In part 2, I undertook to show how certain key images and metaphors operate as organizational principles closely integrated with the texture of Van Gogh’s thinking and writing. Now, in part 3, I wish to focus on a set of general ideas to which Van Gogh returned repeatedly and which also do much to define the content and quality of his literary achievement. These are (1) the paradoxical dynamics of the creative process, (2) the difficult struggle for autonomy in relation to family ties and obligations, and (3) the attempt to move beyond conventional religion without surrendering a sense of wonder at the deep mystery of existence and of consciousness.

The broad distinction I am suggesting here between images (part 2) and ideas (part 3) is not meant to indicate a clear-cut separation. For analytical purposes, we often distinguish without separating so that things that interpenetrate in nature can be examined in thought. In its natural state, water combines two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen; these are not separate in a drop of water but can be distinguished for analytical purposes in ways that, for instance, chemists and engineers find useful. Just so, although my comments on birds’ nests, the mistral, and cab horses in part 2 focus on metaphors, I also take pains to acknowledge the interfusion of images and ideas in Van
Gogh’s actual writing. By contrast, in the present section, I focus on a set of concepts with which Van Gogh was preoccupied even though, in turn, I will wish to acknowledge that these are often enhanced by his imaginative extrapolations. With these points in mind, let me now turn to the topic of the present chapter: learning by heart.

*Learning by Heart*

When one learns by heart, one does so by dint of repetition, usually over an extended period of time. Looked at in isolation, this deliberate practice is the opposite of what is meant by spontaneity. But as is often the case with polar opposites, the interrelationship between patient repetition and spontaneous immediacy is complex: paradoxically, learning by heart can be a means of achieving one’s creative potential. In a television interview with Charlie Rose, actor Anthony Hopkins was asked what advice he would give to young actors. His simple answer was that they should learn their lines by heart, because when actors know their lines and don’t have to think about what they are supposed to say, they are free to interpret a role creatively. Many kinds of skilled performers understand this principle, and among them, we can count Van Gogh, who insisted likewise on the patient acquisition of technique as a means of releasing the creative spontaneity that he believed was necessary for bringing technique to fruition.¹

After his visit to the Rijksmuseum on 6–8 October 1885, Van Gogh developed a fresh appreciation for the Dutch painters of the Golden Age, especially admiring the swiftness with which they worked. On 13 October 1885, he explains this to Theo: “What particularly struck me when I saw the old Dutch paintings again is that they were usually painted quickly. That these great masters like Hals, Rembrandt, Ruisdael — so many others — as far as possible just put it straight down — and didn’t come back to it so very much” (535/3:293). Vincent took the lesson to heart; in the letters, he frequently insists on the value of getting things down quickly whether in paint or writing. Thus, he goes on to tell Theo how he likes to paint “in one go” (535/3:293), and, later, in
Arles, he confirms that he likes to complete “the whole thing in one go” (666/2:242). He acknowledges that “everyone will find that I work too quickly” (631/4:152), but as early as 1882, in The Hague, he states that he prefers to draw “quickly and resolutely,” so that “the broad outlines appear with lightning speed”; “It’s no use hesitating or doubting” (226/2:69). Likewise, in The Hague in 1883, he approves of those who are “led by feeling” and who act “impulsively” against what society “customarily invokes” (300/2:231). Later, in Nuenen, he explains also how “real fellows” don’t hesitate but “just slap it on” (506/3:250), and in Arles, he says that he himself paints in “a riot of impastos” (600/4:64).

Elsewhere, again in Arles, he insists that some landscapes “done more quickly than ever, are among the best things I do” (635/4:159), and he continues to value the quality he admired in the “Black and White” illustrators, who, as he explains to Van Rappard in 1883, worked swiftly and with “spontaneity” (307/2:255).

The same principle holds also for writing, as when Vincent explains, in January 1882, that he wants to tell Theo “everything that pops into my head without being afraid to let fly, without mincing my words or holding back” (199/2:17). Some two months later, he reminds Theo of an “agreement” whereby Vincent would write “simply to tell you things like this in my own way, as it flows from my pen” (211/2:40) rather than (as he says elsewhere) “in a sort of business style, dry and formal” (199/2:17). From Drenthe in 1883, he scolds Theo for expressing himself in an overly “concise form,” which is “a rather unsatisfactory — disappointing — manner of writing,” as distinct from Vincent’s own “wholly forthright” (406/3:65) practice.

Yet, paradoxically, Van Gogh also commends “slow, long work” as “the only road” (823/5:154), and on several occasions, he compares himself to a patient ox (400/3:53, 628/4:138, 633/4:157) and describes himself as having a “collier’s faith” (404/3:62) as he works stubbornly and methodically. He advises Bernard that “there’s nothing better to do than to wait without getting impatient, even if one has to wait for a long time” (696/4:303). At the Academy in Brussels, he acknowledges the difficulties of learning to draw: “those things aren’t so very easy, and require time and moreover quite a bit of patience” (160/1:259).
As a matter of faith, he declares that “those who believe shall not make haste” (56/1:82) and that learning “can go hand in hand with difficulty, worries, disappointments, times of melancholy, of powerlessness and all that” (397/3:43). Towards the end of his life, he strikes the same note as he assures Theo, “It’s looking at things for a long time that matures you and makes you understand more deeply” (686/4:281), and he acknowledges his own “need” to go on working, even “to the point of being mentally crushed and physically drained” (712/4:342).

On the face of it, there is a contradiction between Van Gogh’s approval of doing things “quickly,” “in one go,” and his assurance that “slow, long work” is “the only road.” Yet these opposites are reconciled when we consider what Van Gogh means by learning “by heart” — “par Coeur,” as he says, borrowing the term from Delacroix. For Van Gogh, when knowledge or skill is acquired by patient labour, one result is that creative expression can be spontaneous without lapsing into a merely undisciplined self-indulgence. Just so, skilled performers in many fields know that they must first work hard to acquire technique, after which they must let go of what has been consciously learned in order to release the further, expressive dimension whereby technique is transfigured into art. In itself, technique is not art, but neither is undisciplined self-expression. Rather, technique is the vehicle whereby the creative unconscious is activated while also having access to an adequate, patiently acquired means of expression.

I suggest that Van Gogh’s letters are frequently insightful about the creative process understood in this way and that the letters themselves frequently exemplify the kind of creativity they describe. But Van Gogh is not a theorist; rather, he explores the topic of creativity unsystematically from various angles, and in doing so, he brings to bear a number of associated terms and ideas that he deploys, combines, and recombines as the context requires. For instance, as we shall see, learning by heart is closely implicated with his thinking about simplification and exaggeration and with his reflections on memory and on Japanese art. As I hope to show, taken together, these motifs form a constellation of interconnected ideas by means of which the letters as a whole express a distinctive understanding of the creative process.
Let us begin by considering the following excerpt from a letter to Theo, written from Antwerp in 1885:

I’ve already walked in all directions around these docks and wharves several times. It’s a strange contrast, particularly when one comes from the sand and the heath and the tranquillity of a country village and hasn’t been in anything but quiet surroundings for a long time. It’s an incomprehensible confusion.

One of De Goncourt’s sayings was “Japonaiserie forever.” Well, these docks are one huge Japonaiserie, fantastic, singular, strange — at least so one can see them.

I’d like to walk with you there to find out whether we look at things the same way.

One could do anything there, townscapes — figures of the most diverse character — the ships as the central subject with water and sky in delicate grey — but above all — Japonaiseries.

I mean, the figures there are always in motion, one sees them in the most peculiar settings, everything fantastic, and interesting contrasts keep appearing of their own accord.

A white horse in the mud, in a corner where heaps of merchandise lie covered with a tarpaulin — against the old, black, smoke-stained walls of the warehouse. Quite simple — but a Black and White effect.

Through the window of a very elegant English inn one will look out on the filthiest mud and on a ship where such delightful wares as hides and buffalo horns are being unloaded by monstrous docker types or foreign sailors; by the window, looking at this or at something else, stands a very fair, very delicate English girl. The interior with figure wholly in tone, and for light — the silvery sky above that mud and the buffalo horns, again a series of contrasts that’s quite strong. There’ll be Flemish sailors with exaggeratedly ruddy faces, with broad shoulders, powerful and robust, and Antwerp through and through, standing eating mussels and drinking beer, and making a great deal of noise and commotion about it. Contrast — there goes a tiny little figure in black, with her small hands pressed against her body, slipping soundlessly along the grey walls. In a frame of jet-black hair, a little oval face, brown?
Orange yellow? I don’t know.

She raises her eyelids momentarily and looks with a slanting glance out of a pair of jet-black eyes. It’s a Chinese girl, mysterious, quiet as a mouse, small, like a bedbug by nature. What a contrast to the group of Flemish mussel eaters. (545/3:323)

As Vincent says, this passage was written to give Theo “a few more impressions of Antwerp” (545/3:323). Certainly, the impressionistic aspect of the account strikes us straightaway, as Vincent describes the energy and variety of the scene where everything is “fantastic” and full of “interesting contrasts.” The details pile up: ships and a “delicate grey” sky, the white horse in the mud, a warehouse, the English inn with the young girl, the piles of merchandise, buffalo horns, Flemish sailors eating mussels, and the mysterious, fleeting figure of the Chinese girl. The sheer clutter and “incomprehensible confusion” is part of what Van Gogh means by “Japonaiserie” — namely, a scene full of surprising contrasts and a sense of mystery glimmering through the intricate confusion. There is something breathless about the account, adding to the sense of excitement and novelty, and this excited effect arises partly from the hasty piling up of clauses, abrupt transitions represented by dashes, insistent questions and frequent countering that highlights the main contrasts throughout. The result is that Van Gogh’s writing itself duplicates something of the vibrant energy of the scene he describes, and the impressionistic qualities of the passage are all the more striking because they seem so spontaneous — set down “in one go.”

Yet when we look again, another dimension of the passage reveals itself. Van Gogh has walked along the docks and quays “several times” and in “all directions.” That is, he has crossed and recrossed the scene repeatedly, so that he knows it by heart. The impression of an “incomprehensible confusion” remains, as “fantastic” and “singular” as when he first saw it, but he is able to interpret what he sees by way of a series of carefully observed contrasts, which are the result of his patiently acquired familiarity. Thus, when he describes the docks as “one huge Japonaiserie,” he adds: “at least so one can see them.” Here,
the initial sense of direct involvement is tempered by Van Gogh’s understanding that he is assuming a particular perspective, which in turn is a result of his knowledge of the local landscape, explored beforehand in “all directions.” In short, by practice, he has learned to look at the scene perceptively and not just to record its exhilarating clutter and variety without some careful prior consideration.

The first contrast to which Van Gogh draws a reader’s attention is between Antwerp and the “sand and the heath” from which he has recently come. Then we read about the contrasts between the white horse and the mud; the elegant bar and the rough scene outside; the shy, tiny figure of the Chinese girl and the robust, beer-drinking Flemish sailors. This set of contrasts is developed also by the “very fair, very delicate English girl” standing and looking out the window and the Chinese girl with “jet-black hair” furtively glancing as she steals along the walls outside. A few lines earlier, Van Gogh has summarized a scene by describing it as “a Black and White effect,” referring to the black and white engravings he so admired in the illustrated papers. Interestingly, his writing (perhaps unconsciously) picks up the contrast between black and white as he describes the fair, delicate English girl in her protected environment and the black-haired Chinese girl outside, who resembles both a mouse and a bedbug — that is, she is timid, but with a touch of something uncomfortably furtive and perhaps sinister.

The “interesting contrasts” that Van Gogh notices are thus reproduced as a feature of his own writing, so that the excerpt carries some of the same interest for the reader as Antwerp did for him. Here we might note a further aspect of the passage that, again, shows the interplay between its spontaneity and its deliberately assessed structural aspects. That is, Van Gogh looks at the variegated scene with an artist’s eye, considering how to compose it. All kinds of “townscapes” could be painted, especially if they feature ships, and the sky would be rendered a “delicate grey.” The white horse in the warehouse is deliberately presented as if Van Gogh is composing a painterly scene, and the interior of the inn is described as “wholly in tone,” referring to a quality of light that could also be painted. Finally, the vignette of the Chinese girl is
itself like a small painting, vivid and full of atmosphere, swiftly and economically rendered. Throughout, the spontaneity of the writing remains, captivating a reader’s attention, and the vivid energy of the “fantastic, singular, strange” dockland is preserved even as the scene is also assessed by way of Van Gogh’s patiently acquired knowledge and as his painterly eye all the while estimates its aesthetic potential. Van Gogh’s special energy thus emerges from a fusion of analytical understanding and spontaneous expression: his distinctive creativity is not reducible to either of these poles in isolation but draws on both together.

What Vincent Knew

How self-consciously did Van Gogh understand the relationship between patient labour and spontaneity as the matrix within which creativity is engendered? In chapter 4, I touched on the topic of Van Gogh’s self-consciousness as a writer, and I will return to it in chapter 7. For now, I wish to focus on a selection of passages suggesting that he did indeed realize that he was exploring the topic of creativity along certain favoured lines of argument within a variety of contexts.

Writing from The Hague, for instance, Van Gogh talks about “toiling” arduously on a figure, and then adds: “Precisely because of that toil, I had rather lost my enthusiasm for composing and for making my imagination work once more” (347/2:339). Here, he clearly understands that too much labour invested in technique can impede the free play of imagination. Elsewhere, he describes how he gets the balance right: “I toiled away,” he says, but the effort was worthwhile because he now finds himself “working with a great deal of pleasure” (353/2:345), as his preliminary studies enable him to paint creatively. Again, in Arles, he explains how he is “in the middle of a complicated calculation” that will result in “canvasses done quickly one after another but calculated long beforehand” (635/4:159). The “complicated calculation” and the long preparation are deliberately linked here to the spontaneity of the creative act and the “canvasses done quickly.” Van Gogh
makes the same point when, in The Hague, he explains that “the matter in question now involves both skill and action and perseverance, and furthermore being calmly patient” (291/2:216). That is, patience and perseverance are as important as “skill and action,” and Van Gogh makes clear that he understands the dynamic relationship between these two poles. “One can’t study nature, swot even, too much,” yet “the finest paintings are made relatively freely from the imagination” (537/3:303). Learning by heart therefore depends on “swotting, even if it’s apparently in vain,” because one can then paint “without hesitation” (537/3:304).

As these passages show, Van Gogh understood how the interplay between patiently acquired technique (consolidated by hard study, or “swotting”) and expressive spontaneity belong together: technique, in becoming internalized through practice, releases apparently effortless creative inspiration when the moment is right. As Van Gogh explains to Van Rappard, “let’s try to get the hang of the secrets of technique so well that people are taken in and swear by all that’s holy that we have no technique” (439/3:137). And “when I become stronger in what I’ll call power of expression than I am at this moment, people will say, not less but in fact even more than now, that I have no technique” (439/3:136).

In short, Van Gogh understood very well that in great art, the creative unconscious declares itself through a containing form that must be mastered, even though technical skill is subsumed by the expressive power that brings art to life. This expressive power cannot in itself be conceptualized but shows forth in the remaking of the familiar things of the world through a radiant interpenetration with the artist’s own subjectivity. As Van Gogh realized, the creative process is mysterious: “I can’t exactly put it into words,” he says, but he persists in struggling to clarify his “positive awareness that art is something larger and loftier than our own skill or learning or knowledge. That art is something which, although produced by human hands, is not wrought by the hands alone but wells up from a deeper source in our soul” (332/2:316). On the one hand, then, without technique, the artist’s renovating insight fails to be adequately communicated, but on the other hand, without contact with the creative unconscious (the
process, as Jacques Maritain says, “in which the subjectivity of the poet and the realities of the world awake obscurely in a single awakening”), technique remains an empty formalism, dry and cold, as Van Gogh liked to say.²

In this context, it is pertinent also to consider how the transcendence of technique is connected, for Van Gogh, to self-forgetfulness, which, in turn, has a bearing on the special interest in memory that we find throughout his correspondence. In Arles in 1888, Van Gogh explains how sometimes “we work — without feeling that we’re working” (631/4:152), and he tells Theo that on such occasions, “I’m no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream” (687/4:284). Elsewhere, he draws a contrast between the conscious ardour of apprenticeship and the enchanted unself-consciousness of creative freedom: “We shouldn’t make a big thing of the studies, which take more trouble but which are less attractive than the paintings that are their outcome and fruit, and which one paints as if in a dream, and without suffering so much for it” (699/4:317). Here, the preliminary studies are a “trouble” that involve “suffering” because of the labour required to get the technique right. Still, despite the hard work, the studies remain “less attractive” than the paintings because the studies do not mediate any true creative energy. Yet, as the passage also makes clear, worthwhile paintings are the “fruit” of preliminary exercises, and in the absorption that occurs when technique is mastered and the free play of the creative imagination emerges, as Van Gogh says, “one paints as in a dream.” Thus, he writes to Theo from Drenthe, “I must work and work steadily — FORGETTING MYSELF IN THE WORK,” and he admits that he is “unbearably melancholy when the work doesn’t provide me with distraction” (391/3:24). These sentences strike a different note on the topic of self-forgetfulness than the previous examples because they show that Van Gogh deliberately sought refuge in painting as an escape from loneliness. It is worth noting that towards the end of his life, he needed this kind of deliberately induced self-forgetting to take his mind off his illness. In July 1888, he explains: “I work from necessity so as not to suffer so much mentally, to distract myself,” and “painting is becoming a distraction for me, like hunting rabbits
for the crazy people who do it to distract themselves” (645/4:190–91). Later, in May 1890, he tells Theo, “If I didn’t have my work I’d have sunk far deeper long since” (870/5:232); the consolation that he sought to offer to others through his paintings, he himself sought increasingly in the process of painting.

The self-forgetting that Van Gogh associates in his writing with creativity leads us now to the broader question of memory, about which he has such apparently contradictory things to say that it is worth looking more closely at his accounts of it.

**Memory and Abstraction**

In Antwerp, Van Gogh says that he is determined to practice drawing the figure so that “then I’ll know it by heart, as it were.” He goes on to explain that the patience required for this “long way” of doing things will pay off, because “someone who can draw his figures from memory is much more productive than someone who can’t. And by my taking the trouble to spend that year drawing — you’ll just see how productive we become” (558/3:348). Here, the idea of patient labour is linked to patient learning in a manner that we now recognize. But Van Gogh takes this a step further by connecting what is learned by heart to “memory.” Simply put: if you draw a figure frequently enough, you will remember how to do it when the model is not present.

Van Gogh makes a similar point when he discusses Cormon’s academy in Paris. He expects that he will have to do a test and will be asked to paint a figure from life. Consequently, “the more I have the structure fixed in my mind in advance the better, and the more he’ll be able and willing to tell me” (564/3:357). Later, he expands on this point: “With a view to Cormon, it’s decidedly better for me to go on drawing plaster casts rather than working outdoors, because the more I have the structure of the figure in my head, the better I’ll be able to follow” (565/3:358). In these statements, Van Gogh again recommends practicing until he knows the topic by heart so that he can rely on his memory to reproduce what he has learned; he will then be better able
to attend to the new things Cormon might have to teach him. Interestingly, the process Van Gogh describes here was put into practice when he painted *The Potato Eaters* in 1885, as he tells Theo: “Although I’ll have painted the actual painting in a relatively short time, and largely from memory, it’s taken a whole winter of painting studies of heads and hands” (497/3:231). That is, he worked repeatedly on drawings and paintings of heads and hands so that he knew them by heart. He was then able to rely upon memory, which enabled him to work much more swiftly on the final painting.

The several points I have so far made about careful study, memory, and learning by heart come together in an interesting account, written in Nuenen, of Delacroix’s advice to a friend:

Something else about Delacroix — he had a discussion with a friend about the question of working absolutely from nature, and said on that occasion that one should take one’s *studies* from nature — but that the *actual painting* had to be made *by heart*. This friend was walking along the boulevard when they had this discussion — which was already fairly heated. When they parted the other man was still not entirely persuaded. After they parted, Delacroix let him stroll on for a bit — then (making a trumpet of his two hands) bellowed after him in the middle of the street — to the consternation of the worthy passers-by: *By heart! By heart!* (526/3:275)

Here, Van Gogh might be describing the composition of *The Potato Eaters*. That is, careful study precedes making the final painting, and when the appropriate techniques are learned by heart, then one can compose freely, from memory. The conviction that he attaches to this set of ideas is mirrored in Delacroix’s shouting it out, to the consternation of passersby. Like Delacroix, Van Gogh was not shy about disturbing the “worthy” citizens, if need be.

Memory, however, is also assessed by Van Gogh in a quite different, negative way. Thus, in Arles, he describes a street scene that he has painted from memory, and then adds: “I don’t want to sign this study, because I never work from memory” (698/4:313). Given the approving
comments about memory that I have just cited, this might strike us as puzzling. Yet from early on, Van Gogh expressed hostility to the practice of painting from memory if an arduous apprenticeship has not first been served. There is, therefore, a difference between technique learned first by heart and then recalled, and a merely fanciful composition made up for the occasion out of one’s head, as it were. Van Gogh can be surprisingly vehement in denouncing the use of memory in this second sense, as when he complains to Theo from The Hague in 1882:

But when I see young painters composing and drawing off the top of their head — then daubing on all sorts at random, also off the top of their head — then holding it at a distance and putting on a very profound, somber expression to find out to what in God’s name it might bear some resemblance, and finally, still off the top of their head, making what they can of it, it makes me feel feeble and faint, and I find it truly tedious and heavy going.

The whole thing makes me sick! (252/2:124)

His tone is caustic, and he adds a seasoning of satire as the young painters are imagined pulling long faces, struggling pretentiously to make sense of their work. For Van Gogh, the problem is that they hope to achieve real results by conjuring up images merely from memory “off the top of their head,” and, as the excerpt makes clear, his main reaction is to hold this practice in contempt.

The point is again clear in a reflection Van Gogh offers on the fact that draughtsmen for *The Graphic* work with models “nearly every day”: “If someone with many years of experience draws figures from the imagination after a great deal of study, fine, but to work systematically from the imagination seems overly rash to me” (215/2:51). That is, if one has learned by heart, then working from memory is not a bad thing. But memory is suspect when a painter uses it to conjure up, by way of a merely fanciful imagination, a scene or object that the painter has not learned to draw or paint by diligent practice.

It is therefore interesting that under Gauguin’s influence, Van Gogh attempted to do just the opposite of what he felt he should do —
namely, to paint from memory in exactly the manner that had previously drawn his negative criticism. Vincent tells Theo that Gauguin “encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination” (720/4:360). “Gauguin, in spite of himself and in spite of me, has proved to me a little that it was time for me to vary things a bit — I’m beginning to compose from memory” (721/4:361). In several further letters from the period of Gauguin’s stay in Arles, Van Gogh describes working from memory and imagination in this sense. But, like the relationship with Gauguin as a whole, Van Gogh’s attempt to paint in such a manner did not work out; instead, it contributed to his rapidly worsening relationship with his once-admired mentor. Consequently, Van Gogh reaffirmed his old conviction that “I can’t work without a model” (698/4:313), and when Gauguin left Arles, taking a train north as fast as he could, Van Gogh concluded about his friend’s practice as a painter: “I believed him led by his imagination, by pride perhaps but — quite irresponsible” (736/4:388).

When Van Gogh discusses imagination in the negative sense, he typically equates it with “abstraction.” For instance, in a letter to Bernard from St. Rémy, he again points to Gauguin:

> When Gauguin was in Arles, I once or twice allowed myself to be led into abstraction, as you know, in a woman rocking a cradle, a dark woman reading novels in a yellow library, and at that time abstraction seemed an attractive route to me. But that’s enchanted ground, — my good fellow — and one soon finds oneself up against a wall. I’m not saying that one may not take the risk after a whole manly life of searching, of fighting hand-to-hand with reality, but as far as I’m concerned I don’t want to rack my brains over that sort of thing. (822/5:148)

Here, as elsewhere, “abstraction” means painting from imagination; the word is useful because it helps to confirm Van Gogh’s concern about departing too far from the actual, material nature of the things or people to be painted. For Van Gogh, “abstraction” stands opposed to the “whole manly life of searching” and the “fighting hand-to-hand
with reality”: I take this to mean the difficult labour of apprenticeship, on which, as we have seen, he placed a high value. By contrast, “abstraction” indicates an easy escapism, “attractive” and “enchanted,” but deceptive. As he says later in the same letter, he “found danger in these abstractions” (822/5:148), and he draws a strong contrast between the “abstractions” produced by Gauguin and Bernard and his own “rather harsh and coarse realism” (823/5:154). From St. Rémy, he explains that “I’m trying to reinvigorate myself by means of rather arduous work, and would fear that abstractions would make me soft” (812/5:153). Clearly, Van Gogh was convinced that the failure to learn things through repeated, patient study and attention to actual things and people would damage the authenticity not only of the painting but also of the painter.

Still, Van Gogh does not simply abjure imagination. As discussed in chapter 2, he insists that good painting is not merely a reproduction of appearances and that imagination in a positive sense comes into play in the artist’s representation of the human significance of the thing being painted. Consequently, in Arles, Van Gogh explains how he intends to “work half from the imagination, half with a model” (684/4:277), and he affirms that “imagination is a capacity that must be developed, and only that enables us to create a more exalting and consoling nature” (596/4:52). Likewise, abstraction can play a positive role — for instance, in the attempt “to disentangle” the “intimate character” of a scene: “So to achieve that, you have to toil hard. And so it naturally becomes a little abstract. Because it will be a question of giving strength and brilliance to the sun and the blue sky, and to the scorched and often so melancholy fields their delicate scent of thyme” (809/5:115). The effect of the painting in giving “strength and brilliance to the sun” depends on not reproducing the appearances exactly, but on selecting and simplifying — or abstracting — aspects of the scene in order better to express the qualities of “brilliance” and “melancholy.” The key to keeping this kind of “abstract” effect under control is indicated by Van Gogh’s insistence that one must “toil hard.” Once again, a difficult and patient apprenticeship is the precondition for how imagination and abstraction can improve a painting instead of
producing an easy appeal or sentimental escapism. Still, Van Gogh by and large remains wary of abstraction, as we might sense even in the slightly guarded phrase “a little abstract.”

All of this brings me to a final pair of key concepts in Van Gogh’s thinking about the creative process. These are simplification and exaggeration, which he deploys especially as a way of countering the negative aspects of what he means by abstraction. For instance, he writes to Theo from St. Rémy that “it’s better to attack things with simplicity than to seek abstractions” (820/5:144). Here, he draws a clear contrast between simplification and abstraction, interpreting one as productive and the other not. Elsewhere, he frequently pairs simplification with its polar opposite, exaggeration, to make the same general point: an artist modifies natural appearances, whether by deliberate reduction (simplification) or addition (exaggeration). Thus, he explains to Bernard how he turns his back on nature in order to paint “by enlarging, by simplifying”; even though he worries about departing too far from “the real world” and ending up with “abstract studies,” he admits that “I exaggerate, I sometimes make changes to the subject” (698/4:314).

The aim of simplifying and exaggerating is to reveal what Van Gogh, writing from The Hague, calls the “essence” (336/2:322) of a thing — the place where, in its depths, a thing responds to and mirrors the human concerns and experience of the observer. In seeking “the power to invigorate” and to impart a “certain life” to the work, an artist produces “something very different” from the “accurate rendering of the effect of light, fabric, colour” (332/2:316). For Van Gogh, simplification and exaggeration are two key techniques by which this “very different” effect is achieved.

“Simplifying the figures is something that very much preoccupies me,” he writes, going on to say how he attempts to express “the whole manner” (361/2:379) of a figure rather than the exact features. He praises Van Rappard for attempting to paint like Corot by giving “only the intimate and the essential” (439/3:137), and he explains how, in really getting to know and feel a subject, “I even do my best NOT to give ANY details” (437/3:131). “I must do more figure work,” he tells Theo, because “it’s the study of the figure that teaches one to grasp the
essential and to simplify” (805/5:104). Just a few lines before, Vincent describes two of his own landscapes, stating that they “are exaggerations from the point of view of the arrangement, their lines are contorted like those of the ancient woodcuts” (805/5:101). He describes paintings such as The Sower and The Night Café as “exaggerated,” yet “they are the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning” (680/4:268). When he turns a preliminary study into a picture, he does so “by enlarging, by simplifying”; “I exaggerate,” but “I don’t invent the whole of the painting,” which is “ready-made — but to be untangled — in the real world” (698/4:314). Again, he laments that the results might by “ugly,” but simplification and exaggeration remain central to his pursuit of the truth that painting can best reveal.

Always astute, Theo puts his finger on the key point:

If there are people who occupy themselves seeking the symbol by dint of torturing the form, I find it in many of your canvasses through the expression of the summary of your thoughts on nature and living beings, which you feel are so strongly attached to it. But how hard your mind must have worked and how you endangered yourself to the extreme point where vertigo is inevitable. (781/5:36)

As Theo says, Vincent deliberately tortures the form to have it disclose a human significance not evident in surface appearances alone, yet inherent in them insofar as they have the potential to reveal such a significance in response to the intelligent commitment of the artist’s interrogating, passionate eye. In the process, as Van Gogh explains, he makes “mistakes both in the drawing and in the colour or tone that a REALIST wouldn’t readily make,” and the resulting “inaccuracies” are indeed “imperfections.” Yet he knows what he is doing, and his work “will have a certain life and raison d’être that will overwhelm those faults — in the eyes of those who appreciate character and mulling things over in their minds” (528/3:279). The “certain life” here is itself a product of the “imperfections” that impart to the work a sense of how difficult is the search itself for meaning, which in turn takes us beyond decorum, convention, and technical skill. “Academic” drawings might
be “impeccable — without faults,” but they achieve this distinction “without giving us anything new to discover” (515/3:264). As we have seen, for Van Gogh, academic propriety all too readily “freezes” and “petrifies” (184/1:314) the creative impulse. The “new” thing that he seeks to express by his own strategic simplifications and exaggerations is, rather, a direct, compassionate, living presence that offers and invites understanding while struggling (as we all do) with limitations, imperfections, and weakness. As explained in chapter 2, Van Gogh thematized imperfection as a key element in his aesthetic theory, not least because he realized that people (not only artists) are most themselves and most creative when their lives and work are courageously inspired by the ideal even while they also accept their inability to realize it.

My main point here is that Van Gogh’s interest in simplification and exaggeration (both of which he sees in a positive light as part of the creative process) stands in counterpoint to abstraction (in the negative sense in which he most often uses the term). And so a set of correspondences now begins to open up that involves the main terms I have discussed in the previous pages. But before I provide a summary of these correspondences, I would like to pause to note how Van Gogh’s enthusiasm for Japanese art contributed to and informed his thinking about the relationship between patient preparation and swift execution and about the virtues of simplification and exaggeration.

“I’m in Japan”

In his very helpful Van Gogh and Japan, Louis van Tilborgh shows how Van Gogh’s first significant encounter with Japanese prints occurred at the end of 1885, when he arrived in Antwerp. He started collecting seriously when he went to Paris in 1886, at which time he became convinced of the need to think about art as the Japanese do. In Arles, his enthusiasm had become “almost a religion,” as Van Tilborgh says (7), and Van Gogh saw the future of modern art itself as depending on an imitation of the Japanese. But this enthusiasm faded, and after 1888,
he rarely mentions Japanese prints, focusing instead on his own style. As Van Tilborgh points out, the letters are a fruitful source for tracking this waxing and waning enthusiasm, but I will isolate only a few points in this interesting story to clarify the main argument of the present chapter.

In Antwerp, Van Gogh cites with approval De Goncourt’s declaration, “Japonaiserie for ever” (545/3:323), and when he went to Arles, the highest praise Van Gogh could offer was to say that it resembles Japan. If only there were less mistral, “this part of the country would really be as beautiful, and would lend itself as much to art, as Japan” (682/4:272); “I’m always saying to myself that I’m in Japan here” (678/4:263); “you know, I feel I’m in Japan” (585/4:26); and even on the journey from Paris to Arles, “How I watched out to see ‘if it was like Japan yet’! Childish, isn’t it” (706/4:332). Van Gogh also thought that Japanese art was “taking new roots among French Impressionist artists” (640/4:175), even referring to the Impressionists as “the French Japanese” (642/4:177).

On the face of it, these opinions are naïve, but they also reflect a dimension of Van Gogh’s sensibility that, from the earliest letters, was already well attuned to the kind of vision that Japanese art did, in fact, offer him. By this, I mean that from his early years, Van Gogh had a heightened awareness of the immanence of the transcendent and of the fragility and transience of those moments of enhanced understanding and insight when this interpenetration is disclosed in particular experience. Although he shows no familiarity in his letters with the philosophical aspects of Zen Buddhism, he does show an intuitive understanding of the key experience (or nonexperience) to which it points: the moment of enlightenment that is not divorced from the ordinary world but is discovered in and through it, as its essence. Before his interest in Japanese prints took hold, Van Gogh affirmed how an admired painter “saw the sublime in the most ordinary” (305/2:251), and he says that if we are searching for “something deeper, more infinite” in our lives, we can find it close to hand, for instance in a baby’s eyes (292/2:219). Just so, blossoms that “are among the tenderest and most ‘pure’ things under the sun” (408/3:72) spring from a gnarled old
apple tree. That is, fresh insight, new understanding, springs unbidden, delicate, from the rugged immediacy of a hard world; here we might recall, incidentally, that the emblem of the samurai is not the hardened steel of their famous swords but a cherry blossom.\(^8\)

Still, the above quotations do not owe anything at all to Buddhism; they more likely reflect the incarnational aspects of the Christian spirituality with which Van Gogh grew up and, especially, his enduring interest in the Resurrection. Nonetheless, after he turned away from official Christianity, Van Gogh developed these aspects of his sensibility towards what we might call a natural mysticism, and Japanese art must have confirmed this development so that “Japonaiserie” seemed not so much a discovery as a recognition. In this sense, his declaration that “all my work is based to some extent on Japanese art” (640/4:175) is less reckless than might seem at first to be the case.

It is inviting to follow these suggestions into the many letters that express Van Gogh’s interest in Japan, but, again, I will confine my remarks to some of the main points under discussion in the present chapter. In particular, it is not difficult to see how compatible with Japanese aesthetic practice is the combination of patient training and swift execution, which, as we have seen, Van Gogh admired. Also, the simplification and exaggeration with which an expert practitioner can produce powerful, if not slavishly accurate, effects is also a characteristic of Japanese art.

Van Gogh also admired what he took to be the austerity and disciplined cooperativeness of Japanese painters; he explains to Bernard that they “liked one another and stuck together,” living “a kind of brotherly life” with “very little money” (696/4:306, 308). Elsewhere, he says that they teach “almost a new religion” in that in Japanese paintings, we can detect behind the art “a man, undoubtedly wise and a philosopher and intelligent,” who nonetheless has spent his time studying “a simple blade of grass” (686/4:282). The patient dedication that Van Gogh imagines here confirms his utopian idea that Japanese artists lived an austere, disciplined communal life.\(^9\) No doubt, he was thinking of such things when he painted himself as a Japanese monk, “a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha” (697/4:308).
In turn, Van Gogh saw the discipline and dedication of his admired Japanese as part of an apprenticeship that enabled them to paint swiftly and with great liveliness. “The Japanese draws quickly, very quickly, like a flash of lightning, because his nerves are finer, his feeling simpler” (620/4:110). Leaving aside the dotty remark about nerves, we can see that the speed of execution especially catches Van Gogh’s appreciative attention: he admires the “extreme clarity” of the Japanese painters who achieve their results with “a few confident strokes with the same ease as if it was as simple as buttoning your waistcoat” (686/4:282). Here, Van Gogh again views patient practice and spontaneity as complementary opposites, and his interpretations of Japanese art consistently reflect and confirm his own thinking on these topics.

A similar confirmation of his own ideas is evident in Van Gogh’s comments on the part played by simplification and exaggeration in Japanese art. For instance, he notes a “simplification of colour in the Japanese manner” (622/4:112), and in his own painting he strives for a “simple” effect, “like Japanese prints” (705/4:330). He admires the marvellous facility of a Japanese artist who uses only “white paper and 4 strokes of the pen” (622/4:113), seeing the same expressive simplicity in the deliberate exaggerations whereby a Japanese artist “disregards reflection” and instead boldly juxtaposes “solid tints” (622/4:113). As discussed above, Van Gogh thinks of simplification and exaggeration as hallmarks of the expertise that a patient apprenticeship alone can produce. Although to some extent, he reads some of these preoccupations into Japanese art, he quite rightly also finds them already there, expressing a sensibility in many ways geared to and mirroring his own.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to bring to the surface some key ideas and patterns of thinking that inform Van Gogh’s explorations of the creative process. My main claim is that he is a strong thinker, even though he is not systematic. Rather, he addresses the question of creativity from many angles and in many contexts, crossing and recrossing this
territory (as he did the Antwerp docks) and bringing to bear a wide range of insights, analogies, examples, and arguments. Yet his opinions are not merely eclectic: a reader of the complete letters recognizes an accumulating consistency in his deployment of certain motifs and patterns of thought, expressing a rich and nuanced understanding of the creative process. Although the embeddedness of Van Gogh’s thinking within the dense textures and entanglements of hundreds of letters calls for some careful decipherment, the main elements of an impressive vision and comprehensive understanding can be disclosed with a convincing degree of clarity.

As we have seen, Van Gogh returns frequently to the relationship between patient preparation and spontaneity, and the key to understanding this relationship is the idea of learning “by heart.” In other words, when technique is acquired by arduous apprenticeship, it becomes second nature, freeing the artist to work with ease and spontaneity, yet without losing the advantages of the skills acquired by patient dedication. Although Van Gogh connects memory directly to this process of learning, he also refers to memory in a negative sense to describe the avoidance of the difficult apprenticeship through which an artist learns to draw from actual models and by direct contact with nature. For Van Gogh, the difference between memory that is ingrained as a result of repeated studies of actual objects, which he validates, and memory that substitutes an imaginary object for a real one, which he denigrates, is highly significant.

Furthermore, memory in the negative sense is strongly associated with “abstraction,” which Van Gogh sometimes uses as a synonym for “imagination.” Although he can also use these words in a positive sense, they mainly indicate the consequences of his negative understanding of memory. The antidote to the inauthenticity that Van Gogh associates with abstraction lies in the positive value that he attributes to the ideas of simplification and exaggeration, which bring us back to learning by heart. When a thing is learned by heart and implanted in memory (in the positive sense), the spontaneity and speed with which an artist is now free to work might capture the “essence” of a thing in a lively and fresh way, by means of skilful kinds of simplification and
exaggeration. For Van Gogh, this is the key to creativity, which lies not in reproduction of appearances but in tapping into the creative unconscious that finds expression through a luminous interpenetration of human subjectivity and the world: the familiar is thus made new and radiant with fresh significance.

Throughout this chapter, I have also suggested that Van Gogh’s writing is often itself an expressive embodiment of the ideas he discusses: that is, his letters are frequently creative in a way that exemplifies his theory. We have seen something of this in the dynamic combination of spontaneity and critical distance, immediacy and patient familiarity in the passage about the Antwerp docks. Interestingly, several passages in the letters draw attention to the analogies between painting and writing, suggesting that Van Gogh understood the similarities between the creative processes in both media.

“It’s more or less the same with drawing as with writing,” Van Gogh says from The Hague in 1882. “And I really believe that one must learn to draw in such a way that it’s as easy as writing something down” (265/2:155). Later, he remarks on his own progress: “Drawing in itself, technically, is easy enough for me — I’m beginning to do it the way one writes, with the same ease” (558/3:348). Here, Van Gogh’s favourite idea that practice results in ease and familiarity is applied also to writing, and elsewhere he says that much great art seems to him “like WRITING WITH A PEN” (649/4:196). We might recall that he himself wrote and drew with a pen, so the analogies between both tasks would have been clear to him.

Van Gogh also understood that effective writing depends not only on technical achievement but also on the same kind of creative spontaneity that he admired in the great painters. For instance, in a letter to Van Rappard, in which Van Gogh attempts to achieve genuine “power of expression,” he writes:

Do you think that I don’t care about technique or am not searching for it? I do — but only to the extent that — I want to say what I have to say — and where I can’t do it yet, or not well enough, I work on it to improve myself. But I don’t give a damn whether my language squares with that of these orators. (439/3:136)
Opening this letter with a discussion of painting, Van Gogh describes how he wants to master technique to the point where it will appear that he has none. In short, as the “power of expression” takes over, technique becomes a gateway to creativity. To illustrate the point, he shifts to writing, assuring Van Rappard that the conventional correctness of “these orators” will also have to yield to the truth of what Van Gogh wants to say, even if his writing is incorrect. He makes a similar point when he describes what it is like to work in the heat of inspiration: “We work — without feeling that we’re working — when sometimes the brushstrokes come in a sequence and in relation to one another like the words in a speech or a letter” (631/4:152). Here again, ease and facility driven by a strong emotional charge draw on what has been learned by heart, with the practitioner remaining unconscious of the deliberately acquired background knowledge in the heat of the creative moment: this is the case in painting and in writing alike. And indeed, Van Gogh’s letters are full of striking and vivid passages that combine spontaneity and careful consideration, fresh metaphors and well-rehearsed ideas, participatory immediacy and practiced technique. Here, to conclude, is an example of these combined effects in a letter from Drenthe, written in 1883:

I dropped you a line a couple of days ago to tell you a thing or two about the countryside here. Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes. The heath is much vaster than it is in Brabant, near Zundert or Etten at least — rather monotonous, particularly when it’s afternoon and the sun’s shining, and yet it’s that very effect, which I’ve already vainly tried to paint several times, that I shouldn’t want to miss. The sea isn’t always picturesque either, but one has to look at those moments and effects as well if one doesn’t want to deceive oneself as to its true character. Then — the heath is sometimes far from pleasant in the heat of midday. It’s as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert, just as inhospitable, and as it were hostile. Painting it in that blazing light and capturing the planes vanishing into infinity is something that makes one dizzy. So one mustn’t think that it has to be conceived sentimentally; on the contrary it’s almost
never that. That same irritatingly tedious spot — in the evening as a poor little figure moves through the twilight — when that vast, sun-scorched earth stands out dark against the delicate lilac tints of the evening sky, and the very last fine dark blue line on the horizon separates earth from sky — can be as sublime as in a J. Dupré. And it’s the same with the figures. The peasants and the women aren’t always interesting, but if one is patient one will nonetheless really see the whole Millet-like quality. (387/3:14)

The passage begins with Van Gogh taking up a description of the countryside in Drenthe, about which he has already written to Theo. He continues here, adding further details that create an impression of the landscape while commenting also on his efforts to paint it. He begins with a brief, emphatically stated assertion, striking a positive note: “Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes.” But then, surprisingly, he heads in the opposite direction. The heath is “monotonous,” “far from pleasant,” and “as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert.” Nor is the sea always “picturesque” — indeed, the landscape is disagreeable and, moreover, is difficult to paint: he has “vainly tried” several times, becoming “dizzy” from the effort. What then are we to make of the bold claim that everything is beautiful?

Van Gogh provides a clue when he warns against conceiving the scene “sentimentally.” The point here is that looking for conventional kinds of picturesque beauty is superficial and misses the “true character” of the scene, which is much more difficult to assess and which we must really “look at,” while remaining “patient.” That is, careful attention and dedication are required if we are to see how men and women who “aren’t always interesting” are in fact beautiful when their humanity is disclosed in and through their natural surroundings. And so the “poor little figure” moving “through the twilight” can suddenly become “as sublime” as a Dupré painting. But Van Gogh’s verbal description is suggestive independently of the comparison to Dupré, because don’t we feel that humanity itself is rather like this little figure moving through the twilight? The “delicate lilac tints” suggest the evanescence and fragility of the little figure poised against the

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consuming darkness of the “vast, sun-scorched earth” in a manner that reminds Van Gogh of Dupré but that registers its own independent appeal in the form of words, catching something of the poignancy and beauty of the human condition.

And so we return to the opening statement — “Everything is beautiful here” — seeing it now with new eyes. Things are beautiful if one has worked hard and long enough to be able to see those “moments and effects” that transfigure the ordinary. But most importantly for our purposes, the passage itself effects something of the transfiguration that it describes, as the reader is drawn to see the real meaning of the initial claim, contradicted first by the descriptions of the heath and the sea and then rediscovered by way of Van Gogh’s evocative account of the delicate lilac tints and the little figure moving through the twilight.

Initially, Van Gogh seems (as he says) to provide Theo merely with some further impressions of Drenthe, and he does this vividly and effectively. But his apparently spontaneous description is also shaped by the presence of the practiced thinker and the self-conscious artist. We learn here how spontaneity without patient attentiveness is the equivalent of sentimental escapism, a confusion of the superficial (which elsewhere he calls “abstraction”) and the truly beautiful. Van Gogh’s recollection of paintings by Dupré and Millet indicates his practiced habit of seeing, which helps to shape the description of the scene before him.

The weight of both Van Gogh’s painterly practice and his thinking can therefore be felt in the passage as a whole, even as the writing — by way of its internal contrasts and juxtaposition of images, and its combination of thoughtfulness and ease — exemplifies the values it recommends. The letters are full of passages like this, and so I end this chapter as I began, by suggesting that on the topic of creativity, Van Gogh develops a coherent, interwoven set of motifs and ideas that are themselves engaging and well worth our attention. But because his writing, at its best, also embodies and exemplifies these ideas, we frequently find ourselves taken up, moved and engaged in ways that we recognize as creative rather than as merely descriptive or expository.