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

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

Without commenting on this recollection, Theo goes on to ask for information about the St. Rémy hospital and to discuss some paintings that he had viewed at the salon. The street scene is therefore left to speak for itself; Theo counted on Vincent getting the message without further prompting — that like the horses, Vincent has hit bottom but will be able to turn around and climb back up.
As ever, Theo was well attuned to the sensibility of his difficult brother and would have known — not least from previous correspondence — that Vincent had a special sympathy for horses forced into arduous and debilitating work. He saw their submissiveness and patient suffering as analogous to the abjection of poor people whose fidelity and endurance likewise impart to them an admirable dignity and resolve. Yet, as Vincent realized, deprivation and suffering are often destructive, and dignity and resolve are not always sufficient to save the day. Throughout the letters, he returns often to this set of issues, exploring ways to acknowledge abjection without giving in to despair, on the one hand, or escapism, on the other, though frequently enough he found himself tempted by both. And so Theo struck the right note in describing the belaboured and overworked horses going down to the bottom before trying again to climb the hill. Vincent would have understood that Theo, even as he offered encouragement against despair, was not attempting to evade the fact that abjection is a real concern.

Redeeming Abjection

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

It was the very moment when the street-sweepers were coming home with their carts with old white horses, there was a long line of those carts standing by the so-called sludge works at the beginning of Trekweg. Some of those old white horses resemble a certain old aquatint that you perhaps know, an engraving with no very great artistic value but which nevertheless struck me and made an impression on me. I mean the last of the series of prints titled “The life of a horse.” That print depicts an old white horse, emaciated and spent and worn out to death by a long life of heavy labour and much and difficult work. The poor animal stands in an indescribably lonely and
forsaken place, a plain with lank, withered grass and here and there a twisted tree, bent and cracked by the storm wind. On the ground lies a skull and in the distance, in the background, the bleached skeleton of a horse lying next to a hut, where the man who slaughters horses lives.

A stormy sky hangs over the whole, it’s a foul and bleak day, somber and dark weather. It’s a sorrowful and profoundly melancholy scene that must move everyone who knows and feels that we, too, must one day go through that which we call dying, and that at the end of human life there are tears or grey hair. What lies beyond is a great mystery that God alone comprehends, who has however revealed this irrefutably in His word, that there is a resurrection of the dead.

The poor horse — the old faithful servant, stands patient and submissive, but courageous nonetheless and as resolute, as it were, as the old guard who said “the guard dies but does not surrender” — waits for its final hour. I couldn’t help thinking of that print this evening when I saw those dust-cart horses. (148/1:232–33)

Here, Van Gogh begins by describing an actual scene, focusing on the old white horses and their carts. This scene immediately reminds him of an engraving, which he then also describes in detail. Interestingly, his account of the engraving is much more emotionally charged than is the description of the actual scene that brought the engraving to mind. This is because the engraving is full of effects designed to convey the pathos of the old horse that is about to be killed now that its working life is over. The wretched animal stands in a desolate landscape — an empty plain with withered grass and a storm-blasted tree. There is a bleached skeleton near the horse-knacker’s house, and the sky is stormy and the weather “somer and dark.” Like the horse, who is “emaciated and spent and worn out to death by a long life of heavy labour and much and difficult work,” the old tree is exhausted, “bent and cracked by the storm wind.” In these observations, Van Gogh fills out the picture to accentuate the pathos he wants to convey. The engraving itself does not show the storms that bent the tree or the hard labour that broke the horse; rather, Van Gogh’s writing brings these implied events to the surface as a way of intensifying what the engraving depicts.
In all this, his indignation and moral concern are registered clearly and forcefully.

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

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

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

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

As the above examples suggest, when Van Gogh mentions horses elsewhere in the letters, he usually does so to draw attention to suffering. Thus, when a “cart with a white horse (l’blanc ch’val) brings an injured man home from the mine” (150/1:238), Van Gogh is reminded of “Israels’s shipwreck,” and he is moved by the similarity between the event at the mine and Israels’s painting *The Shipwrecked Man*, which foregrounds the grief and distress of the drowned man’s family. In a further, detailed account of the miners’ working conditions, Van Gogh describes a filthy, damp mineshaft that he visited, seven hundred metres underground (151/1:239). The frequently ill, overworked miners labour there in a poisonous and dangerous environment, assisted by children who load the coal onto carts. In turn, the carts are pulled by “around 7 old horses,” which, like the miners, live and work in “that underworld” (151/1:239). The horses here might at first seem incidental, but then a reader sees that the miners, with their “square-shouldered” strength, “sombre, deep-set eyes” and “nervous dispositions” (151/1:239) are, in their own way, just like the horses, evincing a touching solidarity between the brutalized and suffering animals and the men.
It is worth remembering here that in the late nineteenth century, horses were frequently used in people’s everyday lives and were a constant presence in city streets. The solidarity to which Van Gogh points is therefore grounded in everyday experience. But habit readily dulls people to cruelties and exploitations that, in being normalized, become invisible. By contrast, Van Gogh draws attention to the oppression and injustice implicit in much that passes for normality, and his sensitivity to the plight of both the horses and the people who all too frequently resemble them is one way of doing this.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes poor weavers whose lives, like those of “the miners,” are also “heart-rending” and who look “as little cheerful” as “cab horses” (479/3:201). In Paris, he complains of loneliness and of the fact that “one is always suffering, like a cab-horse” (582/4:18). Again, he remarks that a martyr’s “anguished expression” is “like the eye of a broken-hearted cab horse”; one can see the same anguish everywhere in “the pensioners of the little carriages, or in poets and artists” (599/4:61). In these examples, the overburdened horses, with their sadness and pathos, stand as a figure for abjection in general, and when Van Gogh mentions horses, he virtually always makes this connection.

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

Those nags those poor, sorry-looking nags, black, white, brown, they stand there, patiently submissive, willing, resigned, still. They’ll soon have to drag the heavy boat the last bit of the way, the job’s almost done. They stand still for a moment, they pant, they’re covered in sweat, but they don’t murmur, they don’t protest — they don’t complain — about anything. They’re long past that, years ago already. They’re resigned to living and working a while longer, but
if they have to go to the knacker’s yard tomorrow, so be it, they’re ready for it. I find such a wonderfully elevated, practical, wordless philosophy in this painting, it seems to be saying,

To know how to suffer without complaining, that’s the only practical thing, that’s the great skill, the lesson to learn, the solution to life’s problem.

It seems to me that this painting by Mauve would be one of those rare paintings which Millet would stand in front of for a long time, mumbling to himself, he has a good heart, that painter. (212/2:41)

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

Again, the abject condition of horses and the art of painting occur together when Van Gogh claims that it is “absolutely necessary for me to do a number of horse studies,” and in seeking for a model, he recalls (yet another) “old white horse” (280/2:193) that is cruelly overworked. Presumably, he chose to make those studies because the qualities represented by, and embodied in, the suffering animal are of such pressing concern that a serious painter should regard them as fit topics.

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

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

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

There is and there remains and it always comes back at times, in the midst of the artistic life, a yearning for — real life — ideal and not attainable.

And we sometimes lack the desire to throw ourselves head first into art again and to build ourselves up for that. We know we’re cab-horses and that it’ll be the same cab we’re going to be harnessed to again. And so we don’t feel like doing it and we’d prefer to live in a meadow with a sun, a river, the company of other horses who are also free, and the act of generation. And perhaps in the final account
your heart condition comes partly from there; it wouldn’t greatly surprise me. We no longer rebel against things, we’re not resigned either — we’re ill and it’s not going to get any better — and we can’t do anything specific about it. I don’t know who called this condition being struck by death and immortality. The cab we drag along must be of use to people we don’t know. But you see, if we believe in the new art, in the artists of the future, our presentiment doesn’t deceive us. When good père Corot said a few days before he died: last night I saw in my dreams landscapes with entirely pink skies, well, didn’t they come, those pink skies, and yellow and green into the bargain, in Impressionist landscapes? All this is to say there are things one senses in the future and that really come about.

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

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

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

Yet, despite the exhortation to believe in a reality “bigger than us,” the passage is conspicuously nonreligious, with the belief that Van Gogh extols being directed solely to “the new art” and “the artists of the future.” Since the great new thing is not now the New Jerusalem but a glorious age of artistic freedom and discovery, Van Gogh’s
main point here is to praise the achievement of artistic excellence in the teeth of the social and personal problems preventing it. In working to bring this achievement about, the artist is the cab horse, paying “a steep price” through suffering and the loss of health and liberty in order to be “a link in the chain of artists” working to realize the “ideal” life. Suffering and deprivation are indeed depressing; the horse, after all, would rather live in a meadow under the sun, and here Van Gogh echoes the passage cited earlier on the “pied-à-terre” where artists — the “poor Paris cab-horses” — could go to recover from the hardships of the world where they are constrained to work. Yet Van Gogh’s attention in the present passage is mainly on the belief that the hard realities of grief, disease, and deprivation are offset not just by a belief in a glorious future for art but by an appreciation of what artists have already achieved. The lyrical sentence on the dying Corot’s dream of “landscapes with entirely pink skies” and on the realization of such landscapes by the Impressionists stands out like a small flash of inspiration, giving us the sense of a living faith in art, set over and against the somber meditation on the plight of the horses. The passage as a whole is thus neither depressed nor escapist but is the site of a struggle between these opposed impulses. On the one hand, “the ideal” calls upon hopeful aspiration; on the other, hard experience tells us that the ideal is “not attainable.” Nostalgia, or “yearning,” emerges from a felt understanding of this predicament and is, as Van Gogh well knew, a perennial topic of great painting and literature. One achievement of his own writing — including the passage under discussion — is that it enables us to feel and to understand something of this nostalgia, emergent from the gap between the ideal and the inevitable imperfections of actual experience.

The Problem of Pain

As we see in the passages so far discussed, Van Gogh’s treatment of horses is closely bound up with his exploration of the problems of suffering and abjection. From the start, his letters record how deeply
he was affected by the scandal of suffering in general. “Oh, how much sadness and sorrow and suffering there is in the world, both in the open and in secret” (126/1:185), he writes from Amsterdam in 1877. Earlier, in 1876, he wanted to serve as a missionary to the poor in the London suburbs (84/1:103), and in 1878, he writes to Theo about the “misery” of people’s lives in Montmartre, which seemed so appalling as to be “among the things that have no name in any language” (144/1:224). The hardships of the miners in the Borinage are recorded with indignation and compassion (151/1:239), and Van Gogh objects to the dismissive and callous stereotyping of miners and weavers as merely “a race of criminals and brigands” (158/1:256). He also has a special sympathy for streetwalkers: “I felt as though those poor girls were my sisters, as far as our circumstances and experiences of life were concerned” (193/1:340). As he says, his compassion for Sien arose partly from the fact that she, too, was a social outcast and from her suffering and deprivation, which are evident, for instance, in her smallpox scars and ugly speech (234/2:86). “I see so many weak people downtrodden” (226/2:70), Van Gogh says; is it wrong that “my sorrow indeed aroused a need for compassion with others???” (244/2:101). In a poignant passage he recalls a scene in the Borinage: “There was a girl there, at night in that stable — in the Borinage — a brown peasant face with a white night-cap among other things, she had tears in her eyes of compassion for the poor cow when the animal went into labour and was having great difficulty” (211/2:40). The pain of the animal in labour goes straight to the child’s heart, and in recalling the scene so simply and economically, Van Gogh allows us to grasp something of the primal immediacy of the human compassion called forth by pain, beyond reflection or explanation — much like his response to the horses in our earlier examples. He never surrendered this kind of sensitivity, which drew him to seek subjects for painting in locations where he could focus on the everyday lives of the poor — for instance, soup kitchens (324/2:292), places of refuge for the elderly (351/2:350), and the homes of wood gatherers (458/3:169), peasants, and weavers (419/3:92). “I’ve spent so many evenings sitting pondering by the fire with the miners and the peat-cutters and the weavers and peasants here” (493/3:225), he
the letters of vincent van gogh

says, convinced that his work lay “in the heart of the people” (226/2:69), especially the deprived and overburdened. Later, when he himself was confined in an asylum, he experienced “much true friendship” (776/5:23) among the afflicted inmates; he never lost sight of the principle that had guided him since his early years: “blessed are the poor in spirit” (RM21/5:321).

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

It is not difficult, then, to imagine that Van Gogh would speak approvingly about revolution. And indeed, in May 1883, he assures Van Rappard that the French Revolution is “the greatest modern event on which everything turns” (346/2:339). A few days earlier, he had described the French Revolution as “the centre,” and the constitution of 1789 as “the modern gospel” (345/2:337). In Antwerp in 1886, he imagines that the century will end with an uprising that will pit “the working man against the bourgeois” (562/3:355). But Van Gogh does not engage in detailed discussions of politics, and references such as those above remain undeveloped in his writing. In his heart, he was more committed to what he saw as a revolution in painting, which he thought was under way in his own time. For instance, in Nuenen in 1885, he writes about “a peasant battle against the sort of painters one can still point out in all the juries nowadays” (519/3:270). Writing from Arles in 1888, he describes for his sister Wil the idea of a revolutionary “change in painting” (590/4:38), and in a later letter to her that year, he makes clear that social revolution is not really his concern: “Neither
you or I belong” (626/4:128), he says, among those who argue about the case made by socialism against religion.

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

Ugly Is Beautiful

As we might expect, Van Gogh did not yield to depression without a struggle, and one means by which he chose to resist was what he called “active melancholy” (155/1:246): that is, the deliberate affirmation of life.
and creativity from within the experience of anxiety and depression. “I AM FOR LIFE” (349/2:345), he writes to Theo from The Hague in May 1883, and in July, drawing on Carlyle, he declares his own allegiance to the “everlasting yes,” understood in the context of the negative contrast experience, “the everlasting NO” (358/2:365). In the early letters, Van Gogh’s repeated references to St. Paul’s injunction to be “sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing” (35/1:61) make the same point succinctly. But “alway rejoicing” while in the grip of sorrow was not always easy, and Van Gogh resorted to two main, allied beliefs in order to convince himself that the good fight was indeed worth fighting. The first is the idea that personal growth occurs through suffering; the second idea is analogous — that one can find a special kind of beauty in ugliness.

Because he believed that growth occurs through suffering, Van Gogh sometimes willingly imposed suffering on himself. For instance, during his religious phase, he engaged in ascetic practices that were disturbingly extreme but that he thought would produce spiritual benefit. His Amsterdam teacher, Mendes da Costa, tells us that Van Gogh would beat himself with a club and deliberately lock himself out of the house so that he would have to sleep in a shed, even on winter nights. We learn from Paulus Görlitz that he restricted his diet and refused the meat and gravy that others at the table were eating. He also favoured the idea that to know oneself is to despise oneself, citing the gospels and Thomas à Kempis to confirm what he took to be the virtues of self-hatred. “There is reason to hate that life and what is called ‘the body of this death’” (135/1:205), he says; isn’t Thomas à Kempis correct “when he talks about knowing oneself and despising oneself?” (137/1:211). Van Gogh felt strongly that “by fighting the difficulties in which one finds oneself, an inner strength develops from within our heart” (133/1:199): the more difficult the fight, he believed, the greater the benefit that accrues. Thus, a person who “experiences true difficulty and disappointment and is nonetheless undefeated by it is worth more than someone who prospers and knows nothing but relative good fortune” (143/1:222). “For me,” Van Gogh says in 1883, “the drama of sorrow in life is the best” (381/2:415), and in St. Rémy in 1889, he still wants to believe “that illnesses sometimes cure us” (787/5:56).
The second belief, analogous to the idea that suffering can do us good, is Van Gogh’s conviction that beauty can be found within ugliness — much as rejoicing can occur within sorrow. The overlap between these insights (the first of which is mainly moral and the second mainly aesthetic) becomes clear in Van Gogh’s citation of Millet: “I would never do away with suffering, for it is often that which makes artists express themselves most vigorously” (493/3:224). That is, the quality of a painting is enhanced if it conveys something of the artist’s own trials and tribulations. It is a short step, then, to the further assertion that a special kind of beauty can shine forth from a deliberately thematized ugliness within the painting itself. But before we discuss this interesting idea, it is worth noting that Van Gogh thought that in actual life, the ill-favoured and the abject can have their own special beauty, which he regarded as more authentic than the conventional kind. Thus, he reports to Theo that he told his (no doubt bemused) art dealer Uncle Cor that instead of a conventionally beautiful woman, he would prefer “one who was ugly or old or impoverished or in some way unhappy, who had acquired understanding and a soul through experience of life and trial and error, or sorrow” (139/1:215). Likewise, in Antwerp, he admires a group of girls, “the best-looking of whom was ugly.” He explains that she had “an ugly and irregular face, but with vivacity and piquancy, à la Frans Hals” (546/3:326). It is as if the girl’s inner qualities, expressed as liveliness and piquancy, transfigure her plainness but without concealing it. The very irregularity of her features then becomes the vehicle for an especially affecting kind of beauty, making her more remarkable than her conventionally good-looking companions.

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

When Van Gogh discusses the “ugliness” of his own paintings, he can be uncomfortably indecisive about this set of issues. For instance, in September 1888, he describes his painting The Night Café as “one of the ugliest I’ve done,” going on to discuss the lurid colours in detail. He then explains how he tried to capture “the terrible human passions” (676/4:258), and he compares this painting to his Potato Eaters. Earlier, in June 1888, he describes his drawing of a Zouave as “very ugly,” and “harsh and, well, ugly and badly done” (632/4:155). In discussing another painting of a Zouave, he tells Theo, “it’s a coarse combination of disparate tones that isn’t easy to handle,” and yet “I’d always like to work on portraits that are vulgar, even garish like that one” (629/4:142). In describing The Potato Eaters to Bernard, he pauses to reflect on “how ugly they’ll find it” (665/4:241). On the one hand, he laments that “I’m unable to render” the external beauty of things “because I make it ugly in my painting, and coarse, whereas nature seems perfect to me” (695/4:304). On the other hand, he explains how studies such as The Night Café “usually seem to me atrociously ugly and bad,” yet “they’re the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning” (680/4:268).

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

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

The Trouble with Pangloss

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

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

In broad terms, Van Gogh appreciated Voltaire’s satirical intent, as is clear, for instance, when he points out to Wil that, in *Candide*, “Voltaire dared to laugh at the ‘highly serious life’” (579/4:115). For his part, Van Gogh himself used laughter to counteract depression. As he confides to Theo, “I think I’d feel sad if I didn’t see the funny side of everything” (588/4:30). Humour plays a significant (and changing) role in the letters as a whole, a topic to which I will return in chapter 7. But for now, I will focus on Pangloss, whom Van Gogh cites as a counterweight to the painful reality of suffering. Yet the references to Pangloss occur without any acknowledgement of the role Pangloss actually plays in Voltaire’s satire: for the most part, Van Gogh cites Pangloss’s opinion about the best of all possible worlds as if it really is the case.

In a letter to Gauguin written after the traumatic ear-severing event, Van Gogh offers the following reassurance: “Trust that in fact no evil exists in this best of worlds, where everything is always for the best” (730/4:379). Admittedly, he is trying to put a good face on things, but surely, we feel, this remark is too facile for him really to mean what he says. Yet on other occasions, he makes the same point, and again, he is disconcertingly deadpan, providing no hint of irony. In April 1889, for instance, he advises Theo to “think of Pangloss,” and he regrets that some people “perhaps don’t know Pangloss” or else forget his message when they are afflicted by despair or pain (765/4:437). Later in the same letter, he expresses concern about having to conform to hospital surveillance, but adds: “let’s be aware that everything always happens for the best in the best of worlds” (765/4:439). He might seem at first to strike a different note when he writes to Theo, “from the moment when
père Pangloss assures us that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds — can we doubt it?” (743/4:403). The closing question — “can we doubt it?” — might prompt us to reflect that yes, we can. Yet the context indicates that Pangloss states an indubitable truth upon which Vincent draws to confirm that his future as an artist is promising. In a similar manner, he writes to Gauguin: “Look, everything is always for the best in this best of worlds — in which we have — still according to the excellent père Pangloss, the ineffable happiness of finding ourselves” (701/4:320). Here, Van Gogh is inviting Gauguin to come to Arles and wants to be persuasive. Consequently, he draws, again in a quite straightforward way, on a declaration of Panglossian optimism to help him to make his case.

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

I see just as clearly as the greatest optimist the lark ascending in the spring sky.

But I also see the young girl of barely 20, who could have been healthy and — has contracted consumption — and perhaps will drown herself before she dies of a disease.

When one is always in respectable company and among reasonably well-to-do citizens, one may perhaps not notice it so much — but when, like me, one has been through very hard times, then it’s impossible to ignore the fact that great hardship is a factor that weighs in the balance. (562/3:355)
In this passage, Van Gogh visits again the problems of suffering and abjection that we find in the cab-horse passages. The first of the paired but separated opening sentences presents us with an image to which the second stands in contrast, so that each intensifies the other. The soaring lark and the spring air are suitable figures for optimism, but Van Gogh adds an interesting dimension to these generic images by not quite identifying with them. He sees them, he says, “just as clearly as the greatest optimist,” implying that he holds back from completely accepting the optimistic position. “Just as clearly” means that he understands the point of view but not that he is committed to it; the suggestion here is that his own optimism is more self-aware and less simple.

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

The internal contrasts in this passage set up a range of effects in counterpoint, at once striking and subtle, affecting and thoughtful, balanced and assertive. The preoccupation with abjection and how it can be resisted creatively is reproduced here with a complexity and insight by means of which Van Gogh manages to engage us feelingly with a problem of enduring significance.
At this point, it is worth noting that after he went to Arles, Van Gogh did not express the same insistent solidarity with the poor as in his earlier letters. Part of the reason is that as he became increasingly ill, his own abjection was foregrounded, and he wanted to inform his family about the state of his health and the conditions of his confinement. Earlier, he had insisted on being in direct contact with the miners, weavers, and potato diggers whom he painted. But when he was ill and confined, they, in turn, visited him — at least, in a rhetorical sense — as presences evoked in his letters. For instance, after a seizure, he says he worked like “a coal-miner” (810/5:121). Elsewhere, he is like a Zundert peasant: “I plough in my canvases as they do in their fields” (811/5:122). He is a shoemaker (854/5:200) and will gladly work with “as few pretensions as a peasant” (823/5:154). Here, he does not so much desire to alleviate the suffering of the poor as to have his recollections of them alleviate his. Also, his descriptions of his own illness in the period after his self-mutilation are all the more disturbing because they are so often factual and immediate, as we learn about his hallucinations and nightmares (743/4:402), depression (776/5:26), seizures (772/5:12), auditions (776/5:26), dizziness (801/5:92), fainting (764/4:435) and enervation (820/5:114). Without Theo’s support, he would be suicidal (765/4:438), yet the expenses of Theo’s marriage and impending parenthood, combined with the fact that Theo was paying Vincent’s hospital fees, greatly increased Vincent’s burden of anxiety. Still, he went on painting (and writing), despite knowing that his health hung by a thread and feeling that his soul was “foundering”: “the prospect darkens, I don’t see a happy future at all” (RM20/5:318, 319).

And so Van Gogh’s own situation had now come to resemble, all too disturbingly, the sad plight of those old horses worn down by overwork and ill health. Furthermore, the abject ones were now not just the miners, potato diggers, weavers, and poor people whom Van Gogh had visited. More than ever, he had become one of them, and it is not surprising that as a counterweight to the almost unbearable conditions of his life, he should include statements of the Pangloss variety. Seen in this way, there is some pathos in Van Gogh’s brave, if exaggerated, Panglossian optimism.
But here I need to make a key distinction. If Van Gogh’s Panglossian passages are read as an anxious attempt to counteract despair, then their uncritical exaggeration can help us, indirectly, to feel how threatening the despair really was. This is certainly an interesting, even touching, thing to notice. But there is a difference between Van Gogh’s Panglossian optimism and his passages such as that about the lark and the consumptive girl. For reasons I have set out, the passage about the lark and the girl has a complexity of feeling and thinking that is simultaneously captivating and illuminating — much in the manner of poetry — affecting us independently of the specific circumstances of the letter. Compared to this, the Panglossian optimism must strike us as superficial.

Conclusion

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

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

Have you noticed yet that the old cab-horses there have big, beautiful heartbroken eyes, like Christians sometimes. Whatever the case, we’re not savages nor peasants, and we perhaps even have a duty to love civilization (so-called). (772/5:12)
Here, Vincent is writing to his sister-in-law Jo, who had moved to Paris with Theo, and was finding the city disagreeable. Vincent writes to encourage her, and he goes on in the rest of the letter to tell her about the hospital in St. Rémy. The letter is dated 9 May, which means that it was written directly after Vincent received Theo’s letter of 8 May containing the story of the dray horses pulling the cart up the street and having to go back down and start over. Vincent is therefore almost certainly referencing Theo’s letter when he asks Jo about the depressing aftermath of his recent seizure: “I’m wondering if it is thus that one thinks when, with the passions somewhat extinguished, one comes down the mountain instead of climbing it.” If Vincent is indeed echoing Theo’s letter, then he would have horses in mind when he writes about coming down the mountain, but we cannot be sure. Then, a few lines later, he asks Jo a question in which he does, in fact, make the connection: “Have you noticed yet that the old cab-horses there have big, beautiful heartbroken eyes, like Christians sometimes.” This is the most striking sentence in the excerpt, as the juxtaposed images of horses and Christians offer a response to suffering; they are tinged with sadness and commiseration, yet are offset by a sense that something can be redeemed and that pain and alienation can give rise to a countervailing, compassionate protest. The fact that the cab horses are “old” hints at their lifetime of overwork, but the focus is on their “big, beautiful heartbroken eyes,” an image that, in this context, evokes a sadness that is inseparable from a painful kind of beauty. The sudden switch to the heartbroken Christians comes as a surprise; it has the simultaneous effect of hallowing the suffering of the horses and of reminding us that Christian spirituality entails a commitment to the redemptive passion of the suffering body. Van Gogh’s Christians are thus heartbroken for the same reason as St. Paul’s correspondents are sorrowful yet always rejoicing — namely, because the suffering of Jesus awakens in them a redemptive, humane compassion.

The lyrical conciseness of Van Gogh’s writing in this passage is an effective way of expressing the balanced view that he wants to communicate by way of encouragement to Jo. But he writes in part also about his own health, and the passage begins with his reference to a
“terrible attack” that has left him with “hardly any really clear desire or hope.” By contrast, he offers the familiar Panglossian counterweight: “everything is always for the best in the best of worlds.” Here, we see again how the extremity of his suffering and the threat of despair call forth an emphatic optimism. Yet the present passage differs from our earlier examples because there is now indeed some indication of a skeptical authorial perspective, as is clear when Van Gogh says, “if you can believe, or almost.” If Jo does manage (almost) to believe, then she will “perhaps” feel better about Paris.

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