

Image Upon Image: Alberti and Van Gogh

0. Rafael Alberti's poem "Van Gogh" appears in the second edition of *A la pintura (Poema del color y la línea)/To Painting (Poem of Line and Colour)*, a collection published in Buenos Aires in 1948.¹ In subsequent editions of the volume, this text remains unchanged, although the accompanying iconographic subjects change in illustrated editions. The Argentinean edition has the drawing of the *Cypresses* (Saint-Remy, June 1989) in black and white. The 1968 Spanish edition reproduces an enlarged detail (the moon) of the famous work *The Starry Night* (Saint-Remy, June 1989) in colour,² whereas the bilingual Italian edition of 1971 features Alberti's own collages and drawings.³

The author speaks poetically not of a specific painting by Van Gogh, but of his pictorial trajectory as a tragic symbiosis of life and art: a genius of the excess he approaches with a reticent discourse from a semantic point of view, but very expressive from a formal point of view. It is a case of poetic language that speaks of pictorial language metaphorically and symbolically, in a very broad sense. The metaphor allows us to perceive what the concept turns to stone,⁴ and the symbol allows us to traverse the borders of codes.⁵ With (verbal) images of (visual) images, Alberti constantly replaces the signs of his habitual contexts —through a succinct, elemental, "impressionist" statement— with his scant syntactic articulations and his many resonant implications.

¹Rafael Alberti, *A la pintura (Poema del color y la línea)*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1948, pp.201-203.

²Rafael Alberti, *A la pintura. Poema del color y la línea (1945-1967)*, Madrid, Aguilar, 1968.

³Rafael Alberti, *Alla pittura. Poema del colore e della linea. 1945-1952*, Disegni e collages dell'autore, translated by Ignazio Delogu, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1971.

⁴For Aristotle the metaphor helps us understand things in motion and refers therefore to the *physis*. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *La metafora viva*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1997, pp.60-61. Ed. orig.: *La métaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

On the representation of things in motion

⁵According to Umberto Galimberti, *La terra senza il male*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1984, p.75, "in order to pro-voke the symbol in order to 'call' upon it as much as possible to produce meaning, it is necessary first of all to trans-gress the semantic order, in a literal sense, that is 'to proceed beyond' its codified signs, since the symbol, as a dimension that begins working when the conceptual apparatus fails, and as a reference to further meanings beyond the codified meanings, makes up for a deficiency and ensures a progression, that very same progression which, despite Hegel's prediction, the symbolic order continues to have vis-a-vis the semantic order".

Like Van Gogh's pictorial technique, here Alberti's poetic art suggests that more is said with less, in the end effectively representing what is at play: not the perfection of the work, but the potency of the act. Something so mysterious that it needs much silence,⁶ so that between pauses the figurative saying may interrogate that limit of outward appearance where, for both the painter and the poet, experience starts from the body.⁷ Van Gogh, especially in his final years, made a heart-breaking metaphysic by painting nature. Let's see how Alberti, who had a more positive attitude⁸ on this topic, managed to bring that relationship to his poetry.

VAN GOGH⁹

1	Pincelada quemada. Fuente de aparente	Sunstruck brushstroke; source of a seemingly
5	corriente desordenada. Matutina, golondrina fuente.	orderless streaming, morning- like source of the swallows.
10	Se arremolina, campesina, ondula. Noche en círculo rueda,	Whirls, the countryside swirls night's wheel twirls

⁶Pier Aldo Rovatti observes in *L'esercizio del silenzio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1992, p.130: "Thus language can enter into a sort of oscillation: names and things are slowed down in their correspondence to each other. Semantic deviations and shifts are more visible: words, inertially attracted by the normal conceptual organization, are induced to reveal their metaphorical dimension".

⁷According to José Luis Pardo, *Las formas de la exterioridad*, Valencia, Pre-textos, 1992, p.261: "In Greek thought, 'experience' can mean only 'the experience of feeling,' that is, being becoming sense itself or the natural experience of nature. But like nature it is considered—like *physis*—before all *work*, and *work of art*, a product of technique and *poiesis*, it does not deal with the perception of a chaotic, inert, undifferentiated, abstract or empty multiplicity; nature can be experience—become something felt—in environments of sense within certain limits that we have called Spaces (and which contain time retained and concentrated, which are 'full of things,' which are Images, Shams or Scenes); such spaces are specific places that nature inhabits (they are habitats) and habits with which nature cloaks itself."

⁸Luis García Montero, *La palabra de Ícaro (Estudios literarios sobre García Lorca y Alberti)*, Universidad de Granada, 1996, p.143: "The unprecedented astonishment of creating makes the forces of nature unite with art in Alberti's poetic world. Poetry and painting are activities that are capable of limiting the astonishment of nature, the impetus for life, mystery and metamorphosis, the exaltation to beauty. This creative logic explains the opportunity of the Albertian homage to painting."

⁹Translation of poem by Carolyn Tipton, *To Painting: Poems by Rafael Alberti*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1997, pp.149 and 151. —tr.

	azula	blues
15	la arboleda.	the grove.
	Crepita, carrasca infinita, t izo, el paisaje:	Crackling, the mazed holly-oak, a blaze of coals, the scene:
20	rescoldo movedizo, mar, oleaje. Nuclear	embers shifting, an uplifting of the sea. Yellow dementia
	demencia en amarillo,	at its core,
25	pincel cuchillo, girasol, cruento amarillo sol, violento	knife-applied sunflower: yellow sun- gore, violent-eyed
30	anillo.	round.
	Gualda trigal, verde alucinación, naranja, bermellón, metal,	Wheat-field of weld, hallucination in green, orange, vermilion, brass
35	chilla, pesadilla mortal, humilde silla. Flor,	scream— nightmare, mortal dream: humble, in a room, chair,
40	candela amarilla.	yellow candle, bloom.
	Se corta, se recorta tu color	Your colors then cut short, cut off
45	se exalta, vuela, pintor.	painter, you rise, apotheosized.
	Mas permanece lo que importa: alta,	Yet what you worked to make
50	la estela ¹⁰ .	remains: a starry wake.

¹⁰Rafael Alberti, *A la pintura (Poema del color y la línea) (1945-1976)*, Madrid, Alianza, 1989, pp.124-125; the citations from other poems in the collection refer to this edition. For a general critical work on this volume, cf. Pedro Guerrero Ruiz, *Rafael Alberti: Poema del color y la línea*, Murcia, El Taller, 1989. For a generic interpretation of the poem *Van Gogh*, cf. *ibídem*, pp.73-77. For a precise albeit brief analysis, cf. Kurt Spang, *Inquietud y nostalgia. La poesía de Rafael Alberti*, Pamplona, Universidad de Navarra, 1973, pp.146-148.

1. In the first stanza Alberti focuses immediately on the theme of creation, from the mythology of technology relative to the mythology of nature. The first word, which comprises the first line, is “pincelada” / “brushstroke,” a metonymy of the entire pictorial work in the classic sense of *ars* or technique. With a hyperbolic use of the poetic signifier and its effects of suprasegmental meaning, in this strategic opening Alberti dedicates a line to each word, breaking the fluidity of the text with the first representation of Van Gogh’s abrupt style.¹¹ The second word is “quemada”¹² / “burned,”¹³ a description that refers to the dark stroke as though it were taming fire. Like a new Prometheus, the Dutch painter appears as owner of that cosmogonic element that leaves only the fingerprint of its intervention, the sign that something that existed stopped existing thanks to the noble and sacred process of combustion. The final period, after this minimal noun phrase that—in addition, the enjambment full of emotional tension— indicates that the short, symptomatic foreshortening has come to an end.

The third word—to which, also emphatically, the poet dedicates a single line—is the apposition “Fuente” / “source,” an allusion to another theme in Van Gogh’s paintings: water, another cosmogonic element. Just like the igneous element, the aquatic element is a symbol of creation. In particular, the image of the fountain refers to perennial regeneration, to the endless energy that flows from a secret origin. Here, furthermore, it takes shape as the medium that mysteriously guides chaos toward the cosmos: such is the significance of the noun phrase “source / of a seeming- / ly orderless / streaming.” The reiterated enjambment postpones interpretation until the end. At the same time, the phonic structure reinforces the dynamic polarity between what is stated and what is hidden: in the dissemination of the clear dominant vowel [e], the continuant consonants [f], [n], [r] (“fuente / de aparente / corriente”) oppose the explosive consonants [p] [d] [k] y [t] (“fuente / de aparente / corriente”), while two types of perfect rhyme closely tie together all of the preceding lines. Following the a-a-b-b-b-a rhyme

¹¹ On the mimetic effects of the formal structure of the poem, Spang notes in *Inquietud y nostalgia/Worry and Nostalgia*, cit., p.146: “The short lines, often a single word, that rhyme irregularly, the long and irregular stanzas give the poem a breathless and restless rhythm and are a faithful reflection of Van Gogh’s technique in his tense and laboured brushstrokes.” *Inquietud y nostalgia. La poesía de Rafael Alberti*, Pamplona, Universidad de Navarra, 1973, pp. 146-148. Cf. also Eric Bou, *Pintura en el aire*, Valencia, Pre-textos, 2001, pp.157-177.

¹² When the author’s analysis involves the word order of the poem, its rhyming scheme or its linguistic components, the Spanish is included. Otherwise, only the English is provided. –tr.

¹³ Tipton’s translation is often creative and interpretive, not literal. If the discussion of the Spanish word or phrase cannot be applied to the translation, a literal translation is provided in parentheses. –tr.

scheme, the two sequences “*pincelada, quemada, desordenada*” and “*fuelle, aparente, corriente*” are also integrated from the sonorous point of view. Furthermore, on the poetic plane, the technical, aesthetic and ethical expressions of the painter are reinvented *metaphorically*. Consider, for example, the gloomy paintings of the first Dutch period, whose scenes of peasant life are dominated by brownish tones and blackened outlines. The blue colour belongs to his subsequent stage in Paris: the city’s skies and the backgrounds of his still lifes and self-portraits seem lined with short waves. In both cases, motion is fixed, and the start and finish of movement fall outside the scope of the senses, in the territory of imagination which by its very nature allows us to see what is there *plus ultra*: in this case through the metaphysics of fire and water.

To capture what is beyond the shapes, through the shapes themselves: this was Van Gogh’s obsessive and paradoxical search that Alberti depicts with his knowledge as a poet and a painter. In this way, he sets out the conditions starting in the first verse, especially in the conclusion, where the adjective “morning-like,” which opens the last noun phrase, is another symbolic image from the beginning, analogous to that of the “swallows”, an apposition related to inaugural time and movement.¹⁴ Between “source” (3) and “source” (8), the anaphora that encircles the specifications of “brushstroke,”¹⁵ Alberti introduces the cyclical return of the dawn (“morning-like”) and the spring (“swallows”), as subsequent images of Van Gogh’s creative ability, related to the cosmogonic element of air, an invisible but sensitive mediation between fire and water. This enumeration without verbs, as simple and solemn as a timeless truth, precedes a great dynamic explosion.

2. The “*pincelada*”, also the subject of the second stanza, suddenly begins to act as if it had a life of its own. The poet again encloses each lexeme in a single line, but here the first two lines are both marked by commas and the third line by a period, with a closed rhyme effect, which accompanies and underscores the semantic component: “*Se arremolina, / campesina, / ondula*” / “*Whirls, / the countryside / swirls*”. The interaction between the signifier and the signified is consistent at all levels. For example the continuant consonants in the Spanish [s], [r], [m], [n] of the first reflexive verb (“*se arremolina*” / “whirls”) accentuate the kinetic flow of the referent, its revolving, concentric frenzy: metaphor of metaphors (“*moler*” > “*molino*” > “*remolinar*” >

¹⁴ For example, Alberti also associates light with a bird in flight also in the first lines of the poem *Al movimiento/To Movement*: “To you, winged grace, form in flight/headlong mass revived by light” (p.108).

¹⁵ Line 1 in Spanish –tr.

“arremolinarise” / “to grind” > “mill” > “to spin” > “to whirl”), this image synthesizes the painter’s maximum energy, his incessant wish to break up figures and pile them up, always longing for the supernatural revelation. The synecdoche formed by the adjective “campesina” (“rural”) elaborates further on one of Van Gogh’s favourite themes during both his Dutch and Provençal periods: the country. At the same time it completes the fourth corner of classic cosmogony: fire, water, air, in the first stanza; earth in the second. Once more the material, as well as ideological, ties them together, given that another perfect rhyme creates a single, strategic tone at the end of the stanza (“*matutina, golondrina, se arremolina, campesina*”), lexemes belonging to distinct semantic areas and stanzas. The last verb of this phrase —“*ondula*” (“undulates”)— also expresses a movement, but it is a movement of nature as opposed to the first movement: the “burned brushstroke” is now replaced with a soft, horizontal rhythm, from one side to the other, forming waves. The circle (“whirls”) and the line (“swirls”), never static, respectively refer to totality and discontinuity, to that which is indivisible and that which is discrete, to the being and to the entity: that is, to the eternal polarity of creation.

The idea unfolds over the rest of the stanza, where the result rather than the process of painting is stressed. For the first time a phrase comprised of the subject, complement and verb occupies a single line: “Night’s wheel twirls.” This demiurgic scene represents darkness being replaced with a circular movement: the act of going around, whose vigour is acoustically strengthened by the phoneme [r] in the initial position, since the symbology of the wheel introduces in the eternity of the circle the contingency of becoming and, therefore, the mortal existence of all creation.¹⁶ The “night” is also the grammatical subject of the following noun phrase: “blues/the grove” which, with the fragmentation of the line and the suspension of the enjambment, returns to the mysterious atmosphere of the beginning, but a religious halo has been added. Van Gogh considered blue to be a sacred colour, typical of eternity and infinity.¹⁷ The germinal and powerful night contaminates a grove with its chromaticism, activating the dual symbology of the spiritualization of the subject and the regeneration of life. The tree, a cosmic axis that unites the underworld and the celestial world,¹⁸ completes the four constituent elements of the universe.

¹⁶Cf. Jean Chevalier - Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Paris, Robert Laffont et Jupiter, 1969, s.v.

¹⁷Meyer Schapiro, *Vincent van Gogh*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1950, p.19, observes that if yellow is the colour that ideally represents divine light, “the more recessive blue suggests a distant heavenly space or an inwardness of spirit restored to its celestial source - the blue of the sky absolutized in color, almost to the state of darkness.”

¹⁸Cf. Chevalier - Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, cit., s.v.

This stanza seems to allude to a painful period in the artist's life. When Van Gogh lived in the mental hospital in Saint-Remy (for one year, starting in May 1889), he painted extraordinary works that present analogous features: in addition to *The Starry Night*, there are numerous versions of cypresses, olive groves and other trees, where blue tones prevail even though they are daytime scenes.

3. From the third stanza on, Rafael Alberti brings life to Van Gogh's painting with prosopopeias that introduce a perception beyond the visual. The grammatical and referential subject is "the landscape" (19), but the poet first presents the verb "Crepita"/"Crackling." Again it is an isolated opening on a single line, whose forceful initial tone, a result of the union of the explosive [k] and the continuant and vibrant [r], is disseminated in the apposition "carrasca"/"holly-oak," with echoes that are made endless with the adjective "infinita" ("infinite"). This noisy image, which the perfect rhyme ("crepita, infinita") subsequently brings into a common sonorous subject, may refer to clicks of any origin if the subsequent apposition "tizo," also presented in a line by itself, does not resume the isotopy of the /fire/ that descends from the initial "Pincelada / quemada" "Burned/brushstroke". The following apposition "rescoldo movedizo"/"embers shifting," linked by another perfect rhyme to "tizo"/"a blaze of coals" is the beginning of the poem but brought up to date. The following isotopy of /water/ also confirms this through the final appositions of "sea" and "uplifting." Again the sonorous linking together of the perfect rhyme strengthens the already established semantic relationships. In particular "oleaje", in the last line, is connected to "el paisaje" ("the landscape"), one of the two lexemes in the entire poem that have the determinate article and that here symmetrically occupies the centre of the stanza, in a strategic position between combustion and undulation, fundamental metaphors of Van Gogh's painting.

4. All of this is brought to the extreme in the fourth stanza, which refers to the Arles period (from February 1888 to May 1889), when artistic creativity and mental illness collided with convulsive vehemence. With the isolated images of the noun phrases, Rafael Alberti represents the condition of the tormented genius that at that time produced an astonishing number of masterpieces. The opening lines —"Yellow dementia/at its core"— alludes to the pathological root of the work of art, the point of irradiation that participates in the same symbolic properties of the /circle/. The following line sums up the aggressive use of the pictorial instrument *par excellence*: the "Burned/brushstroke" from the beginning of the poem is now the (literally) "knife-paintbrush," as if the

dark lines were incisions, cuts, wounds. The evocative power of this bare and elemental style is enormous: who could forget, for example, that on the night of December 24, 1898 Van Gogh sank a knife into his own flesh, mutilating his ear?

The rest of the stanza presents the results of this paroxysmic condition. It addresses one of the most famous subjects of the artist's life: "sunflower:/yellow sun-/gore,/violent-eyed/round," often mentioned in letters to his brother Theo. During that period, Van Gogh considered that flower, painted in many versions, the code of his art *par excellence*. But in general the Arles landscape, its light and its weather never stopped surprising him, so much so that at times he painted outside in a rapture of mystic communion with nature. This undying stupor, which drove him to portray the same subject over and over in an attempt to capture its secret essence, belongs to the realm of the sacred. It is a feeling, far from reason, that brings so much loneliness. Van Gogh longs for contact with the vital powers of the universe and he removed himself further and further from the community of men.¹⁹

Alberti's ambiguous poetic text is in keeping with this vague and inexplicable intimacy that the artist wished to paint, thereby producing the effects of music²⁰ in his work. The semantic borders formed by the semiotic signs are dubious: "cruento/amarillo sol" ("bloody/yellow sun") could be the metaphoric apposition of "sunflower", like an autonomous detail from the diurnal paintings of the period. The same holds true for "violento/anillo" ("violent/round"), which may refer to "sunflower" and to "sun" or to one of the two or neither. A key to interpretation lies in the fact that in Arles, Van Gogh stopped painting in the canonical style of the impressionists. Inspired by the ancient masters of Japanese art, he eliminates the shadows and natural light sources as if the objects themselves emitted light, with an autonomous and unknown power.²¹ Even the gigantic suns stopped illuminating the world from high above it: they are powerful, mysterious, terrible coils.²² In his figurative art, so concrete that it becomes unreal, everything is joined to everything else.

The open form of the noun phrase and the striking presence of poetic signifier play a primary role in the construction of labile semantic borders: through the unequal intermittency of the short and extremely short lines (from three syllables to seven); through the enjambments

¹⁹ In reference to the "political" consequences of sacredness, cf. Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, Paris, Gallimard, 1950, p.174.

²⁰ Cf. letter 531. from the Italian edition: *Tutte le lettere di V. van Gogh*, Introduzione di J. van Gogh-Bonger, Milano, Silvana Editoriale d'Arte, 1959, vol.3, p.26.

²¹ Cf. *ibídem*, pp.337 y 341.

²² Cf. *ibídem*, p.360.

("Nuclear/demencia"; "cruento/amarillo", "violento/anillo") that break up the strongest logical-syntactic ties; through the etymological figure and the perfect rhymes ("sol, girasol"; "amarillo, cuchillo, amarillo, anillo"; "cruento, violento") which, together with the anagrammatical dissemination of the subsequent common phonemes (in particular the vowels [u] and [a]; the consonants [k], [r], [m]) keep forming their own sonorous structures. All of this inserts subsequent tensions in a referent that is in itself distressing, devoid of harmony. The relationships are very much woven together: by the isotopies of /circle/; in the symbolic acceptance of invariability and vagueness, ("Core", "sunflower", "sun", "round"); of the /fury/, in the ambiguous valence of the creative drive and the uncontrolled behaviour ("dementia", "knife", "bloody", "violent"); of the /yellow/, which was one of the painter's favourite colours at the time.

It is interesting to note that, in the poem entitled "Yellow," Rafael Alberti dedicates some lines to Van Gogh, conjugating in a manner approaching chromaticism, insanity and an iconographic search. Furthermore, the illustrated Spanish edition of *A la pintura/To Painting* associates the poem "Amarillo" "Yellow" with the painting of the twelve sunflowers (Arles, August 1888). Fragment 28 of this poem is almost a citation from the poem "Van Gogh": "El amarillo del temlor, el tenso / amarillo febril de la demencia" "The yellow of the shivering, the tense/febrile yellow of dementia"; fragment 29 changes the isotopies of the /fury/ and the /circle/, personifying the phenomenological meeting between colour and the artist's eye: "Sueno, resueno. grito / hasta hincarme en el centro / —Van Gogh— de la retina y desgarrarla" "I make a sound, I echo, I scream/until I kneel in the centre/ —Van Gogh— the retina, tearing it up"; fragment 30 possibly refers to the passage from the realistic chromaticism to the symbolic: "Me tuesta el ocre. El rojo / me excita y me suspende hasta la altura / naranja de la llama" "The ochre toasts me. Red lifts me excites me and lifts me high up to/the orange of the flame" (p. 63).

In his letter to Theo from Arles, Van Gogh describes in minute detail this emotional change of colour. Speaking of the portrait of an artist friend, he affirms that he has given up blond hair, initially yellow, for a fiery orange. It is an example that clarifies an aesthetic beginning announced shortly before: using colour arbitrarily is to express himself with intensity.²³

5. Strengthened by the articulation of poetic signifier, the fifth stanza continues to represent fragments of Van Gogh's famous paintings. The expressive strategy is the same: noun phrases confirm, in an indefinite

²³Cf. letter 520, in *Tutte le lettere di V. van Gogh*, cit., p.6.

way, the persistence of the synergy among the context of Arles, chromatic audacity and mental malaise. The first three lines bring together the emotional, passionate use of the most frequent colours: "Wheat-field of weld, /hallucination in green, /orange, vermilion". These lines evoke not only the many versions of wheat-fields, but also the unusual chromaticism of many pictorial subjects from that period onwards, be they men, landscapes or simple objects. In his symbiotic relationship with the universe, Van Gogh's love could not conceive of hierarchy.

The following lines—"brass/scream—/nightmare,/mortal dream: humble, in a room, /chair"—allude to the celebrated paintings of interiors: the painter's bedroom (where the bed is prominent: orange wood, red bedspread, yellow sheets) and his chair (alone in the foreground, the yellow back, legs and straw seat); the green foreshortening of the door and the wall, the orange brick floor). The solitary and sleepless Van Gogh lives humbly in Arles but is concerned about his domestic surroundings: he wants to give it an artistic style, very distinct from the excessively ornate bourgeois taste of his time. He achieves this with very modest furniture, carefully chosen in spite of his scant resources. Painting them means expressing the paradox of an intimately tender and aesthetically heterodox relationship. For similar reasons he paints the chair of his friend Gauguin, with whom he shared his house in Arles for a season. Both chairs—which one critic considers a metaphor of the twentieth century crisis²⁴—are so important for the painter that he describes them to his brother with great passion.²⁵ We are in December 1898: his sudden and dramatic changes in mood are becoming more intense, and Alberti expresses them with the syntagma "mortal dream" and the verb "scream," without a clear subject. Nevertheless fragment 29 in the poem "Yellow" ("I make a sound, I echo, I scream /until I kneel in the centre/—Van Gogh— the retina, tearing it up"); may guide our interpretation: "scream" may personify the deep tone of the colour and also represent the effect of a wave of insanity.

Again, the poetic signifier subsequently ties what semantics joins isotopically. In considering the striking phenomenon of the perfect rhymes in the final line, we note the homogenous series "Trigal, metal, mortal", "alucinación, bermellón" and "chilla, pesadilla, silla, amarilla".

²⁴ Referring to the psychic fragility of so many European geniuses of the 19th and 20th centuries, identified by Hans Seldmeyer, affirm Ingo F. Walther - Rainer Metzger, *Vincent van Gogh. The Complete Paintings*, Köln, Taschen, 1997, p.11: "Van Gogh's chairs constitute a metaphor of the crisis of the entire century, a metaphor that corresponds to the somewhat forced pathos of Sedlmayr's account. We cannot grasp van Gogh's own *via dolorosa*, through his fits of madness and final suicide, in isolation from the century he lived in. Van Gogh's ailment was the *maladie du siècle*, the self-fulfilling *Weltschmerz*, that Seldmayr attempts to explain by the loss of belief in God."

²⁵ Cf. letter 563, in *Tutte le lettere di V. van Gogh*, cit., p.110.

Separated by a period, the last lines introduce two other well-known subjects of the artist's period in Arles: "Yellow candle, /bloom." Van Gogh continues to cultivate the floral theme he debuted in Paris. The final image is the lit candle, a symbol of cosmic individualized life and of rising strength,²⁶ but also the simple testimony of an object that the artist used at night to paint the skies sewn with stars. The symbolism of fire continues to be an active cosmogonic element. No longer a "Burned brushstroke," but rather a flame that keeps burning, as in *The Starry Night*, in which colossal stars are shown in motion across a dark sky: they all have circular halos and a yellow centre, as if they were lit candles.

The adjective "yellow", referring to the "candle", concludes the stanza, which is opened with the variant "wheat-field" and is tied chromatically and symbolically to the previous stanza. This colour connects everything.

6. The entirety of Van Gogh's personal adventure has been outlined. At the conclusive moment, after so many suggestive and unconnected scenes, now a concrete apostrophe appears with the key elements of the poem: the artist, his paintings and —completely unexpected— the spectator. The sixth stanza, as intensely dynamic as the second, both symmetrically equidistant with respect to the beginning and end of the poem, begins with the reflexive verb "Se corta." It is a transformation that may affect a piece of fabric or material; but it is also a metaphor for the pictorial technique of the artist, who increasingly accentuates the reckless lines in his compositions. Each cut is a separation and a beginning: all of the shapes are always in motion, as though threatened by chaos.

An anaphora and an etymological figure subsequently stress this artistic strength in the second reflexive verb: "se recorta" (to stand out or be silhouetted). Thus Rafael Alberti alludes to the schematicism of the silhouettes painted by Van Gogh, from the period in Arles forward, under the influence of the models of Japanese art that he admired.²⁷ Only in the third line does the subject of the phrase appear: "your

²⁶Cf. Chevalier - Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, cit., s.v.

²⁷"Van Gogh used these models primarily to perfect his grasp of colour. He was able to juxtapose large areas of unmixed colour, relying on the familiar impact of contrast; and this brought home the full effect of monochrome blocks of colour alongside each other, where previously the setting of yellow beside violet or red beside green had depended on local colour or on small-scale brushwork. This was the first time van Gogh brought himself to use monumental areas of unmixed colour, undimmed by questions of light and dark, in their full, vivid, radiant power." (Walther - Metzger, *Vincent van Gogh. The Complete Paintings*, cit; pp.291-292).

colour," strategically placed in the centre of the sequence of actions that are divided in two blocks. The first two verbs represent the aspect of tangible construction of the work of art: the next two verbs represent the aspect of their emotional idealization. The third reflexive form — "se exalta"/"you rise"— reunites various components of the state of mind with which Van Gogh went about executing his paintings: enthusiasm, fervour, exasperation, derangement, mysticism, etc. Through the fourth and final verb — "vuela" (flies), which rhymes significantly with "candela"/"candle" of the previous stanza — the dynamic of colour reaches its metaphoric acme. The passage from matter to spirit is fulfilled. Defeating the strength as well as dense and compact texture, in Alberti's poem Van Gogh's colour manages to finally achieve the desired, higher sphere of existence.

But all of this exists thanks to the persona of the "painter," a lexeme that summarizes at the level of the signifier the semantic trajectory that he progressively brings to it. Through the sonorous anagrams and perfect rhymes, the phonemes [t], [o] and [r] of "pintor" are announced in advance by the subject of the phrase, "tu color"/"Your colours." These same phonemes and the phoneme [k] are anticipated by the initial verbs "se recorta" y "se corta." It is a crucial moment of the poem.

The last line of the stanza is a vocative, a moment of discourse that casts a different light on the entire previous enunciation, characterized by an abundance of noun phrases, general assertions and absolutes that, without the temporal and modal localization, are distant from the subjectivity of the speaker.²⁸ The other verbal phrases express objective processes through the pronominal structure of the third person (or non-person).²⁹ Summarizing, the static scenes as well as the dynamic situations do not raise suspicions regarding the poet's *coup de théâtre*. Suddenly he addresses the painter, who emerges as a *presence* that reveals himself and takes over the communication. The other being evoked is the "you" that implies the existence of "I," the speaker. Alberti calls upon Van Gogh and the ontological dimension of time and of the being is opened with the occurrence of his voice.³⁰

²⁸Cf. Émile Benveniste, "La frase nominale", en *Problemi di linguistica generale*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1971, p.189. Tit. orig.: *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

²⁹Cf. Benveniste, "La natura dei pronomi", *ibidem*, pp.306-307.

³⁰Taking up the reflections of Benveniste on the enunciative act, Giorgio Agamben affirms, in *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Torino, Einaudi, 1982, p.49: "Since language takes place in the Voice (that is, in the non-place of the voice, in its having-been), language takes place in time. By showing the instance of discourse, the Voice opens up simultaneously being and time. It is chronthetic".

8. The consequences of this instantaneous enunciation are seen in the very brief conclusion, which nevertheless has the longest and most articulated opening line of the whole poem. Now that the representation of the paintings of Van Gogh is finished, the language recovers its speculative autonomy. Inaugurated by an adversative conjunction, the stanza poses the explicit duration of the work of art against the implied, previous event of death. The ephemeral destiny of the living is silenced, reduced to linguistic nothingness. The discourse focuses directly on the artistic heritage as both challenge and compensation: “mas permanece lo que importa: /alta, / la estela” “Yet what you worked/to make/remains:/a starry wake.

The poetic signifier forms, up to the end, a sonorous network among lexemes that already share the same semantic context. The verb “importa” (“matters”) (which rhymes with “Se corta, /se recorta”), the adjective “alta” (“high”) (which forms an etymological figure with “se exalta”), and the noun “estela” / “wake” (which rhymes with “candela” and “vuela”), comprehend everything that in Van Gogh has a higher or preeminent symbolic connotation: his utopian conception of painting, the sublime heritage of his paintings, universal posthumous fame, etc. But “alta/estela” is at the same time a metaphor with a negative connotation, because it is also the image of a lost unity between the artist and his work. In terms of objects destined to last into the future, the products of painting (or of writing) break from the original context, they escape the control of the subject-creator; they become fingerprints that articulate the experience of loss.³¹ Beyond the good intentions of the poet, who must have been thinking about his own destiny as well, for however high it may be—or perhaps because it is high—the wake of a work of art never saves the artist.

On July 27, 1890 Van Gogh writes to Theo and says goodbye, saying that he risks his life in his work.³² For him, writing and painting are components of the same creative yjectory.³³ But this time, he never

³¹It is the subject that Jacques Derrida addresses especially in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967 and in *La dissémination*, Paris, Seuil, 1972. With regard to Van Gogh, goes into detail on the reflections of Heidegger on the pictorial subject of the boots in *La vérité en peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978.

³² Cf *Vincent van Gogh. Lettere a Theo*, a cura di Massimo Cescon, con un saggio introduttivo di Karl Jaspers, Milano, Guanda, 1984, p.358.

³³ The letters of Van Gogh have a seminal artistic function for Jean-Louis Bonnat, *Écriture sus parole. Vincent Willem van Gogh*, Paris, La lettre volée, 1993, pp.9-10: “L'écriture, dans la vie de Van Gogh, n'est pas une simple figure de style. Elle fait l'Œuvre. Elle marque la place de la destinée du peintre. La peinture s'y révèle comme le destin d'une écriture singulière. C'est elle qui domine Van Gogh. Elle constitue cette marque et ce trait de génie par lesquels nous sommes nous-même obligé de reconnaître qu'il y a là trace, marquage, insistance; le passage d'une rigueur d'abrupt, la chose sur laquelle les gens s'accordent alors en parlant d'un style.”

ended up sending the letter, or painting another work. On that bright summer day, he went out into the fields and shot himself.

University of Venice

Translated by Elizabeth Abraham Gómez



INFORMATION

Scripta Mediterranea is the journal of the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies, an international learned society based in Canada and devoted to the study of all aspects of Mediterranean culture and civilization, past and present, with a special interest in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural investigation. Manuscripts may be submitted in English or French, and two copies must reach the editorial office by September 15th. Articles and brief communications should follow the guidelines set out in the *MLA Handbook*. Articles should normally not exceed thirty pages and brief communications five pages, double spaced. Each full-length article should be accompanied by two abstracts of about one hundred words, one in English and one in French. Manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be sent to:

The Editors

Scripta Mediterranea,
Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies,
c/o Department of Spanish and Portuguese
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1A1.

Subscription to *SM* is included in the annual membership fee:

Student: \$ 15	Senior: \$ 25	Regular/Institution: \$ 35
Couple: \$ 60	Donor: \$ 50-199	Benefactor: \$ 200-499
Patron: \$500 or more.		

Outside Canada the above amounts should be paid in U.S. funds or the equivalent. Subscriptions and all other inquiries concerning *SM* or the Institute should be addressed to the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies, 21 Sussex Ave., University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1A1.