Van Gogh seems to have been an odd and difficult child, and when he got his first job at age sixteen, he soon proved to be an odd and difficult employee. His subsequent religious enthusiasm was so extreme that his ecclesiastical overseers soon fired him, and his father considered having him committed to an institution for the mentally ill. His infatuation with his cousin Kee Vos caused his family much embarrassment and distress, soon resoundingly exceeded by the scandal of his taking up with the pregnant ex-prostitute Sien Hoornik. His sojourn in Paris drove his brother Theo almost to distraction, and in Arles, his breakup with Gauguin was accompanied by self-mutilation and dementia, as a result of which a public petition was presented to the police, claiming that Van Gogh was too dangerous to be walking the streets. While in the asylum in St. Rémy, he ate paint out of tubes, tried to drink turpentine, and kicked a guard in the stomach. In 1888, his devout but distressed mother confided in a letter to Theo that she hoped God would soon take her suffering son: “If it was for me to say, I would ask, ‘Take him unto Thee.’” That is, he would be better off dead. “Poor thing,” she writes, “I believe he was always ill.” Meanwhile, Van Gogh went on contending with loneliness, illness, and anxiety, before dying at the age of thirty-seven from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.
The troubles that so persistently destabilized Van Gogh’s life can help to explain why he repeatedly sought anchorage in an all-but-undauntable utopianism, despite the fact that his idealistic aspirations kept running aground upon the muddy shoals of a predictably recalcitrant actuality. Still, his many disappointments notwithstanding, he sought always to go on affirming the “everlasting yes,” as he says (borrowing from Carlyle). Throughout the letters, we find ourselves everywhere engaged by a remarkable conversation between these strongly contending aspects of Van Gogh’s experience — a dialogue, as it were, between his unusually unstable ego and the self-identical utopian ideals to which he aspired. In turn, the poles that constitute this dialogue also define the parameters within which imagination operates as it infuses (general) ideas with (particular) sensuous immediacy. Moreover, as with the adventure of self-fashioning itself, imagination is fraught with uncertainty and peril, and in committing himself to imagination as the foremost means of his own self-fashioning, Van Gogh encountered these difficulties head-on. Consequently, in the following pages I want to consider how, throughout the letters, Van Gogh’s many reflections on imagination mirror and intensify the challenges, as well as the gratifications, that lie at the heart not only of his own self-fashioning but of the self-fashioning process in general.

Open Sea and Enchanted Ground: The Perils of Commitment

Although Van Gogh realized that he needed ideals, he also feared that if his imagination were deployed too actively in the pursuit of some utopian dream, he might find himself dangerously out of touch with the ordinary world. And so he insists repeatedly that the creative impulse needs to be stabilized by direct reference to particular, recognizable objects. One main reason he offers for seeking this kind of anchorage is that art should stay in contact with the lives and interests of ordinary people. But we don’t have to read far in his letters to detect that, on another level, he was anxious, simply, about the disorienting effects of letting his imagination have too free a rein.
Paradoxically, however, Van Gogh also realized that giving himself over to imagination in the heat of the creative moment was the secret of making a great painting as distinct from a merely correct one. On the one hand, therefore, he worried that imagination would run away with him; on the other hand, he counted on imagination to bring him home.

As a way of exploring Van Gogh’s ambivalence about imagination, we can begin by noticing how frequently he returns to the idea that mysterious and powerful energies lie hidden under the surfaces of things, both in nature and within ourselves. Although he did not have access to the Freudian and post-Freudian idea of the unconscious, he understood very well how apparently purposeful actions and decisions can in fact be shaped by unnamed forces over which we have an uncertain degree of control. For instance, from Amsterdam in 1878, he writes that the work of the painter Gustave Brion “touches more deeply than one is aware of” (142/1:220), and throughout his career, he retained a conviction that the “mysterious” and “holy” power of art (155/1:247) can make an impact beyond rational understanding, as it “imprints itself more deeply” than we realize (265/2:155). Elsewhere, he points to an energy that “wells up from a deeper source in our soul” beyond “our own skill or learning or knowledge” (332/2:316); “in the depths,” he writes, “there are these things — that would rend our hearts if we knew them” (433/3:115). Sometimes, he says, when he paints he is “no longer aware of myself” (687/4:284), and the work takes on a dream-life of its own. He explains that Van Rappard is a realist “without being aware of it” (184/1:313). But then he asks, “Speaking of self-knowledge — who has it?” (516/3:266), later lamenting to his sister Willemien: “alas, we know ourselves so little” (780/5:34).

I cite these examples in order to suggest that Van Gogh’s awareness of the fragility of self-understanding and of rational control enabled him to realize all the more acutely that the “mysterious” (559/3:350; 719/4:356; 155/1:247) powers at work in the world and in ourselves might be agents of either integration or disintegration. Towards the end of his life, the contest between these opposites, in which the disintegrative effect of his hallucinations and epileptic fits was pitched against the harmony and radiance to which his painting aspired, was especially
intense. And throughout his career, his most painful experiences arose from the discovery that an ideal to which he had committed himself was in fact an illusion. Yet despite the fact that he realized how unstable his ego was and how it was influenced by unconscious forces, he never held back from the all-or-nothing commitments that his ideals seemed to require.

Already, for instance, in the midst of his early religious enthusiasm, Van Gogh expressed the kind of self-surrender that would continue to inform many of his later decisions, as he describes his aspiration to “the boundless and miraculous”:

That is the avowal that all great men have expressed in their works, all who have thought a little more deeply and have sought and worked a little harder and have loved more than others, who have launched out into the deep of the sea of life. Launching out into the deep is what we too must do if we want to catch anything, and if it sometimes happens that we have to work the whole night and catch nothing, then it is good not to give up after all but to let down the nets again at dawn. (143/1:223)

An evangelistic dimension comes through clearly, here, in the standard Christian motif of nets and fishing (for souls, that is). But in a secular sense, the passage would apply equally well to Van Gogh’s later commitment to art. Both early and late, the same core conviction remains: “Launching out into the deep is what we too must do,” regardless of the fact that we might “catch nothing.” And so in Drenthe, Van Gogh accepts “the risk of going on” even when “one feels it isn’t possible” (401/3:55). Later, in Nuenen, he affirms that “risking everything is the best thing” (468/3:185) and that “one must work and be bold if one really wants to live” (492/3:222). From Etten, in 1881, he asks Van Rappard, “But where do I want to drive people, especially myself?” and then immediately supplies the answer: “To the open sea. And which doctrine do I preach? People, let us surrender our souls to our cause and let us work with our heart and love what we love” (188/1:322). As with the earlier passage on casting nets, here again we are in “the open
sea,” and Van Gogh’s evangelical fervour remains in the injunction to “surrender our souls.” Although the focus is not now on religion, the commitment retains a quasi-religious intensity as he embraces his new vocation as an artist, driven again by a sense of higher calling to risk everything to the perils of the sea.

It is worth noting, however, that Van Gogh saw the risks of commitment not just as dangerous but, paradoxically, also as stabilizing, at least in some cases. That is, he realized that ideals could give him a sense of purpose; for instance, from the asylum in St. Rémy, he explains, “The doctor here says that one must throw oneself fully into work and distract oneself in that way.” As a result of following the doctor’s orders, he reports, “I feel absolutely calm and in a normal state” (883/5:258). Here, throwing himself into his work is therapeutic, but the doctor’s directive only makes clear what had already been effected by a lifetime’s habit. No wonder Van Gogh reports that it seemed “a normal state.”

Van Gogh also realized that commitment might involve different kinds and degrees of risk: from Drenthe, he advises Theo, “Don’t fear the storm but dread the calm, treacherous, enchanted ground” (407/3:68). This sentence does not mean that storms are not destructive; rather, Van Gogh believed that facing external difficulties head-on would help him to grow. “I believe I will mature in the storm,” he tells Van Rappard, though he also warns, “A man can’t stand it on the open sea for long” and needs “a little hut on the beach with a fire on the hearth” (406/3:67). “Anyway,” Vincent writes to Theo in 1883, “though I know very well that the sea holds dangers and one can drown in it, I still love the sea deeply” (307/2:256). In such a spirit, he repeatedly faced up to the stormy consequences of his own decisions, despite the chance of drowning.

But the “treacherous, enchanted ground” posed a different kind of danger for Van Gogh, not least because illusion was more difficult for him to face than was a storm at sea. In general, although he could take a brave stand against external threats, if he discovered that the ideals to which he was committed were in fact illusions, then he felt that his grip on the world was loosening. For instance, his anxiety about falling
prey to illusions stands front and centre in his letters from The Hague about his relationships with Kee Vos and Sien Hoornik. He had been disastrously infatuated with Kee, who turned him down flat. In retrospect, he writes to Theo as if to reassure himself: “It’s difficult, terribly difficult, indeed impossible, to think of something like my passion of last year as an illusion” (244/2:101). He then goes on to say, confusingly, that “reality has become the woman of the people” — namely, Sien — and “the illusion” was in fact Kee. He attempts to explain: “I may have had an illusion, failure or whatever — I really don’t know what to call it — that doesn’t rule out something more real, either for you or for me” (244/2:102). Although it seems “impossible” for Van Gogh to see his relationship with Kee as an illusion, he nonetheless seems to force himself to do so, and to acknowledge Sien as “more real,” not least because she is a woman “of the people.”

Yet elsewhere, Van Gogh says that when Kee rejected him, “I felt that love die, to be replaced by a void, an infinite void” (228/2:74). Then he met Sien, who helped to fill the “void,” but as a second-best choice: “My feelings for her are less passionate than my feelings last year for Kee Vos, but a love like mine for Sien is the only kind I’m capable of” (234/2:84). Here, Sien seems to be a substitute for Kee — the best Van Gogh could do in the circumstances. His subsequent — and at times, almost embarrassing — attempts to elevate Sien in Theo’s eyes by comparing her to figures in books and paintings seem more like a further indulgence in self-delusion than an acknowledgement of how “real” Sien is in comparison to the “illusion” of his love for Kee, which, seen in another light, he says is also (confoundingly) more real than what he feels for Sien.

The attitudes expressed here are complex and often affecting, as Van Gogh attempts to sort out his feelings for the two women. But at the centre lies an unsettling concern about how we might know, in general, what is real and what is illusory: these letters indicate that Van Gogh was struggling to get his feet on the ground despite the intense feelings and idealized aspirations that also made a claim on him and that he found simultaneously captivating and dangerously destabilizing. The difference between the real and the illusory does
not, in the end, emerge clearly; rather, we feel ourselves taken up by the conflict itself between imagination, illusion, idealism, and the claims of a common world — the arena, that is, in which the process of Van Gogh’s self-fashioning was being worked out. In turn, this process is reproduced in and through the dialogically structured rhetoric of the letters themselves, which assess the pros and cons of the fragile ego’s commitment to the values by means of which it seeks to define itself. In this context, we might now consider in more detail the part played in Van Gogh’s thinking by the idea of imagination — that age-old site of contention about the ambivalent links between illusion and truth.

**Imagination: “Impossible Windmills”**

In The Hague in 1883, Vincent wrote to Theo to register an objection to the paintings of George Breitner: “I utterly fail to understand how anyone could possibly come up with something like that. It’s the sort of thing one sees when one has a fever — as impossible and meaningless as in a dream that makes no sense at all” (361/2:376). Again, Vincent says that Breitner must have been “feverish” and that “the fantasy is heavy-handed and without meaning, and there are almost no correspondences to what exists” (361/2:377). He concludes, roundly: “I find it very ugly” (361/2:377).

But in this strong objection to Breitner’s putative excesses, it is hard not to feel some excess of Van Gogh’s own. Words such as “fever,” “impossible,” “meaningless,” “fantasy,” and “ugly” accumulate in the reinforcement of an antipathy that seems to reach beyond the aesthetic and to touch on something personal as Van Gogh recoils from the fact that Breitner’s creative imagination has lost contact with “what exists.”

The same concern about imagination being disconnected from “what exists” occurs in a letter in which Vincent apologizes to Theo for having written harshly about their parents. “I don’t hit the mark,” he explains, “but fantasize beyond nature and see things very fantastically” (375/2:405). Here, Vincent accuses himself of what was for him
the radical error of allowing imagination to become separated from the facts of the matter; as a result, he says, he became a victim of his own fantasy.

And yet a further, wholly typical manipulation lies not far below the surface of this apparent mea culpa. Because Vincent had let his imagination run away with him, the things he wrote about his parents are not to be taken seriously, and he is therefore responsible only for acting “fantastically.” This line of thinking conveniently allowed Vincent to ignore what he had actually written about his parents. It is as if someone accused of libel should say in defence that he was drunk at the time. All very well, and perhaps even extenuating, but the content and effects of the libel need to be assessed nonetheless. Yet for Vincent, the inherent treachery of the fantastical imagination weighed more heavily than the need to explain his hurtful remarks. Still, although we might feel inclined to scold him for evasiveness here, we might also feel that his apology is being shouldered aside by a deeper concern — namely, that the power of imagination really did loosen his grip on reality.

On other occasions, Van Gogh repeats this same self-accusation, regretting his capitulation to the escapist illusions that imagination has put in his way. For instance, in Drenthe, he suggests that he and Theo share a tendency to draw “impossible windmills,” by which he means unrealizable fantasies. For his own part, Vincent says, this kind of indulgence has led to “a great inner struggle,” and although it might be understandable that “when one is 20 or so, one is passionate to do that,” now, in his present “desperate” attempts to avoid discouragement, he feels only that “one can do nothing and thinks oneself mad” (395/3:31). Vincent then goes on to suggest that Theo should give up his job as an art dealer and become an artist, so that the brothers can join forces. But if ever there were an example of delusional thinking, Vincent’s plan to make Theo a full-time artist is surely it. And so the “impossible windmills” continue to be built, even as Vincent relegates them to the “passionate” self-indulgence of his twenty-year-old self. But most significantly for our purposes, in these remarks he connects the “impossible windmills” of imagination
with mental instability — the “great inner struggle” that causes him to think himself “mad.”

A further passage in a letter to Theo from Nuenen reveals how disturbing Vincent found the combination of uncertainty and disappointment to be. The letter describes his misgivings about the art trade, as well as his personal disenchantment:

I thought, I am disillusioned, that is — I thought — I have believed in many things that I now know are in a sorry state at bottom — I thought, these eyes of mine, here on this gloomy evening, awake here in the solitude, if there have been tears in them from time to time, why should they not have been wrung from me by such sorrow that it disenchants — yes — and banishes illusions — but at the same time — awakens one?

Shortly afterwards, he asks:

Can I be mistaking gold for gilding? Am I mistaking something that’s in full growth for something withering? I couldn’t come up with an answer for myself. Can you? Do you know for sure that there isn’t already a far-advanced, unrelenting decline on all sides?

(409/3:77)

In these paragraphs, Van Gogh does not specify the things in which he believed and which turned out in fact to be “in a sorry state.” Rather, he voices a more general concern that there is an “unrelenting decline on all sides.” He acknowledges that sometimes the “sorrow” of disappointment “banishes illusions” and “awakens one,” but he does so only to exempt himself from this possible compensation. He has experienced disillusionment pure and simple, and one of the main results for him is confusion. Although he says that he believed in things that were in “a sorry state at bottom,” it turns out, as the excerpt continues, that he isn’t sure what is true, at bottom, and what is not. He admits that he doesn’t know: “I couldn’t come up with an answer for myself. Can you?”
Here, the movement away from the opening clear-eyed assertion about unfounded beliefs towards the realization that he doesn’t actually know what is false and what is true leads Van Gogh to the declaration about a general “decline on all sides,” as he projects the vulnerability of his own ego onto the world at large. Throughout his career, as we have seen, he needed strong values, and discovering that his commitments were often shot through with the deceptions of imagination was not only disappointing to him but also threatening.

In Arles, Van Gogh returns to his “impossible windmills” when he explains to Theo that the Midi reminds him of “a certain country Voltaire speaks of” that is associated with “castles in the air.” The allusion seems to be to Voltaire’s fanciful El Dorado, in *Candide.* Interestingly, however, this passage occurs in the context of a discussion about Paul Gauguin, whom Vincent also describes as building “castles in the air” (732/4:380). The problem is that Gauguin is “led by his imagination” and, as a result, is “quite irresponsible” (736/4:388). The illusory “castles” here are connected directly to morality (“irresponsible”), again confirming how seriously Van Gogh considered the indulgence in fantasy to be. In Arles, his main disagreement with Gauguin was caused by the fact that Gauguin liked to paint imaginary scenes and did not depend on models. For a while, Van Gogh allowed himself to be influenced by Gauguin’s example. “He encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination” (720/4:360), Vincent explains to Willemien, and he writes to Theo, “I don’t find it disagreeable to try to work from the imagination” (723/4:367), and “Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character” (719/4:356). But the experiment was not a success for Van Gogh, who, as noted above, concluded that Gauguin was irresponsibly carried away by handing himself over to his own fantasies at the expense of attending to the actual material world.

A clue as to why Van Gogh felt so strongly about the dangers of a free-ranging imagination occurs a few paragraphs before the accusation that Gauguin was irresponsible. There, Van Gogh writes that he hopes to continue working despite his illness and that Dr. Rey will
“deign to remember occasionally that for the moment I myself am not yet mad,” even though admittedly “a little anxious and fearful” (736/4:385). Van Gogh’s claim that he is “not yet mad” might seem to be reassuring, but it carries the unsettling suggestion that he might in fact be on the way to madness, a possibility that, in turn, helps to explain the anxiety that he acknowledges. Later, he describes the “unbearable hallucinations” and nightmares by which he was afflicted, but he reassures Theo that “I’m working furiously from morning till night to prove to you (unless my work is another hallucination)” that “we . . . have a lamp before our feet” (743/4:402). The furious, all-day work is presented here as an antidote to the hallucinations, but then, interestingly, Vincent pauses to wonder whether or not his work itself might be “another hallucination.” Although a touch of wry amusement perhaps accompanies this suggestion, the tone remains uneasy, and Van Gogh’s anxiety about the possible conflation of imagination and delusion is, if anything, all the sharper because of the degree of ironic distance from which he views it.

In a letter to A. H. Koning, Van Gogh repeats his concern about whether he really is mentally ill. He explains that his health has just suffered a setback, but he doesn’t know if the problem is caused by “an attack of brain or some other fever.” He goes on to say that he will leave it to the “Dutch catechists” (the doctors) to decide “whether or not I have been or still am — mad, fancy myself mad, or regarded as mad” (740/4:395). As in the previous example, Van Gogh takes a wry view of his possible (or actual) madness, but the manner in which he hovers between physical and psychological explanations again suggests something of how uncertain for him were the boundaries between “fancy,” madness, and fact.

Consequently, when Vincent declares to Theo from Arles in 1889 that “as for myself, I don’t have any illusions” (745/4:406), we might wonder if he is not whistling in the dark, putting on a bold face to counter what, at this time, he knew to be a frightening susceptibility to hallucinations and the like. His frequent references during these years to Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss, who declares that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that things will turn out for the best, make
sense if we read them as examples of forced optimism, as Van Gogh attempted to distract himself from what he knew to be the case. Thus, although he says he has no illusions, he goes on almost immediately to add, “I have moments when I’m twisted by enthusiasm or madness or prophecy like a Greek oracle on her tripod” (745/4:406). If it is indeed the case that he has no illusions, this must mean that he realizes how prone he is to attacks that deprive him of reason and render him “twisted by enthusiasm or madness or prophecy.” Elsewhere, he says that during his illness, “it seemed to me that everything I was imagining was reality” (760/4:430), and he describes painting a garden “as if seen in a dream” and as “stranger than the reality” (720/4:360). In short, during this period, the boundaries between illusion and reality were unusually unstable for Van Gogh, who knew all too well that the “strangeness” of a beautiful Gauguin-inspired dream could easily slide into the nightmare of a mental storm that would unhinge him from the stable structures of the ordinary world.

And so, for Van Gogh, imagination could be disorienting, threatening, and escapist. Still, in voicing his concerns about these matters, he deals only with one side of the coin, and the complementary opposite — imagination’s other face, as it were — bears quite a different sense for him. Let us now consider how this is so.

Imagination: “That’s Rich, That’s Poetry”

Despite his anxiety about how imagination might cause him to fall prey to illusions, Van Gogh knew that art without imagination is reduced to a sterile academic exercise. A letter written to Émile Bernard in 1888 shows how perplexing Van Gogh found this topic to be. He begins by discussing the Dutch Golden Age painters, whom he respects because they “had scarcely any imagination or fantasy”: instead, they had “great taste” and skill in “the art of arrangement.” Van Gogh then discusses a self-portrait by Rembrandt, admiring how moving and powerfully imagined it is. At this point, he pauses to acknowledge a contradiction in his own account:
I’m showing you a painter who dreams and who paints from the imagination, and I started off by claiming that the character of the Dutch is that they invent nothing, that they have neither imagination nor fantasy.

Am I illogical? No. Rembrandt invented nothing, and that angel and that strange Christ; it’s — that he knew them, felt them there. (649/4:197)

Van Gogh thus says that although Dutch painters have no imagination, Rembrandt did have a quite remarkable imagination. What can this mean? The answer is that Van Gogh understands imagination in two different senses. A clue is in the initial claim that the Dutch “have neither imagination nor fantasy.” Here, imagination is linked to “fantasy” as opposed to the world of real objects. As we have seen, Van Gogh mistrusted this kind of departure from the ordinary, and he says we won’t find that in Dutch painting. And so when Rembrandt is said to have “invented nothing,” we are meant to understand that he stays anchored in the actual world. The “strange Christ” and what Van Gogh calls the “supernatural angel” shining through in one of Rembrandt’s self-portraits are qualities that the painter observed and disclosed in and through the object being represented. Rembrandt’s “magic” brought these qualities to light in a fresh way, thereby enabling us to see the things themselves differently.

Throughout his career, Van Gogh sought adequate words to describe imagination in this second sense as a creative, revelatory power, which he realized was essential to a successful painting. He often used the pronoun “it” to indicate (albeit vaguely) the “wondrous” (193/1:340) energy sustaining the manifest world in general, and he applied this pronoun also to artistic achievement. Thus, of Millet’s Angelus, he says, “That’s it, that’s rich, that’s poetry” (17/1:41). The implication here is that good painting discloses something of the mystery of being, itself, and, as Van Gogh says elsewhere, gives “a sense of the infinite” (652/4:204). He explains that as a painter, he aims to capture that “je ne sais quoi of the eternal” (673/4:253), the “mysterious effect” (613/4:237) or “something else” that great art needs besides the representation of
natural appearances (552/3:340). Consequently, although Rembrandt
remains true to nature in the sense that he doesn’t invent “fantastic”
images, he also “goes into the higher — into the very highest —
infinite” (534/3:291). Art is indeed produced by “human hands,” but
it also “wells up from a deeper source in our soul” (332/2:316), and
imagination produces work of a “mysterious character” (719/4:356),
revealing the “essence” (336/2:322) of the person or thing depicted.
Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh alludes often to this special
imaginative dimension that distinguishes a work of genius from a
merely uninspired study.

I have selected the above excerpts broadly from across Van Gogh’s
correspondence to indicate how he is both emphatic and impressionist-
ic when he describes imagination in a positive sense as a transfigura-
tive, life-enhancing, and indispensable component of great art. But he
offers no systematic analysis of the “magic” that he so admired. Rather,
he uses a series of pointers and assumes that his readers will recognize
what he is getting at, in the same spirit as he himself recognizes the
special quality of a successful painting. Still, his impressionistic de-
scriptions notwithstanding, it is clear that for Van Gogh, the “mysteri-
ous” and “wondrous” aspect of imagination stands strongly in contrast
to the aspect that conjures up dangerous illusions and enchantments.
Also, he knew very well that in opening himself to the first of these
alternatives, he ran a risk of falling victim to the second. Nonetheless,
as ever, he did not hold back: “risking everything,” as he writes from
Nuenen, “is the best thing” (468/3:185). Yet the stakes were especially
high for Van Gogh, whose fears of rejection and not belonging merged
with increasing concerns about his own sanity and, as he says, with his
intermittent failures to distinguish between imagination and reality
(760/4:430).

As the above examples show, the ambivalence expressed in Van
Gogh’s discussions about imagination is registered by way of an
unresolved dialogue in which the threatening and creative aspects
of imagination remain in contention. On the one hand, his self-
fashioning as an artist is closely bound up with creativity; on the
other hand, his self-fashioning as a person is especially threatened by
delusion. The dialogue by means of which these two faces of imagination declare themselves to one another reproduces — as an effect of Van Gogh’s rhetoric itself — the complex mix of idealizing aspiration and personal vulnerability in which we recognize the core dynamic of self-fashioning in general.

Safe Enough to Let Go: On Perseverance and Spontaneity

With these points in mind, I would like now briefly to consider a further strongly marked motif running throughout Van Gogh’s correspondence — namely, his repeated insistence that the highest imaginative achievements depend on an arduous apprenticeship involving constant repetition. The idea that practice makes perfect is in itself a truism, and there is nothing exceptional in Van Gogh subscribing to it. But I want to suggest that his insistence on the benefits of repetition has a direct bearing on how he dealt with the challenge posed by the ambivalence of the creative imagination, as I described it in the previous section.

Let us begin with Van Gogh’s enduring belief in the value of patience and hard work. We can assume that this conviction was, from the beginning, thoroughly enculturated through the upbringing provided by his Calvinist parents. In letters written during his period of study in pursuit of a religious vocation, Van Gogh wonders how long such a course of study would take for someone like his father or Uncle Stricker (both of whom were preachers). He feels that he should live up to their high standards, and yet already at this early stage, he looks to painting for an answer, reminding himself that Corot took “forty years of work, thought and care” to become successful. In Brussels, he reminds himself that “things aren’t so very easy, and require time and moreover quite a bit of patience.” From The Hague, he writes that Tersteeg accuses...
him of having “too much patience,” but Van Gogh objects that “those words aren’t right, one can’t have too much patience in art,” and so he will slog on, like “a draught ox or a work-horse” (210/2:36; 211/2:41). He paints all day and into the night (249/2:113; 258/2:138) because he “must persevere” in order to “make progress” (269/2:165), and he is confident that the “invisible iron wall” of resistance will yield if he works at it “slowly and patiently” (274/2:177). “The truth is that there’s more toil than rest in life” (291/2:216), he writes. “Making headway is a kind of miner’s labour,” so “the first things one must hang on to are patience and faith” (327/2:303). “My fear is always not working enough” (344/2:335), he confesses, and on several occasions, he calls on a “collier’s faith” to sustain him (368/2:391; 397/3:41; 403/3:61).

In Antwerp, he praises “patience and perseverance” (561/3:353), and in Arles, he realizes that he must be prepared to look and practice “for a very long time” (689/4:288). In St. Rémy, he explains that he works “very slowly — but from morning till night without respite” (800/5:80), and he acknowledges again that “patience” is “necessary” (806/5:107) and that “slow, long work is the only road” (823/5:154).

An interesting numerical calculus also runs through the letters, confirming Van Gogh’s many descriptions of his arduous practice. That is, he provides numbers that can be read as a kind of shorthand, showing how obsessively concerned he was with the benefits of sheer endurance and repetition. For instance, from Etten in 1881, he writes to say that he has drawn a particular digger “no fewer than five times” (172/1:280), and elsewhere, he says that he works as if he were a person who might have to “fall down 99 times in order to stand on the hundredth” (187/1:321). He insists that his plans to go to Drenthe must not distract him from painting, and so he intends to produce a hundred studies (380/2:414). In Nuenen, he says, “I’m just getting into my stride — I have to paint 50 heads” (468/3:185), a point he repeats several times. From Nuenen, we also hear about some thirty heads drawn and painted (483/3:206), fifty figures that he wants to draw (506/3:250), and if that’s not enough, he’ll draw a hundred. In Antwerp, he feels that he is out of practice and so he will make “50 or so” studies (555/3:343). In Arles, he plans for fifty paintings (625/4:125), and later, he describes
thirty painted studies that are completed (645/4:190). “I’m going like a painting-locomotive,” he says (680/4:268), and we can hardly doubt it.

I cite these different kinds of examples in order to give some sense of the cumulative effect of Van Gogh’s insistence that patience combined with the production of great numbers of studies was fundamentally important to his development as an artist. But one can’t help but feel here that he is reassuring himself that he has been doing everything he could to make progress. Besides, he needed to reassure Theo, who was providing the monthly stipend. Consequently, keeping Theo informed about his relentless dedication and impressive productivity was clearly strategic. Still, I am less concerned with this biographical aspect of Van Gogh’s writing than with a highly interesting polarization that we can now see emerging. That is, on the one hand, he insists on the value of an arduous apprenticeship; on the other hand, he was fascinated by the unpredictable, “wondrous,” and transfigurative power of imagination. Paradoxically, he even proclaims the limitations of the kind of patience that he so assiduously praises, as when he expresses concern that too much practice can make an artist uncreative. Thus, in The Hague, he complains that because of excessive “toil,” he has “rather lost my enthusiasm for composing and for making my imagination work once more” (347/2:339). Later, he repeats the point: “precisely because of that effort, because of that over-exertion, I ended up in that dryness” (365/2:386). Again, he realizes that “there has to be more zest in my life if I want to get more brio into my brush — I won’t get a hair’s breadth further by exercising patience” (432/3:113–14). In Nuenen, he explains that in “studies,” “no creative process” takes place, even though studies provide “food in reality for one’s imagination” (496/3:230). And so the mere acquisition of technique is not sufficient in itself; indeed, technique without imagination leads eventually to “dryness.”

Here, it is interesting also to note that for Van Gogh, a further key characteristic of a painter working directly under the influence of imagination is, simply, speed of execution. Again, this point stands in sharp contrast to the assurance that working slowly and patiently (like an ox or a collier) is the best way forward. However, as Van Gogh
points out, there are sound practical reasons for drawing and painting quickly. For instance, an artist working in the street might need to capture an image on the spot (264/2:154), and watercolours often have to be put down rapidly because of the nature of the medium (322/2:286). There was also a more mundane reason for speed: Van Gogh says he sometimes has to work quickly because he can’t afford to pay his models to pose for a longer time (327/2:305). And when he writes to Van Rappard that he can now make quick drawings of people in action, the point is that he has learned to capture the fleeting moment (263/2:152).

Still, these practical concerns are overwhelmed by the emphasis Van Gogh so frequently places on speed of execution as an indicator of the highest artistic accomplishment and as a characteristic of the paintings he most admired. After a visit to the newly opened Rijksmuseum in October 1885, he was impressed with how swiftly the great Dutch Golden Age painters seem to have worked, as he explains to Theo: “What particularly struck me when I saw the old Dutch painters again is that they were usually painted quickly . . . as far as possible [they] just put it straight down — and didn’t come back to it very much” (535/3:293). He goes on to say how he also likes to paint “in one go” (535/3:293), and later, in Arles, he says again that he likes to complete “the whole thing in one go” (666/4:242). “Everyone will find that I work too quickly,” he writes (631/4:152), but in letters written as early as 1882, in The Hague, he explains how he prefers to draw “quickly and resolutely” so that “the broad outlines appear with lightning speed” (226/2:69). Everything “comes down to dexterity,” he says, emphasizing again that he wants to put the work down “virtually in one go” (550/3:333). Rubens, for instance, drew with “a swift hand, and without any hesitation” (552/3:339), just as the Japanese also draw “quickly, very quickly, like a flash of lightning” (620/4:110). For his own part, he admits to Bernard, “I’ve sometimes worked excessively fast,” but then adds, “I can’t help it.” After all, he is seeking “intensity,” and “impulsive work on the spot” is the way to achieve it (633/4:156).

We see, then, that Van Gogh placed a high value on inspiration, spontaneity, and speed of execution, even though he was wary about giving himself over to these impulses because of his sensitivity to
the fine line that separates creativity from hallucination, and life-enhancing wonder from destructive enchantment. Yet he was as well aware of the ambivalence of self-surrender as he was of the ambivalence of imagination. Although he feared being taken over by illusions, he draws attention, on several occasions, to the positive aspects of simply being taken out of himself. For instance, he explains that when “I become absorbed in the work and lose myself in it so to speak,” his mood becomes “a good deal better” (392/3:25). In an earlier letter, he declares, “I must work and work steadily — FORGETTING MYSELF IN THE WORK” (391/3:24), and later, he points out that Ingres and David “forget themselves in — being true” (551/3:336). Sometimes in his own painting, he says, “I’m no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream” (687/4:284), a point that he later repeats (699/4:317).

Self-surrender to the creative moment, inspired by imagination, can therefore bring us into a state of self-forgetfulness in which the line between dream and reality is blurred, or even disappears. Yet for Van Gogh, dream and nightmare were uncomfortably close. How, after all, are we to distinguish between the self-forgetfulness of the creative act and the self-forgetfulness of delusion and madness? If we risk surrendering ourselves to the first of these alternatives, might we not be consigning ourselves to the second? As with Van Gogh’s writing about the two faces of imagination, the unresolved tensions in these questions convey, in themselves, a felt sense of the perilous enterprise of the insecure ego seeking an elusive stability — the self-fashioning, that is, to which these unresolved tensions remain so directly pertinent.

Conclusion: Managing the Dialogue

In this chapter, I have tried to show how Van Gogh communicates in the letters something of his need for stability — a concern that emerges from the very emphasis with which he asserts the necessity of staying in contact with the common world and of developing dependable habits for retaining that contact. Yet he also realized that without taking
the risk of self-surrender, the good of the work of art is not served, and his emphasis on spontaneity, speed, and self-forgetfulness suggests how the creative process takes us beyond our predictable, everyday world. But precisely because he was highly sensitive to his personal instability, the prospect of self-surrender was all the more risky for him. His elated insistence on the virtues of speed, reckless abandon, and spontaneity unfettered by self-regard is therefore accompanied by apprehension: if imagination can put us in touch with ideal beauty, it can also lead us into nightmare and delusion.

I have focused on these complex polarities in Van Gogh’s correspondence mainly to show how the letters present us with a compellingly rendered internal dialogue between the opposites I have discussed: stability and insecurity, reassurance and risk, common experience and the inchoate self. As a result, the letters do not just describe but also enact the fraught, dialogical process of Van Gogh’s development as an artist. They do so by allowing us access to the same cross-currents of anxiety and aspiration, subjective instability and public self-presentation, by means of which we all are constrained, in one way or another, to make our way in the world and which is what I take self-fashioning to mean. Yet the idea of a perfect person, like the idea of a perfect painting, did not much appeal to Van Gogh because it seemed to him to lack authenticity. Self-fashioning, like the fashioning of a work of art, always, somehow, falls short, and in the affirmation of a common humanity, it is important to realize this. For now, suffice it to say that, likewise, the dialogue between being grounded in a common world and surrendering to an imaginative vision that transfigures the common world remains unfinished in Van Gogh’s letters, as it does in his paintings. But here I have wanted mainly to suggest that his letters are all the more captivating and interesting to the extent that they enable our engagement with the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of the unfinished process itself.