagine these lives. Many of the seeds planted in their era are just now entering full bloom. For example, Nietzsche and Van Gogh lived in an era when the technology for record-keeping was pushed into new dimensions. It was in the summer of 1888 that the first piece of music was ever recorded—Handel's *Israel in Egypt* was set on a wax cylinder. It was in the autumn of 1888 that the very first motion was captured on film in the *Roundhay Garden Scene*. We have photographs of both Van Gogh and Nietzsche, and even a film of Nietzsche. The importance of record-keeping was immediately apparent to Nietzsche's sister and Van Gogh's sister-in-law, both of whom went through enormous efforts to preserve the written material which attested to the quality of these two men's day-to-day existence.

Our time can be most easily differentiated from all of previous history by our entrance into the era of digital ubiquity, which has been accompanied by an unprecedented ease of making a record of any event. As everyone gradually transforms into dutiful bureaucrats documenting the minutiae of their own lives, it has become more and more impossible for a contemporary person to be the subject of a biography such as this one. The problem of the map and the territory has now entered too decisively into the situation. Despite Elisabeth and Joanna's devoted efforts, the lives of Nietzsche and Van Gogh remain far less documented than those of nearly everyone alive today.

It is due to this oversaturation of information in our era that makes it an auspicious time to attempt to revive the *Sympatheia* of a past period. We are perhaps more receptive to the idea of a 'global mood' because of our increased sensitivity to information which accompanies globalization. It is precisely the ease of access to recorded moments which reminds us what we

are missing about earlier eras. Namely, the absence of video and audio recordings from earlier eras is precisely why it is necessary to 'imagine' them, and 1888 would be one of the last years when this was a necessity. But I want to clarify that these 'imaginations' are not distortions of fact. In this work I have striven for meticulousness in research and honesty with the reader concerning the events of 1888. This book is not a retelling of the mythology surrounding Nietzsche and Van Gogh. The imaginations are not 'poetic liberties' taken with reference to historical events, but rather the philosophical investigations woven into the narrative of the lives of these two men. I call these philosophical investigations 'imaginations' because the faculty of the imagination plays a central role in the formation of philosophical thinking.

It is also my suspicion that the long dormant notion of 'destiny' has been finding its way back into public discourse in all sorts of subtle ways. As Heidegger had already articulated in the middle of the 20th century, "What threatens man in his essence is the willful opinion that through the peaceful release, transformation, stockpiling, and delivery of natural energies, man could make man's being bearable for all and happy in general."[17] With an even greater accommodation to the effects of globalization, we are now recognizing that even the most careful planners can only ever be aware of about five of the ten most influential decisions which shaped their lives.

Lastly on this subject I would like to say that there appears to me to be a literary trend which has emerged since the onset of the digital revolution in which the delicate moods felt in brief, but exceptional, eras are reimagined. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *In 1926,* published just before the turn of the second millennium, might be a marker for the beginning of this in so far as the year chosen was not necessarily one where one could point to specific monumental events, but rather the enmeshment of variously dependent tendrils. It appears to me that this is something that we moderns don't only find edifying, but also entertaining. It helps us to conceptualize how history makes itself felt in our own cultures to visualize how society functioned in centuries past. Therefore, I have always striven for academic meticulous and absolute honesty with the reader concerning the events of 1888. However, it should be admitted that as I am attempting to recapture something as slippery as the 'mood of this time,' no one has access to this territory anymore, we only have the maps.

CHAPTER 1

SPRING EQUINOX

Robert Delaunay, Champs de Mars: The Red Tower (1911)

The Eiffel Tower

In the first days of 1888, the city of Paris was making preparations to host the upcoming world's fair. *L'Exposition Universelle* was scheduled to open to the public on May 6th 1889, marking a century since the calling of the Estates General had inaugurated the French Revolution. The decision to center the world's fair around the revolution's centennial was made by the Ministers of the Finance, Trade and Industry Commission. The choice was

a financial gamble; if the 1889 world's fair attempted to solidify the Revolution as the authentic expression of the essence of the French people, Paris could be assured that none of the royal powers of Europe would in any way be officially represented at the event. Thus the commissioners were placing their faith in the purchasing power of 'the people' to fund the *Exposition Universelle.* This venture was all the more jeopardous given that the previous exposition of 1878 had ended thirty million francs in the red (the equivalent of just under 900 million euros today), a cost that the French government, and therefore indirectly 'the people,' had been obliged to cover.[1] If another exposition failed that disastrously, it would probably be the last which Paris accommodated.

Thus the organizers, assured that the government would be left to cover any red ink, seemed happy to try their luck for the sake of prestige. The exposition was to showcase their nation's role in the story of what they believed was the most significant and unique century in human history. Parisians could state with some authority that the 19th century opened with the fanfare of Napoleon, and was punctuated at its midpoint with a resurgence of a similar melody during the revolutions of 1848. However, these hopeful revolutionary motifs accompanying the establishment of the second republic quickly faltered, and the transformation of these themes into the painful staccato of the second empire rattled the historical affectation of Paris. This embarrassment became tortuous when these stilted imperial gestures rose to the heights of tragi-comic calamity as the Emperor Louis Napoleon III led the French to the most decisive military disaster in their history—one which would only be eclipsed in French national memory by the events of 1940. And yet, even if the attempts to revive the Paris commune under siege lasted only one summer, even if the inhabitants were famously reduced to eating rats, they could be consoled by the thought that they were consuming their bitter meal on the world stage; it always seemed to be events in *Paris* which shaped the subjects of conversation across the continent.

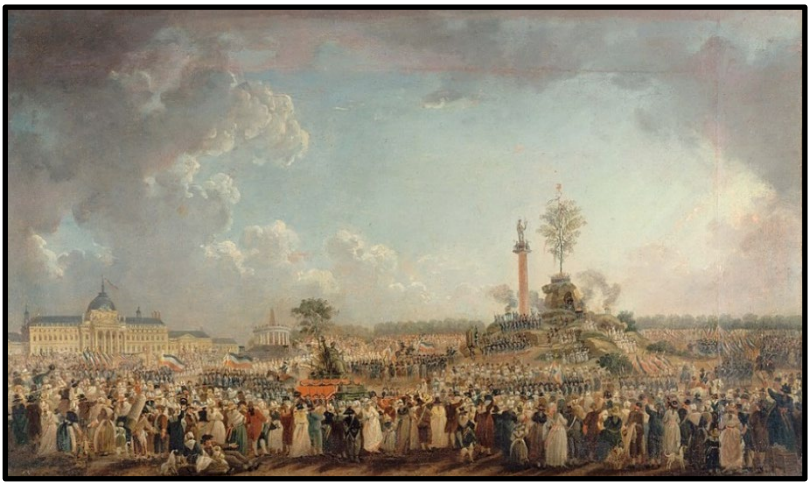
Now, as the *Fin-de-siècle* approached, Parisians were pondering their historical burden as the imagined conductors of the finale of this extraordinary century. Although at the end of the 18th century both Napoleon and Mozart were able to take advantage of the public fascination of a sojourn to the exotic land of Egypt, by the end of the 19th century the organizers of the *Exposition Universelle* understood that the age of discovery had now been firmly concluded. The task of the next centuries was not to adventure beyond the familiar into the strange, but rather the cultivation of a cosmopolitan vision capable of luring everything distant and

unknown to within arms reach. In one of his weekly reports, Louis Léon Théodore Gosselin expressed this dual appetite for what is both rare and convenient: “All Parisians, lifelong or temporary, are now possessed of a magical carpet. This carpet, a simple ticket of entrance, is the talisman that admits them to the country of dreams. Here you are transported, according to your caprice, from Cairo to the Americas, from the Congo to Cochinchina, from Tunisia to Java, from Annam to Algeria."[2] The French colonies would occupy the *Place des Invalides* at the world’s fair, wafting smells of saffron to lure the Parisians away from their usual fare. Americans like Thomas Edison were also there, slotted to give a demonstration of his phonograph—along with other less impressive but no less American exhibits, such as a replica of the Venus de Milo made entirely out of chocolate. The heart of the exposition was the *Galeries des Machines*: the largest vaulted building of its era, it was constructed *sans* internal supports, decorated with elevators and moving walkways, and lit by electric lights, displaying every industrial invention the French could squeeze into 900,000 square feet.

So Javanese dancers in traditional garb would brush shoulders with elegantly corseted French ladies; electricity would power some lighting fixtures while gas powered others; sweet smells emanating from exotic overseas delicacies would be mixed with the noxious fumes of coal-powered generators; Claude Debussy’s famously subtle *petite suite* would be played within earshot of the crashing and drumming of productive industrial exuberance. In short, it was clear from the beginning that the exposition would need a center of gravity to draw together the motley cacophony of impressions which were stationed on and around the *Champ de Mars*.

This kaleidoscopic aesthetic was perhaps an authentic expression of the rising tide of globalization which characterized the 19th century. Although time itself had recently been solemnly standardized at the International Meridian conference in 1884, there were still such a variety of measurements of time across the country that in 1888 the Syndicate of Jewelers, Watchmakers, and Goldsmiths called France “a veritable chronometric tower of Babel.”[3] It was the events of the 19th century which transformed the virtuous and undivided ‘will of the people’, into the more multifarious ‘demands of the consumers.’ However, even if the problem of the unification of a people was now spoken of in the cynical language of target demographics and brand loyalty, the dilemma itself shared strange affinities with the puzzle previously encountered by the revolutionaries of 1789. When the Monarch’s head became separated from the great body of

the state, and the power of the Church crumbled, the revolutionaries found themselves in dire need for a great centripetal force which could consolidate, and console, the people.



Festival of the Supreme Being by Pierre-Antoine Demachy (1794)

Exactly fifty days before his death, on June 8th 1794, Robespierre himself had attempted to solve this same enigma through the summoning of a singular great mood, which could be shared by all the people of France. He conceived of a monumental event: the first and only *Fête de l'Être Suprême* [Festival of the Supreme Being]. It was intended to outstrip all of the First Republic's previous festivals in grandeur and size—a rejuvenation of national feeling which had largely disappeared between differences of opinion and streams of blood. It began with a procession which marched southwest from the *Louvre* through the *Hotel des Invalides,* ending at on the *Champ de Mars,*[4] where an artificial mountain designed by Jacques-Louis David had been constructed. Illuminated by an inventive display of lights and mirrors, Robespierre performed his conjuring rituals from the summit of his synthetic Sinai. He opened the festival with these words: "It has finally arrived, the forever fortunate day that the French people consecrate to the Supreme Being. The world that he created has never offered a spectacle so worthy of his regard."[5]

A century later, it was upon the former site of those festivities that Monsieur Eiffel was asked to build his tower. The implicit historical message might

have been that the god of reason had not ceased to be worshiped when Napoleon outlawed the Cult of the Supreme Being, but that rather this religious ecstasy had been preserved in the guise of the worship of technology. Certainly, the rituals which attended the praise of reason produced more miracles than any previously exalted deities; the techno-priest was working in the tradition of the prophet, the people expected Edison to produce marvels which rivaled that of Moses.

What would quickly become known as 'the Eiffel Tower' was thus designed to be an honest monument to the magnitude of the 19th century's *machina*-centrism. The tower aimed to be the tallest building in the world: light enough that no wind could knock it over, strong enough to reach 1000 feet. Eiffel had been working with iron for decades, and his enthusiasm for the material bordered on fanaticism. He held faith that iron possessed within itself the tensile strength necessary to rise higher and stand longer than any other material, if it was not weighed d own by stone, glass, brick, or any of the other materials mankind had traditionally been prejudiced towards.

Postcard from Exposition Universelle Paris 1889

As soon as the public got a glimpse of what Eiffel planned to construct on the *Champs de Mars*, the cultural elite of France raised an enormous outcry against this "hateful column of bolted sheet metal." The 'Committee of Three Hundred' formed around common opposition to Eiffel's proposed aesthetic, including in their number artists and writers, illustrious names

such as Mauspassant and Zola, as well as controversial political figures such as General Boulanger, all signed a letter against the construction of the tower: “Is the city of Paris to disgrace itself with the gross and mercantile imagination of a machine maker?”[6] The feelings of the artist community of Paris ran so strongly against Eiffel’s aesthetic because they saw in the tower nothing less than a hostile takeover of the imagery of Revolutionary French heroism. This “black smokestack,” seemed to them to be the very symbol of the only possible threat to a Francophiliac rendition of the 19th century: the perspective of the Anglos.

In 1851 The Global Exhibition opened in London, and the Crystal Palace stole the spotlight from France with the claim that the 19th century was the century of an *industrial* revolution, that 1789 was nothing but the year Edmund Cartwright invented a wool-combing machine. Thus the nationalistic as well as the artistically minded amongst the Parisians fought tooth and nail against this symbol of industrial Anglicism occupying the place of prestige on the anniversary of the Revolution. On the other hand, if Eiffel’s Tower was seen as an attempt to rob the 1889 exposition of its revolutionary connotations, one wonders how these left-leaning artists would have reacted were the exposition committee to have chosen amongst some of the alternative designs submitted, one of which was garishly faithful to the centennial theme: a likewise 1000 foot tower, "in the form of a guillotine, to honor the victims of The Terror."[7]

Vincent

Vincent Van Gogh was living amidst this commotion in his brother’s apartment on *Rue Lepic*, less than a ten minute walk from Montmartre. At this time Van Gogh was nowhere near a significant enough figure to have joined the Committee of 300, but he was nonetheless caught up in the enthusiasm for the Revolution’s centennial and the 1889 fair. He was attempting to organize a communal art gallery, one so grand and impetuous it would catapult him and his brother into the annals of history. He wished to cause a scene, something reminiscent of 1875’s impressionist auction at the *Hôtel Drouot*, where the audience turned into a mob and began hurling derision at the auctioneer, who feared they “would take me off to a lunatic asylum”;[8] the police eventually had to be called to prevent the outbreak of violence. He knew that the artists from the first estate of traditional schools would inevitably dominate the fair,[9] and he envisioned his gallery as the artistic equivalent of Camille des Moulin yelling “*Aux Armes Citoyens*!”

From the *Cafe du Foy*, from which fiery impressionists would spill forth to seize power from the establishment painters.

Vincent's dream of a gallery at the 1889 fair seemed possible to organize in principle, his brother Theo, whom he had been monetarily dependent upon for years, had become increasingly important in the art world of Paris. Theo worked for the giant international art dealership Boussod, Valadon & Company (formerly known as 'Groupils' when Vincent had worked there), managing their gallery at *19 Boulevard Montmartre* since 1881. The company had been observing the meteoric rise in prices for a canvas by Monet, Degas, or Renoir, and decided that it could afford to take greater risks in the art world. They noticed that different enclaves of youthful and experimental painters eager to push art beyond impressionism had begun to blossom all over France—such as Pont-aven school where Gauguin worked—and they were selling their work for barely more than the cost of canvas and paint. This primordial soup of artistic talent was like playing the penny stocks for Boussod, Valadon & Company. They gave Theo Van Gogh an *entresol*, a lifted platform between the first and second floors of the building, and tasked him with collecting and showcasing the art of the future. This meant that Theo controlled access to a literal platform meant for attracting attention to unknown artists. Amongst struggling 'artists of the *petit boulevard*,' Theo was perceived as a kingmaker. He also had a good eye for painters with talent, in January 1888 Theo and Vincent had gone to Emile Schuffenecker's home, where Paul Gauguin, virtually unknown at that time, was staying. This would have been the first time Vincent and Paul met each other. From the latter's perspective the meeting was a breakthrough sucess, because Theo bought three paintings for 900 francs including *Among the Mangoes*, which was exhibited on the *entresol*.

However, Theo never once hung anything his brother painted on the *entresol*.[10] By all accounts Vincent's relationship with his brother was disintegrating. Vincent constantly acted in ways that tested the limits of Theo's generosity: he would spend Theo's money on significant quantities of trendy Japanese prints from the print-seller Siegfried Bing, carrying home arm loads of these treasures he hunted for in Bing's attic—arguing with Theo that he was making wise 'investments' of Theo's money. These prints reflected something of Vincent's desperation: he was aging, poor, and unloved. He did not have the luxury of relying on hard work to achieve slow growth; the only investments of time, energy, and money he made must all have the potential for parabolic ascent—or else they were useless.

Vincent had attempted to host a gallery at *Grand-Bouillon Restaurant du Chalet*. Filled with visions of artistic brotherhood, he had hoped that all his 'pals' would contribute something, However, very few artists contributed to his planned gallery: only Toulouse-Lautrec, Anquintin (neither of whom ever visited the 'gallery'), and Emile Bernard contributed something. Emile was a younger artist who had been expelled from the *École des Beaux-Arts* and was enthusiastic about the new forms of painting. Vincent was forced to fill up most of the space in the restaurant with his own paintings, lugging them the short walk From Theo's apartment on *Rue Lepic* to the *Grand-Bouillon* on the *Avenue de Clichy.* After having the artistic community he longed to join refuse to associate themselves with him, he was forced to endure the further humiliation of witnessing years of his life's work hang in the restaurant for weeks, with not one patron expressing interest in buying a painting.

Almost all of Theo's friends disliked Vincent: he was difficult to have a conversation with, his painting style was amateurish and bizarre, he made scenes in the streets, voiced continuous health complaints, fell in mad states of frenzied and possessive love for impossible women, and was constantly intoxicated. Theo wrote of Vincent to Johanna Bonger, a woman whom he would marry, "everyone, without exception, people who are considered pious, those he himself loved dearly, even his father & mother, condemned him for his disregard of more temporal matters & his refusal to yield to society as it is."[11] Later, trying to describe Vincent to Jo, Theo wrote: "From his style of dress and his demeanor you can see at once that he is different, and for years everyone who has seen him has said *C'est un fou* [he is mad]. I don't mind that at all, but at home it is *not* acceptable. [...] Even those with whom he is the best of friends find him difficult to get along with, as he spares nothing and no-one. The year we spent living together was extremely difficult."[12] When discussing his and Vincent's issues with their sister, Wilhemien, Theo wrote,

> Don't think that the money issue is what bothers me most. It is mainly the idea that we sympathize so little anymore. There was a time when I loved Vincent and he was my best friend, but that is over now. On his part it seems to be even worse, for he loses no opportunity of showing me that he despises me and that I abhor him. This makes it most untenable in my home. No one wants to come to my house anymore, because this always leads to scolding and, moreover, it is so dirty and untidy.[13]

Years after both brothers were dead, Andries Bonger, Theo's brother-in-law gives us a story, "One day Theo, exasperated, left the house and swore he would not return until Vincent had a place of his own. Shortly after, Vincent left for the *Midi*"[14]

It was rare that Theo asserted his monetary power over Vincent, but it seems the situation had gotten so bad that he was forced to do so in order to get Vincent to leave Paris. Theo offered to pay for all travel and living expenses. Litanies of excuses were offered from both sides: Winter is difficult in Paris, the nights can last 16 hours, Vincent needed a warmer climate to focus on his health, the phrase 'milder air' entered into the discourse. One of Vincent's heroes, Adolphe Monticelli, had lived in Marseille in near poverty, he painted prolifically and sold his canvases for paltry amounts. But now he was gaining a reputation in Paris, and perhaps there would still be Monticelli paintings to be had for cheap in the area around Marseille.

Before he left Paris there was one more blow of fate Vincent had to endure, when he received the devastating news that the famous Dutch painter Anton Mauve died on 5 February.[15] Mauve was Theo and Vincent's cousin by marriage, and Vincent had looked up to him as one of his many father figures. When Vincent's own father had thrown him out of the family home on Christmas eve 1881, an event which he later described as a "wound which I live above but which is there deep down and cannot heal,"[16] he had traveled directly to the Hague, shown up unannounced at Mauve's doorstep, and begged him to take him in. Moved by the Christmas spirit and pity for his relative, Mauve had allowed Vincent to study with him from January 1882 until September 1883. During this time, Vincent destroyed his relationship with Mauve, just as he had with his father.[17] Since then, Vincent had always desired to redeem himself in the eyes of his father, and of Mauve, to prove to them that he was not as useless and pathetic as he seemed. However, his father had died in 1885, and now Mauve too was dead, and so it seemed that the opportunity for redemption had passed.

On the evening of Sunday the 19 February 1888 Vincent said goodbye to Theo at the *Gare de L'est*, and took the overnight train to Arles. Before he left, he ensured Theo that the two of them would still hold his communal gallery for the 1889 world's fair; he would be going down south in order to prepare for this great event.

An Old Woman of Arles

Arles

February 19th -29th

Vincent arrived in Arles at 4:49 p.m. on the 20th of February. He dragged his luggage about ten minutes to the closest lodging, the *Restaurant Carrel* and booked a room for five francs a night. He fell asleep with snow falling all around him.

At first, Vincent seemed to get along with the proprietors of the *Restaurant Carrel*, Albert Carrel and his wife, Cathérine Carrel-Garcin. His first portrait in Arles was actually of the matriarch of the Carrel clan. This first *Arlésienne* was dressed in the traditional costume of the area. The color is superb: calming blues and soft turquoise lull the viewer; the abundance of pure white in the painting reminds us of the winter season. It might have been an entirely consoling painting, were it not for the subtle streaks of red along *L'Arlésienne*'s cheeks, and her tight lips which inform the viewer of a power still held over from the Roman era.[18]

Vincent's early paintings in Arles did not take any decisive steps forward in artistry, he was perhaps still thinking of himself as more of a business partner to his brother than as an artist in his own right. His main goal was to host a gallery for the 1889 exposition, and in order to prepare the groundwork for that event he would need allies. In late February he wrote a long letter to Hermanus Gijsbertus Tersteeg attempting to rope him into displaying impressionist art at his gallery. Tersteeg had been Vincent and Theo's manager while they worked at Groupils, a job that the pair had received due to their uncle, also named Vincent Van Gogh. For our Vincent, both Tersteeg and his 'Uncle 'Cent' had become yet two more father figures. In what would be the great repetition of Vincent's life, Tersteeg and 'Uncle 'Cent' had initially taken Vincent under their wings, but had later become severely disappointed with him. These were now the last two living representatives of his father through whose eyes redemption was possible. Vincent explained his manic Machieveillian tactics to Theo:

> You see, for myself I thought we had to make an effort from this end, because we'll have Reid through Van Wisselingh and Van Wisselingh through Tersteeg [...] You know that Van W. has married the daughter of the Glasgow picture dealer who's in competition with Reid. *If* Reid takes the Impressionists, if he finds a way of starting up there, and if he tries to do that against the rest of us, from that moment we're entitled to let his opponent over there know what's going on. But if Wisselingh ever gets involved, and especially if today or tomorrow you have a chat with W., Tersteeg could immediately complain: why did you, esteemed employee of our firm, who handles the Impressionists, not tell me what was going on?[19]

This is a very typical example of Vincent's plotting, which he applied to love, painting, and business. He was inserting himself as the role of advisor to Theo, trying to get Theo to open up a second front against Tersteeg, in order to compel the latter to begin buying and displaying impressionist paintings. The great irony of his life is that none of Vincent's scheming ever amounted to anything at all; all of his 'plans' for a gallery, for a family, for a lover, for the yellow house, always failed utterly, and almost always for the same reason. He got tunnel vision: the image of what he hoped after always far outstripped any possibility of its actualization in reality, and other people were reluctant to be driven along into his would-be cult. The 1889 gallery was clearly another product of his visionary madness. He later wrote to Theo, "It seems to me that your letter to Tersteeg adds to mine—myself, I regretted the state in which I had posted it."[20]

Spring

March 1st- March 22nd

Almond Blossoms & Repetition

At the beginning of March the famous Mistral began to blow, and the cold wind whipped the snow into the air, discouraging *plein air* painting. Vincent worked in his room above the *Restaurant Carrel*, his paint and supplies sprawled out beyond his private quarters into the shared outdoor terrace. In order to get out of the hotel, he had gone for a walk and picked a sprig from an Almond tree, intending to paint it in the manner of the Japanese. There was one particular wood cut, a single blade of grass Van Gogh found in *Le Japon Artistique*, an art journal begun that year by Siegfried Bing. Vincent was struck by the simplicity by which a few brush strokes could convey a form of budding life. He would later discuss this print explicitly several times over the summer of 1888. The first *Almond Branch* utilized colors very similar to his Paris paintings, however, when he attempted a repetition of the painting something extraordinary occurred. One detects a change in seasons between the two paintings of almond blossoms: the blossom was a promise that winter winds would cease to blow so ferociously soon, and new life would emerge. The repetition of *The Almond Branch* was Van Gogh's first real spring painting, and perhaps could be considered his first painting with Arlesian color. He felt emboldened to project virtuous pinks, and beaming yellows into this repetition. This first repetition of Vincent's in Arles attempted to express a different meaning than the first through purely through color; all the splendor of a southern spring expressed in the *simplest* form possible.

Study of Grass, Le Japon

Vincent saw in the potential of the blossom his own latent future, which was enlivening itself, "already in flower despite everything."[21] The branch was a symbol, which is to say, the ocular equivalent of the parable. One of the coldest winters of the 19th century was ending, and Vincent felt that he could sense great events on the horizon.

On March 9th he wrote to Theo "Now at long last, this morning the weather has changed and has turned milder."[22] He painted a basket of oranges to mark this movement towards a spring feeling. These were another simple ornament of nature, but bursting with meaning. Vincent happened to be only 60 kilometers away from the town of Orange,[23] where the ancient princes of Orange used to reside. Perhaps no other noble family expressed the