NOTES

Introduction

1 This debate is thoughtfully summarized and explored in Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). I have thought it better to postpone further theoretical considerations — especially of the dialogical aspects of Van Gogh’s correspondence — until a later study.


3 As W. H. Auden says, in his letters, Van Gogh “loved to talk about what he was doing and why.” W. H. Auden, “Calm Even in the Catastrophe,” in *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973), 296. But as is sometimes noted, the letters contain surprisingly little information about Van Gogh’s daily life — his domestic routines, where he acquired books, the various illnesses that he mentions briefly, and so on. However, we do learn a great deal about his practice as a painter.

4 Vincent van Gogh, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009). All references are to this edition, and letter numbers are indicated in the text, with the volume and page number following the forward slash. An expanded version of the printed edition is available free of charge at www.vangoghletters.org.


14 A year before Vincent’s birth, his mother had a son, also called Vincent, but the baby died. Strangely, the first Vincent was born on 30 March 1852, and the second Vincent, on 30 March 1853. See Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 82. Lubin sees the death of the first Vincent as highly significant for the second Vincent’s life and work (94–99). See also Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, “Self-Portrait Between the Lines: A Newly Discovered Letter from Vincent van Gogh to H. G. Tersteeg,” *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2003): 98–111. This letter is the only place on record where Vincent mentions his dead brother.


16 Naifeh and Smith call into question the “family legend of unrequited love” that was held to explain Vincent’s departure (*Van Gogh: The Life*, 95). They suggest that Vincent — ever the difficult houseguest — failed to find with the Loyers (his landlady, Ursula, and her daughter Eugenie) the family security and acceptance he always desired (95–96). Elly Cassee makes the case that Van Gogh’s amorous infatuation at this time was with Caroline van Stokum-Haanebeek. “In Love: Vincent van Gogh’s First True Love,” *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1996): 109–17.

17 While still based in Etten, Van Gogh had taken lessons from Mauve in The Hague, from November to December 1881. When Van Gogh moved to The

18 Naifeh and Smith challenge the standard account that maintains that Van Gogh committed suicide, suggesting instead that he was accidentally shot. They make their case in “Appendix: A Note on Vincent’s Fatal Wounding,” *Van Gogh: The Life*, 869–85. Although they correctly note how unsatisfactory the standard account is, their own theory also remains highly speculative.

19 See also Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters*, 39.


21 Albert J. Lubin suggests that Van Gogh might have been influenced by the Tachtigers, a group of Dutch poets and writers who “revolted against rigid scholastic usage” and who “used unorthodox syntax to increase expressivity.” *Stranger on the Earth*, 71. Judy Sund points out that Van Gogh’s favourite novelist, Émile Zola, was a strong influence on the Tachtigers. *True to Temperament*, 52.

22 Van der Veen, “En tant que quant à moi,” 65.

23 Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters*, 56.

24 For instance, in Theo van Gogh et al., *Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo Van Gogh and Jo Bonger*, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), we find that Jo writes to Wil to say how intelligent Vincent’s letters are, saying “I have seldom read letters like them” (30). In turn, Wil shared with Jo some of Vincent’s letters, which are evidence to Jo of Vincent’s “great mind” (194). Theo also sent a sample of Vincent’s correspondence to Jo (112).


26 Carol Zemel makes this point throughout *Van Gogh’s Progress*. For instance, “Van Gogh insisted on his right to live as a worker among the people he depicted, his ‘subjects,’ while marketing those subjects in his own bourgeois world” (20).

27 As Peter Hecht says, “Vincent recognized the art he had seen in the reality around him, and then saw reality through the eyes of the artists he admired.” *Van Gogh and Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2006), 20. See also Chris Stolwijk, “Van Gogh’s Nature,” in *Vincent’s Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar Van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 29: “Van Gogh’s experience of nature was governed to a large extent by literature and art” so that he “blurred the boundary between the real landscape that he saw and the imaginary landscape that he made of it through free association.”
Notes


5. Van Gogh well understood the allure of the ideal and the impossibility of realizing it, as is illustrated in his letters: “a yearning for — real life — ideal and not attainable” (611/4:88); “that simpler and truer nature whose ideal sometimes haunts us” (789/5:61).


7. As Wouter van der Veen points out, *L’amour* is the work that Van Gogh “quoted most frequently in the first two hundred letters, which cover a period of ten years, from 1872 to 1882.” *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 88.


9. Van Gogh’s enthusiasm for drawing seems to have been intermittent. For instance, approximately a month later, he tells Theo, again from London: “My passion for drawing has again vanished here in England, but maybe inspiration will strike again one day” (27/1:51). He had drawn quite a lot during a brief visit to Helvoirt in June and July of 1874, before he returned to London.


11. Judy Sund is correct to say that during his religious phase, Van Gogh’s letters about art reflect “a preacher’s interest in finding effective prods to religious impulse” rather than “a connoisseur’s love for beautiful or well-crafted objects.” *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist*
Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 33. Van Gogh’s teacher in Amsterdam, Maurits Benjamin Mendes da Costa, provides some useful information on the moral aspect of Van Gogh’s religious enthusiasm. All Van Gogh wanted was “to give poor creatures a peacefulness in their existence on earth”; he was “consumed by a need to help the unfortunate,” and when he gave a copy of Thomas à Kempis’s De Imitatio Christi to Mendes, who was Jewish, he did so “not at all with an unspoken intention of converting me, but simply to make me aware of the humanity in it.” Mendes da Costa, “Personal Reminiscences of Vincent van Gogh” (2 December 1910), translated in Van Gogh: A Retrospective, ed. Susan Alyson Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986), 44–45.

While in England, Van Gogh became sympathetic to the London poor, which is one reason why the novels of Charles Dickens appealed to him. As Naïfeh and Smith point out, the socially concerned illustrations in The Graphic and the Illustrated London News, which Van Gogh saw in London, affected him in force only a decade later. Van Gogh: The Life, 86.

See chapter 4 for a further discussion of Van Gogh’s escapism.


On getting rid of Michelet and Renan, see also letter 55 (1:80). To confirm the turn towards asceticism, Vincent goes on to advise Theo to be sure to “eat simply.”

See especially Sund, True to Temperament, and Van der Veen, Van Gogh: A Literary Mind.

One problem with letters in general is that they are occasional and don’t tell us the whole story. Yet, as Philip Callow says, Van Gogh seems to have “changed direction almost overnight.” Vincent van Gogh: A Life (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996; first published, 1990), 69. Leo Jansen describes Van Gogh’s “change of course” as “radical and definitive: suddenly it was art that was to provide consolation.” “Vincent van Gogh’s Belief in Art as Consolation,” in Stolwijk et al., Vincent’s Choice, 18. Naïfeh and Smith say that “almost overnight,” references to scripture, homiletic passages, and “philosophical ruminations” disappear from the letters. Van Gogh: The Life, 180.

Cited in Naïfeh and Smith, Van Gogh: The Life, 199.

This idea is thoroughly explored in Van der Veen, Van Gogh: A Literary Mind.

21 Though Van Gogh insists on the complexity of human behaviour, he is also capable of making black and white judgments, as, for instance, in his deployment of the contrast between the black and white ray (388/3:20), which I discuss in chapter 8.

CHAPTER 2 *The Artistic Life and Its Limits*

1 Van Gogh regarded photography as a mechanical, and therefore soulless, reproduction of appearances.
Chapter 3  Birds’ Nests


3 “Vincent came to meet us at the train, and he brought a bird’s nest as a plaything for his little nephew and namesake.” Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, “Memoir of Vincent van Gogh,” in Van Gogh, Complete Letters, 1:51.

4 See Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, Dutch Period 1881–1885, vol. 1 of Vincent van Gogh: Paintings (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1999), 198–207. The authors describe five known paintings. They also note that “from the point of view of iconography they are almost entirely without precedent” (200), which helps to show how individual Van Gogh’s interest was. In Van Gogh and the Sunflowers (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2008), 32, Louis van Tilborgh makes a passing observation about the sunflowers and birds’ nests. Letter 533 (3:289), from Nuenen in 1885, contains a sketch of a beautifully contoured nest, held in the prickly fork of a sturdy branch.


6 “Great creating nature” is Shakespeare’s evocative phrase in The Winter’s Tale, 4.4.87.

7 See, for instance, letter 736: “my paintings are worthless” (4:384). Van Gogh’s opinion about the value of his work vacillated, especially after the onset of his illness.

8 There are many examples throughout the letters. See, for instance, 783 (Gauguin and Bernard “might well do more consolatory painting,” 5:41); 665 (“I console myself by reconsidering the sunflowers,” 4:242); 803 (“So it continues to be a great comfort to me that the work is progressing,” 5:96); and 509 (“painting and, to my mind, particularly painting peasant life, gives peace of mind,” 3:254).

10 It is with some degree of wishful thinking, then, that Van Gogh describes Sien as a “tame dove” (224; see part 1 of this volume). In this context, it is worth noting that the domestic implications of nests are also explored in Michelet’s L’amour: the “nest of true love” (49) is also “a world of order, and kindness” (33); a child especially needs “a soft nest” made by the “perfect communion” of the parents (42). Interestingly, Vincent’s enthusiasm for Michelet’s L’oiseau was shared by Theo, who sent a copy to Jo during their courtship. See Theo van Gogh et al., Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), 100. The correspondence between Theo and Jo contains several comparisons of the couple’s upcoming domestic relationship with a nest (81, 153, 217, 276).


12 Van Gogh realized that rebellion against society is not sufficient. For instance, he recommends “taking society as it is,” while also “feeling oneself completely free” (400). The complexities of Van Gogh’s negotiations with the bourgeois society that frequently angered him is explored by Carol Zemel in Van Gogh’s Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

13 Michelet describes nest-building birds as weavers. The Bird, 253. Interestingly, Naifeh and Smith describe Van Gogh’s Nuenen weavers sitting at their machines “like birds in their cages.” Van Gogh: The Life, 379.

CHAPTER 5 Cab Horses

1 Admittedly, Van Gogh says that the engraving has “no very great artistic value,” even though it “struck me and made an impression on me.” Given the points I have made in part 1, this should not be too surprising. During this phase of his life (the letter was written in 1878), art was subordinate to religion, and the engraving mattered to Van Gogh especially because of its moral and religious significance. Nonetheless, he does allow the engraving some artistic value, which supports the argument I make here.

2 In passing, it is of interest to note the curious letter to Bernard in which Van Gogh defends cannibals who eat a human victim “once a month.” His point is that the damage they inflict on one another is much less than the damage inflicted on them by “the frightful white man, with his bottle of alcohol, his wallet and his pox,” and by the Christian hypocrisy that destroys a whole people in order to root out “barbarity” (612/4:90).


4 See also letter 658, where Van Gogh speculates about “the inevitable weakening of families from generation to generation” (4:226), and letter 779, where he is concerned about “something, I don’t know what, disturbed in my brain” (5:32).


7 It is worth noting that a reader of the collected letters will encounter this same mixture of elements. As with the paintings, the letters are also sometimes “harsh” and off-putting, but at other times, these qualities are transfigured by the imaginative power of Van Gogh’s writing.

8 When Vincent writes to Wil, assuring her that “cultivating your garden” is the right thing to do (785 / 5:55), he alludes to the conclusion of *Candide*, again showing that he understood Voltaire’s main message.

9 Leo Jansen correctly points out that Van Gogh alludes to Pangloss as “a contrived counterweight to his own despair.” “Vincent van Gogh’s Belief in Art as Consolation,” in *Vincent’s Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar Van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 13. Wouter van der Veen mentions Jansen’s point and perceptively adds, “Pangloss had replaced St. Paul, but the plan was the same. And all would be well!” *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 206.

10 In letter 772, Vincent thanks Theo for the earlier letter 770.

**CHAPTER 6  By Heart**

1 In letter 141, Van Gogh alludes to an anecdote about Corot, who remarked about a painting which finally sold that “it took only forty years of work, thought and care.” Van Gogh appreciated the value of Corot’s endurance and patient practice, even in the face of rejection and disappointment.


3 The implication is that he didn’t practice the torsos in the same way, which, as he admits to Theo, was indeed the case. 502/3:241.

5 In this sense, “abstraction” complements Van Gogh’s suspicions about “castles in the air,” discussed in chapter 5.

6 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith argue that Van Gogh used exaggeration and simplification to compensate for weak draftsmanship, but they also say that exaggeration and simplification enabled him to express a “deeper emotional truth.” *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 676.


8 It might be worth noting, again in passing, that Van Gogh would have read about the “silken-robed Samurai” in Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (Lexington, KY: Filiquarian, 2010; first published 1887), 27.

9 Tsukasa Kōdera argues that Japan was largely a focus for Van Gogh’s utopian thought. *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 51–65.

**CHAPTER 7 A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt**


5 On numerous occasions, Vincent asked Theo to become a painter and to join him. While in The Hague, Vincent suggested, “We should both of us quite simply become painters” (211/2:41). In his next letter, he makes the point again: “Theo, let it all go hang and become a painter” (212/2:42). In Drenthe, he returned to the idea frequently and was encouraged by the
“repeated occurrence in the history of art of the phenomenon of two brothers who are painters” (394/3:33).

6 Vincent was concerned about the possibility that Theo would move to the United States: “you mustn’t think about America, in my opinion” (393/3:31), he writes, and “do NOT go to America, because it’s exactly the same there as in Paris” (394/3:32). Later, he even says, “I’ll go to America with you” (617/4:102).

7 Transcriptions of the changes are available for study at the Van Gogh Museum and at the Huygens Institute.

8 Albert J. Lubin claims that Vincent “dissociated himself from the Van Gogh name” and that “not a single drawing or painting of his adulthood bears the family name.” Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 46. Still, the break from his family was far from definitive.

9 See also 403/3:60 and 388/3:20.

10 Vincent wrote to Theo about promoting the Impressionists commercially, which he understood would be “a long-term business.” 617/4:102; see also 584/4:24 and 625/4:125. Interestingly, Vincent expresses to Theo the hope that after Theo’s marriage, “you and your wife will set up a commercial firm for several generations in the renewal.” 743/4:403. See also Naifeh and Smith, Van Gogh: The Life, 534–35, 564–82.

11 It is worth remembering that Vincent was also ill and that Theo paid the hospital bills. Vincent was well aware of this and writes to Theo and Jo that “instead of paying money to a landlord we’re giving it to the asylum,” which is “scarcely cheaper.” 787/5:57. Elsewhere, he is uncomfortable because of enquiries being made by the hospital about Theo’s earnings (800/5:82), and he makes a suggestion about moving to a cheaper hospital (839/5:182).

12 A wonderfully compressed version of the ambivalence that this chapter describes occurs in a letter that Van Gogh wrote to Caroline van Stockum-Haanenbeek on 9 February 1874. Van Gogh frequently used the conventional “with a handshake” at the end of a letter, often with variations. In this case, he signs off, “A handshake for you and Willem, like old times, so that it hurts your fingers” (18/1:42). Indeed, Van Gogh seems to have paid special attention to handshakes. He explains to Van Rappard that he objects to people who offer one finger instead of supplying a proper handshake, and he has some tough fun at their expense (439/1:137). Theo apparently told Vincent that Hermanus Tersteeg didn’t like the way Vincent shook his hand — one of “those little antipathies,” Vincent says, “that make one prefer not to see someone” (356/2:360).
Here, “the family” refers to Uncles Cor and Vincent, who seem to have refused to put up funds to help Theo start his own gallery. See 568/3:362n2.


15 Van Gogh’s sense of humour shows up in various ways. Among these, we can count his portrait of the smiling skeleton. Anton Kerssemakers relates a practical joke played by Van Gogh on a troublesome priest in Nuenen, which involved Van Gogh distributing condoms to the local youth. Cited in Hans Luijten, Van Gogh and Love (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 27–28. Jo writes about Vincent’s visit to Paris, during which he and Toulouse-Lautrec “made many jokes” about an undertaker whom they had happened to meet. See Complete Letters, 1: lii.

16 See also Van Gogh’s parody of Balzac’s Baron de Nucingen in 184/1:314: “De debil ton’t exeest.”

CHAPTER 8 Something New Without a Name


3 In letter 228 (2:74), Vincent says that when he was refused by Kee, he felt that love itself had died, going on to explain to Theo (16 May 1882): “Now, as you know, I believe in God, I did not doubt the power of love. But then I felt something like, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” He wonders if he has been deluding himself, and concludes with a sentence from Multatuli: “Oh God, there is no God!” In that crisis of religious faith occasioned by a failed love relationship, Van Gogh appeals to the God about whom he is having doubts in order to express the doubts themselves. It is a familiar enough pattern, not just in Van Gogh’s letters but whenever this topic is discussed. For instance, the word “atheist” incorporates the Greek word for “God,” which is why some radical unbelievers reject the term.

4 Tsukasa Kōdera makes the general argument that Van Gogh moves from Christianity to a “naturalized religion.” Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 27.

5 The sermon is contained in letter 96 (1:127–29). Further references are to those pages.

6 See Debora Leah Silverman’s essay “Pilgrim’s Progress and Vincent van Gogh’s Métier,” in the exhibition catalogue Van Gogh in England: Portrait of


10 The famous line occurs in Arnold’s poem, “Dover Beach.”