CHAPTER 3

Reading Van Gogh’s Letter-Sketches

The Letter-Sketches and the Letters

Van Gogh’s correspondence contains 242 sketches, but there has been no detailed assessment of how they contribute to the record the letters provide of the evolving course of his life and thought. It has, however, been correctly noted that the letter-sketches have art-historical value. For instance, they sometimes show how Van Gogh attempted to catch the essence of a painting on which he was working, thus providing valuable clues about how the finished work evolved. Occasionally, they give us information about paintings that are lost and thereby help to fill out our understanding of Van Gogh’s work as a whole. Also, they provide interesting graphic descriptions of tools and equipment that he used: for instance, his palette (253/2:126), his perspective frame (253/2:127; 254/2:129), the kind of spike with which he secured his easel (628/4:139), a variety of brushes (421/3:96; 777/5:28; 863/5:216), scrapers (325/2:295), and the shutters that he installed to modify the light in his studio (318/2:278–79).

But, as the editors of Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters (2009) point out, the sketches are often hasty and rudimentary, and therefore “cannot be regarded as a stage in the creative process or as part of Van Gogh’s artistic oeuvre.” Rather, they “served one purpose: to give the recipient an idea
of something that he was working on or had just finished” (6:34). This caveat makes good sense, but, as is often the case with discussions of Van Gogh’s letters, the gravitational pull here is towards the paintings. By contrast, in the following pages, I want to consider the relationship of the sketches to the texts of the letters with which they belong. In so doing, I suggest that there is often a revealing interaction between Van Gogh’s writing and the drawings that accompany it, so that the juxtaposition of these two modes of expression produces a range of effects that deepens and complicates the account of Van Gogh’s life and experience described in the letters as a whole. Moreover, because the relationship between the sketches and the written texts is, of necessity, dialogical, the interplay between the visual (spatial) drawings and the (temporal) textual narrative extends the discussion of the “painterly writer,” which was the main topic of chapter 1. This interplay also develops the points made in chapter 2 about juxtaposition and contrast as a mimesis of the contending aspirations and deflections, attractions and repudiations by which the self discovers and claims a place in the world. But because there is as yet no critical assessment of how the sketches contribute to Van Gogh’s correspondence, I want first to describe something of their range, variety, and evolution, with a view to assessing how they interact with the written texts in a manner that exemplifies and intensifies the dynamism of self-fashioning, as I have described it.

At this point, it is worth noting briefly that the letter-sketches can be related also to the other kinds of textual markings throughout the correspondence. The frequent underlinings, crossings out, bold emphases, stretched-out words, dramatic dashes, and exclamation marks are, as the 2009 editors say, “part of the message that Van Gogh wanted to convey; they are part of his rhetoric” (6:9). In other words, how the letters look affects what they mean, and my main suggestion about the letter-sketches makes much the same point: they are not just add-ons to the text; they are also part of Van Gogh’s “rhetoric.”

Certainly, Van Gogh was well aware of the different kinds of interplay between the texts of his letters and the sketches. For instance, he writes to Theo from Amsterdam (28 May 1877) to say that he has been reading in Genesis about the burial of Sarah in a cave at Machpelah,
“and I couldn’t help making a little drawing of how I imagined that place to be” (116/1:162; fig. 1). Here, in a straightforward way, the drawing complements the written text according to Vincent’s explicit intent by adding a further, imaginary dimension to the writing.

A different kind of example occurs in a letter from The Hague (11 August 1882), in which Vincent says that after he composed the letter, he “realized that it lacked something” (255/2:131). And so he held the letter back until he had made a painting of a beach at Scheveningen so that he could add a sketch to his written description of the painting (fig. 2). As was often the case in his correspondence, Vincent was partly concerned to show Theo that he was working and that he deserved Theo’s continuing financial support. “I thought you’d be pleased that I’ve tackled this,” Vincent writes, as if to make the point clear. And so not only does the sketch complement the written account, but the painting (as well as the sketch that depicts it) also enabled the letter
itself to be written. The sketch is therefore not just an illustration, as in the first example, nor are the two realms of discourse (written and graphic) merely juxtaposed; they are interdependent.

As we saw in chapter 1, throughout the letters, Van Gogh reflects often on the analogies between writing and painting and on how, as he says to Émile Bernard, “it’s as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing” (599/4:61). But although he understood the different demands of the two media, he was also interested in the traces that each of them leaves on the other. Thus, he says, “Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2:268). Dickens is like a painter (325/2:300), drawing is like writing (265/2:155), and “there’s something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo” (155/1:247). Nonetheless, writing and painting also have specific strengths and

**FIGURE 2.** Beach with Fishing Boats, from Letter 255 (2:130), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 10 and 11 August 1882, The Hague. Pen and black ink, 5.5 x 10.5 cm (JH 174). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B246v/1962.
weaknesses. For instance, in the example in which Van Gogh provides a sketch of the Scheveningen beach, the description provided by the text falls well short of the information provided by the drawing. The cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words might occur to us here, but it is also worth remembering that, as with many clichés, this one is not always true; in fact, Van Gogh sometimes felt that he could do better with words than with an illustration. Thus, writing to Gauguin from Auvers in June 1890, he says that he is “trying to do studies of wheat like this, however I can’t draw it.” Nonetheless, he does provide a sketch, but it is so hasty that it confirms what the letter says about its insufficiency (fig. 3). The letter then goes on to describe the scene: “Nothing but ears, blue-green stems, long leaves like ribbons, green and pink by reflection, yellowing ears lightly bordered with pale pink due to the dusty flowering. A pink birdweed at the bottom wound around a stem” (RM23/5:322–23). Here, the text is more informative than the sketch, partly because the text focuses on colour, which the drawing does not convey. Van Gogh therefore all but discounts the sketch because of its inherent limitations within the context, and he supplies the omission by words.

The last two examples might now themselves be seen as standing in complementary opposition. In the first (the beach), the sketch specifies what the text sets out loosely and in general terms, and although the sketch is small, it is densely worked and has a certain engaging vividness. In the second (the wheat), the sketch provides a general idea and the telling detail is provided by the text. The very flimsiness of the drawing helps to remind us of the pre-eminence of colour for Van Gogh at the time when the letter was written. By contrast, in The Hague in 1882, when Van Gogh drew the sketch of Scheveningen beach, he was an aspiring illustrator, and something of his desire to draw well is reflected in the vigour of the sketch itself. And so we might conclude from these two examples that the letter-sketches are not always best seen as straightforward illustrations. Rather, they interact with the text, and, as I will show, they do so in a variety of ways, confirming and also enhancing what the letters tell us about the development of Van Gogh’s career and his struggles to define himself as an artist.
FIGURE 3. Ears of Wheat, from Letter RM23 (5:323),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO PAUL GAUGUIN, CA. 17 JUNE 1890, AUVERS-SUR-OISE.
PEN AND INK, 5.0 X 3.2 CM AND 4.5 X 4.5 CM.
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B691V/1962.
At this point, some notice should also be taken of the fact that the letter-sketches occasionally do have merit in themselves. For example, in a long letter from Drenthe in October 1883, Vincent insists on the integrity of his vocation as a painter and his lack of regard for convention. He tries to convince Theo to become a painter and to share in the creative energy exhibited by the great artists of past generations.
The key to success, Vincent says, is perseverance, especially in the face of hardship, and he assures Theo, “You would also have this struggle.” Nonetheless, Vincent goes on, “one must take it up with assurance,” and “if one has no horse, one is one’s own horse” (400/3:53). To confirm the point, he provides a sketch of a man pulling a harrow across a field (fig. 4). The man leans forward to take the strain as he walks away from us, facing the horizon. This is the kind of heroic conviction we need, says Vincent, “like our friend in the scratch, who is doing his own harrowing” (400/3:3).

As a moral exemplum, the sketch of the man pulling a harrow recapitulates and reinforces the text. It is not illustrative of a painting Vincent was working on (as in the Scheveningen sketch), or a hasty gesture pointing us towards a colourful scene that the letter describes (as in the sketch of the wheat). It is arresting in its own right, as Vincent seems to acknowledge when he advises Theo to imitate “our friend in the scratch.”

If Van Gogh was making a copy of some illustration here, the source has not been identified, and, in any case, the fact remains that he made the drawing carefully and inserted it in a letter where it adds weight to the words and even outreaches them in expressing what the letter wants to say. In our earlier examples, the sketches are subordinate to the text, even as they interact with it. In the present example, the centre of gravity has shifted, and the text illustrates the sketch, as much as the reverse.

Admittedly, the letter-sketches do not often achieve the kind of distinction that would enable them to engage us in their own right. Although the man pulling the harrow is an exception, here again the sketch and the text enhance each other, as the text is reinforced by the drawing and the drawing gathers to itself the urgency of the concerns expressed in the text. The relationship is dialogical, and the effect of the interplay between drawing and text is more than the sum of the parts considered independently.

The examples I have so far discussed provide us with a range of effects that are not simple or uniform and that illustrate the different kinds and degrees of relationship between the letter-sketches.
and the texts of the letters in which they occur. Nonetheless, as with the other markings in the letters, the sketches can help us to understand Van Gogh’s governing preoccupations at different phases of his career, while also confirming how the interplay between words and pictures contributes to the depiction of self-fashioning within the correspondence as a whole. I would like now to consider these claims in more detail, before turning to two related topics: first, how the sketches contribute to Van Gogh’s representation of what I will loosely call the sacred; second, how they help to develop a recurrent motif that is relevant to the process of self-fashioning and that I refer to as homo viator.

**Narrative Dimensions**

In broad terms, it is not difficult to detect stylistic developments and changes of subject matter throughout the course of the sketches, considered chronologically. For instance, those dating from Van Gogh’s first stay in London in 1873 to the end of his visit to Etten in 1881 (after his evangelizing in the Borinage), help to record the displacement of his religious enthusiasm by a moral concern for the welfare of marginalized and disadvantaged working people. Also, during this period, Van Gogh’s sketches focus on external scenes rather than domestic interiors. These scenes include landscapes (32/1:56), cities (39/1:67), townscapes and maps (145/1:228; 83/1:102), churches (99/1:134), and men and women digging and working (172/1:281). In general, his concern for the material welfare of the miners is reflected in the fact that he concentrates on their ordinary lives. But while he was in the Borinage, Van Gogh was also discovering that he wanted to be an artist, and he began to present his sketches as evidence — especially for Theo — of his new vocation.³

During his time in The Hague (December 1881 to September 1883), as Van Gogh settled into his challenging apprenticeship as an artist, the number of his letter-sketches increased markedly. Of the letters written in these two years, thirty-nine have sketches (sometimes multiple), in comparison to sixteen letters with sketches in the six years preceding.
Also, Van Gogh’s interest in the technical aspects of his craft is reflected in his sketches of a perspective frame (253/2:126; 254/2:129), a palette (253/2:126), and the shutters by means of which he experimented with the light in his room (318/2:278–79). At this time, as discussed in chapter 1, he was aspiring mainly to be an illustrator and to give expression to his concerned social conscience in drawings that he hoped would sell to magazines. By and large, his letter-sketches demonstrate this set of interests, as Van Gogh continues to focus on the daily lives of working people, and especially on the poor. For instance, his sketches include an old woman with a shawl and walking stick (207/2:32), an old man with an umbrella (268/2:163), a group of men digging (220/2:58), orphan boys and girls out for a walk (265/2:155), miners in the snow (271/2:170), peat diggers (347/2:340), potato grubbers (357/2:362), and weed burners (361/2:375), among others. In all this, he looks forward to “doing something for illustrated magazines” (324/2:292), setting his sights on “The Graphic or London News” (348/2:343).

But Van Gogh’s letter-sketches from The Hague also strike a new note by looking to domestic (and other) interiors to supply fit topics for illustration. And so we find a girl by a stove, grinding coffee (200/2:20), a woman knitting at a window (200/2:20), a woman sewing (201/2:24), a group of people inside a soup kitchen (323/2:291), and a man in a village inn (330/2:309). Still, there are also outdoor scenes, such as fishing boats on a beach (251/2:120; 255/2:130; 260/2:146), a meadow (200/2:22), a breakwater (369/2:394), a girl in a wood (261/2:148), people on a bench (262/2:150; 263/2:153), and a gardener beside an apple tree (362/2:380).

As a group, these letter-sketches are varied, but Van Gogh’s empathy for the trials and sufferings of working people remains the central concern, and he has begun to include children and babies among his subjects. For instance, he draws four people and a baby on a bench (263/2:153), orphan boys and girls out for a walk (265/2:155), five men and a child in the snow (322/2:287), children and babies in a soup kitchen (323/2:291; 324/2:293), and a girl kneeling beside a cradle in which we can see a baby (320/2:309). In general, these topics add a sentimental dimension to Van Gogh’s concerns for the labouring poor and the precariousness of their well-being.4
Finally, it is worth noting that the letter-sketches during Van Gogh’s time in The Hague are, for the most part, densely worked and vigorously cross-hatched. In short, they communicate something of Van Gogh’s effort to make them expressive, and they bear the marks of an intense, urgent labour. As I have mentioned, part of his intent here is to show Theo that he is hard at work, and this point is sometimes explicitly declared. “Here are a couple of small sketches,” Vincent says, and then goes on: “Make no mistake, old chap, I’m fully back into my normal routine, and rest assured that everything else depends on work” (251/2:118). Elsewhere, he sends Theo a rough sketch and asks, “Why am I sending it?” (322/2:286), going on to describe at some length how he will persist through various failures in order to succeed.
“I long for you to come,” he concludes, “specifically so that I can show you the studies and talk about the work” (322/2:287).

Also, Vincent was aware that his technique was improving, and he wanted his sketches to demonstrate this. “Here’s another scratch from the woods,” he says, and “I feel the power to produce so strongly within myself.” He looks forward to doing “something good,” even though he can’t yet achieve it (261/2:148). He sends a sketch of a soup kitchen, and although it is not “sufficiently finished,” “perhaps there’s something of life in it — and some human sentiment” (324/2:292; fig. 5). He also sends an elaborate sketch of a woman digging: “It’s perhaps the best I’ve done so far,” he says, going on to discuss the light and how he has managed to communicate “something else” than the literal appearance, so that “the character comes out” (331/2:311; fig. 6).

In these examples, the sketches help to show Theo that Vincent is continuing to make progress, but he is also concerned to emphasize the moral seriousness of the scenes from everyday life that he depicts. Thus, in a sketch of poor people lining up at a lottery (fig. 7), he tells Theo that the scene has taken on “a larger, deeper meaning” (270/2:167), having to do not so much with the lottery as with “THE POOR AND MONEY,” and the misery and desperation of people staking their last “pennies” on the lottery instead of spending them on food. In itself, the lottery might seem “more or less childish,” but “it becomes serious when one thinks about the other side” (270/2:167–68) — namely, the condition of the people who are driven through desperation to spend their money in this way.

As a whole, then, the sketches from The Hague show Van Gogh the would-be illustrator striving to acquire sufficient technique to enable him to express his moral concerns effectively. We can detect something of the urgency of this desire in the laboured concentration and heavily worked quality of many of the sketches, which, however, also have a vigour and a distinctive atmosphere which show that Van Gogh was already realizing some of the aims to which he aspired as an artist.

Interestingly, the letter-sketches from The Hague are idealistic in a manner that is often in contrast to the strife Van Gogh was experiencing.
during those years. His relationship with Sien, especially, caused friction with his parents, as well as with Tersteeg, Mauve, and Theo. As a result, his embattled, dependent, and insecure ego sought stability by way of a set of ideal, other-centred values deriving especially from Michelet and reflected in the high moral purpose of the drawings sent from The Hague. These sketches thus stand in an interesting relationship to their texts, at once in contrast to and yet filling out what the letters themselves say.

When Van Gogh moved from The Hague to Drenthe, after breaking up with Sien in September 1883, he felt guilty about abandoning her...
and her two children. Although he put a brave face on things, praising the beauty and life-enhancing qualities of the Drenthe countryside and the opportunities it offered to a painter, he was in fact immensely lonely. As part of his determination to appear optimistic, he wrote several fine landscape descriptions (393/3:28; 402/3:57) and he praised the country people whose lives, he said, were more salutary than the lives of city-dwellers (399/3:50). Also, he invited Theo to become a painter (394/3:33) and to join him and take advantage of this special opportunity. But it is hard to miss the counter-note of melancholy and anxiety, as Vincent’s loneliness, guilt, and concern about losing Theo’s financial support stand opposed to the idealized view of the countryside and what it offers to artists.

The letter-sketches from Drenthe continue to focus on the working lives of local people, but they also catch something of Van Gogh’s melancholy. His workers are often depicted in stooped positions, frequently from behind so that we do not see their faces, and even when they are working together, they mostly do not overlap with one another. These effects might partly reflect the fact that Van Gogh was making studies of figures in various poses, and we should not look for compositional complexities because these were not his concern. Moreover, he was perhaps not yet able to draw faces sufficiently well to attempt them in a quick letter-sketch. But even if we take these considerations into account, the sketches stand as we have them, and their effect is distinctive. Thus, a dark and gloomy little sketch of women working in the peat (393/3:29; fig. 8) emphasizes the women’s solitariness. None of them faces us, two are seen from behind, and they all are bent over (three are stooped, one leans forward). Other sketches replicate these effects, as Van Gogh draws workmen beside a stack of peat (398/3:46), ploughmen (396/3:38; 397/3:42), people on a barge (398/3:46), and various figures patiently absorbed in their labour (397/3:42–43). All in all, these sketches are pervaded by a sense of impersonal loneliness and melancholy. The first and last in the series — a sketch of a churchyard and of the man with a harrow — can serve to recapitulate this general effect.

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My Own Portrait in Writing

Figure 8. Women Working in the Peat, from Letter 393 (3:29), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Ca. 7 October 1883, Nieuw-Amsterdam. Pencil, Pen and Ink, 3.8 x 13.5 cm (JH 410). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B354V/1962.

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As a way of introducing Theo to Drenthe, where, according to Vincent, “everything is beautiful,” he includes a sketch of a church-yard (fig. 9), along with a description:

Imagine a patch of heath with a hedge of small, closely planted pines around it — so that one would think that it was an ordinary little pine-wood.

However, there’s an entrance — a short avenue and then one comes upon a number of graves overgrown with bent-grass and heather. (387/3:14)

This account emphasizes the living vegetation — “patch of heath,” “closely planted pines,” “little pine-wood,” “bent-grass and heather” — and the graves are present almost incidentally, the main interest being that they are “overgrown.” But the sketch creates a quite different impression. The graves are foregrounded, and the scene is barren and spectral. Also, the rickety church spire in the background is conspicuously less authoritative than the tall white headstones: death, in this bleak scene, comes across as stronger than religion. It is stronger also than the living vegetation, which the written account emphasizes but which in the sketch appears ragged and starved of sustenance. In short, the written account affirming how “everything is beautiful” is in marked contrast to the sketch, and in this disjuncture, we can detect something of Van Gogh’s divided attitude to his new home. Neither the text nor the sketch alone shows us this revealing and interesting ambivalence, which is a product, rather, of their interaction.

The final sketch from the Drenthe letters is the depiction that we encountered earlier of a man pulling a harrow across a field (400/3:52). Again, as in so many sketches from this period, the man faces away from us and his work is lonely and strenuous. As already noted, in the long letter to which the sketch is attached, Vincent affirms his decision to become an artist and asks Theo to join him so that they can face the rigours of the struggle together, emulating the heroic dedication of the man in the sketch. But here I want to note also how the sketch emphasizes the man’s solitariness. He appears manacled to
the harrow and his hands seem fastened behind his back. His face is turned away as if confirming his isolation, and the sketch seems not so much an exemplum for Theo as an expression of Vincent’s own condition. Here, the tension between Vincent’s confinement and loneliness and his aspiration to a heroic ideal is communicated more effectively by the interplay between the sketch and the text than by either of these considered separately.

In general, then, the letter-sketches from Drenthe continue to develop the themes depicted in Van Gogh’s sketches from The Hague, as he maintains his focus on people’s everyday lives. Again, the Drenthe
sketches are dense and closely worked, but now there is also a distinctive melancholy, reflected in the loneliness of the workers, their facelessness, and their postures.

Van Gogh soon left Drenthe, but it was not long before he felt uncomfortable living with his parents in Nuenen. He complained bitterly to Theo (415/3:85–86), whose response was reproving, so that the relationship between the brothers became testy. Then Vincent’s mother fell and broke her leg, and one of his father’s parishioners, Margot Begemann, with whom Vincent was having some kind of amorous relationship, tried to commit suicide. To make matters worse, Vincent’s father died suddenly, and Vincent’s relationship with his family became acrimonious. He also wanted to be in a city again, and so in November 1885, he left for Antwerp.

In the midst of this turmoil in Nuenen, Van Gogh settled down with a renewed intensity to painting, concentrating especially on the local weavers. It was also at this time that he discovered the colour theories of Eugène Delacroix and began to explore the idea that colour communicates independently of the object represented (537/3:303).

Twenty of Van Gogh’s letters from Nuenen contain sketches that broadly reflect his main preoccupations during this period. The familiar array of workers is depicted labouring outdoors — for instance, at a wheat harvest (453/3:165), planting potatoes (491/3:220), working in the fields (492/3:221), and digging (528/3:280). But the sketches also show a renewed interest in domestic interiors: they depict women sewing, a weaver at his loom (421/3:99), a man winding yarn (450/3:157), and people sharing a meal around a cramped table (499/3:235). In addition to these sketches of workers, both in the fields and indoors, there are gardens (433/3:117; 435/3:123), a still life (490/3:218), a beautifully drawn bird’s nest (533/3:289), and a scene with poplars along a roadside (433/3:116). Also among these drawings is a series of portraits (485/3:212; 489/3:216), preparatory to the famous painting *The Potato Eaters*.

Although several of the Nuenen letter-sketches reproduce the dense style that we recognize from The Hague and Drenthe, some also show a new combination of ease and suggestive detail. This is the case, for instance, in a pair of sketches depicting a woman sewing and a weaver.
at his loom (421/3:99), which are precise even though they were drawn quickly and with something of the liveliness that Van Gogh admired in great painting. Despite the fact that they depict confinement (especially in the case of the weaver, who is engulfed in the machinery surrounding him), these drawings are clearer and airier than are Van Gogh’s earlier depictions of comparable topics.

Other examples of this new facility are the wheat harvest (453/3:165); honesty (a plant) in a vase (490/3:218); men and women planting potatoes, together with two women working in the fields (492/3:221); and the bird’s nest referred to above (533/3:289). Still, the heavily worked, cluttered effect also remains — for instance, in sketches of the parsonage garden (435/3:123), a man winding yarn (450/3:157), the head of a woman together with a seated woman (485/3:212), and people sharing a meal (499/3:235). As we might expect, some sketches demonstrate a mixture of these characteristics. Examples are the parsonage garden with trees in bloom (444/3:146), two female heads (489/3:216), and a group of potato eaters (492/3:222).

In this context, it is worth noting that during his stay in Nuenen, Van Gogh had become increasingly intrigued by the idea that the best paintings do not represent objects literally and that imperfection, or lack of finish, can sometimes impart vigour and originality to a work. As I have mentioned, he also came to believe that colour could communicate independently of the object represented; moreover, when he visited Amsterdam in October 1885, he discovered that the great Dutch masters worked swiftly, disregarding the niceties of academic propriety. Something of these several ideas is reflected in the Nuenen letter-sketches, which likewise show how speed of execution and selective detail can enliven a drawing, partly by incorporating a certain calculated imperfection within it.

But the most important new element in the letter-sketches of the Nuenen period lies in another direction. Van Gogh’s major achievement during these years was his painting *The Potato Eaters*, which he discusses in some detail in the correspondence. Among other things, this painting is an antidote to the idealized depictions of peasant life that were currently fashionable. By contrast, Van Gogh’s peasants
are, as Shakespeare’s King Lear puts it (3.4.10), the “poor bare, forked animal,” not glamorized by wishful thinking or escapist sentiment. As we have seen, a typical Victorian moralizing inclination attracted Van Gogh initially to illustrated magazines such as the *The Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*. In turn, this inclination is reflected in many of the letter-sketches from The Hague, such as the drawings of the soup kitchen and the poor people at the lottery. But in Nuenen, Van Gogh was less interested in this kind of narrative content, focusing instead on portraits of actual peasants, whose heads he drew and painted repeatedly (496/3:230), in preparation for *The Potato Eaters*. The Nuenen letter-sketches also reflect this new emphasis, for the first time showing us portraits with a view to catching both a likeness and a quality of character (fig. 10). In contrast to his avoidance of depicting human faces in the sketches from The Hague and Drenthe, Van Gogh now engages head-on (so to speak) with portraiture, explaining to Theo, for instance, how he is experimenting with light from the window in order to study how it falls on the faces (485/3:212). As he said shortly before, he knows no other way than “to wrestle with nature until such time as she reveals her secret” (480/3:202), and this wrestling, as he came increasingly to insist, brings him beyond the “literally” exact as, following “the great masters,” he seeks mainly for “vitality” (492/3:221). His letter-sketches, especially of the heads of women seen in different kinds of light, convey something of this broader agenda, and although the sketches are not in themselves especially distinguished, they help to chart Van Gogh’s progress towards his first masterpiece.

Thus, a compact, detailed sketch of *The Potato Eaters* is provided in a letter in which Van Gogh also describes the painting (492/3:221). In the subsequent letter, he encloses a larger version of the sketch in pen, ink, and lithographic chalk, and he praises Millet for setting the example that Van Gogh now follows, of being “so absorbed in peasant life” that the authenticity of the experience shows through in the painting (493/3:225). Even though he acknowledges that there are faults in *The Potato Eaters*, he expresses confidence in what he has achieved. “I know myself that there are flaws in it,” he tells Theo, but he is sure that it “will also hold up.” He affirms that “now I’m working
**FIGURE 10.** Head of a Woman (Gordina de Groot), FROM LETTER 505 (3:246), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 28 MAY 1885, NUENEN. PEN AND INK, 13.3 X 15.9 CM (JH 784). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B447V/1962.

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much more confidently” (505/3:245), and, as if to illustrate the point, he encloses a portrait of his Nuenen model, Gordina de Groot (see fig. 10). It is boldly executed, and the woman’s head is rendered with the same coarse features and penetrating stare as the figures in *The Potato Eaters*, combining soulfulness and long-suffering. The sketch again exemplifies Van Gogh’s new understanding that something rough and unfinished can convey a truth-to-life that is more significant than a literal representation of appearances.

When Van Gogh left Nuenen in November 1885, he went first to Antwerp. He stayed there for three months before moving to Paris, where he lived for two years with Theo. There are no sketches in the Antwerp and Paris letters, but in 1888, Vincent moved to Arles, and thirty-two of the letters written from there include sketches. This is a considerable number more than in the Nuenen correspondence (twenty), but slightly fewer than the correspondence from The Hague (thirty-eight).

One thing that strikes us straightaway about the Arles letter-sketches is that so many of them are flimsy, recording the merest impression of the topic being illustrated. Clearly, Van Gogh was now not concerned to promote himself as a draughtsman, and there is no sign of the moral seriousness of the sketches from The Hague, or of their heavy cross-hatchings and laboured pen work. This is so not least because by the time he arrived in Arles, Van Gogh had fought his way through the religious and moral issues that had preoccupied him earlier, and his commitment to painting was now front and centre. Although his dedication to painting did not completely usurp his moral and religious concerns, it was nonetheless the governing principle of his life and work. But he was now more relaxed in his attitude to religion and morality, a fact that is reflected, for instance, in his reading, as he favoured the humour of Daudet and Voltaire, as well as the fantasies of Verne and Loti, in contrast to the lumbering high-seriousness of Zola, Hugo, and Balzac, whom he had previously favoured.6

As we might expect, the letter-sketches from Arles do not depict peasant life or the lives of workers, such as the Nuenen weavers. True,
Van Gogh made sketches of sowers in the fields (714/4:346; 722/4:364), but he did so not to illustrate a moral point about the hard conditions of peasant life. Rather, these sketches celebrate the mysterious cycle of regeneration under the germinating power of “the sun, dear God” (663/4:239). The one portrait he drew (627/4:136), the head of a young girl whom he describes as a “mudlark,” is gentle and not at all like the dark and powerful portraits from Nuenen. As if to confirm the point, Van Gogh describes his “mudlark” as having “a vague florentine sort of figure” (627/4:133). The phrase itself registers something of the main difference between the Arles sketches and those from The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen.

Still, although many of the Arles letter-sketches are indeed rudimentary, some are precisely and carefully drawn and others are reminiscent of the exceptionally good drawings Van Gogh was making at the time. For instance, his sketch of a cicada is as vivid as an entymologist’s illustrated dictionary might require (638/4:169; fig. 11). Also, there are two carefully drawn still-life compositions of a coffee pot with cups and saucers and two jugs (611/4:86; 622/4:113). His two sketches of his famous bedroom painting are precise, with clean lines, attention to perspective and proportion, and careful detail (705/4:330; 706/4:332). Likewise, the “starry night” letter-sketch (fig. 12) catches to a surprising degree the magical glimmer of the painting that it illustrates. The drawing was obviously made with intense patience, as hundreds of small pen-strokes record a variety of textures and different qualities of light (691/4:293).

These careful sketches leave little doubt that Van Gogh could draw effectively when he wanted to, and they provide a clear contrast with the many simpler ones throughout the Arles letters. For instance, a thumbnail sketch of the Seine with the Clichy Bridge is a mere gesture intended to jog Theo’s memory of the painting (589/4:35; fig. 13). Other sketches, such as the orchard with pear trees in bloom (599/4:62) and the farmhouse in a wheat field (609/4:82), are also so elementary as to be virtually without inherent interest. A good many are like this, though sometimes Van Gogh provides enlivening touches that do manage to arrest our attention. For instance, although the sketch
Figure 11. Cicada, from Letter 638 (4:169), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 9 or 10 July 1888, Arles. Pen and black ink, 5.5 x 5.0 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B547AV/1962.
of a garden (644/4:189) is, again, hasty, it is also rendered with some vigour, echoing the accomplished drawing Garden with Flowers (1888), of which Van Gogh also made a painting (644/4:186–87). A similar effect is evident in the letter-sketch of ploughed fields (687/4:284) and the Reminiscence of the Garden at Etten (720/4:359).

For the most part, the Arles sketches depict outdoor scenes such as orchards, bridges, wheat fields, fishing boats, gardens, ploughed fields, and cypresses. Also, their general atmosphere is distinctive. Commenting on his drawing of a Tarascon diligence (703/4:323), Van Gogh says he is reminded of “that wonderful page” in Daudet’s novel about the comically hapless Tartarin of Tarascon, in which an

Figure 12. Starry Night on the Rhône, from Letter 691 (4:293), Vincent van Gogh to Eugène Boch, ca. 29 September 1888, Arles. Pen and black ink, dimensions unknown (f 1515 / JH 1593). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B598B(RM16)
Only once your hospital advises me to recommence the same motif
on another toile, more or less the same time, but another place.
I can’t think of a better solution than a simple design, one
made by a simple line. If you decide to do the Clichy Bridge
with the details of the sky, I am sure you will do it.
You are not one of the artists who
pursue their art as a means of
travelling, but you are the kind of
artist who cannot live without art,
and when you are not working on the
bridge, you must think about it.
In the case where you send me a
painting, I would be delighted to
receive a painting that you have
chosen with care and love. I would
be very grateful to have your
painting, but I have no doubt that
your art will bring you much
happiness.

FIGURE 13. The Seine with the Clichy Bridge, from letter 589 (4:35),
Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, ca. 25 March 1888, Arles.
Pen and ink, 3.0 x 2.6 cm (JH 1324).

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old carriage (or diligence) voices a whimsical complaint about its hard life. The genial note, both in the text and in the sketch, suggests the more easygoing attitude that I mentioned earlier, as Van Gogh was now substantially unburdened of the religious and moral issues with which he had been so preoccupied.

A further point about the Arles letter-sketches is, simply, that they show how Van Gogh was now overridingly concerned about colour. Many of the sketches are merely a scaffold for the colour notations that he writes directly on them, and we watch, as it were, as colour takes over from illustration. For instance, colour notations are supplied for the sketches in letters 587, 592, 596, 597, 599, 600, 609, 615, 622, 628, and 644. After July 1888, Van Gogh discontinued the practice of placing the notations directly on the sketches, but by then, Theo would have understood well enough how to transfer Vincent’s detailed verbal descriptions and could imagine how the colours would fit with the roughly sketched outlines provided by Vincent. This is the case, for instance, in letters 660, 687, 689, 691, 693, 705, 709, 720, and 722.

In the correspondence from St. Rémy, eleven letters have sketches. In three of these, Van Gogh provides drawings of paintbrushes (777/5:29; 800/5:86; 863/5:216), and there are also two small, vestigial drawings on the back of a letter he received from Octave Maus (818/5:140). Another letter contains a small impression in imitation of Bernard (822/5:147), and in another, there is a thumbnail sketch of cypresses (783/5:47). All of these are slight and barely of passing interest. But there are also carefully drawn sketches of a peacock moth (776/5:25) and of three cicadas (790/5:62), as well as two interesting sketches of the asylum garden and one of a ploughman at work. Finally, there is a sketch of the raising of Lazarus, to illustrate the painting that Van Gogh had just finished.

The two gardens and the ploughman are drawn in the loose style characteristic of most of the Arles sketches, but (especially in the first of the two garden drawings) the result is quite evocative. Also, it is worth noting that the drawings of the asylum gardens are close-ups. In the first (776/5:23), the point of view is near ground level, and the sightlines are hemmed in by tree trunks, themselves cut off a short way above
ground. The confined effect is further intensified by the thick foliage that crowds the foreground. The second sketch (868/5:230; fig. 14) is much the same, though less detailed. Here again, we are on the level of the dandelions, and the tree trunks are cut off just above ground, so that we have the impression of seeing the scene close-up. Although this kind of composition owes something to Van Gogh’s study of Japanese prints, his detailed drawings of the three cicadas (790/5:62) and of the peacock moth (in the same letter as the first asylum garden drawing; 776/5:25) suggest that he was, simply, interested at looking at things in a highly focused way, and I would like to suggest that his illness provides a clue as to why this is so.

Throughout the letters from St. Rémy, we are reminded that Van Gogh lived in fear of another epileptic attack. In his calm periods, he painted with great intensity, and he came to see his art as a distraction and also as a means of helping him to get better. “Work,” he tells Theo, “occupies and distracts me” (782/5:37), and, again, “work” is “my only distraction” (805/5:100). He applies himself “like a man possessed,” thinking “that this will contribute to curing me” (800/5:80). “During the crises it’s terrible,” he says, but “it drives me to work” (810/5:120–21), and he assures Theo that “if I didn’t have my work I’d have sunk far deeper long since” (870/5:232).

From these and other examples, it is not difficult to understand how anxious Van Gogh was about his illness and how, in turn, his anxiety is reflected in a fierce concentration on the process itself of painting. “As for ideas,” he says, “I have no others except to think that a wheatfield or a cypress are well worth the effort of looking at them from close at hand” (783/5:46). Elsewhere, when he finds himself wondering about the problem of suffering, he quickly redirects his attention: “it’s better to look at a wheatfield” (784/5:53). He says about the letter-sketch of the cicadas that they remind him of home, and he acknowledges how matters of large significance are often contained in concentrated form in apparently small or transient things: “let’s not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives, and that these we obey without knowing it” (790/5:62). In short, in these examples, we can see how Van Gogh offsets and counteracts his anxiety.
FIGURE 14. The Garden of the Asylum with Dandelions and Tree-Trunks, from Letter 868 (5:230), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 4 May 1890, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Pen and ink, 5.2 x 12.5 cm (JH 1971).
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B6807/1962.

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by way of a deliberately focused, close-up intensity. Interestingly, his drawings at the time also show a proclivity for similar close-up effects. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to pursue this point in detail, a quick look through the catalogue of Van Gogh’s St. Rémy drawings shows a markedly increased emphasis on closely observed studies of plants (periwinkle, tassel hyacinth, pine cones, chestnut leaves) as well as of hands, a beetle, a dead sparrow, a foot, and a wide range of sous bois motifs with truncated perspective lines, crowded vegetation, cut-off trees impeding the view, and compositions that suggest claustrophobia and confinement. And so Van Gogh’s contemporary sketches in general confirm what the St. Rémy letters say about his therapeutic resort to the close-up, alerting us to how potentially chaotic energies need to be intensely observed in order to be contained. All of this can lead us to the sketch of the raising of Lazarus (fig. 15), which is connected both to Van Gogh’s illness and to his trust in the restorative power of art (866/5:225).

The letter with the Lazarus sketch begins with Vincent explaining to Theo that he is “a little worn out by this long crisis,” but now that he plans to leave St. Rémy, the change “will refresh my ideas more.” He is now worried that his confinement in the hospital (even though he went there voluntarily) has been undermining his health as well as his art: “it’s enough that I feel that what remains to me of reason and capacity for work is absolutely in danger” (866/5:224). He therefore hopes that Theo and Dr. Peyron will agree to his release. He then describes the letter-sketch, using it, as usual, to supply Theo with an account of the colours in the painting. Again, the sketch is loose and hasty, except that the head of the resurrected Lazarus is more detailed and stands out from the rest of the drawing. In the painted version, the resurrected Lazarus is a red-bearded Vincent look-alike, and the sketch clearly suggests that Vincent will be brought back to life, as it were, through painting. As Cornelia Homburg says, the depiction of Lazarus is “a very personal interpretation” of Rembrandt’s original, and she follows Evert von Uitert in maintaining that the red beard does indeed suggest a self-portrait. To confirm the point, she notes that this is “the only copy” made by Van Gogh in which he “did not stick closely
to the exact composition of his model.” That is, he includes only the two figures of Martha and Mary, omitting Rembrandt’s other startled observers, as well as Christ. In his letter, Van Gogh indicates that the two women are Mmes Roulin and Ginoux, the models for his Berceuse and Arlésienne paintings (866/5:224). As Homburg says, these women “were close friends who knew about his illness and who had worried about him,” and their expressions of surprise in the Lazarus painting are a reaction to his restored health. The fact that Christ is omitted supports the idea that Van Gogh’s “translation” of Rembrandt is not so much about a supernatural miracle as about the “hope for his own

**Figure 15.** The Raising of Lazarus (After Rembrandt), from Letter 866 (5:225), Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, ca. 2 May 1890, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Pencil, pen and ink, 10.7 x 13.6 cm (JH 1973). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation), B681AV/1962.
And so here again, we see the link between his anxieties about his illness and the therapeutic, life-enhancing power of art — the tension, that is, between an anxiously circumstanced self and the visionary ideal that promises release and fulfillment.

The letters written during Van Gogh’s brief two months in Auvers-sur-Oise continue to engage with the main themes of the St. Rémy correspondence. But in Auvers, Van Gogh has a more-than-usual amount to say about personal relationships — and it is tempting to connect this emphasis with a renewed value that he was coming to place on a non-religious kind of spirituality. In Arles, he had already come to feel that painting — its glorious achievements and wonderful profundities notwithstanding — was to some extent an inadequate substitute for real life. “Ah, it seems to me more and more that people are the root of everything” (595/4:50), he tells Theo, and again, “making paintings” is “not happiness and not real life” (602/4:73). He repeats this point in a letter to his mother from Auvers, explaining that painting is like having a child, but having a real child is “the most natural and best thing” (885/5:260). A little later, he writes to Theo and Jo, saying that it is better to bring up children “than to expend all one’s nervous energy in making paintings” (898/5:287). In general, the Auvers letters continue to express this renewed value Van Gogh was increasingly placing on personal relationships. Thus, he discusses his interesting friendship with Paul Gachet (his physician, who was also an amateur painter; 875/5:242). He writes concerned letters about his baby nephew, Vincent Willem (896/5:282). He sends cordial messages to his mother (878/5:249) and Willemien (879/5:250), as well as to Theo and Jo (873/5:240), and he writes a friendly letter to Gauguin (RM23/5:322). In short, he realized in a new way that the people in his life were important to his well-being, and this fact is reflected also in his letter-sketches.

For instance, six letters from Auvers contain sketches, and four of these are portraits. There is a tiny drawing of Dr. Gachet (877/5:246) and a larger one of Mme Ginoux (879/5:252), as well as a drawing of Marguerite Gachet (893/5:279) and of a girl against a background of wheat (896/5:282). Although they are of uneven quality, these drawings, like the paintings they illustrate, confirm the broad sense that
the letters also provide of Van Gogh’s heightened appreciation of the personal — or, more accurately, the interpersonal, which is to say a more complete form of dialogue than the dialogue mediated by art.

The other main topic of the Auvers letter-sketches is wheat fields, which Van Gogh painted often during his last days. Three drawings depict wheat fields, and another, some ears of wheat. Letter 893 contains sketches of both Marguerite Gachet and a wheat field, and Van Gogh notes that the painting of the girl “looks very good with another horizontal one of wheatfields.” He goes on to say that people generally don’t understand “the curious relationships that exist between one piece of nature and another, which however explain and bring each other out” (893/5:277). As he says, the portrait and the landscape are examples of how differences can enhance one another, and a similar statement about dialogical opposition occurs in an account of yet another wheat field painting: “They’re immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies,” Van Gogh writes, “and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness.” He then goes on to say that he will bring these canvases to Theo in Paris, adding that they “will tell you what I can’t say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside” (898/5:287). Here, the wheat fields at first suggest sadness and loneliness, but shortly afterwards, they are also described as “healthy and fortifying.”

As a whole, the letters from Auvers during the last weeks of Van Gogh’s life continue to express this mix of elements, confirming his sense of isolation and his continuing search for a reconciliation of differences. The fields are lonely but also restorative. Just so, the people to whom Van Gogh wanted to be close were never quite close enough, even if they did help to sustain him; in the end, the kind of mutuality that he sought throughout his life eluded him. Still, in these final letters and in the sketches that accompany them, we see how he kept aspiring to the reconciliations that might lead to the kind of interpersonal fulfillment that he so intensely desired. As ever, the search for such a fulfillment is represented throughout the letters through the inextricable interinvolvement of personal aspirations and elusive ideals. In turn, the structure of this dialogue is a main vehicle for
representing the heroism and anguish of Van Gogh’s own development, which his letters also describe. And so, through a variety of examples spanning his career, I have suggested that the letter-sketches are not only accompaniments to the narrative of Van Gogh’s personal development but are part also of the process that is at the heart of its unfolding and that imparts to that unfolding an enduring human significance.

**Representing the Sacred**

So far, I have suggested that the letter-sketches can be read as an interesting commentary on the quasi-narrative that the letters provide. In so doing, I have described the variety and development of the sketches in some detail because, to date, there has been no critical assessment of how they function as part of Van Gogh’s correspondence as a whole. By contrast, I turn now to some examples of how the sketches can be read in relationship to one another, and to this end, I would like to consider what they tell us about the evolution of Van Gogh’s representation of the sacred — by which I mean topics that are conventionally religious, as well as concerns that can be described as spiritual but that do not entail traditional religious observance.

In a letter from Isleworth (November 1876), Van Gogh includes two small sketches of churches at Petersham and Turnham Green (fig. 16). The drawings are neat and careful, and the letter to which they are attached describes Van Gogh’s journeys on foot to each of the churches. He tells how he got lost and how he “scrambled and waded” to a house to ask for directions. Then, at last, “there was a beautiful little wooden church with a kindly light at the end of that dark road” (99/1:133). The account continues, supported by biblical references, and Van Gogh goes on to commend Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, stating that “for my part I love it with heart and soul” (99/1:133). In addition, the letter contains two transcribed poems dealing with the sadness parents feel when their children grow up and leave home. The first is by George Eliot, and the second by James Gilles. Both are sentimental in a typical Victorian manner — Gilles more so than Eliot.

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The neat little sketches of the Petersham and Turnham Green churches fill out what the letter says, confirming the idea of a “kindly light” being offered to those who reach the end of their journey, or pilgrimage. As in many of his letters during his religious phase, Van Gogh is here again heavily reliant on the Bible, and he sentimentalizes his Christian convictions. But he also acknowledges that life’s journey is arduous; even at the height of his religious enthusiasm, he did not ignore the problem of suffering. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 1, he felt this problem so acutely that he was convinced that only religious faith could help him to bear it. And so he wrote to Theo from Amsterdam in 1877 that because of “evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things,” we need to hope for “a life after this one” and to understand that “without faith in a God one cannot live — cannot endure” (117/1:164). Here, the problem of suffering is acknowledged as so overwhelming that only faith in God can help us to bear it. As discussed in chapter 2, St. Paul’s advice to be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10) appealed to Van Gogh, partly because St. Paul affirms that Christian rejoicing occurs despite the suffering that precedes it. Van Gogh never surrendered his appreciation of this Pauline injunction, even when he surrendered the orthodox faith that had enabled him to feel the weight of the problem of evil in the first place.

As if to offset the little drawings of the “kindly light” churches, in a later letter Van Gogh includes a sketch of the cave at Machpelah (116/1:163; see fig. 1), where, in Genesis, Abraham buried his wife Sarah. Vincent explains to Theo that he has been reading the Genesis story. He would therefore have had in mind Abraham’s words when Sarah died and when Abraham asked the sons of Heth to sell him the burial field: “I am a stranger and a sojourner with you” (Genesis 23:4). The idea of a difficult journey and the trials of the “stranger” and “sojourner” are part of what the cave at Machpelah means and are therefore also part of what the little drawing conveys.

Van Gogh says that he made the drawing of the cave because he “couldn’t help” conveying to Theo how he imagined the place to be. The deft sketch shows a knoll with some grass and trees, and, in the background, a flock of birds. The cave’s mouth is open, suggesting
a threshold to some further mystery, as well as the finality of death. There are also, however, hints of new life in the birds and the foliage in this not-quite-desert place.

As we have seen, the two welcoming churches at Petersham and Turnham Green stand in a direct, supportive relationship to the text of the letter. But they stand also in counterpoint to the sketch of the cave, which represents loss. As the letters make clear, all three sketches address the idea that life is a pilgrimage in which faith supplies a necessary antidote to the problem of pain. The sketches therefore comment on one another, as well as on the letters, thereby filling out the assessment of the trials of human life that the letters provide.

The idea of a church as the end point of a journey is taken up again in a letter written in 1878, to which Van Gogh attaches a map of Etten (145/1:228; fig. 17). The roads on the map are neatly labelled and carefully drawn, and several small churches are indicated. But our attention gravitates to the more distinctive church at the top left corner. It stands out partly because of its position but also because it is highlighted with colour and because the road widens as it approaches the top left of the drawing, where we also see two small figures walking. It is as if all the roads lead upwards to this little church and to the higher destiny that it represents. Interestingly, at the time when Van Gogh drew the map and wrote the letter to which it is attached, he was preparing to make a journey of his own, to Brussels, where he would be trained as an evangelist. The letter is full of anticipation of his departure and he explains that there are moments when “all of life seems to be like a path across the heath” (145/1:230). These words suggest that local geography (“the heath”) can be transparent to a more general significance (“all of life”). Just so, the little church at the top of the drawing where the road widens is not only a particular aspect of the Etten landscape but also a version of the same “kindly light” at the end of the journey, as we see in the sketches of the Turnham Green and Petersham churches. In relation to the letter, the map of Etten therefore operates by way of what we might call suggestive intensification. That is, we cannot say that the sketch is a direct illustration of something described in the letter, but neither can we separate it from the broad concerns that the letter describes.
FIGURE 17. Map of Etten and Environs, FROM LETTER 145 (1:228), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 22 JULY 1878, ETTE.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 18.4 X 13.6 CM.
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B143V/1962.

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When Van Gogh went as an evangelist to the Borinage in 1879, he continued to be sustained by the religious faith that enabled him to endure life’s hardships. But something significant happened when he realized that the ill, overworked miners needed material care more urgently than religious solace. Consequently, by the end of his stay in the Borinage, the abundantly supplied scriptural references and evangelical ardour that were so evident in Van Gogh’s correspondence in previous years had simply disappeared. It was during this time that he decided that art, not preaching, was his real vocation, and, fired by moral indignation at the plight of the miners, he began seriously to draw them.

Shortly before he went to live among the miners, however, and while he was still studying in Laken (where he went in August 1878), Van Gogh wrote an interesting letter to Theo about the working people whose lives he had recently been able to observe. The letter begins with a moving and powerful meditation on the plight of an old horse destined for the knacker’s yard. Again, faced with the challenge of innocent suffering, Van Gogh looks to religion for solace, citing God’s promise “that there is a resurrection of the dead” (148/1:232). The account of the horse is then followed by a detailed description of the daily lives of the miners, whose condition is analogous to that of the sick, overworked animal. To illustrate his account, Van Gogh encloses a sketch of a miner’s café (fig. 18), but then he immediately checks himself, concerned that the drawing will “most likely keep me from my real work” (148/1:233). As if to provide an antidote to the guilty pleasure of such a distraction, he describes a sermon he is preparing. But then, shortly afterwards, he returns to the drawing: “I couldn’t help making it,” he confesses, because recently he has seen so many “coalmen,” and he really wanted to draw the inn where they come to relax (148/1:234).

As the account of the miners continues, Van Gogh expresses hope that he will be able eventually to live among them and to preach. “Experience has taught us,” he writes, that people such as the miners “are very moved by the message of the gospel,” and he describes the “impressive sight” of these faithful souls working underground. The foreman, we learn, “has a cheerful character” and “entrusts himself
**Figure 18.** Café 'Au charbonnage', from Letter 148 (1:233), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, ca. 13–16 November 1878, Laken. Pencil, pen and ink, 14.0 x 14.2 cm (F Juv XXXI / JH Juv 9). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), D293v/1970.
to his God Who sees his labours and Who protects him, his wife and his children” (148/1:234).

Interesting tensions swirl throughout this unusually revealing letter. As we see in the passage on the old white horse, Van Gogh’s religious faith is still ascendant as he answers the problem of suffering by an appeal to divine providence. Accordingly, the idealized account of the miners presents them as cheerful, gospel-loving folk who also trust in God to keep them and their families safe. But when Van Gogh says he feels compelled to make a drawing of the café despite the fact that doing so will distract him from his “real work,” he declares a conflict between his religious duty as a preacher and a contrary, aesthetic impulse that he “couldn’t help.” It might even seem, here, that his vocation as an artist was already beginning to find him out, despite his religious scruples and his own best intentions.

Also, it is worth noting that the topic of the letter-sketch is physical recreation. The café provides material comfort, as does the annex where coal is for sale — again supplying a physical need. Although the drawing is carefully done, we see straightaway how awkward it is. Perspective lines are skewed, the pavement of round stones has no depth, and the rooflines are distorted. Van Gogh is not deliberately manipulating the perspective lines here: he simply couldn’t draw them. But he manages, nonetheless, to convey a sense that the café is welcoming. Brightly lit inside, it provides a comforting refuge from the darkness to which the faint crescent moon draws our attention.

My main point is that, in the context of the letter, the drawing of the café is significant because it is about physical comfort and is not explicitly about religion or the gospel message. Van Gogh thought that making the sketch was transgressive because art was not his “real work” and was less important than religion. The awkwardness of the drawing confirms the point. But in fact the sketch also offers an intimation of how, in the Borinage, moral concerns would displace religion as the main focus of Van Gogh’s attention and how art would become a main vehicle for exploring the implications of this shift. And so we see how the little churches at Petersham, Turnham Green, and Etten yield to a different kind of “kindly light,” represented now by the café.
Van Gogh’s uneasiness about this shift of emphasis is clear in the text. However, the significance of his uneasiness is not discernible from the text or from the sketch alone, but rather from the interaction between them, as Van Gogh struggles to shape himself in the image of an ideal that is itself in process of transformation. He thus seeks anxiously for refuge in a resolve to pursue what he hopes is his “real work,” even though his deeper inclinations are already pulling him in the direction of a different kind of self-fashioning.

Here, as a brief digression, it is also interesting to note that this further direction — whereby Van Gogh defined himself as an artist — is represented by his letter-sketches of yet another building, associated
again with a sustaining light. In May 1888, Vincent wrote to Theo to say that he had rented the Yellow House, and he provides a small, rough drawing by way of illustration (602/4:71). Later, he sent a larger, more detailed sketch (fig. 19) based on a painting that he describes: “The house and its surroundings under a sulphur sun, under a pure cobalt sky. That’s a really difficult subject! But I want to conquer it for that very reason. Because it’s tremendous, these yellow houses in the sunlight and then the incomparable freshness of the blue” (691/4:292). The house is strongly associated with light and with the “tremendous,” energizing contrast between yellow and blue. Also, Van Gogh is concerned about how “difficult” this subject is to paint and how, “for that reason,” he wants to “conquer it.” The main preoccupation here is with painting — and particularly with the challenge offered to the artist by the sulphur sun and cobalt sky. As the passage goes on, Vincent explains how the “venture of painting” needs “collaboration,” and he hopes that Gauguin, Laval, and Bernard will visit and that the Yellow House will become a home for a creative community. The house is therefore not just the subject of a painting but also a safe haven for artists, much as the café was for miners, and the little churches for Christians.

Interestingly, in the same letter, Van Gogh evokes the religious faith that he had by now replaced with a commitment to art. Even though “it does me good to do what’s difficult” (as a painter, that is), nonetheless he still has “a tremendous need for, shall I say the word — for religion — so I go outside at night and paint the stars.” The transvaluation of religion into art is strikingly clear in this passage in which the fearful hesitation to use the word “religion” shows that it still has a grip on him (confirmed by the effect of “tremendous”), even as he rechannels the energy of his now rejected religious orthodoxy into a celebration of the natural mystery of the starry sky, captured in paint.

The letter-sketches of three different kinds of protective and nurturing buildings, each associated with a sustaining light, can therefore in themselves be read as markers of Van Gogh’s entire self-fashioning journey, in the course of which religion (the little churches) yields its dominant ideological position to morality (the miners’ café), which
in turn is displaced by a predominant emphasis on the aesthetic (the Yellow House).

But by way now of returning to the main argument, I would like to consider two letter-sketches that show something of the secularizing process that Van Gogh’s early religious convictions underwent after he left the Borinage. Because he wanted to improve his skills as a draughtsman, he went to Brussels and enrolled in the Academy. He wrote to Theo about the many drawings he had done, expressing confidence in his progress. In this context, he also provides an interesting matched pair of letter-sketches, On the Road and In Front of the Embers (162/1:263; fig. 20).

On the Road depicts a man walking alone at night, holding a lantern to find his way. A leafless tree stands behind him, mimicking his posture and emphasizing his loneliness. In Front of the Embers shows the same man after he has arrived home (or at an inn, perhaps), where he sits alone on a chair in front of a fire that radiates light and warmth. From his dress, we can see that the man is not Van Gogh’s contemporary but is from an earlier period, as his old-fashioned buckled shoes and three-cornered hat indicate. Van Gogh was probably making copies here, perhaps from a book of illustrations, although no source has been identified.

The sketches are a pair, and they are linked also to some familiar themes: here again, Van Gogh shows us a lonely pilgrim making his way and, at the end of his journey, finding a comforting light and warmth. Viewed in this context, the second of the two drawings is especially intriguing. The hearth is large and wide and it looks like a porch; indeed, it resembles the entrance to a church rather than a hearth. Furthermore, we don’t see the fire — only the light cast outwards from deep within this grand hearth-as-vestibule. Van Gogh places a set of tongs against the wall to indicate that this in fact is not a doorway, and he must surely have realized that he was evoking a church porch, emitting the same “kindly light” as the churches described earlier.

And so the pilgrimage and “kindly light” motifs of Van Gogh’s early letter-sketches recur in these two sketches, but now in a secularized form. It is as if the message of the miners’ café has led to a...
MY OWN PORTRAIT IN WRITING

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**Figure 20.** On the Road (A) and In Front of the Embers (B), from Letter 162 (1:263), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, January 1888, Brussels. Pencil, pen and ink, watercolour (both), each 9.8 x 5.8 cm (JH JUV 15 and 16). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), D294V/1972 and D295V/1972.
reconfiguration of Van Gogh’s favoured religious iconography, confirming his new moral concerns. Thus, the light and warmth of the hearth offer the traveller a simple material comfort. But, in so clearly evoking a church porch, the sketch also suggests that the provision of material comfort has taken over from conventional religion.

The moral imperative underlying Van Gogh’s desire to be an illustrator continued to shape his letter-sketches from The Hague, where he lived from December 1881 to September 1883. These sketches do not deal explicitly with religion (though there is a possible exception, to which I will return), and we must wait until his letters from Drenthe for another sketch on this topic.

As noted earlier, Van Gogh tried to counteract the grief of his departure from Sien by throwing himself into his work, but he was lonely, and his solitariness intensified his sadness. This is the broad context within which he includes, in a letter to Theo from Drenthe, the sketch I mentioned earlier, entitled *Churchyard* (387/3:15; see fig. 9). It is in fact a graveyard with a church spire in the background that is markedly less sturdy than the tall tombstones, with which it invites comparison. The graveyard is bleak and depressing, with not a trace of solace. The tall, perpendicular tombstones overwhelm the steeple, suggesting that wherever else Van Gogh might look for consolation, orthodox religion would not provide it.

Van Gogh’s anti-religious animus came even more strongly to the fore when he moved to Nuenen and resumed his old quarrels with his father. But when his mother fell and broke her leg, Vincent looked after her very well, and as a gift for her, he painted the local Reformed Church, providing a letter-sketch for Theo by way of illustration (428/3:106). Vincent did not himself find solace in the church, and the intent of his painting can therefore be interpreted as not so much religious as compassionate. Seen in this light, the sketch resembles Van Gogh’s drawing in a letter from The Hague (the exception referred to above), in 1882, of a church pew with worshippers (270/2:167), in which he focuses on the bored, tired, and alienated condition of the three women in the pew rather than on the church or the church service. The difference in the Nuenen sketch is that it does in fact depict a church, and we need
to refer to the text to understand Van Gogh’s reasons for doing so. The combination of the text and the sketch, together with what we learn from other sketches, therefore gives us a more complex insight than does either the sketch or the text taken separately.

During the last phase of his career, Van Gogh’s letters express a renewed sense of the spiritual — a sense of the infinite that takes us “above art itself” (632/4:154) and even intimates the beginnings of a “new religion,” or rather that “something altogether new, will be reborn, which will have no name but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, that the Christian religion once had” (686/4:282). This new spirituality beyond conventional religion addresses and evokes the overarching mystery of creation itself, in and through the ordinary aspects of a common world — whether a blade of grass or a starry sky. By contrast, during Van Gogh’s year at St. Rémy, his attacks took on what he calls “an absurd religious turn,” and he expressed some horror at “these unhealthy religious aberrations” (801/5:89), which were, to some extent, a reversion to the old religious habits of mind that he had long ago rejected. But for Van Gogh, the vital truth of religion lay elsewhere, by way of a different mode of apprehension, and so he admits to Theo that he has a “tremendous need for” religion, and consequently, “I go outside at night to paint the stars” (691/4:292). These sentences are preceded by a detailed account of the painting *Starry Night over the Rhône*, for which Van Gogh supplies a carefully drawn sketch (691/4:293; see fig. 12). As the letter makes clear, he means Theo to see the painting as evoking the infinite, the spirit of the “something altogether new” that had replaced the old religion of his youth.

Finally, as I have pointed out, *The Raising of Lazarus* (866/5:225) suggests Van Gogh’s own resurrection from his confinement at St. Rémy. But like the sketch, the painting is also an act of homage to Rembrandt, who painted the prototype that Van Gogh “translates,” as he says (850/5:194). So although Van Gogh draws upon a biblical motif, the letter and the sketch together help to show us that for him, art is itself a means of resurrection, which occurs through the perpetually vital, timeless example of Rembrandt and also through Van Gogh’s
own ability to go on painting in the life-enhancing spirit of the old masters. Again, here the text and the sketch comment on one another, and by way of their interrelationship, we discover a more complex and interesting message than either provides separately.

In this section, I have suggested that Van Gogh’s letter-sketches can help us better to understand his evolving attitudes towards what I have loosely called the sacred. As the sketches help to confirm, the letters indicate an evolution of these attitudes in ways that reflect Van Gogh’s rejection of the traditional religious observance to which, early on, he had given his best energies. When morality displaces religion as his governing concern, so also his sketches depict a secularization of traditional religious motifs, until at last he finds a way to reintroduce into his work a new, transfigured sense of the spiritual. The letter-sketches are informative not only because they help to confirm this process but also because they do so by way of a broad range of dialogical interactions with the text and with one another. Mainly, I have argued that these interactions are, for the most part, not straightforwardly illustrative but are an engaging and complex intensification of Van Gogh’s evolving convictions.

**Homo Viator**

In this section, I would like to consider a single image running through Van Gogh’s letter-sketches, a motif that, for convenience, I refer to as *homo viator*. It consists of a distinctive configuration of trees lining a road on which we frequently see a traveller. Typically, we look straight down the road, which vanishes at the horizon or leads to an enigmatic end point. The dramatic effect of the perspective would not be difficult to draw, even for a young and unpracticed artist, and the motif recurs in Van Gogh’s work with remarkable persistence.

Already in his early sketchbook for Betsy Tersteeg (1874), Van Gogh made a sketch of a tree-lined avenue (24/1:48; fig. 21), in which we follow the narrowing perspective lines to what might be a building at the end, though the markings are indistinct and we can’t be sure. Also,
FIGURE 21. Tree-Lined Avenue, FROM LETTER 24 (1:48), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO BETSY TERSTEEG, 7 JULY 1874, HELVOIRT. PENCIL, 11.4 x 9.8 CM. VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D410V/1965.02.
far down the avenue, there appears to be a solitary person walking. It is as if the trees are meant to stand in static contrast to the traveller, whose way forward is supported, nonetheless, by the roots that prop up the road. The symbiosis between the vitality of organic life and the dislocated solitariness of the human journey was compelling to Van Gogh’s imagination throughout his career. It is easy to detect a romantic intuition here: the notion that the human traveller needs to stay in contact with nature’s capacity for perpetual renewal and with nature’s enduring stability. Otherwise, the individual human journey becomes a rootless wandering. At this early stage in his development as an artist, Van Gogh sets down the basic terms of the “I/other” dialogue that will constitute and shape his own journey, as the letters as a whole record it. And in this earliest example of his homo viator motif, the trees, in full leaf, form a canopy inviting us into his traveller’s world, leading us confidently on.

In Paris in 1875, during the period when Vincent was wholly taken up with religion, he sent Theo a letter on which he made a small sketch, copied from a painting by Giuseppe de Nittis (1846–84). The sketch depicts a tree-lined Westminster Bridge leading to Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament (39/1:67; fig. 22). Vincent explains that he was feeling nostalgic for England, adding, “When I saw this painting I felt how much I love London.” Although many paintings could well have served to illustrate what he missed, he chose this one, which again clearly reproduces the homo viator motif — modified, however, because the road in this case leads to a church, in keeping with Van Gogh’s religious enthusiasm at the time.

When Van Gogh went to Etten after his stay in the Borinage, he especially wanted to improve his draughtsmanship, and he declares his determination: “he who truly takes it seriously doesn’t let himself be deterred.” He goes on to say that “figure drawing in particular is good,” but it “also works indirectly to the good of landscape drawing.” For instance, “if one draws a pollard willow as though it were a living being, which it actually is, then the surroundings follow more or less naturally, if only one has focused all one’s attention on that one tree and hasn’t rested until there was some life in it” (175/1:294). He includes
Figure 22. Westminster Bridge, from Letter 39 (1:67), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 24 July 1875, Paris. Pencil, pen and ink, 2.5 x 4.4 cm (F JV XXIII / JH JV 4). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B41V/1962.
**Figure 23.** Road with a Man and Pollard Willows, from Letter 175 (1:295), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, ca. 12–15 October 1881. Etten. Pencil, pen and ink, 18.3 x 11.7 cm (JH 58).  
Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), Amsterdam, B172/1962.
a full-page sketch of a road with pollard willows to illustrate the point, again reproducing the _homo viator_ motif (175/1:295; fig. 23). The road is lined with the severely pruned trees, and a man stands facing us, as if waiting. Behind him, the road winds towards what appears to be a junction, and further behind, on the left, is a church spire.

By contrast with the copy of De Nittis, the road here doesn’t head to a clearly declared end point. Although a church can be seen in the distance, there is an alternative route at the junction, where the road branches to the right. But the main focus is on the two strongly foregrounded willows, behind which stands the familiar receding line of trees. The foregrounded willows are harshly cut back, or pollarded, with the wounds of the lopped-off branches clearly visible. The solitary man stands in a relaxed pose, looking in our direction, with one foot forward and a sack draped over his shoulder. He might be walking, but I can’t readily see him that way. Rather, it seems as if we are on the road together, as he waits for us to catch up. The two strong, heavily pruned trees help us to understand that the travelling man — like us, his companions — needs both strength and endurance to face the difficulties of the journey. And so this example gains considerable complexity and interest as Van Gogh explores the relationship between the human figure and the trees in a way that enhances and develops the account provided by the letter.

In The Hague, as Van Gogh settled down with Sien and her daughter and new baby, he was recovering from gonorrhea, for which he had been hospitalized while Sien was nearing her confinement. He assures Theo that he is now on the mend and ready to continue his work: “I’m going to draw again regularly from morning till evening” (249/2:113). Other letters written at this time confirm Vincent’s reassurances to Theo that the work really is progressing. But Vincent also strikes a new note, calling attention to what he has come to see as his own distinctiveness and his dissimilarity from other painters. Thus, he tells Theo, “I’ll fight my fight quietly in this way and no other.” He wants his old boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, to know “that my painting is an entirely different matter from other things” (250/2:116) — unconnected, he goes on gruffly to assure Theo, from “money from you” (250/2:117). Admittedly,
this might be a defensive ploy. Van Gogh wasn’t able to sell his work and might have sought an excuse for this in claiming an outsider status because of which, he says, “working with an eye to saleability isn’t exactly the right way” (252/2:122). From the position of misunderstood misfit, he could also play for sympathy: “What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an oddity or a disagreeable person.” Still, I take him to be sincere when he claims that he wants his work “to show what is in the heart of such an oddity, such a nobody” and that he hopes “to make drawings that move some people” (249/2:113). “Either in figure or landscape,” he wants to express “not something sentimentally melancholic but deep sorrow” (249/2:113). The important thing about his drawings, he says, is their “poetry” (250/2:115).

In short, although Van Gogh could be overanxious and manipulative, we should resist seeing him simply as a cynic, not least because our own cynicism would be the main driver in the attempt to do so. His life’s work and the urgency of his desire to reach people through his art are prima facie evidence of his sincerity and compassionate humanity, as is recognized by the millions of those who appreciate his paintings. No doubt, his dawning realization that his work was not readily marketable did cause him to react defensively. But throughout his career, he remained committed to the special nature of his gift as the best way for him to make paintings that would matter to people.

All of this can bring us to another pollard willow sketch (fig. 24), included in a letter from The Hague in 1882, and again recording the difficulty and loneliness of the road ahead. In the text, Van Gogh repeats the concern that his work might not be commercially viable, but he also suggests that “in time” things will change. Meanwhile, a painter must “study nature in depth” and “use all his intelligence, to put his feelings into his work” (252/2:122). These comments occur directly after a detailed description of a watercolour of a pollard willow that Van Gogh had recently completed. In the letter, he supplies an ink and watercolour sketch by way of illustration. He tells Theo that the painting shows a “dead tree beside a stagnant pond” and, in the distance, a railway depot. Also, there are “green meadows, a cinder road,” and “a depth of blue where the clouds tear apart for a moment.”
He says that he wants the painting to communicate how “the signal-man with his smock and red flag must see and feel it when he thinks: how gloomy it is today” (252/2:122).

Although the letter-sketch is gloomier than the painting, both reproduce the *homo viator* motif, though again with modifications. Thus, the line of trees is now reduced to a single “dead” pollard willow, its trunk gashed, leaning to the side, as if already half-felled. But (despite the text) there seems to be some life still in the cluster of twigs and small branches that stand in contrast to the stumps of the lopped-off limbs, though admittedly this is clearer in the painting than in the sketch. On the cinder road stretching ahead, the usual solitary figure walks away from us towards the low buildings on the horizon. The sketch also shows some green by the sides of the path, and a streak of brightness shows through the blue-grey sky. But the general atmosphere is as the signalman would describe it: “how gloomy it is today.”

**Figure 24.** Pollard Willow, from Letter 252 (2:123), Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 31 July 1882, The Hague. Pen and ink, watercolour, 6.3 x 13.4 cm (JH 165). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), B243CV/1962.
As I have pointed out, at the time when the letter was written, Van Gogh had come to recognize his own distinctiveness as an artist and to acknowledge the solitariness that comes with such a recognition. He was still feeling “the after-effects” of a recent “illness” (252/2/122), but he wanted nonetheless to reveal what was in his heart by studying nature feelingly and by creating a poetry that would touch people. He also wanted to convey what he elsewhere calls a “deep sorrow” (249/2:113) rather than the merely sentimental kind. The letter-sketch of the pollard willow expresses something of these several concerns. The lone tree is profoundly damaged — more so than in the previous example from Etten, and, as usual, the tree tells us something about the traveller, who is likewise solitary and, we presume, wounded in some way. And yet there are signs of life in the grass and in the brighter sky. Still, as a whole, the sketch is melancholy, expressing the “deep sorrow” that Van Gogh describes, even though there is a sense of lonely grandeur as the old tree stands guard, keeping the faith, as it were, and the solitary traveller continues along the way, sustained by whatever signs of life persist through the desolation. Once again, Van Gogh’s homo viator is reconfigured in ways that mirror his circumstances and preoccupations at the time.

Two further homo viator sketches in the letters from Nuenen are also worth attending to here. The first is included in a letter to Van Rappard in which Van Gogh protests against self-righteousness and reflects (again defensively) on the fact that his work isn’t selling. He attaches a dozen transcribed poems dealing with loss and suffering, as well as a letter-sketch of poplars lining a roadway on which the familiar solitary figure is walking (433/3:116). This drawing resembles the early sketch in the notebook for Betsy Tersteeg, except that it is gloomier, in keeping with Van Gogh’s sombre mood at Nuenen.

The second Nuenen sketch is more interesting. In a letter written on 17 November 1885, Vincent assures Theo that their mother has now fully recovered from her accident and that he is looking forward to leaving Nuenen and heading to Antwerp. “SO THE SOONER I CAN GET AWAY, THE BETTER,” he declares emphatically. He goes on to say that he has “worked entirely alone for years” and now he hopes to
learn from others, even though insisting that “I’ll always see through my own eyes and tackle things originally.” He adds that he is going to take one landscape painting with him, and he describes it in detail, again providing a sketch by way of illustration (542/3:315; fig. 25).

Once more, the familiar scene is before us. There is an avenue of poplars with a roadway leading to the right, on which we see three figures — two together and one solitary. And there is a church spire in the background, but not in the direction the road is going. Van Gogh


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describes the colours in detail, explaining that the foreground is “com-
pletely covered with fallen yellow leaves” and adding details about the
trees: “on the right a birch trunk, white and black, and a green trunk
with red-brown leaves” (542/3:316).

The sketch is made without colour and is hasty, though not care-
less. It presents us with the usual homo viator configuration, with the
tree in the right foreground closely resembling the cut-back willow in
the previously discussed sketch from Etten. The trunk here also leans
away from the road, its top lopped off but with some straggly branches
sending forth shoots. And so Vincent is on the road again, but now
with fellow-travellers of the sort from whom, as the letter promises, he
is willing to learn. Still, the single, conspicuously different wounded
tree standing in a line of taller trees reminds us that for Van Gogh,
even when he seeks the company of others, the way remains solitary.

As an example of the homo viator motif in the letters from Arles,
let us briefly consider the letter-sketch of an orchard bordered by
cypresses. Here, the familiar receding view of the path alongside the
orchard cuts across the sketch diagonally in the manner of the Japanese
prints in which Van Gogh was intensely interested at this time. While
the drawing is hasty, it is quite detailed. However, although the homo
viator motif is strongly evoked, there is no traveller: it is as if the col-
our notations that are plentifully written directly onto the drawing
have replaced Van Gogh’s interest in narrative content. A comparison
of the drawing to the painting makes clear how bright and vibrant
Van Gogh’s colours are, in contrast to the utilitarian drabness of the
drawing, which is mainly a vehicle for the notations.

My final example is from Auvers. On 2 July 1890, Vincent wrote
to Theo and Jo, expressing concern about the baby Vincent Willem’s
health and recommending that the family should come to the coun-
try, where the air would do them good (896/5:282). The letter includes
three sketches on a single sheet. One of these depicts a couple walking
between rows of poplars (fig. 26), and Vincent describes the painting on
which the sketch is based: “Then undergrowth, violet trunks of poplars
which cross the landscape perpendicularly like columns. The depths
of the undergrowth are blue, and under the big trunks the flowery
meadow, white, pink, yellow, green, long russet grasses and flowers” (896/5:282). The sketch itself is a slight, quickly drawn representation of the magnificent, yet strange, painting that Van Gogh describes. There are two main lines of poplars, as well as a further assortment of the same kind of trees, offering several different perspective lines. Close to the centre, a couple is walking. Unlike our other homo viator examples, there is no clearly defined road here but rather a dense foliage, which the couple uses as a walkway. In both the painting and the sketch, it isn’t clear whether the couple is coming towards us or going away. The lines of trees on the right and left of the sketch (and of the painting) suggest further possible walkways, and the perspective lines are so arranged that it seems as if the background is pushing forward as the vitality of the underbrush (much more vivid in the painting) forces itself on our attention. Also, we see only part way up the trunks of the trees, which are cut off by the top edge in both the sketch and the painting, thus concentrating our focus and emphasizing the underbrush. Here again, we find the close-up point of view and the manipulation of perspective that Van Gogh explored in his final years.

And so we see, almost by way of a trompe l’oeil, that there are many possible roads here. Also, the couple is not really going anywhere: they have already arrived. There is, therefore, no travelling to an end point in this captivating painting or in the sketch that summarizes it. Rather, there are numerous paths, and even as we set out upon them, they are all already infused by the mystery of the life-force that sustains them, as well as ourselves, by proxy, as we take the painting in.

And so what I have been calling Van Gogh’s homo viator motif provides a template, as it were, against which the changing preoccupations of his life and work can be charted. As we see, the sketches sometimes support the text and sometimes add new dimensions to it, just as they also comment on one another. Throughout, their relationships with the text and with each other constitute a many-sided dialogue, as written word and graphic image converse in ways that reinforce Van Gogh’s early intuition that the isolated and insecure traveller needs to be sustained along the way, both by the hope of a fulfilling destination and by the dependable foundations of the road itself.
Pencil, pen and ink, 10.2 x 20.9 cm (JH 2042).
Conclusion: Enhancing the Text

Throughout this assessment, I have been concerned to acknowledge that the letter-sketches are often slight, yet also to claim that these 242 illustrations add significantly to the narrative (or quasi-narrative) of Van Gogh’s personal development that the letters supply. Because there is, to date, no general critical assessment of the sketches, I provided an overview of their scope and development before commenting on how they contribute to the self-fashioning process with which I am concerned in this study as a whole. Broadly, my account of the sketches in relation to the texts can be read as an extension of the space-time dialogue discussed in chapter 1, in that both discussions deal with the asymmetrical interplay between pictures and words. In such a view, the sketches stand in a dynamic, if uneven, relationship (or set of relationships) with the texts in which they appear, and I hope to have shown that they make an estimable contribution to the correspondence as a whole.

With these points in mind, I have dealt with the sketches from three different points of view. First, I have suggested that, in a quite straightforward way, they can help us to chart the process of Van Gogh’s development as an artist. In the early correspondence, during his religious phase, the sketches are naive and provide simple illustrations of external scenes. But when Van Gogh’s religious enthusiasm became displaced by his increasingly urgent moral concerns, he discovered also that he wanted to be an artist. His letter-sketches were then deployed both to illustrate his moral commitments and to provide evidence of his developing draughtsmanship, partly as a means of securing Theo’s continuing support. Especially in the sketches from The Hague, Van Gogh’s concentrated labour shows through in his dense cross-hatchings and heavily worked effects. This style continues in the Drenthe drawings, where an additional melancholic element becomes evident. In Nuenen, the narrative aspects of Van Gogh’s sketches are gradually displaced by a fresh engagement with peasant life, prior to the making of The Potato Eaters. A new, unsentimentalized view of peasants as individual people is registered as the sketches provide an earnest of the portraiture that Van Gogh was exploring at the time.
In Arles, the density of the sketches created in The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen is replaced by an airier, looser, and often flimsy style of illustration. Mainly, the Arles sketches reflect the rising pre-eminence of colour in Van Gogh’s theory and practice; indeed, many are simply templates for the colour notations that he prints directly on them. But the Arles sketches are also more varied, both in content and in quality, and in general, they reflect a more relaxed attitude than was the case when Van Gogh’s moral and religious preoccupations were in the foreground.

While he was in St. Rémy and Auvers, Van Gogh’s illness was a continuing source of anxiety, which, I have suggested, helps to explain his interest in close-up points of view and in unconventional perspective lines that intensify the focus, thereby enabling him, as it were, to keep a firmer grip on things. Furthermore, after the failed attempt to found an artists’ community in Arles, Van Gogh realized that painting could not sustain him. Consequently, a new sense of the importance of personal relationships and of a non-religious spirituality emerges from his letters. The sketches help us to understand these developments, as we see in the asylum garden drawings, the portraits, and the starry night and Lazarus illustrations.

My second line of approach is to suggest that rather than being simply an accompaniment to the narrative of Van Gogh’s correspondence, the letter-sketches, by way of interaction with the text and with one another, often enhance what Van Gogh means to say. To this end, I have considered how the sketches affect Van Gogh’s representation of the sacred.

As noted above, the drawings of the churches at Petersham and Turnham Green, together with the map of Etten, stand in counterpoint to the cave at Machpelah, reminding us (as the letters confirm) that Van Gogh’s religious belief was shaped from the start by his sensitivity to suffering. I have suggested that a further contrast between these three drawings and the drawing of the miners’ café indicates an uncomfortable tension — even before he went to the Borinage — in Van Gogh’s understanding of the relationship between religious faith and the moral problems raised by suffering and oppression.
A secularized interpretation of conventional religious motifs is reflected in further sketches from The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen. Then, in the last phase of his career, a renewed spiritual dimension emerges as Van Gogh attempts to express the infinite within the ordinary, reaching for something “above art itself.” To some extent, the sketches I have considered in this section are interesting in relation to one another, even as the dialogical interplay between the sketches and the text also helps us to see how their combined effect exceeds what we can learn from either in isolation.

My third approach is to deal with a single recurring image in order to ask how it relates to the various texts in which it appears. Basically, the *homo viator* motif depicts a tree-lined road along which a person is travelling and which recedes to the horizon. This image is first set out clearly in a drawing for Betsy Tersteeg, a fact which shows that the motif was imprinted very early in Van Gogh’s imagination. In his letters, it recurs in a sketch made in Paris showing a road that leads to Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, symbols of religious orthodoxy and of the state that supports it. By contrast, Van Gogh’s developing artistic sensibility brings him to a new understanding of the relationship between the trees and the human traveller, and in a sketch from The Hague, the damaged tree is partly a means for Van Gogh to represent himself, seeking to touch people as an artist while acknowledging and accepting his unorthodox, outsider status. In the Nuenen drawings, the *homo viator* motif is further modified as Van Gogh again represents himself again as a wounded tree but is joined by others on the journey, which he now depicts as not entirely solitary. Finally, the sketch from Auvers that shows a couple walking among the poplars provides a further variation. Now there is no single road, and the multiple perspective lines open up a variety of paths while the foregrounded undergrowth suggests that the end point of the journey is already at hand, if only we learn to look.

Throughout the correspondence, there are many other examples of the *homo viator* motif, with the familiar tree-lined road metamorphosing into other kinds of roads and scenes leading to a variety of destinations. Van Gogh’s imagination was captivated by the idea of a journey...
leading towards a distant arrival point that will make worthwhile the trials of the way. As he explains to Theo from Arles, “It always seems to me that I’m a traveler who’s going somewhere and to a destination,” even if “the somewhere, the destination don’t exist at all” (656/4:219). In his painting, as in his letters, he does not so much explain this journey as register a compassionate understanding of how we are all, in one way or another, already committed to it. He knew that in the process — en route, as it were — great art gives us a glimpse of the desired end point, the ideal that we value partly because of the fears, insecurities, and personal difficulties that prevent us from attaining it. Again, the tension between the questing, perilously exposed self and the luminous promise of the values to which it aspires, constitute the dialogue that lies at the heart of every adventure in human self-fashioning. But, as Van Gogh’s letters and sketches indicate, the way itself needs to be sustaining, supported by nature as the road is by the trees, even as the road represents the human effort of those who have preceded us on the journey and whose labour remains as a value giving us directions still, in the insecure undertaking of our progress forward. And so, by a counterpoint that is varied, muted, and elaborated by turns, the sketches play off and into the texts, enhancing and complicating what the letters tell us about the trials and gratifications of finding our way ahead on a journey marked, as always, by the finally unresolvable dialogue between an inquisitive “I” and a transcendent value that promises to allay the self’s insecurities, while bringing its desires to rest.