Long ago, Aristotle pointed out that the sheer bulk of a great literary work is a significant part of its aesthetic effect. 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.”

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. 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. “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). 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. 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). 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.

Vincent tells Theo that he has recently started drawing again, though he is dismissive of the results (“it was nothing special” [23/1:45]). 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. 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 always 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. 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). 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.  

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. These writers have in common an insistence on the castigation of self-will, 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). 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 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
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 ascendency 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. 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. 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. 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*.

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). 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 explana-
tion 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 height-
ened 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).