

STARRY NIGHTS: WHITMAN, EPILEPSY, AND VAN GOGH

This face is an epilepsy, its wordless tongue gives out the unearthly cry,
Its veins down the neck distend, its eyes roll till they show nothing but their
whites,
Its teeth grit, the palms of the hands are cut by the turn'd-in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground, while he speculates well.¹

1

Epilepsy, as pathological experience and artistic realization, makes its appearance in both Walt Whitman's and Vincent van Gogh's night skies. The abnormal electrical brain activities of the epileptic body in the nineteenth century, of Van Gogh's temporal lobe epilepsy and of Whitman's brother Edward's "epileptic fits,"² provide a previously unrecognized link between Whitman's and Van Gogh's works. I will argue here that the connection between these two artists goes beyond Van Gogh's often-recognized appreciation for the poet, then, and is also manifested in their experiences with epilepsy, as well as in their mutual regard for and identification with the work of the French painter Jean-François Millet. My purpose is to suggest ways we might expand on previous criticism that has probed the evocative influence of Whitman on Van Gogh.

Since 1984, scholars have shown interest in Whitman's impact on Van Gogh, who proclaimed his admiration for the American poet in an 1888 letter to his sister, Wilhelmen. Critics have often quoted this letter to corroborate the artistic tie between Whitman and the Dutch painter:

Have you read the American poems by Whitman? I am sure Theo has them, and I strongly advise you to read them, because to begin with they are really fine, and the English speak of them a good deal. He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank— of friendship— of work— under the great starlit vault of heaven a something which after all one can only call God— and eternity in its place above this world. At first it makes you smile, it is all so candid and pure; but it sets you thinking for the same reason. The prayer of Christopher Columbus is particularly beautiful.³

Van Gogh, who was fluent in Dutch, English, and French, probably read the English version of *Leaves of Grass*. In “Echoes of Walt Whitman’s ‘Bare-Bosom’d Night’ in Vincent Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night,’” Lewis Layman argues that the landscape in the *Starry Night* painting corresponds to Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and that “both men express similar visions of an interrelationship between two essentially androgynous forces,”⁴ evident in Whitman’s poetic lines about the “bare-bosom’d night” and in the puzzling crescent moon in Van Gogh’s painting. Layman bases his argument of the androgyny of the crescent moon on Marc Edo Tralbaut’s interpretation of the moon as “an old Chinese symbol, known as the Yin and the Yang.” It is fitting to conjure up the notion of the androgynous ideal that has its foundation in the Taoist concept of Yin Yang.⁵ Each part of the Yin Yang symbol takes up half of the circle, and between them there is a curvy line that resembles a perennially morphing watershed, which constantly changes its shape yet never disrupts the equilibrium between the two divisions. The quality of the androgynous moon, then, might be read as a microcosm of Van Gogh’s androgynous mind. The essence of the androgynous ideal is that the androgyny is a congruous entity in which all dissonances are settled in a state of fluid fusion. In accordance with the parallel between the elements of Yin/Yang and moon/sun, Van Gogh’s androgynous moon/sun finds its solid metaphysical representation in an eclipse, an astronomical occurrence that mystifies his starry night sky. Though scholars have sometimes interpreted the eclipse religiously,⁶ we might instead consider the correlation between an eclipse’s abnormal mix of light and shadow and episodes of Van Gogh’s epilepsy triggered by photosensitivity. The eclipsed sun would then serve as the painter’s postictal vision or memory following an epileptic episode.

Up to this point, the critical discussion of these two artists has been limited to interpreting the intertextual connections between Van Gogh’s painting and Whitman’s poems. Jean Schwind develops this method the furthest by arguing that the best way to determine the extent of the influence of Whitman’s poems on *Starry Night* requires an inclusive survey of the poems Van Gogh may have read in order to demonstrate possible sources of inspiration for the painting. However,

her critical rendering misses the tremendous power of creativity and the multidimensional sources of inspiration manifested in the works of both artists that (un)consciously pursue the androgynous ideal in a continuously flowing and yet fluctuating state of artistic creation.

Creativity is oceanic, like the tidal estuary Whitman describes in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”—constantly “flow[ing] with the flood-tide, and ebb[ing] with the ebb-tide!”⁷⁷ The volatility of creativity is manifest in Whitman’s poetic conception of the sea, tidal basins, or bodies of water in general. Schwind’s attempt to harness this artistic irregularity in order to demonstrate a correlation between specific passages in Whitman’s poems and the images in Van Gogh’s painting finally brings the exploration of the relationship between the two artists no further than the preceding criticism.

The androgynous ideal manifested in the works of these two artists serves to conceal and settle the turmoil in their personal lives. Van Gogh’s epileptic episodes did not hinder his desire to depict St. Rémy and its residents. Schwind uses passages in *Leaves of Grass* to evoke what she calls the “lifeless town” (5), arguing that “Van Gogh read Whitman far more closely and insightfully than recent accounts of their shared organic ‘conception of nature and life’ have implied.”⁷⁸ Thus the *Starry Night* town is a representation of Whitman’s “dead-house” in “The City Dead-House” (and of Whitman’s “recurrent image” of “rejection of indoor life” in “Song of Myself” and elsewhere). Schwind argues that the contrast between “the carefully delimited and constricted rectangles of light in the village” portrayed with “rigidly straight lines and dark shadows” and “the vigorous curves in primary colors of the landscape that surrounds it” is Van Gogh’s effort to depict Whitman’s poetic imagery. She bases this argument on the “preliminary studies for ‘Starry Night’ [that] show the St. Rémy landscape as it appears from Van Gogh’s hospital window, townless and without cypress” (6).

In *Van Gogh: The Life*, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith give a detailed account of the painter’s time spent in the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in St. Rémy. Due to the constraints imposed on Van Gogh concerning his condition, he was not allowed to “venture out after dark to paint,” Naifeh and Smith report, and, in order to

paint a starry night, “he could only watch from behind the bars of his bedroom window as the asylum lights blinked off, the sky darkened, and the stars assembled.”⁹ Although his access to the nighttime view was limited, he was allowed to venture out in daytime. In early June 1888, Van Gogh took “a day trip into the town of Saint-Rémy, about a mile downhill from the asylum gates.” It was “on this visit, or on one of his other forays into the hills overlooking the town” that “he had made a careful sketch of the popular mountain resort, with its dense warren of medieval streets girdled by broad modern boulevards.” After creating his night sky, Naifeh and Smith suggest, Van Gogh “added a sleeping village in the middle distance” in order to “ground his celestial vision.” For the painting, he also “reduced the bustling town of six thousand to a sleepy village of no more than a few hundred souls.” To complete his desired composition of the elements in the painting, “he moved the town from the valley floor north of the asylum and placed it to the east, directly between his bedroom window and the familiar serrated line of the Alpilles” (756-757).

In contrast to Schwind’s assertion that “the town of ‘Starry Night’ is clearly fictive” despite Van Gogh’s paintings seldom featuring “imaginative content” (6), Naifeh and Smith demonstrate that the town in the painting is not imaginary by recording Van Gogh’s actual visit to the town on which it is based. The precise illustration of the town contrasts with the mesmerizing and mercurial movement of the circles in Van Gogh’s sky. Naifeh and Smith trace how scientists discovered that, for patients suffering from epileptic seizures, “disruptions of perception, cognition, or emotion” would take place in an arbitrary manner (763): “Seizures could be triggered by visual stimuli as varied as sunlight dappling through leaves, [or] fluttering of the eyelids.” When Van Gogh encountered “an early waking or a sleepless night,” he “stared and stared at the light [the stars] each shone, and the sparkling darkness around them” (760). If we combine the scientific finding of the trigger for seizures and the painter’s nocturnal routines, we realize that the starry night sky in the painting might well be a microcosm of the “storms” (762) in his brain since, as Naifeh and Smith argue, the “euphoric image of swirling, unhinged cosmos signaled that his defense had been breached” (763). Considering this biographical

perspective, the town which Schwind interprets as the “dead-house” should instead be viewed as a contained space of sanity enclosed by the unpredictable and explosive “bolts of neuronal ‘lightning’” (763) inside Van Gogh’s brain. The juxtaposition of the well-delineated town and the ubiquitous, spiral circles reveals the painter’s fear of and conflicted desire for contact with people (the more contact he has with them, the more readily he would suffer an attack) and his longing to become part of the all-encompassing Nature where he would not be ostracized as a mad person. Following his relocation to the asylum, he found himself attracted to and comforted by nature. Prior to painting *Starry Night*, he was engaged in drawing lilies, whose color was of his “new serenity,” and he claimed that he preferred “to go out and look at a blade of grass, the branch of a fir tree, an ear of wheat, in order to calm down” (Naifeh and Smith, 755). Therefore, it is not overreaching to interpret the stars, the night sky, and the earth in *Starry Night* as manifestations of Van Gogh’s mental state and the distant town as the raw reality independent from his realm of ideality.

To investigate the relationship between Whitman and Van Gogh merely by focusing on their artistic renderings, then, is insufficient. This is clearly the view of Hope B. Werness, who examines both artists’ perception of stars in relation to their respective philosophies of life and death. She quotes Mark Van Doren’s well-known diagnosis of Whitman’s “erethism,” a term that describes “persons whose organs and tissues are chronically in a state of abnormal excitement, who tremble and quiver when the rest of us are merely conscious that we are being interested or pleased.”¹⁰ Because of their shared extraordinarily emotional intensity, Werness suggests that both Whitman’s and Van Gogh’s artistic expressiveness originate from their “cosmic consciousness,” which is “most evident in their poetic and painted visions of the night sky” (36). She states that Van Gogh believes that “the immutable cycling of the stars in their courses and the phases of the moon intimated immortality” (37). Van Gogh’s conception of life and death defies the conventional notion that life is linear and leads to death; instead, he speculates that “life too,” just like earth, “is probably round.”¹¹ In a letter written to his brother, Van Gogh expresses views on death as a vehicle that transports the dead to the

celestial realm:

Just as we take the train to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is that we cannot get to a star while we are alive, any more than we can take the train when we are dead.¹²

Van Gogh's view of death as the beginning of life in another form corresponds to Whitman's beliefs as expressed throughout his poetry, as in the image of grass as "the uncut hair of graves" in "Song of Myself" (*Poetry and Prose*, 193). Werness also points out that Whitman, like Van Gogh, associates the stars with "death and immortality" (38). She quotes the passage in "Death of Thomas Carlyle" in Whitman's *Specimen Days* to exemplify how the stars provide "answers to profound questions of life and death" for the poet:

While through the whole of this silent indescribable show, inclosing and bathing my whole receptivity, ran the thought of Carlyle dying. (To soothe and spiritualize, and, as far as may be, solve the mysteries of death and genius, consider them under the stars at midnight). [...] With me, too, when depress'd by some specially sad event, or tearing problem, I wait till I go out under the stars for the last voiceless satisfaction. (*Poetry and Prose*, 889)

Interestingly, Whitman, as a poet known for his harnessing of oratorical power, arrives at a kind of "voiceless satisfaction" through meditating on Carlyle's death while under the stars. For both Whitman and Van Gogh, death serves as an agency that is able to transfer them from earthly existence to a celestial one. The actual stars in the night sky, evidently, joined the two artists across the Atlantic Ocean.

2

These two artists' similarities are not limited to their individual portrayal of the stars in their artwork. They share something more interior: a private conception of the journey of life concealed behind the celestial manifestation on the canvas and in *Leaves*. Nature seemingly imparts knowledge of divinity to both artists, and their pursuit of this divinity can be illustrated in their shared admiration for the French painter Jean-François Millet (1814-1875). In *With Walt Whitman in*

Camden, Horace Traubel records Whitman's respect for Millet:

Yes, there's Millet—he's a whole religion in himself: the best of democracy, the best of all well-bottomed faith, is in his pictures. The man who knows his Millet needs no creed.¹³

Whitman recognizes and praises the self-made divinity in Millet's art, a disposition which he endeavored to possess in his own poetic career. Certainly, his endeavor had already been acknowledged and his poetic achievement accredited in his life. When he reflected on Millet's accomplishment, he said, "The thing that first and always interested me in Millet's pictures was the untold something behind all that was depicted—an essence, a suggestion, an indirection, leading off into the immortal mysteries." Traubel responded, "I have often explained my adhesion to you in almost the same words" (2:407).

Whitman expressed his ultimate appreciation for Millet as a self-contained man who attained transcendence free from religious doctrine. During a visit with his friend Thomas Harned, Whitman even compared his *Leaves of Grass* with Millet's art:

Harned interjected this question: "If Millet is enough and to spare what's the use of *Leaves of Grass*?" "That's what I say," replied W.: "If I had stopped to ask what's the use I never would have written the *Leaves*: who knows, Millet would not have painted pictures! The *Leaves* are really only Millet in another form—they are the Millet that Walt Whitman has succeeded in putting into words." (Traubel, 1:7)

Millet's artwork can thus be seen as a gift circulated to Whitman and an inspiration to his poetic creation. To Whitman, Millet's art is the embodiment of his divine force and spirit, since "he's a whole religion in himself." Therefore, Millet can be viewed as the original donor of the gift that possesses what Marcel Mauss calls "the *hau*, the spirit of things."¹⁴ His *spirit* gives birth to his painting that then finds its spiritual counterpart in Whitman's poems, which are the *things* that have their origins in the *hau*, as the poet himself indicates in the passage quoted above.

Whitman writes in "Millet's Pictures—Last Items," that he had seen three copies of *The Sower* and felt that "the first sower" remained

the best of all and had “doubt” whether “the artist [...] improved in each” (*Poetry and Prose*, 903). He was most impressed by the earliest version because “there is something in this that could hardly be caught again—a sublime murkiness and original pent fury.” The passing of the gift, which initially takes place within the painter’s private sphere from one version of the painting to increasingly paler versions, also occurs in a public domain, between Millet, Whitman, and Van Gogh.

Van Gogh, who professed great reverence for Millet from the beginning of his career in painting, is included in this gift-exchange circle initiated by Millet. During his stay in the asylum, Van Gogh “began where his artistic journey had begun: with Millet” (Naifeh and Smith, 779). Van Gogh expressed in his letters that Millet was “the archetype of the believer” and an artist whose painting had “evangelical” quality and who “painted the doctrine of Christ without painting overtly biblical pictures.”¹⁴ He produced a series of copies of *The Sower* because copying Millet’s paintings gave him “consolation” when he was ill and felt that “only a fantasy of fraternal reunion could save him.” As Naifeh and Smith point out, these “endless reworkings of Millet were just the most visible part of that fantasy” (781). The fraternal feeling that Van Gogh wished to obtain from Millet by copying his paintings can be interpreted as Van Gogh’s incessant artistic attempts to return the *hau* to Millet. Van Gogh has fulfilled his obligation to receive Millet’s gift by modifying his copies in different versions, which symbolize the residual effect of Millet’s gift of art in his paintings. His production of the copies is an act of securing the return of the *hau* to its original donor and of enabling the traveling of the *hau* to other receivers through his own artistic gift-giving in his paintings.

The spread of the seeds of Millet’s sower does not cease there. Whitman’s and Van Gogh’s shared respect for Millet bring them into the same gift circle, within which the gift-exchange process also occurs between Whitman and Van Gogh. Whitman’s declared admiration for Millet in 1888 and Van Gogh’s copying of Millet’s paintings in 1889, after professing his respect for the painter in the 1870s, enhance the connection between the two artists. Their joint tribute to Millet’s art could be construed as an artistic reflection on their separate personal

lives. Van Gogh's use of Whitman's cluster title, "From Noon to Starry Night," to name his own *Starry Night* is not accidental, then, and may have entailed a more private reason that criticism has not yet touched upon.

Shortly after he admitted himself to the asylum in 1889, Van Gogh was diagnosed as having "mental epilepsy," which, as Naifeh and Smith note, is a latent kind of intellectual and emotional disease with which the victim could lead "a relatively normal life" (750). This "hidden" disease had tortured Van Gogh for a number of years, resulting in constant frustration over his inability to take part in "normal life" (751). Naifeh and Smith describe in detail the victim's experience of the seizure:

When attacks came, they were often accompanied by out-of-body sensations, as if the victim's psyche were divided or projected into other entities—entities that sometimes spoke with their own voices. Victims would babble gibberish and act "automatically"—without conscious control, or even recognition, of their actions. This marked the beginning of the seizure itself—the most dangerous period, especially for the victim.

From Naifeh and Smith's perspective, this experience must have haunted Van Gogh, since "his fragile defenses . . . could barely withstand the threats that lurked everywhere in his own thoughts. Against the insults and indifference of the real world, they stood no chance at all" (767). Perhaps it is this sort of forced isolation from normative reality that further solidifies the connection between Van Gogh's and Whitman's personal experiences beyond their shared artistic inspiration.

When Van Gogh read Whitman's "From Noon to Starry Night," his terror of epileptic fits found its counterpart in Whitman's imagery of the "epileptic," which likely emerged from his witnessing his brother Eddy's epileptic condition. According to Loving, "Whitman had always been the most tolerant of Edward" and "often worried about the possibility of his dying before Edward."¹⁵ In "Faces," the second poem in the "From Noon to Starry Night" cluster, Whitman depicts the bodily struggle and mental suffering resulting from an epileptic attack:

This face is an epilepsy, its wordless tongue gives out the unearthly cry,
Its veins down the neck distend, its eyes roll till they show nothing but their
whites,
Its teeth grit, the palms of the hands are cut by the turn'd-in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground, while he
speculates well. . . . (*Poetry and Prose*, 577)

Whitman is not simply an observer when the epileptic's attack takes place. His well-known empathetic abilities allow him to experience the terror, and the distorted face seems to generate other broken faces throughout the following lines in the poem, including "the face of the most smear'd and slobbering idiot they had at the asylum," who the speaker of the poem identifies as "my brother," who is "emptied and broke[n]" by the "agents" who see him as noting but "rubbish." Just as epileptic seizures divide the personality and fracture the sense of self, Whitman has the broken faces of Edward appear in multiple manifestations in this poem. Whitman is able to comprehend the source of the "vermin and worms" that distort the face of his "brother." In addition, his insightful understanding about the epileptic attack is demonstrated when he speaks of how the man "speculates well," showing that Whitman is aware that during the epileptic seizure, the victim has a divided self that is independent from the suffering half and that perceives the entire process. His presentation of this part of epileptic experience especially would have corresponded to Van Gogh's own recollection of his attacks.

Unlike Whitman's description of an epileptic "struggling and foaming on the ground," Van Gogh's epilepsy was of an internalized form, completely imperceptible to anyone but himself at the moment when an attack took place. His physician could not tell the symptoms until the residual condition was revealed after the attack. Therefore, Van Gogh was the observer in the haunting progression towards the attack and also the sufferer of it. I wish to extend Whitman's and Van Gogh's shared comprehension of the disease of epilepsy, then, to the assumption that Van Gogh, when reading Whitman's "From Noon to Starry Night" cluster, would have recognized the description of epilepsy in "Faces." This discovery could well have foregrounded Van Gogh's admiration for Whitman's poetic language and force. In

1888, Whitman described his brother as someone “who has lived in darkness, eclipsed almost from the start” (Traubel, 2:57). Van Gogh did not have to know anything about Whitman’s brother Eddy, but he would have identified with the epileptic in the poem and with the broken face that seems to fracture throughout the poem into multiple faces.

The darkness that Whitman imagines his brother is forced to dwell in, then, is mirrored in Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, in which the canvas is predominantly covered by the darkness of the night sky with stars that symbolize the painter’s “euphoric image of swirling,” an indicator of his epileptic state. Furthermore, in that sky is a mysterious image of either a bright crescent moon with an aurora of light or an image of an impossible solar eclipse where a crescent moon seems to pass between the sun and the earth. This odd and paradoxical image might have emerged from Van Gogh’s reading of the first poem in the “From Noon to Starry Night” cluster, the poem that immediately precedes “Faces”: “Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling.” This paean to the sun has a surprising ending, as the twenty-two lines of celebration of the sun’s “sheeny light” and “fructifying heat and light” give way to a sudden tonal shift in the poem’s final three lines:

Nor only launch thy subtle dazzle and thy strength for these [poetic lines],
 Prepare the later afternoon of me myself—prepare my lengthening shadows,
 Prepare my starry nights. (*Poetry and Prose*, 463)

Van Gogh’s own “full-dazzling” orb appears in a starry night sky, seemingly partially eclipsed, just as Whitman’s opening poem in the poetic cluster that gave *Starry Night* its name enacts its own partial eclipse of the very sun it celebrates.

In the painting, the moon is not full and cannot obscure the entire sun. It is as if Van Gogh painted an inscrutable image that perhaps served as the sign of his own resistance of the blackout of his consciousness during epileptic episodes. Van Gogh, of course, could not have read Traubel’s records of Whitman’s comments (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* did not begin to be published until 1906). Nonetheless, epilepsy, as a disease that momentarily disrupts a sense

of normalcy, served as a catalyst for both the poet's and the painter's representation of darkness—the night sky. The surprising power of the epileptic spirit has travelled, in a manner of Mauss's gifting, from Whitman's "Faces" in "From Noon to Starry Night" to the *Starry Night* in Saint Rémy.

University of Washington

HSINMEI LIN

NOTES

- 1 Walt Whitman, "Faces," in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 120.
- 2 Jerome M. Loving, ed., "Introduction," *The Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 16. Edward Whitman suffered from a number of physical and mental ailments, and epilepsy is usually identified as one of them; see, for example, Randall Waldron's entry on Edward in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1998), 776.
- 3 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 3 vols. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1959), 3:445 (W8).
- 4 Lewis M. Layman, "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'd Night' in Van Gogh's 'Starry Night,'" *American Notes & Queries* 22 (March/April 1984), 105-109. See 107.
- 5 Roger T. Ames, "Taoism and The Androgynous Ideal," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 8.3 (1981), 21-45. See 43-44.
- 6 Harry Eiss, *Christ of the Coal Yards: A Critical Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 245-247.
- 7 "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Section 9, in *Poetry and Prose*, 312.
- 8 Jean Schwind, "Van Gogh's 'Starry Night' and Whitman: A Study in Source," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 3 (Summer (1985), 1-15. See 5.
- 9 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 760.
- 10 Hope B. Werness, "Whitman and Van Gogh: Starry Nights and Other Similarities," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Spring 1985), 35.
- 11 Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 3:#B8.
- 12 Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 3:#506.

- 13 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1:7. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (whitmanarchive.org).
- 14 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*. Trans. W.D. Halls (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 11.
- 15 Loving, "Introduction," 16.