As I mentioned in the introduction, Van Gogh was fascinated by binary oppositions, in which the interplay of differences produces the kind of dialogical “open-endedness” that Bakhtin finds to be fundamental in Dostoevsky’s representation of self-fashioning. Certainly, on the simplest level, Van Gogh’s letters show that dramatic juxtapositions, dynamically paired opposites, and the like are a favoured means for expressing his unusually combative opinions as he seeks to shape a place for himself in a difficult world — a world in which his loyalties were often divided and even his closest friendships were subjected to sudden squalls of animosity. According to Vincent’s sister-in-law, his brother Theo thought of Vincent as very much a self-divided person — indeed, as a sort of walking contradiction. Quoting from a letter by Theo to his sister Willemien, she writes: “It seems as if he were two persons: one, marvelously gifted, tender and refined, the other, egoistic and hard-hearted. They present themselves in turns, so that one hears him talk first in one way, then in the other, and always with arguments on both sides.”

The contending voices described here by Theo are very much in evidence throughout Vincent’s correspondence, where they do indeed often appear as a set of opposites with “arguments on both sides.”
But in the letters, Vincent’s contending voices embody a further clash of values, in the manner suggested by Theo when he says that the “tender and refined” side of his brother is at loggerheads with the “egoistic and hard-hearted side.” This opposition is not so much a matter of contradictory propositions and opposing arguments as of incompatible feeling-states, which in turn reflect and embody Vincent’s continuing struggle to evaluate his relationships with others while shaping his own beliefs and commitments. With these points in mind, I would like to consider, in the following pages, how Van Gogh’s rhetorical use of binary oppositions — contradictions, paradoxes, forceful juxtapositions, and the like — confronts a reader with the combined boldness and insecurity of the questing “I” in relation to the simultaneous invitation and rebuke of the “other” with whom any self-in-the-making finds itself inextricably bound up. The tensions imparted by this interplay of competing elements are not encountered by readers mainly as problems to be resolved; they are, rather, a means of enacting the core drama of an unfinalizable process of self-fashioning.

Contradiction, Paradox, and the Shaping of Commitment

From early in his correspondence, Van Gogh resorts to a strategy whereby he confronts his reader with a set of juxtaposed opposites that are frequently paradoxical or bordering on paradox. “When we are weak, we are strong,” he tells Theo, and “Being ill sanctifies being well and teaches us to be well” (95/1:125). These sentences were written in 1876, from Isleworth, at a time when Van Gogh’s religious idealism was ascendant and he was eagerly absorbing the advice offered by Thomas à Kempis’s “wonderful book,” The Imitation of Christ (97/1:130). During this period, his opinion of his preacher father was uncritically affirmative (“men like Pa are purer than the sea,” he tells Theo [87/1:107]); he admired his father as a paramount example of the good Christian life.

But some troubling events were also intruding on his life at this time. The sister of Van Gogh’s friend Harry Gladwell had recently died, at age seventeen, and Van Gogh was much affected by her death, as his
account of her funeral shows (88/1:109). He was also deeply concerned about the plight of the London poor, with whom he had come in contact both directly and, for instance, by reading Dickens (98/1:131; 94/1:122). Vincent’s faith in God’s goodness and his admiration for his father’s religious vocation were therefore offset by an awareness of the problems of suffering and oppression — problems that would eventually, in the Borinage, lead Van Gogh away from institutional Christianity. But in Isleworth, reflecting Thomas à Kempis’s advice about imitating Christ, Van Gogh asserts with confidence that, paradoxically, weakness makes us strong and illness “teaches us to be well.”

The brevity of this statement and the compression of Van Gogh’s language stand in direct confrontation to whatever doubts a non-believer (or a believer who is aware that faith can be challenged) might experience, faced with the proposal that weakness is actually strength. As with St. Paul, paradox is deployed to push the question of faith dramatically to the fore, even though not every reader is likely to go along with Van Gogh’s rhetorical gambit: weakness, after all, can be debilitating, and serious illness can (or should) give pause to facile moralizers. Still, we do not so much feel that Van Gogh is arguing here about faith in itself, but rather that he is stating a commitment, and paradox becomes a vehicle for expressing the force and direction of his will.

Throughout the letters, the persuasive power of Van Gogh’s frequently deployed paradoxes varies considerably. An example of how a reader might feel somewhat less than convinced occurs in a letter to his sister Willemien, written from Arles in 1889, in which Vincent discusses cancer:

Ivy loves the old lopped willows each spring, ivy loves the trunk of the old oak tree — and so cancer, that mysterious plant, attaches itself so often to people whose lives were nothing but ardent love and devotion. So, however terrible the mystery of these pains may be, the horror of them is sacred, and in them there might indeed be a gentle, heartbreaking thing, just as we see the green moss in abundance on the old thatched roof. However, I don’t know a thing about it — I have no right to assert anything. (764/4:435)
Here, Vincent is commiserating with his sister, who has agreed to nurse a seriously ill woman. He admires Willemien’s courage: “you’re very brave, my sister, not to recoil before these Gethsemanes,” he writes, and then goes on to develop the parallel between cancer and ivy on an old oak and moss on a thatched roof and to suggest that there is a “gentle, heartbreaking” and even “sacred” quality about these natural processes. But a reader will surely want to hold back from the idea that cancer is sacred, gentle, and as pleasing to the eye as moss and ivy. Even Vincent becomes uncomfortable with his own suggestion, and at the end of the passage, he pulls back: “I don’t know a thing about it — I have no right to assert anything.” Although he is trying to reassure Wil, we feel that he also wants to reassure himself — later in the same letter, he cites Voltaire’s Pangloss: “everything is always for the best in the best of worlds” (764/4:436). When his own illness was progressing, Van Gogh resorted on a number of occasions to this famous Panglossian dictum, but without ever pausing to consider Voltaire’s satirical intent. In *Candide*, Pangloss’s optimism is escapist and irresponsible and is not without its own kind of cruelty because of how Pangloss glibly refuses to acknowledge the actual facts of suffering. In the letter to Wil, when Vincent resorts to Pangloss, we might therefore feel a protective manoeuvre, an attempt to convince himself in the face of suffering and uncertainty that things are not so bad after all.

The confident paradox in the letter from Isleworth, stating that weakness is strength and illness is good for us, is significantly modified in the later letter from Arles even though the core issues stay the same. In both cases, Van Gogh tries to define an attitude towards unjust suffering — the problem of pain, to which he was highly sensitive and about which he was indignant throughout his life. The brisk paradox in the Isleworth letter is a means of expressing a confident religious faith, even though the boldness of the assertion in itself might suggest that Van Gogh’s faith depends not so much on argument as on the force of will, of which paradox is the vehicle. By contrast, in the Arles letter, the claim that cancer is beautiful is diffused, along with Van Gogh’s confidence, in the midst of the attempt to reassure Willemien that disease really isn’t so bad. Still, it is worth noting that the mixture of
fraternal solicitude, horror, reassurance, discomfort, escapism, and embarrassed disavowal in the later letter make it a good deal more interesting than the earlier one.

To summarize, in these examples we can see how, on the topic of suffering, the shift from paradox, deployed as an expression of faith, to contradiction, which is allowed to be disturbing (even to the author), tells us quite a lot about how Van Gogh’s understanding had evolved. It also shows us something of the contrasting effects often achieved by his binary rhetoric. Let us now consider some further examples.

During his early religious phase, Van Gogh frequently cites St. Paul’s directive that Christ’s crucifixion should cause us to be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). For St. Paul, this juxtaposition of opposites generates insight into Christ’s redemptive act by maintaining a tension between defeatism and escapism, thereby encouraging us to avoid both extremes. Given Van Gogh’s proclivity for rhetorical binaries, it is not surprising that he favoured this particular New Testament verse. But Van Gogh also supplies a variety of analogous examples of his own. For instance, he assures Theo that “dry wood gives more heat, bright fire and light” than “green wood does” (90/1:114). The word translated as “dry” is “dor,” which means “withered,” “arid,” “barren.” And so Van Gogh draws attention to the fact that although the “green wood” is fresh and vigorous and there is loss and grief in becoming dry and withered, nonetheless there is also compensation in the special warmth and light (comfort and understanding, that is) that the difficult seasoning process enables. This is another version of St. Paul’s phrase “sorrowful yet always rejoicing,” which is, in fact, cited a couple of lines earlier.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh talks about throwing a pail of water on a drawing to produce “delicate tones” and describes how the process is a “dangerous method” that might turn out well or badly (300/2:232). Here, the key point depends much less on an explanation of the “method” than on the juxtaposition of the reckless and forceful act of throwing the pail of water, on the one hand, and the idea of “delicacy,” on the other. What strikes us is the incommensurability between the flung water and the result it is supposed to produce. It is as if one
should undertake to hit someone with a hammer in order to refine that person’s table manners.

Something of the same use of contradiction to express the risks of commitment and the will to endure occurs in a description of Sien. “It’s strange how pure she is despite her corruption” (376/2:407), Vincent writes, offering Theo some paradoxical reassurance. Here again, the interplay of opposites expresses both Vincent’s understanding of the risk involved in taking up with Sien (she is depraved) and his trust in the fact that his commitment will pay off (she is pure, really). Vincent threw himself into this relationship with the same recklessness as when he pitched the pail of water onto the drawing, in each case looking for a redemptive (and refining) result — against the odds, one might think. But, as ever, he insists that it is worthwhile to take a chance. As he writes later about his commitment to painting: “I’ll throw myself into it not because I’m already there now, but because I believe ‘I will mature in the storm’” (406/3:67). Van Gogh’s writerly imagination returns often to this idea of hardship producing joy, sorrow yielding to happiness, deprivation becoming fruitful. The strategy of juxtaposed opposites, of binaries in contradiction, is an effective way to express such concerns, partly because the differences between the terms strike us all but simultaneously, thereby reminding us how the opposites are problematically bound up with one another in actual experience.

Thus, for instance, Vincent describes his father as “the most gentle of cruel men” (415/3:86), and himself as both “placid abbot” and “mad painter” (650/4:200). He has “something of a dual nature,” he says, partly “monk” and partly “artist” (709/4:337). In St. Rémy, he returns, hopefully, to the idea that “illnesses sometimes cure us” (787/5:56) and that “illness” is “a means of getting us back on our feet” (849/5:193). In Auvers, the wheat fields express “sadness, extreme loneliness,” but they are also part of “what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside” (898/5:287).

In these examples, the contrasting binaries cause us to attend to the conflicted nature of Van Gogh’s experience as he invokes an ideal, even as we simultaneously discover the imperfections that prevent
him from reaching it. In the face of this challenge, Van Gogh typically sets himself on an affirmative path, often against the odds, and from a variety of perspectives at different points in his career, his use of condensed juxtaposition and paradox expresses the concentration and direction of his will and the force of his desire. Thus, in the examples that we have so far considered, the effectiveness of Van Gogh’s writing depends on the force fields generated by the paradoxes and juxtapositions themselves, as his aspirations are countered by the uncertainties of the “I” under pressure to shape a stable place for itself in a difficult world. As always, this struggle is structured dialogically through a conflict of opposites. My main point is that Van Gogh’s binary rhetoric is deployed in a way that is in itself a mimesis, in concentrated form, of a dynamic self-fashioning; that is, anxieties and aspirations are communicated as a quality of the writing in excess of the factual information that the letters also provide.

Half-Measures and Negative Contrasts

As Michael Holquist explains, according to Bakhtin, “it is only the other’s categories that will let me be an object of my own perception.” Consequently, “in order to forge a self, I must do it from outside. In other words, I author myself.” In this undertaking, the self is not “unitary” but develops through a variety of dialogical relationships of the kind that Bakhtin especially admires in Dostoevsky’s “polyphonic” writing.²

Van Gogh understood very well that self-authoring is “polyphonic” in such a sense. For instance, he explains to his sister Willemien, “To my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits” (626/4:132). Just so, the authored self in the letters is illuminated from several directions by way of various intersecting relationships and different types of “double-voiced discourse” that rely heavily upon strong juxtapositions, contrasts, and binary oppositions. In this view, the (always provisional) self is best seen as a force field of contending traits and appetites held in relation by the tensions among them and by the gaps and fissures that the tensions entail.
For instance, the early letters are full of exhortations recommending the Christian ideal, which in turn is frequently affirmed by contrast with its negative opposite. God’s “Spirit and Love” is a “Power” “against the dark and evil and terrible things of the world and the dark side of life” (132/1:198). Christmas is a “kindly light from the houses behind the rocks and the water that breaks against them on a dark evening” (134/1:202), and God’s word is also “a light in the night of suffering” (131/1:194). In many similar passages, Van Gogh affirms a certain value, which is then defined by contrast with the turbulent world that would cancel and destroy it but against which it also shines out all the more brightly. “Truly life is a fight,” Vincent tells Theo (133/1:199), and, commenting on the difference between a conventionally beautiful body and a body that shows the marks of suffering and experience, he offers a choice: “just as one cannot serve two masters, one cannot love two things that are so very different and feel sympathies for both” (139/1:215). Consequently, we come to know what is of real value for us by resolutely choosing what seems to be the greater good, even though worldly opinion might be cast against us. In this process, we discover that our ideals create their own counter-images, with which we must then contend.

In the early letters, Van Gogh is especially idealistic about his preacher father, to whose image he strove to conform: “I know that his heart is burning within him that something might happen so that I could give myself over not only almost but altogether to following him, Pa always hoped I would do so” (109/1:151). Here, Vincent’s ardour is indistinguishable from his father’s, so complete is the identification with what Vincent took his father to represent. Elsewhere, this idealization rings out with an almost touching combination of clarity and naïveté. When his father preached, Vincent writes, “his countenance was like that of an angel” (87/1:107), and “how wonderful it must be to have a life behind one like Pa has” (131/1:196). Vincent ardently desired to shape himself in the image of an idealized other. The main counter-image to his ideal at this time was the free-thinking secularist Jules Michelet, whom Vincent had once admired, but in 1885, Vincent tells Theo, “I’m going to get rid of all my works by Michelet,”
adding, “you should too” (50/1:75). However, as Vincent’s faith in institutional Christianity wavered — especially in light of the sufferings of the Borinage miners — so his idealized father came to seem more fallible, human, and disappointing, and was eventually replaced by the formerly rejected counter-image. Vincent explains to Theo: “I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I valued Michelet’s advice more than his” (186/1:317). Shortly afterwards, he suggests, “I nevertheless believe that you will benefit much more from re-reading Michelet than from the Bible” (189/1:325). Here, the secular, liberal, free-thinking Michelet re-emerges as the idealized other, replacing both Christianity and the authority of Vincent’s father, which now assume negative roles. Moreover, this reversal is clearly intended to be provocative. “I wouldn’t do without Michelet for anything in the world,” Vincent writes; “Michelet even says things completely and aloud which the gospel merely whispers to us germinally” (189/1:325).

At this time, Vincent was consumed by his infatuation with Kee Vos, and his governing ideal had become Michelet’s romanticized view of love. The moral and social conformity represented by the Christian observance of Vincent’s father seemed now to his wayward son to be the chief impediment to realizing what Michelet taught.

As we have seen in our earlier examples, Van Gogh exhorts his reader (and himself) to pursue ideals not least because of the negative counter-images that oppose them, so that, for instance, being good becomes an act of defiance against the bad things of which we become aware through the idea of the good. But Van Gogh also came to realize that an ideal can become a straitjacket that impedes a person’s individual development and personal creativity — as was the case for him with conventional Christianity. One response to such a discovery might be to turn away from ideals altogether, but it is possible to counter an oppressive ideal with a more enlightened one, as with Michelet in contrast to Father. And yet we must expect that every new ideal in turn will bring to light its own contradictions between the utopian and the actual, giving rise to new desires, new dissatisfactions and aspirations. And so, within such a many-sided interchange, the self goes on attempting to shape itself meaningfully, through a process that is never finalized.
Throughout his letters, Van Gogh is never drawn to the merely anarchic or extreme individualist alternative — the id unleashed from governing restraint. Although he railed often against convention, he remained throughout his life an idealist who kept substituting one version of the superego for another. At first, he admired each of his authority figures as a model to aspire to, but he soon discovered that they were all sufficiently imperfect to cause him disappointment and resentment. This certainly was the case with his father, but also with his old boss Tersteeg, his uncle C.M., Paul Gauguin, and Theo, with whom he had a complex and often moving relationship, yet everywhere shot through with ambivalence.

Here, I am interested especially in how the conflict between contending ideals often elicited from Van Gogh a special, combative intensity, sometimes expressed as anger or resentment. For instance, when he left his parents’ home in Etten and went to The Hague in 1881, he told Theo: “I was angrier than I ever remember being in my whole life, and I told Pa plainly that I found the whole system of that religion loathsome,” going on to say that he will “guard against” this system “as against something fatal” (194/2:12). The unreserved vehemence of this rejection of an ideal in the image of which he had previously sought so passionately to shape himself is not untypical, and it shows something of both Van Gogh’s strength and his weakness. That is, although his enthusiasm and commitment are admirable, they are also fortifications against what we might feel to be an unusually urgent insecurity. Thus, in the present example, Van Gogh’s anger expresses his disappointment with institutional religion, but the highly charged overstatement (“angrier” than “in my whole life,” “loathsome,” “fatal”) alerts us to a reservoir of anxiety projected as repudiation of a demonized other who had once promised stability sufficient to enable a kind of dialogue through which Van Gogh might shape a viable understanding of his place in the world. Interestingly, at the end of his outburst, he pauses to question his own motivations: “Was I too angry, too violent?” But he does not dwell on the implications of the question, and instead concludes, “at least now it’s over and done with” (194/2:12). Well, we might doubt it.
I cite this example partly to stress the wholeheartedness of Van Gogh’s commitments, and his typical resistance to half measures. As he tells Theo, he insists on following his vocation as a painter because otherwise he would “lapse into the half measures that make someone a half person” (378/2:411). From Drenthe, he declares again, “I don’t do things by halves” (396/3:36). While in Nuenen, he accuses Theo of half-hearted friendship, which he finds “half-and-half less pleasant,” calling instead for a clearcut “separation” (436/3:129) to clarify the differences between them. In the same spirit, he associates Tersteeg with “the everlasting No,” in contrast to the “everlasting yes” that one finds in “men of character” (358/2:365). He then goes on to link Tersteeg’s negative attitude to the process of self-development: “almost all who seek their own way have something like this behind or beside them as a perpetual discourager” (358/2:365). That is, disillusionment with an admired mentor once again conjures up a negative doppelgänger that, ironically, remains as an incentive, if only because it is now an example of what to avoid.

Van Gogh’s distinction between black and white light again marks the difference between acceptance and rejection by way of a strongly declared binary opposition, as he draws on Victor Hugo’s contrast between “the BLACK ray” and “the WHITE ray” as a means of distinguishing between “people who genuinely seek good” and others who do not. Thus, Van Gogh says that his father has “more the black ray” and Corot “more the white ray,” but “above all others,” Van Gogh’s hero, Millet, “had the white ray,” which is, in its own way, “a gospel” (388/3:20). Again, the replacement of one admired model for self-fashioning by another calls up a contrast in which an ideal is affirmed (and even validated) by an equally forceful rejection of what stands opposed to it.

Along the same lines, writing from Drenthe in November 1883, Van Gogh impatiently rejects the kind of “so-called’ common sense” that he sees as aligned with worldly prudence and “half-hearted sincerity.” Instead, he prefers his own “natural common sense,” which he associates with “risk,” and he is impatient with those whose “hesitations” prevent them from believing “that good is good, that black is
black and white is white” (403/3:59). Again, a black and white contrast stands opposed to the “half-hearted” compromisers, as Van Gogh asserts his risky individuality in the teeth of the conventional prudence of those whose stabilizing regulation he sees as merely confining. A few lines later he returns to his preoccupation with his father: “to me he’s a black ray . . . why isn’t he a white ray?” This almost plaintive question is left unanswered, and Van Gogh ends the letter on a note of exhortation: “To you I say, look for white ray, white, do you hear!” (403/3:60).

In these examples, the opposition between black and white allows Van Gogh to assert his freedom in the teeth of convention, but his forceful rejection of the “black ray” also confirms his self-identification with the “white ray” as the means of enhancing his creative freedom instead of repressing it. In the same letter from Drenthe, Van Gogh repeats this idea: “I haven’t been able to find any peace in Pa’s way of thinking (and H.G.T.’s, which I find much the same), and was increasingly beginning to realize that there’s such a thing as a black ray and a white ray, and that I found their light black and a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance.” Again, “convention” stands opposed to the creative achievements of Millet and Corot as clearly as black stands opposed to white. This basic contrast then opens upon a further set of relationships, as we are invited to understand the “lightness” of Millet and Corot’s achievement in contrast to what Father and Tersteeg (H.G.T. in the above quotation) have to offer. Clearly, Van Gogh resented the influence of what he took to be the black ray on his own life, and his comparison is not simply between the men of convention and the artists. Rather, “my youth has been austere and cold, and sterile under the influence of the black ray” (403/3:60), which was “unspeakably cruel”; consequently, “from now on let’s seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness” (403/3:61). Here, the white light is opposed to the sterility and cruelty that destroy the good in general and that are aligned with the influence of a once admired but now repudiated father.

In a later letter, Van Gogh again objects to “something very narrow-minded, or rather icy cold” in his father, whose “character is dark (the black ray, as I once reminded you)” (415/3:85). Confinement, cold, and
dark are the conditions over and against which we come to know, by way of contrast, the “lightness” of the white ray that shines in Millet and Corot. And so, once more, the white ray is best understood by contrast with the black ray, which opposes it and gives it value, and the good is worth pursuing not least because we have known the coldness and sterility of the darkness that would replace it.

Because Theo was an art dealer, Vincent could think of him as a comrade in arms, and therefore on the side of the white ray. But Theo also disapproved of Vincent’s harsh opinions about their parents, as well as his taking up with Sien. And so, at times, Theo seemed after all to be on the side of the dark ray, the oppressive conventions that turn supportive structures into tyrannies. Again, the familiar language is called into service as Vincent accuses Theo of “a sort of relapse into cold decency, which I find sterile and of no use to one — diametrically opposed to everything that is action, especially to everything that is artistic” (432/3:113). The conclusion is then all too predictable, as Vincent accuses Theo of becoming their father’s double: “I don’t want to get into a second series of quarrels with Pa II like I’ve had with Pa I. You would be Pa II. One is enough” (474/3:195). The emphatic binary (“diametrically opposed”) confirms the alignment of coldness and sterility against what is truly artistic. Father I and Father II are thus duplicates, a quasi-binary confirming the further binary opposition of the contending values. Elsewhere, Vincent returns to the two Fathers idea (482/3:204), which can be further associated with the suggestion that he and Theo are on opposite sides of a “barricade”: “And here we are — in my view — opposite each other in different camps” (461/3:173, 174). But then, interestingly, Vincent also allows for a further split within Theo himself: “This is your drawback — in this respect I find you very miserable — but your good side is your reliability with the money” (474/3:194). This is quite shameless, as Vincent continues to condemn Theo’s faults while making clear that he also knows on which side his own bread is buttered. Just as Theo saw “two persons” in Vincent, so Vincent finds a similar duality in Theo, accepting the “good” brother who hands out the money but scolding the censorious one.
All too frequently, as we now see, Van Gogh favours the dramatic clarity of strongly stated opposites, and this is sometimes the case even when it would be prudent to hesitate. For instance, he declares confidently to Theo, “Either one is brave — or one is cowardly” (551/3:336), without pausing to consider that it is quite possible to be neither brave nor cowardly. Still, if Van Gogh sometimes played fast and loose as a way of exercising his flair for the dramatic, he was also capable of assessing his own tendency to exaggerate or oversimplify. Thus, he tells Theo, “it’s again difficult for me to avoid extremes” (411/3:79), as he realizes that he needs to reconsider a judgement that is too clear-cut. “My views may sometimes be out of proportion,” he admits, adding: “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). And so Van Gogh is sometimes quite aware that his own combative oversimplifications can cause difficulties, and with this self-reflexiveness in mind, I want now to focus on how his fondness for contrasts and juxtapositions is part of a further, more complex, dialogical process running throughout the letters.

Deconstructing the Binaries

Although Van Gogh’s idiosyncrasy, stubbornness, and strong opinions often found expression in confrontational language, the letters show us that he also felt a contrary inclination to join with others in the pursuit of a shared goal. For instance, when Theo warns Vincent about the danger of becoming “totally isolated,” Vincent replies that, to the contrary, he really wants “to feel myself a human being among human beings.” He then assures Theo, “I try to look at myself as if I were somebody else, objectively in other words, so that I also try to see my own faults as well as what perhaps offsets them” (419/3:92). In standing back to look at himself “as if I were somebody else,” Vincent accords to himself a degree of objectivity that catches exactly the tension at the centre of the process of self-fashioning itself, and in this context, we can detect what was for him an enduring dilemma. On the
one hand, his insistent individuality threatened to leave him isolated, as Theo says. On the other hand, his desire simply to be “a human being among human beings” threatened to compromise his creative uniqueness. The social ideal and the creative ideal remained at odds to an unusual degree for Vincent, even as he courageously tried to step back and to assess his situation with a view to correcting what he took to be his “faults.”

Van Gogh’s awareness of his own shortcomings — and especially the self-isolating, rebarbative, black and white thinking that made it “difficult” for him, as he says, “to avoid extremes” (411/3:79) — leads him not infrequently to make gestures of reconciliation, offering to join again with those whom he has alienated. In his quarrel with Van Rappard, he at first gives his friend an uncompromising black and white ultimatum “to retract his letter once and for all” or to lose the friendship. But then he straightaway offers to “join hands” with Van Rappard in their joint enterprise of painting rural life, “because unity is strength” and “one can’t do it alone, at any rate; a whole troop who agree can do more” (519/3:270). Here, Van Gogh pushes Van Rappard away by offering a crudely simple ultimatum but then invites him back by way of a more complex, further reflection on what their relationship means. Indeed, some of the most interesting passages in the letters occur when Van Gogh reflects on a vigorous distinction he has drawn and then provides a response that makes the distinction itself more humanly complex. This does not mean that the distinction is abandoned; rather, we are allowed to feel and understand something further of the experiences that gave rise to it in the first place and that continue to inform it. For instance, when Van Gogh says of his work that “regardless of approval or disapproval, it gives tone to life” (272/2:172), the opposition between “approval or disapproval” is not separate from the claim made by the rest of the sentence. That is, the “tone” (the Dutch “het toon” is virtually equivalent) or quality of life — to which a painting attests — is meaningful to Van Gogh partly because he has had to struggle with judgemental attitudes towards his work. If this were not the case, he would have needed only to say that his work “gives tone to life.” As it is, the value associated with
“tone” is both a response to and a protest against the arbitrariness and restrictive thinking inherent in the alternatives articulated: “approval or disapproval.”

Elsewhere, Vincent writes to reassure Theo that their father is not opposed to a decision Theo has taken, despite appearances to the contrary:

Because in my last letter I disapproved so strongly of what Pa had said — and still disapprove of it now, being decidedly of the opposite opinion inasmuch as I don’t consider it appropriate in this case to raise objections to do with money and religion — I wanted to soften my words, in the sense that I believe that it’s a question here of a fault (at any rate a fault in my view) that lies more in Pa’s words than in his heart and mood.

And I have in mind to talk to you about how Pa is an old man and so deeply fond of you, and you’ll find, I believe, that he’ll accept your view if there’s no alternative, even if it conflicts with his own, yet couldn’t possibly accept estrangement from you or having less contact, etc.

And adopting a humane point of view, I take back my opinion: “by saying that, they have shown they are unworthy of your trust and in my eyes you needn’t confide in them any further,” or something similar that I wrote then, I don’t remember exactly. (351/2:350)

Although Vincent says here that he would like to “soften” his words and even to “withdraw” his criticism, he also insists on being still “decidedly of the opposite opinion” to Father, going on to affirm that he does not “disapprove less” of what his father had said. But to interpret this apparent contradiction adequately, we need to notice how Vincent shifts the focus from his father’s “words” to “his heart and mood,” and to the fact that his father is old. “Heart and mood” (“hart en stemming”), here, is equivalent to “tone” in the previous example; the phrase indicates a personal quality that modifies the meaning of Father’s actual words, to which, however, Vincent continues to object. Vincent’s opinion changes not because his quarrel with his father has
been resolved but because the opposition itself has enabled him to see and understand his father in a more complex way.

As Van Gogh says elsewhere, things are “infinitely more complicated, and good and evil no more occur by themselves than black and white do in nature.” Rather, following one’s “conscience” and accepting the fact of not being able to “achieve perfection” will give a person “a deep sense of compassion and courtesy, I believe, broader than the measured quality that the ministers have made their specialty” (368/2:391). Here again, he does not back away from reproving the prudently “measured” response of the clergymen (such as his father), but, as in the previous example, he also emphasizes the value of an inner, personal quality or sensibility (“a deep sense of compassion and courtesy”). That is, the “measured” mentality of the clergy needs to be humanized by the clergy themselves becoming more compassionate. But because things are “complicated” and not “black and white,” this statement can equally mean that the clergy should also be the recipients of the compassion that their prudent chilliness itself has helped us to value.

As we have seen, Van Gogh could be aggressively straightforward when he was in a combative mode, but he also understood the complexities involved when values are contested. Something of this understanding emerges in the letters through his own response to the binary alternatives that he himself frequently presents and from which he does not withdraw even as he points to a further relational dimension that imparts a human value to the exchange, in excess of the simple clash of opposites.

The contrasts I am describing here are typical of the structure of self-fashioning itself, and an interesting letter from Nuenen can clarify how this is so. Writing to Theo in June 1885, Vincent explains that he is painting “two cottages, half decayed under one and the same thatched roof.” These cottages, he writes, “reminded me of a couple of worn-out old folk who make up just one single being and whom one sees supporting each other” (506/3:248). Here, the cottages are distinct, but their connection is imagined in terms of a single human relationship, the personal quality of which exists simultaneously with
the difference between the individual people involved. At the end of the letter, Vincent describes “the breaking and opposing of colours, which I think about every day,” and in so doing, he reminds us that the opposition and harmony of colours in painting is analogous to the simultaneous contrasts by which human relationships are defined. The old couple, like the cottages and the colours, are a pair — a set of binaries — and this remains the case even as the added relational or dialogical dimension complicates the clear-cut distinction, causing us to re-evaluate it.

Along similar lines, writing from Drenthe in 1883, Van Gogh finds himself thinking about a distinction his father had made, comparing Theo and Vincent to Jacob and Esau. For Vincent, this was not exactly an agreeable comparison, but, surprisingly, he begins by confirming that his father’s point was made “not entirely mistakenly” (405/3:63). He then goes on to describe the difference between thinking and acting, in order to stress that, in fact, “thinking and acting don’t quite rule one another out, and sharp distinctions between thinking and acting that it’s customary to assume nowadays, as if one rules out the other, don’t actually exist.” Still, he points out that thinking is, by itself, too much “an abstraction” (405/3:63), especially, he says, in comparison to the kind of action required to make a painting.

Here, Vincent does not simply reject the distinction between Jacob and Esau. Rather, as the rest of the letter makes clear, he sees that kind of distinction as incommensurate with the actual complexities of personal relationships — whether with Theo or with the kind of personal statement that is made in a painting. In giving us a framework of conceptual thought (the discussion of thinking and acting), Van Gogh therefore provides within the letter itself a context for responding to the personal issues raised by the Jacob and Esau comparison, and this dialogical process in turn instructs us about how best to understand a painting.

Another example of this kind of relationship between a conceptual framework and a concrete response occurs in a letter from Arles in which Van Gogh describes himself as caught “between two currents of ideas” as he attempts to cope with the material difficulties of making a living while attending to the development of his art. In painting, he
says, “I still have hopes of finding something there” — for instance, by depicting “the love of two lovers through a marriage of two complementary colours, their mixture and their contrasts, the mysterious vibrations of adjacent tones. To express the thought of a forehead through the radiance of a light tone on a dark background” (673/4:255).

This passage opens by acknowledging a contrast (“two currents of ideas”), which is then carried over to the complementary opposition between the two lovers. In turn, these contrasts are offset by the idea that colours mingle to produce a “mysterious” effect having to do with “vibrations” and “tones.” Again, the idea of opposition is not surrendered but rather provides a subtext by means of which, as in our earlier example, a further, more complex dimension of human understanding emerges, a dimension that the binary opposites alone do not sufficiently explain but that could not be adequately grasped without them.

In an interesting further reflection, Vincent proposes that he, along with Émile Bernard, should give up trying to “overcome,” even though “neither will we be overcome.” Rather, we are “not there for one thing or the other” but “to prepare for more consolatory painting” (782/5:38–39). Again, the overall challenge of conquering and being conquered is not discarded, even though the either-or alternative is not all that matters. Rather, Van Gogh focuses on consolation, a personal quality that is not reducible to the binary opposites in question but that does not emerge authentically without them. After all, as he says elsewhere about happiness and unhappiness, “both are necessary and useful” but, like death and life, they are also “relative” (805/5:105). That is, the contraries by which much human thinking is constructed remain necessary, but they are not all that life is, as a real painting or a real relationship can show us.

And so the structural clarity of Van Gogh’s binary opposites often gives rise to further questions to which the text responds by insisting on a dialogical dimension in human relationships that does not surrender the binary opposition in question but rather allows us insight into its insufficiency as well as its significance. Conceptual clarity is, as it were, a framework to which the sensuous body of the letter responds, reproducing the process by which art itself affects us, neither wholly
a matter of ideas nor of feelings but a complex entanglement of both, an elaborate nexus held together in what I have described as a force field, and by which, in turn, a reader is both engaged and challenged.

The Sower: A Dialogue of Life and Death

To end this chapter, I would like to consider a motif that runs through Van Gogh’s correspondence and that, in various ways, takes up and transfigures the main ideas I have been exploring in these pages. Both in his writing and in his painting, Van Gogh shows a special interest in sowers as a way of addressing the all-encompassing binary opposition between life and death.

The idea of sowing took hold of Van Gogh’s imagination early; in letters written during his religious phase, he refers often to the idea of sowing and reaping to support his conviction that labour and sacrifice will bear fruit in the fullness of time. For instance, he refers approvingly to a sermon in which the Reverend Eliza Laurillard spoke about “the parable of the sower” (120/1:175), and elsewhere, he explains how “the parable of the sower” teaches us about “bringing forth fruits meet for repentance” (130/1:192). Though we await God’s blessing on “the seed of His word” within us, Van Gogh explains, we should “put the hand to the plough on the field of our heart” and persevere accordingly (96/1:129). “In the midst of life we are in death,” he tells Theo from Amsterdam in 1877, going on to cite Luke 9:62, “Let him who has put his hand to the plough not look back” (126/1:185). From Cuesmes in 1880, he writes, “As for The Sower, I’ve drawn it 5 times now, twice small, 3 times large, and yet I’ll go back to it again, that figure haunts me so” (157/1:253). He doesn’t explain why he feels so haunted, but in light of the above examples, we can surmise that the sower represents, in a concentrated form, the interconnection between labour and fruitfulness, death and life, and how the interrelationship between these opposites is fundamental to God’s design.

When Van Gogh gave up his allegiance to institutional religion, his interest in how hard labour bears fruit was transferred both to the
process of producing art and to his own self-fashioning as an artist. In a letter from Cuesmes in 1880, he describes how he is “working like mad,” hoping that his difficult apprenticeship “will bear white flowers in their time” (158/1:255). The work to which he refers here is a drawing, and the juxtaposition of patient endurance and joyful fruition (the shock of “white flowers” emergent from what he calls “these thorns”) applies the idea of hardship and regeneration directly to the process of making art. In a letter from Etten in May 1881, he confirms the point by describing his sketches as a “seed from which later drawings will grow” (166/1:273). From The Hague, he writes that “one has gathered in one’s studies, just like the farmer does his corn or hay” (257/2:136), and, again, “I think of the studies as seed, and the more one sows the more one may hope to reap” (265/2:156). Shortly afterwards, he states, “I regard making studies as Sowing, and making paintings as reaping” (266/2:158). In a passage about the reproduction of etchings and lithographs, he expands this idea: “I’ve always thought painting a miracle, the kind of miracle by which a grain of wheat becomes an ear. An everyday miracle — all the greater because it’s everyday. One sows a single drawing on the stone or in the etching plate and one reaps a multitude” (333/2:318). The “miracle” here is natural, but it remains mysterious in its own way, and for Van Gogh, the main thing “is to ensure that the quality of the seed (namely the drawings themselves) improves, and if it takes a little longer I’ll be content, provided the harvest is better as a result. But I still have my eye on that harvest” (333/2:318). Again, we encounter here the idea that hard labour will be rewarded, just as the sower is rewarded by the harvest. In a similar vein, from Drenthe, Van Gogh writes that “the artistic element” will be like a “new shoot” sprouting from an “old trunk” (397/3:41). Here, his favourite idea of new life springing from old gnarled wood gains in suggestiveness because of the strong juxtaposition of young and old, delicate and harsh, dull and bright. Finally, Van Gogh states that the point of these comparisons is, simply, to show “the artistic element.” That is, the sower throws fresh light upon what it means to be a painter.

At this point, it is worth recalling that Van Gogh’s abandonment of institutional Christianity was followed not by a unilateral dedication
to art for its own sake but by a commitment to art as a means of portraying the lives of working people. For instance, as I pointed out in chapter 1, he writes that “the idea of drawing types of working man from the people for the people, and circulating them as a popular publication” was “an affair of duty and charity.” As an example, he says he has drawn “a Sower,” and then “a second sower” (291/2:215), and after that “a reaper with a big scythe in a pasture,” partly to demonstrate “that there’s more toil than rest in life” (291/2:216). The “toil” here is the condition of the labouring poor whose lives are circumscribed by the contrasting activities of the sower and the mower, and Van Gogh’s aim is to express sympathy with those who are condemned to a life of unrelenting labour. When he says that “in Millet’s sower,” for instance, “there is more soul than in an ordinary sower in the field,” he is praising Millet for successfully distilling “the type” from “many individuals” (298/2:229). That is, Millet’s art captures the truth about the condition of the sower, as distinct from merely depicting a sower in a specific instance. In this sense, Millet’s art is moral, and Van Gogh attempted to duplicate it in his many drawings of working people.

After Van Gogh moved to Arles, his letters show a marked increase in his interest in the sower motif. “The idea of the sower still continues to haunt me,” he writes (680/4:268), and in the letters from St. Rémy, the sower is complemented by a new interest in the reaper — “the opposite of that Sower I tried before” (800/5:80). Also in the Arles letters, the sower is no longer strongly linked to the moral values foregrounded in the letters from The Hague and Nuenen but rather to colour. For instance, Van Gogh describes how he has made “a sower in blue and white. On the horizon a field of short, ripe wheat. Above all that a yellow sky with a yellow sun. You can sense from the mere nomenclature of the tonalities — that colour plays a very important part in this composition.” He goes on to say that “for such a long time it’s been my great desire to do a sower” but that he is “almost afraid” to try. Still, in order to make progress, “what remains to be done is . . . the sower, with colour and in a large format” (629/4:142).

Van Gogh’s main concern here is with the painting itself — including its colour, its size, and the challenge it presents to him as an artist.
This concern is taken up again when Vincent tells Theo, “Yesterday and today I worked on the sower, which has been completely reworked. The sky is yellow and green, the earth purple and orange.” He goes on to say that “Millet’s sower is colourless grey — as are Israëls’s paintings too,” but now he will “paint the sower with colour, with simultaneous contrast between yellow and purple for example (like Delacroix’s Apollo ceiling, which is precisely yellow and purple), yes or no? Yes — definitely” (634/4:158). Again, the focus here is on colour, as the contrast with Millet and Israëls makes clear. And so the idea of contrasting opposites in the sower motif has shifted to the “simultaneous contrast” between the colours themselves.

In a later letter, Van Gogh again discusses the sower, explaining how “the night café is a continuation of the sower” and emphasizing that the colour “isn’t locally true from the realist point of view of trompe l’oeil, but a colour suggesting some emotion, an ardent temperament” (676/4:260). And in the letter in which he admits that the sower “still continues to haunt me,” he says that paintings like The Night Café and The Sower are deliberately “exaggerated” (680/4:268), so that the effectiveness of the painting depends on a heightening of juxtaposed colours, even in defiance of what is conventionally “realistic.”

After Van Gogh entered the asylum at St. Rémy, he described his painting of a reaper, which he saw as complementary to The Sower, so that they make a pair. “The canvas of the reaper will become something like the sower of the other year” (784/5:53), he writes, and in a further letter he describes the reaper painting in more detail:

I’m struggling with a canvas begun a few days before my indisposition. A reaper, the study is all yellow, terribly thickly impasted, but the subject is beautiful and simple. I then saw in this reaper — a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil — I then saw the image of death in it, in the sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it’s the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold. (800/5:80)
Although this passage begins by drawing attention to the colours of the painting, it quickly veers in another direction as Van Gogh describes the reaper’s hard labour, which in turn prompts an almost allegorical observation: “I then saw the image of death in it,” just as he also sees “humanity” in the wheat. By means of this contrast, the life cycle is itself represented — from sowing to reaping, planting to harvesting, life to death. But the sower and the reaper are not just opposites. They also complement each other, and, as a result, death is made to seem less frightening. The last lines of the excerpt can then be read almost as a welcoming gesture — an attempt to make friends with the grim reaper who is now paradoxically associated with the life-affirming “sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.” The reaper struggling to get his work done in the field is an ordinary worker, and yet he is also a “vague” figure, and the passing comparison to a devil (“struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day”) suggests that he has a shadowy, almost allegorical aspect as well. Yet the insistence on “broad daylight” and “nothing sad” returns us to a positive interpretation of this figure who is both like us and unlike us and whose significance seems at first opposite to that of the sower, to whom he is in fact complementary. “Phew — the reaper is finished,” Vincent writes at the end of the letter. “It’s an image of death as the great book of nature speaks to us about it — but what I sought is the ‘almost smiling’” (800/5:85). Death here is interpreted within the context of an encompassing natural process in which the opposites coalesce, so that death is (almost) benign rather than something to be feared.

As his health became more precarious and a series of devastating epileptic attacks left him debilitated for days afterwards, Van Gogh quite understandably became increasingly aware of the proximity of the grim reaper. Also, he began to think about how the natural cycle of sowing and harvesting might be arbitrarily interrupted, as, for instance, when wheat is ground by millstones instead of being sown in the earth. “I feel so strongly that the story of people is like the story of wheat, if one isn’t sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter, one is milled in order to become bread” (805/5:105). He repeats this point in a letter to Willemien:
Not every grain of wheat, once it has ripened, ends up in the earth again to germinate there and become a stalk — but far and away the most grains do not develop but go to the mill — don’t they?

Now comparing people with grains of wheat — in every person who’s healthy and natural there’s the power to germinate as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germinating.

What the power to germinate is in wheat, so love is in us.

If the natural process of germination is thwarted, he goes on to say, we find ourselves “placed in circumstances as hopeless as they must be for the wheat between the millstones” (574/3:369).

In these passages, Van Gogh is uncomfortably aware that the natural cycle, in which life and death are in complementary opposition, can be violently interrupted. That is, the process of germination — which, as he says, is a figure for love — can be thwarted by unexpected trauma, which he compares to being ground by millstones. And so the sowing and reaping metaphors give rise to a further concern about the scandal of unjust suffering, and this concern in turn reflects a renewed spiritual (rather than conventionally religious) interest that developed in the closing years of Van Gogh’s life. For instance, he tells Émile Bernard about “yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols” (628/4:137). In a following letter, he admires Christ “as an artist greater than all artists,” going on to praise the parables: “What a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree, etc.” (632/4:154). In admiring Christ as primarily an artist, Van Gogh avoids returning to conventional religion but instead points to how art itself is spiritually edifying. In this context, the sower, the wheat field, and the harvest become invested with a spiritual significance of which art is both the embodiment and the expression.

Interestingly, this renewed spiritual emphasis had the effect of intensifying Van Gogh’s preoccupation with colour. Thus, when he sends a second picture of the field in which he had painted the reaper, his discussion of it focuses exclusively on its colours, suggesting that “this will complement the reaper” and “will balance it.” He urges Theo
to show the two paintings together “because of the opposition of the complementaries” (810/5:118), whereby the colours in themselves will make an impact on the viewer, even as the paintings evoke the thematic and symbolic opposition between the sower and reaper.

Close to the end of his life, in Auvers, despite his anxieties about money and his feeling that his life is “attacked at the very root,” Van Gogh nonetheless went on painting wheat fields:

They’re immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness. You’ll see this soon, I hope — for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I’d almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can’t say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying in the countryside. (898/5:287)

On the one hand, Van Gogh says that the wheat fields express “sadness, extreme loneliness”; on the other hand, they affirm “what I consider healthy and fortifying in the countryside.” He does not dwell on the contradiction, instead allowing it to speak directly about the struggle between his lonely, suffering self and the consolation that comes from being in harmony with the imagined wholeness of a sustaining other — in this case, nature. As ever, the opposites are not separate but are interrelated as the painter’s labour is shaped in relation to an ideal and by way of a dialogical process beyond what he can “say in words.” Even so, the human value of the process in question is conveyed by the same dialogical process, which in turn is reproduced within the letters themselves.

Conclusion: Contradiction and the Quest for Meaning

In this chapter, I have highlighted how persistently Van Gogh’s writing deploys binary structures, and my aim has been to connect Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogism and self-fashioning with Theo’s diagnosis of Vincent’s self-contradictions.
In general, I have suggested that Van Gogh’s binary rhetoric sets up force fields of meaning that introduce a reader to a fresh perception of the concerns expressed in the letters and to how Van Gogh himself struggled to see and understand more clearly. For instance, the frequent use of juxtaposed opposites bordering on paradox is a means of expressing a direction of the will, the force of an exhortation. But more significantly, these opposites are also a means by which Van Gogh explored and contended with contradictions between the ideals to which he aspired and the intractable demands of his individuality as he struggled to avoid the twin perils of isolation and absorption, the dead hand of convention and the dead end of individualism.

The deployment of a further broad range of “simultaneous contrasts” throughout the letters can help us also to chart the course of Van Gogh’s personal development, but they do so in a manner that enables (indeed, causes) us to feel and understand the human complexity of the process, often imparting to the letters a combination of compelling insight and emotional power. In turn, this literary dimension is a function of how Van Gogh’s writing provides a framework of ideas — presented, for instance, as a choice between opposites — to which the text also responds. The result is not so much that the opposites are reconciled or that the force of a contradiction is lost. Rather, the contradiction itself is invested with a further dimension of meaning and understanding, showing us why and how it is humanly significant, even if not resolvable.

Finally, I have considered Van Gogh’s sower motif as a way of encapsulating and filling out the foregoing discussion. The idea of sowing brings together the interrelated binary notions of planting and harvesting, fruitfulness and reaping, maturity and loss. Running throughout the correspondence, the motif can help us better to understand not only Van Gogh’s own remarkable self-fashioning but also its broader human significance. That is, the means by which the sower motif opens up within the texts a dialogue between pain and joy, loss and fulfillment, loneliness and hope, death and life expresses in a concentrated form the perpetual quest of the troubled and anxious self for the resolution that would lay trouble and anxiety to rest.
Yet such a resolution remains beyond the reach even of our best efforts to overcome the contradictions — the persistent binaries — within which, as creatures of history, we discover and shape a place in the world.