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

Stormy Weather and the Painter’s Dilemma

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

Now at long last, this morning the weather has changed and has turned milder — and I’ve already had an opportunity to find out what this mistral’s like too. I’ve been out on several hikes round about here, but that wind always made it impossible to do anything. The sky was a hard blue with a great bright sun that melted just about all the snow — but the wind was so cold and dry it gave you goose-pimples. But even so I’ve seen lots of beautiful things — a ruined abbey on a hill planted with hollies, pines and grey olive trees. We’ll get down to that soon, I hope. (583/4:22)

It isn’t clear from this passage whether Van Gogh already knew what a mistral was when he arrived in the south of France. The main point is that he now discovers what it feels like to be exposed to it and how it prevents him from painting (“that wind always made it impossible to do anything”). But as the opening sentence of the excerpt indicates, the milder weather provided an opportunity to go outside and paint the “beautiful things” that he had seen while the mistral was blowing. The touches of detail in his description of the landscape (the ruined abbey, holly, pines, and grey olive trees) anticipate the things he will paint when he gets the chance. By contrast, the cold, dry wind, which is associated with snow and the “hard blue” sky, made it impossible for him to work. Still, he confronted the bad weather by going for walks, as a result of which he discovered beautiful things even as the mistral prevented him from painting them. His attitude to the freezing wind is thus to some degree ambivalent. It provides adversity by means of which beauty is discovered even while it takes away the opportunity to be creative.
Van Gogh’s further discussions of the mistral return consistently to the main themes addressed here; in other words, his descriptions of the weather have a bearing on his thinking about the creative process. Although, surprisingly, he does not mention the mistral before he goes to Arles, throughout the letters, he has plenty to say about the weather in general, which he consistently describes in ways that are simultaneously literal and metaphorical. His descriptions of the mistral can therefore provide a focus for a set of concerns that are explored throughout the correspondence and that are not confined to the harsh wind he encountered in the south of France.

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

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

There’s already a lot of sand in the one, but with the second, when there really was a storm and the sea came very close to the dunes, I had to scrape everything off twice because of the thick layer of sand completely covering it. The wind was so strong that I could barely stay on my feet and barely see through the clouds of sand. I tried to get it down anyway by immediately painting it again in a small inn behind the dunes, after first scraping it all off, and then going out to take another look from there. So I have a couple of souvenirs after all. But another souvenir is that I’ve caught a cold again, with the results you know about, which now force me to stay at home for a few days. (259/2:142)
In contrast to the letter about Tersteeg, in which Van Gogh uses “the cruelest north wind” as a metaphor, here he describes a real storm that literally blew sand onto his canvas, requiring him to scrape it off. Eventually, he took shelter at the “small inn,” a safe haven where he set about repainting the battered canvasses. However, for his rashness in exposing himself to the unkind elements, he caught a cold and would have to stay at home and rest.

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

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

A further example of the same kind of interpenetration of the weather and Van Gogh’s personal experience is provided by a comparison he makes between two of his drawings: *Sorrow*, depicting a seated nude figure, and *Roots*, depicting “some tree roots in sandy ground.” He explains to Theo how in these works, he has “tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure,” going on then to describe *Roots* (which, in fact, depicts a leafless, gnarled tree, foregrounded by its massive root system). He says that he wants to show this tree “frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life’s
struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots” (222/2:61). The analogy here allows us to see how significant for Van Gogh is the juxtaposition of the storm in nature and the human figure whom he depicts. Like the tree, she is an earthy creature suffering and damaged by the storms of life, but still tenacious. Here, as elsewhere, the storm is deployed metaphorically, its material immediacy (Roots) opening upon a larger human and moral meaning (Sorrow).

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

Ships in the Storm and the Search for Serenity

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

Van Gogh returns often to this third, metaphorical use of stormy weather, and when he does so, his writing on the topic is at its most interesting. For instance, he tells Van Rappard, “When cares weigh heavily on me it’s as if I were on a ship in a storm” (307/2:256). Elsewhere, he says that Van Rappard will think him “a headstrong person,” and then adds: “But where do I want to drive people, especially myself? To the open sea” (188/1:322). Here, the allusion to the storm is figurative (“as if I were on a ship in a storm”) and is complementary to his account of the “headstrong” energy that compels him to venture onto the “open sea” — which, again, is a metaphor for life’s perilous adventure. He also connects the open sea to his vocation as a painter: “But now, I feel I’m on the high seas — painting must proceed with all the strength that we can muster” (260/2:146).

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

The idea of a ship or small boat weathering a storm or facing the hazards of an open sea appealed to Van Gogh partly because he could readily imagine the ship as a safe haven, a well-ordered, enclosed space (a variation of the nest) where one could be calm and feel sustained in
resistance to the incalculable hostility of the world at large. “I have love for the studio such as a bargee would have for his boat” (323/2:290), he tells Theo, making a link between his own treasured, comfortable workspace and the ships that he associates with fortitude, courage, and protection. Elsewhere, he compares painting to a “raft” (404/3:62), or “a little boat in a disaster” (524/3:273), which, if things were to get sufficiently stormy, Theo might also need. And “even if one does sustain damage,” he says, we “still manage to keep the ship afloat” (557/3:347). In a further passage written in some distress from St. Rémy, he extends the metaphor: “I consider this as a shipwreck, this journey” (865/5:223), and elsewhere, he laments the loss of “my studio, now foundered” (765/4:437) as a consequence of his illness. Yet he also attempts to follow the advice he gives Theo, offsetting “the disaster and shipwreck of the moment” (405/3:64) with the hope of a better future, as he attempts to maintain a creative space even while accepting the perils of the journey: “It’s as if I were on a ship in a storm. Anyway, though I know very well that the sea holds dangers and one can drown in it, I still love the sea deeply and despite all the perils of the future I have a certain serenity” (307/2:256).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Van Gogh returns frequently to these points. For instance, he complains about having “a tremendous amount of wind and mistral here, 3 days out of four at the moment, always with sunshine, though, but then it’s difficult to work out of doors” (603/4:74). Again, he tells Theo that “the mistral’s been blowing hard here,” following up with the reassurance that “the weather’s splendid now” (605/4:77), so his work progresses rapidly. He is bothered by the fact that “the mistral is still
there” but is consoled because “there are intervals of calm, and then it’s wonderful” (682/4:272); he describes having “two or three glorious days here, very hot, with no wind” (671/4:250). Elsewhere, “the devil of a mistral” stands opposed to “the sun, dear God” (663/4:239); he can work “at white heat’ as long as the weather’s fine” and he is not disrupted by the “merciless mistral” (699/4:316). He also reflects on how, “when the days of mistral and rain come,” things are “cold and sad,” and he remembers, by contrast, painting in a “summer furnace over the white-hot wheat” (806/5:106). Here, Van Gogh’s experience of the chilling mistral once again enhances his appreciation of the life-giving sun.

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

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

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

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

Again, Vincent writes about Theo’s impending fatherhood and “emotions which must move the forthcoming father of a family.” He then acknowledges that Theo must also endure “the petty vexations of Paris” and concludes that “realities of this sort must anyway be like a good gust of the mistral, not very soothing, but health-giving” (790/5:61). The figurative intent here is unmistakable because it overrides the literal: Vincent is not talking primarily about the weather but about “the petty vexations of Paris,” which are represented by the mistral.
In these examples, the mistral is self-consciously deployed in a figurative manner, and, as Van Gogh well knew, in a metaphorical sense, a mistral blew through his own life much as did the disturbing wind through Arles. Still, when he writes about the weather in general, his self-conscious intent is not always so clear and can be more or less evident within particular contexts. The result is a fascinating mix of spontaneity in response to immediate circumstances and a self-consciously deployed figurative richness. However, Van Gogh did not see his letters together and did not think of them as a collection; moreover, they were written for a wide variety of purposes, and the quality of the writing is uneven. Still, he must have recognized that he kept returning to a set of favourite motifs, tropes, and figures, by means of which he explored and deepened the understandings that continue to engage and compel readers because of their broad human significance.

**Cold and Dry: On Art and Imperfection**

With these points in mind, I would like to consider one final aspect of Van Gogh’s descriptions of the weather: namely, his frequent allusions to cold and dryness, and their association with a lack of inspiration and, specifically, with the mistral. Thus, he says that his work needs to change course to avoid “meagerness and what they call the dryness,” and he takes heart from the fact that “I could show you a similar moment of dryness in the history of many who have completely overcome it.” He blames overexertion for his having “ended up in that dryness” (365/2:386), and he talks about “a kind of revolution in the working method which I’ve sought for” and as a result of which he has “tried to work less drily” (371/2:399).

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

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

But for Van Gogh, creativity is born especially out of the heart of a continuing struggle, the marks of which are also incorporated in his painting, with the result that the most affecting beauty thematizes its own imperfection. Thus, he notes that if he tries to work while the mistral is blowing, the effects will be evident in the painting: “the constant wind here must have something to do with the fact that the painted studies have that wild look” (644/4:186–87). Later, he repeats the same point: “I always have to struggle against the mistral, which absolutely prevents one being in control of one’s touch. Hence the ‘wild’ look of the studies” (656/4:219). “Wild look” here suggests something disheveled, unfinished, hasty, and Van Gogh gives us a further indication of what he means when he describes the difficulties of contending with the wind. “It’s very windy, though, and a very nasty, nagging wind, the mistral, usually troublesome enough when I have to paint in it, like when I lay my canvas flat on the ground and work on my knees.
Because the easel doesn’t stand firm” (653/4:206). He then goes on to describe a study of poppies and other flowers:

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

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

Here, Van Gogh seeks the very conditions that will cause him to be overhasty and that will make his “touch” unsure and agitated rather than “controlled.” As a result, the painting will gain in “intensity,” and the marks of agitation, of the imperfectly finished, will themselves contribute to the effect.

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

**Conclusion**

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