



Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

Finitude

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IN 2021, WE ATTENDED THE REMARKABLE Immersive Van Gogh exhibit on Pier 36—a stunningly moving, transformative experience. When we stepped out and were walking along the water, stopping to take photos in front of the Manhattan Bridge, it occurred to me that there’s a confining phenomenon whose description has eluded me for decades, though I’ve felt it deeply and in many contexts and iterations. It seems, on the one hand, so axiomatic that writing about it

becomes an exercise in silliness; and, on the other, its touch is so profound that I can’t help but think there must be something useful in the exercise of bringing the experience to the surface of language. Its essential character concerns limits and the desire to transcend these, especially in ways that are irrational and impossible. At both its base and apex is an unappeasable longing for alterity. The experience is necessarily a failed one; that is, as is for all desire, the yearning must

*Where does the fault lie? What the core
O’ the wound, since wound must be?*

—“Two in the Campagna,” Robert Browning

remain unconsummated to remain at all, and yet the incapacity to fulfill the yearning results in a “constricted throat.” If we could, within the realm of reality as we experience it, realize the longing to transcend limits, a transformation (in fact, various transformations) might occur; the experience would be transportive, even as it is—as unrealized. That is, imagining the experience, alone, transports, though in a broken, hazy way. And lastly, I think, as is true of anything concerning a sympathetic view of alterity, on some level the experience involves empathy, though I’m not clear about empathy’s relational position to the whole.

Let’s consider, for a moment, the less irrational version of this desire: I want to alter my state of mind, away from the banality of quotidian concerns and even of waking consciousness. The most expedient and readily available means is through the chemical alteration of the brain—whether from without or within: drugs and alcohol, yes, but also dopamine. Daydreaming and other such psychological practices (or euphoric states of being) can heighten the sense of alterity, too; the oneiric state figures here, of course, given especially the potential transfer and translation of the dream material into wakefulness. Movement seems an interesting contributor, here—physical mobility allows traversal, facilitates range, invites the possibilities of difference and otherness, from one moment to the next. A change in locale, as experienced on vacation or even during extended stays in a place other than one’s home, a new residence or a move to a new town all serve to intensify awareness of one’s surroundings, of exteriority and, by extension, of otherness. These release one from the staid routine of oneself, in a sense. (But this line will carry us down the path of the familiar/unfamiliar and of the uncanny, and the intent here is a look at the limits of the individuated self, instead.)

The longing for limitlessness also carries within it the desire for many lives and the ancillary desire to witness others’ lives, the latter experienced as consolation for the impossibility of the former (expressed, by some, through parenthood). If the ache for multiple lives grows too keen, it articulates itself as paralysis in the one life we have. For those of us unable to reconcile ourselves to the reality of this one round, we shrink from choice under the weight of too many potentialities and, in the end, stifled by the dread of possibility, choose nothing at all—sit still. Past middle age, restrained by waning energy, there is the desire for return—not more lives than one, but the far more modest desire for a second go at one’s own. Here, we encounter the most painful aspect of the confining phenomenon—the unidirectionality of time. That we experience (or perceive) time—even if as an illusion—as moving insistently forward and in predetermined increments along the course of a lifespan (that’s the measuring stick, right?) troubles me. I want to slow it down, stretch it out, freeze it. I want the world to hold still—in a pliable moment, a mobius strip of time that offers up a sweet twist—while I run around and explore it a while. This is a desire, I suppose, to grind down and halt the aging process.

Stronger than the wish to expand time’s limits is the wish to impose upon it a directional turn—by one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. The world’s tightly knit network of agreements about temporal calculations aside, it’s the diachronic nature of time that vexes me most. I want an infinitely synchronous relationship with my heroes and with history. This is the desire for simultaneity. Within the strangest recesses of consciousness, since childhood, I retain a firm belief that somehow I will meet the people I have read about and read—long since

dead, of course, but somewhere still alive and waiting—that a union of all kindred souls will occur somewhere outside of time. Perhaps this is the child’s imagination informed by Christian delusions about heaven and such, extended into adulthood. Nevertheless, it is an inexplicably unwavering dream.

Material existence—the restricted expression of the body in space—troubles me almost as much. Here, the desire to break free from the fetters of reality is at its most irrational. The yearning to embrace alterity envisions one’s invisibility in a space occupied by others—the gentle voyeur who will protect all secrets. Because I cannot have more than one, I want to witness others’ lives in proximity: to leap, at dusk, into the golden-hued, high windows ablaze with evening light, windows whose insides I cannot reach now because I am a body, a selfhood, standing at a distance, down on the street, looking up at a promise that will forever elude me. This yearning holds Blake at its breast. Shapeshifting into a Lilliputian, I want to crawl into interstices and view the world—the world of giant carpet fibers—from the bottom up. I want to be the panoptic eye—walking a street by running my fingers along the buildings’ friezes, gliding on air from above. The wish to shrink and crawl and snuggle into an impossible space has its beginnings in the reading of picture books when I was a child; this is the longing that catalyzed all subsequent hunts after other lives and other worlds in the practice of reading. Oh, the universe that a book offers up. As a child, I wanted desperately and repeatedly, obsessively, to crawl into the minutiae of the shapes and colors and shades and, most of all, momentary incidents of the pictures in my books without the remotest thought to whom or what I might become in that picture; as I was, in my human state, I was entirely effaced by my imagination. This was an eternally recurring, unrequited fancy.

I sense things in raw, Kantian manifold. A given incident—the more traumatic or crisis-driven, the more so—is a *tableau vivant*, not a temporal unraveling, experienced as an amorphous whole hurled at my senses, all of it at once—like a painting, unlike a film—despite

its being an event requiring time to unfold. No filter, no ability to parse things out, no time. This is the inverse of occurrence, of a happening that the psyche should encounter in stages or phases or moments of incremental revelation so as to process the event and offer up a rational response. What, for most, is a temporal experience accosts me as spatial, and I am often undone.

The van Gogh exhibit offers a converse: it upends the viewer’s conventionally spatial experience of static art into a temporal one, by a similar inversion. Interestingly, the turn to temporal revelation doesn’t involve the process of (re)creation. That is, the very unidirectionality of time is subverted through a temporal means. You might think that digital capacities would be operationalized to show, for example, the process by which, brush stroke upon brush stroke, image by image, *The Starry Night* came into being. But instead, the technology is used to raise the night before you by fading the daylight and sharpening the night sky; the stars appear not as they might, over time, upon the canvas as the painter goes to work, but, instead, as the supernovas they are, bursting here, dimming there, sparkling, twinkling, and finally taking static shape as they appear in the actual painting, having disregarded the time-bound process of their creation, and privileging, instead, your experience as viewer of an otherwise strictly spatial art. In the next moment, as though an insect making its way through the world, you are dwarfed by the enormity of wheat fields that tower over you. The sensual sway of the wheat in *Wheat Fields*—a siren call—hypnotizes, pulls you in, tosses you about, as you are lost in the dizzying grasses. Time grows lateral, horizontal, spreading out. This concentrated attention to the process of reception—over and against that of creation—pays meet homage to van Gogh’s grand spirit, and the gaze rightly ricochets so that the viewer’s full imaginative attention culminates in van Gogh, the creator. Reciprocity achieved.

Arguably, the longing for alterity is ultimately a longing for the godhead, variously conceived: a desire to approach (or return to) God, a desire to partake of the panoptic view, yes, but perhaps more humbly, a desire to be



Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield*, 1889

near the sublime and to reconcile oneself to God, who is most Other than all. And maybe the dream of heaven is little more than the yearning to experience an alternative to our spacetime continuum. The practice of reading offers this flight of fancy, as did van Gogh’s exhibit in its capacity to call up childhood’s dream for a magical moment. But the failure to deliver the dream into our phenomenal reality remains a lump in the throat—difficult and painful in its irreconcilability, in the wound that must be. Phenomenal reality is, at minimum, thrice confining, keeping alterity at bay in three distinct ways. First, mortality, obeying the law of the unconsummated, ensures the perpetual longing for additional lifetimes (even of a Nietzschean

return) by rendering these impossible. Next, time’s intractable flow as we experience it, forever forward, is the interdiction against an actual return to both personal and shared history; we cannot reverse the clock for our small lives a little or a lot, nor shatter temporal boundaries through time travel to see the face of Jesus, firsthand. Oh, coveted synchronicity. And last, if modesty contents us with this one life, partaking of a restricted historical sliver, even then, humanness precludes us from altered forms—of permeability, fluidity, physical transformability. Spirits parched by the “salt estranging sea”—of the dearth of proximity, immediacy, mutuality, simultaneity—we remain stung by abject ipseity. ☞