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This past spring I had the opportunity to see the blockbuster exhibition, *Caravaggio 2025*, at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome. The Italian painter, known for his use of dramatic lighting and emotional intensity, is credited with the invention of the technique called *tenebrism*, literally meaning dark and gloomy. Caravaggio was no stranger to darkness. His life was tragically brief; he died in 1610 at the young age of 38, four years after murdering a man in a barroom brawl.

Entering the gallery in the Palazzo Barberini, I was in darkness. The brightly lit paintings glowed in the darkened room, appearing to emanate from their canvases. Once my eyes adjusted, I scanned the room, and through the crowd, one painting immediately caught my eye: a man in a brown robe was lying on the ground, while another male figure with wings was propping him up to receive the light. From across the room, I could see two white specks in the foreground of the painting. I got close enough to the painting to be able to read the wall text. It read, *St Francis in Ecstasy* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Francis\\_of\\_Assisi\\_in\\_Ecstasy\\_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Caravaggio\\_\(c.1595\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Francis_of_Assisi_in_Ecstasy_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Caravaggio_(c.1595).jpg)), 1595, in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.

*St Francis in Ecstasy* is Caravaggio's first religious painting. His treatment of the subject is noticeably understated. St Francis went to Mt Verna in Italy in 1224, to fast in preparation for the feast day, Michaelmas, on September 29. While on Mt

Verna, St Francis experienced the miracle of his stigmata. In this miracle, a seraph, a 6-winged angel, appeared in the sky and pierced St Francis with rays of light. From these rays, St Francis received wounds in the same places that Jesus was wounded on the cross.

Caravaggio's treatment of this miracle is subtle. St Francis has only one wound in the painting; at his heart there is a small tear in his robe revealing a stab wound, which looks like it was made by a sword or a spear. St Francis is touching the wound. A defining feature of the stigmata is wounds in the hands and feet where Jesus was nailed to the cross. Caravaggio does not paint these nail holes, but paints daisies instead. The two white flowers stand out sharply against the dark vegetal background. The only other use of pure white in the painting is the angel's garment draped over his shoulder. Caravaggio has placed the daisies at the sites of the stigmata wounds. One daisy is near St Francis's cupped left hand; the other is close to his bare foot poking out from his robe. If the nail hole wounds are typically considered "proof" of the miracle, Caravaggio makes the daisies that proof instead.

Daisies are like clockwork; they are known to open their eyes at dawn and close them at dusk. This behavior earned them their name. Originally the flowers were called *day's eyes* in old English, and the word shortened to *daisy* over time. The daisies in Caravaggio's painting have their eyes fully open; they are awake. They are facing towards the source of illumination in the painting and yet it is dark out. It looks like nighttime. In the woods behind St Francis, there is light from a campfire. Next to the fire is a barely discernible figure, assumed to be Brother Leo who was with St Francis on Mt Verna. In the far distance is a glowing light emerging from the horizon shrouded behind dark clouds. The light on the horizon could possibly be the moon rising. It is reported that St Francis experienced the stigmata by moonlight. Or

it could be daybreak, or it could be something unidentified, like a comet or a meteor. If it is the sun rising, one would expect the daisies to be just starting to open and facing in the direction of the sun. The sun rises in the East, and the moon typically rises in the East as well. Instead, the daisies are fully opened and facing the source of St Francis's ecstasy. *The daisies are facing the supernatural light.* The daisies are part of the ecstasy. They are not separate, not mere witnesses, *they too are in ecstasy.* The daisies in this painting remind us that human emotional and spiritual life is deeply connected to the natural world. All creatures are connected.

St Francis's ecstasy happened outdoors in nature, which is fitting since St Francis is known as the patron saint of the environment and animals. His feast day, October 4th, the day of his death, has become the "Blessing of the Animals." People bring their pets to a priest who gives blessing, not only to the animal, but to the relationship between the pet and the person.

Four years before St Francis's ecstasy on Mt Verna another miracle occurred in the town of Gubbio in 1220. This miracle was called *Wolf of Gubbio* and is recorded in the *Little Flowers of St Francis*, a collection of legends about St Francis written around 1390. Caravaggio may have known about this text; possibly another reason for his use of the daisies as substitutes for the stigmata. The stories told in the *Little Flowers* are of St Francis's miracles; hence *little flowers are miracles.*

In this *Little Flower* story, there was a wolf in Gubbio who was attacking and eating the town's livestock. The townspeople retaliated by trying to kill the wolf, but this only made the wolf fiercer, causing the wolf to eat the townspeople too. Eating humans is not typical behavior for a wolf nowadays. In the medieval period wolves eating people was probably a result of their habitat being destroyed by agriculture. This is likely what happened in Gubbio, a mountain town in Umbria. The

townspeople became too afraid to leave their city walls. St Francis fearlessly stood up to the wolf. In response, the wolf bowed its head and listened to St Francis. Intuitively, St Francis seems to have known about wolf pack behavior, striking a pose of dominance. St Francis struck a deal between the wolf and the townspeople so that they could peacefully live together. The town would forgive the wolf, if the wolf would stop eating people and livestock. The wolf agreed, and to seal the deal, St Francis had the townspeople of Gubbio agree to feed the wolf every day. The wolf essentially became a pet. The wolf died two years later and the townspeople of Gubbio were very sad because they had become attached to the wolf.

St Francis had the ability to communicate with nature. He called all creatures his brothers and sisters. He talked to them, and they talked back. St Francis understood that life is deeply interconnected. Human consciousness evolved from interdependent relationships with other creatures. In our technological society, our emotional lives are still connected to nature. We still need to talk to nature for our consciousness to keep being creative and alive.

The word *ecstasy* comes from the Greek *ekstasis* which literally means to stand outside of oneself. The ecstatic as a human state of consciousness has taken different forms through the ages. In the ancient world, the ecstatic was achieved collectively through participation in mystery cults, such as the cult of Dionysus. Dionysus was the god of wine, vegetation, pleasure, madness and ritual frenzy. The rites happened at night, secretly and outdoors. They were a release. Their purpose was to ensure fertility. In medieval times, the dominant order was Christian. The word ecstatic became used to describe the personal experiences saints had with God. In these experiences, like the Dionysian mysteries, divinity was experienced bodily.

In Roman mythology, the god Dionysus was called Bacchus. Caravaggio painted several portraits of Bacchus, aligning himself with the god. His self-portrait as *Sick Bacchus* painted in 1593, two years before he made *St Francis in Ecstasy*, was painted after a major illness for which he was hospitalized for 6 months (also included in the exhibit *Caravaggio 2025*). He made another *Bacchus* in 1596, one year after his *St Francis* painting. Different forms of the ecstatic and states of being were a theme for Caravaggio. This drive to paint inner states is a characteristic of Modernism, Caravaggio was way ahead of his time.

In 1939, 344 years after Caravaggio painted his *St Francis in Ecstasy*, Virginia Woolf described her experience of ecstasy. While the Germans were bombing England, she took pen to paper, and wrote *A Sketch of the Past*, posthumously published in a collection titled Moments of Being. In her sketch, Woolf described the ecstatic experiences that she had in childhood, and the memories which stayed with her all her life. She calls these ecstatic memories, “moments of being”. During these moments, she wrote, “*I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.*”<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf had what scientists call *synesthesia*: an experience of one sense, such as sight, automatically stimulates another sense, such as hearing or smell. For me, the two senses most closely linked are smell and sight. I personally think that everybody has synesthesia to a degree. It makes sense evolutionarily that for human survival in the wild, our senses needed to be connected. Woolf’s earliest memory is in her bedroom in the family summer house in St Ives, where sound and sight combined into an experience of ecstasy. In the memory while hearing the waves breaking

outside, she recalls, *“lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.”*<sup>2</sup>

In these ecstatic moments, Woolf had a heightened experience of being alive. Woolf is known for her ability to plumb the depths of human subjectivity and enter a “stream” where things connect and flow into each other. Woolf saw reality in these moments not as discrete objects, but as a whole. She remembers having a revelation while looking at a bed of flowers. She does not specify what kind of flower it was; it’s possible it was a daisy: *“In the garden at St Ives. I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; “That is the whole”, I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later.”*<sup>3</sup>

When I saw the daisies in ecstasy in Caravaggio’s *St Francis in Ecstasy* at the Palazzo Barberini, it felt like the daisies were talking to me. Daisies have been talking to me for five years now. This conversation started when I had a painting studio on Daisy Ave in Pasadena, California. The street name led me to write an essay called *Daisy Consciousness* published in these pages in 2023. *Daisy Consciousness* describes how daisies have played a part in the development of human consciousness. At the heart of the essay is plant communication and my broad interpretation of plants communicating. My next essay, *Day’s Eye Closed* was published in these pages in 2024. In that essay, I describe another *St Francis in Ecstasy* painting, that one by Giovanni Bellini, 1475-80. Bellini’s painting has daisies in ecstasy too.

You can imagine how magical it felt for me to stumble upon Caravaggio's daisies. I have searched the literature, and I have found no mention of the daisies in Caravaggio's *St Francis in Ecstasy*. Not only were the daisies talking to me; they were asking to be discovered.

Notes:

- 1 Woolf, Virginia, *A Sketch of the Past*, in Moments of Being, (New York: Mariner Books, 1985), p. 67.
- 2 , p. 65.
- 3 , p. 71.

*Image credit:* Author's photo collage of daisies in Caravaggio's *St Francis in Ecstasy*

## THE AUTHOR



Elise Adibi is an artist and writer with a background in philosophy and architecture. She created a 6-month installation of plants and oil paintings in the greenhouse of Henry Clay Frick at The Frick museum in Pittsburgh (Respiration Paintings, 2017) and wrote *Subtle Affinity* (2018) published in *Forty-Five: A Journal for Outdoor Research*. Some of her solo gallery shows include, *A Priori* (2010), *Da Capo* (2012) and *Substance* (2015) all in New York and *Metabolic Painting* in Cambridge MA (2013).

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