VAN GOGH'S "STARRY NIGHT" AND WHITMAN: A Study in Source

JEAN SCHWIND

RECENT DISCUSSIONS of Whitman's influence on Van Gogh's "Starry Night" have been unsatisfying because they have ignored important details of Van Gogh's verbal and visual references to Whitman. While Van Gogh's letter to his sister about "the American poems by Whitman" is frequently quoted as evidence that Van Gogh was avidly reading Whitman at the time he was painting "Starry Night," it has been quoted with a distorting incompleteness. The neglected final portion of Van Gogh's remarks about Whitman in his letter to Wilhelmien is critically significant because—contrary to theories that "Starry Night" is informed by the sexually charged forces of the "bare-bosom'd night" and the "voluptuous . . . earth" in *Song of Myself* or by the "cosmic consciousness" reflected in the star imagery of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"—Van Gogh's full reference to Whitman suggests that he was most profoundly moved by the Columbus poems in *Leaves of Grass*.[1] Van Gogh notably concludes his general praise for Whitman by particularly recommending "The Prayer of Columbus":

> Have you read the American poems by Whitman? I am sure Theo has them, and I strongly advise you to read them, because to begin with they are really fine, and the English speak of them a good deal. He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank—of friendship—of work—under the great starlit vault of heaven a something which after all one can only call God—and eternity in its place above this world. At first it makes you smile, it is all so candid and pure; but it sets you thinking for the same reason. The prayer of Christopher Columbus is particularly beautiful.[2]

The specificity of this final reference to Whitman illuminates "Starry Night" because the details of Van Gogh's painting support the details of his letter: both point to the particular influence of Whitman's Columbus poems. The allusion to Whitman's *From Noon the Starry Night* (1881) in the title of Van Gogh's painting is crucially important because Whitman—and particularly the later Columbian Whitman of "Passage to India" and "The Prayer of Columbus" that Van Gogh recommends to his sister—explains more of the painting's imagery and explains it more thoroughly than any current interpretations. Van Gogh's deadened village; the polaric opposition of the cypress on the left side of the composition and the village on the right; the contrasting patterns of lines, swirls, and complete circles; and the fraternal theme implicit in the biblical allusion of the painting's eleven stars

all point to Whitman in a way that suggests that Van Gogh's quotation from Whitman is not limited to his title. "Starry Night" is a brilliant pictorial summary of "the American poems by Whitman"; it is literally the "poetic subject" that Van Gogh once called it in a letter to his brother Theo because it is informed by the central themes and images of the poet of the original "Starry Night."[3]

II

Never publicly exhibited before 1905 and unremarked by the few friends who saw it in his brother's art shop, "Starry Night" was reviewed in Van Gogh's lifetime only by his brother Theo. In a letter to Vincent written in June 1889, Theodore Van Gogh describes "Starry Night" as a "worrisome" departure from "simple studies of what you can see" and as a "mystical speculation" of dubious therapeutic value for a man in a sanatorium.[4] While later critics have been more sympathetic than Theo, who advises his brother to "stick to still lifes and flowers," it is debatable whether recent studies of "Starry Night" as "psychopathic art," a vision of apocalyptic doom, or a modern version of the Agony in the Garden represent an improvement over Theo's cautionary assessment of the painting as a "penetration into mysterious regions which cannot be taken with impunity."[5]

As the major work of Van Gogh's long period of recovery from the mental and emotional collapse that dramatically culminated in the famous Christmas-Day ear amputation of 1888, "Starry Night" has been studied by as many psychologists as art historians, and interpretations of the painting Van Gogh simply described as his "poetic subject" are naturally diverse. Psychological and physiological theories that seem to account for certain formal aspects of "Starry Night" notably discount the iconography of the painting, which is dismissed as "hallucinatory."[6] Albert J. Lubin's explanation of "Starry Night's" swirling brushstrokes and violent distortions of perspective, for example, is contradicted by the remarkably straight lines that make up the walls, roofs, and windows of Van Gogh's village. Citing a number of letters in which Van Gogh complains of vertigo, Lubin suggests that the "swirling line patterns" of "Starry Night" are evidence of the dizziness that accompanied Van Gogh's physical and mental deterioration. Unlike the huts and villages of Van Gogh's other St. Rémy landscapes, however, the valley town of "Starry Night" is not rendered with the same spiraling wavy brushstrokes that Van Gogh uses to depict the surrounding natural landscape (Figures 1–3). Carefully executed with a linear regularity and evenness that sharply contrasts with the circular symmetry of Van Gogh's stars and the vital curves of his cypress, hills, and sky, the town of "Starry Night" testifies to an artistic control that Lubin's theory denies.

If Lubin's analysis of "Starry Night's" "dizziness of style" is clearly inade-

quate, studies more sensitive to the iconographic details of the painting are equally problematic. Meyer Shapiro, the first critic to note that Van Gogh's moon is also a sun, contends that "Starry Night" depicts the apocalyptic vision of Revelation 12:1–4:

> And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailed in birth, and pained to be delivered.

The biblical source that Shapiro suggests for "Starry Night" seems questionable not only because it fails to illuminate Van Gogh's tree and village, but because it distorts the galaxy of stars that it attempts to explain. As Anne Sexton notes in her poem "Starry Night," the night sky "boils with eleven stars."[7] That the exact number is critically significant is suggested by the most important revision which Van Gogh made in painting "Starry Night" from his detailed ink study (Figure 4). In the finished painting, Van Gogh shortens his cypress to allow for the addition of an eleventh star at the tip of the tree. He also clarifies the circular outlines of his remaining ten stars to distinguish them more thoroughly from the wavelike swirls of his turbulent sky.

The eleven stars of "Starry Night" are more accurately accounted for by another scriptural text, one that Sven Lövgren offers to support his reading of the work as Van Gogh's modernization of traditional Garden of Gethsemane scenes. In letters to Emile Bernard, Van Gogh repeatedly criticized the overtly religious paintings of Bernard and Paul Gauguin as "rapes of nature" that stupidly attempt to "revive medieval tapestries."[8] The paintings that Van Gogh particularly cites for "getting on [his] nerves" are the two versions of "Christ in the Garden of Olives." (Typically, the egotistical Gauguin portrays himself as Jesus in his "Agony in the Garden"; in Bernard's "Garden," Gauguin is recast as Judas.) Lövgren argues that "Starry Night" illustrates what Van Gogh writes in his letter to Bernard: the personal isolation and suffering which are the essence of Christ's Agony in the Garden can be expressed "without aiming straight at the historic Garden of Gethsemane."[9] The way Van Gogh describes two separate landscapes in this letter suggests a connection between "Starry Night" and Bernard's "Christ in the Garden" as visions of personal anguish:

> Here is a description of a canvas which is here in front of me at the moment. A view of the park of the asylum where I am staying ["The Park at St. Paul's Hospital" (1889)]. . . . This edge of the park is planted with large pine trees. . . . The nearest tree is an enormous trunk, struck by lightning and sawed off. But one side branch shoots up very high and lets fall an avalanche of dark green pine needles. This sombre giant—like a defeated proud man—contrasting, when considered in the nature of a living creature, with the pale smile of a last rose on the fading bush in front of him. . . .

Another canvas shows the sun rising over a field of young wheat; lines floating away, furrows rising up high into the picture toward a row of lilac hills. . . . The sun is surrounded by a great yellow halo. Here, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calmness, a great peace.

I am telling you about these two canvases, especially about the first one, to remind you that one can try to give an impression of anguish without aiming straight at the historic Garden of Gethsemane; that it is not necessary to portray the characters of the Sermon on the Mount in order to produce a consoling and gentle motif.[10]

In "Starry Night," the "defeated proud" cypress keeps a solitary vigil while the town beneath it sleeps, and the biblical text that Lövgren cites to explain Van Gogh's strange constellation further emphasizes the Gethsemane theme of human betrayal and isolated suffering. According to Lövgren, "Starry Night" quotes not the Book of Revelation, but the Book of Genesis. Van Gogh's mystical sky is the vision of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob who endures a fraternal betrayal which prefigures the desertion of Christ's disciples in the Garden of Olives:

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father and to his brethren. And his father rebuked him and said unto him: What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow ourselves down to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying. (Genesis 37:9–11)

In explaining "Starry Night" as a response to the "medieval" "Christ in the Garden" paintings of Gauguin and Bernard, Lövgren mentions in passing that Van Gogh's work might also have been inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman. The title of the painting, he suggests, is a quotation from one of the first sections of *Leaves of Grass* to appear in a popular French translation, *From Noon to Starry Night.* Translated by Francis Viélé-Griffin, *From Noon to Starry Night* was first published in France in 1888, the year before Van Gogh painted "Starry Night." While Lövgren briefly notes that "Starry Night" shares Whitman's "inspired conception of nature," he stops short of seriously considering Van Gogh's prominent allusion to Whitman as a key to the painting's imagery.[11] That Whitman is central to "Starry Night" is suggested not only by the reference of the title, but by Van Gogh's description of the work in his letters. "Starry Night," Van Gogh told his brother and Bernard, was his only "poetic" or imaginative subject; it is a version of the portrait of "the poet in a starry night" that Van Gogh first mentioned to Bernard in late 1888.[12]

One of the most literary of the post-impressionists, Van Gogh read widely in English and French as well as in his native Dutch. The well-worn copies of novels by Zola, Maupassant, and the Goncourts in several of Van Gogh's still lifes and portraits pay tribute to a few of the authors mentioned in Van

Gogh's letters. The familiarity with Whitman which is most explicitly evidenced by Van Gogh's 1889 letter to his sister is implicitly verified by the painting that prominently quotes Whitman in its title. The iconography of "Starry Night" deserves a careful reconsideration in light of the literary allusion of Van Gogh's title because the details of the painting suggest that Van Gogh read Whitman far more closely and insightfully than recent accounts of their shared organic "conception of nature and life" have implied.[13]

III

While a poet who defines himself as a son of Manhattan and Brooklyn and who celebrates the "labor saving machines" of the city as well as the "resurrection of the wheat" can hardly be accused of nostalgic pastoralism, "The City Dead-House" with its rejection of indoor life is a recurrent image in *Leaves of Grass* and a possible source of "Starry Night's" lifeless town.[14] In the opening sections of *Song of Myself,* Whitman presents the "dead-house" as a metaphor for the accepted forms, conventions, and "creeds and schools" which inhibit us from expressing "nature without check with original energy" (l. 13). Resolving to resist the attractions of "perfumes" already distilled, bottled, and shelved and instead to make poems from the odors of armpits, breath, and crotch, Whitman insists on the need to abandon moribund "houses and rooms" for air open on "all sides":

> Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are
> crowded with perfumes,
> I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
> The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall
> not let it.
> . . .
> Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the
> origin of all poems,
> You shall possess the good of the earth and sun. . . .
> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
> nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on
> the spectres in books. (ll. 14–16, 33–35)

An image of the "bounds binding us" and the "limits and imaginary lines" that constrain "fluid" life, Whitman's spectral "dead-house" reappears as the "fine house" by the sea of the twenty-ninth bather who initially stands trapped and "stock still" in her room in Section Eleven of *Song of Myself* and as the funeral house like the houses that exist "indifferently everywhere" where Whitman writes "Of Him I Loved Day and Night" (pp. 445–446). The significance of Whitman's "City Dead-House" clearly lies not in its exterior urban location, but in the stifling interior "living" space it contains, and the vow Whitman takes at the end of *Song of Myself* and renews in "Song

of the Open Road" is an affirmation of the "house of life" which is usually deadened and checked by "forms upright":

> I swear I will never again mention love or death inside
> a house,
> And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only
> to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air. . . .
> No shutter'd room or school can commune with me,
> But roughs and little children better than they. (ll. 1250–1251, 1255–1256)
> . . . .
> From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and
> imaginary lines. . .
> Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the
> holds that would hold me. . . .
> Whoever you are, come forth! or man or woman come forth!
> You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house,
> though you built it, or though it has been built for you. (ll. 53, 57, 189–190)

While imaginative content is rare in Van Gogh's paintings, the town of "Starry Night" is clearly fictive. Preliminary studies for "Starry Night" show the St. Rémy landscape as it appears from Van Gogh's hospital window, townless and without cypress (Figure 5). That the source of this fictional town might be Whitman is suggested by several details. The difference between the carefully delimited and constricted rectangles of light in the village and the immeasurable radiance of the stars above it is the difference between housebound life and energy "loos'd of limits and imaginary lines" that Whitman defines in his poetry. The contrast between the town's rigidly straight lines and dark shadows and the vigorous curves in primary colors of the landscape that surrounds it, and the location of the town in a compositional "burial place" between the high foreground and the hills in the background further suggest that "Starry Night's" town more closely resembles Whitman's "houses fuller of the dead than of the living" than the "eternal city" or "peaceful pilgrim's goal" described by a recent critic.[15]

On the contrary, Van Gogh's cypress suggests that the linear town of "Starry Night" represents not the pilgrim's goal so much as the cost of spiritual discipleship: it represents the life that must be abandoned by those who seek eternity. Straining with every branch to point to the stars above it, Van Gogh's cypress emphatically pulls away from the earthly sphere of his town and strives to reach the circular symmetry and luminance of the sky. In contrast to the inflexibly upright steeple of the village church, the tree's right-most bough points at a rather improbable ninety-degree angle—as if magnetically drawn—to the sun/moon. The next branch directs us to the next largest star, and each succeeding branch is tipped by a lesser light in the constellation.

The opposition suggested by the difference between the solidly anchored

town and the tree that seems determined to uproot itself as it reaches for the stars is further stressed by the lateral opposition of Van Gogh's compositional design. The only building facade squarely facing the frontal plane of the picture—the central facade of the church—marks the middle of the landscape and effectively bifurcates the lower picture space. The cypress dominates the left side of the painting, while the huddled buildings of the village are concentrated on the right. The significance of this bilateral opposition is illuminated by a letter which suggests that Van Gogh originally planned "Starry Night" as a pendant-piece. Shortly after "Starry Night" was completed, Paul Gauguin was appointed to organize an art exhibit for the 1890 World's Fair. Hoping to be included in the show, Van Gogh wrote to Theo about mounting "Starry Night" for display. Although Van Gogh's painting was finally excluded from the exhibit, his instructions regarding "Starry Night" are nonetheless important. "Starry Night," Van Gogh told Theo, must hang with its daylight counterpart, his "Wheatfield with Cypress" (1889; Figure 6).[16]

"Wheatfield with Cypress" presents the landscape of "Starry Night" at midday. (While the sun is not visible in this second work, the shadowless bright colors of the "Wheatfield" suggest the overhead sun of noon.) Paired with the midnight landscape, "Wheatfield with Cypress" visually completes Van Gogh's quotation from Whitman: the pendant paintings progress "From Noon to Starry Night." "Wheatfield" depicts the "hot October noon" of "Thou Orb Aloft Full Dazzling"—the opening poem of *From Noon to Starry Night*—in the same way that "Starry Night" most explicitly evokes the section's final poem, "A Clear Midnight." Besides the shift in time, the most immediately striking difference between these paired paintings is the radical shift in the position of the cypress. The transition "From Noon to Starry Night" is marked not as we might expect, by the westward movement of a setting sun, but by a leftward movement of Van Gogh's solitary tree.

This curious lateral movement is best explained by what Svetlana Alpers has identified as the "mapping impulse" in Dutch art.[17] As Alpers points out, since the Renaissance Dutch artisans served as the premier mapmakers of Europe, and many of the distinctive features of later Dutch painting (such as the conceptualization of the picture-space as a flat surface like a mirror or a map rather than the perspectivist window of Italian masters and an insistence on minutely detailed description) are rooted in the craft of cartography. The particular mapmaking tradition that Van Gogh exploits in his shifting cypress is the convention governing the representation of east-west direction. Through his wavelike brushstrokes, Van Gogh presents his sky in "Starry Night" as an inscribed or chartered sea. Pictured against this mapped ocean, the changing position of the tree between "Wheatfield" and "Starry Night" represents not merely a leftward movement but a westward navigation.

Figure 1: Vincent Van Gogh, "Starry Night" (1889). Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.

The western voyage traced in Van Gogh's paired landscapes emphasizes the importance of "Starry Night's" inherent right-left or (using the conventions evoked by Van Gogh's painted or "mapped" sea) east-west antitheses and confirms what is implicit in the tree's humanly upright form: the cypress is the protagonist of "Starry Night." As Meyer Shapiro has noted, Van Gogh's tree is an eloquent "symbol of human striving." Yet this central symbol of "Starry Night" is far more precisely defined than Shapiro suggests: the human strife represented in the painting is very specifically identified by Van Gogh's pictorial details and title. Standing in solitary opposition to the town on the right or "eastern" part of the canvas and pointing to the heavenly spheres, the cypress represents the prophetic vision of cyclical planetary form and the momentous westward journey of the poems that Van Gogh recommends to his sister and obliquely cites in his title: Whitman's Columbus poems.

Like Whitman's "dead-house" image of repressed inner life, the Columbian voyage that "interlink[ed] all geography" is a central motif of *Leaves of Grass* (p. 490, l. 18). While it is with the later Columbus, outcast and

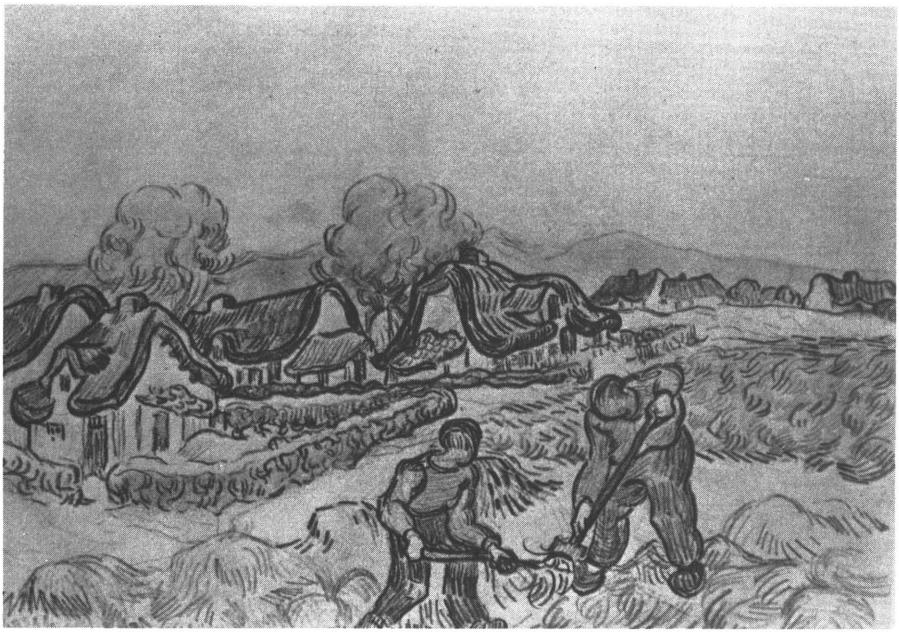

Figure 2: Van Gogh, "View of a Field with Two Peasants and Some Houses in the Background" (1889–90). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

scorned by his countrymen, that Whitman most explicitly identifies in "Passage to India" and "Prayer of Columbus," the younger voyaging explorer inspired by a "potent, felt, interior command" is implicit in Whitman's poetry as early as *Song of Myself.* Columbus "in shackles, prison'd, in disgrace"—his discovery greeted by "misfortunes, calumniators . . . dejection, poverty, [and] death" (pp. 417; 422)—is preceded in Whitman's poetry by the solitary western navigator traveling against the currents of the time (the east-bound rush hour traffic) in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and by the "sailor of the western world" who abjures "solid motionless land" in "A Song of Joys." If the sexual politics and the relative positions of Adam and Eve remain somewhat ambiguous in Whitman's Eden ("By my side or back of me Eve following, / Or in front, and I following her just the same" [p. 90]), the shape and direction of their mutual journeying is clearly Columbian. Deposited by "revolving cycles" in the "new garden of the West," Whitman's American Adam (presumably accompanied, followed, or led by Eve) rises with the morning sun in the east and travels from Paradise to Manhattan and on to the western prairies (pp. 107–111; 594). Whitman's conflation of Adam and Columbus becomes progressively stronger as later poems define the wandering "lusty and phallic . . . chanter of Adamic songs" as the commander of the "ship aboard the ship . . . ship of the body,

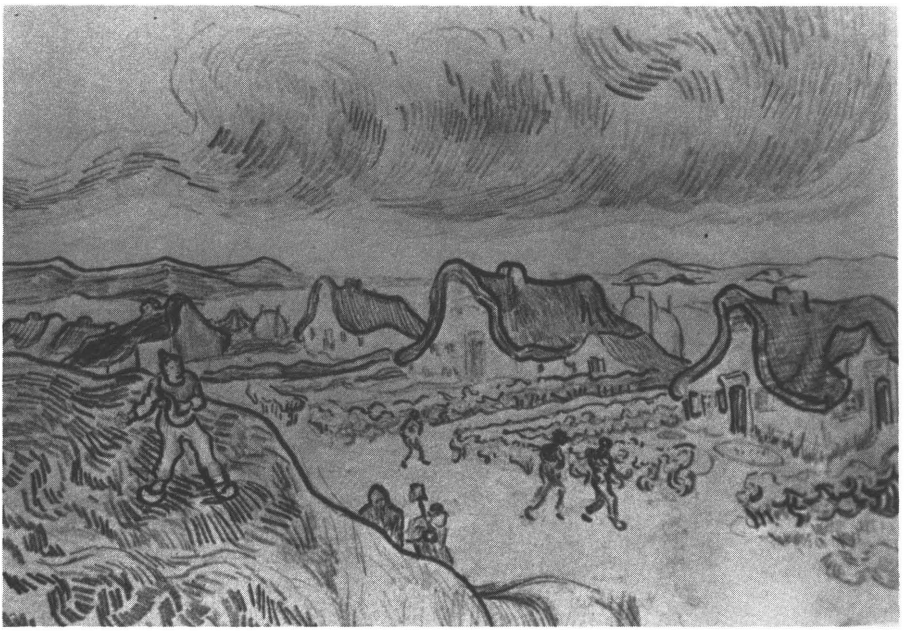

Figure 3: Van Gogh, "View of Field with a Sower Near a Road with Houses" (1889–90). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

ship of the soul, voyaging, voyaging, voyaging" ("Aboard at a Ship's Helm"). In "A Broadway Pageant" and "Passage to India," Whitman presents his American Adam as an heir to the Genoese prophet who proved the "rondure of the world" (p. 414). Carrying Columbus's repudiation of Thulean "limits and imaginary lines" to its logical conclusion, Whitman's Adam points beyond Cathay to a "passage to more than India":

> Superb-faced Manhattan!
> Comrades Americanos! to us, then at last the Orient comes. . . .
> The ring is circled, the journey is done. . . .
> Were the children straying westward so long? so wide the tramping?
> Were the precedent dim ages debouching westward from Paradise so long?
> Were the centuries steadily footing it that way, all the while
> unknown, for you, for reasons? ("A Broadway Pageant," ll. 21–22, 71, 77–79)

> (Ah Genoese thy dream! thy dream!
> Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,
> The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.) . . .
> Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,
> Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
> Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations . . .
> All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd
> and link'd together. . . . ("Passage to India," ll. 65–67, 88–90, 109)

Figure 4: Van Gogh, Ink Study for "Starry Night" (1889). This sketch, formerly in the Kunsthalle Museum in Bremen, Germany, was destroyed in World War II.[20]

Embracing Columbus's discovery of earthly "rondure" as a principle of human life, Whitman insists that "to be in any form" is to be round (*Song of Myself,* p. 57). While Whitman inexplicably gives "mathematical expression" to his central vision of cyclically recurring and evolving life by "Chanting the Square Deific," the geometric form that pervades his poetry is the circular design invoked at the beginning of *From Noon to Starry Night* in "Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling." Whitman's "square deific" is significantly deconstructed by its own fourth side, which is identified as the "general soul" of life and the spirit or "breath" of poetry. Described as the quintessential form underlying the "life of the great round world, the sun and stars, and of man," Whitman's Santa Spirita reconciles the linear oppositions of the other three sides of his "square deific"—God, Saviour, and Satan—by literally finishing or destroying the form that it completes. Whitman's four-part godhead or "square entirely divine" ends in a "great round," and this collapse of the poem's explicit Euclidean metaphor demonstrates the superior power of the "mathematical expression" implicit elsewhere in Whitman. Whitman's celebrations of his cosmic, orbiting self are preeminently chants of cycles, and not squares.

Figure 5: Van Gogh, "Cornfield with Hills" (1889). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

In the poem Van Gogh quotes in the title of "Starry Night," Whitman recognizes the "dazzling orb" as a "twin" or token of himself. Speaking to the sun on terms of friendly equanimity, he asks it to guide the twilight of his life as it has guided his "hot . . . noon":

> Nor only launch thy subtle dazzle and thy strength . . .
> Prepare the later afternoon of me myself—prepare my lengthening shadows,
> Prepare my starry nights. (p. 463, ll. 23–25)

In addressing the sun as an emblem of the perfect "fitting man," Whitman speaks in "Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling" as the round world incarnate: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" is the truth of the Columbian voyage "gloriously . . . compacted" ("Passage to India," p. 415). Like Emerson's Uriel—the heretical poet who defies "reverend use . . . / With a look that solved the sphere," who is evoked by Whitman's description of Columbus ("Gigantic, visionary . . . and pious beaming eyes, / Spreading around with every look . . . a golden world," [p. 417])—Whitman adopts the "geography of the world" as a poetic principle.[18] Both in his free-verse violations of traditional poetic lines and in thematic deconstructions of linear oppositions (east/west, body/soul, male/female, life/death), Whitman echoes Uriel's revolt "against the being of the line":

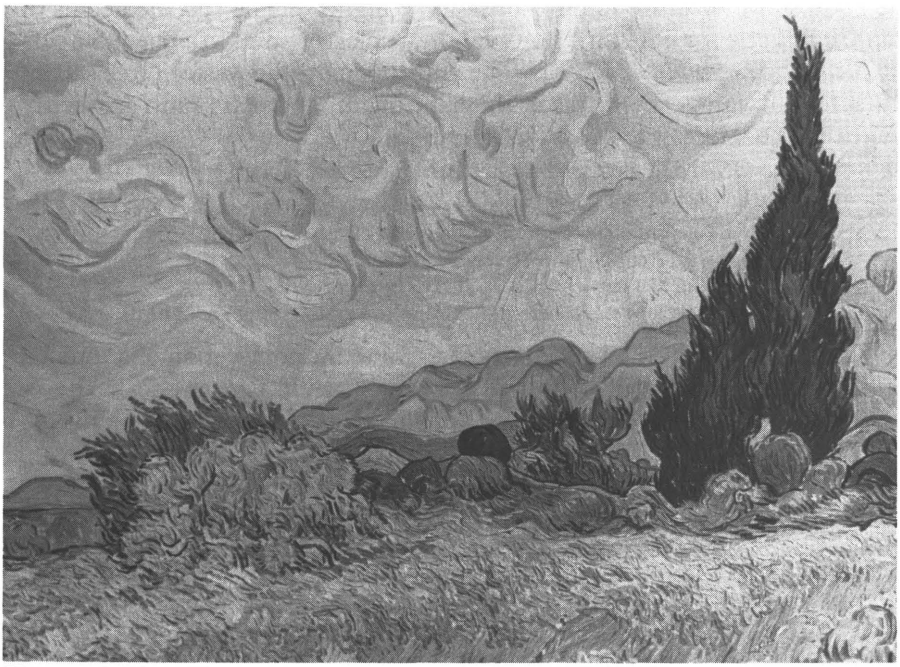

Figure 6: Van Gogh, "Wheatfield with Cypress" (1889). National Gallery, London.

> "Line in nature is not found;
> Unit and universe are round;
> In vain produced, all rays return;
> Evil will bless and ice will burn."
> As Uriel spoke with piercing eye,
> A shutter ran around the sky. . . .
> The balance beam of fate was bent;
> The bounds of good and ill were rent. (Emerson, "Uriel," ll. 21–32)

Uriel's vision of evolving and revolving nature equally informs Van Gogh's painting and Whitman's poetry. Following Emerson, Whitman insists that the true poet can see beyond apparent natural diversity and perceive the same "wheel'd universe" in a star, a leaf of grass, and a pile of compost. The obsessively circling brushstrokes of "Starry Night" vividly confirms Whitman's contention that "splendid suns, . . . moons and rings" undergird all natural life ("Germs," p. 270). Undercutting superficial differences in the density, color, and texture of his landscape elements, Van Gogh's swirling brushstrokes disclose the single, cyclical energizing force that unites his stars, sky, mountains, trees, and fields.

The imagery of "Starry Night" seems to quote the final poem of *From Noon to Starry Night*—"A Clear Midnight"—in the same way that Van Gogh's title quotes the opening poem of the cluster (where Whitman asks

the noon sun to prepare him for his "starry nights"). The specific details of Van Gogh's "clear midnight," however, more clearly point to a poem outside the *Noon to Starry Night* section. The anthropomorphic western tree straining across a sealike sky to reach the sun, moon, and stars most explicitly quotes the conclusion to "Passage to India":

> O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!
> Passage to you!
>
> Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!
> Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
> Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
> Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough? (ll. 240–245)

In "Passage to India" Whitman looks forward to the completion of a "mental [and] moral orb" that will be commensurate to the perfect physical orb discovered by Columbus. Anticipating an end to all human "separations and gaps," he prophesies a final fulfillment of Columbus's dream of a world "hook'd and link'd together" (p. 415). Hence the story of Joseph and his brothers evoked by the eleven stars in Van Gogh's sky strengthens rather than detracts from the quotation from Whitman in the painting's title, since the biblical story testifies to the same need for human brotherhood which propels Whitman's "passage to more than India":

> Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
> The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,
> Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
> As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
> The Younger melts in fondness in his arms. (ll. 219–223)

The concurrence of words, imagery, and theme that links Van Gogh's "Starry Night" to the celestial navigations projected in Whitman's Columbus poems is too striking to be dismissed as coincidence. The iconography and composition of "Starry Night" reinforce the allusion of Van Gogh's title in a way that explains his vague description of the painting as a "poetic subject." "Starry Night" quite literally represents "the poet *in* a starry night" because it is inspired by the poet *of* a "starry night."[19]

The University of Minnesota

NOTES

1 Lewis M. Layman examines the connection between *Song of Myself* and "Starry Night" in "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'd Night' in Van Gogh's 'Starry Night,'" *American Notes & Queries,* 22 (March/April 1984), 105–109; in "Whitman and Van Gogh: Starry Nights and Other Similarities" (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review,* 2 [Spring 1985], 35–40), Hope Werness suggests that "Starry Night" shares the "cosmic consciousness" of Whitman's star imagery in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

2 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh,* 3 vols. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1959), III, #W8, p. 445.

3 Van Gogh, *Complete Letters,* III, #545, p. 66.

4 Van Gogh, *Complete Letters,* III, #T10, pp. 543–544.

5 Van Gogh, *Complete Letters,* III, #T10, p. 544.

6 The most recent analysis of Van Gogh's "psychopathic art" is Albert J. Lubin's *Stranger on Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972). Meyer Shapiro's brilliant one-page essays on the major Van Gogh works in the Metropolitan Museum of New York's collection, which includes "Starry Night," are classic, and my debt to his succinct and sensitive analysis of "Starry Night" is great. Shapiro's apocalyptic reading of "Starry Night" has been very influential, and remains the most popular interpretation of the painting. Anne Sexton's poem, for example, is clearly based as much about Shapiro's Revelation 12:1–4 reading of "Starry Night" as upon the painting itself. Sexton depicts both the laboring woman and the "great red dragon" waiting to devour her child of the Revelation vision:

> Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
> to push children, like a god, from its eye.
> The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars. (Sexton, "The Starry Night," ll. 8–10)

Shapiro's essays are collected in *Van Gogh* (New York: Abrams, 1950), which is also the best source for a color reproduction of "Starry Night." Finally, the Garden of Gethsemane interpretation of "Starry Night" is presented by Sven Lövgren in his *Genesis of Modernism* (Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell, 1959), pp. 129–155.

7 Anne Sexton, "The Starry Night," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry,* ed. Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 1199–1200.

8 Vincent Van Gogh, *Letters to Emile Bernard,* ed. Douglas Lord (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), #21 [St. Remy: Mid-November 1889], p. 99.

9 Van Gogh, *Letters to Emile Bernard,* #21, pp. 97–99.

10 Van Gogh, *Letters to Emile Bernard,* #21, pp. 98–99.

11 Lövgren, pp. 145–147.

12 Van Gogh describes his projected painting of a "star-spangled sky" as one of his rare works of imaginative content in an 1888 letter to Bernard (*Letters to Emile Bernard,* #3 [Arles: Early April 1888], p. 24); as Van Gogh's plans for painting a starry night developed, he wrote in a later letter to Bernard that he wanted to portray a "poet in a starry night" (*Letters to Emile Bernard,* #19 [Arles: Early October 1888], p. 89).

13 Lövgren, p. 146.

14 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 29.

15 Lubin, *Stranger on Earth,* pp. 196–197.

16 Vincent Van Gogh, Letter to Theo, *Complete Letters,* III, #593, p. 178.

17 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. xxiv–xxv.

18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Uriel," in *The Poet in America,* ed. Albert Gelpi (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1973), pp. 82–83.

19 I am grateful to James Farrell for his assistance with the illustrations which accompany this article.

20 A comparison between this final sketch and the oil painting reveals two essential differences. In the painting, the star-embracing tip of the cypress is notably shortened to allow for an eleventh star, and the lines of the buildings in the village are straightened. That only the church of the ink study lacks the vital curves of the surrounding landscape suggests that "Starry Night" is at least in part a critique of conventional or institutional religion—and the revelation of an opposing "religious nature" like that defined by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass.*