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Vincent van Gogh as Artist: A Psychoanalytic Reflection

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Vincent's art conveys an intensely personal quality and a powerful sense of communion with Nature—whether in the sweep of open fields of wheat, the tortured ruggedness of torn and twisted trees, the majestic panorama of the sky and its burning candles of light, the delicate beauty and vibrant color of flowers, or in the haggard face of a peasant woman. All of Vincent's painting carries the stamp of Vincent: it is an expression of something within himself that appears on the canvas, emanating in some unfathomable way from the tip of his brush. I would like to explore these dimensions of Vincent's artistic experience to see whether a psychoanalytic perspective can shed any light on these aspects of Vincent and his work and on the creative power they embody.

The Quest for Meaning

Vincent's life was a saga of unremitting disappointment, disillusionment, and failure. He began his life under a cloud of depression and disappointment as the replacement for his stillborn brother—the other Vincent whose memory and unresolved mourning became a burden to his early life and a dominating unconscious fantasy motif of his adult years (Meissner, 1992a). He tried his hand at selling art (1869–1876) in his uncle's art dealership, the prominent firm of Goupil in Paris, but that too proved abortive and ended in failure. He turned in fanatical desperation to pursue a calling to the ministry (1876–1880), following in the footsteps of his father, but after failing his examinations for the school of theology, and after a heart-rending period of extreme ascetical self-denial and constant mortification in his mission to the

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poor miners of the Borinage (1879–1880), he was dismissed—another abortive venture turned to dust. After that, he turned to art and poured into it all the fanatical zeal and determination of his tormented soul, and there too met only repeated rebuffs, failures, rejections, uncertainty, and frustration. He sold only one painting during his life. Along the way, his every effort to establish a loving relationship with a woman turned sour and ended in rejection and isolation. His pain and anguish burst forth in Arles at Christmas 1888, when his psychosis erupted to the surface and he cut off his ear and had to be hospitalized. After repeated hospitalizations, he decided to commit himself to the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in St.-Remy where he remained for a year (Meissner, in press). He spent the last months of his life in Auvers-sur-Oise, where he ended his life by suicide (Meissner, 1992b).

The Family Romance

The needs that Vincent sought so desperately to satisfy had their roots deeply embedded in the soil of his early life experience (Meissner, 1992a). The role of the family romance in the development of the artist offers some basis for understanding these obscure developmental anlage. The motif of the family romance in the early lives of great artists has been described by Greenacre (1958). The family romance is a general developmental phenomenon, but seems to play a particularly significant role in creative artists. She describes the phenomenon in these terms: “The germ of the family romance is ubiquitous in the hankering of growing children for a return to the real or fancied conditions at or before the dawn of conscious memory when adults were Olympians and the child shared their special privileges and unconditional love without special efforts being demanded” (p. 10). Such well organized fantasies emerge most clearly in the early latency period and reflect a strong degree of unresolved oedipal ambivalence toward the parents.

If it is true that the potential artist brings to this development a special endowment of heightened perceptiveness and sensitivity, then the raw material out of which he fashions his emerging sense of himself and his parents will have somewhat unique characteristics. If one of the parents can provide a model for identification that sustains the burden of idealization and can maintain a satisfactory affective relation to the child, or even sustain a belief in the child's potential for greatness, the chances for the child to fulfill his creative destiny are enhanced (Greenacre, 1958). For Vincent, these optimal conditions were entirely lacking. Yet, even in the face of his harsh devaluation from his father and the failure of maternal empathy, Vincent managed

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to create an idealized, even idolized image of his father and sought desperately to gain approval and acceptance from this Olympian subdeity (Meissner, in preparation a).

For the potential artist, the inborn qualities of greater sensory responsiveness and sensitivity carry with them effects of heightened intensity in interpersonal relations and a more imaginative and animated connection with inanimate objects, the “field of collective alternates” (Greenacre, 1958). The psychological effects can be seen in precocious development, greater diffusion of boundaries between libidinal phases, greater intensity and prematurity of oedipal development, greater difficulty in relinquishing oedipal strivings, and possible disturbances in perception and emotional involvements with other human beings. All of these implications would seem to have

their place in Vincent's story.

The dynamics of the family romance carry an added burden in the child's sense of difference from his social group. As **Greenacre (1958)** comments: "Whether unusual precocity has developed or the reverse picture of blocking and pseudostupidity is uppermost, in either case the child of great potential creativeness often feels different and strange among his colleagues, and at a time when, as in adolescence, there is a strong wish to conform, the family romance furnishes a further rationalization for this sense of difference and is reinforced by it" (pp. 32–33). Inevitably, the child of genius is a lonely child. His sense of difference makes him feel isolated, and often as a result inferior. When the artist finally finds the medium of creative expression and is able to immerse himself in it, only then does the sense of loneliness find relief. As Greenacre puts it: "I believe that this realization of ability is often of great relief to extremely talented people, not so much because of the narcissistic gratification of recognition and not because of realization of balance and harmony, but because of the temporary interruption of essential loneliness" (p. 35). These findings could hardly find more poignant application than to Vincent, and will have important implications for understanding the role of his art in his psychic life (**Bak, 1958**).

From Religion to Art

After the failure of his religious mission in August 1880 (**Nagera, 1967; Lubin, 1972; Meissner, in preparation b**), Vincent emerged from the crisis with new resolve and determination. The ruins of his religious vocation gave way to his intense dedication to art. In the face of his increasing dissatisfaction with religion, he gradually turned toward art to find solace for his inner pain and loneliness. He wrote to his brother Theo: "How rich art is; if one

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can only remember what one has seen one is never without food for thought or truly lonely, never alone" (Letter 126). ¹ And again:

Well, even in that deep misery I felt my energy revive, and I said to myself, In spite of everything I shall rise again: I will take up my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing. From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me; and now I have started and my pencil has become somewhat docile, becoming more so every day.... Though every day difficulties crop up and new ones will present themselves, I cannot tell you how happy I am to have taken up drawing again. I had been thinking of it for a long time, but I always considered the thing impossible and beyond my reach. But now, though I feel my weakness and my painful dependence in many things, I have recovered my mental balance, and day by day my energy increases [Letter 136].

Art became the replacement for all other attachments, goals, ambitions, or meaningful involvements in his life, an all-consuming passion that displaced and dissolved all others. Vincent poured into his art all the intensity of his instinctual life, libidinal and aggressive, and made his devotion to art a substitute religion to which he committed himself with total abandon and unreserved self-immolation. As **Schapiro (1983)** observes, "What is most important is that van Gogh converted all this aspiration and anguish into his art, which thus became the first example of a truly personal art, art as a deeply lived means of spiritual deliverance or transformation of the self" (p. 12). His paintings became the objects of his instinctual power, his loves, his sexual objects, his offspring. He told Theo: "The work is an absolute necessity for me. I can't put it off, I don't care for anything but the work; that is to say, the pleasure in something else ceases at once and I become melancholy when I can't go on with my work" (Letter 288).

The Shattered Self

Vincent struggled heroically, desperately, and with fanatic intensity, to find solace, meaning, hope, and to salvage some semblance of his shattered sense of self. These hopes were shattered in the disappointment of his religious devotion and dedication, and left him even more tormented and tortured, disillusioned and depressed. The only surcease from this agony was in his painting. It became his religion. He painted with intensity, ferocity, unstinting devotion, impervious concentration, and endurance. He was at his drawing board or easel for seemingly endless hours. It became his all-consuming

¹ Citations from the letters are taken from **van Gogh-Bonger and van Gogh (1959)**.

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passion, his obsession, his world, his life. There was nothing else in this world, after his retreat into his art and his abandonment of the world and all its enticements and demands, that he seemed to be concerned about. He seemed to retreat from, or better escape from, life into his painting. Only the slenderest threads tied him to reality: his attachment and dependence on Theo, his residual feelings for his family, however ambivalent. He cared nothing for himself, for his food or clothing, only for his work, his art, his need to create.

Artistic Vision

At the time of his dismissal from Goupil's for incompetence in 1876, many of his attitudes toward art and particularly art dealers had already hardened. ² As **Hamilton (1967)** observed: "He had learned to loathe the insincerity with which art dealers, to his mind, preferred the popular article to the true world of art; but his own conception of artistic value was queerly muddled. From the lessons he had heard from his father's pulpit and his own conception of Christian charity, he believed the best art was that which expressed the sufferings of the poor" (p. 94). As **Elgar (1966)** noted: "Everything he did at this period expressed grief, poverty, irremediable melancholy and the pitiable

condition of labourers, helpless old men, deserted women and orphans” (p. 56).

The sense of empathy and the desperation of existence that permeate the sketch of a crushed and weeping old man (F. 702, JH. 1967³ or the pathos and depth of human feeling that stare out at us from the care-worn face of a peasant woman (F. 74, JH. 648), tell us more profoundly than any words of Vincent's sense of identification with the poor, the downtrodden, the out-casts of this world. The painting of the old man was a subject that Vincent returned to on several occasions. His last effort came toward the end of his stay in St.-Remy.⁴ **Graetz (1963)** observed, “The fact that Vincent reverted a third time to the portrait of the old, sorrowful man stresses its self-portraying character; the subject obviously had not ceased to preoccupy him.... The lonely man looks into himself as if reflecting Vincent's own worn out condition” (p. 252).

² Vincent spent 8 years in training as an art dealer in the firm of Goupil of which his Uncle Cent was a partner. But Vincent squandered the opportunity, becoming absorbed in his religious preoccupations and disparaging the salon art he was supposed to sell. His heart was not in the work and he had finally to be discharged.

³ The F. numbers referring to Vincent's works are from the de la **Faille (1970)** catalogue (F.), and the JH. numbers from the later and more complete **Hulsker (1980)** catalogue (JH.).

⁴ Vincent was a patient in the asylum Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in St.-Remy. He transferred from the hospital in Arles to the asylum in St.-Remy on May 8, 1889, where he remained for over a year and finally was discharged on May 16, 1890.

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He learned much from Rembrandt and especially Millet whose conception of the heroic aspects of peasant life he embraced fully. He told Theo, “I am trying to get at something utterly heartbreaking and therefore utterly heartbreaking” (Letter 503). About an earlier sketch of the old man (F. 1662, JH. 268), he wrote:

It seems to me it's a painter's duty to try to put an idea into his work. In this print I have tried to express (but I cannot do it well or so strikingly as it is in reality; this is merely a weak reflection in a dark mirror) what seems to me one of the strongest proofs of the existence of “quel que chose là-haut” [something on high] in which Millet believed, namely the existence of God and eternity—certainly in the infinitely touching expression of such a little old man, which he himself is perhaps unconscious of, when he is sitting quietly in his corner by the fire. At the same time there is something noble, something great, which cannot be destined for the worms.... For this reason I think a painter is happy because he is in harmony with nature as soon as he can express a little of what he sees [Letter 248].

The Art Student

Vincent returned to the Hague in the fall of 1881 to study with Anton Mauve, a prominent painter of the day and a distant relative. Mauve urged him to begin painting in oils. Vincent was reluctant and held back. The hesitation was in part due to his fear of failing in a new and more difficult form of art. The transition from drawing to painting posed a significant obstacle for him. The highly personal style he had developed in his drawing would translate only uncertainly to the medium of oil. It would actually take years before the combination of coloring and draftsmanship that marked his unique style would be realized. As he increasingly withdrew from any meaningful connection with his fellow men, he became more and more immersed in his art and in his communion with nature. Nature became increasingly alive for him, as though it were endowed with human characteristics and emotions.

In the Hague, things seemed to go well, but not for long. Vincent's style was so unorthodox, his sensitivity so delicate, his resistance to any suggestion or advice so reactive and violent that Mauve began to lose patience. Vincent tried to follow Mauve's suggestion to practice sketching from plaster casts, but when Mauve criticized his drawings, Vincent smashed the casts to bits in a fit of temper, proclaiming that he wanted to draw from real life. Vincent recounted the episode for Theo:

Mauve's talk also became as narrow-minded, if I may call it so, as it used to be broad-minded. I had to draw from casts, that was the principal thing, he

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said. I hate drawing from casts.... Once he spoke to me about drawing from casts in a way such as the worst teacher at the academy would not have spoken; I kept quiet, but when I got home I was so angry that I threw those poor plaster casts into the coalbin, and they were smashed to pieces. And I thought, I will draw from those casts only when they become whole and white again, and when there are no more hands and feet of living beings to draw from [Letter 189].

Understandably Mauve became increasingly distant—Vincent was far from a receptive or appreciative student.

A Solitary Path

Vincent's pride and fierce independence were at stake. He refused to comply with the conventions of acceptability in the art world, refused to paint for the satisfaction of buyers or dealers, refused to compromise his independence and principles. To Theo he proclaimed:

I want you to understand clearly my conception of art. One must work long and hard to grasp the essence. What I want and aim at is confoundedly difficult, and yet I do not think I aim too high. I want to do drawings which *touch* some people.... In

either figure or landscape I should wish to express, not sentimental melancholy, but serious sorrow. In short, I want to progress so far that people will say of my work, He feels deeply, he feels tenderly—notwithstanding my so-called roughness, perhaps even because of it. . . .

What am I in most people's eyes? A nonentity, or an eccentric and disagreeable man—somebody who has no position in society and never will have, in short, the lowest of the low. Very well, even if this were true, then I should want my work to show what is in the heart of such an eccentric, of such a nobody. This is my ambition, which is, in spite of everything, founded less on anger than on love, more on serenity than on passion. It is true that I am often in the greatest misery, but still there is a calm pure harmony and music inside me. I see drawings and pictures in the poorest huts, in the dirtiest corner. And my mind is drawn toward these things by an irresistible force [Letter 218].

His life became an unremitting saga of deprivation, isolation, and rejection. His health suffered seriously. His only thought was for his art, and nothing else seemed to matter. To Theo he wrote:

Not only did I begin drawing relatively late in life, but it may also be that I shall not live for so very many years. . . . Therefore, as to the time ahead in which I shall still be able to work, I think I may safely presume: that my

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body will keep a certain number of years . . . between six and ten, for instance. . . . I do *not* intend to spare myself, nor to avoid emotions or difficulties—I don't care much whether I live a longer or a shorter time; . . . So I go on like an ignoramus who knows only this one thing: "In a few years *I must finish a certain work*" [Letter 309].

The Art Academy

His next move was to Antwerp in January 1886, where he determined to study in the art academy. His existence was meager: art materials were expensive, and his customary choice was between hunger and art supplies. Art came first. He lived on nothing but a little bread, some cheese, and coffee. He suffered continually from internal pains and a persistent cough, and soon lost 10 of his teeth. He was literally starving. In these desperate straits, he wrote to Theo:

In my opinion, I am often *rich as Croesus*—not in money, but rich—because I have found in my work something which I can devote myself to heart and soul, and which inspires me and gives a meaning to life. Of course my moods change, but the average is serenity. I have a firm *faith* in art, a firm confidence in its being a powerful stream which carries a man into a harbor, though he himself must do his bit too; at all events, I think it such a great blessing when a man has found his work that I cannot count myself among the unfortunate. I mean, I may be in certain relatively great difficulties, and there may be gloomy days in my life, but I shouldn't like to be counted among the unfortunate, nor would it be correct if I were [Letter 274].

Unfortunately, he could never conceal his antipathy to academic instruction. To Theo he wrote: "In fact, in my opinion the drawings that I see there are all hopelessly bad and absolutely wrong, and I know for sure that mine are totally different. Time will tell who is right" (Letter 445).

His instructors did not know what to do with this rebellious student; their criticisms were met with resistance and stubborn defiance. One of his fellow students, Victor Hageman, later recalled:

I remember very well that disheveled, nervous, and restless man who fell like a bomb on the Academy of Antwerp, overwhelming the director, the drawing master, and the students. . . . Van Gogh arrived one morning, dressed in the sort of blue smock worn by Flemish livestock merchants, and wearing a fur cap on his head. In place of a palette, he used a board torn from a crate that had contained sugar or yeast. That day, the students were to paint two wrestlers posing on the modeling platform, stripped to the waist. Van Gogh began painting feverishly, furiously, with a speed that

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stupefied his fellow students. He had laid on his impasto so thickly that his colors literally dripped from the canvas onto the floor. When Verlat saw this work and its extraordinary creator, he asked in Flemish, somewhat bewilderedly, "Who are you?" Van Gogh answered quietly, "Wel, Ik ben Vincent, Hollandsch." ("Well, I am Vincent, a Dutchman.")

Then, the very academic director, while pointing to the newcomer's canvas, proclaimed disdainfully, "I cannot correct such putrid dogs. My boy, go quickly to the drawing class." Cheeks flushed, Van Gogh contained his rage and fled to the class of the good M. Sieber [sic], who was also frightened by novelty, but who had a less irascible temperament than his director. Vincent stayed there for a few weeks, drawing ardently, applying himself with visible forbearance to capture the subject, working rapidly without retouching and more often than not tearing up his drawing or throwing it behind him as soon as he finished it. He would sketch everything that was to be found in the classroom: the students, their clothing, or the furniture, but forgetting the plaster cast that the professor had assigned to copy. Already Van Gogh had astonished everyone with the speed at which he worked, redoing the same drawing or painting ten or fifteen times.

One day in the drawing class . . . the students were given, as if by chance, a cast of the *Venus de Milo* to copy. Van Gogh, struck by one of the essential characteristics of the model, strongly accentuated the width of her hips and subjected the Venus to the same deformations that he brought to *The Sower* by Millet and *The Good Samaritan* by Delacroix—other

works which he was also to copy in the course of his career. The beautiful Greek goddess had become a robust Flemish matron. When the honest M. Sieber saw this, he tore Van Gogh's sheet of paper with the furious strokes of his crayon, correcting his drawing while reminding him of the immutable canons of art. Then the young Dutchman, . . . whose gruffness had frightened off the refined female clientele at Goupil's in Paris, flew into a violent rage and shouted at the horrified professor: "You clearly don't know what a young woman is like, God damn it! A woman must have hips, buttocks, a pelvis in which she can carry a baby!" This was the last lesson that Van Gogh took—or gave—at the Academy of Antwerp [cited in **Stein, 1986**, pp. 68–70].

Another fellow student, Richard Baseleer, observed: "Soon the news that a wild man had surfaced spread like wildfire throughout the building complex, and people looked on Vincent as if he were a rare specimen from the human wonders collection in a traveling circus. But Vincent himself didn't notice—or at least pretended as though he didn't for with such acute powers of observation as his, it could hardly have escaped him—and he withdrew further into that stoic silence which soon earned him a reputation for self-centeredness" [cited in **Stein, 1986**, p. 71].

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He dropped out of the academy that February, living in the slums, surrounded by tramps, thieves, and whores. He continued to struggle with his painting. Finally, he left abruptly for Paris where he arrived on February 28, 1886. ⁵

Paris

He straightaway moved in with Theo, who was then an art dealer with the Goupil firm. For the first time, Vincent had the opportunity to associate with and exchange ideas with other artists of first rank. Perhaps his closest association at the time was with Emile Bernard and Toulouse-Lautrec, both young and struggling artists, yet to make their mark on the world of art. But he was also able to study the works of Pissarro, Gauguin, Seurat, and the initiators of the Impressionist movement. He and Gauguin in particular seemed to hit it off, and they talked about prospects for joining forces in some form of artistic community. Obstinate individualist that he was, Vincent nonetheless began to evolve a cherished idea—a dream of a community of artists who would provide each other with a sense of community and support. This fellowship could share the terrible responsibilities of the artist's vocation; together they could run the same risks and keep despair and frustration at bay by their mutual sharing of support and their exchange of feelings and ideas. This was Vincent's utopia—an illusion never to be realized.

As time went on things did not go well with Theo. Vincent grew more and more irritated by Theo's quiet and orderly life, by his conventionality and bourgeois life-style. Arguments erupted. Vincent was too uncompromising, too unconventional, too impatient with the trivial concessions and pretenses of everyday life. He grew more irascible and eccentric in his behavior by the day. Among his fellow artists, he was regarded as a difficult, stubborn, and at times frightening character. The few friendships he had were soon tested to the breaking point by his argumentativeness, his unbending opinions, and his harsh and critical attitudes toward the work of other artists. He quarreled with Rappard after the latter's criticism of *The Potato Eaters* (F. 82, JH. 764). His reply to Rappard was angry and bitter:

Some things that have happened induce me to write you, more to make myself clear than because I enjoy it. As for the fact that I simply returned your previous letter, there were two reasons for that. In the first place, even

⁵ It is one of the curiosities of history that Freud arrived in Paris toward the end of February 1886. Had Freud passed Vincent on the streets of Paris, he would doubtless have ignored him as probably just another tramp or vagrant.

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if your remarks about the lithograph were right, even if I were unable to contradict them, you still had no right to condemn my whole work in the insulting way you did. . . . To come to the point—the reason I am writing you—though it was you who insulted me in the first place, and not I who insulted you—is simply that I have known you so long that I do not consider this a reason to break off all intercourse with you. What I have to say to you I say as one painter to another—and this will be true as long as you and I are painting—whether we keep up our acquaintance or not. . . .

My answer to that is that I most seriously advise you not to fight with me. As for me—I go my own way—you see? I don't want to pick a quarrel with anyone, so not with you either, even now. I should let you say whatever you liked; if you were to have more observations of the same kind, it would leave me stone cold, and that would be all. But for the moment I want to say this much, you have said more than once that I do not care for the form of the figure, it is beneath me to pay attention to it, and—my dear fellow—it is beneath you to say such an unwarranted thing. You have known me for years—just tell me, have you ever seen me work otherwise than after the model, never sparing expense, however heavy at times, though I am surely poor enough [Letter R52].

And again a few months later:

As for my work, that scene of the potato eaters—you saw the lithograph of it. . . . It is true that there are faulty things in that lithograph as well as in my other work—certainly there are. But my other work proves so clearly that I render what I see that people cannot be justified, or speaking in good faith, when they judge my work otherwise than as a whole and in a broader way, taking into account my purposes and endeavor—namely to paint *le paysan chez soi*, peasants in their surroundings. Now you call the aggregate of my work utterly weak, and you demonstrate at great length that its deficiencies

exceed its good qualities. Thus about my work, thus about my person. Well, I won't accept this—never.

The work in question, the painting of peasants, is such a hard job that the utterly weak won't even attempt it.... And as regards technique, I am still searching for many things; and though I happen to find some of them, still there are an infinite number of things wanting. But for all that I know why I work as I do, and my efforts are planted on solid ground. I said to Wenkebach only the other day that I did not know any painter who had as many faults as I do—but for all that I was not convinced that I am radically wrong. At times my case is like this: the product of two negatives is a positive. Take whatever drawing or study of mine you like, especially those that I myself would point out to you with a certain resignation, and—in the drawing as well as in the color or the tone—there will be errors that a realist would hardly commit... certain inaccuracies which I am convinced of

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myself, and which under certain circumstances I could point out with keener discernment than others—errors maybe, or imperfections.

And yet I believe that—even if I go on producing work in which people can point out errors—when they want to, if this is their special purpose and point of view—it will still have a certain vitality and *raison d'être* of its own that will hurl the errors into the shade—in the eyes of those who appreciate character and the spiritual conception of things. And it will not be so easy to confound me as they think, despite all my faults. I know too well what my ultimate goal is, and I am too firmly convinced of being on the right road after all, to pay much attention to what people say of me—when I want to paint what I feel and feel what I paint.

Nevertheless it makes life difficult at times, and—I think it quite possible that later on some fellows will regret either the things they said of me or the opposition and indifference which they have pestered me with. The way I see it is this: I withdraw from people to such an extent that I literally don't meet anybody except—the poor peasants—with whom I am directly concerned because I paint them. And this will remain my policy, and it is quite possible that I shall give up my studio before long and go live in a peasant's cottage, so as not to hear or see educated people—as they call themselves—any longer [Letter R57].

These last words make it clear that the object of Vincent's wrath was not simply Rappard, who was the most immediate cause of Vincent's wounded narcissism. The target area here is extended beyond the disappointing figure of his fellow artist to all those who had failed him, disappointed him, rejected him along the way. The unconscious, or at least implicit, targets of his wrath were his parents and the members of his family who had rejected or been indifferent to him and his deep yearning for acceptance and love. They were the educated and conventional ones on whom he turned his back—only to find his place among the peasants whom he cherished and with whom he identified.

In the Slough of Despond

In the summer of 1887, still in Paris, Vincent fell into a deep depression: he had nowhere to go, no friends to turn to, no home that he could call his own. He complained to Theo:

And sometimes I have a grudge against this rotten painting. It was Richepin who said somewhere: "The love of art means loss of real love." I think this is terribly true, but on the other hand, real love makes you

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disgusted with art. And at times I already feel old and broken, and yet still enough of a lover not to be a real enthusiast for painting. One must have ambition in order to succeed, and ambition seems to me absurd. I don't know what will come of it; above all I should like to be less of a burden to you ... for I hope to make such progress that you will be able to show my stuff boldly without compromising yourself. And then I will take myself off somewhere down south, to get away from the sight of so many painters that disgust me as men [Letter 462].

Vincent was a mystery to his fellow artists; many thought his work strange and eccentric, if not at the same time interesting. His style was so direct, totally unconcerned with artistic conventions, so unorthodox in his technique, his brushwork, his use of colors, the intensity, the unbridled expression and intensity of feeling that permeated his canvases. To many his work seemed rough, unrefined, unskilled, and undisciplined—as though there were little to distinguish between the works and the man. Gauzi, a fellow artist and Lautrec's close friend, recalled: "He worked with a disorderly fury, throwing colors on the canvas with feverish speed. He gathered up the color as though with a shovel, and the globs of paint, covering the length of the paintbrush, stuck to his fingers. When the model rested, he didn't stop painting. The violence of his study surprised the atelier; the classically-oriented remained bewildered by it" (cited in **Stein, 1986**, pp. 71–72).

Another point of contact with other artists was Lautrec's studio where weekly gatherings were held to discuss and compare their work. Suzanne Valadon described Vincent in these meetings: "He would arrive carrying a heavy canvas under his arm, which he would place in a well-lighted corner, and wait for someone to notice him. No one was in the least concerned. He would sit down opposite his work, surveying the others' glances and sharing little of the conversation. Finally wearying, he would depart carrying his latest example of his work. Nevertheless, the following week he would return and commence the same strategem again" [cited in **Sweetman, 1989**, p. 233].

His friend Emile Bernard wrote sympathetically of him:

Vincent agreed to do several paintings a week for Le Tambourin in exchange for meals. He wound up covering the large walls of the establishment with his studies. They were mostly flower studies, and there were some excellent ones. This went on for a few months; then the place went to ruin, was sold, and all the paintings, in a pile, were sold off for a laughable sum. What is certain is that no one ever knew reprobation and financial straits as Vincent did, except for Tanguy. In the case of the latter, it hadn't

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been his own fault, but for Vincent, though supported by his brother, it was voluntary destitution.

Therefore, when the canvases piled up too high (and they accumulated rapidly, because Van Gogh produced up to three per day), they had to be sold. Putting them under his arm, the painter would take them to the nearest junk seller for prices that didn't even pay for the cost of the materials he'd used. One afternoon when Cezanne was over at Tanguy's, Vincent, who was there for lunch, met him. They spoke together and, after talking about art in general, got around to discussing their particular views. Van Gogh thought he could not do better to explain his ideas than by showing his canvases to Cezanne and asking for his opinion. He showed him several kinds: portraits, still lifes, and landscapes. After inspecting everything, Cezanne, who was a timid but violent person, told him, "Honestly, your painting is that of a madman" [cited in **Stein, 1986**, p. 93].

Then, Gauguin, whose relationships with Vincent were complex and troubled, has left us his own poetized impression of Vincent:

The snow is beginning to fall, it is winter,... The poor people are suffering: often the landlords do not understand that. Now, on this December day, in the rue Lepic of our good city of Paris, the pedestrians hasten more than usual without any desire to dawdle. Among them a shivering man, bizarrely outfitted, hurries to reach the outer boulevard. Goatskin envelops him, a fur cap—rabbit, no doubt—the red beard bristling. Like a cowherd. Do not observe him with half a glance; do not go your way without carefully examining, despite the cold, the white and harmonious hand, the blue eyes so clear, so childlike. Surely this is a poor beggar. His name is Vincent van Gogh.

Hastily, he enters the shop of a dealer in primitive arrows, old scrap iron, and cheap oil paintings. Poor artist! You put a part of your soul into the painting of this canvas that you have come to sell. It is a small still life—pink shrimps on pink paper. "Can you give me a little money for this canvas to help me pay my rent?" "My God, my friend, the clientele is becoming difficult, they ask me for cheap Millets; then, you know," the dealer adds, "your painting is not very gay. The Renaissance is in demand today. Well, they say you have talent, and I want to do something for you. Here, take a hundred sous." And the round coin clinked on the counter. Van Gogh took the coin without a murmur, thanked the dealer, and went out.

Painfully, he made his way back up the rue Lepic. When he had almost reached his lodgings, a poor woman, just out of Saint-Lazare, smiled at the painter, desiring his patronage. The beautiful white hand emerged from the overcoat: Van Gogh was a reader, he thought of la fille Elisa, and his

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five-franc piece became the property of the unfortunate girl. Rapidly, as if ashamed of his charity, he fled, his stomach empty [cited in **Stein, 1986**, pp. 95–96].

As the difficulties mounted in Paris, Vincent more and more felt that he had to escape. He realized how difficult he was making life for Theo, and his relationships with many of his friends and fellow artists had deteriorated so that he no longer felt welcome among them. His obsession with the idea of founding a colony of artists consumed him and his dream of a "Midi Studio" turned his desires to the South, to the Midi that Toulouse-Lautrec had described in such glowing terms. He decided to stake everything on this one last ray of hope; nothing, he thought, was impossible to those who shared the same passionate vision. He abruptly left Paris and headed for Provence.

Experimentation

Vincent's sojourn in Paris, from February 1886 until February 1888, was in many ways an eye-opening experience. His contacts with the group of inventive and radical young artists literally opened his eyes to new dimensions and possibilities in art. He learned much from Bernard, Denis, Pissarro, and Gauguin. He began to assimilate the revolutionary techniques and attitudes toward color being developed by the Impressionists. Seurat particularly impressed him. He propounded a theory of esthetics in which "a sense of calm and order in painting is obtained by a balance of light and dark tones, of cool and warm colors, and by establishing an equilibrium between horizontal and vertical forms. Gaiety results from a dominance of light or luminous tones, warm colors and lines that seem to spring upward; sadness by the opposite" (**Wallace, 1969**, p. 74).

Vincent admired Seurat's theory and for a time tried to emulate Seurat's work and adopt some of his techniques. But Vincent's painting instincts lay in different directions. From Seurat he learned a new approach to the rendering of light and color, especially the use of complementary colors, a skill he developed with great effect in some of his later paintings. He probably did not learn these ideas directly from Seurat, but from Paul Signac, Seurat's close friend and advocate. During his stay in Paris he experimented with different techniques and styles in the use and mixing of colors and took what he had learned with him on the train to Arles. There, under the brilliant and warming sun of the Midi, his use of colors broke out into riotous and exuberant expression. There his immersion in and communion with Nature reached its apogee.

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Arles

He arrived in Arles on February 21, 1888. He managed to find some cheap lodging and immediately plunged into his painting with feverish intensity. He worked from morning to night, and sometimes into the night—sporting a broad-brimmed hat with candles stuck in it so that he could see the canvas. He labored incessantly, frantically, seemingly indefatigably. He seemed driven by a demon; he described himself as “a painting engine.” He lived on little, often forgetting to eat, and when he did it was a meager meal of biscuits and milk. His only respite was a glass of absinthe at the end of the day and sometimes a night with one of the women at the local cafe. And he dreamed of the “Midi Studio.” Concretely this took the form of his hope that his friend Gauguin would soon join him in the little yellow house; then he would no longer be alone, and the dream of a community of fellow artists would begin to be realized.

However much his hopes and illusions sustained him, it seems that his impact on the good people of Arles was not unlike his reception in Paris, or anywhere he had been for that matter. His strange habits and appearance were disturbing. In the town he was an object of curiosity and ridicule. His only friends were the prostitutes at the cafe, and after a while a few kind-hearted souls who befriended him, like the postman Roulin or the young lieutenant of Zouaves, Paul Milliet. He was driven by a consuming passion, a fanatical desire, an almost religious dedication to create, to paint, to express and find meaning. He wrote to Theo:

Oh, my dear brother, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life—the power to create.... And in a picture I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.... Ah! portraiture, portraiture with the thoughts, the soul of the model in it, that is what I think must come [Letter 531].

Self-expression

I have suggested that for the most part Vincent's paintings can be viewed as expressions of his inner psychic life, self-portraits after a fashion, distilling the inner turmoil of his soul into vivid forms and brilliant colors on the canvas. **Lubin (1972)** offers us an analysis of his *The Night Cafe* [F. 463, JH.

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1575] that reflects this process. First, Vincent's own description of the painting: “In my picture of the *Night Cafe* I have tried to express the idea that the cafe is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by soft Louis XV green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of pale sulphur” (Letter 534).

The scene is “like a devil's furnace,” suggestive of hell and damnation, terrible passions and sinfulness. It is “a place where you can be ruined, go mad and commit crimes.” The patron-father stands by the billiard table on which there lies a long cue with billiard balls at its base, its tip pointed at the soft-tender counter with its vaginal opening behind. Lubin suggests the primal scene quality of these images, the fantasy of parental intercourse as a brutal and destructive, but nonetheless exciting, assault. **Hamilton (1967)** suggests that there is something violent even about the technique: “In its very execution the painting is a demonstration of passion, so thickly are the impastos built up, so violent the discrepancies between the original visual experience and the pictorial interpretation. The harsh and tragic expressiveness of *The Night Cafe* is a clue to Vincent's inner turmoil at the time” (p. 100). The sexually stimulating atmosphere of Arles and its climate of violence, typified by the frequent bullfights, may have stirred these unconscious residues in Vincent's unconscious.

His painting of his own bedroom (F. 482, JH. 1608) was done soon after, and deliberately contrasted with the cafe. If the one was violent, the other was quiet, relaxing, and tranquil. Was the bedroom scene intended to deny the passions expressed in the cafe painting? There are no performers, no one in the bed, only the framed pictures of a man and a woman above the bed—perhaps a neutralizing displacement from the bed to the containing frames above. Does the latter painting represent an attempt to master and contain the anxieties unleashed in the former?

The lights in the cafe are surrounded by dazzling halos of contrasting orange and green. The effect can be associated to a visual effect described by **Greenacre (1947)** in children suddenly exposed to a frightening and bewildering sight. She writes: “There is generally the sensation of lights, flashes of lightning, bright colors or of some sort of aurora. This may seem to invest the object, or objects seen, or it may be felt as occurring in the subject's own head experienced literally as seeing lights or seeing red.... The initial experience always produces the most intense emotions, whether of awe, fear, rage, or horror” (p. 132).

Was Vincent's painting of the cafe expressing a regressive and traumatic experience based on a repressed memory of a primal scene experience? The character pathology Greenacre describes in these traumatized children is a

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fair description of Vincent: “Mastery is attempted by ... the development of several binding superego reaction-formations of goodness

which are supplemented by or converted into lofty ideals.... Figuratively, the child develops a halo to which, if it remains too burdensome, he reacts either by throwing it defiantly away—conspicuously in some psychopathic and psychotic states—or by endowing someone else with it” (p. 133). Vincent’s “lofty ideals” were distilled into his identification with Christ, an identification that he both lived out unconsciously and that he rebelled against in angry defiance (**Lubin, 1972; Meissner, in preparation b**). Likewise he had invested these lofty ideals in his father whom he idolized and sought to emulate. This ideal too he turned against in anger and bitter disappointment.

Nature

Vincent’s remarkable immersion in and devotion to nature may be connected to the dynamics of the family romance (**Greenacre, 1958**). One consequence of the family romance is the identification of the artist with God and nature, or the assimilation of nature to God. This occurs “through the force of the own body feelings which respond to and cause a kind of amalgamation of body imagery with outer forms in the world” (p. 34). Vincent’s immersion in nature may have brought about an unconscious sense of fusion between his own sense of self and the power and beauty of nature as it revealed itself to his eyes and on his canvas. This dynamic may involve what Greenacre calls a “collective alternative,” a kind of “cosmic emotional relationship” reflecting a basic component of the family romance of the artist—the idealized cosmic image or abstraction becomes a substitute for the image of the idealized parent of the family romance. His art can be regarded as a developmental derivative from and transformation of the primary object, a form of transitional relatedness to the mother of infantile experience. If so, it offers some understanding of the peculiar relation between Vincent and his canvases, particularly the studies of nature and the inanimate world, and the manner in which they seem to take on an inner life communicated and shared through the artist’s brush.

The intensity of the emotional relationship between the artist and his art, as **Oremland (1989)** points out, “for most creative individuals is lifelong, and although easily romanticized by the less gifted, is as beset with jealousy, disappointment, feelings of abandonment by, ecstatic union with, replenishment from, finding fulfillment in, and searching for verification through as is the interpersonal relationship for the less gifted” (p. 25). The artist’s art can be regarded as a developmental derivative from and transformation of the

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primary object, a form of transitional relatedness to the mother of infantile experience. ⁶ If so, it offers some understanding of the peculiar relation between Vincent and his canvases; the primary object for Vincent remained his mother whose face he struggled to find behind the blank canvas—hidden behind a veil of sorrow and grief, and lost in her emotional cocoon of mourning for her lost child. ⁷

Nature became personalized, humanized, ensouled: He wrote:

Sometimes I have such a longing to do landscape, just as I crave a long walk to refresh myself; and in all nature, for instance in trees, I see expression and soul, so to speak. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of almshouse men. Young corn has something inexpressibly pure and tender about it, which awakens the same emotion as the expression of a sleeping baby, for instance. The trodden grass at the roadside looks tired and dusty like the people of the slums. A few days ago, when it had been snowing, I saw a group of Savoy cabbages standing frozen and benumbed, and it reminded me of a group of women in their thin petticoats and old shawls which I had seen standing in a little hot-water-and-coal shop early in the morning [Letter 242].

For him paintings done from the immediacy of nature had a special personal quality.

In his efforts to master the painter’s craft, he had thrown off the conventions of academic art and insisted that the artist’s vision embraced things not as they seemed or were perceived, but as they felt. Replying to criticisms of his work, he wrote Theo:

Tell Serret that *I should be desperate if my figures were correct*, tell him that I do not want them to be academically correct, tell him that I mean: If one photographs a digger, *he certainly would not be digging then*. Tell him that I adore the figures by Michelangelo though the legs are undoubtedly too long, the hips and the backsides too large. Tell him that, for me, Millet and Lhermitte are the real artists for the very reason that they do not paint

⁶ A similar case can be made for the poet Wordsworth for whom Nature as the centerpiece of his poetry is the loving and bountiful mother (**Beres, 1958**). **Turner (1988)** comments:

Wordsworth’s [imagination] as a poet lay in its relationships—relationships, as it happened, chiefly with the nourishing images of the “natural” world, which he believed divine, rather than with the “artificial” works of man. The discovery of imagination, that is, was complemented by the discovery of nature, not simply as the creation of God but also as the creation of that whole process whereby the child’s love for its mother is decathected and spread over the face of the world until its objects come to safeguard the child’s sense of the goodness of life [p. 487].

⁷ The influence of Vincent’s position as a “replacement child” and the failures of empathic mothering occasioned by his mother’s depression are discussed in **Meissner (1992a)**.

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things as they are, traced in a dry analytic way, but as *they*—Millet, Lhermitte, Michelangelo—feel them. Tell him that my great longing is to learn to make those very incorrectnesses, those deviations, remodelings, changes in reality, so that they may become, yes, lies if you like—but truer than the literal truth” [Letter 418].

His painting of *The Potato Eaters* (F. 82, JH. 764) is one of his most poignant expressions of his effort to bring the reality and simplicity of peasant life into being on canvas. He told Theo:

I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of *manual labor*, and how they have honestly earned their food.... But he who prefers to see the peasants in their Sunday best may do as he likes. I personally am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than by giving them a conventional charm.... If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—all right, that's not unhealthy; if a stable smells of dung—all right, that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure—that's healthy, especially for city people [Letter 404].

He has left us some suggestion of what his experience of this artistic communication with nature was like in a letter to Theo:

In a certain way I am glad I have not *learned* painting, because then I might have *learned* to pass by such effects as this. Now I say, No, this is just what I want—if it is impossible, it is impossible; I will try it, though I do not know how it ought to be done. *I do not know myself* how I paint it. I sit down with a white board before the spot that strikes me, I look at what is before my eyes, I say to myself, That white board must become something; I come back dissatisfied—I put it away, and when I have rested a little, I go and look at it with a kind of fear. Then I am still dissatisfied with what I made of it. But I find in my work an echo of what struck me, after all. I see that nature has told me something, has spoken to me, and that I have put it down in shorthand. In my shorthand there may be words that cannot be deciphered, there may be mistakes or gaps; but there is something of what wood or beach or figure has told me in it, and it is not the tame or conventional language derived from a studied manner or a system rather than from nature itself [Letter 228].

He explained to Rappard:

I am getting so used to being confronted immediately with nature that I am keeping my personal feelings unfettered to a far greater extent than in the

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beginning—and I get less dizzy—and *I am more myself just because I am confronted with nature*. If I have the good fortune to find a model who is quiet and collected, then I draw it repeatedly, and then at last a study turns up which is different from an ordinary *study*—I mean more characteristic, more deeply felt.... When once *I feel*—*I know*—a subject, I *usually* draw three or more *variations* of it—whether it is figure or landscape—but every time and for each one I consult nature. And I even *do my best not to give details*—for then the dreaminess goes out of it. And when Tersteeg and my brother, and others, say, “What is this, is it grass or cabbage?”—then I answer, “*Delighted that you can't make it out*” [Letter R371].

At times the intensity of his concentration drew him into a dreamlike state of almost mystical contemplation. “I have a terrible lucidity at moments, these days when nature is so beautiful, I am not conscious of myself any more, and the picture comes to me as in a dream” (Letter 543). Even landscapes required a depth of understanding and an intimacy born of long immersion and contemplation. He wrote: “Many landscape painters do not possess the same intimate knowledge of nature as those who have looked lovingly at the fields from childhood on. Many landscape painters give something which (though we appreciate them as artists) satisfies neither you nor me as human beings.... The real thing is not an absolute copy of nature, but to know nature so well that what one makes is fresh and true—that is what so many lack” (Letter 251).

Nature and Religion

The conflict between his religious inclinations and his love of nature reflected the deeper conflict between his rebellion against the religion of his father and his love of art and nature. In 1875 he wrote Theo: “A feeling, even a keen one, for the beauties of nature is not the same as a religious feeling, though I think these two stand in close relation to one another. Almost everybody has a feeling for nature—some, more; some, less—but a few feel that God is a spirit and whoever worships Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (Letter 38). He continued to struggle for years over the relationship between religion and the love of nature and art that became an ever more dominating theme in his experience. He wrote to Theo, “When you say in your last letter, “What a mystery nature is” I quite agree with you. Life in the abstract is already an enigma; reality makes it an enigma within an enigma. And who are we to solve it? However, we ourselves are an atom of that universe which makes us wonder: Where does it go, to the devil or to God?” (Letter 242).

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He sought to find the face of God in Nature—in the fields, the sea, the trees, and waving fields of wheat. He wrote Theo:

Our purpose is in the first place self-reform by means of a handicraft and of intercourse with nature, believing as we do that this is our first duty in order to be honest with others and to be consistent—our aim is walking with God—the opposite of living in the midst of the doings of the big cities.... Though some people may think it hypocritical to say, our belief is that God will help those who help themselves, as long as they turn their energy and attention in this direction, and set to work *to this end*. I see that Millet believed more and more firmly in “Something on High.” He spoke of it in a way quite different than, for instance, Father does. He left it more vague, but for all that, I see more in Millet's vagueness than in what Father says. And I find that same quality of Millet's in Rembrandt, in Corot—in short, in the work of many, though I must not and

cannot expatiate on this. The end of things need not be the power to explain them, but basing oneself effectively upon them [Letter 337].

Japanese Art

Vincent was fascinated by Japanese art, collected hundreds of prints, and even tried copying Japanese models (F. 371, JH. 1296; F. 372, JH. 1297). One of the features of Japanese art that Vincent found so attractive was the painters' capacity to grasp the essence of nature and portray it in the simplest terms. Undoubtedly one of his reasons for moving to Arles was his wish to emulate Japanese artists in their immersion in nature—he felt the topography of Provence would mimic that depicted in the Japanese works he knew. He wrote Theo:

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismark's policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, the animals, then the human figure. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole.... And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming more joyful and happier, and we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention (Letter 542).

In the portrait of himself he sent to Gauguin (F. 476, JH. 1581), he identified himself as a Japanese monk rather than an artist, and observed, "... isn't it almost a *true religion* which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?" (Letter 542).

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The Struggle with Nature

In Vincent's mind, nature had a life of its own, which the artist was called to grapple with and conquer, but one that resisted and eluded his grasp. He wrote: "Nature always begins by resisting the artist, but he who really takes it seriously does not allow that resistance to put him off his stride; on the contrary, it is that much more of a stimulus to fight for victory, and at bottom nature and a true artist agree. Nature certainly is "intangible" yet one must seize her, and with a strong hand. And then after one has struggled and wrestled with nature, sometimes she becomes a little more docile and yielding" (Letter 152).

He wrote frequently of the artist's struggle with nature. He wrote to Rappard: "I fell in love the same way too—desperately, I tell you—with a certain Dame Nature or Reality, and I have felt so happy ever since, though she is still resisting me cruelly, and does not want me yet, and often raps me over the knuckles when I dare prematurely to consider her mine. Consequently I cannot say that I have won her by a long shot, but what I *can* say is that I am wooing her, and that I am trying to find the key to her heart, notwithstanding the painful raps on the knuckles" (Letter R4). And to Theo: "You do not expect to find something soft or sweet, no, you know that it is impossible to conquer nature and to make her more amenable without a terrible struggle and without more than ordinary patience" (Letter 339a). Regarding his sketch of "Sorrow" (F. 1655, JH. 259) he said, "I wanted to express something of the struggle for life in that pale, slender woman's figure.... Or rather, because I tried to be faithful to nature as I saw it, without philosophizing about it, involuntarily ... something of that great struggle is shown.... But before any success there must first come the hand-to-hand struggle with the things in nature" (Letter 195).

The Visual

Attention has been drawn to Vincent's intense visual sensitivity and acuity. Vincent himself noted his acute reactions to color: "in general all the impressionists are ... under the same influence, and we are all of us more or less neurotic. This renders us very sensitive to colors and their particular language, the effect of complementary colors, of their contrasts and harmony" (Letter W20). As **Lubin (1972)** puts it, in his art Vincent became an eye. Vision became for him a devouring, consuming, omnivorous capacity and passion—it was his preferred sensory modality for contact with the world around him, especially the world of nature. This unusual visual sensitivity seems to reflect an inborn aspect of Vincenes talent.

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Greenacre (1957) argued that exceptional artistic creative potential builds on a set of unusual characteristics, including heightened sensory sensitivity, exceptional capacity to sense relations between stimuli, a capacity for empathy deeper than the normal, and sufficient sensorimotor intactness to permit projective motor discharges for expressive functioning. These abilities contribute an enhanced awareness to similarities and differences, greater reactivity to the form and rhythm of stimulus patterns, and in consequence a greater sense of organization or gestalt, actual or potential. The result is greater sensory attunement not only to external objects, but to one's own bodily states, leading to a capacity for imaginative animation of the inanimate and the capacity for projective anthropomorphizing of the world of Nature (**Greenacre, 1957**).

One might think Greenacre would have had Vincent in mind. Vincent's attunement to the form and rhythm of the external world was cast in a mold of imaginative animation that influenced his depiction of space and perspective. **Heelan (1972)**, for example, commented:

There are a number of paradoxes about Van Gogh's forms... and the space in which they are pictured: the forms are often distorted but look intensely "real"; they are created in a perspective system that is not controlled by an abstract set of rules with which we are familiar, although we sense that it is connected with the structure of Van Gogh's active looking or

sighting or involvement with things; the space looks realistic, organized with respect to an observer, like a stage space, but it is not objective like one constructed according to Euclidean rules, since it is dynamically created by the artist and for him; foreground objects protrude but depth lines plunge to a finite horizon [p. 478].

This view is reinforced by **Schapiro's (1983)** observation that:

Van Gogh ... hastens convergence, exaggerating the extremities in space, from the empathic foreground to the immensely enlarged horizon with its infinitesimal detail.... Linear perspective was for him no impersonal set of rules, but something as real as the objects themselves, a quality of the objects he was sighting. This paradoxical device—both phenomenon and system—at the same time deformed things and made them look more real: it fastened the artist's eye more slavishly to appearance but also brought him more actively into play in the world.... in many of Van Gogh's first landscape drawings, the world seems to emanate from his eye in a gigantic discharge with a continuous motion of rapidly converging lines [pp. 29–30].

The enhanced sensory sensitivity can both intensify particular experiences or broaden them to include secondary objects that may be related to

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the primary object in regard to their potential to produce similar sensory experiences. **Greenacre (1957)** uses the example of the infant's experience of the mother's breast. The complex of sensory elements might impinge on the gifted infant more intensely than his normal counterpart, and he might consequently react more intensely to similar elements of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch stemming from any rounded object in his sensory field. The reaction that all of this sets off, the greater need for harmonizing inner object relationships with sensory impingements' opens the way to the "collective alternates" that are meant to describe this range of expanded experience.

Special investment in the visual function may reflect developmental vicissitudes as a form of focal symbiosis (**Greenacre, 1959**) in which a particular bodily organ or area is selected to express the union between the special needs of the child and the projected pathology of the parent, usually the mother. Where the normal pattern of infantile mirroring is lacking, as it might be in the case of a narcissistic or absent mother, the result may be a heightened cathexis of the eyes, or indirectly through an investment in the mouth and/or genitals displaced to the eyes. The primacy of the visual function may be partially determined not only by early deprivation and frustration, but can be abetted by subsequent primal scene exposure, castration anxiety, or even frank sexual abuse. The outcome in many patients may be a form of scopophilia or hyperacuity with or without perversion (**Mahony, 1989**).

We can note that in Vincent these factors were compounded with defensive needs that reflected important aspects of his psychopathology. For him seeing was better than being seen: in his self-portraits he felt the power to present himself as he wished to be seen, while the models he painted were exposed rather than he himself. He transformed the pain of being looked at into the power of looking—shame was translated into awe. **Lubin (1972)** explains: "The transformation of the visual core of shame, the pain of being looked at, into the awe of looking was especially important in his artistic development. Awe signifies a sense of being overwhelmed by the greatness and majesty of a person or object; feelings of reverence, wonder, or fear often accompany it. Shame and awe are related. Both are concerned with contrasts between superior and inferior and with vision, although in shame one is observed while in awe one is the observer" (pp. 209–210). Vincent often expressed his feelings of awe in relation to idealized figures in his life as well as in the presence of nature. Such awe made him feel small and insignificant in contrast to the power and magnificence of the object. **Greenacre (1956, 1957)** has connected this phenomenon to the experience of penis awe, presumably related to the child's visual exposure to the adult tumescent penis. This sense of awe easily translates into a displacement and communication to external forms in the manner of collective alternates.

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Painting was a device for mastering and containing these distressful feelings of inferiority and helplessness. The object could be visualized and captured on canvas, so that in mastering the object Vincent was able to contain his own inner feelings of shame and fear. In his mastery of the object on the canvas, he no longer had to experience the painful awesomeness of the real object and could escape his own feelings of insignificance and impotence. **Greenacre (1957)** observed with regard to the transformations of the object of awe: "In the gifted one, however, the individual object may be only apparently relinquished, to appear rather in a glorified collective form which becomes the object of the love for a time. The ideals seem to be extended even more than the prohibitive conscience is developed, as the oedipal wishes are expanded, apparently desexualized by their deflection from a personal genital aim, but not renounced ... it does not produce an abandonment of the oedipal object but only a by-passing of this in favor of the larger collective, more powerful one" (pp. 58–59). Nature became Vincent's collective alternate, the object of displacement for these powerful psychic themes.

Artistic Identity

Greenacre (1957) emphasized another point that may have maximal import for our understanding of Vincent. The balance of these influences in the gifted child has a powerful influence on incipient ego development, particularly on the development of the child's self-image or representation, or in more specifically structural terms his introjective configuration that forms the core around which his sense of self is constructed (**Meissner, 1978**). Unfortunately for Vincent, he did not have available appropriate objects that would allow him to consolidate a healthy and positive sense of himself by appropriate and constructive internalizations. Following **Greenacre, Rose (1987)** postulates a characteristic split in the artistic sense of identity:

[T]he urgency of these pressures emanating from the creative self competes for attention and commitment with the person's ordinary world of social stereotype. This struggle between the conventional or social self and the creative self often causes yet another kind of split: a split in the sense of identity. It is one which may well continue into the adult life of the future artist. Depending on changing circumstances, the balance may swing now toward the urgency of creative needs, now toward the demands of ordinary life.... there is a lively if often adversarial [two-way conscious] communication between the self-organizations—both between the conventional and the creative identity, as well as within the private world where the reality sense is held in temporary abeyance until it is reinstated [pp. 112–113].

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I would add to this view of the splitting in the artistic consciousness and sense of self that Vincent's inner world was afflicted by other forms and degrees of splitting and internal fragmentation, especially during the period of his acute illness toward the end of his life. But the inner uncertainty and dissociative quality of his personality structure was a feature of his life adjustment well before its tragic close.

Art as Transitional

For psychoanalysts the personal quality of Vincent's artistic effort expresses his creative involvement in transitional experience. The notion of transitional experience and transitional phenomena emerged from the work of Donald **Winnicott (1971)**, who originally described the child's use of transitional objects in negotiating the shift from dependence on the mothering object to gradual involvement with reality. The origins and implications of transitional experience and the significance of the realm of illusion have a special place in the developmental life of the infant as well as in the creative experience of the artist.

Essential to the notion of transitional experience is that it belongs neither to objective reality nor to the purely subjective realm; rather it holds a middle ground where it participates simultaneously in both. Transitional phenomena play a role in adult experience, standing midway between the inner and outer worlds. As **Modell (1968)** observed: "The transitional object is not completely created by the individual, it is not a hallucination, it is an object 'in' the environment. It is something other than the self, but the separateness from the self is only partially acknowledged, since the object is given life by the subject. It is a created environment—created in the sense that the properties attributed to the object reflect the inner life of the subject" (p. 35).

Adult transitional phenomena find their most significant expression in the realm of cultural experience. **Winnicott (1971)** located cultural experience in the potential space arising between the experiencing individual and his environment. Cultural experience has its origin in the play of children, and in the capacity of each individual to create and use this potential space determined by early life experiences, particularly the earliest experience with objects. As **Winnicott (1971)** observed, "From the beginning the baby has maximally intense experiences in the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and the not-me. This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control" (p. 100). The cultural life of any human individual is determined by the fate of the potential space that arises between the baby and the mother.

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This potential space of cultural experience joins the individual's personal psychic reality and the actual world of activity and interaction of the objective environment as the vital area of human experience and psychically meaningful activity. In childhood, this becomes the area of play, which subsequently expands into a capacity for creative living and cultural experience.

Within this potential space, the artist creates an illusion, bringing together in imaginative fusion the created and the real to produce an illusory experience. The potential space of which Winnicott speaks arises in the process of artistic creation itself, as a place where the real materials with which the artist works—for Vincent canvas and oils—can receive the imaginative vision, the creative impulse by which he transforms material from the real, material environment into something that has meaning, value, implication. The creative capacity of any artist seems linked with his ability to maintain the continuity of transitional experience. Prolongation of transitional experience provides the psychic matrix within which the artist can "explore the external and the internal anew and to invent, play with, and enact symbols akin to the initial discovering we all experienced as the differentiation of self from nonself progressed" (**Oremland, 1989**, p. 27). Oremland summarizes this perspective in a lapidary formula: "Creativity parallels the transitional period. The creative object, like the transitional object, is part self, part primal other (the mother), and yet separate from both" (p. 119).

What does this digression into transitional experience and artistic illusion have to do with Vincent? It seems reasonable to say that Vincent lived his life more immersed in illusion than in reality. Reality was toxic for him—he could not tolerate it, he did not know how to deal with it, it only brought him pain, disappointment, bitterness, and frustration. He struggled desperately to mold the world to his needs, to see it in terms of his wishes and hopes rather than in terms of the harsh realities of sacrifice and disappointment it held for him. His illusions dominated every phase of his life, and brought with them the inevitable burden of disappointment, frustration, failure, and disillusionment. His *Umwelt* was not a pleasant place to live; it was colored by the dynamic forces that shaped his psychic life from the beginning, forces that left him feeling that he was the outcast, the stranger on the earth, the unloved, rejected, unwanted, inadequate and disappointing failure to all he knew and tried to love. In a sense, Vincent lived in a transitional space of tragic illusion.

When he picked up his palette and brushes and approached the canvas, he entered another transitional space that held special qualities for him. That space was a refuge from the harsh world of reality and human expectations and demands that he so passionately rejected and scorned. For Vincent to draw or to paint was to retreat from the world and to enter a sphere of

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special relevance, a sphere in which he could create his own world, reshape the world of nature to fit his own inner vision, and express the pathos and powerful contortions of his soul. Vincent's painting opens a window to that inner world of creative illusion that possessed his heart, mind, and soul. It is difficult to draw a line between the man and his works—they are the same—or at least seem to be mutual reflections of each other. All of Vincent's paintings are a projective expression and realization, through the medium of his art, of himself, of the pain, the power, at times of the delicacy, the sensitivity, as well as the inner struggle and force of his tormented psyche. As he stood before the easel, the canvas became a kind of projective device that revealed as well as any projective test the dynamic forces at work within him, a kind of spontaneously created Rorschach on which he poured himself out in a torrent of creative activity.

Vincent the Artist

Vincent holds a unique position in the history of art, one that he could hardly have hoped for during his lifetime. As he and Gauguin sat in the kitchen of the little yellow house in Arles, and argued their theories of art and the meaning of the artistic life, they might have dreamed, but could hardly have envisioned their place in history. Along with Seurat and the later Cezanne they would be regarded as the progenitors of a new wave not only in terms of artistic technique but in terms of artistic experience itself. They were the initiators of the post-Impressionist developments in art. They led the advance, in a sense, toward the symbolism of the last decades of the century. The decadence and pessimism of the age fostered an artistic response. As **Hamilton (1967)** comments:

The poets and painters of 1885, disgusted by the inability of society to solve these problems, repudiated the standards of a rationalist and materialist era in favour of a new set of values for which the highest spiritual significance was claimed. They found their belief that art was the vehicle for those values confirmed by the great Romantics before them: in Balzac's statement that "the mission of art is not to copy nature but to express it" and in Delacroix's that "in his soul man has innate feelings which actual objects will never satisfy" and the imagination of the painter or poet can give form and life to these feelings" [p. 75].

The tortured months and years that Vincent spent in Arles coincided with a period of transition between the analytic impressionism that preceded and the emerging synthetic and symbolic art that pointed the way to the future, between the use of conventional forms for symbolic aims and the fashioning of new forms of symbolic expression for the discovery of new feelings.

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Hamilton (1967) captures this dimension and its complex mingling with the tragic lives of these heroes of art:

The lasting achievement of Paul Gauguin and of his friend and contemporary, Vincent van Gogh, was to have created the most masterly visualization of the Symbolist aesthetic. Their work, so fundamentally new and so crucial for the development of Expressionism, has sometimes been eclipsed by the sordid tragedies of their lives, which were joined for a few disastrous months in 1888. To find a just balance between each man's art and the life which by turns sustained and crippled it is a difficult task" [p. 83].

And specifically of Vincent he adds:

The problems of van Gogh's art are thus different in kind as well as in degree from those of his French contemporaries. Its function was intentionally less artistic than social, and less social than personal. It answered his need for communication between himself and others, in the course of which he hoped to find the love that was always withheld and for lack of which he died. Since he justified his art by the truth of his feelings, his art is totally self-expressive. When it achieves, as it does at times, a more than personal power and beauty, it is expressive to such a degree that it became almost immediately, although too late to save him, one of the principal sources for the broader currents of European Expressionism [pp. 94–95].

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