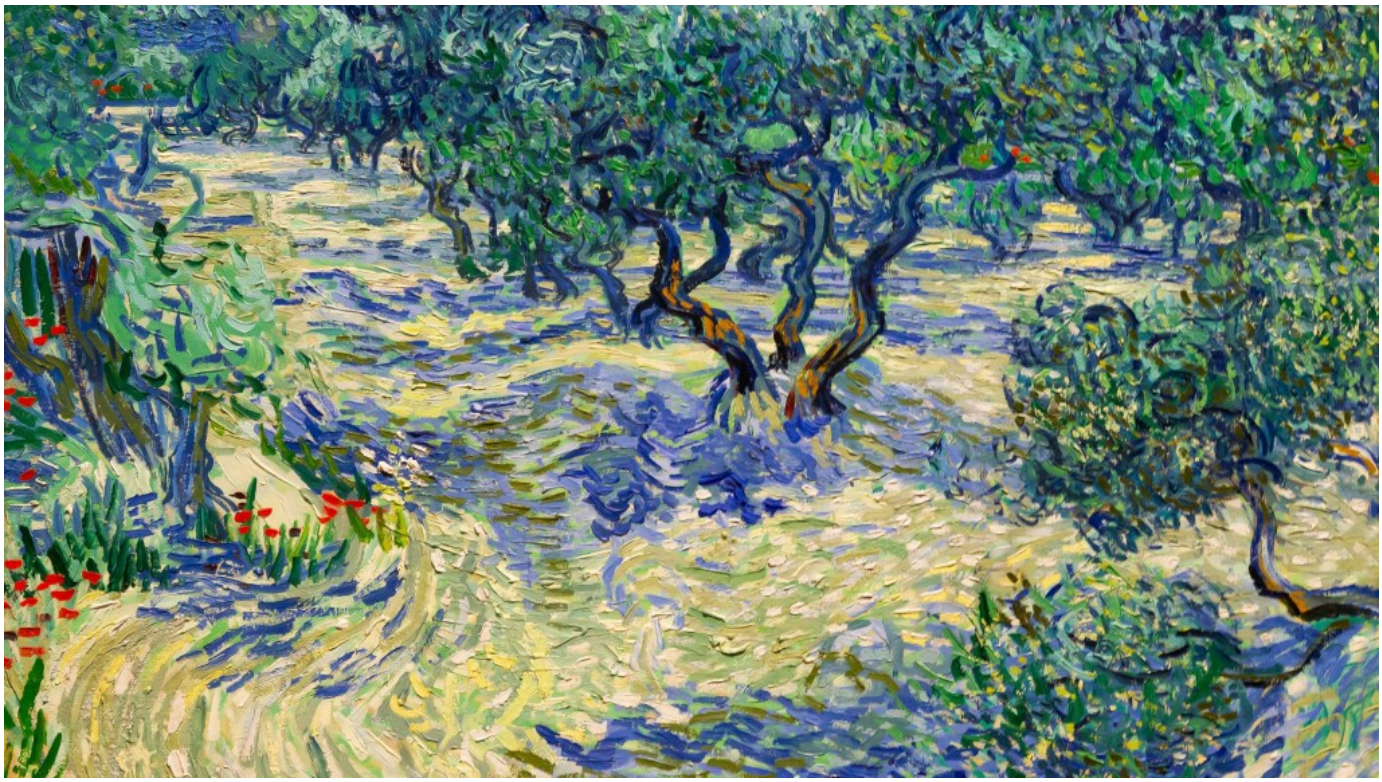
Travel | *Book Review*

A chill wind that blows good

Icy blasts from the north have inspired French artists, writers and scientists

By Emile Chabal



"Olive Trees" by Vincent van Gogh, 1889 | © Alamy

IN THIS REVIEW

The Mistral

A windswept history of modern France

192pp. University of Chicago Press. £26 (US $32.50).

Catherine Tatiana Dunlop

For holidaymakers, the Mediterranean evokes sun, sea and sand. But, for those who live there, these clichés are tempered by a climatic phenomenon rarely captured on postcards or in Instagram shots: the wind. The *libeccio*, the *sirocco*, the *khamsin*, the *levante*, the *tramontane* and the *etesian* all blow across, through or around the region.

Of these, the *mistral* is perhaps the most notorious. It barrels down the Rhône Valley in southern France, sweeps across the Camargue and the Golfe du Lion, then heads towards Nice, Genoa and Corsica. It blows for more than 100 days a year, sometimes as many as 175, making it a climatic fixture for people who live and work in its path. It reshapes everything that stands in its way, from the huge limestone cliffs typical of the Provence region to the pine trees whose trunks are bent out of shape by their perpetual struggle to adapt.

The ubiquity of the *mistral* makes it the perfect subject for a book, and Catherine Tatiana Dunlop sketches out a total history of her subject. To tell what she calls a "windswept history", she reaches back millennia to the creation of the Mediterranean Biogeographical Region and the emergence of regional wind patterns in the Pliocene era. But the bulk of her empirical material comes from the nineteenth century, when a new generation of scientists and technocrats claimed that they could tame the *mistral*.

Dunlop organizes her book around five short chapters. The first two deal with the *mistral*'s role in fashioning the physical and human landscapes of Provence, from the buildings to the sea. We follow in the footsteps of hard-bitten peasants fighting to walk against the wind and weary sailors forced to tack along the Mediterranean coast in order to avoid being blown off course. Chapters three and four explore the attempts of the French state to study, manage and control the *mistral* in the nineteenth century. The Sisyphean efforts by well-meaning meteorologists to measure the wind speed on the top of Mont Ventoux – literally, Mount Windy, from the Latin *ventosus* – feature prominently, as does the importance of the wind at a time when many public health officials believed it could blow away the "miasma" that led to diseases such as cholera.

The book ends with a chapter on visual representations of the *mistral* in European art. Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, among others, went to Provence precisely because it was a place where the wind blew hard. It was this generation of artists that cemented the association between the icy cold blasts of the *mistral* and the translucent blue skies that accompanied it. The bracing authenticity of *plein air* painting was a product of the environment in which it was produced.

Each chapter builds effectively on the previous one. Cumulatively, the effect is both insightful and highly persuasive. Dunlop excels in showing how the *mistral*'s windscape has "become *part* of France's physical makeup,

concretized, over the centuries, in the biogeography of southern France". Its traces are everywhere: in the soil, in the flora and fauna, and in the architecture of the local farmhouses, traditionally built out of hefty stone, with a corner into the wind to channel the gusts to either side.

The *mistral* has even found its way into the physical record left by those who tried to capture its essence. For painters, the incessant wind enhanced the vivid colours they chose by creating a tactile connection to the landscape. As they battled to keep their easels upright, leaves, seeds, sand, dirt, pebbles and insects were blown permanently onto their canvases; in 2017, the discovery of a grasshopper on van Gogh's "Olive Trees" (1889) made headlines. For writers, too, the challenges could be formidable. Émile Zola likened the *mistral* to an unseen visitor that "moaned and sobbed wildly", and Dunlop herself was blown off her bike near Avignon during one of her research trips.

Like all powerful meteorological phenomena, the *mistral* can strike fear into those who face it. It can churn placid seas so that the waves move backwards away from the shore, and it batters any building that stands in its way. Every traveller who has taken shelter from it has come away awestruck at its potency. Alexandre Dumas called the *mistral* a "land tempest", while Stendhal described it as a wind that "grates on the nerves so that the most dauntless person is unwittingly upset".

Yet the *mistral*'s capacity for disruption did not always carry negative connotations. As Dunlop explains, it could also embody a form of resistance to the onward march of industrial modernity. This was clearly visible in post-revolutionary France. Where previously the inhabitants of Provence respected the wind and adapted themselves to its whims, the nineteenth century brought forth a zeal for planning, order and rationality that transcended political differences and regional sensibilities.

Highly trained scientists and technocrats arrived from Paris seeking answers to their abstract – albeit important – questions. How powerful is the *mistral*? What might be its benefits? How might its intensity be mitigated? Answers to these questions required precise measurements and significant state-led interventions in the form of urban planning and new technologies. The astonishing observatory at the top of Mont Ventoux – the windiest mountain in France – stands today as a symbol of this desire to conquer the elements.

But the *mistral* fought back. Every anemometer installed in the Mont Ventoux observatory broke within days, and the conditions were so harsh that the bourgeois gentlemen climatologists of the time could not withstand the terrible rigours of life cooped up on a mountain hammered constantly by the wind. It was left to hardened locals to staff the observatory and take regular readings.

Something similar happened with the enthusiastic rebuilding of Marseille's old city. Following the "miasmatic" theory of disease, public health experts in the nineteenth century believed that disease outbreaks could be controlled by the right kind of winds. They argued that the *sirocco*, which blew in from the south, bringing Saharan dust and high temperatures, acted as a disease incubator, whereas the *mistral*, which left the sky a picture-perfect blue, purified the air. This led municipal authorities in the 1850s and 1860s to adopt the methods that inspired Haussmann's redesign of Paris: narrow streets and insalubrious neighbourhoods were flattened to make way for wide boulevards and geometric street plans designed specifically to promote the movement of clean air.

The problem was that these boulevards acted as air funnels, accelerating the wind and rendering the swish new apartments of Rue Impériale unbearable during the winter, because no heating system could offset the wind chill. Marseille's inhabitants were quickly reminded of what *provençal* peasants had always known: that the *mistral* punishes those who disrespect it.

The lessons for the present are clear. We know that climate change is making us ever more vulnerable to hurricanes, droughts, wildfires and other climate catastrophes. We will eventually need to reckon with the "anthropogenic forcing" we have inflicted on the planet, and learn to accommodate ourselves to the natural world that we have distorted in our efforts to conquer it.

But there could be a bittersweet end to this tale for the *mistral*. According to the most recent studies, it is slowing down because of climate change. Within a century, it may have died down or disappeared altogether, like several other regional winds in Europe. Could it be that Catherine Tatiana Dunlop's accomplished book ends up being an obituary for a once potent climatic phenomenon? If so, it would only confirm the anthropomorphic quality of her story. Except that, rather than seeing the *mistral* as a tempestuous "master" of the atmosphere, we will realize it was a rare species that we drove deliberately to extinction.

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