In Arles, Vincent wrote to Theo about Tolstoi’s *My Religion*, suggesting that it describes the conditions under which “a new religion, or rather, something altogether new, will be reborn, which will have no name but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, that the Christian religion once had” (686/4:282). Although he had not yet read *My Religion*, Vincent was confident about what he took to be its main message, and this was so not least because the ideas he attributed to Tolstoi reproduced the main lines of his own thinking about what we might loosely call a spirituality that would be as comforting as the old religion but not constrained by dogmatism or formal observance.

As seen in chapter 1, aesthetic and religious concerns remained closely interrelated for Van Gogh, and many of the hopes, aspirations, and insights of Christianity continued to inform and inspire him, both as a writer and as a painter. This is clear, for instance, in a letter to Émile Bernard from Arles (June 1888) in which Van Gogh praises Christ as “an artist greater than all artists,” whose special gift was to create “LIVING men, immortals.” The letter goes on to comment on Jesus’s promise that “heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”.

CHAPTER 8

**Something New Without a Name**

*Beyond Religion, Morality, Art*
Those spoken words, which as a prodigal, great lord he didn’t even deign to write down, are one of the highest, the highest summit attained by art, which in them becomes a creative force, a pure creative power.

These reflections, my dear old Bernard — take us a very long way — a very long way — raising us above art itself. They enable us to glimpse — the art of making life, the art of being immortal — alive.

Do they have connections with painting? The patron of painters — St Luke — physician, painter, evangelist — having for his symbol — alas — nothing but the ox — is there to give us hope. (632/4:154)

In this bold representation of Christ as primarily an artist, Van Gogh confirms his own commitment to his vocation as a painter, and so the main thing he admires about Christ is the “creative force” or “pure creative power” that characterizes Christ’s special kind of genius. But then Van Gogh goes on to say that “these reflections” also go a long way towards “raising us above art itself.” Here, the discussion opens upon a further dimension: although Van Gogh does not explain what he means by “the art of being immortal,” he seems to identify it with the encompassing mystery simply of being “alive” in the world. The conclusion then brings us back to painting by way of St. Luke, the patron of painters, who was also Christ’s disciple. And so — the priority of art notwithstanding — the dialogue between the aesthetic and the religious continues, even as it points us towards a transcendent mystery that encompasses both.

This passage can help us to understand Van Gogh’s remarks on “something altogether new” beyond traditional religion. Although words do not describe this new thing adequately, creative actions (such as Christ’s) can, like great painting, reveal something of the infinite within the ordinary objects of a common world, whether a blade of grass or a starry sky. And then, too, there is the mystery of our own interiority, the strange depths of consciousness. Just as nature can reveal its depths to the artist’s creative gaze, so also can nature be reshaped through art to express our deepest human needs and longings. This exchange is reciprocal, as Van Gogh well knew, and is the wellspring of the creative process itself.
Faith and Fidelity

A term increasingly used these days to describe people who subscribe to ideas about religion resembling Van Gogh’s is “spiritual but not religious,” and in some quarters, such people are even accorded an acronym: SBNR. We might, then, see Van Gogh as an early example of what has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon, especially in Western cultures influenced by Christianity. Part of the appeal of Van Gogh’s declarations of a nonreligious spirituality might therefore lie, for modern readers, in the special relevance of his experience to our current historical phase.

In this context, it might be helpful to introduce a distinction made by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville between “faith” and “fidelity.” Sponville argues that even when religious beliefs are no longer accepted as the literal truth, the wisdom that inheres in a developed religious tradition can remain as a cultural inheritance to inform, guide, and humanize people’s behaviour and relationships. That is, “fidelity” to certain culturally produced ways of knowing and living can be valued and can remain influential even when “faith” has dwindled. Certainly, as described in chapter 1, a broad range of Christian values continued to infuse and inform Van Gogh’s imagination even when he denounced institutional Christianity as sterile and hypocritical, and in this, he exemplifies very well the kind of “fidelity” that Sponville describes. Thus, Van Gogh sees himself as searching for “something on high” (288/2:208), which, in the passage on Tolstoi, he says has “no name,” although he immediately adds that the indescribable new thing will also make “life possible” and provide consolation as Christianity once did. And so the “altogether new” is given substance, as it were, through reference to Christianity, which remains a criterion for the value of what is to succeed it.
Throughout his career, Van Gogh expressed frustration at the limitations of language for expressing the kind of truth he valued, whether in religion, morality, or art. On the topic of religion, one way in which he dealt with this inadequacy was to draw attention to it by reducing the descriptive power of language even further, as he did, for instance, by substituting the third person pronoun “it” for the transcendent value in question. For instance, writing to Theo from Isleworth in 1876, he cites verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah, commenting eagerly: “My boy, days will come when we’ll no longer believe because we heard it said but when we’ll know, feel and love it” (90/1:115–16). Later, from Etten in 1881, in describing his love for Kee, he tells Theo, “It seems to me, exchanging everything for everything is the real, true thing, that’s it” (183/1:312). And while in Paris in 1875, he describes a painting by Bonington as having “almost painted it, and yet that isn’t it either” (44/1:71). About Theo’s taste for Millet, Vincent writes from London, approvingly, “that’s it,” and about Millet’s Angelus, “that’s it. That’s rich, that’s poetry” (17/1:41). Again, from London, writing to Caroline van Stockum-Haanebeek, he repeats a phrase (which he says he learned from Anton Mauve), “that’s it” (18/1:42), as a way of describing his search for a homeland. In Nuenen in 1883, commenting on his ambivalent relationship with his father, he describes a “provisional arrangement and calm” that “is indeed it but far more still not yet it at all” (415/3:86).

Although Van Gogh’s later letters do not favour this use of the hypostasized pronoun, in the examples I have cited, he applies the word to painting, poetry, the search for a true home, God’s truth, love, and reconciliation. In each case, he gestures to ideals that exceed description but that, nonetheless, give value to our aspirations and relationships, and for which the word “spiritual” might not be inappropriate.

Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh also reaches for other, again conspicuously inadequate, terms to indicate the transcendent mystery. Thus, “there’s so much soul and mysterious endeavor in nature” (559/3:350); imagination produces things of a “mysterious character” (719/4:356); Shakespeare is “mysterious” (155/1:247). And
in a striking passage written in Etten in 1881, he rejects a standard version of what “God” means, while insisting on preserving “a certain something” that, again, eludes description:

Look, I find the clergymen’s God as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? The clergymen think me one — be that as it may — but look, I love, and how could I feel love if I myself weren’t alive and others weren’t alive? And if we live, there’s something wondrous about it. Call it God or human nature or what you will, but there’s a certain something that I can’t define in a system, even though it’s very much alive and real, and you see, for me it’s God or just as good as God. (193/1:340)

Here, Van Gogh struggles, as it were, to avoid throwing out the baby with the bath water. That is, “God” is not discarded outright because the word can be useful for indicating the “something wondrous” that is the source and origin of life, but “the clergymen’s God” certainly is rejected (“dead as a doornail”). Van Gogh goes on to say that the real, live energy at the source of our universe cannot be defined “in a system.” His slightly daring use of the word “atheist” is therefore equivocal, because it applies only to the opinion that the dogmatic (themselves dead-as-a-doornail) clergy have of him. The suggestion is that they, in fact, are the godless ones because they have so little sense of the living mystery. And so at the end of the excerpt, God, who might seem at first to be rejected, is carefully reinstated: “for me it’s God or just as good as God.” Although Van Gogh might seem to want to replace God with the life force in nature, he pulls back from outright pantheism by allowing “God” to remain ambivalent. Yet the passage as a whole is interesting not because it is equivocal but because of the intensity of Van Gogh’s searching intelligence as he struggles with the God question, at once assertive and scrupulous to avoid oversimplification.

Throughout the letters, impressionistic terms such as “it” and “mysterious” are reinforced by other, similar words gesturing towards the unnameable source of the world and of ourselves within it. For instance, we need “the boundless and miraculous” (143/1:223), and in
a painting, we can discover “something infinite” (259/2:144) because the “grand” and “infinite” are always close at hand. “Something precious, something noble” in art gives us a sense of an “eternal home” (288/2:208). Van Gogh acknowledges the perennial intimations of “something on High” that is “awful” and “inexpressible” and connected to “conscience” (401/3:56). He finds the “eternal” in Monticelli (598/4:60) and the “infinite” (656/4:220) in a child’s eyes. Rembrandt communicates a sense of “superhuman infinitude” (784/5:49), because beauty makes the infinite tangible, as Rembrandt’s “metaphysical magic” (649/4:197) shows. Even printing is an “everyday miracle,” as is reading, which also shows us the way to “something higher” (333/2:318).

The language here, while not strictly theological, is informed by what we might loosely call a religious sensibility. References to infinity, eternity, and something on high that is inexpressible but linked to conscience are complementary to Van Gogh’s suggestive but undefined references to the mysterious “it.” Throughout his correspondence, he resorts frequently to this kind of language, even though when he rejected formal religion, he lost interest in devotional writers such as Bunyan, Fénélon, and Thomas à Kempis, and his letters were no longer packed with Biblical quotations. His religious faith, as we saw in chapter 1, was reconfigured as love for Kee and, subsequently, Sien. And so on the topic of love, he advises Theo, “you will benefit much more from re-reading Michelet than from the Bible” (189/1:325), and he cites with approval Michelet’s opinion that woman herself is a religion (246/2:106). More significantly, he also displaces his faith onto art. For instance, he complains that “Ma simply cannot comprehend that painting is a faith” (490/3:219). By contrast, he declares in an earlier letter, “I’ve found my work,” and it entails “a certain faith in art” (329/2:304).

In a striking passage, he tells Theo: “I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can’t, suffering as I do, do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create” (673/4:253). Here, the ability to paint takes priority over “the dear Lord,” even as Vincent also acknowledges a further mystery (“something greater than myself”) that is the source of his creative energy and that, as shown above, he indicates by a variety of names intended to evoke rather than to describe it.
Clearly, then, Van Gogh did not discard religious language when he broke with official Christian observance. Although he remained vigorously opposed to institutional religion (and to institutions in general), he was ambivalent about the enculturation that his religious upbringing afforded him. As I have suggested, this ambivalence is the site of a genuine exploration of complex issues: although he used various terms to evoke the transcendent mystery without using the word “God,” he could resurrect the idea of God when he needed to, even after he had rejected official Christianity.

For instance, in December 1882, well after he had broken with his father’s faith, Vincent tells Theo that religion is “something one respects if it’s sincere” (294/2:223), going on to admit to his own need to believe in “something on high, even if I don’t know exactly who or what will be there” (294/2:223). He cites with approval Hugo’s observation that “religions pass, but God remains” (294/2:223), and he admires the great artists who died with “no idée fixe about God or abstractions — always on the ground floor of life itself” (560/3:352). Elsewhere, he cites Hugo again, to the effect that “God is a lighthouse whose beam flashes on and off,” and, Van Gogh adds, “now of course we’re passing through that darkness” (691/4:292).

These examples show that Van Gogh did not simply deny God, however much he disliked how the idea of God was commonly used. Rather, he drew a distinction between God and what the religions say about God. Likewise, having “no idée fixe about God” does not mean counting God out, and if God is in eclipse (as the lighthouse metaphor suggests), that does not mean that God does not exist. In his distress at St. Rémy, Van Gogh explains how his attacks took “an absurd religious turn”; although he expressed horror at “these unhealthy religious aberrations,” he admits also that “religious thoughts sometimes console me a great deal” (801/5:89).

Admittedly, Van Gogh sometimes comes close to identifying God with nature, but he does not quite do so definitively. Thus, he suggests that people no longer believe in miracles or “in a God who jumps capriciously and despotically from one thing to another”; rather, they are “beginning to gain more respect and admiration for and belief in
nature” (450/3:158). He equates “contact with nature” to “walking with God” (401/3:56); in Arles, he goes so far as to proclaim that “those who don’t believe in the sun down here are truly blasphemous” (663/4:239). He admits sometimes to “having a tremendous need for, shall I say, the word — for religion — so I go outside at night to paint the stars” (691/4:292).

It is easy to see in these examples how Van Gogh attaches a spiritual, even quasi-religious value to the natural world. But seeing God in nature and deifying nature are not the same, and, as I mentioned earlier, Van Gogh stops short of pantheism: the infinite “It” is not simply nature. To the end, the Biblical roots of his religious sensibility remain surprisingly persistent, as we see, for instance, in his enduring appreciation of Christ. He explains that Bernard may be “surprised to see how little I love the Bible,” except for “this kernel, Christ” (633/4:157). Renan’s interpretation of Jesus, he writes, is “a thousand times more consoling” than the “papier mâché Christs” offered by “Protestant, Catholic or whatever else churches” (763/4:434). He applauds Carlyle for learning from Jesus (325/2:300), and he admires Christ for loving people “more than is wise,” so that he was taken for “a crackpot” (615/4:97). As has often been the case throughout the history of Christianity, Van Gogh sees his own values and aspirations mirrored in Christ, whom, as noted above, Van Gogh thought supreme among artists, even though mocked or rejected as “a crackpot.” In short, Christ remained a compelling figure for Van Gogh, who retained a fidelity to certain core Christian values even when his faith had long since receded. It is too simple to suggest that he threw off Christianity in order, somehow, to embrace a religion of nature.

As is often the case in our discussions of Van Gogh, the foregoing examples cannot be reduced to a systematically thought out set of positions: the effectiveness of his writing on the topics of spirituality and religion resides elsewhere than in philosophical consistency. So far, we have seen him deploy language that acknowledges a transcendent mystery while stressing how far conventional religion falls short of the vital, living truth. But we also see how he deploys conventional religious language and does not dispense with certain core values in the
Christian tradition to which he once devoted himself so wholeheartedly and to some aspects of which he retained a fidelity throughout his life.

Black, White, and Complicated

In light of Van Gogh’s mixed attitude to religion — both rejecting it and drawing upon it — I wish to revisit a tendency in his thinking that I explored from a different point of view in chapter 7. There, we saw how Van Gogh’s break with his family remained uncomfortably bound up with his dependency on it. So, likewise, we see how his rejection of religion existed alongside his continued nourishment by it. And here, again as with autonomy and dependency, we can detect two opposed tendencies in Van Gogh’s writing. The first insists, boldly and assertively, on strong binary oppositions. The second is more complex, showing the limitations of binary opposition without surrendering its critical force. The interplay between these two aspects of his writing on religion and spirituality does much to produce the captivating dynamism that makes his letters as a whole so engaging and challenging.

For instance, on the topic of a person’s spiritual or moral integrity, Van Gogh frequently insists on absolute distinctions with an uncomfortable clarity and forcefulness. This is clear especially in his several references to Victor Hugo’s contrast between the black ray and the white ray (388/3:20), indicating two kinds of spiritual energy. Thus, Van Gogh describes “God” as “the white Ray,” against whom “even the black ray is powerless” (401/3:56). Elsewhere, he exhorts Theo, “Let’s seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness” (403/3:61). He hopes “that I shall see the white ray before my eyes close,” and has “never regretted having said that I considered black ray black ray, and having abandoned that outright” (403/3:60).

When interpreted by way of this binary opposition, Vincent’s problem with his father is stated simply: “To me he’s a black ray. The only criticism I have of Pa is: why isn’t he a white ray? . . . To you I say, look for
white ray, white, do you hear!” Vincent goes on then to align Hermanus Tersteeg with Pa, as he describes how his own understanding increasingly enabled him to realize “that there’s such a thing as black ray and white ray, and that I found their light black and a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance” (403/3:60). In a later letter, he tells Theo, “Pa’s character is dark (the black ray, as I once reminded you)” (415/3:85).

These black and white distinctions are complemented by a similar pair of contrasting terms that Van Gogh derived from Thomas Carlyle. These are “the everlasting yes” and “the everlasting no,” the latter of which Van Gogh applies to Tersteeg: “To me Tersteeg will I think remain *the everlasting NO,*” in contrast to “men of character” in whom “one finds an everlasting *yes*” (358/2:365). Elsewhere, in much the same spirit, Vincent depicts Theo and himself as standing on opposite sides “of a certain barricade” (463/3:176), an idea to which he returns, hoping that the brothers will not take aim at one another from their opposed positions “standing on different sides of a barricade” (473/3:191). Likewise, on some moral issues, Vincent says, “a door should either be open or shut” (432/3:113). Black and white, open and shut, yes and no, the two sides of a barricade: these binaries are forcefully presented and might be experienced by readers as either bracing or, as the exasperated Theo once declared, as an irritating confirmation of Vincent’s inclination to “carry things too far” (197/2:15).

And yet a contradictory impulse to this propensity towards dualism is not hard to find, not least in the sense of mystery, which, as we have seen, Van Gogh often evokes. “There remain imponderables,” he tells Theo from The Hague in 1883, referring again to the ineffable transcendent. He goes on to explain: “If life were as simple and things actually worked as in the story of dutiful Hendrik or an ordinary, routine sermon by a minister, it wouldn’t be all that hard to find one’s way.” But this is not the case, because things are, in fact, “infinitely more complicated and good and evil no more occur by themselves than black and white do in nature” (368/3:291). Here, Van Gogh explicitly rejects the opposition between black and white, which he sees as an oversimplification equivalent to the clichéd sermonizing of
a conventional preacher. Again from The Hague, he admits to Theo that the relationship with Sien is “entangled in thorns” and fraught with complexities because “one is responsible, so to speak, for each other’s failings” (381/2:415). Here, the lines of demarcation are not clearly drawn at all, and Vincent later admits to Theo, “I’m increasingly coming to see that it’s so terribly difficult to know where one is right and where one is wrong” (413/3:83). From Arles in 1888, he advises Theo, “Let’s not think too deeply, about good and bad, that always being very relative” (707/4:335). And from St. Rémy the next year, he makes the same point: “We know so little about life that we’re not really in a position to judge between good and bad, just or unjust” (787/5:56). Alluding to St. Paul, he assures his mother that we know life “through a glass, darkly,” and “one understands no more of it than that” (885/5:260). In short, Van Gogh was well aware that in actual experience, people’s lives are complex in ways that defy reduction to a straightforward binary opposition between bad and good, black and white, no and yes.

There is a marked contrast, then, between Van Gogh’s black and white assertiveness, on the one hand, and his appreciation of life’s irreducible complexities, on the other. But my main point is that the letters often engage us so powerfully because of the interplay that they record between these two aspects of his writing. We see this, for instance, in the excerpt about being an “atheist,” in which bold assertion is qualified by a further, contrapuntal reconsideration, as a result of which we feel ourselves taken up by the process itself of Van Gogh’s searching intelligence. The interplay between “black and white” and “relative,” “God” and “mysterious” is a means of communicating his personal search for a spiritual understanding beyond the confines of traditional religion, yet maintaining a fidelity to the tradition without which the search could neither begin nor be maintained. The compelling authenticity of Van Gogh’s enquiry into such matters emerges not so much from the binary oppositions with which he periodically presents us as from the energy and intelligence with which these oppositions are interrogated at the bar of a richly imagined experience.
As noted above, Van Gogh observes that if life were “simple,” then “an ordinary, routine sermon” would suffice. But life is not simple, and the search for understanding calls for courage, endurance, and creative energy. As it happens, during his stay in England, Van Gogh wrote a sermon that, in comparison to his best letters, provides an interesting example of the contrast he himself wants to make between the clergyman and the artist — which is to say, the “routine” and the truly creative.

“An Ordinary, Routine Sermon”

On Sunday, 29 October 1876, at the Wesleyan Methodist church in Richmond, Van Gogh delivered a sermon. It is preserved in English, just as he wrote it, and its contents can be summarized briefly.\(^5\)

Van Gogh begins by citing Psalm 119:19: “I am a stranger in the earth.” This verse recurs like a refrain throughout, connecting to the leading idea that life is “a pilgrim[]’s progress” during which we journey from earth to heaven. Although this pilgrimage is full of sorrow, angels smile when we are born and when we die, after having fought the good fight. Van Gogh then turns to his favourite verse from St. Paul to confirm that we should resolve to be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” As we journey through life, we must persevere resolutely while attempting also to love our neighbour as ourselves. And although our life begins like a river journey, we soon find ourselves on a stormy sea. Then, we are to remember that Jesus walked on the waves, offering the message of salvation. Above all, during life’s journey, we are to seek our Father’s love and approval as, having left home, we try to find it again. Van Gogh declares his gratitude to his Christian parents and promises, “I will be a Christian too.” To answer such a calling, he will have to plough and cast nets, and all of us must pray that God will keep us from evil. To illustrate the pilgrimage motif, Van Gogh turns to “a very beautiful picture” and cites a poem by Christina Rosetti. He concludes with the assurance that God provides consolation, showing us higher truths through the events of daily life that are often more significant than they might at first seem.
The Richmond sermon is full of evangelical ardour, reflecting Van Gogh’s immersion in the Bible as well as his enthusiasm for John Bunyan, from whom he borrows the idea of a pilgrim’s progress through the trials and tribulations of life to the heavenly Jerusalem. The sermon also demonstrates Van Gogh’s preoccupation with suffering and with his favourite advice from St. Paul: that we remain “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” It glows with admiration for his Christian parents, whom he promises to emulate.

Although Van Gogh could not have known it at the time, the Richmond sermon touches on themes and motifs that would preoccupy him throughout his correspondence. Thus, the sermon contains an extended passage on storms, and especially storms at sea. Readers who might doubt whether his many references to storms in the letters are intended metaphorically need look no further than this sermon for evidence that he was quite aware of using the motif in such a sense, if only because of the explicitness with which he does so in the sermon. Thus, the psalmist who “describes a storm at sea” must also “have felt the storm in his heart to describe it so.” The sea is also “the sea of our lives,” and we experience “the great storms of life” including “all the waves and all the billows of the Lord.”

Among other motifs that would remain close to Van Gogh’s heart is his desire to provide “consolation” and to be “comforting.” Throughout his letters, as in his paintings, he refers to ploughing and to the planting of seeds — again, in a metaphorical sense (the seed is “sown in our hearts”). The refrain that runs through the sermon, “I am a stranger in the earth,” touches on yet another point continually confirmed in his life and correspondence: he never did find the domestic comfort, the homecoming about which he wrote and which he imagined in various forms. Finally, as the sermon concludes, Van Gogh turns to a painting for an example of the values he recommends. This painting was once thought to be Boughton’s Pilgrim’s Progress. It is, however, unnamed and inaccurately described in the sermon, and the identification is now questioned. Whatever the source, Van Gogh describes the painting and expands upon it by alluding to Christina Rosetti’s poem Uphill (again unnamed and incorrectly copied). The interrelationships
between art and religion (or the transcendent values to which religion points) that we see here would, like the other themes and motifs mentioned above, continue to be explored by Van Gogh throughout his career.

Certainly, it is interesting to note how the Richmond sermon engages with themes that were to remain important to Van Gogh. But for all that, the sermon itself is among the least engaging things he wrote. Ironically, it is a perfect example of the “routine, ordinary” sermonizing of the average preacher, which he later criticized. Here, for instance, is a typical passage from the sermon:

These two commandments we must keep and if we follow after these, if we are devoted to this, we are not alone for our Father in Heaven is with us, helps us and guides us, gives us strength day by day, hour by hour, and so we can do all things through Christ who gives us might.

These are the stock-in-trade exhortations of a preacher resorting to standard doctrinal generalizations, without specific applications or what Van Gogh would later come to see as enlivening detail. He goes on to say that the “Saviour and Prince of Peace” announces “to you personally — mind to you personally ‘It is I, be not afraid.’” But this supposedly personal communication has itself nothing of the personal about it that would give it a human face, as it were. Even the metaphors of the storm and the journey remain stilted and overly obvious: “Our life, we might compare it to a journey,” for example, or “my bark is so small and Thy sea is so great.” Moreover, the sermon lacks narrative development, circling back upon the main ideas with an awkward if ardent insistence. In all this, Van Gogh is clearly influenced by the cadences of the English Bible as well as by Bunyan’s seventeenth-century prose and diction. Consequently, the sermon often sounds archaic, but in a mannered rather than an evocative way. Thus, the syntax is marked throughout by awkward inversions and artificial solemnity: “who remembereth no more Her Sorrow”; “Entreat us not to leave Thee or to refrain from following after Thee.”
And yet there is one moment when the tone and register of the writing change clearly for the better. This occurs when Van Gogh turns to the “very beautiful picture,” which he describes first as a “landscape at evening”:

In the distance on the right hand side a row of hills appearing blue in the evening mist. Above those hills the splendour of the sunset, the grey clouds with their linings of silver and gold and purple. The landscape is a plain or heath covered with grass and heather, here and there a white stem of a birch tree and its yellow leaves, for it was in Autumn. Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far far away, on the top of that mountain a city whereon the setting sun casts a glory.

Here, we can’t help but feel Van Gogh’s prose breathing easier, as the description is direct, detailed, and attentive to the mood and colour of the painting. It strikes us as fresh and evocative — a relief from the prevailing leaden diction and dry, doctrinal solemnity. It is as if Van Gogh has stumbled upon something that came naturally to him, the place where (as he would later discover) his gift really lay, intimated in this brief passage about painting, which is so much more engaging than anything else in the sermon.

Van Gogh ranks highly among great letter writers, but, judging from his performance at Richmond, he would not rank at all among the great writers of sermons. As he himself would put it, his sermon lacks that “extra something of singular genius,” the “power to invigorate” (332/2:316) that brings art to life — except, that is, for the one moment when he turns to painting, where we feel his spirits lift and the writing becomes fresh and vigorous. Despite the clichéd and hackneyed prose, however, the main themes of the sermon were to remain with Van Gogh throughout his career. He continued to be a stranger on the earth, seeking for home and enduring the storms of the heart, sorrowful yet rejoicing, compassionate to the widows and orphans, conflicted about his father’s approval, sensitive to the beauty of art and to the resonance of nature with spiritual significance beyond what initial appearances
might suggest. These concerns, to a significant degree born out of Van Gogh’s Christian commitment, remained infused with his admiration for Christ, even when Van Gogh had ceased formally being a Christian. Interestingly, the contrast between what he experienced as the narrow world of his father’s religion and the liberating energy of art is reproduced in the contrast between the Richmond sermon and the letters in their literary dimension.

With these points in mind, let us now consider Van Gogh’s interesting request that Van Rappard, if he has kept Vincent’s letters, reread them, as they deserve, because they were written “in earnest,” giving “free rein to my imagination,” even though Van Rappard might think “I’m in fact preaching a doctrine” (188/1:322):

Now you’ll say that I’m actually a headstrong person and that I’m in fact preaching a doctrine.

Well, if you want to take it that way, so be it, I don’t necessarily have anything against it, I’m not ashamed of my feelings, I’m not ashamed of being a man, of having principles and faith. But where do I want to drive people, especially myself? To the open sea. And which doctrine do I preach? People, let us surrender our souls to our cause and let us work with our heart and love what we love.

*Love what we love,* what an unnecessary warning that seems, and yet how great a *raison d’être.* After all, how many people expend their best efforts on something that isn’t worthy of their best efforts, and treat what they love in a “stepmotherly” fashion instead of giving themselves openly to the irresistible urging of their heart. And we even think that behavior such as the above shows “firmness of character” and “strength of mind,” and we expend our efforts on an unworthy one and neglect our true lass. And all of that with “the most sacred of intentions” and “thinking we must do it” from a “moral conviction” and “sense of duty.” Thus we have “the beam in our own eye,” confusing a seeming or would-be conscience with our real conscience. The person who is now writing to his dear friend Rappard has long gone through the world with one — perhaps even more than one — such object, though of monstrous size, in his eye. (188/1:322)
Van Gogh begins on a note of arch provocation, agreeing that he might seem to be “a headstrong person” and a preacher. He confirms that this might be so by insisting on his “principles” and “faith,” suggesting that he has something of the clergyman about him. But of course, this is a gambit, a tease, for when he goes on to describe his “faith,” it is the exact opposite of the narrowness and confinement associated with the conventional preacher of a “doctrine.” Rather, Van Gogh’s creed leads him to “the open sea” and to giving ourselves over recklessly to “work with our heart and love what we love.” The language shifts here towards the impressionistic, evoking a broad aspiration as undetermined as the sea itself and based on a concern that people not squander their “best efforts” by confining themselves within conventional mores and principles. The triteness of conventional morality is indicated by a series of cliché phrases cited in inverted commas: “firmness of character,” “strength of mind,” “the most sacred of intentions,” “sense of duty,” “moral conviction.” These are the stock in trade of the “ordinary, routine” clergyman, and Van Gogh wants to distinguish between the “real conscience” that informs his particular “faith” and the “seeming or would-be conscience” of these other preachers who have a beam in their eye — a Biblical figure for the hypocrisy of those who condemn others for minor faults while having greater faults of their own. But the excerpt contains a final surprise, as Van Gogh declares that he himself has “long gone through the world” with the biggest beam of all — indeed, “monstrous” — in his own eye. Although there is a touch of comic exaggeration in this confessional moment, there is no reason to disbelieve Van Gogh’s rueful admission of his own imperfection, even though he does not explain it in detail, instead going on to stress the general prevalence of the problem: “For there are all manner of ‘eye beams,’ artistic, theological, moral eye beams (very frequent), practical eye beams and theoretical eye beams (sometimes in combination, very fatal!) and, well, many, many more” (188/1:323).

Van Gogh’s intention here is, in all likelihood, that Van Rappard should take the admission of hypocrisy at face value as Van Gogh’s acknowledgement of a personal failing. And yet it might occur to the reader (especially one who has followed the argument of this chapter)
that the beam in Van Gogh’s own eye is intriguingly pertinent to the double-think implicit in his declarations of liberation from a set of religious doctrines that, in fact, he cannot shake off. Despite having declared the liberty of the open sea, he resorts to the conventional language of the regular clergyman (“creed,” “principles,” “doctrine,” “conviction,” “conscience,” and so on) to express the fact that these terms no longer have the hold on him that they once did. Regardless of whether Van Gogh himself thought of this ambivalence as an example of one of the kinds of hypocrisy he describes, the fact is that the text allows — even provokes — such a reading. And certainly, in broad terms, Van Gogh is aware of the conundrum he presents in the excerpt under consideration, in which he contrasts two kinds of language about belief, the first calling for conceptual clarity (“doctrine,” “principles”) and the second intimating a heart-stirring aspiration (“to the open sea”). Van Gogh begins the passage by inverting the usual sense of the first kind (he is not really a conventional preacher) in order to promote the second, and then, as the passage concludes, he inverts the second in order to accuse himself (with some ironizing humour) of a standard moral failing. There is some witty dexterity and genuine complexity in this performance, which shows very well that Van Gogh knew that for him, the languages of traditional religion and new spirituality do not exist separately but in symbiosis, entailing a fidelity that endures even as faith is surrendered.

To summarize, Van Gogh’s Richmond sermon gives us interesting information about his thinking and favourite preoccupations, but, apart from the one moment we have noted, it does little to engage us personally. What’s more, it is, overwhelmingly, the product of the type of clergyman’s mentality that Van Gogh soon came to denounce in the name of a different set of values and aspirations. Something of these different values and aspirations can be seen and felt in the letter to Van Rappard, where we are taken up by the turns and returns of Van Gogh’s mind as he explores the interrelationship between traditionally religious discourse and the creativity that he came to admire above all else, and that the letter itself exemplifies.
Van Gogh as Post-Romantic Figural

As we have seen throughout this chapter — and as Van Gogh clearly understood — the new thing without a name in fact requires names in order to be sought after in the first place. Consequently, some of the core values of the religion of his youth continued to inform Van Gogh’s search for the mysterious, the transcendent “it,” the “white ray” that is the source of creativity and of life itself. As he kept insisting, the transcendent is immanent in our immediate relationships with other people and with nature, and I have tried to show that, at their best, Van Gogh’s letters themselves express this interinvolvement. But I would like to end this chapter by noting how his insistence on the immanence of the transcendent relates also to his practice as a painter who is neither wholly expressionist nor wholly concerned with the faithful representation of appearances.

Erich Auerbach’s term “figural” is helpful here, even though Auerbach uses “figural” mainly to describe medieval literature (especially Dante). In so doing, he distinguishes between allegoria and figura. That is, in allegoria, events and characters are invented to illustrate an abstract idea; in figura, a thing or person is felt to be the bearer of some further, mysteriously resonant but unconceptualized significance. In an earlier study, I described the poetry of Seamus Heaney as figural in Auerbach’s sense. In doing so, I wanted to elucidate how Heaney holds the carefully observed phenomena of nature on the edge of some broader significance that does not harden out conceptually but that is felt as vital and emotionally charged rather than abstract. In Heaney’s case, this broader significance is frequently self-reflexive, returning us to the craft and achievement of the poem itself. This self-reflexiveness results from the fact that a main difference between Heaney’s figural mode and Dante’s is that Heaney lacks Dante’s medieval sacramentalism and trust in the objective, God-ordained hierarchies of the chain of being. Instead, like Wordsworth, Heaney turns to the ordering effect of the poem itself to express the resonance between the creative mind and the natural world. In this, he reflects a typically modernist self-consciousness, whereby art supplies the loss consequent upon the
receding “sea of faith,” as Matthew Arnold says. We might describe the combined effect of these elements as “post-Romantic figural.”

For Van Gogh, too, I now suggest, nature is likewise figural. In the absence of a traditional religious faith, he looks to the work of art to express the mysterious, life-enhancing resonance between the human mind and the undisclosed dimensions of nature. All of this helps to explain something of the special appeal and achievement of his paintings, as well as some of the most striking effects of his writing. For instance, in the following excerpt, he describes how he longs to paint landscapes, and how “in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were”:

A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.

Young corn can have something ineffably pure and gentle about it that evokes an emotion like that aroused by the expression of a sleeping child, for example.

The grass trodden down at the side of a road looks tired and dusty like the inhabitants of a poor quarter. After it had snowed recently I saw a group of Savoy cabbages that were freezing, and that reminded me of a group of women I had seen early in the morning at a water and fire cellar in their thin skirts and old shawls. (292/2:218–19)

In discovering “expression and a soul” in natural objects, Van Gogh points to the interpenetration of the mind and nature as the means of disclosing some fresh understanding of nature and of human nature simultaneously. The point about the corn, trodden grass, and Savoy cabbages is not that they look like babies, slum dwellers, or poor women. While the pollard willows might possibly suggest a procession of dejected men, someone looking at a painting of the trees would not necessarily see represented there anything as specific as an actual group of “orphan men.” Rather, these objects evoke a set of feelings that we might identify as resembling the feelings evoked by the human referents Van Gogh suggests. Again, he is not saying that a viewer of a painting of trodden grass should see that it resembles the “inhabitants
of a poor quarter.” Rather, the trodden grass is figural, which is to say that the meaning it suggests is not specified but is registered on our emotions nonetheless. We can well imagine a sensitive observer saying: “How tired and dusty that grass appears; why, it reminds one of the plight of some poor people in our cities, of whom we really ought to take more care.” But another observer might just as well explain the feelings in other terms and still remain responsive to the trampled and dusty appearance of the grass. The significance here is not allegorical — that is, there is no governing idea or concept to which the trodden grass corresponds; rather, it is figural, causing the observer to experience a feeling-state in which human emotion and a sense of compassionate concern are disclosed in and through nature.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh describes a “superb” stand of trees: “there was a drama in each figure I’m tempted to say, but I mean in each tree” (381/2:415). The sunflower paintings likewise express “gratitude” (853/5:199; 856/5:204), and a yearning for the “infinite” is represented in the sower and the sheaf of wheat (628/4:137). In these examples, as in the previous excerpt, the human significance of the natural world is disclosed as already immanent there, to be awakened and brought to light by the irradiating gaze of the creative human intelligence. Just so, the nonhuman “tree” and the human “figure” interpenetrate in the “drama” of the emergent beauty and significance of the encounter Van Gogh describes, as is the case also with the sunflowers, the sower, and the wheat. These awakenings remain mysterious, and, as Heidegger says, we turn away from them by seeking refuge in the conceptual. Yet, paradoxically, descriptions or explanations of the revelatory power of art will themselves resort to some degree of conceptualization — as Van Gogh also does, even while he remains careful to be suggestive rather than prescriptive.

In a telling passage that again deals with these issues, Van Gogh explains to Bernard that “in order to give an impression of anxiety, you can try to do it without heading straight for the historical garden of Gethsemane; in order to offer a consoling and gentle subject it isn’t necessary to depict the figures from the Sermon on the Mount” (822/5:153). That is, the human emotion of anguish and the gentleness
of consolation are expressed as much by a quality of style as by the explicit representation of an anguished human being or of a consoling human presence. Indeed, explicit representations might not communicate any genuine anguish or consolation at all: Van Gogh complained often about the lifelessness of much painting that is merely correct in representational terms. What he wanted was of a different order, as he proclaims in the passage where he says that although he can do without the Lord, he cannot do without “the power to create”:

And in painting I’d like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I’d like to paint men and women with that je ne sais quoi of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations. (673/4:253)

This is the post-Romantic figural in a nutshell. Van Gogh realizes that the halo is no longer available as an effective symbol, even though he retains a fidelity to the value it represents. Consequently, his gesture to the transcendent, the “je ne sais quoi of the eternal,” incorporates the traditional idea instead of simply discarding it. As ever, for Van Gogh, new spirituality and old religion remain in close conversation. But the main point of the excerpt is stated in the self-reflective conclusion, bringing us back to the work of art as the embodiment of the new kind of truth to which Van Gogh aspired. That is, the “radiance” and the “vibrancy” of the colours are the bearers of the “consoling” effect, which in turn provides a glimpse of the “eternal” that was once symbolized by the halo. The traditional, religious idea of holiness is thus replaced by a figural suggestiveness, neither divorced from the familiar objects of our common world nor providing us with conceptual closure, but returning us instead to the work of art itself as an expression of the creative interplay between the human mind and nature.
Conclusion

These reflections on the post-Romantic figural can bring us back to our point of departure at the beginning of this chapter and to Van Gogh’s search for an adequate language to express his sense of the mystery of the universe and of human consciousness beyond the categories of the official religious observance to which he had for some years dedicated his best energies. As we have seen, in his letters, his aspiration to something new without a name is never entirely divorced from his Christian enculturation and from the core values to which he maintained a fidelity even as he abandoned his faith in the creeds and observances of institutional religion. Although Van Gogh did not shrink from prescriptive and confrontational clarity, he was well attuned to the complexities of experience and to how black and white distinctions blend, in practice, along a chromatic scale of infinite gradations. His letters frequently express the tensions between his forthright assertions of principle and his further, nuanced assessments of matters under discussion. By such means, he explores the complex relationships between traditional religion and the kind of spiritual awareness to which he aspired as its replacement and of which he found painting, especially, the embodiment. He did not look to painting to illustrate or mediate some creed or set of beliefs but to create its own humanizing and sacred values by embodying them. I have described this process as “post-Romantic figural,” by which I mean to indicate both the sense of a transcendent mystery that Van Gogh found in art and the simultaneous expression and discovery of that mystery in the material realities of a common world.

Finally, although Van Gogh looked principally to painting as an authentic bearer of the “something new” to which he aspired, I have also suggested that, at its best, his writing performs the same task. As he well knew, human creativity is never exhausted by individual instances of its expression, whether in painting or in writing. As discussed above, the core difference between Van Gogh’s early sermon and the letters with which we have compared it is that the letters (unlike the sermon) are alive with the creative energy of a person in whose trials and aspirations we find ourselves participating, taken up by the demanding yet revelatory power of what he has to say and how he says it.