

MILLET'S SHOOTING STARS

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ABSTRACT

In this essay two paintings by the French artist Jean-Francois Millet are described. These paintings, *Les Etoiles Filantes* and *Nuit Etoilée* are particularly interesting since they demonstrate the rare artistic employment of the shooting-star image and metaphor.

Introduction. The shooting stars, those coloured and transient night-time braids, steeped in ancient folklore and mythology, have long been a source of interest and wonder to mankind, that curious earth-bound observer¹. Not least the modern astronomers, but the ancient astrologers, the poets and the artisans, all have been drawn to the study of these lesser luminaries. The poet since antiquity has found rich and rewarding metaphor in the shooting-star image: the fragile rage of first love, the fleeting and diaphanous beauty of youth, the startling and poignant face-slap of satire and wit, a striking bird of prey, the death of kings and beggars alike, all have been linked to the lowly meteor². What of the painter? How has the meteor fared in the artistic eye? The shooting stars, it seems, have at no time been a common source of artistic inspiration or interpretation. This is in complete contrast to the comets which have been painted repeatedly throughout history³. Why this should be is not obviously clear. Certainly the comets can give long-lived, spectacular, and dominant night-sky displays when they appear. But equally the resplendent bolide as it streaks through the sky, turning dark night into dazzling day, is no less spectacular for the few seconds that it shines in destruction. One can only assume it is the very transiency of meteors that accounts for their unimpressive artistic influence. Dramatic, meteor inspired, art-work can none-the-less be found. There are for example the etchings by Henry Robinson and Paul and Thomas Sandby of the great meteor of 1783⁴, and the woodcut by X.A. Vollmy and K. Jaustin depicting the meteor storm of 1833⁵. These works are, however, essentially descriptive pieces. Produced to illustrate an event they are more journalistic than artistic. Few artists seem to have exploited the meteor image to any great depth. One exception to this, however, is Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875). Millet produced during the middle years of the nineteenth century two oil paintings in which the meteor image and metaphor are dominant. It is the philosophy and imagery of these two paintings that we explore below.

Jean-Francois Millet. Before we begin our exploration of Millet's paintings we briefly consider the man himself^{6,7,8,9,10}. Millet was born on October 4th, 1814, in



FIG. 1—*Les Etoiles Filantes*. Cardiff, National Museum of Wales. 1847–48. Oil on canvas (17.7 cm × 13 cm).

the small Normandy village of Gruchy. His childhood surroundings were certainly humble. Born of a peasant family his early years were spent working the land of his parents' small farm. The sights, sounds, smell and human toil of this hard life, however, inspired the artist in the growing Millet, and he soon displayed a clear talent through the drawings he made of the life and landscape around him. In his childhood Millet was fortunate to be taught Latin by the local parish vicar, Abbé Herpent. This introduced Millet to Virgil, whose *Georgics*, with its rich poetry of the land and the seasons, was of life-long importance and influence. At eighteen years of age Millet left for Cherbourg where he began formal art studies under the direction of Langlois de Chevreuille. Some five years later, in 1837, he moved to Paris and for a while became a student of Paul Delaroche. The years between 1837 and 1849 were ones of extreme difficulty for Millet. Barely able to feed his family, his meagre income was that due to street portraits and small paintings of popular subjects. In 1849 Millet left Paris. As a means of escaping the then raging cholera epidemic, Millet and his family moved to the small village of Barbizon on the edge of the Fontainebleau forest. Although he initially intended this as a holiday visit, Millet in fact remained in Barbizon for the rest of his life. It was here that he produced his most famous paintings, and from the early 1850s onwards his fame and artistic respectability grew enormously. In 1867 he was awarded a first-class medal at the International Exhibition and the next year received the Legion of Honour. Most of Millet's later years were spent in ill health and, as is the usual irony of life, having achieved through long struggle financial security and fame, he died on January 20th, 1875, at the height of his popularity.

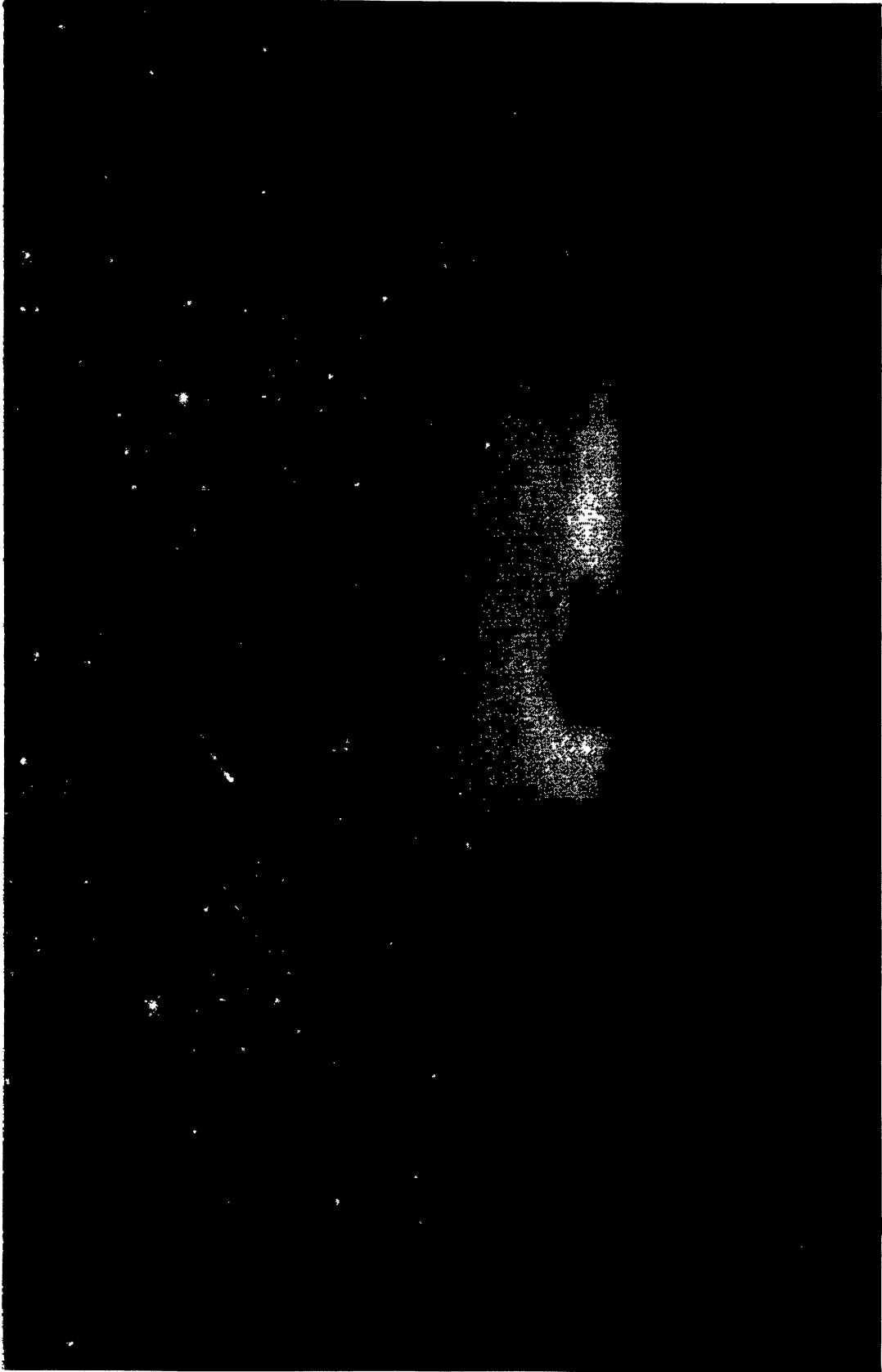


FIG. 2—*Nuit Etoilée*. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery (Leonard C. Hanna fund). 1850-1. Oil-on-wood mounted canvas (65 cm × 81 cm).

Millet may have lived in physical isolation from the Paris studios, but he was one of the figureheads of the new Realism school of art. This style of painting was based upon an intimate dialectic between the artist and the 'real' world¹¹, and saw great popularity through the later half of the nineteenth century. The heart of Millet's Realism lay in its direct dependence on nature, not only its physical form as in the landscape, but the people and events that took place in and on it. This general school of artists, for the first time, began painting peasants and labourers in the very act of their daily work. There were no gay ribbons to the peasant dress, there were no noble and patronized sweat-lined brows. Realism portrayed the daily struggle of human existence. Millet was not, however, a simple peasant painting other peasants, rather he was a highly educated man. By philosophy, Millet was a fatalist, and he saw the labourer as a time-trapped slave, victim of the harsh natural forces that shape the land. The peasant was to Millet a noble hero in the sense of his historical persistence and his ability to eke a living from the very world that continually tried to destroy him. In a letter to Alfred Sensier, written c. 1850, Millet explained¹²,

... peasant subjects suit my nature best, for I must confess, ..., that the human side is what touches me most in art ... I would paint nothing that was not the result of an impression directly from nature, whether in landscape or in figure. The joyous side never shows itself to me: I know not if it exists ...

Earlier in 1847 he had written to Sensier and commented¹³,

... Art is not a pleasure trip, it is a battle, a mill that grinds. I am no philosopher. I do not pretend to do away with pain, or to find a formula which will make me a stoic, and indifferent to evil. Suffering is perhaps the one thing that gives an artist power to express himself clearly ...

Millet was clearly a complex man who painted with a deep passion for his subject. Below we consider two of his works that relate to the shooting stars. These paintings are quite different in style and form, and each illustrates different aspects of Millet's life and philosophy.

"*Les Etoiles Filantes*". A young artist seeking fame and fortune in the middle years of the nineteenth century faced not only the struggle for recognition but a crisis of style¹⁴. This was a time of rapid change in both popular taste and direction. Millet's work during the 1840s was consequently given over to experimentation in style and subject. He painted portraits and classical subjects, erotic nude themes and religious stories. He painted pastorals and still life. Towards the end of the 1840s Millet finished a small (17.7 cm × 33 cm) oil on canvas work called *Les Etoiles Filantes*, literally *The Shooting Stars*. (Cardiff, National Museum of Wales). This painting, dated to 1847–48, is one of the last in which Millet described the nude figure and this was so despite the fact that he had acquired some considerable praise for such works^{15, 16}. There is a passionate

sexuality underlying the theme of this picture. The trailing figures, floating in a starlit space, would seem to display the desires, the struggle, the self-indulgence and tortured longing of new lovers. All these, very human, characteristics being as transient and fickle as the shooting star, and sometimes as self-destructive. One is reminded of Andrew Marvell's "The Unfortunate Lover," where in verse 1 we find,

Alas, how pleasant are their days
With whom the infant love yet plays!
Sorted by pairs, they still are seen
By fountains cool, and shadows green
But soon those flames do loose their light,
Like meteors on a summers night:
Nor can they to that region climb,
To make impression upon time.

Millet left no clue to the inspiration for *Les Etoiles Filantes*, but it has been suggested¹⁷ that the work is based on the doomed lovers Paolo Malatesta and Francesca Da Rimini, whose plight is described in Dante's *Inferno*. The story of these two lovers is found in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, and over the years has been the subject of paintings by numerous artists. It is not obviously clear, however, which aspect of the story the title of the painting is intended to imply. The story of Francesca and Paolo is set in the second circle of Hell, where the sins of the lustful are punished. The punishment for such sin is to be endlessly whirled around in a dark and stormy wind, lines 37–49 read¹⁸,

And as the wings of starlings in the winter
bear them along in wide-spread, crowded flocks,
So does that wind propel the evil spirits:

Here, then there, and up and down, it sweeps them
forever, without hope to comfort them
(hope, not of taking rest, but of suffering less).

And just like cranes in flight, chanting their lays,
Stretching an endless line in their formation
I saw approaching, crying their laments,
Spirits carried along by the battling winds.

The approach of Francesca and Paolo is later described in lines 82–7,

As doves, called by desire to return
to their sweet nest, with wings outstretched and poised,
float downwards through the air, guided by their will,

So these two left the flock where Dido is
and came towards us through the malignant air
such was the tender power of my call.

The connection between Dante's text and shooting stars is not clear. The suffering of the lustful is perpetual, and their flight is likened to the flight of starlings, cranes and doves. There is no transiency or swiftness to the plight of Paolo and Francesca. Millet was certainly well-read and quite familiar with Dante's text, and it is difficult to see therefore where the title of this painting came from, if indeed it was inspired by Dante's poem. Several sources have noted Millet's wide literary interests¹⁹, and his favourite authors included Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Dante, Scott and Hugo. A whole list of meteor imagery can be found in these works alone²⁰! In Virgil the first book of the *Georgics*, gives

And oft, before tempestuous winds arise,
The seeming stars fall headlong from the skies.
And shooting through the darkness, gild the night
With sweeping glories and long trains of light.

In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* lines 811–16 explain,

With this, he breaketh from the sweet embrace
of those fair arms which bound him to her breast,
And homeward through the dark laund runs apace:
leaves love upon her back deeply distress'd.
Look, how a bright star shooteth from the sky.
So glides he in the night from Venus's eye: ...

In Milton's *Paradise Lost* the passage of Uriel from the sun to paradise is likened to a brilliant shooting star,

Thither came Uriel, gliding through the even,
On a sunbeam, swift as a shooting star ...

And, as a final example, from Byron we find in *The Fatal Spell*, verse 4,

We wither from our youth, we gasp away—
....
love, fame, ambition, avarice—and none the worst—
For all are meteors with a different name,
And death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.

There is no compelling evidence that any of the above passages, and the many others unquoted by the same authors, were the inspiration for Millet's *Les Etoiles Filantes*, but the argument that the painting was inspired by Dante's poem is less secure. There are many possible literary sources that Millet could have used or have been inspired by.

In the search for the inspiration behind *Les Etoiles Filantes*, the social and economic upheavals of the mid-nineteenth century should probably not be

overlooked. Because many of his paintings contained scenes of rural life and long-suffering peasants, Millet was accused, incorrectly, by the bourgeois critics of 1848 of being a socialist²¹. Millet can best be described as a philosophical pessimist; he was no socialist or revolutionary, although his social consciousness, in the troubled times of the French revolution, clearly sided with the Republicans. Are then the “shooting stars,” with their brutal peasant faces the personification of the struggling lower class, whose time of glory has finally come? This is unlikely. Millet was not a political painter, but one is reminded of the Wordsworthian verse, in which the death of a friend killed in the Prussian war, is described,

A meteor went thou crossing a dark
 night:
 Yet shall thy name, conspicuous and
 sublime,
 Stand in the spacious firmament of time,
 Fixed as a star: such glory is thy right.

It may be that similar sentiment underlay the production of *Les Etoiles Filantes*. To a certain extent then we have to admit failure. The inspiration behind *Les Etoiles Filantes* is not clear, and one is left, perhaps as one should be, to enjoy the painting for the rich voluptuousness that it displays.

The working of *Les Etoiles Filantes* has been dated to 1847–48. This is a significant period for several reasons. It was at this time that Millet resolved never again to paint naked figures. Apparently this was a reaction to a conversation Millet overheard in which it was suggested that he painted nothing else²². This decision set Millet on a completely new stylistic course. It was also at this time, in fact on June 13, 1849, that Millet and his family moved to Barbizon, which became their home for the next twenty-six years.

“*Nuit Etoilée*”. The move to Barbizon enabled Millet to consolidate both his philosophy and practice of art. He turned to the surrounding environment for his inspiration: the landscape, the people, the livestock, and the seasons. Shortly after arriving in Barbizon, Millet began a work entitled *Nuit Etoilée*, literally, *Starry Night* (Yale University Art Gallery). This oil-on-wood mounted canvas, begun *c.* 1850–51 and possibly retouched *c.* 1866, reflects several important aspects of Millet’s philosophy on life and painting. One of Millet’s students, Edward Wheelwright recollects one lesson in which he was told,²³

Every landscape, however small, should contain the possibility of being indefinitely extended on either side; every glimpse of the horizon should be felt to be a segment of the great circle that bounds our vision ...

There is a deep sense of the infinite in *Nuit Etoilée*. Indeed, the background extends to the very depths of star-studded space. The tone of the painting is

peaceful and yet it is also rich in mystery. The low-light-level half-tones have been carefully recorded and the very trees seem to melt into the infinite itself. And yet, there is also an overpowering sense of the infinite bearing down on the landscape. The horizon in the centre of the composition almost suggests an ‘edge’ to the world. A few more steps and any flatlander would fall from the earth thenceforth to drift endlessly in the all enveloping cosmos. The visual imagery of *Nuit Etoilée* is reflected in several of the many letters Millet wrote to Alfred Sensier. In an 1856 letter he explained,²⁴

If I could only make others feel as I do all the terrors and splendours of the night: If I could but make them hear the songs, the silences and murmurings of the air—one must feel the presence of the infinite. Is it not terrible to think of those worlds of light which rise and set, age after age, in the same unchanging order? They shine upon us all alike, on the joys and sorrows of man, and when this world of ours melts away the life-giving sun will remain a pitiless witness of the universal desolation ...

This letter exemplifies Millet’s pessimistic, somewhat melancholy, temperament, and underscores the sentiments of *Nuit Etoilée*. Such pessimism was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century. Similar feelings were expressed in the poetry of, for example, Alfred Tennyson and the literature of Thomas Hardy²⁵. Tennyson expressed feelings identical to those of Millet in his poem, *God and the Universe*. There one finds,

Will my tiny spark of being wholly vanish
In your deeps and heights?
Must my day be dark by reason, o ye
Heavens, of your boundless nights.
Rush of suns, and roll of systems, and
Your fiery clash of meteorites.

One finds in *Nuit Etoilée*, then, Millet’s feelings for the terrors and insensitive powers of nature. Thoughts which can be further exemplified by Millet’s reaction on hearing of a brutal murder²⁶. He exclaimed, “Horror of horrors! and yet the sun did not stand still in heaven! Truly those orbs are implacable.”

The night sky in *Nuit Etoilée* is particularly interesting. Millet has clearly avoided the stereotypical night-time scene of monotonous, dot-like, stars scattered around a romanticised silver moon. Millet’s stars pulse with vitality. The very permanency of these stars and their constellations is counterbalanced, however, by three shooting stars; those most transient of night-time phenomena. Thus an element of chaos and frailty is introduced into the otherwise timeless scene.

The season during which *Nuit Etoilée* is set can possibly be dated with some accuracy. While Millet may have painted the stars from memory, he was none-the-less inspired by direct observation. The stars are not placed at random in

the composition, rather they conform to real constellations. Outstanding among these is Orion, whose three-starred belt, a very prominent night-time feature is clearly recorded in the upper right-hand corner of the composition. The distinctive 'nebulous' sword of Orion is also clearly shown. The bright, pulsing, star to the upper left of the composition is Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. *Canis Major*, the constellation in which Sirius is found, is clearly outlined, and the ghost-like asterism of the *Pleiades*, or seven sisters, is characteristically described at the very top, right-hand side, of the painting. The one anomaly in the picture is the bright star to the upper right of the composition, just below the three stars in Orion's belt. The star that is normally found in this position is much fainter! Continuing, however, on the basis that Millet was working according to actual observations and that the shooting stars are reasonably accurately placed in the sky, an identity with the so-called Orionid meteor shower may possibly be allowed. This meteor shower is active each year during the month of October, when shooting stars appear to radiate from a region within Orion. At this time Orion is rising in the east after midnight, and hence the golden glow in the centre of the composition is the imminent sunrise and not the fading sunset that several authors have assumed.

The nineteenth century was a time of rapid growth and development in many areas of science. Amongst the 'popular' sciences the new astronomical discoveries were often reported in lay magazines and newspapers. It has been suggested²⁷ that Millet followed many of these popular articles and indeed used his knowledge of new astronomical developments in the working of *Nuit Etoilée*. The evidence for this is not clear. We argued above that the stars and constellations in *Nuit Etoilée* are seemingly accurately placed and organized. This implies that they were painted according to personal observation—such a situation being consistent with Millet's philosophy of painting, "from nature." On the surface there are no obvious references to the new astronomy, that is the newly identified spiral galaxies, planets, variable stars and nebulae, to be found in *Nuit Etoilée*. This is not to say, of course, that Millet was unaware of such objects.

Conclusions. In this essay we have considered just two of Millet's many paintings. These two were chosen specifically for their reference to the shooting stars. In *Les Etoiles Filantes*, one of Millet's transitional paintings, the shooting-star metaphor is reflected in the transiency of lovers' passion, and the composition is probably based upon some, at present unknown, classical literary piece. It has been suggested that Dante's *Inferno* was the inspiration for *Les Etoiles Filantes* but we have found no compelling evidence for this. Inspiration may have, just as likely, been found in Virgil, Shakespeare or Byron. In *Nuit Etoilée* the shooting stars are seemingly recorded directly from observation. In this case, however, the shooting stars introduce an element of chaos and transiency. The brief flash of a shooting star is in complete contrast to the timeless, unchanging, well-ordered background

of the stars. In *Nuit Etoilée* it might be argued that the brief chaotic stirrings of human life confront the overpowering, vast and timeless, cosmos.

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