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 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. 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.” 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 encompasses 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. 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). 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 apostle-dealers, 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 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 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. The quarrels with Gauguin focused squarely on this set of issues, on which the two men held strongly opposed opinions.
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. 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.