



VAN GOGH AND THE STARRY NIGHT

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Van Gogh and The Starry Night, A Symbolic Paper

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Introduction

For my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream¹

The night was a pocket of pleasure hidden in Vincent's waterproof jacket of infinite sadness. It was a tightrope, suspended above his caustic thoughts, but he, the tightrope walker, didn't think he was in danger of falling, he accepted the risk and enjoyed the feeling that comes with escaping danger. Or rather the night itself was the danger: a magnetic storm with no sun, an infected wound in which bacteria develop and proliferate.

I was letting mine devour me: they were floating in the deadly void left within me by the collapse of the masks with which they had dressed me and of the compulsions they had taught me and had stretched their stunted arms out towards my heart to seize it with the poisoned hook of their claws and pull it down to my stomach. They had embraced each other and had become one, none of them could escape and the solidarity that my stomach had provided in order to let my heart live, cost it its primitive freedom. It was a hot summer of my adolescence and the astral vault was the umbrella above me towards which my gaze could not rise except to be crushed and sent back between the blank pages, that were mine, and the dark ones, that were of others.

So it was that one day I stumbled upon Van Gogh's dirty colored words *I didn't know that one could break one's brain and that afterwards that got better too²* and, recognizing in him the same shoulders I had that were a bit curved from the habit of looking at the ground and a bit tired from the habit of dreaming of the stars, I felt less alone.

¹ Letter n. 638 from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo, July 1888

² Letter n. 743 from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo, January 1889

After years that felt like one endless night spent under the blanket of harmless silence and loneliness, my stomach learned how to cry tears that were for it alone and live a life that was for it alone. Vincent Van Gogh's small and sunken eyes were the wells dug by my conscience, in them I found the reflection of my Shadow and the yellow of his individuation illuminated the transitus to mine, on which only the watchful and threatening eyes of the nocturnal birds of my complexes were suspended. The journey through the map for the rebirth that he generously left to humanity in *The Starry Night* is therefore my attempt to snatch him from the Harlequin's sarcophagus in which it would like to lock him and which he showed me in a dream of mine.

**1. Starry night, starry night: Van Gogh's suicide note
How he suffered for his sanity and how he tried to set them free**

Armed with his brushes, Vincent faced the *infinite descent of his life*. His depression and melancholy turned into a disease of the South, a vital need to emigrate towards the southernmost regions of Europe, towards the depths of his very self. Van Gogh strongly wanted to survive the refusal of the peculiarity of his existence. To escape from the North, from its heavy skies, from its cold mother earth, from its dull religious conformism, from the stigma of rejection and of sadness, to free himself from the only blanket he had been given, which was what his brother's tombstone projected onto him and onto every acre of land around it, was an urgent need. Vincent therefore descended into the most remote regions of his personality to get to know its threatening dynamics, its evil shadow-inhabitants and discovered there an inaccessible supplicating woman, a priest empty of vitality and swollen with formal religious ritualism and sexual moralism, a furious son hungry for attention and a father who needed to create, a man guilty of

being alive and a hunter, an unworthy survivor of the catastrophe and an avenging warrior. There he recognised loneliness, fear, pain, melancholy, anger, violence, masochistic forces, the desire to die and the yearning for power, and to take them with him when he went back up was the key to his self-realisation.

Van Gogh spent his whole life looking for the true midday of the sun, of the Sun at its zenith, which would no longer cast any shadows but would embrace them all in its light. Vincent dedicated his existence to claiming the right for his unconscious to speak, to the development of his psyche, to the discovery and affirmation of who he really was. *One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious*³. Like in an incarnation of the Norse myth of the god Odin, Vincent Van Gogh did not hesitate to migrate alone, to mutilate himself and immolate himself for a deeper knowledge of himself and the universe with which he longed to join in an atrociously intimate connection. According to the legend, in order to become wiser than the gods, Odin sacrificed an eye to the god Mimir so he would let him drink from the fountain of knowledge; this was why he was always represented with an eye bandaged or with just one eye. In the *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, does Vincent not seem to stoically remind us that he also acted as a martyr in his march towards the source of secrets in order to fulfil his destiny? The immense wisdom that Odin possessed however, had a different origin: it is said that he immortalised himself by hanging from the huge ash tree Yggdrasil, the tree that supported the nine worlds from which the universe was formed, in order to learn the secrets of the runes, the magic sources of all the power and the knowledge of the cosmic laws. The runes, sacred symbols with sharp

³ C. G. Jung, "Collected Works vol. 13: Alchemical Studies"

angled features, revealed to Odin the mysteries of the destiny of the world through the everlasting surfaces of the wood of the cypress trees and the stones of the tombstones, of the hooves of the proud horses, of the ploughshare of the plough, of the metal of the poets' pens, of the furrows of skin on the swollen bellies of the mothers, of the ivory of the amulets. They did this after nine days and nine nights of hardship and sacrifice during which the god felt he was flourishing and growing. Vincent revealed his destiny to the world through the everlasting surfaces of his canvas struck repeatedly by his paint. Van Gogh tried to embark on the hero's journey: he was a soldier, but his soul overflowed with human feelings and his melancholy aspiration that they might be noticed by another soul at least once was not fulfilled. He carefully sewed the creature of his identity by scratching his skin against his variegated rough materials and by piercing it with the needle that he held with a trembling hand. The child emptied of his individuality, suspended between his cradle and another person's tomb, finally won his human battle to resolve the uncertainty regarding his true identity, to accept it and present it to the Other but nobody answered his invitation. Vincent fulfilled his destiny: he finally found out who he had been and who he really was, that he could accept himself, but again he felt alone, abandoned and refused. He stood exhausted and proud on the top of the mountain of his new self-awareness, but the Hallelujah of the prisoner that he himself had freed was still suspended in the desert around him, devastated and dissolved by the thermal shock of the meeting with the ice-cold emptiness. He found a honest way to access life, but his opening to the Other was once again unsuccessful, the dynamics of his relationships of the past were repeated: the words his cousin Kee said to him echoed the victorious exultation of his Shadow, which was absolved,

recomposed, reorganised and emancipated and became those of the voice of the world: “never, never!”. Van Gogh’s triumph in his war to live fully and conquer his right to exist was not welcomed with embraces of acceptance, congratulatory handshakes, admiring applauses, nor were any glances cast on the canvasses that were a witness to his deep investigation into himself and to the redemption of his dark side.

Vincent Van Gogh could not have done more on this earth that however, had never done anything for him, and on 27th July 1890 he put aside his stubborn desire to free himself from the tangle of the identity and identification of his life, to be more like himself and less like the others, instead he turned himself into them and pulled the trigger of their guns on himself. On that very day, Vincent woke up at dawn like always, but unlike every day before that one, he did not set off immediately for the fields to paint. He lingered in the tiny attic of the tavern that belonged to the Ravoux couple where he had lived extremely cheaply since he had moved there from Auvers. He smoked his pipe and ate some green olives while sitting on the chair. After breakfast he left the inn and went out into the world, for the first time without his easel, paints and canvasses. He did not need them anymore: he had given the self-portrait the last brush stroke and he knew that it was finally completed. Everything was completed. With a brisk step and shoulders hunched forward he walked away from the town into the countryside, meeting and crossing glances with the villagers who, on the other hand, were going the other way as always, towards the main square for the Sunday celebrations. They were wearing their best clothes, as though their ceremonial dresses also made their sins more presentable and lifted their consciences in the presence of God’s judgement.

The day he committed suicide, Vincent was not wearing his straw hat. He no longer put any shelter between himself and the Sun of the identification that had been the guiding compass of his life: he was going to drown in the dream that had kept him alive up to that moment. In the way he committed suicide, with the last crumb of hope that fate left him, Vincent Van Gogh tried to free his Shadow and launch a plea to accept it, to rebel against the conformism of the world that had tried to imprison him. When he left the tavern in Auvers, he walked towards the hamlet of Chaponval, went along Rue Buchet and into a farm; he walked a few more steps, laid down in the manure pit, lit his pipe and smoked all the tobacco in it, emptied it and put it back in his pocket. Then with the same calm that of someone who is no longer tormented and has no more questions, he picked up the gun he had used in the past to drive away the animals that bothered him while he painted consolation and answers, and he shot himself below his ribs.

In the pocket of his jacket there was a letter addressed to Theo who wrote on it: *The letter he had on him on 27 July, that horrible day* and he kept it he whole life.

Today Vincent Van Gogh's *suicide note* celebrates his salvation, his rise beyond love and hate, beyond misery and fear and into freedom, proud in the monumental frame that attracts processions of visitors from the walls of the New York Museum of Modern Art. During his life Vincent never welcomed visitors but he expected them with the mystical sensitivity and foresight often attributed to melancholics. In any case, today not even the most oblivious soul could be indifferent to the painting in which Vincent Van Gogh generously told the story of the infinite and the miraculous that he had managed to conquer, in which he painted *more beginning, more perfection, more sky or hell than*

could ever be⁴. *The Starry Night* is the canvas sheet that bears the signs of a life that found in death the meaning that death itself, as such and as loss of the object of love, had taken from it. The painting is the Holy Shroud of a man who turned the world upside down, who dug into it until he found his own roots planted in hell and who then was able to reassemble it and leave it in order before throwing his heart into the stars to be born again. In *The Starry Night* the narration of his painful discovery of himself, of his tormented acceptance of his darkness in his consciousness, of his annihilation, of his regeneration and rebirth, are described by the revolutionary aspect, the capacity for regulation and order, the totality, the perfection, the immutability and timelessness of a **circular movement**. This starts in the bottom right hand corner of the painting, among the countless olive trees and continues in the village of Vincent's childhood memories, Nuenen. The assumption in the astral vault of the top part of the painting is accomplished with the decisive flaming vertical line of the cypress that flares up on the left. This story begins among the **olive trees**: like the olive tree, its protagonist, marked by the weight of the absence of the object love and tangled with every refusal, takes root in the dry, rocky and sterile soil of a mother in mourning and depressed, cold and inaccessible. Vincent was born and grew up as *the germinating seed exposed to a frosty wind*⁵ in the Garden of Gethsemane in which, like Christ, he prayed for salvation with such sorrow and despair that *his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground*⁶. Vincent was born and grew up entangled in the suffocating knots of identifications, a threat to his life and his health, of trunks twisted through the

⁴ W. Whitman, "Song of Myself, 3", 1892

⁵ Letter n. 404 from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo, November 1883

⁶ Gospel of Luke, 22: 43-44

generations and witnesses of the efforts to free himself of the man who had himself become a rickety plant, deformed and bent over by his constant commitment to the struggle for his life, forgotten by the hostile soil of the Olive Grove's trees of his mother's womb. Among the olive trees that were scattered throughout his existence and that turned it into a dark Garden of Gethsemane, Vincent was as much Simon Peter, the aggressor as he was Malchus his victim. The artist, in his compulsive search for punishment, in the torture and physical affronts to which he subjected his body, repeatedly turned his destructive impulses against himself, becoming the subject and the object of them. The destruction of his creative products, as extensions of the self, during his childhood, his food restrictions, lack of sleep, self-inflicted beatings on his back while he was in Amsterdam. These were the masks he dressed the punishments in, they were the timid requests for acceptance and love, the declaration of his obscenely intimate connection with death and with his constant questions about the infinite and resurrection.

The most famous of Van Gogh's impulses to self-punishment for his guilt can be traced historically as well as symbolically to the Olive Grove, showing what an impression the passage from the Bible set there had made on him. In the representation of the Gethsemane, Vincent described how he came into the world in a place of estrangement and refusal, the darkness of the night with the sunset of his brother's life and of a leaden sky predicting death that weighed on him; he narrated his libido, which in the regression stage had been introverted and had reactivated the imago of his parents; he also expressed his maternal imago, which can be attributed to that designated by Jung as the *terrifying mother*. In this scenario, he cut his ear off, a gesture to harm himself with

which Van Gogh cried out his need for caresses, to be seen, acknowledged and loved at any cost. This self-mutilation reveals a request for oral incorporation to heal his loneliness by joining the maternal figure projected onto her and re-establishing a childlike type of relationship with her. The artist's differential function and typically masculine characteristics, infected by his mother's teratogenic depression, and made even worse by his sentimental and professional disappointments, were therefore the victims of his unconscious and of the paralysis which, with its requests, it had caused on the progressive energy and on the forward push of his conscious. In this state in which Van Gogh's reality testing functions were weak and his primitive thinking processes seemed to have the upper hand over him, his ear became a phallic symbol. But as Jung states in the fifth chapter of *Symbols of Transformations*, remembering among others the myths of Heracles and Gilgamesh, the onslaught of the unconscious, which as matrix of consciousness has a maternal meaning, can be converted into a source of energy for a heroic conflict. In fact, in the setting of his birth and of his tormented first years in the Garden of Gethsemane, Vincent Van Gogh does not only narrate his identification with his deceased brother, with Simon Peter the aggressor and Malchus the victim but also and above all of that with Christ, mocked and unjustly accused and imprisoned like the *fou-rou* was himself. In the life of Christ, the artist recognised disapproval, rejection, isolation and it was precisely this activation in him of the archetype of the Hero that allowed him to rise above those who criticised him, to defeat the monster they represented, to save himself from the paralysing power of depression he had inherited in order to complete the task of discovering his individuality and save his own totality.

If on the barren and stony ground of his maternal complex Van Gogh placed the beginning of the graphic diary of his life that glorified his struggle for identification, his birth and growth as a twisted and stubborn olive tree, the dramas of the terror of lonely sacrifice left unheeded, of rejection, in the next image of the **village** we can expect an aspect of his father. Here, we witness Van Gogh looking back at the nude, remote images of the quiet and ordinary village Zundert where he was born and mentioned in this letter to Theo, and once again at the magical and indistinctly felt desire for an exclusive connection with his mother, which can be guessed from the same letter. Immediately after the episode of his self-mutilation, Van Gogh looked away from the crisis that ensued, from the depression that had silently inhabited him from the beginning of his life and that now claimed the legitimacy of its contents and slipped back into his past. It was precisely this additional regressive phase that he described in the representation of the apparently inhabited centre just outside the Olive Grove in his painting. Once again we come across a maternal symbol, the city that safeguards its inhabitants like children and in which Vincent had also looked for refuge. However, the outline of a **church** breaks through: the reverend Theodore Van Gogh is painted in it, as blind as the dark windows, apparently as kind as an open door but in fact as cruel as the sharp bell tower standing out and reaching for the sky.

During the period of his violent religious passion, Vincent elected his father as his idealised model, but this paternal idealisation soon turned into disappointment and contempt. His father thus took on the appearance of a place of worship that was as *cold as iron*, empty of any sincere devotion but overflowing with blind dogmatism, hypocrisy and varnished with respectability; the home of submissive children imprisoned in

inherited doctrines that are deaf to the voice of the world. In the village of the artist's memories, none of them are out on the streets. Each in their own cage, they have lost the consciousness of the common belonging of human beings: they are benefactors with starched collars, clean hands and impure souls, snipers with weapons loaded with blind faith, with forgotten dreams and frustrated instincts.

On the way back to his mother's body in the symbol still impregnated with the materialism of the city, there is incest. Only the intervention of this *prohibition of incest* could create the self-conscious individual. Thus the author of *The Starry Night*, in his journey through the painting, left his parents' house behind him, he got up from the pit of what he was imposed to be and not be and went towards the sun, to admire himself. From the moment his illusions with respect to the world of religion collapsed, Vincent started challenging his parents. He had to free himself from the restraints that his cramped family atmosphere placed on his progress and transformation, and the projection of his dark destructive instincts on the figures of his parents represented the first essential step in this direction. In his masterpiece, this fundamental turning point in his life is told by the image of the artist who abandons the **sterile maternal olive grove** and the **inhospitable paternal church**, renouncing any limitations he had inherited from them and who starts walking towards the first floor of representation, where he will discover and learn to fully experience his destiny. Significantly, when he started his career as an artist, Vincent decided that his name would no longer be associated with the surname Van Gogh. The official reason he gave for this decision was that people who were not Dutch would have found it difficult to pronounce his name properly; but even his very first drawings are simply signed *Vincent*, demonstrating that this was none

other than a symbolic act to cut all psychological links with the father figure, with the inflexible and distant religion that he represented. However, his total detachment from his childhood, from the relationship of dependence and passivity with his father and from the chilling emptiness of his mother's embrace only occurred in 1885, when Vincent's creative spirit was able to free itself in the composition of what is considered his first masterpiece: *The Potato Eaters*. That same year he managed to abandon his family definitively and he also left Holland, where he felt more like a foreigner than anywhere else. The hero had thus embarked on the crossing in which all the imago, the fantasies, the ghosts that had inhabited his existence until that moment and the lives that they had made him live and had confused him, were destroyed; the idea of an individual and definitive death thus became possible and with it the new creation of himself. Like for Adam in the Book of Genesis, when he became conscious, death appeared in the world; in the graphic storytelling of his struggle and his salvation which *The Starry Night* is, death is in the gigantic **cypress** that aims to strike the heavens above. Standing out and reaching for the scattered stars with its crown of vibrant and domineering flames, it is as much an emblem of death as of light and life; of the life that the transformative power of death creates access to. The Persians saw the holy fire in the cypress, so they considered it the first tree of paradise establishing a connection between the transient human world and the kingdom of heaven. A suggestion of the connection between the cypress and life also derives from its phallic shape. It is said that even Cupid's arrows were made of cypress and in his *Poems*, Catullus reminds us that the *towering cypress* was a customary wedding gift. There are therefore Eros and Thanatos in what in *The Starry Night* is nothing but yet another self-portrait of Vincent;

the artist portrayed himself in the moment when he died and was finally born again. Van Gogh, sick with the poison injected into him by his maternal snake and penetrated by the blade of the paternal knife, looked for shelter in the shadow of the perfumed branches of the cypress. In agony, he dug his grave, he went back to Mother Earth and, bent under the burden of his destiny, oppressed by the weight of his Self, he made his hard decision to voluntarily sacrifice the man that others made him presume he was and to go in search of his individuality. The burden on the hero's shoulders is the hero himself in his totality, his Self which, transcending the merely human element, rises to divinity. In the sixth chapter of *Symbols of Transformation* Jung wrote: *Mithras, in the Taurophoria, took his bull (or, as the Egyptian hymn says, "the bull of his mother"), namely his love for his Mater Natura, on his back, and with this heaviest burden set forth on the via dolorosa of the Transitus. The way of this passion leads to the cave in which the bull is sacrificed. So, too, Christ had to bear the Cross to the place of sacrifice, where, according to the Christian version, the Lamb was slain in the form of the god, and was then laid to earth in the sepulchre*⁷. The cross and, in the story of the battle for salvation that *The Starry Night* tells, the cypress tree whose wood Beda, a saint and doctor of the Church in the 7th century, said was used to make the pole of the holy cross, represent the perfect symbol of the tension of opposites recomposed and therefore the completeness of the hero's process of identification.

In sinking into Mother Earth, in his fusion with Nature, symbolised in his representation as a cypress, Van Gogh depicted the conscious abandonment to the apparent death of the descent into himself, in the cauldron of massed needs, desires and anxiety, which is

⁷ C. G. Jung, "Collected Works vol. 5: Symbols of Transformation"

the unconscious, and the transformation into himself as the victorious outcome of this journey into the abyss. Vincent is reborn from himself in the figure of what from a tree of death becomes a tree of life. Van Gogh had walled himself into himself, prostrate with fatigue and pain he had dug into himself and, in the discovery of and reconciliation with his instincts, with his compulsions, with his depression, with his primordial forces and with his dark sides, he had recomposed himself: he had turned libido over in the kingdom of the unconscious and thus constellated contents up to that moment latent and devouring, he had given them a specific energy and this had attracted the conscious ideas that allowed the illuminating and safeguarding passage in his consciousness. He had been afraid to look at his Shadow and tried to protect himself from its incendiary, brutal, chaotic, overflowing power. Hidden behind the cracks between his eyelashes, with the obstinacy however that his attachment to life gave him, he had scrutinised and learned to recognise enemies and allies in his demonic inner struggle and he had identified, in their eternal confinement between the margins of his canvasses and in their transformation into that beauty towards which modern sensitivity is indebted, the strategy for taming them and going to meet them in order to embrace them and welcome them into himself. He had found inside himself the infinite and the miraculous which up to that moment he had looked for in the external world, but once again he was denied them. Van Gogh came to the resigned understanding that his descent into the underworld of himself and his victory over apparent death would have not be followed by a resurrection in this world and he shot himself. Van Gogh's death seems to retrace the myth of Astraea, the goddess of justice who escaped into the constellation of the Virgin because she was disgusted by human evil. At his bedside, his

brother Theo reassured him that he would be healed, but Vincent Van Gogh was already healed, and the others did not know it. Now he wanted to reach the infinite; silence would no longer be that of loneliness but of peace, so he offered his mocked body and his misunderstood feelings to death so it could finally give meaning to life itself.

In the cypress Vincent told of the gruelling work of discovering his individuality in the unconscious, of his apparent death and of the sacrifice of himself in carnal death as the only doorway to immortality; behind the dark leaves of the tree of death, life seems to go out but the secret expectation of the renewal of life itself winds through the tall pyramid of its courageous ascent towards the sky: in the upper part of *The Starry Night* we can thus see Van Gogh sucked into the eternity of the universe by the stars he painted in concentric circles like magic hypnotising eyes. The cypress is the place of transformation of death into eternal life, in it Vincent Van Gogh painted the tomb and resurrection; the bridge between suffering and joy, loneliness and union, darkness and light, the earth and the skies. The cypress is Vincent Van Gogh himself who cancelled the barriers between man and nature, destroyed every line of separation, disrupted the dialectics of opposites in the name of pantheism. In the act of representing himself in the tree, a bridge built between the cold darkness of the earth in which one dies and the infinity of the **blue** sky in which one rises, Van Gogh has also given shape to the idea of religion that was the central driving force in his life. In *The Starry Night*, such noninstitutional and pantheistic vision competes with the dogmatic and corrupted one of the society that, paralyzed by doctrines, we found locked up in the houses in the shadow of the inhospitable church and that, during the painter's life, was never ready to

welcome him⁸. The **waves** and the **spirals** represent the assumption of Van Gogh into the spiritual sphere without time to which one can only give the name of that God who welcomes and loves unconditionally like the embrace between the swirling clouds that, at the centre of the sky, promise never to part. Vincent had broken his ties with the concrete world and its awe of the senses, with his parents and above all with his mother, with his inhospitable family and with his ghosts, integrating in his consciousness the powerful latent contents of his unconscious which are the stars illuminated in the night in the parallelism between the universe inside oneself and the universe outside oneself. However, the transformation into the man who he was always destined to be did not affect the strength of the attraction of his desire to go back to his mother, rather it had raised it to a symbol. In *Symbols of Transformation* Jung spoke about an inscription from the end of the Roman era that reproduced a sequence of symbols that he translated by making the Sun equal to the phallus and the moon to a vase and therefore to the maternal uterus. The discovery of another monument in the same museum confirmed his assumption; it showed the same representation but replaced the symbol of the vase with the more obvious one of a woman.

So Van Gogh transformed his longing for communion with the mother Anna Cornelia into a desire to return to her uterus which, fertilised by the **wind**, would have given birth to him like the eternal Sun, an image of the god, archetype of the transcendent totality and of the Self which, in *The Starry Night*, actually seems to rise up from the Moon.

⁸ *The personal way Van Gogh had of living religion as a deeply intimate connection with the Nature and God as no longer resident in the institutions but in the wisdom and the virtue, echoed the Buddhism by which he was long fascinated and at times influenced, and reminds of the spiritual attitude with which C. G. Jung led his life*

The sickle that clings and kills, the perfect circle of the return ring, the **Moon**, which is the switch on the painting, represents the essential characteristics of the archetype of the mother: *The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate*⁹. This symbolic analysis of the terrestrial satellite in the right hand corner of the sky in *The Starry Night*, explains the meaning of the mythical cycle represented in this self-portrait of salvation, that is the yearning to reach rebirth through the uterus of a mother who is no longer carnal but who has become a symbol, and to become immortal like the sun. Van Gogh abandoned his damaged body and dissolved his limbs in the oil paints with which he had painted the wind; he thus portrayed himself in the Spirit, in the fertilising breath that blew towards the moon to regenerate itself from it. In support of the interpretation of the image of the moon as the seat of the spiritual mother, we can reference *The Song of Hiawatha*, by Henry Wadsworth, in which the celebrated leader, still a child, asked his grandmother Nokomis about the origin of the Moon and she said that the moon was none other than non *the body of a grandmother* launched into the sky by a belligerent grandson in a moment of anger. The grandmother is one of the countless aspects of the archetype of the mother and, considering that

⁹ C. G. Jung, "Collected Works vol.9 part I: Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious"

Nokomis looked after Hiawatha like a second mother after his biological mother died in childbirth, this meaning of the moon becomes even more evident.

In 1885 Vincent Van Gogh wrote: *Life is not long for anybody, and the problem is only to make something of it*¹⁰, and, wet by the tears from the death of someone for whom he was supposed to be the unworthy replacement, grown up wandering around looking for a place in the desire of the Other, stumbled repeatedly on the metallic threads of his emotional knots, he had made of it a victorious mission to conquer the Self in its entirety. The unshakable faith in himself that he metaphysically and tenaciously always had, led him to the depths of his unconscious where he walled himself in and worked frenetically bent over himself to dig into the cracks of his being and let the light through from them, to turn the original narcissistic wound, the melancholy and his shadows into poems. In *The Starry Night* the artist soared in the timeless glory and space of the heavens, stripping himself of the pain of separation and of guilt, of sin and of shame, of his sense of unworthiness and of his fear of death. He left them as an inheritance, as an insufficient blanket, for the carnal world and its children: for his brother Theo who died maybe also from the pain of the detachment and remorse just six months after his older brother; for the cold iron-like ecclesiastical institution and its blind devotion to human doctrines; for those who reduced his departure from the earthly world to just a few lines in the local newspaper. His genius, radiated from the paintings that were a testimony of his feelings and of his journey into the underworld, refracted in the souls of the few people who had come to bid him farewell and while he, having become the man of his destiny, had been accepted, victorious, in the kingdom of God.

¹⁰ Letter n. 099 from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo, November 1876

Conclusion

Van Gogh was born a prisoner of his own name and of the rejected desire hidden in it. The artist was caught up for a long time in the intricate threads of people's opinions of him, of what they saw and said about him, of what they expected of him, in petrifying identifications with those who surrounded him and inhabited his fantasies and his memories, and was unable to build an integrate and stable image of himself. Among the emotional knots that kept the threads that impeded his flights taut for a long time, the one intertwined by the relationship with the mother Anna Cornelia was robbed of affectionate warmth, intimacy, tenderness, concern, timely care and unconditional acceptance by the tragic event that had struck the woman freezing her in a chronic and contagious depression and had left Van Gogh unable to find his way around the labyrinth-like paths of the process of self-differentiation, gasping in that state that Freud called *ocean feeling*. The borrowing of other people's identity represented Vincent's first attempt to have his right to a human feeling recognized and to free his *maternal complex* from the negative aspects with which it had inevitably become infected. With the idea that *to suffer and to die is to be loved* learned in his childhood in mind, he tried to become the brother who preceded him and Christ who inflicted severe pains over himself and tried to enter the mother through the delivery of a part of his body to a prostitute who represented her. Yet, this act of regeneration in the maternal womb that Van Gogh so desperately needed was not liberating as it was still stuck on a material and corporal level. The ascent towards the symbolic in which the painter found his resurrection only happened, in fact, after the destruction of the parental idealizations that, without any weapon, he had built, and after the projections onto his parents of

those characteristics of unworthy and evil that up to that point had made him feel like a stray, and after the discovery of the blank canvases as a mirror on which to reflect mourning, refusal, solitude, anger, despair, anguish, depression; as a film on which to impress his soul. In *The Starry Night*, Vincent Van Gogh left an illuminating testimony of his battle against the parental complexes that held his progressive energy hostage and of how he managed to travel up the river of his perceptions, his fantasies and his identifications to reach and integrate his Shadow in the new man who could be reborn like the Sun, symbol of the true self, from the mother, finally symbol in the image of the moon, in the sky of infinite glory.

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