# Friedrich Hölderlin: Little Knowledge but Joy Enough

Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was one of Germany's greatest lyric poets. He was exquisitely sensitive to the beauties of the natural world, and thoroughly enamoured to the glories of Ancient Greece. His verses are strikingly beautiful in their sound, and have been set to music by many composers. As a young man he was very productive, writing poems and the epistolary novel *Hyperion* (1799). He also made important new translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. However, in 1806 he lapsed into madness. From 1807 until his death, he lived alone in a room overlooking the Neckar River in Tübingen. He mumbled to himself in many languages, and occasionally wrote brief fragments of verse for visitors, signing them with various pseudonyms and fictitious dates. This posting considers some of his poetry.The text of the poems can been enlarged by clicking on them to get a separate window.

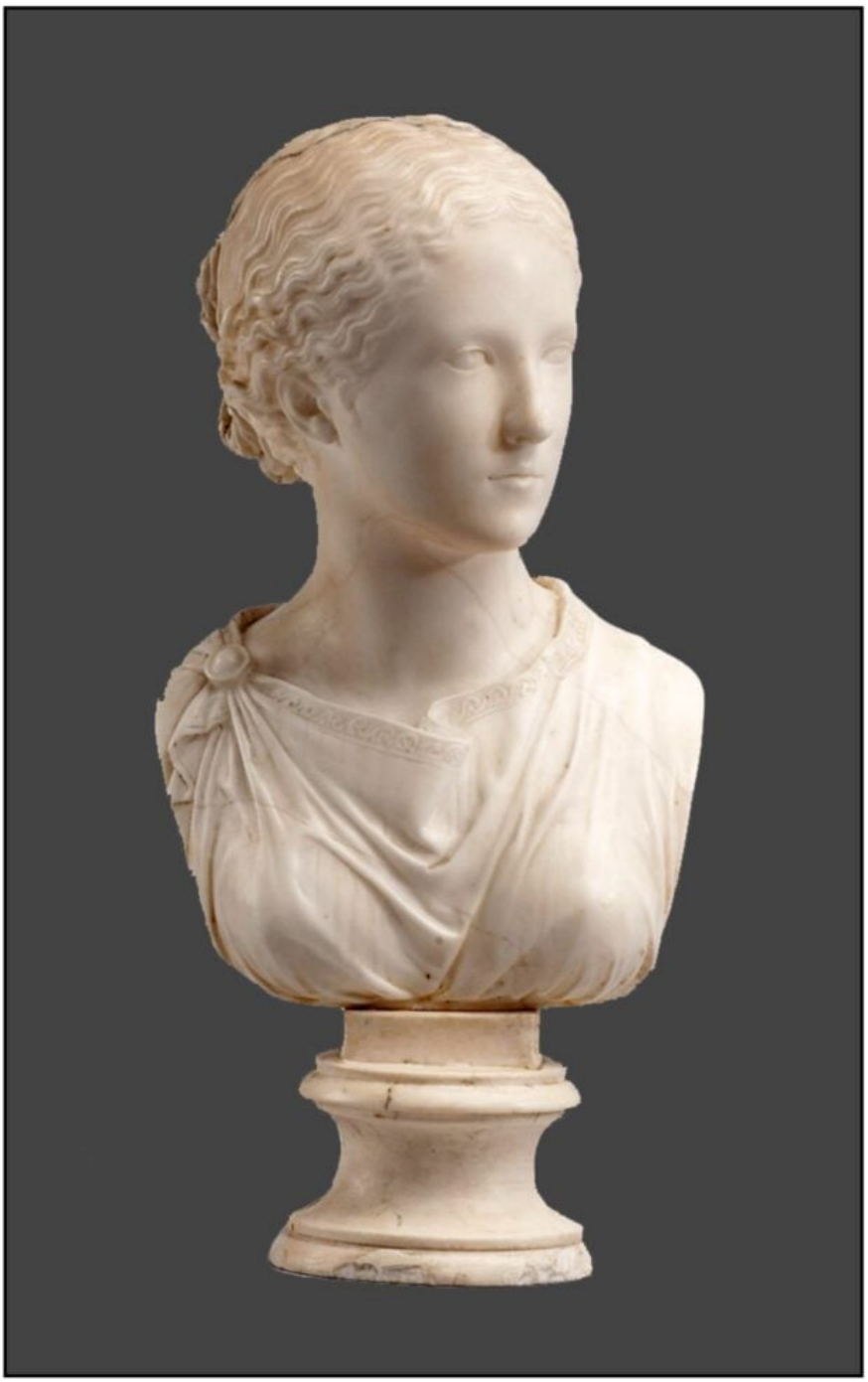
**Life**

Friedrich Hölderlin was born in 1770 in Lauffen am Neckar a village just south of Heilbronn in the Duchy of Württemberg. (That year also marked the birth of Wordsworth, Beethoven, and Hegel). His father died in 1772 and his mother married Johann Gok and moved to Nürtingen. Hölderlin attended school at the monastery of Denkendorf, and then began studies for the clergy at the monastery of Maulbronn. Founded as a Cistercian monastery in 1147, Maulbronn had become a Lutheran institution after the Reformation. In 1788 Hölderlin began to study theology at the *Tübinger Stift* (seminary). Among his fellow-students in Tübingen were the philosophers Georg Hegel and Friedrich Schelling. Hölderlin and most of the Tübingen

students were more fascinated by the ideals of the French Revolution (1789) than by the logic of theology. These were revolutionary times: what might be yet possible was replacing what always had been.

The pastel portrait (illustrated above) by Franz Carl Hiemer dates from 1792, when Hölderlin was in his final days as a student. It is the very picture of a young romantic poet: sensuously beautiful, clear-eyed and idealistic. Who could not fall in love with him?

Having decided against a career in the church, Hölderlin found employment as a tutor in the houses of the bourgeoisie. Though he was not a good teacher, these positions allowed him time to write poetry. When serving as tutor in the Gontard household in Frankfurt from 1796 to 1798, Hölderlin fell passionately in love with Susette Gontard (1769-1802), the wife of his employer. Susette returned Hölderlin’s affections. The illustration below shows a small alabaster bust of Susette by Landolin Ohmacht from around 1795.



Dismissed from his position, Hölderlin moved to Homberg, where he attempted to edit a new journal. He continued to write to Susette, and occasionally arranged secret meetings with her. She became immortalized as Diotima, the great love of the hero in Hölderlin’s novel *Hyperion* which was published in two parts in 1797 and 1799.

In January, 1802, Hölderlin accepted a position as tutor in the household of a German consul in Bordeaux, France.

Penniless, he traveled to Bordeaux on foot, a distance of over 1000 km. The position did not work out, and he traveled back to Tübingen in May. We do not know what happened to him on the journey. He may have been robbed; he was clearly exhausted by his travel, and he was close to starvation. When he arrived in Stuttgart in June, a friend described him as "an emaciated man, pale as death, long-haired and bearded, wild-looking, habited like a beggar" (Zweig, 1939/2017, p 356). At this time, he was informed that Susette had died. She had contracted German measles from her children Though the children recovered easily, Susette who probably had some underlying lung disorder, perhaps tuberculosis, did not. Hölderlin was devastated.

Despite his despair, Hölderlin was able to complete his translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone.* However, when they were published in 1804, these translations were derided as monstrous, and considered the work of a lunatic. For example, in the opening scene of Antigone, the verb *kalchainein* (from *kalche,* the purple limpet), which means "to become dark red," is metaphorically used to describe disturbed thoughts. Hölderlin, directly translated the Greek *dēloīs gār ti kalchaínousa' éposas* as *du scheinst ein rotes Wort zu färben* ("you seem to dye your words red") rather than decorously translating it as "you appear to be troubled." His choice of words is strange and exciting (de Campos, 2007; Carson, 2008). Hölderlin's radical translations have prevailed. Carl Orff used them for his operas *Antigonae* (1949) and *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959), and Bertolt Brecht adapted them for his 1948 play *Antigone*.

Hölderlin's grief after the death of Susette was overwhelming, and he began his descent into madness. Isaac von Sinclair, a close friend, arranged an undemanding position for him as court librarian in Homberg in 1804. However, in 1805, von Sinclair, who was a fervent supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution, was accused of treason against the Elector

of Württemberg, arrested and brought to trial in Stuttgart. Hölderlin was initially considered a co-conspirator, but was soon deemed too mad to stand trial. Ultimately, von Sinclair was found not guilty. The mad Hölderlin left Homberg to return home. However, his mother could not take care of him and in 1806, the poet was admitted to the University Hospital in Tübingen where he was treated by Professor Johann von Autenreith.

In 1807 he was discharged as incurably insane into the care of a carpenter Ernst Zimmer, who took in student boarders. For the next 36 years (one half of his lifetime) Hölderlin lived in the first-floor room in a tower overlooking the Neckar River. His upkeep was supported by a small annuity from the state of Württemberg. The tower had at one time been part of the city's medieval fortifications but was then merged into the houses on Bursagasse. The following illustration shows the tower as viewed from the Neckar River:

In the 1820s, Hölderlin was visited by a young poet, Wilhelm

Waiblinger (1804-1830), who describes his experience visit in his 1830 memoir *Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness:*

> One ponders, wondering whether or not to knock, and feels a sense of uneasiness. After finally knocking, a loud and forceful "Come in!" can be heard. Opening the door, one finds a haggard figure standing in the middle of the room, who bows as deeply as possible and will not stop bestowing compliments, and whose mannerisms would be very graceful were there not something convulsive about them. One admires the profile, the high forehead heavy with thought, the friendly, lovable eyes, extinguished but not soulless; one sees the devastating traces of the mental illness in the cheeks, the mouth, the nose, above the eyes where an oppressive and painful wrinkle has been etched. With regret and sadness, one observes the convulsive movement which sometimes spreads throughout the entire face, forcing his shoulders to jerk and his fingers to twitch. He wears a simple jacket and likes to keep his hands in his pockets. One says a few introductory words which are then received with the most courteous obeisance and a deluge of nonsensical words which confuse the visiting stranger. Gracious as he was and, for the sake of appearance, still is, H. now feels obliged to say something friendly to the guest, to ask him a question. One comprehends a few words of his question, but most of these could not possibly be answered. Nor does Hölderlin in the least expect to be answered. On the contrary, he becomes extremely perplexed if the visitor attempts to follow up a train of thought.

Hölderlin was also visited by other students and tourists. When given paper, Hölderlin would write fragments of verses and give them to his visitors. He would sign these with various pseudonyms, one of the most popular being "Scardanelli." Some of them would be dated with fictitious dates. On most days Hölderlin would go for walks in the city,

but he would not recognize or interact with anyone. He had been given a piano, and would often improvise music for prolonged periods.

We do not know the nature of Hölderlin's madness William Dilthey (1910) attributed his symptoms to spiritual weariness: "that form of dispersion of spirit produced from enormous exhaustion." He likened Hölderlin to Robert Schumann. For both, creativity came at too great a cost: they flew too close to the sun. Some writers have concluded that Hölderlin was schizophrenic (Blanchot, 1951; Jakobsen et al, 1980). Others have refrained from any definite diagnosis (Agamben, 2023; Robles, 2020). Horowski (2017) has proposed that his symptoms might have been due to mercury intoxication since von Autenreith treated him with very high does of calomel. However, Hölderlin's symptoms clearly preceded his treatment in Tübingen. The illustration shows an etching of Hölderlin based on a sketch by J. G. Schreiner in 1826.

**Alcaic Verses**

Hölderlin's German odes were composed using Alcaic verses, traditionally believed to have been invented by the Greek lyric poet Alcaeus around 600 BC (Warren, 1996). Stress in Ancient Greek is mainly related to the duration of the vowel sound, whereas stress in both German and English is more complex and can be affected by the duration, pitch and intensity of the syllable, as well as by semantics. Nevertheless, the Alcaic verse form works well in both German and English.

Alcaic verses consist of four lines. The first two lines contain 11 syllables, the third 9 syllables and the fourth 10 syllables. The stress pattern was complicated, and could be varied slightly. In the following diagram the stressed syllables are denoted by **/** and the unstressed by **–**. Syllables denoted by **x** could be either stressed or unstressed.

x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – – / – /
x / – / x / – / /
/ – – / – – / – / /

To illustrate this form, we can look at the brief poem *Ehmals und Jetzt*, shown below with a translation by Michael Hamburger which uses the same alcaic form:

***Ehmals und Jetzt***

*In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,*
*Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,*
*Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch*
*Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.*

**Then and Now**

In younger days each morning I rose with joy
To weep at nightfall; now in my later years,
Though doubting I begin my day, yet
Always its end is serene and holy.

The following shows the stress pattern in the German verse :

– / – / – / – – / – /
*In jüngern Tagen war ich des Morgens froh,*

– / – / – / – – / – /
*Des Abends weint' ich; jetzt, da ich älter bin,*

– / – / – / – / /
*Beginn' ich zweifelnd meinen Tag, doch*

/ – – / – – / – / /
*Heilig und heiter ist mir sein Ende.*

The following is a musical setting of the ode by Josef Matthias Hauer (1883-1959), sung by tenor Holger Falk accompanied by Steffen Schleiermacher on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/hauer-ehmals-und-jetzt.mp3

**To the Fates**

Greek mythology postulated that human life was controlled by three sisters known as the Fates (*Moirai* in Greek; *Parcae* in Latin): Clotho, the spinner, spun the thread from her distaff onto a spindle; Lachesis, the allotter, measured out the destined amount life; and Atropos, the inflexible, cut the thread and ended the life. The following shows an image of the Fates in a tapestry created in 1983 by Patricia Taylor from a 1948 drawing by Henry Moore:

This is Hölderlin’s ode *To the Fates.* The translation is by Elizabeth Henderson

***An die Parzen***

*Nur Einen Sommer gönnt, ihr Gewaltigen!*
*Und einen Herbst zu reifem Gesange mir,*
*Daß williger mein Herz, vom süßen*
*Spiele gesättiget, dann mir sterbe.*

*Die Seele, der im Leben ihr göttlich Recht*
*Nicht ward, sie ruht auch drunten im Orkus nicht;*
*Doch ist mir einst das Heil’ge, das am*
*Herzen mir liegt, das Gedicht, gelungen,*

*Willkommen dann, O Stille der Schattenwelt!*
*Zufrieden bin ich, wenn auch mein Saitenspiel*
*Mich nicht hinabgeleitet; einmal*
*Lebt ich, wie Götter, und mehr bedarfs nicht.*

**To the Fates**

One summer only, powerful fates, accord
Me, and one autumn only of ripened song,
That, sated by sweet play, my heart then
May less unwillingly face its dying.

The soul deprived on earth of its right to know
Divine fulfilment, cannot in Orcus rest;
Yet let but once my heart's desire,
Let but my poem succeed, the sacred,

Then welcome, silent calm of the world of shades!
I am content to go, even though my harp
Cannot conduct me down; I lived that
Once as the gods do, and more I need not.

As the years pass, it would be a blessing to remember that once one had lived as the gods even if only for a short time.

One could not ask for more.

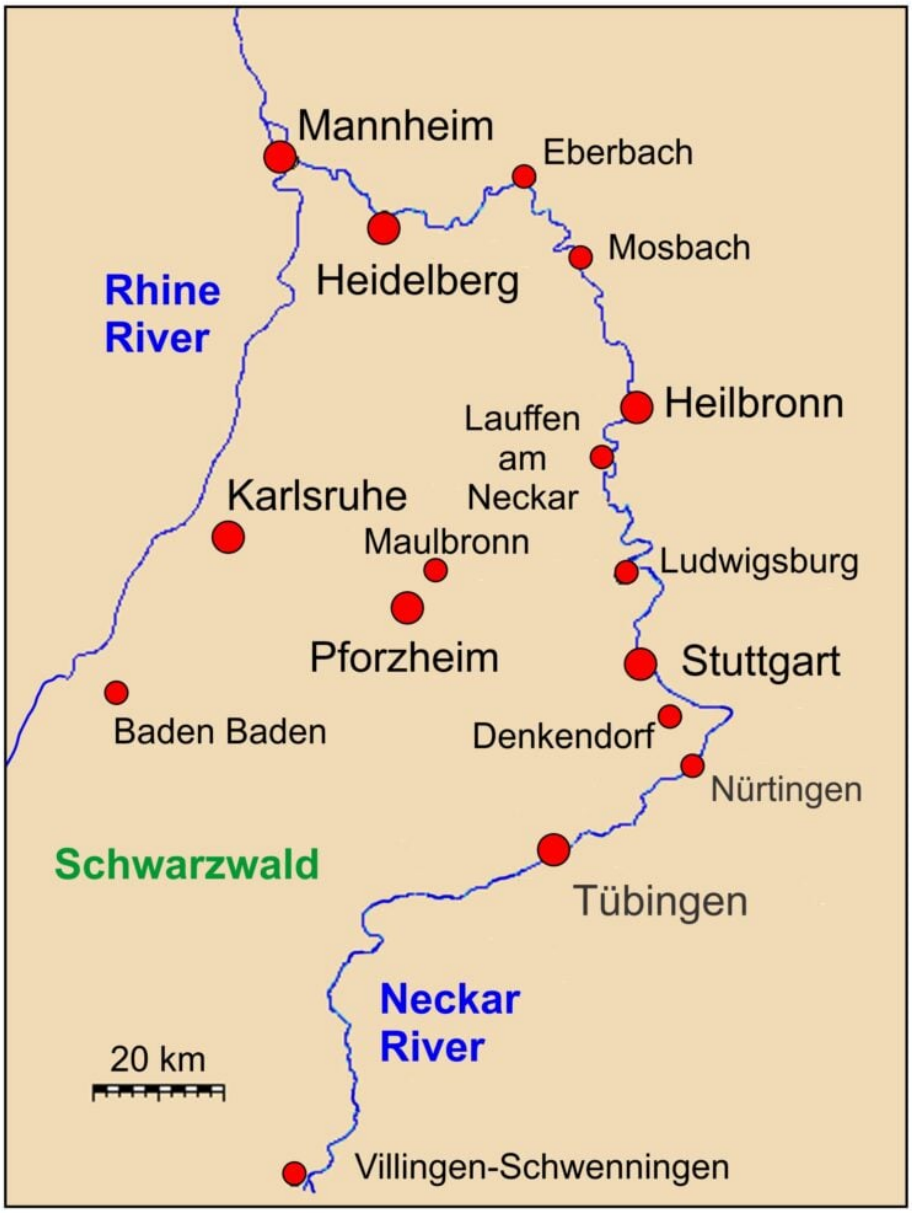
The following is a recitation of the poem by Matthias Wiemann and a musical setting by Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau with Aribert Reimann accompanying him on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/An-die-Parzen-matthias-wiemann.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hindemith-An-die-Parzen-Fischer-Dieskau.mp3

**The Neckar**

Hölderlin was born on the banks of the Neckar River. As shown in the map, this river arises in the Black Forest and flows down to join the Rhine River. Many stretches of the river are freely navigable.




The first half of Hölderlin's poem describes how the river brought him joy and peace. The second half tells how the beauties of the river inspire him to consider what it might be like to visit the wonders of Ancient Greece: Pactolus, a river in Ionia described by Sophocles as a "golden stream;" Smyrna the great coastal city of Western Ionia, now known as Izmir; Ilion, the ancient  name for Troy; Sunium on the southernmost point of the Attic peninsula, with its temple of Poseidon; and Olympia, the site of the Olympic Games.

At the time that Hölderlin was writing his poem, it was impossible to visit Greece since it was part of the Ottoman

Empire. He could only visit in his imagination. Greece attained independence in 1832, but by then Hölderlin was mad.

Below is the text of the poem with a German translation by James Mitchell, followed by a recitation by Burno Ganz The translation follows the meaning but not the alcaic form of the German poem.

***Der Neckar***

*In deinen Tälern wachte mein Herz mir auf*
*Zum Leben, deine Wellen umspielten mich,*
*Und all der holden Hügel, die dich*
*Wanderer! kennen, ist keiner fremd mir.*

*Auf ihren Gipfeln löste des Himmels Luft*
*Mir oft der Knechtschaft Schmerzen; und aus dem Tal,*
*Wie Leben aus dem Freudebecher,*
*Glänzte die bläuliche Silberwelle.*

*Der Berge Quellen eilten hinab zu dir,*
*Mit ihnen auch mein Herz und du nahmst uns mit,*
*Zum stillerhabnen Rhein, zu seinen*
*Städten hinunter und lustgen Inseln.*

*Noch dünkt die Welt mir schön, und das Aug entflieht*
*Verlangend nach den Reizen der Erde mir,*
*Zum goldenen Paktol, zu Smyrnas*
*Ufer, zu Ilions Wald. Auch möcht ich*

*Bei Sunium oft landen, den stummen Pfad*
*Nach deinen Säulen fragen, Olympion!*
*Noch eh der Sturmwind und das Alter*
*Hin in den Schutt der Athenertempel*

*Und ihrer Gottesbilder auch dich begräbt,*
*Denn lang schon einsam stehst du, o Stolz der Welt,*
*Die nicht mehr ist. Und o ihr schönen*
*Inseln Ioniens! wo die Meerluft*

*Die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald*
*Durchsäuselt, wenn die Sonne den Weinstock wärmt,*
*Ach! wo ein goldner Herbst dem armen*
*Volk in Gesänge die Seufzer wandelt,*

*Wenn sein Granatbaum reift, wenn aus grüner Nacht*
*Die Pomeranze blinkt, und der Mastixbaum*
*Von Harze träuft und Pauk und Cymbel*
*Zum labyrinthischen Tanze klingen.*

*Zu euch, ihr Inseln! bringt mich vielleicht, zu euch*
*Mein Schutzgott einst; doch weicht mir aus treuem Sinn*
*Auch da mein Neckar nicht mit seinen*
*Lieblichen Wiesen und Uferweiden.*

**The Neckar**

My heart awakened to life in your valleys,
Your waves played around me.
And all of the fair hills that know you,
Wayfarer, are known to me as well.

On those peaks the winds from the sky
Relieved me from pains of bondage,
And silver-blue waves shone forth from the valley,
Like the joy of life pouring out from a chalice.

Mountain springs hurried down to you,
My heart with them, and you took us along
To the quietly splendid Rhine, down
To its cities and pleasant islands.

The world seems to me yet beautiful, and my eyes
Break out with desire to the charms of the earth,
To golden Pactolus, to Smyrna's shores,
To Ilion's woods. How I'd like to

Go ashore at Sunium, and ask for the silent path
To your pillars, Olympia! Before age
And stormy winds bury you as well
In the ruins of Athens' temples,

Along with the statues of its gods. For you
Have long stood alone, pride of a world
That no longer exists. And the beautiful
Islands of Ionia, where sea air

Cools the hot shores and rushes through the woods
Of laurel, when the sun warms the grapevines,
And, oh, where golden autumn changes
The sighs of the poor people into songs,

When the pomegranate ripens, when the orange trees
Nod in a green night, and the gum trees drip
Resin, and drums and cymbals resound
To labyrinthine dances.

Perhaps someday my guardian deity will bring me
To these islands, but even then my thoughts
Will remain loyal to the Neckar
With its lovely meadows and pastoral shores.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Der-Neckar-Bruno-Ganz.mp3

Josef Matthias Hauer composed a set of brief piano pieces based upon lines from Hölderlin's poems (Barwinek, 2023). The

following are two of these pieces deriving from the poem *Der Neckar*, played by Anna Petrova-Foster:

> *Deine Wellen umspielten mich*
> Your waves played about me

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-deine-Wellen.mp3

> *wo die Meerluft*
> *die heißen Ufer kühlt und den Lorbeerwald durchsäuselt*
> where the sea breeze
> cools the hot shores and rustles through the laurel forest

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Hauer-wo-die-Meerluft.mp3

**Hyperion**

Hölderlin published his novel *Hyperion, oder der Eremit in Griechenland* in two parts in 1797 and 1799. It consists of a series of letters between Hyperion, a young Greek, to his German friend Bellarmin, with some occasional letters between Hyperion and his beloved Diotima. Epistolary novels were very popular in the 18th Century: Rousseau's *Julia, ou la nouvelle New Héloise* (1761), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) all used the format. Those were the days when those who were literate wrote letters.

*Hyperion* is short on plot and long in thought. The novel presents a general theory of beauty as the guiding light for harmonious society and of union with nature as the goal of the

individual person. Hyperion participates in an insurrection against the Ottoman rule with the rebel Alabanda (modeled on Isaac von Sinclair). Later he almost dies fighting with the Russians against the Turks in the great sea battle of Chesma in 1771. Although the Russians were victorious, the Greeks remained subjugated. Hyperion's great love Diotima, modeled on Susette Gontard, dies soon afterwards. Hyperion finally retires to live as a hermit in unspoiled nature. His concluding comment is one of reconciliation (Unger, 1984, p 36):

> *Wie der Zwist der Liebenden, sind die Dissonanzen der Welt. Versohnung ist mitten im Streit und alles Getrennte findet sich wieder. Es scheiden und kehren im Herzen die Adern und einiges, ewiges, gliihendes Leben is Alles*
>
> [The dissonances of the world are like the quarrel of lovers. Reconciliation is in the midst of strife, and all things divided find each other again. The veins depart from and return to the heart, and a unified, eternal, glowing life is All.]

Hyperion's *Schicksalslied* occurs after the battle of Chesma (Unger, 1984, p 36). It begins in awe of the gods and ends in despair.

***Schicksalslied***

*Ihr wandelt droben im Licht*
*Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!*
*Glänzende Götterlüfte*
*Rühren euch leicht,*
*Wie die Finger der Künstlerin*
*Heilige Saiten.*

*Schicksallos, wie der schlafende*
*Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;*
*Keusch bewahrt*
*In bescheidener Knospe,*
*Blühet ewig*
*Ihnen der Geist,*
*Und die seligen Augen*
*Blicken in stiller*
*Ewiger Klarheit.*

*Doch uns ist gegeben,*
*Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,*
*Es schwinden, es fallen*
*Die leidenden Menschen*
*Blindlings von einer*
*Stunde zur andern,*
*Wie Wasser von Klippe*
*Zu Klippe geworfen,*
*Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.*

**Song of Destiny**

You wander above in the light
on soft ground, blessed spirits!
Blazing, divine breezes
brush by you as lightly
as the fingers of the harpist
on her holy strings.

Fateless, like sleeping
infants, breathe the gods,
chastely protected
in modest buds,
blooming eternally
in spirit,
and their holy eyes
gaze in silent,
and eternal clarity.

Yet we are is granted
no place to rest;
we suffering humans
fall and vanish -
blind from one
hour to another,
like water thrown down
from rock to rock,
for years into the abyss.

Brahms' Opus 54 (1871) provides a choral setting of this song. The following are two extracts as performed by the Runfunkchor Berlin conducted by Gijs Leenars with the Deutsche Symphonie Orchester: settings of the first and last verses:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-I.mp3

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/schicksalslied-II.mp3

Brahms added a beautiful adagio at the end of the song. Though criticized for trying to attenuate Hyperion's despair, this movement fits the novel, which ends with a sense of reconciliation.

**Fragments from the Tower**

Most of the slivers of poetry that have been preserved from Hölderlin's time in the tower have little meaning. Occasionally there are flashes that recall the aphorism of the younger poet:

> *Und wenig Wissen, aber der Freude viel*
> *Ist Sterblichen gegeben*
>
> And little knowledge, but joy enough
> Is given to mortals.
> *Stuttgart Hölderlin Ausgabe* 2.323
> translated by Chernoff & Hoover

And some of the poetry from that time is genuinely beautiful. Much of it is in the form of simple rhymed verse, unlike the unrhymed hymns and odes of earlier days. One of his last poems, entitled *Aussicht* (Perspective), likens human life to the necessary passage of the seasons, a theme that recurs in much of Hölderlin's poetry. Like much of his late work it is signed "Scardanelli" and dated to the preceding century:

> Wenn in die Ferne geht der Menschen wohnend Leben,
> Wo in die Ferne sich erglänzt die Zeit der Reben,
> Ist auch dabei des Sommers leer Gefilde,
> Der Wald erscheint mit seinem dunklen Bilde.
>
> Daß die Natur ergänzt das Bild der Zeiten,
> Daß die verweilt, sie schnell vorübergleiten,
> Ist aus Vollkommenheit, des Himmels Höhe glänzet
> Den Menschen dann, wie Bäume Blüt umkränzet.

24 Mai 1748 Mit Untertänigkeit

Scardanelli.

When the life that men live in passes faraway,
Into that future season when the vines gleam,
And the harvested fields lie empty,
Then emerges the dark shadow of the forest.

Nature completes her picture of the seasons,
And lingers while they quickly glide away,
Out of perfection, and the high heavens then shine
On men as if garlanding the trees with blossoms.

24 May 1748 Your humble servant

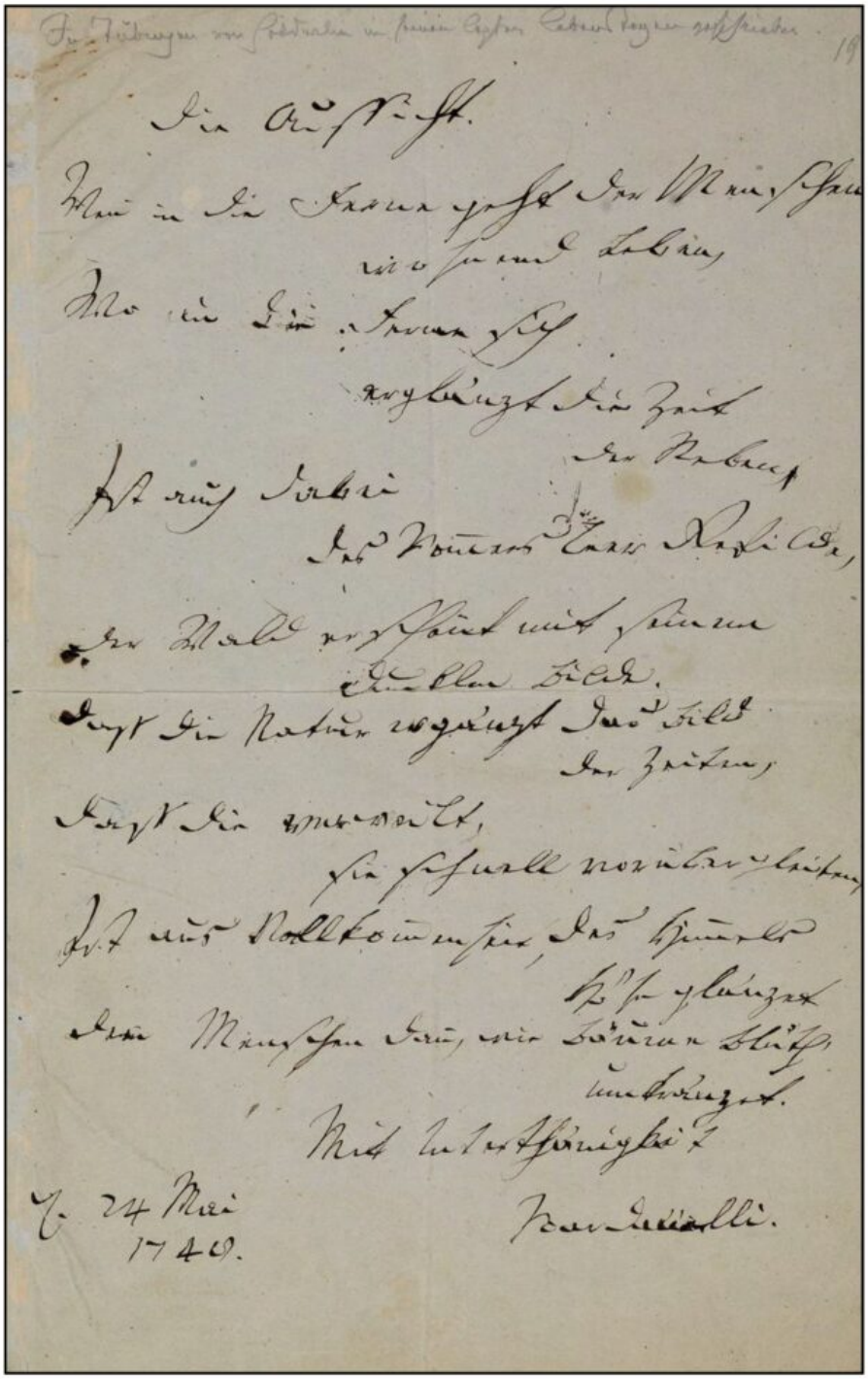
Scardanellli

The above translation is mine. There are few other translations available, but see Agamben (2023, p 289), and Aleksi Barrière for versions in both French and English.

The following is a recitation of the poem by Hanns Zischler:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/aussicht-hanns-zischlers.mp3

And a photograph of the actual manuscript of the poem:



Agamben (2023, pp 295-329) considers the various meanings of the phrase *wohnend Leben* (dwelling life) in the first line of the poem. He relates it to the idea of Christ's incarnation from *John* 1:14:

> And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us …

We live in life for a brief time. Perhaps we come from elsewhere, and return there when we die. Agamben also

considers the word “habit,” which comes from the word “inhabit,” which is close to “dwell” in its meaning. In German, the word *gewohnt* means “usual” or “habitual.” In a life of habit, one is affected by the world but does not try to change it. Such was Hölderlin’s time in the tower.

**Stefan Zweig on Hölderlin’s Poetry**

Hölderlin created some of our most exalted descriptions of nature and of the gods. His poetry is beautiful to read and to listen to. However, it often lacks the specificity of normal human experience. Hölderlin preferred the eternal to the everyday. His poetry may help us to understand the infinite, but provides little insight into our own finite lives. Stefan Zweig (1939, p 342) noted

> Of the “four elements” known to the Greeks – fire, water, air, and earth – Hölderlin’s poetry has but three. There is lacking to it earth, the dark and clinging element, connective and formative, the emblem of plasticity and hardness. His verse is made of fire, the symbol of the ascent heavenward; it is light as air, perpetually athrill like the rustling breeze; it is transparent as water. In it scintillate the colours of the rainbow; it is ever in motion, rising and falling, the unceasing respiration of the creative mind. His poems have no anchorage in experience; they have no ties with the fertile earth; they are homeless and restless, scurrying clouds, sometimes tinged with the red dawn of enthusiasm and sometimes darkened with the shadow of melancholy, sometimes gathering into dense masses from which flash the lightnings and thunders of prophecy. Always they climb towards the zenith, towards the ethereal regions far from solid ground, beyond the immediate range of the senses.

**Heidegger and Hölderlin**

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a German philosopher who contributed significantly to the existentialist movement. In *Being and Time* (1927), he focused on what it means to "be." This question cannot be solved analytically but requires creative intuition. Thus, Heidegger was led to the idea that poetry determines the world through the words we use to describe it. The word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poiesis* making.

In his essay *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* (1941), Heidegger discussed the meaning of the concluding lines to Hölderlin's poem *Andenken* (Remembrance) which dealt with his visit to Bordeaux. The last sentence of the poem reads

> *Es nehmet aber*
> *Und giebt Gedächtniss die See,*
> *Und die Lieb' auch heftet fleissig die Augen,*
> *Was bliebet aber, stiften die Dichter*.
>
> [ But it is the sea
> That takes and gives remembrance
> And love no less keeps eyes attentively fixed,
> But what is lasting the poets provide.
> translated by Hamburger, 1998]

Another translation of the last line is "But what remains is founded by the poets." Heidegger's interpretation follows:

> This line throws light on our question of the essence of poetry. Poetry is a founding by the word and in the word. What is established in this way? What remains. But how can what remains be founded? Is it not that which has always already been present? No! Precisely what remains must be secured against being carried away; the simple must be wrested from the complex, measure must be opposed to excess. What supports and dominates beings as a whole must come into the open. Being must be disclosed, so that beings may

> appear. . . .
>
> The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet’s naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. What endures is never drawn from the transient. What is simple can never be directly derived from the complex. Measure does not lie in excess. We never find the ground in the abyss. Being is never a being. But because being and the essence of things can never be calculated and derived from what is present at hand, they must be freely created, posited, and bestowed. Such free bestowal is a founding.
>
> But when the gods are originally named and the essence of things comes to expression so that the things first shine forth, when this occurs, man’s existence is brought into a firm relation and placed on a ground. The poet’s saying is not only foundation in the sense of a free bestowal, but also in the sense of the firm grounding of human existence on its ground. If we comprehend this essence of poetry, that it is the founding of being in the word, then we can divine something of the truth of that verse which Hölderlin spoke long after he had been taken away into the protection of the night of madness. Heidegger (1941, pp 58-59)

As the Nazis came to power in Germany, Heidegger became an enthusiastic supporter. A major problem in evaluating his philosophy is to determine whether it can be considered independently of his politics. Did his philosophy make him more susceptible to fascism? When one poetically creates an idea of a perfect society, one must be careful to consider the means used to bring it into being.

**Hölderlin and Nazi Propaganda**

In Hölderlin's time, the Holy Roman Empire no longer existed. Germany was a ragtag conglomeration of kingdoms, duchies, bishoprics and city-states. In many of his poems, Hölderlin yearned for a unified Germany, a country that could carry on the ideas of both ancient Greece and revolutionary France. His patriotism was both fervent and critical: he was upset by the petty bourgeois squabbling of his countrymen. The following is the beginning of his *Gesang des Deutschens* (Song to the Germans) with a translation form Sharon Krebs:

O heilig Herz der Völker, o Vaterland!
Allduldend, gleich der schweigenden Mutter Erd,
Und allverkannt, wenn schon aus deiner
Tiefe die Fremden ihr Bestes haben!

Sie ernten den Gedanken, den Geist von dir,
Sie pflücken gern die Traube, doch höhnen sie
Dich, ungestalte Rebe! daß du
Schwankend den Boden und wild umirrest.

Du Land des hohen ernsteren Genius!
Du Land der Liebe! bin ich der deine schon,
Oft zürnt ich weinend, daß du immer
Blöde die eigene Seele leugnest.

Oh holy heart of the nations, oh fatherland!
Forbearing all, like the silent Mother Earth,
And utterly misjudged, even though strangers have
Exploited you, taking the best from your depths.

From you they harvest the thought, the spirit,
They gladly pick the grape cluster, but they scoff
At you, ill-formed vine, that you
Straggle about on the ground, swaying and wild.

You land of lofty, more solemn genius!
You land of love! although I am already yours,
Often I raged, weeping, that you always
Witlessly deny your own soul.

The following is the last verse from Hölderlin's *Der Tod fürs Vaterland* (Death for the Fatherland). It embodies the poet's dedication to his idealized country:

Und Siegesboten kommen herab: Die Schlacht
Ist unser! Lebe droben, o Vaterland,
Und zähle nicht die Toten! Dir ist,
Liebes! nicht Einer zu viel gefallen.

The Nikes of Victory descend; the battle
Is ours! Live on up there, O Fatherland,
And do not count the dead! For you,
My Beloved, not one man too many has fallen

The last three lines of this verse were engraved on the wall of the Langemarck-Halle, a memorial to the German soldiers who had died in World War I, included in the buildings for the 1936 Olympic Games.

During World War II, the Nazi government arranged for 100,000

copies of a special field edition of Hölderlin's poetry to be printed and sent to soldiers at the front (Unger, 1988, pp 130-131; Savage, 2008; pp 6-7; Corngold & Waite, 2009). The poetry increased the morale of the soldiers and provided them with an excuse to die for their country.

How could Hölderlin's poetry be dragooned into military service? As Savage (2008, p 6) asks

> How then did the Nazis transform this scarcely militaristic poet, who never took up arms for his country, and spent the last four decades of his life in a state of spiritual benightedness, into a paragon of Prussian masculinity and patriotic self-sacrifice?

Hölderlin was not a proto-fascist. His poetry was popular not because it urged his readers toward the goals of the Nazis, but because it provided a respite from the suffering of the war:

> He offered an inner sanctuary to which his readers could retreat to lick their wounds when confronted with the material deprivation, physical danger, and increasingly evident lack od freedom of everyday life under the Third Reich. (Savage, 2008, p 7).

Constantine (1988) remarked

> There can be no doubt that Hölderlin was a patriot, but his patriotism was humane and not in the least militaristic. It included also—which is often overlooked—the wish first to *achieve* a homeland it would be a joy and a privilege to live in, one in which the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity would have been realized. (pp 221-222)

Hölderlin did not really care for politics. He could describe his poetic ideals but he was unable to state how they should be attained. Constantine (1988) remarks that the general tendency of German writers to be concerned with the spiritual

rather than the political has been catastrophic:

> The disparagement of politics by Germany's artists and intellectuals left that sphere free for the men of blood and iron to run riot in. (p 222)

**Paul Celan**

Paul Celan (1920-1970) was born in Czernowitz, Romania, into a German-speaking Jewish family. His parents died in German concentration camps, and he was forced to work in a labor camp. After the war he made his way to Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970.

He wrote poetry in German, his mother tongue, despite the fact that the language had come to embody the evil and the suffering of Nazism. He fractured and distorted the language so that he could find the truth behind the words. Celan visited Tübingen in January (Jänner in dialect), 1961, and felt a great sympathy for Hölderlin, who also wrote in fragments and could not make himself understood. The result was the poem entitled *Tübingen, Jänner, 1961*

The poem is cryptic, and understanding may be helped by some notes from Joris (Celan, 2020, pp 469-471), and from Felstiner (1995, pp 172-174):

The first lines refer to the Hölderlin's hymn *Der Rhein,* which states that the sons of God are the blindest of us all. Seeking to understand heaven may make one unaware of the real world. The poem then directly quotes (though in fractured form) that the source of purity is a mystery. Both Hölderlin and Celan relate the German word *rein* (pure) with the name of the river.

The next lines describe the tower in which Hölderlin spent the last half of his life: reflected in the Neckar River and

circled by gulls.

Then we are introduced the carpenter Ernst Zimmer who was responsible for his basic care and who listened to his words.

The final verse likens Hölderlin to a patriarch or prophet with a beard that glowed. This may be a reference to the story that the face of Moses shone brightly when he came down from Sinai

> And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him.
> And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.
> (*Exodus* 34:29-30)

Although Moses was able to communicate the will of God to his people, the people of the present world cannot understand the words of their prophets or poets. We only hear and incoherent babbling. *Pallaksch* is a nonsense word that Hölderlin used to mean "yes" or "no," or simply uttered as an exclamation.

The following is Celan's poem together with a translation by Pierre Joris and a reading by Bruno Ganz:

***Tübingen, Jänner 1961***

*Zur Blindheit über-*
*redete Augen.*
*Ihre – "ein*
*Rätsel ist Rein –*
*entsprungenes" –, ihre*
*Erinnerung an*
*schwimmende Hölderlintürme, möwen-*
*umschwirrt.*

*Besuche ertrunkener Schreiner bei*
*diesen*
*tauchenden Worten:*

*Käme,*
*käme ein Mensch,*
*käme ein Mensch zur Welt, heute, mit*
*dem Lichtbart der*
*Patriarchen: er dürfte,*
*spräch er von dieser*
*Zeit, er*
*dürfte*
*nur lallen und lallen,*
*immer-, immer-*
*zuzu.*

*("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")*

**Tübingen, January, 1961**

Eyes con-
vinced to go blind.
Their – "a
riddle is pure
source" –. Their
remembrance of
swimming Hölderlin-towers, gull-
circled.

Visits of drowned carpenters by
these
diving words:

If,
if a man,
if a man was born, today, with
the lightbeard of
the patriarchs: he could,
speaking of these
days, he
could
but babble and babble,
all-all, way-ways
agagain.

("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Tubingen-Janner-Ganz.mp3

**Farewell**

And so we take our leave of Hölderlin, a poet who described the indescribable to a people who failed to understand him. He was one of the main exemplars of the romantic tradition (de Man, 2012), a movement that considered subjectivity as paramount. He combined the new ideas about nature that began with Rousseau with the ideals of beauty that came from Ancient Greece. The French Revolution led not to a society of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, but to the Terror of Robespierre and the wars of Napoleon. Hölderlin's dream that melding the beauty of

Greece to the revolution of France might bring forth a new and harmonious German society came to naught. Madness overtook his person; and a century later madness overtook Germany in the form of fascism. Yet the original dream was vivid and powerful, and it remains so.

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# Ely Cathedral: The Ship of the Fens

Ely Cathedral was originally situated on a low island in the middle of the Fens, a region of marshland in eastern England lying inland of the Wash. Because of the flatness of the surrounding land the cathedral could be seen from great distances, appearing as the “Ship of the Fens.” The marshes were drained in the 17th Century, but it is still easy to imagine the building floating above the waters: the embodiment of Auden’s image of the English cathedrals:

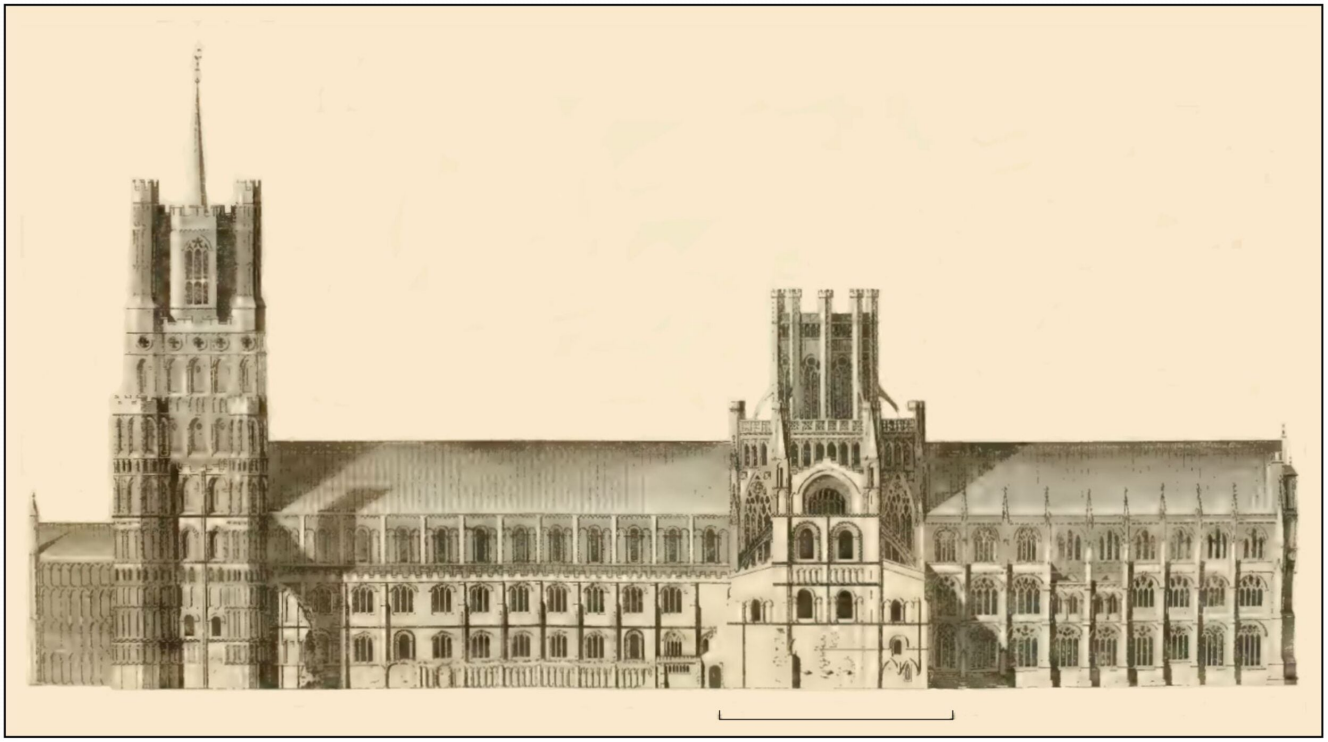
> Luxury liners laden with souls,
> Holding to the east their hulls of stone.
> (Auden, 1936, p 43; also McDiarmid, 1978, p 292)

**The Present Cathedral**

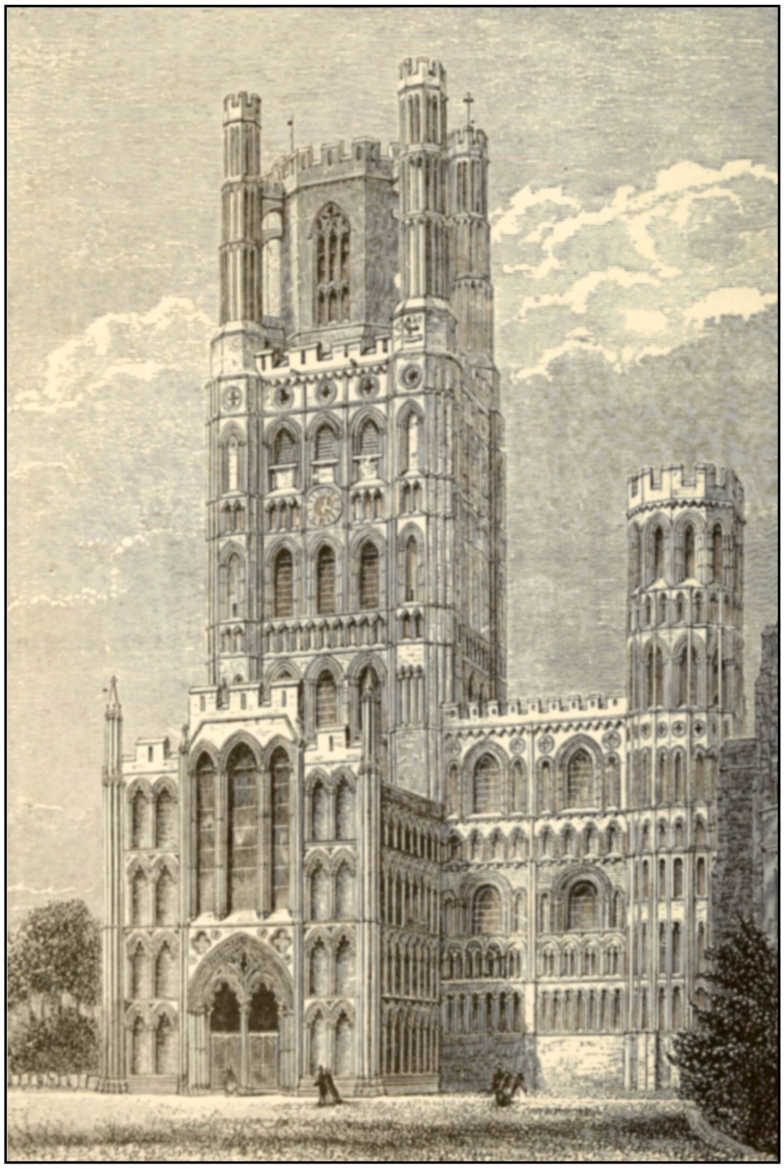
The following illustration shows the cathedral as viewed from the southeast.

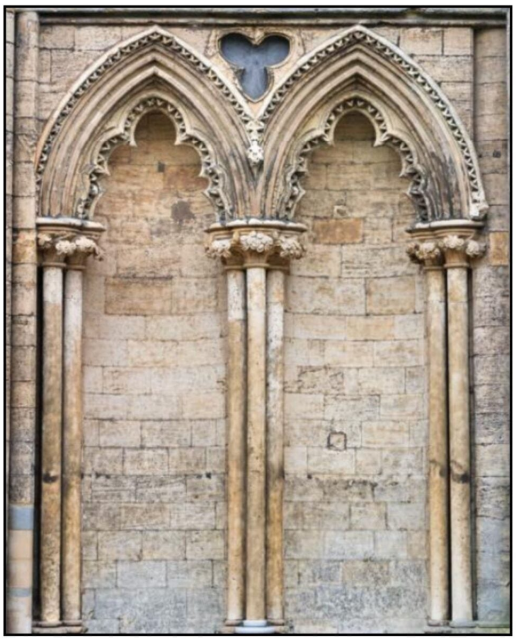
The present building was begun in 1083 by the Normans soon after their conquest of England. They bought with them a style of architecture known as “Romanesque” on the continent but considered “Norman” in England. The style was characterized by large weight-bearing columns surmounted by semi-circular arches. As the years passed, additions, collapses and renovations to the original building left it with a blend of styles that still somehow achieve harmony rather than incoherence.

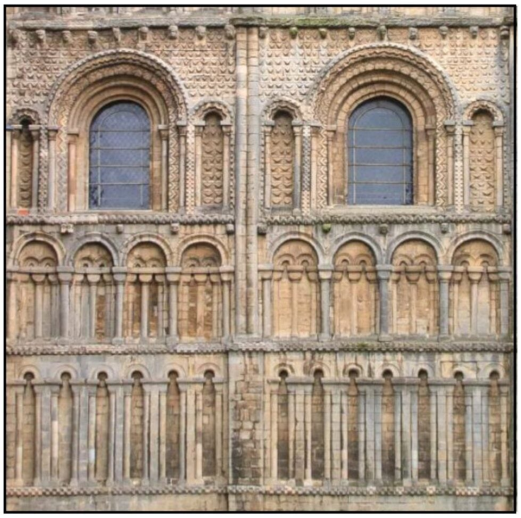
The following is the view of the cathedral from the south from Bentham (1771, Plate 42, scale 100 ft):



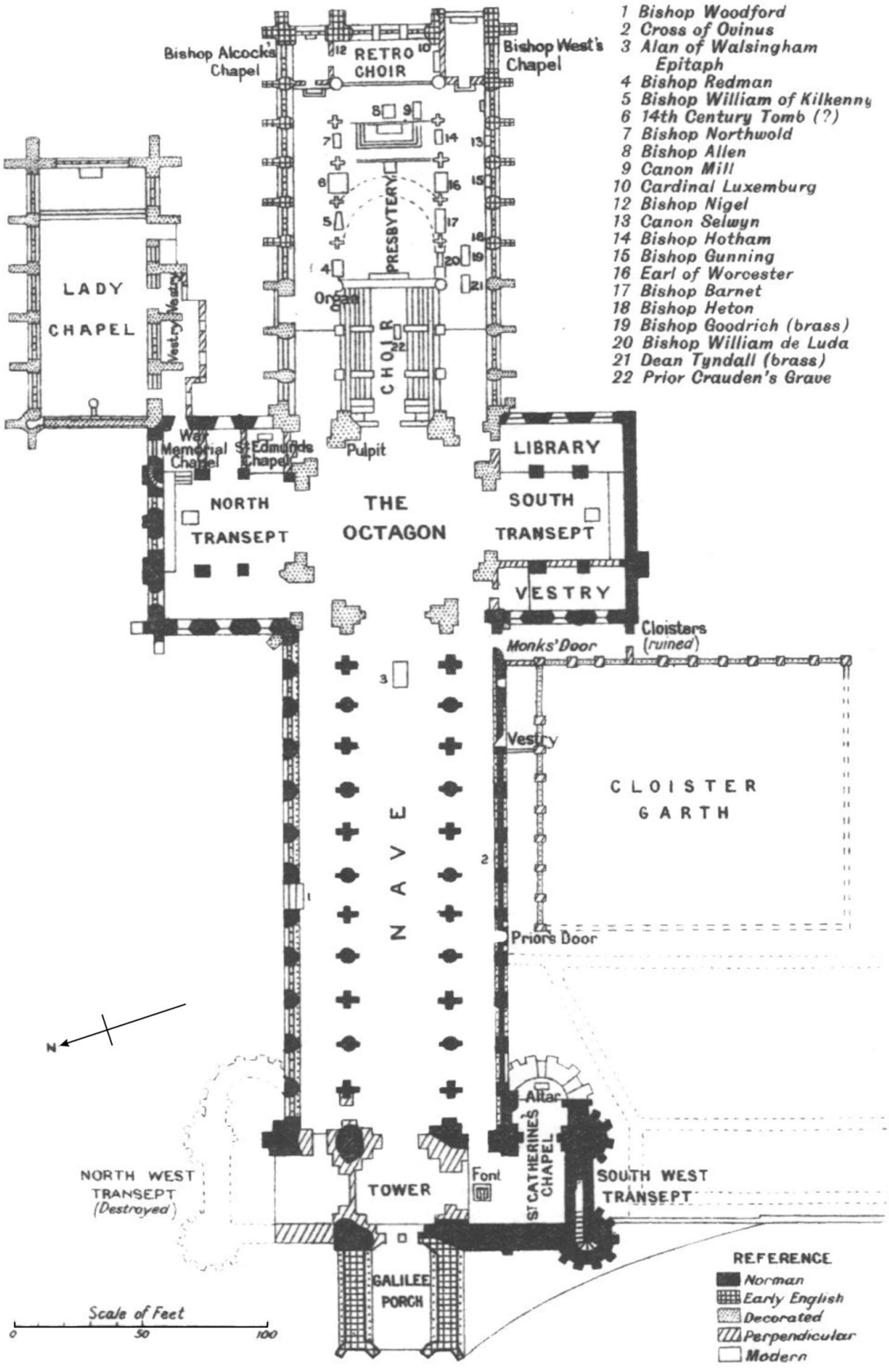
The West end of the cathedral shows its mixture of styles. The following illustration shows a engraving from King (1881, plate XII) as well as two modern photographs showing the Gothic arches on the Galilee Porch and the Norman arches on the south west transepts







The following is a floor plan of the cathedral:


1 Bishop Woodford
2 Cross of Ovinus
3 Alan of Walsingham Epitaph
4 Bishop Redman
5 Bishop William of Kilkenny
6 14th Century Tomb (?)
7 Bishop Northwold
8 Bishop Allen
9 Canon Mill
10 Cardinal Luxemburg
12 Bishop Nigel
13 Canon Selwyn
14 Bishop Hotham
15 Bishop Gunning
16 Earl of Worcester
17 Bishop Barnet
18 Bishop Heton
19 Bishop Goodrich (brass)
20 Bishop William de Luda
21 Dean Tyndall (brass)
22 Prior Crauden's Grave
Bishop Alcock's Chapel
RETRO CHOIR
Bishop West's Chapel
PRESBYTERY
LADY CHAPEL
Vestry
Vestry
Organ
CHOIR
War Memorial Chapel
St Edmunds Chapel
Pulpit
LIBRARY
NORTH TRANSEPT
THE OCTAGON
SOUTH TRANSEPT
VESTRY
Cloisters (ruined)
Monks' Door
Vestry
CLOISTER GARTH
NAVE
Priors Door
N
Altar
St CATHERINE'S CHAPEL
NORTH WEST TRANSEPT (Destroyed)
TOWER
Font
SOUTH WEST TRANSEPT
GALILEE PORCH
Scale of Feet
0
50
100
REFERENCE
Norman
Early English
Decorated
Perpendicular
Modern

The dashed semicircular lines in the Presbytery show the eastern extent of the original Norman cathedral.

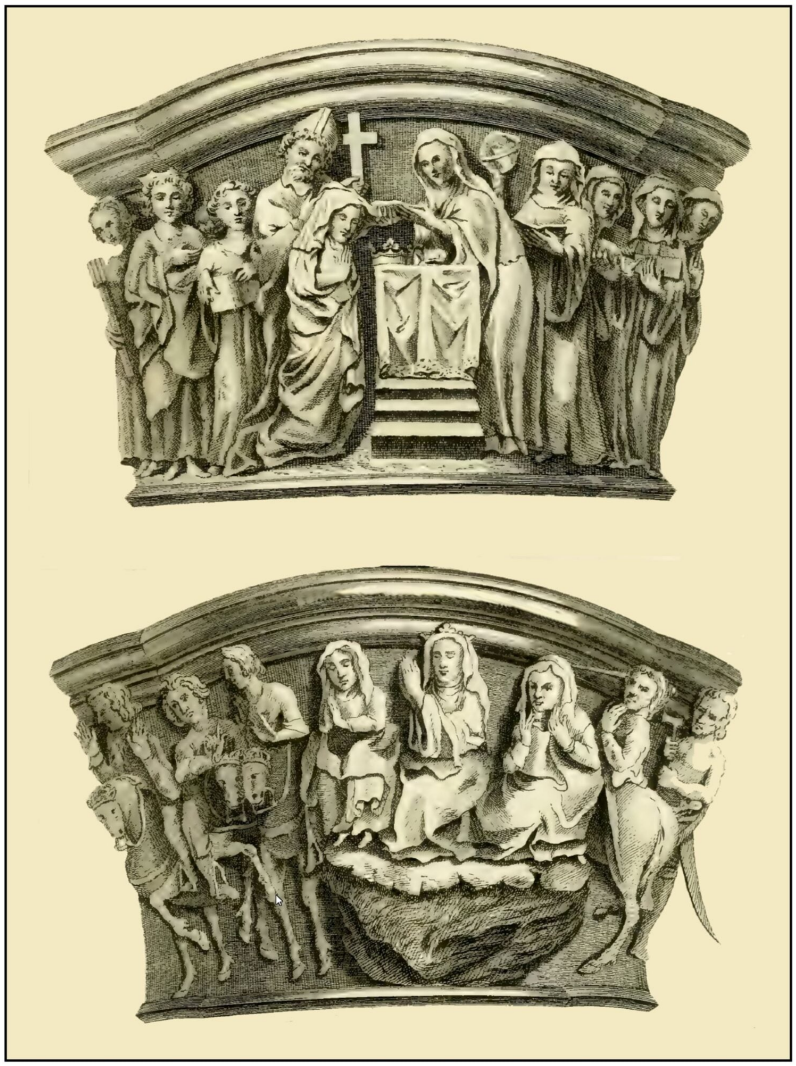
**Saxon Beginnings**

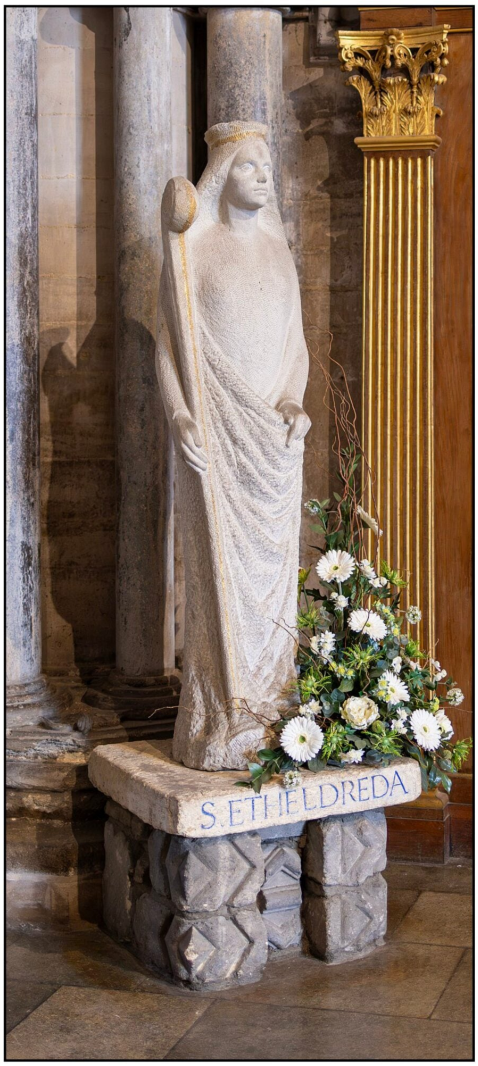
The region of England northeast of London – comprising the present counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex – was settled by Angles and Saxons in the 5$^{th}$ and 6$^{th}$ Centuries CE. Multiple kingdoms were set up on the island of Britain: East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, and Kent. Augustine of Canterbury arrived in England in 597 CE; and the various Saxon kingdoms in England soon converted to Christianity.

Anna, the king of East Anglia (reigned 636-654 CE), a devout Christian, probably reigned in Exning – just east of present-day Cambridge. A large ancient earthen wall, known today as the Devil's Dyke, stretching from the southern end of the Fens to the River Stour, appears to have built as a defense against the Mercian kingdom to the west. The following map shows the kingdom of East Anglia at the time of Anna:


Anna's daughter Æthelthryth (or Etheldreda) was born in 636 CE (Keynes, 2003). In 652, at the age of 16, she was married to Tondberct, a prince who ruled over part of the Fens. This was a political marriage, designed to extend Anna's domain, and Æthelthryth insisted on maintaining her virginity. As a wedding gift she was given the Isle of Ely in the Fens. The name "Ely" probable comes from the Old English *elge* meaning "region of eels." Tonberct died in 655, and Æthelthryth retired to live in Ely.

After Anna died fighting against the Mercians at the battle of Bulcamp in 654, Æthelthryth was married in 660 for a second time to Ecgfrith, a 16-year-old prince of Northumbria. Once again, she insisted on maintaining her virginity. In 670, she formally took the veil as a nun and lived in the double monastery (for both monks and nuns) at Coldingham, in what is now southeast Scotland. In 672, in need of an heir, Ecgfrith decided that he wished to consummate his marriage, and sent armed men to apprehend his wife. She and her attendants fled to Ely; Ecgfrith's men were prevented from capturing her by the tidal waters of the Fens. Æthelthryth then founded a new monastery at Ely, where she presided as abbess until her death in 679. The following illustration shows two of the capitals on the octagon pillars in Ely cathedral (from Bentham, 1771, plates 9 and 10): Æthelthryth's taking of the veil, and her miraculous salvation by the rising waters of the Fens. On the right is a 1960 statue of Æthelthryth by Phillip Turner.






Little is known of the abbey at Ely after its founding. In 869 the Vikings conquered the kingdom of East Anglia and much of Northumbria and Mercia. Alfred the Great (849-899) ultimately prevented the Vikings from further expansion, but allowed the continuation of Danelaw in the eastern parts of England from 886 to 1066. The original abbey of Æthelthryth may have been destroyed or may have simply fallen into disuse during the early Viking period. However, Ely Abbey was re-founded toward the end of the 10th Century as a monastery for monks alone. As his boat approached Ely, King Cnut (reign 1016-1035) was impressed by the music of the monks and wrote a poem, a fragment (perhaps the refrain) of which survives (Parker, 2018):

Merie sungen ðe muneches binnen Ely

ða Cnut ching reu ðer by.
Roweþ cnites noer the lant
and here we þes muneches sæng.

[Sweetly sang the monks in Ely
When Cnut the king rowed by;
'Row, men, nearer to the land
So we can hear the friars' song.']

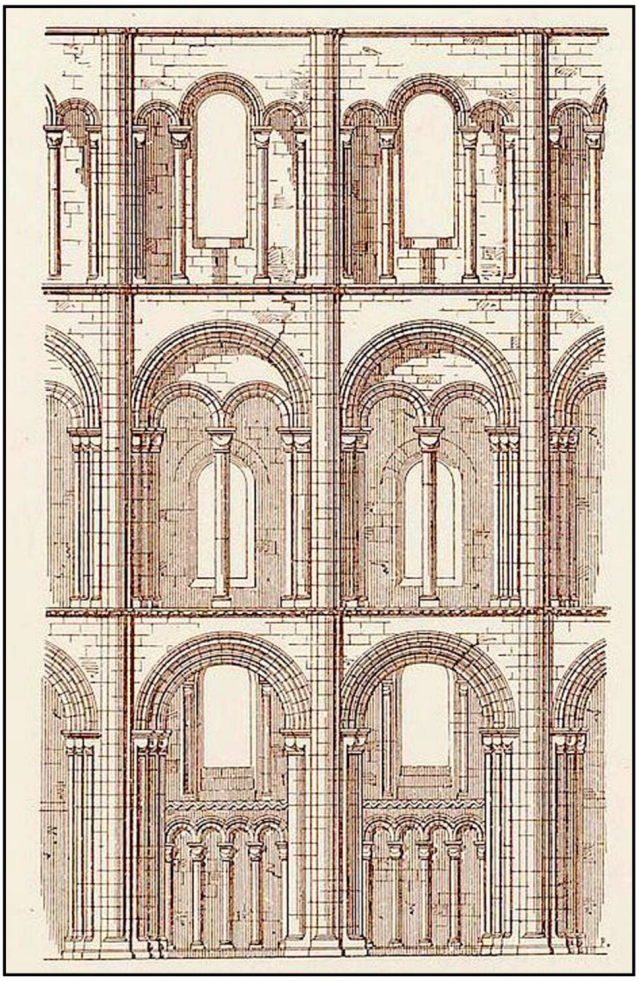
**The Norman Cathedral**

Under the direction of Abbot Simeon, the Normans initiated the construction of a large abbey church in Ely in 1083. The remains of Saint Æthelthryth were moved from the old church to the new in 1106. Her marble tomb was placed in a shrine bedecked by gold and jewels behind the high altar. The building was granted cathedral status by Henry I 1109. The nave, central tower and transepts were completed by about 1140, and the western transepts and tower were finally finished by about 1190.

The nave is 72 meters long and 22 meters high. There are three levels: the arcade, gallery (or tribune) and clerestory, the last containing large windows for light (clerestory means "clear storey"). The proportions for these levels are 6:5:4 (Clifton-Taylor, 1986, p 36). The arcades of the gallery are divided into two and those of the clerestory into three. The columns alternate between piers with multiple shafts and piers with large cylindrical columns, providing a gentle visual rhythm. The aisles on either side of the main nave are each one half the width of the nave (Fernie, 2003). The roof was made of the same timbers that were used to provide the scaffolding when constructing the nave.

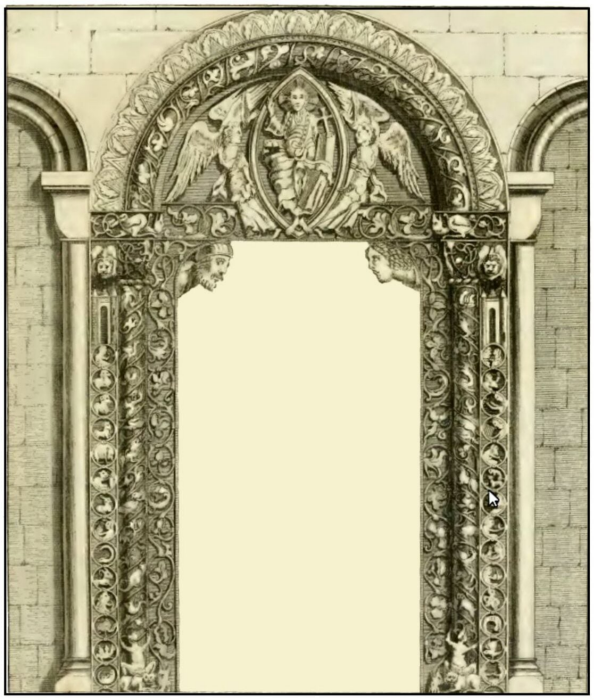
The following illustration shows on the left a diagram of the nave (Dehio & Bezold, 1887, plate 88), On the right is a modern photograph that shows its three levels, and at the

bottom a photograph that illustrates the alternation of the main columns.



The monk’s door and the prior’s door from the cloisters into the nave were likely built and decorated in the 1130s. Both

are intricately sculpted. The prior's door (shown below in a plate from Bentham, 1771, and in a modern photograph) is surmounted by a tympanum containing Christ in Majesty surrounded by two angels. Though far less accomplished than the Romanesque sculptures in France, it has its own charm.



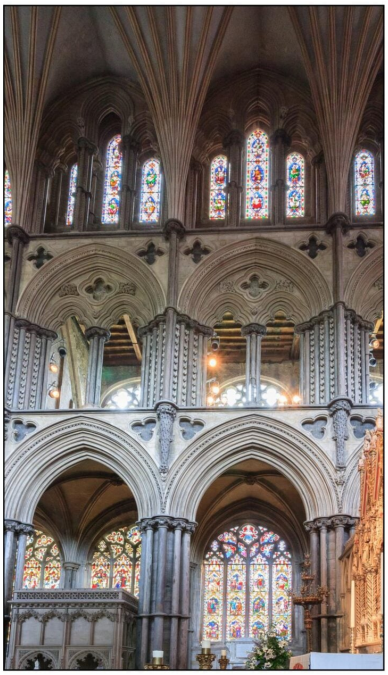
**The Gothic Cathedral**

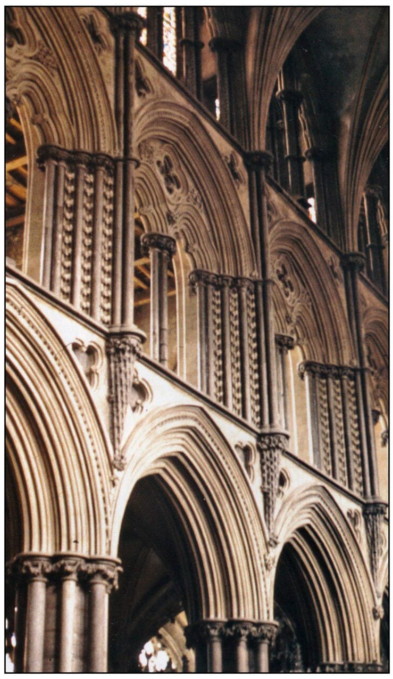
The Galillee Porch was added to the west front of the cathedral in the first two decades of the 13th Century. As we have already noted the style is early Gothic: the blind arcades decorating the façade have pointed arches, narrow columns, and trefoil openings.

A little later, the east end of the Cathedral was extended to form a Presbytery: a space for the monks to worship separate from the choir and the nave. This extension in a richly decorated Gothic style was completed in 1252 (Maddison, 2003). The large columns of the arcade are divided into multiple smaller columns and the pointed arches are geometrically ornamented. The tribune gallery has twin trefoiled openings beneath a large pointed arch. The clerestory has lancet windows with an inner row of cinquefoil arches. The stone

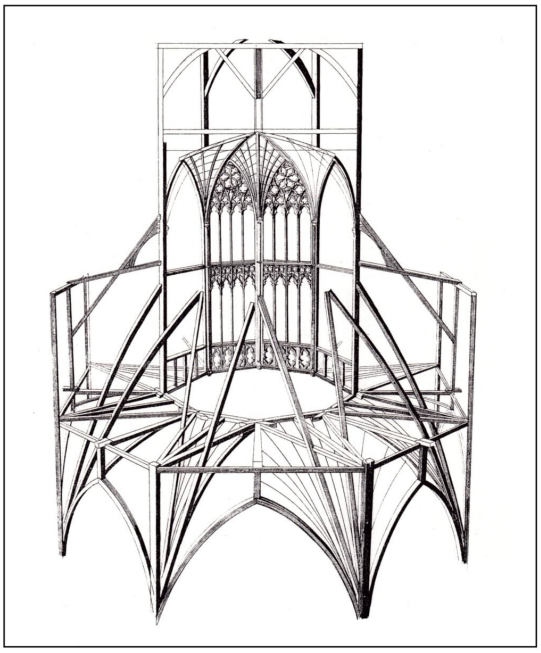
vault is supported by tierceron ribs.

The following illustration shows a view of the choir and presbytery toward the east by John Eaton (2016) surrounded by two views of the north wall, the left by Arthur de Smet (1972) and the right from Broughton (2008):

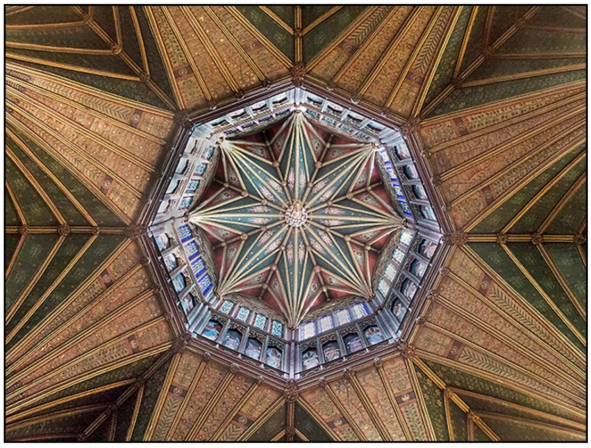


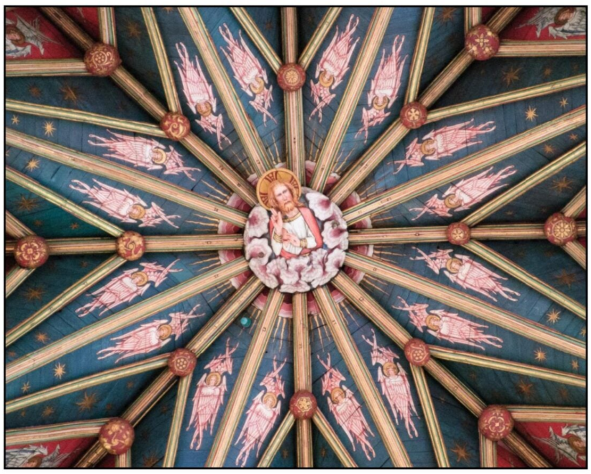


In 1321, work began on a large separate Lady Chapel north of the choir and presbytery. Constructing the foundations for this new building led to the central section of the cathedral being undermined by water. The central bell tower of the cathedral collapsed in 1322, damaging parts of the north transept and the choir. Under the direction of Alan of Walsingham a new octagonal tower was built, with the stonework completed by 1328 (Maddison, 2003). The crowning glory of the tower was a magnificent “lantern” built of timber that allowed light to descend into the cathedral (completed in about 1340). The following illustration shows the octagon viewed from the western tower and a diagram of the carpentry underlying the lantern from Hewett (1974, plate 76):



The following illustration shows views of the lantern from the interior of the cathedral:

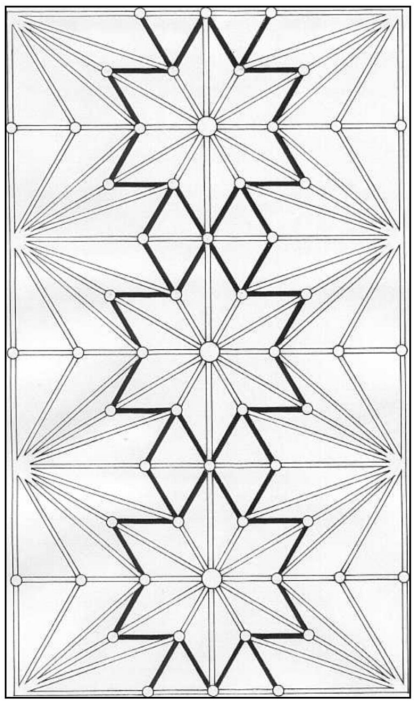




Because of the lantern, Ely cathedral provides a marvelous

interplay of light and shadow. Frederick Evans took many photographs in 1897 and published these in *Camera Work* in 1903 (Lyden, 2020). Two of his images are below:

After the stonework of the octagon was completed Bishop Hotham and Akan of Walsingham then returned to complete the lady chapel – a wonder of Decorated English Gothic. The vault is supported by interconnecting ribs forming star shapes (*lierne,* from French *lier*, to tie, or stellar vaulting). This approach supports a wider vault than the simple tierceron ribbing. The large windows are supported by thin vertical columns that extend outward to provide a buttressing effect. The following illustration shows a photograph of the chapel and a diagram of the lierne vaulting.



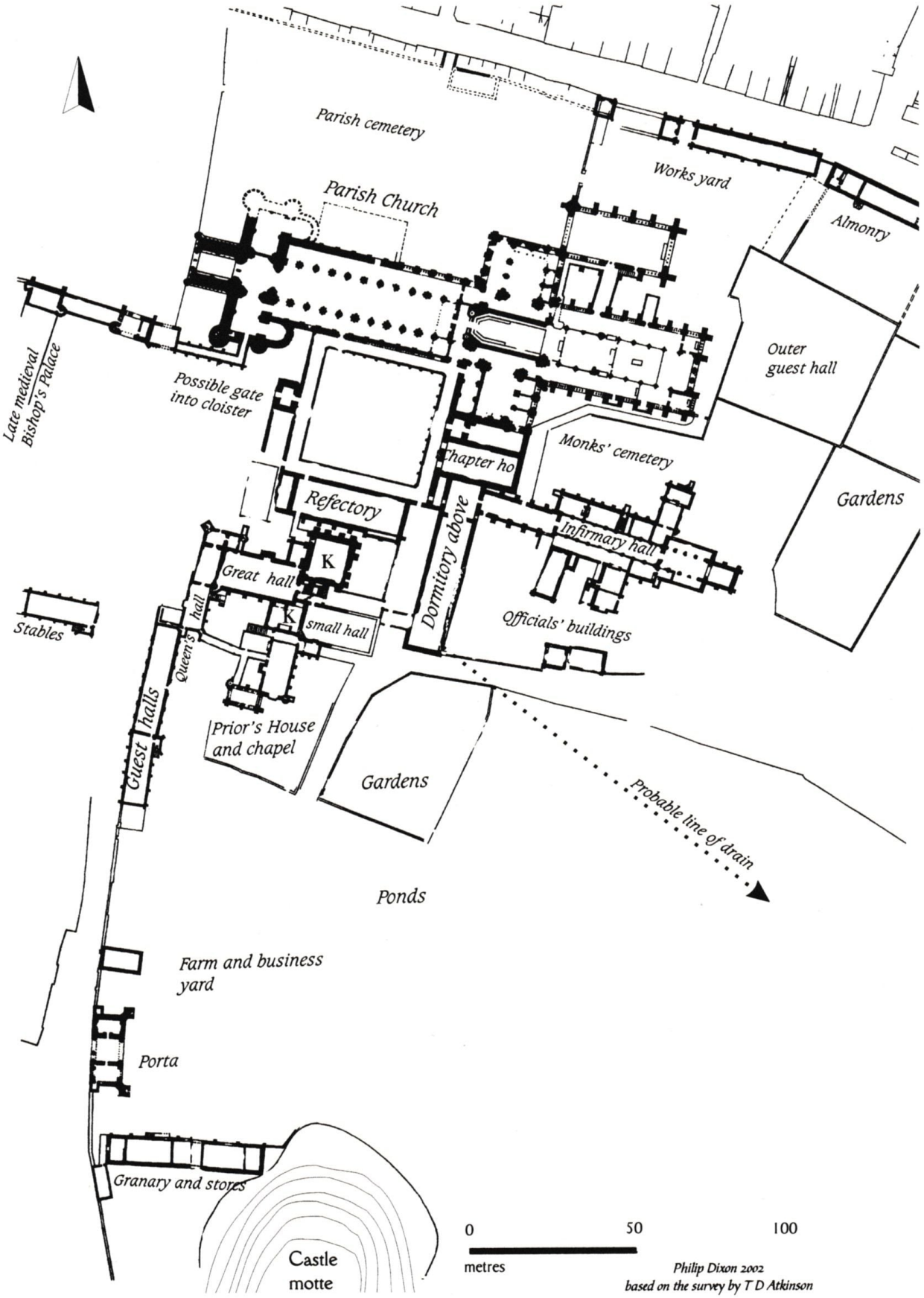
The chapel was completed in the 1340s. The lower sections of the walls are decorated with vegetal patterns, giving the visitor a sense of being in a garden (Broughton, 2008). The present chapel is very different from the way it was in the 14th and 15th Centuries. At that time, numerous painted sculptures existed in the niches, and the windows were made of stained glass.

**The Monastery**

Ely Cathedral, like Canterbury, Durham, and Norwich, was a monastic cathedral. The monks at these cathedrals followed the Benedictine order. The bishop of a monastic cathedral was the titular abbot of the monastery, but the monks were essentially led by the prior. Although most of the old cathedrals in England were monastic, some cathedrals, such as Lincoln and Hereford were secular and had no associated monastery.

The monastery (or priory) at Ely was prosperous. Many of the medieval buildings of the monastery still stand. Some are used by King's Ely School. The following plan shows the probable layout of the monastery (Dixon, 2003). The castle motte is the

site of a fortress in Norman times.



**The Reformation**

As the years wore on the monastery at Ely became rich. The sale of indulgences brought in much money. Death acted like the church's tax-collector, as those in need of heaven left their land and possessions to the church rather than to their children. Pilgrims to the shrine of Æthelthryth/Etheldreda were expected to make significant donations to the church. Æthelthryth was also called Saint Audrey. Ribbons bought at her shrine were called "St Audrey's lace," whence comes the word "tawdry" for overpriced finery. Some Bishops at Ely made special ornate chapels for themselves: Bishop Alcock (1486-1500) at the end of the north aisle and Bishop West (1515-33) at the end of the south aisle. It was easy to accuse the church of luxury and greed.

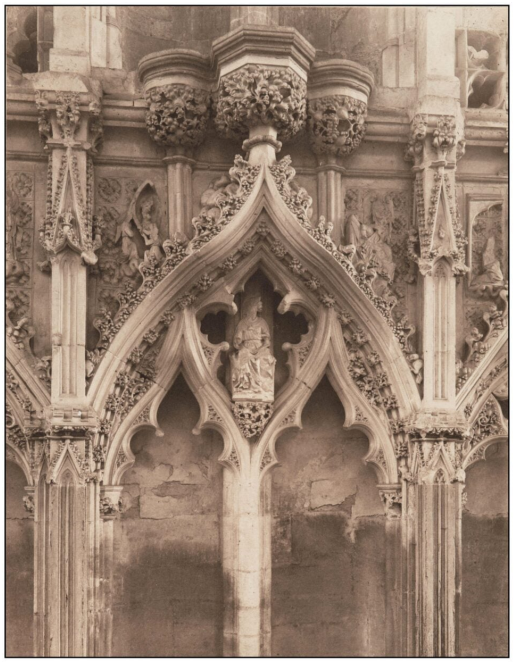
As the 16th Century progressed, Henry VIII came to need both a new wife and a source of gold. In 1533 Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer allowed him to marry Anne Boleyn. In 1534, Thomas Cromwell, the king's chancellor, arranged for Parliament to pass the Act of Supremacy declaring the king to be the head of the English Church. In 1537, Cromwell convened a synod of British bishops who produce a book *The Institution of the Christian Man,* espousing many of the principles proposed by Martin Luther. In 1839 Parliament passed a bill to allow the Dissolution of the Monasteries. All of the small monasteries were to be closed, their monks let go, and their assets expropriated by the king. The monasteries associated with the cathedrals were also to be closed, although some of their monks could remain as officers in the newly secularized cathedrals.

On 18 November, 1539, Prior Robert Seward and 23 other monks signed a deed of surrender of the monastery of Ely to Henry VIII (Duffy, 2020, pp 31-45). There was not much else they could do. The abbots of Gastonbury and Reading had been executed on November 13 for refusing to dissolve their houses.

The monastery and cathedral were held at the pleasure of the monarch and its riches were duly plundered. In 1541 the cathedral was given a royal charter as a secular cathedral. The church which had been devoted to Saint Etheldreda and Saint Peter, was renamed “The Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Ely.”

The bishop during this time was Thomas Goodrich, a colleague of Thomas Cranmer. Trained in theology at Cambridge University, he was appointed Bishop of Ely in 1534 and remained bishop until his death in 1554. After the dissolution of the monastery, he ordered the destruction of the shrine of Ethelreda, the defacement of the statues in the Lady Chapel, and the removal of the statues in the chapels of Bishop’s Alcock and West. Every one of the 147 statues of Mary and the other saints in the Lady Chapel was beheaded. Goodrich continued as bishop after the death of Henry in 1547; during the reign of Edward VI (1547-53), he was also appointed Lord Chancellor (1552). He died in 1554, before Mary (reign 1553-8) had time to pursue her vengeance.

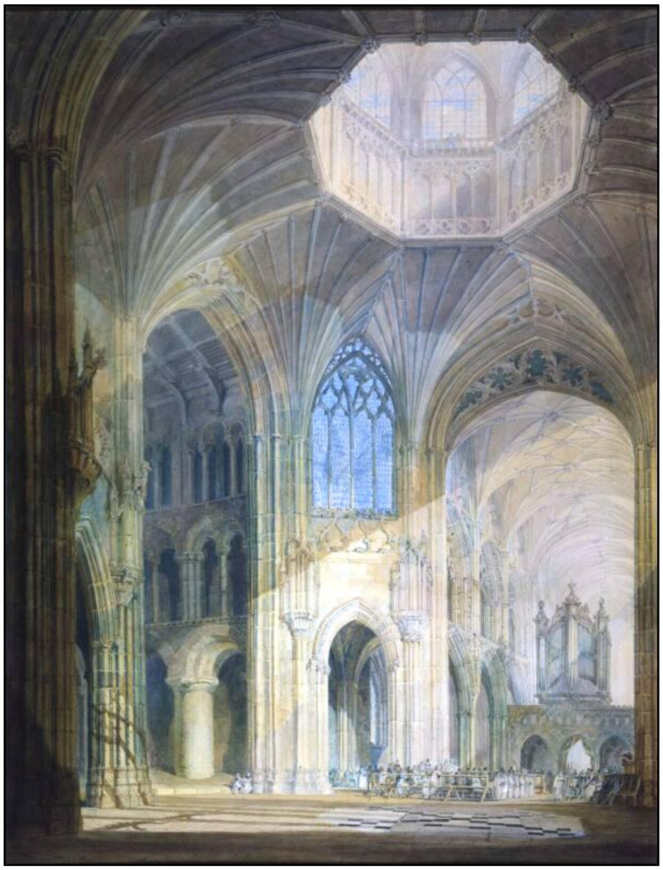
The following illustration shows two photographs from the 1890s by Frederick Evans showing the mutilation of the statues in the Lady Chapel and the empty plinths on the gateway to Bishop West’s chapel. Also shown is the memorial brass to Thomas Goodrich, located on the floor of the south presbytery. The bishop holds in his right hand both a bible and the seal of England, emblematic of his chancellorship.



After the Reformation the cathedrals of England fell into disrepair. The architecture was contemptuously referred to as “Gothic” or barbaric (see Clifton-Taylor, 1986, pp 9-12). In 1699, the north west transept of Ely Cathedral collapsed (Fernie, 2003, p 96). There was no money to rebuild:

> To this day, Ely looks like the wounded veteran of some forgotten war. (Jenkins, 2016, pp 91-2)

Watercolors by J. M. W. Turner from the 1790s show the cathedral octagon and the dilapidated Galilee Porch.



**Repair**

The cathedral was extensively restored during the 19th Century: The roof of the nave was retimbered and painted; the windows were provided with stained glass; the choir was provided with new stalls and a beautifully carved choir screen; the high altar received an intricate reredos (from French *arere*, behind, *dos*, back).

The following illustration shows some of the carvings above the choir stalls. These depict episodes in the life of Jesus: the supper at Emmaus, the appearance of the risen Jesus to Thomas, and the ascension:

**Ely in the Present**

Most people in England no longer attend church, and those who believe that there is a God are equaled by those who believe that there is not. What should be the place of the church in modern society?

Intriguing to me are the modern statues that now adorn the cathedral. Below are illustrations of four of these works. Clockwise from the upper left are the Virgin Mary in the Lady Chapel urging us to exultation by David Wynne (2000), Christ and Mary Magdalene wondering at the mystery of the resurrection by David Wynne (1967), Christ in Majesty above the pulpit by Peter Ball (2000), and half-life-size statues by Sean Henry on the empty plinths in Bishop West's chapel, part of an installation entitled *Am I My Brothers Keeper?* in 2024.

An optimistic view of the future is from Nicholas Orme (2017, p 262):

> The most astonishing feature of cathedral history, when one has journeyed through its seventeen hundred years, is its immense and varied creativity. If we take buildings, there is the evolving history of their plans and construction, the sourcing of the materials, the labours of craftsmen, the elaboration of the decoration, and the successive layers of repair and restoration. There is the worship, complex in its calendar, its liturgical texts, the ways in which it is done, and the application of the worship to God, saints, or popular, needs. There is the vast range of arts involved in producing worship and its setting: sculpture, painting, stained glass, metalwork, fabrics, singing, instrumental music, and chorography. There is the written and spoken word in prayer- and hymn-books, preaching, inscriptions, archives, libraries, guide-books, and service-sheets.

A more restrained understanding of what it is like to visit a church when faith has passed away can be found in a 1954 poem by Philip Larkin entitled *Church Going*, the last verse of which reads:

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
> If only that so many dead lie round.

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# Vincent van Gogh in Saint-Rémy

In May 1889, following several psychotic episodes in Arles, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) voluntarily admitted himself to the asylum at the monastery of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He stayed there for just over a year. Despite several further episodes of severe depression and madness, van Gogh was incredibly prolific during this period, producing about 150 paintings, among them *Starry Night*.

**Madness in Arles**

Vincent van Gogh left Paris and settled in Arles in February, 1888. Profoundly affected by the quality of the light and vividness of the colors, he changed his style of painting, banishing the shadows of his earlier work. He had become fascinated by the Japanese woodblock prints that he had bought in Paris, and was intrigued by the new techniques of Paul

Gauguin (1848-1903) and Emile Bernard (1868-1941) in Pont Aven, who were beginning to using flat colors within clearly defined outlines (a technique later called “cloisonnism” from the procedure of melting enamels onto a surface within compartments defined by small metal strips). Most importantly he began to heighten his colors – to paint what he felt as much as what he saw. He combined these new approaches – flat colors, clear outlines, heightened hues – with the thick impasto and broad brushstrokes of earlier Dutch painting to develop his own unique style.

In October 1888, Gauguin came to stay with van Gogh in Arles. They shared the small Yellow House on the Place Lamartine in Arles that van Gogh had rented and decorated with the financial support of his younger brother Theo (1857-1891), an art-dealer in Paris. Vincent wanted to establish a “Studio of the South” where painters could create art appropriate to the modern age. Both Gauguin and van Gogh had very definite ideas about the future of art and they did not always agree. In particular, van Gogh wanted to paint directly from nature whereas Gauguin wanted to paint from memory and imagination (a process he called “abstraction”). They argued.

On December 23, 1888, Gauguin threatened to leave. Van Gogh became psychotic. In his madness he cut off his left ear with a razor, and presented this bloody object to a young prostitute. The following was the next day’s newspaper report (Bailey, 2016, p 157)

> Hier soir, un individu se présentant à la porte de la maison de tolérance no. 1, sonnait er remettait à la femme, qui vint lui ouvrir, une oreille pliée dans un morceau de papier, lui disant «Tenez, cela vous servira.» Il s’en alla ensuite. Je vous laisse à penser l’étonnement et l’effroi dut avoir cette femme en trouvant une oreille dans ce papier. La police faisant peu après sa ronde, eut connaissance du fait … et at été sur les traces de cet étrange personage. Ce matin, M. le commissaire central et

> son secrétaire se sont transportés au domicile d'un peintre hollandaise nommé Vincent, place Lamartine, et ont appris par la bonne qu'elle avait trouvé ce matin un rasoir ensanglanté sur la table et a trouvé ensuite l'artiste peintre couché dans son lit avec une oreille coupée et dans un état assez grave. M. le commissaire central l'a fait transporté à l'hôpital.
>
> [Yesterday evening, an individual presented himself at brothel no. 1, rang the bell and handed to the woman, who came to open the door, an ear folded into a piece of paper, saying "Here, this will be useful to you." He then left. I leave you to imagine the astonishment and fear this woman must have felt when she found an ear within the paper. The police patrol coming by the brothel soon afterwards were made aware of what had happened … and were soon on the trail of this strange character. This morning, the Chief of Police and his secretary went to the home of a Dutch painter named Vincent on Place Lamartine, and learned from the maid that she had just found a bloody razor on the table. They then discovered the painter lying in bed with an amputated ear and in serious condition from loss of blood. The Chief of Police had him taken to hospital.]

Van Gogh was treated in the hospital at Arles. Theo van Gogh came down from Paris to check on his brother. Gauguin took the train back to Paris and the two artists never saw each other again. The following illustration shows van Gogh' self-portrait (F527) from January 1889. This and later paintings are identified by their Faille number (Faille & Hammermacher, 1970; Feilchenfeldt, 2013) The portrait was painted using a mirror thud making it appear as if his right ear was amputated rather than his left. In the background is one of van Gogh's Japanese prints: *Geishas in a Landscape* by Sato Torakiyu (1870s)

Over the next few months van Gogh suffered from two other bouts of severe madness for which he was hospitalized. His neighbors petitioned the police that *le foux roux* (the red-headed madman) not be allowed to return to the Yellow House. Finally, he agreed to be admitted to the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Theo arranged to pay for his treatment there, and a kindly Protestant minister accompanied him to his new home.

No one knows what caused van Gogh's psychotic episodes. A recent symposium (Bakker et al., 2016) discussed many possible causes but came to no conclusion. Some of the problems in making a diagnosis so long after the patient died are discussed by ter Berg et al. (2012) and Voskuil (2020). The doctors who treated him in Arles and in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence thought that he suffered from a type of epilepsy that manifested itself in mental changes rather than physical convulsions. This disorder presently goes by the name of "temporal lobe epilepsy" (Blumer, 2002). Patients with temporal lobe epilepsy experience attacks of confusion and

automatic behavior. Between these attacks, the patient may be depressed.

To my mind, van Gogh’s periods of madness were more likely due to “bipolar disorder” (Carota et al., 2005), previously known as “manic-depressive illness.” Many other creative artists have suffered from this disorder (Jamison, 1993; Johnson et al., 2012; Ludwig, 1995). Such a diagnosis would explain von Gogh’s episodes of overwhelming depression. His remarkable productivity when not depressed could be attributed to periods of hypomania.

**The Asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole**

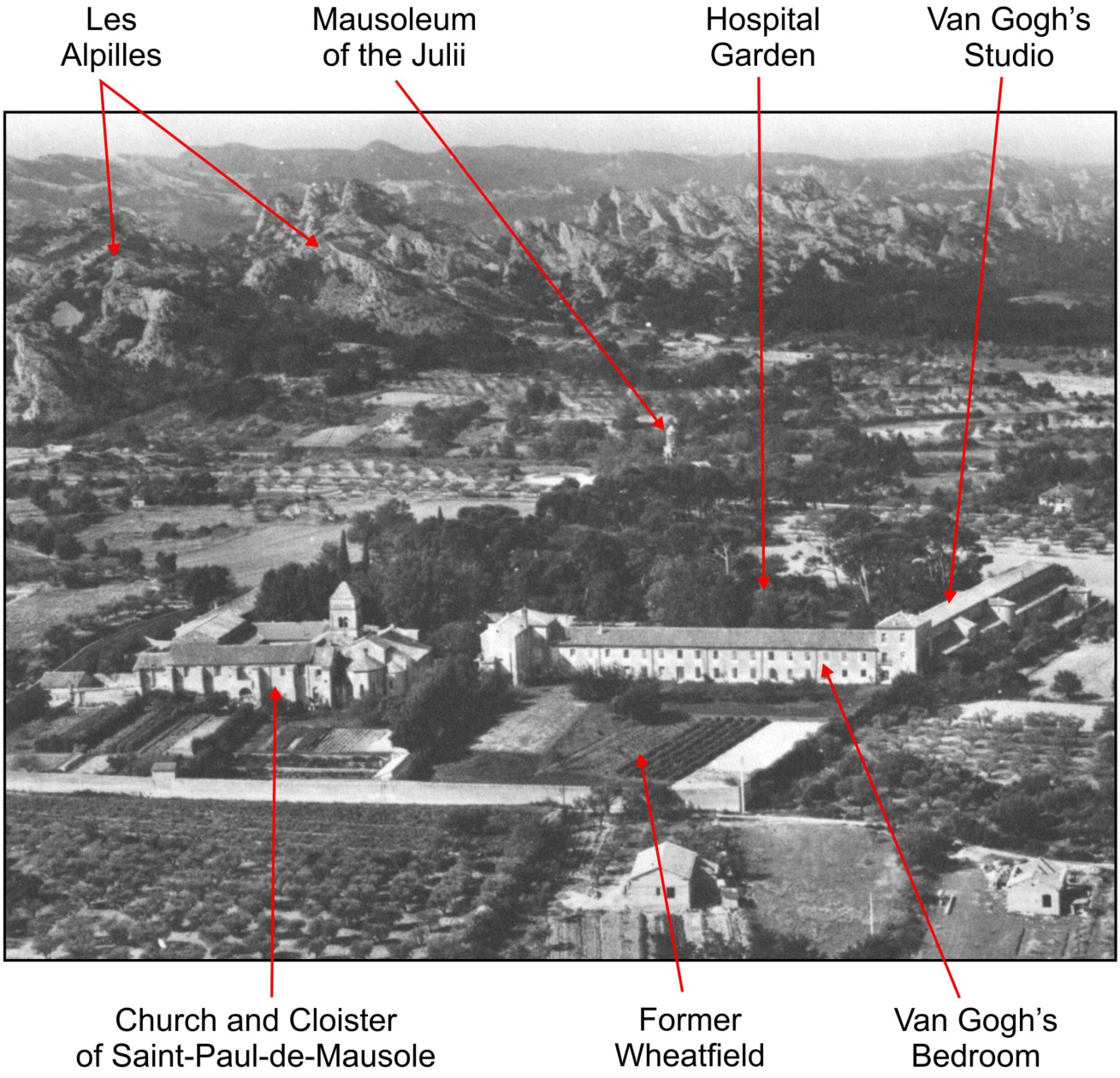
Saint-Rémy-de Provence is located about 20 km south of Avignon in the region called Bouches-du-Rhône (“mouths” of the Rhône – where the river empties into the Mediterranean Sea).


South of Saint-Rémy are a striking set of low limestone mountains called *Les Alpilles*, wherein the medieval Princes of Les Baux (from Provençal, *bauç*, a rocky spur), allegedly descended from the magus Balthasar, built their castle. In the early 19th Century, the mineral bauxite (a source of aluminum) was discovered and mined there.

The region near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence has been inhabited for millennia. Greeks and then Romans lived in a town called Glanum, located about one kilometer south of modern Saint Rémy. The most striking remnants of Roman times are *Les Antiques*: a triumphal arch and a mausoleum for the Julii family, both dating from the 1st century CE.

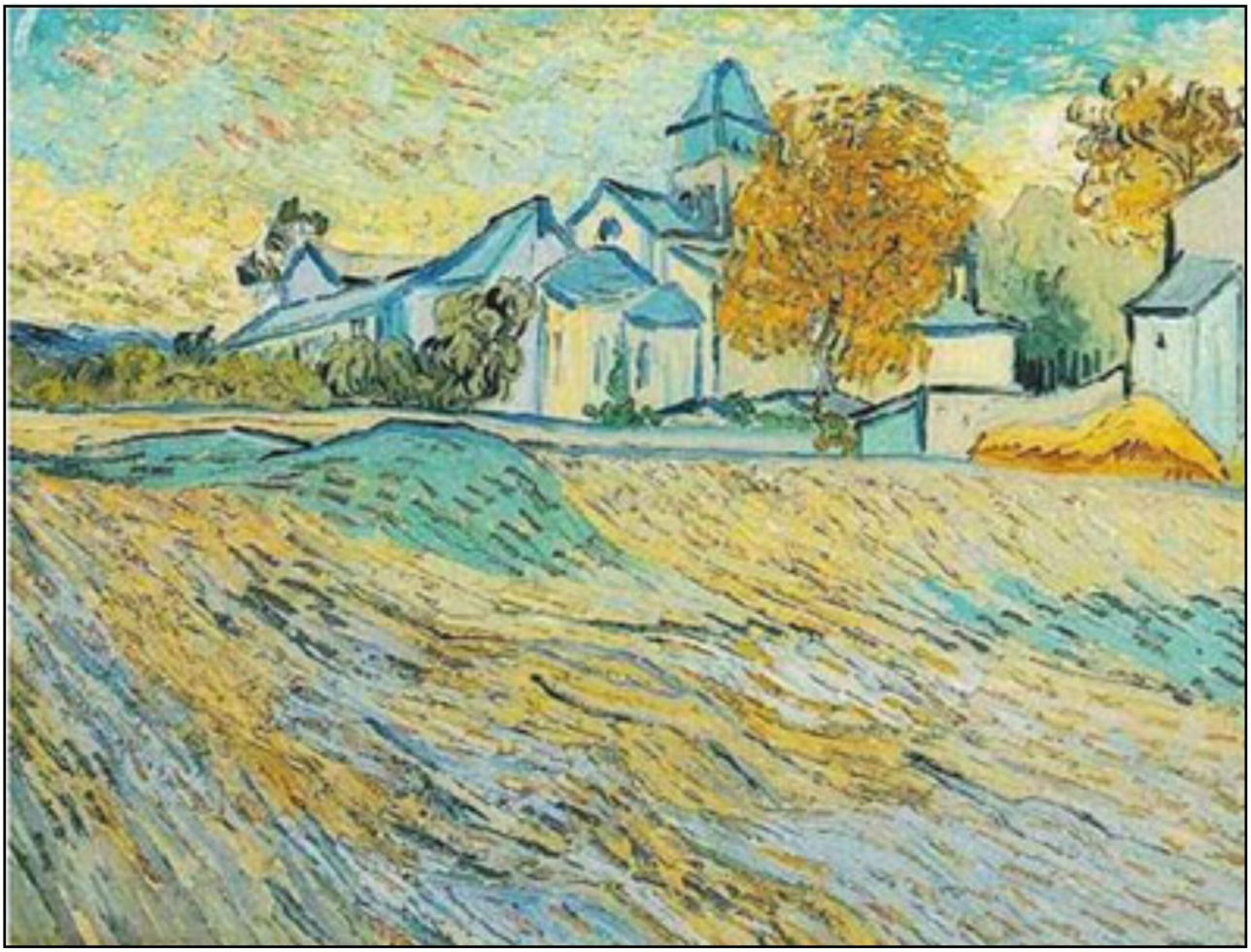
The modern town of Saint-Rémy was named after Saint Remigius who converted the Francs to Christianity in the 5th Century CE. In the 11th Century, a Benedictine monastery was built near the site of Glanum (Duret, 2021), taking its name from the most prominent of the Roman ruins: Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. The Romanesque monastery is renowned for its square bell tower and the peacefulness of its cloister. In 1605, the monastery was ceded to the Strict Order of St. Francis of Assissi. Over the years, these monks began to construct the adjacent hospital buildings and to care for the mentally disturbed. After the French Revolution (1789-99), the monastery was secularized. The asylum was taken over by private interests, but continued to care for mentally disturbed patients, albeit using nuns rather than monks. At the time of van Gogh's hospitalization, the asylum was directed by Théophile Peyron, a retired naval doctor. Treatment was based on kindness and therapeutic baths.

Since there were very few patients, van Gogh was allowed both a second-story bedroom with a barred window facing east over the wheatfield, and a ground-floor painting-studio that looked out onto the enclosed hospital garden. The following illustration is an aerial view of the monastery taken from the east sometime in the 1940s (adapted from Bailey, 2018, 2019). The town of Saint-Rémy is outside the photo to the right (north) and Les Baux is to the left (south)

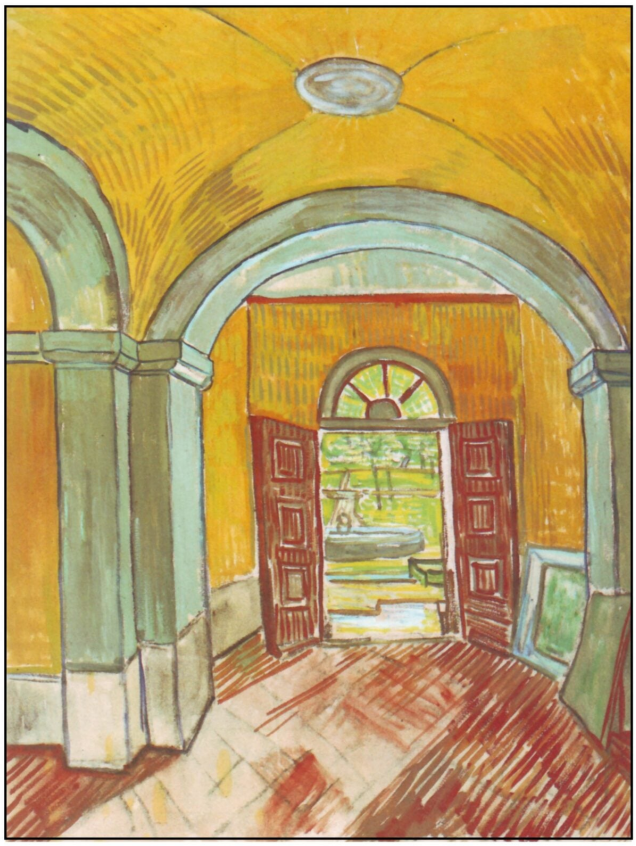



The following illustration shows a view of the monastery as seen from the northeast, as painted by van Gogh in October

1889 (F803). This painting for a while belonged to Elizabeth Taylor. Below that is a recent photograph of the monastery church and cloister as viewed from the southeast.



When van Gogh arrived at the asylum he would have entered through the main door of the hospital. The following illustration shows the view from the vestibule to the enclosed garden in a painting by van Gogh (F1530, October, 1889) and in a modern photograph (Bailey, 2019).



The following is an ink drawing of the fountain in the garden that is visible through the vestibule door (F1531, May 1889) made soon after van Gogh arrived.

**Irises**

During his first weeks at the asylum, van Gogh was limited to the hospital grounds, but was allowed to paint in the hospital garden. He felt comfortable in the asylum and hoped that his stay there might cure his madness. He wrote a letter to his new sister-in-law Joanna van Gogh-Bonger on May 9, 1889

(Jansen et al., 2009, 772):

> Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened.
>
> And although one continually hears shouts and terrible howls as though of the animals in a menagerie, despite this the people here know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises. They all come to see when I'm working in the garden, and I can assure you are more discreet and more polite to leave me in peace than, for example, the good citizens of Arles.
>
> It's possible that I'll stay here for quite a long time, never have I been so tranquil as here and at the hospital in Arles to be able to paint a little at last. Very near here there are some little grey or blue mountains, with very, very green wheatfields at their foot, and pines.

One of the earliest paintings from his stay in the asylum was *Irises* (May 1889, F608)

The painting owes much to the Japanese art that van Gogh had become fascinated by in Paris. In an 1888 letter to Theo, he had praised the Japanese way of seeing the importance of simple things

> If we study Japanese art, then we see a man, undoubtedly wise and a philosopher and intelligent, who spends his time – on what? – studying the distance from the earth to the moon? – no; studying Bismarck's politics? – no, he studies a single blade of grass.
>
> But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants – then the seasons, the broad features of landscapes, finally animals, and then the human figure. He spends his life like that, and life is too short to do everything.
>
> Just think of that; isn't it almost a new religion that

> these Japanese teach us, who are so simple and live in nature as if they themselves were flowers? (Jansen et al., 2009, 686):

One particular painting which van Gogh probably saw in reproduction, is a screen with a field of irises displayed on a gold background by Ogata Korin (1658-1716):

Although the iconography is similar, the style of van Gogh's painting is distinctly his own:

> Korin's paintings seem slick, precious, almost delicate, next to Vincent's fleshy, jostling flowers. Van Gogh reinforced objects with bold outlines, but his thick application of paint gave the surface a tangible, almost sculptural, rather than graphic, quality. (Helvey, 2009, p 122)

One of the fascinating aspects of van Gogh's *Irises* is the isolated white flower in the upper left. Helvey (2009) proposes that this is an *Iris albicans* as opposed to the other *Iris germanica* flowers, rather than a mutation (as might be the pale blue flower on the right). As such it would be much like van Gogh, a "stranger on the earth." This quotation (from *Psalm* 119: 18-19) is from a sermon that a younger van Gogh gave in his days as a preacher; it provides the title for

Lubin’s 1972 biography of the painter.

> Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.
> I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.

Van Gogh’s Irises was sold at auction in 1987 for what was then a record price for a painting: 49 million dollars. However, the stock market crashed and the buyer defaulted. Rather than putting the painting up for auction again (and having it not reach the same price), Sotheby’s arranged for the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to acquire it in a private purchase.

One year later, in May 1890, when the irises were again in bloom, just before leaving the asylum, van Gogh painted *Bouquet of Irises* (F680). The background pink of the original painting has faded over the years:

**The Wheatfield**

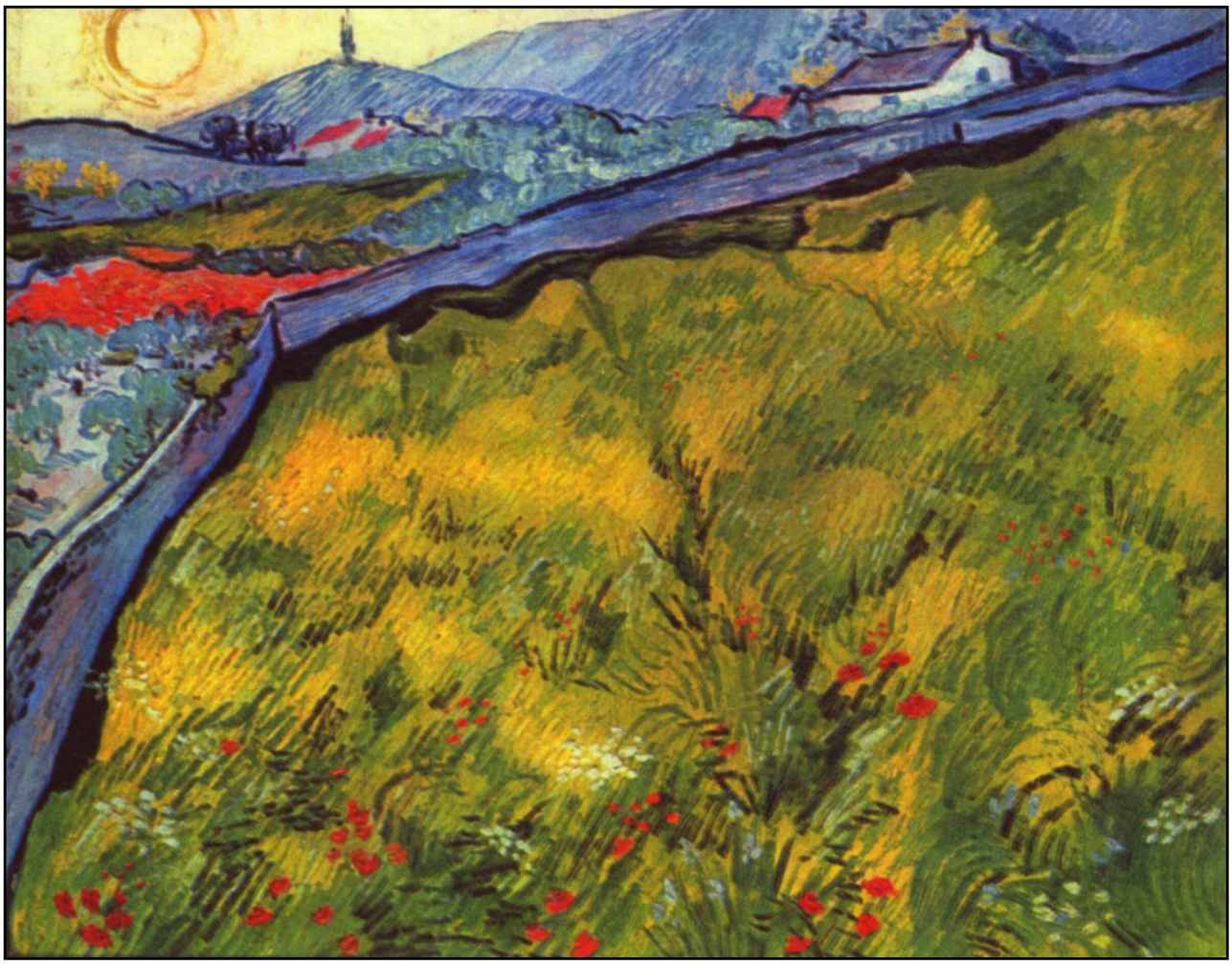
Van Gogh's bedroom at the asylum looked out over a wheatfield. In the distance beyond the wall enclosing the field were the *Alpilles*. Van Gogh remarked on the view in a letter to Theo in late May, 1889:

> Through the iron-barred window I can make out a square of wheat in an enclosure, a perspective in the manner of van Goyen, above which in the morning I see the sun rise in its glory. (Jansen et al., 2009, 776)

Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) was a Dutch painter of landscapes and seascapes. Van Gogh is referring to his characteristic "perspective" which used a low horizon and paid great

attention to the sky and clouds. Van Gogh was different: he seldom used a low horizon for his paintings, his bright colors were the opposite of the highly restricted palette of browns, greys, ochres and greens used by van Goyen, and his brushstrokes were bold rather than fine.

The following is one of his first paintings of the wheatfield (May 1889, F720). The wheat was growing well and beginning to turn from green to gold. Although some have proposed that the view was painted from his window, I suggest that he set up his easel at the edge of the field looking southeast. This would allow him to show the wildflowers at the edge of the field in the foreground:



In mid July, 1889, van Gogh suffered a severe relapse and was unable to work for over a month. After returning to some

semblance of normality, he completed several versions of the harvest in the wheatfield. In a letter to Theo from early September (Jansen et al., 2009, 800) he described the scene

> Work is going quite well – I'm struggling with a canvas begun a few days before my indisposition. A reaper, the study is all yellow, terribly thickly impasted, but the subject was beautiful and simple. I then saw in this reaper – a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil – I then saw the image of death in it, in this sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it's the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.

Van Gogh is comparing the painting to a study that he had made in Arles in 1888 of François Millet's 1850 painting of *The Sower*. He was to make other copies in early 1890 at the asylum.

In 1902, one version of these harvest paintings (September 1889, F619) was the first work of Van Gogh to be purchased and displayed in a museum: the Folkwang Museum, originally in Hagen and now in Essen, Germany (Lloyd et al., 2007, p 41).

After the harvest was over, van Gogh continued to paint the wheatfield. The following illustration shows a painting of the field during rain from November, 1889 (F650). Van Gogh was familiar with the convention in Japanese woodblock prints of using slanting lines to represent rain. In 1887 in Paris, he had made a copy of Hiroshige's 1857 *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake* (Pickvance, 1986, p 139).

Rilke (1907, p 56) remarked about the painting

> But now rain, rain: exhaustive and noisy like in the country, without any other sounds in between. The round edge of the wall in the monastery garden is full of mosses and has spots of an utterly luminous green, much as I have never seen.

In a letter to Emile Bernard (Jansen et al., 2007, 822) described another painting of the wheatfield (November 1889, F737) now newly planted with winter-wheat, illustrated below:

> Another canvas depicts a sun rising over a field of new wheat. Receding lines of the furrows run high up on the canvas, towards a wall and a range of lilac hills. The field

> is violet and green-yellow. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow aureole. In it, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calm, a great peace.

The painting is wonderfully tranquil. This contrasts with van Gogh's inner feelings at the time. In this regard it is worthwhile to consider the "other painting" to which he contrasts it. This *View of the Monastery Garden* (November, 1889, F659) is one that he describes extensively in a letter to Emile Bernard:

> A view of the garden of the asylum where I am, on the right a grey terrace, a section of house, some rosebushes that have lost their flowers; on the left, the earth of the garden – red ochre – earth burnt by the sun, covered in fallen pine twigs. This edge of the garden is planted with

large pines with red ochre trunks and branches, with green foliage saddened by a mixture of black. These tall trees stand out against an evening sky streaked with violet against a yellow background. High up, the yellow turns to pink, turns to green. A wall – red ochre again – blocks the view, and there's nothing above it but a violet and yellow ochre hill. Now, the first tree is an enormous trunk, but struck by lightning and sawn off. A side branch thrusts up very high, however, and falls down again in an avalanche of dark green twigs.

This dark giant – like a proud man brought low – contrasts, when seen as the character of a living being, with the pale smile of the last rose on the bush, which is fading in front of him. Under the trees, empty stone benches, dark box. The sky is reflected yellow in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun – the last glimmer – exalts the dark ochre to orange – small dark figures prowl here and there between the trunks. You'll understand that this combination of red ochre, of green saddened with grey, of black lines that define the outlines, this gives rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer, and which is called 'seeing red'. And what's more, the motif of the great tree struck by lightning, the sickly green and pink smile of the last flower of autumn, confirms this idea. (Jansen et al., 2007, 822)

**Cypresses**

In June 1889 van Gogh was allowed to travel outside the limits of the asylum, usually in the company of one of the hospital's orderlies. He took his easel and paints into the surrounding countryside. Several drawings and paintings from that early summer period portray some of the striking cypress trees near the asylum. Van Gogh noted his new fascination with the cypress trees in a letter to Theo (Jansen et al., 2007, 783):

> The cypresses still preoccupy me, I'd like to do something with them like the canvases of the sunflowers because it astonishes me that no one has yet done them as I see them.
>
> It's beautiful as regards lines and proportions, like an

> Egyptian obelisk.
>
> And the green has such a distinguished quality.
>
> It’s the *dark* patch in a sun-drenched landscape, but it’s one of the most interesting dark notes, the most difficult to hit off exactly that I can imagine.
>
> Now they must be seen here against the blue, *in* the blue, rather.

The following painting (June, 1889, F717) made just before his relapse, portrays a large cypress, linking the gold of the wheatfield to the blues of the *Alpilles* and the stormy sky.

**Starry Night**

The most famous of van Gogh's paintings from Saint-Rémy, *Starry Night*, was painted in mid-June, 1889 (F612), following a profound experience of the night stars, and just before his July madness. Unlike most of van Gogh's paintings, this was not done directly from nature, but rather from memory and imagination – using the technique that Gauguin had called abstraction, and that van Gogh had argued so strongly against in Arles. He did not paint this in the bedroom where he had experienced the stars, but in the ground-floor studio. Images from recent paintings that were drying in the studio – of the wheatfield with the *Alpilles* in the background and of the cypress trees near the asylum – are combined with his memory of the night sky. The town portrayed in the foreground is likely not Saint-Rémy – the church steeple is too prominent, the town is not clearly visible from the hospital, and van Gogh made no other similar paintings. Most critics have suggested that the painting portrays a memory: "a Dutch village inserted into a Southern landscape" (Pickvance, 1986, p 103)

The band of light blue and white above the horizon probably represents the approaching dawn. The moon at the right is surrounded by an intense yellow glow. The bright white star to the left of center is probably Venus, the morning star, also known as *Phosphorus* or light bringer (Boime, 1984). The sky and the milky way appear to move in tumultuous waves. The central swirling pattern in the sky may have a source in the famous Hokusai's 1831 woodblock print of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (Bailey 2018, p 81) Like Hokusai's wave, van Gogh's sky crests and tumbles toward the slopes of the *Alpilles.*

For van Gogh, the stars represented the gateways to eternity. The following is from a letter to Theo in July 1888 Jansen et al., 2007, 638):

> Painters – to speak only of them – being dead and buried, speak to a following generation or to several following generations through their works. Is that all, or is there more, even? In the life of the painter, death may perhaps not be the most difficult thing.
>
> For myself, I declare I don't know anything about it. But the sight of the stars always makes me dream *in as simple a way* as the black spots on the map, representing towns and villages, make me dream.
>
> Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France.
>
> Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star. What's certainly true in this argument is that while *alive,* we *cannot* go to a star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train. So it seems to me not impossible that cholera, the stone, consumption, cancer are celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and the railway are terrestrial ones.
>
> To die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot.

Erickson (1998) suggests that the three main compositional elements of the painting – the village scene, the cypress and the sky – represents different aspects of van Gogh's religious beliefs.  The village likely means the conventional religion that he tried to follow in his youth. Erickson points out that

> While every house glows with yellow light under the brilliance of the starry sky, the church remains completely dark (pp 170-171).

The flame-like cypress tree may represent mankind's aspirations beyond this mortal life. Cypresses have long been associated with death and van Gogh felt that death was the

gateway to eternity. Since the cypress is what ties the earth to the sky, perhaps he could experience the infinite through nature rather than religion. The starry sky itself represents the Infinite.

**Beyond the Asylum**

In the autumn of 1889, after recuperating from his prolonged bout of madness, van Gogh began to travel again in the countryside around the asylum. The illustration below shows the stone quarry (October, 1889, F635). The quarry near Saint-Rémy had provided stone for the building of the Greco-Roman city of Glanum, but by Vincent’s time had long fallen into disuse.

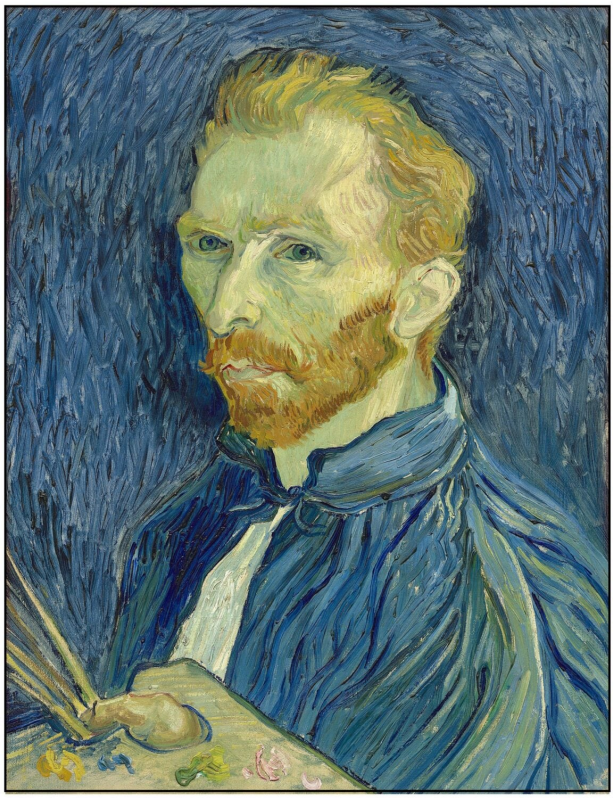
Van Gogh's quarry paintings are intriguing since from 1890 to 2000 Paul Cézanne created a series of paintings of the Bibemus quarry near Aix-en-Provence some 75 km southeast of Saint-Rémy, e.g. *La carrière de Bibémus* (1895). Both painters were intrigued by the different planar surfaces and by the subtle alterations in their color with the direction of the light. The main differences between the painters are that van Gogh's planes are more clearly outlined, and Cézanne's brushwork is much less defined.

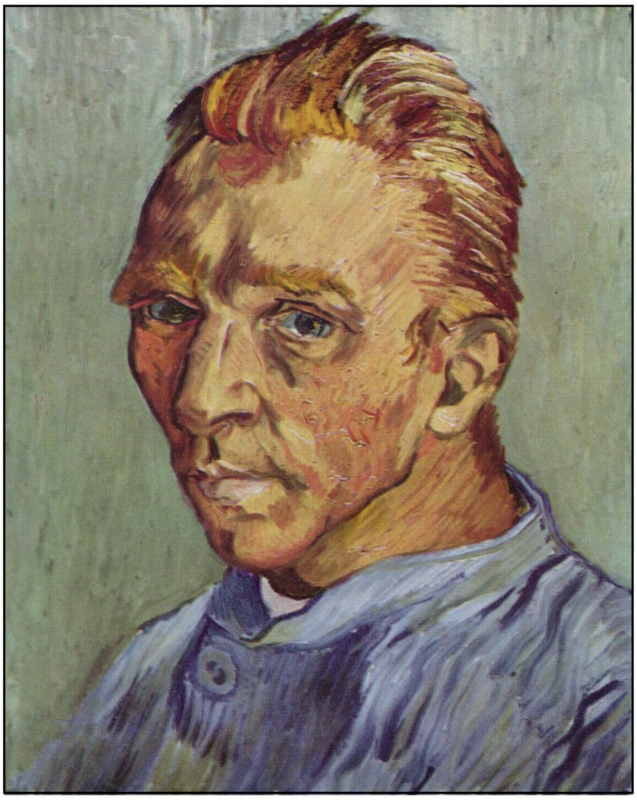
Another theme for the autumn of 1889 were the olive groves near the asylum. The following is one of many paintings of olive trees, with the southern sun and the *Alpilles* in the background (November, 1889, F710). The trees are dancing to the rhythms of the sunlight. By the time van Gogh was painting

the sun, it had itself moved from when he started to paint and the blue shadows on the ground that he had painted first are no longer properly aligned. This painting thus records the passage of time as well as of the existence of the olive groves. Another interesting feature of this particular painting is that all the colors appear heightened except for the light green color of the olive tree foliage which van Gogh has precisely delineated.

**Portraits**

After recuperating from his summer madness, van Gogh painted three self-portraits in September 1889. Two of these are shown below (F626 and F525).





The portrait on the left shows the painter wearing a smock and holding a palette and brushes. This is a convention long used by painters and Van Gogh had likely seen a print of Rembrandt in a similar pose: the *Self-portrait with Two Circles* (1665) now at Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath in London. Rembrandt, however, gazes directly at the viewer whereas van Gogh looks off into the distance.

The orange-white colors of the head contrast strikingly with a dark blue and violet background that recalls the swirling sky of *Starry Night*. Orange and blue are classic complementary colors. From bright orange to dark blue also show a high contrast in brightness. The blue of the eyes ties everything together. Van Gogh described the portrait to Theo in a letter

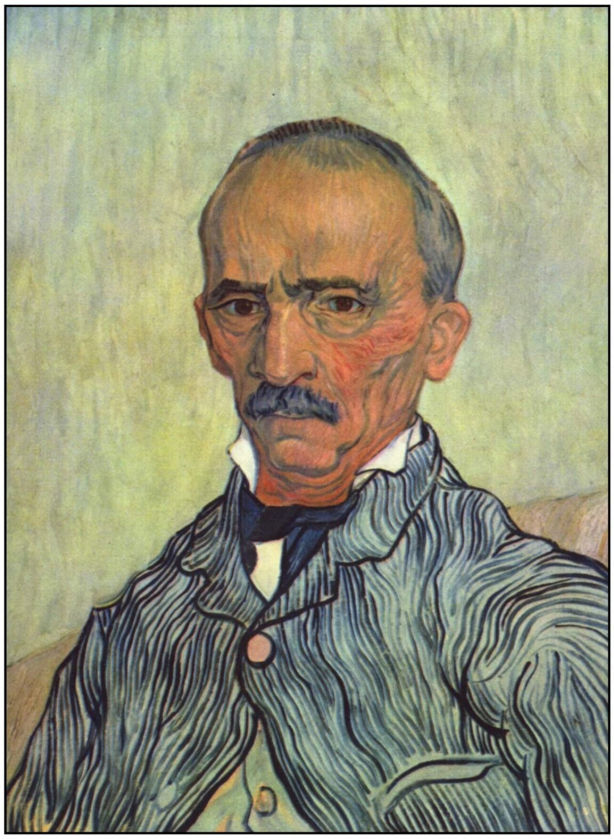
> One I began the first day I got up, I was thin, pale as a devil. It's dark violet blue and the head whiteish with yellow hair, thus a colour effect. (Jansen et al., 2007, 800).

Another similar portrait, much less effective, was completed

at about the same time with a pale blue background. Finally van Gogh painted a small self-portrait after he had shaved his beard. He wondered to Theo whether he should send this to his mother to show how well he had recuperated from his madness. He seemed unaware of how profoundly sad he appears: with raised internal eyebrows and down-turning mouth corners. He looks apologetically at the viewer. According to Pickvance (1986) this is probably van Gogh's last self-portrait.

Van Gogh also produced striking portraits of the head orderly at the hospital Charles-Elzéard Trabuc and his wife, Jeanne Lafuye Trabuc (September 1889, F629 and F231). Rilke was able to see the first portrait in a dealer's storage room in Paris (1907, p 56):

> An elderly man with a short-cropped, black-and-white mustache, sparse hair of the same color, cheeks indented beneath a broad skull; the whole thing in black and white, rose, wet dark blue, and an opaque bluish white – except for the large brown eyes.



Van Gogh remarked about the orderly in a letter to Theo

> He was at the hospital in Marseilles through two periods of cholera, altogether he is a man who has seen an enormous amount of suffering and death, and there is a sort of contemplative calm in his face.
>
> It makes a rather curious contrast with the portrait I have done of myself, in which the look is vague and veiled, whereas he has something military in his small quick black eyes.

His comments to Theo about the wife were unkind, although the painting, itself, is more sympathetic.

> She is a faded woman, an unhappy, resigned creature of small account, so insignificant that I have a great longing to paint that dusty blade of grass. I have talked to her sometimes when doing some olive trees behind their little house, and she told me then that she did not believe I was ill (Jansen et al., 2007, letters 800 and 801)

**Studies of Earlier Artists**

During the autumn of 1889 and early in 1890, van Gogh produced numerous studies of the works of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Gustave Doré (1832-1883) (Naifeh, 2021). All of the copies were based on black-and-white reproductions, with van Gogh seeking to add extra levels of meaning to the images by means of color. One of his most successful copies was based on a *Pièta* by Eugène Delacroix. The original painting from about 1850 was small and dark, but lithographic reproductions, mirror-reversed by the printing process, were very popular. The following illustration shows the original image, the lithograph, and van Gogh’s copy (September, 1889, F630)



Van Gogh uses his favorite colors, blue and yellow. The blue may point to eternity and the yellow, like the sunrise that it promises, may represent hope. The colors are as unnatural as the posture of the dead Messiah. Van Gogh gave Christ beard as orange as his own. He was looking toward his own death and resurrection.

**At Eternity's Gate**

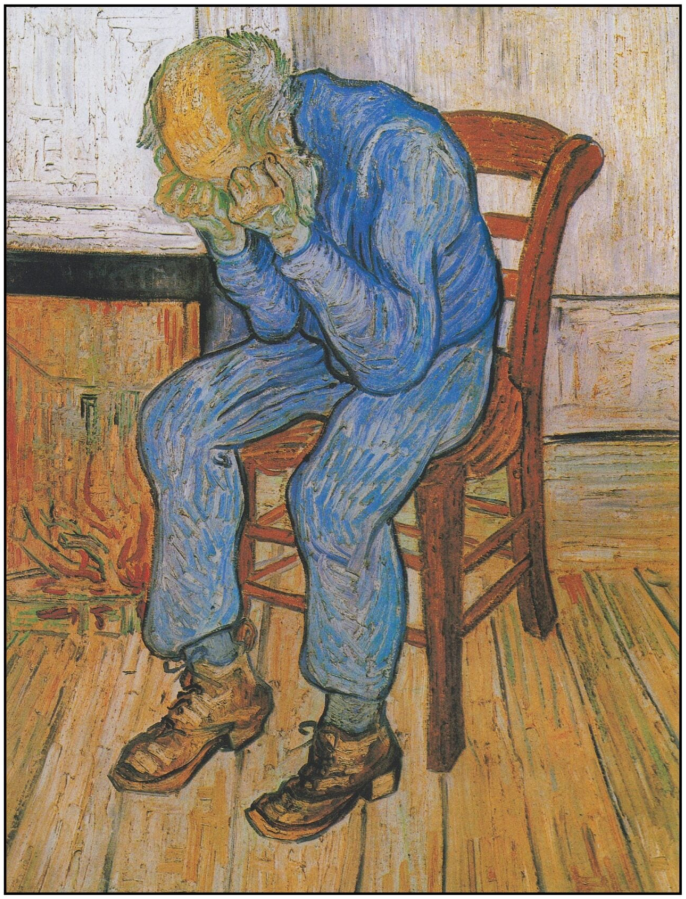
In December, 1889 and in the early months of 1890, van Gogh suffered three more relapses into madness. During each of there periods he was unable to paint for several weeks. His hopes of getting better in the asylum began to wane.

After the last attack, in April 1890, van Gogh painted a color-study of one his own early lithographs, based on a drawing he had made in1882 of an elderly pensioner in an almshouse in the Hague. He told Theo about that drewing:

> It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror—that it seems to me that one of the strongest

> pieces of evidence for the existence of ‘something on high’ in which Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can’t be meant for the worms. … This is far from all theology—simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to. (Jansen et al. 2007, 288).

The original drawing (F997 and the color study (F701) are shown below. The painting became known as *At Eternity’s Gate*.



In May of 1890, van Gogh left the asylum in Saint-Rémy. Theo arranged for him to stay in Auvers-sur-Oise. About 25 km northwest of Paris. There he was able to paint productively

once again. However, he remained depressed and finally committed suicide by shooting himself with a revolver in July 1890. Other versions of how he died have been proposed (Naifeh and Smith, 2011; Schnabel, 2019), but suicide seems most likely. His brother Theo died 6 months later in January, 1891, most likely from the effects of tertiary syphilis. Theo's wife Joanna van Gogh-Bonger (1862-1925) took care of van Gogh's paintings and letters, and nurtured the posthumous fame of her brother-in-law (Luijten, 2019). A 2023 list of the 100 paintings attaining the highest prices ever at auction has 9 paintings by van Gogh, a number only exceeded by Picasso's 14.

**The Afterlife of the Paintings**

Although van Gogh was only able to sell one painting during his lifetime, in the years following his death his work slowly began to exert an immense effect on other artists. Throughout his life, van Gogh attempted to portray the full meaning of the world he experienced. His paintings were directly based on what he saw, but he tried to add his intense emotional response to the visual by heightening the colors and by using powerful brushstrokes. After his death, other artists began to use these techniques

Van Gogh's work thus became the direct precursor of the Expressionist Movement in modern art (Lloyd et al., 2007). Expressionist paintings characteristically portray the emotional response to what the artist sees. Such art is subjective rather than objective, spiritual rather than worldly, creative rather than derivative.

Furness (1973, p. 4) remarked

> Many critics point to the use of the word 'expressionist' to designate the particular intensity of the work of those painters who strove to go beyond impressionism, beyond the passive registration of impressions towards a more violent,

> hectic, energetic creativity such as is found above all in van Gogh. The dissolution of conventional form, the abstract use of colour, the primacy of powerful emotion – above all the turning away from mimesis herald a new consciousness and a new approach in painting, which literature was to follow.

Two of the early groups that followed the expressionist ideals of van Gogh were *Die Brücke* (the bridge) which was founded in Dresden in 1905 and included Erich Heckel, Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and *Der Blaue Reiter* (the blue rider) which originated in Munich 1911, and counted Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke, Franz Marc, and Gabriele Münter among its members.

Van Gogh also had a significant effect on 20th-Century philosophy (Nichols, 2018). The existentialists looked to expressionism as a way to transcend the confining limits of reality. For Karl Jaspers (1883-1969)

> existence is always incomplete and contradictory and thus points toward something that can complete and unify its paradoxes, that is, the transcendent (Longtin Hansen, 2018).

Art can act as a means to understand the transcendent:

> Art acts as a cipher by revealing the deeper reality: it seems to imitate things that occur in the world, but it makes them transparent. (Jaspers, 1932, p 172)

Existentialism insists that we have the freedom to create ourselves in a world without rules; artists like van Gogh create for us a way to experience that world.

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# Madness and Poetry

Robert Lowell (1917-1977) was one of the most important American poets of the mid-20th-Century. He was famous both for his contribution to poetry and for his recurrent attacks of mania. This post reviews his life, comments on some of his poems, and considers the relations between creativity and mood disorders. Madness sometimes goes hand-in-hand with poetry:

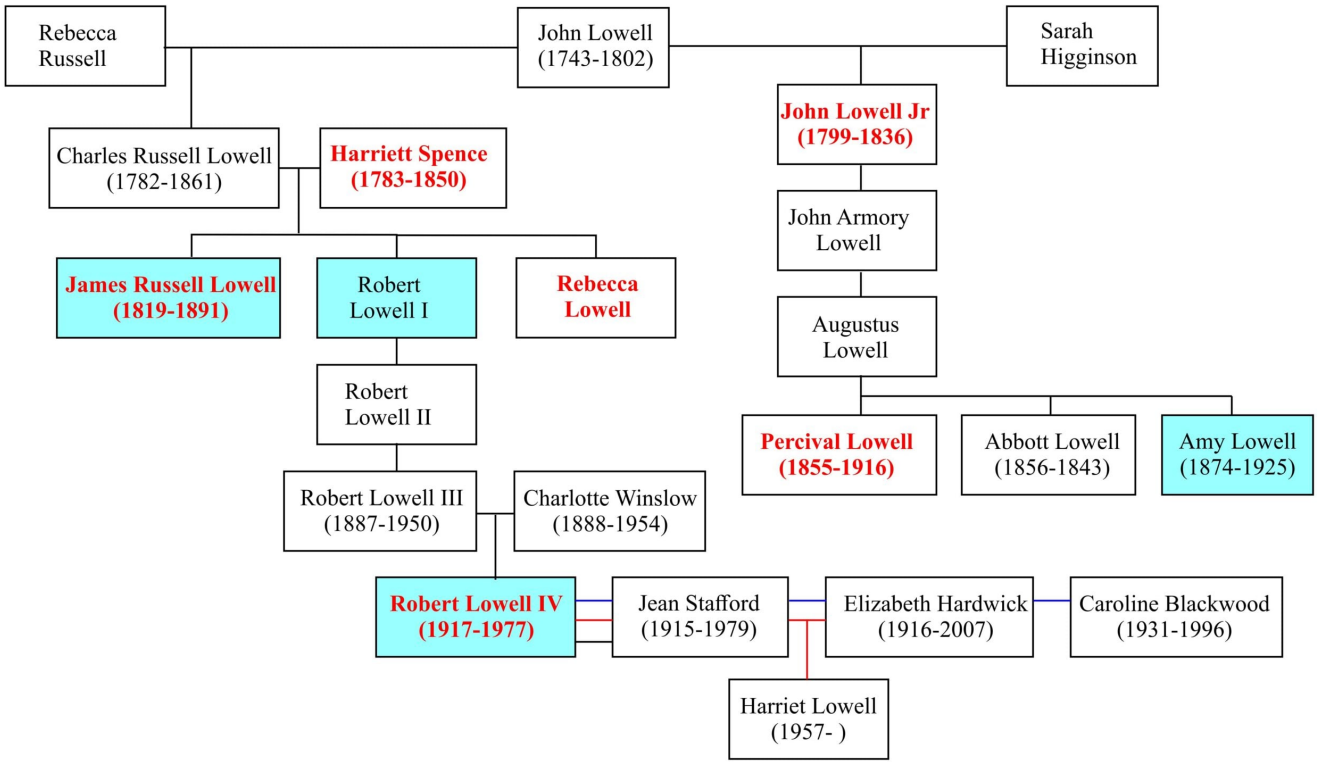
> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends
> The lunatic, the lover and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact
> (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1, 5-9)

**Family Background**

Robert Traill Spencer Lowell IV, as his full name suggests, was born to a long line of "Boston Brahmins," a term that Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. coined to describe the an untitled aristocracy with ancestors among the original Protestant colonists who came to New England in the 17th Century.

The following figure shows part of Lowell's family tree (Jamison, 2017, pp 39-51; also websites by Wikipedia, Geneanet, and Nicholas Jenkins). The diagram begins with John Lowell (1743-1802), a judge in the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts, remembered for authoring Article I of the United States Bill of Rights:

> All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential and inalienable rights, among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties.




The Lowell family tree is noteworthy for the incidence of published poets (light blue shading) and mental disturbances (red lettering). In 1845, Lowell's great-great-grandmother Harriett Bracket Spence was institutionalized for incurable madness in the McLean Asylum for the Insane in Somerville. The hospital later moved to Belmont and became known simply as McLean Hospital (Beam, 2003). Lowell was himself committed there for treatment on several occasions between 1958 and 1967.

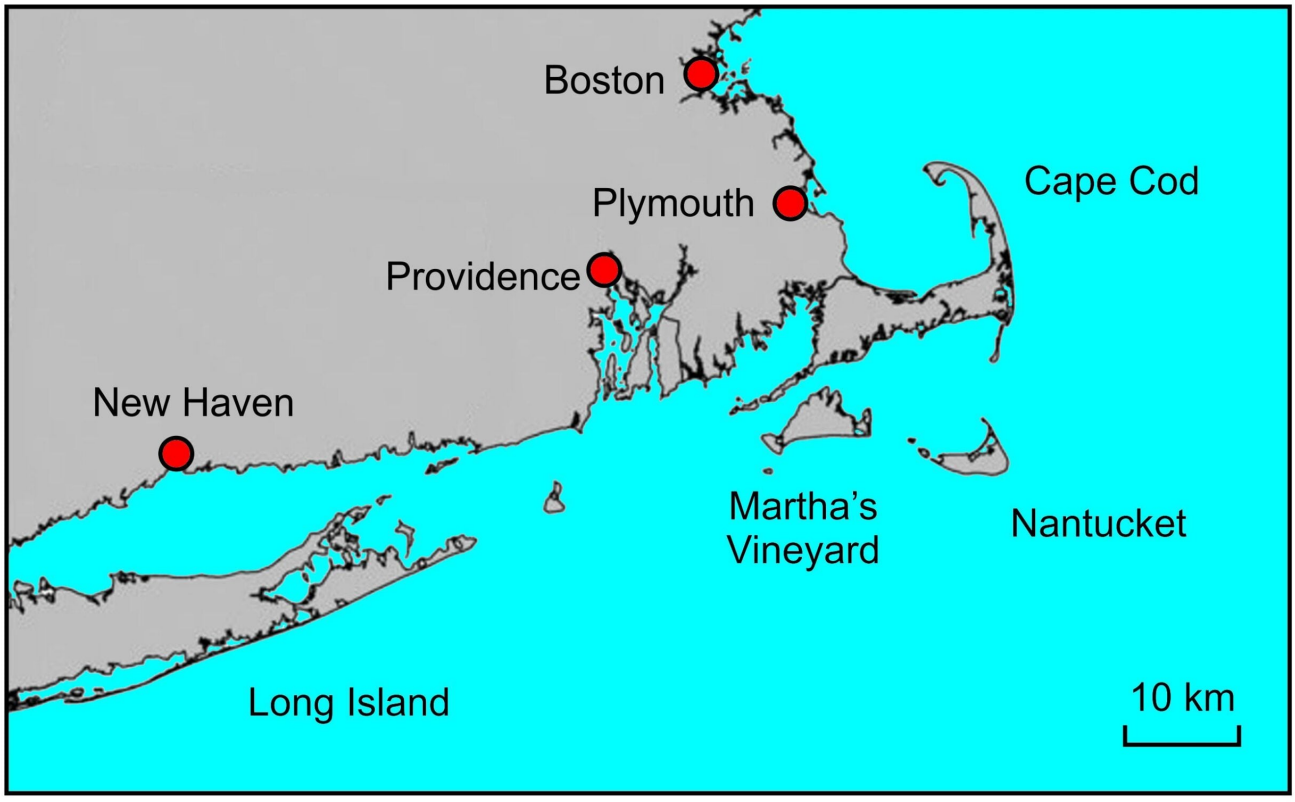
Charles Russell Lowell was considered one of the "fireside poets," a group which included Longfellow, Whittier and Bryant. These were poets whose work was read aloud to the family at the fireside. Amy Lowell became fascinated by Chinese poetry, which she attempted to imitate in brief intensely visual poems, a style that came to be known as "Imagism." Percival Lowell was an astronomer who falsely believed that the markings he observed on the planet Mars represented a network of canals.

Through his mother, Charlotte Winslow, Lowell was a direct

descendent of Mary Chilton (1607-1679), who arrived on the *Mayflower* in 1620. On this father's side, he could trace their ancestry back to a Percival Lowle (1571-1664), who settled just north of Boston some 20 years after the Mayflower arrived.

**Youth**

While attending St Mark's, an Episcopal preparatory school in Southborough, just south of Boston, Lowell was significantly influenced by a young teacher and poet, Richard Eberhart, and decided that poetry was his calling. He spent the summers of 1935 and 1936 with his friends, Frank Parker and Blair Clark, in a rented cottage on Nantucket Island just south of Cape Cod (see map below). There, under Lowell's domineering direction, the three engaged in an impassioned study of literature and art. Lowell came to be known as "Cal," a nickname that derived from both the Roman Emperor Caligula and Shakespeare's character Caliban (Hamilton, 1982, p 20).



Lowell attended Harvard University but after two years left to study with the poet Allen Tate, finally graduating from Kenyon College in 1940. After graduation, he married Jean Stafford (McConahay, 1986), started graduate studies in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, converted from his family's Protestant religion to Roman Catholicism, and began writing the poems for his first book. These were days of decision.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Lowell initially registered for the draft. However, he soon became upset with the Allied policy of "strategic" bombing: attacking civilian targets to undermine morale, as opposed to the "tactical" bombing of military targets. After receiving orders for his induction into the armed forces in 1943, he wrote an open letter to President Roosevelt describing his objections:

> Our rulers have promised us unlimited bombings of Germany and Japan. Let us be honest: we intend the permanent destruction of Germany and Japan. If this program is carried out, it will demonstrate to the world our Machiavellian contempt for the laws of justice and charity between nations; it will destroy any possibility of a European or Asiatic national autonomy; it will leave China and Europe, the two natural power centers of the future, to the mercy of the USSR, a totalitarian tyranny committed to world revolution and total global domination through propaganda and violence.
>
> In 1941 we undertook a patriotic war to preserve our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor against the lawless aggressions of a totalitarian league: in 1943 we are collaborating with the most unscrupulous and powerful of totalitarian dictators to destroy law, freedom, democracy, and above all, our continued national sovereignty. (quoted in Hamilton, 1982, p. 89)

Lowell was sentenced as a Conscientious Objector to a year and a day at the Federal Correctional Center in Danbury Connecticut. He was released on parole after 5 months, and

spent the rest of his sentence working as a cleaner in the nearby Bridgeport hospital. At the end of this period, his first book, *Land of Unlikeness,* was published in a limited edition, to encouraging reviews.

**Lord Weary's Castle**

Lowell's first mainstream book of poetry, *Lord Weary's Castle*, was published in 1946 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The title comes from an old ballad about the stonemason Lambkin who built a castle for Lord Weary. After the lord refused to pay for the castle, Lambkin murdered the lord's wife and child. The frontispiece of the book was an engraving of Cain's murder of Abel by Lowell's schoolfriend Frank Parker (right). Title and frontispiece both point to humanity's long history of violence.

The first poem in the book is *The Exile's Return*:

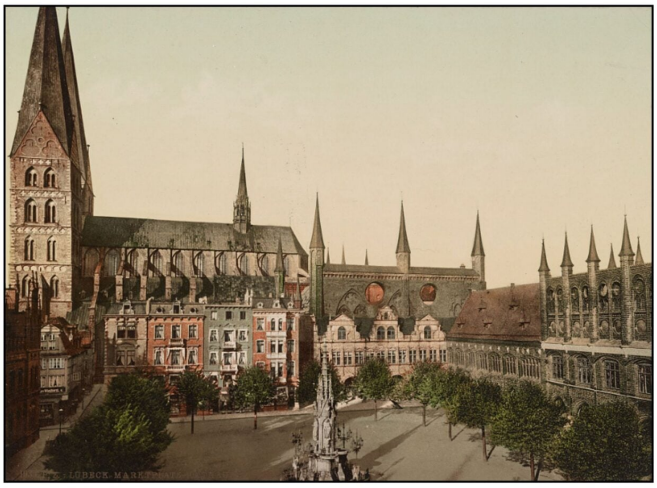
> There mounts in squalls a sort of rusty mire,
> Not ice, not snow, to leaguer the Hôtel
> De Ville, where braced pig-iron dragons grip
> The blizzard to their rigor mortis. A bell
> Grumbles when the reverberations strip
> The thatching from its spire,

The search-guns click and spit and split up timber
And nick the slate roofs on the Holstenwall
Where torn-up tilestones crown the victor. Fall
And winter, spring and summer, guns unlimber
And lumber down the narrow gabled street
Past your gray, sorry and ancestral house
Where the dynamited walnut tree
Shadows a squat, old, wind-torn gate and cows
The Yankee commandant. You will not see
Strutting children or meet
The peg-leg and reproachful chancellor
With a forget-me-not in his button-hole
When the unseasoned liberators roll
Into the Market Square, ground arms before
The Rathaus; but already lily-stands
Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough
Cathedral lifts its eye. Pleasant enough,
*Voi ch'entrate*, and your life is in your hands.

The poem is elusive. In their notes to the *Collected Poems* (2003), Bidart and Gewanter remark on the similarity of some of the poem's lines to passages in Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger*, first published in 1903. It recounts the return of a young poet to Lübeck, where he (like the author) had grown up. In the opening lines of the novella, Mann remarks that "sometimes a kind of soft hail fell, not ice, not snow" (Neugroschel translation, 2998, p 164). He also describes Tonio's father as the "impeccably dressed gentleman with the wildflower in his buttonhole." (p 180). So we should likely place the poem in Lübeck, though I am not sure why Lowell uses the French term Hôtel de Ville to describe its historic city hall (later referred to by its German name Rathaus).

In 1942 Lübeck was one of the first German cities to be strategically bombed by the Allies. The following illustration shows the Market Square and City Hall in a 1906 postcard together with a photograph of the destruction after the

bombing. The Allied attack focused on the city center, which had no military significance; the docks (in the upper right of the photograph) were completely spared.



Lowell's poem imagines the military occupation of the devastated city. Though there may be hope for some sort of salvation – the lilies probably allude to the Virgin Mary and the Annunciation – the general impression is of the Gates of Hell. The last line quotes from Dante's *Inferno*: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* (Abandon all hope, you who enter here).

The most important poem of the book is the seven-part *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket* (Axelrod, 2015; Hass, 1977; Remaley, 1976). The poem was written in memory of Lowell's cousin Warren Winslow, who died in an explosion that sank the destroyer *Turner* close to Rockaway Point near Coney Island in 1944 (Fender, 1973). The cause of the explosion is not known; it was likely caused by an accident and not by enemy action.

The full poem is available on the website of the Poetry Foundation. The beginning vividly describes the recovery of the body of a drowned sailor:

> A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket—
> The sea was still breaking violently and night

Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs:
The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
Its open, staring eyes
Were lustreless dead-lights
Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
Heavy with sand.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/graveyard-1.mp3

Madaket is a beach on the Southwestern edge of Nantucket. As noted by Bidart and Gewanter, much of the description of the drowned sailor derives from Thoreau's *The Shipwreck* (1864). Warren Winslow's body was never recovered. Lowell's poem therefore alludes to all those who died at sea in the war. The poem conveys the violence of such deaths with harsh rhymes, irregular rhythms and the striking enjambment of the fourth line.

The second section of the poem further generalizes the tragedy to all those sailors who have died at sea, like those of the 19th Century whalers in Melville's *Moby Dick* or the Quaker seamen buried in the Nantucket graveyard. The third section reveals how the sailors failed to understand their deaths. They thought that God was on their side, but did not realize that God was in the sea that drowned them or the whale they tried to kill. The next two sections further describe the violence of the whale trade, and by extension the violence of the war that had just come to an end.

Where might we find redemption from the ongoing violence? The sixth and penultimate section of the poem – *Our Lady of Walsingham* – changes dramatically from the previous sections. In 1061, Richeldis de Faverches, an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman, received a vision of the Virgin Mary in Walsingham, a small village in Norfolk. Following the Madonna's request, she built there a replica of Jesus's home in Nazareth, and placed a statue of the Virgin with the infant Jesus within. This shrine became one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Europe. In 1538, during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, the shrine and its associated priory were torn down. (A damaged statue of the virgin in the Victoria and Albert Museum may actually be what remains of the Walsingham statue.) In 1897 a new statue (illustrated on the right) was blessed by the pope and placed in the Slipper Chapel, the last station on the

original pilgrimage route to Walsingham. In the 20th Century, Walsingham began to welcome pilgrims again, though now separate Catholic and Anglican sites compete for their visit.

Lowell looks to find salvation but finds indifference:

> Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
> Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
> At all or charm in that expressionless
> Face with its heavy eyelids. As before,
> This face, for centuries a memory,
> *Non est species, neque decor,*
> Expressionless, expresses God: it goes
> Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,
> Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem
> Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

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The face of the Virginis indeed "expressionless." The Latin "there is nothing special nor beautiful about him" is from *Isaiah* 53:2, which in the Vulgate reads

> Et ascendet sicut virgultum coram eo, et sicut radix de terra sitienti. Non est species ei, neque decor, et vidimus eum, et non erat aspectus, et desideravimus eum:

The King James Version translates this verse (and the succeeding three verses) as

> For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.
> He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

> Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
> But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.
> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This is part of Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah, the man of sorrows who will take away our sins. Looking for redemption, the world comes to Walsingham, but the Virgin pays the world no special attention. Our ideas of God being born in human form at Bethlehem and of our salvation through his death on Calvary are human hopes not divine realities.

The final section of the poem describes the Atlantic Ocean as seen from Nantucket:

> The empty winds are creaking and the oak
> Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
> The boughs are trembling and a gaff
> Bobs on the untimely stroke
> Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell
> In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It's well;
> Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
> Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
> Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
> Mart once of supercilious, wing'd clippers,
> Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
> You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
> Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
> When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
> And breathed into his face the breath of life,
> And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
> The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

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The poem concludes by remembering how God made man by breathing into his face, and how God later destroyed everyone except Noah and his family in the flood, when huge “combers” (long curling sea waves) covered the earth. The final line likely alludes to the rainbow that God gave as a sign to Noah that he would not flood the Earth again:

> And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.
> And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations:
> I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. (*Genesis* 9: 11-13)

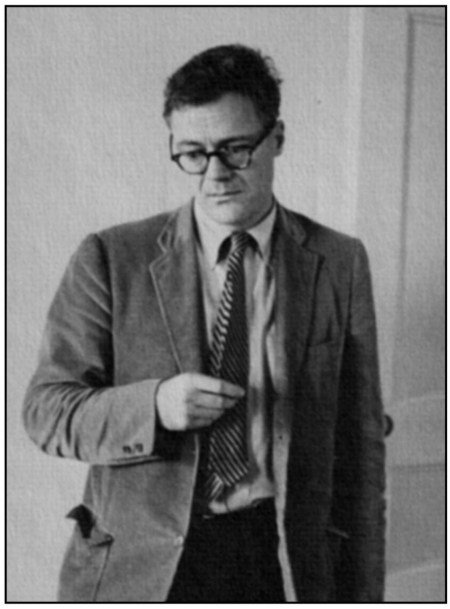
The world wars have shown that humanity’s propensity for violence has not improved.  One assumes that God will keep his promise. But at what cost? God will survive but humanity may perhaps extinguish itself.

**Madness**

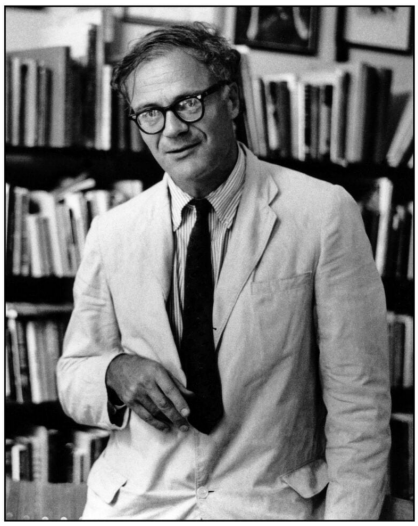
After *Lord Weary’s Castle*, Lowell became famous. The following illustrations show photographs of him from youth to maturity:

1930

1947

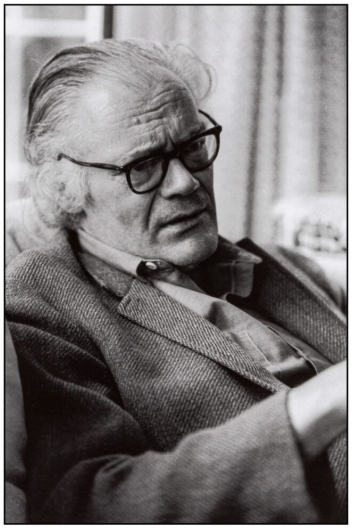


1961 (Henri Cartier-Bresson)



1965 (Elsa Dorfman)

1967 (Jane Brown)



1977 (Judith Aronson)

Lowell published his second book T*he Mills of the Kavanagh* in 1948. In early 1949 he started to become “wound up” (Hamilton, 2003, p 140). While teaching at Yaddo, an artists’ community in Saratoga Springs, New York, he became unjustifiably paranoid about a communist takeover of the center. By the time he arrived in Bloomington, Indiana, to give a talk in March, he was frankly psychotic. He later remembered his state of “pathological enthusiasm:”

> The night before I was locked up, I ran about the streets of Bloomington, Indiana, crying out against devils and homosexuals. I believed I could stop cars and paralyze their forces by merely standing in the middle of the highway with my arms outspread. Each car carried a long rod above its taillight, and the rods were adorned with diabolic Indian or voodoo signs. Bloomington stood for Joyce ‘s hero and Christian regeneration. Indiana stood for the evil, unexorcized, aboriginal Indians. I suspected I was a re-incarnation of the Holy Ghost and had become homocidally hallucinated. To have known the glory, violence and banality of such an experience is corrupting. (*Memoirs*, p 190)

Lowell’s mind was experiencing an overwhelming “flight of ideas.” He suffered from delusions of grandeur. His behavior was irrepressible and reckless. He refused to sleep. Lowell was 6-foot 1-inch tall: when he was psychotic, it was extremely difficult to restrain him (Jamison, 2017, p 83). He was finally subdued by the police, and committed to a psychiatric hospital. This was the first of multiple prolonged hospital stays, most lasting several months, that occurred once every year or two from 1949 to 1968 (Jamison, 2017, pp 112-113). Initially, he was treated with Electro Convulsive Therapy. In the 1960s, when the major tranquilizers became available, his bouts of mania were controlled by chlorpromazine. After 1968, treatment with lithium provided him with some respite from his illness. Yet the mania still occasionally occurred.

Each manic attack was followed by a prolonged period of depression. Lowell attributed his depression to his regret and shame over what had happened when he was psychotic. However, they were likely part and parcel of his bipolar mood disorder. Lowell wrote feverishly during the periods just before he went completely manic, He then revised what he had written during his prolonged periods of depression.

Mania and depression are more common in creative individuals

than in normal controls and this association appears most prominent for poets (Andreasen & Canter, 1974; Ludwig, 1995; Andreasen, 2008; Jamison, 2017; Greenwood, 2022). The flight of ideas that characterizes mania can easily lead to novel ways of looking at things. This is especially true during the hypomanic phase that precedes the psychotic break, when some modicum of control remains.

Despite his recurring attacks of mania, Lowell continued to write. In his 1959 book, *Life Studies*, he examined himself and his family in intimate detail. Rosenthal (1967) used the term "Confessional Poetry" to describe this work. Poets had always tapped into their personal experience to write poetry but until now none had been so unabashedly honest about their failings:

> Because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough. Sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital (and some suggestion that the malady has its violent phase)—these are explicit themes of a number of the poems, usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself. … In a larger, more impersonal context, these poems seemed to me one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the center of the poem.

During the 1950s and 1960s Lowell became the poetic consciousness of the United States, declaiming against its descent into materialism and its waging of unjustified wars. Lowell was one of the lead speakers at the 1967 March on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. Norman Mailer describes him at the March:

> Lowell had the most disconcerting mixture of strength and weakness in his presence, a blending so dramatic in its visible sign of conflict that one had to assume he would be

> sensationally attractive to women. He had something untouchable, all insane in its force: one felt immediately that there were any number of causes for which the man would be ready to die, and for some he would fight, with an axe in his hand and a Cromwellian light in his eye. It was even possible that physically he was very strong—one couldn't tell at all—he might be fragile, he might have the sort of farm mechanic's strength which could manhandle the rear axle and differential off a car and into the back of a pickup. But physical strength or no, his nerves were all too apparently delicate. Obviously spoiled by everyone for years, he seemed nonetheless to need the spoiling. These nerves—the nerves of a consummate poet—were not tuned to any battering. (Mailer, 1968, pp 53-54)

**Final Poems**

Lowell's last book of poetry, *Day by Day*, came out just after his death from a sudden heart attack in 1977. The penultimate poem in that book is *Thanks-Offering for Recovery*:

> The airy, going house grows small
> tonight, and soft enough to be crumpled up
> like a handkerchief in my hand.
> Here with you by this hotbed of coals,
> I am the *homme sensuel*, free
> to turn my back on the lamp, and work.
> Something has been taken off,
> a wooden winter shadow—
> goodbye nothing. I give thanks, thanks—
> thanks too for this small
> Brazilian *ex voto*, this primitive head
> sent me across the Atlantic by my friend . . .
> a corkweight thing,
> to be offered *Deo gratias*
> in church on recovering from head-injury or migraine—
> now mercifully delivered in my hands,
> though shelved awhile unnoticing and unnoticed.

Free of the unshakable terror that made me write . . .
I pick it up, a head holy and unholy,
tonsured or damaged,
with gross black charcoaled brows and stern eyes
frowning as if they had seen the splendor
times past counting . . . unspoiled,
solemn as a child is serious—
light balsa wood the color of my skin.
It is all childcraft, especially
its shallow, chiseled ears,
crudely healed scars lumped out
to listen to itself, perhaps, not knowing
it was made to be given up.
Goodbye nothing. Blockhead,
I would take you to church,
if any church would take you . . .
This winter, I thought
I was created to be given away.

Lowell is describing a small figurine from the northeastern region of Brazil, a gift from his friend Elizabeth Bishop. This was an *ex voto* ("from a vow") offering, called *milagré* in Portuguese. Such objects, were left at a church as thanks to

God after recovery from illness. A tiny leg would be left when the arthritis abated, a miniature head after the migraine had ended. The illustration on the right shows a small (4-inch) head (not the one described by Lowell). The poet wonders whether such an offering might serve as thanks now that the "unshakable terror that made me write" had finally finished.

**Epilogue**

Lowell's final poem in the book *Day by Day* serves as an epilogue to a life distinguished by severe madness and by significant poetry:

> Those blessèd structures, plot and rhyme—
> why are they no help to me now
> I want to make
> something imagined, not recalled?
> I hear the noise of my own voice:
> The painter's vision is not a lens,
> it trembles to caress the light.
> But sometimes everything I write
> with the threadbare art of my eye
> seems a snapshot,
> lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
> heightened from life,
> yet paralyzed by fact.
> All's misalliance.
> Yet why not say what happened?
> Pray for the grace of accuracy
> Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
> stealing like the tide across a map
> to his girl solid with yearning.
> We are poor passing facts,
> warned by that to give
> each figure in the photograph
> his living name.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/lowell-epilogue.mp3

At the end of the poem Lowell refers to Vermeer's 1662 painting *Woman Reading a Letter* in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. Lowell's prayed to be as accurate in his poetry as Vermeer in his painting. On another level, the painting embodied the tranquility that was so often missing in his life.

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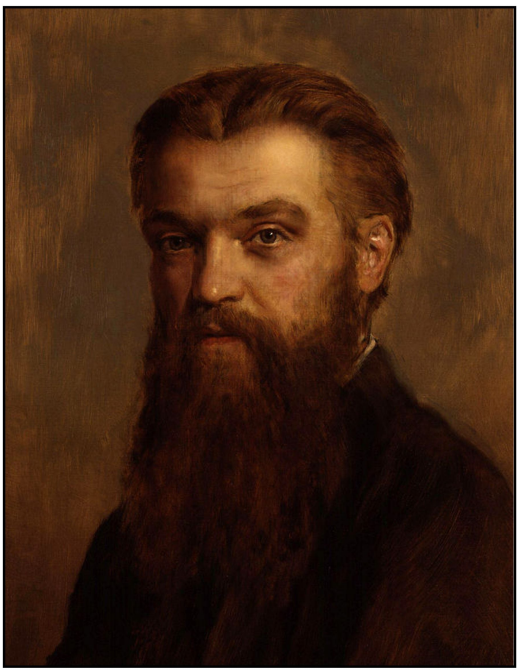
# The Ethics of Belief

In the 19th-Century religious belief came under scientific scrutiny. In 1877, William Kingdon Clifford, an English mathematician and philosopher, proposed that

> it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

Without good supporting evidence, one should refrain from believing: it is wrong to take anything on faith. This proposal was disputed by the American philosopher and psychologist William James in an 1896 lecture entitled *The Will to Believe*. James argued that under certain conditions we must form beliefs and act on them, even though the evidence is insufficient. The main requirements were that the believer must choose between two “genuine” possibilities, and that the choice must be sufficiently “momentous” that not choosing would entail significant risk. The latter condition hearkens

back to the “wager” of Blaise Pascal, wherein a person decides what to believe based on the consequences of these beliefs rather than the evidence for them.



**William Kingdon Clifford (1845-79)**

William Clifford, a professor of mathematics and mechanics at the University of London, made significant contributions to algebra and to geometry, his ideas in the latter foreshadowing Einstein’s *Theory of General Relativity*. He was also interested in the philosophical implications of science, publishing essays on *The Scientific Basis of Morals* and *The Ethics of Belief*.

Clifford begins the latter essay with a story about a shipwreck:

> A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have

> her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Clifford insisted that the ship-owner was responsible for the deaths of all who drowned. He may have sincerely believed in the soundness of his ship, but he had no right to so believe on the basis of the evidence before him. Clifford insisted further that had the ship not foundered, its owner was still guilty. From such examples he proposed the principle ("later known as Clifford's principle") that

> it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

He expounded:

> If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterward, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it – the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.

Chignell (2018) noted that this approach to belief is similar to that of John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

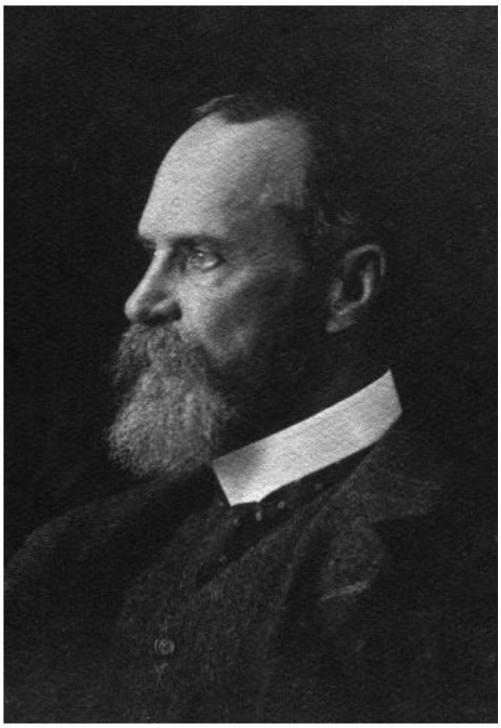
> He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Error.

Clifford realized that a single person cannot sift through all the evidence for everything she needs to believe. Some beliefs must be based on the *authority* of others. However, the believer should make some rational assessment of that authority. The proposers of the beliefs must be honest; the beliefs must be such that they can be or have been verified by those who have the time and experience to verify them; their acceptance should be independent of any personal profit to those that propose the beliefs.

Clifford also considered the *limits of inference*. Most of what we know is inferred from what we and others have experienced. The fact that the sun has risen daily throughout our lives and throughout all the lives of others leads us to believe that it will continue to do so. Clifford proposed

> We may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know.

In passing Clifford noted that we have no *a priori* right to believe that nature is universally uniform – that the future will always follow the rules of the past. This is itself a belief – one that has worked so far. Some beliefs we need to accept.



**William James (1842-1910)**

William James trained as a physician but never practised medicine. Rather he pursued his interests in psychology, religion, and philosophy. In each of these fields he published books that have become essential to their respective disciplines: *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and *Pragmatism* (1907).

In a talk to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities –later published as *The Will to Believe* (1896) – James proposed that there are situations in which we should believe even when the evidence is insufficient. He describes three necessary conditions. First, the belief should involve a choice between two *live* options, i.e. ones that personally meaningful. Choosing between theosophy or Islam was likely not meaningful to his audience. Second, the choice must be *unavoidable*. Deciding to love or hate someone is easily avoidable – we can just be indifferent. However, accepting or denying the truth of a statement is unavoidable – the

statement must be either true or false. Third and most importantly, the choice must be *momentous*. James used the example of joining Nansen's expedition to the North Pole. To do so could lead to fame and glory; not to do so leaves one with nothing:

> He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. Per contra, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise.

James assumed that deciding to believe is much like deciding to act. However, choosing to believe in God is not the same as choosing to join Nansen's polar expedition. One can (and does) choose to act in certain ways. However, one does not usually choose between beliefs if there is no evidence preferring one over the other (see the criticisms of Bertrand Russell, below).

James noted that his idea of the "momentousness" of a belief is related to Pascals famous wager. Pascal proposed that it is better to believe in God than to remain an agnostic: if we are right, we are granted "eternal beatitude," and, if we are wrong, we lose nothing. James did not enjoy considering religious belief in the "language of the gaming-table." Nevertheless, he was apparently convinced by Pascal's logic. When things are that important, we must believe one way or another or risk losing all. James therefore proposed that

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, □ just like deciding yes or no, □ and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

James concludes his lecture with a rousing quotation from the English Jurist, James Fitzjames Stephens (1829-1894):

> In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark…. If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of a good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . .

The image is wildly romantic. It brings to mind Casper David

Friedreich's *Wanderer over a Sea of Fog* (1812). The concept of the "leap of faith" – the act of believing something despite the lack of convincing evidence – was commonly used in the 19th Century to counter the objections of religious skeptics. The term is often attributed to Kierkegaard though he never used it (McKinnon, 1983).

James had used the image of the Alpine Climber in an earlier essay written in French on the "subjective method" (1877, discussed in Wernham, 1987, Chapter 2):

> I find myself in a difficult place from which I can only escape by making a bold and dangerous leap. Though I wish to make the leap, I have never done so before, and I do not know if I have the ability. Let us suppose I use the subjective method: I believe what I desire. My confidence gives me strength and makes possible something which otherwise might not have been. I leap across the space and find myself out of danger. But suppose I doubt my ability because it has never before been demonstrated in such a situation: then I waver; I hesitate; at last, weak and trembling, I am compelled to an attempt by sheer despair; I miss my goal; I fall into the abyss. (my translation).

It is not clear whether James was proclaiming a right to believe when there is insufficient evidence, or whether he was asserting a duty to believe. Most people would support a general right to believe with the proviso that the belief does not harm others. Few, however, would say that we ought to believe something even though the evidence is not convincing.

James has been criticized for indulging in wishful thinking (reviewed in Koopman, 2017). When we decide to believe without any evidence, we run the clear risk of entering a fantasy world. On the other hand, perhaps we should try out new world-views. Provided they cause no harm. Crusades are not allowed.

**Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)**

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. He is most famous for his studies of probability, his experiments on atmospheric pressure and his proposal that beliefs might me determined based on what they entail rather than on the empirical evidence – Pascal's wager.

In in the posthumously published *Pensées* (1670 Section III), Pascal points out that believing in God leads to a promise of Heaven whereas not believing in God has no long-term benefit. We must either believe or not. So

> Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

The following illustration presents the premises that lead to Pascal's wager, and the decision matrix that urges us to believe in God. The estimated benefit of believing or not is

the sum (along the row in the decision matrix) of the probability-weighted benefits when God exists or not. The infinite rewards of belief in God completely outweigh the minor inconvenience of living life as a believer (Cg – a negative value). Similarly, the infinite penalties of not believing are far worse than the transient benefit of a life of indulgence (Bn – a positive value).

## Pascal's Wager

### A. Premises

1. The probability (Pg) that God exists is not zero
2. Either God exists or God does not exist: the probability of the latter is therefore 1-Pg
3. The benefit for believing that God exists is infinite - eternal life in Heaven.
4. The cost (Cg) of believing in God is finite - a life of being good and abstaining from sin.
5. The benefit (Bn) of not believing in God is finite - a lifetime of indulgence.
6. The cost of not believing in God is infinite - death and damnation.

### B. Decision Table

| | God Exists | God Does Not Exist |
|---|---|---|
| Believe in God | $Pg^* \infty$ | $(1-Pg)^*Cg$ |
| Not Believe | $Pg^*(-\infty)$ | $(1-Pg)^*Bn$ |

Pascal's logic falls apart in two ways (Bartha & Pasternack, 2018; Hájek, 2003, 2022). First, it does not discriminate among which of many possible Gods one should believe in. If there is a non-zero possibility of an Islamic God who rewards his followers with heaven and casts infidel Christians into hell, the infinite rewards and penalties associated with the Christian God are cancelled out. This is illustrated in the below. The astute observer will note that while the infinite

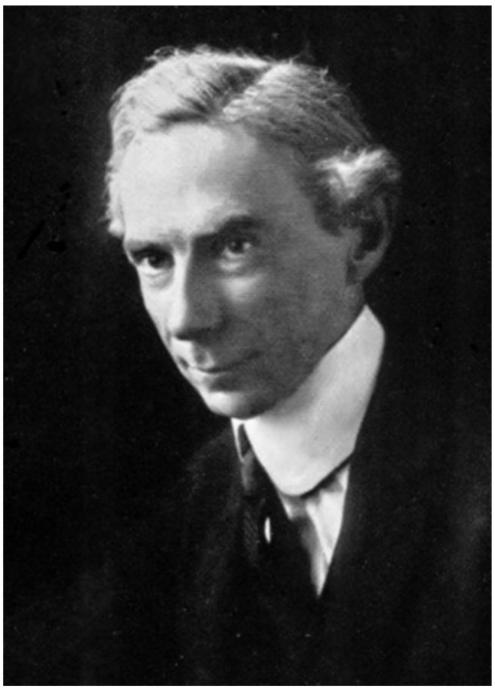
benefits and costs of believing in a particular God are cancelled out, the atheist is still stuck with probabilities of death and damnation regardless of which God exists. Perhaps, this is the human lot. The atheist, however, simply assumes that both Pg and Pa are zero.

Pascal's Wager with more than one God, e.g. there is a non-zero probability (Pa) of the Islamic God Allah as well as a non-zero probability (Pg) of the Christian God:

**Decision Table**

| | Christian God Exists | Islamic God Exists | No God Exists |
|---|---|---|---|
| Christian Belief | Pg* ∞ | Pa*( - ∞ ) | (1-Pg-Pa)*Cg |
| Islamic Belief | Pg*( - ∞ ) | Pa* ∞ | (1-Pg-Pa)*Ca |
| Atheism | Pg*( - ∞ ) | Pa*( - ∞ ) | (1-Pg-Pa)*Bn |

A second objection to Pascal's wager is that it presupposes not only that God might exist but also that God would reward the believer with heaven and damn the non-believer to hell. Among the credible possibilities are a benevolent God who would forgive the non-believer, and a strict God who would damn those that professed belief simply to get to heaven as hypocrites who did not "truly" believe in their hearts.



**Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)**

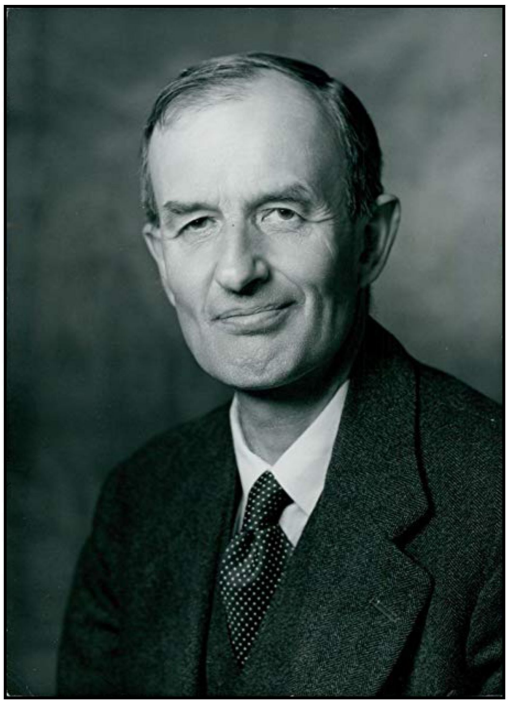
Bertrand Russell was an English philosopher, mathematician, and logician. He is most famous for the *Principia Mathematica* (1913) written together with A. N. Whitehead. This attempted to describe the basic axioms and rules underlying human logic and mathematics. Russell was also known for his pacifism and his agnosticism.

Russell was one of the first major critics of James' *The Will to Believe.* In an essay on *Pragmatism* (1910), he pointed out the James' arguments are appropriate to actions but have no real relevance to belief. He uses the example of a traveler at a fork in the road:

> I come to a fork where there is no signpost and no passer-by, I have, from the point of view of action, a 'forced' option. I must take one road or other if I am to have any chance of reaching my destination; and I may have no evidence whatever as to which is the right road. I then *act* on one or other of the two possible hypotheses, until I find someone of whom I can ask the way. But I do not *believe* either hypothesis. My action is either right or wrong, but

> my belief is neither, since I do not entertain either of the two possible beliefs. The pragmatist assumption that I believe the road I have chosen to be the right one is erroneous.

However, belief can mean different things to different people. Religious thinkers do not consider belief in the same way as a scientist or logician. In a religious context, one can decide to believe based upon the consequents that the belief will have – salvation, heaven, etc. – rather than on the evidence for the belief.



**Henry Habberley Price (1899-1984)**

H. H. Price was a Welsh philosopher with a major interest in perception and belief, and a minor interest in parapsychology. His 1961 Gifford lectures on *Belief* (published in 1969) analyzed the many ways in which we can believe.

He proposed that belief can be considered in two main ways – as an occurrence (a mental event) and as an attitude (a mental

state). The occurrence of belief is the moment when a person decides that something is true (based on evidence or on desire) or assents to consider it true. With respect to Russell's criticism that belief is not usually chosen, Price noted that we often come to a belief ("make up our minds") in much the same way as we decide to act. He uses as an example:

> After waiting for him for over 1½ hours I decided that John had missed the train.

Belief can also be considered as an attitude: to believe a proposition is to be disposed to act as if that proposition were true. Other attitudes are hoping, desiring, and knowing. Having an attitude may be either conscious of not. An attitude is not necessary associated with any overt behavior: it simply represents a tendency to respond in a certain way.

As I discussed in a previous post on Belief and Heresy, Price also pointed out that "believing that" differs from "believing in" (Price, 1965). Believing-that is used with a proposition: it considers that a proposition is true based on the evidence. Believing-in is used with things, persons, or ideas: it not only claims that these exist (existed or will exist) but also affirms many other related propositions. Christ stated

> I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
> And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. (*John* 11: 25-26)

Simply asserting that Christ existed is clearly not sufficient for a person to "believe in" Christ. One must also believe that he is divine, that he died so that those who believe in him do not have to die, that he was resurrected from death, and that he lives forever. Challenging requirements for one of a skeptical disposition. However, the reward is invaluable: eternal life.

**Peter van Inwagen (1942- )**

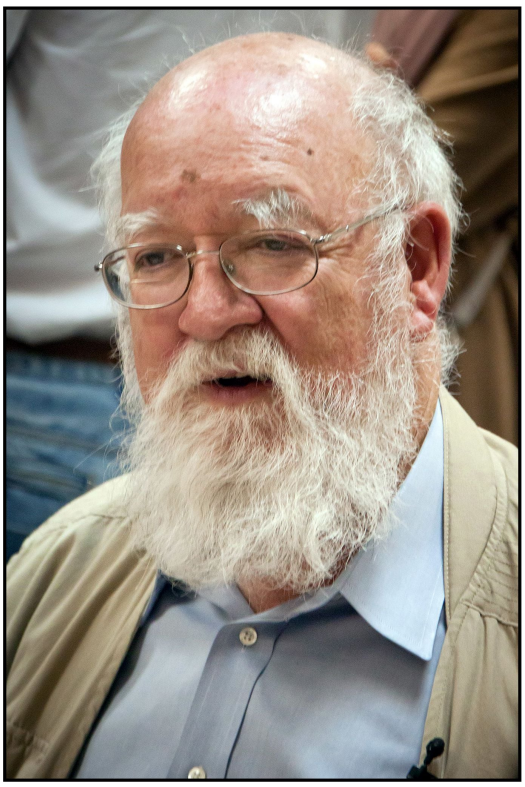
Peter van Inwagen is an American Christian philosopher who has written extensively on the philosophy of religion: *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), *The Problem of Evil* (2006), *Metaphysics* (2002).

In 1996 van Inwagen published a paper commenting Clifford's principle that we should not believe anything based upon insufficient evidence. He initially remarks that although all beliefs need to be based on evidence

> a strict adherence to the terms of the principle would lead to a chain of requests for further evidence that would terminate only in such presumably unanswerable questions as What evidence have you for supposing that your sensory apparatus is reliable? or Yes, but what considerations can you adduce in support of the hypothesis that the future will resemble the past?

More importantly, he points out that Clifford's principle has mainly been applied in criticizing religious beliefs. He notes that for complicated issues in philosophy, politics, economics, and psychiatry, the available evidence even when

properly scrutinised often leads to a diversity of opinion. Each of us may have our own insight or intuition as to what is true. Just as we do not consider it morally wrong to have these individual beliefs in philosophy, politics, etc., so we should allow religious beliefs even when the evidence for them is (necessarily) incomplete.



**Daniel C. Dennett (1942- )**

Daniel Dennett is an American philosopher and cognitive scientist. He has written extensively on psychology (*Consciousness Explained*,1992), evolution (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 1996) and religion (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006). Together with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, he is considered one of "The Four Horsemen of the New Atheism."

One way to consider belief is as an interpretation of reality. Dennett has proposed that our brains are continually modelling what is going on in the world. What we are conscious of at any moment is as the "best draft" of our interpretive model

(Dennett, 1992). Our consciousness of our selves is an abstract “center of narrative gravity” that we use to interpret our experience.

Some philosophers and psychologists have denied the existence of beliefs (see Schwitzgel, 2019, for a review of “eliminativism”). Dennett considers beliefs (and other mental states) as helpful in interpreting the behavior of others who might have mental states similar to our own. He describes this mode of interpreting and predicting behavior as the “intentional stance:”

> Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in most instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent will do. (Dennett, 1987, p 17)

**Whatever Gets You Thru the Night**

We have touched on what various philosophers have thought about belief. What can we conclude?

To survive, human beings must understand what they can about the world in which they find themselves. In some contexts, our understanding has become highly accurate. Our perceptions tell us what things are and predict what they will do; our actions manipulate the world. In other contexts – in philosophy, politics and psychiatry, for example – we often have little understanding. We do not know whether the world has a purpose, how society could be optimally organized, or why our thinking

can become disordered. Rather than just accept these uncertainties, we try out possibilities – to see whether they both fit the world and give us comfort. Often these ideas are just hunches; sometimes they become considered opinions; occasionally they become beliefs. Our beliefs are the way we make sense of the world.

Are there ethical principles that determine what we can believe (Chignell, 2018; Schmidt & Ernst, 2020)? We should base our beliefs as much as possible on the evidence available to us. However, we should not retire to an attitude of universal skepticism. We must try out hypotheses about the what we do not know about world. We remain responsible for the consequences of our actions, even if we sincerely believed those actions appropriate.

Contemplating the smallness of humanity in the immensity of the universe is frightening. Our beliefs provide us with some way to handle this fear. In the words of John Lennon's 1974 song, they are "Whatever gets you thru the night."

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# Frames of Reference: The Art of William Kurelek

**Frames of Reference: The Art of William Kurelek**

This post discusses the life and work of William Kurelek (1927-1977), one of the most distinctive and prolific Canadian painters of the latter half of the 20th Century. Kurelek was a figurative artist during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, and a fervent Christian artist in the years of unbridled secularism. His work should be considered in the context of a life framed by memory, madness and religion (Kurelek, 1980; Morley, 1986). The post contains illustrations of many of his paintings, which can speak for themselves independently of my commentary.

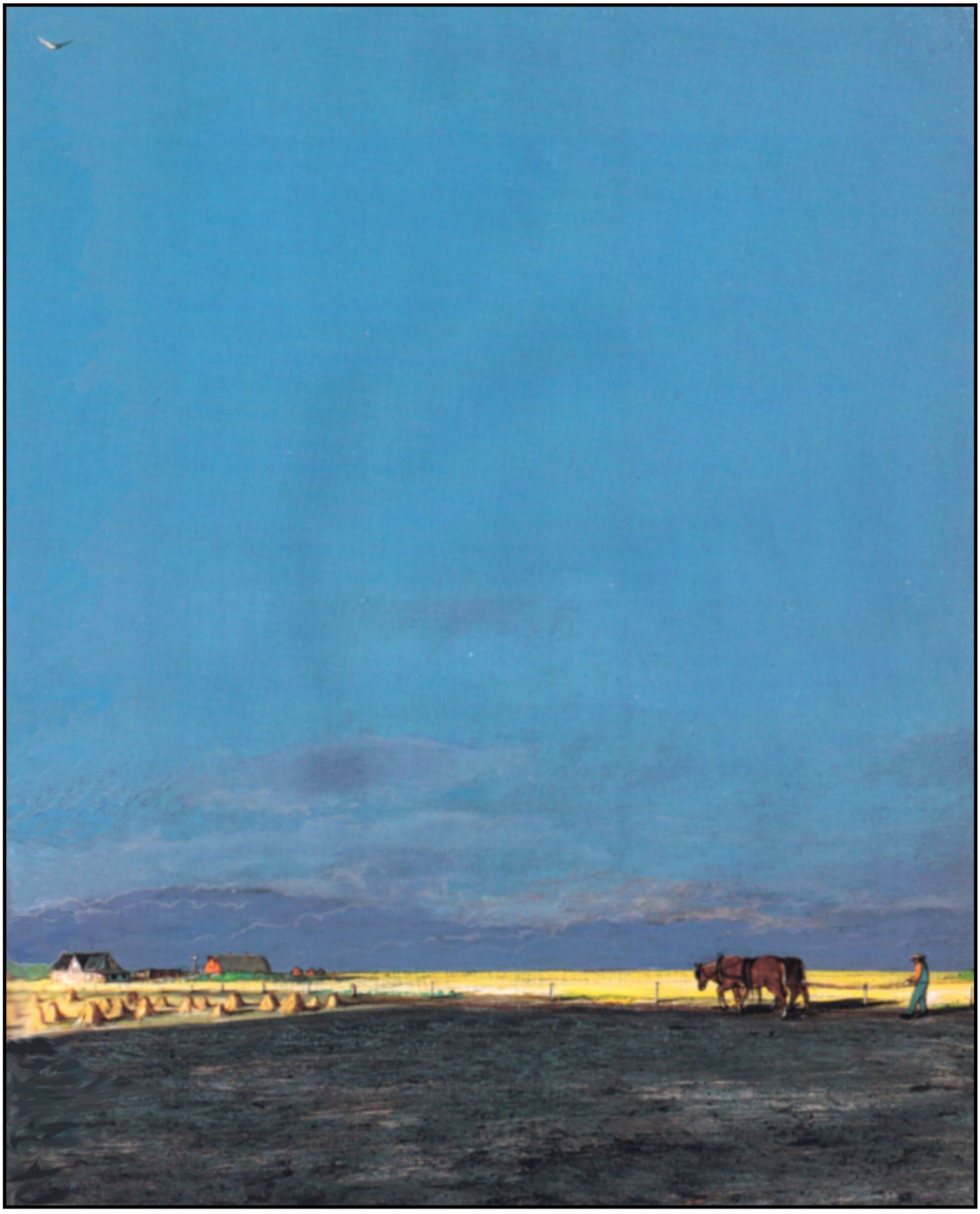
**Early Life**

William Kurelek was born in Whitfield, Alberta, in 1927. His father Dmytro, who had immigrated to Canada from Bukovina in the Ukraine, was unable to make his first farm successful during the Depression, and moved the family to Stonewall, Manitoba in 1933. Kurelek remembered his childhood fondly, even though he did not get along well with his father. His 1968 painting *Reminiscences of Youth* shows a winter scene on the Prairies with children playing on a snow-covered haystack.

The style owes something to Breughel's paintings of Flemish life, but is distinct in the openness of its space and the flatness of the figures. It has the sentimentality of a Norman Rockwell illustration but is far more naïve. In the surrounding frame we see the teenage artist lying on his bed in a darkened room and remembering his childhood. The painting is thus a memory of a memory.

Kurelek's memories of his childhood formed the basis of two books: *A Prairie Boy's Winter* (1973) and *A Prairie Boy's Summer* (1975). They also provided the illustrations for a new edition of W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1976), from which the following image is taken. It contrasts the tininess of human endeavors with the immensity of a prairie sky as

depicted by the flight of a bird:



Kurelek did well at school and graduated in arts from the University of Manitoba in 1949. He then attended the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, his family having moved to

Vinemount, in the Niagara Peninsula near Hamilton, in Southern Ontario. Though convinced of his own talent, Kurelek found himself unable to make any living from his art. He worked as a lumberjack in Northern Ontario to obtain money to travel to Europe. The following illustration of a *Lumberjack's Breakfast* comes from his 1974 book entitled *Lumberjack*. It shows the tremendous energy and warm camaraderie of breakfast in the bush camps.

**London**

In London in 1952, Kurelek found a place to stay, visited museums and considered taking art classes. He travelled briefly to Paris, Brussels and Vienna to see the work of various masters. He was particularly impressed by the paintings of Bosch, Brueghel and Van Gogh. Back in London, he worked briefly as a laborer for the London Transport

Commission. Alone and impoverished, he became severely depressed. After being unsuccessfully treated as an outpatient, he was admitted to the Maudsley Psychiatric Hospital. His occupational therapist there, Margaret Smith, encouraged his art, and introduced him to Roman Catholicism. With Margaret's encouragement, he began to take religious instruction. His painting, *The Maze* (1953), was his attempt to understand his own tortured mind:


The artist's skull is shown split down the middle with its various chambers open to the view of his psychiatrists. In the center the soul lies inert like an exhausted rat unable to find its way out of the maze of its mind. In the upper right is a scene of childhood bullying. Lower on the right a relentless conveyor built carries the person toward an inevitable death. At the lower center, doctors probe a human being inside a test-tube. A panel to left of this shows crows

tormenting a lizard. The illustration below (not to scale) shows some of these sections. The painting is more intensively analyzed in Wikipedia and in the DVD entitled *The Maze* (2015).

Late in 1953, his psychiatrists transferred him the Netherne Psychiatric Hospital in Surrey, where Edward Adamson had established a program in art therapy. His room at the Netherne looked out over a cabbage patch. One night there Kurelek had a nightmare-vision of God calling for him from beyond the cabbage patch. He had been reading Francis Thompson's 1890 poem *The Hound of Heaven*, which describes the soul's flight from the grace of God. Though ever-rejected God keeps following after the soul to provide him, once he submits to grace, with love and salvation. The title of Kurelek's 1970 painting depicting this nightmare comes from the poem – *All Things Betray Thee Who Betrayest Me*.

The painting shows the Hound of Heaven in tiny outline just beyond the cabbages on the far right. On the window sill a small glass of water depicts the grace of God. Thompson’s poem ends with the soul finally reconciled to God who states:

> How little worthy of any love thou art!
> Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
> Save Me, save only Me?
> All which I took from thee I did but take,
> Not for thy harms,

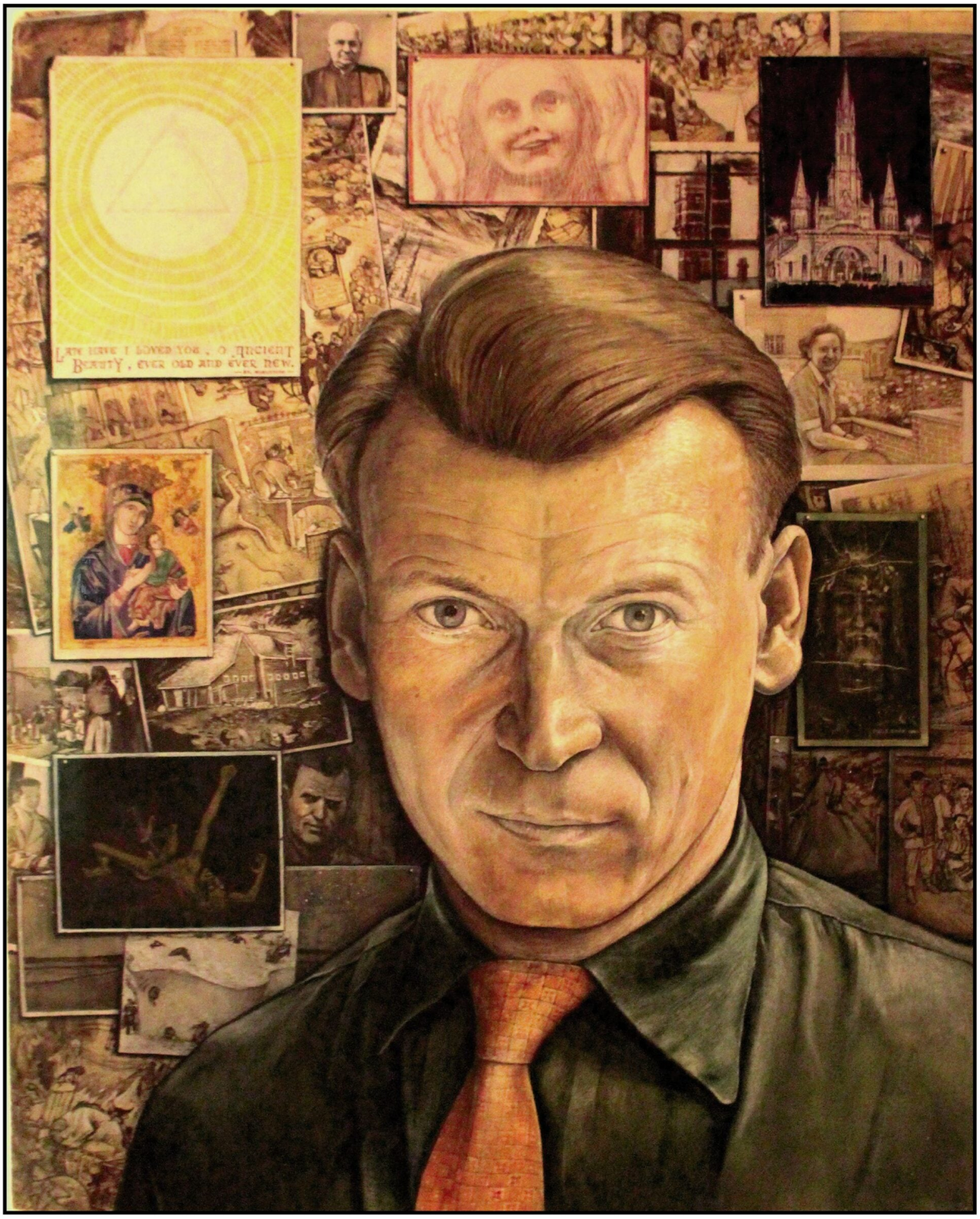
But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!”
Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.

At the Netherne, Kurelek continued his paintings in the workshop. However, he still found no easy way out of his agony. He attempted suicide and was given a course of Electro Convulsive Therapy.

During the ensuing year, he slowly improved, and in 1955 he was discharged from the hospital. He was able to make a living by selling small evocative *trompe-l’oeil* paintings such as *The Airman’s Prayer,* which shows the key to the life of an airman who died in service of his country (represented by the stamp). In the end, his life was “not worth a sixpence.” On the right is the prayer of Australian airman Hugh Brodie written prior to his death and published afterwards in the newspapers. It ends

But this I pray – be at my side
When death is drawing through the sky,
Almighty God, Who also died,
Teach me the way that I should die.


After his discharge, Kurelek travelled home to Canada, but was unable to find stable work. He returned to England and obtained a position in the framing shop of F. A. Pollak, where he learned to be an expert framing craftsman. He completed his religious instruction with Father Thomas Lynch, formally converted to Roman Catholicism in 1957, and made a pilgrimage to Lourdes. The *Self Portrait* of 1957 shows an artist fully in control of his own destiny:

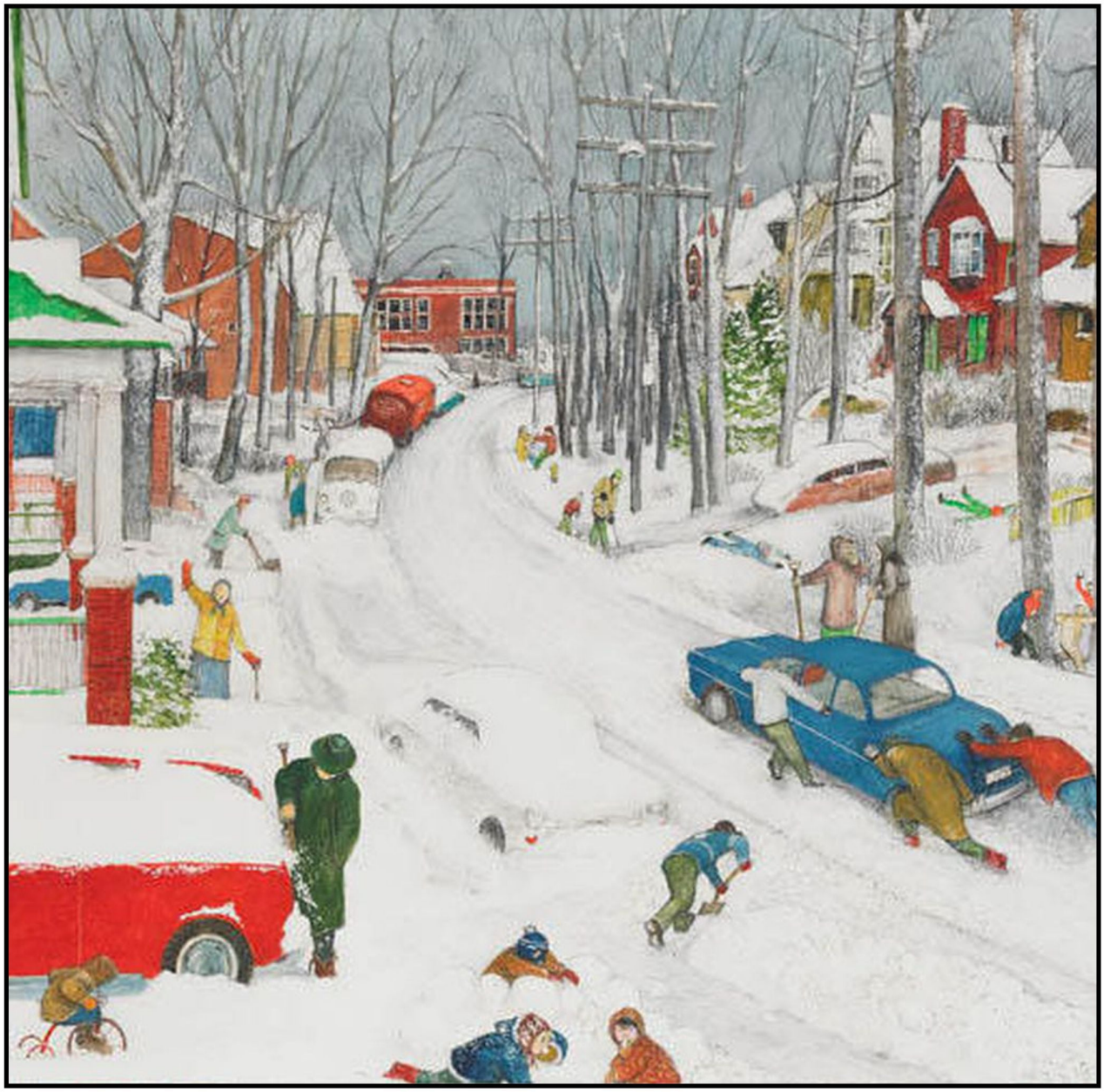



The background represents in *trompe-l'oeil* style various pictures, postcards and photographs pinned to the wall. In the upper left we can see an abstract representation of the Trinity with a quotation from St Augustine, "Late have I loved

you, O Ancient Beauty, ever old and ever new.” Also at the upper edge are a photograph of Father Thomas Lynch, a drawing of Sainte Bernadette Soubirous, who experienced the vision of the Virgin at Lourdes, and a picture of the Rosary Basilica in Lourdes. Below the Basilica are a photograph of Margaret Smith, Kurelek’s occupational therapist at Maudsley, and a representation of the Shroud of Turin. On the left side, a representation of the 15th-Century icon *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* is superimposed on a reproduction (or preliminary drawing?) of Kurelek’s 1955 painting *Behold Man without God.* At the lower left are an illustration of one of the damned in Hell (from I am not sure which Northern Renaissance painting), and a photograph of Kurelek’s father Dmytro.

**Toronto**

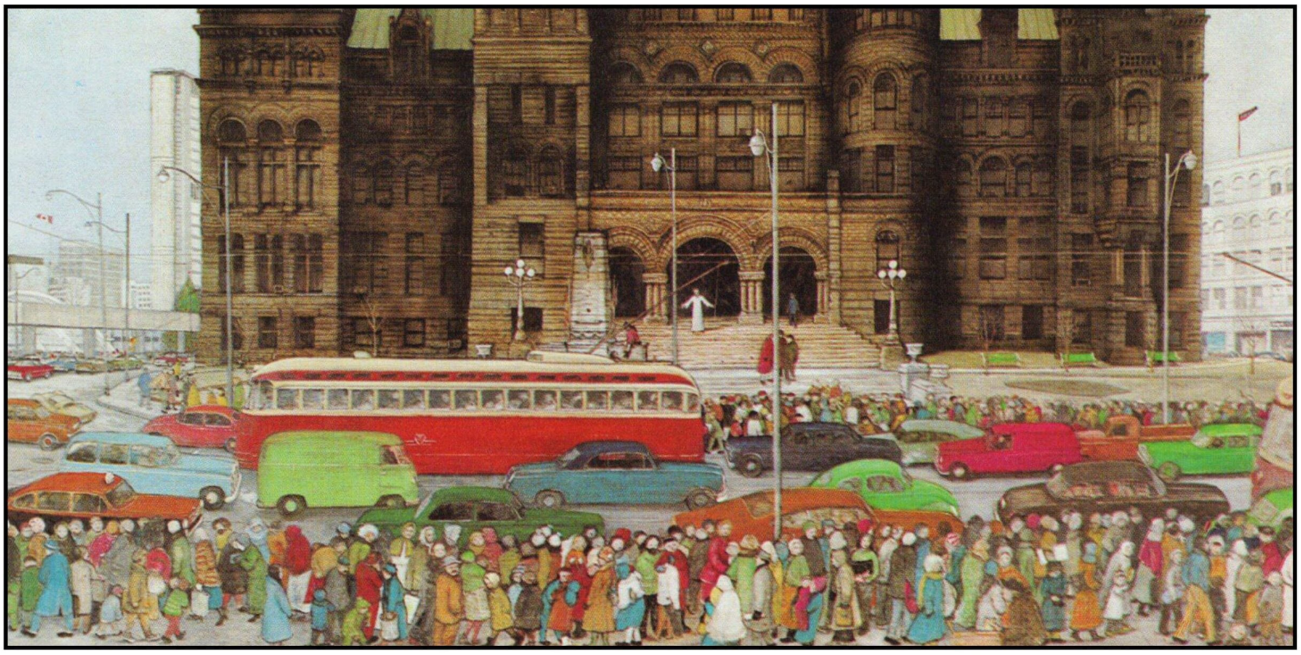
When Kurelek returned to Toronto in 1959, Av Isaacs, owner of a small gallery, was impressed by his paintings and arranged a showing in 1960. Perhaps more importantly, he was able to employ Kurelek as a framer in his gallery. This work provided the artist with a secure income while he painted.  Kurelek married in 1962 and raised three children. As well as publishing books based on his past, Kurelek also painted scenes from his Toronto Life. The following shows a winter scene near his home: *Balsam Avenue after Heavy Snowfall* (1973).



Kurelek had become a fervent Catholic, and some degree of sermonizing soon began to intrude into his paintings. This can be intriguing as in *Toronto, Toronto* (1973) which shows a small figure of Christ lamenting on the steps of the Old City Hall as Christmas shoppers pass by and pay him no attention. It was the same when he had bewailed the state of Jerusalem many centuries before:

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth

her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! (*Matthew* 23:37)



Sometimes, however, Kurelek's imagery becomes offensive, as in *Our My Lai, the Massacre at Highland Creek* (1973), which shows aborted fetuses from the Scarborough Centennial Hospital in Toronto. My Lai was the site of a 1968 massacre in Vietnam. Therapeutic abortions (to preserve the life or health of the mother) were legalized in Canada in 1969, though it was not until 1988 that abortions became more readily available. There is nothing more insufferable than a new convert's absolute certainty about what is right and what is wrong.

Kurelek also began to fuse Christian apocalyptic thinking with ongoing fears of a nuclear war. The Cuban Missile Crisis of1962 had brought the world very close to Annihilation, and Kurelek had made a basement studio in Balsam Avenue like a bomb-shelter. *In the Autumn of Life* (1964) shows the Kurelek

family at the Vinemount farm.

The extended family gathers on the lawn for a photograph. However, this is not just a record of the family's success. As Andrew Kear (2017) points out

> Closer study of the painting reveals several disquieting elements that undermine the painting's function as a sincere celebration of social mobility. A Christ figure appears in the bottom-left foreground, crucified on a dead tree and surrounded by ravenous dogs that clamour over the spilled blood. The dogs, Kurelek later wrote, "are supernatural" ones, referring to the enemies of Christ mentioned in the Book of Psalms. More foreboding still is the giant mushroom cloud that Kurelek uses as the iconic symbol of nuclear war and a reminder that technological advancement does not necessarily make for peace and harmony.

Kurelek illustrated several books about the immigrant experience in Canada: *Jewish Life in Canada* (1976), *They Sought a New World* (1985), *The* Polish Canadians (1981). The following shows *Jewish Doctor's Family Celebrating Passover in Halifax* (1976):

Kurelek spent much of the sixties producing a series of 160 paintings based on *The Passion of Christ according to St. Matthew* (1975). In London after his discharge from the psychiatric hospital, Father Lynch had given him a second-hand copy of Tissot's *Life of Christ* (1896, Dolkart et al, 2009). In 1885, James Tissot (1836-1902), a successful painter of London society and fashion, experienced a religious conversion. He subsequently traveled to the Holy Land and produced a large set of paintings to illustrate the Gospels. Kurelek's paintings derived conceptually from both the water-colors of Tissot and the passion paintings of Bosch and Brueghel, but were created in his own idiosyncratic neo-medieval way. They range in form from close-up portraits to bird's eye views, from populous crowd scenes to lonely individual portraits, from sunny landscapes to dark interiors. In a way they serve as a storyboard for an imaginary film – each painting showing the view of a particular camera set-up,

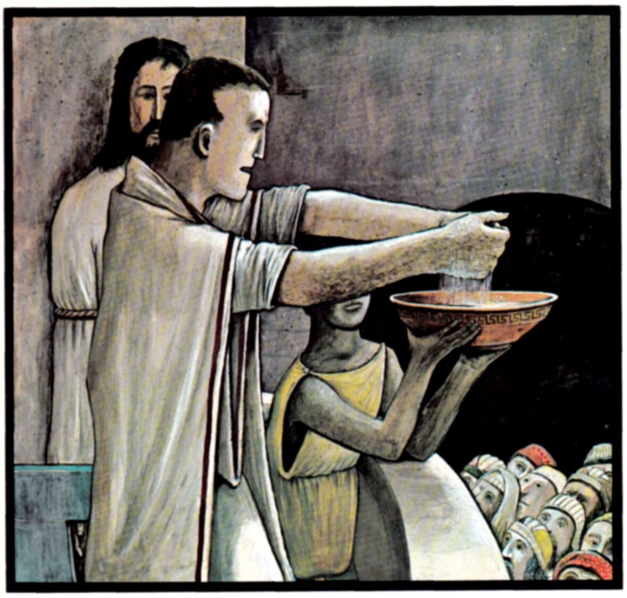
some of them very original. The following illustrations show some selected paintings (in sequence but only occasionally contiguous):

AND, WHILE THEY WERE AT TABLE, HE SAID, BELIEVE ME, ONE OF YOU IS TO BETRAY ME.

THEY WERE FULL OF SORROW, AND BEGAN TO SAY, ONE AFTER ANOTHER, LORD IS IT I?

AND HE MADE DENIAL AGAIN WITH AN OATH, I KNOW NOTHING OF THE MAN.

AND WENT AND HANGED HIMSELF.



AND SO, FINDING THAT HIS GOOD OFFICES WENT FOR NOTHING, AND THE UPROAR ONLY BECAME WORSE, PILATE SENT FOR WATER AND WASHED HIS HANDS IN FULL SIGHT OF THE MULTITUDE, SAYING AS HE DID SO, I HAVE NO PART IN THE DEATH OF THIS INNOCENT MAN : IT CONCERNS YOU ONLY.

THEN THEY PUT ON HIS HEAD A CROWN WHICH THEY HAD WOVEN OUT OF THORNS, AND A ROD IN HIS RIGHT HAND,

AND SO THEY REACHED A PLACE CALLED GOLGOTHA, THAT IS, THE PLACE NAMED AFTER A SKULL.

DIVIDING HIS GARMENTS AMONG THEM BY CASTING LOTS.

FROM THE SIXTH HOUR ONWARDS THERE WAS DARKNESS OVER ALL THE EARTH UNTIL THE NINTH HOUR

JOSEPH TOOK POSSESSION OF THE BODY ,

AND SUDDENLY THERE WAS A GREAT TREMBLING OF THE EARTH , BECAUSE AN ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME TO THE PLACE , DESCENDING FROM HEAVEN AND ROLLED AWAY THE STONE

WITH THAT, THEY CAME NEAR TO HIM , AND CLUNG TO HIS FEET , AND WORSHIPPED HIM .

The figure of Christ is perhaps overly simplified: he has little expression beyond severity and agony. Some of the crowd scenes portray Jews that are almost antisemitic caricatures. Part of this may be caused by the actual text of *Matthew*, the

gospel most prejudiced against the Jews. Despite these shortcomings, many of the paintings have an emotional depth that transcends their simplicity.

**Critical Assessment**

Kurelek's work is difficult to evaluate. When he wanted – as in his *trompe-l'oeil* paintings – he could be acutely aware of perspective and shadow. However, his figures are generally outlined with minimal shading and solid coloring. In most of his work, therefore the people feel flat and the space appears two-dimensional. In some ways these pictures harken back to those of the late medieval period or early Renaissance, but in other ways they become almost caricatures like newspaper cartoons. Some of his paintings have an endearing charm; others are ponderously didactic. Of the contradictions inherent in his work and character, Ilse Friesen (1997, p 177) remarks

> Kurelek's art is both realistic and abstract, both amateurish and expert, both naïve and sophisticated, both mundane and mystical … his personality is both humble and arrogant, educated and provincial, compassionate and judgmental, even saintly and devilish.

The series of *Passion* paintings probably represents Kurelek's greatest achievement. The simplicity of his figures in this series sometimes allows them to carry intense emotion. Like the work of Expressionists like Munch and Nolde, they can have a tremendous power.

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# Human Brain

Over the past two months I presented a course on the Human Brain to students in the LIFE ('Learning is Forever') Institute at Ryerson University in Toronto. The course was designed for the senior layperson. It introduced the basic anatomy and physiology of the nervous system, and described

the various disorders that can affect the elderly human brain.

The course was given at a second-year university level. Some of the material may have been more than the students needed to know, but most were able to follow the main points of the talks, and some were fascinated by the details.

The presentations were supplemented with extensive teaching materials – slides, notes, movies, etc. Many of the illustrations were adapted or created specifically for the course. I am now making these generally available through the page entitled Human Brain on my website.

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# Euthanasia

We cannot choose the moment of our birth. And death usually comes in its own time, not ours. Sometimes, however, we can decide to end our life. The reasons for suicide are various. Most common is the desire to end intractable suffering. Faced with the prospect of a prolonged period of pain and suffering at the end of life, most rational people would prefer *euthanasia* – a "good death." This term first came into English in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (Book II, X.7).

Bacon was encouraging physicians to assuage the pains and agonies of death: to practice what we now call palliative care.

Over the course of time “euthanasia” became differentiated from palliative care, and now generally means the inducement of death so as to prevent intolerable pain and suffering in patients with incurable disease (Young, 2012; Sumner 2011). Euthanasia may be voluntary or involuntary, based on whether the patient provides consent or not. Involuntary euthanasia, where the patient does not provide consent although capable of so doing, is sometimes distinguished from non-voluntary euthanasia (“mercy killing”), where the patient is unable to either object or consent. Some would consider both involuntary and non-voluntary euthanasia as equivalent to murder and limit the term euthanasia to cases wherein consent is explicit. Euthanasia may be active or passive, based on whether death is induced by the administration of a lethal medication or by the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment, nutrition or hydration. Active euthanasia may be initiated by the patient, in which case it is essentially suicide, or by someone else (a physician or a nurse acting under the direction of a physician), in which case it can be described as assisted suicide or assisted dying. Sometimes voluntary euthanasia, where the lethal medication is administered to the patient, is distinguished from assisted suicide, where the patient takes the drug, but this distinction appears unnecessary. When the word is unmodified, euthanasia generally means physician-assisted suicide performed at the request of the patient.

**Historical Backgound**

Our attitudes to euthanasia have changed over the centuries (Dowbiggin, 2005). Developments in religion, law, and medicine have all contributed to these changes. Over the past century or so medicine has increased its ability to treat disease and manage pain. We are now more able to make end-of-life decisions than we have ever been. Nevertheless, the decisions

remain extremely difficult, since they involve our cherished belief in the sanctity of human life and our ancient laws against killing (Pappas, 2012). Any proposal for euthanasia must address our general prohibition of suicide.

In the Eastern religions, suicide was not forbidden. In India, a wife could cast herself on the funeral pyre of her husband in the process of *sati*. Elderly yogis with no remaining responsibilities could seek death by starvation – *prayopavesa.* In Japan, suicide by means of *seppuku* could preserve one's honor. Since one of the goals of Buddhism is to relinquish any attachment to the world, suicide might even be considered as a means to this release, though this should only come after enlightenment has been attained (Attwood, 2004). However, some Chinese and Japanese Buddhist monks sought enlightenment through a process of *sokushinbutsu* or self-mummification, accomplished by slow starvation and self-suffocation.

In the Abrahamic religions, however, suicide was considered an unpardonable sin, tantamount to murder (Cholbi, 2012). Suicide was contrary to the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). The main scriptures, however, do not specifically prohibit killing oneself. The Bible provides various examples of suicide (Samson, Saul, Judas) without ever stating that this is prohibited. However, the scriptures convey a general sense that one should not interfere with divine providence: "My times are in thy hand" (Psalm 31:15). One verse of the Qur'an (4:29) is sometimes translated as "Do not kill yourselves," though it is more usually rendered as "Do not kill each other."

Through most of its history, the Christian Church has adamantly condemned suicide. The body of a suicide was denied burial in consecrated ground and the soul denied access to salvation. In recent years, the churches have relaxed their condemnation, though suicide is still considered a mortal sin. Until recently, suicide was illegal in almost all European countries, and the property of the suicide was confiscated by

the state. Part of the reason why Christian societies have been so severe in their condemnation of suicide may have been the attractiveness of heaven. Without severe sanctions, believers might easily choose the happiness of an after-life to the suffering of a present life.

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, thinkers began to question the Church's stance. When one is coming to the end of life and faced with unrelenting pain, one should be able to choose a quick and painless death rather than undergo prolonged and unnecessary suffering

In Thomas More's *Utopia*

> …when any is taken with a torturing and lingering pain, so that there is no hope either of recovery or ease, the priests and magistrates come and exhort them, that, since they are now unable to go on with the business of life, are become a burden to themselves and to all about them, and they have really out-lived themselves, they should no longer nourish such a rooted distemper, but choose rather to die since they cannot live but in much misery; being assured that if they thus deliver themselves from torture, or are willing that others should do it, they shall be happy after death: since, by their acting thus, they lose none of the pleasures, but only the troubles of life, they think they behave not only reasonably but in a manner consistent with religion and piety; because they follow the advice given them by their priests, who are the expounders of the will of God. Such as are wrought on by these persuasions either starve themselves of their own accord, or take opium, and by that means die without pain. (More, 1516, pp 140-141).

One cannot be sure whether More was advocating euthanasia or just presenting the policy for discussion. The title of his book means "nowhere" – only later did it assume the additional connotation of *eutopia* or "good place." As a devout Roman Catholic, More likely supported his church's opposition to

euthanasia. Death should come when God wills, not when we want.

In an essay that was only published posthumously, David Hume provided a rational view of suicide. He proposed that it is no more contrary to divine providence than building houses to protect ourselves from the weather or cultivating the earth to prevent ourselves from starving. Furthermore, when we become old and infirm suicide is no longer contrary to our duties to society, since we may have become more of a burden than a benefit to our fellows. Thus

> both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence, when it becomes a burthen. 'Tis the only way, that we can then be useful to society, by setting an example, which, if imitated, would preserve to every one his chance for happiness in life, and would effectually free him from all danger of misery. (Hume, 1777)

In the concluding note to his essay, Hume quoted Pliny the Elder who described suicide as an advantage that man possesses over God.

> *Deus non sibi potest mortem consciscere, si velit, quod homini dedit optimum in tantis vitæ poenis*. [God cannot put himself to death even if he wanted to, since among the many ills of life he gave away this best of boons to man]. (Pliny, 79, Book II Chapter V)

The modern interpretation of euthanasia can probably be traced to the much-discussed essay on the subject by Samuel D. Williams published in 1870 (Kemp, 2002). He proposed

> That in all cases of hopeless and painful illness it should be the recognized duty of the medical attendant, whenever so desired by the patient, to administer chloroform, or such other anæsthetic as may by-and-by supersede chloroform, so as to destroy consciousness at once, and put the sufferer at once to a quick and painless death; all needful precautions

> being adopted to prevent any possible abuse of such duty and means being taken to establish, beyond the possibility of doubt or question, that the remedy was applied at the express wish of the patient. (Williams, 1870, p 212).

In the decades subsequent to this essay, many groups in England, Europe and North America began to advocate the legalization of euthanasia.

**Unworthy Lives**

In the 20th Century euthanasia became entrammeled with another idea that promoted the good of society – "eugenics." Unfortunately, joining the "good death" with the "good birth" led to actions of great evil.

Darwin's Theory of Evolution had proposed that humanity's current success derives from the selection of the fittest for survival and propagation. Followers of Darwin warned that we should not alter the course of evolution by social policies to protect the weak and vulnerable. Rather we should encourage our best and brightest to have more offspring, and we should prevent the feeble-minded, criminal and insane from multiplying. These ideas formed the basis of eugenics.

In the first few decades of the 20th Century several jurisdictions in North America and Europe enacted eugenic laws enforcing the sterilization of the mentally defective and the insane. The most efficient of such programs was brought in by the German Nazi government when it came to power in1933 (Proctor, 1988, Chapter 4; Pichot, 2001, Chapter 10). The *Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring* required the sterilization of patients suffering from feeble mindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depression, Huntington's chorea and alcoholism. While the program was in operation between 1933 and 1939, about 400,000 patients were sterilized (compared to about 30,000 patients over a much longer period in the USA).

A more effective eugenics program would not only prevent offspring but also remove from society the costs involved in the long-term care of feeble-minded and mentally ill patients. The possibility of the involuntary euthanasia of patients who were a burden to society had been thoroughly evaluated in the 1920 book *Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life* by Karl Binding, a legal scholar, and Alfred Hoche, a physician. They considered the question

> Is there human life which has so utterly forfeited its claim to worth that its continuation has forever lost all value both for the bearer of that life and for society?

They answered affirmatively, and proposed that society was justified in putting patients with incurable disease to death.

In 1939 the war began and the German sterilization program ceased. In its place a secret program called Operation T4 was instituted to provide a mercy death (*Gnadentod*) for the incurably sick and mentally ill. Patients were killed either in specially constructed gas chambers or by such other means as were found expedient. The number of patients euthanized by the time the war ended was probably around 400,000 (Proctor, 1988, Chapter 7; Pichot, 2001, Chapter 11). The techniques developed in the early stages of this program were then used when the Nazi government decided to murder Jews, homosexuals, communists, Gypsies, Slavs and prisoners of war.

The history of euthanasia in Germany is a horrifying example of the “slippery slope.” By accepting that some people have more of a right to life than others or that a doctor may agree to a patient’s request for death, we slide slowly and inexorably toward complete immorality. Leo Alexander, a medical expert at the Nuremberg trials, stated the problem of the “small beginnings:”

> Whatever proportions these crimes finally assumed, it became evident to all who investigated them that they had started

> from small beginnings. The beginnings at first were merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitude of the physicians. It started with the acceptance of the attitude, basic in the euthanasia movement, that there is such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived. This attitude in its early stages concerned itself merely with the severely and chronically sick. Gradually the sphere of those to be included in this category was enlarged to encompass the socially unproductive, the ideologically unwanted, the racially unwanted and finally all non-Germans (Alexander, 1949).

**Double Effects**

For many years after the war, the ethics of active euthanasia were not discussed. We became more concerned with the relief of pain. New protocols were developed to facilitate analgesia, the speciality of palliative care became a medical specialty, and hospices became available to provide a peaceful and pain-free death to patients with terminal illness.

Sometimes, when medication dosages were increased to levels sufficient to relieve severe and unrelenting pain, death also resulted. Such protocols invoked the principle of "double effect:" that an action intended to bring about a morally desirable effect (the relief of pain) is not wrong if it also leads to a morally reprehensible effect (death) even when this second effect is foreseen. This state of affairs is both morally and medically confusing (McIntyre, 2001). Who is to say what is intended and what is just foreseen? The increased pain medication probably does not in itself bring about the death of the patient. Death results from a combination of causes: limiting the patient's nutrition and hydration adds to the effects of sedation and the ongoing disease. "Terminal sedation" should probably not be considered as an example of double effect, but simply treated as a type of euthanasia.

**End-of-Life Decisions**

In the second half of the 20th Century, medicine developed techniques for cardiopulmonary resuscitation and mechanical ventilation. Although these procedures often prevented unnecessary death, they sometimes resulted in unresponsive patients being maintained alive without any reasonable hope for the return of normal consciousness.

These developments led to the principle that life need not be artificially continued if recovery is futile. A patient may decide to forego resuscitation or mechanical ventilation in such situations. This decision may be made by means of an advance directive or "living will." In cases without such directives, the decision can be made by the patient's family and caregivers. Accepting these protocols has been a long a complicated process that is outside of the main topic of this posting (see discussion in Pappas, 2012, Chapter 4). Issues remain for patients who have no advance directives and when the family and physicians disagree on whether to maintain life support. Nevertheless we have come to general terms with the idea of passive euthanasia when a patient is unresponsive and the prognosis is futile. Outside of a few jurisdictions, however, active euthanasia remains illegal.

**Legalization of Voluntary Euthanasia**

Voluntary euthanasia has been legal in Oregon since 1997 (Lindsay, 2009; Lee, 2014), in Switzerland at least since 1998, and in the Netherlands (Onwuteaka-Philipsen et al., 2012) and Belgium (Cohen-Almagor, 2009) since 2002. Each of these jurisdictions requires a formal application from a patient judged competent to understand the nature of their suffering and the consequences of their request (Lewis & Black, 2013).

The incidence of voluntary euthanasia is low but varies greatly among the jurisdictions. In Oregon the incidence is 0.2% of all deaths, but in Belgium and the Netherlands the incidence is between 1.5 and 3 % (the incidence in Switzerland

is not accurately known). The incidence would be significantly higher if cases of euthanasia without consent, and cases of terminal sedation were included together with those of voluntary euthanasia.

Investigations of patients undergoing voluntary euthanasia indicate no clear evidence that vulnerable populations are unfairly targeted, or that coercion plays a significant role in the patients' decisions. In Oregon most patients requesting euthanasia were white, well-educated, and medically insured (Lindsay, 2009). Furthermore, euthanasia does not substitute for adequate palliative care, since most patients ultimately seeking euthanasia have already tried palliative care or been admitted to a hospice.

Nevertheless, two significant issues remain unanswered. The first is the incidence of euthanasia without explicit consent. Although this is not reported in Oregon, it has been documented in Belgium and the Netherlands. When faced with an incurable patient in severe pain who is not able to provide consent, a compassionate physician may nevertheless proceed with euthanasia. The incidence of this is extremely difficult to assess, particularly if one includes "terminal sedation." The incidence of euthanasia without consent probably equals the incidence with consent (Cohen-Almagor, 2009; Lewis &Black, 2013; Meussen et al., 2010, Onwuteaka-Philipsen et al., 2012).

The second issue concerns the euthanasia of patients with psychiatric disorders. This has become particularly frequent in Belgium (Thienpont et al., 2015; Aviv, 2015). By arguing that mental anguish can cause as much suffering as physical pain, one can make a philosophical case for euthanasia to relieve "existential suffering" (Varelius, 2014). However, we usually believe that psychiatric disorders can be treated, and that even without treatment depression will alleviate with the passage of time. Psychiatric patients are certainly vulnerable and often may have difficulty providing fully informed consent. Thienpont et al. (2015) report that the female/male

ratio was 3.3 for psychiatric patients requesting euthanasia and 2.9 for those patients who were ultimately euthanized. They suggest that this is in keeping with the increased incidence of psychiatric disease in women, but the ratio is nevertheless disconcerting.

**Objections to Euthanasia**

Euthanasia has engendered much public debate (Andorno & Baffone, 2014; Materstvedt et al., 2003; New England Journal of Medicine, 2013; Quill & Greenlaw, 2008; Somerville, 1993, 2014; Smith, 2006; Sumner, 2011, Young, 2012). The main reason for making euthanasia legal is that individuals have a right to decide that a rapid painless assisted death is preferable to one that is prolonged and painful, and to have medical assistance in bringing this about. The main objections are

(i) Euthanasia is unnecessary if there is adequate palliative care. A variant of this argument is that if euthanasia becomes legal, patients and physicians will prefer euthanasia to palliative care. Palliative and hospice care can render the end of life peaceful and pain-free in most patients. Nevertheless, pain medication must sometimes be brought to such levels that the treatment of pain becomes essentially the same as euthanasia.

(ii) Patients may not be able to provide proper informed consent. A state of state of severe pain and distress may preclude proper consent – the patient may agree to anything to stop the pain. This objection could be countered if the patient simply confirmed a previous decision made before the terminal period.

(iii) Patients near the end of life may be very vulnerable to coercion. Opponents of euthanasia suggest that families and caretakers may improperly convince disabled or elderly patients to accept euthanasia. Their ulterior motive might be to be relieved of the expense and effort involved in the care

of their elderly relative or to free up an inheritance.

(iv) Allowing voluntary euthanasia is a “slippery slope” that will ultimately lead to killing all individuals whose lives are considered “unworthy.” If we become used to letting people die, we may become inured to killing and allow the old, the disabled and the mentally defective to be euthanized without consent. The story of Jack Kevorkian (Pappas, 2012, Chapter 5) represents the horrors of the slippery slope. Though there may have been some support for his early actions, ultimately he was killing patients who were obviously unable to give consent. Refutations of the slippery-slope argument hinge on strong safeguards to guarantee proper consent and strict sanctions against euthanasia outside of the legal guidelines (Stingl, 2010). The slope may be slippery but we can construct barriers to prevent us from falling into the abyss.

**Public Opinion**

Despite the objections, the great majority of people in North America support the legalization of voluntary euthanasia. Gallup polls (McCarthy, 2014) show that about 70% of respondents in the USA answer yes to the question

> When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient’s life by some painless means if the patient and his or her family request it?

Support varies with the wording of the question (Saad, 2010). Only 51% agree if the question is worded:

> When a person has a disease that cannot be cure and is living in severe pain, do you think that doctors should or should not be allowed by law to assist the patient to commit suicide if the patient requests it?

Both Somerville (1993) and Callahan (2008) have remarked how easily public opinion on euthanasia may be swayed by the

choice of words.

In a Canadian poll taken in 2013 at the behest of an anti-euthanasia group the key findings were that

> Canadians are about twice as likely to support (63%) as to oppose (32%) a law allowing physician-assisted suicide in Canada. Support is slightly lower for legalizing euthanasia (55% vs. 40% who oppose it), which is likely due in part to providing respondents with information about the rate of euthanasia deaths occurring without patient consent in Belgium. (Environics, 2013).

A year later, an Ipsos-Reid poll performed for a pro-euthanasia group showed 84% of Canadian respondents in favor of physician-assisted suicide. (Ramsay, 2015).

A final survey worth noting is one conducted by the Canadian Medical Association (2011). They found in a survey of their members that

> only 20% of respondents would be willing to participate if euthanasia is legalized in Canada, while twice as many (42%) would refuse to do so. Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) are not sure how they would respond, while 15% did not answer.

The Hippocratic Oath asserts

> I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asks for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy.

Most present day physicians do not swear to this oath, but the idea that a physician should not bring about death has merit. When one is sick and in pain, a physician who will not kill is preferable to one who might be willing to do so. Even if ultimately one could choose suicide.

**Canadian Law**

In Canada active euthanasia is a crime though suicide is not. The Canadian Supreme Courts has examined the issues of euthanasia in three cases: Rodriguez vs British Columbia (1993), R vs Latimer (2001), and Carter vs Canada (2015).

In 2001 Sue Rodriguez, suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, wished to be allowed to die by means of assisted suicide when she became totally incapacitated. She wanted to live life to its fullest, and therefore did not wish to take her life before becoming unable to do so. She proposed that the law prohibiting physician-assisted suicide was discriminatory

> since it prevents persons physically unable to end their lives unassisted from choosing suicide when that option is in principle available to other members of the public without contravening the law.

The judgment of the court was that the blanket prohibition of assisted suicide was justified since its purpose was to protect life. The court expressed concerns about the possible abuse of assisted suicide were it to be legalized, the difficulties in creating appropriate safeguards against such abuse, and the need to protect those members of society who might be vulnerable to such abuse. The court therefore decided against her request. Sue Rodriguez committed suicide with the assistance of an anonymous physician in 1994.

In 1993, Robert Latimer brought about the death of his 12-year old daughter Tracy by means of carbon monoxide poisoning. Tracy suffered from severe cerebral palsy, epilepsy and mental retardation. She had undergone numerous operations to relieve her spastic and painful state. Faced with further surgery for her constantly dislocating hip, her father decided that dying would be preferable to continuing a life of pain and torture. Latimer was convicted of second degree murder and given the minimum 10-year sentence allowed for this crime. The case went through several appeals. In 2001, the Supreme Court considered

a request to reduce the sentence, but affirmed both the conviction and the sentence. They found no justification for non-voluntary euthanasia. Robert Latimer began serving his sentence in 2001 and was release in 2010.

The Supreme Court of Canada re-considered the law prohibiting physician-assisted suicide in its judgment of Carter vs Canada. The case was instigated by Lee Carter, who had been forced to take her mother, suffering from an incurable neurodegenerative disease, to Switzerland for assisted suicide, since this was not legally available in Canada. The court summarized the reasoning of the 1993 Rodriguez judgment:

> The object of the prohibition is not, broadly, to preserve life whatever the circumstances, but more specifically to protect vulnerable persons from being induced to commit suicide at a time of weakness.

However, the court acknowledged that since that 1993 judgment assisted suicide had been legalized in several jurisdictions and that safeguards against abuse have been effective. The court agreed that some people may wish to end their lives but not have the ability to do so without the assistance of a physician. The law prohibiting such assistance thus discriminates against these individuals:

> An individual’s response to a grievous and irremediable medical condition is a matter critical to their dignity and autonomy. The prohibition denies people in this situation the right to make decisions concerning their bodily integrity and medical care and thus trenches on their liberty. And by leaving them to endure intolerable suffering, it impinges on their security of the person.

The court therefore temporarily invalidated the law prohibiting physician-assisted dying and called upon the federal government to provide new legislation more consistent with the Canadian Bill of Rights. However, the present

government seems loath to address the issue, despite the weight of public opinion (Ramsay, 2015). The government of the Province of Quebec has voted to allow euthanasia, although this decision may be legally contested by the federal government.

**Where Do I Stand?**

Euthanasia should be legal when a patient with an incurable illness is suffering pain that cannot be adequately relieved by analgesic medication. The diagnosis and prognosis should be confirmed by at least two physicians. Modern palliative care should have been provided and demonstrated to be inadequate. Euthanasia should only be allowed at the patient's request and only after his physicians have ensured that the request is freely made.

Terminally ill patients who are in obvious pain but unable to consent to euthanasia pose a significant problem for both medicine and the law. We need to develop guidelines and safeguards to allow consent to euthanasia from the family and caretakers in these cases. Otherwise non-voluntary euthanasia may occur and go unreported.

In the absence of unrelenting pain, euthanasia of the elderly, the demented, and the mentally defective should continue to be prohibited.

At the present time there is no adequate justification for assisted suicide for existential suffering. Euthanasia in psychiatric patients is far too susceptible to abuse to be allowed.

Physicians should not be forced to provide euthanasia. Nevertheless, any patient requesting euthanasia should be referred to other physicians who can evaluate the request, judge its validity and conduct the euthanasia. Such referrals should be readily available.

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# Camille Claudel

The photograph is striking. A young woman stares defiantly at the camera. One feels her passion and her sensuality. Her unkempt hair is tied back from her eyes. She is in working

clothes but for the camera she has wrapped a scarf around her neck and fixed it with a pin. The photographer went by the name of César, but nothing else is known about him. The photograph was taken in 1883 or 1884. The Rodin Museum in Paris has an albumen print. The photograph was published in 1913 in the Parisian journal *L'Art Décoratif* (Claudel, 1913b).

The subject was Camille Claudel (1864-1943). Her younger brother remembered her:

> this superb young woman, in the full brilliance of her beauty and genius … a splendid forehead surmounting magnificent eyes of that rare deep blue so rarely seen except in novels, a nose that reflected her heritage in Champagne, a prominent mouth more proud than sensual, a mighty tuft of chestnut hair, a true chestnut that the English call auburn, falling to her hips. An impressive air of courage, frankness, superiority, gaiety. (Paul Claudel, introduction to the 1951 exhibit of Camille's sculpture, quoted in Claudel, 2008, p. 359).

At the time of the photograph, Camille was twenty. For two years, she had been learning to sculpt, sharing a studio with the English student Jessie Lipscombe, and studying with the sculptor Alfred Boucher, one of the few art teachers in Paris willing to tutor women. When Boucher left Paris for a year in Florence in 1882, he recommended his student to Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). Camille Claudel became Rodin's student, his model, his lover, his muse and his colleague.

Ten years later Camille left Rodin, and set herself up in her

own studio. Rodin tried to send commissions her way, and for several years she was able to work productively. After successful exhibitions in the Galerie Eugène Blot in 1905 and 1908, however, Camille became withdrawn and unable to work. She became convinced that Rodin and his "gang" were trying to steal her ideas. She destroyed many of her maquettes. She boarded up her studio and lived in dirt and squalor, coming out only at night. In 1913, her family had her forcibly committed to an insane asylum near Paris. With the onset of the war, Camille was transferred to the Montdevergues asylum in Provence. There she remained until her death in 1943 at the age of 79.

**Passion**

The affair between Rodin and Camille was well known to their colleagues. However, it was hidden from society, and little documentation survives to describe their passion. Novelists (Delbée, 1982/1992; Webb, 2015), musicians (Heggie & Scheer, 2012) and actors (Anne Delbée, 1982; Isabelle Adjani in Nuytten, 1988/2011; Juliette Binoche in Dumont, 2013) have imagined what it was like to be Camille, but we remain unsure.

Camille's position in the affair was by far the more precarious. Rodin already had a mistress – Rose Beuret, a former model. She tolerated Rodin's affairs but maintained the right of primacy. Rose was indeed considered by many to be Rodin's wife, although they were not formally married until 1917 (just before both Rodin and she were to die).

Camille came from a conservative Catholic family. Her desire to be an artist ran counter to her family's wishes. When they learned of her affair with Rodin, they were completely scandalized. Only her father continued to support her both emotionally and financially. Camille spent much effort trying to persuade Rodin to give up Rose, but to no avail. However, she did get Rodin to agree briefly to a "contract" in 1886, wherein he promised that

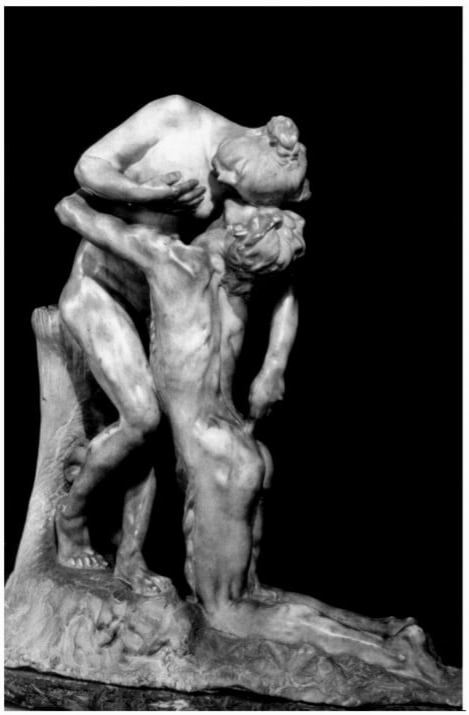
> I will have for a student only Mademoiselle Camille Claudel and I will protect her alone though all the means I have at my disposal through my friends who will be hers especially through my influential friends (Ayre-Clause, 2002, p.71).

The social position of an unmarried woman artist was extremely difficult. Rodin could do as he pleased. Having affairs with beautiful women was one of his pleasures. Camille had no freedom. Even my treatment of the couple shades easily into such differences – I refer to her by her first name and him by his last. (Part of this is to avoid confusion with Camille's brother Paul, but part is probably because I have picked up the viewpoint of *fin-de-siècle* France. This issue is discussed by Wilson, 2012.)

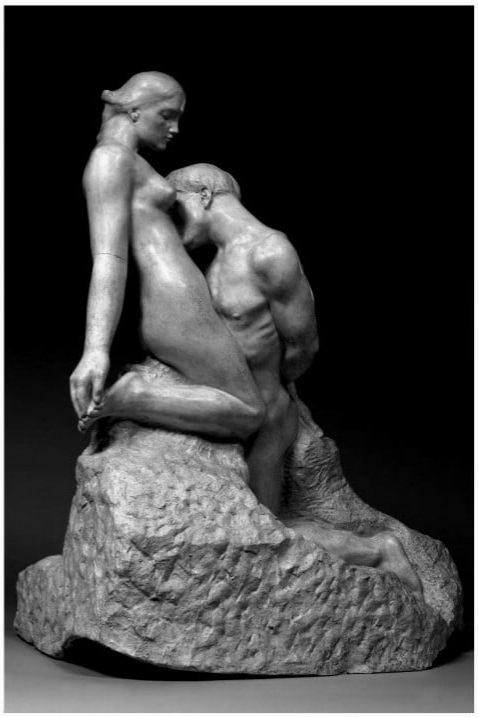
Rodin's passion for his muse was intense. Camille's biographer Odile Ayre-Clause (2002, p. 60) quoted a recently recovered letter from Rodin to Camille. This appears to have followed one of their quarrels:

> Have pity, cruel girl, I can't go on, I can't spend another day without seeing you. Otherwise the atrocious madness. It is over, I don't work anymore, malevolent goddess, and yet I love furiously. My Camille be assured that I feel love for no other woman, and that my soul belongs to you. … Ah! Divine beauty, flower who speaks and loves, intelligent flower, my darling. My dear one, I am on my knees facing your beautiful body which I embrace.

Their physical passion was allied to creative cooperation. Similar themes occur in the work of both artists. Perhaps the most striking parallel is found between Camille's *Sakuntala* and Rodin's *Eternal Idol.* Camille's sculpture is based on an Indian legend about a king who married the maiden Sakuntala, but then was cursed and lost the memory of both his wife and his son. Ultimately the curse was lifted, and the sculpture depicts the moment of their reconciliation.



Claudel, *Sakuntala*, 1888-1905



Rodin, *L'Eternelle Idole*, 1888-1889

Rodin's sculpture has no clear derivation. Rainer-Maria Rilke, who served as Rodin's secretary from 1902-1906, described its effect:

> A girl kneels, her beautiful body is softly bent backward, her right arm is stretched behind her. Her hand has gropingly found her foot. In these three lines which shut her in from the outer world her life lies enclosed with its secret. The stone beneath her lifts her up as she kneels there. And suddenly, in the attitude into which the young girl has fallen from idleness, or reverie, or solitude, one recognizes an ancient, sacred symbol, a posture like that into which the goddess of distant, cruel cults had sunk. The head of this woman bends somewhat forward; with an expression of indulgence, majesty and forbearance, she looks down as from the height of a still night upon the man who sinks his face into her bosom as though into many blossoms. He, too, kneels, but deeper, deep in the stone. His hands lie behind him like worthless and empty things. His right hand is open; one sees into it. From this group radiates a mysterious greatness. One does not dare to give it one

> meaning, it has thousands. Thoughts glide over it like shadows, new meanings arise like riddles and unfold into clear significance. Something of the mood of a Purgatorio lives within this work. A heaven is near that has not yet been reached, a hell is near that has not yet been forgotten. [*Ein Himmel ist nah, aber er ist noch nicht erreicht; eine Hölle ist nah, aber sie ist noch nicht vergessen*.] Here, too, all splendour flashes from the contact of the two bodies and from the contact of the woman with herself. (Rilke, 1907/1919, pp 42-43).

At the time that she was ending the affair with Rodin, Camille was working on a sculptural ensemble called the *L'Age mûr* (Maturity). It depicts a man being led away from a pleading young woman by an old woman. The figure of the young woman was also reproduced by itself as *L'Implorante* (Supplicant). The ensemble can be interpreted as fate leading man away from youth toward death. However, it is impossible not to see the Rose Beuret, Rodin and Camille in the figures.

*L'Age mûr* (maquette), 1898

*L'Implorante*, 1900

**Achievements**

Claudel, *La Valse*, 1891-1905

After her break with Rodin, Claudel worked as an independent artist. She had very little money to support large bronze castings and her major sales involved small pieces for tabletop. Camille became adept at creating sculptures for personal rather than public enjoyment. Two pieces are worth noting. The first is *The Waltz*, several copies of which were cast in bronze. One graced the piano of Claude Debussy. Its fascination lies in the way it combines both movement and stillness.

This sculpture is evoked in the song cycle *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire* (Heggie & Scheer, 2012), recorded by Joyce

DiDonato and the Alexander Quartet. The following is a brief excerpt:

> Is it in the spirit?
> Is it in the flesh?
> Where do I abide?
> Console.
> Oh, console my eyes with beauty.
> Allow me to forget
> That every dance of love
> Is mingled with regret.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/didonato-lavalse.mp3

Claudel, *Pensée Profonde*, 1905

Another piece – *Deep Thought* – shows a young woman kneeling before a fireplace. The piece combines both bronze and onyx in a marvelous mix of texture. It is difficult to say why this resonates so deeply. Perhaps it suggests the dreams of what might be or what might have been.

Paul Claudel described his sister's achievement in terms of its "inner thought:"

> Just as a man sitting in the countryside employs, to accompany his meditation, a tree or a rock on which to anchor his eye, so a work by Camille Claudel in the middle of a room is, by its mere form, like those curious stones that the Chinese collect: a kind of monument of inner thought, the tuft of a theme accessible to any and every dream. While a book, for example, must be taken from the shelves of our library, or a piece of music must be performed, the worked metal or stone here releases its own incantation, and our chamber is imbued with it. (Claudel , 1913b, translated by Richard Howard in Paris, 1988).

**Paranoia**

For a sculptor, large compositions were essential to recognition and success. The sales of the small pieces did not bring in very much money, and Camille's stipend from her father was not large. She lapsed into poverty, depression and paranoia. She attributed her lack of success to Rodin, whom she accused of stealing her work and making money by re-casting her sculptures and selling them to "his pals, the chic artists" (letter to Paul Claudel, 1910, quoted in Paris, 1984/1988, p 132). By 1913, Camille's condition was dire. Dr. Michaux, the physician who certified that she should be committed to an asylum, said that she had sealed up the windows of her studio, had sold everything except for an armchair and a bed, never washed, never went out except by night, and often went without food (Wilson, 2012).

Camille's father died on March 2, 1913. As soon as this last support was gone, the Claudel family quickly moved to have Camille committed. On March 10 Camille was forcibly interned in an asylum near Paris. Her diagnosis was paranoid psychosis.

Some of her supporters voiced objections, but these came to naught. When the war began Camille was transferred to the Montdevergues asylum in the south of France, where she remained until she died in 1943.

At the asylum, Camille continued to have paranoid thoughts about Rodin. After Rodin died in 1917, Camille transferred her suspicions to his followers (and to various Protestant and Jewish cliques). She insisted on preparing her own food, since she was afraid that her enemies were trying to poison her. Nevertheless, much of the time Camille was quite rational. She was never aggressive or violent. Her doctors continuously recommended that she be taken back to live with the family, or at least transferred to a hospital near the family, where she could be visited more easily. The family refused any such suggestions. For fear of scandal, they insisted that Camille not be allowed to send or receive mail from anyone other than her brother and mother. Paranoia sets up positive feedback loops: when patients perceive that people are acting against them, they actually often are.

Paranoid thinking is common. Delusions of persecution occur more frequently than delusions of grandeur. About 10-15% of people harbors thoughts that they are persecuted (Freeman, 2007). Most of these do not require treatment. Modern cognitive psychology considers persecutory delusions to be largely caused by a willingness to “jump to conclusions” when entertaining theories about the origin of stress (Freeman & Garrety, 2014). Additional factors are social isolation, which decreases the chance of anyone providing meaningful feedback, and a lack of sleep, which leads to dream-like rather than rational thought.

Paranoia is a continuum. Although many people with mild delusions can function normally, more ingrained delusions can lead to problems adjusting to society. In the past, mild forms of paranoia were considered paranoid personality disorder, and more severe forms paranoid psychosis, although these specific

diagnostic categories are no longer recognized. The psychiatrists Lhermitte and Allilaire (1984) reviewed the psychiatric history of Camille Claudel and came to a diagnosis of paranoid psychosis.

In 1929, Camille's old friend and colleague, Jessie Lipscomb, who had returned to England and married, found out where Camille was hospitalized. She and her husband then visited her in Montdevergues. Jessie insisted after their reunion that Camille had shown no signs of madness. Jessie's, husband, William Elborne, took two photographs. One shows Camille alone, seated with her arms folded. The other shows Camille and Jessie seated together. As noted by Ayre Clause (2002, p.231):

> With her arms folded around herself, Camille does not seem to see Jessie's hand softly reaching out to her. The long years of isolation have taken their toll; Camille looks empty and withdrawn.

Social isolation is probably the worst approach to treating paranoia. Somehow, the patients must be induced to interact with others. They must learn to consider themselves as others see them. Clearly this must be commenced gently with a therapist whom the patient trusts. The treatment must try to decrease the ingrained suspicion of others, and to help the patient to use more rational modes of thought.

None of this was available in Montdevergues. Most of the inmates were far more psychotic than Camille. She lived in a veritable hell. She wrote in 1934 to Eugène Blot, the owner of the gallery where she had exhibited her work:

> *Je suis tombée dans le gouffre. Je vis dans un monde si curieux, si étrange. Du rêve que fut ma vie, ceci est le cauchemar*. I have fallen into the abyss. I live in a world so curious, so strange. Of the dream that was my life, this is the nightmare. (quoted by Morel, 2009).

**Compassion**

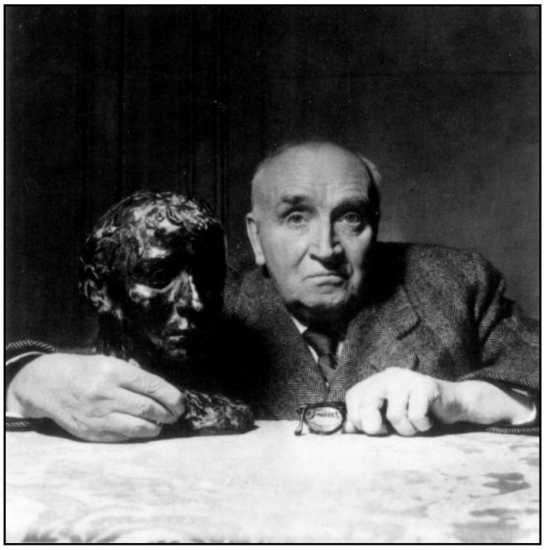
The position of Claudel family toward Camille is difficult to understand (Lhermitte & Allilaire, 1984; Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth, 1994, pp 109-114; Ayre-Clausse, 2002, pp 237-253). Camille's mother was so scandalized by her daughter's behavior and so constrained by her rigid religion that she never once visited her in hospital. Louise also could not bring herself to have anything to do with her wayward sister. Some of this rejection reflected the way mental disorders were considered at the time (Lhermitte & Allilaire, 1984): mad relatives were hidden away from society and ignored.

Paul Claudel (1868-1955) was Camille's younger brother. In 1886, at the age of 18, he experienced a mystical revelation while listening to the *Magnificat* in Notre Dame, and thenceforth was a devoted Catholic. He became a renowned poet (e.g., Claudel, 1913a) and playwright (e.g., Claudel, 1960). His poetry is impressive: he used a new form of blank verse with the length of the line related to the time it takes to speak the line before taking a breath. His poetry has the sound of litany and incantation. At times, however, the writing becomes tedious, so closely is it related to his religious beliefs. Paul became a professional diplomat, representing France in the United States, China, Brazil, Denmark and Tokyo. Despite his devoutness, he carried on a long adulterous affair with a married woman, until she finally

broke of their relationship.

Paul was Camille’s favorite sibling. One of her first major sculptures was a bust of Paul as a young Roman. Paul promoted his sister’s career, writing articles in magazines glorifying her sculptures (e.g., Claudel, 1913b).

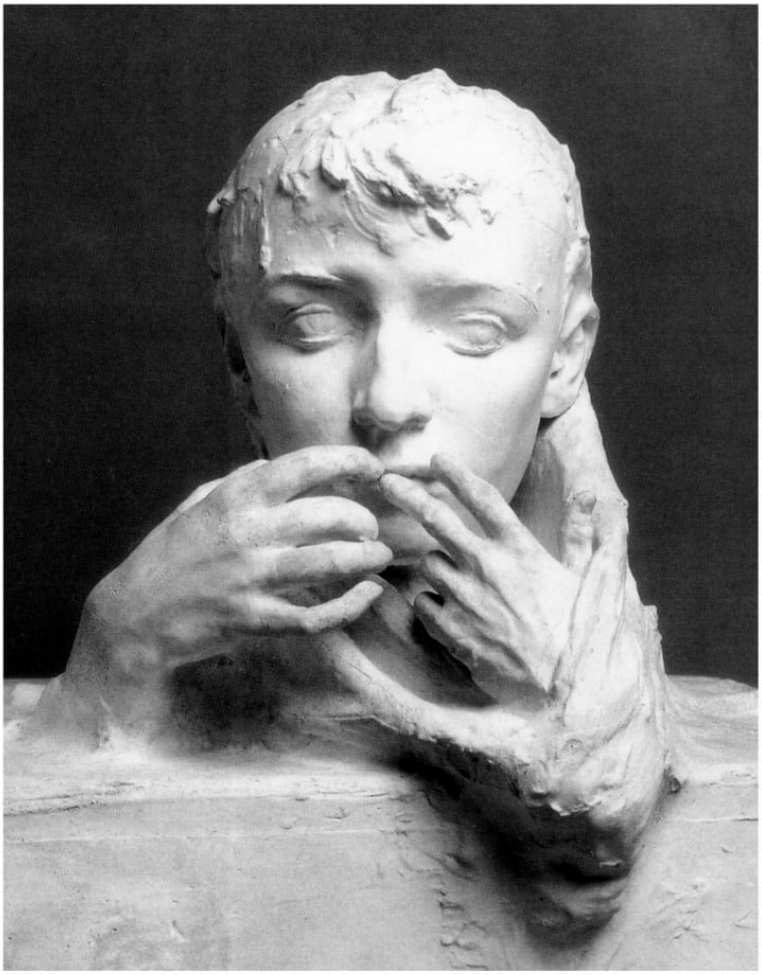
Despite their closeness as children and despite his enthusiasm for her art, Paul had little to do with Camille after she was admitted to Montdevergues. He visited her only a few times, and refused all of her requests to be released or transferred closer to the family. Some of this may have been related to his diplomatic appointments, but he did not visit even when he retired and he settled down in France in 1936. This lack of compassion is strange in a man so religious. Sometimes the mystic forgets himself in his visions and forgets to care for others.



In a photograph taken in 1951, the elderly Paul Claudel holds onto a bust Camille made of him when he was young. The photograph is imbued with regret. Yet it is not clear whether it is for himself or his sister.

**Farewell**

We should not leave Camille without seeing her as she was in her time of passion and creation. One of the most insightful impressions of Camille is a plaster cast by Rodin, a portrait of Camille, aptly entitled *The Farewell*. Both the hands and the face are exquisitely moulded. The sculpture is ambiguous. Are the hands reaching up to stop the tears, to shut out the world, or to gather something in?



Rodin, *L'Adieu*, 1892

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# Freudian Legacies

Sigmund Freud made significant contributions to our understanding of how the human mind works (Gay, 1988). Recently, however, his ideas have come under intense criticism. Eysenck (1985), MacMillan (1991), Fisher and

Greenberg (1995), Webster (1995), Andrews and Brewin (2000) and Gomez (2005) review the issues (with different degrees of politeness and different conclusions). This post comments on some of Freud's contributions.

The photograph shows the Czech sculptor David Černý's *Hanging Man* (1997) in its original location high above Husova Street in Prague. Copies have since been exhibited in various other cities. It is a life-size sculpture of Sigmund Freud, hanging from his right hand which grasps a beam projecting over the street. He seems unconcerned by his precarious position, his left hand remaining insouciantly in his pocket. Like most artists, Černý is noncommittal about the meaning of his art. According to some, the sculpture may represent the role of the intellectual in modern society. Freud goes often unattended, but when noticed he tends to shock. He considers ideas that are not grounded in the normal world; yet he is comfortable in his own thinking.

**(i) The Unconscious**

Freud proposed that the unconscious controls much of what we do. He did not invent the unconscious but he certainly demonstrated how great a role it plays in our thinking. Current scientific psychology has recognized how much of our thinking is unconscious. Most of our mental processes occur automatically without ever entering consciousness. Most of our memories are implicit and affect our thought and behavior without our ever noticing. Most of our motivations exercise their effects without our knowing. Westen (1999) reviews the extensive role of the unconscious in modern cognitive psychology.

The unconscious mediates what Freud called the "psychopathology of everyday life." Unconscious activity often shows up in everyday speech, especially when we are not closely monitoring what we say. We currently use the term "Freudian slip" for those speech mistakes (parapraxes) with a sexual meaning: "we must encourage the breast (instead of best) and the brightest." However, sex is not the cause of every mistake. There are often other things on our unconscious minds.

Free association, a key procedure in psychoanalytic therapy, may be a productive way for discovering what is active in the unconscious but not readily accessible. Relaxing on a couch and talking about the first thing that comes to mind may be as good a way as any for a patient and therapist to begin to talk.

The defense mechanisms described by Freud and his daughter Anna are the cognitive processes we use for handling stress. Repression, regression, sublimation, rationalization, and somatization all seem to be ways that the mind uses to cope with unwanted desires, to shield us from traumatic memories,

and to reduce anxiety.

Dream recall may be an efficient way to trigger free associations. The experience of the dream may reflect what is active in our unconscious. Furthermore the retelling of a dream probably taps into all sorts of other mental information in addition to the actual dream. However, the interpretation of dreams is not the royal road to the unconscious. Freud proposed that a dream could represent the fulfillment of a repressed wish or it could mean exactly the opposite. In either case it could be disguised as something else. With such guidelines, dreams can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways.

Many of Freud's dream-interpretations seem without any justification. Perhaps, the most famous of the dreams is Sergei Pankejeff's recurrent nightmare of the white wolves in the tree outside his bedroom window (Gardiner, 1971). The patient drew a sketch of the dream for Freud during his 1910-1914 analysis. Many years later in 1964 he made a painting (shown below), which now hangs in the Freud Museum in Hampstead, London. Freud linked the dream to an eighteen-month-old infant's memory of seeing his parents copulating. The interpretation seems far-fetched. Perhaps it betrays more the mental associations of the analyst than the repressed memories of the patient. The Wolfman later stated that the supposed memory was unlikely since his cot was in the nurse's room and not his parent's bedroom (Obholzer & Pankejeff, 1982, p. 36). We cannot consciously remember events before the age of about two or three years – "infantile amnesia." Freud claimed that this specific memory from infancy was unconscious, but this was speculation without any corroboration.

**(ii) Mechanisms of Memory**

Freud's views of childhood sexual abuse provide an intriguing case history on the difficulty of determining truth and the problems of memory (Gleaves & Hernandez, 1999). In his initial writings, Freud acknowledged that children had been sexually abused by their fathers, and suggested that this might be the cause of conversion hysteria. This formed the basis of the seduction theory. Later papers proposed that the abuse was fantasized rather than real, and that the fantasies were the effects of repressed desires on the part of the child. Freud has been both praised for recognizing the reality of childhood sexual abuse and criticized for later suppressing these ideas.

Why did Freud change his ideas? Was the change based on new evidence? Recent psychological investigations of false memories have shown how what we remember may not be what actually happened. Freud himself recognized that the physician may suggest the memories and that the patient may invent them. The actual events behind his patients' histories are now impossible to determine. Freud's change of theory may also have been caused by his (consciously or unconsciously) succumbing to social pressures. Viennese society was extremely strait-laced and did not wish to deal with the problem of

childhood sexual abuse. One thing that is lost in the controversies is whether the new theory of repressed fantasies rather than repressed memories could explain the available data better than the old. Freud clearly thought that in many cases it did.

The incidence of childhood sexual abuse is likely higher than our sense of morality and decency would suggest. This has led to the idea that many psychological disorders in adulthood may be due to repressed memories of actual (not fantasized) abuse during childhood. Though such cases can occur, memories that are recovered during therapy are often not repressed memories of actual events but imagined memories suggested by the therapist (Crew, 1995).

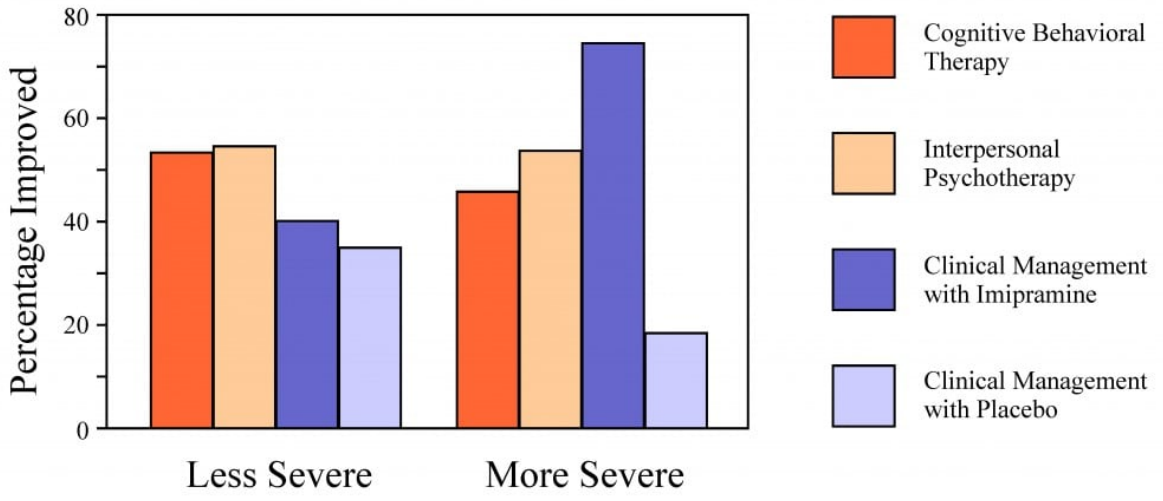
If we accept that memories can be true or false, it is impossible to evaluate patient's histories without some corroboration. Freud thought that the new theory was true because it led to success in treatment. Psychoanalytic success typically involved the cessation of symptoms once the patient and analyst came to a convincing interpretation of the symptoms in terms of repressed desires, and a re-integration of the personality so that such desires can be more effectively handled.

**(iii) Psychoanalytic Therapy**

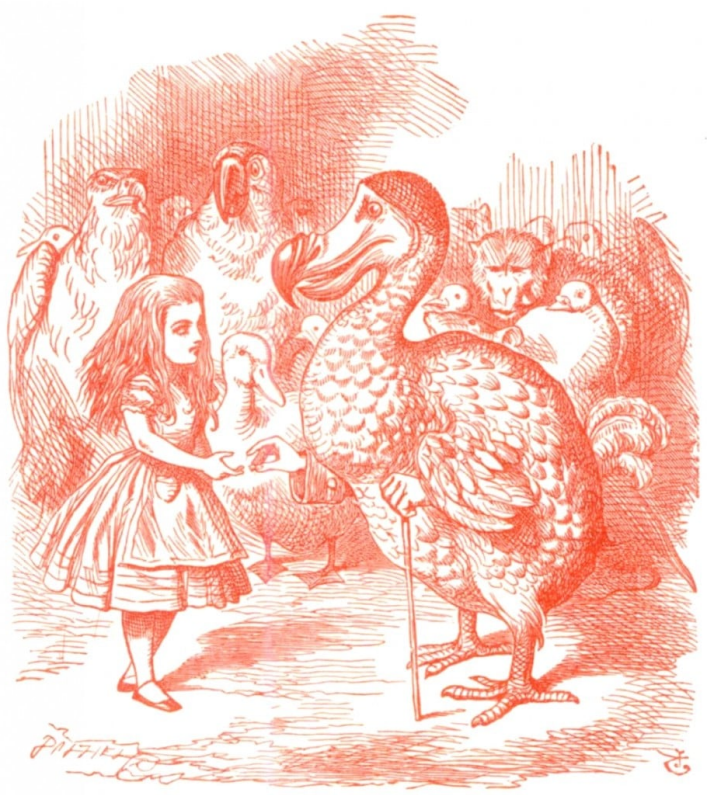
Nowadays, the success of psychoanalytic treatment is not really clear. Psychoanalysis is resistant to scientific evaluation. In the last lecture of *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* Freud stated that each patient is unique, and "statistics would be valueless if the units collated were not alike." People are too different from each other to allow comparable treatment groups. Family interactions are too complex to control. Anecdotal evidence of psychoanalytic cures abound. Yet analysts have a biased view of their ability, and patients do not wish to admit that the treatment has been unhelpful despite the huge investment of time and money.

Objective outcome measurements are difficult to establish. We can measure improvement in the level of the symptoms and the quality of life. However, does improvement mean that a patient has recovered? Can a patient who has regained some semblance of normality still remain abnormally susceptible to stress?

Studies evaluating psychotherapy using various outcome measurements have shown that it has a beneficial effect compared to no therapy (Wampold, 2001, 2007). The “talking cure” that began with Josef Breuer and Bertha Pappenheim works. However, the different types of therapy (those involving psychoanalytic theory and those not) are similar in the amount of benefit they provide. In patients with major depression, a large NIMH study (Elkin et al., 1989) compared two different psychotherapies (cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal psychotherapy), routine clinical management with imipramine and routine clinical management with placebo. The psychotherapy sessions were conducted weekly and lasted one-hour. The clinical management sessions were also weekly and lasted 20-30 minutes. The diagram shows some of the results, based on one of the several scales used in the study. All “treatments” led to improvement, even the placebo. The two psychotherapies and the active pharmacological treatment tended to be significantly better than placebo (though the tests were borderline and varied with the scales used to rate the severity of the depression). Part of the placebo effect may have been related to the passage of time, and part to the minimal psychotherapy involved in the once weekly brief meetings with the physician. The pharmacological treatment condition was better in patients with more severe depression. The results were variable and the differences between conditions were statistically borderline (and varied with the scales).




The study is typical. Psychotherapy has a beneficial effect. However, this effect is variable and sometimes different to demonstrate. Furthermore, there are often no clearly demonstrable differences between different types of therapy.



Bruce Wampold (2001) described the lack of statistical difference between different therapies as the "Dodo bird verdict," quoting an earlier paper of Saul Rosenzweig (1936). The reference is to Chapter 3 of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. When asked to determine who had won the "caucus-race" (a competition with no rules or measurements), the Dodo bird thought for a long while and finally decided that "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes"

The general idea of the talking cure is good, but it seems much less used in psychiatry in recent years, particularly in North America. This is unfortunate since for non-psychotic mental disorders the talking cure is probably as good as any

pharmacological treatment. Even for psychosis, where medication is essential, the talking cure still helps. Nowadays, the interactions between psychiatrist and patient often serve only to assess symptoms, adjust medications and monitor side-effects. Psychotherapy (of whatever kind) is often not the primary activity.

The fact that all therapies work regardless of the type suggests that the beneficial effect is due to the interaction between the patient and a therapist. What makes a therapist good and the therapy beneficial remains difficult to determine. Clearly the therapist should be rational, sympathetic and supportive. The precise system of therapy does not seem to matter. Perhaps there may be some interaction with the personality of the patient. Some patients may do better with some system of therapy than with another. The therapist must have some bona fide training. The patient should not be treated by any mad charlatan who claims to be a therapist. And we need further evidence-based studies will determine which therapy is better for which patient (Hunsley & DiGiulio, 2002).

Most of the studies comparing different kinds of psychotherapy consider periods of time much briefer than used in classical psychoanalysis. “Psychodynamic therapy” is informed by psychoanalytic ideas but much briefer and much less intense. Although earlier studies have found otherwise, a recent meta-analysis has suggested that a prolonged course of analysis lasting for a year or more has no more benefit than a brief period of therapy lasting several weeks (Smite al al., 2012). On any cost-benefit evaluation, however, classical psychoanalysis involving multiple meetings per week and lasting over multiple years would fare very poorly.

The French Institute of Health recently evaluated published scientific studies of three different types of psychotherapy: psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and family counseling. Their report (INSERM, 2004) proposed that

cognitive behavioral therapy was the best approach to many different mental disorders and that psychodynamic therapy was never the preferred treatment. The report triggered a tremendous controversy (Meyer, 2005; Miller, 2006). Psychoanalysts claimed that a treatment that involved reprogramming and conditioning was inhumane; the opposition said that psychoanalysis was pseudoscience. Cognitive behavioral therapy (Beck, 2011) is designed to help patients cope with their symptoms and prevent their exacerbation. Symptoms are alleviated by training the patients to re-interpret the situations under which these symptoms become manifest. This type of therapy is clearly going to do well on studies with outcome measures that assess the severity of symptoms. The goal of psychoanalysis is a long-term re-education or re-integration of the personality. Psychoanalytic therapy might have done better with outcome measures that assess a patient's understanding of self and of others (e.g. Berggraf et al., 2014)

**(iv) Addiction to therapy**

One of the difficulties with any psychotherapy is that it fosters an emotional dependence on the therapist that can become unhealthy. The patient may become unable to live without a weekly session with the therapist. This problem was recognized early in the history of psychoanalysis. The Viennese satirist Karl Kraus (1913) proposed that psychoanalysis is the mental illness whose cure it purports to be ("Psychoanalyse ist jene Geistekrankheit, für deren Therapie sie sich hält"). Even with client-centered therapy, the therapist generally remains the dominant person in the interaction. Psychotherapy has some relations to religion, with confession followed by interpretation rather than absolution.

Some therapies become cults. The patient becomes enslaved to a particular system of thought. Scientology started as a treatment procedure, and therapy continues as a main activity

in the movement. Scientology proposes that a person's achievements may be held back by memories or "engrams" (from early childhood or from another life). The goal of the therapy is to discover (or "audit") these impediments by using an "e-meter" (a simple psychogalvanometer). Once identified these impediments can be removed (or "cleared") by therapy, allowing the patient to become a more complete human being (or "thetan"). Therapies are paid for – a patient who is not willing to pay is not going to be cured. As far as I can understand, scientology is nonsense. It exists not to cure the sick but to allow an elite to make money and to exert power.

Although clearly different, scientology and psychoanalysis have some similarities. Both have a background theory that has not been experimentally tested. Both focus on the handling of anxiety. Both are based on a charismatic leader. Psychoanalysis can be beneficial and Scientology is malignant, but the similarities are very worrisome.

**(v) Overview**

What then is psychoanalysis? It is a system of thought and a way of treatment based on an imaginative interpretation of human development and culture. Psychoanalytic treatment interprets what has happened to a patient to lead to the present situation, and attempts to re-integrate the patient's personality to reduce the conflict between unconscious desires and ideal goals. Even though Freud considered his work as science, it makes no hypotheses that can be refuted. In a sense anything can be explained. A dream may sometimes represent a wish fulfillment; at other times defense mechanisms may have sufficiently distorted its content to represent the complete opposite of wish-fulfillment.

Psychoanalysis has made significant contributions to our culture. First is the freeing of our minds so that we can recognize our desires, especially those that are sexual in nature. Second is the recognition that most of what we think

and do is the result of unconscious processing. Third is the idea that talking to a sympathetic therapist can help us to understand ourselves and to attenuate the stress that results when desires and ideals come into conflict. Fourth is the description of a life narrative wherein we can realistically cope with our unconscious desires.

Psychoanalysis is imaginative rather than scientific According to John Irving, “Sigmund Freud was a novelist with a scientific background” (Plimpton, 1988). Freud’s interpretation of human development according to the story of Oedipus is a powerful metaphor. The meaning is in the way it helps us to see our life, not in how it represents what actually happens. The story of Oedipus encapsulates many aspects of the human condition. (The illustration shows Oedipus being questioned by the Sphinx on a drinking cup from around 470 BCE, Vatican museums, photographed by Carole Raddato).

Jacques Lacan said many outrageous things about psychoanalysis. Within his hyperbole there are germs of truth. The post concludes with two quotations from his seminars:

La psychanalyse est à prendre au sérieux, bien que ce ne

> soit pas un science … parce que c’est irréfutable … c’est un pratique du bavardage. (Lacan 1979) [Psychoanalysis is to be taken seriously even though it is not a science … because its propositions cannot be falsified … it is an exercise in conversation. (I have attenuated the translation of “bavardage,” which means “chattering” or “gossip” to better portray the idea of the “talking cure” )]
>
> Le psychanalyste ne doit jamais hésiter a délirer. (Lacan, 1977) [The psychoanalyst must never hesitate to imagine freely. (I have attenuated the hyperbolic “délirer” which means “become delirious”).

Psychoanalysis is an imaginative way of looking at human life that can help patients in distress and suggest ways to understand the workings of the mind.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