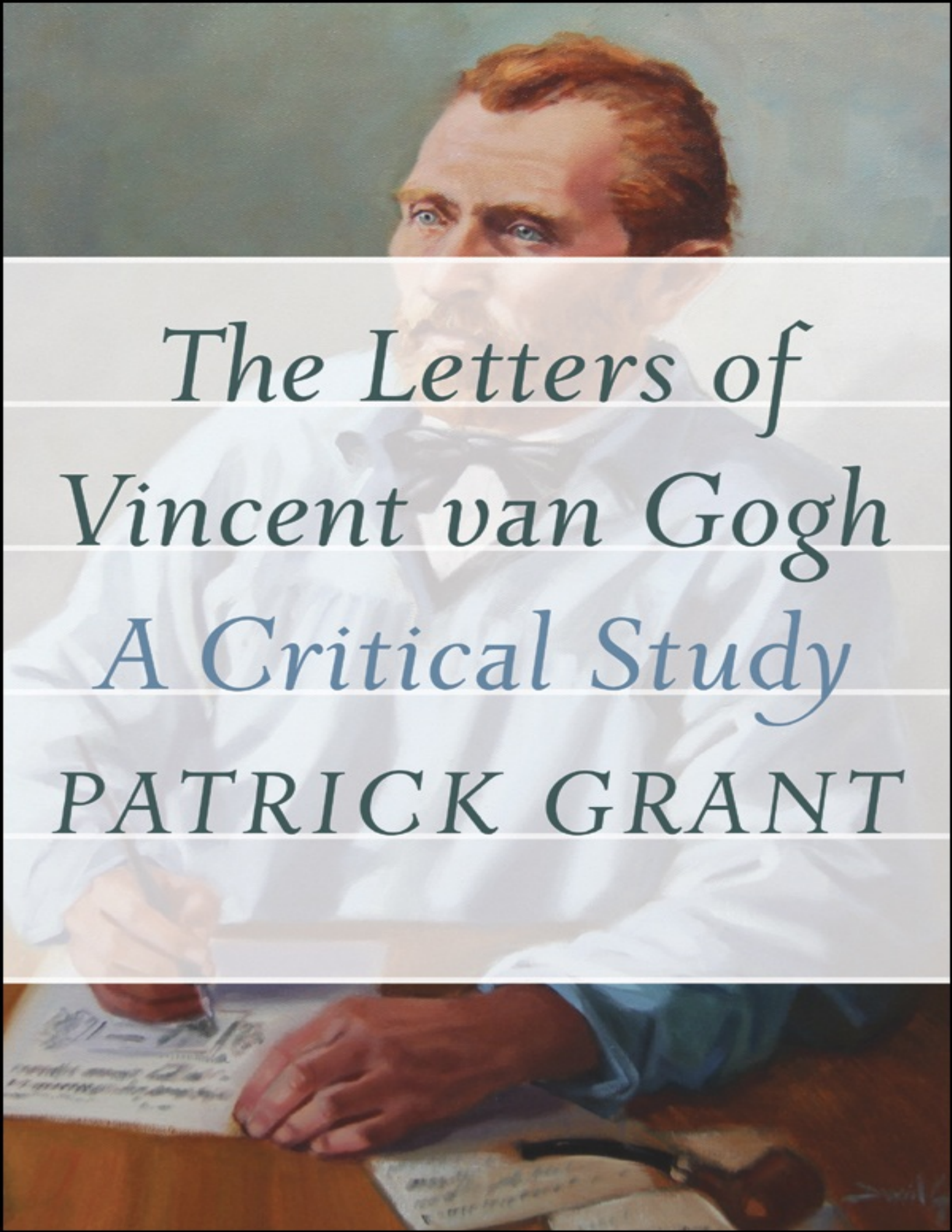

The Letters of Vincent van Gogh

A Critical Study

PATRICK GRANT

THE LETTERS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

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Vincent van Gogh

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Published by AU Press, Athabasca University
1200, 10011 – 109 Street, Edmonton, AB T5J 3S8

A volume in Cultural Dialectics
1915-836X (print) 1915-8378 (electronic)
Cover and interior design by Natalie Olsen, Kisscut Design
Printed and bound in Canada by Marquis Book Printers
doi: 10.15215/aupress/9781927356746.01

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Grant, Patrick, author
The letters of Vincent van Gogh : a critical study / Patrick Grant.
(Cultural dialectics)
Includes bibliographical references.
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-92735674-6 (pbk.). — ISBN 978-1-927356-75-3 (pdf). — ISBN 978-1-927356-76-0 (epub).
1. Gogh, Vincent van, 1853–1890 — Correspondence — History and criticism.
I. Title. II. Series: Cultural dialectics
ND653.G7G83 2014759.9492 C2014-900937-2 C2014-900938-0

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities.

Assistance provided by the Government of Alberta, Alberta Multimedia Development Fund.

For Hans Luijten

I find such interesting things in Vincent's letters and it would really be a remarkable book if one could see how much thinking he did and how he remained true to himself.

THEO VAN GOGH, 8 September 1890

CONTENTS

PREFACE *and* ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Commentators frequently remark on the exceptional literary quality of Vincent van Gogh's collected letters, but no one has yet produced an extended critical assessment of this aspect of his writing. In the present study, I offer such an assessment, focusing on key constellations of metaphors and ideas, as well as a variety of rhetorical strategies through which a compellingly imagined, powerfully humanizing vision emerges from the formidable complexity of Van Gogh's collected correspondence.

In the following pages, I am, for the most part, not interested in the letters as biography or as a way of accessing the paintings, nor do I deal with Van Gogh's many letter-sketches. I realize that the artist would probably be dismayed at the thought of his private correspondence being made public, never mind being subjected to the attentions of a reader bent on discovering a special literary distinction in the eclectic, tangled, and bristling variety of this daunting, often uneven body of writing. As I point out in the introduction, many problems do indeed attend the kind of critical exercise I have undertaken. Still, I am satisfied that the letters as a whole offer such a captivating and authentically imagined set of reflections on our shared human predicament that it is worthwhile attempting some assessment of how and why this is so.

My first encounter with Van Gogh's letters occurred on a rainy winter day in Belfast, Northern Ireland, when I was sixteen. I had ducked into the Belfast Central Library to take refuge from the miserable weather, and I selected a book at random to pass the time. The book was a biography of Van Gogh — I have no idea which one — with extensive excerpts from the letters as well as reproductions of the paintings. Some two hours later, I left the library, still clutching the book, realizing that my personal kaleidoscope, as it were, had shifted: the world was not looking quite the same as before. When I finished the book some days later, I recall telling myself that by and by, I would return to Van Gogh and invest whatever effort I could in attempting to understand more

adequately the extraordinary achievements of this unusual man.

As it happens, it took me almost exactly a half-century to return to the letters in earnest, half a world away from Belfast and at the end of an academic career during which I had written a good deal about literature and various allied topics and concerns. As a sort of recapitulation of that career, I considered writing a collection of essays to address matters I had been especially concerned about or held to be formative during the previous decades. I wanted one of these essays to be on Van Gogh, so I read *The Complete Letters* (2000), finding myself again as thoroughly engaged as I had been in the Belfast Central Library. This time, however, I also visited the Van Gogh Museum Library in Amsterdam to consult the secondary literature, and by and by, I fell into conversation with Hans Luijten, from whom I learned, among other things, that the magnificent 2009 edition of the complete correspondence would soon be published. The more I talked with Hans and the more I learned about the current state of scholarship on the letters, the more clearly I came to realize that despite repeated genuflections by commentators acknowledging the quality of Van Gogh's writing, no one had attempted an extended critical account of the remarkable imaginative power of the correspondence as a whole. The coincidence of interests and opportunities was too persuasive to be resisted, so, after writing my collection of essays (one of them on Van Gogh, as planned), I set about the present project, returning to my early promise in a more thoroughgoing manner than I might ever have anticipated.

Because the following book is addressed primarily to those who will be reading Van Gogh's correspondence in translation, I quote throughout from *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* (2009). Like other distinguished renditions into English (Sir Thomas Hoby's *Courtyer*, Pope's *Iliad*, FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*, MacKenna's *Enneads*, among others), the 2009 translation is remarkable for its inherent interest and high quality. Certainly, in its own right it is captivating and powerful enough to sustain the kind of critical assessment that I offer in the following pages.

Still, not least because of Van Gogh's scarcely translatable idiosyncrasies, grammatical irregularities, and textual markings, it would be unwise to insist on a complete independence of the English version from the source texts in Dutch and French. Consequently, in the following pages my main strategies are, first, to ensure that my readings are sufficiently broad not to depend on nuances that the translation does not catch and, second, to check that, in specific instances, the original languages will sustain the kind of interpretation I am making based on the English. For instance, in Chapter 6, I discuss Van Gogh's opinions about

“memory” and “imagination.” In some cases, the Dutch says “uit het hoofd” and the French “composer de tête,” both using the word for “head” (“hoofd,” “tête”), which is sometimes translated as “memory” and sometimes as “imagination.” In my analysis, the main point is that Van Gogh is concerned with what goes on inside one’s mind as distinct from the outside, material world, and, despite the above-mentioned differences, the translation conveys this idea very adequately. But if I were to explain every such difference between the translation and its source, my book would rapidly sink under the weight of it all.

Although there are indeed limits to working from any translated version, I take heart from the words of Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten, the editors of *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters,* who comment that “thanks to the English translation,” their edition “will be the first truly integral and updated compilation of Van Gogh’s correspondence available to an international readership” (“How to Do It and How Not to Do It: Problems in the Translation of Vincent van Gogh’s Letters,” *Editio: Internationales Jahrbuch für Editionswissenschaft* 15 [2001]: 53). As this observation suggests, a good case can be made for working from the English, if only because the linguistic skills required to read the original Dutch and French are shared by a relatively small number of people. As the editors say, the English is “the first fully integral” version and is especially accessible internationally.

Finally, with a view to concentrating as fully as possible on the patterns of literary images and concepts that are at the heart of the present study, I have preferred not to furnish illustrations from Van Gogh’s visual art. In a subsequent book, I hope to take a more theoretical view of the process of self-fashioning that the letters record and also, especially, to discuss Van Gogh’s 242 letter-sketches.

I gratefully acknowledge the help I have received from the Van Gogh Museum. As I mention above, Hans Luijten encouraged me at a crucial moment to consider embarking on the present study. From the start, it was clear that Hans had an unusually discerning and informed understanding of the literary value of Van Gogh’s letters, and of how this aspect of the correspondence would be well served by an extended literary-critical assessment. Thanks also to Leo Jansen for commenting on the typescript, and to Nina Krebaum, Laurence Lerner, Sue Mitchell, Fieke Pabst, Peter Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield. Permission to print excerpts from the letters has been gratefully received from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and from David Goatley to reproduce his portrait, *My Dear Theo,* on the jacket cover.

The Letters of

Vincent van Gogh

INTRODUCTION

Letters as Literature

In this book, I attempt to offer some assessment of the literary distinction of Vincent van Gogh's collected letters. In doing so, I am not primarily interested in what the letters tell us about Van Gogh's biography, or how they enable us to approach his paintings, or what they say about the times in which he lived. Rather, I focus on a point that commentators often notice in passing: namely, that this remarkable correspondence exercises upon us the same kind of challenging and revelatory power as does a great work of literature.

The meaning of the word *literature* is, of course, in itself problematic and has given rise to some considerable debate among theorists.[1] In a straightforward sense, the word is usually taken to indicate the fictional domain of poetry, plays, and novels, though it is not unusual for other kinds of writing, such as essays, biography, letters, memoirs, and the like, to be described as having literary qualities. This does not mean that letters or memoirs are fictional in the way that novels are, but rather that we are engaged by an imaginative use of language that reveals aspects of experience dulled by customary usage and by habitual ways of thinking and understanding. As Heidegger says, in a work of art, "truth occurs as unconcealedness," as the "unfamiliar source" of familiar things is disclosed, evoking wonder and a sense of discovery. In experiencing a work of art, we therefore find ourselves "for and with one another" in a shared communication of the mystery of being, by which we are constituted and sustained and which is revealed to us in new, life-enhancing ways.[2]

In some such sense, I suggest that Vincent van Gogh's letters likewise illuminate and transfigure how we think and feel about matters of common experience. Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh engages repeatedly with topics of broad human interest and concern — religion, love, death, sickness,

creativity — but he does so with such imaginative resourcefulness that the correspondence as a whole expresses a personal vision of unusual originality and revelatory power.[3] As Van Gogh says, things are "put in a new light by the artist," and as a result, "all things are made new" (152/1:242).[4] Just so, his own correspondence is itself a remarkable artistic achievement, though there is to date no sustained critical discussion of how and why this is so.

As Wouter van der Veen says, the prefaces to all the main editions of Van Gogh's letters "unfailingly point out the artistic *character* of these epistles," even though in the informative analysis of Van Gogh's use of French that Van der Veen then provides, he makes clear that his own goal "is not to produce a literary commentary" but rather to assess Van Gogh's linguistic competence.[5] In his more recent book, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind* (2009), Van der Veen again notes that the letters are "part of the world's literary heritage," but his main concern is now with "Van Gogh the *reader*" and "his intellectual development."[6] In pursuing this line of enquiry, Van der Veen makes some observations of a literary-critical kind, but his main focus is on the governing idea that Van Gogh, for the most part, read books that confirmed his own passionately held convictions: "the texts he mentions are above all the *mirror*, and not necessarily the *source* for this extremely individual mind" (57).

The present book can be seen as complementary to Van der Veen's important study. That is, I am not mainly interested here in the books that Van Gogh read, although I acknowledge the part they play in his letters and his deployment of them for rhetorical effect in specific instances. Rather, I am concerned with the literary dynamics and imaginative coherence of Van Gogh's own writing.

The book that most resembles Van der Veen's is Judy Sund's *True to Temperament* (1992). Sund focuses on how French Naturalist novels shaped Van Gogh's "sociopolitical and aesthetic convictions, as well as his conception of modernity."[7] Her carefully researched and illuminating study attends especially to what she calls "conceptual linkages" between Van Gogh's paintings and the French Naturalists whose works he admired (3). Although Van Gogh does not directly depict scenes from the novels, Sund shows how his reading is "an integral component of his creative personality" as a painter (7). Again, however, she does not dwell on how this "creative personality" is expressed in the letters.

Another major study with a bearing on the present project is Carol Zemel's *Van Gogh's Progress* (1997). Zemel's main idea is that Van Gogh's "unremitting idealism . . . infused his practice" and that his paintings can be seen as launching a series of utopian cultural programs aimed at specific audiences.[8] These projects remain shot through with contradictions and tensions highlighting

unresolved class and gender differences, exacerbated by the burgeoning capitalist art-market with which Van Gogh was closely involved.

Zemel's focus on Van Gogh's utopianism addresses an aspect of his thinking that I highlight in part 1: Van Gogh's idealism and the negative contrasts that challenge it. But Zemel's argument, in large part, depends, as she says, on downplaying the expressive aspects of Van Gogh's work and focusing instead on historically produced class differences and the ensuing contradictions that his utopian thinking reveals (244). By contrast, my own concern is to emphasize the personal and expressive dimensions that Zemel deliberately sets aside and to focus on the literary achievement of the letters, which she does not.

In *Van Gogh and His Letters* (2007), Leo Jansen begins by noting, like so many other commentators, how Van Gogh's collected correspondence is often acknowledged as belonging "in the front rank of world literature."[9] But Jansen does not explore the implications of this statement, mainly because his study aims to provide a broad introduction to the letters and to how they "represent the written complement" to Van Gogh's "artistic career" (17). Jansen describes the contents of the correspondence; the materials used in producing it; the handwriting, revisions, and sketches within the letters; and so on. Given the aim of his project, he does not assess in detail how and why the letters might, in fact, deserve a position of pre-eminence among the world's great literary productions.

In their recent biography, *Van Gogh: The Life* (2011), Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith contend carefully with the difficulties of interpreting the letters as evidence for events that actually happened.[10] Because Van Gogh engages in so much special pleading, evasion, manipulation, and the like, his correspondence often cannot be taken at face value and needs to be assessed with reference to other kinds of evidence. Naifeh and Smith attend carefully to this kind of assessment, in the course of which they also occasionally notice the quality of Van Gogh's writing.

For instance, while in the province of Drenthe, Van Gogh "filled his letters with elaborate word paintings" (351), and he supplied a "relentless varnish of words" (438) in describing *The Potato Eaters* to Theo. Naifeh and Smith acknowledge his "profligate descriptive powers" (422), as well as the "flights of rhetoric" with which he promotes his "*Berceuse*-and-sunflower decorations" (718). Understandably, these observations, among others of the same kind, are made in order to confirm certain biographical points. Thus, the "elaborate word paintings" in Drenthe show how Van Gogh closed his eyes to the dreadful conditions under which people lived there. The "varnish of words" is Vincent's "desperate" (438) advance attempt to shape Theo's opinion about *The Potato*

Eaters and is evidence of Vincent's insecurities. The "profligate descriptive powers" are mentioned to confirm how hard-hearted Vincent was, not having "expended a single word" at his father's funeral, despite his unusual ability with language (422). The "flights of rhetoric" are significant because they mask the seriously ill Van Gogh's futility as he set about "redeeming not just the failed combination with Gauguin but all his Midi suffering and sacrifice" (718). In short, the effectiveness of Van Gogh's writing is discussed here not for its own sake but as a way of confirming the relentlessly depressing portrait of the man (either an "Ingrate From Hell or an achingly sensitive artist," as one reviewer says) that this biography provides.[11]

Although I am convinced by Naifeh and Smith that Van Gogh would have been impossible to have about the house for long, I take solace from the fact that the mind and sensibility that produced the letters are (among other things) engaging and humane. Indeed, the beauty and power that we find in the silent voices of Van Gogh's paintings are complemented by his remarkable correspondence, which would continue to have readers even if, by some chance, the paintings were lost to us. In this regard, Dick van Halsema recently drew attention to an acknowledgement in 2010 by the Museum of Dutch Literature that Vincent van Gogh belongs among "our hundred greatest dead writers."[12] Van Halsema goes on to consider Van Gogh's historical relationship to the Movement of 1880, but in so doing, he correctly points out that the "literary value" of Van Gogh's letters lies especially "in the movements of the whole" and in an encompassing "coherence" (28). Van Halsema's article is a welcome statement of the main underlying conviction of the present study. As he says, Van Gogh was not just a writer of occasional descriptive passages; rather, the collected letters have an imaginative integrity and power that do indeed merit the recognition they were officially accorded in 2010.

Finally, I should mention, however briefly, the magnificent 2009 edition of Van Gogh's complete correspondence, which is available both in print and online. This massive project, fifteen years in the making, is definitive and provides the most accurate, complete English translation, which I use throughout the present study.

As does virtually every other printed version of Van Gogh's letters, the six-volume 2009 edition calls attention to the author's literary distinction. Thus, Van Gogh has left us (however "unwittingly") "a literary monument" (1:9), and "there is broad recognition of the intrinsic qualities of his writing: the personal tone, evocative style and lively language" (1:15). Because of his "gift for words," Van Gogh "rises above the purely individual and, as a result, attains the universality of all great literature" (1:15). Again, given the nature of their

universality of all great literature" (1:15). Again, given the nature of their undertaking, the editors do not dwell on how Van Gogh's "gift for words" affords his correspondence the literary qualities they describe, which is the task I have undertaken here. They do, however, provide a definitive account of the documents (6:19–25), which I will now summarize.

Assessing the Documents

The total number of letters known to exist is 903. Of these, Van Gogh wrote 820 and received 83. In addition, the 2009 edition contains 25 "related manuscripts" (RM) consisting of pages that cannot be placed within the correspondence, as well as some drafts and a few letters that were not sent. After that edition was published, one more letter was discovered and was printed in volume 4 of the Van Gogh Studies series (2012).

Most of the letters (658) are addressed to Vincent's brother Theo (dating from 29 September 1872 to Vincent's death on 29 July 1890). Only 39 letters from Theo to Vincent survive, mainly because Vincent did not preserve his correspondence. There are also 21 letters to Vincent's youngest sister, Willemien (Wil), as well as three more, written after Vincent became ill, that he addressed to his mother and Willemien together.

Van Gogh also wrote to artists with whom he had ideas in common: he wrote 58 letters to Anthon van Rappard and received one from him; 22 to Émile Bernard; and 4 to Paul Gauguin, receiving 16 from him. A small number of letters are addressed to other artists, such as John Peter Russell, Paul Signac, and Eugène Boch, as well as to further assorted recipients such as Albert Aurier, M. and Mme Ginoux, and J. J. Isaäcson, among others.

As we might expect, the tone and register of Van Gogh's writing are often gauged to fit the recipient. Thus, he is solicitous and often kind to Wil, racy and unbuttoned with Bernard, and academic and theoretical with Van Rappard; with Theo, he expresses a spectrum of emotions of Dostoevskian range and variety. Over time, his opinions change and develop, and often his writing is shot through with ambivalence and conflict.

This extraordinary correspondence allows us unmatched access to the narrative of Van Gogh's life and remains the primary source for his biographers, despite the problems of interpretation I have mentioned. Indeed, the documentary value of the letters is so considerable, for both biographers and art historians, that assessing the vast amount of information that the letters provide accounts for most of the scholarly attention they have received.[13] As I have said,

I am not mainly concerned with the correspondence as biography or as a way of approaching the paintings, nor do I discuss the 242 sketches that occur within the letters themselves. Still, I would like to recap briefly the main events of Van Gogh's life, if only because the narrative dimension of the correspondence can help us to contextualize individual letters on which I offer various kinds of assessments as the argument proceeds.

Vincent van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, the eldest son of the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh (1822–85) and Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus (1819–1907). Vincent was the first of six surviving children; his younger brother Theo was born on 1 May 1857.[14] Little is known about Vincent's early schooling, but at age sixteen, he found employment with The Hague branch of the international art dealers Goupil and Cie.

In 1873, Van Gogh was transferred to Goupil's London branch, partly as a result of friction with his employers in The Hague, which, in turn, might have given rise to tension with his parents.[15] While working in London, he may have become infatuated with his landlady's daughter, Eugenie Loyer, but whether or not he suffered heartbreak for love, he found that his relationship with the Loyer household was unsustainable, and he had to leave.[16] During this time, his interests turned increasingly to religion. In 1874, Goupil brought him back to Paris. The following year, he was transferred again to London before returning to Paris, where, in 1876, he was dismissed by his employer.

In 1876, Van Gogh went back once more to England, where he worked as an assistant teacher, first in Ramsgate and then in Isleworth. By this time, he had become intensely religious and had decided to become a preacher like his father. With this goal in mind, he returned to Holland in December 1876; the next year, he worked briefly in a bookshop in Dordrecht before moving to Amsterdam to prepare for the entrance examination to the University of Amsterdam, where he hoped to study theology.

In 1878, Van Gogh abandoned his pre-university studies and entered a missionary school in Brussels. The following year, he went as an evangelist to the coalfields of the Belgian Borinage. There, he discovered that the miners needed more than his evangelical enthusiasm to improve their lives, which were ruined by poverty and sickness. The moral crisis resulting from this realization was accompanied by a dawning sense that his vocation lay not in religion but in art, and in 1880, he decided to work towards becoming an illustrator, with a view especially to depicting the life and condition of the working poor.

In 1881, Van Gogh moved back to his parents' home in Etten, and there, he once again came into contact with Kee Vos, his recently widowed cousin, whom

he had met, along with her husband and son, in Amsterdam. Van Gogh fell intensely in love with Kee, who rejected him out of hand, leaving him devastated. As a result of the ensuing family discord, he moved to The Hague in December 1881, where he studied painting with his cousin-in-law Anton Mauve.[17] He also began a relationship with the unmarried and pregnant Clasina (Sien) Hoornik, who, in order to ease her dire financial circumstances, had been earning money as a prostitute. Although Van Gogh's family was scandalized, he insisted on setting up house with Sien and declared that he would marry her (though he never did).

In 1883, the relationship with Sien ended, and Van Gogh went to Drenthe, seeking solitude in that remote province in order to concentrate on painting. But he soon found himself unbearably lonely, and after three months, he went back to his parents, who had now moved to Nuenen. There, he painted the local weavers and peasants and, in 1885, produced his famous painting *The Potato Eaters*. In Nuenen, yet another scandal occurred, resulting from Van Gogh's relationship with Margot Begemann, one of his father's parishioners. The relationship ended after Margot attempted suicide.

In 1885, Van Gogh's father died, and on 24 November, Vincent left for Antwerp, where he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts and began to develop an interest in Japanese art. But he did not take easily to academic instruction, and early in 1886, he left Antwerp for Paris, turning up unexpectedly and moving in with Theo, who was an art dealer there. Vincent found Paris stimulating and learned much from the Impressionists and post-Impressionists to whom he was directly exposed, partly through studying for three months at the studio of Fernand Cormon. In Paris, he and Theo became enthusiastic collectors of Japanese prints.

But the big city took a toll on Van Gogh, and in 1888, he headed south, to Arles, where he set up house (in the "Yellow House") and sought inspiration from the local people and landscape, which he thought resembled Japan. With the goal of establishing an artists' community, he invited Paul Gauguin to stay at the Yellow House, which Van Gogh decorated for the occasion with, among other things, his sunflower paintings. But his utopian dream soon disintegrated; within two months, the relationship with Gauguin was in ruins, coming to a dramatic end when Van Gogh cut a piece off his own ear. He was admitted to hospital in Arles. In early January 1889, he returned to the Yellow House, but a petition by the local citizens claimed that he was mentally unstable and a risk to public security. As a result, he was apprehended by the police and readmitted to hospital.

On 17 April 1889, Theo married Jo Bonger, and in May, Vincent moved voluntarily to Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in St. Rémy, not far from Arles. There, despite suffering a series of attacks, mainly of an epileptic nature, he continued to paint. On 31 January 1890, Theo and Jo had a son and named him for his uncle, Vincent Willem; in May, Vincent left St. Rémy and moved to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, close to Paris. He took a room at an inn and became friendly with Dr. Paul Gachet, a physician who was also an art collector and an amateur painter. A few months later, on 27 July 1890, Vincent suffered a gunshot wound to the stomach, which he said was self-inflicted.[18] He died on 29 July with Theo by his side.

The letters bring us through this difficult story, showing us a myriad of facets by means of which the narrative emerges, imperfectly but with captivating power. Despite its gaps and fissures, this narrative remains an important aspect of how Van Gogh's writing engages us, partly because our sense of personal participation is intensified as we follow the emergence and resolution of his particular trials and challenges, which often reflect and give shape to our own hopes, fears, and aspirations.

Like the fine points of Van Gogh's biography, the manuscripts of his letters raise issues that lie beyond the scope of the present study. Chief among these is how the material form of the letters affects their meaning. For the most part, Van Gogh used a sheet of paper folded in four, so that a single sheet provided four pages. Some 1,200 sheets survive, containing 3,800 pages of letters. He probably wrote a great deal more than this, but it is difficult to determine exactly how much of his correspondence — for instance, letters to and from his parents — has been lost. The editors of the 2009 edition suggest that the complete correspondence "may have run to more than 2,000 letters" (6:41) — more than twice the number that survive.[19]

The early letters are neatly written, with few corrections, but in the years after roughly 1875, Van Gogh increasingly took liberties, apparently caring less about how neat the letters appeared and more about how forcefully he was expressing himself.[20] Although his handwriting remains generally clear and even, he frequently crossed out words and phrases, and he used bold underlinings, heavy capitals, and afterthoughts squeezed into the margins or between the lines. Notoriously, he disregarded conventional punctuation, accents, capitalization, and spelling.

For instance, when his seizures recurred in the St. Rémy hospital, Van Gogh wrote a brief, pained letter in black crayon (797/6:70). There are several crossings out, words are bent at the end of a line to fit them in, both the right and left margins contain inserts written vertically, and at the heart of the letter, the

left margins contain inserts written vertically, and at the heart of the letter, the words “it is ABOMINABLE” (“c’est ABOMINABLE”) are offset and emphasized in a way that commands our attention visually. There is a wide space between the lines above and below, and the word “ABOMINABLE” is in bold capital letters with a heavy, double underlining in black crayon and with only two other words in the line. It is impossible to read the original without feeling Van Gogh’s anguish, which is communicated by the appearance of the letter.

The correspondence contains many such effects, imparting to it a highly personal quality, not just in what the letters say but also in how they look. In this, Van Gogh’s writing can remind us of similar effects in the paintings, the differences in audience and intent notwithstanding. Although meant for public viewing, the paintings (like the letters) are often disturbingly confessional and personally revealing; although written for private purposes, the letters (like the paintings) are often of broad human interest. In both cases, Van Gogh’s lack of finish, the roughness and imperfection that lie at the far side of technical skill (and are not to be mistaken for lack of technical skill), communicate something essential to his vision, his always unfinished search to know and communicate “what most makes me a human being” (400/3:51). There is, therefore, a complex symbiosis between Van Gogh’s correspondence and his visual art, and when we consider the 242 sketches that are distributed throughout the letters, the complexity of this symbiosis increases greatly. But, again, an investigation of the manuscripts along such lines would require a separate monograph, a different kind of study from the one in which I am engaged. Here, I confine myself to the transcribed texts and to their English translation.

The question of translation raises a final preliminary consideration. Van Gogh wrote some 585 letters in Dutch and 310 in French (as well as 6 in English). He wrote a small number in French from the Borinage but began writing to Theo exclusively in that language in 1888. In both languages, he is unconventional and idiosyncratic, and his French often reflects Dutch usage.[21] The resultant style is “disconcerting, fascinating,” as Van der Veen says, pointing also to the combination of careful correction and freewheeling expressiveness that make Van Gogh’s writing distinctive.[22] Jansen also notes the contrast between the “idiosyncratic and unconventional” in certain letters, and “the great care Van Gogh lavished on them.”[23]

The declared aim of the 2009 English translation is to preserve “absolute fidelity to the original” (6:9), even to the point of preserving the ambiguities or awkwardness of Van Gogh’s “idiosyncratic voice” (1:16). Nonetheless, certain kinds of “idiosyncrasy in spelling, syntax and wording could not possibly be

reflected" (6:9), and one main consequence of this limitation for the critical assessment I wish to provide is that matters of tone, mood, register, metaphoric resonance, and various kinds of nonexplicit suggestiveness need to be checked against the original languages before being affirmed on the basis of the translation alone. Although I am attentive to this set of issues, my argument throughout remains based on the English version.

Further Dimensions of Reading and Writing

All of this can return us now to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter about the relationship between Van Gogh's letters and his reading. As he tells us frequently, books were highly important to him, and he insists that there is an analogy between good writing and good painting. "Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me" (312/2:268), he says, and "one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live" (155/1:247). He acknowledges his "more or less irresistible passion for books" and claims that "the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt" (155/1:246, 247). What we have read, he explains, "has in some way become part of us," so that, for instance, reading Zola affects how one might paint a peasant (662/4:238). He encourages his painter friend Émile Bernard to go on writing sonnets because words are important: "don't you think, it's as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing" (599/4:61). Dickens is like a painter (325/2:300), drawing is like writing (265/2:155), and "there's something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo" (155/1:247). Indeed, Shakespeare's style is compared to an artist's brush "trembling with fever and emotion" (155/1:247). Van Gogh sees himself as "armed only with my brush and my pen" (736/4:390): the pen, here, is an instrument both for writing and drawing — Van Gogh did not make a clear distinction between these activities. As in his painting, so also in his letters, he developed a distinctive voice with his special combination of thoughtfulness and spontaneity, whether in evoking the spirit of a place or landscape or in using surprising metaphor, critical insight, searching aphorism, evocative reflection, and a wide range of mood and tone alive with the presence of the man himself. In his writing, he moved beyond the straightforward record of facts and the material circumstances of his life.

Because the letters frequently deal with personal matters, they are often confessional, as a private communication might be: Van Gogh certainly would not have imagined his correspondence as one day being collected in a printed

edition to be read by strangers. And so it is important to make a distinction between the individual recipients of Van Gogh's letters and ourselves, the public readers of a private correspondence. The fact is that Van Gogh had no opportunity to see his letters in relation to one another as we do, or to consider them as coherent despite their variety, eclecticism, and occasional nature. But in the assemblage of elements that the collected letters provide — coruscating, fragmentary, discontinuous — an imaginative coherence does, nonetheless, emerge, and a reader is by turn captivated, consoled, edified, and affected in a manner not entirely accessible to Van Gogh himself or to his individual correspondents.

In the following pages, I therefore use the term "reader" primarily to indicate ourselves, Van Gogh's public readers, who are afforded the opportunity to see dimensions of his achievement as a writer that the intended recipients of his letters could not. Admittedly, some of these recipients did, on occasion, comment to one another on the unusual quality of Van Gogh's writing.[24] But they were in no position to grasp the scale of his achievement, which is a function of both of his carefully considered and reconsidered leading ideas and his distinctive metaphors, images, and motifs to which he returns throughout the correspondence as a whole.

As is often acknowledged, Van Gogh enjoyed considerable facility with descriptive language, and he provides many fresh, vivid descriptions, especially of landscapes and paintings. Judy Sund points out that in doing so, he consciously imitated the convention of writing "word pictures," following the Romantic interest in the ancient idea of "ut pictura poesis."[25] But as Van Gogh himself kept insisting, description is less important than the human concerns that are expressed by means of it and that in his own writing, provide a deeper coherence than is supplied by his gift for "word pictures" alone. With this in mind, let us briefly consider a passage, both to exemplify the descriptive aspect of Van Gogh's writing and to indicate that descriptiveness is most interesting when it is not an end in itself. Here is Vincent writing to Theo from Drenthe in October 1883:

> This time I'm writing to you from the very back of beyond in Drenthe, where I arrived after an endless trip through the heath on the barge.
>
> I see no way of describing the countryside to you as it should be done, because words fail me. But imagine the banks of the canal as miles and miles of Michels or T. Rousseaus, say, Van Goyens or P. de Koninck.
>
> Flat planes or strips differing in colour, which grow narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon. Accentuated here and there by a sod hut or small farm or a few scrawny birches, poplars, oaks. Stacks of peat everywhere, and always barges sailing past with peat or bulrushes from the marshes. Here and there thin cows of a delicate colour, often sheep — pigs. The figures that now and

marshes. Here and there thin cows of a delicate colour, often sheep — pigs. The figures that now and then appear on the plain usually have great character, sometimes they're really charming. I drew, among others, a woman in the barge with crepe around her cap brooches because she was in mourning, and later a mother with a small child — this one had a purple scarf around her head.

There are a lot of Ostade types among them, physiognomies that remind one of pigs or crows, but every so often there's a little figure that's like a lily among the thorns. (392/3:25)

Van Gogh had gone to Drenthe after his breakup with Sien, and he suffered pangs of conscience about leaving her and the children, as his letters tell us (376, 382, 386). But he sought solitude, and in Drenthe, he wanted to be close to nature as a way of nurturing his art. And so, in writing to Theo, he emphasizes his isolation in "the very back of beyond in Drenthe," going on to preface his description of the countryside by referring to a series of landscape paintings. Although he claims that "words fail me," he nonetheless provides a precisely observed description of the scene before him. Yet the scene is composed as a landscape painter would see it: Van Gogh describes perspective ("narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon"), composition ("accentuated here and there"), and colour ("delicate," laid in "strips"). In short, he is composing a scene in words as a painter would observe it, even though he points beyond the words to a further significance indicated by what he sees in the "great character" of the people.

Specifically, he mentions the woman in mourning and the mother with the baby: we might feel here the frisson of a reminder of the woman and child he had left behind (Sien, after all, was Van Gogh's model for *Sorrow*), as well as the grief that had followed him to Drenthe. When he goes on to describe the "Ostade types," comparing their faces to "pigs or crows" (despite the fact that sometimes one might appear "like a lily among the thorns"), we might feel some discomfort. He himself is not one of these "types," and however much he wanted to be close to the miners, weavers, field workers, and prostitutes (such as Sien), he was not really one of them.[26] The "really charming" qualities he describes here are themselves to some degree composed, an idealized heightening — like the landscape itself — shaped from a point of view marked by class difference, among other things.[27]

Although the discomfort that haunts this passage is not declared directly, it is felt nonetheless, and it is reminiscent of a similar discomfort in earlier, painful letters to Theo about Sien. There, in the wake of his disappointment over Kee and the emergence of his hostility to organized religion, Van Gogh's self-abasement was presented, paradoxically, as an indicator of his superior virtue. That is, he insisted on seeing in the unfortunate, haggard Sien what he calls in the present passage a "lily among the thorns," and he challenged his friends and family to find his integrity and moral vision wanting. Now that he is away from

faility to find his integrity and moral vision waiting. Now that he is away from Sien in “the back of beyond in Drenthe,” Van Gogh depicts a symbiosis of nature and painting that he hoped would be the means of his recovery from the failure of his relationship with her. But, as we see, the evocative account is disturbed by an almost inadvertent reminder of what made the retreat to Drenthe necessary: Van Gogh’s letter betrays, in an undercurrent, the pangs of conscience that bothered him still. Although the writer did not set out to do this, he does so nonetheless, expressively and in excess of the straightforward description that is the passage’s first, most obvious appeal.

My point here is that the letters offer rich intertextual complexities, and in the following pages, I am concerned to bring to the surface some of the underlying structures, both metaphorical and conceptual, that run through Van Gogh’s correspondence and knit it together while opening also upon issues that engage us because of their perennial human significance. Although, indeed, we should keep in mind Van Gogh’s intent as an author as well as the expectations and understandings of his particular correspondents, the letters as a whole are shaped by an evolving vision and set of understandings not fully accessible to his correspondents or even to the author himself. As readers of the collected letters, we therefore enjoy a privileged position, and my aim here is to show something of how this is so and what it entails.

The Argument in Brief

The following study is divided into three main sections. Part 1 takes an overview of Van Gogh’s career, but the emphasis is not on biography. Rather, I suggest that a dialogical interplay among religion, morality, and art provides an implicit, quasi-narrative structure to the correspondence as Van Gogh’s dominant ideology shifts from one of these areas to the other. Yet not one of these ascendant or favoured topics completely displaces the others as Van Gogh contends with the negative contrasts between his persistent idealism and the imperfections of the actual world, until at last he thematizes imperfection itself as a criterion of the aesthetic.

Part 2 consists of three chapters, each of which deals with a key constellation of metaphors that provide special access to the structure of Van Gogh’s literary imagination. These metaphors are, to some extent, modified by the dialogical evolution of Van Gogh’s thinking described in part 1. For the most part, however, they exist asymmetrically in relation to that evolution, providing an imaginative coherence to Van Gogh’s evolving concerns and interests. Thus,

chapter 3, “Birds’ Nests,” shows how Van Gogh addresses the relationship between art and nature and, simultaneously, the opposition between exile and home. Chapter 4, “The Mistral,” focuses on relationships between outer and inner weather as a way of exploring the complexities and uncertainties of creativity. Chapter 5, “Cab Horses,” deals with relationships between hope and depression and with the difficulty of finding a balance between escapism and despair.

Part 3 also consists of three chapters, but the emphasis shifts from imagination to key patterns of ideas or concepts to which Van Gogh returns repeatedly. Again, these patterns occur as constellations rather than as systematic argument, and often, they are extrapolated imaginatively. Chapter 6, “By Heart,” explores the relationships between spontaneity and patience, as well as Van Gogh’s reflections on the importance of interiorizing technical skill as a means of releasing creativity. His thoughts on these matters lead to discussions of memory, abstraction, and Japanese art. Chapter 7, “A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt,” considers a range of rhetorical strategies, especially in relation to the discomfort and ambivalence that Van Gogh experienced in asserting his autonomy in a situation where he knew himself to be painfully dependent. The perennial problem of declaring moral autonomy while acknowledging our necessary dependencies leads to a discussion of Van Gogh’s self-consciousness as a writer and to the function of humour in his letters. Chapter 8, “Something New Without a Name,” deals with Van Gogh’s attempt to describe a spirituality that transcends conventional religious observances. Here, I focus on two opposed tendencies in his writing: first, his forthright declaration of binary opposites between which we must choose; second, his understanding that human judgments are relative. The discussion leads, finally, to a description of Van Gogh’s imaginative thinking as “post-Romantic figural.”

The concluding chapter summarizes the argument as a whole, confirming the claim that the rhetorical versatility, expressive power, imaginative coherence, and thoughtfulness of Van Gogh’s writing are highly remarkable. Although the impressive bulk of his correspondence presents a challenge to anyone intent on working through it from start to finish, a reader who persists will surely feel that something special has occurred, something of the grandeur, catharsis, and enhanced understanding that great literature affords. In the following pages, I try to provide some explanation of how and why this is so.

Vincent

Agonistes

Religion,

Morality,

Art

CHAPTER 1

Religious Convictions, Moral Imperatives

Long ago, Aristotle pointed out that the sheer bulk of a great literary work is a significant part of its aesthetic effect.[1] He was thinking mainly of Homer, but the world's great books written since Aristotle's time also illustrate his point. Tolstoi and Proust, Dante and Spenser, Joyce and Dostoevsky might well wear a reader down with complexities so intricate and narratives of such scale that their sheer weight leaves one wrung out, yet with the knowledge of having experienced something remarkable, perhaps life altering. The reader's patience and endurance then become part of the gratification, built into the hard-won understanding that profound insight cannot be expected to come easily but is often all the more powerful and affecting for that.

Reading the entire collection of Van Gogh's letters produces a similar range of effects. It is all so massive, the story so gripping, the density and entanglement of the personal relationships so conflicted, the joy and distress, affection and anger, hope and disappointment so engaging and disconcerting that a reader might buckle on occasion under the weight of these hundreds of letters, thousands of pages. But when all is done, the grandeur, courage, and tragic beauty that gather and fill as the letters tell their remarkable story leave a reader feeling as though affected by a great work of literature, as if taken up by something deeply humanizing and pervaded, as Wordsworth has it, by "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."[2]

Certainly, the going is not easy, and the dense texture of Van Gogh's correspondence can make it difficult to keep one's bearings or to be sure about his opinions or about lines of development in his thinking. Yet I suggest that this difficulty is in itself a significant aspect of Van Gogh's exploration of the ideals to which he aspired and which preoccupied him throughout his life.

Idealism and the Negative Contrast

As we might expect, these ideals often gave rise to conflict for Van Gogh, despite the fact that what they recommend is, precisely, the transcendence of conflict — this is a problem that attends idealism wherever we find it. The theologian Edward Schillebeekx uses the phrase “negative contrast” to explain this conundrum.[3] Briefly summarized, Schillebeekx points out that ideals set standards in light of which we discover, by (negative) contrast, how imperfect we actually are. This discovery, in turn, generates dissatisfaction and energizes us to bring about change. The negative contrast therefore need not invalidate the ideal but can actually enhance it, while also engendering protest and indignation.

Throughout his life, Van Gogh experienced the negative contrast phenomenon with special intensity because he was, consistently and incorrigibly, a passionate idealist.[4] “Imperfect and full of faults as we are,” he explains to his friend Van Rappard, “we’re never justified in stifling the ideal” (341/6:330).[5] With these words in mind, I suggest that the narrative of Van Gogh’s life can be read as a story of how his ideals repeatedly break against a series of negative contrast experiences until, at last, he formulates an ideal that paradoxically thematizes imperfection itself as a marker of authenticity and humaneness. This narrative — or quasi-narrative — is not biographical in the usual sense. Rather, it describes Van Gogh’s struggles with a series of negative contrasts that both challenge and define his idealism, especially in relation to his lifelong preoccupations with religion, morality, and art.

Throughout the letters, Van Gogh’s discussions of these central preoccupations are everywhere interwoven, each of them rising to a favoured or dominant position during a particular phase of his career. Yet his progression from one to the other does not occur by way of simple or direct replacement. For instance, Van Gogh’s religion was always enhanced and promoted by art, and even when he abandoned conventional Christianity, his sensibility continued to be informed by it. Likewise, art and religion continued to have an indispensable moral dimension for him, so that no one of these topics can be well understood in his letters without reference to the others.

In claiming, then, that Van Gogh’s idealism shifted from religion to morality and from morality to art, I am suggesting not a straightforward substitution but rather a dialogical process. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that in literature, truth always comes to us dialogically.[6] In this, he is not far removed from Heidegger’s idea, which I cited in the introduction, about truth as the revelation of new dimensions of familiar things by way of personal encounter. It is also important to note that the open-endedness of dialogue does not pre-empt coherence, and I will suggest below that the dialogical complexities of Van Gogh’s writing provide a

convincing and sustaining integrity to his engagement with the ideals that informed and shaped his thinking.

Early Letters: Brave New Worlds

One thing that strikes a reader straightaway about Van Gogh's early letters from The Hague (1872–73) and from London (1873–75) is his concern for the family from whom he had recently been separated. His expressions of interest and attachment are straightforward and generous: "How is Uncle Hein?; how is Aunt doing?" (5/1:25); "tell me how you're spending your days at present" (9/1:30); "How are Mauve and Jet Carbentus? Write to me with news of them" (22/1:44). He is lonely ("I sometimes yearn so much for Holland" [22/1:45]), even though he puts a brave face on things: "Sometimes I start to believe that I'm gradually beginning to turn into a true cosmopolitan. . . . With the world as my mother country" (18/1:42). In later letters, he would continue to counteract homesickness by expressing a desire to make another kind of home to supply the original loss: similar combinations of nostalgia and utopian aspiration recur throughout his correspondence, not least towards the end of his life.

In the early letters from London, Van Gogh is enthusiastic about paintings he has seen and museums he has visited. He describes books he has read, and he praises the beauty of the countryside (12/1:35). "*Find things beautiful* as much as you can, most people *find too little beautiful*" (17/1:41), he tells Theo eagerly. Among his admired authors, he lists Michelet and Renan, both of whom were anticlerical, valuing Jesus's morality above the creeds and institutional structures of the church. Vincent tells Theo that Michelet's *L'amour* "was a revelation and immediately a gospel to me" (27/1:51), and he approves of Renan's call for self-sacrifice (33/1:57) on the grounds that we are not here to be happy but "to accomplish great things through society, to arrive at nobleness, and to outgrow the vulgarity in which the existence of almost all individuals drags on" (33/1:52).[7] In his exploration of these thinkers who put morality before religion and secularism before ecclesiastical orthodoxy, Van Gogh was already finding ways to challenge the religion of his parents, whose solicitous concern about his career and prospects had precipitated his transfer to London and caused him to feel resentment.[8]

Vincent tells Theo that he has recently started drawing again, though he is dismissive of the results ("it was nothing special" [23/1:45]).[9] As with much else during his early stay in London, his impulse to draw was not connected to any career goal; his main concerns were finding good lodgings and taking in the

cultural richness of his new surroundings.

In general, then, these early letters, both from The Hague and from London, show the young Van Gogh full of ardour, and insofar as we can identify the stirrings of idealism, they are diffuse, expressed in an exploratory enthusiasm for Michelet's *L'amour*, for Renan's grand gesture about accomplishing "great things," and in a nostalgically tinged longing for home and for a new cosmopolitanism. To "a good and a single eye," Van Gogh says, "it's beautiful everywhere" (27/1:51), and an open, energetic curiosity pervades his writing, which, by and large, is as yet without vigorous partisan rancour or polemical intensity.

But things changed for Van Gogh after he left London for Paris in May 1875. As I mentioned in the introduction, his attempt to make a home for himself with the Loyers failed, much to Van Gogh's disappointment. About his later amorous misadventures with Kee Vos, Sien Hoornik, and Margot Begemann, Vincent would confide at length in Theo, but in no surviving letter does he discuss why or how he came to grief with the Loyers; we are left to assess the depth of his disappointment from the fact that, as Naifeh and Smith point out, he stopped writing home, stopped drawing, and neglected his duties at work.[10] This neglect caused him to be transferred temporarily to Paris, where his dissatisfaction with the art-dealing business became increasingly clear, leading to his being fired by Goupil early in 1876. The main reason for his loss of interest in art dealing is simple: he had found religion — the first powerful ideal upon which he consciously focused his attention and energy. This focus remained until, in the Borinage in 1880, his religious enthusiasm yielded to a new conviction that he should become an artist.

Religion and the Challenge of Suffering

During his religious phase, which we can date roughly from 1875 to 1880, Van Gogh seized especially on St. Paul's challenging advice to Christians to be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). This verse, which distills St. Paul's understanding of the core Christian message that suffering precedes resurrection, had a strong appeal for Van Gogh, to whom asceticism came easily. "Sorrowful yet alway rejoicing," he tells Theo, writing from Paris in June 1875, "and that we must become" (35/1:61). From Isleworth in 1876, he describes St. Paul's advice as "words that accompany us and grow up with us, as it were" (90/1:114). In these examples, the homesick sorrow countered by optimism in Van Gogh's earliest letters is transformed into a more deeply felt sense of loss

countered, in turn, by a more intensely felt religious idealism.

In the biographical outline in the introduction, I indicated how, in pursuing his newly discovered religious vocation, Van Gogh moved from Paris to England, Dordrecht, Amsterdam, Brussels, and the Borinage before returning in 1881 to his parents in Etten. But in the present chapter, I am mainly interested in Van Gogh's religious idealism in relation to the negative contrast experiences that transformed it, and with this in mind, I note that although his main focus during the years between 1875 and 1880 was on religion, his interest in art remained vigorous and he continued to bring high moral standards to bear on what he understood religion to be. And so, although art and morality were subordinate to faith, they remained part of a continuing dialogue by means of which Van Gogh was better able to understand what faith meant to him in the first place. Thus, for instance, in 1875, he acknowledges "a feeling for art" that he and Theo share, but he also provides a caution, keeping art in its place: "Don't give in to that *too* much either." Worshipping God "in spirit and in truth" (49/1:74) remains the first priority, although Van Gogh does not dismiss art or fail to be moved by it. When he goes to a sale of Millet's drawings in Paris in June 1875, for instance, he cites Exodus as a way of expressing his feelings about the sanctity of the occasion: "Put off thy shoes from off they feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (36/1:62). In various letters, he admires Holbein (85), Boughton (89), Scheffer (116), Ruisdael (120), and Millais (122), among others, expressing the feeling, as he would continue to do throughout his life, that great art touches us spiritually, beyond the material confines of the world. When, in Etten, shortly before he went to the Borinage, he commends "those who work with their heart and with their mind and spirit," he assures Theo how "that too is high art" (145/1:230).

During his religious phase, Van Gogh continued to draw, and he admits that even when reading the Bible, "I cannot help making a little drawing now and then" (120/1:177). But when he thinks about some sketches he would like to make, he decides that they "would most likely keep me from my real work," so "it's better I don't begin" (148/1:233). Art thus remains the handmaiden of religion, subordinate to Van Gogh's desire to know the Bible by heart (108/1:150) and to "our desire to become Christians" (56/1:182) on the model, especially, of the "Christian labourer" (109/1:151) or workman in the name of Christ.

For Van Gogh, Christianity also entailed a heavy burden of moral responsibility.[11] His sense of solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is clear from his desire to minister to slum dwellers in London when, as he tells us,

he was too young to qualify (85/1:104) and from his compassion for his fellow inmates at the asylum in St. Rémy (776/5:23). God's help, he says, is "not far from those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (118/1:166), and partly for that reason, he found a special beauty and sanctity in the poor. Writing from Isleworth on 3 October 1876, he recalls that autumn in Paris is indeed splendid, and so is Notre Dame Cathedral, but there is something more beautiful still, "and that is the poor people there" (92/1:118).[12] Later, Van Gogh's evangelizing activity in the Borinage was inspired especially by a desire to comfort the overworked, impoverished, and frequently ill miners, whose living conditions he went to great lengths to share. His academic study of theology had always been of secondary importance to his missionary fervour, which helps to explain why he failed to complete his course in Amsterdam. He preferred to be directly in contact with people such as he found in the Borinage: the "many sickly and bedridden people, lying emaciated on their beds, weak and miserable" (151/1:239). He wanted these unfortunates to know that they could find comfort in Jesus Christ, "because He himself is the great Man of Sorrows, who knows our diseases" (149/1:236), and during the years of his religious enthusiasm, Ary Scheffer's well-known painting, *Christus Consolator*, appealed strongly to him (85, 101).

Writing from the Borinage in 1879, Vincent explains to Theo that he experiences "a familiar feeling" among the miners and that "foreigners who are homesick may come to feel at home here" (150/1:238). Once more, Van Gogh's homesickness caused him to look for an alternative homeland that he felt would satisfy his nostalgia by supplying a more authentic sense of community than did his family in Holland. This conflict between attachment to his Dutch home and his aspiration to a community based on shared principles and values persisted throughout Van Gogh's life, as we shall see in chapter 7. Still, a reader might be inclined to doubt the degree to which he really did "feel at home" among the miners, to whom he was, quite conspicuously, a stranger. This does not mean that the sincerity of his desire is to be doubted — only that there might be an element of whistling in the dark here, as Van Gogh himself would discover on more than one occasion in relation to his utopian aspirations.[13]

The moral imperative that informed Van Gogh's religious commitment might cause us to ask why morality on its own was not a sufficient motivation for serving the poor. His answer is straightforward, as he explains to Theo from Amsterdam in 1877. The problem of evil is simply too overwhelming for morality to deal with it unaided:

> There is evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things, and one doesn't have to have gone far in

life to dread much and to feel the need for unfaltering hope in a life after this one, and to know that without faith in a God one cannot live — cannot endure. But with that faith one can long endure. (117/1:164)

Here, the problem of evil threatens to traumatize individual moral agency, and God alone has the power to carry us through, enabling us to sustain the fight. This is a perennial theme in Christian spirituality: just as art can help to bring us to God, so morality is energized by religious faith. Van Gogh's favourite reading during his religious period included Thomas à Kempis, Bunyan, Bossuet, and Fénelon.[14] These writers have in common an insistence on the castigation of selfwill, enabling one to live entirely in Christ. But when, as a result of the Borinage experience, Van Gogh no longer regarded morality as the handmaiden of a dominant religious ideology, he abandoned these writers altogether. By contrast, socially reforming writers such as Dickens and Beecher-Stowe, among others, remained favourites to the end.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that when he set out to pursue a religious vocation, Van Gogh reversed his early enthusiasm for Michelet. Like Renan, the antiecclesiastical Michelet emphasized the moral dimension of Christianity at the expense of traditional theology. In 1875, the intensely religious Vincent tells Theo, "I'm going to get rid of all my books by Michelet *etc.* etc." and then adds, "you should too" (50/1:75).[15] By and by, when Van Gogh broke with official Christianity, he again reversed his opinion of Michelet, embracing him once more as an ally.

The flexibility of Van Gogh's opinions about Michelet is typical of the dialogical transformations that the letters record, especially when Van Gogh's idealism encountered the negative contrast experiences that caused him to take new bearings. In response to the ignominious end of his career as an art dealer, for instance, he intensified his interest in religion, which he decided to pursue as a vocation, a higher ideal that would transcend his disappointment. But, in turn, his religious devotion gave rise to a heightened awareness of everything in the world that stands in contrast to the blessed community of the kingdom of heaven that Christianity promises. As we have seen, the weight of this negative contrast appears in Van Gogh's writing as an awareness of the relationship between religious belief and the problem of suffering among the Borinage miners. It also appears by way of an intensified sensitivity to death.

When his friend Harry Gladwell's sister, Susannah, died at age seventeen, Van Gogh set out in the late morning to attend the funeral, walking some thirty kilometres from Isleworth to Lewisham and arriving some six hours later, around five in the afternoon. He recounts how the mourners had by that time returned from the funeral service, and how he "had feelings of embarrassment

returned from the funeral service, and how he "had feelings of embarrassment and shame at seeing that deep, estimable grief." He talked with Harry until late in the day "about all kinds of things, about the kingdom of God and about his Bible." He then took a train to Richmond, from where he walked home. While he waited for the train, he says, "we walked back and forth on that station, in that everyday world, but with a feeling that was not everyday." He explains how "I'd have liked to comfort the Father, but I was embarrassed" (88/1:109).

Intensity and delicacy combine in this account as the strength and vigour of Van Gogh's all-day walk stands in counterpoint to his shyness and inarticulacy faced with the grief of the mourners, especially the girl's father. We sense also how the problem of suffering itself affects him, as he discusses God and the Bible in a state of heightened feeling, beyond the "everyday." Religion thus remains at the centre, simultaneously enabling him to discover the full weight of the problem of suffering and to address it.

Later, in Amsterdam in July 1877, Van Gogh recounts how two children had fallen into a canal and one of them drowned. He then describes a visit he paid to the bereaved family:

> In the evening I went back to see the people, it was then already dark in the house, the little body lay so still on a bed in a side room, he was such a sweet little boy. There was great sorrow, that child was the light of that house, as it were, and that light had now been put out. (123/1:180)

Van Gogh goes on to say that he attended three church services, and the letter veers suddenly into a spontaneous statement of affection for Theo: "How are you, old chap? So very often, daily, do I think of you. God help us, struggling, to stay on top" (123/1:181).

In this poignant passage, Van Gogh's brave willingness to immerse himself in the family's grief is accompanied by the Dickensian pathos of the parlour scene with the little boy's corpse. The child is gone, "the light of that house" is extinguished, and we feel something of Van Gogh's own special appreciation of home and its simple comforts made present here as a heartbreaking absence that is all too evident among the family members. Once again, religion helps him to deal with the problem as the account moves to his zealous church-going and then to a spontaneous prayer, shimmering with anxiety: "God help us, struggling, to stay on top." His statement of affection for Theo reminds us that Vincent's own family was close to his heart, a fact brought painfully home to him by the child's death.

In both of these passages about the deaths of young people, Van Gogh shows a special sensitivity to the scandal of suffering, and, ironically, this sensitivity would eventually help to move him away from organized religion. Meanwhile,

religion helps to sustain him, even as it enables him to discover the weight of the problem that innocent suffering presents to religious belief. As noted above, he is convinced that without faith in God, "one cannot live — cannot endure." His lament from Amsterdam in 1877, adds impact to this conviction: "Oh, how much sadness and sorrow and suffering there is in the world, both in the open and in secret." Once more, the Bible provides comfort as, in response, he cites Luke 9:12 and 1 Kings 2:2: "'Let him who has put his hand to the plough not look back' and 'Shew thyself a man'" (126/1:185). Stalwart resolve entails, as St. Paul would say, putting on the armour of Christ, and Van Gogh looks to religion to help him battle the problem that religion itself has helped him to see as so radically disturbing.

The same point occurs in a letter sent in 1877 from Van Gogh to Hermanus Tersteeg, whose baby daughter had died. For the most part, the letter is formal and conventional, but Van Gogh moves quickly to the key point, citing a sermon he had heard on the death of a child. The sermon confirmed for him that the strength to go on comes from "faith in my God, without which I cannot live" (124/1:182) — a conviction that is the main solace he wishes now to pass on to the unfortunate Tersteeg.

So far, Van Gogh's missionary fervour, his preaching the kingdom of heaven, trust in the consoling Christ, and desire to feel at home among the wretched of the earth — all reinforced by the reams of Biblical quotations that weigh down his prose — indicate the intensity of an idealism to which art and morality are subordinate. But Van Gogh's dedication to religion has one further dimension of such significance to the entire course of his letters that no adequate account can ignore it: his father.

As Van Gogh makes clear in a letter from Dordrecht in 1877, his pursuit of a religious vocation was strongly influenced by his pastor father, Theodorus van Gogh: "I know that his heart is burning within him that something might happen so that I could give myself over not only almost but altogether to following Him, Pa always hoped I would do so" (109/1:151). Despite friction with his parents during his early years in The Hague and London, when Van Gogh decided to be a preacher of God's word, he idealized his father with wholehearted, unguarded enthusiasm. When Father preached, he declared, "his countenance was like that of an angel," adding that "men like Pa are purer than the sea" (87/1:107). Writing from Amsterdam in 1877, his heart almost bursting, he tells Theo, "Old boy, how wonderful it must be to have a life behind one like Pa has" (131). A year earlier, from Isleworth, Vincent recounts a childhood memory of his father coming to visit him at school:

> And around a fortnight later I was standing one evening in a corner of the playground when they came to tell me that someone was asking after me, and I knew who it was and a moment later I flung my arms round Father's neck. What I felt, wouldn't it have been "because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying in us, 'Abba, Father'" ? It was a moment in which we both felt that we have a Father in heaven; because my Father, too, looked up and in his heart there was an even bigger voice than mine crying "Abba, Father." (90/1:114)

The theatricality of this little vignette is heightened by the Biblical language: the son's embrace evokes Jesus's words, "Abba, Father," and father and son swoon mystically together. Vincent assures us that those words cried out also in his father's heart, but the desire to provide a special sense of divinely inspired communion overrides the need for plausibility, resulting in a sentimental and overworked account. In turn, partly as a consequence of this excess, the one thing that comes across clearly is Van Gogh's idealization of the man whom, at this point in his life, he revered.

When Van Gogh became disillusioned with official Christianity, his view of his father took a sharp turn in the reverse direction, and religion was not to survive the moral critique that Van Gogh's life and circumstances forced him to bring to bear on it. As we have seen, the seeds of a moral critique of religion were already implicit in Van Gogh's sensitivity to the problem of suffering. Now, in response to a series of further negative contrast experiences, moral concerns would transform his priorities, though without entirely displacing religion from among his enduring interests.

In this context, it is helpful to note how the reinstatement of Michelet as an admired authority accompanies Van Gogh's increasingly unfavourable view of his father. This switch in allegiance itself represents how, for Van Gogh, moral authority gained ascendancy over the authority of official religion, and Van Gogh leaves no doubt about the significance of this opposition. As he explains to Theo in November 1881, after he had moved back to his parents' home in Etten and had fallen in love with Kee Vos, "I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I valued Michelet's advice more than his, and had to choose which of the two I should follow" (186/1:317). As these words suggest, Van Gogh would find himself increasingly involved in a pitched battle between the world represented by his father and the world opened up for him by Michelet and, later, by the French Naturalist writers.[16] In turn, this struggle prepared the way for Van Gogh's fullest acceptance and understanding of the dominant position of art in his thinking and in his life.

There is, as I have suggested, some wishful thinking in Van Gogh's declaration of feeling at home in the Borinage, when in fact his experience there was filled with painful disillusionment and difficult change. As he says, this was

a “moulting” time for him, with “adversity or misfortune” (155/1:246) as the main agent of change. A key aspect of this difficult transition was Van Gogh’s discovery that religion did not sufficiently answer the problem of evil that had been weighing so heavily on him. At the start of his stay among the miners, Van Gogh preached about Jesus Christ as “the great Man of Sorrows who knows our diseases” (149/1:236) and who provides consolation. But this kind of language all but disappears from his letters in the wake of his realizing the simple fact, as reported to Theo in December 1878, that “many people here are ill” (149/1:236). A few months later, in April 1879, he tells Theo about a man who was badly hurt in an accident, and then goes on to describe the abysmal conditions surrounding him: “There have been quite a few cases of typhus and virulent fever, including what is known as ‘foolish fever,’ which causes one to have bad dreams such as nightmares and delirium. So there are again many sickly and bedridden people, lying emaciated on their beds, weak and miserable” (151/1:239). The account continues, and then switches abruptly: “Have you seen anything beautiful recently? I’m eagerly longing for a letter from you. Has Israels been working a lot lately, and Maris and Mauve?” Then, again abruptly, Van Gogh ends the letter: “Must go out and visit the sick, so have to finish now” (151/1:240).

Several aspects of Van Gogh’s “moulting” are represented in these paragraphs. First, his attention is mainly on the sick people, with an emphasis on their suffering. The care he provides is directed at relieving their ailments, and religion is conspicuous by its absence.[17] Second, the sudden change of register, as he inquires about the painters, is notable. As is clear from the Borinage letters as a whole, Van Gogh increasingly found consolation in art to compensate for the consolation that religion was failing to provide.

We also find Van Gogh at this time drawing “until late at night” (153/1:243), eager to show Theo the results. His one-time boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, sends paints and a sketchbook (153/1:243), and when he is not attending to the sick, Van Gogh draws them. He tells Theo about his awakening aspiration as an artist, “although I don’t know in advance what will be possible for me; nevertheless, I do hope to make some scratch yet in which there might be something human” (158/1:257). The voice is tentative, and Van Gogh sees his practice as modest — subordinate to and yet emergent from what he took to be his moral duty to the Borinage miners. Still, it is clear that during this difficult period, art offered him a special solace. By contrast, Biblical quotations and references to devotional reading all but disappear; instead, we find the great painters praised because they are spiritual. Thus, the love of Rembrandt, like the love of books, is “holy,” and “there’s something of Rembrandt in the Gospels or of the Gospels in

Rembrandt" (155/1:247). Vincent tells Theo that meeting a more advanced artist "would be for me truly a Heaven-sent angel," and he finds in Tissot something "great, immense, infinite," while Meryon is, simply, "*Spirit*" (158/1:257).

As these quotations suggest, Van Gogh did not abandon his appreciation for those dimensions of religion that he felt could reveal the creative human spirit. Consequently, art here takes on a quasi-religious significance, incorporating but not entirely invalidating the religious convictions that, for Van Gogh, no longer held at the centre. As emphasized above, the process is dialogical, an interweaving of competing modes of discourse rather than a direct replacement of one (monological) mode by another.

Van Gogh's "moulting" was therefore a complex process. His realization that the inhabitants of the Borinage urgently needed medicine did not prevent him from praying with them (149), and he did not find himself suddenly engaged in antireligious polemics. For instance, writing from Wasmes in March 1879, some two months after he was appointed as a lay preacher, Vincent reports warmly to Theo on a visit from Father:

> I'm very glad that Pa was here. Together we visited the 3 ministers of the Borinage and walked through the snow and visited a miner's family and saw coal being hauled up from a mine called Les trois Diefs (the three heaps of earth) and Pa attended two Bible readings, so we did a great deal in those couple of days. (150/1:238)

Not only is there no tension here between religion and caring for the miners, but the account also suggests harmony between Vincent and his still admired and supportive father. Vincent goes on to say, "If, with God's blessing, I succeed in getting settled here" (150/1:238), then Theo should also visit (as he did).

But a different note begins to sound when, after Theo's visit, Vincent again writes to emphasize how, "like everyone else, I have need of relationships of friendship or affection or trusting companionship." He adds that he hopes he and Theo will not "drift apart" and confesses that he doesn't want to go back home to see his parents: "I really dread going there." He also acknowledges that although he had once set goals for himself, his desire to achieve them "has cooled considerably" (154/1:244).

These remarks suggest that things were not quite so harmonious after all and that tensions did in fact occur, not just between Vincent and Theo but also between Vincent and his father. Perceptively, his father voiced concern that caring for the "sick and wounded" would distract Vincent from religion.[18] In turn, Vincent must have felt that yet again, he was shaping up to be a disappointment to his father. He did not write to Theo for some eight months,

and when he did get back in touch, it was to say that he hoped to mend fences (155). Although the correspondence does not provide enough information for us to be sure, the problem presumably arose from Van Gogh's "cooled" ambition as a missionary, partly as a consequence of discovering that the miners needed medicine more urgently than the consolations of religion and partly from his emerging desire to be an artist. At any rate, he now declares that he feels "homesick for the country of paintings" and that "one's country or native land is everywhere" (155/1:246). As he moved away from official Christianity and from his father's values, art became, as he says, his new home — the new utopian ideal that he would continue to use to counteract his nostalgia for Holland and his family, from whom he felt he must break away even as he held them close, if only to go on grappling with them.

When Van Gogh left the Borinage, he was still on his way to the full realization that he wanted to be a painter. Again, a major crisis in which morality held centre stage would enable him to see art not just as a supplier of spiritual consolation but also as a privileged way of understanding morality.

Kee and Sien: All for Love

The moral crisis in question revolved around Van Gogh's intense infatuation with Kee Vos, whom he met in Etten in the late summer of 1881 and whose rejection affected him profoundly. During this difficult period, he struggled to understand love as a moral value by measuring it against his father's religion; as one result of this struggle, he came to understand, by and by, how art is both a spiritual and a moral force, reducible to neither and transcending both. He would also discover yet again how ideals can give rise to unrealizable expectations and, by negative contrast with actual experience, can confront us with our own imperfections. His mature thinking about (and practice of) painting would lead him eventually to the further realization that the highest achievements of art are, paradoxically, bound up with how it integrates within itself its own imperfection.

Van Gogh had met his cousin Kee Vos, together with her husband, Christoffel, and their four-year-old son, Jan, at his uncle's house in Amsterdam in 1878. That same year, Christoffel died, and in August 1881, the widowed Kee paid an extended visit to the Van Goghs in Etten. By this time, Vincent was working hard to become a competent draftsman and had spent some six months (October 1880 to April 1881) in Brussels, where, among other things, he attended the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts (with mixed results, to put it mildly). He had then returned to Etten, where he fell for Kee, entirely and

catastrophically. When he let her know about his feelings, she rejected him with unhesitating clarity: “no, nay, never” (179/1:301), as he says. Vincent didn’t, couldn’t, wouldn’t believe it. But everyone else did, and the letters to Theo about Kee are among the most affecting and painful he would write. Not surprisingly, his father’s disapproval especially upset him, and he now came to see how deeply the contradictions could run for him between what he saw as a true morality based on love and the merely conventional kinds of behaviour on which his father’s religious orthodoxy placed a high value.

As the letters about Kee make clear, Van Gogh’s idealizing imagination focused on her with an intensity and exclusiveness matching — and also replacing — his earlier religious idealism. Thus, he responds to Kee’s “no, nay, never” with an equally uncompromising absolute (appropriated from Michelet): “She and no other.” He explains how he speaks this “with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind,” and his intensity on the matter is infused with religious sentiment: “Who will win,” he asks, and then, “God knows — I only know this one thing, though, ‘that I had better stick to my faith.’” Love is now his governing ideal, and Kee the sole object of his devotion. “If you can *believe*, *believe!*” he insists to Theo, as if confirming his own resolve to go on with “no other thought than: *She and no other!*” (180/1:304).

When Van Gogh first met Kee with her husband and child, he eagerly romanticized the family group, which seemed to him “an idyll” (131/1:194). Throughout his life, he longed to have something like that for himself, but his pursuit of Kee only caused discord, the opposite of what he desired, and this also was a shock to him. Initially, he thought his parents did not understand — to him, they seemed to be disconnected from the things that now concerned him most deeply. In November 1881, he suggests to Theo that perhaps they have taken “quite a large dose of laudanum, they’re awake on the outside but the actual spirit is sleeping SOUNDLY” (183/1:310). As opposition to his plans grew, his criticism stiffened: when his parents accused him of being “someone who breaks family ties,” he in turn accused them of lacking tolerance and generosity (185/1:316). Then, after his father angrily told him to leave (185), Vincent recognized that “there really is a long-standing and deep-rooted misunderstanding between Pa and me, which cannot be *completely* erased, I think” (189/1:324). For Vincent, morality now poses a clear challenge to religion, which his once-admired father cannot answer: “It seemed to me that the word ‘God’ would have only a hollow ring to it if one had to conceal love and wasn’t allowed to follow one’s heart’s promptings” (185/1:316). But his own heart’s promptings were not credible to his parents, and he would never again

take his bearings from their orthodox religious beliefs and practices.

Van Gogh's disaffection with his parents helps to explain why Michelet, who was once rejected because of his anticlericalism, is now enthusiastically re-enlisted because of his moral idealism, especially on the topic of love. In November 1881, Van Gogh refers to Michelet as "*père* Michelet" (187/1:320), and in the name of the "modern" spirit represented by Michelet, Vincent tells Theo that "God wants the world to be reformed by reforming morals, by renewing the light and the fire of eternal love" (187/1:321). Clearly, "*père* Michelet" is a replacement father, and the reforming of morals in the name of love becomes Vincent's main preoccupation. "I wouldn't do without Michelet for anything in the world," he says, and goes on to advise Theo: "*You* will benefit much more from re-reading Michelet than from the Bible" (189/1:325). Vincent specifically mentions reading Michelet's *L'amour* and *La femme* (186), and recalls telling his father directly that "I valued Michelet's advice more than his" (186/1:317). In light of Michelet's teaching, Vincent concludes that his parents don't even understand the Bible: "I find the clergymen's God as dead as a doornail," he declares. If the clergy regard him as an atheist, "be that as it may." Yet in the same passage, Vincent makes clear that he does not surrender the sense of "something wondrous" (193/1:340) — the mystery that transcends religion and to which love also aspires.

Although Van Gogh drew especially on *L'amour* and *La femme* in the letters about Kee and Sien, he was, as with the rest of his reading, not a critical reader of these disconcertingly mixed reflections on love and domesticity, which Michelet wrote in the wake of his own disillusionment with politics. Michelet is often infuriatingly patronizing in his general view of women, yet his thinking is also shot through with progressive elements and antiestablishment ideas that seem, almost, to be written by another writer altogether. But, as was consistently the case with books he read, Van Gogh took what he wanted in order to confirm opinions he already held.[19] One searches the letters in vain for critical insight into, or detailed assessment of, the great works of literature that he read so voraciously. Michelet's idealism about love resonated with Van Gogh's own, and although he lifted various phrases and sentences directly from Michelet, he was more generally influenced by the soaring aspiration to "Moral Enfranchisement, Effected by True Love," as Michelet says in *L'amour*.[20]

At one point, Theo accuses Vincent of extremism: "You carry things too far" (197/2:15). While there is some truth in what Theo says, Vincent's forthrightness and passionate intensity in the letters about Kee are affecting, as the dialogue between religion and morality is rendered in terms of Vincent's

immediate, personal concerns. His insistence on the value of authentically lived experience in contrast to orthodox correctness would become central also to his understanding of art, but he disliked prescriptiveness, whether in religion or in morality. Consequently, when he turned to Michelet for advice, he did not want simply to replace a set of religious prescriptions with a set of moral ones. Rather, he responded to the spirit of Michelet's thinking and, as he goes on to say with reference to Anton Mauve, to a "poetry" that is "so deep and intangible that one can't simply define it all systematically." Thus, Van Gogh concludes: "All that drivel about good and evil, morality and immorality, I actually care so little about it. For truly, it's impossible for me always to know what is good, what is evil, what is moral, what is immoral. Morality or immorality coincidentally brings me to K.V." (193/1:337). Again, Kee is the focus, and the main issue is morality, but not the conventional, categorical distinctions between good and evil. Human beings are too complex, their individuality too particular, their imperfections too various to be described so simply.[21] Love, the good, and a life-affirming sense of "something wondrous" (193/1:340) remained strong values for Van Gogh. But he could not allow such values to be reduced to easy moral prescription, and he would look increasingly to art as a means of conveying this conviction. And so the pulse of a continuing dialogue among religion, morality, and art goes on beating through the dense body of Van Gogh's correspondence.

Jo van Gogh-Bonger's claim that Kee's rejection was a turning point for Vincent is entirely credible.[22] At first, he tried to visit Kee in Amsterdam, but she would not see him, and her family closed ranks against him. Then, as if to compensate for the disappointment, Vincent flung himself even more vigorously into his career as an artist. Among other things, he put himself under the tutelage of Anton Mauve, through whom he discovered — to his own surprise — that he could paint (258, 260). It is as if with the discovery of colour, Van Gogh's commitment to art began to emerge in full force, displacing the moral drama that had preoccupied him in his pursuit of Kee.

But the problems and challenges raised by his failed relationship with Kee did not just go away. Rather, they were reconfigured in an even more challenging and extreme form in Van Gogh's taking up with the pregnant ex-prostitute, Clasina Hoornik, or Sien. The flames that everyone around him hoped would simply burn out in the wake of Kee's rejection had, instead, been supplied with a massive extra supply of high-octane fuel. Strapped for funds, as ever, Van Gogh now found himself supporting a pregnant woman as well as her daughter. His father, thinking him deranged, wanted to take legal action and make him a ward of the court (234).[23] His friends and supporters turned away from him. He was

hospitalized with clap, and in the midst of all this turmoil, Sien gave birth to a baby boy. Again, I wish to focus not directly on the biographical narrative but rather on some key patterns of transformation in Van Gogh's thinking and writing that are relevant to his overriding preoccupation with the morality of his relationship with Sien.

In The Hague, where Van Gogh resided from 1881 to 1883, he reflected more intensely than ever on the practice and significance of art, but his reflections on this topic are everywhere shaped in the crucible of his difficult relationship with Sien. Van Gogh was convinced that his relationship with Kee, the daughter of his mother's sister, had foundered upon the moral conservatism of his family (which, as it happens, included Kee's). He thought that his lack of money had prevented his suit from being heard (179), and part of his rebellion against his father was driven by anger that such an intense and high-minded love as he felt for Kee could be broken by the venality and petty-mindedness that passed for family values and orthodox religious observance. A key test, he believed, of the integrity of real love is that it should repudiate the soulless compromises of bourgeois respectability, even to the point of scandalizing them. By taking up with Sien, Van Gogh found a way to make this point in an especially spectacular fashion.

When Kee rejected him, Van Gogh "*felt* that love *die*, to be replaced by a void, an infinite void" (228/2:74). But then he met Sien, who filled the void even though Van Gogh did not feel for her what he felt for Kee: "My feelings for her are less passionate than my feelings last year for Kee Vos, but a love like mine for Sien is the only kind I'm capable of, especially after being disappointed in that first passion" (234/2:84). And so he decided to help Sien, and even to marry her:

> The woman is now attached to me like a tame dove — for my part, I can marry only once, and when would be a better time to do it than with her, because only by doing so can I continue to help her, and otherwise hardship will take her the same road that ends in the abyss. (224/2:67)

The love about which Van Gogh had once rhapsodized is now conspicuous by its absence, and there could be many ways to reply to his rhetorical question about the advisability of marrying Sien. But his question also has an aggressive edge to it: the implication is that advising him to the contrary would be to call his moral integrity into question. After all, since he is saving her from misery and from going back into "the abyss" of prostitution, shouldn't his self-sacrifice be applauded by anyone with a moral conscience? We can imagine that he must have taken solace here from Michelet's assurance that "even the prostitute" is

susceptible to love, and “the deeper the abyss, the more ardent Heaven’s desire to lift you up from it” (*L’amour,* 43–44). Certainly, now that Sien was attached to him like “a tame dove,” the pathos of her dependency confirmed Van Gogh in his noble role as rescuer. The moral one-upmanship is clear, but it came at a price, as he was soon to discover.

The relationship with Sien might seem, at first, unideal in the extreme, but in fact, it caused Van Gogh’s idealism to become intensified. In embracing her poverty, neediness, and difficult character (about which he supplies plenty of details [225, 234]), he affirmed the unworldliness of his concern and his transcendence of the selfish ego. His willingness to bear scandal validated his moral principles, which in turn required him to embrace Sien’s imperfections.

And indeed, what do outsiders know about the love and affection, gratitude and understanding that passed between these two? “*There is love between her and me, and promises of mutual loyalty between her and me*. There may be no tampering with this, Theo, for it’s the holiest thing there is in life” (247/2:111). Vincent is right — it is not for any of us to say. The trouble is that he had to work so hard to convince himself (and others) of his own argument; indeed, his struggle to do so is one of the most affecting aspects of this group of letters.

The main tensions are easy to detect. On the one hand, Van Gogh says about Kee: “It’s difficult, terribly difficult, indeed impossible, to think of something like my passion of last year as an illusion” (244/2:101). On the other hand, he says that “the *illusion*” (even though he insists, in bold letters, that he doesn’t like the word) “was Kee Vos; the reality has become the woman of the people.” His further explanation is not especially helpful: “I may have had an illusion, failure or whatever — I really don’t know what to call it — that doesn’t rule out something more real, either for you or for me” (244/2:102). So which is the illusion, and which is the “more real” relationship? Van Gogh doesn’t dwell on the problem but instead puts a great deal of effort into praising the relationship with Sien — a relationship that he knew was far from ideal but that he idealized nonetheless. In the wake of his disappointment about Kee, he cultivated an inverted idealism no less intense than the original version, even though, as he says, he doesn’t have adequate language to describe the difference.

With this in mind, let us consider the following description of a visit to Sien in hospital after she had given birth. Van Gogh is moved by the domestic intimacy of the scene, as he sits “beside the woman one loves with a child in the cradle near her.” He goes on:

> And even if it was a hospital where she lay and I sat with her, it’s always that eternal poetry of Christmas night with the baby in the manger as the old Dutch painters conceived of it, and Millet

> and Breton — that light in the darkness — a brightness in the midst of a dark night. So I've hung the big etching after Rembrandt above it — those two women beside the cradle, one reading from the Bible by the light of a candle, while the great cast shadows put the whole room in deep chiaroscuro. (245/2:103)

This touching passage might strike us in two ways simultaneously. First, we are reminded that the ordinary birth of a baby to a poor, destitute woman is a sacred event. This is an age-old Christian trope, and Van Gogh evokes the birth of Jesus to affirm the relevance of the true Christian spirit to his own difficult circumstances, which, as he well knew, were scandalous in the eyes of the orthodox. Second, we might feel that he is having to work too hard to produce the heightened significance on which he insists. "Eternal poetry" strikes a self-consciously elevated note, maintained by the stage-managed introduction of the Dutch masters, as Van Gogh brings to bear the prestige of high art to enhance what must have been a sad enough little scene. Then come Rembrandt and the Bible, followed by a baroque touch in the sweep of the prose culminating in the "deep chiaroscuro" all over the room. We might feel a moment's hesitation as the word "room" brings us back to Sien and the baby, even though the room in question is the one in the print. And so although religion and the great artists whom Van Gogh admired are summoned to enhance his relationship with Sien, they may also conceal certain all-too-obvious defects for which Van Gogh felt he needed to compensate. Again, we see here the annexation of religion and art to a central moral concern calling forth Van Gogh's inveterate idealizing.

Van Gogh's energetic defence of Sien in the letters to Theo is often especially affecting because he tries so conscientiously to put her in a good light, hoping that Theo will like her. Vincent was clearly concerned that his stipend from Theo might be compromised if Theo disapproved too strongly of Sien — the anxieties are obvious: "I'm eager to know what sort of impression Sien will make on you" (234/2:85), "I do hope you'll feel some sympathy for Sien, because she deserves it" (243/2:99), and so on. As we see, Vincent draws on Rembrandt, the Dutch masters, and the Bible for support in boosting Sien's image. While in The Hague, he had also discovered Zola (244/2:100), and, predictably, he was soon busy convincing Theo that Sien was like a figure from one of Zola's novels (250/2:116). To enhance her image further, Vincent assures Theo that "the professor" at the hospital takes "a special interest in her," and, in case Theo should miss the significance of the learned professor's appreciation, Vincent explains it: Sien is indeed "someone for whom serious people feel a sympathy." Moreover, the head nurse is also impressed with her — again, Vincent explains: "there's more spirit and sensitivity in her; one can see that suffering and going through hard times have refined her." He then describes their "lovely

homecoming" and how "there is now an atmosphere of 'home,' or 'Home' or 'hearth and home.'" He concludes by citing Michelet: "Woman is a religion" (246/2:106). And so Vincent's perennial dream of domestic bliss is swept up into an engulfing romanticism: woman (Sien, that is) *is* religion. Yet in the very insistence of all this idealizing and special pleading, we can feel (as Theo also must surely have felt) an uncomfortable awareness of the cracks running everywhere under the all-too-reassuring surface.

Still, it is important to note that Van Gogh also describes Sien's defects: she has "oddities in her character that have repelled others" (227/2:72); she had smallpox "and is thus no longer beautiful" (234/2:86); her speech is "ugly" (234/2:86; 225/2:68); she has a bad temper and "moods that many would find unbearable" (225/2:68). Yet, paradoxically, these imperfections appeal to Van Gogh because they show up his own selflessness and his superiority over those who denounce his special relationship from the comfortable precincts of their self-righteousness and hypocrisy. "As for love, I don't know whether you already know what its ABC really is," he tells Theo snootily. Then, as if catching himself, he adds, "Do you think me arrogant? By that I mean that you feel what love is best when you sit beside a sickbed, sometimes without a penny in your pocket" (228/2:75). Earlier, I mentioned how, by way of an inverted idealism, Van Gogh used his own abasement to showcase his moral superiority, which he, in turn, might use as a launching pad to attack others, as he does here with Theo. Although he admits that he might sound arrogant, he immediately dismisses this mistaken impression by appealing, sentimentally, to his own long-suffering endurance for love. Van Gogh's denunciation of self-righteousness is therefore not without some self-righteousness of its own.

Conclusion

I mention these several aspects of Van Gogh's relationship with Sien because they are so significant for the development of his thinking as a whole. Although his idealization of Kee broke against the negative contrasts supplied by the world at large, he did not dwell on Kee's personal defects. By contrast, his idealization of the relationship with Sien attempts to *contain* the defects he recognizes in her. He is thus able to interpret Sien's far-from-ideal character as itself a validation of his love, which is all the more authentic because she is so damaged and imperfect. Interestingly, Van Gogh's reflections on how imperfection can enhance a personal relationship are reproduced also in his thinking about painting; his opinions about art reflect what he was learning as he worked

through the moral challenges with which Sien confronted him. While he was well aware of her shortcomings, he was also aware of his own: in his letters from The Hague, he describes his own "peculiarities of temperament" (244/2:103) and "disagreeable" traits (244/2:102). He sees himself as a "nonentity or an oddity or a disagreeable person," but he wants his work "to show what there is in the heart of such an oddity, such a nobody" (249/2:113). He also wants to experience "domestic joys and sorrows myself so that I can draw them from experience" (228/2:75). His own and Sien's imperfections are thus the stuff out of which his art is made, but Van Gogh pushes this point further, suggesting that the actual imperfection of a painting can impart an authenticity or truth-to-life that a perfectly finished artifact lacks. It is as if the best painting thematizes imperfection not just in its subject matter but also in its execution.

Van Gogh was no doubt spurred on in his explorations of the links between his domestic situation with Sien and his ideas about art by Alfred Sensier's (romanticized) biography of Jean-François Millet, about which Vincent wrote enthusiastically to Theo in 1882 (210). Although Sensier presents Millet as a dutiful, if hard-pressed, family man living close to the earth, he also describes Millet as an innovator who discovered that by an "accentuation of the physiognomy," he could portray "the type" more vividly, thereby successfully incorporating "ugliness" into his painting.[24] Millet's embrace of the coarse realities of peasant life and his artistic inventiveness in making beauty out of imperfection are seen by Sensier as interdependent. Van Gogh clearly paid attention to Sensier's account, but I suggest that we can also read Van Gogh's letters as reproducing the same kind of enlivening imperfection that he admired in a great painting. That is, they are expressions of a personal struggle to communicate matters of broad human interest, and in all their discontinuities and idiosyncrasies, their authenticity comes through in the same way in which, according to Van Gogh, we feel the power of great art, exemplified especially by his admired Millet.

My main point here is that the moral crisis with Sien caused Van Gogh to focus in a new way on imperfection as a valuable corrective to escapist idealism, and, in this context, he began all the more seriously to consider the implications of imperfection for painting. For instance, in December 1882, he tells Theo that improvements in technology ought not to replace traditional engravings "with all their shortcomings and imperfections" (295/2:226), and he goes on to say, some two weeks later, that he prefers some studies "even though they're unfinished and even if much is completely neglected" because they "have something of life itself" (298/2:229). Hubert Herkomer's roughness is part of what makes his

work admirable, so that “it’s almost impossible to imagine anything deeper” (306/2:254). Although Van Gogh says he doesn’t much like Michelet’s *Le peuple*, the book derives a “special charm” from its resemblance to “a rough sketch by a painter” (312/2:268). A peculiar eloquence can also be found “in what is relatively unfinished” (326/2:302). A study by De Bock, which the artist left incompleted, would suit Van Gogh just as it is “because it’s so expressive” (360/2:371).

CHAPTER 2

The Artistic Life and Its Limits

So far, I have suggested that Van Gogh's relationship with Sien gave rise to a series of moral insights connected to the painful, sometimes tragic gap between the ideal and the actual. Although Van Gogh well knew how unideal his relationship was, he idealized it nonetheless, as best he could, and there is some pathos, as well as courage and tenderness, in his doing so. Also, in the difficult, often fierce letters about Sien, his own self-abnegation and willing embrace of imperfection emerge as tokens of his moral integrity. In turn, the difficult moral truths that he was in the process of discovering reverberate directly in his thinking about art. In all of this, I am suggesting that the letters indicate a process — an underlying narrative, as it were — through which Van Gogh moved from religious and moral idealism to his conviction that art incorporates imperfection as a condition of its own best realization. Once he discovered this way of thinking about art, he never relinquished it, although, as his understanding deepened, he discovered also a further tragic dimension within it, as we shall see.

Towards an Aesthetic of Imperfection

Although the relationships with Kee and Sien were crucial for Van Gogh's personal development, what he learned from these difficult experiences did not need to be repeated. This is clear, for instance, in his relationship with Margot Begemann. Despite the seriousness of Margot's attempted suicide and of Van Gogh's willingness to marry her, he does not discuss his experience in anything like the intensely conflicted manner of his accounts of the misadventures with Kee and Sien. Combat fatigue might be part of the explanation, though Van Gogh remains as vigorous as ever in denouncing the hypocritical, bullying religious conservatism that he blamed for pushing Margot to extreme measures (456). Still, in general, there is in the letters concerning this relationship more indignation and combativeness than evidence of affection for Margot, and there

indignation and combativeness than evidence of affection for Margot, and there is, at times, a detachment that suggests, despite the seriousness of the events themselves, that Van Gogh was less than fully invested:

> It's a pity that I didn't meet her *earlier* — say 10 years ago or so. Now she gives me the impression of a Cremona violin that's been spoiled in the past by bad bunglers of restorers.
>
> And in the condition in which I met her, it seems to me, a good deal too much had been bungled.
>
> But originally it was a rare example of great value. *And* she *still* has much value *even so.*
>
> (458/3:170)

This is not exactly heartwarming. The comparison of Margot to a badly repaired violin reduces her to the status of a flawed instrument to be played upon by others, a depersonalizing parallel that is confirmed by the fact that it is extended over several sentences. Even the self-conscious cleverness of the conceit adds to the distancing of the actual, suffering Margot, and the overall effect has more than a touch of callousness about it.

Later, Van Gogh provides some details also about Agostina Segatori (571, 572), but without clarifying his (apparently amorous) relationship with her. In a further characteristically disconcerting turn of events, he offers to help Theo by offering to assume responsibility for an unidentified lady who is causing him trouble. "That you don't belong with S. nor S. with you is absolutely certain," Vincent says, but if Theo breaks things off too hastily, he might "either provoke her to suicide or send her mad." The best thing is "to pass her on to someone else" — to Vincent, for example: "I'm prepared to take S. over from you, preferably, though, *without* marrying her, but if it works out better then *even with* a marriage of convenience." Ah well, Vincent goes on to say, "these are strange days" (568/3:362–63). Yes, indeed. But again, however seriously Vincent might have meant what he says here, the romantic dimension is even more absent than in his reflections on the Cremona violin.

During this period, Van Gogh's interest in the aesthetic effects of imperfection continued to evolve, finding expression in the letters from Drenthe (September–December 1883) and Nuenen (1883–85). "*I* have believed in many things that I now know are in a sorry state at bottom," Vincent tells Theo in his first letter from Nuenen in December 1883, going on to say that the right kind of disenchantment would help to awaken him afresh to reality (409/3:77). Painting is a means of doing this, but "it's neither the best paintings nor the best people — in which there are no errors or bias" (465/3:180). The way forward, he writes, is not through the artificial perfectionism of the Salon, which specializes in "paintings which are impeccably drawn and painted" but which "bore me stiff" (500/3:236). Rather, the "best paintings," like the "best people," exhibit a certain

imperfection as a confirmation of their distinctiveness and authenticity. Discussing a painting of his own, Van Gogh says, “I would be able to point to defects and *certain errors* in it myself, just as well as other critics. Yet there’s a certain *life* in it, and perhaps more than in certain paintings in which there are no errors at all” (494/3:226). He realizes that people will say that his paintings are “not finished or they’re ugly” (490/3:219), but this shows a lack of understanding. After all, the great Dutch masters often left their paintings unfinished (535/3:293). “Rather a watercolour that’s somewhat vague and unfinished,” he says, “than one that has been worked up to capture reality” (537/3:303).

In this remark about the watercolour, Van Gogh’s thinking about the “unfinished” merges with a further, closely associated idea that a good painting is not concerned about exact reproduction of appearances. Again writing from Nuenen, he warns against an understanding of “realism” as “*literal* truth — namely *precise* drawing and *local* colour” (495/3:229). His most admired painters do not “literally paint the local tone” (499/3:325), and he is emphatic in asserting how important a principle this is: “Tell Serret *that I would be desperate if my figures were* GOOD, tell him that I don’t *want* them academically correct. . . . Tell him that my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well — lies if you will — but — truer than the literal truth” (515/3:265).

In Nuenen, Van Gogh became fascinated by the colour theory of his admired Eugène Delacroix, which confirmed for him with a clarity he would never relinquish that colour in itself communicates meaning and carries an emotional charge independently of the actual, “literal” colours of the objects being depicted: “COLOUR EXPRESSES SOMETHING IN ITSELF” (537/3:303), he writes emphatically to Theo in October 1885, and he would insist for the rest of his career that “the great colourists don’t do local tones” (449). For instance, writing from Arles in September 1888, he says that what matters is not colour that is “locally true from the realist point of view” but rather “a colour suggesting some emotion, an ardent temperament” (676/4:260). He never tired of insisting that accurate, painstaking reproduction of the actual form and colour of an object is a merely mechanical operation that he associated, for instance, with photography (the artistic potential of which he never did understand) and, especially, with academic canons of correctness.[1] By contrast, real painting communicates a felt interaction between the artist and the object being depicted. Painting thus gives objective form to the subjective dimensions of the artist’s experience that could not otherwise be expressed, and the artifact is a means of

sharing experiences that are both moving and significant but that elude conceptual description.

Gradually, over this time, Van Gogh's ambitions to marry and have a family of his own diminished, and in 1887, in Paris, he strikes a resigned note: "Myself — I feel I'm losing the desire for marriage and children, and at times I'm quite melancholy to be like that at 35 when I ought to feel quite differently" (572/3:367). Later, during the last weeks of his life in Auvers in 1890, he again reflects ruefully: "I still love art and life very much, but as to ever having a wife of my own I don't believe in it very strongly" (896/5:286). In the order of priority stated here, "art" comes first — in the service, as it were, of "life" — and the capacity to "believe," having passed over from religion, now fades also in relation to the quest for love. Still, as he moved on from Nuenen, Van Gogh's idealizing aspirations for a good human community were far from exhausted, as we shall see.

After he left Nuenen, Van Gogh spent a brief time in Antwerp (24 November 1885 to about 28 February 1886). He describes his visits to museums and his studies at the Academy, where his ideas about incorrectness, among other things, got him into trouble. In general, the letters from Antwerp show a consolidation of his thinking about representation, colour, and academic convention, tested by his practice under the scrutiny of the academic establishment and by comparison with the great paintings he was able to see directly in museums. His fascination with Japanese woodcuts also began at this time.

When Van Gogh left Antwerp, he went to stay with Theo in Paris (from about 28 February 1886 to 19 February 1888), where he was exposed to Impressionism and to the company of many of the most progressive French artists of the time. The effect on his painting was transformational as he developed his interest in colour to meet the challenges of the Impressionists' experimentations with light. His palette changed, and he began to develop a style that would soon be distinctive and utterly his own. Understandably, there are not many letters from Paris because Vincent had no need to write to his brother, with whom he was living. The correspondence resumes in force when Vincent went south, to Arles, where many of his most spectacular paintings were made and where he wrote some of his most passionate and insightful commentary on his lifelong preoccupations with art, religion, and morality. In the following pages, I deal with the letters from Arles together with those from St. Rémy, where Van Gogh was confined in hospital for approximately a year (8 May 1889–16 May 1890), and from Auvers, near Paris, where he spent the last months of his life (20 May–29 June 1890).

Arles and After: Religion Again, the Ideal Community, and the Limits of Art

As we might now expect, when Van Gogh's preoccupation with the aesthetic gains ascendancy in his letters, it remains interwoven with moral and religious considerations. For instance, he writes to Theo from Arles in March 1888, proclaiming, "I believe in the absolute necessity of a new art of colour, of drawing and — of the artistic life. And if we work in that faith, it seems to me that there's a chance that our hopes won't be in vain" (585/4:26). The topic here is art, but we feel a residual religious undertow in "believe," "absolute necessity," "faith," and "hopes." In a broader sense, Van Gogh, throughout his life, maintained the sense of a transcendent mystery — some glorious creative energy by which all things manifest are sustained and which he sometimes refers to simply as "It" — as we shall see in more detail in chapter 8. In the letters written after he went to Arles, this universal sustaining power is frequently evoked. Sometimes, it is called "the infinite," which is irreducible to material appearances but binds us most closely to one another and to nature. Painting figures, Van Gogh says, "moves me deeply" and "gives me a sense of the infinite" (652/4:204). He wants to express "the ardour of a living being through the rays of a setting sun" (673/4:255), and as a background to a portrait, he says, "I paint the infinite" (663/4:237). He aims to capture "a mysterious effect, like a star in the deep azure" (663/4:237), while desiring also "still to feel the stars and the infinite, clearly, up there. Then life is almost magical, after all" (663/4:239).

Van Gogh's letters contain many reflections of this sort on the power of art to disclose "the concealed originality of the source of one's own being," as Heidegger says — that is, the depths of being from which manifestation and consciousness both emerge and to which Van Gogh attached a high value, which art expresses.[2] Consequently, he explains how "in life and in painting too, I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can't, suffering as I do, do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create." In a frequently cited passage, he goes on:

> And in a painting I'd like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I'd like to paint men or women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations. (673/4:253)

The language here is a mixture of clarity and vagueness. The repeated "I'd like to," together with the insistence on the "vibrancy" of the colours and on actual "men or women," communicates Van Gogh's characteristically direct engagement with his practice. By contrast, "that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal" and the allusion to something of which "the halo used to be the symbol" are

deliberately indefinite, suggesting the mystery that conventional religious language no longer adequately describes. W. H. Auden points out that Van Gogh is "the first painter, so far as I know, to have consciously attempted to produce a painting which should be religious and yet contain no traditional religious iconography."[3] Auden's claim is exemplified in the above passage, where the quality once represented by the halo is implicit not only in the painting Van Gogh wants to paint but also in his writing about it.

Interestingly, Van Gogh does not attempt to conceal his indebtedness to Christianity, even if he now believes that art rather than orthodox religion mediates the divine mystery most effectively. Thus, in June 1888, he explains to Émile Bernard that "Christ is more of an artist than the artists — he works in living spirit and flesh, he makes men instead of statues" (633/4:157). The appropriation of Christianity by art could not be clearer, but Van Gogh does not lapse into aestheticism because he also insists that art is encompassed by a universal creative energy in which we all participate. He maintains that Christ's words are "the highest summit attained by art," becoming, in turn, "a creative force, a pure creative power." He goes on:

> These reflections, my dear old Bernard — take us a very long way — a very long way — *raising us above art itself.* They enable us to glimpse — the art of making life, the art of being immortal — alive.
>
> Do they have connections with painting? (632/4:154)

The answer to the concluding question is yes, and the patron of painters, St. Luke, "is there to give us hope" (632/4:154). And so the artistry of Christ's words points beyond art to a mystery "*above art itself*" but nonetheless connected to it. Again, the appropriation of religion by art is a way of bringing us into contact with the mystery of life — being "alive" — in a manner more efficacious than conventional religion can supply.

However, towards the end of his life, when he was confined at St. Rémy and was attended by the nuns who worked there, Van Gogh's illness took on a much less benign religious aspect (801/5:89; 805/5:100), and he found himself struggling still with the negative dimensions of orthodox belief, attempting to separate them from the comforting and compassionate spiritual understandings that he valued. Although it is not clear what he refers to when he admits to his sister Wil in May 1889 that "religion has frightened me so much for so many years now" (764/4:436), it is evident that he did not simply leave his father's religion behind but continued to grapple with it. In September 1888, he admits to "having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word — for religion — so I go

outside at night to paint the stars" (691/4:292). Here, painting again subsumes "religion," celebrating what he calls elsewhere the "pure creative power" (632/4:154) that is transcendent and to which we are joined in and through the act of what J.R.R. Tolkien aptly called "sub-creation," whether in painting or in writing.[4] But this ascendancy accorded to art does not occur without a struggle, and we might note that Van Gogh hesitates even to say the word "religion," thereby confirming that it still has a hold on him. In going outside to paint, he deliberately provides an antidote that draws our attention to the uneasy dialogue between art and the "religion" that requires such counteraction.

If art does not entirely displace religion in Van Gogh's later correspondence, neither is it entirely a substitute for morality. For instance, from St. Rémy in February 1890, he writes to Albert Aurier about how Gauguin makes "one feel that a good painting should be the equivalent of a good deed"; in this context, Van Gogh himself acknowledges "a certain moral responsibility" (853/5:198). Morality, here, is granted a degree of autonomy, and Van Gogh remained painfully aware of the gap between painting and the interpersonal relationships within which the moral life is most fully realized. "The more I think about it," he tells Theo, "the more I feel that there's nothing more genuinely artistic than to love people" (682/4:272). And again: "Ah, it seems to me more and more that *people* are the root of everything" (595/4:50). These reflections led him to believe that the artistic life is not fully real, even though he expresses gratitude for being able to paint. "Making paintings," he writes to Theo from Arles in 1888, is "not happiness and not real life, but what can you say, even this artistic life, which we know isn't *the* real one, seems so alive to me, and it would be ungrateful not to be content with it" (602/4:73). Despite its consolations, the "artistic life" is "not the real one" (635/4:159), and Van Gogh worries that painting will "have taken my entire life, and it will seem to me that I haven't lived" (712/4:342). Elsewhere, he explains to his mother that making a painting is like having a child, but he would prefer real children (885/5:260), a point that he repeats (898/5:289), evoking yet again his desire for a wife and family of his own.

As with religion, moral concerns continued to make a claim on Van Gogh even as his thinking was governed by the meaning and significance of painting as the fullest commentary on and revelation of the human condition. He allowed a distinction between art and the divine mystery addressed by religion, and also between art and the moral dimension of interpersonal relationships. But these distinctions were part of a continuing dialogical exchange whereby Van Gogh was able to foreground and develop the ideas about the aesthetic that lay at the heart of his correspondence during the last two years of his life.

During these years, Van Gogh's privileging of the aesthetic remained linked, yet again, to his unquenchable idealizing. Thus, he believed that the south of France was a uniquely sustaining environment for artists, a conviction that led him to the best-known utopian project of his career. This venture focused on the Yellow House in Arles, which he rented on 1 May 1888 with the hope that it would become an artists' commune. His desire for a wife and children was now transformed into a desire for a family of artists — a community joined by a common understanding of the high value of art and inspired by the desire to live accordingly. His fascination with Japan was also at its most intense during his stay in Arles, and he had an idealistic view of, among other things, how Japanese artists lived an exemplary communal life: "they liked one another and stuck together," and "there was a certain harmony among them . . . a kind of brotherly love" (696/4:306–8).[5] He wanted the same for his Yellow House, which would bring together the kind of "association of artists" (631/4:152) that he had encouraged Theo also to cultivate (584/4:24). "I have such a passion to make — an artist's house" (685/4:278), Vincent says, where like-minded people would "live as a family, as brothers and companions" (682/4:273). He describes the decorations lovingly, especially the sunflowers. He explains how he plans to paint twelve sunflower paintings, and he buys twelve chairs (677/4:261). The religious suggestiveness of these numbers becomes clear in Van Gogh's depiction of his new community as a sort of monastery: "when it's a matter of several painters living communally, I stipulate first and foremost that there would have to be a father superior to impose order, and that naturally that would be Gauguin." In an inadvertently comic afterthought, Vincent also finds a place for Theo: "you'll be one of the first apostledealers, or the first." And so the apostle and the abbot will see to it that the community thrives, issuing in "a new era" that Van Gogh feels is already "beginning to appear on the horizon" (694/4:302). It is all heady and exciting, as he envisions a studio that would be "a shelter and a refuge for our pals at moments when they find themselves at an impasse in their struggle" (695/4:304). Once again, art is in the ascendant, but the artistic ideal subsumes a moral aspiration towards the good community, reinforced by the (admittedly ironized) references to Christianity.

The utopian ideal of an artists' commune is the context of Van Gogh's invitation to Paul Gauguin to come to stay: "I've written to Gauguin, and I only said I was sorry we worked so far from each other, and that it was a pity that several painters hadn't joined together for a campaign" (617/4:101). But Gauguin's visit to Arles did not last long. He arrived on 23 October 1888, and on 23 December, Van Gogh suffered a crisis and sliced off part of his own left ear before being hospitalized and subsequently entering an asylum. Just as the

before being hospitalized and subsequently entering an asylum. Just as the religious crisis at the centre of his life was displaced by the moral crises with Kee and Sien, so Van Gogh's aspiration to an ideal community celebrating the practice of art also broke against the negative contrasts so readily supplied by an intractable world, as we will see in the following section.

At this point, it is interesting to note that in the three major crises in which Van Gogh's idealism was shaken by disenchantment, an authority-figure emerged as the representative of the values that Van Gogh repudiated but without entirely rejecting. The ambivalence surrounding his relationship with these representative figures pervaded his struggles with religion, morality, and art, which the three men in question partly enabled him to confront.

The first of the three is Vincent's father, who was central to the confrontation Vincent experienced between religion and morality. Despite the harshness of some of his judgments about his father, Vincent stopped short of outright rejection and continued to speak appreciatively about him, even while remaining infuriated by his father's resistance to his own amorous concerns and dedication to art and literature. The second is Hermanus Tersteeg, Vincent's boss when he first worked at Goupil, and also a friend of the family. While Vincent furiously denounced Tersteeg's philistinism, moral conservatism, and lack of faith in Vincent's abilities as a painter, he kept seeking Tersteeg's approval; even in Arles, he sought to involve Tersteeg in a scheme to promote the Impressionists. As far as the present argument is concerned, Tersteeg is significant because he helped to focus Vincent's struggle with the relationship between morality and art, just as his father had, as it were, mediated the struggle between religion and morality. The third key figure is Paul Gauguin, whom Van Gogh greatly admired but with whom, again, he quarrelled. Gauguin was central to Van Gogh's attempt to create a community of artists, and even after their difficult parting, Van Gogh continued to speak well of him. But when the community failed, Van Gogh had nothing left to sustain his hopes but the practice of painting. The main problem he now faced was that his solitary practice threatened to isolate him from the common world. And so, we might say, Gauguin mediated the conflict between the utopian ideal of an artists' community and Van Gogh's realization of his own solitariness and its limitations. Although art was now, in a sense, all he had, Van Gogh found himself struggling with the painful realization that, after all, art is not enough.

Imagination and the Common World

Van Gogh's later letters return often to his concern about the gap between his

Van Gogh's later letters return often to his concern about the gap between his solitariness as an artist and the world of ordinary human experience. This concern was made more urgent by the seizures, disorientation, hallucinations, and depression that caused Van Gogh to be confined in the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in St. Rémy. But he had long been worried about the danger of imagination losing touch with the everyday world, and it might be helpful to describe briefly his enduring interest in this topic.

Throughout his career, Van Gogh insisted on the importance of keeping imagination in direct touch with the material actuality of objects, even though he also insisted that art should not be confined to a mere reproduction of appearances. While in The Hague, he explains to Theo in April 1882 that "to work systematically from the imagination seems overly rash to me" (215/2:51), because painters need models. Later, in July, he expresses disapproval of young painters who draw from memory, "*off the top of their head*," concluding, with some vehemence, "The whole thing makes me sick" (252/2:124). Instead, he believes that "one thinks much more healthily when the ideas arise from direct contact with things" (266/2:158), although he also warns: "don't snuff out your inspiration and power of imagination, don't become a slave to the model" (280/2:193).

The tension here is between the creative flight of imagination and the demands of an actual, recalcitrant material world. Painting should grow out of this tension, he believed: it won't do for even the most inspired imagination to lose touch with ordinary objects and people. At one point, when Vincent has second thoughts about an opinion, he explains to Theo: "I don't hit the mark but fantasize beyond nature and see things very fantastically" (375/2:405). In other words, he has let his imagination run away with him. Writing from Drenthe, he again insists on the need for a link between pictures and nature (393/3:30), and from Antwerp in February 1886, he writes that when we die, it is better to have "no *idée fixe* about God or abstractions — always on the ground floor of life itself and attached only to that" (560/3:352). Although transcendent, God should not become an imagined reality, separate from the imperfect material world in which we live.

These opinions prepare us for understanding the failure of Van Gogh's hoped-for community of artists in Arles. His most heated discussions with Gauguin were, precisely, about whether or not a painter could work effectively from imagination without reference to a model. This discussion arose in the context of Van Gogh's full discovery of his own individual style as a painter, which, among other things, caused him to insist more than ever on the nonrepresentational aspects of a work of art and the virtues of the kind of

enlivening imperfection that we have seen him praise. He insisted, on the one hand, that art is not a straightforward reproduction of appearances and, on the other, that art should not indulge in escapist flights of imagination but should maintain some representational element, not losing contact with actual objects and people. His attempt to maintain a balance between these opposites helps to explain why his paintings often hover on the edge of abstract expressionism while stubbornly maintaining a representational element.[6] The quarrels with Gauguin focused squarely on this set of issues, on which the two men held strongly opposed opinions.[7]

In Arles, as a means of attaining the kind of expressive impact he valued in a painting, Van Gogh emphasized the effectiveness of exaggeration and even of ugliness in his work. For instance, he describes his portrait of a Zouave — a member of one of the French infantry units recruited originally from an Algerian Berber tribe and subsequently associated with exoticism and fierceness — as "a coarse combination of disparate tones" and goes on to say how he would "always like to work on portraits that are vulgar, even garish like that one" (629/4:142). He praises his *Night Café* by claiming that it is "one of the ugliest I've done," expressing, as it does, "the terrible human passions" (676/4:258). He describes *The Sower* and *The Night Café* as "exaggerated" and as seeming "atrociously ugly and bad," except that they achieve "a more important meaning" (680/4:268) because of these very qualities. He recognizes the "external beauty of things," but "I make it ugly in my painting, and coarse" (695/4:304), and he will not "contradict the critics who will say that my paintings aren't — finished" (683/4:277). Here, he again draws attention to imperfection as an aesthetic value, implicitly correcting the perfectionism that he had, to his cost, found untrue to life — not least in his idealizations of religion and love.

In light of these opinions, Van Gogh's discussions with Gauguin about imagination became especially pressing. The key problem is clear in a letter written to Theo from St. Rémy in 1889, in which Vincent explains how he has written to Gauguin and Bernard to complain about their "dreaming," by which he means their use of imagination divorced from direct observation of nature. By contrast, Van Gogh says he paints olive trees and cypresses, and "what I've done is a rather harsh and coarse realism beside their abstractions" (823/5:154). The "harsh and coarse" here reminds us of Van Gogh's comments about the Zouave and *The Night Café*, and about how a deliberate lack of perfection can bring a painting to life. This way of thinking stands opposed to Bernard and Gauguin's "abstractions" — which is to say, their misunderstanding of the proper use of

imagination.

Still, Gauguin did make some headway in changing Van Gogh's mind. As Vincent explains to Wil, "he encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination" (720/4:360). Elsewhere, he tells Theo, "I don't find it disagreeable to try to work from the imagination" (723/4:367), and "Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character" (719/4:356). Gauguin, he writes, "has proved to me a little that it was time for me to vary things a bit — I'm beginning to compose from memory" (721/4:361).

Still, Van Gogh remained unconvinced, and when the breakup occurred and Gauguin left Arles hastily, Van Gogh regretted having compromised. In January 1889, he writes to Theo denouncing Gauguin's "castles in the air" and goes on to interpret Gauguin's ideas about imagination as a moral concern: "but I, who saw him at very, very close quarters, I believed him led by his imagination, by pride perhaps but — quite irresponsible" (736/4:388). In short, for Van Gogh, imagination broken loose from its anchorage in everyday reality runs the risk of becoming escapist and of fostering pride. Irresponsibility then follows from an insufficiently conscionable engagement with the world and with other people.

Whether this is fair to Gauguin matters less, here, than what it tells us about Van Gogh's struggle to formulate an understanding of his own practice as a painter that would sustain him both through the crisis with Gauguin and through his ensuing illness.[8] Not surprisingly, during his illness, he wanted his work to ground him in the reassuring common world of ordinary objects and people. His hallucinations were "unbearable" and work was the antidote, "unless my work is yet another hallucination" (743/4:402). The fear of madness haunts him — "I'm a madman or an epileptic, probably for good" (767/4:441) — even though he tries "to consider madness as an illness like any other." He is troubled by the fact that during his attacks, "it seemed to me that everything I was imagining was reality," but he concludes, brusquely, "I don't want to think or talk about it" (760/4:430). Rather, he asks Theo to let Dr. Peyron know that "working on my paintings is quite necessary to me for my recovery" (797/5:70), and he also tells Theo, "I'm struggling with all my energy to master my work, telling myself that if I win this it will be the best lightning conductor for the illness" (800/5:82).

Although he does not dwell on his illness, the combination of apprehension, objectivity, and restraint that he typically shows in describing his condition are quietly disturbing:

> I really think that Mr Peyron is right when he says that strictly speaking I'm not mad, for my thoughts are absolutely normal and clear between times, and even more than before, but during the

> crises it's terrible however, and then I lose consciousness of everything. But it drives me to work and to seriousness, as a coal-miner who is always in danger makes haste in what he does. (810/5:120–21)

Here, Van Gogh begins by citing the opinion of his doctor, Peyron, who offers the precise judgment that, "strictly speaking," Van Gogh is not mad. There is some reassurance in the doctor's opinion, which Van Gogh reinforces by stressing that his mind is "absolutely normal" in the lucid periods between attacks. But we might sense some overcompensation in this use of "absolutely." A thing is either normal or not, but to insist on being "absolutely normal" ("absolument normale") is to draw attention to an insecurity that the overemphasis betrays. By contrast, the simple brevity of "it's terrible" is arresting, and, as Van Gogh goes on to say, work is the antidote that stabilizes him. The allusion to the coal miner then evokes the dogged commitment and hard physical labour that Van Gogh had long since admired in the miners of the Borinage. But the miner also works in fear of an imminent collapse, and there is a quiet desperation in his quick, intense work. And so, although this brief passage does not dwell in detail on Van Gogh's suffering, it conveys how terrible its grip was on him, not just during the attacks, but also when his mind was clear — clear enough to know that further attacks might occur without warning.

After the breakup with Gauguin and the failure of Van Gogh's utopian dream of a community of artists, the solitary practice of painting was to be his mainstay. Imagination grounded in the common reality of everyday objects and people would be an antidote to the hallucinations, religious terrors, and epileptic seizures that threatened his sanity. The best painting, after all, incorporated imperfection as part of the compassionate understanding that art can offer, and this truth-to-life could provide solace for a painter who felt the burden of his own imperfections weighing on him all too heavily.

But in the aftermath of the Yellow House, Van Gogh came also to realize, with a new urgency, that painting was not enough. In July 1888, he tells Theo that he realizes that the "artistic life" is not "the real one" (635/4:159) and, in September, that there is nothing more artistic, really, than to love people (682/4:272). This is the context in which a new sense of the spiritual emerges from the letters — a sense of the infinite that takes us "*above art itself*" (632/4:154) and even intimates the beginnings of a "new religion" (686/4:282). Also, in his late letters, Van Gogh reaches out with renewed interest to his family — to his mother and sister in Holland, as well as to Theo and Jo. Admittedly, Theo's new family caused Vincent considerable ambivalence, and it

is difficult not to notice Vincent's repeated, forced expressions of Panglossian optimism, as if he needs to convince himself, against the grain, of some further, underlying knowledge to the contrary. I will deal with both of these points in later chapters. For now, I wish to note how the dialogical interplay of religion, morality, and art remained vigorous to the end, as the ascendancy of the aesthetic, reaching a high point in the dream of an ideal community of artists, opened Van Gogh in new ways to fresh understandings of the spiritual and moral dimensions of human experience.

Conclusion

In this book, I am attempting to provide some account of how Van Gogh's letters achieve the distinction of literature in a manner outreaching their occasional status. To this end, I have focused in this chapter on the sustained dialogical interplay among religion, morality, and the aesthetic that preoccupies Van Gogh throughout his correspondence. Through a series of personal crises, the dominant focus of his letters shifts from one of these areas of concern to the others, though without a straightforward or total replacement of any one by either of the other two. Nonetheless, there is a struggle for ascendancy, out of which Van Gogh's opinions and painfully achieved understandings were forged. To take account of this struggle, I have foregrounded Van Gogh's idealism. Because his aspirations were intense and his commitments fierce, his failure to realize his ideals was especially disillusioning and painful. The gap between his ideals and the thwarting recalcitrance of a harsh and compromised world was the negative contrast experience out of which arose, simultaneously, an enhanced sense of the desirability of the ideal and of compassion born from an understanding of the world's persistent — perhaps ineradicable — imperfections that prevent the ideal from being realized.

Following his early disappointments in London and Paris, Van Gogh directed his whole energy to his religious vocation, and religion became the touchstone both for morality and for art. But religion would yield to Van Gogh's moral critique as the centre of his attention shifted from the oppressed miners in the Borinage to the idealized Kee, and then to an equally idealized counter-Kee in the person of Sien Hoornik. Traditional religion now found itself measured against an intense moral idealism, and in this context, for Van Gogh, art especially reveals and confirms the beauty, pathos, and imperfection of our ordinary, long-suffering human condition. But by and by, Van Gogh's bitter disappointments in love left him dedicated solely to his vocation as an artist, and

he struggled to have art provide a sense of the sacredness of ordinary things that traditional religion once provided, as well as a compassionate moral understanding of the fragile complexity of human beings beyond conventional but oversimplified distinctions between good and evil.

As one consequence of his disappointments with religion and love, Van Gogh came to understand imperfection itself as an aesthetic quality. Art attains its highest distinction only if, paradoxically, it contains the right kind of imperfection within itself. Van Gogh's aesthetic ideal thus thematizes an anti-idealism that reflects the lessons he had learned at such cost from what he once called "the great university of poverty" (155/1:248) and that caused him to look to art to provide the most authentic, humanizing combination of compassion and consolation.

Van Gogh's last idealizing venture was his plan for an artists' cooperative in Arles. But when this plan also broke against the world, Van Gogh's solitariness, now terrifyingly intensified by his mental illness, caused him to acknowledge the limitations of art as a way of coping with the world. In the end, art is not enough, and the late letters express an opening up in fresh ways to a renewed sense of the value of personal relationships and what we might call a renewed spiritual aspiration. In a remarkable sentence, written from St. Rémy in November 1889, Van Gogh reflects: "And then — yes there's something in life other than paintings, and this something else one neglects and nature seems to avenge itself then" (820/5:142). And so Van Gogh's struggle continued — his "always seeking without ever fully finding," and yet, as he promised early on while in The Hague, "I seek, I pursue, my heart is in it" (224/2:66).

This approach to the letters as expressing a dynamic, emergent process of understanding, charted through the course of Van Gogh's engagements with religion, morality, and art by way of a series of negative contrast experiences does much to explain the thematic coherence one feels in this otherwise complex and tangled correspondence. As we have seen, in specific passages as well as in the letters as a whole, Van Gogh's personal concerns and problems enable us to engage anew, through his own particular voice and idiom, with matters of general and perennial human interest.

But there is much more still to say, because Van Gogh's literary power is not confined to the broad dialogical "narrative" I have so far outlined. Throughout the correspondence, he also develops characteristic clusters of metaphors, ideas, and rhetorical strategies that are repeated, modified, and recombined in ways that provide vitality and insight into the themes that we have so far discussed. In the following chapters, I will attend to these further dimensions of Van Gogh's

literary achievement.

Thinking

in Images

CHAPTER 3

Birds' Nests

Art and Nature, Exile and Return

In part 1, I suggested that the evolution of Van Gogh's thinking about religion, morality, and art shapes his correspondence as a whole. Now, in part 2, I wish to focus on a selection of images and metaphors that are characteristic of Van Gogh's practice as a writer.

To this end, I have called the next three chapters "Birds' Nests," "The Mistral," and "Cab Horses." Each of these titles gives us, as it were, a discrete image, the implications of which are extended by Van Gogh into a cluster or constellation of further, closely associated metaphors and ideas. As ever, Van Gogh's thinking is associative rather than systematic, gathering and deepening rather than proceeding by way of direct exposition, and the images in question are a main means by which his writing becomes charged with a distinctive quality and power.

Nests: The Reshaping of Nature

Van Gogh had a special fondness for birds' nests. We know that as a small boy, he searched for them in the countryside; as an adult, he paid other small boys to do the searching for him.[1] At one point, he describes for Theo "a long trip I made in the company of a peasant boy — in order to get hold of a wren's nest." He goes on to say that he ended up finding six of them, hastening to assure Theo that the young birds had left and the nests could be taken "without too many pangs of conscience" (507/3:252). Van Gogh's student at Nuenen, Anton Kerssemakers, describes a cupboard full of nests in Van Gogh's chaotic studio.[2] And when Van Gogh gave his nephew (the baby Vincent Willem) a gift, he chose, yes, a bird's nest.[3] He also drew and painted nests: in these works, with their ruggedly improvised yet shapely contours, we catch an intimation of his

later, more famous sunflowers.[4]

Van Gogh's interest in nests extends also to his letters, where his references to nests help to bring together two main concerns that run throughout his correspondence. The first of these is the relationship between art and nature; the second is the archetypal drama of home-exile-return. For instance, art and nature is a main point of interest in a letter accompanying a basket of nests that Van Gogh sent to his painter friend Anthon van Rappard. At the end of the letter, Van Gogh offers some explanation of the unusual gift: "I thought you might like the birds' nests as I do, because the birds — like the wren or golden oriole — can also truly be counted among the artists. At the same time they're good for still lifes" (526/3:275). We can imagine Van Rappard's bemusement at receiving the basket of nests, but Van Gogh is keen to point out that the nests represent what he and Van Rappard do as artists, reconfiguring nature in order to produce or create something beautiful. Yet birds and artists are not quite the same, because nests are also objects that, as Van Gogh says, are "good for still lifes," and in making a still life, a painter does not simply reproduce the appearance of, say, a nest, but rather discloses something of its human significance. In so doing, an artist brings to bear a contemplative appreciation of the nest in the form of paint that the bird, taken up unself-consciously in the immediacy of nature itself, does not.

In *The Bird* (*L'oiseau*), Michelet discusses the "special art" of nest building and concludes that it is "less analogous to ours than one would be tempted to believe at the first glance."[5] Van Gogh understood this distinction very well, but throughout his life, he also maintained that artists need to remain in close contact with nature. Consequently, although bird-as-artist and man-as-artist are different, they are alike insofar as both are in touch with the mystery at the centre of "great creating nature" — the primal energy that needs to inform even the stillest of still-life paintings, as it does the magical, rough shapeliness of the wren's nest.[6]

Van Gogh returns to this idea of a simultaneous interinvolvement and contrast between nature and art in a letter to Theo in which he describes the differences between complementary and broken colours. To provide an example, Vincent refers to a painting he has made of birds' nests:

> Well — the nests were also painted on a black background on purpose — for the reason that I simply want it to be obvious in these studies that the objects appear against a conventional background, and are not in their natural setting. A — *living* nest in nature is — something very different; one hardly sees the nest itself, one sees the birds.
>
> Given that one wants to paint nests *from one's collection of nests*, one can't say emphatically enough that the background and setting in nature are very different — so I made the background — simply black. (536/3:299)

The point here is that a painting removes the nest from nature, its "*living*" context. Indeed, Van Gogh's collecting of nests is already a disturbance of the natural order, and this twofold removal (first, taking a nest from its natural location; second, representing it in paint) has the advantage of enabling us to see both the meaning and the physical form of the nest more clearly. As Van Gogh says, a "*living* nest in nature" is, in itself, scarcely visible, because nests are camouflaged. A painter therefore needs to provide a background that removes the camouflage: to this end, Van Gogh supplies "a black background on purpose." But a painting — if it is well done — will also show us something further about the nest beyond its physical appearance: for instance, that it is a place of protection and nurture, or a beautiful object that is both artificially constructed and in tune with nature.

All of this reminds us of Van Gogh's conviction that art does not simply reproduce natural appearances, even though it is not entirely separable from them. He liked to cite the idea (derived from Francis Bacon) that art is "man added to nature," as well as the closely allied notion (derived from Zola) that art is "a corner of nature seen through a temperament" (361/2:373). Repeatedly in the letters, he takes exception to those who "conceive of realism in the sense of *literal* truth — namely *precise* drawing and *local* colour," insisting that we must pursue "something other than that" (495/3:229). For his own part, he is confident that "I have my own way of looking" (499/2:236), and in moments of elation, he is convinced that his work is "entirely original" (689/4:289) — though at other times, he could feel the exact opposite.[7] In turn, he links his "own way of looking" to an ability both to "keep hold of an idea" in a painting and to express that idea with "feeling" (291/2:216). This combination of effects entails "knowing nature in such a way that what one does is fresh and true — that's what many now lack" (291/2:217). Confronted by a great painting, we therefore find ourselves sharing a new way of seeing, feeling, and understanding as we are asked to reconsider the meaning of some natural object or aspect of experience that we thought we knew well enough already. Van Gogh often links this sense of fresh discovery to consolation, comfort, and serenity.[8]

An example of how we might discover in a natural object some fresh dimension and new significance is provided by another paragraph in the letter about the nest-hunting expedition with the peasant boy: "Searching for subjects, I've found such splendid cottages that I now really must go bird's nesting with a number of variations of these 'people's nests,' which remind me so much of the nests of wrens — that's to say, paint them" (507/3:252). Here, Van Gogh intends to paint the cottages, but they are so closely tied in his imagination to birds' nests that it might not at first be clear which of the two things he wants to depict.

Soon after, he refers again to the cottages, of which he has now made four paintings (513/3:258). He pauses to reflect: “I’ve never seen the little house where Millet lived — but I imagine that these 4 little human nests are of the same kind” (515/3:262).

As Van Gogh says, wrens’ nests are “splendid” (507/3:252) in themselves, and now they enable him to reproduce in paint an analogous quality in the peasants’ cottages, which, in their own way, are also nests. The interpenetration here of art and nature enables us to see, simultaneously, a difference and similarity between the nests and the cottages, affecting our perception of both. Clearly, cottages are more self-consciously fabricated than are nests, but peasants are not the same kind of artists as are Van Gogh and Millet. That is, Van Gogh paints the cottages, much as he does the nests, in order to render their human significance through the medium of paint. By contrast, the peasant is most likely to be concerned about the cottage as a place to live: although a cottage dweller might pause to admire, say, a wellformed thatch or well-fitted door, the main aim of cottage building is functional rather than aesthetic. The bird and the peasant are therefore, in a way, closer to each other than either of them is to the artist, who, as Van Gogh says, introduces an “idea,” which is rendered (by the painter) and apprehended (by the viewer) with “feeling.” Introducing Millet, whom Van Gogh revered, reminds us again that a great artist needs to remain (like the bird) immersed in nature even while re-creating nature in a way that discloses something of its mystery and the mystery of ourselves dwelling within it.

Cages: Flying to Freedom

As a way of looking further at the elusive relationship between art and nature, let us consider another, more extended passage, again dealing with nests:

> In the springtime a bird in a cage knows very well that there’s something he’d be good for; he feels very clearly that there’s something to be done but he can’t do it; what it is he can’t clearly remember, and he has vague ideas and says to himself, “the others are building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood,” and he bangs his head against the bars of his cage. And then the cage stays there and the bird is mad with suffering. “Look, there’s an idler,” says another passing bird — that fellow’s a sort of man of leisure. And yet the prisoner lives and doesn’t die; nothing of what’s going on within shows outside, he’s in good health, he’s rather cheerful in the sunshine. But then comes the season of migration. A bout of melancholy — but, say the children who look after him, he’s got everything that he needs in his cage, after all — but he looks at the sky outside, heavy with storm clouds, and within himself feels a rebellion against fate. I’m in a cage, I’m in a cage, and so I lack for nothing, you fools! Me, I have everything I need! Ah, for pity’s sake,

> freedom, to be a bird like other birds!
>
> An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that.
>
> And it's often impossible for men to do anything, prisoners in I don't know what kind of horrible, horrible, very horrible cage. There is also, I know, release, belated release. A reputation ruined rightly or wrongly, poverty, inevitability of circumstances, misfortune; that creates prisoners.
>
> You may not always be able to say what it is that confines, that immures, that seems to bury, and yet you feel I know not what bars, I know not what gates — walls.
>
> Is all that imaginary, a fantasy? I don't think so; and then you ask yourself, Dear God, is this for long, is this for ever, is this for eternity?
>
> You know, what makes the prison disappear is every deep, serious attachment. To be friends, to be brothers, to love; that opens the prison through sovereign power, through a most powerful spell. But he who doesn't have that remains in death. But where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again. (155/1:249)

This is markedly different from the passage in which Van Gogh discusses painting birds' nests against a black background. Here, he shows no concern about the aesthetics of painting and focuses instead on morality. In so doing, he gives us something close to allegory — or, more precisely, a parable with allegorical elements — and, consequently, I have needed to cite the passage at length.

One general problem with allegory is that it can easily lapse into frigidity — a mere conceptual game emptied of emotional energy.[9] In the passage above, Van Gogh largely avoids this problem because of the immediacy and urgency of his writing — for instance, in the emphatically repeated questions and exclamations, the interjected passages of direct speech, and the caustically satirical manner in which he shows injustice reinforced by naïve complacency ("he's got everything that he needs in his cage," and so on).

The affective charge provided by these aspects of the passage enlivens the governing idea of the artist as a caged bird longing for freedom but confined by social convention and prejudice. "Ah, for pity's sake, freedom, to be a bird like other birds!" says the captive, "mad with suffering" and desiring only to be like the others, who are "building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood." For Van Gogh, this is the heart of the matter, and the nest represents the nurturing domesticity for which he always longed but which he failed to achieve. As we saw in part 1, a comfortable home, secure but close to nature, within which children could be raised seemed to him, even towards the end of his life, more real than the painting to which he was committed so completely for the very reason that he could not find the satisfying human relationships he desired.[10]

But we need to notice also that "freedom" in this passage provides the liberty

not just to build a nest but also to encounter the “storm clouds” gathering in the sky. When the caged bird sees the approaching storm, far from feeling protected, he feels even more confined, deprived of the opportunity to weather the turbulence directly. And so, although the nest offers security, it also enables a person to encounter the storms of the world with confidence and to soar creatively, risking the worst that might happen. Van Gogh never surrendered the conviction that security (the nest) and creative freedom (the risky and sometimes tempestuous journey) are interdependent. As he explains to Van Rappard, although venturing into “the open sea” is a good thing, it is important to realize that “a man can’t stand it on the open sea for long — he has to have a little hut on the beach with a fire on the hearth — with a wife and children around that hearth.” For his own part, Van Gogh assures Van Rappard that he needs both “the sea and that haven, or that haven and the sea” (190/1:328). The main impediment to successful nest building is therefore not the storm but the inertia symbolized by the cage and by the sadly depleted “idle man” who is captive to convention, poverty, and a concern for reputation.

Nests, then, like the peasants’ cottages, provide a safe haven, a dwelling place that offers serenity and comfort and is close to nature. In such an environment, creativity can be nourished, whether in making children or making art. In turn, creative endeavour is closely linked to freedom, which means the ability not just to fly unimpeded but also to weather the storms of life with purpose and confidence: “I believe ‘I will mature in the storm’” (406/3:67), Van Gogh says. The open sea of adversity and the comforting safe haven are both necessary for human happiness and fulfillment.

But the positive aspects of nest building are also defined by their opposites, which prevent or destroy happiness, as we see in the excerpt above. Thus, the nest stands in contrast to the cage, as well as to other kinds of confinement that suppress creativity, including the rules, the conventions, and the gamut of repressive social measures that Van Gogh deplored throughout his life. As Naifeh and Smith point out, Van Gogh “kept a special place in his inner gallery for images of confinement,” and his “portfolios overflowed with depictions of imprisonment.”[11] Thus, he complains that society at large is so thoroughly governed by restrictions that “you may not always be able to say what it is that confines, that immures, that seems to bury, and yet you feel I know not what bars, I know not what gates — walls.” For Van Gogh, this sadly diminished world of respectable conformity is governed by “children,” by which he means, in this context, people who have not grown up and who do not understand what home and freedom really mean, as opposed to the confining anti-home that they

actually inhabit. Breaking out of that “horrible, very horrible cage” is necessary in the interests of “freedom,” even if we have to take risks, encountering the storms of life head-on. But, happily, there are ways to escape: “every deep, serious attachment” offers a taste of liberation, and “where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again.” For Van Gogh, art aims to produce exactly this kind of liberation, awakening in us a renewed sympathy as well as new kinds of life-enhancing relationships and understandings.

In the examples provided above, we can see how birds’ nests bring together the two large thematic concerns that I mentioned at the start of this chapter: the relationship between art and nature and the experience of home, exile, and return. On the one hand, nest building stands as a figure for the human artist who produces beautiful work by remaining close to nature but infusing nature with “sincere feeling” (291/2:217) that expresses the artist’s personal way of seeing and is not dependent on an exact or literal copy of natural appearances. On the other hand, a nest, like a home, provides the comfort, serenity, and nurture that enable a person to soar creatively and to encounter the storms of life with confidence. As Van Gogh says, the perilous sea journey cannot be sustained unless there is a secure place to return to, and so the home-exile-return motif reinforces the art-and-nature motif, each expanding upon and deepening the other.

The nest, however, has a negative counterpart, represented by the cage — the anti-home marked by confinement, rules, and conventions that suppress creativity. Being in a cage causes inertia and alienation, a reversal of the self-imposed exile of the storm-riding free spirit. In a commentary on some letters from Margot Begemann, who was sent into care in Utrecht after her suicide attempt, Van Gogh describes her writing as having in it “something also of the complaint of a bird whose nest has been robbed — she isn’t *angry* about society as I am, perhaps, but nonetheless she does see in it the ‘naughty boys who rob nests’ — and who take pleasure in it and laugh” (465/3:180). This brief comment again evokes the bird’s nest motif, and here, Van Gogh highlights the negative contrast to its nurturing aspect. Margot’s depression and anguish are largely caused by a repressive society, not just in the making of an anti-home, or cage, to confine her but also in the destruction of the nurture and vitality that are the main antidote to what the cage represents.[12] In Van Gogh’s opinion, “The Begemann family of the *old* religion” suppressed “the *active*, indeed *brilliant* principle in her” and, as a result, “made her *passive* for ever and ever” (464/3:177).

Rough Textures, Hard Constraints

Characteristically, Van Gogh insists on direct contact with the tangled, rough textures of the world, not only in his paintings but also in his writing. He is fascinated by such things as tree roots —"twisted bushes and the roots of trees, as gnarled as those Dürer etched" (148/1:234) — and by the harbours and docks of Antwerp, which are "more tangled and fantastic than a thorn-hedge," even though when one looks carefully, "then one gets the most beautiful, quiet lines" (545/3:324). He has a special liking for weavers — "I've been studying the weavers while I've been here" (419/3:92), he says, and describes his painting of the potato eaters as a woven fabric: "I've had the threads of this fabric in my hands the whole winter long, and searched for the definitive pattern," but the end result remains, nonetheless, "a fabric that has a rough and coarse look" (497/3:231). De Bock's paintings are fresh and genial, but Van Gogh prefers something "more *thorny*, in which I find more for my heart" (325/2:299); he assures Van Rappard, "Even if I address you in what are possibly coarse and harsh terms, I nevertheless feel such warm sympathy for you" (184/1:313). Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes his parents as having the same reservations about him as they would have about "a large, shaggy dog in the house," though people do not sufficiently realize that this unruly animal has "a human soul, and one with finer feelings at that" (413/3:81).

These examples make the same point about the world in general (tree roots, the Antwerp harbour), about human arts and crafts (the weavers, Van Gogh's own paintings), and about Van Gogh himself (the shaggy dog, the brusque correspondent). In each case, a harsh, tangled exterior opens upon something beautiful and shapely — the Dürer etching, the "beautiful, quiet lines" in Antwerp, the "pattern" within the coarse weave of the potato eaters, the "warm sympathy" despite the gruff address to Van Rappard, the "finer feelings" within the shaggy dog. This imaginative pattern runs persistently throughout the letters, and I am suggesting that, for the purposes of the present discussion, a bird's nest can be read as its epitome or symbol. In a nest, too, a rough weave contains a nurturing centre that completes the pattern and imparts to it both beauty and a promise of protection and re-creation.[13]

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that the world's coarseness and entanglements were not seen by Van Gogh as an impediment to the realization of beautiful form; rather, they are its substance. To be human is to be caught up in the labyrinth of a material body within a labyrinthine material world, and any authentic representation of human experience will bear witness to the coarse

opaqueness and immediacy of things, even as we seek meaning and understanding in and through these things. And so the nest *is* the rough weave of twigs, not separate from or opposite to the nurturing and protective centre. Nothing less than this interpenetration of matter and form will do, as Van Gogh never tired of repeating both explicitly and figuratively. “In short,” he tells Theo in July 1882, “I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly. Despite my so-called coarseness — you understand — perhaps precisely because of it” (249/2:113).

Variations on this pattern are evident in Van Gogh’s love of all kinds of rough textures, whether sunflowers or cypresses, or the “rough look” (668/4:246) of a canvas when the paint has not been too finely ground, or weavers and basket makers, thistles and furrows, old boots and olive trees, as well as all manner of poor and unkempt people and whatever “harsh and coarse realism” imparts a “rustic note” and the “smell of the earth” (823/5:154) — these are the substance not only of his painting but also of his writing. At first glance, they might indeed seem a random assortment of elements, but, as with the fabric of the bird’s nest, they have in common a shapeliness and significance that are all the more affecting because they are roughcast.

But if nests are associated by Van Gogh with intricate patterns and patient interweaving, cages — as a counter-image to nests — are associated with rigidity, dogmatic systems, places of confinement (prisons, asylums), mechanization, excessive abstraction, and the enervation consequent upon enforced idleness. For instance, when Van Gogh quarrelled with his father, he objected especially to a certain way of thinking and of living: “it’s too constricting for me — it would suffocate me” (193/1:337). When his father suggested making Vincent a ward of the court because of the scandalous and apparently deranged relationship with Sien, Vincent accused him of being a “policeman” (225/2:68) and condemned his “self-righteousness” and “*petty*-mindedness” (411/3:80). “I’ve *finished* dealing with those systems,” he says, declaring his father “the opposite of a man of faith” (403/3:61) and, later, even disowning the family name: “I’m actually *not* a ‘Van Gogh’” (411/3:80). But for Vincent, the problem lay not just with his father but with systems in general, as he frankly admits: “I can’t shut myself up in a system or school” (199/2:16). This plain declaration of opposition coarsens as he declares his readiness to “piss on the sacred shrine of the intransigents — as I often do — on sacred shrines in general” (472/3:190).

The caustic vigour of these words readily passes over into Van Gogh’s dislike of academic correctness, as, for instance, in his opinions about Van Rappard’s

studies at the Academy in Antwerp. Van Gogh warns that Van Rappard will find himself seduced there by the two false mistresses of fickle vulgarity and oppressive academicism. The second kind are the "women of marble — sphinx — cold vipers — who would like to bind men to themselves, entirely." He goes on to say, "Such mistresses *freeze* men, and *petrify* them," and he identifies these entrapping women with "academic reality" (184/1:313).

Imprisonment, religious dogmatism, narrow-minded conventionalism, and academic correctness, all oppressive to Van Gogh, are synonymous with what he means by the imprisoning cage. The cases that he makes against Margot's family and against his own are therefore identical insofar as he condemns narrow-mindedness and "cold decency" (432/3:113) for suppressing the free flight of the creative imagination. Van Gogh laments that his parents will "never be able to grasp what painting is" (259/2:142), just as Margot's family suppresses what is "brilliant" (464/3:177) in her. Consequently, both families seem to Van Gogh more like anti-families; he points, for instance, to an inversion of value in Margot's "respectable" relatives, who have brought about a "simply *absurd*" situation because "they make society into a sort of madhouse, into an upside-down, wrong world" (456/3:168). The real madhouse, then, is normal society, with everyday social life having become a prison, even though in this "upside-down" world, people think themselves both sane and free. Elsewhere, Van Gogh makes the same point about prostitutes, whom he calls "sisters of charity" on the grounds that "the relationships of good and evil are often reversed because of the corruption of society" (388/3:19).

When Van Gogh went voluntarily to the asylum at St. Rémy, he experienced his confinement partly as an escape from the upside-down world of ordinary society, which thinks of itself as free but is actually the opposite. In April 1889, he tells Theo, "For the time being I wish to remain confined, as much for my own tranquillity as for that of others" (760/4:430), and in May, he writes to Jo, "Never have I been so tranquil as here at the hospital in Arles" (772/5:12). He even describes a certain camaraderie among the inmates, who "know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises" (772/5:12). Ironically, Van Gogh's confinement gave him glimpses of the kind of togetherness he had always wanted. Upside-down, indeed.

Yet, for all that, the asylum remained a place of confinement, oppressive and frightening in its own way. "I see no way out" (836/5:179), Vincent tells Theo in January 1890; in addition, he thought his attacks were made worse because the hospital had once been a religious institution and the cloisters were causing him to have nightmares (805/5:100). Also, despite the occasional camaraderie, many patients were distressingly idle, falling into lassitude and a deadening inertia

patients were distressingly idle, falling into lassitude and a deadening inertia. Their "absolute idleness" (777/5:30) troubled Van Gogh: "and what would be infinitely worse is to let myself slide into the state of my companions in misfortune who do nothing all day, week, month, year" (836/5:178). He complains about the "monotony" of being in the company of so many people "who do absolutely nothing" (820/5:144) — exactly (we might feel) as with the caged bird.

And so, although I have initially drawn a broad contrast between the nest and the cage in Van Gogh's letters, these opposites can also have a more complex interrelationship, exemplified by Van Gogh's confinement at Arles and St. Rémy, where a liberating camaraderie coexists uncomfortably with the patients' disturbing inertia. A similar uneasy combination of elements occurs in Van Gogh's relationship with his parents, whom he associates with the negative kinds of behaviour represented by the cage while nonetheless retaining an affection for them, as they did for him. For instance, when Vincent was living with Sien, he was touched when his parents sent a woman's coat to ensure that Sien would be warm in winter (271/2:170; 351/2:350). In a similar gesture, his father sent clothes to Vincent, which, Vincent wryly notes, didn't fit and were only half of what he needed anyway (193/1:337). While literally true, the fact that the clothes didn't fit is also quietly suggestive of the contrary impulses at work in the exchange. On the one hand, Father's disapproval is softened by his gift giving. On the other, Vincent's gratitude is stiffened by the hint of reproof as he notices that the clothes are both insufficient and the wrong size. Here and elsewhere in matters having to do with Vincent's family, there is some degree of misfit on both sides but no final rejection of one side by the other. In this context, it is worth noting an equivalent complexity in Van Gogh's reproof of Margot Begemann's family, in that he makes an exception of her brother, Louis, whom he found sympathetic (457/3:169).

To summarize, although we can chart a series of opposed values throughout the letters, symbolized by the nest and the cage, the letters also show us that experience does not fall conveniently into one or the other of these categories. The very idea that life might conform to such a clear set of distinctions would have been objectionable to Van Gogh, who disliked abstract schemes of any kind. By contrast, his letters show how the conflict between freedom and captivity, nurture and oppression is embedded in the entanglements of actual relationships and the realities of human imperfection. As with his paintings, the governing idea comes alive for us precisely because it is expressed through the ambiguities and rough irregularities of experience. The literary dimension of the letters as a whole is partly a consequence of how Van Gogh's ideas are brought to life in his writing in just this way, that is, they are captivating, in part, because

to life in his writing in just this way: that is, they are captivating, in part, because they are not oversimplified.

Suffering and Resurrection

With these points in mind, I would like to close this chapter by considering one final aspect of the letters with a bearing on the bird's nest motif. As I have suggested, nests provide security and nurture that enable free flight, even if this entails going directly into a storm. Van Gogh returns frequently to the idea that, even though grounded in nature, the creative spirit also soars above it: "That is the highest art, and *in that* art is sometimes above nature — as, for instance, in Millet's sower, in which there is more soul than in an ordinary sower in the field" (298/2:229). Art, he believed, depicts things "more clearly than nature itself" (152/1:242), and for true art, "something else is needed when working absolutely from nature" (552/3:340). Thus, although Rembrandt remains true to nature, he "goes into the higher — into the very highest — infinite" (534/3:291). And although art is produced by "human hands," it is "not wrought by the hands alone but wells up from a deeper source in our soul" and is "something larger and loftier than our own skill or learning or knowledge" (332/2:316).

This kind of language occurs frequently in the letters, drawing attention to the idea that art is simultaneously rooted in nature and transcendent of it. Yet Van Gogh knew all too well that the conditions that best enable the production of art are often all the more desirable because of their absence. The nurturing home, or nest, the protective space that provides serenity and inspires confidence, the sympathy of fellow humans who are like-minded and cooperative remain, in large part, ideals to aspire to. As ever, the negative contrast supplied by the lives we actually live makes the ideals all the more desirable, even as we also come to understand how intractable are the impediments to their realization.

And so the flight of the creative spirit is not just a result of nurture and enabling circumstances but is depicted frequently in Van Gogh's writing as a struggle to escape from the forces that would imprison and tame what art and creativity mean. In this context, from his early religious phase until the end of his career, Van Gogh was drawn to the idea of resurrection, Christianity's chief symbol of the flight of a free spirit from deadly confinement. Indeed, there are "dark and evil and terrible things of the world," he says in October 1877, but the "fire of Spirit and Love" is "a power of the Resurrection" (132/1:198). And from St. Rémy in 1890, long after he had abandoned his early religious enthusiasm, Van Gogh sent a letter that included a sketch of his painting of Lazarus, reborn

from the dead (866/5:224).

Throughout the letters, Van Gogh returns often to the idea of rebirth after suffering as a resurrection or creative flight in protest against the negative contrast experience and everything entailed by the image of the cage. Even when love dies, there is still hope. “After I had left Amsterdam,” he writes to Theo from The Hague in May 1882, “I felt that my love . . . had been literally *beaten to death* — yet after death one rises from the dead. Resurgam” (228/2:75). Later, from Arles in August 1888, he assures Theo that even “the most worn-out people” can feel “the germ of this indefinable hope” (656/4:220), and everywhere in his writing, as in his painting, Van Gogh depicts fresh young life blossoming from the hard and bitter realities of a damaged and imperfect world. The “blossom from a hard and difficult life is a phenomenon like the blackthorn, or better yet a gnarled old apple tree which suddenly bears blossoms that are among the tenderest and most ‘*pure*’ things under the sun” (408/3:72). Resurrection, new life, replaces the old as part of nature’s process, and here Van Gogh finds an analogy between nature and morality, insofar as a “hard and difficult life” can also produce its own kind of blossoms, like the apple tree that is weathered and toughened by long and hard experience. Later, he applies the same analogy to art: “this eternally existing art and this revival — this green shoot growing from the roots of the old felled trunk” (650/4:199).

The same idea recurs in various contexts, as the conditions of imprisonment or confinement stimulate the splendid protest of life and beauty. The ugly Socrates becomes radiant (368/2:391), a rubbish dump is like a fairy tale (275/2:182), a vicious girl is transfigured when she has a baby (309/2:262), a little old man in a wheelchair is “priceless” (351/2:351), and even a crayon contains a “gypsy soul” (324/2:292) that wants to get out. Van Gogh especially admired people who remained active and creative despite old age and pain, continuing to blossom like the gnarled apple tree. Though Israels is old, he still makes progress as a painter, “and I think that is true youth and evergreen energy” (326/2:303). Despite his age, Antoon Hermans, Van Gogh’s friend in Eindhoven, is “doing his best to learn to paint with the same *freshness* of enthusiasm as if he were 20” (465/3:179). The painter Giotto, who was “*always suffering*” remained “always full of kindness and ardour as if he were already living in a world other than this” (683/4:275). Whimsically, Van Gogh says of himself that “the uglier, older, meaner, iller, poorer I get,” the more he wants “to take my revenge by doing brilliant colour, well arranged, resplendent” (678/4:265). In these examples, the idea of rebirth, of the spirit rising from the ashes of bitter experience, is applied to nature as well as to religion, morality,

and art, each of which is analogous to the others even as Van Gogh's interests changed and developed in the manner I have described in part 1.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that Van Gogh's treatment of birds' nests enables us to see a constellation of values that permeate the letters and that are foundational to the complex weave of Van Gogh's imaginative thinking. The nest is beautiful because it is rough and close to nature, yet it is also shapely in a way that intimates the kind of form an artist seeks to realize. It is a dwelling that offers comfort and serenity, a recuperative space enabling one to face the turbulence of the world, to venture forth bravely and to soar creatively. Its negative contrast is the cage, the anti-home marked by confinement, dogmatism, excessive abstraction, and stifling convention that make ordinary social life a prison that reduces people to a condition of alienation and idleness.

In turn, the nest is a vehicle for discussing the perennial problem of art and nature, and, in conjunction with the cage, it opens further upon the primordial literary theme of home-exile-return. The originality of Van Gogh's writing in relation to what I am calling, broadly, the bird's nest motif lies to a considerable degree in how these large issues of enduring interest are interwoven, not just with each other but with the key images through which they are explored.

As ever, then, for Van Gogh, the ideal beckoned partly because the negative contrast enabled him to understand the impediments to its realization. His imaginative thinking came into its own not so much in the assertion of the ideal values themselves as in how he expressed the felt complexity of a struggle between these values and their negative equivalents. By experiencing something of this struggle by way of a set of images such as the bird's nest and its counter-symbol, the cage, we can see more clearly why Van Gogh's writing, like the transfigurations he admired in great painting, remains so captivating and rewarding.

CHAPTER 4

The Mistral

Creativity and Adversity

In the previous chapter, I suggested that in his correspondence, Van Gogh interprets birds' nests as analogous to the kind of safe haven that can enable a person to face the storms of life creatively. I did not put much stress on the fact that storms can also be destructive and can overwhelm the creative impulse altogether. In this chapter, I explore Van Gogh's often tense and difficult struggle to avoid being destroyed by the storms of life while nonetheless contending creatively with them. That is, he understood that creativity requires some degree of adversity; otherwise, a person becomes complacent and stagnant. But he also knew that too much adversity can crush a person's resolve and ability to work. Throughout the letters, Van Gogh returns often to the interplay between these motifs, which communicate a felt sense of his understanding and experience of the complex symbiosis of creativity and adversity.

Stormy Weather and the Painter's Dilemma

When Van Gogh went to the south of France in 1888, he learned first-hand about the cold, dry north wind that blows down the Rhône-Saône corridor in winter: the mistral. He mentions the mistral on numerous occasions, especially as a way of commenting on the process of painting. For Van Gogh, the wind came to represent not only his literal struggle with the elements as he tried to paint outdoors but also his inner struggle — his inner weather, as it were — as he attempted to exercise his talents in circumstances often fraught with adversity. Here, for instance, is the opening paragraph of the letter in which he first mentions the mistral to Theo:

> Now at long last, this morning the weather has changed and has turned milder — and I've already had an opportunity to find out what this mistral's like too. I've been out on several hikes round

> about here, but that wind always made it impossible to do anything. The sky was a hard blue with a great bright sun that melted just about all the snow — but the wind was so cold and dry it gave you goose-pimples. But even so I've seen lots of beautiful things — a ruined abbey on a hill planted with hollies, pines and grey olive trees. We'll get down to that soon, I hope. (583/4:22)

It isn't clear from this passage whether Van Gogh already knew what a mistral was when he arrived in the south of France. The main point is that he now discovers what it feels like to be exposed to it and how it prevents him from painting ("that wind always made it impossible to do anything"). But as the opening sentence of the excerpt indicates, the milder weather provided an opportunity to go outside and paint the "beautiful things" that he had seen while the mistral was blowing. The touches of detail in his description of the landscape (the ruined abbey, holly, pines, and grey olive trees) anticipate the things he will paint when he gets the chance. By contrast, the cold, dry wind, which is associated with snow and the "hard blue" sky, made it impossible for him to work. Still, he confronted the bad weather by going for walks, as a result of which he discovered beautiful things even as the mistral prevented him from painting them. His attitude to the freezing wind is thus to some degree ambivalent. It provides adversity by means of which beauty is discovered even while it takes away the opportunity to be creative.

Van Gogh's further discussions of the mistral return consistently to the main themes addressed here; in other words, his descriptions of the weather have a bearing on his thinking about the creative process. Although, surprisingly, he does not mention the mistral before he goes to Arles, throughout the letters, he has plenty to say about the weather in general, which he consistently describes in ways that are simultaneously literal and metaphorical. His descriptions of the mistral can therefore provide a focus for a set of concerns that are explored throughout the correspondence and that are not confined to the harsh wind he encountered in the south of France.

For example, in July 1882, Van Gogh describes an interview with Hermanus Tersteeg as having "put the woman [Sien] and me further back than the cruelest north wind," and the main thing now "is full recovery and being able to start regular work again" (248/2:113). Here, Van Gogh might well be talking about the mistral, except that this letter was written well before he went to Arles. The cruel north wind to which he alludes is therefore any north wind at all, and it functions as a metaphor, describing his chilly relationship with Tersteeg, which affects Van Gogh's ability to paint ("being able to start regular work again").

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes a storm at Scheveningen, in the teeth of which he has painted two small seascapes:

> There's already a lot of sand in the one, but with the second, when there really was a storm and the sea came very close to the dunes, I had to scrape everything off twice because of the thick layer of sand completely covering it. The wind was so strong that I could barely stay on my feet and barely see through the clouds of sand. I tried to get it down anyway by immediately painting it again in a small inn behind the dunes, after first scraping it all off, and then going out to take another look from there. So I have a couple of souvenirs after all. But another souvenir is that I've caught a cold again, with the results you know about, which now force me to stay at home for a few days. (259/2:142)

In contrast to the letter about Tersteeg, in which Van Gogh uses "the cruelest north wind" as a metaphor, here he describes a real storm that literally blew sand onto his canvas, requiring him to scrape it off. Eventually, he took shelter at the "small inn," a safe haven where he set about repainting the battered canvasses. However, for his rashness in exposing himself to the unkind elements, he caught a cold and would have to stay at home and rest.

Although Van Gogh is intent here on giving Theo a factual account, he manages also to create a small drama that becomes all the more suggestive when we see it in relationship to other passages in which he describes the weather. In the present case, the painter confronts the stormy conditions directly, as if doing so is required for the seascapes to be authentic. Yet the stormy conditions almost ruin the painting, which can be completed only in the safe haven provided by the inn — a place of calm (like the nest) away from the storm. But for his temerity in facing the storm directly, the painter pays a price: he catches cold and is forced to rest and recuperate.

Once again, Van Gogh's attitude to the storm is ambivalent. That is, the rough weather reveals aspects of nature that the artist finds inspiring, but the harsh wind also makes it all but impossible to work. In one way, the artist grows in the storm (406/3:67); in another, the storm takes a toll on him. In addition, too much exposure to the bad weather will ruin a painting, and the artist needs the calm that comes with the domestic interior of the inn, in contrast to the wind and storm outside.

A further example of the same kind of interpenetration of the weather and Van Gogh's personal experience is provided by a comparison he makes between two of his drawings: *Sorrow*, depicting a seated nude figure, and *Roots*, depicting "some tree roots in sandy ground." He explains to Theo how in these works, he has "tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure," going on then to describe *Roots* (which, in fact, depicts a leafless, gnarled tree, foregrounded by its massive root system). He says that he wants to show this tree "frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life's

struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots" (222/2:61). The analogy here allows us to see how significant for Van Gogh is the juxtaposition of the storm in nature and the human figure whom he depicts. Like the tree, she is an earthy creature suffering and damaged by the storms of life, but still tenacious. Here, as elsewhere, the storm is deployed metaphorically, its material immediacy (*Roots*) opening upon a larger human and moral meaning (*Sorrow*).

In these passages, then, Van Gogh suggests that the storms of life need to be encountered if one is to acquire authentic experience such as a painting can express. But too much exposure to the storm prevents a painter from working: that is, the wind that inspires might also become destructive. Furthermore, a safe refuge is necessary for the creative enterprise to take shape. In turn, these examples can provide a helpful context for reading Van Gogh's allusions to the mistral, which focuses his preoccupation with creativity at a time when his personal storms were becoming increasingly destructive and his search for a safe haven ever more pressing.

Ships in the Storm and the Search for Serenity

As the above excerpts illustrate, when Van Gogh describes the weather, he does so in three distinct ways. First, he describes it directly, as when he asks Theo, "Have I already written to you about the storm I saw recently?" (83/1:102) and then goes on to describe it in detail. Second, he is sensitive to the interplay between the weather and human feeling ("I believe that the poor and the painters have the sentiment of the weather and the changing seasons in common" [310/2:264]). Third, descriptions of the weather frequently operate as metaphors, pertaining specifically to Van Gogh's own experience. "I will mature in the storm," he says, and then adds: "Look — winter is almost upon us, and here I am in the middle of the heath" (406/3:67). Although "winter" here is used literally, the storm is a metaphor, describing Van Gogh's personal growth. His situation "in the middle of the heath" is poised between the literal and the metaphorical: there is a real heath in Drenthe, but it is also a figure for Van Gogh's loneliness.

Van Gogh returns often to this third, metaphorical use of stormy weather, and when he does so, his writing on the topic is at its most interesting. For instance, he tells Van Rappard, "When cares weigh heavily on me it's as if I were on a ship in a storm" (307/2:256). Elsewhere, he says that Van Rappard will think him "a headstrong person," and then adds: "But where do I want to drive people, especially myself? To the open sea" (188/1:322). Here, the allusion to the storm

is figurative (“as if I were on a ship in a storm”) and is complementary to his account of the “headstrong” energy that compels him to venture onto the “open sea” — which, again, is a metaphor for life’s perilous adventure. He also connects the open sea to his vocation as a painter: “But now, I feel I’m on the high seas — painting must proceed with all the strength that we can muster” (260/2:146).

Van Gogh liked the idea of a storm-battered ship as a figure for the courage required to face adversity. In a letter to Theo from Etten in November 1881, when Vincent was in the grip of his infatuation with Kee, he develops a small allegory to explain how lovers use too much sail so that their ship sinks, whereas conventionally ambitious people, who are often driven by avarice, use too little and eventually fall into despair (183/1:311). As an allegorist, Van Gogh does not do so well, and in this instance, his comparisons drift into the kind of abstraction that elsewhere he deplores. He is closer to his own voice when he describes how fishermen face dangerous seas and terrible storms but refuse to stay ashore: “When the storm comes — when night falls — what’s worse: the danger or the fear of danger? Give me reality, the danger itself” (228/2:76). The forthrightness, driven by the aggressively posed question and answered ringingly in Van Gogh’s defiant preference for danger, catches, both in tone (even in translation) and substance, something central to his attitude towards the storms in life that he felt must be bravely faced.

The idea of a ship or small boat weathering a storm or facing the hazards of an open sea appealed to Van Gogh partly because he could readily imagine the ship as a safe haven, a well-ordered, enclosed space (a variation of the nest) where one could be calm and feel sustained in resistance to the incalculable hostility of the world at large. “I have love for the studio such as a bargee would have for his boat” (323/2:290), he tells Theo, making a link between his own treasured, comfortable workspace and the ships that he associates with fortitude, courage, and protection. Elsewhere, he compares painting to a “raft” (404/3:62), or “a little boat in a disaster” (524/3:273), which, if things were to get sufficiently stormy, Theo might also need. And “even if one does sustain damage,” he says, we “still manage to keep the ship afloat” (557/3:347). In a further passage written in some distress from St. Rémy, he extends the metaphor: “I consider this as a shipwreck, this journey” (865/5:223), and elsewhere, he laments the loss of “my studio, now foundered” (765/4:437) as a consequence of his illness. Yet he also attempts to follow the advice he gives Theo, offsetting “the disaster and shipwreck of the moment” (405/3:64) with the hope of a better future, as he attempts to maintain a creative space even while accepting the

perils of the journey: “It’s as if I were on a ship in a storm. Anyway, though I know very well that the sea holds dangers and one can drown in it, I still love the sea deeply and despite all the perils of the future I have a certain serenity” (307/2:256).

All of the main emphases are here. Van Gogh feels as if he is in the middle of a storm, which is a metaphor for life’s journey as well as for his personal difficulties. Still, he embraces the challenge, and although he realizes that he might shipwreck and drown, he maintains a “certain serenity” enabled by the brave clarity of his own choice and by the protected space represented by the ship.

Throughout the letters, it is hard to overestimate the strength of Van Gogh’s desire for a safe haven, a calm interior represented in different but analogous ways by his interest in birds’ nests and in ships, as well as by his unceasing quest for a stable home environment — if possible, with a wife and children. The word “serenity” echoes through the letters with a quiet insistence, registering an aspiration that he never surrendered. Thus, for instance, he assures Theo: “I want to do something good, come what may, and there’s a chance of bringing that about if we keep our serenity, dark future or no dark future” (372/2:401). Here, as so frequently elsewhere, “serenity” stands over against a “dark” foreboding that is paradoxically interconnected with the creative enterprise itself. Partly because of the negative contrast experience, Van Gogh realized that “to paint, the tranquil, regulated life would therefore be absolutely necessary” (823/5:154).

Still, although Van Gogh seeks serenity, he is wary of the perils of nonengagement and of completely avoiding the storm and its challenges. Consequently, although he likes the country because “it *is* quieter, more peaceful,” he prefers “stormy” days (399/3:50). Again, he reminds Theo “of the saying: don’t fear the storm but dread the *calm, treacherous, enchanted* ground” (407/3:68). As with the prudently ambitious men who are reproved in Van Gogh’s allegory for not hoisting enough sail, so also those who remain unchallenged by the risk and adventure of the sea will become stagnant. With a poignancy matched by his disarming lucidity and conciseness, in his last letter to Theo, Vincent hopes that his paintings, “even in calamity” will “retain their calm” (RM25/5:326). Here, his understanding of the relationship between storm and calm is encapsulated with a clarity that is all the more affecting because it engages the core significance of his other meditations on the topic. We should face life’s storms, and even if they threaten to overwhelm us, the calm centre should remain, not just as defiance but also because the storm itself can have a fructifying effect, so that the calm centre can become a creative space. As so

often in the letters, in these remarks, Van Gogh returns to a favoured set of motifs, seeing them from different angles and exploring their contradictions and tensions.

The Mistral: It's an Ill Wind That Blows Nobody Any Good

Van Gogh's descriptions of the mistral bring together in a concentrated way the main points I have been making about his treatment of the weather in general. As we have seen, he frequently complains about it: "that wind always made it impossible to do anything" and is "so cold and dry it gave you goose-pimples" (583/4:22). He frets that "this infuriating nuisance of the constant mistral" (639/4:172) prevents him from working and is "really aggravating" (683/4:276). He is uncomfortably cold "especially on the days when the mistral blows" (706/4:332). When he paints in the open air, he has "to bury" his easel in the stones "so that the wind doesn't send everything flying to the ground" (809/5:117), so he provides instructions about securing the easel with pegs and rope so that "you can work in the wind" (628/4:137).

There is a good deal of this kind of complaint as Van Gogh describes, first of all, a natural phenomenon — the actual winter wind chilling his flesh and capsizing his easel. But his interactions with nature are typically configured by way of imagination, and in keeping with his earlier observations about the weather, he sees the mistral as a disruptive force that can, nonetheless, reveal beautiful things. For instance, he describes how he tries to paint orchards, but "there are three windy days for one still one," and the work is hard "because of the wind." And so he fastens his easel to pegs and works in spite of the weather, because "it's too beautiful" (591/4:41). That is, the beauty of the scene compels him to face the disruptive wind, which in turn helps to reveal the beauty that is appreciated all the more in the calm periods and that he attempts to capture in paint. Elsewhere, he repeats this point about the need to paint the beauty of nature despite the challenges offered by the weather. "When the mistral's blowing," he says, "it's the very opposite of a *pleasant* land here," but still, "what a compensation, what a compensation, when there's a day with no wind. What intensity of colours, what pure air, what serene vibrancy" (683/4:276). In this passage, the emphasis falls on the serenity that reveals an especially intense beauty *because* of the storm. "Serene vibrancy" makes the point exactly: the radiant beauty remains energized by the preceding upheaval, again confirming Van Gogh's point that adversity can be beneficial and should not be avoided, even though too much adversity is destructive.

Here now is another passage in which Vincent describes for Theo an event in which the wind inhibits his painting and yet also intensifies his appreciation of the beauty he wants to communicate:

> Today has been a good day too. This morning I worked on an orchard of plum trees in blossom — suddenly a tremendous wind began to blow, an effect I'd only ever seen here — and came back again at intervals. In the intervals, sunshine that made all the little white flowers sparkle. It was so beautiful! My friend the Dane came to join me, and at risk and peril every moment of seeing the whole lot of it on the ground I carried on painting — in this white effect there's a lot of yellow with blue and lilac, the sky is white and blue. But as for the execution of what we do out of doors like this, what will they say? Well, let's wait and see. (595/4:50)

Again, Van Gogh paints despite the wind, even though he is at "risk and peril" of having his easel blown over. But the shining of the sun in the calm intervals not only provides a respite for the painter but brings the scene itself to life so that the sunshine "made all the little white flowers sparkle." When Van Gogh says "It was so beautiful!" he seems at first to be commenting on the sunlit flowers, but he might just as well be commenting on the whole scene. That is, the flowers and sunshine are all the more lovely because of the wind to which he and his Danish friend are exposed. One consequence is that the painting is itself physically affected, and Van Gogh wonders, "what will they say?" As it turns out, he himself has a good deal to say on this point, but here he is content to pose the question, juxtaposed to his vivid account of the little scene in the orchard of plum trees with the wind coming and going, alternating with periods of sunshine and with the fresh sense of vividness and life that the sunshine brings. The easel might blow over and the painting might be rough, but the difficulty is worth it. This passage again shows Van Gogh's willingness to embrace both the storm and the calm weather, the latter of which offers a creative opportunity not separable from the difficulties that both precede and shape it.

Van Gogh returns frequently to these points. For instance, he complains about having "a tremendous amount of wind and mistral here, 3 days out of four at the moment, always with sunshine, though, but then it's difficult to work out of doors" (603/4:74). Again, he tells Theo that "the mistral's been blowing hard here," following up with the reassurance that "the weather's splendid now" (605/4:77), so his work progresses rapidly. He is bothered by the fact that "the mistral is still there" but is consoled because "there are intervals of calm, and then it's wonderful" (682/4:272); he describes having "two or three glorious days here, very hot, with no wind" (671/4:250). Elsewhere, "the devil of a *mistral*" stands opposed to "the sun, dear God" (663/4:239); he can work "'at white heat' as long as the weather's fine" and he is not disrupted by the "merciless mistral" (699/4:316). He also reflects on how, "when the days of

mistral and rain come," things are "cold and sad," and he remembers, by contrast, painting in a "summer furnace over the white-hot wheat" (806/5:106). Here, Van Gogh's experience of the chilling mistral once again enhances his appreciation of the life-giving sun.

Despite the strong binary opposition in the passage about the "sun, dear God" and "the devil of a *mistral*," Van Gogh also recognized that these opposites interpenetrate. Thus, the mistral is not all bad, and although it is an "infuriating nuisance" (639/4:172) it has its own beauty: "even the mistral is fine weather to *look at*" (657/4:222). One can even experience "a good gust of the mistral," which is "not very soothing, but health-giving" (790/5:61). In another letter, Van Gogh explains how he went out to paint ("I deliberately went outside to make it, out in the mistral") because he sought "intensity of thought" (633/4:156). Soon after, he discusses how Delacroix had witnessed the sea "whipped up by a hard mistral," and Vincent assures Theo that it is important to go on painting, "even if it's studies of cabbages and salad to calm oneself down" (801/5:92). Sometimes, defiance expressed by the very act of painting can help to mitigate the storm.

These examples confirm and develop what we have seen of Van Gogh's attitude to storms in general. Like the mistral, he finds them bracing, and they have their own beauty. Even though they are destructive, they should be confronted and engaged to prevent creativity from lapsing into inertia. In short, for Van Gogh, the mistral and the creative impulse are symbiotic, even as they reproduce the ancient universal drama of a contest between the life-giving sun and the devil mistral whose realm is the life-depriving aspect of the watery world.

The Author's Intent: The Mistral Revisited

At this point, we might find ourselves wondering about the degree to which Van Gogh grasped the metaphorical dimensions of the storm motif that I am suggesting the letters evoke. From a strictly critical point of view, it does not matter if the effect of the letters overreaches the author's understanding or intent: the text is its own vindication, and it is a critical cliché that distinguished writing is often richer and more complex than an author might realize. Still, we should not ignore indications that Van Gogh did, in fact, understand himself sometimes to be using the mistral figuratively. These indications are significant because they show him to be a self-conscious rather than a naïve writer. As with his paintings, it is tempting to see him as lacking technique and being mainly spontaneous. But, in fact, Van Gogh is thoughtful as a writer in much the same

way as he is as a painter, and his self-consciousness adds depth and coherence to his work in both fields. Let us consider some examples.

When Van Gogh ponders what he could do "without the mistral, and without these inevitable circumstances of vanished youth and relative poverty" (662/4:236), he invites his reader to see the mistral as an "inevitable circumstance" similar to his vanished youth and financial worries. And when he describes himself as "thrilled, thrilled with what I see," he adds that we must also "beware the morning after, beware the winter mistrals" (683/4:274). The mistral here is equated to "the morning after," which is to say, a hangover from excessive indulgence, which in turn is analogous to the worries and "impossibilities" that prevent Van Gogh from painting "well, with feeling" (691/4:296).

Again, Vincent writes about Theo's impending fatherhood and "emotions which must move the forthcoming father of a family." He then acknowledges that Theo must also endure "the petty vexations of Paris" and concludes that "realities of this sort must anyway be like a good gust of the mistral, not very soothing, but health-giving" (790/5:61). The figurative intent here is unmistakable because it overrides the literal: Vincent is not talking primarily about the weather but about "the petty vexations of Paris," which are represented by the mistral.

In these examples, the mistral is self-consciously deployed in a figurative manner, and, as Van Gogh well knew, in a metaphorical sense, a mistral blew through his own life much as did the disturbing wind through Arles. Still, when he writes about the weather in general, his self-conscious intent is not always so clear and can be more or less evident within particular contexts. The result is a fascinating mix of spontaneity in response to immediate circumstances and a self-consciously deployed figurative richness. However, Van Gogh did not see his letters together and did not think of them as a collection; moreover, they were written for a wide variety of purposes, and the quality of the writing is uneven. Still, he must have recognized that he kept returning to a set of favourite motifs, tropes, and figures, by means of which he explored and deepened the understandings that continue to engage and compel readers because of their broad human significance.

Cold and Dry: On Art and Imperfection

With these points in mind, I would like to consider one final aspect of Van Gogh's descriptions of the weather: namely, his frequent allusions to cold and

dryness, and their association with a lack of inspiration and, specifically, with the mistral. Thus, he says that his work needs to change course to avoid "meagerness and what they call the dryness," and he takes heart from the fact that "I could show you a similar moment of dryness in the history of many who have completely overcome it." He blames overexertion for his having "ended up in that dryness" (365/2:386), and he talks about "a kind of revolution in the working method which I've sought for" and as a result of which he has "tried to work less drily" (371/2:399).

Likewise, Van Gogh blames the "icy coldness" of conventional Christianity for having hypnotized him in his youth, even though he has taken revenge "by worshipping the love that *they* — the theologians — call *sin*" (464/3:177). He objects to Theo's lapsing "into cold decency, which I find sterile and of no use to one — diametrically opposed to everything that is action, especially to everything that is artistic" (432/3:113). In being committed to the Academy, Van Rappard has "a mistress who freezes you": he should get out or he will "freeze to death" (184/1:314). Elsewhere, Van Gogh says that "one must have and retain a warm feeling of sympathy for people, for all in fact, otherwise the drawings remain cold and feeble" (276/2:184), and he worries that a lack of such sympathy threatens to leave his sister Willemien "frozen again" (506/3:249).

In these observations, Van Gogh associates dryness with lack of artistic inspiration and coldness with lack of the human sympathy underpinning "everything that is artistic" (432/3:113). When we then turn to his remarks about the mistral, we find that he dislikes it specifically because it is "cold and dry" and prevents him from working "in comfort and in the warm" (583/4:22). He says that Bernard might be disappointed if he visits "when the mistral's blowing," and now it is "beginning to get cold." Still, in the long run, "the poetry down here" will come through, and in the fine spells, Bernard will, like Van Gogh, be eager to paint the splendid "autumn effects" (706/4:332). The mistral is described here as the enemy of "poetry"; because it is cold and dry, it stifles imagination and freezes the sympathy necessary for creativity.

But for Van Gogh, creativity is born especially out of the heart of a continuing struggle, the marks of which are also incorporated in his painting, with the result that the most affecting beauty thematizes its own imperfection. Thus, he notes that if he tries to work while the mistral is blowing, the effects will be evident in the painting: "the constant wind here must have something to do with the fact that the painted studies have that wild look" (644/4:186–87). Later, he repeats the same point: "I always have to struggle against the mistral, which absolutely prevents one being in control of one's *touch*. Hence the 'wild'

look of the studies" (656/4:219). "Wild look" here suggests something disheveled, unfinished, hasty, and Van Gogh gives us a further indication of what he means when he describes the difficulties of contending with the wind. "It's very windy, though, and a very nasty, nagging wind, the mistral, usually troublesome enough when I have to paint in it, like when I lay my canvas flat on the ground and work on my knees. Because the easel doesn't stand firm" (653/4:206). He then goes on to describe a study of poppies and other flowers:

> I know very well that not a single flower was drawn, that they're just little licks of colour, red, yellow, orange, green, blue, violet, but the impression of all those colours against one another is nonetheless there in the painting as it is in nature. However, I imagine it would disappoint you and appear ugly were you to see it. (653/4:206)

Although Van Gogh does not say that the flower painting was done while he worked in the wind, his remarks follow directly upon his complaint about the "very nasty, nagging wind," and the incompleteness of the hasty painting makes sense in relation to the kind of disturbance described in the preceding paragraph. The "ugly" result is equivalent to the "wild look": both are the product of working under duress. Yet it is unclear whether Van Gogh regards this kind of ugliness as a diminishment of his art. Then, tellingly, he says in another letter that he painted a canvas outdoors and "excessively fast" because "I deliberately went outside to make it, out in the mistral. Isn't it rather intensity of thought than calmness of touch that we're looking for" — and, after all, "in the given circumstances of impulsive work on the spot and from life, is a calm and controlled touch always possible?" (633/4:156). Here, Van Gogh seeks the very conditions that will cause him to be overhasty and that will make his "touch" unsure and agitated rather than "controlled." As a result, the painting will gain in "intensity," and the marks of agitation, of the imperfectly finished, will themselves contribute to the effect.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh tells Bernard, "I deeply despise rules, institutions, etc.," and then goes on to say that he wants to paint two pictures: "a portrait of myself and a landscape angry with a nasty mistral" (896/4:306). Here, Van Gogh is drawn to the mistral as a way of setting himself apart from the well-regulated, and he does not see the wind as only a negative influence. The very agitation, the "wild" effect of the mistral on the painting, is itself significant for the human self-understanding that he thinks painting should impart. It is also worth noting that Van Gogh wants to paint a self-portrait. In fact, several of his self-portraits depict him against an abstract, swirling background, in the face of which he remains steady even as the whirling brush strokes coil into his clothes, torso, and hair. Van Gogh knew that the mistral was also part of himself, and,

paradoxically, the integrity of his work requires that he does not falsify its disturbing power by seeking a too-perfect finish.

Conclusion

We can now return to the quotation with which I began this chapter, which describes the freezing cold of the mistral preventing Van Gogh from painting. Nonetheless, besides presenting him with adversity, the mistral also causes the fragile beauty of an imperfect world to shine out all the more truly and affectingly, as with the sparkling white flowers that he describes. And so, through a set of dialogical oppositions between mistral and sunshine, storm and calm, tempest and safe haven, shipwreck and serenity, cold and warm, Van Gogh opens up the circumstances of his personal life to the universal drama whereby the sun — “dear God” — stands opposed to the wintry spell of the “devil” mistral. We can all locate ourselves somewhere within this archetypal contest, but in his imaginative exploration of the struggle to remain creative in the midst of life’s storms and tempests, Van Gogh brings us to a felt realization of the human significance of the struggle itself. In his painting, as in his letters, the “wild look,” the “ugly” effect, the intensely felt but unfinished become the bearers of a difficult truth — the consolations of beauty notwithstanding — about the irremediable pathos of our lives and the necessary incompleteness of our work.

CHAPTER 5

Cab Horses

Despair and Optimism

In a letter written in early May 1889, Theo encourages Vincent to think about the hospital at St. Rémy as “a retreat” and “a temporary rest.” To help make the point, Theo recounts a Paris street scene that he witnessed “a long time ago” but that impressed him and stayed with him:

> I saw a very heavy dray which had to climb that street. The driver struck his four horses harder and harder, but right in the middle the worn-out horses refused to go a step further. So he made them turn round and, when they were back at the bottom of the street, almost without resting them, he turned round again and arrived at the top of the street without difficulty. (770/4:448)

Without commenting on this recollection, Theo goes on to ask for information about the St. Rémy hospital and to discuss some paintings that he had viewed at the salon. The street scene is therefore left to speak for itself; Theo counted on Vincent getting the message without further prompting — that like the horses, Vincent has hit bottom but will be able to turn around and climb back up.

As ever, Theo was well attuned to the sensibility of his difficult brother and would have known — not least from previous correspondence — that Vincent had a special sympathy for horses forced into arduous and debilitating work. He saw their submissiveness and patient suffering as analogous to the abjection of poor people whose fidelity and endurance likewise impart to them an admirable dignity and resolve. Yet, as Vincent realized, deprivation and suffering are often destructive, and dignity and resolve are not always sufficient to save the day. Throughout the letters, he returns often to this set of issues, exploring ways to acknowledge abjection without giving in to despair, on the one hand, or escapism, on the other, though frequently enough he found himself tempted by both. And so Theo struck the right note in describing the belaboured and overworked horses going down to the bottom before trying again to climb the hill. Vincent would have understood that Theo, even as he offered

encouragement against despair, was not attempting to evade the fact that abjection is a real concern.

Redeeming Abjection

With these points in mind, let us consider a letter about horses, written to Theo on 15 November 1878, when Vincent was still a committed religious believer and was training to be a missionary preacher:

> It was the very moment when the street-sweepers were coming home with their carts with old white horses, there was a long line of those carts standing by the so-called sludge works at the beginning of Trekweg. Some of those old white horses resemble a certain old aquatint that you perhaps know, an engraving with no very great artistic value but which nevertheless struck me and made an impression on me. I mean the last of the series of prints titled "The life of a horse." That print depicts an old white horse, emaciated and spent and worn out to death by a long life of heavy labour and much and difficult work. The poor animal stands in an indescribably lonely and forsaken place, a plain with lank, withered grass and here and there a twisted tree, bent and cracked by the storm wind. On the ground lies a skull and in the distance, in the background, the bleached skeleton of a horse lying next to a hut, where the man who slaughters horses lives.
>
> A stormy sky hangs over the whole, it's a foul and bleak day, somber and dark weather. It's a sorrowful and profoundly melancholy scene that must move everyone who knows and feels that we, too, must one day go through that which we call dying, and that at the end of human life there are tears or grey hair. What lies beyond is a great mystery that God alone comprehends, who has however revealed this irrefutably in His word, that there is a resurrection of the dead.
>
> The poor horse — the old faithful servant, stands patient and submissive, but courageous nonetheless and as resolute, as it were, as the old guard who said "the guard dies but does not surrender" — waits for its final hour. I couldn't help thinking of that print this evening when I saw those dust-cart horses. (148/1:232–33)

Here, Van Gogh begins by describing an actual scene, focusing on the old white horses and their carts. This scene immediately reminds him of an engraving, which he then also describes in detail. Interestingly, his account of the engraving is much more emotionally charged than is the description of the actual scene that brought the engraving to mind. This is because the engraving is full of effects designed to convey the pathos of the old horse that is about to be killed now that its working life is over. The wretched animal stands in a desolate landscape — an empty plain with withered grass and a storm-blasted tree. There is a bleached skeleton near the horse-knacker's house, and the sky is stormy and the weather "somber and dark." Like the horse, who is "emaciated and spent and worn out to death by a long life of heavy labour and much and difficult work," the old tree is exhausted, "bent and cracked by the storm wind." In these observations, Van Gogh fills out the picture to accentuate the pathos he wants to convey. The

engraving itself does not show the storms that bent the tree or the hard labour that broke the horse; rather, Van Gogh's writing brings these implied events to the surface as a way of intensifying what the engraving depicts. In all this, his indignation and moral concern are registered clearly and forcefully.

But there is more to come, as Van Gogh reflects on the fact that "we, too, must one day go through that which we call dying." Cruelty and exploitation are not the only problems — mortality itself weighs on us, the unavoidable death sentence that sends us all to the knacker's yard by and by. From within this further perspective, we are asked not just to pity the old horse in the engraving but also to emulate the attitude of that "old faithful servant" standing "patient and submissive, but courageous nonetheless" and "resolute." Faced with the fact that our mortality in the end renders us all abject, our best response is brave acceptance and patience. The reflection then takes an explicitly religious turn: "God alone comprehends" the problem represented by the suffering of the old horse, but God has revealed "irrefutably in His word, that there is a resurrection of the dead." As I pointed out in chapter 1, in his early letters, Van Gogh expresses his feeling that without God, the problem of evil would be too much to bear, and here again, he finds refuge in the New Testament promise of a resurrection, entailing, as it does, a New Jerusalem where the injustices of the world are set right.

And so in this passage, we see something again of the dialogical interplay of morality, art, and religion, as the moral problem represented by the old horse is intensified and clarified by way of the engraving — that is, by means of art — and is then resolved by an appeal to religion. The "sorrowful and profoundly melancholy scene" is countered by God's optimistic promise, just as the artistic achievement of the engraving redeems, as it were, the depressing scene that it depicts.[1]

It is also worth noting that the effectiveness of the passage depends partly on how the writing proceeds by way of an expanding series of circles. Van Gogh begins with a brief description of the actual walk, moving then to the engraving as a way of developing the moral problem raised by the old white horse on the towpath. In turn, the details of the engraving are generalized towards the problem of universal suffering to which religion offers a final, transcendent solution. Finally, Van Gogh returns us to the initial scene. The combination of spontaneity (the occasional nature of the central event) and of the strongly rendered, concentrically expanding (and then contracting) reflections provides a captivating and effective exploration of the problems of suffering and abjection, the very expression of which is itself a resistance to the melancholy that an

awareness of such problems can readily engender.

Throughout his letters, as in this passage, Van Gogh struggles often to balance his sensitivity to the problem of suffering against his optimistic resistance to it. But striking a balance was not easy as depression threatened to take hold of him, on the one hand, and unrealistic idealism, on the other. Although individual letters that veer to these extremes can sometimes be overly simple or tendentious, yet, taken together and allowed to comment on one another, the letters as a whole record a movingly heroic struggle out of which Van Gogh forged the will and attitude that we recognize also in his magnificent practice as a painter.

As the above examples suggest, when Van Gogh mentions horses elsewhere in the letters, he usually does so to draw attention to suffering. Thus, when a "cart with a white horse (l'blanc ch'val) brings an injured man home from the mine" (150/1:238), Van Gogh is reminded of "Israels's shipwreck," and he is moved by the similarity between the event at the mine and Israels's painting *The Shipwrecked Man*, which foregrounds the grief and distress of the drowned man's family. In a further, detailed account of the miners' working conditions, Van Gogh describes a filthy, damp mineshaft that he visited, seven hundred metres underground (151/1:239). The frequently ill, overworked miners labour there in a poisonous and dangerous environment, assisted by children who load the coal onto carts. In turn, the carts are pulled by "around 7 old horses," which, like the miners, live and work in "that underworld" (151/1:239). The horses here might at first seem incidental, but then a reader sees that the miners, with their "square-shouldered" strength, "sombre, deep-set eyes" and "nervous dispositions" (151/1:239) are, in their own way, just like the horses, evincing a touching solidarity between the brutalized and suffering animals and the men.

It is worth remembering here that in the late nineteenth century, horses were frequently used in people's everyday lives and were a constant presence in city streets. The solidarity to which Van Gogh points is therefore grounded in everyday experience. But habit readily dulls people to cruelties and exploitations that, in being normalized, become invisible. By contrast, Van Gogh draws attention to the oppression and injustice implicit in much that passes for normality, and his sensitivity to the plight of both the horses and the people who all too frequently resemble them is one way of doing this.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes poor weavers whose lives, like those of "the miners," are also "heart-rending" and who look "as little cheerful" as "cab horses" (479/3:201). In Paris, he complains of loneliness and of the fact that "one is always suffering, like a cab-horse" (582/4:18). Again, he remarks that a martyr's "anguished expression" is "like the eye of a broken-hearted cab horse";

martyr's "anguished expression" is "like the eye of a broken-hearted cab horse"; one can see the same anguish everywhere in "the pensioners of the little carriages, or in poets and artists" (599/4:61). In these examples, the overburdened horses, with their sadness and pathos, stand as a figure for abjection in general, and when Van Gogh mentions horses, he virtually always makes this connection.

The last of these examples takes us in yet another direction as Van Gogh extends the significance of the cab horses to "poets and artists." Indeed, throughout his letters, references to horses occur frequently in the context of discussions about painting, as we see, for example, in the passage about the old white horses on the towpath in relation to the engraving, as well as in the passage about Israels. In addition, Van Gogh especially admired his mentor, Anton Mauve, for his ability to depict horses:

> Those nags those poor, sorry-looking nags, black, white, brown, they stand there, patiently submissive, willing, resigned, still. They'll soon have to drag the heavy boat the last bit of the way, the job's almost done. They stand still for a moment, they pant, they're covered in sweat, but they don't murmur, they don't protest — they don't complain — about anything. They're long past that, years ago already. They're resigned to living and working a while longer, but if they have to go to the knacker's yard tomorrow, so be it, they're ready for it. I find such a wonderfully elevated, practical, wordless philosophy in this painting, it seems to be saying,
>
> > To know how to suffer without complaining, that's the only practical thing, that's the great skill, the lesson to learn, the solution to life's problem.
>
> It seems to me that this painting by Mauve would be one of those rare paintings which Millet would stand in front of for a long time, mumbling to himself, he has a good heart, that painter. (212/2:41)

The familiar motifs are all here: the patient submissiveness, the overwork and pathos, and the relevance of the horses to the human condition. And again, Van Gogh extrapolates, moving beyond the painting to his own meditation on mortality and "the knacker's yard" at the end of the road. But when he wrote this letter from The Hague in 1882, Vincent had broken with his father's religion, and here, he does not offer a religious solution to the problem of suffering. The "wonderfully elevated, practical, wordless philosophy" that he finds in Mauve's painting will have to do instead, the emphasis now being moral rather than conventionally theological. This becomes evident at the end of the passage, when Millet is imagined admiring Mauve and muttering to himself, "he has a good heart, that painter." The painter (Mauve, in the present context) has heart, and this is the important thing — as the painting itself shows.

Again, the abject condition of horses and the art of painting occur together when Van Gogh claims that it is "absolutely necessary for me to do a number of horse studies," and in seeking for a model, he recalls (yet another) "old white

horse studies," and in seeking for a model, he recalls (yet another) "old white horse" (280/2:193) that is cruelly overworked. Presumably, he chose to make those studies because the qualities represented by, and embodied in, the suffering animal are of such pressing concern that a serious painter should regard them as fit topics.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes how he also wants to draw "ragpickers," a project that he says will require that "I must do studies of horses," and so he hopes to find "an old horse at the rubbish dump." Meanwhile, he provides a letter-sketch, which he describes: among other things, he says, there are "sombre sheds," "rubbish," and "grey figures," as well as the horse. But there is also "a green patch with a chink of sky above" offsetting the gloom and causing the depressing elements of the scene to stand out "against something clean and fresh" (350/2:347).

Again, this passage stresses the affinity between the old horse and the poor people working in squalid conditions. But Van Gogh offsets the depressing aspects of the scene by providing an optimistic counterweight in the "clean and fresh" colours of the grass and sky. Here, his response to the problem of suffering is neither mainly religious nor mainly moral; rather, it is implicit in the painting itself, where the "clean and fresh" colours express both protest and hope.

The association of horses with art is further exemplified by two brief passages in which the suffering animals are directly identified with the artist. In the first, Van Gogh expresses a desire "to be able to create a pied-à-terre which, when people were exhausted, could be used to provide a rest in the country for poor Paris cab-horses like yourself and several of our friends, the poor Impressionists" (585/4:26). In the second, he reflects on an old lady's belief that she is immortal, and then asks: "Why should a consumptive or nervous cab-horse, like Delacroix or De Goncourt, with broad ideas though, be any less so?" (656/4:220). In these passages, horses suggest how arduous the artists' lives really are, with an undercurrent of admiration for the endurance required to remain productive in a hostile world. Another, more extended passage expands on the same point:

> There is and there remains and it always comes back at times, in the midst of the artistic life, a yearning for — real life — ideal and not attainable.
>
> And we sometimes lack the desire to throw ourselves head first into art again and to build ourselves up for that. We know we're cab-horses and that it'll be the same cab we're going to be harnessed to again. And so we don't feel like doing it and we'd prefer to live in a meadow with a sun, a river, the company of other horses who are also free, and the act of generation. And perhaps in the final account your heart condition comes partly from there; it wouldn't greatly surprise me. We no longer rebel against things, we're not resigned either — we're ill and it's not going to get any better

— and we can't do anything specific about it. I don't know who called this condition being struck by death and immortality. The cab we drag along must be of use to people we don't know. But you see, if we believe in the new art, in the artists of the future, our presentiment doesn't deceive us. When good *père* Corot said a few days before he died: last night I saw in my dreams landscapes with entirely pink skies, well, didn't they come, those pink skies, and yellow and green into the bargain, in Impressionist landscapes? All this is to say there are things one senses in the future and that really come about.

And we, who, I'm inclined to believe, are by no means so close to dying, nevertheless feel the thing is bigger than us and longer-lasting than our lives.

We don't feel we're dying, but we feel the reality of the fact that we're not much, and that to be a link in the chain of artists we pay a steep price in health, youth, freedom, which we don't enjoy at all, any more than the cab-horse that pulls a carriage full of people who, unlike him, are going out to enjoy the springtime. (611/4:88)

As in previous examples, cab horses are linked here to illness, depression, and drudgery. The lack of "desire" and the sacrifice of health, youth, and beauty are the results of forced labour and of being hitched to "the same cab," the same grinding routine. An almost religious resonance in the language then provides a partial answer to the predicament of the long-suffering horses. If we "believe" in the new art, "there are things one senses in the future" that will "really come about," as we are caught up in something "bigger than us and longer-lasting than our lives."

Yet, despite the exhortation to believe in a reality "bigger than us," the passage is conspicuously nonreligious, with the belief that Van Gogh extols being directed solely to "the new art" and "the artists of the future." Since the great new thing is not now the New Jerusalem but a glorious age of artistic freedom and discovery, Van Gogh's main point here is to praise the achievement of artistic excellence in the teeth of the social and personal problems preventing it. In working to bring this achievement about, the artist *is* the cab horse, paying "a steep price" through suffering and the loss of health and liberty in order to be "a link in the chain of artists" working to realize the "ideal" life. Suffering and deprivation are indeed depressing; the horse, after all, would rather live in a meadow under the sun, and here Van Gogh echoes the passage cited earlier on the "pied-à-terre" where artists — the "poor Paris cab-horses" — could go to recover from the hardships of the world where they are constrained to work. Yet Van Gogh's attention in the present passage is mainly on the belief that the hard realities of grief, disease, and deprivation are offset not just by a belief in a glorious future for art but by an appreciation of what artists have already achieved. The lyrical sentence on the dying Corot's dream of "landscapes with entirely pink skies" and on the realization of such landscapes by the Impressionists stands out like a small flash of inspiration, giving us the sense of

a living faith in art, set over and against the somber meditation on the plight of the horses.

The passage as a whole is thus neither depressed nor escapist but is the site of a struggle between these opposed impulses. On the one hand, “the ideal” calls upon hopeful aspiration; on the other, hard experience tells us that the ideal is “not attainable.” Nostalgia, or “yearning,” emerges from a felt understanding of this predicament and is, as Van Gogh well knew, a perennial topic of great painting and literature. One achievement of his own writing — including the passage under discussion — is that it enables us to feel and to understand something of this nostalgia, emergent from the gap between the ideal and the inevitable imperfections of actual experience.

The Problem of Pain

As we see in the passages so far discussed, Van Gogh’s treatment of horses is closely bound up with his exploration of the problems of suffering and abjection. From the start, his letters record how deeply he was affected by the scandal of suffering in general. “Oh, how much sadness and sorrow and suffering there is in the world, both in the open and in secret” (126/1:185), he writes from Amsterdam in 1877. Earlier, in 1876, he wanted to serve as a missionary to the poor in the London suburbs (84/1:103), and in 1878, he writes to Theo about the “misery” of people’s lives in Montmartre, which seemed so appalling as to be “among the things that have no name in any language” (144/1:224). The hardships of the miners in the Borinage are recorded with indignation and compassion (151/1:239), and Van Gogh objects to the dismissive and callous stereotyping of miners and weavers as merely “a race of criminals and brigands” (158/1:256). He also has a special sympathy for streetwalkers: “I felt as though those poor girls were my sisters, as far as our circumstances and experiences of life were concerned” (193/1:340). As he says, his compassion for Sien arose partly from the fact that she, too, was a social outcast and from her suffering and deprivation, which are evident, for instance, in her smallpox scars and ugly speech (234/2:86). “I see so many weak people downtrodden” (226/2:70), Van Gogh says; is it wrong that “my sorrow indeed aroused a need for compassion with others???” (244/2:101). In a poignant passage he recalls a scene in the Borinage: “There was a girl there, at night in that stable — in the Borinage — a brown peasant face with a white night-cap among other things, she had tears in her eyes of compassion for the poor cow when the animal went into labour and was having great difficulty” (211/2:40). The pain of the animal in labour goes

straight to the child's heart, and in recalling the scene so simply and economically, Van Gogh allows us to grasp something of the primal immediacy of the human compassion called forth by pain, beyond reflection or explanation — much like his response to the horses in our earlier examples. He never surrendered this kind of sensitivity, which drew him to seek subjects for painting in locations where he could focus on the everyday lives of the poor — for instance, soup kitchens (324/2:292), places of refuge for the elderly (351/2:350), and the homes of wood gatherers (458/3:169), peasants, and weavers (419/3:92). "I've spent so many evenings sitting pondering by the fire with the miners and the peat-cutters and the weavers and peasants here" (493/3:225), he says, convinced that his work lay "in the heart of the people" (226/2:69), especially the deprived and overburdened.[2] Later, when he himself was confined in an asylum, he experienced "*much* true friendship" (776/5:23) among the afflicted inmates; he never lost sight of the principle that had guided him since his early years: "blessed are the poor in spirit" (RM21/5:321).

In the letters written before he dedicated himself to art, Van Gogh favoured authors and painters who felt as strongly as he did about the plight of the poor. He was much impressed by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (152/1:242) and by Multatuli (Dutch writer Eduard Douwes Dekker; 193/1:340), as well as by Ary Scheffer's *Christus Consolator* (101/1:138) and the illustrations in *The Graphic*, which he says, writing from The Hague in November 1882, would "keep alive sympathy for the poor" (278/2:189). His admiration for Zola and other French Naturalist writers reflects the fact that they also shared his feelings about such matters, which continued to underpin Van Gogh's thinking after he abandoned the religious convictions that had driven him to his first, passionate expressions of concern about the plight of the poor.

It is not difficult, then, to imagine that Van Gogh would speak approvingly about revolution. And indeed, in May 1883, he assures Van Rappard that the French Revolution is "the greatest modern event on which everything turns" (346/2:339). A few days earlier, he had described the French Revolution as "the centre," and the constitution of 1789 as "the modern gospel" (345/2:337). In Antwerp in 1886, he imagines that the century will end with an uprising that will pit "the working man against the bourgeois" (562/3:355). But Van Gogh does not engage in detailed discussions of politics, and references such as those above remain undeveloped in his writing.[3] In his heart, he was more committed to what he saw as a revolution in painting, which he thought was under way in his own time. For instance, in Nuenen in 1885, he writes about "a peasant battle against the sort of painters one can still point out in all the juries nowadays"

(519/3:270). Writing from Arles in 1888, he describes for his sister Wil the idea of a revolutionary "change in painting" (590/4:38), and in a later letter to her that year, he makes clear that social revolution is not really his concern: "Neither you or I belong" (626/4:128), he says, among those who argue about the case made by socialism against religion.

As we saw in chapter 1, Van Gogh looked to religion, love, and painting rather than to politics to alleviate the burden of the problem of suffering, which, as he realized, is intractable. Even if there is a "vague probability that on the other side of life we'll glimpse justifications for pain," from our present perspective, it "sometimes takes up the whole horizon so much that it takes on the despairing proportions of a deluge" (784/5:53). Van Gogh frequently found himself all but overwhelmed by this "deluge"; he struggled repeatedly with melancholy caused by his pervasive awareness of disappointment, pain, and abjection. From early on, he complained about depression arising from his own failures (106/1:149) and from the belief that he is a cause of misery to others (117/1:164). He struggled to fend off melancholy about Kee (179/1:301), about money (189/1:326), and about his youth passing away (203/2:28). His very insistence that he is not "abnormal" (247/2:111) and not suicidal (180/1:303) alerts us (and Theo) to the fact that these disturbing thoughts were in his mind. When he reflected on the distress suffered by many great men, he felt wretched and overwhelmed (358/2:364). In Drenthe he often complained about melancholy (383/2:419), and he was depressed also in Paris, where he toyed with the idea that some genetic factor was to blame (603/4:75).[4] Eventually, his assurances about not being suicidal yield to an admission that he is living in such a way that he is in fact "ruining myself" (664/4:240), and elsewhere, he says that without Theo's friendship, he would commit suicide (765/4:438). Finally, as he came to realize the seriousness of his illness, he found that his despair, confusion, and wretchedness were unendurable (863/5:216).

Ugly Is Beautiful

As we might expect, Van Gogh did not yield to depression without a struggle, and one means by which he chose to resist was what he called "active melancholy" (155/1:246): that is, the deliberate affirmation of life and creativity from within the experience of anxiety and depression. "I AM FOR LIFE" (349/2:345), he writes to Theo from The Hague in May 1883, and in July, drawing on Carlyle, he declares his own allegiance to the "everlasting *yes*," understood in the context of the negative contrast experience, "*the everlasting*

NO” (358/2:365). In the early letters, Van Gogh’s repeated references to St. Paul’s injunction to be “sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing” (35/1:61) make the same point succinctly. But “alway rejoicing” while in the grip of sorrow was not always easy, and Van Gogh resorted to two main, allied beliefs in order to convince himself that the good fight was indeed worth fighting. The first is the idea that personal growth occurs through suffering; the second idea is analogous — that one can find a special kind of beauty in ugliness.

Because he believed that growth occurs through suffering, Van Gogh sometimes willingly imposed suffering on himself. For instance, during his religious phase, he engaged in ascetic practices that were disturbingly extreme but that he thought would produce spiritual benefit. His Amsterdam teacher, Mendes da Costa, tells us that Van Gogh would beat himself with a club and deliberately lock himself out of the house so that he would have to sleep in a shed, even on winter nights.[5] We learn from Paulus Görlitz that he restricted his diet and refused the meat and gravy that others at the table were eating.[6] He also favoured the idea that to know oneself is to despise oneself, citing the gospels and Thomas à Kempis to confirm what he took to be the virtues of self-hatred. “There is reason to hate that life and what is called ‘the body of this death’” (135/1:205), he says; isn’t Thomas à Kempis correct “when he talks about knowing oneself and despising oneself?” (137/1:211). Van Gogh felt strongly that “by fighting the difficulties in which one finds oneself, an inner strength develops from within our heart” (133/1:199): the more difficult the fight, he believed, the greater the benefit that accrues. Thus, a person who “experiences true difficulty and disappointment and is nonetheless undefeated by it is worth more than someone who prospers and knows nothing but relative good fortune” (143/1:222). “For me,” Van Gogh says in 1883, “the drama of sorrow in life is the best” (381/2:415), and in St. Rémy in 1889, he still wants to believe “that illnesses sometimes cure us” (787/5:56).

The second belief, analogous to the idea that suffering can do us good, is Van Gogh’s conviction that beauty can be found within ugliness — much as rejoicing can occur within sorrow. The overlap between these insights (the first of which is mainly moral and the second mainly aesthetic) becomes clear in Van Gogh’s citation of Millet: “*I would never do away with suffering*, for it is often that which makes artists express themselves most vigorously” (493/3:224). That is, the quality of a painting is enhanced if it conveys something of the artist’s own trials and tribulations. It is a short step, then, to the further assertion that a special kind of beauty can shine forth from a deliberately thematized ugliness within the painting itself. But before we discuss this interesting idea, it is worth

noting that Van Gogh thought that in actual life, the ill-favoured and the abject can have their own special beauty, which he regarded as more authentic than the conventional kind. Thus, he reports to Theo that he told his (no doubt bemused) art dealer Uncle Cor that instead of a conventionally beautiful woman, he would prefer "one who was ugly or old or impoverished or in some way unhappy, who had acquired understanding and a soul through experience of life and trial and error, or sorrow" (139/1:215). Likewise, in Antwerp, he admires a group of girls, "the best-looking of whom was ugly." He explains that she had "an ugly and irregular face, but with vivacity and piquancy, à la Frans Hals" (546/3:326). It is as if the girl's inner qualities, expressed as liveliness and piquancy, transfigure her plainness but without concealing it. The very irregularity of her features then becomes the vehicle for an especially affecting kind of beauty, making her more remarkable than her conventionally goodlooking companions.

Van Gogh never lost sight of this idea, whether in observing people or in painting them or in responding to art. Thus, he describes girls dressed in pit rags as "superb" (693/4:298), and he admires Gavarni's drawings of London drunkards and beggars (356/2:361), as well the "toothless laughter" (665/4:242) in a Rembrandt self-portrait. Of course, there is nothing exceptional in the notion that art can transfigure unpleasant aspects of reality (as in tragic drama, for example), and on the face of it, there is nothing exceptional in Van Gogh's claim that painting can discover beauty in suffering. Still, his position is distinctive because he uses this idea about art in such a confrontational way, as a consciousness-raising strategy to promote actual solidarity with the poor. Then, he takes a further, typically disconcerting step: good painting does not just transfigure ugliness; sometimes good painting can itself *be* ugly, so that its very crudeness and imperfection are part of its aesthetic effect. This is a risky argument because it opens the way for the most incompetent of pseudo-artists to claim that their lack of talent in fact expresses profound insight: all we have to do is to appreciate the irony that incompetence is really a higher form of authenticity.

When Van Gogh discusses the "ugliness" of his own paintings, he can be uncomfortably indecisive about this set of issues. For instance, in September 1888, he describes his painting *The Night Café* as "one of the ugliest I've done," going on to discuss the lurid colours in detail. He then explains how he tried to capture "the terrible human passions" (676/4:258), and he compares this painting to his *Potato Eaters*. Earlier, in June 1888, he describes his drawing of a Zouave as "very ugly," and "harsh and, well, *ugly* and badly done" (632/4:155). In discussing another painting of a Zouave, he tells Theo, "it's a coarse

combination of disparate tones that isn't easy to handle," and yet "I'd always like to work on portraits that are vulgar, even garish like that one" (629/4:142). In describing *The Potato Eaters* to Bernard, he pauses to reflect on "how ugly they'll find it" (665/4:241). On the one hand, he laments that "*I'm unable to render*" the external beauty of things "because I make it ugly in my painting, and coarse, whereas nature seems perfect to me" (695/4:304). On the other hand, he explains how studies such as *The Night Café* "*usually* seem to me atrociously ugly and bad," yet "they're the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning" (680/4:268).

In these examples, Van Gogh seems sometimes to be criticizing his own failures. Thus, he is "*unable to render*" nature's beauty because his technique is limited. When he says that the drawing of the Zouave is "*ugly* and badly done," he is making much the same point, as he does again in his admission to Theo that he didn't find it "easy to handle" the colours in the painting of the Zouave, so that the result is a "coarse combination of disparate tones." Yet he goes on to tell Theo that he wants always to work on portraits that are "vulgar, even garish like that one," and we are invited to make a distinction here between an expressive vulgarity and a mere clumsiness resulting from Van Gogh's limitations as a painter. The ugliness of *The Night Café* might seem at first to indicate an artistic failure, but the rest of the quotation suggests that the ugliness is a deliberate means of expressing "the terrible human passions." A similar ambivalence is evident in Van Gogh's linking (by way of Dostoevsky) the "atrociously ugly and bad" *Night Café* with a deeper, "more important meaning."

In none of these passages does Van Gogh discuss the difference between the kind of "*ugly* and badly done" that an artist might deploy as a strategy and the kind that is just plain ugly and bad. Rather, he floats uncertainly, even perilously, between these alternatives, making his riskiest — if also most characteristic — case for finding beauty in ugliness, rejoicing in the midst of sorrow, experiencing joy in the heart of life's tragedy.[7] By such means, throughout the letters, he attempts to counter the harsh realities of abjection and suffering — the cab-horse predicament, as it were — and to rescue beauty from ugliness, joy from sorrow, life from all that oppresses it. But Van Gogh also encountered a temptation that offset and complemented his inclination to depression — namely, escapism, to which we now turn.

The Trouble with Pangloss

Van Gogh the idealist well knew his own propensity for building "castles in the air" (732/4:380; 736/4:388): indeed, his controversy with Gauguin about painting from imagination rather than from models is connected directly to his concern not to become abstracted (as he liked to say) from the immediacy of the material world. As we have seen, his sensitivity to suffering disposed him to melancholy, but in countering this disposition, he sometimes causes us to wonder whether he is indeed building castles in the air and talking himself into things he does not really believe. This is nowhere clearer than in his references in the later letters to Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss.

In Voltaire's *Candide*, which Van Gogh read and admired, Dr. Pangloss supplies an optimistic interpretation of suffering that becomes, increasingly, the vehicle of Voltaire's satire, as we see how superficial Pangloss really is by comparison with the disturbing facts that he offers to explain. Pangloss's glibly rehearsed idea that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds is Voltaire's ironically caustic commentary on the cruelty of easy optimism.

In broad terms, Van Gogh appreciated Voltaire's satirical intent, as is clear, for instance, when he points out to Wil that, in *Candide*, "Voltaire dared to laugh at the 'highly serious life'" (579/4:15).[8] For his part, Van Gogh himself used laughter to counteract depression. As he confides to Theo, "I think I'd feel sad if I didn't see the funny side of everything" (588/4:30). Humour plays a significant (and changing) role in the letters as a whole, a topic to which I will return in chapter 7. But for now, I will focus on Pangloss, whom Van Gogh cites as a counterweight to the painful reality of suffering.[9] Yet the references to Pangloss occur without any acknowledgement of the role Pangloss actually plays in Voltaire's satire: for the most part, Van Gogh cites Pangloss's opinion about the best of all possible worlds as if it really is the case.

In a letter to Gauguin written after the traumatic ear-severing event, Van Gogh offers the following reassurance: "Trust that in fact no evil exists in this best of worlds, where everything is always for the best" (730/4:379). Admittedly, he is trying to put a good face on things, but surely, we feel, this remark is too facile for him really to mean what he says. Yet on other occasions, he makes the same point, and again, he is disconcertingly deadpan, providing no hint of irony. In April 1889, for instance, he advises Theo to "think of Pangloss," and he regrets that some people "perhaps don't know Pangloss" or else forget his message when they are afflicted by despair or pain (765/4:437). Later in the same letter, he expresses concern about having to conform to hospital surveillance, but adds: "let's be aware that everything always happens for the best in the best of worlds" (765/4:439). He might seem at first to strike a

different note when he writes to Theo, “from the moment when *père* Pangloss assures us that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds — can we doubt it?” (743/4:403). The closing question — “can we doubt it?” — might prompt us to reflect that yes, we can. Yet the context indicates that Pangloss states an indubitable truth upon which Vincent draws to confirm that his future as an artist is promising. In a similar manner, he writes to Gauguin: “Look, everything is always for the best in this best of worlds — in which we have — still according to the excellent *père* Pangloss, the ineffable happiness of finding ourselves” (701/4:320). Here, Van Gogh is inviting Gauguin to come to Arles and wants to be persuasive. Consequently, he draws, again in a quite straightforward way, on a declaration of Panglossian optimism to help him to make his case.

In these passages and others like them, we can feel Van Gogh working deliberately to supply a counterweight to the depression and despair by which he was so often afflicted, but we can feel also that in so doing, he courts escapism. Certainly, he knew his own proclivity for wishful thinking — “castles in the air” — and his idealism was frequently unrealistic. Still, if we consider the letters as a whole, we can also see that the escapist moments are part of a more complex story, as Van Gogh struggled to find and maintain a liveable balance between depression and his utopian dreams. His best writing on these topics catches something of this complexity, as, for instance, when he writes to Theo from Antwerp in 1886 about the depressed social conditions in which many thousands of people live and then pauses to reflect:

> I see just as clearly as the greatest optimist the lark ascending in the spring sky.
>
> But I also see the young girl of barely 20, who could have been healthy and — has contracted consumption — and perhaps will drown herself before she dies of a disease.
>
> When one is always in respectable company and among reasonably well-to-do citizens, one may perhaps not notice it so much — but when, like me, one has been through very hard times, then it’s impossible to ignore the fact that great hardship is a factor that weighs in the balance. (562/3:355)

In this passage, Van Gogh visits again the problems of suffering and abjection that we find in the cab-horse passages. The first of the paired but separated opening sentences presents us with an image to which the second stands in contrast, so that each intensifies the other. The soaring lark and the spring air are suitable figures for optimism, but Van Gogh adds an interesting dimension to these generic images by not quite identifying with them. He sees them, he says, “just as clearly as the greatest optimist,” implying that he holds back from completely accepting the optimistic position. “Just as clearly” means that he understands the point of view but not that he is committed to it; the suggestion

here is that his own optimism is more self-aware and less simple.

Then we come to the young girl, poised between the springtime image suggesting what she should be or "could have been" and the painful facts, which become more painful as we discover how her health is destroyed by consumption and, subsequently, by despair that might cause her to drown herself. The scandal of the girl's innocent suffering is supplied then with yet another charge of indignation when it is juxtaposed to the casual indifference of the "well-to-do citizens." All of this provides the context for Van Gogh's own judgment, which brings us to a measured conclusion that thematizes the idea of equilibrium ("weighs in the balance"). This conclusion does not cancel the optimism, nor does it yield to the girl's despair, even while refusing to evade the cruel facts of her suffering and the indifference of the well-to-do citizens. For Van Gogh, "great hardship" remains the primary fact against which we must place the implications of the soaring lark, if only to prevent the despair in which we, like the girl, might all too readily drown. But what we know about the girl also prevents our optimism from becoming merely escapist.

The internal contrasts in this passage set up a range of effects in counterpoint, at once striking and subtle, affecting and thoughtful, balanced and assertive. The preoccupation with abjection and how it can be resisted creatively is reproduced here with a complexity and insight by means of which Van Gogh manages to engage us feelingly with a problem of enduring significance.

At this point, it is worth noting that after he went to Arles, Van Gogh did not express the same insistent solidarity with the poor as in his earlier letters. Part of the reason is that as he became increasingly ill, his own abjection was foregrounded, and he wanted to inform his family about the state of his health and the conditions of his confinement. Earlier, he had insisted on being in direct contact with the miners, weavers, and potato diggers whom he painted. But when he was ill and confined, they, in turn, visited him — at least, in a rhetorical sense — as presences evoked in his letters. For instance, after a seizure, he says he worked like "a coal-miner" (810/5:121). Elsewhere, he is like a Zundert peasant: "I plough in my canvases as they do in their fields" (811/5:122). He is a shoemaker (854/5:200) and will gladly work with "as few pretensions as a peasant" (823/5:154). Here, he does not so much desire to alleviate the suffering of the poor as to have his recollections of them alleviate his. Also, his descriptions of his own illness in the period after his self-mutilation are all the more disturbing because they are so often factual and immediate, as we learn about his hallucinations and nightmares (743/4:402), depression (776/5:26), seizures (772/5:12), auditions (776/5:26), dizziness (801/5:92), fainting

(764/4:435) and enervation (820/5:114). Without Theo's support, he would be suicidal (765/4:438), yet the expenses of Theo's marriage and impending parenthood, combined with the fact that Theo was paying Vincent's hospital fees, greatly increased Vincent's burden of anxiety. Still, he went on painting (and writing), despite knowing that his health hung by a thread and feeling that his soul was "foundering": "the prospect darkens, I don't see a happy future at all" (RM20/5:318, 319).

And so Van Gogh's own situation had now come to resemble, all too disturbingly, the sad plight of those old horses worn down by overwork and ill health. Furthermore, the abject ones were now not just the miners, potato diggers, weavers, and poor people whom Van Gogh had visited. More than ever, he had become one of them, and it is not surprising that as a counterweight to the almost unbearable conditions of his life, he should include statements of the Pangloss variety. Seen in this way, there is some pathos in Van Gogh's brave, if exaggerated, Panglossian optimism.

But here I need to make a key distinction. If Van Gogh's Panglossian passages are read as an anxious attempt to counteract despair, then their uncritical exaggeration can help us, indirectly, to feel how threatening the despair really was. This is certainly an interesting, even touching, thing to notice. But there is a difference between Van Gogh's Panglossian optimism and his passages such as that about the lark and the consumptive girl. For reasons I have set out, the passage about the lark and the girl has a complexity of feeling and thinking that is simultaneously captivating and illuminating — much in the manner of poetry — affecting us independently of the specific circumstances of the letter. Compared to this, the Panglossian optimism must strike us as superficial.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have been concerned mainly to show the remarkable insight and integrity of Van Gogh's writing about abjection, as he seeks to express sympathy without yielding to depression and to be life affirming without surrendering to escapism. In this discussion, the cab-horse motif has functioned as a symbolic centre. This being the case, let us now return to it in conclusion:

> It's quite odd perhaps that the result of this terrible attack is that in my mind there's hardly any really clear desire or hope left, and I'm wondering if it is thus that one thinks when, with the passions somewhat extinguished, one comes down the mountain instead of climbing it. Anyway my sister, if you can believe, or almost, that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds then

you'll also be able to believe, perhaps, that Paris is the best of the towns in it.

Have you noticed yet that the old cab-horses there have big, beautiful heartbroken eyes, like Christians sometimes. Whatever the case, we're not savages nor peasants, and we perhaps *even have a duty* to love civilization (so-called). (772/5:12)

Here, Vincent is writing to his sister-in-law Jo, who had moved to Paris with Theo, and was finding the city disagreeable. Vincent writes to encourage her, and he goes on in the rest of the letter to tell her about the hospital in St. Rémy. The letter is dated 9 May, which means that it was written directly after Vincent received Theo's letter of 8 May containing the story of the dray horses pulling the cart up the street and having to go back down and start over.[10] Vincent is therefore almost certainly referencing Theo's letter when he asks Jo about the depressing aftermath of his recent seizure: "I'm wondering if it is thus that one thinks when, with the passions somewhat extinguished, one comes down the mountain instead of climbing it." If Vincent is indeed echoing Theo's letter, then he would have horses in mind when he writes about coming down the mountain, but we cannot be sure. Then, a few lines later, he asks Jo a question in which he does, in fact, make the connection: "Have you noticed yet that the old cab-horses there have big, beautiful heartbroken eyes, like Christians sometimes." This is the most striking sentence in the excerpt, as the juxtaposed images of horses and Christians offer a response to suffering; they are tinged with sadness and commiseration, yet are offset by a sense that something can be redeemed and that pain and alienation can give rise to a countervailing, compassionate protest. The fact that the cab horses are "old" hints at their lifetime of overwork, but the focus is on their "big, beautiful heartbroken eyes," an image that, in this context, evokes a sadness that is inseparable from a painful kind of beauty. The sudden switch to the heartbroken Christians comes as a surprise; it has the simultaneous effect of hallowing the suffering of the horses and of reminding us that Christian spirituality entails a commitment to the redemptive passion of the suffering body. Van Gogh's Christians are thus heartbroken for the same reason as St. Paul's correspondents are sorrowful yet always rejoicing — namely, because the suffering of Jesus awakens in them a redemptive, humane compassion.

The lyrical conciseness of Van Gogh's writing in this passage is an effective way of expressing the balanced view that he wants to communicate by way of encouragement to Jo. But he writes in part also about his own health, and the passage begins with his reference to a "terrible attack" that has left him with "hardly any really clear desire or hope." By contrast, he offers the familiar Panglossian counterweight: "everything is always for the best in the best of worlds." Here, we see again how the extremity of his suffering and the threat of

despair call forth an emphatic optimism. Yet the present passage differs from our earlier examples because there is now indeed some indication of a skeptical authorial perspective, as is clear when Van Gogh says, “if you can believe, or almost.” If Jo does manage (almost) to believe, then she will “perhaps” feel better about Paris.

On the one hand, then, although there is “hardly any” desire or hope left, there is some: despair has not prevailed. On the other hand, the facile idea that “everything is always for the best” is not quite believable. The place between, where abjection does not entirely annihilate will and desire (though it might) and where optimism does not become merely escapist (though it might), is the location of the struggle to humanize a suffering world. As Van Gogh knew, there is no easy resolution of these issues, but, at its best, his writing engages us both in the rich entanglements of his own experience and in the overarching matters of perennial human concern that his particular experience embodies.

Exploring

with Ideas

CHAPTER 6

By Heart

The Creative Unconscious

In part 2, I undertook to show how certain key images and metaphors operate as organizational principles closely integrated with the texture of Van Gogh's thinking and writing. Now, in part 3, I wish to focus on a set of general ideas to which Van Gogh returned repeatedly and which also do much to define the content and quality of his literary achievement. These are (1) the paradoxical dynamics of the creative process, (2) the difficult struggle for autonomy in relation to family ties and obligations, and (3) the attempt to move beyond conventional religion without surrendering a sense of wonder at the deep mystery of existence and of consciousness.

The broad distinction I am suggesting here between images (part 2) and ideas (part 3) is not meant to indicate a clear-cut separation. For analytical purposes, we often distinguish without separating so that things that interpenetrate in nature can be examined in thought. In its natural state, water combines two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen; these are not separate in a drop of water but can be distinguished for analytical purposes in ways that, for instance, chemists and engineers find useful. Just so, although my comments on birds' nests, the mistral, and cab horses in part 2 focus on metaphors, I also take pains to acknowledge the interfusion of images and ideas in Van Gogh's actual writing. By contrast, in the present section, I focus on a set of concepts with which Van Gogh was preoccupied even though, in turn, I will wish to acknowledge that these are often enhanced by his imaginative extrapolations. With these points in mind, let me now turn to the topic of the present chapter: learning by heart.

Learning by Heart

When one learns by heart, one does so by dint of repetition, usually over an extended period of time. Looked at in isolation, this deliberate practice is the opposite of what is meant by spontaneity. But as is often the case with polar opposites, the interrelationship between patient repetition and spontaneous immediacy is complex: paradoxically, learning by heart can be a means of achieving one's creative potential. In a television interview with Charlie Rose, actor Anthony Hopkins was asked what advice he would give to young actors. His simple answer was that they should learn their lines by heart, because when actors know their lines and don't have to think about what they are supposed to say, they are free to interpret a role creatively. Many kinds of skilled performers understand this principle, and among them, we can count Van Gogh, who insisted likewise on the patient acquisition of technique as a means of releasing the creative spontaneity that he believed was necessary for bringing technique to fruition.[1]

After his visit to the Rijksmuseum on 6–8 October 1885, Van Gogh developed a fresh appreciation for the Dutch painters of the Golden Age, especially admiring the swiftness with which they worked. On 13 October 1885, he explains this to Theo: "What particularly struck me when I saw the old Dutch paintings again is that they *were usually painted quickly*. That these great masters like Hals, Rembrandt, *Ruisdael* — so many others — as far as possible just put it straight down — and didn't come back to it so very much" (535/3:293). Vincent took the lesson to heart; in the letters, he frequently insists on the value of getting things down quickly whether in paint or writing. Thus, he goes on to tell Theo how he likes to paint "in one go" (535/3:293), and, later, in Arles, he confirms that he likes to complete "the whole thing in one go" (666/2:242). He acknowledges that "everyone will find that I work too quickly" (631/4:152), but as early as 1882, in The Hague, he states that he prefers to draw "quickly and resolutely," so that "the broad outlines appear with lightning speed"; "It's no use hesitating or doubting" (226/2:69). Likewise, in The Hague in 1883, he approves of those who are "led by feeling" and who act "impulsively" against what society "customarily invokes" (300/2:231). Later, in Nuenen, he explains also how "real fellows" don't hesitate but "just slap it on" (506/3:250), and in Arles, he says that he himself paints in "a riot of impastos" (600/4:64). Elsewhere, again in Arles, he insists that some landscapes "done more quickly than ever, are among the best things I do" (635/4:159), and he continues to value the quality he admired in the "Black and White" illustrators, who, as he explains to Van Rappard in 1883, worked swiftly and with "spontaneity" (307/2:255).

The same principle holds also for writing, as when Vincent explains, in

January 1882, that he wants to tell Theo "everything that pops into my head without being afraid to let fly, without mincing my words or holding back" (199/2:17). Some two months later, he reminds Theo of an "agreement" whereby Vincent would write "simply to tell you things like this in my own way, as it flows from my pen" (211/2:40) rather than (as he says elsewhere) "in a sort of business style, dry and formal" (199/2:17). From Drenthe in 1883, he scolds Theo for expressing himself in an overly "concise form," which is "a rather unsatisfactory — disappointing — manner of writing," as distinct from Vincent's own "wholly forthright" (406/3:65) practice.

Yet, paradoxically, Van Gogh also commends "slow, long work" as "the only road" (823/5:154), and on several occasions, he compares himself to a patient ox (400/3:53, 628/4:138, 633/4:157) and describes himself as having a "*collier's faith*" (404/3:62) as he works stubbornly and methodically. He advises Bernard that "there's nothing better to do than to wait without getting impatient, even if one has to wait for a long time" (696/4:303). At the Academy in Brussels, he acknowledges the difficulties of learning to draw: "those things aren't so very easy, and require time and moreover quite a bit of patience" (160/1:259). As a matter of faith, he declares that "*those who believe shall not make haste*" (56/1:82) and that learning "can go hand in hand with difficulty, worries, disappointments, times of melancholy, of powerlessness and all that" (397/3:43). Towards the end of his life, he strikes the same note as he assures Theo, "It's looking at things for a long time that matures you and makes you understand more deeply" (686/4:281), and he acknowledges his own "need" to go on working, even "to the point of being mentally crushed and physically drained" (712/4:342).

On the face of it, there is a contradiction between Van Gogh's approval of doing things "quickly," "in one go," and his assurance that "slow, long work" is "the only road." Yet these opposites are reconciled when we consider what Van Gogh means by learning "by heart" — "par Coeur," as he says, borrowing the term from Delacroix. For Van Gogh, when knowledge or skill is acquired by patient labour, one result is that creative expression can be spontaneous without lapsing into a merely undisciplined self-indulgence. Just so, skilled performers in many fields know that they must first work hard to acquire technique, after which they must let go of what has been consciously learned in order to release the further, expressive dimension whereby technique is transfigured into art. In itself, technique is not art, but neither is undisciplined self-expression. Rather, technique is the vehicle whereby the creative unconscious is activated while also having access to an adequate, patiently acquired means of expression.

I suggest that Van Gogh's letters are frequently insightful about the creative

I suggest that Van Gogh's letters are frequently insightful about the creative process understood in this way and that the letters themselves frequently exemplify the kind of creativity they describe. But Van Gogh is not a theorist; rather, he explores the topic of creativity unsystematically from various angles, and in doing so, he brings to bear a number of associated terms and ideas that he deploys, combines, and recombines as the context requires. For instance, as we shall see, learning by heart is closely implicated with his thinking about simplification and exaggeration and with his reflections on memory and on Japanese art. As I hope to show, taken together, these motifs form a constellation of interconnected ideas by means of which the letters as a whole express a distinctive understanding of the creative process.

Let us being by considering the following excerpt from a letter to Theo, written from Antwerp in 1885:

> I've already walked in all directions around these docks and wharves several times. It's a strange contrast, particularly when one comes from the sand and the heath and the tranquillity of a country village and hasn't been in anything but quiet surroundings for a long time. It's an incomprehensible confusion.
>
> One of De Goncourt's sayings was "*Japonaiserie for ever*." Well, these docks are one huge *Japonaiserie*, fantastic, singular, strange — at least so one can see them.
>
> I'd like to walk with you there to find out whether we look at things the same way.
>
> One could do anything there, townscapes — figures of the most diverse character — the ships as the central subject with water and sky in delicate grey — but above all — *Japonaiseries.*
>
> I mean, the figures there are always in motion, one sees them in the most peculiar settings, everything fantastic, and interesting contrasts keep appearing of their own accord.
>
> A white horse in the mud, in a corner where heaps of merchandise lie covered with a tarpaulin — against the old, black, smoke-stained walls of the warehouse. Quite simple — but a Black and White effect.
>
> Through the window of a very elegant English inn one will look out on the filthiest mud and on a ship where such delightful wares as hides and buffalo horns are being unloaded by monstrous docker types or foreign sailors; by the window, looking at this or at something else, stands a very fair, very delicate English girl. The interior with figure wholly in tone, and for light — the silvery sky above that mud and the buffalo horns, again a series of contrasts that's quite strong. There'll be Flemish sailors with exaggeratedly ruddy faces, with broad shoulders, powerful and robust, and Antwerp through and through, standing eating mussels and drinking beer, and making a great deal of noise and commotion about it. Contrast — there goes a tiny little figure in black, with her small hands pressed against her body, slipping soundlessly along the grey walls. In a frame of jet-black hair, a little oval face, brown? Orange yellow? I don't know.
>
> She raises her eyelids momentarily and looks with a slanting glance out of a pair of jet-black eyes. It's a Chinese girl, mysterious, quiet as a mouse, small, like a bedbug by nature. What a contrast to the group of Flemish mussel eaters. (545/3:323)

As Vincent says, this passage was written to give Theo "a few more impressions of Antwerp" (545/3:323). Certainly, the impressionistic aspect of the account

strikes us straightaway, as Vincent describes the energy and variety of the scene where everything is “fantastic” and full of “interesting contrasts.” The details pile up: ships and a “delicate grey” sky, the white horse in the mud, a warehouse, the English inn with the young girl, the piles of merchandise, buffalo horns, Flemish sailors eating mussels, and the mysterious, fleeting figure of the Chinese girl. The sheer clutter and “incomprehensible confusion” is part of what Van Gogh means by “*Japonaiserie*” — namely, a scene full of surprising contrasts and a sense of mystery glimmering through the intricate confusion. There is something breathless about the account, adding to the sense of excitement and novelty, and this excited effect arises partly from the hasty piling up of clauses, abrupt transitions represented by dashes, insistent questions and frequent counterpointing that highlights the main contrasts throughout. The result is that Van Gogh’s writing itself duplicates something of the vibrant energy of the scene he describes, and the impressionistic qualities of the passage are all the more striking because they seem so spontaneous — set down “in one go.”

Yet when we look again, another dimension of the passage reveals itself. Van Gogh has walked along the docks and quays “several times” and in “all directions.” That is, he has crossed and recrossed the scene repeatedly, so that he knows it by heart. The impression of an “incomprehensible confusion” remains, as “fantastic” and “singular” as when he first saw it, but he is able to interpret what he sees by way of a series of carefully observed contrasts, which are the result of his patiently acquired familiarity. Thus, when he describes the docks as “one huge *Japonaiserie*,” he adds: “at least so one can see them.” Here, the initial sense of direct involvement is tempered by Van Gogh’s understanding that he is assuming a particular perspective, which in turn is a result of his knowledge of the local landscape, explored beforehand in “all directions.” In short, by practice, he has learned to look at the scene perceptively and not just to record its exhilarating clutter and variety without some careful prior consideration.

The first contrast to which Van Gogh draws a reader’s attention is between Antwerp and the “sand and the heath” from which he has recently come. Then we read about the contrasts between the white horse and the mud; the elegant bar and the rough scene outside; the shy, tiny figure of the Chinese girl and the robust, beer-drinking Flemish sailors. This set of contrasts is developed also by the “very fair, very delicate English girl” standing and looking out the window and the Chinese girl with “jet-black hair” furtively glancing as she steals along the walls outside. A few lines earlier, Van Gogh has summarized a scene by describing it as “a Black and White effect,” referring to the black and white engravings he so admired in the illustrated papers. Interestingly, his writing

(perhaps unconsciously) picks up the contrast between black and white as he describes the fair, delicate English girl in her protected environment and the black-haired Chinese girl outside, who resembles both a mouse and a bedbug — that is, she is timid, but with a touch of something uncomfortably furtive and perhaps sinister.

The "interesting contrasts" that Van Gogh notices are thus reproduced as a feature of his own writing, so that the excerpt carries some of the same interest for the reader as Antwerp did for him. Here we might note a further aspect of the passage that, again, shows the interplay between its spontaneity and its deliberately assessed structural aspects. That is, Van Gogh looks at the variegated scene with an artist's eye, considering how to compose it. All kinds of "townscapes" could be painted, especially if they feature ships, and the sky would be rendered a "delicate grey." The white horse in the warehouse is deliberately presented as if Van Gogh is composing a painterly scene, and the interior of the inn is described as "wholly in tone," referring to a quality of light that could also be painted. Finally, the vignette of the Chinese girl is itself like a small painting, vivid and full of atmosphere, swiftly and economically rendered. Throughout, the spontaneity of the writing remains, captivating a reader's attention, and the vivid energy of the "fantastic, singular, strange" dockland is preserved even as the scene is also assessed by way of Van Gogh's patiently acquired knowledge and as his painterly eye all the while estimates its aesthetic potential. Van Gogh's special energy thus emerges from a fusion of analytical understanding and spontaneous expression: his distinctive creativity is not reducible to either of these poles in isolation but draws on both together.

What Vincent Knew

How self-consciously did Van Gogh understand the relationship between patient labour and spontaneity as the matrix within which creativity is engendered? In chapter 4, I touched on the topic of Van Gogh's self-consciousness as a writer, and I will return to it in chapter 7. For now, I wish to focus on a selection of passages suggesting that he did indeed realize that he was exploring the topic of creativity along certain favoured lines of argument within a variety of contexts.

Writing from The Hague, for instance, Van Gogh talks about "toiling" arduously on a figure, and then adds: "Precisely because of that toil, I had rather lost my enthusiasm for composing and for making my imagination work once more" (347/2:339). Here, he clearly understands that too much labour invested

in technique can impede the free play of imagination. Elsewhere, he describes how he gets the balance right: “I toiled away,” he says, but the effort was worthwhile because he now finds himself “working with a great deal of pleasure” (353/2:345), as his preliminary studies enable him to paint creatively. Again, in Arles, he explains how he is “in the middle of a complicated calculation” that will result in “canvasses done quickly one after another but calculated long *beforehand*” (635/4:159). The “complicated calculation” and the long preparation are deliberately linked here to the spontaneity of the creative act and the “canvasses done quickly.” Van Gogh makes the same point when, in The Hague, he explains that “the matter in question now involves *both* skill and action *and* perseverance, and furthermore being calmly patient” (291/2:216). That is, patience and perseverance are as important as “skill and action,” and Van Gogh makes clear that he understands the dynamic relationship between these two poles. “One can’t study nature, swot even, too much,” yet “the finest paintings are made relatively freely from the imagination” (537/3:303). Learning by heart therefore depends on “swotting, even if it’s apparently in vain,” because one can then paint “without hesitation” (537/3:304).

As these passages show, Van Gogh understood how the interplay between patiently acquired technique (consolidated by hard study, or “swotting”) and expressive spontaneity belong together: technique, in becoming internalized through practice, releases apparently effortless creative inspiration when the moment is right. As Van Gogh explains to Van Rappard, “let’s try to get the hang of the secrets of technique so well that people are taken in and swear by all that’s holy that we have no technique” (439/3:137). And “when I become stronger in what I’ll call *power of expression* than I am at this moment, people will say, not *less* but in fact *even more* than now, that I have *no* technique” (439/3:136).

In short, Van Gogh understood very well that in great art, the creative unconscious declares itself through a containing form that must be mastered, even though technical skill is subsumed by the expressive power that brings art to life. This expressive power cannot in itself be conceptualized but shows forth in the remaking of the familiar things of the world through a radiant interpenetration with the artist’s own subjectivity. As Van Gogh realized, the creative process is mysterious: “I can’t exactly put it into words,” he says, but he persists in struggling to clarify his “positive awareness that art is something larger and loftier than our own skill or learning or knowledge. That art is something which, although produced by human hands, is not wrought by the hands alone but wells up from a deeper source in our soul” (332/2:316). On the

one hand, then, without technique, the artist's renovating insight fails to be adequately communicated, but on the other hand, without contact with the creative unconscious (the process, as Jacques Maritain says, "in which the subjectivity of the poet and the realities of the world awake obscurely in a single awakening"), technique remains an empty formalism, dry and cold, as Van Gogh liked to say.[2]

In this context, it is pertinent also to consider how the transcendence of technique is connected, for Van Gogh, to self-forgetfulness, which, in turn, has a bearing on the special interest in memory that we find throughout his correspondence. In Arles in 1888, Van Gogh explains how sometimes "we work — without feeling that we're working" (631/4:152), and he tells Theo that on such occasions, "I'm no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream" (687/4:284). Elsewhere, he draws a contrast between the conscious ardour of apprenticeship and the enchanted unself-consciousness of creative freedom: "We shouldn't make a big thing of the studies, which take more trouble but which are less attractive than the paintings that are their outcome and fruit, and which one paints as if in a dream, and without suffering so much for it" (699/4:317). Here, the preliminary studies are a "trouble" that involve "suffering" because of the labour required to get the technique right. Still, despite the hard work, the studies remain "less attractive" than the paintings because the studies do not mediate any true creative energy. Yet, as the passage also makes clear, worthwhile paintings are the "fruit" of preliminary exercises, and in the absorption that occurs when technique is mastered and the free play of the creative imagination emerges, as Van Gogh says, "one paints as in a dream." Thus, he writes to Theo from Drenthe, "I *must* work and work steadily — FORGETTING MYSELF IN THE WORK," and he admits that he is "unbearably melancholy when the work doesn't provide me with distraction" (391/3:24). These sentences strike a different note on the topic of self-forgetfulness than the previous examples because they show that Van Gogh deliberately sought refuge in painting as an escape from loneliness. It is worth noting that towards the end of his life, he needed this kind of deliberately induced self-forgetting to take his mind off his illness. In July 1888, he explains: "I work *from necessity* so as not to suffer so much mentally, to distract myself," and "painting is becoming a distraction for me, like hunting rabbits for the crazy people who do it to distract themselves" (645/4:190–91). Later, in May 1890, he tells Theo, "If I didn't have my work I'd have sunk far deeper long since" (870/5:232); the consolation that he sought to offer to others through his paintings, he himself sought increasingly in the process of painting.

The self-forgetting that Van Gogh associates in his writing with creativity

leads us now to the broader question of memory, about which he has such apparently contradictory things to say that it is worth looking more closely at his accounts of it.

Memory and Abstraction

In Antwerp, Van Gogh says that he is determined to practice drawing the figure so that "then I'll know it by heart, as it were." He goes on to explain that the patience required for this "*long* way" of doing things will pay off, because "someone who can draw his figures from *memory* is much more productive than someone who can't. And by my taking the trouble to spend that year drawing — you'll just see how productive we become" (558/3:348). Here, the idea of patient labour is linked to patient learning in a manner that we now recognize. But Van Gogh takes this a step further by connecting what is learned by heart to "memory." Simply put: if you draw a figure frequently enough, you will remember how to do it when the model is not present.

Van Gogh makes a similar point when he discusses Cormon's academy in Paris. He expects that he will have to do a test and will be asked to paint a figure from life. Consequently, "the more I have the structure fixed in my mind in advance the better, and the more he'll be able and willing to tell me" (564/3:357). Later, he expands on this point: "With a view to Cormon, it's decidedly better for me to go on drawing plaster casts rather than working outdoors, because the more I have the structure of the figure in my head, the better I'll be able to follow" (565/3:358). In these statements, Van Gogh again recommends practicing until he knows the topic by heart so that he can rely on his memory to reproduce what he has learned; he will then be better able to attend to the new things Cormon might have to teach him. Interestingly, the process Van Gogh describes here was put into practice when he painted *The Potato Eaters* in 1885, as he tells Theo: "Although I'll have painted the actual painting in a relatively short time, and largely from memory, it's taken a whole winter of painting studies of heads and hands" (497/3:231). That is, he worked repeatedly on drawings and paintings of heads and hands so that he knew them by heart.[3] He was then able to rely upon memory, which enabled him to work much more swiftly on the final painting.

The several points I have so far made about careful study, memory, and learning by heart come together in an interesting account, written in Nuenen, of Delacroix's advice to a friend:

> Something else about Delacroix — he had a discussion with a friend about the question of working absolutely from nature, and said on that occasion that one should take one's *studies* from nature — but that the *actual painting* had to be made *by heart.* This friend was walking along the boulevard when they had this discussion — which was already fairly heated. When they parted the other man was still not entirely persuaded. After they parted, Delacroix let him stroll on for a bit — then (making a trumpet of his two hands) bellowed after him in the middle of the street — to the consternation of the worthy passersby: *By heart! By heart!* (526/3:275)

Here, Van Gogh might be describing the composition of *The Potato Eaters*. That is, careful study precedes making the final painting, and when the appropriate techniques are learned by heart, then one can compose freely, from memory. The conviction that he attaches to this set of ideas is mirrored in Delacroix's shouting it out, to the consternation of passersby. Like Delacroix, Van Gogh was not shy about disturbing the "worthy" citizens, if need be.

Memory, however, is also assessed by Van Gogh in a quite different, negative way. Thus, in Arles, he describes a street scene that he has painted from memory, and then adds: "I don't want to sign this study, because I never work from memory" (698/4:313). Given the approving comments about memory that I have just cited, this might strike us as puzzling. Yet from early on, Van Gogh expressed hostility to the practice of painting from memory if an arduous apprenticeship has not first been served. There is, therefore, a difference between technique learned first by heart and then recalled, and a merely fanciful composition made up for the occasion out of one's head, as it were. Van Gogh can be surprisingly vehement in denouncing the use of memory in this second sense, as when he complains to Theo from The Hague in 1882:

> But when I see young painters composing and drawing *off the top of their head* — then daubing on all sorts at random, *also off the top of their head* — then holding it at a distance and putting on a very profound, somber expression to find out to what in God's name it might bear some resemblance, and finally, still off the top of their head, making what they can of it, it makes me feel feeble and faint, and I find it truly tedious and heavy going.
>
> The whole thing makes me sick! (252/2:124)

His tone is caustic, and he adds a seasoning of satire as the young painters are imagined pulling long faces, struggling pretentiously to make sense of their work. For Van Gogh, the problem is that they hope to achieve real results by conjuring up images merely from memory "*off the top of their head*," and, as the excerpt makes clear, his main reaction is to hold this practice in contempt.

The point is again clear in a reflection Van Gogh offers on the fact that draughtsmen for *The Graphic* work with models "nearly every day": "If someone with many years of experience draws figures from the imagination

after a great deal of study, fine, but to work systematically from the imagination seems overly rash to me" (215/2:51). That is, if one has learned by heart, then working from memory is not a bad thing. But memory is suspect when a painter uses it to conjure up, by way of a merely fanciful imagination, a scene or object that the painter has not learned to draw or paint by diligent practice.

It is therefore interesting that under Gauguin's influence, Van Gogh attempted to do just the opposite of what he felt he should do — namely, to paint from memory in exactly the manner that had previously drawn his negative criticism. Vincent tells Theo that Gauguin "encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination" (720/4:360). "Gauguin, in spite of himself and in spite of me, has proved to me a little that it was time for me to vary things a bit — I'm beginning to compose from memory" (721/4:361). In several further letters from the period of Gauguin's stay in Arles, Van Gogh describes working from memory and imagination in this sense.[4] But, like the relationship with Gauguin as a whole, Van Gogh's attempt to paint in such a manner did not work out; instead, it contributed to his rapidly worsening relationship with his once-admired mentor. Consequently, Van Gogh reaffirmed his old conviction that "I can't work without a model" (698/4:313), and when Gauguin left Arles, taking a train north as fast as he could, Van Gogh concluded about his friend's practice as a painter: "I believed him led by his imagination, by pride perhaps but — quite irresponsible" (736/4:388).

When Van Gogh discusses imagination in the negative sense, he typically equates it with "abstraction." For instance, in a letter to Bernard from St. Rémy, he again points to Gauguin:

> When Gauguin was in Arles, I once or twice allowed myself to be led into abstraction, as you know, in a woman rocking a cradle, a dark woman reading novels in a yellow library, and at that time abstraction seemed an attractive route to me. But that's enchanted ground, — my good fellow — and one soon finds oneself up against a wall. I'm not saying that one may not take the risk after a whole manly life of searching, of fighting hand-to-hand with reality, but as far as I'm concerned I don't want to rack my brains over that sort of thing. (822/5:148)

Here, as elsewhere, "abstraction" means painting from imagination; the word is useful because it helps to confirm Van Gogh's concern about departing too far from the actual, material nature of the things or people to be painted. For Van Gogh, "abstraction" stands opposed to the "whole manly life of searching" and the "fighting hand-to-hand with reality": I take this to mean the difficult labour of apprenticeship, on which, as we have seen, he placed a high value. By contrast, "abstraction" indicates an easy escapism, "attractive" and "enchanted," but deceptive.[5] As he says later in the same letter, he "found danger in these

abstractions" (822/5:148), and he draws a strong contrast between the "abstractions" produced by Gauguin and Bernard and his own "rather harsh and coarse realism" (823/5:154). From St. Rémy, he explains that "I'm trying to reinvigorate myself by means of rather arduous work, and would fear that abstractions would make me soft" (812/5:153). Clearly, Van Gogh was convinced that the failure to learn things through repeated, patient study and attention to actual things and people would damage the authenticity not only of the painting but also of the painter.

Still, Van Gogh does not simply abjure imagination. As discussed in chapter 2, he insists that good painting is not merely a reproduction of appearances and that imagination in a positive sense comes into play in the artist's representation of the human significance of the thing being painted. Consequently, in Arles, Van Gogh explains how he intends to "work half from the imagination, half with a model" (684/4:277), and he affirms that "imagination is a capacity that must be developed, and only that enables us to create a more exalting and consoling nature" (596/4:52). Likewise, abstraction can play a positive role — for instance, in the attempt "to disentangle" the "intimate character" of a scene: "So to achieve that, you have to toil hard. And so it naturally becomes a little abstract. Because it will be a question of giving strength and brilliance to the sun and the blue sky, and to the scorched and often so melancholy fields their delicate scent of thyme" (809/5:115). The effect of the painting in giving "strength and brilliance to the sun" depends on *not* reproducing the appearances exactly, but on selecting and simplifying — or abstracting — aspects of the scene in order better to express the qualities of "brilliance" and "melancholy." The key to keeping this kind of "abstract" effect under control is indicated by Van Gogh's insistence that one must "toil hard." Once again, a difficult and patient apprenticeship is the precondition for how imagination and abstraction can improve a painting instead of producing an easy appeal or sentimental escapism. Still, Van Gogh by and large remains wary of abstraction, as we might sense even in the slightly guarded phrase "a little abstract."

All of this brings me to a final pair of key concepts in Van Gogh's thinking about the creative process. These are *simplification* and *exaggeration*, which he deploys especially as a way of countering the negative aspects of what he means by abstraction. For instance, he writes to Theo from St. Rémy that "it's better to attack things with simplicity than to seek abstractions" (820/5:144). Here, he draws a clear contrast between simplification and abstraction, interpreting one as productive and the other not. Elsewhere, he frequently pairs simplification with its polar opposite, exaggeration, to make the same general point: an artist

modifies natural appearances, whether by deliberate reduction (simplification) or addition (exaggeration). Thus, he explains to Bernard how he turns his back on nature in order to paint “by enlarging, by simplifying”; even though he worries about departing too far from “the real world” and ending up with “abstract studies,” he admits that “I exaggerate, I sometimes make changes to the subject” (698/4:314).

The aim of simplifying and exaggerating is to reveal what Van Gogh, writing from The Hague, calls the “essence” (336/2:322) of a thing — the place where, in its depths, a thing responds to and mirrors the human concerns and experience of the observer. In seeking “the power to invigorate” and to impart a “certain life” to the work, an artist produces “something very different” from the “accurate rendering of the effect of light, fabric, colour” (332/2:316). For Van Gogh, simplification and exaggeration are two key techniques by which this “very different” effect is achieved.

“Simplifying the figures is something that very much preoccupies me,” he writes, going on to say how he attempts to express “the whole manner” (361/2:379) of a figure rather than the exact features. He praises Van Rappard for attempting to paint like Corot by giving “only the intimate and the essential” (439/3:137), and he explains how, in really getting to know and feel a subject, “*I even* do *my best* NOT *to give* ANY *details*” (437/3:131). “I must do more figure work,” he tells Theo, because “it’s the study of the figure that teaches one to grasp the essential and to simplify” (805/5:104). Just a few lines before, Vincent describes two of his own landscapes, stating that they “are exaggerations from the point of view of the arrangement, their lines are contorted like those of the ancient woodcuts” (805/5:101). He describes paintings such as *The Sower* and *The Night Café* as “exaggerated,” yet “they are the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning” (680/4:268). When he turns a preliminary study into a picture, he does so “by enlarging, by simplifying”; “I exaggerate,” but “I don’t invent the whole of the painting,” which is “ready-made — but to be untangled — in the real world” (698/4:314). Again, he laments that the results might by “ugly,” but simplification and exaggeration remain central to his pursuit of the truth that painting can best reveal.

Always astute, Theo puts his finger on the key point:

> If there are people who occupy themselves seeking the symbol by dint of torturing the form, I find it in many of your canvasses through the expression of the summary of your thoughts on nature and living beings, which you feel are so strongly attached to it. But how hard your mind must have worked and how you endangered yourself to the extreme point where vertigo is inevitable. (781/5:36)

As Theo says, Vincent deliberately tortures the form to have it disclose a human significance not evident in surface appearances alone, yet inherent in them insofar as they have the potential to reveal such a significance in response to the intelligent commitment of the artist's interrogating, passionate eye. In the process, as Van Gogh explains, he makes "mistakes both in the drawing and in the colour or tone that a REALIST *wouldn't readily make*," and the resulting "inaccuracies" are indeed "imperfections."[6] Yet he knows what he is doing, and his work "will have a certain life and *raison d'être* that will overwhelm those faults — in the eyes of those who appreciate character and *mulling things over in their minds*" (528/3:279). The "certain life" here is itself a product of the "imperfections" that impart to the work a sense of how difficult is the search itself for meaning, which in turn takes us beyond decorum, convention, and technical skill. "Academic" drawings might be "impeccable — *without faults*," but they achieve this distinction "*without giving us anything new* to discover" (515/3:264). As we have seen, for Van Gogh, academic propriety all too readily "freezes" and "petrifies" (184/1:314) the creative impulse. The "new" thing that he seeks to express by his own strategic simplifications and exaggerations is, rather, a direct, compassionate, living presence that offers and invites understanding while struggling (as we all do) with limitations, imperfections, and weakness. As explained in chapter 2, Van Gogh thematized imperfection as a key element in his aesthetic theory, not least because he realized that people (not only artists) are most themselves and most creative when their lives and work are courageously inspired by the ideal even while they also accept their inability to realize it.

My main point here is that Van Gogh's interest in simplification and exaggeration (both of which he sees in a positive light as part of the creative process) stands in counterpoint to abstraction (in the negative sense in which he most often uses the term). And so a set of correspondences now begins to open up that involves the main terms I have discussed in the previous pages. But before I provide a summary of these correspondences, I would like to pause to note how Van Gogh's enthusiasm for Japanese art contributed to and informed his thinking about the relationship between patient preparation and swift execution and about the virtues of simplification and exaggeration.

"I'm in Japan"

In his very helpful *Van Gogh and Japan*, Louis van Tilborgh shows how Van Gogh's first significant encounter with Japanese prints occurred at the end of

1885, when he arrived in Antwerp.[7] He started collecting seriously when he went to Paris in 1886, at which time he became convinced of the need to think about art as the Japanese do. In Arles, his enthusiasm had become "almost a religion," as Van Tilborgh says (7), and Van Gogh saw the future of modern art itself as depending on an imitation of the Japanese. But this enthusiasm faded, and after 1888, he rarely mentions Japanese prints, focusing instead on his own style. As Van Tilborgh points out, the letters are a fruitful source for tracking this waxing and waning enthusiasm, but I will isolate only a few points in this interesting story to clarify the main argument of the present chapter.

In Antwerp, Van Gogh cites with approval De Goncourt's declaration, "*Japonaiserie for ever*" (545/3:323), and when he went to Arles, the highest praise Van Gogh could offer was to say that it resembles Japan. If only there were less mistral, "this part of the country would really be as beautiful, and would lend itself as much to art, as Japan" (682/4:272); "I'm always saying to myself *that I'm in Japan here*" (678/4:263); "you know, I feel I'm in Japan" (585/4:26); and even on the journey from Paris to Arles, "How I watched out to see 'if it was like Japan yet'! Childish, isn't it" (706/4:332). Van Gogh also thought that Japanese art was "taking new roots among French Impressionist artists" (640/4:175), even referring to the Impressionists as "the French Japanese" (642/4:177).

On the face of it, these opinions are naïve, but they also reflect a dimension of Van Gogh's sensibility that, from the earliest letters, was already well attuned to the kind of vision that Japanese art did, in fact, offer him. By this, I mean that from his early years, Van Gogh had a heightened awareness of the immanence of the transcendent and of the fragility and transience of those moments of enhanced understanding and insight when this interpenetration is disclosed in particular experience. Although he shows no familiarity in his letters with the philosophical aspects of Zen Buddhism, he does show an intuitive understanding of the key experience (or nonexperience) to which it points: the moment of enlightenment that is not divorced from the ordinary world but is discovered in and through it, as its essence. Before his interest in Japanese prints took hold, Van Gogh affirmed how an admired painter "saw the sublime in the most ordinary" (305/2:251), and he says that if we are searching for "something deeper, more infinite" in our lives, we can find it close to hand, for instance in a baby's eyes (292/2:219). Just so, blossoms that "are among the tenderest and most '*pure*' things under the sun" (408/3:72) spring from a gnarled old apple tree. That is, fresh insight, new understanding, springs unbidden, delicate, from the rugged immediacy of a hard world; here we might recall, incidentally, that

the emblem of the samurai is not the hardened steel of their famous swords but a cherry blossom.[8]

Still, the above quotations do not owe anything at all to Buddhism; they more likely reflect the incarnational aspects of the Christian spirituality with which Van Gogh grew up and, especially, his enduring interest in the Resurrection. Nonetheless, after he turned away from official Christianity, Van Gogh developed these aspects of his sensibility towards what we might call a natural mysticism, and Japanese art must have confirmed this development so that "Japonaiserie" seemed not so much a discovery as a recognition. In this sense, his declaration that "all my work is based to some extent on Japanese art" (640/4:175) is less reckless than might seem at first to be the case.

It is inviting to follow these suggestions into the many letters that express Van Gogh's interest in Japan, but, again, I will confine my remarks to some of the main points under discussion in the present chapter. In particular, it is not difficult to see how compatible with Japanese aesthetic practice is the combination of patient training and swift execution, which, as we have seen, Van Gogh admired. Also, the simplification and exaggeration with which an expert practitioner can produce powerful, if not slavishly accurate, effects is also a characteristic of Japanese art.

Van Gogh also admired what he took to be the austerity and disciplined cooperativeness of Japanese painters; he explains to Bernard that they "liked one another and stuck together," living "a kind of brotherly life" with "very little money" (696/4:306, 308). Elsewhere, he says that they teach "almost a new religion" in that in Japanese paintings, we can detect behind the art "a man, undoubtedly wise and a philosopher and intelligent," who nonetheless has spent his time studying "a simple blade of grass" (686/4:282). The patient dedication that Van Gogh imagines here confirms his utopian idea that Japanese artists lived an austere, disciplined communal life.[9] No doubt, he was thinking of such things when he painted himself as a Japanese monk, "a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha" (697/4:308).

In turn, Van Gogh saw the discipline and dedication of his admired Japanese as part of an apprenticeship that enabled them to paint swiftly and with great liveliness. "The Japanese draws quickly, very quickly, like a flash of lightning, because his nerves are finer, his feeling simpler" (620/4:110). Leaving aside the dotty remark about nerves, we can see that the speed of execution especially catches Van Gogh's appreciative attention: he admires the "extreme clarity" of the Japanese painters who achieve their results with "a few confident strokes with the same ease as if it was as simple as buttoning your waistcoat"

(686/4:282). Here, Van Gogh again views patient practice and spontaneity as complementary opposites, and his interpretations of Japanese art consistently reflect and confirm his own thinking on these topics.

A similar confirmation of his own ideas is evident in Van Gogh's comments on the part played by simplification and exaggeration in Japanese art. For instance, he notes a "simplification of colour in the Japanese manner" (622/4:112), and in his own painting he strives for a "simple" effect, "like Japanese prints" (705/4:330). He admires the marvellous facility of a Japanese artist who uses only "white paper and 4 strokes of the pen" (622/4:113), seeing the same expressive simplicity in the deliberate exaggerations whereby a Japanese artist "disregards reflection" and instead boldly juxtaposes "solid tints" (622/4:113). As discussed above, Van Gogh thinks of simplification and exaggeration as hallmarks of the expertise that a patient apprenticeship alone can produce. Although to some extent, he reads some of these preoccupations into Japanese art, he quite rightly also finds them already there, expressing a sensibility in many ways geared to and mirroring his own.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to bring to the surface some key ideas and patterns of thinking that inform Van Gogh's explorations of the creative process. My main claim is that he is a strong thinker, even though he is not systematic. Rather, he addresses the question of creativity from many angles and in many contexts, crossing and recrossing this territory (as he did the Antwerp docks) and bringing to bear a wide range of insights, analogies, examples, and arguments. Yet his opinions are not merely eclectic: a reader of the complete letters recognizes an accumulating consistency in his deployment of certain motifs and patterns of thought, expressing a rich and nuanced understanding of the creative process. Although the embeddedness of Van Gogh's thinking within the dense textures and entanglements of hundreds of letters calls for some careful decipherment, the main elements of an impressive vision and comprehensive understanding can be disclosed with a convincing degree of clarity.

As we have seen, Van Gogh returns frequently to the relationship between patient preparation and spontaneity, and the key to understanding this relationship is the idea of learning "by heart." In other words, when technique is acquired by arduous apprenticeship, it becomes second nature, freeing the artist to work with ease and spontaneity, yet without losing the advantages of the skills acquired by patient dedication. Although Van Gogh connects memory directly to

this process of learning, he also refers to memory in a negative sense to describe the avoidance of the difficult apprenticeship through which an artist learns to draw from actual models and by direct contact with nature. For Van Gogh, the difference between memory that is ingrained as a result of repeated studies of actual objects, which he validates, and memory that substitutes an imaginary object for a real one, which he denigrates, is highly significant.

Furthermore, memory in the negative sense is strongly associated with "abstraction," which Van Gogh sometimes uses as a synonym for "imagination." Although he can also use these words in a positive sense, they mainly indicate the consequences of his negative understanding of memory. The antidote to the inauthenticity that Van Gogh associates with abstraction lies in the positive value that he attributes to the ideas of simplification and exaggeration, which bring us back to learning by heart. When a thing is learned by heart and implanted in memory (in the positive sense), the spontaneity and speed with which an artist is now free to work might capture the "essence" of a thing in a lively and fresh way, by means of skilful kinds of simplification and exaggeration. For Van Gogh, this is the key to creativity, which lies not in reproduction of appearances but in tapping into the creative unconscious that finds expression through a luminous interpenetration of human subjectivity and the world: the familiar is thus made new and radiant with fresh significance.

Throughout this chapter, I have also suggested that Van Gogh's writing is often itself an expressive embodiment of the ideas he discusses: that is, his letters are frequently creative in a way that exemplifies his theory. We have seen something of this in the dynamic combination of spontaneity and critical distance, immediacy and patient familiarity in the passage about the Antwerp docks. Interestingly, several passages in the letters draw attention to the analogies between painting and writing, suggesting that Van Gogh understood the similarities between the creative processes in both media.

"It's more or less the same with drawing as with writing," Van Gogh says from The Hague in 1882. "And I really believe that one must learn to draw in such a way that it's as easy as writing something down" (265/2:155). Later, he remarks on his own progress: "Drawing in itself, technically, is easy enough for me — I'm beginning to do it the way one writes, with the same ease" (558/3:348). Here, Van Gogh's favourite idea that practice results in ease and familiarity is applied also to writing, and elsewhere he says that much great art seems to him "like WRITING WITH A PEN" (649/4:196). We might recall that he himself wrote and drew with a pen, so the analogies between both tasks would have been clear to him.

Van Gogh also understood that effective writing depends not only on technical achievement but also on the same kind of creative spontaneity that he admired in the great painters. For instance, in a letter to Van Rappard, in which Van Gogh attempts to achieve genuine "*power of expression*," he writes:

> Do you think that I don't care about technique or am not searching for it? I do — but only to the extent that — I want to say what I have to say — and where I can't do it yet, or not well enough, I work on it to improve myself. But I don't give a damn whether my language squares with that of these orators. (439/3:136)

Opening this letter with a discussion of painting, Van Gogh describes how he wants to master technique to the point where it will appear that he has none. In short, as the "*power of expression*" takes over, technique becomes a gateway to creativity. To illustrate the point, he shifts to writing, assuring Van Rappard that the conventional correctness of "these orators" will also have to yield to the truth of what Van Gogh wants to say, even if his writing is incorrect. He makes a similar point when he describes what it is like to work in the heat of inspiration: "We work — without feeling that we're working — when sometimes the brushstrokes come in a sequence and in relation to one another like the words in a speech or a letter" (631/4:152). Here again, ease and facility driven by a strong emotional charge draw on what has been learned by heart, with the practitioner remaining unconscious of the deliberately acquired background knowledge in the heat of the creative moment: this is the case in painting and in writing alike. And indeed, Van Gogh's letters are full of striking and vivid passages that combine spontaneity and careful consideration, fresh metaphors and well-rehearsed ideas, participatory immediacy and practiced technique. Here, to conclude, is an example of these combined effects in a letter from Drenthe, written in 1883:

> I dropped you a line a couple of days ago to tell you a thing or two about the countryside here. Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes. The heath is much vaster than it is in Brabant, near Zundert or Etten at least — rather monotonous, particularly when it's afternoon and the sun's shining, and yet it's that very effect, which I've already vainly tried to paint several times, that I shouldn't want to miss. The sea isn't always picturesque either, but one has to look at those moments and effects as well if one doesn't want to deceive oneself as to its true character. Then — the heath is sometimes far from pleasant in the heat of midday. It's as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert, just as inhospitable, and as it were hostile. Painting it in that blazing light and capturing the planes vanishing into infinity is something that makes one dizzy. So one mustn't think that it has to be conceived sentimentally; on the contrary it's almost never that. That same irritatingly tedious spot — in the evening as a poor little figure moves through the twilight — when that vast, sun-scorched earth stands out dark against the delicate lilac tints of the evening sky, and the very last fine dark blue line on the horizon separates earth from sky — can be as sublime as in a J. Dupré. And it's the same with the figures. The peasants and the women aren't always interesting,

but if one is patient one will nonetheless really see the whole Millet-like quality. (387/3:14)

The passage begins with Van Gogh taking up a description of the countryside in Drenthe, about which he has already written to Theo. He continues here, adding further details that create an impression of the landscape while commenting also on his efforts to paint it. He begins with a brief, emphatically stated assertion, striking a positive note: “Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes.” But then, surprisingly, he heads in the opposite direction. The heath is “monotonous,” “far from pleasant,” and “as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert.” Nor is the sea always “picturesque” — indeed, the landscape is disagreeable and, moreover, is difficult to paint: he has “vainly tried” several times, becoming “dizzy” from the effort. What then are we to make of the bold claim that everything is beautiful?

Van Gogh provides a clue when he warns against conceiving the scene “sentimentally.” The point here is that looking for conventional kinds of picturesque beauty is superficial and misses the “true character” of the scene, which is much more difficult to assess and which we must really “look at,” while remaining “patient.” That is, careful attention and dedication are required if we are to see how men and women who “aren’t always interesting” are in fact beautiful when their humanity is disclosed in and through their natural surroundings. And so the “poor little figure” moving “through the twilight” can suddenly become “as sublime” as a Dupré painting. But Van Gogh’s verbal description is suggestive independently of the comparison to Dupré, because don’t we feel that humanity itself is rather like this little figure moving through the twilight? The “delicate lilac tints” suggest the evanescence and fragility of the little figure poised against the consuming darkness of the “vast, sun-scorched earth” in a manner that reminds Van Gogh of Dupré but that registers its own independent appeal in the form of words, catching something of the poignancy and beauty of the human condition.

And so we return to the opening statement — “Everything is beautiful here” — seeing it now with new eyes. Things are beautiful if one has worked hard and long enough to be able to see those “moments and effects” that transfigure the ordinary. But most importantly for our purposes, the passage itself effects something of the transfiguration that it describes, as the reader is drawn to see the real meaning of the initial claim, contradicted first by the descriptions of the heath and the sea and then rediscovered by way of Van Gogh’s evocative account of the delicate lilac tints and the little figure moving through the twilight.

Initially, Van Gogh seems (as he says) to provide Theo merely with some

further impressions of Drenthe, and he does this vividly and effectively. But his apparently spontaneous description is also shaped by the presence of the practiced thinker and the self-conscious artist. We learn here how spontaneity without patient attentiveness is the equivalent of sentimental escapism, a confusion of the superficial (which elsewhere he calls “abstraction”) and the truly beautiful. Van Gogh’s recollection of paintings by Dupré and Millet indicates his practiced habit of seeing, which helps to shape the description of the scene before him.

The weight of both Van Gogh’s painterly practice and his thinking can therefore be felt in the passage as a whole, even as the writing — by way of its internal contrasts and juxtaposition of images, and its combination of thoughtfulness and ease — exemplifies the values it recommends. The letters are full of passages like this, and so I end this chapter as I began, by suggesting that on the topic of creativity, Van Gogh develops a coherent, interwoven set of motifs and ideas that are themselves engaging and well worth our attention. But because his writing, at its best, also embodies and exemplifies these ideas, we frequently find ourselves taken up, moved and engaged in ways that we recognize as creative rather than as merely descriptive or expository.

CHAPTER 7

A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt

Autonomy and Dependency

As history shows, the idea that human beings can act as autonomous moral agents was the hard-won result of a difficult process of discovery. The period when this discovery was first making itself felt among many of the world's major cultures is sometimes known as the Axial Age, extending roughly from 900 to 200 BCE.[1] Central to Axial Age thinking is the idea that people can govern their behaviours by appealing, as individuals, to universal standards. By contrast, the communal norms and obligations prescribed by family, tribe, or kin group allowed little room for freedom of conscience or individual interpretation. Rather, one's place within the group constituted one's identity, confirmed by traditional forms of social organization, such as ritual, caste, and kin.

The Axial Age marked a revolution in human thought and behaviour because it elevated the moral conscience of individual persons above the traditional demands of cult practice and group morality. Thus, in ancient Greece, Socrates was condemned to death for teaching young people to think for themselves and to explore the idea that universal principles are the measure of morality. He was accused also of defaming the gods — meaning that he transgressed against traditional practice and custom. These two accusations, at first apparently unrelated, are in fact closely linked: universal ethical norms are observed as a matter of conscience, stressing the autonomy of the individual agent; by contrast, the gods are the guarantors of traditional practice, the cult that binds society together not just by ritual observance but also by mutual obligation enshrined in law, social hierarchy, and shared understandings of the world and our place in it. By promoting the moral autonomy of individuals, Socrates therefore could not avoid offering a radical challenge to time-honoured tradition and to the divine authority protecting it.[2]

Similar universalizing breakthroughs were made by Isaiah and Lao Tzu, with the Buddha and Jesus emphasizing the same governing insight as that of

the Buddha and Jesus emphasizing the same governing insight as that of Socrates by calling their followers to realize that a person can be liberated by adhering to universal principles in comparison to which traditional loyalties, ritual obligations, and the like are insignificant. Understandably, these Axial Age breakthroughs were not without conflict, not least because the bonds of family and of traditional religious observance are not simply replaced by the new universalism. After all, each human being needs to be nurtured within a family or cultural group as a prior condition of achieving moral autonomy. Furthermore, family affection, as well as a sense of duty, continue to make a claim even on individuals who have liberated themselves from the constraints of a kin group that might at one point have impeded or hampered their full moral development. An entire repudiation of one's roots — the condition of one's primary nurture — would diminish the humanity that the liberating universal vision is supposed to enhance. Consequently, the historical conflicts attendant upon the Axial Age breakthroughs are reproduced in the development of every individual human being who lives in a society that puts a high value on moral autonomy and where families remain the main providers of primary nurture.

With these points in mind, in the following pages, I suggest that much of what is striking and captivating in Van Gogh's letters emerges from his personal struggle with his own Axial Age dilemma as he attempts to assert his moral autonomy against the demands and requirements of his family. One main reason why this dilemma plays out in such an intense manner through virtually the entire course of his correspondence is that Vincent depended so heavily on Theo for money. Paradoxically, Theo's stipend provided Vincent with the autonomy he needed to pursue his vocation while simultaneously making him all the more dependent on family ties.

Van Gogh's Axial Age Dilemma

As we saw in chapter 1, Vincent came into conflict with his parents on matters having to do with religion and morality — specifically, Vincent's turning away from the church and his relationships with Kee and Sien. On these matters, Theo was the chief mediator between Vincent and his parents, but Vincent could not be sure if Theo would take his side or would join forces with their father. On the one hand, as an art dealer, Theo was open to Vincent's higher aspirations, encouraging him to pursue his vocation as a painter and enabling him to do so. On the other hand, Theo was a loyal family member who took offence at Vincent's harsh criticisms of his own kith and kin. As we might expect, Vincent's personal struggle for autonomy is mirrored to a remarkable degree in

how he deals with Theo's twofold role as friend and brother.

It is important to note as well that throughout the correspondence, Vincent's relationship with Theo is constantly in process of transformation, as are his relationships with other family members. Thus, in the early letters, Vincent addresses Theo much as an older brother would, offering directions for reading and assorted kinds of advice about life. But as Vincent's idealism suffered the several disillusionments described in chapters 1 and 2, he became increasingly alienated from his family, including Theo. In his letters from Antwerp, he is unpleasantly indifferent to his mother and sisters, and in Paris, he was an unconscionably difficult houseguest, making life all but unbearable for his brother.[3] But in the wake of his mental illness, Vincent's affection for his family was renewed, and he shows concern in his letters for his mother and his sister Wil, as well as for Theo's new wife, Jo. Still, to the end, Vincent's reluctant, conscience-stricken dependency on Theo's money caused him to feel conflicted, and, by way of an irony worthy of Greek tragedy, the joyful arrival of Theo and Jo's baby caused Vincent some anguished concern because he realized that he would be an extra, perhaps unsustainable drain on Theo's resources.

In engaging with these issues, Vincent's letters are by turns affectionate, needy, resentful, aggressive, jubilant, depressed, and (often uncomfortably) manipulative. The pattern of loss and recovery in his rocky relationship with his family can be charted in the letters by attending to how he resorts to humour. As with the appeals to Dr. Pangloss (dealt with in chapter 5), Van Gogh's humour is partly an antidote to the suffering he endured because of his mental illness. But his later letters also suggest that he had resolved — however uneasily — some of the pressing religious and moral problems with which he had wrestled so strenuously before he went to Paris. As a result, his humour reflects a lightness of touch uncharacteristic of most of his earlier correspondence. As Wouter van der Veen points out, Van Gogh's reading reflects this change, as he became less concerned about issues raised by the likes of Balzac, Hugo, and Zola, and instead favoured the lighter, often satirical humour of Daudet, Voltaire, and Loti.[4] Admittedly, Van Gogh returned to his old favourites at the very end — Shakespeare and Dickens among them — but more in the vein of revisiting old friends than as a way of tangling again with the moral and religious issues that had captivated him earlier. One way to view Van Gogh's increasingly deployed sense of humour in the later letters, therefore, is to see it both as a defiance of the solitariness imposed by suffering and as a signal of a release of tension, which in turn promoted a more congenial attitude towards his family.

Vincent and Theo: Hard Talk and Second Thoughts

I will have more to say by and by about Van Gogh's humour; for now, let us return to the main topic of autonomy and dependency in Vincent's relationship with Theo by considering an example from a letter written to Theo from Drenthe, after Vincent's breakup with Sien:

> The longer I think about it the more I see that Millet believes in a something on High.
>
> He speaks of it very differently from Pa, for instance — for he leaves it more vague, yet I see more in Millet's vagueness than in Pa. And I see the same as in Millet in Rembrandt, in Corot, in Breton, in Brion, in short in the work of several people, although I don't hear them hold forth about it.
>
> The end of things doesn't have to be an ability to explain but to base oneself on it effectively.
>
> In short, Theo, a certain indeterminate but nonetheless fixed feeling in me that it's the first duty to direct the heart *upwards* leads me, as brother and as friend to a brother and a friend, to ask you to consider directing yourself towards a life founded on simpler principles.
>
> Principles that I can't define other than: sensing that *duty* is unlikely to bring someone to the *Paris business*, but rather points to retiring from it.
>
> Can you share this sense to some extent? Think about it, reflect on it; if you need time for it, put yourself to the test and take your time. Any hesitation along the lines of "I'm not an artist," though, only seems justified to me in so far as it *doesn't* stand in the way of doing what you have to do and I have to do to *become one*. (401/3:56)

Vincent begins by opposing Millet's spiritual sense to Pa's, drawing then on Rembrandt and Corot for further support against Pa's dogmatism. Yet Vincent does not denounce his father outright but leaves Theo to put a name on Pa's attitude that stands opposed to Millet's "vagueness." The opposition between his father and some of Vincent's admired artists was already familiar to Theo as Vincent's way of emphasizing the incompatibility of his vocation as an artist and the conventional religious and moral values that Vincent condemned for their narrowness, coldness, and hypocrisy. Here again, Vincent makes the point, toning it down perhaps because he is appealing here to Theo for cooperative understanding.

It is worth noting here that the word "vagueness," applied approvingly to Millet, recurs as the "certain indeterminate" feeling about how Theo shares the same higher values, aspiring (like Millet) "*upwards*." Without stating the affinity outright, Vincent aligns Theo with the famous artists and, by implication, against Pa. Again, Theo is addressed as both "brother" and "friend," and here Vincent draws a distinction between the family bond and the comradeship that he praised as part of the painter's vocation. Admittedly, Vincent saw Theo as fulfilling both roles, but he frequently singles out Theo's special insight into a world of values beyond family obligations and relationships. These are the "simpler principles"

that Vincent mentions and that he feels Theo should embrace by also becoming a painter. There is a higher form of "duty," opposed to the mercenary concerns and obligations of Theo's art dealership — "the *Paris business*." Vincent thus reinforces his resistance to a philistine culture based on an oppressive morality and driven by mercenary ambition, preferring instead a culture governed by creativity and a higher "duty" that does not regard money as an end in itself, a culture in which one lives not hypocritically but freely and autonomously among like-minded friends.

And so, as the excerpt develops, Vincent presses the invitation to Theo to put himself on the side of the artists and of "something on High," as distinct from the conventional world of family, duty, and business. Vincent goes on to ask Theo to examine his own motivations ("put yourself to the test and take your time"), and in the final sentence, he makes a point that is interesting partly because initially it is slightly unclear: "Any hesitation along the lines of 'I'm not an artist,' though, only seems justified to me in so far as it *doesn't* stand in the way of doing what you have to *to become one*." That is, Vincent doesn't mind Theo describing himself as not being an artist at present, as long as this description will not prevent him from becoming an artist in the future. The fact that the complex sentence causes us an initial, cognitive hesitation suggests something of the mixed motivations that inform it. On several occasions, Vincent asked Theo to become an artist and to join him.[5] Vincent must have realized, however, that such a thing would probably not happen, and the very insistence that Theo should make such a decision suggests how lonely Vincent was. But here, Vincent uses the invitation to emphasize the fact that he himself has chosen the higher vocation, whereas Theo has not. And so, indirectly, he appeals for Theo's continuing financial support by bringing to bear the implied weight of his own moral superiority. Theo will surely not turn away from the one with whom he can best "share this sense" of a higher duty that aligns the brothers, as friends, with Millet, Corot, and Rembrandt.

Even in these brief paragraphs, then, several elements are intricately at play. Vincent's loneliness in Drenthe is echoed in his desire for companionship, and his tempered criticism of his father might suggest that he was thinking already that he might have to go to live with his parents in Nuenen. His anxiety about losing Theo's support (or, worse, Theo himself, should he go to America) informs both the appeal for Theo's sympathy and the suggestion that the brothers should become comrades in art.[6] Also, by contrast with his businessman brother, Vincent has staked everything on a higher calling, and by encouraging Theo now to take a step up the moral ladder, Vincent reminds him that he is, in fact, a step

or two lower down. If Theo doesn't throw over his job, he should at least keep paying to support his brother's vocation.

Vincent could be shamelessly manipulative when it suited him, yet in the present example, it is hard to know how self-consciously he was playing on Theo's sympathies while maintaining a balance among the other elements that we have considered in the excerpt. It might, therefore, be worth noting that throughout the letters, Vincent does provide evidence of his authorial self-consciousness. We have seen something of this in chapter 6, in connection to the relationship between spontaneity and technique. I now suggest that a similar selfawareness is broadly evident in the correspondence as a whole and that it would be unwise to underestimate Van Gogh's writerly skill on the grounds that his letters so often strike us as spontaneous and disarmingly direct.

I cannot dwell here on the large and interesting question of Van Gogh's many revisions and emendations. His usual neatly ordered handwriting is often interrupted by additional materials in the margins, crossings out, bold letters, and underlinings. These changes indicate that he often had second thoughts about what he had written and that he reshaped his first draft to express nuances and qualifications that he did not want the reader to miss. But although these revisions are worth careful attention, they constitute a topic in their own right, extending beyond the reach of the present study.[7] And so I will focus here on a different set of indicators of Van Gogh's self-consciousness about the process of writing itself.

For instance, writing from The Hague, Vincent apologizes to Theo for expressing himself "sometimes in rough terms" (212/2:42), and later, from Nuenen, he comments on the "tone" of a letter from Margot Begemann (465/3:180) and decides not to send a letter to Theo because it is "*either too bitter or too tame*" (472/3:190). Commenting on one of Van Rappard's letters, he says, "I infer more from it than you imagine you put into it" (176/1:297), and in a similar vein, he advises Van Rappard that by "calmly reading or rereading my letter," he will come to see that Vincent is not the enemy, despite the fact that "I occasionally address you in what are possibly coarse and harsh terms" (184/1:313).

In these examples, Van Gogh is responsive to tone and implied meaning and to how words might convey more than an author intends — how rereading can disclose dimensions of language that might otherwise pass unnoticed. Also, he recognized that good writing is as demanding and difficult as good painting. Thus, he tells Bernard, "It's as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing" (599/4:61), and he suggests to Wil, "I'd also like to see if I can't

make my own portrait in writing" (626/4:132). He seems to have known very well that the care and practice that lie behind good painting are also required for good writing, which, at one point, he thought of taking up professionally (710/4:341). Certainly, as the above examples show, he was alert to the complexities of language in excess of what might appear to be plainly stated, and his understanding of such matters is evident in how deliberately he gauges the tone and register of his letters to fit the recipient.

The simple conclusion here is that despite his spontaneity and disarming forthrightness, we should not underestimate Van Gogh's writerly skill. Thus, in the excerpt that we have considered in some detail, we found ourselves wondering how deliberately Vincent was manipulating Theo and playing upon his sympathies while keeping the other elements of the letter in balance. Although this question cannot be clearly resolved, I am inclined to think that Vincent was very much in control of a nuanced range of effects and that in the repeated injunctions to Theo to become a painter, he knew very well that he was playing upon Theo's conscience. Yet Vincent was also lonely and worried about the future. I therefore wish to stop short of accusing him of cynicism, even though the manipulative undercurrent to which I have drawn attention does seem to be part of the author's intent. Throughout the letters, similar subtextual provocations are repeatedly at work, allowing us insight into a complex personality that we might feel ourselves coming to know increasingly well and yet that remains elusive after all.

So far, I have focused on such matters as nuance and implication to indicate Van Gogh's writerly self-consciousness. But it would not do to ignore the fact that he is frequently the opposite of nuanced — which is to say, he can be offensive and combative to the point of embarrassment. For instance, he declares from Nuenen that Pa is "*not good*," and "I am utterly against him, absolutely against," because he is "stubborn," "dark," "narrow-minded," and "icy cold" (415/3:85–86). There is plenty of this kind of vehemence, which caused Theo to react by accusing Vincent of being "childish" and "shameless" (197/2:15), and even "*cowardly*" (413/3:82). In turn, Vincent could be unpleasantly blunt and aggressive with Theo — for instance, denouncing his "cold decency, which I find sterile and of no use to one" (432/3:113) and assuring him, woundingly, that "you don't in the least belong among the rising men now" (527/3:276). Elsewhere, he tells Theo, "I don't find you natural" (419/3:93) and, moreover, "you are *cruel* in your worldly wisdom" (418/3:90). He doesn't hesitate to conclude a passionate request to Theo for money by resorting to emotional blackmail: "before you strike the blow and chop off my head *and Christien's*

and the child's too . . . sleep on it again" (227/2:73). That is, if Theo holds back on the money, he will be punishing the mother and child as well as Vincent.

Still, Vincent is often affectionate, eagerly looking forward to Theo's visits (250/2:115) and appreciative of them afterwards (253/2:125). He is touched by Theo's confiding in him (312/2:267) and by his brotherly love and kindness (760/4:431), as well as by the special bond of friendship between them: "For I'm right in thinking, am I not, brother, that we aren't just brothers but also friends and kindred spirits" (186/1:307).

As these examples show, Van Gogh's opinions, whether negative or positive, are often wholehearted, and we need to acknowledge this strand in his writing as well as the complex, self-reflexive one. Much as in his paintings, the interplay between contrary elements provides his art, whether in print or words, with a special energy. With these observations in mind, let us now return to Vincent's close but often uneasy relationship with Theo.

"Two Natures": Art and the Family Name

As we have seen, Vincent counted on Theo to understand and support his choice of a vocation. At the same time, by making such a choice, Vincent declared his autonomy, setting himself at odds with his parents, with whom he nonetheless maintained deep emotional ties. And so Theo was the man in the middle, at once Vincent's brother and friend, sharing both a close family bond and a dedication to art — which is to say, a set of values transcending family ties. As I have pointed out, because Vincent depended on Theo for money, he knew there was a risk in criticizing his parents too severely or too often in case he alienated his brother. But neither could Vincent surrender his core conviction about his vocation, of which Theo approved sufficiently to supply a monthly stipend. Perhaps the single most interesting aspect of the long correspondence between the brothers is how Vincent manages the searching horns of this dilemma: in so doing, he combines something of the boldness and subtlety of a matador, albeit fashioned for the contest with a pen, while exercising the range of effects I have described — by turns spontaneously direct and self-consciously nuanced.

When Vincent returned to Nuenen in December 1883 to live with his parents, he was experiencing guilt about abandoning Sien and resentment against his father and Theo for their part in breaking up the relationship. His letters during this period are often testy, and at one point, as Vincent continues on the warpath of recrimination and self-recrimination, he tells Theo: "I see as it were two natures in you, struggling with each other within you — a phenomenon that I

also see in myself" (417/3:90). Vincent goes on to describe these two natures as an opposition between the "humane" and the "cruel" and expresses regret that neither he nor Theo had chosen the better part in their dealings with Sien. By extension, the idea of "two natures" struggling within the brothers can also indicate something of the conflict between obligation imposed by conventional family values and the transcendent ideals that call upon individual conscience and autonomous choice. Vincent's relationship with Sien brought this conflict into sharp focus, pitting the conventional values of his parents against the ideal of selfless love and service about which Vincent wrote with such intensity and eloquence, as we saw in chapter 1. But, as ever, Vincent's idealism encountered the rough shock of the negative contrast provided by his actual circumstances, not least when these circumstances forced him back into the family home and to a re-engagement with emotional complexities from which he had sought so energetically to extricate himself.

To a remarkable degree, Theo is a sounding board for Vincent's conflicts, anxieties, and frustrations about such matters. For instance, in The Hague, Vincent worries that he might have offended Theo on a recent visit and is concerned about "a vague feeling that I must have bothered you with something, because there seemed to be something the matter when you left" (375/2:403–4). Vincent goes on to refer to a remark Theo had made to the effect that he (Theo) was "beginning to think more and more like Pa" (375/2:404). The implications of this remark, together with the "vague feeling" of having done something to upset Theo, cause Vincent anxiety, which he then tries to allay. Thus, he goes on to explain that "if Pa knew anything about art" he would be easier to get along with and that even if Theo did, in fact, become more like Pa, the brothers would still "continue to understand each other" because of Theo's knowledge of art. The main thing is that "there's a bond between you and me which time can only strengthen if we press on with the work, and that is art" (375/2:403–5).

As is often the case, Vincent is more adroit here than he might at first seem. His initial defensiveness about perhaps having offended Theo is countered by the initiative Vincent takes in response to Theo's remark about Pa. So Theo is becoming like Pa, then? Well, Theo can't really mean it, because Theo knows about art, and the trouble with Pa is that he doesn't. The implication is that Pa would be just fine if he understood Vincent's vocation as well as Theo does. Vincent therefore keeps Theo tactfully poised between the family (which disapproves of Vincent but to which he retains bonds of obligation and affection) and Vincent's vocation (the transcendent value, autonomously chosen). But the troublesome hint that Theo resembles Pa would return in a much more vigorous and unsettling way.

For instance, during Vincent's fraught stay at Nuenen, his discomfort quickly turned to resentment and combativeness: "At present I'm observing Pa — I see, I hear, I feel what Pa is — and I don't like it — decidedly not." The attack then spills over to include Theo: "If you are *thus*, if you're becoming more and more thus — then it's wise to part." Here again, Vincent worries that Theo is aligned with Pa, and, as if looking over Pa's shoulder at Theo, Vincent repeats the usual set of accusations against their father: he "eternally descends into *petty*-mindedness instead of being more open, more liberal, broader, more humane." Then again, Vincent's sights turn directly on Theo: "I ask you for something more personal, I ask you frankly: are you a 'Van Gogh' too? I always regarded you as '*Theo.*'" To emphasize the point, Vincent adds: "I'm actually *not* a 'Van Gogh'" (411/3:80).

The distinction Vincent makes here between Theo in a "personal" role and Theo as a "Van Gogh" parallels the "liberal" values Vincent espouses as a painter, in contrast to the "*petty*-mindedness" of his parents. When Vincent denies being a "Van Gogh," he thereby repudiates the family connection and requires Theo to declare on which side of the fence he stands, offering even to separate from Theo and not to take money if Theo chooses against him.[8] And yet this bold stroke is rapidly qualified by the promise that if Theo chooses correctly, he will be exposed to the improving influence of art and artists, "and in short may perhaps become squarer and broader in consequence instead of narrower and more constricted." As the letter ends, Theo is addressed, cajolingly, as "old chap," and Vincent extends a meek request: "if you can, see to it that I can get away from here" (411/3:80). And so, although he is prepared to push Theo, sometimes aggressively, Vincent is also wary of going too far, and in the end, he offers a conciliatory gesture.

At first sight, in this letter, Vincent seems reckless in his angry denial of the family name as a token of his own autonomy and of his desire to break free from an embarrassing dependency. But he also wants Theo to know that financial support has everything to do with the autonomy of Vincent's vocation and is not just a handout to a dependent family member. "Theo" gives money, and that is different, in Vincent's eyes, from Theo being a "Van Gogh." The gruff offer to separate from Theo is therefore less risky than it might at first seem, because the letter goes on to make clear that Theo really supports values that pertain to art (Theo's livelihood, after all) and that Theo knows will promote a humanizing breadth of vision and understanding. Moreover, Theo would surely realize that Vincent's being dependent on his parents in Nuenen was not good either for his parents or for Vincent. In the letter, Vincent's display of bad temper is itself a sign of this discomfort; it would therefore be good not just for Vincent but also

sign of this discomfort; it would therefore be good not just for Vincent but also for the family if Theo could help Vincent to "get away from here."

Initially, then, this letter strikes us as unpleasantly aggressive, and the forceful spontaneity of Vincent's expression of resentment arrests the reader's attention. But the attack on Theo is also modulated by an intuitive grasp of how to appeal to Theo's understanding of Vincent's struggle for autonomy as an artist while recognizing Theo's concern for the well-being of his parents. Once again, Vincent understands Theo's ambivalent position as brother and friend and is careful to prevent the balance from tipping too far in one direction or the other.

Another example illustrates the same set of issues. This time, Vincent begins with a conciliatory gesture, explaining to Theo, again from Nuenen, that old age has slowed their father down to the point where he can't follow an argument any more, and Vincent doesn't want to be picking on an old man. But then the letter takes an unexpected swerve, as Vincent turns on Theo, casting him again in a quasi-paternal role:

> Going to the heart of the matter, I take this opportunity to tell you that I believe that it's precisely because of Pa's influence that you've concentrated more on business than was in your nature.
>
> And that I believe that, even though you're now so sure of your case that you must remain a dealer, a certain something in your original nature will still *keep on working* and perhaps react more than you expect. (413/3:83)

Once more, Vincent depicts Theo as having two natures contending within him. The first draws him to Pa's world (the "influence" that caused Theo to focus on "business"). The second promises a different result, which depends on a set of attitudes to which Vincent gestures ("a certain something") without spelling them out. Theo's allegiance, therefore, remains once more in the balance, as Vincent works to dissociate his brother from the negative aspect of the family ties they both share while stopping short of attempting to alienate Theo from his parents. As Vincent says, everything will be fine, and "as long as it remains in balance — I'll accept it" (440/3:138).

But the balance was not easily maintained, especially during Vincent's difficult years at Nuenen, and Theo had not heard the last of his brother's indignant disowning of the family name. Vincent declares, for instance, that he would rather muddle along through hard times than fall "into the hands of Messers Van Gogh" (432/3:115). And in another acerbic response to Theo, Vincent proclaims:

> When I read your recent letters, what I see from them is that you're contriving to make it seem that the whole thing is my fault if we split up. That's such a mean Van Goghish trick, such a bit of self-righteousness, that you can have with great pleasure if you're attached to it.

> Pa would do the same — I know for myself how I've felt for the last year and what thoughts I have about your friendship. *As it now is, intolerable.* (436/3:128)

Vincent goes on to propose that it would be better to break off relations, even though, "particularly in the financial sense, I will consequently have absolutely nothing else." He then draws Theo's attention to the fact that such a bold but honest proposal is "the opposite of the usual tactics of Messers Van Gogh & Co." (436/3:128).

In this passage, the family name occurs twice in a negative sense, and to the charge of "self-righteousness" that Vincent associates with the family in general, he adds an accusation of deviousness, describing Theo as "contriving" to place the blame on Vincent. In the absence of Theo's letters, we can only speculate that he called Vincent's bluff about earlier suggestions that Vincent and he part company. Ironically, Theo's taking seriously the suggestion to "split up" is interpreted by Vincent as devious — "a mean Van Goghish trick." On the contrary, however, we might find Vincent's praise for his own boldness less than straightforward. That is, although the friendship with Theo is described as "intolerable," Vincent hastens to say that this is the case "*as it now is*" — a qualification that suggests it need not, in fact, be so. And Vincent also makes sure to remind Theo that if they were to part company, Vincent would be entirely without financial support. He therefore does not bravely shut the door on Theo at all but rather appeals to Theo's conscience by way of a suggestive hint and a well-placed reminder. Once again, family loyalty (with Theo continuing to be aligned with Pa) stands opposed to Vincent's commitment to his vocation. But although Vincent accuses Theo of self-righteousness and of colluding in "Van Goghish" tricks, he also wants to reawaken his brother to the alternative, which, again, he describes as "friendship."

A similar pattern of aggression and conciliatory second thoughts occurs when Vincent once more identifies Theo's interests with Pa's. In a previous letter, Theo had described himself as "suspicious" (482/3:204) of Vincent's attitudes and motivations. Vincent seizes on the word, repeating it several times as he objects to the accusation. Suspicion is "a dark glass one looks through," and Vincent does not want to see Theo's character "set in that mould": "I've a history like that behind me with Pa — I'm not starting on a Pa II" (482/3:204). Here, Theo is insultingly referred to as a possible "Pa II" so that he will feel the weight of Vincent's many bitter comments about their father transferred to himself. The remarks about the "dark glass" and being set in a mould confirm this identification because of Vincent's repeated comparison of his father to things that are obdurate and hard and to a "black ray" (415/3:86).[9] Then, as in

our previous example, Vincent rapidly shifts gears and attempts to turn insult into virtue by commending himself for plain speaking: “So don’t take it amiss that I now say foursquare what I think about it” (482/3:204). After all, he is only being honest, and, in turn, this self-exculpation opens the way to a further gesture that invites Theo’s indulgent understanding: “For the rest, old chap, I think I’m working rather too hard.” Theo’s attention is now brought back to Vincent’s hard work and admirable dedication as a painter. In a previous paragraph, Vincent has already paused to reassure Theo that “I take pains to improve my work” and to regret that Theo had not sent a copy of the magazine, *L’illustration*, featuring Renouard, “which I think you would also have been delighted with” (482/3:204). After this digression, the scolding attack on Theo is promptly resumed, culminating in the remark about “Pa II.”

My point here is that in the middle of a letter in which Vincent supposedly is speaking “foursquare,” he is careful to pause in order to bring Theo back to the world of paintings. In the process, he makes some learned references, consistent with his habit of citing books and paintings as a way of elevating the topic under discussion. Thus, *L’illustration* and Renouard remind Theo of where Vincent’s values lie, anticipating his conciliatory tone at the end of the letter, and are introduced to guide Theo back yet again to Vincent’s dedication as a painter (“I take pains to improve my work”). Vincent goes on to express regret that he is a financial burden and suggests that his harsh language in the letter is really intended “to put an end to the possibility of quarreling.” He explains that “even the *possibility* of quarreling ceases to exist as soon as I find a means of covering myself financially. Then my work will no longer be an issue, and at present it still is” (482/3:204).

As ever, anxiety about money surfaces as a main concern, as Vincent attempts to secure Theo’s support despite the hostility to Pa. The intensity of Vincent’s reaction to Theo’s “suspicious” attitude is both a protest against what Vincent maintains is an unfair accusation and the expression of an almost bullying anger meant to put Theo on the defensive. The notion that Theo might become “Pa II” is especially upsetting for the dependent Vincent, yet even as he proclaims this opinion, he takes steps to deflect it by reminding Theo of the high value that attaches to Vincent’s vocation, transcending the entanglements of family obligations and loyalties. The bold accusation that Theo is behaving like “Pa II” is clearly meant to disconcert Theo; it is, however, also qualified and contained by a more circumspect rhetoric designed to confirm Theo’s support for Vincent’s autonomy, yet without denying that both brothers share a complex family history that also makes claims upon them.

By the time Vincent went to Arles, his father had died and Theo had come to recognize that his brother's talent was indeed special. In turn, Vincent had become more tolerant of the commercial aspects of the art business, which he now offered to promote alongside Theo.[10] In a touching letter written from St. Rémy to his mother about his illness, Vincent reflects on Theo's generosity:

> You and Pa have been so much, so very much to me, possibly more even than to the others, and I don't seem to have had a happy nature. I started to realize that in Paris, how much more than I Theo did his best to help Pa practically, so much so that his own interests often went by the board because of it. That's why I'm so thankful now at present that Theo finally found a wife and is waiting for his baby. Anyway, Theo had more self-denial than I, and that's deep in his character. And when Pa was no longer with us and I went to him in Paris, then the poor chap attached himself so much to me that I came to understand how much he had loved Pa. (831/5:170)

There is some delicacy in these words, in which Vincent ruefully acknowledges not having "a happy nature," and, by contrast, praises Theo's exceptional care of their father, which Vincent only came to recognize fully after Pa died, when Theo transferred the same affection to his needy brother.

Clearly, the letter is meant to be consoling to Vincent's mother, and Vincent is intent on being ingratiating, as well as offering reassurance. Yet in light of the passages we have been reading, the description of Theo's loving self-sacrifice divided between Pa and himself is especially interesting. Now that Pa is gone, Theo's affection is transferred to Vincent, and here again, we recognize the two-fathers motif, except that Vincent is now, ironically, himself like "Pa II" as the recipient of Theo's special care and attention. This affirmation of family bonds is calculated to build some broken bridges with his mother, as Vincent proposes that in Theo's eyes, he has, as it were, stepped into Pa's shoes. Mother might perhaps be swayed by the beloved Theo's discernment of Vincent's good qualities. But, as the excerpt makes clear, Vincent's remark pertains also to Theo's marriage and impending fatherhood, which cause Vincent to feel "thankful," even though these events actually led him to re-experience some old anxieties. Just as he saw Theo as torn between Pa's world and his own, so he would come to see Theo as torn between his wife and child and Vincent's continuing needs as an artist.[11] The present excerpt does not deal directly with this further complexity, but despite Vincent's attempt to be gracious, the writing ripples with tensions as he attempts to negotiate the difficult topic of his father's death, his mother's resentment of her wayward son, and, again, Theo's difficult position balancing Vincent's need for support with his own family obligations. Finally, in the depiction of Theo as a "poor chap" who "attached himself" to Vincent after Pa died, we might detect the echo of an anxious hope, an almost

forlorn plea, that the attachment will continue.

Congratulating Theo (Almost)

As the letters tell us, Vincent was simultaneously pleased about his brother's marriage and concerned about becoming a drain on Theo's resources now that Theo had a wife and child to support. And so the old struggle between dependency and autonomy would continue to the end. Consider, for instance, the following (almost) congratulatory message written from Arles to Theo on his upcoming marriage:

> Now the main thing will be that your marriage isn't delayed.
> By marrying you're putting Mother's mind at rest and making her happy, and anyway what your position in life and business rather necessitates. Will that be appreciated by the society to which you belong? Perhaps no more than the artists suspect that from time to time I've worked and suffered for the community . . . So from me, your brother, you won't wish for the absolutely banal congratulations and the assurances that you'll be transported straight to paradise. (741/4:397)

Although Theo's marriage is welcomed, Vincent's first reason for being pleased is that the marriage will make *Mother* happy. It will also be good for Theo to be married because of his "position in life and business." Vincent then points out that as an artist, he has suffered and been ignored despite being virtuous, suggesting, by way of a somewhat clumsy analogy, that Theo's real virtue will also go unnoticed by the world at large. And so Vincent will not offer Theo the usual "banal congratulations" because both brothers know that in a heartless world, virtuous actions are often unrewarded.

We might wonder what Theo felt about such a hedged and qualified message of congratulation; he would probably have recognized a familiar pattern, with Mother now replacing Father as the representative of the commercial interests and respectable society that, in Vincent's opinion, are about to make a permanent claim on his brother. Consequently, instead of feeling any straightforward gladness for Theo, Vincent finds a way to remind him — yet again — of the neglected artist who (it is implied) also needs support, Theo's new family arrangements and duties notwithstanding.

In later correspondence, Vincent's conflicted feelings continue to be evident. Consider this further, hesitant congratulation:

> A few words to wish you and your fiancée much happiness these days. It's like a nervous tic with me that on the occasion of a day of celebration I generally experience difficulties in formulating a congratulation, but it shouldn't be concluded from that that I desire your happiness less ardently than anyone else, as you well know. (754/4:421)

If Vincent had let the first sentence stand on its own, the meaning would have been straightforward. But no, he proceeds instead to add a strained explanation about why he is not more effusive in his good wishes. As a result, he draws attention to a problem that would not otherwise have arisen and that, to make matters worse, he immediately tries to dismiss. That is, Theo should not think that Vincent was wishing him "happiness less ardently than anyone else." But there would be no reason for Theo to think this had Vincent not drawn attention to it in the first place. Vincent's reassurance could therefore only prompt Theo to think that maybe Vincent was, in fact, less than wholly enthusiastic about his brother's new status. Although there is no reason to doubt that Vincent was glad about Theo's happiness, the complexity of his feelings about the matter is evident.[12]

A final example will confirm how persistently ambivalent and anxious Vincent was on the topic of Theo's new domestic arrangements. In the following passage, written from Arles, Vincent comments on how he has preserved his own "integrity" by not using Theo's firm, Goupil, to promote his work, except indirectly by way of accepting Theo's stipend:

> You'll have been poor all the time to feed me, but I'll return the money or turn up my toes.
>
> Now your wife will come, who has a good heart, to make us old fellows feel a bit younger again.
>
> But this I believe, that you and I will have successors in business, and that precisely at the moment when the family abandoned us to our own resources, financially speaking, it will again be we who haven't flinched. (743/4:402)

While commending his own integrity, Vincent affirms Theo's self-sacrificing support and willingness to be "poor all the time to feed me." And so the emphasis falls on the value of Vincent's vocation, despite the fact that "the family" did not provide financial support.[13] In this context, the sentence about Theo's wife having "a good heart" is especially telling. Although Vincent expresses hope that she will "make us old fellows a bit younger again," his words carry a trace of anxiety that Theo might now have outgrown his youthful enthusiasm for Vincent's career. Vincent doesn't want Theo becoming an older, respectable family man who might think twice about supporting his reckless brother. The anticipation that the new wife will make both of them young is therefore an indirect way of expressing the hope that Theo will go on being supportive. The final words of the excerpt (tactfully delayed) press the point: "it will again be we who haven't flinched." That is, despite the new family arrangements, the old collaboration will hold fast. And so, again, Vincent's appreciative affirmation of Theo is not without concern that family obligations

might prevent him from supporting Vincent's vocation. Vincent sees Theo as situated uncomfortably between two poles and feels a need to affirm Theo's family connections even while inviting him to transcend family ties in support of a higher ideal.

In the previous examples, I have dealt only with a cross-section of the remarkably flexible and nuanced rhetoric by means of which Vincent conducted the often turbulent relationship with his brother. This relationship was driven by Vincent's enduring anxiety about money, but I have not dealt directly with this endlessly repeated concern or with the recurrent complaints about illness that run through the letters as a kind of accompaniment to the worry about financial matters. Rather, I have been interested in some characteristic strategies by means of which Vincent negotiates the claims and counter-claims of his autonomy as an artist in relation to his often uncomfortable dependency on his family. I would now like to end this chapter by looking briefly at one aspect of Van Gogh's writing that has been largely ignored in commentaries on Van Gogh but that pertains to the main points I am trying to make, both about his versatility and writerly self-consciousness — that is, his humour.

Getting a Perspective: Van Gogh's Humour

In his early correspondence, Van Gogh's sense of humour is less pronounced than in the letters written after he went to Arles. As Wouter van der Veen says, Van Gogh's reading reflects the fact that after he went to Arles, he did not engage in the same intense manner with the religious and moral issues that had preoccupied him earlier. Instead, he turned to authors who were amusing, satirical, or escapist — for instance, Daudet, Voltaire, Verne, and Loti.[14] Likewise, during this period, his own writing is more often than before satirical and humorous, partly out of a sense of fun but also as a means of deflecting the most distressing aspects of his illness. As with his references to Dr. Pangloss, Van Gogh's humour was a way of taking his mind off his suffering. It also helped to promote and encourage an easier, more accommodating attitude to his family, consistent with his realization, noted in chapter 2, that painting was not, in itself, sufficiently sustaining.

Certainly, Van Gogh approved of humour and recommended it.[15] Writing from Arles, for instance, he reminds Theo that "one mustn't forget completely how to jest" (768/4:60) and how to maintain "our good humour" (790/5:64). In 1887, he confides to Wil that for a period of years, "I completely lost all inclination to laugh"; by contrast, he now needs "above all to have a good laugh"

(574/3:369). Again, writing to Wil in 1890, he says, “One really must be able to laugh sometimes, and make merry a little or even a lot” (856/5:204). Earlier, writing from The Hague, he apologizes to Theo for not expressing himself “more entertainingly” (357/2:362), and he commends Russell for being able to add “a gay note” to his “conceptions of a higher order” (598/4:60). He also adapts his sense of humour to different audiences. For instance, he is caustically amusing with Van Rappard in describing Joseph Stallaert, a teacher at the Brussels Academy: “it would be difficult to convince me that His Hon. has no damnably bad side that eclipses his Hon.’s possibly good qualities” (178/1:300). He is ruefully self-deprecating in explaining to Theo that he won’t go to the tropics because he is too old, “and (especially if I get myself a paper-mâché ear) too jerry-built to go there” (743/4:403). And with Bernard, he is unguardedly ribald: “*Rubens*, ah, there you have it, he was a handsome man and a good fucker” (655/4:218).

From early on, he could be amusing at his own expense. For instance, he remarks on “the politeness of the populace of The Hague towards painters” when someone, “probably from a window, suddenly spat a wad of tobacco onto my paper—life can be very trying at times” (262/2:150). Here, indignation is tempered by a wry attitude that allows Van Gogh to assume some perspectivizing distance on his own discomfort, as he concludes, in a tone of mock resignation, with “life can be very trying at times.” In the same letter, he expresses amusement at the comment of a passerby that “he’s drawing the horse’s backside instead of doing him from the front,” upon which he remarks, approvingly, “I rather enjoyed that comment” (262/2:150). But he could also be caustic, as when he agrees with an opinion in a novel by Zola to the effect that commercial enterprises now are ruled by “Swinery & Co. everywhere” (286/2:204). About Rubens, he says that even the great painter’s “most beautiful heads of a weeping Magdalen or Mater Dolorosa” (552/3:339) remind him of nothing more elevated than a prostitute who has caught a venereal disease. His friend Mourier’s accent is transcribed with some playful but not entirely benign mockery: “He bropaply alvays trinks brendy viz vater” (623/4:118).[16] Likewise, while in The Hague, Vincent, in a half-jocular manner, challenges Theo to go ahead and cut his stipend “and chop off my head *and Christien’s and the child’s too*,” adding, “preferably not, I need it for drawing. (And Christien and the child couldn’t pose *without heads*)” (227/2:73). Although this manages to be at least somewhat amusing, the humour is tempered with a steely aggressiveness that is not entirely pleasant. The same tough sense of fun is evident when Theo is assured that having an argument with Julien Tanguy’s “poisonous” wife is more

than any “mortal should be obliged to do” (637/4:164). Van Gogh even sees something amusingly bizarre in his own obsession with painting: “like hunting rabbits for the crazy people who do it to distract themselves” (645/4:190). Elsewhere, he enjoys the risqué contradiction in his invitation to Gauguin “to resign himself to living like a monk who’d go to the brothel once a fortnight” (616/4:100). And in response to the petition by his neighbours in Arles to have him confined because he could not control himself, Vincent tells Theo, “I bluntly replied that I was entirely disposed to chuck myself into the water, for example, if that could make these virtuous fellows happy once and for all” (750/4:415). Here, Vincent’s mock compliance — his willingness to drown himself so that his neighbours will be rid of him — is itself an example of the neighbours’ concern that he was mentally unstable. His mock-madness would, if declared to them, no doubt further alarm the “virtuous fellows” even as it offered to reassure them — except that Vincent knows that the reassurance is itself fake, set out ironically in a letter for Theo. There is some witty complexity in this expression of Vincent’s exasperation, but his humour could also swerve towards cynicism. For instance, on the topic of Theo’s marriage, he asks Paul Signac how to deal with the “funereal pomp” of the ceremony, including “those pharmacist’s jars where antediluvian civil or religious magistrates sit.” He goes on to conclude that Theo is “married alive on the low heat of the aforementioned funereal receptions” (756/4:424). Amusing, yes, but not exactly charitable, and, in a manner we will now recognize, infused with ambivalence about Theo’s marriage.

There is no simple conclusion to be drawn about the humorous aspects of Van Gogh’s writing. Still, the manner in which he uses humour can help us to see more clearly how the problem of autonomy and dependency played out, especially during the final difficult years of his life.

From early on, Van Gogh was open to the salutary effects of laughter, but in Arles, as we have seen, his humour develops in range and flexibility. Even so, laughter remains for him a complex mix of defensiveness, ironizing distance, and self-protection, paradoxically combined with geniality, a more flexible accommodation of others, and an appreciation of human eccentricity. If we interpret these mixed effects in relation to the main topic of this chapter, we can see that Van Gogh’s humour simultaneously reflects a new openness towards his family and the contradictory fact that his solitariness was all the more emphasized by the isolation imposed by his illness. Like most of us, he never did fully resolve his personal Axial Age dilemma — the tension, that is, between the solitude his autonomy imposed and the entanglements of his family bonds and

obligations. Nonetheless, his sense of humour provides some guidelines for assessing both the nature of the dilemma itself and the brave resolve with which he faced it and the contradictions it presented to him. In the end, to negotiate these contradictions, he found that he needed the geniality of good humour, as well as the protection that humour can sometimes afford.

Conclusion

In a letter written in 1883 to Van Rappard, Van Gogh complained that many friends had abandoned him and did not want to see him any longer. But "this was happily not the case with my best friend, namely my brother — for he and I are more friends than brothers — and he's someone who understands such matters" (307/2:256). This chapter has been mainly about some aspects of Vincent's relationship with his "best friend, namely my brother," which endured until the end, when Vincent died with Theo next to him, a final letter still in Vincent's pocket. I have suggested that the correspondence as a whole gives us an extraordinary insight into this relationship. At the centre lies the perennial human drama of the struggle for autonomy in relation to the family ties that bind us — ties that, ironically, prepare us for the autonomy that we can achieve only by stepping beyond the identity we have as family members. Vincent's letters to Theo enact this struggle in a highly personal way, and with such courage, discernment, and intensity that we readily find our own concerns mirrored in the difficult, heart-rending, and inspiring story that Vincent has to tell.

In this chapter, I have also drawn attention to Van Gogh's resourcefulness as a writer. As we have seen, the drama of his personal struggle in relation to the overarching problem of dependency and autonomy was managed with a combination of boldness and spontaneity, but also with a high degree of sensitivity to nuance and with considerable rhetorical sophistication, including an often self-ironizing humour. These aspects of the correspondence, though easily missed, can, when attended to even briefly, help to clarify how talented and versatile a writer Van Gogh really was.

CHAPTER 8

Something New Without a Name
Beyond Religion, Morality, Art

In Arles, Vincent wrote to Theo about Tolstoi's *My Religion*, suggesting that it describes the conditions under which "a new religion, or rather, something altogether new, will be reborn, which will have no name but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, that the Christian religion once had" (686/4:282). Although he had not yet read *My Religion*, Vincent was confident about what he took to be its main message, and this was so not least because the ideas he attributed to Tolstoi reproduced the main lines of his own thinking about what we might loosely call a spirituality that would be as comforting as the old religion but not constrained by dogmatism or formal observance.

As seen in chapter 1, aesthetic and religious concerns remained closely interrelated for Van Gogh, and many of the hopes, aspirations, and insights of Christianity continued to inform and inspire him, both as a writer and as a painter. This is clear, for instance, in a letter to Émile Bernard from Arles (June 1888) in which Van Gogh praises Christ as "an artist greater than all artists," whose special gift was to create "LIVING men, immortals." The letter goes on to comment on Jesus's promise that "heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away":

> Those spoken words, which as a prodigal, great lord he didn't even deign to write down, are one of the highest, the highest summit attained by art, which in them becomes a creative force, a pure creative power.
>
> These reflections, my dear old Bernard — take us a very long way — a very long way — *raising us above art itself.* They enable us to glimpse — the art of making life, the art of being immortal — alive.
>
> Do they have connections with painting? The patron of painters — St Luke — physician, painter, evangelist — having for his symbol — alas — nothing but the ox — is there to give us hope. (632/4:154)

In this bold representation of Christ as primarily an artist, Van Gogh confirms his own commitment to his vocation as a painter, and so the main thing he admires about Christ is the "creative force" or "pure creative power" that characterizes Christ's special kind of genius. But then Van Gogh goes on to say that "these reflections" also go a long way towards "*raising us above art itself*." Here, the discussion opens upon a further dimension: although Van Gogh does not explain what he means by "the art of being immortal," he seems to identify it with the encompassing mystery simply of being "alive" in the world. The conclusion then brings us back to painting by way of St. Luke, the patron of painters, who was also Christ's disciple. And so — the priority of art notwithstanding — the dialogue between the aesthetic and the religious continues, even as it points us towards a transcendent mystery that encompasses both.

This passage can help us to understand Van Gogh's remarks on "something altogether new" beyond traditional religion. Although words do not describe this new thing adequately, creative actions (such as Christ's) can, like great painting, reveal something of the infinite within the ordinary objects of a common world, whether a blade of grass or a starry sky. And then, too, there is the mystery of our own interiority, the strange depths of consciousness. Just as nature can reveal its depths to the artist's creative gaze, so also can nature be reshaped through art to express our deepest human needs and longings. This exchange is reciprocal, as Van Gogh well knew, and is the wellspring of the creative process itself.

Faith and Fidelity

A term increasingly used these days to describe people who subscribe to ideas about religion resembling Van Gogh's is "spiritual but not religious," and in some quarters, such people are even accorded an acronym: SBNR. We might, then, see Van Gogh as an early example of what has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon, especially in Western cultures influenced by Christianity. Part of the appeal of Van Gogh's declarations of a nonreligious spirituality might therefore lie, for modern readers, in the special relevance of his experience to our current historical phase.

In this context, it might be helpful to introduce a distinction made by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville between "faith" and "fidelity."[1] Sponville argues that even when religious beliefs are no longer accepted as the literal truth, the wisdom that inheres in a developed religious tradition can remain as a cultural inheritance to inform, guide, and humanize people's

behaviour and relationships. That is, “fidelity” to certain culturally produced ways of knowing and living can be valued and can remain influential even when “faith” has dwindled. Certainly, as described in chapter 1, a broad range of Christian values continued to infuse and inform Van Gogh’s imagination even when he denounced institutional Christianity as sterile and hypocritical, and in this, he exemplifies very well the kind of “fidelity” that Sponville describes. Thus, Van Gogh sees himself as searching for “something on high” (288/2:208), which, in the passage on Tolstoi, he says has “no name,” although he immediately adds that the indescribable new thing will also make “life possible” and provide consolation as Christianity once did.[2] And so the “altogether new” is given substance, as it were, through reference to Christianity, which remains a criterion for the value of what is to succeed it.

Christ and the Infinite “It”

Throughout his career, Van Gogh expressed frustration at the limitations of language for expressing the kind of truth he valued, whether in religion, morality, or art. On the topic of religion, one way in which he dealt with this inadequacy was to draw attention to it by reducing the descriptive power of language even further, as he did, for instance, by substituting the third person pronoun “it” for the transcendent value in question. For instance, writing to Theo from Isleworth in 1876, he cites verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah, commenting eagerly: “My boy, days will come when we’ll no longer believe because we heard *it* said but when we’ll know, feel and love *it*” (90/1:115–16). Later, from Etten in 1881, in describing his love for Kee, he tells Theo, “It seems to me, exchanging everything for everything is the real, true thing, that’s *it*” (183/1:312). And while in Paris in 1875, he describes a painting by Bonington as having “*almost* painted it, and yet that isn’t *it* either” (44/1:71). About Theo’s taste for Millet, Vincent writes from London, approvingly, “that’s it,” and about Millet’s *Angelus*, “that’s it. That’s rich, that’s poetry” (17/1:41). Again, from London, writing to Caroline van Stockum-Haanebeek, he repeats a phrase (which he says he learned from Anton Mauve), “that’s it” (18/1:42), as a way of describing his search for a homeland. In Nuenen in 1883, commenting on his ambivalent relationship with his father, he describes a “provisional arrangement and calm” that “is indeed *it* but far more still *not yet it at all*” (415/3:86).

Although Van Gogh’s later letters do not favour this use of the hypostasized pronoun, in the examples I have cited, he applies the word to painting, poetry, the search for a true home, God’s truth, love, and reconciliation. In each case, he

gestures to ideals that exceed description but that, nonetheless, give value to our aspirations and relationships, and for which the word "spiritual" might not be inappropriate.

Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh also reaches for other, again conspicuously inadequate, terms to indicate the transcendent mystery. Thus, "there's so much soul and mysterious endeavor in nature" (559/3:350); imagination produces things of a "mysterious character" (719/4:356); Shakespeare is "mysterious" (155/1:247). And in a striking passage written in Etten in 1881, he rejects a standard version of what "God" means, while insisting on preserving "a certain something" that, again, eludes description:

> Look, I find the clergymen's God as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? The clergymen think me one — be that as it may — but look, I love, and how could I feel love if I myself weren't alive and others weren't alive? And if we live, there's something wondrous about it. Call it God or human nature or what you will, but there's a certain something that I can't define in a system, even though it's very much alive and real, and you see, for me it's God or just as good as God. (193/1:340)

Here, Van Gogh struggles, as it were, to avoid throwing out the baby with the bath water. That is, "God" is not discarded outright because the word can be useful for indicating the "something wondrous" that is the source and origin of life, but "the clergymen's God" certainly is rejected ("dead as a doornail"). Van Gogh goes on to say that the real, live energy at the source of our universe cannot be defined "in a system." His slightly daring use of the word "atheist" is therefore equivocal, because it applies only to the opinion that the dogmatic (themselves dead-as-a-doornail) clergy have of him. The suggestion is that *they*, in fact, are the godless ones because they have so little sense of the living mystery. And so at the end of the excerpt, God, who might seem at first to be rejected, is carefully reinstated: "for me it's God or just as good as God." Although Van Gogh might seem to want to replace God with the life force in nature, he pulls back from outright pantheism by allowing "God" to remain ambivalent. Yet the passage as a whole is interesting not because it is equivocal but because of the intensity of Van Gogh's searching intelligence as he struggles with the God question, at once assertive and scrupulous to avoid oversimplification.

Throughout the letters, impressionistic terms such as "it" and "mysterious" are reinforced by other, similar words gesturing towards the unnameable source of the world and of ourselves within it. For instance, we need "the boundless and miraculous" (143/1:223), and in a painting, we can discover "something infinite" (259/2:144) because the "grand" and "infinite" are always close at hand.

“Something precious, something noble” in art gives us a sense of an “eternal home” (288/2:208). Van Gogh acknowledges the perennial intimations of “something on High” that is “*awful*” and “inexpressible” and connected to “conscience” (401/3:56). He finds the “eternal” in Monticelli (598/4:60) and the “infinite” (656/4:220) in a child’s eyes. Rembrandt communicates a sense of “superhuman infinitude” (784/5:49), because beauty makes the infinite tangible, as Rembrandt’s “metaphysical magic” (649/4:197) shows. Even printing is an “everyday miracle,” as is reading, which also shows us the way to “something higher” (333/2:318).

The language here, while not strictly theological, is informed by what we might loosely call a religious sensibility. References to infinity, eternity, and something on high that is inexpressible but linked to conscience are complementary to Van Gogh’s suggestive but undefined references to the mysterious “*it*.” Throughout his correspondence, he resorts frequently to this kind of language, even though when he rejected formal religion, he lost interest in devotional writers such as Bunyan, Fénélon, and Thomas à Kempis, and his letters were no longer packed with Biblical quotations. His religious faith, as we saw in chapter 1, was reconfigured as love for Kee and, subsequently, Sien. And so on the topic of love, he advises Theo, “*you* will benefit much more from rereading Michelet than from the Bible” (189/1:325), and he cites with approval Michelet’s opinion that woman herself is a religion (246/2:106).[3] More significantly, he also displaces his faith onto art. For instance, he complains that “Ma simply cannot comprehend that painting is *a faith*” (490/3:219). By contrast, he declares in an earlier letter, “I’ve found my work,” and it entails “a certain *faith* in art” (329/2:304). In a striking passage, he tells Theo: “I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can’t, suffering as I do, do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create” (673/4:253). Here, the ability to paint takes priority over “the dear Lord,” even as Vincent also acknowledges a further mystery (“something greater than myself”) that is the source of his creative energy and that, as shown above, he indicates by a variety of names intended to evoke rather than to describe it.

Clearly, then, Van Gogh did not discard religious language when he broke with official Christian observance. Although he remained vigorously opposed to institutional religion (and to institutions in general), he was ambivalent about the enculturation that his religious upbringing afforded him. As I have suggested, this ambivalence is the site of a genuine exploration of complex issues: although he used various terms to evoke the transcendent mystery without using the word “God,” he could resurrect the idea of God when he needed to, even after he had

rejected official Christianity.

For instance, in December 1882, well after he had broken with his father's faith, Vincent tells Theo that religion is "something one respects if it's sincere" (294/2:223), going on to admit to his own need to believe in "something on high, even if I don't know exactly who or what will be there" (294/2:223). He cites with approval Hugo's observation that "*religions* pass, but *God* remains" (294/2:223), and he admires the great artists who died with "no *idée fixe* about God or abstractions — always on the ground floor of life itself" (560/3:352). Elsewhere, he cites Hugo again, to the effect that "*God is a lighthouse whose beam flashes on and off*," and, Van Gogh adds, "now of course we're passing through that darkness" (691/4:292).

These examples show that Van Gogh did not simply deny God, however much he disliked how the idea of God was commonly used. Rather, he drew a distinction between God and what the religions say about God. Likewise, having "no *idée fixe* about God" does not mean counting God out, and if God is in eclipse (as the lighthouse metaphor suggests), that does not mean that God does not exist. In his distress at St. Rémy, Van Gogh explains how his attacks took "an absurd religious turn"; although he expressed horror at "these unhealthy religious aberrations," he admits also that "religious thoughts sometimes console me a great deal" (801/5:89).

Admittedly, Van Gogh sometimes comes close to identifying God with nature, but he does not quite do so definitively. Thus, he suggests that people no longer believe in miracles or "in a God who jumps capriciously and despotically from one thing to another"; rather, they are "beginning to gain more respect and admiration for and belief in nature" (450/3:158). He equates "contact with nature" to "walking with God" (401/3:56); in Arles, he goes so far as to proclaim that "those who don't believe in the sun down here are truly blasphemous" (663/4:239). He admits sometimes to "having a tremendous need for, shall I say, the word — for religion — so I go outside at night to paint the stars" (691/4:292).

It is easy to see in these examples how Van Gogh attaches a spiritual, even quasi-religious value to the natural world.[4] But seeing God in nature and deifying nature are not the same, and, as I mentioned earlier, Van Gogh stops short of pantheism: the infinite "It" is not simply nature. To the end, the Biblical roots of his religious sensibility remain surprisingly persistent, as we see, for instance, in his enduring appreciation of Christ. He explains that Bernard may be "surprised to see how little I love the Bible," except for "this kernel, Christ" (633/4:157). Renan's interpretation of Jesus, he writes, is "a thousand times

more consoling" that the "papier mâché Christs" offered by "Protestant, Catholic or whatever else churches" (763/4:434). He applauds Carlyle for learning from Jesus (325/2:300), and he admires Christ for loving people "more than is wise," so that he was taken for "a crackpot" (615/4:97). As has often been the case throughout the history of Christianity, Van Gogh sees his own values and aspirations mirrored in Christ, whom, as noted above, Van Gogh thought supreme among artists, even though mocked or rejected as "a crackpot." In short, Christ remained a compelling figure for Van Gogh, who retained a fidelity to certain core Christian values even when his faith had long since receded. It is too simple to suggest that he threw off Christianity in order, somehow, to embrace a religion of nature.

As is often the case in our discussions of Van Gogh, the foregoing examples cannot be reduced to a systematically thought out set of positions: the effectiveness of his writing on the topics of spirituality and religion resides elsewhere than in philosophical consistency. So far, we have seen him deploy language that acknowledges a transcendent mystery while stressing how far conventional religion falls short of the vital, living truth. But we also see how he deploys conventional religious language and does not dispense with certain core values in the Christian tradition to which he once devoted himself so wholeheartedly and to some aspects of which he retained a fidelity throughout his life.

Black, White, and Complicated

In light of Van Gogh's mixed attitude to religion — both rejecting it and drawing upon it — I wish to revisit a tendency in his thinking that I explored from a different point of view in chapter 7. There, we saw how Van Gogh's break with his family remained uncomfortably bound up with his dependency on it. So, likewise, we see how his rejection of religion existed alongside his continued nourishment by it. And here, again as with autonomy and dependency, we can detect two opposed tendencies in Van Gogh's writing. The first insists, boldly and assertively, on strong binary oppositions. The second is more complex, showing the limitations of binary opposition without surrendering its critical force. The interplay between these two aspects of his writing on religion and spirituality does much to produce the captivating dynamism that makes his letters as a whole so engaging and challenging.

For instance, on the topic of a person's spiritual or moral integrity, Van Gogh frequently insists on absolute distinctions with an uncomfortable clarity and

forcefulness. This is clear especially in his several references to Victor Hugo's contrast between the black ray and the white ray (388/3:20), indicating two kinds of spiritual energy. Thus, Van Gogh describes "God" as "the *white Ray*," against whom "even the black ray is powerless" (401/3:56). Elsewhere, he exhorts Theo, "Let's seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness" (403/3:61). He hopes "that I shall see the white ray before my eyes close," and has "never regretted having said that I considered black ray black ray, and having abandoned *that* outright" (403/3:60). When interpreted by way of this binary opposition, Vincent's problem with his father is stated simply: "To me he's a black ray. The only criticism I have of Pa is: why isn't he a white ray? . . . To you I say, look for white ray, white, do you hear!" Vincent goes on then to align Hermanus Tersteeg with Pa, as he describes how his own understanding increasingly enabled him to realize "that there's such a thing as black ray and white ray, and that I found their light black and a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance" (403/3:60). In a later letter, he tells Theo, "Pa's character is dark (the black ray, as I once reminded you)" (415/3:85).

These black and white distinctions are complemented by a similar pair of contrasting terms that Van Gogh derived from Thomas Carlyle. These are "the everlasting yes" and "the everlasting no," the latter of which Van Gogh applies to Tersteeg: "To me Tersteeg will I think remain '*the everlasting* NO,'" in contrast to "men of character" in whom "one finds an everlasting *yes*" (358/2:365). Elsewhere, in much the same spirit, Vincent depicts Theo and himself as standing on opposite sides "of a certain barricade" (463/3:176), an idea to which he returns, hoping that the brothers will not take aim at one another from their opposed positions "standing on different sides of a barricade" (473/3:191). Likewise, on some moral issues, Vincent says, "a door should either be open or shut" (432/3:113). Black and white, open and shut, yes and no, the two sides of a barricade: these binaries are forcefully presented and might be experienced by readers as either bracing or, as the exasperated Theo once declared, as an irritating confirmation of Vincent's inclination to "carry things too far" (197/2:15).

And yet a contradictory impulse to this propensity towards dualism is not hard to find, not least in the sense of mystery, which, as we have seen, Van Gogh often evokes. "There remain imponderables," he tells Theo from The Hague in 1883, referring again to the ineffable transcendent. He goes on to explain: "If life were as simple and things actually worked as in the story of dutiful Hendrik or an ordinary, routine sermon by a minister, it wouldn't be all that hard to find

one's way." But this is not the case, because things are, in fact, "infinitely more complicated and good and evil no more occur by themselves than black and white do in nature" (368/3:291). Here, Van Gogh explicitly rejects the opposition between black and white, which he sees as an oversimplification equivalent to the clichéd sermonizing of a conventional preacher. Again from The Hague, he admits to Theo that the relationship with Sien is "entangled in thorns" and fraught with complexities because "one is responsible, so to speak, for each other's failings" (381/2:415). Here, the lines of demarcation are not clearly drawn at all, and Vincent later admits to Theo, "I'm increasingly coming to see that it's so terribly difficult to know where one is right and where one is wrong" (413/3:83). From Arles in 1888, he advises Theo, "Let's not think too deeply, about good and bad, that always being very relative" (707/4:335). And from St. Rémy the next year, he makes the same point: "We know so little about life that we're not really in a position to judge between good and bad, just or unjust" (787/5:56). Alluding to St. Paul, he assures his mother that we know life "through a glass, darkly," and "one understands no more of it than that" (885/5:260). In short, Van Gogh was well aware that in actual experience, people's lives are complex in ways that defy reduction to a straightforward binary opposition between bad and good, black and white, no and yes.

There is a marked contrast, then, between Van Gogh's black and white assertiveness, on the one hand, and his appreciation of life's irreducible complexities, on the other. But my main point is that the letters often engage us so powerfully because of the interplay that they record between these two aspects of his writing. We see this, for instance, in the excerpt about being an "atheist," in which bold assertion is qualified by a further, contrapuntal reconsideration, as a result of which we feel ourselves taken up by the process itself of Van Gogh's searching intelligence. The interplay between "black and white" and "relative," "God" and "mysterious" is a means of communicating his personal search for a spiritual understanding beyond the confines of traditional religion, yet maintaining a fidelity to the tradition without which the search could neither begin nor be maintained. The compelling authenticity of Van Gogh's enquiry into such matters emerges not so much from the binary oppositions with which he periodically presents us as from the energy and intelligence with which these oppositions are interrogated at the bar of a richly imagined experience.

As noted above, Van Gogh observes that if life were "simple," then "an ordinary, routine sermon" would suffice. But life is not simple, and the search for understanding calls for courage, endurance, and creative energy. As it

happens, during his stay in England, Van Gogh wrote a sermon that, in comparison to his best letters, provides an interesting example of the contrast he himself wants to make between the clergyman and the artist — which is to say, the "routine" and the truly creative.

"An Ordinary, Routine Sermon"

On Sunday, 29 October 1876, at the Wesleyan Methodist church in Richmond, Van Gogh delivered a sermon. It is preserved in English, just as he wrote it, and its contents can be summarized briefly.[5]

Van Gogh begins by citing Psalm 119:19: "I am a stranger in the earth." This verse recurs like a refrain throughout, connecting to the leading idea that life is "a pilgrim[']s progress" during which we journey from earth to heaven. Although this pilgrimage is full of sorrow, angels smile when we are born and when we die, after having fought the good fight. Van Gogh then turns to his favourite verse from St. Paul to confirm that we should resolve to be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing." As we journey through life, we must persevere resolutely while attempting also to love our neighbour as ourselves. And although our life begins like a river journey, we soon find ourselves on a stormy sea. Then, we are to remember that Jesus walked on the waves, offering the message of salvation. Above all, during life's journey, we are to seek our Father's love and approval as, having left home, we try to find it again. Van Gogh declares his gratitude to his Christian parents and promises, "I will be a Christian too." To answer such a calling, he will have to plough and cast nets, and all of us must pray that God will keep us from evil. To illustrate the pilgrimage motif, Van Gogh turns to "*a very beautiful picture*" and cites a poem by Christina Rosetti. He concludes with the assurance that God provides consolation, showing us higher truths through the events of daily life that are often more significant than they might at first seem.

The Richmond sermon is full of evangelical ardour, reflecting Van Gogh's immersion in the Bible as well as his enthusiasm for John Bunyan, from whom he borrows the idea of a pilgrim's progress through the trials and tribulations of life to the heavenly Jerusalem.[6] The sermon also demonstrates Van Gogh's preoccupation with suffering and with his favourite advice from St. Paul: that we remain "sorrowful yet always rejoicing." It glows with admiration for his Christian parents, whom he promises to emulate.

Although Van Gogh could not have known it at the time, the Richmond sermon touches on themes and motifs that would preoccupy him throughout his

correspondence. Thus, the sermon contains an extended passage on storms, and especially storms at sea. Readers who might doubt whether his many references to storms in the letters are intended metaphorically need look no further than this sermon for evidence that he was quite aware of using the motif in such a sense, if only because of the explicitness with which he does so in the sermon. Thus, the psalmist who "describes a storm at sea" must also "have felt the storm in his heart to describe it so." The sea is also "the sea of our lives," and we experience "the great storms of life" including "all the waves and all the billows of the Lord."

Among other motifs that would remain close to Van Gogh's heart is his desire to provide "consolation" and to be "comforting." Throughout his letters, as in his paintings, he refers to ploughing and to the planting of seeds — again, in a metaphorical sense (the seed is "sown in our hearts"). The refrain that runs through the sermon, "I am a stranger in the earth," touches on yet another point continually confirmed in his life and correspondence: he never did find the domestic comfort, the homecoming about which he wrote and which he imagined in various forms. Finally, as the sermon concludes, Van Gogh turns to a painting for an example of the values he recommends. This painting was once thought to be Boughton's *Pilgrim's Progress.*[7] It is, however, unnamed and inaccurately described in the sermon, and the identification is now questioned.[8] Whatever the source, Van Gogh describes the painting and expands upon it by alluding to Christina Rosetti's poem *Uphill* (again unnamed and incorrectly copied). The interrelationships between art and religion (or the transcendent values to which religion points) that we see here would, like the other themes and motifs mentioned above, continue to be explored by Van Gogh throughout his career.

Certainly, it is interesting to note how the Richmond sermon engages with themes that were to remain important to Van Gogh. But for all that, the sermon itself is among the least engaging things he wrote. Ironically, it is a perfect example of the "routine, ordinary" sermonizing of the average preacher, which he later criticized. Here, for instance, is a typical passage from the sermon:

> These two commandments we must keep and if we follow after these, if we are devoted to this, we are not alone for our Father in Heaven is with us, helps us and guides us, gives us strength day by day, hour by hour, and so we can do all things through Christ who gives us might.

These are the stock-in-trade exhortations of a preacher resorting to standard doctrinal generalizations, without specific applications or what Van Gogh would later come to see as enlivening detail. He goes on to say that the "Saviour and Prince of Peace" announces "to you personally — mind to you personally 'It is I,

be not afraid.’” But this supposedly personal communication has itself nothing of the personal about it that would give it a human face, as it were. Even the metaphors of the storm and the journey remain stilted and overly obvious: “Our life, we might compare it to a journey,” for example, or “my bark is so small and Thy sea is so great.” Moreover, the sermon lacks narrative development, circling back upon the main ideas with an awkward if ardent insistence. In all this, Van Gogh is clearly influenced by the cadences of the English Bible as well as by Bunyan’s seventeenth-century prose and diction. Consequently, the sermon often sounds archaic, but in a mannered rather than an evocative way. Thus, the syntax is marked throughout by awkward inversions and artificial solemnity: “who remembereth no more Her Sorrow”; “Entreat us not to leave Thee or to refrain from following after Thee.”

And yet there is one moment when the tone and register of the writing change clearly for the better. This occurs when Van Gogh turns to the “*very beautiful picture*,” which he describes first as a “landscape at evening”:

> In the distance on the right hand side a row of hills appearing blue in the evening mist. Above those hills the splendour of the sunset, the grey clouds with their linings of silver and gold and purple. The landscape is a plain or heath covered with grass and heather, here and there a white stem of a birch tree and its yellow leaves, for it was in Autumn. Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far far away, on the top of that mountain a city whereon the setting sun casts a glory.

Here, we can’t help but feel Van Gogh’s prose breathing easier, as the description is direct, detailed, and attentive to the mood and colour of the painting. It strikes us as fresh and evocative — a relief from the prevailing leaden diction and dry, doctrinal solemnity. It is as if Van Gogh has stumbled upon something that came naturally to him, the place where (as he would later discover) his gift really lay, intimated in this brief passage about painting, which is so much more engaging than anything else in the sermon.

Van Gogh ranks highly among great letter writers, but, judging from his performance at Richmond, he would not rank at all among the great writers of sermons. As he himself would put it, his sermon lacks that “extra something of singular genius,” the “power to invigorate” (332/2:316) that brings art to life — except, that is, for the one moment when he turns to painting, where we feel his spirits lift and the writing becomes fresh and vigorous. Despite the clichéd and hackneyed prose, however, the main themes of the sermon were to remain with Van Gogh throughout his career. He continued to be a stranger on the earth, seeking for home and enduring the storms of the heart, sorrowful yet rejoicing, compassionate to the widows and orphans, conflicted about his father’s approval, sensitive to the beauty of art and to the resonance of nature with

spiritual significance beyond what initial appearances might suggest. These concerns, to a significant degree born out of Van Gogh's Christian commitment, remained infused with his admiration for Christ, even when Van Gogh had ceased formally being a Christian. Interestingly, the contrast between what he experienced as the narrow world of his father's religion and the liberating energy of art is reproduced in the contrast between the Richmond sermon and the letters in their literary dimension.

With these points in mind, let us now consider Van Gogh's interesting request that Van Rappard, if he has kept Vincent's letters, reread them, as they deserve, because they were written "in earnest," giving "free rein to my imagination," even though Van Rappard might think "I'm in fact preaching a doctrine" (188/1:322):

> Now you'll say that I'm actually a headstrong person and that I'm in fact preaching a doctrine.
>
> Well, if you want to take it that way, so be it, I don't necessarily have anything against it, I'm not ashamed of my feelings, I'm not ashamed of being a man, of having principles and faith. But where do I want to drive people, especially myself? To the open sea. And which doctrine do I preach? People, let us surrender our souls to our cause and let us work with our heart and love what we love.
>
> *Love what we love*, what an unnecessary warning that seems, and yet how great a *raison d'être*. After all, how many people expend their best efforts on something that isn't worthy of their best efforts, and treat what they love in a "stepmotherly" fashion instead of giving themselves openly to the irresistible urging of their heart. And we even think that behavior such as the above shows "firmness of character" and "strength of mind," and we expend our efforts on an unworthy one and neglect our true lass. And all of that with "the most sacred of intentions" and "thinking we must do it" from a "moral conviction" and "sense of duty." Thus we have "the beam in our own eye," confusing a seeming or would-be conscience with our real conscience. The person who is now writing to his dear friend Rappard has long gone through the world with one — perhaps even more than one — such object, though of monstrous size, in his eye. (188/1:322)

Van Gogh begins on a note of arch provocation, agreeing that he might seem to be "a headstrong person" and a preacher. He confirms that this might be so by insisting on his "principles" and "faith," suggesting that he has something of the clergyman about him. But of course, this is a gambit, a tease, for when he goes on to describe his "faith," it is the exact opposite of the narrowness and confinement associated with the conventional preacher of a "doctrine." Rather, Van Gogh's creed leads him to "the open sea" and to giving ourselves over recklessly to "work with our heart and love what we love." The language shifts here towards the impressionistic, evoking a broad aspiration as undetermined as the sea itself and based on a concern that people not squander their "best efforts" by confining themselves within conventional mores and principles. The triteness of conventional morality is indicated by a series of cliché phrases cited in inverted commas: "firmness of character," "strength of mind," "the most sacred

of intentions," "sense of duty," "moral conviction." These are the stock in trade of the "ordinary, routine" clergyman, and Van Gogh wants to distinguish between the "real conscience" that informs his particular "faith" and the "seeming or would-be conscience" of these other preachers who have a beam in their eye — a Biblical figure for the hypocrisy of those who condemn others for minor faults while having greater faults of their own. But the excerpt contains a final surprise, as Van Gogh declares that he himself has "long gone through the world" with the biggest beam of all — indeed, "monstrous" — in his own eye. Although there is a touch of comic exaggeration in this confessional moment, there is no reason to disbelieve Van Gogh's rueful admission of his own imperfection, even though he does not explain it in detail, instead going on to stress the general prevalence of the problem: "For there are all manner of 'eye beams,' artistic, theological, moral eye beams (very frequent), practical eye beams and theoretical eye beams (sometimes in combination, very fatal!) and, well, many, many more" (188/1:323).

Van Gogh's intention here is, in all likelihood, that Van Rappard should take the admission of hypocrisy at face value as Van Gogh's acknowledgement of a personal failing. And yet it might occur to the reader (especially one who has followed the argument of this chapter) that the beam in Van Gogh's own eye is intriguingly pertinent to the double-think implicit in his declarations of liberation from a set of religious doctrines that, in fact, he cannot shake off. Despite having declared the liberty of the open sea, he resorts to the conventional language of the regular clergyman ("creed," "principles," "doctrine," "conviction," "conscience," and so on) to express the fact that these terms no longer have the hold on him that they once did. Regardless of whether Van Gogh himself thought of this ambivalence as an example of one of the kinds of hypocrisy he describes, the fact is that the text allows — even provokes — such a reading. And certainly, in broad terms, Van Gogh is aware of the conundrum he presents in the excerpt under consideration, in which he contrasts two kinds of language about belief, the first calling for conceptual clarity ("doctrine," "principles") and the second intimating a heart-stirring aspiration ("to the open sea"). Van Gogh begins the passage by inverting the usual sense of the first kind (he is not really a conventional preacher) in order to promote the second, and then, as the passage concludes, he inverts the second in order to accuse himself (with some ironizing humour) of a standard moral failing. There is some witty dexterity and genuine complexity in this performance, which shows very well that Van Gogh knew that for him, the languages of traditional religion and new spirituality do not exist separately but in symbiosis, entailing a fidelity that endures even as faith is

surrendered.

To summarize, Van Gogh's Richmond sermon gives us interesting information about his thinking and favourite preoccupations, but, apart from the one moment we have noted, it does little to engage us personally. What's more, it is, overwhelmingly, the product of the type of clergyman's mentality that Van Gogh soon came to denounce in the name of a different set of values and aspirations. Something of these different values and aspirations can be seen and felt in the letter to Van Rappard, where we are taken up by the turns and returns of Van Gogh's mind as he explores the interrelationship between traditionally religious discourse and the creativity that he came to admire above all else, and that the letter itself exemplifies.

Van Gogh as Post-Romantic Figural

As we have seen throughout this chapter — and as Van Gogh clearly understood — the new thing without a name in fact requires names in order to be sought after in the first place. Consequently, some of the core values of the religion of his youth continued to inform Van Gogh's search for the mysterious, the transcendent "it," the "white ray" that is the source of creativity and of life itself. As he kept insisting, the transcendent is immanent in our immediate relationships with other people and with nature, and I have tried to show that, at their best, Van Gogh's letters themselves express this interinvolvement. But I would like to end this chapter by noting how his insistence on the immanence of the transcendent relates also to his practice as a painter who is neither wholly expressionist nor wholly concerned with the faithful representation of appearances.

Erich Auerbach's term "figural" is helpful here, even though Auerbach uses "figural" mainly to describe medieval literature (especially Dante). In so doing, he distinguishes between *allegoria* and *figura*. That is, in *allegoria*, events and characters are invented to illustrate an abstract idea; in *figura*, a thing or person is felt to be the bearer of some further, mysteriously resonant but unconceptualized significance. In an earlier study, I described the poetry of Seamus Heaney as figural in Auerbach's sense.[9] In doing so, I wanted to elucidate how Heaney holds the carefully observed phenomena of nature on the edge of some broader significance that does not harden out conceptually but that is felt as vital and emotionally charged rather than abstract. In Heaney's case, this broader significance is frequently self-reflexive, returning us to the craft and achievement of the poem itself. This self-reflexiveness results from the fact that

a main difference between Heaney's figural mode and Dante's is that Heaney lacks Dante's medieval sacramentalism and trust in the objective, God-ordained hierarchies of the chain of being. Instead, like Wordsworth, Heaney turns to the ordering effect of the poem itself to express the resonance between the creative mind and the natural world. In this, he reflects a typically modernist self-consciousness, whereby art supplies the loss consequent upon the receding "sea of faith," as Matthew Arnold says.[10] We might describe the combined effect of these elements as "post-Romantic figural."

For Van Gogh, too, I now suggest, nature is likewise figural. In the absence of a traditional religious faith, he looks to the work of art to express the mysterious, life-enhancing resonance between the human mind and the undisclosed dimensions of nature. All of this helps to explain something of the special appeal and achievement of his paintings, as well as some of the most striking effects of his writing. For instance, in the following excerpt, he describes how he longs to paint landscapes, and how "in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were":

> A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.
>
> Young corn can have something ineffably pure and gentle about it that evokes an emotion like that aroused by the expression of a sleeping child, for example.
>
> The grass trodden down at the side of a road looks tired and dusty like the inhabitants of a poor quarter. After it had snowed recently I saw a group of Savoy cabbages that were freezing, and that reminded me of a group of women I had seen early in the morning at a water and fire cellar in their thin skirts and old shawls. (292/2:218–19)

In discovering "expression and a soul" in natural objects, Van Gogh points to the interpenetration of the mind and nature as the means of disclosing some fresh understanding of nature and of human nature simultaneously. The point about the corn, trodden grass, and Savoy cabbages is not that they look like babies, slum dwellers, or poor women. While the pollard willows might possibly suggest a procession of dejected men, someone looking at a painting of the trees would not necessarily see represented there anything as specific as an actual group of "orphan men." Rather, these objects evoke a set of feelings that we might identify as resembling the feelings evoked by the human referents Van Gogh suggests. Again, he is not saying that a viewer of a painting of trodden grass should see that it resembles the "inhabitants of a poor quarter." Rather, the trodden grass is figural, which is to say that the meaning it suggests is not specified but is registered on our emotions nonetheless. We can well imagine a sensitive observer saying: "How tired and dusty that grass appears; why, it reminds one of the plight of some poor people in our cities, of whom we really

ought to take more care." But another observer might just as well explain the feelings in other terms and still remain responsive to the trampled and dusty appearance of the grass. The significance here is not allegorical — that is, there is no governing idea or concept to which the trodden grass corresponds; rather, it is figural, causing the observer to experience a feeling-state in which human emotion and a sense of compassionate concern are disclosed in and through nature.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes a "superb" stand of trees: "there was a drama in each *figure* I'm tempted to say, but I mean in each tree" (381/2:415). The sunflower paintings likewise express "gratitude" (853/5:199; 856/5:204), and a yearning for the "infinite" is represented in the sower and the sheaf of wheat (628/4:137). In these examples, as in the previous excerpt, the human significance of the natural world is disclosed as already immanent there, to be awakened and brought to light by the irradiating gaze of the creative human intelligence. Just so, the nonhuman "tree" and the human "figure" interpenetrate in the "drama" of the emergent beauty and significance of the encounter Van Gogh describes, as is the case also with the sunflowers, the sower, and the wheat. These awakenings remain mysterious, and, as Heidegger says, we turn away from them by seeking refuge in the conceptual. Yet, paradoxically, descriptions or explanations of the revelatory power of art will themselves resort to some degree of conceptualization — as Van Gogh also does, even while he remains careful to be suggestive rather than prescriptive.

In a telling passage that again deals with these issues, Van Gogh explains to Bernard that "in order to give an impression of anxiety, you can try to do it without heading straight for the historical garden of Gethsemane; in order to offer a consoling and gentle subject it isn't necessary to depict the figures from the Sermon on the Mount" (822/5:153). That is, the human emotion of anguish and the gentleness of consolation are expressed as much by a quality of style as by the explicit representation of an anguished human being or of a consoling human presence. Indeed, explicit representations might not communicate any genuine anguish or consolation at all: Van Gogh complained often about the lifelessness of much painting that is merely correct in representational terms. What he wanted was of a different order, as he proclaims in the passage where he says that although he can do without the Lord, he cannot do without "the power to create":

> And in painting I'd like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I'd like to paint men and women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations. (673/4:253)

This is the post-Romantic figural in a nutshell. Van Gogh realizes that the halo is no longer available as an effective symbol, even though he retains a fidelity to the value it represents. Consequently, his gesture to the transcendent, the "*je ne sais quoi* of the eternal," incorporates the traditional idea instead of simply discarding it. As ever, for Van Gogh, new spirituality and old religion remain in close conversation. But the main point of the excerpt is stated in the self-reflexive conclusion, bringing us back to the work of art as the embodiment of the new kind of truth to which Van Gogh aspired.[11] That is, the "radiance" and the "vibrancy" of the colours are the bearers of the "consoling" effect, which in turn provides a glimpse of the "eternal" that was once symbolized by the halo. The traditional, religious idea of holiness is thus replaced by a figural suggestiveness, neither divorced from the familiar objects of our common world nor providing us with conceptual closure, but returning us instead to the work of art itself as an expression of the creative interplay between the human mind and nature.

Conclusion

These reflections on the post-Romantic figural can bring us back to our point of departure at the beginning of this chapter and to Van Gogh's search for an adequate language to express his sense of the mystery of the universe and of human consciousness beyond the categories of the official religious observance to which he had for some years dedicated his best energies. As we have seen, in his letters, his aspiration to something new without a name is never entirely divorced from his Christian enculturation and from the core values to which he maintained a fidelity even as he abandoned his faith in the creeds and observances of institutional religion. Although Van Gogh did not shrink from prescriptive and confrontational clarity, he was well attuned to the complexities of experience and to how black and white distinctions blend, in practice, along a chromatic scale of infinite gradations. His letters frequently express the tensions between his forthright assertions of principle and his further, nuanced assessments of matters under discussion. By such means, he explores the complex relationships between traditional religion and the kind of spiritual awareness to which he aspired as its replacement and of which he found painting, especially, the embodiment. He did not look to painting to illustrate or mediate some creed or set of beliefs but to create its own humanizing and sacred values by embodying them. I have described this process as "post-Romantic figural," by which I mean to indicate both the sense of a transcendent mystery that Van Gogh found in art and the simultaneous expression and discovery of

that Van Gogh found in art and the simultaneous expression and discovery of that mystery in the material realities of a common world.

Finally, although Van Gogh looked principally to painting as an authentic bearer of the “something new” to which he aspired, I have also suggested that, at its best, his writing performs the same task. As he well knew, human creativity is never exhausted by individual instances of its expression, whether in painting or in writing. As discussed above, the core difference between Van Gogh’s early sermon and the letters with which we have compared it is that the letters (unlike the sermon) are alive with the creative energy of a person in whose trials and aspirations we find ourselves participating, taken up by the demanding yet revelatory power of what he has to say and how he says it.

CONCLUSION

"My Own Portrait in Writing"

In a letter written from Arles in 1888 to his sister Wil, Vincent says that he would "like to see if I can't make my own portrait in writing. First I start by saying that to my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits" (626/4:132). Here, Vincent suggests that no single representation expresses the complete truth about an individual person. Yet through the "diverse portraits" that might be produced, whether in paint or writing, we can feel the presence of this "same person," whom we can come increasingly to recognize and value. Elsewhere, Vincent explores the related idea that the main thing about a work of art is that it enables us to get to know not just the people it depicts but also the person who produced it. For instance, writing from Arles, he asks Theo to consider whether "what is alive in art, and eternally alive, is first the painter and then the painting?" (670/4:249). Earlier, in Nuenen, he cites Zola with approval: "In the painting (the work of art) I look for, I love the man — the artist," going on to explain: "I think that's perfectly true — I ask you, what sort of a *man*, what sort of a visionary/observer or *thinker*, what sort of human character is there behind some of these canvases praised for their technique" (515/3:264). Writing from Etten in 1881, he puts the point succinctly: "I generally scrutinize, with artists in particular, the man who produces the work just as much as the work itself" (190/1:328).

These examples show that Van Gogh valued art in part because it reveals the humanity of the artist, putting us in touch with a creative vision that is, above all, personal, and that is valuable for that reason. In making this point, he draws no distinction between painting and writing. As I pointed out in the introduction to this book, he reminds Bernard that "it's as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing" (599/4:61), and, in an earlier letter, he assures

Theo that “books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2:268). In the same vein, he tells Theo that “the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt” and that “one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live” (155/1:247).

Both in writing and painting, then, for Van Gogh, the personality of the artist is disclosed and discovered, although not completely. In The Hague, he defines the artist’s task as “always seeking without ever fully finding” (224/2:66), and in Nuenen, he argues that just as we do not know the whole truth about another person, so neither do we know ourselves: “Speaking of self-knowledge — who has it? Here again ‘*the* knowledge — *no one* has it’” (516/3:266). But although our knowledge of one another, and of ourselves, is imperfect, so that different portraits give us insight into different facets of a person, Van Gogh did not think that personality is merely an assemblage of fragments. Rather, he had a more integral (Romantic) sense of the person as a living, organic presence — a presence of infinite complexity, perhaps, but not merely a kaleidoscope of facets, discontinuous and unstable, such as is likely to strike a chord with modern (or postmodern) readers. As we have seen in other aspects of his correspondence, two opposed tendencies again remain in tension here: on the one hand, Van Gogh held to the idea of the person as a substantive, organic unity; on the other hand, he knew that personal identity is unstable and is often riven by contradiction.

All of this brings us to a theme that occurs persistently throughout the letters and that mirrors the polarity I have just described. That is, Van Gogh wanted his work to be seen as a whole, so that through the diversity of the individual items we might come increasingly to know the person who created them. As early as 1883 in The Hague, he explains, “I don’t view my studies in isolation, but always have in mind the work as a whole” (371/2:401), and he suggests that life itself, like painting, needs to be organized with a view to “the whole composition” (374/2:402). Along the same lines, he advises Theo that “a single drawing by me won’t be entirely satisfactory in itself, *even in the future*. A number of studies, no matter how diverse, will still complement each other” (378/2:410). In Arles, he laments that his pictures are “fated for dispersal,” but he is consoled by the fact that Theo knows “the whole of what I want” (743/4:402), which elsewhere is described as “an ensemble that will hold together” (680/4:268). Discussing his paintings with Theo, he insists: “I seriously ask you to show them *together*” (810/5:118), explaining in the next letter that he is “only trying to form a few things into a sort of ensemble that I would prefer to see stay together” (811/5:122). And so he sees his work as an oeuvre that is best seen “as a whole” (528/3:279), just as Dickens, Balzac, Hugo,

and Zola need also to be read "*as a whole*" (345/3:337). Likewise, he says, the work of Rembrandt and the other great painters needs to be seen "in its full extent" (651/4:201) so that, among other things, we can come to "love the man — the artist" (515/3:264).

The dialogical interplay between a diversity of parts and an ideal wholeness that we see in Van Gogh's descriptions of his painting carries over also to his letters. By their nature, letters are fragmentary, but the more we read Van Gogh's letters, the more we feel his presence as a man with specific preoccupations, a man shaping his experience by way of particular groups of metaphors, favourite ideas, perplexing contradictions, enabling insights, and characteristic rhetorical strategies. We watch this person grow and evolve, suffer and endure, and, even from within the disintegration of his mental and physical health, we feel a presence that remains engaging and affecting, even if nonwhole and labouring under the burden of unresolved problems and tensions that are a burden to him as well as a source of energy.

As we have seen, Van Gogh came to think of Christ as the greatest of artists, and an analogy can be made between the means by which we come to know Christ in the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament and how we come to know Van Gogh in the letters. In both cases, a collection of documents gives us insights into different aspects of a particular personality, but the documents themselves are not wholly consistent and do not form a single narrative account. Just as we come to know Jesus from various points of view, each of which discloses some aspect of the historical person, so also a sense of who Van Gogh was emerges convincingly yet incompletely from within the dense weave of his correspondence. One main difference is that the New Testament was written by others about Jesus, whereas Van Gogh was the author of his own letters; we might see this difference as corresponding roughly to the distinction between a portrait and a self-portrait. Also, in the case of the New Testament, the complexity and variety of the documents has occasioned an immense hermeneutic debate, enduring over centuries. This is to be expected, given that the Bible has so long been considered the Word of God. The stakes are high, and in this regard, the comparison with Van Gogh's letters is incommensurate. Still, it is surprising that the remarkable body of Van Gogh's correspondence has not given rise to more detailed critical commentary, not least because the letters are so frequently praised for their literary distinction. In the present study, I have attempted to do something to repair this omission, and in these concluding remarks, I ask what kind of self-portrait we can expect the letters to offer.

My main conclusion is that Van Gogh's correspondence does reveal the man himself to us, though incompletely and not without contradictions and

himself to us, though incompletely and not without contradictions and inconsistencies. Indeed, the flickering interplay between intimations of wholeness and the all-too-evident gaps is itself a marker of the kind of authenticity that the letters offer, because this is very much how we come to know (and fail to know) one another in actual experience. But this claim in itself does not sufficiently explain how powerful, moving, and gratifying is the experience of reading the entire collection of Van Gogh's letters. Consequently, I have focused on key metaphors, patterns of ideas, and dialogical complexities, as well as on the fact that Van Gogh engages us repeatedly with matters of such broad human significance that we can readily identify our own concerns in the issues with which he deals.

In part 1, I develop this point about matters of broad human interest by charting some key relationships between religion, morality, and art throughout the correspondence and by describing an evolution in Van Gogh's thinking about these topics. In so doing, I focus on the conflict between Van Gogh's idealism and the negative contrast experiences produced by the circumstances of his life. I also suggest that relationships among religion, morality, and art constitute a continuing dialogical exchange throughout the letters. Under the pressure of circumstances, Van Gogh's dominant ideology shifts from religion to morality and then to the aesthetic, yet none of these completely displaces the others, and the evolving story of how he thought about — and experienced — this evolving exchange provides an implicit, if discontinuous, narrative for the letters as a whole. In turn, the discontinuities within this narrative are thematized within the correspondence by Van Gogh's proposal that imperfection is a criterion of the aesthetic, pre-empting perfect closure. Paradoxically, for Van Gogh, the most authentically beautiful things are flawed, their very imperfection being part of what makes them beautiful. Eventually, he came to realize that art itself, however necessary for his well-being, was not finally sustaining, and the aspiration to "something altogether new" that has "no name" (686/4:282) would go on keeping the heart's desire in conflict with the negative contrasts to which human flesh is perennially heir. "One shouldn't be discouraged because utopia isn't coming about" (663/4:237), he tells Theo, and, again, "imperfect and full of faults as we are, we're never justified in stifling the ideal, and what extends into the infinite as if it were no concern of ours" (341/2:330). In the story of Van Gogh's complex, interwoven commitments to religion, morality, and art, the contrast between utopia and the actual world, between the ideal and the imperfect, remains at the centre as the condition of his own, arduous, personal struggle and of his extraordinary creativity, evident in his letters as in his painting.

In the three chapters of part 2, I deal with some key groupings of metaphors that provide access to the deep structure, as it were, of Van Gogh's imagination. I focus on birds' nests, cab horses, and the mistral, not because they offer exclusive means for understanding Van Gogh's creativity as a writer but because they provide points of entry into the dense weave of his mind, enabling us to discern patterns and motifs that knit his writing together. These motifs are hallmarks of his creative imagination, imparting to his correspondence a gathering power and coherence. In their own way, they also reflect the evolution of his thought described in part 1, even though his favourite metaphors do not simply change and develop consistently in lockstep with his thinking about religion, morality, and art. Rather, there is a complex counterpoint between the (already complex) dialogical "narrative" described in part 1, and the tropes and figures analyzed, more or less achronologically, in part 2.

In the chapter on birds' nests, I deal with the fact that the tangled structure and rough fabric of a nest coexists with its comforting shapeliness, which aligns with how Van Gogh thought about art itself. And so birds' nests offer a useful point of entry to two large concerns that run throughout the letters and that Van Gogh brings together in an original way. The first is the age-old question about the relationship between art and nature; the second is the equally enduring problem of the relationship between home and exile. For Van Gogh, a nest, like home, is a safe haven, a place of comfort and serenity where imagination can be nourished and where a person finds confidence to face the storms of life and to soar creatively. In turn, creative flight is associated with hope, resurrection, and the transfiguration of nature by art. But, as ever, the ideal produces a negative contrast, in this case represented by cages, rules, idleness, and enervation — all of which prevent creativity. These negative conditions constitute the anti-home, which is also anti-art, a place of exile rather than freedom.

Van Gogh first encountered the mistral in the south of France, but weather had been a concern in his earlier correspondence, especially as a means of exploring the analogy between changing climatic conditions and the fluctuations of human feeling. Throughout his letters, Van Gogh returns frequently to the contrast between storm and calm in ways that overlap with some aspects of the bird's nest motif, but he also uses the contrast to emphasize a further set of contrasts and insights. Thus, although the mistral (like storms in general) can be destructive, it has its own fierce beauty. Likewise, the calm after the storm offers a special creative opportunity, even though we must try to avoid inertia and stagnation. Again, the opposites do not entirely exclude one another, and Van Gogh's deployment of the mistral as metaphor allows him to explore the

complexities and uncertainties of the creative life in vivid and engaging ways.

As the analysis of particular passages also shows, the mistral motif connects to and reinforces Van Gogh's sensitivity to the transience of beauty, the uncertainty of inspiration, and the patient endurance needed to acquire the skill to paint well. As ever, he is keen to emphasize the links between creativity and imperfection, and in describing the traces left by the mistral on a finished painting, he indicates how authenticity can be communicated and beauty enhanced by the thematizing of imperfection within the work itself.

The cab-horse motif allows us access to Van Gogh's continuing struggle to find a balance between hope and depression without hope becoming escapist and depression descending into despair. Among other things, cab horses represent abjection, which Van Gogh felt should neither be evaded nor become so dispiriting as to stifle creativity and the will to live. He draws an analogy between cab horses and the plight of artists, many of whom also live arduous lives. In painting, though, abjection can have a positive value in the sense that the marginalized, rejected, and maltreated, when rendered effectively in a painting, can give rise to compassion. The cab-horse motif then opens upon several further, related concerns, including the relationship between hope and despair, compassion and suffering, ugliness and beauty. Throughout, Van Gogh's struggle to strike a balance between these opposites tips sometimes in the direction of escapism (the Pangloss motif) and sometimes towards despair (one of the worst consequences of his illness).

In part 3, the emphasis shifts from imagination as a means of thinking to certain favoured sets of ideas that inform the letters. These ideas are often infused and reinforced by imagination, but the three chapters that constitute part 3 give priority to some of the main conceptual preoccupations running through the correspondence as a whole. These are the idea of learning by heart, the challenge of finding a balance between autonomy and dependency, and the aspiration to a spirituality beyond the confines of traditional religious observance.

In the chapter on learning by heart, I suggest that throughout the letters, Van Gogh seeks to reconcile the need for an artist to be spontaneous with the need to acquire technique patiently over a period of time. He concludes that the highest creativity depends on a prior interiorizing of technical skill, which is learned through patient apprenticeship. Van Gogh explains the synthesis of these contrary impulses by stressing the fact that memory is required in the acquisition of skill, even though the creative process is often characterized by self-forgetfulness and by being taken up by the task at hand. Still, even when caught up in the moment, the skilled practitioner is guided by techniques that have

up in the moment, the skilled practitioner is guided by techniques that have become so habitual as to be unconscious and that, consequently, are not attended to in the creative moment itself.

Van Gogh distinguishes between two senses of memory, one of which he links to skill and the other to what he calls “abstraction.” In the second sense, memory is a mere conjuring up of images in the mind’s eye, and for Van Gogh, there is a significant difference between memory informed by a proper apprenticeship and memory that merely calls up fanciful mental pictures. Still, although he remains wary of abstraction, Van Gogh knew also that painting does not reproduce the appearances of things exactly and that all painting therefore involves some degree of abstraction. With this in mind, he looked to “exaggeration” and “simplification” as an antidote to what he considered the negative effects of “abstraction.”

These matters are not explained in the letters systematically but by way of various sorties, engagements, and re-engagements with the key issues in different contexts, among which is Van Gogh’s interest in Japanese art. He admired Japanese artists for combining patient technique with speed of execution and for their use of exaggeration and simplification. He thus found his own thinking about what it means to learn “by heart” exemplified in the style and practice of his admired Japanese. Likewise, in his letters, we find him again working and reworking his leading ideas from different perspectives, so that the apparent spontaneity of his writing is, as with the painters he admired, often underpinned by careful, repeated practice.

Throughout his career, Van Gogh experienced the universal human drama of an individual person’s autonomy in relation to family loyalty and obligation in an unusually acute way. This was so not least because he depended on his brother for money while pursuing a career that his family largely disapproved of. In the chapter dealing with this set of issues, I concentrate on Vincent’s relationship with Theo, who, as “friend and brother,” mediates between Vincent’s loyalties to and affection for his family, on the one hand, and his declaration of autonomy in the pursuit of his vocation as an artist, on the other.

In assessing Vincent’s vexed relationship with Theo, I have concentrated on Vincent’s rhetorical sophistication in the managing of highly ambivalent and sensitive personal matters. The hard-hitting forthrightness and, at times, offensive honesty of his prose can easily conceal the fact that he also deals with human complexities in nuanced and intricate ways. For instance, he is skilled in arguing by implication and by way of half-articulated suggestions that can be, by turns, manipulative or deeply touching. Also, there are indications throughout the letters of his self-consciousness as a writer, suggesting that real discernment

often underlies and informs what might appear as uncalculated spontaneity. His management of tone and register also indicates that he had a developed sense of his audience; in this context, I have drawn attention to the role of humour in the correspondence as a whole and to how the development and changing moods of Van Gogh's humour can help us to understand the pathos of the last period of his life. Throughout the chapter, detailed attention to particular examples shows how versatile a writer Van Gogh was and how capable of addressing complex human issues with a combination of forcefulness and discernment.

The final chapter of part 3 deals with Van Gogh's break with traditional religious observance and his subsequent aspirations to an adequate understanding of the mystery of the universe and of ourselves within it. Throughout the letters, he deploys a wide range of suggestive but undefined terms to evoke our participation in the everyday miracle of existence, and here, I have attended again to two opposed aspects of his thinking. First, he draws strong distinctions between those who are open to the creative spirit and those who are not (black ray and white ray; eternal yes and eternal no). Second, he is aware of the complexities of people's moral and spiritual lives, and he stresses the relativity of judgment in contrast to the direct oppositions upon which he sometimes insists between black and white, yes and no.

I have dealt with these strong oppositions in Van Gogh's writing by suggesting that his black and white assertiveness and his nuanced appreciation of moral relativity do not exist separately but within a process by which he discovers how conceptual clarity is complicated and enriched in actual experience. A comparison between Van Gogh's 1876 sermon and his letters indicates the contrast between the creative complexity of his most effective writing and its absence when the immediacy of experience is separated from the clarity of edifying generalization. To describe the special distinction of Van Gogh's writing at its best, I suggest the phrase "post-Romantic figural" to indicate how his work embodies the transcendent mystery in a manner that is resistant to both allegorizing simplification and expressionist nonrepresentation.

As I noted in part 1, Van Gogh is perceptive about the imperfection of the truly beautiful, and this idea can be extended by analogy to the self-portrait in words that he told his sister Wil he wanted to create. That is, by their nature, letters offer us a series of glimpses and fragmented insights into a person who is represented imperfectly but who nonetheless is revealed as a real presence whom we feel ourselves coming to know. Throughout this study, I have argued that the value we attach to this kind of emergent knowledge is not separate from — indeed, it remains implicit in — the expressive power of the letters themselves

and their engagement with concerns of perennial human significance embodied in the circumstances of Van Gogh's life. After reading his complete correspondence, we might justifiably feel that, among other things, we have indeed encountered something on the order of a great work of literature. And yet the letters are not integrated and developed as, say, a novel is; rather, they present us with a densely tangled, difficult, discontinuous quasi-narrative of formidable bulk and complexity. The task of bringing to the surface the organizational principles, shapeliness of imagination, and coherence of thinking by means of which this body of correspondence engages and affects us, is not straightforward. Here, I have attempted at least the beginning of such a task, attending especially to the reading of specific examples in order to reveal something of the overall design of Van Gogh's mind and thought and his remarkable talent as a writer.

The correspondence (as we have it) began on 29 September 1872, when Van Gogh was nineteen years old and was living in The Hague. The last letter was written in Auvers-sur-Oise on 23 July 1890, when he was thirty-seven years old: it was found in his pocket after his death on 29 July. The three crumpled pages (RM25/5:326) have several dark blotches that are often interpreted as bloodstains, as they might well be. But whether we see actual blood here, or its semblance, these inadvertent markings can serve well enough now, in conclusion, to remind us of the tragic disjuncture between life and art, body and symbol — the disjuncture, that is, out of which desire arises as a condition of our irreparable imperfection. "I myself will actually never think my own work finished or ready" (499/3:234), Van Gogh says, and yet, as his letters show, in this imperfect life and unperfected art, we find a courage, integrity, and compassion far more humanly significant and true to life than any of the ideals that Van Gogh says he failed to realize.

NOTES

Introduction

1 This debate is thoughtfully summarized and explored in Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). I have thought it better to postpone further theoretical considerations — especially of the dialogical aspects of Van Gogh's correspondence — until a later study.

2 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, Harper and Row, 1975), 51, 56, 68.

3 As W. H. Auden says, in his letters, Van Gogh "loved to talk about what he was doing and why." W. H. Auden, "Calm Even in the Catastrophe," in *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973), 296. But as is sometimes noted, the letters contain surprisingly little information about Van Gogh's daily life — his domestic routines, where he acquired books, the various illnesses that he mentions briefly, and so on. However, we do learn a great deal about his practice as a painter.

4 Vincent van Gogh, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009). All references are to this edition, and letter numbers are indicated in the text, with the volume and page number following the forward slash. An expanded version of the printed edition is available free of charge at www.vangoghletters.org.

5 Wouter van der Veen, "'En tant que quant à moi': Vincent van Gogh and the French Language," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 20 (2002): 65, 71.

6 Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 12, 14. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

7 Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

8 Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

9 Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 5. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

10 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011). Page numbers are cited in the text.

11 Deborah Solomon, "Splendor in the Stars," *New York Times*, 25 November 2011.

12 Dick van Halsema, "Vincent van Gogh: A 'Great Dutch Writer' (between Marcellus Emants and Willem Kloos)," in *Van Gogh: New Findings*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Van Gogh Studies 4 (Zwolle: Wbooks; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2012), 19.

13 Van Gogh studies are a highly developed international field. A useful overview is provided in Ann Dumas, "The Van Gogh Literature from 1990 to the Present: A Selective Review," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 20 (2002): 41–51. Dumas focuses, as I do, on the literature in English. Wouter van der Veen, in *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind*, 13–18, provides a helpful account of scholarship on "Van Gogh's literary knowledge" (13), focusing on the letters. For a comprehensive bibliography, see Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, 895–918.

14 A year before Vincent's birth, his mother had a son, also called Vincent, but the baby died. Strangely, the first Vincent was born on 30 March 1852, and the second Vincent, on 30 March 1853. See Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 82. Lubin sees the death of the first Vincent as highly significant for the second Vincent's life and work (94–99). See also Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, "Self-Portrait Between the Lines: A Newly Discovered Letter from Vincent van Gogh to H. G. Tersteeg," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2003): 98–111. This letter is the only place on record where Vincent mentions his dead brother.

15 See Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, 78–83.

16 Naifeh and Smith call into question the "family legend of unrequited love" that was held to explain Vincent's departure (*Van Gogh: The Life*, 95). They

suggest that Vincent — ever the difficult houseguest — failed to find with the Loyers (his landlady, Ursula, and her daughter Eugenie) the family security and acceptance he always desired (95–96). Elly Cassee makes the case that Van Gogh's amorous infatuation at this time was with Caroline van Stokum-Haanebeek. "In Love: Vincent van Gogh's First True Love," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1996): 109–17.

17 While still based in Etten, Van Gogh had taken lessons from Mauve in The Hague, from November to December 1881. When Van Gogh moved to The Hague, he took further lessons in January 1882. A helpful chronology, with references to the letters, can be found in Van Gogh, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:66–77.

18 Naifeh and Smith challenge the standard account that maintains that Van Gogh committed suicide, suggesting instead that he was accidentally shot. They make their case in "Appendix: A Note on Vincent's Fatal Wounding," *Van Gogh: The Life*, 869–85. Although they correctly note how unsatisfactory the standard account is, their own theory also remains highly speculative.

19 See also Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters*, 39.

20 See Van Gogh, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:33.

21 Albert J. Lubin suggests that Van Gogh might have been influenced by the Tachtigers, a group of Dutch poets and writers who "revolted against rigid scholastic usage" and who "used unorthodox syntax to increase expressivity." *Stranger on the Earth*, 71. Judy Sund points out that Van Gogh's favourite novelist, Émile Zola, was a strong influence on the Tachtigers. *True to Temperament*, 52.

22 Van der Veen, "En tant que quant à moi," 65.

23 Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters*, 56.

24 For instance, in Theo van Gogh et al., *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo Van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), we find that Jo writes to Wil to say how intelligent Vincent's letters are, saying "I have seldom read letters like them" (30). In turn, Wil shared with Jo some of Vincent's letters, which are evidence to Jo of Vincent's "great mind" (194). Theo also sent a sample of Vincent's correspondence to Jo (112).

25 Sund, *True to Temperament*, 7, 14–17.

26 Carol Zemel makes this point throughout *Van Gogh's Progress*. For instance, "Van Gogh insisted on his right to live as a worker among the people he

depicted, his ‘subjects,’ while marketing those subjects in his own bourgeois world” (20).

27 As Peter Hecht says, “Vincent recognized the art he had seen in the reality around him, and then saw reality through the eyes of the artists he admired.” *Van Gogh and Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2006), 20. See also Chris Stolwijk, “Van Gogh’s Nature,” in *Vincent’s Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar Van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 29: “Van Gogh’s experience of nature was governed to a large extent by literature and art” so that he “blurred the boundary between the real landscape that he saw and the imaginary landscape that he made of it through free association.”

CHAPTER 1 *Religious Convictions, Moral Imperatives*

1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 56a12. See also 50b35; 59b18.

2 “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” 1.204, in *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, rev. ed., ed. Sandra Anstey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.

3 See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (Collins: Fount, 1979), and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Schillebeeckx draws on the idea of “negative contrast” frequently throughout these two works.

4 Carol Zemel, in *Van Gogh’s Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), focuses on Van Gogh’s “unremitting idealism” (2) as the source of his several utopian projects, which she examines in detail. On the same topic, Octave Mirbeau cites Julien Tanguy: “He felt too much? It made him want the impossible.” Octave Mirbeau, “Le Père Tanguy,” *L’écho de Paris*, 30 January 1894, in *Van Gogh: A Retrospective*, ed. Susan Alyson Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986), 222.

5 Van Gogh well understood the allure of the ideal and the impossibility of realizing it, as is illustrated in his letters: “a yearning for — real life — ideal and not attainable” (611/4:88); “that simpler and truer nature whose ideal sometimes haunts us” (789/5:61).

6 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist

(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Carl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984).

7 As Wouter van der Veen points out, *L'amour* is the work that Van Gogh "quoted most frequently in the first two hundred letters, which cover a period of ten years, from 1872 to 1882." *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 88.

8 See Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 78–83, 105–8.

9 Van Gogh's enthusiasm for drawing seems to have been intermittent. For instance, approximately a month later, he tells Theo, again from London: "My passion for drawing has again vanished here in England, but maybe inspiration will strike again one day" (27/1:51). He had drawn quite a lot during a brief visit to Helvoirt in June and July of 1874, before he returned to London.

10 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, 96.

11 Judy Sund is correct to say that during his religious phase, Van Gogh's letters about art reflect "a preacher's interest in finding effective prods to religious impulse" rather than "a connoisseur's love for beautiful or well-crafted objects." *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 33. Van Gogh's teacher in Amsterdam, Maurits Benjamin Mendes da Costa, provides some useful information on the moral aspect of Van Gogh's religious enthusiasm. All Van Gogh wanted was "to give poor creatures a peacefulness in their existence on earth"; he was "consumed by a need to help the unfortunate," and when he gave a copy of Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatio Christi* to Mendes, who was Jewish, he did so "not at all with an unspoken intention of converting me, but simply to make me aware of the humanity in it." Mendes da Costa, "Personal Reminiscences of Vincent van Gogh" (2 December 1910), translated in *Van Gogh: A Retrospective*, ed. Susan Alyson Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986), 44–45.

12 While in England, Van Gogh became sympathetic to the London poor, which is one reason why the novels of Charles Dickens appealed to him. As Naifeh and Smith point out, the socially concerned illustrations in *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News*, which Van Gogh saw in London, affected him in force only a decade later. *Van Gogh: The Life,* 86.

13 See chapter 4 for a further discussion of Van Gogh's escapism.

14 Wouter van der Veen suggests that Van Gogh probably became acquainted with these authors through his father. "An Avid Reader: Van Gogh and Literature," in *Vincent's Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh,* ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar Van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 53.

15 On getting rid of Michelet and Renan, see also letter 55 (1:80). To confirm the turn towards asceticism, Vincent goes on to advise Theo to be sure to "eat *simply*."

16 See especially Sund, *True to Temperament,* and Van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind*.

17 One problem with letters in general is that they are occasional and don't tell us the whole story. Yet, as Philip Callow says, Van Gogh seems to have "changed direction almost overnight." *Vincent van Gogh: A Life* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996; first published, 1990), 69. Leo Jansen describes Van Gogh's "change of course" as "radical and definitive: suddenly it was art that was to provide consolation." "Vincent van Gogh's Belief in Art as Consolation," in Stolwijk et al., *Vincent's Choice,* 18. Naifeh and Smith say that "almost overnight," references to scripture, homiletic passages, and "philosophical ruminations" disappear from the letters. *Van Gogh: The Life*, 180.

18 Cited in Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life,* 199.

19 This idea is thoroughly explored in Van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind*.

20 Jules Michelet, *Love ("L'amour"): From the French of M. J. Michelet* (n.p.: General Books LLC, 2009), 7.

21 Though Van Gogh insists on the complexity of human behaviour, he is also capable of making black and white judgments, as, for instance, in his deployment of the contrast between the black and white ray (388/3:20), which I discuss in chapter 8.

22 See Vincent van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh,* 3rd ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 1: xxxii.

23 For further commentary on the family concern for Van Gogh's mental health, see Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Erik Fokke, "The Illness of Vincent van Gogh: A Previously Unknown Diagnosis," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2003): 113–19. Naifeh and Smith pay close attention to the early manifestation of Van Gogh's mental disorders, beginning with his transfer to

Paris after his distress in England. *Van Gogh: The Life*, 99.

24 Alfred Sensier, *Jean-François Millet: Peasant and Painter*, trans. Helena de Kay (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1881), 210.

CHAPTER 2 *The Artistic Life and Its Limits*

1 Van Gogh regarded photography as a mechanical, and therefore soulless, reproduction of appearances.

2 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, Harper and Row, 1975), 49.

3 W. H. Auden, "Calm Even in the Catastrophe," in *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973), 294–301.

4 J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 23.

5 Tsukasa Kōdera sees the "core" of Van Gogh's "*japonisme*" as "an expression of his utopian thought." *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 51–55.

6 Judy Sund perceptively observes that Van Gogh rejected "abstraction" and at the same time championed "expressionism." *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 245–46.

7 See Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles* (London: Penguin, 2007); and Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 665–87. For a useful summary, see Douglas W. Druick, "Keynote Address: Current Research on Van Gogh and Gauguin," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2003): 10–23.

8 For Gauguin's own, engagingly tendentious reflections, see Paul Gaugin, *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Dover, 1997), 7–13.

CHAPTER 3 *Birds' Nests*

1 In a memoir written in 1910, Vincent's sister Elisabeth describes his expertise in tracking down nests. Cited in *Van Gogh: A Retrospective*, ed. Susan Alyson Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986), 32. V. W. van Gogh records

being told by Johannes de Looyer and Karel van Engel that “as boys they had hunted bird’s [*sic*] nests for Vincent at 10 cents (twopence) apiece.” Vincent van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3rd ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 2:442. See also Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 38–39, 431.

2 See Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 2:446. Kerssemakers describes “a cupboard with at least thirty different bird’s [*sic*] nests.” In an interview in 1936, Ludwig Wenkebach recalls visiting Van Gogh’s studio in Nuenen with Anthon van Rappard and noticing “a great many birds’ nests and eggs on several tables.” “Ludwig ‘Willem’ Reijmert Wenkebach, Interviewed by Mrs. Johan de Meester (1936),” quoted in Stein, *Van Gogh: A Retrospective*, 67.

3 “Vincent came to meet us at the train, and he brought a bird’s nest as a plaything for his little nephew and namesake.” Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, “Memoir of Vincent van Gogh,” in Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 1:51.

4 See Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Dutch Period 1881–1885*, vol. 1 of *Vincent van Gogh: Paintings* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1999), 198–207. The authors describe five known paintings. They also note that “from the point of view of iconography they are almost entirely without precedent” (200), which helps to show how individual Van Gogh’s interest was. In *Van Gogh and the Sunflowers* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2008), 32, Louis van Tilborgh makes a passing observation about the sunflowers and birds’ nests. Letter 533 (3:289), from Nuenen in 1885, contains a sketch of a beautifully contoured nest, held in the prickly fork of a sturdy branch.

5 Jules Michelet, *The Bird*, trans. A. E. (London: T. Nelson, 1868), 247.

6 “Great creating nature” is Shakespeare’s evocative phrase in *The Winter’s Tale*, 4.4.87.

7 See, for instance, letter 736: “my paintings are worthless” (4:384). Van Gogh’s opinion about the value of his work vacillated, especially after the onset of his illness.

8 There are many examples throughout the letters. See, for instance, 783 (Gauguin and Bernard “might well do more consolatory painting,” 5:41); 665 (“I console myself by reconsidering the sunflowers,” 4:242); 803 (“So it continues to be a great comfort to me that the work is progressing,” 5:96); and 509 (“painting and, to my mind, particularly painting peasant life, gives peace of mind,” 3:254).

9 For an extended discussion of this point, see A. D. Nuttall, *Two Concepts of*

Allegory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

10 It is with some degree of wishful thinking, then, that Van Gogh describes Sien as a "tame dove" (224; see part 1 of this volume). In this context, it is worth noting that the domestic implications of nests are also explored in Michelet's *L'amour:* the "nest of true love" (49) is also "a world of order, and kindness" (33); a child especially needs "a soft nest" made by the "perfect communion" of the parents (42). Interestingly, Vincent's enthusiasm for Michelet's *L'oiseau* was shared by Theo, who sent a copy to Jo during their courtship. See Theo van Gogh et al., *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), 100. The correspondence between Theo and Jo contains several comparisons of the couple's upcoming domestic relationship with a nest (81, 153, 217, 276).

11 Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, 369.

12 Van Gogh realized that rebellion against society is not sufficient. For instance, he recommends "taking society as it is," while also "feeling oneself completely free" (400). The complexities of Van Gogh's negotiations with the bourgeois society that frequently angered him is explored by Carol Zemel in *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

13 Michelet describes nest-building birds as weavers. *The Bird*, 253. Interestingly, Naifeh and Smith describe Van Gogh's Nuenen weavers sitting at their machines "like birds in their cages." *Van Gogh: The Life*, 379.

CHAPTER 5 *Cab Horses*

1 Admittedly, Van Gogh says that the engraving has "no very great artistic value," even though it "struck me and made an impression on me." Given the points I have made in part 1, this should not be too surprising. During this phase of his life (the letter was written in 1878), art was subordinate to religion, and the engraving mattered to Van Gogh especially because of its moral and religious significance. Nonetheless, he does allow the engraving some artistic value, which supports the argument I make here.

2 In passing, it is of interest to note the curious letter to Bernard in which Van Gogh defends cannibals who eat a human victim "once a month." His point is that the damage they inflict on one another is much less than the damage inflicted on them by "the frightful white man, with his bottle of alcohol, his

wallet and his pox," and by the Christian hypocrisy that destroys a whole people in order to root out "barbarity" (612/4:90).

3 Paul Signac mentions talking to Van Gogh about socialism. See Vincent van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3rd ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 3:166. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith argue that in Arles, Van Gogh preached "a coming 'revolution' in art" to replace the consolation once offered by religion. *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 581.

4 See also letter 658, where Van Gogh speculates about "the inevitable weakening of families from generation to generation" (4:226), and letter 779, where he is concerned about "something, I don't know what, disturbed in my brain" (5:32).

5 Maurits Benjamin Mendes da Costa (1851–1938). See Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 1:170.

6 Paulus Coenraad Görlitz (1851–1921) boarded with Van Gogh in Dordrecht. His recollections appear in Van Gogh, *Complete Letters*, 1:112.

7 It is worth noting that a reader of the collected letters will encounter this same mixture of elements. As with the paintings, the letters are also sometimes "harsh" and off-putting, but at other times, these qualities are transfigured by the imaginative power of Van Gogh's writing.

8 When Vincent writes to Wil, assuring her that "cultivating your garden" is the right thing to do (785/5:55), he alludes to the conclusion of *Candide*, again showing that he understood Voltaire's main message.

9 Leo Jansen correctly points out that Van Gogh alludes to Pangloss as "a contrived counterweight to his own despair." "Vincent van Gogh's Belief in Art as Consolation," in *Vincent's Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar Van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 13. Wouter van der Veen mentions Jansen's point and perceptively adds, "Pangloss had replaced St. Paul, but the plan was the same. And all would be well!" *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 206.

10 In letter 772, Vincent thanks Theo for the earlier letter 770.

CHAPTER 6 *By Heart*

1 In letter 141, Van Gogh alludes to an anecdote about Corot, who remarked

about a painting which finally sold that "it took only forty years of work, thought and care." Van Gogh appreciated the value of Corot's endurance and patient practice, even in the face of rejection and disappointment.

2 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 170.

3 The implication is that he didn't practice the torsos in the same way, which, as he admits to Theo, was indeed the case. 502/3:241.

4 See, for instance, 718/4:355, 719/4:356, 721/4:361, and 723/4:367.

5 In this sense, "abstraction" complements Van Gogh's suspicions about "castles in the air," discussed in chapter 5.

6 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith argue that Van Gogh used exaggeration and simplification to compensate for weak draftsmanship, but they also say that exaggeration and simplification enabled him to express a "deeper emotional truth." *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 676.

7 Louis van Tilborgh, *Van Gogh and Japan* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2006).

8 It might be worth noting, again in passing, that Van Gogh would have read about the "silken-robed Samurai" in Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysantheme* (Lexington, KY: Filiquarian, 2010; first published 1887), 27.

9 Tsukasa Kōdera argues that Japan was largely a focus for Van Gogh's utopian thought. *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 51–65.

CHAPTER 7 *A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt*

1 The term "Axial Age" was coined by Karl Jaspers. For his full development of the idea, see Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1953). See also S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilization*s (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

2 See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 179–95.

3 Vincent's indifference to his mothers and sisters is evident when he asks Theo, "Will you let them know that I won't write, which for that matter I made quite plain when I left?" (548/3:330). As for his time in Paris, Andries Bonger witnessed how difficult a guest Vincent was and how much Theo had

to endure. See Vincent van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3rd ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 2:523–24. See also Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 523–39.

4 Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 187.

5 On numerous occasions, Vincent asked Theo to become a painter and to join him. While in The Hague, Vincent suggested, "We should both of us quite simply become painters" (211/2:41). In his next letter, he makes the point again: "Theo, let it all go hang and become a painter" (212/2:42). In Drenthe, he returned to the idea frequently and was encouraged by the "repeated occurrence in the history of art of the phenomenon of two brothers who are painters" (394/3:33).

6 Vincent was concerned about the possibility that Theo would move to the United States: "you mustn't think about America, in my opinion" (393/3:31), he writes, and "do NOT go to America, because it's exactly the same there as in Paris" (394/3:32). Later, he even says, "I'll go to America with you" (617/4:102).

7 Transcriptions of the changes are available for study at the Van Gogh Museum and at the Huygens Institute.

8 Albert J. Lubin claims that Vincent "dissociated himself from the Van Gogh name" and that "not a single drawing or painting of his adulthood bears the family name." *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 46. Still, the break from his family was far from definitive.

9 See also 403/3:60 and 388/3:20.

10 Vincent wrote to Theo about promoting the Impressionists commercially, which he understood would be "a long-term business." 617/4:102; see also 584/4:24 and 625/4:125. Interestingly, Vincent expresses to Theo the hope that after Theo's marriage, "you and your wife will set up a commercial firm for several generations in the renewal." 743/4:403. See also Naifeh and Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life*, 534–35, 564–82.

11 It is worth remembering that Vincent was also ill and that Theo paid the hospital bills. Vincent was well aware of this and writes to Theo and Jo that "instead of paying money to a landlord we're giving it to the asylum," which is "scarcely cheaper." 787/5:57. Elsewhere, he is uncomfortable because of

enquiries being made by the hospital about Theo's earnings (800/5:82), and he makes a suggestion about moving to a cheaper hospital (839/5:182).

12 A wonderfully compressed version of the ambivalence that this chapter describes occurs in a letter that Van Gogh wrote to Caroline van Stockum-Haanebeek on 9 February 1874. Van Gogh frequently used the conventional "with a handshake" at the end of a letter, often with variations. In this case, he signs off, "A handshake for you and Willem, like old times, so that it hurts your fingers" (18/1:42). Indeed, Van Gogh seems to have paid special attention to handshakes. He explains to Van Rappard that he objects to people who offer one finger instead of supplying a proper handshake, and he has some tough fun at their expense (439/1:137). Theo apparently told Vincent that Hermanus Tersteeg didn't like the way Vincent shook his hand — one of "those little antipathies," Vincent says, "that make one prefer not to see someone" (356/2:360).

13 Here, "the family" refers to Uncles Cor and Vincent, who seem to have refused to put up funds to help Theo start his own gallery. See 568/3:362n2.

14 See *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 180–86, 193–209.

15 Van Gogh's sense of humour shows up in various ways. Among these, we can count his portrait of the smiling skeleton. Anton Kerssemakers relates a practical joke played by Van Gogh on a troublesome priest in Nuenen, which involved Van Gogh distributing condoms to the local youth. Cited in Hans Luijten, *Van Gogh and Love* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 27–28. Jo writes about Vincent's visit to Paris, during which he and Toulouse-Lautrec "made many jokes" about an undertaker whom they had happened to meet. See *Complete Letters*, 1: lii.

16 See also Van Gogh's parody of Balzac's Baron de Nucingen in 184/1:314: "De debil ton't exeest."

CHAPTER 8 *Something New Without a Name*

1 André Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, trans. Nancy Huston (New York: Viking, 2007), 19–24.

2 The phrase, "quelque-chôse là haut" ("something on high") probably derives from Victor Hugo. See letter 288, note 13. Van Gogh also uses the phrase in letters 294, 333, 396, 397, 401, 403, and 405.

3 In letter 228 (2:74), Vincent says that when he was refused by Kee, he felt

that love itself had died, going on to explain to Theo (16 May 1882): “Now, as you know, I believe in God, I did not doubt the power of love. But then I felt something like, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” He wonders if he has been deluding himself, and concludes with a sentence from Multatuli: “Oh God, there is no God!” In that crisis of religious faith occasioned by a failed love relationship, Van Gogh appeals to the God about whom he is having doubts in order to express the doubts themselves. It is a familiar enough pattern, not just in Van Gogh’s letters but whenever this topic is discussed. For instance, the word “atheist” incorporates the Greek word for “God,” which is why some radical unbelievers reject the term.

4 Tsukasa Kōdera makes the general argument that Van Gogh moves from Christianity to a “naturalized religion.” *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 27.

5 The sermon is contained in letter 96 (1:127–29). Further references are to those pages.

6 See Debora Leah Silverman’s essay “Pilgrim’s Progress and Vincent van Gogh’s Métier,” in the exhibition catalogue *Van Gogh in England: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Martin Bailey (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1992), 95–115.

7 See the section of Martin Bailey’s introduction to *Van Gogh in England* titled “A Pilgrim’s Progress,” 63–71; see also Ronald de Leeuw, “George Henry Boughton and the ‘Beautiful Picture’ in Van Gogh’s 1876 Sermon,” *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1995): 49–61. For further background information on the sermon, see Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 130–33.

8 See Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 259n77; Hope B. Werness, “Vincent van Gogh and a Lost Painting by G. H. Boughton,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 106 (September 1985): 53–75; Zander van Ech, “Van Gogh and George Henry Boughton,” *Burlington Magazine* 132 (1990): 539–40; De Leeuw, “George Henry Boughton and the ‘Beautiful Picture’”; and Bailey, “Pilgrim’s Progress.”

9 See Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 11–76. For my discussion of Heaney and the “post-Romantic figural,” see Patrick Grant, *Breaking Enmities: Religion, Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland, 1967–97* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 58–71.

10 The famous line occurs in Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach."

11 W. H. Auden insightfully says of Van Gogh: "He is the first painter, so far as I know, to have consciously attempted to produce a painting which should be religious and yet contain no religious iconography." "Calm Even in the Catastrophe," in *Forewords and Afterwords,* ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973), 299; first published in *Encounter* 12 (April 1959): 37–40. Albert Aurier's early commentary already had a finger on the pulse, pointing out that Van Gogh's painting is "at once entirely realistic and yet almost supernatural." "The Isolated Ones: Vincent van Gogh," *Mercure de France,* January 1890, in *Van Gogh: A Retrospective,* ed. Susan Alyson Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986), 181.

INDEX