

Tragic Destiny in the Life and Death of Vincent van Gogh

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The aim of this essay is to interpret selected aspects of the life and death of Vincent van Gogh in light of a new biography. On October 18, 2011 two American scholars published a detailed and comprehensive biography of the artist, consisting of nearly 900 pages with small print and correlated with online footnotes (Naifeh and Smith 2011). This magisterial work will surely become the definitive biography of the painter. The authors present new evidence that refutes previous biographies, making them misleading or obsolete. For example, previous studies presumed that van Gogh died by suicide, but that position can no longer be maintained (cf. Blumer 2002; Meissner 1992; Nagera 1967).

My interpretation is based upon the work of Leopold Szondi, a Hungarian-Swiss psychiatrist who established a monumental system of psychiatry called *Schicksalsanalyse* or the “analysis of destiny.” As a psychiatric geneticist, Szondi discovered the familial unconscious and synthesized it with psychopathology, ego psychology, and psychotherapy. He organized his system in terms of the concept of destiny which he defined as “the totality of all inherited existential possibilities” that one chooses and enacts (Szondi 1968: 21). The existential possibilities emerge from the familial unconscious, and the individual selects them either compulsively or relatively freely while acting out a pattern of behavior. The main choices are those of marriage, vocation, friendship, and to a certain extent illness and mode of death. In some cases compulsive choices may lead to a tragic fate.

In the following four sections I present a condensed biographical narrative based upon the new van Gogh biography, citing only the page numbers, and at the end of the essay I interpret aspects of the tragic destiny of the artist.

van Gogh’s Family

Vincent van Gogh’s mother, Anna Carbentus, grew up in fear and fatalism due to a family memory of the sea flooding and drowning villages in her native Netherlands. As a defense, she became frenetically busy, learning how to draw and paint since her family had artists, and turning to religious faith as a refuge (16–17). On May 21, 1851 she married Theodorus van Gogh who was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. After their wedding, they moved to Zundert, a commercial Dutch town surrounded by swamp, heath, and a treeless uncultivated terrain.

On March 30, 1852 Anna delivered a stillborn son named Vincent, and she buried the baby in the small Protestant cemetery next to the church. Exactly one year later to the day the future painter was born and named Vincent Willems van Gogh. Altogether, Anna bore six children who survived, and she regarded children as holy, parenthood as sacred, and the family as a refuge from the chaos of the world (25). All of the children grew up clinging to the family, and in their adult lives they felt homesick when separated from one another. Of all her children

Anna never understood Vincent, her eldest son, because his eccentricities undermined her sense of order in the world. Vincent never understood why she rejected him, and he never ceased yearning for her approval (11–12).

Anna planted a garden as a model of the cycles of nature, and it was in the garden that Vincent learned his artistic symbolism, such as tree roots as the promise of life after death (27). After dinner, the family would gather in the kitchen to read aloud to one another fairy tales, poetry, literary classics, and the Bible. Vincent enjoyed, in particular, the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, and throughout his adult life he continued the practice of extensive reading. All the van Gogh children learned to draw, sketch, paint, and collage.

Anna imposed a strict discipline upon the children. Their behavior as minister's children was governed by the Dutch "holy Trinity" of duty, decency, and solidity. This meant primarily the duty of upholding the family's high social status. She taught them to dress well, associate only with people in respectable circles, and to repress any "unseemly emotions" (33).

Vincent's father was an aloof disciplinarian who erupted in righteous anger when his authority was questioned (54). While Vincent emulated his father, he was never accepted by him on his own terms. Vincent also admired his paternal male uncle, called Cent, who was a wealthy, cosmopolitan art dealer. Although friendly and outgoing, Uncle Cent was physically frail and vulnerable to "terrible headaches" (59).

As a young boy, Vincent was perceived as strange. He was reclusive, noisy, quarrelsome, often displaying outbursts of anger aimed at his "class-conscious and order-loving mother" (37). Since he felt alienated and rejected by her, he wanted to escape from home; so he began his life-long habit of taking long solitary walks, wandering in nature, particularly at night and during storms (39). Anna distrusted solitude and believed that "country outings" had to be supervised. While walking in nature, Vincent would collect bugs, birds' eggs, and flowers to examine, categorize, and display with their proper Latin names (43).

Vincent's childhood companion was his younger brother Theo. Vincent was aloof, dark, and suspicious; Theo outgoing, bright, and friendly. Despite their character differences, however, they played together constantly, but they also argued with each other. Their father viewed them in terms of the biblical story of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25: 23–28) in which Jacob the second born son of Isaac acquired the blessing from his father, thus earning the hostility of the first born Esau (42, 333).

In October 1864, when Vincent was 11 years old, his parents sent him to a boarding school in Zevenbergen, where he was lonely, homesick, and in need of his father. He took courses in art education, and what he learned came out many years later in his paintings (48). Two years later his parents transferred him to another boarding school in Tilburg, but in March 1868 Vincent left school before finishing the term and walked seven hours back home to Zundert because he wanted to be at home with his family.

van Gogh's Existential Choices

Uncle Cent had established an art dealership, linking the van Gogh family with the international art world (64–66). Sixteen months after he left the boarding school Vincent began

work in his uncle's office in The Hague. While in The Hague, Vincent became attracted to Caroline Haanebeek, a pretty blonde of whom his parents approved. When she married someone else, he reacted by declaring: "If I cannot get a good woman' he told Theo, 'I shall take a bad one ... I would sooner be with a bad whore than be alone'" (78). In the fall of 1872 he began his life-long practice of visiting prostitutes.

Vincent's shyness and awkward behavior did not serve him well in his uncle's firm. The family feared that his misbehavior might discredit the family name; so his uncle decided to transfer him to the London branch of the business which was wholesale only, and Vincent would not be working with customers (81). In 1873 London was the largest city in the world, dirty, chaotic, and distant from nature. Vincent was lonely and did not enjoy working in London. He avoided socializing and continued his solitary activities of taking long walks, reading, and letter writing (87). Socially inept but desiring human contact, he found his only companionship with prostitutes (96). Conflicts with his family intensified. He wrote letters home less frequently, so that his sister Anna said: "He has withdrawn himself from the world and societyHe pretends not to know us He is a stranger" (99).

In 1875 Vincent was transferred to the company office in Paris, where he took an apartment on the Montmartre but did not inform his family of his new address. The reason is that he had found a new evangelical fervor (104). He read religious literature, specifically Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. He identified with Renan's portrait of Jesus as a provincial who shunned his family, loved nature, and journeyed in search of himself. Always longing to go home, Vincent made an unauthorized trip home at Christmas in 1875, for which he was dismissed from the company. By April 1876 Vincent had returned to London, where he secured employment as a tutor in a boarding school. He lived in a boarding house near the church of the Baptist minister Charles Spurgeon, whose preaching attracted large crowds to his services and who portrayed Jesus as a model of unconditional love.

Vincent was enthralled by Spurgeon's oratory, and he decided to become a minister. Having grown up in the Dutch Reformed Church which emphasized consolation rather than sin and guilt, Vincent thought preaching had the purpose of consoling people and not judging them. Dutch Reformed theology viewed God as watchful and caring (129). A Methodist minister invited Vincent to be his assistant, and on October 29, 1876 he preached his first sermon, filled with striking images of reconciliation and redemption. In the parish ministry he enjoyed singing hymns and reading the New Testament story of the Prodigal Son. At Christmas 1876 he returned home, hoping to be reconciled with his family, but they insisted that he should give up his religious calling. They did not think he could make a living to support himself, so his father and Uncle Cent secured a job for him as a bookkeeper and sales clerk for a bookseller in Dordrecht. At age 24 he took the job out of duty, even though he still wanted to become a minister. His father was impressed with his knowledge of art, and he pushed his son in the direction of art business.

His job Dordrecht did not work out well, so he left the shop and traveled to Amsterdam to begin formal study for the ministry. He wrote to Theo that, "If I one day have the joy to become a pastor and to acquit my task like our father ... I will thank God" (149). In Amsterdam Vincent lived with his paternal uncle Jan, a Rear Admiral in the Dutch navy and a heroic, disciplined seaman. Vincent grew weary of his studies, particularly Greek, becoming restless, walking frequently, and not relating to others. He became nostalgic for the past, especially England. His letters were filled with images of darkness and self-reproach. His headaches became worse, and for the first time he considered suicide: "I breakfasted on a piece of dry bread and a glass of beer

... that is what Dickens advises for those who are on the point of committing suicide, as being a good way to keep them from their purpose, at least for a while” (168).

Vincent always had the need to escape the world and construct an alternative reality through art and religion (170). He imagined another world through images of the Prodigal Son, the sower, and boats on stormy seas (285). The sower was one of his favorite life-long images, and it came from his father’s preaching. He believed God could only be known through nature and that artists were the true intermediaries. Religion and art have the power to console and bring light into darkness. “In his description of a twilight walk along the bank of the IJ River he struggled to express—for the first of many times—the solace he found in the night sky. He began with the ‘shining moon’ and ‘that deep silence.’” (176). God’s love is known through the stars, and the starry night is the promise of redemption.

Vincent recognized that he could not complete his theological studies in Amsterdam. With the intervention of his father he enrolled in a three-month trial program at an evangelical school in Brussels, but he failed there as well. He traveled to the mining district of Belgium, to the so-called “black country,” to serve a small country church. Between January and March of 1879 he visited a mine; and although he liked the miners, they rejected him as strange and worthless. In July of 1879 the Evangelical Committee terminated Vincent’s ministry on the grounds of poor preaching, but his parents believed the actual reason was his inability to comply with the committee’s requests (202). Vincent fell into delusion and despair; and he yearned to see his brother Theo, but Theo told him that he had brought their parents grief with shame and disappointment (204). Overcome with melancholy, he considered suicide again when writing to Theo: “My life has gradually become less precious, much less important and more a matter of indifference to me” (207). Meanwhile, his father decided to commit him to an asylum.

In August 1880 Vincent announced that he was an artist (215). Theo began to support Vincent financially, and he would continue the support for the remainder of Vincent’s life. Vincent had become asocial, a person lacking social graces who believed that social interactions were a choice between assaulting or being assaulted (223). Vincent remembered his father’s intention to commit him to an asylum; so when going home for Christmas in 1881, Vincent refused to attend holiday church services. Vincent released “all his pent-up frustration in a fury of righteous indignation and profane curses” against his father (252). He could no longer contain his anger. Consequently, his father ordered him out of his house and demanded that he never return: “Get out of my house ... the sooner the better, in half an hour rather than an hour.” Vincent never overcame his father’s rejection.

With bitterness and rage Vincent returned to The Hague, where he would live alone with Theo’s financial support. Theo reprimanded him for mistreating their parents. Vincent would have “periodic fits of rage, followed by grudging efforts at reconciliation, followed by meaningless vows of indifference” (261) These fits were aimed at everyone. Disagreements “quickly escalated ... into a frenzy of argument that knew neither reason nor restraint” (264). Vincent complained of fever and headaches, warning Theo that if he did not get his money he would have a breakdown. He believed that he deserved to be supported financially on the grounds of his hard work and noble purpose (271).

In the spring of 1882 he began a love affair with a pregnant prostitute Clasina Hoornik, known as Sien. When she delivered her baby, they became his substitute family (293). Though physically unattractive, he considered her an angel. He rented an apartment for his “family” and wanted to marry Sien, but Theo tried to dissuade him from marriage. Two years later, however, Vincent broke off the relationship with Sien.

Having become homeless and thinking of himself as belonging nowhere and being nothing, he still hoped for a reunion with his family. He was getting physically weaker by eating less food and drinking more alcohol. He took his walks at night so as to avoid meeting people. He thought of life as an “ash heap” and spoke “openly of regret (‘some things will never return’) and obliquely of suicide” (327). His debts were mounting, and his creditors were coming after him.

“Reports of nervousness, feverishness, faintness, and dizziness continued throughout the spring and summer, rising to a defensive crescendo—as they always did—in advance of his brother’s arrival” (342). Theo came for a brief visit on August 17, 1883. They argued over money, and Theo demanded that Vincent get a job. In Theo’s reprimand Vincent heard his father speaking, so that with Theo’s departure at the train station Vincent thought “that his brother had *become* his father” (346).

After a three-month trip to Drenthe, a town of poverty and bleakness where he painted the peat fields, Vincent returned home for Christmas in 1883. He blamed his father for banishing him two years earlier, and he charged that the banishment was the source of all his problems. He stayed for two years, fighting with his father, proclaiming his atheism, and complaining of being the black sheep in the family. In January 1884 Vincent’s 64-year old mother fell and broke her hip, and for the next two months Vincent took care of her, thereby pleasing his parents.

In the fall and winter of 1884 a wealthy patron hired Vincent to paint, and he provided paint supplies and even models. He was sexually intimate with one of his models. Vincent also taught students how to paint. At a family dinner Vincent provoked an argument with his father, and a dinner guest recorded that Vincent became so furious “that he rose from his place with the carving knife from the tray in his hand and threatened the bewildered old man” (406).

Vincent’s on-going anger and abuse against his father aggravated the deteriorating health of the elder van Gogh. The father struggled to manage Vincent’s increasingly unmanageable behavior. At Christmas 1884 Vincent’s paternal cousin Hendrik, son of Admiral Jan, was hospitalized for epileptic seizures. On March 27, 1885 Vincent’s father died of a stroke. In subsequent years Vincent never mentioned his father’s death in his letters, and he never described the funeral procession passing through the wheat fields. Vincent’s sister Anna remained at home, did the housework, cared for her mother, and evicted Vincent. She told him that he had killed their father, and he was now killing their mother (435). Vincent left home never to return, and he would always fear a family conspiracy against him.

van Gogh’s Illness

By the end of 1885 Vincent had contracted syphilis and was receiving treatment for it. He had been visiting prostitutes in several cities and using them as models and for sexual satisfaction. On January 18, 1886 Vincent enrolled in painting and drawing classes at the Royal Academy of Art in Antwerp. By early February, however, his life was collapsing, having been expelled from one class and humiliated in another (487). His teeth rotted and broke. He was weak and feverish, having images of death which he portrayed by the skull of a skeleton smoking a cigarette.

Vincent went to Paris to be with Theo and entered a drawing school, but he stayed only three months. He had no success in selling or exhibiting his works, and he could not get any models. Vincent wanted to work with Theo for the rest of their lives, but they continued to quarrel over money, family, and art. Theo's conflicts with Vincent led to his own deteriorating health and by Christmas 1886 he lost weight and became weak. His joints stiffened to the point of immobility, and his face swelled (529).

Theo acquired a new woman in his life, Johanna Bonger, and he proposed marriage to her. At first she said no, but at a later time she accepted his proposal. With Theo's intention to marry Vincent suffered paralyzing nightmares and spoke of suicide (535). He realized that he was dependent on Theo for his livelihood and that his only alternative to living with Theo was suicide (535, 539).

In February 1888 Vincent left Paris unexpectedly and traveled to the town of Arles in southern France. He resumed his life of exile and loneliness in a distant place, even though his health continued to deteriorate with loss of appetite, fevers, and weakness. Theo sent him 150 Francs a month, and Vincent spent all the money. He rented a yellow house in Arles where he wanted to establish an artistic brotherhood in which artists would work together helping one another. With utopian visions of redemption Vincent entered the most productive phase of his life, painting in a frenzy. In August 1888 he painted the "Sower with Setting Sun" in "a vision of Christ as a 'great artist' who spread the light-filled redemption just as the striding figure in the field spread the seeds of rebirth" (612).

In Arles Vincent discovered the night sky and the stars which the lights of Paris had obscured. He believed that the "lovely evening stars express the care and love of God for us all" (648). At night the sky was darker in Arles than in Paris; so he decided to paint the starry night. He produced the "Starry Night over the Rhone" in September 1888. He thought that if he could capture the stars and infinite sky in paint, his loneliness might end (652).

In order to establish his artistic brotherhood Vincent invited Paul Gauguin to come to Arles and work with him in the yellow house. Gauguin arrived in Arles on December 23, 1888, but lacking privacy his work slowed; and he feared that Vincent's volcanic personality might erupt into "a fatal and tragic attack" against him, "especially at night when Vincent roamed the house menacingly" (701).

With Christmas coming soon Vincent became haunted by the memories of his disapproving father, by the fear that Theo would abandon him, since Jo Bonger had accepted his second marriage proposal, and by the regret of having driven off Gauguin. Vincent felt the need to punish himself. Gazing at his image in a mirror, he grabbed a straight razor and sliced off the lower portion of his right ear lobe. Using towels to slow the bleeding, he dressed the wound and ran out of the house into the rainy night, heading for a brothel. He left the packaged ear lobe for Gaby, his favorite prostitute, with the message: "Remember me" (704).

On Christmas Eve Vincent fell gravely ill, and the police hospitalized him at Hôtel Dieu, where he was placed in an isolation ward. Theo was notified, and he made a brief trip to the hospital on Christmas. During the next five months, Vincent would be in and out of the hospital. His inner world became one of darkness in which he had fits of rage, anxiety, unbearable hallucinations, and eruptions of painful memories (708). He feared that Theo's wedding would separate them from each other. By December 30, however, his condition improved, and he was discharged from the hospital.

In January 1889 Vincent was evicted from the yellow house for non-payment of rent. The neighbors had petitioned for Vincent's confinement, and for the second time the police forcibly confined him to the Hôtel Dieu from February 25 until March 23, 1889. Theo was planning his wedding and, at the same time complaining about his crushing debt, worsening health, and possibility of dying. Theo's wedding plans threatened Vincent with feelings of abandonment and fears of mortality. Shortly before Theo's wedding, Vincent decided to enter an asylum, because he could no longer manage his own life.

Vincent chose the Roman Catholic asylum at Saint Rémy, and he arrived there on May 8, 1889. Felix Rey, the physician who had treated Vincent in Arles, sent to Théophile Peyron, the head of the Saint Rémy asylum, his diagnosis of Vincent as that of non-convulsive epilepsy which the French asylum doctors called masked epilepsy. It was characterized by hallucinations, acts of self-mutilation, fits of rage, fury, excitability, and constant wondering (750). His attacks were followed by loss of consciousness, twilight states, and possible acts of violence.

After reviewing Vincent's family history, Peyron confirmed the diagnosis of epilepsy. Vincent's maternal grandfather Willem Carventus "died of a mental disease" (751). His maternal aunt had epilepsy throughout her life as an unmarried woman, and a maternal uncle died by suicide. A paternal uncle suffered his first epileptic seizure at age 35 and then became paralyzed before dying at an early age. Uncle Jan had undiagnosed seizures at 40, and his son "suffered some bad epileptic fits." Peyron wrote the following in Vincent's chart: "What happened to this patient would be only the continuation of what has happened to several members of his family" (752).

Vincent felt liberated by the diagnosis, and he resumed painting. In June 1889 he completed his masterpiece "The Starry Night" to express his vision of "ultimate serenity" with "a kaleidoscope of pulsating beacons, whirlpool of stars, radiant cloud, and a moon that shone as brightly as any sun" (762). From mid-July until the end of August 1889 Vincent had a series of increasingly more frequent attacks, followed by fainting, vertigo, unconsciousness, as well as images of the past and religious ideas (772-773).

He recalled his mother teaching him in childhood that "fate would always have its revenge against excess or falsity" (811). He feared fate falling upon Theo and his newborn baby who was named Vincent. He thought of his father and wrote to his mother, pleading for forgiveness. He believed in an ultimate forgiveness in the next world, so he painted heavenly images in order to unite art, religion, and the family.

On May 16, 1890 Peyron pronounced Vincent cured, and on the next day Vincent boarded a train to Paris to see Theo and his family. Four days later he left Paris on a train bound for Auvers, a town north of Paris, complaining that "Paris had such a bad effect on me that I thought it wise for my head's sake to fly to the country" (822). His life had become one of "resignation" and "of inexplicable suffering and irreversible fate" (838-839). He felt that his family was moving away from him and that he was a burden on Theo, his wife, and their newborn baby.

van Gogh's Death

On Sunday July 27, 1890 Vincent went out of doors with his easel, bag of paints and brushes in the morning and then returned to the Ravoux Inn at noon for his mid-day meal. After lunch he returned to the out of doors. Later that evening he staggered back, holding his abdomen, and went to his room to lie down on his bed. Hearing his moaning, the innkeeper Gustav Ravoux entered Vincent's room and found him curled up in pain and saying: "I wounded myself" (850). He had been hit by a bullet in his upper abdomen, and he died 30 hours later in the early morning hours of July 30. He was 37 years old.

Two physicians examined him, and they concluded that Vincent had been shot with a bullet from a small-caliber pistol, that the bullet had not exited the body, and that it had entered the body obliquely from a distance (869). No autopsy was performed, and the physicians did not remove the bullet from the body. The gun was never found, nor was his painting equipment recovered. There were no eye witnesses, and the exact location of the shooting was never established.

That the bullet entered the body from a distance and not close up indicated that Vincent did not die by suicide. As stated above, Vincent had had suicide ideation on several occasions, but he did not carry it out at the end; and he knew nothing about guns. During the summer of 1890, Parisian students were vacationing in Auvers, and they frequently teased and played pranks on Vincent, but he did not complain. One of the boys was René Secrétan, who was a superb marksman and who owned a .380-caliber pistol that sometimes malfunctioned. He enjoyed teasing Vincent, and on one occasion it is likely that his pistol discharged accidentally, hitting Vincent at a distance. Vincent's statement—"I wounded myself"—probably was intended to protect Secrétan and die as a martyr (879). Afraid of being charged with murder, Secrétan and his friends took the gun and Vincent's painting equipment and ran away in terror of Vincent's bleeding.

van Gogh's Tragic Destiny

Felix Rey was acquainted with the psychiatric aspects of epilepsy, as taught by two French asylum doctors in the 19th century. Jules Falret and Bénédict Morel observed anger and fury in their epileptic patients. In 1860 Morel recognized the epileptic symptoms of alternations of excitement and depression, instability building up to fury without sufficient reason, and auditory and visual hallucinations, altogether comprising masked epilepsy without overt seizures (Blumer 2000: 10). Morel's concept of masked epilepsy has been reformulated as subictal dysphoric disorder and is now regarded as the most common symptom of epilepsy (Blumer 2000: 13).

Rey's diagnosis of Vincent has been confirmed by two influential psychiatrists. Henri Gastaut reviewed Rey's diagnosis of epilepsy with hallucinations and episodic confusional

agitation caused by alcohol consumption and labeled it psychomotor epilepsy (Gastaut 1956: 196–198). Gastaut also indicated that epileptics have heightened emotionality, adhesiveness, and hyposexuality. In spite of his emotional outbursts, Vincent remained attached to Theo throughout his life, and he desired acceptance by his family as well as human contact when alone. His heightened emotionality included a polarity of rage and religious feelings (Gastaut 1956: 223). This affective alternation exemplified the paroxysmal pattern of dual emotions in epileptics (Szondi 1978: 54–55). Gastaut also found that more than half of epileptics have an absent or weakened sexual life, as with impotence or frigidity; and Vincent had these after his stay in Arles (Gastaut 1956: 225).

Dietrich Blumer agreed with Gastaut and pointed out that between 1886 and 1888, while in Paris, Vincent suffered paroxysms of sudden terror, epigastric sensations, lapses of consciousness, tonic spasms of the hand, and stare followed by delusional amnesia (Blumer 2002: 520). Vincent was drinking absinthe, an alcoholic drink containing epileptogenic properties and a favorite of artists at that time. When Vincent moved to Arles, he became psychotic and fluctuated between dysphoria and euphoria, rage and religious feelings. These phases were episodic and not sustained as in a mood disorder.

Psychomotor epilepsy exhibits psychic equivalents that occur independently of seizures. Some of these are poriomania or restless wandering, attention to details, excessive writing, dizziness, and a tendency toward fainting. Vincent had all of these at various times in his pre-psychotic life, suggesting that Vincent was acting out epileptic symptoms long before Rey's diagnosis.

As a paroxysmal-epileptic personality, Vincent's decisions were consistent with his drive tendencies. Although he had sexual desire, Vincent neither married nor sustained a relationship with any woman. Generally, paroxysmal persons select religious professions to socialize their needs and tendencies (Szondi 1987: 274). Despite the opposition of his family, Vincent chose to be a missionary, preacher, and evangelist, even though he did not turn those choices into vocations. When he finally chose to be an artist, he continued to express religious themes and feelings in his paintings. He painted, in effect, a natural theology to express the hope of ultimate forgiveness in the next world (814). He resisted working in the world of art business, which his family preferred and which would be consistent with a schiziform vocational selection (Szondi 1987: 285). Some of Vincent's relatives chose schiziform artistic professions, such as Uncle Cent, but his father and Uncle Jan held paroxysmal vocations of the ministry and the navy.

When Paul Gauguin visited Vincent in Arles in late 1888 but left unexpectedly a few weeks later, Vincent sliced off his ear lobe. The self-mutilation would be interpreted psychologically as a self-punishment for his homicidal intent against Gauguin. That Vincent wanted to establish an artistic brotherhood and make Gauguin a "brother" implies a Cain complex. Szondi found the Cain complex to be implicated in epilepsy in the sense that the seizure is a substitute for the drive to kill the brother, followed by a phase of restitution or making amends (Szondi 1963: 333). After his ear cutting, Vincent desired a reunion with Gastaut (880).

With Theo's marriage to Jo Bonger Vincent felt abandoned, but he welcomed the birth of Theo's baby boy. Theo wrote to Vincent, stating that his wife and baby were ill and complaining about not having enough money. The complaint brought out Vincent's guilt of having been a financial burden upon his brother (842–843). This guilt aggravated Vincent's deepening sense of resignation and fate.

When commenting on his case studies, Szondi would sometimes refer to them as tragedies, but he never defined what he meant by tragedy. I propose to view tragedy as a struggle of the hero against the overwhelming forces of fate (Exum 1992: 10). The hero rises up in an assertion of will but is struck down by irreversible forces. Tragedy has appeared in classical Greek drama and in the Old Testament, as in the suicide of King Saul (1 Sam. 31).

Théophile Peyron's assertion that Vincent's epilepsy was a continuation of what happened to his relatives reflected the idea in the tragic dramas of Aeschylus that fate unfolds through the generations of the family and strikes down the hero at the end (de Romilly 1968: 60–61, 63). Throughout his life Vincent was supported financially by Theo, and he justified that support with the belief in the nobility of his artistic destiny. He tried to rise above ordinary human life of work and love and shape an artistic vision of a transcendent other world. By suffering the overpowering forces of his hereditary epilepsy his personal life deteriorated so much that he could no longer live in this world. Whereas Greek tragedy involved external forces of fate, Vincent endured them as internal.

The actual cause of Vincent's death was a bullet wound to the abdomen. Since the shot was unexpected and apparently accidental, it reflected the realm of chance which Euripides portrayed as an unexpected event breaking into the hero's life tragically (de Romilly 1968: 119, 130). The chance shooting converged with the fate of overpowering epileptic forces and fulfilled Vincent's tragic destiny. His statement at the end—"I wounded myself"—was not a literal description of the pistol shot but a consent to his inevitable death. He welcomed death because he could no longer live in this world.

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