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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vincent: Exuberance and Despair

Dr Marlies ter Borg

* marliesterborg@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Dedicated to [Meerten ter Borg](#).

During Vincent van Gogh's two months in Auvers he painted 74 masterpieces and then he shot himself.

In this article, I investigate the possible connection between his ecstatic creativity and his tragic end. For this, I turn to Aristotle, who investigated the connection between warm melancholy and eminent creativity. In modern terms, it is the increased neurotransmission during a hypomanic episode that allows the magnifying of existing talent.

This 'bipolar melancholy' can foster creativity but also lead to abrupt suicide. Attempts to find, in his letters and paintings, omens foretelling this tragedy fall short. He was exuberantly celebrating nature in his paintings creative until the last canvas. Then came a sudden slowing down of neurotransmission. His suicide was an escape from the looming depression he had experienced in Arles before deep depression made such an action impossible.

The tragic fate of Vincent's brother Theo, who succumbed to the other extreme, mania, suggests a genetic basis for this 'bipolar melancholy'. It was for Dr Gachet, expert in Melancholy, that Vincent moved to Auvers. He offered a broad and compassionate medical therapy, not excluding medication. Gachet's understanding of the link between melancholy and genius was known to the van Gogh brothers. At the funeral Dr Gachet praised Vincent's great achievements.



1. Landscape at twilight, 1890 van Gogh Museum Amsterdam

Introduction

This article is a reflection on the medical problems Vincent van Gogh experienced in Auvers, in the last months of his life. This short period is characterized by tremendous creativity, ending in suicide. The question in this article is how far there is a link between his high productivity, disorder, and death. My special interest in this was triggered by the coming exhibition in the Musée d'Orsay "Vincent's Final Months."¹

Most of the 74 paintings are shown that Vincent produced in these two months. Walking through the different themes, cozy village views, wide inspiring landscapes, homely portraits, and still lives of flowers. All those wonderful compositions, beautiful colors, thrilling movement of trees, of grass rippling and clouds floating, daring, exciting brushstrokes. It is like floating through heaven on the wings of a butterfly. Flitting from one serene picture to another, endlessly. From the world over museums and private collections contributed their treasured van Gogh's to this grand finale. All were produced by Vincent in two months.

In my investigation of the medical side of this 'wonder', my point of departure is the word 'Melancholy,' used so very often by Vincent in his communication with Dr. Gachet, his brother, and his sister Wil. As the excellent website² of the van Gogh Museum shows the term is mentioned in 142 letters. It no longer has a medical content; it refers to a mild nostalgic mood with no serious impact. The term 'Melancholy' however was in use as a medical term from Aristotle³ up to the beginning of the 20th century⁴. It is equivalent to what is now known as bipolar disorder.⁵

Besides many characteristics, symptoms, or criteria, both concepts have the following in common:

1. The double nature of the disorder with cold and warm, low, and high, depressed and (hypo)manic episodes.
2. The circular nature of the disorder, with low and high moods alternating over longer periods of time.
3. The high risk of sudden suicide especially when mood passes from high to low

4. The genetic nature of the disorder, is often seen in more family members over the generations.

5. The link between mild warm melancholy and outstanding achievement.

MELANCHOLY

"I've done the portrait of Mr Gachet with an expression of melancholy."

2 To Will 13 June 1890

"He told me, besides, that if melancholy or something else were to become too strong for me to bear, he could well do something again to lessen its intensity, and that I mustn't be embarrassed to be open with him".

2 to Theo, 25 May 1890

"If only he's not melancholy and heading for another crisis, it was all going so well."

22 July 1890, Theo to Jo

The term 'Melancholy' appears in 121 of the van Gogh letters.² It is used very often by Vincent, especially in referring to himself, his brother Theo, his doctor, and his sister Will. The term 'Melancholy' was, in the time of van Gogh, considered a very serious state, researched by medical science, and treated by doctors. This is shown by the title of the doctorate thesis of Dr. Gachet. 'Études sur la Mélancholie'⁶

DOUBLE, CIRCULAR MELANCHOLY

Vincent saw melancholy as a two-sided affair, one side characterized by despair and the other by exuberance.

"So instead of giving way to despair, I took the way of active melancholy as long as I had strength for activity, or in other words, I preferred the melancholy that hopes and aspires and searches to the one that despairs, mournful and stagnant." 2 To Theo, 24 June 1880

This is reminiscent of Aristotle who, more than 2 millennia earlier wrote in his essay.

"On Melancholy."³

"When the melaina cholè is colder, it gives rise to the despondency of various kinds, but when it is hotter to cheerfulness". 955a15

In 19th century France this double melancholy was described as "Folie à Double form."

These two forms were seen to appear in a recurrent pattern, from low to high, and back again: "La forme circulaire de maladie mentale." In Germany Kraepelin introduced the term 'circuläres Irresein'.⁴ Vincent shares with Theo the swing between the up and downside of melancholy.

"So, one goes from melancholy to cheerfulness and enthusiasm, and this will always remain."

"The heart has its storms, has its seasons of drooping, but also its calms and even its times of exaltation. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

2 to Theo 10 January 1883

MELANCHOLY AND CREATIVITY

Vincent's unbelievable productivity in Auvers, with 74 paintings, is reminiscent of the famous question at the beginning of Aristotle's essay 'On Melancholy'.²

"Through what is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts turn out to be melancholics."

The notion about the link between creativity and bipolar disorder was elaborated by Kay Redfield Jamison, patient and professor of psychiatry.¹¹ It was known to Gachet who held that many great men and women were melancholics. He presented a long list of names including Plato Homer, Moses, Jesus, Luther, Mohammed... Jeanne d'Arc...Rembrandt.⁶ This was known to Vincent, he and Theo even made fun of it.

"Then the doctors will tell us that not only Moses, Mohammed, Christ, Luther...and others were mad, but also Frans Hals, Rembrandt...and all the good, narrow-minded old ladies like our mother." 2 6 August 1888

In Auvers Vincent was experiencing a creative high, now called a hypomanic episode.

"These last few weeks I've been perfectly well as far as my health goes, and I work almost without stopping from morning till night, day after day."²

In the French summer, Vincent could work in the open air from 4 am to 11pm, and find time to do a few things inside after nightfall. Hardly needing any sleep is typical for (hypo)mania. Quicker increase in neurotransmission allows an increase

in all functions of body and mind. The sight is sharper, the color more vivid, and the brighter movement more visible. The fingers and the hand holding the brush are quick and flexible. The mind is faster. Ideas bubble up. Aristotle remarked.

"Due to the susceptibility and liveliness of their minds, they have a myriad of associations and ideas." ^{3 p.36}

Not drowning in his many associations, he quickly makes a selection out of them. He neither wavers nor doubts, he is quick to decide what to paint and how to paint it and then sticks to his decision. He is determined and focused, not allowing himself to be distracted. He is exuberant, with a high self-esteem, sensing that the world is overflowing with meaning. Life is very worthwhile. People encourage him. Beauty is everywhere.

Hypomania brings enhanced courage to break through conformity in the name of the new, the true, the beautiful. Vincent was involved not only in high productivity but in fundamental creativity. That involves reshaping parts of the common worldview. Vincent was rewriting the rules that defined what art is, what color, what nature, what beauty. All these characteristics of mild (hypo) mania - or what Aristotle calls tempered melancholy - can, if coupled to talent, make of a melancholic a genius.

As is usual with fundamental creativity he did not find general applause, he gained approval only of a few persons, his brother, Dr Gachet one or two colleagues. He only sold 1 painting during his life. In his high mood, he longed for the company he had the urge to express his thoughts and feelings and describe his actions. That was possible in his letters, they were his outlet, especially to Theo. Perhaps the listening, encouraging brother was even more important than the 50 francs he found in an envelope once a month. He could go on the lonely journey of an innovator thanks to Theo and in the last months to Dr. Gachet.

Treatment: Dr Gachet

The choice of Auvers had much to do with the presence there of Dr. Gachet.

"I've found in Dr. Gachet a ready-made friend and something like a new brother would be." 2 to Wil, 5 June 1880

To show his affinity with his doctor Vincent painted Dr Gachet in the typical pose of a melancholic. Head resting in hand. He considered his doctor was also a sufferer, perhaps even more sick than Vincent himself. 2 24 May 1880

"I've done the portrait of M. Gachet with a melancholy expression, which might well seem like a grimace to those who see it." he writes to his sister Wil. 2 13 June 1890



2. Doctor Gachet sitting at a Table with Sprigs of Foxglove, June 1890, Musée d'Orsay

The approach of Gachet was broad. In consisted mainly of verbal therapy. And encouraging painting as a form of work therapy. The therapist's task is to boost the self-confidence of a patient, here one who had only ever sold one painting. He did this by graciously accepting Vincent's paintings as remuneration instead of doctor's fees. The encouragement to make etchings by offering the technical means is in the same vein. Finally offering the painter models, his daughter and himself expresses the same trust in Vincent's capabilities.

So, what about medication? On 25 May Vincent writes to Theo about Dr Gachet

"That if the melancholy...were to become too strong for me to bear, he (dr Gachet) could certainly do something to lessen its intensity, and that I should be frank with him." 2 25 May

That something might have been an extract of the digitalis, which features on Gachet's portrait. There was no anti-medication sentiment, either with the doctor or the patient.

On 22 July Theo advised Vincent to go see Gachet and ask for something that

"Will make you feel better". 2 22 July

The relation between a melancholic and his medicine is a troubled one. When high the patient feels he can do without his medication. When low he has little trust in anything or anyone, an equally good reason to refuse medication. Unfortunately, the disorder calls for a more lasting approach, it takes time for the mood to stabilise. Doctors stress the importance of Medication Adherence, taking the medicine regularly and over a long period of time, even a lifetime.

Although the effectiveness of medication has increased dramatically over time, especially since the use of lithium halfway the 20th century, even Aristotle stressed: Those melancholics are in perpetual need of medicine"⁹

In Vincent's time, there was no effective medicine against bipolar melancholy. Vincent and Gachet were, courageously, engaged in a losing battle. Weeping at the funeral Gachet stammered:

"He was a great artist, it was an art he prized above everything and which will make his name live."¹⁰

SUICIDE

Aristotle acknowledged that melancholics can be men of genius, but only if they avoid extreme moods.

"Those who have a great deal of melaina cholè differ from the majority of people. If they are not careful, they can become extremely melancholic. However, if their melaina cholè is tempered, they are men of genius."^{3 954b30}

As a warning he points to Ajax, the Greek hero who committed suicide, and to Herakles who killed his family in a state of extreme mania. Aristotle propagates the tempering of mood in both directions, with medicine and cognitive readjustment of behaviour.³

It is understandable that when someone commits suicide, causes are sought in the person's specific circumstances and relations: Vincent's financial insecurity, relation with his brother, concerns about the health of his namesake, his nephew baby Vincent. Aristotle points out however that it is not bad news as such, but the temperature of someone's mood that makes the difference. The announcement of something alarming can cause great fear if the mood is already low. However, if the temperature is hot the same news can make a man courageous and calm, and insensible to danger. Suicide cannot always be explained by pointing to an external cause or 'trigger'.^{3 955a10} Often the change of mood is the explanation.

"Those who become despondent, when the heat in them dies down suddenly have the urge to kill themselves." ^{3 955a10}

The cooling of melaina cholè, the slowing down of neurotransmission, implies slipping into depression. This is what threatened to happen again to Vincent. What he had always desired to do, what had given him meaning, is suddenly void of sense, pointless. Not only the relationship with his brother but the whole world could be turning into a meaningless void. He tried to fend of the downward spiral by working. He continued painting until the last. He failed to stop the downward movement, failed to pick up the way upward. Retreat, escape was the only option. Aristotle explains sudden, unexpected suicide.

"When the heat of the melaina cholè is extinguished suddenly, people can kill themselves, to the general astonishment of all, since they have given no previous sign of any such intention."^{3 955a15}

Kay Redfield Jamison, who wrote about bipolar creativity in her book 'Touched with fire,'¹¹ comments on the sudden character of suicide in another book, suitably named 'NightFalls Fast'.¹² There is a sense of urgency because the window of opportunity is narrow. Someone who is in an exuberant decisive mood does not want to

end his life. Someone who is in a depressive low has neither the energy nor the ability to do so. He lacks decisiveness and perseverance. It is on the way from high to low, that there is a window of opportunity, a limited time, in which despair can make use of remaining energy and resolve to perform this solitary deed.

This throws a light upon the suddenness, the unexpectedness of Vincent's suicide. One might wonder that he involved no one in his plans, neither his brother nor his doctor, with whom he had such close relations. Persons who decide to kill themselves hardly ever do. They often seek the cover, the loneliness, and the silence as Vincent did. They are wary that their plan be thwarted by a loved one or by a doctor who interns them into a hospital where his every move is guarded. Even asking for medication is betraying the secret.

So, it is possible that Vincent was in a highly inspired and creative mood until his last painting. He had learned at an early age to love and respect nature. He did not reinvent what nature had to offer, nor did he abstract from it, he only made it more colorful, and vibrant. His last painting is a bright blue rendering of an existing natural composition of roots, well known in the area. A photograph of this spot has survived.





3. Tree roots Van Gogh museum 1890 Photo 1890 Photo today

His admiration for nature is also shown in what has become known as



4. Wheatfield with crows July 1890 Van Gogh museum

The title was given not by Vincent but much later by art historians, who interpret the painting as threatening, a foreboding of his death. Indeed crows are solitary creatures, who feed on the bodies of dead animals and are therefore associated with death. In my country a 'crow' is an attendant at a funeral, suitably dressed in black. But the birds on Vincent's painting were rooks! There is rule of thumb to discern rooks and crows, both black, from a distance. If a crow is in a crowd it's a rook, (and if a rook is on its own it's a crow). Rooks are gregarious birds. At the end of the day, when night is falling over the exuberant blue sky, as the black stripe indicates, they rise from all corners of the wheat fields, where they have been happily foraging, into a great flock. They perform some acrobatic antics and chat a great deal, before they fly to their communal home. Like artists, like Vincent, free as a bird in the sky, but desiring togetherness.

He was fascinated by rooks. In 1877 he wrote to Theo about: "Hampton Court with its avenues of lime trees full of rookeries, Hampton Court."
2 To Theo, 5 June 1877

He painted that wonder of nature, which he saw every day in Auvers. He did not give the painting a title, so I feel at liberty to call this colourful, exuberant, playful work:

THE HOMING OF THE ROOKS

Of course, the wheat farmers were not so pleased with the flocks of hungry rooks. As pest control, they shot some young rooks, with a pistol. Their flesh was very tender and tasty, just right for the haute cuisine. Ironically, it was with a borrowed pistol for rook shooting that Vincent shot himself. Two other paintings are considered bad omens because of what Vincent wrote about them.

"They're immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness."
2 to Theo 10 July 1890

Here Vincent stands in the tradition of the Ruisdael brothers, the Dutch 17th century painters of turbulent skies and lonely landscapes, who are mentioned in 42 letters. Vincent himself does not appear lonely at this point. He is trying to persuade his brother to move to the country. Escaping from the apartment where he is trying to raise a child in the overpopulated Paris, to where one can be alone with nature. The French word 'solitude' does not signify loneliness, it has positive connotations. Vincent adds:

"That these canvases will tell you what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside." 2 to Theo 10 July 1890

With the turbulent skies, Vincent stands in the tradition of Van Ruisdael, the Dutch 17th-century painter of turbulent skies and lonely landscapes, who is mentioned in 42 letters. Earlier Vincent had explained his goal:

"I would like to express deep sorrow. In short, I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deep, that man feels subtly."
2 to Theo 21 July 1882

Vincent himself does not appear lonely at this point. He is trying to persuade his brother to move to the country. Escaping from that apartment the overpopulated Paris where he is desperately trying to raise a child to where one can be alone with nature.

"What these canvasses will tell you, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside." 2 10 July 1990

Thus, the search, in the letters and the paintings of Vincent, for signs of the oncoming drama leads us nowhere. We must accept that suddenly, without warning, without being triggered by anything specific, Vincent's neurotransmission fell to an unbearable low, in line with the circular character of his disorder. Rather like the full moon that declines without any kind of trigger. Neurotransmission, important for moving, for painting, speaking, and seeing, is also essential for giving the world sense and meaning. For upholding one's own identity and sense of worth and direction. For trust in other people. For hope. Neurotransmission must be constantly at work to uphold these meanings. When it lags, friends disappear, and identity, perspective, and worldview crumble. The very light disappears.

One of the best descriptions of Deep Depression, cold melancholy, probably known to Vincent, is Psalm 22

"I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not. And in the night season and am not silent. But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn: My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; I can count all my bones. Thou hast brought me into the dust of death." Psalm 22 verses 2-17

Deep despair includes a deep sense of guilt.

"One has a feeling of guilt, of falling short of not keeping promises, one isn't honest. One is afraid to make friends, one is afraid to stir, one would like to call out to people from a distance like one of the old lepers: Don't come too close, for contact with me will bring you sorrow and harm." 2 The Hague to Theo, 26- 27 November 1882

Deep depression is perpetual mourning, not for one specific person or event, but for all that is lost: the light, the meaning of life, friends turned enemies, one's sense of identity, of self-esteem, hope.... If all that dwindles, one descends into a black meaningless void, called Hell. Its gate closes after you. There is no way out. Above the gate, in the words of Dante.¹⁴

"I am the way to the city of desolation. I am the way to eternal sorrow. Relinquish all hope, ye who enter here!"

Vincent said just before he died.

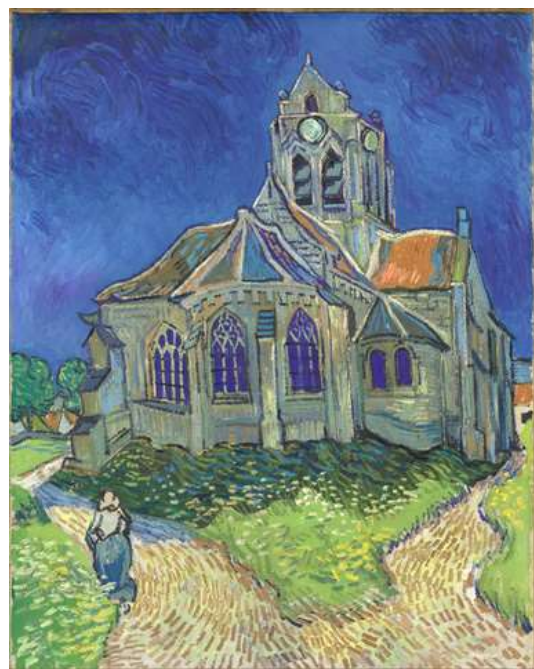
"La tristesse durera toujours" The sadness will last forever. Theo reported this to his sister Lies and added:

"I understood what he wanted to say with those words." 2 to Lies 5th August 1890
Did he mean 'durera', 'would' last forever - if he had not escaped in time.

Vincent knew what was in store for him from earlier experiences in Arles. Reverend Salles, who visited him when he was in deep depression, described his state in a letter to Theo:

"Vincent was hiding under his blankets, crying without saying a word, imagining he was being poisoned, that poison was everywhere. He refused to eat and has hardly spoken." Salles in a letter to Theo on 7 Feb 1889

When the signs of despair returned, Vincent knew what to expect. As the gates of hell swung open: 'Welcome back Vincent' he turned around and took the train to Rouen. A calm and rational decision to escape this time. The funeral ceremony was to be held in the beautiful church lovingly painted by Vincent.



5. L'église d'Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890 M. d'Orsay.

But in the invitation the church was crossed out. Vincent was not welcome there. For centuries the Church held that those who committed suicide were criminals, for whom there was no place in the church or church burial grounds. This cruel idea still lingers in the Dutch word 'zelf moord', 'self-murder'.

SACRIFICE AND REMUNERATION

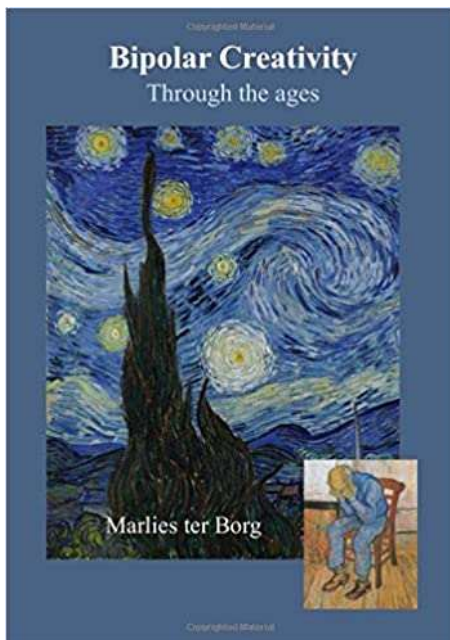
Vincent was deeply religious, although he distanced himself from the Reformed Church of his father. For him, the essence of life was sacrifice, personal suffering for a higher goal. In his last letter to Theo, he added:

"Ah well, I risk my life for my own work (Art) and my reason has half foundered in it - very well." found in his pocket on 27th July 1890

This is not a complaint. It is the statement of his personal sacrifice for art. Comparable to the words that Nelson, dying in the battle of Trafalgar, repeated until he could no longer speak: "Thank God, I have done my duty."

Vincent's belief in duty, in sacrifice, implies a reward. Vincent was exchanging everlasting sorrow for an artist's starry paradise in July 1888 he wrote:

"Just as we take the train to Rouen, we take death to reach a star." 2 To Theo 10 July 1888

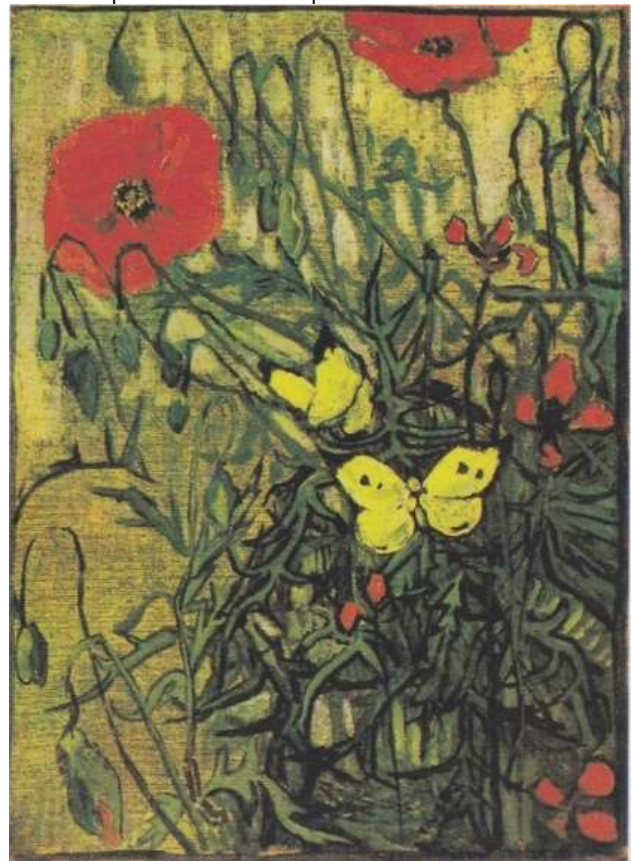


6. De Sterrennacht (Starry night) 1889 MOMA
Sorrowing old man - at eternity's gate 1890 KM
M ter Borg. Bipolar Creativity, Amazon 2021

Another important image of Vincent's belief in eternity was the butterfly. "However, since nothing confutes the assumption that lines and forms and colors exist on innumerable other planets and suns as well, we are at liberty to feel fairly serene about the possibilities of painting in a better and different existence. An existence altered by a phenomenon that is perhaps no more ingenious and no more surprising than the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The existence of a painter butterfly would be played out on countless celestial bodies."

2 to Emile Bernard, 23 June 1888

Vincent painted several pictures of butterflies.



7. Poppies and Butterflies, May 1890, Van Gogh Museum

Vincent's achievements in Auvers are truly a Grand Finale. Compared to that his suicide recedes into a grey past. Vincent's exuberant, dancing colours live on.

THEO'S TRAGIC END

Aristotle warned against both extremes, when the melaina cholè becomes cold it can lead to illogical sadness, lethargy, and even suicide. When it becomes too hot it can result in destructive mania. This is the mood characterized

by extreme energy happiness and confidence and blown-up self-esteem. Aristotle names the mythical hero Hercules, who killed his family in mania.

This mood is characterized by EXUBERANCE+++ extreme energy, euphoric happiness, and blown-up self-esteem. coupled with aggression. Aristotle names the mythical hero Hercules, who became manic and killed his family.

So, what happened to Theo? Months after losing Vincent he underwent a fierce and lengthy episode of mania. After attacking his wife and child he was hospitalized and transported to the Dutch Willem-Arntz clinic.

"After having travelled the whole night he was very cheerful; confused; had no idea of time and place; and utters only disjointed words. Suffers from megalomania. The patient is genetically burdened and has had a life full of emotional turmoil and great effort. The patient who hardly slept has been active all day, cheerful, active, noisy, tearing up his clothes banging his head everywhere." ¹⁶

The French expert Pinel had described the two forms of melancholy 90 years earlier.

"Nothing is more difficult to understand and simultaneously well documented, than the two opposite forms which melancholy can take. Sometimes it is a blown-up pride, the fantastic idea of being unbelievably rich or possessing unlimited power; at other moments there is a cowardly depression, a deep confusion or even despair." ¹⁷ p142

Now it was not the mild creative hypomania but the full-blown mania to which a Van Gogh brother fell prey. Theo was kept in solitary confinement. High neurotransmission implies extremes of energy, and curiously ecstatic happiness and blown-up pride. Theo was, during his confinement, perhaps believing that he was a world-famous art dealer, who had, in his brother Vincent, made the investment of the century! He was sure he could make a lot of money by selling just one or two paintings! Now he was busy and energetically hammering- to the walls of his small confinement cell, Vincent's 74 last paintings,- in the new Van Gogh museum. Within several days, half a year after his brother, Theo died from heart failure caused by exhaustion due to a long and

over-energetic manic episode. The other side of melancholy. However, his last days could have been superbly happy as often in mania. That is some comfort.

Less than two years later their sister Wil was hospitalized for depressive psychosis because she refused to eat. She remained in an asylum for 40 years. The costs were paid by their two healthy sisters Anna and Lies, using money they made by selling paintings of Vincent. That indicates the genetic aspect of the melancholy, as demonstrated by the van Gogh family. As Aristotle pointed out:

"All eminent persons are melancholics not owing to some illness, but due to their natural constitution." ^{3 955a40}

That is as close to genetics as Aristotle comes.

ANNA VAN GOGH AND JO BONGERS

The tragic but colorful drama of Vincent's last months has come to an end. Now it is time to turn the spotlight on two heroines who have remained modestly in the wings.

His mother, Anna van Gogh-Carventus, encouraged Vincent in his early years to draw and to enjoy nature. She herself came from a troubled family as Vincent explained to his doctor.

"He tells us that his mother's sister was troubled and that there are several cases in his family." ¹⁸ p. 59

Ever nervous about the instability of her offspring she lived to witness grave melancholy in three of her children.

Jo Bongers lost her husband in a dramatic way in her early marriage. Without her, the work of her brother-in-law, Vincent, would have slipped into oblivion. But she had a baby son who continued her work.

Vincent van Gogh (junior) was an elderly gentleman when he befriended a teenager, Meerten ter Borg, who had also lost his father at a very early age. From Vincent he learned to love art and in particular the paintings of his uncle Vincent. Sometimes Meerten and his mother were asked to mind the house when the family was away in the US. The paintings were scattered

around. Canvasses everywhere, some even under the beds. Above the kitchen table The Potato Eaters described by Vincent junior as 'gezellig', warm and convivial, the family eating their dinner together. Something Vincent and Meerten, as only sons of a widow, had missed.



8. The Potato Eaters 1885- Van Gogh Museum

It was from Meerten that I in my turn learnt to love art and especially the paintings of Vincent van Gogh.

I am happy to dedicate this article to him.

Conclusions

We have seen that the term Melancholy was central to Vincent's perception of his disorder. He used it to reach out to his brother Theo and to Dr Gachet. The term was part of the medical discourse of his time, as a bipolar and circular mood disorder. I pointed out that the term goes back to Aristotle, and that it is recognizable in today's medical term, manic depressive, or bipolar disorder.

His insight into the creative potential of mild warm melancholy, (hypomania), acknowledged by today's psychiatrists, was shared by 19th-century medical specialists, including Vincent's doctor Gachet.

Whilst acknowledging the creative potential of warm melancholy, Aristotle warned against extremes. The cooling of melancholy, possibly leading to (abrupt) suicide on the one hand. Hot melancholy leads to blown-up self-esteem and aggressive mania on the other hand.

Both extremes are recognizable in the fates of Vincent and Theo. They were soul mates in their love of art but also in the genetic base of their psychiatric troubles.

In this article, I have investigated the sequence of events in the last months of the two brothers. Vincent's exuberant creativity and his calm suicide. Followed by Theo's ecstatic mania and death.

The two brothers died at an early age, 37 and 35, after lives of suffering for art, but in constant communication and solidarity with each other. Their suffering was intimately connected to their great achievements.

"As we bow in honour of all their gifts, of their glorious memory, Let us also bow deeply, in compassion with their unbearable suffering."

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