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Van Gogh's Agony

Lauren Soth

Analysis of the conceptual and circumstantial history of Van Gogh's Starry Night of 1889 (Museum of Modern Art) and explication of the letter he wrote upon its completion show that it was intended as an image of consolation. Further argument interprets it as a sublimated version of the Agony in the Garden, a subject he tried and failed to paint the year before.

The visionary nature of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* has always been recognized (Fig. 1).¹ Perhaps the assumption that the painting was the result of a private mystical experience has prevented scholars from examining it in detail, though there are exceptions, particularly Sven Loevgren.² But images of visions are as amenable to analysis as any other images. Here I shall discuss the *Starry Night* in light of its conceptual history: when it came into Van Gogh's mind and how his ideas about it developed; its circumstantial history: when and where it was done and what its sources were; and what Van Gogh wrote about it. Finally, I shall argue that the *Starry Night* is a religious picture, a sublimation of impulses that, since Van Gogh's loss of faith in the Church, could not find their outlet in conventional Christian imagery. Specifically, I believe it is related to the Agony in the Garden, the biblical episode that had a profound, lifelong significance for him.

The Conceptual History of the *Starry Night*

The thought of painting a starry night preoccupied Van Gogh in Arles during the spring and summer of 1888. He first expressed it in two letters, both written on April 9. To his brother Theo he wrote, 'I must also have a starry night with cypresses.'³ To his friend Émile Bernard he wrote:

The imagination is certainly a faculty which we must develop, one which alone can lead us to the creation of

I first suggested that the *Starry Night* was related to *The Agony in the Garden* in a paper called "Van Gogh's Symbolic Landscapes" read at the Netherlandish Art Symposium at Memphis State University on April 24, 1982. A much condensed version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in Toronto, February 25, 1984. In April, 1984, in the Van Gogh Museum library Sophie Pabst showed me a copy of Griselda Pollock's thesis of 1981 on Van Gogh and Dutch art for the Courtauld Institute, and I discovered that she had reached conclusions about the *Starry Night* similar to mine, although our arguments followed quite different courses. For their help I would like to thank H. van Crimpen, Sophie Pabst, Lili Couvée-Jampoller, Carol Zemel, Johannes van der Wolk, Evert van Uitert, Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński, Hollister Sturges, Jeffrey Howe, Alison Kettering, Alan Birnholz, Sarah Faunce, Robert Mathews, Richard Spear, Miles Chappell, Albert Albano, and Joel Weisberg. I am also indebted to Carleton College for the award of a Bush Fellowship in support of my research.

¹ Recently Albert Boime, an art historian, and Charles Whitney, an astronomer, have independently broken with this view and argued that

a more exalting and consoling nature than the single brief glance at reality — which in our sight is ever changing, passing like a flash of lightning — can let us perceive.

A starry sky, for instance — look that is something I should like to try to do.⁴

This excerpt shows that Van Gogh already thought a starry night a suitable subject for a painting that would, through the use of the imagination, be something more than a realistic depiction of nature. Not only would such a painting be exalted beyond reality, but it would be consoling as well. These two concepts — imaginative exaltation and consolation—are, as will be seen, basic to an understanding of the *Starry Night*.

A painting of a starry night was still on Van Gogh's mind in June when he again wrote Bernard:

I won't hide from you that I don't dislike the country, as I have been brought up there — I am still charmed by the magic of hosts of memories of the past, of a longing for the infinite, of which the sower, the sheaf are the symbols — just as much as before. But when shall I paint my *starry sky*, that picture which preoccupies me continuously?⁵

Finally, on September 9, he declared in a letter to his sister Wilhelmina that "at present I absolutely want to paint

the *Starry Night* was realistic, that Van Gogh painted the night sky as he saw it. The precariousness of such realistic interpretations is shown by the mutually exclusive constellations each scholar claims to find in the *Starry Night*: Boime identifies Aries, Whitney identifies Cygnus. See Albert Boime, "Van Gogh's *Starry Night*: A History of Matter and a Matter of History," *Arts*, LIX, December, 1984, 86-103. I am grateful to Charles Whitney for allowing me to read his unpublished manuscript and for his generosity in discussing Van Gogh's painting with me.

² S. Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism*, Bloomington and London, 1971, 172-191.

³ *Letters*, No. 474, II, 541 (April 9, 1888).

⁴ *Ibid.*, B3, III, 478 (April 9, 1888). A few weeks earlier, Van Gogh had found in De Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean* a literary parallel to the idea he expressed to Bernard. He referred Theo to De Maupassant's preface, "where he explains the artist's liberty to exaggerate, to create in his novel, a world more beautiful, more simple, more consoling than ours" (*ibid.*, No. 470, II, 534 [March 18, 1888]).

⁵ *Letters*, B7, III, 492 (ca. June 18, 1888).



1 Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, 29x36 1/4". New York, Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

a starry sky."⁶

Shortly thereafter Van Gogh did paint two pictures of starry nights. But they did not match the conception in his imagination, and it was not until the following summer that he realized it with the masterpiece now in the Museum of Modern Art.

Why did not the *Café Terrace at Night* (Fig. 2) and the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* (Fig. 3), the two paintings of September, 1888, fulfill Van Gogh's vision of a starry night? The excerpts just quoted make two things clear: that Vincent conceived the ideal starry night as being over a landscape, not a town; and that he conceived it as an imaginative work, not a descriptive one. The *Café Terrace at Night* and the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* are town views, not landscapes, and the town — Arles — is rendered in a

descriptively realistic manner. This is true not only of the appearance of both paintings but of Vincent's written comments on them. His account of the *Café Terrace at Night* to his sister simply describes the scene and the colors. There is no suggestion of further meaning. Van Gogh even draws a parallel with the literary naturalism of Guy de Maupassant's novel *Bel ami*: "the beginning of *Bel ami* happens to be a description of a starlit night in Paris with the brightly lit cafes of the Boulevard, and this is approximately the same subject I just painted."⁷

His two descriptions, to Theo and to Eugene Boch, of the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* are similarly restricted to the identification of motifs and colors.⁸ And, in the very same letter to Theo in which he described it, Vincent acknowledged that the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* was not

⁶ *Ibid.*, W7, III, 443.

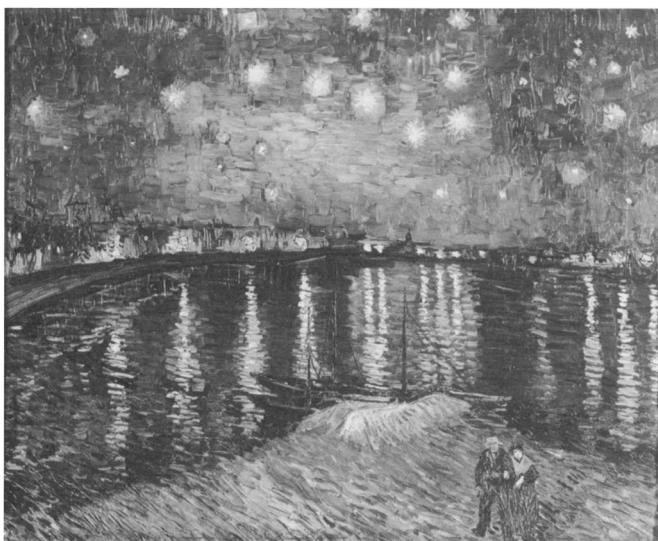
⁷ *Ibid.*, W7, III, 444 (the letter was begun on September 9 and finished

on September 16, 1888).

⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 543, III, 56 (ca. September 28, 1888) and No. 553b, III, 84 (October 2, 1888).



2 Van Gogh, *Café Terrace at Night*, 1888. Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller



3 Van Gogh, *Starry Night Over the Rhône*, 1888. Paris, Musée d'Orsay

what he had been dreaming of, for he went on to say: "As for the 'Starry Sky,' I'd still like very much to paint it, and perhaps one of these nights I shall be in the same plowed field if the sky is sparkling."⁹

Nine months later, Van Gogh fulfilled that ambition. In St.-Rémy he painted a *Starry Night* over a landscape that was an imaginative vision (Fig. 1). How that vision, which had preoccupied him for over a year, took pictorial form can be understood from a discussion of the circumstances of its creation.

The Circumstantial History of the *Starry Night*

On May 8, 1889, Van Gogh entered the hospital of St.-Paul-de-Mausole at St.-Rémy. For several weeks he did not leave the hospital, painting or sketching only in its garden or from his cell window. Figure 4 is one of the paintings he did then from that window.¹⁰ Comparison with a photograph taken in the 1950's of the same view (Fig. 5) shows that Van Gogh portrayed the enclosed field beneath his cell and the landscape beyond its wall in a straightforward way, exaggerating only the steepness of the Alpilles mountains on the horizon.

In early June Van Gogh began working in the country around the hospital and shortly thereafter he painted the *Starry Night*. It can be dated almost to the day. In a letter to his sister that Jan Hulsker has dated to June 16, Van Gogh described the paintings he had just finished: the *Starry Night* is not among them.¹¹ A day or two later, he wrote Theo that he had "a new study of a starry sky."¹² The *Starry Night* was therefore painted between June 16 and 18, 1889.

The mountains in the *Starry Night* are the same Alpilles that Van Gogh could see from his cell window. Their steepness is exaggerated, just as in the earlier, otherwise realistic, painting (Fig. 4). Thus the history of the *Starry Night* — as distinct from the conceptual history of a starry night, which goes back to the spring of 1888 — begins with Van Gogh looking through the iron bars of his cell in the hospital at St.-Rémy.

From that base in observed reality, Van Gogh's imagination took hold. But it was fed by sources in both nature and art. Examination of them helps clarify his method and the meaning of the *Starry Night*.

Beneath his actual cell was an enclosed field, but in the painting Van Gogh depicted cypresses and a village. These came from his immediate visual experience as recorded in the quick sketches, recto and verso, of an ordinary sheet of drawing paper, illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. The latter is, in fact, a view of St.-Rémy, as comparison with the old postcard in Figure 8 shows.¹³ The point at which Van Gogh sketched the town is just a few steps outside the southwest entrance to St.-Paul-de-Mausole. The site of the scene in

⁹ *Ibid.*, 543, III, 59. "The same plowed field" is a reference to *Plowed Fields* (F574), Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 594, III, 179 (ca. June 9, 1889).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, W12, III, 453 (June 16, 1889).

¹² *Ibid.*, No. 595, III, 182 (June 17 or 18, 1889).

¹³ This comparison was first made by Jean-Paul Clébert and Pierre Richard, *La Provence de van Gogh*, Aix-en-Provence, 1981, 54. I am grateful to Pierre Richard for providing me with the postcard used in Figure 9.



4 Van Gogh, *Mountainous Landscape Behind St. Paul's Hospital*, 1889. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek



5 Photograph by M.E. Tralbaut of view from Van Gogh's cell in St. Paul's Hospital, 1950's

the recto (Fig. 6) is undoubtedly not much farther away, in the foothills just south of the hospital.

Struck by these motifs of the actual landscape, Van Gogh set them down on paper. Evidently they still haunted him when he painted the *Starry Night*, since they ended up together on the canvas. In the passage from sketched observation to painted image, one significant transformation took place: the form of the church was changed.¹⁴

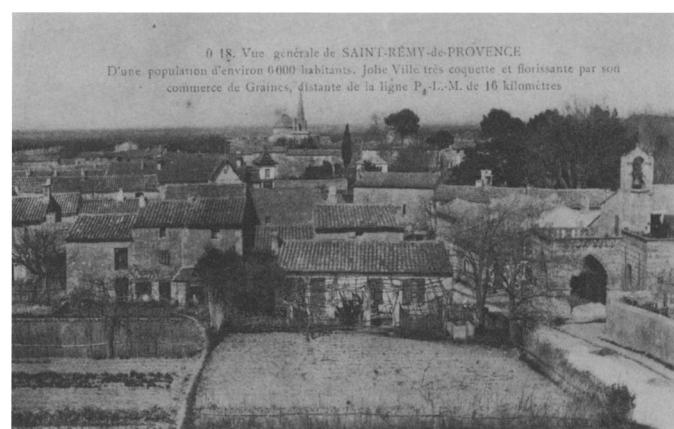
St. Martin, the church in St.-Rémy, has a dome that Van Gogh clearly indicates in his drawing (Fig. 7). The church in the *Starry Night* is not domed; it has a long nave and transept with steeply pitched roofs. With its tall spire, it is a type of church rare in Provence but common in the north and especially common in Brabant, Van Gogh's homeland. When he was living there, in Etten, in July, 1878, he drew a map of the neighborhood in which he included sketches



6 Van Gogh, *Landscape with Cypresses* (recto of Fig. 7), 1889. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Inv. No. F1541

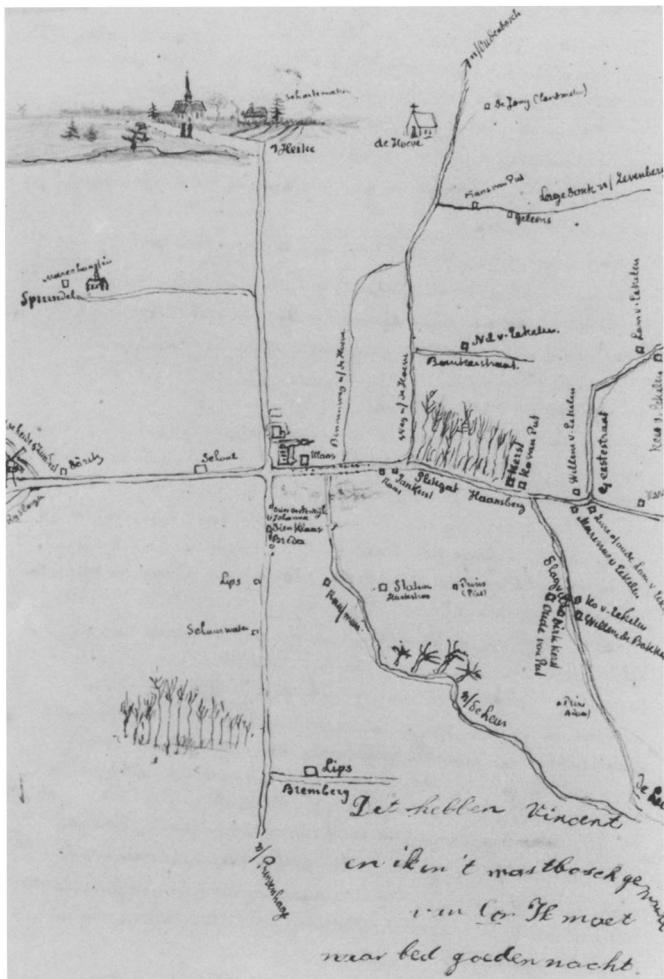


7 Van Gogh, *View of St.-Rémy* (verso of Fig. 6), 1889. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Inv. No. F1541



8 View of St.-Rémy, postcard ca. 1910

¹⁴ The 1970 edition of De la Faille's catalogue is mistaken in claiming in the entry for the *Starry Night* (F612) that the same church is represented in painting and drawing.



9 Van Gogh, *Etten and Its Environs*, 1878, pen sketch. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh

of four similar churches (Fig. 9).¹⁵ They were for him the most significant landmarks, the most meaningful features of the area.

The cypresses and the village seen from above in the *Starry Night* had their genesis in local visual experience. But, in the act of painting, the actual church of St.-Rémy was forgotten and replaced by the archetypal church from Van Gogh's memory of Brabant.

¹⁵ Letters, No. 123, 1, 173, (July 22, 1878).

¹⁶ Ibid., No. 27, 1, 27 (May 31, 1875). Van Gogh then quoted the last stanza of Breton's poem *Le Saint-Jean* from *Les Champs et la Mer*.

¹⁷ It was probably also significant for Van Gogh that the painting depicted not an ordinary day but a special one. In northern European countries, St. John's Eve (June 23) had become identified with Midsummer's Eve. Thus Breton's painting would have carried allusions to the passage of the seasons and the cycle of nature.

¹⁸ Another engraving of the painting was published in the Salon issue of *L'illustration* of April 30, 1887. Both journals use the title *La fin du travail*, as does Marius Vachon in *Jules Breton*, Paris, 1899, illustration opposite p. 37 (see also p. 92). Hollister Sturges, *Jules Breton and the French Rural Tradition*, Omaha, 1983, 99, claims that Vachon confused the two paintings Breton exhibited in the Salon of 1887: *La fin du travail*, and *A travers les champs*. He calls a Breton painting now in the Brooklyn

The image of a church and village in the landscape, combined with a crescent moon, had another source: the paintings of Jules Breton, whom Van Gogh had long admired. On May 31, 1875, he wrote Theo a description of Breton's *Festival of Saint John* (Fig. 10): "He has a beautiful picture at the Salon, 'St. John's Eve.' Peasant girls dancing on a summer evening around a St. John's fire; in the background, the village with a church and the moon over it."¹⁶

The specific mention of village, church, and moon shows that these details had an impact on Van Gogh.¹⁷ They appear again in a painting (now lost) that Breton exhibited in the Salon in 1887. Van Gogh could have seen it there while he was living in Paris or simply have known the engraving published in *Le monde illustré* on March 17, 1888 (Fig. 11).¹⁸

When Van Gogh painted the *Starry Night*, the moon was not the crescent that appears in the painting. It only entered the last quarter on the morning of June 20, 1889, and, as noted earlier, the *Starry Night* was painted between June 16 and 18. The moon then was still in the full phase and its shape was gibbous, that is, between a full circle and a half circle.¹⁹ The crescent moon in the *Starry Night* did not therefore come from Van Gogh's immediate observation. It apparently came from his (unconscious?) memory of Breton's use of it in conjunction with village and church, which same combination is found in the *Starry Night*.²⁰

If the preceding analysis is accepted, the *Starry Night* emerges as an amalgam of images, some drawn from what Van Gogh could see about him (hills, cypresses), some drawn from his memory (church, crescent moon). Whether they arose from observation or memory, conscious or unconscious, the individual components were combined in an imaginative composition. Or, as Van Gogh later put it, "an exaggeration from the point of view of arrangement."²¹

Since the *Starry Night* is not a transcription of nature but an imaginative amalgam, the question arises whether it has any specific meaning, either intended or unconscious. Any answer to this question should begin with the passage in his letters where Van Gogh discussed the painting.

What Van Gogh Wrote About the *Starry Night*

In letter 595, of June 17 or 18, 1889, Vincent wrote Theo,

Museum *La fin du travail*, but since it does not match the illustrations in the journals and Vachon, it must be *A travers les champs* instead. The initial error was probably made by Clarence Cook. In *Art and Artists of Our Time*, New York, 1888, II, 237-238, he described and illustrated the image in my Figure 11, but called it *Across the Fields*. Since the Brooklyn painting shows the sun, the title *La fin du travail* more aptly applies to Figure 11.

¹⁹ Washington: Bureau of Navigation, *The American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac for the Year 1889*, 1886, 103, where the time is given as 19:35, June 19. This is the astronomical time that converts to the civil time of 7:35 a.m. on June 20.

²⁰ Crescent moons occur even more frequently in the work of Millet, whom Van Gogh admired extravagantly. See Alexandra R. Murphy, *Jean-François Millet*, Boston, 1984, Cat. Nos. 62, 78, 100, 105, 109, 148.

²¹ Letters, No. 607, III, 217 (September 19, 1889).

"I have a landscape with olive trees and also a new study of a starry sky."²² The paragraphs that immediately follow this laconic announcement are central to understanding the *Starry Night* and Van Gogh's intentions. The passage in its original French appears as an appendix to this article. Here I shall explain it bit by bit using an English translation. Explication is necessary because Van Gogh expressed himself in an allusive, even cryptic manner. Apparently he could not fully articulate something that touched him so deeply.

The passage begins:

Though I have not seen either Gauguin's or Bernard's last canvases, I am pretty well convinced that these two studies I've spoken of are parallel in feeling.

When you have looked at these two studies for some time, and that of the ivy as well,²³ it will perhaps give you some idea, better than words could, of things that Gauguin and Bernard and I sometimes used to talk about, and which we've thought about a good deal.

What the three artists talked and thought about was working from the imagination. Van Gogh's remarks to Bernard about developing the imagination in order to create "a more exalting and consoling nature" — in which he cited a starry sky as a potential subject — have already been quoted. When Gauguin lived with Van Gogh in Arles, Vincent wrote his sister that "he strongly encourages me to work often from pure imagination."²⁴ To Theo, he wrote, "Gauguin gives me the courage to imagine things."²⁵

Letter 595 continues:

It is not a return to the romantic or to religious ideas, no. Nevertheless, by going the way of Delacroix, more than is apparent, by color and a more spontaneous drawing than exact illusionism, one could express the nature of a countryside more pure than the suburbs and cabarets of Paris.²⁶

The last phrase becomes significant when we remember that Van Gogh had compared his *Café Terrace at Night* with De Maupassant's description of Parisian cafés. The cafés and cabarets of Paris and Arles were modern urban reality for Van Gogh, to be painted in a realistic manner. The purer nature of the country should be expressed in a style that transcended reality, as in the *Starry Night*. But what does "going the way of Delacroix" mean?

Van Gogh greatly admired the Romantic painter as a colorist. He believed Delacroix had created paintings that spoke "a symbolic language through color alone."²⁷ He especially admired Delacroix's use of what Van Gogh called



10 Jules Breton, *Festival of Saint John*, 1875. Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Museum, on loan from Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.



11 Jules Breton, *La fin du travail*, 1887, engraving published in *Le monde illustré*, March 17, 1888 (photo: New York Public Library)

"the two colors which are most condemned, and with most reason, citron-yellow and Prussian blue. All the same I think he did superb things with them — the blues and the citron-yellows."²⁸ These are the colors of the *Starry Night*. While they are appropriate to the nocturnal scene, it is possible that Van Gogh used them not only for descriptive purposes but with an awareness of the "superb things" Delacroix had done with them.

Furthermore, when Van Gogh described these colors in paintings by Delacroix, it was when they were used to define the figure of Christ. In September, 1885, he recounted, to his friend Anton van Rappard, Delacroix's anecdote of how, when painting a *Pietà*, he did the shadows of Christ's body in Prussian blue and the light parts chrome-yellow.²⁹

From Arles, Vincent described to Bernard the "citron-colored aureole" of Christ in Delacroix's *Christ on the Lake*

²² The landscape mentioned is most probably the *Olive Trees* (F712), a promised gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney to the Museum of Modern Art.

²³ *A Corner in the Garden of St. Paul's Hospital: Ivy* (F609), formerly Baron de Rothschild, Paris.

²⁴ *Letters*, W9, III, 448 (ca. November 16, 1888).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 562, III, 105 (ca. November 16, 1888).

²⁶ I have altered the translation of the last sentence.

²⁷ *Letters*, No. 503, II, 597 (ca. June 26, 1888).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 476, II, 545 (ca. April 11, 1888).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, R58, III, 422 (September, 1885).

of *Gennesaret*.³⁰ A month later, he referred Bernard to this painting again: "Delacroix paints a Christ by means of the unexpected effect of a bright-citron yellow note, and a colorful luminous note which possesses the same unspeakable strangeness and charm in the picture as a star does in a corner of the firmament."³¹

Van Gogh jumped from Delacroix's Christ with his citron-yellow aureole to a star. Are we therefore entitled to say the stars in the *Starry Night* symbolize Christ? That would be an over-interpretation, but it may be possible to conclude that when he went "the way of Delacroix," Van Gogh was exalting his painting by using Delacroix's colors, the blues and citron-yellows, which seem to have had spiritual associations for him.

Letter 595 continues:

One would try to paint human beings who are also more serene and pure than Daumier had before his eyes, but following Daumier, of course, in the drawing.

Whether it exists or not is something we may leave aside, but we do believe that nature extends beyond St.-Ouen.

Perhaps even while reading Zola, we are moved by the sound of the pure French of Renan, for instance.

The three paragraphs all make the same distinction between everyday reality and a more ideal, a more pure state. The last contrast is between the vernacular of the naturalist writer Emile Zola and the finer literary style of the historian Ernest Renan. An English-language equivalent might be: Perhaps even while reading Mark Twain, we are moved by the sound of the pure English of Winston Churchill.

St.-Ouen was one of the suburbs of Paris to which Van Gogh made painting excursions from the Montmartre apartment he shared with Theo in 1886-87. It was an industrial suburb without conventional charm; Baedeker dismissed it in one word: "uninteresting."³² So when Van Gogh wrote of nature extending beyond St.-Ouen, he was contrasting the raw, vulgar reality of an industrial area with the purity of the countryside beyond.

The contrast between vulgar and pure, exemplified in language (Zola vs. Renan) and landscape (St.-Ouen vs. nature), was first made in terms of the human figure. The human beings that the realist "Daumier had before his eyes" were contrasted with ideal ones "more serene and pure."

Also to the point is that Van Gogh saw Arles and its people as Daumiers. "Here you will see nothing more beautiful than Daumier; very often the figures here are abso-

lutely Daumier," he wrote Gauguin in September, 1888.³³ Two weeks earlier, when he moved into his new house, he wrote Theo that "its surroundings, the public garden, the night cafés and the grocer, are not Millet, but instead they are Daumier, absolute Zola,"³⁴ thereby assimilating Arles to his two examples of vulgar realism.

There can be no doubt that Vincent meant these comparisons of the people and town of Arles to Daumier as complimentary. Yet he still had a more exalted vision against which both Arles and Daumier fell short: "It isn't a superb, sublime country this; it is only a Daumier come to life," he wrote in October, 1888.³⁵

The passages from letter 595 quoted thus far are an elaborate justification for painting ideal visions from the imagination. The clear inference is that the *Starry Night* is such a vision, more serene and pure than reality. It represents the "superb, sublime country" that Van Gogh contrasted with his Daumier-like surroundings.

Letter 595 continues with a change in imagery:

And, after all, while the *Chat noir* draws us women after its fashion and Forain in a fashion that's masterly, we do some of our own, and being less Parisian but no less fond of Paris and its graces, we try to prove that something very different exists as well.

Le chat noir was a weekly journal of Montmartre. Its illustrations depicted the demi-monde: the world of courtesans and street walkers, cafés and theaters. Jean-Louis Forain was an illustrator and painter. He showed the same urban milieu but with considerably more verve (Fig. 12).

What was that "something very different" that Van Gogh contrasted with their Parisian grace? He did not specify but he could have referred to his portrait of Madame Roulin (Fig. 13). The simple provincial mother in Van Gogh's picture is a tremendous contrast to Forain's chic Parisian. This image had a great significance for Van Gogh.³⁶ He gave it the title *La berceuse* (Cradle Rocker), an honorific implying a certain degree of idealization. He painted five different versions of it in late 1888 and early 1889 and planned to exhibit them between two of his paintings of sunflowers, which "would thus form torches or candelabra."³⁷ The religious implications of the imagery and the triptych form were confirmed in a letter of September, 1889:

And I must tell you — and you will see it in "La Berceuse," — if I had had the strength to continue, I should have made portraits of saints and holy women from life

³⁰ *Ibid.*, B8, III, 497 (ca. June 23, 1888).

³¹ *Ibid.*, B12, III, 504 (ca. July 23, 1888).

³² *Paris and Environs*, London, 1888, 195.

³³ *Letters*, No. 544a, III, 65 (October 3, 1888). After he arrived in Arles, Gauguin wrote Bernard, "It's funny, Vincent sees something like a Daumier to do here, while I, on the other hand, see a colored Puvis to make Japanese blended." Quoted by Evert van Uitert, "Van Gogh and Gauguin in Competition," *Simiolus*, IX, 1977, 154, from Maurice Malingue, ed., *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et ses amis*, Paris, 1946, 151.

³⁴ *Letters*, No. 538, III, 38 (ca. September 17, 1888).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 552, III, 77 (October 13, 1888).

³⁶ A thorough interpretation is given by Haruo Arikawa, "La Berceuse." An Interpretation of Vincent van Gogh's Portraits," *Kokuritsu Seiyo Bijutsukan. Bulletin annuel du musée national d'art occidental*, xv, 1981, 31-75.

³⁷ *Letters*, No. 574, III, 129 (January 28, 1889). See also No. 575, III, 132 (January 30, 1889) and No. 592, III, 171 with a sketch (May 22, 1889).



12 Forain, *Le jardin de Paris*, ca. 1882. Lugano, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



13 Van Gogh, *La berceuse: Mme Augustine Roulin*, 1888. Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller

who would have seemed to belong to another age, and they would be middle-class women of the present day, and yet they would have had something in common with the very primitive Christians.

However, the emotions which that rouses are too strong, I shall stop at that.³⁸

³⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 605, III, 211 (September 7 or 8, 1889).

The passage illustrates a thought process typical of Van Gogh. He paints the reality before him, at the same time conceptually exalting it onto a higher level of meaning, so that Augustine Roulin becomes both *La berceuse* and a modern Madonna.

Painful though it was for him, Van Gogh was able to articulate the process by which mundane reality became religious symbol in the case of the *Berceuse*. The same process lay behind other paintings, including the *Starry Night*, but Van Gogh was unable to articulate it because "the emotions which that rouses are too strong." Ever since his loss of faith, he had repressed conventional religious thoughts and images. He was aghast when the hallucinations he had during his attacks were religious in nature.³⁹ Memory and the unconscious burst the bonds of repression then. They did the same in his act of painting the *Starry Night*. For it is, as much as the *Berceuse*, a traditional religious subject in disguise.

Before this argument can be developed, however, it is necessary to return to the last pertinent passage of letter 595:

Gauguin, Bernard and I may stop at that point perhaps and not conquer, but neither shall we be conquered; perhaps we exist for neither the one thing nor for the other, but to give consolation or to prepare the way for a painting that will give even greater consolation.

We have inferred from the earlier excerpts of this letter that Van Gogh intended the *Starry Night* as an ideal vision, exalted above the reality of a St.-Ouen or a St.-Rémy. The last excerpt clearly implies that it was further intended to be an image of consolation. It was exactly those qualities Van Gogh specified when he first mentioned painting a starry night: on April 8, 1888, in the letter to Bernard already quoted, he wrote of developing the imagination so as to create a "more exalting and consoling nature."

To give consolation was Van Gogh's lifelong aim, first as a missionary, then as an artist. His painting was to fulfill the same purpose as his evangelism: to give comfort to its audience. It sprang from the same deep-seated psychological root: Van Gogh's virtually compulsive urge to console his fellow men for the miseries of life. This urge, basic to Vincent's personality and constant in his life, was essentially religious.

The consolation evoked by the *Starry Night*, however, is not the consolation of personal empathy that the evangelist Van Gogh offered to the miners in the Borinage and that was still apparent in his earlier pictures of Dutch peasants. It is rather the consolation that comes from the sense of being in tune with the deeper forces of the universe, forces powerfully suggested by the blazing turbulence of the *Starry Night*. To use Van Gogh's terms again, he exalts nature through his imagination to create an image of consolation.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 605, III, 208 (September 7 or 8, 1889); No. 607, III, 218 (September 19, 1889).

That the *Starry Night* is an image of consolation is further suggested by the moon. I have noted that it was not a crescent when the painting was done. Could it then have some symbolic significance?

Other works by Van Gogh that include a crescent moon seem to have had emotional connotations for him. In a canvas intended as decoration for Gauguin's room in Arles — one of the series Van Gogh called *The Poet's Garden* — a crescent moon rises above two figures the artist identifies as lovers (Fig. 14).⁴⁰ A similar couple appears beneath a large crescent moon in *The Evening Walk* (Fig. 15). If Matthias Arnold is correct in suggesting that the red-haired, red-bearded man is a self-portrait, then it is likely that the moon in this painting also has some private emotional significance.⁴¹

It is probably impossible to specify the precise nature of that significance, but it can be approached by considering two crescent moons Van Gogh drew before he became a painter. On November 15, 1878, towards the end of his evangelical training in Laeken, he wrote eagerly of becoming an evangelist to the miners in the Borinage. He sketched a local inn, *Au charbonnage*, where miners congregated (Fig. 16). Over its roof is a crescent moon, although, just as in the case of the *Starry Night*, the actual moon was not crescent then. The crescent in the drawing may be an emblematic manifestation of Van Gogh's deeply felt emotions about his anticipated life serving the miners of the Borinage.

When he went to the Borinage, Van Gogh took with him a book containing psalms set to music and other hymns.⁴² In the 634 pages of that book, Van Gogh made only one drawing, really just a doodle, but that doodle is in the shape of a crescent moon (Fig. 17). It is in the margin of the following verse, which Van Gogh underlined:

L'Éternel seul est ma lumière
Ma deliverance et mon appui:
Qu'aurai-je a craindre sur la terre
Puisque ma force est toute en lui?

It is a verse of faith and consolation. Thus the crescent alongside it presumably is an emblem of faith and consolation or, more accurately, of an inchoate congeries of emo-

tions embracing faith and consolation.

It is as such an emblem that the crescent moon in the *Starry Night* should be understood: an emblem of consolation in a painting meant to be consoling.⁴³

The Meaning of the *Starry Night*

In September, 1888, Van Gogh confessed to "having a terrible need of — shall I say the word — religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars."⁴⁴ The exalted, consoling image of the *Starry Night* was the result of that process of sublimation. Recognizing its essentially religious nature, scholars have tried to relate it to the Bible. Meyer Schapiro suggested it may make unconscious reference to the passage in Revelation describing the vision of a woman "robed with the sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."⁴⁵ Sven Loevgren related it to Joseph's dream when "the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars made obeisance to me."⁴⁶

The problem with these interpretations is that there is no sun in the *Starry Night*. Schapiro and Loevgren try to avoid this obstacle by claiming that the sun is conjoined with the moon. Nothing in Van Gogh's writings supports this interpretation, nor does close examination of the painting. When Van Gogh paints the sun in other paintings of 1889, such as *Wheatfield Behind St. Paul's Hospital with Reaper* (Fig. 18), he clearly marks its perimeter and he applies the brushstrokes as though they were centrifugal, cupping them about the center from all sides (Fig. 19). The C-shaped strokes of the supposed sun in the *Starry Night* do not follow this pattern (Fig. 20). Concentric with the crescent of the moon, they are functions of that body. They do not define the sun or anything else.

Nevertheless, the *Starry Night* can still be related to a specific religious subject. In the summer of 1888, when Van Gogh was first dreaming of painting a starry night, he was struggling with another painting, the only religious picture he ever attempted except for copies of other artists' works. The subject was *Christ with the Angel in Gethsemane* or *The Agony in the Garden*.

It was a subject that had long been in Van Gogh's consciousness. When younger he had been moved by renditions of it by artists as different as Corot, Ary Scheffer,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 556, III, 92 (ca. October 21, 1888). Van Gogh specifically mentioned "a crescent moon in pale citron" and included it in the sketch of the painting he sent with this letter.

⁴¹ Matthias Arnold, "Rekonstruktion ohne Interpretation," *Weltkunst*, xix, October 1, 1983, 2556. The only other paintings by Van Gogh that have a crescent moon are *The Cypresses* (F613) in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and *Road with Cypress and Star* (F683) in the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. Van Gogh describes the latter as "Very romantic, if you like, but also Provence, I think" (*Letters*, No. 643, III, 287).

⁴² *Recueil de psaumes et cantiques à l'orage des églises réformées*, Paris and Strasbourg, 1865; see P. Secrétan-Rollier, "Looking Through Vincent's Book of Psalms," *Vincent*, II, 4, 1973, 21-24. The book is now in the library of the Van Gogh Museum. Unfortunately for my argument,

the doodle of the moon is not in the consolation section of the book.

⁴³ The cypresses in the *Starry Night* probably have emblematic significance too. The cypress is a common symbol of death. Van Gogh seems to have been aware of this. He refers to one cypress as "funereal" (*Letters*, No. 541, III, 47) and several times describes them as black. Standing like a gate between the viewer and the heavens, the cypress in the *Starry Night* may be meant to mark the passage from life to death; "We take death to reach a star," Van Gogh wrote in July 1888 (*Letters*, No. 506, II, 605).

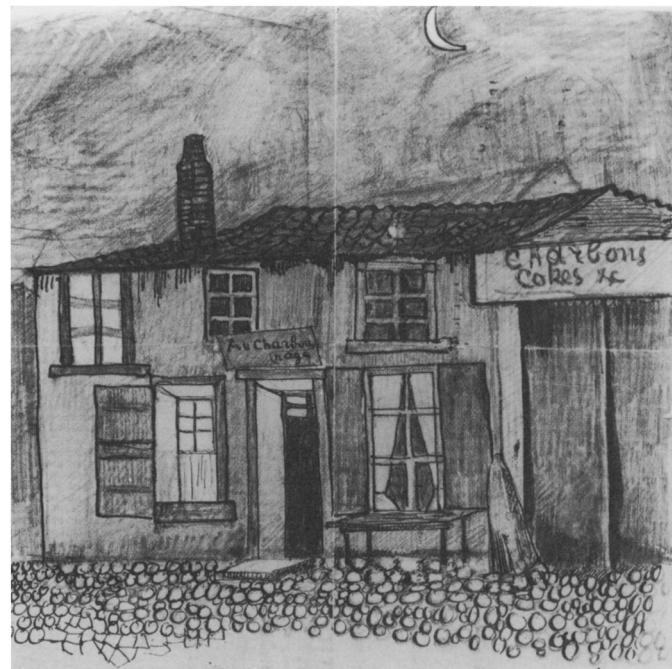
⁴⁴ *Letters*, No. 543, III, 56 (ca. September 29, 1888).

⁴⁵ M. Schapiro, *Vincent van Gogh*, New York, 1950, 33-34. The biblical source is Revelation 12:1.

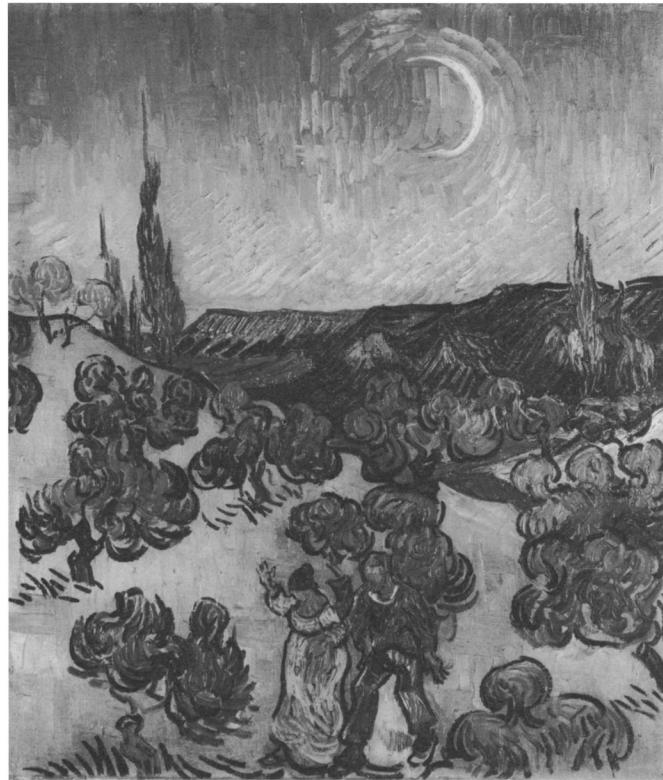
⁴⁶ Loevgren (as in n. 2), 185-186. The biblical source is Genesis 37:9.



14 Van Gogh, *The Lovers: The Poet's Garden*, 1888. Location unknown (photo: Rijksbureau voor kunsthistorische Documentatie)



16 Van Gogh, *Café "Au charbonnage,"* 1878. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh



15 Van Gogh, *The Evening Walk*, 1889 or 1890. São Paulo, Museu de Arte

CANTIQUE 120. 463

Andantino.

voir joyeusement soumise, El-le te suit dans une
sainte ar-deur. Tu lui don-nas en tout temps pour de-
vi - se: « Nous tri-omphons en notre Dieu sau-veur. »

CANTIQUE 121.

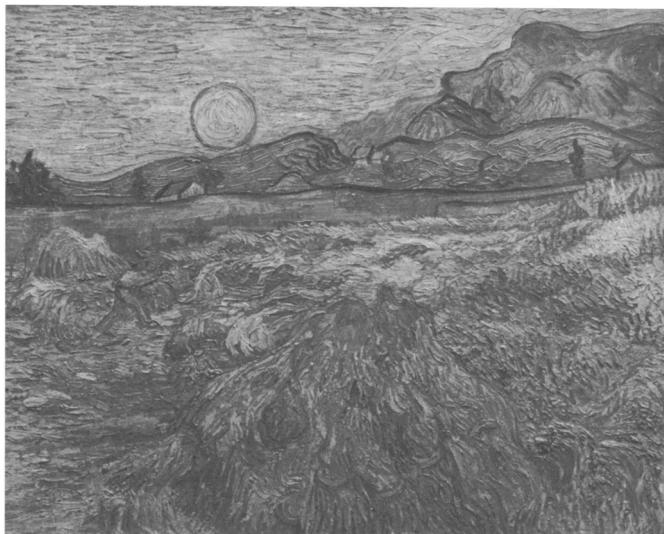
(Des Chants chrétiens le 13^e.)

l'È-ter-nel seul est ma lu - miè - re Ma dé-
livrance et mon ap-pui: Qu'aurai-je à craindre
sur la ter-re Puisque ma force est toute en lui?

2. Mes en-ne-mis à leur ma - li - ce Voulaient
me fai - re suc-com-ber; Mais sous mes yeux leur
in - jus - ti - ce Les a fait bron-cher et tom-ber.

3. Pour m'as-sail-lir, quand une ar - mè - e

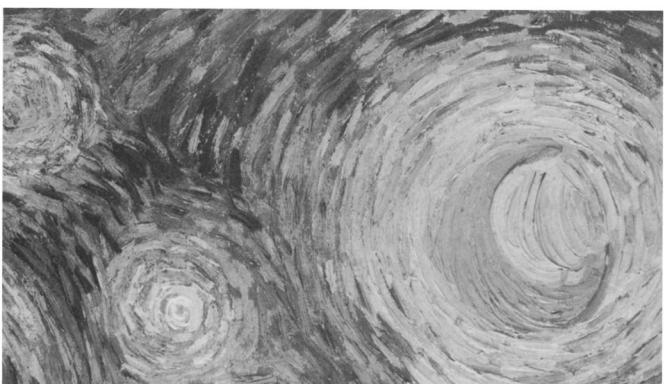
17 Page of Van Gogh's book of psalms containing crescent doodle. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh



18 Van Gogh, *Wheatfield Behind St. Paul's Hospital with Reaper*, 1889. Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller



19 Detail of Fig. 18



20 Detail of Fig. 1

and Carlo Dolci. Corot's painting, he wrote, "affected me deeply;"⁴⁷ Scheffer's was "unforgettable."⁴⁸ Dolci's (Fig. 21) he called "Rembrandtesque" and compared it to "that large round etching of the same subject after Rembrandt."⁴⁹ Van Gogh was probably not referring to Rembrandt's etching (B.75), which is small, but to a painting now attributed to Aert de Gelder (Fig. 22).⁵⁰ In either case, the link that Van Gogh saw between Dolci and the etching after Rembrandt was their common iconography. Both illustrate Luke 22:43: "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him."

There is no angel in the paintings by Corot and Scheffer: they portray Christ's anguish in Gethsemane. By choosing the episode of the angel, which occurs only in the Gospel of Saint Luke, Dolci and Rembrandt or De Gelder emphasize instead the act of succoring — consolation in the midst of suffering.

That is exactly what Van Gogh hoped to bring to the miners in the Borinage. His comments on the depictions of *The Agony in the Garden* by Dolci and Rembrandt (and also Corot) occur in the very same letter of November 15, 1878, that anticipates his evangelical work in the Borinage and includes the drawing of the miners' inn (Fig. 16). In contemplation of his forthcoming mission, Van Gogh's mind turned to Gethsemane and at some level of consciousness he took Saint Luke's story of the agonizing Christ and the ministering angel as a parallel to his own situation.

The Agony in the Garden would have had a strong appeal for Van Gogh in any case. He viewed human existence as a long suffering. The most one could give or receive during life was consolation for its sadness and strength to accept it. Saint Luke's account of "the angel who, in Gethsemane, gave strength unto Him whose soul was sorrowful even unto death"⁵¹ was for Van Gogh a natural metaphor

⁴⁷ *Letters*, No. 126, 1, 180 (November 15, 1878). Van Gogh first mentioned seeing the painting in the Corot exhibition in Paris in 1875: *Letters*, No. 27, 1, 27 (May 31, 1875). The painting is now in the museum of Langres, France. It is in very bad condition. At my request, the conservateur, Roland May, very kindly examined the canvas and confirmed that the figure of Christ in the center is not accompanied by an angel; the Apostles are to the right, Judas and the soldiers are in the left background, and there is a crescent moon(!).

⁴⁸ *Letters*, No. 84, 1, 92 (January 21, 1877). Scheffer's painting is in the Dordrecht Museum where Van Gogh saw it. In contrast to the narrative scene of Corot, with many figures in a landscape, it shows Christ half-length against a dark background.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 126, 1, 180 (November 15, 1878).

⁵⁰ C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, Esslingen a. N., 1907-28, vi, 74, No. 120. I am grateful to Dr. J.P. Filed Kok for help on this point.

⁵¹ *Letters*, No. 99, 1, 121 (May 31, 1877). This letter was written as Van Gogh was beginning theological studies in Amsterdam. The excerpt quoted is from a passage listing angelic interventions from the Bible: the angel who brought food and drink to Elijah in the wilderness, the angel who liberated Peter from prison, and the angel who appeared to Paul. Van Gogh cites them to illustrate his belief that "it is good to believe that now, just as in the olden days, an angel is not far off from those who are sad . . . And we, even if we should not see an angel, even though we are not like the men of old, should we not know there is strength from above?"

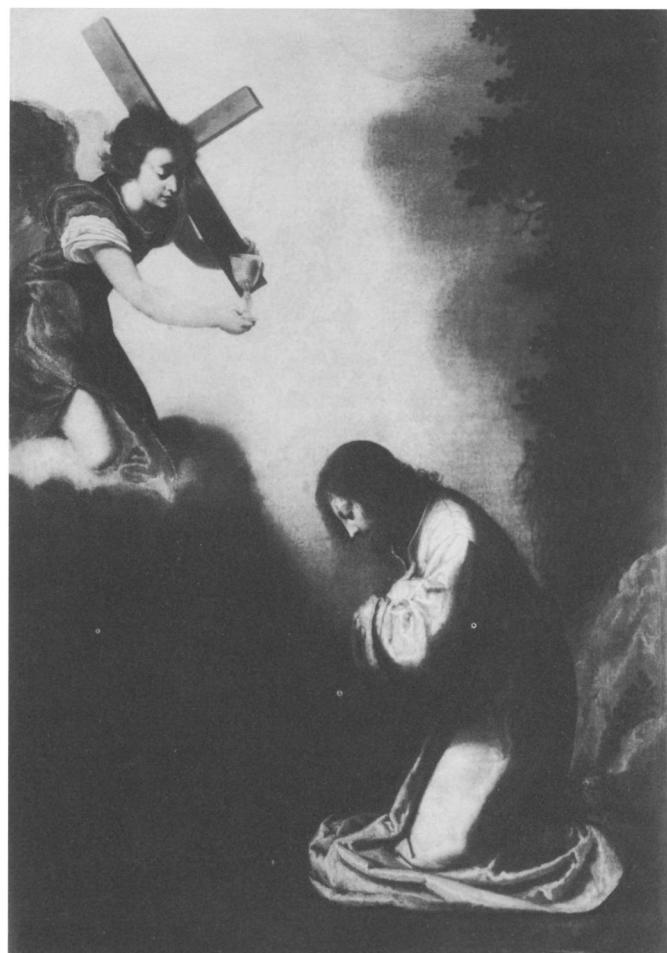
of life. Indeed, as the conclusion of the very first sermon he ever gave, in England in 1876, he used an image clearly borrowed from Saint Luke: "Has not man a strife on earth? But there is a consolation from God in this life. An Angel of God comforting man — that is the Angel of charity."⁵²

Later, he often used the episode of Gethsemane as a metaphor for a situation of extreme difficulty. Monticelli, an artist with whom Van Gogh strongly identified, probably passed through "a regular Gethsemane," he wrote his sister in 1888.⁵³ The next year, when Wilhelmina was nursing a cancer victim, Vincent complimented her on her bravery "not to shrink from this Gethsemane."⁵⁴ In 1883, at one of the most melancholy points of his life, when his liaison with Sien Hoornik in The Hague was breaking up, he declared, "A 'Paradou' is beautiful, but Gethsemane is even more beautiful."⁵⁵

In the summer of 1888, Van Gogh attempted to put on canvas an image of the Gethsemane story which meant so much to him. Not surprisingly, he chose the episode from Saint Luke of the angel strengthening Christ. But he could not bring himself to finish it. Twice, in July and September, he scraped off the canvas.⁵⁶ He rationalized that he could not paint a figural composition without models, but in my opinion the block was as much psychological as visual. The erstwhile evangelist who had abandoned conventional religious belief could not paint a conventional religious image.

When he wrote of scraping off the second Gethsemane canvas, Van Gogh continued, "I have the thing in my head with the colors, a starry night, the figure of Christ in blue, all the strongest blues, and the angel blended citron-yellow. And every shade of violet, from a blood-red purple to ashen, in the landscape."⁵⁷

The "starry night" Van Gogh had in his head for *The Agony in the Garden* became, I believe, the exalted *Starry Night* of St.-Rémy. The blue for Christ and the citron-yellow for the angel became the sky, and the stars and moon. The desire in 1888 to paint a starry night as an image of consolation and the attempt in 1888 to paint the episode of consolation in Gethsemane unconsciously merged and became the *Starry Night* of 1889. Unable to paint *The Agony in the Garden*, Van Gogh projected its emotional content onto nature and created a sublimated image of his deepest religious feelings. At its most profound level, the *Starry Night* is Van Gogh's *Agony*.



21 Carlo Dolci *The Agony in the Garden*. Florence, Palazzo Pitti



22 Aert de Gelder, *The Agony in the Garden*. Formerly Cook Collection, Richmond (photo: Witt Library)

⁵² *Ibid.*, I, 91.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, W8, III, 445 (ca. August 27, 1888).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, W11, III, 449 (April 30, 1889).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 319, II, 128 (ca. September 4, 1883). Vincent's use of the French patois form *Paradou* is apparently a reference to something Theo had written him about, possibly a painting at the Salon. See *ibid.*, No. 286, II, 36 (ca. May 21, 1883): "'Le Paradou' must have been glorious indeed. Yes, I should not mind trying my hand at such a thing."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 505, II, 601 (July 8, 1888); No. 540, III, 46-47 (ca. September 22, 1888); B19, III, 517 (October 4, 1888), in which Van Gogh wrote, "I have mercilessly destroyed one important canvas — a 'Christ with the Angel in Gethsemane'."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 540, III, 47 (ca. September 22, 1888).

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Appendix

Excerpt from Letter No. 595, Vincent to Theo, June 17 or 18, 1889

Enfin j'ai un paysage avec des oliviers et aussi une nouvelle étude de ciel étoilé. Tout en n'ayant pas vu les dernières toiles ni de Gauguin ni de Bernard, je suis assez persuadé que ces deux études, que je te cite, sont dans un sentiment parallèle.

Lorsque pendant quelque temps tu auras vu ces deux études, ainsi que celle du lierre, mieux que par des paroles je pourrai peut-être te donner une idée des choses dont Gauguin, Bernard et moi ont quelquefois causé et qui nous ont préoccupé; ce n'est pas un retour au romantique ou à des idées religieuses, non. Cependant en passant par le Delacroix, davantage que cela paraîsse, par la couleur et un dessin plus volontaire que l'exac-titude trompe-l'œil, on exprimerait une nature de campagne plus pure que la banlieue, les cabarets de Paris.

On chercherait à peindre des êtres humains également plus sereins et plus purs que Daumier n'en avait sous les yeux, mais bien entendu en

suivant Daumier pour le dessin de cela.

Que cela existe ou n'existe pas, nous le laissons de côté, mais nous croyons que la nature s'étend au delà de St.-Ouen.

Peut-être tout en lisant Zola, nous sommes émus par le son du pur français de Renan par exemple.

Et enfin alors que le Chat Noir nous dessine des femmes à sa façon et surtout Forain magistralement, on fait des siennes, moins parisiens mais n'aimant pas moins Paris et ses élégances, nous cherchons à prouver qu'il y a alors encore tout autre chose.

Gauguin, Bernard ou moi, nous y resterons tous peut-être et ne vaincrons pas, mais pas non plus serons-nous vaincus, nous sommes peut-être pas là pour l'un ou pour l'autre, étant là pour consoler ou pour préparer de la peinture plus consolante.⁵⁸

Bibliography

The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh, 3 vols., Greenwich, CT, 1958. For the dates of the letters, I have followed Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Arles*, New York, 1984, for the period Van Gogh was in Arles (February 21, 1888-May 8, 1889), and Jan Hulsker, *Van Gogh door Van Gogh*, Amsterdam, 1973, for the other letters.

F numbers for Van Gogh's paintings and drawings refer to the revised edition of De la Faille's catalogue raisonné: J.-B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*, Amsterdam and New York, 1970.

⁵⁸ *Verzamelde Brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam and Antwerp, 1953, III, 432.