In 1892, two years after Van Gogh’s death, excerpts from his letters were printed in a Dutch catalogue, and in 1893, several further passages were printed in Dutch and French in a Flemish magazine. In the same year, Émile Bernard published selections of the letters Van Gogh had sent to him, placing them in *Mercure de France*, the journal that, in 1890, had published a groundbreaking article by Alfred Aurier on Van Gogh as a painter.

Eventually, all the letters sent to Bernard were printed (1911), and in 1914, Vincent’s sister-in-law, Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, published Vincent’s letters to Theo. She had inherited these along with Theo’s large collection of Vincent’s paintings, and she recognized the value of both, though she probably waited until Vincent’s mother had died before preparing his often highly personal correspondence for publication.¹

After 1914, editions of the letters proliferated, culminating in *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* (2009). For the first time, with the 2009 edition, the collected correspondence is now completely annotated, and even a quick riffling through any of the six volumes immediately shows what more patient study confirms — namely, that a complex symbiosis between painting and writing runs throughout the entire course of Van Gogh’s brief but extraordinary career. As Leo Jansen says, Van Gogh’s paintings and letters were disseminated so closely together that they are nearly inseparable from the historical viewpoint.²
Still, as I pointed out in the introduction, it has been all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Van Gogh’s correspondence is distinguished in its own right, as literature. And so, with the specifically literary dimension of Van Gogh’s writing in mind, I want to suggest that the letters themselves conduct a fascinating enquiry into the relationships between painting and writing, which in turn gives us special access to Van Gogh’s struggles to shape his career. But the letters do not just describe Van Gogh’s professional and personal development; they also present it as a set of contending ideas and issues that dramatize the self-fashioning process, in excess of the factual, biographical information they provide.

To explore how this is so, let me begin by suggesting that the dialogue between painting and writing that occurs virtually throughout the entire course of Van Gogh’s correspondence can in turn be read as a variation on the I/other motif that is central to the process of self-fashioning. In the present chapter, I want also to argue that the connection between the I/other of self-fashioning and the writing/painting dialogue that runs throughout the letters can be analyzed fruitfully by way of an opposition between space and time that is a lynchpin in the aesthetic theory of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In *Laocoön* (1766), Lessing called into question the close identity between painting and writing enshrined by the traditional *ut pictura poesis* (as in painting so in poetry) formula, which had reached a high point in Western painting during the Renaissance. He argued that words and paint do different things, and consequently, the results they produce are different. In brief, painting deals with images in space, and poetry with words in time.

As Wendy Steiner notes, in questioning the *ut pictura poesis* dictum, Lessing exerted a considerable influence on nineteenth-century art, but, as Steiner goes on to show, there are problems with Lessing’s central claim. For instance, medieval painters express temporal sequence by way of triptychs and frescoes, and the eye in fact takes time to process what it sees depicted on any flat surface. Likewise, the text of a poem is a spatial object, and reading is a complex interaction between memorized and anticipated images rather than a simple temporal continuum. Consequently, the absolute distinction between space and time does not hold up under scrutiny.
Nevertheless, Steiner also concludes that it is hard to shake Lessing off altogether, and, despite the scruples that she mentions, “modern theory has not been able to overcome” the “spatial-temporal barriers between painting and literature,” on which Lessing so forcefully insists. That is, the broad distinction between what you see in a painting and what you hear in words holds at the centre, even though, as with many such distinctions, it is not water-tight. As noted in the introduction, because we can’t define “literature” exactly does not mean that the concept is empty. The same point can helpfully be applied to Lessing’s alignment of painting and poetry with space and time.

Again in the introduction, we saw how Bakhtin’s distinction between “I” and “other” corresponds, broadly, to an opposition between time and space. That is, the personal experience of the “I,” in time, is unstable and open-ended, whereas the “other” is more readily perceived as a self-identical object in space. And so it is interesting now to notice that in exploring the dynamics of self-fashioning, Bakhtin has in fact deployed a Lessing-like distinction, even though the differences between “I” and “other” (as with the differences between space and time) are not without some degree of overlap. With this in mind, I want to suggest that throughout the letters, Van Gogh’s discussions of painting and writing frequently resort to a space-time distinction (as in Lessing) as a means of exploring the process of self-fashioning (as in Bakhtin). One result is that the dialogical structures implicit in self-fashioning are reproduced and intensified by the space-time dialogue between painting and writing. But first, let us consider how pictorial Van Gogh’s writerly imagination actually is.

Dissolving Boundaries: Word-Painting and the Sister Arts

As Judy Sund points out, throughout his career, Van Gogh had an “almost obsessive interest” in “comparing textual and pictorial images of similar subjects.” He frequently describes natural scenes as if they were paintings — either painterly in their appearance or evoking actual paintings. For instance, in a letter to the Van Stockum-Haanebeek
family, written in London in 1873, Van Gogh notes that “the old painters almost never painted the autumn” (14/1:38), and as if to compensate for the omission, he encloses “another picture of autumn, by Michelet” (14/1:39). This “picture” is in fact composed of words: Van Gogh copies out the passage in which Michelet describes a woman in a garden, saying that the woman reminds him of paintings “in the museums of Amsterdam or The Hague” and, especially, of a painting by Philippe de Champaigne.

The boundaries here between words and visual art are effortlessly crossed, as Van Gogh begins with “the old painters” and then supplies a pictorial description from Michelet, which in turn refers back to a further set of paintings. Van Gogh is content to let these several analogies stand at face value, exemplifying how painters and writers have similar goals and achieve comparable results.

Many observations along such lines are recorded by Van Gogh from early on in the correspondence. For instance, writing from London in 1873, Vincent tells Theo that Keats is “the favourite of the painters here” (12/1:35) and that he himself has “enjoyed” reading Keats’s poetry. Keats’s ability to (apparently) arrest the moment by the captivating power of his visual imagination could readily confirm the idea that the “sister arts” indeed share the same goal. The idea of *ut pictura poesis* therefore had considerable staying power for Van Gogh, and certainly (despite Lessing’s cold-water drenching), it remained vigorously alive in the widespread nineteenth-century convention of “word-painting,” which, as Judy Sund notes, had become “a popular pan-European genre” by the end of the eighteenth century (15). The aim of word-painting was simply to have writing achieve pictorial vividness; among other things, this required writers to suggest spatial illusion, to frame scenes by using visual markers, and to redeploy terms borrowed from the visual arts (15). Among novelists, Van Gogh’s early favourite, George Eliot, was a self-conscious producer of this kind of word-painting, as was his later favourite, Emile Zola, who once said that he wanted to translate the Impressionists into language (55).

On the simplest level, it is easy to see how Van Gogh’s many verbal descriptions of landscapes draw on these conventions, represented for

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990455.01
him especially by Keats, Michelet, Eliot, and Zola, among others. The letters afford many examples, the combined effect of which is to impart to Van Gogh’s writing a strong sense of visual immediacy. For instance, here is a description of dawn, written from Ramsgate in 1876:

The next morning in the train from Harwich to London it was beautiful to see in the morning twilight the black fields and green pastures with sheep and lambs, and here and there a hedge of thorn-bushes and a few large oak trees with dark branches and grey, moss-covered trunks. The blue twilit sky, still with a few stars, and a bank of grey clouds above the horizon. Even before the sun rose I heard a lark.

When we arrived at the last station before London the sun rose. The bank of grey clouds had disappeared and there was the sun, so simple and as big as possible, a real Easter sun.

The grass was sparkling with dew and night frost.

And yet I prefer that grey hour when we parted. (76/1:96)

The passage begins by defining the moment — “the next morning” at “twilight” — and then focuses on what “was beautiful to see.” Colours predominate: “black fields,” “green pastures,” “dark branches,” “grey” trunks, a “blue” sky with stars still visible, and grass “sparkling” with dew. All of this leads us to the sun rising, “simple and as big as possible.”

The writing here is effective first of all because of how the visual emphasis seems to arrest the moment. It is slightly surprising, then, to learn that the sun rose “at the last station before London,” and that the scene was in fact being recorded during the time that the journey took place. Although there is a temporal marker in Van Gogh hearing the lark, this cue is pushed out of the frame, as it were, because the event had occurred “even before” the strongly emphasized, magisterial appearance of the sun. At the end of the passage, when Van Gogh declares, “I prefer that grey hour when we parted,” he again provides an indicator of time. But in so doing, he also brings us back to the beginning of the passage and, by completing the circle, neutralizes the
sense of time passing. The passage thus presents us with a temporal frame within which a pictorial scene is strongly foregrounded, with the visual details clearly rendered to create a sense of simultaneity.

Other passages like this occur throughout the correspondence; for our purposes, it will suffice to summarize a few examples, to which I will return later. For instance, in a letter from The Hague, Vincent asks Theo to imagine him looking out from an “attic window” at a scene of meadows, cottages, and red tile roofs. The description again is sharply visual, and Vincent frames the scene by looking at it through the window and then by using his “perspective frame” to double up on what the window frame already provides. The visual description is thus made to seem even more self-consciously painterly by the introduction of a technical device to ensure a correct framing of the composition (250/2:116).

Van Gogh’s many striking descriptions of landscapes in Drenthe are likewise often cited as examples of his facility as a maker of word-paintings. Thus, from “the very back of beyond,” he sends Theo a description of peat barges. We are told how the scene narrows towards the horizon, and local colour is provided by sheds, trees, and small farms. The description then focuses on two women on a barge, one dressed in mourning and the other with a baby. The receding view provided by the opening sentences throws into relief the brightly focused foreground figures, and again, we see how Van Gogh’s painterly eye composes the scene, creating the impression of a single image, arrested in time (392/3:25).

While in Arles, Van Gogh visited Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, on the Mediterranean, and he wrote to Theo about taking “a walk along the seashore,” which he found neither “cheerful” nor “sad” but simply “beautiful” (619/4:104). The passage is filled with colour and focuses on the different kinds of blue that the scene affords. The seascape shimmers also with the vividness of “precious stones” such as “opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires.” But in contrast to the previous examples, this passage does not describe perspective; rather, it presents us with a blaze of colour that we apprehend directly and immediately.

Finally, in a letter written in 1889 to his mother, Van Gogh again describes the beauty of the south (788/5:58). Once more, he focuses
on colour, while also noting how the clear air extends his view of the countryside, which he then compares to Holland. In making this comparison, he describes the cottages, moss-covered barns, and tangled hedges of his homeland, and the account as a whole leaves us with two juxtaposed scenes, each vividly evoked through Van Gogh’s pictorial imagination.

The above examples were written at different times during Van Gogh’s career and can confirm his facility for composing word-paintings based on actual scenes before him. But he also frequently compares actual landscapes to painted ones or provides detailed descriptions of the landscapes that appear in paintings. In London, a picture by Thijs Maris reminds him of a poem by Heine, and he goes on to describe Maris’s painting as if it were an actual scene (31/1:54). A walk in Amsterdam evokes Rembrandt’s etchings (114/1:160), and a carefully described storm has a sky that “looked like a painting by Ruisdael” (120/1:177). The Borinage landscape reminds him of Brueghel, Maris, and Dürer (149/1:236), and in Etten, he describes a drawing by Mesdag, again as if the landscape depicted in the drawing were actually present (166/1:272). In The Hague, he compares Sien to a painting by Landelle (234/2:86), a point that he later repeats (246/2:106). And in comparing Montmartre to a painting by Michel, he mixes the description of the painting and the actual scene, so that it is difficult to tell which is which (312/2:269). The aftermath of a thunderstorm is “more like Daubigny than Corot” (356/2:359), and a landscape in Drenthe “can be as sublime as in a J. Dupré” (387/3:14). A description of weavers in Nuenen recalls Rembrandt (445/3:147), a colourful sunset in Arles is like a Monet (615/4:97), and in St. Rémy, “superb, autumnal effects, glorious in colour” are reminiscent of “Jules Dupré and Ziem” (810/5:118).

In these examples, when Van Gogh looks at landscapes, not only does he see them by way of the paintings that he thinks they resemble, but his verbal descriptions assume a fundamental affinity between the written words and painted images. The sister arts remain closely bonded here, and Van Gogh does not pause to question the differences between them. To the contrary, he often takes an engagingly reckless enjoyment in proclaiming what he sees as the mutually shared goals.
and practices of writers and painters together, beginning with that early account of how the London artists admired Keats. Later, he writes, “It’s more or less the same with drawing as with writing” (265/2:155), and, later still, “Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2, 268). In Amsterdam, he listened admiringly to the sermons of Eliza Laurillard, “because he paints, as it were” (121/1:178). Likewise, Zola’s city views are “painted or drawn in a masterly, masterly fashion” (244/2:100), and in Le Ventre de Paris, “How painted those Halles are” (251/2:119). Again, Hugo’s Quatre-vingt-treize is “painted, I mean written, like Descamps or Jules Dupré” (286/1:204). Here, the deliberate hesitation, apparently correcting “painted” to “written,” does not so much sharpen a distinction as confirm the analogy between painters and writers. Likewise, a scene at sunset is “just like a page in Hugo” (333/2:318); Rappard draws like Zola writes (355/2:358); Zola and Voltaire are like Jan Steen and Ostade (657/4:222); Van Eeden’s writing resembles “my style of painting in the manner of colour” (740/4:395). In a frequently cited passage from a letter written in Cuesmes in June 1880, Van Gogh declares that “the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt, and I even think that the two complement each other.” In a previous paragraph, he argues that “there’s something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo,” just as there’s “something of Rembrandt in the Gospels or of the Gospels in Rembrandt” (155/1:247).

There is a fine abandonment in all these resemblances and analogies, and sometimes the boundaries are blurred, almost in the direction of synesthesia. For instance, Alfred Aurier’s article is “a work of art,” and Van Gogh assures him, “you create colour with your words” (853/5:198). Again, Vincent tells Theo, “We can only make our paintings speak” (RM25/5:326), and he explains to his sister Willemien how “one can speak poetry just by arranging colours well, just as one can say comforting things in music” (720/4:360). In these examples, pictures have voices and words are coloured, and Van Gogh delights in the jouissance, the glorious interpenetrations of colour and sound. His embrace of the ancient trope ut pictura poesis seems here entirely without complications, recklessly unimpeded by Lessing-like scruples.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990455.01
Ideal Space, Existential Time

Van Gogh’s word-paintings do indeed demonstrate a remarkable and arresting descriptive facility, but it would be a mistake nonetheless to read them merely as enlivening patches of local colour for a reader’s passing enjoyment. Rather, I want to suggest that they are part of a more complex story — a different picture, as it were. And here we can return to Bakhtin, whose ideas about self-fashioning can fruitfully be combined, as I have suggested, with Lessing’s claim that painting is mainly spatial and words mainly temporal.

As we have seen, for Bakhtin, self-fashioning occurs by way of a many-sided dialogue between the “I,” who negotiates the uncertainties of an open-ended temporal process and the spatially situated “other,” who is perceived as a stable source of value. By analogy, in Van Gogh’s correspondence, a sustained dialogue is conducted between a subject who is filled with inner resolve and anxiety and is following his “calling” by way of a narrative that unfolds uncertainly (in time) and the “visionary” painters (including Van Gogh himself) who aim to produce images (in space) that are consoling and inspiring centres of value. The differences between the mainly temporal medium of words and the mainly spatial medium of painting therefore give rise here to a special set of tensions, which in turn mirror and enact the dialogical process of the self-fashioning to which we are all both invited and condemned, as Bakhtin explains.

With these points in mind, let us return to the examples of Van Gogh’s word-painting that I cited earlier in order to illustrate the visual, quasi-pictorial quality of his descriptive writing. In these examples, Van Gogh wanted language to approximate painting; he wished to create with his words the impression of a single image — a moment frozen in space. Yet the passages I have cited are not so straightforward as they might at first appear, and we can see how this is so by considering the narratives in which they are embedded.

For instance, the letter describing the sunrise observed on a train journey from Harwich to London is full of heartbreak and nostalgia, as Van Gogh recounts his “sorrow” on parting from his parents:
“How much we long for each other,” he writes (76/1:96). Then, in counterpoint, he describes the sun coming up, “so simple and as big as possible, a real Easter sun.” As we have seen, Van Gogh’s extended word-painting here seems to arrest the moment and suggests an enduring value represented by the sun and by its association with Easter. Yet the account of the train journey reminds us that in the temporal dimension, Van Gogh is being taken further away from his family, and the vividness of the passage about the sunrise stands in contrast to the grief recorded in the narrative. The letter as a whole is captivating because it engages us with both of these elements simultaneously, registering both a hopeful optimism and a burden of sadness and anxiety, the two emotional states held in dialogical suspension.

Again, in the passage about a scene observed through an attic window, Van Gogh provides a colourful description while framing the scene like a picture (250/2:116). Yet it is helpful to interpret this description within its context. Earlier in the letter, Van Gogh complains about being rejected by Hermanus Tersteeg, whose approval he had sought, and now Van Gogh’s feelings of woundedness fuel a determination to keep working while also living in solidarity with others (such as the former prostitute Sien) who have likewise been rejected. In this context, he pauses to assure Theo that Sien will soon be able to earn money again by posing, and he looks to Zola for an example of the humane behaviour he wants to show to her, despite the disapproval he has encountered from Tersteeg, among others, because of this scandalous relationship.

The description of the scene through the attic window is therefore also part of Van Gogh’s riposte to Tersteeg: it shows Vincent hard at work and defiant. Thus, he notices the exact time — “as early as 4 o’clock” in the morning — to mark the fact that his labour coincides with the workmen who are also getting ready for the day ahead. The contrast between the “flock of white pigeons” and the “black smoking chimneys” confirms his solidarity with the factory labourers who are likewise condemned to their daily grind, in contrast to the free-flying birds and the green meadows. And so the word-painting stands once more in counterpoint to the defiant and anxiety-fraught narrative.
dimension of the letter in a manner that engages us with the complexity of a highly personal struggle in the process of working itself out.

The striking description of the Drenthe landscape in which a receding view throws into relief the figures of two women on a barge again deepens in significance when we consider preceding events (392/3:25). Van Gogh had gone to Drenthe after breaking up with Sien and was suffering pangs of conscience about leaving her and her children. And so when he notices that one of the women on the barge is in mourning and another has a baby, we feel a resonance of his own guilt and of the loneliness that sets him apart from these women, whom he observes from a distance. On the one hand (especially for Theo’s benefit), the word-painting presents a view of Drenthe as an ideal environment for a painter. On the other hand, the letter reminds us of the pain and sacrifice entailed by Van Gogh’s lonely vocation. The narrative dimension of the correspondence thus contradicts and modifies the painter’s visionary idealism and, in so doing, expresses a complex truth about Van Gogh’s situation and experience.

The passage from Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the beauty of “the deserted beach” differs from the previous examples in that it ignores perspective and other framing devices (619/4:104). Instead, Van Gogh allows the vivid descriptions of colour to affect the reader directly. In so doing, he confirms his intense interest in colour during his time in Arles and his commitment to the idea that colour has an emotional effect on the viewer of a painting, over and above the effect produced by the object depicted. In the following letter, Vincent refers back to the beach scene, explaining that “now that I’ve seen the sea here,” he is convinced that “the colour” in his paintings “has to be even more exaggerated” (620/4:110). This interest in exaggeration and in not attempting to make a simply literal representation is part of a commitment to a more fully aesthetic understanding of the function of painting than had been the case in Van Gogh’s earlier career, when aesthetic concerns were subordinate to religion and morality. Although the passage under consideration does not deal directly with these matters, it is in itself a telling example of the “exaggeration” (a bombardment of colour without perspective guidelines) that governed
Van Gogh’s evolving practice at the time, thereby showing us, again, the dialogical emergence of the values by which he sought to shape his direction forward.

Our final example is Van Gogh’s letter to his mother from St. Rémy, in which he describes a vineyard “all purple, crimson and yellow and green and violet,” again highlighting the immediacy of the colours. But the personal concerns expressed in the letter cause us also to see Van Gogh’s description of things that “are beautiful in the south” as something other than straightforward celebration. Thus, the letter begins by commenting on the fact that although his mother is “approaching 70,” she is holding up well. Vincent goes on to say that now that his brother Cor is about to leave for the Transvaal, the “sorrow . . . about parting and loss” will be painful for the whole family. Moreover, Theo’s health is failing, another cause for concern. For his part, Vincent writes, he has been painting in the “mistral,” the harsh winter wind that he often alludes to as a metaphor for his own disturbed “inner weather.” Finally, interwoven with the colourful description of the southern vineyards is a set of reminders of what he doesn’t see in the south — for instance, “the mossy peasant roofs on the barns or cottages like at home, and no oak coppices and no spurry and no beech hedges with their red-brown leaves and whitish tangled old stems. Also no proper heathland and no birches, which were so beautiful in Nuenen” (788/5:58).

This evocative little passage about Holland thus stands in counterpoint to the account of the sunny vineyard, and the juxtaposition suggests Van Gogh’s ambivalence as he celebrates the Midi while also nostalgically recalling his homeland. While the word-painting of the vineyard shows something of what is “beautiful in the south,” it also makes Van Gogh’s nostalgia more poignant and his anxieties about his family more pressing. As the narrative of Van Gogh’s life tells us, his vision of the south was found wanting, and he became increasingly concerned about his personal relationships with his family. The process of this realization, with its attendant complexities and ambivalence, is registered by this letter as a whole, within which, as we now see, the word-painting of the vineyards plays a part that is best understood when we read it in the context of the personal narrative that the letter also provides.
I am suggesting, then, that there is a continuing dialogue in Van Gogh’s correspondence between the existential concerns of the uncertain, alienated, often lonely man and the aspirations of the painter striving to catch, out of time, images of our shared human condition. These images are consoling (as he liked to say), and they enhance our understanding of ourselves and of one another. Mainly, Van Gogh’s vision is expressed in his paintings and drawings, but the artist also makes his presence felt throughout the letters by way of his talent for pictorial prose. His letters are studded with vividly imagined scenes or descriptions that arrest the reader’s attention, as the visionary moment provides a small epiphany, a showing forth of something beautiful with its own harmony and splendour of form. Yet Van Gogh’s word-paintings are not merely ornamental distractions. Rather (much like the debunked notion of “comic relief” in Shakespeare’s tragedies), they are a dynamic element in the letters in which they appear, showing as they do the inner trajectory of the unstable “I” attempting to follow its particular calling or vocation while encountering and engaging with the visionary world of the pictorial image and the values it represents. Admittedly, this dialogical exchange is not quite symmetrical. Despite its perilous uncertainty, the self forges ahead, not without confidence; despite its reassuring stability, the pictorial image is unsettling insofar as it draws our attention to the gap between the imaginary and the actual. Nonetheless, the dialogue between a relatively unstable self and a relatively stable ideal holds sufficiently at the centre, and, as I have been suggesting, the interplay between these poles does much to explain the captivating power of Van Gogh’s writing.

So far, then, we have seen how enthusiastically Van Gogh conflates the world of books and the world of paintings, and how the many word-paintings in his letters celebrate the shared goals of the sister arts. But we have also seen that Van Gogh’s writing is everywhere energized by the contrasts between temporal and spatial modes of discourse. The coalescence assumed by the ut pictura poesis motif thus stands in counterpoint to the differences insisted upon by Lessing, and I would like now to look at a further aspect of how important this dialogically structured discourse is throughout Van Gogh’s writing.
Drawing and Painting: From Morality to Aesthetics

In this section, I consider how Van Gogh’s letters describe his vacillation between drawing and painting, especially during his Dutch period, when his drawing had a strong narrative dimension that reflected a desire to make his art socially relevant. My main point is that during these years, the contest recorded in Van Gogh’s letters between drawing and painting reproduces the interplay between temporal sequence and spatial immediacy that I have already discussed with reference to his word-paintings.

Let me begin with an early letter, written when Van Gogh was twenty-two years old and living in London:

I’m sending you herewith a small drawing. I made it last Sunday, the morning a daughter (13 years old) of my landlady died.

It’s a view of Streatham Common, a large, grass-covered area with oak trees and broom.

It had rained in the night, and the ground was soggy here and there and the young spring grass fresh and green.

As you see, it’s scribbled on the title page of the “Poesies d’Edmond Roche.”

There are beautiful ones among them, serious and sad, including one that begins and ends

Sad and alone, I climbed the sad, bare dune, 
Where the sea keens its ceaseless moaning plaint, 
The dune where dies the wide unfurling wave, 
Drab path that winds and winds upon itself again. (32/1:55)

As the letter goes on, Van Gogh cites some further verses by Edmond Roche, including Roche’s description of an etching by Corot.

Here again, we see how easily Van Gogh conflates the visual arts and literature. Already at this early date, he was inserting his own drawings into letters, here providing Theo with “a view of Streatham Common” and also with a copy of an etching by Corot, the topic of
Roche’s poem. He creates a brief word-painting before going on to cite the atmospheric (if sentimental) lines from Roche. The mixture of elements here would remain characteristic of Van Gogh’s writerly practice: citing his favourite literary texts, insisting on analogies between the sister arts, inserting drawings into his letters, and providing his own vivid pictorial descriptions. But one further aspect of this letter stands out in a manner that is difficult to ignore.

Van Gogh begins by talking about the “small drawing” that he has enclosed. He then recalls, in passing, that he made the drawing on the day when his landlady’s thirteen-year-old daughter died. In the next sentence, he proceeds without further ado to the view of Streatham Common and to the verses from Roche. But it is hard not to feel an uncomfortable disjunction here between the news about the death of the landlady’s daughter and the casual aestheticism of the rest of the letter, in which Van Gogh describes a set of pleasing effects, whether in nature, drawing, poetry, or etching. In short, he seems unaware of how indifferently he passes off the young girl’s death as apparently no more important than the enclosed letter sketch or the other impressions that he records in passing. This, we might conclude, is a young man’s letter, uninformed by moral seriousness or by real engagement with the art to which he alludes.

In keeping with this example, Van Gogh’s earliest letters are for the most part ingenuous and exploratory and are not yet engaged with the kinds of commitment that would drive him, in one way or another, during the rest of his career. His earliest writing frequently expresses a similar kind of wide-eyed curiosity and wonder; as he proclaims enthusiastically to Theo, “It’s beautiful everywhere” (27/1:51). Thus, in the present example, the girl’s death does not disturb the account of random moments of beauty in nature, verse, and pictorial art that the letter provides. But the developing intensity of Van Gogh’s religious and moral concerns would soon change the direction of his thinking and of his writing alike.

As is well known, religion was the first powerful ideal to command Van Gogh’s full attention, roughly from 1875 to 1880. But although worshipping God “in spirit and in truth” (49/1:74) was his
first priority during these years, Van Gogh continued to value art, singling out Holbein (85), Boughton (89), Scheffer (116), Ruisdael (120), and Millais (122), among others. He admits, “I cannot help making a little drawing now and then” (120/1:177), even though he worries that doing so “would most likely keep me from my main work” (148/1:233), which is, as he says earlier, to be a “Christian labourer” (109/1:151).

And so Van Gogh does not repudiate art, even as he makes clear that it should remain subordinate to religion. Likewise, religion carried a burden of moral responsibility for him, expressed especially in the bond of sympathy that he felt for the poor and marginalized. For instance, he tells Theo that he wanted to minister to slum dwellers in London but was too young to qualify (85/1:104) and that when he went to the Borinage as an evangelist, he attended especially to the “many sickly and bedridden people, lying emaciated in their beds, weak and miserable” (151/1:239).

Eventually, Van Gogh would conclude that the physical needs of the sick people in the Borinage were more urgent than was their need for religion. By the end of his sojourn there, his letters no longer refer to the Bible or to his favourite religious writers, and, partly as a result of his experience among the miners, he abandoned his allegiance to institutional Christianity. Ironically, one main reason why he had needed religion in the first place was, as he tells Theo, that the moral problem of suffering was too overwhelming to deal with without God: “There is evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things,” he writes, and “without faith in a God one cannot live — cannot endure. But with that faith one can long endure” (117/1:164). The letters in which Van Gogh writes about the death of Susannah Gladwell (the seventeen-year-old sister of his friend, Harry Gladwell [88/1:109]) and about the drowning of a child in an Amsterdam canal (123/1:180) show how deeply moved he was by the pathos of the bereaved families. In both cases, he looks to religion to help him manage, writing of God and the Bible to Harry and, in the case of the little boy, ending with a spontaneous prayer: “God help us, struggling to stay on top” (123/1:181). Informed now by a more developed set of commitments, these letters stand in
telling contrast to the earlier perfunctory notice paid to the death of the landlady’s thirteen-year-old daughter.

Again as a reflection of his changing moral concerns, when Van Gogh became disillusioned with religion as the result of what he calls his difficult “moulting” (155/1:246) in the Borinage, he made drawings of the miners as a way of recording the harsh conditions of their daily lives: “I do hope to make some scratch,” he writes tentatively, “in which there might be something human” (158/1:257). Art now compensates, as it were, for conventional religion as a means of expressing Van Gogh’s growing commitment to the miners’ well-being. Certainly, in the years after he left the Borinage, and particularly during his time in The Hague and Nuenen, moral concerns were very much at the forefront of both his life and his art. This was so not least because he found himself struggling with his disastrous relationships with Kee Vos and Sien Hoornik. At the same time, he was aspiring to be an illustrator and to develop his drawing as a vehicle for social commentary. In this context, a further highly interesting tension began to develop between Van Gogh’s commitment to drawing and his discovery (somewhat to his own surprise) that he could paint. That is, the drawing at which he sought to excel had a strong narrative, or temporal, dimension that he hoped would appeal to the illustrated magazines. But when he turned increasingly to painting, he was impressed with how colour has a direct emotional impact that dispenses, by and large, with the kind of narrative that his socially engaged drawing required. In the upshot, the moral focus of Van Gogh’s drawings yielded to an aesthetic understanding of the power of colour. His discussions of drawing and painting can therefore be read as part of a process by which his dominant ideology was itself being transformed as his career took shape. Let us now consider this process in more detail.

After his sojourn in the Borinage and Brussels, Van Gogh stayed with his parents in Etten, where he persisted in his self-directed apprenticeship as an artist. His former boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, had sent him Charles Bargue’s *Exercises au fusain* and *Cours de dessin*, and Van Gogh had also acquired Armand Théophile Cassagne’s *Traité d’aquarelle* (157/1:253; 168/1:274). He studied these books carefully and also visited
his cousin by marriage, Anton Mauve, in The Hague. Mauve was a well-respected painter associated with the flourishing Hague School, and Van Gogh was an enthusiastic student. “He wants me to start painting” (171/1:278), Vincent tells Theo, going on to describe his first attempts at watercolour (173/1:288): “How marvelous watercolour is for expressing space and airiness” (192/1:332), and “what a great thing tone and colour are!” Mauve “has taught me to see so many things I didn’t see before” (193/1:336); Mauve even gave Vincent a paintbox (177/1:299), as his uncle C.M. had also done (173/1:288). Moreover, Vincent assures Theo that Mauve had provided a good report to their parents about Vincent’s progress, adding, “Pa is pleased with what M. himself said to him” (193/1:336). Vincent was also convinced that his watercolours would “become saleable” (199/2:17), a point that he repeats, insistently (201/2:24; 204/2:28). In short, the discovery of watercolours greatly energized him: “I’ve been working all this time with watercolour only, and it’s giving me more pleasure every day” (201/2:24). Mauve and Tersteeg even came to visit, looking on approvingly. “I’m glad about that” (201/1:24), Vincent writes, both pleased and confident.

And so things were looking promising, as Van Gogh made progress with the support of a range of admired authority figures: Mauve, Tersteeg, his uncle C.M., and, not least, his father. Still, in the background, the disruptive affair with Kee had caused a serious rift between Vincent and his family, and when he took up with Sien, his supporters wasted no time in abandoning ship. They did so on moral grounds: the embarrassing infatuation with Kee had been bad enough, but the affair with Sien was outrageous — because of it, Vincent’s father even thought about confining Vincent in an insane asylum. One result was that Van Gogh’s moral sense, already so strongly evident in his compassion for the ill and deprived miners in the Borinage, resurfaced in vigorous protest against his parents’ religious conservatism and against the petty bourgeois vindictiveness of those who condemned his relationship with Sien. She was, after all, a woman of the people and a tragic figure — like a character invented by Zola, whose novels, as it happened, Van Gogh had just recently discovered. Sien was also the model for “Sorrow,” which, in expressing her dejection and
long-suffering, makes a demand on the viewer’s compassion while also protesting against the social conditions that had brought her to such a state.

As in the Borinage, drawing remained Van Gogh’s main vehicle for expressing his newly energized moral concerns, which in turn fuelled his desire to make illustrations for magazines that would get the word out to a broad audience, promoting his message of solidarity with the poor. But as the letters show, Van Gogh was conflicted about how much he should privilege drawing over his new enthusiasm for painting. On the one hand, drawing was a means of social protest and had a quasi-narrative dimension in how it represented the daily lives of working people. On the other hand, Van Gogh’s main backers wanted him to paint rather than draw, so that his insistence on drawing became, in itself, a repudiation of their narrow standards, both artistic and moral. In short, the people who wanted Van Gogh to paint were also the people who had little sympathy for the moral agenda that informed his drawing.

An opposition thus declares itself in the letters between the quasi-narrative, socially engaged language of drawing and the language of colour, which registers an emotional impact over and above the thing depicted. The difference is, broadly, between a predominantly moral and a predominantly aesthetic understanding of the function of art, and the years in The Hague and Nuenen mark a major shift in Van Gogh’s career as he gradually relinquishes the first of these in favour of the second.

Something of these concerns can be seen, for instance, when Theo admires a watercolour, saying that it is the best work that Vincent has so far done. Vincent replies curtly, “That isn’t true,” going on to say that some pen drawings are better. He then complains that Tersteeg, who also favoured the watercolours, is encouraging him “to adopt a procedure that’s actually only half suited to the rendering of what I want to express” (206/2:30). Watercolours are here seen by Vincent as a link between Theo and Tersteeg, neither of whom really understands what Vincent wants to express “according to my own character and according to my own temperament” (206/2:30). The words “character”
and “temperament” have a moral dimension, and the direction that Vincent is being advised to take seems wrong to him because it is based on a misunderstanding of his real values. His response is to align these values with drawing, which, he says, Tersteeg dismissed as “a kind of opium daze you administer to yourself so as not to feel the pain you suffer at not being able to make watercolours” (210/2:36). Van Gogh’s reaction to this high-handedness is to resolve “that I must draw more seriously” (210/2:36).

Yet Van Gogh liked making watercolours, and he did continue to paint. But he gave drawing priority on the grounds that it should precede painting as part of a proper apprenticeship. And so he explains that he is devoting himself “specifically to drawing things” because “one can more easily go from drawing to painting than the other way round: making paintings without drawing the necessary studies” (218/2:55). Van Gogh’s progress in making watercolours, he believed, would therefore depend on his skill as a draughtsman (250/2:115; 251/2:118), but Mauve and Tersteeg, “whose sympathy I more or less thought I could count on” (218/2:55), did not see things this way and, to the contrary, seemed to be advising him to paint prematurely.

On the one hand, it does make sense that Van Gogh would want to learn to draw before moving on to painting, and he vigorously declares his dedication to draughtsmanship: “I want to be concerned with one thing only, drawing” (228/2:75); “drawing is becoming a passion with me, and I’m becoming increasingly absorbed in it” (222/2:63); “pure drawing” is “the foundation of all the rest” (246/2:107). On the other hand, the letters show how drawing was interconnected for Van Gogh with a broader set of moral issues, and we can now detect the lineaments of a complex discourse in which the prescriptivist Tersteeg, whose moral disapproval happens to be bound up with his advice about painting, stands opposed to Van Gogh, whose moral integrity is bound up with the socially responsible narratives that his drawings provide.

But the line between drawing and painting was not as clear-cut as we might think. Van Gogh sometimes tried his hand at mixing watercolour and drawing (350/2:347) and sometimes made watercolours of
the lives of working people (324/2:292). Also, he occasionally drew a scene and then made a painting of it (323/2:290), and sometimes he used a brush in a painterly fashion to apply ink to a drawing (348/2:342). At one point, he even says that the practice of painting might help to make him a better draughtsman: “I also firmly believe my drawing would be strongly influenced if I were to paint for a while” (254/2:128). And so painting and drawing should not be seen, hard and fast, as exclusive opposites. Nonetheless, the fact remains that during his time in The Hague, Van Gogh emphasized the special efficacy of drawing in response, specifically, to the moral issues that weighed heavily upon him. “It’s precisely because I have a draughtsman’s fist that I can’t keep myself from drawing” (220/2:57), he writes, and he goes into “the houses of workers and poor people,” partly to emulate “the draughtsmen for The Graphic, Punch etc.” who likewise go among the people, even in “the poorest alleyways of London” (220/2:59). His choice of “fist” suggests Van Gogh’s combative attitude; indeed, he explicitly declares that he is “keen to do battle” and “I hope to do battle” (220/2:57, 59). And so he writes as if he shares directly in the workers’ struggles, even though he is in fact talking about drawing. As is well known, he liked using carpenter’s pencils and crayons, which were workmen’s tools, so that his “draughtsman’s” practices and attitudes would resemble those of the working people. But “when I go to see Mauve or Tersteeg,” he writes, “I can’t express myself as I’d like” (220/2:59): again, a discussion of drawing merges with Van Gogh’s personal struggle to shape his own life authentically.

Van Gogh’s emphasis on drawing therefore carries considerable ideological significance. “I want to be concerned with one thing only, drawing” (228/2:75), he says, and his aim in so doing is to “move some people” (249/2:113). He wants to emulate the “scenes of factory work” (262/2:151) in Harper’s Monthly, and he “would be really pleased” if he “could supply drawings for illustrated magazines” (264/2:154) and make art “for the people” (278/2:188). He expresses “love and respect for the great draughtsmen,” hoping to emulate them by making “something from what one sees every day on the streets” (278/2:189). The idea of “making figures from the people for the people” seemed a
matter “of charity and duty” (291/2:215). He looks to “magazines like British Workman” and to Charles Dickens for inspiration (291/2:215), but “making the drawings themselves is my main preoccupation” (294/2:222), and, again, “working on the drawings is the main thing” (295/2:224). He even acquires a vast collection of The Graphic (331/2:311) and considers going to London to pursue his career as an illustrator there (348/2:343). In these examples, Van Gogh’s remarks about drawing remain closely linked to a moral agenda, an interest in narrative content, and an emphasis on social engagement.

Yet, as we have seen, when Mauve introduced Van Gogh to colour, the impact was immediate — “How marvellous watercolour is” (192/1:332) — and despite his ambition to become an illustrator, Van Gogh continued to explore this new “marvellous” world. Although drawing was the way he said he wanted to go, he was also, paradoxically, discovering that colour was the way he had to go. And as colour became increasingly important to him, his overriding moral concerns were gradually usurped by a new understanding of the primacy of “the absolute necessity of a new art of colour” (585/4:26). He did not entirely abandon his earlier moral convictions, just as he did not entirely abandon his religious idealism, but morality was increasingly subsumed by and became increasingly implicit in the work of art itself. He left Sien and her children, literally, when he went to Drenthe, but in a further sense, especially after he arrived in Arles, he did not return to the moral battles of his earlier years and to the wars of truth he had fought over religion, his relationships with Kee and Sien, and his attempts to have a family life and to become a socially progressive illustrator. His experience in the Borinage was indeed a “moulting” time, but his years in The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen were also a period of transformation from which, as it were, a richly coloured butterfly emerged from its black-and-white cocoon, to take flight in Paris and Arles.

After Mauve introduced him to watercolours, Van Gogh continued to declare his preference for drawing, but the degree to which his attitude towards his own practice was conflicted is evident, for instance, in a letter to Theo from The Hague in April, 1882: “One fine day when
people start to say that I can in fact draw but not paint, perhaps I’ll appear with a painting just when they least expect it, but as long as it looks as though I must do it and may not do anything else, then I certainly won’t do it” (214/2:50). Van Gogh’s contrarian disposition is in full display here, as he primes himself, simply, to do the opposite of what is expected of him. So long as (for example) Mauve, Tersteeg, and C.M. favour painting, he will draw instead. But as soon as people start admiring his drawings, he will surprise them with a painting. The operative words in the passage — “must do it” (“moeten doen”) and “may not” (“mogt ik niet”) — show Van Gogh taking his bearings from others not so much by emulating them as by opposing them.

The choice between drawing and painting is therefore not straightforward; rather, it is the site of dialogically contending values and of emergent re-evaluations. Interestingly, the discovery that he could paint took Van Gogh himself by surprise, as he tells Theo on more than one occasion. “It surprises me,” he writes about his first painted studies, going on to say that “they do look like something, and that rather amazes me” (257/2:135). He writes as if he has upon something that was latent but is now declaring itself: “I feel that things with colour are becoming apparent in my painting that I didn’t use to have” (257/2:135), and “A certain feeling for colour has been aroused in me of late when painting, stronger than and different from what I’ve felt before” (371/2:399). It is as if colour starts to take over, almost of its own accord, but the full acknowledgement of this fact was not easy because it entailed the relinquishment of Van Gogh’s ambition to become an illustrator, which in turn meant a revision of the moral idealism that had informed that ambition since his sojourn in the Borinage.

Still, Van Gogh knew that something important was happening. Powerful energies were involved, and he struggled to contend with them. Painting “opens up a much broader horizon,” he writes, and “in the past I often had to restrain myself” (255/2:130). “I’ve been made deeply happy by painting these last few days,” he tells Theo, but “I’ve really restrained myself and stuck to drawing” (259/2:144). Finally, he seems to have yielded to the irresistibile attraction to colour:

The Painterly Writer 41
“I’m immersing myself in painting with all my strength — I’m immersing myself in colour — I’ve held back from that until now, and don’t regret it” (260/2:146).

The main reason Van Gogh gives for his self-restraint is that good drawing technique is a necessary foundation for painting; he thought he should not paint before he had learned to draw well. He also knew that painting was much more expensive than drawing, and throughout his career, financial constraint imposed limitations on the amount of painting he could do (252/2:124; 258/2:138; 266/2:158; 363/2:383; 366/2:388). Still, these prudential reasons do not account for Van Gogh’s admissions of surprise and his acknowledgements that colour had an almost autonomous power that was “aroused” in him despite his desire to repress it. Rather, the centre of gravity was shifting, and an interesting indication of this shift occurs when Van Gogh casually mentions that he needs to paint to improve his drawing (363/2:383). In another telling passage, he writes: “I’m curious as to how this will continue and where it will lead. It has sometimes surprised me that I’m not more of a colourist, because my temperament would certainly lead me to expect that, and yet up to now that has hardly developed at all” (371/2:399–400). Here, Van Gogh is still “curious” about where his new adventure with colour will lead, but now he begins to wonder why he did not set out on this adventure earlier, because his “temperament” inclines him so much in that direction. The surprise now is not that he is discovering colour but that his ability as a colourist “has hardly developed at all.” This is a different emphasis from his initial sense that he was discovering something new, almost despite himself.

And so, in the conversation between the draughtsman and the painter, colour gradually gains ascendancy. Vincent tells Theo that he paints a figure with “no more than a few patches” of colour, but “there’s a kind of life that isn’t due to accuracy of drawing, for it isn’t drawn, so to speak.” Rather, a certain “mysteriousness” is captured, as “the forms simplify themselves” into “patches of colour” (371/2:400). Painting, then, had all but usurped drawing, but even so, Van Gogh did not abandon drawing, just as he never lost his concern for poor and
marginalized people, which remained very much alive, for instance, towards the end of his life, in his sympathy for the hospital inmates at St. Rémy. And so in Drenthe, where he went after leaving The Hague, he recorded the working conditions of the local peasants, even though he now drew mainly because he had run out of paints. “I’m drawing,” he explains to Theo, because the paint supply is low, “but you know very well that painting must be the main thing as far as possible” (387/3:16). When he makes pen drawings, he says, he does so “with a view to painting” (388/3:18), and the pressure on Theo to supply paints increases markedly in the Drenthe letters.

In Nuenen, Van Gogh experimented with combining watercolours and pen drawings in depicting the local weavers, but again, colour was his overriding concern. He even sent Theo some pen and ink drawings done after his painted studies and based on them (430/3:107). Several times in his letters, he reproves himself for this focus on painting: “I’ve been so busy painting that recently I haven’t made a single drawing” (446/3:149), and “I’ve devoted myself almost exclusively to painting for more than a whole year” (485/3:210). Although he continued to make drawings in Nuenen, his preoccupation with colour intensified greatly: “my colour is becoming sounder and more accurate” (468/3:185); “I can safely say that I’ve progressed in painting technique and in colour” (469/3:186); “there has been a change in my colour since you were here” (470/3:188); “my grasp of colour is becoming sounder” (470/3:188); and so on.

Later in this chapter, I will return to the contrast between the temporal-narrative and spatial-pictorial aspects of Van Gogh’s development, which I have so far described by way of the opposition in his letters between drawing and painting. But for now, I want to keep the focus on Van Gogh’s rapidly intensifying interest in colour because of what it tells us not only about his own development but also about the inherently dialogical structure of the account of his progress that the letters provide.
One main catalyst for Van Gogh’s fascination with colour was his discovery of the theories of Eugène Delacroix, which he came across in Nuenen through Charles Blanc’s *Les artistes de mon temps* (1876) (449/3:154). The two main aspects of Delacroix’s thinking that captured Van Gogh’s attention were his ideas about complementary colours and his conviction that painters should not aim to reproduce “local” colour (the actual colours of nature) because the internal dynamics of the colours within a painting were more important.

Vincent explains these ideas to Theo in a letter in which he cites a long passage about Delacroix, quoted from Blanc. The passage focuses on the idea that “the great colourists don’t do local tones” (449/3:154). Vincent goes on to explain that a colour appears more or less intense “depending on the colours that are next to it,” and the laws governing such contrasts “always apply” (449/3:155). In a later letter, he comes back to these topics by way of explaining “the great verities in which Delacroix believed” (494/3:226), especially the laws of complementary and simultaneous contrast (494/3:227).

Briefly, what Van Gogh read about Delacroix was based on research by the industrial chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who was employed by the Gobelins tapestry works. Chevreul was asked to investigate customer complaints about the lack of liveliness in the colours of some tapestries. The results of his investigation were published in *De la loi contraste simultané de couleur* (1859), in which he set out the laws of simultaneous and successive contrast. In simultaneous contrast, when two colours are juxtaposed, each tints the other so that the contrast is heightened. In successive contrast, when we focus on a colour and then look at something else, our vision will be influenced by a shadow-image of the first colour.

Chevreul’s book is detailed and technical, but it exerted considerable influence on nineteenth-century painters. Certainly, his main ideas about the effects of colours on one another, and how the interrelatedness of colours affects a viewer, were taken up enthusiastically by Van Gogh. “The breaking and opposing of colours,” he tells Theo,
is something about “which I think every day” (506/3:248). Elsewhere, he gives a detailed account of colour contrasts and colour mixing (536/3:300), and he explains “complementary colours,” “simultaneous contrast,” and “the way complementaries neutralize each other” (536/3:301). Although Van Gogh cautions that painters should try “to remain reasonable” and not depart too far from the natural appearances of things, he nonetheless stresses that the colours on a palette take precedence over the colours of nature: “I don’t really care whether my colours are precisely the same,” he writes, “so long as they look good on my canvas” (537/3:302). He explains that “starting from one’s palette — from one’s knowledge of the beautiful effect of colours, isn’t the same as copying nature mechanically and slavishly” (537/3:302). The main point is that “COLOUR EXPRESSES SOMETHING IN ITSELF,” and “one can’t do without it” (537/3:303).

In the wake of these discoveries, Van Gogh came to realize that his own palette needed to change, and such a change did in fact take place in Paris under the influence of the Impressionists and of the Japanese prints that Van Gogh had begun to acquire in Antwerp and of which he became an avid collector. In Paris, he celebrates “COLOUR seeking LIFE” and declares that “true drawing is modelling with colour” (569/3:364). Writing from Arles, he especially admires the Marseillais painter Adolphe Monticelli, stating that “you have to go straight to Delacroix to find such an orchestration of colours” (589/4:32) and filling his letters with descriptions of the colours that he is using, as, for instance, in this description of a painting of his bedroom:

This time it’s simply my bedroom, but the colour has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general. In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination.

The walls are of a pale violet. The floor — is of red tiles. The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow. The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green. The bedspread scarlet red.
The window green.
The dressing table orange, the basin blue.
The doors lilac.
And that’s all — nothing in this bedroom, with its shutters closed.

(705/4:330)

“The colour has to do the job here,” Van Gogh explains, and then goes on to give a detailed account of the colours in question. But we notice that he draws attention also to a “simplified” style, which — along with a complementary exaggerated, or “grander,” effect — became part of his painterly practice as a consequence of his discovery that he need not slavishly imitate nature. Colour here makes its own emotional impact, and the effectiveness of the painting is, to a great extent, a result of the contrasts within the composition — violet and red, yellow and green, orange and blue. Clearly, Van Gogh has now moved well away from the project to which he had committed himself in his desire to become an illustrator. As noted earlier, the narrative aspect of his drawings in The Hague was a means of engaging with social issues, but when colour emerged as his overriding concern, the aesthetic displaced the ascendancy of the moral, and this reordering of priorities led Van Gogh to attempt (for instance) to establish an artists’ commune in Arles, at the Yellow House. His earlier desire for a wife and children was now transformed into a desire for a family of artists — a community joined by an understanding of the high value of art and inspired by a desire to live accordingly. “I have such a passion to make — an artist’s house” (685/4:278), he writes, where like-minded people would “live as a family, as brothers and companions” (682/4:273).

After he went to Arles, Van Gogh continued to draw (often extremely well), but because of his increasing enchantment with colour, he developed a distinctive style in which complementary and powerfully contrasting colours were foregrounded, even though they were also organized by a strong sense of line. But as a result of both the failure to establish an artists’ colony and his debilitating illness, towards the end of his life Van Gogh became disenchanted with the idea that aesthetic value was sufficiently sustaining. “Making paintings,” he writes to
Theo in 1888, is “not happiness and not real life, but what can you say, even this artistic life, which we know isn’t the real one, seems so alive to me, and it would be ungrateful not to be content with it” (602/4:73). Elsewhere, he explains to his mother that although making a painting is like having a child, he would prefer real children (885/5:260), a point that he repeats (898/5:289), evoking again his earlier forlorn desire for a wife and family of his own. “The more I think about it,” he tells Theo, “the more I feel there’s nothing more genuinely artistic than to love people” (682/4:272). Here, the aesthetic yields ground to a newly revived moral sense, as Van Gogh realizes his own solitariness and acknowledges that human relationships, not art, offer a last best hope. But he also understood that art was now, in a sense, all he had, and his desire was to not be “ungrateful,” despite the difficult realization that art is not enough. And so, in St. Rémy and Auvers, he continued to make beautiful paintings, altering his palette yet again and returning in part to the colours of his Dutch period.  

Conclusion: Dialogical Means and Personal Ends

In this chapter, I have looked at how the letters thematize within their own discourse the dialogue between writing and painting that is central to Van Gogh’s career and reputation as a whole. In so doing, I have argued that throughout the correspondence, the interrelationships between writing and painting are analogous to the interactions between the temporal experience of the “I” of the subject and the spatially situated “other.” To support this argument, I have suggested that Bakhtin’s dialogical model of self and other can helpfully be read in parallel to Lessing’s theory that the distinction between time and space is a main marker of the differences between literature and painting.

Yet we began this chapter by noting an apparently opposite, glorious abandon in Van Gogh’s conflation of his favourite books and paintings. Also, his lifelong habit of including word-paintings in his letters shows his interest in a widespread nineteenth-century
convention whereby the imagistic aspects of language were seen as analogous to painting. Throughout the letters, he often goes out of his way to blur the differences between the sister arts, on the grounds that they both seek similar ends.

One way to understand this aspect of Van Gogh’s writing is to read it in the context of the high value he attached to personal relationships despite (and perhaps because of) the fact that they were so difficult for him. His persistent utopianism is based mainly on a desire for human community, whether religious, or within the family, or among artists. And so I want to suggest that his word-paintings, together with his celebration of the free-running analogies between verbal and visual art, are likewise a way of declaring an aspiration to an ideal convergence of opposites that transcends differences.

Yet such an aspiration needs to be read in the context of the negative contrasts that experience inevitably puts in the way of ideals. And so I have focused especially on how the letters present us with a tension between Van Gogh’s existential quest (his “vocation”) and the visual aspects of his word-paintings, which express harmony and stability in contrast to the uncertainties and doubts of the author as subject. Thus, the dialogue between the unformed, temporally situated “I” of the narrator and the spatially imagined, well-formed verbal picture captured, as it were, in a still moment enacts within the texts themselves the drama of a captivating, personal self-exploration.

In this context, I have also considered the counterpoint between drawing and painting, which the letters describe in some detail. In the Borinage, Van Gogh turned to drawing as a way of expressing his moral concerns and of supplying the deficiency caused by his turning away from orthodox religion. These moral concerns continued to influence his development as an artist, as he sought to become an illustrator and to use his drawing as a means of social commentary. But in The Hague, he discovered that he had a talent for colour, and his letters record a highly charged contest between drawing and painting, especially during his Dutch period. On the one hand, drawing locates Van Gogh in the quasi-narrative world of the illustrator and is the vehicle for his overriding moral concerns. On the other hand, painting (especially
the colour theories that commanded his attention) downplays the significance of narrative and is a means of giving primacy to the aesthetic rather than the moral. Although the interplay here is complex, in the upshot, for Van Gogh, drawing yields to colour, and this change of emphasis marks an important shift in the drama of his own self-fashioning. It is as if the narrative (temporal) concerns of the draughtsman yield to the interests of the colourist, whose effects are achieved by the immediate (spatial) interactions of colours within the frame of the painting. And so, as a subcategory of the space-time contrast with which this chapter has been concerned, the drawing-painting contrast also enacts, within the texts themselves, the dialogical process of the self-fashioning that they describe.

Towards the end of his life, Van Gogh came to believe that human relationships are more important than art, despite the fact that life and art can and should enhance each other. Throughout his career, even despite his incurably rebarbative inclinations, he sought ways to overcome divisive separations and to engage in dialogue that would bridge the gap between self and other, body and world. Throughout, the letters record his struggle to achieve this, but my main point in the present chapter is that the letters also open up within themselves a dialogical exchange between words and paintings, time and space, insecurity and stability, which, as a deep structure or “intention” of the texts, engages us with the core dialogue itself between “I” and “other” that lies at the heart of what self-fashioning entails for all of us.