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

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

Nests: The Reshaping of Nature

Van Gogh had a special fondness for birds’ nests. We know that as a small boy, he searched for them in the countryside; as an adult, he paid other small boys to do the searching for him.1 At one point, he describes for Theo “a long trip I made in the company of a peasant
boy — in order to get hold of a wren’s nest.” He goes on to say that he ended up finding six of them, hastening to assure Theo that the young birds had left and the nests could be taken “without too many pangs of conscience” (507/3:252). Van Gogh’s student at Nuenen, Anton Kerssemakers, describes a cupboard full of nests in Van Gogh’s chaotic studio.² And when Van Gogh gave his nephew (the baby Vincent Willem) a gift, he chose, yes, a bird’s nest.³ He also drew and painted nests: in these works, with their ruggedly improvised yet shapely contours, we catch an intimation of his later, more famous sunflowers.⁴

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

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

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

Well — the nests were also painted on a black background on purpose — for the reason that I simply want it to be obvious in these studies that the objects appear against a conventional background, and are not in their natural setting. A — living nest in nature is — something very different; one hardly sees the nest itself, one sees the birds.

Given that one wants to paint nests from one’s collection of nests, one can’t say emphatically enough that the background and setting in nature are very different — so I made the background — simply black. (536/3:299)

The point here is that a painting removes the nest from nature, its “living” context. Indeed, Van Gogh’s collecting of nests is already a disturbance of the natural order, and this twofold removal (first, taking a nest from its natural location; second, representing it in paint) has the advantage of enabling us to see both the meaning and the physical form of the nest more clearly. As Van Gogh says, a “living nest in nature” is, in itself, scarcely visible, because nests are camouflaged. A painter therefore needs to provide a background that removes the camouflage: to this end, Van Gogh supplies “a black background on purpose.” But a painting — if it is well done — will also show us something further about the nest beyond its physical appearance: for instance, that it is a place of protection and nurture, or a beautiful object that is both artificially constructed and in tune with nature.
All of this reminds us of Van Gogh’s conviction that art does not simply reproduce natural appearances, even though it is not entirely separable from them. He liked to cite the idea (derived from Francis Bacon) that art is “man added to nature,” as well as the closely allied notion (derived from Zola) that art is “a corner of nature seen through a temperament” (361/2:373). Repeatedly in the letters, he takes exception to those who “conceive of realism in the sense of literal truth — namely precise drawing and local colour,” insisting that we must pursue “something other than that” (495/3:229). For his own part, he is confident that “I have my own way of looking” (499/2:236), and in moments of elation, he is convinced that his work is “entirely original” (689/4:289) — though at other times, he could feel the exact opposite. In turn, he links his “own way of looking” to an ability both to “keep hold of an idea” in a painting and to express that idea with “feeling” (291/2:216). This combination of effects entails “knowing nature in such a way that what one does is fresh and true — that’s what many now lack” (291/2:217). Confronted by a great painting, we therefore find ourselves sharing a new way of seeing, feeling, and understanding as we are asked to reconsider the meaning of some natural object or aspect of experience that we thought we knew well enough already. Van Gogh often links this sense of fresh discovery to consolation, comfort, and serenity.

An example of how we might discover in a natural object some fresh dimension and new significance is provided by another paragraph in the letter about the nest-hunting expedition with the peasant boy: “Searching for subjects, I’ve found such splendid cottages that I now really must go bird’s nesting with a number of variations of these ‘people’s nests,’ which remind me so much of the nests of wrens — that’s to say, paint them” (507/3:252). Here, Van Gogh intends to paint the cottages, but they are so closely tied in his imagination to birds’ nests that it might not at first be clear which of the two things he wants to depict. Soon after, he refers again to the cottages, of which he has now made four paintings (513/3:258). He pauses to reflect: “I’ve never seen the little house where Millet lived — but I imagine that these 4 little human nests are of the same kind” (515/3:262).
As Van Gogh says, wrens’ nests are “splendid” (507/3:252) in themselves, and now they enable him to reproduce in paint an analogous quality in the peasants’ cottages, which, in their own way, are also nests. The interpenetration here of art and nature enables us to see, simultaneously, a difference and similarity between the nests and the cottages, affecting our perception of both. Clearly, cottages are more self-consciously fabricated than are nests, but peasants are not the same kind of artists as are Van Gogh and Millet. That is, Van Gogh paints the cottages, much as he does the nests, in order to render their human significance through the medium of paint. By contrast, the peasant is most likely to be concerned about the cottage as a place to live: although a cottage dweller might pause to admire, say, a well-formed thatch or well-fitted door, the main aim of cottage building is functional rather than aesthetic. The bird and the peasant are therefore, in a way, closer to each other than either of them is to the artist, who, as Van Gogh says, introduces an “idea,” which is rendered (by the painter) and apprehended (by the viewer) with “feeling.” Introducing Millet, whom Van Gogh revered, reminds us again that a great artist needs to remain (like the bird) immersed in nature even while re-creating nature in a way that discloses something of its mystery and the mystery of ourselves dwelling within it.

Cages: Flying to Freedom

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

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

An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that.

And it’s often impossible for men to do anything, prisoners in I don’t know what kind of horrible, horrible, very horrible cage. There is also, I know, release, belated release. A reputation ruined rightly or wrongly, poverty, inevitability of circumstances, misfortune; that creates prisoners.

You may not always be able to say what it is that confines, that immures, that seems to bury, and yet you feel I know not what bars, I know not what gates — walls.

Is all that imaginary, a fantasy? I don’t think so; and then you ask yourself, Dear God, is this for long, is this for ever, is this for eternity?

You know, what makes the prison disappear is every deep, serious attachment. To be friends, to be brothers, to love; that opens the prison through sovereign power, through a most powerful spell. But he who doesn’t have that remains in death. But where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again. (155/1:249)

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

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

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

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

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

But the positive aspects of nest building are also defined by their
opposites, which prevent or destroy happiness, as we see in the excerpt
above. Thus, the nest stands in contrast to the cage, as well as to other
kinds of confinement that suppress creativity, including the rules, the
conventions, and the gamut of repressive social measures that Van Gogh
deplored throughout his life. As Naifeh and Smith point out, Van Gogh
“kept a special place in his inner gallery for images of confinement,”
and his “portfolios overflowed with depictions of imprisonment.”
Thus, he complains that society at large is so thoroughly governed by
restrictions that “you may not always be able to say what it is that con-
fines, that immures, that seems to bury, and yet you feel I know not
what bars, I know not what gates — walls.” For Van Gogh, this sadly
diminished world of respectable conformity is governed by “children,”
by which he means, in this context, people who have not grown up
and who do not understand what home and freedom really mean, as
opposed to the confining anti-home that they actually inhabit. Break-
ing out of that “horrible, very horrible cage” is necessary in the interests
of “freedom,” even if we have to take risks, encountering the storms of
life head-on. But, happily, there are ways to escape: “every deep, serious
attachment” offers a taste of liberation, and “where sympathy springs
up again, life springs up again.” For Van Gogh, art aims to produce
exactly this kind of liberation, awakening in us a renewed sympathy as
well as new kinds of life-enhancing relationships and understandings.
In the examples provided above, we can see how birds’ nests bring together the two large thematic concerns that I mentioned at the start of this chapter: the relationship between art and nature and the experience of home, exile, and return. On the one hand, nest building stands as a figure for the human artist who produces beautiful work by remaining close to nature but infusing nature with “sincere feeling” (291/2:217) that expresses the artist’s personal way of seeing and is not dependent on an exact or literal copy of natural appearances. On the other hand, a nest, like a home, provides the comfort, serenity, and nurture that enable a person to soar creatively and to encounter the storms of life with confidence. As Van Gogh says, the perilous sea journey cannot be sustained unless there is a secure place to return to, and so the home-exile-return motif reinforces the art-and-nature motif, each expanding upon and deepening the other.

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

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

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

In this context, it is worth emphasizing that the world’s coarseness and entanglements were not seen by Van Gogh as an impediment to the realization of beautiful form; rather, they are its substance. To be human is to be caught up in the labyrinth of a material body within a labyrinthine material world, and any authentic representation of human experience will bear witness to the coarse opaqueness and immediacy of things, even as we seek meaning and understanding in and through these things. And so the nest is the rough weave of twigs, not separate from or opposite to the nurturing and protective centre. Nothing less than this interpenetration of matter and form will do, as Van Gogh never tired of repeating both explicitly and figuratively. “In short,” he tells Theo in July 1882, “I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly. Despite my so-called coarseness — you understand — perhaps precisely because of it” (249/2:113).

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

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

The caustic vigour of these words readily passes over into Van Gogh’s dislike of academic correctness, as, for instance, in his opinions about Van Rappard’s studies at the Academy in Antwerp. Van Gogh warns that Van Rappard will find himself seduced there by the two false mistresses of fickle vulgarity and oppressive academicism. The second kind are the “women of marble — sphinx — cold vipers — who would like to bind men to themselves, entirely.” He goes on to say, “Such mistresses freeze men, and petrify them,” and he identifies these entrapping women with “academic reality” (184/1:313).

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

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

Yet, for all that, the asylum remained a place of confinement, oppressive and frightening in its own way. “I see no way out” (836/5:179), Vincent tells Theo in January 1890; in addition, he thought his attacks were made worse because the hospital had once been a religious institution and the cloisters were causing him to have nightmares (805/5:100). Also, despite the occasional camaraderie, many patients were distressingly idle, falling into lassitude and a deadening inertia. Their “absolute idleness” (777/5:30) troubled Van Gogh: “and what would be infinitely worse is to let myself slide into the state of my companions in misfortune who do nothing all day, week, month, year” (836/5:178). He complains about the “monotony” of being in the company of so many people “who do absolutely nothing” (820/5:144) — exactly (we might feel) as with the caged bird.

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

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

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

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

And so the flight of the creative spirit is not just a result of nurture and enabling circumstances but is depicted frequently in Van Gogh’s writing as a struggle to escape from the forces that would imprison and tame what art and creativity mean. In this context, from his early religious phase until the end of his career, Van Gogh was drawn to the idea of resurrection, Christianity’s chief symbol of the flight of a
free spirit from deadly confinement. Indeed, there are “dark and evil and terrible things of the world,” he says in October 1877, but the “fire of Spirit and Love” is “a power of the Resurrection” (132/1:198). And from St. Rémy in 1890, long after he had abandoned his early religious enthusiasm, Van Gogh sent a letter that included a sketch of his painting of Lazarus, reborn from the dead (866/5:224).

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

The same idea recurs in various contexts, as the conditions of imprisonment or confinement stimulate the splendid protest of life and beauty. The ugly Socrates becomes radiant (368/2:391), a rubbish dump is like a fairy tale (275/2:182), a vicious girl is transfigured when she has a baby (309/2:262), a little old man in a wheelchair is “priceless” (351/2:351), and even a crayon contains a “gypsy soul” (324/2:292) that wants to get out. Van Gogh especially admired people who remained
active and creative despite old age and pain, continuing to blossom like the gnarled apple tree. Though Israels is old, he still makes progress as a painter, “and I think that is true youth and evergreen energy” (326/2:303). Despite his age, Antoon Hermans, Van Gogh’s friend in Eindhoven, is “doing his best to learn to paint with the same *freshness* of enthusiasm as if he were 20” (465/3:179). The painter Giotto, who was “*always suffering*” remained “always full of kindness and ardour as if he were already living in a world other than this” (683/4:275). Whimsically, Van Gogh says of himself that “the uglier, older, meaner, iller, poorer I get,” the more he wants “to take my revenge by doing brilliant colour, well arranged, resplendent” (678/4:265). In these examples, the idea of rebirth, of the spirit rising from the ashes of bitter experience, is applied to nature as well as to religion, morality, and art, each of which is analogous to the others even as Van Gogh’s interests changed and developed in the manner I have described in part 1.

**Conclusion**

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

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

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